



HORROR STORY AND OTHER HORROR STORIES

ROBERT BOYCZUK

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ChiZine Publications

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QUERY

September 20, 19—

Dear Mr. Poyntz:

Thank you for your query of September 12th. I have just returned from a short (but long overdue) vacation in the southern climes, and am afraid I am somewhat behind in my correspondence. Yes, we received your manuscript; a detailed log of all submissions is kept and it clearly shows your manuscript (*Hipshot* by Alfred Poyntz, 437 pages in length) arrived on April 14 of the previous year. Indeed, I recall the manuscript in question, for, if I am not mistaken, it was printed entirely on pink paper. Though this is not as unusual as one might imagine, it was the only one (pink, that is) that I had received in the last year (canary yellow and powder blue leading the way amongst those who favour colour). Over the past months I watched it advance from shelf to shelf, slowly making its way across the bookcase reserved for submissions, until it achieved the final shelf. From there I moved it to my desktop two weeks ago. You should have had your reply already were it not for an urgent editorial matter that required my immediate attention. Unfortunately, this matter arose just before my vacation, and occupied all my time until the moment of my departure, and so I am somewhat embarrassed to say I did not manage to read as much as a single page of your manuscript. I did, however, resolve to tackle it straightaway upon my return.

Life, alas, is uncertain at best.

No doubt you've read about the troubles we've had out here? About the series of seismological upheavals we've suffered? When I returned from vacation on Monday morning it was to find the building which housed our publishing offices had suffered extensive structural damage as a result of the latest series of earthquakes to strike our already reeling city. The building in question, or parts of it to be more exact, had tumbled into one of the many fissures that have opened up in the earth and now dot the landscape like open wounds.

Remarkably, half the building still towered above the lip of the abyss as if untouched; the other half had vanished completely. Perhaps you can imagine my shock, my incredulity, as I stood on the street outside this once impressive edifice, only moments earlier looking forward to closeting myself with your manuscript.

Naturally, I was appalled.

Hastening to my office (no mean feat with the elevators still out of service and the stairwell littered with debris and twisted cock-a-hoop), I chanced upon Trevor Marchman, a colleague in the Literature division, who advised me against proceeding. His face was streaked with dirt and his tie askew. Placing a trembling hand on my shoulder he explained we had lost the entire Children's Literature section, most of our genre fiction (Romance being the sole exception) and our latest Self-help Guides; on the plus side we had retained our highly successful Cookbook and True Crime lines. The Nature and Acts of God divisions (he continued breathlessly) had fortunately suffered only minor damage and were rushing to get first-hand accounts of the disaster published as soon as possible. Though he had not been to the Literature office yet, he feared the worst, as it straddled the line along which the building had been bisected. I shrugged off his hand and pushed forward, seized by a renewed sense of urgency. If the worst had happened, then I knew I must see it for myself.

When I emerged on the seventeenth floor there was little evidence of the catastrophe itself. The reception area looked much as it had for the last two decades, the patterned carpet worn and dusty, the solid oak desk still manned by the ageless Philip, the chrome and vinyl chairs of the reception area occupied by the usual gallimaufry of writers (albeit more nervous and bedraggled than usual), clutching their usual assortment of boxed manuscripts and large manila envelopes.

"Good morning, Mr. Gardner," Philip said with his customary aplomb, and several heads bobbed up, eyes looking hopefully in my direction.

I nodded curtly at him, still too breathless from my exacting

climb to essay a more congenial response. Then I spun on my heel and hastened down the corridor. I passed the offices of proofreaders and junior editors, their names neatly stencilled on the frosted glass of the windows. Several doors were ajar, and within I could see young men and women seated amongst tottering piles of paper, diligently poring over galleys and manuscripts, the soft glow of computer terminals warming their backs. The air of normalcy gave me hope. I moved towards the corridor in which my office was situated. A few more steps, I thought, and I'll know the tale. My heart thudded fearfully in my chest.

My door was where I had left it.

I cannot convey to you in mere words the relief I felt. I thought briefly of Marchman whom I had passed on the stairs, how I had always considered him foolish and fanciful; and how I'd forgotten this in my moment of panic. He was an alarmist, I now recalled, frequently berating Literature. "There's no future in it," he had said more than once. "Get out while the getting's good!" I chastised myself and vowed in future never to pay him the least attention at all.

Stepping up to the door, I grasped the handle and pulled it open.

A gasp escaped me.

Opposite the door, where a panelled wall hung with framed photographs normally would have stood, was an expanse of blue sky. It was as if the wall had been swept cleanly away, leaving the rest of the room intact. I took a step forward. Outside, gulls circled against a backdrop of brilliant cerulean streaked by ropes of black smoke from the various fires that still burned unchecked about the city. The low, keening ululations of sirens sounded distantly. Looking down, I could see the dark rents where the earth had split open into gaping maws, all roughly parallel, like furrows made by a monstrous plough. Occasionally, the top of buildings poked above the lip of these crevices, as if they had been lowered there gently, on purpose. More often, the ruins of others were visible, some reduced to anonymous piles of rubble. In the deeper fissures, nothing but an ominous, impenetrable black was visible. Everywhere, tiny human figures were busying

themselves about the edge of the crevices, lowering ropes and ladders and cables, swarming into the ruins to rescue those that might still be alive or perhaps to recover what they could of their lives.

While I gawked at the carnage below, a sudden gust of wind blew through the office, riffing the pages of the topmost manuscripts that were still arrayed on the submission shelf. Loose sheets, hidden until now behind my desk, blew about the room in frenetic circles, two fetching up against my legs and fluttering there like wounded birds. Then one was torn free and scudded past the splintered edge of the wooden floor; it was snatched by an updraft and spun out of sight.

I know of no way to soften the blow so I'll give it to you straight: the pages were, as you may have guessed, pink. I glanced at my desk. Other than a blotter and a modest pen and pencil set (a gift marking my twentieth year of service), the desktop was empty, your manuscript gone, scattered by the wind. Bending over, I carefully peeled off the sheet still coiled about my shin. It was page 47.

I moved as close as I dared to the edge of the room and caught sight of that other page, still dancing like a leaf in the wind, but drifting lower and lower now, falling inexorably towards the fissure. Eventually I lost sight of it as it sunk into the dark reaches of the abyss.

I stood there for a time staring after the lost page.

Mr. Poyntz, let me not bore you with the rest of the mundane details; suffice it to say we recovered only two more pages from your manuscript (page 14 behind a radiator and page 312 caught up against a leg of my desk). The rest have vanished.

Perhaps you may think it unfair to judge a manuscript on three disjointed pages, orphans as they were from their extended family. Yet, we often give a manuscript only a few pages in which to catch our attention; after that it is returned, the greater bulk of it unread, with a rejection slip. So I presumed to judge your work, prepared to return the three remaining pages with this letter of apology and a somewhat gentler than usual rejection.

However, this was not to be the case.

At the risk of swelling your head, I saw in those brief, disconnected

scenes a spark of promise. And the Senior Managing Editor (to whom I conveyed—with great excitement—pages 14, 47, and 312 shortly afterwards) agrees. No doubt you can understand how distressed I was to read in your query letter (dated September 12th) about the misfortune with your hard disk. The entire novel gone! A head crash is, as you point out, “very unforgiving.” If nothing else, perhaps this will serve as a lesson to you about the usefulness of making backups!

As you may imagine the rescue teams have been extraordinarily busy in recent days; recovering manuscripts, sadly, is not one of their priorities. However, the Senior Managing Editor has authorized me to undertake an expedition to recover the entire text of your submission—or as much as is humanly possible. Tomorrow I will begin the descent into the fissure, taking along with me as many junior editors, proofreaders and text entry clerks as will volunteer. I will endeavour to keep you informed of our progress.

Once again, please accept my sincerest apologies for the delay in our response.

Yours Truly,

Roland Gardner, Managing Editor, Literature
Cameron, Blaylock, Fulsum and Hui Publications

■

September 21, 19—

Dear Mr. Poyntz:

This morning I stood for the first time at the edge of the abyss. The fissure is a long tear in the earth, seven kilometres in length; the chasm measures one hundred and fifty metres at its widest. Where I stand now it is roughly a hundred metres from lip to lip. Along its brink are office towers and commercial establishments, forming an eerie canyon of half-human, half-natural design. Those buildings that

haven't collapsed entirely, leaving sad, gap-toothed openings in the wall, are similar to our own: it is as if the structures had been neatly sliced with a scalpel of extraordinary proportions, laying bare their innards like those cut-away models of car engines and hydroelectric plants one often finds in museums. In several, the day to day activity of commerce has resumed, and the figures of men and women could be seen working at desks or edging along the narrow lip of half-corridors with a briefcase or file folder tucked beneath their arms. Occasionally, the trilling of a phone or the hum of a fax machine echoes from above.

Nearest us, the crevice is steep, a sheer face that drops precipitously out of sight. Further along, a series of ledges of varying widths can be seen in the depths, some supporting the remnants of buildings—others littered with unidentifiable rubble. At our feet, however, nothing is visible save a blackness as thick and impenetrable as that of a child's nightmare.

It is nearly noon now, and I am typing this note into my laptop as we are making last-minute preparations for the descent. The party I've assembled includes two mountaineering enthusiasts among the volunteers, only too eager to have a go at the face of the fissure. As I write this they have already set off, and I can hear the ring of their hammers as they fix pitons in preparation for the descent of the main party. In total, we number seven. We might have had a nice round ten, but only moments ago, Marchman (whom I mentioned in my previous letter) sent word that he was recalling two editors and a proofreader, citing the loss of two other assistants—who were unfortunate enough to be working late the night of the quakes—and the rapidly approaching fall launch deadlines. Though I am in fact his senior (he being the *Assistant Managing Editor, Literature*), this seniority has always been nominal, eroding over the years until its only manifestation is an office with a window. Beyond that, we work as equals. Reluctantly, I must allow them to return. Yet, I continue to be optimistic. I believe the remaining members to be sufficient for the job.

But let me not dwell on the bad; there is good news also.

Searching near the lip of the abyss, we have already recovered half a dozen more pages of your manuscript (73, 74, 121, 160, 344 and 349). I admit I was somewhat apprehensive when I read page 160, for the prose there is unlike that of any of the other nine pages. If I may be blunt, it stumbles along in an awkward, uncertain manner, poking about like a blind man with a cane in an unfamiliar room, leaving the reader to surmise from these faltering sentences its significance. This sudden change so unnerved me that for a moment I reconsidered the entire project.

But then, pacing back and forth near the edge of the fissure, chin cupped in palm, I was struck by a thought. What if the words were *purposefully* awkward. What if this halting, muddled prose is intentional, reflecting the distracted state of a character's mind. Recalling the passage, I imagined a withered old man, soured by repeated disappointments in career and love, his outlook jaundiced by the accumulated bile of years of disillusionment. As if someone had adjusted a projector lens, he snapped into focus for me. Taken as such, his rendering was masterful. The more I thought about it, the more I realized this could be the only explanation.

Trust, Mr. Poyntz. I should have trusted my author. . . .

It is the first and foremost lesson of being a competent reader—and one I'd somehow forgotten. Thank you for reminding me. In future I promise to give the pages of your manuscript the latitude they deserve.

Yours apologetically,

Roland Gardner, Managing Editor, Literature
Cameron, Blaylock, Fulsum and Hui Publications

■

September 21, 19—

Dear Mr. Poyntz:

Six of us began the descent in earnest this afternoon.

The seventh, a pallid data entry clerk fearful of heights, remained at our base camp on the edge of the fissure. Earlier, we had attached a pulley to the top of an A-frame constructed of two-by-fours. Running a lengthy rope over the wheel of the pulley, we tied a bucket to its end. We wound the other end of the rope around a windlass. Then we fixed the whole contrivance with cement blocks so that it projected out over the fissure. The clerk who remained behind will man this contraption, passing down such supplies as we need and pulling to the surface any pages we recover. He will work as if he were at a well—although he will be drawing words instead of water. Through this crude device (and the clerk's diligence) I also hope to send you letters (such as this one) to keep you apprised of our progress.

The first hours of climbing were uneventful. We rappelled down a featureless surface, the lights of our helmets crossing and criss-crossing in the chasm as we worked the ropes. The granite wall was smooth and surprisingly warm to the touch, as if it still retained traces of the heat produced during the upheaval. Looking to my right, I could just make out where the two walls came together in a sharp V a kilometre or so away, closing off the fissure; in the other direction the end of the chasm was invisible, the light of my helmet fading into the darkness. As we descended, the sounds of our progress bounced off the opposite wall and were returned, through some trick of acoustics, magnified; at times I heard only the echo and not the sound that had engendered it, creating the illusion that there was another party, like ours, on the other side, also working its way towards the bottom. It was an unnerving sensation, and one I suspect affected the others as it did me: conversation, brisk in the earlier stages, ceased altogether, as if no one wished to make any more noise than was absolutely necessary.

Several hours passed in this manner.

Bit by bit awareness of my immediate surroundings slipped away, for there was nothing to fix my attention on save the endless wall and the darkness. What I thought of instead was my office and the manuscripts still patiently waiting for me there. Of how, in all the years I'd been Managing Editor, Literature, the pile has never once

diminished. Read one and two more would appear. Read those and the afternoon mail would bring half a dozen additional submissions. Everyone in the world, apparently, has decided to become a writer. Now this might seem a cause for celebration, heralding a new golden age of literature. But, curiously, as our submissions increased, so our sales in the division have plummeted. Given this, I began to suspect that several of our regular correspondents wrote more novels in a year than they actually read!

Being a writer yourself, Mr. Poyntz, you may not find this strange. But for me, first and foremost a reader, this notion was disturbing in the extreme. It was a love of *reading* itself that impelled me to become an editor. I had no writing aspirations of my own. Nor do I now. I was—and am—a bibliophile in the truest sense of the word: I read gently, lovingly, losing myself readily in those landscapes of the imagination. When I was younger I thought there was nothing more exciting than the smell of a new book. Ah, how I remember those days! I'd sit in my favourite wingback chair, my reading lamp on and ready, the unopened book in my lap, anticipating that moment, that glorious, orgasmic moment, when the spine of the book would at last be cracked and the doors to an undiscovered world flung wide!

Alas, there are few true readers left. And, sadly, altogether too many writers. What will happen when the scales have finally tipped? Will writers be forced to pay their readers for the privilege of having their novels read? Will I, and other readers like me, be courted by authors anxious to be read by someone who understands their work? I fear things may come to such a pass.

Even in my division, the bastion (or so one would like to believe) of reading, we no longer attract readers of quality. Take, for example, young Trevor Marchman. To him reading is merely a job, no better or worse than selling vacuum cleaners or making car parts on an assembly line. It is a convenient rung on the corporate ladder. I know he eyes my position jealously, seeing it as a stepping stone to the rarefied heights of "upper management." Though he does a competent job, it is performed passionlessly and without commitment. To him,

the only thing that counts is the bottom line (of which he tirelessly reminds us).

But I digress. I have left you (and me) hanging.

Our progress down the wall of the fissure, as I have already said, was uneventful. At least until the end of the day, at which time we encountered an obstacle that caused us to halt our descent. For there we came across a series of small, regularly-spaced ledges jutting out from the wall. Swinging wide on the end of the line, a flashlight clutched in her hand, our lead climber reported that the ledges continued to mar the face of the fissure for some distance down, and estimated their number to be in the hundreds—if not the thousands—all ranging from half a metre to two metres in width. The bottom, she reported glumly, was still out of sight.

One would think that we'd be grateful for any horizontal surface after countless hours of rappelling down sheer wall. Yet, when we finally decided to make camp (our party splitting into three separate groups to fit comfortably into the limited space of adjacent outcroppings), the momentary pleasure of shrugging out of the constricting loops of my climbing harness gave way to a feeling of dismay. These cursed ledges would, I realized, only make our job doubly difficult. Not only would they impede a speedy descent by taking away our direct line to the bottom, but we would also be forced to investigate each and every outcropping lest we miss a single page of your manuscript. Such an undertaking will require days.

But what else can we do?

I have spent a lifetime chasing words and know no other way.

Yours sincerely,

Roland Gardner, Managing Editor, Literature
Cameron, Blaylock, Fulsum and Hui Publications



September 24, 19—

Dear Mr. Poyntz:

It took the better part of two days, but we've completed our inspection of the ledges. We sit here on one of the last sizeable outcroppings as we patiently await our daily rendezvous with the bucket. Below, the wall drops away, black and featureless, into the depths. Our efforts, though taxing in the extreme, have yielded twelve new pages, more than I could have reasonably hoped. I read them all with great interest, saving for the last three consecutive pages, 212–215, stuck together along their edges by a dark, gummy substance (cappuccino, if I were to hazard a guess).

Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!

I must say Nell is a completely (and unexpectedly) delightful creature. Her name, like her idiosyncratic way of speaking, is at first distracting, but within the space of a few hundred words becomes wholly natural and familiar, leaving us feeling sheepish for not having realized sooner—as you clearly did—how truly suitable it is. To use such a name and make it work as well as you have is not an inconsiderable feat. It reveals the hand of a master. Though I am a jaded reader, I was absorbed by your description of her, and found myself watching Nell with fascination. With a start, I realized that, in the brief span of three pages, I had come to care a great deal about her. You may understand, then, why I was disturbed by the scene on page 331, where a child, who might or might not be Nell, dies. Could it be her?

No, don't answer.

I must find out for myself.

Your Besotted Reader,

Roland Gardner

P.S. A curious event to report: yesterday, without warning, a building

dropped past narrowly missing us, the screams of its occupants clearly audible above the building's own complaints. Perhaps it had clung to the edge for as long as was possible, then gave up hope and tumbled into the abyss. The experience left me somewhat shaken, not only because of what might have happened if the building had chosen to tumble upon our party, but also because I had thought it to be our building. But at the last moment I caught sight of a flash of red, the telltale banner of the neighbouring Insurance Firm. Why, one wonders, do people (and I count myself among their number) continue to inhabit edifices on the brink? Is it force of habit? An irresistible love of their work? A way of confronting their fear? Or do they just have nowhere better to be? If it is the last, I sometimes wonder why they do not leap themselves and have done with it. But then, that kind of courage is a rare quality amongst men and women of business.

■

September 25, 19—

Dear Mr. Poyntz:

Today we reached the beginning of the end.

That is to say, we encountered a series of flat shelves that descend, like a gargantuan staircase, to the floor of the chasm. We decided to strike a base camp here from which we will explore the steps more fully. After assembling our tents (the blue fabric incongruously bright against the black and dark grey in which everything else down here is expressed), we gathered stones to ring a fire. The overall effect is, surprisingly, cheery. As I write this my back is to the camp and I am sitting on the edge of the first step, my legs dangling two metres above the next. Here and there the debris of buildings can be seen. Not five metres from my perch (and two steps down) is a crumpled hot dog cart, its decaying contents

spilled over the hard, unforgiving ground. Scattered throughout the carnage are pink sheets. It was all I could do to keep myself from clambering down a rope to the next level so as to collect more pages. But we are exhausted from the day's work. And we have already gathered twenty-three pages from the first "step."

I still have not learned any more about Nell. Though the pages we recovered span a broad range (7, 23, 29, 68, 101, 128, 145, 155, 170, 221, 224, 226, 256, 289, 303, 314, 367, 368, 390, 395, 400, 416, 421), there is nary a mention of her. Could she have only been an ancillary character? A convenient figure who carries out her role and then is casually discarded? Somehow, I cannot bring myself to believe this. . . .

The writing is, as usual, impeccable, the voice authoritative and refreshingly new. Peach is a fine foil for the Colonel, and his antics make for what I assume will evolve into an interesting subplot. The arcane practices of the sisters (introduced on page 68) hint at a sense of foreboding that is skilfully rendered. And when the Harrisons came over and disported themselves on the lawn—well, I laughed aloud! A few of the finer points bothered me, however: when did the Colonel acquire his scar? Have both the sisters seen it?

Yet, as entertaining as these others are, they are still mere shades next to Nell. I cannot get her out of my head. You may think it foolish, but I've offered the lion's share of the rations to whoever finds the next reference to her.

I'd best go now. All the others have turned in and we make an early start of it tomorrow. I can hear the assorted sounds of their sleep—wheezing and snorts and restless shufflings—from directly behind me. The only other sound one hears down here is the occasional stone clattering down the side of the fissure or the wind howling far above, like it is blowing through a troubled place we've left behind. Down here, though, nothing stirs. Everything is calm. All the countless distractions of the waking world have disappeared without a trace.

In a way, I am growing to like this.

Still yours,

R. Gardner

P.S. When the bucket descended at its appointed time yesterday, it contained (along with the usual rations of sardines and bread) a brief, handwritten note from a junior editor on my staff. In it, he worries that our expedition might be recalled. There are rumours, you see, that Marchman has acquired the ear of the Chief Managing Editor in my absence. It is widely known Trevor has opposed our purpose from the start. A reliable source reports that during a discussion of your manuscript he was heard to mutter, "There are plenty more where *that* came from." I'm afraid he can be a rather insensitive bastard at times. But I should be more gracious. If only he had read, as I have, these scant pages, he might not be so pigheaded. But one of the great tragedies of life is that you cannot force people to read what they ought, as good as it might be for them.

■

September 26, 19—

Dear Albert:

A major find!

I can barely contain myself. After we returned to our base camp on the first step, I collated the pages we had collected today (fifty-three in total from the first seven steps). My hands trembled uncontrollably when I realized we had recovered the longest continuous section thus far (pages 231 through 254). Perhaps this will satisfy them upstairs. Although I am certain Marchman will be unimpressed, I believe the Chief Managing Editor to be a perspicacious man. He will understand the importance of this find.

Yet in my elation, a disappointment: nothing about Nell—unless the first sentence on page 231, in its elided phrase (“knew he couldn’t get her out of his mind . . . nor out of his house”) refers to her. Yet I fear not.

As for the rest of it, the writing is top-drawer. Though I don’t quite see how these pages relate to the rest of the novel, they are brilliantly conceived. Until this moment, I had supposed this was a coming of age tale, but this new section calls my assumptions (presumptuousness?) into question. One moment I was happily immersed in your story, the next I realized I’d misread large parts of it. But then, isn’t that what the best writing does? Throws you a curve when you least expect it?

I shall have to rethink my approach to your work. It will be difficult now that the bulk of the manuscript has been sent up top. But, as I often said, patience and doggedness are the hallmarks of a good reader.

Roland G.

P.S. I apologize for the brevity of this note, but the bucket fell early today surprising us and nearly breaching my skull. No sooner had we placed the pages of your manuscript within it than it was jerked back up, as if that junior editor working the line is growing impatient with his job. Perhaps I will find him something better suited to his temperament when I return!

■

September 27, 19—

Albert:

Disaster has struck.

This morning, shortly after breakfast, the earth groaned, a deep guttural thing that vibrated in our bones. Everyone froze; we stared

stupidly at one another, not sure what to make of this preternatural noise. For a moment there was a silence as profound as the one at the beginning of the world must have been. Then, without warning, cracks appeared in the walls, each accompanied by a report like gunfire. Stone moved upon stone with ear-piercing wails. The ground heaved, scattering editors and proofreaders like nine-pins. Large chunks of earth, torn loose from the lip of the abyss, crashed down amongst us, shattering with thunderous reports and throwing off shards like shrapnel. Preposterously, I found myself lying on the ground, staring upwards. I was not frightened; I suppose I was in shock. Waves of dust, accompanied by small stones, rained down around me. Above the din, a voice in my skull spoke clearly, urging me to find shelter. I looked around.

To my immediate left was the wall of the fissure; rising from its base was a narrow crack. Calmly, I regained my feet and walked, somewhat unsteadily, towards the small protection it offered, catching my right thigh on a jagged edge and tearing both my khakis and the skin beneath as I angled my body into the opening. Absurdly, I had wedged myself facing in. Behind me, the havoc continued unabated.

I cannot say how long the entire episode lasted. To me it seemed to be upwards of half an hour; in reality, it could only have been a few minutes. When it did finally end, I backed out from my refuge to find the landscape altered beyond recognition. A thick cloud of dust hung in the air; shattered stone was everywhere; the shelves of rock leading downwards, once smooth and regular as stairs, had buckled and splintered; our camp—and all its equipment—had disappeared, save for the single tongue of blue tent fabric that flared out from beneath one of the larger boulders. Overhead, barely visible through the narrow channel that leads back to that other world, dark clouds roiled, but whether they were thunderheads or an accumulation of the blackest smoke I could not have said.

The long and short of it is that our party has been decimated.

Our lead climber lies unconscious, a fragment the size of a finger embedded in her forehead. Two others have disappeared, either

buried in the new debris or panicked and run off. The remaining members—a lad who clutches his knees and rocks back and forth while emitting a low moan, and a woman who stares sullenly into the darkness, refusing to answer any questions—are covered in bruises and numerous cuts.

Our situation is not good. Our supplies are gone. We have no tents, no food and only two functioning lamps. Nor will there be any chance of replacing them. Earlier, searching through the rubble, I came across the corpse of that hapless editor who I had stationed on the edge of the abyss. He lay jammed between two boulders, his thin body folded over like a sheet, his vital fluids collecting in a sticky puddle beneath. Curiously, a crumpled piece of paper lay caged within his lifeless finger. Swallowing back my distaste, I managed to pry the note free. It was from the Chief Managing Editor and addressed to me. In no uncertain terms, we'd been recalled.

I wadded the note up and buried it deeply in the debris.

How things can change in the space of a few moments! I had thought us safe from that other world, too distant to be touched by its vagaries and inexplicable whims. But, Mr. Poyntz, when the very ground heaves beneath you, what certainties are left?

The others wish to return to the surface. I tried to explain how I need their help more than ever now that several pages of your manuscript may lie buried in the debris. How this is what the Chief Managing Editor would wish. But my pleas fall on deaf ears. Nor would they hear anything of Nell. Ignoring me, they have begun rigging a litter in which they hope to raise their wounded comrade. Leaving now would serve no purpose: can they not see she is already as good as dead? But explaining this to them has no effect, and only seems to infuriate the sullen lad. He has taken to throwing stones at me when I approach.

Tonight, while they sleep, I will slip this letter into the pocket of the lead climber. I do not know how (or when) I will be able to apprise you of my further progress; I do, however, believe the Chief Managing Editor will come to his senses and renew the search. But

that may not be for some time.

For now, I carry on alone.

R. G.

■

A:

Please forgive me for scribbling this note on the back of your manuscript, but it is the only paper I have.

Two (or is it three?) days have passed since my last letter. I cannot be certain of the time, for my watch is gone, its strap severed in my mad scramble down the broken shelves of rock. Nor can I say if it is day or night—at this depth the opening to the upper world is no longer discernible. For all I know, the fissure might have resealed itself, leaving me forever trapped.

Yesterday, I reached bottom. A cold, steady breeze winds like a river along the bed of this lowest level, trapped in a narrow channel between the steps I descended and another set climbing the opposite wall. Lowering myself from the penultimate shelf to the floor was like slipping into icy water.

In the last days I'd recovered only half a dozen new pages; now, on the lowest level, I found but two more, caught against rocks. The bulk of the missing pages, I surmised, had been carried off by this gelid breeze. Perhaps you can understand the momentary dismay I felt: I had thought my journey near its completion, only to discover yet another ending in store for me.

Now don't misread me. The pages I found I'd consumed with the same eagerness a starving man might consume a single celery stick—I was grateful, but it was only enough to sharpen the edge of my hunger. So I set off, the wind at my back, the weakening beam of my flashlight marking my way, determined to go the distance.

I walked slowly, doubled over, searching carefully for any stray

sheets. The wind increased, its icy fingers snapping the cuffs of my pants with loud cracks and causing me to shiver uncontrollably. I ignored it as best I could, hunkering down into a small shape, continuing to sweep the light back and forth across the floor. So great was my concentration that it wasn't until some time later, when I paused to stretch, that I realized the walls of the fissure had drawn in and the channel had shrunk to half its original width. Pointing the light ahead, I discovered I was no more than fifty metres from the point at which the two walls met. At the base of the conjunction was what appeared to be an incline of scree, like one often sees at the foot of a retreating glacier, though it was hard to be certain, the weakening cell of my flashlight now incapable of clearly illuminating anything that distant.

I hurried ahead, pushed along by the mounting wind.

When I reached the base of the scree I stopped, clinging to a large rock to be kept from being blown over. The wind tore past me, howling up along the incline of rubble and rushing into a black, man-sized opening at its summit. It looked as if the gap had, at one time, stretched from the floor of the fissure to its present height. But the last upheaval must have sent this rubble down to partially block the opening, constricting the passage through which the wind drained, increasing its velocity fiercely near the mouth. Weighting my pockets with as many stones as they would hold, I began the climb.

Twice, in particularly vigorous gusts, I felt certain I would be plucked from this loose face of rubble and swept in; but somehow I managed to cling to the heap. Small objects, pebbles perhaps, stung my back and arms as they shot past. The scream of the wind deafened me. I gritted my teeth and edged upwards until I could shine my flashlight past the lip of the opening.

The scene made my heart stop.

Beyond and down was a mammoth cavern, filled with a forest of stalactites and stalagmites painted in breathtaking colours; overarching all, the roof was covered with a dark, lush growth that glittered in the beam of my light like the heavens on the clearest of

country nights; at the cavern's extremes were countless passages twisting out of sight, each coloured in its own unique hue. And here and there, scattered throughout, were hundreds of pink pages.

I scrambled back down the windward side of the slope.

You may consider it foolish, Alfred, but I have decided to go into the cavern. I can think of nothing but Nell. In my present state, it may well be impossible to struggle back out through that narrow gap against a wind which I can barely keep from dragging me in. You might argue, as my colleagues would, that these last pages are better left consigned to darkness. However, I am a faithful reader and could never contrive my own ending. That would be false, a gutless betrayal.

No, it will be your ending or none at all.

I must finish this note now, for the bulb in my flashlight grows dimmer yet; I fear it will last no more than a few minutes. But do not be dismayed: I've armed myself with a stick of wood I found lodged beneath a slab of granite. When this light fades altogether, I'll use the stick as a blind man would a cane, tapping about darkness until I've found those final sheets.

I leave this note (and the pages I've collected) beneath a cairn of stone here at the foot of the hill of rubble. In the event I should not be able to return, I can only hope that this letter (and, more importantly, your pages) will be found and conveyed back to the surface.

Wish me luck—and good reading.

R.

■

September 29

Dear A. Pointz:

Thank you for letting us see your manuscript. Unfortunately, it doesn't suit our needs at present. Please forgive this form letter, but the volume of manuscripts that we receive makes it impossible to

reply to each submission individually, as we wish we were able. Good luck placing it elsewhere.

Trevor Marchman, Acting Managing Editor, Literature
Cameron, Blaylock, Fulsum and Hui Publications

GAYTOWN

Gaytown, 5 mi. Your home away from home!

"Gaytown? They've got to be kidding."

Two hours, and it was the first thing Paul had said since he'd slammed the passenger door of the Escort. He punched the eject button on the deck and flipped his compilation tape, starting it again.

"I mean, shouldn't the sign read, 'Your homo away from home'?"

Damien didn't smile; instead, his grip on the wheel tightened.

"Hm," Paul said, "since you *refuse* to come out, maybe we should turn around. Just in case, you know, someone might see *you* passing through Gaytown."

Damien went for the light touch. "Nah. But I'm going have to ask you to get into the trunk."

"Naturally."

No trace of amusement in Paul's voice. Crossing his arms, he stared outside. Playing the temperamental artist again.

Another hour of pouting and it'll be over, Damien thought. *Paul will perk up like he always does. Then we can get on with our vacation.*

The tape whirled on, a song from a British band from the '80s whose name Damien couldn't quite recall, though he could picture the sexy lead singer clearly: tall, athletic, handsome, who'd gone on to star in a few indie films after the band had broken up.

Gaytown.

The sign had been old, weathered. An artefact from a time when the name wouldn't have raised eyebrows or invited jokes. Someone, a few years ago by the looks of it, had made a half-hearted attempt to paint out the word Gay; but the paint had faded so that now, instead of obscuring, it highlighted the word like a crucial term in a high school student's text.

The Escort's tires hissed over country asphalt, the late afternoon world drifting past. An hour and a half earlier they'd passed into cottage country, the flat, barren fields outside Toronto melting into undulating terrain. Ranks of evergreens snuck up on them, pressing

in on the highway, falling away when a lake suddenly appeared at the side of the road, or retreating reluctantly for an oasis of humanity—a resort, a country store, a restaurant—although these became less frequent as the afternoon wore on. Above it all, the sky was unaccountably blue, the counterpoint of a few white clouds tacking across its sweep. A perfect Thanksgiving weekend. Exactly the sort they'd come seeking.

Only Paul's mood had spoiled it all.

Four years we've been together, Damien thought. *You'd think he'd have adjusted by now*. But Paul had only become worse lately. How could someone so sensitive, so loving, also be so unreasonable?

"It's wrong," Paul said.

"We're on vacation." Damien tried to keep his voice even. "Can't you give it a rest?"

"You're ashamed of me, aren't you?"

"No." Of course not. Still, there were times when Paul acted—if not exactly flamboyant—then gay enough to make Damien uncomfortable. "You know that's got nothing to do with it."

"Then why not come out?"

"Jesus, Paul, how many times do we have to have the same argument?"

"You didn't answer the question," he said flatly.

"You know I can't come out." Damien shook his head. "Not right now, anyway."

"I did."

"You're an artist, Paul. I'm a high school principal."

"It's not like they can fire you."

"That's not the point." How could Damien explain it so that Paul would understand? "It's the way people would treat me afterwards."

"Okay, forget work. But you won't even introduce me to your family."

"You've met my brother."

Paul blew out an exasperated breath. "You told Jeff I was your tenant." His anger dissolved into hurt. "One time he came over. *One*

time. And you made me move all my things out of our bedroom and into the study.”

Damien felt a spike of guilt. He *had* made Paul do that.

“You don’t give them enough credit.” Paul’s voice softened. Reaching over, he rested a hand on Damien’s forearm. “If your family really loved you, they’d understand.”

“Not all families are as understanding as yours.” Paul’s parents, a university professor and a social worker, were hardly cut from the same bolt of cloth as Damien’s, who were sturdy small-town folk. Nor could Paul begin to fathom the kind of place Damien grew up, a circumscribed, distrustful and disapproving world. Where, reputedly, no one was, or ever had been, gay. “If you knew them, you’d get it.”

Paul yanked his hand away like it had been burned. “Not much chance of that, is there?”

“You’ve got to be patient.” How many times had he told Paul that? It was starting to sound more and more like a lame excuse, even to him. “I promise, when the time is right, I’ll introduce you.”

“At thirty-six,” Paul said, “I’m no longer willing to be somebody’s dirty little secret.”

Damien’s stomach fluttered, like they’d just hit a dip in the road.

Paul pulled a road map out of the glove compartment; it had been neatly folded back to display a section of highway. On it he’d traced out a route in black marker. Paul tapped the map with his forefinger. “It’s about five kilometres to the next junction. If we turn left there, we’ll be in Coville in three hours.”

Perspiration gathered between Damien’s palms and the wheel.

“I’m not asking you to make an announcement or anything,” Paul said, a hopeful note in his voice. “Just introduce me to your parents. Let them see my face, maybe start getting used to it.”

“You said the cottage was booked for tonight. If we don’t show up—”

“I lied. There’s no cottage.”

Damien stared at him in disbelief.

“I’m sorry.” Paul fidgeted. “But it was the only way to get you

up here.” He brightened. “You said your mom invited you and your roommate for Thanksgiving. Remember?”

“Shit, Paul—”

“Just a quick visit. We grab a drumstick and we’re out of there.”

“No.” Damien kept his eyes on the road, unable to look at Paul.

“I swear I won’t act gay.”

“I said no.”

“Why not?”

Why not? Damien’s dad would spot Paul for what he was in a second. And connect the dots. *My son the faggot*. Then all hell would break loose. Jesus, Paul really didn’t have a clue.

“Because.”

Paul snorted. “There’s a good reason.”

In a dense tangle of trees on the left, a corridor suddenly opened up, revealing a field behind. Damien knew he should have been focused on their conversation, but an odd colour in the field had hooked his attention. A blotch of pink in the midst of sere grass and thick-limbed evergreens. It moved. Stood up? Or seemed to, although it was hard to tell with the motion of the car, the rapid change in perspective. *An animal?* But there were no animals that colour. None that Damien knew about, anyway. He craned his neck, only the angle was gone, the field lost to sight.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Of course I am.”

“I can’t wait any longer, Damien. If you won’t do this for me, then . . .” Paul’s voice trailed off.

“Then what?”

“Then I’m moving out.”

Damien felt like he’d been sucker punched. *He doesn’t mean it*, Damien thought. *He’s tired, that’s all*. But when he looked over, Paul returned his gaze resolutely, the map clutched in his hand, his determination plain. The Escort’s engine whined as it began labouring up the back of a large broken rise.

“Well?”

I can't, Damien answered silently, his stomach churning. Only the alternative was no more palatable. *Life without Paul*. The only man he'd ever dared love. The space inside the car suddenly seemed way too small.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

They passed another old sign that Damien almost missed, faded and barely visible through the tangle of anaemic trees that huddled around it, announcing the inevitability of Gaytown in three kilometres. "You dump this on me out of the blue then expect an immediate response?"

"No," Paul said, flipping the map into Damien's lap. "Not immediate. You've got three kilometres left." The map slid onto the floor. "I've made up my mind, Damien. I can't abide half a relationship any longer. Either we turn left at the junction together, or we turn back and go our separate ways. Your choice."

The Escort continued to toil up the hill. They'd crest it momentarily. Damien was possessed by an irrational impulse to stomp on the brakes, to throw the car into reverse and back up past the start of their conversation, back to a place where everything had been all right.

Topping the ridge, they dropped into a shallow valley and came upon Gaytown.

Damien's mind numbly registered the outskirts, a scattering of clapboard houses, some dodgy trailers that had sunk cinderblock roots, alone Quonset hut. Down the highway he saw more responsible-looking brick structures clustered around an intersection, a lone stop light suspended above the road by thin black wires as fine as the lines in one of Paul's pen-and-ink drawings. Although they were too far to make out the markings on the green highway sign posted at the intersection, Damien knew with heart-sinking certainty it marked the junction. The intersection seemed to be flying towards him. Lifting his foot from the gas, Damien eased the Escort off the road; gravel crunched under the tires.

"What are you doing?" Paul sounded alarmed, like maybe he

the junction. The intersection seemed to be flying towards him. Lifting his foot from the gas, Damien eased the Escort off the road; gravel crunched under the tires.

"What are you doing?" Paul sounded alarmed, like maybe he thought Damien *was* going turn around. Or ask him to climb into the trunk.

"Gas," Damien said, pointing at the pump in front of the Quonset hut. "We're out of gas." Somehow his mind had registered the congruence of pump and gas gauge needle hovering just below *E*, and had grasped at the momentary reprieve like a drowning man would a scrap of flotsam.

Paul frowned, eyeing the gauge.

Damien pulled up beside the pump, killed the engine and reached for the door handle.

"Yesterday—"

Damien paused, a leg out the door.

"—when I went to the wine store, I filled up." Paul looked at Damien. "It should still be half full."

"Look at the gauge." Damien felt detached, like someone else was talking. "It says we're out of gas."

"Tell me about it."

It took Damien a second to realize Paul had just served up a shot. *Don't react*, he thought numbly. *It'll only make things worse.*

He stepped onto the dirt lot, the chill of autumn enveloping him. The gas bar seemed abandoned. For a second he couldn't remember why he was *here*, of all the places he might have been in the world.

He undid the gas cap. No one appeared from the hut.

Paul opened his door and climbed out, leaning on the roof. "Well?" He said it like he thought Damien had contrived this delay.

"It's not self serve." The pump, an old mechanical one, had no digital display, no instructions, no card swipe. On its side was a flow indicator, a small half-sphere of glass with an orange ball that would flutter the moment the gasoline started flowing.

"You know that's not what I was asking. I want to know—"

inside. He heard Paul climb back into the car.

Damien tried the handle. Locked.

He leaned forward, cupping one hand against the glass to block the bedevilling reflections. Hard to make out anything, just the shadowy outlines of a cramped front office, a beat-up metal desk, sagging shelves to one side, a yellowing girly calendar tacked to the back wall. Damien was about to turn away when, in the far corner, a movement caught his eye. He squinted, but whatever had shifted was still now. Raising his hand, he rapped sharply on the glass—

A figure reared up from the floor, cutting across the smeared field of view, in full sight for a split second, then disappearing through a backroom door.

A naked girl.

At least Damien was pretty sure it had been a girl.

Behind the glass, a second figure rose now, levering itself up tentatively, like it had just woken. It swept upwards, dwarfing Damien, practically filling the whole window, stooping as its head brushed the ceiling. Its skin was the same colour he'd spotted earlier in the field, an off-pink, except now he could see it was marbled with blue veins, like the ribbons of flesh left between the ribs of an eviscerated carcass. Where there should have been a face was a vacant oval—or at least no distinguishable features, just nubs or indentations where there should have been eyes, a nose, a mouth. For half a heartbeat, the empty visage regarded Damien impassively. Then the thing turned and wobbled drunkenly into shadows that folded around it in a protective mantle.

For another second Damien blinked at the empty room. Then he turned and bolted back to the car. Throwing himself into the driver's seat, he yanked his door closed so hard the car rocked. He felt sick.

"What the hell was that?" Paul's eyes flicked from Damien to the hut and back.

"I—" Damien started, then stopped. The whole thing seemed unreal, like he'd been watching a movie. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Paul gaped at him in disbelief.

"A couple of kids," Damien said. "Probably the pump jockey and his girlfriend." It sounded right as soon as it was out of his mouth. What he thought he had seen couldn't have been real. Could it? "I surprised them. Caught them *in flagrante delicto*." The suddenness of it, the shock of Paul's ultimatum, had magnified everything in his already battered imagination. Sure the guy had been big—

Clutching the sleeve of Damien's sweater, Paul said, "Kids? Jesus, Damien, he had to be nine feet tall. And his skin was pink, like . . ." Paul hesitated, searching for the words to explain what he'd seen. "Nobody has skin like that."

"You were startled," Damien said. *Like I was*. "That's all."

Paul peered at the window; his hand trembled. "Don't fuck around."

"Who's fucking around?" Damien pried his sweater free from Paul's fingers. "You're the one who saw the jolly pink giant. All I saw was a couple of horny kids."

"Bullshit. You saw exactly the same—" Paul stopped, staring at something outside.

Damien turned.

Beside his door was a kid. He wore spotless coveralls, a jean jacket. On an oval badge above the pocket the name "Jerry" had been stitched. He didn't look the sort you'd expect at a gas bar: his skin was flawless, his eyebrows as precise as if they'd been drawn on. Not a single hair out of place. He was beautiful in an unnatural way, like a perfectly symmetrical mannequin. He swirled his finger, indicating that they should lower the window. Damien cranked the handle.

"Fill 'er up?"

Damien nodded.

Paul stared at Jerry, tight-lipped. The kid sauntered over to the pump and lifted the hose from its cradle. Sliding the nozzle into the tank, he squeezed the trigger gently. Lovingly, almost. He smiled and nodded at Damien. The pump went *ching-ching-ching* with old-fashioned animation.

"Doesn't look pink to me," Damien said. "More pasty, I'd say."

Paul stared at Jerry through the back window, then at the office where the door was now open and the lights on. "That's not him." On the left side of Paul's forehead a vein throbbed conspicuously. Outside, Jerry began whistling.

"You're upset." Damien laid his hand on top of Paul's and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "We both are."

"Jesus, Damien, I know what I saw."

A movement in the rearview mirror snagged Damien's attention.

Paul looked at the hut. "I mean, I'm pretty sure I saw—"

Jerry was walking towards his door.

"—that *thing*—"

Damien pulled his hand away; Paul look startled.

Reaching Damien's window, Jerry leaned in. The slightest of wrinkles creased that perfect forehead. "There's something you'd best have a look at out here."

"Damien," Paul whispered, "don't . . ."

"It's fine," he answered. Opening the door, he got out, following Jerry to the back of the car.

"See there," Jerry pointed at the dirt behind the car. This close, Damien smelled a whiff of something on Jerry, like the stink of rotting potatoes he'd once found mouldering under the sink. "You've got a leak."

Damien looked but couldn't see anything. "Leaking?"

"Uh huhn. Gas. I'd better have a look." Jerry trotted back to the office, returning a moment later with a flattened cardboard carton. Placing it on the ground at the rear bumper, he lay on it face up, wriggling underneath the car. Damien heard him tinkering with something. Then he made a *tchhhing* sound. A moment later he eased himself out and got to his feet.

"Big crack in your gas tank," he said, wiping his hands on a pristine rag he'd pulled from his back pocket. "Leaking like a cocksucker."

Damien glanced behind the car; a tiny rivulet now snaked through the dirt.

"So what does that mean?" Paul's question startled Damien; he

hadn't heard him open his door.

"You need to get her fixed. Or you won't make it another ten miles, let alone the next gas station."

"How long to fix it?" Paul said. He sounded angry—but Damien knew him well enough to know his anger masked his agitation.

"Need to drain the tank, let her dry out overnight, and then weld a patch. You'll be back on the road by eleven tomorrow."

Paul's expression tightened; Damien felt relief.

Another distraction. Maybe a reprieve. He'd almost forgotten about Paul's ultimatum. Maybe Paul had, too.

"What's it going to cost?" It was the expected question, even though Damien didn't really give a damn.

"With parts and labour, and a new tank of gas, it'll run you about seventy-five."

Less than Damien had guessed. "Fine. Do it."

"You'll have to leave the car overnight." Jerry nodded towards the junction. "There's a hotel just on this side of the lights." He pointed. "It has a bar downstairs. Just don't go in there expecting much *action*, if you know what I mean." He smiled, exposing a row of perfect teeth, and elbowed Damien lightly in the ribs, startling him. "Leastways, not for a couple of young bucks like you." He winked at Paul, who opened his mouth as if to say something, then snapped it shut.

"That's okay," Damien said quickly. "We need a break anyway. That's why we're batching it." He handed the keys to Jerry. "Just us, a lake, and some cooperative fish." The lie slipped out before Damien realized they had no poles or tackle boxes or bait in the car.

Paul pulled his overnight bag from the back seat and started off down the shoulder of the highway, towards the hotel. He was pissed. As pissed as Damien had ever seen him. Moving at a good clip, too; Damien nodded at Jerry, then hustled after Paul, finally catching up as they neared the intersection.

"Paul?"

Eyes forward, refusing to look.

Fine, Damien thought. *Let him pout.* At least he wasn't talking

nonsense about visiting Damien's parents. He slowed, letting Paul stay a few steps ahead. On the other side of the road, an old man wearing a white panama hat, tweed jacket with an ascot and grey loafers leaned on a walking stick, waiting patiently for a miniature Scotty while it sniffed critically at the base of a sapling. It was an absurdly small dog. Not like the Rottweilers or German Shepherds that Damien remembered from his own town, the sort of dogs that would have ripped a Scotty like that to pieces given half a chance. The man lifted his chin to stare, and Damien looked away, hurrying to catch up with Paul.

In silence, they passed a row of businesses—Ace Hardware, The Hi-Style Hair Salon, a dry cleaner's, the Apollo 8 Diner—coming to the last building before the intersection, a vertical art deco sign bolted to its side. The words "town Hotel" were visible on the bottom part but someone had painted over the top bit; Damien could guess what lay underneath.

They entered a narrow lobby. To the right, through a set of open glass doors, was the bar: dark wood panelling, round tables and curved-back chairs, the walls hung with posters of barely clad cheerleaders advertising different brands of beer that Damien found indistinguishable in taste. A few late afternoon patrons gave them no more than a bored glance.

On the lobby desk there was a bell. Damien banged it until a grey, middle-aged man in a cardigan materialized from the back room. Dust seemed to have settled permanently in his wrinkles. "Can I help you gents?" His rheumy eyes took them in with bored disapproval.

"A room with a king-sized bed," Paul said. "And fresh sheets."

The man glared at him.

"He's joking," Damien said quickly. "Twin beds will be fine."

The clerk tapped a pencil on the counter for a full five seconds, looking from Paul to Damien and back again, like he was trying to decide between renting them the room and getting his baseball bat. Then he shrugged, like the bat was too much trouble, and surrendered a yellowed card for them to fill out. Damien scribbled their information

in the tiny boxes as fast as he could. The clerk handed him a key, pointing wordlessly to a set of crooked stairs at the back.

"Thanks," Damien said and hurried away.

Paul followed him up. Their room, number eight, was on the corner overlooking the intersection. It was surprisingly clean. Nice even. Obviously, someone with taste had decorated it. The walls were yellow and artfully hand-stencilled; the furniture was colonial, including hand-painted quilt chests at the foot of each bed. Damien threw his bag on a wingback chair that in a Queen street vintage store would have fetched several hundred dollars.

"Why won't you talk about it?"

Damien closed the door quietly. "I'm tired, Paul. Can't we discuss going to my parents tomorrow, when we pick up the car?"

Moving over to the window, Paul lifted a green chintz curtain with his finger, his head turning slowly, tracking someone walking along the sidewalk outside. Maybe the old guy with the Scotty. "Your parents? That's not what I meant." Paul let the curtain drop. "I was talking about that *thing*."

"There was no 'thing.' I was right there. You were thirty feet away. It was just Jerry and some girl."

"A girl?" Paul took a step towards Damien. "What girl?"

"The one who ran by first."

"It *wasn't* a girl."

"There's no need to raise your voice." Damien glanced at the walls.

"No one's listening, if that's what you're worried about. We're the only people in this dump."

"Look, I'm as pissed as you that we're stuck here." Damien spoke in a whisper.

"Really?" Paul sniffed. "You sure don't seem to be."

"We've just got to make the best of it."

"Something's wrong. And you don't care."

"This is a small town." Damien was getting annoyed. "*Everything's* wrong here."

"It was Jerry."

"What are you talking about?"

"There was no girl. Just Jerry. Then that *thing*."

Jerry? "You're nuts." It *had* been a girl, and Jerry afterwards . . . except Jerry wasn't very tall. Shorter than Damien. And kind of skinny. While the second figure had been big. Really big. Only it made no sense. *Two men*? Not here. "You saw him, Paul. Talked to him. He wasn't rattled or upset. He was whistling. Not the way he'd act if he'd just been caught with another guy."

"He was gay. Hell, he was even flirting with you. I saw him wink."

Damien shook his head. "Christ, Paul, you can't be gay in a place like this."

"You were."

"I meant you can't be openly gay here."

"Or anywhere, apparently."

Damien's cheeks heated. "I'm not going to talk about this anymore."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"I'm going to the diner to get something to eat," Damien said, opening the door. "If you want, you can join me."

"Wait." Paul's anger melted; he looked nervous, scared maybe. "I was only—"

But Damien pulled the door shut. For a second he stood in the hall, hand still on the knob, squeezing it so hard it hurt his fingers. *It's not my fault*, Damien thought. *I refuse to feel guilty*. Letting go, he thumped downstairs and stepped out of the hotel onto the street.

On the north side of the intersection, a couple, walking hand in hand, swung right and disappeared into an narrow laneway. Damien had only caught a glimpse of them from the back. One, from the size and shape, could have been Jerry; the other had to duck under a NO PARKING sign ten feet off the ground.

Damien's heart pounded.

He took a few halting steps toward the lane. Then stopped.

Just my imagination. Paul's got me so worked up, shouldn't come as a surprise.

Doing a one-eighty, he hurried back past the hotel, glancing over his shoulder at the laneway and almost collided with a man wearing a greasy apron, smoking a cigarette. Despite the chill in the air, he wore only a tee-shirt underneath. No, not a tee-shirt, more like a tank top, the kind you'd see on men cruising Jarvis Street. The guy took a long drag on his smoke.

"Did you . . . did you see a man down there?" Damien pointed to the alleyway. "A big man?"

"Nope." The guy flicked his butt onto the sidewalk and crushed it under heel. "Didn't see no one." He pulled open a door behind him and held it. The distinctive odour of well-seasoned deep-fryer oil wafted out of the Apollo 8 Diner. "Well?"

Paul would have never have gone into a greasy spoon like this, where he couldn't get a vegetarian burger with arugula and goat cheese toppings. Damien crossed the threshold.

Empty, except for a few pensioners. Despite the odour, the place had a kitschy charm. On one side half a dozen booths ran back along the wall. The seats were upholstered in vinyl and the tables had Arborite tops whose patterns had gently faded over the years. On the other side a long counter wrapped around a stainless steel grill, classic soda-shop stools with chrome trim bolted to the floor in a neat row in front of it. Hung on the wall above the grill was a blackboard listing the daily special: *Soy burger with choice of three toppings, includes side salad, hearts of romaine with sweet corn, toasted brioche croutons and a red wine yogurt dressing – \$6.99.*

Damien picked a spot near the back.

The cook brought him a menu in a maroon plastic folder, not venturing a word. Damien tried to read it, nothing registering, his eyes flicking up again and again to the plate glass windows in the front. Waiting. For Paul. Or that thing. A few minutes passed, but no one—

Damien sensed a presence hovering beside him; the stink of stale cigarettes drifted around his head. He turned. The cook stared down at him through dull, simian eyes. "Made up your mind yet?"

A figure that might have been Paul flitted past the front window, but Damien had been distracted, didn't get a good look.

"I need a few more minutes."

■

Six-thirty.

Paul hadn't joined him.

Cover to cover through two old *Time* magazines, retrieved from a rack at the counter, chewing and swallowing his burger and fries without really tasting them. An hour and a half since he'd stormed out of the room. Long enough, Damien supposed, for Paul to have finished his sulk. And for his own nerves to settle. He paid his bill and returned to the hotel.

On his way through the lobby he spotted Paul in the bar, wedged behind a table, his back to a musty wall that probably hadn't been painted in twenty years. In his hand was a beer mug containing a red concoction, no doubt an approximation of a Caesar, his current drink of choice. Although he looked up when Damien walked in, he didn't say a word.

"Here." Damien dropped the plastic bag he'd been carrying on the table. "I got you some take out."

Paul glanced at the bag but remained silent.

"So don't eat it." Damien tried not to show his irritation. "I'm going up to the room."

No response. Like *he* was the one who'd been wronged.

"You coming?"

Paul shook his head.

"You've made your point."

"I'm not trying to make a point."

"Then what *are* you doing?"

"Waiting."

"For what?"

Paul glanced around the bar. "You'll see."

The remnants of Damien's soy burger roiled unhappily in his stomach. Paul drained his mug, raised his hand to order another, clearly determined to get drunk.

Let him, Damien thought. In the morning he'd be hung over, too focused on his own miseries to worry about a trip to Damien's parents.

Only . . .

Only Paul could be a lousy drunk. When he got something in his head, he just wouldn't let it go. At best, he'd make an ass of himself. At worst . . . Damien glanced around the bar. It wasn't the sort of place where you wanted to find out about the worst. Damien plunked himself down in one of the uncomfortable seats.

"Thought you were going to the room."

"There's no TV." Damien stared at the set above the bar.

Paul hunkered down, watching the locals through restless, narrowed eyes while Damien pretended to be absorbed by the movie of the week.

The bar filled, Paul still not saying a word except to order his drinks from the dour, consumptive waiter. Damien ordered draft, like everyone else, wanting to fade into the background. But he was painfully aware that they were strangers here, marked not only by their unfamiliar faces, but also by their awkward silence and the garish colour of Paul's drink, the only bright cocktail in a sea of dull beer.

■

It was pushing nine o'clock.

The last tables had filled an hour ago; groups formed, standing shoulder to shoulder, clotting the aisles. The waiter now had to move with his tray held above the sea of heads, and the buzz of conversation had become so loud it was hard for Damien to hear the TV.

Paul ordered another drink. His fourth—no fifth—since Damien had arrived. Damien himself was starting to feel drunk, even though

he'd just finished his second beer. He kept his eyes glued to the set. The movie was about a housewife who led a secret life as a prostitute. Her motivation for being a prostitute didn't make much sense, nor did the naïve credulity of her family. What sort of PTA meeting lasted until one in the morning?

"You're part of it, aren't you?"

Paul's question startled Damien; he'd fallen into the movie. "Part of what?"

Paul waved his arm. "This." He slurred the word slightly, but at least he was speaking low enough that there was no danger of being overheard.

"You're not making any sense," Damien said, sensing the potential scene he had dreaded. He wanted the conversation to go away, for them to lapse back into a moody silence.

Furrowing his brow in inebriated concentration, Paul asked, "Why did our car break down?"

"God, Paul, I'm not a mechanic," Damien whispered. "Why does anything go wrong with a car?"

"I mean, we didn't scrape the tank," Paul said. "I would have remembered that. Don't you have to hit something to puncture the tank?"

Damien decided to ignore him. He swivelled around to face the television screen again.

"When you went for dinner I walked back to the garage to check. I couldn't find a gash in the tank. Or anything like it. Nothing that would cause a leak. And there was something else I wanted to check. Something . . . that bothered me." Paul reached in his pocket and pulled out their map. Dropping it on the table, he spun it around. It was folded to the right place, a thick black line running along the highway, angling right at the junction not thirty metres from where they sat. "Where's this town?"

"Paul—"

"Show me."

Reluctantly, Damien peered at the map. There was no mistaking

the junction. But nothing to indicate Gaytown. "Maybe it's too small."

"We went through plenty of smaller towns, and they were all on the map."

Damien's shifted uncomfortably on the hard seat. "Don't be paranoid."

"Maybe," Paul said, "it's the sort of place that never makes it onto maps."

"Come on," Damien said. "Let's go back to the room." He reached over and tried to pry the mug out of Paul's hand, but Paul snatched it back, eyes blazing.

"Where are the women, Damien?" He said it loudly; a few people glanced over.

"What are you talking about, Paul?"

"Look around. There aren't any women."

Paul was right. They were surrounded by men. Some of whom now eyed them suspiciously. "It's a small-town bar," Damien said, feeling this was explanation enough. "And would you mind keeping your voice down?"

"Don't you think that's odd?"

"Sure. Whatever you say." Damien glanced around, trying to remain calm. "Why don't we go back to the room and talk about it there?"

"NO!" Paul banged his glass down on the table. Incarnadine liquid sloshed over the side and onto the chipped veneer. A group of four men, all wearing baseball caps, glanced over. One said something and they laughed dismissively, then returned to their conversation. Paul glared at them, put his hands on the arms of the chair as if he was thinking about pushing himself out of his seat to confront them.

Leaning in, Damien whispered, "You're making a scene."

"A scene?" Paul's voice boomed out at drunken volume. The people at the table nearest them now stared openly, their smiles gone, their conversation stopped dead. In the background the hooker mom on TV droned on, talking dirty to one of her clients, while the rest of the

bar obliviously hummed with trivial Friday night conversations.

"Please, Paul—"

"Don't you see?" He was shouting now. "There was no girl! It was two men fucking!"

Those nearest them had fallen silent. "I don't know what you're talking about," Damien said. He felt the stares of people boring into him; a drop of perspiration rolled down his temple. He rose, fighting the impulse to run, to get as far away as possible. "I . . . I'm going back to the room. Are you coming with me?"

Paul shook his head, leaving Damien no other choice.

He walked away. Or tried to. A wall of bodies blocked the aisle, deflecting him from the double doors leading back to the lobby, steering him in another direction, deeper into the bar. He tried another route, but it was plugged with people, too. The crowd swirled around him, making him dizzy. Then a passage opened up and he rushed down it, coming to a door, a dead-end, with a hand-lettered sign: MEN'S. Pushing through, he found himself in a narrow, dimly lit bathroom, a bare bulb on the back wall casting watery illumination. Thankfully, it was empty. He stepped up to a urinal, just in case someone came in. The muted sounds of the TV and a dozen indistinct conversations buzzed on the other side of the thin wall like a swarm of annoyed flies.

On the wall, right in front of Damien's nose, someone had scrawled, *Jerry is a faggot*.

A scratching sound. From the row of the stalls at the back. Then a stink, like that of rotting potatoes, filled the air. Damien could hear something else now, something that sounded like an exhalation, but it went on and on, more air than a set of lungs should have been able to hold. Then silence. Damien realized he was holding his own breath.

A sharp gasp sliced the air, higher pitched—too high to have come from the same person.

No, Damien thought, stepping back from the urinal, fumbling with his zipper. *Impossible*.

A wavering groan filled the narrow space, prickling up Damien's spine. A groan of intense pleasure. It went on and on, rising in

volume. Under the last stall, something—a bare foot scrabbling for purchase?—slipped into view then disappeared. It had long, twisted talons and had been absurdly pink.

Damien crashed through the door, bursting into the bar. At his back the groan changed pitch, became an unrestrained shriek, so loud it seemed to tear the air.

No one else took any notice.

The old man in the white panama hat, the one Damien had seen earlier at the side of the road, sat at the end of the bar, his Scotty curled at his feet. He cast a disapproving glance at Damien, as if his hasty exit had violated an unwritten rule of washroom etiquette, then returned to idle contemplation of his beer. The howl blotted out all sound. Damien looked around wildly. Oblivious or uncaring, the bartender filled a pitcher; groups of men chatted or laughed at crude, testosterone-laden jokes. None seemed to hear it.

Damien shoved through a clutch of people—
—then stopped short.

Two locals were settling into their vacant seats, Paul's half-finished drink still on the table.

The shriek broke off. Cut with the abruptness of a slashed throat. Bar noise trickled back into his consciousness: the clink of a glass, the muted whispers of conversation (*about me, about us*, Damien thought), the jukebox now playing, the nasally whine of a country singer whose love had turned sour.

Paul was gone.

Damien felt his reality slipping away.

"Looking for your friend?"

A hand clasped Damien's shoulder. It was Jerry's. Guiding him through the crowd. The ranks of people opened, staring as he passed, then closed behind with the finality of prison doors. They emerged from the bar, Damien stumbling out into the chill night. The street was deserted, the buildings—save for the room behind him—empty and dark.

"Is he—"

"Your friend's all right. He went to the dance."

"Dance?"

"Up at the Legion hall," Jerry said. "Told me he wanted to see women. I told him there were loads—too many if you ask me—but they were all at the dance. He asked where it was, so I gave him directions. That's when he took off like a bat out of hell."

Damien's hands shook; perspiration peppered his forehead. He pulled a deep breath of cool air into his lungs. It helped calm him.

"You best go after him," Jerry hesitated. "Before he gets hurt."

"Where—"

"Over there." Jerry pointed north of the intersection, to the laneway where Damien had seen the couple earlier.

"Are . . . are you gay?"

Jerry went rigid at Damien's question; he curled his hands into fists. Damien braced himself for the blow.

"No one here is a homo," he hissed. "And you best remember that." Turning, Jerry strode back into the bar, abandoning Damien on the desolate street.



The laneway became a dirt road behind the buildings on the main drag. Damien sprinted past a row of neatly groomed Andy-of-Mayberry bungalows and a field of broken corn stalks. Heavy-set Douglas fir crowded in on the road, constricting it, then fell back abruptly revealing a stubbly pasture, the flat-roofed Legion hall sitting in its middle. From around the edges of mustard curtains soft light trickled out, and he could hear the *thump-thump-thump* of the music's backbeat. Behind, the town was nowhere to be seen, hidden by the close-ranked trees. For a moment he experienced a panicked belief that the town no longer existed, maybe never had existed, and that the hall in front of him was the only real thing, the only drop of humanity in the midst of the vast, dark ocean of woods.

Shaking his head, he dislodged the unsettling notion. Leaves

scratched past his feet, blown by the gusting night wind.

Hurrying up a gravel drive, Damien tugged open a wooden door. A blast of a song drained out of the building. It was the same song that had been on Paul's tape, only now he remembered the title and the band's name: *Johnny Come Home* by the Fine Young Cannibals. A young woman stood in the foyer sipping from a plastic cup, blocking his way; the stink of scotch coiled around her like a noxious perfume. Swaying slightly, she smiled at him, displaying lipstick-smeared teeth. "Wanna dance?"

Damien pushed past her.

"Cheeky!"

It was like walking into the past. Nothing had changed since he had gone to these things as a teenager, not the room, not the music, not the people. Maybe twenty couples, men *and* women—more than enough, Damien thought, to satisfy Paul—were gyrating on the dance floor. Other people were scattered around the periphery of the hall, at tables or leaning against the wall, drinking, gossiping, watching, trying hard to get laid. On the stage at the back a DJ stood behind a plywood table pulling a record from its sleeve; above his head a disco ball suspended from the ceiling dragged silver-dollars of light across everything with dizzying regularity.

Damien scanned the crowd. No Paul.

Godammit, where was he?

There, in front of the stage, saying something to a tall, thin man who just kept shaking his head. The man's face darkened and he walked away, waving his hand dismissively, like he was trying to disperse a bad stench. Paul shouted something after him that was lost in the tumult of music.

Jesus Christ. Paul was determined to get them both killed.

Scooting across the dance floor—dodging a spinning couple—Damien grabbed his arm. "What the hell is the matter with you?" On the stage behind, a large speaker boomed; he could barely hear his own words. "Are you trying to piss off everyone in town?"

"I've figured it out, Damien." Paul didn't sound drunk anymore.

Damien tried to nudge him away from the stage, over into the corner. "Figured what out?"

"This place. These people." He paused. "You."

Damien spotted the man Paul had been talking to, speaking to two of his buddies and nodding in their direction.

"It all makes a weird kind of sense."

The three men were glaring openly at them now.

"Come on, Paul. You've seen your women. Let's go." Damien tried tugging on his arm, but he refused to budge.

"You really only see what you want to, don't you?"

"Jesus, Paul. I don't know what kind of point you're still trying to make, but you've made it. Now let's get out of here."

"Okay. But first you have to do me a small favour."

"What favour?" The men began advancing towards them. Damien could tell from the look in their eyes that things were about to turn very ugly.

"I want you to get up on stage and say you love me."

"*What?*"

"You heard me."

Until now Damien had tried to keep his voice level, but everything was happening too fast. "Those guys coming towards us, they're going to kick the shit out of us. We've got to get out of here!"

"And go where?" Paul smiled crookedly. "This place isn't even on the map."

"For Christ's sake!" The men were only a few steps away. "You want to get us killed?"

Paul shrugged. "Too late." Breaking Damien's grip, he loped to the side of the stage and mounted a short set of stairs, taking them two at a time. He smashed his palm against the edge of the DJ's table; the needle scratched across the record, killing the song. People stopped dancing, conversations died. "Hey," someone said. Hiss from the speakers filled the hall.

Paul raised his arms. The disco ball slashed circles of light across his chest. "Hey everyone, I have an announcement," he shouted. "I'm

gay!" Pointing an accusing finger at Damien, he added, "And I love that man."

Damien felt the blood drain from his face. Around the edges of the crowd, he heard mutters. Angry, disapproving words, growing like the rumble in tiger's chest. People eyed him with malice.

A fat woman stepped up to the stage. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'm gay," he said as if that were the most reasonable thing in the world. "Like all of you!"

The woman blanched.

From the back of the room, a shrill voice screamed, "Get off the stage, homo!"

A chorus of other voices joined in, jeering.

"Go back to the city!"

"Get him!"

"Kill the faggot!"

The fat woman lurched forward, trying to snatch at Paul's pant leg, but Paul pirouetted out of the way, ducking back towards the woman and grabbing a fistful of hair. Jerking his hand back, he pulled a wig free. Underneath, wispy brown hair circled a bald spot.

A man. Damien couldn't believe it. *A goddamn man.*

Shrieking, the man fell to his knees, his dress ballooning around him, futilely trying to cover his head with his hands.

Paul, holding up the wig like a trophy, giggled.

A big guy vaulted onto the stage and punched Paul in the mouth. He crumpled, the wig dropping from his hand. The DJ scooped it up and tossed it down to the fat man.

"Paul!"

Damien started up the steps to the stage. But someone pinned his arms from behind, dragging him back. More men surged onto the stage, Paul at the heart of the scrum, hard to see through the forest of legs, screaming as he was pummelled. The fat man, his wig askew, stepped in front of Damien and slapped him so hard his head snapped back; tears blurred his vision and the coppery taste of blood

filled his mouth.

He felt himself being propelled across the dance floor. Blinking his vision clear, he craned to look back, saw a group of men carrying Paul face down, his head lolling, muttering. They passed an older man wearing a military uniform and a beret, his chest cluttered with ribbons and medals, who shook his head sadly. Another face swam up, stuck itself right in Damien's. "Too bad," said the woman who'd asked Damien to dance, her breath reeking of scotch. "You're cute." Beneath her makeup, Damien could see the start of a five o'clock shadow.

In a moment of clarity he thought: *We're going to die.*

They were in the foyer; he was thrust at the door, his chest crashing against it, knocking the wind from his lungs. Strong arms heaved him outside, the cool night air on his skin for a brief, shocked second as he tumbled through the air. He hit the ground, rolling over, skinning hands and knees on concrete, ending up on his stomach, staring back at the knot of angry men clustered in the doorway. A second group pushed to the fore, hauling Paul. They dropped him on the sidewalk like a bag of trash.

No one moved. No one spoke.

Please, God, Damien thought, hateful stares pinning him to the ground, *I don't want to die.*

Paul raised his head. One eye was already swelling shut. His jaw moved, like he was chewing on a piece of gum, and a tooth entwined in bloody strands of saliva emerged from between his lips; he spat it out onto the sidewalk. Swivelling his head slowly, painfully, to look at them, the men who'd beaten him, he whispered, "Fuck you."

Damien braced himself for a new onslaught.

Incredibly, it didn't come. Instead, they turned their backs and retreated inside the hall. The lock on the door clacked shut.

Damien couldn't believe they were still alive. He pushed himself up onto his knees, felt a stab of pain where one pant leg was bloody, wobbled, and went back down on all fours. He swore.

Paul regarded him impassively.

"I . . . I love you," Damien offered.

"Of course you do," Paul said, drawing a wheezing, liquid breath, as if a viscous fluid bubbled at the bottom of his lungs. "You just don't want anyone to know it."

Even now, he couldn't let it go. "Jesus, Paul—"

But Paul wasn't listening; his attention had shifted to something past Damien. His one good eye squinted.

"Paul?"

From behind, a scrabbling noise, like claws scratching and clicking towards them over the concrete walk. Damien froze, his own stare locked on Paul's. A fetid odour, like rotting potatoes, curled into his nose. Paul's mouth opened and closed in disbelief.

Everything went terribly, terribly still.

Don't look, Damien thought desperately at Paul. *If you don't look it won't be there*. But Paul's eyes were wide, goggling with terror.

Damien felt a familiar dread shiver through his bones. He squeezed his eyes shut.

—don'tlookdon'tlookdon'tlook—

A chill wind touched him, a sickening cold, like a plunge into the frigid waters of a stagnant reservoir. A ragged, slavering breath, the same one Damien had heard in the washroom, tickled the hair on his neck and cheek, passed him by—

Brief scuffling sounds, and something that may have been Paul's grunt. Then the sensation lifted. Gone. Like it had never been there. Damien snapped his eyes open.

The sidewalk was empty.

He pushed himself to his feet, pain spiking up his leg. He ignored it, looking around wildly, hobbling back and forth on the path.

"Paul!"

Behind the Legion hall, he spotted something large loping across the stubble of the denuded field, a body slung across its shoulder. The darkness washed out its colour, but its shape, the shape of Damien's fear, was unmistakable. Paul began screaming then, a cry that pierced Damien's heart like the tip of a knife. The thing reached the edge of the field, vaulted over a wooden fence, and was swallowed by the

woods. Paul's final cry echoed and was lost, suffocated by trees and torn away by gusting wind and scattered like the invisible leaves scudding past on the sidewalk.

This can't be real. Damien stared dumbly at the ranks of indifferent evergreens. The path rocked under Damien's feet like the deck of a sailboat foundering in a storm. *This can't be happening.*



Sometime later, Jerry stood beside him, shoulder to shoulder. Two friends who'd just wandered out of the dance to clear their heads. When he'd appeared, Damien couldn't have said.

"Looks like it'll be another few days for your car."

Damien said nothing.

"People round here aren't so bad." Jerry stared across the field, unaccountably beautiful in the moonlight. "Long as you don't go around upsetting them."

"Please," Damien croaked, even though he wasn't sure what he was begging for.

"Shhhh."

In the dark a smooth, lifeless hand slipped into Damien's.

"It's best not talk about these things."

HOME

Sitting up abruptly in his cryo-coffin, Abraham shudders as the last wisps of his dream slip away. The cover is up and he is awake, but this is not what he had expected, not at all like the previous times he had come out of stasis—it is abrupt and unsettling, sharp pain where his sudden movement has torn the leads away from his scalp. His head is throbbing, his heart pounding in his chest; he brushes his fingers across his brow to wipe the perspiration from his eyes, but when his hand comes away his fingertips are red with blood. He stares at them as if from a distance, trying to remember his dream, but now that he is fully awake it is lost, its importance a dead weight. *An old dream*, he thinks, *Maybe an old memory*, though why he believes this he cannot say. But he recognizes its familiar contours, the taste of its shapeless fear.

He runs both his hands over his scalp, feeling the small rough abrasions left by the leads and thinks, *I am going home*.



Abraham is on duty for the next four months. It is his third time in the rotation, the two hundred and twenty-fourth year since they left Earth orbit for Home, a planet orbiting Delta Pavonis, 18.6 light years away. He has not worked with Pill before, and misses Leyla with whom he was last partnered, misses her easy laugh and soft round body. Pill is different: he is long and thin with an angular frame and face, all elbows and knees as he leans over the panel speaking softly to Ship, reminding Abraham of the mantises he occasionally finds in the bio-pod.

Abraham misses the constant chatter of Leyla; though it was unimportant and he rarely listened to what she said, he had found it surprisingly comforting, like the murmur of a brook. But Pill keeps to himself, speaking only of their endless diagnostics—and Home.

Abraham feels the imminence of Home, too. This is one thing they share. “Soon,” Pill often remarks to Abraham, his voice filled

with pleasure and expectation, “soon we will be Home.”

Whenever he hears these words, Abraham nods, and his mouth goes dry. His heart beats faster as he thinks of Home, a world neither man has ever seen.



Since coming out of stasis, Abraham has been having a recurring dream: he is eleven years old again, back on his father’s farm in Saskatchewan. Something has happened, and he is terrified, though he cannot remember what. He runs and runs, past the outer pastures and the fodder cornfields, along the narrow dirt road that leads to the house, out of breath, heart in throat as he stumbles up the porch steps. He reaches for the screen door.

“Abraham!”

He jumps back, turns to where he had not noticed his father sitting, leaning back in the lawn chair, feet on railing.

“Abraham,” his father looks at him. “What’s the matter?”

“I . . . P . . . Paul . . .”

His father lifts his feet and lets his chair down. “Now, now,” he says, rising, a large, dark-haired man, towering over Abraham, casting him in shadow. “Just tell me what’s happened.”

“PAUL!” The word bursts from him like an awful revelation, and, as always, throws Abraham abruptly from his sleep and back into the sweat-tangled sheets of his bunk.



I don’t care about Ship, Abraham thinks, sitting in front of his monitor.

A sharp stab of guilt pierces his chest like an arrow; it is followed immediately by a bout of self-loathing so intense he thinks he is going to heave up the contents of his stomach. A sense of failure, *his* own shameful failure, shakes him to his very roots. But he fights

the urge to cry out his apologies, to throw himself back into his work with a frenzy. Instead, he swallows back his discomfort and grits his teeth, pulling his shaking fingers from the keyboard. He knows these feelings aren't truly his, but merely a trick of Ship's. That his reaction is just another part of the game that began the moment he'd been lifted into orbit.

Abraham remembers how he had first seen Ship from the outside, during the shuttle docking. It had been an unsettling experience as they approached and the true proportions of the interstellar vessel had become evident. He had been surprised at how much it resembled an ocean-going ship, its antennae and sensors looking like a prow and its bulbous fusion jets, a stern; huge silver light sails towered above and were reflected below, as if the bottom ones were mirrored in perfectly calm water. But that illusion quickly fled as they moved closer and Abraham realized the sails had not yet been played out to their full extent, that they had only barely begun to be unfurled. Over the next week he had watched as they stretched out two thousand kilometres from the hull in all directions, completing the three concentric circles that made up the photon sail, the oval of the ship now a tiny and delicate egg against that vastness of dull silver.

It had cowed him.

He had understood, even back then, that this was the intended effect. To instill awe and respect. To make Ship's passengers feel well-tended and safe in their cryo-coffins. To augment the psychotropic moulding that Ship would perform while they slept during the voyage, bolstering their confidence in Ship's ability to complete the journey Home.

Yet it has elicited another, perhaps unintended, response in Abraham: fear. Even now, he can feel its creeping fingers. For him it is easy to imagine losing himself altogether, the fragile shell of his identity cracking beneath the enormity of the ship that folds around him, the thought of its immensity burrowing into his brain like a worm while he sleeps.

Abraham shudders, shakes his head to dislodge the disturbing

image. Then, like a counterpunch, he throws the thought at Ship again: *I don't care!*

Only this time when the wave of recrimination strikes him, he is prepared. He curls his hands into fists and endures the rush of shaming emotions stoically. Two metres away at the next station, Pill is oblivious to his struggle. Instead, the other man watches rapturously as figures scroll by endlessly on his screen.

■

This morning, like every morning for the last two weeks, Ship has prepared a new maintenance schedule. Abraham watches as Pill executes the specified tests with a demented glee, leaning, white-knuckled, over the square of his diagnostic monitor, each correct readout seeming to intensify his pleasure—and stoking his need for more.

Abraham shakes his head, moves his own monitor without enthusiasm to the next testing station.

Doesn't Pill know these diagnostics are pointless? That Ship could look after itself better than fumbling humans ever could? Abraham understands this because he had thought to ask Ship about it during his last shift. It's the humans who need these periodic wakings, who need to experience the psychological reality of the journey. This is the component they are missing, Ship had explained to him. During stasis, Ship does what it can, manipulating the limbic system and hypothalamus through microvolt impulses, stimulating the production of dopamine and norepinephrine to shape the dreams of those in stasis. And over the course of decades, it creates a counterfeit desire for the planet towards which they are hurtling.

A desire for Home.

And, as he thinks this, Abraham's throat constricts, perspiration beads on his forehead, and his hands begin to shake over his monitor.

No, Abraham thinks. Ship is wrong. It is not a desire for Home. It is an addiction.



“What are you doing?”

Pill’s question startles Abraham, who is knee-deep in the ditch he has been digging. His clothes are soiled and he is covered in a fine sheen of sweat. He tries to hide his agitation as he answers, “Nothing,” then winces as his voice reminds him of nothing so much as a child’s. “Getting some exercise,” he adds quickly, looking away. “That’s all.”

Pill surveys the bed of Abraham’s creek, looking down on him where he stands in the thigh-high, meandering channel. It runs fifty metres, the entire length of the bio-pod, and along one bank is a mound where Abraham has piled the stones and dirt he has unearthed. Canted on this incline, looking over its lip like an enormous, metallic insect, is the skeletal frame of the backhoe he has used to do most of the excavating. Several bushes and a few larger trees lie uprooted from the soil.

“You’re late for the magnetic bottle calibration,” Pill says, frowning. He turns abruptly, stepping over a bag of fertilizer, and is gone, leaving Abraham alone in the pod.



Abraham dreams: he is back on the farm and it is a warm, cloudless day. For a moment he is confused, not sure what he is doing here, down by the small creek that runs along the foot of the back pasture. He is standing next to the old willow tree whose roots curl and dip like long, slender fingers into the cool water, and he stares through its drooping branches at blue shards of sky.

Though everything is familiar, he’s forgotten why he’s here.

Then he remembers.

It is Sunday, and he’s here with his younger brother, Paul.

“Paul!” he shouts, but there is no answer. “Paul!” he shouts again, wandering down the creek, past the old willow.

He stoops to pick up a broken twig, and swishes it like a sword.

His runners make small sucking sounds as they stick then pull free of the mud by the bank.

“Pa—” he stops in mid-shout, drops his stick.

Twenty metres ahead a small form lies face down in the creek.

Abraham stands perfectly still, thinking, *No, it's only a rock or tree stump or something else*. But in his stomach he feels a rising bolus of panic. His legs seem to turn of their own accord. He runs and runs, past the outer pastures and the fodder cornfields, along the narrow dirt road that leads to the house, out of breath, heart in throat as he stumbles up the porch steps, reaching once again for the screen door.



Abraham steps back to survey his work. He is proud of the stream which is almost complete—it took some time before he could find the right kind of material to line the bottom, but he discovered a roll of ultra-lite plastic sheeting that had been provided for constructing shelters upon their arrival; he has taken only a small portion of the huge roll, trimming it away cleanly with a cutting laser, knowing it is unlikely it will ever be missed. The liner is grey and he has buried its edges beneath dirt and stone to form small banks. He has also covered the bottom of the creek with a thin layer of fine sand and then filled this over with what pebbles and stones he could gather from the biosphere, pleased that the grey of the vinyl is hardly visible. With water in it, the liner will be virtually impossible to see.

He smiles, wiping his hands on the back of his shorts.

Tomorrow he will begin work on the water system.



“I’m sorry,” Abraham says, even though he is not at all sorry. “I don’t have time.”

Pill’s narrow face tightens in outrage and disbelief. “*Don’t have time?*”

Abraham shakes his head, pretending not to notice Pill's anger. They stare at one another from their seats on opposite sides of a small table in the centre of the observation dome; the remnants of Pill's dinner litter the table. Overhead the ceiling projector displays a vast expanse of stars. Abraham's heart skips a beat as he notes the smudge directly above Pill's head has now become a small, well-defined circle of blue and green and white. He had not wanted to come, does not like the dome, had only made the concession to get Pill out of his bio-pod, as far away from it as he could.

"We've only got three weeks left," Pill says. "Two days to complete the analysis on the secondary fusion drive before we begin braking. We've already fallen behind schedule because of you!"

Abraham says nothing, ignoring the coiled tension of Pill's need. He feels it too, this urgent necessity to make the preparations for Home.

Instead he shakes his head. "I can't. Believe me, I would if I had the time, but I've got my own problems—"

"*Home!*" Pill shouts, pointing to the display overhead. "We're almost Home! What's wrong with you? We've got to finish our assignments! What if the main engine misfires? Or if it's misaligned? There won't be any second chances!" Abraham feels a tightening in his chest, and can see Pill has closed his hands into fists and is trembling. "Don't you want to go Home?" he asks Abraham, hissing through clenched teeth, as if it were a challenge, a threat.

"Ship takes care of itself . . ." Abraham's words trail off weakly. There is nothing more he can say to appease Pill. He has worked hard, and would accommodate Pill, but there are so few hours left he cannot afford to give up another precious minute to Ship's useless games. He must complete his project. For the last three days he has spent all his time in the bio-pod, doing his best to ignore Pill's incessant interruptions, so busy that he has skipped rest periods and more than once forgotten to eat. He is certain that if he can finish his work before returning to his coffin, then things might somehow be different—

Pill hammers his fist on the table so hard that it jumps, a glass falling on its side and rolling over the edge to drop on the floor with a hollow ring. His face is red; the tendons in his neck stand out in angry ridges.

"I want to help you, Pill, really I do, but—"

"Enough!" Pill shouts, knocking his chair back and pushing past Abraham so roughly that he is nearly toppled from his seat. The door sighs open, then seals as the lanky man stalks from the dome.

Pill, Abraham thinks, is out of control. I must be careful not to let him ruin things.

For a time, Abraham sits in silence, pondering what he must do. Then he rises. Just before he leaves the dome, his hand flicks out as if he is swatting a persistent insect, striking a button set in a panel near the door. Overhead, the display winks out of existence.



Abraham has taken to sleeping in the bio-pod. Only when hunger presses him does he reluctantly leave to retrieve food from the galley. He believes Pill watches him, has seen the tall man skulking around the pod lock. Once, returning from the galley, he'd spotted Pill darting from the bio-pod. Abraham had dropped his bundle then, and raced down the long corridor, cursing and screaming at Pill, shaking his fist in the air. He had wanted to kill Pill at that moment, and had he had a weapon he might have done it, firing at that retreating form until it crumpled in a satisfying heap on the floor. But there are no weapons onboard, at least none Abraham knows about, and even the cutting lasers have a safety guard that, once removed, renders the tool useless.

So he had secured the door, sealing it manually from the inside, then checked the bio-pod carefully, finding nothing amiss. Everything was just as he had left it.

But Pill's intrusion had shaken him severely. Enough so that another day passed before he dared venture out of the pod to

retrieve the food scattered in the corridor, the pangs of hunger finally conquering his fear.

■

Abraham has cut the speaker to the bio-pod.

For the last two days Pill had been using it to entreat him to rejoin the maintenance work, painting a hundred possible scenarios of disaster should they not complete their designated tasks. At first, Abraham had ignored these rantings; but when Pill began to shout and scream incoherently, raging at Abraham, naming him as the betrayer of Ship, of those in stasis, of Home, he cut the line.

He can see that Pill is coming unhinged, that he has been programmed by Ship to think of nothing but Home. Abraham imagines that each day the idea of Home grows in Pill like a tumour, consuming everything else, leaving no room for any other thought except the belief that Abraham will somehow subvert the mission, perhaps even destroy Ship.

No, Abraham thinks, I will not destroy Ship.

He has already considered his situation carefully and feels he has a good chance of fooling Ship's sensors with false images. He has envisaged himself outside in his EVA suit, crawling along the main grid, attaching his own small box to the mast housing where it will intercept and alter the signals. This, he thinks, will be the simplest route, to let Ship believe in the destruction of that little round circle that it calls Home, to let it think its torpid thoughts and conclude that it must change its course, find a new destination. A different planet. A different home.

Ship is, after all, only a computer, barely sentient, and easy to fool.

Pill, Abraham now realizes, is his real problem. He is certain the other man will never leave him alone, will not return to his coffin at the appointed time as long as Abraham is awake. Pill cannot, for such an act would gnaw away at his consciousness incessantly like a parasite, unravelling the carefully contrived pattern Ship has built in his skull.

So Abraham does what he must do.

He grabs a shovel and walks over to his stream where it jogs around a small willow. It is his favourite spot, reminding him of the one where he and Paul often played after school. *Pill will like it here*, he thinks, and drives the blade of the shovel into the soft earth with the bottom of his boot.

■

Abraham steps from the bio-pod and orders the door sealed behind him. Out here, in the open corridor, he feels naked and dizzy. He is sweating freely and his breathing is shallow and raspy. His heart hammers fiercely against his ribs. It's the first time he's been out of the pod in four days and he is light-headed from hunger. But he is not headed for the galley. Instead, he turns in the opposite direction, towards the crew quarters.

The corridor is long, and Abraham must pass many junctions; he pauses before each open passageway, first listening carefully, then darting as silently as he can past the openings. Soon, he comes to a junction wider than most; sucking in a breath, he pokes his head around the corner.

There are six doors in this new corridor; all are open—except for the third one on the left, the one that marks Pill's cabin. In the dimly lit corridor, the red lock-light on Pill's door shines like a beacon.

Relief washes over Abraham. The only time Pill shuts his cabin door is when he is inside, sleeping. If nothing else, Pill is a creature of habit, and this is the time Ship has designated as his rest period.

Abraham steps gingerly into the corridor, then slips past Pill's room without a sound. He continues down the hall to the last door on the right, pausing on the threshold, caught in a moment of uncertainty. *What if he didn't put it away? What if it's not there?* But then he reminds himself that Pill's faith in official procedures is as strong as his belief in Home. Abraham steps through the door.

Pill's diagnostic monitor sits in its rack, just where it should be.

Elated, Abraham grabs it. In his hands he holds the only working monitor on Ship. His own he has smashed, and the backup units he has taken from the storage pods and hidden. Without the monitors, Pill will not be able to complete his assigned checks. *Now*, Abraham thinks, heart thumping loudly in his chest, *Pill must come to me! And I'll be ready for him!*

Tucking the unit under his arm, he turns and slips out of the room, moving swiftly down the corridor and past Pill's room, no longer fearful of making noise, intent only on the safety of the biopod. He clutches Pill's monitor to his chest as if it were a young child, almost losing his balance as he turns the sharp corner to the central corridor, pounding down that long expanse, his lungs burning with the exertion, throwing himself through the open door to the pod and shouting "CLOSE!" as he flies through.

For a breathless moment he stands there, watching the thick metal doors seal behind him, gulping air wildly into his lungs in ragged gasps, his fear giving way to understanding, then exhilaration, thinking, *I've got it! I've got it! Pill will have to come!*

He can feel the smile growing inside him, about to burst forth, and he wants to shout aloud his triumph. *It was easy*, he thinks, *As easy as it will be when Pill arrives*, and stepping back he imagines the cold hard rock that will be in his hand as he watches Pill, tall lanky foolish Pill, stepping from the corridor through the open door—

Open door, Abraham thinks, and blinks slowly, staring at the biopod door. *Didn't I order it sealed—*

Pain explodes in Abraham's skull. Darting lights obscure his vision, and far away he feels his fingers go slack, Pill's monitor drop. He staggers forward, knees buckling, something wet and sticky trickling down the side of his head. Another explosion, jagged flashes, his knees finally giving way, the world spinning around him, earth rushing towards him, some part of him thinking *Pill*, and knowing despair, knowing he has lost, thinking, *I can't go home. Please don't make me go home. . . .*

He tastes earth in his mouth, soft brown soil, and rolls onto his

back, the grid of plant lights high above now making his eyes hurt, a tall stick figure blocking the light, and Abraham can see one of its arms pulled back, hand holding a dark round object. *A rock*, he thinks. It reminds him of something, reminds him of a time when he had held a rock just so, back on the farm. *Paul*, he remembers suddenly, *He wouldn't leave me alone*. Childhood anger wells in him again as it had that day, incensed at his small brother who tagged along everywhere, the growing frustration and the solid weight of the rock in his fist. *Leave me alone*, he had warned Paul, *Just go away or else*, but his brother had only backed off when he saw Abraham scoop up the rock, had taken two steps back into the creek where he stood, unmoving, eyes round with fear. He watches as that other Abraham cocks his arm and the rock hurtles through the air, thinking, *No, it was an accident. Paul slipped and hit his head and drowned. Everyone said so*. Abraham can feel tears welling in his eyes, and through the soft unfocussed blur he can see the shadowy figure move forward and grow to eclipse the light. *I couldn't tell them*, he thinks, swallowing, as the darkness rolls over him.

Paul, forgive me.



Though he is conscious, Abraham cannot seem to open his eyes. It is an odd feeling, like they have been glued shut. So instead, he tries to raise his arm, but the attempt makes him nauseous and sends sharp bolts of pain through his head; he nearly slips back into the pool of blackness.

"Don't move, Abraham," he can hear Pill saying, the words muffled and distant. "I've given you a mild paralytic. You'll only hurt yourself."

Abraham senses Pill hovering over him.

"I'm sorry, but you gave me no choice."

Abraham opens his eyes slowly, millimetre by millimetre, the effort requiring enormous concentration.

“Your shift is over, Abraham. It’s time to go back to sleep.”

Pill’s thin figure finally comes into focus, long fingers untangling the familiar leads, snapping them into the sockets on the side of Abraham’s coffin.

“I patched you up as best I could, and I think you’ll be all right. All you need is rest. A long sleep.” Pill smiles down at him. “Ship will fix you up.”

Abraham can feel the sluggish movement of hair trying to rise on his arms and legs as Pill rubs conducting gel on the back of his neck and scalp where the leads attach. Then the tall man steps back, out of sight, towards the coffin’s head. Abraham hears a soft click as Pill begins powering up the stasis field.

“I’ve run the diagnostics on your coffin. Everything is fine. Perhaps there was a temporary glitch, a hiccough. But it’s gone now.”

Pill reappears on the coffin’s left side. Abraham wants to tell him that he is wrong, that there was no malfunction, no glitch. That it is him, Abraham, that’s broken. That he has a memory he can no longer suppress, a seed of guilt lodged in his brain, that will flower into madness as he sleeps. But when he tries to speak his lips move only with a slight tremble, and Pill seems not to notice.

“When you come out of stasis next time we’ll be Home. And this whole thing will seem like a bad dream.” Pill squeezes Abraham’s shoulder reassuringly, lifts his hand to press the final switch.

The air above Abraham’s face distorts, then coalesces into a blurred translucence, like he is staring out from within a block of amber. Abraham wants to sob, but cannot. All around him the stasis field creeps up, lapping at the edges of his consciousness, his skin tingling now, as if fine-grained sand were being poured around him, rising along the sides of his coffin, spilling over onto his arms, legs, chest, face. Slipping between his lips. Suffocating him.

“Don’t worry,” he hears Pill’s voice, a smothered sound, like the murmur of a distant brook. “Soon you’ll be Home.”

ASSASSINATION AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

1. The Assassin Strikes

The first assassination passes largely unmarked, a senior bureaucrat in the employ of the Governor of C_____; it is the least of the Provinces, a distant area of the country with a long and well-respected tradition of sudden violence. The victim, head of the Department of Child Welfare, is found in his apartment, large red marks where the Assassin's powerful fingers had closed around his windpipe like a vise. The Minister of the Interior brings it to the President's attention, describing with an undisguised relish the details not found in the press reports: the presence of a naked child, bound and gagged, in the bureaucrat's bed. A street urchin, the Minister says with a sneer, just like the ones in dozens of photographs uncovered at the scene. And he adds one more peculiar detail. On the mirror in the bathroom a few words have been scrawled in an unsteady hand, their letters drawn with bright, red lipstick: *It can be different*.

There are no witnesses, no evidence, not even the customary round of anonymous and contradictory claims devised to obscure whatever importance the act may have had. And though the police round up the usual suspects, they are as perplexed as everyone else.

2. The President Considers Marriage

The President is a handsome, dark-skinned man, with a silver mane of hair, given to making long, energetic speeches that capture the public imagination. Sometimes, in the midst of his peroration, he forgets himself, loses himself in the sweeping passion of his grandiloquence, for a moment half-believing these fine sentiments, the visionary promises, thinking that maybe he will, after all, attempt to live up to them.

But the feeling is short-lived.

He is not married, having foregone the usual social relations early in his life, never really feeling at ease around women, instead giving himself over entirely to his political ambitions. He has few regrets about his solitary life, having accomplished far more than he could have hoped at a remarkably young age. But as a consequence he has no close friends, no confidants, and has come to view the world in terms of political allies and dangerous conspirators, those whom he can use and those hoping to use him. He watches as they switch roles as easily as they slip into new suits of clothing, avoiding at all costs the dangers inherent in action. He knows they are fearful that any clear declaration, no matter how insignificant, will somehow define them, clarify their role, commit them to a course of action as surely as if they'd stepped off a cliff.

Sometimes, late at night, he imagines what it would be like to have a wife lying next to him, someone to whom he could unburden himself, confide in, argue with, or beg forgiveness of; but he believes it is too late, that the habits of silence and caution run too deep.

3. Another Victim

The assassination of the Minister for Interior Stability of A_____ follows within a month. His demise is not unexpected, quite overdue from the whispers that have echoed softly in the halls of the Capital Building for the last several months. Indeed, his death would have passed with hardly a ripple had it not been for the particulars of his passing: he is discovered in his country villa, having slowly bled to death on an ingenious device of torture. It is a steel wedge turned upright, on whose thin, sharp edge he was placed, hands bound, weights attached to his feet. There is an art, or so the President is told, to using precisely the correct weight on each ankle so that death comes slowly and painfully, each tiny movement of the subject causing the edge to cut more deeply into flesh, a process that may stretch to hours or, in extreme cases, days. It was reputed to be the

Minister's favourite, the one he had christened *The Rocking Horse*.

Penned on the wall in the Minister's blood is the following message: *I do not do this through choice*.

Again, the investigation reveals nothing, the Assassin invisible to the posted guards who, despite protesting to having heard or seen nothing, are found guilty of collusion and executed.

There are reports, unsubstantiated, that certain information was found with the body, information connecting the former Minister to hundreds of disappearances and deaths, though little proof of his complicity is needed, for he was widely hated, known to all as *The Butcher*. A _____ is far from the seat of power, another country almost, but the President is uneasy when he hears of this, having always regarded it as a bellwether district, a microcosm of his small and troubled nation.

4. Political Necessity of Assassination

Assassination has been on the President's mind lately. Sitting in his office he considers its uses, the latest reports on crop failure forgotten on his desk. He has not yet had to resort to assassination to achieve his ends, but thinks he would if the circumstances required it, the political necessity, so to speak. He views the act as being a thing without moral adjunct, nothing more than a tool, really, to discharge his responsibilities. Without it, without the *possibility* of its violence, he knows he would have little control, for even in a nominal democracy such as his he understands the purpose of government is a dissemination of power, a promise to the citizens that no one individual will become too powerful; thus, it is only through secret networks that real authority is exercised, that anything is accomplished. He sees himself as a shepherd, his job to nudge things in their right direction, set them on the proper course, to lead by whatever means are necessary, and although this sometimes makes him uneasy, this practised deceit, he knows no other way. Politics is

the exercise of power, he believes, and power is nothing if it cannot stir fear in men's hearts.

5. A Disturbing Note

The President had met the Governor of F_____ only once, two years before, and remembers him as a melancholy figure, tall and gaunt with a thin beard that ran along the edge of his chin as if it were a pencil smudge; when he talked it was sonorously, his language weighty, stiff and formal like the suits he wore. The President remembers those suits especially, for when they met it was just before the monsoon season, the humidity folding closely around them, and he watched with fascination as the Governor's sweat blossomed on his back and beneath his arms as the day progressed.

The Governor is discovered in his bathtub with a small portable TV whose cord still snakes to a darkened wall socket. A piece of paper is found nearby on which a single sentence is written in a small, precise hand, *YOU have created me*, the word YOU like that, printed all in capitals, and it makes the President uneasy, as if that YOU is intended for him.

At first it is thought to be a suicide, but when details of the hydro-electric scandal emerge in the local press, the President becomes apprehensive. It was to discuss funding for this project that he had met with the Governor earlier, and documents that have somehow surfaced expose the use of substandard materials in the dam's construction, hinting obliquely at embezzlement and Swiss bank accounts. Of course the President had had his suspicions when the dam had given way, but, like everyone else, had no choice but to accept these things. But he does what he can, moving swiftly to compensate the widows and children of those lost in the disaster.

Later, an autopsy confirms the Governor did not die of electrocution, but drowned, the television merely a rhetorical flourish.

6. Public Reaction

Discreetly commissioned polls reveal that reaction to the rash of recent assassinations is mixed. On the matter of whether the government should do more to ensure the security of the republic, forty-three percent strongly agree, twenty-nine percent agree, and twenty-five percent have no opinion. Only three percent disagree or strongly disagree, and this the President views as an encouraging sign.

Other answers indicate a growing distrust of the leadership.

One in particular is worrisome: in response to a question asking the public if they are happy with the achievements of their government, a mere thirty-one percent answer in the affirmative, sixty-four percent undecided. This, of course, the President finds disquieting, knowing that in his country undecided has come to mean *no*. But it is the five percent who have openly expressed their disillusionment who keep the President awake long into the night, sitting in his favourite wingback chair before the low fire, the small table beside him littered with the names and addresses of the five percent, the Vice President's among them.

7. The Epidemiology of Assassination

Having suffered two seasons of disastrous crop failures, the citizens of S_____ are more concerned with their own stomachs than the fate of their Provincial Minister of Bread and Wine. He is the Grand Marshall of the Festival of Plenty, the most important celebration of the year, marking the end of the season and giving thanks for a bountiful harvest. Only this year the crowds are sparse and mostly drawn from the ranks of public officials and military academies, clerks and cadets mingling uneasily while waiting for their presence to be noted.

When the Minister disappears from the VIP podium his

absence becomes apparent only when he does not rise to give his customary speech.

Six weeks later, an anonymous note directs the police far into the country, to a secret warehouse of considerable dimensions. In it they find the missing official, who has been chained to the floor in the midst of sacks and tins and crates of relief food, food that has, for some inexplicable reason, not been distributed to the starving masses, but instead has been boxed and labelled with the names and addresses of private individuals both in this country and in adjoining nations.

The Minister has died of starvation, the only food near him contained in tins whose lids bear the small indentations where he had broken several teeth.

The President stares at the photos, running his forefinger along the edge, and a frown creases his features. In them, the single word *WHY* has been spelled out on the floor in six foot long letters with double rows of cans. And to the right he can see the Minister's emaciated form arranged in the shape of a large question mark.

The President pulls a map from his desk drawer, unfolding it carefully, and adds another tiny X to it in his neat hand, four in all, a crooked line, a child's scrawl, that snakes unhurriedly towards him.

8. A Brief History of Assassination

The Assassin is a professional, priding himself on the precision required by his occupation. When he is not busy studying street maps and building plans, or practising his many techniques of death, he sometimes amuses himself by reading about his predecessors.

The original Assassins, he has learned, were a sect organized in eleventh-century Persia by Hasa-i Sabbah, the Old Man in the Mountain. From their stronghold in Alamut, the Assassins spread terror throughout Persia and Iraq, striking as far away as Syria.

They raised no armies, waged no wars, accomplished their goals by carefully selecting key victims, their campaigns conducted not on fields of battle strewn with corpses, but with single assassins who stalked their prey.

He is somewhat disturbed to discover that the word, *Assassin*, is derived from the Persian word *hashishin*, a taker of hash, referring to their practice of taking hashish before engaging in their holy tasks.

He does not take drugs when he works, having tried it once and not liking it, feeling that it impaired his ability to conduct himself in a manner consonant with the dignity of his profession.

9. The Assassin's Confidence Grows

As if emboldened by his previous successes, the Assassin strikes within a week of his last crime, his latest victim the ambitious Mayor of a small but prosperous mining town of O_____.

His bloated corpse is unearthed with the bodies of half a dozen other miners who have perished in an accident. It remains unclear why the Mayor had descended, reports found on his desk clearly indicating the precariousness of the mine and recommending its closure. His passing attracts little notice, and may have been completely overlooked had a curious handwritten addendum to his order to reopen the mine not been found: *In the event of my death*, it reads, *I blame no one but myself*.

Subsequently, it is determined that the handwriting is not his.

10. The President Reminisces

As long as he can remember, the President has always wanted to be a politician; at boarding school he was the one from whom the other boys always took their lead, the captain of all the sports teams, the president of the class. He recalls these days with fondness, and

sometimes longs for the simplicity of his youth.

But then he thinks of his father, a career diplomat who returned home only rarely, for holidays and his mother's funeral, remembering him as a taciturn man, full of silences and disapproving looks. When they did spend time together it would be at the estate house in the country, the long ride there spent in silence, both made uncomfortable by their inexplicable bond of flesh.

During these awkward visits the President would often listen outside the door to his father's study, but seldom heard anything other than the tinkle of crystal on crystal and the endless arias that his father played on his antique gramophone.

11. A Difficult Call

Xs cover the map, a random scattering across its three lesser Provinces, and the President hesitates before making another mark, uncertain if it is the Assassin's work. Of all the victims, this is the one he has known best, whose services he has had occasion to use, a cunning man, adroit at avoiding the vicissitudes of political life. Though not a politician, he was well known to all who move in these circles, a man to be feared and respected, for his business was information and rumour, his work widely regarded as reliable and discreet.

But this time the police have a suspect and a motive, the Warden of L_____ in M_____, who has stabbed this man to be reckoned with as he fled the Warden's bedroom and his wife. When the police arrive they discover the Warden has made their job simpler by having had the decency to hang himself; in his shirt pocket is a three-page typewritten note recording the history of his wife's betrayals. It is signed, *A Friend Who Thought You Should Know*.

The President pulls on his lip for a moment, then quickly adds two fresh marks to his map, one beside the other.

12. A Strange Reversal

What the President can't understand is the fascination the Assassin holds for women; the press is full of stories of them swooning over him, in love with him, claiming to be his mistress, wife, sister, the mother of his child. It is as if they believe he has the ability to change them, to free them from their mundane lives. To them he is a movie star, a rock star, a world-class athlete.

There was a time, the President remembers, when politicians were thought of in the same light, when they were respected and honoured, a time when women whom he had never met sent him notes and flowers and proposals of marriage. And though it seems petty and unreasonable, he envies the assassin, nurturing a faint bitterness at the inversion of their roles.

13. In Time of War, Is It a Crime to Kill?

A series of assassinations follow, and the President marks each diligently on his map. The marks crawl across the folds in the sheet, sawing back and forth across the narrow width of the country, but always moving east to west, heading irrefutably towards the capital. The President has formed a special commission charged with putting an end to these acts of violence, but they meet infrequently, rarely achieving quorum, its members fleeing the country almost as soon as he appoints them. Whether they flee their own crimes or view their appointment as sufficient grounds for the Assassin's attention, he can only guess. But never one to miss an opportunity, he selects the most ruthless and feared of his enemies to sit on the commission.

It is late, and his untouched dinner grows cold on his desk as he considers where he has just drawn the latest X, in L_____, less than twenty miles from the Capital. He measures from the last joint of his little finger to its tip, and places it on the map's scale to confirm the distance. Even now the soft glow of the fires can still be seen if he

looks out his office window, a red halo rising from the east where the munitions dump is located.

“Yes,” he had said quietly when they came to describe the passing of his General, “I know,” having already placed a thick X in the appropriate position.

14. Theories About the Assassin and His Childhood

The President reads with great interest reports in the dailies that attempt to draw a composite of the Assassin, the picture of his personality emerging like the details of a Polaroid with each new murder.

He is above average in intelligence, they say, adept at bending others to his will, skilful at using language. These are the qualities that enable him to move unseen and unsuspected as he works. But the articles also confirm what the public already suspects, that he is in actuality a lonely man, incapable of understanding the needs or aspirations of others, of understanding or feeling in any significant way, in particular, unable to deal with his own thwarted desires. In his acts of violence he feels no remorse, no regrets, the necessity of the political act outweighing all other concerns.

There is also little doubt he comes from a dysfunctional family, in which an antisocial parent figures largely, violence and abuse almost a certainty.

There are suggestions, too, of an abnormal brain structure, and in bars and coffee shops across the country heads can be seen behind open papers nodding in silent agreement.

15. The American Ambassador

They had not expected the American Ambassador to be the Assassin's next target. Until this happened the President is sure the Americans regarded these assassinations as a curiosity, an odd string of events

in a distant and troubled nation. He was a new Ambassador, in the country only three weeks, but now lies dead on the outskirts of the city, a single silver bullet lodged in his heart. His death is puzzling, for his political record is unblemished, his integrity unimpugned, the only explanation a note found pinned to his body that reads, *It is not for what he has done, but for what he will do.*

Even the Americans had been unable to predict this, to stay that bullet from its inevitable course, and for the first time the President is shaken. The Americans must have suspected this was coming, must have selected this representative because they believed his pristine record made him safe; but they have erred, and as if to redress this oversight, three American warships lie anchored off the coast.

16. The Mirror

The President observes himself in a mirror. Despite the rigors of political life he has managed to keep his looks, his white hair and the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes only adding to the distinguished character of his appearance. He looks every bit the elder statesman, cool and confident, the one with all the answers. Regarding himself in the mirror, he knows at times he can be too vain, and wonders if it is vanity and a compelling need for self-aggrandizement which drive his political aspirations. Or is his concern with image merely symptomatic of a greater need for control over the vagaries of life? Is his desire for power a fear of disorder and, ultimately, chaos?

He likes this latter possibility best, for if it proves to be true, he has only done what any man, given the opportunity, would choose to do. Thus, he reckons he is merely a reflection of the people, no more or less accurate than the reflection that stands before him now.

17. The President's Fears Are Confirmed

Lying on the western coast, the Capital city, V_____, sprawls across the lush countryside in a careless unplanned fashion, as if it had just been washed up from the sea. On its extreme outskirts are the most recent shanty towns, but as one moves inwards the buildings gradually become larger and more stable, until all traces of the tumbledown, rickety shacks disappear. This is how the city has grown over the years, in layers, and travelling to its centre is akin to witnessing its evolution. At its heart lies the Palace, a square, imposing building whose wings stretch around to enclose a formidable square that during Independence Day celebrations holds crowds of twenty thousand. In its precise centre rests a statue of a long-forgotten hero of the revolution. He stands as if on the deck of a ship, sabre extended defiantly, his features set in a determined expression, a reminder of the time when this country had briefly been a glorious sea power. The monument is large, reaching a height of forty feet; it intrigues the President, this hero from the past, who seems to know precisely where he is and what he is doing, whose motives and beliefs seem unequivocally etched on that stony face. Looking out on it as the morning breaks, he wonders, *Could he have been so certain? Could he have really known?*

In the red wash of dawn, the President regards the statue, recognizing, even at this distance, the corpulent form of his Chancellor, Chief Minister of State, impaled on the monument's upthrust sword. On the base of the statue the following question has been splashed in black paint: *Who's responsible?* And though he is uncertain for what crimes the assassin has punished the Chancellor, it no longer seems to matter.

18. Assassination and the New World Order

The President sits behind his mahogany desk; its surface is covered with the resignations of civil servants and party members. The

Palace is nearly empty, most of its usual inhabitants having hastily departed the country. The President's few remaining aides surround him, sitting gravely in folding chairs or nervously pacing, clearing their throats periodically, jumping at the least noise. At first the President had wanted their reassuring presence, but now finds their exaggerated mannerisms annoying. So he dismisses them, and they file from the room in an orderly fashion, all careful not to walk too fast, nor to show too much relief.

When the President looks out his window, he sees the square has begun to fill, the small groups of citizens growing larger and larger until their edges touch and they merge, their boundaries beginning to dissolve. They speak in hushed tones and mill about impatiently, as if waiting for the reading of a proclamation or the announcement of a new heir.

The Chief of Security has positioned soldiers in the square and throughout the palace, a select group of crack troops standing at attention outside the President's door.

In his office the President waits, and reflects on his political life, attempting to examine each of his actions as if he were the Assassin, weighing them against what he had been taught many years ago was *right* and *wrong*. He has not thought much about these ideas since the demands of adolescence compelled him to discard them, one by one, like outgrown clothing. He knows that at times he has been a party to crimes of omission or wilful blindness, but is convinced he has only done what was necessary, reasoning he really had no choice, none at all. All in all, he feels he hasn't done too badly given the circumstances. It is not a system he created, nor can he be held responsible for the impulses of human nature that have spawned it. Things are what they are, and cannot be otherwise.

Or can they? he wonders.

Is this what the Assassin has been trying to tell him all along, that change is possible?

It can be different.

His heart races, and he realizes that there is some small part of

him that has not given up, that still clings to a tiny particle of hope. *Perhaps*, he thinks, *it is not too late*.

He springs from his chair and runs to the door to call back his aides, for he will need them if he is to begin the enormous task before him.

But when he pulls open the door the outer office is empty, the breeze from the window behind him blowing between the rooms, sheets of paper skittering across the floor to catch against the legs of furniture and abandoned rifles.

For a moment he stands perfectly still except for the slightest trembling he can no longer control; then, walking through the outer office he steps into a smaller, darkened room, pulling the door shut behind him. Inside, a bank of monitors has been set up against one wall, a single chair placed before them, a large red button glowing on its left arm. He sits down. From varied angles he looks at the Palace, its offices and meeting rooms, corridors and closets, kitchens and dining rooms, even fish-eyed views of washrooms, all vacant, forsaken, except—

—except for the monitor in the last row which reveals the interior of his office. In it, a figure moves slowly, its back to the camera, past his bookshelves and sideboard and cabinets, past the plushly upholstered easy chairs reserved for diplomats and business leaders of consequence. Though he cannot make out any significant features, the President can see it is a man, roughly his size and age, wearing a suit much like his own. He watches as the other retrieves something from the right-hand drawer of his desk, and the President's heart seems to stop, knowing what it is the intruder carefully unfolds and spreads before him, meticulously smoothing its creases. The other picks up a thick pencil and holds it firmly, confidently, just above the surface of the map.

The President wants to stand up, to return to his office, but he hasn't the strength. His limbs are strangely heavy, a numbness growing in his chest. *Too late*, he thinks. *Too late for anything*. He feels as if his country has contracted around him, has drawn up to the

edges of this building, to the walls of this very room. To the borders of his own skin.

Beneath his thumb lies the red button, and it is all he can do to press it. There is a snick, and the monitors wink out as one, each screen collapsing to a singular, bright point, all diminishing at the same rate, more or less. Darkness swallows everything, making it impossible to determine if the room holds one occupant or a hundred.

Or no one at all.

WHEN FAT MEN LOVE THIN WOMEN

From the porch, from within my heap of flesh, I watch them gawk. The sun is my bright-eyed enemy, and people stare, then look away as if ashamed—whether for me or for themselves, I am not sure. Eyes move, feigned nonchalance, over trim lawns and boxy houses, budding, dirt-brown gardens and plastic lawn gnomes, lingering only slightly longer on my too-wide door, my throne-sized chair, the concrete steps where others are wooden. A TV table within arm's reach holds a large bag of ripple chips, a chocolate log, a two-litre bottle of Coke. Furtive looks, nervous and sparrow-like, at my mass, at the clownish shoes and huge balloon pants, at the dark runnels on my sweat-streaked shirt. Their expressions are of disbelief, sometimes shock, as if they'd encountered a man who'd purposefully fouled himself.

I pluck at the fabric, not because I am embarrassed, but because it is new, and the material sticks uncomfortably.

She stares, too, from her stoop across the way, but always unabashedly. I cannot meet her eyes. Instead, I affect indifference, dab at my forehead with a sodden tissue, leaf slowly through my limp paper, peeling apart the pages one after another, almost able to see her through the translucent newsprint.

Sometimes I hear snatches of whispers. *Four-fifty*, they guess. *Five hundred*. Early evening strollers walk down one side of the street, then up the other. Perhaps they believe a consequence of my weight is that my hearing has become dulled. *He is ill. It must be glandular*. Notions to comfort themselves, thin ideas.

She would never think that.

Occasionally, men, walking singly or in pairs, try to strike up a conversation with her, but she will have none of them or their scrawny minds, their gaunt, unpalatable notions. She sits inviolate on her stoop, revealing nothing, dispatching them with pointed indifference.

Her house is set back, so that I am the only one who can see into

her living room. Later, I watch from shadows as she disrobes before an uncurtained window, as she does every night, staring into my well of darkness.

He will never return, I want to say to her, but I am sure she understands this already. Perhaps she is only waiting for someone to tell her, to nail it down in words.

In the cool night, long after the last strollers have retreated to their homes, I heave myself out of my chair by grasping two bars bolted to the brickwork specially for that purpose. Fixed about the house are more grab bars at various heights so that I might lift myself, unaided, from two oversize chairs, a steel-legged bed, a toilet the size of a small bathtub, all on the first floor. On the second floor, dust gathers.

My feet are sore as I walk, and undressing is a thirty-minute penance. In summer months, fat men must move with care.

Naked, I pull my obesity to the kitchen, and open a tub of ice cream. Not because I want to, but because I must.

They would never understand. To them, it is inconceivable this is my wish, to be a thick-lipped enormity, fingers the size of sausages.

But I do.

I want to eat, eat, eat. For her.

I want to eat until I am big enough to swallow her sadness and desire whole, in one monstrous gulp.

JAZZ THRENODY

When Hamilton first heard the note he thought he'd dreamed it, so pure and achingly clear it was, sparkling before him in the air like a cut diamond. It hung there unimaginably long, piercing the smoky grey half-light and smell of stale beer, burrowing relentlessly into his clouded brain until at last it found purchase, disturbing his addled and aimless thoughts, no longer a dream, another of his aborted fantasies, but suddenly real, *very* real. His slight alcoholic sway ceased abruptly, a momentary disturbance of his beery contemplation of a dark Formica table top with its cigarette burns and legion of dark rings. The note caught him like a bright, razor-sharp hook, sank into his skull and began turning his head, slowly and cruelly, so that before he knew what was happening he found himself staring down the length of dark, narrow room, past the end of the bar, to where the band played.

Hamilton, blinked, once, twice, then rubbed his eyes to clear away the trailing wisps of muzziness. The band—"JJ's Jazzmen" had been chalked on a blistered blackboard near the door—was sandwiched in a small area, not even a stage, really, just an empty space that needed filling, jammed between and around two pillars supporting enormous smoke-blackened beams that ran a foot or so above head height the entire length of the room. It seemed impossible that they might play in such circumstances, the bass and clarinet (*Who still used clarinet?* Hamilton wondered) on the outside of the pillars, all but invisible to the trumpet and guitar inside. Yet the players seemed as oblivious of their surroundings as the bar's other patrons, their music reflecting this indifference, listless and dull, a minimum of energy expended, empty, mechanical playing.

Hamilton listened. Had he heard that impossible note? He wasn't even sure he could have said which instrument had given it life—the clarinet, perhaps? His memory had faded, leaving only a vague recollection of what it had stirred in him. He watched the band play, squinting through the gloom to make them out: but they

were indistinguishable, four enervated faces, glassy-eyed, tired, passionless.

A dull throb in Hamilton's head distracted him; he lost interest in the band and began rubbing his temples, hoping to massage away his incipient hangover, forgetting the moment of excitement, what had roused him from his stupor, licking his dry lips instead, thinking of whether he might have enough change in his pocket for one more.

He rubbed; the band played.

Then the note came again, powerful this time, not from the clarinet, no—how could he have believed that?—but from the trumpet, the unmistakable ring of a trumpet. *Listen to me*, it demanded, *Wake up, Hamilton, listen*. He stared at the trumpet player, watched his leathery, wrinkled cheeks distend as he blew into the mouthpiece, his fingers stationary on the buttons. He listened as the dark figure blew another like the first two, shifted his fingers and blew a third and fourth that crackled with ferocity, Hamilton ridiculously counting them, savouring each one as if it were a rare wine to be sipped and appreciated, feeling inexplicably disappointed as they faded, only to be buoyed when the next note growled around him. Five, six, seven, and Hamilton began humming—eight, nine, ten, a tune he had known, one he had once played years ago, with Buzz Snider, wasn't it?

He pushed his chair back and got unsteadily to his feet, staggering closer so he could see who was cooking on the trumpet. But when he approached, he was puzzled, for though he could still hear those driving, forceful notes, he could see only a stooped old man, whose rheumy eyes had none of the intensity he'd expected to see in someone wailing, really *wailing*, but instead had only a sad, objectless stare. Yet . . . yet, when his fingers moved, the notes came spilling out, one after another, faster now, a riff Hamilton recalled as tremendously difficult, but executed flawlessly, big brash blustery notes of energy and life that took his breath away. He shook his head as if to clear it, and looked around for another player, thinking perhaps he had missed something, that maybe someone else was

teasing the brass. But he realized there couldn't be: he knew this bar too well, every dust-covered case of empties and rotting ceiling tile long ago catalogued in his memory. There was no one else.

Hamilton took a step closer, now uncertain, hearing those startling notes but unable to connect them with the man before him. He collapsed at the table closest to the band; the others continued playing in their uncaring fashion, the sound of their instruments harsher and more irritating next to the heart-wrenching clarity of the trumpet's voice. He could sense the band becoming aware of his presence, purposely ignoring him—he could hear it in their playing, the apathy replaced with a bristling defensiveness. He had always had an ear that way, a *gift* he'd called it back then. Listening to the better players he'd been able to tell them what they were feeling, sometimes—when he knew them well enough—exactly what they'd been thinking. He even acquired something of a reputation as a prophet, an unerring judge of raw talent. Somehow, he could block out the uneven edges and discordant notes, smooth away the rough spots and *imagine*—no, hear—what they might be like some day. His band leaders often asked him to sit in on sessions just to listen to hungry youngsters, and then asked him, “What'd ya think? Any good?” Waiting for him to say, “Yeah, he's got it,” or, “Nah, no heart,” sure that whatever Hamilton said would show itself to be true. His gift had made him a lot of enemies over the years, and spooked enough people to get him fired once or twice; but he had only laughed when it had happened, young and hopeful and sure of himself.

But it had been a long time since he'd been sure of himself, of anything really, not since he'd lost himself in a bottle and drunk his music away, sip by sip, until even his gift deserted him, those who had hung on his opinions now passing him on the street without so much as a look.

Closing his eyes, he blocked the squawking of the others out, willed them away, concentrating solely on the man blowing wild, the man talking to him unlike anyone had for some time.

He listened with an astonishment and joy he had not felt in years,

losing himself in the music, nodding his head in time. The notes sang through him, resounded in his skull as if it were a concert hall; he could feel the tingling in his fingers, he the old sax player, his fingers moving along the same lines, imagining how *he* might play it, pausing when the trumpet took off on a ride, running out of control up and down the scales, improvising, yet managing to work seamlessly with the whole, moving with such authority Hamilton's whole body moved with it, in it, around it. *Yeah*, he thought, his heart pounding wildly, *Go, man! Blow it!*

And as it started so it stopped, abruptly and without warning, the final note lingering, echoing, drifting past Hamilton, down the length of the bar, past the pimps and their whores, out the battered little door, into the night.

Hamilton clung to it, as a dying man might hang onto the hope of a last-minute cure. But it died, extinguished, a last coal winking out, followed by harsh, raucous laughter and the angry voices of the pimps arguing over one of the girls.

He opened his eyes.

JJ's Jazzmen were packing their instruments into battered cases.

Hamilton pushed himself away from the table. "Hey, man," he said, his tongue thick with drink, looking at the trumpet player. "Hey."

Eight dark eyes turned towards him. Their movements stopped.

Hamilton suddenly felt foolish. He had wanted to say something, had wanted to acknowledge the thing of beauty he'd just been given, to thank someone for it. But now he wasn't sure what to say.

"Yeah?" It was the trumpet player, his voice was cracked and raspy from too many cigarettes, teeth and hair yellow with nicotine.

"I . . . I played," he said hesitantly. "The sax, I mean."

The trumpet player shrugged.

"Man, you were really smoking out there! You were great! I haven't heard playing like that in years."

The trumpet player narrowed his eyes. Hamilton could see the wrinkles in his dark skin, could almost imagine the dust in them. "What'd ya mean? Huhn? What'd ya mean by that?" he said, his voice

crackling with anger.

"Nothin', nothin' at all."

The old man scowled and stooped over to pick up his case; the others were already packed and moving towards the door.

"Wait," Hamilton almost shouted at the bent figure. "One question. Okay? Just one question."

"What? What'd want, man?"

"What you were doing. That little ride right at the end. Man that was great. As good as I ever heard. And I've heard a lot."

"Well, you ain't hearing so good now. I didn't play no ride."

"Sure you did," Hamilton said excitedly. "You know what I mean, where you spun off just before the all-in. You know," he said again, and began humming it as best he could, though he had never heard it before, trying to recall every note of that unlikely improvisation. As he hummed he watched the old man's expression, watched his face freeze, become cold and hard as winter stone. He stopped humming. "You know," he said again, quietly, a question this time, not sure why, but aware he had done something wrong.

"I didn't play no ride like that." Anger filled the old man's voice, and Hamilton could see his hands trembling. "I can't. I couldn't. Not in years. I ain't played nothin' like that in years. What do ya mean makin' fun o' me like that for? What do ya mean?"

"I . . . I didn't mean anything. I just heard—"

"Who put ya up to it? What son-o-bitch asked you to do this?"

"I just heard it, man. That's all."

"You didn' hear nothin'. Nothin' at all. You just like to make fun o' ol' men, that's all."

"But I did, just before—"

"You ain't nothin' but a low-life, son-o-bitch drunk. Why you gotta be draggin' other folks down, too. Huhn? What you gotta be doing tha' for?"

"But I heard it, man," Hamilton insisted. "I did. That was so sweet. You were great. *Really* great."

The old man began backing away. Hamilton could hear him hiss

through his teeth. “What for, man? What for? Can’t ya leave me alone? What’d I do to you? Jus’ let me be.” He shuffled quickly towards the door. Then he was gone, following his notes into the night.

■

Waking in the dark.

Perspiration soaked, heart hammering wildly, breathing raggedly, uncertainly, as if your body had forgotten how, believing that had you not woken your lungs might not have remembered.

A short while later, when you’ve calmed down, when your respiration has become more or less regular again, when the banging in your chest has been reduced to merely a steady knock, the reality of your flat brings you back down, all the way down, the torn and discoloured wallpaper, dripping sounds from the rusty sink, the startled roaches scurrying for cover whenever you move, the creak of the old bed as you roll over to find that half-finished smoke, all nailing you firmly down to earth once more, placing you squarely in the monotony of your wasted, unchanging life—not a life, really, you think, merely an exercise, mechanical, without meaning.

You remember, then, and your heart skips a beat. You close your eyes, trying to bring it back, but it’s too late: the memory has faded, the music has fled.

■

When Hamilton returned the next day all that remained of the band was the faint, half-erased word “zzmen” on the blackboard, over which a new name had been scratched raggedly. Hamilton stood there, trembling slightly. He hadn’t had a drink for hours, wanting to be as clean as possible. Ordinarily he didn’t pay much attention to the shakes, considering them to be a natural rhythm; but this time there was something else, something he couldn’t define that made his condition intensely uncomfortable.

They had gone.

Where, the sullen bartender couldn't—or wouldn't—tell him. So Hamilton left, and wandered down the street, searching through bus shelters and dark alleys for newspapers that might have club listings. And though he managed to collect a few, JJ's Jazzmen were nowhere to be found in their pages. He returned to his small, damp room, turned on his hot plate and warmed his hands. They still trembled, yet he felt detached, as if they were someone else's hands, that this craving for a drink was not his—or at least had been replaced, usurped by another need, something that ran stronger and deeper.

When the room began to warm a little, Hamilton moved over to his bed where he had laid the soggy papers and read through them again, hoping, though he knew better, to find some sign of the Jazzmen.



Delivering flyers didn't pay much—anyway he never delivered them all, sometimes trashing them, other times putting three or four in every mailbox. But it did pay enough for his room, and gave him a few dollars which he normally spent on beer, or something stronger when he could afford it. He hadn't been reduced to bitters yet, though he'd been tempted once or twice; it was still a point of pride with him.

This time, however, Hamilton didn't run out and buy a bottle when the route manager placed the money in his hand; rather he closed his fingers around the bills tightly, and with it balled up in his fist he walked back to his flat, past his usual haunts, stopping on the way only once, to buy a newspaper.

At home he placed the paper carefully on his bed, gingerly turning the pages until he found the entertainment section. He ran his finger down the columns with club listings. Nothing. He guessed they were a local band; with the exception of the trumpet player, they weren't talented enough to be anything else. He searched again, this time noting all the clubs that held jam sessions. He carefully folded

the paper, moved it to the end of the bed and laid down next to it, shaking slightly, sweating despite the cold.



Hamilton began with the local clubs. He spent the first few days drifting from one bar to another, managing to visit four that were within walking distance. There were two or three others he would have liked to go to, but he didn't think he would be able to get past the bouncer, or at least not looking as he did; besides, he reasoned, a band like JJ's Jazzmen would have been as welcome in those places as he was. But who could tell where they might surface next: jams seemed the most likely, but when and where was difficult to say. Most sessions were held only once a week in each bar, and though Hamilton looked and listened intently, he saw only hungry young musicians paying their dues, unable to find any trace of the Jazzmen.

In the second week he took the cross-town bus, saving his money for the fares and, when necessary, cover charges, so that he might visit two clubs a week.

By the third week Hamilton had run out of legitimate clubs: there simply weren't that many places these days—at least not many for clientele of his type. He began moving into the empty hours of the night, going to dark after-hours clubs, chasing them to their elusive locations, only to be disappointed after paying dearly to enter. This occupied two more weeks and he found himself growing steadily despondent, watching his meagre resources dwindle, figuring in his head how many beers he might have had instead.

Then, walking home after a day of delivering flyers, intent on the hard, cracked concrete of the sidewalk, oblivious to the crowd shouldering past him—

—he heard it.

Amid the honks, the hiss of tires sighing on the pavement, obscured by the thrum of engines, Hamilton heard it. He stopped dead, heart pounding, ignoring the pressure of the crowd,

straightening up from his habitual stoop, straining his senses. Different this time, he thought, a cornet this time, not a trumpet, but somehow still the same. Still the same arresting quality, the same pureness, the same beauty.

Then it came again, a playful note, chased by another, laughing music, chittering and skittering across the heaps of metal to Hamilton. The sound was full of joy, jumping from car to car, deliriously happy to be free upon the world. The notes swirled and skidded around him, tittering and chortling, inviting him to jump and run, to dance and sing, to cry out with delight.

Across the street he saw the source.

But it wasn't the old trumpet player.

It was a gangly boy, all elbows and knees, standing, his back to a wall of large grey cinderblocks of the new bank building, long fingers jumping frenetically from button to button on his piece, rocking wildly back and forth on his heels, looking like he might lose his balance at any moment. He played his laughter. It flowed out of the bell of his horn in great bursts, electrifying the air, infecting Hamilton with its enthusiasm. Hamilton could see the boy's face beneath a shock of red hair, could see the ecstasy written on it, could read clearly in the notes the wild abandon, the soaring delirium.

Hamilton struggled back against the current of the crowd, shoved his way across the intersection, until he stood in front of the boy who was still free-wheeling, hammering crazily on those keys so hard Hamilton thought he might push them right into the valves. This lasted only a moment, because with a sudden nerve-jangling rip—a short rapid glissando cutting off hard on the last note—the boy finished.

Hamilton found himself staring into deep grey eyes, eyes that stared back, unabashedly, above a huge grin. The boy nodded at Hamilton, then squatted down to scoop up the change in a battered black fedora at his feet.

"Not great," he said jingling the coins in his hand and looking up. "Care to add any more?" He held out the hat teasingly. When Hamilton

didn't respond, the boy said, "I didn't think so," and laughed merrily, not *at* Hamilton, but as if it were some kind of private joke the two shared. "Maybe next time I'll sound better." Then he winked.

"What?" Hamilton was nonplussed. "What do you mean?"

The boy laughed again. "Hey, it's okay, man. Relax. I won't play any more, honest." He smiled broadly. "You get what you pay for," he said, flipping the hat lightly onto his head, tucking his piece under his arm and moving towards the street.

"No, wait," Hamilton said, plucking at his sleeve. "You don't understand. I don't want you to stop." He could hear the desperation creeping into his voice. "You're great, man. Incredible. Don't stop."

A look of puzzlement settled on the boy's face. "Naw, not really."

"You *are*," Hamilton insisted. "I could hear it. You could be picking your gigs. You could pick your bands. People would be begging you to let them play with you!"

The boy gently removed Hamilton's hand from his sleeve. "Naw," he said once more. "Not yet. Some day, maybe. I have this feeling, you know. You ever get those feelings? I do. Someday I may be as good as you think I am. But not now, not yet. I just graduated to street corners, and I'm not even very good at that. I mean, you were here. How much of a crowd was there? Huhn? I just got barely enough to buy dinner. But some day, you wait and see." Then he walked towards the street.

"No!" Hamilton shouted after him, and the boy, hearing him, turned to wave goodbye as he stepped off the street corner.

The car that hit him wasn't going that fast; the owner afterwards could find no dent where the bumper had broken the young musician's leg, and only the slightest indentation where he had slammed into the hood.

Hamilton ran out into the street.

The boy's leg was twisted beneath him; his expression was dazed, unfocussed. Hamilton knelt down next to him, cradling his head. Beneath his left hand the boy's temple felt soft and sticky. "Shit, oh shit," he said under his breath. Then: "You're going to be okay," trying

hard not to shout. "Hang on, man, just hang on."

But the boy's head lolled indifferently from side to side, blood trickling down his jaw and dripping onto the cold pavement.

Hamilton wanted to say something to comfort him, something that might put him back together, to straighten his crooked leg, fix his broken head. "God, that was great work, man," he whispered. "Unbelievable. I never heard better." The boy's head stopped moving, his eyes wandered for a second, then paused at Hamilton's face, tried to focus. "Yeah, man. You're some player. I wish I could only play half as good." Big sea-grey eyes, innocent, untried eyes, stared at Hamilton. "Shit, you could be playing anywhere, man, anywhere in the world. You don't need no street corner. If I could blow like you, man, I sure as hell would be somewhere else."

The boy's mouth opened slightly and a bloody bubble formed, broke. His lips moved; but no sound came out. Yet Hamilton could read the eyes, knew the words those lips formed: *Me, too*, they said, *I wish I could, too*.

When the ambulance finally arrived, Hamilton had been pushed to the back of the crowd by urgent hands. He stood there, no longer able to see the young man, rubbing his hands harder and harder on his frayed, bloodied pants.



Dark, thick glass you find on the bottom of a bottle.

Comfortable, cool. It swung in its own way, played its own tunes. You could look at the world through it between swigs. It gave you a whole new attitude, and not a bad one either. Sure it wasn't the real thing. Sure it lasted only a little while. Then the darkness seeped back in to fill that hole in you, that empty place somewhere inside, not your stomach, which needed nothing but drink and an occasional bowl of soup, not your heart which had withered years before anyway; no, it was somewhere in between those two, between body and soul. And though you don't want to think it, you know it's the music, it's in the way those notes seduce you, the

way they make you remember what it is to be alive, to hope, the way they fill you up and make you whole. Something you'd forgotten years ago. Or thought you had.

Why won't it let you go?

■

Empty.

The rye bottle sat atop his useless radiator, and from where Hamilton lay he could see the distorted, neon glow of the sign on the Chinese restaurant across the street. He had spent his last few dollars to buy it, and now it was gone.

Curiously, though, Hamilton felt none of the depression that usually followed the last swig. Instead he lay on his bed staring abstractedly at the bottle, thinking how foolish he'd been, how completely out of his mind. He couldn't have heard what he thought he'd heard. No. No one else did. Did they? It must be the rum. Too much rum'll do that to you. Yeah, he decided, that must be it. I'll stick with rye from now on.

For a time Hamilton didn't move; his mind seemed to be working wonderfully fast, everything seemed clear to him. He felt elated, as good as he could remember feeling in many years. But then the glow began to fade. He knew what would follow, so he decided, while there was still time, to see what he could do to sustain this state. There was a bar not too far from here where, two weeks before, he had gone looking for the Jazzmen. They didn't know him there; he might be able to cadge a few drinks. Anything seemed possible tonight.

The bar was a step up from Hamilton's usual haunts, although the surroundings were much the same: cheap plywood chairs with broken backs and splayed legs; round Formica tables, hard to ever imagine new; dark, stained floorboards, sagging in places, cracked in others; pillars with tattered posters on them, advertising bands of years past. The place was almost empty, and he bit back his disappointment, knowing the crowd was too thin, that he'd have to

go elsewhere to find a free drink. He looked around and was about to leave when he heard laughter coming from the bar. Sitting on a stool was a fat, middle-aged man talking with the waiter, engaged in an animated discussion, his round arms and belly shaking as he spoke, his balding head bobbing up and down as he made another point. He looked no different than half the men in the bar, wearing black pants with a plain belt and a white, short-sleeved shirt. He laughed again, a sound that seemed at odds with the place. A toothless, shrivelled man looked up glumly at the disturbance, then turned his glare back on the far wall.

Then the fat man glanced in Hamilton's direction and, catching his eye, smiled at him and nodded as if they were old friends. Hamilton found himself smiling back.

He decided then to stay a bit; he was still feeling pretty good, and he took this greeting to be a sign. He found a table and flopped down in a chair, still watching the big man who was now sipping from a glass as the waiter made his rounds.

"What'll ya have?"

The question surprised Hamilton, who hadn't noticed the waiter creeping up.

"Hey buddy," he said again, "What's it going to be?"

"Uh, nothing."

The waiter glared at him for a long five seconds, but moved on without saying anything more.

Hamilton relaxed, slumping down comfortably in his seat. He looked back to the bar again, but couldn't see the fat man. He was startled, instead, to see his bulk loom suddenly around a pillar, and head directly towards him. The man walked up to Hamilton's table, nodded, and continued past.

Hamilton swung around.

Behind him he saw a small area of the floor had been cleared; there were two folding chairs, one into which the fat man settled himself, the other on which an alto sax lay flat.

The fat man picked up the instrument, placed his lips carefully,

lovingly, on the mouth piece and blew.

Hamilton went rigid.

The first note cut him slowly, excruciatingly, an unhurried knife of pain. He felt his heart stop as the fat man played another note and yet another, each of mourning, each a sigh, a mood perfectly embodied, thick raindrops, melancholy blues beating down on him, washing him in their misery.

Hamilton couldn't say how long this went on: he lost all sense of time, absorbed as the fat man blew the blues out at him, the soulful lament of something lost that could have been, might have been, possible, if only, if only . . .

Flattened notes wove around him, through him, into him; an anguished slow curl dragged by him, almost pulling him into its dark, empty despair. He could feel something stir restlessly within his breast, a longing he had recognized only distantly—or that he had buried, years ago, buried so deep he had never thought he'd feel it again.

"Thank you."

Startled, Hamilton opened his eyes.

The music had stopped.

He felt warm tears rolling down his cheeks.

"What?" He was confused, dazed.

The fat man smiled at him across the table. "It's not often I've had that kind of effect. Not for years, anyway. Ha, ha!" His laughs tumbled out of him like rolling barrels. "I guess it means . . . you understand, huhn?"

Hamilton said nothing, only stared.

"Not many people do, you know," the fat man continued, sighing, for a moment looking more like his blues. "There was a time. I can't play it now like I used to, but if I had had the time, I think, anyway, maybe . . . But hey, no use in talking about it now. Ha, ha!" He smiled broadly. "But you heard anyway, didn't you? Sure it wasn't perfect, but I can see you could hear what it should have been."

The fat man had an expectant look on his face, a half-smile,

an invitation. Hamilton wanted to tell him how great he was, how wonderful his music had been, but instead he said, "What happened?"

The fat man's expression fell. He said nothing for a moment, then looked down at his arm. Hamilton saw the needle tracks.

Hamilton shook his head, angry. "No! You coulda been great. The greatest. I can tell, you see. I got the gift!" The words tumbled out, propelled by their weight. "It's . . . it's . . . this *thing*, you know. I can hear what you might have been. Yeah. I know. And you do, too." He looked directly into the fat man's eyes, and could see the constricted pupils, the drooping eyelids, the watery brightness of his high. "Why?" His voice began to rise. "Why did you do it? You could've had everything. You still can!"

The fat man raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"Sure," Hamilton said quickly. "Sure you can. All you've got to do is clean yourself up. That's all."

The fat man mocked Hamilton's tone. "Why?" Then he laughed, but it was a bitter laugh. "Maybe I don't want to. Maybe I can't. Maybe I just don't have a choice. Maybe none of us ever do."

"What do you mean?"

The fat man smiled wickedly. "You play, don't you?"

Hamilton stared blankly at him. "How'd you know?"

"Your fingers. They moved when I played."

"I used to," Hamilton said uncertainly, holding his hands above the table and staring at them as if they weren't part of him. They shook.

"Used to?"

"Yeah," he said, his voice suddenly small.

"Sax?"

"Yeah," unable to meet the fat man's glassy eyes. "Yeah."

"Well, there it is." The fat man gestured, still smiling crookedly. "Go ahead. Play."

"No. . . I don't think . . . I mean I haven't in years . . ." His stomach churned and his heart beat wildly. For a moment he thought he was going to be ill.

"You got the *gift*, man. Use it. Find out if you're the one, if you're the golden boy." He laughed boisterously now. "Man, it might be too late for me, but if what you say is true, all you gotta do is listen."

Hamilton shook his head, his lips formed the word *No*, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. What if he got up now and played, played like he'd heard the others play? Was it too late for him? Or might he still have a chance, had this gift been given to him for this moment, to let him know things could still change?

He felt giddy. With a start he realized he had stood up and walked over to the sax; now his hand rested calmly on the neck.

"Go on, man, go on," the fat man hissed. "Go on or you'll never know."

Hamilton reached down, lifted the sax till the mouthpiece moved back and forth slowly in front of his lips. He flexed his fingers, testing the movement of the keys. He felt frightened, but excited, too, not sure whether to be scared or exhilarated or both.

"Blow it, man," the fat man jeered at him, Hamilton hazily aware of the mocking tone, but no longer caring. A strange belief in himself began to grow. He knew what he'd hear, and had only been too frightened all along to seize what was his. Everything had been leading to this, he thought, an elaborate preparation for this moment, a trial, a penance he'd been forced to endure.

He closed his lips around the mouthpiece and blew.

He played a bar, and then another, falling into the music, forgetting to listen, so wrapped up in remembering, in remembering what the notes should sound like. He heard it in his head, powerful and straining, vigorous and wild, sensing that he was the centre, the room turning about him, as if he were the only thing fixed to the earth, while all else spun in a frenzied circle around him.

He played on, two more bars, his fingers moving confidently now, blowing with the authority he had always felt but had never been able to manage, taking great rushes of air into his lungs to drive the sax.

"Do you hear?" The words were distant, almost inaudible. "Can you hear it, man?"

What, Hamilton thought as he played furiously. *Hear what?*

"Can you?" the fat man said again, this time his boomy voice working insistently into Hamilton's spinning head.

Hear? Hamilton thought. He listened to his sweet notes.

Yet somewhere, *somewhere*, he heard . . . squawks and skirls, nerve-jangling transitions that jarred him, that assaulted his ears and made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Distended, labouring notes, twisted mangled creatures. He was puzzled, confused, and paused for a moment, dropping a note, and the irritating noises also stopped. Hamilton blew again, but now he was tentative; he could feel perspiration gather on his forehead with each bent sound.

No, he thought, *Please, God, no*.

A lump formed in his throat, making it difficult to play, making him gasp for air. He felt something important was slipping away from him, that the hole in his middle was growing larger and larger, bigger than him, pushing beyond to completely fold around him, swallowing everything that was Hamilton, becoming so big it could never be filled. He felt himself lost, disappearing.

The sax slipped from his hands and fell to the floor with a clatter.

The bar was silent.

Hamilton stood over the instrument, head hung, heart stopped, seeing only that dented thing, that golden sax, a dying animal, lying on the floor—

—a golden pool at your feet, puddling around your worn shoes, head crowded with unfinished phrases from your almost compositions, tumbling disconnected moments of scattered script, still hearing those haunting notes (in your head, only in your head) knowing you won't, can't, hear them anymore, because there's something inside you that won't listen anymore, not wanting to know, knowing instead only your fear, yes, and your failure, hearing but not listening, voices in the background, whispering, softly, seductively: "Incredible," one says, "Man can that guy play," a second gasps in awe, "Who is he?" another wants to know, and things like that, hushed reverent whispers, but you can't take the chance, not now, hearing them

but not listening, having given up hope for the certainty of the bottle too long ago, stumbling towards the door and the next drink, nearly tripping on a broken floorboard, fleeing the aching, frightening uncertainties of the future.

DOING TIME

My cell is small, Robin, seven paces from end to end, three from side to side, and sometimes I think it too small for sanity, too narrow for any sort of clear understanding. You of all people should know what I mean, trapped in your own prison, your own desires. Not like this one, no. But a prison all the same.

Sometimes I imagine us walking together, pacing off the minutes of our sentences, in tandem, you with your small strides stretching to keep up with mine, ten seconds for each circuit, front to back, your soft voice in my ear, patient, more patient than you ever were in our time together, rhyming off the steps with me one by one. I know you are satisfied for now, and with each passing moment I can feel your smile growing inside me like a tumour. For I have done what you wanted, Robin, spoken in your place: I killed her, I killed her for you.

■

I hungered for you Robin.

I remember when you first came to St. James Town, small and ginger-skinned, angry dreadlocks spilling from beneath a loose-knit beret of green and gold and black. Looking for *kicks*, you said, in mock high school seriousness (though you were older, far older, in your nakedness), meaning drugs and sex and colourful memories, you wandering among the rundown tenements and swirling garbage like a goofy eighteen-year-old kid, another of Mick's disposable uptown friends, another clean face slumming for a thrill, stepping delicately around the dog turds in your scuffed Docs and meticulously torn jeans. He introduced us, knowing I liked your type, but not for the reasons he ever believed. He thought I was tired of Janine, poor worn out Janine, greasy blonde hair always obscuring half her tired face, shivering and shaking most of the time when she wasn't high, wobbling down the shabby corridors of crack houses like a top about to fall over. No, I wasn't tired of her, nor she of me, but I knew she

might dry up at any moment, and I didn't want to take that chance.

But you. You were young with a whole life ahead of you. A clean-cut kid. I imagined comfortable, middle-class parents for you, a lace-filled room populated with stuffed animals, and your own pink princess phone, me wanting to revel in your freshness, your naive, soap-scrubbed smell, to use you, to taste you, to consume you whole.

You said you wanted kicks.

You were shy at first, as I expected, trembling as you slipped out of your clothes though it was warm and humid, covering yourself with crossed arms, timorously, as if this were your first time. You were beautiful, untouched, a pristine sculpture, and I remember my heart, my blood, singing out, my desire rising.

Gently, hesitantly, you placed your hands on me, and I let you roam; drinking in your pleasure, the edge of your excitement, as if all this were new to you, all this unexplored, you touching me, first here, then there, cool fingers around my cock, happy to prolong your pleasure, to revel in my ache one minute more. I directed your hands, your mouth, your legs, and after a time I kissed you, long and deep and slow, rolling you onto your side then on top of you, lightly, lightly, one hand cupping your ass, the other guiding myself into you. For a moment you looked astonished, a sudden exhalation, eyes wide, shocked. Then you saw me again, lifted your legs and bent your knees, locking ankles behind my back, rocking your hips forward until our pelvises ground bone on bone.

I began to move in a slow rhythm, knowing you were almost ready for me, for both my hungers, slipping more deeply into you, feeling the rush of your blood now, the rhythm of your heart, moving in and out of your lungs with your ragged breaths, touching the edges of your mind, spinning round your memories, ready at last for the final plunge . . .

But I held myself. I stayed there, lingering at the boundary of your consciousness, mind jangling, catching at one of your thoughts, startled to see this wasn't your first time, that the gentle fumbling

was an act only for my pleasure. I hesitated then, surprised.

And before I could begin stealing time from you, your body surged violently under mine, your mind flaring out like a lick of fire, you turning and twisting wildly beneath, a shock of energy desperate for pleasure, every nerve vibrating like a plucked string, shivering with a desire so strong I fell into your rush, your cadence, humming with your faster pace, my other need forgotten, your eyes open and fixed on mine, your small heels beating my back with the rhythm of my strokes, your lips drawn to show the too-white tips of teeth, back arched above the sheets, shuddering with the rush, 'cause you knew, you knew somehow I was experiencing it, too, searing across my arms, my chest, a shuddering warmth in my loins, pouring out in staggered waves of you.

I came, I remember thinking in the shattered silence. Dear God, I came.

And then I collapsed on top of you.

Oh, you said after a polite interval, you're heavy, pushing at my shoulder till you levered me over, spooning yourself into my side. Then you laughed, face flushed, sweat-slicked breasts against my arm.

Well, you said. That didn't take long.

What? I said, numbed, uncertain, my body trembling restlessly at this old sensation, confused, one hunger sated, the other still clamouring in anger and frustration, wanting your moments, your breath, your time. How long? I wondered. How long since I last came?

You were done, weren't you? you said, sliding your fingers lightly over the damp of my shrinking dick.

I said nothing.

You smiled sweetly, sat up, and gave my cock a peck. Don't worry, you whispered to it, pretending like you were keeping what you told it from me: There's always later, you said. Plenty of time.

Did you know, I wondered then. Did you know that I was going to steal a little piece of your life, adding it to mine? You'd have liked it, Robin, the best orgasm you'd ever had, all your synapses firing,

rocketing you into a state you'd never be able to equal, one that would have left you rubbery-legged and drained and bragging to your friends for months. A good exchange, a kick well worth a few weeks of your life.

I watched you sleep later, small, sharp breasts rising and falling in a steady rhythm, the trace of hip bone beneath skin, a shiny tuft of black hair. Wrapped in the smell of you and me. Thinking about those moments I could have stolen from you. Might yet steal from you.

Just before midnight I grabbed my stash and slipped out. My hunger became too intense to bear. I didn't like doing it this way, so public and violent, stealing moments from an anonymous body in the street with an offer of drugs or money. But time was creeping up on me, and I knew it was somehow too late for you, had been too late the moment I met you.

Have I ever told you, Robin, it was that night, after my second feeding, in a dark, roach-infested room off Wellesley, I shivered, frightened you might be gone when I returned, frightened you might be there.

I have stolen lifetimes from men and women, a few weeks at a time. At the moment of orgasm, when the mind is an incoherent fiery ball, I dash in like a thief and slip out with a week, perhaps two, to add to mine.

But I never thought to ask myself what you were stealing from me.

■

It wasn't long before you moved in.

For me it is an indistinct time of recollection, a swirl I remember only vaguely. Comings and goings. You showing up and dragging me out to a play or movie, something new, something experimental that momentarily excited you, a different restaurant, sharp new spices, another cheap thrill, anything to try to eradicate the memory of what you insisted was a mundane life. You stayed at my place some nights, left others, until you stopped going back to your parents'

place altogether.

How you loved my friends and their vials and needles and foil packets. I lied, told you I didn't have any money, not enough to buy that shit, but you still managed to cadge a pill here, a joint there. Sitting cross-legged on my worn little couch with your prize, puffing seriously, face falling when the effect wasn't what you craved. You falling asleep to dream of what new kicks tomorrow might bring. And I'd carry you to bed, again and again.

Robin, you needed me, I'd convinced myself, even though it was the other way around.

Do you remember how our lovemaking became more intense? Growing progressively longer, draining and exhilarating at the same time, you always wanting to push it further and higher, happy in the pool of the exhaustion afterwards, but never for long. For me it was as I had never imagined it could be. Yet painful all the same. Only part of my completion. A death half felt. Satisfaction and frustration spun together. You see, that hunger only served to fuel my other, the one I could never tell you about. A longing deferred. A desire to steal time from you, from your perfect future. My need was a burning stone lodged in my chest, so intense that after we uncoiled, always afterwards, my yearning would drive me to slip out and wander the streets, careful to make sure you did not follow.

To swallow other less appetizing futures.

I knew often you lay awake as I drifted out, feeling your eyes trailing me to the door. Where did you think I was going? To see other women? It was always an understanding we had, a convenient part of our relationship. After all, you saw other men. And you never asked. Maybe you thought it wasn't cool to speak of it. Or perhaps, I reasoned, you were fearful of losing me, your latest kick.

Me, your latest kick.

Did I ever tell you that you were mine?

■

Once a week a bus comes from the local lock-ups. I stare at the faces as they drift past, appraising them, their expressions calculating and cagey, some desperate, some stupid. First-timers look tired, harried, dark rings beneath their eyes, while the pros are cool and uncaring, flashing smiles at half-remembered faces. Then there are those trailing at the end, slack-jawed, eyes dark and withdrawn, nervous or too stupid to be nervous, unaware that time has already begun to slow with each step.

Once in a while, there is an innocent face. Fresh meat, I think, and later, after they've settled, I offer them a cigarette.

We smoke in silence, leaning against a wall, and I remember you, Robin, your lip caught between your teeth, staring at a magazine, or your tongue twisted with mine, your body tense and waiting, and I think, my God, my God, I'm caught, I'm a captive and I'll never be free.



It was a foolish pang of hunger.

You were supposed to be at work, breakfast shift. A job in the diner around the corner for pocket money. Perhaps it was that moment of weakness for which you never forgave me. Not the act itself, which I think you understood for what it was. Three months together, and I had been careful, to rent rooms, to haunt neighbourhoods far away.

You were supposed to be at work.

I shouldn't have brought Janine back to our place. Should never have talked her into our bed, hiding our circle of dampness beneath the sheets from her. A promise of twenty dollars. Me on top, brushing her greasy blonde locks from dispassionate, empty eyes. But I was desperate, so desperate, for her time. . . .

Had you waited for this, Robin, biding your time?

I saw you first in her mind, me sliding into her without thinking, a reflex wrapping myself around her memories, her moments yet to come. She must have seen you over my shoulder, leaning over us, for

there you were, Janine's idea of you, a naked woman-child with an odd expression, seeing you in a way, as an image, I no longer could.

Then I felt you pressing against my back, distantly, for my mind was already submerged in hers, your arms and legs covering mine like a sheath, your wetness moist on my leg, urging me on, your mind, your thoughts there, too, the three of us now connected by our urgency, our need.

I knew this was what you wanted, more than anything else. The ultimate kick.

I pulled too hard, pulled too fast, and she bucked beneath me with a frenzy you had never matched, could never match, eyes white and rolling in her head, her mind wild with longing and death, spittle at the corners of her mouth, me drinking her in, taking her in monstrous gulps and passing it all to you, a conduit, not careful, not caring, but doing only what you demanded, draining her future away, in her mind until there was nothing but us, together, howling as our hunger became a single roaring beast, dragging her life out, not thinking to stop as we raged through her, only the hunger important, consuming us as it consumed her, ripping from her a deep scream, that tailed away.

She passed out, her body quivering, spasming, losing control, the stink of her coiling up around as she soiled the bed. I tried to withdraw, to pull out, but it was too late, for it was you, Robin, you who were in control, compelling us forward, drinking her lives through me as if I were a thin wire, overheating, mind blinding white and burning without remorse, until the feeling was everything, everything, and I remembered nothing more. . . .

■

When I woke you were gone.

A pounding on the door.

I shivered, sat up, drained and weak, in a pool of congealing blood and vomit. Could any of it have been yours? Janine was on

the floor, propped next to the mattress, hands arranged neatly in her lap, half my stash tucked between her legs, needle hanging from the bruised flesh of her arm, a trickle of blood dripping from her earlobe onto the crumpled baggie. *Police*, a voice shouted. And you weren't there. I pressed my thumb against Janine's neck, felt nothing. Dead. Sucked dry. A husk. What had you done, Robin? How many lives did you steal from us that day?

Yet I don't grudge you any of it. Not a single minute.

Here in the prison yard I watch men measuring out their lives in small steps, grudging the moments stolen from them bit by bit. They are filled with bitter and unrepentant spirits that I swallow only reluctantly. Sitting on the edge of the bleachers, watching with a detached air the ebb and flow, the comings and goings, trying to imagine it through your eyes, seeing if I can feel the thrill for you, drawing on the parts of you left in me, as you would have wanted to, letting it wash around me, through me, without touching anything inside but you.

Why, Robin? Why didn't you take everything? Why'd you let me live?

I watch them standing in clutches, cigarettes burning down with their lives, and try to let your hunger direct me, perhaps to this one, perhaps to that one, helping me pick the life you'd have wanted.

I have every right to hate you. But I don't. Life is too long for that, and I won't be here forever. I know now that I've only been marking time, stealing bits and pieces of other lives like a petty thief, waiting for you. But when I get out, will you be waiting for me, Robin?

Will you?

FALLING

23.

A good clean fall is what Adrian hoped for.
One step out from the ledge, a quick plummet and—
No fuss, no muss.
At least none for him.

22.

Disconcerted, Adrian hangs above the crowd, stuck between earth and sky, his progress arrested ten stories too soon. He cannot move, or even blink, only float before curious eyes like a half-formed thought. At first, he finds his suicide a source of profound embarrassment; later he comes to regard it as simply another banal fact of his life.

21.

Adrian soon realizes that, no, he is not exactly suspended. Careful observation shows that he is indeed falling: objects at the top of his field of vision have inched upwards and out of sight while new ones have slowly crept in at the bottom. Certainly he is falling, not quickly, perhaps as little as a centimetre every hour, but falling all the same. Moreover, he notes that the tableau below grows slightly smaller with each passing day, the scope of his vision narrowing as he approaches his death.

20.

Adrian is neither comfortable nor uncomfortable.
He simply *is*.

He can, if he strains, make out the blurred contour of what he believes to be his right arm. Further away, somewhat more in focus, is the tip of his right foot, still covered with its frayed work sock. Many stories below lies the familiar corner of Market Street and East Avenue, the gathering crowd pressed against police cordons. It is as if he is looking through a circular plate of glass whose focal point is at the centre, and whose image becomes increasingly distorted towards the edges like a funhouse mirror.

Physical sensation has vanished. He feels neither heartbeat nor breath, senses no breeze stirring on his skin even when he can see litter scudding energetically across the street below, has no bodily aches or pains, not even the familiar ones to which he's grown accustomed.

As for the other aches, he knows these, too, will disappear in the course of time.

19.

Falling is not a particularly bad thing, he thinks in these early days. It gives one time to reflect.

For instance: he hadn't found her especially beautiful. Her mother was First Nations and her father Asian, giving her skin a curious hue that he had never seen before. Her nose was too large for her face, her teeth crooked and slightly yellow. But it was the way she had cut her hair, raggedly short, the stubble dyed an alarming red, that had caught his eye with its improbability. "Take me home," she had whispered that first evening, unexpectedly, startling and exciting him at the same time. They had only known each other three hours, he reluctantly attending a client's dinner party, she a friend of a friend.

18.

For a span of days after his leap he recalls events clearly: first the

commotion, the sidewalk and street crowded with onlookers, curiosity seekers, officials. To the side were parked several vehicles—a fire truck, an ambulance, three police cars—lights flashing, doors ajar, serious men leaning on the roofs of their vehicles and speaking quietly amongst themselves with an occasional nod in his direction.

Not long after came the media.

They arrived all at once, surging like angry insects, hauling cameras and recorders, dragging dishes and antennas, scrambling over one another, pushing and shoving, some even ludicrously shouting questions as if they thought Adrian might answer, though he can no more speak than he can stop his descent.

What, he wonders often, can they find so compelling in one man's death?

17.

She was, he believes, somewhat vain, though this he can easily forgive her. She would stand for hours before the gilt-framed mirror in his bathroom, naked and beautiful against white tile, snipping meticulously at the tiny hairs that had become too long, or those that seemed to have grown into too regular a pattern, as if she viewed any kind of uniformity with the same kind of embarrassment he felt in an ill-fitting suit.

Afterwards, he would sweep the floor, filling the dust pan with those small, bright red strands of hair, sometimes rolling them between his thumb and forefinger before letting them drop into the garbage.

16.

All rescue attempts fail.

Nets cannot hold him, both fibre and metal twines stretch then tear, snapping violently back when the last strands finally part

under his inescapable weight. Platforms are anchored with thick bolts to the side of his apartment building to cradle him, but these too splinter and tumble to the ground taking with them part of the dirty yellow brickwork of the wall. And once, as if they had forgotten previous attempts, spiderwork scaffolding is erected till its rough boards almost touch his buttocks, but this, too, he pushes through, his creeping momentum bending and twisting the thin metal tubes supporting the platform until the whole structure suddenly explodes outwards and showers the terrified crowd, injuring several.

He feels a stab of anger at their stupidity, and wonders why no one has thought to ask him if he wants to be saved, why no one has even tried to question him about his wishes?

But the anger passes, and what follows is an overwhelming guilt at the suffering others endure at his expense.

15.

Adrian's apartment is nearly bare.

Over the years he has reduced those objects surrounding him until he has only the essentials he needs for a day-to-day existence. His living room is spartan, holding a few necessary furnishings: a drafting table he purchased at an art supplies store and on which his computer sits, an office swivel chair he discovered at a yard sale, his mother's small worn leather couch and battered end table, a large-screen TV with remote control.

His bedroom contains a bed, a dresser, and a small night table with an old lamp he has kept from his childhood. The fridge and cupboards in his kitchen are nearly bare.

There are no pictures or decorations of any sort on the walls, with the exception of an old photograph of his father—a thin, sombre-looking man wearing a dark suit—that sits in a wooden frame atop his fridge.

14.

There are periods Adrian cannot remember clearly, and he believes during these times his mind *sleeps*, as it did in that other life, for the various states accompanying sleep remain. One difference, however, is that he remembers wisps of dreams, half-formed visions, although until now he has retained almost none since childhood. He dreams outlines of hard, unforgiving geometric patterns, squares and triangles, cubes and blocks against a brilliant white background that leave burning afterimages when he returns to consciousness.

For some reason this makes him sad.

13.

Adrian, We Understand, reads one sign. *Hang In There, Adrian*, says another. *Don't Do It!* implores a third absurdly, as if he had not already made his decision.

He reads these signs with detachment, knowing that most who watch him do not share these sentiments. He senses their distaste for the melodramatic, can imagine their resentment of what they see as his huge conceit. But this is not all. He also believes he can see the longing in their eyes, watching hungrily and imagining their own varied ends, feeling frustration at this upsetting of the proper order of things. Sometimes he believes it is they who hold him here, that it is their appetite that denies him his peace. In his death they see all the small deaths they die each day, a metaphor, he thinks, for their own gradual disintegrations.

But he discards this notion as too obvious.

12.

Adrian has lived in this neighbourhood all his life, although its

character has taken a turn for the worse in the last few years. Why he has remained he cannot say. He recalls long summer days spent playing in the streets, his parents watching from the stoop of the red-brick rowhouse on East Avenue. His family lived three houses from the corner until his father had failed to come home one night in August. Adrian remembers that night for its particular humidity and the movement of his mother, who hummed and sweated and cooked porridge as if nothing in the world was more important. The following week he and his mother moved in with his aunt's family twelve doors down the street.

Sometimes Adrian wonders what might have happened to his father, wonders if he is still alive, wonders if he sees his son suspended on the screen of his television on the six o'clock news.

11.

And sometimes, when he is not careful, he catches himself wondering where she is now.

10.

A memory:

It is late, and Adrian stares at the screen, having just finished his final contractual obligation. Adrian does not work in an office, at least not the same one every day. He is a freelance programmer, his specialty the C++ programming language. Often he works from his small, one-bedroom apartment. In this he considers himself lucky. Though his work does not afford him the security he would like, he tells acquaintances that he enjoys the variety of jobs it brings him. With his career, as with all other things, he is careful and cautious, fearful of the consequences of ill-considered actions.

He leans back in his chair and rubs his eyes.

For the last three months he has taken on no new clients, leaving behind in each company's file the small discreet business cards of competitors whose work he feels is reliable. His decision is not a rash one. Adrian is not a rash man.

Before her he had lost himself in the thrum of his work, the long hours of code that strolled out on the screen before him like elegant flamingos.

When she left she took even this.

Perhaps, he thinks, she was only an excuse, a last chance, realizing the process of his isolation had begun long before he met her.

He pushes himself out of his swivel chair and walks into the kitchen where he leans against the fridge. Looking at the dusty picture of his father, he thinks of her.

9.

Adrian considers falling. He counts off mentally the meanings and phrases of falling in his life: to fall asleep, to have a falling out, falling through the cracks, deals falling through, falling flat on his face, falling into line, falling all over himself, to fall short of his goals, to fall out a window, to fall in love, to fall from grace, the fall of man.

8.

Exactly what attracted him Adrian could not say.

Her temperament was contradictory and difficult, her emotional swings wild and unpredictable. She dressed and acted aggressively and with confidence, yet in private moments betrayed to him fears of weakness and self-doubt; her anger rose suddenly and without warning, but passed quickly, leaving a tenderness and compassion so complete Adrian feared that he might weep; she was moved by beggars on the street and almost always stopped to give them money,

but would fly into a rage when appeals were made on TV. It was as if only in this tension of opposites she found her momentum.

To Adrian her behaviour was nerve-wracking.

But then he remembers a family wedding when, for a time, she seemed at peace, free of these constantly warring complexities. She was transformed, a serenity he had not seen before settling on her features, and she became almost beautiful. Adrian watched this metamorphosis with amazement, as she moved from cousin to uncle in light, carefree steps; then, later, as she whirled past him on the dance floor in the arms of her father, bestowing a warm smile on him that made his heart skip a beat. He smiled back, but it was too late, for she had already turned.

And at that moment he thought that should he ever be capable of loving someone, it might be her.

7.

The crowd, Adrian notes, has taken to wearing long overcoats, hats and scarves. Dead leaves skitter through the streets.

How long he has been falling, Adrian wonders. Days? Weeks? Years? Forever? Or no time at all?

Although he knows this should bother him, it does not, for he now recognizes that his fall is a gift, his momentum a revelation, his leap one of faith. This prolonged tumble has presented him with an opportunity few are given: a chance to rewrite his story.

Adrian rejoices in falling.

6.

When he thinks of her it is her eyes he thinks of first: big, brown and luminous, impassioned, lively eyes. He recognizes that this is only a fancy, knowing eyes cannot express emotion, that they are anything

but expressive, changing little from the time of birth. Why then, he wonders, did his chest constrict each time he looked directly into hers, or now, when he merely recalls them? Why did he talk to her so often with his eyes averted, lest she see how foolish and irrevocable his own belief had become?

She was erratic, an enigma, unknowable, and perhaps this is what, in part, attracted him. Each time she left he had no way of knowing if she would return.

"I love you," he had once ventured at her moment of departure, quietly, uncertain, not sure she had even heard. She paused, one hand on the door, then turned and walked back to where he sat on the end of his old couch.

"Almost forgot," she said as he watched her long narrow fingers snatch sunglasses from the end table before she walked out the door.

5.

Though still caught in his fall, Adrian tries to imagine possible futures with her, considering them living together in his little apartment. But each scene he envisages does not work, suffering from some subtle dissonance which will not allow him to enjoy the moment. He can't help wondering, for instance, what she would do as he works at his computer. Certainly she can't stay in the room, for then he'd never accomplish anything, her presence a distraction too great for him to bear. Would she sit quietly on the edge of the bed until he is finished? Perhaps she could busy herself about the kitchen preparing his meals? Or would she leave without saying a word to him, returning to the cafés and bars and clubs where she keeps friends?

So he makes up a larger apartment for them, and safer friends for her, and though she looks and sounds the same, she also changes in these visions, becomes more understanding, less demanding, unpredictable and vulnerable enough to excite his curiosity without

making him overly anxious. At these times he is convinced she waits for him below, amongst the crowd, where she keeps her vigil night and day, waiting patiently for the end of his descent.

4.

It had happened again.

“Shit,” she said, in that small, angry voice, shaking her head. She said it as if she was not even talking to him, as if he was not even there in bed next to her.

Adrian followed her stare down to where her hand rested uselessly between his thighs, where she had for the last half hour tried without success to revive his ardour.

“Sorry,” was all he could think to say.

“Why can’t you just relax? Huh? There’s just no in between for you, is there? Christ, you’re either too fast or not at all. I don’t know how much longer I can take this.”

“Sorry,” he said again, listening to the sound of the word, wondering if perhaps there was not some small part of him that willed it to happen this way, that wanted to push things to their limit, to see how far they could be stretched before they broke.

3.

It is night, and a solitary figure stands below in the circle of lamplight. Snow continues to fall, and Adrian watches as the man’s breath slips out in small white clouds, the only sign that he is alive.

Adrian feels alone, as if he has been abandoned.

In some future history, Adrian thinks, I will be forgotten, the text will disappear, the historical notes vanish, a loose page torn from the book to fall, unnoticed, to the floor; and this thought, more than anything else, frightens him.

2.

Real memories have become increasingly elusive. Many are now only vague afterthoughts, a feeling that something once happened, that something was once important, but now has no meaning. Thus diminished, Adrian feels them slip away like the strings of helium-filled balloons from between his fingers. But no matter how much of his life has eroded in this manner he cannot free himself from the one image he would if it were in his power: the contempt that twists her features as she speaks.

“You have no feelings.” Her words are clipped and cruelly direct. “You pretend you feel, but there is nothing there. Only self-interest. Sometimes I’m not sure there is even that. You’re so lost in yourself you can’t even see how desperately lonely you are.”

Adrian ventures nothing this time, not even his usual denials.

“There’s no room in your universe for anyone else. We are all creations that live and die as we enter and leave your sight. So I’ll make it easy for you and leave.”

Adrian sits alone in his apartment.

Did she really say all that?

Could she have said all that?

But she was wrong, had misinterpreted. He did feel, but could not express it. He couldn’t do otherwise. It wasn’t in the nature of the character he had created for himself.

1.

Alone, Adrian hangs far above the street, caught between endless planes of earth and sky, bit by bit becoming aware of a small thought that worries away at the edge of his resolve.

He wonders, did she ever care?

But yes, he must believe, has to believe, for that is all that carries him towards a final resolution.

He knows the weight of her love will bear him down like a stone.

OBJECT OF DESIRE

Lying back on the acceleration couch, Cat dug her fingers into the warm, yielding material. Gritting her teeth, she waited for the drop. In less than a tenth of a second she knew it would be over: the *Zel'dovich* tearing through bent space near the singularity gate, the throat opening to swallow them whole. Yet for her it always seemed an eternity: a lurch, then a sudden terrifying plummet away in all directions, her body drawn out thinner and squashed flatter, tailing away into an emptiness without end, stretched beyond redemption. And when she thought she could take no more, she fetched up against an *almost* barrier, a sensation like being run through a strainer with an impossibly fine mesh, wires so thin they sliced away tiny subatomic bonds, made her into a cloud of cold, unfeeling matter.

Yet awareness persisted.

Each time a brief instant followed in which she was sure this was the final drop, that she would be sucked into the gravity well of the singularity gate like the stream of helpless, lonely particles she had become. But at that last moment the singularity seemed to relent, to relinquish its grasp, and her body pulled together again like an elastic band stretched to its limit, collapsing back into the woman known as Cat, leaving her weak and sickened, feeling useless and somehow violated in a way she could find no words to describe.

Why did this always make her think of love?

■

"The planet wasn't there before," Wei said hunching over her comm panel.

Simon laughed; he stood behind her, his tall, gangly form dwarfing Wei, shaking his head. He patted her on the back in mock consolation.

Cat looked up from ops; she could see the muscles tense in Wei's shoulders as she hunched lower, drawing away from Simon's touch,

her compact body coiling itself even tighter. A few metres away, completely oblivious to Simon's goading, Chan hummed to himself in the pilot's cage, his eyes large and a dreamy expression on his face.

"Perhaps," Simon said, "perhaps it arrived with us?" Then he smiled at Cat.

Wei turned, her eyes cold and hard. "Stay away from me," she hissed at him.

Simon's face coloured and he stepped back. Then he composed himself, and smiled crookedly. "Sure," he said in a too-casual tone. "Whatever you say." Sauntering over to Cat's station on the opposite side of the bridge, he placed a cold, moist hand on her shoulder.

Cat shrugged it off.

Leave me alone, she thought irritably. *Just leave me out of it.* She felt nauseous and disoriented as she always did after a drop. Only this drop, the effect had been more severe than usual, almost debilitating. She bent over the ops panel, her stomach churning, trying to concentrate on the diagnostics that ran past her eyes like an unfamiliar alphabet.

Simon hovered beside her, and Cat knew Wei was watching them. When Cat glanced up, Wei caught her eye and held it. Cat shook her head slowly from side to side and smiled, trying to reassure her across the distance, feeling a sudden spur of anger at Simon. What the hell was he up to? He wasn't even supposed to be on the bridge now; he should have been below, with the rest of the survey team. Why was he acting like a jealous lover now? Their affair had been short and impersonal, the way she liked them, months before she had met Wei. She glanced at him and a strange look—pain, she thought, mixed with longing—flickered across his face; Cat's stomach tightened and she averted her eyes quickly, her lips curling in distaste.

"The diagnostics indicate everything is functioning correctly," Wei said. "The survey must have been incorrect."

"What do you mean?" Simon asked.

Wei swung her chair around. "The survey was your responsibility. You didn't do your job properly."

Simon's face flushed again; his half-smile disappeared completely. "And perhaps you haven't yet learned how to do yours properly—"

"Brethren," Chan said, twists of dreadlocks bouncing from side to side as he shook his head. Exhaling a long thin line of smoke into the cabin, he sighed contentedly and smiled. "No need fe argument."

Yeah, thought Cat sourly. *That's a lot of help*. She whispered a command to her panel; the lights dimmed and an image coalesced between Simon and Wei. At first it was an indistinct, colourless ball, a swirling sphere of grey. But then it began to firm, become a planet, its surface dappled with smudges and clots of growing colour, deep, earthy tones, ochre and sienna and paler, sandy browns; sparkling aquamarine blues rippled across its surface and slipped into cool shades of slate grey; bright greens blossomed, splotches like spills of paints, here and there; and great expanses of eye-straining white, lumped across the sphere in long, distended masses.

The fourth planet in a system that was supposed to have only three.

Fully resolved, it shimmered, suddenly became sharper as the simulation slipped into real-time. It was rotating now, its motion so slow Cat could detect it only by watching the clouds and darker land masses slip past the edge of the world.

How could they have missed it?

■

Cap/N's projected image wavered, then solidified above the empty chair, drifting down into the seat at the head of the oval table; he had assumed the form of a middle-aged man, with an expansive, fatherly face. Knowing wrinkles radiated from the corners of his eyes. An air of calm seemed to emanate from him. "Well?" he asked, resting his chin on steepled fingers, a hint of a smile playing about the corner of his lips.

The lounge was silent. Above the table a smaller version of the planet floated, high enough so they could see each other under the

white of its southern pole.

Wei squirmed impatiently in her seat, staring angrily at Simon; Cat reached over and squeezed her hand and Wei, after a moment's hesitation, returned the pressure. On the other side of the table Simon crossed his arms, his eyes flicking from Wei to Cat. A vein throbbed in his temple.

Cat glanced around the table. If the others were aware of the tension, they didn't seem to be showing it: Singh, their planetologist, sat next to Simon, staring at the planet with his habitual air of distraction. And at the far end of the table, opposite Cap/N, sat JC, the geologist, his massive body crammed into a seat far too small for him, doodling in the small, brown sketchbook he carried everywhere with him. He looked bored and half asleep. The only person missing was Chan, whom they had left in his cage, wreathed in a holy cloud of ganja smoke, a joint the thickness of his thumb dangling loosely from his lips.

Cap/N cleared his throat. "Singh, perhaps you'd best begin."

The small man nodded, flipped through several sheets of hardcopy until he found the one he wanted. "According to the earlier survey, we had a stable, three-planet system. Three cold worlds. Now we have a fourth." He held up a second sheet. "So I reworked all the orbital data. The numbers for the original planets haven't changed from the earlier surveys. Which means that the new planet appears to exert no gravitational influence on the others."

There was a moment of silence. Then, with a bemused smile, Simon spoke: "You're telling us it's not there?"

Singh dropped the sheets, looked at him. He blinked. "It shouldn't be—if the figures are to be believed."

"What about Simon's suggestion?" Cap/N asked. He had drifted out of his chair and now floated thoughtfully above the planet, half his normal size so that he could squeeze between the image and the low ceiling. He gestured at the globe. "Are we sure it's even there?"

"Not there?" JC scratched his head with his pencil. "What do you mean?"

“Well,” Cap/N said, “what if the instruments are malfunctioning? Or if they have been tampered with in some way?” He slipped back down into his chair as if he rode an invisible slide, now looking like a young child perched on the edge of the seat. “What if we only think it’s there?”

Cat squirmed in her seat. “Is it possible? That we could be looking at a false image.”

“Who can say?” replied Cap/N, returning for the most part to normal size while his shoulders continued to grow, shrugged, then shrunk back. “I know no better than you. Perhaps worse since everything I perceive comes to me through the ship’s Net.”

“We can check easily enough,” Cat said. “We don’t need the instruments. We’re close enough so that an EVA could verify its existence.”

“I’ll do it,” said Singh.

“Fine,” Cap/N responded warmly. “That should help clear things up.”

“It flickered.” Wei said softly, staring at the table top. “When I started running the diagnostics the screen was empty. I’m sure of it. Then something caught my eye: a small blue dot in the corner where there’d been nothing before.”

“Maybe it was just a hiccough, Wei,” Cat said softly. “You know how temperamental the imaging system can be after a drop.” She glanced at Cap/N for support, but he had become semi-transparent, making his expression difficult to read.

“No,” Wei said. “This was different. The image was straight through without any enhancements. Nothing else in the field changed. The planet wasn’t there—then it was.”

“Were you recording?” Cat asked.

Wei shook her head.

“Any way you can verify that Cap/N?” Singh asked.

“No. I’m afraid not. Wei’s board was fully manual at the time, so if she didn’t record, I have no back-up.”

“You think the planet is a glitch in the imaging system? On every

wavelength?" Cat shook her head. "Then it's a pretty damn specific glitch. With lots of specific detail." She stared at the dark continents, the sharp blue of the sea.

Cap/N shrugged. "It does seem unlikely. However, I have another reason to believe the instruments may be defective," Cap/N said. He rose, his chair dissolving behind him and his suit melting away to reveal a lab smock beneath. Using a pointer that materialized in his hand he gestured at figures that now scrolled on the wall behind him. "My observations also show something odd about the singularity gate. They recorded a decrease in the angular momentum of the singularity without an accompanying increase in mass."

Singh drew his brows together in a frown. "The event horizon shrunk?"

Cap/N nodded. "Yes."

"Is that important?" JC asked slowly.

"The event horizon of a singularity can't shrink," Singh said. "It can only get bigger. Cap/N is telling us that the hole has lost mass energy. An impossibility." He sat back in his seat. "Our instruments must be shot."

"Yes," Cap/N said. "That seems like a reasonable conclusion." As he spoke a thick, dark beard with flecks of grey flowered on his cheeks and chin. "Which also means that until we can verify and correct the problem, any data we collect might be compromised."

"Then what do *you* suggest we do?" Simon said irritably.

"We've still got twenty-seven days before they open up the throat for the return drop, Simon. So I suggest we let Singh make his observations, and then we'll decide what our course of action should be."

■

They were both naked.

Wei lay next to Cat on the bunk, staring at the ceiling. It was the first chance they had had to be together since the drop, and their lovemaking—normally slow and unhurried, a leisurely, pleasurable

stroll—had been sharp and urgent, with an intensity that had made Cat gasp in surprise and pleasure. Her body was covered with a sheen of sweat.

Cat sat up. She reached over and pulled gently at Wei's shoulder, felt the tension still there. "Come on," she said. "I'll give you a massage."

Wei looked at her a moment, then shrugged. She let Cat roll her onto her stomach. Above the bunk was a gravity shelf, and Cat reached up and lifted off a bottle of oil. She flipped open the lid and squirted some into the cup of her palm. The scent of tangerine and rose filled the small cabin. Kneeling, she straddled Wei's back.

Soon her fingers were warm and slippery and Wei's skin glistened, though her muscles were still hard and unyielding beneath Cat's touch. Despite her own fatigue, Cat pushed with determination against the knots of resistance, losing herself in the rhythm of her strokes, thinking of nothing but the smooth skin that slid beneath her fingers, of the slight angles of Wei, of her spare, economical frame.

Cat envied Wei's body, its smooth hairless contours, its sleek, almost boyish, proportions. A compact, functional form. In comparison, hers felt loose, rounded, far too soft. Too much a useless, inefficient, pampered body. There had been a time when she had loved her own shape, had admired its curves and hollows in the mirror, tracing them slowly with the tip of her index finger. When men and women alike had vied for her attention, pursuing her, proclaiming in unstinting terms their *love*, each wanting desperately to possess her—

No, she thought suddenly, and bitterly, not me. It was this body they wanted. Never me. Just like Simon. . . .

Wei grunted sharply, and Cat was suddenly aware of the woman beneath her, of the flushed skin on Wei's back and neck, of her own fingers digging deeply into the flesh. Cat released her grip, lifting her hands away. Curling her fists and using only her thumbs, she pressed lightly into the shallow channels between Wei's ribs. A moment later she was rewarded with a sigh. Shifting her weight, Cat wiggled

forward, and began to knead the muscle just above Wei's shoulder blades slowly and tenderly; she could feel the ridges of tissue beginning to break down under her fingers. Wei was finally letting go, her anger broken, Cat feeling it seeping through her skin and evaporating in the warm air of their cabin. Cat pushed though the joints in her fingers ached. Soon Wei's breathing became quiet and rhythmic, her muscles relaxed, a calm washing over her face as she fell asleep. Cat smiled, a feeling of affection suddenly and inexplicably welling in her.

She caught herself. *It's only admiration, perhaps the warmth of friendship, I am feeling*, she thought, having decided long ago that she did not, could not, love Wei. *No, not love*, she thought. It was more respect for her self-sufficiency, envy, perhaps, of her independent nature. Wei needed no one. And Wei let her alone, let Cat be, asked no questions, made no demands. It was why she had agreed to share Wei's cabin. Cat glanced at the wall where a shadow, roughly square in its dimensions, was visible. It was the shadow left when, at Cat's request, Wei had removed the mirror.

And she had never asked why.

■

Singh's EVA confirmed the planet was real. And Cap/N's instruments continued to report the hole had not only lost mass, but apparently was continuing to do so at a small, but constant, rate. Though the news should have disturbed Cat as much as it bothered the others, she felt only a mild annoyance. There was really nothing she could do anyway. It was up to Cap/N and Singh to decide on the significance of these facts, if any. Instead, she spent most of her time avoiding Simon, whose resentment seemed to have grown. His jealousy had become an almost palpable presence, stalking her down the corridors, following her into her cabin, creeping into her dreams. Whenever she encountered Simon in the corridors, he stared at her wordlessly, his face pale and his eyes red and darkened by ever-larger circles. It left her unnerved. So much so that she found an excuse

to miss the meeting in which they had decided to scrap the system survey for the chance to map the new world.

Cat was relieved by the decision. It meant plenty of activity, realigning the instruments and collating entirely different sets of data for which they had not been prepared. It was an opportunity to throw herself into her work, to forget, at least for a time, the tension she felt whenever Simon entered the room. Yet, as they moved towards the planet, she sensed a growing unease, not just in Wei and Simon, but in the others, too, as if Simon's jealousy had infected them. They seemed to make efforts to avoid Cat, to dodge conversations with her, barely acknowledging her when they passed in the corridors, as if they blamed her for Simon's feelings. She'd encountered many such reactions in the past.

She didn't mind. Not really. In a few days they'd make orbit and do their survey; two weeks after that they'd be back at the way station. There, she'd request a transfer like she'd done several times before—whenever things had gotten complicated.

And then she'd never have to see any of them again.

■

Cat sat in the lounge, her eyes fixed on the screen, several hardcopies scattered on the table in front of her. She had just finished the third run of the imaging survey. They'd been in orbit for twelve hours now.

"Do you love her?"

Cat looked up, startled; she had thought herself alone.

Simon stood on the opposite side of the table near the door; he lifted one of the photos and idly examined it. He swayed slightly. "Well?" he said, smiling weakly when Cat did not reply. "Do you?"

Cat curled her fists. "Simon. Dammit, don't creep up on me like that—"

"I mean," Simon continued as if he had not heard her. "I know you don't care for me. You've told me that much already." His voice

was calm, almost detached, as if he were reciting an often rehearsed scene of which he was bored. He dropped the chart. "But I want to know if she's special . . ."

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"Special," he said again. "That's all I want to know." He leaned forward, resting his hands on the table. "Why?"

Cat looked into his eyes; they were red and his pupils were unnaturally large. "You're high," she said, and began organizing the survey shots, stacking them in neat piles. "I have work to do."

"Is she a better lover?" Simon reached across, snared her wrist. "Is she? Tell me!" Simon's face flushed; his grip tightened until Cat could feel the tips of her fingers beginning to throb.

"*Simon*," she gasped, "you're hurting me!"

"Hurting you? Hurting you?" For a moment his eyes seemed to clear, his vision to focus, and he appeared surprised. Then his face fell back into unrepentant lines. "And me? What about how you hurt me?" He turned Cat's arm down towards the table, pulling her out of her chair and making her stagger. A contorted smile twisted his face. "How do you like it now?"

Cat tried to pull free of his grip, but he held her arm firmly. With a sudden thrust he cracked her hand sharply on the table. Cat's mind filled with jagged pain; her eyes blurred with tears. "Perhaps now *you* can see—"

"Trouble?" A voice, Chan's voice, cut off whatever Simon was about to say. "Let the sistah go, man," he said calmly, as if he were asking for a light.

Cat blinked back tears, saw Chan standing beside Simon; in his left hand he held his hookah loosely by its throat. He had none of his usual distractedness about him. "Yuh no hear what I-man seh to you?" The hookah was an antique, Chan's pride, glass fluting above a base of thick, solid brass. It had taken his entire weight allowance. Simon wavered for a moment, and Chan hefted the pipe. Simon watched it closely. Then he released his grip on her arm. "You don't know what you're doing," he said. He turned, brushed past Chan, and

walked out the door.

"Hey. Yuh alright, sistah?" Chan stood next to Cat, his arm around her shoulder, supporting her.

Cat rubbed her wrist, felt along the bone. Nothing seemed broken. "Yeah," she said numbly. "I think so."

Chan smiled broadly, displaying an irregular grin of darkening teeth. "Irie. That man is a good fe nuttin, yuh no see it?"

Cat nodded. "Yeah, you said it."

"Seen. But don' fret, sistah. Cap/N tell I say, yuh need help, so I-and-I mek haste to be here. Cap/N watching out fe yuh." Chan gave her a friendly squeeze and left his arm resting lightly over her shoulder.

"Chan?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you have? Creamed him with your pipe? I know how much you love that thing."

He nodded.

"Thanks."

"Thanks not necessary, sistah. I-and-I do anything fe you." He smiled broadly. "Yuh is a righteous woman, a fine woman." He bent his head and kissed her before Cat could react; she tasted ganja thick on his lips and tongue. "Me ha'fe go," he said. "Later . . ." He gave her a final squeeze, winked, and walked out the door.

For a moment Cat stood unmoving, her wrist still cradled in her other hand. Her heart seemed to falter. *Oh, God*, she thought. *Oh, God*.

■

"Simon's gone?"

"Yes, Cat." Cap/N was a disembodied voice that drifted near the ceiling; there were no projectors in the hold of the dropship where Cat had been storing gear.

Her arms trembled. "How . . . how could that happen?"

"I don't know. But I am gravely concerned."

"You monitor the ship, don't you? You watch every member of the crew?"

"Yes." Cap/N paused and Cat fancied she heard a sigh, though she couldn't be certain. "However, for some reason I am unable to access anything relating to Simon after 14:35:53, shortly after your altercation. The moment, in fact, he entered his cabin and I passed the monitoring function back to a subroutine."

"A software failure?"

"No. At least not as far as I can tell."

Cat dropped onto a crate containing drill bits. "Then what happened?" she asked, her voice subdued.

"I don't know. There's no record. The only thing I can tell you with certainty is that he's no longer on the ship." He paused, then added quietly, "The others are waiting in the lounge."

■

Cat passed through the doorway. Singh stood quietly in the corner, his hands hanging down in front of him, his fingers interlocked, studying the floor at his feet as if nothing mattered more. Wei, who sat at the table, darted a glance at Cat then looked away quickly. JC was next to her, his sketch pad closed beside him; he had been drumming his fingers on its thick, brown cover, but stopped the moment Cat entered the room. He too glanced up then looked away.

They think it's me. That I did something. The thought shook Cat; she dropped numbly into a chair. No one spoke. She tried, unsuccessfully, to catch Wei's eye.

Chan strolled in, smiled broadly as if nothing were amiss, and slipped into the seat next to Cat. He pulled a plastic bag and some papers from a pocket in his coveralls and began rolling a large joint. Under the table his leg pressed against hers; she jerked away.

Cap/N materialized near the end of the room dressed in baggy trousers, a brightly flowered, short-sleeved shirt, and a white apron that ran from his knees to his chest and which bore, in large red

letters, the words *Kiss the Cook!* On his head an oversize chef's hat drooped. "Ah," he said cheerily, "I see we've all arrived." In his left hand he held barbecue tongs.

"Except for Simon," Singh said dryly. For the first time he looked at Cat; in his eyes she saw anger—and perhaps fear. Something else, too, something that she couldn't quite place.

"Um, yes." Cap/N furrowed his brow. "No doubt."

JC eyed Cap/N's image sourly, pushing his sketchbook back and forth between his forefingers. "Why are we here?" he asked.

Cap/N lifted the hat's mushroom top which had collapsed over his eyes. "We are here to discuss our next step."

"Next step?" JC growled, a deep sound that seemed to rumble even in Cat's chest. "Shouldn't we return to the drop site immediately? Regulations specifically stipulate that we are to abort missions in the event of death."

"True," said Cap/N. "But we don't know Simon's dead. Not yet anyway. I've listed him as missing."

"You said he's not on the ship. Out here, missing or dead amounts to the same thing."

"Not necessarily," Cap/N said. "It is possible that he may be on the planet. We already know it's a hospitable environment, surprisingly earth-like. And there is this." Cap/N gestured with his tongs and a holo of the planet appeared above the table. A tiny pinpoint of light flared on its surface near the equator, then began pulsing with regularity.

"Radio beacon," Singh said, incredulous.

Cap/N nodded. "The signal appeared almost immediately after Simon vanished. Regular one second pulse on the emergency band. I've returned messages on the same frequency, but haven't received a response yet."

Singh leaned forward. "Visuals?"

"The source is obscured by heavy foliage."

"Could be anything," JC mumbled. "We don't know it's Simon."

"No," Cap/N said. "We don't. There may be no connection

whatsoever. But if he's alive and down there, leaving now would almost certainly result in his death. It would be weeks before a proper rescue mission could be mounted."

This is crazy, Cat thought. *Why doesn't anyone say this is crazy?* She looked around the group, at the six of them, but no one—except Chan, who bared a mouthful of yellowed teeth at her in a lopsided grin—would meet her gaze. How could they sit here, she wondered, discussing these absurdities as if it were some sort of minor technical problem?

"What do *you* recommend?" Singh asked, looking at Cap/N.

The apron and shirt dissolved, were replaced by a sober, dark jacket; Cap/N's face aged, the lines on his forehead deepening, crow's feet crimping the corner's of his eyes. "I'm afraid I have no suggestions this time." He seemed to shrink, to stoop with age. Reaching up, he plucked the hat from his head. His hair was white. "This decision is one you'll have to sort out amongst yourselves. In situations such as these my role is limited to pointing out the available options. I am, after all, merely a simulation." The hat had, during this last speech, metamorphosed into a narrow, darkly bound volume, with gold lettering embossed on its cover. Cat wasn't sure, but it still appeared to say *Kiss the Cook!*

"Yes," JC said. "Cap/N is right. And I think it's a decision we need to make in private."

"I understand," Cap/N said agreeably. "I shall make myself scarce."

Cat looked at JC, surprised, realizing suddenly she was scared, that she didn't want to be alone in the room without Cap/N.

Cap/N smiled reassuringly at Cat as if he sensed her discomfort. Drifting in her direction, he rested an insubstantial hand on her shoulder. "I shall restrict my monitoring to areas outside the lounge until you have reached your decision." Then he vanished.

Cat sat up straight in her chair. "JC," she said sharply, trying to mask her discomfort with anger, "what the hell was that about?"

"We only have Cap/N's word that Simon is gone," he said. "I think

we should conduct our own search of the ship.”

“You think Cap/N is *lying*?”

“Lying may not be the right word. Perhaps he’s malfunctioned. Something might have gotten scrambled when we did the drop. Or,” and here JC paused, staring at a point on the wall just beyond Cat. “Maybe he’s been tampered with.”

Chan exhaled a large cloud of smoke that wafted over Cat and settled around her like a fog. “Wha’ that man mean?” he said, threads of smoke still spilling from his nostrils.

JC shrugged, then looked away. “This is too weird to be explained by a simple glitch in the system. Cap/N controls everything. If someone’s messed around with him, then we can’t be certain of anything. Hell, for all we know he might still be listening.” He stared at the spot Cap/N had last occupied.

Smoke wreathed Cat’s head, tickled her nose. She breathed deeply, drawing the numbing fumes deeply into her lungs.

“All right, an onboard search,” said Wei evenly, her eyes focussed on the table top. “If Simon is still aboard, then we know the problem is with Cap/N. I’d just as soon find that out before we trust Cap/N to the return drop. If he’s acting up, we can send a message and wait for another team to come get us.”

“And if we don’t find Simon, what then?” Singh asked.

“I think we should do just what Cap/N suggested,” Wei answered without hesitation. “Check the planet.”

“I agree,” JC said. “We can’t just leave.”

Wei looked at Singh. He shrugged. “I’ll go along with the majority.”

“Chan?”

“Aye, aye, mon.”

“What about you, Cat?” Wei asked, for the first time looking directly at her.

Cat could read nothing in her gaze. But Wei’s hands lay stiffly in her lap, curled into small, tight fists. For some reason Cat didn’t feel threatened by this. Instead, she found Wei’s hands fascinating.

Smoke spiralled around her head; bright, friendly pinpricks of light flared in her brain. "Sure," she said at last, inhaling deeply, her tongue feeling numb, growing heavy, making it hard to speak. "Why not?" The words rushed out with her exhalation. Beneath the table Chan was pressing his leg against hers again. "What else is there to do?"

■

Searching the *Zel'dovich* took just a few hours; there were only so many places into which you could squeeze a body of Simon's size. Cat had worked her way back to the last two holds, crawling over containers and bundles of dogged equipment, convincing herself that Simon was not an occupant of any of them. She sat on a box designed to hold core samples. Her head throbbed.

"Cat?" Cap/N appeared across from her, hovering above a stack of flat alloy plates JC used for some sort of geological research. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but Wei asked me to tell you the others have completed their search and have failed to find Simon."

Cat nodded.

Cap/N slipped down along the far wall, his shape flowing like water around the plates. "Do you think they believe me now?"

The question surprised Cat. He sounded genuinely concerned. To be believed had never been a thing she would have thought important to Cap/N. "Who can say? Does it bother you?"

"Yes," Cap/N said sadly. "A little."

"Well," Cat said, "for what it's worth, I believe you."

"Thanks." Cap/N floated in mid-air, his legs crossed, his chin resting in the palm of his hand, staring at her. "Please forgive my impertinence, Cat, but I was wondering about your relationship with Simon? Would you mind if I asked you a question."

"Ask if you want," Cat said slowly. "Though I don't think it's going to help anything."

Cap/N drifted next to her, eased himself down on the edge of the same container on which Cat perched, careful to keep a polite

distance. "I inferred from your conversation with Simon that you were once lovers. Do you still love him?"

She felt her face colour. "No," she said quickly. "I didn't love him. I never loved him. *Love* and *lovers* can be very different things." She stared at Cap/N. "Why? Why do you want to know?"

Cap/N lifted his hands and stared at them. "I was just thinking," he said, his voice tinged with melancholy, "that it can be very hard when you are unable to touch the one you love." He vanished before Cat could reply.



They landed in a meadow seven clicks southwest of the beacon, the closest open ground that was large enough for the dropship. The early morning sun was a brooding, red eye on the horizon, a few thin clouds drifting forlornly across its surface. From the open hatch of the ship Cat stared down a gentle incline to a narrow creek; their survey shots had shown the creek ran a relatively straight course to the point at which the signal originated. Behind her she heard JC shifting things in the hold; he had spent most of the short flight back there, sketching in his book, staying as far away from her as possible. Ignoring him, Cat stepped out of the dropship.

The flora seemed strikingly similar to Earth's, the thick forest and broken hills reminding Cat of southern Vermont where she had grown up. The trees looked like twisted version of pines, though their shapes were more rounded than conical. Low clumps of silver-grey bushes grew between the trees, and thick blades of grass, indistinguishable from those back home, grew wherever sunlight penetrated the canopy of the forest. Despite the impermeable membrane of the skinsuit, Cat fancied she could smell spring sap and the pungent odour of the decaying forest floor. The sun warmed her, felt good on her. In the morning light her suit was almost completely transparent, and it was possible to believe she stood alone and naked basking in the warmth of the new day. She closed her eyes and stretched.

JC cleared his throat; Cat opened her eyes. He stood behind her, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his squat form hunched more than usual. "Perhaps we should get going, huhn?"

Cat realized he had been watching her. She stared at him, and his face coloured slightly, something like anger flashing there for an instant then disappearing. "Sure," she said. She reached down to the small box fixed near her waist and pressed a button. The skinsuit opaqued.

Behind them, the exterior of the dropship shimmered in the morning light, and Cat located the remote through which Wei would be watching them from the *Zel'dovich*. She raised her arm and waved. Turning her back on JC, she plunged into the shadows of the trees.



The day grew hot. Cat pulled at the fabric of her skinsuit where perspiration had collected in the small of her back. The suit should have wicked away the moisture, recycled it, should have, in fact, left her cool and dry despite the heat. Cat tried adjusting the temperature manually, but nothing seemed to help. Both she and JC were covered with a film of sweat. They had been scrambling over rugged terrain all morning, and the creek, fed by a number of runnels, had widened into a vigorous river of dark agitated waters that cascaded over a series of stepped falls. The seven kilometres they thought they'd be able to traverse in a couple of hours had taken much longer as they had to skirt two large bluffs and swing wide when the river had dropped off into a steep-sided ravine. It had been five hours and they were, according to Cap/N's latest estimate, still nearly two kilometres away from the beacon.

JC had remained sullen and Cat had given up any attempt to talk to him. She could hear him now, struggling behind her as they ascended a steeply pitched hill, the river falling away to their right into a precipitous canyon. Footing was treacherous here, the ground covered with loose, rocky soil. A tangle of rotting logs criss-crossed

the slope, caught on the trunks of upright trees, blocking their path. Cat listened to JC curse incessantly between ragged breaths as they scrambled over the smaller barricades and crabwalked sideways to get around the larger trunks that blocked their progress. Each footstep was followed by the rattle of loosened debris rolling down the hill in their wake.

Cat quickened her pace, and soon JC's sounds faded into the distance. She felt a little prickling of guilt at leaving him behind, but suppressed it; there seemed to be no real danger. The suits, though not indestructible, were designed for far more extreme conditions, and they had encountered nothing more dangerous than a few large insects that floated lazily amongst the lower branches of the trees. She continued to climb.

Cat crested the hill suddenly, breaking from cover into a tiny clearing. The sun was directly overhead, and to her right the river had become a thin ribbon a hundred metres below. In the distance, back towards the dropship, tree-covered hills receded in a series of rounded humps, like a green, rolling sea. A breeze rustled through the grass. It seemed to lick at her as well, and she imagined it evaporating the sweat that had collected on her, though she knew this was impossible through the fabric of the suit. She sat down in the grass, fatigued, watching as the material began to darken, obscuring her body with a smoky translucency now that she was in bright sunlight. She reached down and pressed a stub on her control panel, activating the suit-to-suit radio. Heavy breathing filled her ears.

"JC?"

There was an answering grunt.

"I've reached the top of the hill. I'll wait here, okay? I need a bit of a breather anyway."

There was a pause. "Sure."

"Right. See you shortly." She cut the link.

Cat lay back in the grass. Overhead, the ring of sky was blue, and a single cloud, small and lonely, hung just above the swaying tips of twisted pines. Cat closed her eyes, not intending to fall asleep.



A dark figure knelt over her, his form blocking the sun. For a moment, she experienced confusion. Then she recognized JC's shape, remembered suddenly where she was. His silhouette moved and she felt a heavy weight settle on her legs just above her knees. She gasped. "JC! What are you doing?"

"Do you love me?" he asked.

Cat's heart pounded wildly. "What? Don't be absurd!"

JC leaned forward, and his face emerged from shadow; his eyes were wide, his face flushed, his breathing rapid and irregular. Cat could see large drops of perspiration rolling down his forehead and temples. One splashed on her suit just above her cheek, making her blink.

"Your suit!" Cat shouted. "Where's your suit?"

Thick fingers encircled her wrists, bent them back, pinning her to the ground.

"Cat," Cap/N's voice sounded in her ear. "There is something wrong. JC has discarded his skinsuit. Quarantine procedures dictate—"

"We'll stay here together, just the two of us," JC said calmly. "Then you'll understand." He let go of her left hand and fumbled at her suit's fastener. Horrified, she watched as his finger found the stud. There was a faint pop as the seams split along the length of her sides and the material began to peel back. "Stop it!" she shouted, and twisted between his legs, flailing at him with her free hand; but he was heavy, too heavy, and all she succeeded in doing was pulling away more of her suit.

"I want to be with you," he said in a hoarse whisper. "More than I've ever wanted anything." JC smiled weakly at her, and for an instant Cat saw Simon, that same mad smile twisting the corners of his mouth. JC lifted the suit fabric from her face like a veil, and bent his head to kiss her.

She screamed.

The air howled around them, as if a great bird beat its wings above them. JC pulled back, blinking rapidly, an expression of bewilderment on his face. Light descended, enfolding them, crackling around them. The tips of JC's hair rose; he looked down at Cat, as if he were surprised to find her there, beneath him. Then he was gone, the pressure suddenly lifted from Cat, the brightness fleeing with it, dazzling afterimages darting in her eyes.

A tremor began deep in her chest, then spread to her limbs until she was shaking uncontrollably. A moment later she curled into a ball and began sobbing.



"Are you sure you're all right?" Wei's voice sounded distant, unnatural.

Cat rubbed her wrists; they still ached and yellowish bruises discoloured her flesh there. A few metres away, in the shadow of the nearest trees, JC's suit lay like a discarded snake skin. "Yeah," she said. "Fine." She had managed to struggle back into her suit, and seal it again; standing in the centre of the clearing, she stared at the outline where she had lain, the only place the grass had not been singed. The tips of the branches of nearby trees were blackened. "JC?"

"Cap/N doesn't know, or won't tell. He said something jammed most of the frequencies when JC was . . . taken. All he knows is that the beacon stopped transmitting at the same time."

There was a moment of silence. Then Cat asked, "What now?"

"Back to the dropship, I guess. You okay to get back?"

"Yeah, sure. But what about the quarantine?"

"Let's worry about that later," Wei said. Her voice sounded tired, worn out. "Cat, did JC say anything strange to you? You know, when he was, uh, trying—"

"Yeah," Cat said. "He asked me—" something caught in her throat "—asked me if I loved him." She waited for Wei's response, for a statement of disbelief, for a comment, for anything. But there was

nothing. “Wei?”

“I’ve got this bad feeling, Cat. We should have never—”

Chan’s distinctive voice rose angrily in the background making it impossible to hear the rest of her words.

“Wei? What’s going on up there?”

“Chan and Singh are arguing about something,” Wei shouted over the noise. “Just worry about getting back to the dropship, okay? I’ll talk to you then. Got to go.”

“Wei?” Cat asked. But the connection had already been broken.

■

Darkness had fallen.

Cat stood in the artificial light of the dropship’s hold, turning the pages of JC’s sketchbook. She had found it here, lying atop a crate meant to hold mineral samples. Page after page contained sketches of her. Between the last two sheets she had found a carefully folded note scrawled with a charcoal pencil: *Dearest Cat, it began, I am sorry I do not have the courage to tell you my feelings in person. I had wanted to speak to you before, but I never had a chance to be alone with you. Perhaps this was best, what with Cap/N and all. I know now I cannot trust even him. I am frightened and alone. I have seen the others looking at you, and I know they are all dangerous. I know now it is unnatural, these feelings, and that you are the cause of something terrible. Sometimes I think the best thing would be to kill you, to end this madness, but I know I could never do that. Perhaps I will kill myself instead. I don’t know what I am saying, but I don’t face you. I love you—I have no choice. Isn’t that strange?*

The note ended there.

“What’s that you’re reading, Cat?”

Cap/N stood behind her, staring over her shoulder. He wore a simple pair of blue work coveralls and a white shirt with its sleeves rolled up. “Nothing,” she said, refolding the sheet quickly and fumbling for a place to put it. But she was still wearing her skinsuit, and had no pockets, so she pressed the little square tightly into her fist.

"Cat?" Wei's voice filled the cabin. "You there?"

"Oh yes," Cap/N said with a distracted air. "Wei has been waiting to speak to you."

A holo of Wei appeared near the pilot's console. "Where are you?"

Cat walked to the forward cabin and dropped into the co-pilot's seat. An indicator flashed red. She touched it and it turned a steady green. "I'm here, Wei," she said.

"You had me worried!" Wei looked angry and relieved all at once. "You wouldn't believe what's happening up here. Singh's locked himself in his cabin and won't come out. He and Chan had a fight. Chan would have killed him, too, if I hadn't stepped in. That little laid-back son of a bitch can really move. I had to brain him. There's no telling what he'll do when he comes to."

Cat felt giddy, lightheaded, as if she had been too long in the sun. "Fighting?" she asked. "Why would they be fighting?"

"Don't you know?" Wei stared at her. "It was about *you*. It's all been about *you*." Cat felt her stomach begin a slow spin. "Everything that's been happening. Simon, JC, Chan and Singh. Even me, dammit. Something's happened to us. To make us—" she stopped abruptly, and her face twisted up as if in pain. Her expression hardened, became resolute. "To make us *want* you, Cat. To make us want you so bad it hurts. God, Cat," her face filled with anguish, and Cat could see her hands shaking. "I can't tell you how much I love you . . ." A tear slipped down her cheek. She closed her eyes, her face crumpling. "We've all got it, Cat," she said, her voice choked with emotion. "Every one of us. Even Cap/N." She laughed, but it was a pained sound. "Do you know he's been running holographic simulations of you for the last two hours? Dozens of them. Gobbled up every last bit of processing power. Holo's of you on the bridge at the ops console, walking through the corridors, standing in the lounge, eating in the mess. God, there's even one lying in our bunk. I had to rip the leads to this board and wire it up directly to the solar panels to get through to you."

"Why?" Cat clenched her fists. "Why is he doing this?"

"Cap/N? You think it's Cap/N?" Wei shook her head. "He's not the one doing this, Cat. Couldn't be. He's just an AI. He can't create planets or make people disappear, can't change human feelings. He's only a hologram. He can't even touch you!"

Can't touch you. Hadn't Cap/N said something like that to her?

"He was here," Cat said. "Just a minute ago. In the hold."

Wei looked surprised. "Who? Cap/N?"

"Yeah."

"In the hold?"

Cat nodded.

Wei stared at her. "You know there aren't any projectors in the hold, Cat," she said slowly.

Cat swung around. The cabin was empty. She looked through the doorway to the hold, but if Cap/N was in there, she couldn't see him.

"So," Wei's voice was cold, even. "You've finally met it."

Cat turned back. "It?"

"Him. Her. It." Wei stared over Cat's shoulder. Her image flickered and lines began running across it. "Remember," she said, her eyes moving back to Cat, "remember what Cap/N said, about how the hole lost some of its momentum? Cap/N kept an eye on the hole after that, at least until he flipped out. I checked his data. It kept losing momentum, Cat. A tiny loss. But steady. With two notable blips." She paused. "The first when Simon disappeared, the second when JC did." Wei's image seemed suddenly grainier, almost pebbled. "It's the hole, Cat. It's the hole that's doing it."

Cat clutched the armrests, tried to keep herself from slipping out of the chair. "*Wei*," she whispered, "*help me*."

"I don't think I can." Wei reached out as if to touch the side of Cat's face, but her hand passed through her cheek. The corner of Wei's mouth twitched, her image wavered, became static, a crooked smile frozen on her face. Then it depixelated, bit by bit, an image carved in sand, washed away by the tide. The connect light died.

"Wei? Wei?" Cat reached across, pressed the Request/Connect button several times. She banged it with her fist, but the entire panel

had gone dead. Pushing herself from the seat, she staggered out the hatch. The sky was clear and darker than she could have imagined; she looked up to where the bright point of the *Zel'dovich* should have been, but there was only empty space and a handful of cold, glittering stars. A moment later, the stars winked out.



Cat stood, her toes curled over the edge of the world. In either direction the rim curved away from her like a ragged shoreline. Below, the ground angled to a distant, singular point where it vanished altogether. She stood atop a cone, outside which she could see nothing, not even stars. It made her dizzy. She felt a breeze; behind her the trees stirred restlessly.

The wind whispered to her: *Cat*.

Cat glanced over her shoulder. There was no sun, yet light filled the world. A low rise covered by thinning forest stopped half a kilometre away, dropping off into empty space, the furthest point from which she stood, the extent of her world. "You killed them," she said to no one.

No, Cat. The breeze tickled her back, playfully pulled on her as if to draw her away from the edge. It ran its fingers through her hair. *I only sent them away.*

"You destroyed them."

Silence.

"What will happen when others come for me? Will you destroy them, too?"

They will not come here. We are . . . elsewhere.

Cat leaned forward, felt the soil begin to crumple beneath her toes, trickle away into the void. She closed her eyes and shivered.

The wind was restless, tugged at her. *Please*, it said. *It was an accident. I did not mean to change them. I wasn't aware of the effect I was having on them.*

"You did it on purpose. You were playing with us, watching to see

what would happen.”

No. You are wrong.

Cat imagined herself tumbling through the emptiness beyond her feet, through the oblivion, the not knowing. She began to sway.

You are beautiful. I love you.

Cat’s motion stopped abruptly. She opened her eyes. “Love me?” She laughed bitterly. “How can *you* love me?”

I was sleeping. You woke me.

“No,” Cat said.

I love you. You must love me.

“No.”

You will learn. I will teach you.

“Teach me?” Cat shouted. “Like you taught the others? Why don’t you just change me the way you did them? Make me into whatever you want me to be!”

I cannot. It must be your choice. Otherwise, it would mean nothing.
“Nothing.”

The word startled Cat; she spun around. Wei stood behind her, arms open, her face filled with longing and sadness. A bright, peculiar light burned behind her eyes.

“Please, Cat.”

Cat took a step towards her. “Wei?”

“You must stay. You must love me. I can be anyone you desire me to be.” The voice was Wei’s, but Cat knew it wasn’t her, could never be her. “I cannot let you go.”

Cat shook her head, mouthed the word *No*. Then she turned, leapt past the edge. Her stomach tore into her throat; she tasted the sickening rush of vertigo as the ground slipped by in an incomprehensible blur.

Then nothing.

Nowhere. A universe without sensation, without dimension, without light, her awareness the only thing that existed.

I will not let you go.

Alone and naked, she stood in the middle of a forest.



Time is an ocean in which an island floats.

Around the island's shores darkness gathers from every direction, black waters rising, eating away at the edges, drawing inwards. Where the black sea touches, land falls away, drops faster and faster into the abyss, stretching towards the heart of the nothingness below. A stand of twisted pines is swallowed on one side, a grassy knoll on the other. Shadows roll like gentle waves across a ravine, a brook, through forests and glades, gathering, finally, around the base of a hill. All else has been consumed. The waters continue to rise quickly; then slow, falter, finally halting just before the summit.

On this last bit of land she sits, unmoving, knees drawn up to her chin, arms locked round shins, in the centre of a small patch of green grass the shape of a woman's body. Words fill her mind, and she shivers, drawing herself tighter: *I will love you*, they whisper. *Forever*.

THE DEATH ARTIST

At the height of his popularity, the Death Artist schedules a performance for the first full moon in the month of August. He has purchased the Eagle Dome in the heart of the City centre, boasting a seating capacity of eighty thousand. The show is sold out. In part, he has financed this purchase through a sale of television rights, though how he has managed the balance of this enormous sum remains a mystery. Many believe he is secretly funded by the government.

One of his earliest performances occurred three years ago, when, prior to the City fathers' annual motorcade, he slipped a rope around the Mayor's bumper, then worked the other end into a noose which he placed around his neck. When asked, he will only say he remembers that day because the sky was the colour of a cracked drinking glass.

The field is empty, the goalposts have been removed, and the artificial turf has been painted green. Some think this last touch is his sense of humour; others are bewildered. Enthusiasm runs high, though it is generally held he will have some difficulty meeting the expectations he has excited.

Another highly regarded work was his death in a fishbowl, played at the now defunct Verity Theatre, during which he placed a miniature replica of Houdini's glass-walled tank over his head, then filled it from a series of pitchers. Before sealing the lid he added two goldfish.

Today, he is dressed not in his usual modest attire; rather he wears preposterously long and narrow shoes; balloon pants that billow around him in the slightest breeze; a white shirt covered in large purple and green polka dots, and whose buttons are mismatched; around his neck he sports a large black bow tie and on his head a pointed cap. His face is grease-paint white, his ears oversized, and on his nose it appears he wears a red rubber ball, though later it is revealed his features have been surgically altered.

Perhaps his best-remembered performance was a more lingering death than anyone had yet dared. For four weeks he lay in a pavilion in the heart of Funerary Park, injected hourly with a different and

equally fatal disease. When pressed as to why he had not focused on a single malady, he replied, "One body may contain all the suffering we know."

Six mirrors, each six metres square and silvered on either side, have been brought in on the back of a truck. Three workmen, with the aid of a small boom and winch, place the first on the ground in the centre of the playing field. Sides are then erected. In an hour the cube is completed. The Death Artist is sealed in.

Scholars have argued at great length over the meanings of his deaths; in the end, the only thing upon which they can agree is that there *is* meaning. They, too, were required to purchase tickets for the final performance.

Two more hours and the stadium is deserted.

I hated her.

More than I hated Pierre.

Pierre, now he was clear, easy to see. His beauty was his simplicity, his purity of thought and purpose: sure you hated the bastard, but you had to admire him, too, scrambling across the rugged, uneven hills of what the poor deluded asshole thought was his own country, using twenty-year-old weapons against our Steyr self-targeting assault rifles, wearing those ridiculous *Nationaliste* uniforms, as if they were a shield that would protect him against anything, though they were no hell on stopping our flechettes. Yeah, he was stupid all right—but straight, as straight as you can get. You and he knew each other, better than you’ve ever known anybody else, because that’s the test, that’s the only real test, putting yourself there, with the few other assholes who dare, believing in something stupid like your own country, in a world that doesn’t believe in anything anymore. That’s the kind of stupidity that’s worth admiring, that’s worth having: daring those crosshairs to shake your belief, challenging that trigger finger to squeeze you out of your resolve, welcoming that round as if it was a special lover, not just a dumb lay like Shika. . . .

Now, don’t get me wrong.

Shika’s out there all alone on point.

And she’s lasted for over three months—not an easy thing to do. She’s as mean as they come, her pinched-up little face wagging back and forth as she hunts, her body small and low to the ground, swaying from side to side as she shuffles from cover to cover. I’ve seen her grease more than her share of Pierres and it’s weird, because she really hates them, not with my distant, admiring kind of hate, but personal, like they all did something awful to her last night in the wood shed, and now she’s going to make the bastards pay and pay and pay. You gotta appreciate all that slow, seething hate walking up front for you, a giant scythe sweeping your path clear.

She was that way when I met her back in basic, eighteen months

ago, a nasty piece of business, breathing dark anger, ready to explode. I was glad when our orders came and I thought I'd seen the last of her, she going off up north to Chibougamau where there was lots of heavy shit happening, while I pulled soft duty down south in the valley.

I never expected to see her again.

But I did.

I remember when she transferred in, sitting across from me in the barracks, studying me when she thought I wasn't watching her, sharpening that long knife she always carried in her boot, running it up and down that whetstone, looking as if she was wondering how much of an edge she'd have to put on it to slice right through my neck with one stroke.

Seeing her again that day I felt something inside me tighten up, and I knew I hated her still, even though she has saved my life every day since just by being there, walking the point, rolling her hatred in front of her like a boulder.



We'd drawn recon patrol again, another hot spot in the foothills of the Laurentians.

Why us? Why always send us into the worst possible shit? We drew this kind of stuff twice as much as any other squad. It was like somebody back at HQ had it in for us. But if it troubled anyone else in our squad, they didn't complain. Instead, they seemed to like it, to savour the opportunity to raise our kill ratio.

We were strung out in a ragged line. I caught sight of Shika about ten metres ahead and a little too far to my left, so I picked up the pace, edging back in her direction. Occasionally I could see Angela between us, flitting in and out of cover, pale and wraith-like, difficult to spot, bending tree and shrub to her will, folding them around her like a cloak. Behind me there was Cash, then, in the middle of the pack, Sarge with his little dog, Tremblay. I could never quite figure out what Tremblay's story was, a clean-shaven regular army guy,

betraying nothing, not really part of the unit, an *observer*, as Sarge called him, always scribbling in those little blue notebooks he carried around, attached to us in some way that was never made quite clear, observing God knows what, as he hunted his own people. It gave me the creeps whenever he was behind me, like he was *observing* me personally, even though there wasn't a goddamned thing I could think of that was worth observing.

We moved downhill, and the tree cover thinned a bit, then turned into a stand of birches, branches arching overhead to form a canopy. We broke into a copse. It was quiet and beautiful, flanked with thick undergrowth that looked like it had been cultivated, the duff soft and yielding under our boots, a shaft of sunlight slanting through the gap in the tree cover and into our eyes. . . .

Nice spot, I thought. For an ambush.

Then Pierre hit us.

I was knocked off my feet the instant they opened up, half a dozen slugs hammering into my flak jacket, their AK-47s making an awful racket. I rolled on the ground, wheezing and gasping, trying to catch the breath that had been hammered from my lungs, fighting off the sharp pain of what I figured was a broken rib or two. Beside me Cash lay on the ground, blood oozing from a hole in his throat, eyes open, dead as dead can get. I heard shouts over the gunfire, some I recognized, some I didn't. Heavy boots stamped on the ground, crashing through the underbrush, then the muffled thump of low-yield ordinance, mostly smoke it seemed, to confuse and hide. But I wasn't scared; I didn't even care if I'd been hit. The only thing I felt was anger, anger at being on the ground, at the incompetence of Pierre not killing me when he had the chance. I wanted to make the bastard pay for his mistake. Gritting my teeth I pushed myself to my feet, my Steyr cradled in my fists—and gasped as pain spiked my ribs again; my eyes teared up.

I blinked until my vision cleared. Gunfire had become sporadic, the confusion and smoke still making it difficult to know who to kill now, an occasional burst, sounds moving off in the left. Though I

couldn't be sure, I guessed that Pierre had more or less hightailed it, Sarge and the rest of the squad chasing after him. I was alone.

Or thought I was.

Danby had been standing so still I hadn't noticed him. But there he was, off to my right, his piece gone, his eyes glassy, unfocussed, seeing something I couldn't, seeing somewhere else, staring, maybe, at the place he'd rather be.

About to walk.

I'd seen it before, seen maybe a dozen or more in my last two squads.

It was always the same.

They'd pull their leads, drop their weapons, and disappear quietly into the bush, following Pierre mostly, sometimes just wandering off, going God knows where, thinking God knows what. Even the ones brought back were blanks, shells, their brains wiped clean of anything but this need to walk, as if they didn't know anything anymore except how to put one foot in front of the other, step after goddamn step. Sometimes we'd find them—walkers, I mean—who'd walked until they couldn't walk any farther because they fell into a ravine and broke a leg or turned an ankle on a root or something, lying there in the dirt, covered with scratches and cuts where branches and twigs had whipped their faces, usually dead, but not always, sometimes legs still pushing against the ground, digging little channels in the earth, moving them forward, inch by terrible inch. . . .

The army says walkers are Pierre's doing, some kind of bio-engineered stuff, a virus maybe, though they haven't isolated it yet even though they've had two years and hundreds of walkers to experiment on. The masks and suits they used to give us didn't seem to be any damn good, and after a few weeks we gave up on them. All they know is that once you've got it you're gone, there's no return: *irreversible cortical damage*, meaning it eats away at your brain until you're nothing but a vegetable, an empty husk where someone used to live.

And there was Danby, his piece gone, his eyes glassy with that

look walkers get, me watching him, not offing him right then and there like I was supposed to, the way it said in our orders, because there was something . . . wrong. A weird nagging feeling that told me this wasn't right. He wasn't going anywhere fast, so I just moved my rifle along, keeping it trained on him, thinking it odd, not Danby at all, that there was something really out of whack, because he was nothing like those other poor dreamy bastards I'd seen walk, nothing like them at all. Sure he was crazy as a loon, but he just wasn't the type, you know, he just didn't have the smell. None of us did in this squad.

And I realized maybe that was it. He was the first walker since they'd cobbled together our squad six months ago. In that time I'd almost forgotten about walking. I tightened my finger on the trigger, about to waste him, thinking, *Oh well, there goes our perfect record—*

—and I was on the ground, the trees above me spinning out of control, my head pounding and my ears ringing so loud I couldn't hear a thing.

I squeezed my eyes shut but that only made it worse, so I opened them.

Shika was standing over me, rifle balanced in one hand, its muzzle almost touching my nose, her finger still inside the trigger guard. She wasn't looking at me—she was watching something else that I couldn't see.

I wondered what she could be watching, in a sort of detached, dreamy way, as if it really wasn't me there, getting this weird feeling that it was important that I know what she was so intent on.

So I thought hard even though my head still pounded.

Then I remembered Danby.

She must have been watching him, I realized, the crazy little bitch, staring at him with this puzzled expression on her screwed up face, an expression I'd never seen her wear before.

And that's all she did.

Even though she knew letting walkers go meant court-martial, still doing nothing, just watching, while I concentrated on a tendon

in her forearm moving in and out, in and out, as she ran her finger up and down that hair trigger. But she didn't squeeze it, only stood there, as Danby wandered off into the bush.

She looked after him for a moment, long after he must have been gone, then turned suddenly to stare at me, her eyes burning with something I couldn't understand, something I couldn't quite place, staring along the barrel of her weapon right into my face.

A long dark stare that nailed me where I was.

Like she wanted something, not begging or pleading, but *insisting* on an answer from me.

Then she was gone.

Faster than you could imagine anyone moving, without sound or motion, just gone, leaving me there on the ground, head pounding, pain searing my side, scared that maybe I had just answered her question without meaning to.

■

When we got back, all of Danby's stuff was gone, his locker cleared out, his pictures taken down.

Like he'd never been there at all.

The next day a stiff was waiting for us, a Lieutenant-Colonel straight from HQ, to give us the drill, wanting to know who saw Danby, what happened, when he'd gone, what he said just before going, how he looked, the whole routine, asking his stupid questions over and over, making my brain ache so bad I had to close my eyes and put my head in my hands, my fingers feeling that big lump on the back of my neck.

It was all wrong.

And they knew it, somehow.

Danby bothered them more than he should have, more than it had ever bothered them before. With my other outfits, some pencil pusher had shown up with the standard forms, ten minutes, talk into the mike, thank-you very much, done. But this time it was different,

more important, and Colonel Stiff was really annoyed.

It bothered me, too, though I didn't say anything then, because that'd be inviting trouble. Something was really cracked about this whole thing, Shika giving me strange looks ever since, and that whore, Angela, too, whenever I saw them together as they were most of the time now, whispering to each other.

Before Danby there had been some silent stream connecting them, an underground movement they shared for God knows what reason, maybe because they were the only two women in the squad. But now, since Danby, they'd become inseparable, day and night, together every moment like—like lovers or something.

Why did it all of a sudden start to get under my skin?

I mean, I hated Shika more than all these other sorry bastards, a trained performer, doing her duty without feeling or remorse, killing efficiently and without respect for those she killed, in any way she could, cool and machine-like, Pierre an insect to be crushed beneath her heel. And Angela was just a big nothing, an empty space, in danger of being blown away by the next stiff breeze. It rattled you the way she appeared and disappeared without a sound, even around the barracks. Almost as if she wasn't really there. The one, hard and predatory, a slow careful, unforgiving stalker; the other a phantom, a waking dream, smoke.

Angela and Shika.

I ignored them, but it gave me the creeps anyway.

And for once I agreed: everyone was right to be all worked up, because there was definitely something wrong, something about this outfit that made it wrong to do what Danby did.

■

I opened my eyes; it was dark and the ground was cold and hard beneath my thin sheets, and I knew I wasn't alone. I rolled over.

Shika hung over me, a gargoyle in the moonless dark, rain dripping down that long nose of hers to splash on my face.

"Did you tell them?"

I didn't say anything.

"Did you tell them?" she hissed at me again.

"Tell them what?"

"About Danby?"

I shook my head.

She squatted there next to me in the cold and wet, her face a crumpled map of shadows and broken edges, her hooded eyes no longer focused on mine, but staring now at an invisible place.

"Shika?"

She looked startled, as if she'd forgotten I was there. Then she got this weird look in her eyes. "I want to know," she said suddenly.

"Know what, Shika?"

"In basic. A pretty boy like you could've had anyone. Why me? Why'd you sleep with me?"

The question caught me off guard. I looked up at her, at that ugly, deformed little face, with its hard lines and unforgiving angles. I started to say, "I heard you gave good head," or, "I didn't have enough energy for a struggle." But for some reason the words stuck in my throat, wouldn't come out with that little face poking right into mine. "Dunno," I said instead, shrugging, trying to sound unconcerned, uninterested.

She peered at me intently, and I could feel her reaching deep down into me, trying to find the real reason, trying to pull it out. I looked away. "Honest to God, I don't."

She blinked, once, twice, then began to push herself off her haunches.

"Shika?" She stopped and looked at me; my heart thumped beneath the weight of my rain-soaked fatigues. "Why don't you stay here tonight?"

She bit her lower lip, then shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Why not?" I was surprised at the sudden surge of anger I felt, at the rising volume of my words. "Is it because of that bitch, Angela? *Is it?*"

She shrugged. "No," she said, simply, quietly, with the same

finality with which I'd once seen her slice open the throat of an unlucky Pierre. She shifted her weight slightly, showing me what I hadn't seen before, the dull metallic gleam of the knife in her hand.

"You weren't so choosy back in basic," I said, watching the cold rain run off the tip of that blade.

"Neither were you."

"Fuck you," I said, trying not to let my voice shake, still watching that knife, hunkering back beneath my tarp and away from the rain. "Go back to your Angela."

Without a word she slipped the knife into her boot and stood up, poncho-less and insensible to the rain. "Yeah," she said. "I will."

And as she strode off into the darkness, it felt as if she had somehow stolen part of me, taken it with her so that I would never be whole again.



Another week passed and we managed to stay clear of each other. It wasn't until we were on recon, two days out, cold and tired and bored in the hills north of Lac Saint Jean, that we spoke again. We'd been humping through terrain worn down by ages of erosion, covered by enormous pine and fir.

There hadn't been much action in the last few weeks, just some hit and run stuff, nothing important. We hadn't even had a casualty, though we had to smoke some *Nationalistes* out of an abandoned shack a few days ago. They were hungry and ragged, and the poor bastards almost looked grateful. But to Command, one Pierre meant a hundred more, so they sent us up into the hills to check it out, chasing after imaginary units because there was nothing better to do.

I was supposed to be doing a wide sweep on our eastern flank, but I dragged my ass west instead, over towards where Angela was patrolling, because my neck had been itching all morning, a light persistent tingling, telling me to go over there. It took me about half

an hour to work my way round to where I guessed she was; it would have been much faster, but she had her gift, and though my neck itched wildly, urging me on, telling me I was headed the right way, I wasn't sure I could get close enough to the bitch without stepping on her first.

So I went slowly, carefully, passing as silently as I could from shadow to shadow—

—and almost stumbled when I caught sight of Angela.

She was standing beside a shallow creek, the sun beating down on her, no cover nearby, rifle and helmet at her feet, her thin hair not braided, but out and hanging down between those narrow shoulders, strands moving slightly in the breeze. I was a good twenty metres away—and I knew she was about to walk then, because if she wasn't, she'd have known by now I watched her, and would have vanished before I could do anything.

Instead, she stood there, solid, more substantial than I'd ever seen her look before, staring north—I imagined her eyes, big and round and unfocussed, great big pie-in-the-sky eyes, a walker's eyes.

I raised my rifle and sighted, thinking, strangely, not about her, but about Shika, hard, unbreakable Shika, while I waited for those first few steps, for my chance to fire.

Shika.

Like the callus on my thumb, dead and tough and unfeeling.

Maybe, just maybe, I thought, I won't wait for her to take that first step.

I caressed the trigger as if it were a charm, pulling it back ever so slowly, savouring the moment, tasting its satisfaction—

Then froze. Became stone.

As dead-still as I could, because my itch was back and shouting DON'T MOVE, DON'T BREATHE, telling me BEHIND, BEHIND YOU, so I turned, slowly as I could, centimetre by centimetre, till I could see what I knew would be there, Shika, her piece pointed at me, its muzzle making small hypnotic arcs, a snake about to strike, needing only the smallest of pressure from her finger to stitch across

my stomach. Beside her lay Tremblay, his throat cut cleanly, blood still trickling onto last autumn's leaves beneath him. She had this insane look in those hard, grey eyes, like she'd lost it or something, but I knew it wasn't that, couldn't be that, with her standing the way she was.

And then I thought, *I'm going to die*, and began shaking, though I'd never been scared before.

I wanted to talk to her, to tell her—what? I wasn't sure.

"*Shika . . .*" I had this crazy urge to say to her, to those mad eyes staring through me, fixing me where I stood, a bug with a pin in it. But nothing came out.

Then she fired.

She didn't blink those eyes of hers, never took them off mine, just squeezed off the burst that brought Angela down in midstride as she stepped into the brook, tearing through her back and spraying out her front with her guts, shattering a small tree on the other side of the stream.

Shika closed her eyes, then, at last, and turned and walked away, unhurriedly, not bothering to duck and weave as she'd always done out here in the bush, but straight up and stiff legged, like it was something she hadn't done in a long time, something she wasn't used to doing.

■

I waited outside.

She'd been hustled right in, still in her fatigues and recon gear, while I hung around outside the barracks, across from the mess hall where they took her, stripping my piece, meticulously cleaning and laying each part on a small sheet of plywood I'd found nearby.

Cleaning and waiting, to see if she'd come out, to see if they'd call me in.

People came and went.

Clerks and officers, even the CO, and the same stiff from HQ

who'd been here when Danby walked.

What would she tell them, about Tremblay and Angela?

What could she tell them?

I waited until it got late and the lights went on in the mess, but they never called for me, and she never came out.

■

"Did you like Angela?"

It was dark in the barracks, and I could barely hear the whisper, but I knew right away who it was.

"*Like* her? Shit, I didn't even know her. How the hell could I like her?"

Sitting on Danby's bunk I could make out Shika's squat form, and though I couldn't see her face, her shoulders looked tired and hunched.

"*I* liked her," she said.

I felt a sudden stab of anger. "Then why'd you waste her?"

I could feel her coil, as if she were about to come at me. But she didn't. Instead she answered, "Because she loved me," just like that.

I thought then that she had snapped, had lost it, that all this shit they'd piled on us had finally made her go over the edge, that maybe she really was insane.

"She asked me to," she said when I didn't say anything, and it sounded like she was asking for my forgiveness. "She made me promise, and I did—"

"Yeah," I said stupidly.

"—'cause she said she loved me."

We both sat there in the dark for a minute, before her voice came to me softly again. "We're special, you know."

"Special?"

"Yeah. Special." She shifted her weight and I could hear the bunk creak; it sounded loud, and I wondered if anyone else was awake listening to this. "You should know that. You've been here since the

beginning. Can't you see we're special?"

"I don't see anything special about us," I whispered to her. "We're just a bunch of shit kickers, Shika, too much trouble on our own maybe, so they stick us together, you know, to minimize the problems."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Why do you think the brass is so pissed off? This squad isn't supposed to have walkers. That's why. I didn't know it before Danby walked, but when he did, I knew it wasn't . . . *right* . . . you know? It didn't *fit*. It wasn't supposed to happen."

Somewhere down inside me I could feel muscles tightening. "Yeah, so what? We've all seen our share of walkers. What's the big deal?"

She shook her head. "Don't you see? Nothing happens by accident in the army. Nothing. It's that way 'cause they wanted it to be that way. Understand?"

"No, I—"

"Don't be an asshole," she hissed at me. "All you gotta do is watch. Why do you think they're making this stink? It's 'cause we're their prize guinea pigs—or were until *this*." I could hear pain in her voice, and it startled me, because it was something I'd never thought I'd hear from her. "Did you know," she said, me still hearing the strain in that voice of hers, "that we've had the best kill ratio for the last five months? And not a single walker the whole time."

"Now this, Danby and Angela, this is making them blow smoke outta their assholes. When I went in there I thought they were going to crucify me, you know. But they asked hardly anything about Angela, and nothing about old Tremblay, they don't even care about him, just about me, 'How are you? How did you feel about Angela? Does this upset you? Does this depress you?' and on and on and on, and I'm thinking, why are they asking me, you know, and not wondering about why I offed the two of them in the first place."

"And I start to notice things, the way they keep looking into

these little blue notebooks, Tremblay's notebooks, while they ask things, and flip through files, thick files, these medical corps guys there, not doctors, but psychiatrist types, one I remember from a while ago, who interviewed me just before they transferred me here. And get this. One guy even asks, 'Where was *Doctor* Tremblay while this was happening.' Can you believe that shit? Doctor Tremblay? He was a Goddamn doctor!"

"Maybe the guy made a mistake, Shika."

"No. He didn't. 'Cause the others looked at him sharp, like he'd fucked up bad, not like he'd made a little mistake." The way she said it, I knew she believed. "No, he knew what he was saying, 'cause they're the ones that put Tremblay there in the first place, to watch us, to spy on us, to take his notes. They're the ones that put us together, you, me, Angela, Danby, Cash, all of us, even Sarge."

"Why? Why us?"

She shrugged. "Who knows?" She leaned forward until her head almost touched mine. "Maybe it's 'cause we're all sick twists," she said slowly, carefully watching how I'd react, but I didn't move a muscle. "Maybe we're like puzzles with a piece missing—the thing that makes walkers want to walk. Maybe something inside of us is stunted, or not there, and so we can't walk. Or at least that's what the army thought."

It was my turn to shrug. "An awful lot of maybes," I said.

She studied my face for a moment, then asked, "Why do you hate yourself?"

A jagged flash of anger blinded me, and I began to rise; but before I could lift myself, Shika was on me, knocking my arms out from under me and pinning me to the bed, folding me in my sheets as if it were a cocoon. I struggled, letting out a wordless cry of frustration as I lay tangled in the sheets; but it was useless, and so I let myself go limp, forcing myself to be calm, letting the rage leech away.

She made a strange sound then, a dog bark, and it was a moment before I recognized it for what it was: a laugh. "We're part of the experiment," she said. "Their search for that missing piece that'll

stop Pierres fever. We hate ourselves so much we can't think of anythin' else but dying. We're the exact sort they wanted, 'cause we conditioned ourselves better'n they ever coulda."



They laid out a pattern of suppressing fire around us that chewed up great big chunks of earth and showered them down on our heads. It sounded like an old Gustaff launcher with anti-tank rounds because of the way they detonated only after burrowing into the ground. Using it now seemed absurd, ludicrous, the same as killing an ant with a howitzer. An awful lot of trouble, an awful waste of energy, to use it on us, so unlike Pierre's normal sparing use of ordinance. What could he be thinking?

Crawling a few metres, I peeked over the lip of the crater, and tried to spot their placement, where they'd dug in on the hillside, but it was hard to see because it was buried deep in the trees and creeping shadows. I looked quickly to either side, curious more than for any other reason, wondering what had happened to the other squad that was with us, but couldn't see much of anything, except for a few big holes where the shells had struck, an uprooted tree, and twisted and burned pieces of debris.

I let myself slide back down into the crater next to Shika, Pettis and what was left of Sarge.

"Well," Pettis asked, calm as always. "See anything?"

"Nah."

Pettis nodded, idly moving a piece of Sarge back and forth with the toe of his boot. He didn't look scared at all, just kind of aware for a change, that sleepy look gone from his face, at peace I guess, as if he'd settled something with himself. He smiled at me, and I looked at him, his young face red and scrubbed, and realized I've never looked closely at him before, never really looked at any of them.

"Well," he said, "I guess I'd better get going." He smiled again, a warm knowing smile, and winked, crazy bastard, winked at us. He

crawled to the edge of the crater, teetered on the brink for a moment, then was gone.

Shika stared at the sky, lying there on her back, but still wouldn't look at me.

I heard the distant sound of first one, then two, semis opening up, and the distinctive reply of Pettis's piece. One of the semis suddenly fell silent, then the other, and all was quiet again.

A moment later the ground rocked with the impact of another strike not too far off, a dull thud and whistling of fragments, followed by a shower of dirt and small stones.

I brushed the crap from where it had fallen on Shika's face. She shivered, pulling her arms tighter around her bloodied stomach, as if she believed that might stop her insides from spilling out through those gaping holes. I didn't know why she wasn't already dead; she should have died half an hour ago when she first caught the fragment.

"Fuck it," she hissed through gritted teeth. "Fuck it all."

I heard the thump of another shell, close this time, and leaned over to shield her as dirt and small rocks pattered around us, something sharp striking my back and bouncing away. The shower ended, and the silence was broken once more only by Shika's ragged breathing.

"Why are you here?"

The question was hard to hear, coming as it did, whispered, throaty, through tightly clenched lips, through her pain.

I shrugged and rolled over onto my back next to her, the two of us staring up at the autumn sky, like a couple of goofy kids.

I knew it was a good question.

I could have gone Pettis's way, maybe broken through even, at the very least, greased a few Pierres for my trouble. Or I could have tried for the forest behind; it was only about two hundred metres and a few minutes until darkness, and if I made the cover then they would never have been able to find me. . . .

But I stayed.

“Maybe I’ve got that death wish you were talking about.”

“No,” her voice was weak, but the way she said it I knew she meant it. She started to say something else, to explain herself, maybe, but her lips twisted in a rictus of pain, and her words were choked off when she began coughing up blood.

Silence fell then, a breathless calm, and I could hear her struggling to inhale, fighting for each breath, not surrendering a single one, focussed entirely on drawing in air, making shattered muscles obey her will, raggedly forcing the oxygen into her torn lungs—

It stopped.

No. Not stopped.

Changed. Became quiet, steady, rhythmic—peaceful.

Her eyes had a distant, faraway look in them. A walker’s look. Her face was no longer hard and angry, just tired, full of sadness, as if for things she couldn’t change. She relaxed her grip on her chest, and her arms slipped, bit by bit, down her sides, to where they lay, palms up, in the dark earth.

I knew then that she would have walked if she could—it seemed to me that her little legs were restless, she wanting nothing more than to push herself to her feet, to get up and walk towards Pierre.

But it was too late; she hadn’t the strength.

So I picked her up—lighter than I’d ever have imagined—as if all that were substantial about her, all that kept her nailed down to the earth, had fled, only that little wisp of air, a tiny rising and settling of her chest, connecting her still to this world, still to me. I climbed the side of the crater, moving towards Pierre, through the gloom, through the shattered trees and smoke and debris.

I walked without thinking, a distant part of me waiting for the sound of those final rounds, the last I knew I would hear, but it didn’t seem important, the only important thing now the small misshapen figure cradled in my arms.

And when her breathing finally stopped, I realized I was crying, my tears falling down onto her face, leaving little pink trails on her cheeks where they washed away the dust, hearing somewhere in the

back of my mind, coming from a different place, a world I no longer belonged to, the faraway sound of choppers.



Six months have passed since then.

I'm back in the valley now, attached to a unit west of Montreal, training new meat, teaching them what they didn't learn in basic, meaning just about everything. When I look around, their faces seem normal, young and scared and excited all at the same time, but mostly scared, though they wouldn't admit it. They strut around, pretending they're not frightened of anything or anyone, proudly flashing their new hardware as if they were marching in a parade.

Every once in a while I catch a glimpse of a face in the crowd with that same hardened look Shika wore, and my heart seems to stop then. In those moments I can almost convince myself I hate her once again, hate her for abandoning me, hate her for leaving before I had my chance.

I try not to think about it too much, but I know that soon I'll have no other choice, because that day when she went she took my hatred with her, leaving me with a big empty space inside that I'm going have to fill somehow.

And it's hard to know where to begin.

TABULA RASA

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

“You’re dead.” Peter wagged the damning slips of paper he’d pulled from the toque at Barry. “Five minutes to pack your things and leave the cabin.”

Barry, the first man overboard.

Daniel watched the soon-to-be-drowned man, sitting cross-legged on the floor before the hearth, his bulk eclipsing the fire, a thumb-sized wine stain on his shirt, zipper half open, eyeglasses at their usual cant. Naturally he was the first to go.

Barry attempted a smile.

“Honestly, Peter,” he sniffled through his incipient cold, the susurrus of breath whispering from his nose. “I just got here.”

Incredibly, Barry had once been Daniel’s lover. Daniel couldn’t have said why exactly. Pity, perhaps. Or more likely a sense of gratitude. Barry had stuck by him when, some years ago, Daniel had spiralled into an alcoholic despondency. While all his other so-called friends, many of whom now sat in this rough semi-circle around the fire, had expertly vanished.

“You agreed to the rules. We all did.” Peter stretched out his long legs, the antithesis of Barry: tall, athletic, handsome in a vaguely dissipate way. Dressed in casually expensive clothes of such quality that, as someone had once pointed out, one was expected to recognize them without the benefit of the usual designer labels. “I trust you’ll see yourself out.”

It had been Peter’s idea. Who else? A game called Lifeboat. Justify your continued presence on a raft in the middle of the ocean, your meagre supplies dwindling. Each round of rationalizations to be followed by a vote: who should be thrown overboard?

“Four minutes left.”

But the game itself wasn't the crowning touch. No. It was the group Peter had assembled. He'd lured Daniel and his new boyfriend, Marcus, up here with the promise of a quiet weekend, crowing about the beauty of the countryside, the romance of a rustic cabin. An ideal setting for budding paramours. But said nothing about the others. Daniel scanned the circle of faces—and felt nauseous. All his former lovers. A testimonial to his mistakes, to a past poorly spent. Marcus was unaware. He was too young, too new to the community, unacquainted with Daniel's checkered past. And the others seemed oblivious too, ignorant of this connection, perhaps because Daniel had always been discreet in his affairs.

Except with Peter. Fucking Peter. How could he be doing this?

"B . . . but, it'll be dark before I reach the highway." Barry floundered. He raised an arm, running it under his nose and dragging the offending mucus onto the sleeve of his moth-eaten cardigan, spilling a bit of his wine onto the area rug. Peter scowled. Daniel, sickened and embarrassed, looked away. He didn't want to witness this; he wanted Barry gone. Wanted them all gone. Or, better yet, wanted to leave himself. With Marcus. But what could he say without looking like a fool?

"The mob has spoken." Peter held aloft the slips of paper in one hand and the toque into which they deposited their votes in the other. "Five for tossing you out of the lifeboat. Three for Jason."

"Bitches," Jason hissed.

Daniel burned. At Peter. At the game. At being suckered into coming up to the cabin. He curled his hands into fists. Fuck Peter. He *would* leave. And to hell with them all!

Daniel felt fingers touch the back of his hand, startling him. "Daniel?"

Daniel glanced to his left, at Marcus—

—and went utterly still. Light from the fire played across the planes of Marcus's face. Across sculpted cheek bones, Roman nose, skin as flawless as marble. Christ, he was beautiful. Striking as Michelangelo's David. No, Daniel decided. More striking.

Because he was real.

Daniel's heart twitched in that miserably clichéd way. Love. It embarrassed, mortified and excited him. It made a hash of his life. How could *he*, of all people, be in love? Fifty-eight years old, a once-handsome man in decline, an acknowledged cynic. In love for the first time—with a boy toy half his age.

More than Daniel, Peter was sceptical about the notion of love. When Daniel had confided his infatuation with Marcus, Peter had scoffed. Mocked him mercilessly. And, had it not been his own miserable heart in a vise, Daniel would have joined in. Yet here he was, stupid as a schoolgirl, in love with Marcus. In love with his youthfulness, his naïveté. Aching to reclaim that innocence. To forget his misused past. Daniel wanted a new start. A blank slate. *Tabula rasa*. And up here, away from the affectation of the city and its petty concerns, in the clear, bright air of the country, Daniel imagined it might be possible, the two of them walking, hand in hand, in the breathless winter calm of the forest. . . .

Only Peter's malicious game had ruined all that.

"Three minutes."

Daniel swallowed, suddenly giddy. Barry, somehow on his feet now, trembled in the midst of the circle. He gestured at the front window where large, lazy flakes lit on the pane. Outside, scotch pines, boughs drooping with accumulated snow, ringed the cabin, an incongruously picturesque scene. "I . . . I'm not sure I have enough gas to make the highway."

Daniel almost laughed.

"Sorry, old man."

Barry searched the ring of faces for an ally. "Don't make me go."

Daniel watched them, one by one, stare back impassively: Martin first, then his partner Rick, chewing nervously on his fingernails; Kurt who'd crossed his burly arms; and Jason who stuck out his tongue. And then Barry turned to Marcus. Daniel caught his breath. Two pair of eyes, locked: Barry's hopeful, entreating; Marcus's . . . what? Sympathetic? Impassive? He couldn't tell. Then abruptly Barry

was looking at him.

"Daniel?"

Shamed, though not sure why, Daniel stared at a fascinating swirl in the rug just beyond the banded toes of his hiking socks.

"Daniel?"

"I'm sorry." Quietly. Had he even said it aloud?

"I'll leave in the morning." Barry spoke to Peter this time. "When the snow stops."

Daniel looked up. Peter had moved over to the fireplace. One by one he let the slips of paper drift from his hand and into the flames, chanting as each piece flared: "No. No. No. No. No." He checked his Rolex. "Two minutes."

"What if I won't go?"

Jason sucked in his breath; chairs creaked as Kurt and Martin sat up.

Won't go? Barry refusing? It seemed incomprehensible. Daniel watched Peter for a reaction. Had his face flushed? Or was that a trick of the flickering light?

"As I see it, you've no choice."

"I won't." Barry glanced out the window as if there was something out there that unnerved him more than Peter's scorn. He was trembling. "I'm not going."

Daniel followed his gaze: in the few moments that had passed clouds had knit overhead, darkness spreading over the trees that circled the cabin, hardening their edges, inking out the gaps between them, making the snow they bore look filthy.

"One minute."

"You can't make me leave."

"Yes, I can." Peter flipped open the lid of a vintage cigar box on the mantle. From it he withdrew a small, pearl-handled revolver. Barry stared at the weapon, open-mouthed.

"Every good lifeboat should be provisioned for all emergencies."

"Does it really work?" Kurt asked, lifting his bulk from his seat, towering over them like a grizzly.

"You've got to be joking." Rick, perpetually agitated, stood also, pushing past Kurt. Barry looked at him gratefully, as if Rick had just thrown him a lifeline. "It's too little to do any real damage. You'll want something bigger."

Jason tittered nervously; Barry's fleeting expression of hope collapsed like a cheap tent in a windstorm.

Peter waved the pistol towards the door. "Time's up."

His eyes moving from Peter to the lowering sky outside, Barry edged back, caught between Scylla and Charybdis. "You wouldn't shoot me." His expression was akin to that of a rabbit Daniel had once seen, forlornly dragging its crushed hindquarters off the gravel shoulder of a country road into a weed-choked ditch.

Peter cocked the gun. "Get out."

"Wait . . ." The word popped out of Daniel's mouth.

Peter looked mildly curious. "Yes?"

"Let him stay. Just for the night."

"And why should we do that?"

"He's our friend, for God's sake."

"*Your* friend. I never much liked him."

"For God's sake, Peter, if he doesn't make it to the highway it'd be just like shooting him."

"Then perhaps I should save him the trip and shoot him right now."

"Jesus, it's just a game!"

"And it's my fucking cabin! If you don't like the rules, you can leave. With *him*." He sneered. "Maybe that's what you'd like to do, hey? Leave with your fat *friend*. Then if the car breaks down, you two can cuddle to stave off the cold. It's not like you haven't cuddled before."

Daniel's cheeks burned; the others stared at him in incredulity.

"Daniel and Barry?" Jason was positively elated. "This is *too* much."

Marcus stiffened; he pulled his hand away from Daniel's and turned to stare at the fire.

"It's not true," Daniel blurted out, struggling to keep his tone light. "Jesus. I mean, really. Look at *him*."

The colour drained from Barry's face; he seemed to deflate. Daniel felt sickened at his betrayal. He tried to hold Barry's gaze, couldn't. Barry picked up his parka from a chair and tugged it on. His duffel lay slumped over at his feet. Cinching shut his duffel, Barry hoisted it. The dead weight swung from his hand like a condemned man from the gallows. He opened the door. Wind gusted around the edges of the screen door, rattling it, chilling the room. Barry looked back. "Love makes us do cruel things." He spoke to Daniel alone. Then to everyone else, "Fuck you all."

A blast of icy wind, the slam of the door.

"And to all a good night!" Jason said, laughing too loudly at his own joke.

An engine coughed twice, started, snow squeaking under tires, the sound quickly fading, lost in the trees and scrub and the hills, under the incalculable weight of snow that smothered them.

Part of Daniel's past was gone. Despite his self-loathing, he experienced an undeniable surge of relief. Hopeful, he tried to catch Marcus's eye, but Marcus stared resolutely at the fire, his expression set like stone, ignoring Daniel.

Jason snorted. "Good riddance!" He looked to Peter for approval.

But Peter merely turned the revolver over in his hand, admiring it, then placed it back in the cigar box and shut the lid.

Jason fidgeted. "Now that Barry's gone we don't have to play that stupid game anymore. Right?"

Peter arched his eyebrows slightly in a patrician gesture. "Wrong. The next round will be tomorrow morning after breakfast. And we'll have another round after each meal." Surveying the surviving castaways, he smiled. "Now, who's for another glass of wine?"

■

As Daniel peeled carrots for dinner, Marcus sidled up to him. For a full minute he stood at Daniel's side, silently watching the slivers of orange raining down into the sink.

"Did you cuddle?" Marcus's question was low, almost a whisper. At the other end of the cabin the rest of the group sat around a folding table in front of the fire, talking, laughing, sipping Chardonnay and absorbed in a game of whist, the latest megrim of the theatre crowd. Barry had been gone less than an hour.

"What are you talking about?" Daniel tried to hide his apprehension, continued the rhythmic slicing, the jangle of the peeler filling the silence.

"Did you fuck him?"

"No."

"Then why are your hands shaking?"

Daniel stopped peeling, rested his hands on the edge of the sink to steady them. "For God's sake! We're friends. That's all." From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of Peter watching them. He fought to calm himself.

"You know I'm a jealous person." Marcus said it matter-of-factly, like he was describing his height or hair colour. "I told you when we first met that I couldn't stand being around your . . ." he hesitated, searching for a word, ". . . your *past*."

It was true. He had almost broken up with Daniel over it. Marcus made no secret of feeling threatened by Daniel's older and 'more sophisticated' friends. Especially by his former lovers. The community was lousy with them. They were in night clubs, in restaurants, at the theatre. So, after a few awkward incidents, Daniel had steered Marcus away from those places and people. Of anything that might jeopardize their relationship.

Marcus picked up a small paring knife. "The thought of you with Barry makes me crazy. . . ."

Peter leaned towards them, no doubt straining to hear.

"Well, we weren't together." Daniel wished it had never happened. Could almost convince himself it hadn't. "Besides, he's gone." Daniel

resumed peeling. He smiled wanly. "Drowned."

Marcus ran the blade back and forth, like a tiny saw, along the tip of his finger. "Is there anyone else here I need to worry about?"

Daniel shook his head. He couldn't bring himself to frame a lie in words.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Marcus put the knife down. A small cut welled blood on the tip of his finger. Marcus stared at it for a moment, then wiped it carelessly on his pants. Leaning forward, he put his hand on Daniel's shoulder, gave him a peck on the cheek, then sauntered over to watch Daniel's ex-lovers play cards. Peter nodded to Marcus, then turned and winked at Daniel. He returned his attention to the card game. Daniel stared at them, the group absorbed in the game, like a small, exclusive club. On his shoulder a single drop of blood seeped into the fabric of his sweatshirt.

Christ, he thought, what a mess.

Peter had lined his former lovers up like ducks in a row. And all Daniel could do was wait and hope it came to nothing. His past rushed towards him like a runaway freight train and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

■

One a.m.

Only Kurt and Daniel remained up. Everyone else had gone to bed. Outside, relentless flakes of snow obliterated everything. Even the row of cars, parked no more than ten metres away, had vanished. It was as if they had been walled in.

Daniel didn't mind being alone with Kurt. Of them all, he'd been Daniel's most thoughtful lover: steady, gentle, undemanding. And in the big man's contemplative silences Daniel had always found comfort. Once, Kurt had even declared his love. Why, Daniel wondered, did I end it with him? The answer came to him as soon as he'd framed the

question: because he never loved Kurt. He was merely comfortable with him.

“Can’t sleep?”

Kurt’s voice was a low, baritone murmur; it startled Daniel from his reverie. Daniel turned; Kurt stood behind him holding the slim volume of poetry he’d been leafing through. The faint odour of scotch was unmistakable.

“A touch of insomnia, that’s all.” He couldn’t tell Kurt he’d been avoiding his room, the empty space next to Marcus. The guilt of his lies. He glanced to the back of the cabin and the short hallway leading to the rooms. It was hard to tell because of the shadows, but the door to the room he shared with Marcus seemed to be open a crack.

“I hate this snow,” Kurt said, snapping shut the book and tossing it on the couch. “It’s as if the world’s been erased.”

Like Barry was erased, Daniel thought. Instead he said, “It’ll look beautiful in the morning. The trees, the hills, the lake.”

Kurt shrugged. “Maybe. But I hate not being able to see where I am. To get my bearings.” The two stood side by side, staring out the window at the blankness. “When I was a kid, I never got lost. My friends and I would go on hikes and they’d listen to me because I always knew which way was home. But this snow . . . it’s messing me up. Like it’s jamming my radar or something.”

It was the most he’d said all day. Daniel shifted his weight, uneasy at Kurt’s sudden garrulousness. It’s just the booze, he thought.

“I know the lake’s out there. Normally I could point to it, even through a blizzard, and be certain that I was right.” He raised his arm and straightened it like a compass needle, pointing out the window, but his arm arced back and forth uncertainly. “Only now, I’m not sure.” He let his arm drop. “It’s weird, but I get the feeling that out *there*, there is no direction.” The lines on his forehead deepened. “It scares me.”

Scared?

Kurt was the last person Daniel had expected to be scared. But now that he’d said it, Daniel could see the tension in him, the rigidity

of the way he held himself, almost coiled, as if preparing for flight. "You'll feel better in the morning." It sounded strange to Daniel, coming out of his mouth, this attempt to comfort Kurt who'd always done the comforting.

"I don't want to lose the next round, Daniel." Kurt's voice was hushed. "If I have to leave, I have this feeling I'll never find my way back. I know it sounds stupid. I know there's only one road out of here. But I can't shake this feeling."

"You won't lose. Jason will. Everyone detests him."

"But what if I do?"

"Peter likes you. He wouldn't make you leave." Daniel smiled up at the big man in what he hoped was a reassuring way. "Besides, he couldn't make you leave if you didn't want to."

"I'm not so sure." He looked at Daniel. "I'm not so sure what to make of anything anymore." Kurt turned towards the fireplace; it was a moment before Daniel understood what he was staring at: the cigar box.

Daniel reached up and put a hand on Kurt's broad shoulder, felt him try to suppress a twitch. "Peter's cruel. But he's not crazy."

Kurt shrugged away his hand. He walked over to the box and flipped open the lid. He tilted it to show it was empty.

Daniel stared. "Peter must have taken it," he said, not sure who he was trying to convince. "Probably put it away. Because of Jason. You know how he'd want to play with it. And end up shooting himself or someone else in the foot."

"Guns scare the shit out of me." Kurt dropped the box back onto the mantle; the lid fell shut. "So I was watching. Peter didn't go near the box. No one did. Except Marcus."

The wall clock ticked loudly, once, twice. "You saw him take the gun?"

Kurt shook his head. "As far as I could tell, he only looked." Relief flooded Daniel. "But if he was good with his hands, like a magician or something . . ."

It felt like an icy lump had congealed in Daniel's stomach. Marcus,

in an idle moment, had once shown him a parlour trick, making Daniel's comb disappear. Daniel had watched closely a second and then a third time, but couldn't tell how he'd done it. Could he have taken the gun? Christ, why would he want to take the gun?

Kurt had moved over next to Daniel; his fingers circled Daniel's upper arm, thumb easily meeting forefinger. He was speaking quietly, but urgently, most of his words lost on Daniel. ". . . you know about him?"

"What?"

Kurt squeezed; Daniel felt blood throbbing where fingers pressed into his flesh. Kurt leaned in until his chin almost touched Daniel's forehead; thick fumes from the scotch curled into his nostrils, seeped into his brain. He felt drunk on Kurt's breath.

"Marcus. We all know you've just met him. What do you *really* know about him?"

Nothing, Daniel thought. Not a Goddamn thing.

"Why would he want the gun, Daniel?"

"He doesn't have the gun. You said so yourself."

"Maybe." Kurt darted a nervous glance around the cabin, as if he was afraid Marcus had, until this moment, stood unnoticed in a corner. He lowered his voice. "I know what Peter's up to. Why we're all here." He shook his head. "Jesus, this is a new low, even for Peter."

Daniel tried to pull away; his efforts were futile. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't give me that bullshit!" His eyes blazed. "It's *you* he wants to humiliate, Daniel. It's *your* lovers he's assembled."

"You're crazy!"

"If Marcus were the jealous sort . . ." His grip tightened.

Daniel's eyes teared up; blood sang in his ears. "Jesus!" he gasped, "Let go of my arm!"

Kurt stared at his fingers wrapped around Daniel's forearm as if he'd just become aware of them himself; he released his grip. Daniel squirmed away, headed for the bedroom on wobbly legs. "For Christ's sake, he didn't take the gun," he said, over his shoulder. "It's not him."

He listened for the creaking of the floorboards, for Kurt's steps, but the big man didn't follow.

"Wait . . ."

Daniel paused, his hand on the doorknob; there was something plaintive in Kurt's voice, a tone wholly inappropriate to him. It dug into Daniel like a barbed hook.

"For the sake of what we once had, please don't let Peter throw me overboard."

He glanced back at Kurt: the big man stood, his back to the window and the implacable snow, his shoulders slumped, arms hung at his side, fingers half-curved around nothing, looking for all the world like a small, frightened boy.

"You're drunk. Get some sleep." Daniel pulled open the door. He stepped into the dark room, dragging the door shut behind him—
—and almost collided with Marcus. He caught his breath, his heart hammering wildly.

"Jesus! You scared me!"

Marcus was naked; he frowned but said nothing.

Daniel's eyes adjusted. Enough light came through their uncurtained window for Daniel to make out the smooth surfaces of his body, the sinewy muscle, the flawless skin. Perfect as a Greek statue. The beginning of an erection disquieted him.

"What was that all about?" Marcus's voice was as cold as the storm outside.

"Nothing," Daniel answered quietly, pushing past him, the skin of his hand tingling where it brushed against the warmth of Marcus's thigh. "Nothing at all." His heart still beat fiercely against his ribs. What had he heard? Daniel wondered. Could the sound of their voices have reached him? Daniel caught himself glancing at Marcus's hands, half-expecting to see the gun. But his fingers were curled around nothing, forming loose fists.

Daniel turned his back, felt Marcus's eyes on him as he pulled off his clothes, sharply aware of the contrast of his own body, mottled with moles and tufts of odd hair, his skin beginning its irreparable

sagging. The image was like a plunge into icy water. What was left of his erection subsided. Climbing into bed he lay on his side, his back to Marcus. For a time there was silence, then the bed creaked as Marcus settled behind him.

He didn't take it, Daniel told himself. Kurt's worry about the gun was nonsense. Hell, for all he knew, Kurt had taken the gun. Or maybe it was another of Peter's mind games. Maybe he'd never really put the gun back in the box to begin with.

Fingers lightly touched the hollow of Daniel's side, just below his ribs. Daniel's desire stirred. Marcus's hand drifted around to his stomach, then crept down his abdomen, fingers circling his rekindled erection.

"I love you," Marcus whispered. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," Daniel whispered. He shivered and closed his eyes, falling into thoughtless pleasures where words became unnecessary.



Drifts had climbed the trunks of trees, wrapping around them like mufflers; branches hung low with their burden of snow; pristine white blanketed the ground. An altogether beautiful winter scene. Just as he'd told Kurt it would be.

"He's gone," Daniel said.

Martin, a chef by trade, flipped an omelette expertly. "Who's gone?"

"Kurt."

Rick poked tentatively at bacon with his spatula; unlike Martin, he was useless in the kitchen. There was a time Daniel's apartment had filled with the marvellous aromas of Martin's breakfasts. Of the breakfasts they had cooked together. He missed those. But Martin had been hinting more and more strongly about his feelings for Daniel, feelings Daniel did not reciprocate. What choice did he have? He had to break it off before it had gotten messy. An obscenely short time later, Martin and Rick started dating. Now, they were inseparable.

But early in their budding relationship, out of spite at Martin's remarkable emotional resilience, and with Peter's encouragement, Daniel had once seduced Rick. Since then the small man couldn't hold Daniel's gaze without turning crimson; for months after he'd clung to Martin like a frightened child in Daniel's presence.

"I just assumed he got lucky." Jason leered at Daniel. He and Kurt had been sharing a room. "He didn't use the bed last night. His bag is still sitting on it." Jason paused between mouthfuls of jam-smeared toast he was supposed to have been preparing for the group.

"Maybe he went for a walk." Martin turned his attention back to his eggs.

Daniel looked outside. In the light of day, the weather didn't look nearly as bad. The tail end of the lake had become visible where it licked the shore. "His Rover is gone." In front of the cabin were two empty spots in the line of cars. Barry's had filled with snow, erasing any evidence that he'd once parked there; not so with Kurt's, thick, tumbling flakes softly rounding the edges of a recent depression. Daniel guessed he couldn't have left more than two hours ago.

"Okay, so he went for a drive."

"He's not coming back." Daniel turned. They all stared at him. Except for Marcus, who sat alone on the couch, legs crossed, a yellowed magazine open in his lap. A vague memory plagued Daniel: of Marcus sliding out of bed in the pre-dawn light, walking silently to the door of their room. Or had it been a dream?

"How do you know?" Peter's question conveyed curiosity but little concern. He sat at the card table snipping slips of paper for future rounds. Next to blank ballots lay the toque in which they placed their votes, Peter's small nod to anonymity.

"He talked about it last night." Daniel imagined Kurt's Rover plunging into the whiteness, the snow coagulating around him, Kurt losing himself on that lonely road.

"That's odd," Jason said, nodding at the coat rack. "His coat's still on the hook."

Daniel looked; there was no mistaking Kurt's large houndstooth overcoat.

"Why would he do that? Go without his coat or bag?" Martin poked half-heartedly at the solidifying eggs.

Peter shrugged. "It happens. Despair. A sense of hopelessness. Who knows, perhaps he felt betrayed." He looked at Daniel, then at Martin. "Just like you must have felt when . . ." He paused, raised his hand to cover his mouth in mock horror, looking from Daniel to Rick to Martin. "Oh dear! I'm afraid I've said too much."

Rick's face coloured; he stared at his feet. Martin seemed confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Suicide," Daniel said quickly. To his right, Marcus had gone still, although he never lifted his eyes from his magazine. "Peter thinks he threw himself overboard while we were all sleeping."

"Oh."

Bacon sizzled. Martin looked uncomfortable, but Daniel knew him well enough to know he wouldn't press the issue. If nothing, he was circumspect. Later, perhaps, when he and Rick were alone.

Marcus frowned and flipped pages of his magazine roughly with his right hand, exaggerating the sound. His left hand lay next his thigh, clenched in a fist. Daniel looked at Kurt's coat, then turned his attention to the scene outside the window.

He'd been wrong. Despite the illusion of improved visibility the morning brought, the snow hadn't really let up at all. If anything, it had grown worse. The weather still crept towards them, down the hills and across the frozen lake, closing in on them with the inevitability of fate.



Over post-breakfast mimosas, Peter announced the start of the second round of the game.

The session moved quickly, the arguments brief and to the point: Peter alluded to the handy survival tips he'd picked up during his

brief, ignoble stint in the Boy Scouts; Martin, not his usual voluble self, briefly touted his culinary skills with whatever seafood they might catch; as a teenager, Rick had worked a fishing sloop one summer, and claimed he could supply Martin with a steady supply of fish; having once read a survivalist book, Marcus declared himself capable of rigging up a solar water collector; Jason promised to satisfy every sexual whim of whoever might survive this round. He leered at Peter.

And then it was Daniel's turn.

He felt disoriented, couldn't think. Kurt's disappearance hung over him like a pall. He glanced at Marcus who stared back blithely.

"Well?" Peter tapped his pencil on the arm of his chair; he looked bored.

Daniel couldn't come up with what he felt was a convincing argument. "In a cramped boat," he began, "disputes are bound to arise." He stopped. "About food. Water."

"Relationships?" Peter added.

Daniel ignored him. "You need me because you need a level-headed mediator whom everyone can trust to impartially resolve disputes." To his own ears his argument sounded weak and irrational.

Peter handed out the slips of paper and pencils. To Daniel's surprise, he passed the toque to Marcus. "As the newest member of our *esteemed* group," here Peter paused and glanced significantly at Daniel, "you can collect the votes."

Marcus took the hat with a stiff nod; a tic had developed in his right cheek.

They scribbled, then dropped their votes in the hat as Marcus held it out. Daniel couldn't meet his gaze when he deposited his.

Marcus reached in and unfolded them one by one.

Jason. Jason. Jason. Jason. Jason. Jason.

Six votes against. Marcus smiled.

"Bullshit!" A vein throbbed on Jason's forehead. "I didn't vote against myself!" He looked desperately at the circle of faces. "You're all out to get me!"

His outrage was no surprise; histrionics were his stock in trade. Although Daniel had extricated himself from their brief relationship in the privacy of Jason's house, Jason had engineered a public scene the next day, accosting him in an outdoor café, making it clear to anyone in earshot that it was he who was dispensing with Daniel. He ceded Jason his small spectacle, hoping that it would be the last he'd have to endure of him. Until this weekend, he'd been largely successful.

"You cheated!" Rising, Jason snatched the toque from Marcus' hand, turning it inside out. It was empty. Quivering like an agitated terrier, Jason glared at Marcus. "He rigged it!"

"We all watched him. He didn't do anything," Peter smiled, clearly amused by the turn of events.

"You shit!" Jason pointed his finger at Marcus. "I voted against *you*! Where's my vote?" He swung around to face Daniel. "They're both in on it! Daniel's still trying to spite me! For the way I humiliated him when we broke up!"

Daniel's temper flared; he wanted to smash Jason in the mouth, to hammer the words back down his throat. But it was too late: Marcus stared at Jason with narrowed, baleful eyes. Daniel swallowed, looked down at the table, his anger dissipating as quickly as it had risen, fear washing it away. Marcus knew. Christ, what would he do?

"It's not fair!"

Peter rose and walked over to the mantle; he rested his hand significantly on the cigar box. "You're history."

Jason shook with fury; for a moment Daniel thought he might make more of a scene than Barry had. That he wouldn't have the good grace to depart with what little dignity he had left. But then he stomped off to his room, collected his overnight bag and exited with only the slightest of whimpers. He didn't even slam the door.

Just like that, another part of Daniel's past was gone.



A few minutes later, someone remarked they hadn't heard Jason's car start. As it turned out, no one had.

Peter, mixing up the day's first batch of margaritas, eyed Daniel. "Be a good chap and check to see if his car is gone, will you? I don't much care for the thought of him lurking around outside."

Daniel went to the window. "It's gone."

"Good."

Three empty spaces. Barry, Kurt, Jason. Jason's was a fresh wound; Kurt's had almost filled in, his tire tracks now merely shallow ruts—

Daniel blinked, looked again.

There were no new tire tracks on the drive. No tracks at all leading from Jason's spot. But his vehicle wasn't there. It was as if the hand of a malicious god had plucked his car from the earth and hurled it into the void. Daniel's stomach knotted. When he turned, he found Marcus observing him from the far end of the couch—as distant from the other members of the group as was humanly possible—with a steady, uninflected gaze.

"Good riddance," Marcus said, his words echoing Jason's own after Barry's departure. And then he crossed his arms and turned to stare out the window at the approaching wall of white, willing it—or so it seemed to Daniel—to hasten towards them and smother the past, erasing it forever.

■

"Why shouldn't we throw *you* overboard?" Peter rolled the stem of his wine glass between his fingers, as if he were rolling around the question. He observed Marcus through the bowl, the legs of his Chardonnay descending in long, parabolic arcs.

It was early-afternoon, and the third round was drawing to a close, Marcus the last to justify his continued existence. He hadn't spoken to Daniel since Jason's departure, had studiously ignored him, even when Daniel had tried to catch his attention. Still on the

couch, away from the card table, he stared outside as thick flakes of snow blew across the porch and ticked on the window-sill, growing miniature drifts. Visibility had shrunk to twenty metres.

"I'm with Daniel," Marcus answered, as if that was more than enough, never taking his eyes from the scene outside.

Daniel was astonished.

"That's it?" Martin asked.

Marcus turned to face the group. "Yes."

"It's your funeral," Peter said. "Time to vote."

Marcus rose and walked to the table to collect his slip and pencil. They all scribbled, cupping their hands to hide what they were writing. Daniel thought about Jason's altered vote. About the missing tire tracks. About Kurt's disappearance. He moved his pencil, but left the slip blank, putting a tiny crease in the corner with his thumbnail. Picking up the toque, he stuffed his vote in. This round he'd volunteered to be enumerator. Daniel held out the toque to the others. One by one they deposited their votes, Daniel watching them carefully, making sure their hands stayed well outside the hat. He removed the slips and read out the names: two Ricks, one Martin, one Peter and one Daniel.

The slip bearing his name had a tiny crease in the corner. He felt sick.

"Well," Peter said, looking at Marcus strangely, "it's not exactly the result I expected. But tyranny of the ignorant, and all that."

Rick blanched, unprepared for the outcome. He'd arrived with Martin and had probably not contemplated having to leave without him. They'd driven up in Martin's SUV, and now Martin would have to shuttle Rick to the bus station—really a bus stop outside a general store—forty miles away.

"I think the snow's letting up," Daniel lied. "The 4x4 should be okay."

Marcus rose, went into the kitchen and began rooting around in the fridge.

"Sorry," Peter said. "You know the rules."

Rick looked like a lost child. No one said a word.

In silence he collected his kit and slouched to the door; Martin joined him a moment later. Daniel watched from the corner, his arms folded over his chest; Peter still sat the card table where he shuffled and dealt himself a hand of solitaire, cards clicking in the silence. It was a solemn, almost mournful, air. In the kitchen Marcus sliced onions on the cutting board, making himself a sandwich.

Martin and Rick pulled on their boots and coats. Martin opened the door and stepped out. Pausing on the threshold, Rick looked back and, affecting a false bravado, said, "See you all in hell!" The door banged shut behind them.

Daniel hurried over to the window, watched Martin climb into the driver's side of his 4x4 while Rick loaded his suitcase in the back seat. Daniel didn't want to take his eyes off them for a second, afraid that if he did . . . what? They might disappear? It was absurd. Yet he couldn't shake the fear. He watched as Rick climbed in next to Martin.

A familiar touch on his shoulder; he twisted away, snatching his overcoat from a hook.

"Going somewhere?"

"I need some air."

"It won't matter."

Daniel buttoned his coat, pulled on his boots, his sense of urgency growing.

Marcus gripped his shoulder with surprising strength. "Don't go."

Shrugging free of Marcus's grip, he hurried out the door. Martin was backing out, his vehicle leaving crisp tire prints in the snow. The temperature had dropped, and the snowfall blotted out everything beyond a radius of about ten metres. Daniel shivered, his breath unfurling before him. The windows of the 4x4 were lightly fogged, but Daniel could make them out, Martin holding the wheel with his left hand, working the clutch with his right, Rick sitting next to him fiddling with the radio. The car backed into the drive until its nose pointed towards the road that climbed into the hills. It wasn't two

metres away. Daniel raised his hand to wave goodbye.

Martin waved back.

Then he leaned forward and rubbed a small circle on the fogged windshield. It clouded over within seconds. He rubbed again with no better results. Everywhere else, the grey moisture coating the windows thickened. Martin became less distinct, Rick a dark blotch on his other side, flicking the controls on the front panel, perhaps trying to get their blower to work. Martin reached towards his door. He seemed to be pressing the window button, but the window didn't budge. Daniel lost sight of Rick altogether.

The hum of the engine changed as the 4x4 slipped into gear. The car lurched forward uncertainly, like a novice driver was at the wheel. Only Rick's hands weren't on the wheel. They were flat on the plane of the window, trying to pull it down; then his fists pounded the glass, the meaty part of his palms leaving momentary smears that fogged up as soon as he pulled his hands away. Muffled sounds reached Daniel, the revving engine, the pounding, what could have been screams. A plume of exhaust filled the air as the car slowly accelerated away.

Helpless, Daniel stood rooted.

The 4x4 moved up the road, fading. The horn tooted twice, the way one would signal a cheery goodbye. And then it was gone, lost to sight, thick sheets of snow folding around it like a shroud.

"Love you." Marcus stood next to Daniel as if he had materialized there; he stuck his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. "You love me?"

Cold crept into Daniel's coat underneath his collar; wind made his eyes tear up. Shivering, he wrapped his arms around himself.

"Please, Daniel, I need to know."

"Yes," he whispered, the porch seeming to spin beneath his feet. "Of course I do."

Behind him, the screen door banged shut. Marcus was gone, the space next to Daniel empty, as if Marcus had never been there in the first place.



"He's had plenty of time to drive to town and back," Peter said. "Let's get on with it."

Marcus dried the last plate and placed it in the dish rack. Dinner had come and gone. The portion left for Martin had long grown cold, been wrapped and tucked away in the fridge.

Daniel stood by the window, staring at the white that pressed in on the cabin. Beyond the edge of the porch nothing was visible. It was as if they floated in a void, with no proof the rest of the world still existed. "Let's give him just a few more minutes." He had no plan. No ideas. Other than to defer the start of the next round as long as possible.

Marcus took a seat at the table opposite Peter; he eyed Daniel.

"No," Peter said. "Get your wrinkly ass over here."

I'll tell him, Daniel thought. What I saw. What Marcus did.

But he knew Peter wouldn't believe it.

And even if he could convince him, what then? Try to escape like Kurt had? At the thought of leaving Marcus, Daniel's resolve crumpled. He hadn't the will. I love him, he thought. And am frightened of him. He tried to smile at Marcus, to reassure him, that whatever had happened, or was happening, was okay. But Marcus only stared back without expression.

"Martin's dead," Peter said decisively. "One of those couple things, I suppose. You know, one partner dies and the other follows shortly after with a broken heart." He stuck his finger in his mouth and made a retching sound. "Too clichéd. But Martin was never one to shy away from cliché." He smiled. "But then love makes fools of us all. Doesn't it?"

Marcus stared blankly at Peter. Without malice, Daniel wanted to believe. But couldn't.

"The next round begins now. If you don't want to play, then pack your things and leave."

Daniel felt dizzy; beneath him his legs worked, managed to

negotiate the distance. Then he was sitting. The toque lay in the middle of the table.

"You go first."

He'd looked at Peter, about to plead for another delay—and realized, up close, how etiolated Peter looked, hunched over, hands in lap, eyes sunken and dark. As if he hadn't slept in days. "Jesus, Peter, you look like shit."

"Fuck how I look." Raising his right hand from his lap, he pointed the snout of his gun at Daniel. "State your case."

Daniel was transfixed.

"Perhaps you'd better." Marcus's voice was even, unperturbed, as if he were urging a trip to the market.

Peter had had the gun all along. It wasn't Marcus, hadn't been Marcus. Daniel opened his mouth and snapped it shut; his mind raced in maddening circles. He couldn't take his eyes off the small dark "o" of the weapon's bore.

"Last chance." Peter cocked the gun.

"Don't! I . . . I don't want to die!"

"Not terribly convincing, but okay."

That hadn't been his reason. Daniel wanted to stop things, or at least slow them down. Instead, the scene seemed to accelerate, unfolding with horrifying speed.

"Alright," Peter said, "my go." He smiled crookedly. "So here's why I shouldn't be cast overboard, Daniel: even though you may not know it, I love you."

Love you? Daniel was astounded.

"Isn't that stupid?" Peter shook his head, as if at his own folly. "I don't suppose that's enough. But it's all I have." He swung the gun on Marcus. "Your turn."

"I love him, too," Marcus said. "And I think he loves me."

Peter nodded, as if he understood. But what the hell did he understand?

"Time to vote." With his free hand Peter pushed the slips of paper towards them.

Marcus scribbled; Peter did the same, writing awkwardly with his left hand, using the butt of the gun to keep the paper from moving. They put their votes in the toque. Neither made an attempt to hide what they'd written from Daniel: they'd voted against each other.

"I . . . I don't understand." Daniel felt like he was in shock.

"Vote." Peter swung the gun on him.

"That's what it's always been about," Marcus said. "You have to choose."

"Do it!" Perspiration had collected on Peter's forehead; he ran his finger up and down the trigger.

Daniel looked from one to the other, Peter's eyes tinged with madness, Marcus's unfathomable. Then he stared at the empty slip of paper. The pen was leaden in his hand. Peter reached across the table, placing the metal snout of the gun on Daniel's temple.

"You'd best do as he says, Daniel."

Jesus fucking Christ. They were crazy, both of them.

"Make your choice." Peter ground the barrel into Daniel's temple.

"Please," Marcus said. "For me."

Cupping his hand so they couldn't see, Daniel scrawled in small letters his own name, *daniel*, and added his slip to the hat.

"Now empty it," Peter said, the pressure from the gun unrelenting.

Daniel reached for the toque and upended it.

A slip fell out, then another. Then half a dozen all at once, more and more, hundreds of slips fluttering from the maw of the hat, falling like thick clotting flakes of snow, until a mound formed in the centre of the table. Still more slips tumbled out and accumulated in drifts, swirled, slipping over the edge to float into Daniel's lap and then tumble gently to the floor. And each slip was identical, inscribed in large, black letters with the same name, over and over: PETER.

Daniel heard a strangled gasp; the gun tumbled to the table, settled into the rat's nest of paper. He turned. Peter was gone, his seat empty.

He and Marcus were alone at the table.



The snowstorm dwindled, then petered out altogether. The world was fresh, unsullied.

Daniel stood at the side of the cabin, gathering logs from the woodpile until his arms were full. He turned. Sunlight glittered on the new fall, stung his eyes, making it bearable only for the briefest time. In front of the cabin the cars were gone, all of them, even Daniel's. As if they never existed. There was no sign of the drive or of the service road. Trees had filled in those spaces.

Is this the same world or a new one? Daniel wondered. There was no way of telling.

He trudged back through the drifts and climbed onto the front porch. Shouldering open the door, Daniel stamped the snow from his boots, walked the logs across the room and piled them on the andirons. Marcus sat in the corner, a blanket over his shoulders, playing with the gun, spinning the cylinder idly, his breath forming tenuous clouds. The electricity had gone with Peter. As had their phone and everything that ran on batteries. Daniel tore pages out of old magazines, crumpled them and shoved them under the logs along with the bit of kindling they had. He struck a match. Even though the lights wouldn't work, the logs caught obligingly.

"There," Daniel said wearily. "That should help."

They had enough logs to keep themselves alive for two weeks, maybe more; if they rationed, the food might last even longer.

"Do you love me?" Marcus asked.

The constant question was an annoyance, a background hum that wouldn't go away. But Daniel smiled obligingly and answered, "Yes."

It was the new game. That love would sustain them, keep them from vanishing like the others. It was their lifeboat.

"Promise?"

His steady assurances had done nothing to ameliorate Marcus's need. To blunt his jealousy and fear. He's scared, Daniel thought.

Been scared all along of not being loved.

“Of course I do.”

Marcus scrutinized him, seemed to be weighing the sincerity of his words; Daniel tried to smile reassuringly.

It's not his fault, Daniel tried to convince himself. Not completely. Didn't I wish for it, too? For them all to go away? Hasn't he only been doing what I'd wanted all along?

Marcus turned, stared out the window, spun the cylinder again.

“And me?” Daniel asked, his heart tripping in his chest. “Do you love me?”

“So much it hurts.”

Daniel let out his breath. He wanted to believe Marcus. After all, he was still here, the smell of burning wood in his nose, the spreading warmth of the fire creeping into his legs, a tingle in his arms left over from the weight of the logs. Alive. But would Marcus love him forever? Or was it only a matter of time before Daniel, too, would vanish, another distasteful memory erased?

A man in love, it seemed, must learn to live with uncertainty.

THE BACK SHED

Sitting with his back against the headboard of the bed he is struck by the way the moonlight slides obliquely through the window and across the back of Naomi's calves and shoulders, framing her. Black lines of shadow cast by the muntins divide her body into twelve unequal planes of light: he considers them, imagining the feel and texture each holds—a sculpted forearm, the plateau of her small shoulder blade, the slight curve of her hip—lingering on each extent until he learns it, knows it better than he knows those regions of his own body. Sheets lie rumpled around her, between them, bunched where she has pushed them away in her sleep; in this half-light the tiny patterns of chrysanthemums she likes so well are invisible.

She stirs, rolls onto her back. Her body is compact, narrow hips and small, jutting breasts with large nipples that cast thin shadows in the moonlight. Her hair is cropped close to the skull and dyed black. She is small and naked and perfect, and he feels his desire stirring.

He wants to reach out and touch her, to run his forefinger between her breasts, around them, imagines his hand a skiff drifting lightly across the surface of her skin. Leaning forward, he extends his arm, breaking into her light, shadow fingers hovering, about to descend—

—then stops, hand suspended, as night is sundered. A thin trail of fire outside his window, slicing from sky to earth, swallowed by the desert. *A meteorite*, he thinks, the afterimage still burning across his retinae.

Outside the sand glows silver in the moonlight and beyond a low hill he believes he can still make out a soft, inviting radiance where the finger of light has touched.

■

“Ron?” Naomi's voice is distant, sleep-filled.

“Mmm,” he answers, struggling into his jeans.

"Where are you going?"

"Out for a drive," he says. "I can't sleep."

"Oh." She is awake now, propped on her elbows, watching him with large, brown eyes as if she is studying him. "Would you like some company—"

"No," he says sharply, immediately regretting his tone, softening. "No. Thanks anyway. I need some time alone." He smiles, a lopsided thing, hoping to disguise his annoyance at her intrusion—and the sudden spur of guilt he experiences for refusing her company.

She stares at him a moment, blinks, rolls over, leaving him feeling as if he should make some amends. He is about to tell her he is sorry, about the light he has seen, perhaps invite her along. But her back is a wall whose purpose he cannot fathom. Instead he grabs his shirt from where it lays on a chair, pulls it on, steps quickly through the house and out the front door, the screen door banging against its aluminum frame.

The moon has set and it is dark. He is driving away from the ranch house, towards the spine of mountains where he had seen the meteorite strike. In his rearview mirror the house is a lonely, dark shadow. He has rented this place from Stott, in whose galleries he shows his sculptures. A retreat, Stott called it. It is a wooden one-storey affair, L-shaped, its windows long and wide, giving onto views of fifty miles of desert stretching to the foothills in the east and rolling dunes that conceal the house from the highway to the west. Isolation. Peace. Perfect lighting for his work. The foot of the L is where he has made his studio. Out here, theirs is the only house, theirs the only road, and when night closes in he can almost convince himself they are the last people on earth.

The desert surface is smooth, occasional rocks looming out of the night in his headlights, but he drives with caution, steering carefully around them. It is cold in the drafty truck, colder than he had expected, and he is sorry he has not brought his jacket with him. He thinks of Naomi lying in bed alone.

Should he have brought Naomi at all, he wonders.

When was the last time he sculpted her?

They have not really spoken since they arrived, only inconsequential, civil words of no importance. He knows now he shouldn't have mentioned children again, had forgotten the sting of her silences. Two miscarriages. Not his fault, really. He recognizes the signs, the pattern that plays itself out, a prelude to yet another breakup with her, feels it like a net closing around him. Since arriving she has been subdued and withdrawn, never entering his studio, showing no interest in his work; perhaps, he thinks, she is trying to please him, to provide him with the solitude he told her he craved. Yet her manner has the opposite effect, makes him edgy and uncertain, less tolerant than he should be. It is for her he has rented this place, but he cannot bring himself to explain this. Can't she see this? She understands his work has faltered, his ideas dried up, and probably believes they have come for that reason. But he has done it for her. Every day he sits before his sculpting table, but the pieces he executes feel lumpy and awkward under his leaden fingers, stale and unexciting. Sculptures of Naomi. One time they were beautiful, Naomi emerging like a wild and splendid creature from the clay, from the earth and water he kneaded patiently between his fingers. Back then, he'd believed he felt the way God must have felt, sculpting the first people.

Now, most he won't even cast.

The desert slides beneath him, a cold, dry plain of hard-packed earth and gravel. The truck skids slightly as he brings it to a stop. In the west, a few miles distant, an orange nimbus is visible above a dark mound. He puts the truck back in gear.

■

Standing on the lip of the crater he is sweating from the heat of the broken thing that lies almost completely buried, watching its colour slowly leeching away into the night as if it were dying. His clothes are dirty and his hands are scratched in half a dozen places

from his scramble up the crater's slope. He squats, uncertain what to do, staring at the thing buried in the sand, at its smooth, machined edges. It is a large cylinder, at least twenty metres in length, though it is hard to tell because its nose is buried. His heart beats quickly.

Then he remembers the military range a hundred and twenty miles to the southeast. *A missile*, he thinks, *just a missile*, and his heart settles back into its regular rhythm.

He chastises himself for letting his imagination get the better of him, then wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve. He half slides, half walks down the loose debris of the slope, stumbling near the bottom, losing his balance, falling to one knee. Steadying himself against the incline he rises and curses, shaking the sand from his jeans, and swings around to where he's left his truck.

He takes one step then stops.

In the headlights a figure sits cross-legged.

■

His throat constricts in horror.

It is a dream, he thinks, still not believing what has just happened. His clothes lie in a pile next to him, and he stands naked and shivering in the desert night. He struggles to get his leg into his jeans. *Soon, I will wake up*. He pulls on his shirt and boots.

From the back of the truck he retrieves an old blanket, and in this he wraps—

What?

Her, he thinks, remembering the hard, cold ground on his back, the softness of her above. Of warm, inhumanly smooth skin against his. Of the shape of thighs and breasts and belly, moving and rocking in time with his motion, knees digging into his sides so hard he had to gasp for breath. The emptiness of impossibly large eyes, black eyes without irises, like the dark between stars.

Or has he only imagined these things? She is completely concealed in the blanket now. He lifts her, and in his arms she is light, barely

there at all. Then she stirs and his heart seems to falter. Quickly he opens the tailgate and places her on the floor next to the spare. He closes the gate, climbs into the driver's seat and starts the engine.

The night speeds towards him as he grips the wheel, the truck flying over ruts and past jagged tongues of rock, his senses still shocked into numbness by that . . . that moment, mind agog at what he has done, at what *it* has made him do. *It made me*, he tells himself. *I was helpless*. But he is not sure he believes this, and the notion brings him little comfort. *Yes, a dream*. And he seizes on this thought as a drowning man would a piece of flotsam, focussing on it until he can almost believe that none of it has happened, that the bundle wrapped in blankets in the back of his truck will not be there when he gets home.



At the far end of the house, attached to the foot of the L, is a small, windowless shed built of greying wood. Its door is secured with an old padlock for which he could find no key; but in his studio, behind an armoire, he had discovered a low plywood door with a bolt that opened into the shed. He uses the shed as his storeroom, stacking supplies on warped, rickety shelves: bags of terra cotta, stoneware and plastelene clays; tins of ferro cement, vinyl-concrete and epoxies; sacks of grog, vermiculite and fibreglass strands; rolls of soft aluminum wire and varied-width steel pipes.

Now he cleans away a space, struggling with unwieldy sacks and boxes, grunting as he drags them to the side, heaves others onto shelves that creak and complain about the weight. He places an old cot and sleeping bag in the tiny room, moving quietly, afraid of any sound that might intrude upon Naomi's sleep. He feels as if he's slightly drunk, observing his movements from a distance, detached and unafraid, his heart thumping hollowly in his chest, blood singing in his ears—and something else, something unexpected.

He has an erection.

This thing—*she*—sits before him, staring at him with open eyes. He is staggered by a wash of desire, barely able to contain his excitement as he stands over her, unable to recall ever feeling this compelling, this desperate an urge.

He is intoxicated, and somewhere a small thought troubles him: Why? Why is he doing this? But the puzzlement lingers only momentarily before it, too, flees to a remote corner of his consciousness, chased there by wave after wave of longing that threaten to drown him.

Stepping into the shed, he pulls the door shut after him.



Sometime later he closes and bolts the door to the shed.

My God, he thinks, *What am I doing?*

His hands tremble, and he can taste his bile rising. He cannot tell Naomi. Not now. Perhaps later. He wants to, and thinks he might, but wonders what he could tell her, what he could possibly say.

He burns with shame at this thought, as if it were a hackneyed, commonplace betrayal. But he has betrayed her with . . . with what? *No*, he thinks, *I had no choice. It is not the same. No different*, he reasons, *than if he had been drugged or coerced.*

He steps into the shower, his body wrapped in a pungent, aromatic scent, like the odour of warm cinnamon. He shivers underneath the spray of the scalding water, thinking of that small form that lies in the back room, recalling suddenly her taste that reminds him of peach, the sensation of his skin pressed against hers, horrified as his body begins once more to respond.



At breakfast he stares at the toast and grapefruit Naomi sets before him, averting his eyes. He's said nothing to her yet.

"Did you have a good drive?"

He feels his face flush, wonders if she can see his guilt, his fear. "Yeah, fine."

"I heard you working last night when you got in. Maybe the drive did you some good."

His heart bangs fearfully against his ribcage. *What did she hear?* he wonders. *Does she know?* Looking away, he bites into a cold slice of toast, chewing it mechanically. He wants to tell her, to show her the thing he has in the back shed. But he is afraid. Of what? Of discovery? Of losing it?

"I was thinking that maybe we could go away this weekend," she says, leaning against the counter, holding the other grapefruit half in her left hand, paring knife in her right. "Book a room in town and see a play or something."

No, he thinks. *Not now. Not yet.* "I'd rather not. I just started a new piece, and it's going pretty well. I really don't want to leave it right now." He studies her expression, but it's blank. "You know the trouble I've been having . . ."

She turns back to the sink, laying the grapefruit on the counter, and he can see the muscles beneath her tee-shirt bunched. She begins to cut the sections.

"A couple of weeks from now. Okay?"

She lifts her shoulders in a shrug. "Whatever." Her voice is flat, toneless.

He feels as if something has just been closed off from him. A door shut. *Tell her*, he thinks. *She doesn't know. Tell her before she finds out.* But instead he drops the crust on his plate, pushes back his chair, its legs scraping across the linoleum. "Back to work," he says, and turns towards his studio.

■

Two days have passed and still he has not told Naomi. He spends most of his waking hours in his studio, *working* he tells Naomi, fearing that she sees through him and his lie. But, he convinces himself, it is

not really such a lie, for, to his surprise, he is working.

He sculpts *her*, that small figure concealed in the back shed, though curiously he cannot seem to picture her clearly in his mind, finding that she is a shadow, a dream, indistinct and nebulous when he is not in her presence. But his fingers know her, know the curves and hollows of her body, all the soft lines and angles of her form, know the sensual movement of muscle beneath impossibly smooth skin (surprising himself at the remembered touch, her skin as cool and smooth as marble), know it far better than his eye ever could, more accurately than his mind could ever imagine. Something has suddenly given way inside him, and each time he kneads and wedges the moist clay on the welding table he can feel in the formless lump of material her incipient figure, the idea of her impatient to emerge. And when he sculpts his hands move quickly and with assurance, rolling, pinching and moulding as he never has before, the figures almost fashioning themselves without his will, as if the act of surrender is all that is required of him, the ability to lose himself utterly in her.

But when he stops, when he no longer has the coolness of wet clay between his fingers, his hands begin to shake, and his mind is filled with nothing but the *fact* of her, that thing hidden behind the plywood door, the force of it in his studio, feeling its insistent pull like a tug on his sleeve. A great self-loathing overwhelms him then, making him nauseous, his chest growing heavy, his legs suddenly trembling, and he must leave his studio, if only momentarily, before he collapses beneath the weight of what he has done.

During these times he knows Naomi watches him wander through the rest of the house in her mute, dispassionate way, never saying a word to him, responding briefly only when she is spoken to, a sharp silence having opened between them like a wound. He feels the touch of her eyes, judging and condemning him, though when he tries to catch her at it he meets nothing but her disinterested gaze. He hates this, hating himself and Naomi, too, for making him feel humiliation and remorse, for forcing him into pretending nothing is wrong, one moment wishing for her to leave, the next frightened she

might, above all fearing the edge of her anger, of what she will do when she finds out.

He works and so avoids that moment, leaving the studio only when he feels dizzy with hunger or fatigued beyond endurance—and for those brief times when he loses all sense of himself in that small, dark shed.

■

He remembers an old biology text he sometimes uses for the pictures it has of animals. In it he finds the section for which he's been looking. With his finger he traces the tri-coloured diagram, a double helix connected by strands, nucleotide bases in pairs, twisted in a familiar pattern: DNA. A genetic blueprint. One that defines physical characteristics, intelligence, sexuality, inherited disorders—and behaviour? Does it dictate that as well, he wonders. Can he act in no other way? The boundaries, the book says, are still uncertain, still unclear. Nature and nurture, wrapped up in this perplexing strand.

■

She does not eat nor, as far as he can tell, sleep.

Three days now, yet she seems no worse, displays no signs of hunger or fatigue, is always there, waiting for him to open that door. He has proffered her food, but when he returns the plate is always untouched. It is as if she draws all the sustenance she needs from him, from his fires, from those moments in which he immerses himself completely in her. This idea scares him, makes him wonder if she is somehow sucking him dry. He imagines himself as a husk, an empty skin like those the snakes leave scattered in their yard. It is unrestrained desire, addictive, without diffidence or reserve, and now he understands why he must hide her, why he has no choice.

She is silent, makes no attempt at communication—at least none he remembers. He has taken to calling her his muse.



It is night, and he has left the studio to make himself something to eat, exhausted after working until his back ached and his arms felt as if they were wrapped in a thick layer of the dark, wet clay. He sits on the couch chewing listlessly on a sandwich, thinking of Naomi who is asleep in their bed, his head heavy and difficult to support, nodding now, drifting in and out of sleep . . .

. . . then waking, red-eyed sun burning through the window, a throbbing in his skull as if he were hung over. He is stiff from where he has slept, half-eaten sandwich in his lap, stomach growling loudly in the silence of the morning. It is Sunday, he realizes. The weekend has passed and Naomi has said nothing more about going away. *Breakfast*, he thinks. *I'll surprise her. I'll make breakfast for the both of us.* Silently he rises, moves towards their room, imagining her caught in the tangle of sheets.

But she is not there, and for a moment he is confused. Then he turns, stares at his studio, at the door he always carefully shuts, that now hangs open. He thinks of that tiny plywood door, of Naomi.

He rushes across the room into the studio, nearly colliding with Naomi as he enters. She backs up a step. Her face is ashen, an expression of shock and revulsion etched on her features, and he looks to the back of his studio, but can see the bolt is still in place, the door shut, no sign that anyone has been into the shed, but knows this means nothing. He turns to her, and for a moment they regard one another, his face colouring, embarrassed at first, then anger rising, uncertain yet how to react, while she stands there, eyes locked on his. "You bastard," she says, twisting the words between her lips as if they poison her tongue. She pushes past him and out the studio, while he stands there, angry and confused and fearful.

The front door slams and he can hear the truck engine roar to life, realizing he has moved across the room, now stands with his back to the plywood door, heart hammering in his chest, relief mingling with anger, grateful that the storm had not been as severe

as he had expected.

She must know, he thinks. *Why else would she have left?*

On the tables around the room the small grey faces of his work regard him silently.

And then he understands.

For the first time he sees his work as if through Naomi's eyes: figures with grotesquely twisted limbs, sagging breasts and engorged genitalia, distended eyes, clawed feet and hands, ravenous, devouring mouths, obscene caricatures of her, of Naomi, of the two of them together, coupling like wild beasts in the night.



For a time he sits alone in the gloom of the empty house, on their bed, his clothes caked and stiff with clay, waiting. He does not really believe Naomi will return, but allows himself this hope, convincing himself that he will tell her everything if only she comes back.

But she does not.

It is too late now, the sun finally gone, hours since she departed. He knows her moods, knows that if she has not returned by now she will not be coming back at all.

Briefly, he thinks about his studio, about his work, about that cramped, dark shed. Despite his exhaustion, his body begins to move in expectation, anticipation, a body no longer his own. A loathing fills him, burning his insides like acid; he pushes away from their bed and stumbles out the door, to get away, to put as much distance as possible between himself and that shed. He staggers, stiff-legged, into the night, over the low rolling dunes to the west, away from the mountains, away from the house, pushing one leg before the other until in the darkness he trips on an outcrop of stone and falls, crying in agony as he tears the skin on palms and cheek against earth that feels like sandpaper.

He lies there, unmoving, eyes shut tightly against the pain, mind numb and blank, whimpering in the cool air. Images well

up, colliding with one another, whirling slowly round the edge of his understanding, a disorienting jumble of almost-seen faces and background lights, a wobbling top about to fall over.

He rolls over onto his back, crossing arms over chest, and one image swims to the surface, crowding out everything else, that blazing line of fire; it is so real he believes he is seeing it happen again, watching it span earth and sky, listening to the muffled impact as it burrows deeply into desert sand. . . .

But something is wrong. He sits up and rubs his eyes, thinking that he is not remembering quite right, realizing all at once that he heard no sound that first time, none at all. But he heard it just now, clearly, as if it had struck close by. He pushes himself to his feet and shakes his head to clear it, his mind still fogged, his thoughts confused, looking back in the direction he has just come, towards the house, back to where a yellow nimbus glows in the night.

The house, he thinks.

He is afraid, recalling that other bloom of light, the one he had seen rising from the crater. His stomach churns with a nauseating fear, and he breaks into a run, scrambling up and down the slopes of dirt and rock and sand in his path, thinking, *No, it can't be*. A wild, uncontrollable fear pierces his chest like a needle. He is terrified that *they* have returned—that they will take her back.

He runs heedlessly, stumbling and almost falling, driven by fear and rage, the house still out of sight, pausing at the summit of each rise to see if he can make out what is happening, crying with frustration when he can't.

And when he crests the last hill he stops.

Down the road he sees the familiar tail lights of a truck speeding off into the night. Before him, his house burns, throwing a bright dome up to the sky, flames licking the air. As he watches the big picture window seems to waver momentarily, as if its surface is made of water, then abruptly explodes outwards with a rush of flame. The roof sags, and its splintering beams groan like a dying beast, giving way, caving in, the lone wall of his studio now left. For a moment it

hangs there, as if supported by an invisible hand. Then it collapses atop the wooden shed, lifting a great flurry of sparks to the sky with a roar, almost masking an unearthly howl that makes his bones crack and echoes in the empty night.



The invasion has begun.

He has seen the signs everywhere. In cities large and small. In faces like his. Haunted faces that look away when he tries to catch their eyes. Faces above coveralls and suits and institutional whites. He has studied them, the endlessly replicating patterns of their movements as they follow their own programs while living in the illusion of choice, clocks winding down. The paradigm betrays itself, its purpose, again and again. Stimulus, response. Testing of a carefully programmed pattern, an analysis to make sure the genetic transcription is still workable, universal, the end product governed according to its specifications.

He has returned to the desert.

He squats on the hard, unforgiving earth. Behind, the truck's engine cools, parts drawing tighter, small sounds of complaint. He rises, stares at the cruciform shapes of cacti and humps of distant hills that break and roll towards the mountains. He has driven most of the night, crossing and recrossing the terrain in ever wider patterns, but the crater has disappeared.

The papers have reported an unusually high number of meteorites this summer.

He closes his eyes and imagines Naomi. He envisions her naked and in their bed. In silvered moonlight she is exquisite, perfect, white squares of flesh and sharp shadows. His chest constricts abruptly, and for a moment breathing is impossible. He feels dizzy, overcome . . . anticipates the rush of blood and excitement, the mounting tension of his hunger for her, for Naomi, a desperate need to possess her.

But he is numb. Knows he has been programmed to be numb.

He releases his breath.

There is nothing.

No matter how much he thirsts for her, for their lost desire, he regards her serenely, abstractly, as if he were anaesthetized, without passion, as if she were a painting or a sculpture, no longer flesh and blood, but as empty as a clod of earth, an inanimate lump of clay.

Naomi has fled.

He stares at the sky, and thinks of that small wooden shed; his heart beats faster, and his desire rises like a swollen river overflowing its banks, threatening to obliterate him. He remembers, as if *she* lay before him now, and he wants to sob.

Overhead, the sky is slit open, and a finger of light beckons.

THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

To love someone is to isolate him from the world, wipe out every trace of him, dispossess him of his shadow, drag him into a murderous future. It is to circle around the other like a dead star and absorb him into a black light.

—Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*

The alarm klaxon ululated like a bereaved lover. An arm's length away, a fading circular welt marked the spot where the iris to the command module had once been. I watched the bruise slip through gradations of hue, the characteristic violet of new nanoscaffolding bleeding towards the necrotic grey of the rest of the hull, a time-lapsed wound healing over. I blinked and blinked again—and lost the after-image of that metre-wide oval for good. I touched the spot, ran my fingers across the place where the air-lock had been. Flawless.

"I . . . I don't understand." Renée's words were barely audible over the alarm. She stared at the skin of the ship, floating there in her rumpled tee-shirt and shorts, zero-g buoying her short, dark hair. Beautiful even in the midst of catastrophe. Squinting at the hull, she furrowed her brow, an effort, it seemed, to marshal her thoughts. Poor Renée. She'd never taken well to stasis. "How can we get to the command module?"

"We can't," Beck answered levelly. Hanging on to a grab bar, he looked at the hull dispassionately, one hand draped around the small of Renée's back, drawing her towards him—and away from me. "It's gone." Although I'd already reached the same conclusion, my stomach knotted at hearing it said aloud. "There's no need for a hatch that leads nowhere," Beck continued sonorously, like a judge delivering his sentence. "Therefore the ship's decided to strengthen the hull."

"Maybe it's still there," Renée said hopefully. "Maybe there was just a rupture in the access tube—"

"No." Beck pointed to the lone display aft in our cramped cabin. It was filled with the frantic yellow glare of dire warnings and flashing red of failures. "CDS, communications, telemetry, navigation," he said, pulling Renée closer, then wrapping her hand around the bar.

"It's all offline."

Renée was fully awake now. You could see the panic bubbling up in her eyes. She understood what the loss of the command module meant: there was no engine or attitude control and, with the antennae array gone, no way of radioing for help. Not that they would send a rescue ship for three lonely souls. Not here, millions of clicks from anywhere.

Beck spun around and launched himself towards the stasis cells we recently vacated, catching hold of a grab bar near his locker. Pulling out a static pad, he velcroed it on the bulwark forward of his cell. He opened his duffel and began methodically going through his stuff, examining each item before returning it to the webbed pockets inside the duffel or sticking it on the pad, sorting his stuff the way a kid might separate his toys into two piles. At first I thought maybe Beck had flipped out. Christ, I was close to flipping out myself. But then I thought, *Beck? No way*. He was practically an automaton. If he had any emotions, he'd kept them in his pocket the last two years. Of the three of us, he'd be the last to crack.

Renée turned to me, looking every bit as scared as I was. "Lowery, what are we going to do?"

I felt a flush of satisfaction. Renée had asked me. *Not Beck*. Only the satisfaction evaporated just as quickly: I had no answer. All I could do was hang there, feeling stupid and useless and frightened. For a moment I was seized by an irrational desire to wrap my arms around her the way I once did. To comfort her and find my own comfort in return. I felt an excruciating pang of homesickness for her touch, felt nerve endings tingling with imprinted memories of my fingers on her skin, my sweat mingling with hers—

"I have a plan," Beck answered without turning to face us.

His words were a hammer through glass, shattering the moment. I spun around to face him, infuriated. "*A plan?* Of course you have a *plan*. You always have a fucking plan!"

Beck paused in his sorting and looked at me, his expression puzzled. As if my anger and fear were an inappropriate response to

this situation. “Yes,” he said simply.

“Jesus, we don’t even know what happened—”

“Meteoroid strike.”

“What?”

“A meteoroid sheared off the command module.”

He was guessing. “You don’t know shit.”

“What else could have caused the damage?”

The damage. He said it as if we were discussing a fender bender. “How the hell should I know?”

“Unlikely as it may seem, that’s the theory that best fits the observations.”

“What observations? CDS is gone, including all the major data stores. We’ve no records of the impact—if it even was an impact. All we know is the entire command module is gone.”

Beck pointed to the aft viewport. “If you look outside you’ll see we’re spinning. Precisely the kind of momentum that would be imparted if something big hit the command module.” He pointed to the erstwhile air lock forward. “That’s the weakest structural point on the shuttle, the place the shuttle would fracture in such an impact.” He resumed his sorting, paying me only half a mind. “The simplest theory that fits the facts is always the most likely.” He paused to look at me. “Unless you have a better theory?” Beck was silent for a beat. “I didn’t think so.” He turned his back on me again, sticking more stuff on the mat. “Thousands of ships have shuttled back and forth to the Oort cloud. An event like this was inevitable. We should be thankful that we’re alive.”

“That’s comforting.”

My sarcasm, as usual, was lost on him. Instead, Beck busied himself going through his toilet kit now, placing selected items—a foil-backed packet containing pills, a small mirror, a pair of folding scissors—on the static mat, putting others—depilatory gel, aspirin, a small roll of gauze—back in the bag, separating them according to a pattern that only he could appreciate. What the hell was he doing?

I pushed away from the hull and floated over, grabbing a bar so

that I stopped face-to-face with him. He glanced at me, then reached into his duffel again. "Can you stop that shit for a minute!" I seized his wrist and pulled it out of the bag.

Beck twisted his arm nonchalantly, breaking my grip as easily as he would have a child's. "There's no need to panic, Lowery." He glanced at Renée, his look conveying the slightest hint of sadness, for me, for my unseemly outburst. "We have enough life support for two days."

That only stoked my anger. I let go of the handhold and balled my fists. I wanted to pummel his implacable face until he showed a sign, any sign, of emotion, of anger, of fear. Of contrition.

"Lowery!" It was Renée's turn to yell. "This isn't going to solve anything!"

I almost laughed aloud; it seemed even here, even now, the three of us couldn't escape our clichés. Renée moved behind me and grabbed my arm the way I had Beck's, pulling it back. Renée was tall, athletic, blessed with natural grace and strength; I, on the other hand, had always been chosen last for pick-up teams. Her fingers pressed deeply into my flesh. I tried not to wince.

"We need to concentrate on how to get out of this mess," Beck said reasonably. "Not on what caused it."

"He's right." Renée drew herself past me, casually catching hold of Beck's arm, not like she had mine, but tenderly. Beck slipped his arm around her waist again. They hung there, their heads almost touching, staring at me, two shiny people, a perfect couple, their beauty like a slap in the face.

The alarm klaxon howled relentlessly.

"Lowery," Beck said, releasing Renée and turning back to his locker. "Be a good fellow and do something about that hideous noise, will you?"

Exactly when he assumed command I couldn't say. I guess I missed the vote.

■

We'd left for the stars together, Renée and I. Two young engineers, barely out of college, on a romantic adventure. With both of us pulling two-year contracts, we'd return set for life. I had been swept up in her naïve passion, her bright belief in the future. What I had thought was *our* future. So the stars it was. . . .

Only it hadn't turned out that way at all.

Eleven months after our arrival at Alpha-L station everything fell apart. Another stupid argument had us avoiding each other for a week—not a simple feat on a cramped station built to house only a couple of hundred people. To be honest, I can't even remember why we'd fought in the first place. When she'd broken the ice, inviting me for dinner, I'd assumed it was to apologize. I'd been prepared for a tearful reconciliation, and, later, the satisfying warmth of a shared bed. But after a gloomy dinner in a tiny common area, replete with long stretches of awkward silences and furtive looks, she averted her eyes. Neatly folded and refolded her used napkin. Poked the largely uneaten piece of pie on her plate with her fork. All evening she had talked in an off-hand way about us, circling round and round the topic of our relationship like a carrion bird. Waiting, I suppose, for the last bleary-eyed miner to leave us alone. The moment he was gone, she alighted.

"This isn't going anywhere," she said, putting down her fork and frowning.

"No," I answered, thinking she meant the long forgotten point of contention. "If you weren't so damned stubborn—"

"I've met someone else."

I felt like I'd smashed into a wall. She spoke some more, but nothing she said registered. An eye-blink later (or so it seemed) I was standing outside the door to her cubby, not sure how we'd even gotten there. "Hey, no hard feelings. The station is too small for that. Okay, Lowery?" There was a crumb of pie crust on her upper lip that I wanted to brush off. "Okay?"

I guess I was in shock, because I took a step forward, an automatic gesture, moving towards the rumpled sheets of her bed, as I had on

so many other occasions. Only this time she straight-armed me, her palm slamming into my sternum, making me gasp and stagger backwards. Although the resulting bruise was tender for weeks, what hurt more was the way her beautiful sculpted features twisted into an unmistakable look of disgust before she swung the door shut in my face.

I remember stumbling down the corridor back to my own miserable little cubby, thinking, *She'll come round*, but knowing in my heart it was a comfortless lie.



We were alone, Beck having retreated to the aft propulsion module after ordering us to go through our lockers—and all the other lockers in the cabin, of which there were a considerable number—and add anything that might contain metal to his mat.

“It’s pointless,” I said to Renée.

She ignored me and continued to root through her locker, as Beck had instructed her, occasionally adding something to the items on the mat. “Did you hear me?”

Renée separated her stuff carefully, methodically. “I heard you, Lowery. Now shut up and get to work.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that we’re going to die?” I asked.

“Life support is in the green. Propulsion is still online. As are most of the attitude and articulation subsystems.” Renée parroted Beck’s earlier pronouncements tonelessly, like a mantra, not looking at me.

“Useless without nav.”

She looked up, her duffel open and in her hand. “We can reconstitute any command systems we need, including the nav computer, using the GPAD.”

I glanced at the aft hatch. Beck was back there, playing around with the GPAD, our *General Purpose Assembler/Disassembler*, a series of interconnected tubs, secured near the tertiary engine shield. Inside

was an array of tiny seeds, nanomachines that could, in theory, rebuild any of the command/data systems. In lieu of the triply redundant systems that had been swept away with the command module, we still had the GPAD. All we had to do was program the request and feed in the right kind of raw material. That was why Beck had us sorting through this stuff. To see if we had the requisite molecules. But I knew it was a vain, foolish hope. As foolish as my belief had been that Renée would someday return to me. “Won’t work.”

“That’s your response to everything,” Renée snapped. “If you want to lie down and die, go ahead. Just don’t dig a grave for me.”

“I’m only being realistic.”

“Pessimistic is more like it.”

I shrugged. “God knows how far off course we are. Even if we get the nav computer back, we still have to feed it navigational data. The antennae arrays went with the command module. And we don’t have the material to reconstitute them. Most of what we have here is carbon-based. Even if we could find enough metal for the antennae, there’s no way of installing and calibrating them. So scratch any hope of communication and navigational data.” I hadn’t bothered pointing this out to Beck. I smirked—and it struck me that I was smirking not only at Beck’s oversight but at the certainty of my own death.

“We’ve got optics. It won’t be perfect, but it doesn’t need to be. As long as we can get back to where we’re likely to be spotted . . .”

I’d completely forgotten about optics. But Beck hadn’t. I felt foolish. Nav *could* plot a course based solely on optical sightings; it had hard-coded star-maps. Once the optical data was loaded into memory—

Like a guttering candle, that hope flickered and died. The nav computer, like other essential control systems, was radiation-hardened for the rigors of a long haul. It used good old-fashioned ferrite-core memory. The GPAD would require only micrograms, but I doubted there were even trace amounts of iron or iron-bearing alloys on the shuttle. Iron and steel were too unwieldy, too heavy, for space. There were far better, cheaper and more efficient materials

available. Materials like those used in the skin of the ship, hundreds of times harder than diamond. Who the hell used iron for anything anymore?

I watched Renée sort through her clothes, examining buttons and clasps and zippers.

Beck was smart. Smart enough to have figured this out, too. Why hadn't he told Renée? Was he trying to shield her from despair as long as possible? That wasn't like him. And it wasn't right to hide it from her. "It's no good," I said. "We don't have enough—"

"You love making yourself miserable." Renée spun around, cutting me off. She glared at me. "And when there's nothing to make you miserable, you create your own miseries."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Why are you here, Lowery? On this shuttle with us?"

"You know why."

"Tell me."

"My contract ended the same time as yours."

"But why this shuttle, Lowery? Why not the next?"

"And wait another month on the God-forsaken station because of some small awkwardness between us?"

"Small awkwardness." She laughed, and it was a blade sliding between my ribs. "You have a gift for understatement. For the last year you've been playing martyr. Making my life miserable in a thousand small ways. The looks, the muttered comments, the constant barbs at Beck's expense."

"Don't worry. He's oblivious."

"Not as oblivious as you think."

I was momentarily taken aback by the notion that Beck might have had feelings that I could hurt. Then I remembered I didn't give a damn how he felt. "If I am that way, maybe it's with good reason."

Renée shook her head sadly. "Still the martyr." She paused then, a single breath. "You think you love me, but you don't. You only love the *idea* of being in love with me." She turned back to her locker.

It wasn't true. Still, my cheeks grew warm. "And I suppose Beck

loves you? He barely qualifies as human.” I said it loudly enough so that he couldn’t help but hear. “How could he love you?”

Renée looked up at me, clutching her half-empty duffel to her chest. I could tell by her expression that I’d struck a nerve. “He’s reserved. But at least he’s willing to chance things. To chance his feelings. In three years how often did you say ‘I love you’ to me? Three, maybe four times. And not convincingly. Beck said it to me the first time we met.”

The first time? It was the day we arrived at Alpha-L, three newbies in a briefing. Afterwards, we decided to have a drink in the lounge, for good luck. I remember going to the bar to collect the second round. It was the only moment they were alone. Beck would have known we were a couple then. And Renée . . . she said nothing about it afterwards when we returned to her cubby, excited about our adventure, anxious to make love for the first time on the station. I had held on to the memory of that astonishing afternoon, treasuring it, citing it over and over as proof that we *were* good together. That we were meant to be together. Only now Beck had sullied even that. “And you believed him?” My voice was on the edge of cracking. “A man who professes his love the first time he meets you?”

“He’s convinced me since.” She jammed her duffel back into her locker violently.

I shook my head. “All because he tells you he loves you.”

She shrugged. “Why not? What other way is there to tell? You can’t prove or disprove what’s in someone’s heart. At some point, you have to take their word.”

“Christ, Renée! That’s my point exactly. Beck insists on a proof for everything. *Everything*. That’s just the way his mind works.” Renée looked at me with contempt, but there was something else there, too, a glimmer of self-doubt. She knew I was right in this. I hovered closer, trying to press my advantage. “You’ve seen how he treats other people, how he interacts with them. He works out relationships the same way he works out equations, loading appropriate values into variables to come up with the solution he wants. Saying he loves you

is merely his means to an end. He doesn't understand love. And he certainly isn't capable of loving you."

"And you are?"

"Yes."

I think her question and my response surprised us both. She looked into my eyes, her expression neither angry nor dismissive as I had expected; instead I felt she was trying to weigh the strength of my conviction. "I don't want to make the same mistake twice," she said, turning her back on me, snapping the lid of her locker closed and opening the one next to it.

I watched her rifle the next locker, replaying her words in my mind. There had been no rancour in her tone. Had it been an invitation? She kicked off, gliding past the stasis cells, beneath the long-gone forward hatch, adding a single coil of cabling to the detritus on the static mat. The collection of items was small, and I already knew that none contained a speck of precious iron. If we were going to die, there was no point in holding back.

"I love you, Renée. I'll always love you."

"Please, Lowery." She turned to face me; for the first time I noticed the dark circles under her eyes, the exhausted look on her face. "We don't have time for this. We've got to search these lockers."

She was still clinging to the absurd notion that we might be saved. "There's no point," I said, angry that this nonsensical make-work of Beck's was thwarting what might be my last chance of a reconciliation. "We're going to die. And Beck knows that, too."

She shook her head. "Beck doesn't do things without a reason. You said so yourself. If he thought this was pointless, why would he have us bother?"

"Because—" I began, then stopped abruptly.

Renée was right. It wasn't in character for Beck. Not the Beck I knew. I looked at the mat, at the unusable junk we'd accumulated. I felt a strange dislocation; a chill prickled the bare skin on the back of my arms, as if a cold breeze had gusted through the cabin. *Beck doesn't do things without a reason.* So why would he want to keep us

busy up here while he went aft? Then, like the last tumbler of a lock falling into place, I got it.

There *was* enough iron on the shuttle.

I stared at Renée, looking for it in her eyes, to see if she knew. To see if she'd been in on it from the start. But I couldn't detect anything.

"I know what he's up to." I watched Renée's face carefully, trying to gauge her reaction. She looked puzzled. Her mouth opened then closed. Her eyes flicked up, past my shoulder towards the aft hatch, then went wide. I swung around—

Beck glided soundlessly towards me, his eyes lit with murderous intent. In his right hand he clutched a long-bladed knife of dark glass. I froze, staring at that knife, its edge honed to an inhuman sharpness. In the short time Beck had been back there it was the best weapon the GPAD could construct. He cocked his arm, readying to slash at the artery in my throat.

I don't remember ordering my legs to kick away from the forward bulwark, but I must have. I shot towards Beck. The space was cramped, only a few metres across, and there was nowhere else to go. Beck was bigger and stronger and faster. Only for the next few seconds he was a captive of his inertia. . . .

I bounced off him like a ball—but a ball moving at twice his velocity. Beck was caught by surprise, hesitated; he twisted around, cut an arc through the air with the knife. I was already gone, having ricocheted off my own stasis cell, angling towards the aft hatch. In a moment I was through, catching the grab bar just inside the propulsion module and pounding the flat of my palm against the emergency seal button. The hatch began dilating. Alarm klaxons ululated angrily. The last thing I saw was Beck's hate-filled, crimson face bearing down on me as the opening grew smaller and smaller.

But he was too late, too late for anything.

■

I hadn't felt the cut at all. Perhaps it was the surgical precision of Beck's blade; or perhaps it had been the rush of adrenalin, blotting out everything but the need for flight. A precise slash along the outside of my thigh bled steadily. Small globules drifted around the cabin like tiny sanguine planets. How ironic, I thought. Here I was, leaking precious iron-laden blood as Beck had wanted me to, while he and Renée were trapped on the other side of the hatch. I batted a large bubble and it shattered into a dozen small red spheres that wobbled away.

How much blood would it take?

Beck would have taken a sample of his own blood, submitted it to the GPAD and run the cold equations. Determined the exact amount of iron required. And he would have concluded that it would require a death.

I made a rat's nest of the wiring in two of three EVA suits clipped to the wall. Then I struggled into the third one. Beck, for all his faults, was smart. It was only a matter of time before he figured out how to override the emergency lockdown. Or until the ship decided the danger had passed, that the atmosphere was safely equalized on both sides of the hatch and reenabled access.

The docking airlock had gone with the command module; but there was another back here, a small emergency airlock opposite the GPAD. I keyed in the sequence to dilate the inner door. Inside a large square button flashed green, waiting for the final command. I stepped in, then turned and stared at the translucent sides of the GPAD. I thought about trashing it, destroying their last hope. Instead, I punched the green button. The inner door sealed; the lock cycled out the atmosphere, then the outer door dilated to reveal a heartbreaking scattering of stars.

■

I clung to the hull. The shuttle spun, the heavens reeling around it in the slow, vertiginous roll. I hadn't bothered clipping myself to

the safety lines; the gentle tug of centrifugal force tried to pry me from the hull. I squeezed my eyes shut against the spin of nausea.

"Lowery?"

Renée's small voice sounded in the earpiece.

"Can you hear me? I'm in the propulsion module."

I opened my eyes and, careful to keep them fixed on the hull, inched over to the port near the airlock; Renée's face was framed in the small pane. She wore a headset.

"I didn't know. I swear. Beck . . . Beck's told me what it was all about."

I opened the transmit channel and there was the subtle, characteristic change in the ambient.

"Lowery!" She banged on the small window with her fist. "Talk to me!"

"I'm here." We stared at one another, no more than a heartbeat apart.

"I'm sorry." Her voice hung there in the void, begging forgiveness. "Beck's sorry. He's done the calculations. We can manufacture the equipment, needles, catheters, blood sacs. We'll draw blood from all three of us. It'll leave us anaemic, but Beck says it's unlikely to be fatal."

Was she telling the truth? Or was Beck crouched on the other side of the hatch with his knife?

"Lowery, come back inside."

"Why should I?"

She hesitated. "Beck and I talked. He understands now."

"Understands what?"

"That . . ." She lowered her gaze. "That I don't love him."

As absurd as it was, I felt a momentary surge of hope. She didn't love him. My thigh throbbed, a steady *beat beat beat* in time to the rhythm of my heart. "What are you saying?"

"David, please." She turned her head, as if she were trying to see if Beck was still there, behind her. Maybe he was or maybe he wasn't. There was no way I could tell. She looked back. "It's you . . . I love you."

The muscles in my arms contracted involuntarily. I had to squeeze the handholds with all my might to keep from reaching out to the button that would begin the cycle to open the outer airlock. She loved me. Or was it a lie, another betrayal?

"It's too complicated," I said, shaking my head. "In any experiment you have to cut down on the variables, to isolate the thing that you want to study."

"What are you talking about?"

"Beck would understand."

"David, please! You're not making sense."

"Love," I said. "Believing someone loves you."

"You have to take it on faith." She paused. "I love you, David. Don't you believe me?"

It would be so easy to believe her. So easy. And she knew it, too. "I love you, too," I said, switching off my comm circuit, and kicking away from the hull, adding a small new component to the momentum of their spin.

■

Can you come up with a test for love?

I make a box with the thick fingers of my gloves, framing the shuttle. A closed system, little more than a sealed can, isolated from contamination by millions of kilometres of vacuum, no means of communicating with the universe outside. And inside, two people; only one, at best, can emerge alive. Love is their only salvation. But who will make the ultimate sacrifice?

The uncertainty principle dictates that until the precise moment the lid is unscrewed and the curious rescuers peek in, the results of the experiment must, of necessity, be indeterminate, the souls inside existing in an undefined state, both loved and unloved at the same time.

I let the box of my fingers fall apart.

The shuttle is a thinning sliver, spinning slowly from sight.

A test for love? Possibly. The conditions seem right.

I watch the shuttle grow smaller and smaller; then, when my mind drifts for a moment, it is gone.

MONSTER

In the perpetual Arctic dusk the monster shambles across the broken, hump-backed terrain of the ice field, his breath unfurling before him in slow moving clouds, a sack slung over his shoulder. Silence is absolute, except for snow squeaking under his weighted steps. His lips tingle; his cheeks and beard are pinked with the frozen moisture of his exhalations. Despite a coat of bearskin, and leathered mittens and boots whose seams have been generously greased with seal fat, his extremities are already numbing. Though he isn't as sensitive to cold as the ordinary mortals after whom he is modelled, he is not immune to its effects. He stumbles in the uncertain shadows, almost falls, at the mouth of his cave.

Inside, a small fire crackles brightly, warmly; the cave is filled with wooden furniture, crudely made and oversized. Towards the back, in flickering, problematic shadows, is his workbench, racked with vials and syringes, coiled hoops of wires and electrodes, a plethora of broad-faced metres with arcing scales of numbers that always end in infinity. To one side, a miniature Jacob's Ladder hums expectantly. Beyond all this is a thick-legged table over which a grey sheet has been drawn: his latest attempt to recreate Doctor Frankenstein. The remains of earlier attempts lie outside the cave mouth in a frozen, variegated refuse heap.

Stripping completely, the monster warms himself by the fire. He spreads his fingers and toes widely, lets the warmth seep into his joints, work its way up into the marrow of his bones. Like always, he runs fingers across the white-ridged scars on his wrists, forearms, chest, belly, buttocks and legs where the copper staples and long, looping stitches once were, touching lightly and with reverence this undeniable evidence of his construction.

He counts himself lucky. Although those indefatigable, scurrying others that swarm the rest of the world would destroy him if they could, he pities them. Forgives them their jealousy. They have been denied the certainty he knows, the proof in each raised scar of the

existence of his creator.

It is this very certainty that enables him to undertake his task, assembling parts, taking them from people and animals alike. If only he could hit upon the correct combination.

He is patient, knows that he will have his failures, for science is at best an imperfect language.

But he has hope.

After all, he found the cave. Here, at the top of the world, he'd found this place, where the pain of the world gathers as if into the neck of a funnel.

So here he works, assembling the parts. Laying them out in exact lines on this table. And when enough pain accumulates, he knows his creation will knit itself together and rise from its palette to look upon him forgivingly.

Then they will leave the cave; in the gelid Arctic morning they will stand together and watch the sunrise.

THE LOVE CLINIC

"Is there something wrong?" Valerie's question seems harmless, casual.

"No," Davis answers, perhaps a trifle too quickly. He'd been thinking about the Clinic, wondering if she'd ever been there—and if so, how often. It's a thought that's been troubling him recently, though it's not the sort of thing one can ask. He slouches marginally lower into the battered, vinyl couch.

"You look tired," she says.

"Not sleeping well," he mumbles, "that's all."

Rising from the green easy chair, she glides over the creaking floorboards of his living room. Davis admires her graceful, fluid steps; she is long-limbed, taller than he is, and carries herself with assurance. She has come straight from her job at the Trust Company and is dressed in a tailored, burgundy suit—impeccable, as usual—and a loose fitting white blouse that conceals breasts too large and heavy for her narrow shoulders. Astonishing ebony hair falls to the middle of her back in straight lines, framing a long, wistful face, lightly etched with the lines of character that hint at her age. Her eyes are deep grey and full of the expectation of pleasure. In her, Davis sees the face of a sensualist, rich in experience and wordless understandings. A face unlike his own. Whenever Davis thinks of himself, he imagines an unremarkable face burdened with a perpetually dull and uninformed expression.

She is thirty-eight; he has just turned twenty-seven. Early on, she'd given him a choice—an open relationship or nothing.

"I know a good cure for insomnia," she says, kneeling down beside him, sitting back on her heels, the material of her skirt drawn upwards and stretching tautly over her thighs. She leans forward until Davis can feel her heartbeat against his knees. Smiling, she extends her hand, lets it glide lightly over his crotch.

Davis feels a tightening there; his pulse quickens.

Sometimes he doesn't know how to react to her advances, struck dumb not by his shyness—which she coaxed him out of months

ago—but by her self-assurance. Although they never discuss it, he is convinced she has other lovers, and cannot help but believe those other men play their roles less self-consciously. At times he wonders why she bothers with him at all.

She bounces to her feet, instantly transformed, giggling like the high school girls that swarm onto Davis's bus every morning. In a parody of a striptease, she peels off her jacket and tosses it onto the couch. She flips open the buttons on her blouse with a practised movement, then lets it drop to the floor. Underneath, she wears a simple, black bra that, despite its best efforts, cannot quite support the weight of her breasts properly nor conceal her prominent nipples. She undoes the clasp and her breasts swing free. A moment later she works a concealed zipper and her skirt settles around her ankles; underneath she is naked. Stepping from the ring of cloth, she slips into Davis's lap. Her fingers begin to work on the buttons of his shirt.

Davis thinks briefly of his brightly lit living room, of the inquisitive neighbours across the street—then decides he doesn't give a shit. Let them watch. He is too tired and his desire crowds out other considerations. Leaning forward so she can slip his shirttail from his pants, he kisses her lightly on the brow just beneath her hairline, his lips barely brushing the soft skin of her forehead, surprising even himself at this gesture. It's only an expression of his friendship, he thinks, an admission of his indebtedness to her. A sign of his gratitude, perhaps.

Anything but love.



Valerie never stays the night.

They have an agreement, after all, struck right after the first time they made love. She had sat up, still astride him, her knees pressed lightly against the base of his ribs, her chest flushed, her magnificent

breasts swaying with every small motion of his or hers, with each of their breaths. A single bead of sweat slipped from between them, wound its way down the outside of his hip to the bed; beneath him, he felt the ridged confusion of damp, rucked-up sheets.

She hovered above him and they talked.

"I don't want this to get too complicated," she had said, the tips of her hair skimming his chest. "No obligations, okay?"

"Sure," he had agreed. "I feel exactly the same way."

Earlier that night, over the second bottle of wine, they'd discovered they were both fresh from other relationships. This was a transitional association, they decided, a way station before the next real commitment. It was what they both wanted: a simple diversion, uncomplicated by feelings.

"Good." Reaching down, she cupped his chin in her hand and forced him to look directly at her as if he were a recalcitrant child. "No sense in letting feelings mess up a perfectly good relationship. Right?"

He'd agreed. Then, looking for words that would display a spirit of selfishness appropriate to the moment, he said, "I just want to have some mindless fun."

She smiled. "Me, too."

Breaking open the third bottle, they toasted their good fortune at finding each other when they did.

■

After she is gone, sleep comes erratically and lasts an indeterminate amount of time. Getting drunk is no use, nor are the little pills his doctor has prescribed. Both bring oblivion but no rest: when he wakes, he is still exhausted, still alone.

Following prolonged bouts of sleeplessness, Davis wanders the streets of his neighbourhood, stopping at the all-night Minimart to examine the fruit and check the expiry dates on the dairy products.

The manager watches him through sleepy eyes as Davis drifts from aisle to aisle, turning milk cartons and squeezing pears, looking but never buying. Surprisingly, the store is busy, and often young couples shop, hands linked, filling a single basket. They make Davis sad, so sad he feels compelled to leave the store.

When had it happened? he catches himself wondering. When had he begun to imagine them together like that, fingers intertwined, filling their own basket?

He knows it is an absurd image. An impossibility.

Each morning the dark circles grow slightly larger beneath his eyes. When he shaves, it is a stranger's face he sees in the mirror and it takes all his will power to keep his hand from trembling as he slides the blade along the tendons of his neck.



Davis is in an alley, huddled in his winter overcoat and the shadow cast by a dumpster, staring across the street at the Clinic. It was easy to find: it's been on the six o'clock news almost every night for the past few weeks. Of the original six, it's the only Clinic left in the city now, its doctor the only practitioner of the cure. The others have closed shop, boarded up their windows and moved on in the face of ever more violent protests.

The building is squat and single-storied, constructed from grey cinderblock. Two broad driveways set it apart from a Chinese restaurant on one side and an architectural firm on the other. A small, unpainted door, covered with sheet metal, is the only entrance. The ground floor windows have all been barred since the bombings last year; the roof still bears the scars of an arson attempt. Graffiti has been spray-painted on the front of the building, but the bulb of the nearest street lamp has been shattered and Davis can't make out the words. There are no signs attached to the building advertising its business, not even a street number affixed to its outside wall. If he

didn't know better, he would have guessed it to be abandoned.

It is three in the morning, and his feet have carried him here. Why? he asks himself. Because, he answers, I can no longer face her. Because I love her.

They've never talked about it—the Clinic that is—except lightly, as if it were a joke. But he's certain she's been here before, perhaps after her last relationship, though she's always been vague about her feelings.

As for himself, he's never had the need. When he was younger his father had insisted on a private, all-boys high school; the few girls he'd met in those days had rebuffed his awkward advances, often with cutting remarks and laughter. By the time he reached university he'd developed a cynical and somewhat sullen demeanour, particularly in the presence of women. His first date, at the age of nineteen, was with an equally cynical woman; the two of them spent the evening making disparaging remarks about the movie they had just seen. She agreed to see him again the following night. And the next. For several weeks they continued to meet almost daily in coffee shops and cafés, he listening to her prattle on about Descartes or Nietzsche and nodding his head in vigorous agreement, the two of them wreathed in clouds of chain-smoked cigarettes. Evenings they would go out to a bar and offer up snide comments about the other patrons, drinking themselves into hysterical fits of laughter. Afterwards, they would prowls the early morning streets, side by side, not touching, both comfortable in the shared silence. When they parted, he would venture a tentative kiss; sometimes she would return it lightly, other times she would avert her face so that his lips grazed her cheeks. This was all she would allow, citing a string of bad relationships and a need for time. But for him it was enough: he was still a virgin—though he would never have admitted it to anyone—and frightened of how she might react to his inexperience. He could wait. Eventually she would come around.

But she didn't. Four months after their first date, as they sat

at three a.m. on a cold bench in a deserted park, she told him she'd moved in with another man.

That was the last time he saw her.

For the better part of the semester Davis had tried to convince himself he wasn't hurt, that she hadn't had that kind of power over him. No, it wasn't love, he told himself; it was a biological drive as simple and immediate as hunger. A need for companionship and sex, perhaps. At worst a simple infatuation. Nothing more. To confuse such a need with love would be a mistake that only the naïve and wishful would make. Neither of them had ever used the word love. He certainly had never called it that. How could he? After all, he had proclaimed to her, on more than one occasion, that he didn't even believe in love. Even so, had he the option of a Clinic back then . . .

But the Clinics opened only last year.

For years Davis had replayed that other relationship over and over in his mind, cataloguing his mistakes, his overeagerness, his fumbling inexperience. For years he savoured this stunted love like a jaw-breaker, letting it dissolve slowly in his mouth, careful never to bite down.

But now, since meeting Valerie, even that small pleasure has fled.

Though he tries, he cannot recall that other woman's face. Instead, Valerie fills every available bit of space in his brain. He shivers despite the thick pile lining of his coat; his breath hangs in front of him like a small, dark cloud. Tomorrow, during normal business hours, he will return.



He approaches slowly, dragging his feet to make each step take as long as possible. It is a cloudless day, and in harsh, unforgiving daylight the Clinic no longer looks abandoned. A small crowd has gathered outside the front doors. Protesters for the Right to Love movement mill on the sidewalk in front of the building, waving

colourful placards: *Make Love, Not Indifference*, one sign reads; *It is better to have loved and lost*, says another. *Give love a chance*, begs a third. From behind a triangular phalanx of barricades, police officers eye the demonstrators dispassionately and sip from steaming cups of coffee. A handful of curious onlookers observe the proceedings from Davis's side of the street. He has seen footage of these protests many times on the six o'clock news. But here, in person, the event is diminished, tawdry and unimaginative, the protesters enervated and bored.

He lowers his head, deciding to walk past. What was he thinking?

"You're going in there, aren't you?" The voice startles Davis; he turns to discover a young woman has fallen into step beside him. She has a thin, earnest face. Pale tufts of curly blonde hair creep out from beneath a dirty knit cap. On the lapel of her coat are several buttons that identify her as a Pro-Lover.

"No," he says, picking up his pace and smiling weakly at her.

"First time, isn't it?" Her eyes are fixed on his, her hand clutches his arm, arresting his progress.

Davis is flustered; he knows about their methods, has read reports in the paper of harassment and intimidation. He is fearful of a scene, of the inquisitive stares of protesters and onlookers alike. "First time for what?" he asks, trying to sound ingenuous.

"Have you thought this through carefully?"

"I'm afraid you've made some sort of mistake," Davis says. He tries to disengage his arm, but her grip is firm.

"Sometimes all we need is someone to talk to. A friendly, nonjudgemental ear." She smiles at Davis, a bright, beatific smile, smothering him in her concern. "I have a friend, a counsellor, who'd like to help you through this crisis, perhaps give you some things to think about that you may not have considered." A business card magically appears in her hand. She waves it at Davis.

"Yes," he says to placate her, grabbing the card and shoving it

deep into his pocket. "Fine." He looks around; three of the protesters are staring in his direction now, talking amongst themselves.

"We're only given a few chances," the woman is saying. "We've got to cherish these moments though they cause us suffering." Something in her voice draws Davis's attention. Her smile has evaporated. "Love in any form is precious." Anguish flowers in her eyes. It is the same tormented expression that stares back at Davis from his own mirror. "I know," she says in a hushed voice, as if she is no longer talking to him, but to herself. "I've made my choice." She releases his arm.

Davis remains next to her, frozen. A moment before he'd wanted nothing more than to escape her; now he is possessed by an absurd desire to reach out and hug her. To let her know she isn't alone. Looking at her closely for the first time, he realizes her eyes are exactly the same colour as Valerie's. "She doesn't love me," he says, his words an offering.

The young woman stares at Davis; she shakes her head ruefully. "That's not important," she says as if dismissing an irrelevant fact. "You're human. *We're* human. Hurting is part of that. If you go into the Clinic it's like surrendering a part of what keeps us alive." The woman extends her hand, stepping away from the Clinic. "Come with me."

"No," Davis manages to say, his voice pinched and hoarse. "You don't understand. I wasn't—"

Before he can finish his sentence, a hand grips his shoulder; he is spun around. A man with wire-rim glasses, a goatee and a worn leather jacket stands before him; to his left is a small woman in a blue parka and matching beret. The man shifts his grip to Davis's forearm. "Come on," he says gruffly. "We'll help you through this." The woman slips in beside Davis, winds her arm through his, shouldering the other woman away. "We know what you're going through," she says and propels him forward. "We won't let *them* intimidate you." They whisk him expertly towards the Clinic and the line of protesters.

It is over quickly. Though there is a little jostling and muttered

words Davis cannot quite make out, his escort manages to slide him through the crowd. They deposit him at the door. "Good luck," the woman says and squeezes his hand reassuringly. Then she waves at a security camera mounted over the lintel.

A lock snicks and the door opens a crack, then widens enough to let a body through.

"Yeah," says the man, planting his hand in the small of Davis's back and shoving him through the opening. "Ditto."



Davis is alone in a brightly lit, peach-coloured hallway. A worn, cream carpet covers a wooden floor. Two doors down, past an occasional table with a vase of wilting flowers, a door has been stencilled with the words *Clinic Waiting Room*. Beneath, in smaller letters, it says, *No appointment necessary*. Davis's face is flushed and his heart pounds.

He stands motionless, calming himself, trying to get a grip on what happened outside. The last few minutes are a swirling confusion. It is not how he had planned to come here at all. Embarrassment suffuses him. He reaches for the door handle.

But turning around would mean wading through the angry, accusing faces of the crowd again. Would mean facing the girl with the earnest face. Would mean explanations to the man and woman who escorted him through the protesters. No, he decides. He cannot go back.

Nor, now that he thinks about it, does he want to, for he remembers what has brought him here in the first place.

Valerie. He thinks of the way she comes and goes as she pleases. Of how reluctant she is to reveal anything of her life. Davis has never seen her apartment; they always meet at his. She comes straight from her job at the Trust Company, a job about which Davis knows almost nothing. She doles out the details of her life parsimoniously, as if

fearful that any revelation may strengthen their connection, may bind them like those who share a secret perversion. Davis suspects she has other lovers. She has not told him so, no. But then she hasn't denied it either. Often, he has walked out to the phone on the street corner at odd hours and dialled her number, wondering if a man's voice will answer, "Hello?" or perhaps in the background he'll hear male laughter. But he's always lost his nerve, hung up the moment the connection is made.

I love you.

Words he can never say. She is too ephemeral, too transient. Saying it would be like trying to nail her down. How often has she said she doesn't want to feel boxed in? That she wants her freedom? The very same words he has used. No, he can never tell her about his feelings. She would flee. He would lose what little he has.

But he cannot continue in this way, either, pretending he has no feelings for her. Each day he wakes from a troubled sleep more exhausted than when he finally shut his eyes the night before. Valerie spins in his mind like a maddening, inescapable tune.

I have no choice, he thinks.

Stepping up, he opens the door. The waiting room is small and boxy, with folding chairs lined up along three walls. On a low, wide table are scattered brochures for the Clinic and dog-eared copies of *Time Magazine*. At the far end of the room a receptionist in a white smock sits behind a thick, plate-glass window. A speaker grille has been set into the window near its base. No one else is in the room. With all the recent publicity, Davis is not surprised. He steps up to the window.

Without looking at him, the receptionist says, "The doctor will be with you shortly. Please take a seat."

■

The examination room is across the hall from the waiting room,

and faces the street. Davis sits on a gurney, the only piece of furniture; white cupboards run along one wall, and several gas cylinders are arrayed against the other next to the gurney. In the far corner sits a large machine, comprised of several drawer-sized panels that are mounted in a wall rack. Incomprehensible dials litter its surface; cables thick as his wrist snake from its base. Several indicators burn red and green above a bank of unlabelled switches on its highest panel. Next to it vertical blinds cover a single, narrow window and the noise of traffic outside can be heard distantly. Occasionally Davis fancies he can make out the chants of the protesters.

Doctor Ted, a gaunt man who combs his few remaining strands of hair crosswise over his head, stands near the window as he explains the method to Davis. "It is a simple, safe procedure," he says, pausing to peek between the slats of the blinds at the crowd outside. "One hundred percent effective."

Doctor Ted raises his eyes to stare at him, and Davis nods, as he believes the doctor expects him to.

The doctor smiles, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He seems more nervous than Davis. "It all has to do with neurochemical equilibrium, you see. Balancing the natural amphetamines your brain produces." He taps himself on the skull to underscore his point. "First you will have to take this." From the pocket of his lab coat the doctor extracts a bottle of small white pills. "They're marking agents," he says removing the lid and shaking the container until one drops into the palm of his hand. "They're keyed to identify those excess neurochemicals. Like painting targets." He extends his hand; Davis picks up the pill.

"Once you've taken that, then all you have to do is lie back and breathe deeply." Doctor Ted reaches down and pulls out a mask hung from the end of the gurney; a long, clear hose runs from it to the closest cylinder. "With this, of course." He waves it at Davis. "It helps *rearrange* the psychological imprinting that caused the, ah, trouble in the first place. At least insofar as this particular person is concerned.

Fifteen minutes and you'll walk out of here a new man."

"And the machine?" Davis nods at the thing with the red and green lights.

"That's the air conditioner," the Doctor says with a nervous chuckle. "Now then, shall we begin?"

Davis's hand trembles as he lifts the pill to his mouth. It is surprisingly easy to swallow.

"Good." The Doctor lifts the mask and places it over Davis's face. He adjusts the straps and directs him to lie down. "I'll be back in ten minutes to check your progress. Don't worry if you feel some odd sensations. It's perfectly normal. The experience is actually quite a pleasant one."

Davis wants to ask him how he knows about its effects, if his certainty stems from personal knowledge. But the Doctor has already swept out of the room.

At first Davis feels nothing, merely a sweet cloying at the back of his throat, like the air he breathes has been perfumed. Then he begins to feel drowsy. His limbs tingle and his eyes become heavy. He thinks of Valerie. He cannot help himself.

Inside, something delicate folds up, crumbles and disappears; strangely he is not sad, though he doesn't understand why.

■

"Get him out of here!"

The shout echoes in Davis's head; at first he believes it is part of the tumble of disconnected thoughts that have been floating lazily in and out of his consciousness like helium-filled balloons. But then the mask is ripped violently from his face. Urgent hands tug at him, drag him off the gurney and onto his feet. Davis feels weak-kneed; his vision is blurred and sounds are dull and flattened, as if he's listening underwater. He's exhausted, more tired than he can ever remember being. All he wants to do is sleep. The edge of something bumps him

sharply and he staggers into a corner. There is a rush of activity, grunts as if someone is working with a weighty object.

"Is he dead?"

No, Davis wants to assure them. *I'm fine*. His vision begins to clear and he can make out three figures with their backs to him. A fourth, he suddenly realizes, lies on the gurney from which he's been decanted. *They're talking about him*, he thinks, feeling foolish.

He rubs his eyes, blinks. Recognizes the receptionist and the man and woman who escorted him into the Clinic. On the gurney lies Doctor Ted, his face white, his eyes swimming in their sockets, a string of spittle hanging from the corner of his mouth. On his chest is a large red stain from which protrudes the handle of a kitchen knife.

"Jesus," the woman says. "I can't believe they did it." But her tone expresses no shock, only bafflement as if she is staring at a curiosity and not someone dying on the table in front of her.

"How did he get in here?" the man with the goatee and glasses demands in an angry voice. His hands are curled into fists, his face flushed.

"I . . . I let him in," the receptionist says. Her voice shakes. "He wanted me to sign for a package." Her shoulders begin to heave; Davis can hear her sobs.

This only seems to anger the young man more. "Shit! Has anyone called for an ambulance?"

Silence.

The man turns, grabs Davis by the shoulders. "You!" he shouts in his face. "Call an ambulance!" He spins Davis around and pushes him into the corridor. "In the receptionist's office!"

The door slams shut, leaving Davis alone in the hall. On the carpet a trail of drops leads to a large red stain where the Doctor must have fallen. There, bloody handmarks mar the wall.

Davis feels oddly disconnected. His thoughts are still muddled, as if he is a step behind everything that is happening. Calmly, he walks to the first door past the waiting room and opens it. As he guessed,

it gives onto the small cubicle that the receptionist had occupied. Inside he recognizes the thick-paned window through which he had stared earlier. Beneath it is a cluttered desk. Davis steps up to the desk and lifts the handset of a phone. He reaches down to press 911, then stops when a movement on the other side of the glass catches his eye. He straightens up.

In the waiting room is Valerie.

She sits, legs crossed, a cigarette burning in her hand, a distracted expression etched on her face. She wears dirty jeans and an old sweatshirt. Dark circles limn her eyes and her hair is matted and tangled. She looks as if she hasn't slept in days. When she raises the cigarette to her mouth, her hand trembles. She hasn't yet become aware of Davis on the other side of the glass.

Davis lets the phone drop back into its cradle. He moves towards the door, careful to remain out of sight. Stepping out into the hall, he quietly pulls the door shut and moves quickly towards the entrance. The front door is slightly ajar; Davis pulls it open and walks outside. The protesters are still there, as are the police, both sides still unaware of what has transpired inside the Clinic. Davis elbows his way through the demonstrators, ignoring their glares and muttered invective. He is around the corner, the Clinic now out of sight, and he turns toward home.

A short time later a siren sounds distantly, like the wail of a wounded animal.

■

The phone rings and Davis snatches it from the cradle. But once again there is only silence, then the sound of the connection being broken. The calls began shortly after he split up with Valerie.

They met twice after his visit to the Clinic. After the second time, he began to make excuses whenever she called.

Though Davis hadn't asked out of politeness, he was certain

she hadn't returned to the Clinic for treatment from Doctor Ted's successor. He recognized the signs. The agitated movements. The mood swings. The intent looks that tried to reach inside him and pull something out that's no longer there. At the time he said nothing. Instead he pretended things were the same as in the beginning, the two of them engaged in a casual tryst. Despite his best efforts, though, both their meetings left him feeling vaguely uneasy, as if he were spoiling a performance by playing his role badly and without conviction.

Still, Davis occasionally toys with the idea of phoning her. He misses her walk, the warmth of her body next to his, the release of their lovemaking. But it is a nostalgic yearning, he reminds himself, at best a desire for the familiar.

Not love.

The clinic has cured him of that.

No. He won't call. Though he doesn't love her, he still can't bring himself to disappoint her. After all, he's always considered himself a decent sort of fellow who doesn't want to cause undue pain to others. And if he's also thinking of himself, his own convenience, who can blame him?

Davis remembers the Doctor's sad, dazed face and Valerie's trembling hand as she smoked that day in the waiting room. *In a story about love*, Davis thinks, *someone always gets hurt*.

Perhaps someday he'll be ready again. For love, that is. To fill that space once occupied by Valerie. Only not for a while. Not until he's back on his feet. And the next time he knows he'll be better prepared.

Putting the receiver back in the cradle, Davis makes a mental note to call the phone company tomorrow to get an unlisted number.

PIRATES

It is better to be a commander, than a common man, since I have dipped my hands in muddy water and must be a pirate.

—Bartholomew Roberts, 1682–1723

Captain Bartholomew Roberts, a.k.a. Black Bart, is subject to a curious temporal glitch: when he sleeps, he suffers dreams of dangers that are still hundreds of years distant. Today, for instance, he spent a considerable amount of time weighing the merits of installing a sonar system. Although he knows the threat from submarines in 1721 is negligible, that last night he dreamed them and their deadly torpedoes seems justification enough. The system would be costly, and he is certain the men would grumble at it eating into their share of the booty. He understands this resentment, and sympathizes more than his men may realize. But as Captain it is his job—nay, his duty—to imagine perils they will never encounter.

They are twenty-seven days out from Madagascar, and standing on the weather deck, Roberts scans the seas for the telltale signs of the dark conning tower of U-boats cutting the waves like sharks fins.

■

“I don’t like it.” The first mate scratches himself, and Captain Roberts looks away discreetly. “I don’t like it at all.”

They stand shoulder to shoulder at the taffrail. Below, the surface of the sea is littered with the debris of a ship, burned timbers, torn and charred sails, a shattered mast, smashed crates, long, unwinding bolts of cloth that float lazily on the surface like giant sea snakes—and an occasional body. Nothing is whole, as if every item, every stick, every body, has suffered its own particular violence.

Both men have, in the course of their careers as *cutthroats*, seen

much destruction and death, and participated in more than their fair share of mayhem, but there is something different about this. There is a wantonness to it, a disregard for the code, as it were, that binds *men of fortune* together. It is just the sort of excuse his arch enemy, the Governor of Jamaica, has been waiting for; it is almost certain now that his long-standing request for additional Royal Navy ships will be satisfied. Captain Roberts knows this will cause him and his men no end of grief.

The sea is slate-grey and undulates slowly beneath a darkening, weather-filled sky. From time to time there is a hollow thump as flotsam fetches up against the hull.



Pirating, Captain Roberts thinks, is a lonely business.

The isolation of countless months at sea and the necessary secrecy of a pirate's life have presented him few opportunities to enjoy the company of the fairer sex. Being a Christian and a gentleman, he refuses, when in port, to avail himself of the bawdy houses his men frequent. Yet, there are times . . .

No, he reproaches himself, he could never bring himself to do that.

Lately, he has been plagued by an idea which, more and more, occupies his thoughts. When he next seizes a vessel, he imagines assembling the women passengers on deck and, passing a steely gaze over them, selecting the most beautiful to return with him to the *Royal Fortune*, his to ravage or free as he sees fit.

Immediately he is shaken by the horror of this ungallant thought and quickly banishes it from his mind, its residue a burning shame. He makes a mental note to order his men to throw overboard the stacks of glossy magazines and unmarked video cassettes that litter their quarters.

Still, he wonders, what harm is there in idle musings?

She would have to be tall, he thinks, and fine featured, with a proud bearing and spirited, fiery eyes. Of course he wouldn't—couldn't—ravage her, but would treat her with the same respect and kindness he shows the Governor, whom he kidnaps, with regularity, twice each year. And though she might be distraught and frightened at first, she would, in time, appreciate that he is not so much her abductor as her liberator. And with this must surely blossom feelings of respect, admiration and . . . who knows, who knows?



The *Royal Fortune* encounters more wreckage strewn across the sea lane. They pass through the remains of a second and then a third vessel, and now it is a certainty these marauders have, as a matter of course, destroyed the ships and lifeboats of those they've attacked, for they have not encountered a single survivor. This is an unspeakably barbaric act, an unforgivable breach of pirate etiquette, and, perhaps worst of all, bad for business. When word of this unseemly violence spreads, what merchantman will not fight to the very last man?

His own men have become withdrawn and fractious, staring tightlipped at the sporadic signs of wreckage. He knows he must do something, and soon, for in their silence the Captain senses a growing embarrassment in their profession.

Captain Roberts frowns, unconsciously using the carefully practised creasing of his brow that is meant to convey disapproval to his crew, though no one can see it now.

Who could be doing this?



As is his habit, Bartholomew Roberts dresses with care. This morning he selects dark, velvet breeches, a white shirt with ruffles, and a broad black belt to match his boots. Slipping on his favourite

damask waistcoat, crimson with polished brass buttons, he drapes a bright, purple sash over his shoulder. Finally he sets a broad cockaded hat at a stylish angle on his head. Studying himself in his mirror, he sees a sombre man, tall and thin, with black hair and eyes as dark as a moonless night. Altogether, he appears fearsome and brooding, and it is small wonder his crew refers to him, not without a hint of pride, as Black Bart.

■

Today, in an inspired speech at the close of Sunday services, Captain Roberts informs his men that it is time to set aside personal profit in the face of the growing threat from this unknown enemy. He explains that although attacking a brother pirate may be deemed bad form, this interloper, by dint of his actions, has placed his ship and crew outside the pale, so to speak, and is no longer entitled to such courtesies as are normally granted between gentlemen of fortune. The crew greets his speech with a rousing cheer and the men quickly fall to their tasks, unfurling the sails and priming the guns with a gusto he has not seen since their early days together. Above him the sails snap and strain at their lines like tethered dogs, and the *Royal Fortune* cleaves sharply through the waves, moving swiftly to the hunt. Watching his men work this way, his throat constricts with pride. He could love them no more than he loves them this moment. He turns from them and gazes out to sea, struggling against the sentiment of a single tear.

■

Captain Roberts is aghast.

The Governor's mansion is a charred ruin. The city streets are deserted. The Governor himself they found in the town square, hands bound, head hooded, swinging from the public gallows.

Though he and the Governor had been at odds over the years, Captain Roberts would never have wished such an ignominious end on him. Many a night the two had stood on the aft deck, the glowing tips of cheroots illuminating their faces with each indrawn breath as they discussed the state of the empire, commiserated over the difficulties of command, and squabbled over the terms of Governor's ransom. It is a game they played, this fiction of enmity.

The Captain orders his men to cut down the Governor, and watches sombrely as they drag his stiff-limbed corpse to a shallow grave.

Things, he thinks, are out of control.

A feeling of helplessness seizes him. This is a strange feeling, one he has, until now, never experienced save in the midst of bustling land-locked cities, where the faceless, undisciplined masses surged around him like random swells. And, he suddenly realizes, in one other place: in the perfumed confusion and swirling skirts of sitting rooms, in the company of women, when his tongue lay leaden in his mouth and his limbs grew unwieldy.



Captain Roberts is wont, from time to time, to scale the mizzen mast and recline in the crow's nest. Though it strikes his officers as odd, they have learned it is better not to question the Captain's actions. The crew, for their part, have become accustomed to seeing him there at irregular hours, in the early morning and late at night, and think no more of it now than they do the Captain's frippery.

The Captain himself is not certain why he feels the need to ascend the mast. Perhaps, he thinks, it is because from this vantage he is reminded the sea is wide and holds many strange things, not the least of which is this tiny ship, a speck of men bobbing precariously in a fragile wooden shell. In the mornings he finds it reassuring to watch the crew, just roused from sleep, move about their duties in the small, ordered universe of his vessel far below.



They heave-to beside a listing, burned-out galleon that, incredibly, remains afloat despite several gaping holes amidships. Had Hands, the sharp-eared pilot, not heard something they might have passed it by, in pursuit of the cowards that have gutted it and left it to sink.

Oh horror of horrors! the men shout when they discover it is the weeping of a young woman, left to drown on the foundering wreck, that has drawn the pilot's attention. With all possible dispatch, the Captain has a boat lowered and sent to retrieve her.

And when the woman is brought before him, the Captain's heart falters.

It is her. The one he has imagined.

She is a startling beauty, dusky-skinned, with flowing raven hair, full ruby lips, and wide, piercing eyes. Her dress is torn in several places, and singed at its hem, and the Captain's anger rises at the thought of any harm befalling her.

"Who has done this to you?" he demands, barely in control of his rage.

Her face colours and she averts her eyes in such a way that the Captain is sure his heart will burst. But she says nothing.

Fighting back his anger, the Captain again implores her, "Please, you must tell us. Who has done this to you?"

Still she remains mute; she shifts her weight from foot to foot uneasily, and her dress rustles, revealing tantalizing glimpses of flesh through its rents.

"Do not fear me," the Captain says. "I will let no one hurt you."

There is a tug on his sleeve from behind. "Captain, sir," a voice whispers in his ear.

"What?" The irritation is his voice is, he knows, unwarranted, but it comes of its own accord.

"She can't tell you nothing." It is a large crewman with a cauliflower ear whose name he has forgotten, one of those whom he

had sent to rescue her. “She be a Spaniard,” he says, “and ignorant of the Queen’s English.”

Captain Roberts frowns.

That night, in honour of his guest, Captain Roberts has his men place a table and two chairs on the afterdeck. The table is covered with a sampling of his booty: the best Irish linen from Perth; plates of English bone china; delicate crystal goblets from Italy; and chased silverware from Persia whose polished surfaces reflect the stars burning in the heavens.

Her name, he has discovered, is *Ana Maria Guadalupe Isabel Urraca de Sandoval Y Montero*.

The meal, despite the lack of fresh meat, is excellent, though the Captain barely touches it. Instead, he watches the flawless lines of her face, head bowed demurely, the slight movement of her jaw as she chews morsels of food between rows of small, perfect teeth. She swallows. When, on occasion, she raises her head and their eyes meet, both look away in an embarrassed silence.

Afterwards, without thinking, he asks, “Did you enjoy the meal?”

But she only stares without comprehension, and makes a little shrug.

Later, when *Isabella* (how he has already come to love the sound of that name!) has retired to her berth, the Captain climbs to the crow’s nest. In the darkness when they run, as now, with lanterns extinguished, it is possible for him to believe that they lie there together, hand in hand, beneath the vault of the star speckled sky.

■

Not all pirates are so by choice:

It’s true. Roberts, once a pilot for an English merchantmen, had simpler ambitions before being pressed into service by a pirate crew into whose hands his ship had fallen. He wished, history tells us, to

be master of a schooner. To be respected and obeyed by his crew. To have a master's share of the profit. To own a Captain's home by the sea. To love a beautiful woman. And to be loved in return.

■

"Ship ahoy!"

On the horizon a vessel limps into view, tacking raggedly against the wind towards them. Behind her she trails a coil of black smoke, a snake rising into the heavens.

As she approaches, Captain Roberts, in an uncommon appearance on the foredeck, observes her through his favourite brass telescope: the ship is badly damaged, its main mast sheared, its rigging a tangle, tattered sails flapping loosely in the wind. Her starboard side bears an enormous scorched wound twice the height of a man, her timbers staved in just above the waterline. It is a miracle she is afloat.

It is the *Amity*, Tew's ship, and Captain Roberts orders his men to stand down from the cannon.

Roberts has met Tew before: once sheltering in the Madagascar from a storm, during which time the two pirates eyed each other warily; and the other when they had formed an uneasy alliance off the coast of India to pursue a rich, heavily armed, French vessel. Tew is a formidable opponent, a stern and demanding leader, courageous in battle. Captain Roberts sees him not so much as an enemy as a competitor, though in the right circumstances he would as soon give him a broadside as a cheery wave.

The Captain orders his pilot to swing the *Royal Fortune* close to the *Amity*, and when the two ships are but a few lengths apart Captain Roberts cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, "Heave to!"

"No, sir!" Tew shouts across the shimmering water that separates them. "I will not! The devil take me before I drop sail! Fire if you must, but I will not!"

The two ships are opposite one another now, and the Captain can

see Tew's shoulder is bloody, his arm supported by a makeshift sling. At his feet lie many wounded and dead.

"What scurvy dog has done this to you?" Captain Roberts demands.

The *Amity* has slid past him and Roberts moves along the rail, and down to the weather deck towards the aft of the *Royal Fortune*, attempting to stay in earshot. Tew shouts something in response, but a sudden crack of a sail obliterates his words.

"Say again!"

"... *Bachelor's Delight*!"

The Captain is puzzled; the name is unfamiliar. "What are her armaments?"

The *Amity* drives on, and only snatches of Tew's response can be made out. "... her crew ... pursued ... half-a-day ... do not trust ..."

"What? What?" shouts the Captain, but it is too late, for the *Amity* has passed, and Tew's words are torn from his lips by the wind and scattered to the sea.



When in port, Captain Roberts stands on the forecastle deck as his crew disappear into the night. It is one of those rare occasions when he may be seen before the mast. The men believe it to be a superstition on the Captain's part, though the truth is were they not to see his solitary figure as they drifted towards the smoky taverns and ill-lit brothels, it is they who would be apprehensive, casting backward glances, uneasy at what this might portend.

Alone at last, Captain Roberts retires to his cabin. Here he lights a lamp and, selecting a leather-bound volume from his shelf, sits in his favourite chair to read seafaring adventures. He enjoys these times, when the trials of his command are forgotten. Despite what he believes to be an unfair bias against his calling, these accounts greatly interest him, and he secretly pulls for the pirate captains though he

knows they must always lose in the end.

Yet . . . yet, he cannot help but hope. You just never know, he says to himself. You just never know.



Her name, *Bachelor's Delight*, is painted in bright, red letters above the stern windows. She is a small, innocuous vessel, with minimal armaments—only bow and stern cannon, swivel mounted and of small bore—labouring under half-sail, pushing towards the Americas, and if she is concerned about the truculent ship that closes rapidly on her, she shows no sign.

It boggles Captain Robert's imagination how this ship could be the author of such destruction. He taps his chin, eyeing the *Bachelor's Delight*, not yet calling his men to arms. Given the formidable appearance of the ship, and his ship's forty-eight heavy cannon, it hardly seems sporting—

—but perhaps that was Tew's mistake.

Captain Roberts orders all hands above deck to prepare for the coming engagement. Muskets, pistols, boarding axes and cutlasses are distributed; barrels of gunpowder and shot are wrestled from the holds and cached where they will be protected from stray shot; cannons are primed and loaded with grapeshot, then packed tightly with old rags; grapnels are placed near the rails where they might be taken up quickly. Sharp shooters position themselves near the bow to fire at those manning the aft cannon of the ship ahead. Behind them wait another group of men whose job it is to pound large wooden wedges between the rudder and sternpost of the enemy vessel when they are close enough, so she will no longer obey the helmsman's command.

Bachelor's Delight hasn't a hope.

Going below, Captain Roberts dons a crimson waistcoat, silk breeches, and places a thick silver cross suspended by a gold chain

around his neck. Then he jams a brace of pistols into his waistband. Finally, he places his favourite hat, with a single ostrich feather stuck in its band, on his head.

When he returns to the deck, the stations report their readiness.



One of Captain Robert's recurring nightmares: in it he stands alone mid-ocean, barefoot, on the oily back of an immense, slumbering sea-beast, waves lapping over his feet, not daring to breathe.



They had not expected her to turn, nor were they prepared for how smartly she comes about, angling towards the *Royal Fortune*. Captain Roberts has done the only sensible thing he can do to respond to their manoeuvre, which is to swing his ship in a parallel course so that they may bring her heavy guns to bear.

Both ships cleave the waves, but the *Royal Fortune*, despite its size, is the swifter and more agile of the two, and presents Roberts with the first chance to let fly a broadside.

"Stand ready!" he shouts, and the gun captains raise smouldering ropes so they dangle just above the cannons' touch-holes.

One more moment, then . . .

A long row of women, their stiff skirts bouncing in the wind, is herded against the enemy's rail, directly in their line of fire.

The Captain gapes at them in horror. What madman, what craven wretch, could do such a despicable thing?

"*Mi madre! Mi hermana!*" The shriek fills the Captain's ear. Isabella has found her way on deck, and cries out, falling to her knees, clawing at the captain's clothing. "*Mi madre!*" she wails over and over again, gesturing to a grey-haired woman at the end of the row, who waves in return.

The Captain does the only thing he can do: he calls for his megaphone.

■

It is only in the calm after a successful engagement, while the men dutiful tend fallen comrades and swab the blood from the forecastle deck, that Captain Roberts feels fear. Not for his own poor corporeal manifestation; rather, it is for his way of life. For his vocation of pirating. He is lucky, he tells himself, to be living in an age such as this. A time when enterprise can make a man's fortunes. When spirited and courageous men are limited only by the boundaries of the own imaginings. A time when men are men and—

Still, he is plagued by dreams, nightmares of far more hazardous and uncertain lives to live yet. An age in which vapour trails criss-cross the sky and destruction is not face to face in a manly confrontation, but is instantaneous and unannounced. A time in which honour, valour and love have been utterly, and irrevocably, annihilated. These are dreams he hopes he shall never wake to see.

■

Captain Roberts would never, ever have fired on the *Bachelor's Delight*. He is too much the gentleman for that. Nevertheless, he can still bluff. And bluffing is always easier with the forty-eight heavy guns of the *Royal Fortune* weighing in on his side. Not to mention a well-placed warning shot over the other ship's bow. A terse, shouted conversation results in a boat being put out from the *Bachelor's Delight* as per the Captain's demands.

It is dropped into the water on their starboard, out of the Captain's sight, and he holds his breath until it comes round their stern. A single man pulls the oars as the boat bobs towards them. In it are the women, including Isabella's mother, as Captain Roberts has

ordered. Only, when the line is finally thrown up and the boat sidles up to their starboard, Captain Roberts can see it is not women sitting in the boat, but barrels festooned in women's garments. Isabella's mother stands, holding a yard-length wick that curls from the top of one of the barrels. In her other hand she holds a smouldering rope. The Captain is flabbergasted.

"Surrender!" she shouts in the King's English. "Or I will blow you all to hell!"

"Madam," Roberts begins, trying to regain his composure, to sound reasonable in the face of this entirely unreasonable behaviour, "if you sink our ship you will loose whatever booty you might have had. And you will kill everyone aboard, yourself into the bargain."

She shrugs. "And if I do not, you will have us." She touches the wick with the tip of her cigar and it burns furiously. "So I have no choice."

"Are you *mad*?" Captain Roberts flaps his hand back and forth ludicrously, like he is trying to wave out the hissing wick from this distance. Already one third of its length has been consumed.

"No, she is not." It is Isabella, whose English has taken a sudden turn for the better. "It is the world that has gone mad."

Captain Roberts looks from her to the wick, which has burned to within a foot of the barrel, then back to her. Isabella's cheeks are flushed and her eyes are ablaze. She is beautiful beyond words; and the Captain knows in that moment she would kill them all without a second thought.

"Well?" she asks, touching his neck with the delicate tip of her finger and running it down over his heart, not at all hurried, as if there wasn't a mere handspan of wick left between them and oblivion.

■

"Ah, the famous Black Bart!"

Roberts sits across from a pale young man in the belly of the *Bachelor's Delight*. The lad's voice is high pitched, and a smirk plays at

the corner of his lips. To his right sits the woman Isabella.

"I wish to speak to your Captain," Roberts says flatly. He has been led blindfolded, to these quarters, and is still smarting from the indignity of his defeat and his subsequent treatment. Even so, he has resolved that, despite the risk to his own person, he will not—nay *cannot*—let this craven use of women pass unremarked.

"You *are* speaking to the Captain," the young man replies curtly, and with a small twitch of irritation, as if it is a slight to which he has become accustomed. "What is it you wish to say?"

Captain Roberts can barely conceal his surprise, and shifts uncomfortably in his chair. Can he have been defeated by this . . . this slip of a lad? "You, sir," he says mustering his greatest disdain, "are a coward."

"And you, *sir*, are a dandy," the lad replies, uninterested.

Captain Roberts blinks. He adjusts the rakish angle of his hat which suddenly seems askew, and the feather momentarily dips into his sight.

The boy leans forward. "And do not call me *sir*. I am a woman. We allow no men to serve on this ship."

The Captain is nonplussed; he opens his mouth, but no words emerge. No men? And a woman in a man's clothing, the captain of a ship. Absurd!

"I am Mary Read." She nods at Isabella. "And this is my co-captain Anne Bonny." The two women smile at one another, and join hands in an unconscious, familiar gesture. "Now then, back to business." She releases her compatriot's hand and clasps her own on the table. "Will you negotiate?"

"Negotiate? What is there to negotiate?" Under Isabella's supervision, they have already emptied out his ship's magazines and holds, then rowed the booty over to the *Bachelor's Delight*, all the while Isabella's mother—or whoever she might be—stood ready by the wick. "We've nothing left."

"Do you value your men's lives so little?"

His men's lives? Roberts is taken aback. What new monstrosity is this? "But . . . but, we surrendered." It is tradition that the victor may press defeated sailors into service, as Roberts had been pressed. But the others you always released, either on their own vessel if it was still sea worthy, or at the next port of call. To kill them went against all the rules of civilized engagement. "My God, woman, you cannot . . . this is . . . this is outrageous!"

"Outrageous?" Mary's eyes blaze. "You are far luckier than you know, *Captain*. Normally it is against my nature to negotiate surrender. If I were to have my way, we'd have set sail by now . . ."

Roberts knows from the way she says it that she means they'd have scuppered his ship, consigning him and his men to the bottom of the sea. "You *are* mad!"

Balling her fists, Mary stands; Roberts rises to meet her.

To the side, Anne clears her throat meaningfully.

Mary glances at her, piqued, but reclaims her seat. "Very well," she says, turning back to Roberts, who still stands. "Dandies are not to my taste," she says dismissively. "Alas, Mary has a weakness for your sort. So here it is: in return for the lives of you and your crew, we have just one demand. Something in the nature of a personal service you may render my co-captain . . ." Anne (or is it Isabella?) drops her chin slightly, coyly, and smiles at him. "Pirating, you see, is a lonely business . . ."

The Captain blanches.



Captain Roberts has far to sail yet. He will take many ships in becoming the most successful of all pirates. And he will meet his death another day at the hands of Captain Ogle of the *Swallow* when he is struck in the throat by grapeshot, standing atop a gun carriage, dressed in silk breeches, a crimson waistcoat, and a hat with a single ostrich feather.



The world, it seems, is wider and stranger than even Captain Roberts has dreamed it.

True to their word, they leave in the middle of the night, dumping him unceremoniously in his small launch, weighing anchor and running up every inch of sheet they have. The *Bachelor's Delight* moves swiftly and, in the time it takes the Captain to row the short distance to the *Royal Fortune*, it has already become an uncertain glimmer in the moonless night.

She kept his hat.

When he climbs aboard he finds his men crowded onto the weather deck holding lanterns, awaiting his arrival, staring at him expectantly. But what can he tell them? Instead, he stares at the delicate remains of a burned-down wick, a thin line that lays on the rump of the canon like a blackened snake. Pirating has taken on new and unexpected complications; the old rules are no more substantial than the ashes he presses beneath his thumb, a black smudge of empty promises.

"Shall we pursue, sir?" asks the first mate. "I had the men hide powder enough for two or three good shots."

He considers this possibility, feels an inexplicable yearning lodge behind his breastbone like a fragment of swallowed shot. Pursuit, he thinks, but perhaps not for the reasons the crew imagine. And should they close, what then?

"No," he tells them, shaking his head. Not yet.

He is bone tired and wishes only for the peace of his bed. And, God willing, a night of dreamless sleep.

When Marissa said, “Maybe we should see other people,” Nicholas decided to give her cancer.



Nicholas, like many geniuses, had his great obsession. The root of his monomania wasn't hard to trace. After all, he'd lost both his parents to cancer by the age of thirteen. He bore mute witness as they wasted away, leaking viscid fluids onto crisp white hospital sheets. Colon cancer (father) and lung cancer (mother) had followed in quick succession. Outwardly, he remained stoic; inwardly, he was a roil of emotion. First debilitating grief, then rage at his parents for abandoning him. Followed by searing guilt. Guilt at surviving. Guilt at having done nothing to save his parents. Certainly he'd been young when it all happened, not even of legal age; still he suffered lingering doubts that if only he'd asked the right questions, insisted on different doctors or courses of treatments, spoke out for his parents when they'd been unable, things might have gone differently. For years he prayed that cancer would take him, too.

Seven months after he'd watched his mother's casket lowered into the ground alongside his father's grave, and one week after he turned thirteen, Nicholas matriculated at Harvard. By the age of sixteen he'd graduated *summa cum laude* with a degree in biology. At twenty-five, he'd already published half a dozen groundbreaking studies, was a full professor at his *alma mater* and an M.D. His goal was nothing less than the holy grail of cancer research: a magic bullet to cure all cancers. By twenty-eight, frustrated with the incessant struggle for funding and bothersome distractions of teaching, he'd left academe for full-time research in a corporate lab. Twelve years he toiled at Recombicon, insisting on working alone, skirted by colleagues made uncomfortable by his brooding intensity. He didn't care that he must

look a freak to them, tall and thin, a long sad face, stooped shoulders, skin sallow from the florescent lights of the lab. More than once he'd been likened to John Carradine, the perennial B-movie mad scientist. Yet he did nothing to dispel this image, favouring sombre garb and the dark stubble of almost-beards, while sectioning cancerous mammals with precise strokes of his scalpel.

But he was tolerated, venerated even, by the corporation's board: his work had produced several lucrative patents. They gave him the things he needed and left him alone. In the same way cancer had relentlessly consumed his parents' vital organs, so it consumed his imagination, day after day in the lab, and during endless, sheet-twisting nights in his spartan, bare-walled apartment.

Until Marissa happened into his life, that is.



Even obsessed geniuses can fall in love.

The IRS had sent Marissa to audit him, he never having filed a return, nor answered any of their letters. She waited for him outside his apartment, into the wee hours of the morning, until he dragged himself home from work. She startled him, looming out of the darkness, spectral, pale as a gibbous moon, the oval of her lovely, preternatural face framed in white hair. But most startling of all were her eyes, deep-red pupils, like those of a photo's flash-frozen cat, surrounded by milky blue irises. Bewitched, Nicholas couldn't look away.

Marissa was breathtakingly, beautifully albino.

She wore a perfectly tailored black suit, a shocking contrast to her unpigmented skin and argentine hair. A red garnet pin on her lapel glowed with the same eerie light as her eyes. "You've been a bad boy," she said, and that was all it took for Nicholas to fall terminally in love.



An audit can be a simple thing if one keeps good records; if the records are spotty, it can take a long time, require the auditor and auditee to spend many hours huddled, head to head, weaving together the intimate details of one's financial life. Nicholas's case was the latter. Not only had his parents come from money—carrying with them all the attendant stocks, bonds, and sundry other investments he'd inherited and then ignored—but the generous royalty contract he'd negotiated with his biotech firm had netted him a small fortune now that three of the drugs he'd developed were fairly burning up the market. His tax liability, penalties included, was substantial. Seven figures, was her guess. A prolonged audit would be necessary. Nicholas was elated.

Over the course of the next few weeks he spent less and less time at the lab, and more and more at his apartment with Marissa, sifting through his financial records, slowly exposing his empty life through an audit trail. Within days cancer had been displaced in all his waking thoughts by her; when she wasn't around, he suffered the pangs of nascent love, the sleepless nights and tortuous days waiting for her to reappear. To prolong the audit, he lost some of the critical paperwork, purposefully misreported on other forms. She was unfazed. They ordered pizza as they tried to make sense of his statements of earning and losses, tipped espressos in the local donut shop as they sorted receipts. When it turned out he was nominal president of three numbered corporations, and that his net worth was in the tens of millions, he shrugged. Marissa was clearly puzzled by his reaction, at his indifference to his own wealth. Still, she seemed to warm to him, took to calling him by his first name, to touching his arm lightly when she discovered something of interest in the sea of documents. One day, they even took boxes of pay stubs to dinner at her favourite restaurant, an intimate Turkish café. It was here, after the meal, that she jokingly suggested he might add to his

paltry deductions by marrying her and having a child.

Marriage. A child. With Marissa.

His heart soared.

Weeks passed before the first kiss, weeks in which Nicholas fretted endlessly about her feelings, replayed their encounters over and over again in his mind trying to gauge her reactions to his clumsy advances. Marissa. Beautiful, delicate Marissa. When the last “i” was dotted and last “t” crossed on his final return, they kissed.

For the first time, cancer seemed unimportant.



“Maybe we should see other people.”

Marissa’s words jolted Nicholas out of his body. He floated above them, the vacated shell of his physical self still in bed next to her, frozen in rejection, his glistening erection, not yet subsided, withering instantly. Twice before he’d experienced this out-of-body phenomenon: both times when the same stooped oncologist had explained his parents’ cancers had metastasized.

“Things aren’t working out the way I’d hoped,” Marissa said to the shadows of his bedroom.

Nicholas collapsed back into his body. Every molecule of his being wanted to scream, *No! You’re wrong!*, but he remained tight-lipped. As self-contained as he had been at the side of his parents’ hospital beds.

“I don’t think you’re ready for this level of commitment.”

How could she say that? Of course he was ready. Tonight he had planned on telling her he loved her. That he wanted to be with her forever. Too late for that now. Unless . . . Reaching out, he put his hand on her breast, traced its shape the way she liked.

“Don’t.” But her sharp intake of breath belied her admonition.

Nicholas feathered the back of his hand down her belly, felt tiny invisible hairs rise to meet his knuckles. As soft as a breeze, his hand

slid between her legs, his long index finger straightening into the mucilaginous warmth. . . .

"No!" Marissa disentangled herself and rose, looming naked in the moonlight, her skin flawless as the finest English porcelain. Heart-stoppingly beautiful. A contrast, in Nicholas's imagination, to his own scrawny, consumptive form. Of course she wanted to see other men. Younger, better looking men. Men she could love the way he loved her. He pulled the sheets up to his chin, ashamed of his pitiful carcass. "You're dumping me."

"Don't say it like that, Nicholas."

His genius utterly failed him. She was slipping away while all he could do was stupidly clutch the edge of the sheet.

"You know I want children." She looked away. "I'm sorry, but I don't think you're ready."

So that's what this was about. "You're wrong."

"Look, Nicholas, you're a nice guy. But there's an anger inside you that scares me. It's poisoning our relationship. I can barely cope, so how could a child deal with it?"

Anger? Nicholas was taken aback. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You can't bring your parents back," she said sharply, as if she were annoyed at him for forcing her to explain. "Not by being with me. Or by having your own child." Marissa pulled on her panties, an absence of black against her alabaster skin, slid her arms through the straps of her bra, its dark lines bisecting her breasts. "I've got to get going." Her tone softened, become conciliatory. "We'll talk about it later. When we're calmer. Next week. Okay?"

He had nothing to say.

Too fast, too fast, she'd gathered up her things and was gone, leaving Nicholas in the dark, a ghostly after-image of her naked luminescence burned indelibly into his corneas. He felt abandoned, lost, as much as he had that day he stood alone over the twin graves of his parents.

That was when he knew he had to give her cancer.

■

The essence of his plan was simple: he'd save her and she'd love him. How to do it? Three years ago he'd worked on a clandestine project funded by the CIA. The agency had requested an undetectable delivery system for aggressive cancers using emasculated viral vectors—a kind of deleterious gene therapy. Nicholas pulled up the old files. The cancer he selected, an accelerated pancreatic cancer, was one he'd fathered in his lab. He knew its cell surface proteins as intimately as he would have known the face of his own child. And so knew its weaknesses too. In his experiments, he found that he could vanquish the malignant neoplasm easily, working miraculous recoveries in chimpanzees languishing in the latter stages of the disease. He also knew conventional therapies would be useless in fighting his variant. It was ideal. The only problem was its liquid suspension system: too dark, too viscid, and with a sharp, funky aftertaste that made it useless to the CIA.

But Marissa loved the thick, brackish coffee served at the Turkish place. Nicholas was right in believing that the murky liquid was one of the few substances likely to mask the taste, smell and appearance of his acrid, carcinogenic goo.

■

A tiny squeeze tube in his pocket. An opportune moment when she excused herself to go to the toilet. Nicholas picked up a silver-plated teaspoon, stirred, watching the liquid diffuse in the miniature cup. Marissa returned and resumed her seat. She looked at him oddly. Nicholas frowned, then realized he was still stirring her coffee. "Sorry," he said, dropping the spoon.

She looked at her cup, then at him. "Are you all right?"

Sweat trickled down his temple. "Fine."

His stomach knotted. Until now he'd been so focused on preparing his cancer he hadn't had time to experience doubts. Now he looked at her, at beautiful Marissa. What the hell was he doing? Reaching for her cup, he curled his fingers around it. "That one's probably cold. I'll order you another."

She grabbed his wrist. Nicholas could feel his own quickened pulse beating beneath her pale fingers. "No. It's fine. I . . . I have to be going."

"Going? But we haven't really talked."

"I'm not sure there's a lot more to say." She looked away, out the window. "Besides," she said, far too casually, while letting go his wrist. "I really do have to be going. Another case."

Another case? Another late night audit? Like his? Nicholas felt nauseous. He let go of the cup. Marissa picked it up and put it to her lips. Nicholas watched her drink. She dropped her share of the bill on the table and, with a chaste peck on Nicholas's cheek, was gone.

Six weeks later she called him from the cancer ward.



Ask any researcher: as good as a chimp is for modeling a human being, a chimp is *not* a human being. So, it shouldn't have been a complete surprise to Nicholas when things went awry. Amidst the monitor ping and the drip of the IV, he hovered over her hospital bed, devastated. Marissa's fingers clutched weakly at his. She looked deceptively normal. But inside things had gone very wrong. Unlike the lab experiments, Marissa's cancer had metastasized. Slipped into other organs where it wasn't supposed to have gone. It spread with a single-minded virulence that befuddled the doctors at the hospital. In a matter of weeks Marissa's poor body had not only been assaulted by pancreatic cancer, but had been besieged with an inexplicable spate of other cancers afflicting her colon, lungs and throat. Nicholas's

miraculous cure aimed at only one target: the pancreas. In that respect, the experimental drug he proffered the doctors had worked exceptionally well. They were singularly impressed at the results. But as for the other cancers . . .

They gave her four months, tops.

Nicholas stared at Marissa's beautiful, sad face. She would abandon him as his parents had. And, for all his genius, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

Or was there?



Fused trophoblasts.

He'd made the proposal to the board several years ago. His notion was to fight cancer with an equally aggressive vector: embryonic cells. Or, more specifically, trophoblasts cultivated from embryonic cells. After all, the embryo's struggle to bury itself in its mother's uterus was rivalled only by the assault of malignant cancer on normal tissue. His PowerPoint animation showed the engineered cells, his black magic bullets, dispersing throughout the body like a swarm of angry bees, targeting malignant growths, then hijacking critical blood for their own voracious appetite, starving out the malignancy. Once its host died, the engineered trophoblast cells would starve, too. On Nicholas's screen bright tangles of tumorous cells crumbled under the onslaught, disappearing altogether. Complete remission in days. A catholicon for all cancers in a single syringe.

A convincing presentation, he thought.

Unfortunately, the board hadn't found it so. Rather, they found it unpalatable. Developing bio-weapons for the CIA was one thing; creating human embryos from which to harvest cells was another. Support for the project was roundly rejected, thus making it impossible for Nicholas to obtain the embryonic material he needed for his experiments. He moved on.

Only now his magic bullet was Marissa's last hope. She simply had too many tumours, too many targets, even if he stole all the experimental drugs he and his colleagues had ever produced and pumped her full of them. So Nicholas made a copy of the necessary files, snapped the lids onto several Petri dishes, and stuffed everything into his briefcase. Then he tendered his resignation.

The next day he rented a vacant butcher shop and spent a significant amount of his liquid assets equipping it. The place was in the middle of an industrial neighbourhood, surrounded by decaying warehouses on three sides and a rail yard on the fourth. Painting over the windows, he worked feverishly to convert the shop into part lab, part operating theatre. He installed everything necessary for blood work and biopsies, then put together an imaging centre of sorts, including an ultrasound and a used X-ray unit. Against one wall he placed a rack for a dozen rat cages; against the other he put two blue plastic-lined bins for animal waste. He'd use the animals to perform toxicity and side-effects tests—at least whatever time would allow.



Long after visiting hours had ended, the corridor was silent save for the occasional nightmare-inspired moan or distant sputum-laden cough. Unseen, Nicholas slipped past the sleepy duty nurse and crept into Marissa's darkened room. Her eyes were closed and her chest rose and fell with a wheezing irregularity. It had been a week since his last visit—he'd been busy prepping his lab and beginning the first series of live animal experiments—and her condition had so deteriorated Nicholas was shocked into momentary inaction. She looked hollowed out, her cheeks sunken, her eyes dark bruises, her long glorious hair all but gone from the futile regimen of radiation and chemotherapy. Nicholas picked up her hand; it was limp and damp, like holding a drowned kitten. She stirred and groaned softly, her eyes fluttered open, startling him. Her red pupils were dilated. "Nicholas?"

"I'm here."

"Wh . . . why . . ." She floated groggily in a sea of painkillers.

He stroked her forehead gently. "Why what, Marissa?"

"Why . . . did you . . . do this to me?"

Nicholas was taken aback. Did she know? She'd never mentioned it on any of his previous visits. Or was she just delirious, talking about something else, an errant memory swimming up through the analgesics? He searched her face, but couldn't tell. She swallowed and closed her eyes. In a moment her breathing slowed and, although shallow, became regular.

"Because I love you," Nicholas said, kissing her lightly on the forehead.

He carefully detached the IV drips, sliding the needles from her velum skin, dribbling bright red lines on her thin arms. Peeling back the tape Nicholas removed two catheters. Cradling her like a newborn, he lifted and placed her in the wheelchair he'd brought. He made for the elevator, passing the now empty nursing station, and down to street level. He rolled her through the emergency room, past incurious, dazed eyes lost in their own pain, and out to his waiting van.



"Please, Nicholas, let me die." Marissa's voice was raspy; it was the first time she'd addressed him directly in a week. Usually when she spoke it was to phantoms; occasionally she sang snatches of children's songs. But for the last hour she'd followed his movements around the room from where she was strapped to the gurney, repeating her plea like a mantra.

Nicholas increased her morphine dose 2 milligrams. "Please—" she started again, then shuddered, lapsing into abrupt silence.

Nicholas felt a sharp pang of guilt; she hadn't really needed the analgesic. But his nerves were raw. And now, of all times, it was

critical that he be able to concentrate. For three weeks he worked on culturing trophoblasts from Marissa's eggs and his sperm. Of the dozens of cultures he'd started, only one cell line was still viable. Nicholas filled a syringe with half of the murky fluid in which her final hope swam, slid it into a vein in her arm, then thumbed the plunger, firing his magic bullets at their targets.

■

Marissa rallied and Nicholas allowed himself a faint hope. In the days that followed her tumours began to shrink. In the next two weeks her progress was astonishing; her recovery seemed a certainty. Nicholas was joyous.

Then her remission came to a crashing halt.

Her tumours began reasserting themselves. Nicholas applied a second course of treatment. It used up the last of his engineered cells. Only this time her rally lasted for no more than forty-eight hours. The cancer made up for its temporary abatement with a deadly new efficacy. Fresh lymphomas, carcinomas and myelomas appeared. Lumps developed in her breasts and uterus. Her left iris flecked with the black spots characteristic of melanoma of the eye and her nose developed ulcerating sores. Her beautiful, once-pristine skin, slowly receded under masses of brown lesions and the red-purple nodules of Kaposi's sarcoma. As esophageal cancer ravaged her throat, reducing her cry to an unrecognizable rasping noise. When an X-ray revealed the dark spots of several gliomas in her brain tissue, Nicholas finally understood her cancer-riddled organs were beyond even his powers of redemption. In days, perhaps hours, Marissa would succumb. He'd lost again. Six weeks to the day after he'd brought her here, exhausted and filled with desperate anguish, he pulled her off life support, then lay next to her on the gurney and wept.

■

Despite his belief that he was feeding the cancers more than her, Nicholas kept her IVs attached. He couldn't bear to starve her to death. He loved her too much for that. So she lingered another day. And then the next. For a whole week.

But how?

For two long weeks the cancers continued their rampage. She barely looked human. There wasn't a single centimetre of her ivory skin left; although she was still vaguely Marissa shaped, she was a mass of lesions, waxy brown lumps and suppurating tumours. Her left eye was dark with clotted blood. It swelled and crusted over, forcing her lid perpetually open. Nicholas leaned over to examine the brown, distended globe; he touched it with the tip of his latex-clad finger and it popped, spattering his cheek with a yellowish-white pus.

How could she be alive? Nicholas hadn't a clue.

Then a snatch of conversation he'd once had with Marissa came back to him, one of the few times he'd talked to her about his work.

"Isn't cancer caused by a mutation?" she'd asked.

He'd answered in the affirmative.

"And isn't that also how new species evolve?"

He'd conceded the point.

"So maybe cancer is a new form of life struggling to express itself."

At the time he'd tried to explain the naïveté of her point. But now Nicholas wondered if he hadn't been the naïve one.

■

Another week passed. Nicholas's lab filled with the stench of death, of the bacterial products of decay: histamine, putrescine and cadaverine. But instead of killing her, the tumours commandeered her organs and stabilized them, creating dark, clotted doppelgangers. The smell diminished. New growths began to pop up, the cancers somehow activating long-dormant sequences of DNA. Strange misshapen organs proliferated inside her abdominal walls and

thoracic cavity. They pulsed with life and dark fluids passed around and through them, sustaining her. Her blood-starved skin cracked and peeled, then sloughed off in broad swatches, revealing a brown carapace beneath. Where her mouth had been was a blistered oval. Something that might have been a tongue twisted in its depths. Two brown, fibrous orbs had replaced her albinic eyes, twitching in dark sockets, mimicking the movements of real eyes. But did they see anything? Nicholas had no way of knowing.

Marissa was alive. He stared at her, incredulous, and appalled. How could he love such a monster? Yet he did.

When blood began forming dangerous, fetid pools in her new organs, Nicholas disensanguinated her. He washed the blood from the floor with a hose, spraying it into runoff channels. A brown sludge now circulated in her sclerotic veins. A few days later he cut out her fibrous, atrophied heart. It had no appreciable effect on her.

Marissa, his Marissa, made odd, ululating sounds, turning her head back and forth as if trapped in a nightmare. Nicholas discontinued the morphine. She calmed. However, when he approached, her head swivelled and her body strained towards him, as if she wanted him to comfort her. Nicholas pulled on his latex gloves and stroked her striated forehead. She relaxed. A dark arm pressed against his thigh.

■

Though nobody else in the world could possibly have understood the mangled word, Nicholas did. Marissa, his Marissa, had called his name.

Nicholas peeled off his gloves; he reached out and, for the first time since he'd brought her here, touched her directly. Her skin was stippled with waxy bumps and felt cool beneath his fingertips. Yet, in that moment, he could not have loved her more. She stirred when he touched the prominence of her breast. The nipples had rotted and

fallen off nearly a month ago, but the rest of the breast had hardened into a shape that remained true to Marissa's. He stroked her the way she liked. Marissa groaned, arching against the restraints.

Just as he had done so long ago, Nicholas feathered the back of his hand down her belly, felt tiny invisible hairs rise to meet his knuckles. As soft as a breeze, his hand slid between her legs, his long index finger straightening into the mucilaginous warmth. . . .

A single drop of brownish fluid ran down his finger to his knuckle and fell onto the table. Nicholas had an erection.

She called out his name again.

Climbing onto the gurney, Nicholas straddled Marissa. Her head rose to meet his, her lipless mouth fitting precisely over his—

—and something pointed and greasy tore across his tongue like a rasp. He jerked his head back, tasting his own welling blood, and something else, too: the pang of loneliness, abandonment and dark, brackish coffee. The taste of cancer. He leaned forward and kissed her harder this time, pressing his face against hers, his weight fully on her chest, her blistering breath forced down his throat, scalding his esophagus like bad scotch, unfurling in his lungs, settling contentedly there. He kept his lips on her, one minute, two minutes, almost three. Then pulled back, gasping for air. His heart hammered desperately; his vision blurred. Losing his balance, he toppled backwards off the gurney, felt ribs crack when he hit something that jutted from the cold floor, though he couldn't quite think what it might be, and it didn't really bother him all that much. Nicholas's limbs twitched uselessly as he convulsed. But bit by bit his body stilled as the cure took hold.

HORROR STORY

The third murder happened at a dumpy motel on Lakeshore Boulevard, just off the Gardiner Expressway. The Lakeview Inn. A real hole, peeling paint and pigeon shit everywhere. Meyers sat hunched in his car, parked behind two cruisers, staring at the scene through the curve of his windshield. The motel was a way station for the down and out, for transients, junkies, prostitutes and their johns—rooms to let by the week, day or hour. Meyers was familiar with its water-stained walls, its florid, torn curtains, its grey, sway-backed mattresses. When he'd worked vice, he'd been here on at least half a dozen calls. Bright yellow tape, snapping in late autumn gusts, closed the entrance way. The uniforms had sealed off the parking lot even though it was empty. Leaves scudded across the cracked asphalt. Through the big plate-glass window of the office he could see the sad-eyed, East Indian woman who worked the front desk. She was flanked by a couple of detectives, pads open, scribbling impassively as she talked.

Christ, how could this be happening?

I knew, Meyers wanted to tell them. *I knew the call was coming*. But what could he have said? That this morning, while scrambling eggs for Sarah, he'd seen the killer outside his kitchen window? No, not seen. Not clearly, anyway. More a silhouette flitting between houses, an indistinct, half-formed image, flat mask for a face with only the eyes clear, two tiny pinpricks of ruby light, blazing points that pulsed with the rhythm of his own heartbeat.

Twice before he'd seen the shadow, each time just before the call had come. This morning had been the third.

There was no fucking way he could tell them. *A shadow?* they'd ask in disbelief, then laugh. *You saw a shadow?* And the Staff Inspector would call it stress, and replace him with someone who could no more help the case than Meyers could help seeing his shadow. Perhaps if he had explained earlier, in the beginning . . .

Shit, no. Even then they'd have figured he was nuts. He couldn't have told them about the dark figure that stalked the edges of his world, that lurked just outside the periphery of his vision. Nor about the file folder he carried with him all the time now, that sat on the passenger seat of his car. A folder he'd pulled from the dust-grimed filing cabinet in his basement when he'd first understood the pattern. Christ almighty! He stared at the folder. It had been an exercise. Just a fucking exercise!

Meyers' hands trembled; a trickle of perspiration ran down his temple, clung to the edge of his jaw.

Even the Scotch didn't seem to be helping. He had dawdled, let the others leave the Operations Room before him, telling them he had to make a quick call, that he'd meet them at the Lakeview; and when they'd all gone, he pulled the mickey from his desk drawer, taken a stiff pull on it, then slipped it into his pocket. Now the smoky bottle weighed heavily in his hand again, its stubby, black cap atop the folder on the passenger seat. Ducking so the cops in the office couldn't see him, he took another slug, screwed the cap back on, then tossed it into the glove compartment, snapping the door shut with his elbow. He wiped the sleeve of his overcoat across his mouth and climbed from the car.

Halfway along the boxy, whitewashed block of rooms, a door stood open; figures swam through the murkiness inside, a uniform standing watch outside. Meyers ducked under the police tape, walked unsteadily across the lot. He nodded brusquely at the officer, sucked in a big breath and plunged inside the room.

Lukas's bulky form loomed up, blocked the view. He held a half-eaten cinnamon roll in his left hand; a coffee steamed in his right. "About time you got here."

At first Meyers couldn't see anything. Then, as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw either end of the bed, Lukas's girth still blocking its middle. A pair of arms and legs was all he could see, the body spread-eagled by black straps wound around wrists and ankles,

the straps secured to the four thick wooden feet of the bed. A leather jacket, jeans, and a pair of ragged underwear had been neatly laid out on a chair near the head of the bed. Leather biker boots sat on the floor at the foot of the bed. On the far wall, the words *Once upon a time* had been painted in blood. Meyers throat tightened.

"Thought we'd have to send someone out to look for you." Lucas smirked.

Meyers brushed past him.

Like the others, this victim had been splayed like a pinned insect. Two lines had been neatly incised at the top of his chest, and wadded, blood-soaked Kleenex had been stuffed inside to distend the skin below the incisions into the shape of small breasts. He had been emasculated, his penis and scrotum cut away, a crude vagina formed and the flaps of skin held in place by several large safety pins. The sheets beneath him were black with dried blood. His thin, parted lips had been slathered with bright red lipstick, and, beneath his open eyes, exaggerated dark circles had been painted in mascara that gave him a plaintive, questioning look, sad and bewildered, as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd become. His eyes seemed to stare at Meyers, asking him, *Why? Why did you do this to me?*

Christ. The bitch had done it again. Something inside Meyers crumpled like a tissue crisped by a flame. He felt the blood drain from his face.

"No signs of struggle," Lucas said. He took a big bite out of his roll, a thick line of cream bleeding onto his chin. He nodded towards the wall.

No shit, Meyers thought. No fucking shit. Stun guns don't leave those kind of marks. But he couldn't tell them about the 40,000-volt gun; not yet. They'd think it was too fucking weird that he knew. They'd just have to figure it out themselves. Forensics would pick it up eventually. Wouldn't they?

"Put on your gloves. You've been elected to baggie detail," Lucas said, grinning. He put his coffee down on an end table, pulled an

extra-large, zip-lock baggie from the pocket of his rumpled jacket and shoved it at Meyers. "You can begin with the garbage pail in the washroom. That's where his balls are. Oh, and look before you pour yourself a drink," Luckas said, stuffing the bag in Meyers's hand. "His dick is in a Dixie cup by the sink."

But then, Meyers already knew that, didn't he? That was the way he'd written it.

■

Alone. Everyone else had gone home long ago.

The lights of the Operations Room at Metro Headquarters burned brightly, painfully. Meyers turned on every one of them when he'd felt the darkness pressing against the window panes like a slaving beast. Against the utter black, the unnatural brilliance dazzled him, made his head spin. Meyers snatched his glass from the desk, Scotch slopping over the side and watering his hand. It was his fourth—no fifth. He took a big swig, let the warmth of the liquid wash down his gullet, quell his jangling nerves, blunt the glare of the lights. Then his hand fell, the thick bottom of the glass clacking loudly against desktop, making him jump. He released the glass, watched it wobble for a second, then settle.

Two folders lay on his desk.

One was old, shedding fibres along its edges, its cover stained, dog-eared. The other folder was new, unmarked, drawn from the supply cabinet that afternoon.

Meyers opened the fresh one. He stared at the white sheets, filled with crisp, orderly lines of black type. The crime scene report he'd written earlier today. Clean, neat, methodical. The murder reduced to simple, comprehensible facts:

Arriving at the scene at 10:45 a.m., I found the victim, subsequently identified as Ronald Kurt Aikmen,

in room 12 at the Lakeview Inn. The subject sustained numerous sharp force injuries, including massive incisions in his pelvis and chest. Coagulated and dried blood stained the bed and surrounding carpet, principally near the pelvis of the victim. Cordura straps had been looped around the wrists and ankles of the decedent and secured to the feet of the bed. The victim was naked with the exception of a leather vest. Lividity was fixed and rigor mortis was fully established. To the right of the bed, a flannel shirt, leather jacket, and jeans had been neatly arranged on a chair. . . .

He poured himself another shot, a smaller one; he threw it back. The tremor in his hand seemed to diminish infinitesimally. Goddamn if he couldn't have used this earlier, when he'd had to bag that guy's nuts.

Meyers slapped the folder closed. The bottle clicked against his glass as he poured himself a double this time. A moment later the burning liquid curled into his throat. Yeah. That seemed to do the trick.

He fingered the other folder; its cover was filled with scribbles, names and phone numbers, cryptic notes made to himself that no longer made sense, and the name of a recommended restaurant to which he'd never had the chance to go. It was an exercise he'd done at the seminar in Pennsylvania, nearly seven years ago. Something he'd almost forgotten, stuck in a filing cabinet in his basement, along with miscellany of his life: tax returns, receipts, warranties and bills, birth and marriage certificates, the deed to his house, a yellowing envelope containing his only citation in an otherwise undistinguished career at Metro.

He flicked the folder open.

Inside were several sheets with his cramped handwriting, all in pencil. On its index tab he'd written the name *VICKI* in large, dramatic

letters, then underlined the name twice. It had been his project, an exercise in creating a psychological profile for a serial killer. While the other cops at the workshop had struggled to imagine a killer, his had flowed easily, naturally. But then, he'd always liked that sort of thing, making stuff up. Like the stories he'd woven for Sarah soon after they started dating. At first he'd thought it was kind of weird, the way she'd insisted, late at night when they were settled into the pocket of warmth beneath the quilt, that he tell her a story. But, much to his surprise, he found he had a talent for storytelling. For imagining things he'd never seen.

Vicki is a white female, in her early to mid-thirties; she keeps herself in good shape. Personal appearance is very important to her. Parts of her residence, however, are disordered. She has split into half a dozen distinct personalities, all with different and sometimes conflicting needs (though bits of each leak through into the others' lives). Two personalities dominate, one meticulous and organized, who keeps an immaculate home, a woman who has no close friends but many acquaintances, and seems to be searching for stability—and is possibly even married; the other a careless, often slovenly, thrill seeker, insensible to threat and oblivious to danger, though acutely aware of her other half's attitudes towards her—and often resentful of them. When living this second aspect of her personality, she frequents local bars, strikes up conversations with complete strangers, takes them to their homes or hotel rooms.

Vicki is the only daughter in a family of men. From an early age she was raped repeatedly by her father and brothers, suffering severe beatings in the process. What Vicki remembers of the women in her family is

unflattering: she sees her mother as an ineffectual, withdrawn woman who suffered similar abuse at the hands of the male members of the family, and slipped into alcoholic or drug-induced stupors to numb her pain. Most importantly, perhaps, Vicki came to see her mother as a passive, non-threatening, creature. From this stems her desire to remake the people in her world into equally non-threatening entities. . . .

Meyers's teacher at the FBI's road school had dismissed these preliminary notes as contradictory, an unlikely blend of psychological traits. Too clever, he had called Meyers's work, designed only to fool his fellow students, and of little use in real life. There was simply not enough information available on women serial killers to justify his portrait.

Vicki. Meyers could see her clearly in his mind's eye, just as he had all those years ago. Short cropped blonde hair. A severe, narrow face. Grey, washed-out eyes, flat and lifeless, shoulders stooped and withdrawn, begging to be ignored, left alone. Except . . . except when she hunted; then her eyes shone, glittered like chips of ice, cold and dark and predatory. As they did now in his imagination. She smiled at him, a sly mocking thing that made him shudder.

No! He slammed a fist down on the desk. You're not real! I made you up! He shook his head, trying to dislodge the picture of her, but only succeeded in making the room spin.

Christ, he thought, panicky, staring at the sheet. Christ almighty! Sweat rolled down his temple, collected in the small of his back. He pulled his hand from atop the page, leaving a dark palm print in its centre. An absurd notion occurred to him: he wondered if perhaps no serial killer, not a single one, had ever existed except in their files, that it was the fact of the files that had given them shape and meaning and life.

Swallowing, he turned the pages, lifting the pieces of paper like

he'd have lifted the sheet from a corpse in the morgue, until he came to the descriptions. His mock crime scene reports. The third one began,

The victim, an unidentified white male, approximate age 30, was discovered in room 3A of the Sandylot Hotel by the chambermaid. The decedent was naked with the exception of a leather vest. Cordura straps had been used to bind the subject to the bed. Minor bruising was observed on the victim's upper right shoulder and two large sharp force injuries were evident on the victim's upper chest and lower pelvis. A leather jacket, jeans and boots had been arranged neatly on a chair to the right of the bed. . . .

There were still three more reports left in the folder. They were only supposed to write two reports, but Meyers had enjoyed the assignment so much he'd written six. *Six*. Meyers's stomach felt like a knot being pulled tight. He grabbed the mickey, turned it upside down over his glass, and was rewarded with only a thin trickle, two, maybe three, drops. Empty. Goddamn empty.

The bottle banged into Meyers's wastepaper basket, spun the pail until it fell to its side flinging its contents onto the floor, spilling rubbish everywhere.

In his head, Meyers heard the echo of Vicki's mocking laughter.

■

Sarah was in bed when Meyers got home.

Swaying only slightly, he tiptoed into the room. Close now, he could see she breathed deeply, regularly. Her clothes were scattered about the room, and, weaving between bed and dresser, he picked them up, one by one, a silk blouse and a linen skirt in a pile near the closet, a serge jacket thrown carelessly across the foot of the bed,

one arm brushing the floor. Her clothes were expensive, impeccable, beautiful. Like she was. In her late thirties, and she could still turn heads. Meyers placed each item carefully on a hangar and smoothed it, his fingers thick and coarse against the fine material.

"David?" Her voice weighted by sleep. She stirred, propped herself up on an elbow, blonde hair spilling over her shoulders and across her small, perfect breasts. In the cross-thatched shadows of their room her face was hidden, her expression veiled, unknowable. Meyers stepped over to the bed and gently brushed back her hair until he could see the pale oval of her face. But in the dark it wasn't the face he remembered, its lines and edges were different, deeper, hardened. The face of a stranger. How long since he had last looked at it closely?

"You've been drinking." She pushed his hands away, like she was disgusted. "Damnit, David," she said, her voice tired, resigned. "You're going to kill yourself."

"Just a quick one. After work."

She drew her lips into a tight line; her eyes narrowed. She looked pissed, more pissed than usual. "I waited an hour." Her voice was cool, not angry, more detached than anything, as if her words belonged to a different scene, a different couple. "Where were you?" she asked, staring at the sheets, the wall, the open closet, anything but him.

Then it hit him. *La Piazza*. Her favourite restaurant on Bloor. Christ, how could he have forgotten? He was supposed to have met her there for lunch. Then drive her to the garage where they were going to pick up her old Tercel. He'd forgotten all about it when the call on the latest victim had come in that morning.

"Sorry." He dropped numbly onto the edge of the bed, moving his hand towards her again, but she continued to recede. "Work, you know—"

"Shit, David! I had to take a cab to the garage, and I didn't have enough money with me to pay for the work. They had to replace the whole bumper. They almost wouldn't let me have the car." She pulled

herself into a sitting position, away from him, crossing arms over her breasts. "I had to promise them you'd come by tomorrow with the rest of it."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it. Tomorrow."

She frowned, but said nothing.

"We had another one today."

She stiffened, and her voice sounded strained, not frightened exactly, but tense, breathless, as if she was struggling to control it. "You know I don't like hearing about these things."

She thought his work gruesome. At home, she skipped past the stories of murder and mayhem in the papers, flicked the remote whenever they came on the news. But the Scotch had loosened his tongue.

"Just south of here. Along the Lakeshore."

Pulling up her legs, she wrapped her arms around her shins, flattening her breasts. "David, please—"

"The Lakeview Motel. You must know it." Meyers stared at the curve of her muscled calf. "You jog past it all the time."

Her eyes darkened. "Jesus. What did you have to tell me that for? You know I hate hearing about these things!" She shuddered.

"No reason to worry. You're safe." Reaching up, he placed his hands on her arms. Cool. Her skin was cool, like that of a fresh corpse. He began rubbing her arms, trying to put some warmth back in them, but she shrugged free of his grip, edged backwards. He let his hands drop to the bed. "She's only interested in men."

"She?"

Meyers panicked; he pushed off of the bed, staggered over to the dresser, clutched it for support. Christ. What the fuck was he thinking? He hadn't told anyone yet. They were only beginning to suspect. But no one had seriously suggested the killer was a woman yet. "He? She?" He tried to shrug nonchalantly. "Whoever."

"You said *she*. A woman."

"I did?" Meyers lowered his head, swallowed. He decided to bite

the bullet. "Yeah. I think so, anyway." He shrugged. "It would answer a lot of questions."

Sarah nodded gravely in the dark; she seemed infinitely distant. A mystery deeper than any of the ones he confronted every day. If only he could apply the same methods to his own life . . .

Christ, yes! Why hadn't he thought of it before? He was an investigator, a problem solver, a simple fact that had somehow eluded him before. It was only a matter of finding the proper clues to untangle Sarah's motivation, to understand what needed to be done to keep them from drifting even further apart, to repair the damage time and indifference had done. A strange optimism flushed him, a crazy hope. "Listen," Meyers said in a sudden rush, stumbling back towards the bed. "Let's go away, huhn?" His words were quick, excited, his hands extended. "When all of this is over. I'll take some time. We'll go away somewhere nice. What do you think?" Meyers meant it, really meant it this time, though he was not sure how to say it convincingly, how to make the words sound real instead of like the drivel that came out of the TV. Jesus, he hadn't told her a story in years. Even though he knew she loved them. When had that all stopped? Why had it stopped? He couldn't remember. It had just faded, disappeared without a trace. But he'd make up for it. Had to make up for it.

He reached out, thinking he might tell her about the folder he'd pulled from the filing cabinet in the basement, about the shadows. About his monster. But she jerked back reflexively, eyes wide, surprising him. Could she smell his fear, sense in her own groping way the weight of his responsibility, the guilt leaking out from around his edges. "Sarah?"

She blinked, pulled the sheets up around her, then looked away. "You know I hate to hear about this stuff."

His heart, thumping expectantly an instant ago, withered. He let his hands fall to his sides. It was too late for stories. It was too late for anything. How could he have believed that he might unburden

himself to her? Silence had grown too strong a habit between them, become too much part of their lives. He was alone in this. Turning, he walked to the door, paused, hand on the jamb. "I've got some reports to go over."

She nodded distantly, but he could see she wasn't really listening, hadn't really listened to him in years. Some actions had no motivation that could be understood; like random, pointless murders, some feelings couldn't be solved.



Three days later the shadows gathered again.

Meyers stared out the fourth-floor hallway window by the vending machines, the coins in his hand forgotten, his attention focussed on the small square opposite the station. Not a square, really, more an interruption in the face of abutted office towers, an indentation in which a few low-slung concrete benches had been scattered around two large, ugly concrete planters. The space was empty, the awnings of an adjacent bar trembling in the breeze, the day bright and relentless, casting sharp dark lines that sliced the world into strange, distended planes. Beneath the arching branches of a denuded oak, in its shadows, blackness in the form of a human shape uncoiled, twisting and turning like a grub in black earth.

Meyers stomach flip-flopped; his coins clattered to the floor.

The shadow solidified like an egg hardening in a frying pan; colours sprang up along the thing's edges, ran along it like spikes of flame. Clamping his jaw shut and fighting a rising panic, Meyers willed it to still, to cease its restless stirring. The tendons in his neck tightened with his concentration.

His efforts were having an effect. The shadow's growth slowed, became sluggish, then stopped. He felt the tug of it against his will, fighting to take on shape. Vicki's shape. But, if the thing didn't grow, neither did it shrink. A standoff. Sweat collected on his brow, ran

down along his temples; he trembled. If only he could hang on, he might yet drive it back into the recesses from which it sprang.

"DTs got you?"

The words jolted Meyers. A hand clasped his shoulder, making him jerk like he'd been shocked. He blinked rapidly, his eyes suddenly watering as if they stung. His attention wavered then dissolved, his eyes cutting to Luckas who had spoken, then back to the tree. But in the moment of his lapse, the shadow had completed its metamorphosis. A woman stood there, wrapped in a long coat blacker than the deepest shadows. Her face was shaded by the broad brim of a hat, but her head was angled towards him. Two crimson points for eyes, watching him. She waved. The bitch waved!

Meyers shoved past Luckas, ran towards the stairwell.

"Asshole." Luckas's word pursued Meyers as he took the steps two at a time. He broke out into the bitter fall light of the day and loped heedlessly across the street, ignoring the squeal of tires and the angry honks.

Gone. She'd fled. The square was deserted.

Meyers looked up and down the canyon of office towers. Nothing. Not a Goddamned thing. A few pedestrians strolling in the distance, carrying shopping bags, office workers in suits but no overcoats hustling from heated building to heated building, an older man walking a terrier. And doors. Dozen of doors, any one of which she could have slipped through.

"Fuck!" The shout burst from him; several people glanced over, then looked away quickly, hurrying past, and Meyers was suddenly aware he was standing there in the square, jacketless, his shoulder harness visible for all to see.

She was gone. And there was nothing he could do but return to the Operations Room and wait for the next call. This time it would be a security guard, a deserted office building, and common hardware-store string in large, crude stitches in place of safety pins.



The call came early the next morning.

“Rise and shine, asshole,” Luckas said when Meyers picked the phone up, the big man taking obvious delight in waking Meyers. But Meyers was up, had been up most of the night, sitting at the dining room table with his file spread out before him. In a way it was preferable to contemplating the insuperable barrier of Sarah’s back. “We got another one. The night watchman in the Hunter-Thompson Building. Fifth floor washroom. Jesus, doesn’t this guy ever sleep?”

Half listening to Luckas, Meyers lifted a sheet of paper. *The fourth victim, the security guard at Dominion Securities, began the report, was found the day after the previous murder.*

He crumpled the page in his fist, let it fall to the floor. The phone was back in its cradle, but Meyers couldn’t remember hanging it up. The Hunter-Thompson Building. He’d been in the building a few times, the last time maybe two years ago. To pick up Sarah who’d been working as a copy editor for a trade publication, something to do with concrete. Had she worked on the fifth floor? He couldn’t remember. Christ, he’d even used the washroom there, once.

Half an hour later, Meyers’s heart was hammering, his pulse pounding in his neck, as he walked through the glassed-in lobby of the building. But even when he stepped off the elevator on the fifth floor, he couldn’t be sure if this was where Sarah had worked; if it was, the partitions had been changed, the furniture moved. He followed a trail of police tape to the washroom.

“You look like shit,” Luckas said. He half-leaned, half-sat against a long vanity with four sinks, flipping idly through a pad filled with scribbles. “The photographer’s not here yet.”

Meyers ignored him; instead his eyes flicked over the scene, the smashed mirrors, the smears of blood over the tiled floor, the guard’s feet sticking out from the last stall, the metal trash can with the mess spilling out of its flap. A fucking mess. He took another step into the

room and glass ground loudly under the soles of his shoes.

"Lucked out this time," Lukas said, grinning.

"What?" Meyers blinked stupidly. He'd been trying to remember if the mirror had been on this side of the washroom he'd used. Christ, all these places looked the same.

"We maybe got a witness," Lukas said tapping his pad with a thick forefinger. "A cleaning lady. She said she saw someone leaving just as she was coming in for her shift. A *woman*."

Meyers's heart froze; he stared at Lukas, every atom in his body seemed to quiver, every sense intensified, painfully aware of the buzz of the fluorescent lights, of the intermittent drip from the closest tap.

"Can you fuckin' believe it? A broad's been doing this." Lukas shook his head ruefully. "The cleaning lady didn't get a good look at her face. Short, pale, thin. Orange, spiky hair. Carrying a black case. Leather dress and jacket, she said."

Christ Jesus. It wasn't Vicki. Not the Vicki he'd described, anyway. He'd never imagined her with the hair or the leather skirt and jacket.

"Oh, and she said some weird shit about her eyes, like they glowed or something." Lukas snorted.

Meyers's stomach fluttered, like he'd hit a dip on a rollercoaster.

Lukas flipped his pad closed. With his free hand he pulled something from his pocket, flicked his wrist. The thing shot across the washroom, struck Meyers squarely in the chest and dropped to the floor between his feet. A pair of latex gloves in a plastic package. "Come on," Lukas said cheerfully. "Let's get to work."

■

Eleven p.m. and Sarah wasn't home.

Meyers sat in the wingback chair by the door, a small bottle of Scotch balanced on its arm, rolling his glass with the tips of his

fingers, back and forth, watching the amber liquid pitch first one way then the other. His tongue tingled from too many drinks.

Something was buzzing inside Meyers's head. He tried to rub it away by pressing the glass of Scotch against it, but the glass felt hot, scalding hot against his temple, and he dropped it, liquor and ice splashing the papers scattered at his feet and going all over the rug. He knew he should clean it up, Sarah would go nuts, her favourite rug. He slid down out of the chair and gingerly touched the glass. Cool, now. He needed a rag, but was too drunk to want to get up again; he shrugged out of his shirt, began blotting up the liquor, bunching ice cubes in the folds. The thing in his head was still angry at him, like a wasp on a hot summer's day bumping into the windowpane. How could he fucking work with this shit going on? He pressed the damp of his shirt to his forehead, felt the chill go deep, breathed fumes of Scotch. There, that was all right, that was the ticket. He glanced up, hearing a click from somewhere in the house, some mechanism, the furnace, the water heater, switching on. Shadows everywhere, closing in on the lamplit oval where he was sitting; but when they felt the pressure of his stare, they oozed back several inches, like frightened oil.

The report. He had to see his report again. Dropping his shirt, he moved the strewn pages around, sheet sliding on sheet, mixing them even more. Then he spotted it, the one he wanted, a brown streak on its upper right corner, smudges of chocolate from a candy bar he'd been eating when he first wrote it years ago. He snatched it up, stuck it in front of his face. It was hard to read, his tiny crabbed handwriting swimming like an army of spiders across the sheet.

The fifth victim is a salesman on his bi-annual trip to Toronto. His body was discovered in the bathtub of his room in the Sutton Place Hotel. . . .

He thought about Sarah alone in the house all day, his filing

cabinet collecting dust in the basement. Bored, she might have noticed it one day, pulled open the drawer searching for something, anything. . . .

Jesus, what was he thinking?

Sarah was nothing like Vicki. Was she? He'd met her parents several times, and they were both normal, stable people, not like the parents of the killer in his profile.

Unless . . .

A vague memory drifted through his mind like the snatches of a half-remembered song. A late night shortly after he'd met Sarah, before she'd given up drinking, two or three bottles of wine into the evening and a slurred recollection about her childhood, about her . . . step-parents? Had she called them that? Or was he imagining it, constructing and reconstructing the memory as he had the killer in his file, as they did now in the Operations Room, piecing the portrait together bit by bit until it matched his own?

No! Not Sarah! Christ, he was a cop. He'd been trained to identify the signs, would have recognized such darkness long ago, seen it for what it was. And helped her. He was always willing to help, wasn't he? He shook his head to clear away the creeping fog.

But what that left him with was a ghost, a phantom. A paper killer.

Where are you, Sarah? he wondered.

On hands and knees, his glass cradled in one fist, he crawled back to the chair and the bottle of Scotch miraculously still balanced on its arm.

■

"David?"

Meyers opened his eyes, and the light made his head throb; his mouth was dry, filled with the gummy residue of Scotch. He sat in the wingback chair, something hard pressed between the arm of the chair and his thigh. A glass. His empty glass.

“David, I’m leaving.”

He lifted his head, and a spike of pain shot through his neck, blazed in his skull. Colours danced madly before him; the radio blared loudly in the background. Who had left it on? “What?” he croaked; everything was too dazzling, too loud, a hash, and he couldn’t make it settle into any kind of sense.

“I didn’t want to sneak off. I wanted you to know.”

His eyes snapped into focus. Sarah stood by the open door, a look of disgust on her face. Her gaze wandered over the scattered sheets, the stained carpet, the wadded mass of his shirt. “I’ll pick up the rest of my things later,” she said. Bending, she lifted her suitcase. Then, she was gone, vanished, like she’d never been there in the first place. He hadn’t seen her turn, walk out the door, but she wasn’t there.

Meyers heaved himself to his feet, staggered forward, crashing into the doorframe, his head spinning, the muscles in his legs rubbery and unwilling. His vision blurred, then cleared, in time to see Sarah climb into her Toyota. The new front bumper glinted blackly against the fading red paint of the car’s exterior. Meyers blinked, looked through the windshield. Behind Sarah, in the back seat, a shadow rose, like someone sitting up, but it was a silhouette, an emptiness darker than tar, its only clear feature two pupilless, glowing ovals in the centre of its face, eyes that expressionless red colour you’d sometimes get in pictures taken with a flash. Eyes staring blankly at Meyers. Asking . . . asking for what? Christ, he thought, trembling uncontrollably. Christ almighty.

The engine started, and the headlights flared in the night, blinding him, making him raise his arm across his eyes.

“Sarah! No! Stop!”

Her car backed out, its lights raking the front of the house as it swung into the road.

Meyers stumbled back into the house, crashed through the bedroom, the hallway closet, the kitchen, until he found his jacket on the back of a chair. He rifled the pockets, looking for his keys. Not

there. He began his frantic search again, tearing through the house, his head throbbing, his heart hammering, his stomach heaving. But the keys weren't anywhere.

By the time he found them dangling from the ignition of his car, it was too late, she'd been gone nearly five minutes and there was no hope of catching her.

■

The phone in the Operations Room trilled, and Meyers jumped a little, just as he had every time it rang that morning.

He felt like shit. His head throbbed unmercifully; he shivered, sweat peppering his forehead, running freely beneath his arms. It rang again, and Meyers shuddered. Standing in front of the corkboard, he pretended to study the sheets of paper tacked to the board, the psychological profile of the killer. Behind him, he heard a sigh, the creak of leather shoes, the click of the receiver being lifted.

"Yeah?" Lukas's rough voice, sounding bored. "Yeah, okay. I got it. We'll be right there." The sound of the receiver being dropped back into its cradle.

"Number five," Lukas announced to the room.

Meyers turned with the others, watched Lukas shake his head; he looked pissed, like this time he'd been insulted personally. "The Erskine Hotel," he said gruffly. "Jesus, can you believe the balls?"

The Erskine Hotel. A block away. Only a block.

Meyers knew the place, because once he'd spent a weekend there with Sarah. Just for the hell of it. *Let's be good to ourselves*, she'd said, giggling. She'd always been that way, impulsive where Meyers was methodical. It was one of the things he had loved about her. Her impetuosity. He'd capitulated, gave in to her whim. They'd taken the Oriental Suite, complete with Japanese teak furniture, hinged, painted screens, a hot tub with woven mats next to it, and a king-size water bed with an ornate headboard. They ordered champagne.

Sitting across from him in the tub, he'd thought it would be fun to watch the soft-core porno movies on the TV, but she'd shaken her head, then said, "Tell me a story."

And in the midst of swirling jets of heated water, with the inspiration of the implausible setting and the wine coursing through his veins, Meyers had told her stories, one after another, as if they would never end. . . .

The body had been carved up in the same way as the others. But this time it had been dumped in the hot tub, an empty champagne bottle and two shattered glasses beneath it. Around the tub the killer had arranged two black lacquered screens, their panels filled with pink cherry blossom trees, long-necked cranes, and incomprehensible Japanese ideographs.

What was happening?



Meyers barely managed to stagger through the day. Three times he'd slipped away to call everyone he could think of: Sarah's parents, her few friends, the fitness club to which she belonged, even the people at the store where she'd worked last year during the Christmas holidays. But no one had heard from her. Or if they had, they weren't telling him. When he spoke to her mother, he tried to sound calm, as if this was nothing more than a small spat. But when she began to flip out, Meyers told her that he was sure Sarah was all right. Knew that she was fine. For an instant he thought about telling her. But Christ, what could he say, that he was worried her daughter had been kidnapped by a shadow? He made reassuring noises, promised to call her the moment he heard anything, made her promise the same thing. And in all this he lost his nerve to ask her about Sarah's past, to confirm or refute his hazy, alcohol-laden recollection of what she'd said about her adoption.

At six p.m. they finished with the scene, and Meyers stepped

from the Hotel into an overcast day, dark, snarled clouds blotting out the lowering sun.

Jesus, he was tired. He hadn't slept well in days, not at all in the last twenty-six hours. He felt giddy, light-headed. People hurried past, clutching their coats tightly around them, holding their hats firmly on their heads against a bitter, blustering wind. Meyers moved forward, travelling on a wave of numbing energy, an enervated momentum that pushed at his back like a large, insistent hand, driving him ahead, across the street to Headquarters and the underground parking lot. He found himself in his car, his hands clutched tightly on the wheel to keep them from shaking.

Where now?

Home. He'd go home.

But without Sarah, the word *home*, the whole concept, seemed empty, pointless. Repellent. His stomach churned apprehensively. Bad idea. Maybe he'd just drive around for a while, to get his bearings. To calm down. Stop somewhere for a quick one. A drop to help him think things through. His mouth watered. Yeah, that was what he needed. Sarah would understand, wouldn't she? How could she fault him for doing what he had to? He imagined the sting of Scotch sliding down his throat, its perfume seeping into his brain, blunting the edges of his jagged world. He fumbled for the keys he'd dropped on the passenger's seat, stuck them in the ignition, pulled the car out of the lot.

He drove through two intersections; at the third, the light went yellow. He pulled up to the crosswalk just as the first drops of rain pattered onto his windshield. Then it began pissing down, sluicing off his windshield in tiny streams that blurred the outside world. Meyers stared out, unseeing, into the wash of colours. A patch of red across the street snagged his attention.

Red like Sarah's car.

He flicked on his wipers, forced his eyes to focus.

On the opposite side of the intersection, idling at the stoplights,

was a Tercel, its front bumper too new for the rest of the car, its driver an outline.

The shadow.

Christ Jesus! Meyers's heart stuttered, stalled.

It was her. Alone in Sarah's car.

The figure was sitting upright, clearly visible, dead black where there should have been some detail, some hint of colour, of flesh, but there was only absolute, undifferentiated black. And two tiny red glimmers for eyes.

As the light went green and the Tercel pulled away, Meyers spun his steering wheel around—then stomped on his brakes to keep from teeing into a beige Bonneville that trundled into the intersection behind the Toyota, drifting past like it was moving in slow motion. By the time he managed to pull a U-turn, the Tercel was two blocks ahead. Meyers hit the gas, swung around the Bonneville, just making the next light, and closed on the Tercel, his breath coming hard, but beginning to get a grip, to think coherently, to feel a strong, gleeful confidence. No way she was going to lose him now. He'd cuff her, beat her, blow holes in her if he had to, whatever it took to make her return Sarah. Panic tightened his chest when he realized he left his gun behind. No, no, wait. The glove compartment. He'd stuck it there that morning. He punched open the compartment, keeping an eye on the Tercel, and groped inside it, felt weighted leather, the familiar grip. Fucking A! He was down with it this time.

A block ahead, the Tercel sped up and turned right. Maybe she'd spotted him. Shit! Meyers swung after her, cutting across the apron of a gas station with a big painted sign out front proclaiming NO AIR, some guy in a greasy coverall cursing at him, and sped along a residential street, houses here and there among the clusters of low-rise apartments, and every fifty feet or so a diseased-looking sapling planted on the narrow median. The Tercel was still a block ahead, and before Meyers could cut much of the distance, it turned again. By the time he rounded the corner, it had pulled ahead nearly two blocks,

separated from him by three cars. He slammed his hand against the steering wheel in frustration, so hard pain spiked his wrist, and he leadfooted the gas, blowing through a stop sign.

They were in some kind of industrial park.

Ahead, the Tercel's right taillight flashed once, then it disappeared, unhurriedly, around the corner. Meyers honked, roared past a white sedan, his wheels squealing as he took the corner and—
—tromped on his brakes.

A dead end.

A short street lined with squat, red-brick buildings, concrete stairs leading up to metal doors, narrow margins on which cars had been parked haphazardly under NO PARKING signs, crammed in between dented, green dumpsters. And at the very end, facing him, a bar, a glaring neon sign low along its front, parts burned out, others flickering and buzzing angrily, red in a border of white: *Vicki's Place*. The Tercel was parked under the sign, jammed between two other cars, the door on its driver's side open. Meyers thought about the last crime scene report he'd written for his project, about the final victim, a bartender.

His stomach went cold. Lifting his foot off the brake, he let his car roll forward, fat drops of rain thumping on the roof and splattering on his windshield. He angled in behind the Toyota, blocking it.

Meyers switched off the engine, climbed out of his car into the downpour. Shoulders hunched against the rain, he sidled up to the bar's entrance, a blistered wooden door, and listened. Nothing but the staccato pattering of rain. Cautiously, he pushed the door open. It swung inward easily.

Just inside was a small foyer with flimsy, plywood walls. He stepped in, paused, hand on the inner door. He sniffed the air, a whiff of something underneath the smell of stale beer and urine, something trickling past him that, at first, he couldn't quite place, a familiar smell. Sarah's perfume. Christ Jesus, Sarah's perfume! Pushing open the door, he stumbled into the gloom of the bar.

The room was long and narrow, the wall on the left covered in a burgundy wallpaper that had faded to the colour of dried blood, beneath which were scattered half a dozen small round tables and plastic chairs with splayed legs. On the other side was a long mahogany bar, the only clear illumination in the entire room coming from its far end, a small table lamp, its porcelain base cracked and its shade askew, sitting on the polished surface of the bar where it curved back towards the wall. The place was deserted, except—except for the far corner, where a lone woman sat at a small table, legs crossed, a cigarette dangling from her fingers, its smoke curling away into the hovering shadows.

She lifted her hand, took a drag. The tip of the cigarette glowed bright red and her eyes blazed, too, burning intensely for an instant, then diminishing with the cigarette's retreating glow as she lowered her hand. "I've been waiting for you, David," she said, smiling, smoke sliding listlessly from between her lips. Her face was pale, bloodless, her teeth small and sharp and perfect.

Christ Almighty, it was her. Vicki. But not as he'd imagined her, as he'd written her. She'd changed. Remade herself. Cropped and coloured her mousy hair into a spiky orange tangle; exaggerated her soft, unassuming features with dramatic, uneven slashes of ruddy blush, green eye shadow and black lip gloss; replaced her baggy, shapeless clothes with a skin-tight leather skirt and zippered vinyl vest, a leather biker's jacket hanging from the back of her chair. And she held herself with none of the uncertainty and fear he'd imagined for her, but with the sort of corrupt assurance Meyers had seen in the countless punks he'd busted. She beckoned to an empty chair next to her.

Meyers's head spun. This couldn't be real, couldn't be happening. He closed his eyes and opened them. But the bitch was still there, still smiling. Christ, what was he doing here? Sarah. He was here for Sarah. But his legs trembled, failed him, as if they'd developed a life of their own, as if the only way they would work was if he turned and let

them carry him out of this fucking bar as far and as fast they could.

"Sarah sends her regards."

Rage suffused Meyers; he staggered forward, came to a swaying halt in front of the table, his fists bunched. Behind the woman, the shadows seemed to stir themselves in response, thickened like a congealing gravy, closing in. He ignored them.

"Sarah," Meyers sputtered, his voice rough, almost unintelligible; his face burned like it had been splashed with acid. Here, near the table, an overpowering smell curled into his nostrils, sweet and sickly and nauseating all at once, made his throat constrict and his gorge rise. The coppery smell of blood.

"Ah, that got your attention." She laughed lightly, carelessly, like a child.

Back by the wall Meyers caught sight of a body on the floor, arms and legs splayed. The blood in his own body stilled, froze in his veins. He stared, but shadows clung to it like a thousand dark spider webs, cocooning it, making it impossible to see with any clarity.

"Don't worry," Vicki said cheerfully, nodding at the figure. "The bartender. Looks like it's self-serve for the next little while." She laughed again.

"Answer my question!"

"Sarah's safe." Leaning forward, she stubbed out her cigarette in a chipped ashtray and Meyers caught the rising scent of Sarah's perfume. "Or is for now. As long as you treat me right."

The anger drained from Meyers; despair filled the space it had vacated. How did you fight a shadow, a phantom? He felt helpless before her, as helpless as he had in his disintegrating marriage. He went limp, collapsing into the empty chair, cupping his head in his hands. "What . . . what do you want from me?" His words were choked.

A glass scraped across the table. He looked up. Two fingers of Scotch in a dirty tumbler in front of him. He hadn't noticed it before. He stared at her. And suddenly noticed something he hadn't seen

before. She looked like Sarah. Christ, he'd never realized, even when he'd pictured her years ago. But Sarah was there, in the shape of her mouth, the lift of cheekbones. And he was, too, Vicki's eyes identical to those that stared back at Meyers from the mirror every morning. It was like he was looking at their child.

"I need a small favour, David. It's nothing really. Something you've done before. . . ."

Something he'd done before? Meyers gaped at her, at the cold, dead flesh cloaking the monster. His monster.

Uncrossing her legs, she reached into the pocket of her jacket, the leather of her skirt creaking as she shifted. "Here."

She dropped a pencil in front of him, smoothed out a folded piece of paper next to it. It was blank. She stood and her heels ticked across the linoleum, stopped behind him. He felt her lean over his shoulder, could hear her breathing, only it wasn't the breath of a slight woman, but ragged and huge, in and out, in and out, like an enormous, shuddering bellows; moist air licked the side of his face in warm, nauseating waves. In it he could smell the beast, her distinctive reek, the stink of the putrid organs she had carved like trophies from corpses—and the dust from his file, laced with the stench of his own fear and uncertainty, of long sleepless nights, of unhappiness, anger and failure. The room heaved beneath him, began a long, slow, lazy spin.

Reaching past him, she dragged the glass of Scotch closer, until the odour of the alcohol rose into his nostrils, merging with the stench, became so twisted, one in the other, that it was impossible to separate the two smells. She worked the pencil into the cold claw his fingers had become. In a voice that could have been Sarah's, she whispered, "Tell me a story."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Everything you need to know about R. Boyczuk can be found at <http://boyczuk.com>.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

"Query," first published in *Tesseract's*⁷, Tesseract Books (1999).

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"Cure for Cancer," first published in *ChiZine: Treatments of Light and Shade in Words* (April–June 2004).

"Horror Story," first published in *Northern Frights*, Mosaic Press (1997).

Love and loss are the two prevailing themes in this gripping short story collection, featuring 19 of the author's tales—five of which are original to this collection: "When Fat Men Love Thin Women," "The Death Artist," "The Uncertainty Principle," "Monster," and "The Love Clinic." The rest of the stories appeared in such publications as *On Spec*, *TransVersions*, *Prairie Fire*, *Northern Frights*, *Dark Planet*, *Descant*, *ChiZine*, and the *Tesseract* and *Queer Fear* anthology series.



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