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This thesis is a collection of short stories.

THE BARE MINIMUM

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| CHAPTER | |
| I. THE BARE MINIMUM | 1 |
| II. THE BIRDHOUSE..... | 18 |
| III. TODAY IS NOT SEPTEMBER | 37 |
| IV. SPHERES OF INFLUENCE | 57 |
| V. RETURN TO ROME | 83 |

CHAPTER I

THE BARE MINIMUM

About a year after I got out of the navy, I received a voicemail from my buddy, Salt. Most of the recording was unintelligible, his voice masked by the bass of a stereo and what I guessed to be wind blowing in his driver side window, but after several listens I managed to determine that he too was finally out of the navy and on his way home (either New York or New Jersey—I was never able to tell the difference) and he wanted me to meet him in Raleigh, where he was planning to spend the night with some relatives. I hadn't seen Salt since I'd gotten out and hadn't talked to him for even longer because of what had happened. But I felt like I owed it to him—for old time's sake, as they say—and to be perfectly honest, I wanted to know what he was up to. So partly out of guilt and partly out of curiosity, I skipped my last class and took off west on I-40.

It turned out Salt's relatives—an uncle, an aunt, and a cousin—didn't live in Raleigh itself, but just outside the city limits in an unincorporated development, the kind of rural pseudo-neighborhood I had always assumed was unique to the farmlands around my hometown. Large houses appeared at random intervals along the highway, most of them partially hidden behind rows of pines. The one Salt's family lived in was identifiable only because of a giant boulder jutting over the ditch beside the driveway. I turned onto the gravel and my headlights fell on Salt and another guy about his height

and size. They were standing next to Salt's '76 El Dorado, smoking cigarettes and leaning on the car, whose massive trunk was covered with empty beer bottles.

"Patty Cake, Patty Cake, skater man!" Salt sang when I stepped out of my trunk. In the five years we'd been in the navy together, I had heard this ditty no fewer than ten times a day, and the last year didn't seem to have diminished Salt's enjoyment of it. "Look at those UA sideburns! You better get that haircut squared away, shipmate!"

Salt looked the same as always: high and tight haircut, eyes a little too close together, and long hook of a nose that seemed to act as a scout anytime he turned his head. The guy beside him could have been his twin. They were both dressed in polos and jeans and leather jackets, and they both wore Yankee caps with straight brims and the stickers still attached. The only distinguishing feature between them was a gold chain the other guy wore outside his shirt, so you could see the pendant: a diamond encrusted money sign with a few gems missing.

"Patterson, this is my cousin, Eddie," Salt said, gesturing toward his near twin. "Eddie, meet Patty Cake."

Eddie dropped a cigarette butt into his beer and shook my hand.

"Patty's from NC, too."

"From Gibraltar," I told Eddie.

"Never heard of it," he laughed. "I been livin' down here twelve years and still don't know where shit is. I like it, though. Mom and pops been talkin' bout movin' back north. I told 'em they can just leave my ass here." He absentmindedly picked a bottle

from the trunk lid and slung it against a tree on the other side of the driveway. It exploded into brown shards that tinkled as they fell to the ground.

“You’re late,” Salt said and nodded to the empty twelve pack.

“It’s alright,” Eddie said. “I know a place we can go, if you don’t driving, Patty.”

I didn’t like the prospect of playing chauffeur to two drunks, but there didn’t seem to be another option. “Sure,” I said. “Let’s go.”

We piled into my pickup and Eddie pointed the way with a freshly lit cigarette. One deserted road turned into another and then another while Salt quizzed me about attending college. He was planning to use the GI Bill like I was doing—not because there was anything he wanted to study or any reason for him to get a degree (he already had an under-the-counter gig waiting for him at his grandparents’ bakery)—he just wanted to meet some coeds and maybe score some money off the benefits checks.

Eddie wished us both well. He’d done the college thing before, at Harvard. Not as a student of course—his “brainiac” high school sweetheart had let him live there in her dorm room for half a semester before kicking him out for sleeping with her roommate—but the experience had been enough for him to realize that college was a bunch of bullshit.

I cut a look at Salt. From his lack of reaction, Eddie was either telling the truth or he had told this lie so many times it no longer provoked a response.

Eddie somehow ended the story by claiming it had led him to a job at IHOP. And as he was listing the pros and cons of working the night shift at a twenty-four hour breakfast-centered restaurant, we came to a place where the road widened and a small

cinderblock building appeared off the right shoulder. A pack of dew-covered cars were sitting in one corner of the parking lot. Eddie told us the place was called Mulligan's and it was one of the best spots around for a drink, even though it wasn't really a bar, just a pizza place. Their ABC permits had been revoked, but the owner, a real close friend of Eddie's, sold canned beer from a cooler underneath the bar after the restaurant closed.

The inside of Mulligan's was movie theater dark. Each table had a dim lamp with a large green shade, and the only overhead lights were angled onto a back wall which was covered with a mural of different golf scenes: crude, cartoonish pictures of men in tack golf clothes teeing off, chipping shots, lining up putts—all with droopy slices of pepperoni pizza in one hand. A group of ten or twelve people, mostly guys but a few girls, had pushed some tables together and were so preoccupied with a game of cards, none of them so much as glanced up when we walked in. To the right of the door was a small bar with only four stools and a rabbit ear TV. Two flags, one Italian, one Scottish, hung overhead. A pot-bellied man with slick gray hair was behind the bar, rolling up silverware in paper napkins.

"It's Hold 'Em Night," the man told Eddie. "Y'all want in?"

Salt and I said no thanks. Eddie said he would like to play, but he'd just got burned on the Carolina game. He proceeded to ramble off a list of complaints about the lack of consistency in ACC basketball officiating, throwing in just enough *Sportscenter* catch phrases to make it sound like he knew what he was talking about.

I turned to Salt. "Order whatever you want," I said. "It's on me. Consider it your getting out present."

He ordered a Miller High Life. I didn't feel like drinking, but I let him talk me into getting one as well. The bartender pulled two gold cans from a cooler under the counter and popped the tops. I took a sip. The beer was cold and slightly bitter. The taste took me back to our Okinawa deployment, where High Life had been the only brand we would drink, both because it was cheap and because it was the only beer on the island that didn't taste like it had been mixed with formaldehyde.

"So how's it feel to be out?"

"You know, it feels the same right now. Right now it just feels like I'm going home on leave."

"I know what you mean," I said. "It won't hit you for another couple weeks or so. You'll wake up every morning feeling like you're late for Quarters. But you eventually learn how to ignore it. That's how it was for me at least."

We sipped our beers and listened to Eddie talk up the bartender. He had moved on to pro football now and was busy laying out his Super Bowl picks for the next five years. At the poker table somebody yelled something about a pair of kings.

"So what've you been up to?" Salt asked after a couple minutes.

I told him about everything I'd done since I'd left the navy—taking classes at the community college, living with my dad, trying to hang out with my old friends who had all either married or moved away. The whole year was summed up in less than thirty seconds. I took a long swig of beer and, even though I didn't really want to know, asked how things had been going in the battalion. He said in the last six months, the whole thing had gone to shit.

“Be glad you weren’t there to see it. These fuckin’ bootcamps, man. They come in thinkin’ they already know everything. Act like they’re gonna tell *you* what to do.”

“Sounds like the same old shit to me.”

“Well, it’s different now. We fixed this one kid, though. A real smartass named Doherty.”

He went on to tell me how he and another mechanic, Muñoz, had convinced Doherty that one of the R-36 civilians was really a hooker and that she turned tricks out of the Heavy Shop at night. Salt took him down there after hours, and Muñoz had jumped out of the shadows wearing nothing but a gas mask and a pair of brown skivvies.

“That Dominican freak, he’s got a K-bar in one hand and a roll of duct tape in the other, coming at this kid, just screaming bloody murder. I think the poor fuck pissed himself.”

Salt told the story quickly, almost as if rehearsed, and I got the feeling he’d been storing this up for a while just to have something to tell me. Something about the way it came out, the way the words went together, made me suspect Salt hadn’t been a part of the prank at all, or maybe it had never really taken place.

Eddie finished his sports riff and stared down the bar at me.

“So,” he said. “How’d you two come to know each other, anyway?”

I threw a look at Salt to see if he was going to tell it or if I had to do it. He didn’t budge.

“Well,” I said. “We both got to the battalion the same day. It was pure chaos around there, because they were doing the mount out for Fex.”

“Fex?”

“A field exercise. It’s like a game where you go out and pretend you’re fighting some imaginary war. But the enemy is just this other group of guys with white bands around their hats.”

“Not really,” said Salt. “The regiment’s more like the referees. The enemy is played by non-rates from other battalions.”

“Right,” I said. “Whatever. Anyway, it’s pretty stupid. And it sucks because they don’t let you sleep and you can’t take a shower for like two weeks. At any rate, because everything was just this huge clusterfuck, nobody had any time to explain things to us. They stuck us in a hole as far away from camp as possible and left us out there till it was time to go home.”

“We didn’t stay there the whole time. Two other guys rotated with us.”

“May as well have been the whole time.”

Eddie shook his head. “That’s something I can’t really get through my head, you guys being in the navy and not being on a ship. I mean, you had to go on a ship at least once, right?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Never,” said Salt. “I’ve never even seen one.”

“We were Seabees,” I told Eddie. “We build. We fight. We don’t ride on ships.”

Salt explained the history of the Seabees to his cousin. How during WWII when the contractors the navy had started getting killed off, Admiral Ben Moreel had decided to make a new sect within the navy, a bunch of construction workers who would wear

uniforms and carry guns so they could fight back if they got shot at. They called themselves the Seabees because of the initials: C.B. for Construction Battalion. Thanks to constant grilling by the higher ups, this bit of history is etched into the mind of every Seabee that has come since, and Salt reeled it off like he was taking a test. “That last part is bullshit, though,” he said when he finished. “We don’t fight shit.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “We get into firefights every now and then.”

“The fuck we do. When was the last time you pulled a trigger outside the gun range?”

“I’m not talking about me. I’m saying some people.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said. He turned to Salt. “What about you, that shit you got a medal for?”

“That was nothing. All I did was almost get blown up. That’s not fighting.”

“But it is combat,” I said.

“Sure. Whatever.”

Eddie flipped his hat around and motioned to the bartender for another beer. “I’m the last guy that could have an opinion about it, but if you ask me it’s combat. That’s some real Saving Private Ryan type shit.”

They gave you a medal?” I asked.

“Yeah, a purple heart. Navy commendation too. You didn’t hear about it?”

“No.”

“They had this big ceremony on the grinder and everything. The whole base had a mandatory muster. The MCPON even showed up.”

“The fuck’s a Mick Pawn?” Eddie asked.

“Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. He’s like the highest enlisted guy there is. He happened to be in town for some other shit and he showed up to pin the medals on me.”

“I’d pay to see that,” I said.

“I know, right? Can you imagine the fuckin’ MCPON standing up there talking about how squared away my shit-bag ass is?”

“No, I honestly can’t.”

“Believe it.”

He crushed the empty can and tossed it into the trash behind the bar. The bartender set another one in front of him.

“Hey, youse guys see those two girls over there?” asked Eddie. He pointed at two blondes sitting beside each other at the poker table. “They work with me over at the IHOP. They ain’t much to look at, but they can be fun, if youse know what I’m saying.”

We knew exactly what he was saying, and we declined. Eddie shrugged and excused himself, saying not to wait for him if he slipped into the back with one, or both, of the girls.

“Your cousin’s pretty full of it,” I said after he left.

“Eddie? Yeah, he’s kind of an assclown, huh?”

“Did y’all grow up together?”

“Yaw! You kill me with that shit, Patty.”

“Okay then. Did youse guys grow up together?”

“Not really. I mean, I guess we hung out a lot when we were younger, but he moved down here when we were like ten.”

“Right. He mentioned that I think.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you two could be brothers. Twins even.”

I stared at the bar, where the condensation from my beer had formed a ring of water. I thought about saying something about a basketball player on TV, but before I could, the image switched over to a commercial for laundry detergent.

“So how was the drive?”

“All right. Elvira did better than I thought she’d do. Sucked on gas, though.”

Then we got into a vague conversation about gas prices and the unexpectedly steep hills of Alabama. Salt finished off his High Life and ordered another. As he tossed his empty into the trash can behind the bar, I caught a glimpse of his left palm. He saw me looking at it and turned it over so I could see it better.

“It’s healed up pretty good, don’t you think?” he said.

“Sure. Yeah, it has.”

A faintly purple scar, no bigger than a dime but not nearly as round, stood out from the surrounding skin, an inch or so below the gap between his pinky and ring fingers. Salt traced the outline with his thumb.

“They told me in another few years, you won’t even be able to tell it was there unless you look hard enough.” He cracked open his fresh beer and took a quick sip.

“I’m glad it’s healing up,” I said.

“Me too. This fucker can’t go away soon enough, man.”

I don’t really have the right to tell the story of how Salt got his scar, but since I’m certain that he’s never going to do it himself, I have to.

It happened like this: Our third (and for me, final) deployment had taken us to Iraq. And not just any part of Iraq. Out to the Anbar Province, the part people were calling the Triangle of Death. They had stuck us on a detail with a bunch of Special Ops army guys, on a camp about the size of a football field, a camp so small it didn’t even have a name, just a number: FOB 1149, known informally as Camp Nightmare. It was little more than a mud pit encircled with concrete partitions and concertina wire. Everyone, officers and enlisted, army and navy, slept in a small cinderblock building with poncho liners strung up on 550 cord in order to make rooms. We wore full battle rattle—helmets, flak jackets with ceramic inserts—at all times, even when we slept. It was heavy and made the heat intolerable, but no one ever took it off. Mortar rounds and the occasional rocket would land on or near Camp Nightmare almost every day. The incoming siren was as common as the sound of planes flying overhead or the sound of our chief barking profanity-laced orders. Most of the attacks had little effect on anything but our nerves. Some were more damaging. About a month into the deployment, an army guy got a piece of shrapnel lodged in his left ass cheek when a mortar landed on the shower trailer he was in. After that, everyone just used baby wipes.

Our job at Camp Nightmare consisted mostly of minor repairs to equipment, the bare minimum amount of work to keep them running, and the never ending task of

pulling stuck vehicles out of the mud. One day halfway through the deployment, in July, the mechanics were prepping a convoy that was supposed to head out that night. I was near the shop, checking the tire pressure in a HMMWV. Salt was on the other side of the equipment yard, checking the oil levels in all the generators. It was a pretty nice day, by Iraq standards: hot but not unbearably hot, with a soft breeze and a clear blue sky. When the alarm went off, I thought it would be little more than a blemish on an otherwise nice day. I leisurely trotted over to the shop and ducked into the sand bag bunker we had made on the back side. The first round hit shortly after I sat down. Eight more fell before I noticed Salt wasn't in the bunker.

Since I wasn't there, and since Salt refused to tell anyone about it, the only things I know about what happened to him come from what I was able to piece together afterwards, and—I have to admit—what I'm able to imagine.

The first round lands close by. Not close enough to hurt anything. Still, close enough to make the ground shake. Close enough to make his ears ring. He grabs his weapon, slings the strap over his shoulder, starts to run. Another round lands. Then another. Closer now. His feet miss their steps, trip over themselves. His weapon falls off his shoulder, grazes the back of his heel. It falls in the mud. He doesn't stop. He turns the corner around a MTVR. The blast from another mortar knocks him off his feet. His face scrapes through the mud. It's in his teeth he can't see he can't hear he thinks he isn't breathing or it feels like he isn't breathing or if he is breathing it doesn't feel like he's breathing air, it's as if all the air has turned into mud. He pulls himself under the truck, crawls on his hands and knees. The rounds keep coming in. He's certain that any second

one will land on top of him. Then he notices the blood, blood everywhere, blood on his leg blood on his chest blood on his hands and arms. He can't stop it. He closes his eyes. He waits.

After the All Clear came down, we ran out of the bunker looking for him. He was still under the truck, his head propped on a tire, eyes closed. It took two of us to pull him out from under there, kicking and screaming for us to let him go. The corpsman ripped open his flak jacket to look for wounds. He kept talking to Salt, asking him if he was okay, if he had been hit. Salt didn't say a word. His skin was dark purple, the color of an eggplant. Then, like someone had flipped a switch, he went completely white. The corpsman put him on his back and propped up his legs and search Salt frantically for the source of all the blood. A first responder tried to find a vein and start an IV. I stood there, unable to do or say anything.

With Eddie gone, the silence between us seemed even heavier. We filled it with stories about the past, about the people we knew in the battalion, the things we'd done or liked to say we'd done, the things other people had done or had been rumored to have done. We talked about the time Hutchison had filled EO1 White's hard hat with grease, then ran it up on the crane with a big cardboard sign that said Pet Turtle For Sale. We talked about the time Carroll had showed up late for muster and then proceeded to remove a week old slice of pizza from his cargo pocket and eat it while we waited for the word to be passed down. We talked about the time BU2 Gillis had supposedly seen Chief Schmidt making out with a Japanese transvestite on Gate Two Street. We talked about

how, on a bet, CM2 Bowen had once sung the entire soundtrack to *Purple Rain* as cadence during morning PT. Every story seemed to lead to another. Every name brought up another name. Every outrageous claim produced two more.

But, for some reason, none of it seemed real. The stories were like Salt's: too neat, whittled down past the point of recognition. It was like we were talking about characters in a movie we had both seen or rehashing the plots of an old TV show we used to watch.

Aside from the wound to his hand, Salt didn't have so much as a scratch. They flew him to Baghdad to be stabilized, then to Germany for reconstructive surgery. The doctors said he had been lucky: a fraction of an inch either way and he would have completely lost the use of his fingers.

The next time I saw him, I knew something had changed. Because he knew I'd be getting out soon, he had moved into a one bedroom apartment in Biloxi and seemed to spend as much of his time there as he could. He was still the same on the outside. He still told the same jokes, sang the same Patty Cake rhyme every time he saw me. But something was off. During the middle of work, he would drop his wrenches and simply walk out of the shop without saying a word. They were making him go to the counseling center on base, but every time I asked him about it he would only say it was stupid and a waste of time. This went on for several months.

Then one night my phone rang at 3:30 in the morning. It was Salt. He hung up before I could answer, and I stared at his name and number on the display for several seconds before shutting it and going back to sleep.

Several rumors were already circulating when I showed up for work the next day. Some said Salt had been in an accident, had flipped Elvira in a ditch off 49. Some said he had gotten in a fight with a neighbor and had been thrown off the balcony into the apartment complex pool. None of them were right.

Later that night I was standing watch on the quarterdeck. I flipped the logbook back to when Salt had called me. I found this entry:

0352: REGENCY MEDICAL CALLED TO INFORM QD THAT CM3
MORTON HAS BEEN ADMITTED TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.
CONTACTED OOD AND CDO.

Then, in a different handwriting someone had added:

CONTACTED CHAPLAIN.

I read it over and over for the next four hours, hoping that maybe if I read it carefully enough, with enough patience, it would say something more.

Salt came back to the battalion three weeks later. The bandages showing past the ends of his sleeves confirmed what had already been whispered around Alfa Company: in a fit of drunken rage, Salt had cut his wrists. I didn't tell anyone about the phone call.

This is all I was able to say to him:

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"Never," he said and immediately changed the subject.

I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out why Salt had tried to kill himself. Considering all the horrible things that have happened to people in war—lost legs, missing arms, burnt faces—what had happened with Salt didn't seem that bad. He could still use his hand, and as far as I knew it didn't even hurt. But I think it was just the never-ending presence of it that bothered him so much. He couldn't cover it up with clothing or avoid it by not looking in the mirror. Every time he reached for the door or signed his name on a check or lifted a can of beer, there it was staring back at him, a purplish-pink reminder of ten minutes of pure terror.

At some point during the night, Eddie came back from the poker table. The game had broken up and everyone was going home, so we did too. We made the trip back to Eddie's house in silence. When I dropped them off, a security light turned on as they approached the back door. The light illuminated Salt so that he was nothing more than a shadow fringed in white. Then he was gone.

But before any of that happened, while we were still back at the bar, Salt told me this:

“I don’t know what I’m going to do now, Patty.”

I stalled, trying to guess at his meaning. “Neither do I.”

“I mean now that I’m out.”

“I was the same way,” I told him. “Still am, if you want to know the truth.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“The same thing everybody else does.” Then I fed him a line about putting one foot in front of the other, or something equally lame and meaningless.

“I guess you’re right.”

Salt took the rest of his High Life down in one gulp and set it on the bar. He pressed his thumb into the middle of the can until it buckled and bent in half. He let it fall onto its side and looked at me, in the face, eye to eye, for the first time that night.

“Hey, Patty,” he said. “All that’s over now, ain’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “It is.”

CHAPTER II

THE BIRDHOUSE

Linda Girt was beside herself. As a general rule she was never late to anything, but on today of all days—the first annual Jibraltar Historic Home Tour—she was in danger of missing the opening of the Enright House, the stop she had been selected to host. She was running behind because her car wouldn't turn over that morning. The battery was dead again, even though her husband had taken the car to the shop just the week before. Luckily, it was a Saturday, and she was able to borrow Mr. Girt's work truck. But it had been low on gas, and even though she only stopped long enough to add a dollar's worth to the tank, her watch showed she only had two minutes to make it to Jackson Street before the tour started.

Two months earlier, the Jibraltar Historical Society, of which Mrs. Girt was a lifetime member and the acting Refreshment Committee chairwoman, had decided to sponsor a daylong walking tour of some of the older homes in town, with the hope of attracting attention to all the historical revitalization that had been flourishing in recent years. After some debate, the newly formed Tour Committee deemed that it was necessary to have a representative from the Society at each stop in order to escort the tour groups through the residences, and in a special Wednesday meeting, they drew lots to see who would go where. Much to the disappointment of several other members, Mrs. Girt

had drawn the Charles J. Enright house. The Enright House was a late-Victorian three-story which had spent the majority of Mrs. Girt's life in a shameful state of neglect. It had recently been purchased by a family from up North, a younger couple and their two daughters, who had moved down from somewhere in New England and, over the course of the past few months, had spent untold amounts of money—some said as much as half a million dollars—on having the place restored from the ground up. Other than a few out-of-town contractors, no one except a Mr. Kinna, the architectural consultant the couple had flown down from New York City, had seen the inside of the place, though there were rumors that the wife, an artist, had done all of the decorating herself and that *Southern Living* was planning to feature the home in an upcoming issue. The Enright House was the crown jewel on the Historic Home circuit, and it would not do to have its hostess show up late.

As Mrs. Girt turned onto Jackson Street, she saw that Mrs. Fullard, the Historical Society President, was already waiting for her on the porch. Mrs. Girt pulled up to the curb and was about to park when she thought of what an ugly picture that would make: the stately spires and gables of the Enright House in the background and Mr. Girt's dinged-up, rust-eaten truck sitting in front, with its patches of primer and dented left fender. So she pulled the truck around and parked it on the other side of the street, next to an old washing machine someone had set out with the garbage. In the rearview, she hastily checked her makeup and her hair—she had had it cut the week before in anticipation of today and still wasn't sure if she liked it this way: short on the sides and

spiked on the top, like a cardinal's crest. Satisfied that everything was as good as it could be, she stumbled out of the pickup, already wishing she had chosen flats instead of heels.

Even on a street lined with ornate old homes, the Enright House managed to stand out. The fleur-de-lis picketed porch hugged the perimeter of the first floor, and as it made its way to the front, it sprouted thick columns that branched upward into an impressive display of scrollwork and hand-carved bargeboards. The second story was divided into two asymmetrical sections, one jutting out from the other, with large windows staring out from each face. The third story, perhaps the most astounding of all, was a broken mixture of gables and windows framed by delicate scroll work. Gingerbread fringed the eaves of the roofs which slid down at sharp angles from several brass spires. A large gable in the center completed the house. Unlike the others, it was bare of any window and was instead decorated with a bas relief carving of a Biblical scene, Noah on Mt. Ararat, which James Lucas Enright, a previous owner of the house, had had copied, so it was said, from an engraving he had seen during a trip to Rome.

The home's clapboard siding was painted an earth tone somewhere between green and brown, and the trim was colored with a deep ivory gloss. Mrs. Girt thought it wasn't appropriate to use such drab colors on the outside of such a cheerful house—when she was a little girl, the house had been completely white—but she reasoned that perhaps that was part of the style these days and an accomplished artist would know more about it than her.

The house was something of a personal landmark for Mrs. Girt. Her family had once lived two blocks away from the Enright House, on Church Street, and she and the

other neighborhood children had spent many a summer afternoon playing in front of the abandoned house. She remembered how they used to make a game of standing on the porch steps, believing, partly because of old stories they had heard from their parents and partly because of the shabby appearance of the house itself, that it was haunted.

“Good morning, Miss Edna,” Mrs. Girt called when she reached the walkway.
“Sorry I’m late.”

Mrs. Fullard was leaning on the porch railing, studying some papers tucked inside a red binder. She was dressed in a pine green pantsuit with black piping along the edges, and despite the heat—it was hot for April—she also wore a silver paisley neckerchief, which puffed out so that it resembled the neck of a turkey. Her blue-rinsed hair was bunched into a stack of curls that looked as if it might fall over at any second. Mrs. Fullard was typically a pleasant and accommodating lady, the missions chair of the Gibraltar Baptist Ladies’ Auxiliary, but in the months since she had been elected Historical Society President, she had made it clear that her good humor did not extend to matters where the Society could lose face.

“Hello, Linda. Glad you could make it. I was starting to wonder whether I was going to have to fill in for you.”

“I apologize for that. My car’s been giving me fits lately. That’s why I’m on the truck.”

Mrs. Fullard shook her head as if to say it was no concern of hers. She shuffled through the papers in the binder until she found the one she wanted and handed it to Mrs. Girt.

“That’s more or less your script for the day,” she said. “The lady of the house went to the trouble of typing it up for you. You just missed meeting her.”

They were interrupted by the sound of a vehicle, a large Land Rover, backing quickly out the driveway. All Mrs. Girt could make out through the windshield was a dark splotch of hair, the back of a head. She and Mrs. Fullard waved at the blob as it pulled away down the street.

“It’s arranged by rooms,” Mrs. Fullard continued. “I suppose you could use it anyway you want, but I would recommend starting in the foyer then working your way through the living room and dining room. You should probably end in the kitchen, so the guests can exit through the backyard. That way there’s no back tracking, and you can keep people moving through without having to herd them past one another.”

“Wait,” said Mrs. Girt. “Nobody from the house is going to be here?”
“No, I’m afraid you’ll be by yourself most of the day. Mr. Pickgren, the owner, is at work, and Mrs. Pickgren had planned to take her daughters shopping in Raleigh. She said should be home shortly after lunch, though. Do you think you can handle things by yourself?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“I’m sure you can. Now let me know if you have any issues. Don’t wait until they become big. I don’t want a repeat of last year’s raffle where people couldn’t buy tickets because one of my girls was too timid to ask for more.”

“But haven’t people already bought their tickets for the tour?”

“You know what I mean. Call me if there are any problems, don’t let them linger.”

“I will.” Mrs. Girt took the key from Mrs. Fullard. It was cold, like a sliver of ice in the palm of her hand. “Is she nice?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Mrs. Pickgren. I’ve never met her. I mean, I’ve seen her around of course, but I’ve never talked to her. How is she?”

“She seems very nice. And looks even younger than you’d expect. Very pretty. So are her daughters.” Mrs. Fullard checked her watch. “Well, you’d better get started then.”

The first group arrived at six minutes after eight. It was small, made mostly of little old ladies, either retirees or widows, the kind who showed up out of a sense of responsibility to the community and who wanted, Mrs. Girt assumed, nothing more than to complete the entire circuit of houses in time to be home for midday news. They followed her through the house in near silence. She stumbled once or twice during her narration, but it was nothing important. She got the impression that the ladies didn’t really understand what she was saying, and besides, whether they understood or not, just being in front of them gave her a sense of importance. It reminded her of when she had done her student teaching. Although she had completed her degree in elementary education, Mrs. Girt had never gone on to teach. She had gotten married the week after her graduation, and Caroline, their daughter, had come the following year. Standing in front of these women, with their eyes following her every command—*If you look over*

here... If you turn to your left... if you follow me this way—gave her a feeling of authority that she hadn't experienced in some time. She assumed a completely different personality when she spoke in front of strangers, a personality she couldn't quite place and one she was only vaguely conscious of possessing, but one that was there nonetheless.

She began the tours, as Mrs. Fullard had suggested, in the front parlor, having the visitors line up along the wall across from the stairs.

"First," she would say, "I would like to begin with a bit of history about the house."

Mrs. Pickgren had not included any of this information in her script, but Mrs. Girt reckoned that she had counted on the hostess to provide that information.

She would tell the guests how Lattimer James Enright, who had opened the town's first drug store, built the house by hand in 1889, and how it had been handed down from one generation to the next, each successive Enright being, quite unfortunately, less industrious than the previous one, until the house finally sat uninhabited and uncared for, rotting away on its foundation. Mrs. Girt would then explain how the Pickgrens had purchased the house from Mr. Lattimer's great-great-grandson, devoted themselves to renovating it, and were now so gracious as to allow the Historical Society to conduct a tour of this monument to Gibraltar's history. Here, if the guests seemed interested enough, she would tell one of the ghost stories that she had heard so often repeated during her childhood, ending with an account of the time she, her sister, and Emma Jean Wiggins had come up and peeped through the window and had seen a ghost that even now, forty years later, sent shivers up her spine. If the guests seemed unresponsive to ghosts, she

would simply skip to the biographical data Mrs. Pickgren had included at the top of the paper, feeling slightly proud of herself when she realized that the tour guests must assume she knew the family personally.

Next, she would lead the guests into the living room, or at least what the paper listed as the living room. She would start by highlighting the architectural details of the room before moving on to the various paintings which hung on the plum-colored walls. She would glance up to see the reactions of the ladies in the crowd, delighted at how they always seemed so surprised to learn there was an artist living in such a little town. Most of the works were by Mrs. Pickgren herself, and although they weren't what you would typically think to hang in a living room—they seemed too dark for Mrs. Girt's taste—they did more or less look like what they were supposed to be. Their titles were another matter. One was called *Effervescence* and showed the shadow of an old barn stretched across a dirt path with a row of tangled weeds and grass growing in the center. The one beside it was called *To the End of Light*, another outdoor scene, which showed a panoramic view of a marsh from which all the water had been drained. The sky was filled with thunder clouds and looked like the surface of a pot of boiling motor oil. The largest canvas, which hung to the right of the marble fireplace, was titled *Sweet Suite Sweep* and was the one Mrs. Girt liked best. It showed the inside of a living room not very different from the one they were in. In the lower right corner of the frame, a little man wearing an old-fashioned suit was standing with his head bent so you couldn't see his face, sweeping dust into a small pile. The lights in the room had not been lit, and the sun setting outside

the windows cast long patches of orange light across the floor. Mrs. Girt thought there was something peaceful about that.

But then there was the one over the sofa. It had to be one of the ugliest things Mrs. Girt had seen in her entire life. It was called *La dama du cirque* and had won an award, so the piece of paper said, from the New England Academy of Art. It was a portrait—if you could call it that—of a large naked woman as seen from behind. The entire canvas was a swirl of yellow and gray brushstrokes interrupted only by the harsh pink of the woman’s skin. The woman herself seemed to be deformed and was squeezed into the left side of the frame, as if Mrs. Pickgren had raked her there with the tip of her brush. The woman’s head was turned in profile, and a jagged nose extended almost to the tip of her shoulder. Mrs. Girt shuddered to look at it.

At the point in the tour where she had to introduce this painting to the guests, she would allow herself her only unscripted comment:

“I suppose that’s what they call *modern* art,” she would say, smirking as the crowd giggled.

Most of the tour takers, especially the women close to Mrs. Girt’s age, were dumbstruck by the sheer extravagance of the house. The collective gasps that rose as each group crossed the threshold from one room to another made Mrs. Girt beam with satisfaction. It was as if every *ooh* and *ahh* was made for her ears alone. Not everyone was so impressed, however. In one of the groups, there was a couple who stood to the back of the crowd with their arms crossed, frowning as they studied each room.

In the dining room, Mrs. Girt was pointing out the copper-plated ceiling and describing the painstaking detail that had gone into painting the floral pattern on the Toasted Mango walls when she overheard the two talking to one another.

The woman was thin and had straight silver hair that hung almost to her waist and was held back by a purple headband. The man was tall, with a head of thick straw yellow hair, and he had to bend at the waist to whisper in the woman's ear.

"How much do you think they spent on that?" the woman giggled.

"Fools and money parted," said the man under his breath.

Mrs. Girt knew their type well: the kind of people who would go around looking at what others had just so they could talk poorly about it later. Mr. Girt's people were like that. Once her mother-in-law had taken a tour of the Biltmore up in Asheville only to come back cackling about what great firewood and paving gravel the place would make. Mrs. Girt could picture the couple later that evening at a friend's house telling about how they had gone to see what those rich Yankees had done to the Enright House.

It pained Mrs. Girt to hear such a fine lady's home badmouthed by people who were clearly less cultured and she made an effort to cut her eyes at them as she gave the details about the portrait of Mrs. Pickgren and her newborn daughter which was hanging near the doorway.

In the kitchen, while Mrs. Girt was telling how many weeks it had taken to import the Caldonia granite countertops and Brazilian Cherrywood floors, a little boy raised his hand and asked where the Pickgrens went to the bathroom.

“Well, as you all may have noticed, there’s no bathroom on the first floor. But there’s two on the second. There’s also three bedrooms, another living room, and another kitchen. I believe the Pickgrens only use the first floor on special occasions.”

“Oh, sure.” the woman with the purple headband said to her husband. “Two houses in one. That’s real practical.”

Mrs. Girt was about to say something to her, but the boy raised his hand again.

“Can we go upstairs?” he asked.

“I’m afraid not. The only rooms on display are the ones downstairs.”

Blushing, Mrs. Girt looked at her sheet for information about the Sub Zero appliances.

“What’s on the third floor?” one of the guests asked.

Before Mrs. Girt could answer, the woman with the purple headband blurted out, “Maybe that’s where they keep their spaceship!”

Mrs. Girt felt a stinging in the corner of her eyes as everyone burst into laughter. So not everyone was as able to appreciate fine culture as she was. It didn’t matter, she told herself. It was their loss. Of course not everything was the way she would have it if she owned the house—that horrible picture of the naked woman would be the first thing to go—but that was part of the fun of looking at other people’s houses. Not everybody has the same taste, and it takes different strokes for different folks. They should all feel lucky to be allowed inside this fine piece of the town’s heritage.

After eating a grilled pimento cheese sandwich she had brought along in her purse, Mrs. Girt resumed the tours at fifteen minutes to one. The groups were getting smaller, but, thankfully, they seemed more interested in what she was saying. Some even remarked that hers was the best presentation on the tour. She had streamlined the performance into a flourish of hand gestures and graceful segues from room to room. She had memorized every line on the paper and had started to include more comments of her own, little things she supposed had escaped the mind of Mrs. Pickgren—she was such a busy woman, it was a wonder she had found the time to write anything at all.

Mrs. Girt was in the kitchen, showing off the Austrian exhaust hood above the stove, when she heard the front door open.

“Excuse me?” she called into the foyer. “If you’ll please wait on the porch, I’ll be starting another tour in just a few minutes.”

The door closed, and Mrs. Girt heard footsteps running up the stairs. She told the group to look around while she went to see what was going on and was almost to the stairs when the door opened and Mrs. Pickgren stepped inside. A wave of heat followed behind her.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Mrs. Girt started to say, but Mrs. Pickgren was busy sorting a stack of mail. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She had on a simple yet elegant white blouse—obviously expensive—and khaki pants that stopped just above her ankles.

“Hello,” she said when she saw that Mrs. Girt was standing in front of her. “I’m-”

“Oh, I would recognize you anywhere,” Mrs. Girt said. “That’s a beautiful family you have there, Mrs. Pickgren.” She nodded towards the family portrait.

“Thank you. Um, actually, it’s DiMarco. I kept my last name.”

“You must be right-brain oriented,” said Mrs. Girt.

“Pardon?”

“I said you must be right-brain oriented. I read that somewhere. In *Newsweek*, I think. Or was it *Time* magazine? Anyway, there was this article and it said that women who keep their last name after they get married are more likely to be right-brain oriented. They’re more independent, more creative, more... I can’t remember what else. But the creative part would fit, wouldn’t it? Seeing how you’re a painter and all.”

“That’s interesting...” said Mrs. DiMarco. She adjusted the weight of several shopping bags that were hanging from her wrists.

Mrs. Girt gave herself a light slap on the forehead. “Where are my manners?” she said. “I didn’t even introduce myself.”

She told Mrs. DiMarco who she was and gave a brief description of her participation in the Gibraltar Historical Society. She also let Mrs. DiMarco know that she had grown up only two blocks away from here and that she had been a Hargrave—a Church Street Hargrave, of course, not one of those sorry Hargraves that lived over to Abbot’s Crossroads. “Mrs. Dimarco, I just want to thank you for letting us show your gorgeous home. It’s simply amazing.”

“It’s no-”

“I don’t think the tour would have been complete without it. It’s breathtaking.”

“You’re too kind,” said Mrs. DiMarco. “It’s nice to meet you. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go upstairs and be out of your way.

“Nonsense. You can’t possibly be in the way in your own home.”

“No, I should go. You’ll understand I hope.”

“We all like to be in our own nests, don’t we?

“I suppose so.”

“Well, it was very nice to meet you. And thank you again.”

Back in the kitchen, Mrs. Girt had the honor of informing the visitors that the lady of the house had returned, making special mention of how nice she was and how much the Historical Society was indebted to her generosity.“It’s folks like the Pickgrens that keep our community going,” she told them. “Without them, our little town simply wouldn’t be what it is today.” She only wished the tall man and the woman with the purple headband could have been there to hear her say it.

She had picked up her purse and was attempting to leave when Mrs. DiMarco walked into the kitchen.

“Hello again,” said Mrs. Girt. “You just missed the last group. I think everything went very smoothly.”

“Good. That’s good.”

A little girl in sockfeet came sliding in behind Mrs. DiMarco. She froze when she saw Mrs. Girt standing beside the kitchen island.

“Hello, there,” said Mrs. Girt. “What’s your name, precious?”

“This is Spencer, my youngest,” said Mrs. DiMarco.

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t mistake this cute little thing for anyone else’s. You sure do favor your mama, Spencer.”

The little girl stared at Mrs. Girt, her blue eyes wide with curiosity. She had curly blonde hair and small nose like her mother’s.

“You remind me of myself as a little girl.”

The girl continued to stare.

“Believe it or not, I used to have curly hair too.” Mrs. Girt reached up to feel her hair and realized that the hairspray had worn off and her hair was laying flat against her head. “I bet your mama has a time brushing that curly hair. I remember when my mama used to brush mine. I would just cry, cry, cry, it hurt so bad.”

Mrs. Dimarco went to the refrigerator and took out an apple. She rinsed it off and handed it to her daughter.

“You should feel very fortunate to live in such a beautiful house, Spencer,” said Mrs. Girt. “Did you know that when I was a little girl, me and my friends used to play in front of this house and we would dare each other to come up and touch it? We all thought it was haunted! And wouldn’t you know it, one day we got brave and came up and looked in the door, and there was a ghost, a woman just as plain as the nose on your face.”

Mrs. DiMarco seemed startled.

“That’s just a story,” Mrs. Girt said quickly, blushing. “There’s no ghosts here. We were playing make believe.”

The little girl bit into the apple and, holding it in her mouth, took off running for the stairs.

“Spence!” Mrs. DiMarco called after her. “No running, okay?”

The child’s footsteps thumped up the stairs without slowing.

“Well, I guess I better get going,” said Mrs. Girt.

“Mrs...”

“Girt. With a I. But you can call me Linda.”

“Linda. Sorry. If you don’t mind, do you think you could help me bring something in from the car? It’ll take just a second.”

“I’d be delighted.”

She followed Mrs. DiMarco out to her Land Rover. In the back, there was a cardboard box that took up most of the cargo area. They carefully slid it out and carried it inside, where they placed it on the island in the middle of the kitchen.

“For such a big box, it sure don’t weigh much,” said Mrs. Girt. “If you don’t mind my asking...”

“It’s just something a friend of mine made me. Would you like to see it?”

“I’d love to! I meant to tell you how much I love the artwork you have here. I’ve been enjoying it all day long. Is your friend a professional artist, too?”

“Yes. Well, she’s an architect mainly. But she also does little things like these on the side.”

Mrs. DiMarco used one of the carving block knives to carefully cut the tape and open the top of the box.

“Oh, my word!” said Mrs. Girt.

Inside, there was a birdhouse made to look exactly like the one they were standing in. It was as if, Mrs. Girt thought, somebody had waved a magic wand and shrunk the Enright House to a fraction of its size.

“Oh, my word!” Mrs. Girt said again. “I can’t believe it. Look how detailed it is. Even down to the railing.”

“Sara’s a talented architect.”

“Is she ever. I can only imagine how long it took to make.”

“Probably not as long as you might think.”

“But still. Look at that detail.”

“She said it’s supposed to be for the backyard, but-”

“To be sure not! You can’t put something like this out in the yard to get rained on. It’d be a pure crime. And I wouldn’t let some old lice-ridden bird make herself a nest in there, neither.”

Mrs. DiMarco laughed. “I suppose you have a point.”

“Course I do. There’s no way you could let a fine piece of artwork like this get ruined. You have to keep it somewhere inside. If it was me, I’d put it on a stand right there next to the stairs where people walk in. That way it’d be like they’re seeing the house a second time as they come inside, sort of a *déjà vu* thing. Wouldn’t that be neat?”

Mrs. DiMarco glanced at the front door and back at the birdhouse, as if contemplating the suggestion. The two women stood for a moment in silence.

Finally, Mrs. DiMarco said, “Do you really like it?”

“Of course. What’s not to like?”

She laughed. “But don’t you think maybe it’s a little too hokey? I love Sara to death, but this thing looks something you’d find at one of those little artisan stands beside the road. Or worse, at a flea market, right? But thank you so much for helping me bring it in. Sorry to keep you.”

“Oh, it’s no...”

Mrs. DiMarco checked her watch. “It’s getting late.”

“Of course... I, I should go.”

Fumbling with her purse, Mrs. Girt hurried out of the kitchen. Mrs. DiMarco had to be wrong, she thought to herself. Maybe she just hadn’t looked at the birdhouse enough. Things didn’t always strike you the right way the first time you see them. Sometimes you had to allow time to let things grow on you, just set them somewhere you could see them and wait awhile. She thought she would go back in and tell Mrs. DiMarco that, but as she turned around to do so, something in the living room caught her eye.

It was the painting of the naked woman. In the afternoon light that was slanting in from the window, the woman had taken on a stark glow. It seemed as if her skin were made of coal embers and her eyes, or at least the one you could see, were like holes ripped in the canvas. The ripples of fat in the woman’s stomach were almost too disgusting to look at. The background had taken on an opaque glaze like the skin that forms on the surface of unstirred gravy. Seeing the painting made Mrs. Girt feel sick and ashamed all at once. She stumbled out the door shaking her head, thinking that anyone

who would live with something like that in her house could never possibly understand what real beauty was.

CHAPTER III

TODAY IS NOT SEPTEMBER

Hurricane Katrina's first victim on the Biloxi coast was the Gran Tropicana Casino. The day after the storm, newspapers around the country were plastered with photos of its enormous tangerine and turquoise gaming floor lying on its side like a bloated whale carcass in the middle of Highway 90. At the time, Tim Harris was waiting out the evacuation with one of his cousins in Hattiesburg, and the minute he saw the pictures he knew he should start looking for another job and another place to live. Until the rebuilding got underway he would have to settle for sleeping on his mom's couch in Gulfport, but finding work in a natural disaster area turned out to be an easier prospect than he had thought. Once the power was back on, almost every business in town was hiring to replace the employees who had decided not to come back, and paying well. Tim knew it wouldn't last, so when he spotted a sign offering twelve dollars an hour for changing oil at the Ten Minute Lube on Creosote Road, he jumped right on it.

They put him to work down in the pit, an easy job, just pull the plug and replace the filter. But it was hot as hell down there, and the oil left a greasy sheen on the back of his arms, plus black gunk under his fingernails that wouldn't come out no matter how hard he scrubbed later. To top it off, Tim was pretty sure that at thirty-two, he was the oldest trainee in Ten Lube history. The next oldest was Johnnie Azimuth, the associate

manager, who Tim judged to be about twenty-five, though it was hard to tell, big as the guy was.

Johnnie was six-three or four, pushing two fifty, maybe two sixty. He curled a set of thirty pound dumbbells during breaks to stay ripped, and had a look that implied he wasn't afraid to use those big muscles if he was so inclined. All day long he stood up in the service bay and filled oil, calling orders down to the pit, pressuring customers into buying \$75 radiator flushes they didn't need or want, something his size no doubt helped him do. Johnnie was intense, not the kind of guy you said no to. Which is why one day about a month after Tim started work, when Johnnie poked his face through the netting between Bay Two and the pit to ask if Tim minded giving him a hand with something after work, Tim said okay without giving it a second thought.

They closed shop at five and took off in Johnnie's Trans Am, a late model, not a Bandit edition but set up to look like one, all the way down to the gold pin stripes and snowflake rims. They headed east on 90 toward Biloxi, T-tops off, windows down, Johnnie playing with the radio and weaving the T/A in and out of the slower traffic. To the left, a concrete barrier blocked out the westbound lanes but further uphill, Tim could see the overgrown grass and piles of debris from Katrina. To the right, out the passenger window, only a thin strip of sand lay between them and the Gulf of Mexico. The water was pale green with splotches of pink where the sunset reflected off the peaks, an unusual color for the Gulf, even at this time of day. Johnnie must have noticed it too.

"Any other time, man, that fucker's doo-doo brown," he said.

Johnnie took the exit for the Edgewater Mall, down-shifting into second gear so the engine would redline and make the straight pipes really rumble. He flipped what was left of his cigarette out the window and opened the glove box. A large nickel-plated revolver was laying on top of his registration and a stack of yellow napkins. Johnnie shuffled through until he found a bag of weed and a small bowl and tossed them into Tim's lap.

"Hook it up," he said, then noticing Tim eyeing the gun, picked it up. "Pretty sweet, huh? .44 Magnum, same kind Dirty Harry had. I got it from a guy up in Moss Point, owed me some money." Johnnie held it out for a few seconds, letting the sunlight gleam off the barrel. "Now that is a gun, man. Soon as I get some ammo, I'm takin it back behind the shop and popping a few of those old batteries we got lyin around. You in?"

Tim was having trouble getting his fingers to pack the bowl. "Sure. Sounds cool to me."

"We'll blow them fuckers sky high."

Johnnie pulled into the mall entrance, right in front of a group of kids waiting for rides from their parents. A guy near the back made his way forward, glancing from side to side like he wasn't really sure where he was. He was carrying a small box, and his red hair was plastered to his head, wet with some kind of gel or hairspray. This couldn't be who they had come to pick up. Did Johnnie have a disabled brother he had never mentioned? The guy sidled up to the car and stared at Tim through the window. His mouth hung open, and an unusually large tongue was held pushed to the edge of his lips.

“Don’t just sit there,” Johnnie said. “Let the man in. You’ll have to sit in back.”

Tim got out and let the new guy have his seat, barely having enough time to get in the back before Johnnie took off chirping the tires. When the mall was out of sight, Johnnie introduced the guy as Frank. Frank took a quick glance at him.

“You tell him about the plan yet?” he asked Johnnie.

“Naw, man, not yet.”

“And you’re sure he’s cool?”

Johnnie’s eyes went up to the rearview, said, “Yeah. You’re cool, ain’t you, Tim?” Then tossed back his Zippo.

“Sure,” said Tim.

“He says he’s cool.”

Frank was undoing the top buttons of his shirt, untucking it at the same time. He put the red box in the seat next to Tim.

Tim took a deep hit from the bowl and passed it up to Frank.

“What’s in the box?” he asked.

“Stickers,” Frank said. Then as if to explain, he reached back and opened it up. All kinds of stickers were stuffed in there, mostly cartoon characters, some with cutesy words. Like this one: DINO-MITE over top a picture of a smiling brontosaurus in a baseball cap and bow tie.

Frank said, “I take em in the mall with me, walk around like I don’t know what’s going on? People buy em off me for change. Sometimes as much as a dollar a piece.”

“People pay that much for a Sponge Bob sticker?”

“People feel sorry enough for you, bro, they’ll give you anything.”

“What d’you say to them?”

“Don’t say shit. I pretend I can’t even look at em. Just hold out the box and shake it. They know what I want.”

“Sure,” said Johnnie. “Drool on yourself a little...”

“Yeah, well, you gotta play the part, bro. And I’m sellin a product, so it’s not like they can bust me for panhandling neither. I buy one of those packs of stickers for two bucks? Make twenty off it, easy day. In less than an hour’s work, too. All I got to worry about is nosey fucks askin questions, sayin they want to help. ‘Where do you live?’ ‘Where’re your parents?’ That kind of shit.”

Johnnie told Tim about how Frank hated talking to people, how if it wasn’t for having to deal with people he’d have already made enough to get out of Mississippi. Frank had been a cook on the navy base until some senior chief had caught him auctioning off government equipment on Ebay.

They were back on 90 now, near an intersection with the road one of Tim’s great aunts used to live on. In the summers he had gone there to play in her yard while his mom picked up an extra shift at the Wal-Mart. In those days it had been an oak-lined street of little ranch houses. Now it was a jumbled pile of debris: broken glass, splinters of wood, pieces of brick, and thrown in among them, every type of personal item you could imagine. Kid’s toys, shoes, rakes, plates, pieces of bloated particle board furniture. In the branch of a bowed over pine, a pink strapless bra whipped around in the sea breeze.

“Hey, where’re we goin?” Tim asked.

Johnnie and Frank looked at each other and smiled.

“My mom’s house,” said Johnnie.

“What for?”

“When was the last time you wore a suit?”

Tim knew he could walk away whenever he wanted, forget the whole thing with Johnnie, get another job somewhere else, maybe some fast food place paying nine an hour because they couldn’t find anyone to cover the late shift. It wouldn’t be near as good as twelve dollars an hour for changing oil nine-to-five, but at least there probably wouldn’t be someone like Johnnie there. Then he would think about all his bills: the rent he was paying now, old gambling debts from the Gran Tropicana, payments on the big screen TV and surround sound that had been swept away by the storm surge. He could use the extra cash from the shop and from whatever it was Johnnie wanted to do, which he promised wasn’t much. Just wear a suit for about an hour and pocket a hundred dollars.

Johnnie and Frank took turns slowly hinting at the plan, a form of insurance fraud, as they went back up 49 to Johnnie’s mom’s house in Orange Grove. It all sounded bat shit crazy, even for a knucklehead like Johnnie, with a G.E.D. and a tattoo of the Tasmanian Devil on his right forearm, but Tim had a good buzz going and if somebody was going to get ripped off, it might as well have been the insurance companies. Tim didn’t have any mercy where they were concerned. They certainly had shown none to him.

At Johnnie's mom's house, Johnnie led them into a little shag-carpeted room in the back and pulled a blue serge suit from the closet.

"My old man left it here," he said. "It may be a little big on you, man, but it'll do."

Tim shrugged and took the suit. Judging from the cut, it had been hanging in the closet since the seventies, probably about the same time the shag carpet had been put down. "So, how does this work?"

"Okay. What we do is, we go door-to-door telling people we're representatives from the Gulf State Fire Insurance Company, right? I tell the owners I'm there to collect payment on an insurance loan from Katrina..."

"The beauty of it is," Frank interrupted, "so many people took out so many loans from all those suits that were goin around after the storm, nobody remembers who all they took money from."

"Or how much," said Frank.

"Right. So I tell em Gulf State had this Hurricane Relief Fund, which was just a short term, interest free loan."

"Hold on," Tim said. "I thought the insurance company was who we were going to rip off."

"You did?"

"That's what most people mean when they say insurance fraud."

Johnnie laughed. "What d'you know? I never was good with all that legal shit. You see, Frank. Told you we got the right guy."

Tim tossed the suit on a twin bed in the corner. “If we’re not ripping off the insurance company, who are we ripping off?”

“To put it in general terms, dumb people.”

“And these, uh, dumb people, they believe that you’re an insurance agent?” Tim asked.

“Shit yeah. I lay it on real thick, tell em how we at Gulfstate don’t want to have to pursue legal action. I even got credentials.”

He handed Tim a business card with the name Jacob Norris, Senior Agent, the kind you could rub your fingers across and feel the letters. It looked real enough, aside from the fact insurance was spelled with an e.

“What’s the number to?” Tim asked.

“An escort service up in Meridian.”

Tim stared at the card for a few seconds before he finally gave it back. “So how much do you get?” he asked.

Johnnie frowned, thinking. “To be honest, man, not that much. I don’t want it to sound too suspicious, you know, so I say they owe twenty bucks. Maybe fifty if the house looks nice enough. But that’s where you come in. This is our chance to step up our game. Tonight we’re hittin this mark I’ve been watching for a while. We’re gonna take her for five hundred. You just have to stand there and pretend to be my lawyer. I even got you a briefcase.”

Johnnie held up a brown leather case that was scuffed and worn thin around the edges.

“You think this lady’s gonna give you five hundred dollars just cause I’m standing there holding a briefcase?”

“Old people’re scared of lawyers, man. Don’t understand em. And you’re the only guy I know, or I should say, the only one I trust, who’s old enough to pass.”

“Won’t she want to see some sort of ID or something?”

“It won’t even cross her mind,” said Frank. “Who the fuck would believe somebody’d come to their house, seven o’clock at night, to collect payment on a loan anyway? The people we’ve been dealing with here, they ain’t exactly rocket scientists, bro.”

“That’s the trick: you gotta confuse em. Confuse the shit out of em, and they’ll give you anything you want. These marks’re all like cats. There’s lots a ways to skin em.”

“So what part do you play in this?” Tim asked Frank. There was something about the kid that he didn’t like, a look in his eyes that suggested he thought he was better than any of this.

“Me? I’ll be in the car waitin on my cut.”

“Frank’s gonna step aside on this one,” Johnnie said, “so you can get your feet wet. Your cut’ll still be less than his cause it was all his idea. But if you do good, I’ll bump it up next time.”

Tim hated the way Johnnie talked to him like he was the subordinate, especially when they weren’t even at work. “I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not sure this is really worth my time.”

Johnnie let that hang in the air for a few seconds. Then, his voice serious, he said, “Don’t fuck me on this, Tim. I’d hate it if you showed up to work on Monday and had a random drug test. I’d have to fire you. You don’t think that twelve dollars an hour is coming from little Miss Daisy getting the oil changed in her Buick, do you?”

Johnnie stared at him, unsmiling, a thick vein in his neck standing out like a snake.

“Yeah, don’t be a pussy about it, bro,” said Frank.

“Just put on the suit,” Johnnie said, smiling again. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

Johnnie parked on a street where all the lights were out. Through the bifocals Johnnie had found in his dad’s old dresser drawer—to make him look more distinguished, he’d said—Tim could see that most of the houses on the block were damaged, still unoccupied. Many of them were missing windows or even the front door. The ones that had doors were marked with a fluorescent orange Xs, with numbers on either side to tell what the rescue people had found in the house. Some were more like frames than actual houses, the storm surge or the wind having swept away all the siding and shingles. Tim wondered how close they were to the beach, thinking he could make out the whine of the cars on 90.

After the storm, he had come back to a similar scene at his apartment complex. The front of the whole building had been ripped off, and what was left looked like a doll house that had been opened at the hinges so you could see into each room. Nothing had been salvageable. His unit was on the bottom floor and you could see the mark in the

drywall where the water had come almost to the ceiling. His TV, which was still in its 90 days same as cash grace period, had floated away or been toted off by looters who hoped saltwater didn't do much damage to its circuitry. The couch he had bought with his credit card was waterlogged and already growing a thick coat of angry-looking mold. It wasn't much, what had been in the apartment, but it was everything he had. He had insurance, but of course they had denied his claim, saying it was because he didn't have a flood rider on his policy or that the storm had been an act of God or something like that. Either way, it meant they weren't going to be paying him a thing.

Tim and Frank got out and switched seats. Tim hesitated, hoping that maybe he could somehow become invisible, maybe they would forget he was back there.

"You ain't bout to puss out, are you?" said Frank.

Johnnie touched him on the arm and said, "Naw. He's not pussin out. Are you, Tim?" In the shadows, Johnnie's eyes were barely visible. "C'mon, man. Twenty minutes tops. A hundred bucks."

Johnnie gave him this look that said it wasn't too much to ask, was it? Made it feel like, if he didn't go along, he would be messing up something that could've been so simple. Like it was such an easy thing, and Tim was trying to make it complicated.

Even though he'd never carried a briefcase before, Tim was pretty sure the one Johnnie had given him was too light to seem like a lawyer's. He decided he should walk holding it still, like it was loaded with all kinds of important papers, like he couldn't swing it because of all the weight. They approached a street lit by security lights. Tim could feel everything around him. The gravel beneath his shoes. The wind blowing up

from the Gulf. It ruffled his hair, and he realized how thin the wool of his suit was, could feel the way the material clung to his shoulders, tightening and relaxing with each step. He tried to pull his pants up further on his hips. Not having a belt and wearing pants three inches too big in the waist, he had to walk with his knees angled toward each other to keep them from falling down. His coat, the sleeves at least an inch too long, hung off of him like it was still on a rack, and he had to pull on the legs of his pants every couple steps to keep from walking on the cuffs.

Beside him, Johnnie was whistling something under his breath, just barely pushing out enough air to make a noise between his teeth. Tim listened for a few seconds before he recognized the bouncy tune as the chorus of "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dinah." If it was any consolation, Johnnie didn't seem to fit his part as insurance agent any more than Tim looked like a lawyer. The yellow light from the telephone poles cast his eyes in even deeper shadows than usual, almost blacked them out completely.

The house they were going to belonged to a woman named Mayellen Langston. As far as Johnnie could tell from going through her mail she lived alone in this little tiny house, what they used to call a shotgun shack, on account of how you could kill everybody in the place with one load of buckshot. The house was so small it seemed like nobody would have enough room to live in there. The front door, at the top of a three step concrete stoop, was lit by a naked bulb. The yard wasn't much to look at either: more sand than grass, a few weeds poking up here and there. A live oak was growing in the corner of the lot, its limbs sprawled across the ground so you had to step over them to get to the walkway. Her house was the only one left on the block. It wasn't right, the way a

storm could pick and choose like that. Tim thought he could deal with it if it had been everybody. But every time he drove by a house that stood untouched among the piles of debris, his hands would grip the wheel tighter and there would be a burning in his throat and chest. Tim paused at the curb, about to turn back. Johnnie clapped a hand on his shoulder and squeezed firmly.

“Let’s do this,” he said.

Johnnie knocked twice without an answer. The TV was going inside. Johnnie pulled back the screen door and knocked again, louder this time, and let the screen slam. Finally, the volume of the TV went down, then there was the noise of someone stumbling across a linoleum floor. The door opened, and a woman with white hair dressed in a housecoat with pink and blue flowers appeared behind the screen.

“Good evening, ma’am,” said Johnnie. “I hope we’re not disturbing you. Are you Missus Langston by any chance?”

The woman opened the screen door just wide enough to stick her face out.

“Yes, sir,” she said, looking in turn at both of them.

“Oh good. We’re at the right house then. I’m sorry about the time.”

“What?”

“It’s just we try to get by earlier in the day, in the afternoon most times. But we had trouble locating your residence here. Looked and looked and couldn’t find it. I hope you don’t mind talking to us now.”

“What’s this about?”

“Mrs. Langston, it’s all very simple. First, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Jacob Norris.” Johnnie extended a hand for Mrs. Langston to shake, saying, “And this here’s my legal counsel, Rusty Bartlett. We’re representatives from Gulfstate Fire and Insurance out of Mobile.”

“I don’t need any insurance,” said Mrs. Langston. She was eyeing Tim’s briefcase.

“I’m sure you don’t,” Johnnie said.

The old lady looked like somebody’s grandmother. Not Tim’s—his had been a wiry fifty-five year old chain-smoker who wore hip-huggers and wanted to be called Brenda—but somebody’s. Mrs. Langston’s face was soft, with sagging cheeks and lines of small wrinkles radiating out from the corners of her eyes. Tim nodded to her and turned to Johnnie so he could have something else to look at.

Johnnie pointed at the house and said, “This is a cozy little place you got here. Kind of close to the water, though. You didn’t stay here through the hurricane, did you Mrs. Langston?”

“Here? Lord, no. I got a son lives in Louisiana, up near Shreveport? He came down and took me to stay with him.”

“Have much damage when you got back?”

She said there was some damage, some trees down—used to be four in the yard, three pines and a live oak, and now she was down to just the one, the live oak. They had to replace part of the roof, some other damage, but she couldn’t keep it all straight. Her son, George, Jr., the one in Shreveport, sorted most of it out for her.

"It's changed things around here a whole heap," she said. "Don't nothin look like it used to."

"No, ma'am, it don't," said Johnnie. "Everything's different, that's for sure."

Mrs. Langston nodded as if Johnnie had been the one to think of it.

"I don't have to tell you, Mrs. Langston, but everything's been a mess at all these insurance places too. Over a year later, and we're still trying to get policies and things like that straightened out. But we're making progress. And that's what we're here to talk to you about. You see, Gulfstate had this program they put in place right after the storm to help out people who had damage. They called it the Hurricane Relief Fund. And what they did was basically go around asking if anybody needed help, you know, with money. They offered that to just about anybody that wanted it, even if they didn't have a policy."

"What does that have to do with me?" asked Mrs. Langston.

She was leaning up against the door frame now, her head still poking around the screen door. Over her shoulder, the opening credits to *Wheel of Fortune* were flashing on the screen of a thirteen inch TV. The most Tim could tell, it was a well kept place. Lot of stuff laying around, little figurines of clowns in a glass case, cross-stitched pillows piled in a high back chair. But nice and clean. You could tell she'd been living by herself for a while. Just waiting around to die. How could she possibly miss seven hundred fifty dollars? What would she buy? More porcelain clowns?

"Well, Mrs. Langston," Johnnie said. "Our records indicate that after the storm, on or about the fifth of September 2005, you signed a contract with us and received some money from the Relief Fund."

“I don’t remember any money,” she said.

“Are you saying you didn’t accept any money after the hurricane?”

“Well, there was some. I remember the Red Cross coming around, a few other people. I’m not sure who all. George, Jr. handled a lot of it for me.”

“Yes, ma’am, you’re right. The name on the paperwork is George Langston, Jr., but I’m afraid since he was acting on your part and you were the recipient of the money, it was your responsibility.”

Mrs. Langston looked at Tim, as if asking him to say whether or not this was true. Tim looked at his shoes.

“Responsibility for what? What are you saying?”

“What I’m saying, ma’am, is that you are the holder of the fund. Now, that money wasn’t free. It was a loan. A loan that, providing it was paid back within the year, we wouldn’t have charged you any interest on.” He paused a second, leaning in closer. “But we haven’t received a single payment. And the interest has been accumulating, Mrs. Langston. We’ve sent you numerous letters-”

“I haven’t seen any letters.”

“Trust me. We’ve tried to contact you several times. Made phone calls...”

The old lady was sinking down. It seemed the door frame was the only thing holding her up. Tim fought back the urge to offer her a hand, help her back to her feet.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

"It's simple, Mrs. Langston. You've gone back on your word. The original sum of the loan was five hundred dollars. Today, interest added, you owe seven hundred forty-nine dollars and fifty-three cents. Do you know what compound interest is?"

She didn't answer.

"It's a monster, Mrs. Langston. It can make people rich. Or ruin people's lives. In your case, I'd say it's more the second thing. And we don't want to see your life ruined."

"Wha, what is this about?" Mrs. Langston asked.

"What we're here to do is collect. We're offering you the opportunity to make good on this loan. For seven hundred and fifty dollars, we'll wipe this whole mess clean. It'll be like it never even happened. We'll forget everything. But if you don't pay up now, we'll be forced to take legal action."

Johnnie pointed to Tim. Tim's entire body was breaking out in a sweat. Fat beads were collecting on his armpits, pooling together, and then trickling down the sides of his torso. Mrs. Langston turned to him. She looked down at the briefcase. It occurred to him that she might notice the black under his fingernails and he hid them against his pant legs.

"What did you say your name was again?" she asked him.

"He didn't say," said Johnnie. "It's Rusty Bartlett."

Her eyes didn't leave Tim's. "You look mighty young, Mr. Bartlett, for a lawyer."

Tim tried to think of an answer, but Johnnie had it covered.

"The youngest in his class. And I assure you he's very good."

The old lady looked him over again. She didn't seem to be afraid of him. She smiled in a way that suggested she thought of he was on her side, like this was all a misunderstanding that he was here to correct.

"Where'd you go to law school?" she asked.

"Harvard," Tim said. It was the only name he could think of.

"He doesn't like to brag," Johnnie explained.

"How about that," the old lady said. "I got a nephew went to Harvard. But not for law. For anthropology—Indians and all that. His name is Brent, Brent Langston. Do you know him by any chance?"

"Afraid not, ma'am," said Tim.

"Mrs. Langston, we don't want to take you to court. Let's just settle this right now."

The old lady was still shaking her head, saying, "Maybe I can call George, Jr. You should talk to him about this."

"We don't want to talk to him," said Johnnie. "We want to talk to you."

"But I just... I just don't know."

"Well, we *do* know, Mrs. Langston. We know perfectly well. Don't think you can get out of this. Now here are the facts: You owe us this money. You took out a loan, with the promise you would pay it back by September of 2006. You didn't do it. Now you owe us more."

"But I didn't know!"

"Yes you did. We've sent letter after letter after letter. We've tried several times to reach you by phone. Why d'you think we're here now? Don't try to play games with us, Mrs. Langston. We've heard it all before. You were supposed to pay back this money in September. Today is not September, but it *is* time to pay up."

The old lady's worry was turning into fear. She took a step back from the door. Johnnie caught the screen.

"Don't try to get away with this, lady," said Johnnie. "Our lawyers are prepared to take you to court. We'll take everything you got, the house, the furniture, everything. Just give us the money."

"I don't—"

"And don't try to tell us you don't have it. You just cashed a check for two thousand dollars last week. We've been in contact with your bank, Mrs. Langston. We know everything about you. Everything."

Mrs. Langston stumbled back, tried to grab the door, but Johnnie reached in and caught her by the shoulder. Then he pulled the .44 Magnum from the waist of his pants. He kicked the door open and pulled the old lady out onto the steps.

"You see this?" he shouted, his face gone completely red. "It's a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and it'll blow your head clean off. You gotta ask yourself a question. Do I feel lucky?"

Tears ran down the wrinkles in the old lady's cheeks. She looked at Tim, blinking.

"Just give him the money, ma'am," he said.

Back in the T/A, speeding down 90, Johnnie was filling in Frank on what had happened.

“Then I started quoting Dirty Harry to her, man. Dirty fuckin Harry. I don’t even know where that shit came from.”

Johnnie turned around in the passenger seat and put the gun up to Tim’s face.

“Do ya feel lucky? Do ya, punk?”

Tim knew that if he wanted to he could pull the gun from Johnnie’s hands, beat him and Frank over the head with it. But he also knew he wouldn’t. They had him beat in numbers and in size, and besides... Out the window, he could see the lights of the other cars speeding by. They passed dark spots on either side of the road where houses and hotels should have been. Frank whipped quickly around a slow-moving Ford and Tim’s weight shifted in the seat.

Johnnie pulled the trigger, and the gun gave a hollow, metallic click. Johnnie laughed. He pulled out a hundred dollar bill and threw it on Tim’s leg. The bill sat there, fluttering in the wind coming through the window for a few seconds before a gust lifted it. It circled in air for a split second and then another draft knocked it down to the floorboard, and it disappeared underneath Johnnie’s seat.

CHAPTER IV

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

Roman McKinney was napping in the media room when the sound of his wife's voice woke him up.

"Roman! Roman! Could you come in here, please? Now?"

Even through the intercom she sounded breathless and panicky, but over the last eight and a half years, Roman had come to understand that panic was her natural response to any variety of situations, so he took his time shutting off the blu-ray player and projector and then shuffled downstairs, picking stray pieces of popcorn from his shirt as he went. It had been three hours since his last Oxycodone, and he told himself he could make it another hour before taking another.

He found Judy in the kitchen, bent over the stove, spooning out a plate of steamed vegetables. Their son, Bobby, sat on a stool at the bar, still wearing his helmet, knee pads, elbow pads, wrist guards, and first aid fanny pack.

"Hello, son," Roman said. "Looking sharp. What is it, Judy?"

"Bobby just got back from skating."

"Oh, really?" Roman took a seat next to his son. "Well, how was it? What's the verdict?"

"Fun."

“That’s good to hear. I would expect nothing less from a place that bills itself as Fun World. It’s the ‘capital of Fun,’ if you can believe what you hear in the commercials.”

Though Bobby was only six years old, Roman had developed the habit early on of talking to him as if he were an adult. He thought Bobby would take it as a sign of respect, a courtesy which he would then return once he was older. With the daughter he had with his first wife, he had made the mistake of assuming that respect would come naturally with age. He had talked to Stephanie like she was a child, and from then on she had operated under the belief that he was indebted to her, that being treated like a child when she was young gave her permission to behave childishly once she was grown. He would not make that mistake again.

“Mr. Barnes took them skating,” said Judy. She raised her eyebrows at Roman as she sat a plate of zucchini, summer squash, and carrots on the bar.

“That was nice of him. How is Jack these days?”

“Good,” said Bobby.

“What about Jacob? How is he?”

“He’s good too.”

“Well, isn’t that nice,” said Roman.

The Barnes family lived next door to the McKinneys, and since the two couples had sons who were close in age, they had shared babysitting duties over the past years, although Jack, who was an executive with an international marketing firm, was often away on business and had contributed least to the joint parenting endeavor.

“Bobby,” said Judy, “why don’t you tell Dad what you told me? Tell him what happened on your trip. And take off your helmet when you eat, please.”

“We had snow cones.”

“No, not that. Though I’m not particularly happy about that either.”

“Mine was grape.”

“No. Tell your dad what happened when you got to Fun World. What happened right after you walked in?”

“We rented skates.”

“No. After that, when-”

“Come on, Judy,” Roman interrupted. “Why don’t you just tell me what happened?”

Judy had put the steamer pot in the sink with the other dishes and was vigorously scrubbing it with a worn brillo pad. She looked up through a few strands of light blond hair that had fallen into her eyes. “There was a woman there,” she said.

“Oh, yeah,” said Bobby. “Mr. Barnes’ friend.”

Then he told Roman about the woman at the skating rink. She was blond, he said between mouthfuls of zucchini, and had been waiting near the snack bar when they came in. She and Mr. Barnes had sat at a table and talked while he and Jacob skated around. It was fun, even when the deejay turned down the lights and a group of big kids almost pushed them down, and afterwards Mr. Barnes’ friend bought them all snow cones. Jacob got cherry. Mr. Barnes and his friend got banana.

“Did you hear that?” said Judy. “She bought them snow cones.”

“Sounds like a nice gesture,” Roman said and turned to his son. “Do you mind if I have a carrot, Bobby?”

Bobby shrugged. Roman plucked an orange disc from the edge of the plate and popped it in his mouth. His neck and chest were starting to itch again, and he absentmindedly scratched.

“Mom?” Bobby said. “I’m full.”

“Of course you are. Full of high fructose corn syrup, artificial flavoring, FD&C Red #40, and Blue #2.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Put your plate in the dishwasher, please.”

When their son had left the kitchen, Judy turned to Roman. She performed the little routine she had developed to communicate she was agitated: she crossed and uncrossed her arms in front of her chest, then smoothed her blouse, brushed the loose hair from her forehead, and adjusted her ponytail.

“Well?” she said. “What do you think?”

“About what, love?”

“About Jack taking your son with him on a date.”

“A date? What do you mean?”

“He met a woman there, Roman.”

“A coworker.”

“A likely story.”

“How am I supposed to know the details of their relationship?”

“Come on. She was a blonde waiting for him in a skating rink.”

“I hardly see what her hair color has to do with anything.”

“A children’s skating rink, Roman.”

“So maybe she was there with her kid. Or kids.”

“Bobby didn’t say anything about any other children.”

“Maybe he forgot. Since when are we basing accusations on the word of our six year old? He may be advanced for his age, Judy, but come on. He still wets the bed sometimes.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Fine. What are you getting at? What does this mean?”

“You know as well as I do what this means, Roman. It means our neighbor just took his son and our son along with him on a date with his mistress.”

“Now she’s his mistress?”

“Well, she’s certainly not a stranger. And she’s obviously not someone Jack would bring to his house.”

“She’s also apparently not someone he cares much for. I mean, a roller rink. My God, he could have at least sprung for bowling.”

“Roman, this is serious.” Judy said, giggling. “Would you stop all that scratching?” She propped her right elbow in her left hand and massaged the hairline above her temples.

Roman thought it over: It did seem rather strange that Jack would meet a coworker at a skating rink, especially a female co-worker, who seemed to be there only

with the purpose of spending time with him. That she had bought everyone snow cones afterwards also seemed strange. What did that mean?

After a few seconds of careful deliberation, Roman spoke.

“Did they both get a snow cone?”

“Who? The boys?”

“No. Jack and his... ladyfriend. Did they get two separate snow cones or did they share the same one?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bobby said they had banana, right? But what does that mean? Does it mean that they both ordered banana, that they each had their own personal banana snow cone, or that they ordered a single banana snow cone and shared it?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s everything. If they ate two separate snow cones, well, that shows a certain degree of separation—a lack of intimacy. But if, on the other hand, they shared a single cone... That’s not something you would do with a coworker, now is it?”

“She’s not his coworker.”

“How do you know that?”

“Okay, maybe she really is his coworker, but that’s not all she is.”

“Obviously not, if they shared a snow cone.”

“How could we ever prove that?”

Judy dropped her arms and went to the bay window that overlooked the Barneses' front yard. It was the middle of summer, and though it was late in the afternoon, the sun was still high above the horizon.

"We could ask Bobby to clarify," Roman continued. "Were there two cones or one cone? A single cone mingling germs and passions."

"Or you could ask him."

"Who?"

Judy pointed out the window. "Jack. He's out there washing his car. That ugly Corvette."

"I always thought that car was rather nice," Roman said, although in truth, he had also thought many times about how clichéd a purchase it was for a man like Jack, who had just turned forty. But then he would think of how people must see his own midlife crisis: divorcing his wife of fifteen years, trading her in for a younger, newer model.

"A car like that shows you a man that's trying to make up for something, you know," Judy said.

"Hmm. Perhaps you're right."

"You've got to go over there. You've got to talk to him."

"What about?"

"About making our son an accomplice in an illicit love affair. You've got to confront him about it, let him know we don't appreciate it. Tell him we don't approve."

She was right. Taking someone else's kid—taking your own kid—on a date with the other woman was out of bounds, even for an asshole like Jack. He couldn't imagine

himself bringing Stephanie along when he had first started things with Judy. Out the window, Jack was soaping up his Corvette. The car's mustard yellow paint glimmered in the sunlight.

Judy crossed the room. She laid her hand over his heart and kissed him on the neck, right where it itched most. Strange thing, Roman thought. This was the most intimate he and his wife had been in months. Judy wanted another baby, but Roman didn't think it was a good idea and their sex life had devolved into a high-stakes game of chicken that would go on until one of them changed their mind.

Of course, they had talked about kids before they got married. Judy had been twenty-two then, and Roman had agreed it would have been unfair to not give her at least one child of her own, even though the thought of another hostile progeny hadn't thrilled him. But another one on top of that? He felt like they'd been lucky with Bobby so far, but that didn't mean he wanted to push it. Besides, there was his age to think about. Jesus, by the time the kid was out of diapers, he'd be fifty. He remembered the particularly sobering and depressing day he had discovered that he would start drawing social security at the same time Bobby would be graduating from college.

Roman could smell Judy's coconut and verbena shampoo. It had been seventy-two days since the last time they made love, and he could feel every one of those days reverberating through his body as he held his wife close to him, her breasts brushing against his ribs, her hair floating closer to his nostrils each time inhaled. He didn't think it was his place to confront Jack about his alleged infidelity, especially with such scant

evidence. But he knew it would make Judy happy, and she was stroking his arm in a way that suggested that maybe later they could find a compromise on the baby situation.

“You’re right,” Roman said finally. “I’ll go say something.”

The Barnes and McKinney families shared the cul-de-sac of Briarwood Court, in the highly regarded Stratford Acres subdivision. The lots in Stratford were huge, the houses tremendous, made of stone and brick and raw beams of exotic wood. It was the kind of place where every detail was looked after and every opportunity for enhancement was exploited. Rather than leave the cul-de-sac as a plain slab of asphalt, the landscape architect had installed an island in the center, which was planted with crepe myrtles and flowering shrubs bordered by perennial flowers and bulbs that bloomed in succession throughout the growing season. As he crossed his front lawn to the Barneses’, Roman took note of a row of coral pink gladioluses that were just starting to open up in front of a crop of Black-Eye Susans.

He had never liked talking to Jack. Even at their age, Jack had a way of making him feel like he was back in high school. Jack was the all-star captain of the football team and Roman the dorky mathlete trying to convince the world he was cool enough to sit at the popular table. Despite the heat, his fingers had gone numb with cold sweat and he became aware that his tongue was running back and forth over the backs of his incisors, a nervous habit he had never been able to curb. He checked his watch: thirty-seven minutes until the next pill. Taking it early one time wouldn’t hurt. He pulled a Tylox from his pocket and took it quickly, the pill sticking in his throat briefly before going down.

Jack was squatted beside the Corvette's left fender, using a rag to get between the tiny gaps in the chrome wheel. He was singing along with a Hall and Oates song coming from the car's radio, his partially bald head bobbing in time with the beat.

"Uh, hello, Jack," Roman said.

Without seeming the least bit embarrassed for having been caught providing a falsetto accompaniment to "Out of Touch," Jack looked up from his work and wiped the sweat from his eyes with the tail of his sleeveless Jimmy Buffet t-shirt.

"McKinney! How's it going, partner?"

"Oh, fine. Washing the car, huh?"

"Yep. Hell to keep her clean with this paint."

Jack dropped his rag into a bucket of soapy water and stood to spray the wheel down with the hose.

"How's business?" Roman asked.

"Booming. I'm taking off tonight for Los Angeles. Got a company out there, a taco and quesadilla mall franchise, ready to ink a deal for two point five. I may use the commission to buy a house up at Lake George, if I can talk Ruthie into it. You and the wife could bring the kid up, let the boys ride around on jetskis or something. We'll get drunk on margaritas and pass out in the hot tub."

"Sounds great."

"What about you, how's things in your world?"

"It's good. Lots of overbites this week."

“Hey, you let me know if you ever want to do a work up on your office. We can get spots in magazines, maybe even some billboards. We don’t usually represent small outfits like that, but I could talk the boys into cutting you a deal.”

“I’ll think about it,” Roman said.

Jack pitched this offer to provide exposure for Roman’s orthodontist practice every time he saw him. Roman had been “thinking about it” for four years.

“So,” Roman said. “I hear you took the boys roller skating today.”

“That’s right. You know, Jake isn’t too keen with his skates yet, but he didn’t do so bad. I think they had a pretty good time.”

“How did you like it?”

“That Fun World is something else. You wouldn’t believe the size of the arcade they got in there. Frickin’ carpet everywhere, though. Even in the bathrooms. Everywhere you go, you’re steppin’ in some stain, something squishing under your feet. Nacho cheese, ketchup, pee, who knows what.”

“Sounds awful.”

“Ah, it’s not so bad. The boys liked it.”

The pill was breaking down in Roman’s stomach. He imagined it dissolving down there, reacting with his digestive juices to form a sort of algal bloom of frothy narcotics, a process which resulted in a buzzy warmth that began in his middle and slowly radiated out into the rest of his body.

“Well,” said Roman. He licked his lips and brought some spit to his tongue. “A funny thing happened when Bobby came home. He was telling Judy about the trip and he mentioned something about snow cones.”

Roman thought he saw Jack flinch, a quick involuntary stutter as his hand was going into the bucket for more suds.

“Oh yeah,” Jack said. “We all had a snow cone after the kids were done skating. Hope that’s okay.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. It’s just... See, the thing is, Bobby seems to think there was this woman there and that you sat with her while he and Jake were skating and that she was the one who bought the snow cones.”

Jack stopped again to wipe the sweat from his eyes.

“That’s right. Carol. She’s an associate from work. She’s an accountant. You know, in the accounting department. She was, just happened to be there, so we sat together to keep each other company. You okay McKinney?”

“Huh?”

“You look flush.”

“Really?”

“Jesus, man, you’re as red as that tree over there.” Jack pointed at one of the crepe myrtles in the cul-de-sac island.

“Oh, I’m fine. It’s a little hot out here is all.”

“You can say that again.”

“So she was there with her kids too?”

“Carol? Yeah, sure, of course.”

“How old are they?”

“I think the oldest one’s seven? I don’t know about the other one.”

“Two, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Bobby didn’t mention any other kids.”

“Well, I think they were playing in the arcade the whole time.”

Jack again got up and proceeded to rinse down the back wheel. He aimed the hose directly at the middle of the rim, so that water splashed outward in every direction making a small rainbow. He held it there for longer than necessary and sucked in the corner of his mouth as if he was thinking of something to say.

Roman considered leaving it at that. He had confronted Jack about the woman, and obviously he wasn’t going to admit to anything. Maybe Jack was having an affair, maybe he wasn’t. It wasn’t any of their business. He would have to find another way to convince his wife to have sex and to not have another kid. But the drugs were working now, loosening him up. He had a strong urge to put Jack in his place.

“Look,” Roman said after Jack put the hose down. “I don’t want to accuse you of anything here. I just wanted to tell you that Judy and I would appreciate it if you didn’t involve our son in any of your liaisons, if that is in fact what happened.”

Jack looked at him. His mouth tightened into a slight grimace, then quickly corrected itself. A hint of disdain showed in his eyes, as if it bothered him to have to answer for anything at all, as if he felt no need to confess, or maybe it was that he felt that

this look, this grimace or whatever it had been, was confession enough. Was that what it was, a confession? Or was he innocent and merely disgusted by Roman's implication?

"Liaison," he said. "What are you, in the C.I.A. now, McKinney?"

"No. Nothing of the sort. Listen, I didn't mean to upset you, Jack. It's just, you should know that as children grow up—especially boys—they move through certain spheres of influence..."

Roman faltered. He wasn't sure where this phrase had come from. Spheres of influence: It had fallen out of his mouth before he even realized he was saying it. Maybe it was from some child development book Judy had made him read when she was pregnant with Bobby.

"And one of the most important ones," he continued, "is centered around the male figures in their lives. The actions of the father figure—any father figure—form the axis of one of these spheres, and they can have a very lasting impact on a child, even if the actions themselves are not something he understands as they happen."

Jack had turned away from Roman and was walking to the other side of the car, apparently resolved to listen no further to any talk of spheres and axes. The radio, which was set to 104.7's Awesomely Eighties Weekend, was now segueing from "When Doves Cry" to "Walk Like an Egyptian."

"So I guess what I'm asking, Jack," Roman said in as firm a tone as he could summon. "Is that, in the future, you not allow Bobby to be witness to any extramarital rendezvous, however innocent they may be."

He waited for Jack's reply, for him to curse or kick over the water bucket, for Jack to jump up and challenge him to a fight, or simply punch him in the nose. But Jack did none of these things. He simply snorted again and spit into the brown grass at the edge of the driveway, then started to sing along with The Bangles with a complacency that seemed to signal this was the end of the conversation.

Roman turned to go back to his house. He knew Judy would be disappointed that he hadn't been able to get Jack to confess, but maybe he could convince her that the situation was resolved. Jack would never again consider using their son as an alibi.

Mrs. Edwell, the elderly widow who lived on Brushwood Lane, was walking her Peek-a-poo around the cul-de-sac, and Roman nodded to her as if it were an ordinary July day. Then in a voice that echoed across the neighborhood, he heard Jack yell:

“Go fuck yourself, McKinney! Go straighten some teeth, you fucking orthodontist!”

The Peek-a-poo's ears perked up, and Mrs. Edwell gave Roman a look that seemed to ask whether this was a personal attack on Roman or an attack on the art of orthodontia itself. He shrugged at her and hurried on numb legs up the driveway to his house, thankful that the warmth was finally reaching his fingers.

Roman had first developed his reliance on prescription-strength painkillers following a hiking accident: on the Appalachian Trail two summers before he had slipped on a mossy rock and fell five feet, breaking his right ankle in three places. At first he hadn't like the way the pills muddled his brain, but with time had come to enjoy the

fuzziness they gave his depth perception and the mercifully slow reaction time they granted him no matter what stimuli he found himself confronted with. He had gone off of them cold turkey when the scrip ran out. Five days later he was back on, this time after raiding his narcotics cabinet at work. It lasted about a month, until Judy had found the empty red pill bottles at the bottom of the trash and threatened to force him into rehab if he didn't quit. Kicking the habit the second time had been harder. He couldn't do it cold turkey and had to enlist Judy's help weaning him off the pills by making her the sole executor of his stash. He had thought he had kicked them for good, but this standoff with Judy changed that. He had started again on a Monday, swiping a handful of Vicodin, from a box of samples left by a pharmaceutical rep. By that Friday, he had amassed an impressive collection of painkillers: Tylox, Percoset, Oxycodone, a few Demerol—all hidden in a paper bag at the bottom of his sock drawer.

He rationalized his new use, first, by claiming it was only a temporary solution to an also temporary problem, then, once he realized he was hooked for the long haul, by telling himself that at least he was better off than most addicts. Unlike the so-called hillbilly heroin addicts of Appalachia, he didn't crush his pills and snort them or chew them up. Most of the time, because of habit or reluctance to disregard his training, he even followed the dosage recommendations. His was a dignified addiction, an upper-middle class addiction. One without the unsavory trappings of lesser forms of drug abuse. One without needles, without dealers, without damaged nasal passages or irritated lungs. It was a clean and efficient high. The most he would ever need in the way of

paraphernalia was a glass of water. The worst side effects, itchy skin and never ending constipation. In a certain sense, it was even legal.

Later that night, after Bobby had been tucked in, Roman and Judy reviewed the confrontation in Jack's driveway as they were getting ready for bed.

"Spheres of what?" Judy asked.

"Spheres of influence. I think it's from one of those baby books you... asked me to read."

"Never heard of it. You must have picked it up somewhere else."

"Maybe."

They both began brushing their teeth.

"Show me the face again," Judy said through a mouth of foam.

Roman spit into his sink and looked up at the mirror. He concentrated on the muscles around his mouth, trying to recreate the same fleeting grimace he had seen in Jack's face. But he lacked the necessary muscular coordination and what resulted more resembled the look of someone who had just smelled a dirty diaper and realized they were the one who had to change it.

"It was like that," he said. "But not as extreme. And it was much quicker."

"Quicker?"

"He didn't make it for very long. Not even a second. A fraction of a second."

"Like how much of a second?"

"I don't know, Judy... thirteen sixtieths of a second."

Roman wrapped a length of floss around his fingers and began sawing it between his lower incisors in search of a popcorn kernel that was lodged there. He had meant his estimate as a joke, but Judy seemed to be weighing it carefully as she waited for the hot water to reach her faucet. After she had splashed some on her cheeks and soaped them up, she pronounced her conclusion.

“I think you’re onto something, Roman.”

“Come again?”

“If it had been caused by indignation, it would have lasted much longer. The way he suppressed it shows guilt. It shows he didn’t want you to see his reaction. In fact, if he had had the option, I bet he wouldn’t have reacted at all. I wish I had been there. If I’d seen it in person, I could tell you for sure.”

The two finished the rest of their nightly hygiene in silence. It seemed that the whole thing had been dropped, but as they were putting away the throw pillows and turning down their comforter, Judy returned to the matter.

“What about the snow cones?”

“Snow cones?”

“Did you ask about the snow cones?”

“Yes. He freely admitted to feeding your son empty calories. And didn’t seem the least bit ashamed of it, either. It was a blatant act of disregard for child development possibly leading to an unhealthy body mass index and/or a variety of dental maladies.”

“Ha, ha,” she said and smiled broadly. “You know, it’s very hard to have an honest talk with you when you’re being so darn witty. Was it one or two?”

“I forgot to ask.”

“I thought the snow cone question was central to our hypothesis.”

“It was. Wait. Ours?”

“I thought some more about it. It makes sense.”

She smiled, bringing out a slight dimple in her right cheek. It was this lonely dimple and her ice blue eyes, which, to Judy’s chagrin, could only be described as elfish, that had first attracted Roman to her.

“I wasn’t able to find out about the cones,” he said. “But I’m not so sure it matters.”

“So you agree that the woman was his mistress?”

“Well, that or something along those lines.”

“Jack is cheating on Ruth.”

“It appears that way, yes.”

“And you’re sure?”

“As much as I can be, I suppose.”

Judy sucked a breath between her teeth. “It’s just horrible,” she whispered. Roman feared that she would start to cry, but she retained her composure.

“Yes it is.”

They kissed goodnight and turned out their bedside lamps. Roman turned onto his side, disappointed that their sexual drought would continue. Maybe he should relent, tell Judy they could have another kid. Seventeen minutes later, Judy snapped her light back on and shook his shoulder.

“Roman, are you asleep?”

“Almost,” he said, though in fact, he was nowhere near sleep. He had been playing the confrontation with Jack over in his head, trying to determine what method, if any, he could have used to nonchalantly find out if Jack and his acquaintance had shared a snow cone.

“I just can’t stop thinking about Ruth,” Judy said.

Roman rolled over and kissed her on the left eyebrow.

“I’m sorry, love. It’s a messy business.”

“We need to tell her.”

“I’m not too sure that’s the right thing to do.”

“Of course it is. Roman, we know that her husband is having an affair. We can’t just keep that information to ourselves when she’s right there, next door, sleeping beside that sleezeball.”

“Who says we can’t? It’s none of our business. And Jack’s not there. He left for Los Angeles tonight.”

“A likely story. I bet he’s meeting that bimbo again. I bet he has one in every city. And yes it is our business. We’re neighbors. The boys play together all the time. Bobby’ll probably go over there tomorrow. Is that what you want him exposed to?

“Of course not.”

“Remember the spheres of influence?”

“I thought we determined that didn’t come from any of the baby books.”

“Who cares. It still makes sense when you think about it.”

Judy crossed her arms under her chest as if their course of action had been decided. The tiny hairs on her forearms were standing on end. Roman hated it when she used his own arguments against him, but she was right. It wasn't a healthy environment for Bobby—not to mention Jacob—to be brought up in.

"Maybe we'll just stop letting Bobby go over there," he said. "The boys can only play over here from now on."

"You know that won't work. Children don't respond well to change. And what would you tell them the reason for that is? What would you tell Ruth? My kid can't come to your house because your husband is a, a, man-whore?"

Roman laughed. "Now you're being ridiculous, Judith."

"No," she said, playfully shoving his shoulder. "You're the one who thinks we can just suddenly avoid any contact with the people who live two hundred feet from us."

"You're right. That is a bit unreasonable."

They let the question of what should be done linger for a few seconds. Then Judy threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. Her pink slip billowed as she crossed the room to the closet. She threw on her robe, a plush red one that Roman had got her for Christmas, with an oversized collar that encircled her head and shoulders like a feather boa.

"You've got to call and tell her," she said.

"Right now?"

"Yes."

"Why should I have to do it?"

“She knows my voice too well.”

“She could just as easily recognize mine.”

“You’re right.” Judy sighed. “And Jack knows we know, so he could always just say it was us if she confronts him about it. We need proof. But don’t I have an obligation to tell her? Ruth has been a good friend to me. I can’t possibly keep this from her. How could I look her in the face when I know her husband’s cheating on her right under her nose?”

“But you don’t know for sure.”

“I know enough.”

Judy paced over to the window and looked out toward the Barnes’. Roman knew she couldn’t possibly see much from this angle, maybe if the kitchen light was still on. He got up and went to her, wrapped his arms around her from behind, and kissed her on the ear. He moved his hand to the split in her robe. She squeezed her thighs together, then turned to face him.

“I know you’re using again, Roman.”

“What?”

“I can see it in your eyes. They’re completely glazed over. And I can hear your guts rumbling from across the room.”

Roman stared at her, speechless, frozen. He could see no way out of it, so he nodded pathetically.

“I knew it!” she said. “Where are you hiding them this time?”

“At the bottom of my underwear drawer.”

“Is that why you’ve taken an interest in laundry lately?”

“Yes.”

Judy went to their dresser and dug through his underwear drawer until she pulled out a paper bag he had wrapped in a pair of silk J. Crew boxer shorts.

“Jesus, Roman. There’s enough here to numb an elephant.”

He stood there, still motionless, still unable to act or state his case. Not that laying the blame on her desire to have another baby would make things better.

Judy spun around and went to the bathroom. She shuffled around in there for a few seconds. Roman waited, expecting to hear the sound of her flushing the pills down the toilet. Instead, she reemerged with a glass of water.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m going to take one.”

“What?”

“I’m taking one.” She held up a pink pill the size of a pebble. “What is this, Percocet? Whatever it is, I’m taking it. I want to see what it’s like.”

“Don’t. You’re being irrational.”

“No. I want to see what the big deal is.”

Before he could stop her, she dropped the pill onto her tongue and followed it with half the glass of water. The room was silent except for the muffled sound of an airplane flying high overhead.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Roman said quietly.

“Well, I did.”

She put the glass on the shelf and sat beside him on the bed.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll call Ruth and tell her about Jack. But can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

Judy shook her head. “I don’t care about Ruth,” she said “I mean, I care about Ruth, but...” She turned to him, a tear paused on her cheek, then slid quickly down her chin. “I can feel it,” she said. “I can feel the Percocet.”

“Actually I think it was Oxycontin.”

Judy kissed him on the cheek. “It’s making me sleepy,” she said. She lay down on her side, pulling him along with her. They began to kiss. “My head’s all loopy,” she said, pulling away, smiling.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I see what you’ve been saying now, about the warmth I mean.”

“I don’t want you getting hooked too.”

“I know,” Judy said. Her eyes were staring at the ceiling, rolling loose in her head and didn’t seem to be seeing anything at all. “Tomorrow I’ll hide them from you. We’ll start weaning you off of them again. Slower this time.”

Roman started to tell her that maybe this time he should go to someone, a drug counselor or something, but she cut him off with a kiss and a hand sliding past the waist of his pajama pants. She climbed on top of him, straddled him, and for the first time in over two months, they made love. It crossed his mind during the act that he hadn’t put on a condom, and for all he knew Judy was off the pill, but he didn’t care. He could see the

future stretched out before him. Not just his future, the future of the whole damn human race: a long line of babies, screaming faces, crying, wailing to be born.

At about two a.m. he awoke in the same position, face up on the edge of the bed. Judy had moved to her side and was under the covers, snoring softly, the sound as thin and labored as a kitten's purring. His mouth was dry and his head was throbbing with a horrible pain that started behind his eyes, bounced off the top of his skull, and then descended down the base of his neck to his shoulders. He knew another Tylox or Oxycontin would quiet it, but for now he would tolerate it. Relish it the way he imagined an alcoholic would relish a hangover from the night before, as the souvenir of his return from the brink of self-annihilation.

He stumbled downstairs to the kitchen, not bothering to turn on the lights. In the glow of the refrigerator he finished a jug of cranberry juice. The garage floodlight was still on over at the Barnes house, but the windows were all dark. He thought briefly of his promise to Judy about calling Ruth to tell her about Jack's woman at the skating rink. He laughed out loud at the stupidity of it: a blonde and a banana snow cone. You should be worried because your husband and another woman shared a frozen water product topped with artificially flavored syrup. Despite its silliness, the idea unintentionally brought to mind his daughter. Stephanie was a sophomore at UCLA now, studying German and urban planning, taking summer classes. What was it, 11:00 out there? It wasn't too late for a twenty year old to be up. He could call her, relay the story of his crazy neighbor, tell her about her step-mom's scheme to have another baby, about his own prescription drug problem. Your old man's a pill head, he could say. Why don't I come out to visit you

once I get clean? Or you could come here—I still have some of your things in one of the guest rooms. He laughed aloud at the ridiculousness of it, tears rimming his eyes. His head felt like a watermelon split and being pried apart from the center.

He crept back upstairs to the bedroom. He cautiously pulled back the covers and settled into bed. The blood thumped a staccato rhythm in his ears. He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing through his nose, thinking that if he could calm his mind and settle into a slower rhythm sleep would come faster. He could tell from the pace of her breathing and from the way her weight didn't seem so heavy on the mattress that Judy was awake. He lay there patiently, waiting for her to sigh or speak or cough, to do something, perform whatever task she felt necessary to acknowledge his presence, anything.

CHAPTER V

RETURN TO ROME

The most memorable experience of Edie Collier's life was a trip to Rome she had taken as a junior in high school, in 1951. She had gone there with a group of nine other students from around the country, having earned her spot on the trip with an essay written from the prompt "The Chief Purpose of Travel," in which she had asserted that the main reason for traveling outside one's own country was to expand one's view of the world. "One must go abroad to broaden," she had claimed in the final sentence, the cleverness of which pleased her to such an extent that, although she never made any further trips outside of the U.S., this sentiment became something of a catch-all piece of advice, one she brought out anytime a connection, however tenuous, could be made between broadening one's horizons and the topic at hand. She also did not hesitate to speak of her trip whenever someone mentioned Italy—her favorite topics were the enormous cathedrals and the delicious spaghetti at a trattoria called *Il pomodoro succoso*—and she would remind her listeners that, despite the fact that more years had passed than she liked to admit, she could still count to ten in Italian, and would then recite "*uno, due, tre...*" without a pause until she got to *dieci*.

In spite of her pleasant memories, Edie had been rather unsettled when her son, Nathan, announced that he would be taking her to Rome in honor of her seventy-fifth

birthday. The cause of her anxiety was the memory of a boy she had met on her first trip. His name was Harry and he had been the winner from the Midwest region of the essay contest. He had spent their first few days abroad telling her homesick stories about life on the plains and detailing all the ribbons he had won at the County Fair. Because of his boastfulness and his tendency to compare everything they saw to silos and barns, Edie hadn't liked him very much at first. But he had intense blue eyes, short-cropped blond hair, a face as smooth and inviting as a field of fresh snow, and the way he would never stray more than a few feet from her, eventually won her affection. She had never told anyone this, but it was the memory of this boy which gave her such pleasure and was the real reason she found it so hard to let go of that trip.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that Nathan would offer to take her back to Rome for her birthday. He'd been saying for years that she should go, and now that more than a decade had passed since her husband, Walter, had died, the time was as good as any. "You've got to go while you still can, Mama," Nathan had told her when he noticed her hesitation to accept. And he was right: There was no telling when you could wake up unable to get out of bed by yourself, or worse. So Edie tried the best she could to ignore her doubts, packed the suitcase she hadn't touched since she and Walt had returned from their honeymoon more than fifty years ago, and went to Italy.

In her opinion, the week had gone fairly well. They had seen most of the major tourist attractions: the Coliseum, the Spanish Steps, St. Peter's Basilica—they'd even suffered the heat to do a walking tour of the Forum. Edie took in most of these things

with a stoic reverence. She recognized the city, and of course several places conjured up old memories from the first trip, but somehow everything seemed changed. Older, more run down. Where the churches and cathedrals had once seemed beautiful and inspiring, they now seemed oppressive and intimidating, like a giant wall of stone ready to collapse on her any minute. Nathan was impressed by everything, and Edie didn't want him to feel she was disappointed, so to his repeated questions of whether this or that had changed since the last time she was there, she would simply reply, "If most of this stuff's made it through the past five hundred years, I don't believe the last sixty would have changed it enough so you could tell it."

Truth be told, Edie didn't feel as adventuresome as she had at fifteen. The heat made her gasp for breath, all the walking made her feet ache, and because Italian food didn't agree with her anymore, they ate all their meals at a McDonald's two blocks from their hotel. Every night they were in their room by eight o'clock, and she would get ready for bed while Nathan read a paperback he had picked up at the airport. She had assured him several times that he was free to go explore the city on his own, but was always secretly glad when he said that he didn't mind staying in. It pleased her that he was finally starting to slow down. A month before, the latest girl that had been living with him had found her way into some trouble she couldn't be bailed out of, and it looked like Nathan was starting to realize a man couldn't go through life bouncing from one wild woman to the next. This trip has done him good, she thought. In all, though, it was a fairly unremarkable vacation, and Edie was afraid that, as much as she had tried not to, she had disappointed her son.

So on their last night, on their way back from supper, when Nathan paused to stare at a crowd that was gathering in a piazza two blocks away, she decided to indulge his curiosity.

“What d’you figure is going on over there?” she asked.

“Don’t know,” Nathan said and, as if coming back to his senses, resumed walking.

“Wanna go see?”

“Don’t you think we should be getting back to the room, Mama? I thought you’d be tired.”

“You’re always tired when you get to be my age. And it may be sixty more years before I ever get back over here,” she laughed. “Let’s go see what the fuss is about.”

Edie regretted her decision as they began to wade through the crowd, which was at least twice as large as it had looked from the distance. About fifty people, all of them tourists, had formed a half circle in front of an unusually modest Catholic church. Seeing it made her think of the time the Methodist church the next town over had purchased a building from a defunct Catholic parish and the Diocese had sent a priest all the way from Raleigh just to “desecrate” the land. She started to tell Nathan the story, but then she remembered she had already mentioned it several times since they had arrived.

They worked their way past students and families with children sitting on their parents’ shoulders until they could see what held everyone’s interest. In the middle of the clearing an angel was standing on a pedestal. Not a real angel, of course—though when she first saw it, Edie almost believed otherwise. Rather, it was a man dressed as an angel.

He wore a long, rumpled gown and a set of feathery wings that jutted up behind his shoulders. His entire body was airbrushed to look like an old marble statue. There were even dark streaks of weathering that ran down his cheeks and onto the front of his gown, which had been treated with something that prevented it from making even the slightest movement in the breeze. He stood there with his hands held in front of his chest, his fingers pointing to the sky.

“Well how about that?” said Edie, turning to her son. “If he’d have been standing next to the church instead of in the street, I’d of thought he—”

Nathan hushed her and pointed to the left.

A little boy emerged from the crowd and walked up to the angel. He seemed nervous and kept looking back to his parents, who gave him words of encouragement in a language Edie didn’t recognize. He reached up and touched the angel’s gown and, once satisfied that it was not actual stone, he bent down and dropped a coin into a slot on the pedestal. There was a pause in which nothing happened, and then the angel jerked to life. The boy jumped—Edie did too—and a few people in the crowd giggled. The angel made several quick, officious-looking movements with his hands and bowed to the little boy, who, staring at the angel with terror, was already backing toward his parents. The angel waved his hand over the crowd as if he were performing some sort of benediction, then settled back into his stone-faced pose.

“How about that,” said Edie. “I bet it took a lot of practice to be able to stand so still like that. Remember what your daddy used to say about our wedding day, standing up in front of the church? He said, I never worked so hard at doing nothing.”

Another American was standing next to them, a middle-aged man with pockmarked cheeks and a nose that was brown and flaky with old sunburn.

“Wait’ll you see what he does if you give him a whole euro,” he said.

“Why? What’s he do?” Edie asked.

The man grinned with one corner of his mouth. “No, I’m not telling. You’ll have to wait and see.”

From the other side of the circle, a young woman who looked to be a college student, walked up to the angel and posed next to him while her friends snapped pictures. The angel didn’t so much as blink, even when the girl leaned against him and wrapped her arm around his waist. In the camera flashes, his face seemed bland and vaguely bored. When the girl’s friends had taken enough pictures, she made an exaggerated bow at his feet and placed a small coin in the pedestal’s slot. Again, he came suddenly to life, this time adding a few mocking imitations of the young woman to his routine.

“Why don’t you go give him a euro, Mama?” Nathan asked. His eyebrows shot up mischievously. She hadn’t seen him this excited since he had gone to the circus with his fifth grade class and had come home proclaiming that when he grew up he was either going to be an acrobat or the guy who sold the cotton candy.

“I couldn’t do that,” Edie said.

“Ain’t nothing to be scared of,” said the pockmarked man.

Nathan nodded in agreement. He held out a gold-colored coin. “Here. It’ll be fun.”

“But all these people,” Edie said.

“You don’t know any of them. It’s not like you’re gonna see them again.”

Edie studied the face of the angel, who had frozen in a different position this time, his eyes gazing upward at the heavens.

“Okay,” she said.

With the coin hidden in the palm of her hand, she slowly made her way to the front of the circle and walked hesitantly across the cobblestones to where the angel stood. She held up the coin so he could see it.

“Got a euro here,” she told him and waved it in front of his eyes.

The angel didn’t even appear to be breathing.

Edie looked back at her son. He was smiling with all his teeth and he motioned for her to put the coin in the slot. Keeping her head up so she could see the angel’s face, she bent down and dropped it in.

A few seconds passed. The angel didn’t move. Edie turned and was about to walk back into the crowd when the angel grabbed her shoulder. She shrieked, and everyone else laughed. The angel spun her around, took her right wrist, and held her hand palm up in front of his chest. His eyes looked straight into hers. The whites were silvery and flashed like stainless steel in the light from the streetlamps, the pupils black and fierce. He glanced down at her palm and then back into her eyes. From a distance he had appeared to be a young man, but up close Edie could tell he was just a boy, no more than sixteen years old. She trembled. A few beads of sweat prickled her scalp. The angel’s fingers tightened around her wrist—not so much that it hurt, but enough to make Edie wonder if he meant for it to. With his other hand, he brought a necklace out from under

his gown. On the end hung a small leather sack, from which he deftly removed a folded slip of paper. He gave some ceremonial flourishes with his hand, then placed the paper firmly in Edie's palm and closed her fingers over it. Finally, he let go.

As the angel repeated his benediction over the crowd, Edie turned and shuffled back to Nathan as quickly as she could.

He came forward to meet her, still smiling with all his teeth.

"How about that, Mama? Won't that something?"

"I told you he'd do something good," said the pockmarked man, chuckling.

"What'd he give you, Mama?"

"I don't know."

"It's a fortune," said the pockmarked man. "That's what he gives you if you put in a euro." He removed a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and held it open so that Nathan and Edie could read it. There, in a meticulous calligraphy:

Chi nasce asino non può morire cavallo

"That's Italian for 'A trip abroad will broaden your horizons.' A fella at a bar told me that."

"Hear that, Mama?" said Nathan. "That's what you always say."

Edie was staring at the ground, thinking about the angel's face and about the face of the boy she had known a long time ago.

"Well, let's see what yours says, miss," said the pockmarked man.

"Huh?"

"Your fortune. Let's see what it says."

“Yeah, Mama. Let’s see it.”

Edie looked at her closed fist, then back at the angel.

“I don’t think I want to,” she said.

“Why not?” asked the man. He had folded his fortune up and was carefully putting it back into his shirt pocket.

“What’s wrong, Mama?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, why don’t you want to...”

“I’m tired. Okay? I’m just tired.”

The pockmarked man shook his head. “But you’ve got to see what the angel said. Come on, that bar’s on the next block over. We’ll get the bartender to translate for us. The angel...”

“He’s not a angel,” Edie said. “He’s just some boy in a angel suit and he don’t have any more say in what happens than you do.”

“Mama, it’s just a...” Nathan started.

“I don’t care what it is. Let’s go.”

Edie forced her way through the crowd, no longer concerned with being polite. She picked up speed as she reached Via Veneto and by the time she came to the street their hotel was on, she was breathing heavily, her face damp with perspiration. Nathan followed closely behind, urging her to slow down and tell him what was wrong, but she didn’t answer. She felt pulled along, unable to pause or slow down, and it reminded her

of the way the boy from the trip would confidently grab hold of her ponytail as they shuffled through a crowd.

When Edie had returned home from that first trip, she'd immediately sat down and wrote the boy a long letter detailing every hour that had passed since they had parted. She ended by saying that she was afraid she might be falling love with him. Within days of dropping it in the mailbox, she decided she was absolutely sure she loved him and she bought a train ticket and made secret preparations to escape. But before the day she was to leave, a response arrived from the boy. In tight block letters printed on a sheet torn from a pocket ledger he had written:

Dear Edie,

Glad to know you made it back. Things here are good, aside from the fact it didn't rain the whole time I was gone and now the corn is all twisted up like a licorice stick. Speaking of which. You remember how I told you about Betty Jane our milk cow? Well ma's got her hooked on those molasses chews you get two for a nickel at the store. She'll eat them right out your hand if you can believe that! I'd better get back to work.

Your pal,

Harry

As she bumped along the crowded sidewalk, Edie rubbed the rough surface of the paper the angel had given her. Nathan grabbed her shoulder.

“Mama, where are we going?”

He was panting. Sweat stood out on his lip and his cheeks, and the way the light shown on his face cast shadows on the wrinkles crossing his forehead and the loose skin under his eyes, highlighted the flecks of gray showing in his stubble.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Oh, I was just noticing how grown up you are. That’s all.”

“Grown up?”

“You’ve gotten older on me.”

“Well, people tend to do that. You’re not the only one gets older, you know.”

“It’s just a shock when you see your children are getting up there in age.”

She attempted a smile. It was true: Her son was grown. Soon, he would be an old man himself. But it wasn’t just the realization that her son was aging that upset Edie, it was her sudden certainty that the boy she had fallen in love with in Rome was dead.

“I was just going back to the hotel” she said, remembering Nathan’s question.

“But you walked right by it.”

“I did?”

“Yeah. About five blocks back.”

“Oh,” she said. “I must not have seen it.”

Nathan held out an elbow for her to take. “That’s okay, Mama.” They began walking back in the direction they had come from. “You know, for a while there, I was wondering if you were going to keep walking all night,” he said. “Is there anything else you want to see while we’re out?”

Edie looked up at the domes and steeples and spires that composed the skyline. She took in the faces of the pedestrians, the tourists and residents, the young and old, streaming from one experience to the next. They would continue on their way, and once they were gone they would be replaced by others just like them, and all the while the ancient and nearly ancient buildings would stay silently looking on.

“No,” she said. “I believe I’ve seen all I can take.”