I SCORN TO CHANGE

MY PLATE WITH KINGS

A Thesis

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Thesis

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DEDICATION

for Wyatt Leonard

EPIGRAPH

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate.
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the Lark at break of day arising)
From sullen earth sings hymns at Heaven's gate,
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings,
That then I scorn to change my state with Kings.

—Shakespeare, *Sonnet XXIX*

“More and more he was becoming convinced that it was only through children that one could connect with anything anymore, that in this life it was only through children that one came home, became a home, that one was no longer a visitor.”

—Lorrie Moore, *Anagrams*

“Give up learning and you will be free / from all your cares.”

—*Tao Te Ching*

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CHAPTER I

ONE

Mark's Triangle

Ruth Bishop was radiant in a lilac, flapper-style dress, the slight muscles of her back gleamed with the sweat of exertion under the ballroom lights, and she continued to intrigue Mark the way she had intrigued him from her easel. It had been the way she held the charcoal—her talent was in her shoulder, and he had watched that lightly freckled shoulder, the red band of her tank top, the dip of her clavicle, until the art professor had clapped her hands and directed him.

Alphonse Alexander was a mystery. For instance, Mark wondered how he could drink glass after glass of wine and still dance as if the music were emanating from him instead of the big tweed-covered speakers at the front of the art gallery ballroom. Alphonse was relatively steady on his feet, yet he had led Ruth off the dance floor onto the carpet. A semi-circle of spectators had formed, lending to their dance a kind of public spectacle quality that fascinated Mark. How a man as old as Alphonse could get away with spinning a girl like Ruth was beyond him.

"They're something else." The art professor was without her usual half-moon spectacles, swirling dark wine in a glass. Ruth had spent most of the evening failing at small talk with the professor, who in Mark's opinion was nearly as unsavory as Alphonse. Mark conjured images of something by Thomas Eakins or even Lucian Freud

when modeling, but the way she doled cash into his hand from a green metal box never failed to make him feel a bit like a prostitute.

"Yep, those two are something special," Mark said crossing his arms. She touched his shoulder and told him to have some wine. Their table was lustrous with glass.

Mark couldn't say when the yellow jonquil corsage had fallen from Ruth's dress, but in the final throes of the waltz, shuffling feet must have scattered bright petals across the dark carpet. Just hours ago Mark had very nearly wrung his hands over the different styles of bouquet—he used to bring a spill of red roses to Julie's play openings, but he didn't know the difference between a play opening and a gallery opening and didn't wish to appear either overzealous or overly sentimental. The old florist in the tatty brown cardigan had finally sold him the yellow jonquil corsage. Mark had studied the long needle as he waited for Ruth in the foyer of her building. He had kept his eyes on hers and apologized for his cold hands. Even then a single yellow petal had pirouetted to the floor between their feet, and as he looked at the scattered petals in the ballroom, they came to exude the quintessence of his romantic immaturity. Never before had the idea of dating two women at the same time seemed so hopeless.

The art professor held up her empty wine glass and Alphonse caught the cue. Ruth approached the table, features imbued with color. Mark stood. "It's damn hot in here," he said, rubbing his forehead. "And all that dancing."

"Oh, I know," Ruth said, fanning herself with one hand. "I'm sweating."

"Where did you learn to dance like that?"

She exhaled. "My dad taught me in our barn. When I was, wow. When I was

thirteen. We started."

Mark thought only Ruth could make dancing in a barn sound delectable. "Do you want to get some fresh air?"

She laughed. "I was afraid you wanted to go back out there."

"Oh no. I wouldn't put you through that again," he said. His own dance steps had been embarrassing improvisations.

"That's not what I meant—" she said. Alphonse produced a bottle of wine from under his suit jacket and began pouring, but he knocked over the glass and a dark stain grew across the tablecloth.

"Pretty sloppy for such a good dancer," Mark said.

"Yes," she said. Ruth stood on tiptoes and whispered into Mark's ear. "He smelled like he needed a bath." Mark laughed, a bit relieved that she had not been taken with him, and he felt the heat radiating from her skin when he moved to steer her under the archway into the bright gallery, toward the collection of student work.

They had saved the student display for last. Mark noticed Ruth's hands were balled into fists at her side. Some art students were education majors looking for an easy three credits. He happened to be a culinary student with a desire to go *au naturale*. Ruth didn't have a back-up plan—art was her major, and he knew she'd be devastated if the professor hadn't picked something of hers.

The first piece was lit by a strong, overhead light. Someone had carved half a man from the block—two legs, buttocks and a penis. The legs looked as if they were walking somewhere. The sculpture was student art, but Mark wasn't convinced the parts were his. He still felt very much like the half-man—as if he were walking around

without knowing where he was going or whether or not he had already arrived. He was unsure about living with Julie, being with Ruth, his culinary pretensions—he was just a dishwasher, anyway. Posing himself in the middle of a half-circle of art students had made him understand that he was seeking value in himself no one else could reveal, no matter how skilled they were with charcoal.

"Are you okay?" Ruth said.

"Yes," he said. "I think I'm all right."

There was a group gathered farther ahead. Mark recognized a skinny blond, a boy with hair hanging in his face, and a black kid from Ruth's life drawing class. They were talking and pointing at the wall. Mark was anxious only because he knew Ruth was anxious, and as they approached, Mark saw it first. He recognized himself in charcoal and Conté crayon. She had drawn him from the back, and the profile had been rendered with clemency—it stopped at his waist. Clearly, his portrait was the centerpiece.

Mark imagined he was smiling for Ruth, and the smile felt sculpted.

"What's funny," Ruth said.

The truth was he felt pretty good because he looked pretty good, and the portrait was dignified, unlike having cash doled into your palm. Mark spread the fingers of one hand over the drawing, feigning modesty. "Somebody throw this guy a robe."

Ruth laughed politely, her fingers grazed her chest and she looked at the front of her dress. "Ouch," she said. A dot of blood welled on her finger. It nearly surprised Mark to be reminded that Ruth was made of flesh and blood.

"Here," he said. "If you don't mind," and pulled the long corsage pin from the front of her dress.

"Oh, I must've lost the jonquil," she said, looking around as if it might be scattered at their feet instead of back in the ballroom.

"No worries," Mark said. He held the pin by its head, which was small and green like a pea. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Ah, that means you have to make a promise. Unless," she said, "you're planning to stick that in your eye."

"I promise to stick this pin in one of those ferns," he said.

"That's not a very good promise," she said.

"Well," Mark said, "I've never been very good at promises."

"Oh, I've left my purse," Ruth said and smiled. "I guess I've never been very good at remembering things."

Voices hung under the music like a bad laugh track. Ferns had been set on either side of the archway, and Mark walked over to the one on the left and rammed the long pin in the soil so that only the green head showed like a tiny bud in the dark dirt. He wanted to believe it was the start of something new.

They walked into the music, into the voices, into the dim lighting. Dark figures were gathered around white tables, and the bronze lights were pointy, and the voices were getting louder and the music was too. Mark followed Ruth, but he broke away when he spotted one bright yellow jonquil petal on the dark carpet. He was halfway across the room before he realized his intention of putting his shoe over it. Instead he picked it off the floor and pocketed it.

Alphonse and the art professor had drawn their chairs around the table to sit beside one another. A match made in heaven, Mark sighed, and tried to force the shoe

onto the other foot—he imagined them without clothes. The best he could do was to give Alphonse striped shorts, garter socks and a jersey tee that showed his pale chest, the professor a glowing white bra, swollen thighs. She stood to embrace Ruth. Ah, Mark thought, Granny Panties.

The art professor was saying something to Ruth, touching her bare arms, nodding and patting. She nodded one last time and looked at Mark. He had the feeling she drank him in the way Alphonse was drinking wine from his glass. "What was she talking about?"

"God, I don't know," Ruth said, folding her arms. "I think she said my picture was scrumptious. You got me up on the wall. No offense." Mark hated to admit thinking something similar, but he recognized what he thought was perhaps his last chance to save the evening and make, upon Ruth, a favorable impression.

"The relationship between an artist and her subject is something precious, not at all subject to the petty whims of certain art professors, and I think your picture captures the sensitivity and sanctity of that relationship completely." It sounded better than he had hoped. "To tell you the truth, I was very nervous about the prospect of appearing nude, so to speak, in public, but I had forgotten just how elegantly you capture the human form."

"You were nervous?" Ruth said.

Mark had not been nervous. In fact, his vanity was slightly flattered. He could only imagine that this was what Julie felt during the applause at curtain call. "Very nervous," Mark said.

"That's sweet," Ruth said and examined the tip of her stuck finger.

"Heck, call her back here," Mark said. "I'll teach her to use the word scrumptious. Certainly not to describe the work of Ruth Bishop." Ruth was laughing, and Mark thought he would lie for the rest of the evening just to keep her happy.

"I'd go and get her," Ruth said, "but I think she's left."

"Now that's the best idea I've heard in a while," Mark said. "What do you say we get some coffee?"

"Let me grab my purse."

Ruth checked the chairbacks and Mark got on his knees to look under the table. Alphonse's black socks had fallen around his ankles. "Should've gone with the garters." Mark was about to suggest they query lost and found when Ruth spoke. "Look what he's doing."

"Who?" Mark said, brushing the knees of his trousers. Ruth nodded toward Alphonse and Mark saw what she meant—he held Ruth's purse on his lap the way an old woman might hold a small, black dog. He stroked the material with one hand and worked the wine with the other. Ruth sat next to him.

"Excuse me," she said. "You've got my purse there." He had hooked one of his arms through the straps.

Alphonse took a sip from his wineglass and smiled thinly. Most of his lower lip was stained dark purple, and he looked at her with small eyes—his skin appeared as thin as newsprint and just as gray. She asked him again. "May I please have my purse?" The little man started nodding as he took another sip but continued to stroke the purse. Ruth widened her eyes at Mark.

"Let's have the lady's purse," Mark said, and placed one hand on Alphonse's

shoulder—a shoulder so slight it might have been made from paper maché. "Hey?" he said, shaking. The gesture had no noticeable effect. Mark was beginning to wonder just how much wine he had drunk. "You'll just have to take him home," Mark said, and imagined carrying the little man across Ruth's threshold.

"Oh, I don't want him in my apartment," Ruth said.

"I'm joking." Mark said. "C'mon, who the hell does this guy think he is?" Alphonse finished the wine and stood, clutching Ruth's purse to his chest. He said something low and unintelligible, staggering off.

They watched him weave across the room. "He's going to hurt himself," Ruth said.

"I'll do it for him," Mark said, making up his mind to retrieve Ruth's purse and knock the little man with glasses into something. The ferns. He would knock him into the goddamned ferns.

"No," Ruth said. "Here, I'll come with you." In the gallery, someone had turned off half the lights. He watched a woman in a turquoise gown help a young man into his jacket. Mark saw the back of a slight man in a black jacket and thought it was Alphonse, but this man carried a fern, wore shiny lapels, a black bow tie at his throat. "I'll check the coat room," Ruth said.

As Mark pushed into the men's room he imagined Ruth kneeling beside an Alphonse asleep on a pile of coats. Mark imagined Ruth would feel bad, ask the caterer for a cup of water, help him to sit, raise the cup to his purple lip. Mark's heels clicked loudly on the tile. The stall door was wide open, and Mark heard someone breathing in there. Alphonse was asleep on the toilet, his head thrown back, one arm hung almost to

the tiles, the other guarded Ruth's purse in his lap, its contents strewn across the floor. At least he got his shorts down, Mark thought. No stripes. Mark bent to gather Ruth's personal effects. Her cell phone buzzed on the tile and Mark picked it off the floor like a living thing and dropped it into the bag. A small bottle of aspirin had rolled behind the toilet and he left it. Mark picked a brightly colored metal compact off the floor, opened it to his eye staring back, shut it, dropped it in. He picked her wallet off the floor. It was big and heavy and open to a picture of Ruth as a girl standing next to a man with a gray moustache, a black horse in the background. Mark flipped through her checkbook to the calendar. Something named Vahana has a vet appointment in April. Someone named Erin celebrates a birthday in February. She said she wasn't very good at remembering things, Mark thought, maybe that's why she writes them all down. He flipped back a few pages and his eye was drawn to the red letters First Date With Mark flanked with exclamation points, his name underlined. There were some other names, some written in blue pen, some in pencil, and Mark stared at his own name and felt good, but he also felt a little sad imagining Ruth writing in red Conté crayon. He closed her wallet, dropped it in, zipped the purse and pulled it from the little man's arm. Mark slapped him once on the cheek but he didn't stir. "Shit," Mark said. "He'll probably sleep here all night."

Mark pushed out through the men's room doors and found Ruth near the entrance wearing her coat. His own coat was folded over her arm. "How about that coffee?" he said, handing her the purse.

"The bathroom?" she said.

"Yeah," Mark said, gesturing for his coat. "He's passed out." A man held the door for the woman in the turquoise gown and the foyer was flooded with cold air from

the street.

"Oh, wow," Ruth said. "I don't suppose we can just leave him like that. Can we?"

"Yeah, I think we can," Mark said. "You said you don't want him in your apartment."

"Silly. We can at least call the poor guy a cab," she said, unzipping her purse and pulling out the phone. "It'll only take a few minutes." Mark shoved his hands in his pockets. If it were up to him they'd be in a booth somewhere enjoying a steamed beverage and some *pain au lait*. Mark looked at a scrap of tissue on the floor and thought it was shaped like a swan. "They'll pick us up out front in fifteen minutes," she said.

"Us?" Mark said.

"Me, you," she said, "and him."

Alphonse was much heavier than Mark thought he would be, as heavy as a mound of wet earth Mark had thought, and it occurred to him that he smelled just as bad. Ruth had been right. He needed a bath. Mark lifted the little man's shorts and pants to his knees, pulled him into a standing position and lifted them the rest of the way. His wrist grazed something wet. He fastened the belt. "Alphonse," Mark said into the little man's ear. Mark leaned the little man over his shoulder and stood, felt a twinge in his knee. Mark used him to push open the bathroom door.

Mark had tried to wake Alphonse by pinching his nose, had even cupped some cold water and tossed it into his face. "Wake up, bastard." The water had wet the little man's glasses and streaked bright trails down his neck. He was passed out.

"It's starting to snow," Ruth said, standing by the door.

The gallery was quiet with no music and the rest of the art gazers pushed out the front doors. The boy with hair hanging in his face stopped and patted the little man's head before pushing outside. Ruth approached Mark, and for a moment he thought she was going to hug him, but she reached for Alphonse's black wallet instead, flipped out a few bills and folded them into Mark's pants pocket.

"Split it with you," he said, adjusting the weight on his shoulder.

"We'll be lucky," she said, "if it covers fare."

The cabbie didn't say much when Mark loaded Alphonse onto the front seat and buckled him in. "He alive?" the cabbie asked, his eyes on them in the rearview mirror as they pulled away from the curb. Mark made a tipping gesture in front of his mouth and put his arm around Ruth. He could feel her cold hand through his shirt. The cabbie was sucking his teeth, and Alphonse's balding head swayed and jerked with every sharp turn, every abrupt stop. Mark watched snowflakes disappear on the window.

Mark opened his eyes when he realized they had stopped. He'd been dreaming of Julie— that she was the one driving them through the streets, sucking her teeth, playing cabbie. "So, you two in love?" she had asked, her eyes on them in the rearview mirror, features exaggerated with stage make-up. "She a good lay?"

Mark breathed deeply, shook Ruth, and she looked up into his face. They were parked outside a brick building with brownstone accents and an attached front porch. Thick snow was drifting sideways through the soft halo of lamplight. "Yeah," Ruth said sleepily, checking the address. "This is it." The cabbie parked and did not offer to help.

Mark's knee was beginning to ache as he leaned the little man with glasses partly against the stone balustrade and the brick face of the building. There was a sculpture of a little porter holding a lantern on the porch. Mark blew into his hands and pushed the ringer. He heard a buzzing inside. Ruth climbed the stairs, her nose pink, eyelashes snow whitened. She held up the black wallet. "I almost forgot," she said.

The door cracked open and a woman's white face squinted out at them. After a moment of hazy recognition she said, "Do you know what time it is?" Her words fogged on the glass of the storm door.

Mark was taken aback, and he consulted the man's driver's license. "Is this where he lives?"

The woman looked at Alphonse slumped against the building, head lolled to one side, snow wetting his glasses. "Not anymore he doesn't," she said. "I don't want to have anything to do with him." The door shut.

The woman's breath slowly disappeared from the glass. Mark slumped against the cold brownstone. The gallery would be closed. Snow was beginning to cover the road. "Jeez." Ruth said. "That's kind of harsh."

What would be harsh, Mark thought, is if we left him leaned up against the building, for snow to collect on his shoulders and head—that would be harsh. Mark found he wanted Alphonse to become frozen solid like the little porter. He looked down at his own body and imagined himself as a sculpture on the porch and stepped in place to keep warm.

"I'm freezing," Ruth said. She was trembling but smiling expectantly. "What about your place?"

Mark grabbed the little man's arms. "I must be crazy," he said.

Mark reached into his pocket to pay the cabbie and counted off a few bills. The last yellow jonquil petal floated off with the snow. He watched it go.

"Could you wait here for just a moment," Mark said to Ruth in the foyer of his building.

He looked down at the black floor mat and the colored mosaic tile as he lifted the little man. Mark's knee was beginning to throb as he carried him up the stairs, and halfway he imagined what would happen if he slipped, imagined the little man rolling down the flights. He tried the doorknob, then fit his key in the lock and pushed inside. The apartment was dark. Mark flipped on the lights and saw that Julie was sitting on the couch. Her hair was up. She didn't turn to look. Mark's shoes squeaked on the orange Yoga mat.

Color photographs were spread across the coffee table and Julie held a memory book on her lap. "What are you doing?" Mark said, adjusting Alphonse. She shrugged. "Get some blankets," he said. "We've got a houseguest."

This time Julie did look, and as she stood Mark noticed the gold, department store nametag, pleated skirt, black hose. Work fare. "Oh my god," she said. "Who is that?"

Mark dropped the little man with glasses onto the couch and the springs creaked. His head bounced on the armrest and his glasses fell with a clatter to the floor. One arm crossed his chest. Mark noticed a thin, gold wedding band on one hand.

"Alphonse?" she said, pressing the back of her hand against his cheek.

"You know this guy?" Mark said. Julie nodded. "Look," he said. "I'll be right

back and we can talk." His knee throbbed as he walked back down the stairs to the lobby.

"He's waiting," Ruth said, thumbing the cabbie.

"Ah, my knee is killing me," Mark said from the last stair.

"I've some aspirin if you want," Ruth said. "You could swallow some aspirin."

"No," Mark said, bending. "I think I deserve a nice, hot bath."

"Hold on," Ruth said, and pulled a dimpled scroll from inside her jacket and handed it to him like a runner's baton. "It's a little beat up," she said, "but it survived." Mark unfurled her portrait of him. "What you said—" she began. "The thought of you hanging up there in the dark, for anyone who just happened to come along—"

He couldn't think of anything to say, so he stepped down and pressed his lips to hers. She kissed him back. Mark broke off. "Thank you," he said.

Ruth reached into her purse, held Mark's hand holding the newsprint and wrote a number with a nub of red Conté crayon. "Call me."

Mark folded the portrait into a square as he ascended the steps, keeping the red number on the outside, and though his knee hurt, he was smiling. Julie had covered Alphonse with a white afghan, but it had pulled up from his feet and bunched around his waist. Mark opened a cupboard, filled a glass with water and stood in the kitchen drinking. He looked at the dirty dishes in the sink. He poured the rest of the water into the plants on the window's ledge and set the glass on the countertop.

There was no light coming from under the door to the bedroom. Mark sat in the chair, lifted one foot onto the coffee table and studied Alphonse's face. The mouth was

open but the lips were dry. There were two red marks on either side of his nose, breath sour with wine. Mark bent over and picked the little man's glasses off the floor. He looked down at the photographs on the coffee table. Julie had made two piles. Atop the closest pile, he and Julie were sitting on the steps of their apartment building. They had asked someone on the street to take the picture the day they moved in, and they had been laughing at something. Mark couldn't remember what they had found so funny. When he lifted the watermarked glasses onto his face, the photo blurred into meaningless swirls of color.

Julie was standing nude in the kitchen steeping a cup of tea. Her hair was up in a ponytail and she was humming something. "I thought of waking you, but you looked so peaceful."

Mark pulled himself up into a sitting position and bent his neck painfully to one side. "Jules," he said. "Aren't you cold?"

Julie walked around the counter with the steaming cup of tea. She was wearing a pair of heavy black boots, yet she tentatively, femininely, sipped the hot drink. "A little bit," she said. "It's not too bad." She walked over to one window and lifted the blinds, then moved on to the next. "I want the whole city to see," she said letting in the rays of the sun.

A swath of sunlight had fallen across Mark's face, and his knee was moaning. He peeled one cheek from the hot leather and looked around. Light was streaming through the blinds and the white afghan had been folded neatly on the couch—Alphonse was gone, and so was Julie by the look of it—their bedroom door was open and Mark could

see the bed was made. He got up and walked into the kitchen. There was a note on the counter. Julie would be at work all day—she sold curtains at a department store—and at play practice that night. *Got the lead!* she wrote. *Would love for you to swing by to pick me up afterward. Show off my Mark.* There was the address of the campus performing arts building, and she signed her name with a heart.

Mark filled a glass in the sink of dirty dishes and drank. He dumped what remained into the plants. He ran his hand over one rough cheek—late for work without a shower.

Four pots were sitting on the stovetop—a ring of thick, reddish-brown coagulation had formed in one of them, and Mark knew he would have to run it through the dishwasher at least twice—might even need the wire brush. He was alone in the kitchen, so he grabbed a hanging spoon, stirred the red sauce, lowered the heat and ignited the ring under the white sauce. Mark walked deeper into the kitchen, over to stainless steel sinks and the large metal dishwasher. He scooped some powdered soap into the machine, turned on the heat, and began loading in bussed dishes and silverware from tubs, occasionally running water from the sink over a messy plate.

Someone came into the kitchen. Servers changed so frequently Mark had stopped recognizing them. This one was black and nodded to Mark. His nametag read *Lamont*. Mark nodded back at Lamont. "We've been going crazy. Miles called off again," Lamont said. Miles had worked the kitchen longer than Mark had been alive. "Can you cook?"

Mark smiled. "A little," he said, pulling the dishwasher shut. Italian food wasn't

his forte—Mark had been drafting his own menu based on French Haute cuisine—but as he grabbed one of the sauce ladles he took comfort in the fact that even Carême had had to start somewhere.

Mark finally pulled alongside a curb, left his hazard lights blinking and jogged toward the theatre building. When Mark pushed through the amphitheatre's double doors, Alphonse Alexander was up on stage next to Julie. He held her by one wrist and was shouting, "Do your work!" after a man that was nearly jogging up the aisle with a duffle bag over one shoulder. The man brushed past Mark and passed out of the amphitheatre, muttering.

Mark walked slowly down the aisle and watched as Alphonse said, "I may be old, dear, but you're so plainly ignorant, and for that there's no excuse under heav—"

Julie slapped Alphonse. The blow resounded in the empty theatre. "If it's ignorance you're on about, you might look at your own Melanie! She's the only one who's ignorant to your gallivanting, and it's a powerful education she's got coming. And to think—I let you touch me with those hands—those hands that have been at the beck and call of my father since before I was born!"

Mark moved down the aisle.

"These hands may be old Puss," Alphonse said, kissing her hand, "but they pleased you well enough that night in the hayloft—"

"You don't get to call me that anymore. You gave up that right." Julie snatched her hand away and turned, letting a low moan.

"Clint exits stage right and the curtain falls on you," Alphonse said in a different voice. A small voice.

"Oh, bravo! Truly," Julie said, turning.

"Do you really think it's good?" Alphonse took one of her hands and kissed it. "Do you think it's believable?"

"You had me going," Mark said. They turned to look at him where he stood at the foot of the stage. "This must be some play." In truth he thought it sounded like hot drivel.

"I hope the leading gentleman will shape up before opening night," Alphonse said, letting go of Julie's hand.

"I still think you could do it, Alphonse" Julie said.

"I'm too old," Alphonse said.

"Who's to say a younger woman couldn't fall for an older man?" Julie said.

Mark pulled himself up on stage and felt a twinge in his bad knee. "Are you ready?"

Alphonse thrust his hand out for Mark to shake, the other around Julie's waist, and Mark took it, squeezing a bit harder than usual. "I have to thank you for seeing to me the other night," Alphonse said. "Sometimes I get carried away and forget my sugar."

Next time, find someone else to carry you Mark wanted to say.

"Your date was absolutely charming," Alphonse said. "Quite a dancer."

Mark felt blood rush into his face and opened his mouth to speak. Julie shifted in Alphonse's embrace. Mark pushed the hair off his forehead. "You must be mistaken."

"Perhaps," Alphonse said, "but a charming girl nonetheless," he winked. In Mark's opinion there was nothing more unsavory than a wink from an old man. "Do your work my dear. I know you will," he said, and hugged Julie fully, bald dome

brushing her chin.

Julie grabbed a book bag lying off stage and slung it over one shoulder. She took the steps and began up the aisle. From roughly the seventh row she turned, “Are you coming?”

Mark jumped off the stage, agitating his knee, jogged up to meet her, but she was traveling up the incline determinedly, pack jouncing on her back. Mark turned to look at Alphonse, but he had disappeared behind the heavy red curtain.

Julie kept switching radio stations in the car until turning it off altogether. Mark wished he was dropping her off somewhere. “I can cook us something when we get home.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said, looking out the window.

They were silent the rest of the way, and she walked slightly ahead of him up the stairs, pulling her keys from her backpack. Mark sighed and followed her up, wincing at the pain. He made the top of the stairs in time to watch her disappear demurely behind the bedroom door. He wasn’t sure, nor was he surprised, but he thought he heard the click of the lock.

Mark made the water as hot as he could stand, waved at the cluster of gnats hanging over the whole mess and started scrubbing the dirty dishes. He squeezed a thick glass in one hand hoping it might shatter, wounding him. It did not. He finished washing the stack and set them to dry. He wiped his hands on a sour rag and leaned against the counter. His body felt heavy, and as he moved to the unoccupied couch—the white afghan folded over one armrest—he passed the memory book from the cushion to the coffee table, surprised at its substantial weight. He lay himself out, and as the throbbing

in his knee reached a state of numbness that seemed to permeate his entire lower region, he felt the weight of the room itself push him down, down into unconsciousness.

Six Months Later

Gordon Joseph Fuller, PhD had never pushed Mark to do anything, and though he had never indicted his father, Mark imagined Gordon might have labeled his approach Laissez Faire. Gordon Joseph Fuller, PhD had taught high school history before he became superintendent of the technical school, and as a youth, Mark had been uninterested in most of what the old man considered sacred. History. Hand-me-down wisdom as Mark thought of it, though sometimes his father's mental database of such hand-me-downs made him feel like a dime store scholar in a dishwasher's apron. When the phone call had come the day after graduation offering a position teaching special needs students culinary skills, Mark felt there had to be some catch. The only catch was that he interview like the rest of the candidates. Gordon Joseph Fuller, PhD certainly didn't condone nepotism.

"You can go on in," the secretary had said looking on behind large, rose-tinted glasses. Gordon had dated her briefly following his mother's death, but Mark didn't even know her name. "Thanks." He picked a black licorice-drop from a bowl on her desk and stepped through the heavily wooded doorway. His father had said he was impressed with Mark's résumé, his service in the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America, and, to Mark's relief, didn't question the mention of modeling. Mark stared around the huge office while his father arranged the paperwork. The décor was a nautical motif—a few ships in bottles, a blowfish caught in the act, a bright tank along one wall.

Incredibly, there was a hooked harpoon mounted on the wall above his father's head. Gordon handed his son a navy blue binder emblazoned with a gold ship's wheel. "Welcome aboard." Mark had been hired on with an emergency certificate and agreed to enroll in special education night classes.

The smell in his father's study—a mix of leather, musk and Alsatian pipe tobacco—was stronger than roast pork, and Mark somehow associated the integrity of the air with the sanctimonious stone bust. It was supposed to be Herodotus, and the pupils were perhaps staring into the ether of the past, yet Mark felt the stony gaze and knit brow of the ancient historian had communicated an unflinching doubt that he might never be able to fully appreciate the books' contents; Mark acknowledged that Herodotus and his father were cut from the same stone—they had both allowed their beards to grow rather wild and his father chose his words carefully, as if he were scanning the databanks of a thousand historical anecdotes. Mark had been the type to blurt anarthrous sentences and cry in public.

Mark lifted his father's cardigan sweater from the back of the desk chair and tossed the garment over the stone scholar's head. It was not a symbolic gesture signaling any sort of severing with the past. As far as Mark could tell, the past was stacked neatly on the shelves all around him—the world as influenced by cause and effect. For example, Mark reasoned, Julie had found Ruth's portrait, had dialed the numbers printed in red and changed the locks to their apartment; the previous culinary teacher had quit after the first month of school, his father had offered Mark the job and now he was cooking dinner to celebrate.

He opened one of the leather bound books to its title page and touched his fingers to the monogram stamp—a Grecian Lamp and the raised letters From The Desk of Gordon Joseph Fuller, PhD. Mark bent toward the page. Nothing. Not even a hint of pulp. The book smelled like everything else in the room. That was, like his father. He replaced the book on the shelf, sat in the large leather desk chair, placed his elbows on the worn armrests and pivoted. Mark noticed that the leather sofa along the far wall was piled with a few pillows and blankets. Since his mother had died of an embolic aneurysm Gordon slept in the study. He imagined trying to sleep with Herodotus staring down in the dark.

Somewhere within the house Mark heard a bell. He pushed himself off the chair and into the main hallway, into the heavy aroma of the French Roast. He was stopped by a particularly strong memory of his mother peering into the oven through the little window in the stove door and his heart filled with nostalgia for the afternoons they had spent in the kitchen, creating mistake after smoky mistake. In those days they had thrown wide the windows and buried the failed culinary experiments in the flowerbeds before Gordon returned from school. It was Mark who was preparing dinner for his father in celebration of the new job—two bachelors—though it was fair to say Mark felt a little bit like a wife. All he was missing was his mother's flowered apron.

"What kind of wine do you want?" Gordon said.

"I'd suggest a dry red. A Cabernet," Mark said.

His mother was fond of jibing him. "What fancy taste you have, Chef Fuller." They used to affect accents in the kitchen. Mark's was always French, hers, a hybrid of British and Scottish.

"Can I interest you in something of the boxed variety?" Gordon said.

"Do you have wine glasses," Mark asked in his fake accent, "or will we be drinking from Styrofoam cups?"

"Coffee mugs," his father said, in his own voice.

"Oh, really," Mark said drolly, cutting the roast. "Such pique from the peasantry these days. Next I'll be cracking my teeth on buckshot."

"Boy, when did anyone ever shoot a pig?" Gordon entered the room with the newspaper under one arm and holding a box of red wine. He handed Mark the box and set the paper on the table, took his seat, and a sliver of roast. "Not bad, Mark," his father said, chewing. "A tad dry. Is this the type of cooking you'll have them doing up there?" Mark found two wine glasses at the top of the cabinet and washed them. He hadn't given much thought to the curriculum though he had been drafting his own menu based on French Haute cuisine. He had read most of the major chef's biographies. Adequate preparation, Mark assumed. More than adequate.

"I was thinking of duck dressed with salt, roasted confit," he said. "We learned to stuff the necks with roquette risotto."

"Well," Gordon said, "you'll be expected to prepare lunches for the staff. Wished I'd told you this sooner?" Gordon opened the newspaper. "Don't worry. Most of those men's wives pack them, and those who don't would be happy with hot dogs," he said, a slight smile of self-satisfaction touching his lips. "Yeah, hot dogs might be a good place to start."

Lulled by the soft evening fog, halos of oncoming headlights and the nonsense

whisperings of the car radio, Mark considered the array of fondness and frustration the visit to his father's house had dredged up.

Mark passed the construction site of the new library two blocks from his apartment. He had been monitoring its progress since he passed sitting high in the growling head of the orange moving van, possessions banging around in back—the half-constructed building seemed the only beacon of authentic culture in a damningly rural town—the popcorn capital of the world. Most everyone called the place Popcorn, Ohio, as if the city couldn't escape the handle of what it offered.

The move from a collegiate city had been slightly jarring, especially during the first bottomless dark. As Mark anticipated his first day teaching, he imagined the walls of interesting books inside a school might be strong enough to keep the rest of the strange world temporarily on the other side, which was why he awaited the opening of the local library with trepidation; he'd just been subjected to a dream in which tractor repair manuals filled the poetry section, and a grizzled hobo, one he'd passed frequently on the side of the road just off the town square, was eating a bag of popcorn, actually tossing kernels into the air while sitting behind the circulation desk. The sounds of trains, vast factories with thousands of tiny windows—most of them broken—the unsettling stench of asphalt from the roofing shingle factory, and *popcorn*, for Christ's sake, had all added up to his unique idea of Hell. That the new library might only stock Chilton's seemed appropriate.

Since Julie, Mark's only romance had involved well-worn books. They had been a necessity—true soul food—and Mark didn't just read a book, he had come to make love to it in a way. Slipping off a dust jacket could be as sweet as foreplay. New books

exuded the virginal aroma of the press while used books often carried a more complex sensuality—pencil marks from previous relationships, monogram stamps. Once he had bought a used book with a set of perfectly rounded teeth marks in one corner of the cover.

The bees were out, never mind the oncoming twilight. Either behind a shutter or under some sofit, bees had nested, and a few fat ones hung near his head while he climbed the stairs. Mark dispensed with the swatting—he lowered his head and charged, stopped long enough to cram the key into the lock and was through the doorway, spilling a stack of books. Mark slammed the door with a backwards slap, set the leftover food on the counter, bent to gather the scattered volumes and stacked them against the wall under the large window overlooking the town-square. He tossed a fly-fishing manual on top—he'd enjoyed the scent of the pages much more than the thought of the sport—finally realizing he had accumulated far too many books for his cramped living quarters. Just last week a collection of French dessert recipes had taken an ill-timed dive from the toilet tank. Before he knew what he was doing, his collection had formed stacks on either side of the couch, in his bedroom, the bathroom, and even the hall closet. He likened his father's library to a leather-clad army assembled, he imagined, to reinforce chronology and cause and effect—general sanity. Mark realized his own collection was a tatterdemalion regiment of musty, dime store brigands outlining Cocteau to croustade, Brocciu to Breton, Rimbaud to Roquefort; some were part of an Epicurean syllabi, and some chronicled spiritual leavings that hinted at the desultory subconscious, the occasionally debauched human spirit.

Mark kicked off his shoes, peeled the socks from his feet and stood barefoot, looking out the large window at a woman walking a black and tan animal across the

square. Mark admired her swagger. She could be French, he thought. We could easily be in France. Mark stretched his fingers across the cool glass. He looked out across the rural town square and admitted it was not France. No, he was in a rented apartment with bare walls. He was looking through a window with no curtain. He was smack dab in the middle of Ohio where he was not a well-loved chef or a classical poet; Ohio, where the hazy light of far off commerce had the power to block starlight. Yes, an urban backwoods with, as far as Mark could tell, absolutely no cultural significance.

As his view became obscured by breath on the window, Mark realized his forehead was nearly resting against the glass—he'd been leering at that woman like a maniac until she'd disappeared behind the white pavilion marking the town center. He looked down at the stack of books, staring instead at the romanticized cover art profiling a fish, a trout he thought, bending the long pole of an astonished hip wader knee deep in a sparkling summer brook. Mark flipped through a few pages of stylized fish woodcuts and then ran water in the tub, feeling the paper between his forefinger and thumb. As the mirror fogged over he undressed, settled cross-legged in the bath and watched as dots darkened on the manual's textured, yellow pages. He read about the stream and river fish of the Midwestern United States and his eyes began to feel puffy. He tossed the book across the tiles—it flipped open against the wall and Mark reclined in the water, rested his hands over his chest and closed his eyes.

His dream woman was sitting behind a desk stamping the last page of a well-worn book. Darkness in the hollows of her features indicated she was perhaps a well-worn woman further wearing a well-worn book. She set the book on end and slipped off the dust jacket, lifted the bare book to her mouth and bit the corner. Her jaw muscles

worked, and after just a moment, Mark found himself barefoot on the bank of a mild river, sky the jaundiced tint of old paper, froth tingled his toes and the flat river stones practically massaged the bottoms of his feet. The water was filled with the light of some round sun high overhead, and the white rocks glowed like flat pearls along the bank as he became aware of moving with the water, of being carried on his back through the rushing currents, and the water was warm, like the caresses of thousands of tiny hands, and he was aware that the water was moving through him, and he was falling with the water—plunging into a bottomless darkness. He stayed there for a while.

That night Mark sat in his pajamas sipping cold coffee at the edge of the bed, the notebook containing his own literary efforts in one hand, a poetry pastiche, and admired the photograph of the first mature woman he had ever loved. In the picture, a chubby Polynesian man and a darkly tanned woman with dreadlocks posed on a bright beach. When Ms. Makaiau had introduced herself to his high school English class, Mark had been intrigued by the slick little red, yellow and green Rasta tattoo on her ankle. By spring break she had Mark searching the pharmacies for patchouli, kicking a hacky sac and saying "mahalo" to the lunch ladies.

Mark's affectation for poetry had everything to do with the twenty-two-year old English exchange teacher. The school library, a place where one could pass notes or sleep through the period undisturbed, had become Ms. Makaiau's conference period study. Mark pulled down old books by writers he had never heard of—he admired her mysterious dark skin, elbow bent to the task of marking compositions. "Ms. M? Can I help you with anything?" He had given her, he imagined, his most winning smile. He

had helped mark papers and learned she had grown up on a Naval base, loved Greek food, poetry and surfing. She had a way of glancing sideways that he absolutely adored.

Her exchange was cut short when her brother's neck was broken by a momboosa wave that had dragged him along the bottom of the Pacific off of Oahu's South Shore. Ms. Makaiau returned to her corner of the world and Mark graduated in the spring. In the months following, a block typed sonnet was as good as a whiff of patchouli—in essence, served as a link to Ms. Makaiau, who Mark imagined slowly rising on a sleek white surfboard thousands of miles deep in the Pacific.

Mark's affectation for poetry was the seed necessary to home grow his own poet's heart. He nurtured the growth with Donne's conceits, Byron's apostrophes, Petrarch's longing, Shakespeare's wry wit. The list grew. The feel of the language in his mouth appealed to him as well as the idea that sounds and sentiment played the heartstrings of a woman like Ms. Makaiau. Mark considered himself, on the day he received his associate's degree in restaurant management, a modern Romantic in chef's clothing.

He set the notebook beside his bed and felt encouraged—if only he could inspire someone the way Ms. Makaiau had inspired him, through verse, with a dish, or in front of the class. His sleep, the night before his first day at school, was full of hope—he imagined captivating his students with every gesture of his body, his indelible charm. Julia Child of the classroom.

They had locked him out before the morning announcements were over. They had spilled into the classroom as a virtual tide of faces and noise, some clutching sack lunches, stranger chattels, and Mark had no idea what to make of them. One of them, a

girl, had been wearing headphones and singing a country music song, another worked a puppet on one hand. Still another didn't have any hands… or hair. One was hooting and punching out slack-wrist in all directions. Mark observed all of this from behind the refrigerated cooler. His mind couldn't process what he was seeing, and in fear of panic, of drowning really, he simply walked from the room. "They don't know who I am yet," he reasoned, found the bathroom and splashed some cold water into his face. When he returned they had locked the door from the inside. Mark could see into the classroom through the glass on either side of the door. He knocked, but it did no good. They were too loud. A striking young blonde leaned into the hall, made a disapproving face and closed her own door. The exaggerated hoots of the punching boy rose. Mark nearly ran downstairs toward the office—for all he knew they were killing one another in there.

"See building maintenance," one of the secretaries said. She hadn't looked up from her computer. The building maintenance door was simply marked "Janitor" and Mark knocked on it. After a moment a white haired woman answered. "You have to help me. I'm locked out," he said. Even in his agitated state, Mark noted stacks of books in the janitor's workroom. "One moment," she said, smiling, and reappeared with a ring of keys.

Pam let Mark back into his classroom and suggested he keep an extra key on a lanyard around his neck. "For these emergencies," she said.

When Mark pushed back inside most of the kids were watching a gangly half-man, half-boy with a shadow of a moustache swing an old woman puppet—the puppet seemed to be clutching a steel ladle, and he was singing—Old Lady Schubert has gray hair / Big fat boobs and Old Lady underwear / She hits Omar with a spoon / She leaves at

noon / Lock the door / She'll be back real soon.

Mark summoned what courage he could muster and approached the young man with one hand open. "Give me the puppet," he said in his sternest tone. This is ridiculous, he thought, but it didn't *feel* ridiculous.

"David," said a girl with headphones.

David handed it over. Mark took the puppet and the ladle, and the young man muttered something. Mark thought it sounded like "crook."

"Who are you?" A student named Nate asked of Mark the first of what would seem like a lifetime's supply of questions, some simple in their profundity, all maddeningly unanswerable. For this first, Mark had an answer.

"I'm—" he almost said *I'm Mark*. "I'm here to teach you how to cook."

The day passed in a sensory blur, and though Mark had never been exposed to harmful radiation, he thought he had an idea what it felt like. The glass on either side of the door was covered in fingerprints, faceprints, and Mark thought, God-only-knew-what-other-kind of prints as he wiped it clean. His students liked to watch the traditional high-schoolers pass by in the halls from behind the window through which Mark could now see the striking blonde arranging papers in her classroom. After a moment, he realized he was fogging the glass.

Mark checked his mailbox before he left school, found a spare room key with a note—*for your lanyard*—and a memo from the superintendent informing him he had been allotted one week to prepare for foodservice. "One week?"

His blonde neighbor entered the mailroom and ran a hand into her box—Ms.

Simmons, the name read—she came up empty, turned and called “good evening” over her shoulder. Mark stood looking after her unsure if he had imagined the French accent or not.

He checked the expiration dates on foodstuffs in the classroom’s stainless steel refrigerator and threw nearly all of it away; he spent most of the evening filling out a rush order for supplies. And of course, before he left, he washed the dishes.

Late that evening Mark changed into his bedclothes and walked into the kitchen to start a late supper. He was able to make coffee, lift down the large pot for boiling noodles, fill it with tap water and ignite the stove burners while standing in one spot. In order to open the oven door, however, he had to slide a stack of books with one foot, bracing them against his leg. Mark’s books were piled in stacks along the walls, on either side of the sofa—they were even taking over the one-step kitchen. He picked out a few volumes of poetry and set them by the door to take in to school.

Mark sat down at the dining room table with his notebook and picked up a pencil, turning to avoid the glare from the setting sun streaming in through the large picture window in the living room. He’d been drafting an outline for his own menu based on French Haute Cuisine and had read that Auguste Escoffier named dishes after women he admired. Mark had finished writing dinner recipes for his fanciful menu, though he couldn’t imagine dedicating a recipe for roast pork loin—no, Mark was saving the dedications for the desserts. He had a whole list of names, to which he added Simmons—and only one dessert. Mille-feuille. He had dropped his dessert course after only a week. The teacher, he had felt, had held no authority in the classroom. He sighed,

set down the pencil, looked over at the bare window and sighed again.

The water on the stove came to a boil. Mark opened a few cupboards and realized he didn't have any noodles. He lifted down the phone book—as he searched for "pizza," he noted the pulp smell, like ripped cardboard, and picked up the phone. On teacher's wages, he could, after all, afford an extra large.

The student from whom he had confiscated the old lady puppet had taken home an oven mitt overnight and turned it into Dracula. The mitt had been white to begin with—all Dave had needed was a cloak, Mark suspected, cut from one of his mother's silk blouses. Dave had deserved an A for his needlework, however, and had drawn in features and a few drops of blood with permanent marker.

"Do you know who was originally supposed to play Frankenstein's Monster?" Dave seemed to have a knack for remembering B movie trivia. Mark shrugged. "Me!" he said, springing the puppet from behind his back. "Béla Lugosi!"

Questions, it seemed, were contagious. Nate began with a few unanswerables, each dealing with hygiene. What are these red bumps on my arm? Where do lice come from? Why does hair turn grey? There may be answers to these questions, Mark conceded, but he certainly did not know them. It occurred to Mark to send Nate to the school nurse, but she was a slightly jaundiced person with puffy eyes and a cigarette cough whom students were a little afraid of.

Mark grabbed a book from the stack that he had brought into school and opened to a random page. He brandished the poem like a silver crucifix and read something by Petrarch. They made faces. Boomer plugged his ears. Vikki couldn't stop giggling.

Omar made a fart noise. The poem seemed to staunch the flow of questions. Mark started them on task and planned to read another after lunch; maybe something French. "From now on," Mark said, "if you have a question, you must first raise your hand." Dave raised his hand. "Yes?" Mark said.

"What if it's a question but you already know the answer?"

Vikki started to speak but raised her hand. Mark nodded. "Why would you ask a question when you already know the answer?" she said.

Dave raised his hand. Mark looked at him. "What if it's a trivia question?"

Nate raised his hand. "What if no one knows the answer?"

"*Any* question," Mark said. "Raise your hand whether there's an answer or not."

One of the male janitors stopped by long enough to tell Mark that his stuff had arrived that morning and was still on the palate at the loading dock. "Some of those items require refrigeration," Mark said.

"Well, then, I guess you better grab the stock cart," he said. "We've got a bad breaker—it's those damned new computers." He held up large, brown hands to indicate that they were bound.

"I'll get it," Mark said. He spent his entire lunch loading items, trundling onto the elevator and down the hall into the classroom. The freight elevator took forever to close its oversized doors, probably hadn't been inspected in ages, and labored, shuddering occasionally with a frightening, slipping racket. Mark piled the little cart with so much inventory that his shoes slipped on the thin carpet. Ms. Simmons passed him in their hallway, a half eaten pear in one hand. "You're going to fall directly on your face." This

time Mark distinctly heard the accent—it was thin, but definitely European. He was aware of his mussed hair, the sweat standing on his face.

That afternoon, Mark prepared to show them how to boil water for noodles. A student named Buddy came late from lunch, face flush, and locked himself in the bathroom. After he set the others on task, Mark knocked and asked him what was the matter. Buddy did not answer. Some of the other students complained that they needed to use the toilet. Nate, who Mark observed washed his hands excessively, was particularly put upon by having to move his ritual to the kitchen sink. Nate raised his hand. "What's he *doing* in there?" The classroom key did not work in the bathroom door, so Mark walked down to the Janitor's room. He was relieved to find Pam and asked her for help. Again.

"Well, there is no key for that door," she explained. "I think one of them flushed it. It's Buddy is it? I'll see if I can talk him out."

She told Mark that Buddy's real name was Leonard. "I know his mom. His father held the world record for the most popcorn eaten in one sitting. Fame went to his head."

"Well Buddy's a good nickname," Mark said. "One of my students can't speak and his nickname is Boomer. Isn't that kind of ironic?"

"I know his parents too," Pam said, "and it's not a nickname."

"Boomer's his real name?" Mark said.

Nate was standing on a step stool, pants around his ankles, palming water onto himself. Washing. The other students were pretending not to notice. Mark felt lightheaded and grabbed the doorframe for support. "Nathan!" Pam said and rushed into

the room. In what looked to Mark like life observed through a pinhole camera, weird and somehow upside down, she helped him dry and get his pants up. She told him to sit on the stool until she came back. To Mark's surprise, he hunkered down. Steam was rising from one of the large pots and Mark moved to check the noodles.

Someone had boiled the book of poems.

The pages floated like the leaves of a sickly cabbage. Mark studied the room. Pam was talking through the door to Buddy—the only true innocent. He immediately suspected Dave. Tony didn't have hands, but that didn't absolve him as far as Mark was concerned. Mark fished the book out with a pair of tongs and tossed it, steaming, into the trash. He had no idea what to do.

Buddy was emerging from the bathroom, wiping his eyes, and Pam gave him an awkward hug—he was still wearing his book bag—then Pam unzipped the pack and pulled out the *Guinness Book of World Records* Mark was always asking him to put away. Mark dumped the bookwater into the sink and refilled the pot.

Pam approached Mark. "Apparently Dave told Buddy at lunch that Jaws had been a machine."

Mark raised his eyebrows.

"Sharks are Buddy's favorite animal. To get him to come out I had to promise that Jaws was really real," she said, as if the sequence of this logic were as natural as an algorithm. "So they boiled your book?"

Mark nodded. "I think I know who did it."

"Everyone come here, please," Pam said over the chatter. She handed each student a napkin and asked them to write down exactly what they had seen. "You know

what I'm talking about," she said, firmly but kindly. They shuffled around grabbing pens and pencils. Dave grabbed the dry erase marker from the menu board. "Use a pen, please," Pam asked. Dave asked Vikki for a pen. Tony wrote with a pencil between his teeth. Pam asked them to fold their napkins and pass them in. "Thank you," she said, handing Mark the stack. "Now, get back to work. Everything smells wonderful."

They got back to work.

Mark waited until after the bell, fixed some of the pasta on a plate and flipped through the napkins. Mark recognized Vikki's loopy handwriting—*Omar did it. P.S. I liked your poem*. Each indicted Omar. Even Omar's, he suspected, written in a hurried scrawl—*I did it*.

Mark wasn't angry—he was in awe of Pam's instincts, but also that his own had been so wrong. He still had no idea what he was going to do—maybe nothing—but he unlocked his desk drawer and stowed their confessions. He pulled out the Ms. Schubert puppet. The doll was kind of grotesque, but artistic compared to Béla Lugosi. The strips of felt that comprised her head and body had been sewn from the inside. The hair grew in a tattered clump of gray yarn. Someone had even bent brass wire into round spectacles. She was swaddled in a dark green doll dress. Mark had been a little irritated by Dave's theft of the oven mitt, yet he had been secretly amused by the ingenuity. Mark had half expected, feared in fact, that he might see himself rendered in puppet form, and imagined his own song—Mr. Fuller has a dirty beard / A gay hoop earring and talks real weird / He's a crook / He makes us cook / Reads us poems / From a stinky old book.

Mark pulled Ms. Schubert onto his hand and walked down to the teacher's lounge

to find a math teacher named Kurt sitting on the couch with his eyes closed. His hands were dusted with chalk, and at first Mark suspected he was sleeping despite the painful grimace chiseled into his face. "Kurt?" He slowly opened his eyes and the grimace intensified. "Bad day?"

"I don't have bad days," Kurt said. "I cause them."

"Okay," Mark said. "I was just wondering… do you know what happened to my predecessor? Ms. Schubert?"

Kurt motioned Mark to come closer, to sit beside him on the couch. "What's that?" he said, pointing at the old lady puppet.

"Ms. Schubert," Mark said, and Kurt snorted. "What's funny?"

"This job," he said, taking the puppet, "will warp you into caricature." He looked fondly at the doll.

"I don't understand," Mark said.

"You think this was Schubert?" Kurt said and got up. He walked over to a desk cluttered with textbooks, MSDS sheets and auto repair manuals. He shook out a thin volume with *Tech* and the year printed on the front cover. Kurt brought it over for Mark to see and pointed to a picture of an attractive, dark-haired woman—her head was canted to one side, emphasizing something in her smile. Mark looked at the corresponding name printed in the margin.

"*That's* Ms. Schubert?" He looked closely at the picture. "I thought she was an old lady."

"Oh no," Kurt said. "What did your old man tell you?"

"Something about wanting to be closer to relatives. Why, what do you think

really happened to her?"

"She lasted longer than some of the others," Kurt said. "Just don't expect a straight answer. They like to keep things hush-hush."

"Who are they?" Mark asked.

"The administration," Kurt said. "I know. I used to be superintendent of this school."

"You?" Mark said.

"Yeah me," Kurt said. "I wasn't always a pre-calc peon."

"I'm sorry," Mark said. "It's just—"

"You're right," Kurt said. "I wasn't really cut out for it. Don't forget. Sometimes," Kurt said, holding the puppet, "the numbers don't add up."

Mark didn't always know how to take him, but there was something about Kurt that he liked. There was also something frightening about him—it wasn't his abrasiveness, even Mark could see through that—it was the way, when he spoke, the whites were visible all around the colored part of his eyes. "Like Pam," Kurt said. "Betcha didn't know she used to be the librarian."

"Why is she scrubbing toilets?" Mark instantly regretted the question. He had only been at the school for two days, yet he could intuit that in a technical school, manual labor was something to be revered, not reviled. "Is that why there's a bunch of books in the workroom?"

"Ah, you've seen our literary remnants?" Mark nodded. "Your pops replaced all the books with computers," Kurt said, and Mark felt the words settle like a murder of storm crows. "Goddamn godless machines."

Kurt gave an abridged history of the school. He emphasized the early 1970s during which they had made some serious changes. "We knocked down the walls, man. The learning was supposed to float around. Free learning," he said, wiggling his eyebrows and waving his hands. "Students were expected to gravitate toward authentic instruction. It was inquiry-based hippie invasion shit." Kurt loosened the knot of his tie and produced a wooden bead-necklace. "I still wear the beads."

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The special needs class was supposed to meet once a month for four hours on Tuesday night at the regional campus extension in a building, Mark thought, with something of the asylum about it. Mark was familiar with the myth of the teacher who drank on the job—the one who reputedly poured vodka in a plastic water bottle, or kept a flask in the desk, and Mark thought Mr. Stankowitz was the kind of teacher responsible for such myths. The notes for the course had been written out on rolled transparency, and when everyone had copied the information Mr. Stankowitz got up from behind his desk and cranked to the next series of scribble. Occasionally he would flavor the notes with an anecdote dredged up from the few years he had spent in a public school classroom. He talked about the days he drove a bus for the Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. "My girlfriend," he quipped, "had worked magic with those kids, but a lot could go wrong on the bus. We kept the spare tire behind one of the seats, and one day, on a trip to an orchard, they rolled it out the back door. Thank God it didn't hit anyone behind us," he said. "That was back when some of the roads out here were still unpaved."

In another story he related the experience of teaching a group of "high

functioners" how to pour a patio concrete. "They laid it so thick that it dried up past the bottom of the door and wedged us out. Eventually we broke it up and tried again." The memories were always given in the tone an old man might reserve for reminiscing about the more curious aspects of owning an ant-farm.

"I used to give out downers before I took them anywhere. It's just how things were done back then." If Mr. Stankowitz had any educational philosophy, Mark was unsure what it was.

What annoyed him most, perhaps, was the kind of snack food they all seemed to have in no short supply—bags of chips, soda, and candy bars were their manna, it seemed. One dough-faced woman named Maureen had brought a jar of peanut butter, and Mark watched with a kind of horrified fascination as she dipped first her pretzels rods, then her fingers into the jar.

They learned how to read Individualized Education Plans, 504s, and copied strings of educational acronyms from the overhead—Developmentally Handicapped, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, English as a Second Language, Limited English Proficient, Severe Behavior Handicap, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Annual Yearly Progress, Academic Content Standards, Ohio Graduation Test, Academic Emergency, Learning Disabilities Association of America, American Sign Language, Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation, Children's Protective Services, Highly Qualified Teacher, Individualized Family Service Plan, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, Children of Alcoholic Parents, Landau-Kleffler Syndrome, Prader-Willi Syndrome, Sturge-Weber Syndrome, Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence, Least Restrictive Environment, Mental Retardation Developmental Disabilities, Ohio

Achievement Test, and Specific Learning Disabilities. There was a name for everything; there was even an acronym for nothing—NDA—No Diagnosis of Anything.

Halfway through the first session, Mark gave up writing notes, and while Stankowitz cranked through the transparencies, he wrote sentences employing as many of these acronyms as possible. "This HQT needs to get an IEP for that 504—the one who is ADHD, ODD and OCD—before he fails the OGT and we miss AYP and go on AE."

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By Wednesday afternoon, Mark was ready to quit. They had burned noodles, for Christ's sake. Omar had used a saucepot to boil two boxes of handmade Tagliatelle, and Mark had been too busy showing Vikki how to powder and knead French bread dough to notice. He was excited that Vikki showed an aptitude for some of the more delicate dishes, but Mark was pretty sure Buddy and Tony ate half of what they cooked. He had actually caught them eating honey—well, Buddy had been feeding it to Tony with a spoon. Nate was too busy raising his hand, asking questions and washing his hands, along with everything else.

Dave didn't want to remove the puppets from his hand long enough to get any serious work done. He had brought in a new creation Wednesday morning. It was supposed to be The Phantom of the Opera, a la Lon Chaney. It looked like a sweat sock, but he'd drawn dark circles under the googly eyes with permanent marker, and the hair was black yarn. The subtle genius of the puppet, Mark thought, was the ugly rubber teeth—the kind sold for a quarter in vending bubbles. Dave had Boomer carry the puppet around all morning. "Boomer can't talk because he's got no voice box. Just like a silent film," Dave said, and raised his hand. "Did you know *The Phantom of the Opera* was a

silent film?"

By the end of the day, all they had to show for their labor were a few loaves of bread, some Alfredo sauce into which someone had chopped two whole bulbs of garlic instead of two cloves, yet he had seen to it that the sauce bolognaise turned out. The only problem was they didn't have any noodles.

After school, Gordon knocked at Mark's door and introduced him to a man wearing a shiny blue jacket, cuffs and waist cinched with a striped elastic. The man's gray hair was closely cropped. Mark shook his hand, and his grip was quite firm. "Mr. Mullins's son will be joining your class starting Friday."

"Okay," Mark said. "Great. What's your son's name?"

"Ben," Mr. Mullins said, squinting at Mark. "That's my name," he said. His blue eyes were watery, as if he had been staring into a strong wind, and Mark thought he caught the ghost of alcohol on his breath. Gordon suggested they sit. Mark cleared a table for them to talk.

"I can put on some coffee," Mark said.

Mr. Mullins nodded. While the coffee percolated, Mr. Mullins talked about his son. "Ben is a good boy, but he needs a structured environment." He used his hands while he spoke in what Mark thought was probably a conscious effort at straight talk.

Gordon produced the boy's Individual Educational Plan. Mark thought the number of acronyms on Ben's IEP could've provided his night class with quite an exercise in transcription. Ben was twenty-two, older than David, which would make him the oldest student.

"Looks fine," Mark said.

"This is Ben's last year of public school eligibility. Probably put him to work shoveling asphalt. Now, he's been prescribed medications to help him cope," Mr. Mullins said, "with certain issues. You'll need to make sure he gets to the nurse during lunch." Nothing new, Mark thought. Student medication was kept in those brown plastic vials behind the glass of the nurse's cabinet. Mr. Mullins looked Mark up and down. "Ben's instructors have found it necessary to use restraint in the past," he said. "Is that something you're prepared to handle?"

"If it comes to that," Mark said, "I suppose."

Gordon visited Thursday morning. Dave quizzed him with movie trivia from behind the cash register, one hand encased in his latest creation—the Wolfman. "What was the name of the fifty foot woman?" He had sewn the puppet from the lining of an old coat. The eyes had been sculpted from the white heads of plastic spoons. The mouth so much red felt. Gordon had raised his eyebrows at Mark and puffed out his cheeks. It might have been comical if Mark hadn't known what the look meant. *Really? You'll have them ready by next week?*

"You watch that movie and get back to me, okay?" Dave said.

Mark counted inventory at the end of the day; most of it had been burned or overused. He looked at the stack of poetry books on his desk. Boomer had cried for no reason, at least as far as Mark could tell. Nate had asked twenty-six questions, Mark had kept count, to which no one knew the answers. Omar had grabbed Tony by the throat. Vikki had whispered that someone in the lunchroom told her to "go fuck herself." There

was a strange sauce seeping through his apron. They had run out of eggs. He had to drive to a convenience store during lunch and had eaten a microwave burrito in his car.

Mark lifted the navy blue binder emblazoned with the gold leaf ship's wheel from the bottom drawer of his desk. It was just the kind of corny metaphor his father would think up for a teacher's handbook. He looked around at the dirty pots, baking pans, measuring cups and silverware heaped in the sink. A mystery sauce had darkened his apron. For the first time since he had been hired, Mark opened the notebook and read—*Ahoy and welcome aboard! Your primary role as an educator will be to construct a stable environment in which students can fulfill the educational goals you have created for them. You'll be expected to run a tight ship, but don't worry! You won't be sailing alone. Not only have you joined an elite crew of seafaring individuals—the State of Ohio has written educational goals for each academic content area. You have been hired as an educator by the State of Ohio to assess your students' ability to meet these standards. Your educational training will serve as your rudder and compass, and the standards will serve as the constellations by which you chart you and your students' journey.*

Time and again you will hear this phrase, however, my time in the classroom showed me it deserves its own place among educational aphorisms—A student cannot succeed unless they know what is expected of them. *It is your job to make sure our students have a clear understanding of what is expected, as I have taken the time in this volume to make clear what is expected of you.*

Expect to work as hard as a ship hand in a high force wind. For those of you who have never been on a boat, whether you're slacking the halyard, fasting jib sheets to the clew, ducking the whiskerpole, or just scrimshanding to pass the time, a sailor's work is

never done. Such is the case with any effective teacher.

Mark closed the book. The mystery sauce had stained his favorite blue shirt. He knew the cupboards in his apartment kitchen were bare. He tossed his apron across the counter and left the dish pile for morning. He was going to the grocery store.

His eye was drawn to every depraved detail as he sat behind the wheel waiting for a break in the pedestrian traffic—lopsided shoulders, sweatpants, a limping old woman, her son's greasy, bedraggled hair. Circles of rain appeared on the windshield as he pulled into a spot at the far end of the lot. He grabbed the cart resting against the neighboring car's bumper and pushed it, running, into a jangling grocery chariot, hopped up on the crossbar and coasted as the first really heavy drops wet his face and hair. Mark swerved past a few Amish and the automatic doors had barely opened wide enough when he passed through. His shoes were squeaking out a crazy rhythm on the tile floor, he stretched his face into a manic grin just for kicks and hooked a few stares as he streaked past the vending bubbles and into the produce aisles. There were sections stocked with local harvest. He slowed down at the deli counter and asked a woman in a paper hat for some thick sliced capicolla and a pound of provolone. He picked up some fresh Parmesan and backtracked to the vegetables, grabbed two firm red tomatoes, a sweet onion, a bag of clove garlic and a head of romaine lettuce.

He stopped for a moment in front of the canned tuna fish. Oh how easy it would be, he thought, picking up a can of albacore in water. He would need only mayonnaise, and they already had a commercial jar. Maybe chop in a few sticks of celery. Mix and spread.

"No," he said, and set the can back on the shelf.

On his second trip past the deli counter he grabbed a ball of mozzarella, squeezed out a beat while he pushed the cart up and down the aisles picking out the rest of whatever the hell he wanted.

Ben arrived Friday morning holding a brown bag in one fist and wearing a blue jacket identical to his father's. Ben's brown hair was closely cropped, and Mark shook his big hand. Same grip, he thought. "Welcome, Ben." He was big boned, much like his father, and Mark was nearly positive that if Ben wanted to, he could haul him off his feet by his shirt collars.

That afternoon, Mark noticed a bright policeman's star clipped near Ben's buckle, and decided to attach the spare classroom key to a retractable lanyard and give it to him to wear on his belt. "This lets us get in and out if we're ever locked out," Mark said, and he showed Ben how to turn the knob and the key at the same time. Mark held the key for Ben to see. "This is power," he said. "And I'm giving it to you."

That afternoon, Ben stood with his thick arms crossed over his chest as Mark read from Byron. Boomer plugged his ears and Omar pulled out a goalie mask from his book bag and put it on. Mark finished the poem and set the book on his desk. He was startled by loud applause as he pulled on his apron. Ben was clapping.

Vikki turned on the radio. Mark asked Ben to wash the fingerpints from the deli windows. Ben ran hot tap water and steam rose from the bucket as he carried it over to the windows. He washed until his arms were red halfway to the elbows.

That afternoon they achieved what Mark thought all along was impossible. On

Monday, they would be ready to serve.

By that Friday evening Mark could only sulk in his bath, a book open under his nose, words swimming on the page. As a boy he had lifted down one of his father's heavy tomes searching for pictures of the Nazi blitzkrieg bombers he was learning about in school and had stumbled across a black-and-white photograph of Nagasaki. The effects of the atom bomb. In the picture, the shadow of a man sitting on a park bench had been burned onto the pavement like a photonegative. The image had burned itself into Mark's mind as a boy, and he recalled it now as a loose metaphor for the sensory stew coloring the soupbowl of his mind. As if, he imagined, all the sounds from the week had been burned into his nerves, or maybe just condensed to echo indefinitely between his ears.

In only one day, Ben had become a force in the classroom. He was physically intimidating to the other students, and more importantly, he was on Mark's side. He made sure hands were raised for questions and put the other kids to work if there was a job. Mark didn't want to count his graces before they had been realized, but he was pretty sure he would no longer need to spend time after school washing prints from the deli windows and dirty dishes in the sink.

Mark let the bathwater down the drain and tossed a book of sonnets into the corner of the bathroom with the others. As he stepped from the tub, water dripped from his big toe and dotted the covers. He wiped the books, dried himself and wrapped the wet towel about his waist. He turned off the bathroom light, walked into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at the blue veins running along the tops of his lumpy feet. He fell backwards onto his bed and hit his head against a book. He lay for a

moment against the hard surface, got up and started collecting the scattered volumes from under the bed, atop the toilet tank, piled on either side of the couch. He made stacks in the closet and along the wall of his bedroom, his face and bare back cooling with perspiration. His mind felt a bit untangled, yet his spirit was still restless as he tossed the towel and he climbed under the cover to watch the sunlight die on the walls.

Lying in the dark, Mark waited for sleep and tried to calculate how long it had been since he had been on a date. The hard-drinking girls at the bar in the town square weren't exactly his type. He had walked in there one night wearing a corduroy sport jacket, his fingers caressing the hoop earring, and drank one draft beer before walking back to his apartment. "Where you going, professor?" A bleach blonde and her flannelled friend were out front sharing a cigarette. It would have been sexy, Mark thought, but for the Carharts and muddy boots. "Home," he said. "To read a book." A wolf-whistle followed him up the street. The bleach blonde, he imagined.

In an effort to refill his manna tank, he drove to a bookstore the next morning. The rural library was still under construction. He followed a natural blonde through the bookstore, stealing glances from behind a hastily chosen volume until he realized he was following Ms. Simmons. He had admired her black stockings and green skirt without seeing her face. She was flipping through a volume in the modern poetry section. He had flipped through the same volume weeks before and planned to ask, "They're a bit ribald, don't you think?" Maybe raw was a better word. He liked ribald. She tucked the black book under one arm and began downstairs. Mark followed. He watched her pay for her books from behind a shelf in the History section. He planned to leave the store at the same

time, bump into her. "What kind of books do beautiful women read?" Maybe, "Don't you love the smell?" He pulled a random book from the shelf while he waited and allowed it to fall open in his hand. His eyes scanned the page of block text, registered the words "retreat" and "evacuate." The passage, closer inspection revealed, was an essay on Dunkirk, and by the time Mark returned his attention to Ms. Simmons, she was gone through the front doors.

That evening, Mark slipped out from under the covers and walked bare skinned into the dark living room of his apartment. Cool air from the window glass tightened the skin over his stomach. The white pavilion glowed vaguely in the middle of the square. Being on display reminded him of modeling. This window, he decided, needs a curtain. Sunlight drenched the walls during the day but any lamps lit his apartment like a stage at night. He thought of Julie. He wondered if she was still working in housewares.

Mark took off his hat as he pushed through the front doors of the department store. The parking lot had been barren, and at such an hour only mannequins inhabited the aisles. He stopped in front of one covered by a purple sweater emblazoned with a ruby sequence in the shape of a rose.

The escalator lifted Mark to the second floor, to housewares, Julie's section, and he gripped the brim of his hat tightly in one fist. He was nervous, so he imagined he was traveling to the upper floors of a large corporate office to fire someone important. After the firing he would take a stiff drink and cancel his afternoon appointments. Mark looked at himself in the mirrors lining the walls and stood a little straighter, buttoned one more button on his shirt and adjusted the cuffs of his sport jacket.

Mark found Julie leaned against a cash register, paging through a magazine. She had highlighted her hair a glittering kind of gold, maybe for a new part in a play Mark thought, and the long tresses were in the way. He watched her for a while. She pulled the hair back over her ears and didn't lift her eyes from the magazine. Mark watched her jaw work as he approached the desk.

"I'm looking for some curtains," Mark said. "For my apartment."

Julie looked up from her magazine and he admired her familiar bottom lip, the glitter she liked to apply at the corners of her eyes. He realized he could never really interpret the color of her eyes, as if the iris turned like wildflower petals in the rain.

"We have many cretins to choose from," Julie said working her jaw, returning to her magazine. "Cretins that can't take a hint. Cretins that will stab you in the back. Cretins that leave their crumby books lying around the apartment."

"I suppose I deserve that," Mark said, appreciating the familiar aroma of her bubblegum. He set his hat on the counter.

Julie reached under the counter, pulled up a thick catalogue and slid it over to him. "They're about halfway through," she said, returning to her magazine.

Mark hauled open the catalogue and found the curtain section by accident. He flipped through a few pages of neutral Chenille panels and white sheer under treatments. Mark glanced at Julie's magazine—glossy pictures of men and women cradling babies to their breast, looking the other way, wearing sunglasses.

"Ah, perfect for the burlesque dancer," Mark said and gestured toward the black velvet. He turned the page and admired a blue curtain with a sailboat and lifesaver pattern. He put his finger on the spot. "I want those."

Julie looked at the page. "Those are little kid curtains." She licked the tips of her fingers and flipped a few pages to the Chameleon Crushed Satin. "These are for the adults." Mark thought they looked like curtains in a funeral parlor. He cleared his throat. "You never did… entertain much," Julie said. She looked at him as if he were made of crystal—as if she knew he would shatter at any moment and expected to be angry when it happened. She pulled the catalogue to her side of the counter. "What about these?" she pointed to the Chenille panel curtains. "What colors are you working with? In your new place?"

"Brown," Mark said. He wondered, again, about the color of her eyes. "I guess."

"What kind of brown?" Julie asked. Mark pointed to the Formica. "That's beige," she said. "Actually, taupe. It's a warm beige," she said. He thought her eyes had communicated secret warmth, but they weren't taupe. "Look. Why don't you get the measurements of the windows and bring in your color?"

"It's really just one big window," he said squaring his hands. "I like the sailboats."

"Let me guess. You've knocked up a sailor's daughter. Decorating the nursery?"

"Not exactly," he said. "But bravo for using your imagination. I've been teaching school. We could talk about it over dinner some night."

"On a date? Oh Mark," she said, as if he were a pup she had caught chewing Chameleon Crushed Satin. Mark picked his hat off the countertop and covered his heart. He arched his eyebrows and stuck out his lower lip. Julie sighed. "Tuesday's my day off. Pick me up at five."

The Emptiness of Experience

Mark opened the restaurant for lunch foodservice the next Monday afternoon. They set out buffet style pans of store-bought shells in Alfredo and sauce bolognaise, sliced French loaves, and provided café' au lait. A flat price had been set per serving, and despite the fact that a few of the technical instructors and an environmental science teacher made a contest of how much food they could load onto trays, he figured they had made enough profit to order something more extravagant next time.

Even Ms. Simmons had made an appearance. Overhearing her talking to one of the other instructors, Mark decided she must teach British Literature. Mark had put Dave in charge of the cash register, and he kept up with sales while sharing fragments of B movie trivia. Mark had insisted he take The Phantom of the Opera off his hand, but Ms. Simmons had shown interest in Dave's puppets, and Mark had to take over register while he introduced her to the entire troupe. Ben supervised the buffet line and made sure they didn't run out of food. Vikki handed out utensils and napkins. Mark had asked Tony to stand by the door and say goodbye. Boomer had accidentally torn a page in Buddy's *Guinness Book of World Records*—something about the world's largest bat—and the offence had caused him to take refuge in the bathroom. Boomer stood behind the refrigerated cooler with Mark. "Maybe we'll get dessert tomorrow," one of the teachers had said.

Mark hadn't thought of tomorrow.

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Most of the guys packed, a fact for which Mark was thankful, and on the rare occasion he was able to eat in the staff lunch-room, he sat with Frank, a carpentry instructor who pulled the same meal from his lunchbox day after day—scraps of dried beef, two hardboiled eggs, a bowl of long brown rice, green olives, cubes of cheddar cheese and four tomato slices that he salted with a little shaker built into his lunchbox like a lunch tool. The sun had hardened Frank's skin, and his aspect, coupled with rigidity and calm bearing, conjured the regality of a daguerreotype Indian from the plains—something from one of Gordon's history books. While Frank cut dried beef with a pocketknife, Mark picked gummy bears from a sandwich bag and twirled whole-wheat fettuccini noodles in his homemade Alfredo sauce.

"You've just got to break it down for them. Kids can do the most difficult jobs in the world as long as they don't know it's difficult," Frank said. "We could have them manufacturing those goddamned silicon computer chips if we could break down the steps.

"We put in a hip and valley roof every year, and as we do it one cut per step, the final product is beautiful. Some say they need to see what the finished product is going to look like. Those kids are gonna be foremen some day. I show them a blueprint then tell them to pick up their saw. It all comes together in the end.

"Sometimes you get kids who don't want to learn. You can't make them. Some kids just want to horse around. Throw nails. Not on a job site. Send em home with a box of nails—you want to throw nails? Here, go home and throw them at your neighbors. Give me a break.

"They have to want to learn. Kids today are pampered. No one is allowed to fail. Time is money. You don't have the time to count the little black marks. To recognize length by sight. That takes practice. I'll put it up on the overhead. Pop quiz. No numbers, just black lines, like the marks on a ruler." Frank drew some lines on a napkin with a flat pencil. "Give them maybe three seconds to recognize the length. You've got to know 5/16" from 1/4" in this job.

"Repetition is a great teacher—I still believe that. Some woman said, 'You're not supposed to drill it into their heads,' and she thought that was supposed to be funny because I'm a carpenter. 'Explain it to them. Appeal to their reason.' She said you have to make sure they understand why before you teach them how. Can you believe that? The reason is, if you can't read a ruler the boss is gonna can your ass.

"You've got guys now that keep a box of caulk in the van. Guys who never learned to miter a corner, and most of the time the saw does all the work. I learned on an old Langdon box. I'm not saying it's better, but I am saying I never forgot how. New builds nowadays, people tack up pre-primed trim and join the corners with caulk. You can have that.

"Every kid's different, just like every piece of wood has its own grain. Some kids you can push harder than others. Some kids are soft—you have to watch what you say. You become too hard, like a piece of wood, and maybe you can knock out crown molding, but your wife won't sleep in the same room with you. The hell with it," Frank said and bit into a tomato slice.

Mark was used to feeling kind of silly among the other tech instructors, and the realization of their differences hit home hardest in, of all places, the bathroom. There

were two stalls, one with a door, one without. Mark had chosen the stall with a door—a book of sonnets in hand. He had even tucked a length of brown paper towel in the crease between the door and the wall, and sat, reading. Mark coughed and flushed when a pair of muddy boots approached. The boots chose the doorless stall. After a series of sounds similar to those a man might emit while hefting a square of shingles up a ladder, the boots flushed and left a trail of dried mud. Mark continued reading his sonnets and realized he would never be the type of man who could perform that particular function while other people watched. Or listened for that matter. Whereas he had very little in common with the majority of them, he sat with Frank because Frank had stopped into the deli and opened one of the books of poetry. In his 80-grit voice he had recited from memory lines from Carl Sandburg. Frank said he had written poems in longhand as a youth, and Mark imagined that as a tradesman, he sheltered his love for verse the way Indian fire carriers shielded cinders from plain winds. Mark fantasized that Frank still wrote poetry with his flat carpenter's pencil on the rough frames of houses.

Despite the lunch packer's variable, by the end of the day Mark decided they might need more food for Tuesday's crowd so he boiled the rest of the shells after school and whipped up some more sauce bolognaise, both of which had garnered compliments.

The florist on the square was denoted simply with a sign reading *Flowers*, and Mark stopped in there on his way to Julie's—he was hoping for someone worldly enough to understand the difference between a wrist corsage and one that pins—but the old florist standing behind the counter with his arms crossed over his chest did little to ease his apprehension, yet the old man's cheeks retained the warmth of youthful vigor, reddish as

if lightly rouged, his thin lips were askew but shined with vitality, thin white hair stood up in places as if some wet palm had tousled it, and he was wearing a style of tatty brown cardigan Gordon kept close at hand. "Tell me about her."

"Well," Mark said, scratching the hair on his chin. "She's all right."

"I get all kinds in here," the old man said, "and their shoes don't cross that threshold for just all right."

Mark shrugged.

"Then let me ask you," he pressed. "What have you done wrong?"

Mark smiled. "I don't think you've got time for that story."

The old man guided himself along the counter's edge to stand beside Mark. Mark looked down at their feet. The old man's slippers had been wrapped in gray duct tape. "Do you love her?"

"Why?" Mark asked him. "You ever love a woman?"

"Oh, yes," the old man said. "Lots." Had he loved lots of women, or had he loved a woman lots, or had he loved many women lots? The old man sighed and Mark decided not to ask.

He left with a conical spill of flowers—blue crocus and delphinium—nothing serious, like roses. The way chicory was hastily sprigged throughout the bouquet he thought Julie might think he stopped off at the side of the road on his way over. The woman in the white fur hat walking the black and tan animal crossed the street toward him. Mark saw the animal was a dog and thought its wet nose protruded from the wild mane of its head like a black licorice drop. The woman in the white fur hat was smiling. It was not a sexual smile in the way Mark sometimes associated a woman's smile with

sex. She smiled the way adults had smiled at him as a child, a smile that communicated he was indeed the darling of the world and that the world was one filled with hopeful possibility rather than the emptiness of experience. The opposite idea had been growing unchecked in his mind and heart, the idea, for example, that once one tasted a black licorice drop, a black licorice drop it would remain, always and forever, as long as beautiful women in white fur hats walked black and tan dogs at the end of a red leashes, as long as the delphinium attracted the hummingbird's beak. As long as the sun held back its warmth on these, the days of winter's promise. Mark smiled back at her.

Julie was singing something high and dramatic as he approached the door to what used to be their apartment. He lifted the flowers and knocked. She pulled open the door and the singing stopped. Her cheeks were blotched with red as if maybe she were rushing about getting ready, and her hair was still in pins. She sighed when she saw the flowers. Mark stepped inside and closed the door. It was darker inside than in the hallway, but the window was cracked open and the sheers moved with the breeze. The curtains themselves were crushed velvet, purple, parted with gold tassel tiebacks. Julie took the flowers from Mark, and he walked over to inspect the new curtains. A plant that looked brown about the edges of its leaves was enjoying what Mark thought was some needed sun on the windowsill.

"You really shouldn't have," Julie said, pulling down her hair. She sounded like she meant it.

No, you really shouldn't have, he thought, lifting one of the tassels.

"Don't worry," Julie said, noticing him noticing the curtains. "We'll find you

something just as good." She smelled the flowers and set them on her kitchen table.

"You might want to put those in something," Mark said.

"I know," she said, opening the hall closet. She lifted down a box and pulled out, Styrofoam and all, a thick crystal vase. "I haven't had to use this yet," she said. Mark looked at her crouched on the floor, hair hanging into the mouth of the vase, and he thought she really was lovely. "I got this on clearance." She held the vase for Mark to see. "Just a little chip," she said.

"I can't even tell," Mark said.

"What color do you want?" Julie asked Mark on the escalator. They had agreed to pick out the curtains before dinner.

"What do you think about blinds? We used to have blinds."

"Did you measure the windows? Blinds are out of the question unless you want to drive back to your apartment."

"No," Mark said. "Sailboats?"

"Earth tones," she said. "Earth tones are nice." Julie turned at the top of the steps. "You'll need something big enough to cover the entire window, though, and they'll need hemming."

"Okay," Mark said, watching her step off the escalator. "You've got it."

They looked at the display patterns. She leaned toward the rich fabrics, ruffled treatments. He liked the one with the Cowboys and Indians. "For kids," she said in a tone he imagined fit for a little buckaroo.

"What about this?" she said, holding an ivory sheer across her body that, he

thought, resembled a formal gown. Perhaps a wedding gown.

"Let's keep looking," he said. Finally, they decided on a neutral Chenille panel drapery and a sheer white under-treatment. Neither really loved it the way he had truly liked the sailboats, the way she had gushed at the Chameleon Crushed Satin. In order to get the discount, she used his card to pay, and as she forged his signature, he imagined their future together as yards of neutral fabric. She would carry the checkbook, look over expenses and decorate their house in gaudy fabric, crystal baubles. He would cook fancy meals she would be unable to pronounce. He began to imagine them as his own parents had been. He imagined taming his own library with a monogram stamp. *From the Desk of Mark Gordon Fuller, Dishwasher*. He imagined sleeping on a couch in the library. As he picked up the bag containing the boring drapes (Julie had instructed him that curtains were decorative, drapes were functional) he imagined tossing them in one corner of the living room, forgetting about them entirely. "We'll need rods," she said, "and a screwdriver. We'll put them up tonight." She was a little excited, which made him a little excited, and the dark feelings passed.

"I don't own any tools," he said, and put his arm around her waist.

They stopped at the hardware on the square before heading back to his place. It was his first time in there and he thought it smelled like the building trades wing of the school—glue, paint, and wood. Mark breathed deeply and didn't feel entirely out of place. He approached the man behind the counter—a guy paging through a magazine. "Where are your screwdrivers?" Mark asked.

"Aisle four," the man said.

Mark pulled the biggest screwdriver from the pegboard hooks like a king unsheathing a sword. "I'll bet you need a Phillips," Julie said. Mark looked at the long screwdriver in his hand. He sheathed it and grabbed a stubby Phillips with a black plastic handle. She grabbed the rods.

* * *

"I'll cook," he said as she pulled the curtains from the bag and lay them over the couch.

"Not if you want these hung," she said, pulling the rods from their plastic.

"Okay," he said and pulled down the phonebook. "Pizza?" She requested mushrooms.

"Do you have a step stool or anything in there?" Julie said. "We'll need something to stand on."

Mark thought briefly about a stack of books, but instead dragged his recliner over to the big window. He stepped up on the seat and asked for the screwdriver. She handed it to him. The handle slipped in his sweaty grip and he scraped a knuckle against the metal bracket. "Ouch."

"What's the matter?" Julie said. Mark shook off the sting. He showed her his bleeding knuckle. "Aw, do you have any peroxide?" He shook his head.

The pizza arrived. They had hung the sheer and one of the drapes. Fabric was pooled on Mark's floor. They set the pizza box on the coffee table and stood eating. Julie was talking about hemming. "Hold on," Mark said, walked into the kitchen and returned with the box wine, two coffee mugs. "Shall we?"

Mark filled her mug, poured his own and drank deeply. He tried to toast her with

a Shakespearean sonnet, but he jumbled the words. He balanced a plate of pizza on one hand and improvised the couplet. "Your sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my plate with kings."

"You're ridiculous," Julie said, but she was laughing. He leaned over and tried to kiss her. She pulled back and gave him a stern look. "Mark," she said.

"You're right," he said and gestured to the half-covered window. "We don't want to put on a show." Mark walked into the bathroom and ran water in the tub. He tossed his clothes out and his jeans wrapped around the floor lamp. Julie steadied it with her free hand but spilled wine down the front of her shirt. "Mark! I ought to brain you."

He popped his head out. "Darling," he said, "all the more reason to take them off."

The tub was a bit cramped, but they made it work. Afterward, Mark noticed water on the floor tile. He stood, dripping. "Shit," he said.

"What?" she said.

"My books." Water had pooled near the scattered collection, darkening the bindings. He stepped out and wrapped a towel around his waist. "Goddamn if it isn't the Petrarch." He lifted the books out of there. From the other room he heard water running down the drain. "What are you doing?" He refilled his mug from the box and walked back in there.

"It's cold," Julie said, gesturing for a towel. Mark finished the cheap wine and twisted the faucets. Clear, warm water refilled the tub.

The next morning Mark stood in the living room eating a Pink Lady, looking at the single

hanging drape. The rising sun lit a swash across his arms and stomach. Julie was asleep in the other room. He tried to convince himself the half-baked job was not a metaphor for their relationship. "I just don't give a damn," he said softly, "about these curtains."

Julie walked from the bedroom rubbing the back of one hand across her eye and stepped into the light. Some of her golden hair had pulled from the ponytail and hung in bright wisps across her collarbone. She walked between Mark and the window and her body was bathed in sunlight. She pulled her hair free, hung her head back, gathered it with both hands, smoothed the loose strands on the side and wrapped the bundle in a band. Mark opened his mouth to tell her to step away from the window, that the whole city would see, but he looked down at his own skin painted yellow in the morning light and offered a bite of the apple. Julie touched his hand and brought the fruit to her lips.

Later Mark searched the cupboards for something to cook for lunch and Julie scrubbed her shirt at the sink. He could see the dark bands of her bra through his white undershirt. "This just isn't going to come out," she said squeezing water into the sink. Mark saw a faint pink mark on the fabric as she draped it across the counter to dry. Julie sat at the kitchen table to pull on her boots. "How's your hand?" she asked.

"This old thing?" he said. "I'll live."

She picked up his notebook. "Who's this?" she said, indicating Ms. Makaiau.

"One of my high school teachers," Mark said.

"She's pretty," Julie said.

Mark didn't say anything.

She opened to the Haute Cuisine menu. "Hey, can I order from this?"

"Let me see," he said, and pulled the notebook from her hand. He looked

doubtfully at the contents of his cupboards. He pulled down a box of instant rice and a ripe red tomato from the fridge. "As long as it's rice," he said and shook the box.

"What's *Mill-fuel?"* she asked.

Mark stuck the notebook under one arm and began cutting the tomato into thin slices on a plate. "Did you know Auguste Escoffier used to name dishes after women in his life," he said, reaching for the salt. Mark turned and looked at her sitting there in his shirt and wrinkled pants. She had managed one boot and the other lay on the floor. He set the plate of tomato slices on the table.

"How romantic," Julie said, and set the menu on the table. She took one of the tomato slices. "I'm going to need to get home soon," she said. "I've got play practice."

Mark drove Julie back to her apartment. She sat with the stained shirt over one leg, set the radio to a pop station and sang along to the music. He surprised her by singing some of the verses. They pulled into her lot. "Come up for a minute," she said. "I've got something for you."

Mark followed her up the stairs into their old apartment. She disappeared into the bedroom and turned on a light. Mark headed to the bathroom. The shower curtain was decorated with fish like those in his father's tank. The shower curtain used to be plain old brown, Mark thought. The color of dried seaweed. He pulled the new curtain back and noted the hair curled in the drain. She had always left her hair in the drain, he thought. No matter how many times I asked, she could never remember to pull the hair from the drain. As Mark ran the curtain shut he noticed a bright O on the shower ledge. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand. A man's wedding band, worn smooth.

Mark slipped it in his pocket, lifted the toilet lid, unzipped and shot a long, hard stream into the bowl. He touched the flush on the toilet and decided to leave it.

Julie was watering the plants with a drinking glass. She was dressed in a fresh yellow sleeveless shirt. Mark noticed his own white shirt hung over one side of a shoebox on the coffee table. "I think I was over-watering this aloe plant," she said.

Mark whipped the white shirt over one shoulder and poked at the box's contents—a few books, a map of Cuyahoga Valley trails he had never been able to fold quite right, one of her playbills. A red and white plastic boat she had bought him for the bath. A half eaten bag of black licorice drops. Mark popped one of the licorice drops in his mouth. It was hard between his teeth.

"Here," she said, and snapped a fleshy leaf off one of the plants. She took his hand and wet his scraped knuckle.

"Thanks," Mark said, lifting the box of stuff. "I think this is yours," he said and set the playbill on the table. But what I really want to know, he thought, slipping one hand into his pocket and fingering the ring, is who this belongs to.

That night Mark sat in bed running his fingers over the ring and began to regret taking it. Julie had been seeing someone all along. A married someone. The ring did not fit any of his fingers. A married someone with thin hands. James Caulfield had been the ex-boyfriend art student. Mark had posed for his Advanced Life Drawing class. Had he been married? No, he thought, not an ex boyfriend. It's probably some divorced, mop-head sewer-rat, guitar strumming, Don-Juan-wannabe that picked her up in the bar with a cheap line from a men's help magazine. She'd be dumb enough to fall for it after having

been plied with drinks, perhaps dumb enough before the drinks, Mark thought. But they drank at the bar until she was too drunk to stand up and I'll bet he had to carry her home over one shoulder like I carried that little director. What was his name? Alphonse something. Alexander. Lascivious little Alphonse Alexander—so depraved even his own wife wouldn't have him.

The answer came like an unpleasant taste. The suave little director. It had to be. Julie said she was practicing in a new play. Mark snapped his fingers. He looked at the wedding band. *Who's to say a younger woman couldn't fall for an older man?*

Monday morning Mark put on some coffee and thumbed to a poem he had written shortly after he and Julie had split. Mark carried the notebook to the kitchen table and poured some coffee. No time for cream. He sat down to read. Mark had written *Julie* above the sonnet and he traced along the letters with a pencil. In half quantity your love bathes my heart, / Luscious liquid succors the souls of men, / Yet I cloud love's pool with this ink of pen. / A waning moon shadows our time apart, / What aching may the phases of Diana impart? / Can the marriage of desperate hearts amend / Such a breach in the ocean trails we wend? / You are woman and I man, of what import / May it be that I divert and linger, / While you whisk through a voyage with haste? / Will such disparate paths ever converge? / And what of wines, poetry and fine taste? / Yet your lips offer manna, precious myrrh / Even Diana might scorn such waste.

Do you love her? He felt the lump in the notebook with the heel of his palm and pulled out the folded square of newsprint. Mark unfolded the portrait and stared at it. He turned it over to look at the red numbers written on the back.

***

Ben was back at school, the bright policeman's star absent from his belt. Boomer had hit Omar with a wooden spoon for ripping his comic until Ben took the spoon away from him and set it on Mark's desk. Vikki came back from lunch in tears. She locked herself in the bathroom for most of the afternoon. Dave told Mark of his plans to marry her.

Ben was paging through Buddy's *Guinness Book of World Records* and called Mark over to look at one of the pictures. Mark looked at the dishes in the sink and went over to where he sat. "Look at that," Ben said. In the picture, a dark skinned Hindu man held one arm above his head. "He's been like that for two decades," Ben said.

"Twenty years," Mark said.

Ben raised his own hand, trying it out. "Why would he do that?"

"Maybe he had a question," Mark said, absently.

The final bell rang, and they all packed up. Most were out the door, merging with the tide of students filling the halls. "You'd better go before you miss your bus," Mark said. Finally, he was alone.

He dialed the red number.

Ben

The aprons were beginning to smell. Mark had checked the room for rotten foodstuffs before he realized the smell was coming from hooks on the wall mounted for students to hang their chef's apparel—in this case, eight moldering aprons.

Mark scooped them all up in his arms and had to turn his face from the mess as he carried them downstairs, outside to his car. He opened the passenger side door, thought twice and popped the trunk. He stuffed them in there with all the care a mobster might take in stashing a corpse—his own dirty little secret.

The machines in the laundromat at Mark's apartment complex ran on quarters. He fed a five-dollar bill into the change machine mounted on the wall and the little red light reading *No Change* began to flash. "You've got to be shitting me," Mark said and pressed the coin return button a few times and looked around. The small room was as muggy as a boy's locker room after the big game, smelled just as appealing. There was one large girl in there with him loading her own dirty little secrets into a machine. He realized the pile of aprons did indeed smell a bit like a clogged garbage disposal, and felt bad, for a moment about leaving them in the tiny room with the girl now pouring detergent into her machine. "Do you mind keeping an eye on these for me?" he asked. She shrugged, frowning. "Thanks a million," he said and pushed outside.

He'd needed to climb the stairs and grab some of the cash he kept in a valet on his dresser, and the little cardboard box containing his detergent, fabric softener and drier

sheets. He drove to the bank, but the lobby was already closed, so he stuffed the bills into the canister and ran it through the pneumatic tube. He mashed the button and asked for change—quarters. The voice said they were out of rolls, would loose change be okay?

"Fine," Mark said. Soon the vacuum sounded and Mark received his giant table shaker filled with quarters instead of salt or pepper. He opened the canister and dumped the change on the passenger seat. Some rolled onto the floor mat. My luck one will get stuck in the cigarette lighter, short circuit the battery and my car will burst into flames. He made a mental note to check the cigarette lighter for posterity.

By the time he got back to his apartment, scooped the change off the passenger seat (he left those on the floor) and pushed back into the laundromat, the sun had set. The same girl was leaned on one of the washers, looking at a magazine and talking on a cell phone. The pile of aprons was where he had left it. Not as if anyone would have wanted to steal them, he thought.

He pushed them into the machine, pretending as if he were holding a perp's head underwater, jammed home the coin sleeve and turned on the water. He upended the detergent and slammed the lid. Case closed.

He still had time to make his date with Ruth.

The woman behind the circulation desk at the library looked a bit like the Schubert puppet. A well-worn woman, though she was not quite the woman he'd imagined sitting behind a desk, stamping books. Besides, there were no stamps anymore, Mark thought. Everything was computerized. Ruth, it turned out, had snagged a job in the children's

section.

"Floor three," the well-worn woman said, holding up bent fingers. Mark took the stairs, his thoughts ping-ponging between women. Ruth was more cultured than Julie but lacked what Mark called stage presence. When Julie walked into a room, she owned it. Ruth, he decided, was something his mother might have called "mousy." Simmons, on the other hand, was a sleeper—a woman whom if she ditched the school-marmish pencil holding her bun intact, the glasses, and the head cold that had been rimming her nostrils red, would be ravishing. The children's section was decorated in a jungle theme and Mark stepped on the purple monkey. A woman sat near the window paging through a pop-up book with a girl in her lap. Mark ran his finger along the titles. He was relieved to find no repair manuals. He found a book on puppets and pulled it from the shelf. The cover was wrapped in clear plastic, and he opened the book to smell the page.

"You're supposed to read them." Ruth said. "Nice earring." She pulled her hair back and tooled crystal caught light in a prismatic wink.

"I like yours better," Mark said.

Ruth touched the book with two fingers. "Puppets?"

"It's a long story," he said as they walked toward the elevators.

She shrugged and looked at her watch. "I've got some time, you know."

"We could finally get that coffee," Mark said, allowing her to step into the elevator before him.

"There's a little winery at the edge of town," she said. "They press their own grapes."

"I'm sold," Mark said. The elevator doors opened and they walked from the

building into the parking lot. "The last time I had wine it came in a box."

"Oh," Ruth said. "Then you'll appreciate a little culture."

"Always," Mark said. "Is that what you call that?" He pointed to the large, two-tone blue pickup. Rust on the door and mud splashed on the quarter panels.

"How'd you know it was mine?"

Mark eyed the bumper stickers. *My Other Car is an Arabian Horse.* "Wild guess," he said. "I'll follow you."

There was a strong bouquet in the air, and Mark slid into the booth and set the puppet book on the table. Ruth sat across from him. Mark picked the wine list off the tabletop. "Knockout selection," he said.

"I know, right?" Ruth said. "This place is a goldmine." They ordered a glass of the house red.

"You know what would go great with this?" Mark said. "Pelardon."

Ruth raised her eyebrows.

"It's nothing," he said affecting the French accent. "I teach the culinary arts." He placed one hand to his chest. "It's how I pay the bills."

Ruth laughed through her nose. "I'm stuck at home the last semester. I thought I'd go insane, but my dad gives me space. And the keys to the truck. There's graduation. Then who knows?" she said. "I've been thinking about grad school, but maybe I'll just set up an easel on the street corner and sketch caricatures." She sketched something on a new page. "What do you call it? I'll pimp myself out."

"No self-respecting girl pimps herself," he said, taking a drink. "Someone has to

do it for her, and I have to say, I've always been a big fan of your work."

"Stick to cooking," Ruth said. She held up a caricature of Mark wearing a chef's hat, earring and all. He was holding a whisk.

"Ugh," Mark said. "That's hideous. I mean, it's good. You know what I mean."

"Yeah," Ruth said. "You're a good model."

"I'm glad you think so," he said, "but I wasn't really cut out for it. What's really great about being with kids is that I feel like I blend in. I don't feel like I'm on display," he said. "They let me be myself."

"And who is that?" she asked.

"I'd like to be a carefree someone, but right now I get the impression I don't deserve the freedom. I guess I'm supposed to care about teaching them something. They've got their interests."

"And your interests?" Ruth said.

"Poetry," Mark said. "Haute cuisine. France."

"France," she said. "I've always wanted to go back to India."

"What's in India?"

"Many things," Ruth said. "I went to Varanasi on a fellowship as a freshman. The locals showed me how to perform ablutions in the Ganges. What do you call it? Ritual cleansing."

"Like taking a bath?"

"Yeah," she said. "Like bathing."

"Couldn't you do that anywhere? Not anywhere. You know."

"Well," she said, "you wouldn't baptize someone in a swimming pool, would

you?"

"But suppose you believed chlorine in the eyes was a spiritual thing."

"Hindus believe Ganga flows from Brahman in a torrent strong enough to destroy the world," Ruth said, "but the river is peaceful because the water is strained through Shiva's hair. The river has special significance because of the mythology."

"So," Mark said, "it's holy because it has a story."

"Sure," Ruth said. "Here." She pulled a sketchbook from her purse and Mark noted it was a different purse. She showed him a colored picture of a river flowing from the stars, and many people were on the steps, bathing in the river, and there was a golden dome in the background. Pink, violet and green petals and leaves were spread across a corner. Mark saw three eyes in the river.

"You imagined this picture?" Mark said.

"Kind of," Ruth said. "I saw the golden dome and the river and the ghats. I added the lotus and the banyan leaves."

Mark motioned for the book and Ruth slid it across the table. Ruth opened the puppet book. Mark opened the sketchbook to a barn scene of sunlight streaming though board chinks onto a hay mow. Somehow she had captured motes turning in the light. There was one of a horse's tan face—a white spot between the eyes. Mark told Ruth about the picture Ben had shown him—the Hindu with a raised hand. "Why would he do that?"

"I've heard about him," Ruth said. "Maybe he does it to prove something to God."

"Maybe he has a question and no one ever called on him," Mark said.

"Yes," Ruth said. "Like, hey, what the hell is this world all about?"

They sat like that for a while, Mark paging through her sketchbook, Ruth the puppet book. "Hey," Ruth said, turning the puppet book so Mark could see. "You should build your students a theatre." She pointed to a blueprint.

"That's not a bad idea," Mark said. "Too bad I can't hammer a straight nail."

"That is too bad," Ruth said. "I can see this painted like a vaudeville stage."

"You could do that?" Mark said.

"What are friends for?" Ruth said.

"Well," Mark said. "Bend back the corner of the page."

"This is a library book," she said. "What?"

"I just realized I never checked it out," he said, covering his mouth.

"Oh, you're in big trouble now, mister," she said, folding back the page.

Mark considered himself something of a gentleman, but the way Ruth folded back the corner of the page bordered, for him, on the erotic, and he had a little difficulty pushing the image of them coupling on volumes and volumes of well-worn books. Mark took a big drink of wine. "Do you want to check out my new place?"

"We could get a bottle to go," she said.

Mark's head was a little thick from the wine as he led the way back to his apartment, so he rolled the window down and leaned his face out into the wind. He grabbed the bottle, the puppet book, and his notebook from the passenger seat. Ruth had to hop to the ground from the truck cab. She smoothed her shirt and slammed the door. She told him how sailors used to wear gold to cover their burial expenses in foreign lands. "Afraid

you'll die at sea?"

"Maybe," Mark said, "though my crew would probably loot my body and dump it overboard."

"It was supposed to be a code of honor. Like a promise," Ruth said as Mark unlocked the door to the apartment.

"Promises don't go for much these days," Mark said.

"It depends who is making them," Ruth said and followed Mark up the stairs.

"Your cheeks are red," Mark said.

"So are yours," she said, following Mark up the stairs.

Of course, the bees were out. Mark swatted at one as it dive-bombed his face and felt a hand on his shoulder. "You'll just make them angry," Ruth said, then they hurried inside.

"I'll get some glasses," Mark said, and Ruth walked over to the window. He didn't have any wineglasses. He passed over the coffee mugs and settled on water glass. He set the puppet book and the notebook over his menu. He uncorked the wine and poured two glassfuls and carried them out. He handed Ruth a glass. "Nice view," she said. "There's a church near my dad's house. It's pretty, but the bells wake me up every Sunday."

"It's peaceful out here," Mark said. "Boring really."

"Oh," she said, "look at the little pavilion."

Mark sat on the couch and sipped the wine. It was good wine. "Do you want to walk over there?"

Ruth turned to look at him. "It's getting a bit chilly," she said.

Mark thought to offer her a jacket, but he didn't say anything. The sun was beginning to set, and the walls of his apartment were bright with the light. Well, he thought. This is just fine.

Ruth picked the fly fishing manual off the stack of books and opened it. She paged through. "I didn't mark you as an outdoorsman," she said.

"That's my father's book," he said. "I like the woodcuts."

"All of these names," Ruth said. "I don't imagine there's a single fish swimming around out there without a name."

"I guess everything has a name," Mark said. "So we can talk about it."

"Talk, talk, talk," Ruth said. "Why do we have to talk?"

"One of my students is mute," Mark said. "Boomer."

"He's mute and his name is Boomer?"

"I know," Mark said. "Kind of ironic, isn't it?"

"It's sweet," she said, and put down the book. She crossed the room and sat next to Mark on the couch. "Things would be much sweeter," she said, "if no one talked."

"Are you telling me to be quiet?" Mark said. She was looking at him and he knew that look.

Mark set down his glass and intended to kiss her, but they were interrupted by a knock at the door. Mark got up. He looked through the peephole. It was Julie. Her hair was down. Mark turned to look at Ruth. He thought for a moment about letting Julie stand out there forever, and then she knocked again. He cracked open the door. "Hi," she said.

"Hello," Mark said, opening the door.

“I thought I’d drop this off,” Julie said. She held a potted plant. Thick green leaves spread from the soil in a rosette. Julie stepped inside. “Oh. Hello,” she said.

“Hello,” Ruth said to Julie.

“Julie this is Ruth,” Mark said. “Ruth. Julie.”

“Is that an aloe plant?” Ruth said.

“Yes,” Julie said, stepping inside. “I bought it for Mark.”

“Those are good to have around. They’re good for burns,” Ruth said, folding her arms.

“They’re good for scrapes,” Julie said and handed Mark the pot.

“I burn myself a lot,” Mark said, taking the plant.

“I’m not sure you’re supposed to use them on cuts,” Ruth said, and picked up her wineglass.

“I’ll be able to use this,” Mark said.

“Just water it once a week,” Julie said. “I think I over watered mine.”

“It probably needs a lot of sun, too,” Ruth said.

“Not too much,” Julie said.

“The big window will be good for it,” Mark said. “Would you care for a glass of wine?”

“You have company,” Julie said. “I’ll be going.”

“Thanks for the plant,” Mark said, cradling it in one arm, gripping the doorknob with his free hand.

“You’re welcome,” Julie said, and left.

Mark shut the door, walked the plant over to the countertop and set it down. “We

used to live together," he said.

"I see," Ruth said. "She seems nice."

"Yes," Mark said. "Would you care for more wine?"

"Not at the moment," she said. "At the moment, I'm rather tired."

"I could make some coffee," Mark said.

"No, no," Ruth said. "That's okay. Maybe we should walk over to the pavilion."

"Okay," Mark said. "Do you want a jacket?"

"Okay," Ruth said. "I'll take a jacket."

Mark pulled a corduroy sport coat from the hall closet and handed it to Ruth. They left the wine, walked over to the white pavilion and up the steps. She had brought her purse. There were benches built into the railings and they sat on a bench. "It is a little chilly," Mark said.

"Yeah," Ruth said. "I'm looking forward to the snow. It's quiet out here. Like a little temple." She smoothed one lapel of the jacket over the other. "Hey, did you know you can see up into your apartment from here?"

"Yeah," Mark said. "It's especially bad at night. I have to draw the curtains."

"But you only have one curtain," she said.

"Okay. I have to draw the curtain," he said.

They didn't say anything for a while. "Here's something they taught me in India," Ruth said. "Close your eyes and relax your muscles starting with the toes." Mark closed his eyes and tried to relax. "Concentrate on your breathing," Ruth said. They sat like that for a while. A slight breeze pushed Mark's hair across his forehead. "Now," Ruth said, "try to focus on one image."

"Like what?" Mark said.

"It's up to you. I use a triangle. But you have to pick something," Ruth said.

Mark's mind shifted between the images of Julie through the peephole and the rosette of aloe leaves. He imagined the mysterious burnished gold ring. The images in his mind shimmered like the air above a boiling kettle—the way he had felt when he had intended to kiss Ruth.

"Now," Ruth said. "What do you see?"

Lunch was a relative success on Monday due to the fact that most items were leftovers. Mark had forgotten the aprons over the weekend in the laundromat until that morning, and decided once he got to school it was too late to do anything about them. They'd probably need to be rewashed anyway. Ms. Simmons visited again, and she brought Dave a length of bulletin board paper rolled up in a scroll. Mark listened in on their conversation.

"What color should I use?" Dave said.

"Any color. It's up to you," she said.

"I could use a different color for each puppet," Dave said. There was a lull in customers, and Mark broke away to join them.

"I think this is just wonderful," she said to Mark. "You have your very own Punch and Judy."

In his mailbox after school Mark found the carbon of an official reprimand written in Gordon's hand. *Students must be outfitted in lab accordingly, for both safety's sake and the sake of professionalism*, and what followed was a string of numbers and

letters Mark assumed were taken directly from the teacher's handbook. Mark crumpled the note and tossed it in the trash. That night he picked the rest of the quarters off the floormat to finish the job.

On Tuesday morning, Mark hauled in the freshly laundered aprons, hung them in lab, Xeroxed blueprints from the puppet book and walked them down to the building trades wing. The workshop was redolent of sawn wood. Mark looked down at the tale of his passage in the sawdust—a set of staggered footprints. Frank stood by his desk wrapping a yellow cord around his forearm. Two boys were pushing brooms. "Need a hand?" Mark said.

"You could grab a broom," Frank said, "if you want."

Mark felt a little silly sweeping alongside the "regular" students. One of the boys was a head taller, and his goatee was thick and black. The other boy's ears were gauged with hoops. Mark pushed his broom along the floor, cutting a clean path through the sawdust. He had to stop to rub his stinging eyes. He sneezed. Mark felt a tap on the shoulder. Frank held out a pair of safety glasses. Mark stuck them on his face and continued sweeping.

The boys wiped their arms, patted down their thighs and leaned the brooms in the tool closet. They nodded to Frank and left. "Good kids," Frank said, once they were gone.

Mark hopped up on one of the wooden tables. He let his legs dangle, kicked them back and forth a few times. Frank arranged some papers on his desk and laughed bitterly. "What's wrong?"

"You ever hear of someone tearing the copper wiring out of a house?"

Mark ran his finger along the chamfered edge of the table. "You mean out at *the* house?" Students built a house from scratch each year under the direction of the carpentry instructors, and Mark didn't have to be a genius to realize the project was one of the school's sacred cows. Frank nodded. "Shit," Mark said. "That's the kind of crap you hear about in the city."

"It's chaos," Frank said, "and we got it out here too. I ain't telling you anything new."

"I heard people steal copper for meth or crack and stuff," Mark said. "Tell you the truth, I don't know what people who steal copper wiring do with it, but I suppose they're desperate."

"I suppose you're right," Frank said.

"Do you think it was one of yours?"

Frank let out a little exasperated snort. "I hope it wasn't one of ours. It's going to set us back a few weeks. I'm just glad the drywall wasn't hung. They would've busted that too."

Mark noticed large color pictures on the corkboard behind Frank and walked over to get a closer look. The moon was nearly translucent white. "Your boat?"

Frank nodded. "Used to take it up to north every summer," he said. "You sail?"

It was a simple question and the answer was no. Ever since he was a child he'd had an aversion to water. It seemed that recently, since he had taken the job, he craved it, whether it was to be immersed in a bath, or now, staring at the inky water in the picture. "Yes," he lied, "I sail," and moved closer to the picture. The word Diana was scripted

across the back bow. “Diana? Like the moon goddess?”

“My ex-wife,” Frank said. “I used to be able to sail it myself before the bursitis set in.”

“Wow.” Mark didn’t know if he should be impressed or not. Mark showed Frank the blueprints for the stage. “What do you think?”

“Looks pretty simple,” Frank said. “You could use one by and some plywood. Is this something you’re going to build?”

“Me? I wondered if it’s something you could build.”

“When do you want it?” Frank said.

On his way home from school Mark noticed the glare of the familiar blue jacket on the side of the road. Ben was walking with both hands in the coat pockets. Mark adjusted the rearview. Ben’s ball cap was pulled low on his forehead and he slumped from side to side. Mark pulled off the road into the gravel, got out and waited for him to catch up. His face was red beneath the curved bill of the cap.

“What are you doing, Ben?”

“Missed my bus,” he said. Mark noticed his cheeks were wet.

“Do you want a ride?” Mark asked.

It was an unseasonably warm day and he could smell Ben. Mark twisted a knob on the dash and cool air blew from the vents. Mark cracked his window and Ben stroked the gray yarn on the puppet’s head. “Where do you live?”

Mark drove them through the streets at Ben’s direction and Ben directed him into the driveway of a white ranch. Mark got out and walked up to the door of the house.

Mark could hear voices, but they sounded monotone, like robots. Ben sat in the car, looking at the puppet in his lap. Mark pushed the doorbell and started at his own dim reflection in the glass. The robot voices went away. Soon the man who had shaken Mark's hand opened the door. He was dressed in a white undershirt. Mark waved at Mr. Mullins behind the glass. The whites of his blue eyes looked red. "Ben missed his bus," Mark said.

Mr. Mullins opened the storm door. He waved Ben inside, and Ben got out of the car and stood beside it. "Well, come on," Mr. Mullins said. He looked at Mark. "Some days you'd think he was a dummy." Ben walked up to the porch and Mark noticed he was still holding the old lady puppet with both hands. "Well?" Mr. Mullins held the door for Ben. Faint static was audible from inside. Ben walked past Mark and into the house. "What do you say?"

"Thank you," Ben said, more to the puppet than to Mark.

"Look at who you're talking to," Mr. Mullins said.

Ben turned to Mark and stuck out a meaty hand. Mark took the hand in his. The palm was cool and moist. "Thank you," Ben said, and Mr. Mullins dropped one hand on Ben's shoulder. Ben's grip tightened around Mark's hand. Mark shook hands and let go. "You're welcome," Mark said.

"If it happens again," Mr. Mullins said. "You can call me to come get him."

Mark pulled out of the drive and soon he was traveling along an unfamiliar road. The clouds had passed over the sun dulling the glow of light into a fluorescence that brightened the metallic blue car hood, deepened the dark forms of geese flying overhead

into moving shadows, mellowed the reflection of the skin of Mark's face in the rearview to sallow wax. The very air pulled through the dash vents seemed lit with the potentiality of electricity, and beads of water began to break on the windshield. A lopsided wagon weighted with stacked hay bales lumbered on at the side of the road, the orange triangle not so much reflecting as glowing at the back of the tractor as Mark accelerated and passed. A farmer slumped in his seat, arms hanging from the steering wheel appeared less master of the craft, rather part of the automation, and the viscid smell of cut hay and precipitation lulled Mark into a near trance, and the man riding on the tractor did not look over as he passed. Mark drove past a disheveled barn, its beams collapsed, weeds grown up through a hole in its roof—a universe collapsed in upon itself. Farther off, a dead tree stood alone in the fields of cut hay—many small birds lit in snatches of movement, and they scattered suddenly as if of one mind and dipped along the field skimming along the hay stalks and Mark, driving along the nameless road, felt the pithy consciousness of order fall away like so many nameless, dovening birds. The constant locomotion of the automobile and the sound of its tires on the road and the lingering smell of hay and the movement of water on the windshield focused into what he imagined as some point of reckoning, and Mark stopped the car and turned around to travel toward the direction from which he had just arrived.

That night in class, a man swaddled in purple crushed velvet walked into the classroom. Mark thought of Julie's curtains, but this man was using the fabric as some sort of cape. He pushed the overhead to one wall and wrote Mr. King on the board. Mark caught the glint of a costume store crown as he stepped up onto the table at the front of the

classroom, plain brown dress shoes sliding dangerously on the veneer, and stood, nearly brushing the ceiling. Mark could see that he was wearing tights and an improvised tunic girded with a bit of rope. Dave would have been impressed.

"Subjects," he said, producing a scroll from his waistband. Mark closed his notebook and listened. The king unfurled the scroll and began to read—"I've always wanted to start a garden, and last summer I began. My wife, an optometrist, bought me gloves, an almanac, fertilizer, and a watering can laser engraved with my initials. I have read up on tomatoes; collards I consider myself something of an expert. Don't even get me started on carrots—yes, carrots are good for vision. This past summer I added a row of wax beans. Not long after I discovered yellow leaves on my tomatoes. Alas, a symptom of over watering. My wife encouraged me to keep on. Collards? Blighted. She helped me turn the soil. I began to think something was wrong with me. With the land."

The woman named Maureen said, "This is Teaching Special Needs—"

"I know," said the man. "I am your substitute teacher and this is a lesson." He pulled a carrot from under his cape and bit off a hunk. "What became of the carrots, folks? Rabbits. Cliché, I know, but they went through those stalks like so much clover. The wax beans, mind you I know nothing of wax beans, the wax beans have rooted like kudzu. How like an eyeball I became that afternoon. I realized from my years in the classroom I had come to carry a certain truth like collagen in the vitreous humor of my being: perhaps the teaching of knowledge is as tedious and ultimately fruitless, or vegetable-less, as tending to those blighted rows. Who can say what seeds will take root and prosper?

"My wife taught me a valuable lesson in education. She provided the resources, or in some cases, an avenue to the necessary resources. And she applauded. In order for a pupil to follow the path of their interest to the highest shelf of knowledge the educator must appeal to the student's ego. I think of that laser engraving."

Here, the man produced a wilted red and white pom-pom from under his cape. He brandished the sad thing in one fist while holding the carrot. "You will be overpaid cheerleaders. Give me an L!" The woman named Maureen said "L"

"Give me an E!" A few more joined in. "Give me an A!" Mark was swept along. "Give me an R!" Everyone did. "Give me an N! What does that spell?" Here he hopped down from the table, the crown fell from his head and rattled on the floor—plastic, Mark thought—picked up a nub of chalk and wrote L-E-A-R-N on the blackboard. "I can't hear you," he said.

"Learn," the class recited.

The king cupped one hand to his ear.

"LEARN!" the class said a bit louder.

"That's right! For thirty years I taught the learning disabled, developmentally handicapped, emotionally disturbed. Tonight I hit the big time." He pulled the overhead to the front of the room and flicked on the light. Stankowitz's handwriting was projected up on the screen. "Well," he said. "What are you waiting for? Learn."

The King walked around the class to make sure they were taking notes, intermittently shaking the pom-pom and chewing the rest of the carrot. Mark put his journal away and pulled out his steno pad.

***

Dave grabbed the old lady puppet from Ben's hand the next morning, Ben hollered, and Omar began hooting, as usual, to mark the passage of some violence. Buddy was running his finger along a page of bird records as Mark walked past to put an end to the outburst—he took the old lady puppet from Dave and locked it in his desk drawer. He picked up The Phantom of the Opera and held him high for everyone to see. He held the puppet plainly and pointed.

"That means everyone be quiet," Dave said.

Everyone took the cue and returned to their stations silently. Dave picked up a green marker and unrolled his script in the corner of the room to mark the page. He had spread all the puppets out in front of him while he wrote, occasionally pulling one onto his hand to make it move in some way.

That afternoon Dave and Boomer cut two large circles from a cardboard box with kitchen shears and Mark told them cutting cardboard would dull the shears, besides, their circle was lopsided. Dave challenged Mark to make a better circle. Mark slipped the shears into a drawer and searched for something round to use as a template.

Ben pulled a length of brown thread from the sewing machine and tied a black marker to one end and a loose knot to the end of a broom handle. He set the broom handle on the cardboard and asked Dave to pull the thread taut and to use the marker to draw a circle. "Yeah, but how are we gonna cut it out?" Dave asked.

"That's your problem," Ben said.

Mark used a box cutter to liberate the circles, and Dave leaned a cardboard tube from a roll of hand towels between the two disks and helped Omar to stretch aluminum foil across their diameter and stapled the circles together along their circumference. Dave

attached the length of brown thread to the center of the chrome disk with the stapler and climbed up the step stool they had used to clean windows and dangled the UFO from the end of the broomstick. Pleased with the work, he leaned the entire contraption in one corner of the room with the final bell, rolled his script into a tube and left through the main door to catch his bus. Mark liberated the Schubert doll from its place in his desk and pulled it onto his hand. He used the doll to lift the broomstick and dangled the UFO on the end of its string over the dishes in the sink.

Mark looked at the monster puppets lying in a row along the floor and picked up The Phantom of the Opera. He imagined not being able to speak the way Boomer was unable to speak. And there was The Wolfman. As a boy, Mark had been convinced that werewolves, vampires, even phantoms were real, and he remembered that his father had read to him Herodotus' tale of the Neuri. Mark had always preferred the literal interpretation, but his father insisted that monster myths were attempts to explain away life's mysteries. "There is no such thing as monsters. There's no real mystery, either," he had said. "There's only the deficit between our perception and what is. Or what was."

Mark set the puppet on the floor and took the stairs to the lowest floor, toward the superintendent's office. His father had made it known that the superintendent's office had been built in the northeast corner upon the cornerstone of the foundation, and that the cornerstone of a building was supposed to be sacred. His father had laughed at the idea of a sacred stone and told the story with as much phony eyebrow wiggling and auspicious candor that he could muster. The lights on the lowest floor had been dimmed, by the custodian he imagined, and as he walked the corridor to his father's office door, he imagined foreboding music, like the music in the scary films he had used to inject a bit of

supernatural intrigue and mendacity into the mundane story of his youth. He pushed up against the door to find it locked.

Before he left Mark found in his mailbox the carbon of another official reprimand. *No staff member, regardless of the circumstances may take a student into his or her personal vehicle at any time*— Mark crumpled the paper into the wastebasket.

That evening Mark arrived at his apartment, parked his car, pushed though the door, left the lights off and lay down on the couch in his shoes. He closed his eyes against the setting rays of the sun, and though his mind and body were buzzing with fatigue, he tried to visualize a triangle. He didn't see anything, but found the darkness comforting, and when he shifted on the cushions to make himself even more comfortable, he was startled by the dull sound of metal dropping onto the floor. The wedding band must have fallen from his pocket, and now it was rimmed with sunlight on the dark wood. He picked it up and held it in front of his eyes—there were nicks and scratches along the burnished gold. He tried all his fingers and, again, found the ring was too small to fit. After a moment he pushed it onto the tip of his tongue and closed his eyes. He tried to clear his mind. Mark touched his teeth to the metal and the small *clink* was magnified in his skull. Finally, he tongued the ring from his mouth out onto his chin. He got up, balancing the ring on his chin, let it fall onto his palm, and pocketed it. He pushed through the door, walked back down the stairs and to his car.

On his way to Julie's apartment, Mark began to question his suspicions. Don't be ridiculous, he thought. There's got to be a simple explanation. Like, the ring was hers. It had been inherited from her grandfather—the one with bright cataracts growing in both eyes. He'd been either a machinist or a draftsman. No. A welder, and he had lost his

eyesight late in life. Julie had been upset that he would never see her act on Broadway. The grandfather had been sick. Mark knew that was true. Was it diabetes? Why didn't she tell him that he had died? But her father had given her the ring because it was too small for anyone else to wear, and so she slipped it over the knuckle of her index finger. Must have forgotten it after a shower. I'll bet she panicked when she realized it was missing and searched the entire apartment.

Perhaps there was no rational explanation, Mark thought, and entertained himself with the notion that Alphonse Alexander was indeed a werewolf. While in human form, he plied his mind with drink to sate the anticipation of metamorphosis. His wife, the woman who'd wanted nothing to do with him, didn't understand his sorrowful existence, and he had kept the secret from her all these years by wandering the countryside with the onset of the full moon. Because he was small in stature as a man, those who had caught a glimpse of him in his transformed state assumed he was a coyote or a large fox. His wife had suspected he was having a violent affair, and in a sense he was—he fed on squirrels and waded into streams to paw fish from the very waters. The little man spent his nights in an earth den beneath the root system of an ancient sycamore.

Don't be silly, a voice in his head chided, Gordon's voice, and all the sudden another answer came to him. It was the landlord's ring, someone with a name like Mitch, or Jim, someone who had probably attended a technical school. He had taken it off while snaking hair from Julie's drain. She didn't even know he had set it there. He had returned to show her the bright band of skin around his finger and asked to look for it. Mark thought, and here I am carrying it around in my pocket daydreaming of werewolves.

Mark parked alongside the curb outside Julie's apartment building and reclined in his seat. He cracked the window and waited. He watched a woman with a headscarf roughly the color of their old brown shower curtain walk from the entrance of the building. It could have been Ms. Simmons, as far as he could tell. She clutched a purse under one arm as if it housed some extraordinarily valuable secret. Perhaps it does, Mark thought. She turned her head his way before crossing the street, and her large sunglasses gave him the impression she didn't want to be recognized. Mark felt a bit of empathy for the woman in the headscarf. Had she been jilted by some faithless lover? Why would anyone ever feel the need to sneak around corners in a world absent of witches and bogeymen? This whole thing is stupid he thought, and got out of the car. He felt the ring between his forefinger and thumb as he walked toward the entrance to his old apartment building and held the door for an extraordinarily large, red-faced man. Mark entered the foyer of the building and gazed along the familiar mailbox compartments. He found theirs. Hers. 421. He decided to slip the ring anonymously through the slot and cleanse his hands of the entire matter. The ring was too wide to fit. He supposed he could walk upstairs and confront her.

Instead he held onto the mystery.

Ben wasn't at school Wednesday, and Mark had watched Dave out of the corner of one eye. He was making his way down the scroll with various colored markers.

After school Mark was sitting in his classroom, lights off, desk chair reclined, meditating. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't visualize Ruth's triangle. What color? Was it made of bent wire like the musical instrument, or the triangle K on kosher

food packaging? Or was it a shape of many colors, like an illustration of the food pyramid? Mark had begun to ascribe true holiness to the triangle of Ruth's imagination and he wanted one for himself. He used a straight edge and a marker to draw one on leftover cardboard and cut it out. He leaned it on his desktop against the wall and stared at the brown shape. He closed his eyes. Nothing.

There was a knock at the door. When he saw that Mark wasn't sleeping, Gordon entered and stood by the refrigerated display. He squatted by the monster puppets, the tails of his sport coat nearly touching the floor, shoe leather creaking. "Quite a collection," he said, laughing through his nose and picked up the Wolfman. He held the puppet the way someone might hold a soiled apron.

"I know you only gave that boy a ride because you felt bad for him," Gordon said, "but feelings can't count for much. Not in this job. That is, if you want to do it well."

"How am I supposed to know I'm doing it well?" Mark said. "All I get are reprimands."

"Well," Gordon said, tossing the puppet back to the floor, standing, sliding his hands into his pants pockets, coattails feathered, stomach protruding like a sack of meal. "You have been following the standards, haven't you?"

Mark knew he was referring to the navy blue binder emblazoned with the gold leaf ship's wheel. "No," Mark said. "Not really."

"The rules are in place for a reason, Mark." Mark imagined Gordon regarding a tattered pom-pom with the same contempt with which he'd regarded the Wolfman. "What *have* you been following?"

Mark thought about this question for a moment. "Their interests," he answered.

“If you really want to know.”

“Good,” Gordon touched the Phantom of the Opera with the toe of his shoe, “but there are things in this world less transient than feelings and interests,” he said. “What really matters never changes.”

“Interests can change,” Mark said.

“Interests aren’t important, really. If we taught what was interesting to students…”

“Go ahead. Finish that sentence,” Mark said.

“We’d be teaching how to machine marijuana pipe bowls. Instead of building a grown-up, civilized house they’d want to spray paint vulgarities on clubhouse walls where they could get their girlfriends drunk. Interest is transient. Dangerous. Deadly in some cases. What really matters anchors our being, and we either acknowledge it when we’re young or we spend our lives chasing illusions.” He nudged the Wolfman. “Shadow puppets on the wall.”

Mark picked the cardboard triangle off his desk and held it on his lap. “Why have you come up here?” Mark said. “To ruin my day?”

“Maybe.” Gordon shrugged and turned to the window. “I have some bad news,” he said. It was Mark’s turn to shrug. Maybe his teaching position was forfeit. His hackneyed attempt had caused his father to non-renew his contract. Que sera, sera.

“I got the call just after lunch,” Gordon said. “It’s the new boy. The Mullin’s boy.”

“Ben?” Mark said.

“Ben Wesley Mullins II. Did you know I almost named you Gordon Joseph

Fuller II?" Mark's father stood looking out the window and slid his hands back in his pants pockets. "Mullins was hard on the boy because the boy wasn't right."

"Ben does whatever I ask," Mark said.

"I'm no philosopher, but I think he always blamed himself. Mullins had quit the beat after he was brought up on a few drunk and disorderlies, but he kept his service revolver locked in a box with his badge. Maybe the boy knew all along he kept the key on a ring with all the others. Maybe he thought it was a puzzle of some sort. He could've brought it to school. He could've brought it in here."

Dread began to creep into Mark's belly.

"Mullins said he hadn't ever heard such a sound, or such a silence. He knew right away and called for help. He even knew the men that showed up at his door. He explained it had been an accident, that it had been locked away, had forgotten it was loaded."

Mark sat looking down at the cardboard triangle in his lap. "So what are you saying?"

"He's dead, Mark. Ben Wesley Mullins II was killed when his father's service revolver went off early this morning." He turned to look at his son. "It was an accident. And that's all there is to the story."

CHAPTER II

TWO

Employee of the Month

It was shock that made Mark feel as if he were floating rather than driving home from school. Even as he pushed through the door to his apartment and crossed the dark room toward the couch he felt as if he were moving through a dream. The gold script on a book of Byron's poems was shining up from the floor and, in the dark, Mark had put his shoe on the cover.

The sobbing came suddenly, violently. Afterward, his ribs ached and he felt as if he'd been retching up something rotten. His stomach hurt and he was thirsty. He popped a soda from the fridge. The cold bubbles worked magic on the bitter taste lingering at the back of his throat. He climbed back into bed and eventually slept.

The morning sunlight was bright on the apartment walls when he switched off the alarm clock. At a quarter past eight his phone rang. Without lifting his head, he reached onto his nightstand, lifted the receiver and let it drop back onto the cradle. Mark woke near noon in a feverish sweat. He slid out of bed and walked groggily into the living room. From the heat emanating off of the window, he could tell it was a warm day—bright and smiling if only to tempt blossoms for the next frost. Mark filled a glass with water from

the tap and drank. He dumped the rest into the aloe plant and set the glass upside down in the sink. He tried to crack the kitchen window for breeze, but it wouldn't budge. Instead he cracked his front door. Let them take everything, he thought. I don't give a damn.

In the middle of the afternoon, Mark sat up and sipped the warm soda on his nightstand. At first he thought he had cut something on the aluminum, he felt something like a walnut in his mouth and spit it onto the bed sheet. It occurred to him that it might be a piece of his tongue, but the pain brought the world into focus and he could see it was a bee writhing on the bedcovers. Mark picked a book off the stack next to his bed and crushed it. Most of what was left of the bee covered the E of CUISINE, and his hand covered the CUI, but the title was upside down, so he read the letters NIS punctuated with a dead bee. He tossed the book to the floor, walked into the bathroom and stuck out his tongue. A large red spot had already begun to rise on the surface, he couldn't see the stinger, and his tongue hurt to the touch. He turned on the cold water and lowered it towards the numbing water. Finally he got the stinger between his fingernails, it was a tiny black barb, and washed it down the drain. He drank some cool water, took some nighttime aspirin, and tried to go back to sleep.

When he woke, his tongue was large and tender against his teeth. He had trouble breathing and imagined the organ had distended like a malcontented red frog. He got up to get some ice and noted that the sun was nearly set. Soon they'd be filing through his door like a tide, his father, his dead mother, probably the students. "Where are you? Why are you just lying there? Where is Ben?" He held a cube on his tongue as long as he could stand it, until water dripped off his knuckles, and he placed it in his mouth until

the ice was just a sliver, swallowed the sliver and noticed another bee crawling across the countertop. He opened a drawer, used a plastic spatula to smash the bee, and then he closed the front door. He considered breaking off an aloe leaf and squeezing drops onto his tongue. Probably poison, he thought, walking through the apartment with the spatula. He found another bee in the corner of the living room and smashed it against the wall before taking another aspirin and climbing into bed.

Sleep brought nonsense images to his mind like lurid flames. The moon, large and lucid—the surface writhing with bees. Slicing open a live fish to reveal the hexagon cells of a hive. Words popping out of books like kernels. Finally, Mark dreamed of Ben.

In the dream, Ben was filling a dark blue water bucket, but there was a hole in the bottom and the water ran out as quickly as it poured in. No matter how many times Mark tried to explain why the bucket wasn't filling Ben stared with cold, steel eyes.

When he woke, the room darkened, he felt the need to write. It was something different—a feeling like things crawling under his skin, so he spent a few hours writing in his notebook a children's story. Mark looked at the words on the page. He regarded them as strange fish swimming in a forgotten lake—he ran his fingers over them, and the fish all had names, and the words were their names.

The sting in Mark's tongue simmered over the course of the next two days until the pain melted off, but he did not go back into school. He imagined the identification lanyard as a noose. He wasn't sure if it was an after effect of the sting, but everything tasted bitter. When the phone rang the sound hung in the air like smoke, nearly tangible, as if staying too long in bed were anything like over-baking.

That night, the white pavilion nearly glowed amid the dark hedges. Some children had written with chalk on the sidewalk, and Mark enjoyed stepping on a tree, what must've been a chicken or a duck, and finally a whale with a white water spout shooting from its humped back. Mark stood just inside the doorway to the bar until his eyes could adjust. There were a handful of patrons and though Mark didn't recognize any of the women, he recognized Ben's father bent over the pool table. The man from the hardware store was ribbing him with insults between sips from a mug of beer, Mullins sunk the shot, chalked the end of his cue and offered some choice phrases of his own. The guy from the hardware store shook his head with a grin and tossed off the rest of his mug on the way for a refill. Mullins hauled out the bridge from under the table and the hardware man shouted.

Mark pushed back out into the night.

He filled the notebook with words. They came to him like ripples along the surface of a lake. From time to time, he unfolded the charcoal portrait and looked at it—it was him, but it wasn't all of him. The charcoal darkened his thumb as he moved it across the page, and even though the offence was small, the smear distorted the overall clarity of the portrait. The likeness had been a gift, and though Mark knew no one could be given ones self, he thought perhaps aid was necessary, and he wondered if he was any less lost than when he had been taking off his clothes. He thought of calling on Julie—there were times she had taken care of him, offer to run him a bath, but he didn't crave pity, he craved understanding.

There were a few cars in the school parking lot and Mark looked for his father's but

didn't see it. He pulled into the *Employee of the Month* spot at the front of the lot to lighten his spirits, but after a few moments he ended up backing into one of the unmarked spots.

The smell of the school wasn't one he could easily put into words. It was the kind of smell he imagined in some exotic animal's den—not sweat, not food—an animal from the book of world records, an animal that knew how to read. Running his fingertips along the wall, he imagined the wall was made of stone, reflected torchlight amid piles of moldering bones.

The sounds of distant vacuuming brought Mark out of his daydream. He took the back staircase and watched his feet as he climbed. He got the keys to the classroom in his hand and found he didn't need them—the door was already standing open. Mark attempted to look into the room through the window, but he was surprised to find the glass covered from the inside.

Finally, he entered. The deli was awash with the smells of soap and bleach. Pans hung from the rack—the blue countertops had been cleaned of flower spattering and eggshells—no dirty dishes in the sink. He could tell by the way his shoes moved across the tiles that the floor had been mopped. The UFO was no longer leaning in one corner, and there was no sign of the horror troupe. Mark bent to inspect items in the refrigerated deli cooler—sandwiches and hot dogs. Tuna tins stacked on the counter

"Brown is the only color of thread I could find."

Mark turned. Pam stood in the doorway with something white draped over her arm. "You scared me," he said.

"Nothing to be afraid of," she said, crossing the room to stand behind the

refrigerated display, “even if the place is full of ghosts.” She slid open the back of the cooler and pulled out a sandwich wrapped in deli paper. “You look like you haven’t eaten for days,” she said. Mark took the sandwich.

Pam sat behind a small sewing machine and used her teeth to sever a piece of thread from its spool. She threaded the needle of the machine and tested the pedal. Mark sat down at his desk. It had been cleared, dusted, and his books had been stacked along the rear edge against the wall. He spread the white paper and took a bite of the sandwich. It did not taste bitter. Fishy, but not bitter. The sewing machine started up.

Mark looked around while he ate. Had she painted? No. The walls had been washed. “When did you pierce your ear?” Mark’s fingers moved to the ring in his earlobe. He’d forgotten about the earring entirely. She spoke from behind the sewing machine—“An earring makes some men look girlish,” she said, “but it becomes you.” She continued sewing while Mark finished the sandwich, half expecting his father to come through the door with the newspaper.

Mark opened the desk drawer. The Schubert puppet was gone, but Ben’s key lanyard was lying at the bottom of the drawer. He stood up with his sandwich and walked over to the classroom door, rubbed his fingers on a pant leg and touched the white butcher paper covering the window glass. The sewing stopped.

“That helps them,” she said, “stay focused.” Mark took the last bite, balled up the sandwich paper and dropped it in the trash. The machine started up again. “They keep asking when you’re coming back,” she said over the noise.

“Do they know?” Mark asked.

Pam shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. “I think you should be the

one." Mark was afraid she'd say something to that effect. Somehow he didn't believe Ben's death had been an accident. What was he going to tell them? Abducted by a UFO? Eaten by a shark? Mark had no idea how someone like Buddy was going to handle the news.

"Where are the puppets?" Mark asked over the noise.

"Those things Dave carries around?" She stopped sewing.

"Yes. He's writing a script," Mark said.

"I'm afraid you'll have to talk to your father about the puppets," she said. "When you didn't come in he kind of took over. As you can see, he tidied up a bit."

The aprons looked as if they had been starched and bleached on their hooks. Mark turned the lapel. Someone had stitched on the students' names. Mark rubbed his face with one hand. "Is he here?" he said.

The walls of the hallway leading to his father's office were made of stone, and it was a bit easier for Mark to imagine he was walking through a cave. The pitch of the floor seemed to drop as he walked toward the large wooden door at the end of the hallway. Even the secretary had gone home. He grasped the cold brass doorknob. Locked.

Mark turned back down the dark hallway and climbed the stairs. When he reached the deli, he found that the lights had been darkened, and at first he thought a ghost was hovering in the middle of the room. When he turned on the lights, he saw it was just his white apron draped over the desk chair. Pam had sewn *Chef Mark* in brown thread across the breast. Mark ran his thumb over the stitching. He had come to see Dave's puppetry as a method of mastering the darkest shadows on the wall of his

imagination—his child's method for defeating the boogeyman. Mark asked himself what demons he was fighting. He knew he had been inspired by Ms. Makaiau. He hoped he could be important to someone the way she had been important to him. He had hoped to gain some form of mastery over the muttered appraisals of his father's voice. Could he silence it with success? If not by succeeding, he thought, at least by enduring until something resembling success crawled into his lap?

Buddy's book of world records was lying on one of the tables and Mark opened it. He sought the picture Ben had shared, the man with an arm raised over his head, and studied it—muscles had atrophied, the fingernails grown out of control. Mark read that Hindu holy man Baba Hath Khada had kept one arm raised over his head for nearly two decades. To prove his devotion to God. The man's eyes spoke to Mark, they said that something was wrong with the way the world worked, the way it didn't always inspire people to become who they wanted to be. The way it might caste sons into shadows. Mark believed he was learning something about how to fight the numbing influence of the world over himself, but he was beginning to think he could help his students discover something about themselves—he didn't know if such a fight mattered in a grand kind of way, but it mattered enough for him not to give up just yet. He set the apron on the counter and walked downstairs. He intended to find the puppets.

Some Weird Father-Son Thing

The superintendent's office doors were locked and Mark had no particular plan of attack other than to kick them in gangster style. Unfortunately, the width of the wood jamb was as thick as his ankle. He decided to call upon the keeper of the keys.

Pam had taken the idea of taping paper over the window from the folks in building maintenance however he imagined the bulletin-board paper spread over their windows was designed to keep faces from peering in. "Come in."

Mark opened the door and peeked. The room was furnished in pegboard and plastic. Pam was reading—book spread on a patio table. There were tools hanging from the pegboard and stacks of books were angled on shelves, against the wall. Mark walked over to one of the stacks of books and ran his fingers across the cover. "Captain Fuller's cabin is locked tight," Mark said. "I don't suppose you possess the magic to jimmy it?"

Pam had been one of the first school employees he'd become acquainted with. As she dog-eared the page in the book she was reading and smiled, Mark realized she had also been one of the most attractive. Her hair was gray, and he was guessing, given the youthful curve of her features, a tad premature. "Ah, one door," she said, "that's supposed to be locked."

The double doors were fitted with a large brass deadbolt that stood out like a single, gold eye in the dark hallway leading to the superintendent's office. Pam had said she wouldn't

mind a peek at the place herself. Mark couldn't shake the sensation that the hallway was canted, as if they were walking deeper underground. The air seemed compounded of the building's smells, had even taken on humidity.

What did his father do all day? Mark thought. Sit behind that large, wooden desk like a sea captain half out of his mind, harboring schemes against a crew he imagined was growing more mutinous day in and day out? Maybe he waited until everyone was gone and carried the harpoon down to building trades to run along the grinding wheel.

"This is it," Pam said, fitting a key into the lock. Mark wondered if the door would be torn from her grasp, if his father had indeed been waiting, harpoon blade ground to a razor's width, seaweed and sand mites crawling in his beard. Pam pushed one of the doors open and, incredibly, it creaked on the hinges like the mast of an ancient ship. "All hail Portunes," she said.

Mark entered his father's space, his hand searching for a light switch, his eyes searching the dark corners for the coalglow of a pipe bowl. There were no windows. Except for the murky light of the fishtank, the darkness was complete. When he found the light switch, the office appeared, unoccupied. A green haze filmed the fish tank. Mark began searching for the sequestered puppets in the drawers of his father's desk. Pam searched files. Mark was not really surprised when the big wooden desk drawers failed to offer up anything exciting. Office supplies, most of them new out of the box—new in the box in a few cases—and some drawers were just plain empty. Mark got up from his position on the floor and sat in the desk chair. He felt along the underside of the desk. He imagined a button to open a secret passage, maybe a trapdoor to the dungeons. "Do you know of any secret rooms, or anything?" Mark asked.

"No," Pam said, intent on something she had found in one of the filing cabinets. "But you're welcome to check."

Mark regarded the harpoon. It looked real all right. The wooden shaft had been wrapped in some sort of rope; the blade had tarnished, but still looked like it would do the trick. He found, hanging on the wall, portraits of the superintendents beginning in 1890 with Theophilus Finneus. In 1912 the title passed to Seamus Degrasse who lasted three years, then on to William Dooley who stayed, Mark counted on his fingers, for twenty-three years. The lengths of their respective terms seemed a helter skelter sprinkling of a few years here, a few decades there. One thing became certain as Mark searched the eyes of the men in the portraits—all of them had done something else with their lives. He arrived at the last picture in which his father was looking a little wild eyed. 1980. Wow, Mark thought. He's been doing this since before I was born. There were no more slots left for pictures, and Mark wondered if his father was going to stay on indefinitely. Perhaps even after death. Maybe he's a vampire he thought, looking around. Heavy drapes covered the window. It would explain the lack of natural light.

Mark barely recognized Kurt's picture. For starters he had hair, and it wasn't gray. He looked, Mark thought, very young compared to the other men. Kurt had given Mark the impression of someone who had survived a particularly harrowing tour of duty. It was the sunken eyes. Mark thought lifted the picture away from the wall to peek. Nothing. Not even a safe. What had he been thinking? His father would never shanghai a bunch of puppets and hide them in a secret safe behind an old portrait. True, the old man could be a bit of a stick in the mud, but he wasn't such a bugbear to deny some special needs kids a chuckle or two. Pam was still over by the filing cabinets, cradling

something in her arms. “Hey, let’s get out of here, okay? Thanks for the service by the way, but he doesn’t have what I’m looking for—”

Pam was bending the wire frame glasses of the Schubert puppet back into place. Before he registered the significance, it occurred to Mark to tell her she could wrap the wire around a broomstick. He had performed the same maneuver after Omar treated the puppet to the rolling pin. Mark looked down into the cabinet and there they were, all the familiar faces. There was one new addition—a puppet with long blonde yarn hair swaddled in a pink gown. There were no facial features, but she wore a conical felt cap from which streamed a length of sparkling lavender ribbon.

Mark reached down and grabbed Dracula. “That bastard,” Mark said. “No. He’s not even a bastard—he’s just a big, stinking bully. He should’ve thrown them into the furnace if he wanted rid of them so badly.” He pulled the puppet onto his hand and affected a vampire accent. “Or rammed a stake into our hearts. Blah.” He set the puppet on the floor and picked up Dracula. Dave had once told him that Béla Lugosi had become addicted to injecting formaldehyde into his body. Mark couldn’t imagine such longing for death.

“Is this some weird father-son thing?” Pam asked, indicating the puppets.

“I don’t know what this is,” Mark said. He sat on the corner of the desk. “Part of me thought taking this job would make him happy.”

“Isn’t the trick finding what makes you happy?”

“I’m not so good at that either,” Mark smiled. “Women, wine and snuff.”

“A Libertine,” Pam said. “Not so hot on Keats. Give me Byron.”

“That’s right. You were the librarian”

"Once upon a star," Pam said. "Now I clean the toilets—a service some would argue is more noble. And necessary. Look, whatever you're up to doesn't jive with yonder captain's plan, and I'm sure breaking into his office won't help to smooth things over. You don't want to end up scrubbing toilets—"

"I don't care about smoothing things over," Mark said, "and we had a key, so we weren't breaking in. Besides, how close is washing dishes to scrubbing a toilet, anyway?"

"I've seen your kitchen," Pam said. "Pretty close."

Pam made a production of straightening up. She even tipped some flakes into the fish tank before locking the door behind them. "He's going to know we came in and took these back," Mark said.

"We?" Pam said. "You're making me an accessory?"

Mark pointed at the security camera in the corner of the hallway. "Nope," he said, "but those babies never lie."

"Leave that to me," Pam said. "The booty has been sprung, but he doesn't have to know who sprang it."

Mark carried the puppets back to the building maintenance office by making a pouch of his shirt. Pam carried the old lady puppet and the UFO under one arm. They closed the door. "This beats all," she said, still fussing with the wire frames.

Mark handed her a broomstick. "Wrap it around this," he said. Mark dumped the puppets on the patio table. "Why didn't you go to another school? Heck, a new library just opened up in town."

"Existing on alimony alone is a bear in this economy," Pam said, wrapping the wire around the broomstick, "besides, you've got to carry a Golden Buckeye card and still be a virgin to work in a place like that. There," she said, holding Schubert where Mark could see her, the wire glasses mended, and made her talk. "I use a Judith Krantz novel and a warm dill pickle. In the dark I imagine it's the real thing."

"Not bad," Mark said, "but I can hook you up with a stuffed turkey neck if you want."

"I'm not sure we know each other well enough for you to say that to me."

"Oh, God. I'm sorry," Mark said. "The thing with the pickle—"

"I'm kidding," Pam said. "But you should've seen your face." She boosted herself up on the workbench.

"Are these still separated by genre?" he asked.

"Yes," Pam said.

Mark scrolled down the titles of the autobiographies. He found Escoffier's *Memories of my Life*. "Woah," he said, pulling the book from the stack. "I've got to check this out."

"Just take it," Pam said.

Mark fanned the pages with one thumb. The smell reminded him of building trades. "C'mon," he said, a little giddy. "Check me out. I want to take a book."

"You're a weird kid, you know that?" Pam said, but she pulled the old lady puppet onto one hand. "As long as you bring it back," she made it say, and rummaged through the drawer of the workbench. "Here," she said and sat down at the patio table. She opened the book to the back cover, inked an old stamp, brought it down on one

column of the card and looked at Mark with a sidelong glance. For the first time in days, he felt nearly right. Pam shut the book and pushed it across the table.

Mark opened to the back cover and looked at the dates. "Hey, there aren't any due dates," he said. "How do I know when to bring it back?"

"Bring it back when you've finished," she said.

Mark walked over to the nearest stack of books and opened the one on top to the back cover. "You mean you never gave a due date?"

"No," she said.

"No wonder you had to shut down. You must've lost a ton of books."

"Not as many as you'd think. Sometimes Donny would find one in some kid's locker at the end of the year, or they'd drive around with one in their trunk for a semester, but they were pretty good at getting them back. Reading a book is like starting a relationship. I'm sure you've got some girlfriends. You know what I mean?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you had any Judith Krantz."

"Ha, ha," Pam said. "Hopeless Romantic?"

"Do you know who wants to get married?" Mark said. "Dave."

"It's Vikki, isn't it?" Pam said.

"Do you think they could be happy?" Mark said.

"I think they're already happier than most people," Pam said.

"No, I mean, do you think they could pull it off?"

"Why not?" Pam said. "They'd need a place to live. I think they could make it work. What'd you do before this?" Pam said.

"I washed dishes," Mark said.

"Did you make it?"

"Yeah," Mark said, "I suppose so. I guess I see your point. Look, I'd better get these guys back to my room, try to make the most of the weekend."

"They'll be sitting ducks up there," Pam said. "Why don't you let me hold onto them? Your old man rarely sets foot in here," she said.

"Okay," Mark said. He was really beginning to worry about telling his kids about Ben. He was thinking of Buddy, the lock on the bathroom door. A few strips of duct tape on the strike plate would work just fine. "Pam, can you do me one more favor?"

The bees were out. He took a few hearty swats with the book, knocked one to the step and smooshed it with his shoe; he also succeeded in getting stung on the wrist. He ran it under a cold tap, snapped a fleshy leaf off of the aloe plant on the window and rubbed it on the sting. Mark noticed that his answering machine's little red light was blinking and he reached down to press PLAY.

"Mark. Hey, man, I was just calling in that favor," a man's voice Mark dimly recognized but couldn't place. "… should be done next week, but I need a first mate. I've got some business to settle. Rondeau Bay. Alone it takes me the better part of a weekend, but I figure with Gordon Fuller's son as a first mate we'll be there and back in under twenty-four. Meet me at the shop in the morning if you're interested. We'll head out around six. Bring your pole." Mark played the message again. It sounded like the caller was eating something. He was almost inclined to believe they'd had the wrong number, probably would've deleted the recording if it weren't for the bit about his father. The third time through, Mark realized he was listening to Frank Wagner speak through

what sounded like a mouthful of Brie. Oh Jesus, he wants me to make a boat trip with him. "Bring my pole," Mark said. "I don't even own a pole."

He played the message a fourth time. What does being Gordon's son have to do with it? His father certainly seemed to enjoy the sea, yet he'd always suspected his father's penchant for the nautical was a testosterone meandering of the male psyche—the ocean as the conqueror's last battlefield. Evidence of a man who, in a previous life, liked to wet a line. Maybe even owned a skiff.

Mark held his wrist and looked at the single drape. He looked down at the red bump. The aloe had really comforted the sting. It was just like Julie to offer solace to the needy, he thought, and his mind was cast back to his last vision of Alphonse—the red bumps on either side of his nose, stubble and grime, sour breath. Mark removed his shoes, peeled off his socks, and left them near the front door. He walked barefoot across the apartment, the ring on one palm. If Julie was looking for a well-worn man, by Mark's estimation, Alphonse Alexander was about as well-worn as you could get. Worn out, even. Mark flipped the ring like a coin and tried to make it dance across his knuckles but it was too wide, and dropped. Mark made a grab and sent it rolling across the carpet under the couch—he got on his hands and knees. It was so far back he couldn't look under the couch and reach at the same time, he had to go in up to his shoulder and feel around a bit, errant stuffing tickling the back of his hand, until he got his fingers on it. He sat with his back up against the couch and looked at the familiar burnished gold, the scratches. He lay down on top of his covers and fell asleep before he could undress, the ring clenched in one fist.

Diana

The alarm went off at five o' clock in the morning. Mark pooled some of his dwindling kitchen stock into a fairly respectable packed lunch—he'd sliced a tomato and twisted salt in a scrap of waxed paper, cut patches of mold off of a hunk of mozzarella, cubed it, hardboiled a half dozen eggs and a cup of plain, white rice. He'd resisted the urge to chop in some frozen watercress and left the marjoram on the shelf. He found a plain brown paper bag, dumped in the works, balled it in one fist and hefted the weight imagining he was someone who showered in his clothes at the end of a pier.

Mark decided not to shower. On some level he thought detectable body odor and the manly food might disguise the fact that his hands were shaking. He threw a change of clothes in a backpack, grabbed the toothbrush—couldn't forgo that ritual—and crammed the lunchbag in the pack.

"Goddamnit," he lied. "I feel good."

The sun wasn't quite up, which meant the bees were still sleeping, or doing whatever they did when the sun was down, and newspapers were sleeping at the doorsteps. Usually folks had grabbed their papers by the time he was on his way to work and seeing them set out like morning loaves was an odd sight. He stooped at the nearest and turned it to see the date. It had occurred to him to swipe a copy to see if anything related to Ben's death had been printed. He told himself that he could never swipe someone's newspaper, but the truth was that he didn't want to read the word accident in

print. It was the kind of thing that defied order, cause and effect. Why couldn't his father see that? But what was the alternative? Suspect Ben Wesley Mullins of murder? The idea of Ben's death was floating far off, like something Mark wanted to tell himself was just a mirage. A ghost ship on the horizon.

Frank was waiting in his truck at the school and motioned Mark to hop in. Mark parked at a garage door that opened into the building trades workshop, tossed his backpack into the bed of the truck alongside some large, red gas tanks. It was a confident gesture, yet the truth was Mark had never tossed anything into the bed of a truck in his entire life.

Frank got out. "Real quick, before I forget," he said, and pulled a cluster of keys from a coat pocket. Mark followed him through the man door and into the dark classroom, bright with the smell of sawn lumber.

The lights came on low at first, and Frank turned to Mark to speak and his lips looked blue. The image of Alphonse holding Ruth's purse in his lap, winestained smile, came to Mark as if he were back in the gallery ballroom.

"Come again?" Mark said.

"I said I just went over it with the punch last night." The puppet stage, as it had been conceived in the blueprint, had been realized in a white, light grained wood. It sat in one corner of the shop with all the grandeur of a newly iced wedding cake. The stage was nearly six feet high and bellowed out in a half circle. "Wow," Mark said, but thought "wow" didn't quite cover it. He ran a hand along the stage, sanded as fine as taffeta. "Wow" came nowhere close.

"I routered these edges and used some fluted molding on the sides to give it...

well, you know, some style. They suggested using pine or poplar, but most of this is maple," he said. "I had a little left over from a job."

"Gorgeous," Mark said.

"That," he said, indicating the stage, "is quilted maple." Mark ran his hand over the intricate grain pattern and understood why they called it quilted—the wood looked a bit like the thread pattern in the quilts his mother had liked to spread on every amenable surface of the house. "I made a guitar body with that stuff for my nephew. Had some left," Frank said.

"It's beautiful Frank," Mark said.

"By the way," Frank said, "if you paint that, prepare to lose some valuable parts." He picked up a handsaw and laughed.

"I could have you make me a peg leg out of California Redwood."

"I wasn't talking about your leg," Frank said. "Aw, you might want to paint some of it, which is fine I guess, but this wood is one of the reasons they invented varnish. When you varnish, you'll want to fill these nail holes, but only in between coats. Also," Frank said, "You'll probably want some stage curtains. I went ahead and hung a rod, but you're on your own there."

"Frank, I don't know how to thank you," Mark said. "I really don't."

Frank waved a hand. "Just help me wrestle it onto the freight elevator. I measured, it'll fit through your door if we turn it sideways, but that means I won't be able to get a dolly under it. Monday morning. In the meantime, we've got badder fish to fry." Mark had been so taken with the stage he had almost forgotten the order of the day. "Diana awaits."

They were on the road for about an hour and a half, conversing, though Frank made no further mention of the woman for whom the ship was named. The topic of poetry surfaced briefly, and when it did Frank spoke the way someone might speak of a long dead child. Mark wanted to ask Frank why it mattered that he was Gordon's son. Frank was talking about the fishing in Erieau. Finally, he asked about the boat, and then, once the topic of conversation had shifted to sailing, "So, my dad was some sort of sea captain?"

"Apparently," Frank said, "if I remember correctly, you come from a great long line of seafarers. Something like your great-great-great grandfather was a whaler—turn of the 18th century. I think you might even have an admiral in your tree. Your grandfather, that was your grandpa Fuller, fled Austria-Hungary on the brink of the First World War. I think his name was Joseph. That's the name that sticks."

"That sounds familiar." His mother had shown him a handful of photos as a boy, but Gordon rarely mentioned him.

"Among the artifacts from those days was the letter signed by the Kaiser himself urging Joseph to fight for the motherland. Your pops and I had both enlisted. Somehow he knew that war was going to be bad. Bad-in-a-way-the-world-had-never-known bad. He was a docker and legend has it he was so strong that he could drive a railroad tie through the floor of a boxcar. His brother joined the ranks, but Joseph found his way onto one of the ships desperate for crew, ended up in Brazil—"

"Frank, how do you know all this?" Mark said.

"Gordon had your great grandfather's maps and notes and letters with him on the sub. He spent three months pouring over that stuff. I thought it was for a lack of

anything better to do—we were on a boomer, Gulf of Tonkin, search and rescue. On a sub, day and night grow together into one long wick. I forget how it came up, but we started talking about our fathers. My dad had been army, and of course, if it was good enough for him… you know the rest of the story.

"I ended up trying on a bunch of odd jobs, but I didn't go to college and most of the blue-collar kids ended up in Johnson's war. I gave in and went ahead and enlisted. I figured I could beat the draft so I went navy, mostly because I didn't cop much to the idea of having my head blown off. That's when I met your dad. He had gone navy because he said he wanted to learn how to sail. I asked him how the hell he expected to learn to sail on a submarine, and I remember he did a goofy little dance, pantomimed rolling some dice and flashed jazz hands. 'Nothing but bluebirds all day long.' By that point we hadn't seen the sky in a month. The whole thing seemed so absurd we laughed our stupid heads off.

"He shared the maps your great grandfather drew on his way from Europe to America. In the attitude of maps from an earlier day, the waters were populated with strange creatures, tusked, shaggy, some of them jetting steam out of tubes along their backs, some pinching seafarers between claws. Some large enough to swallow ships whole. I'm not exaggerating when I say that on those nights the cabin pressure seemed to be working against the hollows of my body, or when the movement of the submarine ticked contrary to the metronome of my own beating heart, the images inspired me to wonder what was swimming out there in the ether."

"What were you saying about Brazil?"

"Apparently he crossed the equator with a whole rag-tag crew. Your dad and I

swapped stories on that submarine. The red lights touched everything, and the stories stuck in my head like hallucinations. Up here, they'll probably sound like tall tales."

Mark waved a hand. "What did he do in Brazil?"

"Well, the men found work logging. Not so many people cared about saving the Amazon in those days. One story goes that men in his camp woke up with a rash. They itched and complained during work. A few thought it was an ill omen—the very ground on which we lay is poisoning us kind of thing. The captain went missing. Most of the crew was from foreign parts, some were gypsies, mercenary sailors and some, like your great grandfather, were avoiding the growing conflict in Europe. Superstitious old worlders didn't know what to think. Some thought it was some sort of phantom causing harm and many were ready to get back on the boat. Joseph knew most of the men were scared and restless, yet there was still a lot of work to do. One night he waited up to see what was happening.

"Early in the morning, while the skies were still dark—darker still under the jungle canopy—a giant anaconda entered the camp and wound through the tents of the sleeping men. Your grandfather anticipated startled screams, but no one stirred. Joseph saw it as his opportunity to win the trust and admiration of the men, so, he grabbed his axe and started chopping.

"Let me guess," Mark said, "he found the captain in the anaconda's belly."

"No," Frank said. "It turned out he had wandered into a neighboring village, but the sight of the snake's carcass dismissed the superstitions beginning to spread through the ranks as quickly as the rash. A native explained the snake had moved through some Lithraea in a field near the encampment."

Mark made a so-what gesture.

"You need to get out of doors, kid. The mysterious rash was just garden-variety poison ivy. The captain wasn't in the anaconda's belly because anacondas can't swallow people—he had fled to a neighboring village and forced himself upon a young girl in the jungle. Raised a hell of a commotion—maybe it had to do with him being foreign, but the girl's story stuck, and the rumor circulated that the guilty man had run off into the mountains. Your great grandfather and some of the men from camp accompanied the father of the girl up into the mountains where they found he'd been hiding out. When they offered to escort him back to the village, he pulled a pistol. Your grandpa told him 'you can't shoot all of us.' They all had machetes and promised to hack the deserter to bits if he fired. 'At least I can take you with me,' the man had said, and pointed at your grandfather.

"In the end, the captain had given up his gun and was dealt with by the authorities of the village, and I guess Joseph had his crew—the bond formed in the jungle was strong enough to secure their loyalties. They returned to Austria when the work was done, Joseph at the helm. By this time the country had changed quite a bit. Joseph came to find that his brother had been killed in the war, that the economy was worse off than when he had left, and that his parents had dismissed him as a coward for refusing to stay and fight. So, he stuck with his crew, his real family in a way, and they headed for the Americas."

Frank told the story without taking his eyes from the road, his mouth was set but Mark could tell he was enjoying himself. He spoke like a man who too often lived with silence. "Their goal was to become established loggers—they were essentially a crew of

lumberjacks—but Joseph had larger ambitions. He hoped they could profit from the coastal trade boom. Ship goods. It was during this trip that your great-grandfather began a journal and mapped the sea route region between Europe and America. They were really just sketches, but if I know the story the way I think I do, one thing would become apparent—it was this trip that would determine your grandfather's fate."

At this Frank pulled into a gas station along side a pump and turned off the engine. There was a gleam in his eye and a ghost of a smile on his lips—a fisherman deciding whether or not to keep a catch. "Son of a bitch," he said absently. "Four nineteen. Cheaper than the marina, but still, it's highway robbery."

It took a moment for Mark to realize that his mouth was hanging open a little bit as Frank filled first the large red canisters in the bed and then the truck itself. Frank knocked on the glass. "Want anything?" Mark shook his head.

He returned with a cigarette between his lips, opened the door and pulled himself up. "You mind?" Mark shook his head again and Frank lit his smoke, cracked the window, pulled the seatbelt across himself and started the truck. "We're about twenty minutes out," he said, and blew a stream of smoke toward the crack in the window. "I hope we beat that front."

"From the stories you've told," Mark said, "my great grandfather seemed like the least superstitious man—" here, Mark thought of his own father, who he considered the least superstitious man on the planet, "—at least one of the most *rational* men. Monsters and sea creatures? Crazy maps. It doesn't really make sense."

"You're right," Frank said, took a hit from the cigarette and set it in the dashtray. "His early maps were all latitudes and landmarks, like blueprints. As they sailed deeper

into the Atlantic, the maps got—" Frank looked at Mark. "–well, just plain weird. The sea monsters were just the start of it. By the time they had begun to map New England, the lines had taken on a paralytic scrawl, and if I remember correctly, the edge of the US continent had been boiling with what I thought were maggots. It was almost like he didn't quite know where the line went, so his mind… compensated. I think something happened out there," Frank said.

Mark didn't have much frame of reference when it came to boats, but in his estimation, Diana was a big one. All the boats, really—they loomed on either side of the docks like strange, sleeping mastodons. The sun was out, but the wind running off the shock of blue lake was a cleaver. Mark shrugged his jacket tighter around his neck and swung his book bag off one shoulder. Frank tossed his own bag on board and bent to the dock cleat to loosen the stern rigging. "You might as well get started on the other breast line," Frank said, after a moment he pointed. "That one."

There were a few moments when Mark had to pull back on the line in order to bring the freeboards against the dock fenders to allow for some slack. He saw Frank doing the same thing on his own end. Diana was riding the choppy water—he'd no idea how to measure wind, but his knuckles were freezing as he picked at the puzzling knot. "Hop aboard once you've got that untangled," Frank said, "and we'll throw the stern."

"Aye, aye captain," Mark said without gusto. The story Frank had told him about his grandfather had rigged a knot into his guts. He still had so many questions, the need to sate the curiosity was a palpable hunger, but he was also aware that under the other net of feelings anger at being deprived of this history bubbled like a sleeping hulk.

"Climb aboard," Frank said, and held out a hand for Mark to grab. Frank pulled him fully on board and tossed the stern line. He first raised the jib and came port to throw off the bowline. "We're dealing with a strong breeze. The jib might be enough to get us underway, but I'm afraid we won't be able to raise the main in this wind until we're on open water." Wind cut through Mark's light jacket as he watched Frank and he wished for some heavier clothes.

Mark had been completely unsure how the movement of the boat would affect him and had anticipated spending a portion of the trip curled on the decking. However, the movement seemed as old and familiar as sleep, and Frank's description of how they would come about once they reached open water allowed Mark to anticipate the swinging boom and settle well in on their way.

Frank gestured Mark over to the wheel and showed him how to keep it steady and disappeared into the cabin. The wind, as cold as it was, started to feel good with the wheel beneath his hand.

Frank emerged after a few moments with two badly wrinkled, blue life vests. "Here," he said, handing the vest to Mark. He donned his own while Mark fumbled with the clasps. Frank didn't bother to tighten down the straps, took the wheel, balling its bladder contemptuously in one fist. "A blue lifejacket," he said. "For those who want to drown in peace."

"If I had to drown," Mark said, pulling on the vest, "peacefully might be the best way."

Frank nodded and Mark turned his back to the headwind. He'd grown silent as they approached the marina, and though Mark had been itching to prod, he kept quiet.

Now that they were underway, Diana's prow parting the tide effortlessly, Mark asked the question he had been mulling over as they had chatted up a woman in the marina guard house with the raucous laugh, picked at knots and pulled on ropes. "What do you think happened out there?"

The skin around Frank's temples was drawn tight. It might have been the wind, yet Mark could have sworn it was the look of a man who was searching for just the right words. "There's a lot that can happen to a man on the water," Frank said loudly in order to be heard over the wind. "Most of it was in your grandfather's journals. Great whacks of it were missing, if memory serves, but it's funny. I've found that memory often serves the moment. Something Diana used to say, anyway. It may be that your dad only showed me some of it—I remember it was clear that at one point, the crew had divided—another man had tried to rally some of the deckhands against your grandfather. At the heart of most conflicts, you're apt to find a woman. That's one of mine."

The wind had slowed and the sails were luffing. Frank tightened the rigging, stretched both arms above his head and arched his back. Spray had been wetting Mark's neck intermittently, and he found the sensation not unpleasant. The landscape from which they had set out was definitely shrinking, and Frank gestured for Mark to take the wheel. Mark took it. Frank sat, fingered a cigarette from his breast pocket and eventually got it lit. He appeared to weigh something in his mind.

"Your father and I talked a lot in those days. It was one of the things that kept the darkness from closing in. We were underwater for nearly three months and while your father was searching for his birthright, I was attempting to deny part of my own. I said I came from a long line of military men, but after several weeks on the sub I was starting to

feel like a square peg someone had been hammering into a round hole. I get the idea a lot of guys over there had the same idea. Once we came back to land we went our separate ways. I spent some time on a PBR along the Mekong Delta—a time in my life that I won't recall here, or anywhere for that matter. When my tour was up I started hammering nails. I didn't run into your dad again for, shoot. Fifteen years. By then I was married to Diana and had a little son." Mark looked at Frank, carefully pinching the cherry of his cigarette over the side. "We haven't spoken much about it since those days. He asked me to consider working for him in '82, and it's been so ever since. I hammer the nails, he writes the paychecks." Frank tightened the rigging. After a while, he looked out at the sky. "This wind is picking up, but I doubt we're going to outrun that storm front. We'll be wet by nightfall."

"Frank, can I ask you a question?" Mark said.

"Shoot," Frank said.

"Why did you want me to come out here?"

Frank bent to pull on a winch, and it clicked once. "It gets lonely on the water." Frank usually formed his words with the care of a man who had measured wood twice before he sawed it for thirty years. He was the type of man who preferred to plane wood by hand and usually his speech came out even, as if the grit in his voice was knocking off the high points and sharpening the edges, but he spoke this last roughly. It gave Mark the impression Frank had seen and experienced some things no man ever should.

The rain came just after nightfall in a violent squall that blocked out the moon and stars. Frank told Mark they would anchor and see if they could wait it out. He cast two in

opposite directions and lowered the sails before they went down into the cabin. There were two cots, one above the other. Frank told Mark to take the lower one, and that it would be less of a fall if they happened to be bludgeoned by waves. "You're doing pretty well for a guy who doesn't do this very often," Frank said. "Bet you're hungry though." They had snacked on some jerky and dried fruit at midday. Mark had nearly forgotten his packed lunch. Frank got up to open the little refrigerator squatting in one corner of the cabin. "We've got ham," Frank said. "Some cheese."

"I've brought my own," Mark said.

"Pheasant under glass?" Frank said. He returned with some ham between two pieces of bread—one of which, Mark was pretty sure, was the heel.

Mark pulled the contents from the paper bag and set them on the cot. Frank grunted what Mark thought was a note of approval as he bit into a slice of tomato.

When they had finished, Frank told Mark to try and get some rest, that they would unmoor when the squall passed. He hoped to reach Rondeau by morning. Mark pulled the shoes from his feet and lay back on the lower cot enjoying the waves and closed his eyes. His last thought was that he had forgotten the twist of salt for the tomato.

When Mark woke up, Frank was oiling a big revolver. The action was open, the gun broke in the middle, and Frank was running a thin instrument through the cylinders. Mark considered feigning sleep, instead he sat up and asked where they were. "Erieau," Frank said. "Canada. I thought for sure the motor would wake you," Frank said. Mark asked Frank whom he intended to shoot.

Frank chuckled deep in his chest and tossed something at Mark. It was small and

hard and bounced into his lap. It looked like a bullet, but it was made of wood. "This is what they call a thrower," Frank said, indicating the big gun, which he was loading with the wooden bullets. He handed the pistol butt end to Mark. "It doesn't shoot, but anyone caught on the wrong end isn't going to need much more persuasion." Mark measured its weight in his hand. He pointed the gun and handed it back.

"So then, are we going to rob a bank?" Mark asked.

Frank chuckled again and stood up. "No," Frank said, stowing the gun in his waistband. "I'm going to get paid."

Mark refused Frank's suggestion that he stay on the boat and climbed up into the morning light. The deck was wet—either they had outrun the squall or the squall had outrun them. The marina was larger than the one in Sandusky, and the boats didn't resemble mastodons so much as Herculean bulls dozing in their stalls. "I work up here in the summer," Frank said. "Or, I used to," he said. "Ran a charter. Canadians usually don't hire foreigners unless it's under the table work. It was a good arrangement because I never had to pay taxes." Frank paused. "It's bad because a whole lot can go wrong under the table."

Mark hung back a few paces from Frank and tucked both hands into the front pouch of his red windbreaker. He felt an urge to turn back and wait in Diana's cabin, but something in Frank's walk made him keep up. The sense of purpose was contagious, and Mark stood a little straighter, shifted his weight from his heels to the balls of his feet. He pulled his hands from his pockets and swung them by his side.

"They know I'm coming," Frank said over his shoulder. Mark was walking

Frank's walk as they approached the commercial ships. "There might be a little bit of trouble."

The ship's cabin was blue and their footfalls echoed. Mark imagined they were in a big empty pool. Frank knocked on a wooden door, and after a moment, a pretty blonde, face deeply tanned, answered.

"Diana," Frank said cordially. Her lips thinned and she stepped back. There was a short guy sitting behind a desk in the room—black hair was in his face and he was eating something that smelled of garlic. Faded tattoos marked both his arms. Frank crossed the room toward him.

"Hi, Sam," he said, and stuck out his hand to shake. Sam shook, and Frank pulled him halfway across the desk into a sharp left cross. The plate of food clattered to the floor as Sam sprawled back on the desk chair and hit his head against the wall.

"Frank!" Diana said.

Sam was up in an instant—blood trailing from his nose—a marlinspike in one fist. Frank pulled the big revolver from his waistband and pointed with it. Mark noticed his hand was as steady as it had been at the wheel. "Hand me your wallet, Sammy, or so help me I'll paint these walls with the shit you call brains."

One hand cupping his nose, Sam set the spike on the desk and pulled out his wallet. The wallet connected to a belt loop with a chain. Sam handed Frank the wallet, chain and all. Frank unbuttoned it and took out the cash. He fingered the bills, stuck a few back in there and tossed the wallet onto the desktop where the chain made a racket. "You can do whatever you want, Diana," Frank said, "and I wish you two the best of

times, but what's mine is mine." Frank folded the bills into one breast pocket. "Consider this over," he said. "And you," Frank said, pointing almost nonchalantly with the gun barrel. "If you ever come looking to start things up again," he said, tucking the big revolver into the waistband of his jeans, "you'll be cooling on a slab. Do you understand?"

Sam nodded, blood collecting on his upper lip.

Frank stood directly in front of Diana, her chest heaved once. For a moment, Mark thought he was going to take her into his arms. Instead he grinned and said, "Have a nice life, baby."

Frank stepped unceremoniously through the door. Mark followed.

A storm blew in and they got a nice seafood dinner. Frank said he didn't feel much like fishing anyway. At times the boat labored into a crosswind and the motor whined—the sails came down and stayed that way. Frank said the canisters of diesel would be more than enough to get them home. They talked over the noise of the engine, and the conversation was light between two men who had met halfway between companionship and friendship—the place where another human voice is a welcome sound.

Business

Frank was standing behind his desk writing on Monday morning. There were a few students in the carpentry classroom leaning against tables. Mark noticed the puppet stage in a corner of the workshop strapped to a dolly. As they waited for the freight elevator, Frank's name was called over the PA.

"Why don't you see what they want?" Mark said. "I can get this."

Mark listened for a slipping cable as he rode the elevator. Finally the doors reopened on the second floor and Mark put all his weight on the dolly's handles. He bounced there, a little like a gymnast until finally the stage began to tip. He caught its progress and created some momentum—just enough to get the wheels stuck on the elevator threshold. The doors closed, dinging cheerily against the obstruction. Mark pushed until little white rings appeared in his vision. "Sonofabitch," he said. The doors dinged again and again.

"I will lift, you will push." Ms. Simmons appeared from around one side of the stage. "That sound is very annoying."

"Yes," Mark said. "On trois."

"Un… deux… trios," she said. Mark pushed. The whole works resisted at first and finally, after the little rings reappeared, moved.

"Quite the load," she said, brushing hands on her skirt.

"You're telling me," Mark said pushing.

"It is a stage of some sort, no?" she said.

"No. I mean, yes," he said. "Oui."

"You built this?" she said.

Mark pushed through the deli entrance and carefully rested the stage in the corner. He pushed hair from off his forehead. "Me? Oh, no. It was my idea, but I didn't—"

"For David," she said, touching the fluted molding.

"Yeah," Mark said. "For all of them."

"It's very beautiful," she said.

"Thanks," he said. "I mean, yes."

"You'll need a curtain," she said, looking at him. He saw that her eyes were blue, and there was nothing ambiguous about their blueness or what he read there—interest. "Here," she said, running her fingers along the bar.

"I suppose we do," he said, "need curtains." Some students passing in the hallway stopped to look in. One stopped. "Ms. Simmons?" They left together. Mark unlocked the classroom and turned on the lights. He tossed the keys on his desk and walked down to the janitor's office. The workroom had been completely cleared of books. "Hello?" Mark called.

The man named Donny answered. "Yeah?" he said.

"Hi," Mark said. "Where's Pam?"

"She retired," Donny said. "Kinda hush, hush."

"Do you know how I can get in contact with Pam?" he said. "She has something of mine."

"Hold on," Donny said. He came back with a scrap of paper with something

written on it. "I used to plow her drive," he said. "Before gas was what it is," he added.

Mark took the scrap of paper and looked at the address. "Thanks," he said.

"For a minute I thought they locked you out again," he said. "Golden boy." The door shut.

Mark took the stairs and looked at the scrap of paper. There was something vaguely familiar about the address. Halfway up the stairs the first bell rang and the halls were awash with students. Mark floated over to one side of the stairwell as they passed. These kids don't even know who I am, he thought. He stopped for a moment at the top and watched them all for just a moment. There must have been hundreds.

The late bell rang, and he caught Ms. Simmons moving from his classroom to hers. She glanced, smiled and waved with two fingers. Mark waved back with his whole hand.

Each of the students greeted him when they came into the classroom—Boomer saluted, Vikki gave Mark a *Get Well* card she had made, Buddy pulled his apron up in front of his face. Omar grunted. Tony nodded. Nate raised his hand. "Where have you been?"

"I've been sick," Mark said, and he supposed it was true—Vikki's card was not too far from the mark. "I'm better now," he said, and felt as if it were true. The lake air had cleared his head. Morning announcements came on and everyone waited, listening until they were through. Most eyes were on the stage.

Nate raised his hand again. "Why do you have an earring?"

Mark considered ignoring the question. It had worked with Nate in the past—usually he repeated himself until he found something else to fixate upon.

"It's in case I die at sea," Mark said.

Another hand. "Were you sick at sea?" This time it was Dave.

"No. I felt good at sea," Mark said. "But sometimes people die on accident. It's a real tragedy, but it happens."

None of them said anything for a while, then Tony said, "The doctors thought I was going to die." Mark made a well-there-you-go gesture with one hand. "But they gave me a new heart."

"Natalie Wood died at sea," Dave said. "She was only forty three." Vikki nodded solemnly.

"Most people want to be considerate of the people they leave behind," Mark said. "Like Ben," Mark said. "Ben left us behind, but I know he really liked all of you."

Nate raised his hand. "Ben died at sea?"

"No," Mark said. "He died at home. It was an accident." Buddy headed toward the bathroom.

Vikki put both hands in front of her face and Dave stepped sideways to stand next to her. Tony looked Mark in the eye. Nate raised his hand as Mark knew he would. "What happened?" Vikki made a thick, disgusted noise from behind her hands and said, "Can't you see he doesn't want to talk about it?"

"It's okay Vikki," Mark said. "A gun discharged and fatally injured him." Mark repeated that it had been an accident. "Do you have any more questions? Anyone?" No one did. "Okay then," Mark said. "I want to show you all something new, but only after we get the coffee percolating and some cans of tuna drained for lunch. Dave and Nate, we're doing tuna fish sandwiches, and we're using the pitas, so Omar, don't even think

about cutting that bread. Vikki, you're in charge of dessert, honey. Make something sweet. Tony, our inventory is really low, see if you can verify our stock and come up with a budget for the week."

Mark saw to it that the kids were busy. Vikki's face was red in patches, but Dave was with her. Mark tapped on the bathroom door. "I'm in here," Buddy said.

"I know you're in there, Buddy. It's Chef Fuller. Can I open the door, please?"

Mark heard Buddy unlock the door. He hadn't needed the duct tape after all. Buddy was sitting on the closed toilet wearing his backpack. The *Guinness Book of World Records* was open on his lap. Sharks.

Buddy raised his hand. Mark lowered it for him. "You don't have to do that. Just for right now you don't have to do that."

"Were you really at sea?" Buddy said.

"Yes. I saw a shark," Mark said. "It was a baby."

"Can I touch your earring?" Buddy asked.

"Yes," Mark said, and Buddy touched the earring.

"I really need your help, Buddy. I need you to find what kind of snake is the biggest snake in the world."

"The Whale Shark is the biggest shark in the ocean," Buddy said.

"Thank you," Mark said. "I need to know about the biggest snake in the jungle."

"Okay," Buddy said.

"And I need you to sit in my desk chair until you find out, okay?"

"Your desk chair?"

"My desk chair."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No."

Vikki had turned on the radio, and both she and Dave were showing Omar and Nate how to wrap pitas, Tony was writing something, it may have been inventory or he may have been drawing a picture, Boomer was listening to Buddy and they were both laughing—Buddy in a staccato, Boomer soundlessly. Before the lunch crowd would be rolling through, Mark called all the students into the corner by the stage. "I've got something to show you," Mark said.

Nate raised his hand.

After all the kids had gone, Mark was double-checking Tony's numbers with a calculator as Gordon entered the classroom. He was wearing a navy blue suit and held the jacket over one arm. His white collared shirt looked like it hadn't been ironed, the top button was open—the tie knot loose around his neck. He held a video tape in one hand. "I thought you'd like to know there's enough evidence here to see you out of this building," Gordon said.

"Is that what happened to Pam?" Mark said.

"That's my business." Gordon walked over to the stage and touched it. "You didn't build this," he said.

"No," Mark said. "I didn't."

"Who did?" Gordon asked.

"That's my business," Mark said.

“If it was created through the use of school funds it’s my business,” Gordon said.

“It was not,” Mark said.

“If it was not created through the use of school funds then it needs to be out of here by tomorrow morning,” Gordon said, walking back through the door. “Or it will be permanently removed.”

Echoes

By the time he got back to his apartment, the clouds that had been threatening rain all day began to deliver a lazy squall that mellowed the rays of the sun into a surreal haze Mark associated with certain unkempt fish-tanks. At his apartment, the sidewalks and stairwells had been taped off, and men outfitted in what looked like space suits were performing a kind of autopsy. One of the men carried a large canister with a long thin nose from which white smoke was rising, and the other man was pulling off lengths of siding with a pry bar. Mark was getting wet watching them, and a third approached from a white van that had been pulled up onto the grass just beyond the sidewalk. This man was wearing a space outfit sans helmet, and he held a half-eaten sandwich in one considerable hand. Judging by the meat's color, Mark thought it was probably capicolla.

"Can't go up there," the man said. "Bees."

Mark nodded.

"One of em stung the landlord's kid," he said. "You're the fella on the end?" Mark nodded again. The guy took a bite of his sandwich. "Many times you get stung?"

Mark shrugged. "Couple," he said, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Can I get through?"

"Too bad you wasn't the landlord's kid. Those guys think there's a story for six o' clock back there—siz'a the one they pulled out of those old folk's home." The man took another bite and licked a daub of mustard from a finger. Mark felt the ring in his

pocket remembering he had carried it into the shower that morning, while he dressed, brushed his teeth, before slipping it into a pocket. He held it tightly between his fingertips. "Three hundred pound hive. Believe that? Them bees sure stung the wrong kid. I guess he blew up an everything."

"How long did you say?" Mark asked. "Until I can get through?"

"Round eight," the guy said. "Less CNN shows up." Mark nodded and turned to walk back to his car. "I don't think it's going to weigh out anywhere near what they say—"

Mark drove to Julie's apartment, parked in front of the building and jogged up the steps with the ring in one fist. He knocked on the door. Julie opened it. Her hair was up and she was wearing what she referred to as her nightclothes—a pink t-shirt and gray sweatpants. "Mark," she said. Mark grabbed her around the waist, pulled her close and kissed her on the lips. She was rigid. There was a man sitting on the couch with some paper in one hand. Mark recognized him as Alphonse Alexander, and Alphonse stood as Mark came across the room, and he opened his mouth to speak but Mark hit him before any words could come out. The blow landed on the tip of the little man's chin and though Mark had never punched anyone in his life the effort effectively crumpled Alphonse. Mark shook the sting out of his hand, bent over the little man and grabbed his limp left hand. There was a bright band of skin around the ring finger. "I knew it," Mark said, and threw the little man's arm roughly across his chest. Alphonse was out cold. Again.

"What the hell are you doing?" Julie said.

Mark tossed her the ring. “I knew you’d been cheating, but I never would’ve dreamed it was with this old rag.”

“Hold on,” Julie said. “You think I’ve been sleeping with Alphonse?” She almost laughed in spite of herself. “You’re the one with someone on the side. What was her name? Ruth?” Mark had been flying along on a righteous current and now he felt as if the benevolent headwinds had totally abandoned him. “Alphonse has been helping me with my part,” Julie said, “not that you would know.” Julie laughed. “He could tell you himself, if you hadn’t knocked him down.” Julie crossed the room and touched a finger to Alphonse’s wrist. “At least you didn’t kill him,” she added.

“Well what’s he doing in your shower anyway?” Mark asked.

“He’s between apartments,” Julie said. She pressed the tips of her fingers into her forehead. “He’s trying to get control… of his drinking, if you really must know.” Julie picked the script Alphonse had been holding off the floor and set it on the coffee table. “So you thought all this time—”

“Ah,” came a groggy voice from the couch. “You must be Mark.”

The Director

Alphonse's voice was small as he pronounced his jaw battered but unbroken, and he reminded Mark a little bit of a saucier he had once known named Miles. Miles like to point out that, as his name indicated, he'd come a long way. If Mark considered himself the remotest judge of character, he thought Alphonse had probably seen more. There was something about Alphonse that reminded Mark of Frank. They were both older, divorced men it was true, but it was as if each had retained some aura of dignity that the world had not been able to dispel. Even as Alphonse held a bag of ice to his face, Mark noticed he sat up relatively straight and took pains to annunciate each syllable precisely even though his jaw must have been causing him some considerable pain. Almost nothing remained of the sneaky sulk he remembered from the night at the gallery. Although Mark was on the brink of storming out, was pretty sure Julie was in favor of it, Alphonse had suggested they all sit down and have a talk.

"You absolutely must know," Alphonse said to Mark, "that this young woman thinks the world of you. Considering the acute pain in my jaw, I'm qualified to say that you must have feelings for her."

"I do, but—" Mark began. Mark was still standing over Alphonse, but the little man raised one finger to quiet him.

"You'll have a chance to speak in a moment. These days I must speak when the words come because I never know when they'll slip away," he said, "or when some

young buck will come crashing through the door and knock them from of my mouth. Sit down. You're going to catch a fly."

Mark sat next to Alphonse on the couch. Julie sat in the recliner. "That's so much better," Alphonse said. "I take it your paths diverged?" Alphonse said. "I'd say that's a shame. It would be, um, easy for me to tell you to leave the china patterns for another life, but I can honestly say that my marriage was one of the wholly good things along the way. There was a period when I thought I was looking for something, or someone rather closer to my own heart than the person I had found. For a time I was searching for the perfect woman because I was naïve enough to believe that I was the perfect man. For a while I thought I might be looking for another perfect man. Oh, it's true that I speak four languages, have read all the important books—quite a few unimportant ones as well. As you know young man, I am a peerless dancer—even with enough alcohol in my blood to induce a hypoglycemic coma. Thank God the past is past.

"I had decided that sacrificing my marriage was necessary as well as noble—hadn't every great man, hadn't God Himself given up something precious in order to come fully into the world?" Alphonse paused to work his jaw.

"The truth was that I was suffering from one of the world's grandest cases of hamartia, and had been absolutely blind to see." Alphonse waved his free hand. "All the while I was hopping in and out of bed I told myself I was looking for true love—what I didn't realize was that all of those lovers reminded me of me. I had found the habit of falling in love with myself over and over again.

"True love, my young friends," Alphonse said, "is not about finding someone to love who is just like you—that's base Narcissism. True love is loving the other person

not in spite of their differences, but because of them. Oh dear," Alphonse said. "I seem to have sprung a leak." The ice had melted, and cold water was dribbling onto his shirt.

Julie stood up and took the bag. "Let me get you some fresh cubes," she said.

"It's just as well," Alphonse said, handing her the mess. "I'd really best be going."

"Nonsense," Julie said.

"I'm afraid so," Alphonse said, wiping his hands on his shirt. "The green room awaits."

Julie walked the bag of water over to the sink and Mark noticed she dumped it into the plants on the window ledge. "Well," she said, "Mark was just leaving."

"Julie I—" Mark said.

"He can make sure you don't crack yourself up in the stairway," she said, brushing hair from her face. "It's the *least* he can do." Both Alphonse and Mark seemed to know when the tone of a woman's voice brooked no argument. They moved toward the door and she placed a hand on the doorknob. "Thanks for the tips, Alphonse," she said.

"Oh," he said. "Tips. How funny, young lady. You do your work. In the shower and while you sleep. Whether you're washing the windows," he said, and paused, "or in bed with a lover. You do your work."

The two men left the apartment, and Julie closed the door behind them. At the top of the stairs Mark offered his arm and Alphonse grabbed hold. "You know," Mark said, "I strained my knee carrying you up these stairs once upon a time."

"Oddly enough young man," Alphonse said, "I don't feel terribly guilty about that

just now."

On the sidewalk, Mark offered to drive Alphonse where he needed to go. "I enjoy the bus at this hour," Alphonse said. "There are more colorful characters than at a Jewish exorcism."

The men in spacesuits were reattaching the siding to the building but the way up the steps was clear. The man Mark had spoken to was loading some tools into the back of a van. "CNN show?" he asked.

"We didn't even score Nineteen Action News," he said.

"Better luck next time," Mark said on his way upstairs.

"Hey, you've got a visitor, pal." There was a girl in the gazebo concentrating on something in her lap. Mark could tell from the curls. As he walked up the steps to the gazebo Ruth said "Hold it right there," and flipped a page in her tablet. He held it while she made wide strokes across the page. She worked quickly. "I liked the way you looked."

Flattery did not cause Mark the surge of pleasure it once had. "You don't look so bad yourself." He walked over to where Ruth was sitting and looked at the picture. She had improved her art—he could see that much.

"They found the queen," she said. "All they had to do was move her and all the others followed."

It occurred to Mark to allude to the mysterious power women held over men, but hadn't she been the one to seek him out? She got into that big rusty tank, probably burned ten dollars in gas, and drove all the way out here just to see if he was home.

Yeah, he thought, a big rusty tank…

"You busy?" he asked.

Mark tipped the stage on the dolly with Ruth's help. Together, they guided it through the doors, down the hallway and onto the elevator. The wheels stuck on the threshold. Again. The elevator groaned its customary litany. Together they pushed it onto the loading dock and Mark unlocked the bay. Ruth pulled the truck in close so that the tailgate nearly touched the dock, and together they were able to shove the stage onto the bed. By the end of it, they were both sweating laughter.

The acreage was next to an alpaca farm. Ruth said the land had been in her family for generations, and even though the farm itself made virtually no profit, her father still mowed a few fields to have hay for the horses and sharecropped popcorn. The little alpacas were stoic in their pens and stared at the passing automobile with eyes as hard as kernels. Fur hung from their bodies like strange shawls, and Mark was glad when they passed out of sight. Creek water moved parallel to the driveway in a little ditch and into the fields.

Mark had half expected a log cabin, and he was a little taken off his guard by the classic Victorian nestled way back in the wood. "I'll summon the brat," Ruth said, and ran inside. She reappeared a few minutes later with a teenage boy wearing—Mark had overheard the term in the hallways—girl pants. They were black and very tight, and Mark decided that they probably only looked good if you were about twenty pounds underweight. Ruth pulled the hood from his head and he looked at her with annoyance,

smoothing his longish hair behind one ear. "Ryan," Ruth said.

"I'm Mark," he said, holding out a hand. Ryan took it with what little of his hand was not up his sleeve. Mark thought Ruth might be more help in lifting the heavy stage. She hopped up into the cab of the truck. "C'mon guys," she said.

"I'm not riding bitch, dude," Ryan said, gesturing to the open door.

Mark got in and straddled the transmission hump. "I figure I can set up in the barn," Ruth said. "Some of my supplies are out there anyways." The ride was bumpy, and the seatbelt latches kept digging into Mark's backside. You're smart, he thought, looking at Ryan. This is the last time I ride bitch.

Ruth backed right through the barn doors. It was dark. They got out. The horses were large and brazen, and Mark didn't like them. The odor of the barn was offensive, yet an oblique robustness compelled Mark forward. Ruth spread some newspaper and came back with a thumb up. She pushed while Mark and Ryan pulled. They rested the stage on the tailgate. "I think we can carry it," Mark said. "Right over onto the paper." They waited for Ruth to hop down and grab an edge. "On three."

They held. For some reason Ruth was the last to pull her fingers out from underneath. "Guys?" Her voice held a note of panic and Mark pushed the entire works on one edge, nearly over onto its side. Ruth shook her hands and blew on her fingers. "Are you okay?" Mark said.

"I think so," she said, bending them. Mark wanted to hold her hands in his; he wanted to make sure they were okay. "What kind of wood did you say that was?" Ryan said. He was running his fingertips across the stage floor.

"Quilted Maple," Mark said. "They make guitar bodies out of that stuff."

Ryan smiled. “I know.”

“Ryan plays guitar,” Ruth said.

“What color would you use?” Mark asked.

“A deep brown. Almost purple,” he said automatically.

“What?” Ruth said. “That’s not a color.”

It was strange that Mark should think of Julie, but he did. Her eyes. They were deep brown. Almost purple. “No,” Mark said. “I know exactly what he’s talking about.”

“Okay…” Ruth said. “I’ll leave that up to you guys.”

“Cool,” Ryan said. “I’m freezing.” He pushed in some earbuds and left.

Ruth’s back was to Mark. She was arranging some cans of paint. Mark noticed an easel off to one side of the barn. “You work out here?”

“He never smiles,” she said. “It’s part of his emo thing.”

“He seemed to like the wood,” Mark said.

“That’s what I’m saying,” she said, shaking a little jar. “He doesn’t like anything.”

“It’s just a phase,” Mark said. Wait until he gets a girlfriend, he thought.

“The school identified him,” Ruth said. “Can you grab me that can of solvent? They think he’s ADHD.”

“Swell,” Mark said. “He’s definitely not hyper.”

“I know,” she said. One of the horses whinnied.

“So which one’s yours?” Mark said.

Ruth nearly dropped what she was doing and grabbed Mark’s hand. “C’mere.”

She pulled him over to one of the stalls. “This is Vahana,” she said. The horse was chestnut with white markings. Ruth pressed the heel of her hand between its eyes. “That filly is Kamadeva.” Ruth moved among the animals with grace Mark recalled from the dance floor. “That’s Equuleus, and he’s my father’s. Go on,” she said. “Stroke him.” Mark reached tentatively toward the black stallion—his coat was dappled with bars of light streaming through chinks in the barn siding—and stroked the fur. The fur was slick though not unpleasant, and even in such a delicate place as between the eyes, the animal’s hardness was apparent.

“We’ve got a saddle to seat two,” she said, “but you’ll have to help me wrestle it from the tack room.”

“I don’t think so,” Mark said. He didn’t like horses.

“Oh, come on,” Ruth said.

“You know, I better get going,” Mark said. “I’ve got an early bird duty tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” Ruth said. “I’ll walk you to your car. This place kind of gets spooky at night.”

The *Better Homes and Gardens* Lending Library for the Domestically Deranged

Mark spent the next day at school filling out a purchase order. He was ready to try something beyond tuna. He found a new food supplier that did not specialize in industrial sized cans of fruit cocktail and fell in love with a website that scrolled quotes by famous chefs. Something Escoffier had said caught his eye: "The greatest dishes are very simple dishes."

Of course, Mark thought. We can do this. Escoffier wasn't talking about hot dogs. Lamb, potatoes, pork, artichoke, beef, asparagus, sausage were all items Mark requested. He also needed to freshen his supply of pasta and other dry goods. He ordered some vegetables from a local grower, reviewed some of his cookbooks and was excited to try Toulouse Cassoulet, soufflés. With the current menu, the students finished lunch prep by nine thirty and there wasn't much to do until the crowd rolled in. Mark looked around. They were all occupied in various pursuits. Dave had been very disappointed that the puppets hadn't been found, and he was not shy about telling anyone who would listen. Buddy was busy with the record book. "The reticulated python," he told Mark, "is the longest snake in the world." Boomer was paging through a comic book, and Tony was browsing one of Mark's poetry books with Vikki. Omar might have been asleep.

Dave was the first back from lunch and handed Mark a scroll.

"Done," Dave said. "It's no poem, but let me know what you think."

Mark rolled the rubber band to one end. The scroll was made of many different lengths of paper. The script was written in different colors. "This may take a day or two," Mark said.

"Take your time," Dave said, but he checked with Mark periodically throughout the day anyway to see if he had read it.

"How about I come to you when I'm ready to talk about it," Mark finally said.

"Okay," Dave said.

"What's the story?" Mark asked.

"It's a romance," Dave said. "That's why I needed the puppets."

"Monsters?" Mark asked.

"Mostly bit parts," Dave said. "Where's the stage?"

Mark said, "I told you. It isn't finished yet."

"That pretty lady came and left you something," Dave said.

"Who?" Mark said. "Ms. Simmons?"

"I knew you thought she was pretty," Dave said.

Folded on his desk was a set of miniature curtains. They were sewn of black velvet and stitched with gold thread. "Perfect for the burlesque dancer," Mark said to himself. "Holy cow."

Mark stopped at the hardware before night class. The same little man with the patches of red skin was behind the counter. Mark told him he wanted to stain some quilted maple. "We want a kind of brownish purple."

The little man raised his eyebrows. "Tricky business. Sounds like a specialty item," he said, pulling a catalogue from under the counter. "Multiple coats. You want oil. Water will raise the grain. Combine a few different colors," he flipped to a page. "Rub in the dark, sand, come over top of it with the bright." He came around the counter and grabbed a can of shellac. "I could add some pigment to get this to pop. Brush it on. Three coats minimum."

"How long would something like this take?" Mark said.

"We got a truck coming in tomorrow. They'll add your product tonight. You'll want to use some practice boards to get the color. Wait a day in between coats. How much wood?" Mark held up his hands to indicate the size of the stage. "Couple days. Been in here before?"

"Once," Mark said. "With a real pretty girl. I teach at the vo-ed."

"That's where I went," the hardware guy said. "Carpentry, class of '76."

"You know Frank Wagner?" Mark said.

"Know him?" he said. "That man saved my life. He still up there?"

Mark nodded. "Still ticking."

The little man was old enough to be Mark's father, but there was something sweet about hearing him talk about the school. "Shame what happened to the Mullins boy," he said, looking at Mark over his glasses.

"I was his teacher," Mark said.

"Oh," he said. "Sorry to hear. Big Ben is a mess. Thinking about selling."

"I guess you find a way to move on," Mark said.

The hardware guy puffed out his cheeks. "Yeah," he said. "Helluva cop that

Mullins, but public service just wears on you after a while. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

The King was back. This time he had props. Swaddled in the cape, he stood in front of what looked like a large, glass fishbowl. "A teacher," he said, "needs to be one part witch doctor—" he pulled out a shrunken head from under his cape and tossed it in the bowl, "—one part snake charmer," he pulled out a rubber snake and tossed it into the bowl, "one part used car salesman," this time it was a fake moustache, "one part cheerleader," he said, producing the pom-pom, "and lastly… anyone care to guess?"

Voices perked up around the room: "Painter!" "Mechanic!" "Composer!" "Nurse!" "Asshole!" Mark thought the whole thing was a bad joke, and a sudden, irresistible need to jibe the whole scene made him shout "Sailor!"

Mr. King silenced the room and asked Mark to speak again. "A sailor," Mark said. "Composer!" someone else said. Mr. King waved his hand irritably.

"A sailor," Mr. King said, "subject to headwinds, tides, and outright mutiny." He produced a tiny boat from under his cape, moved it along some imaginary waves and tossed it in. "Sometimes you've got to go with the flow," he said. Then, he clapped.

When Mr. King flipped the switch on the overhead, Mark opened his notebook to work on his menu. He added a recipe for Crêpe to the dessert section. He had trouble concentrating and flipped to a fresh page to draw the stage from memory, writing in the steps the little man at the hardware store had described, drafting a list of necessary items. Then, he colored in a set of black velvet curtains with the flat of his pencil.

Before school, Mark found his purchase orders in his mailbox stamped REJECTED with a note—*See Me*. He didn't even unlock his classroom; he headed past the secretary, order in one fist, and knocked loudly. The door opened.

"Hello," Ms. Simmons said quietly, hair up in a bun, eyes cast down. She passed Mark and he watched her go. Gordon was standing behind the desk, beard trimmed, wearing what Mark thought was probably a freshly laundered suit.

"What the hell?" Mark said, holding up the order.

"Good morning Mr. Fuller," Gordon said. "Have a seat."

"I spent the better part of a morning filling these out," he said.

"Then I think you need to learn how to manage your time more effectively," Gordon said, sitting. "That single order puts you over budget for the month." Gordon opened a drawer and pulled out some papers. "I've drawn up another," Gordon said, pushing the paper across the desk. Many of the same items, but the vegetables were not fresh, there was no lamb, and the rest of the meat was from a discount supplier Mark had never heard of. "Hot dogs are, of course, cheaper, but I'm prepared to compromise. Sign there at the bottom."

Mark looked at his father and knew argument was useless. Gordon had once driven a brand new car back to the lot from which he had bought it and demanded the down payment after finding a charge for new floor mats on the invoice. Mark's childhood was full of Gordon's Resolve. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he had talked down the priest at his mother's funeral.

Gordon nodded. "There," he said. "I can be reasonable." Mark bit his tongue. "The calling hours for Ben Mullins the Second are tonight," said Gordon. "I trust you'll

be in attendance?"

"Are you asking me to go with you?" Mark said.

"I've already got a chaperone," he said. "But the doors open at six thirty. You might want to arrive early to avoid a crowd."

Mark held the black velvet to his nose and inhaled deeply. There was no particular smell, though he had anticipated something—perfume perhaps—there was nothing. In his hands it resembled a death shroud, and he thought of the phrase "forever dead," but the fabric was deceptively soft on his cheek, and he ran the stitching over his lips. Deceptive, he thought. Like death itself. Mark looked at his hands—they were dry and very wrinkled—the hands of a dishwasher. The hands of an old man.

Julie was sitting on Mark's couch when he got back to the apartment. She wore a dark purple dress, held a small purse on one knee, and her hair was pulled to the side with a rhinestone barrette. She was reading Dave's script, the pages spread across the coffee table. "You should really start locking your doors," she said.

"What's going on?"

"Your dad called me and told me what happened. He thought you might need… someone."

She must have just dyed her hair, Mark thought. Damn women and their shining hair. And their dumb legs. And their stupid, luscious lips. "Well?" she said.

"I guess he was right," Mark said. Julie stood up and held out her arms. Mark hugged her. She smelled good.

"What is this?" she said, looking down at the script.

"One of my students—"

"Oh, it wasn't… *his*?" she said. "Was it?"

Mark shook his head and she hugged him.

"I'm sorry," she said in his ear.

Ben's name was on the sign out front. There was a line of people running out the front doors. Julie was freshening her make-up in the rearview mirror. Mark noticed the little man from the hardware store smoking with some other guys on the steps. The weather had turned cold. You'll need this, Mark said, draping his sport coat around Julie's shoulders. He wondered why women never remember their coats.

They stood in line and Mark told her about Ben. About the key. The bucket. How he had clapped for Byron. "Sounds like a wonderful student," she said, squeezing his hand. "It's a shame." Soon they were inside. Mark didn't see any of his students or any other familiar faces. When they had moved past the coats hanging in the foyer, Mark saw his father standing at the front of the room next to the casket in a receiving line. He was a little relieved the coffin lid was closed, but his stomach turned when he saw Mullins smiling and shaking hands. Then he saw Ms. Simmons. "Can you hold our place?" Mark said. "I'll be right back."

He didn't really know what he was going to say, but he set out from the line toward her. Her blonde hair was pulled up in her customary bun (no pencil this time), but she wasn't wearing her glasses. She wore a black dress, and her earrings caught the light as she straightened some photographs that had been arranged on display boards. Mark

had to step in front of some folks, was on the brink of calling her name when Gordon wrapped his arm around her waist from behind. Gordon said something to her, and she turned, laughing, lightly slapping his chest. "Holy shit," Mark said.

"Excuse me, young man," an elderly woman in line said. "This is a house of the Lord."

"At least the expression takes that fact into consideration," Mark said. He walked past Julie and she snagged him by his pants pocket. "Hey," she said. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"No," he said, absently. "Not a ghost. More like a vampire."

"What?" she said.

"Nevermind," he said. "I thought I saw someone I knew."

There were quite a few pictures arranged on the memory boards. There was one of Ben holding a bow and arrow. In another he was standing by a soapbox derby car. He held a pole and a fish in another. Ben on a black horse that looked like Equuleus. After looking for a while, Mark realized Mullins wasn't in a single shot. "Can you believe—" he said to Julie, but he stopped. Her eyes were swimming. "Can you believe how much he could do?" he said. She shook her head and Mark held her hand.

At the end of the receiving line, Mullins shook Mark's hand, and there was no strength in the grip. He was smiling, but up close Mark saw it was the kind of smile someone might wear while sorting through the ashes of a ruined home—bittersweet. He pulled Mark close. "Thank you for looking after my boy," he said, voice thick as syrup. "He talked about you all the time."

"Me?" Mark said, feeling all the breath leave his body. It was not unpleasant. He let it go.

Gordon took Julie's hand and kissed it. Mark waved at Ms. Simmons. "Hi," he said.

"Hello," she said. "Who is your friend?"

For a moment he was terrified of saying "Ruth," but he got it right. They shook hands. It felt to Mark as if the room warmed twenty degrees. He pushed hair off his forehead. "We don't want to hold up the line."

"I'm looking forward to Dave's play," Ms. Simmons said. "Did you get my—"

"Yes," Mark cut her off. "Thank you. Really, we'd better be going." He grabbed Julie's hand and nearly dragged her away. When they had reached the foyer she stopped, pulling back.

"Hold on," she said. "Wait!"

"Yes?" Mark said.

"Can you bring the car around?"

"Well, I definitely want to come," Julie said, picking up the script. "It's really good, Mark." Dave had marked the pages by act, and Julie had arranged them into what she thought was some semblance of order. He looked at all the scribbled markings on the paper and went to put on some coffee. He leaned against a cabinet, rubbing his eyes. "Okay," he said. Why the Hell not? While I'm at it I'll look up my girlfriend from kindergarten. We'll all have crab cakes after the show. "Okay," he said. "You can come."

***

Mark started typing a clean copy of the script the next morning at school. After he'd finished the first act, he knew it was good too. It was so good he'd started wishing his mother was around to see it, and the thought of her surprised him. Here she was bubbling up in his mind though the work wasn't his. None of it is, really, he thought.

He put the students on task that day and finished typing. Dave explained to Mark that they would need more than just one copy. "If we're going to rehearse. We'll need the puppets." Mark's head was pounding with the effort of discerning Dave's scrawl. He walked downstairs to the nurse's station to borrow a few aspirin. The door was partly open, and Mark knocked, pushing it fully open. A student lay face down on the bed. One girl sat next to the nurse's desk, mascara streaking. The nurse was writing something and looked up at him. "I'm sorry to interrupt," Mark said, "but could I possibly borrow a few aspirin?" He felt like a heel considering the poor girl in the sick seat, but before he could begin to speculate what was the matter the nurse stood up. "Sure," she said, pulling out her keys, opening the medicine cabinet revealing a myriad of phials and packages. "Help yourself," she said. "There's trial packets of ibuprofen and aspirin. The generic has caffeine." Mark reached for what he imagined was the generic aspirin when the name on one of the phials stayed his hand. Ben Mullins. Mark grabbed the bottle with Ben's name as well as a few generic packets of aspirin. "Thanks," he said, slipping the pills into his pocket and sliding the cabinet closed.

The complicated names on the phial didn't mean anything to Mark. He swallowed two generic aspirin and dropped Ben's meds in his bag.

He drove to Ruth's that night after school with the stain and supplies in a box on the passenger's seat. He checked the barn. She wasn't there, but the stage had changed colors. It was definitely an improvement, he could see that much. He grabbed the box off the front seat and rang the doorbell. Ryan answered the door. His hood was up. "She's not here," he said.

"When do you expect her?" Mark said. Ryan shrugged. "Do you want to see if we can get that color?" he said, shaking the box.

Ryan frowned. "Why not," he said, and went back into the house. It was dark. Mark stepped in. There were some shoes lined up by the door. He shut the door but didn't latch it.

The kid lit up a cigarette in the barn. "Smoke?"

"Nah," Mark said.

"You're not going to pull some big brother shit are you?" he said.

Fuck it, Mark thought. "Give me one." It tasted as bad as it smelled, but Mark had, on occasion, smoked thin cigars with Miles behind the restaurant. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me," the kid said. "Thank Phillip Morris."

Mark told him what he remembered of what the guy at the hardware had said and started pulling cans from the box. He gave the kid one of the cans. "Stir this up. Don't shake it. Nice and easy." Mark stirred the black stain and popped the lid. Smoke stung his eyes. The liquid inside the can was dark as oil. He used some heavy sandpaper. "This is supposed to open the grain." He handed the kid a cloth when he was finished stirring. "You do the honors."

The kid crushed out his cigarette on the floor. He took the can of black and began. It was obvious his hands were used to intricacy, and Mark wondered how a kid like Ryan survived farm life. "Which one's yours?" Mark said. "Which horse?"

"How dark is this supposed to get?" he said.

"That's fine," Mark said. How the hell am I supposed to know?

"None. I don't have one," Ryan said. "I used to, though. It was my mom's really." Mark crushed out the cigarette and tossed the butt in the box. "Took it with her when she left."

"There. That's probably good," Mark said, and tossed the kid a clean pad. "Go over it with that."

"Her and my old man split when I was in sixth grade," the kid said. Mark stirred the purple stain to have something to do. "Is it supposed to come up like this?" The pad was black.

"Yeah," Mark said. "Let it set. Ruth said you play guitar," Mark said.

"Yeah," the kid said. "I gotta keyboard."

"I'd like to hear," Mark said.

"Maybe you will," the kid said. He tossed the blackened pad and lit another cigarette. "You like my sister?"

"Yeah," Mark said. "She's all right. Do you?"

The kid laughed. "Liker? Yeah," he said. "I do." He walked over to the radio lashed to the beam and touched one of the dials but didn't turn it on. "Do you want another one?" he asked.

"One's my limit," Mark said. "I have weak lungs. You can turn that on if you

want."

"She gets pissed if I change the station," he said. "Whadda we do now? Wait?"

"Well," Mark said. "Let's do that purple. Same deal."

The kid applied some of the purple stain and the colors bled together. "That kind of looks like shit," he said. "No offence."

"No, you're right. That shellac is supposed to do the trick. Make it pop," Mark said. "What's funny?"

"That's what one of my dudes always says," Ryan said, "but he does tattoos. Uses part of a guitar string. He always says this or that color will pop. His stuff looks like shit too."

"Great," Mark said. "Have you let him… you know. Practice on you? There. Keep doing that."

"Hell no. I may be hyperactive, but I'm not stupid."

Mark hesitated then asked, "What do you think about that diagnosis?"

"They made me take a test and some shit. I don't know." Ryan took a drag. "I just circled in some bubbles. I guess the pills help me concentrate more. School's not my thing. No offence."

"No, I understand," Mark said. "We should probably let it set overnight, but let's do one more coat of purple. That's the color we want. That's the color we want to pop."

The unmistakable crunching of tires on gravel grew louder than the horse sounds. "Do me a favor," Ryan said, "and see who it is."

Mark couldn't mistake the wide-set headlights of Ruth's truck. "Sis," he said.

"Cool," Ryan said, smoking, wiping on the stain, working the grain. The sound

of gravel grew and light streamed through the door casting large, weird shadows on the far wall until the light cut out. They heard a door shut. "Whaddya doin?" Ruth asked.

"Don't worry," Ryan said, working. "We're not wrecking anything. It's just stain."

"You're a human stain," Ruth said. "Greaser."

"Art-fag," Ryan said.

Ruth stuck out her tongue. "Did you feed the horses?"

"I was too busy babysitting your boyfriend," Ryan said. "Sorry dude."

"I *am* a handful," Mark said.

Ruth smiled and started tossing corncobs into a bucket. "How do you like it?" she said, meaning the stage. She had used maroons, dark greens, gold leaf, deep turquoise. The fluting was still bare.

"Well enough to eat," Mark said in fake French. "Art-fags abound say, *it eez a mahstah-peas."*

"Good," she said and left. Mark heard the pump drawing water around back. She came back weighted on one side, holding the bucket by its bail.

Mark helped her freshen the horses' troughs. They grabbed handfuls of straw and tossed it into the stables. There was neighing, but mostly the sounds of dinner.

Over the course of the next few days, Mark finished typing a clean copy of the script and Ryan applied shellac—five coats in all. He was sincerely thankful that the final product did not look like shit. Mark had yet to finish the fluted molding. Ruth worked at distressing some the finish by rubbing the cornices with emery cloth, spattering black and

gold leaf with an old toothbrush, then she sprayed the whole thing with a clear sealant.

On Tuesday night, a man with an ashen complexion wheeled himself through the classroom doorway, one leg jutting out, and it took Mark a few moments to realize that he was looking at Mr. Stankowitz. His aspect was somehow even more pathetic hunkered in the wheelchair, but Mark felt sorry for him as he relayed the tale of the car accident that had broken his leg, deflated one of his lungs. He said that he'd thought he was destined for the big schoolhouse in the sky. Sounds kind of like Hell, Mark thought. He was able to switch on the overhead, but needed a volunteer to crank the notes forward. The woman named Maureen set to the task with what Mark thought was the type of grim determination she would exhibit in the classroom—if ever she wound up in charge of one. Mark reached into his bag for his steno pad of notes and rattled the bottle of meds he had cribbed from the nurse's cabinet. The crank made a grim creaking as that night's information passed onto the screen.

A few well-wishers beat Mark to the front of the class when it was over, and he waited patiently in line while they announced their regrets to Stankowitz. It's not like he died or anything, Mark thought, looking down at the brown container in one hand. Finally, it was his turn. Mr. Stankowitz looked expectantly toward Mark, and Mark slid into one of the desks in the front row. "I was wondering if you could tell me about these pills."

Stankowitz took the container and pulled on the reading glasses hanging around his neck. He turned the phial in one hand. "There are two major types of antipsychotic medication, and patients with this kind of atypical dosage wouldn't just leave their

prescriptions lying around. Does the person to whom these belong know you have them?"

Mark told him about Ben.

"Ah," he said. "I'm sorry, son. They're commonly used to treat the more serious symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia."

"What might happen if the patient forgot to take them?" Mark asked.

"Some of the affects of the disease are depression, paranoia, as I'm sure you might have guessed, and hallucination accompanied by thoughts of suicide. Rather serious I'm afraid."

Suicide. Mark's mouth went dry. "Do you think a patient like Ben might have had another prescription at home?"

"It's very likely," Stankowitz said. "Some diseases require constant medication." He handed the pills back to Mark. "I'd probably get rid of those if I were you."

Mark spilled the pills onto the counter at home and paired off dosages. He measured the prescription date against the date of Ben's death, subtracted the missing doses, and tried to remember how many days he'd been absent from school. The equation grew more and more complicated. He tried to remember if he had ever asked Ben about his medication. Why hadn't he read the IEP more thoroughly? Mark pulled the steno pad from his backpack and paged through the pages of notes wondering why he hadn't been able to take any of it more seriously.

One disturbing possibility was growing in his mind. Had Ben deliberately used his father's pistol on himself? No matter how far removed he was to what went on at

home Mark was beginning to feel responsible. He couldn't exactly call up big Ben. He wasn't likely to be at home anyway, and the bar was no place to discuss his son's theoretical suicide. Mark dug in his bag and found the scrap of paper he'd been looking for. He called the number hoping Donny had a good memory.

There was something familiar about Pam's neighborhood, something he sensed as he drove down her street and scanned the addresses on houses and condominiums. She had sensed the distress in his voice and told him to drive on over if he wanted, that it was a cold night and she was in for the evening. "I just wish this damned winter would hurry up and go away."

It wasn't until Mark parked and walked up onto the porch, nearly running into the little stone porter, that he remembered. He knocked on the door and she opened it just as she had months before, her face a white oval in the darkness. "Come in," she said, her words fogging the storm glass. "Before you catch your death."

She was wearing nightclothes and a robe, and she let Mark in with one hand across her stomach. The townhouse smelled like a library—there were books everywhere—books on either side of the television, the divan, stacked in the hall. The place looked like the Better Homes and Gardens Lending Library for the Domestically Deranged. Mark pulled the bag off his shoulder, didn't see a place for it, so he held onto it. He caught the dark shape of a cat on the steps, a flash of green. "Cream or sugar?"

"Both," Mark said.

"Of course," she said from the kitchen, "I almost forgot. A libertine. You probably want a shot of brandy in there too." Mark thought of Alphonse, too drunk to

walk straight. “No thanks,” he said. “The cream and sugar will do just fine.”

When she retuned with the coffee, Mark showed Pam the pills and told her what Stankowitz had said. “You’re staring to wonder if he did it on purpose,” Pam said, “if there was anything you could have done. Aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Mark said, holding his coffee in his lap.

“Yeah,” she said. “I probably would. When I was younger I thought I could save the world too.”

Mark hesitated. “What changed?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, sipping. “It’s just that the older you get the more you realize you’re just one page in a book. Part of something that’s already been decided.”

“That’s pretty bleak,” Mark said.

“Not really,” she said. “You never give up hoping for a happy ending.” She looked around at the stacks. Some were sideways on the shelf. Others were scattered on the floor. “Everything eventually falls apart, and I guess I’ve been filling holes in my life with books for as long as I can remember,” she said. The idea that he was up to the same thing swarmed about Mark’s head like a particularly annoying swarm of bees. “Oh,” she said, getting up, “I just remembered. I’ve got something for you.”

She returned with a brown grocery bag, set it on Mark’s lap. He looked inside—all the puppets were piled up in there. Schubert was lying on top. He pulled her out. “Dave was calling this thing Schubert,” he said.

“Oh,” Pam said. “That poor girl.”

“What do you mean?” Mark said.

"Gordon fired her at the beginning of this year," Pam said. "She had an alcohol problem. I was filling in until they hired you."

"They told me she moved to be closer to relatives," Mark said.

Pam had retired before Gordon could fire her. "He keeps two copies of surveillance tapes," she said. "Hold on." Pam got up and appeared to be looking for something. She left the room and Mark looked around. He realized there were no pictures in the living room. The walls were bare. Pam returned with a large key ring jangling in one hand. "I never turned them in," she said, tossing them to Mark. He caught them. There might have been fifty. "They're labeled by floor and room number," she said. "Most locks are keyed the same, but some are unique," she said. "They might come in handy."

Of course the barn burned. The combination of paint and shellac fumes, the dried-out winter hay, and Ryan's relatively careless disposal of ash and cigarette butts resulted in one of the biggest fires the county had seen in nearly ten years. Ruth heard the horses from her bedroom and was able, with the help of her father, to save most of them. She said steam lifted from Equuleus' black coat like vapor rising off lake water while Kamadeva spooked and took off through the west field. Vahana, the stage and Ruth's most recent paintings did not fare so well. The vet came out while the barn was still burning—smoke inhalation, she'd said. Ryan ran off, and Ruth drove around half the night only to find him, hood up, blanket under one arm, walking down the middle of county road 57 smoking a cigarette.

CHAPTER III

THREE

From the Sea Journals of Joseph Fuller

It is true. My brother, Jacob, is dead. Four of his company have reported the tent in which he was bunked has been shelled. These men from the front move and speak as if they are suffering some scurvy. Would they were. The motherland has decided she'd rather give them up as cannon fodder… My mother has not moved from the black rocking chair in the sitting room, refuses even the warmth of fire. I have told myself she is in shock, yet I cannot be sure if it be due to her son's death or because the coward has returned to show his face while his own brothers hold (and die) at the front. The men in Jacob's company have brought what little artifacts remain of his belongings—a broken powder horn and a small bronze horse. My father set the horse on the mantle and tossed the hornshell in the fire where it flared and bubbled and was no more. He has been terse with me. The Fullers have always been a land loving people. It is only this black mark, like the lines dividing countries on a map, their errant son Joseph, whom fell so easily into the sway of that false siren's song—the sea.

I have not told my father I plan to voyage to the Americas. He will only beat his breast and swear oaths upon his beard. My mother had been fond of altering my shirtsleeves with her sewing kit—even as a beardless boy my shirtsleeves stretched over

the muscles of my arms—and she had taken to enlarging them with strips of fabric. Now she slits them with a knife. I have watched the tendons stand out in her hands as she had once taken the utmost care with needle and thread and I suppose she'd have slit my coward's throat if only it could have guaranteed her Jacob's safe passage. She would use my strength if she could to hurl her rage at the Serbs.

Tonight I sat in Jacob's old room after I had thought the house asleep; I wondered how many sleepless nights he looked out over the pasture to count sheep, explosions faintly coloring the horizon. I found myself wondering how many nights he sat gazing at the seductive lights, so much like will-o-wisps. Woolgathering, I had the eerie sensation that Peter was standing behind me, gore coloring his uniform…when I turned, the room was empty. I have packed what clothes I plan to take and pressed the brass horse to my lips. Soon I leave this house forever.

The men have suggested we take on passengers to fund our voyage; many here are looking for peace, some are drifters, gypsies, the wounded. Sandoval has pointed out that without proper medical care the wounded would not make the journey. So much as an infection can be deadly at sea. Benedek claimed their misfortune would fatten our purses as much as the fish in our wake. Just this morning I could hear the far-off thunder of artillery shells from my cabin—it was enough to rouse me from slumber. I climbed up to the deck only to find Benedek staring portside into the milky gray horizon. He said men have made missiles powerful enough to breach the earth's curvature. He was barefoot and seemed sad… I have sent the cook to inquire of supplies; he's a silly man who couldn't run a spanker gaff, yet he knows the fair market price of a barrel of pork or

Dreher beer… My men have decided the matter, and the rumor of our passage has spread through the channels at port. Benedek has heard the Russians plan to block port. The men laughed heartily at this, yet there was something in Benedek's face I did not find funny. Our journey is nigh…

Sandoval has asked me to allow his sister passage to the Americas, but the men have decided to admit no women on the voyage. Benedek said it may be true that the motherland will forgive us for harboring her dissidents [sic], her vagrants and criminals, but not for robbing her of that fairer sex. I said that the open water was no place for a woman. Strike that. A boat full of men is no place for a woman. Yet, how can I deny him? Sandoval has shown me he would die by my side steady handed if the occasion demanded. He has made a case: she has been dishonored, subject to public chastisement. Besides, he said, she is small and will not eat much. She could be useful in nursing the sick. He said that she would lighten the spirits of the men, that they will enjoy her company. This is precisely what I'm afraid of. The sea has its way of bringing out the worst in men. The ocean is feminine, there can be little doubt… but what is a man (or a woman for that matter) without family? A lone star without a constellation. A boat adrift. These men have become my sky.

Her name is Sophia. Her hair has been cropped. I cannot…I cannot remain firm. She is to stow away in Sandoval's quarters. They plan to dress her in breeches. Those who ask will be told she is Sandoval's brother, Tamás—a sickly child allergic to sun…

We set sail tomorrow. Benedek fears the Russians. He says he has had an unsettling premonition, new moon—ill portents. I convinced him to take a drop with me and his spirits seemed to lighten, but he admitted to feeling old. He said that he had been smelling dirt and I told him to stop being superstitious. If he is to die at sea, I said, he should by all rights smell fish. The ocean is a balm. The men have fallen back into their old stations, I myself feel at home.

Joseph, I hope we are well met. Sleep has not come easily, and as I write this by candle, I must admit that I have come to confuse night with day. Spending so much time within this coffin ship has taken its toll. It's grown impossible to know anything. I'd love to know what phase the moon has taken, what constellations show this far from land, the color of the water. Sandoval tells me nothing. Agree to meet me tonight on deck. I will knock once on your cabin door. Please allow me this fresh air.

Indebted,

Sophia

She must've slipped the note under the cabin door in the middle of the night. Dare I climb above to meet her? Perhaps some ocean air will do us both good.

Sophia is a strange girl. She was very much excited by the weather. We spent time staring at the stars and she told stories of the water constellations—Cetus, Aquarius, Hydra. I learned that hydra is the largest in the night sky, and perhaps also the silliest. She challenged my knowledge of the sea. "You think you're so wise that there's no chance there may exist," she said, indicating the water, "a creature that has eluded your

experience?"

"Perhaps," I said, "but the idea of a creature with a hundred heads is a little ridiculous."

"How many are on this boat?" she asked.

"Why nearly one hundred and twenty," I said. The real number is closer to seventy. I don't know why I felt the need to boast. She was indignant. "This very ship is a monster with over a hundred heads!"

"And what a ridiculous thing it is," I conceded.

Just then the ship was hit by an uncharacteristically large wave and Sophia fell, opening a gash over one eye. She must've struck one of the side rails. Benedek, I think now, must have been asleep at his post. I helped her up and dabbed the wound with my handkerchief. "What would I do with a hundred heads," she said. "I can't even take care of one." She took my handkerchief and held the fabric to her brow. Sandoval would be irate. "He'll know I snuck out."

I was beginning to feel like a stowaway on my own ship and said as much. While the night crew was making adjustments to compensate for the unexpected gale, I escorted Sophia back to her cabin. "Sandoval could sleep through the end of the world," she said. "Perhaps we'll see it yet." She ducked her head and pushed inside.

There have been complaints. A few passengers feel that because they have paid a fare, they've won the right to tell the captain how to run his ship! It is true we were caught off guard by a gale and I have since spoken to Benedek. He drinks more than usual these days. I have accounted it to nerves.

Sandoval returned my handkerchief, today. He identified it by the monogram sewn into the hem. The bloodspots had been washed from the fabric. The truth was it was my dead brother's garment, though we share initials. How strange that I should carry it while he will never carry anything ever again…Sandoval held my eyes just a few beats too long. "I trust you won't lose this again," he said.

It seems as if lately we've all tarried from our true purpose—navigating *The Boa* safely to the Americas. Distractions abound. I hope to have cleared my head by morning.

Sophia has requested my presence upon deck tonight. Perhaps I will take a draught to Benedek and, if she has not arrived, be on my way. The girl is silly, that much is true, yet I feel she is lost. Strange as it may seem, some nights I feel like a spirit guide, Charon, some will-o-wisp guiding these lost souls toward hope. Perhaps I am lost more than any…

We glimpsed land tonight. I told her she must be seeing things. Sure enough, the broad purple arch was visible far in the distance. Benedek hailed us from his post. He claimed to have spotted the cinders of my pipe, yet I suspect it was our chatter—his eyes are not as sharp as they once were. He lost his patience when Sophia wanted to scale the mizzenmast, so I sent him to bed. The rheum of weariness (intoxication, if I be so bold) hung upon him like a miasma. Before he retired I took his long glasses.

We were able to clearly distinguish land at the height of the lookout. We've clearly passed the Pico Islands and still have nearly another month at sea until we're

expected to arrive at the American coastline. The mere mention of discovering a new land sent Sophia giddy with possibility, and we spent a portion of the night dreaming until she took on a pallor and retreated to her quarters. I spent the remainder of the night at Benedek's post straining my eyes and my imagination. This afternoon, with the sun at its summit, I sleep…

Dare I be so bold to approach Sandoval on the topic of Sophia? I fear he will raise his hand against her. Her skin had been vibrant as sea foam and yet tonight she arrived with a bruise coloring her forehead. She claimed to have been tossed about in the night and made a joke at blaming my poor navigation. Perhaps she is in truth, for she does not behave as one who suffers abuses—her wit is as keen as her eye for magic. She will not allow the topic of the island to rest. She has speculated upon an Elysian isle of the dead where one might visit those who have passed from this world. In our times such would be a crowded place, I fear, unwelcome to the likes of us…

Benedek has become a man put-upon and I scarcely know how to put it in words. At first I thought it was drink, but drink alone does not torment a man so that he goes about without shoes, clothes hanging like curtains, as if he didn't have the time or the inclination to fully dress, and his eyes have fairly sunk in; writing this now I realize the man from Jacob's unit had a similar look about him. Strangest perhaps is the muttering—it's as if he's arguing with himself. He does not answer knocks at his cabin door and I fear for him.

Now I must move above deck to meet with Sophia. I have promised to show her

how to raise the jib. Until tomorrow… Benedek has just left. He has just told me some shocking news. Sophia is not Sandoval's sister. Somehow he got it in his head that they are lovers. He has told me Sandoval knows of our meeting. I suggested that our relationship is wholly Familial, but I cannot ignore the tug in my chest, as if a hook has caught there just behind the breastbone. Just the other night the waves spat a flying fish onto the deck. The creature thrashed, gasping for breath, and I watched as she lifted the fellow to her breast and tossed him overboard—delivered him from his suffering… if what Benedek says is true can I not continue to see her? Our meetings have helped to speed the passage of night…

I write this with trembling hands. I cannot bring myself to admit what I know is true—I am damned. One moment of rage has turned many against me—I have struck one of this beast's proudest heads from the shoulder—would it had the tenacity to grow back. Forgive me Sandoval… These nights, after the moon has passed overhead and most of the crew has retired, I wake. I think of Benedek in the crow's nest, though I cannot face him. My own dreams have been a source of no small discomfiture. One stands amongst the rest… we have struck land though it is not a land to be found on any map. I am wary of its shore, though the men are overjoyed with the prospect of peace and rest—the island is rich with the promise of comfort. Yet, a voice beckons… a voice is full of distress, and though I travel through the deepest jungle growth, I fail to find its source. This voice is at once Sophia's, yet at the same time, that of my mother, my brother Jacob. The faster I run, the less ground I gain. Some great peril threatens to do the voice harm, though I do not know what it is.

In this dream, if I stop seeking, I find that the voice is coming from within, and when I look down at my own body, I find I am dressed in white—in the attitude of my Sophia—and blood, nearly black in its quantity, stains my middle. In the dream I feel as if I am screaming, yet the beckoning voice does not falter, and Sandoval's sea-bloated specter grows large over the island.

Sophia has roused me from this dream. She claims I am "making noises," and she "cannot sleep for all the world's weariness is upon her." I find it perverse that I cannot settle the question of who has given her the child. I cannot help but suspect a bastard grows in her womb.

Cooking and Love Go Hand in Hand, and I Have No Love for Tuna Fish

As is customary with most accidents, the burning of the barn distributed portions of guilt the way a lunch lady might spoon dollops onto a tray: the serving sizes are never the same and invariably cause heartburn. Some of Ruth's best work had been destroyed, Mark would have to break more bad news to his students, but Ryan seemed to be suffering the worst case of indigestion.

"We're keeping the horses at a friend's," Ruth said to Mark as they walked through the charred frame of what used to be the barn. Smoke was still rising from some of the boards. Popcorn kernels were scattered everywhere. A squirrel sat up on its haunches, turning one in its hands. The stage looked like a cake someone had attempted to barbeque. "My dad threatened to use Ryan's college fund to build a new barn. That caused a huge fight. He said he doesn't even want to go to college, which only made things worse. He won't come out of his room, not even to go to school. He thinks you're mad at him. I think you should talk to him."

When did I become a certified crisis councilor? Mark thought. In truth he *was* mad. The stage had been the only real success of the school year: without it, he was left with hot dogs and tuna fish. "Maybe not," Mark said.

Mark beat everyone to school early the next day to take inventory. He Xeroxed copies of the menu from his notebook and wrote a purchase order. It started with a few items they

would need for Toulouse Cassoulet, including a specialty cassole. In the end, he included in the order a list of gourmet spices, a virtual library of cookbooks, new chef coats, toques for the entire class, and an industrial washer and drier. He'd beat everyone to school. Even the secretary.

It took a few tries to find the key that fit the lock, but when Mark got it, he stayed his hand. He couldn't say why he was invading his father's space. He supposed it was for the same reason he had snuck into his office as a child and took down books from the highest shelves, ran his tongue across the letter opener in the desk, as if, by some osmosis, he'd be able to read words written to Gordon.

He imagined pulling open a long cabinet drawer and looking down at the names written on the filing tabs. So many lives, so many secrets. He could find Schubert's file. Learn what kind of teacher she had been. Maybe she'd been a knockout. Maybe she'd never written a lesson plan, like him. His own file would be labeled Mark Gordon Fuller. His father wouldn't be able to resist using his full name—that's the way it's been with Gordon all along—names on files, tomes full of dates, facts, fish woodcuts. Gordon Joseph Fuller, PhD was terrified of the unknown.

Mark pulled the key from the lock.

Ms. Simmons was pulling some memos from her mailbox as Mark entered the small room. Precipitation had wet the delicate black fabric of her coat, and she was uncoiling a dark scarf from around her neck. It might have been made from the same stuff as the stage curtains. She pulled a stack of memos and envelopes from Gordon's box. "You know, I don't even know your name," Mark said to her. "My mom's name was Gloria.

It means heavenly angel."

"Karen," she said, offering her hand. "It means devilish little girl."

Mark shook her hand. "Mine means warlike," he said, tossing his purchase order on the stack.

"Listen up," Mark said, and they all stopped what they were doing and gathered around. "We've made pasta, hot dogs and tuna fish. I've taught you how to crawl, but I want to teach you to fly," he said. He handed out the Xeroxed copies of his haute menu. "We're going to make the recipes with stars by them," he said. "No tuna fish. Did you know Auguste Escoffier used to name his dishes after women that he loved? Cooking and love go hand in hand, and I have no love for tuna fish," he said.

That afternoon he taught with more intensity than he ever had. Vikki was learning to make a passable mille-feuille. Nate, whom Mark couldn't keep on task longer than ten minutes, had learned to quarter artichokes. Tony figured out how to run the mixer. Buddy, it turned out, could crack an egg without bits of shell dropping into the bowl.

Mark broke the news at the end of the day. He told them the stage had been ruined, but he passed out copies of Dave's script and asked for volunteers. Everyone in class raised their hands. Even Tony, who technically didn't have hands. "Nothing's going to stop us from doing this," Mark said.

Dave raised his hand. "Where are we going to rehearse?"

Rehearsal

Mark stopped in the bathroom before the last special needs class to wash off the day and set his bag on the counter, which fell over while he was soaping his hands. Two brown phials rolled into the sink bowl and floated in the suds like pharmaceutical tub toys. Mark set them in a puddle, finished washing and dried himself. The words on the labels were bleeding, and Mark twisted off the tops and poured the pills into the toilet, touched the flush with his toe. He tossed the empty containers into the trash and was startled by Stankowitz wheeling himself in, a bag on his lap.

"Do you need any help?" Mark asked, regretting the offer given the circumstances. I've already helped one old man off the toilet in this life, he thought, God save me if I'm faced with another. Stankowitz pursed his face and shook his head. Mark was surprised to see tears on the old man's cheeks. He pulled a length of paper towel from the dispenser and handed it to him. "Are you in pain?"

Stankowitz shook his head again, blew his nose on the towel and wiped his eyes. "The last time I cried," he said, "was when my wife and I moved out of the house where we raised our children." Mark looked down at his watch—at least they'd both be late. "Silly," Stankowitz said, "how moving on can turn you into a sentimental fool. Silly especially when everyone would be grateful if I didn't show up at all." Mark wet another towel and handed it to Stankowitz. "Thirty-nine years in the classroom," Stankowitz said. "What's the last few hours?"

Mark needed groceries. He feared some of the stains in his hamper were beginning to mold. In truth, he was hungry and tired and horny and pissed off. He felt as if he had been holding his eyes open underwater for the last hour, and the thought even of townie bar girls aroused a startling degree of prurient interest. The last thing Mark wanted was to sit in a classroom and take notes from an overhead for two and a half hours.

"Maybe you could let us out a little early," he said, and pushed the wheelchair toward the vending machines. "Do you want to split a snack before class?" Mark said, rattling some change in his pocket. "My treat."

Mark was not surprised when he found the purchase order stamped REJECTED. In fact, he'd not expected the dignity of a response. Mark knew the order, as he had written it, would deplete his program funds for the rest of the year and over again by half. He tied apron strings tight around his waist the way a martial arts fighter might cinch a black belt, he imagined, grabbed his teacher's handbook and headed into Gordon's office.

Gordon was writing something when Mark entered the room. He did not look up. "Yes?" he asked, closing the book he had been writing in. He waited calmly for Mark to sit, speak, explode. Mark opened the teacher handbook to a marked page. "Section eight, article A: The school prohibits all individuals it employs, whether faculty, staff or students, from directly or indirectly supervising other individuals at the school with whom they have a sexual, intimate, and/or romantic relationship, whether or not such relationships are consensual. Sexual, intimate, and/or romantic relationships (even consensual ones) between school employees and those they supervise are potentially

exploitive because of the imbalance of power inherent in them. Such relationships raise concerns about the validity of consent, conflict of interest, fairness of treatment, and the creation of a hostile or intimidating work environment. Further, they may give rise to liabilities for the school and/or the individuals involved in the relationships," Mark said. Gordon's arms were crossed, but he was regarding Mark with amusement, as if the very lines that he had no doubt written were the most interesting words he'd ever heard his son speak. Finally, Mark sat. "Any employee who violates this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment," he finished, pulling his rejected purchase order from the handbook and set it facing Gordon on his desk.

Gordon made a face—the kind of face a chef might make if his sauce were too sour, a simple fix, and pulled his glasses back onto his face to regard the order. "They'll fire her, you know," he said, looking at the paper. "The board."

"It'll look bad in the papers," Mark said. "That's all I care about."

Gordon took a deep breath. "I genuinely like her."

"I was thinking of having their names stitched on the chef coats," Mark said, "but that might cost extra."

"When you're spending this much," Gordon said, signing the paper, "you might as well get exactly what you want. Just don't get a big head. When you leave this office I'm calling the health department to schedule an inspection of your kitchen. I hope you play cleaner up there than you do down here. It may be tomorrow, it may be a month from now."

Dave was the first to show. Mark saw him, cheeks slapped with red, appear at the crest

of the hill trailing off the town square. He was wearing a backpack. Mark had been sitting in the little pavilion reading over the script with a pencil, searching for mistakes. He'd only found a few—silly errors that really wouldn't affect the way the narrative sounded. There were more characters in the play than Dave could play himself, and Mark didn't plan on getting involved in the play itself. Dave jogged up the steps of the pavilion and sat, huffing, next to Mark. He pulled off his backpack and pulled out the cast. Mark wondered about the rest of the crew.

"This isn't bad," Dave said, looking around, under things, pointing out some electrical outlets Mark hadn't seen, built right into the pavilion under the benches. He ran his hand along the railings. "We'll just need to block these off."

A minivan pulled up to the curb and Tony got out. His mother, a dark-haired, pretty woman, waved at Mark from the driver's seat and drove away. Tony climbed the stairs and sat next to Mark—he was wearing a red bandana under a black ball cap. Mark wondered if his mother had tied the bandana and then set the cap on his head. He had never wondered this kind of thing before. Tony could write with a pencil clenched between his teeth, and his resolve had always amused Mark, but he'd never considered how Tony survived anywhere other than his classroom. He handed Tony a script and he took it between his wrists and set it on his lap. Vikki had brought a boombox and her collection of cassettes. Mark asked to look at them while she looked over her copy of the script. It was an eclectic mix. Some were country western bands he'd recognized from the radio at school, some were classical recordings arranged for piano, a few jazz. Dave showed her where to plug it in. Buddy and Boomer showed up on bikes. Mark noticed that Buddy did not have his *Guinness Book of World Records*. They both ran up the steps

and Mark handed out scripts.

Vikki was messing around with the dial on the radio—nothing was coming in right, and static buzzed inside the pavilion like a hive. Dave seemed to be practicing howls. Boomer and Buddy were seeing how many times they could run up and down the steps. Boomer seemed to be winning when Tony set the script on the flat railing, stepped up on one of the benches, cleared his throat and said, theatrically, "Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away, horrible monsters roamed the countryside," Dave emitted one of his howls. Buddy and Boomer stopped running. Tony bent to read the rest of the line, "and no one was safe."

They decided that Dave would play Bartholomew the dog, the Wolfman, Dracula, the caravan escorts, the king and the queen, Buddy was going to play David the stable boy and the castle guests, Boomer was in charge of The Phantom of the Opera while Vikki would be in charge of the music and sound effects.

Tony would narrate. The only issue this raised was his inability to hold a script and turn the page. Vikki came up with the idea to record the play on a cassette in her boombox during practice and for Tony to repeat his narrative. "That means we'll need to have it down to a science," Mark said.

"What does science have to do with it?" Dave asked.

When the last of his students had been picked up, Mark walked upstairs, even his teeth were cold, and pushed inside. The apartment was dark and he stepped on something. Probably just another unruly tome, he thought, turning on the light to find his journal underfoot. He lifted his shoe to discover a black leaf outlined by a muddy print. He

pulled off his soiled shoes, kicked the journal out of the way and headed to the bathroom to draw a nice, hot bath.

He closed his eyes as the tub filled, warmth nurturing his tired bones, and tried to meditate. He found himself barefoot on the bank of a mild river, everything some color of yellow, the sky, the water itself, the rocks, and rather than being carried away by the stream, he stepped up on a boat, the deck of which was empty and began to drift with the current. He was not interested in steering or stopping. The wind seemed bottled by his ribcage, and he started to float like a big balloon. The boat got smaller and smaller, carried along by the water, and the trees, he could see, swayed in the breeze bottled inside of him—some leaves were the ochre of saffron, others pale as powdered ginger. The stream stretched, he could see, as far as the horizon, as deliberate and constant as a rail. He thought the word “windkeeper,” and nothing else.

Raga Vasant

The crowd had begun to form with the woman in the white hat, who stopped long enough to watch a scene, her large dog resting its head on its paws. She laughed in the right spots. The next day she was joined by others—some held shopping bags, a few busboys looking on from across the street on their cigarette break. Even the old florist scuffed across the street.

The health inspector came on a day in which Mark's sense of humor was inversely proportional to the amount of hours he had slept, and he had lay awake haunted by having to decide between Ruth and Julie. They both deserved to be there—that much was apparent—but the play was going to force a decision. He'd already backed out of the relationship with Julie, and it had taken months for him to call Ruth, and Ruth had decorated the stage but Julie had been there for Ben's calling hours. The stage was Ruth's idea, but Julie was the actress. He'd thought about not inviting either of them, but he thought it would be too much like spending months preparing a banquet and eating it yourself.

Late on a Tuesday night, a night he'd become accustomed to spending at school, Mark got it in his head to pick up the aprons and run them through the wash—the humidity, bright lighting and strange, though not unpleasant feeling of having a stranger washing their intimates in the machine next to yours would be preferable to sitting alone in the apartment, so he got up. Being in the little laundromat was probably a little bit like

spending time in a Turkish bath, he reasoned, sweeping the dirty aprons (one had fairly crinkled) into his arms.

The inspector had shown up the next day; the kind of woman who walks around slack-jawed and pokes her head into a room before entering; one, Mark imaged, who was doing inspections to get back at her father for a veritable lifetime of emotional transgressions; a cathartic, but pointless kind of point keeping. She'd walked around with a clipboard while Mark taught. It had occurred to him to hit on her; at least offer a cup of coffee, but the coffee machine had needed cleaning—what came out was beginning to taste as if someone had washed their delicates in it. He really didn't know what Gordon was trying to prove. The kids had worn hairnets since day one. He was looking forward to the day on which they'd have toques instead of the type of apparel that made each of them look like they were running a cafeteria inside of a prison instead of a school.

"Well," she said, while Mark was showing Vikki how to slice seasoning pockets in the leg of lamb, "that just about does it."

"Great," he said, removing his latex gloves. "Thanks for coming in. I'm heading downstairs myself," he said, "let me walk you." At the end of the hallway Mark pressed the call button on the elevator. "So do you live in the city?"

"Oh, no," she said, clutching the clipboard to her chest.

Finally the doors began to jitter open. "After you," Mark said. They stood looking out of the elevator until the doors shuddered closed. The belts made a sound like teeth on a chalkboard. Mark closed his eyes and smiled. "I was wondering if you could recommend an elevator inspector?"

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The door was cracked open and Mark pushed through. Gordon was dressed in sweatpants, a cardigan sweater, and he was bent over behind his desk. He looked back over one shoulder—he was wearing the old horn-rim glasses that he'd traded for contacts after Mark's mother had died. He was taking things off the walls.

"Did you know men used to pierce their ears to cover their burial expenses at sea?" Gordon said from over one shoulder. Mark felt the hoop at his ear. Gordon came up holding the harpoon. For one crazy moment Mark had the impulse to duck. "It always struck me like bargaining against the odds," Gordon said, weighing the harpoon. "Frank says you're quite a deckhand. Perhaps you'd have a use for this?"

"I don't think so," Mark said.

"I didn't think so," Gordon said. "You always went your own way."

Mark wanted to point out that they worked in the same building, had been interested in the same woman.

"I know you have affection for books that have… outlived their usefulness," Gordon said. "The only way I could get you interested in a book when you were young was to try and toss it out." Gordon lifted a few old tomes from a deep drawer in his desk—the one with a lock on it, Mark noted—and pushed them across the table. Mark opened the volume on top. The words were written in another language and the script was canted to one side, as if the author was writing by candlelight, or reckoning the tide.

"Are you going somewhere?" Mark said.

Gordon leaned the harpoon against the desk. "Redecorating," he said.

There was a message from Julie when he got home. The last performance of her show was on Saturday morning—the same date they'd decided to put on the puppet play. Saturday was the ideal date because kids were off school, the weather was supposed to finally turn the corner. There might be a crowd. They'd even prepared hors d'ourves—the hell with popcorn.

Mark got in his car with the intention to drive to Julie's, apologize, tell her he wouldn't be able to make it to her show. Instead of taking the on ramp toward the city he found himself driving farther into the country.

He started sweating once he was in the driveway. It took nearly five full minutes to reach the house. Mark could make out bright lumber of the rebuilt barn in the darkness. He rang the doorbell and the front windows lit. Ruth opened the door. "Stay right there," she said. Mark thought he heard some shouting, maybe someone shutting a door. She came back wearing a coat. "I cannot *wait* to get out of this house," she said, shutting the door behind her. "They fight night and day."

"Do you think I should go," Mark said.

"God no," Ruth said. "I mean, I've been dying to get outside." They walked over to the new barn. Mark was comforted by the smells—sawn lumber, hay and animal. "My dad's kind of sentimental," she said, pulling the door open. "He wanted it rebuilt exactly the same." Mark could hear horses moving around in there. Ruth threw the light switch. Mark noticed a large red and white *No Smoking* sign screwed into one of the beams. There was an easel set up in the corner. Mark started over there and she grabbed one of his hands.

"Later," she said. "Right now we're going for a ride."

Sitting behind Ruth on the double saddle was awkward because Mark couldn't decide where to place his hands, yet he feared being pitched with every gallop. His hand brushed hers as they lifted the heavy saddle, and even coincidentally their touch was powerful, like a shock. "You'll have to grab hold of my waist," Ruth said. Her hair was fragrant and soft when it grazed his cheek. "Hold tight," she said, spurring the horse forward to jump the ditch just outside the barn. They followed a faint path that was little more than dust and Ruth explained she enjoyed the freedom of riding through the fields, "but the woodchuck dens are dangerous. Some of the holes," she explained, "are deep enough to stymie a hay wagon. Or break a horse's leg."

The ribcage of some long dead animal—it may have been a calf or even some kind of dog—was visible in the ditch. "Stick to the path," Mark said.

The trail led them into a dense grove of conifers that blocked the far-off noise of passing cars—here the shadows were large and seemingly bottomless, and the occasional warbling of a bat's wings, or an owl's call were nice distractions. They rode together for some time. Neither said much save Ruth's occasional command. Eventually the discomfort of the saddle dulled and the evening wind found its way into Mark's very skin. The numbness was a blessing.

At the crest of a hill, Ruth slowed the horse to a trot. She brought him about and pointed with one long, white arm toward the moon on some far off water—a garish slash lake. "The woods thicken here," Ruth said. "We can go on if you want, but we'll have to slow

our pace."

The consideration of time did not matter. "Okay," he said. "Let's see where it goes."

The horse stepped over a large knot of roots and Mark watched their twisted union with fascination. Some force had pushed them up through the soil where they had twisted over one another, and the same force had pulled them back down into the earth. The bough of a pine had blown over in some long gone gale, and they ducked and leaned to one side in order to pass underneath. The horse's strides were regular, deliberate, in no way mirroring the tentativeness Mark felt, and the shadows of the pines seemed bent on inducing a reverie. Mark pulled a strand of Ruth's hair from between his lips.

Soon they approached a clearing in which the surface of the lake shone like a dream mirror reflecting inchoate cosmic depth. "Do you want to stretch?" Ruth said, and Mark said that he did, his lower regions had reached such a state of numbness he was unsure if he would collapse. Ruth swung one leg over the saddle, slipped to the ground and Mark tried to do the same—his legs buckled, but he braced himself with one hand on the damp grass. The horse nuzzled the back of Mark's neck with its cold nose and he cried out. Ruth laughed. "He likes you."

Mark's legs grew a bit more solid. "Are there fish?" he asked, indicating the lake.

"I suppose there are," Ruth said, "but I've never seen any. This used to be a great place to swim," she said. "If there were fish here, my cousin Carrie would have never wet so much as a toe. It's best they stay down deep. Oh I wonder—" she began, and stepped though some of the higher grass, her arms wrapped about her, peering up into the branches of a willow occupying that section of shore. She parted the hanging branches

like a thick curtain and was soon nearly out of sight. Mark followed and heard a sigh of disappointment. A rope hung from one of the branches but it had broken a long time ago and frazzled. Ruth turned up the ground around her with the toe of one boot. She squatted and lifted a long shape from the grass. "Oh," she said, and dropped it, wiping one hand on her pant leg. "It's rotten."

Mark moved over to where she was standing and touched the swing with a shoe. A shining, segmented creature slithered out from the decayed wood and disappeared into the grass.

"My cousin, Carrie," Ruth said. "She's married with her own children." Even under the willow, the striated moonlight lent her skin the quality of alabaster. Her lips were scarlet in the darkness, yet her face held as little warmth as a porcelain doll's and he knew he wanted to be with her in the way he had always been with Julie, but something stayed his hand—it was a feeling that her skin might crack under his touch like the shell of an egg.

"And you want that too?" Mark said.

"Some day," Ruth said. "I suppose you think I'm silly."

"No," Mark said. "I really don't. I think you're talented and pretty and smart and classy—"

"Okay," she said, laughing. "That's enough."

"No," Mark said. "It's true. There was a time when I used to look into women's eyes just to see myself."

"I don't believe that," Ruth said.

"Believe what you want," Mark said. "I'll bet you think *I'm* silly."

"No, you're serious," Ruth said, taking one of his hands. "Too serious."

"Okay," he said. "I've got a silly idea." Mark took her hand in his and pulled her to the grass. "Let's pretend this is our own little temple."

"I'm tired of church bells," Ruth said, playing with the grass.

"No, look at the water. We're on the ghats. Now what did you say to do? Close your eyes and concentrate on one thing?"

"Yeah," she said. "Push everything from your mind. Try and visualize a shape."

Mark wanted something of his own—the trouble was he saw nothing in the darkness. "It's not working," he said.

"Be patient," Ruth said. "And stop talking."

Night descended on them like a blanket of sound—it was the first call of spring peepers, the wood frogs so much like a raga vasant—but it was also the far off shuffling of the black horse and their own breathing. Mark could feel his consciousness begin to expand outward beyond his body until he thought he was the willow itself.

After some time Mark opened his eyes to find Ruth looking at him with a grin. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Big," he said.

The horse carried them homeward, and fog had begun to creep into the lowlands by the time they were riding alongside open field. They dismounted nearly a quarter mile from the barn and Ruth led the black horse by its reigns. Mark was finally beginning to feel the right size for his body, but he didn't really want to. They were walking with the horse in between. Ruth pointed out the form of a bird drifting high over the field. The

stars were visible.

At the barn, Ruth pumped some water into a bucket. Mark offered to carry it and she let him. Inside she unhooked the saddle, Mark set down the bucket and helped her wrestle it into the tack room. She rubbed the black horse with a rag. "Pour that bucket into his trough," she said. "On the left." When she was done, she removed the saddle blanket and stalled him. While she was occupied Mark stole a peek at her canvas. There were yellows and oranges and reds. He thought he saw a kernel of popcorn in there somewhere.

"My dad says he won that horse in a game of cards," Ruth said, tossing the towel. "It's more like an excuse to act like he doesn't care about him. I remember he'd just been weaned and we had no place to put him, so we tied him to the back porch rail. He spooked one day and dragged the railing halfway across the west field. He's always been strong." Ruth turned on a brand new radio that had been lashed to one of the support beams. The music was tinny. Something classical. She moved her hips and held out her hands.

"Oh no," he said. "You're asking for a toe mashing. Really."

"It's okay," she said. "I've got boots."

"You know I can't dance," Mark said.

"I'll show you a few moves," she said, gesturing him forward. "C'mon, no one's watching."

Mark took her hands.

Love Doesn't Have to be Hard

A small group of people had formed around the pavilion—no one Mark had really wanted to come, but he thought, fine, let these strangers stuff their faces with my students' mille-feuille, and then Vikki pressed play on the boombox and harp music filled the air. Tony stepped up on the first stair of the pavilion. He was wearing a jerkin over a ruffle-collared shirt. The spotlight lit him—he was also wearing the single headphone under his paper Robin Hood hat. He pressed *play* on the Walkman, and after a moment, began narrating.

"Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away, horrible monsters roamed the countryside, and no one was safe. There was the Wolfman—" The puppet stole the spotlight on stage and offered a bloodcurdling howl. "—the Phantom of the Opera—" The Phantom made his lugubrious appearance "—and Dracula," Tony finished. The oven-mitt popped up and brooded a few paces across the stage and then disappeared. Tony stepped to one side and lit the stage to reveal the pacing king and the princess puppet. "The king had a beautiful daughter named Victoria, and decreed that the man whom could cleanse the land of these monsters would have her hand in marriage."

The puppet in overalls and the dog-lamb appeared on stage and the music changed. "There lived a poor orphan boy named David who worked in the royal stables and admired the princess from afar. David's only companion was his dog—Bartholomew. David heard of the king's decree and set his mind to work at once. One

cold night, David and Bartholomew were sharing a pile of straw for a bed, and they heard the Wolfman's horrible howls."

David the stable boy said, "Oh, how could I rid the land of such a horrible monster?"

Bartholomew replied, "Everyone in the village is terrified of the Wolfman's howls, yet I know that he is lonely, for that is the reason he carries on at night. If you could find the Wolfman someone to love, he would no longer terrify the village with his howling."

"Oh, but where am I going to find someone to love such a creature?" David asked.

"David was hopeless until one day a gypsy caravan came to the kingdom. While he stalled the horses and traded news of the weather with the carriage driver, Buddy, the gypsy woman emerged from the carriage and asked David how much he should like for his pet dog."

"He is not for sale," David said.

The carriage driver said, "I have come all this way because the king's daughter is lonely and wants a pet. I have the ability to tame any creature known to man, yet I fear my creatures are too wicked for a princess."

"Her stagecoach was filled with lizards, ferrets, bats, and even some creatures David did not recognize. Buddy, the carriage driver knew everything about the animals and politely answered David's questions. There were poison dart frogs, a reticulated python, a tarantula, and she even kept a baby great white in a tank of saltwater."

"I know of a wild dog that would make a perfect pet for the princess," David said.

“For he is so lonely that he howls all through the night. If you follow the howls you will find him. He will make an excellent pet for the princess.”

Dave recommenced the howling. “That night, the Wolfman howled more desperately than he had ever howled before, and the gypsy woman went off into the hills.” David was too nervous to sleep. What if the Wolfman ate the gypsy woman? he thought. His appetite would be whetted for blood and he would attack the village and it would all be his fault.

“No sooner than David had thought this, the howling stopped. Soon after, the gypsy woman reappeared.”

Her puppet was arm in arm with a bearded puppet in ragged clothing. “What happened?” David asked.

“Larry had been transformed into wolf by an evil curse,” the gypsy puppet said.

“Only a kiss from a beautiful young woman could break the curse,” Larry said.

“Love,” the gypsy said, “doesn’t have to be hard.”

The puppets disappeared with the spotlight; ominous organ music sounded. “The next night,” Buddy said, “David heard the Phantom playing the village theatre’s organ. The music was dreadful and terrifying, and David asked Bartholomew why the Phantom liked to play such music.”

“Men are only capable of such music when they long for a love they think will never arrive,” Bartholomew said.

“How does he expect to find love? He makes everyone afraid to go into the theatre,” David said, “and without entertainment the village people are bored and

depressed. If only I could find a way to put an end to his music."

"Soon after, another caravan entered the kingdom at dusk." The sounds of sobs were audible.

"What's the matter?" Dave asked the carriage driver.

The carriage driver said nothing.

"What is the matter?" David asked again, and a young woman dressed all in black emerged from the carriage.

"Boomer does not speak," she said, "but he is the greatest listener I have ever known. I have been invited here by the king because I am the greatest violinist in all the land. He wants me to play for his daughter because she is sad and lonely." The young woman produced a violin. "But I am in mourning because my mother has passed away. She taught me to play, and I loved her very much." The puppet played a few mournful notes on her violin. "David's heart was saddened," Tony said. "I cannot think of playing happy music at a time like this," she said.

"The young woman stroked the strings with the bow and the music was even sadder. Just then, the last rays of sunlight passed from the sky," the spotlight grew dim, "and the music from the theatre organ struck up and accompanied her." The organ and the violin music merged. "Together, their song was the saddest David had ever heard. Even the carriage driver wept. They played together for many measures and David thought he would be driven mad by their sadness." The frenzied music continued until it reached a crescendo. Finally, the young woman lay down her violin.

"I must speak with this musician," she said.

"You can find him in the basement of the theatre," David said. "I can show you."

"I can think of no truer guide," she said, "than the music."

"Dave expected the organ to stop like the Wolfman's howls had stopped, but the music carried long into the night as an opus the likes of which no one had ever heard. Finally, David and Boomer used some straw to plug their ears. When the sun rose in the morning, the young woman reappeared at the stables arm in arm with a young man."

"Erik was cursed to play the organ every night until someone came along who played music that was lonelier than him," the young woman said. The puppets kissed. "Love doesn't have to be hard."

"Soon after, a third caravan came to the kingdom. David spoke to the carriage driver, Ben, who was large, and no doubt a wonderful bodyguard in such dangerous times."

Dave did his voice, "She is the greatest chef in all the land. She is also the most arrogant. The king has invited her to cook a banquet because his daughter is lonely."

"Sure enough, the cook never showed herself and gave orders only from the luxury of her cabin. During the day she ordered Ben hither and thither to fetch rare herbs and flowers. Bartholomew showed him the secrets of the surrounding landscape, for he could smell the rarest herbs, dig up the most potent root. One day she overheard Ben and David discussing Count Dracula who had taken refuge in a nearby cave and drank only blood to survive."

"That is impossible," the cook said from the caravan. "An individual cannot survive on blood alone. They must eat!"

David said, "No it's true. Not even the most *skilled* chef could cook a meal that he would be even the slightest bit tempted to eat."

“Men have never been able to resist my cooking,” she said. “This Dracula will be no different.”

“Well, Dave thought. What could it hurt? He dug under the straw and brought out his life’s savings—a small pouch of silver.”

“I’ll bet all this silver that he refuses your cooking,” Dave said.

“What would I do with such a pittance?” she said. “And if I lose?”

“You have to agree to sneak me into the castle,” David said. “That is our bet.”

“Deal,” the cook said.

“She set to work immediately on an extravagant dish. The smell was so succulent that Bartholomew took to stuffing his nose with tufts of straw. On the third night the meal was ready.”

“Where is this Count?” she said. “I’m sure if we wait long enough the smell of my cooking will deliver him.”

“No,” said David. “You’ll have to take it to his cave if you hope to tempt him to try a bite.”

“David described to Ben how to get to the Count’s cave. He and the arrogant chef left that very night. Not soon after, David filled his pockets with wild garlic from the chef’s store. He set off with a torch through the woods. Ben was waiting outside the cave.”

“She wanted to do it herself,” Dave said for Ben.

“David walked bravely into the cave holding the torch high in one hand. He found the meal untouched, but the Count was definitely sucking the arrogant chef’s blood.” The oven mitt was sucking the blood of the Schubert doll. Dave threw some of

the wild garlic at the count, cotton-balls, it looked like, and he seemed to be stunned. David grabbed the chef and dragged her out of the cave.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Saving your life," David said.

"Oh, you're right," she said. "The Count didn't want my cooking. He wanted *me*!"

Soon after the count emerged from the cave. "You…you have the most delicious blood," he said.

"Darling," she said, jumping into the Count's embrace.

"David and Ben were in a predicament," Tony said. "The only way into the castle was through the front gate, but the chef refused to come out of Dracula's cave. David used one of the chef's aprons and stowed Bartholomew in an empty hogshead, and with Ben driving, rode through the front gate and into the castle. David, mimicking the arrogant chef's behavior, refused to show himself. In the meantime, they worried about the banquet. The only dish David knew how to cook was a bland potato stew that he made for himself and Bartholomew every night. Sensing his master's dismay, Bartholomew spoke up."

"I will prepare the meal. I have an idea of what the royal family will enjoy."

"So Bartholomew told David what herbs to mix, what roots to crush, and soon they had prepared a banquet fit for a king. On the day of the banquet, as was customary, David surveyed his work in the hall. Indeed, the meal was a success. When it was time, David prepared a toast."

"I wish to offer this toast to celebrate a rare day in the history of the kingdom," he said. "I wish to celebrate the peace that our kingdom enjoys. It was I who banished the monsters. I have come before you today to ask the king to make good on his promise and allow me the hand of his daughter in marriage."

The royal puppets burst into laughter. "It seems no one believed David, and he was distraught at their jeers and planned to duck out of the hall and resume his life in the stables."

"He speaks the truth," Bartholomew spoke up.

"No one is going to believe us," David said. "C'mon, it's back to the stables for us."

"But, to David's utter astonishment, the hall fell silent with Bartholomew's words."

"He speaks the truth," Bartholomew continued. "The monsters that plagued this kingdom have been freed from their curse through the cunning genius of none other than David the Stable Boy. For he alone believed in the curative power of love, and for that you owe him your promise."

At this the queen puppet spoke up. "What evil magic is at work here that allows a common dog to speak like a human?"

"Well you should know, queen," Bartholomew said. "For it was your evil magic that had transformed those young men into beasts, for all sought the hand of your daughter. Far you flung these young men from the castle, cursed to wander the countryside. Each has found what you denied them—the love of a young woman. Isn't that the truth? *Mother*?"

At this the queen said, “Yes, it was my doing.”

“Lastly,” the dog commanded, “speak your lost son’s name.”

“Bartholomew,” she said.

“Yes, it is I,” Bartholomew said. The king and the princess gasped. “I have flavored your meal with a powerful truth serum derived from rare herbs and roots,” Bartholomew continued, “so until the new moon, it is impossible for any of you to tell a lie.” The puppets gasped again, yet Bartholomew pressed on. “Tell them why you did not want your daughter to be wed? Why you cursed your own son.”

“I sought the crown for myself,” the queen said, and slapped her puppet hands over her mouth. The king began pacing. He moved to Bartholomew and whispered something in his ear. Bartholomew answered. “Guards!” the king spoke, “take the queen to the dungeons! I have suspected her betrayal for some time. For this dog is my long lost son, the prince destined to inherit my kingdom.”

“And only my sister’s betrothal will break the curse,” Bartholomew said.

At this, Dave stood up behind the stage. He was dressed in black. He shook Bartholomew and the stable boy from his hands. “Vikki,” he said. “Could you come here?”

There was muttering in the audience. The spotlight dimmed and Dave stepped around the stage to meet her. He knelt on one knee and produced something from his pocket.

“Will you marry me?”

Mark

I asked Pam to be my date to the wedding. The food, I'll admit, was well prepared—salmon, bacon wrapped scallops, potatoes a la apricot—wine, it turns out, is much cheaper by the box, but a box makes it harder to tell how much you've drunk—no empty bottle to toss in the trash or up against a wall—a final crashing note of conviviality. Pam was a great date up until the sixth or seventh glass.

I remember my head felt stuffed with dirty wool as I hung on the toilet, vomiting the salmon and bacon wrapped scallops, the reek of alcohol. I was determined not to pass out. I just didn't wish to be found in such a state, nor did I wish for someone to have to carry me over their shoulder to one of the overstuffed chairs in the lobby to wait for a cab, or worse, home to crash on their couch.

Karen had made a lovely bride. Her hair was up, which I usually don't like, but she has a nice neck, so it was okay. I staggered out from the bathroom during the dollar dance to find Pam dancing with the groom, so I cut in line, tossed back a shot of liquor and grabbed Karen.

She was nice considering the fact that I think I mashed her toes on several occasions and that I was stammering about how I was glad she was my mom and that I wanted to make her proud. The next person in line kept tapping me on the shoulder, and I kept sayin in a minute, will ya, I'm trying to have a dance with my mom, this is my mom, when I realized I was being lifted over someone's shoulder, carried out of there. I

remember thinking it's too bad I'd puked beforehand, because I could have sent a nice streak down their back, whoever they were—they were wearing what I thought was a pretty nice suit. It was soft against my cheek, anyway.

It was the handsome groom, Gordon, who set me in one of those overstuffed chairs in the lobby and left to get me a cup of coffee. I remember a foreign couple was speaking excitedly in the corner—not about me. When I woke, Gordon was wiping my face with a napkin the way my mom did when I was a kid—I think he was probably scrubbing salmon from my goatee. He took off my bowtie, wrapped it around his fingers and tucked it into my coat pocket. "You'll be looking for that later," he said. He didn't try and lecture me or relate to me, he just smiled. "Thanks for coming," he said, as if I were a guest for whom he was holding the door, but I knew he meant it—"thanks," but it also meant "this is your cue to leave now."

"You're welcome," I said, and pretty soon I was staggering out the front doors, weaving a path home.

I probably shouldn't have done it, but I stopped at the bar. I went into their rancid bathroom, unraveled my bowtie and clasped it around my neck. I hoped to run into one, maybe both, of the county girls. I wet my face and hair, slicking back the strands. My nose and cheeks were red, and I remember thinking I looked like a derelict in an old movie, and I started thinking what a derelict in an old movie might order to drink with the crumpled bills in his pants pocket when I realized all I had were a few quarters, which wouldn't even buy me a glass of box wine, and then I got serious and pushed back out into the bar.

There was a guy playing pool by himself, and I glanced at him when I passed

through, almost didn't recognize him with his hair grown out. Change seems to be a constant these days in everyone's life except mine. Ben Mullins Senior was icing a cue and staring down his next shot when I set my quarters on the table.

Well, he ran the table before I got much of a chance to sink anything other than one of his and the cue ball a couple times, and then we sat at the bar. He said, "You're that teacher aren't you?" I said I was, and he bought me a drink.

I think I would have felt better if he had mentioned Ben, or cried, or even if he'd tried to feel me up under the bar, but he just sipped beer from his mug. That was it. He didn't know what to say any more than I did. Shoot, maybe he *was* a drunk, but I knew heartbreak when I saw it, and it was written in every line of his face. He said something about a show that was playing on the television above the bar, and I thought it would sound a little pretentious of me to say that I didn't even own a TV, so I said a few things. I didn't want to finish my drink, but I did anyway. Looking back, I want to write that maybe there was something of the nepenthe about it, about the whole moment, but really I just thought it might be rude to leave a drink on the bar.

Julie went to New York, maybe to try and make it in a Broadway show. Anyway, she spent a couple of miserable months there before leaving the states to tour with the Royal Canadian Theatre Company. I don't know if Canada is as miserable because I haven't spoken with her. She called me once, from New York, from a street phone she'd said, and left a message on my machine—sounded like rain in the background, but it may have been traffic.

Ruth won a Fulbright exchange and is teaching art in Hawaii of all places, taking graduate classes at the University—she got in on the merit of a series of paintings

inspired by the barn burning. I guess you could say that sometimes tragedy ends up being useful. I've got a plane ticket for the first week of August to fly out there and see her. I'm living in the same apartment on the square, listening to trains and lying awake at night, pretending I don't miss either of them.

At the end of Dave's play, the dog Bartholomew is transformed again into a handsome young prince, David was to wed to the princess of his fantasies, and they all lived happily ever after, except for the queen, who was chained up in the dungeons. Maybe it was the queen who wrote that editorial in the paper—I couldn't imagine her having access to ink and paper, but someone did, someone wrote it. There were enough people hanging around the play to call it a crowd, and we even got a little write up in the local paper—Gordon liked the positive attention it drew to the school, and I was sure to remind him of all the support he had given us throughout the year.

Dave and Vikki's public engagement caused quite a splash. Someone actually wrote in to the paper *wouldn't it be unethical to allow two developmentally handicapped people to get married or have kids?* Someone wrote in that it was relatively unethical to write *developmentally handicapped people. People with exceptionalities* is how it's termed. I thought the argument would be short lived, that he or she who opposed their marriage would be shouted down by the collective voice of reason, but the collective voice of reason is something I'm beginning to think does not exist. Either way, Dave and Vikki set a date, and I've got my fingers crossed. I never did return that tux from Gordon's wedding, so at least I'll be well dressed.

I made a stack of all the books in my apartment. I've read my grandfather's journals and poured over the maps. Many of the islands had been circled and then

crossed out. Gordon, it turned out, had spent a number of years tracking them down when he got out of the military—he wanted to find the place of his birth. The real pisser was that more than half of the islands on those maps had never existed—either they were phantoms or figments—shadows of botched coordinates. My journal was still under the couch in the living room from the night I barged in and stepped on it, mud, and leaves and all. I set it on the stack. Before I drop the books off, I'm going to copy out one of the stories from that time in my life when change was a constant, for good and for ill, and the words came unbidden. I like the idea of *my* journal out there somewhere, some stranger turning over the pictures, the poetry, wondering who had needed all those words.

The Old Man of the Bees

There once was a man who loved no one because he carried within his chest a petrified beehive, however, as a child his heart was alive with many small wings. The boy's father was a jewel cutter, and the boy's mother was a comely woman who loved shiny things. She did not love the fact that her boy's roving fingers left smudges like tiny butterflies, and every night the mother mournfully wiped these prints from polished stones and muscovy window glass.

One day the mother found her jewels spread throughout the garden, and though the polished rocks shined as prettily as fallen petals, the mother sighed, "What will we do with this child?"

The father helped the mother gather stones onto her apron and said, "Every day on my way to work, I pass an earthen hut wherein lives an old witch, and her garden is strange with gnarled trees and terrible vines. Some say she possesses the ability to grow these plants in the blighted soil of the forest meadows. Tree limbs twist into knots under her very gaze. Perhaps she can offer some suggestion as to how we might manage our son."

The next day the father knocked at the old woman's crooked door, expected to find a crone, was surprised when a beautiful woman with bright blue eyes received him. "I've come looking for a powerful witch—"

"Look no further," the young woman said.

"How is it you are so young?" he said.

"I have spent my life unlocking many secrets, and I have discovered the secret of youthful beauty. It is a shame however that I have lived here alone for many years. Never have men called at my door, for they are frightened by the wicked garden. It is a shame that my work has not allowed me many visitors. Will you please stay for a cup of tea?"

As the father listened to the woman talk about her life among the plants he was struck by the strangeness and beauty of her old soul as much by the strangeness of the fragrant dark tea. "How very similar we are," he thought. "I spend my life among the rocks and minerals of the earth, and though they are beautiful they do not return my love or my care." Soon he spoke of his son.

"Return here in a fortnight, and I will have prepared a potion that will calm the buzzing of your child's heart, but you must have payment, for the necessary root is very dear."

For a fortnight the father agonized over cut jewels and forgot his troubles at home. He fashioned for the beautiful woman an onyx panther because he imagined a panther might be at peace within the wild vine walls of the wicked garden, but the panther looked cheap in the memory of her beauty, so after great effort, he fashioned a platinum necklace and set in the necklace a single, large opal. Pleased with his work, he returned to her home. He was pleased that her eyes were the exact shade of the precious stone. "I have come with payment," he said.

The woman handed him a small yellow phial. "Administer this draught to your son—a single drop on his sleeping tongue. Until the potion is gone."

The father produced the opal necklace wrapped within a length of black velvet. Nearly transfixed by the beauty of his own work, he broke his gaze to see if the young woman shared his joy, and discovered tears in her opal blue eyes. "Why are you crying?" he asked, though he thought the tears made the woman's eyes ever more translucent so that he thought he glimpsed her hermit's soul. "Is the necklace not beautiful?"

"No one has ever shared anything as rare as this," she said, and he unhooked the clasp and laid the necklace over her collarbone, "with me." She smiled and looked into his eyes as he fastened the clasp at the back of her neck, and their lips touched. He had never before been moved by such a kiss, and the kiss could have lasted hours, for all of the happiest moments of his life projected across the screen of his heart, and her breath was fragrant and sweet like the dark tea had been. Soon she pulled away. "Go," she said. "It is not my place to be kissing men within these walls. My place is among the garden. Go now and do not return."

The father left the hut with the potion, and the cool darkness crept into the forest as he walked the path, and indeed he felt kinship with the very rocks of the earth, yet he mourned that such a beautiful woman's heart should be dark and cruel like her garden. He felt as if there had been an exchange beyond the exchange of goods, as if their lonely spirits had touched. So bewildered was he with the kiss and his thoughts that fortune alone delivered him home.

For well over a week he and his wife waited until the child had fallen asleep after a day's rambling and dripped a single drop of potion onto his tongue night after night until the yellow phial was empty.

As the young woman in the wicked garden promised, the flutter of wings within

the boy's heart soon grew still and not even the brightest rocks drew his interest.

"I am glad," the mother said.

The father's love for the beautiful woman in the earthen hut grew into a sickness, and on his way to and from work he passed the wicked garden, and though his heart was heavy with longing, never again did he knock at her crooked door, and sicker and sicker he became until his breath grew ragged in his chest. The mother fetched a doctor.

Even the doctor did not understand what plagued the man, and the boy sat as still as a stone in the corner of his father's room on the night that he died. He did not stir or even wake his mother when the first dark leaves blossomed from his father's mouth like a wicked, searching hand. He watched the black petals unfurl in the moonlight. The boy reached out his own hand and pulled the dark flower from his father's mouth. The boy moved from the house like a stone falling through water, and soon he arrived in a moonlit meadow to find a woman crouched and weeping. The boy did not reach out to her, but she turned toward him, and the colored veins in the opal around her neck swam with moonlight the way her eyes swam with bitter tears.

The boy dropped the dark flower at her feet and returned home.

Soon after the father's death, a cloud muddied the mother's bright jewels until they held no luster. Without the beauty of the jewels the mother wrung her hands and soon a dark cloud passed into her heart and she died. With time, the terrible vines and gnarled trees of the young woman's wicked garden withered into dust.

The boy traveled through life like a dull stone. Never again did he see another flower like the one that had grown from his father's mouth until he had grown very old, and as an old man bees were drawn to him, and he allowed the bees to crawl along his

skin, and the villagers feared the old man of the bees the way they had feared the young woman of the wicked garden, for it was rumored that with he alone the bees shared their secrets.

The old man passed through the countryside with a walking stick, and the bees came to him and indeed they whispered secrets, but his petrified heart grew heavier and heavier with their talk. They whispered that death would soon be at his doorstep, and though the old man had lived a long, lonely life he did not wish to die, so he crossed his doorstep and walked far up into hills. One night the bees led him to a meadow overrun with dark flowers. His slow memory was stirred by the silvery moonlight on the black petals, and it was here he stopped to rest. It was here the bees whispered to turn up the earth with his stick. It was here, staring up from the soil like a keen eye, he uncovered a single, blue opal.