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Bard

BUT A WALKING SHADOW

CHARLOTTE BENBENISTE

But A Walking Shadow
Stories

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Charlotte Benbeniste

Annandale-On-Hudson, NY
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To my four closest friends, who, by some stroke of luck, continue to tolerate me,

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And to my mother, whose year introduced into my thoughts the fodder for much of these stories,

I offer my endless gratitude.

Author's Notes

The characters in these stories are all fictitious.

Pages 2-3 of *Hollywood Forever* feature text directly from the Hollywood Forever Cemetery.

to Jacqueline Bao, whose very large shadow I continue to walk in,
these stories are warmly dedicated

CONTENTS

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

-William Shakespeare, “Macbeth”

Boogie Nights

It was four in the morning and Boogie Bloom couldn't sleep. For hours he had found himself caught in that cruel and particular junction of restlessness, where his ceaseless thoughts, his inclement body temperature, and his pillow's inability to get cold intersected. He sat up on the one bed of the Bloom household, a bouncy thing the syrupy hue of cough medicine and wondered, in varying lengths of time, about the sequencing of the last two songs he had played that night, the potential proximity of one's hand to a fly before it bolts, and of the woman who had rung the station at eight forty-six that evening.

Wakefulness was Boogie's constant companion, his frequent visitor, and over the years, through methods motley though equally strange, Boogie had learned how to expel this nettlesome guest when it had overstayed its welcome. At first, he had jumped jumping jacks and they had worked marvelously. But years of smoking left him quickly out of breath, and all the gasping and wheezing would lead his mind quickly to the thought of death, and Boogie would lay in his bed until the sun rose, pondering his own mortality. He felt ridiculous, anyhow, throwing his arms up and down and flailing about like a teenager.

Afterwards, a woman he had been seeing at the time forced him to drink Valerian root, but he couldn't stomach the stuff, couldn't stand the smell of it, and even after he broken things off with her, that foul smell lingered on his pillowcases and made him sick at night. Acupuncture had been suggested to him, but after a brief stint with junk, he had acquired an acute fear of needles. Now only one thing would suffice, as it had sufficed unfailingly over all the years, Boogie's only fail-proof remedy: a drive to the Pink Elephant and a fifth of whisky.

Boogie got into his car and found a parking ticket on the windshield and a thin layer of early morning dew dotting his leather seats. He had forgotten to put the top up. He turned the wipers on, the heat up, and put the car into drive. His toes warmed and his head went cold while a feeble wind blew the ticket and the remaining white strands of Boogie's hair aside in his periphery.

A faint impression of the quarter moon still dallied above; the slightest hint of the sun began to reveal itself; the few small clouds overhead radiated a wan morning glow; but the sky, with all its miscellany of light was scarcely so resplendent as the earth. Small pieces of silver seemed to glisten in the street beneath his headlights, and the wide roads of Los Angeles were paved with a glossy brightness. Boogie loved this time of day, when the streets were unburdened with the cars that for most hours weighed down on them, when the fuzzed glow of the neon signs hit empty pavement, when the city seemed to loosen, and he could move through it, unbridled.

And so he drove, out of the canyon, bracing the brakes as he slid down the steep hills, humming country tunes. He recalled their lyrics in incorrect order, but jumbled as they were in Boogie's somnolent mind, they still maintained that frank and shameless aching that he loved about country music, a simple sincerity in the songs that he could always trust, the certainty that no one was tricking him. Had the weather and the women of Nashville agreed with Boogie, he'd have stayed to fulfill his childhood fantasy of becoming a honky tonk star, but with an equal hankering for rock 'n' roll and easy girls, he had moved his show to Los Angeles nearly twenty-five years ago, bringing along with him that same country candor that he found so hard to come by in Southern California. There was no radio in Boogie's car, not since he had broken it, anyhow. His was the only tolerable station on the air, and unable to stand the advertisements for his own show on the hour, every hour, Boogie had smashed it in one night some years ago. Now he drove past the haciendas, fiddling with the heater and murmuring songs about tender hearts and big hair.

Until the very end, that night's show had gone quite like they always did. Boogie arrived at five 'til five, much to Larry the station manager's constant irritation, exchanged a glare with the idiot who played jazz in the hour slot prior to his, and got settled in his chair and headphones where he would remain for four hours.

"You're late," said Larry. He was wearing a black band T-shirt band, and blue jeans that he had torn himself.

"Can't win 'em all, Lars."

Boogie swiveled around in his chair and drummed pencils onto the mixing desk, answering phone calls from teenage boys who called him possessive names of presumed mutual maturity, "My brother," or "My man," and listing off trivia about rockabilly songs in that familiar worn drone of his. Coming up on the fourth and last hour of his show, the station phone rumbled and lit in the studio. It was eight forty-six and there were fourteen minutes left in Boogie's show. He stared at the phone nearly bouncing off of the table and hated it, its useless

rotary, the yellowing white paint that cracked off from its body, the way it seemed to jump when it rang. Boogie would have been happy to end the show with the three songs he had cued up, indeed, the thought of cutting even one for a phone call felt unholy. But Larry's voice sounded in Boogie's head as loudly as the phone: his more-than-mild urgings to be more personable, the tacit threat that lay in his suggestion to "be the Boogie they hired!" Boogie's only recollection of that man was that he had intentionally greasy hair, that he was uncouth, and that people had loved him for it. The phone came up on its final rings, its death rattle, and Boogie answered it.

"This is Rock no Talk. Boogie Bloom here. Who am I speaking to and what do you want?"

"Hello?" There was a woman on the other end of the line.

"Yes, dear, what's your name?" He called all women dear. It was perfect, really. If they were girls, he established the age-dynamic between them, creating a necessary distance while not entirely nullifying sexual potential. And if they were older, as this woman was, he made them feel young again, that single word alone conveying his years of experience, his grooming, and the certain safety they would feel with him.

"Wanda."

Her voice was saccharine and high-pitched but not pitchy and there was a forced calm in her reply. Boogie could tell a lot from someone's voice. Of all exchanges, those vocal had been his only currency over the years. He could understand things about people's natures from their pauses, from the depth of their breath, from their particular intonations.

"Hello Wanda, what can I do for you tonight?"

"I'm calling to tell you something that I've wanted to tell you for about a year now."

"Sounds serious."

"It is serious."

"Lay it on me, my dear."

She took a long and slow breath in. Boogie could hear from the slight rumbling in her inhale that she smoked.

"I think, no, well, I'm quite certain of the fact, that, I'm in love with you."

Boogie had started to receive calls like this. His show had never seemed to have so many active callers, and it gave him a fortifying confidence that people out there were still listening, until he remembered that Larry had fired the man who had screened the phone calls into the station. Some were pranks, some were callers uncertain of what else to say in the rush of the moment. But an earnest silence followed what Wanda had said. He could hear her sincerity, that this wasn't a prank, that she meant it. Normally when he received calls such as these he replied with the obligatory "Love you, too," a hearty laugh, and then he'd hang up.

"You are, huh?" he replied, in a tone somewhere in between teasing and genuine curiosity.

"Absolutely."

"But we don't know each other, Wanda."

"You may not know me, but I know you very well, Boogie."

"You—"

"I listen to your program every day on my drive home from work, I work in Hollywood and live in Santa Monica, and drive during rush hour, which means I spend two hours in my car everyday. Which sounds hectic, right? And it used to be, it really did, and it used to get lonely, but then we started doing the drive together, Boogie."

"Sounds like you're an avid listener."

She was, and had been since Boogie had started his show. Wanda worked at an old and popular open-all-the-time diner on Sunset Boulevard, that served their hamburgers and french-fries in thin cardboard foldout boxes shaped like '64 Corvettes—blue for boys and pink for girls or older ladies with youthful aspirations in the facial region— and where the waitresses wore rollerblades and had their hair in pigtails, as mandated by the uniform. Wanda was fifty-four

and wore her hair in pigtails to work. Pearly and bright, the diner had red fake leather booths embroidered with white fake leather diamonds that sandwiched fake-enamel tabletops with nickel-munching jukeboxes on them. Most days, all days, really, Wanda skated through the diner with trays carrying cardboard cars and malts listening to the music chosen on a whim by the hungry or bored or drunk or most times all of the above. Every now and again, a song that Wanda liked played, but it was over almost as soon as it started.

"I am. I really am. I listen to you everyday," Wanda said, exasperated.

When her shift was done and her feet were sufficiently swollen and she had left her day's worth of roller skate skid marks on the pearly white floors, Wanda drove home. It was her time with Boogie, whom she trusted to soothe her ears, to undo what had been done by the hungry, the bored, and the drunk. Sure, someone else was choosing the tunes for her still, but here she got to choose who chose for her, and she chose Boogie, time after time.

Eight minutes were left of his program. If she stopped talking, he could fit in one full song, and the majority of the second with a smooth fade-out. But there were no signs of Wanda slowing down, and the excited widening of Larry the station manager's eyes meant not to cut her short. Their conversation would fall into the category of what Larry called "the jooj." Radio Juju was anything that, in Larry's opinion, gained listeners for the station. Boogie had never needed any sort of jooj in the past, nor had the station. He hated the thought of it. Larry was a fine looking man, generally polite and adequately groomed, his sartorial misguidance aside. But when he spoke of the "jooj," the word seemed to seep out through his teeth, yellowing them as it slid out, the horrible thing.

Boogie's car screeched to a stop at a dimly lit intersection. In the car beside his, a middle-aged man with a handsome jaw turned the knobs of his radio. And turned and turned, still unrestingly he turned the small knobs. The man looked up at Boogie, and then down again at the knobs, the synthetic lights of the control deck casting a faint but warm shadow around his eyes. Piles of thumb-worn files were stacked high on his passenger seat, and he sipped from one

of the two open cans of soda in the center console. The reflecting light and the buzzing sound from the stereo seemed the only imbecilic hope in the mighty forlornness of the car.

Boogie had come to prefer red lights to green ones. He felt they weren't paid enough attention. Or when they were paid their due attention, it was as the menacing pauses to the rush of the day. But a kinship could be formed here, at these red lights, an expediated intimacy. The red light was the drivers' common enemy. It was the enemy like the tacit potential of death was to passengers on an airplane, like the long line was to those who stood in it. They hated the enemy, together, and in this unified loathing, an unprecedented candor availed itself to them. The unspoken acknowledgement of these relationships merely as a fleeting dalliance and the overwhelming possibility to never again encounter one another allowed for a particular kind of freedom—the shorter the time period, the more candor permitted—for frankness, for wildness. He'd seem some memorable things at red lights, but this morning, at this red light, he imagined himself there with Wanda, the two of them sitting side by side, in their own cars, her listening to him, him thinking of her, turning to face one another through the windows, still completely ignorant of their proximity to one another.

It was a fair bet to assume they'd crossed paths before, in the literal and not the figurative sense of paths crossing. They lived in a huge city, second most populated in the country. And it was vast, all four hundred and eighty three square miles of it, so large and stretched that a resident was at home and a guest all in one city. Four main surface roads ran all the way East-West underneath two highways that did the same. Depending on the hour, these roads either reminded a driver or helped him to forget the city's immensity. Chances were that he and Wanda had faced one another, for seconds or even whole minutes, depending on the hour, inching forward or speeding in opposite directions on opposite sides of the highway.

The red light hadn't changed colors, hadn't even flickered, for what seemed like over two minutes now. The man in the car next to Boogie's had started to plead with it. With the rare exception of those rushing to a death-bed, these red lights were ultimately inconsequential,

and yet a fair amount of energy was exhausted at their expense, pleading and fidgeting, tic tocking. The light turned green, and though the man was staring straight ahead, he took some time to notice. In an instant, he was gone, as Boogie released his own break.

The phone call had ended that night with Wanda in tears.

"God, that was pathetic," Larry had said to Boogie with an excited smile in the parking lot outside of the studio that night. He had a bumper sticker on his car that read *Jesus Was Asian.* Larry was not. He was in a sort of frenzy. He had loved the phone call, the course it had taken, the real heartbreak Boogie had dealt the stranger, and that a whole city might listen to a woman making a fool of herself, caught up in fantasy. Unrequited love was so often dismissed as a juvenile delusion. But Boogie was of the opinion that this was love of the purest sort, a love unencouraged. Solitary love was the most difficult.

If Wanda had seen him on the street, she wouldn't have been able to recognize him. He'd been on the radio for twenty-eight years now, and about twenty ago, had stopped allowing pictures of himself to be taken. Boogie was handsome as a young man, with the stick-straight flaxen hair of an American pure breed and earnest brown eyes, deep-set beneath eyebrows with a relaxed sort of arch. His youthful self-acclaim had lead to the end of these wholesome features, his rosy cheeks now reddened and inflamed, as though stricken by gout, the lids over his elliptical eyes seeming never to fully open, the pores on his forehead enlarged and darkened by dirt and sweat and a diminishing hygienic zeal. There was a common saying that some people had a face for radio. Boogie's had not been, he had had the face television anchor, with a pronounced jaw and spotless teeth. But his invisible time behind the microphone had given him a face fitting of the medium. And now the only images associated with the voice everyone knew so well were those of him as a spirited young man, with sun-warmed skin and an attractive smile.

Boogie parked and walked towards THE PI K ELE HANT and the pink elephant painted on the store's cement exterior holding three hearts of pink and red with a pink bow on

its head stared at Boogie and Boogie said "hello" and saluted the elephant and entered the store where his nostrum awaited him.

Boogie curtsied and greeted the clerk, pulling the tails of his partially buttoned flannel shirt out to the sides so they looked like the flying veil of a nun's habit: "Heya Steve," said Boogie to Steve, and Steve saluted him and said "Hey Mr. B." and then asked him if he'd like the usual, to which Boogie's reply was "yes." Steve turned to the shelves behind the register where the nicer bottles were stashed to fetch his whiskey, while Boogie scanned the aisles for anything extra that he fancied that morning, peering through the clear bottles, seeing his eyeballs in the mirrors on the walls, magnified by the liquor and the glass. The store was unusually full for that time in the morning.

"You got it, Mr. B."

At five-thirty in the morning, the replay of Boogie's evening show buzzed through the shop. Boogie strolled the familiar aisles in a big jean jacket with sheepskin around the neck and warm, slouchy boots he was beginning to think were made for women. An old woman and a younger woman who was not young walked hand in hand through the aisle. The first song he had played that night—a blues standard reworked in a later decade by a prominent folkie came through feebly on the shop's speakers. The old woman began humming along, and the younger woman stamped her feet, with more energy than that morning's hour would suggest possible. He wondered if this was Wanda. She seemed to know the words, and was enjoying the music. The song ended and he heard his voice, recalling the name of the song and the moniker of the man who'd written it. He'd always wanted a blues name—some force of nature and then his surname, some adjective depicting his musical prowess—"Thunder Boogie Bloom," Boogie "Sly Cat" Bloom.

"All ready for you, Mr. B," called Steve from the register. "Good show, huh?"

"Watch it."

Steve made him nervous. He knew who Boogie was in a town where no one else could. Boogie looked at him like the son he never had (he had one, but via his weekly visits to the Pink Elephant, he saw Steve more frequently). With his cheeky little remarks and his insistence that he was in on the joke, Steve threatened Boogie's dear and safely guarded anonymity. It was a gift seldom found in this city, something Boogie had come by as if by accident, this faceless fame.

"Fifth of Turkey."

Boogie said thank you, and curtsied goodbye, a broken button on his shirt scratching his palm as he grabbed its tails and got back into his car. He jimmied the engine and the exhaust pipes rattled and the heater let out a foul smell and the windshield wipers squeaked and the headlights flashed on and off and then on again and soon the gas pedal gave way and Boogie's foot fell upon it and off he went down the driveway of the Pink Elephant and onto the streets of the city which boasted its own edifice, the whole thing, with its beachside mansions and its east-side slums, its well-manicured gardens, the flyer-littered neon streets, the roads so full of cars you'd think they were parked, it all seemed like a set. It was a trinket museum and itself a trinket, this city of his.

Drivers were beginning to fill the streets, those particular people who made the cross-town drive. He stopped at a red light, falling unwittingly out of his early morning stupor, and looked over at a woman, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, wearing a pantsuit and a face that resembled his ex-wife's. She applied makeup in her mirror, faultily, wiping her eyes and drawing a dark line across her eyelid once more. Boogie watched her become progressively frustrated. She took it out on the car: first on the mirrors—slamming the foldout mirror shut, adjusting, furiously, her rearviews, her sideviews—then on the dashboard, turning the heat on and off, rolling down her window, clicking from song to song in a frenzy and finally giving up control of the whole thing to the radio. Was this Wanda? he wondered. He considered asking her for directions, just to hear her voice. He remembered Wanda's well. Boogie heard his own

voice coming from inside her car. His voice had lost its charm, there was nothing sweet in its tone anymore. She looked at him with a wince. She seemed to think he was checking her out. He supposed he had been staring. He imagined the look on Wanda's face, as he was now calling this woman, when he told her who he was, and how she'd regret the wince, and how she's gush all excitedly and apologetically to him, and how he'd forgive her and tell her to call the station again right as the light turned green and he'd speed off and she'd sit there, stunned, with a line of people honking behind her which she wouldn't notice because she'd just seen the face of Boogie Bloom. The light turned green and the woman drove quickly away and Boogie turned left.

Boogie parked his car in the same spot that he had taken it from only a few hours earlier. He fiddled around in his jacket for his keys, keeping his hands in the padding of the shearling that lined the pockets. He climbed up the stairs to his apartment, keys in one hand, whiskey in another, the bottle open and meeting his mouth every few stairs, like an athletic drink. He thought about his show replaying that morning, and of the people—few as they may have been nowadays, or at least, for Boogie's sake, at this hour—listening to him, unknowingly tuned into the same station, on different sides of town, like pushpins on a map, or like flickering impressions of torpedoes coming up on the circling radar of a submarine. He wondered if Wanda was listening, if she was beautiful, her face as foreign to him as his was to her. Boogie neared his bed and, placing the bottle on his bedside table, noodled himself beneath the sheets. They were cold again and so were his pillows and Boogie fell asleep with ease, as the sun began to rise outside.

A Different Kingdom

Charles descended the airplane onto the runway, the hot cement warning the soles of his feet, which was a portion of his body he had seldom paid attention to, but now could not ignore. A dry breeze swept southwest from the Bosporus and the air filled with the smell of dead fish and jet fuel, as wide-necked men with thick and gristly mustaches removed his baggage from beneath the plane. The sun threw its glare over the plane's curve, and Charles watched the fading shine of jet fuel on the runway.

Outside, lines of cabmen attempted their various seductions—shouting, baritone coaxings, wild hand gestures. These were the men whose produce came to them by donkey-drawn carriages, who prized their spear guns and flippers above all else. The ones whose childish apprehensions of masculinity were modeled after the John Wayne they had seen in open-air cinemas, and whose brawn and width made Charles uncomfortable, he himself housed neatly in a thin frame, with long arms and long legs with little definition, and beardless cheeks with a chest that matched.

Charles slept for the most of the drive to Cesme, coming in and out of sleep with the rise and fall of the hoarse voice on the radio. He located his aunt and uncle's house from the memory of the small brown fence that circled it.

His aunt Renee greeted him at the door.

"Charlie!" She rolled the Rs of his name with a Turkish rumbling of the uvula. She had aged considerably since he'd last seen her, but was still very beautiful with fair-freckled skin that housed placid sky-colored eyes and short, coarse, red hair that fell by her chin. They dropped his bags at the door.

His uncle arrived as Renee led him outside for a drink. Moreno kicked down the stand of his bicycle with a jug of juice in his hand. He was horizontally enlarged, and vertically reduced and his growing belly squeezed against the handlebars of his bicycle as he dismounted it. They sat in a triangle, sipping cold pomegranate juice while Charles answered questions about his younger sister, the weather at home, his forehand, his backhand—he hadn't had much time to play over the last four years but talk of tennis was one of the few places where he and his uncle found common ground. He was teased about his slowly maturing good looks and questioned about his recent academic accolades.

"Your father says to me that you pass con maxima alabanzos. Summa Cum Laude."

"Si," Charles replied with a feeble smile. His uncle's Spanish was better than his English so when they spoke it was often like this.

"Para no tiene tempo para tennis?"

"Estudiando mucho."

His uncle paused.

"No puedo vivir solo hasta el cuello."

It was something he had heard his father say to his mother when he was a boy. It meant "you can't live from the neck up."

"How is your mother?" Renee broke the silence. "Your house, has she finished it yet?"

The last time his aunt and uncle had visited, Charles's mother had been adding a section to their already very large house in California. His father had worn a tie at the dinner table, had shown them his new car and had fixed them vodka gimlets from behind the bar in their living room. To Renee and Moreno, it seemed as though his mother had remodeled the house and his father as well.

His father was a hard worker and had spent most nights of Charles's childhood in the office, to build the spectacle of their house, to send Charles to private schools, to give his children the things they wanted, and still he begrudged the house and the woman who lived in it, and could take no part in the felicity of his son's intellect, finding him a stranger all the more as a result of it. It was as though his parents were still playing that cute game that new parents play in front of their friends, naming the infant's features as their own: "my eyes, his ears," "her lips, my nose." If Charles's parents were to play that game with him now, his mother would claim his mind, and his father would take whatever was left. When the conversation stilled, Moreno suggested that Charles settle in and that they take a swim.

The room that Charles would stay in for July was once his father's. When his grandparents had died, and Charles's father had moved away to California, Moreno and his young wife had stayed nearby and made it their home for the summer. The room was the smallest in the house. It had a low ceiling and a small bed in the corner with a thin quilt over it that looked scratchy and two small windows with wide ledges underneath them that had accumulated dust and chips of cracked paint. Charles tossed his bag on the bed. The windows let in a lot of light and the room was bright and hot even though the fan on the ceiling was spinning. He wiped the dust off the ledges beneath the window and off the countertop of the short dresser in the room and unpacked his clothes and some of his things—a few t-shirts in one drawer, a pair of slacks and a pair of jeans in the next, a dinner jacket on the hook behind the door, a pair of sneakers and a pair of sandals under the bed, his swim trunks, which he laid out on the bed to change into, and from inside the padding of his socks in the center of his suitcase,

three Russian novels which he stacked on the dresser, an old postcard which he propped over the books, two magazines that he hid beneath his trousers, and a photograph of Charles and his mother on graduation day, in an ivory frame that she had given him. He put on his swim trunks and rejoined his aunt and uncle outside.

They climbed onto their road-bikes and set off for the Aegean, speeding through unpaved rows of one-storied houses, lined up side-by-side, divided neatly by short stonewalls. White-bearded shoe polishers sat behind gilded booths with brush-tops and carvers loitered by their rotating spits of meat, behind red neon signs, while their sauciers in burgundy caps waited absently by their sides.

The pedals of Charles's bike spun faster and faster, hitting the backs of his ankles as he rode. He fell behind.

"Desde su tacones!" yelled his uncle from up ahead, for Charles to push from his heels, "Legs!" he yelled again.

They reached the sea and locked their bikes together, one on top of the next. Charles looked out at the water. He had never experienced any natural affinity to the sea. Nothing pulled him towards it, as though the its briny water ran through him or constitution some portion of his body. He hated how the salt bound itself to the hairs on his legs and how when it dried it made him itchy while he read on the beach and how all of his things seemed to smell acidic afterwards, and he how he found it hard to focus on anything, even to focus on not focusing with the clanking tongs of the men who sold boiled corn from large buckets near the shoreline. But his uncle insisted he go in, that it was good for his hair and his skin and for his sinuses.

He walked in knee-deep and then farther. Moreno was a few feet ahead of him, splashing about and throwing himself against the waves and then under them. His uncle loved the sea. Charles watched as he maneuvered onto his back, the salt's buoyant hand carrying him above the sea's eddying whirl. His stomach protruded up above sea level, like the fin of a shark.

Charles bobbed through the waves, mouthfuls of seawater leaking from his mouth and nose. He positioned himself side-by-side with his uncle, their shoulders colliding from time to time as the current shot through the water. Moreno's skin felt soft and cool underneath the water, nothing of the rough carparace that clothed him while on land.

Charles floated on his back, looking up at the spotted sky, trying to enjoy it. The sun warmed his skin and the water underneath him, and at that precise moment when the temperature of Charles's body matched exactly the temperature of the sea, his skin seemed to evanesce, and he felt translucent, like a plastic container for his bones floating about in the water. His ears were submerged beneath the surface, and all Charles could hear was the sound of the current and of his own breath.

The day had exhausted them all, and when Charles returned home with Renee and Moreno, lead-footed and sleepy, they each retired to their own rooms to nap off the rest of the afternoon. When night fell, he awoke in his bed of scratchy sheets, and hunger sounded from his belly. His aunt and uncle were snoring in unison from the next room, so Charles laced his shoes and set out for a bite to eat.

The night air was warm and agreed with him. He walked past the rows of neon signs. Strings of beach balls were roped together and hung beside their bearded vendors in long braids. The lights illuminated the beach balls, and as Charles strolled by them, they lit his path, like a series of clues.

He picked one of the restaurants that all looked the same. A man in a white linen jacket—whom, from his puissant eyes, the large ring on his index finger, and the spectacles hanging from a strap around his neck, Charles deduced was the owner— sent a young man in a suit to seat him. With a smile, the man walked Charles to his table. He was hungry, and finished a large plate of food very quickly. As was the custom, he ordered a Turkish coffee after dinner, and while he drank it, mindful of the grit that would remain at the bottom of the cup, he watched as the owner stopped from table to table to greet his customers. The man lingered at

some tables longer than others, sitting down with the regulars, smoking a new cigarette at each. As his eyes followed the owner, he saw that the diners around him had turned their cups, mouth down, into the small white saucers that had accompanied them.

By the kitchen, the owner spoke to a young woman. They bore a striking resemblance to one another, not in any particular feature, but in their general countenance. He sent her out into the dense crowd, and she began moving to the tables whose cups were down-turned in their saucers. She would pull up a small stool next to them, sit down, pick up their cup and peer into it for a short while, running her fingers through her dark hair, before looking up and speaking to them. He watched her carefully, as she squeezed her broad hips between the narrow spaces between the tables, and shrugged her shoulders up to her ears so that her arms forced her breasts together. She was large and had the shape of a woman, though she could have been no older than Charles.

Methodically she moved, table to table, turning cups and talking. The cups were her draw, and Charles wanted her at his table so when she came near, he too flipped his coffee cup over into its saucer.

As she approached, he started to get warm, perspiring at the nape of his neck, the manicured strands of his hair that had been neatly combed into place were now falling into his eyes. He started running through lines of poetry, as a reflex, but none suited the occasion, the majority of them being about dead girls. She finished with the two women at the table next to his and turned towards Charles, eyeing him and then the cup, her eyebrows rising for permission to approach. He smiled at her, or hoped he had. He could hardly know now, though he must have communicated something because she was pulling her stool up. She sat down and said one word, “fortune?”

He had never bought into these sorts of things, these necromancies. But not wanting her to leave, and hardly capable of fashioning an answer with the certainty he wished to project

to her, he pointed to the cup and nodded. When she sat right in front of him, he could see that she was even younger than he had originally thought, she could be no older than seventeen.

The girl reached across the table and positioned his hands in front of him, with one on each side of the saucer. She picked up the cup in her own dainty hands, her long fingers stroking the cooled porcelain as she turned it to face her. The girl peered into the cup, and he peered at her.

"You're going to tell my fortune?

She turned the cup towards him to reveal what she had been staring at. The remaining coffee grinds had dripped down the walls of the small cup and dried into different shapes, a caffeinated set of hieroglyphics.

"Yes," she replied, "from these."

She spoke very slowly and with a heavy accent. He asked for her name.

"Idil"

He repeated it back to her incorrectly.

"Idil. Ee Deel."

"Idil," he said to her again and this time she seemed satisfied.

"Charles," he said back.

"Charlie." He didn't like it, but hadn't the heart to correct her.

Her English was broken but he understood her hands, her fingers as they waved through the air, while she revealed to him what his cup foretold. She pointed into the cup, at a dark glob with wiry extremities.

"See?"

"Yes, I see it."

"You see what it looks like?"

"Coffee."

Idil pointed up to a tree and flapped her arms, up and down, and up and down again, her breasts bouncing together and then apart as she moved. He understood it to mean "bird" but maintained the puzzled look on his face, so that she might keep flapping and bouncing about.

"It's a bird," she finally said.

"There are birds in my future?" he asked with a smile.

"It means voyage, you will go a place that is different."

He looked around and then at her, noting the accuracy of the first prediction. The next shape that she pointed to looked just as much like coffee to him as the first one had.

"What does it look like?" she asked him

"I don't know."

"I help you." She interlaced her fingers together and pounded her locked hands gently over her chest. Her breasts went bouncing again, and she started to laugh. It was this that endeared him to her so, her own self-oblivion, her laugh ringing truer to a child's in the excitement of a game of charades than to a woman in the middle of a seduction.

"Heartbeat?"

"Heart, yes," she replied quietly.

He knew what this symbol meant and needed no further explanation.

"Do you know of a place to get a drink here? A bar?"

"Yes, there is many bar here."

"You can show me?"

She paused.

"Yes, I show you, no problem."

"Now?"

"Fortune," she replied and pointed to the cup.

"There's more?"

"Only one."

"All right."

They were leaning over together, to look into the cup, when the owner shouted from the kitchen.

"Idil!"

He circled his arm around his head, his hand in a fist but for his index finger pointing up.

"Yalla," he shouted again.

"I go now, but you will wait for me around the corner?"

"Can't I wait here," Charles asked?

She didn't answer but only looked back at the owner.

"Understood."

Charles waited around the corner, in a little nook area where two roads met behind a street lamp. He sat and then squatted and then sat again, waiting for her. Some time later, after what felt like a few hours, but mustn't have been more than one, Idil came around.

"You are hiding!"

He was about to explain himself before he realized that she was being coy.

They reached a nearby bar. It was crowded with young men in shorts too short, young women in skirts too long, and middle-aged men ignoring their leathery wives. There was one seat open at the bar and Charles sat on it and Idil sat on Charles. She ordered for both of them. He could now feel the full berth of her weight, her wide behind pushing through the side slots of the bar chairs and straining the circulation of his legs. But as his thighs went sandy, into the prickly sensation of a youth having sat Indian-style past his legs' capacity, the warmth of her body penetrated his skin. The barman arrived with two tall glasses filled shallowly with a clear liquid and two cubes of ice bobbing in its center. It smelled like dark licorice, which he hated as a child and still hated. Idil was holding a small pitcher of water in her hands. She poured the water into the glasses, and when the thin stream hit the shallow icy liquid, it billowed up to the

lip of the glass and clouded into a murky opal. It smelled of anise and the taste of it burnt Charles's throat as it went down.

He was full of food and they had been drinking for some time. Charles had no sensation in his legs and was perfectly content having her on top of him, her elbows digging into his stomach as she turned to reply to him, her muscles contracting and releasing on top of his thighs, the way his arms swept across her breasts as he reached for drink at the bar. Yes, Charles was happy to stay in that position for some time. But the barman soon shouted something in Turkish and Idil told Charles that it was time to go.

Out they went into the night, out into the neon dream of the street, hand in hand, a chained helix conducting a feverish energy, an uncouth eagerness, doubt and certainty together at once in some happy dizziness. They walked down the road, their bodies seeming to illuminate the streetlights as they passed them. And for small moments they were spotlighted, fleetingly ethereal under the lamps as they moved.

When they reached it, nothing but silence and the crickets bowing their legs together came from the house. The front door was equipped with surprisingly well-greased hinges, and he and Idil made little sound as they moved from the front of the house to the room that Charles would call his for the remainder of the month. Idil walked into the room first and when Charles shut the door behind them, the quiet sound of it fastening in place filled him with self-satisfaction. He turned from the door and Idil was eyeing the room—the few personal ornaments of his own that Charles had placed in its corners and on its shelves, and on its smooth tabletops to give it some false semblance of familiarity— a small ivory frame from his mother, the set of Russian novels he had brought from home, a bent postcard of John F. Kennedy.

"This is your family?" she asked, looking into the frame at the photograph.

He nodded at her.

"This is your mother, the woman in the hat?"

"Yes"

"She is very beautiful," she said, as she ran her fingers along the white frame.

He moved to undress her, fingering the thin straps that dug into her wide shoulders, her neck a sudden victim to his prurient gaze. But she stopped him, preferring to undress herself, the room turning into her theater, Charles fixed as a young boy beneath a short Church-play stage, wide-eyed and curious, his eyes following her arms as they moved to reveal her beige skin. She pulled out of her dress in precise and methodical tugs, slowly working the fabric from her skin, melting away the sweaty fixative that bound it to her body. In nothing but her underwear, Idil's body was as new to her as it was to Charles, her near-nakedness a power perceptible to her, but still unbridled. A clumsy and clownish smile on Idil's face at once revealed small gaps in between her front teeth, and the bashful reflection of Charles's awe of her bare skin. Indeed, her body had a magnificent effect on Charles. His was incapable of producing the same visceral warmth in Idil. If she could revel in the pallid tone of his skin, in his wan and hairless chest against hers, he imagined it would be for the novelty of it alone. She stood before him, palatial and statuesque, her thick ankles at last caged in her cotton underwear. He moved towards her, and soon she lay beneath him, and they lay beneath his coarse sheets, all eight of their limbs in a splendid vigor as the crickets' chirp unified into a lulling hum.

In the morning Idil was gone. Charles lay in bed, a solitary calm his only bedfellow. His stucco walls glowed yellow in the mid-morning light as he remained still in his sheets, watching a small beetle walk slowly across his ceiling. When he emerged from his room, the house was empty. A note in a wide cursive laden with foreign characters peeped out from under his bare feet. His Aunt and Uncle had gone to the market and had left him directions to the local Bazaar: a series of lefts and rights, Ls and Rs, at street names he couldn't pronounce.

He returned to his room to get the appropriate clothes, opening and closing the drawers in his dresser to remember where he had left his shirts. As he searched around the room, he noticed something missing. His picture frame was gone. The books remained, and the postcard

was in its same position above them, but the picture frame was gone. He remembered the way back to the restaurant. If she had it, he would go to retrieve it.

On the road, Charles biked the dirt path beneath him with a newfound ease. Unimpeded by the bumps in the gravel, the large stones that would hit his rusted wheels and throw him up into the air for fragments of seconds now became rhythmic little joys. At each jump he pictured himself momentarily floating: the earth spinning rapidly beneath him and himself floating weightlessly above its ether, untethered by gravity, a brief citizen of the air and not the land.

He sped by the ocean, past the houses, the shoe-shine, the meat carvers and the hungry beach toy vendors, past the ice cream shops and the small drive-in theater, all the while the sun meeting the peaks of his face, burning his cheek-bones and the bridge of his nose. He turned onto a familiar street, into the rows of restaurants that luck, if he believed in it, had lead him to the night before. Bald men were loading glass cases with ice and newly dead fish, once baited, now bait.

He quickly approached the end of the row, where last night's restaurant sat in all of its retrospective majesty. He was like a bottle-rocket, the hope of seeing her bubbling uncontrollably from his stomach, its heat gradually enlivening the particles from his gut to his ears. He reached the restaurant and his eyes scanned wildly for any site of his spotted girl. But she wasn't there. Instead he encountered the owner, her uncle or father or cousin or whoever he was. The man issues his commandments to a small army of waiters around the tables, himself meticulously straightening cutlery, arranging napkins, fastening tablecloth clamps and chairs as he shouted.

He saw Charles, and his sporadic eyes swiftly focused, widening and rounding with recognition and seeming to darken in sudden fury. The owner pointed a raised arm at him and his already pointed eyebrows angled as he shouted at Charles.

Charles biked faster, peering down at his uncle's directions though filled with an instantaneous disinterest in his intended destination—an instinctual sensing of danger

propelling his feet faster and faster at the cracked pedals. He thought he could hear a dog barking, but when he looked around there was no dog.

Charles reached the Bazaar by some fortuitous accident. He locked his bike to a lamppost in a hurry and ventured into the tunnel of the Bazaar, seeking sanctum in its frescoed walls, in the confused maze of the marketplace. Chaos encircled Charles as he walked into the long tunnel. In some far distance, he could see a dime-sized moon of light at its opposite end. Smaller tunnels branching off the main path filled the Bazaar with a sense of uncertain risk and finality at once, the truth and the visage of all mazes, being simultaneously lost and found.

It was as strange a place as he'd ever seen—its ceilings overwhelmed in painted patterns, geometries in the deepest greens and blues. No surface was left unornamented, each layer from the roof down, covered. The concave ceiling of the grand hall was lined with medallions in octagonal flowers and octagonal stars. Beneath them, vendors hung illuminated glass lamps of similar patterns, besides trays of cubed jellies coated in a matte sugary dust. At eye level, Arabic epigraphy boasted of the wonders of god, of paradise, of the grandeur of this place.

Charles walked through this gallery of unkempt glory, his mind ricocheting at the whim of his eyes, to the men with colorings and builds so unlike his own, to the women whose builds he could never make our beneath their robes. With things moving so quickly around him, time seemed to stand still for Charles and soon he had reached the end of the tunnel.

Blinded as he emerged from the Bazaar, his eyes reprocessed the natural light after nearly an hour beneath the tunnel's dull glow. All of the figures outside were for moments only silhouettes, reduced to shapes. As his eyes came to, the face of the owner crystallized in front of his. The man howled at Charles, but Charles heard nothing, his eyes monopolizing his sensual focus. He studied the man for an instant: his hair and beard were of a dark chestnut; his eyes, narrow and ambulant. His entire face, of a fine irregularity, announced a boundless pluck, a scorn of all things weak. The owner's only comprehensible word was "Idil." Her name, again

and again, in between slurred bursts of what were certainly profanities. Charles knew to move, the same reflexive recognition of danger impelling his feet. But he did not. There was a new heat in him, dry and suffocating and unfamiliar to Charles, and after another moment, the owner's fist swept across his face, the large ring on his index finger brushing against his cheek, taking with it Charles' footing and a small scrap of his skin. He was knocked to the ground, the sun-soaked pavement warming the cold sweat on his shoulder blades as he lay there with determinate clarity. Settling shadows of the crowd surrounding him shaded out the sun as Charles shut his eyes.

He got up slowly, with no sense of how long he had been laying there, recalling only the changing cast of faces that he had seen looking down at him when he had opened his eyes every now and again from the ground. As he shifted from his knees to his feet, no one around him seemed to notice, time having rendered his spectacle insignificant. He stepped into the teeming crowd, anonymous once more, and directed himself towards the water. He moved quickly, extracting an elemental ecstasy in the fluidity of his strides. The wonderful pleasure of his ligaments pulling and releasing as he walked was a sensation totally new to him. Before, he had never noticed, but now, his body's ability to move this way gave him a sense of boundless delight.

Charles removed his shoes and walked onto the sand, unbuttoning his shirt as he approached the sea. The shoreline was cold and wet beneath his toes, and there he laid his shirt and shoes before stepping in. He maneuvered onto his back. The clouds seemed perfectly positioned in the sky. The seawater soaked into his hair, and as he ran his hand through it, he thought of Idil, of her hair marshy with sweat the night before. He moved up and down with the waves, the water washing over his face, salting his tongue and seeping into the fresh cut beneath his eye. But as the water stung his gash, Charles felt no particular pain. He felt warm beneath the sun, the lines of buoys forming patterns around him as he floated unfettered in the maze of the sea.

Indian Summer

Henry Langham was nearing the end of his life and knew it. Recently widowed, he lived alone in a large house. The many hours of solitude had at last reached his mind, and Henry was of a certain whimsy not unfamiliar to people his age. His children rarely visited him but had bought him a cat. He had named it Manchester, after the city where he was born, and Manchester spent his days treading the vertical lines of the tennis court outside, where the young people bearing Henry's surname had played the first leg of a three round game he had organized to determine the successor to his company. He didn't really care much about their athletic prowess, but loved the sport of tennis very dearly, and had included it in the game of succession for his own entertainment. He had been the one of youngest in his family, but now, much since multiplied, some having died off, he was the elder, the wise one, something of a shaman or a high priest. Though he often felt like a fraud, a terrible failure, for the family he presided over hardly resembled a family at all.

The glow from the television screen hit his grandson's face from its place in the groove in the living room wall. The room was dark, but for a small ashy light that came in from the tall

and partially curtained windows. Theo sat on the couch, in the middle of the room, with his chin perched heavily on his open palm.

"Category! Potent Potables!" the host exclaimed. He had an oily voice, a tone ideal for the excited proclamations of imminent triple-doubles, a herald for the sentimental and often ridiculous names of racehorses and the order in which they were rounding the bend. The contestants would be going into the final round of the game. Theo asked his father if he could turn off the television and his father said no, warning Theo that this was "prep time," and then walked into the kitchen where something he dropped made a loud noise on the tile, which the acoustics of the room magnified into a convex echo, something of a cannonade, whose foreboding sounded throughout the apartment.

Theo was left alone in their living room, watching the end of the show. The final jeopardy round was a blind gamble, but in one single question, could erase the history of the game, turning it on its head, leader to loser. Best bet strategies had started to become obvious to Theo. The leading contestant's bet was simple: he assumed the second place contestant would go all in and calculated his bet by doubling second place's earnings, subtracting his own earnings from that, and finally, and most importantly, adding one dollar. If both second and first place contestants answer correctly, the leader will win by one dollar every time. In the game on the screen, the leading contestant, a middle-aged man with large pores and ginger-colored hair had garnered ten thousand throughout the course of the game. If he, as most game theories suggest he should, doubles second place, subtracts first place, and adds the crucial single dollar, his sole competitor, a thin woman with rimless glasses pushed up very high on the bridge of her nose, gets beat by one dollar. The show ended and Theo switched off the television and walked down the hallways to his room.

Two twin beds were pushed up neatly against each lateral wall of his bedroom. Julian laid on his back, spinning a basketball into the air with a sharp flicking of his wrist.

"Who won?"

"Diner waitress."

His brother told him to grow a pair, and at this, Theo was silent. Julian was sixteen, a year younger than his brother, and by some mottle in the way of things, had hit his spurt first, which Julian had channeled into a pair of respectable sideburns that widened into his cheeks, highlighting perhaps his most prominent feature, a mandible of cromagnonean proportion. The extent of Theo's facial ornamentation was limited to a few hairs over his upper lip and above his chin.

They were unlikely siblings—one with a head for numbers, the other for words—Theo could watch the jeopardy game and understand it instantly, and Julian, with a great thirst for oral history, had put to memory the stories of his grandfather and his three great uncles, or as they called themselves, The Brothers Langham.

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The four Brothers Langham— Ernest, Arthur, Henry and Fred—had grown up in Northern England. Ernest, the eldest, finished his schooling and, after working for a local butcher for a year, had saved enough money to buy a boat ticket to the United States, leaving behind his three younger brothers and a promise to send for them when he could. He moved to Queens and opened a shop that sold knickknacks and the English teas that his mother would send him in small, labeled jars. Money rolled in and soon, so did Arthur. They shared a one-bedroom apartment above the shop for two years, all the while saving their earnings but for the occasional stock investment.

When Henry had arrived to New York, he had spotted his brothers standing on the platform as his train from the boat basin approached the station, seeing Ernest for the first time in six years and Arthur for the first time in three. At the sight of their brother in the window, so grown, Ernest and Arthur began to cry. The train came to a gradual halt, and when Henry's compartment passed the brothers, they ran along side it, jumping up to touch Henry's hands dangling out from the train window.

Henry was the mathematician of the family, tactful but full of the eccentricities of a mind capable of numbers, and under his guidance the brothers invested Ernest's savings into small plots of land. By the time the Brothers sent for Fred, Ernest's fortune had turned from modest to handsome. When Fred arrived, resentful of his brothers for leaving him alone in Manchester for so long, he bought a Cadillac with money from the Brother's shared bank account. He was left out of the contracts when at long last the Brothers purchased a property entirely their own, a small apartment building on the West Side of New York City, across the street from Central Park which they named, appropriately, the Langham. It was to be the home of the their posterity. The Brothers would accept tenants only until their own spawn was plenty enough to fill the nine units in the building themselves. While the Langhams multiplied, so too did their wealth. They named their company The Tetrad.

Now, of the four Langham brothers, only Henry and Fred remained. The family never saw much of Fred. He had made a significant fortune of his own and squandered the majority of it funding an autobiographical film entitled "The Playboy." The Langham was thus occupied: Ernest's three daughters on the top floor, Arthur's daughter and two sons on the second floor and Henry's two children and an ever-shifting tenant on the first floor above the lobby, the building a physical materialization of their family tree.

4A belonged to Janet Langham, Ernest's eldest, blonde and plain and of the particular sternness not uncommon of eldest siblings. 4B was occupied by her sister, Lily, who their father, inspired by her unmatched fondness of all things floral, had affectionately called "Petals." 4C belonged to Diane Langham, who lived there with her nurse. She was often seen wandering the halls of the Langham, arm in arm with Ling, mumbling things to herself, loudly and quietly and then loudly, again.

Arthur's children lived on the third floor. It's said that when addicts are rehabilitated, they replace one addiction for another—cigarettes for cocaine, fast food for cigarettes. Thomas had replaced Quaaludes with horses and 3A was often left unoccupied as he and his wife

preferred to spend much of their sober time at a ranch in the Hudson Valley. His sister Karen was an analyst, and 3B doubled as an office. Well past the acceptable age, her son, Alex, a failed musician, lived at home. 3C belonged to Gary Langham, a portly man with an odd humor and a deep love of opera. He had two daughters. Audrey, his youngest, had inherited her mother's rosy complexion and her father's build, and as a result, had been eliminated in the tennis match. Cleo was Gary's eldest. She had, among other things, blue hair, a passion for Japanese cartoons and friends who referred to themselves as nuns betrothed to the Marquis de Sade, a cloister in which she was in the process of joining.

Theo and Julian lived with Michael in 2A. Tensions between the second generation Langhams spread through the building from the ground up, sometimes insidiously, but often times not, each floor ruled by the choleric humor, resentful of the one above them, taking to heart the figurative implications of one man's floor being another man's ceiling and for what they assumed was a better view of the Macy's Day Parade. Michael spearheaded this vertical ill will. In 2B lived Pamela Langham-Crowley-Huffington, ex wife to the road manager of an English band of moderate fame, and mother to a well-behaved adolescent named Spencer and an incontinent dog named Sandy, who, years from now when the dog would die, Pamela would replace with a homosexual personal assistant of the same name. Spencer enjoyed speed skating, and watching women's television with his mother. He had won the tennis match and was the popular favorite to win the entire game.

Mr. Orson Foley had no relation to the Langhams and lived in 2C. He seemed to be a journalist of some sort, though no one could be certain. That the plebian, non-Langham lived on the second floor did not help Michael's growing acerbity.

The Langhams worked together and were cordial for the purposes of business, but rarely spoke outside of the office, save for the occasional nicety when crossing paths in the lobby. The most talking any of the second generation Langhams did was during the twice yearly management meeting at Henry Langham's house in the country, where they conversed

about façade restoration, the efficiency of the maintenance staff, doorman applicants, and expanded parking.

Each of the second generation Langhams owned ten percent of The Tetrad, as had been bequeathed to them by their fathers, with Henry Langham holding twenty percent and control of the company. After this brothers had died, Henry saw it unfit to change how they had plotted the Langham, which had been set up precisely as a mirror to their familiar structure, eldest to youngest, top to bottom. But he had witnessed how it had bewildered a family, making these cousins strangers to one another.

"On the issue of succession," he had begun the last meeting at his home, in his dry baritone English accent. Michael waited with an eager grin widening across his face. He was Henry's only son, he would inherit the Tetrad and take the best apartment in the Langham. "I've decided the company will pass to none of you." The room around Michael felt slow and contained, a fish bowl, his relatives moving in a sway, like the artificial algae in unnaturally blue water. "Instead, breaking with the dynastic nature of this family, if you can even call it that, I leave it up to the third generation Langhams to determine for themselves, through a multi-stage game, who will take majority ownership of The Tetrad."

"You can't be serious," Michael had said to his father.

"Ah, in fact, I can be, and in this case, I am."

Michael opened his mouth to protest further, but Henry continued without pause.

"The young Langhams will compete in a three-part game to determine a winner. Each stage will involve an exam, the first physical; the third, mental; and the second falling somewhere in the middle. First, they will play a round-robin tennis match, with the possibility of sudden death. Stage two is a surprise in which I'm certain some of you will learn something new about your children."

He paused.

"And finally, stage three. A trivia game that will test your children's knowledge of world history, current events, dead languages, ancient ruins, and basic tenants of property law. Let's see whose been enjoying my holiday gifts."

The gifts Henry referred to were these. Each holiday season, the third generation Langhams received a heavy present from Henry and, while he lived, from Arthur. Arthur would predictably give each child a volume of British Romantic Poetry, starting them off with Wordsworth the first year, Coleridge the second, Shelley, and then Byron, and then Keats as they got older, eventually moving them on to the Victorians, leaving them Oscar Wilde the year that he died.

Henry, on the other hand, had given them business books. He had started them off with *Beginnger's Real Estate*, subtitled *Lets Get Real*, and then onto *Irrational Exuberance* and *Every Landlords Legal Guide*. He inscribed every book he gave with the same note: *Words go, Monuments Fall, People Die, Land, however, lasts forever.*

*

On a sunny day in October, when the daylight hours were still plentiful and the trees around Henry Langham's house were red and orange in Indian Summer, the first round of the game was scheduled to begin at noon. All six of the competing third generation Langhams had come to the country with their weekend bags, and their tennis bags, each of which was complete with two newly strung and gripped rackets, their own can of balls, and each contestant's choice of sweat absorbant—for Spencer, a visor; Julian, a headband; Cleo, a tie-dyed bandana with cherries on it; Theo, a baseball cap; Audrey, a towel, because she would require that much surface area; and Alex brought a yellowed and torn old T-shirt that smelled like he did.

One of many Langham rites— among which were a blindfolded walk through Central Park, and the recitation of a verse from book twelve of the Aeneid, in Latin—they had been playing tennis since they were small, training at the same club in Perth Amboy three days a week, for three hours at a time. Their coaches were all tanned, all the time. Some had foreign

accents and some had silver chains entangled in their abounding chest hair, and they seduced, or were seduced by, sometimes it was hard to tell, their older female clients or the mothers of the children they instructed, the most recent of whom was Pamela Langham.

Stretched, with towels folded over their foldout chairs, the Langhams assumed their positions for the first match of the game. Alex and Spencer played first.

Alex had an immense talent for the sport, being more naturally inclined to it than any of his cousins. Spencer wasn't particularly disposed towards tennis, but was the best player among the group, training five times a week as opposed to their tree. Spencer and Alex stood at opposite baselines, the emblems of talent versus drive, separated only by the taught white net. Alex served, his arm reaching the height of extension, his wrist pronating at a seventy-three degree angle, the ball racing through the air, invisible to the spectators against the background of autumnal leaves, eventually hitting the court so hard, and with such quickly rotating top spin, that it rose from the floor and went sharply to the left, soaring past any possible lunge. Ace.

The Langhams on the sideline, beside the rainbow of sports drinks, clapped that familiar tennis cheer, that same noble tapping, fingers to outer palm, almost inaudible. Back and forth zipped the balls, some just grazing the tape, some in parabolic arches, seeming almost to reach the birds, and still from the sidelines sounded that diminutive tap, the song of formality, suppressing all reaction, the music of restraint. After losing the first game to Alex, scoreless, it was Spencer's turn to serve. The first serve's ball fell flatly to the floor on Spencer's side of the net, but, from that same place of disadvantage, so familiar to him in tennis, landing on the outskirts of Alex's deuce side with vengeful force came Spencer's second serve and his ease into the game.

Sidelined Langhams watched the balls go from side to side, their heads turning like a disapproving nod in slow motion, long rallies and quick winners, aces and lobs, and smashes from the net and from the service line from overheads and reflexive volleys and still sounded the taciturn hands. Spencer and Alex walked off the court, Spencer the victor.

The second generation Langhams sat in the lawn chairs like boxing coaches, squirting water into their children's open mouths, massaging their backs and their egos at once, readying them to return to Henry Langham's arena where they'd play out the unclosed and unforgotten stories of their parents, point by point. Cleo played Julian, a crosscourt duel, her first forehand a brush top long drive returned by a one-handed backhand, the spectators eyes ticking like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, watching the neon ball blur into yellow diagonals, each swing a shot of duty, a front court winner and then the muffled cheer, a down the line undercut and then that tight-lipped applause, every hit existing outside of the game, the time that Pamela screwed Karen's fiancé, fingers to palm in muzzled rage, Michael smashing Gary's car, and the gentle clapping once again, the three thousand Gary owes and will never pay, the scar over Karen's left eye, backhand to forehand, the overdose in seventy-four, Gary's unreturned haymaker, the mailroom terseness, the lobby glowers, the complete and total stalemate, and still the little claps, tightened wrists and fluttering hands in the careful bridling of all histrionics.

*

The five remaining contestants who had scored highly enough in the tennis match had reported to the Tetrad by nine o'clock, as Henry Langham had instructed them to. Winter was fast approaching, no snow had fallen but a thick chill hung in the air. Alex had arrived last, in sweat pants and a jean jacket buttoned all the way up. He wasn't wearing a shirt. His hair was greasy and tousled and he smelled funny, like the inside of an antique shop. Cleo, Julian, Theo and Spencer took the elevator up to the thirteenth floor. Alex wanted to take the stairs; he was jumpy, as though he'd been electrocuted, and said it was good for the heart. When they reached the office, Alex arriving later than his younger cousins, sweatier than before and out of breath, Henry Langham was sitting in a large desk chair facing the window. They stood there in silence for what felt like a long time, wondering if he'd heard them come in. Eventually he spun around and, without greeting them, opened a desk drawer. He pulled out five tick plastic cups, lined with numerical values. On a table by the door were five glasses of water.

"I'll need for you each to drink a glass of water, refill it however many times to you see fit, and deliver its recycled contents in these cups."

Cleo took the urine cup, dropped it in the woven hemp bag strapped across her chest and walked towards the table at the door. She raised her glass.

"Cheers," she said coyly. She gulped down the entire glass, her head tilted backwards, intentionally leaking a few drops of water to spill unelegantly down her neck. Theo, Julian and Spencer drank their waters together while Henry Langham spun himself around in his desk chair with what strength old age had left him.

Alex was the only one left in the office, with Henry and the urine cup and the tall glass of water by the door. He drank the water, and set the glass back down on the table, saluted his great uncle Henry, finger to forehead, and left his office with a look so brilliant and grabbing that Henry, in spite of what his refusal to take the test meant, nearly handed the company over to Alex then and there.

Henry sat alone in his office. It was a glass box, in the corner of the thirteenth floor, with two of the walls looking out over the city, eastward to Queens. He thought of the knickknack shop which he had been told now sold inappropriate toys and leather lingerie. The room was full of wan winter light, the same pale hue of his skin, which was thin and had lost its taughtness, nearly translucent now, so that you could see the web of capillaries around his nose and a bit about his cheeks.

The boys stood at the urinals, rocking on their heels and waiting. With nothing else to talk about, they talked about the game, though with marked reticence. Things went on this way, rocking and waiting, until Theo asked Spencer what books he was reading in preparation of the jeopardy round. When Spencer told him that he had just finished two books on Ancient Mayan civilization, Theo asked:

"You really think he'll ask about that stuff?"

"He'll ask anything he wants," Spencer snapped back, "You think he cares about fairness? The only thing that man cares about is Manchester the cat, because Manchester the cat's the only one who cares about him. He sees the way the we are, you think this is how he thought it would be? He's going to ask us whatever it is that tickles him. Bet on that, " Spencer said as he began to pee, feebly and then forcefully, aiming into the cup.

"Avast ye!" shouted Julian, "Stub!" he turned to Theo, "Flask!" he turned to Spencer, "Thar she blows!" he laughed, amused at his literalism.

Spencer finished and capped the lined cup with the yellow lid. He zipped up and patted Julian on the back.

"Overachiever," said Julian, as Spencer left the bathroom.

Julian's urinal began to sound.

"The point is to get it into the cup, genius," said Theo to his brother.

"Ah, yes, but I fear grandfather will be displeased with my results."

Theo's eyebrows furrowed together and his eyes narrowed into very serious looking slits. He grabbed his younger brother's arms and turned them over with considerable force. They were blank, and Theo was relieved and infuriated at once when his brother told him that it was nothing serious, just "something green after school." Then there was nothing in the bathroom but the sound of Julian's urine hitting the porcelain and Theo's hitting the plastic.

"Your cup runneth over!"

"Shut up, Shakespeare."

"Not Shakespeare, God."

"Don't you think that's a bit of an overstatement?"

"It's in the Bible."

"Just give me your cup," Theo said to his younger brother.

Julian handed his cup to Theo who began to fill it.

"Ah, sweet Theo. Your cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

All who submitted their tests passed. On the day the results had returned from the lab, Henry Langham announced to the family that he would hold a dinner party at his home in the country in honor of the remaining contestants. He had telephoned Ramon, the new lobby attendant, to place the following memo in each of the Langham mailboxes.

SUBJECT: THE FINAL FOUR

PLEASE JOIN ME FOR DINNER TO CELEBRATE THE SOBRIETY OF CLEO, JULIAN, SPENCER AND THEO LANGHAM.

DINNER WILL BE SERVED PROMPLY AT 7:30 P.M.

H.N.L.

Spencer checked the mailbox that day. His mother was out of the country and he was alone in 2B with the incontinent dog he had grown to hate. When he received Henry Langham's note, he picked up the telephone and called Cleo's apartment to ask for a lift to dinner, which her father obliged.

Gary Langham was large and drove a tiny car. Spencer sat in the middle seat in the back, packed between Cleo and Audrey who had each claimed a window seat. Audrey was reading a nature magazine about snow tigers and Cleo doodled in the corners of a Japanese graphic novel. The farther they moved from the city, where the Langham stood in veiled malaise, the more traffic loosened, and the cars moved with greater ease while an unfamiliar calm swept over the Langhams.

The older Langhams were seated in their own individual armchairs in the living room when Henry Langham descended the staircase in a velvet jacket and tasseled loafers. The second floor of his house was painted white, and no one but Henry was allowed up upstairs. The third generation coterie sat around a small table in the kitchen, speaking only a little but taking turns mixing the squares of a Rubik's Cube they had found in a drawer.

"What are you lot having to drink then?" asked Henry as he walked into the kitchen to check on the hors d'oeuvres.

Audrey wanted a juice, Theo wanted water, Cleo abstained from drugs and alcohol, "cloister rules," Julian was driving, and Spencer wanted white wine, preferably chardonnay.

Henry's cook had prepared Shepherd's Pie for dinner. The Langhams sat around a long, rectangular table and the four large pies were served in glass dishes down the center.

"Would anyone like to propose a toast?" Henry Langham asked from the head of the table. Cleo raised her hand. "Ah, yes, Cleo Langham!"

"This has meat in it."

"Yes it does."

"I don't eat meat."

"Well, that's foolish, dear."

"Cheers!" shouted Spencer, raising his glass of old pinot grigio.

Henry Langham stood up from his large chair, the only one at the table with arm rests.

"Let's raise our glasses to the final four. Go on young ones, Holding single or together, steady moving, to the front, all for us, Pioneers! O pioneers!" he said, breaching his usual patriotism, "the games have only just begun."

They all took sips from their glasses and although few clinks were heard from the table, it was remarkable to Henry Langham how much, in this house, perhaps only in this house, so far away from the building named to contain them in just this state, they resembled a family.

When dinner was done and the Langhams were full, they sat, each in big armchairs, in Henry Langham's parlour, which was very quiet but for the sound of Manchester the cat's bell jingling as he weaved around their feet. The room was full of artificial heat, the stale sort that made all of the Langhams sleepy.

Henry Langham was asleep in the corner. Old, pale and clean-shaven, he began, rather strikingly, with a great mass of silver-white hair, neatly combed to the side, with thick black-

framed glasses that covered his bushy big-man eyebrows, a small nose reddening at its edges, thin but well-postured neck, straight torso packed tightly inside his velvet dinner jacket, and ended, appropriately, in a pair of long and well defined legs, now limp and tucked together, and feet in the tasseled loafers that he had been wearing faithfully for over forty years.

Diane Langham was talking to Cleo in the opposite corner of the room, telling the blue-haired girl how much she reminded Diane of herself. Some years ago, she had lost the ability to control the volume of her voice, already a loud and poorly tuned instrument, and as she yapped away to Cleo, Henry Langham awoke in his armchair across the parlour.

"Where was I?"

He seemed disoriented and for the first time in the competition, its creator looked weak.

"We were deciding a location for the game!" Diane shouted.

"Thank you, Diane. Let's get on with it, then. In the democratic spirit of these games, I propose a nomination voting process."

Michael raised his hand.

"I volunteer my apartment."

"Veto!" Spencer interjected, "Unfair advantage."

"Spencer raises a good point."

"You think I'll help them cheat?"

"Wouldn't put it past you," sounded Julian, who was reclining in poor posture in his armchair.

"Sit up straight, Julian," said Henry Langham.

"Thrown to the wolves by my own son," said Michael.

"In true Langham fashion," replied Julian.

"It's their comfort zone, it's their apartment," continued Spencer.

"So we eliminate the homes of all competitors."

"Can we agree to that?" asked Henry Langham.

"Fine," replied each of them, but not in unison.

"Can't we just have it here?" suggested Cleo.

This seemed reasonable to the Langhams.

"Absolutely not!" replied Henry Langham, "This is not a place of Langham competition."

"But the tennis match was here."

"That was an entirely different sort of competition, nothing could be more fair than a game of tennis."

"Is fairness not a prerequisite of the final round?" asked Spencer.

"The final round of the game will be governed by rules entirely your own. My hope is that whatever those may be, that they, as a fundament, be fair, but I leave wholly up to you."

Diane Langham suddenly cleared her throat.

"Since I never experienced the felicity of children, and since I HAVE no real inVEStment in the game, I believe, believe, believe. I believe that makes 4C neutral territory."

The third generation Langhams hadn't been to Diane apartment since they were very young, when Diane had invited them all over to celebrate her fifty-seventh birthday. Her apartment was dusty and mauve, and had big plants hanging in the corners and framed photographs of her father Ernest and the many dogs that she had kept over the years on the large piano that she never played. That night so many nights ago, it had been decided that a live-in nurse would move in with Diane after she had attempted to cook a pot roast for her birthday guests and had nearly burned down the Langham.

After a short deliberation, they agreed that Diane Langham would host the trivia round, which Henry Langham would plead with Mr. Foley to host, at Cleo's less than mild urgings.

*

The game began at five o'clock on the dot, when Diane Langham, Henry Langham and Mr. Foley opened the door, their hands gripping its edge, one on top of the other, a totemic

emblem of what was to follow. The four contestants had been waiting outside, occasionally ringing the bell and knocking to no avail. Diane led them into the living room, where the piano still stood in dusty grandeur. Four chairs were lined up in a row, with a fair amount of space between them. Each had a short, green felt-topped table in front of it, carrying a notepad and an ink pen. By the piano across the room, a chalkboard found roots in an unreflective brushed metal frame.

Each Langham assumed their positions. Theo next to Cleo next to Spencer next to Julian, and Mr. Foley at a lighted lectern in front of the chalkboard. Henry and Diane Langham sat on a sofa behind the piano looking on at the commencing game.

"Begin?" Mr. Foley turned back to Henry Langham and asked.

"Commence, Mr. Foley."

"There are three rounds of the game which will proceed as follows. Three categories per round, five questions per category. The worth of the questions will differ in variants of one hundred dollars in the first round, which will test your knowledge of world history. The second round will test your knowledge of real estate, and its questions will vary in increments of two hundred dollars, and the final round will test your knowledge of various ruins, and its questions will vary in increments of three hundred dollars."

Each playing Langham was looking straight ahead at Mr. Foley, in a stale anticipatory silence.

"The game will function with the same basic rules as Jeopardy, the answers will be read aloud and the first person to successfully provide the appropriate question will secure the monetary value ascribed to that answer. Each of your armchairs is fashioned with a buzzer, the various sounds of which, under the threat of eviction, I have spent the last week familiarizing myself with. I consider myself a consummate expert on their sounds and thus I must insist my decisions on the order of their sounding must not be questioned."

"Can we all agree on this?" asked Henry Langham from the faded sofa behind the piano.

None of the contestants spoke, but, still looking forward, nodded in silence.

"Begin, Mr. Foley."

Mr. Foley walked to the chalkboard and turned it over in its frame. The other side revealed a grid mimicking that of the game show, with three headers and five square boxes below each with the numbers one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, four hundred, and five hundred descending vertically. The categories read THE BEST WAR EVER, WORLD GEOGRAPHY, and MANCHESTER 101.

"Spencer, since you won the tennis match, you chose first."

"I'll take The Best War Ever for three hundred, please."

"ANSWER!" Mr. Foley shouted.

Diane Langham broke out into hysterics on the sofa.

"These two British ships went to Singapore to provide artillery support and to help prevent the Japanese invasion of what was then Malaya."

Spencer hit his buzzer.

"Spencer."

"What were the HMS Prince of Wales, and HMS Repulse."

"Correct."

Spencer knew history well and felt an immediate ease with the category.

"Manchester for two hundred."

"Manchester derived its name from this Roman word, itself Latinized from the Celtic word meaning "breast-shaped hill."

Julian and Cleo both hit their buzzers.

"Julian."

"Mamucium"

"Correct."

"I believe our responses have to be phrased as questions," said Cleo.

"Mr. Langham?"

"Yes, Cleo, this is true, but in the first round of the game, we don't penalize for this error. Mr. Foley, please remind our contestants of the rules of the game."

"Contestants, please remember that your responses must be phrased as questions, in proper grammar."

"Two hundred dollars awarded to Julian. Pick the next question, please."

"Manchester for one hundred."

"This man is said to have erected the first cotton mill in the city."

Theo buzzed in.

"Theo."

"Who is Lewis Paul."

"Incorrect."

Spencer's buzzer rang.

"Who is Richard Arkwright."

"Correct."

"The Best War Ever for two hundred."

"This German General was sent to Tripoli ahead of his army to stem considerable losses."

"Who is Rommel."

"Correct."

*

At the end of the first round, Spencer and Julian were tied, with Theo lagging behind them, and Cleo with no money at all. Without the necessary score to advance into the second round, Cleo was eliminated from the game. No Langham was accustomed to losing, and Theo was no exception from that. From the same place of disadvantage, like Spencer's in tennis, or Julian's in sobriety, Theo was galvanized. In the second round, answering two one hundred

dollar questions about a Walrasian auction setting, two five hundred dollar questions about net leasing, four one hundred dollar questions about appraisals and two three hundred dollar questions about development, Theo caught up to his brother and Spencer.

Spencer got anxious. He deserved this. He was the most dutiful grandson, he was the hardest working tennis player, he tolerated his mother, he was a great student, he at least *wanted* to save the whales, he read voraciously, he cleaned up after the incontinent dog, he fed the homeless that one time, he was the best Langham and he deserved the Tetrad. It was now Spencer was in that same place of disadvantage once more, aced four times over, this time by Theo.

Julian was having a glass of water in the kitchen during the small break in between the second and third round. It was there where Spencer found him, leaning gently against Diane Langham's dark marble countertop which was covered appliances and novelty salt-shakers.

"Your brother came out of nowhere."

"He studied."

At this, breaking with the Langhams's long running tradition of inter-familiar stoicism, Spencer clapped silently no longer.

"I studied, too. I studied harder than all of you. And he was buzzing way too fast, he was buzzing before the question was even over. Theo cheats, and you should know that about your brother, Julian. Henry's right you know? It's land, just land, that's the only thing that will last, not you or me or family or anything just land, and that's what I'm going to get."

Julian said nothing. Theo hadn't cheated. If Spencer was the best tennis player, and Julian had the best memory; Audrey, the sweetest; Cleo, the sharpest; Alex, the most artistic, Theo was the most honest.

Mr. Foley called the three remaining contestants back into the parlour for the third round of the game. The header over the chalkboard read RUINS, with three categories beneath it: ANCIENT RUINS, GLOTTOPHAGY, and FAMILY FEUDS.

"The questions in this last round before final jeopardy are worth three hundred, six hundred, nine hundred, twelve hundred and fifteen hundred each."

Julian sat in between Theo and Spencer. His brother had won the second round and was asked to choose first. Theo chose ancient ruins, for three hundred, his voice timid and quaking slightly as he called his selection out to Mr. Foley by the lectern. He answered a question about Macchu Picchu incorrectly, and Julian sat back and watched Spencer buzz in and proudly exclaimed: "What is Inca."

"Glottophagy for six hundred," said Spencer.

"This language was spoken in northwestern Louisiana. The name is derived from the Caddo word meaning "brushwood."

Spencer buzzed in.

"What is Creole."

"Incorrect."

Neither Theo nor Julian attempted the question.

"The correct answer is, What is Adai."

It was Julian's turn to select a question.

"Family feuds, nine hundred."

"Brothers Curtis and Preston Blake stopped talking over a debt issue in this sweet company, which they founded in 1935."

He buzzed in.

"What is Friendly's"

"Correct."

Spencer was still in the lead. Diane Langham was coughing loudly on the couch behind the lectern, the dust of erased chalk whitening the warm air in the room. Henry Langham sat cross-legged beside her, tapping her back absent-mindedly with no real care paid to seeing that

she breath once more, watching his grandchildren answer questions about all the things that wouldn't last.

Julian hated him. He had forced them all, in the last round of his life, to see them together, playing tennis in his back yard, eating dinner at his table, petting his cat, gathering at his office, and all to show them that it meant nothing, that like Machu Picchu and like Adai and Ayuthaya, and Aka Bo, like words and things, that it wouldn't last. Land and only land.

If this indeed was the case, if land and only land was most permanent, if this was the lesson necessary to earn the Tetrad, then Theo, with the least money in the game, but having won most of it in the real estate round was most deserving of the win. Julian realized this at once, and in an unforeseen moment of enterprise and affection, answered six consecutive questions incorrectly, his brother answering correctly each one that he missed, insuring Julian's exit from the game and Theo's entrance into the final jeopardy round.

At the end of the third round, Theo and Spencer were tied with $22,000 each. Theo he knew the scenario well, he had studied it for weeks. The final jeopardy question was read aloud.

"Ernest Langham met his wife Shirley like this."

Henry Langham hit a button on a boombox in between his loafers and Diane Langham's kitten heels. Julian sat on a chair next to the sofa, watching his brother scribble down the answer that he was certain Theo knew. Julian had told him the story only a few weeks before. How in 1955, on a warm Sunday in New York City, Ernest Langham had walked into the 92nd street Y where a basketball was taking place. Rows of pretty girls sat swinging their feet on the bleachers, and one short blonde caught his eye. He watched her small feet rock back and forth against the pale wood, her shoelaces undone, swaying gently from side to side. It was then that he approached her and asked if he could tie her shoelaces, which Theo's great aunt Shirley described as the moment she knew she had met her husband. The thirty seconds of slow measured music, those few electric notes came to a close and it was time for the two to reveal their answers. Julian waited eagerly in his chair to see his sacrifice into fruition. The right man

would win. Theo was kind and good, and would restore some order to the family that Henry had seen unravel. He was holding his notepad tightly against his chest, and at the very moment Mr. Foley asked the contestants for their answers, Theo looked at Julian on the chair by the sofa and smiled.

"What is, by tying her shoelaces at the Y," Mr. Foley read aloud from Theo's notepad, and after a short pause said, "That is correct."

He had done it, much indebted to Julian, who could hardly control himself behind the piano.

"Let's see how much you wagered."

Theo turned the page in the notebook, to the mostly blank sheet on which he had scribbled down his wager in a frenzy only a few seconds before. As he spun the notebook around to Mr. Foley, and Julian caught sight of the page, his breath started to slow, the skin on his face suddenly feeling heavy, seeming weighty enough to anchor him to the floor. His eyes fixed on one number on his brother's page, one tiny but crucial number—the perfectly round black zero at the end of the Theo's wager. It was a miniscule error, innocent and unforseen. Julian shut his eyes, and waited. The noise of the game receded entirely, and all he could hear was Diane Langham snoring on the sofa beside him. Spencer's notebook was facing Mr. Foley when Julian's eyes opened. He held his notebook lengthwise, descending from his grip vertically, page to spine to page.

Julian looked straight at Spencer's face, his eyes were wet with delight, his nostrils flaring uncontrollably above a pompous and toothy grin. As Julian's eyes moved down he saw that tweed bowtie pulled so tightly around Spencer's neck and then the first page of the notebook which, in curly and feminine cursive read *What is tying her shoelaces at a basketball game.* Then came that shiny spiral spine, which connected, in those few loops of metal, the Langham past with the determinant of the Langham future. There, waiting at the end of the four digits, as

Julian had so feared that it would be, was a straight and well postured one. That crucial single dollar that secured Spencer as the winner of Henry Langham's game.

Somewhere among Theo's polite congratulations and Mr. Foley's official declaration of a victor, the chalky coughing came roaring again from the sofa, this time much stronger, more desperate, and from Henry Langham. The white dust that had floated through the air, as new categories were written and erased and then written again, had finally settled in the apartment on the top floor of the Langham like a thin snowy veil. Outside, some stories below, taxi cabs sped down a wide road along Central Park, their heavy exhaust fumes dirtying the tall banks of snow as they melted into the grass.

Atlantic City

She asks me again what I'd like to do, the bowtied dealer in a cheap and ugly vest, but the fat woman beside me is making the most horrible sound, and in the end it doesn't really matter whether I hit or stay. The woman to my right is black and fat with large rolls cascading from her neck through her stomach down to her thick ankles, and she is having an asthmatic fit or something like that because she is sneezing in the shrillest pitches, as though she were screaming and coughing in low gutteral huffs, emulating the sonic range of a flushing toilet. Snot drips down from her nose and splatters over her the ends of waxy black bob, which is either treated or a wig, and the dealer is beginning to look concerned that she'll drip onto the felt. I have a nine and a seven and when I say hit the dealer places a queen on top of my pile and smiles and says bust. She pulls away my chips and my cards and asks the bald man with the white friar's ring and a small white dog in a pink T-shirt that says Sweetie across it in rhinestones what he'd like to do. He says he has to consult with Ms. Agnes, and after a moment

we all realize he is referring to the dog. The dog barks and the white haired man explains that Ms. Agnes says to hit, and the dealer places a card down and says that he now has nineteen and the man says he'll stay without consulting the dog.

The table is beginning to feel unlucky so I get up because I need to save my singles for later. The casino floors are magenta and dirty with spilled ash. Hasidic Jews with fur hats and furry ringlets catcall the underclothed waitresses. The lights buzz a white harsh glow, so bright and sterile that it seems out of place in this filthy room, keeping these filthy people awake at this terrible and unholy hour of the morning. Beneath the long tubes of light and fake crystal chandeliers hang flyers for the Miss Miniature Junior Atlantic City pageant which Jacqueline is getting her sleep for upstairs. The pageant is suggested for girls between the ages of three to six years old, and Jackie is eight, but, according to her mother, has premature aging anxieties and Jackie's shrink suggested that participating in a younger age group's pageant would be useful in calming her gerascophobia. Lisa sees patients on Saturdays and can't take the time off, and if the pageant were anywhere else I wouldn't bother, but they're here and the little lady stays at home and the littler lady sleeps in the hotel room on a special silk pillow that she brings from home to avoid wrinkles, so I have an okay time.

Everything in the casino is of imperial Roman inspiration. The faded burgundy carpets, the chipped gilded roulette tables, the scratched marble, the waitresses' velvety crop tops the color of some conchyllian dyes, tyrian purple curtains covered in dust. It really does look like a palace. A common misconception is that most time in a casino is spent sitting: eating steaks that don't taste good, smoking cigarettes at the twenty-five cent slots trying to make enough money back for at least two rounds of one dollar Black Jack, losing at one dollar Black Jack. But, in point of fact, most time in a casino is spent walking. Walking to see what table looks lucky, what table looks good both in card and clientele, walking off the hundred you just lost at the table you thought looked lucky.

A group of teenage-looking boys with unnaturally defined jaws who have finally

escaped from the lacrosse field are sitting around a ten dollar poker table ordering vodka shots. They are all wearing the same polo shirt, each in a different pastel color. And they each have their collars upturned, and the front most pieces of their platinum hair pointing in the same direction.

At the next table over a girl in a tiara with a banner across her chest that has a pink 21!!! 21!!! 21!!! written across it. Her friends are dressed up, the girls are wearing pink and purple colored wigs cut in Go-Go style bobs and the boys are in Stetson hats and bolo ties. They are all wearing sunglasses. There are a total of ten of them and they each have a camera and they take a picture of everything that they do. The girls are wearing very tight dresses and split their fingers into peace signs when they smile on the laps of the dealer at their table, as though he were a mall Santa. The birthday girl points to her tiara in every photograph that's taken of her. One of her friends is very petite and is in the process of draping a black fabric over her head and over the large format camera she has set up on a tripod in front of her when a security guard who is grossly overweight and could probably only be of security to someone by sitting on perpetrators tells her that there is no professional photography on the casino floor.

Behind a waterfall of translucent blue beads, barely clothed women dance on platforms and the bars are crowded with people who are wearing black and what seem like very uncomfortable shoes. This area is guarded by the blue beads and by a tall and fit man in a black suit standing at the bottom of the stairway underneath a sign that reads Exta-C in shiny neon letters. The guard is bald and the sign makes his head look blue. He asks me if I have a wristband. I don't. When I ask him where I might procure one, he tells me not to bother because I am dressed inappropriately. When I ask him what he means he calls me "bro."

"Ya wearin' Khakis, bro."

I am indeed wearing khakis. They are well made and ironed and pleated nicely, as I specify to my wife to do on laundry day. My loafers are brown and polished nicely and the triangular pattern on my shirt is, I am told, quite of the moment. I want to tell him where to

shove that bead curtain. Most of the screwable ladies lay behind that plastic curtain. Perhaps a group of ripened divorcees, here to celebrate their most recent alimony check. It didn't matter really, my standards for trips such as these are never very high, free and consensual are the only two things remaining on my list and really both of those are potentially negotiable under the right circumstances.

"Sir, you're blocking my line."

"Pardon me?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to step aside from my line."

As though the line belonged to him. The twenty-first birthday party had all lined up behind me, and when I move to the side in my khakis and short-sleeve shirt, they each approach the bouncer, who is dressed in a too-big suit with uncommonly shiny lapels, and takes a photograph with him. The birthday girl is the last of her friends up to the door and asks the bouncer to "carry me like a bride!!!" in her photograph to which the bouncer happily obliges. He holds her—sliding one arm underneath her knees and one beneath her shoulder blades—King Kong to her Ann Darrow—and the hem of her dress begins riding up which she excuses by shouting to all of her friends that she is intoxicated. Soon follow the Aryan Connecticuties, looking for a break from their Stepford women, certain to be waiting for them, in Nantucket or Cape Cod or Providence, to do a variety of activities that require turning poor and unassuming nouns into ghastly verbs: summer, vacation, yacht.

There's a poker table behind me whose buy in is out of my usually acceptable price range, not quite high rollers but high rollers for me. At the table are two men and woman. A set of Asian businessmen are wearing rimless glasses so it looks as though all there is is a metal bar across the bridges of their noses. At the foot of the stools surrounding the poker table, their briefcases are wedged between their feet in some sort of airport safety maneuver. They hum to one another and I'm quite certain that those tonal bastards have an unfair advantage. Beside them is an older woman dressed in the same outfit as the girls in the birthday party but without

a wig. She's older than me but her makeup is making her look more attractive, to her credit. She has thick and uneven inky lines sweeping over her eyelids which extend onto her face and curve up in a feline fashion and very rosy cheeks which sparkle when the light hits her face. It looks like she is wearing Jackie's pageant makeup. Her dress is very lowcut and very tight and it's clear that her breasts are not her own because her nipples are pointing up and out towards her shoulders. I sit down at the stool next to hers.

"Fifteen dollar buy in, sir."

I shell out a twenty and he gives me a set of multicolored chips, which at this point in Jackie's pageant career I know each of the monetary values for, which is why I stop him mid-sentence when he tries to explain them to me.

"The game is Hold'em, Ladies and Gentlemen. Bet on the flop, on the turn or on the river."

When he announces this, the businessmen snap on the sunglass clip-ons to their spectacles. I pull out the cigar that I bought in the gift shop after Jackie fell asleep. It's in a pink cylindrical tin with a picture of the beach and the words ***Atlantic City*** written on it in fancy letters. The waves are bright blue on the tin, with white shiny frosty crests and a bright yellow sanded beach, which I'd have to say is false advertising because everything outside in ***Atlantic City*** is grey. The water is grey and so is the gravelly sand, which is made up primarily of stones, glass and cigarette butts, and the boardwalk is also grey. The clouds are grey as though the beach water evaporated into the clouds in color. The waitress in her velvety crop top with a roll of fat falling over her high-waisted skirt asks us if we'd like any more drinks. I would and I tell her so. The drinks are free here if you're sitting at the tables. They come in tiny plastic water glasses with only one skinny red straw and not two so that you can't drink them as fast unless you gulp them, but they're strong and, well, they're free. The two businessmen point to their empty glasses without looking up and its obvious that they've been here for a while or that their poker strategy is to make me believe that they've been here for a while. The lady orders a

whisky sour and I order an old fashioned to show the Asian duo that I'm not intimidated by their reign over this table.

The cigar is in my mouth and I'm chewing the end of it between my teeth until the fake breasted woman beside me leans over so that I can see her breasts and just how fake they are and lights my cigar with a Zippo lighter which is apparently also from ***Atlantic City.***

"Big cigar," she says to me, her eyes locking with mine.

The businessmen act bothered by the smoke and I'm glad for it. It's five o'clock in the morning and the sun should be rising over the grey ocean any minute now but we can't see it because there are no windows in the casino, and the windows in the lobby are covered by the tyrian purple curtains that block out the light entirely because they don't want you to see the light and know what time it is so that you keep gambling, which I was going to do anyways. The businessmen hum to one another again and it's unbelievably apparent that they're cheating. The game's been going on for some time now, and the pot isn't very big, but it's the climax of the game and time for everyone to make their moves. The businessmen bet, the lady goes all in, which, considering how small her winnings are, isn't as daring a move as her tone and face would suggest. I also go all in, with an okay hand, but I'm a great liar.

"Caw" says one of the businessmen.

"Gentleman calls," says the dealer.

"Damn," says the woman.

"Let's see those cards," says the dealer.

I don't move and eventually the dealer looks at me. The businessmen have a flush and a straight, respectively. The woman has two twos, and I have a jack and a four. I've lost again.

"Sir, your cards?"

I lay them face down on the table and he pulls away my cards to reveal a losing hand. He is short and has slicked back hair and his nametag reads Alan.

"Alan. Alan? Is that your name? I believe its your responsibility to recognize, as a state

officiated dealer, that there two men are cheating."

"Sir, please lower your voice."

"They've been talking to one another!"

"Sir, I'll have to ask you again to please lower your voice and to lower your hand."

"They're counting cards, Alan! They're counting cards."

"Sir, it's poker."

"This coming from a state certified dealer who can't even recognize when people at his own table are cheating."

I was beginning to sweat.

"Sir, unless you lower your voice and lower your arm, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the table."

"Oh! Fear not, Alan. I'm leaving. Send my drinks to the slots."

I get up from the table and head towards the slots where overweight people in T-shirts and white sneakers sit with buckets full of coins. I sit in front of one of the machines that is Elvis-themed and is playing Viva Las Vegas.

The cigar is still hanging out of my mouth and I need a place to ash it. The seats in front of the slots are like the fisherman's chair on a boat, padded, with arm rests. The chair spins and reclines to accommodate the fight with the fish and to help the angler reel her in. I spin around in the chair and the ash knub at the end of my cigar is getting heavy and I really need to find a place to ash it, and when the chair stops spinning and I realize the ash has dropped into my lap, the woman with fake breasts is standing in front of me. She is very tall because she is wearing very high-heeled shoes which make her orangey legs look nicer.

"Rough night?"

"Haven't been winning much."

"Looking to score big?"

I cross free off of my standards list.

"Guess so."

"I know a way to make your night better."

The glowing colors from the slots cast themselves on her peroxide hair and she looks like a technicolor television character. She inhales demurely from her cigarette and then coughs very deeply and hacks something up into a hankerchief that she pulls out from between her breasts.

"How much better and for how much?" I ask her.

We're in the elevator and its walled in mirrors. Even the portion of the elevator with the buttons on it has a mirror behind it so that you see yourself reflected with an abdomen full of buttons. Everything is mirrored but the floor, which would be indecent for ladies in skirts. And the ceiling is a mirror so that you must see yourself riding up, must see yourself in khakis and a Hawaiian shirt riding up to the eleventh floor to screw an old asthmatic hooker.

I walk down the hallway to the room and on the way there I tell the woman who's just informed me that her name is Crystal Chandelier that I've got a thing for bathrooms. I stick the card into the slot and a small circle on the door flashes red. I try it again and it takes a second but another small circle flashes green and make a quiet mechanical noise and then the door opens. I open the bathroom door so that it blocks access to the bedroom where Jackie is asleep in the King sized bed and where her evening wear, casual wear and swimsuit hang from the light fixtures in thin dry cleaning plastic.

Crystal unbuckles my belt and slides my khakis down my legs. The bathroom light is fluorescent and makes my skin look blotchy and red in the mirror and casts dark shadows beneath my eyes. She takes her dress off and is not wearing a bra. Her panties are black and have a slit running down the center. Her breasts are huge and look unattractively hard and stick out very straight, though her right nipple points off a little crookedly and you can see tiny incision lines where her breasts meet the top of her stomach. I screw her and I hope that her clear plastic chunky shoes don't hit the toilet seat and wake Jackie, and when I remember that

Jackie is wearing her lavender-scented headphones that play ambient wave music, I unclench my ass cheeks which I was clenching to try and hold Crystal a little higher off of the ground.

If Lisa knew I were screwing this woman I doubt she'd be too upset. She'd find a way to explain myself to her, in the same way Jackie's shrink explains our daughter to her and in the same way that she explains things to her patients. She's got a gift for rationalization. She attended a lecture last year about male and female energies, and how the union of the two create some sort of deity, some sort of magic, and it's a comfort to know that I'm participating in a religious act. I finish after an acceptable amount of time and Crystal gets off and goes pee. I pull out my wallet and as she's wiping herself, still in her slitted panties which she hasn't taken off, says that the suggested tip is usually twenty bucks. I giver her eighty and she's gone.

I take off the Hawaiian shirt and the Khakis and leave on my white undershirt and boxers. I climb into bed with Jackie and she recognizes me in her sleep and says "Dad" very softly. The whole bed smells of lavender, and she's left an extra silk pillow out for me to sleep on. When she's asleep, she looks a lot like me because you can't see her blue eyes which are strikingly her mother's.

When the alarm goes off at eight, Jackie is already in the shower. The first round begins at eleven and by her standards she's cutting it close. When she's out of the shower and my Bad Company T-shirt that she's had since she was five, and her hair has been towel dried and blow dried, she comes out of the bathroom for me to apply her creams. She puts hemorrhoid cream under her eyes and around her eyelids to target the puffiness, and was permitted to do it herself until last year, when she put too much on her face because she thought it would make her look thinner and she broke out into a horrible rash.

She puts on her first outfit which is green and has sparkly sequins on the top and itchy puffy looking fabric on the bottom. The dress is too small for her. The straps are digging into her shoulders and when she moves around in it, just how small the dress is on her becomes apparent, but I'm sure her mother has okayed it with her shrink as a way to make her feel

younger. She walks around in it for a while and then shuts herself away in the bathroom to style and pin her hair and apply her makeup and after an hour she re-emerges and she looks terrifying. I've put my Hawaiian shirt and khakis back on, and after buckling her shoes on, we walk through the hallway, and into the elevator where I was only a few hours earlier with a different woman in a similar outfit and a similarly painted visage.

In the convention room, beige plastic chairs have been unfolded into rows for the audience. I say goodbye to Jackie who wont let me kiss her cheek because of her makeup. I sit down in the chair among the other parents who are mostly women and mostly overweight with frizzy hair and unmade faces. Their daughters are announced one by one and strut across the stage to variously themed music that corresponds to their outfits. The mothers each stand while their daughters cross the stage, pushing their shoulders back and mouthing the words "posture"

The announcer of the pageant is not southern but calls everyone "y'all." She announces Jackie with the biography her mother wrote out.

"Jacqueline Haring is from New York City. Daughter of Lisa Haring, an analyst and Jack Haring, a high school teacher. Her mother named her Jacqueline after the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. In her spare time, Jacqueline enjoys reading, playing bridge, and yoga."

She walks across the stage in all her sparkly green majesty and looks like the color of money.

The judges award her straight twos across the board. When I meet her backstage a few moments later, she is crying. Black watery streaks are running down her face and smudge on my Hawaiian shirt when she hugs me. She whispers into my ear, but I can hardly hear her over the disco music that is playing as some girl does the hussle across the stage, so I just hold her close to me and feel how heavily she is breathing and how her whole body seems to jump when she hiccups. I release my arms but she hasn't, she's holding onto me. I swing one arm beneath the crease of her knees, and one underneath her back, her small arms are linked tightly around

my neck, and her hiccups start to slow down as another backstage mom shoots me a forced look of understanding and fashions Jackie's pageant bag over my wrist, so that I may, with greater ease, walk out of conference room, past the slots and the poker and the blackjack and the roulette, through the shiny lobby, and through he front door, where outside it's grey but it's bright, and the crashing of the waves is drowning out the horns of the few cars driving through Atlantic City.

Hollywood Forever

The "more" in Petunias 'N' More meant soil. They sold no other flowers, only petunias. Olive Lloyd had been working at the shop for six years, and had managed, over the course of her time there, to resist absorbing any information about flowers. She was old, and on the pudgy side, but had a stately face. And as a result of her age and her masculine features, customers rarely asked her questions. She suspected that they bought petunias from her out of guilt, or pity, or out of fear. Anyhow, it was no matter to her why they bought so many flowers, so long as they were buying them and she could add to the plot fund.

On the third shelf of her bookshelf, next to an unpacked line of Russian dolls, was a jar containing the deposit slips of Olive's plot savings account, which now contained exactly two thousand, nine hundred and fifty-four dollars in it, about half of what was necessary for the Hollywood Forever plot she wanted, which rested about forty-five yards from Jane Mansfield and on the same hill as Cecil B. Demille.

Of all the burial options in Los Angeles, Hollywood Forever was the winner by a long shot. Besides its famous residents, who were numerous and in and of themselves a strong enough draw for Olive— to have the worms that crawled around their caskets crawl around hers—Hollywood Forever had a legion of good qualities. Chief among them was its

architectural excellence: marble statues of cherubs, illegal-Mexican sculpted shrubbery, the Masonic lodge on site complete with life-size figures of Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Sophocles, Sappho, and Cary Grant, the Paramount Pictures water tower which overlooked the central lawn, and two very well-maintained ponds, one containing ducks, and another, in an area of more expensive burial property, containing white geese.

Second only to the architecture were the burial properties themselves. Headstones as tall as refrigerators, some with very convincing looking false-marble columns surrounding the grave, some with long vertical reflection pools in front of them. It was remarkable how far the burial arts had come, one could actually make their final resting place *underneath* the reflection pool, which is what Olive had set her sights on.

This would cost five thousand, four hundred, and thirty-two dollars exactly, which was the discounted price, provided Olive would contribute her own flowers. All of this was explained to her in detail at her Pre-Arrangement meeting. When she had called Hollywood Forever, and a man named Winston answered the phone, she had cleared her throat and lowered her voice an octave and arranged an initial meeting with him in a slight British accent.

Olive arrived at the cemetery late and in her Sunday best and sunglasses, all of which to give the impression that she actually possessed the funds to purchase a Hollywood Forever plot. She was greeted by Winston , who wasted no time in explaining to Olive the things that would be offered to her at Hollywood Forever:

"Prearranging your funeral is a natural progression in life. At some point, all of us will be faced with the loss of a loved one. We want to honor that person in a dignified, caring way. The prearrangement process gives you the opportunity to make decisions in a businesslike, calm atmosphere. You have the time to make choices not dictated by emotion or time limits."

"Yes, well –"

“Prearranging insures you will be remembered as you wish. By completing our Gift of Love booklet, all the necessary information is available. You may indicate emergency contacts, the location of important records and detail your biographical information.”

“I –”

“The Gift of Love booklet is also the place to express your final wishes; your choice of who will conduct your ceremony, music, pallbearers, merchandise and type of burial. Planning relieves your family members of making very personal decisions at the time of need.”

“Alright, but—”

“Please Miss Lloyd, I have allotted three minutes at the end of our meeting for questions. Please hold off on all questions until then.”

Olive was quiet, and thoroughly impressed. Winston so well spoken and so polite and so incredibly thorough!

"Prearranging today protects you and your family from inflation tomorrow. The inflation factor is built into our policies; your at-need expenses will be covered. Your Hollywood Forever Funeral Home prearrangement is 100 percent shielded prior to nursing home exposure. No extensive health questionnaire or physical exam is required. No one will be turned down, and there is no waiting for return documents.”

There was a long silence between Olive Lloyd and Winston of the Hollywood Forever Funeral Home.

“You can speak now, Miss Lloyd.”

“Well this all sounds grand indeed.”

“Will you be paying check or credit?”

“Oh, well, Mr. Parsons,”

“Winston, please.”

“Winston. Let’s not be presumptuous now. My family must be consulted, other options must be considered, surely you understand.”

She had no family, and no other options.

"Yes, of course."

She left the meeting with the brochures, which included a large map of the Hollywood Forever grounds, which Olive had unfolded and hung above her bed.

The shop closed at six o'clock and Olive took the forty two-bus home at 6:04. Her second job began at six-thirty today. Olive lived on a very wide street, packed side-to-side with short stucco apartment complexes, and wire-fenced homes, which housed people primarily in her age group, who lived primarily with cats. Olive saw this as a lucrative opportunity. Dogs were too heavy, and too strong. Cats were just right. She dictated to Felix, the delivery bike boy at Petunias 'N' More, who typed everything that Olive said to him on Marv's computer in the back room.

"BREAKING NEWS!" she had yelled to Felix, "New scientific studies prove that cats live a longer life with exposure to the outdoors and weekly walks."

Customers peeked around the shop as Olive continued her dictation to Felix in the back room.

"Dr. Len Winterson, expert of the feline genus at the University of Washington, says that walking your cat outdoors could significantly extend the life-span of these furry companions."

She conjured a two-page report, and had attached copies of it to business cards she had Felix retrieve from the printer. They read:

OLIVE LLYOD
WILLING AND ABLE
310 210 6745

These packets, she slipped underneath her neighbors' doors, or in the mailboxes in the condo lobbies. After three years, she had procured six customers (she had had seven the year before, but Mrs. Ventura had a coronary and passed in December). On Sundays from six o'clock to seven-thirty, Olive had her exercise, and made eleven dollars per cat— Banana, Bing Crosby,

Merle, Cat, Monroe, and Bob—which amounted to a grand total of sixty-six dollars per week, which she deposited directly into the plot account.

Felix delivered the local orders on his bicycle and was underpaid. When he wasn't biking and delivering he sat by Olive, who sat by the phone and the cash register and the petunias. When the phone didn't ring, and when Olive wasn't eyeing the customers into buying flowers, Felix talked about his bicycle, his clairvoyant grandmother in El Salvador whose name was Chuchi and who he had never met, his father's truck, his brother's truck and the truck that he wanted to buy and why it was the best truck and why all of the things he would then list made it the best truck, and Olive mainly talked about the plot, until the phone rang and she answered it and gave Felix the address and the number of petunias that needed to be delivered to it, which would happen about three times a day, until Felix's uncle and father would pick him up in a pick-up truck that sat three in the front seat and Felix's bicycle on the flatbed on top of the roofing supplies.

Felix had agreed to help her with menial things for measly pay. Besides taking dictation from her, he biked her packages and mail to her home from the post office. They lived in a neighborhood with dirty streets, in the eastern side of town, far away from the Pacific. In fact, the closest body of water to them was the Los Angeles River, which was more of a gutter than a river. It ran through most of east Los Angeles, often empty, except in the rain when it filled one or two inches with murky brown water.

The boxes Felix delivered looked large but were not very heavy because they were mainly full of tissue paper and bubble wrap which Olive would let Felix take home for his younger sister to jump on and pop. Packages came for Olive about once a month. She ordered from catalogues. Most of her spare change went into old copies of *Variety Magazine*, and framed pictures of Alfred Hitchcock, who she was absolutely certain had made eyes at her in 1956 when she worked as a script girl for Columbia Pictures. She had worked there with the intention of marrying a Hollywood man, but all the script girls were prettier than she was and put out, and

by 1963, Olive worked in the mail room before being asked to leave after it was discovered that she had been sending love letters to famous actors. The catalogues sold photographs for cheap, and she saw these purchases as good investments.

On this particular Thursday, Felix delivered a photograph of Hitchcock in profile, with a long cigar in his mouth and a black mean-looking bird perched on top of the cigar, which Olive thought must not have been very sanitary. She had unwrapped it and put the bubble wrap in a bag for Felix and sent him home with five dollars.

On Friday, Olive received a phone call for flowers from Hollywood Forever, and sent Felix with the van to the cemetery.

"Now do you understand?" she had asked him when he had returned after an hour of sitting in traffic on the way back from the cemetery, tipless.

"Not really."

"Did you see the statues?"

"Yup."

"The fountain?"

"Yup."

"The lodge?"

"Doesn't seem worth over 5K."

"Well, it is."

The phone rang. Olive answered.

"Hello? No. Only Petunias. Soil. It's not misleading. No. Only Petunias."

She hung up.

"It's worth it."

"OK, Miss Olive."

She had visited a religious cemetery on the other side of town. Not as abounding with famous people but for two local politicians, the more famous of whom had hung himself off of a

ceiling fan after his involvement in high end Malibu prostitution rink had been exposed. These details had been explained to her as selling points by a bald man named Shmul who covered his friar's ring in a wide yamecha. The plot on the same hill as this rather notorious politician had become available after his two children had opted not to be buried near to him.

"This is prime real estate, Miss Lloyd," Shmul said quietly to her, as though he were letting her in on a secret, "I think you'll be very happy here."

She disagreed.

Olive had one meeting left, three bus rides away, at the top of a valley in the Malibu-canyon side. It wasn't a cemetery. It was listed in the phone book and on the computer where Felix looked it up, as a spreading ground. A tall steel gate stood with an enamel rainbow on the top of the left side and a copper colored pot of gold on the other side. When the gate was closed, the rainbow linked to the gold pot. At the top of the gate hung a large bell with a chain dropping down from within it. It made a sound like a tipping cow when Olive yanked it around, and though he took some time to answer her call, a man arrived to open the gate. He was very tall and very tanned, wearing denim from head to toe, a light denim shirt, with white pearly snaps over the breast pockets and down the center, and dark denim jeans that were torn around his knees and flared around his ankles. His hair was long and white and was arranged messily into two long braided pigtails.

He allowed her through the gates and she greeted him excitedly. The grounds were vast, and from this peak, Olive could see the lush valley below and the Pacific Ocean in the distance.

"Please keep your voice down, sister."

"Pardon me?"

"The dead are napping."

The man had introduced himself as Dale and led Olive from the gate to a short log cabin across a foul smelling field. She was offered a stool to sit on, Dale sat cross-legged on a Navaho blanket on the ground.

"Three of the Laurel Canyon greats have been spread on our grounds, and continue to find musical communion with one another on the other side through their ashes intermingling here."

When he spoke, he pressed his hands together, as though he were praying, and rocked them back and forth, closing his eyes for long periods of time as he invited Olive to breathe with him.

"When the flowers grow, it's as though their spirits are reborn into the earth."

Olive knew full well that no flowers could grow on a field covered in ashes, and left thinking the spreading ground was better suited for those of a younger generation. It was at that precise moment that Olive decided that she would settle for nothing but Hollywood Forever, what with her illustrious neighbors and the summer film festival that happened on the cemetery grounds which only required minimal cleanup of soda cans and cigarette butts.

Petunias N' More stayed opened on weekends, which meant more time for Olive to work. Then, the shop opened two hours later than its weekly opening of eight o'clock. Olive had started to wake at dawn on the weekends and took the bus to ritzier neighborhoods, west, to spread around her business cards. On Saturdays Felix still made bike deliveries for the shop, but on Sundays, he went to Church with his family, who forbade him to work on the Sabbath, or what Felix called el Dia del Señor.

Sundays were quieter without Felix around. He wasn't coming in and out of the shop, retelling abuela Chuchi's visions, bug-eyed about the air he'd just achieved on his bike (he was an excellent cyclist), or asking Olive about the plot, and about how much money she had made, and how much she was making from cat walking, and why she spent her "alive life preparing for her dead life." Without Felix she spent Sundays alone, with the petunias and with the phone,

and sometime, when he wasn't sleeping, with Marv, the owner of the shop, a short man with a shiny head, a wrinkled face, thin legs and a fat belly, who winked at Olive a lot, and called Felix "Bean Dip," and who sat in the back room and drove the van if needed, though he was much older than Olive and could hardly see.

When Olive arrived at the shop at eight o'clock on Monday morning, Marv was asleep in the back room where she had left him the night before with an open bottle of Jamaican rum. In her purse, she had thirty-three dollars that she had collected from cat-walking early that morning, and the change of a broken twenty from that morning's bus fare, which totaled to fifty-one dollars and forty-four cents. The radio said it was going to be "a scorcher," and this seemed accurate to Olive, because by eight-forty, when Felix was dropped off by the pickup truck that this morning sat four in the front of which he was one, it was already eighty-three degrees and Olive was perspiring an unladylike amount and was beginning to feel faint near the wilting petunias. Felix walked past Olive at the register where she was fanning herself:

"Miss Olive."

"Good morning, Felix."

He looked upset.

"Mr. Marv!" he raised his voice, while knocking on the back room door.

"He's asleep," whispered Olive to Felix.

"I gotta get paid, Miss Olive."

"Don't I know it."

"Mr. Marv?" he said quietly as he opened the door to the backroom where Marv was sleeping on his side with his hand trapped in between his legs.

"God dammit, Bean Dip. It's early."

"It's almost nine, Mr. Marv."

"Precisely."

"But the shop opens at eight"

"Quieter, Beanie."

"Sorry to bother you, Mr. Marv, but you have not paid me in five weeks, Mr. Marv, and I don't like to have to ask you, but I need my money Mr. Marv, for school in the fall, Mr. Marv."

"You remember what we talked about, Bean Dip?"

"Yes. But this was some time ago."

It was very hot in Marv's back room.

"The shop's lagging, and we've all gotta be patient."

"You've been paying Miss Olive."

"That's because she sells flowers, and she's got her big plan for Hollywood Forever, and she's an old lady."

"You owe me nine-hundred and twenty dollars for the last two four weeks."

"It can't be that much, I pay you five an hour."

"I can show you my calculations."

"That's alright, Bean, I'll try and believe you."

"By California Law, employees cannot go more than two weeks without being paid."

"Unfortunately for you, Bean Dip, being an illegal bean, you don't enjoy California Law."

Olive was by the register, looking for a fan.

"But I'm going to try and be big about this and pay you for today's work."

"Mr. Marv—"

"You're welcome."

"I need my paycheck for—"

"Don't you have something to deliver?"

"Yes, sir."

Felix turned towards the door.

"They say it's going to be a scorcher, make sure to stay hydrated," Marv laughed to Felix, holding out the nearly-empty bottle of rum.

When Felix came out to the front, Olive was sitting on her stool behind the register, her forehead dotted in sweat, fanning herself with a petunia. The phone was ringing.

"Miss Olive, you gonna get that?

"What did you say?"

"You gonna get that?"

"Get what?"

"The phone, Miss Olive."

"What about it, Felix?"

"It's ringing, Miss Olive."

She looked at the phone. It was indeed ringing.

"Hello? Yes, it is. Only Petunias, sir. Yes. Yes, I am aware. Hello?"

"Any deliveries?

"No. What happened in there?"

"Just need my school money. Shouldn't you fan yourself with something else, Miss Olive?"

"Couldn't find anything else. This thing will be dead soon anyhow. Did he pay you?"

"No."

"It's an oven in here."

Felix was quiet.

"It was even hot this morning when I walked Pussy and Cat in the flats."

"Those are their names?"

"According to Mrs. Rosenberg's maid, they're mates."

"I can't believe that worked."

"Some people like to spend money."

"Everyone likes to spend money, Miss Olive. Only some people have some."

Marv was snoring so loudly from the back room that Olive and Felix could hear him by the register. A smooth-skinned young lady walked into the shop and Felix sat up straighter on the stool next to Olive's. She was pretty and pulled her hair back as she walked around.

"Miss Olive."

Felix nugged her.

"Don't you want to ask her if she needs some help?"

"Do I ever ask customers if they need help, Felix?"

"Let us know if you need anything!" he shouted to the young lady.

She didn't look up.

"It's real hot today, huh?" he said to her.

"Hot as hell. I didn't need no flowers I was jus' comin' in here to see if ya'll guys got air conditionin', but I can see that ya'll are as hot in here as I was outside."

She walked back out, and Felix followed her and offered to buy her a soda. The phone rang and Olive answered it, and took the delivery order, which the woman on the other end of the phone said was UR! GENT!

"Felix!"

He glared at Olive through the unclean shop windows that separated the sidewalk where he knew he was making progress with the young lady, and the shop.

"Delivery, Felix!"

"One minute, Miss Olive!"

He walked back inside.

"No disrespect, Miss Olive, but that's my game you're threatening outside."

"Delivery."

"The way you think about your plot, that's the way I think about girls like that. I help you with the plot."

"You do."

"You gotta help me out with this stuff."

Olive just nodded.

"Two medium bouquets, to 478 Vernon St. Sorry about your games. Oh, and they say it's UR! GENT! so take the van."

When Felix returned, Olive was asleep behind the counter, and covered in sweat, with the now very wilted flower hanging limply her loosely clenched hand. There was a note on the counter beneath a ten-dollar bill that read:

Lady was asleep. Took the flowers. Left the cash.

Felix took the money and brought it to Marv's office in the back.

"Mr. Marv?"

He was awake now, and laying out a few dirty green bills on the table in front of him.

"Always got something to say, Bean Dip."

" I wanted to give you this money. Someone left it on the counter with a note in front because Miss Olive fell asleep."

"She still sleeping, huh?"

"Looks like it."

"Close the door, kid, it's your payday."

Felix closed the door loudly, which woke Olive up. On the counter in front of her was a note. She looked around for the cash, but saw no bills. It was ten 'til four and she didn't know how long she had been asleep. Her right hand smelled like that stuff that Marv sprayed on the petunias to make their petals look shinier. Olive hated to be this hot, but preferred being hot over being cold—if she had to chose weather to burn or freeze to death she always picked burn, and she tried to remember that on hot days like these. There were no customers around, and she didn't anticipate hot days made anyone want to buy petunias, so Olive left her post at the register, and walked around the back of the shop where the hose that Marv filed the flower

buckets with was linked to a faucet. She poured from the hose right into her mouth, which she probably wouldn't have done on a cooler day.

Felix was back by the time she had returned to her desk.

"You just get in?"

"Got back a while ago. You were sleeping."

Olive was curious.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah I threw out that petunia in your hand."

He had been at the counter. It was starting to become clear to Olive what had happened.

"Is that so?"

He had seen the money and, angry about this morning's fit with Marv, taken the money for himself. How could she be certain, though? She would test him.

"You forgot the note, Felix."

"What?"

"When you took the money you forgot the note."

"I don't think Mr. Marv needs that."

"Is that so?" she said very slowly.

He didn't inquire at all as to what note she was referring to. He had seen the note and he had seen the money and he had taken it.

On the bus ride home, Olive went over the day in her head. It all added up. Felix needed the money, Marv didn't give him the money, he saw it on the counter and he took it for himself. Marv hadn't been very nice to him, paying him less because he could, because he was paying him under the table, and calling him that terrible name. But it didn't justify stealing. Besides, that money would have gone in the cash register, which meant that Olive would have made commission off of it, and stealing from Marv was wrong but stealing from Olive was unacceptable.

It was cooler inside Olive's small house. She had drawn the blinds in the morning before she left, at the suggestion of the weather man on the radio who had talked about the heat so emphatically that he sounded like Sylvester the Cat sweating and spitting all over his microphone as the weather report came through the airwaves into a small brown box by her bedside. Her bedroom was zebra printed now, striped—with lines of light and lines of shade. There was more light than shade, but in Olive's bedroom, the heat had all but seeped away. Five shelves sandwiched one on top of the next and a poorly-enforced door stood as the first and second barrier between her bedroom and the steaming pavement outside. The shelves housed items of descending importance, her plot jar on the top, the *Variety*s on the shelf below it, underneath the binder of newspaper clippings and playbills, a miniature Walk of Fame star that was bent at its edges and read OLIV LOYD, followed below by the shelf seating a small vase of petunias which Marv sent her home with every three days, and finally a shelf with one red high heel on it which she had taken as a memento from the costume department at Columbia.

She sat on the corner of her bed, beside her purse, and removed her shoes, which smelled terrible and stuck a little bit to her moist stockings. Next she unpacked her purse—the hairbrush went to her nightstand, the small bottle of lotion there too, the money in her wallet to the envelopes in her desk drawer. There were five singles inside the wallet. She dug around the purse, frantic, her state of mind like the day's weather, but the money was gone. He had taken it all. He had taken the money from the counter and the money from her bag, forty seven dollars from her bag, Felix, she couldn't believe it, but he had done it, this unthinkable malfeasance, he had needed to get paid and Marv wouldn't give it to him and he had taken it from her. The room felt hot again, and she poured herself a tall glass of water and drank it and refilled the glass and fell asleep before finishing the second helping.

In the morning, she spoke to Marv.

"I think you are correct in your accusation, Lloyd. I bet it was the Bean Dip."

"His name is Felix."

"He's a beanie little thief is what he is," Marv had said to her the next morning.

They watched together from the register as Felix dismounted the front seat of the pick-up truck, which stood very high off the ground. He wheeled his bike off the flatbed and onto the cement and then into the slots of a bike rack outside of the shop to which he locked it with very thick fetters.

"Sit down, frijole."

"Mr. Marv?"

"On the stool."

He sat down.

"Stealing is wrong, wouldn't you say, Bean-Bandit?"

"Yes."

Marv had the hiccups.

"You ac hup knowledge that hup stealing is hup wrong?"

Olive stood with her hands on her thighs behind Marv.

"Yes."

"Olive here knows that you took money from her wallet yesterday."

"Miss Olive?"

"I need that money, Felix."

"I know that, Miss Olive."

"That's for my plot."

"I know, Miss Olive, but I didn't take nothing from you."

"Open your wallet."

Inside of Felix's wallet was a wrinkled white envelope with forty- seven dollars inside of it.

"Voilá!"

"Miss Olive, Mr. Marv gave me that yesterday."

"Hey now, Bean Dip, Ca ya tey, as they say in Mexican."

"Marv?"

"You think *I* took it, Olive? Do I look hup like I'd need to steal from an old lady? I am the owner of a lucrative business. Let's be realistic now."

"You told me business was lagging."

"Easy, Bean. You can try and wriggle your way out of this all you like, you know you're out of here."

"Miss Olive."

"Don't look at her. Out. Hola."

Felix looked at Olive for what seemed to her like a very long time, as though he were walking in reverse, a rosy cheeked specter exiting the flower shop.

By Friday, Marv had hired someone new. He was younger than Felix, not quite fifteen, and not as elegant of a cyclist, which, besides his one eyebrow, was the first thing that Olive had noticed about Artur. Olive had tried to talk to him, about the plot at Hollywood Forever and just what it would mean to be buried in the same hill as Cecil B. Demille. Artur didn't know who that was, and called Olive things under his breath in Spanish that she couldn't understand.

The heat wave that had hit the city those weeks ago had only just started to recede. Olive walked the cats again, having abandoned them for those hot weeks. Marv put away the fist-sized fan that he had placed at the register at Olive's insistence. Marv was getting along with the new kid—he paid the boy in bottles of liquor that Artur's childish features made it impossible to for him to buy, and Artur didn't speak much. Marv called him Hombre.

Only fifteen hundred dollars stood between Olive and her plot. Felix's absence was unmissable to her now. She was good at alone, she had to be, but in her loneliness, all she thought about was whether he would attend her funeral, and if, while there, he would ever concede the esteem of Hollywood Forever, and if he would know that she was being buried that day at all. These were the things running through her mind when she dismounted the forty

two-bus at eight o'clock. Her bus stop and Petunias N' More were separated by a very busy intersection, on which cars drove fast, stop lights were only a suggestion and a Mosaical staff was a necessary tool for illegal crossing. At the other end of the crosswalk, a box flashed an orange neon hand and a timer that, at the moment she reached the white lines that ran across the wide street, showed ten seconds on the clock. Ten seconds was enough time for an able-bodied body to cross this street, and though Olive hadn't met that description for some time, since her return to cat walking and the end of the miserable heat wave, her joints had been feeling particularly well-oiled and this morning Olive was emboldened.

Alarmed by a loudening buzzing, a few steps into the crosswalk, Olive halted. She turned, and put one hand on her hip, taking slow steps forward, looking toward the snow capped San Gabriels and the Chino Hills to the east. The cars behind the red lights gave off an eagerness like horses at a start line or hot bulls, spurred and mounted and trapped behind the gate. Olive was wearing red and was in the middle of a good laugh to herself, thinking of what Marv's face would look like when she gave him a piece of her mind in a few minutes, when she put a face to that awful buzzing.

Artur was on that tiny bike of his, the one he had rudely explained to Olive was meant for tricks. He was biking towards the intersection at an incredible speed, standing up on the pedals, his tongue hanging out of his open mouth. Olive had made it to the farther side of the crosswalk, across the double yellow lines that split the intersection in half, where no cars had arrived at the light.

"Out of the way, Olive. Move!" Artur yelled at her.

She jumped to the side, as the cars sped towards the green light, and felt a big-boned, air-knocking shove on her side, the hot metal of the car warming her love handle and the pavement heating her back, as her neck was moistened by a thick liquid. Things were loud and then quiet, the former multiplying into the latter, the horns of the cars together in unison, so

sonorous that their frequencies seemed to match one another and overwhelm Olive's red ear before loudening so that the frequencies canceled each other and there was nothing but silence.