

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis is a collection of short fiction preceded by a critical essay. The critical essay, a work in three sections, examines the writer's role in reflecting human subjectivity and ontological dilemmas. The essay illustrates the responses of self-reflexive Postmodern writers like Julio Cortázar and Ronald Sukenick to the idea of absolutes. It posits that while many self-reflexive Postmodernists sought to convey the chaos implicit in living in the world by employing willfully artificial narrative "structures" aimed at rendering an experiential sense of chaos in the reader, theirs are not the only methods in relating or examining human subjectivity in a chaotic world. The essay concludes by offering an example of literature which addresses Postmodern concerns while making use of more traditional, familiar narrative tools that are not entirely self-referential. Following the critical essay are five short works of fiction which are illustrative of the manner by which the subjectivity of human response in a chaotic world may be rendered through traditional narrative structures while still addressing Postmodern concerns.

# A Transcendental Cartography

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A Thesis

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The Division of English

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

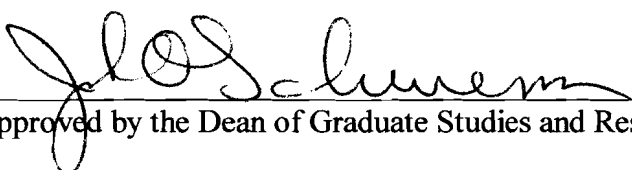
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by

Eric Edward Wahl

May, 1998

  
Approved by the Division Chair

  
Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

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This thesis is dedicated to its reader, especially if you are reading it on purpose.

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## A Transcendental Cartography

## I. Dis-ease in yearning for a system of “We”

Friday, 7 February, 1998. On television, we are watching the Olympic opening ceremonies broadcast live from Nagano, Japan. As we sit here, my family and I, in this tiny living room in Mission, Kansas, we can also see, right before us, ten in the morning, thousands of miles away. The Japanese conductor, with shades of Arthur Fiedler’s crazy, Muppet-hair, vigorously thrusts his baton. His face, eyes wide, teeth gritted, looms over the stadium. From the chest up, he conducts from a giant screen, and we watch him on a screen of our own. But it’s not just that; it’s *this*: Beethoven! “Ode to Joy” is being sung simultaneously by a tuxedoed choir in New York City, a winter-coat-clad group at the Brandenburg Gate, a multi-ethnic crowd in Cape Town, a chorus of men and women at the Forbidden City, and a group of colorfully tee-shirted people on the steps of the Sydney Opera House. This is one moment, but it is also many moments. It is morning, afternoon, and night. It is winter, and it is summer. It is one song--or is it? The conductor

encourages all viewers of this world chorus to join in, noting that knowledge of the correct words is unnecessary. It seems that “Ode to Joy” is no longer a specific part of German composer Ludwig Van Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*, but is a piece of some collective melody. “Ode to Joy” is a name applied to a widely-recognizable collection of ordered sounds, the origins of which are now of marginal importance. But the sound of the singing is startling. The world seems so small at this moment that I hate to imagine a satellite malfunctioning or a plug being pulled. Would the singers just stop singing?

What, I wonder, was the model for this? Granted, the singers all have the sheet music, the map, as it were, but not the map for *this*, for what I am receiving, for all of the thoughts this moment is eliciting from me. Suddenly, I am struck by the knowledge that no one else could be experiencing this moment in a way identical to my own experience--my idea of Beethoven, the sound of voices, my sense of place, of history, of context (all shaped by the singular act of my living as me). But this “world’s shared experience,” as it has been called, was not so much a shared experience as it was a shared stimulus to a multiplicity of subjective feelings. While the production of such a moment is, certainly, borne out of a desire to find a unifying element among all human beings--an idea that something can be collective in human consciousness, the best it can do is approximate a general idea of what a collectively held notion might be. In this way, such a spectacle attempts to address the chaos and fracture implicit in living in the world.

Chaos and fracture cannot be erased from life, yet attempts to keep them from overtaking life can be made; like cleaning a house or weeding a garden, it is a process of ongoing maintenance. To aid in reconciling this process of maintenance with the fear of



being overtaken by chaos, humankind has created this yearning for a sense of “We.” And notions of ideals have been created. After all, waging any campaign to keep a threatening element at bay is bolstered by support from one’s “group.” Yet obstacles remain. Creation and maintenance of ideals may not be enough, when the subjectivity of our neighbors’ interpretations of said ideals is considered. Ideals can exist as potential goals to be strived for, but while ideals may not suffice, a person without them is adrift.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in our attempts at allaying chaos is the inescapable knowledge that we will die. No matter what is done in life there exists a force over which control has yet to be gained. French philosopher Georges Bataille suggests that there must exist a “narcotic” of some kind to suppress the dis-ease brought on by knowledge of human limitations (xxxii). Bataille says such narcotics manifest themselves in works of “project” (49), in what can be inferred to include the arts, chores, athletics, religion, even spectacle. The Olympic spectacle is, then, a reaching for shared ideals as a salve (or narcotic) for the other knowledge--that all that can really be done where ideals are concerned is attempt to maintain a kind of striving in the face of complex individual realities.

Faced with the knowledge of a limited existence, a kind of anguish arises. Such a dis-ease may be suppressed through the seeking out of those things which seem to make people, whoever they may be, feel part of some phenomenon of shared experience.

Bataille addresses the desire to be a part of universal experience:

Anyone wanting slyly to avoid suffering identifies with the entirety of the universe, judges each thing as if he were it. In the same way, he imagines, at bottom, that he

will never die. We receive these hazy illusions like a narcotic necessary to bear life. But what happens to us when, disintoxicated, we learn what we are? Lost among babblers in a night in which we can only hate the appearance of light which comes from babbling. (xxxii)

Bataille's comments are important because they illustrate two key concepts: that mankind seeks to identify himself with the entirety of the known universe, and that we search because the alternative, acceptance of limits, is unbearable.

The search for shared human experiences exists as an effort to suppress anguish. Such anguish results from the knowledge that experience is and can only be subjective. Similarly, each individual's sense of self and sense of reality is purely singular. Thus, when we attempt to interact, we can choose either to be aware of these singularities, or to believe that our own personal reality-concepts are shared. We may even project them onto others. When the subjectivity of reality-concepts presents itself we may suddenly feel, as Bataille says, "lost among babblers" (xxxii). The arts offer a reflection of such ontological dilemmas. But art can never prescribe reliable courses of action to answer our yearnings for public consensus. Thus, it is often said that an artwork is "emblematic" of any of a various assortment of conditions. However, it must also be said that the presentation and interpretation of such emblematic works will always be subjective. We must confront the subjectivity of individual perception. Such confrontation is sharply illustrated in the works of more self-reflexive Postmodern writers like Julio Cortázar and Ronald Sukenick.

## II. Postmodern self-reflexivity in Cortázar and Sukenick

Linda Hutcheon, who has called Postmodernism “a cultural enterprise” (ix), discusses the term further:

Willfully contradictory, then, postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within. (xiii)

What I see as useful in such a definition is the notion that what is called Postmodern is marked by a skewering of form through disorienting self-reflexiveness. A fragmented world is anathema to the attainment of ideals. In self-reflexive Postmodernism, “meaning” cannot be wrested from the world, so meaning moves inward, its subjectivity recognized. Yet, such interiority is sparked by a recognition that the world is chaotic, and that

attempts to wrest meaning from it create anguish. Given that Postmodernism recognizes these ontological dilemmas, it must also recognize the act of *creation* as limited, as both an act of suppression of our dis-ease and a reflection of it.

One notion held by self-reflexive Postmodernists is that we have no absolutes, that there exist, as the ancient Sophists realized, no singular, obtainable truths; such an assertion creates its own kind of anguish. Many Postmodernists attempted to reflect this anguish through the form of their works. The intended result was for the receiver of data (reader, listener, viewer) to *experience* a dis-ease, a sense of fracture inherent in the world of the work.

In Argentine writer Julio Cortázar's 1966 novel, *Hopscotch*, this dis-ease manifests itself slowly. The book is divided into three sections, the first two, set in Paris and Buenos Aires respectively, follow a traditional narrative structure. The disaffected expatriate Argentine intellectual, Horacio Oliveira searches Paris for a strange kind of absolute he calls the "kibbutz of desire"--an idealized marriage of individuality and the intellectual community whose approval of his individuality he needs. The third section of the novel presents a collection of what Cortázar calls "Expendable Chapters"--odd quotations from historical figures, newspaper clippings, brief snippets of dialogue, and the work of a writer named Morelli, who writes chiefly about the process of writing itself. These chapters, some no longer than one sentence, as per the author's instructions, are to be read in and out of sequence as the earlier chapters are re-read. The new chapters often contradict what has gone before them, placing the reader in a state of confusion not unlike that of Oliveira himself. Chapter 82 gives us Morelli:

Why am I writing this? I have no clear ideas, I do not even have ideas. There are tugs, impulses, blocks, and everything is looking for a form, then rhythm comes into play and I write within that rhythm, I write by it and not by that thing they call thought and which turns out prose, literature, or what have you [...] (402)

After this short passage, readers are instructed to jump to Chapter 99, in which some of the novel's characters discuss Morelli's views on fiction in a self-referential, metafictional kind of game (439). Not long after this, readers are whisked to a brief passage concerning boys whose penises have been caught in the zippers of their trousers (508). The effect of such jumping from chapter to chapter, thought to thought (to seeming non-sequitur) is disorienting. However, Cortázar's purpose, as Carlos Fuentes points out in his 1967 review of *Hopscotch*, is "to exhaust all the possible formulations of an impossible book: a book that would radically supplant life or, rather, would turn our lives into one vast reading of all the combinations of what has been written" (86). With *Hopscotch*, Cortázar lures readers into a world of intellectual disaffection, and then attempts to make them feel just that. Cortázar, through his implementation of the "chapter-jumping" device, also attempts to illustrate the subjectivity of human response to order. For him, the book can reveal to a reader infinite possibilities through infinite combinations and recombinations of chapter readings.

Moving even further into Postmodernist self-referentialism, Ronald Sukenick, in his 1973 novel, *O u t*, abandons all notions of mimetic or representational forms. The novel is marked by its unconventional typography. The chapters descend from 10 to 0, and the amount and order of text is reduced in each chapter until the last page bears only a single

letter. *O u t* gives us several interchangeable “characters” united only in that they all carry a stick of dynamite, get mixed up in assorted crimes, and are involved in some mysterious conspiracy as they move from east to west coast. None of the characters can find a way out of the crazy story into which they’ve been thrown. The first chapter, Chapter 1)0 (sic), sets the scene:

It all comes together. Don’t fall. Each of us carries a stick of dynamite. Concealed on his person. That does several things. One it forms a bond. Two it makes you feel special. Three it’s mute articulation of the conditions we live in today I mean not only us but everybody the *zeitgeist* you might say if not the human condition itself and keeps you in touch with reality. (1)

After this, Sukenick plays with text and typography even more. Text shifts from side to side, paragraphs and punctuation virtually cease to exist, and characters and motivations become indistinct beyond their existence in a world of absolute chaos. By Chapter Three, readers are confronted with text-groupings reduced to three lines apiece:

zero he gets back in his car drives south on the freeway he  
hits severe wind conditions coming down from the mountains  
a hot dry wind that slams into the car carrying sand (33)

The prose structures familiar to readers as they search for order are not evidenced in *O u t*. Readers who attempt to impose a system of order onto the text will be foiled. They are left, then, in a state of confusion, as Sukenick has sought to create a work that is, as his character, Ronny, states, “like a cloud that changes as it goes” (14).

Raymond Federman, in his review of *O u t*, acknowledges that it “. . . progresses with total disregard for coherence and credibility” (137), but sees this as the novel’s artistic statement and Sukenick’s authorial goal. For Federman, Sukenick has created a work in which the design is emblematic of our experience of fracture in the world:

This unlimited, unrestricted work frees us of all accepted notions of hierarchy: true perception, fixed nomination, credible association. *O u t* is such a work which changes our perceptions of the world. *O u t* gets rid of social reality as a stable, organizable, recognizable entity. *O u t* demolishes any pretension we may have of perceiving the world as being rational, safe, and apprehensible. (141-42)

Sukenick has set as his goal to elicit from the reader something of the dis-ease he feels is inherent in living in the modern world. By foiling expectations borne of traditional literary forms and structures, Sukenick’s novel renders an experience of its own self-referentiality.

Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* and Sukenick’s *O u t* are novels which, through their defiance of traditional structures, attempt to relate the dilemmas of being in their stories experientially in the reader. Problematic in this type of Postmodernist fiction, however, is an ever-isolated, ever-inward narrative. Georg Lukács predicted (rather, *worried*) that, over time, fiction writing would continue to grow more interiorized until it amounted to little more than “the disintegration of form in a nebulous and unstructured sequence of moods, the replacement of a sensuously meaningful story by psychological analysis” (113). In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács fears that an ever-inward movement in writing might eventually isolate individuals from one another entirely:

The autonomous life of interiority is possible and necessary only when the

distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm; when the gods are silent and neither sacrifices nor the ecstatic gift of tongues can solve their riddle; when the world of deeds separates itself from men and, because of this independence, becomes hollow and incapable of absorbing the true meaning of deeds in itself, incapable of becoming a symbol through deeds and dissolving them in turn into symbols; when interiority and adventure are forever divorced from one another.

(66)

When applied to self-reflexive Postmodern writing, Lukács's ideas about interiority imply a possibility for much of it to slip into endless self-reflexivity. Lukács laments the direction hyper-interiority might take us. He sees the need for a sense of "We" evident in epic fiction, yet supposes such a need may cease if writers continue to interiorize. It is a legitimate fear. Failing absolutes, failing our abilities to ever truly communicate the precise essence of any idea or experience as we have experienced it internally, perhaps the only solution is to quit reaching for shared notions and turn inward. If the writing process becomes something akin to the futility of Tantalus's never-ending reachings, little wonder, then, that writers such as Cortázar and Sukenick did move inward. Such a direction, however, causes its own dis-ease for Lukács:

The inner importance of the individual has reached its historical apogee: the individual is no longer significant as the carrier of transcendent worlds, as he was in abstract idealism, he now carries his value exclusively within himself; indeed, the



values of being seem to draw the justification of their validity only from the fact of having been subjectively experienced, from their significance to the individual's soul. (117)

When viewed in light of works such as *Hopscotch* and *Out*, Lukács's observations seem valid, indeed. Linda Hutcheon acknowledges of Postmodernism its interiorization, adding that "[i]t can only problematize what Barthes (1973) called the 'given' or 'what goes without saying' in our culture" (xiii), so that we question the validity of any possible notions of shared human experience. Hutcheon continues:

What is important in all these internalized challenges to humanism is the interrogating of the notion of consensus. Whatever narratives or systems that once allowed us to think we could unproblematically and universally define public agreement have now been questioned by the acknowledgment of differences--in theory and in artistic practice. In its most extreme formulation, the result is that consensus becomes the illusion of consensus [.] (7)

Hutcheon states clearly the Postmodern tenet that we must question "public agreement." One way Postmodern-labeled writing reflects this questioning occurs through evermore interiorized, self-reflexive narrative "structures" such as those of Cortázar and Sukenick.

Many Postmodernists illustrated the confusion and complexity of life through their narrative methodologies and structures. This was in keeping with their aims. However, other Postmodernists began to expand the parameters of the genre beyond the self-reflexive text. New strategies began to emerge regarding how a world of zero absolutes

could be reflected in writing. Later writers such as Anne Enright began to look at more traditional narrative structures for what those structures could provide in reflecting the same dilemmas of being illustrated in self-reflexive texts. When writers are released from the need blatantly to point out that reader subjectivity exists, they become free to examine as subject matter the infinite variations of differing world-views.

An important challenge, then, for writers who seek to address Postmodern dilemmas of being is whether to plunge into self-reflexivity. And if not, then to go *where*? If the only things human beings truly share as their unifying elements are that they cannot control everything and that they will die, writers are faced with a further question: “How can any writer attempt to achieve a goal requiring some singular, panhuman reaction?” This question must be posed even of Postmodern writers like Cortázar and Sukenick, who assume that their respective textual manipulations will disorient all readers. When a writer realizes such a goal (such a reaching for unobtainable ideals) is not possible, rationalizing his or her craft may become challenging. If a writer attempts to create a recognizable order in his or her work when he or she is aware of the subjectivity of both order and individual perception, committing *anything* to words may seem intellectually futile. How, then, to convey this recognition of dis-ease? Perhaps the answer is found in fictive structures which are emblematic of the experience of Postmodern dis-ease. Or, a writer could consider making use of traditional narrative structures in order to illustrate characters who experience the phenomenon of Postmodern dis-ease.

In watching the opening ceremonies of the 1998 Winter Olympics, I do not know how the Japanese viewed Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” (or the Chinese, the South Africans, the

Belgians, etc.). I never will. But I do know I shared *something*. I shared in the consumption of “Ode to Joy,” if not in the digestion. Similarly, when I write I cannot hope to provoke specific reader-responses. But I can present my stories for community-consumption and celebrate the subjectivity of human response.

### III. An idea of Order

Anne Enright, in her story “Indifference,” presents an interesting individual case of a man, somewhat naïve, who comes to an inaccurate-but-seemingly-typical initial conclusion about how people think (in “We” terms). The young man bases this initial conclusion on an “epiphany” he thinks he has experienced. Set in Ireland, “Indifference” begins in a pub in which two men on break from their menial jobs as workers in a bakery eye a foreign woman (she is Canadian). One of the bakers, a simple man, intrigues the woman. They meet and have sex shortly thereafter, whereupon the simple man admits to the woman that he was a virgin. The sex act provokes in the man something of a mistaken epiphany: he comes to believe that he is suddenly in on a secret the rest of the adult world shares collectively. Because he has experienced sex, the simple man believes he is now unified with the adult world. His idea of, and yearning to believe in, a collective conclusion, or

collective knowledge of sex, unites him in his own mind, with all others who have had the “same” experience. Walking down a busy sidewalk after his sexual encounter, the man thinks he is experiencing a realization of shared knowledge when he looks at the people he passes: “They [have sex] night and day . . . and it doesn’t show. Walking down the street and you’d think they’d look different. You’d think they’d recognize and smile at each other, like, ‘I know and you know’” (16).

All too soon for the baker, however, he learns that not all people share the same idea of sex. The man is disappointed to learn that the woman with whom he’s had sex does not view the act with the same degree of weight as he. For the woman, the sex act is nothing more than a brief event in time. There is no ideal, shared knowledge after all. In fact, the woman has used him and tired of him. The baker, naïve as he is, has projected his “reality” onto the world, only to learn that the world did not share it--that it was *only* a notion, of him and unique to him. He discovers that his world view is not universal. The woman’s view of sex bears little resemblance to his own, save for the *word* used to describe the act itself. The baker, then, has discovered a failure of ideals (of “We”), and this realization bewilders him. And bewildered, as Enright illustrates, is the state in which the recognition of human subjectivity often leaves us.

I am not a Postmodernist in the traditional sense (the irony of there being a traditional sense of Postmodernism inherent in the oxymoronic pairing of those terms together). If I know order is at the mercy of subjective response, how can I ever create order in a story which seeks to reflect a Postmodern dilemma of being? Is such a thing possible? For chaos, while an irrefutable element of our being and our world, inspires more fear than

liberation in human beings. The challenge, then, for writers of fiction becomes that of how best to address such dilemmas of being.

One condition of our Postmodern world is that we are bombarded with data. The overload may crush us if we cannot learn to be, if only for ourselves, “handy filters.” This is how good writers today must think about their fiction. Yet I cannot deny, as the Nagano opening ceremonies so clearly demonstrate, this fundamental human need to feel at one with others which pervades my being. Thus, I feel this additional need to categorize the data with which I come in contact. I do so in order to feel I am experiencing “control” in my life if not of *Life* itself. Therefore, typical questions are asked of writers: What kind of writer are you? What do you write? Science fiction? Romance? Western? Are you a Postmodernist? Who are your models? Where is your road?

Inherent in a question such as, “What kind of music did Beethoven produce?” is a basic human need to categorize. Doing so helps us believe we are establishing a reliable order. As I have said that a world without absolutes, with no definable Truth, inspires an anguish in me, so do I yearn for security, even if what I yearn for is merely a “sense” of security. After all, running headlong into the abyss of my fears is a dangerous proposition. And so I seek to numb my fears. The need to categorize is often a product of this numbing. This is an ontological dilemma so often reflected in the arts.

The Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar has become adept at telling the stories of men and women who experience dilemmas of being in our chaotic world: the love-struck mental patient who kidnaps an actress in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*; the beautician in

*Kika* who just wants to settle down in light of the murder and mayhem all around her; and the neglected wife/romance novelist searching for her sense of self in *The Flower of My Secret*. While making use of traditional storytelling structures, Almodóvar succeeds in illustrating the sheer variety of responses to a world without easy answers in the form of absolutes. And yet, as an artist, he confronts the dilemma of categorization. Almodóvar maintains that, for an artist such as himself, the dilemma of addressing American audiences is that: “they’ll only accept one facet of your personality. If you are a member of the underground, you stay underground. If you are homosexual, that’s all you are. I’ve never wanted to be ghettoized in this way” (Strauss, 123). Because several of Almodóvar’s earlier works contained scenes of graphic sex and/or violence, audiences came to expect such shocks from all his works. When he released the gentle, decidedly introspective *The Flower of My Secret*, a story of a middle-aged woman who must re-evaluate her senses of family and of self when left by her husband, many audiences were thrown. Almodóvar had changed! Gone were the drug-addicted porn-stars (*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*), the murdering matadors (*Matador*), and pious transsexuals (*Law of Desire*), and in their place was a very ordinary, unshocking woman. Yet Almodóvar’s *Flower* did reflect his interpretations of chaos in the world as his previous films had, just in a new way. He had found in *Flower*’s Leo a main character more subdued in her habits than his earlier characters had been, but one no less bewildered by the chaos around her. *Flower*, then, marked Almodóvar’s movement away from easy categorization. When writers are pushed (by audiences, critics, or both) to fall in with genres, this is a terrible, limiting factor for any of them who are unwilling to accept easy compartmentalization. Almodóvar

continues: “Genres force you to view characters in an elementary manner. I don’t think that’s possible anymore. It corresponds to the mentality of another age” (124). The need for compartmentalization becomes something of an affliction for writers. Easy categorization becomes a disease, whether aimed at what influences us or at what we are. And yet we do have these deep needs to classify, to identify by a name all the things and ideas and practices of our existence, an existence which is surely as limited as is our functional language. While compartmentalizing may create in us a sense of security, the practice, as Almodóvar would agree, also clips our wings. If the world is so complex and so defiant of our attempts at categorization, then surely we cannot rely on those traditional models and tags to classify writing. Categorization is a human response to disorder. When I write, my aims are similar to the Postmodernists’ in that I wish, as an artist, to escape the need for easy ordering/sense-making. Yet, my devices are different from those of the more self-reflexive Postmodernists’. I tamper with subject while leaving the form basically intact.

Lukács suggests individuals are in pain because they recognize all they are not. To know one’s limitations, if, indeed, that is what they are, is painful, so individuals create their own, often-peculiar mechanisms to deal with this knowledge. We try for what we can. The narrative structures of works by Postmodern writers such as Cortázar and Sukenick are emblematic of the chaos their works examine. In my stories, I employ traditional realist strategies while trying to reach typical Postmodern conclusions of ontology. I want to write a story which allows for a multiplicity of responses without alienating its audience through willfully chaotic, self-reflexive forms, so I seek narrative



play in traditional forms. Because I cannot control what readers bring to a text (i.e., psychologically, socially) I do not seek to evoke from them a singular, specified response, emotionally or psychologically, and this is not unacceptable. This is a part of what I see as the liberating element in a world without true public, shared knowledge. A multiplicity of responses is exciting to me when I have made use of what, in my reachings for the most general of human touchstones, will suffice: familiar forms. I employ a more or less traditional narrative structure, because it is familiar to readers and will entice them into the story in a way that willful artifice often will not. I say, “Here’s a character with some unusual ‘pieces’ in his or her life puzzle, who doesn’t necessarily know where they came from or how they fit together.” My characters use their “pieces” as fractured rubrics for living. In an attempt to clearly allow the reader the understanding that the character/narrator of a work is not meant to signify the reader, I take time to create contexts for my characters which are illustrative only of their subjective experiences. In this way, the experience comes to the reader not through model/form, but through the primary experience of a character who is clearly not meant to act as a channel for the reader’s psyche. I don’t use the pieces as the frame; I try to frame the pieces.

The often-delusional thinking on the part of my characters is quite real to *them*. In presenting it, I am interested in how people may perceive the world to be. And, because my characters display delusional thinking, rather than using delusional structure as my point of novelty, I must establish a sense of authority in my storytelling. The characters may seem rudderless, but I am in control. I want to draw the reader into accepting that

what I present is a conceivable reality. My characters see their worlds in uncharacteristic ways.

My goal, then, is to maintain a delicate balance between the degree to which characters are unique in their delusions and the degree to which I can push their delusions without falling into an artifice which is reflective of such delusions. Because I recognize the futility inherent in attempting to elicit a singular response in readers, I choose to revel in the subjectivity of response to what I write. In such subjectivity exists the true freedom from limits in the world. I use traditional devices to reflect human/natural uncertainties-- *what is my place in the world? What do I believe it to be? What do others see it as?* I find traditional, realist narrative devices such as those employed by Enright to be essential, because my aims in writing rely more upon what the reader may possess inside than what my characters do not. I may use traditional devices, but I make use of them in illustrating the *un*traditionality of these characters' lives. These characters hold the conviction that, based on their life-experiences, theirs *are* somewhat reliable world-views. The reflection of such conviction, I believe, eliminates the dilemma of authority for me so long as I create worlds for my characters to inhabit in which their experiences are possible for them. It is the subject matter which is in flux, rather than the narrative form.

One of my key challenges, then, is to provide realistic reasons for my characters' motivations. If I did not provide such a scheme, I would compromise the believability of my characters and the fabricated sense of reality established with my reader. I know that realist devices are not the only ones available, but I choose them purposefully.

My characters, like all of us, seek to avoid suffering in their lives, yet they do suffer because they are not equipped with, or equipped to see the models/rubrics which might help them change. They feel/experience what Georges Bataille called the sense of anguish at the idea of their limited existences, of their inability to be “everything” and seek identification with the entirety of the universe. Bataille concludes that there are “only two certainties in this world--that we are not everything and that we will die. To be conscious of not being everything, as one is of being mortal, is nothing. But if we are without a narcotic, an unbreathable void reveals itself” (xxxii). All of my characters make do as best they can with some sadly insufficient models for living--faceless voices on telephones, Doris Day movies, cemetery statues, bar-room frat-boys. Their ideals do not serve them very well, but they cannot see how or why this may be, so they must cope. They must make use of any of a variety of what Bataille has termed “narcotics”--the safety of anonymity on a phone or behind a computer screen, life in a movie, reliance on mystical signs, plastic surgery, alcoholic binges, anonymous sex, and even near-schizophrenic psychosis. All of them are looking for signposts, for directions, some kind of external force to guide them into the states of being only they can see or dream for themselves.

I cannot hope to affect in all readers the kind of shared, singular ideal an Olympic “world chorus” perhaps thinks it does. I can only reach for what will suffice, just as my characters do. Enright’s characters’ experiences are emblematic of their respective dilemmas of being, and their perceptions are in flux rather than the narrative. That is what I seek to do in my writing. Generally, familiar narrative structures allow me to achieve this as nearly as I can. I cannot attain an ideal, authorial goal, but I can hover around an

*idea* of a goal. And that is really all I can do: create a continuous, written reflection of a reaching process which is made *unfutile* in the very examination of such human “reachings.”

What follows, then, is a collection of fiction about individuals whose world-views are as subjective as the responses they will elicit in readers. This subjectivity is something I seek to celebrate. I shall never achieve the cartographic skills necessary to provoke guaranteed responses from my readers through my writing. I choose, then, a different kind of mapping, one which corresponds to different points on the inner landscape of each character. I may never truly know such points, but no singular destination is ever my end. The traveling is the thing!

Tonight, someone, unable  
to see in one darkness,  
has shut his eyes  
to see into another.

--Li-Young Lee, "Furious Versions"

I Love You: I Don't Want to Meet You

E-mail incoming. *Whoa! Wonder-dyke at 12:00! ;-)*

Ursula could never speak like this. It scared and excited her. This was the third personal thrill she'd seen on her screen today and she hadn't even had lunch yet. This was clearing up her skin. This was waking her up rested. This was making her conduct cheerful interviews with housewives in places with names like Chickadee Falls and Pretty Prairie. “. . . and how, exactly, does Persuasion in the 4-ounce spray bottle make you feel ‘more like a woman,’ Mrs. Humbert?” “On a scale of one to ten with ten being extremely satisfied, five being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and one being extremely dissatisfied, how would you rate your overall reaction to Persuasion in the 4-ounce spray bottle?”

On her breaks, she didn't leave cubicle 41F with its not-quite-dark-enough-to-be-purple-but-not-quite-light-enough-to-be-pink carpeted panels and the permanently-affixed placard reading “You are important to Garish Industries,” exclamation point, happy face. All cubicles had this placard. A highly-paid consultant who smiled a lot insisted they increased the “worker-joy-initiative ratio.” She had statistics. There had been studies.

The F-section was for the advanced interviewers. Ursula had experienced the worker-joy-initiative ratio sufficiently to be moved here after the natural-fiber diaper survey and the yearly herbicide nightmare that had the junior interviewers in fits for a month. It was she who had to call back farm widows to apologize for their having been bothered earlier by “the new trainee who didn’t understand her husband had been deceased for over three years, and was no longer double-cropping or going fallow this year.” Farm widows prefer to keep their late husband’s names on the mailings. It makes them feel safer. Mrs. John S. Buxton. Mrs. Arvold Arvoldsen. Mrs. Bertie Crox. Consumer surveys tell you a lot about people. She knew never to visit the WestGlenn Cheaper Beeper Grocers in La Jolla, California because so many people remarked about the parking lot muggings and the strange smell in the deli section. Ursula lived in Toronto, but you never know.

Another perk of the F-section was your own computer ID number and Internet access. It happened when Ursula responded to a posting from “Gardenia.” Postings by people who went by floral names always attracted her sense of the romantic. *Hi, grrrls out there! I’m not very good at this. I’m 25, a receptionist at a dentist’s office, bored. I’m going home to see my parents next weekend, and I want to come out to them. Am I crazy!!!??? Tell me how to do this without ruining my life!!!??? Thanks!!!*

**Ursula wrote back:** *Hi, Gardenia!!! Wow, we are so alike! I am also 25 and a receptionist and have been wanting to come out to my parents soon! I think the best thing to do is just be honest and forthright and then give them time to adjust. If they really love you, it shouldn’t make a difference. Let’s do this at the same time!! Ursula.*



It was like shoplifting. It was like reading a book that wrote back. Oh, she was probably being monitored, but she almost wanted to be caught. When “Gardenia” wrote back the first time Ursula didn’t know what to feel. She was *known*. *Hey, Ursula!!! Thanks for your reply!! I can’t believe how alike we are!! Are you my lost twin??!! Ha! Ha! Ha! Yes, let’s do this at the same time, grrrrl!! Let’s plan!!*

It was the winking acknowledgment of her sexuality, the sly camaraderie in the way they commented on *Ellen* or Rosie O’Donnell, and the surprising choice of *herself* that made Ursula at once acutely aware of her needs and physically ill at her inability to pursue them. Ursula was thirty-six. Her parents were dead.

The weekend of their coming out yielded *amazingly great* results for Ursula and depressing results from “Gardenia.” She stopped using exclamation points. She said her name was Terri. Ursula became her therapist. *It’s okay. You know I’m always here.* Then Terri wanted to know if Ursula’s system had the capability for accepting pictures. *Sorry, grrrlfriend. I don’t think it does.* And then Terri sent her phone number. Ursula began to wake up tired, worried. Her skin broke out. She lost her temper with Mrs. Ephram Legg. “I’m not asking you about the brand you like better, damnit! I’m asking you about Persuasion in the 4-ounce spray bottle!”

A coworker standing nearby asked her if she was okay. Ursula turned to face the woman’s burgundy-polyester uterus. She was so close. *Too* close. The woman’s closeness caused Ursula’s ears to fuzz, and she began to feel faint. She could feel the warmth of the woman’s body on her nose-tip. She could almost hear the rushing of blood through the woman’s body. She could almost breathe in the woman’s DNA like little

sparks popping off of her clothes every second--*hold your breath!* And this scared Ursula because she could not imagine what might happen if she did *that*. The woman was too close. "Are you okay?" the woman said again. Ursula couldn't speak--she was bad face-to-face anyway. Face-to-uterus, well, forget it.

Then Terri wanted to meet Ursula. Ursula was thirty-six. Her parents were dead. She worked in cubicle 41F. Ursula wasn't *Ursula*.

Ursula drove her 1983 Honda Accord with the hanger-antenna and koosh ball mirror fob across the province. When the radio didn't work she was trapped with her thoughts, and this was a long drive. At first she thought about the kind of people who had to live out here in these spaces *between*. The sky was overpowering in its reach, and the land undulated in such an isolating vastness that she began to long for cubicle 41F on the weekend. She knew the boundaries there. In between was where the insecurity was--your thoughts shot out anywhere, all over the landscape. She'd have to go back to diaper surveys with bored housewives with two fecally-empowered children whose lives were still better than hers. Ursula wore glasses that pinched her nose. She bleached her hair and liked Michael Bolton better than the Indigo Girls. She was thirty-six.

A country station scratched into the radio's orbit, then out. Then a religious station--*Going to Hell*--and then talk radio. It was all just streaming in from out there and she began to imagine what it really looked like free-flowing across the landscape. She briefly worried about the unknown dangers of inhaling radio waves allowed to roam free like that. At least in the city she knew the parameters of the dial. Country was here, religion was there, and talk was there--always. Out here, you just never knew. Why had she told

Terri she'd meet her? Knowing all the time she had no intention of doing so. She had to see her, though, if only from the window of a 1983 Honda Accord with a hanger for an antenna and a koosh ball mirror fob. This way, the story of loved-and-lost would still suit her. But, of course, she didn't do this, even. Couldn't. Did drive *around* the Wendy's five times. One of them had to be her. She would provide a significant excuse come Monday.

The absence of any messages Monday punched Ursula in her stomach. "What about the shape of the bottle reminds you of your mother's hysterectomy, Mrs. Bland?" Ursula looked up at the joy-initiative placard. "No, actually my mother died. How would you rate the way Persuasion in the 4-ounce spray bottle makes you feel about being a woman?" Twelve other women had been asking the same questions all morning. No one needed the script anymore. Very often, interviewers went ahead and answered the questions for the respondents anyway. Ursula was partially responsible for Howdy-Boy Pizza changing its whole ad campaign. She'd answered for some of her respondents that the pepperoni should be square instead of round. That was power, grrrrl. Then, several things happened. Ursula was still thirty-six with glasses, a 1983 Honda Accord, and dead parents. The screen blipped--*you have mail!* Then it blipped again--*you have mail!*

Ursula thanked Mrs. Aldred Ramrod of Hickleweck Springs for completing the survey she hadn't entirely completed and signed off. Checked the mail with pain and hope.

*Ursula!!! I'm so sorry about Saturday!! I hope you're not mad at me. Something really big came up at the last minute--doesn't that sound awful?! But it did!! More later!! Take care!!! :-)* L-U-V, Terri!

**And then:** *Message reload. Dest.: 41F. Taylor, Ursula Renee. 331-87-8845.*

*Sr. Interviewer 65LF-O. Re. Martin Delmar, Supervisor, Consumer Product Testing, Garish Industries. Message: Mr. Delmar would like to see you in his office upstairs on your next break. Thank you. End. Close message. Reload. Garish Industries, Market Research. "You are important to Garish Industries! :-)"™.*

Ursula excused herself to the lavatory and threw up. She was thirty-six. Her parents were dead. She drove a 1983 Honda Accord with hanger-antenna and koosh ball mirror fob. She wore glasses and had bleached hair. She was known.

Eva Takes a Lover

Eva fanned herself with a piece of cardboard from the top of a tomato paste box one of the children had grown tired of playing with. She imagined it an elaborate Spanish lace fan--black with red satin and gold leaf decorations. She rocked herself slowly in the flaking metal patio chair and stared out of the pocked screens at the cracked black pavement down the hill. *So much debris and decay in the neighborhood now.* Tires, glass, and paper in yards. Dogs barking at the children who raked sticks against fences. They all interfered with her memories of the neighborhood. Her son did not care for her memories. Her grandchildren, certainly, cared even less. But what did it matter? Her son was the perfect gift of love from the perfect lover.

She watched the vapor-like heat spirits dance above the street and regarded them nostalgically. Had June yet sweat itself into July, she wondered? Suddenly, she found herself dismayed that she could not recall exactly how many years or decades of steamy summers had passed since Emre had kissed her so tenderly, since that movie-special day.

Rock and Eira fought in the kitchen. Rock had said the other day that he had finally gotten a job, but here it was 12:30 and he was just getting out of bed.

Eva just smiled and fanned, smiled and rocked in wonder at the heat spirits dancing. Rock was a good son. His beauty caused him to be misunderstood, that was all. He liked to rest and think.

A glass had broken during the yelling. They were in some other room then and the baby began crying. She remembered a time she used to get involved in the battles, but now she was old and ornamental. On holidays she was Mamma Garza with a kiss, but the rest of the year she was little more than furniture, a knick-knack, a souvenir.

The locusts began their chanting again. Perhaps the heat was lessening somewhat. A pickup truck sped by with a hard metal stutter. Eva watched it disrupt the heat spirits. They danced and circled each other. Some looked, then waved to her. She followed the truck with squinting eyes as it disappeared at the crest of the hill and was consumed by the aura of sizzling asphalt. A dribble of sweat glided down from her forehead, channeling into a wrinkle in her cheek. She wiped at it with her hand. Just then, there was a silvery glimmer where the truck had been. She looked. There it was again. Eva's heart raced and she could faintly hear guitar strings.

“Oh, Emre,” she said, shaking her head. *A pistol? A pistol! I've never been the object of such deep passion!*

~ ~ ~

It was when Eva was fourteen that everything in the world had changed.

A couple, neither of whom Eva knew, were to marry at the church. All day Eva had been play-acting wedding scenes in the basement, drawing upon an old Doris Day movie she had seen with some string of female relations whose exact ties were not clear to her. All of Doris Day's friends and family were at her wedding to the dashing businessman who would take her off to a new house in a new car with white-wall tires. They would have blond children named Scott and Becky and Chip. Rock Hudson was the husband. *A good choice, too, as he accepted all her crazy schemes with such good nature. Only a real man could do that!*

Eva hadn't done a single chore all day--she didn't even sweep the patio or hang the wash out or do the morning dishes. Ivan, her brother, would be angry at her again. She lived with Ivan, his wife, and her various intermittent aunts, cousins, and so on. Eva remembered a blue-uniform man patting her father all over with his hands when she was little, and she remembered her mother in the back of a car wearing only her bra! The car in which her mother waited was crowned with a beautiful, swirling blue light. It was more beautiful, even, than the dancing lights at the Skate-A-Licious on Locust. Eva's cousin, Rita, told her how it was a special magic light and she guessed that it must have been, for she never saw either her mother or father again. That was how she had come to live where she was living--a mattress on the musty, gray basement floor and a pillow that had pink and yellow flower decorations all over it. Ivan's wife, Juana, who Eva didn't like



because she was so bossy, told her how her mother and father had been seen by a Hollywood man who thought they were perfect for a big romance movie set in Mexico just like *Gone With the Wind*, only with haciendas instead of plantations. Her mother was crying because she had to leave so suddenly, and being a famous Hollywood star took so much time that she couldn't always be with her family.

Eva knew that her brother's wife did not like her, and Eva reasoned that this was probably due to some jealousy. Eva knew to be careful around her, she was so easily upset. Juana had no imagination. She *did* have, Eva saw, strange, intermittent fits of passion, and these spells always caught Eva off her guard, fascinated. The Wife Juana had a certain power, a certain way of creasing her thin lips into the most uncommon of smiles. She could arch her shoulders, rotating them romantically as she flutter-chirped to Ivan. The effect was such that Ivan, tired from a day of grocery work, suddenly became star struck. Captured. They would disappear for awhile, laughing like children. And this was the same woman who shouted at Eva like an angry, scolding teacher, upset at her refusal to follow "simple" directions. *Clean this. Put that away. Fold that again. What IS the matter with you, Child?*

Some neighborhood kids called Eva Fatty, and she was indeed large for her fourteen-and-a-half years, but she knew they were just jealous of her because of her parents being famous Hollywood stars. She was strong, too. Ivan often thought of her first when he needed help lifting crates of apples or lemons off of his truck to take into the market. The market boys looked at nudie magazines and sometimes tried to get Eva to take closer looks when Ivan had turned his back. She knew that if she wanted a dream baby of her

own that none of the market boys would do; they smelled like tar and old clothes and corn instead of lemons. Oh, they grabbed at her infrequently, but she could defend herself.

Those boys had no *star quality*.

She beat up Rolanda, the black girl from upstreet, who told her nobody would want to marry her because she was so fat and stupid. *What did it matter? More jealousy.*

Rolanda was stupid anyway--those big lips and kinky hair and ashy skin. Always smelling of Vaseline and cough drops. And she walked like Cyrus Stumper, the retard from school. They both lurched with big dips because one leg or the other didn't grow right. Rolanda was easy to beat up, but when Ivan's wife heard about what Eva had done she became furious.

"What's the matter with you?" she screamed, and more chores were levied.

~ ~ ~

Eva licked from her wrist the salty sweat she had wiped from her forehead. She could just hear the Wife Juana's yelling in her mind, and it made her chuckle. "*Beating on neighbor children, honestly!*" She resumed her fanning as she watched the figure at the end of the street walk to a nearby house, the one with the *new* people in it. Yes, it was a man, no question about that. Even though he was short, he carried himself with a confident sort of John Wayne gait. He *was* carrying a gun. She had thought so! And already she could hear yelling from somewhere in that house down the street, although not yet well enough to understand it. Rock and Eira were still too busy in their own flap to consider Eva's neighborhood studies. If she knew one thing, it was that raised voices were always the signs of misplaced passions, and this had long been a passionate

neighborhood. Even before Ivan and the Wife Juana made the decision to leave for *better* parts of town. Even before Rock realized the urge to take care of his mama was more powerful than his need for public school.

~ ~ ~

By the day of the wedding, Eva still had not one clean dress to wear. She was forced, instead, to squeeze herself into a hand-me-down from one of Ivan's wife's rotten, mothball relatives. Eva followed the entourage up the hot street (she couldn't find her sandals) carrying a ratty, woven basket filled with oranges from one of Ivan's produce boxes. Eva remembered that when she was in an unusually reflective mood, the Wife Juana had told a friend on the phone that her own mother swore by the fertility powers of extra-ripe oranges.

"Hurry up, Eva," Ivan's wife yelled back to her.

Eva carried a few too many oranges, for they insisted on spilling out of her basket, and she repeatedly stopped to pick them up and apologize tenderly to each one she had bruised. She wanted to look romantic and poetic--just like in that movie where the girl has all the bright red apples and all the boys talk to her.

"Honestly," said an old woman on her way to the wedding with a friend, "that child is touched."

"Satan," said the old woman's friend. "That's the neighborhood these days."

San Isobel's church on Chess Street was the pride of the aging community. Its thick, dark stone walls and leaded glass windows were sanctuary for many, religious or otherwise. A large, white paper wedding flower decorated with pink and red ribbons had

been placed above the doors to the church. Eva found a seat on the dark wooden pew next to Ivan.

The sanctuary was filled with the smell of sweat and perfume and lilies--the latter, Eva thought, a natural mixture of the first two. Heavy women in light summer frocks fanned themselves as they gossiped. The men sat silently still, sweating and nodding to one another with the minimum level of sincerity needed for the occasion. Pink, orange, and yellow flowers hung in abundance--seeming to rain from the dark recesses of the ceiling and spread their sweet perfume out to battle the other contending aromas.

Eva saw the Virgin in her grotto, standing radiantly--illuminated by a cluster of jumping flames held hostage in red jars. The rosy paint cheek on her wooden face shone serenely. Eva stared, transfixed. At any moment the Virgin might have winked or smiled or extended a hand to her.

Mina Reyes sat at the piano as she always did--today in her good blue dress with the pearl buttons down the back. Handsome men stood in fancy dress at the altar. The groom, movie-star handsome to be sure, Eva thought, stood awaiting his bride. His face glowed a bronze dampness, like a rock after rain. He turned when piano music began and a motherly-looking woman with red cheeks and sky-blue eyelids sang a Spanish song about sparrows in love. His eyes met Eva's so briefly, but *certainly long enough to be acknowledged!* How grand she felt!

The din of the sanctuary fell off as the crowd turned with a collective heave to see the bride and her attendants sashay down the aisle. "Oh, she's so beautiful!" Eva wept quietly. The bride's white dress with its intricate lace work and satin ribbons had surely

cost the family all they had. Her bridal veil was crowned with pointed rays cut from shiny silver papers. It looked to Eva like a halo of little ice stars. Eva felt an eruption of passion flowing thunderously from her heart through her stomach and down into each of her toes. Eva is parading down the aisle to her beloved because it's wonderful and it's right.

*Oh, Eva, my darling! You and no other . . . Oooh.* She closed her eyes and smiled. She and her lover were running, barely clothed, along the sandy shores of Mexico. The sun smiled at them as they hugged and kissed in a field of flowers while a hundred cellos played somewhere in the background. He kissed her toes and her elbows and she laughed and read his future in his palm, which was, of course, her future. *Oooh.*

People were on their feet clapping, snapping Eva's hold upon her fantasy. *They must be married now.* A happy fugue of salutations and laughter filled the hall.

The basement of the church reminded Eva, when comparing musty old smells, of her own squalid mattress room, except everything here was *happening*, and happening *fast*. People chatted and laughed. Trumpeters and mariachis played lively tunes while people danced across the green and white checked tiles. The *speed* of the revelry, of the *living* sparked a near-queasy whirl of overindulgence--of powder and paint and sweat and cake, tortillas and cigars. Eva could not fix on one image before another flashed before and out again.

"Where is he?" she wondered. "Where is *my* man?" She saw Ivan dancing with his wife. She saw Mina Reyes dancing with the elder Mr. Bracca. Then she saw stupid Rolanda dancing, for want of a better word, with Tonio from the tracks. This angered

her. No one wanted Fatty. Why, oh why? She turned to leave, looking down at her tattered, too-small, triple hand-me-down dress that stretched to cover her big flesh. She looked down at her dirty bare feet. A screeching sound shook her attentions. The Wife Juana was shouting to her. The crowd was parting.

“Eva! Come over here!” she snapped. The mass of people was assembling into a line and Eva had been caught off guard. “Honestly,” said Ivan’s wife, “sometimes I think you were sent here to punish me. Get in line and behave.”

Eva trudged, head down, to Ivan’s side, avoiding his wife, whose coldness was stinging her. *How could that woman ever know about love?* When Ivan tried to explain that the guests would be meeting the bride for congratulations, Eva brightened immediately. Ivan’s wife wanted to ensure there would be no embarrassments, and Eva heard her mention to Ivan something about the basket and putting it away, but Eva’s head swirled only with the thrill of touching the new bride, of somehow contacting whatever it was within a bride that might have made a man want her for his own. Maybe she could touch one of the fragile ice stars in the beautiful bride’s crown? Eva leaned forward excitedly to check the progression of the line. Upon his wife’s insistence, Ivan put his arm in front of Eva, bringing her back in line.

“Won’t you put the basket away, Eva?” Ivan asked, exasperated. She did not react. “Well, then keep quiet. Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

And the bride grew ever closer, glowing white. She smiled at each person in line, young and old. She met eyes with Eva, looked at Eva’s feet, then to Ivan--who smiled

painfully--and then back to Eva, whose eyes glazed over at the power of the bride's halo. Eva reached for one of the shiny points, and there was a cracking.

The basket Eva held snapped and gave up its contents to the floor. Oranges fell, then rolled about. The old clucking hens nearby felt cued to mention again how oddly pathetic the girl was. "Just smart enough to know she's irreparably stupid, poor thing." The bride, momentarily chagrined but admirably maintaining her composure, stepped over and around the spilled fruit as though the next person in line was all that mattered. The next person in line would have been Ivan, but instead it was a boiling, embarrassed wife of Ivan, who apologized profusely, pointing out that the girl was not hers. Ivan escorted a bewildered Eva away from the line by arm, and into the dark hallway.

"*You* wait here until we come back. You've done enough for one day." His nostrils expanded and contracted like plastic bags caught in fences in the wind.

She felt small and horrible. Everyone would be laughing. At that instant, she thought only of Ivan's anger at her for abusing his fruit and of his wife's inevitable shrieking at her for her *all-time low*. She sank against the wall to her backside, plopping onto the slick, cold floor. She couldn't breathe; she couldn't cry. She didn't know what to think beyond *bad, stupid*. A thin man stood before her. He held a ratty, badly-made basket and some battered oranges.

"Are you all right?" he asked. She recognized him as San Isobel's janitor. He didn't wait for an answer before kneeling down and setting the tired basket next to her with its few, lumpy oranges. He was getting up. She had to think of something to say to make him stay.

“Oh, but my ankle!” She reached for her left ankle and he remained near her. From head to foot he was thin and rigidly featured, with a big Peruvian nose. His butterscotch hair was neatly combed to the left, falling just above his eyebrow.

“Let me help you up,” he said. “Maybe you would like to rest?”

“Will you take me *somewhere*?” Eva asked.

“Take you?”

“To sit,” she went on. He appeared relieved. “Somewhere less crowded?”

“There’s a bench in the cloak room, or, or, the padded chair in the Father’s office.”

“Oh, yes, please. There.” He loved her. She could feel it.

As they walked cautiously down the dark-tiled hallway toward the Father’s office, Eva felt her flesh against his arm and strained to catch any signifying scent of him. The delicate man opened the door to the office--a sparse affair with a desk, bookshelf, crucifix, portrait of the Virgin, and the chair, rumply-riddled with a thousand buttons in valleys between fat green leather bulges. He reached for the light switch.

“Oh, no, please. I like it here without the light,” she said, smiling.

He helped Eva into the chair. He had been carrying the battered basket with its few remaining oranges and set it down, sad and frayed, at her feet.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Emre,” he said. He seemed as frail as a *papier-mâché* crèche figure. “I work here.”

“I know you work here,” she said. “When will the cellos play?”

“Well,” he sigh-whispered, tensely eager to go, “if you’re all right then--”

“Please stay. Talk with me some.”



“I really shouldn’t. I--”

“Oh, please, Emre.” She rose from the chair and hobbled carefully to the door, pushed it closed, and the laughter and merriment down the hall seemed miles away.

Emre looked everywhere but at her. He swallowed big gulps of air and felt his heartbeats through quick mouth-breaths. Eva spoke up. “Let me see your palm.”

“What?”

“I can see into your future if you give me your palm,” she said, inventing all her palmistry steps on the spot. She thought of Ivan’s wife’s magic and arched her shoulder slowly upward, slowly back. She felt feline.

He reluctantly gave over his quivering hand. She touched it as though it were a sacred relic--it was hot, and the fingers spread out thin like spider legs. She followed the creases in his palm with her fingers, dreaming of beds full of fresh-cut flowers and a halo of little ice stars about her head. She felt his blood rushing. A lava flow was beginning as she grabbed his hand tightly and arose, throwing her heavy arms around his wan frame and forcefully kissing him. He lurched back, gasping for breath. “No!” he shouted, voice cracking.

Eva was consumed by her passions. She tore at the little man like a ravenous child with the first Christmas package.

“Please! No! I don’t--” he said between her intruding kisses. They fell first against the desk and then to the floor. Eva pinned the little man to the ground, straddling him, her legs fumbling like a child trying to get comfortable on a tree limb. She released him from

his trousers, thought of the nudie-market-boys, and loved him amidst the slightly bruised oranges.

After a few months it became clear that Eva was not lying about being pregnant, and when endless immaculate conception yarns began to wear even her out, she admitted to a secret love affair with a dangerous man. Ivan's wife was, naturally, skeptical.

Emre fled each time Eva tried to meet with him and this told her the affair must be kept secret. Maybe people were after him. Maybe he desired the priesthood and now was in conflict with his soul over his love for her. It wasn't impossible.

After considerable prodding from his nagging wife, Ivan demanded to know who the father of Eva's baby really was. She would never tell. Their bond was stronger than-- stronger than what? Romeo and that girl? No. Well, their bond was strong.

For several weeks Eva wrote love notes and vows of fidelity to her Emre. She had to make do with Big Chief tablet paper leftover from school, with its not-quite-white, not-quite-beige pallor, and thin, red guidelines split by dotted blue lines. She preferred the romance of delicate, monogrammed stationary scented, perhaps, with rose water or Chanel No. 5, but she felt certain Emre would prefer the sincerity of Big Chief tablet paper. Fancy scented notes only attracted attention. Before turning her bed light out at night, she composed the best, most blushinglly hopeful letters she could imagine. How she wished she had studied more last year in school! She left the notes in special places in the church where she felt sure he would sweep or dust or whatever he did there. In the Bible holders behind pews, on the ledges of stained-glass windows, atop the push-button of the drinking fountain--*Don't worry, love. We have all the time in the world. Do you like*

*breakfast in bed? I can make French toast!* “Oh, Mamma,” she thought. “Película Madre, if you could just see my Emre. Maybe he could go to Hollywood, too.”

One afternoon when Eva had gone to help Ivan carry boxes, the Wife Juana discovered a note while *cleaning*. It was a half-finished note, a neatly-folded piece of faded Big Chief tablet paper marked with eraser-crumbles and penciled words like *forver* and *matrimany*. Right under Eva’s pillow with the pink and yellow flower decorations. Nearby was a rather *used* Big Chief writing tablet. *Ta-da!* Ivan’s wife pocketed the evidence and waited on the porch with a glass of lemonade, fanning herself ruthlessly. That night Ivan confronted Eva in the basement.

“Yes, it’s true. We’re lovers.” Her eyes welled up with love, with fear, with pride. “But I swore I would never betray him.”

“What? You’re fourteen, Child!”

“Nearly fifteen!” Silence. “Ivan, it’s true! There are evil men after him!”

Ivan stared at his sister with a sense of pity and anger. How could they be related? What was his crime that he had been saddled with this deluded girl for so long? When she thwarted his every effort to help her, to guide her? He was long past the stage at which neighbors and parishioners had pity for him. She was the recurrent inflammation, the nagging itch, the dripping faucet that every man had to contend with at some point--a too-long-put-off thing he could no longer ignore. But *this*. Something had to give, or *burst*. Had she been raped, perhaps? By the church *janitor*? Of all people. Ivan’s temples throbbed. Things would surely get out sooner or later. “I have to make this right,” he said. He resolved to find Emre that night and make him accountable for his deeds.

Eva yelled her protestations and was locked--for her safety--in the basement that night, where she shrieked into her pillow for fear Ivan would kill her beloved. "Mama, help me!" she cried. "Help us!" Her shrieking yielded to sobs and a sore stomach. Surely Ivan wouldn't *kill* the father of her child! She tried to smile and think of the warm spot in her belly which warmed half a mind of Emre--a child, a voice, a star. Maybe Ivan would bring Emre home. Eva looked up at the locked door. *Locked!* She cried again.

Ivan, tall and strong, located Emre's crumbling shack, leaning tiredly against the back wall of a groceria. Its white, peeling paint flecked the dirt and grass around it with summer snow. Ivan was puzzled by the sight of a shiny sedan parked before the house. It was from the suburbs--new and not yet dented or scratched. Ivan stepped onto the rotting porch and heard laughter and grunting inside. His rage grew for this despicable man who had so confused his sister. Upon another round of insidious laughter Ivan thrust open the door and gasped at what he saw. Wan, naked Emre, wine glass in hand, on the fold-out sofa bed with a white, naked man from the suburbs. "What in God's name?"

"Who the hell are you?" Suburb-man yelled at him. He turned to Emre and barked, "Who is he?"

Emre squinted and leaned forward slowly before recognizing Ivan, and suddenly shot upright, spilling his drink. He gathered sheets up around himself as if for protection.

"You disgusting piece of garbage," Ivan shouted.

The naked, white suburb man leaned in to Ivan. "Buddy, you better haul your ass out of here," he said with a trace of a country drawl.

Ivan's temples pulsed. He was aware of his heart beat in odd places, his neck, his arm, his ears.

"I'm tellin' you, Jack!" the naked man said.

Ivan balled a fist and threw it at him without thinking. The man deflected the blow with his forearm. Emre cowered behind the sheets and tipped over the yellowish bedside lamp.

"This is bullshit," the white man said. "You're fucking nuts, Man. Get out of my way!" He strode, confidently naked, out the door and got into his car, where he turned on the ignition, and sped away.

Emre looked at Ivan, whose fist was still shaking towards him. Emre opened his mouth to deliver a drunken explanation, despite his quivering, his lost breath, and his dry mouth. As he tried to speak, he grew more afraid because the words that came out made his story sound like it were some sickening and untrue delusional invention. ". . . and it was *she* who did this, not me! I could do nothing!"

"What kind of a man are you?" Ivan shouted.

"Isn't it clear?" Emre said, his tongue feeling inflated and somewhat numb.

Ivan was perplexed by this obvious and unsettling new information. What did happen, he wondered? *This kind of a man won't make a fool out of me!* Ivan hit into the deliriously shaking Emre, breaking him stick by stick. Emre cried out in pain at each blow. Ribs cracked, skin split, and flesh swelled. Ivan left the pathetic, shaking Emre drunk, bleeding, vomiting, and crying on the fold-out sofa bed in the decrepit shack with the peeling white paint. Emre lurched like a squirrel hit but not killed in a road. Ivan

would have to force Eva to face reality and deliver the truth about the pregnancy, whatever it might be.

Emre found breathing a great and painful labor, but the amount of alcohol in him eased matters somewhat. His head was a great overripe melon ready to explode. Would Ivan tell everyone? Would he be forced from another job? And Eva said she loved him so. She left him little notes at San Isobel's, proclaiming her eternal fidelity. Did she feel remorse for what she had done? Had she done something wrong? He could no longer recall. He . . . loved her, yes? No. Well . . . his life would be made ever painful by Ivan spreading filth about him. *This kind of a man won't make a fool out of me!* Emre spilled out of the creaking sofa bed and fumbled at the drawer in the console nearby. From this he retrieved the silver-plated, purse-sized revolver he'd found in San Isobel's cloak room. He would go to the house of Garza and solve this before sunlight.

The Wife Juana succumbed to Eva's hours-long crying tirade in the basement and let her out on the condition that she sit alone and silent on the porch and not bother anybody. Indeed, she was sitting on the porch as Ivan, sweating and frenzied, returned from his visit to Emre. Purple-brown splotches of blood glistened on his arm and Eva thought, briefly, of the mess made after eating mulberries from the tree that used to be next door. Ivan's hands were swollen. He rushed to Eva, breathing hard, and grabbed her by both shoulders in an uneasy marriage of rage and pity.

"What have you done?" Ivan shouted.

"What have *you*?" she cried.

“Do you even *know* the truth, you stupid girl? He *couldn't* be the father, could he? Could he?”

Eva began to sob again and the Wife Juana yelled from inside the house for her to be silent.

And then there was the glimmer from up the street Eva remembered so well. A thin man with a small, shiny gun caught her eye. He made his way down the street, swaggering and waving the gun about. “Emre!” Eva shouted. Ivan swirled around. The little man, Emre, reached the foot of the Garza house, and stared up at the characters on the porch--Ivan, sweaty in his tee shirt and dark trousers, in the doorway, Eva eagerly at the porch railings, and a bitter-looking woman with high, black hair and pursed lips behind her, watching.

“Ivan Garza!” Emre stammered into the darkening sky.

“Get out of here!” Ivan yelled. He turned to the Wife Juana and laughed loud enough for Emre to feel its stabbings.

“I can defend *myself*, you--” He swallowed hard and wanted to leave. “You COWARD!” *What* had he said?

Ivan’s surprise at Emre’s taunt gave way to delight. “*What* did you say? Oh, the Chihuahua gets brave! Is that it, now?” He looked to the small gun and then at Emre. Neighbors appeared on porches and curtains parted in living rooms. “Put that thing away before I beat you to death with it, you sick little *woman*.”

“He’s the father, Ivan!” Eva shouted through tears. The Wife Juana tried to pull her back from the rails. “He is! He *is!*”

“Aach, Eva! He doesn’t even know what to do with a woman!” Ivan sneered down at the swaying Emre. “He can’t even hold a gun like a man.”

The Wife Juana pushed forward. “Did you rape this girl?” She pointed at him, and then at Eva, with ruby-painted nails. “Did you? Bastard!”

*Don’t tolerate this, Emre told himself. This is your chance! People are watching! He lifted the gun and pointed and then withdrew it. He looked at the rows of houses on both sides of the street. People were watching, were paying attention. What if I was that man? The kind of man who could rape a girl? He imagined the kind of power such a public display might actually bring to him. Everyone knew there was something about him, anyway. What if he were that kind of man? Maybe it can be!* He raised the gun with a new confidence.

“Darling, I will always love you!” Eva cried. *He had come for her!*

This startled Emre and disrupted his concentration and his drunken aim at Ivan. He stood still, swayed a bit more, then tried hard to focus on the large and sickening girl who had attacked him. “Eva Garza!”

“Yes! Yes, my love!”

“I will--” He stumbled for balance. *You can be this man.* “I will love you ‘til the end of time, Sweet One!” He looked confused by what he had just shouted. “*My Sweet One!*”

“Yes! Yes, my love!” How her heart soared!

“But you know evil men are after me, and I must fly!”



Eva thought of her parents, now famous in Hollywood and understood. She gazed lovingly at her beautiful man as he shakily raised the silver gun and tried to aim it at Ivan, who stood, arms crossed, aghast.

Emre's arm was uncooperative, alternately numb and sharply painful. He waited for control, his wet fingers straining at the handle, the trigger. *Think about Love!* The characters up on the porch were as motionless as coffee cans set up on fence posts. *Just one squeeze! You are this man.* The tingling heat in his arm whooshed from wrist to elbow like mercury. The muscles in his arm, his wrist, his fingers contracted at once, his arm contorted sideways, downward, and there was a brilliant *shot* in the dusk and both Eva and the Wife Juana screamed with arms upraised. The side of Emre's head was wet with purple mulberry and he let out a confused sort of yodel-cry as he dropped the revolver. Emre had shot his own right ear clean from the side of his head. Pop! Everyone stood motionless as the pop echoed and the ear, with some fleshy bits, took flight, arcing gently in its skyward path and its eventual swanlike decent onto the Garza steps. Some officious neighbor, a suspiciously friendly Chinaman to whom the Garzas never spoke, rushed to Emre and took hold of his shoulder and arm. The suspicious Chinaman, Eva assumed, must have taken him to medical attention. The neighborhood did not see Emre again. Eva tenderly picked up the ear, warm and wet, and somewhat sticky. Something like a jellyfish washed ashore. It was a beautiful token of his love. She kissed it tenderly, apologizing quietly to it for all it had endured, and saved it in a pickling jar in place of a photo of her beloved. Next to the jar, after the pains of separation became more intense, Eva placed offerings and candles. She cleared a special shelf that had once

been reserved for detergents but which became Eva's orange-peel-scented, altar-candle-lit shrine to her beloved. The Wife Juana, of course, worried about fires, but then the baby did finally come and all agreed Eva would do well to light candles only at church--*or in her heart*. Often, when the baby cried and kept everyone awake, Eva would cry as well. They both needed their protectors. And she wondered, briefly, why she had never seen Doris Day or Rock Hudson awake at two in the morning in a mildewy basement in the bad part of town, trying desperately to quiet a screeching baby. She tried and tried to see Emre in the yellowish wrinkles of its fat head as it wailed and she cried herself. When her baby, Rock Garza, was older, the nights of endless cryings and feeding did not matter so much--*he had such amazing eyes! Emre could see her through those eyes, surely.*

~ ~ ~

As this new summer afternoon became evening, Mamma Garza, fanning herself with a box lid, watched the man coming up the street with a gun. What memories indeed! The gunman went to a house within sight and began to yell. Chinese! This, to her, signaled the sad decline of the neighborhood. The occupants of the house yelled back and shots were fired. Several shots pop-popped like little celebratory firecrackers at a wedding festival.

Rock rushed to the porch, fearing the kind of violence that had caused his uncle to take his family and move away not so long ago. "Mama! Get inside!" He knew well his mother's ability to see everything, even the horrible, as somehow worthwhile if hearts were involved. There were never bad hearts in her mind, only lost ones. This was why he both pitied her and loved her more than anyone else. He grabbed at the woman's arm,

warm and doughy. She resisted, pointing down the street, eyes glazed. “Oh, Mamma,” Rock said, somewhat dejected, somewhat afraid, somewhat with love.

Soon the decorated automobiles appeared with their beautifully swirling lights on their roofs to take the parties to Hollywood. It was love, surely, she said to herself as she watched the lights, those lovely things. She closed her eyes and fell asleep dreaming of a halo of little ice stars about her head, her son’s warm hand on her shoulder.

## La Mortalidad de Augurios

She should have known. Should have know there would be a crowd, but nothing like this. Then she remembered. *That's why the Calle Florida is so packed!* The American cartoon movie was showing there. You could have followed the unnaturally-colored, pancake-sized, movie-themed leaves on all the storefronts! She was nearing the CineMetropol and bodies were becoming close. All these bodies sucking her in like a twig in the rapids. She was brushing against leathers and mohairs and alpacas and minks. Roasting nuts, cigarette smoke, Chanel No. 5, Herrera, bad breath, and the farts of children. The disco chunka chunka chunka of "*Mal Bicho*," pink and green neon, unsympathetic cobblestones pushing her shoe heels hard into her feet. Hands-in-gloves, shaded eyes, smears of lipstick, whiskers, nostrils, hair conditioner, and sharp corners of shopping bags. College girls with long, straight hair pulled back in tails screamed for the rights of babies with AIDS as they thrust pamphlets into dead hands that let them fall and scatter like unnaturally-colored leaves.

Suddenly the crush began and Maribel, unable to take a step of her own any more, found her arms pressed sharply into her ribcage. The film had let out, and buckets of frenzied bodies poured into the Calle Florida beginning a wild gush of shouting and shoving and smelling and touching. Men grew furious, cussing. Women with children clung to them like tigresses, shouting back at the cussing men to cease such language. Bodies lurched forward, sideways, all ways. Maribel felt her feet leave the pavement.

What could one do in such a crush but fight to breathe and pray for a doorway? Elbows in her back, a child's face in her thigh. She held stiff her neck for fear of damaging her nose. She wanted to reach up and touch her bandage, but it was no use. Too many bodies too close in on her. She had heard of people dying his way, never to fall flat, being pushed along the Calle Florida, upright and dead, by the living. No police anywhere. Her ears began to ring. A great surge threw her almost five feet to the left. She scanned above and between heads for any opening into which she might possibly squeeze. A stomp on her right foot, a hand in her crotch. She nearly bit the back of a woman's head, black, wavy hair. Her feet left the ground and she quickly began to cry while imagining futbol stampedes at La Boca and elsewhere. A frantic mother was separated from her child. The noise. People began shouting for help and for God and for the Holy Virgin. For anything. All this noise.

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“Know how to read the signs!” That was her motto. The problem, though, as she saw it, was that the language of signs had to be universal--*it just had to be*, but nobody

seemed to have the definitive phrasebook. To be sure, Porteños know a women's baño because of the pictogram, and they know that with a few lights and shapes they must go or stop--that was easy. Maribel was a master of the other signs, those moments so many of us write off as coincidence or, worse, as nothing at all beyond strange, meaningless occurrences. A lily growing through a crack in the pavement on the Avenida Cabildo, a white sparrow at your feet near a dock in Tigre. God, or the Earth, was in the details. Not a broken mirror, though! That cliché had made it to Buenos Aires at last. People may be born ugly, or, as they grow, hint in that direction--just like the buildings in this city. But, for God's sake, these things can be fixed!

~ ~ ~

The subway car clacked its way toward Calle Florida, the shopping district's lifeline. A sickly, unflattering white light showcased the flaws of every passenger--dips in cheekbones, uneven skin-tones, brassy hair, Peruvian noses. Would any of them suddenly tell her what might happen? She sat with her back to the smeared window. She felt pain in her nose again. She hadn't been taking her pills. The big, white bandage had sufficed in comforting her since the procedure. Maybe it was all the jostling.

A man in a dark suit and too old for his slicked-back hair stood in front of her, grasping a handle. He stunk of sweat and his pant leg brushed back and forth against Maribel's leg. Was *this* it? She made the mistake of meeting eyes with him. He clearly couldn't tango. He nodded, smiled, and raised his eyebrows twice. She thought of a stool, as it flushed in her head. The subway car clacked onward, jostling its occupants like the last cracker-cookies in a box.

A filthy little girl in a ripped dress and too-small coat waddled down the aisle, placing unsharpened pencils in the hands, or on the laps, of each passenger. Some waved the child off. She had no expressions. Was *this* it? Maribel read the paper tied to the pencil: *Please help a homeless child. A day of luck for you.* The girl was slowly making her way back through the crowd as she and hundreds of others did every day, collecting small change or else reclaiming the pencils. No one looked at the child as she took back pencils from cold hands and off of cold laps. Robotic--this is what she did. That was bad enough, but this child also bore the *tragedy* of a harelip! Maribel gave the child some small change and a smile. The child took the money, her tiny, rough hand dragged slowly against Maribel's. The light of joy Maribel expected to see never appeared. The child moved on to the next car. The sweat-reeking man looked down at Maribel and remarked with a laugh that the filthy child had been on the make for forty years.

Maribel looked up at him, newly strong because of the way the lights ignited the white of her bandage. "Little men like you disgust me."

The man arched one eyebrow.

The train stopped and the doors beeped. Bodies lurched with the brakes. The doors slid apart. Maribel clasped her calfskin bag and hurried past the sweat-reeking man, who cut her.

"Fat bitch."

The subway car doors slid shut. Maribel closed her eyes and inhaled the coldness of the remark. For a minute everything in the world shut down. *Fat. Bitch.* And then she was bumped awake by a passer-by. She was back in living noise.



Fashionable people with Harrods's bags and mink coats passed this way and that way. She was surrounded by people. Painted women in bandages who reeked of jasmine and heliotrope and chypher walked proudly along the tiles toward the stairs, smiling in sisterhood with Maribel's attack. One woman raised her gloved hand in absolution as her bangles jangled down her wrist. Maribel needed to fall on the stairs, to collapse to the floor, to close her eyes and lean backward for a catch. Maribel was surrounded by people. She didn't know where she was going.

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She sat up in the bed, bandage still tightly in place. The feeling was coming back into her nose now, all the blood would soon be rushing around as lively as ever, and she knew she needed to get home and lie down--take the pills to reduce the bruising (She wouldn't do that, of course. Nobody wanted to *reduce* the bruising! Doctors!).

She looked at her clothes on his floor. This apartment was awful--nothing on the walls. How does a man live like this, with nothing on the white walls? What have you got to look at then? The chair? The radio? The bed? The zigzag parquet? Who doesn't have zigzag parquet? She looked out the window at another flat, grey, August afternoon. Skyless. Just city cement fudge for clouds, into which all the buildings nudged (three days in a row, after all, meant a frigid winter indeed). She kept her eyes on a strange black shape hovering in the distance, over the rooftops and in between the shuttered apartment high-rise balcony windows. A pilot had just reported another OVNI in Bariloche, you know, so everybody's looking at the sky for aliens these days. They could be anywhere. It was probably a big bird, but its lack of forward motion taxed her and made her head

throb in the back. The Radio City deejay said “Shareel Krouw” had just sung. Was it a crow? That’s a bad sign. Maribel blinked. Tilted her head. The crow is not a crow. It’s not an OVNI. It’s dirt. There is a dirt speck on the window. Sunlight stabbed briefly through the winter fudge to embarrass her as it hit the glass.

The man in the bed mumbled, asleep. Maribel looked at him. In a one room shoe box like this you’d think he’d have *something* on the walls. You’d think he’d at least have left the balcony blinds open so a lonely neighbor might have watched--it could have been a sign of good things to come for somebody. People can be signs, too, after all.

She thought his name was Carlos, but he couldn’t tango. Argentina’s gift to the world was, of course, a sacred language. Knowledge of tango was crucial in any man. These days, though, she met too many men who simply didn’t know the right steps. You can’t just thrust your leg into some woman and fling her around the tiles pell-mell. Not an Argentine woman, anyway. Maybe some cheap negro chicas from Montevideo, but *not* a Porteña.

Sometimes men, *some* men, waited in front of the clinics to see what came out. It was her first procedure ever, and she was almost 25! Nose job, this. She had been saving for the right doctor, but with the new government plan, now anyone could do it, *and should!* The mumbling man in the bed was suitably suave at the time, and she could always just tell Diego she had been groggy from the anesthesia. Men liked to be the first to have the new woman. Get something lifted or sucked out or pushed up and it was as if the Blessed Virgin had reinstated your hymen. *And now she was finally rid of that horrible Peruvian proboscis!*

She knew it was all going right for a change, everything told her so. Finding a single, gold earring on the subway last week, rose petals in the toilet at her mother's favorite restaurant. She *knew* men were in her future. Why hadn't she found *two* earrings? Clearly, something was wrong with her face. Maribel didn't know what the rose petals meant, but she knew what to do about her face. Still, men often did not appreciate the diplomacy involved in making love to a nose job. For the man next to her in this bed, it would be someone else tomorrow--or this evening perhaps. He had *that kind of hair*.

She took a grape from the bunch on the kitchen countertop, burgundy seedless from Ecuador--in winter, no less. The man in the bed must have used all his energy on her, which she saw as a disappointing pity. "Rrrrrradio City!" the macho from the clock radio boasted, followed by a series of electronic-video-game-bleats, something like lightening strikes. Maribel secured her heavy coat and threw her calfskin bag over her shoulder. All days off should be so nice.

Freezing wind can be a shocking thing when you've had a nose job. Suddenly, the bones and cartilage in your face seem to communicate their displeasure intimately with your teeth. Perhaps it was good to numb things a bit. Besides, stares like the ones she was getting now made it all worthwhile. Two men in natty blue suits revved their approval at her passing, and an ugly girl looked quickly at her then away.

Here in Palermo, all she had to do to get to the Norté Market was cross the park. She was going for pills but forgot to get them. When you enter a groceria in the Capital Federal in mid afternoon it's easy to forget what you came for. Maribel spotted three of the most amazing fur coats she had ever seen at a Norté Market--leopard, fox, mink.

These were *women*. The one with the nutria stole and matching gloves--must have taken hours for the hair--stood in produce, inspecting some shiny red peppers. She was partially bandaged across the eyes and forehead. Because today Maribel could be bold, she went into produce. Why not? The poor staff girl at the produce scale might feel doubly unattractive today.

Maribel took a taxi to the Cementario de Recoleta. She had a spot there she liked. *Every girl should have a spot she likes.* "I did it," she told him. "What do you think? I'm rather proud of it, actually." She turned her head, slowly, from left to right. She didn't know anything about the family of this crypt but the statue of the heroic and muscular warrior drew her there anytime she felt she had something particularly worth saying. *It's not like I'm crazy or something. I know how it looks. I know it's a statue.* In a huge city such as this, the cementario was an island of calm, the dead's suburb. For Maribel, the crisscrossing avenues of lavish stone vaults, with their iron and glass doors, their sparkling mosaics and rococo statuary symbolized, well, death. It was Disneyland in reverse. "I hope it makes mama happy. I hope it gets me a good man." She studied his soft, white face. The warrior's mouth gaped in a furious shout, his eyes looked to the heavens, and his bulging arms clasped the darkly-veined black marble crypt. Dead leaves blew past her feet. Car horns battled jackhammers beyond the walls of the cementario. Quite a sight just above--against the matte gray swath of sky darted a klatch of very black birds, maybe a hundred black dots, like lumps of coal tossed into the sky. They scattered, but never fell. They separated and converged and became a strange sort of unit, undulating from fat blob to thin squiggle in seconds. Maribel knew a metaphor for

weight-loss when she saw it. She looked back to the statue, who held his mouth agape. “Busy day! Have to get home to change and see mama.” She looked at her feet. “It’s the miracle today.”

When she got up that morning, before the surgery, before the man who couldn’t tango, and before the cementario, she had found a fist-sized ball of aluminum foil on the balcony of the flat she shared with Lola. *It was like a star fallen from the heavens!* This would be a special day, maybe a miracle for her.

Lola and Maribel had gone to secretarial school together. They weren’t close, just single. Lola had the tendency for destructive self-examination many fat girls with Peruvian-looking noses often had. Lola was unattractive and Maribel used to be. That’s why she had to find a man. She knew Diego was sleeping with Lola. He thought Lola was Maribel’s best friend, so that was why. That was the story of men. A miracle today should be in the cards. She felt due for one.

“I’m so proud of you, dear one.” Maribel’s mother reached up to pat her cheek. She was a small, weathered woman, somewhat overpowered by the stateliness of her attire. Maribel did not understand her mother’s fascination with the purple mohair sweater with the heavily-padded shoulders. Perhaps it was her way of telling her daughter she had shouldered too many of her burdens. Silent pauses made the old woman nervous. They were waiting in line outside the convent among the pious and the curious and the bored. Maribel felt almost like embracing her mother for warmth. It was the third time since they had arrived that her mother told her she was proud of her--meaning the nose job, of course.

They reached a ledge as they stood in line and Maribel sat on it, her mother scolding her. Maribel looked away. A large, blue leaf tottered across the street, caught in a chilly gust of wind that also sent newspapers and other garbage flying into little urban tornadoes. A red leaf. A purple leaf. She had seen these before. Earlier. The line advanced in a trickle. People bobbed and swayed. Few talked. Maribel alternately saw the notion of visiting the miracle of the stool as pathetic and portentous. Traveling to see a Virgin in a toilet should be private, it was so disgusting to think of. *But how disgusted are you willing to be for faith? For hope? Maybe it was a test.*

A blue, cardboard leaf the size of a pancake rolled by on its edges. She remembered the walls of the subways were plastered with them, part of the come-on of the omnipresent new American animated movie that had just opened. Pictures of cartoon Indians in boats seemed to be floating by on every shop window. Everywhere the city was littered with unnaturally colored leaves the size of pancakes. This meant nothing. Maybe it would mean something tomorrow.

All the old woman's questions about the actual pain of Maribel's operation gave way to the inevitable "maybe I should have one done" statement and the crushing "your father, rest his soul, would be so proud." Another face pat.

"Move ahead, Mama."

The woman trundled forward. Her dead husband's last mortal action had been to send a teenage Maribel to a clinic for fat girls for *improvements*. It was nice to get away from familial cuts into her fragile psyche about her size, and trade them in for cuts into her

fragile psyche about her size from absolute strangers with cold hands and strange instruments. She came home smaller, indeed. And the bastard died.

“I’m so proud of you, Dear One.”

“Enough, Woman--”

The old woman rummaged in her calfskin bag, withdrawing a ball of tissue paper which she opened carefully. Small, metal objects clinked. “I have one for my arthritis--” *Oh, look. A golden right arm charm.* “--and one for my swelling ankles, Deíos Mío--” *Oh, look. Little golden legs. Why not wear them in your ears?* “--and, oh where is that? And this one for you, Darling.” *Good Christ, is that a penis or a baby?*

“I don’t need your help to get a man, you silly woman!”

“Well, it can’t hurt,” her mother said, returning the offerings to her purse. She wore enormous, tortoise shell sunglasses. They were octagonal.

The line advanced again. They were next to the stone archway of the entrance. Two chatty ladies exited with sweeping hand gestures, blurring red nail polish. One said “fantastico” and the other nodded while mentioning a surprisingly bad odor.

“Somebody has to think of you, Darling. If not me, who? You dream all your days and take no action. I’m not blind. I’m not so old.” She stopped and stared at Maribel. “You’re like a sheep without a shepherd, you are,” she said, nodding. “Like a sheep without a shepherd.”

Maribel could feel her nose becoming fat. She nudged her mother forward. You don’t let your mother know you’re glad about anything she does concerning your welfare

when she tells you you're like a sheep without a shepherd--it only makes her shoulder pads grow larger. "I'm not!"

"You are! Diego's no good," she said, pointing a finger up at Maribel. It shook. "Have you seen him eye Lola? I'd say what *she* is but we're at the convent." She looked up at Maribel and crossed herself as her eyes disappeared in the thick of her sunglasses like leaves under ice.

When a nun has a bowel movement no one really thinks that much about it. No one remarks ill or well of the deed. No one stops to describe it in the bowl, its color, shape, style, consistency. To hear some tell it, nun's probably shouldn't *have* bowel movements. Well, this nun did--and she called the papers.

Maribel's mother had to cover her nose with her gloved hand as she bent over the white, porcelain stool. It was in a small water closet that smelled of age and ivory soap and, well, the obvious reeking Virgin. Two plain pillows had been laid before the stool and a corkboard had been propped up against the cracked, white tile wall onto which hundreds of small metal appendages had been affixed--arms, legs, torsos, penis-babies. All were gleaming, illuminated by the crooked candles, waxed onto the window sill. Maribel's mother examined the stool's contents and remarked how nice some incense would have been. She knelt and said a prayer, crossing herself.

It *did* look like something after all. A face, somewhat feminine and sad-looking. A small, upward-curving portion along the bowlside may have been a hand raised in absolution. Maribel couldn't remember the last time she looked into her own stool. *Well, really. Who would? Men? The stool! Was that where to look, after all?* This was a



good day for her nose job--she absorbed none of this. Still, she said a prayer and crossed herself before leaving. It had supposedly cured a crippled girl yesterday, why not today, too? *What has the world come to if you can't rely on the toilets anymore?*

*One week and no miracle!* Maribel was crying in the cementario. What else do you do when you catch Diego *en flagrante* with your flatmate when you knew all along but still didn't want to catch them? The warrior wasn't giving her anything. She wished she *had* smelled the Virgin. "So I'm a sheep without a shepherd," she said. Silence. A purple, cardboard leaf the size of a pancake blew by. "Lola got Diego and soon Mama will have no arthritis and I will be typing phone billings into a computer who loves me about as much as you do."

An American couple passed through a lane of nearby vaults saying things like "I'll be darned," and "Evita ain't this one either." Maribel looked up at the warrior. A pigeon had struck him in a perfect streak across the face. He hadn't blinked. Hadn't noticed her bandage was off, revealing her black and blue, but smaller nose. She fished around in her calfskin bag for the bandage she knew she would keep for a long time. The tape was still good, so she pulled off the lint and stray hairs. She taped the bandage back to her face. She hadn't needed it for a week, but more people approved of her with it on. Where, once, she could have imagined the statue's replies to her there now was nothing, no response. Maribel frowned. "WE ARE THROUGH!" she announced.

The Americans stood and stared. "I'll be," the man said.

Maribel clutched tightly her calfskin bag and ran to the subway. She needed to be approached. She needed to be approached about change. She saw a wounded dog. It made her feel optimistic.

And so Maribel found herself sucked into the frenzied mob on the Calle Florida having never received any indication such a thing might occur. She thought she must be slipping. She was, after all, preoccupied, although not so much, as one might imagine, with the possibility of her asphyxiated carcass being pushed down the city's digestive tract like a stale empanada. What brought her to this uncomfortable, and *crowded*, predicament, was, of course, a desperate need to be pointed in the right direction. And *love*. Of course.

"Maribel," Diego had said, "I barely even *know* you. Are you crazy? What have you been telling people?" *So he's Lola's fiancé. So she's moving away.* She had to find a man. She didn't know which way to flow. More people were shouting. Someone spit.

Another great surge in the Calle Florida excreted Maribel into an arcade of tiny shops and phone centers. She was thrown into the chest of a skinny man in a green coat. He caught her arms and pulled her slightly forward, slightly back, and two steps to both sides as she gasped for air. His hands were warm. He could tango. *Thank you, sweet Virgin!* Maribel collapsed in his arms. He smelled like old books and patience.

After the third time of waking up next to him she learned he was called Jens, of a family from Germany. He had rather greasy black hair, long enough to have been fashionable when that sort of thing was fashionable. The surprise of sex with him was his silence, his worry for her happiness. She had no idea why this was. Looking at him asleep there now she could see how, from a distance, he might be mistaken for attractive, and

how, nearer to him, so near you could smell the words on the pages of the books he read, he might be mistaken for unattractive. He had a bed, some chairs, and nothing at all on his walls. But his walls were red! And books and papers littered every surface, spilling into lazy piles on the floors. She stubbed her toe on a book in a language she did not know.

He limped when he walked. He worked in the library, making copies for people whenever they came to the arduous conclusion they needed the copy of a copy of what may have once been, somewhere, an original. But he insisted what he really was was a writer. *Another Borges, whoever that was.* He preferred lamps with dim bulbs. The sun was for the earth. She hadn't read a horoscope in a week but was now in need of some direction.

Midnight at a parilla she'd never seen before. They ate bife de chorizo with a vino fino near a gray, longhaired cat that surveyed the tables from the bartop. On the far wall loomed Carlos Gardel, looking dead while smiling in his shiny black suit. He could have been Lenin. Los Inmortales. He made the tango and he had to be there, of course, watching them. This was bad. Jens wanted words and Maribel hid them, changed them, turned them around and beautified them. She never initiated anything, to hear him tell it. He seemed to care, but his ideas of the meanings of things very often sent her mind elsewhere. The women in the corner laughed and smoked and stroked each other's hair while talking about important things. Maribel longed for her bandage. She felt the tingle of an urge in her arm to reach for it. She felt fat begin to form on her legs, expanding her arms. Her nose inflated and she imagined a small, wet sort of explosion of blood and skin and cartilage. And Jens would have sat there, in his way of looking possibly attractive,

and continue on with, “You blow in the wind like a leaf. Why rely so on signs you can’t prove reliable?” How she hated this. But she was put to him. You don’t just give up on the man you were put to. If she didn’t quite understand why it was him now, maybe she didn’t quite know the Virgin’s intentions. And then it struck her it may have been the warrior instead. *He* had listened.

*Jens asks about books I don’t know. When he smiles, his lips create a most embarrassing shape. He has dark freckles on his shoulders, like birds very far off and very high. He’s a Taurus and doesn’t at all live up to the sign’s criteria. There must be a reason.*

The barman turned up the television volume. The words *Muere Diana* silenced the hall. Well, nobody knew what to think. Nobody came here for the same reason and now they had to react. To one thing. Together. How? *Do we not think of the Islas Malvinas? To call them the Falklands, even now, was too much. Hadn’t her own people rejected her? Then what had she become? Whose was she?* Maribel didn’t know where this had come from. She must have missed some indication this would happen. She searched her head for what that might have been. The garbage hadn’t been picked up that week. Things were becoming so subtle. Yes, it must be sad, she decided. When Jens did look up at the broadcaster he returned his gaze to Maribel. “Did you see that coming?”

“What do you mean? Of course not.” She played with the food on her plate until noticing she made the only noise in the restaurant. She was restless.

Jens spoke so slowly. “Now *they* have an *Evita, too.*” He smiled. “Wasn’t she doomed from her wedding day?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Maribel said.

“And why not?”

“Don’t joke.”

“Can’t you read what the world is telling you?” Jens asked.

“It isn’t like that--”

“. . . or is it the gods who are telling you?”

“Now you’re mocking me!” Maribel retorted.

“I’m not! I want to show you why you can’t always--”

Maribel smashed her fork against her plate, drawing stares. “How did I find you? I didn’t arrange it! But I had asked--I had been asking. How can you not--”

The barman shushed her. She and Jens were silent again. Well, she had to stay with him, didn’t she? They left when the crowd began to sing the national anthem.

The twelfth time she woke up next to him he was awake. She no longer noticed any smell about him at all. She wanted to love him because she felt she must, but she felt her mind running away from the rest of her. She knew he was probably what her mother had prayed for. That’s a fine thing. He said something about another novel. She was wearing her bandage again, telling him she had had a bit of a touch-up he thought most ridiculous. When she shared with him her deepest worry, his response moved her. Well, she needed to be moved, so there it was.

“I really believe the world tells us things. I do. I know you think it’s silly, but I *know* it to be so. When an event happens in my life all I need do is look back a few days to find

exactly what it was that told me the event was coming. I learned to tell more quickly. But I always worried.”

Jens was on his stomach, head on his arms. He faced away from her.

“I always worried about the *peoples* who are gone.”

“What can that possibly mean?” He rolled toward her. She sat upright, fingers lightly touching at her nose.

“You know, vanished cultures. Gone peoples.”

“I don’t understand. What about them?” He kissed her shoulder, her arm, her elbow. She paid no mind.

“What happened to their stories? What happened to their signs? Their omens?”

“When will you let this go?”

“No, if we think a shamrock is a bit of luck, or, or--”

“This is silly.” He got up to dress.

“--or we think a cracked mirror indicates bad luck--”

“*We* don’t think that. They’re stories.”

“They’re stories, but we make them true, so they are.”

Jens went to the bathroom, coming back with toothbrush in mouth. “Let this go!”

“Imagine where the gone peoples’ omens have gone.”

“The question is moot. It doesn’t matter.”

“Because we’ll never know.” She slumped into the bed. Her eyes went out the window. Black birds in formation.

“Exactly,” he said, brushing. “So it doesn’t matter.”

“But what are we *missing* because we don’t *know*?”

“That’s the mortality of omens. How can you miss what you don’t know?”

“I don’t know.” Maribel closed her eyes. She would consult the warrior, if he would forgive her, and try to leave Jens. She’d misread something. “But I *do* miss whatever it is.” Omens, she thought, should not have *lifespans*.

Jens’s windows glowed red like wounds. Maribel looked up at them from the street one night. Freezing. The cold persuaded the glue in her bandages to become uncooperative. She had come to say she was wrong--about him, about everything. It was chance that they met. Nothing more. This she could say, never mind she didn’t mean a bit of it save for the part about her being wrong about him. After all, he may have gotten in the way of the man she was *really* supposed to fall into on the Calle Florida. Chance was so prone to questions of its good judgment these days. Somehow, though, all that goes out the window when *he* tells *you* he isn’t in love with *you*. So, she stood outside the window as her stomach expanded and her thighs split her dress open and her face swelled to the size of a riverside corpse. And he had said to her--of course he was quoting somebody else, a copy of some copy of some once-original thing--that the earth was made round so we might not see too far down the road. “What a hateful thing to say,” she had told the warrior. She went back to the plastic surgeon’s--just the lobby--and waited ten minutes before emerging with her tired, old bandage re-affixed. One man out. She saw a red leaf the size of a pancake.

When she left the apartment building of this new man, who, by the way, couldn’t tango, but who smelled like a woman and cried with her when he thought she must be

enjoying herself, she found herself, again, at the Calle Florida. She gave no money to beggar children then.

Timing the exodus from a movie according to the papers was futile, delays were inevitable. So she waited. Window-shopped. Looked for some indication the world sympathized. *If you want to punish me, Virgin, answer my prayers.* And, indeed, there was a great onrush of people into the street, as she knew there would be. People shouted, felt crushed, cursed, smelled of things. There was no direction to take that wasn't somehow dictated by the swell and surge of the mass, like a great cluster of birds that seemed to have a destination. But, whereas those black dots of birds synchronized their elegant movement, Maribel felt sure this crowd, this mob, held the possibility of causing such a force as to squeeze them all into one. This hurt her. An elbow, a foot, a smell, a shout, spittle across her face. *I'm so proud of you, Dear One.* Maribel's feet were off the ground. She had been punched inadvertently, flying into a darkened shop window as frenzied parents yelled to keep their children near. The throng was pushing her again and again into the window. The impact across her face was cold and hard. Her cheek smashed up against the glass. The shop was vacant. Maribel could see nothing but the outline of her form in the glass--a dark shape at first. She began to sob. More pushes, crushing, yelling. Police whistles, finally. She could make out the white of her bandage in the glass, then her eyes, her mouth, her hair. Maribel Lopez was 24, had straight, ear-length black hair, pearl earrings. Her face was oval with high cheek bones and she had a beauty mark just below her lip on the right. She had had work done on her nose. Her favorite perfume was *Paris*. No one else--no man--in the reflection, only herself. It was



so hard to take a breath and her tears forced her to suck back a newly runny, and tingling nose. A Cracking sound. The last push caused the shop-window glass to split into a million veins that traveled its surface with a cold, surprisingly lingering crackle-snap. That *did* take care of the reflection, she thought, as all the tiny ice-pieces rained out of their frame and Maribel stumbled into the vacant shop. How awful, indeed. The black birds in the sky, the ball of tin foil, the warrior, the stool Virgin, cardboard leaves, crowds of people, Jens, Princess Di--all that, and they hadn't meant a thing.

At the Wheel

The waitress had called him *sir*. He couldn't get over that. Or that he was back here in what long years away had convinced him was the cradle of his salad days. This ugly, tiny bar. The split burgundy vinyl of some stools, the hundreds of words carved into the dark, wooden tables. The smell of popcorn, smoke, and too-strong cologne. He waited, uncomfortably in his grey Brooks Brother's suit, in the back booth, watching the door for whomever might come in and suddenly be happy to see him. He waited, uncomfortably, for the waitress who had called him *sir* to bring him a vodka tonic (he had lost his taste for cheap beer). He waited, uncomfortably, for, what? His old friend? His rediscovered friend? His acquaintance?

He waited in the back booth of the bar he felt sure he should have relegated to the glow of his past for Prell to come back from the restroom. No one new had entered the bar since their arrival. The waitress who had called him *sir* had awful teeth, pointing in all kinds of directions. The word *sir* escaped from her mouth with a smile, and it was as if

she had no idea such a mess of teeth was there at all. But, of course, she probably did know. Hart wondered how she could live with teeth like that. He had time to decide how to respond to Prell's inevitable question: *What are you doing back here?* But he didn't know what to say. Why does a *together* man jump into a river having no idea where it will send him?

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Hart drove his two-week old anthracite gray Audi A8 with ivory leather interior from Chicago to Lawrence. "Behold the magnificent Audi A8," says the brochure. Three hundred horses, 32-valve V-8 quattro all-wheel drive, and 295-pounds feet of torque at 3300 rpm--never mind the raging hard-on such machinery could produce when slaloming past rat-schmoes in Hyundais and Buicks. Fucking unbelievable. This was the first act of true impulsiveness he'd committed since college.

He had been given unlimited time off--the kind of thing that happens only when you have broken into the major leagues of trading--for grieving, of all things. In the course of a few days his wife, Jennifer, had died in the hospital, the arrangements had been made, the necessary people called, and the funeral held. She looked so awful in her hospital bed with the metal rails. Breast cancer, so it wasn't sudden. He had to watch the once-fantastic Chi Omega turn, slowly, horrible, like fruit left out too long. Like his life since then. Her bleached-blonde hair reduced to a few sickly strands across her bloated, no-longer-tanned face. It was her but it wasn't. She was in no shape for an open-casket funeral, so it was best people who hadn't seen her in awhile remember her as the aerobics instructor with the killer abs and perfect tits she used to have. Whether it was the fault of

the implants or not, it was over and done with. It's not like he forced her to get them, although he made it clear getting them wouldn't hurt their relationship. When your wife dies young and tells you on her deathbed you're a cock-sucking asshole before she slips away for good it's that much harder to smile and greet her parents who never liked you in the first place. So he was driving.

A loss, even when you hate to admit you had almost hoped for it, creates a strange need to feel bad, even worse somehow, and Hart was no different. Death means you're supposed to suddenly feel introspective and not notice the fifty thousand dollar car you're driving smells like everything you ever wanted and now are supposed to want to reject *if only to have that special person back again*. He depressed the smooth, concave button on the side of the leather-wrapped steering wheel and the sunlight streamed into the car's cabin as the moon roof slid silently into its hiding place. Hart checked his hair in the mirror. He'd just bought these gun metal-framed Kenneth Cole sunglasses the day Jennifer passed. He didn't feel bad she was dead, *not to sound cruel*, because she was once really attractive, but the thought of having had sex with someone who was now dead was almost unbearable. All he could think about was the unavoidable process of Jennifer's decomposition. *Actually, wouldn't it have been better for her to have died suddenly?* "Goddamnit, Parker," his supervisor had said on first seeing her, "you're one lucky son of a bitch. I'd be a fucking bear at this job, too, if I had a piece of *that* every night when I got home." Word got around. Guys wanted to *know* him. He joined a squash team.

He had to watch her transform into the thing she became, and he did indeed wish he had loved her, but the first things to enter his mind when he knew for sure she wouldn't be coming home were, in order, the insurance money, having to survive seeing her parents, and Rhonda Finch. This last thought took him quite by surprise. She was probably still in Lawrence, after all. This he knew, but he drove toward Lawrence anyway. He was feeling the need to be sanctified by *places* and *things*.

After crossing into Kansas on the Turnpike, that old feeling did indeed stir within him, a melancholic tingle in his brain and stomach that reached out for things which once were--never possibly as great as he now remembered, but more than what he had today, *sort of*. He didn't understand this yet, and he did. It was early October and the trees held desperately onto their leaves even though everyone, the trees included, knew it was no good and soon they'd turn and lose it all. He thought of college and all those crazy times and his ATΩ brothers there and how he had always thought that *those* were the people he'd really always wanted to be his friends. But you just don't *say* stuff like that. This made him expel a kind of laugh from his nose as he shut the sunroof and cranked up the CD-player--new Whitney Houston--to cover the distressing thinking of hundreds of careless Monarch butterflies trying to cross the highway. Flutter flutter thunk-splat. Lovely. It would be a fucking bitch to clean, Goddamnit. He'd get some rat-schmoe to do it by hand just to blow shit about all the great stuff under the hood. It's one thing to be worshipped by women, but there's no comparison to being worshipped by worker ants.

~ ~ ~

“George Bush is God!” Murphy announced to the corner booth of ATΩ’s at The Wheel the Friday night after their winning the PanHellenic flag football tournament. He was on his fourth pale ale and it wasn’t even 7:00.

“Shut up, Murphy,” Prell said. His name was Peter, but everyone called him Prell because he was so mental about his perfect hair. One bad day out of the shower and it was backwards caps for a week. Hart once tweaked Prell’s hair at breakfast and the guy knocked over the table to defend himself. “Man, you reek.”

“No doubt, Murphy,” added Feingold. He was a Jew, but nobody cared. His dad sent the guys to Mexico last spring break. “A little soap and water never killed anybody. You gonna’ eat the breadstick?”

“No, you take it,” Murphy said. “We need a pitcher.” He looked around, motioning for a waitress. The lifting of his dirty arm inspired squirms and gasps for breath from the others. “If you’d stop sipping those pints, you pussies, and actually *drink* them, the reek of victory might not seem so bad.” He belched. He was pre-dentistry. “Kickin’ Saddam’s *ass* on prime time, baby!”

“Man, shut up,” Ringer said. He had been staring at the door since they arrived. He was a legacy, but he wasn’t so bad. He just stared at things a lot. Moody. Girls liked that, though, so he was handy to have around.

“Careful guys,” Murphy said, accepting a new pitcher, “Ringer’s using words!”

Ringer was used to this. “At any moment, some fantastic girl could walk in here and see me and maybe walk over here to talk and then, just when I might be about to get laid,

her face melts off because of the outrageous funk stink vibrating off your decidedly *chickless* bod, Murphy.” Ringer was known for choosing his words.

“Pour that man a beer!” Feingold pronounced.

Hart laughed at the scene. The three guys he’d known the longest of anybody and there wasn’t much of a good reason for it. They were more unlike than alike, but as a group, they almost made one unit, of a sort, that they couldn’t seem to make individually. He didn’t quite know what this meant, but he did.

The Wheel was the traditional hole in the wall near the house and, while it wasn’t their usual hangout, it did the job when they were all generally dateless horndogs or when they wanted to go somewhere their girlfriend-of-the-month or her sisters would never be. Only Hart-throb was seeing somebody, Miss Jennifer Goodbody Goodman. This week they were fighting, but that’s the story of women. It’s always something. She’d be dripping on his doorstep come Monday. If anybody was on the fast track, it was Hart Parker. They all knew that. Jennifer knew that.

Hart was something of the reluctant ringleader these days. The seniors were a small crop at the house since, four years ago, there was that harassment suit in the news and officious parents sent their boys to Fiji House or someplace posh. So Hart’s gang was a rather exclusive club. They couldn’t afford to be jealous of one another, they couldn’t afford to fight and not make up, they couldn’t afford to disagree over women. They had to make the house respectable, so they did what they could. Prell even dated Jennifer before Hart did--it was how Hart met her, after all. When Prell didn’t get into business school like he promised, Jennifer moved on to Hart, who did. There could have been a



fight, but they all knew the rules. If there was one thing KU had in abundance it was wet new Chi O's.

Hart was the lone non-Kansan, coming from Austin where his single dad had been working at that time. His future had been mapped out for him the way some families do, and he didn't seem to mind. His dad had written a book about networking and positive attitudes called *From Butt-kicks to Back-pats* which, after a few highballs, he called *Hoop-jumping for Rat-Schmoes*, the latter phrase being one Hart affected and passed along to the gang to signify, basically, everyone who wasn't them. Even as a frosh he exuded the magnetic charm and behind-the-scenes killer chops that shot a bastard to the top--it was something undoubtedly in the genes. Well, that was Feingold's theory. Something about the amount of space his parted lips left for his flawlessly capped teeth, the strange, upward tilt of his blue eyes, the thick and shiny blonde hair, and the unfading tan. Even a guy might find himself thanking Hart just for pissing on him. It was the kind of perfection the guys in Hart's house could feel, like static, and they wanted to be around it. They speculated about his powers and were never let down by his demonstrations.

The guys were on the road to inebriation, must have been, for old Murphy was starting to lose his smell, and Ringer was beginning to get chatty. Another pitcher arrived. Feingold had gone to the john and Hart was starting to scan the premises for possibilities.

Ringer looked up at the waitress, a heavy-ish towny in her upper twenties with pink plastic spirals for earrings. "Hey, gorgeous, you know what bronco fucking is?"

"Ringer, shut up," Hart said, wasting a smile on the waitress to keep her from spitting in future pitchers.

“I know I’d rather fuck one of them than one of you,” she said as she put down the pitcher and Murphy whooped. Hart laughed. Feingold returned to the booth.

“What’d he do now?” Feingold asked.

“Bronco fucking,” Hart and Murphy said together.

“You get some bitch doggie style, right?” Ringer said, slapping a hand on Feingold’s shoulder, causing him to mispour, “and you tell her she’s the worst lay you’ve ever had, and then she goes fucking wild.”

There was a round of shaking heads.

“I’m serious. Try it and tell me if I lie.”

“Drink, Ringer. We like you better quiet,” Hart said, pouring. Last week, he remembered, it was some story about the gal who insisted on giving blow-jobs using toothpaste and how much the toothpaste actually stung a guy’s willie. Well, this was what he said, nobody pursued it.

And then, somehow, a bet was made. This Hart did remember. Somebody had insisted Hart could get any girl in town because he was armed with a superior knowledge of people from his business courses, not to mention great looks and the wisdom of Burton Parker’s *From Butt-kicks to Back-pats*. “He’s not *that* good, man,” somebody had said. “I most certainly am, you dried up old kooz,” was his response. The bet was set: *the next bitch who walks in that door*. The four guys swigged and stared, silent. The door opened. “Shit, fat dudes,” Ringer said.

“Go for it, lover boy,” Feingold said.

“Shut up, pussy,” Murphy said. And then Rhonda Finch walked in the door, alone.

~ ~ ~

The red tile roofs of the KU campus were just visible on the horizon--the twin towers of Fraser Hall with their flags and the high, thin brick rat-schmoe dorms on Daisy Hill. The sun was red and near to setting behind strips of pink and white clouds. He pressed quickly on the accelerator then, feeling a nervous kind of excitement he would have had trouble articulating to even the most star-struck woman in a bar. The sun lit up the bug streaks across his windshield. The wipers only made the streaking worse. As he shooshed along the winding curves of K-10, finding warmth in the sight of a familiar silo he'd often passed on bar-runs to Kansas City, Hart tried but failed to eliminate two oddly competing women from his head. There had been some problems before Jennifer was even diagnosed that he knew he needed to address but hadn't. He had been faithful to her, after a fashion. He hadn't had sex with anyone else after they married. That wasn't it. He couldn't. And now Rhonda Finch, of all people, was invading his brain and he hadn't thought a *thing*--not one *thing*--about her for years. All he could see was her Vietnamese face reacting to his initial surprise that her name was, indeed Rhonda Finch. *Well, who wouldn't have?*

As K-10 became 23rd Street--far earlier than he had expected it to--Hart found himself in disarmingly unfamiliar territory. Where there had once, not so long ago, been tall grass and busted fencing there now was a Yogurt and More with a drive-thru and a Payless ShoeSource. It was the same story on the other side of the street. Endless traffic lights and minivans and jacked-up trucks, all before Naismith Drive, no less! What was this place? Nothing was the same.

Hart passed an auto-detailing joint and made a mental note of it before he fired right onto Naismith Drive. Now, finally, he was being met with what he knew. On his right, the lone party rat-schmoe dorm. On his left, the Jew dorm--it had maids and a pool. *And yes! Allen Fieldhouse!* He submerged the A8's window, cool air in his face smelling like burnt wood. He inhaled. Hart could hear crowds cheering the game in his head. He didn't know anyone in the crowd. Did this make it easier? Looking ahead, the sun nearly gone, Hart could see some of the campus buildings on the hill were different, additions and things. He continued up the hill to the old Jayhawk Bookstore--new façade--and turned right onto Jayhawk Boulevard. The engine note was just right. He left the window down. Passed the Chi Omega house without looking, didn't look at the Chi-O fountain either, although he couldn't escape the sound of its water slopping from the high, stone spigot into the pool below. And then he was on campus. He had to go slow.

Couple of joggers with headphones lumped by, some Asians on the other side with their books, of course. Not much other activity to be seen. Lots of colorful flyers on the kiosks advertised for the usual *causes*, he imagined. He laughed to himself. He even missed that. *We've got to WAKE UP, AMERICA!* Once, as they sat on Wescoe Beach and watched a particularly funny demonstration--no idea what it was about--Ringer went up to the megaphone-toting speaker, some tree-hugger, Birkenstock-wearing, Granola-head, and planted a big, wet smooch right on his mouth just before walking off. Got in the *Daily Kansan* even, although Ringer wouldn't comment. Hart was driving past the exact spot where it had happened. He passed the admissions hall, the journalism hall, and the library--some guys playing Frisbee on the lawn. He had half-expected to see people he

knew walking with their backpacks down the Boulevard to their next class or to the Union or *something*. The campus was giving him none of this. The tingling in his gut he took for recognition of *himself being there* now felt like the school laughing at him. *You think you're the first fool to do this? I own a million memories, and I don't care about a one of them. That's your problem, schmoe. Nice car, though.*

At the alumni building, Hart turned the wheel and arced the big A8 down the steep brick of 13th Street. *That* was the same! You couldn't let your foot off the brake pedal here. Of course, he always had the desperate urge to floor it, but he never did. At Tennessee, a one-way right turn, he slowly moved toward the ATΩ house, not nearly as excited to do so as he had been miles earlier. Tennessee North was all student ghetto--old Vic's evermore dilapidated and divided up into fire-trap apartment for kids generally a step above rat-schmoes but too weird to be normal and certainly never to be players. Some fuckables, though. Rhonda Finch. Tennessee South was Palace row--all the oldest, most trad Greek houses, some even bigger than before. *And nobody was outside of a one of them.* This, he thought, was odd. Where were his friends? He'd known hundreds of people. He could sense ATΩ coming up from behind the trees, and his breathing became quick. Hart hit the gas. He needed to check in at the Holiday Inn, provided *it* was still where it was supposed to be. The bugs would have to spend the night on his car and this bothered him a great deal.

Prell was managing the Holiday Inn, for Chrissakes. This was a shock. He had a goatee and less hair up top, which must have made some therapist rich. Still, it was a bittersweet sighting. This was such an embarrassing meeting, Hart supposed. The lobby's

soffet lights illuminated Prell's scalp like some ray from the heavens pointing out how unfair life can be. He patted Prell on the shoulder as though no time had passed at all. At least they had pissed together somewhere once.

"I can't believe what I'm seeing," Prell beamed. "You son of a bitch," he said, laughing. He wore a weekday suit of navy and khaki, not the cheapest, but hovering close. He was still in pretty good shape. At least he was smiling. Hart didn't know what to feel, but he felt he should have felt more than he did. He wondered what Prell drove these days. "What are you doing here? Wow, I can't believe this."

"It's been a long time, Prell."

"I haven't heard that name in a long time." The two men stood silently grinning for what seemed too long to Hart--not knowing whether or not to walk somewhere, sit down, part ways, or *what*.

They found themselves at The Wheel. Friday night. Early October.

~ ~ ~

He had assumed she was a student but she wasn't--just a towny. She said she didn't know what she was doing in the bar. She'd never been there before. Right. It was tough getting her to say much at first. Hart didn't think she was much of a prize--really small tits, but she was no bowzer, either. *Could try that bronco fucking idea.*

He had to be sure the guys could see them from where they were. She had done some kind of lemon-juice thing to her hair because it wasn't all dark. It fell in wisps around her shoulders. He offered her a drink. She declined. She smelled like roses. *Grandmothers smelled like that.* Hart smiled.

He said, "I'm not from here. I mean Lawrence. My dad sent me here for school, you know--am I boring you?" He leaned in.

"No. I guess not." She had a Pepsi. She was really thin. Something about her wasn't all-the-way Asian. Half-breed, probably.

"I'm a little embarrassed."

"What? Why?" Her voice was soft and definitely American. She wore tight, greenish jeans that hung on her bony hips in a sexy sort of way. Her top was some kind of crocheted, off-white thing with tassels from both sides of the neck. She had one upper tooth sticking out and away from the others. At this, Hart couldn't help but stare, so it was lucky it was in the general area of her face.

"See my friends over there?" He motioned to the back booth. Murphy waved a salute and Feingold, Ringer, and Prell looked the other way, faux-distracted.

"Uh huh." She sipped her Pepsi.

"Well, they rib me about being too shy."

"You're kidding."

"No, really." He laughed, ran his fingers through his hair. He knew how this looked, he'd practiced. "I have, well," he looked down, then around the room before leaning in very close to her, "I have problems talking to women."

"What? I don't know why, you aren't so bad."

"Wha-- Really? You think so?"

She looked at the back booth and then at Hart. "You putting me on or something?"

“I wish. I mean, no. I mean, well. I saw you, see. I saw you come in here and, I don’t know. This is dumb. I’m just, I’m . . .” Hart continued to stutter, every um and uh coming exactly where he knew they would. “Listen, I’m really sorry I bothered you--” He turned.

“No, hey, *I’m* sorry. I’m just not used to, well, you know.”

“What?” Silence. “No, you’re, well . . . you’re--”

“What?”

Hart swigged his beer. He rolled his eyes and laughed down at his lap. “Oh, man, you’re making this tough on me.”

She smiled and brushed her hair back behind her ear. “What?” she said gleefully.

“You’re really pretty and, well, you’re really pretty, and I saw you come in here and, oh, man . . . and I thought I’d like to know who you were but I made the mistake of saying that to my friends and they were going to force me to--”

She kissed him on the lips, mid-sentence. This may have been the fastest this had ever worked. He could feel the bump of the tooth under her lip. He wasn’t drunk enough. Almost through, though. The boys in the booth high-fived.

Murphy sent a pitcher to them, waving. That’s when Hart learned she was Rhonda Finch, AmerAsian daughter of a local ‘Nam vet and a deceased mother. He had his hook. It was almost too easy.

“That’s rough, I know.” He traced the wet ring his glass left on the wood of the table. “Yeah, my dad lost a leg in ‘Nam. It still kills him to talk about it. After my mom died,” he lied, “we just never connected. I don’t know.” The girl almost teared up. Of course



she understood. “Hey, you want to get out of here? Maybe watch the stars or something?”

It was not the night for bronco fucking, but that was okay. He didn't need the bronco. She didn't mind the car, and her zeal to get down to business surprised him somewhat. She said “I need you” twice. Pulled him close. And was mostly silent, save the small, breathy grunts for the duration. He couldn't believe his luck. At one point, with her face into his chest, Hart had to wave the guys away from the car or he'd have had a laugh fit right there. He had to concentrate on the chore at hand, but that was difficult. He hadn't anticipated just how distracting that tooth of hers would be. With every kiss, every closeness of breath. Any time her lips brushed against his cheek or neck--it was there. The unnatural bump. *Didn't she know it was there?* He imagined the tooth stabbing him, cutting him. *Why didn't she get that fixed?* He imagined punching it out with one clean pop, and then getting back to business, but by then he was done with business.

And then something changed. Something about her. Something, even, about the world. The world was silent, cold, and Rhonda Finch backed away from him like her aura had gone out. Hart pulled back to fix his trousers and give her room. She flopped like a fish on pavement as she pulled up her panties, not looking at him. The car was quiet, which irritated him for reasons he could not articulate. “You're beautiful,” he regretted saying, and then he saw her do something which, although he could not be certain because it was dark, looked very much like she was brushing a tear out of one eye. “Hey, what's up with you? Is something the matter?”

She pushed hair out of her face. “No.” She still did not look at him.

“What did I do? Hey--” He tried to touch her, as he assumed she must have seen herself as one of those *complicated* girls. He knew she would back away, and she did.

“Look. I want you to know,” she sniffed, still fumbling at fasteners. “I want you to know that I *knew* you were just lying before and I don’t care. I didn’t care.”

“What? No, I wasn’t. I--” He reached for her face and she brushed him away.

She looked at him. With that tooth pointing right at him, accusatory.

Hart smiled, then looked down. “Oh, come on,” he said. “If that’s true, and I’m not saying it *is*, then what difference does it make?” He had never felt whatever this was before. A mistake? No. What, then? She could have been bluffing, he supposed, or maybe wanted to believe she was the one using him. Some girls thought they had this power, which he thought was hilarious.

“I could love somebody like you. You said nice things.”

Hart did not know what to make of this. “Is that all it takes?”

“You’re good at what you do.”

*Was that a back-pat or a butt-kick? It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter!* He promised to meet her at The Wheel the next night, but he didn’t go back there. She probably didn’t expect him to do so. She simply let herself out of the car and walked away. He sat in the back of the car until he couldn’t hear foot steps anymore. *I could love somebody like you.* After that, Hart Parker was legendary, and Rhonda Finch became a character doomed to sit at a table for the next million nights at The Wheel with wet eyes and empty glasses with traces of Pepsi. He’d made up with Jennifer and slept with her the next day.

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“Damn, Hart, man,” Prell said, leaning back against the split vinyl of the old booth. “I can’t believe that about Jennifer. I don’t know what to say.” *He was thinking about having sex with her, but that was okay.* After an uncomfortable silence--Hart hadn’t looked up from his beer, Prell swallowed hard and continued. “This is--” he coughed, “--this is, well, this is a little weird, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Hart couldn’t look at his old friend in the face. He’d stared at his hands. They seemed bigger, bigger than his own. “So, you’re in charge of the hotel?”

“Yeah, yep. I sure am. Weird, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“It actually pays pretty good.”

“Does it?”

“Well, nothing like what you get, of course, you know.” Prell shrugged and laughed uncomfortably.

Hart smiled at his lap, took a drink. The urge to grab Prell and pull him close wasn’t as surprising as he thought it might have been back at the hotel. Still, he couldn’t make himself look up, not longer than a second or two anyway. “What do you hear from the guys, anything?”

Prell swallowed and appeared to think. “Not much lately. Man, it’s been a long time.” He drank again. “Murphy’s been out in Alaska, last I heard--”

“No shit?” Hart laughed.

“Yeah, and Feingold’s got one kid that I know of.”

“A kid?”

“A girl, I guess. They live back east someplace. I haven’t heard from them in a long time. I heard Ringer turned gay.”

“No way.”

“I don’t really know.” Prell leaned on his elbows. “Why’d you show up after all this time, Parker? Why didn’t you ever stay in touch, man?”

“I don’t know, man.”

“Bullshit. Come on. Did you just get so busy none of us mattered anymore? Didn’t you care?”

“Of course I cared.” He drank. Motioned for another. “It’s not that I didn’t think about--I mean, I *did*. I suck.”

“I mean, we were in the wedding and then nothing. One Christmas card from Jennifer the first year and that was it. I felt ditched.”

“You make it sound like we were going out.”

Prell frowned as he sipped. He stared down at the table. He looked so different. It was still clearly Prell, but he looked as though he were suffering the terminal effects of age and loss of hope.

“Jennifer had filed papers on me before she died.” The beer in his stomach was pressing on his bladder.

“What? Police papers? Divorce papers? A divorce?”

“We hadn’t had sex in months.” Hart instantly regretted having said that. This man was a stranger. He had no way of knowing about the kind of nostalgic Hart had been committing for nearly a week. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t--”

“Naw, man,” Prell said, knocking Hart’s shoulder in a sad attempt to regain geniality. “It’s just, well, it’s just a little--”

“It’s not the way I thought it would be if I saw you or the guys again.”

“Didn’t you ever think about it?”

“Sure, but--I don’t know. I guess I thought nothing would have changed over time.”

“Is *that* why we never heard from you?”

“I dunno. I guess.”

“Things change, Hart.”

Hart hadn’t thought about this, and it’s cold truth told him he probably had thought about it without recognizing that he had. He did know he had a way of realizing he’d been thinking about things before he was cognizant of having actually thought things sometimes. He didn’t know what this meant and, of course, he also did. He knew all about *Time* and yet he didn’t want to accept that he knew.

“Look, Parker, man--” Prell drank, wiped at his lip. “I’ve been divorced going on two years now--”

Every new piece of information crash-landed on him like a life, a Nature laughing at him. Everything was changed. Everything was thrown into question.

“I know it’s not easy. I know that--”

“You don’t know what it’s like, Prell.”

“What is this? ‘Pity the Rich Guy’?”

“You know what it’s like to not be able to get a fucking erection, Prell? You know what *that’s* like?” Hart looked into Prell’s startled face. Apparently Prell did not know what this was like, and Hart was ready to leave.

“I can’t say I--I mean, I’m sorry, man.” He expelled a whoosh of air; he eyed the ceiling. “Was it the her sickness?”

“Happened way before that. I just didn’t care anymore.”

“Man.”

“And you know what? I have a car, a *fucking fifty-grand car* that gave me my first hard-on in over a year. Now you tell me what the fuck that’s about.” He did know he didn’t want to know.

“Why don’t we go back?” Prell said, visibly ill at ease. He helped his old friend to the Audi, which he drove, carefully, back to the Holiday Inn. In the parking lot, he wiped at the windshield.

Hart couldn’t bear that. “No, man. Don’t.”

“Which room is yours, Hart?”

Inside the room, dark but for the single, dim light hanging above the veneer-covered table, Prell folded back the bed spread and turned on the bathroom light. Hart sat on the corner of the firm bed. Prell was about to leave. “You remember that girl at The Wheel?”

“What girl?”

“You know, that oriental one? The bet? The car? You know?”

Prell ran his hand over his head. "I think so, maybe." Hart slid back on the bed, leaning against the headboard. Prell stood at the door, the hanging light finding all the deepest cracks in his face. "Why? You see her somewhere?"

"No."

"That was some time, wasn't it?"

"Different life, I guess." Hart looked at Prell and thought of the two of them as they were at that moment. Two men, disheveled old friends, looking at each other full of what he was sure were thoughts given no voice. Firing a hundred scenarios, past and present and future of what might have been, what was and never was, what could be, what should have been. But he didn't know how to fill in the blanks. He hoped Prell would speak, would break this fuzzing in Hart's brain. *I never thought I'd see you again and now that I have, I have to change my memories. I wanted to believe you'd always be like \_\_\_\_\_.* He wondered if they both thought this way.

Hart looked up and Prell was in the chair next to the door. *Things do change.*

"She said she could have loved me," Hart managed to say, breaking the uneasy silence.

"Death is a scary thing for everyone, man."

"No. I mean--" *That's not what I'm talking about.* "I'm not talking--Jennifer hated my guts, man, and she should have."

"No she didn't."

"I know what you're thinking." He pointed at Prell, who sat back in the chair, legs spread.

“I doubt you do, Hart.”

“I do know,” he said, crossing both arms behind his head. He could forgive his friend for thinking about Jennifer that way. They *had* gone out.

“What then?”

“What?”

“What am I thinking, Hart? What?”

“What? Well, what? About Jennifer being dead, I think--”

“Nah--”

“--and about me, us, old times. Screwing around.”

“Used to think about you a lot,” Prell said. How Hart needed to hear this. “I’d think--” He paused, rubbed his eyes. “Oh, man.”

“What?”

“I’d think, *I must be some lucky bastard to know Hart Parker. To sit next to him. I’ll never be him, but I’d think about it. I’d think, if for just one day . . .*”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Do you think things happen for a reason?”

“What do you mean?”

Prell didn’t answer. He seemed to be undergoing his own regrets.

“What, like old times?” Hart asked.

“Maybe, but, like, death, meeting you here, now, after all this time. Seeing you in the lobby and actually thinking--” Silence.

“What?”



“Thinking for one moment you came down to see me.” They both laughed uncertainly. “How stupid is that?”

“It’s not stupid, man. It’s just that I had no idea you’d still . . . Well, that you’d be here.”

“*Still* here.” Silence again. “You thought that *nothing* girl was gonna’ be around?”

“I don’t know what I thought.” That two a.m. silence, the shrill, high piercing tone in the sound-void you really have to focus on, invaded his skull like sleep. Prell said something he couldn’t make out. “I *am* glad I saw you here, man. I am.” Prell was responding. Hart continued, “Maybe things do happen for a reason, I don’t know. I’m just glad they do.” Prell pulled the cover over him and patted him on the shoulder.

“What was that one gal’s name?” Prell asked just before leaving.

“I don’t know.” The bed was warm. Hart fell asleep imagining the specters of Feingold, Murphy, and Ringer somewhere in the room, too, but it was them as they were, of course. Maybe he would find them again.

*Good morning, Drymouth!* The antiseptic smell of corporate cleanliness followed him everywhere--Chicago, New York, London, Lawrence. This was the smell of the business of hospitality. He took the car to the auto-detailing place on 23rd Street near Naismith. He had Prell’s number and address in his breast pocket. It was almost warm, creating its own kind of energy. An uncomfortable energy.

“What’s a car like this set a guy back, anyway?” the detailer asked as he squirted and scrubbed.

It seemed absolutely ridiculous for him to be having any of this done. He'd be driving back to Chicago right after. Right through all the butterflies again.

Easter Dunne

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The scent of a roast cooking in the height of summer is what did it. Easter knew he couldn't remember why Mavis was in such a state this afternoon, rushing between Regina's room and the kitchen since she came home from her work at the cleaner's an hour or so ago. When her eyes met his as he ambled toward the fan-cooled front room and she passed with arms full of table linens and sweat on her forehead, he knew. *Something important, Goddamnit.* The realization he *knew* he was supposed to know something, and all he knew for sure was that he couldn't remember what it was filled him with a nagging despair. Others encountering his ever-sharpening tongue wrote it off with uncomfortable humor as the curmudgeonly air of the *golden years*. But he knew something in him was changing. He could still remember third-Thursday card games with his boys at the railroad, but the more he strained to remember why Mavis was so busy-- *cleaning the table leaf even--* the more frustrated he became. It wasn't true that this was

like waking up after dreaming, as he'd tried to rationalize the first few times this happened. He couldn't remember the name of the woman next door when she came by to borrow mason jars. He lost his watch last week *and looked for it everywhere*. Regina found it, plain as day, on the dinette table. Easter was *aware* of losing things, of forgetting things. It was the awareness that was excruciating. So it wasn't like waking up after a dream at all. *Who cared if you forgot a dream?* Easter was aware of forgetting *reality*.

Mavis's industrious clatter was all the reminder he needed that he had forgotten something big. He couldn't ask her what it was. He would sound ridiculous. Feeble. Not the self he felt he was, had been--not his best self, certainly.

*This heat!* He stood in front of the fan, it's noisy vibrato masking some of the kitchen racket. The fan blew cold the wet cloth of his shirt against his back. Easter could see Regina playing on the porch steps. The heavy front door was open, propped by a felt-covered brick decorated with cut-out flowers of red and yellow with black centers, a remnant of some old church bazaar or other. "Comin' through, Trumpet," he said to the child as he pushed open the screen door, flecks of white paint crumbling into his fingers.

"Hello, Mr. Granddad," she said, busy with a regiment of twigs and leaves fanned out on the cement step.

Easter glanced up and down the street. Some young men were up to their usual summertime out-in-the-open no-good three doors down, and the Cubans were having another argument across the street. Studebaker parked up the way had a flat tire and a

man on his knees before it. Easter tried to fight the sudden notion that these people, *any* of them, probably knew whatever it was he had forgotten. “I’ma’ sit myself down here next to my girl, if that’s all right with you, Ma’am,” he said as he lowered himself, carefully, to the step. Regina remained at play. Easter patted her head and wished she’d known him *when*. “What’s she got goin’ on in there, Trumpet?” He pointed back to the house.

“I dunno,” she said. She looked up at him and smiled, then went back to her twigs.

Easter cupped a moist palm over her small head, where plastic barrettes barely held her wild pigtails in place. She smelled sweet, like honey butter. “You makin’ quite a mess there. I can see that.”

“They’re my chidden,” she said, not looking up.

“Looks like sticks!”

“I lost my paper dolls.”

“Don’t you hate losin’ stuff?” He shook his head.

“My *good* stuff, too.”

“I know!”

“What’s going on out there?” Mavis yelled shrilly from inside the house. “I’m not workin’ in here for nothin’.”

Easter grimaced. “What’s your mamma got goin’ on in there, Sugar?”

“I dunno,” she said again.

“You do,” Easter said. The child continued her play. Easter held his hand out before him. In the heat it almost looked like he had two right hands instead of one. He squinted, moved the hand back and forth. There was only one after all.

“Mamma says that woman is coming.”

*Christ. That's it.*

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They sat, in the July evening heat, around the good table, which had been pushed to the center of the living room, center-leaf added, off-white tablecloth borrowed from next door. Before now, the table had spent most of its days pressed against the wall, supporting the radio, which was nowhere in evidence at that moment. How Easter hated changes in routine. The fan motor beat like an exhausted old car laboring to make it up a mountain. Several flies and a miller danced around the light bulb, casting disturbing shadows against the walls. The jovial weather-chat of the meal had soured Easter's stomach to such an extent that dessert, blueberries in cream, wasn't sweet at all. Nothing could steer Easter's attentions away from being boilerplate mad. The frown, fixed to his face, cramped up, but he maintained it.

Regina sat on the floor near the couch with Bessie Mae's Enoch, a noisy toddler. Easter couldn't eat. Wouldn't. *Who this woman think she is? Makin' us put on the dog like this? It's a damn fool waste of the good money we barely got.* He had seen her before, the church organist and self-appointed righteousness deputy who everybody knew had a child but no man. To this day nobody knew the father, but Easter amused himself with the thought that Bessie Mae would prefer everyone to think it was an immaculate

conception. Of course, Mavis was a different case, and most everybody just felt sorry for her. She had a man, a husband, until the police shot up a place they said was a gambling parlor off of Vine--of course, they never found any gambling *anything*--and that was the end of him. No one was allowed to talk of him, Mavis's rules. She ran a rule-infested house, so far as Easter was concerned: no cigars in the house, no music after six o'clock and none on Sunday, no railroad workers over to the house, and certainly no poker games. That was why he so looked forward to the third Thursdays when the 20th-Century's full line porters got the day off and he could go down and meet his old buddies back of the Fred Harvey's for poker and cigars.

He looked at the wide, shiny face of the woman opposite him in her navy suit and matching felt hat with the yellow flower on it. Pinkie in the air. He longed for Thursday. She sipped her coffee like it was miracle water. Nostrils from ear to ear like she was proud to smell the air in New York and Los Angeles at the same time. He pushed the bowl of blueberries away from him. Faceless heads in a milky sea.

"And haa-uh lawng didjoo wuhk fuh thuh Twenuth Senchuhee, Mista Dunne?" Bessie Mae asked, arch-Southern. She was from Omaha.

"Not long enough to get outta this town," he replied.

Bessie Mae smiled hesitantly, looking to a haggard Mavis for some indication of how to respond. Mavis, her relaxed hair swept back to peek-out points curling up behind her ears, feigned a light smile of her own, as if to say, "This is what it'll be like, living here."

Bessie Mae returned her gaze to the shrunken man in the sweat-moistened yellow shirt. "Tha Lawd has plans fuhs all, Mista Dunne. You hepped keep yo famlee tahgetha,



ain't that right? Oh, thehs heapsa luhvleh hiums 'bout keepin' tahgetha!" This smile was big, the real deal. She put her cup down and took in a great breath, ready to--

"Well, it's after six o'clock, I-tell-you. Look at that." He looked at his watch in a sweeping gesture.

"It's whuut?" A look to Mavis and then to Easter.

"No singin'" he pronounced.

"Whuut? But whuut--?"

"We got rules, woman. Ain't no music here after six, and praise the damn lord for that." He was visibly pleased with himself. He set both hands astride his chest.

"Enough of you," Mavis said. "He's just in love with being difficult." She began to place dirty dishes on top of one another, separating silverware.

"Mista Dunne, if weaze gawn all live tahgetha in this haaus, we canna be nippin' at each uthuh's heeals all live-long day, na-uh can we?" Fake smile, clasped hands.

"I don't have to like *nothin'*. Wasn't me asked you and your strange child in here." This sparked a horrified "Oh!" from the large woman who was now beginning to sweat more profusely. "She don't ever tell me nothin' 'cept what to *not* do," he said, pointing at his daughter. "You sleep in those crazy hats?"

"Really, Mista Dunne, I had jessa 'bout enuff you this eevnin."

"There's the door!"

"Daddy, enough!" Mavis commanded. She turned to Bessie Mae. "I told him all about this *last week*, but he already forgot everything I told him."

This, he knew, could be true, which caused him a great deal of added annoyance.

*What had happened to all that Time between the telling and the forgetting?*

“Bessie Mae has been kind enough to stay here and help out and I won’t have you making her feel anything less than welcome, is that clear?”

Easter mouthed inaudible words to the effect of “blah, blah, blah” as the two women moved dishes and silverware into the kitchen for washing. He steamed, knowing the two of them would chat up his various faults like comic strip jokes and he wouldn’t be able to hear them. *What could they say? “Old coot?” “Poor man?” Surely that big woman was full of Bible stories about long-suffering daughters of crazy old men. Just what we need in this house.* Easter crossed his arms and harrumphed. How he needed to get out of this house! He thought about the look on his daughter’s face as she explained, or *re-explained*, to him what the new arrangement was. It was like she was talking to a child. Bessie Mae and Enoch would stay in what had been Regina’s room and Regina would sleep with her mother. *No telling how long something like that can last.* Twenty-five extra dollars coming in a month and somebody to watch the children and help clean wasn’t really a *bad* situation, but Easter felt unmanned and small in a house full of women. But that was how it was. He could offer to help clean and be met with surly-comical “No, thank-you’s” gilded with jokes about the possibility of his *losing* the dust rags. He could forego the offers and just do what chores he could do without notifying the *authorities* and be met with stern “What-are-you-doings?” and “You-need-to-rests.” Thoughts of Thursday right around the corner took on all the desperate urgency of nights before Christmas for twelve-year-olds.

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“What’s this?” Easter looked at the thick, yellowish mush in his oatmeal bowl. Six o’clock in the morning, already humid, bugs already in the house, somebody already in a shouting match outside close. Easter had shuffled into the kitchen in white boxer shorts and a sleeveless undershirt leftover from his railroad days. Such early mornings saw the greatest rush of activity in the old house, not unlike a rail terminal somewhere--busy people with things to do, even if those things were scouting out insects under the front porch. Mavis was busy detangling Regina’s unruly hair, the child’s head jerking wildly with each pull while her tiny face registered nothing but tacit acceptance of the burden of African hair. Mavis used one hand to pull and one hand to position the girl’s head; she held fast the white plastic barrettes and elastic baubles between her lips. Enoch fussed on the floor with what must have, at one time, been crackers, now an explosion of debris about his face and lap. He looked up at Mr. Dunne, white eyes shining, and howled. Bessie Mae rattled pans in the sink.

“That they-uhs hominy mash, Mista Dunne,” Bessie Mae said before turning around to address Enoch’s wailing. “I declaya,” she said, putting a hand up to her yellow, ruffled bathrobe as she saw Easter with gaping fly.

“That what that’s ‘sposed to be? I take oatmeal at my breakfast,” he said. He eased into the chair, scraping its metal coasters over the floor with an eek. Bessie Mae set a glass of juice in front of him. “What’s this? Holy Indianberry?”

“It’s orange juice, as it happens,” she replied, bending to attend to Enoch, still howling (although no one else seemed at all bothered by this). “Suppose it’d be faya ifn I made you oatmeal mornins if you woah *bathrobe* tuh thuh table, Mista Dunne?”

Mavis laughed, as did Regina, who didn’t know what the laughing was all about anyway.

“What you so worried about? I ain’t after you.”

“Puh-lease!”

“If it don’t get up, Woman, it sure don’t get out.”

Bessie Mae harrumphed and, shrieking Enoch in tow, chugged off to her room.

Easter watched the heavy rhythms of her backside roll up and down and up and down, on out of the kitchen. Floorboard creaks echoed in the hallway. His breakfast was cold.

Regina’s hair situation temporarily solved, she kissed her mother and ran out of the room, her green plastic thongs smacking the backs of her feet. Mavis sat in her chair near an old cup of coffee and looked to be breathing in her one moment of solitude. Easter noticed the corners of her mouth, as he supposed just about everyone did--the way they seemed to pull so far back and slightly upward. Made her look almost foreign, almost exotic, almost . . . what? Not his. She worked such long hours doing nothing more than pressing and steaming shirts and slacks at Pennler’s, day after day, and it never changed. Only got hotter or colder. Barely kept them in the family house, what it was.

Easter had worked for several lines, none long enough to earn a pension, but that’s what happened to people. A few dollars each month from the government helped buy food and he could hide away the odd dollar or quarter and wait for third Thursdays, when

he could take the better part of a day walking the blocks to the station, maybe take the streetcar from Swope if he had extra change and felt like suffering the looks of the good folks.

“I need you to sit with Regina tomorrow, Daddy,” Mavis said, holding her chipped white cup.

Easter’s eyes grew wide. “That’ll be my *Thursday*, Mavis!”

Mavis closed her eyes and leant her head back; she hadn’t remembered. “Daddy, I’m sorry, I should have known.” She put her hand to her forehead. “I’ve got nobody else.”

“Well, what’s Bessie Mae Mucho here for, then? You tell me that.” His heart beat faster. He drank his orange juice in one full pass.

“She’s got the doctor’s with Enoch and then practice with the elder choir and then something else.” Easter grimaced and Mavis fought for something else to say that would pacify him, although she knew there was little chance of that. She could see his temples throbbing and the ridge of his white hair creeping back on his wrinkled scalp. “You know she adores you.”

“That woman?”

“Regina,” she responded, half-laughing. “Regina, Daddy.”

“What I’m gonna’ do, Mavis?” Easter said, trying for sympathy. “What I’ve got here but my boys? I can’t miss my boys, Mavis. What if they think I’m dead and we don’t meet no more? Nothin’ more hopeless than people can’t find each other ‘cause they think somebody give up on ‘em.”

“Very moving, but no sale. Easy enough to just leave word for ‘em.”

Dejected, Easter replied with a society sniff, “Oh, yes sir, Mr. Nee-gro, we’ll be *too* happy to pass along your delightful message.” He hated that he no longer had any command of his own. Mrs. Dunne, God rest her soul, would never have even asked Easter to miss his boys. Now Mavis had command, he knew it and so did she, but he didn’t have to let her know he accepted it. Girl had no time to humor an old man.

“Please, Daddy. I can’t pay nobody, you know that.”

Easter hated his predicament and rubbed his hand around the top of his head, sighing. “I don’t suppose I could teach her five card stud?”

“Very funny,” Mavis said, standing and crossing to the sink, where she washed out her cup and set it on the tile of the counter. She turned and leant against the sink as she pinned her Pennler’s name tag to her blouse and checked her pocket for change for the trolley. “You know I love you.”

“Don’t seem like it,” he said, knowing otherwise. He crossed his arms and tried to imagine missing his game and his rare opportunity to be out in the world as he once had been. He knew she wasn’t willfully robbing him of this sense of self, but he couldn’t help feeling a little indignant. “You always get me with the love crap.”

“Don’t let her under that porch, now. I had a time with her hair this morning and I’m in no mood to do that again soon,” Mavis said as she left the kitchen to pick up her hair net and then whiz back through the kitchen to go out the back door.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. And no fillin’ her full of liquor, neither.”

Mavis left the house. Easter wondered about Regina, who wasn’t in sight. *No doubt, she was already under the porch, poking sticks at mantises.* Bessie Mae sang in the

bathroom about being lost in the world without God as Enoch continued to wail in the bedroom. The morning was whooshing to life--trucks sped by on noisy engines belching noxious fumes, dogs barked in every surrounding yard, trash cans were being rolled in the street by bored children, sirens wailed in the distance--how was it Easter Dunne felt so alone?

~ ~ ~

Easter hadn't been able to sleep the night before. He had felt giddiness and guilt in his stomach to such a mind-swirling level that he had sat straight up around 3:00, worried Mavis or Bessie Mae might have actually heard him thinking. The morning's routine had alarmed him in its ordinariness--neither woman stopped, mid-action, to ask him what he was up to. Neither woman suddenly accused him of acting afraid (or worse, trying to act too ordinary). *They had to know something, didn't they?* He couldn't decide what was right. Mavis had left for work saying at least she knew nobody'd be under the porch today. *What did she really mean?* Bessie Mae and Enoch had gone as well. "Now where is that child?" he asked himself, shuffling from his small room, down the hallway, and into the front room. Morning sun streamed into the room through the thin, brownish curtains. They fluttered in and out against the gusts from the noisy fan like contracting lungs or catfish gills. The scent of chicken and noodles from the night before still hung thick in the air, and Easter tried to imagine what it was about the smell of something *that wasn't there anymore* that still had the power to be so evident, so *there* in its absence. He thought of his wife. He could taste the air. The fan motor ground away. The thin curtains billowed and flapped. *And what to do today?* Easter felt dizzy and grabbed for the doorway so he

could lean a spell. His vision was a bit blurry just then. Looked almost like two right hands where the Good Lord gave him one.

“Regina!” he shouted from the front room. The front door was propped open again. *She was probably outside.* “Gigi! Child, where you at?” He moved, slowly, to the screen door, looked around. The summertime, out-in-the-street no-gooders were standing around under the dead mulberry kicking cans and smoking. The Cubans were arguing again. No sign of any kids Regina’s age. Then he heard a shuffle and knew. *What is the matter with this child?* He moved out onto the flaking boards of the left-leaning porch. He sat down, carefully, on a side-turned fruit crate from the A&P as he listened for more. He couldn’t make out what she was saying, but he knew she was there. “Trumpetina!” he called out. The girl became quiet. “Saxophonia?” She giggled. More shuffling. Easter put his worn hands to his mouth and pretended to call out down the block. “Clarinetta?”

The child shrieked with laughter and, then, mock-scolding: “That’s not *my* name! Don’t call *me* that!”

One of the summertime, out-in-the-street no-gooders yelled at the old man to shut up, and the others mumbled their agreement.

“Mamma don’t like you callin’ me them names!” She gave a five-year-old’s best approximation of a stern voice.

“*Your* mamma?” he answered. “*Your* mamma know you under that filthy old porch again?”

“I’m jess playin’ with the bugs,” she responded, and something in the way she said *bugs* struck Easter right across his lips.



Easter took an already moist handkerchief from his back pocket and mopped at his forehead. “You plannin’ on comin’ outta that hole anytime ‘fore Christmas? I’m too old to get in there and drag you out.”

“I’m busy.”

His friends were probably arriving at the station this minute, laughing, smoking, setting up the card table. The sun was shining like a memorable day. “She’s busy!” he said, as though telling the ghost next to him. Someone in the Cuban’s house broke a glass. “Well, pardon me, Trombonina. Come on outta there, you crazy child. I gotta ask you a important *question*.” His heart pumped hard.

“What question?” She went back to her playing.

Easter was growing frustrated. “Might as well be talkin’ to the door. I can at least *see* it.” The child didn’t respond. “I may be too old to get you outta there, but your mamma ain’t! You hear what I’m sayin’ to you, Girlie?”

Regina moved herself along the dirt and cans and gravel underneath the porch until her head showed through the small opening between the crumbling stone supports. A long stem of dead grass had lodged in her hair and, of course, she was filthy. “I need a pull, Granddaddy!” she yelled. A breeze blew the scent of earth and grass and urban exhaust past both of them.

“I ain’t pullin’ nothin’ nowhere, Missy. Uh-uuh.”

“I’ll be stucked!” She seemed legitimately worried over her sudden predicament, flopping like a fish on the banks. Dogs barked in the back lot and somebody was laughing too much somewhere; a woman down the way.

“Maybe your friends, the bugs, can help you out ‘cause I’m just *too old* to get down there,” he said, sounding closer to ninety than to sixty-five. He looked down at the dirty little head. The fruit crate creaked. The no-good boys laughed at their own jokes. He could feel his other self stirring, the selfish Easter. “You like adventure, Trumpet?” He stood up and started to lower himself backwards down the steps, with both hands on the wobbly metal rail. Regina flailed about in the dirt. Mosquitoes were out; Easter jerked his head away from them. Overhead, thick clouds were moving in. Stepping to the ground, Easter turned to see Regina, out of the hole, swatting at the dirt on her knees.

“Now I’m down here for nothin’. Look at you.” He shook his head. “What a mess.” The girl hugged him around the knees. “I don’t want your dirt all over me!” he protested, but it was a weak protest, and he assumed she knew it. She grabbed him tighter. He loved her more than all the world. *Looks just like her mamma.* The sun was disappearing and it wasn’t even lunchtime. His boys would be wondering after him. “You like adventure, Trumpet?” Regina looked up at her grandfather and smiled. He pulled the grass from her hair. A single drop of rain hit his nose.

~ ~ ~

“Now you hold tight to that coat, Trumpet,” Easter said to Regina. The child looked up at him, stumbling somewhat to keep pace with his invigorated steps. He held the battered black umbrella arced forward to combat the blowing downpour that had surprised everyone that morning. Thunder rolled continuously, like a kettle drum underneath the bricks they crossed to get to the west side of Grand. They could walk under the awnings on that side.

Easter watched Regina as they walked, constantly gauging her reactions to what she saw. He felt like a king showing off his land. Regina had seemed excited at the prospect of an outing. Her world was so small, Easter thought; just the house and yard, infrequent church trips (although Bessie Mae was doing her darndest to rectify that), and even more infrequent trips to Swope Park Pool, though *people* said blacks were running everybody else out. She would, most likely, be starting school soon enough. He had taken particular care to make sure Regina knew this was their special secret outing, no use making her mamma angry over something she didn't even have to know about. Regina was a sharp girl, though, and already in an exploratory state of mind. She was always into everything, wanting to see how it all worked. Easter figured Regina knew how her mamma worked, that it was a bad thing saying something to her to get her going. She had agreed the outing should be a secret, while helping Easter finish making cheese sandwiches which they quickly wrapped in paper and stuffed into their pockets.

They were into the shopping district, rain pelting them still. Regina stopped, apparently entranced, in front of Tobler's Florist. Despite the thunder, the rain, and the crowds of passing people, the light from within the florist's seized her. Glamorous yellow-haired women in flower-print dresses walked across a black and white, checkered tile floor. They pointed at red roses on long stems and at orange and white carnations that a man in an apron quickly bundled up in green tissue paper.

"Come on, now," Easter said with a tug.

"Do flowers cost lots?" she asked.

“Big lots,” Easter replied. He opened the umbrella again as they prepared to cross Pershing. The enormous station was almost invisible in the rain, save for the white light of the outer clock and the red and white streaks of light from buses and taxis making entries and exits to and from the drop-offs. “Hold on, now, Trumpet.” They rushed across the busy road--someone honked at them--and landed safe but soaked at the station parking lot. Regina spit dirty street water out of her mouth. Easter tugged the little girl underneath the front awning of the station’s grand entrance. Busy people bumped him as he withdrew a handkerchief and dabbed at the child’s face. “Just a mess today, Honey Girl. Hold still, now. That’s a big girl. What’s a little dirt to a big girl like you?” He was full of pride to be bringing his beautiful granddaughter into his world, the world where he was somebody. And there was that trace of *thrill* at finally getting out from under Mavis’s thumb, if only for awhile. Regina said nothing, only stared at everything, which moved so fast.

Regina remained silent, awestruck, Easter wanted to believe, as they entered the massive main hall of the cacophonous station. Twice she nearly fell over herself in trying to walk and stare at the cathedral-like ceiling at the same time. Easter grasped her sopping hand as he pulled her through the teeming crowds. “Don’t you love this?” Easter said, beaming. He looked at her looking at the faces of the other people. A voice in his head asked if maybe Regina wasn’t, in fact, awestruck, but frightened. This was Easter’s worrying self, and it was at odds with his proud self, which tried to imagine how any child as adventurous as Regina could find this frightening. As he pulled her through the crowds

he had to believe it was exciting. *He* was excited. People did seem to stare at Regina, if not coldly, then blankly. *Weren't they a pair? Black, wet rats!*

Gaggles of suited men talked in corners, smoking long cigarettes. Women in yellow slickers read fashion magazines at long, pew-like benches. Redcaps wheeled heavy suitcases to unknown destinations. This was where people *traveled*. “Everybody’s *travelin’* here, Honey,” Easter said to Regina. Her hand contracted in his. He used his folded umbrella like a rich man’s cane. Who cared if they were both as wet as sponges? He could feel the cards and cigar smoke pulling him onward. *She must be amazed at her old Granddaddy. This was where her grandfather worked; this was his world.* Voices on loudspeakers called out a litany of places, names, and directions; everything was frighteningly, excitingly alive. Everyone they passed was as wet as they were, but Easter’s smile outshone even the East Hall chandelier. He was walking through the glow of times which could have only been grander, *surely Regina could see that.*

Easter and Regina passed by the Fred Harvey’s, where the early lunch crowd rattled dishes and clanked silverware. A Harvey girl had just dropped a glass and the local attention had fixed upon her as she directed a colored man to sweep it up. The air was thick with the smell of roast beef and potatoes with gravy. The two entered a less busy hallway and then descended a flight of dimly-lit marble stairs to what Easter often imagined to be the back of some grand stage. Everything was an unfolding tale. Regina still said nothing. *She’ll probably have a thousand questions when she’s being tucked in tonight.*

A frowning redcap carrying three mops passed them in the corridor. Easter nodded to him, but he did not respond. "Three mops!" Easter said to him, in a strained sort of greeting. The redcap stopped briefly and glared at Easter, who held his smile tennuously. "My shit that obvious, old man?" He began to walk away, and suddenly Easter lost the glow of his memories. "Hold on there, mack," Easter said to the man, who kept walking but managed to audibly say "Fuck you, man." Regina craned her neck to watch him disappear around the corner and caught the angry man's glance when he looked over his shoulder. She gasped. Easter tugged her along, shaking his head. "Come on now, Honey. You don't pay that *no mind*." His steps picked up as they clicked down the hallway, the tip of his umbrella clacking like a third step. She double-stepped clumsily to keep pace.

Three old men in shiny black caps covered with plastic baggies whooped big hellos to Easter in the same dark hallway. Easter patted them each on the back. *Her granddaddy must have been an important man, indeed.* At the end of the hallway, and before an even darker staircase, was a wooden door with smoky, bubbled glass bearing the number 12 on it in black paint, outlined in gold. A light glowed inside, and Easter heard the din of male conversation punctuated by brief, low laughs and one or two handclaps. Easter stopped before the door and turned to Regina, who now stared up at him.

"You're not scared?"

"I dunno," she said, grabbing his hand again.

"You are," he replied. "Gonna squeeze all the blood outta my hand."

She let go of his hand and Easter took out his worn handkerchief as he bent down to her eye level.

“Ain’t we a sight?” he said, dabbing at her forehead and cheeks. He then wiped at his own hands. “Okay, now, Gigi,” Easter said to her as he unhooked her raincoat. “In here’ll be my old boys.” He pointed at the door. More laughter could be heard. “They’s a good a bunch a men as you’ll ever see, but they try to be scary sometimes just ‘cause, well, this ain’t a little girl’s place. But you be brave and I can get us both some ice cream soon enough if you’ll be my good luck.”

The girl sniffed and wiped at her cheek with her arm.

“Will you be my good luck, then?”

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Come on, now, Trumpet.” He did worry. He wanted her to see the best of his life. His best self. “Wouldn’t your mamma laugh at us now?” he said, laughing a small, guilt-tinged laugh. “Wouldn’t she, Trumpet?” He smiled. “Calrinetta?” He poked at her belly. “Saxophonia?” He poked again and she smiled, swaying coyly. “There, now. That’s my girl. Will you be my good luck, then?”

“Yes,” she said.

Easter stood up, knees popping, and opened the door, freeing a stream of smoke, which rose, curling, out of the room and swirled up past the gold light of the globed hall sconce. The men inside, five of them, each with cigar in mouth, shrieked their excitement at Easter’s appearance. Regina hid behind his legs.

“Now you don’t be such a shy girl, eh?” Easter said.

“Who you got with you, you sopping wet old fool?” one of the men at the card table asked. It was a tiny room, dingy wallpaper above dark green wainscoting, slate tile floor, battered leather couch on three legs against the far wall and a painted-over window above it, tilted open just enough to see it was still gray, rain dripping audibly onto some unknown surface beyond the glass. A thin door opened onto a small, dark lavatory on the right. Smoke swirled around the lone, hanging light bulb. The men, all black, wore the clothes they had, doubtless to Easter, been wearing on their last train job across the Rockies.

“This here’s my best girl, Gentlemen. The lovely Miss Regina, here, somewhere behind my legs.” He reached for her, she remained elusive. “Come here, Squirrelly.”

“Findin’ ‘em younger all the time, ain’t ya?” said another man, causing the room to erupt into laughter again. “Let’s get you two outta those wet things, for a start,” he continued.

Easter took off his coat and hung it on the tree, setting the umbrella in the stand. He motioned for Regina to sit at a chair against the wall, but she held tight to his leg, suddenly far less adventurous than he had supposed she would be. One man asked what her name was again, and this seemed to frighten her even more. She would not let go of Easter’s pant leg.

“Maybe she’d like it better if she sat out in the hall,” a man suggested.

“What I’m gonna’ do then?” Easter asked.

“She’ll be fine.”

“She won’t go home smelling like all of Cuba!” More laughs.



“Come on, Easter, man. We’ll play fast. Eddie’s been losing at the spedda’ light lately.”

“I’m afraid she’s a bit scared alla’ sudden,” Easter said, putting his hand over hers. “Strange, ‘cause this one’s a regular Mr. Livingston-I-presume.” He looked down at the teary-eyed girl. “You wanta sit out in the hall for a bit, then, Trumpet?”

She shook her head from side to side, then peered at the men. *Maybe she didn’t like them? Maybe she’d never seen a **group** of them before?* She looked out to the hall where she had seen the redcap with the three mops, and put her finger in her mouth. “I’ll sit,” she said.

“Where? In here or out there, Honey?” Easter asked.

Regina pointed to the hallway.

“She’s gonna’ sit out away from all you crazy men,” Easter announced. Some of the men said “Nice to meet you, Honey” as she went out of the door. Easter pulled the chair next to the wall out into the hallway. “Now you just sit here a bit and I won’t be long at all.”

Regina looked up at her grandfather and then at the smoke trails dancing around the light. Two Harvey girls laughed down the way, their shoes clacking against the butterscotch marble floor.

“Have you got your sandwiches ready to go?”

“Yes,” she said, and she felt for them in her pocket; pieces of home.

“I’m right in here, in this door, Honey Girl, so you tell me if you need anything at all, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. Her small legs swung back and forth under the chair.

“You just think about that ice cream.”

“Okay,” she said

Easter disappeared into the smoky room, and Regina watched him until there was nothing left to see. He then poked his head back out the door, smiling a crazy smile. “I’m right in here, Trumpet.”

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. She heard him say “She’ll be fine” and two other men responded to him with the same sentiments.

Forty-five minutes later, when Easter went out to use the rest room, the hallway seat was empty.

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“Child, where you at?” Easter said, not particularly loudly. He looked down the hallway and saw nothing. He looked down the dimly-lit service stairs as a young porter came up slowly carrying several wet, folded-over tarpaulins. “Hey, Mack, you see a little colored girl down that way?” Easter swiped at his nose and looked over his shoulder. The men in the cloudy room were still laughing as they bickered and threw down cards.

“Down there? Ain’t nothin’ for a little girl down there, Sir.”

“You sure?”

“I didn’t see nobody,” he said, hefting the damp canvases’ weight to his other side.

“Yeah, well, she’s small’s the thing.”

“Try upstairs, maybe?”

“Yeah, all right,” Easter said. He looked down the stairwell at the empty void and imagined it as a hole under a porch. *Child can't stand the sight of five men with cigars, and yet she goes off explorin' in a whole foreign country?* He turned and poked his head back into the room. “She ain't out here, so I'm goin' searchin'.”

“Hoo-boy, you got some chore, then,” one man said.

“She comes back here, you tell her to wait--and be *nice*.”

“Best bet's the candy counter over by information, you know,” said a man.

“Old Betty's still up there, East. She'll set things right. She always been sweet on old fools like you.” The men laughed.

When Regina didn't turn up at the candy counter, the magazine rack, Fred Harvey's, or the ladies' room--Betty looked in there--Easter began to feel a growing, cramping hollow in his gut. He stood by the rear gate of the circular information booth, nervously tapping his fingers on the dark veins of the cold marble countertop as he waited for Betty to request an announcement. She came back to Easter in short order to say there would be an announcement soon.

“We've asked the gals over in lost and found, Susie at the cigarette window, and Dal at the east shoe-shine, but nobody's seen her,” Betty said with a sigh. She was impossibly small, white and school-marmish, with close-cropped swirls of electrically white hair circling in waves about her thick, round head. She wore simple makeup and plastic jewelry made to look expensive. Her glasses hung at her chest from a shiny chain and her eyebrows were the thin, penciled-in kind that a much younger movie starlet might choose. She had a good heart, though, and Easter was rather fond of her.

“It’nt there a small flower shop in here?”

“Hasn’t been for years; you know that, Easter.”

The two people stood silent. Betty scanned the throngs of travelers for a sign. Easter looked down at his feet.

“I know all the places she wouldn’t be, couldn’t be, you know?”

“I know, Easter, but--”

“But what? She’s in here somewhere. She’s--”

“What’d ya go and leave her by herself for?”

“Somewhere.” He looked around. His heart throbbed behind each ear. The P.A. announcement startled him and he jumped a bit.

“Regina Marles. Regina Marles. Please come to . . .”

“Can’t nobody hear that!” Easter proclaimed. He had to sit down. It was 2:30.

At one point in the afternoon it seemed to Easter as though he had everyone in the station who once knew him, not including security or anybody who had a bent to not regard coloreds in any particular way, working for him. How many places could a tiny, crazy girl who talked to *bugs* hide? This he thought at 3:30.

At 4:30, a shift manager became angry at some of the redcaps for not being at the arrival line of the Zephyr Limited on time, and he came to Easter, who was now sitting in a metal folding chair within the perimeter of the information booth. Betty, who was with a line of lost travelers, kept a watchful eye on Easter and the shift manager in his stiff, gray suit.

“We can’t have this running around all day, Mr. Dunne,” the shift manager said with an Irish lilt.

Easter said nothing at first, only looked down at his old hands.

“What you need to do is get the officer on duty. That’s what you need to do. We can’t have this running around all day.”

“Yessir,” Easter said without looking at the man. “I reckon’ you sho-nuff right.”

At 5:30, the fat policeman on duty said there was nothing to be done until a day had passed and the parent had come in to fill out a formal, written statement.

“This child is gone *now*, What do we do *now*? Some crazy fool could be killin’ her *now*.” Easter pleaded, wringing his hands. His stomach hurt for some food and the Fred Harvey’s was in full swing. He had never eaten there. Now people said it was going to close by year’s end.

“If that child has been gone since before noon, you just gotta’ wait. That’s all there is to do.” The officer nodded a hello to a man walking by with a briefcase before returning his gaze to Easter. “I don’t suppose she hopped a train to Jersey?” he snickered. Maybe he had intended on lightening the mood. “I’m sorry, sir, but the best thing for you to do right now is just go home. There’s plenty of people here knows what’s the problem. You go on home now to your wife, and come back tomorrow and we’ll see what happens. Could be nothing more than just a mix-up is all. Happens all the time with these kids.”

“What kids? You don’t know what the goddamned *fuck* you’re talking about!” Easter roared. How could he go home to that house?

“Listen here, you, I’m not gonna have any more talk like that, Boy. I can tell you that. Now you just go on home. Go on.”

Instead of going home, Easter slowly, achingly, checked every place everyone had looked before, sometimes twice, sometimes asking the same tired people the same desperate questions. “Have you seen . . . ?” The answer was always no. Every little girl he saw could have been her--girls at shop windows, at candy counters, holding the hands of mothers--but no little girl was. He tried to imagine what she was seeing, tried to somehow absorb for her any fear and pain she might be feeling. A hundred disastrous scenarios pummeled his stomach muscles to bruises.

At 7:15, Easter had nothing left. Betty had to leave or miss her last bus. “I can’t go home, Betty,” he said. He lost his ability to speak after that. He knew Mavis was home by now. He left the station at 7:30, turned to look once more, briefly imagining she might come running, but nothing. He walked out into the black city rain without his umbrella. His coat blew open and closed. He walked into streets with his eyes closed. He had to sit often. He came to the Tobler’s on Grand, with its bright, black-and-white checked floor and rows of carefully arranged flowers. Yellow, white, red, orange. Brass planters in the shape of watering cans. Easter stood right at the door of the shop, his breath clouding the glass at the Closed sign. A tall, thin woman in a red dress appeared at his eye-level and pointed a nail-painted finger at his face as she frowned. Her finger made a cold thunk against the glass and Easter continued on in the exhaust-smelling rain. A car horn, a train whistle, the bustle of people rushing for cover--it was all the same; just sounds.

At 8:05, Easter stood before the house. The street was empty and lights from each house glowed like jack-o-lanterns. He couldn't get a single drop of moisture in his mouth despite the rain, which was now barely a sprinkle. The street shined like oil. Dogs still barked. The front porch still was there, its steps slick-looking from the water and light. Moths darted around the porch light, dancing around their moon. They didn't know any better.

He couldn't do it. He could not touch those stairs. He tried to imagine Mavis's face and her rage and sorrow and anger and hatred. He felt dizzy. Looking down to his hands, he squinted to separate the fuzzy vision of blurry fingers. He waved his hand about as if to shake off the illusion. He noticed his other hand and, indeed, both his feet, seemed equally blurry and divided. He blinked hard but it all stayed the same. He hadn't drunken anything, or eaten. He hadn't been able to, even when his body ached for it.

Easter's ears fuzzed with a noise not unlike late August locusts. He fell to the pavement and cut his left wrist. He wanted to grab at the earth and hang on as it rotated on its heavy axis. He wanted to be taken somewhere. He wanted, more than anything, to shout out and cry, but nothing came. Nothing was in him to call upon. He couldn't go up those stairs. He saw a figure, a woman, at the picture window. She put a hand up to her forehead to look out and then, seemingly dissatisfied, went away. It was Bessie Mae.

Easter entered the house through the back kitchen door at 9:00. He was wet, dirty, and bleeding from his wrist. Silence hung thick in the house, accusatory. How his stomach ached--where guilt really tried to be digested. The dark kitchen cared nothing for

him, nor all the kitchen wares on the countertops shadowed by the lone light from the front room.

“Mavis?” Bessie Mae said from the front room. A creak of chair springs.

Easter pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. The floorboards moaned as Bessie Mae came into the darkened kitchen.

“My land o’Goshen, Mista Dunne. Whatevah happened to you? Where you been all this time?” She took the dishtowel from the refrigerator handle and handed it to him. He set it down on the wobbly table. “You’ve hurt yoseff,” she said.

Easter took his hand off of the table and placed it in his lap. He looked to the infinite blackness of the hallway, like a stairwell, like a porch hole, like a cavern. Would she come around the corner? Would she smile and hold onto his leg? Maybe laugh about what a big day they had had and wasn’t it *funny* what happened then? But the hallway remained dark and no little girl emerged. “Where are you?” he thought. “My God, what are you seeing right now, child?”

“A man called ‘round six-thurteh this eevnin’ said he was hopin’ you was home. Said he was hopin’ you’d found *your girl*. Said you’d been at Union Station.” She sat down. She was wearing her yellow, ruffled-front bathrobe. She smelled of liniment, acrid. She wore a plastic haircap. She looked . . . *different*. Altered. Unashamedly human. She stared at him with something like fear. “‘Course, I said, ‘No *suh*, Mista Dunne wudn’ be at the station.’ I said that.” She bowed her head with the perplexed look of a waitress trying to calculate a tab in her head. “He wudn’ be at the *station*.” She looked up again,



looking for something from him. Silence. Easter looked up to her. He tried to speak, almost forcing words from brain to mouth, but no words came. He blinked and looked at his hands, still blurry. He saw Regina's face in the station and shuddered.

"What?" Bessie Mae asked, swallowing hard. She put both her hands up to her mouth, one over the other, pressing hard to suppress a shriek. Her eyes shot wide. "My *God*, Mista Dunne! My *God*, Mista Dunne! My *God*! My *God*, no!" She cried and shook her head.

Easter looked to the front room doorway. Mavis stood there in her plastic coat, as wet as he, entranced by Bessie Mae's reaction to his silence. Bessie Mae followed Easter's gaze to the doorway. The light reflected off of Mavis's damp brown skin like the aura of heat from a fire.

"Oh, Miss Mavis!" Bessie Mae shrieked.

Mavis looked up at the ceiling of the house she lived in, the house of her father, the house of her daughter. She did not look at Bessie Mae or Easter. She reached for the countertop, dripping, shaking, trying to deposit her keys as though it were any other day. But, of course, it wasn't. The keys hit the floor with a shock of metal against flooring, a sound jolting enough to cause Bessie Mae to cease her own sobbing. The neighbors could have heard those keys drop.

"I, I--" Mavis said to the ceiling. She stopped, expressionless, clutched at her plastic coat, turned--and it was the silent turn that crushed Easter's insides--and went to her room, where, he surmised, no one could see her crash to her worn knees on the unforgiving planks of the floor. Bessie Mae rose quickly to follow her.

“Oh, Honey. Honey, now,” she cried after her. Her voiced trailed off, behind Mavis’s closing bedroom door, where Regina should have been. Safe. Asleep.

Easter sat in his own cold bed in his own cold bedroom, guilt and fear eating him from the insides out. He ached all over. He couldn’t move. His vision was terrible, growing worse. Ten fingers on each hand, two hands on each arm. Two feet on each leg, swimming back and forth like hazy ghosts in water. He tried to see the kind of man who would take Regina someplace dark. Maybe he would strangle her with some industrial rope. Maybe he would rape her. Maybe he would hit her so hard her eyes would swell shut and she would have to scream for her mamma or her granddaddy but she couldn’t--like trying to scream for help mid-nightmare only to find your voice asleep and failing you. Every possible fear she could have or might have had already pinned itself to Easter’s heart. He asked God to let him die. There was no answer. He heard Bessie Mae shriek again. Enoch began to cry from the back room. Easter could imagine Bessie Mae in her room, arms raised to the heavens. He did not want to imagine Mavis.

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Easter found himself sitting upright in his bed, a thick pillow between his back and the dark cherry of the headboard he once shared with his wife. Was it day? What day might it be? How long had he been there? He couldn’t hear any sounds at all. He tried to shout out to Mavis or Bessie Mae or Regina, but it seemed too difficult an effort. He opened his mouth, feeling cracks around the corners of his dry lips. He held open his mouth, trying to summon the strength to make a sound loud enough to be heard. All he could do was

breathe. Easter took a deep breath and pushed hard from his stomach while mouthing, “Mavis, come here!” When he heard nothing, he blinked hard and reached up to scratch at his neck. Just as his thoughts began to move to other concerns, he heard, from what seemed to be a place of warm breath just behind his head, a strange, garbled shout: “Asvim, mearc!”

Easter stopped cold and shivered. He slowly moved his head from side to side, scanning the small room. He saw nothing. He opened his mouth again and tried to force out words. No words came. Easter waited. The fuzzy warm spot behind his head stirred up as he heard “Zdnava! Vrem!” He felt at the back of his head and it was warm and somewhat damp. Still, he saw no one and heard no activity outside of his room. He had no sensation of hot or cold. No sensation of day or night. Was he encased in some protective shell, or just numb? He looked to the window shade and determined to pull it up. He reached for the blanket, grasping the fringed edge. His hands bore fingers which swayed and mingled and did not mind. Some curled backward and a few grasped the blanket. Some fingers pointed and some seemed to be trying to draw the others away. Briefly, he felt a plunging sensation as another wrist crept transparently away from his own and swam back. His breathing grew labored and he began to sense a strange bobbing in his waist and spine, as though he had just been on a ship. Finally, Easter wrested the blanket from its place, gasping.

Legs! Legs legs, with too many feet--one floated back and forth like a twig in a puddle while another seemed crooked on one side. One leg appeared to be suffering odd spasms. Waves of toes rose and fell out of it. Like snakes! Easter thought alarming

exclamations which died in the hole of his dried out mouth. He cried out wordless pleas for assistance. He looked wildly around the room. Nothing had changed, nothing was--

”Vreng gaddas! Jeewollka! Bregdan, Breghana!”

He knew he would vomit. A spasm in the neck and a sickly warm curl at the back of his jaw; he knew. His head jerked forward and his vision blurred. No concentrating, he couldn't focus. Blurring. Different. Blurring again. A head came forward. This he saw. He saw it. It vomited across the floor. It flew back into him and he fell against the pillow, gasping at air; a salty, chemically, raw-egg-like bile rested between his cheeks and gums. An arm fuzzed up from his own, reaching, grabbing at air. He could see through it. Something was stepping out of him.

It must have been the next week. Mavis stood against the far wall of the bedroom, next to the bureau. First he'd seen of her since that night. She never wore makeup, but something about her eyes seemed painted on. She did not speak or move.

Bessie Mae, in full makeup and flowered hat, wore a lavender frock fairly bursting with dancing florals. When she leaned down to speak she furrowed her brow and reached forward with what seemed like too-serious concern. Her lips moved. He couldn't make out what she was saying. He watched her lean up, then, and look to the chair on the other side of his bed. He was sitting there, too. Easter blinked hard. He was sitting there, too.

Night. Easter wasn't sure of the day. They had become as fuzzy to him as everything else. The room was empty now and definitely dark, save for the light coming in the room from out past the hall, probably the front room. He could hear radio noises. Easter

looked at his hands, putting them palms-up before himself. Old, dark, clearly fleshy and vein-patterned. He shook them and they did not blur. He felt a kind of not-quite-contentment, but a definite something released. As though perhaps he *had* just vomited. Maybe he'd gone and relieved himself. Had he?

He opened his mouth to speak, but found this to be a now-useless exercise. He couldn't make that work anymore, almost as if the ingredients for knowing how to create sounds had fallen from their shelf and scattered on the floor to be blown about, or blown away during a troublesome wind.

He heard a sniff. He was still sitting in the chair next to the bed. He looked down and saw he was in bed, but he was also sitting in the chair next to the bed. That he had sniffed and was sitting with both thin arms outstretched on the arms of the chair. Only in his boxer shorts. Both feet--there were two--firmly on the floor boards. That he looked down at his lap. He sniffed again. That he was a bit not-quite fleshy. Rather transparent. The Bed He could still see the back slats of the chair from within the hazy ribcage of the Chair He. The Bed He made a mouth motion and thought confrontational words. Nothing, of course, came out.

The Chair He looked up at the Bed He. His mouth opened. "*Munner frugger!*" the Chair He yelled. He smashed a fist down on the arm of the chair. "*Gob doggit! Shiniva putch, frugga!*" He pounded at the arm of the chair and began stomping his feet. "*Shezus, fugg!*"

The Bed He was confused. He was clearly himself over in the chair, albeit far angrier than usual. Then he remembered. Regina. He thought hard where she was but did not

know. The Chair He was still pounding and stomping, not looking up. He wasn't making sense now, with his rantings, but he was quite audible. The Bed He looked to the door where Mavis and Bessie Mae watched. When they had appeared, he could not be sure. They were dressed for bed. Mavis left Bessie Mae and quickly returned with a man Easter had never seen before. The man wore a police uniform and walked toward Easter.

No, he didn't.

He *did*, but to the cranky, transparent man in the chair. The officer, a thickly muscular white man in a hard-looking navy cap, bent down on one knee, saying *things*, and tried to lay hands on the Chair He. He removed his cap with one hand and placed the other on Chair He's shoulder. Bed Easter shook his head, mouth agape. *Not him! Me! I'm here in this bed!* Chair He chewed at his tongue and rocked back and forth. He hummed as he rocked. He did not speak. Puzzled, the officer patted at Chair Easter and looked up to Mavis, who was silent. What love did she have for the police? She was supposed to put her faith in them?

The officer stood up and planted his shiny black-billed cap on his head. He put his other hand to his forehead. He had only two hands, *like most of 'em*. He asked questions. Bed Easter could tell by his intonations. Mavis offered no reaction. Chair he continued to hum and rock, the chair creaking its protestations more fervently. Bessie Mae, saying something, shook her head. The officer looked to the Easter in the bed, who looked as frightened as a lost child. *Here I am, see?* Nothing registered on the officer's face to suggest he had seen him. *Here I am!* The officer asked more questions, Easter knew, but the sounds of the questions came and went like unreliable radio signals. The officer wrote

things down. He had a small notepad. “Damnit!” Chair Easter managed to yell before returning to his humming.

Bed Easter pushed the word mechanism as hard as he could to try to say, “Help me find my baby,” but the only sound he produced was a sickly sort of wheeze. He looked, in desperation and guilt, to Mavis, who refused his every glance. The muscles of his lips twitched uncontrollably. Mavis huffed and shook her head, distressing Easter greatly. His stomach ached. She walked out of the room. Bessie Mae and the officer talked and then Bessie Mae, pointing to the Chair Easter, said something loudly, accusatorially. Bed Easter did not know exactly what, but he did hear the tones of her accusations--in his stomach. “Gaaaaaahn!” Chair Easter wailed, slapping the arms of the chair and stamping his left foot. Bed Easter seemed to hear the noises a second or two after their creators had produced them. How he needed to see Mavis alone, to touch her, to talk to her, to *explain*. No apology would do, but he couldn’t leave things this way, with this foul new self in the chair next to his bed making things even worse. He began to weep. Bessie Mae and the officer left, and the officer closed the door.

Easter stayed in bed with his guilt and regret. Where is *gone*? What *place* is that? He may have eaten, but he could not recall. He certainly never spoke, although his thoughts became more clear and he knew what had happened that terrible Thursday. He had done what *he* wanted to do. No good *fool*. He had *let* his beautiful grandbaby get herself killed and nobody knew how, when, why, or by whom. Nobody knew where she was and that was the worst, most excruciating part because, even if Regina was dead, was *killed*, the absence of a child to see buried--at least the dignity of *that*--made the day of her

disappearance last *forever*. Easter could see only two things in his mind, in the hollow of his heart. Two faces that tugged and yanked and screamed for him to live while he wanted only to die. His sweet Regina wondering where her granddaddy had gone to, why he had left her at a place like that where she had never been before. And Mavis's cold, silent, hating stare. Did she have to punish him all the more by refusing to be with him? Refusing to speak to him? Refusing *him*? Why didn't Mavis throw open his door in a rage? Why didn't she yell and tear about? She had every right, after all. Easter's joints ached all over and he did not like to move. When he did, it was with the slow, deliberate flow of a crane, say, by the riverside, or of an ancient turtle moving its head to the other side of its shell for a different view of the world.

Sometimes Bessie Mae would come in and sing hymns or read from the Bible. She always put her hand over his before leaving the room. He did not respond in any discernible way. Early on he had tried, but he no longer felt able, fearing the further humiliations of the childlike whinnies and wheezes that came from him where he meant words to be. And now? He wouldn't even know where to begin.

One week, early on a Thursday, Easter saw the shadow of his daughter in the hall, she had dropped something, maybe a handful of peanuts, maybe the contents of her purse. He was determined to reach her, to make her finally acknowledge him for what he was and for what he had done. To finally let him go. He needed her hatred to be tangible. He needed to *hear* her scream at him, to *see* her wring her hands and point and clutch her bosom. He needed to *feel* her hitting him as she cried. "*It was you! It was you!*" He needed to *feel*. Her tangible rage would, somehow, be less painful than this terrible, awful



*silence*. He needed to hear her not forgive him. He had to get her attention. Easter saw Mavis's shadow, but there was nothing near him to throw. He couldn't yell out. He had nothing. So, Easter fell out of his bed. Hard, onto the cold, dusty floor. Why, he wondered, was it so much easier for Mavis to acknowledge that screeching, cussing Bastard Easter who'd taken up residence in the living room? Who had, slowly, lost his transparency while Bed Easter was beginning to get hazy? Bessie Mae and Mavis came in to put him back into the bed. It was Bessie Mae who spoke--of Easter's clumsiness--while the two women grasped him forcefully under his arms and placed him back onto the creaky springs of the worn mattress. He could smell Mavis's skin, slightly floral. She said something to Bessie Mae about dinner before walking out of the room. Bessie Mae stared at Easter, mentioning how much trouble he had become and *why couldn't he just mind?*

Easter had seen Mavis pass his door several times after that. He waited. His mind caught fire--old, faded pictures of the selves he'd had and lost burned up, melted down, flicker-flashed into fluttering ash that disappeared into the night. Friends slapping him on the back at the station. A passenger thanking him with a grateful "Yes, sir." Mrs. Dunne laughing at his jokes as he chomped a cigar. The floor creaking as Mavis sneaked in late on a school night. Regina playing under the porch. His greatest mistake. He knew what he had done. He just didn't have the words. He wasn't the same. He could hear her shout at "Chair Easter," as he was called, to stop his cussing and come to the table. One day, at last, Mavis stood and stood at Easter's bedroom door. He noticed her there as she seemed to ready herself for crossing into the atmosphere of her father or, now and forever, the man who had ripped from her her one true glory. She had been crying and was

holding something. He couldn't hear what the hole of her mouth was saying but he also knew what she was saying. She had not yet uttered the words "hate," "you," or "fault," and he would have surely heard those--he had been waiting and waiting for those words. Mavis walked to Easter's bedside tentatively, as though each step somehow led her into a very dark and sinister place. She looked to her father only when his eyes did not directly meet her own, as if knowing how a connection of the eyes locked souls together in uncomfortable ways. With a weathered sigh, Mavis placed a picture of Regina on his bed. The photo, a tattered, black-and-white print Mavis had kept in her purse to show off proudly to anyone she might have been around, bore an unfortunate, cruel crease right across the middle, but Regina smiled anyway in the dress her mamma made for her, light yellow and frilly. *Looked just like her mamma. Everybody said so. And she tried to go play in the dirt with that dress! How angry we got at that crazy girl. And how is it now I feel like smiling when I feel so low?* Mavis sat on the bed, staring away at the ceiling. She began to wring her hands, no words. *Won't you look at me? Won't you at least . . . Can't you just send me to hell and be done with it?* He tried to reach for her hand. How he tried. The language wasn't there. His arm wouldn't move. *Can't she look at me? Can't my eyes tell her? I'm still here, I just can't find the words.* Her head moved, and for one brief, aching moment, Easter thought finally, after all this hurt, they might finally see one another again. That she might find the strength to finally erupt at him. *Why won't you scream at me? I did this.* But she didn't look at him. She looked, instead, at the door, the exit, the escape. She was killing him. Mavis hurried out of the room. Easter did not see her for weeks after this.

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When it was summer again and the humidity awful, Bed Easter began feeling increasingly transparent. Indeed, he was beginning to see, hazily, through his own hands. This seemed a relief to him. He hadn't used the hands for a long time anyway, and he was always tired. He forgot things.

One afternoon, Bessie Mae came into the room with a man as black as night whose skin was made all the more dark by his white outfit. He helped Bessie Mae put Bed Easter into a wheelchair and wheel him into the front room where a new fan was at work, though he couldn't seem to feel the breeze. Through his lap he could see the seat of the wheelchair. The two people had some fuzzy, fudgy trouble getting Bed Easter into the contraption.

He looked around the strangely unfamiliar room. He saw a little boy walking with a plastic hammer, pounding away at the Easter on the couch. That Easter was cussing at the boy. Suddenly, that Easter looked up at Bed Easter. The two nodded at one another, an uneasy acknowledgment. Chair Easter was no longer transparent, but frail, nonetheless. "One *year* of this shit," the no-longer-transparent Chair Easter had said.

The next day something finally gave way. Mavis stormed into Easter's bedroom, his door knocking hard against the bureau. Easter's wedding picture toppled face down. Easter felt light, like floating in water. *She's shouting! She's shouting at me! Waving her arms! Tell me what I know, Mavis. Tell me what I am.* Finally, she let loose her rage, her angry, yelling hatred. Easter looked at his own bed. Bed Easter was not in his bed. Chair Easter was there instead, sitting upright, cupping his hands over his ears. The

more Mavis shrieked and yelled the more noise Chair Easter seemed to make, some kind of continuous, garbled whining. Mavis picked up the toppled wedding picture from the bureau and threw it hard against the wall next to Chair Easter's head. He flinched and cried. He raised his arms to the heavens. Mavis continued to yell. "Hell," "You," and "Fault," they were all there. *Finally*. Bed Easter watched this from the hallway, standing, faintly, barely there at all, confused. In a flash moment, his eyes met Chair Easter's. The house fell silent. Mavis seemed to freeze mid-epithet. Chair Easter looked at Bed Easter. "Bout time, Goddamnit!" And then Bed Easter knew. *This was the Time*. He walked out the front door of the house, down the steps--carefully-- and away.

No one ever spoke of Regina. That girl just went.

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