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THE GUEST REALITY

I was wiping your face clean with my index finger.
Maybe I didn’t realize it had already been cleaned.
Then superimposition occurred and left an assortment.
For a bit, some faces in history
Were stealing outward, distinguished rubber noses
And carefully studied mannerisms
The audience so much liked.
Moderately until they planned out their own.

Then a clown and another clown are in a restaurant
In Budapest in the Fifties,
With mirrors and chandeliers, ice cream frosting and stale espresso.
They’ll be smiling at other people.
Maybe they look wisely sad
As their painted bodies sparkle.
That means there’s someplace else to go.
I DIDN'T EXPECT my son to stand up every time that I entered the room as if I were the Prom Queen, but he could have helped me with my packages when I came in from shopping. When he was a little boy, we always went to the store together. And he would cry if I didn't give him a loaf of bread or a box of Kleenex to carry into the house afterwards. Now he was six-foot three, and the big oaf just sat there at the dining room table tonight while I struggled through the doorway with two bags of groceries and a box of new shoes. I didn't know where I went wrong.

Other mothers had it better. Lily Carlson, who lived three blocks over, said that she just tooted her horn when she drove into the garage and her Daphne came running out of the house to help. I tried that once. Matthew showed himself. "Your horn works!" he yelled. "Try your lights!" Then he slammed the door.

Matthew and Daphne dated for a year until he broke it off that fall for one of the cheerleaders. Her name was Jenny, and she was very attractive with long legs and a bust like a grown woman. Lily and I didn't talk about it, but Daphne was smothering Matthew. One night she came over because he had gone somewhere without telling her, and she was worried about him. She sat in our living room for three hours and talked while I was trying to watch a PBS special on kids who murder their parents. From what I gathered, most of the parents had it coming.

Another thing about Matthew was that he was not polite with the girls now. He never opened doors for them, and I had heard him use rough language around Jenny. Some of his friends were worse. Will Monroe, who used so much mousse on his hair that he looked like an otter, left his date standing in our kitchen one Saturday night while he went somewhere with another girl. Will didn't go out for sports and had too much time on his hands.

"Hi," I said, setting my bags on the table. "How did the
game turn out?"

"What?" Matthew asked. He looked up as if I had surprised him.

"Didn't you play football this afternoon?" I asked. Matthew was just sitting there with his hands folded, as if he was waiting for something. His mouth was slightly open, and now he was giving me that who-are-you look that he has adopted lately. Shifting slightly on his chair, he grunted at me.

I was running late. Lily had insisted that I meet her at Holiday Mall and help her decide between a rayon blouse and a knit top. She allowed herself one new outfit a month and had already bought some cotton jodhpurs that would make any middle-aged woman look ridiculous. She finally decided on the knit top and was wearing it to Missoula next weekend. Her husband Phil was taking her to a George Benson concert over there for their anniversary.

I lifted a carton of milk out of the groceries and walked into the kitchen. Matthew still loved milk, which pleased me, and I took a glass out of the cupboard above the toaster and set it on the counter. Here in Great Falls, our milk cartons still had pictures of missing children on them even though everybody knew now that those children had been stolen by their fathers not kidnapped by strangers. I opened the milk and poured the glass full and studied a three year-old on the side of the carton. When Matthew was that age, Dan never would have stolen him if we had divorced. He didn't take an interest in the boy until Matthew could play catch out in the front yard.

While I was putting the milk in the refrigerator, I looked at the Great Falls High School Football Schedule, which was stuck on the refrigerator door by a Special Olympics magnet. Matthew's team had played Helena today, with the kickoff at two o'clock.

"Did you win?" I asked Matthew. "And do you know that next week is Homecoming?" I didn't hear anything from the dining room, so I stepped back until I could see Matthew. "Hey! Golden Boy!"

"What?" Matthew turned his head back and forth, as if he was trying to locate me, and I walked towards him with the glass of milk. We had a minor drug problem here in Great Falls, mostly
marijuana, and I supposed that sooner or later Matthew would give it a try.

"Are you okay?" I asked him. Now I was sure that he had played football because I saw the stubble on his face. On game day the boys didn't shave. And although he was blonde and his beard scanty, Matthew did look tough. I set the milk down in front of him and put a dried flower back in the Horn-of-Plenty centerpiece that I had put together yesterday.

I was very fond of Matthew. He was not named after the Saint but after Eddie Matthews, who played third base for the Milwaukee Braves when my husband Dan was a little boy. A few years ago Dan called me into the living room because Eddie Matthews was on television. Fat and bald and coarse-looking with a bad cigarette laugh, Eddie was selling his memorabilia—bats, gloves, and uniforms. He even held up an athletic supporter and wanted one hundred dollars for it. Dan said that Eddie had changed.

"We'll be eating soon," I said to Matthew. I sat down across from him and folded my hands in front of me too. "Do you have plans?"

Matthew stared at me. "What?"

"Plans. Are you taking Jenny to the movies?"

"Jenny?" Matthew scowled.

I sighed. "Where is your father?" I raised up in my chair and looked past Matthew out the window at our backyard. Somebody needed to rake up the leaves from the big ash beside the fence. And I could feel crumbs on the table, so I swept them off into the palm of my hand. Dan must have had a sandwich before he went to the game. If there was a game. "I'm going to start on dinner," I said to Matthew. "Maybe you could work on those leaves in the backyard."

"Yeah," Matthew said. He hadn't touched the milk. I watched him come around the table and amble past me through the kitchen instead of going into the garage. He was headed down the hall toward his bedroom, and I wondered if he and Jenny were having difficulties. I dumped the crumbs into one of the grocery bags and picked it up and walked back into the kitchen.

Growing up was hard nowadays. Kids were faced with all kinds of temptations that we never had. Drugs, MTV, those reli-
gious cults. But it was their friends from homes where there was no supervision that were the worst influence. I asked Dan, how could we raise Matthew to be a good citizen when he ran around with kids whose fathers had disappeared and whose mothers left the liquor cabinet unlocked while they flew off to Los Angeles for breast augmentation? That was the situation, apparently, at the Reed household. Charlie Reed was another of Matthew’s friends. And, I never came home from school and saw my mother having sex on the couch with a man covered with tattoos. He was from Malmstrom Air Force Base, apparently, and that’s what happened to Will Monroe. I had to listen to the whole story. No wonder he put too much mousse on his head and abandoned his dates. He must have been terribly distracted. And he couldn’t be good for Matthew.

The telephone beside me rang while I was chopping celery. Thinking it was Dan calling to tell me that he was drinking beer over at Carl Burke’s house, I let it ring. Carl was a neighbor, and whether the team won or lost he and Dan usually had a few after the game. After seven or eight rings, I dropped my knife and picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Baker, this is Daphne Carlson.”

“Yes,” I said, shifting the phone to my other ear. “How nice of you to call, Daphne.” She was a brown-noser, but I liked her.

I tucked the receiver between my neck and my shoulder and picked up my knife again. The green pepper was next, and I set it on my chopping block. Seeing a black spot on the side of the pepper, I cut it out. We would not get decent produce in the Great Falls supermarkets again until next June, so I would have trouble making salads for Dan and Matthew.

“I am calling to check on Matt,” Daphne said. “Is he okay?”

“Well, we appreciate it, Daphne. Would you like to speak to him?” I wished that people wouldn’t call him Matt.

“Oh, no, Mrs. Baker. I just want to be sure that he is all right. He collided with a player from Helena,” Daphne said, “and it was like a sonic boom. I mean, really.”

“Oh, dear,” I said. I dropped the knife and took the phone with my hand again. “Nobody told me. And he is acting funny.”

“He was unconscious, Mrs. Baker. Doctor Hoffman went out
on the field and waved ammonia capsules under his nose. He came over afterwards and told us that it was a concussion."

"Daphne, I really appreciate this call. And I am sorry that you and Matthew aren’t seeing each other these days."

"Oh, that’s okay, Mrs. Baker. It was good talking to you. Maybe Matt shouldn’t play, you know?"

After I hung up, I tiptoed down the hall and stopped in front of Matthew’s room. I didn’t hear anything, so I turned the door knob and looked in. Matthew was lying on his bed, facing the wall. His chest was moving, rising and falling regularly.

"Matthew?" I called. He rolled toward me. "Are you feeling okay?"

"What?"

"Never mind." I closed the door and stood in the hall. I needed the details on what had happened from Dan. And rather than finish the salad, I walked further down the hall to my study to read up on concussions in my back issues of Today’s Wellness Letter.

I was not a professional woman, but I did have my own study. It was originally the third bedroom of the house, but I took it over when it became obvious that we weren’t going to have another child. Because I couldn’t get pregnant again after Matthew was born, I started reading about infertility. Before long I had branched out and needed a place to keep my books and newspaper clippings, so Dan bought me a desk and put some shelves in the extra bedroom. It was one of those quiet agreements that take place in stable marriages. I didn’t make Dan go get a sperm count, and he let me have the third bedroom for my little activities.

I was not being modest when I called my activities little, as I knew women who got interested in something such as the cutting of trees in the rain forests and went hog wild. Regina Adams, who went to our church, was a fanatic about traveling. Every three months she was off on some adventure. And when she got back she gave a dinner party. But me, I wanted to know why I couldn’t have more children. I was soon in way over my head, but it was interesting.

Dan said that I was old-fashioned. He thought that I needed to get out of the house and get a job. I supposed that he was
right. But I thought that it was wrong when parents assumed that teenagers didn’t need much attention. I wanted to be here for Matthew, and I didn’t think that an apology was necessary.

Dan loved Matthew too. Ever since Matthew started playing Little League baseball, Dan had followed his sports career closely, going to every game or listening to it on the radio. Last year Dan drove to a football game in Glendive, three hundred and fifty miles away. The only time that I had seen Glendive was when we drove through it on our way to Great Falls. Great Falls was a metropolis by comparison.

I didn’t want to move here. Dan and I grew up in Milwaukee and met at a college party near Marquette. We lived in Wauwatosa until Dan got the offer from Montana Power. He was an engineer, and he was ready to leave the same day. He wore me down, I’m afraid, with his begging me to move. Dan said that it was more money, so I could stay home with Matthew. He was two years old then. I had a lousy job with a bank and, finally, one night after I had been stuck in traffic on Blue Mound Road for two hours, I said okay.

I liked it here now. Great Falls was an easy place to bring up a child. Not much crime. No gangs. And I had seen a change in Matthew since he had become a star halfback. He was much more self-confident. He would have been a bench warmer in Milwaukee, according to Dan.

Dan came in the door after I had finished the salad and was washing off two chickens in the sink. There was a long section in my Today’s Wellness Letter about headaches but nothing about concussions. I couldn’t smell any alcohol on Dan, so we could have a rational discussion about Matthew. Although we were supposed to go over to the Adams’s house later to see their slides from Kenya, after talking to Daphne I wanted to stay home and watch Matthew. I didn’t even know if Kenya was on the east side of Africa or the west.

“Unbelievable,” Dan said, grabbing one of my buttocks.

“What is that, dear?” I stiffened against the counter. Since Dan hadn’t been drinking, his grab was meaningless. It would be a sex-free night unless we did go to the slide show and Bill Adams served his Black Russians. Then, if Dan had two or three of those, he turned into an animal.
"They took Matthew out of the game, and we lost by ten points," Dan said. "One more and we’re out of the running."

"We can’t all be champions, right?" I looked at Dan over my shoulder. I didn’t go to the games because I didn’t understand what was happening. Plus, I couldn’t see the players’ faces from where Dan and Carl sat. It was like watching robots run around.

"This is Matthew’s last year, Alice."

I laid one of the chickens on my cutting board. "Why don’t you go talk to him," I said. "See if you think he’s acting a little funny."

Dan opened the refrigerator and plucked a tomato slice off my salad and dropped it in his mouth while I watched him. "Oh, he’ll be acting funny for a couple of days," Dan said, wiping his mouth. "He took a good lick in the third quarter." Dan looked over at the chicken. "Will you leave the skin on for a change?"

"I am concerned about him," I said. "He was walking around here in a daze."

"And easy on the curry, okay?"

"Then don’t eat it."

"Oh, Alice. The boy is fine. Actually it was the best hit of the season," Dan said. "Just that Matthew was on the wrong end of it."

I didn't see how there could be a right and a wrong end to a collision between two boys, but Dan just waved his hand. He believed that it was hopeless to talk to me about sports. And Dan said that Coach Thomas was going to hold Matthew out of practice on Monday. Just to be on the safe side. Dan wanted to know where Matthew was.

"He is lying down," I said. I kept the cutlery set right beside the toaster, and I pulled out my sharpest knife just as the doorbell rang. "Now who would that be at this hour?" I asked.

"Uh, probably Doctor Hoffman," Dan said. "He was going to drop by to check on Matthew."

"Why didn’t you call me?" I asked. "Daphne did. She said that Matthew had a concussion."

"Where was I suppose to call, the cosmetics counter at Penny’s?"

The doorbell rang again. I turned around and faced Dan and
pointed the knife at his nose. “I don’t shop at Penny’s, okay? Now go answer the door.”

I finished up with the chicken, taking off every bit of skin, but I didn’t start to cook it. I could hear Dan and Dr. Hoffman talking in low voices, and they stopped when I walked into the living room. Doctor Hoffman stood up and stuck out his hand. “Alice,” he said, “good to see you.” I just nodded. Doctor Hoffman was the general practitioner whom I saw a few times when I was trying to get pregnant again. He had always called me by my first name, which I resented, and he wasn’t very concerned about my problem. “One healthy boy is enough these days, Alice,” I remember him saying. “He will be more than you can handle.”

“May I offer you a cup of tea or something?” I asked the doctor. Dan was standing at the wet bar beside the fireplace, fixing himself a drink. “Will you stay for dinner? We’re having curried chicken.”

Doctor Hoffman laughed, showing me his gray teeth. “No, thanks. I just want to allay your concerns about Matt,” he said. He sat back down and looked over at Dan, who had perched his dark-looking scotch and water on the mantle and was striking his let’s-have-a-serious-talk pose alongside it.

“Matthew wants to play, Alice,” Dan said. “And I thought if you talked to Doctor Hoffman and he explained that this concussion is not a serious thing, you would feel better.”

I put my hands on my hips. “You haven’t even seen Matthew, Dan. Not since you came home. So how can you say that?” I sat down in the Danish rocker that Dan had bought me for Christmas last year and looked at Doctor Hoffman. I would have to tell Lily that he made house calls.

“A concussion is simply a loss of consciousness that temporarily affects the memory,” Doctor Hoffman said. He cleared his throat. “There is no damage to the brain.”

I smoothed my skirt with the tips of my fingers and asked Dr. Hoffman how he could be so sure that there was no brain damage. He smiled and nodded the way that a teacher did when one of his students asked a good question.

“People who suffer concussions are normal afterwards,” he answered. “All tests of their intelligence do not change after a concussion.”
I nodded too, but I didn't follow his reasoning. "So we should keep Matthew out of football until he takes another IQ test?" I asked. "And what about these boxers that I have read about?" I said. "Mohammed Ali?" I looked at Dan. "My goodness, we saw him on television, and you couldn't understand a word that the man was saying."

Doctor Hoffman raised his hand and said that boxers were a different case. There, he explained, we have repeated contusions with hemorrhages and scarring. Millions of brain cells are killed in those people. I didn't know what a contusion was. A bruise, Dr. Hoffman told me, and he waved both hands around.

"So you are giving me your one hundred per cent absolute guarantee that Matthew has suffered no brain damage?" I asked.

Doctor Hoffman looked at Dan. "Well, nothing is ever one hundred per cent in this business, Alice," he said, "but I promise you that I am very, very sure that he is fine."

I rocked back and forth a couple of times and wondered if Dr. Hoffman had children. If they played football. Dan made a noise with his lips, and I glanced at him. "Why don't you bring Matthew out here?" I asked him softly.

Naturally, when Matthew appeared and I asked him questions about the game, things got nasty. Dan said in a loud voice that it didn't matter that Matthew didn't know what the score was because a halfback was not supposed to know the score. Only the quarterback. Doctor Hoffman said in a firm voice that amnesia was a normal part of any concussion and might last for weeks. That sounded like brain damage to me, and I told the two men that Matthew's football days were over.

"He's not that smart to begin with," I said, looking right at Matthew, "so if he loses part of his memory he'll be in real trouble." I stood up and walked out into the dining room to set the table. When I glanced into the living room on my way back to the kitchen, Doctor Hoffman was gone.

Everybody was quiet over dinner. Matthew seemed fine, although I didn't ask him any more questions about the game. I tried to see his pupils, but the light wasn't good enough. I excused myself early and went back into my study. Somebody else could do the dishes for a change. I had a little day bed in my study, but I was not going to escalate things by sleeping in it.
This was not a marital quarrel but a simple case of a mother exercising her prerogative.

The week passed without incident. I was expecting Matthew home after school, but he kept coming in right before supper as if he was still going to football practice. His memory had returned, and he mentioned that he needed to start thinking about where he was going to attend college. He did remember my remark about his intelligence in front of Doctor Hoffman, I guess, and I didn’t object when he said that his first choice was Stanford. But I almost cut myself with the carrot peeler.

I thought that Matthew should go to Montana State in Bozeman. The town was only two hundred miles away and was surrounded by mountains. Lily’s oldest daughter attended Montana State and now taught school in Havre. She said that the school was easier than Great Falls High, so it should have been perfect for Matthew.

Dan and I didn’t argue during the week either. He did take my car in for an oil change, which bothered me a little. Just like the wives in situation comedies on television, I was suspicious whenever my husband brought home presents or was too nice. And it was on the following Saturday, when I had the house all to myself and was sitting in the living room and flipping through Christmas catalogs, that I discovered that Matthew was still playing football.

One of the things that I didn’t like about Great Falls was the wind. It came sweeping down off the Rocky Mountain Front, the big blue ridge of mountains west of here, and roared through town. Being from Milwaukee, I was accustomed to wind but not the loud wail that came through the walls and windows here. It would blow for days in the spring and fall, and I noticed it more now that I had the house all to myself so much. At times I wondered if the wind would lift me up and blow me clear across the Dakotas and back to Wisconsin, where I would start over. I hated to admit it, but when that wind got going and I was alone I had second thoughts about my life. I might have done something other than raised Matthew and taken care of Dan. I might have had my own career as a banker or financial advisor. Plenty of women did that nowadays. After several days of wind, I would leave in the afternoon. I would go over to Tenth Avenue for a
matinee followed by a couple of Manhattans and some brooding in the Broker Lounge of the Rainbow Hotel. I didn’t take Lily, as she thought that sitting in a bar without her husband was wicked.

On the Saturday that I discovered that Matthew and Dan had ignored my ultimatum, the wind was howling. And it was too cold to leave the house. So to drown out the noise, I turned on the stereo. The radio came on, set to the station that Dan always listened to, and the announcer said, “Matthew Baker breaks a tackle and is run out of bounds at the fifteen yard line.” I just stood there while Great Falls High took it on in for a touchdown. Then, during a commercial for antifreeze, I stepped to the hall closet and put on my full-length down parka and walked out of the house.

Memorial Stadium was only about a mile from our house, so I was still buzzing with anger when I parked the car and bought my ticket. Inside the stadium I headed straight for the playing field. I walked between the grandstand and a set of bleachers and crossed a cinder track to come up behind the bench of a team wearing black and orange uniforms. These boys were not the Great Falls Bison. I knew from the pictures that I had of Matthew in his blue and white uniform. He was number forty-two and pulled his socks up very high on his calves.

With the grandstand behind me and to the left, I put up the hood of my parka so that Dan wouldn’t spot me. Most of the players in front of me were seated, and I could see out on the field. I tucked my hands in the pockets of my parka and scanned the clump of boys on the field for number forty-two.

“Down in front, lady!”

I couldn’t find Matthew, and I moved off toward the end of the field where the scoreboard was. The bleachers next to the scoreboard were half-full, and I sat down in the first row. The wind was coming right at me, stronger than at home. I should have worn my wool ski pants.

The teams were also coming right at me, and the orange and black boys had the ball. I wondered where they were from and what they would think when a lady in a parka came rushing out on the field and grabbed number forty-two on the other team by his face mask and hauled him over to the sidelines. I crossed my
legs. They would remember the incident for the rest of their playing days. Matthew would remember it for the rest of his life.

He was not in the ball game now. I was sure of that. Before each play the Great Falls team spread out in front of me facing the other way, and I looked at each player's back. No number forty-two. It was possible that Matthew had seen me and told the coach that he couldn't go into the game because if he did his crazy mother would charge out on the field and make a scene.

I looked over at the Great Falls bench. The players were wearing warm-ups, so spotting Matthew was hopeless. Behind the bench the cheerleaders were bouncing around and twirling in order to show their blue panties to the crowd. I had only met Jenny on a couple of occasions and couldn't pick her out as the girls all looked the same except for the color of their hair. If Jenny was dating Matthew because he was a big jock, she would dump him after today.

I let my eyes roam through the grandstand. Somewhere up there Dan was sitting alongside Carl Burke. Doctor Hoffman would be in the crowd too. They came to see Matthew play football and were going to get a demonstration of a mother's wrath. Middle-aged men didn't know what it meant to raise a son, what an investment it was. They hanged back during the tough years and then stepped forward when the boy was another form of entertainment for them, like television or deer hunting. So what if he got his brains bashed in a few times. That was part of the fun.

Suddenly the crowd roared and rose to its feet as one. On the field a huge pile of players were crawling all over each other, and the referees were waving their arms and blowing their whistles.

"Fumble, recovered by the Bison," boomed a voice over the loudspeaker at the end of the bleachers. And there was a wholesale replacement of players. Great Falls now had the ball, and Matthew was thirty feet away. He was jumping up and down, hitting his teammates on their shoulder pads with his fists and screaming at the top of his lungs.

I had never seen my son so agitated. He spit out his mouth guard, and it dangled on his face mask like a huge glob of something from his nose. The front of Matthew's jersey was streaked with blood, and he grabbed number seventeen and butted him
in the head. Number seventeen butted Matthew right back. Then
the referee blew his whistle, and the boys formed a huddle. The
players across the line in the orange and black were on their hands
and knees, bowing their necks and snorting while a teammate
behind them paced back and forth like a cougar.

I wasn’t about to step into that mayhem. So, for the next
several minutes, I watched as the Great Falls team marched down
field away from me. I saw number seventeen pitch out the foot-
ball to Matthew twice, and both times my son hurled himself
into a wall of players. The boys were running at each other full-
speed, and the reports of contact echoed around the stadium
like gunshots. Matthew’s teammates helped him up and gave him
high-fives, so he must have been doing the right thing. When
Great Falls suddenly scored a touchdown on a pass, Matthew
charged around with his arms in the air before diving into a mass
of Bison players at the center of the field.

I didn’t move until an old man who had been sitting a few
seats down from me came over and waved a Bison pennant in
my face. I pushed it away and headed out the gate underneath
the scoreboard. The band was playing a fight song, and every-
body was clapping with the beat of the bass drum. I followed
the wire fence that curved around the outside of the stadium,
and the wind hit me again. It straightened me up and carried
away the sounds coming from inside. But I lowered my head and
kept putting one foot in front of the other.

When I reached my car, the wind was roaring in my ears. I
was cold, and I was disgusted. Matthew was rude to his girl-
friends. He was selfish. And on the football field he lost all self-
control. I didn’t teach him to spit things out of his mouth. I
didn’t teach him the head butt. I taught him to wait his turn and
chew with his mouth closed and say “please” and “thank you.” I
unlocked the car door and slid in behind the wheel. Seventeen
years of mothering down the toilet.

Turning the ignition, I shifted into gear and eased out across
the gravel parking lot. Well, that was the way it went. I had been
a mother long enough, maybe. Dan thought that getting knocked
unconscious was good for Matthew, so he could take over and
try to get Matthew into college when his IQ had been bludgeoned
down to eighty. I would stay in my study. Come out at feeding

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time and put some meat on the table. I would serve one big steak and put it exactly halfway between Dan and Matthew and leave the room. Matthew told me once that he would kill for a good steak.

I headed for Tenth Avenue. It was Saturday afternoon, and that meant a double feature. Afterwards I would go to the Rainbow Hotel and tell my troubles to the polite bartender in the Broker Lounge while I knocked back a couple of Manhattans. I would go home a little tipsy, but it wouldn’t matter. Everybody there would be too brain-damaged to notice.
“There’s a disease that eats up the limbs that feels like ants are eating them.” (St. Antoine! St. Antoine... ) and
there was a disease that dried up the heart from the inside out, and another that began as spots of light on the
skin that grew and grew and then enormously died. Did you notice that all the saints died, sometimes in droves.
and there was a disease that made the body soar and one that made it disappear slowly,
grain by grain while
you watched. (Fascinated. As in nailed to the spot.)

(When you can see right through the skull there’s still time, but you
can’t (as in entranced
affixed)
There’s a grave just large enough for the face.

And a tendency incessantly to walk back and forth and another to arrive. And in the peripheral field, a
you couldn’t name. Like all things that sense of light that
(all living takes place
just before the word
was said
was hidden (or slid, as into an envelope)
in fire or flood, but usually fire.
Land, air and water. Must be added fire. Is utterly altered by fire. Are utterly altered. And is element only and in fact the only element, only earthly example of four-dimensional form hour by hour; I suppose it's true and must

aligned with

that ensure, that erased inherent in (the very notion of) time.

I'd rather live in the cold. The three-dimensional, the sky was red, the hours invented and then bent to serve. Someone. Hears.

An arbitrary machine called Heaven, a silent engine, a single woman

said no, it heals, said the flames seal something I was just about to think

anneals. I see an edge.
JUNE 24: THE LONG DAY

The day of Jean L’Amour. The “Saint-John” — all summer starts here. Lit a fire on every corner. Rain of.

Done. (and all the city alight with it. Ashes

bring honor

and aim peace and anchor cendres semence the senders

sooner or later

a man shifts in his chair but keeps looking out the window

so rarely seen this time of year because

they have become in this time of war nocturnal things like the swans once were when they could hover, could
tread air

(representing the soul at peace etc. while in addition serving

as an early version of the streetlight — Cygne — cendre — signer — sender of signs that in later centuries became

our word “singer.” Now sing. I said Louder. I said Soon.
I WAS TALKING to this guy Stan, and I suppose someone looking in from the hallway, one who had an interest in this scene, might think we were, well, more than friends. There was Stan leaning back in the office chair at his terminal, there was me standing behind him and his computer screen. And he was nice-looking. A youngish guy, had a girlfriend. In fact, there's a good chance we were talking about his girlfriend.

I don't think it's beside the point here to mention that I'm married.

But I had this sense that someone was in the hall walking by, walking with a familiar heel-toe saunter to that very room, that they paused at the doorway and stared in at us, at the back of me, invading Stan's space, and at Stan's grinning good looks, the rumpled red hair and crossed arms, his shirttail hanging below the seat. That they paused just long enough to snap a picture of that scene, take it with them and develop it into all the grainy gradations of black and white that they desired, stick it in the fix and hang it to dry.

I didn't stop in Blake's office until the following day. Then he was unusually cool. "You remind me of a friend of mine," he said. "This gal I went to school with. At one point she and her husband quit their teaching jobs to run a bakery in Colorado. They skied, they backpacked, all that stuff. One day she left him clueless and ran off to Madison.

"She visited us recently," Blake went on, "brought along a sharp-looking guy. Youngish. A law student."

"Sweet," I cracked.

"See what I mean? She never should have married." I left that one there, sitting in the fix.

"What do you think?" I said. "Any chance for us in the Orange Bowl?"

In the mail we got a sixty-dollar rent bill for
the extra phone my husband, Del, had supposedly returned two months ago.

“That’s funny,” I said. “You returned that phone, didn’t you?”

“What a bunch of screw-ups!” he said. “Better give me that. I’ll write them a letter.”

My bicycle was propped upside down on the living room floor, bike parts and tools spread across newspaper. “See this.” Del held tip a tiny plastic ring with holes. “You don’t need these rings to hold in your ball bearings. When you’re overhauling, you should just throw these away and repack the bearings with grease. Listen, Nyla. You’ll need to know these things.”

I sat on the sofa and watched him work with a kind of schoolgirl’s awe, how sure and gently he maneuvered the tools and patiently packed the bearings into the bottom bracket, screwed down the pedals without stripping the threads. My own hands lay useless in my lap, twirling the gold band on my finger around and around and around.

Soon after that my husband searched out the checkbook. He found an entry for a check written in August, for the final month’s rent on our extra phone. He had sent the check along with the boxed-up phone. Now all he needed to prove he’d sent them was the canceled check.

I told him the bank had quit sending those. We would have to request photocopies.

“Since when?” Del retorted. So I got the bank statements out of the desk drawer.

Our last statement listed checks 436 and 438, but no 437, so again he looked in the checkbook. We would mark an “X” beside each entry after the check had cleared the bank; number 437 wasn’t marked.

He called the bank. “Is it possible to tell me if a check has cleared my account yet?” His phone manner was more polished and polite than his normal way—“Is that right,” he said. “I wonder what could be happening with that.” He said, “Is that right” again. I got the feeling he wasn’t getting much help.

“Well,” he said, “I believe I’ll have to do some investigating on my own. I do thank you people for your help.” Then he made an uncharacteristic sound, a short, rude snort of frustration, right into the mouthpiece.
I didn’t work until the afternoon shift so I spent all morning with the dough.

I punched and turned that thing, stripped off my sweatshirt and worked in my tank top, worked it until the dough felt soft as a baby’s behind, as they say. I twisted off half the mound and stretched it apart in my hands, into a fine thin sheet, still solid dough but I could almost see the light through it. Then it tore.

I went back to work, adding flour, folding it over, punching it down with my knuckles. Still the dough smelled yeasty and old and not at all like fresh floursy bread.

(“There she is!” Blake had greeted me. He had crossed the length of polished floor with his sure clipped stride. “Don’t be such a stranger,” he’d teased and put a friendly arm around my waist.)

Remembering the bread, I opened the cookbook to the section titled “Tips for Successful Baking.”

Too much kneading makes the gluten disintegrate; the dough gets wet and sticky and can never regain its strength.

I could see the dough was wasted; seven cups of flour, a little salt and yeast. And all that time I’d spent. What do you do?

According to this book, you start another batch. This time I picked something a little less glorified: Unwreckable Rye. You mixed the dough by machine, beat it awhile, then you didn’t have to work it by hand so long. Again I consulted the “Tips.”

It is a whole lot better to use a mixer than to give up the idea completely of making your own bread.

I ended up with two dark round loaves brushed with melted butter, containing nubbles of caraway seed throughout. The crust was evenly browned but not too dry. I spread my hands around
one of the warm loaves. I lifted it to my face, then breathed in its slightly sour, nutty smell. I slid the bread knife out of a drawer and sawed through one end. Steam rose from the cut and dissipated.

“What time is lunch?” I called my husband. “I’ll bring you a fresh rye bread sandwich.”

“To the shop?”

“Sure. We’ll have a picnic.”

“A picnic,” Del said. “Great. All right.”

“What time?”

He tapped his teeth. “I’ll ask what Barry and Spokes are doing.”

“Why don’t you wear your white jeans?” he said then. “And your green sweater? Wear those big loop earrings, and how about putting your hair down? Just this once?”

I also took rye bread rolls to a friend’s going away party. “You have room in the oven for these?” I asked my friend. I had wrapped the rolls in foil to re-warm them.

“Ooh, let’s see!” As I opened the foil, the others crowded around me.

“Look at you, woman!” “Susie Smart!” I shrugged them off.

“You forget. I’ve been at this for years.”

“Years?” said one. “Come on! How long have you been married?”

I lied a little. “Six and a half, seven years.” I wasn’t prepared to be anyone’s sage. Martha took me aside.

“I can’t imagine it,” she murmured.

Martha had lived with Louise for two years, and Shawna for a summer, and before that I didn’t know. “Doesn’t it get old?” she said. “Sleeping with the same person? Boring? You know? What do you do in that case?”

“Any more questions?” I said.

“But doesn’t it get old?”

“Well, anything can get old,” I said. “Maybe if you thought of it like dough? And how many foods you can make out of your same mixture.”

See, sometimes Del would surprise me. Show up outside my building at the end of the night, and we would walk together to
the student center for coffee or drink beers somewhere, watch the sunset as we walked home. He might turn on the stereo and rub my back, or reach into the bath water; that's how things heated up. Once I found a new sweater in my dresser. He wrote goofy poems on cards.

But you forget, maybe even the very next day; you just get scared or frustrated or feel trapped and thin: This is it—my life, for Godssakes! These selfish little routines, our snug little home. And then suddenly, without warning, you are screaming at each other: "You're always doing this! Now you're doing that! Get out of my face!" Until one or the other of you makes a move.

Once, after slamming doors for five days, I went to sit on the toilet. As I sat there and unrolled some toilet paper, I saw something written on the paper: DID EVERYTHING COME OUT ALL RIGHT?

We were deep into autumn; the days darkened early. Blake would return to the building for his night class and afterward come by the terminal room. When he did, I gladly abandoned my data entry crap and stepped into the hall.

"What's the occasion?" I said once. He looked elegant and casual in pressed blue slacks and white shirt, the sleeves folded above his forearms.

"Meetings." He rolled his eyes. "Meetings all day. Simmons wants me to represent the department when we oppose this salary freeze..."

As he talked, he placed his hand flat on the wall beside my head. He leaned into his arm. I noticed that his hair had grown out in a youngish style and curled over his shirt collar.

"Now we're all going to get computers in our offices, which, on the one hand, is fine. But I can just see what will happen. You know the chairman. We'll have fewer secretaries and he'll expect faster turnaround time. Computers will create more work for us," he muttered. "Not less! Damnation, Nyla."

The hall was dim. Blake was near. I had passed the janitor fifteen minutes ago working two floors down. Blake was so near. What was he doing? This was a man who in all our conversations never lowered his gaze farther south than my chin.

Our situation there in the hallway struck me as suddenly clichéd.
and ludicrous. Funny strange, not funny ha ha. Blake didn’t think of me in that way, of course he didn’t. In relief I grinned. That movement led to another and I stepped away from the wall—actually a little to one side—and raised my arm, cocked one elbow. With my other hand I stroked an imaginary violin. In case Blake didn’t get it, I kidded, “So play me another of your sad songs.”

He turned on his heel and strode away.

That same week at the laundromat, a weird coincidence.

A bearded young man sat on the table next to my washer. “Re-group day,” he offered ruefully, and we struck up a conversation. He was a ragged sort of hippy, lived with his dog in a shack by the lake and took classes part-time. I enjoyed his gentle laugh and manner, and I suppose, for a harmless five minutes, I pictured myself dwelling in that carefree shack. After I put quarters in my dryers, he asked if I would go next door for coffee. “No time, thanks. I’ve got to work.” I held out my hand. “It was so nice to meet you.”

He, too, pivoted abruptly and walked away.

I ventured by Blake’s office timidly, after several days had gone by.

“You,” he said. “Only you.” He was himself. I was relieved. “Only you or George Radke could come up with something like this.”

He tossed me a phony letter supposedly sent from the university president. “We are now offering bonuses for carpooling on business trips,” the letter said. “Thirty-five dollars per rider, and there will be extra bonuses given for seven or more staff who transport together in a subcompact car.

“I remind you, we are educators,” the letter went on, “and educators concerned for our dwindling resources, and the ungodly millions of our potential corporate sponsors. So let’s squeeze our thousand asses stupid in anticipation of a meaner, toadier world.”

“Amen,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

Then the phone rang and Blake was tied up. He motioned for me to stay. While he talked I glanced around at his philosophy books and took a closer look at the photo of his wife and
kids. She was a tall, pretty blonde, nothing like me. I'd heard that she could have quite a time tearing Blake from gatherings when he got a little drunk and began singing or horsing around with George Radke. I had gathered that Blake was very well-liked.

Then I had to get to work. As I closed his door, Blake waved regretfully, grimacing at the phone.

"You mean you haven't straightened out this phone deal?" I said. It was working up to be one of those days. Marital claus-trophobia.

Del's newest project covered the living room floor. He was assembling a maverick bike from parts. I directed his attention to the phone company's toll-free number. "So do you want me to take over this job or what? You said you'd do it."

"No, no," he said.

"Don't you see, if we wait much longer on this—"

He picked up the phone.

It turned out that the telephone company hadn't received our boxed-up phone. And no, Del hadn't insured the package. No, he hadn't used one of their mailers. "How was I supposed to know about that?" he asked me.

"I thought you had already called them," I accused. "You told me you had talked to someone about returning the phone. Didn't you tell me that?"

"I know I called somebody about the bill," he said. "The bill. I'm not sure I told them I was mailing the phone."

He paced in and out of the bedroom in his bike shop cover-alls, his mechanic's composure undone.

"It's only money," I offered then, sorry for my outbursts. "Are you positive you didn't insure it?"

"Nyla," he said, "I'm not even sure where I sent the damn thing."

"Okay, Delbert," I said. "Think."

Blake won a pizza from 91 FM. "I was the ninety-oneth caller," he said. "How about lunch?"

We planned it for Friday, him and me.

On Friday he called me in the morning, at home. "What are you doing? Let's beat the rush," he said. "Can you come early?"
"I just got home. What time?"

"Eleven o'clock?" he said. "Where have you been? Fairmart? Really? I never see you there!"

It was an occasion; I wore my white jeans and green sweater. In the restaurant booth, waiting to order, Blake told me I looked "rawboned." He told me his wife was a saint and she had the gift of gab and I sighed and said I envied those people. When I ordered a beer, he seemed surprised, then he ordered a pitcher. We talked department gossip and impeachment and bowl games, and laughed until our eyes watered. It didn't seem to matter what we talked about.

On our return to work, he steered us through a crowd gathered outside the union for government cheese. "My people," I mumbled. "What?" Blake said. Then he slapped his forehead, said he must run home to let the dog out. We parted outside University Books. Not until later that night did it hit me, I might well have gone home with him.

Del worked up a letter and asked me to sign it, since the extra phone had been rented in my name. "Madam or Sir:" the letter began, then went on to explain about the missing check.

... The post office is trying to trace the package. But I believe it must have been stolen enroute. Has anything turned up there as yet? What will be the consequences if the phone is never recovered?

I think you should quit billing me for rent. I am living on part-time work and a bicycle mechanic's income, paying off student loans and health insurance—and every fifty dollars earned is—fifty dollars spent! It is frustrating to discover you've done everything all wrong when you thought things were well in hand. I hope you people will review my records, and that a history of good credit still stands for something.

"Nice, Del." I signed the letter. "But I bet we're still going to have to pay for it."
“It’s only money, Nyla.”
“Just our luck, this happens before Christmas.”
“They might want to keep their old customers, if you will just have patience.
“We’ll pay,” I said. “Welcome to reality.”

For a week Blake avoided the terminal room. Likewise I didn’t stop by his office.
Meanwhile Del decided we should rearrange the living room. He held up the old crazy quilt we had re-pieced together. “Is it straight?”
It had too much black.
“Could we fold it in half?” he said. He held it up folded. The dark border dominated the room. He spread it over the couch. “No,” I said. “We’ll wear it out there.”
He moved the couch against a different wall and started yanking books off the brick and board shelves. With half the books unloaded he stopped and hauled a box out of the walk-in closet. He rummaged through the box and pulled out some black and white photos I had shot and matted for a class, and set them in a row along the wall where the couch had rested: The Body-Builder, Bowling Ball, Apples.
“Earth to wife, Earth to wife,” Del was saying. “Are you with me?”

A familiar voice sounded from inside the main office. I looked in.
“There she is,” Blake said.
I said hello to Georgia. I don’t think I imagined that she looked deliberately away from me. Vicki, too, glanced at the floor coldly when we passed her in the hall. Or was I imagining? Blake didn’t seem to notice.
“Stop in, stop in! You’ve got a few minutes.”
I sat in the chair alongside Blake’s desk, then I seemed to have nothing witty to say. He, too, was unusually quiet. “What’s this?” he said. “New watch?”
“From the husband. It has different colored bands
to match your outfit.”

I pushed back my sleeve and twisted my wrist to illustrate, then nervously dropped my arm. He said, “Well, now, just a minute,” grabbed hold of my hand and pulled my arm towards him.

Energy was an issue that year. As a conservation measure, the university announced a campus-wide shutdown over Thanksgiving break. My husband suggested we drive south.

“How do we do that?” I said.

“Sometimes you do it anyway.”

Next day a card came in the mail addressed to “NyLady Bug”:

(Ny)Lady Bug, Lady Bug,
Fly aflit
Your house is on fire
And I want to suck your

“Aflit,” I said to Del. “Aflit?” Probably he sighed.

I walked in a vacuum, to work and back home. Mute and airy-headed, riding a wave of wonder and guilt. I burned food, let mistakes at work slip past me. I didn’t like myself this way. I was not giving it up yet either. Evenings I would see a light burning through Blake’s office transom. Wife and kids; repeat like a mantra. Del.

So Blake and I had kissed for a while. He had seemed as surprised about it happening as I was. I fell on his lap and we kissed. We kissed like a pair of thirsty mutts lapping up a river. We kissed like snakes, tangled and tonguey. We kissed like we had jumped out of a plane and to hell with wherever we landed. Oh God no matter how I berated the memory—he had held each kiss too long, his neck smelled sweetly fancy—I couldn’t deny the heady pleasure of finally giving in, nor the lathered mental replays that would rob me of good sense, of blessed cleansing sleep. We had kissed; a door had opened. Another threatened to close.

Finally someone moved. I like to think it was me. Blake released me and I left for the terminal room.
Sometimes now he stole upstairs and we whispered at my corner stadon. "Sometimes I'm afraid I'll do something I'll regret," he said of his frustration with the department. "What will you do during the shutdown?"

I didn't know.

By supper time Del and I were in Stillwater. Our motel room smelled of furniture polish and feet. We showered and walked in lovely wind-breakers to a downtown cafe. Del had insisted on local flavor.

"With some variety?" I argued.

It was fall in Stillwater too: cloudy, crisp, pragmatic. But oh, that southward whisper of warm breeze. Del brought the map with us into the cafe and for a time we studied it. We were in a celebratory mood; before we had left home the unbelievable had occurred. We had received notice that our missing phone problem, while not resolved, had been forgiven.

Our happiness must have seemed infectious. The cafe's aproned waiter hovered at our table with a pot of coffee. "More of the good brew?" he liked to say.

I grinned at my husband. "I can't believe the ocean is so close!"

As we sat back— waiting for our food, I noticed a table of interesting customers seated behind Del's left shoulder. "Local color," I whispered, nudging him. "Don't look yet."

Genuine cowboys they seemed, three silent men companionably sipping coffee. One in particular caught my eye. Red-eyed and heron skinny, his bronze hair slicked straight back, he held a match to a cigarette in his leathery long-fingered hands.

He caught me looking.

What was happening here? Though the man's face seemed as earthy and familiar to me as fresh bread, his engine was hell-bent. How else to explain? Every time I allowed myself a glance at their table, he gazed back. I walked to the counter to pay, then he rose and sauntered to the counter also, and stood there opposite me. And then that cowboy straightened and faced me, humbly but blatant enough, hands in his coveralls, his weathered face questioning.
You'd think it was spring and full of the yearnings that accompany those warm nights and the fragrance of lavender blossoms, the beauty of ball fields lit up at dusk. Because—yeah, I stood there. I understood. Can you imagine for yourself that face? Those questions? Will you consider your own darkly narrowing choices?

I did. I stood there at that counter in Stillwater, facing that willing, troublesome creature, and I did want— I wanted— I wanted— I wanted—. What I did then, I pictured that promise: a life set amid wood stove flames; drafty, naked and free. A smell of clean straw. I pictured a thousand lives.

At the table I touched my husband's shoulder. "Let's ride," I said, into the sunset, though it seemed that ours remained a terrible distance further.
LANDLOCKED POEM

No shores in my days,
no long slide and fold,
glisten and drain,
breeze and salty residue;
no bulbs of seaweed,
prattle of tumbled rocks,
old bones in the sand,
no blow-me-down
fifty foot waves.

Only fog in the hollows,
ghost of the water,
white stones in the fields.
I walk uphill through
fathoms in the hush,
wind and small birds,
breathing like a fish.
Dazzle and cannonade, 
thunder is bridges falling.
Slam down the sashes! 
Wind bulges the glass.

Rain wants everything, 
the rug and the grass, 
slashing its molecules, 
it sparks the dog, 
rings the phone 
and sways me like 
a light bulb on 
the end of my current.
I was hungry. The cottage leaned into the night wind. The triple groan of my family's slumber shook my bed. I curled onto my side, sucking my knuckles, gnawing the tips of my hair. I dreamt, eyes open: bread, milk, honey. My hands passed over my body, naming my bones, shaping the skeleton beneath the meat of me: collarbone harness, hipbone cage. I waited in that narrow bed for morning, watched my brother's bony face turn grey to white with the lightening sky.

At dawn, our mother unlocked the cabinet, shaved us both a slice of bread. She locked us out of the house with our portions. We let the bread dissolve on our tongues and drank long at the well; our stomachs gurgled and sloshed, the liquid rose in our throats. We thought of eating stones.

We stood in the yard. We were quiet. I was thinking of the whole loaf, our mother and father feeding each other across the wooden table. Perhaps a fingerful of honey, a mouthful of milk, Who knows what they shared? I leaned into my brother's shoulder, and he leaned into me. We held hands. It was winter then, and the world was black and white and very, very still.

My brother and I had the same summer birthday. My brother and I had the same quiet voice. My brother and I had the same pale face. My brother and I were the same except I was a girl and he was a boy.

I followed my father into the woods. My brother followed me. My fingers burned in the morning chill. We stumbled in a bleary row, hungry. Once every few steps, my brother stepped on the back of my shoe. We were too familiar for spoken apology; I knew what he was thinking.

We settled into the nest of branches and snow from which
you could see the clearing. Last winter, our father had killed a massive buck from this hiding spot. I could still taste the pungent meat, feel the fat softening my lips. We had eaten from that deer until summer.

I sat to the side, unarmed. My father and my brother watched the clearing. I watched their faces. I saw in the set of my brother’s jaw that he believed today was to be the day that he would will the deer into the open, that his kill would feed us all. I saw in the set of my father’s mouth that he no longer believed in deer. I did not know what I believed.

I followed my father out of the forest. My brother followed me. On each of our backs was a load of wood, split and tied hastily in the falling dusk. Our house was always warm. But, of course, you cannot eat wood.

Our mother grew fat that winter. Her belly brushed against the table as she ate. The fabric of her dress moved as she swallowed, and she kept one hand always on her stomach. Each night she leaned back from the table and challenged our father with her eyes. Each night he met her gaze and handed her the last of the bread on his plate.

In bed at night I tried to think it through. Always it had been like this: my father got the most food, because men did the hardest work. My brother got the next most, because he was a growing boy. I got the same amount as my mother, but she would give the choicest bits to me.

But all that winter, my mother ate what she could. She did not smile at me. She locked me out of the house with my brother at sunrise. Sometimes we could hear her screaming through the walls, before my father emerged from his breakfast to lead us into the woods.

My brother and I held hands across the space that separated our beds. Each night he fell asleep first, and the weight of his sleep dragged his hand away from me. The walls of the cottage shifted in the wind, and I felt my ribs with my fingers, pressed hard into my stomach. I could hear my mother whispering in the dark to my father, and sometimes it sounded like she was laughing, and sometimes it sounded like she was crying.
I followed my father into the woods. My brother followed me. I licked a crumb of bread from my back teeth, stared into the rough cloth that covered my father's back. The trees lined our corridor, spare and black; the sky was grey and then white; the sun cloaked by unfallen snow.

My father carried his gun in his hands, and carried my brother's on his back. I carried the coils of rope to drag the deer or bundle the wood. My brother followed me, carrying the axe for the wood and the knife for the deer, wrapped in the blanket we would sit on when we got to the blind.

When we got to the nest of branches and snow from which you could see the clearing, my father paused and looked up into the sky. He cleared his throat; spit into the snow.

Today we will hunt a different place, he said. And he walked through the clearing and into the woods on the other side. I followed my father, and my brother followed me.

I had not been beyond the clearing before, and I knew my brother had not also. The trees were as black as the ones we knew, and the sky as blank and white. Still, it was strange to see the trees flying past as we moved so quickly by, and the pattern of them not at all familiar. My father said that we had to hurry, and we walked behind him faster and faster.

It was a long time before we stopped to rest. We had not come to a clearing yet, and the sky had turned back towards grey. I slid down against a tree and my brother did the same. My knees and feet were aching; my tongue was swollen with thirst. I ate some snow from the ground. My brother rubbed his eyes. We set our packs on the ground.

My father said, Wait here, and he walked a little away from us to relieve himself, leaning his gun against a tree. I was too exhausted to get up. I felt for my brother's hand beside me, and then I heard the snap, a fat squirrel breaking the branch it was running across.

Father, we yelled, but he already had his gun up. He took two quick shots at the squirrel as it ran. The woods split with the crack of his gun.

I watched the squirrel's tall bob away in the treetops, my fin-
gers plugging my ears. My father took another shot, although the animal by now was safely away. I turned toward him and saw his face, the anger and shame that he wore as he lowered his gun.

And then I saw him set his mouth and raise his gun to me.

We ran. I ran as fast and as hard as I could, and I could hear that my brother was following me. His breathing and my heartbeat and our footfalls were loud in my ears as I crashed through the trees, stumbling, scrambling up, falling, running, running. I tripped on a log, fell down a hill and kept running. The air echoed with the thunder of my father’s gun and my body was numb with fear and I wondered if I was shot and dead and a ghost hurtling past these trees in the growing dusk. But the snow began to sting my face and I could feel my thighs lifting and falling through air that was heavy like water and I heard myself crying and I knew that I was alive. The gun began to sound a little farther away after a while, and then a little farther, and when it sounded far enough away we slowed a little, but we kept moving.

Maybe he wanted us to get away.

We held each other’s hands in the forest and tried to hold our breath to listen for sounds other than our feet falling on the snow, our hearts drumming blood through our ears. We held hands and walked this way: one hand in the other’s, one hand stretched before us, pushing our way through the black, black night. Finally we had to stop. At dawn we curled into each other, curled into the snow. We tucked our heads into the other’s belly, listened to the gnawings of hunger or fear, dreamt of bread.

When I woke, the noon sun dove down to where we lay, crackling into my eyes in thin bright needles. All else was the same as before: thick trees black as absence, snow pale as death. I uncurled and rose, sleepwalking awake, stumbled away from our tracks, away from the way we had come. My brother followed me.

I saw my brother’s face for the first time since our flight. Passing in and out of deep shadow, he did not wince when the
sudden light stabbed across his face. He watched only the ground where he stepped, even when I called him by his name. I reached back and caught his hand; it slipped heavy from my grasp.

The second night I dreamt of a feast. I hid in the corner and watched as people ate from a table laid heavily with food that I had never seen: rich sauces over exotic animals, tender off the bone. Crusts of pastries forked open to release the fragrant steam of succulent fruits. Vegetables, fresh and bright, swept with butter: peas sweet with spring, carrots baked with brown sugar. Bread as warm as a blanket. More milk than you could ever drink, warm and frothy or cold as ice.

My brother ate the snow I handed him, and no more. My brother watched his feet when we walked, and did not say a word. I walked on through the forest, and my brother followed me.

On the third night, I ate at the table. Food filled my mouth as soon as I sat on the cushioned chair; fingers held my glass to my lips, wiped the stew from my chin as I reached with both hands for more, more. My stomach creaked wider than it had all year, ballooned with food. I could not stop. It was delicious. I was so hungry. Soft hands renewed my plate and patted my hair. She said that I was a very good girl.

In the morning, I had to push my brother ahead of me, a good shove every few steps. His mouth leaked constantly down his chin; his trousers were frozen with piss. He went only as far as I shoved him, empty and strange as a stupid animal. I looked at the back of his bare neck as he stalled before me for the hundredth time, and my fingers itched to pinch his blank pink skin.

I hesitated, fingers in the air, and then clamped down. I peered around his body at his face. Nothing.

I let my fingernails sink beneath his skin, watching his color, listening to the dumb regular pace of his breath. Nothing.

When I took my hand away, there was crimson blood washing his throat and four piles of scraped flesh beneath my claws. The woods were silent. I pushed him then, and he moved forward. The light before us shifted, and we came into a clearing. It was then that I saw the house.
At first, it appeared so small that I believed it was just an abandoned hunter's shed. Any shelter from the woods was a blessing, and I left my brother at the edge of the woods and ran ahead through the unmarked snow.

Two things stopped me at less than ten paces: the house suddenly seemed to loom and sprawl, inflated by, I thought wildly, imagination? Breath?

And also, the smell of food surrounded me so completely, so luxuriously, that I pinched my thigh through my dress, sure I still lay sleeping.

The shutters of the house flew open, and the smell of the feast grew stronger still. My thigh throbbed where I had pinched it. I looked back at my brother and saw his features shift and then again grow still.

I ran to the heavy door and pounded with both fists. It swung open at the first blow. Someone within said, Can I help you, child?

I screamed: Feed him!

And I fell to the floor, and I slept.

As I woke, I reached for my brother, but I was alone. I stretched in a wide, bright bed, the sun of an early hour striping the quilts. There were two plump pillows tucked under my head, and an extra blanket folded at the end of the bed. I sat up and discovered that someone had been in with a tray: five golden circles of egg, ten slabs of bread, lightly toasted. No fork; no matter—I ate it all, sucking my fingers, before my feet touched the floor. I took the glass of milk off the night-stand and drank it down as I walked to the window.

The glass dropped from my hand and shattered at my feet as I looked out. How long had I lay sleeping? The snow had disappeared from the yard, and in its place were grass and gardens, lush greenery filling the space to the foot of the woods. A rabbit nibbled on a head of lettuce, and tomatoes hung heavy from staked vines; corn grew high and green in cozy, nodding rows. Surrounding the vegetable plots were rows of thriving flowers, swaying slightly in the breeze. It must be spring.
when he moved in the middle of the night next to her bed,  
in his eyes the lights from the outside shone, and she pondered  
how death would finally come to her, in mirror image,  

a woman with crow's wings for eyebrows, bruised like ripe  
plums, scars from so many surgeries like muddy rivers,  
swift, sea-bound, and when she ached with the pain  
of forgiveness, Diego in her mind, *sapito hechisero, hers,*  
and the dog yelped several times until it found its groove  
on the piece of carpet on the floor. *Feo,* she whispered,  

*feito lindo,* her attraction to exotic animals helped  
her get used to the idea of an other-worldliness, Xólotl  
climbed over the edge of her bed to be petted, licked  
her hands, and she thought of his tongue as one giant  
brush with which she painted the canvas of her nights,  
a world ablaze with crimson, purple, pulsing colors  

like those she saw the first time she made love, so long  
ago, when the world, lighter, lifted her skyward,  
an angel's azure wingfeather-she sighs, the dog barks.
I really shouldn't tease her, but on nights like this when she jerks into dreams of the great poets, speaking through the navels of beautiful women, I'm tempted to sing, "Come On-a My House" just to see her dance the mashed potato. Cranial, really. Of course waking her could be dangerous. She might expect the paperboy to arrive dressed as Monsignor. She'd graciously accept from him a silver tray with two large breasts on it, the ones she fantasized about during Mass as she practiced giving herself orgasms by crossing her legs and squeezing tightly. Maybe I shouldn't whisper, "I give you ca-nn-dy" in her ear. Life is difficult enough these days with her dream journals and free associations. And when the coachman doesn't arrive to rush her off to the forest, I say to her, "Don't believe everything you see." Only in Buñuel do we have a road of neuroses to walk down as diplomats invade the house. I know, I know, occasionally a tree resembles a lung and on the best of days, an infected lung, bronchi red, inflamed.
BALLARD'S ROOMMATE DURING the spring of Watergate, was Iranian, and according to rumor a member of SAVAK, the Shah's secret service. A picture of the Shah's wedding party adorned Ali's desk and his demeanor—Ali's that is—was watchful, suspicious, and seemingly available for confidences. The Shah, on the other hand, whose Pahlavi Dynasty had once seemed so unassailable, was pictured smiling broadly, escorting his bride underneath a bower of drawn swords, confident that this third marriage would produce the requisite heir. Unlike Ali he would not prove watchful enough.

Ali was noticeably different from the rest of the Iranian students who drove black Trans-Ams, partied every evening into the early hours of morning, and seemed desperate to establish their reputations as libertines in the grand European style. Ali, however, worked dutifully at his built-in desk, drawing schematics and diagrams for his engineering courses until midnight each evening, and then he rose at five each morning to work in the campus dining hall before his day-long schedule of classes and labs. Ballard once caught a glimpse of him in the dish room standing at his position next to the commercial dishwasher, wearing a rubber apron and long, black rubber gloves. Given his slight stature and hollow expression, he looked like a weary child in a photograph illustrating the abuses of child labor laws.

Ballard, indifferent at best to his classes, left campus each evening at midnight for his job downtown, where he cleaned the offices of his great-Uncle Leo's collection agency, Loss Finders ("No bad debts, only bad debtors"). The offices were extensive, and although one might think that white collars workers could not make that much of a mess, the job kept him busy until six Monday through Thursday. He stayed awake long enough to attend his classes, all of them morning seminars, then went to bed. He did not see Ali except in the early evenings when he woke to find his roommate in his characteristic pose: hunched over his
desk and his drawings, holding his breath, his lips hidden beneath his heavy mustache, his desk lamp shining down like an academic third-degree.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” Ali might say, twisting around in his chair, while Ballard stumbled into the shower.

Often enough, Ali would be gone by the time Ballard returned with a towel around his waist, dripping water on the tile floor. To a study carrel in the library or a table in the student union. Ballard wasn’t offended; Ali needed privacy and concentration. So he was surprised one Saturday evening when he returned to their room to find it filled with other Iranian students. Ballard realized with a start that he had never seen Ali with them before. Ali was sitting in his chair, his elbows on his knees, and the others were standing around him in an attitude that resembled nothing so much as some sort of fraternity hazing. Or an interrogation.

“I’m sorry,” Ballard said. “I’ll be out of here in a second.”

There was a certain amount of awkwardness as Ballard, clutching his towel, searched in his drawers with his free hand for, well, a clean pair of drawers that he could wear under his least dirty pair of jeans. One of the girls snickered. Zari, he thought, though he couldn’t be sure since they all wore the same style of black silk blouses and skintight black pants, their only ornament the heavy gold chains looped like gorgeous ropes around their necks. He could hardly think of them as girls, though, since they possessed not only more money than God, they were also possessed of more experience than he could ever hope to acquire. They spoke with ease of skiing trips to Biarritz and shopping expeditions in Paris, New York, and Rome. Since coming to college, Ballard had met many wealthy students, but the Iranians seemed always to go one better in their lavishness and casual disregard of how much things cost. And although he had been Ali’s roommate for nearly a year he had yet to get to know any of them.

“Ballard,” Rahim said, “we were trying to get your roommate to come with us, but he insists that he must study.”

“He studies a lot.”

“Too much,” Zari, definitely Zari, said.

Rahim placed a hand on Ali’s shoulder as though to hold him in his chair. “What can we do to persuade him? We would like to
go out and have a nice time, but he refuses all our invitations. It is hard not to be offended, if you know what I mean. No one can study all the time, can they?”

Ballard did not know them well, they obviously had different expectations of life now as well as life later and they moved in such different circles as to be planets in other orbits, but he understood that at some level coercion was being administered. Against Ali. Why, he couldn’t say. “I can’t study all the time. But I should, I guess. I should study a little more. A lot more. Still it’s hard to turn down a little bit of fun.”

Standing behind Rahim, Maryam said, “Poor Ali needs a break. Even Ballard understands the value of fun.” Maryam, quiet, with sleepy eyes, pushed half a dozen gold bracelets up one slender forearm. “But all poor Ali says is no, no, no. Baby needs to have a little fun.” She crouched beside his chair, put one manicured finger to his lips. “Don’t you, baby?”

“I have a test on Monday,” Ali said evenly, “and I’m a full chapter behind.”

“Poor baby.”

“Just think how much better you’ll study,” Rahim said, “after a little break. We won’t keep you out very late. Just enough to refresh your thought process.”

“I cannot.”

“Such pessimism.”

“I am not so gifted that I can play at night with my friends. At night is when I learn what I failed to understand during the day.”

“Poor baby.” Maryam clucked her tongue in some approximation of sympathy. “Poor baby.”

“Yes, he is a poor, poor baby.”

They all crowded around him—Rahim and Maryam, Zari and Pasha, Houri and Mohammad.

Ali rose from his chair, the weary laborer, pushing them away as though for air. “Okay, maybe. Okay. If Ballard comes, then I’ll come. For an hour, no more, then I come immediately back. Agreed?”

“Wonderful,” Rahim said. “That’s all we asked. A little diversion from work, work, work.”

Ali turned to Ballard who was still struggling with his towel and clothes. “You’ll bring me back?”
“Sure. Just let me get dressed.”

“Wonderful,” Rahim said again. “But we’re already so late. I’ll give you the address. It’s a club on the east side. A Persian club, you understand, but you’re our guest. Here, I’ll write it down, and you can join us later, okay?”

He tore a page out of Ballard’s economics notes and wrote the address down, obliterating the Keynesian ideal of government’s role in employment. “You won’t need any money. Just ask for us at the door, and they’ll let you in. We’ll buy you a drink when you arrive.”

It was a remarkable moment, to be addressed by these fabulous creatures, invited to their personal playground.

“Okay,” he said. “Sure.”

They left then, herding Ali out between them, Pasha, the weight-lifter, the last to leave. Pausing, he turned to face Ballard, his short black hair bristling around his square brown face.

“See you later, alligator,” he grimaced, an expression that thickened his already thick neck, expanded his shoulders and deep chest.

“I’ll catch up,” Ballard said. “I’ll be there in a little bit.”

He dressed quickly, feeling the weight of some undefined tension, an urgency reinforced by Ali’s mournful look back at his texts and schematics. The address was practically to Rockwood and took about forty-five minutes to reach. And then, of course, the address turned out to be a vacant field next to an industrial park. The name of the club, Ebrahim’s, was not listed in the phone book. He looked at the paper again, wondering if he had made a mistake. No, this was the name and address, and instead of a line of young sultans extending from the door out onto the sidewalk, he was faced with a chain link fence and scraps of wind-littered garbage. What were they trying to pull? Not since the fourth grade had he felt so obviously snubbed. ‘I told to get lost. What was going on? And what were they doing to Ali?

He found out three hours later. He had driven to Burnside and, watched by three envious winos, bought a gallon jug of Tokay and a sack of chicharones at a corner market, the pork rinds so greasy and full of fat that the paper bag was translucent before he left the store. The night would not be a total loss. He threw the stack of textbooks and notebooks under his desk and
filled a coffee cup with wine, opened the window above his desk and, sitting on the sill, imitated the residents of the Burnside hotels. He drank steadily. Other students passed underneath the window, occasionally a couple holding hands, radiating the aura of their sexual heat. When the wind shifted he could hear the sounds of the Saturday night band in the commons, the staccato of a drum set, the woof of a bass. He drank some more, nibbling the pork rinds. Ali came in a little after midnight. He unlocked the unlocked door, then stood on the threshold. His white shirt was ripped and bloodstained from a cut above his left eye, the skin around which was already turning the color of eggplant.

“What the hell?” Ballard said.

“I tripped,” Ali said, “getting out of Rahim’s car, you know, getting out of the back seat.”

“That’s pretty dangerous, all right.”

“No, no. It is difficult getting out of Rahim’s back seat. There were seven of us in the car. It was dark. Pasha was pushing me out. It was my own clumsiness.”

“It looks like they pushed you out on the freeway.” Ali stripped off his shirt then threw it in the trash can between their desks.

“I tripped and fell against a fire hydrant. It was an accident.”

“That fire hydrant must have been in a pretty bad mood.”

“Yes,” Ali said, an unfocused smile stitched across his face, "well.”

“Well, here,” Ballard said, holding up the jug. “I’ve been drinking. Very bad stuff actually.”

“I see that. We missed you, you know. At the club. Everyone was dancing. There were many women. Ebrahim’s. A very fancy place. Very fancy women. You would have liked it.”

“There was no club.”

“I think Rahim gave you bad directions.”

“He gave me the address of a vacant lot. For a club that’s not listed in the phone book. A club that doesn’t exist.”

“No, no, no. You don’t understand. It’s very private. The only people who go there already know how to find it. There’s no need for a telephone listing.”

“Listen, Ali. I don’t know what the problem is, but I think Rahim and Pasha and Mohammad beat you up, not too badly,
but just enough to let you know they mean business about something. I have no idea what or why. I don’t need to know.”

Ali shook his head slowly, like a draft horse tired of its yoke but still pulling nonetheless. “Everything is as I said. I am sorry for your inconvenience. Let me make it up to you.” He opened his closet and rummaged behind his shoes, emerging at last with a bottle of Glenfiddich, the seal unbroken. “Put away that poison.”

Ballard emptied his coffee cup out the window. “You should wash that,” Ali said. “It would be criminal to pollute such good scotch. And maybe you could bring back some ice.”

The ice, as it turned out, was for Ali’s eye and not for the scotch. Ice, according to Ali, would have been yet another pollutant. Ballard poured a little of the Glenfiddich into his mug and into a glass that Ali offered. “Is it allowed?” he said. Ali snorted and downed the amber liquid. “I am not one of the fundamentalists. Neither am I one of the dilettantes. I am what I am not. I also know what the rumors say, but I am no informant either. I’m poor. That’s what I am. That’s my crime. My father owns a greenhouse in Tabriz. Those others, they think that I am watching them to report to their families and to the government, but I don’t care what they do. They’re ridiculous. They can do anything, they can spend thousands of dollars, a million dollars, and it doesn’t matter. Me, though, if I do not pass a test, I can be brought back anytime, a discredit to my family. I am grateful to the government which has allowed me to be here, but I do not owe them anything other than a good life and to use my skills when I return. I am not one of them. I don’t care about the radical religionists either. At least they are concerned about something other than pleasure, but I am not one of them either. If they have their way, they would imprison us to save us.”

Ballard, who knew nothing of Iranian politics or religion, said little while, using a washcloth dampened with a few drops of the scotch, he touched the cut on his roommate’s forehead. “Still, these friends of yours mean business.”
Ali’s wan smile reminded Ballard once again of a child in a coal mine. “You mean fire hydrant.”
“Right. That fire hydrant means business.”

BALLARD HAD NO business being in college, not a good one at any rate, and the letter of acceptance and the terms of scholarship had come as a complete and unwelcome surprise. Harriet, his grandmother, was responsible. “If I hadn’t done something,” she said, “you’d just rot here. That place is ga-ga for the children of alums, and it’s not like you can’t do the work. Not if you put your mind to it.” Secure in her belief that Ballard was the recipient of a superior gene pool—hadn’t his father, her son, gotten his start there?—she ignored his father’s dismal and his equally dismal high school record. She wrote his application essay (“How World Peace Might Be Accomplished”) aware that her grandson, when not emptying trash cans and scrubbing toilets at midnight, had spent the better part of one summer in his narrow room, staring at the ceiling above his twin bed until his eyes lost focus, tracing the cracks which, depending on one’s mood, resembled a map of the Panama Canal or the profile of Raquel Welch, but she chose to believe that a young man’s excessive time in his bedroom was an indication of hormones rather than a symptom of depression or fear. Wrong about most of his motives, his grandmother was right about one thing: there was little short of dynamite that could have gotten him out of his bed, out of his room, out of that house with its musty, mildewed smell. Ever since he and his sister had come to their grandmother’s house, Lucy had done everything in her power to leave while he could only imagine staying—waiting for Harriet to die.

But the real problem was knowing that he didn’t belong. Not in his grandmother’s house and not in this hothouse of privileged children. It wasn’t a feeling so much as an article of faith that he was in the wrong place, as certain of that displacement as if he had stumbled into one of the women’s dorms, after midnight. The Iranians were an extreme case, but the other students seemed testimony to the fact that not only did he not know as
much as they did, he also did not have as much money. Check that: he had no money. They were worlds apart, and while it was easy enough to hop in a car with others from his floor at two o’clock in the morning as they made a pizza-and-beer run, he did so, checking his pockets for loose change, with the distinct impression of being an impostor. School bored him, that was a given, but—what was worse—his participation in it had turned him into a frightened spy on an assignment he didn’t understand.

Other roommates in other semesters spoke with confidence about fraternities and thermodynamics, Kitzbuhl and Hegelian imperatives. He nodded knowingly all the while wishing he could shout: What in the hell are you talking about? Was it any wonder that Ali seemed like a kindred spirit?

ONCE, NOT LONG after he and Lucy had arrived on Harriet’s doorstep, like an advertisement for foundlings, clutching their battered suitcases and wearing their best clothes and most guarded expressions, Ballard overheard Harriet lecturing her only child over the telephone: “They’re young, I’m old. I’m sick, they’re healthy. We’re a match made in heaven all right. If you think you’ve done me a favor, boy, oh, boy what a rotten son you turned out to be. They’re little sneak, these two, all eyes, watching all the time. Gives me the creeps.” His father must had said something funny then, because the last thing Ballard heard before his grandmother hung up the phone was the sound of Harriet’s laughter.

Which was Ballard’s father’s gift—making jokes—as well as his curse. Jokes and racquet sports, his twin legacy of college. In twenty years of competitive tennis, he had been renowned for his repartee with spectators, gaining more notoriety with his wit than his serve which, never better than mediocre, was also something of a joke. He had joked with Ballard’s mother until she ran away with their next door neighbor the airline pilot; evidently, she no longer felt like laughing, no longer willing to be part of her husband’s gallery, the imagery of flight more resonant than a loss in the quarter-finals of yet another no-name tournament.
So their father had dumped them with Harriet. Temporarily, he said, not realizing that one night after a match at The Cow Palace in San Francisco, he would get loaded and walk in front of a Muni streetcar. Ballard was eight, his sister twelve, and Harriet’s only comment was to lay down the law:

“I have a life, and I don’t intend to give it up for two little snottmeisters. You have a room, you’ll be fed and clothed, but otherwise you’re going to take care of yourselves. We all have our rows to hoe, and some are longer than others. You’ll go to school, you’ll do your work, and you won’t touch my stuff. Got it?”

Harriet’s life was largely conducted across the river in Vancouver, where she earned the largest portion of her income playing poker at the five dollar tables. If her career was a trifle odd, her “stuff” was bizarre: a dozen or more red wigs, never worn by anyone except the styrofoam heads upon which they sat, stored on two shelves in the dining room. Bouffants, falls, beehives, Little Orphan Annie curls, you name it. At moments, Ballard could see them as harmless enough, eccentric collectibles; at other times, they seemed to be something more sinister, the remains of enemies propped up on stakes, their totem power sufficient warning against rebellion.

In high school, at the urging of a well-meaning teacher, Ballard once wrote a letter to himself. “I am the loneliest person I have ever met.” This did not particularly cheer him although he supposed his teacher felt better for having suggested it. By this time, Harriet had thrown Lucy out of her crooked, malodorous house; she had caught Lucy and her biker boyfriend fucking like jackrabbits atop a valentine of red wigs. So his only ally had been vanquished, and the narrow room he had shared with Lucy became his to do with as he wished. To sleep, to stare at the ceiling. He wished to do nothing.

Enter fat Uncle Leo, Harriet’s younger brother, who needed some slave labor, and Ballard was the very first person he thought of. He needed someone willing to get his hands dirty, scrubbing toilets, emptying the trash, changing light bulbs down at the Loss Finders office. “Who knows? You get through with school and you’re interested, you can chase deadbeats like me.” Leo, all three hundred pounds if he was an ounce, scratched his belly between

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the straining buttons and gold polyester fabric of his shirt. "It ain't a profession for Pollyannas. You lose all respect for human nature, that's for sure. Not that anybody's so awful, you understand. They're just lousy. Lousy and weak. In the meantime, you need to get your butt out of my sister's house. Just for some fresh air if nothing else."

"Is there any chance," Ballard asked Leo, "any chance at all I was adopted?"

ALI LEFT DURING midterms. Buried inside the library, Ballard might have assumed but that their room displayed the unmistakable signs of departure: Ali's books, his stereo, his picture of the Shah. All gone. He looked in Ali's closet and found only a few empty wire hangers which began to swing in sympathy when Ballard opened the door. The chest of drawers held nothing but nylon dress socks without mates. Besides them there was nothing except the rug which lay in the center of the room; he had taken everything else. The other Iranian students were no help. Pasha only grinned and shrugged his massive shoulders, saying, "He moves a lot, you know." Rahim did not even acknowledge Ballard's question, apologizing instead for the mix-up about the nightclub: "I am so stupid sometimes. Stupid. Our little club is on the southeast side, not the northeast as I wrote down in the address. Ali told me about my mistake, and I felt terrible, terrible. You would think I was dyslexic or something like that. We will have to make it up to you somehow." Only Maryam was more forthcoming, but even that, he suspected, was at least partly a lie. "He did," Maryam said, "what he thought best, I'm sure. Rahim was trying too hard, trying to make him one of us, you see, and so he's gone. To keep his distance. As though we won't see him. As though we won't find him in the dish room or the library. He didn't have to do that, you know. We were only trying to include him, and what does he do? He hurts us. Like a brother who is spiteful and mean to his family." Her anger, like heat rising from asphalt, shimmered about her head.

But, she was wrong. About seeing Ali around campus, that is. He looked in the usual places.

The next morning he left work an hour early, the sky still
bruised with night, and made his way down the hill from his
dormitory to the dining hall. A side door was open for student
workers: girls in hair nets grating potatoes, mixing batter, and
frying bacon stood sleepily at the counter tops and stoves. Ballard
walked through the kitchen and into the dark, humid bowels of
the dish room. Curtains of steam billowed from the dishwasher
where instead of the slum-shouldered posture of Ali, he en­
countered the back of a girl, her thick, corky hair twisted into a
knot held in place by a wooden spike. Waves of noise from the
dishwasher crashed against the stainless steel surfaces of the dish
room.

“Who?” she shouted in reply. Her fists were on her hips while
moisture from the steamy air dotted her forehead and cheeks.
“Who do you want?”

“I can’t help you,” she said an hour later in the downstairs
coffee shop, sliding into a booth opposite Ballard. She pulled
the spike from her hair, made frizzy from the steam, and shook it
out. “He left. I don’t have a clue why or where. Diana— she’s the
supervisor— called me, told me he didn’t show up for work, and
she could give me more hours. I didn’t ask questions. Don’t get
me wrong, I’m sorry about your friend, but I need the money.”

“He quit.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“What about school?”

She waved her hands in the air like a magician releasing a
favorite dove. “I wouldn’t know.”

As though he were one of Uncle Leo’s investigators, follow­
ing a trail of bad checks, false information, and less than noble
intentions, Ballard next walked to the engineering building where
Ali’s lab partner, a haggard, gray-faced chain smoker named
Parker, glumly informed him that Ali had not been present for
the previous four weeks.

“He kept sending me notes,” Parker said, “and I kept turning
in lab reports with both our names. They were bull shit, the notes.
‘Please forgive my inexcusable behavior,’ that sort of crap. Pissed
me off.”

Ballard could imagine the notes: Ali’s fastidious printing, the
courtly, excessively polite apologies revealing nothing.

“I’m sure he had his reasons,” he said.
Parker lit a Lucky Strike: “Actually, since he’s been gone, the work’s been easier, no more triple-checking the results. He wants to bail, fine by me. He’s so fucking anal.”

According to the registrar Ali had not withdrawn from school. Not officially. “People have their reasons,” a secretary told him, “and after the deadline for refunds, they don’t always bother to tell us.”

That was that. Ali was gone. He had cut and run for reasons he didn’t entirely understand. Other than Ali himself, who could know for sure? It seemed clear that his treatment by the other Iranians was responsible, at least in part. The beating. The implied threat of more. What else could it be? Such barely concealed antagonism seemed as exotic as it was inconceivable. To be held in such regard. Such contempt. To matter that much.

“I DON’T SUPPOSE he told you we were to be married.”

“No. He didn’t tell me.”

Another Saturday night and another entrance into his room clutching a towel around his waist only to find that he had an audience: Maryam stretched out on Ali’s bare mattress, one slender forearm covering her eyes.

They had known one another in Tabriz, the children of poor families, and there had always existed an understanding between them. But, when they were offered scholarships abroad in exchange for their loyalty to the Shah and SAVAK, their paths diverged. “I was smart enough to know there were other ways,” Maryam said. “That has always been Ali’s fault; he can’t see with his imagination; he can only grasp what is in front of his nose. Rahim and the others—they are nothing but spoiled oil brats; they are not radicals or fundamentalists; there is no reason to spy on them. They are not about to undermine their money, their parties, their decadence for the sake of some ayatollah, some imbecile in a caftan. Can you imagine me veiled?”

Despite their differences, despite her role in his beating, Maryam and Ali had made up shortly before his disappearance. But he had lied to her about the state of their relationship. “Our reconciliation,” Maryam had said. He had not written or called since he left, and she felt offended and deceived. He was a differ-
ent person altogether from the boy she had known; he had ac-
cepted the culture of deceit as the manner of his life. “This rug,
you see. The one thing he left was my present to him before we
left our country. It is his way of leaving me behind after the
promises we had made to each other.”

“I don’t know,” she said, rolling off Ali’s bare mattress and
onto her lethal heels. “I could accept his choice if it were in the
name of ideology, but for Ali it is only a practical matter. He
wants a degree in engineering so he can build dams, so he can be
a part of this grand design, as he calls it. He needed to be a part
of something. So he informs on others for the sake of his own
life. A spy, with no moral compunctions. I see him sometimes, I
think, watching me, but he would not be doing that for senti-
ment but for a report.”

So maybe it wasn’t that surprising when, following Maryam’s
visit, Ballard began seeing glimpses of Ali in the strangest places
and the strangest times: hunched over a desk in the collection
agency at two o’clock in the morning, riding a bicycle across the
Hawthorne Bridge at dawn, standing in line for dinner outside
the Portland Rescue Mission. Each time he stopped the car or
hurried to look, it turned out to be his mistake, a stranger’s eyes,
usually someone who, when viewed at close range, looked noth-
ing like Ali. The mustache was wrong, the shoulders too wide. It
was haunting though, and Ballard could not rid himself of the
feeling that Ali was not truly gone, that he was somewhere nearby,
watching him.

And indeed, one morning while unlocking his car in the base-
ment parking lot underneath the collection agency, Ballard grew
so heavy, so uneasy with the sense that someone was watching
that he spun around, not at all surprised when a Volkswagen,
faded blue and decorated with the pop art decals of a popular
shampoo, sputtered away, the driver dark-haired and slump-shoul-
dered.

“Ali,” he cried, running after the receding car, “what the hell
are you doing? Ali!”

He ran three blocks, the chain of office keys jangling at his
side, but in the light early morning traffic, the VW ran one red
light and was gone.

That was that.
THE YEARS PASSED, but not without their share of other disappointments, other illusions. Ballard graduated, and he fell in love, but following graduation, his girlfriend—the heiress of a gasoline pump manufacturer—decided that a life with those of her father's tax bracket was preferable to a life with someone such as Ballard, and her judgment seemed confirmed when, in the uncertain economy of the Carter years, he failed to find a job that paid more than waxing a relative's floors at midnight, his degree and half-hearted efforts notwithstanding. His basic unsuitability, it seemed, had been unmasked, showing him as the fraud that he was. In the text of Ballard's life, Ali's disappearance was a brief but provocative chapter.

Even so, Ballard thought that someday Ali would contact him, an expectation that persisted long past the point of reason. Ali might have wished to disappear, but he had to have sensed the sympathy and concern of his former roommate, the twinning of their experience. So went Ballard's thinking. A letter perhaps. Something on the order of "I profoundly regret the haste of my departure, but circumstances dictated an immediate withdrawal. Please forgive my rudeness, etc., etc." And yet, except for his few bills and announcements of campus events, his mailbox was empty. No letter, no phone call, no note slipped stealthily under the door—nothing came. Ever. But, even at that moment when Ballard waited with Susan for her boarding call, standing at the gate where she would board a plane to Ohio and home and the members of her class, and while she nattered on, hoping, she said, to remain such good, good friends for the rest of their lives, Ballard's attentions were drawn involuntarily toward those who sat on the margins of the waiting area, suspecting that somewhere among them Ali might be hiding in watch.

Two years later on a chilly night in the fall: while driving home from work—he had, through sheer inertia, risen from night janitor to one of Uncle Leo's junior investigators—he passed a downtown church, its exterior dimly illuminated by the light of hundreds of candles, a demonstration in progress. Ballard parked in a side street, then walked around the police barricades to watch while robed and hooded figures marched silently back and forth.
in front of the church's gothic facade, in and out of the lights of the television news crews that had come out to cover the event. The marchers held no signs; no one addressed the growing crowd with bullhorn or microphone. But for a few hooded protesters distributing pamphlets, the purpose of the gathering would have been inscrutable; the participants just as easily could have been Klan members or monks bundled against the chilly night air. Printed on cheap paper, the pamphlets denounced the Shah’s declaration of martial law, the crackdown on dissidents, the curtailment of religious expression, and the violation of the will of Allah. The shrill, inflamed rhetoric screamed for jihad and the imminent return of Allah’s servant Khomeini. The protest was orderly, unnaturally silent until a photographer began taking a series of pictures from the dark edges of the crowd, the camera’s strobe freezing the marchers in still frames of blue light. A collective growl emanated from the marchers, and their ranks began to break.

“Traitor,” Ballard heard someone in the crowd say. “SAVAK pig.”

More rumbling among the demonstrators as well as those watching.

“He is taking names,” someone else said, “as well as pictures.”

“Our families will be ruined.”

With a shout, the protesters, aided by confederates in the crowd, surged toward the flashes from the camera. The lone photographer— slight, his head drawn in to his shoulders—scrambled toward the haven of darkness. Candles were dropped; there were curses and screams; Ballard heard the soft sounds of flesh being struck, the whimper of pain. Something smashed against the pavement as the police moved to break up the disturbance. One of the robed figures howled as his sheet caught flame. Others reacted, rolling the poor unfortunate on the ground. Caught up in the crowd and carried toward the street, Ballard pushed his way out of the crush, only to see Maryam, muffled inside an enormous greatcoat, kneeling over the shattered pieces of a camera. He watched as she picked up something from the pavement, placing it inside the pocket of her coat.

“Ah, you,” she said, seeing him. “I remember you.” She touched the side of his face, close enough that, even in the shad-
ows, he could see the dark, finely textured skin along her cheekbones, smell her fragrance of jasmine and spice. "The world is chaos, and we are destroying one another, aren't we? Like a dog with a tail."

"That was Ali," he said, "with the camera. Wasn't it? And you were picking up the film. You're both in on it."

Her index finger traced the line of his jaw, tapped him lightly on the chin. "We shall have to get together one day. Have a little gossip. But that must wait for another time."

She kissed him then, neither an answer nor invitation to follow, and she slipped away, her hands in the pockets of her greatcoat. He would not see her again for years by which time the Shah had fallen, Iran was a shambles of fundamentalism, and she would be seven months pregnant, her face sallow and rounded, the peacefully settled wife of a Swedish consular official. This happened at a chamber of commerce Christmas party; he looked across the serving line, and there she was, wearing a sequined top over the swell of her breasts and belly, and mounding a plate with crab salad and ham slices. It was the sort of event that breeds chance meetings, and after living a lifetime in one spot, even a collections investigator (and one-time night janitor) is bound to run into acquaintances. Her husband had excellent diplomatic connections, of course, and as his wife, she could travel anywhere—even Tabriz if she wished, though a modern woman like herself would never choose to wear a veil, now would she? "Can you imagine," she said, rubbing her sequined belly, "can you imagine me in a chador?" At various moments during the course of the evening, he asked her about Ali, and each time she gracefully deflected the conversation to other topics. As she and her husband left, she shook his hand with both of her own and whispered in his ear: "Life is what it is, after all. Your imagination will not make it something else."

That was nearly the same time that he met Nadir. Nadi, as he preferred to be called, answered the door when Ballard knocked, looking for the person who had defaulted on payments toward a used refrigerator. The collections report listed an address just south of downtown. A dilapidated three-story frame building, the gray paint blistered and peeling, the apartment house sat on a slight incline at the end of a dead-end street. A date, 1918, was
inscribed into the sidewalks, and iron rings for the reins of one's horse were yet embedded into the curbs. From the sidewalk, three steps descended to the locked front door. Ballard pressed the buzzer by the apartment number listed on the paperwork, and when the front door clicked open, he stepped into a hallway lit by one blue bulb, dust rising like steam from the threadbare runner and into the gloomy aqueous light.

"Ali?"

"One moment." The stoop-shouldered man closed the door to release the safety chain before opening it again. "I'm sorry. You must be mistaken. My name is Nadir Mansur. Nadi to my friends."

The slight figure in the doorway was attired in a sleeveless tee-shirt and a pair of dirty work pants, his face broken and scared around the sockets of his eyes, the crooked path of his nose. At some time—maybe years before—he had shaved off a mustache. Of that, Ballard was certain.

"I know it's you," he said.

"No," the other man said, shaking his head. "It happens very often. I am often thought to be someone else, but I assure you I am not."

The small man stepped away from the door, motioning Ballard inside. "Please. I am about to have tea."

On the uphill side of the building, the one room apartment was essentially underground. A narrow window near the ceiling admitted the muddy light of an alley. The radiator hung from a bracket in the ceiling, the plaster of which was crumbling and falling to the floor, a crazy quilt pattern of mismatched Congoleum.

This apartment, with its crumbling ceiling and its patchwork floor was precisely the sort of place Ballard had been running from for twenty years because of its feeling of home. Living here—and he could imagine it all too well—would constitute a kind of surrender from which he was not sure he would ever be able to recover. Thoughts of Harriet's house, mowing Harriet's crab grass lawn, tending her garden and picking the fig tree, hearing the same lies about walking barefoot to school through snow and stubble fields in South Dakota, those moral lies about dili-
gence, purpose, and hardiness of spirit ran in front of Ballard like a dying man's remembrance of a bitter life.

"I know the person you're looking for, this Ali. Ali Mussadegh. Yes. He has gone back to Iran, I believe. So he can build dams for Allah. Always the dams." This other man winced. "Please. My tea is nearly ready. Maybe you would join me."

Ballard ignored the offer, noticing for the first time a picture of the Shah on the table beneath the narrow window.

"He disappeared quite suddenly."

"Yes. That happens."

"I think he was in a great deal of danger. People wanting to hurt him, maybe kill him."

"It's possible." Nadi pointed to the disfigurement of his own face. "But a car accident is even easier. I don't drink now. Allah— and the state of Oregon— forbid it."

"Ah." Ballard handed Nadi one of the agency's orange business cards, his home phone number written on the back. "If by some chance Ali didn't go home, have him call me, okay?"

"Yes," he said, and his lips seemed to be looking for what camouflage a mustache provides. "I will tell him. Of course. You were good friends."

Later, while sitting in his car, at the end of the dead-end street, he wrote Whereabouts Unknown across the top of the agency file, knowing that by the next morning it wouldn't be a lie.

WHEN HE BEGAN working at Loss Finders, cleaning the agency's offices, he was fifteen and not unhappy to be away from Harriet's house several hours each night, though most days he was asleep by his third period Algebra class. Sunday mornings, to the sound of various church bells, he picked up the trash from the Friday before, cleaned the bathrooms, and with whatever time he had left, waxed the hallways, shampooed the carpets, really cleaned. There was something soothing about the deserted offices while he danced with the electric buffer or swung a mop, the reverential quiet of papers stacked and squared away on desks, paper clips in their holders, staplers at the ready. Most of the
desks also held pictures of families and loved ones: trips to the beach or snow, graduations, birthdays, anniversaries. He knew something of their lives by their desks, and he sampled them vicariously. Mr. Montgomery, for example. One of his uncle’s newest investigators, Mr. Montgomery kept a picture of his wife next to the phone. They had been married only for a short time. Mrs. Montgomery wore flowers in her hair while leaning against the trunk of a tree, her eyes nearly closed, and Ballard could imagine Mr. Montgomery, yawning away a slow afternoon and falling into that picture like a dream of love and belonging. Or Mrs. Harrington. One of the telephone agents, she had a daughter who had run away—she kept track of her daughter’s movements, credit card transactions, that sort of thing, on a yellow pad underneath her desk blotter. Whereas his Uncle Leo kept a bottle of vodka in the lower right hand drawer of his desk, a bottle that was replenished every three days. Ballard restricted his sampling between the first and second day, when his uncle’s suspicions would be least likely aroused.

His lunches were similarly a potluck of whatever he found in the office. He looked through the cupboards and the office refrigerator for those items that wouldn’t be missed, a soda, crackers from a box, an apple from a nearly full bag, and he rooted through the trash cans for whatever appeared not to be spoiled or dirtied. The night of Uncle Leo’s sixty-second birthday, he came in to find the remains of an enormous sheet cake on the conference room table. The top had been decorated with a caricature of Sherlock Holmes, the two-billed hat and the bulbous pipe the unmistakable signs. Happy Birthday to the Sleuth of misfortune! was written in script along the sides. Barely a quarter of the cake had been eaten, and a note had been taped to the table:

Dear Ballard,

Even the fat guy gets a birthday once in awhile. There’s ice cream in the fridge, paper plates, plastic forks in the cupboard. Make yourself sick, you lousy kid! Just kidding, ha, ha. Seriously, pretend you’re one of us, okay? I know it hurts. Forget the floors for tonight, we’ll live in filth for a day. It won’t hurt us. Just stay the hell out of my booze, that’s all I ask.
THERE WAS AT LEAST a quart of ice cream left in the refrigerator; he cut a slab of cake and dumped it into the container of ice cream, blessing his uncle and his uncle’s birthday from the other side of midnight, grateful for the bellyache he was about to create, unable to believe how hungry he was.

Then again, he couldn’t remember a time when he wasn’t.
Serving the Foreign Office

I am the son of Jack the Ripper. His name is Charles and the rumors are true. He is upper-class, belongs to the Royal Geographic Society, and served with distinction in the Foreign Office. He has joked with Burton, Speke, and Livingstone, and comes home through the stables to shed his blood slicked oil-skin amid the aprons of the butchers.

My mother, an idiot of Anglo-Irish gentility sings his praises through turnip lips, never saying boo about his absences to Afghanistan and the Dark Continent. He has seen the Night of the Long Knives, traveled a plateau of burning stones, and murders whores with surgical abandon in the sawdust gutters of Whitechapel.

He reads the papers assiduously and leans across a plate of fried tomatoes and herring, uttering, how horrible.

My father has ordered sub-alterns towards the Crimean guns, speaks of Nightingale with pride, had a finger amputated after Khartoum, and keeps a Dutch mistress in Paris. He is skilled at espionage and the wives of ambassadors return his glances. He enjoys the company of Americans and ashes his cigars in a mummified monkey’s head, presented to him by the ruler of Lahore, with whom he shared the brains.

He is a cartographer and has mapped the Mountains of the Moon. Among his charts of the Silk Road and the Blue Nile, there is a sketch of the East End, red stars drawn like engagements
in anonymous alleyways. There has been no change to his behavior, before the deaths or after, and he takes his meals regularly to fulfill the needs of his slight paunch. He tells stories of surviving without water, love, or ammunition, laughing loudly and equally at Punch, Twain, and the Nun’s Priest.

In a box that opens with the smell of musk, I found a broken knife, a pressed orchid, a locket portrait of my mother, a tuft of ebon hair entwined in a cheap green ribbon, and a severed brown finger. I cannot tell the reason or origin of any of these objects. He spies me at the box and smiles, remarking he did the same thing at my age. The deaths have stopped, and the killer is no longer sought. The murders remain a mystery to all the world.
Once we forget day the clearing fills
with light. No trees block the stars and the sky
blues towards Washington. Headlights stutter
along the highway, then shine a steady
moment at the bridges. From the first ridge
below this mountain top, the spring begins
in pines its sixteen mile run past thickets
of alder, past interludes of moose-loved
sedge, through culverts we explored as kids,
battling down webs and their spiders with sticks,
the random traffic coming like airplanes
overhead, infrequent and far away,
until, finally, now a creek, it spills
cold water into the sun-warmed shallows
of Luby Bay, on the northwestern shores
of Priest Lake. We are living again, Bob
and I, near the start of the water's week-
long trip, in a lookout tower we haven't
seen in twenty years, the less important
two-thirds of our lives, enough to forget
the helix of stairs between tar-coated legs.
Bob wants to play cards in the dark, so we
move the two chairs out onto the catwalk.
Once we forget the hissing, yellow light
of propane wicks, we see the wind, a down-
valley-breeze, turn up the white undersides of aspen leaves. Balanced on the railing,

the last slice of apple glows like scrimshaw, like a whale bone carefully scored and inked.
The radio catches an AM skip

of accordions and voices we can't understand. We think we recognize Bush, 
Yeltsin and Murmansk, and Luby Bay shines red and white with running lights. Bob shuffles the cards. He deals and I spread out my hand to gather the childhood light of stars.
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