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A Debt

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A DEBT

When George banked the eight ball into the side pocket, I couldn't pay time on the table, much less pay George \$25 escudos. In fact, neither of us had any money so we climbed out the men's room window to the alley and ran, leaving the men's door bolted from inside. We raced past avenida de Palmas, where I lived with my parents, then ran on to rua d'Ingleterra, a cobbled street where the buildings are painted blue or white or yellow and the street lights hang from wrought iron. The August night was hot and we sagged, finally, into two of the white metal chairs outside Cafe Befica. George bought a lemon-ice.

"You swine," I said, "You did have money for the table."

"Who me? The winner?" George said.

"You could've paid, man."

George pressed the ice to his forehead. "I'm hot. You hot, Wart?"

"Why didn't you pay? Damn it! I live just about next door to the place."

"Aw," he said, "I didn't have enough."

"Like hell."

He stood up and pulled out the front pockets of his khakis. "See? No money." There was only a blue handkerchief, which he stretched square, a corner in each hand. "See?" He shook it and showed me the other side.

"You swine."

Later, we swam in the water hazard on the 15th fairway of the Cascais Club. Sweetflag and mint grew on the banks of the black water and a thin moon was floating. A stand of pine screened the water from rua d'Angola and the walled houses beyond; but the fairways stretched off – blue as jade and cool – beneath huge jets of water slapping onto the grass, revolving in the huge night.

I was lying naked between the pond and piled mowings, on bristly grass: belly-up, high-ribbed and vulnerable. Dental floss was tightly knotted around the wart on my lower lip, in the center, just below the red. The floss strands hung to my chin.

"String'll never work," said George. He was lying naked on his shirt, with his pale legs splayed back in the grass. "You've got to cut it

off, I'm telling you." And with a straight razor from his shoe, he slit a golfball open to the tight rubber windings. Seven more balls – fished from weed root and mud in the water hazard – were stacked between us, in the yellow beam of George's flashlight.

"O your dad'll be thrilled about his razor," I said. "He'll just . . ." A passing car swept headlights through the pines, and I stared across the water at the bulging shadows. I sat up, crooked my hands around my eyes. "Do you see someone? Over there?" I asked.

George razored blond hairs from the back of his left hand. "You'll have to cut," he said and slit a vein that piped down the hand. His blood welled out, channeled between his fingers into the bristley sour-smelling grass.

I watched him dab at the bleeding with his tongue. He lifted up the hand, skimmed blood off the cut with a stiff finger, and I saw the blood spill down his white arm. Pressing his thumb on the cut, George waded through a patch of mint into the black water, where he dipped his hand. In my mind's eye, the blood rose in streaks, then billowed. A newt swam into the cloud.

"Hey Wart, bring me a sock," said George. "And the flashlight too."

He wrapped his cut hand once with the sock. Gripping one end in his teeth, he tied a square knot across his palm. Calf-deep in water, ankle-deep in mud, I held the flashlight. Glancing from time to time at the pines, I sloshed my leg through frogweed; the light wobbled on green ripples, the water bent my leg askew.

Twenty yards off, a man stepped out from the pines. George saw him too, as the man leaned a suitcase against a stump. I snapped off the weak yellow light. Unexpectedly, I heard crickets and the waterjets, and the powerlines humming over the road. I felt the warm black water on my legs and the strands of floss on my chin. Then the man was limping towards the pond, one leg stiff, staggering with each lame step; I splashed through the water to the lawn.

Trousers, shirt, white underwear were strewn on the pile of mowings. My wet feet stuck in the twisted cloth of my jeans. I sat down to pull them on and George stood on my trouser leg.

"Scared?" he said.

"Hell no."

"Scared of that crippled old man?" he said.

"Just don't want my clothes stolen."

"Your clothes? Your clothes? Fuck your clothes! He wants your

money.”

“My money?” I said.

George threw up his hands. “Well, I don’t have any. How can I when you don’t pay your gambling debts.”

“I’ll pay. I’ll pay. Get the fuck off my pants.”

“Now now, Wart. Nobody likes a loser. Not a poor loser.”

“David. The name is David. David. David.” But the lame man was already by the pond and it was worse, I thought, worse to flop about with my wet feet stuck, then to be naked. I kicked my jeans away.

George shined the flashlight on the man. An old man. He wore coveralls and a brown felt hat, broad brim pulled over a thin face. One leg of his denim coveralls was tucked into a grey sock; George’s razor was open in the grass by his feet. The man crouched down to the pond, lame leg straight back, stiff. His hat brim slanted into the water as he drank. Then he sat down.

“Hot,” he said. Drops of water hung in the grey stubble on his face.

We didn’t say anything. George walked forward and picked up the razor. Reaching down, he noticed blood oozing through his make-shift bandage. He knelt at the pond, washed out the blood, and packed two fingers of mud over the cut.

“Fucking hot,” said the man. He peered at me and smiled, his upper teeth gone, the smile pulpy. Beneath the hard round eyes, his skin sagged. He had a long nose that bent to one side and ears with huge lobes. When I noticed that grey hairs grew out of his ears, I moved my leg more to hide my dick.

He was staring at me.

He opened his mouth, slowly slid out his tongue, and on the tip was a small black stone. My ears began to ring. The ganster hat tilted back and his tongue slid out wide as the stone came out. When the stone fell, he caught it in cupped hands. He rubbed his hands together, then he blew on them, and when he opened his palms the stone was gone.

My fingers throbbed. The slap-slap of the waterjets filled my ears, but I knew where the stone was. In the fold of his thumb and hand. I knew it. I reached towards his hands, then hesitated, turning my palms up finally, arching my thumbs.

The old man giggled. He scooted through the sour grass until he was beside me, stiff leg straight out, palms straight up and down. I saw that the fingertips of one hand were severed. When he arched his thumbs out, a snail fell from his left hand.

“A small thing, really,” he said and shrugged. “Once, I swallowed a

dog." And rolling back his lips, he threw back his head and began to howl.

I barely breathed.

"I swallowed a house painter," he said in a grave manner. "His wife, too. It was a great relief to their daughter. She still thanks me." He narrowed his eyes and slapped his chest. "Even sent me a picture."

George kneeled beside me. Bits of grass were pressed into the mud over his cut.

Opening two buttons of his denim coveralls, the man pulled out a square photograph from an inner pocket. A tiny cross dangled from his neck as he handed me the black and white of a slender, naked girl. She straddled a wooden chair, blindfolded but not bound, her body oiled, her sex sagging open. There were pinholes in the corners of the picture and a soft, white rip from one border into her waist. I realized her image was barely tinted with watercolor.

". . . slit," said George. The old man was doubled up giggling.

"What?" I said. The picture disturbed me in the same way as the tilt of my leg in water.

George said something.

"What?"

"Don't try to be funny, Wart. You're too deep in debt."

At that moment, the neighborhood guard interrupted us. We saw his light rising and falling through the pines as he walked rúa d'Angola. Pressing ourselves facedown to the grass, we listened to him pass by, one boot scuffling gravel on the road's shoulder.

The old man had crushed a sprig of mint and was massaging his gums with the pulp. Pausing, he said: "The string will never work."

"We'll have to cut," said George.

"No . . . no . . . no." said the man. "Let's see . . . have you got a cigarette?"

"Sure," said George. "They're in my shoe, Wart."

"Get them yourself." I said.

George leaned back on his elbows. "Pay your debts or bear the consequences."

"Fuck the consequences."

"You'll never gamble with me again."

"Damn right." I said, but I went.

My bluejeans were still on the grass and the legs were wet with dew. I spread them beside my shirt on the dry mowings, then pushed my and into the damp, heating core of the pile. I liked the ammonia smell.

George's tennis shoes were neatly side by side. A red stripe sealed the canvas to the rubber soles and two red stripes sailed up the grommets. One shoe was empty. From the other, I pulled out the blue handkerchief – the swine – and found his Marlboro's in the toe. And George's wallet: black matte leather, folded in three. Opening it, I imagined a keyhole. Inside a yellow room, a grey suited man lay sleeping on leaves.

In the wallet, tucked between his condom and a picture of Susan Fields, were five bills of \$20 escudos.

"What's taking so long," called George.

"Looking for matches," I said. For some reason I took out the bills, unfolded them, and hid them under the loose insole of the tennis shoe.

When I returned, the man fingered two cigarettes out of the pack. One he lighted, the other he tucked upright in the band of his hat. He smoked for awhile, then asked: "Have you ever had a woman?"

"Not him," said George.

"Hell yes," I said.

The man spread his arms. "That's the problem. Your balls are full."

"What?"

Gripping his crotch, he said: "When our balls are full," and he puffed out his cheeks, "When they are full, sperm enters the blood. This causes lice and boils and warts. See?"

"Sure," said George and nudged me. "Let's cut yours off, Wart."

"Only a woman," said the man. "Only her belly, her blue rose, can help now." He seized my wrist. "And I will bring you one. A gypsy really, but your need is extreme. How much money do you have?"

George rolled his eyes.

"How much?" the man insisted.

"How much do we need?" asked George, examining his nails.

"\$40 escudos."

George snapped his fingers. "And I only have \$20."

"Then there's only enough for one," said the man and he released my wrist.

Only enough for his lemon ice. "\$20?"

"Too bad for you," said George.

"What about . . ."

"What?" interrupted George.

I tugged at the grass. "I'm the one who needs it."

"So you are, Wart, so you are." He slapped me on the back and said: "Tell you what. I'll give you a sporting chance."

"O thanks."

"We'll wrestle," said George. "If you win, the \$20 escudos are yours and I'll cancel your debts as well. If I win, well it's just more hard luck for me."

I slipped a blade of grass between my thumbs and tried to whistle with it.

"O she has a big tambourine," said the man.

I tried again to whistle the grass. "All right, George."

"Please," said the old man, gesturing at his lame leg. "Please bring my suitcase."

"Wart . . ." said George.

"Sure George," I said, "Anything for you."

The suitcase was cardboard, tied with sisal twine. It leaned against a tan and yellow fungus that curved out from the stump. Snapping off a piece of the fungus, I smelled the woody pulp, then dropped it. I pissed on the thick segmented bark of a tilting pine, tried to see how high I could extend the darker wet bark, the water splattering my feet. I held my breath as I carried back the suitcase and gauged my steps to arrive on my left foot. I began to jog. As I passed the water hazard, George stood up, the water rushing off him, pale and slick in black water to his knees. He waded to the fairway and ran towards a bank of sandtraps.

I set the suitcase before the man, who unknotted the twine, breathing with abrupt exhalations from his nostrils. He coiled the sisal around the stiff fingers of one hand. Angling the lid so that I could not see in, he opened the suitcase and rummaged about. "A big tambourine," he said and removed a lipstick. "To keep in mind your prize." And he smeared magenta on his cracked lips, stretching the lower lip expertly, sucking color onto the upper. He giggled and the grey hairs on his cheeks bristled.

I lept up.

From nowhere, George stepped past the suitcase. "Pay your debts," he said, "or bear the consequences." He was caked in sand. On his face and his chest and his arms: sand. He rubbed his palms on his thighs and sand trickled down. The cut was bleeding openly. The old man touched my calf.

I ran. I sprang past the man in lipstick and ran, rushing over the wet grass. George chased me, our feet flicking up clear drops of water. The jade grass spilled into the dark. The pines were flat as knives.

We ran through jets of water towards the 14th tee, which rose as a low, flat mound. Then we were past it, neither gaining on the other. As I ran, I tasted a garlic flavor, my mouth filling with saliva. I breathed the sour odor of mowed grass. I spit, my chest tight as a fist. A black hose curled through the grass and the hairs on my arms lifted in chills.

George began to lag.

A gang-mower rose suddenly from the dark, deserted in the ankle deep grass between the fairways. I could just make out the tractor hitch, tilting into the grass, turned at an angle to the mower. An image of its wheels formed in my mind: iron wheels notched like coins. Over the first cylinder of blades hung the huge sagging intestines of a horse.

“David, come back,” yelled George. He slowed to a walk, then stopped. “Come back. I was only kidding.”

But I ran on. Down a long gentle slope, I ran even faster, hips rolling with each stride, white legs reckless. I felt the air pushing over my body, my hair streaming, heart pounding. I threw myself to the ground, pressed my body to the sharp grass, as violets sprouted from my throat.

The old man, of course, stole our clothes.