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Four works of original short fiction: “Bleeding Room,” about a love affair between two workers in a Texas slaughterhouse; “The Pregnant Whale,” about a man who investigates the life of the father he never knew; “Anthony Grant the Only,” in which a family hopes to rehabilitate their vegetative son with the help of a young neurologist; and “The Worm in the Apple,” about a a man who tries to dodge his past misdeeds in a rural small town.

HABITS OF SOLITUDE

by

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BLEEDING ROOM

It was meant to happen, the way Arlene met Alfed Konopacki. The Lord set it up. And He set it up long before they worked together on the processing line. He might have set it up from the day she was born, but at least from the summer she was fourteen. That was the summer her Daddy woke her up early one morning and said to get her dirtiest jeans on because he was taking her to work at Jim Tucker's farm. The Tuckers had little place on the road toward Dalhart, and a couple times every year her Daddy, who worked on the line at Farwell Lot, helped him slaughter his chickens. She couldn't think of a more repulsive thing to do with the end of her summer than spend it cutting up chickens, and when she saw her Mama at the breakfast table she asked if she could stay home and help her and Bernie with the dresses for Ginny Kinsey's bridesmaids.

“Arlene,” her Mama said, “you got fists like two grapefruits. The Lord don't want you for no seamstress.”

Arlene and her Daddy spent all that morning bleeding Jim Tucker's broilers. When they were done, Jim Tucker asked her Daddy if he'd like to do a hog for him. Her daddy told him it weren't legal, he'd have to take it up to Farwell Lot and have them do it.

“I know it,” Jim told him. “But they won't be taking hogs for another month, and I ain't hoping to get nothing for it. Just for the house. Freeze it for the winter. I'd be happy to give you the fatback and anything else you'd like. Take it to your girls.”

“What the hell,” her Daddy said. “Ag ain't but swine themselves anyhow. Let's have a look.” Jim brought her out to a patch of dirt behind his tractor port. There was a shallow depression in the dirt, to catch all the blood. For Jim Tucker and her Daddy it was just business—who knows how many hogs they'd bled—but Arlene had never seen such a thing, and she watched fearfully with Jim's boy Russ while they prepared the hog. No way the hog knew she was going to die, how still she was when Jim braced her round the hips and her Daddy put an arm round her shoulders and with the skill and care of a real artisan pierced the skin of her throat and eased the blade toward him and backed off and let his craft do its work.

It was the sound she made that was most memorable. What it looked like and how it smelled weren't nothing like the sound she made. It wasn't that quiet low gurgle like the chickens made. It was a damn awful shriek, like the brakes worn thin on a truck, except it was like Arlene could hear something in it, like that hog was screaming I'm a creation of God like you and I don't want to die and my final curse against what you done to me is this damned deafening howl that you're going to hear tonight in your sleep and think it's your own soul clambering out of Hell. Then the hog collapsed onto her face in the dirt and went completely still.

Hearing that hog scream proved two things to Arlene: that God lives in every animal as long as its heart still beats, and rages mad inside the animal when it stops; and that she'd better get used to the sound of it, because this was the work God chose for her.

Arlene spent her summers this way until she was eighteen and out of school and her Daddy got her on at Farwell Lot. There was never any question about it; she was always going to work there. Some of her friends at school talked about going off to college in places like Lubbock or Denton or even Austin if they were real smart, but even though Arlene had done all right as any of them she knew she was meant to stay in Farwell County.

She got on in the lot at first, helping the shitkickers and the migrants push the cows around like a bunch of big dumb rocks. That was fine. Damn hard but fine. The yard was about thirty-five hundred acres of shit-blackened earth in the bare middle of the panhandle prairie. She had a hard time at first with the smell. Like the whole lot was one big outhouse. The first few hours of the morning she thought she was going to throw up. But it didn't take all that long to get used to it, and after while she noticed—or maybe imagined—a kind of sweetness about it, a kind of caramel scent under all that filth. Sometimes she'd find herself up to her ankles in shit and crimson mud and all she'd have to do was look to the wide open sky and breathe in the caramel scent and it was fine.

After a year of that they put her on the processing line. She was a plucker. She cut the pluck—the heart and lungs—out of the chest. That had a smell too. God it had a smell. You could smell the slaughterhouse from a mile away, she knew growing up, but until she got inside it she didn't know just how bad and powerful it was. They kept the building cool but from the smell it seemed to her there were great steaming cauldrons beneath of boiling shit and flesh. She *did* throw up the first day she walked inside. The first instant almost. She wore a small plastic clamp on her nose the first few weeks to

block it out. The clamp was another thing meant to dull the sensory experience of tearing apart a cow. Its viscera felt slick but not soft or moist beneath her thick rubber gloves; its lungs were a dull pale pink and green beneath the bright lights, drained as they were, the color more of stones than flesh; its bones could not be heard to snap beneath the constant clink and whir of the line.

From outside, the place looked small, a tin shack on all those miles of black-red dirt. Inside, too, it could seem that way, because Arlene didn't often get around, just stuck at her station all day doing the same thing cow after cow. But when she toured the line she got a sense for how impressive the place really was. From the stock where they were knocked unconscious, to the bleeding room, a concrete floor with an oversized drain in the middle and four high metal walls to contain the blood that sprays from the still-beating heart, to stations for skinning, gutting, decapitating, cleaning, and butchering. The processing line, a taut chain eight and a half feet off the floor, snaked through it all like a lazy river, moved constantly all day through two shifts. Every twelve feet a beast hung by its hind legs like a giant sleeping bat. After every station a little less of it was there.

She hated it. The stink, the noise, the dumb meat drifting past her every day. She weren't no stranger to guts and dead beasts, but something about the repetition of it bothered her. Sometimes when she sawed out the lungs she could feel her own inside her chest, hanging. She went home one day and prayed. She said, Dear Lord, I know you put me where you have for a reason, and want to honor you with it, but I got to say, if you don't mind my complaining: it's just unbearable. I don't know how long I can tolerate it. I

need you to send me a sign, Lord, that I'm really doing your work, so as I can do it more honorably. I know you're in the slaughterhouse, Lord. I know you're everywhere. But I don't see you in there. I want you to show yourself, Lord, so I can do as you'd have me do.

The next day, word went round that Garza was leaving. He was the first-shift knocker then, and his mom got sick and he had to go back to Durango. All the rednecks grumbled about they were going to hire another wetback, but none of them wanted to do the job themselves so Arlene, whose chest was sore every night just from thinking about her own lungs, said pick me, I'll do it.

“You'd better think about that,” her Daddy told her. “If it's all that bad I'll get you a job in the cooler. It's hell in the winter but cleaner than any job on the line.”

“I already thought about it,” Arlene said. “It didn't take much thinking.”

“You ought to know that once you get on the stunner there ain't any easy getting off it.”

“It ain't up to and me anyway, and besides, Wayne already gave me the job. Just as soon as I asked for it.”

Nor did the other men give her an easy time of it. Even Russ Tucker, who always treated her as a sister—albeit not a terribly precious one—on account of their daddies being so close, said to her in the parking lot that day, “I never heard of a lady knocker.”

“You might never heard of one but you're looking at one now,” she said.

“Hell,” he said. “Just cause you got knockers don't mean you can be one.”

“I'll bet you been waiting all day to tell me that.”

It was just part of the job, the way the boys out there talked down to her all the time. They'd do it no matter where she worked. They'd do it if she was cooking their lunch.

Garza trained her on the bolt stunner. When he stunned them she could hear, even through the whirring clink of the line, a crisp little crunch, like the sound of ice when you stepped on it. Flecks of blood and fur and skin burst on the face and splattered his apron and mask. Then the beast went limp, a bright pink circle punched in the black coat, and the stock opened and the line whisked it away by its hind legs to be bled and skinned and gutted and hung.

Garza did a few more, then he let Arlene try. She did just as he did, but she was fearful when she put the gun to its head. She closed her eyes, and when she pulled the trigger it slipped and stripped a perfect groove of flesh and skull from the top of its head. The beast shrieked and bucked mad behind the stock until Garza wrested the gun from her and stilled it with a quick blow. When the next one came he put the gun, wrapped his fingers around hers, squeezed her grip into the trigger for her. She liked that crunch. It made the job seem quick and quiet. *Pop* and the thing went limp and swung away hind-first as if on the wind.

Alfred was a sticker. He bled the animals out. He worked at the very next station from Arlene. From where she stood, she could see the bleeding floor, but only a sliver of it. There were those tall metal walls round it, so she could really only see the narrow maw that ate the beasts up one after the other. Now and again, she could see Alfred through it.

He didn't look like so many of the other men on the line. He was bone skinny, and his rubber apron hung off him like a sheet in the breeze. What caught her attention was the way he moved those carcasses around. He had a hard time of it, you could tell, but he didn't seem to struggle against them. He was graceful about the way he used their weight against his own to swing them around just right, like he was doing the two-step with them. Now and then he seemed to see her too.

Then one day in June she passed by him at shift change. He looked older up close. Older than her, for sure. Thirty-five, maybe. Maybe forty. She didn't expect him to know her with the mask off, but he did, and he said, "You need to be more precise with that thing. Every tenth one looks like you use a pick ax on it. A couple of them I thought I saw stir."

She said, "I know for a damn fact you didn't see nothing. You know my job as well as I know yours. That's why I don't offer you advice on it."

"The difference," he said, "is that when you foul up your job it makes mine harder."

"Mine ain't always easy neither," she said.

"That ain't what it looks like to me."

"You think it's easy, what I do?" she said.

"That ain't what I meant."

"I don't know how else to take it," she said.

"I just meant I never seen anyone have as much grace with that gun as you. I suppose I hold you to a higher standard."

Alfred looked at her right in the eye and she looked away, down at the broad rusty arcs of blood that crisscrossed his apron. And hers, all speckled with bits of skin and skull and bright orange brain. Like polka dots and stripes.

That night at dinner Arlene watched her Mama and Daddy make small talk as usual while Bernie sat all quiet and sullen. Her sister was getting to that age of girlhood when she only ever talked to pick a fight. Normally Arlene would poke and prod at her to get a rise while their Mama took turns scolding them, but that night she let her be. She ate slowly by the open window and stared at the reddening sky. That hour in early June is the best hour you'll get all year in Texas; the cold wind has mellowed into a gentle warm breeze and the air is not so hot and thick yet to coat you at night in your own sweat.

Arlene's Mama sat down and asked why she'd been so quiet.

"No reason," she said. "Just tired."

"Well you're at the table now so don't be so lonesome. Tell us about your day."

"Same as always," she said. "Daddy, you ever talk to that boy Alfred?"

"Nah," he said. "But some of the boys on the line like to drink with him some days. Say he's an odd one. I wouldn't say he's a boy, neither."

"Alfred who?" her Mama asked. "We ever met his family?"

"Nah," her Daddy said. "He ain't from here. Weird name. Kono something or other."

"Why would anyone come to Farwell County unless they got kin here," Bernie said. "Why would they come even if they did?"

“Don't be so negative,” their Mama said.

“Work,” their Daddy said. “Maybe he come here from here from Deaf Smith. They just let a bunch go.”

“Where's he go to church at?” Arlene's Mama asked.

“Not sure,” her Daddy said.

Arlene wondered if he went to church. If he didn't that would be odd all right. Was it even important? God was everywhere. He was in the earth and the sky and the home and everybody's heart, and if that was true you didn't need a church to find him. That's what she'd always believed anyway. God was in the slaughterhouse even. He was in all the gutted cattle that ambled by on the line.

The next day, Arlene did her job extra careful, so as not to cause any trouble down the line as Alfred said she might. Now and again she caught a glimpse of him, doing his waltz with the beasts, though she couldn't tell whether he saw her looking. She thought he might. She felt like it anyway.

At the end of the day, she found Russ Tucker leaning up against her Honda. At shift change, if he wanted to hassle her any, it seemed he could always find that car without much fuss, fire-engine red as it was and all busted up from a run-in with a stag a year back. He looked happy and a little mischievous, and she figured he was about to invite to the bar with his boys. He knew she didn't drink, but he always asked.

He said, “A few us are fixing to get drunk up at Cosmo's. What do you say, Arlene?”

She said, "What would my Daddy say if he knew I was out boozing with a bunch of foul-mouthed rednecks?"

"I think he'd be proud, Arlene," Russ said. "Probably thinks it's about time you meet yourself a man to take you out of that little house of his."

"Not that kind of man. I don't think so."

"Even your Daddy knows you got to start somewhere, Arlene. Get you a little practice for the real thing. I'm sure a few of them old drunks up there would be happy to oblige, you buy them enough whiskey."

She told him to go to hell, and he blew her a kiss and walked away with a chuckle. She tossed her bag into the back seat and, as she opened the door, looked back toward the slaughterhouse. She saw in the distance, walking her way, Alfred. She couldn't see his face but she knew him by his gait. He was awkward, as if he'd got so used to dancing with the cattle he'd forgot how to carry only his own weight.

She waited for him to walk up to her. She didn't look at him directly, but over his shoulder toward the feedlot, where the cattle paced around in circles over its slick earth. He didn't look at her neither, but straight ahead, so that as he got near it seemed he was going to just walk on by. She yelled, "You got any more tips for me today?"

He stopped and looked at her. He walked toward her and said, "This will sound dumb, but I'm always afraid they're going to stir. That's the only reason I said what I did."

She was surprised to hear him say that. She expected something smart from him, if anything at all. And she knew what he meant. She knew because she didn't like it when they looked at her, and she suspected everyone felt a little something like it, no matter

how long they been there. But it was the work they did, and no one ever said a thing about it.

Even she didn't say anything about it. Instead, she asked him what church he went to.

“I'm not much the type,” he said.

“You got a soul?” she said.

“As much as anyone else.”

“Then you best be looking after it. You could come with us if you wanted. Mama and me and my sister go to the First Methodist on three eighty-five.”

“And your dad?”

A cool breeze came off the lot and rustled a few fine strands of his hair. It brought the caramel scent with it.

“He ain't got a soul,” Arlene said.

He laughed, and she saw him smile, and wondered how many smiles she missed when they were in the slaughterhouse and he wore that cotton mask over his mouth. He said, “North three eighty-five or south?”

“South,” she said.

“Probably not far from where I live,” he said.

“So you'll come?”

“I don't think so. I'm not much company in church, if I'm honest about it.”

“Everyone's good company in the Lord's house.”

“Everyone's good company in mine too,” he said. “Why don't you and your Mama and your sister come by for coffee some Sunday.”

“How about this Sunday?” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “How about it.”

That Sunday, Arlene told her Mama she was going to her friend Lottie's church in Dalhart.

When she arrived at Alfred's he asked where her Mama was. She told him that she'd lost her soul at the last minute, and her sister too. It took him a minute to remember the joke, but when he did he smiled and asked her in. The floor was tilted. She could feel herself leaning when she walked in, and her coffee fell away from the lip of the mug at an angle. It wasn't all that run down though; he had matching furniture and a wide TV.

“What do you do on Sunday mornings,” she asked, “if you don't go to church?”

“I sleep,” he said. “Or I just sit around and think.”

He put a coffee cake on the table between them. Arlene was too nervous to eat, but she took a slice and picked at it now and again for his sake.

“Sit around?” she said. “That's all?”

“Sometimes I stand and sing and sit and pray and stand and sing again, but I found I get more done by sitting around.”

“That ain't all it's about, you know. It's about getting together and sharing our faith. Being together under God.”

“Well,” he said, “I'm sharing my coffee cake.”

Arlene knew she was going to get mad if they kept up with that line of talk. She felt like he thought he was smarter than her. Maybe he *was* smarter than her, but if he didn't see God then he didn't need to make fun of her for it. She changed the subject. She asked him where his family was, and he said nowhere.

“That can't be,” she said. “They got to be *somewhere*.”

“Nowhere,” he said.

“Are you from nowhere then too?”

“No,” he said. “I'm from somewhere.”

“From where?”

“From Mars.”

“Mars?” she asked.

“For real,” he said.

She laughed. He might be making fun of her still but she enjoyed it. So she laughed, and he laughed too, and she spent the rest of the afternoon drinking his coffee and picking at his cake and laughing, and when she left she never wanted so badly to go back to Farwell Lot and hear the soft crunch of broken bone and watch him dance with the cattle.

The next Sunday she told her Mama again she was going to Lottie's church in Dalhart and knocked on his door late morning. The Texas summer was full and strong by then, and she was embarrassed when she arrived to be covered in a sticky layer of sweat, but he said nothing of it and asked her in right away. They sat at his table again with coffee in

front of them and made a little banter until she said, “For real, I want you to tell me where you're from.”

“For real,” he said. “Mars.”

She feared he might get cruel if the talk went on like this, but still she was curious, and she asked, “*Where* on Mars?”

“New Farwell,” he said.

“Is it as hot in New Farwell as it is in the old one?” she asked.

But it ain't, of course, because there ain't any atmosphere and everything's underground. That might get dismal, Alfred explained, not being able to look out a window now and again, and sure it is, but there ain't any choice in it: the solar radiation would burn up the domiciles like a pressure cooker. In any case, there ain't nothing to look at but red dirt and rocks. “Life on the Martian frontier is a hard one,” he said. “Hard and lonely. But quiet.”

It seemed so ridiculous, but he was so serious. Not like he believed it, or like he expected her to believe it, but like he hoped for it to be real.

Then, as she sat quiet in front of him, he said, “I got pictures. Would you believe me if I showed you some pictures?”

“I wouldn't believe you if you took me there in your spaceship,” she said.

He left and went to the back of the house, and when he returned he had an oversized black case with him.

He cleared off the table and laid the case on it and opened it up. Inside was a whole stack of papers, great big and covered in color. He slid the top sheet toward her and said, "That's the view from above, half a mile up."

It was a drawing, and a beautiful one by her eye. There was a deep red and rugged landscape and a solid black sky and a sliver of blue light on the horizon. The jagged taper of some mountain range crept in from off the left side of the page. At the center of the picture, the outline of a sprawling underground civilization cut through the soil like a burn scar. He moved his chair right over to her side and pointed at an octagonal wing hidden under the land. "That's the greenhouse," he said. "Let me show you." He dug through his stack of pages until he found the one he wanted, a ground-level study of the greenhouse from outside, with a whole section of the soil cut away as if someone trained an x-ray beam on the structure and you could see all the rich detail of it right down to the labels on the green and violet and golden leaves that grew on its shelves.

Arlene asked about the leaves, what they were for, and about each wing and shaft that punched up underneath the red dirt. Then with her finger she traced the outline of a narrow ridge that curved long off the bottom of the complex like the Devil's bent red spine and stopped in a great mass at the bottom.

"That's the slaughterhouse," he said.

"They got a slaughterhouse on Mars?"

"Yes ma'am. Mars has everything Texas has."

"Show it to me."

"I haven't drawn it yet."

This disappointed her awful. She said, “I bet you were a sticker there too.”

“Yes ma'am.”

“And did you have a lady knocker.”

But they didn't, you see, because there weren't no need for a knocker on Mars; Martian cattle don't have heads. There ain't any room for shit-stained feedlots in the bunker civilization of New Farwell, so the best scientists from Texas made the cows to grow just the parts they need without the ones they don't, no legs or heads and just enough neck to keep the heart beating. He told her about the Shep Farwell Bovine Genoculture Complex, where they grow thousands of such alien carcasses on the ends of silver umbilical tubes, laid out in rows fifty deep as far as the eye can see, like a herd of quietly breathing sacks of cotton.

Then she asked, curious just how far he'd thought this through, “And how is it you get to Mars from Texas?”

“How else,” he said. “Space pickups!”

She laughed so damn hard at that she nearly tumbled out of her chair, and before she knew it he had his lips around her lips and his tongue digging into her mouth like a warm slug. She pushed him away quickly, and only after she did did she realize she liked it. It felt good. Maybe not the way it felt on her skin, but the way it felt inside her at least, because she'd been watching him for weeks and wondering terrified if he noticed her and never did she believe it would happen, not with her shoulders like a bull and her sledgehammer jaw.

But Alfred, after she pushed him away, said, “I’m sorry. You ought to leave. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I want you to do it again.”

“I shouldn’t have done it at all. I’m sorry.” He stood up and stepped away and made himself busy with the dishes.

So Arlene stood up too, and walked right up to him and turned him to face her and leaned against him until she could feel him tremble against her. Then she kissed him. He was tense at first, but after a moment he put his hands on her waist and moaned gently with his mouth still embracing hers so that she could feel the vibration hum mildly through her lips. She moaned too, so he could feel it back.

She’d heard Lottie talk before about her first time, other girls too, but for her it was like none of that. It did not hurt, like she expected. Or it did, but it was not a hurt she didn’t like. There was pain where he entered her, but it seemed to shoot outward through her entire body, so that it felt like he was present everywhere inside her. That feeling, she decided, was God. It was God entering her through Alfred.

That was how the summer passed. Days at the slaughterhouse breaking skulls and watching Alfred dance. Maybe she’d get near him and maybe she’d not, but even if she did they didn’t say much. Then every Friday he’d catch her up in the parking lot and ask her over on Sunday. He showed her every hidden corner of New Farwell, and she asked him to draw the slaughterhouse, and they made love, and she went home. Every day

Arlene thought only about Sunday, and every skull she punched was a message to him, a sign to show him she was waiting.

She didn't go to church a day after that. She told her Mama she'd liked Lottie's Baptists so much she joined the congregation. She figured it was fine with the Lord, who seemed to be telling her where she should have been.

Then one Sunday in August she lay next to Alfred and he asked her whether she planned to live and die in Farwell County.

“I never thought about it much,” she said. “I suppose I always left it up to the Lord.”

“Well sometimes I think I'd better get out, if the Lord wants it or not.”

“Where would you go?” she asked. “To Mars?”

She'd hoped he'd kid her back but he was serious. “Kansas,” he said. “Or maybe some city somewhere. I'm tired of cutting throats.”

“It just ain't up to you,” she said. “Anyway what's wrong with Farwell? You're here for a reason, I think. It won't do you no good to fight against it.”

“Is that what you tell yourself? That God wants you in this hellhole? Is that how you keep comfortable in that shit-smelling factory day in, day out?”

“It ain't up to me neither,” she said. “The Lord made me a knocker for now, and He'll do what He wants with me when he's ready.”

“Lord hell. You and the Lord. *You* made you a knocker.”

“That ain't how I see it. He put me here for you.”

“Is that right? For me?”

“You ever hear the way an animal screams when you cut into it?”

“Yeah I've heard it.”

“Do you much care for it?”

“What the hell has that got to do with anything?”

“That's why God put me here. To make your job possible.”

“Did God create the Department of Agriculture too, then?”

It hurt Arlene, the way he so actively denied the divine perfect symmetry they had between them. And scared her, because she truly felt God held them together, and if Alfred didn't feel Him then how could he see that, how could he feel that tether? So maybe it was because she was scared that she asked him the next thing, which was why he didn't talk to her at work.

“I don't want folks to get the wrong idea,” he said.

“They don't get that idea about you and anybody else you talk to,” she said.

“It's different with you. You stand out.”

“So you're ashamed,” she said. “Is that it?”

“It just ain't any of their business.”

“Seems to be they'd be getting the right idea if they saw us together.”

“Well then maybe I don't want you to get the wrong idea.”

“And what idea would that be?”

“I ain't made to stay here, Arlene. Whether by God or anything else. And I sure as hell ain't made to settle down in shit country with no girl.”

Alfred got up and left the room and Arlene just lay there quiet. It occurred to her that maybe she'd just walk right up him in the middle of the bleeding room the next time she saw him and throw herself all over him, see what he'd do then. But then she thought about her Daddy and what he'd do if he found out. She realized it was out of her hands. She shouldn't have been so scared of that, by her own accounting, but she was.

The next day was Labor Day, and Farwell Lot was closed. The company threw a big cookout at Independence Park with burgers and ribeyes and smoked brisket and ribs, platters of it overflowing onto red checkered tablecloths. Arlene sat on a blanket near the edge of the park and wondered what a strange day it was. It was hot, as hot as it had been all year, but something about it seemed strange. It was the light. It was fall light, harsh on the eye. It was sideways light.

Everyone was there. Alfred was there but he didn't say a word to her. Nor did Arlene say a word to anyone, even her own Daddy and sister. After she finished eating she took her plate up to the garbage, and as she walked back Russ Tucker stepped in front of her. He said hello, and his breath smelled like beer. They talked small about the holiday and work and church until finally he said, "My sister tells me something mighty interesting."

"Then I suppose you'd do me a favor to share it," she said.

"She says you switched churches. Says you ain't been at First all summer."

"That's true," she told him, and she wondered if Russ Tucker's sister knew Lottie somehow, heard Arlene hadn't been going with her neither. "I'm with the Baptists now, up in Dalhart."

“Is that right?”

“Right as rain.”

“Cause I heard you was worshiping at the church of Alfred the Sticker.”

Arlene felt her chest go cold and said, with a stammer, “I don't even know what you're talking about.”

“Well that's odd, cause she's been taking three eighty-five back lately, cause she stops by our grandma's these days for lunch, and she says for the last three Sundays she's seen your little Honda parked out at his place.”

“Lots of little Hondas in Farwell County, Russ.”

“Not a lot of red ones with a buck-sized dent in the hood, not that I've noticed at least.”

“You think what you want, Russ. I ain't said more than two words to him long as I've worked there.”

She tried to walk away then, but he followed after her. “Tell me something,” he said. “Does he do it to you like he does to them cows?”

She walked faster, angry and a little frightened, but he kept right up with her.

“Once in, once out,” he said, “and then a big old puddle of blood on the floor.”

She stopped and turned and dug her finger into his chest. “You sonofabitch,” she said. “You don't know the first fucking thing about it. He's brilliant and he loves me and he's ten times the man as you and your shitheel buddies and when I'm with him it's like being with God. So go fuck you.”

Russ seemed to go faint almost, he was so taken aback. He didn't say a word in response but walked away as if in shame. For a moment, Arlene felt she'd scored a great and righteous victory. But when she saw over his shoulders, far down the way, Alfred playing horseshoes with some of the other men, she got scared. She should have let Russ be. She should have just sat back down with her family and let Russ Tucker make a drunk fool of himself. But instead she spelled it out for everyone, and she got sick right then thinking about what Alfred might do when Russ spouted off to him, and how he might walk away from her for good now or even leave Farwell. She got so sick thinking about it she didn't even look to see if Russ, in fact, did walk over to those old boys and her love. She just walked back to her blanket and hoped the Lord would not have delivered him only to take him away. She prayed for a sign that this was so, that Alfred's vision of Mars, so vivid and real, was not a recognition somewhere deep inside him that his home was somewhere else, and he was about to go there.

The next day she didn't see Alfred at all. He was back there sure as hell because they were bleeding out and where else would he be, but he never showed himself to her. She saw him from a distance at shift change, but didn't go to talk to him for fear she'd only push him away. She hoped he would come to her, but he didn't. The same the next day and all through the week. On Friday, she walked all the way to her car without hearing him call her name at all. The next Sunday, she went to his place anyhow, but he wasn't there. She waited for hours and he never turned up.

Things went this way for a month. She'd never felt a desperation like it, how he ignored her now. And every day it got worse, like a howling inside her that no one else could hear. Then one night in October she dreamed of him. She dreamed of him often but never like this. They were on Mars together, in the slaughterhouse at New Farwell. She was on the feedlot floor. The roof was one thousand feet high and the room was as big as big as the Texas prairie. Except it wasn't a crimson mud she walked through, but a cool, dark floor, and a thousand orderly rows of legless, headless cattle in cool silence. Alfred was right next to her. He walked alongside her, from one formless beast to the next. They leaned over each one, which weezed softly, and she detached the umbilical tube, and once she did he reached down to its belly and pulled the small, fleshy drain plug that held all the blood in. She had to go first. If he pulled the plug while the tube was connected the blood would draw all the radiation in and the room would explode. He didn't explain but she understood.

The morning after her dream, Arlene showed up at Farwell Lot and a man from operations was at her station working on the gun. He said he had to calibrate the valve on the cartridge jack, that they had to stop the line last night because a cow made it on half-conscious. She watched him crank incrementally, with a small pair of pliers, a dial at the head of the jack, and realized then how she would make Alfred to hear the voice of the Lord.

On her first break, she went back to the tool house in the feedlot, and rummaged through the drawers till she found a similar set of pliers. Then she went back to work. She

knocked the first few just as she had done all day, all summer. Then she pulled the pliers out of her pocket and with them turned the valve just slightly. The next few were knocked out just the same, so she adjusted it again. Then again. Then she made slight turns after each one until she knocked a beast limp and, as it flew away onto the line, it blinked at her. She went through four or five more, then from behind the wall of the bleeding room she heard the cry, that hideous prayer to the Lord not to let its one precious life run out of it as quick as this and in these mechanical jaws. It came howling out over the wall and drowned out the whir and clink of the line. And how the thing must have struggled too, because the line began to bounce up and down and sway, and the four beasts that followed it bounced up and down as well, until they too awakened and flailed and let out howls of their own and now resembled wild desperate fluttering bats, screaming and huge and summoning every last bit of the power and strength of their dumb and miserable but holy lives.

THE PREGNANT WHALE

A few months into his retirement, William Ostracky began losing sleep. He worried about Jason, his son. Jason was twenty, and troubled. He had long struggled with a number of addictions, most disruptively methamphetamine, but recently things had gotten worse. Jason had been arrested for possession and criminal trespass. It was his third arrest, and it cost him some time in jail and an inpatient treatment program. After that, William and his wife suggested, and Jason agreed, that it would be good for him to leave Wichita for a while. He went to live with his Aunt Harriet in Colorado, where William had grown up. Harriet was actually William's step-father's niece, however that bound her to him, but she had a big heart for William and his family, and she was enthusiastic about hosting his son.

It was after Jason left that William began troubling himself. He went for long walks through his neighborhood at night and thought about his son out there, so far away, in that vast land. Harriet had a small place at the mouth of the Thompson Canyon. He imagined him walking up the blunt ridge that released at her house, examining to his left the violent rupture of the Rocky Mountains against the sky and to his right the wide tawny sprawl of the high plains, and feeling so deeply small and alone in all that space, all the embarrassment at confessing his sickness and at the torture of dissolving all his friendships and at thinking, in that way young men think, that his meager troubles must be apocalyptic portents on the entirety of his life.

Often those nights, William wanted to call his son and tell him how proud of him he was and how he loved him, that he knew deep in his bones, in the DNA they shared, that he'd be all right and he'd make his name proud. It was always too late of course, and when he *could* call he was afraid to because it seemed Jason didn't much care to talk to him.

Which made him wonder if that was his fault, if he'd failed him in some way. If his son did not want to talk to him, did not feel comfortable being seen by his father in his weakness, then he must have gone wrong somewhere. And perhaps Jason's weakness, too, was his failure. How could his son not believe William could have done more to instill in him a strong constitution, a self-examining sensibility, the discipline and self-regard to choose his health over his temptations?

He saw puzzling things in the darkness as he lay awake, things from his own youth he had long since packed away. He saw those mountains, and remembered gusty days in winter after a storm, the snow whipping off the mountain tops like vapor. He saw the small brick house he grew up in, saw it smaller probably than it really was. He saw his mother's golden hair wrapped up in an oblong bun at the back of her head.

She only wore her hair that way one time that he could remember. It was the day she told him he had no father. She sat at the breakfast table as he came downstairs that morning, with her back to the east-facing window over the sink, so that the sunlight smoldered around the edges of that bun. She said, "Billy, come have a seat. I have something to tell you."

He was sixteen then, and the apparition of his mother in that manner terrified him, because that year he'd begun to grow apart from her, and she responded by growing a distance from him. He understood much later that her coolness must have been a patient and affectionate one, necessary for herself as much as for him, but at the time he understood only that they did not speak often, and so whatever it was she had to tell him—whatever it was that required a staged sit-down replete strategically backlit by the morning sun—made him nervous.

He sat, and she asked him a few questions about the rote things she'd been missing out on. She asked about track practice and his classes, and a few of his friends, and he grumbled vague answers to each. Then she said, “Your father is not your father.”

Billy—William—did not understand. He had expected some horrible news. What he got instead was a bridgekeeper's riddle. Your father is not your father.

“*Edgar* is not your father,” she said, meaning his father, Edgar. Edgar was not his father.

“Your father was a man from California named Orvis Wesche, and he was killed in the war. Edgar married me just after you were born.”

Edgar.

“Edgar is a good man and he raised you up, and you should give him all the respect of a father just the same. I'm only telling you this because we're getting divorced.”

William nodded and stood up and went to his room, where he lay on the bed and wondered how this quiet new trauma could make him more attractive to the girls at school.

Thirty-seven years later, William sat at his own breakfast table and said to his wife, "I think I'd like to find my father."

"Your dead father?" she asked.

"His name was Wesche."

"You've told me," she said. "What do you mean, find him?"

"His story. Who he was."

"Is this about Jason?"

William did not expect it to be so transparent to her, though perhaps he should have. "Yes," he said. "I think it would be good for him to know his lineage. Don't you think so?"

"When did you talk to him last? To Jason?"

"I think I'll go to the library."

"The library," Kathy said. "You think you're going to find him in the card catalog?"

"It's all computers now, I'm sure. Anyway, I don't know where else to start. I don't know anything about genealogy. Or the war."

Kathy pondered this for a moment, and said, "It's probably a good idea. You need a project. It will be good for you."

When she said that, it seemed to William she was just humoring him, his pretense that this was another project to keep him busy in retirement. But when she'd asked him about Jason he recognized immediately that this project was for him. William had mentioned Wesche to Jason when he was sixteen, and then with only as much detail as

his mother had given him when *he* was sixteen. Except Jason did not let it slip away the way he did. He asked periodically, at least for a time, what William knew, suspected, and wanted to know. William always brushed it aside as though he weren't interested, which, at the time, he wasn't much. Now, with his son far away and troubled, the matter seemed much more crucial.

He went to the library that afternoon. He found a computer terminal and looked up subject, World War Two. It delivered three hundred results. "Oh hell," he said.

He took the stairs to the second floor and found D759, which he selected randomly from the catalog. From there he browsed the spines of all the volumes that chronicled the war. They were black and red and blue and white and multiple shades of green, shiny with protective veneer covers. Their titles were written in stern block letters centered over red and yellow and blue insignia and the occasional swastika. The odd antiquated cloth-bound tome whispered its name through embossed text. He picked one called *A Bastard Done in It*. It was a funny title, William thought, but it not supposed to be. It was about the Australian 2/33 militia regiment in the Papuan Campaign. It was the first time William had heard of the Papuan Campaign. He felt helpless and incompetent.

He found a woman at the reference desk and told her he was looking for Orvis Wesche. She ticked away at her computer and made studious faces, and came up with nothing.

"I didn't expect you would find him," William said. "I don't think he was anyone famous. I just thought—I need help."

He explained, and she suggested he leave a request with the staff historian, a man named Crowley, who was not in then. He did not want to wait or leave empty handed. He had no choice. She just didn't know where to begin, she said. Neither did he.

William did his best to honor his mother's advice about Edgar—that he give him all the respect of a father—but it was not easy, perhaps because even before William knew the truth about the situation, he had not been close to the man. After the separation, he and his mother moved to Denver with a man named Rolf, a stout and cheerful German who called William's mother his Wolfie and had a mole the size of a chickpea beneath his left nostril. William saw Edgar periodically after that, weekends and some holidays. He lived with him for two months during the summer after he graduated. They did not spend much time together; dinner in front of the TV two or three nights a week, now and again a movie or a trip to the hardware store together. Edgar worked odd hours, and William used the time to catch up with old friends before he left for college.

Then William went off to D.C., and he saw Edgar once or twice during breaks. Then he moved to Seattle, and saw him now and again when he went back, if he had time. Then he moved to Wichita, and by then saw him almost never at all. Once, after more than two years had passed since he'd seen him, William sat down to write him, but he felt both compelled to excuse his absence and nervous that to do so would call attention to it, to its implications, and he couldn't write the first sentence.

Then in September of 1987 William got a call from a woman in Denver named Francine. He had met her once; she was a friend of his mother's. She said he'd better get

out there, his mother was in the hospital, and things didn't look so good. She had by then acquired a number of chronic illnesses, no one of which appeared imminently life threatening, but collectively seemed increasingly much for her to bear. The last several times he'd visited her he'd come closer and closer to the decision to move her in with him, or find a home for her. It was clear, after that call, he'd not have to make that decision.

William arrived just in time for his two children to witness her death. Lucy, who was only twelve at the time, clutched her grandmother's hand and gawked at her trembling lips. A seven-year-old Jason sat in a chair in the corner of the room and stared at his knees. William, for his part, rubbed her shoulder and tried desperately to weep. He wanted to cry, he knew, only for the other people in the room, who included Rolf and Francine, so they wouldn't find him callous or unloving, and this itself made him feel callous and unloving. Francine, through a sloppy Mississippi accent, kept saying, "God's got room for you Amelia, you won't be in no more pain," while Rolf leaned his head back with his eyes closed and offered prayers for his Wolfie. William only wept after he caught sight of the velcro sleeve that held the IV tubes in place on her arm. The sleeve had three illustrations of an infant on it; one, struck through with the international symbol for 'forbidden,' that had the sleeve draped loosely over the infant's chubby arm; one, also forbidden, that wrapped around the whole child's body and clasped its arms to its sides; and one, permissible, that wrapped around its torso like a girdle while the happy baby crawled and romped over a floorless white space, a cloud in heaven. William wanted to laugh so badly at this that he sobbed.

That afternoon he loaded Lucy and Jason into his rental car and drove them an hour north along the Front Range, to meet the man who was not their grandfather. Harriet had moved in with him by then. She opened the door with a gaping smile, and her kinky red hair appeared to burst out of her scalp as she screamed, “Oh God in Heaven how wonderful to see you again!” She bear-hugged William, stifling a squeal through her nose, then she dropped to a crouch and said, “Which one of you is Lucy?” Neither of the children found this funny.

Harriet led them to the den, where Edgar watched the evening news. Floor-to-ceiling oak paneling darkened the room artificially. The oak was artificial too. It had a musty smell, like the newspaper at the doorstep on a misty day. Edgar sat in the farthest of two boxy beige chairs that flanked the couch. He was sunk fully in it, with his elbows slung over the high armrests and his head just bobbing out so that he looked like he was clinging to a lifesaver. When Harriet called his name, he looked at William and the children. Lucy stared nervously at her father, as if waiting for directions, while Jason half hid behind William’s right leg. Edgar smiled and said, “Billy!”

“Hi Dad,” William said.

Harriet offered to make ice cream as William approached Edgar. Lucy followed her into the kitchen, but Jason stayed by William’s thigh. He stared up at William, and then glanced at Edgar. He stared at William. And then glanced at Edgar.

“What’s the matter bud?” Edgar said. “I never met a kid who didn’t like ice cream.”

Jason looked up at William again and whispered to him. William couldn't make it out, and as he leaned down, about to ask the child to repeat himself, Edgar lunged at Jason with his left fist. The boy gasped, withdrew fully behind William, and nestled his face into the small of William's back. On the floor where Jason was standing Edgar had dropped a JFK half-dollar.

"I was going to pull it from his ear," Edgar said.

William told Jason to pick it up. "What do you say?"

Jason mumbled thank you.

"Ah, go get some ice cream, bud," Edgar said.

Jason took three paces backward from William before he turned and ran toward the kitchen.

Only after the kids had left did William notice the shrine. Maybe a dozen photographs of his mother, some in frames and some not, stood on an aluminum TV tray draped with a cheap floral-print tapestry. All the photos were black-and-whites from the 40s and 50s. An unfastened paper crown encircled them all from the front. It was a novelty of the Barnum and Bailey circus. Printed on the crown was the slogan *The Greatest Show on Earth*. It was something Edgar must have gotten not long ago, or long, anyway, after the divorce.

William felt a surge of pity for his former father, who knew no better way to grieve for a woman who had left him twenty-five years ago. He took a seat on the couch near Edgar, who had gone back to his lifesaver posture.

"How's your mother?" Edgar asked.

William hesitated. He had told him over the phone, but how was the old man's memory?

"I mean how did it go? How did she pass?"

"Oh. Calm. In her sleep." It had been only a few hours since William sobbed at that cartoonish baby and his mother's grunts and gasps.

"Good."

"How are you holding up, Dad?"

Edgar tilted his head back and ran a quivering hand over his scalp. "You know I never loved any other. She was the one that got away."

Hearing Edgar speak so candidly made William uncomfortable. He could not remember a single time that either of them had frankly stated his emotions to the other. He didn't want to hear it, in fact. He didn't want to hear it, he realized, because he didn't really care. More importantly, he seemed to him that to talk this way would only serve to demonstrate to the both of them that they had no emotional stake in each other.

But Edgar went on. "All I wanted," he said, "was to be strong for her. To be her man. To *provide*."

"You did your best, Dad. You did good."

"She left me, though. She was stronger."

William squirmed in his seat. He could think of nothing new to say. "You did your best, Dad. I know you did."

"You see what I did for her?" Edgar pointed at the shrine. "That's Amelia. The greatest show on earth."

William looked again at the shrine. It was tacky, he thought. His mother would have hated it. He said, “Has it been this hot all summer?”

“All summer,” Edgar said. “Hot and dry. Windy too.”

The shrine. William could not help but be embarrassed by it, to find it an insult to his grief. It was his own mother who died, after all. Why should this man who had been estranged from her for better than twenty-five years be excused of such maudlin idiocy? He actually thought those words, maudlin idiocy. It compelled him to avoid eye contact with Edgar. But when he did make eye contact he saw the old man slouched as he was in that chair, and saw his total vulnerability, and felt guilty. Edgar had never given him any cause for contempt, and even if he had, what sort of brute would think cruelly on a man in his position? William said, “She asked about you, Dad.”

“What's that?” Edgar said.

“Mom asked about you, there in the hospital. She asked if you were getting along all right.”

Edgar just nodded and stared at the shrine he'd made to the woman who did not love him.

When William returned from the library, Kathy told him Jason had called. He asked her if Jason wanted him to call her back. She didn't say anything back, and William took this to mean she was shaming him. Well, he *was* ashamed. Every night he lay awake in hot sweats about his son, wanting to be close to him, but in the daytime, when he had the opportunity, it made him nervous. The last time they had spoken, weeks ago, was

painfully awkward. There were many silences. Finally William brought up the weather, and Jason sounded impatient about it. He wanted to say the topic didn't excite him either, but it was something, at least, words between them. He had ambivalent feelings about being looked down upon by his drug addict son.

William went to the kitchen and picked up the phone. He held it for a moment and looked at the keypad. He set it back down. He decided he would wait on this fellow, Crowley. Perhaps he would call with exciting news. A longshot, but perhaps. And if he did, William would be too excited about it to contain himself. He would call Jason immediately and tell him what he knew—that the boy's grandfather was a medal-winner or a lauded officer or the victim of some famous battle. Or not even that. He did not have to be a hero—William was not a jingoist and nor did he raise his son to be. Orvis Wesche could have washed dishes at Langley and died in a car accident, as long as there was Orvis Wesche. It would be better to wait until he had a reason to call.

He walked into the living room, where Kathy worked in her puzzle book, and sat beside her.

“He found a job,” she said.

“He did? Where?”

“At a steakhouse. He's a cook.”

“Cooking steaks. He must be miserable. The kid's a computer genius.”

“How did your little research trip go?”

“Nothing. I left a message with a guy but I think it's useless. All I know is a name. There's too much history there. Too many names.”

“Maybe you'll get lucky.”

“Maybe.”

“Why don't we go for a drink tonight.” Kathy said. “After dinner. Why don't we walk to Charlie's.”

“Okay,” William said. Then he left the room and walked upstairs to sit for a while in his reading chair.

As he walked up the stairs, Kathy said, “He sounds happy. Or better, at least.”

William supposed that was probably true. It was good to have work, at least.

Crowley called him back the next day. He asked William questions he never expected to hear, let alone answer: what branch, what area, what theater. Theater? Sixteen million men served during that conflict, he said. He died, that's all there is to know any more. That narrows it down to a quarter million. He said he'd do his best and get back to him when he could. For as direct as he was during that interrogation, he made quite a fuss about just what a task William had dumped on him. He had a booming, self-important voice, and he spoke at length but with almost no particulars about all the irons he had in the fire at the moment.

William was annoyed by the man's bombast. He did not care to hear it or have his time taken up this way. But also he did not want to push it. It occurred to him that if he tried too hard to justify himself, Crowley might ask just who this Wesche was anyhow and what was his interest in him. It seemed unlikely but what if he did? He didn't seem to have much tact or courtesy. What would he think of William, a middle-aged man

searching out his unknown father. It occurred to William just how vulnerable it made him feel, but he didn't understand just why he couldn't answer for it. Was it Jason? Was he afraid Crowley would catch on to failures with his son? That seemed ridiculous, but in any case he felt exposed, and he let Crowley go on until he claimed some pressing matter and excused himself.

It took Crowley only four days to call back. William was afraid the time would kill him. He thought the anxiety of waiting might finally unravel his nerves altogether. But in actuality he did better those four days. He supposed it was because he had a purpose now, a thing to anticipate, even if he feared it too, feared learning nothing, going back to square one. Crowley sounded happy when William answered. He took that as a good sign. But then he said he didn't find anything exactly like that, but he found the interment card for a man named Arvin Wesche from Needles, California.

“Could that be him?” William asked. “It doesn't seem too similar, Arvin.”

“Nothing's certain,” Crowley said, “but it could. Yes it could. I searched every data source there is and that's the closest I found. You said you thought he was from Barstow. Well, Needles is right down the road from Barstow.”

“I know where Needles is,” William said.

“I'm sure you know where Needles is, Bill. I'm not saying you don't know where Needles is. I'm saying it's just down the road. And it's small, is it not? Just how many A. or O. Wesches do you think they had in nineteen forty-five? In any case, the Army could have gotten it wrong.”

“He was in the Army?”

“The Air Corps. Look, that's all I've got right now. I could look into it more, but I'll warn you, I've got a lot of irons in the fire and it will take some time.”

William hung up and went to find Kathy immediately. She was in the back yard, weeding the flower garden. He called to her from the patio and she turned to look at him. He told her what he'd been told as he walked her way. She stood to face him. She said, “Arvin?”

“It's not one hundred percent,” he said. “But it's something.”

Kathy held her hand up to the bill of her hat to block the sun. Her hands caked with dirt from fingertip to forearm, and a film of sweat coated her face, William noticed. She had been out most of the day, and she looked tired. She loved it, though. Or so she claimed. “Sounds tenuous,” she finally said.

“Crowley thought maybe the Army made a mistake.”

“Or maybe your mother did,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he said. “Do you think my mother would have forgotten his name?”

“No,” she said. “I don't think that. It could be the Army made a mistake.”

William felt a sharp sting of anger at her. Did she really believe his mother forgot the name of the man who fathered her son? Or, worse, did she suspect she might have lied to him?

But quickly his anger toward her gave way to an anger with himself. Perhaps *he* had forgotten the name. That was so long ago, it just then occurred to him. He remembered it clear as day or maybe he didn't. He felt a sudden and desperate pang of

regret at never having once asked his mother or Edgar while they were alive. They never talked about Wesche, and he never asked.

Orvis Wesche—or Arvin Wesche—or William's father—or not—left behind a scant paper trail in the annals of Army Air Corps. He deployed initially to Clark Field, Luzon, Philippine Islands, and was attached to the ground crew of M/Sgt. Chester Wheatley, 65th Squadron, 43rd Bombardment Group. He was an armorer. He loaded bombs onto the B-24 Liberator Heavy Bomber. The B-24, produced by Consolidated Aircraft, was the most widely produced bomber of the war, and it saw prodigious action in the Pacific. By the time Wesche died, in August of 1945, it was consigned mostly to recce flights over the China Sea. Interment card says head trauma. Likely he died in the typhoon, along with any more germane or illuminating documentation.

Wheatley's men were the regular crew for B-24M #44-41841, *The Pregnant Whale*, commanded by 1/Lt. Claude Robbins. The plane flew over sixty missions before it was returned stateside and scrapped. One color photo of it still existed, an oblique profile of it on the ground at Ie Shima. The photograph shows painted on the side of its broad nose a cartoon sperm whale with a mischievous grin on its face. Three bombs fall below it. A turret protrudes where the blowhole should be. A topless blonde straddles it with a smile.

William had a hard time making any sense of the image. It was silly, he thought. Sloppy and fantastical and jarringly profane, and rendered on the side of an instrument of terrible destruction.

Crowley gave him a copy of the interment card, of an alphabetical roster of incoming enlisted men with Arvin J. Wesche's name buried near the bottom of it, of a book by a man named Rex Henneman titled *B-24 Libs Over the Rising Sun*. The book had a detailed color reproduction of the plane in profile view, just above that yellowed photo, its colors so degraded the drawing looked more real. The book, too, had a few action paintings by Henneman, scenes of aerial combat, in which these lumbering bombers, sometimes with flames licking at their wings, banked desperately away from enemy planes, bursts of gunfire lighting up from their waists. He thought maybe he could take all that money he idled so comfortably on and commission Rex Henneman to make him a good-sized painting of the plane, something he could hang over the mantle, or give to Jason. Maybe an action shot, even, like others he saw in the book, The Pregnant Whale battling fighters over a blazing field.

But when he imagined the painting in his head, though he imagined it just as the scenes in the book, it didn't feel more artful than the cartoonish picture on the side of the nose. How authentic could those scenes have been? The brilliant orange of the flames and the heavy green of the landscape and the acrid smoke in the far-off sky? How must it have squared with the memories of the men who flew in those planes? How would it have squared with Wesche's memory, if Wesche were alive to tell? When William asked himself this, he realized there would have been no memory to square, because he spent the war on the ground, fixing those burned-out wings. And Wesche, importantly, was *not* alive to tell. And *who was he* anyway? What William walked out of the library with may

have amounted to his unknown father, but it did not amount to a man, and according to Crowley it was about as much as he could hope to get.

When he got home, Kathy was pacing around the living room with the cordless up to her ear. She smiled at William and pointed with the receiver and whispered, "Harriet." She waved him close to her, and said, "Yes, here he is," and handed William the receiver.

She said she had something to ask him, and he feared for a moment it was something bad, something to do with Jason, but it turned out only to be that she needed his address. That's all she called for, but she got caught up in gossip with Kathy and, you know.

William indulged her for a minute, then he cut in and said, "Harriet, in all your time around Dad, around your uncle..." but he couldn't finish. He knew it would be useless anyway; if Edgar never mentioned Wesche to him, what would he say to Harriet? He trailed off, and noted her silence as she waited for him to finish. "Nevermind," he said. "I was just thinking about Edgar lately, is all."

Then she told him Jason wanted to speak with him, and put him on the phone.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey, son," William said. "How are things?"

"Good. How are you?"

"Kathy told me you got a job."

"I did."

"How do you like it?"

“I like it fine. It's not ideal, but it's something. Keeps me out of trouble, you know.”

Jason gave one quick chuckle when he said this. William heard it and gave one too. Then he said, “Good. Something is better than nothing.”

“And how about you? Find anything to do with all that free time you've got?”

William stammered a bit, then said, simply, “No.”

“Well you'd better,” Jason said. “You'll go stir crazy if you don't.”

It went on this way, just as William feared it would. The weather came up, and local restaurants, and things either of them had seen on television. Of course he couldn't tell Jason about his flight of fancy with Wesche; he'd think he *had* gone crazy, if he cared at all. So in order to cut it short he asked if there was anything he needed.

“I don't think so,” Jason said. “Harriet takes good care of me here.”

“I'd better go, son.”

“Maybe just a list of your favorite places for fishing around here.”

“Fishing?”

“I'd like to start fishing. Harriet said you used to fish around here. I thought you could get me started.”

That was true, and a surprise for William to hear. He did like to fish when he was a boy. He hadn't thought about that in a long time.

“I don't know that I remember any of them,” William said. “But I'll let you know if I think of them.”

Then he said goodbye.

* * *

William did not take his children to see Edgar Ostracky for another nine years after they met him, and then it was only to view his powdered body in the chapel of the Methodist church of tenth street in Loveland, Colorado. The funeral was two days before Christmas. Jason and Lucy still lived with their mother then, and she agreed to let them go only on the condition that William take them again for a whole month over the summer, so that she could take a vacation with the man she was seeing. That struck him as an odd bargaining chip. She could have kept them for Christmas and he would have wanted them for month yet more.

The chapel was modest, even by the standards of Loveland, though it had an ornate and imposing stained glass window high up above the altar that painted the whole sanctuary in a soft blue light. An organist played from that familiar repertoire of Protestant dirges. William had rented a poorly fitted suit for his son. When they stood together at the casket, he noticed the way the sunlight, doused in blue, glistened off the cheap fibers of Jason's coat. He saw that he was trembling. His son's gentle sobs stuck with him for the rest of the service, and on to the reception. It must have been death, William thought, that chilled him; simple, young exposure to all the somber accoutrements of death. He felt a little guilty for this second acquaintance his gentle son made with death, but also a little humane, since it was best to get him on terms with it honestly and soon.

At Edgar's house—Harriet's house now—after the burial, they sat among strangers in that dark musty den and ate cheese cubes and spinach dip.

“I’m sorry,” Jason said to him.

“Sorry?” William said. “What are you sorry for?”

“About Grandpa,” Jason said. “I’m just sorry.”

“I’m okay,” William said. He wiped a bit of food from the corner of his lip. “I’m okay.” If his son were the type to accept an affectionate touch, he would have cradled his neck just then.

“It’s too bad I never got to know him.”

“It is too bad,” he said to his son. “When we get back to Kansas, we’ll have to buy you a new suit.”

William did not speak with his son for another two weeks. He gave up on Orvis Wesche. His sleep did not improve, but his memories dulled, became complacent. He began taking walks in the afternoon, hoping it would help. He returned, one afternoon while Kathy was out, to a yellow envelope on the breakfast table. Inside was a compact old diary and a note from Jason. The note said, *Harriet dug this out of the attic the other day. Don't know whose it was originally, maybe Grandpa's. Thought you might be interested.*

The diary was ripe with the fusty scent of brittle paper. Its cover was a thick burgundy paperboard. Embossed in gold at its center, in an antiquated script, was the name, Osterruck. It was a genealogy of some kind, a family history. William opened to the first page and read an account of the life of Jan Georg Osterruck, 1607 – 1661. The handwriting was dense and careful, a disciplined penmanship. He read a bit and then flipped to the next page, where there was a much briefer account of Herbert Osterruck,

1613 – 1674. Each page contained a new name, and as much information, ostensibly, as the author could uncover; sometimes a few lines, sometimes multiple pages, often accompanied by a scrawled cross-section of family tree, especially for those entries that deviated from the Osterruck name. The entries were dry and difficult to read, though sometimes intriguing. What most caught William's attention, though, was the name's incremental conversion over time. Osterruck. Ostruck. Ostrucky. Ostrawcky. Ostracky.

The lineage was interesting in its way, but not especially compelling to William. It was Edgar's history, not his. But it was Jason's, too; wasn't that his point in sending him this diary? Perhaps not so pointedly, not as a message to his father, but the implication was that Jason was an Ostracky, more so than William, and that it mattered very little to him who Orvis Wesche was. He would never understand how William yearned for a father, how dislocated from any family history he felt. Perhaps this was not a bad thing. Perhaps Jason had a sense of identity that William did not, and that might ultimately save him in a way William couldn't.

He closed the diary and took it upstairs with him. He set it down on his desk. He liked it, even if he felt no connection to it. He'd keep it. He might not ever read it. He would let it sit on his shelf and grow more timeworn, so that when he was gone, Jason might rediscover it, and breathe in another generation's worth of dust as he pored again over its tale.

ANTHONY GRANT THE ONLY

T.S. Andorra darkened our door one unexceptional day a little more than two months ago. I answered, expecting no one, and he said, “You must be Anthony Grant the Younger.” I stood there quiet for a moment, taking in his toothy smile and his outsized bobbling head, then told him, “I’m Anthony Grant the Only.”

What I remember most from that first encounter is his head. It was the kind of head that would save him in a shipwreck. It was far too large for the rest of him and it bobbed around on his neck like a stubby balloon on a string. It made him look cartoonish.

He put his hand out and said, “I’m T.S. Andorra, Neuropathologist. I am a student of your father’s.”

I knew nothing about my father at work. I knew what I had heard, which was that he was a leading authority on speech and linguistic disorders. Aphasia, especially. I pictured him pacing through a white room in a labcoat, frowning, nodding at stuttering children hooked up to machines.

“You’re an aphasiac?” I said.

T.S. Andorra’s grin flattened and he seemed maybe to tremble slightly, and I just stared because I sensed something wrong. A moment more of that and maybe he’d have turned around and skittered back to wherever he came from—Baltimore, I suppose. Instead, I heard my mother’s voice from behind me, and I saw him look past me to her. She was smiling.

“You made it,” she said. “Come in.”

Why T.S. Andorra came here is a difficult question to answer. People know it, I think—surely he does, and possibly my mother too—but I do not. It is possible he came here to swindle us, which he seems to have done. He seems also to have seduced my mother. But what he accomplished here goes far beyond that, by no ostensible design of his own.

If I cannot say for sure why he came here, I can be fairly certain about what brought him here.

I come from distinguished stock. My father was the neurologist Anthony Grant and my mother is Pamela Wiegert, the psychologist and author. I’m no one to speak of, really, but I’m trying my best.

I was born with the umbilical cord wrapped too tightly around my neck, and my mother thinks that’s why I’m dyslexic, which is a bizarre superstition for someone with her level of education. I’m only mildly dyslexic. I also cried a lot as a child, and when I listen to music, notes of a certain high range tend to sound like the undifferentiated banging of skillets together.

My brother Maxwell, on the other hand, was quiet as a snowflake from the day he was born, which my mother said indicated a kind of stoic intellectualism. He’s twelve years younger than me, and he’s twelve years old now, and he’s been quiet as a snowflake all that time.

* * *

One day when I myself was twelve, my father told me he was having a solipsistic crisis. “I can’t shake the feeling that my mind is a captive in a prison of mirrors,” he said. Then he shut himself in his office and grumbled and cried for an unknowable amount of time. Then he blew his brains out.

It was very early in the morning. I had just come downstairs for corn flakes and juice, and there he was in the kitchen, in his briefs and nothing else, stroking the cheese grater. In this particular memory of my father, I have noticed an odd detail that I never caught before: his sternum, gaunt as ever, is also sharply convex. It looks like it is spring-loaded and trying to fling his elbows together behind his back. It’s an aberration; if the memories of my father are like photos in an album, then all the photos have his heart encased in a healthy, flat human chest, but in this one—every time you look at it and no matter how close—it peaks at the center like a flexing bow.

To be honest, I don’t trust most of my memories from that day. The cheese grater—it might have been a garlic press. And his chest might have been just as it always was. And his skin might not have been pale like oatmeal but creamy or red or purple. Every detail transitions from one form to another, or more accurately is *in transition* at every moment. But those words, they are crystal clear and certain to me. They are urgent, unchanging through time, more real than me. If my memory is murky and fluid, like a muddy creek, those words are heavy stones lodged in its bed.

“I’m having a solipsistic crisis. I can’t shake the feeling that my mind is a captive in a prison of mirrors.”

My mother, whose last book dealt heavily with the mirror stage of infancy, has always taken that as a slight against her.

About my mother: she was in the house that morning. You won't be surprised to hear that this was not my father's first breakdown. In the last year of his life, in fact, he had a few of them. Every so often he'd get up at some point in the night and we'd find him later in his skivvies, sweating and babbling, and as soon as we spotted him he'd go into his office and flip out for awhile until he fell asleep. Then he'd wake up with a headache and pretend he didn't remember it. He saw a few professionals about this, and they tried to help, but I guess being a big-shot neurologist goes to your head eventually, gives you an inflated sense of the control you have over your own world, and he pretty glibly discarded their prescriptions.

Now that I'm older, and I've been through all these things, I wonder just what his thinking was on his own decline. I wonder if he was concerned about the fact that his universe periodically dissolved and reduced him to a sniveling infant, or if he just accepted that as part of his constitution, like freckles or asthma. Maybe he never made a decision about that. Whatever the case, his breakdowns became just another crisis our household had to deal with intermittently.

So on this particular morning, whereas I rounded the corner and somehow knew right away I was witnessing my father's annihilation, my mother, upstairs, heard the muffled commotion below and did what she had taken to doing through these episodes: she went into my infant brother's room to soothe his nerves. Hers too, I guess.

When my father shot himself, she was lying on the floor directly above his office, right next to Maxwell. The bullet my father fired through his skull, she heard it as it tore through the ceiling and the very floor she lay on. She watched my baby brother's legs kick out and go flaccid when it burrowed into his brain.

He didn't die, believe it or not. He soldiered on through various ICUs and emergency procedures until he came out stable and live, albeit with his brain in the off position—a miraculously healthy sack of blood and bones. For this reason, he became very popular with the local press, a heartrending emblem of the whole heft of the ordeal.

My father and mother too were pretty thoroughly stylized in most media accounts: he as the tortured genius, one-time head of the neurology department at UC Davis and a pioneer in aphasia research, driven mad by his own obsessive intellect; she as the tragic widow whose loftiest dreams were destroyed by the unforeseen fall of her once-dashing husband.

I missed out on all this scrutiny. I was mostly left alone, just one obligatory mention in any given article.

It's my name too, by the way. Anthony Grant.

There was one reporter who, after he learned this, said, "That's gotta be a fucking albatross around your neck." He meant to say it to himself, I think, but I was right there with my mother and we both heard him.

"No it's not," my mother said to him. "Certainly not *his* neck."

* * *

This morning, I indulged a habit I have sometimes when I'm drinking the coffee: I said my own name out loud. "Anthony." The morning yawned and the light softened, and I could more clearly see myself against the objects of the room. "Anthony." The leather feeling on my tongue—I licked the roof of my mouth to reassure myself. "Anthony." At some point, it became my mother talking, calling to me from the top of the stairs.

"What is it?"

"Maxwell is awake," she said. "Come help him please."

I walked over to the staircase and looked up at her; she looked like a dwarf from that angle, but skinnier. Lively dirty blond hair kinked out of her scalp.

I went up into his room and found him writhing mildly in his bed. That's how we know he is awake, the writhing, because he sleeps with his eyes open. I approached and embraced him and he fell still, but before I picked him up I stared into his eyes. I do that sometimes. They are always static and glazed, but also energetic—his pale irises swirl inside them like tiny galaxies, and they make me think of my mother, who hopes there is so much going on behind them.

As Maxwell's body grew—faster than anyone warned us it would, faster than I thought possible—a family friend gave us the number of a company that installs staircase chair lifts. My mother dismissed it out of hand. She did not say as much, but I think she thought it would be an unwise investment, because eventually he'd be able to walk up and down them himself. Sometimes I think she's waiting for him to snap out of it, to become the functional boy she meant to have. I'm amazed she even bought the

wheelchair. To her, this kind of treatment is the difference between him being disabled and being an invalid. To me, the difference is less clear. It's somewhere between his swirling eyes and his colostomy bag. I used to think she was crazy for this dream. I don't think that anymore.

My mother never stopped reading to him. She read to him every night as an infant and she reads to him every night still. For a couple hours at least. Heavy stuff, too. Not the indulgent suspense thrillers she took to devouring after my father's death, but classics, theory, great works of history and all that. Even books on physics and math, which she'd always claimed had bored her. Privately, she seems to be charting some kind of progress, working through a curriculum, since the texts have gotten harder—though I can't name any whiz kid who's gone from Dr. Seuss to Dostoevsky in a decade. She reads carefully, slowly, repeats key passages, dangles illustrations for his inspection, while he just slumps there, blank, his eyes swirling and swirling.

There are surprises, though. The growth was one, and then there was the feeding. It used to be we had to shunt nutrients down his throat, but for several years my mother stubbornly loaded his mouth with mashed vegetables and tried to massage their way down. Maxwell's doctors all told her that this was the surest way to kill her invalid son by choking him to death, but instead she taught his mouth how to swallow.

Peristalsis, they call it. You and I take it for granted, but for my baby brother it was a hard-won fight. This morning, all I had to do was stuff the slop in his mouth, and his body took care of the rest, began whipping up tomorrow's colostomy job.

* * *

T.S. Andorra had apparently mailed a letter to my mother some number of weeks before he arrived, and it must have been a hell of a letter, because my mother, who makes the power lady read the meters from the other side of our fence, asked him right out and offered him our house and a weekly stipend—funded by the Grant Family Trust, which was established by my father’s self-destruction.

“He thinks he can help Maxwell,” she told me. “He’s going to be staying with us.”

I asked, “Where, in Maxwell’s room?”

“No,” she said, “we’ll set up a bed in the office.”

“The office? *Father’s* office?”

“Yes,” she said.

I bet you thought I was exaggerating when I said I feared the house would collapse into that space. Perhaps, but I’ll tell you this: I opened the door with my jaw clenched. I reasonably, irrationally considered that it might be the last thing anyone did for all time. But it was a just another room. A small oak desk in the far corner, a wall of showy books from ceiling to floor, and the tiniest little chink in the ceiling, about two-thirds of the way between the doorframe and a plantless hook above the desk.

That was all I could bear to observe of it. Very quickly I walked away, told T.S. Andorra I’d dig out the spare mattress for him, offered no invitation for him to enter that room other than leaving the door open as I left. Well, no, there was one other thing. About the room, I mean. It was dark, a weighty dark. The desk and the burgundy oak floor and the dark dusty bookshelf seemed lodged, there, in the middle of our house, like a lead weight in the middle of a billowing white sheet. When I turned to leave, out of the corner

of my eye, I saw T.S. Andorra shuffle into the office, his head bobbing against the movement of his body, so that he seemed to float, as if the room was drawing him in. It was a strange thing to see.

The next day, T.S. Andorra took Maxwell away. He took him in our van, since he didn't himself have a car, and kept him away from us for hours. Initially I thought it would be nice to have Maxwell gone for the day, but as time wore on I began to feel a piece of me was missing. I didn't know what to do with the freedom. There was nowhere I wanted to go, nothing I needed to accomplish. I made two pots of coffee that day.

My mother, too, was affected. She vacuumed. She never vacuums—that's my job. She didn't nap for two hours as she usually does. She didn't read. She paced and vacuumed and rearranged the bookshelf, the one in the living room where we keep the books we hope will impress the company we never have. At one point, as she was rummaging through the shelf, she pulled out of some discreet slot an old framed photograph. She examined it momentarily and then gasped.

“This,” she said, and then handed it to me. It was a picture of me with my father, taken just before Maxwell had arrived. One night when I was a teenager, my mother and I had an argument. I don't recall what started it, but my insisting that I hated my brother, that I loved my father for shooting him in the head, ended it. I watched my mother grab that photograph, which was displayed on the bookshelf then, tear it out from its frame, and then rip it into eighths. That evening, after things had settled and apologies were said,

I caught her reconstructing the image, carefully matching lines and taping the segments together. I hadn't seen it again until now.

"This," she repeated, "needs to go." I stuffed it into the linen closet.

When T.S. Andorra returned that evening, my mother was waiting in the living room. I met the van in the driveway and carried Maxwell into the house like a bag of potting soil, while T.S. Andorra, head aflutter, addressed my mother.

"I've got excellent news, Pamela," he said. "I've got *excellent news!*"

Lately, I've come to wonder certain possibilities about the human brain. I've come to wonder if there's a switch somewhere deep inside all that meat. A switch that, when flipped—by a gently prodding skewer, say, or a tiring bullet—activates a kind of force-field between the body and its master, encases the eyes in crystal and seals the mind against decay.

That is to say, I wonder if Maxwell's brain wasn't shut down, but allowed to develop without being able to show off to the rest of us. And that all it would take for him to show his personality is an unflipping of the switch.

This way of thinking was not possible before T.S. Andorra, whose excellent news outlined the promise for just such an unflipping. He was like a carnival barker, frighteningly expounding on the triumph ahead, insisting that Maxwell's vacuous exterior hid a fully capable mind, and that the proper therapeutic tools might surely unleash a wit to rival that of his father, distinguished neurologist and foremost expert on aphasia that he

was. That Pamela's habit of reading to him every night before bed, unavailing though it may have seemed, may in fact prove to be an exercise in static education. Account for the pupil's lack of distraction and the mother's discriminate erudition in her selection of texts—everything from Homer to Joyce to Nietzsche to Mandelbrot—and you cannot deny the potential of the child, if given the right tools, to extend the stellar legacy of his genius father, unerring neurologist and world's most respected authority on aphasia.

I stood there next to my brother in his chair, awestruck, glancing away from T.S. Andorra's sideshow spectacle to see my mother leaning ever more forward from the couch, jaw ever lower, eyes wide. When he was through, the showman Andorra darted up to Maxwell, took to one knee, and cuffed his hands around one pliant wrist. "Soon you'll be free," he said, staring right into the glassy eyes. "Soon enough!"

He could have done better—he could have left out the Anthony Grant worship, which doesn't score points with my mother. But everything else was perfect. Everything she'd told him about her son in those letters I'd never read, though it seemed only like so much helpful backstory, was really a kind of equation. T.S. Andorra solved for x , and it melted her heart.

Of course it's not possible. That Anthony was somehow quietly vibrant inside all that time. The brain is a piece of meat, not a machine with switches and lights, or a house with secret chambers inside.

She read to me too, my mother, farther back than I can remember. She decided to teach me to read not long into my fourth year, after I learned to recite from memory *Are You My*

Mother? She said, “We’ll begin with *Where the Wild Things Are*, and soon we’ll be on to *You Liss E’s*.”

But when she asked me in some ancient memory to write down *who* was making way for ducklings, she found I could state very clearly the cars were mean and scary without getting it down on paper in less than half an hour. This after three years of intensive instruction in metonymy. She even had my father take a crack at it once. “*You are* an expert on these things,” she told him. He asked me what the Mallard family would do in Davis, and I said they would have to go to Camp Putah, and he said probably yes and congratulated me and left it mercifully at that.

I don’t remember much reading thereafter. My mother started having me sit down once a day for music, and I took a liking to *Imaginary Landscape*, by John Cage, which I was not supposed to like. I was supposed to dislike it, but it was the first thing she played for me that sounded right, sounded like maybe it *ought* to sound that way, instead of Satie or Bizet with all their clanging pans. Eventually music time made way for play time, TV and action figures, which was quite fine by me.

Then finally one day I saw her reading out loud on the living room couch. I asked why she was doing that and she said, “Because there is a new little boy in my belly, and he is going to have to learn this someday.” She was reading *Angles of Emulation: The Soul as a Construct of Other*, which she wrote.

After his initial evaluation, naturally, T.S. Andorra took Maxwell out daily. And every night he returned yet more energetic. Something great was going to happen soon, he

knew. It was like the two of them were driving a winding highway at night, and they could see no farther than the beam of the headlights, and the breakthrough was going to jump in front of them suddenly, like a transfixed deer, without any time for them to brake.

My mother met them at the door every night. She was more lively in her conversations with T.S. Andorra than I had seen her about anything. Her days changed too. She took walks. For years she had rarely left the house, and only with me or someone else she knew well, but now she was venturing out every day, if only briefly. Then I found her working on the manuscript she had abandoned when my father did himself in, something about the reality of mind as a distorted record of the experience of the senses. Something about that.

One night I was doing dishes when I heard T.S. Andorra explaining synaptic self-regeneration through determinate auto-instruction. There were glasses of wine poured this night. There was bourbon. There was my mother barking fascinated interjections, “my God” and “incredible” and all that. I walked out of the kitchen and asked just what the hell that meant anyway.

“It means Maxwell is healing himself,” my mother said.

I didn’t say anything and went back to the dishes. My mother excused herself, said goodnight to me, and went upstairs.

For a moment or two, I sensed T.S. Andorra watching me, standing on the line between my back and the door to my father’s office, his bedroom. His gaze fell over me like a sheet, made me anxious. Then I saw the dishwasher turn rusty and realized I’d cut

myself on a paring knife. I hadn't even noticed I was holding it, just stroked my finger clean over the blade.

I cursed myself in a whisper.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

I turned around, and his goddamn head was bobbling. "I'm fine," I said.

"You should be on your mother's side," he told me. "She has a lot of heart for your baby bro."

"She does," I said. "Anyone can see that. What do you suppose will happen to that heart of hers if you can't fix him?"

"Things will work out," he said, "if you can find the love and hope for Maxwell that he deserves."

I could have punched him then. "No amount of love and hope," I said, "will fix a hole in the head."

But I also wondered if he was right, if Maxwell was really on a path to recovery and the only thing that held him back was my doubt. My resentment. He could feel it, and it was shutting him down. And if he never got better, would it be my fault? T.S. Andorra was an expert, after all.

He went on to tell me about how jaded I understandably was, how I confused optimism for unreality. "You lived with your brother's suffering for so long," he said, "that the thought of his recovery is hallucinatory."

"Maxwell doesn't suffer," I told him. "Maxwell doesn't feel. I suffer. My mother suffers. And when she realizes that Maxwell is beyond help the finality of it will kill her."

* * *

One evening, I came home from the library, where I'd checked out a stack of titles for T.S. Andorra, and he and my mother were seated on the couch, hip to hip, with Maxwell facing them from maybe fifteen feet away.

“Anthony!” My mother said. “Watch!”

I watched. They buzzed and twitched and smiled, which struck me as charmingly cruel in front of my brother's amber gaze. My mother clutched T.S. Andorra's thigh as he prepared to pitch a tennis ball at Maxwell's head.

What he was doing, of course, was reenacting a scene from a popular movie. It was unbelievably stupid of him. The reference was not unnoticed, and I can't imagine he thought the experiment would turn out any different than it did—with Maxwell ever-so-slightly jerking his head every time the ball bounced off his cheek.

And yet my mother was riveted to T.S. Andorra the entire time. “You should have seen it earlier,” she said, “he batted his arm at it. He almost caught it!”

You wouldn't even need to convince her of that, just hand her the notion. Still, after they both went off to their beds, I spent a few minutes with Maxwell in the kitchen, lobbing the ball at him. He showed no reflex toward it. Nothing. And as I sat, pondering this, vindicated, I heard a breathy sound from him—not the gassy exhalations he sometimes pours out, but a kind of lisp, the budding of a word—and then I swear out of the corner of my eye I saw a movement of his head, quick and deliberate, like nothing I had seen him do before. I stood again and stared at him for several minutes, silently hoping he'd repeat the motion, but nothing.

That was the first time I can remember that began to imagine my brother in motion, that I began to suspect—or hope—that he was struggling beneath his glassy veneer to walk and speak and come fully to life.

Three days after that, we awoke to find T.S. Andorra gone. He did not return. Looking back, his disappearing act did not have nearly the sky-shattering impact it should have had on my mother, like the one it had on me. She kept writing, kept cleaning, kept walking. I, on the other hand, waited. Then I made phone calls. To the university, to the Immelt clinic, whose state-of-the-art equipment supposedly was prodding Maxwell's brain, to a number of my father's former colleagues. No one—not a single person—had ever met or heard of anyone going by the name of T.S. Andorra.

Then there was yesterday's mail. There among the circulars and coupons and easy credit were the telephone bill and the statement for the Grant Family Trust. I don't know what shocked me more—that the trust, which last month stood at more than two million dollars, had been drawn down to nothing, or that the balance on the phone bill was \$8,137, with more than two thousand minutes billed to our phone company by Life of the Party, LLC, City of Industry, California, Fantasy Nights Entertainment, LLC, Tampa, Florida, and a few others.

I stared at these documents for a while, admitting the reality of them to myself, making space for them in my world. Then I looked at Maxwell, whose gaze corkscrewed around me into the pallor of the kitchen. "Phone sex," I said. "Don't it figure, Baby Bro?"

I took the evidence to my mother, who was at the desk in her bedroom, humming along to some awful clatter. I stood in front of the doorframe, and she looked up at me and smiled. I didn't know how to tell her. I didn't want to see her reaction to the news that her livelihood had been wrecked. I just came out with it.

"He's pilfered the trust," I said.

She tightened her brow, making her kinky hair to spring gently over it. "Who? What are you talking about?"

"T.S. Andorra. He's taken everything."

"Of course he didn't," she said. "Why would he do that?"

"He's a con," I told her. "He's ripped us off."

"It's probably just a mistake," she said. "Get on the phone to the bank and have them figure it out."

It made me angry that she did not seem alarmed at all.

This morning, my mother asked me to pick up some things from the grocery store. I thought to approach her again about the trust but decided to put it off.

It was good to get out. I like the drive. I like the van. The streets in our neighborhood are wide, and the windshield is like a huge bubble. With the windows shut, almost no sound comes in. And the ride is smooth. When I descend the sharp hill on Oakwood Lane, it feels like the world is rising in front of me. It's like floating in dish soap, or watching a fish tank. It's certainly not like moving.

I can't say I much care for the supermarket, though. Did you ever notice there are no shadows there? It's all white.

I started in the produce section, wheeled my vegetated brother along through the vegetables. Not long into the ordeal, I turned around with a bushel of fresh parsley to see a little dark-haired girl, maybe six or seven, staring magically at him in his little wheelchair. I know the experience. At first, he looks like he's very intensely listening to you, even though you're not saying anything. Then he looks like he's pretending to listen but really daydreaming, which is silly, because you're still not saying anything. Then he looks like a corpse.

I approached him as she gawked and said, "Hey, Baby Brother, won't you say hey to the lady."

She just so briefly looked at me before Maxwell started convulsing, all of a sudden, his arms and legs completely still while his chest pulsated violently and he hiccupped and gagged until a red-white foam—cauliflower and carrots—oozed out of his mouth. I overfed him, apparently.

The girl turned pale as a cracker and tensed up and froze, until I picked up a nearby avocado and pitched it into the crown of his head hard enough to rupture the peel and mark the tile with a smattering of green flesh. She ran to her mother, who looked herself like she might vomit when she saw us. I slapped Maxwell on the back and said, "Let it out son. Ain't doing you no good inside."

Of course I was accosted by a mid-level employee, who surely would have bounced me if not for my fleshy sack of a brother covered in goo. He showed us to the family

restroom and said to grab him if we needed anything. Maxwell reeked of bile and fetid food and the natural stink of nutritional yeast. I scrubbed his blue polo and then went at the crust on his chin. Even now, it's still surprising to feel the *warmth* of his skin.

When he was just born, and I was a twelve-year-old kid, I looked into Maxwell's eyes and saw a density I am just beginning to make sense of. It was like the tightness of a rose that in two or three days will spread completely open. I looked into his eyes again today, in that bathroom, and saw the same thing, except the rose wanted to knock me over and burst through the wall.

"Don't be mad at me, Baby Brother," I said. "It was only a joke. Don't be mad."

Then I turned toward the washbasin to clean my hands. As I scrubbed, with Maxwell heaped behind me, I saw in the bottom corner of the mirror what I thought was his foot creeping onto the floor. I turned around, quickly, to find it dangling just above the footrest, as usual, but wondered also if I saw him retract, startled, back into that withered repose. And then he lisped again, that aching unspeakable word, whatever it is, right there in front of me. I swear to God.

My mother was gone when we returned. Initially, I thought she was napping, so I put away the groceries, parked Maxwell by the couch, and thumbed through a National Geographic. I admired bleak Patagonian landscapes and considered one editor's notion that our universe lives entirely in another universe's black hole. By early evening my mother still hadn't arisen and Maxwell hadn't stirred, and that's when I realized the house was empty. I couldn't begin to guess at how or why she left, or where she went.

* * *

Yes, I trembled as I opened the door to my father's office. For twelve years I stared at that door, certain of terrible things behind it—black holes, alternate realities, my father's frantic corpse. What I found wasn't nearly so frightening, but just as strange: two worlds, distinct, contradictory in places, sharing the same space. At one level my father's oak writing table, his wall of hard-bound books, his dusty brass floor lamp, and superimposed on it all like an overlaid transparency, T.S. Andorra's disheveled twin mattress, his pile of soiled garments, bits of paper and trash strewn about the hardwood floor.

I stepped in, hesitantly, like shuffling out onto a frozen lake for the first time. I began picking through the litter. A receipt here, an illegible note there. A Maryland driver's license with the photograph removed, identifying one C.J. Monaco. A letter from the Yolo County Parks and Recreation Department to Mr. A.G. Liechtenstein.

On the desk, I found the old reconstructed photograph of my father and myself, the one my mother had discovered the day T.S. Andorra arrived. How he got ahold of it, or why he chose to keep it, I don't know, but there it was. I picked it up and examined it. In it, I stood in a gray sweatshirt, and my father crouched behind me with one arm bracing my chest. A strip of clear tape beneath his chin glared, so that his head appeared to be disembodied, levitating behind me. He smiled. He didn't look happy but he smiled, I swear with teeth as white as the walls of this house.

I stopped looking then. I took a seat on the mattress and stared upward at the tiny, mute ding in the ceiling above the desk. I would never learn anything about T.S. Andorra.

“She's not coming back. She went to be with him.”

Maxwell stood in the doorway, regarding me casually, scraping flecks of dried vomit from his shirt. He had far more grace and composure than I ever expected of him, though nothing extraordinary for a kid his age. I'm sure in those initial moments of sizing him up my jaw was agape. He looked away from me and said, "I should have told you sooner. I'm sorry. I have a headache."

"Why would she do that?" I asked.

"She loves him."

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would she do that? How do you know?"

He walked into the room innocently, curiously, running his fingers over the exposed surface of the bookshelf. "She told me. She said they were meant to be together."

"Didn't you try to dissuade her?"

"I never spoke to her," he said. "I just listened."

Maxwell had worked his way in front our father's giant leather desk chair, which sat between me and the desk. He looked at me deferentially. "Please," I said. "Have a seat."

He sat. His feet dangled over the floor. "I didn't want her to," he said. "I didn't want her to go."

I watched him fidget in the chair, kicking the casters to propel himself in quarter turns this way and that, edging the chair incrementally in my direction. "Where did they go?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe to the mall."

"The mall?"

“It’s where Teddy liked to go. We liked to go to the mall and to the park. He talked a lot about the girls.”

“Teddy,” I mused. “Did you speak to *him*?”

Maxwell looked at his shoes. “No. I couldn’t ever talk around him.” He twisted, reached behind him to grab the edge of the desk. With a strained wind-up, he flung the chair into three dizzying revolutions, then caught himself and said, “I think she’s happy with him, though. I think he’s nicer than us. I’m glad she’s happy now.”

I didn’t see it that way, to be truthful. I felt betrayed, and though I admired Maxwell’s compassion, I refused to consider it from our mother’s perspective. But before I could rebut, he changed the subject.

“Aren’t you sad to be in here? Doesn’t it make you think about *him*?”

I didn’t respond. I hoped to let him know with my silence that I didn’t much care to take this road. But he took it as a challenge instead.

He spread a wide, mischievous grin. “Hey,” he said, “ever get the feeling your brain is a prisoner in a funhouse mirror?”

I stood up. “You’ve got it wrong,” I said. No. I shouted it. “It’s *captive*. Ever get the feeling your brain is a *captive* in a *house of mirrors*?”

“Same thing. Whatever.”

“It’s not about what they *mean*, it’s about what they *are*. I can’t shake the feeling my brain is a *captive* in a *house of mirrors*. It’s important. It’s what they *are*. They don’t change. Don’t change them.”

“Whatever. It’s like Milton says, a hell of heaven and stuff. Besides,” he pointed at his own head, “you want to talk about captive minds? I know all about captive minds.”

With that, he stood and shuffled out of the room, back to his chair, where he sat and shriveled back into his familiar repose.

My conversation with Maxwell did not happen; I'm not too far gone to understand that. Nor was it a dream or hallucination. It was a fantasy, I'd say. A very vivid, very tangible fantasy. For at least a moment, I needed for T.S. Andorra to be vindicated, if only to confirm my suspicions about his fraudulence.

I suppose I cannot know why T.S. Andorra came to us because I don't know anything at all about him. Obviously, he was not a neurologist or a doctor of any kind. But he was brilliant at what he did. I don't know how I knew my mother had abandoned us for him, but I was sure of it. Maybe it was because of her nonchalance about the trust. Maybe it was because of the very real affection for him I saw in her. Maybe it was because it just made sense; Andorra offered her hope, if not in Maxwell's ability to heal, than in a life untethered to him.

I could not blame her for it. I really just had to marvel at the elegance of Andorra's con. Here I was imagining my invalid brother moving, walking, talking to me in my own voice—even as I stared at his motionless husk the whole time. It occurred to me then just what Andorra had done: he'd awakened my mother's deepest hopes so crucially that even I had to believe his lies, or else our whole family would dissolve. Of course, that is eventually what happened.

* * *

I could pore over the phone bill for only so long until I gave up. I sat quietly in our living room with all the lights on. I stared at the black window; it seemed to seal me inside the house like a bug in amber. I decided just to forget about it, the mystery of T.S. Andorra. I could probably go to the police, or to a lawyer, but for what? It was all in my mother's name anyway. I looked up to see Maxwell, folding into his own ribs, knees jutting at me, irises swirling.

So I stood up. I gripped his chair and wheeled him out the door and off the stoop. As I pushed, he flopped upright, more or less. I eased him down the driveway, and down our street, and pointed him down the sharp hill on Oakwood Lane. As far as I could see, the creamy intermittent halos of the streetlights melted into the darkness like orange sherbet. It made the road look like it was breathing sleepily. Maxwell did not react at all. Not a flinch. I let go. Actually, I gave him a sturdy heave. He glided downward, not moving but shrinking, flickering under the creamy light, until the chair flipped forward and dumped him there on the pavement. Improbably, after a few daring flips, the chair righted itself and burst directly forward down the hill, lightened, agile, Maxwell heaped inertly in its track. It kept to its course and did not stop moving before I lost sight of it. I stared briefly at the lump of my brother in the road, but then went inside before I could watch him get up.

THE WORM IN THE APPLE

His first night in Alsted, Mike Fincher thought stunningly of his gym coach at Dry Creek High, Jim Chert, who was gossiped about as something of a lech. Stunningly, because in the seventeen years since Fincher last dealt with Chert he hadn't to his recollection thought of him once, at least not considerably, and yet on this night the pudgy brute came back to him so vividly—squeezed into his too-tight football shorts with thick laces over the crotch, grinning always as if to indicate to you his very satisfaction with his lascivious comportment—that it made Fincher anxious, like Chert may have existed at a sentient person within Fincher's thoughts and might at any moment begin to taunt him from inside. The rumors about Chert were not undeserved. He was hard as a three-penny nail on most his boys, but Fincher grew to resent the pass he gave to the ebullient pretty girls, who might kill half an hour of class time by flirting with the old satyr. Licked at their unconscious cravings for male attention, taking a moment here or there only to bark humiliations at his clumsier boys. “Guard him, Fletcher. Don't cuddle him.” Each time he hollered at Fincher he got his name wrong in some new—and, Fincher suspected, intentional—way; Fisher, Farmer, Fackler. . . He paid no mind to the fat girls or the quiet girls or the tomboys who rolled their sleeves up over their shoulders, and not to the aggressive varsity boys or the flush-red and panting ones, but he called out Fincher and his lanky ilk without fail.

Fincher wondered if Chert ever did sink his stubby fingers into some of that flesh. Of course the rumor mill had it in several imaginative and detailed iterations that he did, but those rumors were incredible at the time and in hindsight dubious, products of the adolescent's nebulous desire and the mystery of the sex act, propelled by the titillating unbelief that it could take a form as hideous as the sweat-humid passion of Jim Chert. Probably he did not, Fincher concluded, for no reason other than that it would have too perfectly fulfilled the fantasies of his classmates. Then it occurred to him that maybe this was Chert's great sleight of hand, that he hid for all those years in plain sight, that no one of any stature suspected it because all their sons and daughters ecstatically did.

Fincher arrived in Alsted at night. It was hot, early summer, and he had not moved any furniture into the place, so he sat on the hard brown carpet in the thick heat and ate a cheeseburger and drank a pint of gin. He brought nothing to read or otherwise distract himself, so he got drunk and tip-toed through his own desperate thoughts, and stunned himself with memories of Chert, and planned and feared his future in Alsted. He awakened the next morning flat on his back, which because it was used to hard surfaces felt fine. He cleared his throat and tautened the skin on his face so he could feel the dull pressure beneath his cheeks, stood and paced over the empty hard floor to stimulate his mind. He would have liked to take a long walk but did not want to draw the scrutiny of this town just yet, so he went out into the back yard. The lawn was patchy, mostly dead and decomposing swaths of bluegrass interrupted by tufts of unkempt crabgrass and spots of dirt, and a wild thicket of hip-tall yellow switchgrass crawled up the south side of the weathered pine fence. He walked along the fence, even through the tall wild grass, and

admired the warm wind and the bright and empty sky and the spring of the blades beneath his feet.

After two laps, he walked inside. He brushed his teeth and examined himself in the bathroom mirror. He'd lost weight over the last few months. He did not feel healthy but he was slender now, and that satisfied him. As he looked at himself, he heard a knock at the door. It made him nervous, though he knew he would have to face that about Alsted: small-town alacrity. At the door stood, when Fincher answered, a man of forty-five, maybe fifty. He was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and dense from a life of hard work. Or so Fincher guessed.

He said, "Howdy. Joe Lertz."

Fincher said nothing.

He said, "I live next door. In the green house. My wife and me. I saw your car here and thought I'd come and introduce myself."

It was not green, exactly. It was dark, a kind of moss. Lertz broke eye contact with Fincher and tried furtively to glance inside the house.

He said, "What brings you around?"

"I'm taking a gander at the house," Fincher said.

"Are you thinking of buying it?"

"I *have* bought it. I've come to take a gander."

"I see. I didn't know they'd sold it. What is it brought you to Alsted, if you don't mind me asking?"

"What is it brought *you* here?" Fincher said.

“I was born here,” Lertz said. “Never had a reason to leave.”

The tone in his voice changed, and his expression changed too. He was clearly irritated. Fincher realized he was acting too hostile. “It’s one of several properties I have,” he said, warmer now. “I look for cheap properties in tiny towns, and try to make the most of them.”

Lertz seemed to respond. He relaxed his posture a bit and asked, “You’re not moving in then?”

“Oh, I am,” Fincher said. “I think moving in is the most I can make of this one. The very most.”

Lertz said, “Then welcome. Like I said, I’m in the green house. If you need anything, holler.”

“Thank you, Joe.”

Lertz put his hand out to shake. Fincher shook it. Lertz said, “And you? I didn’t catch your name.”

“Jim Chert,” said Fincher. “Call me Jim.”

Lertz smiled and said, “Welcome to Alsted, Jim,” and lumbered over to his moss-colored house. He was careful to follow Fincher’s walkway to the sidewalk and over to his own driveway rather than cut across the swath of dying grass in between their homes.

How long would it take for the people of Alsted to find out that in Lubbock Fincher seduced a seventeen-year-old boy? Probably not long. He had discovered while browsing the online classifieds for used furniture that the regional paper catalogued every sex offender in four neighboring counties and presented them by way of a slick

interactive map replete with mug shots, addresses, and adjudication data. Fincher was not on the map, but he would have to be soon; he had already submitted the forms. Even granting wishfully that Alsted's people lived without the internet or, more implausibly yet, prurient curiosity, and still he was not safe; someone there had an aunt or a third cousin in Lubbock, and all of Lubbock spent its days knowing his disgrace. Forget, for the moment, the most horrific scenarios—the deep boiling ignorance of the rural mob and their visceral disgust with pederasty—and presume the best, that they'd shun him with the respectful disregard of god-fearing country folk. Even then, how could he be among them? How could he shop in their stores and eat in their diners? How could he sit upright in his own house knowing that they know who he is and that they believe he is less than human for it? Well, he'd discover it soon enough, and if he could not live with it he just wouldn't sit upright, or he'd bleed himself out in the bathtub, or he'd move.

His choice to move to Alsted was counterintuitive, to say the least. He had grown up in such a small town, and knew how exposed one was in them. They were echo chambers of gossip, these little places, sealed in by the wide prairie around them so that every titillating atom of chatter, once uttered, did not drift into the open air of the town but bounced off its invisible walls and pinballed among its citizens in one entropic festerpot of nobody's business. The people who live in these places call this *community*. His parole officer suggested he stay in Lubbock, or move to a larger city, where there were more opportunities for him, though it would be easier if he stayed in the county. But he knew that at a certain threshold of populousness, cities began to operate on systems, paper trails, computer databases. Everything came with a background check. And so

when Fincher left prison, he contacted his aunt Lucy, whose husband had died two years before and left her a house his family owned in Alsted. Lucy was the one person he knew who retained some sympathy for him. Or perhaps she was just desperate. In any case she agreed to rent the house, which she had been trying to sell for more than a year, to him. He had never been to Alsted, but he knew it anyhow. It was the kind of place where a look in the eye passed for a background check, and the residents had no imagination for deviance so long as you could pass as one of them. The kind of place that functioned on networks of confidence, not cogs in a bureaucratic machine.

One morning, about a week after Lertz knocked on his door, Fincher again traced the perimeter of his back yard, and as he made his third or fourth lap, she showed herself over the top of his pine fence. She had short blond hair and she was young. Not scandalously young, but surprisingly, knowing she was attached to Lertz. Younger than Fincher, at least.

“Hi,” she said. “You must be Jim.”

“I am,” Fincher said. He took a step back from the fence to look at her more clearly.

“I’m Ellie.”

“You’re Lertz’s wife,” Fincher said.

She laughed. “Don’t let *him* hear you call him that. The kids at the restaurant call him that sometimes and he has to go on a long rant about how it means they think he’s their enemy. It’s *Mister* Lertz, he says. Or Sir.”

“And what does he make you call him?”

He was joking, but he wondered if he hit a nerve. She changed the topic, and asked, "How do you like the place?"

"Just fine," Fincher said.

"You been in the basement yet? Don't go down there."

"Why? What's in the basement?"

"Just don't go down there."

"I didn't know there was a basement."

Ellie snickered and said, "There isn't. I'm just playing."

That was funny, he supposed. Or not funny but a surprising departure from the country artlessness, the pitiable sincerity he expected of this town. He was attracted to it instantly.

"I have coffee going," she said. "Would you like to come over?"

Fincher's instinct was to decline. He did not want the kind of exposure that this neighborly interlude would create for him. But understood, too, that the surest way to invite scrutiny in Alsted was to act aloof. It was a dead giveaway to minds like these that he had something to hide. So he said, "Sure."

Fincher sat on a floral print couch, a shoddy thing of pine and polyester, made to look like an antique, while Ellie poured coffee for the two of them. Just being at Lertz's place, at another place, made Fincher uncomfortable. It made him yet more uncomfortable that it was so brightly lit, and he could examine every knick-knack and signifier of his neighbors' honest life.

Ellie spoke to him loudly from the kitchen. “What is it brought you to Alsted?” she said.

“Your husband asked me the very same question.”

“Well? What did you tell him?”

“I came here to work.”

“Where do you work at?”

“I teach history at Texas Tech. I'm on sabbatical. I came here to finish my book. I thought the small-town atmosphere would help me concentrate.”

“A writer,” she said, pretending to be impressed.

“I don't think of myself as one. It's just a requirement of the trade.”

She walked into the living room and set two mugs on the table. She sat on the other end of the couch. “Seems like you could find any old town to write in, though. What made you pick this one?”

“I got a deal on the house. Have I made a mistake?”

“No. I like it here. People leave you alone, if that's what you're looking for.”

“What makes you believe that's what I'm looking for?”

Ellie seemed flustered at that question. He was making her nervous. He had to be more tactful.

“Nothing,” she said. “I guess because you said you came here to write.”

“I suppose I *was* hoping to be left alone.”

“Well you can be left alone here, long as you don't do anything to get attention..”

“I'd say you've already proven yourself wrong on that count.”

“Maybe. Maybe we're just the curious type, me and Joe.”

This was clear, Fincher reasoned, yet there was something unthreatening about Ellie, something worldwise in her disposition that implied tolerance. No, he could never confess himself to her, but for all her inquisitiveness he got the sense she respected cues of privacy, could have empathy for unrevealed failings enough to let them stay unrevealed.

“Probably this annoys you,” she said. “I get to feeling that way anyway, the way you're so private. Probably you're busy.”

“That's not strictly true,” Fincher said. “There's only so much writing I can do in a day. In fact, I've found myself rather bored the last week. I've thought about taking a part time job.”

Fincher knew just what he was doing when he said that. He'd made out all right, surprisingly, from the divorce, but still he would soon need at least a modest income. Ellie played straight into his hands. She suggested immediately that he take a job at the restaurant she owned with Lertz. She'd have to run it by him, of course, but she didn't see any problem why he shouldn't start right away.

Lertz offered Fincher a job as a server in his little prairie steakhouse. He said he thought he'd be good at it, and they were looking for a server anyway, and it would be a good way to get to know the people in the town. Fincher deflected. He said after a day poring over his research he was too exhausted to entertain jovial families on their one night out for the month. That was a lie, of course, but only halfway. He *was* too exhausted to put up

pretense for anyone. Lertz told him he could wash dishes, then. This job sounded ideal to Fincher.

He worked in what amounted to an open closet, with a sink in front of him, a rack to his right, and another behind him. To his left was an opening which almost no one ever darkened. None of Alsted's restless teens were interested at all in the doings of an older dishwasher. For six hours in the evening, four evenings a week, Fincher stood over the deep steel basin and sprayed plates, trays, utensils, grinning in modest delight with every crust and morsel that flew dislodged when he sprayed it, every tiny measure of accomplishment.

Lertz and his wife were the curious type indeed. Each night after closing, Fincher was occupied with mopping the floors and otherwise keeping the place up to code, and he was the last to go. The Lertzes took a strange interest in him. Often they offered to drive him home, though he frequently professed to enjoy the walk, or asked him out for drinks, though he claimed—perhaps unconvincingly—that he did not drink. They were motivated by their unsatisfactory social life in Alsted, he deduced. These were not small town people. They were ostracized, it was clear, by the community, on account of their untraditional marriage—this must have been what Ellie was talking about when she said one could remain anonymous here so long as he did not draw attention—and the social scene they did have access to was in the form of the teenagers they hired to run the restaurant. Perhaps not ostracized—after all, they found ample patronage for the restaurant—but still they were outsiders. In this way, Fincher felt a kind of kinship with

them, or sympathy for them, though it wasn't enough to impel him toward the bond they appeared to desire from him.

Then again, it wasn't *them* exactly. It was really only Ellie. Lertz came off as a churl sometimes, such that Fincher often questioned what integrity he himself had working for him. One day, as Fincher finished up his duties at the restaurant, and only the three of them were left there, Lertz invited him into a conversation he was having with Ellie.

“Jim,” he said, “tell me your opinion on this, if you don't mind.”

“I'm not sure I'm qualified,” Fincher said. “I haven't been listening.” This was a lie. Lertz had been berating Ellie about going to the tanning salon. Fincher had heard every word of it.

“My wife lays down in a tanning bed at least once a month. She says she needs it for her health. I say we got more sun out here than the damn Sahara desert. What does anyone need a tanning bed for?”

“I notice a difference,” she said. “It changes my mood. If I didn't do it, you'd notice it too.”

Fincher could see in Ellie's face that she felt on the attack. In point of fact, he agreed with Lertz. The whole custom was foreign to him, and vain, and when he learned that Ellie was partial to it he looked down on her for it. Yet that look in her face made him almost want to defend her. He was uncomfortable with the situation entirely, though, and he excused himself quickly.

* * *

Then one night in mid-summer, as Fincher lay alone on his couch, drinking gin, Ellie knocked on his door. She was visibly distraught, panting, moving erratically. Fincher asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's Joe," she said. "Something's wrong. Come over quick."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. He just collapsed. I need your help. Come over quick."

"You'd better call 911," Fincher said. He wanted nothing to do with the situation.

"I *did*," Ellie said. "*Please*, Jim. I need help. Come over quick."

Fincher put on his shoes and followed Ellie across the lawn to the house she shared with Lertz. When he walked behind her through the front door, he saw Lertz in the living room, sitting on the couch with a beer in his hand. A man he recognized but did not know was sitting in the chair nearest Lertz. Ellie was giggling.

"Jim!" Lertz said. "Good to see you, buddy."

"What the hell is this?" Fincher asked. "I thought something was wrong."

"Sorry, Jim," Ellie said. "We were talking about you. Joe bet I couldn't get you to come over. Looks like I won."

"Now don't get hurt, Jim," Lertz said. "We just wanted to hang out with you. We knew you wouldn't come over unless there was extraordinary circumstances."

The man in the chair smiled uncomfortably through this exchange. Fincher was irate, but he knew he'd better not lose his cool. "I was alarmed," he said. "You should have just asked."

“We *have* asked, Jim,” Lertz said. “Don’t be so hurt. Grab a beer and stay a while. Calm down a bit.”

Fincher thought to leave immediately. He was embarrassed and angry. But there was something disarming in the Lertzes’ ploy, something mischievous in the way of a well-meaning child. In any case, the fact they had resorted to it meant they were intent on getting his attention in a way he could not avoid, so he stayed. “I suppose I could use one,” he said.

Lertz and his wife were good company, he supposed. He was nervous they would ask too many questions of him, put him in a position to answer for himself, explain his past, as they’d done before, but they demanded very little of him, in fact. They made off-colored jokes, picked on notable people in the town, and generally seemed to enjoy themselves. He laughed along with them, and remained as unobtrusive as possible. They never introduced their friend in the armchair. Nor did he make much of an effort to distinguish himself. He laughed at their jokes, and interjected only occasionally, and otherwise faded into the background. Fincher, too, did not say much. It was Lertz and Ellie’s show that night, and he was happy with that.

But after he’d been there for perhaps an hour, and helped himself to a second beer, they did turn the conversation on him. They were talking about a middle aged woman, Diane Foust, who was single and had something of a lascivious reputation. Of course in this town, Fincher guessed, that could mean she’d carried on relationships with just one or two men. Ellie, jokingly, suggested they set her up with Fincher. And though Fincher

tried to move along from the topic with an anodyne laugh, Ellie was too pleased with herself to let the suggestion go.

“It ain't a bad idea after all. Don't you think you need yourself a woman out here, Jim?”

“I'm all right as I am, I'd say,” said Fincher.

“But maybe you'd get a little kick out of a woman like Diane,” Ellie said.

“I have my work to think about,” Fincher said. “I don't need any distraction.”

“Come on, Jim,” Ellie said. “We all need a little distraction.”

Just as Fincher struggled for a response, Lertz jumped in. He tapped Ellie, who sat next to him, on the knee and said, “Jim's got a little too much class for a woman like that.

“What's wrong with wrong with Foust?” Ellie asked.

“Nothing. I just think Jim likes them in better condition is all.”

“Better condition?”

Lertz, cornered, turned to Fincher. “You know what I mean, Jim,” he said. “Once they get to a certain point they're all used up.”

Fincher only laughed, out of anxiety.

“That's a shitty thing to say,” Ellie said. “Just when do you think I'll be used up?”

“Not long from now, I don' figure.”

At this point, they were still joking. Ellie slapped Lertz on the shoulder, and said, “How long do you figure, then?”

“Can't be much longer. I've seen your mother.”

Ellie looked deeply offended at that. Fincher could see the hurt in her face. He felt he should do something about it. He knew very little of her relationship with Lertz, but he could tell he held some power over her, enough that it caused a certain amount of resentment. He, personally, believed Lertz regarded her as his trophy, which *he* resented.

Lertz, sensing he'd crossed a line, and looking for validation, turned to Fincher and said, "You know what I mean, right Jim? If you want to know what a girl's going to look like in twenty years, just look at her mother."

The man in the chair, whose name Fincher still hadn't picked up, laughed deeply.

"Right Jim?" Lertz said.

"And what is it about my mother turns you off so much, Joe?" Ellie said.

"Nothing," Lertz said. "Your mother's a doll."

"Uh-huh. Just how you meant it."

Lertz turned to Fincher and smiled. He was stifling a belly laugh. Fincher could see the anger in Ellie's face. She looked like a frightened animal beside Lertz, quivering. She looked helpless. Fincher hoped Lertz would take her cue and leave the conversation where it was.

Lertz said, "Though I never seen them make a doll as fat as that."

"I never seen them make one with cancer neither," said Ellie. "Bastard."

She stood up off the couch and stormed toward the front door. Just before she did though, Fincher saw her look at him. A quick glance, but a deep one. He thought it was only right for him to be her ally here. She needed that. The man in the armchair chuckled.

Lertz taunted her. She was painfully alone in this room. Neither of those two recognized her hurt.

He took the boy twice. First in his study. His wife was home and maybe that added to the thrill, that she might walk in and find him. It was easier than anything he'd ever wanted to do and done. He touched the boy's shoulder and the boy recoiled but he did not remove his hand. The boy touched his hand. He said, "I've never taught a boy like you." He sat the boy on his desk and he sat in his chair, between the boy's legs. The boy belonged to his wife's friend and he agreed to tutor him for the AP test. Fincher took him in his mouth while he stroked himself. When he asked the boy if he'd like to finish, the boy didn't even know what he meant. He knew from the first day the boy would let him do this . He stained the chair, he noticed. Two weeks later he took the boy in his bedroom. His wife was at work. As he wiped his cum off the boy's flat torso the boy said, "I guess now I'm a full-fledged faggot." He said, "No more than I am." Then he had a thought and said, "But that's what people would think, if they were to find out." The boy was hard. How could it be rape if the boy was hard. When it was over the boy waited with him in his kitchen until his mother arrived. They said nothing. He was arrested two days later.

He remembered experiencing some powerful and ecstatic sensation within him when he smelled the boy's earthy scent and felt the boy's firm flesh on his lips, but he could not remember the feeling itself.

Ellie slammed the door behind her and lit a cigarette as soon as she was on the porch. Fincher could see her just barely through the window. The rest of the house reflected back on him, Lertz leaning back on the couch, saying, "Like a china doll, that

girl. Everything's a crisis.” The man's head poking up from the armchair. The glare of the lamp behind Fincher. Ellie, like a ghost, smoking under the porchlight, exhaling helplessly, the smoke around her sinking instead of rising.