The Mechanisms of Injury

David W. Lavender

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The class meets on Monday nights in the new annex of the old Public Library in a quiet, cozy room where the very idea of calamity seems as faint and undetectable as a shock victim’s slippery pulse. There’s recessed lighting, the heady smell of fresh paint, and the kind of carpet that makes you want to take your shoes off and curl your toes—but no windows, so Marilyn, the instructor, does her best to dress things up by tacking surplus Red Cross posters on each of the four bare walls. She’s only got a few minutes between the time the last of the origami folks file out and her own students show up, which is probably why the posters always seem crooked. Or maybe it’s by design. Walter wouldn’t know because he’s never shown up early enough to see Marilyn at work with the push pins. Usually, he hunkers down by the New Arrivals shelf and pretends to scan book spines until the last of his classmates arrives. Then he stands, dizzy from squatting so long, and heads for the annex. On the way, he passes elderly women clutching delicate, bright-colored cranes.

Tonight, a warning about blood-borne pathogens tilts from the west wall. On the east wall, at the opposite angle, leans a poster showing a group of ethnically mixed firefighters ranged before their shiny engine, all of them smiling from beneath their formidable helmets. On the north wall, an action shot: two men in hard hats—one, employing the pack-strap carry Marilyn taught the class two weeks ago, is dragging the other from the scene of a nasty industrial accident. Purple smoke billows at his heels, and the slant of the poster makes it look like hard work. Carrying all that weight uphill. Walter has studiously taken a seat with his back to the south wall where Marilyn’s hung a poster of a pretty woman in a red bathing suit kneeling by a child prostrate in the sand. He’s convinced he’s seen this woman before, sans Speedo, splayed across the pixels of his seventeen inch, SuperScan computer screen: Smut Pic of the Day. He knows he’s probably wrong, but doesn’t want to spend the next couple of hours in lustful speculation, doesn’t need to be reminded of his own cravings.
and the pathetically hollow manner in which he's been satisfying them of late. He's been free-falling in hyperspace for the past several months now and his sister, for one, has told him it's high time he get a life! She has the habit of ticking off his faults on fingers that are almost identical to his own: thirty-three, no wife, no kids, a job that requires he go brain dead for forty hours a week, and an internet bill that could finance a small mortgage. She tells him every chance she gets that he's hardly doing the gene pool proud.

Walter always counters that he had a life, once.

The last time he said this they were sitting in the sunken pit that passed for the living room of his sister's duplex. "Wally," his sister sighed, "you know that doesn't count. That was over way before you 'lost' it." She was working on a hook rug while Walter gave his nephew a half-hearted bronco ride on his knee. The whole house was done up in crowded country cute. Folksy knick-knacks jammed together on the end-tables, the walls were hung with hand-made quilts, and the furniture had been artfully 'pre-distressed' to look as if it had been pirated from some farmhouse in Vermont. When he'd arrived, Walter's sister had been out in the garage taking a claw hammer to a hope chest.

"A loss is a loss," Walter insisted, following it with a miserable, horsey whimper. His nephew laughed and pawed at the air.

"Anyway," his sister went on, yanking yarn, "that was back in January. It's now practically November. I think the period for mourning, assuming there even was one, is officially over."

"Can you believe it?" Walter asked his nephew. "My wife does an endo in her Plymouth, and your mom, here, thinks I should just suck it up and deal."

"Your ex-wife," his sister corrected. "And I'd be the last to speak ill of the dead, but your Amy was no saint. The drunk that hit her probably did you a favor."

These were harsh words and they carried a dull, almost delicious sting. Walter leaned closer to the boy, letting his voice drop halfway to a whisper. "Plus, she was pregnant." He lingered over the last word, letting his tongue work the syllables like he was probing a bad tooth.

"By whatever schmuck it was she left you for!" His sister stabbed the hook through the first hole in the next row. "Hon-
estly, Wally, did you have to take classes to qualify as such a certified loser? Sometimes I can hardly believe you’re my own brother. Maybe you should save your pity for the rest of us.”

“Hey,” Walter started in, “I think if anyone here deserves a little pity—”

“Oh, please. I hope you didn’t come by hoping to be coddled, because this house is a designated No Sniveling Zone. If Mom were still with us, she’d tell you the same thing; it’s time you get off your duff and get over it.”

Walter had felt a familiar slosh in his nephew’s diaper and lifted the boy to reveal a dark blot on his jeans. “I think someone needs a change,” he’d told his sister.

“That’s just what I’m saying.”

A *Yearn to Yearn*, the quarterly catalogue his sister received from the community college extension program, listed over a hundred Adult Ed courses ranging from tole painting to do-it-yourself genealogy to a class that in a single Saturday empowered you to act as a Notary Public anywhere in the state.

“Think of it,” his sister had suggested, “as a way to get out and meet some people. Real people, not like those ghosts in your goddamned machine. Who knows? This could be your ticket to kick. Maybe shake the silicon monkey once and for all. Goodbye plug-in drug!”

“Right,” Walter snorted, “become a real rug master like you.”

“There’s worse ways to spend your time,” she countered. “Besides, you shouldn’t be pissy with people you’re borrowing money from.”

In the end, he’d had to hit her up for sixty-five dollars over and above the balance due on his phone bill so he could make tuition on an eight-week course in Advanced First Aid. His sister wanted proof that he’d actually enrolled, so he’d swung by the duplex after that first Monday night and shown her the thick book that Marilyn had passed out. The cover read *Emergency First Response*! Inside, there were sections covering everything from Soft Tissue Injuries, to Poisoning, to Multiple Casualty Incidents. An entire chapter was devoted to nothing but Bleeding. His sister had flipped through the pages, taking note of the illustrations which, even if they were re-enactments, were pretty gruesome
which is supposed to approximate the rib-resistance of a middle-aged man in cardiac arrest. Marilyn passes them out like party favors, one for each student. Walter considers his. Up close, the bald plastic head looks like the fellow in that Munch painting, pre-scream.

Before they get intimate with the ACTARS, Marilyn wants them to practice the head tilt on a real person—meaning, each other. This is the part Walter likes least about the class. It's been a long time since he's had call to touch another human, and he's grown accustomed to the clean feel of his computer keys. It would be okay, would be wonderful in fact, if he were ever paired with Diane, who's a rookie cop, one of the new female recruits that the city has hired under pressure of lawsuit. She's surprisingly petite, has clear, cream-colored skin and wears her dark hair borderline butch in a stylish cut that makes her seem even smaller than she is. Walter figures that she wouldn't have to lean much to look through a driver's side window and demand license and registration. She has a no-nonsense manner that he finds oddly attractive, though he suspects it's just a front to go with the job. He'd like to find out, but hasn't had the nerve to approach her during the mid-class break when everyone heads for the library's cramped vending room to purchase stale nuts and candy bars that they wash down with a hot brown liquid that's sold as coffee at a quarter a cup. He certainly hasn't been paired with her. Marilyn, ever gender sensitive, always sticks Diane with Ramona, the only other female student. Tonight, as usual, Walter gets partnered with Mr. Heebert, a high school math teacher cum football coach who, like Diane, needs regular re-certification as part of his job. Everyone, it seems, is taking the course for a reason. Even Ramona, who manages the office at the local Redi-Mix, has signed up as that company's designated Industrial Safety Planner. Walter, apparently, is the only one who's taking the class for fun.

Coach Heebert approaches life like it's a serial wind sprint. "Hup, hup, Wally!" he barks. "Let's check those airways. Who's gonna be first?" Before Walter can even put off volunteering, the coach has punched him in the arm, hard enough to hurt, and begun stretching himself out on the carpet. "Me? Okay, pal," he winks, giving Walter the go-ahead, "Let's save a life!"

Up at the front of the class, Marilyn is saying, louder than
necessary, “Primary Survey first. Remember your ABCs, people. Airway, Breathing and Circulation!”

In unison, Walter and the other non-victims ask, “Are you okay?” Coach Heebert, of course, says nothing. His eyes are closed and he appears to be holding his breath. Walter feigns putting an ear to his chest, then gingerly checks the carotid artery for a pulse, which turns out to be strong. No way you can fake that. The beat of the other man’s blood in his own fingertips gives Walter the willies. As quickly as he can, he grabs the coach’s head and tilts it back until the other man’s chin is pointing at the regular pattern of round holes in the acoustic ceiling. There’s a gray stubble along Coach Heebert’s solid jaw, the feel of which Walter does his best to ignore. He wipes his hands on his thighs, sits back and waits for the others to finish. Beneath him, the coach starts making a gurgling noise like a goose being slowly strangled: nyek, ny nog honks. Walter ignores him, but Coach Heebert keeps it up, getting louder until, just as Marilyn is coming up to check on them, the coach opens his eyes, grabs his partner by the arm and says, “No good, Wally. You forgot to check inside my mouth. Hell, I could’ve swallowed my tongue by now. Why, I’d be a corpse thanks to you!”

“That’s right,” Marilyn says, squatting by the coach. “It’s never enough just to tilt the head. You’ve got to physically check the airway.” She hooks one finger and mimics scooping out the inside of Coach Heebert’s mouth. “Your victim could be choking on anything. Even his own vomit.”

“Had a kid gag on his own tooth guard once,” the coach volunteers. “Got hit that hard.”

“Right,” Walter nods to them both. “I’ll try and remember next time.”

Marilyn reminds him coolly, “In real life, trying isn’t enough. Doing is what counts.”

When it’s Walter’s turn to play victim, Coach Heebert scrapes a forefinger along his tongue a couple of times for good measure. It tastes bitter, and Walter doesn’t even want to imagine where it’s been. Afterward, he sits up and looks around and wishes there were some place to spit.

They spend the next half hour practicing chest compressions on the ACTARS. One and-two-and-three-and-four. . . . It’s harder
than it looks. After giving his ACTAR the requisite fifteen pumps, he barely has enough breath left to inflate the plastic bag that doubles for lungs. Marilyn keeps them at it until Walter figures his dummy would’ve died a dozen times over. When he checks the others, he sees that the coach hasn’t even broken a sweat. Diane’s pretty mouth is the picture of resolve; she’s straddling her own ACTAR, pumping away like she could keep it up forever. Walter ignores the scowl he’s getting from Marilyn, takes a break, wondering how he’s let himself go so soft. All this exercise has him hankering for a smoke. When Marilyn wanders up and wants to know why he’s stopped, Walter tells her the victim was successfully revived. He holds up the ACTAR like it’s a ventriloquist’s dummy and mumbles through mostly closed lips, “I owe my life to Walter!”

“Ha, ha,” Marilyn says, clearly un-amused, but behind her Walter glimpses Diane grinning up at him as she finishes giving two hearty breaths and gets ready to start in again with the chest compressions.

“Okay, everybody,” Marilyn decides. “That’s enough for now.”

Later, in the parking lot, he has his chance, and blows it. Marilyn’s still inside packing up her lightweight dummies, but her students are all gathered in a group out front, car keys jingling, breath steaming in the not-quite-yet-winter air. Everyone’s hanging out, enjoying a little post-class camaraderie. Coach Heebert, ever effusive, suggests that they should all make like real students and go get a cup of coffee or maybe a beer. But this just reminds everyone that there’s somewhere else they’re supposed to be. The group wavers and then begins to break up, everyone agreeing to shoot for next week.

Walter’s car, it turns out, is parked next to Diane’s, and so they head off together. She drives a black Toyota 4-Runner with fog lights and custom wheel rims and an extra gas can strapped on back by the spare. It looks sleek and solid, but slightly downsized given that it’s a Japanese make. A compact bundle of get-up-and-go, Walter thinks, next to which his own K-car, with its primer paint and duct-taped taillight looks downright frumpy.

“I could cite you for that,” Diane says, nodding toward the rear of his car.
Walter starts in on making lame excuses before he realizes, too late, that she's only kidding. In the soft light of the street lamp, her smile is like a stray moonbeam. It makes him dizzy. He leans against his car and begins fishing in his pocket for a cigarette, then decides against it. Diane hits a button on her key chain and the 4-Runner chirps and comes to life. Door locks pop up and the dome light flickers on. "Well," she says, "I guess I'll see you next week?"

"Right," Walter says, but for a moment neither of them moves. There's a frost forming on the surface of both cars and on the asphalt beneath them. When another car backs out of its space, its headlights sweep a field of diamonds at their feet. Diane is briefly backlit by the passing lights. She's just waiting, Walter's convinced, for him to give her a reason to linger. He grinds the grey matter, searching for something to say. But in the time it takes a fleeting halo to form and vanish around Diane's close-cropped head, about a million synapses misfire and fizzle in his own.

"Right," she echoes at last, and then the moment's clearly gone. She climbs up into her truck and backs away, leaving Walter all alone, his ass growing cold and his pants beginning to stick to the frosted fender.

The night the hospital called, his divorce had been final for exactly three days. There'd been an unseasonable thaw, a week of highs in the forties and a steady rain that made the snow slump back to reveal patches of brown lawn beneath holiday decorations that had yet to be taken in. All around the neighborhood, plastic Santas and reindeer stood marooned on barren grass. Then overnight—clearing skies and bitter cold again, everything iced over under a full moon. Crusty snow banks sparkled like heaped crystals. Tree limbs turned eerily luminescent in the dead of night, and the parking lot gleamed like the surface of a pond, throwing his headlights back at him as he crept into a space at Mercy General, tapping at the brakes like there was an egg under the pedal he was afraid of cracking. Later, the police would speculate that it was the ice as much as the booze that had caused it all, like maybe it was an act of God or Nature—fate, and not just some drunk with no business being on the road. The doctor, though,
had been too weary to be anything but blunt. He told Walter that Amy had arrived minus most of her brain pan. Massive trauma. The kind of thing that’s usually restricted to war zones. He told him they’d tried to keep her vitals going for as long as possible, because of the baby. But the fetus was only about six weeks along, seven max. “The chances were slim to none,” the doctor said. While he spoke, his fingers picked at the rim of his white cup and flicked bits of styrofoam into the quarter inch of cold coffee at the base.

When he jiggled the cup, the tiny pieces chased each other around and around.

“It was pretty much over before we even got to her, “the doctor told him. “I’m sorry.” He dropped the cup into a waste basket, and Walter worked out the math.

Amy had left him barely a month before, but for a long time prior to that, the most she’d been willing to do was jerk him off now and then while they sat and watched TV. For Walter, it wasn’t so much sex as self-loathing. He’d whine about needs, but what he increasingly came to need was first the almost ugly look on her face—her jaw locked like a dead bolt, one eyebrow winched toward the other, and the same sum of passion she might bring to the task of scrubbing a burnt pot—and then the way her features dissolved and went blank as he spasmed back into the cushions of the couch, desperate to kiss her, even as she wiped her sticky hand across his leg and reached for the remote and thumbed the volume up. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d actually made love. Clearly, her own needs were being taken care of by someone else. She told him as much in the end, but Walter never found out who. He never got a name. Or even an address, later, when she’d insisted that everything be sent care of her lawyer. The only reason the police had called Walter was that she hadn’t gotten around yet to changing the last name on her driver’s license. There in the hospital, as the doctor cleared his throat and turned and strode off down the hall, it dawned on Walter that this tragedy really belonged to some other man. For the first time all evening, he wanted to weep.

But now, driving home from the library, Walter finds that for once his mind isn’t clotted with the thought of Amy. He’s thinking about Diane and the way she hesitated before climbing into
her car. He smacks the steering wheel a couple of times and
mentally kicks himself over the missed opening. It amazes him
he can manage to be so inept. A car passes in the opposite direc-
tion, its high beams right in his face. He looks away and catches
sight of his own reflection flashing in the rearview mirror, stunned
eyes and a pale forehead flickering to life.

“What, you like being alone?” he asks. The sound of his own
voice startles him, but when he looks directly at the mirror, all he
sees are taillights receding. Half a block ahead is an empty inter-
section, the light changing to yellow. He takes a deep breath and
squeezes his eyes shut and stomps on the gas. He feels the car
lurch forward. As slowly as he dares, he counts: One. Two. Three.
When he opens his eyes again, the stoplight’s behind him, and
his vision jerks with the beat of his heart. He blows out his breath
and steers the rumbling K-car into the lot of an all-night market.

It’s late, and the place is practically deserted. Mostly it’s night-
shift stockers swabbing areas ringed by “Wet Floor” signs or
spraying replenished produce bins or straightening boxes along
well-dusted shelves. There’s the sharp smell of ammonia, and
not a trace of disorder—no gaps in the cereal aisle, no finger-
prints on the freezer door, no fog on the inside of the glass.
Bread loaves are lined up like a regiment. At the end of one aisle,
dozens of identical soup cans are stacked in a perfect pyramid,
all the labels turned in the same direction. Walter finds the sight
of it, the solid and assertive shape, suddenly overwhelming and
he has to chide himself, They’re soup cans for Christ’s sake! He grabs
a six-pack of beer from the cooler in the back of the store and
heads for the checkout.

Out of habit, he finds himself studying the other men in the
place. Most of the stockers seem too young, barely out of ado-
lescence. There’s an old guy wheeling his cart distractedly, tap-
ing its nose into displays, backing up, then moving on. By the
milk section, a man is sorting through the cartons, scrutinizing
expiration dates. His parka’s unzipped and he’s got a gut like he’s
stuffed a watermelon up his shirt. Not Amy’s type at all. The guy
at the register has silver hair, but looks pretty young all the same.
Mid-forties, maybe. His sleeves are rolled up, and from the meat
in his forearms it’s pretty obvious he works out. He’s got an
elaborate mustache that sweeps up toward his ears, just the sort
of extravagance that Amy might have favored. Walter can make out creases around the guy's eyes that could have been etched there by grief, or by guilt. The man runs the beer across the scanner, the machine chatters and Walter waits for the total to pop up.

After his ex-wife's death, Walter had managed to finesse a one-week bereavement leave and spent the entire time sitting by the phone, waiting for the call he figured eventually had to come. The funeral, though well-advertised, had been perfunctory and sparsely attended. Amy's only living relative, a sister in Seattle, sent flowers and a card that had a name, but nothing else, scribbled beneath the imprinted sentiment. A small gang of women from Amy's office showed up and stood together in one corner whispering among themselves. Now and then they threw Walter the sort of closed-lip looks that suggested he wouldn't get much information from them even if he tried. The only other males in attendance were his nephew and his brother-in-law.

For that first week, as he sat and waited by the phone, Walter had tried to put himself in the shoes of the other man, his own shadowy double, whom he'd come to think of as a silhouette of pure black surrounded by white, like a pop-up target at a shooting range. He wasn't quite sure what to feel. On the one hand, the guy had been boning Walter's wife, a simple truth that, each time he entertained it, immediately prompted a deep and primal rage that lunged like an attack dog against its leash, but which tended just as quickly to bubble over into a whimpering self-pity, something which Walter, the cuckold, both relished and despised. He tried to fan his anger by focusing on the fact that Mr. Mystery, after screwing Amy for who knew how long, had gone all soft when push came to shove, had shriveled up and slunk away. What a coward! What a callous bastard! But on the other hand, it was entirely possible that Mr. Mystery didn't even know—not just about the baby, but about Amy, too—in which case Walter felt a stage sort of kinship for this other fellow who he imagined, at certain moments, to be much like himself, sitting abandoned by a phone somewhere, wondering what the hell he'd done wrong, and waiting for a call that would never come. Walter had considered taking out a classified ad, some sort of notification, but
couldn’t decide how best to word it. When he consulted his sister, she looked at him sideways. “What, are you nuts? You think you owe this creep anything? If he doesn’t read the obituaries, that’s his problem.”

Back in his apartment, Walter pops open one of the beers, turns his computer on and waits for it to boot up. He logs onto the net and types in the URL for Hardcore Harry’s House of Sin. After a few seconds, a familiar screen comes up, a naked woman smiling beneath a pair of devil’s horns. She’s got a pitchfork in one hand and a pointy tail curling out from behind her ass, the tip of which jerks up and down in a bit of crude animation. Walter clicks on the Members Entry button and begins to type in his password only to find that he’s forgotten it. It’s been a couple of weeks, maybe longer, since he’s logged on, and he wonders if he should take this as a good sign, even as he digs through his desk drawer in search of the scrap of paper on which he’s scribbled down his passwords. When the main menu comes up, he lets the cursor slide by “Stories” and “Chat” and clicks on “Photo Gallery.” The next screen offers links to more than a thousand high-res jpegs, all grouped by category. Walter clicks on “Couples” and sits back and sips his beer and waits for the first page of thumbnails to download.

It was Amy who’d first begun dabbling in on-line porn. Walter had gotten them on the internet thinking: News, Weather and Sports, but Amy had quickly discerned in the technology an astonishing marriage of access and privacy—like she could stroll every red light district in the world and never leave her own home! It wasn’t long before she was jumping on the search engines and riding them to all the raunchier sites. She’d sit there half-naked in the desk chair, her tongue tracing her top lip in the green glow of the screen, Walter behind her, kneading her shoulders as she click-click-clicked through one image after another before settling on a shot whose particular composition sent a jolt of pleasure that Walter could feel ripple up through his fingertips. She’d reach up and take his hand and, with her fingers on his, pinch her own nipple and suck in a sharp breath. Getting wet on the net, she called it. She started spending hours in chatrooms—first with Walter, then on her own. She’d don different identities and send
out streams of titillating type that always converged on the same dark territory. When Walter tried to prick the bubble, when he pointed out that the others on-line with her—Young & Hung, or Stud Muffin, or even Daddy’s Little Angel—that any one, or all of them might be a fat guy with bad teeth and flat feet spanking the monkey somewhere in Cleveland, Amy would look up at him, flushed and distracted, and ask, “So?” It was like the computer was a window onto a world where sex was the swampy thing she’d always secretly believed it to be, a dank and musky place with endless byways where you might push your prow through a curtain of Spanish moss and come upon a creature you’d never imagined existed, let alone recognized as yourself. She’d tell Walter to love her so nasty it made him weak in the knees. But the more often she logged on, the more Walter came to feel like a bit player in these head games of hers. He started having a hard time distinguishing himself from any one of the various aids and accouterments which Amy began to order on-line and bring with her into bed.

Early on, she’d told him that what she liked about the smutty pictures wasn’t so much that their carnality was so raw and exposed, though that was part of it. Rather, it was the way they froze time, flashed on a single, sordid instant and left the rest to the imagination. They were better than videos that way. You could extrapolate forward or back, work out all the moves—the shedding of street clothes, the foreplay, the fumbling for a right fit—that had led up to the moment, or let your mind wander on to what might be coming next. When she said this, Walter had a bad feeling, his mind running forward, thinking not “what,” but “who.” And he’d been right, hadn’t he?

Walter picks out a thumbnail and clicks on it to enlarge the photo. The screen fills with the image of a woman straddling her partner. Her back glistens with sweat and her face, even with the mussed bangs and the bad light, is surprisingly pretty. She’s looking back over her shoulder at the camera, just starting to smile, her eyes half-crescents under lowered lids as she lowers herself down. It’s easy to imagine Amy in the same pose. The man beneath her is just a gangly pair of legs and a stiff prick, which is good. Walter favors photos where the man’s face is obscured. He
likes to do a little extrapolating of his own. Once she’d left him for real, Walter had taken to trolling through images, searching for ones in which the man was just a tensed ass or a headless trunk. He’d use the computer’s zoom function to blow up patches of body hair, or the thick veins in a forearm, or any quirky features of the skin—a big mole, a scar, or a blue tattoo. The larger he made the images, the more these small details would distort and become lost in a pixilated blur, but the easier it was, strangely enough, for Walter to begin fleshing in the outline of the man he knew must be responsible for Amy’s arriving home later and later each evening, and then not at all. He’d shrink the picture back down to normal size and feel himself split—his body responding to the subjects captured mid-rut, his mind floating somewhere above, thinking of a dead baby that had none of his blood.

Walter clicks on another thumbnail, then another. Tonight, it isn’t working. He can’t summon the right blend of wormy lust and insipid self-pity. Worse, the people in the pictures keep melting into so many body parts—ankles and elbows, torsos and limbs—more frail than robust, vulnerable. Walter studies them in terms of potential occlusions and fractures, worries over the sudden misalignment of skin and bone. He hears Marilyn’s voice drilling the class on survey and response, and as he lingers on one shot after another, he tries to work out the mechanism of injury. Torn ligaments seem likely, and muscle strain. He imagines applying ice to the latisimus dorsi, or guiding a dislocated shoulder back into place, or binding a wrist that’s been snapped from being thrust against a bedpost. When he zooms in on a man’s arched back, he can identify the vertebrae by number, descending from the cervical on through the thoracic and the lumbar. He begins to see positions in terms of distal and radial—who’s closer to the woman’s heart, who’s further away. In one shot, a man lifts a slim brunette from his lap and his hands are right where the brachial pulse would be.

After fifteen minutes, Walter shuts off the machine.

In bed, he flips through a few pages of his text book. He’s read it all the way through once already, and so he sets the book aside, switches off the light and tries to mentally review what he’s learned so far while he lies there and waits for sleep. They’ve
covered a lot of ground—from puncture wounds to asphyxiation to all sorts of different burns. Walter remembers most of it in bits and pieces, all of it jumbled like the mess behind his bathroom mirror. He wonders whether or not, if called on in an emergency, he’d wind up doing more harm than good. The Monday before had included an overview of shock, which Marilyn had informed her students was the most insidious killer of all. You could think you’d done everything right, attended to all the surface injuries, and still you might find your victim going south on you, just slipping away. The serious injuries might lie below the surface of the skin, which is why the Secondary Survey is so crucial. Stretched out in bed, Walter is aware of himself slipping into a dream. The heater kicks in, causing the curtains to sway and toss shadows around the darkened room. He closes his eyes and listens to the hum of the digital clock. A shape which he dimly recognizes as Diane congeals and hovers in the area above him. She’s wearing her uniform and badge, but instead of blue pants, she’s got on garters and silk stockings. He can’t tell if she’s wearing underwear. Walter’s own shirt is open and her soft hands are on his skin, moving gently as she palpates the region immediately below the ribs. Slowly, she probes the area above his liver, her fingers cautious, like a pastry chef pressing designs into a delicate dough. Her hands drift down toward his spleen, but no lower. At first Walter’s confused, until it dawns on him that what she’s doing is feeling for any unusual distention. For any epidermal rigidity. For the sort of bruising you can feel, but not see. Sure signs of internal bleeding. But just her touch alone is enough to make everything inside him break apart and rupture in the most delightful way, even as his breathing slides into the steady rhythms. And then the phone rings.

Walter blinks his eyes open and stumbles out of bed. His first, impossible hope is that Diane has managed to get a hold of his number and chosen of all moments this precise one to call him—ESP, he thinks, or mental telepathy, or some other unearthly synchronicity. But he shakes off this unlikelihood along with his sleep. He scrambles for the phone and answers, “Hello?”

There’s nothing but a stuttered breathing on the other end, a half gasp followed by a volley of truncated sobs. “Hello?” he asks again.
A voice, pinched with emotion but decidedly male, says, “I’m . . . I’m looking for someone.”

Suddenly Walter’s wide awake. He can’t believe it. After waiting for months, here the call’s finally come and caught him unawares. He doesn’t know what to say. He’s done probably a hundred dry runs. He’s picked up the receiver and practiced spitting every curse he could think of into the dial tone. Has unleashed his heart into the hum. He’s slammed the phone back into its cradle a dozen different ways. Other nights, he’s forced himself to be calm, has rehearsed the role of bearer of bad news, has pitched his voice at a level that might accommodate compassion, or even concern. Sometimes, he’s simply lifted the phone and said, “Dead”—over and over, till the word’s become a mantra, empty of all meaning. And yet now, shivering in his boxers, his feet chill on the kitchen floor, all he can come up with is the obvious. “Who is this?”

There’s a pause. “Who is this?” the voice asks, more aggressive now.

Walter detects a slightly upper crust clip to the words. Not quite British, but proper all the same. He pictures bloodless lips, a nose hooked like beak. “I asked first,” he says.

The voice on the other end sniffs once. “Listen here, I’m in no mood for games.”

There’s noise in background. Music? Yes, something classical, the sonorous lament of a string section overlaid by the other man’s deep sigh. “Have I rung the wrong number?” he asks after a moment. “Just what number have I dialed?”

Walter ignores him. “Who are you trying to reach?”

There’s another pause. Then the sound of a swallow followed by the muffled thunk of a glass being set upon a table.

“Who are you?” Walter demands, but the line clicks and goes dead.

Walter spends the next week scanning crowds, picking out strange faces, searching for one that might match the voice on the phone. Despite the odds of being a wrong number, he’s suspicious of coincidence. Real life, he’s convinced, doesn’t work that way. Life! What a terrible tease it is. Tantalizing you with a snapshot of a
single happy moment, letting you believe you can control what comes next. Accidents, he's decided, are anything but.

The following Monday, he's back at the New Arrivals shelf. There are a couple of biographies he doesn't recognize, a new mystery or two. He pulls down a fat volume and cracks open the spine. The pages have sharp edges and give off a pleasant, inky smell. He's holding the book up to his nose when he's startled by the sight of Diane strolling not toward the annex, but toward him. Her hair looks slightly damp, as if she's just showered. Her face looks fresh scrubbed. The tips of her ears are bright pink in the fluorescent light.

"Hey, there." she says. "Anything good?"

Walter closes the book in his hands. "Don't know. Just browsing. Smelling, actually." He re-shelves the book and realizes too late he's put it upside down.

"Mmm," She smiles. "That new book thing. I know what you mean." She traces a finger along the shelf, letting her nail click against each dust jacket like the pickets of a fence.

Walter's about to ask her if she reads much, when over her shoulder he spots a man entering the library. Not just any man, the man. Mr. Mystery himself. He's wearing tweed beneath a camel hair overcoat, and his hands are sheathed in expensive looking leather gloves. Everything about him—the longish hair swept back from an angular forehead, the smug set of his shoulders, the almost proprietary air with which he strides toward the periodicals section and plucks up a journal—all of it matches the composite Walter's been carrying around with him all week. The man shrugs off his coat and drapes it over the arm of a chair, establishing his claim. Walter goes rigid. Watching the man remove first one glove, then the other, he feels an almost irresistible urge to break all his fingers, snap every knuckle one by one. He wants to gouge out those eyes that have looked upon Amy, wants to bite off that patrician nose that has sampled her most private scents. He wants to discharge such a flurry of blows, rain them down around the man's head, that he'll be left bruised and reeling for months afterward, unable to banish the ache. He's so distracted by the sudden boil in his blood that when Diane taps him in the chest with the comer of her first aid manual, he mistakes it for the pounding of his own heart.
“So,” she asks, “you ready for another round?”

Walter looks down and finds himself held in her pretty gaze, suspended in such a way that all she has to do is blink once and his rage begins to reform itself. Up close, she smells of apricots. Walter thinks it must be her shampoo. “Come again?”

“Chapter Ten,” she says, inventing her own title as she goes. “Splints and Slings and Other Fun Things. You ready?”

“Oh. Sure,” he says. “I’ve been boning up all week.”

It’s a bad pun, but Diane is kind enough not to care. She laughs, and there’s such an effortless generosity in the sound of it, the way it ripples back and forth between insouciance and something much closer to grace, that Walter is momentarily stunned. He feels something tear, not within him, but without, like a small rent in whatever noxious cloud has been gathered about him since Amy’s death, choking him on the fumes of his own obsessions. How long, he wonders, has his heart been bounded by a belief in life’s parsimony? When had he decided that happiness was a commodity doled out but once in a lifetime, and then only in meager allotments paid for over time in daily installments of bitterness and regret?

Diane looks at her watch. “Well,” she says. “It’s almost time. Shall we?” She nods her head toward the annex, her gesture an invitation—limited for now, but perhaps only for now. He glances once more at the man in Periodicals, whom it suddenly seems possible to see as just another stranger. A man with a magazine, nothing more. Then he steps after Diane who is saying, “So, I’ve been wondering...”

“You. Why you’re taking this course.” She throws him a curious look. “I mean, does this go with your work? Or is it just a hobby?”

“More like self-improvement,” Walter tells her. “A yearn to learn.”

“Ha!” Diane snorts. “You don’t seem to be learning all that much.” She looks over at him quickly. “I mean, no offense. But some the material seems to have you pretty stumped.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Maybe you could use a study partner.”

Walter considers this. Considers her. “Could be.”
The hallway is suddenly clogged with old ladies. This week it’s flowers: colorful bouquets of folded camellias and tulips and lilies all bending cheerfully from green paper stems. Walter and Diane step aside to let the procession pass. His hand brushes her arm, which is firm beneath her blouse. She says, “But jeeze. Listen to me! I don’t mean to pry or anything.”

“No,” Walter tells her. “It’s okay. I’m not even sure why I’m here myself. I guess I needed a little excitement in my life.”

Diane hesitates, then asks, “Ever date a cop?”

She starts to blush, then turns and steps through the classroom door.

They spend the first half hour working with Sam splints and triangular bandages and rolls of white adhesive tape. Walter keeps making a mess of it. At one point he’s got the coach trussed up like something out of *Tales from the Crypt*. The bandages are tight where they shouldn’t be, and loose where they should, stray ends trailing all over the place. “I don’t think so, Wally,” Coach says. “I can’t feel my fingers. And look!” He jerks himself around and the arm Walter’s been trying to brace flops free.

Later, Marilyn takes down the two back boards she’s had propped against the wall since the start of class. After walking everyone through the straps and buckles, she lays out the scenario. She tells them to imagine some guy who’s taken a nose dive from a tall ladder. “You’ve got breathing and a strong pulse, but your house painter’s unconscious and can’t respond to verbal stimuli. Given the mechanism of injury, of course you suspect the worst.” Then she divides her students into two groups. Diane joins Walter and the Coach, along with two younger guys—one who lifeguards during the summers, and the other who’s getting ready to start his EMT training. Everyone agrees Walter should play the victim.

“You’re out cold,” Coach Heebert reminds him. “This shouldn’t be hard.”

Walter gets prone on the carpet, closes his eyes and does his best to go limp. The coach is right; it’s easy. While the three men fiddle with the back board, getting it ready, Diane takes up position above Walter’s head. Using the technique Marilyn’s demonstrated, she stabilizes his head and neck. Her thumbs are at his...
temples, her fingers spread out along his jaw. "Mmmm." Walter tells her, eyes still shut. "That feels about right."

"Shush," she laughs. "You're supposed to be unconscious."

The three men crouch alongside him at his shoulders, waist and knees. On the count of three, they gently roll Walter on his side and slide the board underneath him. Diane keeps on cradling his head. Then they lower him back down and start strapping him in. Someone fits a foam collar around his neck, and Diane lets go.

"Feels tight," Walter grunts, his chin hampered by the collar.

"Has to be," Diane reminds him. "You don't want to be paralyzed for life, do you?"

Walter's not so sure. With the straps snug and the collar in place, he can't move at all and he likes the way it feels. Relaxed and secure at the same time. When he opens his eyes, he sees Diane above him. It's his dream all over again, slightly different, but better. She has a dimple in her chin, and another, larger depression where her throat meets her clavicle. She grins down at him and takes a deep breath that make her breasts swell beneath her shirt. "Ready?" she asks.

Coach Heebert says, "Okay, everybody. On three. . ."

And then Walter feels himself lifted.