

Honey Love

We are in the computer lab. I've grouped students in triads.

I've shifted two students to different groups because they wouldn't stop talking. I've threatened detention to others for being on NAWS, non-applicable websites; i.e., they were drooling over shoes. Shoe porn a fellow teacher calls it. I've collected three cell phones in the first half hour. In other words, I'm engaged in the usual low-intensity battles between students and teacher.

I'm sitting back in my chair equipped with castors. Hands behind head. Loving being a teacher. Loving being the man. I stumbled the last couple of years, but I'm back on my game.

The counselor comes to the computer lab door, lightly knocks on the doorframe and says, "Mr. Zaner, you've got a new student."

Female. Slender. Medium height. Mixed race. She's dressed well. Looks like she's already CEO of some dynamic new start up that sells trend information to fashion designers.

I take the slip from the counselor and give her a frown which I hope signals, *You're killing me. Can't you bring these students to me at the beginning of class?* The counselor backs

out of the room and I say hello to Teresa Napoli.

Most students pay homage by casting eyes down and following orders. They might bust out in a week or two and become defiant pirates, but the initial moment of face-to-face usually belongs to the teacher.

The rare creature in the animal kingdom is someone like Teresa Napoli. She's self-possessed. She says hello to me and reaches out her hand to shake. We're equals. A couple of professionals taking care of our own turf.

Later, I look through her folder in the counselor's office. She'd turned 18, which means she got planted in school late or she failed a grade. Or she went dark for a year, which often happens. The straight ahead march through school from 1st through 12th experiencing what was once considered your usual traumas belongs to the Paleozoic era. Today's students: homelessness, parents in jail, drugs, pregnancy before 16, single parent households, tattoos, parole officers...it's a long list.

I give her a project sheet which explains the assignment and provides possible websites. She goes to a computer and starts reading. I take out my flash drive and type her name in my shareware electronic gradebook, and what do you know, Teresa Napoli turns out to be number 17 here in my fifth period social studies class.

I'm in my 17th year. It's my magic number.

During teacher week at the end of August before the current school year, I find myself stinking up the lounge with my bad attitude. The hardcore negatives love it. I'm feeding their Mojo. Right after I slather it on one afternoon, piss on administration, the new students, the class

sizes, the union, the lousy lunch they bought for us, I stand to leave and lock eyes with a new teacher who'd stopped at the periphery of our circle like a greenhorn cowboy sidling up to a campfire to listen to the stories. A shock wave echoes through me.

In the exposing light of his innocent eyes, I take charge of myself: *Stop being such an asshole.*

I put out my hand. I say, "Let's go and look at your opening day lesson plan."

After an hour together, he asks me to be his mentor. I say of course.

I need to reorient, I decide right then and there. I need to re-invent. I've been in a long slump of negativity.

I speak at education workshops in Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland about at-risk students, what school means to them, how to get them to be successful, how school systems, with their emphasis on high stakes testing, work to their detriment.

I met a guy who publishes an online magazine, Education Now. He invited me to write a yearlong series of articles on what it means to teach at-risk students. He told me that if I use one syllable of education-jargon he would burn my house down. I decide to do case studies.

To get a random sample, I choose the 17th kid in each of my five classes. I will find out about them. I will work with them. I will do everything in my briefcase to get those students to the land of high achievement. I will get back to my roots when I used to stay at school till 7:00 p.m.

Yes, I'd slipped the past couple of years. Three? Four? I'd become a lounge clown:

Administration this, students that, when I was first teaching...

The school year begins. I have been assigned three 10th grade Humanities and two Social

Studies classes. The student population fluctuates more than usual during the first month.

Students come in, transfer, leave. Class sizes bulge, shrink back to normal. I pick my 17s, two of them depart. I wait till October when school settles. Finally, they're fixed.

I stay late to prepare myself as if every day I were teaching for the last time. Two other new teachers join the first year teacher I mentor for discussions. I feel myself lifting into a more complex, fulfilling, challenging teacher realm. I am an Indian guide and a warrior scholar.

I can't keep Teresa Napoli out of my mind. She seeks me out throughout the day to show me good grades on assignments from other classes. She wonders if she should quit her job and try for another one at a better restaurant. She compliments me on my shirts. She tells me I'm the best teacher she has ever had. She unexpectedly hugs me after class one day. With tears in eyes she says that she has never experienced such intellectual challenge as happens in my class.

The year marches into November. Teresa Napoli helps organize a Thanksgiving food drive for the needy. She directs a student production of an original play. She joins the chorus.

She comes to me for life coach-type consultation. She wants to know which colleges she should apply to.

I call up an old friend, a fellow teacher, who first encouraged me to get my teaching certificate. He moved to Texas six years ago. He's on a downward path. Drugs. Alcohol. Cigarettes. I tell him I have it bad for a student.

"No," I say. "It's bad."

"I'm a fuckup," he says. "But even me, I don't do that. Hands off. Don't go there."

"She would be discreet," I say.

"A high school girl who's getting banged by a teacher would keep her mouth closed."

Make sense to you?"

It's 3:30. Classrooms are empty. Everyone has gone home except those in clubs or on athletic fields or courts. I'm in my room grading papers. I've had a rough day. The weather has begun to change. It's cold outside. My room is poorly heated. My lessons didn't lift off. A student insulted me. "You suck, Mr. Zaner." Funny, they always use the Mr. even when they're being pricks.

I should have taken a sick day. I feel hollowed out because three days ago I had one of two annual observations and the principal gave me "Satisfactory with reservation." I don't need to redo the lesson, but I'm 17 years into the teaching profession. She knows my ex-wife. She punishes me. Last year they needed two social studies teachers to go a prestigious conference in Memphis, and she chose one up-and-comer and another who is a lazy good-for-nothing. I asked her about it. She looked over the rims of her glasses and said, "Mr. Zaner, do you really think you're at the top of my list?"

I begin to think that maybe it's time I transfer to another school.

Last night, I couldn't sleep. I thought about the divorce. Maybe my wife and I could have worked it out. She moved to Kansas City, her childhood home, with our twin daughters. Both of my daughters attend an arts and design school in the city. The cost is exorbitant. I work during the summer to keep up.

I cannot help it. I think about Teresa Napoli. She has been visiting my room on her way between classes to wave hello and ask how my day has been going. She wrote me a note in a scented envelope thanking me for all of my good advice and encouraging words.

Teresa walks in and sits down across student desks I have put together on which I spread out piles of papers for each class. My computer is to my left. I grade the papers then electronically enter the grades into my gradebook.

“Do you have a minute?” she says.

“Yes, Teresa.” I slip into teacher mode. A guy you can count on.

She tells me that she needs a letter of recommendation for a college application and for a job she’s applying for.

“I mean it’s only for a hostess job, but it’s at an upscale restaurant.”

“It helps them separate the wheat from the chaff.”

She stands up and walks to the front of the room, to my right. She picks up a piece of chalk, puts it down, dusts off her hands.

“What’s it like being a teacher? Knowing you’re the center of everyone’s attention.”

“I don’t really think of it like that. You get interested in ways to help young people learn.”

She sits on a nearby desk. “Girls think about teachers, you know.”

“Well,” I say.

My heart is pounding.

I stand up, walk around my island of four desks, and sit atop my teacher desk located near the door.

“Don’t be standoffish,” she says.

“Not standoffish,” I say. “Just like to make sure I give students their personal space.” I’m

shaking.

“I don’t need so much,” she says.

My breath is faint. I wonder if I’m about to seizure.

“Okay,” I say.

She walks toward me.

“Like this,” she says.

She grabs my hands and pulls me gently off the desk. We’re close. She puts her hands to my face, lowers me, and we kiss. She turns around and presses her rump into me and I groan.

“Feel these,” she says. She puts my hands beneath her shirt up to her breasts. I haven’t felt young breasts in years. She unhooks her bra and my hands are on her flesh. I’m moaning into her neck. I slobber on her. She rubs her rump into me. It’s been so long.

She turns around and we hold each other. Tears flood my eyes. After a while, she pulls back.

“Mr. Z.,” she says.

“Teresa, my God.”

There are a few more minutes of that. Soon enough, she leaves. I walk with rubbery legs back to my seat and look about me at all of the papers I should grade. I wonder if anyone might have drifted by and peeked in. The custodial staff arrives at 3:30, but they hang out together in their lounge before launching into their duties.

On the drive home, I sniff the air, wait for paranoia to stop my heart. It doesn’t happen. I feel like celebrating. I order Chinese food. I sleep like a lumberjack.

Next morning, she knocks on the door of the teachers' lounge before school starts, the time when many of us gather to exchange gossip and fill last cups of coffee. I see her at the doorway. My heart freezes. I wonder if the principal is behind her. This is my last day of teaching. I will wander through downtown Baltimore the male version of a bag lady. I won't ever work again. Kids will laugh at me, try to steal my possessions, maybe set me on fire.

She informs us that we look old and out of shape. She tells us about the six principles of Pilates: Centering, Concentration, Control, Precision, Breath, and Flow.

“And all of you need to join me tomorrow at 3:00 p.m. in the audition room. I am giving a free introductory lesson. You won't be disappointed.” She hands out a flyer. “You will pass the word around about what a wonderful instructor I am. I will begin making my fortune after opening up health centers. You can say you knew me when. You will glow with health. I will even hire some of you if you dedicate yourselves.”

We laugh. She leaves.

Several of us agree that, yes, we'll give it a try. I step into the small teachers' restroom. I rinse my face and look at myself in the mirror. I can feel that my t-shirt is drenched with sweat. I am incapable of explaining to myself why I allowed that to happen yesterday.

I say to my image in the mirror, “Just act normal. Keep it normal.”

I step back into the teachers' lounge. Pipenshaw, the ever alert gym teacher who has been in the profession for 35 years, plays the staff fool. Cracks jokes at staff development meetings, puts on a Santa suit at Christmas, stuffs our mailboxes with fake notices about extending the school year. I steer clear of him. His practical jokes are aggressive.

He spots me coming out of the restroom.

“Look at Zaner’s shirt, ladies. Chick magnet! He’s on the hunt!”

He’s got a preternatural sense for another’s distress. He steps to me and slaps my back too hard. “Love you good looking smart guys,” he says. “Hey, loosen up. You’re tense.”

I’ve always thought that my life would be easier if Pipenshaw didn’t exist. He one time said to me, “I don’t know what it is. I hate English majors, but history majors even more. You’d think it would be the other way around.”

Seven of us show up at the Pilates session. We’ve all changed into running shoes, sweat pants, and t-shirts. Pipenshaw stops by to laugh at us then bolts for home.

We’re the forty-something crowd. She takes us through a gentle warm up.

A skinny 9th grade boy sits near the curtains off to the side. Five minutes after we start she signals him. He scrunches his nose and aims a Flip Cam at us, holding it about a foot away from his face.

I glance over to him and zero in on the bland looking piece of technology, with its soft-edged, plastic case, an innocuous, hand-sized, digital video camera. Often I can’t tell what young people are referencing when they pull out their electronic gear. The varieties elude my post 40 year old context. Is it a phone? An iPod? An MP3 player? The Flip Cam, which I had never heard of, scans us and records our no doubt comic efforts at exerting bodies that have sat on chairs too many hours for too many days.

“I hope all of you don’t mind if I take some footage. I’m packaging a presentation video. I want fitness centers to see me in action.”

She takes us through a 30 minute workout. At one point the maestro with the Flip Cam steps closer and zooms in on our faces. We pump arms, crunch our cores, lie on our backs and

perform a frog swim. Roll on our tummies, stretch, push arms forward.

“That’s enough,” she says. She asks us if we would sign up for once a week.

A few of us promise.

Two days later, she’s in my room a half hour after school dismissal. I have regained my composure. I will never, ever, ever again touch a student “in a way that could be construed as inappropriate,” as defined in our Teachers’ Manual.

Last week, I volunteered to coach the badminton team. It doesn’t have the same cache as Mixed Martial Arts, but they needed somebody, and I fill the breach. No practice on Thursdays, so I plan on catching up with papers to grade. One of my favorite times as a teacher is being in my classroom after the Huns leave the building when I have moments alone to look over their work, reflect on what went on that day or week, and tidy up the classroom space, my own dojo.

In she walks. My first thought is, let’s get out of here and into a public space. But I remain. I have again squared up four student desks to make a table. Papers sit in neat piles. My laptop is open in front of me. I am entering grades. The door classroom door is to my left.

She pulls up a chair and sits across from me at a safe distance.

“Mr. Zaner, you are the one person in my life I can trust. And I need your advice.”

“Anything I can do to help.”

It’s as if nothing has “happened” between us. I am greatly relieved. I am free.

She tells me she has been given the opportunity to take classes at a nearby community college. She doesn’t know what to do. If she decides accept offer, she’ll split her time finishing two high school credits here in the mornings, then shift there three afternoons a week, which

means she can't participate in clubs she likes and will have to give up working on the prom committee.

"I don't know what to do."

I prompt her with questions. I turn over an assignment sheet and draw a T-chart: pro and cons. We talk. She cries. She leaves for the restroom. She comes back restored.

She decides to take the classes, which start next semester. She thinks she can still help out with the prom committee. The music teacher, Ms. Tribolet, likes her.

"That's what I'll do," she said. "I won't try to be the head of the whole committee. I'll take one part of it and make it mine. Maybe find the right band or something."

Great idea, I congratulate.

She reaches back to bunch her raven black hair. She possess an open-faced frankness, unafraid to look into my eyes.

"So tell me about yourself," she says. "I notice you don't have on a wedding ring. How old are you?"

"I'm a forty-three year old father of two girls. Both are in college. They live in Kansas City with their mother. I was an inattentive father."

"Inattentive father?"

"It happens. I enjoyed teaching too much. Well, I found out that I didn't much enjoy my wife and stayed away as much as I could. Terrible feeling, really, not wanting to go home. It's why I like my bachelor life so much now." Emphasizing bachelor. A troubled past life. A minefield she wouldn't want to enter.

I say too much. I feel my canoe turn on the river and slide toward the now not so distant

waterfall. I want to spend my weekends with her in a little cabin in the mountains where we're both warmed by a wood fire in a stone fireplace.

"Okay," she says. "I should be off."

Thank the gods. But after I hear her footsteps disappear down the hallway, and listen for the soft thud of the closing stairway door, I look around me as if examining the interior of a spacecraft in which I have been stored after abduction. The environment registers as strange and otherworldly, absent of emotional tethers.

I attempt to record grades of papers I've already corrected. I give up. I paperclip class papers together, put them in a manila folder, grab my school bag, and turn out the lights.

Driving home, I admit to myself that, because of Teresa, I'm in a rearranged electromagnetic field. My inner compass no longer points toward true north.

On Saturday, I join a gym. I talk to a fitness coach who takes me through a warm up. We agree on a plan for me to get toned. I am there for a single reason. I aspire to make myself so tired as to not have energy for anything other than my renewed interest in teaching, working on my manuscript of best practices, and reading books on psychology.

But I need something else. I sign up for an online dating service. I want someone with whom I can share my electromagnetic field other than a student by the name of Teresa Napoli. I get some hits. Teachers, I quickly find out, draw interest from women. One writes: I want a sensitive listener, someone who likes long walks. Another says: I'm a bad girl. I need you to give me detention.

On Monday, my electromagnetic field causes trouble. I forget where I put assignment sheets. My lesson is flat. I'm one step behind the moment. My case study students in the first two

periods are absent.

A girl says to me, “You’re out of it today, Mr. Zaner. Did you get enough sleep last night?”

Teresa Napoli stops by my room between third and fourth periods even though I have her fifth. She has made a special effort.

“Mind if I drop by after school again today?”

“Of course not. Come any time.”

“Where do you get your shirts? They’re awesome.” She leaves.

My heart sings.

Post school day. Thirty minutes go by. Sixty minutes. My electromagnetic field hums with inner vibrations. What are my intentions with Teresa? To seduce. We shall seduce. We will keep it our secret. I will hold my breath through the remainder of the school year. I like my job. I love my job. I will allow myself to trust her with our illicit truth.

I have been renewed. I am a renewed man.

Seventy-five minutes go by. My womb-like electromagnetic field is malfunctioning. Anger and isolation begin to register.

Then she arrives and instant electromagnetic field repair happens. She smiles and says knock-knock at my doorway, but she shifts her eyes. Warning. Something is off.

Then nothing is off. She walks to the same seat she occupied last week. I have a similar stack of papers. My laptop is to my left. My shareware gradebook is on the screen.

“Mr. Zaner,” she begins.

I see movement at the doorway. A young man with a kerchief headband who looks like

Jimi Hendrix, the same ‘fro and slender build, the same lanky bellbottoms, enters. Comes behind him a square shouldered brute with a neck tattoo, wearing a jean jacket, and sporting a mohawk mullet. He walks cupping both hands at his crotch, sort of rolling his body. He tries to radiate menace, but he’s cartoonishly exaggerated.

“So this where the nigger do his business,” says the white boy.

“Winston,” says Teresa glancing to the side, “if I hear you say ‘nigger’ one more time, I’m going to slap the shit out of you.”

He sniffs.

I’ve never heard her speak like that.

She turns to smile at me. Winston stays near the doorway. He’s the lookout.

Jimi Hendrix pulls a chair up next to mine. He says, “Yeah, it’s you all right.” He punches apps on an iPad. He gets to a file folder. He finds a file.

He opens it to video footage. There’s a momentary pause waiting for internal digital connections to grab and capture.

“Teresa, what’s going on?” I ask.

“By the way, my name is Maurice,” says Jimi Hendrix. “Most of the world fell in love with Steve Jobs. Me, I fell in love with the other Steve. Steve Wozniak. He’s the brains.”

“It’s complicated, Mr. Zaner.”

For the first time, I noticed her upturned nose. She smiles at me again. I stare at her. She seems actressy.

“There it is,” says Maurice.

Video technology. Is there any such thing as grainy, black and white footage anymore?

The camera bobbed, was held unsteadily. Then settled. Technological wizardry. For ninety seconds I watch myself atop Teresa Napoli in a cheesy soft porn home movie with jazz music accompaniment. At one point, I turn, so my face is clearly visible. I'm mimicking the muscle motion of a white dolphin trying to get upstream. Through the music I hear female groans that suggest pleasure, but no ascendance toward climax. I hear her saying, "That's it, baby. That's it." Abruptly the video ends.

I sit back, trying for cool. "It's faked," I say.

"It looks real, though, doesn't it?" says Maurice. "It's some good work. Not everybody can do that."

"Teresa, you got all of us down there for that Pilates workout just so you could do something like this?"

"No. Not exactly. Not specifically."

"Teresa, you a lie," says Winston at the doorway.

She exhales and says to Maurice. "Your buddy is going to get his everloving ass kicked if..."

Maurice juts his chin at Winston, then makes a slash mark with hand at throat. Winston raises his palms in surrender and corkscrews his body to look down the hallway.

"Let's just say I began talking to her about opportunities a while back." He touches my shirt sleeve. "Nice shirt," he says. He shoots me a grin. I notice that half of his left ear, north to south, has been sliced off. He's thin, feminine looking, feline in the way he crosses right leg over left knee.

Until Maurice touches my shirt, I have been telling myself that I only need to push back

and they would go away. But Maurice, up close, registers as dimensionally different. His eyes are mean. He's got a jailhouse tattoo on his left wrist. Making his play like this, coming inside a school where he doesn't command the variables, tells me he would hurt someone who stood in his way. He's jumpy, but he's no wannabe like Winston at the doorway.

I wait.

He powers off the iPad and slips it into his backpack. "I just wanted to show you what I got," he says. "I'll be in touch. This is going to be interesting. I got needs. You got needs. The world never quits like that."

"There are cameras up and down this hall. All three of you are caught on tape."

"He told us to duck our heads, yo," says Winston from his post. "Ain't nobody got shit on us, yo."

"Actually, they upgraded last year. Higher pixel density," I say. "What they told us. We had some problems with outsiders."

"Yo," says Winston. "Naw, it ain't going to be about that." He's addressing Maurice.

Teresa's eyes flatten. She's irritated.

"All of this could go away," I say. "But you blackmail me, we move onto another level. I call the police. They look at the tapes. The first one they come after is your pet monkey over there."

"The fuck," says Winston. He takes two steps into the room.

"The weak link," I say.

Maurice points him back. Winston leans against the doorway and crosses his arms. His eyes smoke with anger.

“Sometimes you go hi-tech,” says Maurice. “Sometimes you go no-tech. Right now, teacher man, I got a whispering campaign just started. You and Teresa here are unusually close. I mean,” he leans to the side as if sharing a secret, “*I wonder if those two get busy*. It’s launched from about six nodal points, Mr. Zaner. They’re zombies, don’t even know who they’re working for. They don’t even know they’re working. Let administration get a whiff of that. I could snuff it out or I could feed it. Depends.”

“You got time for all this?” I say. “It’s low rent. How much do you think you’ll get out of me. I’m a teacher.”

He leans back in the student chair. “You don’t get greedy. See, this one here, our meeting, it’s like one of many hot dog stands around New York City. You got one, you don’t make any money. You got five or ten, now that’s an income stream.”

I feel my knees shake. He could inflict some damage. A teacher’s reputation is fragile. People think teachers are saints, card carrying union do-littles, or sexual predators. There’s little gray area we occupy. I need to finish out my thirty. Thirteen more years.

Teresa and I had talked about my divorce.

“We got the professional avenue and the personal avenue. One time we photocopied...how many was it, Winston?”

“A thousand,” he says.

“We photocopied one thousand fliers with black and white photos of a guy who got cute with us. Put his picture on the front with Accusations of Sex Crimes in bold. Listed notices of Predatory Behavior. Made up quotes from authorities. Not a syllable of it was true. We put them in mailboxes in one mile square area. You ever notice how gullible people are?” he says. “People

love to find somebody to blame. We wrote letters to neighborhood committees. A black operation. The guy is still climbing out of the hole.”

I wonder about myself. How much of that would I be able to absorb? How much before I would cave?

I feel sick to my stomach. I want them to drive me to the nearest ATM machine, show them how much I have in my savings account, and pay them off. I never want to see them again. I want to give Teresa an advanced “A” then have her disappear into a community college. I want to devote myself to my teaching. I want to change my behavior toward everything. I want to pay attention, to listen, to think.

“What are you guys after?”

“Resource allocation,” Maurice says.

“How much is it worth to you?” I say. “How much are you wanting from me?”

“Now that’s a hard figure to come up with off the top of my head.”

“It’s time for you to leave. Figure it out and get back to me,” I say.

Maurice laughs in my face. “You’re the man.”

Winston picks up a student chair and hurls it into the middle of the room where it crashes on a desk and bounces to the floor.

Maurice doesn’t like out of control moments. I can’t figure out why they’re babysitting the imbecile. Maurice rubs his nose with his knuckle then stands. “You’ll be hearing from me,” he says.

Teresa avoids my eyes. The gang of micro-terrorists leaves.

Last year, a fellow social studies teacher in another school had a picture of a 19th century

painting of a nude woman on his hard drive. He intended to have students compare it to something by Picasso or Modigliani (I forget which), all in the name of how artists are influenced by the times within which they live. He wanted a daring lesson, something to wake up his students, who, being teenagers and thus hormonally deranged, would find pay dirt pondering a painting of a nude woman. Before showing it, he would get permission from his department chair who would insist he send a note home, all of which he intended to do.

Somebody somewhere along the string of peeping eyes in the IT department of the school system located it. There was no stopping the accusations once they started. They amplified into a Category 5 hurricane. Past behavior became suspicious. Future behavior a concern. He got bounced out of the classroom and put in The Warehouse off of Route 4 in the west part of the district while the wheels of an investigation slowly turned.

The mind police couldn't prove anything. But they transferred him from the high school where he'd been teaching for years and planted him in a middle school hell where student-teacher ratio is about thirty-five to one. I haven't seen him at any of the social studies workshops. I've heard he's considering his options.

I try to figure the variables on leaving the state. I could work as a janitor or a taxi cab driver. I could use funds that I've saved up and go to a technical school in Oregon and pursue a childhood dream of becoming a bicycle mechanic.

I want to reach out to loved ones. My sister, who lives in South Carolina with her rich husband, and I haven't gotten along as well as we used to. She testified against me in front of the divorce judge.

I could call my ex-wife, but there are conditions. She told me to think of her ability to

listen to me as a gallon jug. Once that gallon gets filled, there's no more room, and I should wait a week or two to call back while it empties. She'll remind me at various points in our telephone conversations, *two quarts left, one quart, now a pint*. When it's full she'll hang up, even in mid-sentence. I need to fly there to see my daughters. Last time I talked to them I forgot they were twins.

“What do you mean, my older sister?” said Karen. “We're twins, remember?”

I gather my teacher bag and light jacket and leave my room. I wonder which group of colleagues I could call on who would come to my aid. I tend to stay to myself. I don't know if I have a group of colleagues I could call on.

I walk down the stairs past the front office. Everyone has gone home. The administrative assistant's thin pink sweater hangs on the back of her chair. She is everyone's mother. I need to lie my head on her breast and have her rub my head and tell me I will be okay.

I go out to my car, the last one in the lot.

I bet it was Winston who punctured the sidewalls of my two rear tires. I've let my membership in AAA lapse. I call a tow truck. He charges me \$145.00 to tow my car to nearest Pep Boys where I am sold four tires for \$600.00. I get home at 9:30 p.m.

I shower then eat a can of tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich. I am utterly terrified. I want to appease them. I now understand Neville Chamberlain.

My phone rings. I don't recognize the number.

“Hi, Zaner,” says the voice.

“This is?” I still try to play it cool. I know who it is.

“It's Maurice. Listen, sorry about the tires. Winston was having a bad hair day. He

usually behaves.”

“You people are looking at serious jail time for extortion.”

“Think about that video of you and Teresa.”

I realize that Teresa hasn't told him about our session together the week before when I touched her breasts and lived through a six or seven minute epoch of ecstasy. I still want to run away with Teresa to our weekend cabin. The Teresa I knew before today.

“I go to the police with your threat,” I say. “They'll laugh. It's an amateur job.”

“I spread that video around, we'll see who's laughing.”

“You don't know what you want. What do you want? What will it take for you and that bozo sidekick of yours to disappear?”

“Ten thousand dollars ought to do it.”

“First of all, that's a ridiculous figure, a ridiculous amount of money. You're talking to a teacher. Second, how do I know that you won't come back to the well. You could keep a copy of your faked tape and whenever you knuckleheads want another flat screen TV, you just give me a ring. None of this is going to work. You three stepped in it.”

I hung up. My brave talk was a front. I am a hider. I bury my head, let people make decisions, then come up for air. My wife hated me for it. *You know what you are*, she said to me, *you're weak*.

I check the phone call log and write down the number.

I can't sleep. I hear the ticking of the analog clock on my bed stand. I am the character in *The Tell-tale Heart*.

The only resource I can call on is my teaching. It's the middle of the night, but I get up

from bed and go to my office room. I search YouTube videos for good teaching practices. I write in my journal, the place I “compost.” From there I draw ideas and inspiration for my teacher book which I hope to publish. I manage hours of work. At 4:00 a.m., I stop, exhausted and exhilarated.

I nap for an hour and a half on the couch before I shower, dress, and head to work.

In my teacher mailbox is an envelope. Inside is a 3x5 notecard with an address on it. I fold it and tuck it into my wallet.

I am on high alert, though foggy headed and stuck in the middle distance from a lack of sleep. I find it difficult to toggle back and forth from individual students to the whole class. I stay in an unspecified neutral zone.

Students arrive, I teach, they leave. My case study children have begun to notice my subtle, consistent interest in them, and they seek that extra teaspoon of attention, which I don't grant today. I can see them staring out of their lairs with scrunched faces and wounded feelings.

I stand at my door between classes. I see Teresa who walks past me as if I were just another wooden Indian teacher she keeps at the periphery of her attention.

In class, she is a soldier. She does all of her work. She raises her hand and asks for additional assignments as others lag behind. She plays student. I play teacher. Surface normal. I walk up and down aisles. I stop near her desk. I pull out the 3x5 card. She glances at it then looks up at me.

Her impenetrable dark eyes rest in meditative stillness. She told me that her black American grandfather impregnated her grandmother in Viet Nam during the war, which shamed the family. Her mother married a white man, who left, just as the grandfather had. She and her

mother hopped cities. They ended up in Toronto while the mother worked in an abusive uncle's restaurant.

Now she and mother live in Baltimore. Teresa is a survivor, a warrior.

“What am I supposed to make of this?” I ask her at her desk.

One or two heads turn our way. I think Maurice's no-tech viral campaign is working: *I wonder if those two get busy?*

She says to me in a casual way so that the eavesdroppers can hear, “Thanks for your advice about my college applications. And your letter of recommendation.”

Then she attends to her work.

About 7:00 p.m., it clicks. I pick up the card off the kitchen table. It is a thank you gift. I make myself coffee. I Google the address. I drive to a corner house in a Northeast Baltimore City neighborhood. In the driveway leading to an garage beneath the house sits a late model, silver Camero. The neighborhood has gone to seed. On the corner of the main road as I entered the neighborhood, a bunch of kids hang out and zap me with warlord stares. I note boarded up houses, unmowed lawns, broken fences, and a few respectable, well-kept places with barred windows. Doubtless, an area of liberal handgun ownership.

In the backyard of the house I'm watching, I see turned over lawn chairs, a car engine bulging the fence, discarded children's scooters and toys, and various miscellaneous crap piled in the shadows.

Three boys ride by on bicycles. They peer into the car at the middle aged white man. The circle behind me, ride by again. The one with a squashed looking head and rubbery grin gives me the finger. Another pounds on the trunk lid. I start the car and drive away. Ten minutes later I

return. I have a limited time here. No doubt word has spread that a foreign element has entered the local biosphere. Aggressive rejection methods will quickly assemble.

While scanning the area, I almost miss Maurice walk down the metal stairs, open the dilapidated gate, and point the key alarm at the silver Camero. He slips into the car holding onto the roof like a race car driver and starts it up, keeping one foot on the pavement. I see the headlights go on then the brake lights brighten. He closes the door. He's hidden from view behind dark tinted windows in deep recline as if in a fighter jet.

He backs up then drives and I follow him at about a one block distance.

I manage to stay with him. He goes south on Harford Road. He turns right on Cold Spring, drives for six blocks, turns right into a neighborhood. He stops at two story apartment complex, maybe eight units from what I can tell, takes his time leaving the car, then walks up to ring the bell.

I drive past and wait around the corner. I don't want him and whoever lives in that low-rent apartment to spot me. I sense that if identification happens the whole extortion event becomes personal because now I know where Maurice lives. If I know where Maurice lives, he maybe starts feeling crowded.

I drive past the boxy apartment building and wonder if that's where the knucklehead Winston holes up. I want to wait around for Maurice to leave, but he also might be landing with his girlfriend for the evening. I write down the address.

I drive home hoping that understanding and insight will visit me. They don't. I am left to ponder variables I can't decipher.

I am whipped tired. I didn't sleep much last night. My watch tells me it's 9:45. I shower,

climb into bed, I'm out within sixty seconds.

Next day Teresa again passes me in the hallway as if we'd never been introduced. Shamefully, I lust after her. I want to say to her, *Maybe we can comfort each other in our, well, my time of need.* I know it is a bad move, but I don't discount it. I shelve it, maybe pull it off later, see how it fits. I want to tell her about my imagined cabin and the stone hearth. Our getaway house where we can leave the stresses of the world behind and just be us.

I don't know, in the midst of the storm, I get focused. I'm *on it* in class. I push the kids to wonder about what it would be like to be on the losing side in the Civil War. How would you pay your bills? What would happen to all of those ex-slaves? How would you feel about them? They try for easy answers: *I'd just go about my business. They don't mean nothing to me.* I don't let them get away with it. I question, question, question.

In humanities, they begin a creative writing project. We come up with topics together, choose a short story to read from a list I offer them.

I'm cored out by the end of the day. I leave it on the field. I feel great.

I go home. I take a cab to a local car rental place and rent a car, hoping for anonymity. I wait till dark then drive to Maurice's neighborhood. I feel the neighborhood's eyes on me. I notice that people begin walking their dogs past where I park. Does the dark blue Chevrolet sedan I rented look like a cop car to them? Another roving band of kids on bicycles appears. I stare back at them when they try to eye-jab me. I'm feeling a power boost. I don't know who I am. I wait for I don't know what.

I see Maurice again. He slips into his car in the same manner he did last night, hand to roof, one leg outside. He starts the engine, listens to its oxygen rich combustion. He reverses,

eases out of the driveway. I start my car. I step on the gas. I slam into the rear of his Camero. It turns like an hour hand on an analog clock from 12:00 to 9:00.

He jumps out, bug-eyed, and begins flailing wiry thin arms.

“Maurice, my gosh, it’s you,” I say. I have never done anything that approximates what I just did. I’d bought the full insurance package on the rental. Maybe in the deep layers of consciousness I knew I would need it. The damage won’t cost me a thing.

“The fuck,” he says.

“How’s your insurance?” I ask. I reach out my hand to shake.

“You did not just do this,” he says.

I’m out of my depth. I put my hand to my side.

I see an older woman’s head appear in the window above the garage of what I imagine is the kitchen.

“I guess I scratched your car,” I say. I can’t help it. I’m possessed. Fixing the body of his car will cost hundreds of dollars. Thousands. I see the back left wheel is bent inward at a crazy angle. “Is that this year’s model?” I ask.

People gather on the sidewalk staring and talking. Squads of bicyclers have appeared. More adults congregate with dogs. I hear a police siren.

If Maurice entertained thoughts of shooting or stabbing or beating, they have dissipated beneath the gaze of multiple witnesses.

He glides into a calm zone, I’ll give him that.

“Zaner, you have no idea, bro, what you just started.”

I don’t. He’s correct. But I feel vast liberation. It’s as if I left the life I once knew when I

crazy-brained stepped on the gas and aimed at his car.

A big guy, *big*, wearing a Baltimore Ravens jersey, comes down the metal steps from the kitchen door. He wide-walks over to us. He could fill in as an offensive tackle.

“The fuck is this?” he says to Maurice. He’s got a thick beard, dark skin, dreds hanging like loose vines over his shoulders and back.

“Piece of shit right here ran into me.”

He doesn’t identify me to the big man. He’s hiding something. I’m picking up information. I’m now *street*. I’ve entered the criminal world.

Like Maurice, he doesn’t want unasked for attention. I notice his ankle monitor.

A squad car arrives. I take charge of the situation. The big man with the Ravens jersey retreats. I speculate that engagement with the police on any level does not interest him.

I’m full of arm gestures, descriptions of exactly what happened, how it happened, when it happened. I watch Maurice watching me. I listen as the police ask him questions. He answers in monosyllables. Maurice sees I’m vacuuming up information. We exchange insurance numbers.

A tow truck arrives for the car rental. Maurice leans against the rear quarter panel of his Camaro. Ready to go, I climb aboard the truck, open the window, bang on the door and say to Maurice, “See you soon.” Most of the crowd has dispersed. I see Maurice begin to argue with a guy who complains that Maurice’s car is blocking the road.

I give the tow truck guy ten bucks to drive by my house and drop me off.

I can’t sleep. I go for a walk. I return and make myself a sandwich. I pick up a book. Put it down. I feel out of body. Maybe I have identity jumped. Maybe I’m someone else and someone else is me. Maybe I’ve begun a manic cycle in a heretofore undiagnosed bipolar

disorder.

I go to bed and manage to fall asleep about 2:00. I'm jolted awake by what I think is someone trying to get into the front door. I'm frozen with fear. I creep out of bed and barefoot it to the banister and look down the stairway, but it's nothing. I try to conjure up my triumphal moment last night when I torpedoed into Maurice's car. I'm wrapped in mental darkness. I don't know why I would have done something like that. I have brought chaos into my life where none existed pre-Teresa, pre-wanting to change my orientation to teaching. Mentally, I try to recapture what it was I wanted with the case studies of students.

That moment in time is gone. I go back to bed, sleep fitfully, awaken. I eat my oatmeal while watching ESPN.

I don't know what is going to happen to me. I feel in physical jeopardy. I leave for work. I circle the school in my car before I creep into the parking lot. I check my mirror. I scan the perimeter. I snake through a choke point where student parking stops and a service drive begins which leads to staff-only parking. I feel like I could be ambushed. In the early darkness of morning, car lights brighten my rearview mirror. I consider jetting through the staff lot for the exit that feeds into local cross street where I could turn and get onto a main road and dodge anyone trying to tail me.

The car comes close to my bumper. Its lights flick off, on, off, on. The driver turns into an empty spot. He electrically rolls down his window.

"Zaner," he shouts. I stop. It's the assistant principal.

I park my car two spots down from his.

He's always early. He likes people to know what time he comes in. I figure he wants to

make some small talk so that I'll take news of his earliness into the teachers' lounge.

He's a mountain climber and a distance runner. He reminds me of a hawk or some bird of predation that lives high on hills and watches for darting animal movements on the valley floor.

"Hey, John," I say. My voice sounds thin, mousey. I wonder if his predatory instincts are aroused.

I carry a shoulder bag holding a computer and my lunch. He strides up behind me and claps me on my back up near my neck. I sense it's a testing gesture meant to provide him with instantaneous information about my emotional and physical fight-flight tendencies.

"How's it going, big guy?" he says to me.

He has never called me big guy, and I begin collapsing inside. He hasn't taken his hand off my upper back area and I know he senses hiding behavior.

He says, "Little bird told me you're the man, these days." I look at him. He grips my neck hard. "Loosen up. Life is treating you right."

He snaps off a quick wink. *I'm an Alpha*, he's told me more than once. *I need it bad. You have no idea*. He considers me, well, someone who has no idea.

"John," I say. "I'm a poor shlub getting along, that's all." My mouth has turned to cotton. "Don't know what you're talking about, John." I've said his name twice, once more than necessary. I'm going to get fired.

We enter the building. He looks at his watch. We turn the corner to walk down the hall toward the sign in sheet in the office. He has forgotten about me.

It's the first time in my life when I embrace my sexual prowess being laughed at, usually a sore spot with me. I'm the guy who was chosen last or second to last on any pickup game I've

ever been part of. But I am completely, utterly freaked out. What has he heard? What could he possibly mean?

The admin assistant with the pink sweater hasn't arrived yet, nor has the principal, nor has either of the two other assistant principals, nor has much of the staff.

He charges toward his back office.

I say to him, "Have a day," trying to be a funny guy.

He looks back, "Leave some of the ladies for me."

His smile is all surface and teeth. He keeps himself in impossibly good shape. His ever present magma of anger is bubbling to the surface this morning. He's one of these people who claims he never gets angry. I've heard him say that. *I don't get angry*. I wonder if he managed his gym time this morning. Or maybe his 5:17 arrival is not early enough for him. Maybe those seventeen minutes means he's slipping.

I go to my classroom. I don't know why I've come early.

I look around the room. I have spent many years of my life reporting for duty right here. The school years begin and end, the summers begin and end, then it starts over. Reporting for duty has become my link to the world.

My cell phone rings. I don't recognize the number. My palms sweat. I fumble with the phone.

"Hi, Mr. Zaner," Teresa says. "I hear you and Maurice got into an accident last night."

"You heard that, did you?"

I sit down at a student desk. I look at my teacher bag which I placed in my chair. It seems to belong to someone else.

“I would avoid accidents with Maurice if I were you,” she says. “Don’t make this complicated.”

I press the End Call button.

I have been a man afraid my entire adult life. I lean back in the chair. I sit holding knee in hands. I start back-mapping. I write in my journal.

Soon, teachers start passing by my door on their way to their classrooms. A few call out a “hello.” Pipenshaw walks by. He’s far from the gym. He likes to stroll around the school and irritate people. He sticks his head in.

He says with an unusual amount of sincerity: “What are your students going to learn today?”

I look up. “Well, the humanities classes are...”

He nods his head and starts with an exaggerated snore then laughs.

“I’m sorry, you were saying.”

He taps on the door jamb. I hear his University of Maryland class ring clack metal to metal. Twice in the past four years he’s been put on probation for getting into skirmishes with staff and administration. He derives inordinate pleasure from the spectrum of needling to humiliation. We had an assistant principal a few years ago who was hyper-touchy about her Jewishness. Shark-like, Pipenshaw swam toward her distress. On Halloween he dressed up as Hitler. She was outraged. She cried. She called the union. She whipped the principal into taking action. Pipenshaw tried to laugh it off. At one point in his crab scramble backwards, he announced to us in the teachers’ lounge that he’d dressed as Mo from the Three Stooges not the Fuehrer himself. I couldn’t help myself, to my endless grief.

I said, "You're a stooge all right."

He turned those fish gray eyes on me and since then he runs the shiv into me whenever he can.

"You're one of the brains of this outfit, right?" he says.

"What do you want, Pipes?" I say. He likes to be called Pipes.

"I want to know where you get your shirts." He laughs with a wheezy exhale. I would say his teeth are more green than yellow, as some claim.

I give him the finger. He frowns. He's forever startled that people don't enjoy his aggressive joking as much as he does.

My cell phone rings again. He watches. I turn my back to him. I hear him huff away.

I don't have time for this. School is about to start. I need to put my game face on.

"Hello, Maurice," I say.

"I know where you live," he says.

"I know where you live, too," I say.

"You done fucked up last night."

"You didn't leave me a choice."

"Twenty thousand dollars," he says. "Ten for all the trouble you cost me with my car. Ten to convince me to hold back the video and not post it on YouTube."

"You don't mind hurting Teresa, do you?" I see a few students in the hallway. Sometimes teachers hold coach classes before regular school.

"You have a lot to lose, brother," he says to me. "I post it Monday at 12:00 noon if I don't get my money." He hangs up.

John Lowder, the assistant principal I met in the parking lot earlier this morning, calls me over the intercom. He says, "Pick up your phone."

"Yes," I say into the white receiver of my intra-school desk phone.

I got an anonymous email this morning about ten minutes ago. You need to get down here."

"I've got a home room."

"I'll send somebody up to cover it."

Five minutes later, I walk into his office. On the wall is an overlarge photograph of him rappelling up the face of a cliff somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. Other photos show him riding a bike, swimming, running, and pointing a handgun at an outdoor gun range.

He swivels his computer screen so I can see. An email message says, "Zaner is fucking one of your students."

"What's this about?" he asks.

"I have no idea," I say.

He looks at my biceps and abdomen indexing me as a possible opponent.

"Nothing? Why do I get this message?"

"Somebody's fishing. Trying to make teachers look bad."

"Nothing whatsoever to this, then? Because what I'm supposed to do is take it to Bellingham. Then what's supposed to happen is there's an investigation. Between us boys, I don't like her. She doesn't like men in general, and I picked up she doesn't like you in particular. I know she thinks I'm a neanderthal. I don't like women who can't admit they need a protein injection once in a while, if you get my drift."

“Got it. Why’d you call me a ladies’ man when we were coming in this morning?”

“Nothing, really. I noticed you’re displaying lately. I think it’s the shirts. I heard a female student in the hall compliment you, that’s all. Should I be worried?”

“What’s to worry about?” I ask.

“Didn’t think so. This goes away, it goes away. I see something else like this I got to take it serious.”

I turn left once in the hallway and go to the counselor’s office. I knock on her door. I ask to see Teresa’s folder again. The counselor gives me a suspicious look. But Bellingham has given strict orders to let teachers see students’ comps if they need to.

I look at Teresa’s home address. It’s the same as the eight unit apartment complex.

I close the folder. “How’s she doing anyway?” the counselor asks.

“A real star,” I say. “I see she doesn’t have an SAT score.” I’m making it up as I go along. We’re allowed access to the folders, but the counselors are a gossipy group. “I was checking up on that to make sure. Don’t want her to miss out on college for a semester because of not taking the SAT.”

“She told me she got sick on the day of the test last year. She took it a couple of months ago. We’re waiting for the scores to come back,” says the counselor.

“Good,” I say. “I’ve been encouraging her to go to a four year university. I want to help her get her ducks in a row.”

“Mr. Zaner, you’ve done an awful lot for her. She talks about you all the time.”

“Glad to help.”

“I shouldn’t tell you this, but I overheard some of the teachers saying how you’re in line

for the teacher of the year award in May. Personally, I think it's long overdue. You do a lot for this school."

"You're kidding," I say.

"No, I'm not."

I know it's ridiculous, but I almost begin to cry. I don't feel I have control over events that are happening to me.

I have been watching Teresa walk by in the hallway since her visit with Maurice and the knucklehead Winston. I've been avoiding her. I need to stop that. I need to approach. I need to talk.

"Thank you for saying that to me," I say. "I'm floored."

"Have a blessed day, Mr. Zaner," she says.

I leave her office and nearly click my heels in a moment of joyous celebration. Halfway to my room, though, I mentally scan the counselor's face that lingers in my mind space. I recreate and closely examine signals she might have sent me. I begin to wonder if she's part of a web of conspiracy trying to soften me up for the mortal blow of losing my job and ejecting me into the world as a bag lady, male version. A gloom settles on me.

I'm about ready to enter my room to take charge of my duties as homeroom teacher, but I slip past then take a walkabout through the building. I need to do something. I'm not thinking straight. I felt up a female student right in my room. I slobbered on her. Then I deliberately crashed into the car of a punk who is trying to blackmail me.

No doubt Maurice is the one who sent the anonymous email saying I was fucking a female student. I have to get to Teresa and talk to her. I am convinced that somehow she's caught

up in Maurice's schemes. Why didn't I see that earlier? I granted them the status of micro-terrorists, where really, Maurice is the mullah who's grabbed hold of Teresa and the idiot Winston and directed them down wrong paths.

She tried to save me. Yes, she did. She, after all, put me onto Maurice's scent by slipping his address into my teacher mailbox.

My best teacher instincts are aroused. I've got some saving to do. I hustle down to 301, Teresa's homeroom. The bell signaling first period sounds as I'm walking. Students fill the hallway. I try to walk around them. I'm blocked by bodies. I bump into two or three students.

One of them turns and says, "Watch it."

Another says, "That must be some stupid fucking substitute."

I can't remember what her first period class is on A days. I return to my room. Some students are lingering outside the door. Others are inside milling about. One is sitting in my chair at my teacher desk.

The principal walks by. She's big on visiting classrooms. She stands at the doorway. She has arms folded and lips pursed. I wonder how much effort it is for her to maintain hair off of which you could ricochet a .22 caliber bullet.

I get the class in order. I launch my lesson. She leaves after a while, but not before sending silent, disapproving vibrations through the room, which I receive like a shrill dog whistle.

While moving students through the lesson, I feel a separate rotor working inside my head that runs alongside my teacher rotor: Teresa and I will get together and plan a counter strategy against Maurice. He's dangerous. He could get me fired. He could get her to commit a crime, a

felony.

I want to introduce her to my idea of how we need to rent a cabin together. I wonder what my daughters will think of her when I get them to spend their spring break with us.

I search the hallway for Teresa between classes. No sign. I scout for her during my planning period from 10:00 to 11:15. Nothing. I avoid going to the office to ask for her. The pink sweater wearing admin assistant might turn from mother to warrior crone if she sixth-sensed my internal dialogue.

During my lunch period, I find Teresa in the library sitting in front of a computer screen. A student mans the check out desk. He's playing a video game on his cell phone beneath sight lines. He glances up at me. I don't know him so I don't matter.

The school librarian must be in a back office somewhere. Rumor has it he takes naps. Books have gone missing. A computer was stolen. They'll probably throw him overboard at the end of the year. The inefficiencies pile up.

I sit next to the raven haired Teresa. She looks at me, and I should have detected and properly interpreted her momentary, startled reaction.”

“Mr. Zaner,” she says. “I didn't expect to see you.”

Open next to the keyboard is a spiral bound notebook with a filled page of her neat handwriting.

“You're in trouble,” I say. Declare.

“I'm not sure what you're talking about.”

“Maurice. Winston. What do they have on you?”

“That's hard for me to really get into,” she says. She's alert now. She directs her black

eyes on me. I feel my insides being lighted up, a flashlight against the walls of a cave.

“You’re observant,” she says.

“How can I help?”

“Leave Maurice alone. You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Okay,” I say. “But Maurice needs to be stopped.”

“Leave Maurice to me.”

“I don’t want you to get in over your head.”

A student sits down at a computer to my left. I’m in a student zone. Teachers have computers in their lounge and at their desks. We don’t need to be in here during our lunch hours. I feel eyes on me.

I want to cup her face in my hands. I feel that I’m having a spacious moment with her. I am on the cusp of telling her about the cabin.

Her cell phone begins playing a song muffled in her purse. It is against the rules for students to use personal cell phones or other electronic equipment while in school. She answers the phone. I don’t say anything. My authority resource has been temporarily displaced.

Maurice?

“I see,” she says to whoever it is. “Yes.” She smiles. “Yes, yes.” She has disregarded my presence.

Finally, I say, “Teresa, no phone conversations in school.”

She turns to me. “I’ve got to go,” she says to the person at the other end of the line.

“How can I help you?” I say.

“Give Maurice what he wants and make him go away.”

“What has he done to you?” I say. “Has he hurt you?”

She touches me on my forearm. “Mr. Zaner,” she says. “I’m okay. I’m going to make it.”

I know she is sincere. How could she not be? I know sincerity when I see it. She is in trouble and she needs someone to help. I know that there is no one in her life who can come to her aid, her rescue, in the way that I can.

I glance to the front desk to make sure an adult isn’t scanning the room and seeing us. The student continues to focus on his cell phone at lap level. The librarian must still be napping.

I want to go to my knees and kiss her hand, then wrist, then arm, then...

She takes her hand from my forearm and attends to the website.

“Mr. Zaner, I need to finish up.”

Again, I feel that the perfect moment for urging us to depart for the cabin, which I have to locate and work out rental details for a long weekend, is upon me, but I hold back because one of her friends appears, eyeballs me, then starts talking to her at her other shoulder.

I am affronted but realize it’s time to retreat. I can hear the echoes: Those two *definitely* get busy.

I stand, glance at my watch, which I hope signals that appointments await, that I must be off.

I’m working on two levels: a) Teresa and I should be walking together to my car to begin the journey to a northern locale of lake and cabin. I’m thinking New York State, Adirondack Mountains. Crisp air. Poor cellular connectivity; b) I need to contemplate the muffled fire bell deep inside my internal warning system signaling that something is off. Some power configuration of Teresa and Maurice so apparent to me a while ago has twisted into

indecipherability.

Teresa didn't precisely act...what's the word I need?...she didn't seem scared when Maurice called while I was sitting there. And that was Maurice because though she attempted to shield the optical glass on her cell phone, I saw the name Maurice N-something before she put phone to her ear.

I return to my classroom for my next class. I am operating one-half second behind the flow of events, like an out of synch voice on a television announcer.

I now realize that I have been attempting siege warfare against Maurice and Teresa, which ancient Chinese warfare texts advise against. I take heed.

Teresa had said to me calmly, "You should not have done that to Maurice."

I finish my teaching day. After my dismissal duty in front of the school--I am responsible for keeping an eye on the last four buses in the yellow bus convoy--I walk back to my room.

I think about Winston. Could he be a student at this school? Weirdly, I'd not thought about that possibility, given that I could bump into him by chance. I assumed that Maurice would not have allowed that uncontrollable variant.

My classroom is on the fourth floor in a wing that has an alter universe, M.C. Esher feel to it. From my room, one walks down the hallway to a stairwell that leads down flights to another hallway that leads to a foyer area in front of the gym, from which you can walk out the side door or take yet another hallway to another stairway which puts you at the front office of the school. Behind the school are five portables. I've never seen Winston on the premises. Maybe he's a portable kid.

Through my room window, I can see a stretch of walkway that leads from Portable 5 to

the back parking lot where I met up with John Lowder, the assistant principal, this morning.

I feel the need to walk the perimeter and do a reconnaissance of the area. I start at the front of the school, turn right, then walk alongside the school building which feels abandoned and non-school-like, as if I am circumnavigating a storage facility near an airport.

I get to the portables and realize it's been two or three years since I've been back here. They're set up like an igloo village with doors between each and a single hallway that runs their entire length. Technically, they're part of the school proper and any teacher can freely go in them. In reality, they're like a neighborhood that doesn't look kindly on outsiders.

I see Mrs. Kilkuddy sitting in an old roller chair with cracked upholstery inside the office as one steps into the first portable. She looks at me with merry Irish eyes. A colleague told me that she is as sweet as an 18th century Caribbean pirate as he slices your throat and tosses you overboard to the sharks. She used to work inside the regular school building, and I never once heard her raise her voice, though she maneuvered to get underperforming teachers fired and drove noncompliant students to night programs or the system's alternative school.

“Hello, Mr. Zaner. What brings you to our lone outpost?”

She smiles and hunches her shoulders. Meantime, I know she's sizing me up, perhaps wondering if I'm an emissary from John Lowder. If so, I'm a mortal enemy. She tagged John as a retrograde and a dimwit after he clumsily tried to defend Pipenshaw during the Hitler incident. She and Ms. Bellingham, the principal, have formed a cabal in which their inner huntress is venerated.

“Hi there, Ms. Kilkuddy, I'm out stretching my legs. I've got some work to do, and I thought I better get to it before going home, but I was feeling some cabin fever up there...”

“Ah, Mr. Zaner,” she says, “you’re starting to slather on the bullshit.” She gives me a wink. “What are you up to, laddie?”

“Ms. Kilkuddy, you wouldn’t understand if I chopped it up bite sized and tossed it in some potato soup.”

“Well, there you go with your sarcasm. Angry, are we? I’ll make a kindly suggestion. Turn yourself about-face and march out of here and don’t ever come back with your smirks and shifty eyes looking about for whichever girl, or more likely a boy, you might have taken a shine to.”

“Stuff it up your nose, Ms. Kilkuddy then reach down there in your bottom desk drawer for your flask and calm your nerves.”

I turned and walked into the portables wondering if she would try to spin a knife into my back. She’ll hunker down with Ms. Bellingham and ambush me later, but I push that to the bottom of my list of worries.

Classrooms are port and starboard. I had no reason to be in there except that I wanted to search the little planet of my school for Winston. I was hoping to ask a teacher or two about him. Ms. Kilkuddy stayed in her office rather than chase after me. Not long ago, she tumbled down some stairs and permanently injured her foot. I imagined buzzards eyeballing each other near her supine body deciding if she were worth the stomach upset.

The prefab, high-grade plastic portables made it seem as if I were in some sort of craft. A ready made, sealed-up, lift off energy emanates from them. A few teachers remain, grading papers or teaching students who’d stayed for coach class.

I’d forgotten that Jim Moynihan works back here. The portables represent purgatory, an

unstated sense of punishment and exile accompany those whose names appear on the portable room schedules at the beginning of the year. I don't know why Bellingham cast him into darkness.

I go into his classroom and as usual with English teachers he had a stack of papers he was grading. I can tell he didn't want to talk with anyone, but we are friendly.

"Jim," I say, "how's it going out here?" I sit at a student desk.

He looks at me, at the stack of papers, at me again. He doesn't put down his marking pen.

"Not bad. Listen," he says, "I've got a mountain of work."

"Right. You know a kid named Winston? White kid. Neck tattoo."

"Yeah, he's one of our scholars. The tattoo is bullshit. Really, I've got to get at it here."

"He stay around after school ever? Sports? Clubs? Drug dealing near the fence?"

"He might be over with McDunn."

"Where would that be?"

"Go outside the portables then into the back door of the gym. The wrestling practice room is right there. Now get out of here. I need to finish these fucking papers. Let me tell you, if I never see another student composition the rest of my fucking life, I'll be happy."

"How many more years you got?"

"Twenty."

I wonder about the suicide rate among English teachers.

"Goodbye," he says.

I leave the portables into rainy weather. I take the few steps to the gym door which is propped open with a kayak oar. I step inside and see McDunn on the mat demonstrating a

wrestling move with a skinhead student. Seven or eight wrestlers in gym shorts and t-shirts kneel in a semi-circle watching. A kid with a mohawk mullet stands and bolts across the mat to the partition door on the opposite side of the room. I chase.

We sprint through the basketball gym where dancing gymnastics is being practiced. Two dozen girls with flowing silk trailers of fabric on thin sticks write air designs in elaborate calligraphy while Asian-esque music fills the gym space. Winston cuts a diagonal path through them to a set of double doors. I go around the dancers and follow him out.

He sprints, but he suffers two afflictions of early 21st century youth: too much caloric intake and too much time in repose playing video games.

And he hadn't worked on his critical thinking skills. He lacks a coherent escape strategy. He arrows straight toward the football practice field, empty except for a neighborhood man at the far end holding an umbrella and throwing a Frisbee which doggy chases, catches, and returns to master.

Winston runs with a chunky boy's waddle and I catch up with him. I grab his shoulder and he shrugs me off. He says, "Get the fuck off me, yo." I slow, get him thinking he's free ranging, then I charge and tackle him, something I haven't done in decades. It is one of the most satisfying feats of athleticism I've ever performed.

"Get off me, yo," sounding feeble. "You're hurting me."

He's face down. I sit on him like he's a surf board. I'm breathing hard.

"You and I," I say, living a movie moment, "need to have a discussion."

"I'm going to sue."

"I'm going to call the cops." I take out my cell phone. Little mister foul mouth cannot

want the police in his life.

I feel him stop fighting me.

“Naw, man,” he says. “Fuck that.”

I sense he needs a cookie. I stand.

He sits up. “I didn’t have nothing to do with that.”

Something is off.

“Where’s your tattoo?”

“I just put that on, you know, whenever.” He looks up at me. “I don’t want no trouble.”

“Neither do I.” I realize that although it’s after school, someone could be watching us from one of the classrooms. I’m starting to get wet. I wipe my face with my hand.

“Let’s go,” I say. “You run, I call the cops. Instantly. I didn’t figure Maurice would be simple enough to get someone from the school where I work to be his wing man.”

“His what?”

“Jesus.”

We walk back to the portables. We get to a place beneath an overhang at the corner, shielded from the rain and probing eyes. “I need this blackmail crap to go away. I will come down on you like an Old Testament plague if this doesn’t stop.”

“Yo, you say stuff that I don’t even know what you’re talking about. What’s an Old Testament?”

“Winston, how do I get to Maurice?”

“You got to talk to Teresa. Them two is married.”

“Maurice and Teresa are married.”

“Been married.”

“How long.”

“Been married a minute, yo.” He sniffs. Glances to the gym doors. “I need to get my shit then dip.”

“What do you get out of this?”

“Hundred dollars.”

“Who cooked this thing up?”

“I didn’t eat nobody’s cooking,” he says. “Listen, yo, I need to dip.”

“Who thought up the idea of blackmailing me?”

“Teresa.”

“How’d you first hear about it. I mean, how’d it first begin.”

“Maurice and me was at the old lady’s house getting high and she comes in the door.”

“Is that the apartment over on Glendale?”

“You been there?”

“No, I’ve heard about it,” I say. “So she walks in and what happens?”

“Says she got a fish. Maurice and her look for people they can score off. Been doing it. She’s smart.” He shakes his head. “She reads books. Three, four hundred pages.” He looks right into my eyes. “Really,” he says, “I’m not shitting you.”

He scratches his mohawked scalp.

“How do I get that video?”

“Dropbox.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s this website thing where you just put all your pictures and whatnot on there.”

“And a thousand other places.”

“Naw,” he says. “Maurice, he’s paranoid. He don’t want nobody getting hold of what’s his. Dropbox is his safe deposit. That’s it.” He made horizontal karate chop motions, no doubt picked up from his favorite rapper. “I’m telling you.”

“It’s got a password, right? How do I get it?”

“I know it.”

“Why would Maurice give you the password to his account?”

He sniffs. “I watched him type it in then I tried it then I memorized it. I figured you know,” more gestures with the horizontal karate chopping hand, “I had to have something right here in my back pocket. Like them kung fu masters who like don’t teach their students everything just in case them students wanted to come back and like take over by kicking their ass.”

Who says TV doesn’t expand horizons, I think.

“Maurice thinks I’m stupid.” He grins. He winks at me. “Sure enough.”

“I need it.”

“How much is it worth to you?”

“That hundred dollars that Maurice promised you. And I won’t mention your name when I call the cops on Maurice and Teresa. Won’t get the administration involved here. Won’t tell your mother.”

“You would do that, wouldn’t you. Snitch.”

“Yes, I would.”

“That’s cruddy, yo.”

I wait outside the locker room for him to get out of his gym togs and put on his street clothes.

McDunn and I get along. He’s a big beefy Irish guy who used to wrestle at one of the power schools in Iowa. He competed at a national level and has turned our high school into a state contender every year, but he turned forty and now looks like he competes at pie eating contests. I’m sure he tips the scales at 270.

He sees me sitting on the edge of the bleachers outside the locker room door.

“What’s up?” he says. “That little shitbird Winston your son?”

“My pride and joy.”

He sits next to me. “I’m alive five more years. Max. I spend my weekends casket shopping.”

“Why not get cremated? Help out the ecosystem.”

“I always thought cremation was bullshit. There’s no commitment there. You die, you get buried, people know where to find you.”

I check my watch.

“What’s up with that kid?” He nods to the locker room.

“He owes me an assignment.”

“I’ll give him till age twenty, twenty-one before he starts serving a seven to 10 for armed robbery. Or possession with intent. Or burglary first degree. One of those. That kid can be talked into anything.”

He breathes like an overworked ox. I am not interested in mouth-to-mouth if he goes into

cardiac arrest.

“McDunn, you should look after your health.”

“My old man. Boom. Heart attack age forty-five. His old man, same thing. I’m going out with a full stomach,” he says. “I ate a large sausage and pepperoni pizza all by myself the other night. Crushed it. Wife says I got an eating disorder. That an eating disorder? I don’t think so. I like to be full.”

He gets off the edge of the bleacher and pushes through the locker room door. A half minute later, he returns.

“Your little shitbird flew the coop. Some of them know how to jimmy the emergency door.”

I can picture Maurice splashing across the football field.

“Damn,” I say. “That’s not good.”

McDunn has sweated through a baseball cap that says Linktown Marauders Wrestling. He sits on the edge of the bleachers again. The entire section sags under his weight. “I got to lock up. Get home. Get something to eat. I feel like I’m one of those starving African children. Maybe I’ll stop at McDonald’s on my way home. You in?” Breathing stertorously. I see him wheeling around a tank of oxygen in a few years.

I need to get to Teresa. Or do I need to get to Maurice who could get Teresa off my back?

There’s a feeling of slow-shift to apocalyptic doom in the night streets of Baltimore, masked by the swank Inner Harbor shops and high rise buildings downtown. You drive through neighborhoods off the north-south axes and find abandoned houses and young men gathered at

street corners living in a weather system of generalized predatory hunger. I often drive around at night when I can't sleep through unknown neighborhoods. Places where I don't belong. Places where I'd be beaten or shot if I got a flat tire and my car was immobilized. The neighborhoods themselves seem to lean in to take a look, scanning, deciding if murder or assault might be the corrective for innocence and middle class thrill seeking.

I take a roundabout way through a neighborhood with boarded up windows and old trees. I am not surprised when I see a man who looks like an over-the-hill boxer walking down the street, shoeless, wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, cursing, maddened for some reason, swinging left and right hooks, as if anger itself selected him for a ride which would find another victim tomorrow night.

My head hurts. I'm in something far beyond my capabilities. I need to find normal again. I am middle-aged, reluctantly, and I want to finish out my time as a school teacher and find a hobby and be even keel.

I drive to Maurice's house.

I park my car in the same spot. I cross the street. Sitting in a lawn chair in the shadows to the side of the safety light hanging atop the back of the garage is the big guy wearing another style of Ravens jersey whom I saw come out of the house when I crashed into Maurice's car. If he shaved the dreads and beard I wouldn't recognize him.

He waggles his legs like wings. I've noticed fat people like to do that. A teacher at school does the same thing when he sits in the front lobby after students leave in the afternoon.

From behind, he pulls out a length of small black pipe, whips it forward. It expands. A police baton. "I ought to beat your white ass," he says.

“Look, I need to talk with Maurice. I’m not here to cause anyone trouble.”

“Let me see your wallet.”

I hesitate. He stares at me sleepy-eyed, like a bear, and taps the baton on his knee.

I pull out my wallet and toss it to him. He opens it, takes out every bill I have in there, folds it, flips it back to me.

“You owe me fifty-seven dollars,” I say. “Where’s Maurice?”

“Who’s that?”

“Listen, you big fat ugly motherfucker, I’ve got to talk to him.”

He sniffs, walks over to me, casually pops me on the shin with the steel baton. I go down. Pain radiates in a starburst through my body. He cracks me a good one on my shoulder. I can see my breath against the safety light hanging above the garage.

“Jesus Christ,” I say. I feel tears well in my eyes.

“Won’t help some stupid white nigger.”

He sits back down in the lawn chair. I writhe around for a few minutes, then manage to hike up on my elbow. I see him thumb pressing his cell phone screen. He puts the phone to his ear. He talks to Maurice. Tells him I’m here.

I sit on the concrete. I manage to stand. I hobble to the low wall bordering the driveway and sit.

Maurice steps out of the door where I first saw him a few nights ago. He whistles to me and waves me in. I limp up the wood plank stairs while holding onto the unpainted banister.

Maurice laughs. “I can tell Jo Jo likes you.”

He lets the weather door slam. I make it up and open the door to a rich odor of feces and

urine, so intense it booms in my ears.

An old crone is washing dishes at a sudsy sink. She turns her face to me and I see her dentures in a half filled glass of water on the window sill. After a moment inspection, she sets her hands back into the sink of dishes. I remember her face at the window when I plowed into the car.

Maurice has disappeared.

“Where’d Maurice go?” I ask.

She points her head meaning go through the kitchen door.

“Is he down in the basement?”

She does not answer.

The air is vinegary with excrement odor. Are they weirdo hoarders or have they graduated into keeping leopards instead of domestic cats?

I go into the dining room where schoolbooks sit piled on one end of the table next to stacks of newspapers, magazines, bills, envelopes, and yellow notepads, all of it suggesting the household operations nerve center.

No lights illuminate the interior of the house. I see a flashlight on a baker’s rack, pick it up, and go through the far doorway into the living room and point the light around. Animal eyes shine from atop the couch. From the periphery of my vision, I see cat bodies leaping into invisibility behind a stuffed chair. I hear running movement along the baseboard toward the staircase in the foyer.

I turn around. I’ll leave and go back to my life. I’ll call Maurice’s bluff and let him release the fake porn moment construed between Teresa and me. I will be a 43 year old with a

sexual predator rap tied around his neck, and no matter where I go to find work, I won't be able to shake it.

But, who cares, I need to find normal. At least it will be my life. What about being a janitor? One immediately perceives the grinding, narrow character to that job, where every know-nothing with a clipboard is a boss, where your work is low-level appreciated or off-handedly expected but never celebrated. Yet I've noticed at school that the janitors belong to a tribe. I'll hear them talk in that low subversive way that I sometimes wish I could participate in, but for them I'm too far up the education-income totem pole, and I can't be a member.

I see them come into work carrying bags of crappy food, chicken boxes from some greasy ghetto take-out place or fat, meat sandwiches slathered with mayonnaise. They hunker down in a corner of the cafeteria and laugh about God knows what. I've walked through and wish I could be one of them. Wish I could be that passionate about the Baltimore Ravens or what Keonshaye said to Richard that caused him to start going out with that "trashy, light-skinned bitch Ashley" or anything to do with high-end athletic shoes.

Some of them are more even keel than others. A few stay long-term. A fair number come and go because they get into squabbles with supervisors. But by their connection to a web of interests, humor, and passion that elude me in my singular, middle-aged white man life, they all seem to belong. I'm sure each one of them would claim jealousy over my teacher salary and options that education has provided me, but given a peephole into my life, few of them would choose to leave their tribe.

I gag. I want out. The excrement odors have gotten to me.

Someone shut the door barring my entrance back into the kitchen from the dining room. I

shine the light that way. That same someone has snapped off the lights in the dining room, and it's as dark as a cave.

I want to flee. My heart pounds. I wonder if something is going to charge me from a blind spot at one of my flanks.

I turn around again, toward the living room. I see a glow at the far end. I step into the hallway, away from the kitchen and dining room, and check the front door. It's deadbolted.

I see a bar of light beneath the closed basement door. I approach. What else can I do? Run screaming around the house pounding on closed doors? Open a window and jump out? I suppose I could call the cops using my cell phone. What do I say? I'm in a house and it's dark and I'm scared?

I open the basement door and walk down the steps to cooler air and greater intensity of feces-urine odor.

"Maurice, you down here?" I ask.

No sounds except more cat scrambling then silence. I imagine a bunched leopard hidden in the darkness, waiting for the most recent appearance of human prey, springing out, taking me down by the throat, shaking me till I succumb, tearing at the soft, belly viscera once resistance has stopped.

I go down a few more steps. "Maurice," I call out.

He leans into view near the bottom of the stairs.

"Come on down, man. What's taking you so long?" he says, now in the guise of a pal.

I'm still conscious of the bunched leopard possibility, but I breathe easier. I walk down the steps and see Maurice who sits on a stool at a scarred and beaten wooden work bench. All

manner of tools are on a pegboard nailed to a wall above the work station. A triangular light hangs from above and his face is shadowed. An axe handle lies at a diagonal angle near his left hand.

I hear a water pipe shudder and the whoosh of flame open in the water heater.

I try to remember if Maurice is left or right handed.

The darkness of the basement presses in. Something creaks in the depths, as if someone inadvertently shifts his weight to relieve pressure on his legs.

I feel my hands shake. My skin prickles. I wait for someone to slip a piano wire around my neck and strangle me.

“So you come to my house,” he says.

He picks up the axe handle. He slams it on the workbench. I jump.

“The video goes online Monday,” he says. “Here it is Thursday. You don’t have the money, I can tell that right now.”

“Twenty-thousand dollars, Maurice. Are you serious?”

Something behind me creaks. I turn to look. My body is rigid with fright.

“Nothing’s going to get you Teacher man.”

“Maurice, it seems to me you want out of this as much as I do.”

“One thing I never liked, people telling me what I think.”

“You don’t seem to have the heart for it anymore. What happened?” I’m making it up. I’m trying to locate weak joints.

“You met Jo Jo outside. How’d you like to go one on one with him. Right here. Right now. He finishes with you, we dump you on the street somewhere. How you going to tie that to

us?”

I realize that Maurice isn't in charge. She is.

“What does she have on you, Maurice? Your wife.”

“That little bitch Winston tell you we're married?”

“He did.”

“Try to get good help these days. I pick him because he knows the school. One shot deal.

Says he never seen you before. Doesn't know who you are.”

“He was right about that.”

He shakes his head.

“She stays with you here?”

“No, we hook up over at her mother's. Apartment building near here.”

“Winston told me about that place.” Not 100% true. I knew about it when I followed him, but I want to put Winston in a bad spot.

“He's turning out to be a migraine,” he says.

“Full of all sorts of news.”

“I'll deal with him.”

“So you need money.”

“Says she found a fish. Says you leaped into the fishbowl. Says we can tie this one right off.”

“Good luck.”

A gray tabby cat jumps up from the down below shadows. He light-foot walks to Maurice who scratches him beneath his chin. The cat tips up his head, purring, sleepy-eyed.

Another cat jumps atop the workbench. Black with white paws. Then another, with a crazy quilt of colors. They crowd around. The crazy quilt meanders over to me and I scratch its back.

“How many cats live here?” I ask.

“Plenty,” he says.

From the far reaches of the basement, I hear a loud snap and the triangular lamp above the bench goes black. Someone has tripped the circuit breaker to the house. Maurice pushes me over on my stool. I reach back into air and topple onto the cement floor, banging my wrist. My head bounces off the concrete. The cats scramble away.

I crawl on my forearms, slither into the darkness. He begins chopping down the axe handle where he thinks I might be. He can't find me.

“White cracker motherfucker thinks he can run into my car.”

I snake to my right and manage to crawl beneath a laundry sink. He bangs around. I hear a cat howl, another one hisses.

I don't have a clue as to what I've gotten myself into. This craziness. I do need to call the cops now. I slip out my cell phone. The screen is dark. It won't power up. Low batteries. Curse of modern man.

“Where the fuck are you...”

He swings the handle. I hear ~~Jo~~ jobreaking and toppling.

“Goddamn, that motherfucking bitch,” he says. He roams around like some ancient underworld crazy trying to batter his way out of a dungeon. His trajectory is away from my hidey-hole. Cats move across the room in singles and skitter up the stairs. I leave my zone and

frog scramble to the stairs myself, then break out and dash.

He cracks the stair behind me with a down-hack of the handle. I fall. The light goes on in the basement. I turn to look up at him. He has the handle over his head ready to bring it down on me. I am going to die...

Jo Jo comes up from behind him and grabs hold of the axe handle.

“You ain’t right,” he says to Maurice. “This wasn’t supposed to go down like this.”

My hands are sticky with cat scud. I can feel its wetness on my back. It’s gotten into my hair. The odor of it is in my pores.

Jo Jo points the beam of flashlight on me. I’d left it on the workbench.

“That’s a sorry looking white man right there,” he says.

“I think I can help you,” I say.

“What do you got?” says Maurice.

“My good name,” I say.

“How are you going to help me?”

I heard him curse her when he was trying to beat me out of the bushes like game.

Jo Jo and Maurice haul me upstairs into the kitchen where the crone continues to wash dishes at the sink. She dries off her hands then gives the wet towel to Jo Jo who wraps it around my eyes. Maurice duct tapes my hands. They pull me up. I’m standing.

Maurice punches me in the stomach. I double over gasping. I haven’t had the wind knocked out of me since I was a teenager playing touch football. I suck air. I’m on my knees. I’m a middle-aged teacher being beaten up by a 19 or 20 year old watched over by his bearded body man. What I have done to deserve this? How did I find their world?

“You have to understand,” Maurice says.

“What am I’m supposed to understand?” I say.

Jo Jo says, “Tell him to shut the...”

The crone says, “Beat him. He’s gon cause you a hell of a mess. Just beat him and leave it be.”

I hear her begin to sweep the floor.

“This ain’t working,” says Jo Jo. “We need something more detailed than talk of your good name.”

“Let’s take him for a ride,” Maurice says.

I hear Maurice pull a chair out from the table then sit. “I know you teachers got retirement.”

“I don’t have access to that,” I say.

“All of you put money in a 403b. Don’t lie. Snap your fingers, you can pull ten thousand out of that.”

“Not doing it. Release the video, I don’t give a shit.”

“Naw, man,” says Jo Jo. “It ain’t about the video. Maurice here, he needs the money. You don’t seem to understand.”

“Why in God’s name would you try to milk a teacher for money? Doesn’t make sense.” I cough. My stomach aches, my ribs are bruised. I might faint.

“Take that thing off his eyes,” says Maurice.

Jo Jo rough-handles me while unwrapping the towel. He scissors off the duct tape binding my wrists.

“Smells a wicked,” says the old lady. She leaves the room for regions upstairs.

Maurice rubs his head. “You got to understand, bro. I’m in a bind here. She got us into something. I’m the man of the family, so I do clean up.”

“You are a nasty smelling bitch,” says Jo Jo.

“That’s a bad seed right there,” I say. “What’s she got on you?”

“Be cool, brother. That’s my wife you’re talking about.”

Jo Jo says, “Naw, man, you got to give that up.”

“That’s my wife,” he says.

“Like I said,” Jo Jo says. “She’s a toxic asset.”

I had noticed it before. In our dire times, people use the language of finance.

I go to the double sink. I turn on the water and suds up with dishsoap. I wash my hands and arms up to my elbows.

“You got to get away from that thing,” says Jo Jo. “fore she turns you real stupid. You think she cares you behind bars again? Matter of fact, she would *like* to see you there. She don’t have to deal with you like that. Why don’t she stay here?”

I want to suggest that the house has an odor-cleanliness problem. I keep my mouth shut.

“Where’d you two get married?” I ask.

“Virgin Islands.”

“So you want to get away from her. Is that what I’m hearing.”

“That’s your cue,” says Jo Jo.

Maurice sniffs, nods.

“Why don’t you think about getting marriage annulled?” I’m making it up as I go along.

The distribution of news and information through television drama has given all of us play as street lawyers.

“I don’t know anything about that,” Maurice says.

“You promise to hold off releasing the tape, I’ll make some phone calls.”

“I don’t know if that’s going to work,” he says.

“Cause she’s not going to like it, right?” says Jo Jo.

“It’s in a Dropbox folder, right?”

“Now, how the...” He closes his eyes. “Winston tell you that?”

“He did. He also told me that he knows the password, so you should change it immediately.”

Jo Jo leaves the room. He returns with a lap top. Maurice powers up, goes to his Dropbox account.

“Done,” he says.

“You sure she doesn’t have a copy?” I say.

“I’m sure. Keeping hold of it was my job.”

“So she could deny involvement if you get caught,” says Jo Jo. “She ain’t no fool.”

Maurice scratches the underside of his chin.

“I got a lawyer friend who can look into your Virgin Island marriage. You got a wedding certificate?”

“She’s holding that,” he says.

“Damn, if she don’t have a game plan,” says Jo Jo.

“Okay. Write down the date when the marriage occurred. What time of day. Where. Any

details that you can remember about the presiding official. His name.”

“Her name,” he says. “She looked voodoo to me.”

“Anything at all. Who, what, when, and where. The name of the hotel you stayed in.

When you got there. When you left.”

“Okay, I got it.”

Jo Jo went into the other room and came back with a yellow notepad and a pen.

“Give the man everything,” Jo Jo says. “She needs to go.”

I wait, encrusted in cat scud. The odors of the house had seeped into my pores, pooled at the bottom of my stomach. I ask for the bathroom, and manage to mask my gagging behind the sounds of the water from the faucet.

I return. Maurice writes with the intensity of a student finishing a school assignment. Jo Jo, still as Buddha, stares into his inner forest.

I read through everything after Maurice hands me the paper. I ask for clarification on one or two items.

“I need you to tell me you’ll hold the video. I’m going to bust my ass seeing about springing you from this marriage.”

“He’s going to hold it,” says Jo Jo. “Keep it under wraps till if or when it needs to get unwrapped.” He tilts his head at me. “You understand what I’m saying?”

“I do,” I say.

I fold up the yellow sheet of paper with Maurice’s notes and tuck it into my wallet. They stare at me as I leave.

I step outside into the darkness of early evening. The damp air has cooled. I remember a

roll of plastic bags I keep in the trunk. I unroll several, place them on the seat and seatback to protect from the cat feces, then climb in. I pull away from the curb waiting for a gunshot to ring out from the top window and shatter the glass then penetrate my skull at which point I will see a flash of white light before entering the void.

But once away from a potential field of fire, I feel relief. I feel internal tumblers click into place.

I will clean up the sloppiness in my life. I will focus, zero in. I will begin sharing more with my fellow workers. The principal asked me to conduct a workshop on the 6+1 writing technique I learned when I went to a cross-pollinating English-Social Studies conference. I snubbed her because she was an ally of my wife. That's over with. I feel impulses to cooperate surging through my bloodstream.

I stop to get myself Thai food. I give the hardworking Thai owner, who cooks all of his own food in a small kitchen behind a counter, a big tip. He smiles. Three more teeth on the bottom are no longer present.

The lack of teeth make me lose altitude. One's mortality...

Showered and cleaned up, I sit in front of the TV eating Pad Thai with shrimp out of the Styrofoam container. I'm distracted. I wish for companionship. I think about the hearth, the cabin, chilly air, warmth beneath blankets.

I'm unsettled and disturbed. It's as if brain operations weren't mine, as if I'm receiving suggestions, ideas, strategies from another source that implants them into me. I receive them with pleasure, though, because they offer an end result of Teresa and me at the cabin with smoke curling from the chimney.

I don't have a friend who is a lawyer, as I told Maurice. I'll have to hire one. When I finish with my Pad Thai, I place the empty Styrofoam container in the trash. I realize the apartment has a lingering, dead shrimp odor. I carry the trash to the backyard trashcan, look up at the citylights-bleached sky, and see the half moon. In the alley, I watch a brown haired cat chase a furtive creature, a small rat or a large mouse. The cat pounces, the furtive creature bleats out a squeaky, forlorn cry, then its life is over and the cat carries it away, proud chest forward, heading to the line of parked cars on the other side of the alley where it will hide and begin tearing out the guts of its succumbed prey.

In those few moments, I shift from the hunted sphere to the hunter sphere.

Back in the apartment, I Google lawyers within a ten mile radius of Hampden, the neighborhood within Baltimore City where I live. I copy and paste names and telephone numbers onto a doc file that I place into a folder in a thumb drive which I'll take with me to work.

During my planning period, I call lawyers and explain that I want to check up on a marriage certificate issued in the Virgin Islands. I get bounced around four or five times. Finally, a guy tells me that I want someone who deals with immigration issues. He gives me a name. I call. I explain.

He says, "That doesn't sound too hard. I need \$500.00 up front."

I drive by his office after school, not two miles from my home, and give him the particulars. I ignore the smell of soft decomposing organic material that exudes from the pores of the interior of the office spaces. He says he can start making calls after I leave. He's been dealing with immigration problems for years. Don't worry, he says. He'll get back to me by tomorrow.

At home, I call Maurice to give him an update. He speaks in a low voice. I sense Teresa is present. I hang up.

“There are three or four avenues I follow,” the lawyer says to me over the phone, “when I’m going after something like this. People get in a jam, start wondering if their marriage is valid. It’s not uncommon. Happens all the time, as a matter of fact.”

He begins a long, wandering response meant for two purposes: one, to impress me with his lawyer-worthiness; two, as a prelude to charging me more money. About ten minutes into it, I’m starting to get the drift. There was nothing there.

“Happens all the time,” he says. “Somebody scams somebody who scams somebody who collects from an innocent victim.”

I can’t help wondering if he just described our relationship.

“So there was no certificate issued?”

“I’m not saying that. Your friend might have gotten a piece of paper, but it’s not worth anything. There was no marriage.”

“You’re sure about this.”

“The not so sovereign state of the Virgin Islands has one office where marriage certificates are issued. If it’s not there, it’s not there. They faxed up what they call an ‘Issuance of Denial’ which, in effect, excuses Virgin Islands of any responsibility of claims made by any supposed marriage parties. When they do that, they mean business. They got tired of being sued by people contesting marriage licenses.”

“That’s it then.”

“Yes. I’ll need one hundred and fifty more dollars to ensure that the paperwork is filed.”

And where would that be? In your file cabinet behind your desk? I don't argue. I've got some pondering to do.

"I need you to draw up another document," I say.

"Be glad to."

I explained the faked soft porn tape that Maurice has in his possession. I want some sort of disclaimer in which he would admit that it wasn't me, that it was a sham.

"I can do that," he says. "You got PayPal?"

"Yes," I say.

"Send over \$250.00. One-fifty to file the Virgin Islands paperwork, \$100.00 for the document I'm about to craft for you. I'll email your document by tomorrow morning. Make sure he signs it with a notary present."

I am in the clear. I've provided a way for Maurice and me to have a soft landing. Like a mismanaged rook, Teresa will be isolated by our behind the scenes moves.

I sit at my small, wooden kitchen table and drink a cup of coffee and stare out the window overlooking the back yard. I am thinking about the cat who carried its prey across the alley to then feast beneath the parked cars. I am reflecting on my life, a forty-something bachelor who is thirteen years away from retirement. Who will, at the retirement moment, be challenged with the complexities of figuring out what he'll do with the rest of his life when he's fifty-something. Who will do his figuring alone in a state far away from his ex-wife and twin daughters who breathe the oxygen of another world entirely.

It hits me that New York State isn't quite right. Too populated. Too many freeways. I want something simpler. I am overcome with a Thoreau vibe, and I know with clarity of a vision,

that New Hampshire or Vermont is where I'll find a cabin nestled in the valley of a mountain. We will ski and eat late night dinners in the stone meeting house. We will open little packets of chocolate and pour them into bottoms of heavy mugs and fill them with warm milk and watch a crackling fire and put our mugs down and reach to each other beneath our warm blanket while sitting with heavy socks on the couch.

Saturday morning, 5:00 a.m. I make coffee. I'm feeling nervous about the flow of events. I again sit at my meditation spot and keep my own counsel. I'm looking downrange at today, tomorrow, Monday. Monday, I want to be unlocked from the possibility of a viral video spreading from student to student then to parents, then to overseers in the system, then to law enforcement. I imagine a gaggle of television cameras and protesters outside my modest row home. Nothing titillates quite like a teacher who can't resist one of the juicy youngsters.

I'm picturing the moment of Maurice signing the disclaimer in front of a notary public that states that the video has no basis in reality, it is a work of the imagination, and if ever released then I can sue for damages since it would be released with the sole purpose of damaging my reputation. The signee states that all copies or other kinds of reproductions of said video have been destroyed.

But there's a snag. Why should he sign it if I tell him he's not legally bound by marriage to Teresa. He might get it in mind to start freelancing and keep hold of the video. I will have leverage only if I get him to sign the video disclaimer before I tell him he's not married. But why would he do that? He might just think I'm playing him.

I call the lawyer at 6:30 a.m. He's already on point.

I say we need to get creative.

“Creative’s my middle name,” he says. “How can I help you?”

I experience a wave of paranoia. I freeze while holding the phone. What if he’s colluding with Maurice and Teresa? I thaw. I’ve paid him. Attorney client privilege holds. I’m protected. I would sue if he went over to the other side. I feel my heart rate settle. Maybe I should seek pharmacological solutions for sporadic anxiety.

“I need to create some subterfuge. Not outright lying mind you.”

“Subterfuge is my middle name,” he says. “Happens all the time that somebody needs subterfuge. What can I do for you in that area?”

I explain my dilemma. If I tell Maurice that he’s really not married, why should he sign the video release? In effect, I didn’t do anything for him. He would have leverage over me with the tape, even if only to squeeze me to get Teresa off his back. But if I can show him a document (subterfuge, not lying) which gives permission to my lawyer to get the marriage annulled, then I have some leverage. I scratch his back getting the marriage annulled. He scratches mine by dumping the video.

“That will be no problem, my friend. I’m glad you turned to me in your time of me. Send me \$100.00 through PayPal and I will craft another document for you within the hour. People’s real interest in life is to make other people happy, and in your wisdom you have found a way to do that. I’ve come to realize that life is not over-scrupulous. So, no, you are not lying. The man upstairs was not over-scrupulous when he decided to breathe life into a handful of clay, so let’s follow his example.”

He emails it over. It is a fine looking document, I’ll give him that.

I call Maurice and leave a message. I suggest meeting at 10:00 a.m. at a Denny's restaurant near his neighborhood. In a sly move, I locate the nearest real estate agent to the restaurant. I find a second one, then a third. I punch their telephone numbers into my mobile phone contacts. One of them will have a notary whom we'll visit when we sign the documents. I wait for Maurice's call.

Incoming at 8:45. He sounds groggy. He agrees to meet. I say bring Jo Jo. Breakfast is on me.

"Trust me," he says. "Jo Jo's going to be part of this."

I drive to the restaurant in plenty of time. I park. I enter.

My nightmare will soon be over. I feel relaxation flow into my shoulders and neck. I've been tense. I should treat myself to a massage.

My eyes slide back and forth and crisscross up and down through the over-sized laminated menu.

The *Sizzlin' Skillets* options catch my attention: "Diced ham over crispy hash browns with mushrooms and fire-roasted peppers and onions served on a sizzlin' skillet. Topped with cheese sauce and two eggs cooked the way you like. Yee-ha! Add toast or warm tortillas for an additional charge."

While I'm wondering if I want to splurge on the tortillas--they seem far more *western* than your standard toast--I see Maurice and Jo Jo enter the restaurant.

They spot me. Should I have met them outside the real estate agent's office so that we could sign the documents before I treat them to a Denny's meal? What if events turn upside down at the table, and I won't be able to get them to sign?

I've been raised to be polite and stand when joined by others, but doing so now as two adversaries approach feels wrong. It might signal weak and unmanly. I maintain my seat with my menu folded in front of me.

The waitress steps to our table. They order coffee. They know their way around a Denny's menu. She takes their order.

"I'll take the Western Skillet," I say.

"You going all out," Jo Jo says.

"Anyway," Maurice says, "I think Brad and Angelina have issues."

"They're deep into family, man," says Jo Jo. "They're creating a home."

"I don't know."

"Took them a while to get there. Other marriages and whatnot," Jo Jo says, "but they got it now. It's a lock for them."

"How many children are they going to have?"

"There's no magic number. The more the better."

"I don't believe that. You mean there's no difference between five kids, eight, fourteen?"

"Comes down to resources."

"Five, maximum. After that, it's excessive."

That quick our food arrives.

"What do you think?" says Jo Jo. He bites into his club sandwich. He holds the triangle with dainty fingers.

"Four," I say. "More than that, you can't fix the problems you created." I'm trying to catch their People Magazine flow. I'm ecstatic about their lack of aggression, their seeming

resignation. We're bonding. But the texture shift is weird. Didn't they want to beat me a couple of days ago?

"How do you like this place?" Jo Jo says to Maurice.

"Nice quality of wait staff. Clean. Demographics are solid, so it seems to me," says Maurice.

"I like it, too. I didn't like that other Denny's."

"The Glen Burnie place?"

"Right."

"Disappointed me, too."

"It was dirty."

Maurice shook his head.

This from two people with the cats.

"It was a disappointment."

"You two in the restaurant business?" I ask. I want to encourage. Their anima has absolute dominion over them.

"We have entrepreneurial spirits that need expression," says Jo Jo as serious as a surgeon.

"So, is there a restaurant in your future?"

Jo Jo eyes me up and down. "Might be. We need start up funds. We were also thinking about a model shop, but the internet"--he shakes his head--"it's a plague for your hands-on activities. Nobody comes out of their rooms anymore. We can get a model shop, though, for twenty thousand down."

"I've heard that figure before," I said. Attempting droll.

“You had bifurcation there,” says Jo Jo. “Maurice had his operation running. But Teresa comes aboard with another scheme altogether. Take ten from you, find another way to make another ten, then we get the shop.”

“When you hit my car,” says Maurice, “I saw a way to pinch you for that extra ten. We got a cousin who owns a body shop. He banged it right out for us. You didn’t need to know that.”

Bifurcation, for sure. In a snap, I now don’t know if it were Teresa who was behind the money grab or Maurice. I feel a shadow cross over us.

We finish eating, have our final cups of coffee. I make a jog to the men’s. I call up the first real estate office which is in the strip mall with the Denny’s. Sure enough there’s a guy who’s a notary. I can hear her put the phone to her shoulder and call to him in another room. Yes, he’s available she tells me.

I rejoin them. I have avoided mention of why I called them here. Until this moment at the end of the meal when we’ve pushed back our plates and are sipping the last of our coffee, it would have been...*gauche* is the word that pops into mind. Aggressive. Untoward.

I’ve kept my beige folder on the seat next to me.

“Okay, fellas, time for us to wrap up our business. I’ve been in consultation with my lawyer friend many times over the past few days. He got in touch with the office in the Virgin Islands that deals with marriages of off islanders. After a lot of back and forth, he found the proper statutes that allow for marriage annulment.”

Jo Jo has the two page document in hand. It’s filled with legalese. He’s a close reader.

“What are the conditions of the annulment?” he asks, lawyer-like, while peering at the

document, all set in ten point font.

“My friend believes that the best strategy is maintaining that they were married fraudulently, on the basis of two claims. One, Maurice concealed his criminal history from her.” I glance at Maurice. He’s taking it in. “Two, she threatened to blackmail him and therefore he married under duress.”

Jo Jo sniffs. “You all right with this?” he asks Maurice.

“I guess,” he says. “What was she blackmailing me about?”

“It’s not going to court so it can be unspecified.”

“Doesn’t she have to be a party to the annulment?” asks Jo Jo, the blossoming lawyer.

“Within the domain of the Virgin Islands, no,” I say, making it up. The lawyer coached me. “At least not initially. In the United States, yes, of course, that would be the procedure. It couldn’t move ahead until both parties agreed.”

Jo Jo sniffs again and renews his interest in the eternal fine print of the document in front.

“What if she raises some hell about this?” says Maurice.

Jo Jo looks over at me.

“Well,” I say. “I imagine that’s her right and due. We’re a litigious society and anybody can take anybody to court about anything. But you bring the document along with you to court and when the judge sees that everything is in order you have right on your side.”

“It doesn’t sound right that she’s not a party to this from the get-go,” says Jo Jo.

“Not at the initial signing. If you look right here,” I point, “Maurice has to inform her of his actions within a ninety day window. By that time, of course, he will have made his moves to extricate himself emotionally. She’s a shrewd person,” I say. “She’ll make a strategic

assessment, then will realize it's in her best interests to bow out." I've gone to the dark side. I'm lying as if I were born to it.

Jo Jo gets quiet and reads, but I can tell he's turned a corner. He's going to give the go-ahead for Maurice to sign.

"The lawyer hasn't signed off on this yet," says Jo Jo.

"That's right, he hasn't. That's because I told him not to. I want Maurice to sign this disclaimer," I place it on the table, "which you can see the lawyer has signed, stating that the video of me having sexual relations with Teresa is bogus. I want to know that that video is out of my life. I don't want you two jerking my chain anymore. You sign this, and the marriage gets annulled."

Maurice picks it up. It's a one-pager. He reads it top to bottom.

"I'll sign it," he says. "And I'll sign the other one, too. I'm closing the book on this one."

I pay the bill and we walk halfway around the strip mall to the realtor's office. The woman at the desk calls to the back. A pear shaped man comes out front and with a butler's hand gesture points us to an empty conference room. His eyes sparkle in the presence of three men. Maurice signs and Jo Jo witnesses. The man embosses the documents. Jo Jo asks for copies and he obliges.

The man asks if he can help in any other way. Jo Jo asks him what he's got in terms of commercial retail space in the area.

"Time for me to bow out," I say.

Maurice doesn't even shoot me a glance. I leave the building and walk to the car. I start it up and drive out of the parking space. A block away from the area I scream, "Yes!"

I am the happiest man in Baltimore. I drive home to an empty house.

I stand in my living room listening for something. Perhaps I should consider going to the SPCA and finding a dog. I had a wife and children, but that seems an epoch ago. We no longer share orbits. Maybe I should move to Kansas City, more precisely Overland Park, Kansas, to be near them. I am feeling the need to reconcile and amend.

I call my wife, conscious of the gallon jug that quickly gets filled.

“Hi, Zaner,” she says. She’s always called me by my last name.

“Hi Mare. Listen, what do you think about me moving out there with the three of you?”

She starts laughing, cackling really. Finished, she says, “Oh, my gosh, you sounded serious.”

“I am.”

“Give yourself a couple of hours. You’ll get over it.”

“I thought I wanted to be a bachelor, but now I don’t.”

“You’re three years too late, Zaner. Besides, the girls are off on their own now.”

“Maybe we could get them back. Sort of rewind the tape.”

“I’ve met someone. He’s a keeper. I have a feeling we’ll get married in a year.”

“Things should have been different for us.”

“Zaner, it’s over. We’re over. We’ve been over for a long time. It’s actually sort of creepy that you’re calling and talking like this. You wanted out of our marriage years before we signed the papers.”

“I feel...”

“You’re a quart shy of a gallon.”

I pause. Her quarts fill up quickly. “I’m coming apart over here a little bit,” I say.

“Therapy.”

“I was hoping...”

“I’m going to say three more words and that will top off this conversation.”

“I think you need to revisit the volume size of your gallon jug. It seems to have gotten smaller.”

“Three words. *Deal with reality.*”

“I’d like to discuss that with you.”

“I know you would. Goodbye.”

She hangs up.

My cell phone rings. I hope it’s her calling right back. I don’t look at the number on the screen.

“Um, Mr. Zaner,” says the voice.

“Yes.”

“Like this is that guy who you tackled who might be thinking about a class action lawsuit against you.”

“Winston, you need to figure out what a class action lawsuit is.”

Winston pauses. “I can look that up on Wikipedia any time of the day, any day of the week. What you need to figure out is how I’m going to get gone with a video of you and Teresa which I plan on putting on YouTube if me and Maurice don’t get something for it.”

“You and Maurice working on this one together?” I ask.

“Straight up,” he says.

“That’s funny. I just came from a meeting with Maurice. I’ve got a notarized affidavit from him stating the tape is false.”

“Whatever a afterdavid is, it don’t matter. You like big words like most teachers who just like to hear themselves talk about stuff they like but don’t let students talk about the stuff they like to do.”

“Winston, let it go. You guys missed on this one.”

“And now Maurice told me that I don’t get my hundred bucks, but what he doesn’t know but you know is that I got his password from Dropbox which I wrote down because I knew I wouldn’t remember it. Then I made a copy of the video by putting it onto my desktop then I moved it into my own Dropbox account which I didn’t give him the password to either.”

“I told him you had his password.”

“So I’m supposed to believe that you and Maurice are good buddies now who he talks to and gets information like who has his password?”

“Are you in front of your computer now?”

“No, because I’m at my girlfriend’s house and it’s only her iPad here.”

“Try to get into Maurice’s Dropbox account right now. See whether or not he changed his password.”

“Okay.”

I hear him tapping on the iPad screen. I hear him say, “Shit.” I hear him say to his girlfriend. “Clorox, do this. I can’t hold the phone and...” I hear the phone drop.

He recovers the phone. “She can’t get it open either.”

“Because he changed his password.”

“Oh, okay.”

“So you’re flying solo here Winston.”

“What?”

“You’re alone on this one.”

“What do you mean? Clorox is right here.”

“You and Maurice are no longer a team. You try to blackmail me with that tape and I come after you with the police. Maurice signed a statement saying that the tape is faked.”

“Well that sucks.”

“You and Maurice are no longer on the same team.”

“What?”

“We’re getting to the lowest common denominator, Winston, of speech. Of references. Same team means...”

“Sorry,” he says. “Clorox was saying something to me about something and I was trying to think and talk to you at the same time and somebody I think it was my social studies teacher he was saying that we’re on information overload and so does my mother.”

“Winston, the tape is faked. It’s time that you just delete it and move on with life.”

“I don’t think so. It’s going to be really funny when I download that video to YouTube and see you and my sister going at it. Does it really matter whether it’s something that really happened?”

“Your sister.”

“My half-sister really. What?” he says. “Sorry. Clorox tells me I meant my step-sister,

but she's really more like my sister since we started being sister and brother back in the day."

"Winston, you're telling me that Teresa's your step-sister?"

"She's more like my sister because, see, my father and her mother hooked up and whatever happened happened so he left and her mother is really my mother, too, because my mother died of a blood disease which she had from when she was little. Back in the day they didn't have prescriptions like they do now, so she died really when I was too little to remember her except she took us to the beach one time then Ma became my mother and since she was cool she's always been my mother so then Teresa, see, she's always been my sister."

"When you came into the room with Teresa that first time, she seemed angry with you."

"Okay, so she told me she wanted me to play a part and since it was trying to act like a G I thought..."

"A G?"

"Gangster. Then we practiced then when we got into your room she went all hardcore and I thought it was epic. She told me I was on point and Clorox says all the time that I should think about being an actor so I'm trying out for the school play this year. So maybe you could come and see it and since you're a teacher you could give me some pointers, but it's not easy, acting isn't."

"This would be sometime after you release the fake video tape to the world."

"Right. The play doesn't even start rehearsals till later in the year."

I'm alone in my house. I shake my head. The child is bulletproof. "What can I do to make this go away?"

"What's that?"

“The situation of you releasing the video. If you do post it on YouTube, Winston, I will call the police. I have the affidavit signed by Maurice and notarized. I will tell them that we had this conversation and warned you about releasing the video, but you went ahead and released it anyway. It could potentially damage my reputation. You will be charged.”

“Yo, snitches get stitches.”

“But I think that maybe you should be rewarded for doing the right thing and deleting it. It sounds to me that you might have been manipulated a little bit throughout the process, which is too bad.”

Silence.

“Winston,” I say.

“Clorox has been sort of on my case today, so I need to get off and...”

“What I’m thinking, Winston, is that I’ll give you the one hundred dollars that you feel is your due from Maurice.”

“Serious business?”

“Yes,” I say.

“That’s what’s up.”

“How do I know that you’ll delete the video?”

“I will. But not until I get my money.”

“Where’s Teresa?”

“At work, I think.”

“I want to give the money to her who’ll give it to you.”

“Why don’t I just have Clorox stop by your place and then you give me the money and

then we'll go to Underground Zombies where I can get myself a new skateboard.”

“Because I don't want to be implicated in any...”

“Mr. Zaner, could you talk down to Earth English?”

“I don't want you or anyone else taking a picture of me handing over \$100 to you. I can only imagine that somebody would blackmail me about that, too.”

“Why don't you give it to Clorox?”

“What's wrong with giving it to Teresa.”

“It's just that I owe her \$26.00 and I think she'll take it. I want my hunnerd.”

“I'll pay her the \$26.00 on top of the \$100.00. Winston, I want all of this to go away.”

“You're being like a father to me taking care of me. Nobody does stuff like that. Clorox,” he says close enough to the receiver that I can hear. He explains what transpired between us.

I walk out the front door to sit on the porch steps. I am feeling out of body. I need to visit a doctor for a general checkup. Teresa slash Maurice slash Jo Jo slash Winston have stressed me more than I would like to admit. I need a massage. I need to fast and purge toxins. But I am almost free of it. I want to put in my thirty then retire and find a path of humility. I've always admired Tibetan monks.

I realize that Winston had covered the mouthpiece. I can hear the palm of his hand slipping over the plastic surface of the phone.

“Mr. Zaner,” he says.

“I'm here.”

“Clorox is wondering if she can get \$25.00 from you because she's had some expenses this month because her mother grounded her and didn't give her her usual allowance.”

“Yes, of course.” I know what it is. It’s the feeling of driving in a car, not even fast, and without warning it begins slipping on black ice. The world becomes unglued and one waits in suspension for impact. I need to tie off the blackmail event. It’s swelling toward eruption.

“Do you think you can call Teresa, set up a meeting today, then call me right back.”

“I suppose unless this phone runs out of juice then I’ll have to charge it.”

“Doesn’t Clorox have a phone.”

“Yes, but she said somebody stole it but I think she lost it really.”

I can hear myself breathing. I’m wondering if hyperventilation is on the immediate horizon.

“Let’s do this. You call up Teresa right now. Tell her that we’ll meet at a restaurant close to where she is working. I need you to keep it simple. I need you to say, ‘Mr. Zaner wants to meet but he won’t tell me why.’ I need to you act like a G and keep real cool about it.”

“I got the G part down.”

“Okay, repeat what I want you to say.”

“Mr. Zaner wants to meet but he won’t tell me why.”

“And where are we going to meet?”

“At a restaurant near her restaurant.”

“You are a G,” I say.

“It’s not even a thing,” he says. “I got that.”

“You’re going to call her now then call me right back. Okay?”

“That’s right,” he says.

Two hours later, still no call.

I try to call Winston back, but when he doesn't pick up, I click off, not wanting to leave a message.

I take a walk through the Hampden neighborhood which in recent years has become gentrified with small clothing stores, restaurants, an organic market, and high end antique stores. By chance, I purchased a rowhouse within its sphere during a downturn in the housing market. I couldn't afford to sell then move back in.

Though I feel engaged as a teacher, my predominating sense is that I am rootless in the community in which I live because my wife and children left for another world. But walking through the neighborhood, I now know I am part of it in a greater degree than I imagine. I look back and forth up and down the street. I often buy wine from a local merchant who asks about my life and since his daughter wants to be a teacher, he and I exchange news of education and public schooling. Down from the wine and store, a woman owns a clothing store who takes in stray cats. She keeps a large jar on the counter with a slit in the white metal lid, and a couple of times a month I stop by to say hello and slip ten dollars into the jar for her cat fund. I began to frequent Ben's Bar, a local watering hole for families and what seemed to be an ever growing population of middle-aged orphans who gather there for companionship.

During my short walkabout, I understand that I must make amends to Teresa. I hadn't thought of that before now. For the peabrain Winston, the faked video held the possibility of placing him at the center of a drama and I could imagine his friends and him drinking Boone's Farm wine and playing it over and over in someone's basement while laughing hysterically.

I sit on the stairs of the Episcopal church at the end of the long block in the center of Hampden's main street and again call Winston hoping to get the name of Teresa's restaurant. I

leave a voicemail. Minutes later he calls back.

“Winston, why didn’t you return my call?”

“What?”

“You were supposed to call Teresa then get right back to me. We were going to set up a meeting with her.”

“One hundred percent for real, Mr. Zaner. Straight talk? I forgot all about it. Clorox told me I needed to help her go shopping and I was going to call Teresa when I got in the car but Clorox got all mad about something so I forgot. I just figured she was on her period but her mother told me that she thinks Clorox is bi-polar.”

“Where does Teresa work, Winston.”

“I can never remember, but it’s like this place that’s a restaurant in a parking lot in Laurel? Clorox, what’s the name of the place Teresa works?”

I wait.

“She forgets too, but first you go down I-95 and then you get over to Laurel and you start going down the main street, I forget what it’s called, and her restaurant is on the right and it’s got these stripes on the window awnings and it’s called something like Mayberry’s or Berry Bright or something. I know it has the word berry in it somewhere.”

“I’m going to hunt it down, Winston. I’ll be over there within the hour. Why don’t you join me?”

I hear him relay the news to Clorox. Back on the phone to me: “Clorox is getting sort of mad about it because she says I promised her I’d shop with her because it was like I told you earlier a bad week for her because she has a bunch of downer people in her life that it...”

“Bring her along. We all can have lunch together and I’m sure there is plenty of shopping in Laurel.”

More conferencing with Clorox.

“But she says there’s not a whole lot of stores where she could buy jeans that make her look young and tragic, but maybe there is one and so we’ll meet you over at the restaurant that...”

“In the lobby of the restaurant where Teresa works. We can be in touch by phone. Let’s get this over with, Winston. No delay. Where are you now?”

“We’re down here in Glen Burnie at the Target where Clorox is shopping for clothes where she can’t find anything in black that fits her right because she’s a petite and sometimes she has to go to the little girls section.”

“Good,” I say. “Jump in the car and go south on I-95. You should get there before I do.”

“Where are you?”

“In Hampden at my house.”

“We’ll come and pick you up because everybody’s supposed to be trying to save the economy by not driving too much in individual cars.”

“Winston, listen carefully. I will meet you in the lobby of the restaurant where Teresa works.”

“Okay, but there’s like plenty of room in Clorox’s mom’s Honda Civic even though Clorox has already purchased a lot of things mainly for solutions to pesky household problems like stains and such like that.”

“I’ll see you there in an hour.”

I run upstairs to my computer and Google metropolitan area restaurants with berry in the

name, but come up with nothing. I would have to seek striped window awnings.

Huge accident on southbound I-95 north of the beltway that forces traffic to crawl. One eye on the road, I try to find an alternative route by searching Mapquest on my cellphone, but can't manage the necessary micro-movements with my right thumb. I keep activating advertisements on the edge of the main screen. Look up and see brake lights of cars flower multiple levels deep in front of me and I skid, bucking the car, nearly smashing into the Volvo in front of me.

The Interstate turns into a parking lot. A helicopter roars by close overhead. I see the craft bank then hover a half mile downrange before slowly descending, spinning a whirl of debris in its wind field cone. After twenty minutes, cars move again, then slow, then surge forward, then creep, which, from far above, might present as enchantingly muscular, rhythmic, and serpentine, but here on the ground feels like the thousand other times modern life grips me and my fellow citizens in its stranglehold of boredom and anonymous, low-grade struggle.

Each of us passes by the ground zero scene of the accident. I turn to gape. I see a motorcycle tumbled on its side and resting amidst a pool of leaked lubricants in the middle of the third lane over. A man lies secured with straps and duct tape on a stretcher next to the lane in which all of us pass, his middle-aged, white face open to the sky.

I stare harder. He could be me, I could be him. Two efficient med techs lift him and hustle with minimal jostling to the helicopter sitting like a gargantuan mother insect in the flat grassy median between north and southbound lanes. I silently wish him the best, hoping now so close to death that life would offer him bounty. I want to witness helicopter ascent to safety, but there is too much medical business inside the beast that needs doing, and I drive onward around a

bend and never see it achieve flight.

I've been glancing at my watch noting minutes tick by. The crash then stutter of traffic has marooned me at 3:00 p.m. I hold back from calling Winston because talking to him creates nonlinear ricochets which I don't manage well psychologically. I speed toward the Laurel exit once traffic spreads into all lanes again, and fifteen minutes later I creep down the main drag looking left and right for striped awnings. A gaudy, brightly painted building in dark blue and fire-engine red with same colored awnings jumps out at me. Situated in the middle of a parking lot to an endless bank of strip mall stores. Beetlejoint, its name. Close enough to berry, I think, especially for a free-associator like Winston.

I wheel into the acreage of parking lot and slot the car into a spot near the front door.

Inside, I look around for Teresa. If only she and I could talk a moment, I could clear out a space in which a rational explanation could be poured like fresh blue water into a pool.

I notice as I survey the employees that all of them possess a robotic good cheer. As a twenty-something I rolled my eyes and damned "corporatization," "nazification," or "Disneyization." But now, a middle aged guy, I appreciate the friendly smile and pervasive good cheer in restaurants within orbits of mall-dom. Why not? One's inability to make sense of life amidst such feverish shopping can, at least, be counteracted for a few minutes by the role-play of waiter and waitress units dressed in uniform greeting you with aggressive smiles while asking how they can help.

One such happy person square-shoulders her way into my space as I try to make out as if I were a customer looking for the restroom.

“Hi, how may I help you?” she says.

I like that she has one blue and one brown eye. I know youngsters like to wear contacts to change their eye color, and I suspect because of the intensity of the colors that she goofed on all the fudgies around her.

“Well,” I say, “maybe you can.”

She must have caught me staring into the eyes. I smile. I want to be in on the joke.

She smiles back at me. I smile more at her. She starts laughing and so do I. We laugh hard together Two people in a booth to our right frown.

She and I double over in laughter sharing a great joke. We come up for air. She fans a slender white hand at her face. She tears up.

I am so happy that someone understands me, that I have been located. I want to hail the manager over and suggest that he give the happy unit here a raise and maybe a promotion to assistant manager.

“Your eyes are great,” I say.

“Oh. It’s called heterochromia. I...”

“I thought you were wearing two different colored contacts.”

“What? Why would I do that? Geez,” she says. “You look just like my Uncle Harry. It just made me laugh like crazy and when you were laughing I thought somehow you knew him. Now I feel really weird.”

I become an attractor. Particles of her feelings-of-weirdness drift onto me like pollen and saturate my aura then begin rapidly soaking into deeper layers.

“Gosh, I’m sorry,” I say.

“What were you laughing at?”

“I don’t know, I just thought...” I have been switched onto a wrong track. I have no reverse gear.

“I mean, if I limped, would you find that funny?”

“I wish I could explain myself, but that would be impossible. I wasn’t making fun of you.”

“I really wish you hadn’t laughed.”

My bones now ache with her infecting weirdness. I need to escape.

“I’m looking for a woman named Teresa who works here. Teresa Napoli.”

“Right,” she says.

“She’s a waitress.”

I walk through the restaurant checking all the employees. No Teresa.

I could wait in the lobby for Winston and Clorox, whom I’d begun to want to meet, given her name.

I pull out my phone. I’d hoped that our plans would mesh without further calling. I’d hoped that Teresa would magically appear. I’d hoped that I could chair a meeting of our mini United Nations at a back table in a nearby restaurant and work through the structures of our competing interests and seek ways in which we could find compromise.

I leave the building, take a breath, and call Winston.

“Hello, Winston,” I say.

“Yo,” he says.

“I was hoping to see you at Beetlejoint right here in Laurel. It seemed to fit the

description.”

“Scorch,” he says. “I forgot to call you. We like waited for you with Teresa for a ton of time but she finally left but Clorox and me have been talking about how maybe you could come on over here and meet with us two instead of with Teresa needing to be here. Teresa had to get going and we’re both really into some dessert and I want a Blue Ribbon Brownie at Applebees which is where Teresa works because I remembered the striped awnings.”

“I thought you said it had berry in the name?”

“It must have been bees I was thinking about but it doesn’t matter what matters is that Teresa works here and those Blue Ribbon Brownies are epic and Clorox wants a Triple Chocolate Meltdown and I know since you’re one of those old people that you might want to have a half portion but they have this one thing Sizzling Apple Pie that’s for heath food you might like.”

I didn’t like the snapshot moment of handing over \$100.00 to a student at the school where I work which could be posted as an insert in the faked video. I want Teresa there, the heavy, the game changer, the C.E.O.

But forced into another strategy, the bottom-up way, the righteous, grassroots way, might solve my problem. Get Winston and Clorox on my side and they might convince Teresa to cut losses and move on to the next scheme. She would find out that she no longer had Maurice in her gang of two, and if Winston urges her to leave me alone, then I could be a teacher again instead of a frantic guy driving around the beltway trying to persuade a teenager to delete a faked soft-porn video.

What hadn’t occurred to me until parallel thinking while talking to Winston is that Teresa

might direct all brand of furious wrath at me once she discovers that I authored her marriage annulment. No doubt she authored the faked marriage in the first place, and no doubt she knew it was a matter of time before Maurice found out, but still, I am the guy who derailed her game. Now, she would have to construct another con and maybe she didn't want to do that. Maybe she liked her life with Maurice and her mother situated in that rundown eight unit apartment complex with her brother-pawn Winston while she finished high school and caged some sort of scholarship to get into a local university. Maybe by taking her off her game at this juncture would cause a blowback on me that would spread into the law enforcement field rather than the job-dislocating prank field. What if she'd confessed to some sort of counselor or authority that in fact a teacher had reached under her blouse and felt her up and that, yes, she had willingly participated, but now suffered all manner of guilt and shame and wished to address how violated she felt by Mr. Zaner.

Tell me, Teresa, so I hear the prosecuting lawyer in my mind's courtroom, did you at any time feel uncomfortable and wished Mr. Zaner to stop his sexual advances?

Yes, I admit I was being sort of flirty, but he was a teacher and we were in his classroom and I wanted to be respected and admired by him. I feel he used me as an object of his desires and right after he started touching me I didn't know what to do. I felt too ashamed to scream so I...

No, that mustn't happen. I needed the video deleted into unrecoverable ether. I was a CIA handler with a rogue agent who may or may not respond to instructions. Maybe I should visit Ma, their mother. Was she the force behind the force? Maybe Teresa and Winston ran her operations. Yes, maybe I needed to go on bended knee to Ma.

Ma would know the precise dosage of vengeance to administer, then afterward, scarred, poorer, I could get on my way in life.

I need to reel myself in. I am circulating through an aquifer of panic.

“Where are you?”

He tells me. Applebee’s is another half-mile down the road.

I pull into traffic and think I see Teresa going the opposite direction toward Baltimore City, but that is four lanes away and I’m far from clear-headed profiling abilities. Applebee’s could have been Beetlejoint. Both are situated in the middle of a sea of parking space. Behind Applebee’s, as Beetlejoint, are endless stores and armies of cars. How could there be so much to buy? I tend to *tsk* at shopping as idiots trying to bore their way into some sort of vein of happiness in the way of old time gold prospectors, but maybe I am the one wearing blinders. Maybe going around looking for some household item like a lampshade is merely a causal agent for the journey which in the end is fun in itself.

I find those two at a table near the window. Are they even old enough to drive? My gosh, I’m dealing with jesters from some Ozian otherworld who with a fumble of their magic power wand could cause me profound career injury.

I sit down at their table and I can feel Clorox, the brains of the outfit, examining me, the man from the video.

Winston introduces us. “This is the teacher guy from my school who’s somebody I never saw before I went with Teresa that time.”

I reach my hand across the table for a polite shake. She puts fist up so we bump fists. “I don’t like shaking hands,” she says. “Germs freak me out.”

The three of us live through uncomfortable moments of trying to find common ground.
They order dessert.

“It’s on me,” I say.

Winston stabs and chops at his brownie and ice cream. After he spoons a mouthful, he says, “Why don’t you recite one of your poems to him, Clorox, you’re always reciting them to me and it’s hard for me to really understand them because they’re not like a story of anything but just a lot of words.”

She looks at me from behind stylish black rimmed glasses. She has dyed blonde hair in a kewpie doll cascade and wears a red vest with bumble bee pins and a tight long sleeved shirt.

“Oh,” she begins, “the breath of dark animal men in my life.”

“That’s the one you were saying to me last night, right, that you said you sent off to a...”

“Winston, you’re interrupting me.”

“I was just saying.”

“Oh,” she again launches, closing her eyes, grasping her throat with a small, childlike hand, “the breath of dark animal men in my life.

The seizure of criminal joy, godless lust and
Wounds so deep they cry,
Their lips misbegotten into clam smiles.
The screams of howling inwardness,
The thrusts of feral plunging.
Plunging inwardly into my soul-less
Howling.”

She opens her eyes and awaits my response.

“Well,” I say.

“I mean,” he says, “you’re a teacher. What grade would you give that poem and like the

way she says it?"

"The imagery is arresting," I say. "So graphic and intense. You're wise beyond your years." I'm scrambling to find an exit. I need us to talk about the video.

"Say another one," Winston says.

"You don't really have to," I coax.

"Just one more, Winston, then that's it. I'm not some monkey girlfriend for you to show off."

"Okay," he says. "But you're always telling me that I don't understand you and here's a teacher, all right, who he's got education from a long time ago who can tell about whether the poem is good."

Again, she closes her eyes and puts hand to throat: "He turns me bottom up..."

I stop listening as best I can, but the imagery acts as gravity. She recites quietly, almost whispering the words.

Finished, she wipes away tears.

She again settles back in the booth and stares at me, awaiting my reaction.

"Intense, personal, dramatic," I say. "Your images are startling. How long have you been writing?" I ask hoping to veer her into happy talk.

"Which line do you like best?" she asks.

"I think the first one," I say. "It sets up the poem nicely." It's the only one I can remember intact. Images of this woman-child being ravished by the likes of Winston, whom I slot in as one of her animal men, are too much for my circuitry. My gosh, the sexual alertness of this youngster.

My imagination begins to run amok: a cop walks in and sits in an adjacent booth. He hears a bleach-blonde teenager recite sexually drenched poetry to a man who's trying to bribe her boyfriend into deleting a video tape depicting a sexual liaison between boyfriend's sister and the man. No, none of this stacks right.

The waitress pours me more coffee. Those two start squabbling about how little attention he pays her compared to what Gary gives Julie, Julie being her best friend.

In response, Winston scarfs up the rest of his dessert. She puts her fork down and declares, "I'm getting fat."

He pulls her plate over and in a few scoops finishes hers off.

"Okay, Winston, time for us to talk turkey," I say.

"What?" he says. "I'm still sort of hungry. Do you think I could get another dessert?"

"Of course."

"I'm going to get the Maple Butter Blondie because they serve it sizzling to your table and that's awesome."

I flag over the waitress. He orders.

"Winston, I need to know that you're going to delete that video."

"But like I said I was supposed to get one hundred dollars from Maurice and he ripped me off."

"I'll give you a hundred dollars. I need to know that that video doesn't exist."

"Plus you said you'd give Clorox twenty-five dollars because her mother is being a bitch."

"Don't say that about her," she says.

“I’m just saying what you said.”

“I can say it. She’s family. You...”

“Listen,” I say. “I can give Clorox twenty-five and you one hundred.” I pull out my cell phone. “I want you to go to your Dropbox account and delete the tape.”

“Okay,” he says. He twists his tongue while working the small touch screen. He goes online. He’s at the Dropbox site. He’s punching in username and password. Then he grits teeth. He re-punches. I’m moments away from escaping this minefield, this nightmare, this horror.

“I knew it,” he says. “I can’t remember the password. I’ve got all of them written down at home and like it had a bunch of symbols like a percentage mark and big and small letters that didn’t make sense so nobody would ever crack the code but I don’t remember how it goes.”

“You create a password you don’t remember?” I can’t help myself.

“Because sometimes I do, but then I forget them and the computer people send me a password that never makes sense and sometimes I just leave it and I write it down because if I don’t remember it nobody else can remember it and steal my identity.”

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s email Dropbox right now, request another password which they’ll generate, and we can open it.”

“Awesome, here’s my dessert.”

The Maple Butter Blondie truly does come sizzling to the table.

“Put a little of that on my plate,” Clorox says.

“I’m hungry,” he says. “Ask Mr. Zaner to get you another one or one of those bowls of soup or something that you like.”

She turns pouty eyes on me.

“Of course,” I say.

“I need a menu,” she says.

I realize she is suggesting that I hop up and get her one.

“They’re right over there by the hostess stand,” she says.

“Oh,” I say, “you can go ahead and get yourself one.”

She rolls her eyes and with great heaviness and huffing hauls herself out of the booth and walks toward the front of the restaurant. She is small of stature and with her hair in that kooky top side water spout, she appears elfin.

She returns, scans, looks up, corkscrews her head, and says, “Well, do you want anything? If you sit there and stare at us it makes me feel weird.”

I am Santa and the elves have taken control of the workshop.

She hands over the menu.

“You know what,” I say. “I think I will have something.”

“I thought we were just here for dessert,” she says.

“No, anything you want.”

Winston raises his head like a prairie dog. “Really? That’s so awesome.”

Our waitress appears. I ask for more menus. She brings them.

“I’m starving,” he says. “Them desserts are not like a real authentic meal.”

“I want to order for everyone,” she says. “Then you have to tell me if it’s what you would have ordered yourself.”

“See,” says Winston. “Clorox both her and her mother are psychics and they can tell about things, but Clorox since she’s younger she should go into police work telling about where

bodies are and things like that, maybe drawing pictures of the murderer.”

“For Mr. Zaner man,” she says. “I’m going to order only appetizers because he’s not that hungry.”

Had I said something to tip her off? She is exactly right.

“I would say it’s between the Chicken Wonton Tacos and the Potato Twisters.”

She stares into my eyes. “You know what. You won’t admit it to yourself, but you want both. So, that’s what you get, both.”

“I’m floored,” I say.

“Say what I want,” says Winston. He closes his eyes. “I’m thinking it right now.”

“You, Winston, are in the mood for a Quesadilla burger. You’ve never had one before and since this is an unusual day, you’re ready to try something different.”

“Awesome times two,” he says. “You’re right.”

“I’m going to have the shrimp and spinach salad,” she says.

The mood lifts. I angle in. “Winston, why don’t we email Dropbox and have them send you another password so that you can then open your account right here. Then we’ll eat, and everything will be fine.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Go to your email account and...”

“Email is such a scorch. I think texting is better.”

“Okay, but why don’t you do it now so this video business gets taken care of. We’ll just go to your web email just this once.”

“But I never do that because for real how am I supposed to remember my password on

my email if I never do it except at home where I have my passwords thumbtacked to a cork board right above this desk where I'm supposed to do my homework?"

I am without a weapon to fight the amazing psychic elf Clorox and the baffling Winston who defies profiling.

"So you don't remember your password for your email account?"

"Then even if I did I might by accident write it down or while typing it in somebody could look at my fingers or over my shoulder and they could use my email account to say it's me when it's not."

The food arrives. Winston and Clorox order more sodas. Those two gossip about the events in their lives and I'm left as elder caretaker, seen but not heard. Finished, Winston declares he stuffed. Clorox looks pleased that she got to dine out.

It's Sunday. Earlier, Winston had threatened to release the video to YouTube on Monday. I remind him of that. "I've made a good faith effort to do everything I could on my end to make sure that video doesn't get released."

"But Maurice he's the one who never gave me my hundred."

"As I've said, I'll make sure to pay you, but I haven't seen the video deleted. I'm not going to hand over one hundred dollars if you still have a copy of it. I was hoping to take care of all of that today."

"I know. I'm wondering if I could bring my password to your classroom tomorrow and we could sit at your teacher computer and I could delete the video and you could give me a hundred dollars and seriously I won't tell anyone."

"Winston, can you imagine how that would look?"

“And Clorox she could come with to stand at the door as lookout like I did with Maurice and Teresa late in the afternoon.”

“No, it has to take place off school grounds. I’m talking about my job here, Winston.”

“But like I need my hundred dollars otherwise...”

“And I want to give it to you but not before I see the video deleted.”

“But what if I post it on YouTube then they’ll think that you’re a kiddie porno type person and they could take you to jail.”

“And you wouldn’t get your one hundred dollars.”

“Which would be a total rip,” he says.

“I think what we need to do,” I say, “is give this another try. I want Teresa with you.”

“And don’t forget me,” says Clorox.

“How about tomorrow evening? If Teresa works, we can come right back here. Please, whatever you do, don’t forget your password to your Dropbox account. I want Teresa’s word that this will stop. Does Teresa work tomorrow?”

“I don’t know but she told me she was saving up for college because I know she wants to be a professor or a scientist or something not just somebody who’s in school for a whole bunch of years.”

“I will talk to Teresa tomorrow if I see her in school and check on her schedule. Either way, I will call you tomorrow after school at 3:30 sharp. We will agree to meet here or in another restaurant with a specific address so there is no mixup. You will have your email account password and your Dropbox account password.”

“Emailing somebody blows.”

“You, Teresa, Clorox and I will meet together. You will delete the sham video of Teresa and me. I will give you one hundred dollars. I will pay Teresa the twenty-six dollars you owe her. I will give Clorox twenty-five dollars. Is there anything I could have possibly left out or that is unclear?” I look at Clorox.

“I can see why you’re a teacher,” she says. “The way you give instructions.”

“Clorox, may I have your phone number?” I say. “In case I can’t get in touch with Winston.”

She gives it to me and I punch it into my contact list.

“I’ve seen the video,” she says. “It’s obviously faked. I mean, get real. If it was me, I wouldn’t pay it any mind. Teresa’s just messing with you.” She blinked and stared off to the side. “I wonder if they ever planned on releasing it.”

“But Clorox, you say it’s faked but then he will just say okay and it won’t be sort of like a video release he sweats over.”

“That’s not the point, Winston,” she says.

The female forever mystifies. Why would she ride the directionless pony Winston? For practice? Surely, she had outgrown him five minutes into their relationship, whenever it began.

Clorox tilts her head and regards me as a designer trying to capture the essential me.

“Your aura is throwing off some crazy sunspots,” she says.

“That can happen.” I need to escape.

“She pulls out her cell phone from a small cloth hippie bag, hits someone’s number, and puts it to her ear.

She clicks off.

“I thought I could set something up right now,” she says. “Teresa’s not answering.

I call Clorox from where I’m sitting. Her cell phone rings. I say to her, “Save my number, would you?” She does then clicks off. “I want to leave all lines of communication open,” I say.

“I want resolution and you seem to have a handle on what needs to be done,” I say.

She shrugs. “Ignore it. Let Teresa or whoever do what they’re going to do. You’re sweating it and it’s a nothing.”

Winston sits back in a thickheaded huff. I notice for the first time how low his hairline is. “Clorox, it’s like we been saying to each other about our relationship all for one. All of us,” he points to her then him, “for one of us. But Mr. Zaner here he doesn’t want the video released so we should at least consider that so what he does is do everything he wants to keep the video not being released.”

“I need to go, you two.” I thought I would have been able to corral the variables and create termination, but that didn’t occur. I need to go back to the temple and enter deep meditation. I hope that from inner realms springs some methodology of attack or retreat or plan if the meeting with Teresa tomorrow doesn’t work.

I am sitting on the front porch of my row home. The homes have granite foundations and all have a structural overhang supported by white pillars. A knee high wall divides porch territories. The sunny day has given over to a cool and wet early evening. I wear my winter coat.

Some days the drama of life appears before me while I sit here. Toddlers, parents, and old people pass by on the walkway out front. Some wave. I say hi.

That evening, post-Clorox and Winston, I see a police car make its way down the block,

then pull over in front of my house. My first impulse is to flee.

My tongue thickens. My mouth dries. My breath shortens. The officer inside turns on her dome light and works at a metal clipboard. She's found a quiet place to finish paperwork. I avoid cardiac arrest.

My phone rings. Teresa. I glance at the cop.

"Hello," I say, keeping my voice low. "I've tried to get in touch with you." I now know that I want her completely out of my life. I will be a Baptist preacher of moral rectitude and finish the school year wearing white shirts and conservative ties. I have been through a slough of despond, and I seek righteousness like a plant turning toward the sun.

"Maurice just called me with all this rigmarole about the video and I told him two or three days ago to let it go," Teresa says. "I didn't like the way it was stacking up. I know it wasn't at all cool, Mr. Zaner that I was part of that, and I was only part of it, but I washed my hands of it days ago. Maurice and his cousin Jo Jo wanted to keep squeezing you because they want to open a store."

"That's not how Maurice would tell the tale."

"You were over at their house. Who would be the most likely person who would be blackmailing you, me or those people? They're batshit nuts. I wanted out of their plan almost as soon as they conjured it up."

"Teresa, that's a little hard to believe."

"Mr. Zaner, you were good to me. I let myself go along with something I knew was wrong. I've got to live with that."

"Your little brother, Winston, is trying to work me, too."

“My brother? Let’s not take that too far. His father ended up dumping that pasty-faced little moron on our doorstep and my mother took him in. She’s taken in more than one stray in her day. I love her for it, but it’s caused her no end of troubles.”

“Let’s you, Winston, Clorox, and me sit down tomorrow so that he can pull up the video and I can see it being deleted. That would give me a great deal of satisfaction.”

“We can do more than that.”

We set up a meeting time. I hang up the phone. *We can do more than that.*

I drive up to my favorite Indian food restaurant and buy carryout paneer makhani with nan bread and bring back the loaded styrofoam packages to my little world and watch TV. I hope to dissolve into a de-nerved state, a sort of receiving organism in the guise of a human. I want low-level visual stimulation and a rutted-in narrative that I can coast along with which asks for no cerebral contribution.

But during an epoch of commercials which I mute I finally have to admit that the cabin with the wintry chill and the stacked splintered wood against the stone wall and the crackling fire and the high pitched ceiling and the lodge a quarter mile away where skiers and cross country hikers and backpackers meet and drink and laugh, all of it launches from its hidden sphere just beneath consciousness and positions itself in the center of my universe. *We can do more than that.*

I open my laptop and scour winter resort possibilities in Vermont and New Hampshire, but I want to stick with Vermont because of the two it feels more Thoreau-ish. I Google *Where is Walden Pond* on a separate tab and find out it is in Massachusetts which seems to me as if I had

known that at one time in my life but forgot it along with other culturally important nodal points.

Still, I stick with Vermont.

I find a resort ten miles outside of Burlington that has all the attributes I'm seeking plus a folk concert held on their pavilion on the Saturday evening we would be there which I book for two weeks from yesterday. If we drive up, that's ten or eleven hours which requires a day on the road going then one returning. We'll leave early Thursday morning then return late Tuesday evening.

I take my fingers off the keyboard after leaving a \$200.00 deposit. I stand up and look out the front window wondering if the cop has left the car to approach my front door, alerted to web traffic that suggests untoward teacher behavior.

I return to the couch and look at my computer and think, are you out of your mind?

I am disturbed beyond measure. I am now 43 years old and, really, I have nothing. I am a man orphaned whose profession acts as his caretaker. I have a wife and daughters who live a thousand miles away. A girl comes to my classroom, shows me goo-goo eyes, and suddenly she's got me twisted and down, down I go as if I were wrestling an alligator.

It is Sunday evening after dark, 8:00 p.m. The street is filled with parked cars as seems to happen on Sundays, so if I go out I'll have to park blocks away.

But I do need to go out. I need to leave. To drive around. To find another way to think.

I wonder how many of us there are, people who get in their cars at night and drive around their cities or those spaces with horizons in the country. People who need to move, to roll down their windows, and feel the night air on them. People like me who feel uncomfortable in their own skin, people impacted with a low hum engine which doesn't power anything, but revolves

on its own, below hearing range, far down in the self-mine where signals are hard to manage and interpret.

I stop for coffee at a diner down in Fells Point. I glance at the filmy wall clock and it says 9:30. I sit down knowing that tomorrow Winston, if the whim strikes him, could release a video that could cut me off from my only known livelihood. Waves of panic reverberate through me, and I freeze. I'm gripped with the absolute knowledge that Winston will release and that Maurice and Teresa hover outside of my field of vision urging him to do so.

I get out of there knowing that I'm surfing a down wave. I shake clear of the whirlpool and find myself driving. I head east on Boston Street which once upon a time was a two lane road from the Inner Harbor to Dundalk with nothing but abandoned buildings on either side for a couple of miles. Now, in the triangles of streets meeting at odd angles, grocery stores and independent shops with artistic neon signs fill those long ago buildings. Parking has become a problem. The young crowd demographic has chosen to spend lifestyle dollars in those shops, live in nearby houses, and attend neighborhood community meetings.

Down the road, Brewer's Hill has its own group of upscale shops south of its neighborhood row homes. I go through Canton Industrial Area then head over to Dundalk by way of Holabird Avenue then wind my way over to Merritt Boulevard going north-northwest. Shops shoulder to shoulder line both sides of the street, McDonald's, new automobile lots, a bowling alley, a pet store, auto parts, a Denny's restaurant, and on and on. I take Merritt Boulevard to North Point Avenue to East Lombard and head west again, then take North Havern Street a block north to East Baltimore and turn left.

I hadn't planned to arrive here...except perhaps subconsciously. I slow down to glance at

the prostitutes that that walk in singles. I've seen them, not these particular, but members of their flock, on other occasions. Bleached hair, no longer pretty, sometimes bruises, stiff shoulders, scanning eyes. In college I paid for sex with a prostitute one drunken night with buddies, and I caught a case of chlamydia. Never again, I thought, but here I am.

The prostitutes stroll along a poorly lit strip behind a plaza with a locally owned grocery store, dollar store, laundromat, two hair places and a check cashing outlet. The upscale demographic hasn't established itself in this quadrant of the city. The parking lot is never more than half-full. Windowless bars and a despairing VFW hall are close by.

It is 10:00 p.m. on a Sunday night and our lives have met.

Two girls walk along the shoulder of the potholed roadway on the left. One walks on the sidewalk to the right. My direction. I slow down in front of her, and all three heads turn toward me. It's a numbers game, and the far two have lost. I look in the rearview mirror and see her approach in her tight jeans and jacked heels and a fake fur lined thin coat. Her bleached hair hangs to her shoulders whipped and frayed as if she just got off a motorcycle. She comes up to the opposite side and quick searches the seat of the car for an errant wallet or salable item then stares at me through mascaraed eyes.

"Hey, baby, you look like you want a good time."

I see her nostrils flex like fish gills, as if she were testing for emanations signaling danger. Her lilac perfume pervades the car and the odor of it sits heavy in my stomach. She's tried to cover up acne along her jawline, but she has no problem exposing her alarmingly rotted teeth. What was no doubt once a girly twitch of her head now seems aggressive and predatory. She opens the door and slides in without being invited.

“Baby, I’ve got a spot for us. What do you want this evening? Big boy like you.”

“Just a blowjob,” I say.

“No just-a anything from me, baby, you’ll see. Give me forty, honey, and I got a spot for us real private.”

I lean over to pull out my wallet from my back pocket, and I shake my head. Right there with a hooker in my car I almost start to cry at how meaningless my life has become to me.

The phone rings and I see it’s Teresa. I say hello then glance at the creature sitting beside me who strikes me as being stronger than I am.

“Hold on Teresa,” I say.

“Another time, m’am.”

I give her a twenty dollar bill to inoculate myself from any sort of blowback--her pummeling me, rock through the windshield, knife puncture of a tire, boyfriend Ralpie appearing from shadows who carries a lead pipe. She snatches it out of my hand, slips out of the car, and steps into the street peering into the driver’s side window of the next car that passes.

I pull away.

“I didn’t expect a call from you,” I say, determined to be casual. I am close to gibbering and slobbering on myself at hearing her voice. She registers as a friend from an era capable of being mapped only by us.

“Mr. Zaner,” she says. “What are you doing right now?”

“Well, Teresa, it’s Sunday night. I’m preparing for class tomorrow.”

Why the lying, I think. But something is in charge of me, rather than the opposite. I want

to believe that if one or two more things were under my control, then lots of other things would be under my control.

“Why don’t you come by and pick me up?”

“Where would that be?”

“At the apartment. You know about it. You know where I live.”

“I do.”

“Come by and pick me up so we can go somewhere and talk. This has been an usually disturbed time for me and I could use someone to talk to.”

“Teresa,” I say. I am going west on East Baltimore Street, past rundown row homes, and people sitting on their front stoops smoking. The winter days are mild, though Baltimoreans wear coats, and weather forecasters talk about the possibility of snow. I’ve never quite understood Baltimore’s response to winter. It’s as though the drop in the temperature below 40 degrees takes them by surprise every year. A big fat guy wearing a wifebeater t-shirt stands in the doorway to his house, door open, unshaven beard, not going in or out, staring with a cigar plug in the side of his mouth. The world’s ill-health stamped on his face and slumping body.

“I know how it must sound, Mr. Zaner, but just come by and we’ll worry about appearances later. How long will it take you?”

“Give me a half-hour,” I say. I could get over there in ten minutes, but I must gather my dignity somehow. I’m hoping that I can maneuver it so that I can convince myself that I’m making decisions. I dawdle along, turn left at Light Street and go down by the Harbor then farther south past the Cross Street Market then back and forth through those neighborhoods of row homes, here better kept, the streets wider, the sense of money being managed, and homes

dimensional degrees from bankruptcy proceedings and short sales.

I swing back north, this time taking Charles Street so that I can go through Baltimore's narrow downtown streets populated by buildings that have been updated and modernized but still retain the sense of being from another, slower time, those big gray hulks of offices without the majesty of skyscrapers. I drive past the quiet Peabody, around the cobblestone circle then beyond the bars and small shops of Mt. Vernon then up past the train station then beyond farther north still to an area that the city is trying to develop for artists to live and work then up past Johns Hopkins University. My neighborhood Hampden is to the west about a mile.

I stop at the light and consider turning left on the diagonal University Parkway. I could go home and not answer the phone when Teresa calls wondering where I am. I could go to school tomorrow and get through a hard week of internal churning. But by the end of the week I would settle and find an uneven, disturbed, but nonetheless present equilibrium.

I watch the light. A group of Hopkins students crosses in front of me. Two couples hold hands. Three or four others are satellites around the lovers. They are animated with talk. I wonder if they have been to a performance of some kind, since they're out and about late on a Sunday night. No matter. They live the time in their lives of lack of restraint in which the fetters of the years upcoming will like vines entwine and tug them without remorse toward earthbound pursuits.

The light changes to green. For a few moments I remain. No one is behind me who with a tap on his horn might urge me forward. I look both ways in front and see the intersection is void of cars and people. I should turn left and go home to the quiet of my house and the known pattern of an evening before a school week. I wait, deciding through the seconds of the green

light, until I see in my rearview the headlights of a car approaching.

I will turn toward home. Winston, Teresa, Clorox, and I will meet tomorrow, and the video images of Teresa and me will disappear into ether.

I press the gas pedal but I don't turn. I go north to Cold Spring Road and take the short drive to the neighborhood apartment complex where Teresa lives. I pull up and see her standing on the sidewalk.

I look at my watch. 10:30. None of this should be happening. It's a dream I want to wake from, but I'm weighed down with weights that pull me slough-of-despondward. I do everything to remain upright. I can't seem to find a way to control what is happening to me. Fog and lights seem to thicken the periphery, low, at horizon level. A sort of sub-acoustic whirring which when I turn my attention to locate seems to silence.

"I have a friend," she says now inside the car, "who has a cottage on the Eastern Shore."

I drive away. What is open in Baltimore on Sunday evening? A few bars, maybe the odd restaurant downtown. I know of an Italian place with dimmed lights and an old world attention to heavy, red tablecloths and miniature gold lanterns as centerpieces.

We drive for a while in excruciating silence. I am ready to tell her that we need to circle back. My life is slipping away from me as recognizable space. I remember taking a drug in college that impelled critical distance from my normal that shocked me so badly that I never again took anything resembling a chemical product stronger than smoking a joint after a long week of school. Right now, I feel that I've ingested something without notion of a time arc for when the trip might be over.

I get on I-83 and drive south toward the Harbor. She knows of a place in Canton that

stays open till 1:00 a.m every day. She wants to go there.

“What’s this about your friend’s cottage?” I ask. Snap of my fingers, it replaces Vermont. I can’t seem to help myself.

“She told me her family owns it. I give her a week lead, and I can use it. Especially during the winter. You feel like going there with me?”

“Sure,” I say, attempt casual. “Why not?”

“Why not is right, Mr. Zaner. Let’s go next weekend. I’m not doing anything.”

“My calendar is clear,” I say.

“Who is Sonny Marketson?” she asks.

Gravity releases me. I’m falling upward, outward.

“How would you know about Sonny?”

“She’s the reason your wife left you, right?”

“When marriages break up, it’s not because of one thing.”

“If there was no Sonny, you’d still be married, I bet.

I shift in my seat. I clear my throat. Sonny Marketson was a mistake from a long time ago. A misunderstanding all the way around.

“How do you know about Sonny Marketson?”

“Mr. Zaner, I’m a thorough person. I get to know the people in my life who are going to make a difference to me.”

“That information is sealed.”

“Funny about information. The web has changed the game. Is anything private anymore? Nothing seems to stay contained.”

“You should tell me how you found out about Sonny.”

“Mr. Zaner, let’s tell each other our secrets.” She puts her hand on my leg. She says,
“We’re grownups together, aren’t we?” Then removes it.

I pull up to a stoplight. She tilts her head at me. Her unreadable black eyes hold spheroids
of light.

“Are you hungry, Mr. Zaner,” she says.

“I am.”

More silence. I drive.

“Sonny Marketson made an accusation about me years ago that was never proven.”

“But you were put under Administrative supervision, weren’t you?”

She even knows the language.

“That is my personal business,” I say.

“It’s in your record.”

“How did you get hold of that?” I say.

“There are a lot of people who work behind the scenes who have access to files, Mr.
Zaner. One person says something to another person who passes it along to another. Sometimes
you just have to perk up your ears. There’s a lot of information floating about.”

“There shouldn’t be.” Pathetic.

“But there is, Mr. Zaner! It’s there.”

“I think I’m going to choose denial as a coping mechanism. I am not part of the facebook
generation.”

“That was a really lame, old person’s response. And condescending. Kind of a crybaby

thing to say. Get off on Guilford here.”

“I thought we were going downtown then over to Canton.”

“I need to make a stop.”

I exit I-83 and she tells me to turn right on Madison.

I go for a few blocks before she says, “Here, park right here.”

We’re at Madison and Cathedral Streets. I park near the corner. Many of the big stone buildings have been converted into apartments. Peabody students live here. Singles. Artist types. Gays. A stone Episcopal church sits one block away on Cathedral. Some good restaurants on Charles around the corner.

She crosses the street and goes down about a half-block and takes the four steps up to the alcove of a large brownstone and presses the buzzer to go in.

“It’s me,” I hear Teresa say after someone garbles a “Who is it?” I stand on the bottom step.

“Why are we stopping here?” I ask.

“You’ll see.”

She sits in a simple, straight-backed wooden chair, barefoot, wearing bluejeans and a well worn baseball shirt, with stitch marks where an insignia had once been, buttoned up the front and loosely open at the neck. Her face is shadowed in the unlit room. I see she’s thin with dark hair and bangs and apparently in some sort of deep, personal recession. She leans with elbows on her knees as if weary beyond weariness.

Hung on the walls are framed, abstract works made of fabric. Geometric shapes harmonized with colors and patterns. Other than those, the room is spare, dark. A small wooden

table near where she sits is in a corner outside of the tiny kitchen. On the seat of a cushioned blue chair near a plain bookcase a child sleeps curled like a cat. A couch. An end table. A small TV on a portable stand. Bare floors. A door to the bathroom. Large windows overlooking a courtyard.

She nods her head with minute movements. She squints at me then leans back and smiles. Her lips are parched. I want to go to her and put the back of her head in my hand and bring a cup of water to her lips. She looks about the room slowly, as if she had awoken and sensed she didn't quite know where she was. I avert my eyes.

I reach to turn on a light, but the bulb has blown. I click it again to make sure. Her eyes are shadowed. Teresa steps into the kitchen and fills a glass tea pot with water and fires up the gas stove.

"Look at her," she says to me.

"Why don't I wait in the car," I say.

I don't belong here. I have a feeling that Teresa is going to buy marijuana from this friend. I have taken my eyes away, but the thin young lady in the chair is in her early twenties, I guess. The child in the chair is two or three and desperation hangs in the air like vines, and what needs to happen is for me to leave. Not wait by the car for Teresa with hopes that I will take her blouse off later, but leave. Go home. Put cab fare on the table near the stack of letters. Leave.

"Look at her," says Teresa.

"Just get whatever you want and let's get out of here."

I step to open the door.

"Zaner," says Teresa, "Look at her. Really."

I stop. In this moment I have finally got it. I will walk away from Teresa and the ridiculousness of still considering myself a young man. I have never been able to regard myself as forty-three. I've kept myself in good enough shape that when I hear colleagues my age who have old man complaints--bowel problems, digestive issues, back difficulties--I think, I'm not in that world. I end up measuring myself against guys who are ten, even fifteen years younger than I.

But this moment I'm forty-three, and I know it's taken too long. I'm a middle aged guy who's slogging it out like everyone else, and knowing such in my bones is liberating.

I look at Teresa and her magic aura has vanished. Women, I think, are aware of the moment the veil drops and can come out of their lair and take a panther swipe at you. I've been good about letting them know I'm tired of them, but not this moment. This one is payback. I know Teresa is tired of me, as well she should be. Some old guy drooling over her. It's got to register as annoying, revolting even, after the first uplift of vanity.

We are the past. I can breathe now. I can make amends and move into my middle age years. Lonely, happy, sad, surprising. It doesn't matter. I have finally grown up.

I pull out my wallet, the second time I've done that tonight, and put a twenty down on the table and say, "Here's cab fare, Teresa."

"Zaner." Another voice. Familiar.

I look at the woman sitting in the hardback chair.

I hadn't seen Sonny Marketson in three years.

"Sonny's in trouble, Zaner," says Teresa.

Teresa steps into the kitchen again to turn down the boiling water. She comes out empty

handed and goes to a floor lamp near the couch and turns on the light. Sonny has hands to thighs staring at me.

I've turned into salt and am melting into the sea.

"How do you two know each other?" I manage.

"Remember I told you I was taking a college course over at CCBC? I applied for an internship in their admissions office, and what do you know but Sonny works there, too. We got to talking. I kept telling her about this teacher I had a thing for. Then all of a sudden I hear her story. Not right, Mr. Zaner. She had to leave and you get to stay."

"Nothing about that appears the way it really was, Teresa. That was a long time ago."

I pull up a chair and sit at the kitchen table. Teresa goes to Sonny and reaches for her hand and walks her to the table where we all sit. Sonny smiles at me.

"Zaner," Sonny says. "You're here."

"But really not that long ago, Zaner," says Teresa. "You joining us for a cup of tea?"

I nod, okay. Not knowing what else to do.

Teresa's in the kitchen managing mugs. Sonny reaches across to me and puts her hand on mine. Tears fill her eyes.

Only a moment ago my life was available to me.

Teresa brings out mugs with strings trailing over the side. Then another trip for spoons and honey and a saucer for our discarded tea bags.

"We're just friends," says Teresa. Teresa touches her hand to Sonny's face. "Now, anyway." She bobs Sonny's tea bag up and down then places it on the saucer. "Drink your tea, hon," she says to her.

Sonny brings the mug to her lips and blows across the top.

“What’s wrong with her?” I ask.

“There’s nothing wrong with her. They’ve got her on some damned sedative or anti-anxiety meds or something. She needs to go home, Zaner, and I’m going to move all her stuff up to Vermont where her parents live.”

Vermont. A punch in the face.

“But they don’t know about Jonathan.” She nods to the child curled in the chair. “And neither do you, Zaner. But he’s yours. That’s why I brought you here.”

I know I black out because Teresa is sitting next to me with a wet towel to my forehead when I hear her asking, “Are you okay? You looked really crazy there for a minute,” she says.

I hold the wet cloth to my head.

She goes to the other side of the table again. I wipe my face with the cloth then hang it on the back of the chair next to me.

“That can’t be my child,” I say.

“Why not?” says Teresa.

Sonny breathes and tries holding her attention on our conversation.

“Because I would have heard about it,” I say.

“It? Sonny told me she didn’t want that. She didn’t want you to know. Women do it all the time, Zaner. But she’s in trouble now.” She reaches over to an envelope in a basket at the far end of the table and hands it to me. I open it and scan it. Sonny’s being evicted for lack of payment of rent.

“She’s not doing well. She needs to go home. It didn’t work here in Baltimore for her.

And you need to get Jonathan on your insurance. He's got some health problems, Zaner. You need to help."

"No," I say, "this is bullshit. You've been trying to scam me. This is just another..."

She stands and goes over to the chair and reaches down for the child. Gently, so she doesn't wake him, she carries him over to me.

"Look," she says.

The bridge of his nose, his cheekbones, his brows. I see it.

She places him back on the cushion.

"I'm going to get him DNA tested."

"Of course," she says.

"What in..."

"I was ready to leave Maurice shortly after I met you. I got tired of scamming people. We made some money, don't get me wrong, but I started to want to be a real citizen after a while. A grownup. When I found out that Maurice and Jo Jo wanted to open a store of some kind and sell model airplanes..." She shakes her head. "I mean, come on."

"A restaurant."

"I heard about the restaurant."

"But I met you, Zaner, and I thought, you know, older man, somebody settled. It just seemed cool. I could tell you were really into me."

I glance at Sonny. Her eyes are closed.

"Remember I came to you and asked if I should go over to CCBC and take classes? You did a great teacher thing of saying yes, so I did. I did it so you would be proud of me."

“What about Maurice?”

“Maurice. I don’t know. We went down to Jamaica. I got him to think we were married. I probably shouldn’t have done that.”

I think to myself, you just spent hundreds of dollars proving what she already knows.

“I met Sonny and we talked, I found out about you. She was jammed up, bad, Mr. Zaner. She needed money. I figured we should ask you for ten thousand, come out with five if we were lucky. Then you started getting all resistant on us. I would have gone away if you would have coughed it up.”

“So, why don’t I give it to you?”

“It’s too late, now. She needs to go home. Her parents threatened to come down here and drag her up there.”

“She’ll need to bring Jonathan. They could take care of him.”

“Her father’s a minister in a church up there. Real hard core kind of guy. They kicked their other daughter out ten years ago and haven’t ever talked to her again. She was sixteen years old at the time. No, that wouldn’t work. Sonny would break. Her child would go into the foster care system. It’s your time now.”

“Doesn’t Sonny want her child with her?”

“It’s your time now, Zaner. She might come back for him, but she’s in a bad way. She took a lot of pills one night. I had to rush her to the hospital. They kept her in the psych wing for ten days. Guess who took care of Jonathan?”

I look over at the child. I can see that he has awakened and now stares at the ceiling. He’s got his arms crossed like a philosopher-king.

“I’m going to get him checked out by a doctor. I need to see the DNA results.”

Teresa goes into the bedroom and comes out with a folder.

“Here are his medical records,” she says.

I take them. I’ll flip through them later.

“I’m leaving with Sonny on Friday,” she says. “You need to get your house ready for him.”

“I can’t take of a child!” I scream. It seems to reverberate for moments.

“My mother will do day care for him,” she says. “I’ve already set that up.”

Sonny touches my hand.

“She was a virgin before you,” says Teresa.

I sit on the front porch of my row home two weeks later on a Saturday morning. Jonathan is napping on the couch. I’ve cracked the window a half inch. If he makes a noise, I’ll hear him through the screen. At night Jonathan screams for hours before finally giving it up and falling into a restless sleep. His mother was abducted by aliens and left him in the care of confused man. I don’t fault him. Some nights I manage four hours of sleep.

I’ve made anonymous calls to social services explaining my position, wondering what my options are. I find out I can park him in foster care and work out a visiting schedule. But that involves questions of guardianship, contact with the mother, Legal Services, files with the local Department of Social Services, background checks, calls to my employer. I decide against it. It feels like volunteering for overseas duty in a war zone.

Sonny’s parents wouldn’t be hard to find. I could drive him up there, plop him down on

their front porch, then roll back to my life. What are they going to do? Put a 2.5 year old on the nearest Greyhound?

I pick up my cell phone from the window ledge and call the lawyer.

“At your service, Mr. Zaner,” he says hearing my voice. We’re old pals.

“I’ve got a theoretical question,” I say.

“Guess what my middle name is?” he says.

“I’ve got a friend who found out he has a child. He didn’t know anything about the kid...”

“Boy or girl?” he asks.

“Boy,” I say. “He didn’t know anything about the child, but suddenly due to complicated external circumstances beyond his control, he now has to care and provide for him.”

“It happens,” he says. “Stuff of life.”

“Let’s say that foster care is not an option. And there are no relatives on the scene to provide care and nurturing.”

“A tragedy, isn’t it?”

“That’s what this friend thinks. And he’s only thinking of the child’s well-being. That his first priority.”

“I’m sure it is. What’s best for the child is like a lighthouse beacon cutting through the fog of confusion.”

“Now let’s just say he doesn’t want the attention that legal adoption would bring to his doorstep. Let’s say he’s considering selling the baby on the black market. Is that possible? Is there such a thing as a black market for a baby?”

“Of course there is. Not only possible, but feasible. What’s the race of the beloved

child?”

“Caucasian.”

“Health?”

“Perfect,” I lie.

“Age? You said two and a half, correct?”

“Correct,” I say. I can tell he’s typing in notes on a computer.

He asks me about proper documentation, health history, living conditions from birth to present.

“Okay,” he says. “You have given me quite a bit of information on a hypothetical situation.”

“I have,” I say.

“What you need is someone to mediate. To find a loving home headed by loving parents who have been unable to adopt through regular channels. You need someone who can determine the appropriate price point for such a sensitive transaction. And above all, you need discretion of the highest order. You have come to the right person, Mr. Zaner.”

“Off the top of your head, what kind of money does a healthy child sell for?”

“Twenty-five to thirty thousand dollars. That’s your gross dollar amount before expenses, of course. My fee is \$7,500 plus 15% of the take. And let me tell you something, Mr. Zaner, that’s quite reasonable given the extra-legal nature of the matter at hand. Shall I begin doing some trolling regarding potential buyers? Wait, before you answer, because I know that there are many complex and conflicting feelings about such a matter that your friend would be having, I’m going to ask only for a \$300.00 good faith upfront payment for the thorough and tedious work

that is required to begin, and only begin, my friend, because I will exhaust every measure at my disposal, to establish a list of loving parents as potential adopters. It would be nonrefundable, but I will apply it to the base \$7,500 once you give me the full green light to launch.”

“I’ll consult with him today then get back to you.”

“I’m here to help. No more, no less.”

It’s 10:30 p.m. Jonathan throws a tantrum. He cries as hard as I’ve ever seen or heard a child cry. I have my laptop open on the coffee table and I sit perched on the couch. Jonathan is lying prone behind me crying, crying, crying. I have unsettled his world. He had unsettled my world. I am searching for a Wikipedia entry that will explain Jonathan to me. I need to know about two year olds who have been abandoned by their mothers. We both need a paradigm shift. I find myself staring at the screen. I am unable to maintain focus.

I hear a knock at the door. Through the window I can see Teresa.

I let her in and she goes right to crying Jonathan, picks him up, and begins singing to him. He resists by amping up the crying, but soon I detect an arc toward calmness. Within twenty minutes, he’s lying with his head on her lap.

“He’s underweight.”

“He’s hasn’t stopped crying long enough to eat,” I say. “Why are you here?”

“You looked raggedy when you came and picked him up from my mother the other day. My friends wanted to go down to D.C. for a party they’d heard about. I didn’t feel like it, so I came over here to check in with Jonathan.”

“You’re a natural,” I say.

“Go get me a spoon,” she says.

I retrieve. Return.

She pulls out of her large black purse a jar of homemade mashed pears. Teresa sits him up and feeds him, but he soon slides back down and puts his head on her lap again and falls asleep.

“Any of those mashed pears left for me?”

She smiles.

“Whatever happened to the video clip of you and me?”

“Oh, Clorox and I got Winston to delete it. I wasn’t ever going to allow them to release it, Mr. Zaner.”

“Teresa, I can’t keep this up. What am I supposed to do with a two and a half year old unit? I’m forty-three. I’m ready to retire and play golf.”

“Nobody retires and plays golf at forty-three. That’s for when you turn forty-five.”

“Man, I’m tired,” I say.

She puts her hand on Jonathan’s head. She’s the good witch Glenda that he’s been wishing would appear in his life.

“You’re going to have to start custody proceedings,” she says. “I’ll be the go-between with Sonny. She won’t be in his life for a while. Years maybe. Maybe never. I know she’ll want to visit him. She’s had hard time,” she says.

“How did she pay the bills?”

“She had a boyfriend for a while. They both worked. She made him believe Jonathan was his, but he found out that he wasn’t, and that’s when Sonny went downhill. It was ugly.”

“Why didn’t you just come to me and...”

She turns her head and looks at me with a deep stare.

“Okay,” I say.

“You don’t know it, but you helped me think better of myself, Mr. Zaner. You encouraged me. I stopped smoking weed. I am on a better path. You were good to me. My mother will help you with day care for as long as you want. I’ll be around at least some of the time. I plan on going to college, thanks to you.”

“Locally? he asks with a twinge of desperation in his voice,” I say.

“Wherever I get accepted.”

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” I say.

“Lots of things aren’t supposed to happen,” she says. “They do, though.”

“When did you become so wise?”

“I’m not wise,” she says. “Here.” She picks him up and hands him over to me.

He’s sound asleep and his body relaxed. I take him in my arms and hold him close. His face is scrunched like an old man’s.

“Say something to him,” she says.

I look at him, really for the first time. He head is cradled in the crook of my right arm. “I won’t let you be orphaned,” I say. I feel an intensity of vibrations pass between us, and he opens his eyes and looks into mine and for a moment I disappear. I stop breathing until he closes his eyes again.

She rests her legs on the coffee table.

“See,” she says, “you can do it. That was a little weird, *I won’t let you be orphaned*. But,

you're a good man, Mr. Zaner. You are.”

Pony Boy

You're rigged, the Converse, the Levis, the fresh Polo. None of them own Polo like you. A little gold on the wrist. A little gold on the neck. A little gold hoop earring she gave you. The SF Giants hat. SF being exotic to the local know nothings.

"Sup," you say. You are on your game and those no pony boys do not have it.

"Sup."

"Sup."

Two of them circle Diggity Douglas as if D2 is something. As usual, they're on The Corner in front of the Royal Farms store.

"Keith, where my fries?" Diggity Douglas says. He named himself Diggity. He thinks it sounds ghetto. Those two anteater looking boys snort, them with pants pulled low, white mommy washed undies. That's all right. McD's is keeping you in Polos.

"You the man of men," you say. He doesn't understand you're corkscrewing it. You read D2's mind: he thinks, *Everybody knows I'm a pony*. But he's a no pony. No ponies need two chuckleheads saying all the time, *You the man, D2*.

“What you up to now, Keith?” he says to you.

“Up to the market, D2. You know, chillin.”

“Naw, man, we got a thing. You in?” D2’s always trying to act black.

Grinning no ponies look at me.

“What’s that?” you ask.

“A thing.”

“I got that part,” you say. Last time they had *a thing*, you nearly got busted for a B&E.

One of the no ponies says to you, “Naw, man, you just got to come along with it.” His black is worse than D2’s. He pounds five with his knucklehead sidekick no pony. Grinning like they think they’re Scarface twins.

But you’re thinking, the world is your no pony, you two saltshaker no counts.

“I got to go,” you say.

D2 starts talking behind his hand at the two slurping ninny no’s, but you gallop away with the clippity-clop stride you got going, right leg in front, holding onto the reins. You hear them behind you while you cross in front of the fire station.

D2 and the twin zeros are laughing, grabbing their package, yelling out, “Forrest Gump. Forrest Gump.”

You don’t do no running, though. You gallop.

Thick neck sitting on a lawn chair in the fire station says, “Wrong with you, boy?”

“Nothing officer, I got a distress call, which I’m tending to right now.”

Thick neck turns to fellow fireman laughing, mashing up a Subway sandwich with bonus mayonnaise in his big open mouth.

That clippidy-clop starts to pressure up your legs, so right at the market you walk like a cowboy pony, open the doors, and step in.

Always happens that the Korean guy at the first counter puts an eyeball bullet through you. You didn't mean nothing stealing, *borrowing*, an orange from him last winter. You give him a wave. He reaches down and picks up a sawed off baseball bat and taps the end into his cupped hand. He's got some gold in them teeth. Wife doesn't like you either, always bundled up in a puffy coat, looking at you like she got her foot caught in a bear trap. You give her a wave, too. You don't carry hard feelings.

You cowboy walk up and down. You saw Tina in here last week. She got all jealous of Marnette and the SF hat. You want to pony on that, see what comes up.

For show, you stop and do a feet planted white man's boogaloo dance right in the middle of the aisle. Shimmy up and down, poke butt out doggy like, reach for the stars, throw out some peace signs, do some standing swim moves. For all the customers. You can't help it. If you're white, you're white. Some son takes a picture. Two brothers off to the side laugh, hold onto each other. "Yo, let's bring him to the club, yo."

You go up to the meat guy, big angry volcano head. Apron splashed with meat drips.

"Um, I want one of those. I like my pork chops thick."

He doesn't like you either. You heard him call you a *little shit* last week to the flower lady next stall over. He doesn't recognize you. You're just a *little shit* to him. He wraps up the chop. Writes on the white paper. He flops it on the counter. "A half-pound cut of baloney," you say. Repeat of the same wrapping up business. He flops it harder. "A pound of that salami there. Don't bother to cut." He starts talking to himself. Then your last order you say, "Quarter pound

masserella cheese thin sliced.” You say masserella. By this time he’s sniffing and cursing at you in Greek. Finished, he rings it up. You say, “Put it on my tab.” He starts to step around the counter and you bolt up the aisle, coursing through the Dawn of the Deads who’re eyeballing foods and flowers, knowing he can’t leave his station because a buzzard might step back there and steal his prime beef.

You chill at the right angle of the market, see his bald head retreat back to Meats, and over near Candies you hunt for Marnette who gave you the SF hat which you make sure to cock off center just right, not lip it all the way to the side like no ponies, but right smart teetering it just enough.

You see her with Dragon. The one with the eye make-up, hiding behind a veil of straight black hair, wearing black fingernail polish and tie up boot shoes. That little vampire, she hates everyone, especially ponies.

You do your clippity-clop over to them where they’re sitting at a table. The owner guy offers a deal called the Grand Finale: fill up a cross-sectioned dish with ten kinds of candy. She chose all the number ones: peanut clusters, M&Ms, Goobers, turtles, corn candy, Reese’s. Bunch of others.

You slide down in a seat. You take a turtle. You try for an angle.

“You got my favorite kinds right here. How’d you know I was coming over?”

There’s some wrong air pressure. Dragon cocks her head. Marnette cocks *her* head. You see that Dragon took lead spot. Last week Marnette had it.

“What’s up?”

Dragon says, “What’s up with you?”

I touch my SF cap. “What’s up with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Marnette, what’s up with you?”

“Nothing, Keith. Why do you keep asking me that?”

Well for one damn thing you’re my hook. If you and her didn’t have this Dragon thing between you.

“Saw D2,” you say. Why girls think anything of him escapes me.

“What’s he up to?” says Marnette.

Dragon rolls her eyes left.

“Not much. What are you two up to today?”

“Not much,” says Marnette.

Dragon rolls eyes right.

You realize this is a science project that stopped working. You decide to blow it up.

“So I was wondering Marnette, if you wanted to go to the senior prom with me.”

Both of them bug eyes at you.

“Keith. Senior prom? What grade are you in now?”

Dragon says knife cool: “I don’t see you getting your high school diploma.”

“I don’t see Marnette and me inviting you over to our house when I’m barbecuing chicken leg and thigh pieces,” you say. “When we’re both finding her noodle salad extra delicious because she made her own vinegar sauce.” You’re an Indian seeing trails invisible to the white man. You’re remembering a noodle salad from the family reunion four years ago.

Marnette’s eyes lock into yours for a mad second and leave Dragon drifting in the clouds,

but girl power pulls hard.

“Wanker,” says Dragon.

“And for a minute,” you say, grabbing up another turtle, “I was going to name our first baby after you, but I don’t think it would do well in the world with the name *Hater*. And Marnette, now that you and Dragon are a couple...”

“It’s not like that Keith.”

“Now that you two are a thing together, every time I look into the eyes of another woman I’ll see you. ‘Cause you were my first, Marnette, and you were the best.”

Dragon slides her eyes to Marnette, wondering if in fact you broke the cherry together because Dragon, she still has hers. She wants to be Big Chief Medicine Woman bringing news to everybody. You still have yours, too, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“First what, Keith?” says Marnette breaking the spell.

You bow your head then bring up some sad eyes and look at the Dragon then Marnette.

“First person who tore this right here up from the root,” you say pounding your chest twice with your fist. “You broke my heart, baby,” you say.

“I did?” she says.

Marnette loves you, man. It’s deep.

“It’s never going to be the same for me.” You drop your head. You manage to say, “I’m giving up on girls till I can heal.” You wait maybe five seconds then you turn to Dragon and say, “Can I get your number? I’ve always had a thing for you.”

Dragon is alpine cool. She lives above the tree line. She turns to Marnette real slow like she’s memorized her lines. Like she knows the scene already. She says, “I told you he was a

Johnson.”

Up you go, snatch one last turtle, and clippity-clop away. Pony boy, pony boy. You’re thinking that was supposed to be fun, riding the goof wave, saluting to the no ponies. But it doesn’t have any traction.

You clippity-clop south on Falls Road. You got that weird no pony feeling. What’s your new grip going to be? You’ve been searching for a grip. Skateboarding? No. Guitar? No. Chess master? No.

On the way down Falls Road, you think about all them feet around you. Your father grew toenail fungus all his life. Followed him into the coffin. You wonder about the corns, the ingrown nails, the plantar’s warts. You wonder about cracked heels and flat feet. You wonder about foot bruises and bone breaks and picture in your mind people walking with pain spiking up their legs, people wheezing into cloth couches at night crying because their feet hurt so bad, but they can’t quit because they’re taking care of Alzheimer parents or little kids. You’re thinking, every one of these old ponies was once upon a time your age. It hits you like a bird in the face. Every single one of these fat, ugly, sour-ass, sagging flesh, mumbling-to-themselves humpty-dumpties rolled at your age.

You never thought of it before. You can’t stop seeing all those feet in your mind hiding their ugly monkey faces inside of shoes and sandals. You shift over, look left and right, and toss it into the curb.

You get away quick as possible. Last week D2 got snagged by some cops for puking his nasty because of vodka. He got all smart-ass up on them, and they made him sit right down in it till he stopped yapping.

Where did your pony go?

You get to 3rd and Falls Road and look all the way down to The Corner, and of course D2 is there with his satellites and all the other members of the beehive. You think about clippity-clopping over there to laugh and watch the world with them, but you aren't feeling it. You circle down the road one more block, go up the alley off of Falls, turn at the T, go down one block, then slip in through the back door where your cousin Mike told you you could crash whenever and forever.

In the basement, go to the left, and there's your rollaway cot in the little slot off the furnace, near the washer and dryer. You got a mobile rack where you hang your Polos; you got your child's dresser where you store your Levis; you got your boxes turned open end sideways where you line up your shoes.

You lie down. You realize that the turtles didn't actually make you full. You know you got burgers galore when you show up for work tonight at McD's but right now you need to forage. Up the stairs and there she is, Auntie. Smoking at the table staring into the back yard.

"You got any money?" she asks you. You work it with Mike. You give her thirty a week and she's cool, Mike says.

"I paid you already," you say.

"You got any money?" she asks again. "Food don't grow on trees."

You want to remind her that some food actually does grow on trees, but, you know, you got a cot downstairs. You're not on the street anymore.

You lay a fiver by her milk filled teacup on a saucer, and retaliate by making a bigger than usual double decker sandwich. Turkey, mayo, yellow cheese, bologna, tomatoes, salami.

You pour yourself some orange soda. You pile potato chips in a bowl. You retreat to the basement, sit on your cot, and stare to your right where their cat lies on the washer looking at you.

You done get done and then take a power nap. You grab your McD's uniform shirt, tuck in into your backpack, and hit the streets.

Up near the Royal Farms is the center of the hurricane. The Corner.

You start clippity-clopping. You can see Diggity D still hanging, must have been up there for eight, nine hours. Where else is he going to go? You walk the line, glance in a couple of stores.

Before you go too far you step into 7-Eleven. You're trying to work coffee into your schedule. Mike tells you to drink it black, that way you keep it simple. It's part of staying on point. It's walking the tightrope.

You look at all the pots on all the burners. All the people over there snap-shaking little colored packets of sweeteners, staring into space. All of them pouring milk or cream or dairy flavored something into their coffees. Meantime, you get yourself a small cup, pour from a topped off pot, walk over to the counter, pay. You're out the door. You're a pony. You walk with the wind. You try to tell Mike about being a pony. He tells you, you say one more word about ponies, your cot is gone.

You walk up to the corner Royal Farms. Cars gliding by on the Strip, what 3rd Street is called. Crosswise from north, too.

You don't feel like talking to D2, but of course he feels like talking to you. You keep nodding at him. He finally drifts off, turns his attention to a couple of zero ponies come up to

him like he's the Man, so now he's got something to do with himself.

You lean against the corner of the building, watching. You hear background back of the background. You're sipping coffee. Two girls go by and puncture your world with their eyes. But you're inside the zone, watching.

Birdbrain with a homemade tattoo on his neck comes up and smacks you on your back.

"Keith," he says.

The zone goes away. You land back outside the Royal Farms store looking at Birdbrain with his hand out, wearing that filthy sailor hat he's had on his head for a year.

You give him a oner.

"That all you got?"

"Birdbrain," you say. You look at him from a place he can read so he walks off. You been giving him oners almost every day. They know you have a job. They come up to you.

You think to yourself, what's the new grip? What's it going to be?

You hang for a while, take the #27 up to McD's. Work your shift. You're back at the cot about 11:30 p.m., and you're still thinking about the next grip, but you're not in synch.

It's Saturday and you pop awake about 4:30 in the a.m. You can't wrestle it to the ground. It's eating you. It's a termite boring through a tree stump. You have nothing. She threw you out and you hear D2 and his no ponies laughing in your head because for a month you had to sleep down near Falls River underneath the overpass. Then you had to shift it up into the woods because two simpletons come up on you middle of the night to kick the shit out of you, no doubt tipped by D2, for laughs. You remember when D2 thought it was the funniest when you couldn't find a place to wash your clothes.

Mike came back from a construction job in Pennsylvania, found out you were in orbit, told you you got a cot long as whenever. One condition: pay Auntie \$30.00 a week and stay out of her way best you can. No telling about her.

You got it farking bad this morning. You get up, but it's eating your chest, right behind the bone. You go into the bathroom, wash your face, fold a towel, and cry into it like a no pony. You get your key and slip out the back door and wander around till there's nothing left in your legs. You come back and manage to crash on the cot after checking to make sure Mike got back. He told you you and him would hang today.

"You still sleeping," he says from across the basement.

You must have dozed hard. You check your watch. It's 9:30.

"No," you say, but you were. "No, just laying out here, you know, up since dawn, waiting for you to get up so we can start the day."

"Hah," he says.

You hear him settling in.

"Get out here," he says. He's in the finished part of the basement, watching TV, no doubt eating a bowl of cornflakes. He stacked a refrigerator with breakfast food for him and you downstairs so you can avoid Auntie in the morning. His room is down here too, across the floor from your cubbyhole near the washer and dryer.

You go out. The light bothers your eyes.

"Fill up," he says. You pour yourself some cereal with milk. He's got an old coffee percolator plugged in. Must be from last century.

You and him watch ESPN.

“What you got going today? You working?”

“No,” you say. You don’t tell him, but you switched shifts with a girl making eyes at you so you could have the day. Promised her you’d take her out. It’s a one-timer for you. “I’m free. We’re hanging out. Unless you know, you’re so PW’d you got to get going somewhere.”

“Hah,” he says. His girlfriend’s a nightmare. You hope he sheds her. Soon. “She don’t know I’m back.” He cuts his eyes over to you. You just been asked to promise. That woman, she’s got radar all over. She’ll find out he’s home. Give him hell about it. You know he’s cogitating on it, but he’s giving you the day.

“Naw,” he says, “I feel like hanging out. How old are you anyway?”

“Hah,” you say, imitating him. “Old enough.”

He scratches his head. “You finishing high school, right?”

“Maybe,” you say.

“Don’t bullshit me,” he says.

“Of course,” you say. You try to keep it in your pocket, but you get A’s and B’s. You got a teacher told you he could help you get into UMBC. You got dreams. You don’t let anybody know that, though. Imagine D2 finding out you got UMBC in your headlights?

“That G.E.D.,” he says. “I’m glad I picked it up, but it don’t have the same git of a high school diploma. Just not the same.”

“So I heard,” you say, wanting him to keep talking. He looks all tired and beat up. Old.

“I’m going to be thirty-one next month,” he shakes his head. “I stand around with a bunch of other morons on highways with cars gunning past us at 75 miles an hour. Grit spraying my face all day. Clothes stink. Listening to fat ass bosses tell me how to flatten gravel.” He pulls

his hat off and scratches his head. "I need another gig, Keith. This one'll kill me."

"You're going to start those electrician classes, I thought," you say.

"She's been giving me hell. Telling me we need a house."

"You'll get a house for her," you say. "You need your electrician's license. Then the house."

He sniffs, crosses his legs at the ankles. "You know, that's right. That's right."

You helped him line up the classes at a good trade school last semester. He didn't pull the trigger.

"How long's it going to take you?" you ask. "You got it in your pocket in a year."

"That's right," he says.

You can hear that dehumidifier humming. You go over, switch it off, pull the pan out, take it over to the laundry sink and dump the water. You put it back and fire the machine up again.

"I'm not complaining," he says.

"Yes you are," you say.

He laughs. "I'll tell you, I'm going to be an electrician this time next year. I'll tell you what. That's in the books."

"That's right," you say. You're feeling hollow inside. It makes no sense. You think, Mike can't give up the tiger. That can't happen.

You watch ESPN a while. Auntie is upstairs walking back and forth from the front window to the back door. Once in a while you can hear her talking to herself. She used to have a dog follow her around, Mike tells you. Died four or five years ago. She still talks to him.

“Seriously,” he says. He looks over at you. He’s sitting in a La-Z-Boy he got third-hand from a Salvation Army store. Buddy of his works there. They hauled it out the back door an hour after somebody brought it in. “Electrician in a year. That will happen.” He sniffs. “Damn right it will.”

You’re getting the willies. Your heart is pounding. You’re looking for a day of hanging out, slicing the wind. You’re hoping for some laughs.

You watch TV. Drink coffee like he likes to. You’re riding the cloth couch, slunk down, wondering if you and Mike ever going to make it out the door. You want a day outside. You were hoping to get Mike to take you down to Annapolis. Never been there before. It’s thirty or forty miles away, which sounds like a winning ticket to you. Get the hell down the road somewhere. Or maybe you could talk him into going to D.C. Maybe you could see some different girls for a change. You wouldn’t mind going up into the Washington Monument. Last time you went to D.C. was in elementary school.

He sees you squirming around, itching to get going. He’s giving you eye slides. Finally, when you’re ready to call it a day and get on out of here yourself, he says, “Damned, Keith, I nearly forgot. Stay here a minute.”

He goes into a back storage room right off the TV den and wheels out a blue stunt bike. Goes in and gets another, this one green. Both brand new.

You sit there. The room spins in a carnival ride upside down then back right again. You grip the armrest.

“I figured you and me, we need to do some riding.”

Your mother told you she threw your bike in a green dumpster – nothing but spite – then

told you to get the hell gone. Mike knew that bike of yours was the thing got you up in the morning.

“Which one you like?” he asks.

You can't talk. You stand up. You swallow and you try, but it's a zero moment.

“I think the blue one's yours,” he says.

They're both leaning against the beam down there. You go over to him and hug him hard as you can. You wipe your eyes with your wrist.

“Come on,” he says. “Help me haul them up to the pickup. Let's go on over to that park in Catonsville we went to last fall.”

All the structures in that park are made out of old tires and wood. Crazy slides and towers. Little forts kids run in and out of. Heaven for stunt riding.

We go outside and he makes a few adjustments on the seats, and you never touched such a perfect bike. He says, “Let's get going.”

But you take off for a minute, pop a wheelie down near Nelson's where the alley ends and gets wide so people can swing around in their cars. You jump up on a tree stump, bounce on the back wheel, jump down, and do front wheelie. He's up there near the pickup truck laughing his ass off. You never felt the wind up in your hair like you do this minute. You never heard the world hum in your ears like a tuning fork.

You and Mike go over to the park. There's even an off-road path that heads down a half mile into the woods, loops back and puts you in the park again. You get a few kids stop their bikes and watch you take picnic tables in one bounce. You turn over a wire trashcan and go from table to can to tire slide to fort roof without touching the ground. You ride up the side of a tree

trunk, turn one-eighty, and head down. Mike, he puts on a show himself. You stop and watch him a while. When he rides down the path that heads into the woods, comes barreling back out of it with a smile on his face, laying back in a wheelie, you wish you could thank him.

That's your new grip. The Share. That's what you can do. It comes into your head like over a loudspeaker. The Share. Just like he did.

You ride until late, near dark. After you haul the bikes back into the house and order a pizza, sit and watch TV a while, you stretch out on the couch. You watch him look at his phone when it rings, but he turns it off before answering her. He gives you a wink, stretches his legs out on the coffee table and closes his eyes. It breaks your heart. You know his green bike's still going to look new a year from now. But not yours.

Source Code

About that security clearance. I was not a hardcore tech guy. I didn't write code or hack as a black hat/gray hat, nor did I know how to create an app. I wrote about those who did in our company newsletter. I also helped the higher ups write press releases. Long story short, I manned one wing of the communications shop. Most tech guys don't have the brain makeup to write code *and* talk to fellow humans. If they could, I didn't have a job.

But the management track I was on got blown up in a spasm of company reorganization. The Chief Operating Officer wanted greater vertical and horizontal integration, and he envisioned a nation state of apps developers within the larger structure of the company. We could offer our own products, customize anything government, business, or individual clients ordered.

Problem #1 with the COO's vision. We weren't one of those companies that ended up in Forbes Magazine bragging about new management structures. We were stuck somewhere back in the day when sales, tech, lawyers, etc. didn't talk to each other, just blamed each other for everything that went wrong. The COO wanted to hire a bunch of brainies to write apps and

programs, and we needed face-to-face RTUs (response team units) to go out on the street, do sales, follow up on leads, muscle out the other guys. The RTU concept? My baby.

Problem #2. Nobody wanted to work with the tech guys. Too intimidating. In response to “greater vertical and horizontal integration” the COO himself received hundreds of emails in a viral barrage stating, “Don’t FUKKK with us.”

My management track no longer open, I was tasked to go down there and share biorhythms with them. Get them talking like humans so that they could be part of the RTU cells and help promote our company and its products. Yes, I was the RTU Man. I named it, created it, sold it to Mrs. Luna and the COO. I needed to make it work, otherwise they would hit the delete button on my career and put me in the recycle basket which automatically emptied.

I boxed up my personals and files and moved downstairs to my new office cube. Tech guys had packed my cube-space with two dozen cardboard boxes filled with bricks. I called maintenance.

“They still doing that shit?” he said. Shook his head. I could tell he was in on it. “I need to get my hand truck.”

Ten minutes went by. Fifteen. I hauled the boxes out and stacked them in the hallway nice and neat, quietly, devoutly, like a monk tending his garden, while the tech guys found excuses to pass by with coffee cups in hand.

First day, they turned their backs to me in the office kitchen. I’m soft humanities. They’re hard science. I read print books. They read e-manuals.

And they liked to intimidate with software instructions: “This procedure habits users to data-field documents image-conveyed in master file descriptors analyzed and categorized by the

program dictionary.”

When they referred to me, they called me a Ronald.

“Look, the Ronald knows how to use a computer.”

For three days I tried to schedule a meeting so we could get a downrange plan working. They ignored my emails. I knew there had to be a leader. I had no idea who it was. The basement was filled with busy beavers, but who gave the orders? They seemed to self-organize, like a neural network or like drug dealers. I needed causal event that would allow me in.

At home with the *I Ching*. I threw 11. Tai/Advance. The decision: Advance./The little is departing./The great is arriving./Good fortune./Prosperous and smooth.

What an auspicious result! I thought. Alas, it changed into 23. Bo/Falling Away. Decision: Falling Away./Unfavorable to have somewhere to go.

Hmm.

At the close of day three, I went up to the 29th floor to see the head honcho of the division, the person who “tasked” me to initiate a culture change in the basement, Mrs. Luna.

She asked me what my problem was.

I told her we didn’t have buy-in from anyone down below.

“That’s your job,” she said. “Sell it.”

“I don’t have a stick.”

“You’re right. Wonder where you’ll get one?” Elbows on desk, she rested her chin in interlocking fingers.

For a moment, feeling appreciated, I floated in a mind-stream, awaiting her suggestions. We were in this together. But I snapped back to the present under her anthropologist’s gaze and

realized she had asked me a question I had no answer to.

“Give me the authority to fire someone.”

“That wouldn’t work,” she said.

“I need some help here.”

She held up a finger, picked up her office phone, and pressed silent buttons to an in-office extension. She had the capability to talk in a way in which I couldn’t distinguish what she was saying. She smiled, turned to the side, and held onto the conversation longer than I thought necessary. She looked out of her window to the right while the other person spoke. She nestled the receiver back into the phone cradle.

“Yes,” she said. Then nothing.

“How about resending the email outlining Phase One of Blueprint 2.0?”

“Are you insisting?”

She was born into Buenos Aires aristocracy. Her arrogance worked as an electro-magnetic force. It threw off my compass bearings. Rumor had it her son was a narco-terrorist. One stepped carefully around her.

“It would help me out.”

“I’m here to help you out? That is big of me.” She flashed a shockingly aggressive smile.

“Would you?”

“That’s better.”

She swiveled to her laptop. I couldn’t see the screen. She typed a few keystrokes. She closed the lid. I sensed it was performance.

“There,” she said. “Just for you.”

“Did you cc me on that?”

She tipped her head to the side, regarding me.

I excused myself. I needed to go deep. I needed to find resources.

I wasn't expecting a gift, but I got one.

In the basement, David Spelter called a meeting. No, he didn't call a meeting. People started going to the meeting room about 9:30. I asked my cube-neighbor what was happening. He said he didn't know.

“But I can sense it's productive to get over there,” he said.

I couldn't help it. “Why?”

“Have you ever heard of the concept that human beings are sensors in the environment of the system?”

“No,” I said.

“It exists.”

People walked down aisles and bunched around the door of the meeting room or got themselves seats. Everyone shared the air of *yes, I'm here, but it's just because it's a thing*. A uniform policy? Absurd. But so much black. So many leather bracelets with crystal beads.

David, unshaven, dark-whiskered, walked out of his cube space, elevated above others by a step and situated adjacent to the meeting room. You couldn't have water-tortured to get them to admit it, but it was the master-cube in the room, the lair an alpha would choose. They supposedly shared the ideal that, as I overheard, *We just do our jobs. Nobody's a power lech down here. That's what's so awesome.*

Two days in, I asked same cube-neighbor, “Who exactly is the boss?”

He rolled his eyes, he exhaled. His shoulders slumped. I'd heard him say to a female worker, who stopped by earlier that second morning to wish him a happy birthday, "Twenty-two years of age isn't provided for in our culture." I chewed on that a while. It made sense, but it didn't make sense, but it did make sense.

"Man-person," he said to me. "Don't be a Ronald. The boss-thing happens up there." He point toward the world above.

But the David-meeting was a gift to me. David, *the* badass source code writer and programmer was there to make an announcement: "I need a team of Samurai. We'll be a four-person unit. Highly sensitive. Intelligence required." He left. So, he was the boss.

Nobody fled toward or away from him. People started murmuring among themselves. The bits of conversation I could pick up had nothing to do with David or becoming one of his Samurai. Most of it was in-house gossip and verbal release from their cubed sandboxes.

After a spell of somehow the exact amount of time, three members pointed at one another, winking and smiling, and walked to David's cube.

When that happened, the meeting room emptied of the twenty or so people who worked in the basement. I'd watched closely. I could not pick up one overt signal from the natives suggesting time to depart.

Since the basement dwellers had kept me outside the information fence, I had little to do but look around and observe. I could see the meeting room from my cube.

Three Samurai and David occupied it. They sat in front of laptops and David either telepathically communicated with them or did so verbally without discernable mouth movement. I saw David's assistant, Ashmita, enter several times to stand next to him or hover about his

three devotees. In two or three hours, the three Samurai came out together, eyes lowered, not wanting to signal the wonderful wonderfulness of their status of having worked with Sifu David.

I called Mrs. Luna, desperate for even a morsel of information. I told her that David was working with a team on something. Did she know anything about it?

“I need a way in down here.”

I wanted to say that people being summoned to a meeting and David’s emergence was as rare as sighting snow leopards mating. But I feared that Mrs. Luna would think that I thought we were pals if began making funny. She didn’t do pals. I kept in mind 21st century time-space shrinkage. Her narco-terrorist son could be at my doorstep in less than a day.

“Yes,” she said. “One of our more elegant cyber security programs is a leap forward from what’s out there. We want to get it in people’s hands. And we need its various functionalities translated into a manual that users can actually read and understand. We don’t want to sell it with the understanding that some company’s tech people will take God knows how long to interpret it to someone higher up the chain of command. It’s network based, but it has retail capabilities. Guess who wrote the program?”

“David?”

“You’re coming along, aren’t you?”

“I will take that as a compliment,” I said, hoping for no trace of inflection, as if speaking to a hyper-alert, hyper-sensitive criminal.

“We have tasked David with writing a coherent manual. It’s rather important to us,” she said.

Were they gunning for David?

“That shouldn’t be too hard, Mrs. Luna.”

“No, it shouldn’t, should it?”

I let it play. I went into my shell. I had little to do. I watched.

Word went around that David and his micro band of Samurai worked the manual for one draft then sent it up. It would have taken a cadre of MIT graduate students days to do it properly.

One of my spies on the 29th floor gave me a one minute synopsis. David and his swordsmen had turned it into a joke. They put it in PDF format, created a table of contents, wrote sections and subsections, all of which gave it an aura of respectability and coherence. But it was a stew of cut and pastes from other, unrelated manuals, back and forth references meant to confuse, and even jerk-off humor embedded in techno-speak (“The pen15 datum rises to dock in inverted mode.”)

Wife, two kids in private school, big house, imported cars, motorcycles. Was the rumor about a mistress true? It sounded like fill-in-the blanks. But who knew? I realized as I was sitting in my private ceremonial temple that I needed to know the code of honor he lived by. If I found out, I could initiate a strategy. But he had achieved the status of The One. Everyone down there lowered voices when I was present.

David wore black jeans, motorcycle boots, a heavy hematite wristband, skipped meetings, refused to recruit new clients. I made the connection: that’s why boys and girls working there happened to wear wrist bands and wardrobe choices dominated by black.

David wanted to be a cave-dweller with his clan of true-believers. He didn’t realize he occupied turf from another age when cowboys ruled and policy guys deferred.

My spy called me again after hours on my private cell. I sat in a Chinese food restaurant

at 9:30 p.m. listening to her.

“After the brain-bots received David’s manual, they combed through his accounts and HR info looking for a convenient way to fire him. They wonder if he’ll hunker down and decide to sue. The company’s in transition mode and they don’t want blowback.”

I pulled out my copy of the *I Ching* for consultation. I threw my coins. All 8s and 7s. Stable.

45 Cui/Bringing Together. “He is at a minister’s place and close to the king. He can bring together those people in the lower gua.” And not to be dismissed: “he should act with extreme caution.”

Before my *I Ching* throw, I’d wondered if David and his ilk would be purged. I thought I might throw something like Retreat, a gua instructing that inferior persons were multiplying, and they needed to go. I wish I had. It would have opened up possibilities, clearer avenues of operation. But no.

I needed fortification. I ordered more Lo Mein noodles, this time with shrimp. I looked around the Green Dragon, the restaurant that had been converted from a narrow row home. The owner, Jimmy Joe, son of Madam Chang, who had run the place for twenty years, sat with a squat, heavy shouldered man wearing wraparound sunglasses who sent out the vibrational tone of a gangster.

I must have been staring at them. Jimmy Joe said, “How’s the food?”

“Perfect,” I said.

“I saw you throwing coins.”

The gangster, talking on his cell, turned to me.

“Yes,” I said. “Helps clarify my situation.”

Gangster man clicked off his cell. He surrounded his plate of food with his left forearm. Chopsticks in right hand, he lowered his head and began eating again.

Jimmy Joe liked to wear his long hair slicked straight back then tied off in a short pony tail, which gave him the sleek look of a flamenco dancer.

“You’re more Chinese than I am.”

For some reason, that struck them both as big funny. They laughed. Gangster man turned toward me with noodles hanging from his mouth.

How could they have realized that my fiancé Sofia, who did past life readings, told me that I had lived during the Shang dynasty around 1300 BCE?

“Your life was a bitch,” she’d said. “You’re still working through confidence issues because even the other peasants thought you were lame.”

“Thanks, Jimmy Joe,” I said. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” Which they thought hugely funny, also. More laughter.

I blinked. I knew my strategy.

I would save Sifu David.

If I saved him I would gain instant cred and walk with an illuminated aura among the tech guys. With illuminated aura, I could instruct them in the new ways of the company. They would realize how far away they were from renaissance man status. Thus, how much they needed me. I would appear like an ancient Taoist master wearing a blue robe with images of cranes. With humbleness, I would lead. I would introduce them to the concept of team-work. You need an evolutionary jump, I would inform, from tribe-work, the guiding ethos of which

was to mock, sneer at, disrupt, and humiliate anyone and everyone not belonging to the tribe.

You must share bread with ancient enemies, people who actually sold products which paid your salaries.

Yes, I had the vision-thing locked. I had to figure out how to meet with Sifu David. I began to go guerrilla. I bought a daypack with multiple pockets, large enough to fit my MacBook Air, pens, pencils, a clipboard with paper, a few other human essentials. No pictures pinned to my cube walls, nothing to indicate habitation. Keep it simple, leave no traces, complete the mission, return home.

Yes, Sifu David. He was they key to my master plan, my special ops infiltration. My future employment.

Huike cut off his arm to demonstrate sincerity to Bodhidharma, the first patriarch who brought Zen to Japan. I'd be willing to sacrifice a toe, left foot, fourth one over. Bring it to him in a small cardboard gift box. "Sifu," head bowed, kneeling, "I wish to bring honor to you." Hold up box with toe like a chalice, keep eyes lowered.

But then I thought, why not the direct approach? Go to his Grand Cube. Be earnest, wide-eyed, maybe give nod in a kowtow-bowing kind of way. Sit down, have a conversation with the man.

No that wouldn't work. I'd picked up from office chatter that either he summoned you or you went through Ashmita, his confidante/protege. Not to mention I sensed that David thought I was funny, in the way that when one saw an unfamiliar animal at the zoo one pointed and laughed. I one time said hello to him in the kitchen area, and he laughed out loud before walking off.

I needed to begin sub rosa operations with Ashmita.

1st day, 2nd week I spent doing intel. I Googled Ashmita and found out she blogged. She “self-identified as transgender.” I’d never figured out what transgender meant exactly. Then Wikipedia told me that “the degree to which individuals feel genuine, authentic, and comfortable within their external appearance and accept their genuine identity is referred to as transgender congruence.” I leaned back. I went to the kitchen, stuffed a dollar in the can, poured a cup of coffee, returned to my computer. Rattled, I realized I was transgender congruent. I wondered if Sofia already knew.

Ashmita practiced being a good Hindu, she claimed on her blog.

David’s cube was in the front next to the windowed conference room which, crammed standing and sitting, accommodated up to forty people. My cube was in back in the maze, the last one next to the aisle. I realized that it had been abandoned and given to the new guy because people passed by for the restroom or the staircase to go out and smoke, so forever intruding into my zone was talk, rude comments, lowered gossipy voices, and, wafting when the doors opened, human smells of perfumes, and colognes, funkish flavored air-freshener stink leaking from the bathroom, passed gas, and a permanent cloud of various food odors from the kitchen located out the door immediately to one’s right.

But it was perfect for me because I was a spy and needed information.

When Ashmita came through the door late in the afternoon holding a cup of tea, I said hello. Perhaps Hindu manners demanded she say hello back to me, which she did, framing it with a scowl and averted eyes.

David had left for the day and though the general sense pervaded that he was the boss

but-not-really, and that no one should act differently if he was or wasn't present, as soon as someone reported that he'd driven from the parking lot, a sense of communal ease flowed into the room.

“What kind of teas they have back there?”

Ashmita looked behind her, the animal's instinct of gauging threat.

“You need to go and check.”

“I guess I do.”

She blushed at her poor manners. “Come on.”

I followed. She was five-six, slender, wore athletic shoes, a blazer with jeans. I sensed that her deep kung fu lay in her organizational abilities. She possessed a body efficiency I'd not had a chance to notice. She took down several boxes of tea, recommended a brand of Darjeeling, told me she thought it best if she made me a cup of chai, made it, handed it to me.

“I've never had chai before. Wonderful.”

“I've changed your world then.”

“I need your help,” I said. Blurted.

I sat on a stool at the island table to be eye level with her. She leaned against the countertop near the microwave and blew across the top of her tea cup. Her dark eyes glanced above my shoulder, scanning for anyone who might approach. The bright red bindi seemed to sharpen in color. Behind it lay the sixth chakra, the place of concealed wisdom. I tried to project earnestness into the bindi, to appeal to the bindi, to seduce the bindi.

“How can I help?”

I noticed she'd lowered her voice.

“Can we meet for a sit-down somewhere outside of work?”

“My schedule is full.”

“Twenty minutes.”

“I practice archery whenever I’m not here.”

“Any time. Any place.”

She slipped a recycled paper napkin off the counter, wrote down an address, and handed it to me. Crofton, Maryland, about 45 minutes south of Baltimore.

“I have been wanting to talk to you,” she said. “You’ll see me at one of the ranges. 7:00 a.m., Saturday morning.”

She put her finger to her lips. Co-conspirators. My self-esteem upticked.

She walked out as someone walked in.

“Enjoy your chai,” she said.

“Thank you.” I wondered if she were a transgender *congruent*, as I was.

I’m not an early riser kind of guy. Our workday started at 9:00 a.m. I turn off the alarm at 7:15, do situps, pushups, take a shower, drink coffee, eat cereal. I still get a newspaper. It makes me feel old school and therefore superior in a cross-grain, go against the mindless herd kind of way. I read a few articles, tuck away a handful of opinions about international, national, local, and sports issues then drive to work. I’m a well oiled machine.

I had to rise at 4:30 a.m. to make Crofton, Maryland early, get there ahead of schedule to check out our meeting ground.

Sun Tzu, Chapter 6, The Solid and Empty. “One who takes position first at the battleground and awaits the enemy is at ease.” I stepped out the front door of my apartment into

the bleary darkness of a rainy morning. I punched in numbers on my GPS device and cruised to a Starbucks for coffee and an 8-grain roll, knowing that in one pop 28% of my dietary fibre was taken care of. Bam! I felt good. Though way too early, way too dark, way too off my usual schedule, my mojo and me, we were in harmony.

As I swung into the parking lot next to the archery range, I scanned the area for a restroom. Coffee and 8-grain had worked their magic. I saw a chartreuse porta potty across the lot with the name Gotügo on the side. I stuck one leg out of the car and realized I needed to sprint to get over before a system's release. I cannot prove it, but I swear I heard a silvery *fweesh* sound zing over the roof of the car. I stood, looked around, waved to Ashmita who smiled, peered at me beneath an army issue billed hat, and lowered her bow. I scuttled over to the porta potty and took care of business. I emerged sensing me and my mojo weren't quite as harmonious as even ten minutes ago.

I walked across the muddy, unpaved parking lot.

"You found it," she said. Her breath formed clouds. She looked at my caked shoes.

"Of course," I said. I wanted a prop. But I thought that going back to the car for my empty coffee cup just to have something to hold would arouse her critical probing capabilities and mark me as weak or uncertain.

She had occupied the battleground first. She knew it. I knew it.

We stood looking at each other.

"Why all the way out here?" I said. "Does David have the city bugged?"

"You can think better out here. Besides, I don't know you, yet. You're still a Ronald as far as I can see."

“I need your help.”

“You need somebody’s help.”

“I heard through the grapevine that your boss is attracting a lot of negative attention. He doesn’t know it yet, but they’re building a case against him. They want him out.”

“Had to happen sometime.”

“Which means people close to him will go, too.”

Someone far down the range lifted his bow and shot toward the target. I lowered my eyes from my 6’2” perch and looked into hers. We were making subtle connections. Our neurons did high-fives together. She smiled and the world glowed. I felt an urge to confess things to her.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I want you to set up a meeting with David, the three of us.”

“I’ve been talking to David about you.”

“I hope in a positive way.”

I followed her off the parking lot and onto the grassy field.

“I’m beginning to question David,” she said.

She went to the end target lane, pulled an arrow from a quiver belted to her leg, and launched an arrow.

“How far?” I asked when she lowered her bow.

“Thirty meters.”

She launched five more.

I followed her to retrieve them. They were bunched in the yellow nine and ten rings.

“Impressive.”

From the target, I looked back to where she'd stood and shot. Two other archers several target lanes over had their nocked arrows pointed toward the ground waiting for us to return to the shooter's line. I felt like a deer that had come into a clearing. I kept my eye on Ashmita, wondering, in a wild spasm of paranoia, if she would signal to them, bolt to the left in a tuck roll, and have them commence shooting at me. What an unending drag it would be to get skewered in the kidney trying to sprint from the danger zone.

With arrows in hand, she walked back. I followed.

She started to get into position to shoot. I sensed she would be content with displaying herself and her awesomeness for hours on end while I would be audience.

Sun Tzu: "In warfare, engage directly. Secure victory indirectly."

"Ashmita. I'm going to drive back to Baltimore."

She glanced at me. I picked up information from two Ashmita signal towers. From the first, she wanted to cultivate me until we would become allies with our shared visions. From the second, she wanted to manipulate me until I was deeply confused at which time she would feed me to Sifu David who would know how to usher my exit from the company.

"Can we trust each other?" I asked.

"By all means."

"Get me into a meeting with David."

"You should know that I never, ever go part way. I'm in it to win it." I waited for a wink. None came. She continued: "I want you take charge in there. Tell David what he needs to do, don't ask him. I think you and I can work together."

A tiny alarm bell sounded from far away in my inner basement. "If that doesn't work?" I

managed.

“I live by a variation of five words. Variation number one. *They won. I lost. Next.* Variation number two. *I won. They lost. Next.* See how balanced the world can be? It doesn’t matter which variation comes first.”

“Monday,” I said. “Let’s meet Monday.”

She placed her bow in a rack-like holder. She approached, grabbed the back of my arm. “Let’s do this.”

“Look,” I said, feeling helium elevation with her so close. “The company’s got a great bonus structure. We can make a lot of money.”

“David is losing a step,” she whispered. “It’s time for a change.”

“David’s an asset,” I said. “If we get David on board we get his expertise, not to mention everyone else in the basement. We’ve got clients that want to hear hardcore techno-speak from our sales team. But I’m using the wrong language. We don’t have sales teams anymore. We’ve got RTUs, response team units, ready to tailor our products to the customer’s needs or whims. We need to cross-train, get out into the field, gather intel, realize we’re in a brave new world. Nobody knows anything anymore. We’re inventing as we go along.”

“I believe,” she said.

“Set up a meeting with David, then text or call me.”

Everybody had everybody’s cell numbers at work.

“I will,” she said. “This has been enlightening.” The top two buttons of her shirt had come undone, revealing her long throat. “We can do this together.”

That was my line. She stole my line.

“Yes we can.”

“Goodbye, Tiger,” she said. She reached out her hand. I shook. She put her other hand on top of mine. “Thank you. You have helped me.”

On the way home, I said to myself, Trust Signal Tower #1. Trust what you got from her. Don’t be so suspicious all the time. You made some magic happen.

The phone awoke me from a nap. I looked at the clock, 4:30 p.m., twelve hours from my morning wake up when I went to see her.

“Hello.” My head felt pillowy and odd. My sinuses had swelled.

“Hi,” she said. “It’s on. 1500hrs, Monday. David likes to use military time.”

“I have difficulty keeping military time straight.”

“I would practice.”

“Okay.”

“I think we should go over essentials tonight. We want a flawless meeting with David. You impressed me today, Mark. I think you’re the right man for the job.”

“Thank you,” I said. I tried to recall the moment when I might have impressed. I couldn’t get over the wall of my mounting sinus headache. “But I’m like a jazz musician,” I said. “I like to know the direction I’ll take, but I don’t want to lock down the details too tight. Too much practice, I might not be able to find the edge.” Who was this speaking? I’m at the other end of the spectrum from jazz musician. Ashmita was taking me off my game.

“Well, let’s consider this a loose limbed jam session,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, like a go-along bass player. But I wanted to be the out-front guy, the

saxophonist.

My beneath the surface focus was job preservation. Mark was the key. Without him, I'd either be excessed or put in charge of some low-grade sales effort that a newbie could take care of. For the first time in my life, I wanted to step on some toes, manage my climb, not concern myself with the drones around me. I was sick to death of the Davids of the world conquering the Marks, the guys who just go along because they're good soldiers and have a keen sense of team play. I was a Ronald and I wanted to be a non-Ronald. I wanted to sacrifice David at the altar of my non-Ronaldness.

"Let's go somewhere casual, get a bite, and highlight some talking points," she said. "I know a great Indian restaurant downtown off of Eastern Avenue."

She gave me the address. I heard myself agreeing.

I said to myself, we're taking it to the next level. Though what level were we on?

We would meet at 8:00 p.m. I went out for a two mile power run, did some pushups, sit-ups, stretches. I like to feel it all come to a center point. I like finding a groove, I like my mojo.

I felt like walking, something a warrior would do, but the place was five miles away and I'd be late. Take the car this time, next time arrive by foot or bicycle. Let her know you're a commander who takes his own form of transportation, doesn't settle for what's easy, what's on the surface. Let her know you operate from deep strategies.

Before walking out the door, I stood looking up at book spines in my bookcase. I idly flipped open one of my many translations of the *Tao Te Ching*. Chapter 22. "Be twisted and thus be complete; be crooked and thus be straight." I felt a vibrational yes-ness. I opened the front

door, about ready to leave. A thought pinpricked. I stopped. I went back to my small office room overlooking the alley and from my desk picked up *The Art of War*. “The Fray: The difficulty of the fray lies in making the crooked straight.”

Harmonic convergence. I was back in the saddle. I sensed a methodology in an unable to be articulated way.

I walked in and there she was at a table, once more occupying the ground before me. She waved.

“Be crooked and thus be straight.” What did that mean? As I waved back, I understood that I knew crooked but not straight. Straight had vanished.

I had responded to clothing cues from her this morning and came casual, slacks and an open necked shirt. She’d outflanked me. She wore a beautiful red-patterned Sari with a headscarf. I wish I’d gone native. What would be the traditional dress for an Indian man?

The maitre d showed me to the table and I bowed, which made her smile. Fiancé Sofia had gone with friends to a cabin in Pennsylvania. She seemed far, far away. I pondered the nature of my relationship with Sofia. We’d only been seeing each other for five years. Why rush into the next stage? Shouldn’t we consider dating...or at least involvement...with other people?

“Do you mind if I order wine for us?” she asked. I didn’t. She spoke to the waiter in Hindi. Within a minute he brought over a bottle of wine.

She allowed me to take the tasting sip. I approved.

“Would you like to order dinner?” she asked.

I declined, incapable, so very deeply crooked.

“He will have the curry chicken. I’ll have the Pishori Pasanda.” She order two types of

Indian breads. “And Mulligatawny Soup for both of us.”

The waiter nodded, eyes closed, appreciative of the her-ness of her.

“So,” she said. “Cheers.” We clinked glasses. “Tell me about your presence in the basement. Tell me about our company. Tell me what will make us great.”

I was bending toward her gravitational pull. Crooked, crooked, crooked.

“I feel like you know all that.”

“Tell me again.”

I did. She wanted to know details. She listened with a chess players stillness.

“The key to it all,” I said, “is that we...”

“We?” She smiled. Oh, such a smile.

“I have to establish the RTUs and send them out in the field. Do you know how many cyber-security firms there are out there?” I pointed somewhere toward the front door.

“I assume many,” she said.

“So our edge is to come from the ground up. We don’t send a suit guy out there. We send cell teams with at least one tech guy, one communications slash company guy, and one guy who will be nursemaid to the client’s particular needs, an assigned diplomat. We go small to go big.”

“You are the right man for the job,” she said.

“Do you think we can convince David? We need him to create synergy between the basement and the 29th floor.” I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the wall behind her. I was a visitor. I had never, not once, ever, used the word *synergy* in any way other way but to mock it. When had the brain altering chip been implanted?

She reached over and touched my hand and squeezed it.

“We will go far together.”

Our soup came. My skull buzzed with high-pitched, happy vibrations. Or was it drilling?

Up from the depths of me, came “I saw an old cube mate of mine down there in the basement, Stu Mitchell. You know him?”

A nano-second moment of uncertainty passed over her face, then she turned crooked into straight. “Of course I know him,” she said. She smiled that knee bucklingly beautiful smile. “I am his team leader.”

“I thought David was the team leader down there.”

“Well, that’s true,” she said.

I wanted to point out that we’d just entered an M.C. Escher woodcut. We’d passed by each other walking on staircases that led in different dimensions. I left it alone. I felt that I could get to a discussion about basic organizational structures and, from that, methods of operations somewhere downrange.

I thought of Stu while she talked to the waiter. The owner waddled over to us from behind the hostess stand. He joined their conversation.

Stu Mitchell alarmed me. A few days before, in the parking lot after work, he slipped me a note on sheet of paper folded into quarters, then he scuttled away in his black Chino slacks bunched in the nether region of butt-crack area, climbed the five or six utility stairs near a service entrance, and reentered the building. My first thought? *So low tech*. I was beginning to think like a non-Ronald. His message said, *help me*. Lower case. I wondered if it was a joke wrapped in earnestness bundled in sarcasm packaged in a goof, the usual multi-dimensional way tech people communicated, and which I was beginning to find so satisfyingly tribal.

But I didn't receive facial signals that suggested his *help me* was anything but earnest.

Stu Mitchell. Until he'd slipped me the note, I'd not paid any attention to him except being surprised that he still worked for the company. He'd once been an expensive shoes, creased slacks, nice shirt, bright tie kind of guy up on the 29th floor. Down in the basement he'd begun to become pear shape, sported dark athletic shoes, and collared, three button, long-sleeved black shirts, a variant of the uniform all basement dwellers wore.

And way back when, he was a gym guy, too, come to think of it. He and his wife broke up, so he had time on his hands. He seemed happy in a hungry soldier kind of way. His sales team always put up big numbers, but he didn't swagger around like your prototypical obnoxious knob. He passed around credit to his team members, then increased his time at the gym and hunkered down for the next kill. A good guy, outlier, lonely, love-starved, the kind of sales team roger a company relies on.

The waiter and owner left. I looked down. I resumed eating my soup, as did she.

"I want you to meet with Mrs. Luna."

Had I told her that my boss had been calling for a sit-down with me? If not, how did she know? Mrs. Luna liked backdoor communication and would have never cc'd Ashmita when trying to get my attention. I fended off Mrs. Luna with talk of pressing deadlines and meetings. And within ten days of moving to the basement, I had found myself leaving the office at 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. I'd become, without deciding to, immersed in the world of small team cells working on projects requiring discussions with programmers and various IT people who lived in a nether world of contractual relationships.

Crazily, I'd begun to understand source code and started writing my own programs.

“Why?” I said to Ashmita. “I feel the need to continue to gain acceptance as a member of the basement group.”

“You’re in with us now, Mark. I need you to keep Mrs. Luna happy. Close your eyes.”

“Are you serious?”

She furrowed her brows. I remembered the arrow sizzling over the roof of the car. I closed my eyes.

“Imagine the company as a network of nerve paths.”

“Yes,” I said. I saw the nerve network in the form of an elaborate, branching lightning strike against black night.

“Mrs. Luna is the trunk of one of those pathways that needs to stay open. If she closes it off then one limb of the company body atrophies and dies.”

“Okay,” I said wanting to open my eyes.

“Tell her right now that you will meet her to discuss whatever issues she wants to discuss.”

I remained silent. Did she mean I should open my eyes and call right this minute?

“Say it out loud. *Mrs. Luna, I will meet with you and discuss any issues that are on your mind.*”

“Mrs. Luna, I will meet with you and discuss any issues that are on your mind.”

“Now, open your eyes.”

A busboy took our empty soup bowls away.

I blinked.

“I believe in the power of visualization,” she said. “And I want you to believe in it, too.”

Will you do that for me?"

"Okay," I said. I looked into the pools of her dark Indian eyes. I swear I saw, deep inside them, sinuous movements of twin cobras, synchronized hoods flaring. But I moved on. Really, I would do many kinds of things to have her smile at me. Yes, crooked becomes straight.

The waiter brought our food. He stood close by while we ate, cutting off conversation I wanted to have with Ashmita. They spoke in their native language.

Ashmita ignored me completely. I played as if I were happy to be in her presence, but in my mind something happened. I crawled back to the words, the concept, the new paradigm of RTUs. At Mrs. Luna's urging, I presented the concept to the COO and the ACD, the assistant chief of the directorate, who then took it to the CD, chief of the directorate. I nurtured it, brought it into being. From that little pebble dropped into our pool, a tidal wave of corporate culture would change. Was supposed to change. I was a change agent. I was the first SEAL team member, so to speak, to launch then land on the foreign shore of the basement.

I had betrayed Mrs. Luna and myself, and I needed to cross back over from enemy into friendly territory, but now, which was which? What colors did I wear?

Ashmita and I had dessert of rice pudding. We smiled back and forth while she conversed in Hindi with our attentive hosts. We, she and I, were through. Our evening's conversation ended when we'd been served soup.

I wanted to be briefed on those talking points Ashmita referred to that I should cover with Mrs. Luna. What constituted a bull's-eye on Ashmita's target? I was left with a weird sort of in-the-clouds sensation. Did Ashmita want me to go so far as to try and recruit Mrs. Luna? Should that be my goal?

How had Ashmita and I said goodbye? A handshake, a kiss on the cheek? Recall eluded me.

So many realizations came to me while sitting at my kitchen table post-dinner with Ashmita. I'd gone from SEAL team member to weasel spy.

Du Mu, commentator of the *Art of War* text, on live spies: "They move to and fro between the enemy camp and ours....They must be active, robust, endowed with physical strength and courage; thoroughly accustomed to all sorts of dirty work, able to endure hunger and cold, and to put up with shame and ignominy."

Able to put up with shame and ignominy.

Next day, Ashmita met me at my cube when I walked in.

"We don't need to meet with David," she said. "I've taken care of everything."

"I wanted to talk to him," I said. "Get up close and personal."

"But there is no need," she said. "Everything is taken care of, as I said."

She stepped toward me, tightened my tie, pressed her hand against my chest, and looked up. I fell into the eyes and became bifurcated man.

"Come, this way," she whispered. I followed. We passed her cube. I glanced in. A book lay on her desk next to her keyboard with post it notes marking pages throughout. Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. My ears rang.

I followed her. I wondered if she were leading us to a private, out of the way room where good things would happen between us. Where our secret life would begin. She stopped at a cube catty-corner to hers.

"Here is your new home, Mark," she said.

“Okay,” I said. Not capable of more than two syllables.

“It is a good place for you to be.”

“I know.” Only two syllables.

“I’m so happy that you know. Bring your things over. We have so much to do.”

In a few minutes, I had finished with my old cube and sat in my new. I had morphed into a new piece at a new place on the chessboard. A pawn into a bishop? Surely not a mighty rook? Or had I been demoted? Knight to pawn.

Later that morning, I looked up and found her eyes and forehead directed at me in a mirror. She had four mirrors at different angles periscoping above her cube so that she had incoming visuals from 360 degrees. She raised eyebrows. *See, I can see you!*

I toggled my desk chair to the left to try to get out of her line of sight, and in doing so I noticed that in peeking out of my cube entrance, as one might stretch to see the Hudson River from a New York apartment, I could see Sifu David sitting in his master cube. More, I saw that Ashmita could see him, too, by leaning back from her computer.

I closed my eyes and employed Ashmita’s visualizations. *Imagine the company as a network of nerve paths.* But I didn’t see nerves like lightning this time. I saw nerves like a spider web. I saw Ashmita in the bull’s-eye center of the web with a happy face on a spider body. I saw myself cocooned, legs flickering with death throes. I saw Stu, no longer in his cocoon, sitting still, brain chemicals altered by a spider sting, unable to scramble away.

I opened my eyes. I told myself to get up and walk. I looked down at my nonfunctioning legs. I remembered a message on a card I read in a health food/coffee shop: *When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing.* I stood. Eyes and forehead appeared. I walked. Did I hear

cameras whirring on swivel platforms while following my movements?

I took the elevator to the 29th floor.

Mrs. Luna and I had exchanged emails that morning. She expected me.

I said hello to Mrs. Luna's secretary, someone I used to flirt with. She glanced up from her computer duties and gave me a warning scowl. She shifted eyes toward Mrs. Luna's room signalling something. When I started to question her, she waved me away.

"Come in, darling," Mrs. Luna said from inside. I stepped in.

She held up a hand in greeting. She smiled, which exaggerated the sense of her belonging to an order of predators. Bipedal carnivore. Descendant of the mighty *tyrannosaurus rex*? My fight or flight response elevated.

Darling? I felt like a steer being funnelled toward a slaughterhouse.

I stepped into her office proper and saw sitting on the chair to the left of her desk a young Latin man with three days' beard growth, expensive suit, no tie, and a pair of shoes with top stitching. The resemblance was distinct, her narco-terrorist son. I reached to shake his hand. He grabbed my first three fingers and gave them a tug, not wanting to sully his very being with physical communication with an office drone.

He had come for me, I thought. He was going to kill me.

I sat across from her and warned myself not to appear as prey. It only aroused the predator.

I needed to consult my *I Ching*.

"Ah," she began. "Mark. Where have you been?"

"Not far," I said. Squeaked.

The son laughed.

“Yes, well. One knows that.”

The old arrogance began to fill the room. That was more like it. The kinder, gentler Mrs. Luna was deeply disturbing.

“You have been down there for nearly two weeks,” she said. “I’m looking for a status report.”

I wondered why we were discussing business in front of her son. I saw a bulge on the left side of his suit. I’ve read a lot about men in battle. I’ve often wondered how I would react to gunfire directed at me. I thought I might have the chance to find out.

“I can work something up.”

“I hoped you might have worked it up then come to see me.” Eyebrows raised. Pure theater.

The son frowned.

“I’m running into many dimensions down there,” I said.

“When did you begin speaking like that?”

I looked at the son, then the mother.

“I don’t know,” I said.

I sensed they were about ready to introduce me to a world I couldn’t imagine: a bag over my head, injections, waking up to the droning noise of an airplane in flight, landing on a bumpy runway in the tropics.

“You see,” she said. “My son here wishes to make an investment in the company, but we are not clear on which direction the COO or the CD wants us to take us. You were sent down

there to initiate a 21st century strategy. I sense that you have gone native, Mark.”

“No,” I said, “not really.”

I had reverted to a seventh grader crab walking away from a stern teacher.

“But you have.”

“You didn’t give me the authority to fire anyone. My hands are tied.”

“Who is in charge down there?”

“Mrs. Luna, you are the boss here on the 29th floor. Why don’t you know who is in charge?”

The son cleared his throat.

She raised her chin and pondered worlds. Outside of her glass enclosed office were other glass enclosed offices in a central work space, both with and without outside windows, an airy openness not present in the basement. One sensed a local calmness up here. From the 29th, people exited the building for appointments then returned brimful of strategies for future enterprises.

“There has been a coup,” she said.

“Really,” I said. “Between who and who?”

“One is not quite sure.”

I looked to the son, then to her.

“How do you know there’s been a coup then?”

“Ah,” she said. “How does one know how fall has arrived? There is a tonal shift. We have lost control of the company. We have become a hive that is hermetically sealed.”

“With all due respect, Mrs. Luna, I think that’s an exaggeration.”

“I think you need to spend time with our P&L statement,” she said quietly. Then, “Do you have any understanding how important the RTUs were to us?”

“Well, you know, I knew it was an important concept.”

The son turned to the mother. “Does he have his head up his ass?”

“I’m not sure why you’re here,” I said to him. I thought of Ashmita. She would want me to be strong.

Ashmita came through the door. She walked to the narco-terrorist and put her hand to his shoulder and rubbed his upper back, a lover greeting her partner in a public space.

Ashmita pulled up a chair in front of Mrs. Luna’s desk.

“Well,” she said. “How did he do?”

“He displays a certain shiftiness, a certain protectiveness about his intentions. I like it,” said Mrs. Luna.

“Do you think he still believes that David is our basement Sifu?” she asked then smiled and winked at me.

I had never used the work *Sifu* in her presence. I might have written it in an email to Sofia using my private email account.

“Who knows what he thinks?” said narco-terrorist.

“Santiago, behave.”

Right in that moment, I figured that fiancée Sofia and I maybe shouldn’t think about seeing other people. We should, instead, think about deepening our relationship.

No, we wouldn’t land on a bumpy runway. I would hear a security bar clank then a heavy

metal door slide open. I would be grabbed from behind. I would be pushed out into rushing air. I would fall from a great height.

“Mark has become one of our stars downstairs,” said Ashmita. “Haven’t you, Mark?”

“Yes,” I said robotically. She was catastrophically beautiful to me.

“You see,” waxed Mrs. Luna, “our culture, our corporate culture, is one of amazing plasticity.”

“Mark,” said Ashmita. “We have decided to give you greater responsibilities in the basement.”

Something was happening to me, for me, which I’d been wanting for years, before it was ever named: emergence from Ronald-dom. Although I had drifted to soft humanities as my overly-sensitive child-self grew into a college student, I had begun to realize, at age 34, that the world grouped into 20% winners and 80% losers. I had been seeking membership in the 20% since I smelled middle age on the horizon.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m ready. Three requests. First, I want a raise.”

Ms Luna nodded her head. The narco-terrorist narrowed his eyes and gave me an affirming raised chin.

“That’s in order,” said Mrs. Luna. “But I will give you a raise when I see the numbers.”

“No, raise first, then numbers. I’ve proven myself.”

Ashmita looked to Ms Luna. “I can make it work on my end. How about you?”

Mrs. Luna looked down her long nose at me. How I wish I would have seen beyond the distraction of my inner Ronald jumping up and down screaming to the world, *I’m a big boy now*.

“You will be scrutinized, Mark. I have people to answer to.”

“That’s a given. Second, I want David’s office cube and job.”

Now it was Ashmita’s turn to hold up the crossing guard stop sign. “David performs a function that would be hard for a relative newcomer to perceive. David thinks worlds ahead of most of us in terms of technology.”

“And that’s his fatal flaw. His creative genius is yang. His non-management is yin. It needs to be reversed, and he’s not up for it. Everyone waits around until they hear his inner chimes ringing then they gather round. He needs to work for us, not us for him. Ashmita and Mrs. Luna, you have given him too big a sandbox.”

“Deep,” said narco-terrorist.

“But, Mark,” Ashmita said, “you’re coming from a sales slash communications background. This will cause a revolt.”

“I come from a humanities background. I had to write a lot. One skill which I learned was editing. If those people don’t want to be part of the new paradigm, they need to be edited out of the narrative. By the way, that’s the third nonnegotiable. I want the power to fire people.”

“With my approval,” said Mrs. Luna.

“With your knowledge,” I said. “Approval, no. We need to do business in an entirely new way down in the basement.”

“Yes, Sifu Mark,” said Ashmita.

Narco, Mrs. Luna, and I laughed.

“What’s this business about a coup?”

“The COO has left after one quarter. He started the upheaval which Wall Street majestically approved of, but he pissed someone off. No one knows who.”

“The stock went up,” said business man Santiago.

“Then he left. They floated the story of family obligations.”

“He made seven million dollars in three months,” said Ashmita.

“Remarkable,” said Mrs. Luna.

“I’ve got me-ness envy,” said the suddenly urbane Santiago.

“They thought it was sales-to-tech. We understood that the dialogue had to be tech-to-sales. It’s just a small turn of the dial, but it makes all the difference, don’t you think, Mark?”

“I thought it was about company cohesiveness. About doing the right thing by the shareholders.”

“I see what you mean,” said Santiago.

“He is *perfect* for the job,” said Ashmita. “But we must thank Mrs. Luna.” Who closed her eyes and dipped her head in a humble bow.

“We gave them David, and *she* gave us Mark. And now we will give Mark back, won’t we Mark? We will rewrite your contract now so that when your RTUs are up and running you will receive a grand bonus.”

“RTUs were what we wanted to do in the first place,” I said.

“But we’re in charge of the teams down here now. Think about all that you have learned. You are the missing link. You will go topside, and teach them what we offer.”

“Isn’t it all the same?”

Patently, Mrs. Luna tried again: “We are not interested in a culture change. We are interested in preservation of the species.”

“But you’re up here on the 29th.”

“She is our spy,” said Ashmita. “She recruited you.”

“I think I should move back up here to the 29th.”

“That is no longer possible, Mark,” said Mrs. Luna. “No, that would not be possible.”

“But the company needs to change. What about David’s manual for the new security software?”

“He carried out our instructions perfectly, didn’t he Ashmita? He put everyone in a tizzy fit. So much fun to watch.”

“So I will...” I no longer knew my role in the company.

“Yes,” said Ashmita. “And you will be well compensated.”

Later that night, at home, I looked at the battlespace of my professional life in the company, much like a World War II commander poring over a three-dimensional model. I realized I did not know where the front lines, allies, or enemies were. I sensed I had been both promoted and demoted, but I didn’t know quite how.

I tried to discuss it with Sofia. She said that I should quit and become a bicycle mechanic.

One day, I heard about a new guy who would move in. He would occupy the corner cube, close to the doorway, near the kitchen, my old space. He would be isolated and alone. Ashmita could watch him.

She stopped by my cube at the end of the day, after most everyone had gone home. I worked on writing code for a program that would help organize threat levels in the tsunami of incoming information from Middle Eastern countries. The program was simplicity itself. Gather webs of information centered on locales rather than individual actors. We found out that the

higher ups took precautions, but the runners and gatherers, we called them, lower on the food chain took greater risks. One task was that we had to find a filter that discarded their complaints about food, bad pay, being ignored, the unfairness of tribal leaders, all that stuff, so that we could be able to “hear” things significant. I’d been given me the green light, but I told Ashmita that I wanted proprietary rights over my intellectual property.

“We encourage that Mark.”

I fell into a groove that day. I knew I’d be in-office until 22 or 2300hrs.

“Would you do something for me, Mark?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Come.”

I followed. What was it? I’d been down here three months now. The RTUs seemed not to have materialized. Ashmita guaranteed they would become a reality.

We walked through the unfinished store room: plastic shelving filled with boxes of pens and pencils, staplers, paperclips, stacks of hard drives, boxes of old files, reams of paper, supplies for the kitchen.

The custodian I met the first day down here sat at a desk in the back reading the newspaper. I thought he had a desk in an area on some other floor. He smiled at me and pointed his hand like a gun and fired the trigger. Big yellow-teeth grin.

Ashmita in her wonderful, melodious Indian accent said, “He is the first newbie from upstairs since you, Mark.”

I followed her into the furnace room past a workbench with a vise. Mounted on the wall was pegboard with tools.

“There,” she said. Against a far wall were twenty-five boxes which I recognized. “You do the honors.”

From the dark recess of the furnace room, opposite the area we walked in, came Stu, as if some roly-poly nocturnal animal roused from sleep.

“Stu will help you. Grayson has put the hand trucks there.”

“Why are we doing this?”

Stu had grabbed a hand truck and attempted to slip the noseplate beneath the first stack. He stopped when he heard my question.

She placed her hand on my wrist. “It provides us with a tell,” she said. “We want good soldiers here.”

“So when I dutifully removed them from the cube...”

“Yes,” she said.

Ashmita and I turned to Stu when he scraped and nudged the noseplate beneath the first stack of boxes, leaned them toward him, then trudged out the way we’d come in.

“How many of us have come from above?” I asked.

She smiled. “It doesn’t matter. You are so special to us, Mark.”

The following morning he arrived. I yearned to go over, help him out, provide him with details of our tribal rituals. As I was ready to break free and just do it, march down the aisle, turn left, stick out my hand and say, “Hello,” Ashmita came up behind me and put her hand on my shoulder. “Come with me.” I flinched.

We had what we called jumper chairs, your basic straight back, four legged chair, available when we visited other cubes. She had one next to her.

“Here,” she patted the jumper.

I sat.

“Watch.”

On her computer screen were feeds coming from different cameras embedded somewhere in the ceiling. She blew up the eye-in-the-sky feed that showed the newbie’s office cube, my former residence, with him standing, contemplating his options. We watched him look into the well of his space, look around the room for a friendly face, look behind him, perhaps waiting for people to burst forth, clap him on the back, and give him a “for he’s a jolly good fellow” moment of encouragement.

“Here it is,” she whispered.

“What’s his name?”

“Lukey. That’s how introduced himself,” she continued with lowered voice. “Lukey Mickenson.”

Lukey didn’t even wait for the custodian, as I did. He started with the boxes nearest him, and placed them in neat stacks against the wall. He made sure that none of them impeded foot traffic.

“Isn’t he gorgeous,” she said. “He’s one of us.”

“Thank you,” I said. “For showing me the way.”

She grabbed my hand, eyes on her computer.

I slipped away. I hadn’t ever noticed any camera mounts. I meandered over to the meeting room and leaned against the doorframe. I surveyed the ceiling and saw nothing. They must be using some sort of advanced micro lens.

I wanted to make contact. I walked along the far aisle, being watched no doubt, and went into the men's room and waited in a stall like a lurker. Two regulars came in and went to urinals.

"You see the Ronald?"

"Where do they get these guys?"

"Lukey the Ronald."

"Ronald the Lukey."

Laughing.

I couldn't go through with it. Not in the bathroom. Too weird. I walked back to my cube where Ashmita could watch me. She winked in the mirror and gave a wave. I now loved source code, and I noticed about myself that I'd begun to be less verbally adept.

I felt a primal yearning for the great outdoors and potential Response Team Unit camaraderie.

Lately, Sofia had been asking me *What's wrong?*

She informed me that I hadn't read a book or magazine in weeks. I drifted to the technical manuals section in the coffee shop bookstore we frequented.

On our last Thursday night date, she said, "You've changed. You're no longer a Ronald. I want you to be a Ronald again."

"Source code," I replied.

Lukey had unpacked and settled in. Ashmita burrowed into her work. I lay in wait. In the middle of the afternoon, 1500 hours, I stood and stretched. Ashmita's eyes and forehead appeared. At that moment, Lukey stood, too. He looked toward the doors to the kitchen area, and decided on a snack. I meandered over there.

I needed contact. I wanted to talk with Lukey. I followed him into the kitchen.

“Hello,” he said. “My name’s Lukey.”

“Hello,” I said. “My name’s Mark.” Help me, I mouthed.

“What?”

Help me, I again mouthed. I wrote it out on a brown napkin. *help me*. Just as Stu had done.

He took the napkin. and glanced at it. His face brightened, a child watching fireworks.

“Just like she said you would,” he said. He strode out of the kitchen area. I followed.

He walked over to Ashmita’s cube and handed it to her.

I stood next to her cube, a little boy who’d got caught.

“Mark,” she said in her mellifluous, snake-charming, Indian accent. “Don’t you know that you are one of us now?” She cupped my left hand in hers.

“I’m not sure what that means.”

“You are. You are.”

“When can I start training people for the RTUs?”

“Oh, Mark. I think I could fall in love with you.”

Taking Possession

I sat on the porch. Through the window screen I could hear her talking to her father on her cell phone.

“Exhausted. Yes, the house needs a lot of work. Oh, he's all right. You know as well as I do that he doesn't have a job right now.” She turned her back and quieted her voice. When she hung up, she joined me on the porch.

The moving van had gone. After hauling boxes from one floor to another, I wondered if I had begun to fall to the back of the herd. My whole body hurt.

We sat in the bench swing suspended by two rusty chains.

“I've got to put the bed together,” I said.

“There's a lot to be done.”

We heard the neighbor unlock her front door. Our adjacent row house porches were separated by a knee high cement divide.

“Hidy, neighbor,” she called.

She let the screen door smack shut behind her then briskly stepped toward us. She wore

an old-ladyish, faded print dress that went below her knees, with a lace collar and short sleeves, and black shoes with blocky, square heels. This on a 95° day. She clutched her hands together up under her chin. She smiled at us, and I noticed that her pupils rotated in little donut circles.

Behind to her left I saw her cat sitting in the front room window. The fur at its shoulders, between its ears, and along the front half of its body appeared stiff, pushed up the wrong way, as if it had rolled in pancake syrup. It looked at us--me--through the window and gave a silent hiss.

“Hello,” I said to her. I stood and stretched out my hand.

“No,” she said, “don’t.” She took one step back, gripped her hands tighter at throat height, and stared at me as if I might leap the knee high wall like a pirate and begin pillaging.

I was caught in an awkward moment of a half-forward, half-retreat, when Christopher, our cat, my cat, saved me. He came to the front door, stood on his hind legs, put claws into the screen, and arched his back in a long-bodied, princely stretch. I opened the door and he meandered about the porch sniffing, raising his head, and shifting his ears to the new neighborhood sounds. He inspected the piled boxes and empty plant pots that remained outside. The neighbor, my wife, and I, needing a place for our eyes, watched him explore his new territory.

I glanced up after a while to see if we might reset the opening moment of our first meeting, scrub away any lingering awkwardness. I wanted to say a kind word to her, ask about the area, maybe get a friendly suggestion about a new local restaurant. Unmoving and silent, she stared at Christopher with pupils that circled little zeros. A pickup truck drove down the street and took the speed bump in front of our house too fast, rattling a bed full of metal junk that bounced and landed loudly in the bed of the truck. I jumped. She didn’t flinch.

“What a lovely cat,” she whispered to herself.

I overheard and thanked her.

She looked up at me as if trying to recall the face.

“Well,” she said, instantly shaking off her cat reverie, “I must be on. Tootles.” She fluttered four fingers, went down her front steps, adjusted her little straw hat, and walked toward Falls Road. Later, I found out her name was Mrs. McGill.

“Tootles?” I said to my wife.

“Don’t start,” she said.

“Katherine, she’s a weirdo.”

“Maybe she thinks you’re a weirdo.”

I sat down against the pillar that held up the front eave structure of our house. Katherine leaned over and ripped off the flap of a box and fanned her face. She’d pinned her hair back; her neck was flush; her eyes had dark half-moons beneath them.

“I cannot believe the heat,” she said. Sitting curled in the chair-swing made her seem young, like a teenager. Slender and intense, she ran three to five miles a day before her recent health problems. She’d had a thousand dreams of moving away from blue collar Baltimore, landing in San Francisco, and living her life on the west coast. We’d stayed there for five years.

“Well, you wanted to come back,” I said. “It’s probably about 65 degrees in San Francisco right now.”

“I won’t fight with you, Boyd,” she said quietly.

Christopher found his way over to me and rubbed his head against my hand. I scratched his neck; he sat on his haunches, closed his eyes, and purred. When I stopped he lay next to me,

and I pet his striped, bronze colored fur.

Maria, our downstairs neighbor in San Francisco, had said, “I think he’s the most beautiful cat I’ve ever seen.”

“I moved back to Baltimore and bought a house in Hampden of all places, the place of my birth and childhood,” she said to the sky, the universe. “I told myself since I was twelve years old that I would move away from Hampden and never come back.”

“You have friends here.”

“Yes, I do. My friends have tattoos and too many kids and service jobs, if they work at all. Tina’s got a job as the night manager of a cleaning crew of office buildings. She’s considered a big success.”

“Maybe we can go back.”

“Boyd, you need to get a job,” she said, almost whispered. “You’ve got a pregnant wife on your hands.”

“I’m saying that we don’t give up the San Francisco plan. I messed up, I admit it, but...”

She uncurled herself from the wooden bench swing and walked through the front door.

I pounded the phone, sent my resume around through three difference job search websites, even scanned the classifieds in a local rag and the Baltimore Sun. I bought a used car from a mechanic in Arbutus, the little town outside of Baltimore when I grew up.

I’d forgotten about Baltimore’s humidity. The first ten-day stretch of June when we moved in tied the record for most days in a row of 95° or hotter, including four that topped 100°. We bought three air-conditioners at Home Depot, but couldn’t use them because our house

hadn't yet been rewired; they blew the screw-in fuses in the fuse box down in the basement. The previous owners had left a few box floor fans that squeaked and rattled which we carried from room to room. The electrician promised to get to us by the end of the month. The heat caused people's central air conditioning units to crash, and he was booked up.

I'd advocated renting for a year until we got back on our feet, but Katherine insisted on buying. I dug in my heels. She had her father call me. I caved. We scraped together enough from the proceeds of the sale of our second floor unit in San Francisco to pay off the mortgage then make a downpayment on the Hampden row house and buy an eight year old car. We were broke. We paid into Katherine's health plan from her job in San Francisco, but we couldn't afford to keep me on it. I had enough Prozac to get me halfway through August, then maybe I'd re-up with some TV medical insurance if I didn't yet have a job.

My insomnia intensified. I couldn't sleep more than three hours at a stretch. I felt like I was drowning.

Three weeks after we moved in I got lucky. A guy from Arbutus got wind of my job search and told me he could "toss some work my way." His mother and mine went to the same church, and Johnny, her stay at home thirty-two year old, needed an IT specialist. He'd gotten a contract to wire some city schools that just received a big grant.

"You'll be helping me out, too," he said. "This might lead to some bigger stuff, but I need to see if you got the kung fu I'm looking for. You'll start August 1st." Five weeks away.

I wondered if I could hold it together for that long.

One afternoon, about 5:00 p.m., I sat in a plastic lawn chair in the back yard. Shadows from trees trunks, the slats of the fence, and overhead telephone wires lay elongated across the grass. My eyes felt grainy from lack of sleep, and I closed them and must have drifted off, sitting straight up in the chair with the heat wrapped around me like wool. I snapped awake when I began to tilt. Christopher, who had been lounging beneath my chair, had escaped into Mrs. McGill's yard then climbed to the fifth or sixth step of her back stairs leading to her kitchen. I ticked, ticked, ticked my tongue. Christopher looked over sharply. He dashed down the stairs, jumped the fence, and danced over to me. He put the top of his head into my left hand then stared with the mesmerizing cat intensity that bewitches cat owners, bunched, then leaped onto my shoulders. I reached my hand back to caress his neck. His purring rumbled in my ear. He balanced there for a few moments before stepping down then curling onto my lap. He looked up at me with heavy lidded eyes before curling tighter, tucking his paws, and breathing like a child in slumber. I smiled for the first time all day.

Mrs. McGill, outside of my consciousness, had managed to creep down from her porch, sidle along her walkway, place her hands on the top pipe of the chain link fence, and stare at Christopher with what I can only describe as lust. Christopher popped his head up when he no doubt felt me stiffen in her presence. She made no neighborly gesture of excusing herself when I looked at her directly, no "I'm sorry, I was just looking for something in the garage." Christopher, sensing my mood change, stood on my lap, arched in a shivering stretch, then jumped away and sashayed down the back walk, up the metal stairs, then lounged atop the sun-warmed landing of our porch.

Mrs. McGill said nothing to me. She mounted her stairs, whispered something across to

Christopher which perked his ears, then went back inside her house.

The days passed. I couldn't wait to start working.

Katherine went to see her grandparents who lived in a condominium up in Cockeysville, as she did every Saturday. Her sisters and parents joined her. I knew she would spend the full day with them, maybe go out to eat dinner then return home at 9:00 or 10:00. Yesterday she said, why don't you join us? I was tempted, but her family had always kept me at arm's distance, and I didn't feel like navigating the looks and abrupt silences.

I used to ask Katherine why they didn't invite me onboard. She would shrug, tell me I imagined it.

"It's because we lived together before we got married, right?" Her parents were strict Roman Catholics, a religion I never understood.

Marion, the youngest, told me that wasn't it. Katherine, she, and I got drunk at a bar in San Francisco one night when Marion visited from Baltimore. I kept asking her why their family didn't like me.

"Look, I'm not whining, I just want to know. Lots of people don't like the guy their daughter or sister marries. I'm curious about what it is. I don't sell drugs. We share the same bank account. Her name is on the lease."

Marion said it was nothing. We're just a tight knit group, she said. All boyfriends and husbands find our family treacherous sailing.

"But what is it," I pressed. I knew Marion liked me more than the others in her family. We had an openly flirty relationship. One time, and one time only, we groped each other in the

basement of her parents' house when I spent a few days there after Katherine and I flew back for Christmas the first year we started going out. She had her shirt off when we heard someone upstairs, which stopped us cold.

I said to her, "I've heard you talk about others as being too jocky or nerdy or stuck up. Look, I know the things you guys say. I've been around for a couple of years. Information starts to leak out. So what is it with me?"

I could tell she wanted to tell. Katherine sat back with Samurai calm and let her sister spill it.

Marion said, "My parents think you're a creep."

"Your father, you mean," I said. I felt like she'd tossed me a twisting, muscular fish that tried to torque out of my hands.

"No," she said, "my mother is right in there."

I remember I said something like, "Parents these days, what do they know?" Then I started to poke at it. Why would they think that? Samurai Katherine must have semaphored a signal because they sealed the topic, and I could never get Marion to talk about it again. Katherine wouldn't touch it.

"Hi there," I said. "You're a sound for sore ears."

Maria, our downstairs neighbor from San Francisco, and I agreed that we wouldn't talk to each other for three months after I moved back to Baltimore, and here three weeks in, she called.

"I didn't expect to hear from you," I said. I went to the front porch, phone to ear. Mrs. McGill snipped at her shrubs with hedge cutters. She wore a straw sun hat with a dipping front

brim that hid her face, brown clogs, and a frilly blue dress. For a moment, she acted as if she didn't see me, but after I sat down in the swing and lowered my voice I saw her staring, hedge clippers crossed in an X in front of her.

“Do I have your full attention, Boyd. You seem distracted.” Maria had an upper class Spanish accent, soothing and dictatorial.

“No, I'm here.”

Christopher jumped to the back of the chair inside the house where he could sit and stare out. He yeowed once then looked over my shoulder in the direction of Mrs. McGill who went back to her yard work.

“I'm surprised you called. How's Belford?”

“Belford's fine, Boyd. We need to talk about you.”

For a moment I felt a gut squashing fear that she might tell me that she was pregnant with my child. One time, and one time only, Maria and I made it, right there on her kitchen floor when we went inside to get more hot water for tea. I'd sit with her in the yard some late afternoons while Katherine was at work. Katherine suffered mild depression from the Lyme disease or CFS--or whatever it was, three doctors couldn't figure it out--which crashed her libido. One thing leads to another right? Afterward, Maria said to me: That will never happen again.

“Do you remember a girl named Nixie Vogel?”

“No,” I said. “Nixie Vogel? Doesn't ring a bell.”

“From the high school,” she said.

Maria had gotten me a job working as a contractual custodian at the private high school

where she taught art classes, no doubt to get me out of her hair as much to help me along. The regular guy quit in a huff, and until they hired a new permanent chief custodian, they needed a stand in.

“Nixie Vogel,” she said. “Think hard.”

Nixie Vogel. My mouth turned to cotton. I couldn’t control my breath.

I liked buffing floors the best. I felt like I piloted a small aircraft as the pad skimmed over the surface geography of the tiled school floors.

My two knucklehead assistants and I would rotate duties. The school building had six floors; we did two apiece every night. They loved me as a boss because, being 20-somethings, they had a million things to do, and as long as they got their work squared away, I would let them fly. I eyeballed their workspace every night to make sure they didn’t try to get-over on me, but they teamed up, got their work done double quick most nights, and often bolted before 6:00. They both slipped me twenty bucks at the end of the week to clock them out at 7:00.

I saw her at a bank of lockers in the middle of the dim hallway. I noticed that a light needed changing, stopped the buffer, and made a note on a small pad I kept with me. I released the safety at the hand grip and put the flying saucer buffer in motion again. I cracked myself up thinking of it as a martian ship hovering, attempting human contact. I figure put a buffer in the hands of every white collar American male once a week, that would take care of some neurotic behavior real quick. I felt like a king behind that bad boy, moving it side to side, feeling the rotation of the buffer pad doing its work.

I made my way toward her. She leaned against the wall, looking down at her cell, text

messaging with one hand. She stood about 5' 8", blue jeans, black Converse All Stars high tops. It was after 5:30, so she must have just gotten out of a club meeting.

I rolled up close to her. She didn't move, so I stopped the machine and said, "I hate to bother you, good looking, but I got a floor that needs my attention." I liked playing the roguish janitor to those kids. They hauled in Benz's for their 16th birthdays; they packed enough gear--iPad, iPods, iPhones, netbooks, and Nooks--in their soft-bellied urban soldier lives that they lived in an exclusive digital landscape unavailable to us who could remember as far back as Bill Clinton's presidency.

When I got up next to their space, most of them huffed away as if they needed fresh air from staying too long in the monkey exhibit at the zoo. Some of them shyly crept off because of their shame at being adolescents. A few looked me in the eye and said hello.

This one here was altogether different.

"Hi," she said, stretched out her hand, "I'm Nixie Vogel."

"Glad to meet you, Nixie. What the hell you doing standing on my floor?" Big grin.

"Maybe I was just waiting here for you."

"Here I am."

"You and your big buffer."

I laughed. "You're going to get me in trouble."

We didn't have a problem getting right down to it. I'm telling you, snap your fingers, it was just like that. A once in a lifetime thing. We went into room 012, on Ms. Tottinger's reading rug, and made it. Afterward, I asked her what's a nice girl like her. She said she was in the mood.

Never happen again, I figured, luck of the draw.

Three days later, I can't tell you I forgot about it, but I was back to my duties trying to figure myself as a responsible person, a good husband, a guy who was on track.

I came down the hallway with my buffer, and there she stood. I looked at my watch: 6:30. Her eyes were puffy, her face tear stained. I turned off the machine.

“What's wrong?”

“I got into a fight with the house director. He threatened to kick me out of the group home. I needed to see someone.” She stepped toward me and hugged me like I was a long lost hero. She cried hard for a while. “Make love to me,” she whispered.

My chest tightened. My thinking stopped. I imagined I heard somebody coming down the stairs. Two weeks ago, Katherine, bedridden on and off for months, managed to walk the six blocks to the school. She said she felt lonely and wanted me to go with her to The Vanilla Bean for an ice cream cone.

I turned around. Nobody. Nothing.

“You're in a group home?” I said.

I held her by the arms out from me. I needed to see her face.

She nodded. “Boyd, hold me.”

She grabbed me and held onto me. I imagined the police. I imagined Katherine and Marie showing up together. I didn't know what to do. I could feel my legs shaking. My breathing was shallow. She kept saying, “Oh, Boyd. Oh, Boyd. God you feel good.”

I sang “Hush Little Baby, Don't Say a Word.” My grandmother used to sing it to my brother and me when she babysat. I couldn't think of anything else to do. “Hush little baby, don't say a word, Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird.” Last two lines go like this: “And if that horse

and cart fall down, you'll still be the sweetest little baby in town.” She cried hard, but I felt her turning. I swayed and held her. After a while, she said she needed to go to the bathroom.

I stood there staring at my buffer as if it were an exotic, mechanical relative of the ostrich. When she came out, she looked like she'd gathered herself together.

She said, “Thanks, I feel a lot better. Sorry to be such a basket case.” She smiled.

I told her she was a trooper. She put her arms around me, stared me in the face, then gave me a passionate kiss. “I'm feeling better.”

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe you should go.”

“Okay,” she said. Her eyes got blank, as if shutters closed. She tapped my chest twice with the flat of her hand.

Did she whisper, “I love you,” before stepping away? I felt like a rat caught in a glue trap.

I got back behind the controls of the buffer. My headspace was pierced with high anxiety flares. I almost let the machine get away from me and plow into a trophy case.

I called Katherine a few minutes before 7:00 and asked her if she wanted to meet me at The Vanilla Bean.

“No,” she said. “And don't bring any home, either. You're getting fat.”

I stood near the old fashioned time clock where we punched in and out. “I'm five pounds overweight,” I said. “Big deal.”

“You're fat,” she said. “You're a strudel boy.”

I tried to laugh it off. She knew I was touchy about my weight. I should have gone to the Y more often. I was freaked out to my fingertips.

“Just take a walk with me, then,” I said.

“I’m tired,” she said.

“I was finishing up and thought I’d call.”

“What’s wrong? You sound weird. You get fired?”

“No, I’m a damned good janitor.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Listen, I’ll see you in about fifteen minutes.”

I opened the front door to our second floor home, and I nearly went to my knees and kissed the floor. I didn’t want to lose her or the apartment we owned or the San Francisco dreams we shared. I had everything I could want, and I nearly threw it away. Maria and now Nixie. And I don’t doubt I could have done something about getting excessed from my IT job. I made half-assed excuses about upgrading my skills three or four times over the years I was with the company. They wanted me to go down to Sacramento for a week, and I blew them off about it. And near the end I didn’t read the spec sheets closely enough, which means I didn’t get the job done right, which means the company lost time redoing what I should have done in the first place, which means I made us look like amateurs. Nobody could exactly trace it back to me--we worked as a team--but I didn’t fool anyone, either. When the company needed to tighten up, I was out on my ass. Now I pushed a broom and guided a buffer around a high-falutin private high school.

Yes, veils dropped from my eyes that night after leaving Nixie and entering the front door to our home. Katherine had repainted the living room in the spring. She’d bought new furniture. She’d refurbished a chest cabinet that she used to store nice dishes and tablecloths. She’d put up

pictures of friends and relatives and found a wooden kitchen table at a yard sale with all four chairs intact. She had maintained our home even though she'd been in deteriorating physical health for months.

I saw her in the kitchen at the stove in her running tights and a windbreaker type jacket. She'd taken off her running shoes but still wore ankle socks.

"Hey," I said. "You're wearing your running stuff."

"I ran a mile today," she said. "I'm going to beat this thing." As I said, she routinely ran three to five miles before getting hammered by the virus or bacterial infection.

"Hey, congratulations," I said. "Really. I'm proud of you."

"You should be. I kicked ass today. Now get over here and give me a hug." After dinner, we made love for the first time in six months.

Three days later she was back in bed. She told me her bones ached. She could hardly stand up. The next day, I got her to the doctor's who told her she needed to take a leave of absence from work or she would never recover.

The med-tech firm couldn't afford to keep her on any longer--she'd stretched their patience with absences--so she got canned the first week of April.

I remember sitting with Maria and Belford in the shared yard of our Victorian house. Cool foggy smells filled the air. Belford was bloviating about something when Maria asked, "What's wrong?"

"Katherine's not getting any better," I said. "She got fired from her job."

Maria put her flat fingers through her hair. She had strong hands, like a potter. She raised her chin, sized me up. "What are you going to do about it?"

“Try to get something,” I said. “My contract with your school ends in June.”

“Why don't you stay on as janitor?” said Belford. I could see the tiniest of smiles.

“He can't do that,” said Maria. “They've got somebody else lined up. A teacher has a cousin who's been station over in Germany. He gets discharged in July. The principal promised it to him.”

Belford worked as an associate professor in sociology at a community college across the bridge in Oakland. Both his and Maria's parents had money. No worries on that front.

Christopher crept down our wooden deck to the fence, then onto the grass. He sauntered over to me, leaped up to my shoulders where he curled around my head, then came onto my lap. He turned over on his back and opened his neck which I scratched and he purred. I'd saved him from the alley a few months before, took him to the vet's for shots, gave him anti-bodies because he had an infection on his paw, fed him, nurtured him back to health. I'd never felt such a strong connection to an animal or person, I'm embarrassed to say. Getting frustrated with Katherine's mysterious Lyme disease or CFS or whatever it was, being exsessed from work for my own willful incompetence, and indulging in shit-stain behavior with Maria and Nixie, all of it made me realize Christopher was the single thing that I hadn't betrayed or damaged or made excuses about. I got it right with him.

“Have you tried to get back with your old company?” she asked. “Maybe they're rehiring again.”

“They were glad to see me go,” I said. I shrugged.

“You're kind of a fuck-up, aren't you?” said Belford. He laughed, like we were old rugby buddies. His face always reminded me of a hamster's.

Maria said, "Calm down, Belford. He's having a hard time."

"You know what your problem is," he said. "You need to grovel. You're trying to stay on the outside all the time. It don't work like that, bro."

"They teach you that in Hillsborough Heights?" I asked, throwing his wealthy upbringing in his face.

"You know what they teach us in Hillsborough Heights? They teach us to keep our hands to ourselves."

"Mi amor," she said. "That's over."

"Is it over, Boyd, with you and that waitress?"

I told Maria about an affair I had right after Katherine and I got married. I asked her to keep it to herself.

"How many times have we sat here listening to you talk about Katherine and how sick she is, with the implication that she's ruining your life. You ever wonder how you're ruining hers?"

"You're so angry tonight, mi hombre," she said. "What's up with you?"

"This guy," he said pointing at me, "I bet the moment I turn my back he'll try to get you in bed, Maria. That would kill us. I see how he looks at you. You got him a job, helped him get on his feet. Now I've got to sit here and pity him because his life sucks."

I rubbed Christopher's neck, pet him along his upper arm.

"It's best you go inside," she said.

I thought she might be talking to Belford, but silence lay on us till I looked up and saw them both staring at me. The back yard belonged to occupants of the first and second floors, but

because they lived on the first floor it seemed like it was more theirs than ours.

I picked up Christopher who put front paws on my outstretched hand, as if a perch for a falcon, then I trudged upstairs.

Over the next month, Katherine got worse. June loomed. I began to sleep less. I self-medicated by increasing my daily dosage of Prozac. I started looking for jobs in the custodial field. Younger people glutted the IT market. Companies wanted high powered, lean staffs. I was long in the tooth for my skill set. They wondered why at age 35 I hadn't been promoted to project manager anywhere.

I hoped to get on with the city, cleaning parks, doing something outdoors, changing my ways. I interviewed with a private waste management company. The woman in Human Resources told me they had an opening for a guy on the truck starting June 1st when some end of the fiscal year money would open up.

“It's contractual,” she told me, “but you stay with us for six months, we put you on our full benefits plan. You can do well here,” she said. “I've been here fifteen years and not a day goes by that I regret.”

She told me that if it worked out they would train me to drive a truck. I could then go out solo and take charge of a green dumpster route. She leaned back in her chair. She said she thought I was management material.

I remember the sparkling late spring day when I walked out of her windowless office in that flat-roofed, one story, cement building. My heart sang knowing I had a permanent job lined up. I would be a trash man. The air had warmed to 75 or 80 degrees. I took off my sweater and could have tapped my heels together in a joyous movie moment. The HR woman told me that my

hours would be 5:00 to 2:30. That would leave me with time to get to the high school for the last two weeks of the school year for my custodial duties there.

I jumped on the bus to take the half hour ride home. My heart started to race—I think it was a side effect of the Prozac, though the doctor at the street clinic shrugged when I'd asked him about it. A woman three seats up and across the aisle, whose face looked like it had been stung by a swarm of bees, started shouting: "Oh, God, oh, Jesus. They're coming for me now. They're coming. They're coming for me now." Tears trickled down the side of her face.

I got off because she rattled me. I started walking and was between bus stops when the next one blew by. I walked some more. I waited for another bus for forty-five minutes. When I disembarked and walked up our street, I saw a bicyclist crash into the side of a car then tumble over the top of it. People gathered and whipped out cell phones. Almost instantly, sirens spun through the air.

I ascended the steps and entered through the front door, and as had happened the past month, the moment I walked in and shut the outside world behind me, I felt deep gratitude for Katherine and the safety of our home.

I found her in bed with her arm across the brow of her eyes as if shielding herself from light. I sat next to her and grabbed her weak hand in mine and asked her what I could do for her.

"Whew," she said, "I'm really out of it today." She attempted a smile. "How about going to the store and getting us one of those already cooked chickens. We have enough stuff here for a salad."

I peeked in on her when I returned. She snored softly in a deep sleep.

Days later on Sunday morning, I went down to the cooperative and got us sesame-sunflower bread, fresh cherries and nectarines, and Sumatra coffee which she liked. She'd been in bed or spending time with Maria in the yard, so I hadn't told her my news.

She'd got up after I left for the market, set the table, opened the window. Christopher greeted me when I walked in. I picked him up and kissed him. Katherine looked strong. Her eyes were bright.

At the table, buttering my toast, I said, "I'm going to be a trash man." Tears welled in my eyes. Christopher sat on my lap beneath the table. I could feel him purring. I can't express how happy I was.

She bit into a cherry. I noticed she hadn't touched her coffee.

Right before she got sick in January, I think she was about to tell me we should separate. She'd started taking kick boxing lessons again and hoped to compete in the over 30 category. She wanted to finish her master's in psychology so she could hang out her shingle.

"Boyd," she said.

Those dark eyes of hers, they sometimes went hard and sharp.

"I'm pregnant. We've got to make plans."

"You're pregnant, and I've got a job. What else is there to plan for?" I didn't quite know what to think about the pregnancy part.

"The other night, I sat on the front step with Belford."

"I don't really like him all that much."

"He told me about the waitress, Boyd. He also told me about Maria. Do you know that

those two might break up because of your...your sloppiness?"

I stopped eating. I guess Maria started feeling guilty about us.

"Is there anyone else you need to tell me about?"

The letters N-i-x-i-e V-o-g-e-l engraved themselves in my mind like automatic writing on a piece of silver.

"I've been sick, Boyd. How could you be such an asshole?"

Any plans we would make, she'd already made.

"All of that stuff is in the past, Maria. Katherine. I've got a good job lined up. It's something I can do. I'm management material."

"I talked with my father, Boyd. We need to move back to Baltimore. I'm not well yet, and Johns Hopkins Hospital is right in the city. I'll be around medical experts. I'll feel safer there."

"Are you serious?"

"We need to sell this place and get set up in Baltimore. My father told me the real estate market is good right now. We can get a row home in Hampden for cheap."

"A row home in Hampden. Why don't you put a stake through my heart?"

She buttered a piece of sesame-sunflower toast and with the tip of the knife put a thin layer of apple butter on it. "Like you put through mine? I called the realtor. She's going to be here at 2:30."

"I'm waiting," said Maria.

"What's the name again?"

“Boyd, I’m waiting.”

“Okay, I remember her. Vaguely. Substitute teacher at your school, right? Out of college, 25, 26 years old?” I lied.

“Enough, Boyd. Enough of that. She's having problems, Boyd. Serious problems.”

“How old did you say she was?”

“I didn’t, but she’s 18.”

“She looked older than that to me.”

“You won’t get slapped with lewd and lascivious behavior, Boyd, so take a breath. I helped get her admitted to the psych wing at San Francisco General Hospital. She got kicked out of the group home. She keeps asking for you.”

“You tell her I moved all the way over here to Baltimore?”

“I think you need to come and see her.”

“How’s that supposed to work?” Sweat trickled down my back.

“Get on a plane and get out here.”

“What, tell Katherine I got a hankering for the sourdough bread and need to get out there and buy us a loaf?”

“You might consider coming clean with Katherine. Nixie’s suicidal, Boyd. Believe me, this isn’t pleasant for anyone.”

“What if I say no?”

“There’s a group out here that’s big on rights for mental patients called Advocacy Corps for Persons with Mental Illness. After San Francisco General has her a while, they’ll contact ACPMI. If a true believer gets hold of your name, he or she will come after you. They’re big on

responsible citizenry. ACPMI is a great place to earn your stripes, and the hordes of youngsters coming out of law school who sign up with them are prowling around looking for game. How would you like to be slapped with a civil suit? ACPMI, let me tell you, has deep pockets.”

“How long do I have?”

“I'd say you better decide in 24 hours.”

I sat in our postage stamp back yard in the middle of the night, feet propped on a lawn chair, aimless with insomnia.

The light went on in the second floor back room of Mrs. McGill's house. Robinson, her cat, leaped to the window sill and peered down at me. I could only see his Halloween outline, and I waited for her to appear behind him and stare down at me while petting her mangy cat, but that didn't happen.

Sounds of the freeway from a mile away circled in the air. I tick, tick, ticked my tongue to see if Christopher would wake from wherever he slept and come to the door of the screen porch, and there he appeared, tail straight up, question mark hook at the end, searching the gray night for the source of that familiar sound. I let him out with hopes that he would sit on my lap and not leap the fence and scurry away forever. I dreaded ever losing him. I carried him to my chair and petted him a minute, but the night smells and sounds were too alluring for him to remain contented. He jumped off and tiptoed through the unmowed grass sniffing, indexing odors, stopping mid step, staring fiercely and shifting ears toward shadowed movements or sounds outside of my range. He granted me momentary peace just by being present and alive.

As he scouted around, I lived vicariously through his quiet, ferocious journey. He was the

hunter I wanted to be.

Without the slightest cringing, I can say I loved him, and I'm tempted to say that I would give my life for him. If I ever saw a snot nosed little shit of a neighborhood kid throw a rock at Christopher or hit him with a stick, I would go after him with a baseball bat.

The fur-tangled, medley coated Robinson still stared down at us from mast height on the good ship Next Door Neighbor. Christopher was blissfully unaware. I watched him, relieved that I had something to do with myself this muggy, insomniac evening. He was full of stops and starts, heads up to sounds; he swiped at a nocturnal bug, then he pranced three or four times toward the chain link fence, bunched and bounded over.

I don't know why—nothing more than a neurotic habit, I suppose—but the moment I saw him leap to the top of her fence then bounce into her yard then up her back metal steps, I checked my watch. 3:15 in the morning. With as much stealth as I could manage, I put one leg over then the other and tiptoed up her steps.

Christopher had some playfulness in him. He no longer ranged freely as he did in San Francisco, and we would have to decide if we wanted to allow him to be an outdoor cat. He eluded my grasp when I stood on the second step from the top. The porch had only a small platform, as did ours, about five feet by eight feet. He made me come all the way up and reach for him before he stayed put. I grabbed him, and as I stood, Mrs. McGill opened her door wearing a thin robe over a nightgown unbuttoned at her neck and chest.

She stepped outside.

“I'm so sorry, Ms. McGill, Christopher...”

I wondered if she'd taken out dentures--her mouth seemed puffy and puckered--though I

doubt she was sixty years old. She moved into my body space, reached out, and took Christopher from me. Unnerved and speechless, I watched Christopher curl up in her arms, back to forearm, squeeze his eyes half-shut and purr like a cat contented with all things in this world. It tore my heart out.

“There’s a good boy,” she whispered to him. “There he is.”

Christopher looked at me with eyes half-closed, sodden with pleasure, then he shifted his face toward her and rested his head against her shrunken breasts and blue streaked chest.

I watched Madonna and her child for as long as I could stand it, then hoisted him out of her arms and carried him down the stairs. I walked through her back gate then around to my gate, opened it, and carried Christopher, who had hardly moved in his state of bliss, into the house.

The swampy heat made the inside of the house feel like a crypt. I stretched out on the hard floor with a couch pillow beneath my head and stared at the ceiling until falling asleep. I awoke feeling seasick, as if I’d been bobbing on a small fishing boat in rough seas. My left arm was numb. I got up and took some Excedrin then went downstairs to the back yard and stood holding the railing on the metal porch breathing deeply, trying to clear my head, fighting off the nausea.

The plane touched down at 3:35 p.m., right on time. Katherine said she would stay with her parents. She insisted I not call her while I was in San Francisco.

“Fix whatever mess you made,” she said. “Try and do that.”

I rode the bus to my weatherbeaten hotel. The room stunk of mold, and two drawers were missing from the chest. A bar of used soap sat in the dish, and someone had within the hour it

seemed to me taken a shower and used one of the towels.

At 7:00 p.m., I took a BART train to San Francisco General Hospital. I'd called Maria from Baltimore and begged her to come with me, but she said, "You're on your own, Boyd."

I found my way to the proper floor and asked for Dr. Minford, as he'd instructed me. On that dreary morning in Baltimore, after I'd seen Mrs. Gill hold my Christopher in the middle of the night, I listened over the phone as the doctor told me that when I arrived we would need to go over some protocols.

I hadn't sat in my chair for long when the woman behind the glass who'd alerted the doctor I was present, called my name through an amplified speaker built into the glass.

I walked into the doctor's office and found the middle-age doctor sitting behind an organized desk in a white lab coat over a shirt and tie. He looked up and pointed to a chair to his left. A silver haired couple sat in a small couch on the opposite side of the office, at the desk's other end.

Dr. Minford introduced himself. He said me, "We've had some developments."

The man to the other side had laid his obviously expensive, brown suede cowboy hat on his lap. He wore a bolo tie with a silver slide showing an Indian on horseback spearing a buffalo. He had a boulder sized head, big shoulders, and calloused hands. His wife, rangy and tough, wearing a red cowboy shirt, stared at me with a tight, ferocious mouth.

The doctor folded hands on the desk top. He looked at me.

"Mr. James, these are the grandparents of Nixie Vogel, Mr. and Mrs. Vogel. They called me this morning and I asked them to come over, knowing that you would be here. They have decided to take Nixie with them, so her stay with us will end after our meeting. Mr. Vogel knew

that..."

"I'll take it from here, Doctor," he said.

Mrs. Vogel said to the doctor: "May I speak with you in the hallway a minute, Doctor Minford. I need to say just one little old thing before we go further with this."

He looked to me, then her husband. He glanced at his watch. "Okay, but let's be quick."

He allowed her to go first. She walked him down the hallway several feet. Mr. Vogel stood and quickly pulled the small couch across the office space, shut then blocked the door.

The big, powerful man turned to me. "You go screw an innocent child like that, some little girl don't know what's what."

He took three steps toward me and smacked me so hard on the side of my face with a hand that felt like iron in a glove that my head rang.

He bunched my shirt in his fist and pulled my face up close to his. I could smell his briny, sweat stink and see the hairs inside his nostrils.

He didn't breathe hard, other than his normal stertorous inhalations. "You're somebody all he does is take. That little girl in there don't have her head screwed right. By God up in heaven if it was up to me I'd take you back to my ranch and have a bull fuck you till you couldn't think straight no more." He pressed me back onto the couch, then grabbed me from the back of my head and jammed his fat middle finger down my throat till I choked and nearly passed out.

When he finished, he took out a blue kerchief and wiped his hand then threw the cloth in the trashcan.

I coughed and gagged. Finally my breath came back.

The doctor had been banging, yelling for him to open the door. The old boy pulled the

half-couch away and the doctor charged in followed by the woman.

“What in the hell went on in here?”

I didn't say a word.

The man and his wife sat down together again. “We're going to take her back to the ranch, Doctor. My son didn't do right by her, but we will. We got rights to her. I don't want this poor excuse for a human being to set eyes on her. We'll take care of her, make her right again.”

After dinner, I leaned against the wooden fence that outlined my back yard and saw Mrs. McGill snipping ends of plants and fussing with arrangements of statuary and furniture up on her porch. She swept the deck and steps as she did each night then sat down at her glass top porch table with a cup of iced tea, looking like some deranged crone staring out over the sea.

“Mrs. McGill?” I said. She turned and saw that I had Christopher in my arms.

“Oh,” she said and walked down her back steps, holding the railing, the crazy eyes pinwheeling.

I handed him, my treasure, to her over the fence. Christopher lay on his back, spine along her forearm, reached his paw up to her face, and stared into her eyes.

“Oh,” she said. “There he is.” She cupped his head and kissed him. “He will come to visit you,” she whispered to me.

She turned and mounted the stairs again and lay him atop the table. She moved aside a planted pot and her glass of tea. Christopher stretched and with triangular head on paws, stared at her as she chattered away.

I stepped back inside the porch then went into the basement. I looked with fresh eyes at

haphazard boxes still filled with our belongings, unused furniture, and piles of junk that we should have thrown out in San Francisco.

Though it was late in the day, I began.

“Katherine,” I called up to her. “Let’s clean some of this stuff up tonight, want to?”

Zero Point

The Amtrak train appeared from a blue pinpoint. She leaned to look down the tracks. He glanced at his wristwatch. He'd told her he wanted to stay in town, get together with Mark, and watch a football game up at Fitch's Bar.

"I need some sleep," Marilyn said. "I should have taken the later train."

"Holidays can be weird," Luke said.

"Yes they can," she said, staring into his eyes.

The train lumbered with a soft rocking into the station. A high pressure hiss sounded three cars down.

The conductor stepped away and yelled, "All aboard!"

"I'll be here Sunday night to pick you up," he said. "What did you say, 8:00?"

"I can't wait to get back to work out. I already feel fat, which makes me want to beat the crap out of someone."

"Maybe you're a little too engaged in the martial arts thing."

"All aboard!" said the conductor.

“I thought it was cool last night when Mark told me I looked like Hilary Swank. She’s one of my favorite actors. She’s tough. I like tough chicks.”

“She’s good looking, too.”

“She’s weird looking which I like. I like weird looking chicks who are tough. If I was down at Southland when that guy started shooting, I’d have charged him.”

“Lady, you need to kiss Romeo goodbye and get on the train.” The conductor stepped into the adjacent car.

When she turned to look at him, Luke glanced down at her bulging stomach. Everyone says stomach, he thought. She wore her faux-WWII flight jacket which she could no longer zip up.

She disappeared into the train car. He lost her form amidst other forms behind the tinted window while they slow-walked toward empty seats. The train began to slide away like someone shifting a large stage prop.

A week ago he’d asked her to marry him. She said yes. Ever since, she’d spent more time than usual working out at the dojo. Two days ago she suggested that they get out of town for Thanksgiving, clear their heads. See her grandparents.

“We’re thousands of dollars in debt,” she’d said while lying on the floor with a pillow tucked beneath her back.

Thousands and thousands, he thought to himself.

“We have just enough to cover this month’s rent. I mean, by dollars,” she said. “After the first of the year, the new insurance plan kicks in. My meds are going up.”

Upstairs the young guy cranked up his music. They’d talked to him a hundred times.

Chalky gray clouds draped the sky. He drove her big green Buick out of the parking lot. Three minutes later she called.

“Why did you say holidays can be weird?” she said.

“I was trying to create some simpatico ground. Let me tell you, calling May at six-thirty in the morning and getting into a fight seemed deliberately aggressive to me. You’ve only got one sister.”

“It was a first-strike thing. May’s bringing KC, her knucklehead girlfriend, who’ll set up her archery target and start shooting arrows in the back field again. You think Grannie and Gramps like her shooting arrows around?”

“They own a farm. I don’t think they care one way or another. First strike?”

“I was putting myself into a zone. May acts weak when that butchy KC is around. KC is mind-cancer. I should beat the crap out of KC for emotional abduction.”

He looked at his watch again. On the way to see Mark, he would pass by the Southland mall, south of Ann Arbor, where the shooting took place three days ago.

“When are you going up to Flick’s?” she said.

“Not till about 3:00.”

“Why are you lying to me?”

He switched the phone from left ear to right. He glanced into the rearview mirror. Snow dusted the air and swirled on the blacktop.

“If I told the truth, you would have given me too much blowback. I needed to be on my own today.”

“Hold on.”

The conductor asked for her ticket and behind their voices he heard distinct yet unidentifiable noises of a people occupied space and more distantly the rhythmic clacking of train wheels.

“I’m back,” she said. “Let’s go over that part where you said you needed to be on your own.”

“That’s right. I need to find the bottom of something. You’ve got too much gravitational pull.”

“You told me that you stayed so that you could keep Mark company. He couldn’t afford to travel east to be with his peeps.”

“I said that to back you off. You’re a buyer for Whole Foods, so you got the hot shit job covered. You’ll finish your MBA in less than a year, so you got the hot shit credentials covered. You want to open a food cooperative, so you have the hot shit social conscience covered.”

“I’m efficient,” she said.

“What’s the next level up from efficient? You’re that.”

“Okay, I’ll let you work in my co-op.”

“That was funny. Not haw-haw funny, but funny-when-you-think-about-it later funny. I need to get to zero point.”-They listened to a long pause together. “Mark knows the guy’s cousin or something who shot up the mall.”

“The shooter in the Southland Mall?”

“Yes. The guy they haven’t caught yet.”

“How many did he...”

“Eight. Thank God no one was killed. Miracle. And somehow the guy goes to his car, a Camaro with a hood flame decal on it, and because he drives like a model citizen through the proper exits, he doesn’t put a bing on the radar and gets through the gauntlet of police. Mark knows the cousin. The cousin is like a brother to this guy.”

“Has the cousin-brother gone to the police?”

“Not that I know of. I guess the shooter is off his nut in a deep-brain chemical sort of way.”

“Careful,” she said.

“Super soldier kind of thing. Or was it a psychic soldier? I forgot what Mark told me.”

“Let’s go back to go forward. What does any of this have to do with you?”

“I’m stopping at the Round Here to get something to eat. I’m pulling in right now. I’ll call you when I’m finished. High level meeting.”

“Call me.”

“When I’m finished.”

Luke sat at the counter. Chuck poured him a cup of coffee in a white mug. Someone had smashed the left side of Chuck's face with an iron skillet when he was in the Navy.

"Thanks," said Luke.

"Wolverines are going to win the Rose Bowl this year. Watch."

"Five bucks says they won't," said Luke.

"Atheist. Son of a bitch," Chuck said.

Luke laughed too loud. He attempted to manage his own nervousness.

Beatrice, bird-thin, tight-lipped, snapped out her green pad.

She wrote down his order then ripped the ticket off and stuck it on the wheel.

"Where's your girlfriend?" Chuck asked.

"Fiancée. Went to see her grandfolks. They live on the lake outside Kalamazoo."

"Fiancée. That a fact?" Chuck said.

Beatrice slid the plate of eggs and bacon in front of
him.

Mark swung open the glass front door and limp-walked into the restaurant.

He climbed aboard the stool next to Luke like a child swinging himself up to the saddle
of a merry-go-round pony.

Luke looked over at him. "Mohawk?"

"Don't give me that look. Try being five-five in the land of giants. How tall are you?"

"Six-feet."

Chuck narrowed his eyes at Mark. "Happened to your foot?"

"Fell," he said. "I was in the mall with the shooter."

"You were in the mall?" said Chuck.

Luke ate, watching.

"Stampede in there. Somebody pushed me. I fell against one of those mall carts where a
guy was selling cell phones."

Chuck took two steps over to the cashier counter, crouched, opened the back of the glass
case, and snatched up a pack of Trident spearmint. He thumbed open the package and popped a
piece in his mouth.

"You're telling us, you, Mark, were in the mall when that guy started shooting."

Chuck cocked his head at him.

Mark hooked finger in the cup, sniffed his nose, and looked around. His foot twitched. He coughed into his hand.

“In the mall when everyone ran around screaming and yelling and he was shooting wildly all over the place, plinking bullets off the ceiling and the staircase and shop windows, I shouted at him. He looks over at me and aims the gun and I yelled, ‘Stop! Enough of this shit.’ He catches himself, sort of like he wakes up. He put his gun into his belt and walked toward the exit.”

“So in other words, you probably saved a lot of people,” said Chuck. “I thought he was shooting a rifle. How’s that supposed to fit in his belt?”

“I don’t think of myself as a hero,” Mark said. He shifted a glance at the table of customers close by. Nobody there had heard him.

Chuck looked to the ceiling, chewed his gum with his front teeth. “Let me get into the office. I’ve got some paperwork needs doing.”

A rangy guy in a fleece lined jean jacket came through the door and sat one stool down from Luke and Mark. Cheeks hollowed, hair tumbled, hands calloused. He hadn’t notched many life victories.

“Tommy,” said Mark, greeting him.

The man nodded. He swiveled to his left and stretched toward Mark. “You was in the mall when that guy started shooting?”

Mark had been talking up his heroics other places.

He tried casual on for size. “I was,” he said. “How’d you hear?”

Tommy leaned back. “I heard you trampled over two old ladies and three children trying to get out of there.”

“What?” Mark checked around the restaurant. A middle-aged, big bellied bruiser turned to look over at him from two tables down. “I got the guy out of there.”

“Not what I heard,” said Tommy.

Mark’s face reddened. “Whoever told you that, tell them to come right in here and I’ll kick their ass in front of everyone.”

“My momma told me that. You going to kick her ass? Besides, she never told me nothing. I was just getting you riled up.”

“I think we need to do something about it,” Luke said.

Tommy looked their way. “What’s that?”

Mark kicked Luke underneath the counter.

“Keep an eye out for copy-cats. That sort of thing,” Luke said, retreating.

“Duh,” Tommy said. “Thanks, Beatrice,” he said when she handed the menu to him. “I’ll have scrambled eggs and bacon.”

Mark whispered to Luke. “We don’t want him tagging along on this.”

An old pickup truck spewing white smoke rolled through the parking lot. Its cherry red brake lights lit up then it backfired. *Bang!*

Two ladies screamed and stood.

Luke went to the front door. All eyes were on him.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You just got an old pickup truck out there.”

“Well, for Lord’s sake,” one of the ladies said, then she sat.

Voices bubbled above normal.

Luke returned to the counter. The guy driving the pickup came in and sat to Tommy’s right and those two started talking about the mall shooting and the cold weather.

Luke kept his voice low his voice. “Mark, you know this guy honestly?”

“No, I know the guy’s cousin who’s like a brother to him.”

“Did you really yell to him when he was shooting.”

“No, not really. I just felt like making that up.”

“I’m working on an idea. But you and me, we start at zero point. What comes out of your mouth has got to be the truth.”

“Swear to God. I’m clean of all the lies and bullshit.” He held up a scout hand.

“You’ve always walked with a limp. Why did you tell Chuck you got hurt?”

“How long I’ve been coming into this place limping and he sees I got a limp for the first time. How long?”

“I need to know that when I turn to you you’re going to tell me the truth and nothing but the truth.”

“It’s done. It’s a done deal. I’m turning a corner with you, Luke.”

“Because I have a proposition.”

“What is it? Is it a moneymaker? I’m all in. I’m broke. Lick the bottom of the barrel broke. Nothing. Zero. Zed.”

“It involves making twenty-five thousand dollars.”

“You want more coffee?” Beatrice said.

Mark jumped, kicked the facing on the counter. “Jesus, Beatrice. You scared the sacrilegious out of me.”

“That a good thing?”

“Happy Thanksgiving, by the way.”

“To you, too. My daughter baked pumpkin and apple pies and a few dozen chocolate chip cookies.”

“Apple pie for me,” Luke said. “Mark, I’m buying.”

“Pumpkin,” he said.

They ate their pie and drank more coffee and Luke kept his plan quiet because Tommy had turned back to them. Then Chuck sauntered their way where they sat at the end of the counter and took over the cash register so that the young lady who worked it could go home. He started talking Wolverines football.

“Whew,” Beatrice said. “That was some rush.”

Luke’s phone rang. He saw it was Marilyn. He told her the high level meeting was still going on. She told him to hurry up.

He and Mark finished their pie. Mark told him he left his wallet at home. “But it doesn’t matter. I’m broke.”

Luke looked right at him. “We’re at zero point,” he said. “Where the y-axis and the x-axis meet. Where you have to tell the truth.”

“Okay,” Mark said. “I did in fact leave my wallet at home, but I do happen to have a few dollars here in my pocket. But even so, could you pay my bill?”

“Did that hurt so much?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, it did. But I’m over it.”

Chuck cashed them out and he and Mark walked out together.

“Where’s your car?”

“Over there.”

“I’ll follow you home then we’ll take Marilyn’s car over to the mall.”

Luke stood near the front door of the apartment while Mark rooted around in his bedroom packing a bag. Unbeknownst to Marilyn, Luke had packed his own and stashed it in the trunk.

Mark lived in a craphole, which Luke knew, but he’d forgotten about the depths of its crapholeness.

“How many cats you got?” Luke called to him to take his mind off the smell. The one litter box in the kitchen was overstuffed with turd clumps. It smelled like ten cats had sprayed in corners, along walls, into creases of the couch.

“One,” he called back.

The front room had a couch, a chair, and a TV, all of which looked like they’d done time in college frat houses.

“Hurry up,” said Mark. “Jesus Christ, don’t you ever clean this place?”

Luke’s phone rang.

“You forgot to call,” she said.

“I’m at Mark’s fighting off the smell. I’m getting a little lightheaded. I was going to call as soon as we hit the road.”

“Hit the road for what?”

“Hold on.”

Mark came from his bedroom and went through the living room into the kitchen.

“Let’s go,” Luke said.

“I need to pour some kibbles for the cat,” he said.

He filled two smeary looking glass bowls on the floor with multi-colored dry cat food.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Luke. He had the phone cocked away from his mouth. She said something to him. “Marilyn, I’m trying to get Mark to roll out of here.”

Mark opened the refrigerator door and rooted through a crisper drawer. He pulled out a package of bologna then mustard and mayonnaise. He grabbed a horizontal box of Velveeta cheese product.

From the cupboard above the counter, a loaf of white bread.

“I’m making sandwiches,” he said. “You in?”

He put the bread slices on the counter polka-dotted with paw prints.

“You ever hear of germs? No way I’m eating one of those sandwiches,” said Luke.

Bologna on each piece of bread then thick, uneven slices of Velveeta which he cut with a butter knife.

“Key to a good sandwich? Mayo-mustard combo. Last chance. Because in an hour or two, I’m hungry. I’m going to need both of these boys. I’ll make you one now, but I’m not sharing mine.”

He said to Marilyn, “You cannot believe the level of germ involvement I’m witnessing. Listen, I’m hanging up. I’ll call you back.” He paused. “I said I would.”

“Your cat craps in the overloaded litter box, hops up here, walks around, goes outside.

Meantime, you make yourself a sandwich on the same counter. Am I getting through to you.”

“You know what I think.” A gob of mayonnaise plopped on the counter. He bent over and licked it off. “I think the whole germ thing is way overblown. I see parallels to a conspiracy-minded public. Remember communism? Remember aliens invading from outer space? It’s the same sort of deal.”

He pulled out a bunched plastic bag jammed between jars on the counter, snapped it downward to balloon it open, packed the sandwiches, said, “Let’s roll.”

In the car, before Luke had driven from the parking lot, Mark took out a sandwich and bit into it. He ate half then said to himself, “Discipline you piece of shit.” He rolled up the bag then put it on the back seat.

Luke called Marilyn.

“I need to do something for us, Marilyn. For me.”

Mark listened to him.

“There’s a twenty-five thousand dollar reward out on the shooter. Mark knows the guy’s cousin so we’re going to the mall and do a forensic makeup then we’re going to the cousin’s house and see what we can get on this guy.”

“You’re cowboying it.” said Marilyn. “I’m not hearing this. Forensic makeup? That’s a TV show.”

“You know where the cousin lives, right Mark?” he said, phone cranked below chin.

“Sure do,” Mark said, He sniffed then scratched the back of his head.

“I’m jumping off this train at the next stop and coming with you,” said Marilyn.

“No you’re not. First of all you don’t know where we are. Second, I’m not coming to get

you.” He said to Mark. “She wants to come with us.”

More moments of sniffing and clearing throat from Mark. “Not a good idea,” he said.

“We’ve got to concentrate out here.”

“Nobody here thinks it’s a good idea you coming with us.”

“You’re driving my car,” she said.

“That’s the third reason you can’t come with us,” he said. “I’ve got your car. The mall is coming up in about ten minutes and I’ve got to talk with Mark about forensic tasks. So I’m hanging up. Marilyn, I’m doing this for us, too. We need the money. I put us in debt.”

“We put us in debt,” she said. “The meds. The car payment.”

“I lost a thousand dollars playing poker.”

Nothing but silence on the phone. Then he could hear her crying. She tried to get herself to stop. “I thought you ended that. I thought that was over. Where’d you get the money?”

“A friend of a friend and he’s not happy. I’ve got to get that money to him. I need to do this.”

“Luke, I don’t know what to say.”

“I’m going to get us out of this.”

“I’ve got something to talk to you about.”

“You got something else? Isn’t the agenda full? I’ve got to clear my head. I’m hanging up.”

They drove in silence until coming to the mall. He turned left.

“I don’t usually come in this way,” said Mark. It looks strange to me, like we’re in a different mall.”

“What the hell. This is Southland Mall.”

“I know. I saw the sign. I just usually come in another way.” He scratched his scalp and cleared his throat. “Where’d you hear twenty-five thousand,” he said.

“In the paper. Back seat.”

Mark reached and got it.

“Go to the last paragraph in the article.”

“I see it.”

“Read it.”

““The Michigan State Police Department has issued a \$25,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of...””

“That’s it. We’re going to Southland because I want you to show me exactly where he was, where you were when you said something to him, where he turned to walk out of the mall without being captured. I need a deep visual sense of what happened. I have to feel like I lived the moment. When I confront the shooter, I want to feel that I have shared his brain-space. Then him to feel that I’ve share it.”

“They might have the area up there cordoned off.”

“Doubt it. They want people to come out shopping, get it off their mind.”

“When did they start opening the mall on Thanksgiving?”

“When they started realizing Black Friday could back-leak and become black Thursday.”

He parked the car. “I like to go in through the Sears. People say there’s all sorts of problems with Sears. I don’t get it. There’s lots to like about Sears. Customer service, for one. The fact that they sell black Lees jeans for two.”

“I never come this way.”

Luke opened his door. Mark opened his then stood with foot on the well of the car.

“I’m feeling sort of traumatized,” said Mark. “A little shaky.”

Luke walked toward the store entrance. “Let’s go.”

Mark followed.

Inside, Luke said, “You smell that. That’s the smell of Sears. Authentic. Some stores aren’t authentic.”

He led them into the interior of the mall.

“Which floor?” he said.

“Let me get my bearings,” Mark said.

“The newspaper article said the second floor,” said Luke.

“That’s right.”

“Or did it say the third floor?” said Luke. He stared at Mark.

“Sometimes in the heat of battle these things don’t get reported right,” said Mark. “Or they get misremembered.” He looked around himself. He’d pulled from a pocket a short brimmed cap Luke had not seen before that provided a vaguely military look. Mark scanned the mall environment, eyes sweeping 180 degrees, 9:00 o’clock to 3:00 o’clock, relaxed hands at his sides.

“It’s up one flight,” said Mark.

Luke searched for a heavy police or mall-guard presence. He followed Mark.

Luke’s phone rang.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“I’ll call back,” he said.

“I will call the police,” she said, “and inform them of your height, weight, and general appearance and suggest that you have copycat notions. I am the fiancée of someone, I’ll say, who is not quite right because when he heard the news of the shooting it seemed to set him off. He’d been having one of his episodes and all of a sudden, I’ll say, he stopped speaking and had gone up to the mall several times and today especially it seemed like he was up to something and I’m worried officer, could you make sure to hunt him down in the mall so that he doesn’t hurt himself or anyone else.”

“Sh,” he said.

“Don’t shush me!” she said. But she stopped talking.

Mark had begun to walk in a crouching, stalking manner. He left the TV program CSI and went into a History Channel special on how ancient hunters managed to survive by stalking their prey.

Luke followed. They took the escalator up to the third floor which deposited them facing east. They turned back to walk the mall and in the far area Luke saw uniformed men and women and a section cordoned off with yellow police tape.

“There,” whispered Mark. He straightened, returned to the 21st century.

Luke said to Marilyn using a golf announcer’s whisper, “We’re at the scene of the crime. Our intention is to pick up details of what was in the shooter’s mind as he approached the physical space where he started shooting.”

“Why are you doing that?”

“We want to start from square one, zero point.”

“Start?”

“I’m calling in to work,” he says. “In case this thing pushes through this weekend and crowds into the work week.”

“And whose car is all this taking place with?”

“Can I borrow your car?”

“No. You didn’t take me with you. Why didn’t you take me with you?”

“That’s already been discussed,” he said. “You’re Neptune or Saturn and I’m Mercury or Earth. You have too much gravity for me to remain stable. Everything between us has gone into fuck-space. I need to get us right. I need to use your car. ”

“No.”

“I need to use your car.”

“No.”

“I need to use your car.”

“Okay. But *we* need to get us right. *We*.”

“How far are you from Kalamazoo?”

“A few minutes. I can feel the train slowing down.”

“Let me give you a snapshot of real time: I’m walking behind Mark who’s looking at the police up ahead.”

“How many?”

“One two three four five. Five of them. They’re occupying the far end of the third floor of the mall.” Whispering: “Mark tells me he was here when the shooter went off. He told Chuck that he talked the guy down. He was the one, he said, who said something to the guy who turned

toward him who then stopped shooting. Then later he told me that he didn't really do that then he told me that he knew the guy's cousin. The shooter's cousin."

"Yes."

"Then I started wondering how much information he fabricated and how much he actually knew. I decided to trust him. I'll make him prove everything he says is true or not."

"Do you know why I love you?"

"No," he said.

"Because you try so hard."

"Why don't you love all the other try-so-harders? I'm one of many. Many many many. Like farm workers. They're trying hard twenty-four/seven."

"Well, I didn't meet them at the appropriate time."

"I haven't even finished my undergraduate degree and I'm thirty."

"But you're trying hard to finish it."

"I'm an assistant manager who works the night shift at a C-minus restaurant."

"I know, but you don't do a C-minus job. You got employee of the month three months ago."

"I have to admit that made me feel proud of myself."

"So there. They don't give that to people who don't try hard."

"Okay. We need to get out of debt. You're pregnant."

"And crazy. Don't forget that."

"Come on, Marilyn."

"Bi-polar is crazy. I need to be on medication the rest of my life. The thing I was going to

tell you about later? My doctor called. He told me I should get tested again. I'm shaky. He thinks I need a new regimen."

Walking in the mall with the telephone to his ear, he thought of costs. He thought specifically of how her monthly deductible would increase with the turn of the year and that the tests and the new medication would mean a jacked-up co-pay. He knew the owner of their two bedroom rented house wanted to sell in the spring. They would have to move out and wherever they went would mean higher rent. Last month, they had \$17.47 in their checking account after they paid all bills. Total liquid assets. He wanted to finish his undergraduate degree, he had two more classes, but they had no money. He played poker in an attempt to shovel away some of their debt. He used to be good. It didn't work. He needed to get hold of the shooter, turn him in, and collect half the reward money.

"Why aren't you answering?"

"I got distracted by events on the ground here," he said. "Things are moving fast."

"Is the guy still in the area?"

"My guess is that he's fled the state."

"You have entered deductive realms, Luke. Why do you say that?"

"Mark told me his cousin, the guy Mark knows, moved from Ann Arbor to Baltimore less than a year ago. I'm betting he went there to find refuge."

"That's it? That's what you got?"

"You ask a state trooper if he'd like to own that tidbit of information. You'd get a big fat yes."

"Or a big fat *we'll look into it, son.*"

“See why I need to do this on my own?”

“Sorry. I let executive functioning take over. So you’re taking my car from Michigan to Baltimore, Maryland?”

“Yes,” he said.

“You’re lucky I keep it in good shape. I take it into the shop every four months for oil changes and whatever repairs are needed.”

“I’ll call you back. I’ve got to get on top of the forensic investigation”

“Call me.”

“I said I would.” He hung up.

He and Mark positioned themselves at the side of the opening to Macy’s. The cops, most leaning forearms to railing, guarded over the aftermath. The area, no doubt cordoned off after the incident, was now accessible to Thanksgiving shoppers. Luke looked for blood traces on the walls and ceilings.

“The shooter stood at the top of the down side of the escalator,” whispered Mark, pointing. “I saw a 3-D graphic of it online where you could manipulate the image and see it from above, below, shooter’s view, victims’ view.” Quieter whisper: “It was pretty awesome when you get down to it.”

“We’ll mark this as zero point right here where we’re standing,” said Luke. We’ll trace the quarter-compass to 90 degrees. Follow me. Look at everything. Think of being him.” They walked, stopped, looked around.

“Now,” said Luke. “We go to 180, opposite zero point.”

Finished, Luke told Mark to wait over there. He pointed to the Apple Store.

Luke stood at the top of the escalator platform, where the shooter took position, thinking: the shooter directed his fire in front of him on the 3rd floor so that he could slip to the level below and escape without causing shooter havoc. Shooter would be just another guy scrambling away from the chaos.

He whistled *The girl from Ipanema goes walking*.

Mark approached. "We learn anything?"

"He's logical. He had a plan."

"Teach me."

"Guy took the position at the top of the escalator and used a horizontal field of fire then escaped down the escalator while packing up. He camouflaged himself as just another guy. He'd be security tape fodder for a later time moment. By then, he would have disappeared into the warp and woof."

"Okay."

"I see him with a backpack or large side bag where he could store the gun after his rampage then go black."

"Naw, people would see him. Point him out."

"People would hear the chaos and begin running. He shoots then stashes his stuff and if he starts running he's just one of the crowd. Then he walks out, gets in his car which later is reported to be a Camaro with a flame on on the hood, and goes on his merry way."

"You're deep into it."

"He was part of the demographics here in that he didn't get noticed. He's probably your white man in his twenties. We don't have reports of a suspicious foreigner."

“Duh, I know the guy’s cousin and he’s whitebread through and through.”

“Doesn’t mean the shooter didn’t come from mixed bloodlines. Have you ever seen the shooter yourself?”

“From way back one time.” He looked off to the side. Cleared his throat.

“Way back one time,” said Luke. “Like across a field? Across a room?”

“Behind a fence other side of an outdoor basketball court.”

“Where at?”

“That one over on Granger. Near Paddox.”

“The one that’s been closed for what? couple of years? You sure you saw him?”

“Pretty sure.”

Luke’s phone rang. “Hi,” he said. “What’s up?”

“I’m at the station waiting for Grannie. There they are. Shit, May and KC are with her. KC is driving Grannie’s car. I’ve got to jump. KC’s now got the opportunity to experience a Marilyn-in-her-face-moment. Question: How’s Mark?”

“Slippery.”

“Call me.” She clicked off.

“We’re done here,” said Luke.

They took the escalator down then Luke said, “Stop. See this is what he saw when he came down here. Which way did he go?”

“Maybe he stopped for a slice of pizza right over there.” He pointed toward the food court. “Which is what I want to do.”

“Why, when you have those delicious sandwiches in the car? No, he doesn’t stop. He

goes to the right, see? Where there's an exit to the parking lot. Over there."

"Okay," Mark said.

"The guy's a cool operator. He avoided sending out vibrations which a local hero might have picked up, who then might have jumped him. Tackled him."

"Can I ask you a question?" asked Mark.

"Go ahead."

"What kind of books you been reading lately? You're talking kind of funny."

"I'm 30 years old and I'm still working on my undergraduate degree. I read lots of books. I'm going to be a history major and either I'll teach in some high school or community college or go on and get a Ph.D and drive a cab, I guess."

"Why don't you write a book?"

"What am I supposed to write about?"

"You could write about what we're doing right now. Finding the guy who shot other people then escaped. We don't even know who he is and here we are trying to find the guy."

"We know who he is. He's the guy's cousin who you know."

"That's right. That's the guy."

"What's his name again?"

"We're going to call him Shooter. I don't want to say his name because that sort brings me into him too close and I want to maintain critical distance."

"You don't know his name, do you?"

"I know his name," said Mark. "I just don't want any part of it."

"Follow me." They went into the low-ceiling space of the parking garage and looked

around. Cars were packed among pillars at forty-five degree angles.”

“Hear that?” said Luke.

“Hear what? What are we hearing?”

“The sound of squealing tires echoing in this space. People would’ve been flocking to their cars and bolting like bats out of a cave. I’m wrong. He didn’t come here. He had his car spotted in a place where he could hop in and not get jammed up in the panic. He was on the ground floor in that overflow lot where he could easily escape. He came here but went right down the stairs. Let’s go.”

They took the switchback stairs to the ground floor. Luke pointed toward the unroofed parking area to their left.

“I bet the shooter walked straight as a ruler line to his car then took one of those four exits from the lot and went on his way.”

“What’s his motivation for doing this?”

“We’re not there yet,” Luke said. “We might get there, might not. We’re doing *how* and *what* right now. How did he escape? What were his movements post-event? Those sorts of questions. We do the puzzle one piece at a time. It’s a backwards investigation. Some of them are. Sometimes you know the *why* only after you put it together. Some of them you know the *why* up front which helps you put it together.”

“So you do a lot of these? You a bounty hunter?”

“No, I’m moving into that space really quickly, though.”

“I’m hungry.”

“We need to locate the cousin.”

“I’ll take you by his house.”

“You said he moved to Baltimore.”

“That’s right. Brain slip. I’ll take you by the house where he used to live.”

“I’m putting this together. I’m creating a profile. I’m dialed in to this guy. You know what I’m realizing?”

“No.”

“That you *might* have met the cousin of this guy sometime in the vague past and because this is Ann Arbor the cousin is a guy who probably went to school at U of M or Eastern. He was a student, right?”

“I don’t know those kinds of details.”

Across the lot was a group of stores on a sub level beneath a street outside the mall world. Barnes and Noble’s. Trader Joe’s. A locally owned hair stylist. A dentist’s office.

“I’ve got one kind of detail for you. Twenty-five thousand dollars. We split it right down the middle that’s twelve-five for both of us. I can wrap up that five thousand dollar gambling debt, put another five against school, and knock off a chunk of a credit card bill. And more to the point balance the scales between Marilyn and me.”

They stood near the cart corral in the lot.

“You like Trader Joe’s?” Mark asked.

“At various times I have. Sometimes when I have a single item and have to stand in a long line, I don’t.”

“Let’s go in and get ourselves a free mini-cup of coffee.”

“I need to mentally stay on the x-axis for a few minutes here, Mark. I’m living my first

post Marilyn event within my Luke-Marilyn world, and I want to find the right path. I don't want off-point suggestions. Tell me, were you there the night of the shooting?"

"Answer. Yes."

"Where exactly were you?"

"It was a pretty chaotic..."

"Stop. Where were you precisely? Exactly? The place where I could outline your feet in chalk and say, Mark was right here the moment he heard the first shot. I don't care if you bolted out the door or where you went afterward."

"I happened to stop by Trader Joe's that night, that one right there," he pointed from where they stood at the cart corral, "to get a free mini-cup of coffee. I had about four of them actually. I'd drink one then wander over to the Barnes and Noble, then come back and get some more. Oppressed people find ways to survive."

"Moving forward."

"I was in the Trader Joe's for a final coffee and somebody got a text message then other people did and everybody was chattering about it and so it *felt* like I was right there on the scene. Because I sort of was."

"But you also sort of weren't because the mall is that way," Luke pointed to the mall which loomed like a canyon wall behind them.

"I see what you mean. I'm beginning to enjoy the *whats* and *hows* more and more. Let's go get that coffee."

Luke found himself alone in Trader Joe's drinking his second mini-cup of the house brand of French Roast. He trolled the raw nuts aisle and considered the possibility of buying

expensive bags of trail mix for the ride ahead.

Ten minutes after disappearing, Mark walked down the aisle and joined him.

“Where were you?”

“Sorry. I ran next door to the Barnes and Noble to use their bathroom.”

“They got a bathroom right over there.” Luke pointed toward the Men’s door.

“I know, but bookstore bathrooms are nicer. They’re inviting.” He nodded his head in empty, wordless space. Cleared his throat.

Luke made mental notes then said, “Let’s pick up some supplies, like trail mix. We get four or five bags of these, we don’t have to take time out for road food. Of course you got your sandwiches.”

They bought bags of trail mix, bananas, oranges, crackers of various sorts, bottled water, a jar of peanut butter and plastic silverware.

“You can only foresee so far,” said Luke.

“You’re right,” Mark said. “You are so right. You don’t even know how right.”

Luke got out of the car and went to the front door and knocked. A woman in her thirties wearing a man’s bathrobe opened it. Luke smelled alcohol. Loud TV sounds chattered in the background.

“Yes,” she said.

Luke wondered if she had deliberately loosened the top of the robe which revealed an indecipherable tattoo on the swell of her right breast.

“Does the cousin of the person who shot those people in the mall live here or used to live

here?”

“Officer, I need to see your badge.”

“No badge, ma’am. I’m seeking information.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I take in student boarders but it’s by referral only. Are you interested in letting out a room young man?”

“No.”

“Do you do lawn work or would you consider doing lawn work if the price was right?”

She glanced down to his chest.

“No, I have enough to keep me busy.”

“Well, then,” she said. “I won’t let your ride my motorcycle.”

She shut the door quietly.

Luke returned to the front seat of the car parked at the curb. He started through the windshield.

“The cousin told me she was the mother he wished he’d never had. Get it?”

Luke started the car. He drove into downtown Ann Arbor, then up near campus, then down Liberty until he reached the plaza where he had often sat as a high school student watching the college world go by.

“Let’s get out,” he said to Mark.

They sat on a park bench.

“Why are we sitting here?” said Mark. “We’ve got to get rolling.”

“Call up the cousin you know. I want to talk to him.”

“He likes to keep things on the down low. He’s one of these guys who doesn’t like

surprises.”

“Twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Mark stroked his Mohawk. He took the phone from Luke then leaned, took out his wallet, and retrieved a business card with a telephone number written on the back.

“Hey, David,” Mark said.

Luke watched. They talked. About two minutes into the conversation, Luke snatched the phone from his hand. He looked at the receiving number. 410 area code. Baltimore. He gave the phone back to Mark.

Mark told him he and a buddy were on a road trip. They wanted to stop by and do some partying. “I know, I know. I heard. What’s he, nuts? He’s down there with you I hope. That’s right, nobody died, but he’s still in the papers.” Silence. “Listen, my lips are sealed. Bring him along. I’m sure he’s stressed to the max.”

Luke stopped listening. Maybe Mark really did know the guy.

South of Toledo then east on I-80 toward Cleveland then on to I-76.

Forty-five miles outside of Pittsburgh, Luke pulled into the parking lot of a Red Roof Inn.

“I’m bushed,” said Luke. “It’s 1900 hours.”

“Stay with the twelve hour clock, would you?”

“It’s 7:00 p.m. Let’s call it a night.

“I think I overdid it,” said Mark.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever seen anyone consume so much trail mix in one day.”

“I’m going to be constipated if I don’t address the problem,” he said. “The prunes don’t even begin.”

“There’s a drugstore next door.”

“I’m there. You got five bucks?”

“I’m going to start keeping a tab. Take it off your end.”

His phone rang.

“Hi,” he said. He leaned over and gave Mark a ten dollar bill. “Bring me the change,” he said.

“Who are you talking to?” she asked.

“Who else. Mark, my farting, mooching buddy.”

“Listen,” Mark said. “If there’s no Mark, there’s no cousin, there’s no shooter, there’s no reward. I’m indispensable.”

“I heard that,” she said. “He’s right, you know.”

“She said you’re right,” he said to Mark.

Mark left the hotel room.

“I’m on a death watch,” she said. “Grampie has aged considerably from when I last saw him.”

“In the spring when he was 84. Now he’s 84 and a half.

“Don’t make fun. Grannie told me she doesn’t think he’ll last till Christmas. It’s been a bummer.”

“How are May and KC?”

“KC has sensed a Grannie vulnerability. She’s been sugar-sweet to her. No doubt May

told her that Grannie and G are loaded so she's picked up the scent. I know in my heart of hearts she wants to get Grannie to give them a larger slice of the pie. She'd make a maggot gag."

"What's wrong with May? She used to be kick-ass."

"She gave up her eggs to the serpent to buy herself a little paradise, my only guess. It's a horrendous and critical bummer to watch. She's completely deceived. Earlier today KC went out on one of her power walks as she called it, and I managed to get May off in the barn with me alone and ask her about KC."

"You did? You said, 'Hey, how are you and KC doing? You make such a nice couple.'"

"That's funny in a between-you-and-me kind of way. I said to her why have you let KC take over your brain? She is a deceptive cunt who when she finishes sapping the marrow of your bones will fly like a buzzard to the next meat opportunity and begin her work again."

"That's the spirit. What'd she say?"

"She started whining about how I don't really want to see her happy. Then she ran off to cry in the bedroom. I went to the front porch and there Grannie sat on the wooden bench swing they have. I sat next to her. She said, 'What do you think of May's friend? She certainly has a strong personality.' Then gave me that hard, Grannie look. I said to her, 'Granny, that little viper will steal the prescription medicine right off your nightstand.' 'Well,' she said, 'I must say that I think that May could do better.'"

"Grannie the granster, still sharp as tacks."

"Where are you?"

"Hotel outside of Pittsburgh. Stuffed with trail mix. Mark went next door to look for digestion relief aids."

He woke in the middle of the night and noticed Mark wasn't in the room. Luke figured he'd gone downstairs to bug the person working the desk. Mark had moaned about his insomnia for years.

Luke woke up again an hour later. He looked at the digital alarm clock and saw it was 3:45. He got out of bed, slipped on some clothes, and left the room. He took the stairs down then went into the hallway of the first floor. He saw Mark, hand to wall in the alcove of the bathrooms, talking on a pay phone. Luke walked back upstairs and went to bed. Ten minutes later, Mark opened the door and tiptoed in.

“So I go downstairs wondering where you were and see you on the phone. What are you, a secret agent?”

“I'm holding the cousin's hand. He's getting nervous about us coming over. It's nothing. I got it handled.”

“At four in the morning?”

“People live by their own clocks, bro.”

“Somehow he lets you know that he needs you to call him at 4:00 a.m. How'd he do that?”

“When I was in the park up in Ann Arbor calling him.”

“I didn't hear that.”

“You weren't listening. Look, he's strung tight as guitar strings. He asked me to call him when he knew his girlfriend would be sawing logs and he could talk. She's one of these babes

who's all over him at all times. I needed to check his pulse so to speak.”

Mark sat down on the other double bed. He cracked open his bottle Maalox and drank.

“You want some of this?” he asked Luke.

“I'm fine. I ate about twelve less pounds of nuts than you did.”

“I sort of surprised myself.”

“I'm going to sleep. I want to launch at 0700 hours.”

“What was I thinking with all that trail mix?” Mark said. “I believe I have self-esteem issues.”

Luke reached up over and turned off the lamp next to his bed.

“I've never been to Maryland,” said Mark.

“Neither have I.”

They passed by Hagerstown and Fredericksburg. At Mt. Airy, Luke got off the freeway and swung into the parking lot of Bob's Big Boy restaurant.

“I could eat,” said Mark.

“We're calling the cousin-guy.”

“He told me he wanted radio silence. He needed us to meet at a discreet location which he gave me.”

“Where would that be?”

“Train station on Charles Street. He told me it's right off I-83.”

Luke pulled out his cell phone and thumbed through telephone numbers. He pressed the call button. Listened to the phone ringing on the other end.

Someone answered and said, “This Mark?”

“No, this is Luke who’s...”

The answerer hung up. Luke held it out from his ear.

“I told you.”

“Get him on the phone.”

“You spooked him. He wouldn’t answer that phone for nothing right now.”

“When are we meeting him?”

“Three, 3:30. We sit there like we’re waiting on a train. I told him that you’re good.

Everything’s good. He said he might do a flyby and call us later. Or maybe he’ll approach us.”

“The texture of this thing has changed.”

“What do you mean?” Mark powered down the window then leaned to look at himself in the side mirror. “My Mohawk needs a touchup. Next time, I’m going for a mullet.”

“What’s he being all wary for?”

“He’s constitutionally paranoid, bro. I’m trying to tell you. I bet the shooter is staying with him and all of a sudden he’s got to deal with that. I told him I feel like hanging out for a few days. A friend, you, came down here for a meeting. We’re just out for a good time, and I guess I hinted at him that we’re into into an outlaw thing and we wouldn’t mind if the shooter came along.”

“We can make this work,” said Luke. “You’ve got to stand strong. I need to count on you to stand strong.”

“Okay.” The eyes darted ceilingward.

“I’m seeing us enter quick strike mode. We’ve got to own the tempo. That’s the name of

this operation. Own the tempo.”

“I got that,” Mark said. He reached around back and found his bottle of Maalox on the floor. He looked through front, side, and back windows as if scanning for a suspicious car with a suspicious driver who pointed a suspicious piece of video recording equipment at them. He swished Maalox around as if it were mouthwash.

“You let the cousin-guy feel like the only thing we want to do is party. Maybe get laid. Like we’re irresponsible. Sure, you let him know, we’ll meet the shooter, but the guy has to like to party. We’re not interested in anybody who’s a downer. Mark, you’ve got to give the performance of your life. You up for that?”

“You’re asking me, the ultimate man of disguise, if I’m up for that.”

“You’re the ultimate man of disguise?”

“Have been.”

“You’re playing the part of an irresponsible guy who just wants to party. You’ll be relieving him of the burden of having to look after the shooter for a few hours. Everybody gets to blow off steam. Meantime, I slip away either right after we meet the shooter or right before, call the cops, they come to arrest him, we get our twenty-five.

“Own the tempo,” said Mark.

“That it. That’s our zero point.”

“I like it that we’ve named our operation,” Mark said.

“You want to go into Bob’s Big Boy?”

“They have got a variety of menu items that will enhance our lives.” Mark tried a straight face, but couldn’t hold it.

“I’m telling you, I’m keeping a tab. \$12,500 minus ten dollars here, twelve dollars there. Etcetera.”

Luke noticed a look pass over Mark’s face. He tried for interpretation, but let it go. Mark liked to nurse wounds, so maybe bringing up finances stabbed him. Four years ago, Luke beat him three straight games of pool in a bar in front of Mark’s friends from work after Mark, drunk, bragged he could beat Luke anytime, day or night. Mark’s banter annoyed him, so Luke decided to put an eight-ball beatdown on him. Mark didn’t talk to him for two months, and woundedly brought up the pool shooting night for a year when he wanted to wrench some guilt from him.

“Okay, let’s get something to eat then we’ll go down and find us a train station,” said Luke, cracking the Mark imposed mood.

Luke looked at his watch. “Tick-tock,” he said to Mark.

“So he’s late. What’s the big deal?”

Luke stood.

“Where you going?” said Mark. He took the toothpick out of his mouth.

“I’ve got to look around,” said Luke. “Get my bearings.”

“Well...”

“You stay here.”

“I need your phone.”

“No you don’t.” Luke strode toward the front door scanning the people around him, looking for a furtive-seeming white male who could be the cousin type of a shooter in a mall in Ann Arbor.

He stepped outside. Right in front of him crowded taxis in a lane. In the circular plaza beyond stood a four-story modernist sculpture. Why would Baltimoreans choose a statue so out of place with its surroundings? Gargantuan interlocking cutouts of a man and woman with a glowing heart at the center.

“You ever seen anything so fucking ugly in all your life?”

Luke turned. Had to be the cousin. Behind him a young guy with a striped long sleeved polo shirt, a Detroit Tigers baseball cap, and a goofy grin.

Quick as handshake, Luke knew he could win this game. He pictured the shooter giving him a nasty sneer as he ducked into a police cruiser.

“It’s out of place,” said Luke. “I don’t get it.”

“Nobody does,” he said.

Luke decided to come out with it. “I’m here with Mark.”

“You looked like the guy. Thought you were the guy. Jimmy, this look like the guy to you?”

“It does,” the shooter said. He smiled. He had flat hazel eyes that signalled not meanness but lack of habitation, as if human operations were conducted remotely. The goofy grin was cover.

“Mark’s inside.”

“What are you doing out here?” said Jimmy the shooter.

“Stretching my legs. Been in the car too much.”

“Oh, yeah?” The eyes scanned Luke’s face. The weird-mouthed joker’s grin stretched. A broad chest, a naturally fit physique. No doubt a grade school bully.

Luke could hear Marilyn: *That guy's vibrations manifest as dangerous. Leave the area.*

"Let's go in," said the cousin.

Luke looked right at Jimmy. "You going to show us a good time down here or what?"

"You need a good time?"

"Fucking right I do, Jimmy," said Luke, right up on him.

Jimmy grinned. "Goddamned," he said. "Let's have us a good time."

"Come on," said the cousin.

"Didn't catch your name."

"David," he said.

"Luke." They shook hands around.

"Now that we're ready to jump in bed together," said David, "let's go in and see if Mark wants to make it a foursome."

They went through the front doors. Luke's phone rang. Marilyn. He answered, told her not now, hung up.

"The little woman?" asked Jimmy.

"Right," he said.

"They'll eat right through your insides, won't they?"

"You got a way with words, Jimmy," said Luke. "We're going to have us a party tonight." Loud, aggressive.

Mark stood when he saw them crowd toward him. His eyes went wary.

Rangy Jimmy in his pirate's polo shirt said, "We got us a midget going to party with us tonight." Laughed with head tipped back. "Come on man, give me some love." He shook Mark's

hand in a way that pushed him off balance. “You know what? We’re getting the munchkin laid tonight. My personal guarantee.”

Mark tried to weasel-laugh it off. He scratched the back of his head. “You’re a nut,” he said searching for Jimmy’s wave-length of funny.

“The fuck is that shit?” said Jimmy, mouth in a straight line. He bunched his right fist. A vapor of silence radiated off of him.

Luke crouched ready to jump in. Then Jimmy laughed like a frat-boy. “I love this guy,” he said. He bear-hugged Mark and lifted him off floor. “You’re my little fucker,” he said then dropped Mark to his feet.

“All right,” said Mark, “you’re my fucker, too.” Still pinging around for humor harmony wavelengths.

David said, “How long you boys down here for?”

“Couple of days,” said Luke.

“The fuck you come down to Baltimore for?” said Jimmy, eyes hard on Luke.

“Management meeting,” said Luke. “I’m climbing the corporate ladder, baby.”

Jimmy snorted. “You don’t seem the type. bro. You come all the way down from Ann Arbor to go to a meeting. You sure about that?”

Luke said, “Who are you, my girlfriend?”

Jimmy turned to David. “You sure these guys are all right?” He snapped his eyes from Luke to Mark.

“Come on, let’s get out of here and go get drunk,” said David.

“We’re going down to Hooters,” said Jimmy. “I need to get real.”

“Where’s that?” asked Mark.

“Inner Harbor,” said Jimmy. “You got to see this place.” Suddenly the happy tourist.
“They got girls all over. Food courts. Shops. Real-time shit.”

David gave them directions.

“Let me see,” said Luke. “It’s almost 4:00 now. We need to check in to the hotel. We’ll meet you down there at 5:30, 6:00 o’clock. Look you two, I don’t get out much. I’m getting married in a few months. I want to have a good time. A good time. I don’t want to end up in a bar watching a game somewhere with a bunch of knuckleheads yelling at the TV. You got it?”
What did Mao say: uproar in the east, strike in the west.

“Now you’re talking,” said Mark from the side. He rubbed his hand over the stripe of hair on his head.

Jimmy blinked at him and said with seriousness, even concern: “That Mohawk’s not a good look for you, bro.”

Luke and Mark turned north on Charles Street.

“I didn’t know we were checking into a hotel,” said Mark. He glanced back at the train station.

“We’re not, at least right now. I needed to find some space. I thought you were a man of disguise. You came off like a guilty five year old.”

“See, I fooled you. That was part of my act.”

“Cut the crap. I need you to hold tight. We’ve got to create a *thing*. We’re down here ready to have a good time without apology. We know that he knows that we know he’s the

shooter. Go with it. It's all good."

"All right. That guy is crazy."

"You think? He shot up a mall full of people."

"I sort of forgot about that."

"This is the plan. We go down to Hooters with this moron and your friend the cousin. I'll slip away and call the cops who come down and nab him. But we establish a backup plan because in life everything goes wrong. Before I call, we need to figure out where we're going next. I'll let the cops know that if we're not at Point A, Hooters, we'll be at Point B, Unknown, at such and such a time. This is where I need you."

Mark rubbed his mouth. He had a faraway look.

"You with me?"

"I'm here," said Mark. "We're up close and personal now, bro. I'm getting nervous."

"Stand tall."

"That funny to you?"

"I'm ignoring that. The reason I need you is because Jimmy's sniffing me out, and anything I do will trip an alarm. I need you to figure out where we're going after Hooters. Start talking about wanting to see college girls or eat crabcakes, just so you can get something out of David or Jimmy, one of them, it doesn't matter. Get them to give you a specific place. It's got to be locked in because I'm calling the cops, and if they come to Point A and we're not there then go to Point B and we're not there either, they won't come the next time we call."

"Where we going right now?"

"I'm figuring we actually do check into a hotel since

we need a place to stay anyway.”

Luke turned right into a residential neighborhood at the first street north of Cold Spring Road then parked. He spent a few minutes nursing information from his cell phone. He found a Holiday Inn off of Charles Street in Towson. He called, found out directions, made reservations.

“If you get shaky,” Luke said from the bathroom of the hotel room, “just think twelve thousand five hundred dollars. Twelve-five. Twelve-five. You know what, I’m taking a shower. Give me ten minutes.”

“Let’s get going. We’ve got to make our play,” Mark said.

“I’m on it,” said Luke.

He got out of the shower and saw that Mark had shifted spots and sat in the chair by the phone.

“You want to jump in the shower before we go down there?”

“Naw, I’m good,” he said.

He packed up his bag.

“What are you doing?” Mark said. “I thought we were coming back here.”

“Who knows. Let’s keep it tight. I don’t want to get snagged up if we’re bolting out of town.”

“Okay,” said Mark. “Except I never get to go out of town and I thought we could spend the night then hang around tomorrow. See what’s what.”

“We’re on a mission, bro. If we need to come back here, we do. If not, not.”

“Ding! I got it,” said Mark. “We meet them at Hooters then I say to them let’s go hang out at our hotel.”

“Grab your bag,” Luke said. They left the hotel room. “You think that’s a plan? Especially after I said to them that I want to go and have some fun. Now it’s come on back to the room and let’s party? What, we tell them we met a bunch of girls want to meet us back here?”

“We could.”

Luke went to the far end of the hallway to the the exit toward the parking lot. The reverberations from their footsteps filled the hollow space as they descended to the first floor. “If I’m Jimmy, I’m hearing that and bolting.”

“Okay, I’ll go with your plan,” Mark said, rushing to keep up with him while he strode toward the car. “I’m going to say to David that I want some crabcakes at a bar where there’s some girls.”

Luke opened the trunk. They dumped their bags. Inside the car, he said, “Get the name of the place. Make sure you get the name of the place.”

He pulled into traffic.

“Let me call.”

“What do you want to call for? We’ll meet them down there.”

“I”m going to be honest with you, Luke. If I’m right in front of him and having to come up with all these lines, I’m going to get nervous. Let me call him, check in sort of thing, then say to him after we go to Hooters I want the crabcakes and girls.”

“You can’t hold it together long enough to do that when we’re on the ground there?”

“Let me call.”

Luke gave him his phone. He listened to Mark shoot the breeze then ask about the crabcakes place with the girls. He heard Mark ask him where it was. He heard him say, where in Fells Point? They talked back and forth.

Mark kept the phone in his hand instead of giving it back. Two minutes later it rang. Mark answered.

Luke looked at him as if to say, what are you answering my phone for? Mark put up a finger, one minute.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll go there now. Why not? Go slow, tell me where it’s at. Okay. Okay. Got it.”

He got off the phone. “Before I forget. At Eager Street turn left. Go to 83 south. Keep going till you hit Eastern. Turn left. Go to Broadway. Turn right. Park near Broadway and Thames. The place is right on the corner.”

At the end of 83 he stopped at a stoplight. “Why not Hooters?”

“I guess Einstein all of sudden thought Hooters was lame.”

“Seem right to you?” asked Luke.

“Right as rain,” he said. “Go straight. That’s right. There’s Eastern.”

They got to Thames and Broadway in six or seven minutes.

Out of the car, they saw a big yellow sign that said, Crabs ‘n Eats. They stepped toward it and looked in the window to a dingy joint with a half-dozen tables. A wild haired man leaning against the bright red Coke machine, legs splayed, stocking cap fallen on the floor, snoozed while sitting upright in a chair.

“Yeah, I can see girls coming here,” said Luke.

“David, he’s the earthy type. I bet we get a bite here and walk around. He told me college kids come up this way all the time.”

“He tell you that, did he?”

“All the time they’re up here.”

They stood out front for fifteen minutes. “Give him a call,” Luke said.

“He’ll be here.”

Luke located the number on the phone directory and called him. No answer. He left a message.

Fifteen more minutes went by. He tried him again.

Holding the phone in his right hand, he looked down Broadway. “Shit,” he said. “It’s blown. They’re gone.”

Mark looked at his watch. “Seems that way. I wondered if this was going to happen.”

“You wondered if this was going to happen,” he said, voice drained.

Mark shrugged.

The phone rang. “Yeah,” Luke said.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“He’s off the radar,” he said. “Nothing. I’ll call you.”

“Call me,” she said.

He was always the horse coming round the bend who can’t seem to find it while Marilyn gallops faster with each furlong distance between them.

“I needed this one,” he said.

“It was a longshot,” said Mark.

“What are you so even-keel for? We had twelve-five in our pockets on this one.”

He shrugged. “Let’s get something to eat.”

“Listen,” Luke said. “Go on in. I need a minute. I’ve got to call Marilyn. This is the worst. Standing here at a corner in Baltimore with nothing. Zero. I mean, what was I thinking?”

“You’re going dark.”

“I’m dark all right. Done. I’m an idiot.”

“I’m going inside. Don’t take too long. I’m hungry.”

He called Marilyn. Got her message machine. He watched people and cars go by. He heard young males cursing each other in Spanish while standing in front of a bodega across the street. A car pulled up. One of the young men sprinted toward it, opened the back door, got inside before the car roared away. The others screamed *mericon* and *traidor*.

He joined Mark in the crab place.

“What’s up?” he asked about Marilyn.

“I just got her voicemail.”

“You feel like eating something?”

“Here? I want to avoid food poisoning.”

“You two eat?” said one of the counter men. He could have worked as a side kick hitman in a grade B mafia warlord movie.

“Sure,” Mark said. He looked at the menu items written with poor penmanship on a sideboard. “Two specials, number one. Put the hot sauce on the side.”

“You’re taking this pretty calm,” said Luke.

“I know. I figured it was a long shot. I’m feeling good. I got out of town, expanded my

horizons a little bit. Got to see an old bud.”

“David’s an old bud?”

“Yeah, he is. We got roots, so I’m feeling back in the saddle again. Matter of fact, I might stay down here. Baltimore’s got a good vibe for me. Someplace for me to start fresh.”

Luke stared at him. “What’s going on? I’m missing something.”

“Luke, all right, no offense, but, you know, you got to get it together a little more. You seem to be missing a lot of stuff sometimes.”

Luke sat back in his chair, turned to look at the mafia countermen. One of them caught his eye, stopped prepping, stared back as if to say who the fuck asked you to glance over here.

“See, sometimes,” continued Mark, “I think you think you know more than you do.”

“Mark, I’m hearing you say this, right? The guy who hasn’t had a job in how long? Guy who borrowed sixty dollars from me two weeks ago which I had to lie to Marilyn about because, bro, I’m broke. Big time.”

“See that’s another thing, you need to look after your finances more.”

“We got your order,” the bald guy at the counter said. “Pick up.”

Luke saw two red plastic baskets with waxed paper in them up on the counter.

“You got this?” said Mark. “I don’t have a dime. Really. Straight up.”

Luke paid and brought the baskets over and they ate.

“These are great. I can see why Davidy-Dave told us to come over here.”

“Mark, I’m falling through space here. Davidy-Dave?”

“You know what I realized finally, that I’m the one who kept me short. I’m the one who put me down. I’m the guy who was always laughing instead of creating the laughter.”

Luke cut into his crabcake and ate. He squirted ketchup on his french fries. He forked up a bite of coleslaw.

He looked at his watch. He'd spend the night here and would get back tomorrow, Saturday evening, then pick up Marilyn at the train station Sunday at 8:00 p.m.

His phone rang. He saw it was David. He said to Mark, "Maybe we'll get some answers."

David asked for Mark.

Luke said, "You got me on the line for a minute."

"Yeah, but I need to speak with Mark."

He handed over the phone to Mark who yes'd and no'd and said, "Got it," three or four times.

He hung up then continued to eat with eyes on food.

"Hey!" Luke said.

Mark said, "Whoa. Man, what's up? Give me a heart attack."

"What just happened?"

"David called. Listen," he said. "I don't want you getting all pissed off, all right? But I had a decision to make. David and me, we decided to work as a team, all right? You were offering me a fifty-fifty split. I got sixty-forty from him. It was purely a business decision."

"You didn't do that to me. You did not do that."

"I figured you would understand in the end. Really, it was my play all along, Luke."

"What was that phone call about?"

"Cops came and picked him up in the parking lot of Hooters. Jimmy wasn't happy about it. But they got him tucked away. Look, I'm sure there's going to be some stuff in the papers and

all about local hero does good, so I just figure I should give you a heads up.”

Luke saw sparkles in his vision he was so mad. He couldn't remember where he was for a moment. He told himself to breathe. Breathe. Again, he had been outfoxed. He couldn't seem to figure out how to make his life work.

“You couldn't have told me so we could work out a deal?”

“That's not you, Luke. It's your way or no way.”

Marilyn and the baby coming and needing to work out a financial arrangement with a bank or something. Then work. Find another job. Stop gambling. Finish school. Be with Marilyn. Save enough for a house. Yes, he could do that. No more schemes. Do it the hard way. That was zero point.

He smiled, then laughed out loud. His childhood lifted off of him, his twenties, his partying, his telling the world how it should behave.

“You know what, you did me a favor, Mark.”

Mark sniffed, narrowed his eyes. “Look, that money is mine, bro. Sorry it had to come down like that.”

Luke said, “I know what to do now. I'm going to take care of things. I've got a pregnant girlfriend.”

“Okay,” he said warily. “That's cool.”

“I was lost, but now I'm found.”

“That fast?”

He ate the last of his meal then told Mark he needed to get a good night's sleep.

“David's picking me up in a few minutes. Listen, we can still be cool.”

“No, no we can’t. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you think David’s going to give you sixty percent?”

“We’re cool like that.”

“You played me. He played you. You’re here. He’s somewhere else.”

Mark’s eyes widened. “Naw, that’s not going to happen.”

Luke drove back to the hotel. He didn’t answer any of the five phone calls from Mark he received while driving. His hotel telephone blinked indicating he had messages. At 6:00 a.m., he awoke and drove toward Ann Arbor, his pregnant girlfriend, his battlefield of debts, his home.