

PLAGIARISMS

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by

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PLAGIARISMS

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For Angela

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“For, mark it well, imitation is often the first charge brought against real originality.”

– Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses”

Shaking

Even the training staff was afraid of Mike Marcus. He was always two seconds away from going berserker on somebody.

He didn't like me, but I took the open door as an invitation. I walked into the one-bedroom apartment where Marcus saved money crashing with three other fighters from the gym. My intention was to ask him nicely for any leftover anabolics. Lately I'd seen a need to boost my fight game. I was dragging. After sparring I couldn't even hold a cup of water to my mouth.

Until I heard moaning from the bathroom, I believed everyone was gone. I waited on the sofa, its springs ringing as I sat down. Orange cans of energy drinks were scattered across the floor, as if stacked in a pyramid and then slapped down from the bottom.

Marcus walked out of the bedroom and recognized me without flinching. He was dark, Doberman dark, with a smooth skull. Sweat beaded there like a fever. He wore his gym clothes still, with white knee socks and flip-flops. The socks glowed against his skin.

Behind the bathroom door, metal curtain rings scraped against a shower rod.

"Bathroom's taken," I said, trying to joke.

Marcus reached a hooked finger into his mouth and flicked a turd of dipping tobacco against the wall. It thudded and broke apart like a dirt bomb. Brown juice leaked from the corner of his mouth into a plastic cup.

“Yuri’s not doing too good,” Marcus said. “He probably punctured a lung.”

“He did that all by himself?” I said.

“Fuck that guy. It’s not something I planned on doing when I got up this morning.”

I suddenly heard the thin whispers of Yuri’s breathing, distinguished from the rasping air conditioner. In a high school wrestling match I’d made those sounds when my shoulder slipped out of socket. Each breath making the separation worse, feeling that I might puke on the trainer. That was two years ago.

The shower activated and my whole body twitched. I looked back at Marcus, embarrassed.

“Is he all right?” I said.

“Don’t know.” Marcus looked over his shoulder and shouted, “You gonna take a shit or get some help?”

“But he’s okay.”

“I said I don’t know. He’s in there and I’m out here.”

I looked at the door. “You can’t get in?”

Marcus pulled the tobacco tin from his pocket and worried the lid with his fingernails.

I walked to the bathroom at the back of the apartment. The bedroom to the right was open and warm and smelled like an old pillow. The door had been taken off the

hinges and propped against a wall. I slipped my head inside and saw Fisher on the bed, shirtless, tossing a pink handball to himself with one hand down his shorts. He looked up without appreciation. Sotkley's feet extended from the closet, shin-deep into the room. A bandage covering his torn toenail was soaked through with blood.

"What did Marcus do?" I asked Fisher.

"Something happened."

"You don't know?"

"I know it was something."

The bathroom doorknob had a push-lock that could be opened with a screwdriver.

"You never tried to get in?"

Fisher threw his ball at me, and then brought his hands together beneath his shorts. "He locked the door," he said. "What do you think that means?"

From the closet I heard the scrape of a lighter. Smoke began to appear above Stokely's feet and the room's scent sweetened, like a marijuana sauna. I found this acceptable.

Then Marcus was behind me, tapping my arm with a vial of clear liquid. The label had been rubbed off.

"See if he wants this."

"What if he doesn't?" I asked.

Fisher yelled at me. "Why are you here?"

I put the vial in my pocket knowing it would stay there. There was a toenail clipper on a bookshelf. I grabbed it. "I'm coming in," I said, louder than I needed to, and

popped the lock with the collapsible file. Mostly out of fear I closed the door behind me. No one else tried to get in.

Yuri lay in the tub facing the cream tiled wall, naked but for his hands covering a portion of torso. Patches of wet, blond hairs stuck to his nipples. I adjusted the shower stream and water splashed off Yuri into my mouth, tasting of rust.

“Are you dying?” I asked.

His Adam’s apple bobbed as though struggling to float in choppy waters.

With three fingers in his mouth, Yuri said, “I coughed,” and then he smeared a wad of bloody saliva on the shower tiles. The one hand removed, I saw what looked like a miniature car crash in Yuri’s side. Not a dent so much, just purple and yellow that the shading made it look that way.

It was a hard time taking Yuri out to my car. He fell from my arms. I dropped him. Just once.

Outside I saw Marcus already behind the wheel, and I realized I’d left the keys in the ignition.

“I’m driving,” he said through the window.

“You serious?” I looked to Stokely standing in the apartment doorway. “What about you?” I asked.

Stokely’s skin was waxy. He looked to be standing by rigor only. “I’m so fucked, man,” he said. It appeared so. His nose pointed left when looking at his face straight on.

I got in the backseat with Yuri, his skin slipping across the maroon vinyl. I put his head on my lap and understood it might work out for the best that he and Marcus be separated.

“I never drive anymore,” Marcus said over his shoulder. “All I do is train for the title shot.”

“We should go,” I said.

“He’s not getting any worse. He’s smiling.”

“You’re looking at him upside-down.”

Marcus accelerated like we were fleeing an accident, not taking one with us. I was forced to cradle Yuri’s head with my hips in a way that struck me as improper. The shocks on my car were shot.

“We’re in an emergency. This is emergency circumstances and that means everyone can get out of *my* way,” Marcus said.

Marcus was thirty-two and running out of chances to make it in mixed martial arts. Next month he was scheduled to fight a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu stud, and with a win he’d have a legitimate case for a title shot. I didn’t know he’d lose that fight with a dislocated elbow, and that he’d never get his title shot.

But in the car it felt good to be part of something with Marcus. We were colluding. I thought word might get around about how I helped save Yuri. That I’d get some respect.

We streaked across the crumbling Jersey City streets, bits of asphalt pinging the chassis like kettle corn. Around us the city was dying and already dead in some places. Brownstones like the one I’d grown up in had been tossed away, stone-by-stone, in huge metal dumpsters, leaving empty lots like missing teeth that no one thought worth replacing.

Marcus asked me, “You grow up around here?”

“We’re close,” I told him.

Yuri stared up from my lap with something that looked a lot like love. There wasn’t blood in his drool anymore. I took that for a good sign.

“You definitely from here,” Marcus said, his voice thick. “Nobody knows the streets of this place unless they born by it. Just like every place. I’m from nowhere, know what I mean? I grew up on the streets since I was eight, but for some reason I got no directions. That figures, right? I got nothing in my head that tells me where to go. I just go and somehow I always get to where I need to be. And if I don’t? If I get someplace else? Well that’s the place I need to be. I mean, *really* need to be. Know what I mean?”

I thought I knew. I wanted to.

Marcus put in one of the CDs I kept in the glove compartment and I noticed how different it sounded from the backseat, being driven. To the music, there was a dance happening outside my window that I couldn’t figure out, but it was something: the streetlamps, the metal fences catching pieces of paper off the wind, the stumbling people with no place else to be. It was all solid and hard, but it moved.

“Take a left,” I said.

“You definitely from around here.”

“Left!”

Marcus yanked the steering wheel and I arched my body into the turn for Yuri. After that, Marcus stopped talking for a while. He skipped to the next song on the CD, which I didn’t know. It sounded a lot like rejection.

As in most of the cities I've been to, the neighborhood got worse closer to the hospital. Tired men and women on the sidewalks seemed to fall past our car. But they fought forward, or maybe it only appeared so as we slowed down.

"They got a McDonald's at this hospital," said Marcus, suddenly excited.

"Doctors too," I said. "Don't park. Pull up to the front."

But Marcus drove to the back of the lot and stopped next to a bus, parking in its shadow. He turned to look at Yuri. "Tell the doctors you got jumped."

"I think he's in shock," I said. "He can't hear you."

"Like, four of five dudes beat you down and took your shoes."

"He's fucking bare-assed!"

I felt Yuri's head getting denser, the blood pooling there and turning to sand. His body relaxed but the veins in his neck and chest bulged like blue earthworms. Looking at them made my own neck ache.

"So maybe they took his clothes too. And they could have raped him or something."

"Doctors can tell about that stuff," I said, because I thought it was probably true.

"Yeah," Yuri said. It felt like the words were coming from my stomach. "Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah ..."

Marcus got out and opened my door. I tried to get out then but he put a hand on my shoulder smelling sweet and rotten with mint tobacco juice. I waited as Marcus slammed his fist into Yuri's face. Some blows glanced off the side of his head and deadened my legs, but I didn't want to show that I felt anything. I didn't want to speak. I

convinced myself that he knew what had to be done. He was Mike Marcus, for Christ sakes. I was just a kid.

The back of Yuri's head pounded into my balls.

Afterward, we rolled into the circular drive of the hospital's main entrance. Marcus stopped the car and locked the doors. I could have pulled up on the chrome lock and gotten out, but I caught sight of him in the rearview mirror. Right then, with Yuri's jaw shuddering to seize tiny bits of air, my only thought was how I wished I hadn't corrected Marcus when he made that wrong turn.

"If he can't say anything, tell the doctors they took his wallet and gold chains too."

"I don't think Yuri owns any chains."

"They don't know that. Yuri can file with insurance or something."

Marcus unlocked the doors. I carried Yuri into the hospital lobby and placed him on a recently vacated bed with pale-blue sheets. He didn't even move to cover himself.

I was soon aware that this was the hospital where I was born, almost three weeks early and jaundiced. Doctors had me placed under a green lamp for days. In pictures I'm shriveled with a head of black hair and a mask placed over my eyes. I looked like a baby mole, head tilted up to sniff danger.

When they rolled Yuri away I almost didn't notice, but he was the only naked man in the huge lobby of sick and injured people. They were rolling him fast, too, just like on television.

I walked outside and saw that Marcus had gone. Tomorrow I'd find out he sold my car for three hundred dollars, but he kept my CDs and would also start letting me know when his connection came through with the steroids.

Back in the waiting room I took a seat next to a colorless girl with a ball of gauze around her index finger. She was pointing it upward, probably because she'd been told to. I felt the vial in my pocket and tried to figure a plan to steal some needles while checking on Yuri.

Marcus would never receive medical attention for his dislocated elbow, so it never healed right. When the gym finally cut him loose, he traveled around the country fighting at small-time shows and county motorcycle rallies. It was for a two-hundred-dollar purse, I heard, that he took a short-notice fight in Laramie, Wyoming, where he faced another arm-bar submission hold for which he wouldn't tap. Could you ever imagine a trauma-center doctor taking his arm below the elbow while he was unconscious?

I'm still shaking.

Nuclear Fiction

George Saint-John wrote fiction during lunch breaks at his public relations firm. These short stories earned him a full-scholarship to study creative writing at Little Falls Community College. Banyan Kinsworth had never worked for money, nor would he truly ever. The manuscript he sent with his application to LFCC had been worked and re-worked over four years by exasperated undergraduate professors. He was accepted and arrived at school with a signed copy of Stone's *Dog Soldiers* and a check from his father. It had been Banyan's intention to continue as a forever student until, before his third and final year at LFCC, his father refused to continue payment. With peers and professors, Banyan used this privation to excuse his failure to finish his master's degree thesis.

"How can I finish when I don't know how I will continue to live?" he'd asked his mother over the phone.

"Do you want me to talk with your father?" she asked.

"You need my permission?"

"Would you like me to, is what I'm asking."

"Don't bother. It would have no effect on my situation. Your husband has of a sudden become a man of principles."

"One of those principles could be to give you independence."

“What is true independence when burdened by doubt and fear?”

“It’s life,” his mother said. “More or less.”

For the next three months Banyan refused to talk to his mother, opting not to answer when her number appeared on his cell phone.

While at school, Banyan confessed only to George his belief that inspiration, on the whole, came from the future. More specifically, it was a belief in his ability to form connections with his future-selves and probe their minds for the stories he, by then, would have already written.

“So why have you never finished a story?” George asked.

“Because in the future, I don’t want anyone else to succeed,” Banyan said.

“Including me.”

“I’ll have to remember you turn into a real jackass.”

“You can say you saw it coming.”

Toward the end of his final year in the master’s program, Banyan’s cell phone displayed an incoming call from an unknown number.

“I made myself unlisted. How do you have this number?” Banyan demanded.

“I’m at the hospital,” his mother said. “The doctor says the tumor is acting aggressively.”

Banyan asked, “How much longer must we endure?”

He soon discovered she was not talking about his father. There had been messages on his cell phone he'd erased without listening to, he recalled. She must have been looking for his support, and he ignored her.

Banyan could imagine his mother on the telephone, hairless and scarred from surgeries, the telephone receiver cold on her ear, her skin nearly translucent, the electric blue veins, the pungent odor of chemotherapy chemicals. He could see it, smell it, feel it and taste it, but he couldn't write it.

In another month Banyan would mourn his mother silently by producing false starts, twenty-three in all, to a story about a bearded man able to grow things by touch: a carrot, a button, a fish, a wart, a gold coin, his own testicles.

"I'm experimenting in flash fiction."

"Even those kinds of stories need a point," George argued. "You introduce a man, show what he can do, and only once does he accidentally kill himself by touching his tongue."

"But they do have points!" Banyan said. "They're all moot points."

"Is that a brainchild from one of your future-selves?"

"All great stories should be moot. A story is meant for entertainment, yes? I want to open up stories for discussion, to have them told at parties. This will make literary fiction relevant again."

"It was genius to have his ass swell and break his chair at dinner. Did you research rectal infections?"

"Until it was on the page," Banyan said, "I didn't even see it coming."

After receiving his master's degree in fine arts, George found himself lost in a jeremiad of his own uselessness. He didn't read newspapers but Internet sites murmured of a depression across America, for which George had great empathy. Toward a solution for this situation, however, he could not contribute. He was a writer, a drain on the economy.

Based on a few promising chapters of what he called "the great American anti-novel," George received an emerging-artist grant from an endowment known to be financed by Socialist political activists. He'd explained in his application the interconnectedness of harmony and destruction, detailing their relationship all the way to the zero-point of a black hole, where they stretch, intertwine, and become one final, eternal thought. It was a liberal paraphrasing of an article in *The Old Atlantic* by critic William Henry Devereaux Sr., a known pinko.

"I should give the money back," George said to Mr. Ferrucci, his former boss at the public relations firm. "They have no idea that I have nothing written down, or even conceived of beyond those chapters."

"Where'd your balls go, Saint-John?" Mr. Ferrucci said. "When someone gives you money, that means they believe in you. The least you could do is smile your best shit-eating grin, take their money, spread it out on your bed and roll around on it naked. Try it on for size. You don't want to kick this gift-horse in the ass."

"But what if I can't finish anything? What if I end up no further along than where I am today? I'll be ruined!"

"You can't know *what if* until *what if* comes around. Until then, all I can tell you is where to procure a suspect massage in the Meat Packing District."

Instead, George escaped to the Catskill Mountains where for three years he was cloistered in the counselor's cabin of a defunct summer camp for rich Jewish boys. Above each window were hung wooden Stars of David, crudely hammered together, and half-charred in the fireplace was a poster of a tusked hog obscured by a large red X.

In time, George grew inwardly antagonistic in his attempts at writing, enough so to finish his anti-novel and four others. Though finished, he told no one about them and remained in the Catskills. His grant money still had not run out.

Without graduating, Banyan held no higher degree than his bachelor's in English literature and took a job working in his father's shoe store in Elizabeth, New Jersey. He lived in an apartment above the stockroom, which his father also owned. To better his application for welfare, Banyan asked to be paid in cash. As an alternative solution, his father packed up Banyan's belongings into three canvas shoe organizers and heaved them onto the sidewalk.

"If you're really curious, *this* is how to get welfare," his father had said in front of the store. Under the ringing door chimes he added: "Best of luck."

Homeless for all of fifteen minutes, Banyan moved in with his father's estranged brother three blocks up the street. His uncle lived off disability insurance for a patchy case of mental decay. He was also depressive and moderately suicidal—meaning he might kill himself, one day, when moderation was more fashionable.

"I am thoroughly unemployable," Banyan wrote in a letter to George in the Catskills. "Though I imagine obtaining an MFA degree would make me even more undesirable. Do you agree? In the meantime I've tried to convince myself to study other

subjects, to speculate about technical degrees, perhaps welding or pastries. However I find that nothing fits me like writing. To me, it is life. It is breathing. Writing is in my genes. Do you agree?"

From the safety of their separation, George did not agree with any of Banyan's statements. Except perhaps that he was beginning to view his MFA degree with the same malaise as turning thirty years old: lots of hype but not such a big deal when it comes around. Now he's thirty-four with five unpublished novels growing stale in a crudely hammered-together wooden crate, a clumsy crack at the Ark of the Covenant.

"I'm doing well," George wrote back, appropriate of nothing written in Banyan's previous letter. "Slap an ending on one of your stories and come out for a visit. Like the old days we'll talk it over and see what happens. I hate these letters. Too much life happens between their writing and reading. It's already getting cold up here. The air smells like campfires."

The letters did temporarily stop, and in this time George was wholly uncreative. His inspiring depression lagged. He physically abused himself in front of a blank screen on his laptop computer, periodically catching the reflection of a mezuzah nailed to the doorpost. He thought little of Banyan until finally receiving another letter:

Dear George,

I saw you in the cabin, but I didn't want to be a bother.

You looked miserable. Good for you.

If you've finished reading my story, then I'm terribly sorry. I drink now (my father's brother is a crackpot!) and left the manuscript with poor judgment. Please throw it away at your first opportunity. I'm ashamed. I only did it for you.

You're a good friend. Don't let me down.

Banyan Kinsworth

It was on his return trip from the grocery store the following day that George found Banyan's story on the side of his doorstep, suffocating in a plastic bag beneath a piece of hewn wood. The moisture of melting snow had warped the paper. He read from the first page:

On Tuesday morning Jerome was in bed, not time traveling. On another morning, who knows?

When he woke, he was touching himself—his future-self having traveled back in time to give his past a rubdown. *It's superb*, thought Jerome. *Finally, someone else is touching me the way I like to be touched. Finally, a partner with intuition.*

“Would you call this masturbation?” his future-self asked, wiping his hands on the plaid sheets. “It’s your hand, but then it’s also not. It’s familiar and yet foreign.”

“Like pizza on Christmas Eve,” said Jerome, recovering with a shiver.

“Was it weird?”

“Shouldn’t you know?”

“That would stand to reason.”

Then George flipped to the final page:

Jerome’s future-self appeared again, suddenly. No *poof*, no smoke. They sat at the breakfast table with pancakes and four years between them. Jerome still couldn’t figure out why he would ever let his hair grow into such a mess of coils. His future sat gaunt and amused, picking at his scalp as though he were infected with lice. He’d lost a tooth somewhere along the way, a canine that, from the present, Jerome tongued for proof of weakness or rot.

“Have the blueberry jam,” he said from the future.

Over here, in the present, Jerome was annoyed.

Jerome never doubted that he would visit himself from the future for something important. But that his future

would not pronounce this something—and merely smile at him across the red paisley tablecloth—implied a pleasure Jerome couldn't share. And it stood to reason that he should.

Jerome began to dislike himself.

“Would you like some pancakes?” he asked his future.

“No.” And again came the directive for selecting blueberry jam.

“In the future,” Jerome wanted to know, “are you considered attractive?”

“Have you ever been?” was the reply. “What do you think four years will do?”

Jerome gave a quick shrug. He didn't judge this a particularly poignant question. “I suppose four years will make time travel possible.”

“That would stand to reason,” said the elder, and then before disappearing into the future: “The blueberry jam.”

No *poof*, no smoke. Just gone. Jerome's pancakes were still warm.

George was not fooled. This was no ending, and he knew without reading the middle of the story that it wasn't finished. He was relieved to avoid instigating the argument he'd sustained with Banyan since their first year of graduate school.

“It’s not an ending if you simply stop writing,” George had said. “You have to have a reason for everything.”

“You’re wrong. It’s an ending precisely because that is where the author decided to stop,” Banyan asserted. “Wouldn’t you have liked Joyce to write more of ‘Araby’? Maybe find out if the boy eventually seduced his older love?”

“I think you missed the point.”

“Then so did Joyce. He got tired of the piece and gave up.”

“It’s a coming-of-age story of love and the frustrations of a child to express his feelings. It’s an illustration of our search to grasp the unattainable.”

“It is a poem,” said Banyan. “It’s useless.”

George obeyed his friend, refused to send back edits, and instead rolled the paper tightly into kindling. He thought Banyan would have found this final use of his story appropriate.

In his uncle’s apartment, Banyan found direction by contemplating the economic law of diminishing returns as applied to personal relationships. The model explained on Wikipedia provided ample ambiguity for fiction, and his uncle proved a suitable indifferent wall at which to pitch his ideas, see what stuck. His uncle wore wire-rimmed glasses and an Egyptian-blue, three-piece suite with polished lapels. Banyan was in his pajamas, had remained that way for weeks. They spoke to each other while seated at opposing couches in the combination living room/dining room/kitchen/Banyan’s bedroom.

“Let’s take our family, for instance,” Banyan said. “You are my father’s brother, therefore establishing the production system. And what were you to produce? A relationship. Love. A bond. An extended family.”

“I’m not your uncle,” said his uncle, looking out a window.

“Your fixed inputs were mutual parents, the same home, the same meals, the same budget to buy clothes with, the same community. The variables were your differing ages, friends, and interests.”

“I’m your father’s godfather. That makes me your ... great-godfather!” His uncle’s mouth hung open, dark and stale.

Banyan continued: “Then you reached a point in your relationship—puberty, college, sexual encounters, what-have-you—and suddenly the addition of more and more variables yielded less and less output. With everything added to your lives, your relationship diminished, your bond broke down, your extended family turned inward.”

“Imagine making an agnostic responsible for your soul,” said the uncle.

Banyan pressed on. “On the other hand, if you had shifted priorities to focus on the family, on love and connectedness, you would have found a need to jettison your variables, your friends and sex partners, your sports and books and telescopes—never considering a college education. This is the increasing relative cost of family.

“But uncle, I keep returning to a problem. How can I make this idea entertaining? I cannot base this story on my own disappointments. The only relationship that has yet to disappoint is my friendship with George.”

“What are we talking about?” his uncle asked. “You’re talking so fast that I can’t hear you.”

“That would stand to reason, uncle.”

In his cabin, George began to receive letters from Banyan twice weekly. George watched as his friend’s tone depreciated from writerly commiseration to a pleading inferiority. He was embarrassed to read the letters, cringing on the log bench in his single-room cabin, absently fingering the rough inscription: *Herschel ‘91*.

“Have you ever felt that Faulkner was watching over your shoulder as you produced a horrible sentence?” wrote Banyan. “I swear he’s always in the room with me now, whichever room I choose for writing. Last night I had a dream where I connected with myself nine years into the future. Do you know what I said to myself? *Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!* Christ, I turn into Melville. In the future I go backward. Do you have an opinion of what that means?”

George did not. With concern, he wrote Banyan insisting that he stop these letters or, at a minimum, resort to e-mail. “The signal strength on my laptop is strong. Soon, I believe, wireless fidelity will be everywhere in America, like creativity and atheism.”

But Banyan refused e-mail correspondence, despising the notion of being so easily deleted. He replied: “If you are going to ignore me, I will at least make you get off your ass to throw me in the garbage! As such, I will henceforward double my output. Perhaps this will save you money on toilet paper!”

The letters so depressed George that he stopped visiting his mailbox altogether, which, since he also stopped retrieving his bills, led to his eviction from the defunct summer camp for Jewish boys and his migration to Manhattan. With the remainder of his

grant money, he moved in with Mr. Ferrucci, declaring it would be a very temporary situation.

“Stay as long as you like,” Mr. Ferrucci said. “My wife’s moved out and taken the TV, and you’re cheaper entertainment than I’m used to.”

“Yes,” said George. “I think only a week or two—a very short time.”

Banyan may have hoped his uncle would become a father by proxy. It would stand to reason because he despised him, too, for his limitations. “You are the untold story of humanity,” he informed his uncle one afternoon in the apartment, “living among others but wholly apart. I need to capture you on the page. However the more I think about it, I can see the story ending only with your death.”

“But I don’t want to die,” his uncle said. “What’s in it for me?”

“You’re a non-believer, so most likely nothing. But you should start thinking about someone other than yourself for a change, otherwise I might not get anything out of our relationship.”

“You want me dead?”

“For the sake of my story, yes, but only for that. Outside of fiction, my love for you is complete and far-reaching, like a very long arm.”

“So where do I go from here?”

“That’s a good question, uncle.”

It was now summer and George took to editing his manuscripts in Washington Square Park, where old, smelly men played chess and grubby pigeons strutted right up to the

cuffs of his pants, acting on a dare to approach the man who cursed into his papers, cooing for a pat on the pileum. In the park George experienced acceptance among the strange characters—the dirty and the idle, the wasted and the serious and the too-busy-to-notice-if-the-sun-were-gone—while also recognizing his apartness from them, as though returning home from an extended diplomatic mission overseas. He had prowled the city to find this spot, sought out the company of its inhabitants, and then isolated himself within it, among them, becoming invisible.

Still, George found this better than latching onto his host, Mr. Ferrucci, who treated him to lavish dinners and abraded his arm with friendly punches like the college buddy George had never been for anyone. He had a clandestine fear of chumming around with this man, and where it might lead. It was not that he feared being better friends with his old boss, but that he realized how little he actually knew him. One evening, George's anxiety over this led him to the EpicQuest Playhouse. There he saw, by cheerful coincidence, the debut of *The Wolf Kisser*, a play written by the director of LFCC's graduate writing program.

"May we all live our lives with real consequence," the lead actor said in the final scene. "For there will be no stories in heaven: its seasons have no end."

Much later, George would think that criticism of the play's overwrought morbidity and nihilistic morality was pretty spot-on. But backstage in the theater, as an aspiring author, unpublished and unread, he was awestruck. He congratulated his former professor, who then introduced his literary agent, a much younger woman, mid-thirties, who seemed to smile permanently, eagerly, painfully, but undoubtedly, to George, beautifully.

“This is Shelly,” he said, squeezing her around the waist. They posed with a firm, yet flippant attitude: her attachment to him like a clam burrowed into gray sand, respiring openmouthed in the backstage current of conditioned air and cigarette smoke.

A clam has kidneys and a heart, George recalled from high school biology, a mouth and an anus.

He smiled and took her hand.

There were times inside the apartment when Banyan regretted the way he treated his uncle, and other times when he found the results educational, but for the most part, despite emotional swings, their lives continued on unchanged. Banyan’s uncle confined himself to the apartment, shared his delivered meals with his nephew. And Banyan, to better observe, prod and stoke his uncle, also refused to leave. However, he did not truly want his uncle to kill himself—mostly because Banyan realized he would be forced to discover the body.

“But as the model for all humanity, it stands to reason that you would *want* to end it all,” Banyan said. He was holding an issue of Annihilism Today, a journal with eponymous objectives and a dangerously declining circulation. Banyan’s uncle had wanted to know what it was doing on top of the toilet tank. “Just thinking your ideas are strange does not make them abnormal,” continued Banyan. “You must wear your thoughts like skin, feel them contract when stimulated, feel them expand when no one is around to judge you.”

“I could see myself in there,” his uncle replied, horrified and shaking, pointing at the journal. Its cover was thick—maybe two-hundred-pound paper—and flawlessly black

and glossy. His and Banyan's fingerprints danced across it, inadvertently providing a foot-placement guide for the Viennese Waltz.

"My face was on that magazine. What am I supposed to think about that?"

"It is not for me to say, uncle. But by all means, *think*. Think hard. Tell me what you discover."

Over cold coffee in Mr. Ferrucci's kitchen, Shelly agreed to be George's literary agent. She quickly arranged for a private office in which George could work on his manuscripts, gave him access to a team of researchers and fact-checkers, even set up an apartment he could housesit for one of her friends.

So content with his circumstances, George couldn't write or edit worth a damn. Happiness, he found, extinguished the desire to ever work on his writing again.

"I'm deathly afraid of the loneliness," he confided in Shelly, who had managed to insert herself as his therapist.

"There are drugs for that," she said. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

Prior to its release, William Henry Devereaux Sr. wrote a review of George's first novel, which appeared in *The Old Atlantic* and instigated early and (George thought) undeserved talk of literary prizes. George believed but couldn't prove that Shelly had somehow extorted this review. It stood to reason. He was not a sufficient figure to garner the attention of established literary journals, nor impressive enough to have caught the eyes of influential critics. On the other hand, Shelly was attractive and aggressive in her gold hoop earrings, her smile a summons for all to enter, and Devereaux Sr. was a man

with ambitions to share in the world's wealth—both financial and physical. Though plausible, George was too much a self-doubter to investigate this matter properly.

“Don't look a gift-horse in the mouth,” Mr. Ferrucci said after George had called to voice his concern. “Your own breath might be worse.”

“Could it be that you own horses?” George asked timidly.

For several months, Banyan ignored his uncle, preferring to sketch out a family system to fit his theories of diminishing returns on relationships. Unable to think of adequate names, he used numbers.

One and Two (a couple deluded by their name rank) gave birth to Three and Four, who were deemed perfect in every way. This brought the parents to the conclusion that additional acts of reproduction would manufacture additional perfect children, therefore bettering the world by satiating its desire for perfect people. But investing in greater output provoked a need for increasing amounts of variables: jobs they could work from home, babysitters and bulk tubs of yogurt; explicit videos, aphrodisiacs and lubricants; outside partners, ice packs and pregnancy tests; new sheets, a new mattress and earplugs for the children. As One and Two struggled to create perfection on a larger scale, their environment, psychologies, and the limits of their bodies hindered returns.

Banyan sent George this abstract and asked his opinion, feeling that if he could not defend his logic against George, then further pursuit was meaningless. George replied with a phone call.

“It's a heavy-handed metaphor,” George said, “and you have no characters, just an explosive yet passionless sex life.”

“Right now it’s a treatment, only. Bear in mind that I haven’t as yet written a thing,” said Banyan.

“Still, you don’t have any names. Do you know who your characters are?”

“Names are irrelevant. I have always said this. Tell me, would you be less of a man if I called you Tom?”

“Perhaps I would be *more* of a man. But, you know, either way I would have a definite location in the world you’ve created. As of now, there’s only idea, no life. In graduate school you should have learned that ideas don’t make stories. And so far, this story’s a big mistake. I don’t want to encourage you.”

Banyan switched the phone to a fresh ear, said he was man enough to take criticism.

“Okay so tell me, how will your story end?” George asked. “You have loose ends like a frayed rope, and none of them with any consequence. Do you know how it all comes together? Can your future-selves tell you this?”

“To hell with loose ends! The entire *world* is loose ends! It’s high-time literature caught onto that.”

“Literature is a microcosm of human drama, not a still-life of an endless blank wall—no matter how pretty the paint job.”

“So how would *you* end my story?”

“The children, Three and Four, report their parents to the Department of Child Welfare. But that’s just the end of act one.” Banyan was silent for a moment, and then George continued in a kinder tone: “Sometimes it’s hard to see this stuff coming until someone else shows you.”

The two friends did not speak again for several months.

Alone with Shelly in her agency's conference room, George vied heavily against publicizing his book, fearing the exposure of his perceived shortcomings as a writer.

“What if someone asks a question I can't answer?” he asked. “My use of metaphor opens up the story for interpretation, throwing my original intentions out the window, and me with it. To lecture about my novel, to converse with these so-called fans, even to *be* there, would be fraud. Based on sales figures, they probably know my work better than I do.”

“Let's start with this, then,” Shelly said. “What *were* your intentions with this novel?”

“That,” George said, “I don't remember anymore.”

“Good,” she said, surprising George. “Be mysterious. Be dark. Live in the shadows. It'll work for us. We'll be able to sell books before they're even finished or previewed by the critics. We'll have a leg up on the competition.”

George couldn't help but notice she'd said *us* and *we* when she could have said *you*, and find that he was pleased by it. He began to think there might be something to his novel, a truth in the relationship of harmony and destruction he'd described—though, here, more aptly described as a relationship between possibility and doubt. He began to think of Shelly's leg up on his shoulder.

At the Barnes & Noble on Union Square, George read the portion of his novel Shelly had highlighted, in which a space ship carrying his protagonist—who on Earth had been a director of corporate communications—approached the outer reaches of a black

hole. His mission was to record the scientific findings of his crew, while also reflecting the U.S. government's brand message, which he had helped create. That message was, "The United States: probably the best thing going."

It was the first time George had read these words aloud, and he couldn't help wondering how anyone else would have the patience to read them. George admitted to himself that his only reason for reading the novel was that he had written it. Soon enough, it came time for the question-and-answer portion of his reading, and before George had the chance to select a member of the audience, a man in a red jumpsuit raised his hand and stood.

"I'm a football coach over at Northern Hills High, and I was thinking," he said. "The functional dissonance you described, is there a way to apply that to strength training? It seems to me that there might be ways to use this stuff outside of books ... in the real world."

"Well I should hope so," said George from the dais.

"So. I mean ... well, what is it?"

George laughed nervously. "I don't have a clue. If you're asking if there's a possibility, then sure—I believe in all possibilities. But this is something for you to figure out. Not me. I'm just a silly writer." There was other laughter then, the audience picking up on George's self-deprecation, but he felt embarrassed for the coach in the red jumpsuit. "Maybe this will help," he continued. "Try to see things without your eyes as filters. But that's Kant's idea, not mine."

In the audience, heads nodded knowingly, but George didn't totally understand what he had said, or how others possibly could, or how it would help the coach. The coach sat down slowly and then was lost from sight.

"We have time for one more question," Shelly said, suddenly at George's side; he felt saved. "You? In the front?"

A man in a baseball cap and wraparound sunglasses remained seated as he spoke, wearing a three-piece suite with polished lapels; steel blue, George thought. He sat properly rigid, his ankles crossed above soiled, threadbare sneakers.

"You clearly infer that the purpose of the relationship between harmony and destruction is to tear the human existence to pieces—"

"Well I don't know about that—" George said.

"—so I wonder," continued the questioner, "if you might tell us how and when you plan on killing yourself?"

Whispers rumbled backward through the audience as though the question were an explosion in the vacuum of space.

"I hardly think that's an appropriate question," Shelly said, motioning to the bookstore's security team stationed at the top of the escalators.

"My question was for Mr. Saint-John."

"I suggest seeking other opinions, then," George replied.

The man quickly laughed and said, "But I only want yours. In this book you lay out your misery, but once it's explained, once it's out there, what do you have left? Your personal balance of harmony and destruction is utterly out of whack. Death is the logical answer ... and who else will provide but you?"

Two security guards grabbed the man by his arms and forced him to stand, but in an instant he had shed his jacket, revealing a scrawny, pale man in an Egyptian blue vest with no shirt underneath. “I saw this coming!” he said, and dashed away down the long aisle splitting the audience in two, his white arms flailing like a cardboard skeleton jiving in a strong wind. Disappearing down the escalators, the ruckus of diverted patrons on the lower floors reported his exit from the bookstore.

Shelly took George by the hand and escorted him to the greenroom, which was merely the largest storage closet on the third floor, and measured out two Xanax from a pillbox in her purse. She gave them to George, took two herself, and then, gingerly, placed her palms on his flushed cheeks.

“Lunatics aside,” she said, “let’s go sign some books.”

Again, George picked up on her use of *us*, this time compressed for time and familiarity into a contraction with the transitive verb *to let*, meaning to allow or permit. He was lost in the word, wondering why he had not used it more often.

“Let’s,” he said.

For three years, Banyan wrote his novel *The Diminishing Ordinals* and nourished a personal debate on the merits of literary fiction in a capitalist society. Though both remained underdeveloped—for his debate, he could equate money to fiction in an ephemeral sense but loathed a comparison between literary fiction and capitalism—he found the courage to call George. Banyan often found courage in unfinished business, half-truths, half-lies; this, in his opinion, being the human experience. George agreed to meet in Manhattan to catch up.

Before leaving his apartment, Banyan's uncle asked if he would be gone long, and would he mind, after all this time, picking up his suit jacket from the dry cleaners.

"I do not think I will have the opportunity," Banyan said, and then added: "It is finally time for me to become a variable input in your production system."

"Man alive," said his uncle. "You don't make any sense, nephew. You're really out there."

"That's a matter of opinion, uncle,"—Banyan tapped his manuscript—"and yours is now moot. You should go to parties and revel in your moot opinions. You will be a huge success."

"All this time and I never understood a word you said to me. I think you must be a very smart man."

"Likewise, uncle."

Banyan met George for coffee in the stark lobby of the Hudson Hotel, where Shelly had arranged for George's media interviews later that afternoon. Rather than hand over his manuscript, Banyan explained his updated theory of diminishing returns in interpersonal affairs. His assertion was that the patterns of relationships become predictable, so that anyone with an understanding of this theory should be able to predict the end of the relationship, should see it coming a mile away.

"In the end," he concluded, "we all reach a point at which what we put into a relationship is more than what we get out."

"That sounds like the writer's life," George said.

"A perfect illustration," added Shelly, joining them with a cup of tea.

George smiled and introduced Banyan. “He’s got terrific ideas, and he’s a hell of a writer ... better than I am.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Shelly said.

“No, it’s true,” affirmed Banyan. “George and I mutually reached that determination years ago.”

“I see.”

For the next hour, Banyan kept himself busy walking around the hotel’s public spaces while George and Shelly skimmed his incomplete manuscript. He identified the stylistic scheme and paraphernalia arranged to make the wealthy feel taken care of, at home, but it looked to Banyan like shiny floors and matte walls, paper lights and indoor dwarf trees, a cafeteria that probably didn’t serve meatloaf. It was a whole world of dramatic, purposeful incongruities. He’d never seen a home like this, not even in the leaps he’d taken while reading Fitzgerald or Vonnegut or Grisham or Rowling.

In the bathroom Banyan masturbated into paper towels like freshly shorn wool, grabbing more of them on the way out and stuffing them into his coat pockets.

George and Shelly were talking to one another when he returned, their heads close together, intimate, cagey.

“Very interesting stuff you have here,” Shelly said, leaning back into the sofa.

“Can’t say I’ve seen anything like it.” She and George shared a strange look that Banyan noticed. An agreement had been reached in his absence. “I think I could get a section of this published in a journal,” she continued, “try to stir up interest at the publishing houses. Could you maybe turn the first section into a short story?”

“Never!” said Banyan.

Immediately George pleaded with him to be reasonable, as though he'd known what his friend's reaction would be.

"All I ask is that you view every word of this manuscript as genius unadulterated. It should be published in toto or not at all."

"Think of this as a first step," George said. "This is how the game is played."

"Then let's change the rules. George, we should strive to transcend rules. Look at your novel. It was good, sure, but it could have been great. You needed to forget the rules of modern literature, because modern literature is dying; it's dead! *Future* literature is the new modern literature. And it is only when we think beyond the modern that we can actually exist in the future."

"So you've always said," George mumbled.

"With your novel, you accepted contemporary ideals over literary merit, sold out to see your name on a dust jacket. So at the time, you see, I was being ironic when I asked how you might kill yourself. And then you asked me to seek other opinions ... marvelous!"

"It was you!" Shelly said. "At Barnes & Noble. *You* were the lunatic."

"No," said Banyan calmly. "You're confusing me with the football coach. I spoke afterward."

"Did you know it was him?" Shelly asked George, incredulous.

"I suspected," he said. "I mean, yes. Yes, I knew it."

"And," Banyan said, returning to Shelly, "you owe my great-godfather a new suit jacket."

Despite all grievances, Banyan eventually warmed to the idea of having his work published and become enthusiastic that Shelly, an established agent with close ties to the W.H.D., Sr., had shown interest in his work. He believed it was finally time for his impact on literary culture to be discovered.

What Banyan threw together, George edited—without the author’s approval—and Shelly submitted to journals. Three months later, just as George’s second novel was to be released, Banyan’s story was published by The Clock, a journal accepting various genres of experimental literature: neologist poetics, phlego fiction, hyper-poetic prose poems, reverse-epiphonemaic paragraphs, metaphysical nihilism, hapax legomenon novelas, pleonastic fiction stories, and magical realism. Banyan’s story was published in the section for avant-garde comedy, which consisted of serious stories, so unfunny in plot and language that only the label “humor” could compel a second read. The goal of this particular movement was to make readers laugh at themselves for seeking humor in earnest.

“My readers have no idea that they’re laughing at themselves.”

“Who better to laugh at?” George asked.

“They should weep. They should rip each other’s throat out. I was writing truth in fiction. My theories turned to fact at the atomic level. Everything’s elemental from here on.”

“You wrote a fictional essay. It’s witty, provocative. That’s what people like.”

“It makes me despise them.”

Six months later, Banyan’s story was selected to appear in the Best Speculative Fiction Anthology. Though he wouldn’t admit it, he was proud to have been published

and knew, somehow, that his works would have a great effect upon literary fiction. As a challenge, he decided to have a story published in each genre section of The Clock.

“In April they’ll publish ‘A Consummate Ideal,’ my pleonastic fiction story. Now I only have hapax legomenon remaining.”

“What word have you chosen for it?” asked George.

“Farnookle.”

“Farnookle is a hapax legomenon?”

“Well ... not *anymore!*”

“So what does it mean?”

“It’s crude.”

In less than one year—a short time for things like this to happen—Banyan became an underground cult sensation. Critics labeled him a “writer’s writer,” which meant publishing houses wanted nothing to do with him. One of his devoted readers was arrested after traveling to Islington, U.K., and crossing out “CLAPTON” to assert that “KINSWORTH” was indeed God. There were bidding wars on EBay for original copies of The Clock featuring his work.

Embarrassed by the adoration, sure that his readers misunderstood his work, Banyan decided to move back into his uncle’s apartment in Elizabeth, New Jersey, disappearing from the outside world for seven years.

There were seven years in which George, with Shelly’s assistance, continued a steady accumulation of success and prestige. Three more of his books were published to positive, though tediously uniform reviews. It was as though critics dared not counter the

initial wisdom of William Henry Devereaux, Sr., and George was too hooked on success to question them.

One afternoon, George surveyed the bookshelves in his office. He saw the reviews from *Publisher's Weekly* and *The New York Times* framed and standing, tilted slightly to the fluorescent lights. He saw the first-runs of his five books. He remembered the last conversation he'd had with Shelly during the final leg of his fifth book tour:

“Which one of your characters would I be?” she asked.

“I don't know. Brooke?”

“The prostitute!”

“Only abstractly. I think I'm talking in abstractions.”

“You'd have me die in Nepal on a rusty bicycle?”

“You tell me. I mean ... I don't know my characters that well.”

It was during this moment of self-reflection that George received a phone call from the director of LFCC's graduate writing program.

“I remember you saying once how much you needed structure in your life, but that you could never find it on your own.”

“That's why I have Shelly,” said George.

“Okay, but how'd you like to have something more? Within a year I'll either retire or get fired by the school, but right now I have some pull with the administration. How'd you like to take over for me as the director of your old program? You'll get paid to talk about books, teach whatever the hell you like, pay your writer-friends a bunch of money just to visit and read from their books, and on top of all this, you'll get a sabbatical every three years.”

“Sounds like heaven.”

“It’s awful, actually. I’ve been here for twenty-five years. I’ve taken just two sabbaticals and all my writer-friends have learned to hate me. But on the plus side, it’ll give you something to do with your days.”

George hesitated only to smile and take a long breath. “Sure,” he said. “I’ll do it.”

During the time of transition in George’s life, the only notable event in Banyan’s was the death of his uncle (natural causes), and his final eviction from the apartment in Elizabeth, New Jersey, by police force. Without much fuss, Banyan moved into the basement of his father’s house, where physical proximity replaced emotional closeness between father and son.

When George and Shelly got engaged, an announcement was published in *The Triangle*, LFCC MFA alumni newsletter. It was below news of an alumnae’s desktop-published book of poetry, complete with information on how to order. Printed on hand-torn, ecru linen stock with leather-loop binding, and for an additional five dollars customers could have the cover autographed: Cindy Mariner, MFA.

While a graduate student—the MFA program divided into groups of fiction and poetry students—Banyan had taken his natural loathing of poets to unprecedented levels. At the tavern where students congregated after class, he would relocate to the bar if a poet joined his table. He would grumble and moan when George dragged him to their classmates’ poetry readings.

“Nothing but word jumbles,” he’d said after one reading. “I’ve written shopping lists more interesting. And is it requisite for all poets to write about their cats and grandmothers? The Muse of poetry must be Whistler’s mother suffocating under the weight of a thousand Tabbies.”

With the distraction of Cindy Mariner’s advertisement, it was surprising to George that Banyan should call him about the wedding. Invitations had not yet been mailed.

“This is regrettable news,” he said. “I am not happy, so you will not be happy.”

“You bought an autographed copy of Cindy’s book too?”

“You’re only marrying Shelly out of gratitude. That, and maybe you think you’ll never be able to publish again without her.”

“Shelly’s also the reason *you’re* published.”

“That’s not a denial.”

“I don’t owe you one.”

“I’ve begun to connect with myself again. This last time it was ten years into the future. In that time we become friends again.”

“I thought we’re friends now,” said George.

“But you are a miserable and unproductive person. Your succubus sucks you dry of inspiration and passion.”

“That sounds like more fun than you’re making it out to be.”

“Of all the people on this planet, you have to be the most infuriating. Run from her!” Banyan said. “Burn your bridges. Would it hurt you to burn a few bridges? Your writing will benefit from the experience.”

“You mean I should become like you?”

“And why not?”

“You never published another story,” said George. “Have you written anything in all this time?”

“That’s not important,” Banyan said.

“I’ve actually come to believe it’s the *most* important aspect of what writers do. We write, we publish, otherwise we’re not writers ... we’re thinkers.”

“I’ve produced a few sentences. I send them to you. They’re wonderful.”

“Sentences don’t get published, Banyan. Unless you’ve suddenly become a poet?”

“Bastard!” Banyan said. “I really didn’t see that coming. Not from you.”

One morning, a few months later, Banyan found a letter addressed to him, which was odd because no one was supposed to know where he lived.

My Friend Banyan,

I’m a director. Look at me! Could you ever say you saw this coming?

But it’s so lonesome here without you. I’ve moved some things around in our annual budget and found money for a writer-in-residence program. How’d you like to be our first endowed writer? You’ll have to teach two classes, one each semester, and read from some of your stories ... or

whatever you're working on. We'll give you housing and set you up on the college meal plan. On top of this, you'll receive a stipend totaling \$72,000.

I convinced the administration that you'd be perfect for the position. Too many writers today sound the same. They don't care about the furtherance of art. They have no visible or confident aesthetic. I know you, and you have so much to give our students. All I hope is that you'd want to give back, just a little.

Hope to see you here later this year,

All the best,

George Saint-John

Director, MFA Program

Little Falls Community College

P.S. Using your short stories published in The Clock as collateral (as your thesis), the administration decided to present you with a master's degree in fine arts. The only constraint, however, is that you accept the fellowship position. What will you choose to do?

Banyan resentfully chose employment over his father's basement, hating himself for wanting his degree. He wondered what could it possibly mean to him after all these years.

He entered the program with brio, his students leaving class confused and energized, his public readings like a religious emissary proselytizing to willful converts. The administration was dumbfounded. George was embarrassed but tolerant, excusatory. Banyan was putting on weight. There was a glint in his eye.

Then one day, during a creative writing workshop, Banyan accused one of his students of not taking life seriously.

"I'm not sure I've met anyone who takes himself less seriously than you," Banyan said.

The student, to his credit, seemed to have considered this idea often and thoroughly. "Good," he said. "I believe the only way people should take themselves is *less* seriously."

Banyan sat silent for some moments and the students were on the edge of their seats, pens poised to record his response—all but the non-serious student who reclined in his chair, resisting a smile. As a reply, Banyan stood and exited the classroom, and for the next two weeks he was not seen on campus.

Under pressure from the students, and finally the administration, George went to visit Banyan. He lived in a house paid for by the MFA program's endowment. On a block cleared of trees, it was the only house, narrow and tall, seeming to list to its left in search of the neighboring row houses that had not been built. The only personal touch Banyan had given the home was to replace the front doorknocker with a Brannock Device from his father's shoe store, as though to pre-restrict entrance by foot size.

Inside, the friends addressed each other from opposing sides of the room. Banyan lay drunk on a couch under the front window, while George rested on the arm of a dingy La-Z-Boy recliner.

“I’m finished with all this,” Banyan said.

“Why don’t you want to teach? It was not the administration that made me come down here. Your students approached me. They’re hungry for what you can teach them.”

“But all they want from me is all I don’t believe in.”

“What don’t you believe in?”

“Imitation.”

“And what *do* you believe in?”

“Provenance.”

“I don’t understand your distinction.”

“One can be taught,” Banyan said. “The other cannot.”

“And everything else is moot, right?”

“That would stand to reason, though I’m surprised you figured that out on your own. That makes me happy.”

“Well, in the very least I’m glad for that.”

For a time they were silent, listening to the sound of wind, unabated by trees, thrumping against the windows. George took a deep breath and explained that he would have to fire Banyan if he didn’t show up for classes.

“You’ll do what you have to,” Banyan said. “But where do I go from here?”

George stood and walked to the door. He turned and said, “My friend, that’s an excellent question.”

The wedding of George and Shelly took place in a mansion on the Long Island Sound owned by Shelly's adoptive parents. The parents were now very old—George and Shelly were in their fifties—and the house would be a gift to the happy couple.

Ninety-nine percent of all invitees were present: Mr. Ferrucci and his fourth wife, the director emeritus of LFCC's MFA program, even William Henry Devereaux Sr. would make an appearance and an uncomfortable toast to the translation of love from the literary to the physical. There was but one empty chair.

Upon the RSVP card on which Banyan should have checked *Yes* or *No* for attendance, and chosen between the pepper steak and the Atlantic cod, he simply scribbled from corner to corner, *I would prefer not to*.

George should have been upset, but he had seen that coming.

While George and Shelly were in Long Island being joyously hoisted up on chairs—though neither were Jewish—Banyan drank from a bottle of Rumplemintz on the sofa in his father's basement. The next morning, when checking on his son, Mr. Kinsworth discovered the scent of urine on the sofa cushions and a note on the arm. It read: *For further information, please don't bother yourself*.

George returned from his honeymoon in the Fiji islands to discover a large envelope from Banyan mixed in with the pile of catalogues and bills still addressed to his in-laws. He opened it before taking his luggage to his new bedroom, pulling out a fifteen-page story. It was a revision of the first story George had received from Banyan while living in the

Catskill's, the one Banyan had asked him to destroy. Immediately, George flipped to the final page:

Jerome waited some minutes more at the table, absentmindedly dabbing at the juice-soaked tablecloth with a fresh pancake—he had made too many. When his future failed to return again, he got up from the table and vomited in the sink.

“Farnookle,” he said, and then went back to bed. This morning hadn't given him any reason to continue with the day.

“Perhaps I've killed myself,” Jerome said to no one. Maybe he spoke to the person he imagined standing in the corner of his room, or sitting on his bed, or touching him, or telling him what to do and where to be. “In the future I'll have to remember to avoid that.”

Continuing from the last typed word was a hand-written note:

THIS IS THE END...

With a pen in one hand and a pistol in my mouth, it is difficult to catch all the drool. At least there will be DNA proof of this letter's authenticity, its provenance.

George, my friend, did you see this coming! Is it an ending at all? What's the point?

This is the first story I ever started and the last one I finished. I imagine someone might pay a lot of money for it, but that always mattered more to you than me. Allow Shelly to run wild with it, and enjoy whatever it brings you. Enjoy it. It is my wedding present to you.

Your friend,

Banyan Kinsworth

P.S. Keep the master's degree. I cannot imagine it would have done me anything ... and you?

George smelled the fire Shelly had started in their massive walk-in fireplace and wondered if she had remembered to open the flue. The smell of warm air pushing out the cold, of burning wood and newspaper, filled the ground level of their new home.

George did wonder if this was an ending at all for Banyan. Then he wondered if, through it all, he ever really cared. But maybe that's a moot point, he thought.

He joined his new wife in front of the fireplace.

“What’s that?” Shelly asked, looking at the manuscript in her husband’s hand.

“One final fuck you from Banyan,” he said.

“Well then,” Shelly said, grabbing the pages and tossing them into the fire. “Fuck him too.”

Talent

It happened at the national college wrestling tournament on the first day of competition. As a long-tenured history professor with the host university, I was able to secure terrific seats to the event, and all I cared to see was Nick Kendall seek his third consecutive national title. If you are a true fan of the sport as I am, then you know there has never been a national college wrestling champion named Nick Kendall. I created the pseudonym to protect the real wrestler's reputation. I think it's a good wrestling name, and anyone who has wrestled competitively knows the power of a name, how your bowels can turn to water as the name is called over the speaker system. The real Nick Kendall was such an athlete to inspire dread in even the most talented wrestler.

Anyone deeply affected by this story might uncover my subject through a bit of research. You may do this, but I don't wish to be blatant.

I had been following Kendall's career since his astonishing and glorious emergence at St. Matthew's Preparatory Academy. In his first year at the varsity level, Kendall sent shockwaves through the wrestling community, knocking off several nationally ranked opponents. By the end of his freshman year at Delbranton College—again, pseudonymous—his name had been enshrined in verb form, such as:

“The diminutive freshman grappler pulled off the upset of his lifetime, *Kendalling* the top seed and advancing to the tournament finals.”

Of course, the actual term was created from a different name, and its progressive tenses play much better in actual sports commentary than my humble example.

Despite my intense desire to watch Kendall in live action, my duties as professor constrained any free time I might have to travel and see him wrestle at nearby schools. Until the national championships came to my university, my experience with this marvel of an athlete had been relegated to newspaper articles and action stills taken by amateur photographers. But like I said, my seats were remarkable: close to the action and far from the throngs of boisterous onlookers in the upper tiers hoisting their poster-board signs of slogans and glitter; those troglodytes cared little that some of the greatest feats of athleticism were happening just beyond the sandwiches they managed to sneak past security.

During the preliminary bouts, I spoke with the spectators sitting near me in the arena, all but an old man to my left who refused to engage in any kind of communication. He sat with his arms folded as if to keep a painful churning in his chest from erupting. The others and I thought highly of Kendall as a wrestler, though acknowledged his bad luck at entering the tournament as the eighth seed. This meant he would hit the top seed in his second match. His odds were slim, but this was Nick Kendall we were talking about. If anyone could overcome this obstacle, it would be him.

Suddenly, Kendall’s name boomed over the arena speaker system, and there he was, right before my eyes on the grandest stage of college wrestling. I could feel the gravity of the room shift, and cheers swirled down from the upper tiers like confetti. He

looked much bigger than the photos I had seen of him, but also, strangely, just as I had imagined. He walked calmly across the mat to shake his opponent's hand, and the referee blew his whistle. I stood and cheered as Kendall began the match with a flourish of action, and in my excitement I hardly felt the slap of a program against my leg.

"Sit down!" said the man at my left. I glanced over and caught sight of his cauliflowered ears tufted in gray hair.

How could I sit? How could *he*? How could anybody playing witness to one of the greatest college wrestlers in history possibly remain seated? Yes, a few others have won three consecutive national titles, but Kendall was vying for a distinction in the record books, an asterisk: to achieve these titles without ever having entered the tournament as the top seed. Unheard of.

The man at my side progressed from hitting me with his program to using one of his old tennis shoes. Fearing a scene, I took my seat and found this man's face close to mine, his breath like vaped Velamint:

"You think you're a fan, but that kid's got no talent. He has almost no idea what he's doing out there."

I thought he was joking until I saw the fire in his eyes. Had I asked, he would have sworn to the truth of his statement as to the presence of God above us. His confidence stunned me. I flushed. I had no clue what to say nor thought I owned the right to freely engage this crazy man amongst so many Nick Kendall fans. In a single statement he had shaken my sound belief in the greatness of this wrestler, and I sat quietly among those free to applaud Kendall as he won his first match of the tournament.

When it ended, the man at my side got to his feet, though it was difficult to notice—his height changed so little. He made his way toward the arena floor, shouldering through the masses and favoring one knee. I watched him thinking impossibly violent and intricate thoughts and hoping with some desperation that he would not return. But at that moment a smiling Nick Kendall trotted over to our side of the arena, a mess of hair and sweat, and he shook the hand of my abuser. The venerable Nick Kendall spoke with this curmudgeon as if they were accomplice thieves.

They exchanged a few excited words and then, before retreating to the locker room, Kendall pointed at the old man's jacket with his other hand over his own heart. I blinked because it was impossible I had missed it: The old man wore the jacket of St. Matthew's Preparatory Academy. And as he rotated to return to his seat, I saw his name sewn across the breast, a name I remembered from the many articles I had read about Nick Kendall. I will not mention this name but to say that it was preceded by the words "Assistant Coach" in an equally perfect cursive thread.

This old man had instructed Kendall in high school. Surely he must know the boy's level of talent; he was perhaps the best person to make this assessment. He had shaken me with his previous statement, but now I trembled. My belief in Nick Kendall, the perpetual underdog who struggled to victory against incredible odds, was shattering and I didn't know what to do. Kendall was a god! How could he achieve such greatness without any talent? I needed to know.

I stood and waited for this Assistant Coach to return. I waved and shouted his name above the crowd. He noticed me, but his face seemed angry and he walked away, stalking up the stairs to exit the arena. I followed him outside, and came through the

doors and into the cold air outside, he grabbed my arm, yanking me away from the crowds milling about.

“I shouldn’t have said anything, so just drop it,” he said, and walked away from me.

But I wouldn’t let up. I dogged him. I was insane with the desire that he reveal his secret knowledge to me. I called after him, offering him money, swearing that he could trust me. I attested to my confidentiality by telling him I was a professor at the university, and this seemed to impress him because he stopped walking and faced me. There were long, silent moments that we stood there, and I could hear the gears in his brain grinding as he came to the decision to speak with me. Then, as if unloading a great burden, as if his words had been planned with great deliberation, he told me this:

I’ve been coaching at St. Matthew’s for more than forty years. About ten years ago, the school made me assistant head coach to a younger, more decorated alumnus. It wasn’t an easy transition, I tell you. He was an even bigger ass than when I was his coach, and just like then his only focus was on individual performance. He didn’t care at all how the rest of the team developed, just his prized pupils. He didn’t understand that to have great individual wrestlers, you must also have a great team. A wrestler’s performance is a direct reflection of the caliber of his teammates, the people he practices with every day.

I noticed one kid in particular received not a minute’s attention. This was Nick Kendall at St. Matthew’s. He was nothing. A nice enough boy, but he didn’t look like a wrestler, all knobby knees and elbows. And no matter how many times he’d practice the same move, he could neither reproduce it nor defend against it with any effectiveness. He

seemed incapable of learning *anything* on his own. For three years he didn't grow in body or ability, and the team's top wrestlers used him like a rag doll. It was awful to see that kind of abuse every day, though I said nothing.

I thought Kendall would quit the team, but he didn't. He returned each practice and put up with the slams and the headlocks and the power-nelson's. It was only a matter of time before he suffered a serious injury, so I guess I became infected with some kind of charitable bug. I started holding conferences with the boy after practice, drilling him on the basics until I was satisfied with his soundness at the fundamental level. I also showed him videos of Billy Sikorsky wrestling top opponents. Sikorsky was vicious, maybe the most skilled wrestler at St. Matthew's, and he and Kendall were alone at the 151-pound weight class on our team. When it came to Kendall's health, it was Sikorsky I feared most.

After a few weeks of these conferences, it came time for the wrestle-off match – to see who would take the varsity position at their weight class. Kendall was able to hold his own against Sikorsky for the first period, and I wasn't the only one amazed. Sikorsky got frustrated and attempted a stupid move, leaving himself with a twice-broken collarbone and ending his entire season. A strange storm of luck had struck Kendall that day, something I thought could never be repeated.

At first I was pleased, but I couldn't ignore that my meddlings had somehow turned a hapless boy into a varsity starter at St. Matthew's. As a representative of our team, as the kid taking over for Billy Sikorsky, Kendall would be expected to perform throughout the season at a level his abilities couldn't match. So you can see how abandoning him was out of the question.

I kept holding after-hours practices throughout the season, and Kendall continued performing miracles, hanging on just long enough for his opponents to make terrible mistakes ... and they always did! On a great wave of unprecedented luck, he managed to amass the best personal record of any wrestler on our team, and he was slated to represent St. Matthew's at the state tournament. Our head coach, of course, took all credit for this blossoming talent—a testament to his own stupidity—and I entertained thoughts of quitting simply to watch his star prodigy crumple. But again, I could not. I played accomplice in Kendall's rise, and my desertion would result in his horrible fall. I could not let that happen, you see, because none of this was his fault.

The only consolation was that I knew his true colors would be exposed at the state tournament. I didn't want him to suffer a monumental disgrace, however, and I resolved to make his decline as painless as possible. After all of our conferences, Kendall was at least prepared to avoid a terrific shaming, to himself and our school. You've no doubt followed Kendall's career, so it comes as no surprise that he won the whole damned thing.

At the time, however, it was beyond my imagination to think of how he and the other bottom seed reached the tournament finals, but Kendall's opponent as good as laid down and pinned himself. Atrocious. Then those senseless administrators went and named him 'Outstanding Wrestler' of the tournament. A double atrocity.

At that point I thought it had to be over, but things only got worse. After the tournament, every college with a wrestling program knew Kendall's name, and Delbranton College nabbed him with a full athletic scholarship. His acceptance was on the assumption of athletic excellence; fail and they withdraw his funding. But failure was

an absolute certainty! It had to happen eventually; he would be ruined and it would land on my head, it would all be my fault. My health began to deteriorate. I lost weight. Nick Kendall was my Frankenstein. Would I have to follow him forever, guiding him through each of life's obstacles? I imagined coaching him through job interviews and wedding vows. My charity had ballooned into the heaviest burden; it was I who needed charity!

Think about what I did, what I had to do – I, who couldn't retire from the sport I loved, even when I'd been insulted, debased, made an assistant to that wretched ass of a head coach. My absence in Kendall's life would prove ruinous, a crushing event in the boy's life. Could I live with this? My God, I could not. So I did what I thought I had to. I took my inevitable leave of St. Matthew's. I ended my lengthy career over an inescapable pang of guilt and rented a small house near Delbranton.

For the past three years I've continued meddling while also praying for the collapse of the house of cards I'd built, but each new situation finds our Kendall swimming in a treasure chest of luck. Do you remember his freshman year, when he advanced to the national tournament finals after the top seed executed an illegal slam? He won on a technicality and they called it a *Kendall!* Then last year, Black Friday, when the top four seeds fell to lesser opponents – Kendall didn't even have the chance to lose to them. Earlier today you must have heard that Dante Kearns tested positive for stimulants ... out goes another top seed. With my horrible fortune, Kendall's sure to win the title this year, and I'll have to continue my charade until he enters the history books as the first wrestler to win *four* consecutive national titles without holding the top seed. What then? The World Championships? The Olympics? Will it never end?

Kendall is as innocent today as when I first set eyes on him, but his wits won't tell him it's raining until a lightning bolt strikes his ass. He is the luckiest being on the face of this earth and until now, nobody knew it but me. You may curse me for telling you this, but in the end you're free from the horrible mess I've made. I must spend my life treading forever in the service of a talentless nobody.

Nick Kendall is haunted by the most unrepentant luck. He doesn't deserve his titles, and one day the whole world will see it. They must, for if Kendall's success continues, he will ruin the sport of wrestling forever. Talent must always prevail over luck. How can sport survive if Lady Luck bears all control over victory? She's a whore!

High in the Humble Trees

A man once asked what I thought about religion. “Are you a faithful man?” was his exact question. So I told him, “Here’s what I think about religion.

“You’re at my door to find out if I think God exists. Well sure He does. I guess that makes me a Deist for starters. But what I can’t wrap my brain around is what existence is like for God, what it *means* to Him, and how He *feels* about it. Nor how any of my brethren can declare knowledge of that fact. This would be ascribing emotions to God, and such an assignation, to be blunt, is blasphemy.

“Therefore, why do we think our going to church means a mouse’s fart to someone like God? If we can’t understand Him, what makes us think we know what He actually wants from us? Does He want us to pray? If so, why can’t I call Him Joe or Mr. Finley?”

The man at my door was an elderly Baptist in a shiny black leather coat. He had brought with him Cameron, his adopted son. Cameron had red hair in a violent style. He held his bible like a rubber discus. I will never forget them.

Of late, I have become a man in possession of sundry temperaments all outside his control. My age has made me emotionally agile. My feet, in the mornings, are sore with heavy blood. This has all happened of late—is all a very recent change in me.

It was a question that got it all started, not the forthcoming high school reunion, as my wife would like to believe and maybe told the neighbors across the street. But she doesn't know about the question I'd been asked, and she never will, so let her think what she thinks. I do not like her much anyway.

Maybe you don't know this either, wife, Theresa, but I'm afraid we will not be together much longer. You try to convince me of my faults, while you appreciate your own defects too wholesomely. Think what you must about me, whatever gets you through the day.

Think, think away.

The question I had been asked: Who do you think you are?

In a truly American way, I had never asked this of myself, had never wondered in what category my biography might be found: tragedy, human interest, science fiction, comedy, botany. What bookshelf could hold my life?

The question I had been asked, then, held great consequence.

I'm reasonably sure I've been around for forty-two years. Dad left me the business seven years ago. It thrives against all odds, and without my knowing a scrap about landscape maintenance. I answer telephone calls, talk with a reassuring timbre.

We'll be right over, I say, in a jiff. My clients believe it, and I say this because it's probably true.

Dad had told me it would be this way.

I have a poor memory. Latin confounds me, so I don't bother with the proper names of plant life, which all sound to me like gross anatomy. *Viburnum prunifolium*. *Crataegus oxycantha*. *Alnus serrulata vaginatus*.

But I enjoy swinging from the tops of trees where the branches are hardy and elastic. In any weather I'll be up in the crow's nest, finding foothold and shifting my weight, hale and horny, rain slathered, surly mouthed, screaming into the winds. I am an arborist! I possess certifications!

Do you understand? I get paid for this!

The unfortunate situation is that I am too short to be considered a normal man ... for me to consider myself as such. There is an acceptable range, below which men like me privately discuss their heights in fractions. Fully erect, fully inflated, I am five-feet and three-sixteenths of an inch.

I'm also incredibly duck-footed. I am afflicted, big time. In the third grade, John Harris encouraged me to become a ballerina, and no matter my logic—that it's insane to think I could become a ballerina because all ballerinas are girls—I was forced to field his kiddie slurs and spend long hours in my bedroom stretching my toes inward.

Dad had told me to ignore John Harris. Dad had told me to let the business run itself. He had told me to marry Theresa when he first met her, had told me that foot stretching was wasted time. He had told me many things to build me up, and yet I am still

afraid of his carcinoma. I hear he is lonely in hospice care. Maybe he's found Jesus sitting in his room, where I should have been, to keep him company.

But it was Cissy, my secretary, who had asked me the question. It was quitting time at the office. Everyone else had gone home. She faced me, scuffed at my red, threadbare industrial carpeting. I said to her, "You just might be the one."

"The one?" she asked.

"I'm gonna go to hell for the things we do to each other."

That's when she landed on that kicker of a query.

"Who do you think you are?" she asked.

"I am," I answered, "is what I think I am."

Cissy has plum-colored lips, grew up in Germantown, PA. There were bullets humming in her past, blades, gold-ringed fists, tiny sticks of dynamite exploding on paper rafts in some rich guy's pool, and she has come through cleaner than Ivory soap. She is closer to her youth, to those thrilling events, than I am to my own. It makes her monstrous in my thoughts.

Is it possible to fall in love with someone's history, her provenance, her makeup, without a single care for her otherwise? Let's imagine I could. I am one of those in love with Cissy, my adorable secretary with that red metal barrette in her long black hair.

My position does not require a secretary because Dad set up the company to chug along on its own steam. He perhaps knew what little ambition existed in his son. But I soon entertained designs of becoming a more professional type of man, and I understood that all successful professional-types need secretaries. Of course they do. It's on every program across every station in the *TV Guide*.

You know what that is? That's life imitating art.

Cissy is of Mexican heritage. I always took this for granted and never asked if I was correct. Her name I pronounced: *Sí-Sí*. Her brother Carl doesn't say her name like this. Nor her mother. Nor, I imagine, her father, had he not been consumed by prison riots. I never met Señor Pardo.

Once, I had fallen from a tree and woken up in their home, on their sofa, the Pardos walking around me in slow domestic loops. Though the children had grown, and Carl had taken a wife and produced a son of his own, the family remained together in one house, insulated from the world at large.

They lapped the sofa, but then Cissy went out. She left me there with her family when I was ill. I felt ruined, melted on the inside. The air became a mist of hot pine needles in my lungs. I coughed powerfully until blacking out. When I woke again I was at home with Theresa, wishing I could return to sleep. For weeks I prayed to fall out of another tree, but I'm a coward in such ways.

Cissy has love to give. It is tattooed to her back: a faint yellow Star of Bethlehem where her jeans ride low. My wife also owns a tattoo, just above her ankle where she forgets to shave sometimes: S.N.C. They're my initials. But they're also another's, the "S" having been added a good time after the first printing.

Cissy's dark hair is in constant need of pruning, yet she lets it grow down to the star on her back. At her desk outside my office, answering the telephone, she plays with a small tress of that hair growing somewhere behind her right ear. Always the same lock, she twirls it between two fingers, pulls it across her face into a floppy mustache. It must smell divine.

Then in my office, Cissy said to me again, “Who do you think you are.” She’d become rhetorical. Where did that come from?

“I don’t think,” I said. “But if I did, I’d think I’m the man for you, Cissy. I know you think of me too. Let’s not slink around in our thoughts. I much prefer to slink in the flesh. Slink with me. We’ll slink away together. Don’t you see? It’s dark out, and I must crawl inside you for protection.”

But already I am two days beyond this event. Why do I live in past moments? Come to! Remember yourself, Sean. Who are you? You don’t care a lick for your wife. That is who you are.

You are going to find Cissy to explain yourself. You will fix it so she is agreeable once more.

When the door opens I am roused from the skirted, blue corduroy Barcalounger with the three-hundred-and-sixty-degree swivel feature. I am in my living room where the carpet is beige and tufty.

Enter Theresa, disappointment crusting her eyes, melting with the moisture from her coat hood. I have no idea if this look comes from finding herself married to me still—the man in the sofa chair enjoying a swivel with his mouth open wide—or in her not having produced any children, or in our dog Rickey having had urgent business on the front porch steps. My wife has vermilion hair and is beautifully difficult to read.

Take for one instance the evening when Theresa swam alone in gin martinis and told me that I, Sean Conley, had been her third choice for a husband. Only because of her

unwillingness to make decisions, her youthful ambivalence, did she end up married to me.

“You married me for the tattoo,” I said.

When she laughed at this, I laughed at this, though my thoughts were galaxies away from hers. Our roof was gently leaking.

Even still, later that night she swore up and down to God, with blasphemous fire, that I had made her soul come.

She designated me a perfect storm.

She cried that she might be broken, and then cried for me to break her again.

“You make me happy,” she had said afterward, “to think all my hair might fall out one day, and you’ll be right there with me.”

In the soft beige living room she tells me that Charles and Willamina will be over for dinner at eight sharp.

I ask her, “Is that why you’re upset?”

“I’m not upset,” she says.

“You look upset.”

“Well I’m not. I’m not upset.”

“But you look it.”

“Thanks.”

“So are you?” I ask.

“No,” she says.

“Well, I’m just saying you look upset.”

“Maybe I’m upset because you keep asking me about it.”

“So you are upset, then?”

“The end,” Theresa concludes. “I have groceries in the car.”

Theresa may have wanted more out of life than what I was willing to give her, but, then again, maybe she didn't. The only truth was that I no longer cared. Other than that, we were the same old couple.

In high school I had cared about Theresa. Yeah, I did. Big time.

At this point, a boy named Neal Cully creeps into my history, and then he leaves just as abruptly; but he'll be back again soon enough.

I hate Neal Cully. It's a kind of hate that blooms from love—I'm talking least common denominators here, not vulgar derivatives. Both love and hate require the same intensity of emotion in me, the same lusts, the same waking dreams and salivary responses and stirring tenderloins, the fierce adrenal palpitations. In such a way, I always hated Neal Cully.

His father was old steel money tied to old coal money, married to new lottery money. It was rumored that Neal Cully, Sr. had struck a deal with the city of Philadelphia to donate vast swaths of wooded acreage in return for tax immunization to cover the course of three generations of Cullys. His name alone made royalty of Neal Cully II at Northern Hills High School.

I further hated his height. We true wrestlers are hamstrung by height. If we'd been given a choice in the matter, none of us would have chosen wrestling over a few measly inches. Neal, the lurking yobbo, could have played basketball instead of wrestling. He made us feel like the athletic refugees we were, and it wounded us deeply to watch him develop into a damned inspiring grappler.

But the worst of it was that Neal Cully owned the first-rights to my future wife's body.

We'd known each other forever, Theresa Bennett and I, growing up six houses apart on Endicott Boulevard. And it was on an eighth-grade school trip to the Pearl S. Buck House that we first kissed. We were on the back lawn, huddled under a beach towel against a cold wind, when she allowed me to reach a hand inside the arm of her t-shirt where she was warm and downy and already forming. She too was crafty and curious, trying to feel what had made my pants grow tighter. The lawn blushed for us an electric green. I became bold, tunneling my fingers beneath the waistband of her shorts toward her nether pulp. But then she stiffened, grabbed my wrist. After that I didn't know what else to do, so I pinched her jutting nipple, and that was that.

In stealing her away, just days later, Neal Cully had proven a braver boy than I. Even then he was tall, mature, and blatantly rich.

But then, beyond Neal Cully, twenty years from that lawn and several sexual partners apart, Theresa and I got married. I may have married for the sake of reminiscence, but now I know Theresa did worse. She had settled for me.

The love from which I bore my hatred for Neal Cully was actually envy, which is just a specialized kind of love. Neal got to live out his hyper-sexed teenage years with my Theresa, and I got to dream about what they were doing to each other, their copious enthusiasms. Even today, for total bliss, I close my eyes and pretend to be Neal Cully in high school, cuckolding myself with memory. With swift motions, I pretend at vanquishing the first curiosities of Theresa Bennett.

On the other hand, dinner approaches. Friends are at the door.

As I am a man undisciplined in weight management and strength training, my friend Charles Giacommetti is a man ripe for purest spite.

Sing it with me: *He is my twin but for his discipline.*

Charles springs through every situation as though he might finish with a flourish: sliding out of his burnished sedan, walking through my front door, guiding his girlfriend Willamina into the kitchen where she might converse with Theresa, et cetera.

“My little man!” Willie calls him, and there’s a wet kiss for his reward.

Now Charles sits on my couch shining his shoes, massaging the leather garishly, his feet horribly parallel. I’m flossing between my toes with a damp sock, disgusted at my toe jam and the hot air forced into my nostrils.

“I know you,” Charles said.

“You know me?”

“I do. And of all the things I want to say, there’s only one thing I think can help. You need to be honest with Theresa, for both your sakes. Then you will both be free, free to live together or apart or in any other sort of arrangement. Without that freedom of honesty, you are headed for misery and destruction.

“Now, it’s your prerogative not to tell me what you’re going through. That’s just fine. But take this suggestion from a doctor who has studied such things. Get together with Theresa and talk things through. Do this as soon as you can. If you need, I can play facilitator.”

At my friend, I scoff. “So you can be the reason we come together? Really, wow. I mean, great.”

Charles Giacommetti, ladies and gentlemen: the celebrated psychologist of Philadelphia's lost children.

Giacommetti is fast approaching his three-year anniversary of dating Willamina.

They had met at the Hotel Malostranská in Prague, during a conference on the psychology of repatriated toddlers and preteens. Charles was the main attraction, the keynote speaker on the conference's final day, a rising superstar of the mind. The wisdom au courant was that because he so resembled a child, physically, his connection to the emotions of children must be acutely reliable.

Willie was head of security for the event, a large woman with honeydew-like shoulders and a solid watermelon rump. One might get the feeling that she exerted only enough energy to set her body into motion, that she ran on inertia. Not slow, but deliberate and economical, largely elegant, as though treading barefoot on a greasy floor.

(When Charles brought her home I finally got inside his head, saw what he had been dreaming of: a fleshy jungle gym on which to play and climb and conquer for hours. This is all we ever thought about, we former wrestlers, having practiced for that wonderful occasion of ultimate exploration. During lulls in conversation at our double dates—Theresa feeling undersized and insecure—I would wonder what Willamina permitted my friend to accomplish in the bedroom. Probably things he'd never contemplated, or even heard of. After all, she's Eastern European.)

Willamina was not without other suitors, however. The evening of the conference, the first day, she was set to meet a young man named Petr, a blackguard, tall, wary, and hateful of foreigners. Charles escorted Willie through the Old Town Square, admiring the

Astronomical Clock, the Orloj, whose creator had had his eyes burned from his skull so that he might never again build something so wondrous. Willie made a point of identifying Petr, who watched them from across the square, at the monument to Jan Hus. Petr held the crushed expression of unfulfilled desire. He concealed an extension baton in his cargo pants.

Never before had Charles fought for passion, but when the time came he scaled young Petr like a telephone pole and reduced him to a shredded pile of splinters.

Did I mention the spastic genius with which Charles wrestled?

It took three weeks of letters for Charles to convince Willie to come to Philadelphia, and then, suddenly, I'm on dates with them, toting Theresa and a bottle of Shiraz, and enjoying the stumbles of Willamina's English.

"My little man!" she calls Charles.

"Willie," I say. "You're a marvel! Speak the truth!"

Cissy gives off heat. Big time. It's a crazy heat.

You can only tell when she's real close, leaning over your shoulder with a fax in her hand or an opinion about what's wrong with the computer. Her fragrance of fresh apples and rose petals like a fancy dessert warming in the oven. Even her personality is hot sweetness. She sees opportunity when nothing else seems to be going right. A drunk sanitation worker lost control of his truck and felled three lacebark elms at her family's apartment complex. Mr. Pardo's car had been among the collateral damage. That's when I first met Cissy. I thought she was trying to walk around me. Like a pinecone falling

from the tallest spruce, I didn't know where she'd land but couldn't stop staring, even when it was clear she aimed for my attention.

She was seventeen, wore a tight red t-shirt and tight jeans that stopped at mid-shin, expecting a sudden flood to accompany the devastation of her family's property.

"Be careful there, girl," I said. "Those branches could lash out."

She might not have heard me from Diego's chainsaw.

"I'm Cissy," she said.

I might not have heard her, either. From her ears, big gold hoops rattled on excitedly in the breeze. Her jeans pulled snugly to a dark point between her legs. With a short distance between us, it appeared to me that we were the same height.

"Yes," I said. We didn't shake hands.

"You look busy."

"I am," I said. "What is it? Can I help you?"

"Money," she said. "I need some. My family needs it too."

"Just like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"You want me to give you money just for asking? I'd like to, but I don't have that kind of wealth."

"No," she said. "I mean, wait. I'm looking for a job," she said. "You hiring?"

"Sorry," I said, but I hesitated because I didn't want the conversation to end like that. Conversations that end with 'Sorry' have no hope of reanimation. The roundness of Cissy's chest made my knees shake. I fought the urge to excuse myself and take a leak in the bushes.

Diego finished dismembering one elm and moved cyborg-like to another. And as the jarring noise drifted away, so did Cissy into her apartment building.

A week later she showed up at my office. I hired her right there for her grit, and my weakness for pretty, wounded things. It was a flurry to find work for her to do. I paid her too much. This was six months ago.

I used to think my life was pretty good, but then Cissy showed up. Never before had something so beautiful approached me willfully, so out of the blue. Except perhaps for Theresa in the eighth grade. But now I believe my wife's motives back then were less for me than for an experience. And look how things turned out!

"My father works in the prison," Cissy had told me sometime during the first week of her employment. "I got a fat brother who thinks he's tough shit, but he got that scar on his face from a cake knife at my cousin's wedding. Mom's too quiet. Our family's already quiet enough. It's a woman's job to keep things interesting, to say what won't be said."

"Interesting," I said. "Sure. Why not."

You see? I couldn't disagree with my *Sí-sí*. She made me alternately poetic and mute, engaged and detached with my sense of self.

Dinner is awful, exceeded only by the conversation. How have my friends and I become so droll, so concerned with the vacant space of nonsense in our mouths? For example, talk of our upcoming high school reunion.

"I've got it all set up for this weekend," said Charles. "Our base of operations will be the brand-new Howard Johnson."

“Fun!” Theresa said. “And how special! The school’s doing all this just for the old wrestling team?”

Asked Willie, “Is all small as two of you?”

“No. We’re special men,” I said. “There was a philter we took from an old crone that made us short and insatiable.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Theresa asked me.

“Crone?” said Willie.

“Go without me,” I said. “I told you I don’t want to go. From the very start I’ve been resistant. If anything, you’ve got to call me consistent.”

Theresa called me a goon instead. *Here, here!* exclaimed Charles. Willie let loose a husky gobble.

“In high school, you were the only people I cared for,” I said to my wife and friend. “Give me a reason to revisit our past that has nothing to do with showing off Willie.”

“Goon!” Willie said.

“There you have it,” Theresa equivocated, as though it answered a single, damned thing.

Now it is afterward, and I say to my guests that I need a walk to settle my stomach. They three opt for a Portuguese Muscatel I’d been saving for no reason I could remember, perhaps better company, or the Super Bowl. Still, I dislike the imposition, the assumption that all mine is theirs.

I am sick with company and beginning to hate people, all of them, generally. I need church, I think, but exit the house knowing I will pass by the Church of God for Seventh-Day Adventists, the First Baptist Church, the house secretly utilized for Orthodox Jewry, and walk with the winds of shadows into the proximity of my ruin.

And another thing about religion: I was brought up without. Both mother and father fell in line with the religious malaise of their parents, and reveled in each other's disinterest. I, on the other hand, needed more. With my own compulsions, I visited Baptist churches, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Unitarian, once a cowboy church congregating in a warehouse parking lot. I went to synagogues for Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform Jews. The Orthodoxy refused to take me in without the proper provenance, the documentation of inclusion in the Twelve Tribes.

"That's why I'm here," I said into their pale faces and sunken eyes, their beards and kippot and tallitim. "I want to belong."

"That is not for you to decide," said a man, ignoring the woman walking past us through the doorway.

I never went to a mosque. For some reason they scared me, and I've never been able to shake that feeling.

You may think I go around looking soured and pickled all day, like some overstuffed dwarf, salty from the gypsum mines.

Not so! Babies love me. So do their mothers. I stroll by on warm afternoons and smile at them absurdly. They return the favor with zesty wet teeth. I smile for the world to remember how to smile. I've been called a pleasing man. There must be many old

mothers around who would love for me to scoop up their divorcee daughters and ruin them again. I have always been good with mothers.

I walk three miles in the dark before reaching the Pardo home. It's nicer than my own, the trees certainly groomed and nourished by more skilled hands than mine, or than I can afford to employ.

The Pardos are recent beneficiaries of three million dollars from the Dynamic Shield Corporation, payment for the death of their patriarch and primary breadwinner. As a prison guard in Philadelphia's publicly owned prison, Mr. Pardo was slain in a recent riot when his protective vest failed to stop a plastic bullet from entering his heart. This had been a failure of the law of averages, the corporation determined, not of science. In other words, three million dollars was the going rate for an accident.

I've walked by the Pardo home many times before, always at night. Sometimes the police would cruise by, looking for me I'm sure, having been called by Mrs. Pardo, or Carl or his wife, worried I was a burglar casing out a job. But from the light of their home—I in the darkness outside—they have never seen my face as I watched them.

Often I have observed the family through their yellow-lit windows, dashing across the bottom floor, harried, windowpanes flashing across them like pages from a flipbook. There was an argument, an emergency, a telephone screaming, water boiling over in the kitchen—but we are watching television in the library! Did you hear suspicious sounds popping near the child's room? Go see! Go see!

¡Ay dios mío!

I'm no bigot. I can't be. I am in love with Cissy.

A pewter minivan rusts in the driveway—Mr. Pardo’s restored ‘67 Stingray hidden in the garage beneath a brown sheet. The Bermuda lawn and holly shrubs and dwarf magnolias and fully mature sycamores stack up one against the other in accordance with rules governed by homeowner and historic associations. The house itself: two-stories of old gray masonry backlit by the cold dark emanating from the Schuylkill River.

The Pardos do not know what to do with such a house. They had been poor, dreamt of what money could buy them. Now, to their consternation, they are wealthy, confounded by the depths of their reserves. Their living rooms are horrifically empty.

What compels me to raise the iron knocker? It falls, bounces, cracks like a string of strip caps in a toy pistol. Playing the hunted Indian I dive into the holy, hiding from cowboys and rangers. My hands scream. The dead leaves on the ground have hardened to prickly steel shavings. I roll to my back, picking up twigs and leaves and other chaff with my sweater.

“Mr. Conley?” I hear.

I consider. I turn. I admire the unrestricted breasts of Mrs. Pardo as she leans over me, listen to their susurrations beneath her flannel nightshirt.

“Are you sick?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. “I think I may be.”

At the couch, Mrs. Pardo lets go of my arm. It’s the same couch I had lain on after my earlier fall. I see now it is hoary, purple stripes on yellow, and worn at every curve. It is a vestige of their previous, smaller home, the apartment in Germantown. It would have dominated its room there, but now rests atop wide oak flooring, alone without

accompanying end tables, coffee tables, benches or other tablature. I felt it was on display. Where were the velvet ropes?

“Cindy isn’t here,” says Mrs. Pardo.

I sit on the couch, lie down, and she leaves me for an Alka-Seltzer. There are dreams I try to evoke on that couch, the buzz of stealing kisses and caresses from Cissy while her mother and Carl’s family sleep upstairs. I stop when the babble of small naked feet closes in on me.

Carl Pardo’s boy, Cissy’s nephew, is four years old. He approaches my shoes, my knees, my waist, belly, chest, and then my turned face. He did this quickly. I am a short distance to span, even on four-year-old legs.

He tells me his name is Alex. Alex is a bloated child, tanned with dirt, bowl-cut, wrists like jelly tubes choked with cooking twine. He stares at me, and wants to know if I see his sticky fingers.

“I do,” I say. “I do. Don’t touch me.”

He brings one glossy, mucilaginous finger toward his nose. His eyes expand at the sight of it.

“Oh,” I say.

I stand and raise Alex up by the armpits, marveling at his young density, and scamper to the bathroom.

“Lather,” I say, adjusting the faucets. “You’ve got to lather. Lathering is what gets all the germs off. Lather with me, one-two-three, one-two-three. More soap? Here, one-two-three. Squish it around. Get the lather going and destroy those germs. Yes, this is fun. Wonderful.”

Back to the past! A memory about last week:

Cissy was early to work and discovered me sleeping under my desk. The office was bright with the strata of sunrays through Venetian blinds.

“Is that you, Sean?”

“Oh man,” I said.

I stood weakly, then sat atop my desk blotter, my hanging feet a good distance from the floor. Cissy brought me coffee and a fresh glazed donut.

“You eat,” I said. “So I know it’s not poison.”

“Whatever,” she said.

A warm, oily sheen covered her lips as she handed back the donut, and I made a crude demonstration of stuffing my mouth with all that remained. She watched me chew slowly, nearly unhinging my jaw. The silence made me uncomfortable. I felt compelled to lie about why I had spent the night at work, to tell her it wasn’t because I knew she used the office for late-night trysts with her boyfriend. I tried to say what came to mind.

“Wumf,” I said instead, and sprayed her blouse with globs of wet dough.

It was the closest I had ever come to lying to Cissy.

She left my office for the bathroom and washed her hands before cleaning her face and clothing. I found this act very civilized.

Enter Carl to the bathroom, joining Alex and me. He is a hulking mass of hairy flesh, his leg occupying an area equivalent to my entire body. He fingers the faint scar under his left eye that affects a permanent sadness. He asks what I’m doing here.

“Your child is filthy,” I say. “We’re washing his hands, aren’t we?”

“Gloop,” says the child, showing his hands, dripping suds onto the pink shag bathmat. “La ... la ...”

“Lather,” I finish for him. “Good. A little slow, but he’s learning. You must take charge of his continuing education.”

“Cindy’s not here,” Carl says.

“So said your mother. I have a feeling it might be true.”

“You should go,” says Alex’s father.

Never before had I noticed the red splotch in the white of Carl’s eye, just above the thin flaw on his cheek. It is a vicious disfigurement that has no business being around children. But young Alex has probably grown used to it, seeing this large man in every memory, helping at bathing and dressing and cutting up hot dogs, mixing them with ketchup. To the boy, the red in his father’s eye must be as natural as shoes, or the morning sun.

“Cindy told me what you said to her,” says Carl. “It’s not right for a boss to say that to his employee. It’s not right for anyone to say to *anybody*.”

“Cissy’s a big girl. If she has a problem, she should be able to discuss it with me,” I tell him. “When will she be home?”

“You need to go,” Carl says.

“Yes,” I say. “So you’ve told me.”

But then I hear my name called and quickly exit the Pardos’ bathroom, leaving Carl to dry his son’s clean hands. I am suddenly conscious of my black dress shoes. They knock hollowly on the floor like a woman in heels. *Ki-clak. Ki-clak.*

“Feeling better, Señora Pardo?” I ask.

Ki-clak. Ki-clak.

“Alka-Seltzer always does the trick for me,” I say.

Ki-clak.

I take a seat on the bare floor in front of Mrs. Pardo, which makes her uncomfortable. She shifts and pulls down her flannel nightshirt where it had slid to her upper thigh. A cozy smell like pastry flour floats from her body.

Tremendous, purple bags hang under her eyes. I envy her her hardships, knowing how struggle and endurance make people strong. Mrs. Pardo has borne children and buried a husband. She has been told not to talk with the media about her husband’s death. That is why she is strong.

My father has cancer and I don’t visit him. I do not love my wife. Those are my hardships. That is why I am weak.

“How can you not love your wife?” Mrs. Pardo asks. “Where’s the sense in that?”

“I said that out loud?” I ask.

“Yeah, you did,” Carl says, standing in the hallway.

Mrs. Pardo crosses her legs and I glimpse a shifting, cream-colored garment. I then look to Carl, apologetically. He doesn’t know what I’ve just seen.

“If I said it, then it must be true, Señora Pardo. I only speak in truths,” I say. “It’s one of my better traits, not that Mrs. Conley notices anymore. And that’s just the thing. It’s mutual. We both do not love one another, and only I have the guts to do something about it. I can’t say why we are still married. She is in love with other men from her past,

and worse, she had merely settled for marrying me. My heart is free and open now, and I am in love with your precious *Sí-Sí*.”

“Her name is Cindy,” says Carl.

“Sure,” I say.

“No sure,” says Mrs. Pardo. “It’s Cindy. It’s on her birth certificate. Cindy Pardo.”

Mrs. Pardo looks away, toward the kitchen and the back door. I follow her thoughts up Rosehaus Avenue, across Park Drive, beyond the parking lot and into my place of business. She’s trying to open my files with her imagination, has invented a large brass key to unlock them. She finds the grotesque, the dangers, the colorful quivering toys of an unwholesome soul. They frighten her. In reality, there is nothing in my files but files. Still, Mrs. Pardo’s mind shrieks.

“This is craziness,” she says. “I appreciate—I really do—that you gave Cindy a job when she needed one, when my husband was alive and we needed the money. You were generous then. But now”—Mrs. Pardo’s breath smells bitter like my father’s had—“I don’t want Cindy working for you anymore.”

“But Señora Pardo—”

“Why do you call me señora? Why always this *señora*?” she asks.

“Would you like me to stop that?”

“Yes,” she says. “My Jesus, yes.”

Before I go, Mrs. Pardo permits me a moment in Cissy’s bedroom. I told her there were documents Cissy had taken for duplication at Kinko’s. That she would believe this

showed me Cissy had never discussed work with her mother. Nevertheless, I believe it was the mention of Kinko's that sold the lie. There is truth in details.

Cissy's room is orderly, I say, it has a particular order but I can't tell what it is. Let me say then that there's a flow. I follow this flow from the door, shuffling my feet across her ivory carpet. I flow back to the door, shut it mostly and receive a shock from the doorknob. I flow to the foot of Cissy's lavender bed, then to her window and see the balsam fir from which I had taken a fall.

There had been a boy in this room, you understand? It was a reconnaissance mission I had been on. Reconnoitering my target. Recon operations behind enemy lines. A total wreck.

Another thing: I am terrible at war games.

I had been shot down by the enemy's bold moves in this room, but then woken up in heaven.

The flow guides me to her pillow. It smells of damp hair. Helplessly I flow on. The current takes me to her desk (white, antiqued, battered corners), and shows me a watch glinting in the crack of hallway light from the door. A brief wave pushes my hand, flips the piece over. I see etched in a hackneyed, lacy script:

my Love

to the limits ...

I scratch at the inscription. It's real. The flow puts the watch in Sean's pocket. What else could Sean do but keep it there?

In Cissy's drawer I find a yellow legal pad and fight the tide of my intrusion to write a letter.

Cissy,

I have come to see that you are not here, or so your family says. Though you are also not in the closet or under your bed. Maybe they are being truthful. Maybe then, as your mother suggests, it is right to fire you so that our relationship will not be viewed as inappropriate.

Cissy, you have a beautiful bedroom, much lovelier from this side of the windowpane. Please forgive me this invasion. I have touched nothing but the door and this pad and pen.

I also took your watch. Don't worry. As you forgive me, I forgive you.

Had you intended to pawn it? Do you keep it as a memento of the boy who would buy you things? If so, know this. I will buy you a house. Well, perhaps it will be an apartment, but it will be yours alone. No Pardos in sight. Let that stand against a trinket.

I must see you. My wife is unbearable. She will take me away to a high school reunion on Saturday, but I cannot

wait through the weekend to speak with you. I will arrange for a car to pick you up at your house that afternoon and drive you to the Howard Johnson downtown. There, a room will be booked under your name, on the top floor, where we might have some time together, free from the world that doesn't want us to be as one.

It is finally happening. Do you see it too? Please agree to see me.

In everything yours,

Mr. Conley

I scan my letter three times over, and then add below my name:

President and Owner

Conley & Son Landscape Maintenance

Let this business be official, I think.

Leaving the house, I hear Mrs. Pardo shuffling in her slippers around the kitchen. I spy her sitting with a cup of tea at the square kitchen table. The chair opposite her has been pulled out. Her back is laden, rounded, and I fight the urge to place a hand on that red flannel hump, imagining the grief contained therein would be too great for my smallness to bear. Quickly, I take my leave.

Next month I'll be high and clear headed, speaking to a batch of potential arborists at the community college. The storm last year generated a fear of trees among the more influential voting blocs. They're everywhere, was the general thought. The menace of nature, multiplying and dying slow, dangerous, unpredictable deaths near our houses, with our children up in them; we must do something drastic about them.

Education was the general answer to that general thought. Build more arborists, they proposed. Generally, I think this might do some good.

Enter Sean Conley, proprietor of Conley & Son Landscape Maintenance, Certified Arborist.

Avid Tree Swinger, I will add in red ink to each pamphlet.

Already behind the lectern, standing atop a milk crate, I will watch my students enter the auditorium and tell them it's okay to sit in the back. Don't feel a need to sit right up front, I say, though some will inevitably do so. Please, I'll say, in the middle. My peripheral vision is failing, I'll add falsely. Though again, some sit to my flanks, nearest the side exits, with a grand view of my booster crate.

"Why are you here?" I'll ask when all are settled. They will talk of their love for green things, of mother earth, of the feeling of dirt under their fingernails, or, more honestly, of the need for gainful employment. Only one will reply, "I don't know," and I ask this student to remain after the conclusion of class to speak with me.

I will wait for the last student to leave, the stylized brunette in Timberland boots and long, injurious eyelashes. Holding onto his ambivalent elbow in the empty room, looking into his vacant eyes, I will tell this student, "There is much potential in you.

You're wise not to commit to reasons for your actions. Let your actions preclude your thoughts. Wonderful. You are wise for eighteen."

And he'll reply, "I don't know."

"Yes. Exactly. Wonderful," I'll say again.

A week later, the student will have dropped the course and I will teach the remaining arboreal students what little I know, if even that much. They will listen, and I will hire one of them to assume the arborist division of Conley & Son Landscape Maintenance.

This course, these eager students, will ruin trees for me. Without trees I will not think properly, and without thought my brain will decay. These students will be the death of me.

"Hello?"

"Sean? Where are you?"

"I could ask the same of you."

"You've been gone for three hours. Are you coming home? Do you need a ride?"

"I'll be home after you go to bed. When you wake up, it'll be like I never left at all."

"You know I have trouble sleeping without you. Can we talk while I try to go to sleep?"

"Nope. Sorry."

"What's gotten into you? Is it me? Have I done something wrong?"

"You're breaking up, dear. Can't hear you, dear."

“Sean?”

“Yes?”

“You’re a horrible liar and a bastard.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to say to a man whose father’s dying.”

“We spoke the other day. Your father said the same thing about you.”

“Go figure.”

“He loves you, but he’s afraid he did something wrong when you were a boy, and that that’s why you’re having troubles now.”

“That’s doubtful. The man was a talker if there ever was one.”

“You should go see him soon. It won’t be much longer now.”

“What’s that? You’re breaking up, dear. Bye-bye.”

At my house, Charles’s car is still in the driveway. Night has reached its darkest. It will be some hours before the sun rolls up the far side of the mountain, spilling light over everything.

I find that my wife and friends had opened another bottle of Muscatel, my last, and left half of it to warm on the counter. Standing there, I finish it without a break for breath. Then I tote a bottle of Chablis out with me to the backyard where I scale what I think is a sugar maple, to think more clearly.

It was wrong to allow Theresa to marry me. Before, my life had been a job and a small friend, my father, co-workers I couldn’t relate to, shrubs and gasoline-powered tools and bitter, tearful chemicals. There came a day when I thought more should come of

it all, and suddenly Theresa reemerged from a dark corner of memory into the dim light of my life. With her, my past reformed, became changed and vibrant with affection.

When she relented to me and seemed happy for it, I was lonesome yet. We traded secrets in the bedroom, silently surprising each other until the moment of climax when we burst together. Theresa came like a banshee. Familiar and new nonetheless, this woman frightened me.

But none of this was fair of me—to let everything continue on its course toward our marriage—but I hadn't known then of the power of trees to console and educate. Their wisdom is paramount. How things would have been different if I took my questions to the nearest weeping willow.

Yes, I think much better in trees.

I see the television has been left on in the upstairs bedroom of my house, lighting the window with a pulsating blue. Through the curtains I see shadows of Willie and Charles: the silhouette theater of an ogre devouring a small lamb. I am happy for my friend.

There is a great deal of sap smeared to the inner thighs of my khaki pants, I discover. I am gratified to have identified this tree correctly.

I dreamt of my employees chasing me up a middle-aged pine. Good old Sam and Diego, Lawrence and Puck, Kravowitz and Martinez, Jimmy-I and Jimmy-II over at Conley & Son Landscape Maintenance. They cheered for me with whoops and other hollers. I was afraid, for Cissy was not with them. It was deception! I grabbed hold of the pine's crown, where an angel might make a home, and I leapt down. My audience made as if to catch

me, their fingers snapping at my toes, but the sturdy pine slung me into the sky. Through the emptiness of space I dodged stars and kicked off the moon. The vacuum of space tasted of metal. I landed atop Seattle's Space Needle, safe and sturdy, dense like King Kong, and looking down upon the entire world's population fighting and climbing over each other to reach me. I am trapped! Damn the creations of mankind!

My goodness.

Charles wakes me by flashing the living room lights on and off, on and off. I picture the trilling bodies of giant bumblebees behind my eyelids. Charles says we need to leave before the women get up. He is already in his coat, holding his boots by the laces. I don't remember him wearing them the night before. No, he is handing me *my* boots.

"Ungh," I say.

I am stiff, having slept erect in the Barcalounger. There are pins in all my joints.

Charles tells me we have an errand, and that we must go, now.

"There's sap on my crotch," I say, slowly spinning in a circle.

"Not my problem," he says.

"Last night I flew across the country," I tell him, having another swivel. "There's a shooting star caught in my pocket."

"Get your head in this world, Sean. We have serious business to attend to, and I can't be bothered by what you're going through. Not now. Just give me today. Then you can go back to whatever it is you're doing to piss off Theresa."

Like many short men—myself excluded—Charles walks with a straight back, as though iron bars had been inserted from his hips to his ears, and then crossed by another to fasten his shoulder blades together. He walks like Jesus might have, had the crucifix been on the inside. I, on the other hand, wobble in a straight line, more or less.

One day, Charles mistakenly confided in me a secret:

“I keep this posture to maximize the space between my vertebrae, to make the most of what little I’ve been given in stature. You might try this too.”

“I’ve heard that stunts your growth,” I said. “My doctor says I haven’t reached my full potential yet.”

As rigid as he is, as high as he puffs his chest, Charles must stand on tippy-toes to check his teeth in the side-view mirror of my pickup truck. One does not imagine Jesus was ever so small.

I, on the other hand, think I may have grown in the night. I feel as though I might clock in at five-feet and seven-sixteenths of an inch.

“No car,” Charles says to me. “It might wake the girls.”

Charles has a straightforward gait. I waddle like a buoy in rough water. As we stroll into town together, I don’t listen to my friend ramble on. The trees speak louder than he can manage, his voice only a deep squeak about responsibility and loneliness.

The trees are whispering to me in the soft morning wind, forming a name with their shuffling leaves. *Sí-sí ... Sí-sí ... Sí-sí ...*

They tell me she needs my love. And if the trees say it is so, then it must be.

A month ago, I learned of my destiny with Cissy while up in an ancient oak. It was one of those tall, ancient earth erections I had scaled in order to clear my head, to

hear more clearly the wisdom of nature, to be convinced. The oak was reassuring and faithful, constant like me, but massive. When the winds died I shook it by the arms to be convinced again. And I was, over and over, back and forth, swishing and swaying.

Sí-sí ... Sí-sí ... Sí-sí ...

A nest of eggs fell through stories of branches. A robin took flight.

Time crawls when Charles's around. It has taken us fourteen years to reach the jewelry store downtown, to see our low reflections on the storefront windows staring back at us.

I enjoy brief observations of my friend, and only do this when I know his attentions are well occupied. Looking at Charles is like seeing what I *could* be, if only I were a man of regiments. I do not take vitamins or exercise daily. Both are more painful than doing nothing at all. To hell with accomplishments!

Charles has taken off his jacket to reveal a snug black t-shirt. He's ogling an assortment of diamond rings, his one arm extended, palm down on the glass counter. His bicep is an enormous, soft almond, and when he scratches his head, the muscle transforms into a swollen hazelnut. In comparison, I'm a peanut rotting inside its husk. This makes both of us nuts. And we are, in our own ways. Charles's a nut for Willamina, and I'm learning what it's like to be a nut for Cissy. My love is a putrid pecan melting into the forest floor.

"I want it to be big," Charles says to me.

Examining the array of rings, the different sizes, colors, designs with baguettes and twisted precious metals, gold and platinum, Charles appears thwarted.

"So this is a compensation thing," I say.

“You’re only here for support,” says Charles. “I’ve never done this before.”

“And I’m an expert?”

“Sean, do you even realize anymore that you’re married?”

It pleases me to think I might not have. Words have preceded my thoughts, and thoughts precede action. I know the latter to be absolutely true.

“You should know what a big decision this is,” Charles says. “I don’t want to give Willie a reason to say no.”

“She’s not going to do that.”

Willie may be unwholesomely exaggerated, but not as concerns the drama of her sex. Her emotions and thoughts remain on exhibition, in the open, like unrestrained nipples through her silk blouse. She’s Eastern European, after all.

“Well,” I say.

“Well what?” Charles asks.

“I mean, most likely she’ll say yes.”

“Asshole,” says Charles.

“Look at it this way,” I say. “Either she’s in love with you or she really, really enjoys living in America.”

“She loves me,” Charles says, but suddenly fretful. “Don’t you have something else you can do?”

“I thought you wanted my help.”

“You’re not helping,” he says.

“But I’m an expert.”

“Go.”

“Do you even know her size?”

With their soft, mottled pallor, Willamina’s fingers were an even assortment of raw bratwurst links. “Maybe we want to look over there.”

“Those are bracelets,” says Charles.

“Oh.”

“Go,” he says to me again.

“In my expert opinion, she’ll say yes,” I say. “A definite maybe, more like. I think you should have a Plan B.”

Charles might have wanted me to talk him out of marrying Willie, or to convince him it’s a good idea, that the institution of marriage needs more members. Or he might have wanted me around as a similar body type, so it would be less likely for him to be mistaken for a child, for others to take *him* more seriously.

That’s not exactly irony, but it’s something, and I’m not sure I’m in favor of it.

I walk to the back of the jewelry store dragging my fingers over the display cases, leaving greasy finger-streaks on the glass above exhibits for gold chains and pendants and watches. No Rolexes here: not an authorized dealer. I should tell Charles we’re at a second-rate jewelry store. I should, but I don’t.

The customer service counter is covered in a mess of work orders, pink, blue, and yellow carbon papers with a gray polishing cloth on top, soiled with black smudges of oxidation and grit like a coal miner’s handkerchief. I remove Cissy’s watch from my pocket and weigh it in my palm, repress the urge to wing it through a large glass container of brooches.

“Name,” says the jeweler. In his teeth, the tiniest screwdriver I’d ever seen.

“No name,” I say.

“No name?”

“Sean, I guess.”

“You’re not sure?”

“No, I’m sure. But I don’t know if it’s what you want.”

“I’ll bet,” he says, still not distracted from his work. Then he looks up. “What is it? What do you need?”

I hold out Cissy’s watch. He approaches, bringing with him a burnt, acrid smell that I attribute to the only bottle on his workspace I can read: fulcrum oil. He might have rubbed it all over his blunt pate, that empty space framed by clouds of white curls like the tiers of a heavenly baseball stadium. Who was it said there are no watches in heaven?

“I’d like to have something inscribed on the back,” I say. “Here, only there’s already something on it.”

“You want this buffed out and re-inscribed, or you want a plate put over it?”

“Surprise me, Melvin,” I say, spotting the name pinned to his shirt.

Melvin walks away from me with the watch in both hands.

Charles, who had already reached the end of the display of engagement rings, is mumbling to himself, squeezing his lower lip between two fingers, face so close to the glass as though a child considering what toppings to put on a sundae. He pokes the countertop with his free hand—either to select or reject—and then paces back to the opposite end.

In the boy's locker room, a young Charles shakes Sean's hand with gratitude. They're not friends yet, but this is the beginning, and there's camaraderie among these short boys, who are tiny even among the other wrestlers on the team.

Five minutes before they'd shaken hands, Sean uttered a brave word.

"Stop," he'd said.

For some reason the three boys holding Charles by the shirt listened. But they hadn't finished with Charles, who stared horrified at the broomstick in one of their hands, held in such a way as to recast the definition of a broom's purpose. It occurred to Sean that there were no limits to malicious invention.

"This freshman's gonna understand he can't sneak up on us," said one fat boy with a thin beard of acne. Strange, Sean thought, the legally binding agreement between ugliness and cruelty.

"We gotta be sure he understands that he can't tell what he saw," continued the fat boy. "Gotta teach these freshmen early about the rules."

Another boy joined in, skinny, his chest concave. "You're a freshman too, right? Maybe you want some of this too." This boy held the broomstick. He was nervous and looking to his friends to strengthen his spite.

"This one looks like a sneaky one too," he added. "Now we can give two lessons. Him, and him too."

The last boy was very tall and silent.

School had just let out. It was only the five of them in that large, gray tiled shower stall.

“You,” Sean said, pointing at the fat one. “These other two might get me later, but you’re gonna get everything I got. Just you. You’ll take it all.”

Sean knew he wasn’t a tough guy. Vaguely he remembered hearing those words before, perhaps on a television program his parents had preferred him not to watch.

“Me too,” squeaked Charles, suddenly. “I’ll bite your ear off, I don’t care.”

The posse looked at each other, unsure of what to say and who should say it. Sean, impatient in the seconds of waiting, dove at the knees of the fat boy, who landed flat on his butt with a *hoof!* of breath forced from his lungs. A *whap!* sounded behind Sean. The broomstick. Charles began to cry, a faint squeal bursting into a supernova of sound feeding back and forth from tiled wall to tiled wall to eardrum and straight on through.

The fat boy rolled to his side, sore, the rounded end of his femur having dug into the soft fat of his rump. Sean’s moves were instinct. From the age of five on, he had been a wrestler. But through that time he had also been a small kid, bullied on the playground, unskilled in the effective techniques of fighting. Sean bit the fat boy’s denim knee, lost an anterior tooth.

Enter Coach Carrier: gnarled, gristled, bristled, ears cauliflowered, rheumy eyed, a troll in miniature. He was both wrestling coach and professor of physical education. A black whistle dangled from the thin rope around his neck.

“You all about finished?” he said, his voice like a display of iron shackles.

The fat boy winced, shoved both his hands in his back pockets. The broomstick boy dropped his weapon. Charles held his shoulder and tried to swallow his hysteria. The tall boy was silent.

“Well I suppose that’s it, then,” said Coach. “You three are late for practice.”

Sean scanned the floor for his tooth, found it, handed it to Coach as a prize. Three boys left the shower stall and walked silently behind Coach Carrier: Sean, Charles, and the tall, silent boy named Neal Cully.

As hard as I try, I can’t escape memories. Who needs a high school reunion with a memory like mine? This all took place more than twenty years ago, but now it happens again, for the very first time, new like sunrise.

“Hey,” says the jeweler, his elbows on the counter. He’s holding up Cissy’s watch. It has an elegant rectangular face I hadn’t noticed before, with Roman numerals and mother-of-pearl inlay. The jeweler flips it over and pulls on his spectacles, these modern marvels amended by tubular magnifying lenses.

“It’s way too deep,” he says, reexamining the piece, “so I can’t buff it out. Not enough metal there. See? All we can do is cover it up, if you want.”

“I don’t follow,” I say.

The jeweler drops his head between his shoulders and exhales loudly. The shiny fragrance of his scalp burns in my sinuses.

“See it? Here?” Melvin scratches at the inscription with his thumbnail. “A registered dealer didn’t do this. That’s hack work.”

“Sure,” I say.

“No,” he says. “Definitely. I’ll have to plate it.”

“Will that take long?”

“I can do it while you wait. What do you want inscribed?”

“Be with me now,” I say.

“Listen,” Melvin says. “I’ve done this kind of thing a bunch over the years.

Would you mind if I made a better suggestion?”

“I would,” I say, and then: “Just let me know when it’s finished.”

Across the store, Charles’s face is a ball of bumpy muscles, a smiling sack of roasted cashews. “I’ve found it!” he says. “That one.”

I join him and follow the line of his finger through the glass, which could be singling out any one of a dozen rings on the white, pillowy easel.

“Too small,” I say, and for once, no matter what, I know I’m right. Charles still calls me a jerk. I’m sure I don’t care.

Back to the trees! Any day of the week give me a conifer, an oak, or the great Sycamore known here as the buttonwood with its exfoliating bark. Make them male or female, split or sure of trunk, and I will say that it is good.

Let us make a maypole of the Eastern Hemlock and dance naked with the abandon of our forebears, those folk we merely hope to succeed.

Centuries ago, good old Thomas Morton had it right. Find a new start and live by your own code. Exist with nature, in it and among it, not in spite of it. Circulate with the natives. Give them guns, what do you care? Learn from the Indians how to sniff out a Frenchman by the scent of his hand.

Look for the quiet places in the world, spaces where man can be alone with his thoughts. Because only there can you find yourself. But that’s Emerson talking now. He

fetishized the trees and then Thoreau burned them down with his ignorance. These are the smartest men in America's history, and I doubt they ever experienced the peace I feel as a bird perched on the topmost branches, woven into the quilt of leaves.

On the ground, Jimmy-II told me the branch was splintering. Five years of scaling and hiding and I had never used a harness, dismissed the safety of a belaying system. Belays were for true professionals, and I considered myself a fancier, a dabbler, a diddler, a faker, a true manager. This was months ago.

Jimmy-II threw up a rope tied to a rock, too low. A great popping from the tree's joint sent me sliding to the end of the limb. Joining the audience was Jimmy-I. Martinez sprinted madly in heavy boots. A hundred degrees and they're all buttoned to the top in thin blue wool, leather belts and denim, like worker ants from my height.

I wore khaki shorts. My socks were high and white. Another pop, another slip and the socks caught on sharp points of wood.

"Not today!" I screamed, inverted.

I fell, bounced on a lower limb and grasped another branch. Slipping, falling, another branch. Back, buttocks, thighs bruised, head knocked into silliness, still I grasped and swung and bounced downward. Curse gravity and all its laws! Down and down. Two arms slapped the final branch, and I let go to land on my feet, upright, with a wreath of twigs and leaves crowning my head.

The open mouths of the crew showed worry, then amazement, and finally reverence. Jimmy-I spoke first.

"Spider monkey," he said.

I preferred it when Martinez called me *ardilla*, whatever that meant.

I recall this to show you I am capable of more than nastiness. There are further dimensions to my character, only very little of it is worth repeating.

At church now. I finally made it, long depleted of my spiritual reserves. On the walk back to my house, I'd ditched Charles and the ring burning a hole in the velvet box in his pocket.

The sanctuary smells dusty, the candles burning wax and dust and old breath. A few parishioners mill about with church business on their minds, holidays and decorations, maintenance of the reverential spaces, and such. They don't see me enter, or watch as I march to the second row. They don't turn when the kneeler thumps against the marble floor.

Weekday mass ended hours ago. A parishioner smooths his blue checkered shirt. Another leaves the sanctuary with unchecked urgency. Another absentmindedly scratches below his left buttock, thinking no one is looking. But in church, someone is always looking.

I direct my thoughts inward and find the solitary, ultimately reverential space inside my head.

When at church I expect people to find me, to talk about me from the entryway, to examine what parts of my body can be seen above the pews. Though always disappointed, I still hope someone will eventually sit by my side as I kneel, and perhaps instinctively pray for the same things I'm praying for.

Generally, I think prayer's a silly idea, the indulgence of selfish people. Every time I pray, I pray for no more prayer. I think this and yet continue to pray. I do this because what if ...

Pray with me, I say, and let it be done with. That is it. Now I am done.

In the priest's back office, my chair squeaks like the nagging boy within me.

Father Craig has psoriasis and cirrhosis, alternately splotchy with red and yellow. On bad days, both. For this, he is a man to be taken seriously. If there is a person on earth with the requisite experience to deal with my problems, then it is the man who shows his suffering on his skin. Every day he screams at the world: *A man is his pain*. Thusly, Father Craig cannot hide his inner-self, nor the creams and tangerine pill bottles all in a row on his desk, setting up the counterscarp of his fortress. *See past them*, he says with his eyes, *and I will bring you into the halcyon lightness*.

"Give it to me straight," I say. "Am I doomed?"

"Let us walk," says Father Craig, which bores me beyond possible thought. But since I have nothing left to pray for but contradictions and empty ideals, I follow him to the courtyard.

Father Craig wants me to walk at his side. He is a pensive walker, his steps determined and long, what might be termed an august stride. I try to mimic but can't maintain my balance on these splayed feet. I list into his arm. He makes room for me, but I give up and drift a step behind.

The courtyard is small and manicured. I recognize the parishioner who had exited the sanctuary. He's spreading mulch beneath a boxed shrub. Father Craig scratches at his elbow, the skin like frozen lava. There's an inflamed patch above his collar, too, ending

just below the hair on the back of his neck. He is burning from within, I imagine, roasting and boiling simultaneously. How I envy his hardships. I think now of Mrs. Pardo.

“What makes you think of her?” asks the father.

“I said that out loud?” I ask.

“You did,” he says.

“So you know her?”

“What is happening with you?” asks Father Craig. “I hear things, of changes in your behavior, how you’ve become manic and strange. People are becoming frightened of you.”

I say, “Tell me who said so.”

“I cannot,” says the father, “but you can imagine.”

“Theresa,” I say, and Father Craig doesn’t refute. He’s good at this, keeping his stride without the faintest flinch. “You know she hasn’t been to confession in years.”

“Neither have you, last time I checked,” he says.

“But *she’s* the Catholic. Not me.”

“Any further thoughts on that issue?”

“Just waiting on God’s word,” I say.

“Sure,” he says. “Okay.”

Thinking I’ve found the right moment to say so, I tell the father: “My thoughts are impure, but they don’t feel that way. What’s the going theory on impurity?”

Father Craig pauses. “You’re talking of lust,” he says. “Lust is a sin, even if not acted upon. The Bible is very clear on this. It’s extremely black and white. But you don’t

believe in all that, right? You don't have the first consideration for being saved. If you're not talking about beliefs and faith, why ask me at all?"

"Because unlike you, father, I exist in the liquid world of grays," I say. "I ask for your help, but you're not giving me anything to work with. Any way to crawl out of it all."

"How about starting with Theresa?" he asks.

"You want me to have lust with her?"

"She loves you but thinks you've changed and now don't love her anymore. You're drinking, spending all that time at work and then, sometimes, not even coming home at night. She's afraid for you," he says.

"Don't get emotional with me, father."

"I'm trying to tell you that love doesn't do this kind of thing. It won't just leave one day. Maybe you have a bad run of things for awhile, and maybe forget what brought you two together. But then—"

"Things change," I finish.

"Right. You've got it."

"What have I got? You're talking endgame when I haven't the tools to enter the contest."

"You know, Sean," says Father Craig, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Yeah. Who does?

Here at the Howard Johnson congregate all the old jerks—and some new ones—from my high school wrestling team. A wonderfully benign conference room, new and fragrant

with carpet glue and shampoo—the carpet itself a confetti design that makes me nervous where I step. Plastic trees stand sentry, staggered against the walls.

Like cows in summertime, the alumni huddle in small groups near the trees, stifled in their stiff sweaters, khakis and loafers, dark ties and blazers. They sip the burnt decaf coffee, happy to be out on a Saturday night, and then will no doubt meet each other again, more genuinely, waiting their turn in line at the restroom.

Theresa's done herself up real nice, I have to admit. We'd been silent to each other most of the day, and now she's making me resent myself with her good looks. And her eyes, those blue things that can read both the essential and abject ends of the spectrum. They're frightening to behold. The fear in my legs makes me remember there was a reason I always wanted to be with her, a reason any man would be content with such a wife. She should be enough. Theresa walks away from me without a word, taking Willie by the arm to make introductions with some of the women she knows. A shameful sensation accompanies the awakening in my groin.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Charles says. "My God I'm going to do it tonight. There's no stopping me. Should I do it now? Should I wait until after?"

Willie appears to be wearing a white canvas sheet torn by hand, and cinched at the waist with a shiny gold belt. There is a significant possibility she's wearing nothing underneath. After all, she's Eastern European.

"Now ... later. Who gives?" I say. "She just wants you to ask her."

"Maybe someone will hit on her tonight," says Charles. "Then I'll get to shove it in his face!"

"Sounds like a grand strategy," I say.

Charles and I are wearing suits, his pinstriped and mine a lenient brown. To dress up was his idea. I fought him on it but lost. There's something very Munchkin-Land about small men in suits.

Among the other men I smile dumbly with Charles, listening to the telling of stories. The alumni relive their greatest victories—the pins and technical falls, the last-minute takedowns—and then offer up lies that violate memory and physiology. There are delusions about great consequential losses, the ones that still make sleep a troublesome undertaking. Every story awesome and terrible, a falsehood of recall and dredged up bravado.

But these jerks love the attention, because who else would listen to them go on like this? The only ones who care are those with lies themselves, the big whoppers they've convinced themselves are true. The scholarship they turned down to wrestle at Lehigh University. The torn ligament preventing their audition for the Olympic team.

God bless them, these men are vested in collective lies.

“We were the first class to scrimmage Irvington,” says an alumnus with thin, floppy hair and a big, blousy shirt, as though he'd recently lost a bunch of weight, maybe just for this occasion. His nametag reads *Hank*, but I can't recall his face. “We took that bus straight into the ghetto because coach thought we should wrestle black kids in practice, so when it happened in a tournament we wouldn't freak out or anything. As if that one day was going to solve anything.”

“Crazy times,” says a younger man, shaking his head. A representative of a more progressive generation, he thinks it his duty to scold the past. “There was a black kid on our team. One of my best and greatest friends.”

“Still,” Hank goes on, “there was always someone who used it as an excuse.”

This is news to the younger man.

“If you win you win, and if you lose you lose. That’s what I always think. There’s no room for color in victory or defeat,” Hank says, hitting his stride. “Now lemme tell you, I lost to a black boy in the county championships one year, and when I tell this to people I never say he was black. I don’t feel that matters a bit. Instead I tell people that this boy went on to wrestle at Hofstra University on a full scholarship. *That’s* who I lost the championship to—not a black boy, but a scholarship boy.”

Another man shoulders into our group, smoothing a salt-and-pepper moustache that gives him a sensible look.

“Chip Dalton, ’84,” he says, expecting all should know his name. “I beat Dmitri Korovin.”

We all recognized the name of the two-time world champion. Dmitri had been recruited from somewhere near Siberia to train at St. Matthew’s Prep, just two towns over.

“He was killing me,” Chip says. “It wasn’t even close. But Coach Carrier screamed for me to shoot. So I did, only I kept tripping over my own foot. Dmitri was scoring like there was no tomorrow. He wanted a technical fall, and he almost had the fifteen-point difference. Takedowns left and right—he was picking my pockets.

“Then I tried shooting again, and I fell again, but the top of my head busted up Dmitri’s nose. So angry, he punched me right in the mouth. I went flying off the mat and they disqualified him. It was the only time he lost in three years. I’d broken his nose but they disqualified *him!*”

“Broken?” says a hunched old man, bitterly fingering the curves of his own nose, glad for the story to continue.

“Then I wake up in Jennifer Beakley’s lap. I’ll never forget it. The prettiest cheerleader on the squad, and I’m drooling on her legs. But,” Chip says with practiced emphasis, “the moral is we’re married seven years later.”

“That’s no moral,” I tell him, the first words I’d said to anyone but Charles.

“Sure it is,” says Chip.

“There’s no lesson,” I say. “You have to learn something from a moral. What are we supposed to take home from your story—punches in the face are lucky? Love comes with a concussion? Break your nose, win the girl? What?”

The old man with the swollen nose looks betrayed. He leaves our group.

“Think about it,” I say.

I have no courtesy for the idiot breeds of men.

Having consumed a number of iced vodkas at the bar, I am somewhat cool by the time I find Theresa again. Though in spite of myself I place a warm palm on the arc of her ass. I am helpless. It looks so lovely cased in all that printed fabric, the flowers an apostrophe to her Flanks: at once encompassing, bequeathing and satisfying my lusts. I thought it a shame for her body to go unappreciated at that moment.

She breaks free and I follow her away from the group of women, who are occupied with admiration for Willie and her continental curvature. I’m stalking Theresa. We make a game of this. My hands reach out, and hers reach back to block, and all the while we’re making a circuit of the conference room, through groups and around the

loners. In the background, a tune by Billy Joel tells me how crazy I am, and how right this all is. Theresa is smiling again. There's red lipstick on her front tooth.

It's coming back to me now, what a lovely woman Theresa is to play with a man like me. How amazing her ability to look past my indecencies in an instant, and to have fun with her husband despite who he's become of late.

Enter Neal Cully. Of course. Tall, tan, swaggering with triumph, brown hair flopping over his ears.

Theresa and I stop on a carpet pattern of yellow confetti on red, the remains of his parade.

"You're here," says Neal, but not at me.

"So we are," I say. "We're all here, all of us in one place. And after all this time. What a night!"

Theresa clings to my arm with one hand. The other traces up my spine and ends up in my hair. I don't care if she's doing it for Neal's benefit or her own. I imagine it's all for me. It feels real, and that should be enough.

Neal has more to say to Theresa than me, but it's a good thing I don't have to talk. Not long ago I'd entertained designs of pawning off Theresa to the towering, successful, wealthy Neal Cully. I had wanted this to happen. It was why I had agreed to come.

Amazing how things change with a game, a smile, a shaking of the rump.

"So, you got married," my wife says, pointing at the platinum ring on Neal's finger. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks. Yeah," says Neal, in a careless sort of way. "I didn't think wives were coming, so I left her at home. Which was an ordeal, let me tell you. A crafty girl, that

one. She even had the date of our wedding inscribed inside my wedding band. See? Just to be sure I'd never forget. What a thing to think of your husband."

I hear these words and am gone, at once, back to the comfort of my sundry temperaments. I'm suddenly walking away from Neal and my wife, following the current of air conditioning out of the conference room, and removing Cissy's watch from my jacket pocket. I couldn't believe a moment had passed where I'd forgotten about it.

There was my inscription on the watch shining in the sharp light of a Howard Johnson lobby. *Be with me now*. But what was the meaning of that original inscription, the one I'd covered up: *my Love / to the limits...*? It reeked of pretentiousness. It burst with inconsequence. Was it a lyric her boyfriend had sung to her before removing her panties? Was it a line from the first movie they saw together, where he'd reached around her shoulder to paw at her chest? She kept these words pressed to her flesh!

Oh! How I would have preferred to discover *I love you!* I might have killed for it to be *Together forever!* There is at least a finality to those platitudes, something to argue against and ultimately vanquish.

I've experienced a slight arrest, but I'm building myself back up mentally, in the men's room. Without trees around, where else can I go for solitary thought?

Look at me. I am the protector of all things green, of landscapes, a steward of the earth. The world is failing in energy and economy. The trees I plant and save eat up the deadly carbon; the soil I restore nourishes the lettuce and broccoli and spinach and cucumbers for healthy consumption; the trees—again the trees ... where are my trees!—they give shade to homes and reduce energy bills.

My influence is widespread and yet misunderstood, like a healthy panic. And I am the healthiest kind of panic. Therefore I am important. My existence, therefore, is vital.

Tell me, have I accumulated enough points to be granted a modicum of self-worth? Who keeps this tally?

There's confusion when I reenter the conference room, but it's all mine. Cissy's watch like a stone in my pocket, and the ghost of Theresa's fanny burning on my palm. Under the combined weight of both sensations, I'm teetering to the right as though dragging a dead leg.

Theresa and Neal converse with flashing hands and teeth, the eager shifting of weights, the choreographed nods and flaunts. I join them near the wall by a knotty, silk birch with three intertwined trunks.

"Old wresting injury," I say to them, slapping my leg. They don't understand, and I think that's about right. Neal reacts by fingering his wedding band nervously, by which I mean he does this without regard for the significance of that piece of jewelry.

"Something wrong at the office?" Theresa asks seemingly out of nowhere, but she points over my shoulder to the entrance. Cissy is there, hands clasped in front as though looking for a place to sit. "You called her all the way down here?"

"Appears that way, doesn't it?" I say.

Cissy walks toward us through the mumbling crowds, those protective groupings of fish disturbed by the rumor of a shark. This is all wrong, I think. Had she been waiting in the room on the top floor? Should I have checked so early in the evening? This was not how I'd pictured this evening.

“I want it back,” she says. “You had not right to go into my bedroom and take my personal stuff.”

I feel the full weight of my body as Theresa lets go of my arm and takes a step toward Neal, leaning against the wall with all his hangdog impotence.

“Sean?” my wife says to me. “What’s she talking about?”

I have been caught, I think. To the trees! I jump into the wicker pot on the other side of Neal, in with the silk birch and its plastic trunk and its dusty leaves. But this tree has no advice, no comfort, no conviction to offer. Its leaves scream for me to be quiet.

Shhhhh!

After this bold move I am paralyzed with indecision.

“Hand it over,” says Cissy. “Now. Give me the watch or I’ll call the police. I quit. I no longer work for you. I want the watch back.”

“Give it to her,” says Theresa.

So I do. I hand it to her. But it’s too much to hope she wouldn’t examine it before leaving. I have only a second to admire her rage.

“You ruined it!” she says.

“No, wait. It’s better. It’s what should be there,” I say. “That’s what I always wanted to say to you because I understand you better than any boy ever could. You know that.”

“What do you think you know? You have no idea about me,” says Cissy. “My father gave me this watch for my sixteenth birthday. And now he’s dead and you’ve wrecked it!”

Cissy throws the watch at my chest. Suddenly there's a great crack and the wicker pot snaps under my weight. I fall to the confetti carpet, tangled in plastic brances.

For a moment nobody moves. But then they do and I don't see them coming. Theresa is there, slapping my head at all angles. Cissy is there, trying to find her watch among the shambles of my brown suit. Charles is there, trying to pull the fake tree away from my legs. It shakes violently with piercing soughs: *Shhhhh!* Green, silk leaves are showering down.

I look up as Cissy runs out of the conference room. The bright hopeful star beneath her t-shirt is burning out, disappearing, dying.

"What have you done?" asks my wife, relentless. "What did you do? How could you?"

She never could wait for answers.

"I'm not ashamed," I say, because I know I am and there's no escaping it. There is no weight to my words.

Later, in the parking lot, Theresa will say this to me:

"I don't think you went after that girl for the normal reasons a man does, but maybe for something you can't understand yourself. You're not a degenerate, Sean. Only you've found a way to be real good one for a little while."

Then, exit Theresa, my wife.

But now, as I stand and rid my jacket of silk leaves, Neal gives me a disapproving shake of his head and walks away toward the exit, toward where my wife has gone.

“This is all your fault, scum!” I scream. “You stole my history, you thief. Get back here!”

My lunge is clumsy and I land on the carpet behind his shoes, but a swipe at his heel sends him sprawling, and then we are struggling. Neal’s size is too much and already I am winded. My arms fill with heavy, burning blood. Neal returns the attack, and I take his jabs at my ribs and stomach. I do not protest until he finds my face. I say *No* because it hurts, and *No* because I don’t want any more. A ring of eager old faces looms over us.

Neal is now off of me, Charlie holding him around the waist. I am glad for this yet I want more hurt. There is a charge inside me that isn’t satisfied with a split lip and bruised sides. I jump for Neal again but do not reach. I am floating and kicking inside a cloud. It’s Willie. She’s holding me, pressing me roughly to her goddess bosom.

“Goon,” she says.

Oh Charles. Bravo. What a lucky man you are.

* * *

Let me tell you about the view outside his window: a black chokeberry bush, a rare successful Peking Willow with golden leaves, two flowering rhododendrons parting just enough to glimpse the pale, harlequin ocean of lawn. It’s a pleasing view, despite its limited height. I have mostly given up on trees.

Enter my father. Or, rather, he wakes from morphine sleep. I’ve been told this is the only time he is both lucid and pain free, though also sluggish and groggy and often irritable. I visited him once before, but only shortly, to see if it was bearable. The worst

of it is the narrow bulge his body makes under the electric blanket. It's not right for a man's body to shrink in such a way.

My father's words come in short bursts. It's selfish, I know, to expect his words to be important. But I do. I expect him to destroy and rebuild me with great truths. I know it's unfair, but still I feel let down.

The old man turns his head toward me. How I envy him his dreams, that chemical relief from his worldly pain.

"Did you dream of mom again?"

At this he raises a dark whittled crucifix, perhaps something created by a past inmate of the hospice center.

"Well," I say. "I'm a Catholic, now. Did I tell you? I was confirmed in time to take communion at Charlie's wedding."

"Good. That's very good," he says.

Because I thought he might be able to handle it, I probed him for some real truth.

I say, "You tried to make me be like you—gave me the business and the truck, told me what to do with my life, what decisions to make. But now I need to ask you for something you never gave me. With all your experience and pain, tell me, what should I do now? If you were me, how exactly would you go about getting Theresa back?"

My father works his jaw as though trying to unstick his tongue, then softly turns his face away from me.

"I should have gotten you another mother," he says to the wall. "You needed it."

"Don't get so emotional," I say.

"Man," he says, "and woman ... not much else."

Maybe, I think. But there is also the view from the window, where there creeps a shadow of something tall and solid and old just outside the frame, giving weight to what's already out there, and further credence to my limited human appreciation.

Yeah ... who knows what I mean?

VITA

Adam Henry Pedowitz was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on September 19, 1978, the son of Diane Alice Pedowitz and Walter Jason Pedowitz. After graduating from Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 2000 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, he worked in the public relations and communications industry in New York City and New Jersey before entering the Master of Fine Arts Program at Texas State University – San Marcos in 2006. He is married and currently lives in Austin, Texas.

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