

Writes of Passage

A Collection of Short Stories

by

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The Winner

“It’s been an exciting day in junior-college basketball, but with just seconds left on the clock, it looks like the Southside Flying Squirrels will maintain their one-point lead over the Westside Kangaroo Rats. No, wait! Number thirty-eight of the Kangaroo Rats has just stolen the ball. He’s racing down the sideline. With one second left he shoots from half court. There’s the buzzer. The ball’s in the air. Swish! The basket’s good. What a shot! The Westside Kangaroo Rats win the—”

“Ha! I told you so,” Vicky Ventura said, switching off the car radio. “Pay up, mister.”

“I don’t believe it,” Chance muttered. “I swear if my last name were ‘Luck,’ my first name would be ‘Rotten.’” He reached in the breast pocket of his jacket, pulled out his wallet, and drew forth a twenty to hand to his wife.

“This rabbit’s foot”—he eyed the furry appendage hanging from his rearview mirror—
“hasn’t brought me any more luck than it did the rabbit.”

“Well, if you wanted to double your money, you should have folded it and stuck it in your pocket. Now give me the dough, the bread, the moolah, the smackeroos.” She snatched the twenty from his hand, gloating with a good-natured laugh provoked by the affectionate banter.

“Thank God all our money is in joint accounts. Otherwise, I’d go broke paying you off.” He chuckled too. “As it is, we’re just robbing Peter to pay Paul.”

“And, oh, how sweet it is,” Vicky said, kissed the bill, and stuck it in her pocket. “Kaching.”

“Yeah, it’s always sweeter to win money than to work for it. But you’ve got to give me a chance to at least break even. Are you ready to try your luck again?”

“That’s what luck is for, isn’t it? So, go ahead, Mister Money Bags. Put all of your nest eggs in my one basket. I’ll bet you twenty dollars the next song we hear on the radio will be a Beatles song.”

“You’re on.”

Vicky switched the radio back on and quickly turned the dial. A moment of silence. Then a measure of piano doubled by bass guitar. Lead guitar and drums in the second measure. Next, rhythm guitar in the third. Finally, vocals. It was John Lennon singing “Give Me Money.”

Chance sighed, took out his wallet again, and handed his wife another twenty. “You’re on a roll. How in the world did you know?”

Vicky sang along with the song, smiling at her husband, bobbing her head, and swaying in time to the music as she took his money.

Two minutes later, the song ended, and the announcer came on the air. “You’re listening to K109.4, all Beatles, all the time.”

“Hey, that’s not fair. You cheated,” Chance said in mock indignation.

“Ah, it’s true. There really *is* a sucker born every minute.” She winked at him and giggled, stuffing the twenty in her pocket along with the other one.

As they approached the red light at the northeast corner of City Park, Vicky was the first to notice a shabbily dressed man on the curb up ahead holding a cardboard sign that said HOMELESS. HUNGRY. PLEASE HELP.

“Why don’t you give that poor man some money?” she suggested.

“Why don’t you? You’re the one with two twenties in your pocket.”

“Oh, come on. He’s on your side. And he needs our help.”

“Hmpf. Any money we gave him he would just waste on getting wasted. His sign ought to read *Sober. Sad. Please souse*. Those homeless guys are all alike. They’re too lazy to work, so they just stand around and beg until they get enough money to get drunk on.”

“You don’t know that. How can you say such a thing?”

“I didn’t. Oscar Wilde did.” Chance raised his right index finger as if to make a solemn pronouncement and said in a pompous, pontifical voice: “Work is the curse of the drinking class.”

“That’s horrible.”

“No, it’s true. I’ll bet you anything.”

“Anything? Okay, Mr. High Roller, I’ll bet you fifty bucks he doesn’t spend the money you give him on alcohol.”

“I’ll see your fifty and raise you fifty.”

“High-stakes gambling, huh? I’m in. A hundred dollars it is, buster.”

“Oh, this is too easy.” Chance snickered. “It’s like taking candy from you, baby.”

When he came to a stop at the light, Chance took out his wallet again, rolled down his window, and handed the beggar a crisp hundred-dollar bill.

“God bless you,” the beggar said before he looked at the bill.

Right then the light changed. Chance rolled up his window and turned left.

“Well, this is the safest bet I ever made. Talk about a sure thing. It will be worth the hundred dollars I gave him to win a hundred dollars from you.” He turned and grinned at his wife. “Keep your on eye on him. We’ve got to see what he does next.”

Vicky turned back to look at the beggar.

“He’s jumping up and down and waving the money at two guys sitting at a picnic table. Now he’s dancing. How funny.” She slapped her husband lightly on the right thigh.

Chance parked the car in the first empty space on the left side of the street. “Let’s get out and watch him from behind that big tree over there.”

* * *

A minute later they had taken their positions, each peeking out from one side of the thick trunk. The beggar had ended his dance and was strutting across the street.

“Ha! I knew it,” Chance said. “He’s going into Booze and Bites. That place has every kind of liquor, beer, and wine you can imagine. It’s hooch heaven. Potation paradise.

Bacchanalian bliss. Inebriate nirvana. Come on. Let’s go.”

“Not so fast, my little alliterator. Let’s wait till he comes out.”

“You know you have a better chance of winning the lottery than winning this bet, don’t you? Come on. The jig is up. The game’s over.”

“I haven’t heard the fat lady sing, and don’t you dare say it was me in the car. I’m warning you.” She pointed her finger at him and peered over the rim of her glasses, though she couldn’t suppress a playful laugh. “Besides, you said these jeans didn’t make me look fat.”

“You women fall for that one every time,” Chance joked back at her.

A couple of minutes later, the beggar came out of the store with two big white bags, one under each arm, obviously too heavy to hold by the string handles.

“Looks like he’s carrying quite a load,” Chance said. “Must mean he’s about to get loaded.”

The beggar crossed the street, walked over to the picnic table where his two friends were sitting, and unpacked the bags.

“What did he buy?” Chance asked.

“Looks like barbecue, pinto beans, potato salad, coleslaw, some rolls . . . and bottled water.” She sounded the last two words with a note of triumph.

“Are you sure it’s not vodka?”

“Not unless Ozarka has bought a distillery.” Vicky held out her hand.

“I’ve had a rash of bad luck here,” Chance said, making a sour face. “While you’re basking in four-leaf clover, I’m sitting in poison ivy.” Shamming reluctance, he got out his wallet again, took out a hundred-dollar bill, and laid it in Vicky’s open palm.

“Now that’s what I like, a man who pays his debts promptly. I would hate to have to send someone to break your kneecaps.”

“Well, maybe that guy isn’t a drunk, but he’s still a bum.”

“Or maybe he just got a bum rap.”

“I doubt it. Hard luck doesn’t come from hard work. If he had any job skills, he wouldn’t be in this position.”

“Oh, yeah? Then how about another bet?”

Chance feigned a grave expression. “Woman, I’m beginning to think you have a serious gambling problem. You might need to go to Gamblers Anonymous.”

“Gambling is only a problem when you lose, my dear,” Vicky shot back, her right hand on her hip and her head cocked. “That makes *you* the one with the problem. I might have to send you to L.A.”

“Los Angeles?”

“Losers Anonymous.”

“Very funny, Miss Happy-Go-Lucky. But I think my luck is about to change. I’m ready to roll the dice, spin the roulette wheel, pull the handle on the slot machine. What are the stakes?”

“Quite the player, aren’t you? In that case, I’m upping the ante. If he has a job skill you can use, then you give him a job, and you get him set up with a place to live and a means of transportation. And that goes for his friends too.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then you get back the hundred and forty you lost today plus bragging rights forever.”

“Bragging rights?” Chance rubbed the palms of his hands together. “I’d say that’s better than two-to-one odds in my favor.”

* * *

Chance and Vicky left their lookout post behind the tree and walked hand in hand toward the picnic table. When the beggar looked up and caught sight of them, he rose and hurried to meet them.

“I can’t thank you enough, sir,” he said. “We haven’t had a meal like this in I don’t know how long.”

“Glad to help. By the way, this is Vicky, and my name’s Chance. What’s yours?”

“Val Hammer, sir.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, Val. How did you end up like this anyway?”

“It was just dumb luck, sir. I was a roofer—”

“A roofer,” Vicky said to her husband. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah, I heard it.”

“And one day,” the beggar continued, “I was kneeling down, nailing a shingle over a gable. The pounding must have rattled a hornets’ nest under the gable because a whole swarm of them came whirring out. I started flailing my arms to protect myself since I’m allergic to their stings, but three of them stung me in the face. I jumped to my feet, lost my balance, and fell off the roof.”

“That *was* an unlucky break,” Chance said.

“It was two unlucky breaks: my right arm and my left leg. After that, I couldn’t work for quite some time, so I didn’t get any checks, and I had medical bills I couldn’t afford. Then, I missed a payment on my truck, and they repossessed it. I couldn’t make my rent the next month, and they evicted me. So, here I am.”

“I see you bought lunch for your buddies there,” Chance said, pointing towards the picnic table.

“They’re the best friends I ever had, sir. We always pool our resources and share.”

“Tell me about them.”

“Well, the tall, skinny one is Rocky Steinmann. The first night I was on the streets, it was cold. When he saw I didn’t have any covering, he folded his blanket in half, took out his pocketknife, and made a slit at the top of the crease. Then he tore the blanket in two and gave me half. I’ve slept with that blanket every night since.”

“So, what’s his story?”

“His wife and son were killed in a car wreck. When he fell apart, everything else did too. You know how it is. You push the first domino, and they all fall one after another: job, car, house, everything.”

“And what did he do?”

“He was a bricklayer.”

“A bricklayer,” Vicky said. “Did you—“

“Yeah, I heard it,” Chance interrupted. Then, turning back to the roofer: “And the other guy?”

“He just goes by ‘Sarge.’ He doesn’t say much. In fact, he hardly talks at all. He was a Marine and did three tours of duty in Iraq. Probably saw some pretty horrible things. After I was on the streets for about a month, though, I reached a point where I couldn’t go on. I was about to end it all. Sarge put his hand on my shoulder, looked me straight in the eye, and said, ‘The Marines leave no man behind. I’m bringing you back, soldier, and I’m sticking by your side till we get you home.’ That was the most he ever said at one time, and he’s been by my side ever since.”

“I’m thinking he’d make a good security guard at one of your properties,” Vicky said to her husband.

“Here’s the deal,” Chance told the beggar. “I own a construction company, and I’m always on the lookout for a good man. I pay a fair wage for an honest day’s work. Now, I don’t usually place a wager on a long shot, but today I’ll make an exception. If you three want to work, I’ll give you a job.”

“And . . .,” Vicky said to remind him.

“And I’ll pay your first month’s rent on a three-bedroom apartment and make a down payment on a truck you can share to get to work and back. That’ll get you started. After that, you’re on your own.”

The beggar had tears in his eyes. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll be on that corner eight o’clock Monday morning. I’ll pick you up.”

“Yes, sir. It’s a deal. We’ll be there.” He wiped the tears from his eyes but kept crying all the same.

“See you then,” Chance said and turned to walk back to his car.

Vicky lingered behind. “I’ll catch up with you in just a minute,” she called to her husband.

“It was so nice of you to buy us lunch yesterday,” the beggar told her, “but when you said you’d be back today, I had no idea it would turn out like this.” He couldn’t stop crying.

“I told you I had an ace up my sleeve. Let’s just keep this our little secret, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

* * *

Back in the car, Chance said, “Well, Lady Luck really smiled on you today.”

“We girls have to stick together, you know,” Vicky said.

“As much as I hate to admit it, maybe you were right. Maybe those three guys weren’t bums after all. They might just be down on their luck.”

“Kind of like you today, huh?”

“Hey, you don’t have to rub it in. Don’t be a sore winner,” Chance said, playing hurt.

“Anyway, I have a good feeling about this. I bet those three guys are going to work out just fine.”

“Well, that’s one bet I hope you win,” Vicky said.

“To tell the truth, I don’t even mind losing the last one. I’m glad I can help them out. At least, I’m willing to take a gamble on them.”

“That’s what I love about you, Chance.”

“That I like to help people?”

“No, that you’re such a good loser. You really are a good sport, and that makes you a winner in my eyes.”

Chance started the car, and the radio came on, the dial right where Vicky had left it. Immediately, she recognized the voice of Paul McCartney singing “Money Can’t Buy Me Love” and started to sing along.

Chance looked at her, smiled, and, taking her hand, joined in the song.

Rules Are Made To Be . . .

Connie Kahler, twelve years old, rolled the dice.

“Six,” she said and moved her token from Pennsylvania Railroad to Kentucky Avenue. She paid \$220 to the bank for the property and adjusted her floral headscarf.

“Your turn,” she said and passed the dice to Mila Milligan, also twelve, who came to play Monopoly with her every day after school. Mila self-consciously smoothed her long, golden-blond hair back behind her ear.

“Can I ask you something?”

“We’re best friends, aren’t we?” Connie said.

“What’s it like being bald?”

Mila rolled a three and advanced her token from Virginia Avenue to Community Chest. “Advance To Go. Collect \$200,” she said, reading the card she had just drawn. “Well, I don’t have much of a choice. It’s hard, especially when I look in the mirror. Before, I had such nice, thick hair.”

“It was such a pretty red color too.”

“Chestnut—that’s what my mom called it.” Mila sighed. “And now it’s gone. The boys at school all make fun of me. I hate that.”

“Boys are so mean.”

“My dad says they’re insecure about their masculinity. They try to build themselves up by tearing others down. And my mom says boys don’t know how to show their feelings, so they tease me because they like me.”

“Do you think they like you?”

Connie rolled the dice. A nine. She counted off the spaces.

“Oh, just my luck. Go To Jail.”

“Here, I have a Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card you can use.” The rules of friendship trumped those of Monopoly.

“Thanks. I don’t think the boys like me very much. I don’t feel pretty anymore.”

“Well, you’re the bravest person I know, and that’s beautiful.”

“But the Bible says long hair is a woman’s glory.”

“You know what my mom used to do when my dad would tell her the Bible says wives should submit to their husbands?”

“What?”

“I’ll show you.” Mila stood up, held an imaginary microphone in her hand, and started to sway her hips as she sang with a gravelly voice, “It ain’t necessarily so, de things that yo’ liable to read in de Bible, it ain’t necessarily so.”

Connie laughed. For a just moment her sunken green eyes sparkled, in spite of the dark circles beneath them.

“Mila, your mom’s here to pick you up,” Connie’s mother called from below.

Connie walked Mila downstairs. “Best friends forever?” she asked when they stood at the front door.

“Forever,” Mila said and turned to walk to her mother’s car.

* * *

“Hi, honey, did you have fun with Connie?” Alexis asked, opening the door of her white Honda Civic for her daughter.

“Mom, I want to cut my hair off,” Mila said as she fastened her seatbelt.

“But you have your grandmother’s beautiful hair. She loves to look at you and remember when she was your age . . . I don’t know, though, maybe a short haircut would look cute.”

“No, Mom. I don’t want to cut it short. I want to cut it off. Shave my head.”

“What? Have you lost your mind?” Alexis turned to see whether her daughter was joking—she wasn’t—and nearly ran the corner stop sign.

“Connie has lost all her hair because of the chemo, and she feels ugly. Besides, the boys at her school make fun of her. I don’t want her to feel all alone.”

“But you’ve been growing your hair for three years. If you cut it all off, you’ll look like a space alien at first and then like a little bird when it starts to grow back. It will take over a year to reach a normal length again.”

“Connie is my friend.” Mila’s eyes moistened, but her voice was firm.

“And if the kids make fun of her at her school, they’ll make fun of you at your school too. Children can be so cruel.”

“Then they’re not really my friends. Connie is my best friend.”

Alexis shook her head. “Well, I don’t much like the idea. I love your long, beautiful hair. But I love your good heart even more. If you really want to shave your head, I won’t stop you.”

“And I want to donate my hair to make wigs.”

“For Connie?”

“No, for other cancer patients. Connie says that people have to accept her just as she is or not at all.”

Alexis did not respond. Now her eyes were moist too.

That evening after dinner Mila sat at the kitchen table, and her mother cut her hair close to the scalp, tress by tress, and carefully laid each one in a long narrow box. When she had finished with the scissors, she went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom of the master bedroom and took out the razor and shaving cream that had belonged to her husband. Back in the kitchen, Alexis lathered her daughter’s head, shaved off the remaining stubble, and wiped away the leftover foam with a towel.

“There you are, honey, just like the day you were born.”

Mila ran her hand over her smooth head and smiled.

* * *

When Mila boarded the school bus the next morning, all the kids erupted into laughter. Some nudged each other and pointed at her; others doubled up and nearly fell out of their seats; still others slapped their knees or stomped their feet on the floor. No matter what he said, the driver could not quiet them down.

“Egghead!” one boy shouted.

“Cue ball!” another yelled.

“Chrome dome!” hollered a third.

“My eyes! My eyes! The reflection is blinding my eyes!” the boy next to him cried, covering his eyes with his hands.

“Did you forget to use your Rogaine?” someone asked.

“How about Bosley Hair Replacement . . . for Women?” another added.

Peals of laughter followed each exclamation. Mila only smiled.

“I can’t believe she did that,” a girl said to the one beside her, covering her mouth with her hand.

“What was she thinking?” the second girl whispered back. “They’re taking class pictures next week.”

The girl behind them leaned forward and said in a hushed voice over the seat, “She’ll never get invited to another party. They boys will never talk to her again.”

The laughter, stares, and pointing continued as Mila walked down the school hall towards her homeroom class. Monitoring the hall, Mrs. Krabbe, the homeroom teacher, stood outside the door. She wore a drab gray sweater and skirt, her hair pulled back in a tight bun, her horn-rimmed glasses sitting high on her pointed nose.

“Where do you think you’re going, young lady?” Mrs. Krabbe said when Mila approached the door.

“To homeroom.”

“Not looking like that you’re not. You can just march yourself down to the principal’s office. I can see you’re starting your teenage rebellion a year early.”

Mila sat in the reception area outside the principal’s office until Flint Steinherz finished his phone call. When he stepped out of his office in his sharply creased pants, seersucker jacket, starched white shirt, and bowtie, he peered at her over his wire-rimmed glasses.

“What’s the meaning of this? Do you think this is funny?”

“No, my friend has ca—”

“I don’t have time for your smart-aleck explanations. Call your mother to come get you. You’re suspended.”

“But she’s at work.”

“Call her,” Mr. Steinherz said and went back into his office, closing the door behind him.

Mila walked over to the phone on top of the receptionist’s counter and dialed her mother’s work number.

“Mom, I’m sorry to bother you at work, but you have to come pick me up.”

“Why? Are you sick, honey?” She sounded worried.

“No. I got suspended.”

“Suspended? What in the world did you do?” Her tone of voice betrayed her disbelief.

“I didn’t do anything. You did. You shaved my head.”

“I’ll be right there. I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding. We’ll straighten everything out.”

* * *

Forty-five minutes later Alexis was sitting on a wooden, uncushioned, straight-backed chair in the principal’s office. Mr. Steinherz sat across from her behind a massive oak desk on which several stacks of papers were neatly arranged.

“Mr. Steinherz, please reconsider. Mila is a straight-A student. She has been on the honor roll every grading period, and she is a member of the National Junior Honor Society.”

“There is nothing to reconsider, Mrs. Milligan,” he said without looking up from the papers in front of him. “Your daughter is suspended.”

“But she hasn’t done anything wrong.”

Mr. Steinherz looked up. “She is in flagrant violation of Article 8.3.1 of the Student Handbook, which clearly states that unconventional dress and hairstyles will not be tolerated.” He looked back down at his papers.

“Did you even ask her why she shaved her head?”

“Her motives are irrelevant. Whatever her reasons, she has violated school policy.”

“Her best friend, who is dying of cancer, has lost all her hair because of chemotherapy. Mila didn’t want her to feel alone.”

Mr. Steinherz sighed, looking up from his papers again. “Mrs. Milligan, we have high standards here at the Liberty Charter School, and we adhere to them strictly. We teach our students conservative values—respect for authority, obedience to the rules, and the importance of law and order. This is not a public school where the students can run wild, drinking alcohol, using drugs, and engaging in promiscuity. Their libertarian laxness is destroying this country.” He took a pen out of the inside breast pocket of his seersucker jacket and signed a paper.

“My daughter is not running wild. She is supporting a sick friend.”

He placed the paper on the bottom of the stack and signed the one on top. “Mrs. Milligan, if we make an exception for one, we shall have to make an exception for all, and then we shall have no more standards. I’m sorry, but sometimes personal sacrifices have to be made for the sake of the common good.”

“Don’t talk to me about personal sacrifices, Mr. Steinherz. I lost my father in Vietnam and my husband in Iraq. And my daughter has sacrificed her beautiful hair, which she is donating to make wigs for cancer patients. First her schoolmates mocked her for an act of compassionate solidarity, and now you’re suspending her.”

Mr. Steinherz looked up again, visibly exasperated. “Mrs. Milligan, I have explained our position. Contrary to popular opinion, rules are not made to be broken; they are made to be obeyed. Your daughter is suspended. Take her home.”

“Suspended for how long?”

“Until her hair grows back to an appropriate length.”

“But what about her education in the meantime?”

“She can either be homeschooled or enroll in public school.” He gave a slight shudder after mentioning the second option.

“Mr. Steinherz, this is so unfair.”

He took off his wire-rimmed glasses and leaned forward, looking directly at Alexis.

“Your daughter has to learn that her ill-considered actions have consequences, Mrs. Milligan.”

“And so will yours, Mr. Steinherz, so will yours.”

Alexis rose, turned, and exited the office without saying good-bye. “Come on, honey, we’re going home,” she said to Mila, who was still sitting in the reception area. Next to her sat Newman Duke, the young and friendly assistant principal. He had been trying to console and encourage her.

When Mila stood up to leave with her mother, he said, “I’m proud of you, Mila. You’re doing a beautiful thing here. Keep your head up, and don’t give up. Study hard while you’re gone. We’ll miss you, but you’ll be back here before you know it. Until then good luck to you and to your friend.”

“Thank you, Mr. Duke,” Mila said. Alexis put her arm around Mila’s shoulder, and they left the building together.

“What are we going to do, Mom?” Mila asked once they were inside the car.

“Don’t you worry that pretty little head of yours, honey. Mama has a plan.”

* * *

Some six hundred children attended the Liberty Charter School in grades one through twelve, with about twenty-five students a grade. In case of school closures because of inclement weather or other such news, their families had a telephone tree in place.

That evening Alexis called her best friend, Ruth Kemp, the president of the PTA.

“Ruth, this is Alexis. We really need your help. My daughter . . .”

As soon as they hung up, Ruth called the vice-president, the secretary, and the treasurer of the PTA. The four officers then each called two “captains,” and each of the eight captains called five “lieutenants,” who called six or seven families each. Two hours later they had reached nearly every parent in the school.

By noon the next day the school office and the school board had received over five hundred phone messages, e-mails, and texts supporting Mila Milligan and protesting the suspension. When Flint Steinherz’s phone rang at 2:15 p.m., it was Henry Dean, the president of the school board.

“Flint, we’ve got a situation on our hands with this suspension thing.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Henry. It will all blow over in a few days.”

“I don’t think it will. We’ve got a ton of messages from parents, and they’re threatening to withdraw their children from the school if you don’t let that little Milligan girl back in.”

“Henry, we’ve got to stand firm. We can’t let parents dictate school policy.”

“You won’t even have a school if they pull their kids out. What’s more, Flint, they’re calling for your resignation.”

“Oh, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I spoke with Ruth Kemp, from the PTA, this morning. If we don’t take immediate action, they’ll go to the newspaper and the television stations. Imagine the headlines—*Twelve-Year-Old Girl Suspended for Supporting a Dying Cancer Patient*. We can’t afford that kind of publicity.”

“But that’s not what happened. She was in violation of the dress code.”

“And those damn investigative reporters are always hellbent on making you look bad, no matter what you’ve done. They’ll crucify us on the evening news. I’m calling an emergency meeting of the school board tomorrow night at a quarter till seven. I want you there to explain your position to the parents. We’ve got to do some damage control. See if you can put a positive spin on this mess.”

* * *

At 6:45 the following evening the seven members of the school board sat behind a long, narrow table on the stage of the school auditorium, looking out over more than four hundred parents in the stair-stepped rows of theater seats. Once Henry Dean had called the meeting to order, he introduced Flint Steinherz to give an opening statement. Mr. Steinherz, dressed in his usual creased slacks, seersucker jacket, white shirt, and bowtie, stepped up to the podium a little to the left of center stage. From his inside breast pocket he took out a couple of sheets of paper, unfolded them, and laid them on the podium. He adjusted the microphone and began to read.

“Esteemed parents, many of you have expressed concern about the recent suspension of a student found to be in violation of the school dress code. Allow me to explain the context of the school’s action, and I am sure you will agree with it. This is not about the merits of a particular case but about the importance of school policy, a policy carefully designed for the safety and well-being of your children. Many of you were alarmed by the state of affairs in the public

schools and did not want your children exposed to the negative influences there. Furthermore, you wanted an atmosphere in which your children could study without distraction and prepare themselves for their future careers.”

Mr. Steinherz looked up, and a number of parents were nodding in agreement.

“To that end the founding committee drafted a student handbook that, among other things, prohibits unconventional clothing and hairstyles. We do not, for example, allow gang-related apparel, sexually seductive clothing, or t-shirt inscriptions glorifying drugs or violence. Instead we insist on tasteful, conventional attire and grooming of the kind your children will be expected to adopt when they enter the professional world. As a result of our policies and strict vigilance in enforcing them your children have been spared the problems with alcohol, drugs, sex, and violence that plague our public schools.”

A brief round of applause interrupted Mr. Steinherz’s talk.

“We strive at the Liberty Charter School to inculcate in our students the traditional American values that countercultural movements seek to erode. As you know, the student in question was suspended for shaving her head. A shaved head is often associated with so-called skinhead or neo-Nazi gangs, who advocate an ideology of xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism incompatible with the best of American traditions. Such an association is one we cannot accept at our school. Our actions were not intended to punish one student but to protect the entire student body. Rest assured, esteemed parents, that we shall continue to act in the best interest of the children you have entrusted to our care. Thank you.”

The audience responded with moderate applause. After it subsided, Henry Dean opened the floor to statements from the audience. Alexis Milligan stepped up to the microphone standing at the front of the left aisle.

“Since my daughter, Mila, is the one who was suspended, I think I should go first. I can speak for my daughter, but before I do, there is someone else I cannot speak for, and you need to hear from her.” Alexis turned around and said, “You can send her in now.”

The back door of the auditorium opened, and a frail young person entered. Placing her hand on the tops of the seats for support, she slowly made her way down the aisle. The short walk seemed to fatigue her. When she reached the front, Alexis lowered the microphone for her and said, “Don’t be afraid, sweetheart.” The little girl began to speak.

“My name is Connie Kahler, I am twelve years old, and I have a cancer called high-risk neuroblastoma. I have been through two rounds of chemotherapy. They haven’t worked. Next week I am starting a third round. If it doesn’t work, the doctors say there is nothing else they can do for me. They say I have about a twenty percent chance of survival. That means I am probably dying. I will never go to high school or college, never have a career, never date a boy, never fall in love, never get married, never have children. I will be dead at thirteen.”

A hush descended upon the audience.

“The chemotherapy makes me sick. I am too tired to do anything. I can’t eat, and if I do, I throw up. I have lost twenty pounds.” She took off her jacket and held her scrawny arms out to the side so the audience could see. “My hair has fallen out, and I am completely bald.” She took off her headscarf and turned from the stage towards the audience, so they could see her bare scalp, her sunken eyes, her drawn cheeks. “When I am sick, I can’t go to school, and I have to stay home all by myself with my mom. No one from my school calls or comes to visit. It’s so lonely. When I’m well enough to go to school between chemo rounds, some kids make fun of me and call me names. Most of them just avoid me. I guess they feel uncomfortable because they

don't know what to say or how to act around someone who is dying. I don't blame them. I wouldn't know what to do either."

Some of the audience members had started to cry.

"But Mila Milligan is my friend. She is my only friend. Even if I had a hundred good friends, she would be my best friend. She comes to see me everyday. We play together and talk about everything. She doesn't feel uncomfortable around me. She doesn't see me as a sick person, a cancer patient, a dying person. She just sees me as me, and she accepts me for who I am. She shaved her head so I wouldn't have to go through this alone. She has always been there for me, she is there for me now, and she will be there for me until the very end. With the cancer, the sickness, the loneliness, I would want to die if it weren't for her. But with her as my friend, even if I'm going to die, I want to live. I just want you to understand who she is and why she did what she did."

When Connie finished and started trudging back up the aisle, there was scarcely a dry eye in the house. Even some of the school-board members were wiping away a tear. The whole time Connie was talking, Alexis stood by her side. She raised the microphone again to speak.

"Thank you, Connie, you're a courageous young lady, and I think you have inspired and moved us all." The audience burst into thunderous applause. When it died down, Alexis faced the school board.

"I hope you can see that what my daughter did was not an act of teenage rebellion. It was not disobedience to the rules. It was not defiance of authority. It was not some kind of antiestablishment fashion statement. And it was most certainly not an assertion of neo-Nazi ideology. Rather, it was a gesture of compassion and kindness, an act of solidarity, an expression of true friendship. Yes, we all want our children to grow up to be good, law-abiding citizens. But

more than that we want them to grow up to be good people. My daughter is a good person, and I am so proud of her. If only my husband, Miles, could be here to see her now. I know he would be just as proud of her as I am. I have to tell you that when she first cut her hair, I thought she was ugly. Now I think she is more beautiful than she has ever been.”

Alexis turned towards the audience. “Some of your children made fun of my daughter on the school bus two days ago. She was not hurt by their jokes, and she is not angry at them, because she knew they did not understand. But she was suspended before she could explain to them why she had shaved her head. If they knew, I think they would support her too. So, when you go home, please tell your children what you have heard here tonight. Thank you.”

The audience rose for a standing ovation, clapping as much for Connie as for Alexis. When they sat again, Henry Dean said, “Who would like to speak next?”

“What else is there to say?” someone from the audience called out. “She’s pretty much said it all.” The entire crowd voiced their agreement.

“Well, then, let’s put it to a vote of the school board,” Henry Dean said. “All those in favor of allowing Mila Milligan back in school raise your hand.” Five members did so.

“All those opposed.” Two members raised their hands.

“The motion is passed. Mila may return to school tomorrow. This meeting is adjourned.”

* * *

Alexis shared the good news with Mila as soon as she got home. The next morning after breakfast she said, “Mila, I want to drive you to school today myself so the kids on the bus won’t tease you before you’ve had a chance to explain things to them.”

On account of the heavy traffic, however, they arrived just before the bell rang. All the students were already in their homerooms as Mila scurried down the empty hall. When she arrived at her classroom, Mrs. Krabbe was still standing at the door.

“Just look at what you’ve started,” she said.

Mila walked through the door and saw the other eleven girls in her class had shaved their heads too.

Later that day it was announced that Mr. Duke, the assistant principal, had been promoted to principal. Mr. Steinherz resigned for “personal reasons.”

Fathers and Sons

That Saturday morning Reuben Abbot and his wife, Hope, were strolling hand in hand in the neighborhood park—in spite of the dark, heavy clouds that threatened rain. They were not the only ones to defy the weather forecast and to venture out with no umbrella.

“Oh, look at that precious little girl playing with her dog,” Hope said, pointing.

“Remember when I told you about the toy sheltie my daddy brought home for me on my fifth birthday? How I loved to play with it, take it for walks, and brush its long, sable coat. I have such happy memories of that time.”

“Can’t say I know what that’s like,” Reuben said, slowly shaking his head.

“To have a sheltie?”

“A happy childhood memory.”

Hope squeezed his hand as they walked on the pea-gravel path, crunching the freshly fallen autumn leaves beneath their steps. Suddenly they heard shrieks of laughter. They both turned their heads to the right and saw four children swinging and bailing out from the swings,

two others climbing on a jungle gym, and another sliding down the slide, with three more mounting the ladder behind him.

“I just love to see children playing and having fun,” Hope said. “Speaking of children, I’ve been thinking. I’m thirty-six now, almost thirty-seven. If we’re going to have a child, this would be a good time.”

“You know how uncomfortable that subject makes me.” Reuben took his hand from hers.

“But, Reuben, when we first got married, you said we couldn’t afford a child yet. So I waited while we both worked hard and saved money. Then you said you wanted to focus on your career. So I waited some more. But now you have your book on the American Revolution published, you have tenure at the university, and you’ve been promoted to full professor, with a salary increase to boot. What are we still waiting for?”

Reuben stopped. “I’ve never said this before, though I’ve thought about it for years: I don’t think I could be a good father; I think there’s something wrong with me.”

“Just your ulcers, honey, but the doctor’s treating them.”

“I don’t mean my health. I mean the way I am.”

“But you’re fine. You’ve accomplished so much already.”

“That’s just it.” Reuben took a deep breath. “I work compulsively because I’m terrified of failure. Nothing I do is ever good enough. Everything has to be perfect. I crave recognition, but I’m deathly afraid of criticism. As soon as I finish one project, I can’t stop to enjoy it; I have to start the next one.”

He paused. From the way Hope looked at him, he knew she wasn’t convinced.

“I don’t know how to relax and have fun. I’m uncomfortable being around other people, even you sometimes. I can give a lecture, but I can’t carry on a conversation. I spend too much

time alone because it's safer that way, yet I'm terribly lonely. I'm a mess. How could I possibly be a father?"

Hope took his hand again and started walking, gently pulling Reuben alongside her.

"Why, I think you'd be a great father. You're so smart and talented."

He could see she didn't get it.

"They say history repeats itself. I don't know whether that's true of nations, but I think it is of families. My dad was not a very good father, so I didn't get to learn from him what a good father is, and I don't know how to be one . . . We were never close. Everything was cold and distant in my family. I've suffered horribly from it, and I'm afraid of doing the same thing to my child. I don't want him or her to go through what I did."

"But, Reuben, you know how important this is to me."

He did, and he felt terrible about it. "I'm sorry. Maybe I just need a little more time."

"Reuben, I don't have much more time. It's now or—" Right then deafening thunder drowned out her words, and a downpour drenched them in a matter of seconds. They went running for their car.

* * *

As Reuben turned the key to the kitchen door from the garage, he heard the phone ringing inside. He hurried to pick it up while Hope went to get a towel from the bathroom.

"Hello."

"Reuben, it's about your father."

"Oh, hi, Mom," he said, dripping wet and making a puddle on the linoleum. "What's the problem?"

"He's not well."

“He hasn’t been for a long time, Mom, with the emphysema and cirrhosis, I mean.”

“I think he’s dying.”

“Oh.”

“You haven’t seen him in so long. You should come see him.”

Reuben cleared his throat. “Gee, I don’t know, Mom . . .” See his father face-to-face? He had been dreading this moment for years.

“He may not have long, Reuben. Don’t let him die with things the way they are between you two. Please. Do it for me.”

Everything in him recoiled at the idea, but how could he refuse his mother at a time like this?

“Well, let me think about it, okay?”

“Okay, honey. I hope you can make it. Goodbye.”

Hope came back into the kitchen, drying her hair with a towel.

“Reuben, we have to finish our talk.”

Reuben didn’t want to disappoint his wife or his mother, but he didn’t want to stay and finish the talk or go to see his father either.

“That was my mom on the phone. My father’s dying. She wants me to come.”

“Oh. Then you have to go. We’ll talk as soon as you get back.”

Reuben didn’t want to do either, and now he had to do both.

* * *

After a shower Reuben stuffed a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and a book into a backpack, not knowing exactly when he would return, and kissed Hope goodbye. Now that he was on the road to his parents’ house—a road he hadn’t traveled in twenty years—he had two

hours and fifteen minutes to think about what he was doing. He had kept in touch with his mother by letter and by phone, and even met her for lunch once or twice a year, but he hadn't seen or spoken to his father in all that time. What would he say?

The grade-schooler in him remembered how he once hit a baseball and broke the next-door neighbor's window and how his father whipped him with a belt for it. "Tanning his hide" his father called it. A more or less frequent occurrence. But now the tables were turned. Now he was the strong one and his father the weak one, and, truth be told, part of him wanted to take that baseball bat and smash his father's skull in.

Thump. A pothole in the road? Thump-a-thump. A rough patch? Thump-a-thump-a-thump. No, a flat tire.

Reuben pulled over to the shoulder and coasted to a stop. "Just my luck," he would have said under other circumstances. Instead, his lips stretched into a grin of relief. If he arrived too late to talk with his father, neither his mother nor his wife could reproach him. The flat tire wasn't his fault. Wasn't he doing the best he could?

Reuben found the AAA card in his wallet, called the number on his cell, and got out his book to read while he waited for the roadside-assistance truck to arrive. Ah, nothing like a good book, now all the more enjoyable because with each turn of the page the chances of having to confront his father decreased. He settled into a good read.

After an hour Reuben found himself waiting more than reading. Where was that truck? He hated nothing more than wasting time. Granted, he might not have to see his father. But what if he didn't? His questions would never be answered, and his father would take the incomprehensible reasons for his behavior to his grave. Suddenly, he had a realization. Without the answers he sought, he would never resolve his own ambivalence about being a father. As

much as he wanted to let his father slip away without having to face him, Reuben had to get to him while he was still alive. His marriage depended on it.

The roadside assistance truck could not arrive soon enough, and Reuben's eyes now checked the rearview mirror more often than they lit on the page. At last he saw the hulking truck come lumbering up, as though its driver had all the time in the world. Once the spare tire was aired up and the flat tire switched out, Reuben went speeding down the highway. To hell with the highway patrol.

As he raced ahead, the grade-schooler in him began to give way to the historian. He knew that every event of the past, no matter how horrific, has its cause and wanted to understand why his father acted the way he did. What unique combination of circumstances and events made his father the kind of man he was? If historians could attempt to understand a monster like Hitler, certainly he could try to understand a poor father like his dad.

Besides, his dad was dying. What would be the point of making him suffer now? Yes, Reuben was still angry at his dad after all these years, but he didn't want to be cruel. He didn't want to cause his dad pain just to watch him suffer. No, study his father's history to avoid repeating his mistakes—that was what he really wanted. He could not afford to make the same mistakes with his own child, if he ever had one. As though looking at a stopwatch, Reuben could almost see the seconds flying by. He had to get there before it was too late.

* * *

When Reuben rounded the corner onto his parents street, he saw an ambulance parked in the driveway. Oh, no, he didn't make it in time. He floored the gas pedal for the short distance to his parents' house, then slammed on the brakes in front of it, screeching to a halt. Leaving his

backpack in the car, he bolted to the front door, threw it open, and burst in to see his mother standing there, wringing her hands.

“Mom?” he said, not daring to ask the question burning in his mind.

Just then two paramedics came out of his parents’ bedroom.

“Is he . . .” Reuben’s mother couldn’t finish her sentence.

“We’ve got him stabilized now,” one of the paramedics said. “It’s a good thing you called nine-one-one as soon as he started having trouble breathing. If we had gotten here later, he may not have made it.”

She gave a sigh of relief. “Can we see him?”

“Yes, but keep it short. He needs to rest.”

When the paramedics left, Reuben gave his mom a hug. After just a second, she pulled away and said, “Why don’t you go in and see him, dear?”

“Okay.”

For the first time Reuben took cognizance of his surroundings. Everything was just as he remembered it. Had nothing changed in twenty years? Reuben could almost see his father sitting in the rocker, smoking his pipe, and reading the paper, his drink by his side.

When he entered his parents’ bedroom, though, he stopped dead, shocked at what he saw. His father’s body looked like a corpse already: his skin ashen, his eyes sunken, his cheeks hollow. Was this shriveled frame really all that remained of his father’s former brawn? He had a nasal cannula attached to his nostrils and an oxygen tank beside his bed, with only the slightest rise and fall of his chest to distinguish sleep from death.

“Dad?”

“Huh?” His father opened his eyes.

“It’s me. Reuben. I’ve come to see you.”

“Oh, Reuben. Come in.”

“How are you, Dad?”

“Pretty good.” Still in denial as much as ever. “How about you?”

Reuben pulled a chair up to his father’s bedside.

“Dad, I’ve come to make peace with you.”

“I never knew we were at war.” The old man tried to sit up a little.

“We haven’t spoken to each other in twenty years.”

“I just figured you were busy with work and all.”

“Well, I have been busy. That’s true. I guess you could say it’s been a cold war, but now it’s time for the iron curtain to come down.”

“I’m not following you, son.”

No use to explain. He wouldn’t get it. “Dad, Hope and I are thinking about having a baby.”

“You mean I’m gonna be a grandpa?”

“Maybe. But before I have my own child, I wanted to ask you some things about when I was a kid.”

“Okay.” He sat up a little more.

“Well, first of all, I was wondering why you were always so aloof and distant.”

“Distant? Well, you know I worked . . . in the oil fields.” His speech was slow and labored.” I had to be away . . . for weeks at a time.”

“That’s not what I mean. Even when you were home, you were aloof. You never showed any feelings.”

“A man’s got to be . . . strong, boy.” He wheezed. “His family depends on it.”

“But you never hugged me when I was little.”

“Why, that’s a woman’s business . . . I didn’t want you to grow up to be . . . a sissy.”

“And you never once told me you loved me.”

“I don’t tell your mother that either,” he said with a raspy voice, short of breath. “But she knows I do . . . ‘I love you’ is just . . . empty words. Real love isn’t . . . talk, it’s action. I put a roof over your head . . . food on the table . . . and clothes on your back. That’s a father’s love.”

“You never praised me, not even when I got straight A’s or won an award.”

“I didn’t want you to get . . . cocky.” He was winded already. “Nuthin’ worse than a cocky . . . kid who thinks he knows it all.”

“And no matter how well I did, you always found something to criticize about it.”

“Because I wanted you to . . . do your best.” He coughed a couple of times.

“And you beat me with a belt.”

“Beat you? Why, I didn’t . . . beat you. I just gave you a good, old-fashioned . . . whoopin’ when you deserved one . . . And you got off easy.”

“Dad, it was child abuse. The authorities could have removed me from the home, and you could have gone to prison for that.”

“Child abuse? Hell, when I was a kid, my old man . . . stripped me down to my underwear . . . tied my hands with a rope . . . and hooked the rope to the back of the pickup.” He gasped for air. “Then he dragged me through . . . the briar patch.”

Appalled, Reuben remained silent. He had no idea of the abuse his father had suffered. If something like that had happened, what else had as well? He couldn’t imagine.

“But I turned out . . . all right, didn’t I?” Even after a bit of silence, his father was still taking short, shallow breaths.

“Well, you’ve nearly smoked and drunk yourself to death. Your lungs have had it, and your liver’s shot. I know that everyone smoked back in your day—they didn’t know about the health risks yet—but why did you drink so much?”

“I had my own . . . sorrows to drown.” His voice was husky, scarcely more than a whisper.

“You never talked about them.”

“Of course not. I didn’t want to . . . burden your mother or you.” He coughed again and struggled to catch his breath.

Reuben’s father was not doing well. Should he stop there? Reuben decided to continue.

“What were you sad about?”

“Oh, that’s ancient . . . history.”

“No, tell me. I want to know.”

“Well, my whole life . . . I wanted to be an Air Force pilot. I enlisted in the service . . . at the very end of World War Two, ’cause I was . . . too young earlier. But they wouldn’t take me into pilots school . . . on account of I was a little color blind. When the war was over, I met your mother, we had you, and . . . I had to go to work to support a family. My dream . . . died right then and there. I never got to do . . . the only thing I really wanted to do.”

His eyes moistened, then he coughed. Once. Twice. Three times. And then nonstop. A coughing fit. Reuben handed him a glass of water from the bedside table. After he had taken a swallow, the coughing subsided, though he was still wheezing and gasping.

“I’m pretty tired, son . . . I think I need to rest.” He lay back down.

“Okay, Dad. It was good to talk to you.”

His father closed his eyes, and Reuben went back out to his mother.

“Would you like me to stay the night, Mom?”

“No, no, no. That’s not necessary. You get along home to that lovely wife of yours.”

“Will you be okay, Mom?”

“Oh, you know me. I’ll be fine.”

That was his mom. Whatever her fear, whatever her grief, she had spent a lifetime pretending everything was fine when it wasn’t. Reuben had just had something resembling a real conversation with his dad. Maybe he would someday with his mother too.

He gave her a hug goodbye, a hug just like the one that said hello. A hug in no way lacking in love on her part, but one devoid of closeness and warmth. She didn’t know how to express those feelings any more than his dad did, though they were certainly there.

* * *

On the way back Reuben thought about what had just happened. Perhaps for the first time he had seen his father not as his dad but as a person in his own right. Now he understood: his dad had not been a better father to him because he didn’t know how, and he didn’t know how because his grandfather had not shown him. Reuben wondered for just a second how his grandfather could have been so bad, but then he realized it was because his grandfather had not learned from his great-grandfather how to be a good father. And so on back through the generations. “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

Nevertheless, Reuben’s dad had been a better father to him than his grandfather had been to his father. His father had done the best he could, and Reuben would do the same. If his father had done better than his grandfather, he would surely do better than his father. Tonight he would

tell Hope that he was finally ready to have a child. It felt good to give her what she wanted. Deep down, he wanted it too.

* * *

The next morning the phone rang just after 9:00.

“Reuben . . .” Her voice choked.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Your father died last night in his sleep.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. He died a happy man. He said you had a good talk, and he so appreciated your coming to see him. I can’t thank you enough. It means the world to me that you two were on good terms when he died. I’ll call you later with the funeral details. I just wanted to let you know.”

“Okay, Mom. Bye for now.”

Reuben hung up the phone. His father was at peace now, and so was he.

In the Cold of the Night

“Attention shoppers. The mall will close in ten minutes. Please take your items to the checkout counter now. And merry Christmas.”

Dolores turned the lavender slingback pump around in her hand again. Six hundred seventy-five dollars. She squinted to eye the thin strap and flirty peep toe. A bit expensive, but fine Italian design and craftsmanship.

When she glanced up and out of the boutique entrance into the courtyard, her heart leapt.

“Tommy!” she nearly cried out but checked herself. She saw him everywhere—or thought she did, for a split second.

Repressing a tear, Dolores decided to buy the shoes. Why shouldn’t she? They were comfort food for the soul, like a big spoonful of macaroni and cheese. With all she had been through, she deserved them. Never mind that they would suffer the same neglect as all the other unworn shoes that crowded her closet. For now they made her feel better, even if just a little. Party shoes took her back to a time when she was slimmer, prettier, and still hopeful.

Dolores had completed her shopping, at least for this excursion, though it didn't really qualify as "Christmas" shopping. Last week she had bought a cashmere sweater for her ill, aging mother, and after that she didn't have anyone else to shop for. Not anymore. All these presents were for herself, if you could even call them presents.

The icy wind stung her cheeks when she stepped out into the parking lot, her arms full of boxes and bags. In the last row, barely visible, the Mercedes she had retained in the divorce settlement stood all alone. Was she really the last shopper to leave the mall?

Dolores peered from side to side. What if someone was lurking in the darkness, lying in wait for her? She struggled to take out her keys without dropping a package and walked with a quick, firm pace towards her car, which seemed much farther away from the mall entrance now than before. She couldn't wait to lock herself inside, turn on the heater, and feel the soft leather seat cradle her weary body.

Once she had stored her bags and boxes in the trunk, Dolores started the engine and pulled out. But she didn't even reach the exit before her car sputtered to a stop. She tried starting it again. Nothing. Oh, no. Not this. She was out here all alone, defenseless. If only she were safe and sound at home, had her feet up, and were sipping on a glass of wine.

Was the battery dead? Dolores removed the car key, grabbed her purse from unthinking habit, and got out, not to look under the hood—she knew nothing about cars—but to see if some passing motorist might help her.

Not another car in sight.

She stood there for a moment, under a dim parking-lot light, debating what to do.

As if out of the void of darkness a big black man stepped into the circle of feeble light and came limping towards her. He looked homeless and desperate in his tattered army coat and

grimy camouflage pants. From under his raveling blue knit cap his tightly curled hair was matted with dust and lint.

“Please don’t hurt me,” Dolores pleaded. “I have money. I can pay you.” She fumbled in her purse for her wallet.

“You think I want your money?”

“You can take my car. Just don’t kill me. Please, I’m begging you.”

“Open the trunk.”

Her fingers trembled as she pressed the button on the car key to pop the trunk lid. “Take it. It’s all yours. Anything you want.”

The homeless man rummaged about. “Ah, this is what I was looking for,” he said, holding up a gas can. “You out of gas. There’s a filling station ’bout three blocks up the road. Five dollars’ worth should do it. Meanwhile, you get back in the car. It’s freezing out here.”

Dolores gave him a five-dollar bill and did as he said. Inside the car she burst into tears, still shaking from the mortal fear just past. She thought of her elderly mother, who couldn’t have too many years left; of her husband, who had deserted her for a younger woman; and of her son . . . Oh, her son, her son, her only child . . . She laid her forehead against the steering wheel and sobbed uncontrollably.

Half an hour later sounds interrupted her tears—the opening of the gas lid and the unscrewing of the gas cap. Dolores got out and stood in silence, wiping her eyes, as the homeless man finished pouring the gas into her tank.

“There you go. That should get you on your way.”

“Thank you. I was so afraid you were going to hurt me.”

The homeless man lifted the trunk lid, which he had lowered but not latched, put back the empty gas can, and closed the lid.

"I've done enough hurting for one lifetime. Now it's time to help," he said and turned to leave.

Reassured by his words—and unsettled—Dolores hesitated.

"Wait."

He stopped and turned around, the tiny icicles in his moustache glistening in the faint light.

"There's a coffee-and-pastry shop across the highway. Would you like something hot to drink and a bite to eat?"

"I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't, and I don't lie—at least not no more."

During the five-minute drive to the coffee shop they scarcely spoke. Dolores was having second thoughts. Had she made a terrible mistake in letting a stranger into her car?

At the coffee shop, the homeless man held the door open for Dolores. When the waiter saw him about to enter behind her, he scurried up to block his way. "I'm sorry. We don't allow—"

"He's with me," Dolores snapped, turning to interrupt him mid-sentence.

"My apologies, ma'am," the waiter said and scuttled off, red-faced. The patrons nearest the entrance raised their eyebrows at the sight of the homeless man and wrinkled their noses at his stench.

Dolores glared at them till shame forced their eyes back to their coffee mugs and plates.

"Let's sit at the table next to the fireplace," she suggested, smiling at the homeless man now that she was safe inside a public place.

Before he sat, he planted himself in front of the fire, rubbing his hands together and then extending them towards the flames.

“How about a giant cappuccino and a big slice of *Sachertorte*?” Dolores asked once they had both taken their seats.

“A what?”

“It’s a kind of chocolate cake. It’s to die for.”

“Can’t think of a sweeter death.”

In a couple of minutes Dolores had returned with their order.

“I don’t even know your name,” she began. “I’m Dolores.”

“Folks call me G. I. Joe.”

“You were a soldier?”

“Afghanistan.”

He took a sip of coffee, clutching the warm mug between his fingerless gloves. For the first time Dolores saw his fingertips, chafed and split open by the cold.

“What were you doing out on a night like this, Joe?” She assumed that’s what she should call him.

“Redeeming myself.”

Dolores didn’t know what to make of that answer.

“Where do you live, Joe?”

“Here and there.”

“You don’t have a home?”

“The whole city’s my home.”

Just as she had thought. “But where do you sleep?”

“In a pup tent. The stars is pretty much the same here as in Afghanistan.”

He took a bite of cake, chewed once or twice, and then stopped, apparently letting the chocolate morsel rest on his tongue and savoring its flavor. With his eyes closed, he leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers behind his head, and crossed his legs, laying his right ankle over his left knee. Dolores noticed cardboard through the hole in the sole of his army boot.

“Me, oh my! Goodness gracious! Sakes alive! I ain’t never tasted chocolate cake like that before. Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

“No, thank *you*, Joe, for helping me. You’re my guardian angel.”

“A man’s gotta set right what he’s done wrong.”

“What do you mean, Joe?”

“A boy’s dead because of me. I can’t do nothing ’bout that now, but I’ve got to make up for it by doing all the good I can.”

“A boy is dead?”

“He was just nineteen.”

“That was the age of my son.”

“You lost your son?”

“Yes. Tommy. My husband and I went through a bitter divorce, and I guess we were so consumed with hurt and rage at each other that we lost sight of our boy.”

“How did he die?”

“He started using drugs. Drugs! When I was a kid, ‘using drugs’ meant smoking a little pot. Today it means snorting coke or shooting up heroin. The autopsy found he had injected heroin laced with fentanyl. It killed him, and it was all my fault.”

Dolores set down her mug and buried her face in her hands, crying softly.

“Your fault?”

“Yes.” She lifted her face. “All the signs were there. He skipped his classes at the university. His grades fell. He quit the track team. He changed his friends for a bunch of thugs. He lost interest in everything. He quit talking to us. He stayed away from home. He was always so irritable and angry. His whole personality changed. He used to be such a sweet child. The signs were there, and I didn’t do anything to help him. If only I had seen them.”

She buried her face again and cried.

“How do you get through the day?”

She looked up, the tears hovering at the rims of her eyelids. “Oh, I shop. I go out to eat with friends. I go to parties. I travel. Anything to give me a little bit of comfort.”

Joe took another bite of cake and washed it down with a swig of coffee.

“And does that help?”

“A little. For the moment.”

“Hmm . . .” He appeared lost in thought.

“But you said that a boy the same age as my Tommy died.”

“The Taliban was holed up in a compound. I was leading a team in to get them. I didn’t even see the snipers on the roof. They hit three of my men. I still pulled two of them to safety after they shot me in the leg . . .”

“Why, Joe, you’re a hero.”

“ . . . but the third one died. We called him ‘Johnny-Boy.’ He was like a son to me. I had to tell his parents what happened. I should’ve known about the snipers. I didn’t even think of them before I went charging in.”

“And now you’re homeless and you don’t have a job. Joe, have you seen a doctor? You know, a lot of soldiers coming back from the Middle East have trouble readjusting.”

“Oh, I know all about PTSD. I seen some cases of it, something fearsome. People can’t sleep at night. They have nightmares and flashbacks. They all numb. They walk around like zombies. Then all of a sudden they think they back in the war. They do crazy stuff. But that’s not me. No. I’m making up for what I done wrong.”

“So you wander the streets in the freezing cold to help people in need? People like me?”

“Yes’m.”

“You’re a good Samaritan?”

“Wrong on both counts. I was born in Kentucky, not Samaria, and I’m just paying my dues.”

“No, Joe, you’re a saint, an honest-to-God saint, but there’s no pleasure in your life. No comfort. No consolation. You have to have something to make you feel good every now and then. Otherwise, life becomes unbearable.”

“Well, this coffee and cake sure was mighty good.”

“I don’t think I could live the way you do, Joe, helping other people with no thought for myself.”

Joe ate his last bite of cake and finished his coffee, then got up to leave.

“You just did,” he said. “Keep it up.”

And with that he walked away.

Light in the Darkness

How long had it been since he sat in a place like this? Vic Dolens struggled to remember. Eighteen, nineteen years? No, twenty. It felt strange to be here again, almost like returning to a boyhood home where his family had not lived for years, and where he no longer belonged. Yet he did call it home once; maybe he could again.

The sheer immensity of the place dwarfed his problems for a minute or two, then threatened to swallow him into nothingness. What did his life matter anyway? Did anyone even care about him? Certainly nobody here.

The last rays of the afternoon sun filtered through the large windows, softening every contour with a muted gray that would soon ebb into a featureless black. A time of day soothing and unsettling at once. The stillness, disrupted only by the occasional creak of a door and click of heels on the floor, calmed the turmoil of his thoughts at first, but then replaced it with a disturbing emptiness.

Had he made a mistake in coming here after all these years? There were still a couple of people in line; he had time enough to leave. But no, he couldn't go on like this anymore. Vic

leaned against the back of the oak bench, sensing how its hardness offered no comfort. Closing his eyes, he thought again, this has to end today. He reached into his jacket pocket and fingered the cold steel. Now was the time. There was no other. Ten minutes later no one else was waiting in line.

Finally, the red light above the doorframe on the right went out; the heavy door squeaked open; and the last person stepped out and exited the building. Vic sat there all alone. At last his turn had come. He rose, strode towards the open door, and entered a space no larger than a small closet. Once he had closed the door behind him, he stood in total darkness. He lowered himself to his knees and then heard the solid-wood screen slide back behind the small latticed window. From the other side emerged a faint, almost imperceptible light.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been twenty years since my last confession.”

“Have you been away from the Church all this time, my son?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Church law commands you to attend mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, and to miss mass on those days is a mortal sin. But God will forgive you if you are truly contrite, my son.”

“Well, that’s not really why I’m here, Father. I kind of lost my faith in the Church a long time ago.”

“Then, why have you come to confession? Do you want to confess a sin, my son?”

“Yes, Father, I do.” Vic braced himself, taking a deep breath. “I’m going to commit suicide. Today. When I leave here. And I want you to give me absolution, so I can die in peace.”

“What? You want me to forgive you for a sin you haven’t even committed?”

“After I commit it, it will be too late. My life has been pure hell, and I don’t want to suffer in Hell for all eternity for what I am about to do.”

“But absolution requires the firm resolve not to sin again, and you intend to go out and immediately commit the very sin for which you seek absolution.”

No response.

The priest did not speak for a moment. “What has brought you to such a pass, my son?”

“My wife has finally left me. She says I don’t know how to be close, I cling to her out of a fear of abandonment, but when she tries to get close, I panic and flee. I think she’s right. It’s been that way with a long series of women I’ve been involved with.”

“Involved with? You know that fornication is a mortal sin, my son.”

Vic sighed out of frustration. “And I relapsed when she left. I was clean for the two years we were married, but I’ve had drinking and drugging problems since my early twenties. Hard liquor and heroin were the only ways to numb the pain and forget the memories.”

“The abuse of alcohol and drugs is a serious sin against the virtue of temperance, my son.”

Irritated, Vic shook his head, wondering why he was even talking. Yet, for some reason, he went on. “And then I lost my job. I’m a frame carpenter. But when I didn’t show up for work because I was too smacked out to go, they just fired me. The two years I was married are the only time I’ve been able to hold down a steady job. My drinking and drugging always got in the way before. Alone, addicted, jobless. I just can’t go on. It has to stop. Today. When I leave.”

Vic was determined, even if it meant defying the priest, the Church, and God himself.

“You must pray for divine help, my son.”

“I’ve been praying every day for the last twenty-four years,” Vic nearly shouted, “and there’s no help in sight.”

“I thought you said you stopped practicing your faith twenty years ago.”

“I stopped going to church when I moved out of my parents’ house at eighteen. Something happened four years earlier, when I was fourteen. I’ve never told anyone about it.”

“You are protected by the seal of confession, my son. Only God will hear what you say here. Speak freely.”

Vic felt a shudder of fear and anxiety run down his spine; he swallowed hard. But, then, what did he have to lose? It would all be over with soon anyway.

“I was raped towards the end of my eighth-grade year.”

He nearly choked on the words.

“My family moved that summer, shortly after it happened. I felt terrible, you know. . . . guilty . . . like it was all my fault because I didn’t stop it. I couldn’t get it out of my head. It kept forcing its way into my thoughts.”

The tightness in his chest made it difficult to get the words out.

“When I started high school in the fall, I couldn’t concentrate in class, and my grades dropped. I couldn’t sleep at night, and if I did, I woke up with nightmares about it . . . I was always angry and would explode over nothing. So I kept getting into fights with the other kids and into trouble with the school authorities . . . When I wasn’t angry, I was depressed, or just numb. This is hard to say . . . but I started burning myself with cigarettes.”

He lowered his head out of embarrassment. How could he explain that?

“I know it sounds crazy, but somehow the pain felt good. It was a way to let my anger and sadness out. And when I felt physical pain, I didn’t feel the emotional pain so much . . . At

least I was in control of what was happening to my body. My whole body is still covered with the scars from those burns. But eventually the burning wasn't enough. So I started using alcohol and drugs, and . . . well . . . you know the rest of the story."

There. He had said it. A momentary feeling of relief, before the gravity of it all weighed heavily on his shoulders again.

The priest softened his tone. "Who did this to you, my son?"

"You won't believe it, Father; it was our parish priest. I was just learning to be an altar boy. He would invite me to the rectory on Saturdays after acolyte practice. He would say that in the order of nature we first have to learn to love the members of our own sex before we can love someone of the opposite sex but that in our culture men didn't know how to love each other. And he talked about how David and Jonathan in the Old Testament loved each other and kissed each other and about how John reclined on Jesus' breast during the last supper because he was the disciple whom Jesus loved. And he quoted St. Paul, who said we should greet one another with a holy kiss. Well, the kisses were just the beginning of it, but, believe me, there was nothing holy about them. After a couple of months of that, one Saturday he . . . "

A knot in his throat, tears in his eyes, Vic couldn't go on. He could almost feel the hands of the priest touching him again . . . down there. Revulsion. Recoil. Burning shame.

"You say this happened twenty-four years ago?"

"Yes." Overwhelmed by the memories, Vic couldn't understand why the date was important.

The priest paused for a long time. "And where did this happen?"

"In Shady Hollow, but what the hell does that have to do with anything?" Exasperated by the idle question, Vic pulled a gun from his jacket pocket. "Are you going to give me absolution

or not?" he screamed. "If you don't, I'll shoot myself right here!" He cocked the gun and held it against his right temple.

"Wait! . . . I prayed this day would never come," the priest stammered, his voice quavering, "but somehow I always knew it would."

"What?" Vic wasn't at all prepared for that statement.

"There is nothing to absolve you of. It is not you who have sinned; it is I. And this is not your confession; it is mine."

"W-what do you mean?" Vic lowered the gun, confused.

"I am the priest who abused you. I was transferred to this parish just last year."

"You're Father Viazio? You're the one who ruined my life? You son of a bitch! I ought to blow your fucking brains out right here." Vic pushed the gun barrel against the latticed window, pointing it at the priest. Suddenly he was sinking into a whirlpool of rage.

"That Saturday was the one and only time I ever did such a thing. I was going through a personal crisis, doubting my vocation. I just wanted a little human warmth and didn't know where else to turn. I know I did you a terrible wrong, but I have confessed my sin and have tried to atone by being a good priest ever since." He didn't sound convinced. Was he just making excuses?

"Well, that may be good enough for God, but it's not good enough for me." Vic's finger itched on the trigger.

"Can you forgive me?" The priest sniffled.

Caught off guard by the question, Vic thought a long while, weighing the possibilities.

"After absolution comes penance, right?"

"Yes."

“Then, I’ll absolve you, but you have to do the penance I give you.”

“Anything you ask.” The priest’s voice trembled again, probably his hands as well.

“First thing tomorrow you go to the bishop, tell him what you did to me, and resign as pastor of the parish. Then you go straight to the police station and turn yourself in. Maybe you’ll sit in prison for the next twenty years, see what it’s like to get raped. It would still be a lighter sentence than the one I got.”

Stunned silence at first. Then a hiccupped sob. Finally, his voice breaking along with his entire world, Father Viazo said, “I will do as you say . . . but on one condition.”

“What?”

“You promise not to kill yourself.”

Vic uncocked the gun.

“Deal.”

The red light above the doorframe went off; the heavy door grated in its hinges; and Vic stepped out of the confessional. Now he had no need for absolution. He let out a big sigh.

Once outside the church, Victor Dolens looked up at the stars in the sky and thought to himself, there is light in the darkness.

Paulie's Fight

“Hey, kids. Come down here. Your mother and I need to talk to you,” Andrew Freeman called up from the foot of the stairs.

Oh, boy. This can't be good, ten-year-old Paulie thought. We must be in trouble big time. What in the world did we do wrong?

If his parents confined him to his room for the rest of the day, he could finish playing this round of TEKKEN, his favorite martial-arts video game, and many other rounds as well. He set down the controls of his PlayStation.

When Paulie and his nine-year-old sister, Courtney, came downstairs, their mother and father were sitting in the stiff wingback chairs on either side of the lamp table in the living room. He and his sister sat next to each other on the edge of the sofa opposite them. A moment of unbearable silence.

“I know I didn't take out the trash yesterday, but I'll do it this morning,” Paulie said, hoping to avert disaster.

“And I’ll clean my room today,” Courtney added immediately. “I just didn’t have time this week, with the math test and all.”

“Don’t worry, kids,” Colleen Freeman said. “You’re not in trouble.”

Paulie and Courtney leaned back against the sofa.

“Your father and I want you to know that we both love you very much.”

“Wait,” Paulie said, bolting forward again. “You didn’t call us down here to say you love us. You do that every time you hang up the phone.”

“And you never talk to us together,” Courtney said.

“Well, we have something important to tell you,” their father cut in. He shifted his weight in the chair and cleared his throat. “Your mother and I are . . . uh . . . well, we are— ”

“Your father is moving out on Monday,” their mother said.

“But why? You don’t want to live with us anymore?” Courtney asked her father. Her lower lip quivered.

“No, it’s not that. Your mother and I are . . . uh—”

“Getting a divorce,” she completed his sentence.

“What? But you can’t do that!” Paulie objected. He had just been sucker-punched in the gut.

“I know this is a shock,” their mother said, “But don’t worry. We’ll still be a family.”

Like hell. Paulie wasn’t giving up his family without a fight. Now it was his turn to throw a few punches.

“Oh yeah? Will you still be in Dad’s family?”

“Well, no—”

“And will he still be in your family?”

“No, but—”

“Then how will *we* still be a family?” Paulie thought he had won the first round.

“We will always be your parents, Paulie.”

“Are you leaving because I made a B in math?” Courtney asked her father before Paulie could spar again with his mother. Her voice almost broke.

“No, no. This has nothing to do with you, dear” her mother answered in her father’s place.

“But why, then?”

“Well, these things are hard to explain to children. But the important thing is that you both understand we will always love you.”

“Promise?” Courtney wiped away a tear.

“Yes, of course, sweetheart.”

“But you don’t love each other anymore?” Paulie was coming out of his corner for round two.

“Sometimes adults fall out of love,” his father answered.

“But didn’t you promise to love each other forever when you got married?”

“I suppose we did, but things have changed.” He shifted his weight in the chair again, crossed his legs, and then uncrossed them.

“So, when you promise that you’ll love us forever, that can change too?”

“Uh . . . well . . . uh—”

“No, we’ll never stop loving you. I promise,” his mother interjected.

“But you’re both promise-breakers.” Paulie thought he had just boxed them into a corner.

“And when I grow up and get married, my husband can fall out of love with me and just leave?” Courtney said.

When he saw the tears welling up in Courtney’s eyes, Paulie took her hand. He knew that she couldn’t fight the way he could.

“No, honey. I’m sure that will never happen to you,” her mother said.

“So where are you going to live?” Paulie asked his father. Round three was just beginning.

“I’m getting a two-bedroom apartment in Retiro. I’ll need you to be the man of the house from now on and take care of your mother and sister when I’m gone.”

“But I’m just ten years old. You’re supposed to be the man of the house. You and Mom are supposed to take care of us.”

“Will we ever get to see you?” Courtney said, the tears still hovering on her eyelids.

“Your father and I have decided that you will each spend a week with one of us and then switch the next week. That way we will each have to take care of only one child at a time.”

“You don’t want to take care of us anymore?” Courtney’s little body collapsed back into the sofa.

“No, that didn’t come out right. What I meant is that we both want to be involved in your lives—but we also want a little more freedom for ourselves.”

“So Courtney and I are going to share a room at Dad’s?” Paulie was probing with a slight jab.

“Well, not at the same time. You’ll alternate weeks,” his father answered.

“Can I hang up my kickboxing posters?” His room was his space; he was defending his territory now.

“Eew, no!” Courtney said, taking her hand away from Paulie’s, though her tears hadn’t dried up yet.

Paulie had just taken an unexpected hit but chose not to fight back. Changing his stance, he tried a new jab. “How will we get to school and back?”

“You’ll have to take the bus,” his father said.

“But what about my kickboxing practice at the dojo?”

“Well, I have to work. I won’t be able to pick you up.”

“So, I have to quit the team?”

“Uh . . .”

“When I first started kickboxing last year, I wanted to quit because I couldn’t fight as well as the other kids. But you said I couldn’t because we don’t have quitters in our family. So I worked real hard and got a lot better. And now I have to quit the team because you’re quitting your marriage? That’s not fair. The instructor and the other fighters are counting on me. We have a big tournament coming up.”

“Now, Paulie,” his mother said.

What? He didn’t think he was hitting below the belt.

“And my piano lessons?” Courtney asked, tearing up again. “You won’t have a piano in your apartment, will you? How can I practice?”

“We’ll all have to make some sacrifices,” her father said. “For one thing your mother and I will have to maintain two households on the same income. There won’t be as much money for things we want to do or buy.”

“But what about Thanksgiving and Christmas and our birthdays? We won’t all be together then anymore?” The tears were streaming down her cheeks now.

"I'm afraid not, pumpkin," her mother answered.

"Wait a minute," Paulie said. "If I live with Mom one week and Courtney lives with Dad, and then we switch, Courtney and I won't be living together anymore. We're not the ones getting divorced. We'll never see each other." That realization nearly knocked him out.

"I guess we hadn't considered that," his mother said. "Your father and I just thought it would be easier if we each took care of only one child at a time."

Paulie was reeling; his head was spinning; he was about to fall on the mat. Now he was losing not only his parents but his sister as well. He scarcely had the strength for one more jab.

"Maybe that's why you're getting divorced. You each just think about yourself and not anyone else."

As though returning to his corner of the ring, Paulie slumped back into the sofa. He wanted to keep fighting, but he knew the final bell had rung, the last round was over, and he had lost the fight. Courtney was still crying, and now he was too.

Yes, this fight was over. Paulie's parents were getting divorced, and there was nothing he could do about it. But another fight was just beginning, a much longer one. He would no longer be fighting against his parents. From now on he would be fighting for himself and for his sister. Was he equal to the task? He had to be.

Paulie dried his tears.

Fateful Choice

Jonathan Maddox looked up from his reading and glanced at the clock. Seven-thirty-four. His wife was supposed to be home by seven, and he had dinner sitting ready on the stove, staying warm. No need for alarm, though. Punctuality was not Janet's greatest virtue. How many times had he imagined the worst and worried himself sick in the first months of their marriage fourteen years ago? She would call and say, "I'll be home soon." In his mind "soon" meant within fifteen minutes; in hers it was whenever she finished her work or her shopping, and that could be two or three hours later. Once she learned how he tormented himself with worry when she was running late, she did get better about calling and updating him on her progress. Better, but not perfect. He would just continue reading until she got there.

Ten minutes later the doorbell rang. She often had her arms full of work folders or grocery bags and didn't have a free hand to unlock the door. So Jonathan got up as usual to open the door for her and help her with her things. When he opened the door, he started to say, "Hi, honey," but stopped short.

Two police officers were standing there, one middle aged, the other considerably younger.

“May I help you?” Jonathan said.

“Sir, it’s your wife.” The older officer broke the news in a serious but matter-of-fact tone.

“She’s okay, isn’t she?”

“Sir, there’s been an accident.”

“An accident? What kind of accident?”

“I don’t have those details, sir. They’ll tell you at the hospital.”

But she’s going to be okay, isn’t she?”

“Sir, you’d best let us give you a ride to the hospital.”

“Uh . . . okay . . . let me turn off the stove and get a jacket.”

Once Jonathan was sitting in the backseat of the squad car and the officer driving was pulling out, he asked, “It’s not serious, is it?”

“Sir, I’m not qualified to answer that question. You’ll have to speak with the doctor.”

From that point on, they rode in a tense silence. Jonathan thought of how he and Janet went to a coffee shop on Saturday mornings and grade papers after teaching all week . . . How they liked to go to the art museum for the new exhibits and to the arts cinema for foreign films . . . Their walks after dinner in the spring and the fall . . . Her gardening, his classical guitar playing . . . She never tired of listening to him practice or play his latest composition.

Suddenly Jonathan felt guilty. He was always reading a book or playing the guitar. How often did he just sit and talk with her? Almost never. He just couldn’t think of anything to say. Day after day it was the same routine. Work, dinner, reading, music. There was never anything new for him to talk about. Yet she would have loved to spend an evening just chatting with him.

She always had something to tell him about. Something that happened in her day. Something she read about in the paper. Something she saw on the news. Why didn't he spend more time with her?

He didn't even know how to start the new washing machine. She always washed the clothes. How would he manage without her? He mowed the grass and trimmed the hedges. But the garden, all the flowers and shrubs, that was her specialty. He wouldn't know where to begin. And the house cleaning. Plus the grocery shopping and cooking. He couldn't do it all by himself. It was too much.

God, what was wrong with him? How could he even think of such things when she might be seriously injured? Maybe she would be okay. But what if she wasn't? What if she had to stay in the hospital for months? Health insurance hardly covers anything these days. And on their teacher salaries, how could they afford it? And what if she needed round-the-clock care when she got home? He had to work. How would he take care of her? He wanted to ask the police officer again how bad it was but knew he wouldn't get a straight answer.

Once they had entered the hospital elevator, one of the police officers said, "She's in the ICU. Fifth floor." Jonathan pushed the button, and the elevator seemed to creep upwards ever so slowly.

In the waiting room he fidgeted with a quarter in his pants pocket, rocking back and forth on his heels in an unconscious, yet vain, attempt at self-soothing. After five or six interminable minutes a young female doctor came out to talk with him.

"Mr. Maddox, I'm Dr. Heiler. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your wife suffered an extreme head trauma during the accident. We have her on vasopressors to keep her heart beating

and on mechanical ventilation to keep her breathing. But there is no clinical evidence of brain function.”

“You mean she’s brain dead?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“So there’s nothing you can do for her? There’s no hope for recovery?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Jonathan felt himself falling through a bottomless void. Stumbling backwards, he collapsed into a chair and choked back the tears.

“I know this is a difficult question,” the doctor said. “But would you be willing to consider organ donation?”

“Uh, I don’t know. We never talked about it. We never expected . . .”

“There is a patient in the hospital right now who will die without a heart transplant.”

Jonathan looked up at her. “So Janet’s heart would save his life?”

“Yes, it would. I should tell you, though, that he is the driver who crashed into your wife.”

“What?”

“Apparently he suffered heart failure, lost control of the car, and had a wreck.”

“Oh, the poor man.”

“I should also tell you that the heart failure was caused by excessive alcohol consumption. He is a long-standing alcoholic.”

“You mean he brought this on himself and killed my wife?”

“What I need to know now, Mr. Maddox, is whether you will authorize a heart transplant.”

This was all too quick. “Wait a minute. He nearly drinks himself to death and then kills my wife, and now he would get to go on living with Janet’s heart as if nothing had ever happened?”

“Mr. Maddox, the question at this point is whether you will give us permission to do the heart transplant.”

“I-I don’t know. Can I have some time to think about this?”

“Yes, of course. You might want to use the chapel on the fourth floor. But please don’t take long. We need to act quickly if we are going to act.”

This was so unfair. At the worst moment of his life they were asking him to stay cool, calm, and collected, to think through an issue clearly and rationally, to weigh the pros and the cons with a clear mind and come to a responsible decision. He needed to scream, to bang his fists against the wall, to fall on the ground and wail. How could they expect him to think at a time like this?

Jonathan staggered to the chapel and slumped into a pew, aching to be alone where it was quiet. Had he gone there to pray? Did he even believe in God? He didn’t know. Where the hell was God when Janet had her accident? Why didn’t he prevent it? Why was he letting her die? He knew that millions of people had asked those very same questions about their loved ones and no one had ever received an answer, at least not one that would satisfy him.

Jonathan was a man of simple beliefs. When it came to moral and religious truths, he knew very little for sure. One thing he did know, perhaps the only thing, was that love was right and hate was wrong. Not the love you read about in the tabloids at grocery-store checkout lines—Hollywood celebrities constantly getting married, divorced, and remarried. No, the way

that Janet had loved him. The kind of love that seeks never to harm and always to do what is truly good for the other.

The right thing to do, and perhaps God's will, if he even existed, would be to seek the other driver's well-being. Or would it? Would he just continue drinking and destroy Janet's heart the way he had destroyed his own? Would the gift of life be wasted on him? And there were other people to think about besides the driver. What if he did keep drinking? Would he kill someone else because he was driving drunk or his heart failed again? Would Janet's heart allow him to kill a second time? Or a third? He didn't want that on his conscience.

Jonathan shuddered to think of Janet's heart, the heart that had loved him so, beating in her killer's body. Of course, he was confusing metaphor and literal reality, but still . . . He shuddered again to think of her heartless body lying in a casket buried in the earth. When had she ever been heartless? The thought was too much to bear.

Did the other driver even deserve to live? At first Jonathan felt sorry for the man. Then he learned that the heart failure didn't just happen to him. He inflicted it on himself. Oh, don't come with that AA crap that alcoholism is a disease, that it's not the alcoholic's fault, that he can't help himself. Sure, maybe when he loses his job, or his wife leaves him, or his doctor tells him that he has cirrhosis of the liver, then he wishes he didn't drink. But when he reaches for that bottle, he is doing exactly what he wants to at that moment. No one is holding a gun to his head. Perhaps he will regret it later. But right then and there he wants that drink more than he wants his job or his wife or his health. Janet's death was that bastard's fault, and he deserved to die.

He killed Janet, and now Jonathan would kill him. An eye for an eye. His life for Janet's. That would be justice. Perhaps if the killer lived, some slick lawyer would get him off scot free, and he would never have to pay for what he had done. But right here and now Jonathan held in

his hand the sword of justice. One single blow and Janet's death would be avenged. His justice would be swifter and more certain than that of any court or judge. No appeals. No retrials. No pardons or paroles. No time off for good behavior.

If anything could make an alcoholic quit drinking, though, it would be carrying inside him the heart of the person his drinking had killed. What if the gift of Janet's heart did heal him, not just the sickness of his body but the illness of his spirit? And what if he then went on to help others who had been in his same position? Think of all the good Janet's heart could do. His beloved Janet was dying one way or the other. Without the transplant her death would just be a senseless tragedy. But with the transplant some good could come from it. A good that would give her death some meaning. She would not die totally in vain.

In spite of his anguish over her certain death and his anger at the other driver, Janet would want him to do the right thing. But what was it? Jonathan had no idea. He took the quarter from his pocket. Heads he would allow the transplant, tails he wouldn't. But first he prayed with all the fervor he could muster, as though he were about to perform a solemn religious rite, "O Lord, bless this coin." Then he flipped it.

In the elevator on the way back up to the fifth floor Jonathan had misgivings. Should he have gone the best two out of three? No, a flip was a flip. But how could he entrust such a momentous decision to mere chance? He had flipped back and forth in his mind; the coin simply put an end to it.

When the elevator door opened, Dr. Heiler was still standing there, waiting for him. At first Jonathan froze. He couldn't go forward; too much was at stake. Yet the unavoidable moment had come. Jonathan took that fateful step out of the elevator and walked heavy-footed up to Dr. Heiler.

“Did you decide, Mr. Maddox? Will you authorize the transplant?”

“Yes,” Jonathan said.

The coin had come up heads.

The Measure of Love

“In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother Maksim, and we commit his body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him, the Lord make his face to shine upon him and be gracious to him, the Lord lift up his countenance upon him and give him peace. Amen.”

The priest took a handful of dirt and cast it upon the casket.

“Rest eternal grant to him, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him. May his soul, and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”

When the priest concluded the burial rite, a man wearing a white shirt with a black tie, khaki pants, and a zip-up jacket walked over to a slender woman of about thirty years of age. He extended a hand, which she took, and said, “Your father was the only house painter I ever hired who could paint a perfectly straight line without using masking tape. In fact, he didn’t even use to lay down a tarp because he never dripped a single drop of paint. I’m going to miss him.”

“That’s very kind of you,” she said. “Thank you.” After the brief exchange, the man started walking back to his car.

At her side stood the only other mourner, a gray-haired gentleman of her father’s generation. He turned to her and said, “Usually there is a reception after the graveside service, but since it’s just the two of us, I hope you’ll let me take you to lunch.”

“Thank you,” she said, “but I’m really not hungry, and I still have a number of things to do to settle my adoptive father’s estate before I fly back.”

“How about coffee and a pastry then? It’s not good to be alone at a time like this.”

“Well, all right,” she said and took his arm.

A drizzle began to fall from the gray sky that cold November morning. Perhaps nature, otherwise indifferent to human affairs, grieved the passing of a man whom so few mourned.

Thirty minutes later, they sat across from one another in a cozy corner of a small coffee shop, their coats draped over the backs of their chairs. “Well, Liubova . . .,” the man began.

She laughed. “No one ever called me that except my father.”

“What do they call you then?”

“Libby.”

“It’s the same with me,” he said. “Here they call me Rod. I guess Radomil sounds too foreign to them. Well, anyway, I can’t believe how you’re all grown up. I remember you as a little girl.”

“I know,” she said. “I used to see you at church when I got out of Sunday school and you were talking to my father over coffee and donuts. As far as I know, you were his only friend.”

“He always talked about you when we met at the Russian Club. And now here we are, you and I, talking with each other for the first time really. I mean beyond saying hello. This must be a sad time for you.”

“Not really. My father and I were never close, so there’s not much for me to grieve. But, as his sole survivor, it falls on me to put his affairs in order. I’m just doing my duty. That’s all.”

“He loved you deeply, you know.”

She raised her eyebrows as if to challenge his statement.

“I remember when the parish priest—your father went to the Catholic Church since there was no Russian Orthodox Church in town—told him that a drug-addicted woman whom the court had declared unfit to be a mother had just given birth to a beautiful baby girl. The moment they looked into your eyes, he and his wife fell in love with you and arranged to adopt you.”

“He never told me he loved me,” she said and took a bite of her chocolate croissant as if to indulge herself in recompense.

“You have to understand, Libby, that some men express their love not by what they say but by what they do. Besides, after his wife died of breast cancer when you were just two, your father fell into a kind of abyss from which he never climbed out. The magnitude of the loss is measured by the greatness of the love, and your father loved her boundlessly, just as he did you. He was a great man.”

Libby nearly choked on her sip of coffee. “A great man? Why, he could barely speak English.”

“It’s true,” Rod said, shrugging his shoulders. “Your father never learned much English. After his wife died, he somehow lost the will. But he spoke all the Slavic languages fluently:

Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian, Serbo-Croatian. And he read both German and French as well.”

Her jaw dropped. “I had no idea. He never spoke Russian to me because he wanted me to learn English, but he couldn’t really speak English himself, so we hardly talked.”

“Your father was a member of the Russian intelligentsia. In St. Petersburg we used to sit up late at night drinking vodka and discussing history, politics, and sociology.”

“And then he drank himself to death,” she said, staring blankly into her coffee cup.

“He didn’t start drinking heavily until you left home at eighteen to go to college. With his wife dead and you gone, the sadness and the loneliness consumed him. He was not made to be alone.”

“I didn’t know. After I graduated, I never went back. I guess there’s a lot about him I don’t know.” Libby took another bite of her chocolate croissant. Perhaps an analyst would say she was trying to fill an emptiness of which she was just becoming aware.

“What a shame. He was such a great man.”

“But he was just a simple house painter.” She no longer felt so sure of itself.

“He painted houses, yes—and masterpieces. In Russia he was a famous artist, the voice of an entire generation of dissidents. His works had the critical force of Picasso’s ‘Guernica’ suffused with the spiritual power of a holy icon. A year before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the authorities felt so threatened by him they wanted to send him to Siberia, but he went underground and somehow escaped to the West.”

“My father, the immigrant house painter, was a famous artist in Russia?” Libby had just stirred her coffee with a spoon and nearly dropped it on the saucer. “But I never saw him paint a single picture the whole time I was growing up.”

“He didn’t believe the Americans could understand his work or that he could ever sell a painting here.”

“So that’s why he stopped painting,” Libby said, nodding as though she understood now.

“In part. He and his wife were willing to live in poverty for the sake of his art. After all, van Gogh himself sold only one painting during his lifetime. But they didn’t think they had the right to impose such a life on you.”

Libby sat in silence. Inside her a Copernican revolution was taking place. Previously, she had drifted like a lonely planet through empty space, but now she was being drawn into an orbit around a sun that attracted her with its warmth and light. She felt herself gravitating towards her father in a way she never had when he was alive.

“So, your father stopped painting to support you,” Rod continued, “but with his meager English there weren’t many jobs he could get. He was pretty much limited to manual labor.”

“When I was going through my father’s clothes, I found a painting wrapped in a sheet in the back of his closet.”

Rod smiled.

“It was of a beautiful woman with dark, penetrating eyes and a sense of quiet dignity and strength, but it looked unfinished.”

“You know who that woman was, don’t you?”

“No.” Both intrigued and confused, Libby waited for an explanation.

“His wife—and your adoptive mother. He was working on her portrait when they adopted you, but after he started painting houses, he never finished it. As a matter of fact, it was the last picture he ever painted.”

“He was a great artist, and he gave it all up for me,” Libby said, though her tone of voice lay halfway between a statement and a question.

“The depth of love is measured by the greatness of the sacrifice. Your father sacrificed everything for you. Art was his life. He loved you more than life itself.”

For a long time Libby sat lost in contemplation. How wrong she had been her whole life. She could see herself as a child feeling embarrassed about her father in front of her friends, staying out of the house as much as possible during her teenage years, and all but losing contact with him in college and as an adult. In fact, she had always resented being adopted and never knowing her real parents. But what biological parent could ever love her more than her father had? Yet, he silently suffered grief and loneliness all these years, and she never knew. She wanted to comfort him, but now it was too late.

Rod looked at his watch. “Well, you have things to do. Perhaps we should get going.” He left a few dollars on the table beside the ticket the waiter had brought, and they put on their coats.

By now the drizzle had stopped, and the sun was peeking through the gray clouds. The temperature had even risen a few degrees.

Back out on the sidewalk, Libby took Rod’s arm again. “You’ve just given me a gift of great joy and great sorrow—joy in knowing how my father loved me, sorrow in not knowing it while he was alive. Now I have something to grieve. Thank you,” she said and kissed him on the cheek.

Payback

Dr. Lance Michaels walked into the room, chatting with the nurse. When he reached the foot of the bed, where the patient was dozing, he stopped dead. He had not seen that hated face in twenty years. Although the man's hair was now streaked with a bit of gray and he had put on fifteen or twenty pounds, there was no mistaking him. He had the same ugly scar above his right eyebrow.

Suddenly Dr. Michaels was twelve years old again.

He had just finished dinner, and his mom told him to put his baseball uniform in the washing machine before he went out to play. At the unexpected sound of the back door to the patio opening, Lance peered through the louvered doors of the laundry room into the kitchen, where his parents sat drinking their coffee. Perfectly still, scarcely breathing, he watched a man point a gun at his dad. Lance's blood ran cold.

"It's time to pay up."

"Just give me another week," his dad said, trembling. "I'll pay everything then."

“That’s what you said last week . . . and the week before. Do you have the money or not?”

“Not right now, but I’ll get it. I promise.” His voice cracked.

“It’s the same story with you every time. This has been going on forever. We’re sick of it. Get on your knees.”

“So you want me to beg? Okay, I’ll beg. Just don’t hurt me again.” His dad knelt down and clasped his hands. “Please give me another week. I beg you.” His lower lip quivered.

“Turn around.”

“What are you doing?” his dad cried, trembling.

“We’re gonna make an example of you. People shouldn’t bet money they don’t have.”

“O God, please, no!” his dad sobbed.

“Turn around.”

Still on his knees, crying and quivering, his dad turned his back to the gunman, who squeezed the trigger. His dad’s body thudded to the floor, his head in a pool of blood.

Then his mom started screaming hysterically, the way Lance himself wanted to but couldn’t. He stood watching through the louvered doors, frozen with horror.

“Shut up,” the triggerman yelled, pointing his weapon at his mom. “Or I’ll put a bullet right between your eyes.”

She managed to choke her screams but shook uncontrollably.

“Take off your clothes.”

She hesitated.

“Now!”

She unbuttoned and took off her blouse, then rose to unzip and slip off her jeans, and finally stood there in her bra and panties.

“Come on! I don’t have all day.”

With the red of shame staining the white of fear on her face, she reached back, unfastened her bra, and pulled the straps off her shoulders and over her elbows. She lowered and stepped out of her panties then covered her nakedness with her hands the best she could.

“You’re gonna pay part of your husband’s debt. Turn around and bend over,” the gunman ordered. He grabbed her with his free hand, spun her around, and pushed her head down to the table. Then he unzipped his pants. A moment later he had penetrated her and was thrusting so hard her thighs banged against the table edge.

“Don’t move,” he commanded when he had finished and withdrawn. She remained bent over the table, weeping silently. After he had zipped up his pants, he raised his gun, pulled the trigger, and put a bullet in back of her head.

He left the same way he had come in. Only the stench of alcohol and tobacco lingered behind him.

Lance collapsed on the floor of the laundry room in an almost catatonic state and remained there motionless until a neighbor discovered the bodies the next day. Overwhelmed by the trauma, he could not speak for seventeen months. What words could ever express his grief and rage? He could not even give the police a description of the perpetrator.

Later, Lance Michaels learned that the killer’s fingerprints were not in any state or federal database and that the DNA sample was contaminated upon collection by an inexperienced officer, so it could not be used in any match. An arrest was never made.

What would have happened to him if Jason Lalos, a speech therapist, and his wife had not adopted him out of the orphanage where he spent the first year after his parents' death? They nurtured him into speaking again, loved him back to normalcy, and supported him in his studies all the way through to his medical degree. Somehow, as an anesthesiologist, Dr. Michaels had been numbing his own pain by rendering others insensible to pain. But all the old feelings had awakened again.

The man who murdered his father and raped and killed his mother now lay before him, but what could he do? No physical evidence of the crime remained: his parents had been cremated and the house demolished long ago. And the twenty-year-old memories of a traumatized twelve-year-old could easily be called into question in court. He couldn't prove a thing.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" the nurse asked.

"Uh, yes," Dr. Michaels said, jolted back to the present. "I just remembered something. That's all. You can wake the patient."

As Dr. Michaels took the chart from the rack at the foot of the bed and began to study it, the nurse tapped the patient lightly on the shoulder and said, "Wake up, Mr. Sauvage. Wake up. The doctor is here to see you." Blinking several times, the patient opened his eyes.

"I'm Dr. Michaels, your anesthesiologist."

"So you're going to put me to sleep, huh, Doc?"

"I see from your chart that you have an atrial septal defect known as a patent foramen ovale," Dr. Michaels said with a clinical aloofness unusual for him.

"You mean I got a chink in the ol' ticker. That's what my heart doctor said."

“Your heart has an opening in the wall, or septum, between the two upper chambers, or atria, which in various ways can lead to air bubbles in the circulatory system and cause a stroke or heart attack. It’s a congenital defect affecting about twenty-five percent of the population.” So as not to be consumed by his own feelings, he kept up the impersonal, professional façade.

“And I thought my heart problems came from living the good life.”

“The good life?” Dr. Michaels said, raising an eyebrow at the intolerable irony.

“Women, whiskey, and cigars. And all the steak I can eat. But it ain’t that, or even the stress of the job.”

“What line of work are you in?”

“I guess you could say I’m a collections agent. You’d be surprised how many people try to welch on their debts. I see to it that they pay up—or else.”

“I bet you make a killing.”

“I do my best, but sometimes the work is just murder. So, about this surgery.”

Dr. Michaels glared at him. Inside, he could feel smoldering embers about to burst into flames. “We’re going to introduce a catheter into a vein in your groin . . . ”

“Hey, be careful down there.” The patient laughed.

“ . . . and lead it up to the hole in the septum, where an umbrella-shaped device will open and plug the hole between the two chambers. It’s a simple procedure. You should be released tomorrow.”

“So that’s how you’re gonna save my life,” the patient said, musing.

“Surgery always carries risks. And some people never wake up from the anesthesia.”

Gasp. The nurse looked at Dr. Michaels with her mouth open.

“You mean you could kill me?” the patient said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“You have to balance the risks against the benefits.” A block of ice without, Dr. Michaels was now a raging fire within.

“Kind of like gambling.”

“Kind of,” Dr. Michaels said with a poker face. “I’ll be back shortly before the surgery to administer the anesthesia.”

With that, Dr. Michaels turned and walked out of the room

* * *

If the punishment were to fit the crime, Dr. Michaels thought, Sauvage would have to die twice for killing both his parents. And who knew how many deaths he would have to suffer in strict justice for all the other people he had killed? What a tragedy strict justice could not be done. Law enforcement had failed and no longer had any chance of succeeding. If even that modicum of justice were to be done that was still possible, Dr. Michaels would have to do it himself.

His patient deserved to die, and he could take the villain’s life. But Dr. Michaels could not make him suffer the way Sauvage had made his victims suffer. Although as defenseless as his victims, he would lie unconscious, under anesthesia. Dr. Michaels knew Sauvage would never feel his dad’s helplessness and terror, his mom’s shame and humiliation, his own horrified trauma. What a pity Sauvage would die peacefully in his sleep. It was far better than he deserved. Still, it was something.

How could Dr. Michaels avoid detection and punishment, though, just as Sauvage himself had done? There was no such thing as a perfect crime. No matter what means he used, he would leave some trace, one an autopsy could reveal. He would be risking his medical license, his profession, his livelihood, the financial security of his wife and children, the happiness of his

family, and his own freedom, all to avenge the death of his parents. If only he could find a way that would not arouse suspicion during an autopsy. And what if someone walked in on him in the commission of the act? It was a risk he would have to take. But he needed something quick, inconspicuous, and easily hidden.

* * *

A couple of hours later, Dr. Michaels returned to start the IV drip. "I want you to count down backwards from a hundred," he instructed the patient.

"Okay, Doc. I'll see you later," the patient said. "Or maybe not." Within a minute or so he was unconscious.

Dr. Michaels took an empty syringe from his lab coat pocket, uncapped it, and held it in his hand. Inject enough air into the IV tube or, better yet, into the jugular vein, and the air embolism would do its work. A fatal air embolism happened often enough with this condition anyway, and no one would ever think to look for his needle in this haystack. Who would ever suspect him? No one at the hospital knew his childhood history, and the police never discovered the identity of his parents' murderer. Well, Mr. Sauvage, it's time to pay up, Dr. Michaels thought, and I'm here to collect the debt.

Just as Dr. Michaels was bringing the needle to the patient's neck, he remembered a series of Bible verses he had learned in Sunday school as a child. "When someone smites you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other." But this man had done far worse than punch him in the face. He had destroyed his family and his childhood. "Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you." Yet God had to forgive him only for small things. He had never done anything so horrendous as this monster. "Love your enemies, and pray for your persecutors." How could he feel love for

such a man? He felt nothing but hatred. But he would pray all right—he would pray that the bastard burn in hell.

Dr. Michaels raised the needle to the patient's neck again and positioned the point on the left jugular vein but stopped with his thumb on the plunger. How could the same device administer a life-saving vaccine and a fatal air embolism? The ambiguity of the instrument gave him pause. But he would be saving the lives of this assassin's future victims, not just taking personal revenge.

Dr. Michaels raised the needle again. Just then a voice came over the loud speaker: "Paging Doctor Michaels."

He would have to hurry. One quick puncture with the needle, a push on the plunger of the empty syringe, and the air would do its work.

"Paging Doctor Michaels," the voice said again.

Doctor Michaels. Suddenly he remembered the oath he had sworn "to consecrate his life to the service of humanity," "to practice his profession with conscience and dignity," and to make "the health of his patient . . . his first consideration."

But this was no ordinary patient, a sick person seeking health. This was the hit man who gunned down his parents like a couple of dogs.

As he raised the needle one last time, he noticed his wrist extend from the sleeve of his white lab coat, the symbol of his profession and of the thousands who had given their lives to research and healing. Then it struck him: he was one of them. However much this man deserved to die, Lance Michaels was a doctor, not an executioner. His business was saving lives, not taking them.

If he spared the life of this hollow-hearted killer, it was not out of Christian charity, forgiveness, or non-retaliation. It was because he knew who and what he was. Killing this man would not mean triumphing over him but sinking into his abyss, and he would become like him: a murderer. How could he, a doctor, live with himself? Instead of killing him, he would let this butcher continue to exist as the wretched man he was. Perhaps that was payback enough, though scant consolation to the orphaned child he carried inside himself.

Dr. Michaels lowered the syringe, recapped it, and put it in his lab coat pocket. Then he answered the page. A few minutes later they took the patient to surgery.

* * *

The following day, as Dr. Michaels was returning to the hospital from a late lunch, he saw an orderly taking Mr. Sauvage out in a wheelchair to a taxi.

“Hey, Doc. I survived. You didn’t kill me after all,” the patient said and laughed.

“I haven’t lost a patient yet,” Dr. Michaels responded with a sense of pride.

“I guess one good turn deserves another.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The way I look at it, you just returned a favor.”

“I’m afraid I’m still not following you,” Dr. Michaels said with a certain impatience.

“Well, Doc, you can see both ways through a louvered door. When they told me I had to have the surgery, I wanted to see what kind of man you turned out to be, so I came here. Now I know,” the patient said and got into his taxi.

Family Burdens

Bam! A hard bump from behind, and Red Heissman lunged forward, tipping his tray towards himself and spilling the prison slop all down the front of his orange jumpsuit. He wheeled around, lifted his metal tray high, and slammed it down on the head of the inmate behind him. Before he could raise it for a second blow, two oversized guards ran up behind him. They placed him in a physical restraint, pinning his arms behind his back, before his tray had stopped clanging on the cement floor. Shoulder to shoulder, they backed him out of the cafeteria, half-dragging him, writhing and kicking, to his cell, where they put him on twenty-four-hour confinement.

“Kind of overreacted there didn’t you?” Officer Goodman said when he came on duty for the two-to-ten shift at the State Juvenile Corrections Facility.

“I ain’t no punk.” Red’s gut was still churning with anger.

“From what I hear, Spike was looking the other way when he bumped into you. It was an accident.”

“No one messes with me.”

“You know, you might want to talk with the Preacher Man about that temper of yours.”

“The Preacher Man can go to hell.”

“Well, that’s not too likely. He sure has helped a lot of fellows like you, though. Just think about it.”

* * *

Red would not have given it another thought, but his probation officer insisted on it. Two days later Red stepped into the Preacher Man’s office. Christ, he thought to himself, some old black guy’s gonna tell *me* what to do? Red stiffened, ready for another round of sermons, threats, and predictions of failure. Why did adults always make the same speech?

“You must be Red Heissman. Come in and have a seat.” A gold-capped front tooth gleamed as Rev. Prediger smiled big and gestured towards one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

“You really a preacher man?” Red was half-expecting him to wear ministerial robes and to keep a large bible, a crucifix, and candles in his office. Instead, he found a still-athletic middle-aged man in blue jeans and a crew-neck shirt.

Rev. Prediger stepped out from behind his desk and sat in the chair next to Red, facing him at a three-quarters angle. Once again he flashed his gold tooth in a warm smile.

“Well, I am an ordained Baptist minister, but I’m here as a counselor.”

“I don’t like counselors. I don’t want nobody in my business.” Red was baiting him.

“Red, I’m glad that you already feel comfortable enough here to tell me what you really think. I want you to keep doing that, and I promise to do the same for you. If we can talk honestly to one another, man to man, I think we can make some real progress.”

The Preacher Man didn't take the bait. Expecting but not getting a fight, Red didn't know what to say.

Rev. Prediger reached over to his desk, picked up a manila folder, and opened it.

"I've been looking over your file, Red, and see you got eighteen months on a possession charge when you were sixteen, but they added an extra month every time you got into a fight, and now you're up to two years. It must be very important to you to stand up for yourself."

"I don't take nothing from nobody," Red replied, putting the Preacher Man on notice.

"No, but you pay a high price for that. Tell me, how badly do you want to get out of this place and stay out of places like this in the future?"

"I'd like to see you live in this hellhole."

Rev. Prediger gave an understanding nod. "Life in prison isn't easy. What's going to happen if you keep getting into fights, Red, even after you get out?"

"What do you care?"

Rev. Prediger looked him in the eyes. "I don't like to see a good kid like you locked up."

Good kid? No one had ever called him that before.

"Red, you're a big, strong guy. I bet you're a hundred and seventy-five pounds of solid muscle. What if you end up seriously injuring or even killing someone?"

"I'll go away for a long time, maybe life, I guess."

"Or get a needle in your arm. Is playing the tough guy really worth that to you?"

"But what can I do? People just pick fights with me."

"How about if the next time someone provokes you, you don't react?"

"You mean just stand there and take it?" Fat chance.

“I mean don’t let the other guy push your buttons. Don’t let him be in control of your emotions. And if he starts getting to you, just turn around and walk away.”

He couldn’t be serious. “And let him punk me?”

“And regain your freedom. Instead of doing time you could be spending time with your family and friends.”

Red sat in silence, as though surveying unfamiliar territory.

“So, tell me a little about your family, Red. Do you have any brothers and sisters?”

The question jerked him back. “I’ve got a five-year-old cousin named Russell. He’s a great little kid. Lots of fun to play with.” For the first time, Red smiled, thinking of him.

“I bet you miss him.”

Red nodded his head in response.

“How about your parents?”

“Uh . . . I live with my grandparents.” Red shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“What are they like?”

“They’re pretty nice. My grandma, she cooks real good.”

“I bet you miss her cooking too, though you can’t get food like ours anywhere else, not even in the finest restaurants,” Rev. Prediger joked, showing his gold tooth again.

“Thank God for that.” Red enjoyed the irony and relaxed a little.

“I’d like to see you back playing with your cousin, Red, and eating your grandmother’s cooking as soon as possible. How does that sound?”

“Pretty good.”

“Well, let’s work together towards that goal, okay?”

* * *

Red left Rev. Prediger's office confused. Not once had the Preacher Man preached to him. He didn't yell at him for fighting, threaten him with punishment, or say he would never amount to anything. Instead he just smiled with that gold tooth of his, asked questions out of interest, and made suggestions he thought might help. He even seemed to like Red and called him a "good kid." And yet, he wanted him to act like a sissy. Could he really trust the Preacher Man?

Suddenly Red remembered something Officer Goodman once told him: "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got." He had to admit what he was doing wasn't working. Maybe he should follow the Preacher Man's advice. Against his better judgment he decided to try it, just once, to see how it worked. It might help him get out of here sooner. Before long he was thinking of playing ball with his cousin and eating his grandma's fried chicken.

Two days later Spike Agudo called him out in the rec yard.

"Hey, Heissman, we got a score to settle. You wanna piece of me? Come and get it when I'm looking instead of blindsiding me. You wanna fight, fight like a man."

In a flash Red felt his face getting hot and his fists balling up. He almost spun around and said, "Well, if it ain't Spike the spic," but remembered what the Preacher Man had told him. Instead he forced himself to keep walking to the other side of the rec yard, where he struck up a conversation with another inmate.

"I like the way you handled yourself today," Officer Goodman said after the rec hour. "That showed some self-control and some real maturity. I'm proud of you, son. Today you were the kind of man that little cousin of yours can look up to."

When was the last time Red had heard words like those? That recognition took some of the sting out of the shame he felt at backing down.

* * *

“Good job!” Rev. Prediger said, congratulating Red at their next session. His gold-toothed smile convinced Red that he really meant it. “You got angry but not aggressive.”

“Yeah, I could’ve rearranged his face.” Despite the congratulations Red felt he had to reaffirm his manhood.

“And spent another month here. Now tell me, when you control your anger, no one else gets hurt, but who suffers on the inside?”

“Man, it was like fire burning in my gut.” Red placed both hands on his stomach.

“So let’s turn down the heat. I want you to close your eyes . . . Now, breathe in through your nose for a count of four . . . Hold your breath for a count of seven . . . And breathe out slowly through your mouth for a count of eight . . . Again . . . And again.”

After several minutes of breathing, Rev. Prediger asked, “How are you feeling now?”

“Like a cool stream is putting out the flames.”

“Now, return to breathing normally, but keep your eyes closed. I want you to clench your fists as tight as you can . . . Hold . . . Release . . . And breathe. Feel the difference between tension and relaxation . . . Now tense your forearms as tight as you can . . . Hold . . . Release . . . And breathe.”

Rev. Prediger spoke in a slow, hypnotic voice as Red successively tensed and relaxed his upper arms, face, neck, chest, back, abdomen, thighs, calves, and feet.

“Now, open your eyes, and tell me how you feel.”

Red laughed. “Man, I didn’t know you could feel like this without drugs. This is great.”

“If you do the breathing exercise and progressive muscle relaxation every morning, it will help you get centered and calm for the day. Do it again at night, and it will help relieve the stress that’s built up during the day. The more relaxed you are, the less things will get to you.”

Red nearly floated back to his cell, his steps were so light. Let Spike say what he wants. What did he care? He wasn’t going to get another month added to his sentence. No way. He was getting out. Maybe that Preacher Man wasn’t such a bad guy after all. Red could almost taste his grandma’s cherry cobbler.

* * *

The next afternoon Red and Spike happened to be on the same outdoor work detail.

“Looks like Little Red Riding Hood just met the Big Bad Wolf,” Spike taunted him.

The blood rushed to Red’s face, his temples throbbed, the veins in his neck stood out. Yet he bit his lip and said nothing.

“The little girl’s too afraid to talk?” Spike said and pushed him.

Instinctively Red shoved him back, and they both put up their fists. Officer Goodman quickly stepped between them. “Let’s stop this train before it wrecks. Red, you take the weed-eater over there by the fence. Spike, you start pushing the mower on the other side.”

* * *

“I hope you thanked Officer Goodman,” Rev. Prediger said at the beginning of that week’s session. “When push literally came to shove, he saved you from spending another month here.”

“Man, this counseling crap don’t work.” Red sulked in his chair.

Rev. Prediger leaned forward slightly. “That’s right. You’re the one who has to do the work. Tell me, what were you thinking when Spike pushed you?”

“I’m gonna teach this little wetback beaner a lesson.”

“And did that thought help you calm down and control yourself?”

“It helped me get even.”

“And it almost helped get you another month, or maybe an assault charge.”

“What the hell did you expect me to do? He started it.”

“He started it, so I’ve gotta finish it. I gotta teach him a lesson, give him a taste of his own medicine, show him how it feels. No one does that to me and gets away with it. I had a right to be angry. He got what he deserved. I ain’t no punk. I ain’t afraid of nobody. I don’t back down for nothing. A real man has to fight. I gotta show him who’s boss.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Red responded, not grasping the obvious satire.

“All of those are hot thoughts, Red. They will only bring you more charges and longer sentences. Our prisons are full of men who think like that. If you want to change your angry feelings and your aggressive behavior, you have to change your thinking.”

“Well, I just get mad sometimes. I can’t help it.”

“Right. You can’t change your feelings directly, but you can change the thinking that causes your feelings. Try thinking, ‘I can handle this, I’m not going to let him get to me, this is not worth getting angry about. Losing my temper will only make things worse. As long as I stay cool, I’m in control. Violence won’t solve anything; it will just get me another charge.’ Then you might avoid a fight, a charge, and a sentence.”

“Hell, I might as well be a little girl.” For all his tough-guy act Red feared weakness more than anything.

“Look, who’s in charge here, you or your feelings? Are you going to let your anger punk you?”

Red didn't know what to say to that. Deep down he knew the Preacher Man was right. In fact, Red even liked his blunt straightforwardness. Man to man—that was the way men talked to each other.

* * *

The next morning Red had just sat down with his tray at breakfast when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Spike advancing towards him, clutching a fork in his right hand. Intuitively he knew that Spike was going to try to stab him in the neck. When Spike was within two feet of him, Red threw his hot coffee in his face. He jumped up, grabbed him by the back of his hair, and slammed his head down against the table—once, twice, three times. Spike fell to the ground, half conscious. Within seconds the guards had Red in a physical restraint. Back to the cell. Another twenty-four-hour confinement. Red bloodied his knuckles on the wall. How else could he get his anger out?

* * *

“Well, you got another month added to your sentence,” Rev. Prediger began at the following session.

In those words Red heard accusation, judgment, condemnation. He felt like a failure, a disappointment. Covering his shame with anger, he nearly shouted, “It was self-defense. That little taco-eating greaser was gonna kill me.”

“So you beat him to the punch.”

“Damn straight.”

“Yet, you're the one whose sentence was increased.”

“Yeah, that's messed up. He tries to kill me, and I get punished.”

“Mmhmm.” Rev. Prediger nodded.

Red took that close-lipped response as agreement with the punishment. Angered even more, he came out swinging.

“What was I supposed to do? Sit there and let him stab me? If I followed your advice, I’d be dead!”

“Well, let’s talk about what else you could have done. What other options did you have?”

“I’m done talking!” Red screamed, jumping to his feet. “Talking don’t get you nowhere. Screw this counseling crap, and screw you.”

Rev. Prediger remained seated and spoke a little more softly than he had. “You met a situation you didn’t know how to handle, and now you’re so frustrated you’re ready to give up.”

“You don’t know what it’s like. You haven’t been through what I have. You’ve never been on the streets. You sit in an office all day and just repeat what you’ve read in a book. You get to go home at night. You don’t know what it’s like to be locked up in a cell.” Red’s voice grew even louder with every sentence.

Looking up at his young client, Rev. Prediger said, “You don’t believe I can understand you.”

“You don’t care about me. You’re just here for the money. You want to see us locked up, or else you wouldn’t have a job.” Red’s voice nearly broke, and he felt a lump in his throat.

“You don’t feel that you can trust me.”

“You got that right! I’m out of here!” Red headed towards the door.

“Wait, Red,” Rev. Prediger called after him. “Let’s talk a little longer.”

“Go to hell!” With that, Red stormed out the door and slammed it behind him.

Red had thought the Preacher Man was on his side, but now he turned out to be just like everyone else. Blame him for something that wasn’t his fault and then punish him for it. The

story of his life. How would he ever get out of there when everyone was against him? Back in his cell, he felt more alone than he ever had. He had no one on his side.

* * *

If it had not been required, Red would never have gone back to counseling. By refusing, though, he would only get himself into more trouble. He returned the next week as angry as ever, expecting a lecture about his behavior during the last session.

“Good morning, Red,” Rev. Prediger said with his habitual gold-toothed smile. “Come in and have a seat.”

Without responding, Red sat in his usual chair, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at the floor.

“I’ve thought a lot since our last meeting, Red,” Rev. Prediger began. “Somehow I have the feeling Spike isn’t really the one you’re angry at. I’d like you to close your eyes again and ask yourself whom you’re really angry at, Red.”

Relieved to avoid eye contact, Red closed his eyes, though he had no intention of examining himself.

“Don’t strain for an answer. Just let it come. Keep your eyes closed. Breathe. And let the answer come to you.”

Suddenly, Red felt a sick feeling in his stomach, a pain in his chest, a dry tightness in his throat. He was choking down a sob. In an involuntary moment of clarity he saw what he had never seen before. He spoke in spite of himself, though in a barely audible voice.

“My grandparents.”

“Your grandparents?” Rev. Prediger raised his eyebrows. “But I thought you got along with them. You love your grandmother’s cooking.”

Red's eyes were moistening.

"My grandparents raised me till I was six. They told me they were my parents. Then, when I was six, I met my real father, and when I was eight, I met my mother. My grandparents then told me my parents were never there because they had to work, even on Christmas, but that was a lie. My dad was in prison for dealing. My mom was strung out on dope."

"And you're angry because—" Rev. Prediger started.

"Because my grandparents lied to me," Red interrupted, his voice betraying the hurt beneath his anger. "When they introduced me to my dad, he just said, 'What's up?' and when they told my mom, 'This is your son,' she said, 'So?' They didn't say they were glad to meet me. They didn't ask anything about me. They didn't say they were sorry for not being there. They didn't hug me. Nothing. My mom never called me or came to visit me after that, and my dad didn't either after he got out of prison." Tears hovered on his eyelids.

"And that seemed grossly unfair to you. How did that make you feel about yourself?"

"They thought that I wasn't even worth coming to see or talking to, that I was just no good." The tears trickled down his cheeks.

"And every time someone else made you feel worthless, you lashed out at him because you couldn't strike back at your parents. Maybe that's what your violence is all about."

Red bent over, put his face in his hands, and sobbed.

Rev. Prediger let him cry. When the tearful spasm had passed, the reverend changed his tack.

"You got pretty heavily into drugs yourself, didn't you?"

Red raised his head and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "Yeah, I started marijuana when I was just six or seven and moved to heroin by the time I was twelve."

“And what effect did the drugs have on you?”

“Man, they totally took over. I mean I would break into people’s houses to steal and beat up complete strangers and rob them just to get money for drugs. And I would leave home for weeks at a time.”

“So the drugs were in control of you. You weren’t really in control of yourself. Do you think the same thing might have happened with your parents?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Red softened a bit on thinking that he and his parents were not so different.

“What about your grandparents? They had already raised their own children. They may have been caring for their elderly parents. And now, when they were no longer so young, they had to raise an infant, spending money on him they could have saved for their retirement. Why do you think they did that?”

“I dunno. Because they wanted to help me?” The thought of their sacrifice touched him.

“They had a difficult situation, and they probably didn’t know how else to handle it. They didn’t want to burden you with a truth too heavy for you to shoulder when you were just five or six years old, so they lied to you. Can you forgive them, and your parents too?”

“What, and just play like it never happened? Act as if it was all right?” Red’s temper was flaring up again.

“No, not at all. If nothing were wrong, there would be nothing to forgive. I mean understanding why they did what they did, letting go of your anger and the desire to get back at them, and moving on with your life. You don’t have to carry around this heavy burden of anger anymore.”

“Well, maybe I can forgive them. I don’t know.” First not fight back and now let go of his anger?

Rev. Prediger took an inch-thick plastic binder from his desk and put it in Red’s hands.

“Is that binder heavy?” he asked out of the blue.

“No, not really.”

“Hold it in your left hand, and stick your left arm straight out to the side. Is it heavy now?”

“A little.”

“Okay. Just keep holding it out to your side until I say you can let it down.” Rev. Prediger then continued talking about anger issues for a couple of minutes.”

“How’s your arm feeling now?”

“It’s starting to hurt.” Red began to lower his arm.

“Down let it down! You’ve just been holding that binder for a little while. How would it feel if you had to hold it out to your side for an hour?”

“Unbearable.”

“For twenty-four hours?”

“They’d have to take me to the hospital.”

“For years on end?”

“It would kill me.”

“Now let go of the binder. Just drop it on the floor.”

Thud.

“How does your arm feel now?”

“A hundred percent better.” Red rubbed his upper arm and smiled from relief.

“Red, imagine that binder is your anger and it contains everything you’re angry about. The longer you hold on to it the more it hurts you. You’ll feel so much better when you finally let it all go.”

Mow down a weed, and it grows back; pull it out by the roots, and it dies. The Preacher Man had just gotten to the root of Red’s anger. Maybe Officer Goodman was right about him after all. For the remainder of his sentence Red didn’t get into a single fight. He wanted to make the Preacher Man proud of him.

* * *

A month before his release date Red had a twenty-four-hour furlough. It was a time to readjust to life in the community. When his uncle drove him up to his grandparents’ home, his aunt and five-year-old cousin, Russell, were waiting there for him also.

“Red!” Russell screamed, running and jumping into his arms when he walked through the door. “Did you graduate? Are you done with school yet?” Red knew that his cousin idolized him and that his aunt and uncle had told Russell he was away at school because the truth would have shattered him.

“Uh . . . yeah, almost. I still have to go back for a little bit, and then I’ll be home for good.”

“And then we can play catch every day! Do you want to play now? I brought my glove.”

“Maybe a little later. How about if you help me get my stuff out of the car?” Red asked and then greeted the other family members.

“Sure!”

Red opened the hatchback of the SUV, lifted out a large duffel bag with all the things he had stored at his uncle’s, and set it on the ground. Russell tried to lift it but couldn’t.

“Here, you take this backpack, and let me get that,” Red said.

He understood now. Maybe some burdens were just too heavy for a boy Russell’s age to carry.

Brotherly Love

Joshua Pascal steadied himself with his cane as he descended the stairs from his second-story apartment, careful not to fall as he had last Saturday morning around 3:00 a.m., when he sprained his ankle after a night of drinking with the guys. On Monday morning that little mishap earned him the nickname “Citizen Cane” among his coworkers at the art supply store. He hobbled to the corner, stood, watched, and waited. After a minute, he reached into his inside jacket pocket, pulled out a flask of vodka, and took a hefty swig. He couldn’t face dinner sober with his mother and brother. Who could?

When he slipped the flask back into its hiding place, he noticed his fingernails were dirty. He stuck his hand into the right front pocket of his blue jeans, took out his pocketknife, and opened the blade to clean them. One thing less for Mom to nag about. Just as he was finishing, he saw his brother’s new Mercedes approaching, about two blocks away. He whipped out a ballpoint pen and a small spiral notepad from his shirt pocket, glanced at his wristwatch, and jotted down, “Thursday, October 16th, seventeen minutes late.” In his desk drawer there lay

dozens of these spiral notepads. Ammunition for the future. He didn't want to be caught unarmed.

"Hey, Josh, how's the ankle?" Abel asked once Joshua was in the car.

"Not as painful as some things in life." He was thinking of the upcoming dinner, though his brother had no way of knowing it.

"Did Mom tell you? I got promoted to chief surgeon at the hospital."

"I'm glad Dad didn't die in vain."

"Oh, don't start that crap again, Josh. Dad died of a heart attack, and you know it."

"Yeah, a heart attack he got by working so hard to put you through college and medical school."

They scarcely exchanged another word until they got to their mother's house, in a working-class neighborhood where they had been the only Jewish family.

* * *

"Hi, Mom. *Chag sameach!*" Abel said, coming through the front door.

"And happy Sukkot to you!" his mother responded. "Come, have a glass of wine to commemorate the—"

"Forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert and lived in huts," Joshua finished her sentence in a sing-song voice. "You say that every year, Mom. Just because I don't go to temple anymore doesn't mean you have to give me a history lesson on every Jewish holiday. Why can't we just celebrate Thanksgiving like everyone else?"

"I just want you to be proud of your Jewish heritage. And besides, you're just being cranky because your ankle hurts." She smiled. "Why don't you go and sit down at the table, you two? I have everything ready."

Abel and Joshua took their seats in the dining room, across from the living room, and their mother brought out the final platter from the kitchen. Whatever her failings, Joshua had to admit his mother could cook. It smelled wonderful.

“Go ahead and start the harvest bisque, boys. Joshua, did you hear that your brother got promoted to chief surgeon at the hospital? We are all so proud of him.”

“Yes, so proud,” Joshua said. He looked at Abel. “*Mazel tof*. So now you have your own little promised land flowing with milk and honey. I wonder how many Canaanites you had to slay to get that position.”

Abel laughed, taking no apparent offense. “Well, I did beat out several contenders, and there is a handsome salary increase to go with the new position.”

God, where was the avenging angel to smite the firstborn when you need him? “I guess there’s nothing in the hypocritic oath against bleeding your patients dry.”

“I’m a highly skilled surgeon, Joshua. I save lives. I deserve a good salary.”

Joshua took a big sip of wine. “I saved your life once and didn’t get paid a dime.” It was a deliberate provocation.

“O God, you’re going to bring that up again? We were just little kids.”

“Yeah, I was four and you were six. You were running by the side of the pool, slipped, and hit your head on the ledge.”

“It was just a little bump.”

“You fell in face down and would have died if I hadn’t pulled you out.”

“It was the shallow end. The water was only a foot and a half deep.”

“You can drown in four inches of water.”

“I would have stood up on my own in a couple of seconds.”

“You were out cold and would have died.” Joshua drained his wine glass.

“Joshua, don’t be so envious of your big brother,” their mother said. “Here, let’s start passing the baked salmon and the whipped butternut squash and sweet potatoes.”

The aromas made Joshua’s mouth water.

“Do you have to dote on him all the time?” He poured himself another glass of wine almost to the brim.

“But you know I love you both equally.”

“Do you now? Just look at the Abel Pascal Wall of Fame.” Joshua pointed to the living room. “There are four shelves full of his trophies and medals. And look at the pictures on the wall. There’s Abel the captain of the football team, the basketball team, the baseball team. Abel the track and field star. Abel the president of the student council, the homecoming king, and the valedictorian. Abel the full-scholarship recipient, the Harvard graduate, the Stanford Medical School graduate. And there on the side table next to the rocker is one grade-school picture of Joshua. You call that equal?”

“Well, you never won anything, dear.” She gave a pained smile.

“I won the spelling bee in the fifth grade.”

“I don’t recall that.”

“Of course not. That was the day Abel won the award for best all-around student athlete. You were too busy celebrating his success to notice.” Joshua drank half of his full glass of wine in a single gulp.

“Fifth-grade spelling bee,” Abel interjected. “Give me a break. It’s not Mom’s fault that you’ve wasted your life.”

“Maybe if I could have gone to college, I wouldn’t have.”

“But you couldn’t get into college with your grades,” his mother said.

“I wanted to go to the Art and Design Institute. They would have taken me.” He drank the other half of his glass of wine.

“Based on what?” Abel said. “Hanging out with a bunch of hoodlums and spray-painting graffiti on bridges and public buildings?”

“That was street art. And they were more of a family to me than you were.” Joshua refilled his wine glass almost to the brim again. Abel and his mother eyed each other.

“Street art? It was vandalism, and you got arrested for it,” Abel said.

“Yeah? Tell that to Banksy in London. His ‘vandalism’ has sold for over half a million pounds. That’s over eight hundred thousand dollars. Now that’s some *gelt*.” Joshua drank the better part of his wine.

“And if they ever catch him, they’ll throw him in jail.”

“Help yourselves to some mixed salad, boys,” their mother said. “It has lots of fresh vegetables.”

“Everything tastes great, Mom,” Abel replied.

It was true. Especially the salmon. Tender and succulent.

“Don’t take that as a compliment, Mom,” Joshua said. “It comes from a man utterly devoid of taste.”

“*Oy vey*, Joshua! Stop talking *shmutz*. This is a family occasion. Show your brother a little respect.”

Joshua finished his wine and refilled his glass again. “Moses said to honor your father and your mother. He didn’t say anything about your brother.”

“You’ve got some real *chutzpah* there, my little *boychik*,” Abel said.

Could the ten plagues of Egypt have been worse than these family dinners? They ate the rosca, stuffed with cinnamon, dried fruit, and nuts, in silence. As tasty as it was, no one showed any sign of enjoying it. Abel and Joshua didn't stay for coffee.

* * *

"Do you have to ruin every family celebration?" Abel asked as soon as they were back on the road.

"That's the price you pay for ruining my life."

"When are you going to get it, you *schmuck*? We didn't ruin your life. You did that all by yourself."

"You got all the attention, all the opportunities, all the support. Mom and Dad hardly noticed me."

"While you were out getting into trouble with your hoodlum friends, I was working my *tukhus* off to get where I am today. It's not my fault that you didn't study, make good grades, and get a scholarship. And it's certainly not my fault that you started drinking so heavily. You're *schickered* today, aren't you?"

"Always so high and mighty. You doctors all think you're gods. I'm glad God doesn't think he's a doctor. Life would be one long prostate exam."

Abel turned and glared at Joshua.

"The red light!" Joshua screamed.

Too late.

* * *

After the collision Joshua checked himself. Nothing seemed broken. Minor cuts and scrapes. He turned to his brother.

“Abel, are you okay?”

No response. His eyes were expressive, but he couldn’t talk. Joshua shook his arm.

“Abel, are you okay?”

Still no response.

Joshua saw that his brother’s neck was swollen and that his face was turning blue. *O God, what do I do? He can’t breathe. What do I do?*

Joshua opened his door, grabbed his cane, and hobbled around to his brother’s door, but it was too bashed in to open. Shambling back around, he unfastened his brother’s seatbelt, struggled to pull him out the passenger’s side, and laid him on the ground.

If I don’t do anything, he’ll die, and I’ll get blamed. But if I do something and botch it, he’ll die, and I’ll get blamed. I can’t win here.

The driver of the other car staggered towards them. “Are you guys all right?”

“My brother can’t breathe! Call 911!” Joshua shouted.

Joshua dumped out his pockets, opened the vodka flask and the pocketknife, and took apart the ballpoint pen. On television there was always someone on the radio or the phone to talk the rescuer through an emergency tracheotomy. He would have to rely on his memory of those episodes. How ironic. Now he was operating on his brother, the chief surgeon.

He doused the knife blade with vodka. Then he located the soft spot under his brother’s Adam’s apple and shuddered as he made an incision. Not deep enough. He cut a little more. Next he poured vodka over the pen barrel and inserted it into the incision as a breathing tube.

Able started to breathe, and the color returned to his face. Thank God.

By then a small crowd of bystanders had gathered. They applauded Joshua. “Good job, son,” an older man said, patting him on the back. “You’re a hero.” Before he finished speaking, Joshua could hear the siren and see the flashing lights of the approaching ambulance.

Once the paramedics had Abel strapped to a gurney and in the ambulance, one of them said, “The impact of the other vehicle or the blunt force of the airbag may have broken your brother’s jaw. The mandibular fracture caused his neck to swell, which obstructed his airway. You probably saved his life.”

“Good,” Joshua said. “I hope it counts this time.”

Cane in hand, he walked away, still limping but holding his head a little higher.

Gracie

From his study upstairs Dr. Marter heard the front door open. He hurried downstairs.

“Gracie, you’re early. It’s so good to see you!” He gave his daughter a big hug. “Oh, I’m glad that you’re going to spend the summer at home! I’ve missed you terribly.”

“Well, actually, I have something to tell you, Dad.”

“What? You’re getting married? Oh, that’s wonderful news! Who is he?”

“No, no, Dad. It’s not that.”

“You’ve gotten your first job as a physical therapist then? That’s great news too!”

“Well, sort of. Let’s sit down.”

They took their seats across from each other in the living room, he on the sofa, she in the rocker, where his wife always sat before she died.

“I hope you’re going to be working close to home.”

“Uh, no, Dad. I’m going to Morocco.”

“Morocco? But, Gracie, you’ve been away at grad school for three whole years, and now you’re going to turn right around and leave again? And so far away?” He felt like an orphaned child someone had just adopted only to abandon at once.

“I know you’re all alone in this big house, Dad, but I have the chance of a lifetime here. The American Friendship Foundation opened a physical therapy clinic in Rabat last year, and they’ve hired me as a therapist. They specialize in treating children with cerebral palsy, which, as you know, is my main interest.”

“But, Gracie, you can’t leave me again. You just can’t.” In a matter of seconds, his entire future had become a cold and empty darkness.

“Dad, I have to. This is my chance to see another part of the world, to live in a foreign country, and to do some real good. If I don’t do something like this now, when I’m twenty-five, when will I? After I’m married or well established in my career, it will be too late.”

To avoid feeling and expressing his pain, Dr. Marter had recourse to rational argument. “Gracie, I don’t think you’ve thought this through. Do you know how dangerous the Muslim countries are for Americans after 9/11?”

“Dad, I feel an inner calling to do this.”

“What, an angel of the Lord has spoken to you from on high?” His feelings of hurt were leaking out in sarcasm. “Come on, Gracie. That’s just a passing fancy.”

“No, Dad, this desire has been with me for a long time now. It’s a kind of inner certainty I feel. I have to do this.”

“Oh, Gracie, you’re just like your mother! She was always rushing off on some foolhardy adventure, always taking needless risks. And it got her killed.” For all his grief, his voice had an angry edge to it.

“At least she lived life. You’ve never taken a risk in your life, Dad. You’re always playing it safe.”

That remark cut too deep. “Maybe that’s why I’m still alive. Where would you be if we had both gotten ourselves killed?”

Gracie’s tone grew softer. “I know how much you miss Mom. I miss her too. And I know you’ll miss me. But please try to understand. I really want to do this. And besides, Morocco is a safe country. It’s not like Afghanistan under the Taliban.”

“Oh, Gracie, you are still so young, so idealistic, and so naïve. I would *never* go to a Muslim country. Not on your life. But I guess there’s nothing I can do to stop you.”

“It’s just for a year, Dad, and you’ll be busy with your medical practice. The time will go by quickly. You’ll see. Then I’ll be back.”

He slumped back on the sofa.

Gracie stood up and stepped over to kiss her father on the forehead. Then she took her bag and went upstairs to her room.

* * *

Gracie sat on the bed and looked at the picture of her mother on the dresser. O Mom, she thought, how did you and Dad ever make it together when you were so different? You were always so much fun and ever ready for a new adventure, while Dad was always so serious and stuck in his routine. Maybe he thought he had to be overly responsible because he saw you as irresponsible. But I think he never understood you. How could he understand a free spirit like yours? I know he feels lonely and afraid. He needs at least one of us to take care of him. And maybe he’s right. If you hadn’t gone to Brazil to photograph that indigenous tribe they’d just discovered, you’d still be with us. But photography was not only your profession, it was your

life. How could you not go? Oh, I wish you were here to tell me what to do . . . But I already know just what you would say. I carry your voice inside of me. You would say, “Gracie, follow your heart, live your dream, do what you think is right, and fear nothing!” And that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

* * *

Two weeks later Dr. Marter drove his daughter to JFK. They rode the whole way in silence. When the boarding began, they both stood, and Dr. Marter said, “Gracie, it’s not too late to reconsider. You don’t have to get on that plane.”

“Yes, Dad, I do. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. You just take care of yourself.”

“But I do worry about you. I really don’t have a good feeling about this. At least promise you’ll call me every week, on Friday, okay?”

“I will, Dad. Goodbye.” Gracie kissed her father on the cheek and hugged him tightly.

Some eleven hours later, Gracie Marter had just gone through customs at the Mohammed V International Airport in Casablanca. When she entered the main hall, she saw people dressed in strange clothes and could not understand a word anyone was saying. She stood for a moment, perplexed. Then she spotted a couple holding a sign with her name on it and walked straight towards them. They were about a decade older than she and had a relaxed, casual air about them.

“Well, you must be Gracie. I’m Eric, and this is my wife, Amy. Welcome to Morocco and welcome to the team.”

“Thanks. I’m so excited to be here. I can’t wait to get started. I think it’s going to be great. At least, I hope it will be.”

As they began the hour-and-twenty-minute trek from Casablanca to Rabat, Eric asked, “So, Gracie, what are your first impressions of Morocco?”

“Really different from America. I can recognize Arabic though I don’t speak it. But there was another language at the airport, and I had no idea what it was.”

“Probably one of the three Berber dialects. A little under thirty percent of the people speak it, though most people speak Darija, a dialect of Arabic. But many Moroccans know French as a second language, and that’s the language we use to communicate with them. By the way, how’s your French?”

“Well, I took it all through high school and college, and I spent a semester in Paris my junior year as an undergrad. So, it’s not too bad, I think. But tell me, why do they wear those long robes with pointy hoods? They look really funny.”

“The robes are called *djellabas*. They’re really very practical. The hood shields the eyes from the sun during the summer and from the sand during a sandstorm. In the winter it functions as a hat and protects from rain and snow. But get this. When the weather is good, they use it like a backpack to carry loaves of bread or groceries home from the market!”

Gracie laughed.

* * *

Finally, they arrived at the team’s house on the Avenue Ibn Toumart in Rabat. The outside appeared plain enough, but when Gracie crossed the threshold and passed through the entrance hall, she said, “What? A huge garden right in the middle of the house? Just look at all of these exotic plants!” Then she raised her eyes. “Oh my! You can see the stars from inside the house! But what happens when it rains?”

“It rains right inside the house. But there is a covered walkway all around the atrium, and all the rooms on both floors open onto it. So, you won’t get too wet. That’s the dining room.”

Eric pointed to an open room on the right with no wall separating it from the atrium. “Why don’t you take a seat on a *mazwad*? The team will be assembling in a few minutes for dinner.”

“A what?”

“A *mazwad*, one of those big floor pillows.”

Gracie sat down on a large cushion at a Tayfour brass table measuring about forty inches in diameter and only eighteen inches high. One by one the other five members of the team straggled in, and Gracie introduced herself to each in turn.

Once everyone had arrived, Nuwairah, the cook, brought out a large platter and set it on the table.

“Mmm. That smells interesting. What is it?” Gracie asked.

“It’s called *zalouk*,” one of the team members answered. “It’s basically a hot eggplant and tomato salad. Here,” he said, tearing a piece of bread from a round, flat loaf, “this is *khobz*. Use it to scoop up the *zalouk*. But be careful. Nuwairah likes to use a lot of chili oil.”

Gracie scooped up a healthy portion of the mixture and took a big bite. Suddenly, her eyes opened wide. She fanned her mouth with one hand, while reaching for water with the other, as tears streamed from her eyes. From the kitchen they could hear Nuwairah laughing, and the team members winked at one another. It was all part of Gracie’s initiation.

After the first course, Nuwairah brought out a shallow bowl almost two feet in diameter topped by a strange cone. An enticing aroma wafted from it.

“My heavens, what in the world is that?” Gracie asked.

“It’s called a *tagine*,” another team member answered. You cook in it over hot coals and then serve from it. The lid traps the steam and returns it to the pot, and so you only need a little bit of water, which is scarce here.”

Inside simmered a stew of squid rings, tomatoes, and onion, seasoned with paprika, cumin, coriander, and, of course, cayenne pepper. Once they had served the dish onto individual plates, Gracie, made wise by experience, took a small bite. “Mmm, still spicy, but not quite so hot this time.”

“No. We’ve had our fun with you for one night,” Amy said.

After a dessert of fresh fruit and a date-filled pastry called *ma’amoul*, served with mint tea, Gracie retired for the night, looking forward to her first day at work in the morning. She fell asleep quickly but awoke about midnight, startled by a loud sound that she at first thought was a siren. For a moment she didn’t know what to do. Was a hurricane coming? Had there been an accident? Was the house on fire? A little more awake, she recognized that the sound was a human voice singing through a loudspeaker. What on earth? Was somebody throwing a wild party? But it didn’t sound like party music. It was more like a chant. Now she strained to catch the words and made out the phrase *Allahu Akbar*, “Allah is the greatest,” one of the very few she knew in Arabic. Oh, a *muezzin*, a kind of cantor, was sounding the *adhan*, the call to prayer, from a minaret. She lay back down, with the strange sights, sounds, smells, and flavors swirling in her head.

* * *

Around nine o’clock the next morning, a Moroccan couple in traditional garb came to the clinic, the husband pushing a wheelchair, which held their four-year-old son strapped in, the wife walking several paces behind him.

When the Moroccan nurse showed them into the consultation room, the man stopped short at the sight of a blond-haired, Western woman wearing blue jeans, a short-sleeved blouse, and a headscarf. The husband and wife looked apprehensively at one other.

“At least she wears the *hijab*,” he said to her in Arabic.

“Well, who is this handsome young man?” the foreigner asked in French with evident enthusiasm.

The husband and wife looked at each other again, disconcertedly this time—no one had ever spoken of their son in those terms. Encouraged by the foreigner’s affectionate smile towards their little boy, the father said, “This is Tahir. My wife is Qismah, and I am Nasir.”

“And my name is Gracie,” the foreigner said with the same smile. “I’m so pleased to meet you.”

The husband and wife looked at each other again, not quite sure what to make of this outgoing newcomer.

The foreigner asked about their child’s symptoms, and the husband answered her questions, while his wife looked down at the floor. But even when the foreigner proceeded to take a history and inquired about the pregnancy and delivery, the father continued to speak for the mother, who had not yet raised her eyes.

“Does your wife not speak French?” the foreigner asked.

“She does, but she is very ashamed. She thinks that Allah has afflicted our child to punish us for our sins.”

“Oh.”

“But I tell her we have not sinned,” Nasir said and sighed with the weariness of a man who has repeated the same argument a thousand times. “We recite the *shahadah* (the Islamic creed) every day, we perform the *ṣalāt* (ritual prayers) five times a day, we give the *zakāt* (alms) to the poor, and we observe the *ṣāwm* (fast) during Ramadhan. We have even made the *ḥajj*

(pilgrimage) to Mecca. But I cannot convince her.” He looked sadly at his wife, who did not look up.

“Well, Nasir,” the foreigner said, “I am not Muslim, and it is not my place to teach you about your religion. But I believe that Allah loves all his children, especially those who most need his help. This child is a blessing to us, not a curse. Tahir will teach us how to show love and care, and he will bring us much joy. His cerebral palsy is caused by a brain injury, not by something you or your wife did.”

For the first time Qismah looked up. She smiled at Gracie.

A week later, another Moroccan couple attired in modern dress brought their six-year-old daughter, who walked with crutches.

“What a precious young lady! What is your name?” the physical therapist said when they entered the consultation room.

The father translated for her into Arabic since his daughter had not yet learned French in school, and the little girl answered, “Kifah.”

“Well, hello, Kifah,” the physical therapist said, squatting so as to be on the child’s level. “My name is Gracie.” She gave the little girl a big smile and held out her hand, which the child shook.

“I know that our daughter will never be normal,” the father said, as if apologizing, before telling the physical therapist the particulars of her condition.

“Instead of dividing the world into the normal and the abnormal,” the physical therapist said, “I prefer to think that each of us has our strengths and weaknesses. We want to discover Kifah’s strengths and build on them as well as teach her new skills to help her overcome her weaknesses. That way she will become as independent and as integrated into her home and

school life as possible. She is a beautiful little girl. Let's never tell her that her way of doing something is wrong. We want to help her do the best she can in a way that's right for her."

The mother squeezed the father's hand, and the parents looked at each other with new hope. Then they looked at the physical therapist and nodded together in approbation. It was clear that her words had pleased them.

* * *

Those kinds of responses confirmed in Gracie the sense that she had chosen the right path. Another day, however, as she was finishing an exam, she heard shouting from the lobby. As soon as her patient had left, Eric appeared at the door.

"What was all that shouting about?" Gracie asked.

"You," Eric said.

"Me? What did I do?"

"It's not what you did, it's who you are. The patient's father refused to have a woman treat his son. He claims that women may not work outside the home, or even leave the house without a *mahram*, a male relative, and that women should not be educated. He was scandalized that you don't cover yourself from head to toe. According to him, you should have your hands cut off for wearing nail polish and be stoned to death for being sexually seductive."

"Sexually seductive?"

"Yes. Your ankles are showing. He called you a Western whore."

Gracie did not know what to make of the incident. Perhaps not everyone corresponded to her positive images after all. She wondered how many Moroccans shared that man's sentiments.

* * *

Gracie got along well with Eric, Amy, and the other five housemates and colleagues. But she worked with them all day Monday through Friday and spent every evening with them after work. On the weekends she wanted to get out and explore on her own. One Saturday she went strolling through the Andalusian Gardens on the grounds of the Kasbah of the Oudaia, a 12th-century complex of walled fortress, palace, and mosque. She listened to the music of the fountains, breathed in the scent of the orange and lemon trees, and marveled at the imposing structure of the surrounding fortress walls. What a beautiful, quiet retreat for solitude and meditation! As she soaked in the atmosphere, two Moroccan men approached from the opposite direction. One of them said something to her in Arabic, which sounded angry.

“Je ne parle pas l’arabe,” Gracie said.

The man translated into French: “The prophet Mohammed, may peace be upon him, sanctified this ground when he walked upon it with his holy feet, but you defile it with your filthy infidel steps. May Allah wipe all the enemies of Islam from the face of the earth!”

Stunned, Gracie did not know what to reply, and the two men walked off. Maybe her father was not altogether wrong about the dangers here. Although it didn’t happen every day, she had encountered an unexplained hostility from time to time in the six months or so she had now lived in Morocco. Yet, the families she worked with seemed to appreciate her, and she felt that she was making a difference.

* * *

One Friday morning a team member was watching the news before work.

“Hey, everyone, come here fast. You need to see this.”

The seven other team members scurried to the television just as the announcer began his report.

“Yesterday morning an American soldier was accused of raping and murdering a Muslim woman in Afghanistan. Although unconfirmed, the report has unleashed a wave of indignation across the Middle East. Massive protests were staged yesterday afternoon and are planned again today in Islamabad, Kabul, Teheran, Bagdad, Damascus, Riyadh, Cairo, Tripoli, and Algiers.” Then scenes of thousands of angry men swarming the streets and chanting anti-American slogans filled the screen. “Authorities fear some of the demonstrations may become violent. The United States is recalling its ambassadors from several Muslim capitals.”

“This looks bad,” Eric said. “Maybe we should close the clinic today and give things a chance to settle down over the weekend.”

“How are things here in Rabat?” someone asked.

“Calm so far,” the one who had been watching the news replied.

“We can’t close the clinic,” Gracie said. “Our patients are depending on us. We have to see them, no matter what the cost to us.”

After some discussion Gracie prevailed, and the team went to work as usual. The morning passed without incident, and everyone started to feel relieved. When the clinic closed from 12:00 to 3:00 for the *jumu’ah*, the Friday congregational prayers, Gracie went to the Medina, the old town, as she always did during that long midday pause, to have lunch at her favorite café and to browse in the open-air shops that lined the narrow streets. She had just finished eating and now, at about 1:30, she was standing in front of a pottery store, looking at its display, across from the Moulay Sliman Mosque.

* * *

Inside the mosque sat Husam al Din el-Hashem, a young, uneducated, and unemployed Moroccan. He listened to a middle-aged imam describe how the US presence in Saudi Arabia

desecrated the entire Muslim world, how America's support of Israel enabled the murder of Muslim brothers, how the Americans had killed over 20,000 Muslims believers in Iraq and Afghanistan, ten times the number of infidels who died in the Twin Towers on that glorious day, and how the immorality and godlessness of America and the entire West was an affront to Islam. Then the imam called for a worldwide caliphate, the introduction of shari'a law, and the execution of every infidel who refuses to convert to Islam or to submit to Islamic rule. With each proclamation el-Hashem grew more heated. Now he had reached the boiling point. At the close of his sermon, the imam shouted:

"My brothers, does not the Quran tell us, 'Fight in the way of Allah with those who fight with you . . . And kill them wherever you find them'? Does it not say that 'those who believe fight in the way of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of Satan. Fight therefore against the friends of Satan'? Does it not command us to 'slay the idolaters wherever you find them'? Remember, my brothers, 'Allah loves those who fight in his way.' You are the sword of Allah, for it is written: 'You did not slay them, but it was Allah who slew them, and you did not smite when you smote the enemy, but it was Allah who smote them.' Death to the infidels! Death to the enemies of Islam! Death to the Christian West! Death to America, the Great Satan! You are *mujahideen*. It is your sacred duty to kill the unbeliever. *Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!*"

Stirred to a frenzy by the sermon, el-Hashem left the mosque at the end of the prayers. His eyes lit on a woman in front of a shop immediately across the street. Although she wore a headscarf, when many Moroccan women did not, her blond hair and blue jeans gave her away as a Westerner.

He rushed towards her from behind, drew the knife he always carried, and pulled her head back with his left hand on her forehead. With one swift stroke of his blade, he slit her throat. The woman fell to the ground and soon lay in a pool of blood.

Screams of the bystanders alerted the local police, who patrolled the Medina. Within minutes they took el-Hashem into custody.

* * *

It's getting late. Why hasn't Gracie called yet? I hope everything's okay, Dr. Marter thought. Every few minutes he looked at the clock, thinking her call would come any second now. The phone did not ring until Saturday morning.

"Hello, Gracie? Is that you?"

"This is Nunzio Angelo, Deputy Chief of Mission of the United States Embassy in Rabat, Morocco. Sir, I regret to inform you that . . ."

Dr. Marter sat for an hour in disbelief. Then he pulled himself together and booked a flight with Royal Air Maroc leaving JFK at 5:45 Saturday afternoon and arriving in Casablanca at 6:25 Sunday morning. He had to bring Gracie's body home for a proper burial.

Once he had boarded, Dr. Marter found his seat in the very back of the plane. He had a long flight ahead of him and time to be alone with his thoughts. When the stewardess came by, he ordered a scotch on the rocks.

O Gracie, my dear Gracie, first you left me for school, then for Morocco, and now for good. I shall never hear your voice or see your smile again. I shall never walk you down the aisle and give you away at your wedding. I shall never hold your children in my arms. You won't be there to comfort me in my old age. I shall be all alone for the rest of my life.

Why didn't you listen to me? I tried to tell you how dangerous it was. But your mother didn't listen to me either. I begged her not to go to Brazil. She was the first love of my life, and you were the second. Now you have both left me to lead a loveless life. We could have all been so happy together, if only you two had listened. Why were you both so naïve? Why couldn't you see the dangers? I should never have let you go. This is all my fault.

And Dr. Marter burst into sobs, which the engine noise drowned out.

* * *

Dr. Marter had arranged for Eric and Amy to pick him up in Casablanca, just as they had Gracie. When they arrived home, the other five members of the team were waiting for them.

"I'm so sorry that we had to meet under these circumstances. We all loved Gracie," one of them said to Dr. Marter.

"And all the people she worked with, the children and their parents, loved her too," another said.

"Yes, and she loved working with them. She was so dedicated to them," a third added.

"I think you would have been proud of her, Dr. Marter," still another said. "She had become increasingly aware of the dangers here, and she knew the risk she was taking Friday, but she put the children before herself. She was a courageous woman."

These last words shocked Dr. Marter. Until then he had thought of his daughter only as young and foolish, not as knowing and brave. He choked back the tears welling up as much from gratitude as from grief.

After resting Sunday afternoon and evening, Dr. Marter spent the day Monday on the necessary formalities: he obtained a medical certificate of death and a certificate of noncontagious disease from the morgue, recovered Gracie's passport from the police, had a

mortuary certificate notarized by the Consulate General stating that Gracie's remains could be buried in the United States, and himself signed a next-of-kin letter authorizing shipment of her body. Then he made arrangements with the only funeral home in Morocco to ship internationally, the Compagnie Marocaine des Pompes Funèbres. Eric drove Dr. Marter from place to place and translated for him as needed.

By the time they had finished, it was already growing dark.

"Before we go home," Eric said, "let me show you our clinic, where Gracie worked. It's not far from the house."

As they pulled up, they saw a crowd of several hundred people standing in front of the clinic and holding candles, among them numerous children in wheelchairs and on crutches. At the front door and all along the sidewalk lay a carpet of freshly cut flowers. A large picture of Gracie hung in the window. Above it a sign written in big letters said in both Arabic and French, "The Friend of Islam." Scores of notes had been taped to the window around Gracie's picture: "We will miss you," "We love you," "Thank you for everything," "We will never forget you," "May Allah be pleased with you."

Eric thanked the crowd for their show of support. When he introduced Gracie's father, they came one by one to kiss his hands. Dr. Marter had held it together all day long, but he could maintain his composure no longer and wept openly with the crowd of strangers, with whom he felt an inexplicable bond.

On the way back Dr. Marter asked Eric: "How would you like to have a doctor on your team?"

"What do you mean?"

“My wife died a few years ago, and now Gracie is gone. I am all alone. I have been thinking about retiring anyway. I could sell my house and my practice, move here, and help you at the clinic. I would need a few weeks, of course, to set all my affairs in order.”

Two months later Dr. Marter had taken Gracie’s place at the clinic. She was gone, but her spirit of friendship was not.

The Violin

Darien Chapman laid the jacket of his Italian suit, made to measure by his tailor in Milan, across the backseat of his car. Damn fools, he thought, as he slipped behind the wheel and slammed the door.

He started the engine of his fully restored 1955 Bentley S1 and pulled out.

Those cretins, wasting his entire afternoon. He should have known it was too good to be true. A 17th-century Italian marquetry table by Lucio de Lucci. Like hell. It was a 19th-century reproduction. And to think those idiots couldn't even tell the difference. That was the last time he would drive an hour and a half to Folton to appraise anything for them.

A dealer in high-end antiques and art as well as a widely recognized expert, Darien often responded to requests by members of the trade to authenticate and evaluate their rarest and most precious acquisitions.

Now that he had left Folton and driven through the countryside for some thirty minutes, still fuming and muttering to himself, he turned on the classical radio station to calm himself down. Ah, his favorite. Solo violin. A historic recording by David Oistrach of Locatelli's

“Harmonic Labyrinth.” He recognized the opening phrases immediately and let himself be carried away by the rippling flow of arpeggios. Another world.

Coming out of his reverie when the piece ended and the announcer spoke again, Damien saw a sign that said, “Entering Geigersville.” He realized he had overshot by a couple of exits the turnoff to the highway that led back to his upscale home in the suburbs of Hamstead. Great. Just what he needed. This was really not his day. At least he could take the next exit and make a U-turn to get back on the highway going the other direction. It would only cost him fifteen minutes. Twenty at the most.

Once Darien had exited and turned left under the overpass, however, the road did not curve back to the highway but continued straight. He had no choice but to follow it. At the first opportunity he took a left in the hope of meandering back to the freeway.

Oh, my God, where had he ended up? Look at those run-down little shops. Bars on the windows. Steel gratings over the doors . . . Broken streetlights . . . Garbage on the sidewalks . . . Trash in the gutters . . . People with clothes from the Salvation Army, probably unemployed, maybe homeless . . . A drunk sitting on the curb with a bottle of wine in a paper bag . . . He had to get out of there.

In the next block Darien saw a shabby street musician standing on the corner playing a cheap fiddle for spare change. He couldn’t imagine what a horrible screech was coming from that thing. What was he fiddling? “Old MacDonald Had A Farm”? He was glad he couldn’t hear it.

As soon as he passed the fiddler, Darien ran over a broken beer bottle in the street and blew out his left front tire. He couldn’t believe it. What else could go wrong today?

He pulled over to the curb, got out of his car, and opened the trunk. Then he took the jack and set it down by the flat tire. When he stood up and turned around, he saw a man in front of him, holding a gun.

“Gimme your wallet.”

Oh, no. This was it. What chance did he have? The great Darien Chapman gunned down by a street punk in a trashy neighborhood. His forehead broke out in a sweat; his heart pounded in his chest. Steadying his trembling hand, Darien reached back for his wallet, which held several hundred dollars in cash and four or five credit cards. If he was going to die, he would die with dignity. He refused to show a common thief his fear.

When Darien stretched out his arm to hand his wallet to the robber, his watch showed from under the cuff of his shirt—a Patek Philippe World Time, 33-jewelled, 18k rose-gold timepiece with a silver dial and sapphire crystal, worth upwards of forty thousand dollars.

“Gimme the watch too, or I’ll put a bullet through your head.” The robber raised his gun to eye level.

Just as Darien started to unfasten his watch, someone snuck up to the robber from behind his car, clutching the tire iron from the open trunk. The robber spun around, and the stranger dealt a sharp blow to his wrist, fracturing it and sending the gun flying.

“Get the hell out of here before I crack your skull open.” The stranger held the tire iron high, ready to strike a second blow.

The robber ran off clutching his right wrist with his left hand.

“Thank God you were there,” said Darien, as relieved as he was stunned. He now recognized the stranger as the street musician. With his eyebrows raised a bit, Darien stared at

the man's torn gray knit cap, his dirty red flannel shirt, his quilted brown vest, his tattered blue jeans, and his boots with duct tape wrapped around the toes.

"Here, let me pay you something for your trouble," Darien finally said, still holding his wallet.

"No time for that. We gotta fix your flat and get you out of here fast. You're a sitting duck. What were you thinking coming into this neighborhood in a car like that and dressed in those clothes? Were you trying to get yourself killed?"

In ten minutes the street musician had put the spare tire on, given Darien directions back to the highway, and picked up his violin. Fifteen minutes later Darien was taking the cutoff back to Hamstead. He suddenly realized that he hadn't even gotten the street musician's name.

Where in the world had he come from? He must have heard the blowout and seen the robber approaching. Then he probably packed up his fiddle and crept towards the car, staying hidden by the open trunk lid. He would have set his fiddle in the trunk, picked up the tire iron, and tiptoed up to the robber. Did he retrieve the gun from the sidewalk afterwards or leave it there for someone else to find? Well, it didn't matter to Darien.

Even if the fiddler didn't know how to play the violin, it was awfully nice of him to help. That street musician probably saved his life. After the crook got his wallet and his watch, he would have just shot him and stolen his car. In fact, that little fiddler risked his life for him. Going up against a gun with a tire iron. That guy had some nerve. What if he had gotten killed? Darien didn't think he would have done the same for him. No, he felt sure he wouldn't have.

Darien would not admit to himself his sense of shame that he had held in contempt, because of his appearance, the man who saved his life.

* * *

The next morning at nine Darien unlocked the door to his shop, entered, and locked the door behind him. His store was not open to the general public. Appointments only, and only for the wealthiest clients. He was greeted by a marble statue of a male warrior, a 2nd-century Roman copy of a lost Greek original by Polyclitus. Just past it there stood an intricately carved 12th-century baptismal font from a Gothic church in Champagne-Ardenne, France. A hunting-scene tapestry from the Este court, woven in Ferrara, Italy, in the 1530s, hung on the wall behind it. To the left of the tapestry was a small 17th-century Flemish painting, a minor allegorical work by Jacob Jordaens. The entire showroom overflowed with such treasures. Scarcely was there anything in the whole store on sale for under a hundred thousand dollars, and some items ran into the millions. Darien didn't even consider anything made after 1800 a real antique.

Strewn on his desk lay trade magazines in Italian, French, Spanish, German, and Russian—languages that Darien had mastered fairly well, doing much of his business in the major cities where they were spoken. He took a seat and began leafing through this month's *Zeitschrift für Kunst und Antiquitäten*.

Good Lord, why hadn't he seen this before? How in the world did he miss it?

His eyes had alighted on the notice of a recently discovered and just authenticated 1649 Jacob Stainer violin to be auctioned at the Dorotheum in Vienna.

He banged his fist on the desk. That violin was his. He had to have it.

Darien picked up the phone and called Otto Kaufmann, one of his agents, a native German naturalized as an American citizen.

“Ja, hallo.”

“This is Darien. I need you to book a flight to Vienna as soon as possible. A Jacob Stainer violin is coming up for auction at the Dorotheum in less than a week. Get there and check out the competition. Let me know what we’re looking at. Got it?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Roughly forty-eight hours later Darien received a call back from Otto.

“The competition is pretty stiff. A couple of private collectors are looking at it, a bank, and even the Wiener Kunsthistorisches Museum.”

“How high do you think they will go?”

“It’s hard to say. How high are you willing to go?”

“Mmm, let’s say an even million. That should come to about 750,000 Euros, give or take.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do. Bye.”

The thought of the Stainer violin reminded Darien of the nameless street musician who had saved his life. For the rest of the day the image of that mendicant fiddler kept returning to his mind. He felt as though he had a debt to pay.

* * *

The next morning Darien had no appointments. He put on some jeans, a T-shirt, and a pair of old jogging shoes from the back of his closet. Then he rented a low-budget car for the day since he didn’t own anything inconspicuous in his fleet of collector’s cars. After about an hour’s drive he arrived at the scene of the mugging in Geigersville. The street musician was nowhere to be seen. So Darien circled the block, and still no sign of him. Against his better judgment, he parked the rental car and went into a tobacco shop. The syrupy-sweet smell of flavored pipe tobacco sickened him.

“Excuse me, sir. Do you happen to know a street musician, a fiddler, who sometimes plays on the corner here?”

“Oh, you mean Theodorus Mousa, the violinist,” the portly, bald shop owner said. “Why, everybody knows him. He plays like an angel! That’s heavenly music there.”

“Uh, yes, if you say so. Do you know where I might find him?”

“Well, I can’t rightly say. Our corner is just one of the places he plays. But he has others. He goes wherever the spirit moves him. He’s divinely inspired, you know.”

“Is he now? Well, thank you for your time.”

There was no point in driving around. That poor fiddler could have been anywhere, so Darien headed home. Divinely inspired! He shook his head and chuckled.

* * *

Within a week Otto returned from his trip, violin in hand. The other bidders had stalled out at 950,000 dollars; he got it for 975,000. When Darien lifted it from the case, he thrilled at the sight of it. In rapturous silence he contemplated the delicately warm, orange-chestnut varnish. Next he lightly ran his hand over the highly arched belly and back, which gracefully scooped and then rose to the handsomely rounded rim. He felt the silky smoothness of the grainless ebony fingerboard. Finally, he gently kissed the exquisitely carved face of a woman in place of the usual scroll. He was in love. Peering through one of the elegant, almost vertical, and slightly asymmetrical f-holes, which ended in circles, he could see the label inside with the Latin inscription:

*Jacobus Stainer
Absam prope Oenipontum
fecit Cremonae
1649.*

“Jacob Stainer, from Absam near Innsbruck, made this at Cremona in 1649,” he translated with deep satisfaction. Darien envisioned exhibiting his new purchase at a major world museum, which would place a sign next to it that said, “From the Private Collection of Darien Chapman,” or loaning it to a world-renowned virtuoso and having his name figure largely in the program acknowledgments for every concert he or she gave: “X plays a Jacob Stainer violin on generous loan from Darien Chapman.” Ah, what glory would be his.

* * *

A week later, business again took Darien to Geigersville, where he was mugged, though to nicer part of town. After his appointment he was making his way back to the highway when he passed a city park filled with booths and stands and crowded with people. Apparently they were holding a festival of some kind.

There he was. There on the sidewalk stood Theodorus Mousa playing his fiddle. Open on the ground in front of him lay an instrument case with a dollar bill or two and some loose change inside of it. A small crowd had gathered around him. What the . . . ? It looked as though some of the listeners had tears streaming down their cheeks. Less than a half a block ahead a car pulled out, and Darien parked his vehicle in its place. When he got out, he stopped, transfixed.

He was hearing Bach’s “Fugue in G Minor.” True, because of the cheap instrument the tone sounded a little thin, and the outdoor acoustics could not match those of a concert hall. But the intonation remained absolutely perfect throughout, the phrasing exquisitely elegant, and the dynamics minutely precise. As though two or three violins were playing at once, the separation of the voices came through limpidly clear. Darien found the tempo exhilarating, the feeling and passion soul-rending, and yet the entire execution seemingly effortless. Overwhelmed, Darien was shaken to his core. Had he not been in a hundred of the finest concert halls in Europe and

America, where he had listened to the performances of the greatest virtuosi of our times? Yet he had never heard anything like this. The final note sounded, and Darien remained breathless. Once again he felt ashamed that he had disdained the musical ability of a man whom he had never heard play.

Theodorus now took a bow to acknowledge the applause of the small crowd. Just as he was rising, a jogger accidentally bumped into him. The blow knocked Theodorus to the ground and sent the violin soaring straight up into the air. Landing on the sidewalk, it shattered to pieces.

Theodorus crawled over to it and gathered up the fragments, clutching them to his breast like a mother holding a child who had just died in her arms. He knelt there and wailed.

Everyone, including the jogger, stood there in stunned silence. Eventually Theodorus rose to his feet and headed off, tenderly cradling the remains of his broken instrument. When the jogger tried to apologize and see what he could do about the violin, Theodorus appeared not even to hear him and did not respond.

Darien hurried into a submarine sandwich shop across the street. When he opened the door, the smell of greasy meatballs slapped him in the face.

“Say, do you know the violinist who was playing out there?” he asked the young man behind the counter.

“Theodorus Mousa? Why, sure. Who doesn’t?”

“Do you happen to know where he lives?”

“He stays in a tenement just a couple of blocks up the next side street.”

* * *

After a bit of detective work Darien Chapman succeeded in locating the street musician’s exact address. He arrived there the next morning around 10:15. Outside, apparently unemployed

men leaned against the walls, smoking and passing a bottle back and forth. The building had no security, and Darien was able to open the door and step into the trash-littered corridor. From behind closed doors he could hear babies crying and mothers screaming at children. Darien shuddered in disgust at the whole filthy, chaotic sight. When he rang the doorbell of apartment nine, Theodorus Mousa opened the door but showed no signs of remembering the man whose life he had saved just a couple of weeks earlier.

“Mr. Mousa, my name is Darien Chapman. I saw what happened to you yesterday, and I have brought something for you.” He handed him a violin case.

Theodorus took the case, walked over to the worn couch, and set it down. When he opened it, his eyes grew big. “Whoa, I ain’t never seen nothing this pretty before.”

Darien followed him in. “Well, it’s a very old and very expensive instrument. Why don’t you take it out and give it a try?”

Theodorus did just that. After adjusting the tuning pegs a bit, he closed his eyes and launched into Paganini’s “Caprice No. 1,” playing at a dizzying speed yet articulating every note distinctly. Darien felt as though he were riding in a race car driving 200 mph, it was that exciting.

“Amazing! Simply amazing!” Darien said when the last note faded away. “And you played the whole thing from memory.”

“That’s because I ain’t never learned to read music. I ain’t never had a teacher or took no lessons.”

“What? How did you learn to play then?”

“My uncle had a pawnshop, and he gave me a violin and a bow when I was seven. Can’t rightly say how I learned to play it, though. It just come natural to me. Sort of like talking.”

“But how do you learn a new piece if you can’t read music?”

“I just hear it once on a CD or a radio, and I know how to play it. And then I never forget it”

Darien sat down on the couch, stunned. Had he not just witnessed it himself, he never would have thought such a thing possible. “Listen, I have connections in the music world. I can get you booked with the best symphony orchestras in the world. Just think, you’ll be playing at Carnegie Hall in New York, the Royal Albert Hall in London, the Salle Pleyel in Paris, the Konzerthaus in Berlin, the Parco della Musica in Rome. You’ll be rich and famous.”

“Naw, that’s all right. I’m happy just playing on the street corners around here.”

“But you deserve to be heard.”

“The people who go to all them fancy places you just said are rich. They can hear good music anytime they want to. If it wasn’t for me, the people around here wouldn’t never hear nothing. This is where I belong.”

Darien was even more stunned now than just a minute ago. “There’s nothing I can say to persuade you?”

“Fraid not.” Theodorus put the violin back in its case, latched the lid, and handed the instrument back to Darien. “Thank you for letting me see your violin. It sure is a nice one.”

“No, it’s yours to keep.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m quite serious. No one deserves it as much as you.”

“But I can’t—“

“My decision is final. Now there’s nothing *you* can say to persuade *me*.”

Darien shook the hand of the astonished musician and opened the door to leave. Just before he stepped out, he turned and said, "I'll be back before long to listen to you play on the street corner." Then he closed the door behind himself.

"I'll be there," Theodorus called after him.

Darien walked through the corridor rubbish a humbled man: he had just come face to face with genius. All his breeding, studies, travels, accomplishments, success, affluence, taste, refinement, reputation—what were they worth in comparison? Nothing. He had just given away a million-dollar violin, and no one would ever know. Or if they found out, they would think he had lost his mind. His name would never figure prominently on a museum plaque or in the program notes for a concert given by a world-famous musician. No matter. Although he had given the instrument to someone who didn't even know what he had, the gift counted as his tribute to genius. This was his moment of glory after all, a private glory to be sure, but a glory nonetheless. Perhaps it would serve as atonement for the contempt in which he had first held Theororus Mousa.

* * *

Theodorus opened the case again, took out the violin, and gazed at it. Wow, what had he done to deserve this? He started playing and didn't stop till dinner time. Then he played for the rest of the night. None of the neighbors complained.

Friday Night

Day in and day out, Patrick Solus drove his old, beat-up pickup truck to work. On Friday nights, however, he took his “baby” out for a spin: a pennant-blue 1958 Corvette convertible. Talk about a head turner! She had white side coves, twin trunk spears, and bumper-exiting exhaust tips, not to mention hood louvers, quad headlamps, and a nine-tooth grille. A real looker. She boasted heavy-duty brakes and suspension, a four-speed manual transmission, and a 283 cubic-inch V-8 engine. Why, this dreamboat even had the original vacuum tubes and the transistors of its Delco hybrid radio. Patrick had sunk every spare penny into that car, and it was art on wheels. An American classic. His pride and joy.

Tonight he had his weekly date with Delicia, a woman almost as beautiful as his car.

When Patrick stepped out of the shower and stood in front of the mirror, he flexed his right bicep, admiring the muscle in his arm. He turned to the side, looked at his flat stomach, and nodded his head. Not bad for a forty-two-year-old man. How many of his high-school classmates had beer bellies by now? Working construction had kept him in shape, he thought as he ran his

hand through his thick black hair streaked with the slightest gray. And all those trips to the gym didn't hurt either.

Once he had finished drying off his well-toned body, Patrick hung his towel on the rack and picked up the can of shaving cream to lather up. Yes, he had shaved this morning before work, but he had a five-o'clock shadow, and he wanted to look his best for Delicia.

Construction was hard work, he mused to himself, placing the razor beneath his right sideburn and carefully pulling it down over his well-chiseled jaw. The bending, the heavy lifting, the hot summer sun, the cold winter wind. By quitting time, his muscles ached, and he was tired. Friday nights—apart from a few beers after work—counted as his one indulgence. He deserved it, didn't he? He had no qualms, or almost no qualms, about it.

Of course, if his young wife, Désirée, had not died in childbirth twenty-two years ago, everything would have been different. He would come home to a loving spouse, dinner on the table, and a quiet evening sitting side by side on the sofa watching television. On some Friday nights, he worried he was betraying her memory.

If only she had borne him a son. He would have had some idea what to do: how to talk to him, what clothes to buy him, how to play with him. With his daughter, Winona, he was at an utter loss. What did he know about being a girl, and how could he ever raise one by himself in such woeful ignorance? It was for her sake that he made the heart-wrenching decision to give her up for adoption when she was just a few months old. Indeed, it left a hole in him that could never be filled.

Patrick brushed the thought of his wife and daughter from his mind as he went to get a shirt and slacks from his closet. For all these years he had lived alone. If he enjoyed the normal

pleasures of marriage and family, he would gladly stay home on Friday nights, but he didn't, and he refused to feel guilty about it—though his feelings of guilt often ignored his refusal.

He punished his body all week long with the pain and fatigue of manual labor. On Friday nights he owed himself the reward of a little pleasure and relaxation. It was only fair. Besides, he was not made of wood or stone; he was a flesh-and-blood man like any other. Why should he be the only one to deprive himself?

Patrick finished dressing and stood again in front of the mirror to view the result. Not bad. He turned a bit. No, not bad at all. His bulging biceps filled the short sleeves of his blue floral sport shirt; his black leather belt fit comfortably around his trim waist; and his muscular thighs gave shape to his slacks. Who would ever guess his real age? He grabbed his keys and headed for the car.

* * *

Outside, the stars shone clearly in the cloudless sky, and the warm breeze felt good against his tanned face once he was heading down Homestead Lane towards the corner. A muscle man in a muscle car—that's what he would have said had he expressed his feelings in words. Oh, how he felt young again. He didn't have a care in the world, except perhaps for one thought that sometimes nagged at him as he made the weekly drive.

What was so wrong with his Friday-night outings, anyhow? he asked an imaginary accuser. When you think about it, Delicia and he really did have some things in common. They both did physical work, though while he worked outside in the harsh elements, she worked in all the indoor comfort you could ask for. Even if their work was unpleasant at times, they did it of their own free wills and probably enjoyed it often enough. Her work did carry certain health risks, but so did his: accidents and injuries happened all too frequently on the construction site.

Neither was self-employed, and their companies made a handsome profit off of their daily grind, but you could hardly call it exploitation. In a service economy, services are rendered for pay. It's just business. Nothing wrong with that. She earned a better hourly rate than he did, but he worked more hours than she, so maybe they came out about the same. They really weren't so different after all.

Patrick flicked on his left turn signal, stopped at the corner sign, and then rolled onto Wide Gate Avenue. In his mind he pictured himself at a classic car show, leaning against the hood of his car in a Jimmy Dean pose, wearing tight blue jeans and a black leather jacket, his hair slicked back 1950s style, as all the girls in bobby socks secretly lusted after him. Or maybe he was going to a good old-fashioned drag race, where all the guys would drool at the sight of his rod.

With the top down, he cruised along the brightly lit avenue with its storefronts and signs vying for attention. He enjoyed looking and being looked at. Somehow the bustle of the traffic, the shoppers and diners out on the town, and the neon lights almost drove the ruminations from his mind, almost but not quite.

After a couple of miles, Patrick took another left onto Broad Street, passed five blocks of upscale buildings, and parked in front of the luxurious Sweet Dreams Hotel. Though all alone in his car, he felt as if the nuns from his childhood Catholic school were glaring at him in silent condemnation. He shook himself to put the mental image to flight. If God had let his wife live, or even found him another wife, he wouldn't be in this situation. What right did they have to throw stones, living in their glass-house convent and endlessly paging through their thick book of rules and regulations? They didn't know what it was like in the real world, what he had been through, the loneliness he had suffered. To hell with them.

* * *

Patrick strutted into the swanky lobby of the hotel. Off to the side sat a middle-aged woman wearing a form-revealing, black evening gown and a string of white pearls with matching earrings. She was nursing a glass of champagne. A picture of simple elegance, she had lost none of her feminine charms. When Patrick approached, she slowly rose to greet him.

Patrick glanced around, took an envelope from his pocket, and handed it discreetly to her. In exchange, she slipped him a room key.

“Sixth floor, room sixty-six,” she said in subdued tones. “Delicia is out of town, but we have something very special for you instead. Something you are sure to like.”

“Good,” Patrick said, then headed towards the elevator, hoping no one had seen him talking to her. Inside the elevator, his palms were sweating like a nervous schoolboy’s and his heart rate increasing in eager anticipation.

When Patrick entered the room, he beheld the back of a beautiful form through the sheer black lace of a waist-length jacket. A couple of seconds after his entrance, the young woman turned around to face him in her skimpy bra and matching panties.

“Hey, baby,” she said almost mechanically.

Patrick’s eyes slithered up from her shapely thighs, to her curvaceous hips, to her slender waist, to her full, well-rounded breasts, to her face—

Suddenly, he panicked, as if he had seen a ghost.

Her shoulders back, her hips swaying, the young woman slunk right up to him, nuzzling her breasts against his chest.

“Are you ready to feel good?” she said, running her fingers through his hair.

Patrick thrust her back with both hands against her shoulders.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like me?”

“No, it’s not that,” Patrick stammered. “I can’t.”

“Oh, don’t worry, baby. I’ve helped plenty of men your age. You just let me work my magic.”

As soon as she started to sidle up to him again, he took a step back and held out both his arms.

“Wait,” he commanded.

She stopped.

“What’s your name?”

“They call me Hot Spice,” she said, almost purring.

“No, I mean your real name.”

“That’s none of your business,” she said, suddenly changing her tone. “This is a fee-for-service relationship, not a personal one. No contact outside of this room. Understand?”

“Were you adopted?”

“Who are you? You’re creeping me out.” She pulled her lace jacket together in the vain attempt to cover herself.

“Did your adoptive parents tell you your real mother’s name?”

“Yes . . . I mean that’s none of your business either.”

“It was Désirée, wasn’t it?”

“How did you know that? Who are you?”

His arms still outstretched, Patrick now took a step towards her.

“Don’t come any closer, or I’ll scream,” she said.

He didn’t.

“And your real name is Winona, isn’t it?”

“You can’t know me. I’ve never seen you before.”

“You look exactly the way your mother did twenty-two years ago.”

“That’s how old *I* am.”

“She was my wife.”

“You mean you’re my—”

“Father,” he said before she could finish her sentence.

“And I’m your—”

“Daughter,” he said.

She burst into tears and fell into his arms. Overwhelmed with emotion, he wept on her shoulder as well.

“Go put your clothes on,” Patrick said after a moment.

She went into the bathroom to change. While she was doing so, it finally hit Patrick: Winona was his daughter, but every young woman whose services he had contracted was someone’s daughter. Right then Patrick knew he would never come to this place, or to any place like it, again. From now on he had to be the kind of man his daughter could look up to and respect. He didn’t know how she had come to this point in her life, but it didn’t matter: he loved her and would do everything he could to help her. True, he didn’t know how to be a father when she was a baby, and he didn’t know any more about it now than he did then, but he was willing to learn how to be the dad his little girl needed. He had come here looking for what he thought he wanted tonight and found what he had really wanted all these years.

When Winona came out in her street clothes, her lingerie stuffed in a large leather handbag, she sat awkwardly on the edge of the bed, and he in a chair across from her. Patrick

told the daughter he had not seen in twenty-two years what most weighed on his heart, and she said what she most longed to say to the father she had dreamed of, fantasized about, and even searched for, but never found.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, the elevator doors opened. Patrick and Winona stepped out and walked through the lobby.

When the elegant middle-aged woman saw them, she jumped up and hurried towards them.

“Was there a problem? Was something wrong?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Patrick said.

“But it’s scarcely been twenty minutes. Were you dissatisfied?”

“On the contrary, I haven’t been this happy for the last twenty-two years.”

“And I haven’t either,” Winona said. “I’m giving you my notice, effective immediately. I quit.”

At that Winona took her father by the arm and started walking towards the exit.

“But where are you going?” the middle-aged woman called after him.

“Home,” Patrick said, without turning around.

He and Winona would probably stay up all night talking.

The Confession

Five-year-old Kent Conley sprinted through the backyard at top speed, tore across the patio, nearly overshot the walkway to the door, burst through the door into the garage, made a turn-on-a-dime spin to the left, hopped the step, flung open the kitchen door, and raced across the white linoleum, sliding to his knees in front of the sitting-room couch. Propping his forearms on the cushion, he closed his eyes tight, folded his hands, and frantically began praying the first of the only two prayers he knew by heart. “Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name . . . ,” he stammered, out of breath. When he reached “deliver us from evil. Amen,” he shot a glance over his shoulder through the sliding glass door to the patio and backyard. The grassfire was still burning!

Closing his eyes tighter and clasping his hands harder, he prayed more fervently. “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .” Just as he was sputtering, “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen,” Kent sprang to his feet and wheeled around, only to see the fire spreading. He bolted out of the house even faster than he had rushed in, screaming, “Fire! Fire!”

Fifteen minutes ago the thought of fire fascinated Kent as much as it terrified him now. When his mother went next door for a moment, Kent saw his chance. He pulled open one of the lower kitchen cabinet doors, stepped up on the inside shelf, and clambered onto the counter. From there he opened the door to the upper cabinet, where his mother kept the matches. Unfortunately, not the long fireplace matches, which were by far the best. Not even the wooden kitchen stove matches, which were still pretty good. But just the ordinary matchbook matches, which would have to do. Kent sprang down from the counter without even bothering to close the incriminating open cabinet doors and called his three-year-old sister.

Tired of board games inside and limited to the driveway on his bicycle outside, Kent was left to his own devices. He had just invented a humdinger of a game: “Stomp Out the Lighted Match.” Eager to teach his little sister how to play, he led her outside to where his family’s yard met the neighbor’s in back of them.

“I light the match and throw it on the ground,” Kent explained, “and then you stomp it out, okay?”

Nodding, his little sister indicated her comprehension and consent.

Taking pride in his own inventiveness, the big brother in Kent delighted in teaching his little sister. The individualist in him relished asserting his independence from his parents, while the naughty child derived pleasure from doing something prohibited and the little sneak reveled in escaping his mother’s detection. Likewise, the questioner in him wondered what would happen, and the budding scientist would perform an experiment to find out. The superhero in him would unleash and attempt to control an elemental force of nature, and the daredevil face the danger. Although he was holding the matchbook in his left hand and about to tear out the first match with his right, inwardly Kent was rubbing his hands together in sheer delight.

It was August, and the North Texas sky yielded no more water than a well run dry. No one could remember the last time it rained, and the temperature had broken a hundred every day for weeks on end. What's more, the wind blew hotter air than the hair dryer hoods at Betty Jo's Beauty Salon, where Kent's mother could not afford to get a perm. Nothing outdoors could survive August in North Texas, except perhaps rattlesnakes and cactus, and the grass was no exception. While Kent and his sister were tramping their way to the edge of the backyard, the Bermuda, which looked more like straw than grass, crunched under their Keds. The whole yard was a tinderbox if there ever was one.

When the torrid wind died down for a moment, Kent tore out the first safety match from the matchbook, scraped its head against the striking pad, and dropped it lit on the ground.

"Stomp it out! Stomp it out!" he cried to his little sister.

But his sister didn't stomp it out. She just stood there, looking down at her feet, where the brown grass was beginning to crinkle into black as the flames skimmed over the dry blades.

"Stomp it out!" Kent yelled louder, but she still stood there, motionless.

Right then the wind gusted, and the fire leapt across three or four feet of dead grass. Kent began stomping wildly himself, contrary to the rules of the game, but the flames spread faster than he could crush them out. Clearly, his "Stomp Out the Lighted Match" game was over.

"Stomp Out the Grassfire" was no longer child's play, and Kent knew it.

As long as he'd still had a prayer, Kent had hoped somehow to hide the fire from his mother. But he no longer had a prayer, now that his recourse to divine intervention had failed. In his eyes his mother still retained her godlike aura as all-knowing and all-powerful, and she could put out the fire (even if it meant she would find out who had started it), so he cried all the louder,

“Fire! Fire!” But his mother did not materialize. Unequal to the situation, Kent ran back indoors to hide. Out sight, out of existence, at least in the five-year-old mind.

* * *

“Did you hear that?” Cora Conley asked, alarmed.

“What?” the neighbor lady said.

“It sounds like Kent . . . screaming.” Cora jumped up, hurried out the back door to the patio, but froze when she saw the flames in her backyard creeping in her direction. Panic. Her children! Where were her children? She left them just for a moment playing quietly in the den when the neighbor called asking to borrow some cough syrup for her sick child. How could this have happened? She was just going to drop off the medicine and come right back, but then the neighbor wanted to chat. If only her husband were here! He would know what to do.

“Is everything okay?” the neighbor asked, sticking her head out the backdoor.

“Call the fire department!” Cora yelled, shaken out of her immobility.

She dashed to her yard, heading towards the garden hose, coiled on a rack at the rear of the house. Maybe she could put out the blaze. But the line of fire blocked her way, and, as soon as she stood close enough, she saw that the flames had already destroyed the hose.

If only she had a wet towel to beat out the fire. She started tromping the ground madly, but when the flames nipped at her ankles, she fled back to the neighbor’s yard. Still coughing from the smoke, she didn’t know whether her tears came from eye irritation or sheer helplessness as she stood and watched the fire spread.

Sirens blaring, lights flashing, the fire truck screeched around the corner. The three-block trip from the neighborhood firehouse had just taken a couple of minutes. Soon the firemen, in

bright yellow turnout gear and helmets, wielding massive hoses, extinguished the blaze, though not until it had scorched four backyards.

* * *

“Kent, come here,” his mother said when all the commotion had died down.

Uh-oh. He froze for a minute, not knowing what to do, like a cornered animal looking for a way of escape.

“Kent,” she repeated.

With no way out, he went and stood silently before her.

“Do you know how the fire started?” she asked.

“N-no,” he said, looking down at the floor, unable to bear her gaze.

She eyed him more intently. “You weren’t playing outside when it began?”

“No.” He kept his head lowered.

“So you didn’t see how it started?”

“No.” He had already traveled too far down the path of deception and couldn’t turn back now.

“Hmm.” She stood in silence for a moment, peering at him.

If only he could turn and run away, but there was no where to run.

“And the cabinet doors in the kitchen? They were open when I came back in.”

Kent stared at the floor and said nothing.

“You didn’t climb up on the counter and get Mommy’s matches?”

“No,” he said, still not daring to look up. His heart was racing.

“And you weren’t playing with the matches outside?”

“No.” Now his palms were sweating too.

“So, how did the fire start?”

Kent shrugged his shoulders, almost on the verge of tears.

“Well, fires don’t just start all by themselves.” She turned and walked away.

Did she believe him? Either way, the interrogation was over, and he had escaped detection. What a relief, though an uneasy one at that.

* * *

Of his own accord Kent spent the remainder of the day in his room with the door closed, coming out only for dinner and returning there as soon as he had finished eating in silence. His mother sometimes sent him to his room to punish him. Perhaps he knew he deserved a punishment and exiled himself to his room so his mother wouldn’t have to send him there.

Kent lay on his bed, face down. Stupid sister, he thought. She didn’t even stomp out the match. Rotten luck. The wind blew the fire faster than he could stomp it out. And mean God, who didn’t put out the fire, even though he said two whole prayers on his knees.

Kent’s stomach hurt. Yet he knew that he was sick not in his body but in his soul. He didn’t know exactly where his soul was, but he knew it was inside of him somewhere.

For the first time in his life he had lied to his mother. What he showed on the outside hid what he knew on the inside. Last Halloween, when he was still an honest boy, he wore a little devil’s mask and costume. Now that he had turned into a liar, he was hiding behind a little angel’s mask. By donning it, he had tricked his mother, but there was no treat for him. A single word, “no,” had changed everything, forever. And Kent knew it in his gut.

Not that he had broken a rule and feared punishment. Kent had been punished often enough before and knew he could again take being deprived of his favorite toy, not being allowed outside to play, or even getting spanked. It wasn’t the closed bedroom door that kept

him from going out to his mother and her from coming in to him. Rather, it was the lie. Kent felt sick, and the only medicine that could heal him would taste bitter indeed.

At last Kent got up from his bed. He knew exactly what he had to do.

God Bless America

The fourteen-month-old infant woke up coughing, wheezing, and crying.

“Ay, *mi hijita*,” Pura said, picking up the baby and patting her on the back to calm her.

“She has a fever. The *pulmonía* is getting worse.”

“Pneumonia,” Cristóbal said. Although Pura had agreed to practice English at home with him, he had to help her with the words she didn’t know.

“Maybe we can buy the medicine this week.”

“No, *mi amor*. We had eighteen dollars left last week, and we should have twenty-two left this week. But the drugstore said the medicine costs a hundred and eighteen dollars. We still have to wait.”

The baby started a coughing fit.

“But if we wait a month, or even a week, she may die. She is very sick.” Worry furrowed Pura’s brow.

Cristóbal took a deep breath and turned his head towards the wall. How could he look Pura in the eyes with what he was about to say?

“I will ask Diego to lend me his gun. There is a convenience store near here. They have money in the cash register.”

“You’re going to rob them? ¡Ay, *Dios mío, no! Es un pecado.*” The reversion to Spanish signaled that Pura was too upset to speak English.

“I know it’s a sin to rob. But it is a bigger sin to let our daughter die. I will lose my soul to save her life. Pray for me.”

Cristóbal took the brown paper bag Pura had fixed for him and walked out the door to the bus stop three blocks away from Econo-Lodgings, where the young couple rented a one-room apartment on a weekly basis.

As soon as the door closed, Pura lit a candle and set it on the table in front of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, whose picture she had taped to the wall. She took her rosary from her pocket, knelt on the floor, and, holding her baby desperately, began a Hail Mary: “*Ave María, llena de gracia . . .*”

* * *

Some fifteen minutes later Cristóbal got off the bus on the corner of Thirteenth and Black Street, where the day laborers stood until someone hired them. A few always stood there all day long. Even though he was younger than the others, just twenty-one years old, he had been lucky. Every day for the last two weeks he had worked with a small crew landscaping a rich man’s house. The pickup would come in a few minutes to get him.

Cristóbal reached into the paper bag and pulled out one of the bean and onion burritos Pura had fixed for him. As soon as he took the first bite, he remembered how much better they tasted in Guatemala, where they grew and ground their own corn for the tortillas. But here they

had a carpet instead of a dirt floor, and though they didn't have a cow to give them milk, they could get water from the faucet without having to go to the river.

His crew would finish the landscape job today, and Cristóbal didn't know whether anyone would hire him tomorrow. If he went without work for two or three days, he couldn't pay next week's rent, and they would have to move out and sleep under the bridge again, where his daughter caught pneumonia three weeks ago. Cristóbal turned up the collar of his jacket. Although spring was just beginning, at 6:30 the cold morning wind still cut to the bone.

When a rusty red pickup stopped at the curb seven or eight minutes later, Cristóbal climbed in the bed and sat next to Diego across from two other men.

"Buenos días, compadre," he said, extending his hand.

"Muy buenos días," Diego responded, shaking his hand. *"¿Cómo estás, amigo?"*

"Mal. I have to ask you a favor after work."

"Anything for you."

Roughly forty minutes later they were on the job. Cristóbal surveyed the flagstone patio and walkways, the retaining walls, and the fountain they had built, the sod they had lain, and the trees and shrubs they had planted. Today they had to set hundreds of petunias, zinnias, and geraniums in the many flowerbeds they had dug around the trees and the palatial house. A warm sun had risen by now, and a refreshing breeze was blowing. But Cristóbal couldn't enjoy the fine spring weather, thinking about what he had to do after work.

When five o'clock finally came, he said to Diego, *"Oye, amigo,* that favor I wanted to ask you."

"Sí," Diego said, ready to help his friend.

At just that moment an olive-green Jaguar pulled up. Out stepped a middle-aged man, who stood for a minute, looked left to right, and smiled with satisfaction. He strolled up to the workers.

“Good afternoon, *Señor* Reichman,” Cristóbal said, more confident of his English, or perhaps just more eager to practice, than the others.

“Hello, boys. You’ve done fine work here. I’m very pleased. Since today’s your last day, I wanted to give you each a little token of my appreciation for a job well done.”

“Oh, that is very kind of you. *Dios lo bendiga*. God bless you,” Cristóbal said.

Mr. Reichman handed them each an envelope, smiled graciously, and turned back to his car.

When he was driving away, Cristóbal peeked in the envelope. To his amazement he saw a hundred-dollar bill. But wait . . . There was another . . . And another . . . ¡*Dios mío!* There were ten of them.

He fell to his knees and raised both his arms to heaven. “*O Señor, gracias, gracias, gracias,*” he cried with tears streaming down his cheeks.

The rusty red pickup seemed to crawl back to the corner of Thirteenth and Black Street, and the bus ride home had never lasted so long. Again and again Cristóbal caressed the envelope in his left jacket pocket, imagining Pura’s face when he showed it to her. Finally they arrived at his stop. He pulled himself up by the pole in front of his seat, stepped out of the bus, and started trudging home with a slight limp. After he had bent over all day to plant flowers, his lumbago was acting up. It had given him trouble ever since last year when he fell from a tree while trimming the upper branches. But now he gave no thought to the pain and hurried home to their room at Econo-Lodgings as fast as he could.

* * *

The man who had been sitting just across the aisle from Cristóbal noticed a white envelope on his seat. Was it a love letter or just grocery coupons? His curiosity got the better of him. Quickly he slid across the aisle, picked up the envelope, and glanced inside. As soon as he glimpsed the money, he stuffed the envelope in the inside pocket of his jacket before anyone noticed.

* * *

“You’ll never believe what happened,” Cristóbal cried when he burst through the door.

“Oh, Cristóbal, what have you done? I prayed to the Virgin for you.”

“I didn’t do anything because the Virgin answered our prayers. Just look.”

He reached in his left jacket pocket, then the right; next he checked his jean pockets front and back; finally he unzipped his jacket and stuck his hand in his shirt pocket. Nothing.

“Oh no, where is it?”

“What?”

“The envelope.”

“¿*El sobre?*”

“Sí,” Cristóbal said, confirming she had understood him. “It was right here. It had a thousand dollars in it.”

“¿*Mil dólares?* Cristóbal, have you been drinking?”

Cristóbal collapsed onto the bed in the center of the room, buried his face in his hands, and sat there mute for the rest of the evening. This couldn’t be happening.

* * *

The front door to the right side of a duplex in a rundown working-class neighborhood opened.

“How was your day at work, honey?” Madeleine said, looking up from her ironing. She sensed that something was different.

“Well, I have good news and bad news, as they say. The bad news is they were laying people off at the factory today, and I got cut,” Chase Argent said.

“One of the girls quit today—she’s pregnant and almost due—so I can get more houses to clean.”

“You won’t have to. The good news is I found a thousand dollars.”

“Get out of here.”

“Some Spanish guy on the bus left it in an envelope on his seat. Must have fallen out of his pocket.”

“Chase, you can’t keep that.”

“The hell I can’t. Finders keepers.”

“But it’s not yours.”

“It is now. Besides, where’s some Spanish guy gonna get a thousand dollars? He probably stole it himself.”

“He could have worked for years to save that money.”

“Hell, those Spanish guys come here from Mexico and take our jobs. Their kids go to our schools for free. They go to the emergency room for free when they’re sick. They’re just a bunch of freeloaders looking for a handout. They’re taking advantage of good, honest, hardworking Americans. It’s about time one of us took something from them.”

“And you’re the good, honest American who’s gonna do it?”

“It’s his fault, not mine. He should’ve been paying attention. I guarantee he wouldn’t give an envelope full of money back to me.”

“I’d rather work the extra hours, and you can find another job too.”

“Like an ex-con can find a job. I finally get one, and then I get laid off. No one wants to hire a guy with a rap sheet for breaking and entering, armed robbery, and credit-card theft. They’re all afraid I’m going to steal from them.”

“But you’ve changed. You have to give that money back. He probably needs it for his family.”

“Why should we give a damn about his family? He ain’t one of us. We gotta watch out for ourselves.”

“No, Chase, I can’t be a part of this. Either you give that money back tomorrow, or I have to leave. I can’t be with you if you go back to your old ways.”

“But it’s not stealing if I find it.”

“It’s the same difference.”

Chase stared at her, speechless.

* * *

At 6:30 the next morning Cristóbal was standing on the corner of Thirteenth and Black Street, eating his bean and onion burrito and thinking about how he would ask Diego to borrow his gun tonight. The next hour brought work to five or six other men but not to him. About a quarter till eight a shiny new pickup pulled up and an Anglo man got out. Cristóbal immediately walked up to him and extended his hand while the remaining jobseekers stood there, waiting to be approached.

“Good morning, sir. I am Cristóbal. You need a strong worker for today?”

“One of my boys just called in sick with the flu, so I’m a man short. You ever laid concrete before, Chris? We have a driveway, a walkway, a porch, and a patio to do.”

“Oh, yes sir. I will do a good job. I promise.”

“Then, you’re hired. Let’s go.”

Gracias, Señor Dios, Cristóbal prayed silently. Maybe he would be able to pay next week’s rent after all. If his daughter had to sleep outside again, she would surely die.

Cristóbal tried his best to hide his limp as they walked to the truck. Throughout the day he ignored the pain in his lower back and worked as hard as he could. If he made a good impression, perhaps the Anglo man would hire him again tomorrow.

The crew Cristóbal had joined for the day finished up the job about 4:45. While the Anglo man was inspecting their work, his cell phone rang.

After a short conversation he said, “Hey, Chris, one of my other crews is running late and needs some extra help. They have to finish the job today. I’ll pay you an extra hundred dollars if you come over and help us out.”

“Of course,” Cristóbal said, smiling broadly. He wanted to jump and shout for joy. Now he could buy the medicine, and his daughter would get well.

As they were walking back to the truck at the end of the day, when the second job was finished, the Anglo man said, “You did good work today, Chris. My guy with the flu is gonna be out for a week to ten days. How would you like to take his place?”

“Oh, yes sir. You can count on me. I will work even harder tomorrow.” Cristóbal felt new strength in his tired limbs.

* * *

Chase sat on the bench at the bus stop, muttering to himself. Was he a fool to choose Madeleine over the thousand dollars? Two buses had already come and gone, and the Spanish man hadn't gotten off. He would wait for one more bus, but that was it. If he came back with the money and she wanted to leave, then let her leave. He would still have a thousand dollars.

Finally the bus arrived, and the Spanish man stepped out.

Damn it.

Chase shuffled up to him, dragging his feet, and held out the envelope.

"You left this on the bus yesterday."

"Did you look inside it?" the Spanish man asked, his eyebrows raised and his eyes wide.

"Of course. Here." He held out the envelope a little farther.

The Spanish man's eyes lit up with amazement. "You came to find me and return the money?"

"Just because my girlfriend's making me. Do you want it or not? Take it."

"No, you keep the envelope."

"Huh? Are you crazy? There's a thousand dollars in this envelope."

"I know, and it's all yours," he said with a big smile.

What did that smile mean? This had to be some kind of trap. "What the hell are you trying to pull? Are you going to call the police and tell them I stole it? I can't go back to prison."

"No, amigo. In my country they say: *No te preocupes por el día de mañana porque el día de mañana se cuidará de sí mismo.*

"What the—"

"That means 'Don't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will take care of itself.'"

“That doesn’t make any sense. Man, there’s a thousand dollars here.” Chase quickly looked around in all directions. Men and women still getting off the bus, others waiting to get on—they all looked like undercover cops to him. Were they just waiting for the signal to arrest him?

“I have work for another week,” the Spanish man said. “I have a wife who loves me. My daughter is going to get well. And I have saved my soul. What more could I want? Today I am the richest man in the world. You keep the money.”

No, this was too easy. It had to be a setup. With his criminal history, a grand larceny charge could mean another ten years in the joint. No way was he going to fall for this one.

“I don’t trust you Spanish guys, and I don’t believe a word you say.” Chase dropped the envelope on the ground, turned, and hurried off.

* * *

Cristóbal stooped to pick up the envelope. When he straightened up, he looked inside. The money was all there. This time he folded the envelope and stuffed it into the right front pocket of his jeans, where it wouldn’t fall out.

The man nearest to Cristóbal sat on a bench waiting for a bus. Apparently, he had paid no attention to the entire scene between Cristóbal and the other man.

Cristóbal looked at him and said: “First an *americano* gives me an envelope with a thousand dollars and then another *americano* gives it back to me. God bless America!”

The man gave no indication that he had even heard Cristóbal. No matter. Cristóbal set out for home, not feeling the pain in his lower back or noticing his slight limp. Just wait till he told Pura what had happened!

The River of Life

“The meds aren’t working,” Amanda Bristol said.

To pull it down over her knees, she tugged at the hem of her—what would you call it? Not a dress. It had no waistline to separate the skirt from the bodice. And certainly not a gown. It was too formless and not at all elegant. Perhaps you could call it a shift or maybe a smock. It looked something like a sleeveless choir robe, though not so long. To be honest, you would think it was a huge potato sack with holes cut for the head and the arms, except it was made out of red cotton, not brown burlap.

“Well, we might have to increase the dosage, or even switch to another medication,” Dr. Orvos, her psychiatrist, said, looking down at her file.

Amanda wondered whether he even saw her. Was she just another faceless patient in the long line of the day’s appointments?

“I’ve tried them all. Lithium, Tegretol, Depakote, Lamictal, Zyprexa, Abilify. Nothing works. This isn’t a medication issue.”

“Depression is always an issue of brain chemistry, and you’re here for a medication consult, though you should be talking about your personal issues in therapy. Research shows that the combination of medication and therapy works best in treating Bipolar II Disorder.” He sounded like a journal article.

“The whole notion of having to pay someone to talk to me is so depressing.”

Amanda tried to shift in her armchair but couldn’t: she was wedged in too tight.

“And then, my first therapist wanted to talk about my mother, not me. The second kept asking how everything made me feel. And now the third just wants to know the evidence for everything I say and to argue about my beliefs. Therapy is a waste of time.”

“Well, psychotherapy is not an exact science like psychiatry,” Dr. Orvos said in the way an engineer might speak of a construction worker. He still hadn’t made eye contact with her.

“No one gets it. I’m depressed because I’m lonely. I’m lonely because no one wants to be with me. And no one wants to be with me because of my weight.”

“Then, in addition to taking your meds and going to therapy, you should see a nutritionist about a weight reduction plan.”

Take a pill. See a therapist. Go on a diet. He had a simple solution for everything.

“Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, Nutrisystem, Slim Fast, the Atkins Diet, the South Beach Diet—I’ve tried them all. None of them work either. I’m hungry all the time, and, besides, eating and drinking are my only comfort.”

“You’re caught in a vicious cycle: you’re miserable because you’re overweight, so you eat and drink to comfort yourself, which causes you to gain weight and makes you more miserable. And alcohol is a central-nervous-system depressant. Your drinking isn’t helping your depression, you know. Have you considered going back to AA?” He wrote a note in her file.

“I’m done with AA. I’m done with meds. I’m done with therapy. I’m done with weight loss programs. In fact, I’m done with everything. That’s it. I quit.” Suddenly, Amanda’s voice had a ring of determination to it that surprised even her.

“What are you telling me?” Dr. Orvos sat up straight, glancing at his watch.

“I’m sick of my life. I’m not going on like this anymore.” Just uttering those words out loud brought her a strange sense of peace.

“Are you saying you want to kill yourself?” He looked up fully for the first time.

“I guess I am.” She felt better all ready.

“We absolutely have to discuss this at length, but this is just a fifteen-minute medication consult, and I have another patient waiting. I can see you again tomorrow at the same time. But I can tell you right now: whatever the problem, suicide is not the answer. We’ll find a better solution tomorrow. You can put off killing yourself for twenty-four hours, can’t you?”

“Maybe.” She wanted to leave her options open.

“Look, I want you to remove all lethal means from your home. Guns. Knives. Pills. Anything you could use to kill yourself. Okay?”

So now he was taking a serious interest in her?

“Sure. And, while I’m at it, I’ll have them cut off the water so I don’t drown myself in the bathtub, and turn off the electricity so I can’t lick my finger, stick it in a socket, and electrocute myself, and remove the roof from my house so I don’t get up on it and jump off, and then shut down my street so I don’t throw myself in front of a bus.”

“Stop joking. This is no laughing matter. Do you have anyone you can call?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be suicidal.” She had never seen her lonely reality so clearly.

“Then I’m giving you the number of the Suicide Hotline.” He scribbled the number on the back of his card and handed it to her. “Call them if you are feeling like hurting yourself. In the meantime, I want you to agree not to kill yourself for twenty-four hours and to sign a no-suicide contract.”

“On one condition.” She relished the foretaste of bitter irony.

“What?”

“You promise not to sue me if I break the contract.”

“You understand that I can have you involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital if you refuse? My first priority is to keep you safe.”

“Hah! Your first priority is to keep your bank account safe. Don’t worry, there’s no one to sue you for malpractice if I die. But if it makes you happy, give me the paper. I’ll sign it.”

Dr. Orvos drew a photocopied form from a folder in his file cabinet. After Amanda signed it, she stepped out of his office into the waiting room, and the next patient stepped in. That office door was just a turnstile for a steady stream of pill-popping, relief-seeking patients, she thought.

Well, she had finally found her relief. How odd, though. She had thought of suicide many times before but always pictured it as an impulsive act. First, a whirlpool of loneliness, a drinking bout, and an eating binge. Next, pangs of guilt and remorse, a tearful fit of desperation, and a moment when it all became unbearable. At last, the deed itself. The way it turned out, though, she had made the decision in a state of relative calm and even engaged in a bit of banter with the good doctor.

* * *

Out on the crowded sidewalk again, Amanda would have walked with a light-footed step, if her build had permitted it. Instead, she waddled her way up the street, not knowing exactly where she was going and not caring. Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last, she said to herself. Free from all the painful memories of the past, free from the lonely burden of the present, free from the bleak expectation of the future. No more pills. No more therapy sessions. No more diets. Just freedom. Whether today, or tomorrow, or next week, it didn't matter. She was already savoring the sweet taste of her deliverance.

Suddenly, she stopped dead in front of a man in a suit carrying a briefcase and coming towards her.

"Doug? Doug Lethe?" she said when he was a few steps from her.

The man halted. "How do you know my name?"

"It's me. Amanda. Amanda Bristol. From high school."

A look of perplexity.

"Don't you remember? We went to The Honors Academy together. There were only fifty-three kids in our graduating class. You have to remember me."

"I'm sorry, I don't. That was fourteen years ago. I have no recollection of you." He looked at his wristwatch. "And besides, I'm late for a meeting."

He stepped around her and continued with long strides down the street. How was it possible to be so large and yet to remain invisible? He had seen her every day for four years and never noticed her once. The story of her life.

Oh well, it didn't matter. Soon she would be free. She was already free in her mind. Before long she would be free in her body too—or free from it, rather. In the next block she spotted the sign for O'Flannigan's bar. Why not celebrate her newfound freedom with a drink?

* * *

She squeezed into a booth against the left wall and caught her breath from the walk. At once, a college-aged lad wearing a white waiter's apron and a green T-shirt with the bar's logo appeared with a notebook and pen in hand.

"What can I get you?" he asked, his eyes fixed on a tight-skirted young lady in heels who happened to be passing in front of the plate-glass window.

"Give me a double Johnny Walker Black on the rocks."

"Coming up," he said, without ever looking at her.

A minute later he set the drink on the table and left. Amanda raised the rim of the glass to her lips, puckered as if to kiss it, and took a sip. O Johnny, she thought, the only man who ever made me feel good. The only one who was always there for me. The only man I ever loved . . . Well, except for Jack Daniel. No need to be jealous, though. I'm enough woman for two men.

Amanda drained the glass and signaled the waiter for another drink. Was everyone looking at her? She could feel their eyes upon her, yet when she surveyed the other patrons, no one was paying her any attention. Was she invisible to them too, or had they stared at her in horrified disbelief and then turned their eyes away? She was all too familiar with that shocked stare and then those averted eyes. Among adults, they replaced the taunts and insults of her classmates, going all the way back to grade school.

Fatso, roly-poly, butterball, tub of lard, blimp, Patti Fatty, chunky monkey, chubasaurus, porker, fat pig, stupid cow, hippopotamus, elephant, beached whale. She had been called by those names more often than by her own. Even the polite euphemisms—overweight, stout, portly, corpulent, rotund, Rubenesque, obese (morbidly so)—however well meant, caused no less pain. They all came down to the same thing: just plain fat.

On the right side of the room sat two slender women in their mid to late twenties, sipping strawberry daiquiris. Probably secretaries who had just gotten off work. A good-looking man standing at the bar had turned his head towards them. Maybe he winked at them. They giggled like schoolgirls. When Amanda looked at them, they raised their eyes, then quickly looked back down, and giggled again. She was sure they were laughing at her because a man like that would never give her a second look, or even a first.

So what? The insults, the stares, and the laughs, as well as the inattention, the neglect, and the disregard would all be over soon.

“Anything else?” the waiter said, looking at his watch. Maybe he was almost through with his shift.

“Bring me another one.”

Amanda remembered how she was the only girl in her class who didn’t get invited to the senior prom. In fact, she didn’t get asked on a single date all through high school. Or college, for that matter. Or after college, when she started working as a data analyst. Truth was, she had never been on a date.

Amanda finished her drink, left some bills on the table, and struggled to get out of the booth and onto her swollen feet. On the street again, she plodded slowly along, still not knowing where she was going, still not caring.

* * *

It was a fine spring afternoon. The temperature mild. The sky a clear blue. Before all too long Amanda had wandered the two blocks east out of the commercial district. Trees lined the side of the road, their recently bare branches bursting into green leafage. Round about, birds flitted and chirped. The wind blowing in her hair gave her a sense of freedom. Relaxed, carefree,

her head swimming pleasantly from the drinks, Amanda drew in a deep breath and let it out. She wasn't sure where she had left her car. If she found it later, fine. If she didn't, that was fine too. In any case, she wasn't going to work tomorrow. She was through with that as well. Say, didn't this road lead down to Mill River?

Amanda trudged on, her weight shifting from side to side with each step, like a boat rocked back and forth by the waves. Ten minutes later she had reached the steep riverbank. It was a good thing too, for she was entirely winded from the short walk.

Although as a child she had visited the river, just a quarter mile past the commercial district, Amanda had not returned there since and had never looked at it carefully. What a beautiful scene it was. Tall grasses and wild flowers covered its banks; trees arched their branches over its clear waters, spreading their cool shade upon them; the white, sandy bottom and smooth, multicolored rocks shone through in the clearings, glistening in the gentle sun. By now the psychiatrist's office, the crowded sidewalk, and the bar had receded far into the background. So had the pain of her memories and the shame of her condition. Freedom, relief, and peace. The Sea of Tranquility itself could not hold a more otherworldly peace than Mill River.

A narrow, old, country bridge spanned the river. To the outside of the guardrail stood a small ledge just barely wide enough for someone Amanda's size to walk on. She wanted to gaze upon the flow of the water from the center of the bridge. Since the occasional car still passed by, Amanda stepped carefully from the side of the road onto the ledge. With her left hand on the guardrail, she inched her way towards the center. Each step brought her fresh exhilaration, as though she were weightlessly defying gravity.

At the center of the bridge, Amanda turned cautiously to face the river, holding on to the guardrail behind her with both hands. She gazed down. Was she dizzy from the drinks, her shortness of breath from the walk, or the height of the bridge?

In her lightheaded state, the river took on cosmic dimensions. Always changing, yet ever the same, it represented the river of life, with its myriad births and deaths, merging into the ocean of being. It symbolized the stream of time emptying into the sea of eternity. How Amanda longed to be one with that river. To leave behind her fleshly burden, to immerse herself in something infinitely greater, to lose herself in the whole.

She had decided to end her loneliness and depression but couldn't bear the ugly image of vomiting from an overdose of pills or reddening the bathtub water with blood from her slit wrists. What more beautiful place for her liberation than this idyllic spot? Nor could she face another night alone, another hopeless morning, another pointless day. What more perfect time for her deliverance than this moment of sublime serenity? A slight lean forward, and ultimate freedom would be hers. Amanda let go of the guardrail and teetered on the ledge.

* * *

Just then Amanda heard a car pull up at the foot of the bridge. Turning her head, she saw two policemen step out of a squad car. The older one hurried forward. "Don't come any closer," she cried.

The officer stopped when he was a couple of yards onto the bridge. "Are you thinking of jumping?"

"Thinking? No. I've already decided. Don't try to stop me."

"I won't. Can we talk, though, just for five minutes? Then, if you still want to jump, you can."

“You won’t make me change my mind,” Amanda said. “What are you doing out here anyway? You aren’t writing parking tickets.”

“A passing motorist saw you on the ledge and called nine-one-one.”

“Well, maybe he needs your help. I don’t. Go find him.” Looking over her right shoulder, Amanda saw his eyes riveted on hers, though he stood ten yards away. He wasn’t moving.

“My name is Sal Retter,” he said. “What’s yours?”

“Amanda. But you could have read that in the obituaries tomorrow.”

“Amanda, I’m thinking some terrible emotional pain has brought you to this point. Can you tell me about it?”

“So you can say you feel my pain?”

“I won’t pretend to know what you’re going through.” Sal slowly took a step forward. “But have you thought what your death would do to your family, Amanda?”

That was the second time he had called her by her name. “I don’t have any family. I was an only child, and my parents died in a car crash three years ago. I never married. In fact, I never even had a boyfriend. So I don’t have any children. I’m all alone.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Amanda.” The police always said that on TV, but he seemed to mean it. “What about your friends, though? How would they feel if you killed yourself?”

“I don’t have any friends.”

He paused. “Is there any cause you feel strongly about? Any issue that’s important to you?” He dared another step forward.

“Like saving the baby whales? Not really.” Amanda would have broken off the conversation, but it felt good to have a man take an interest in her.

“Isn’t there anything in life you enjoy? A hobby? A creative activity?”

“No. I just work a boring job crunching numbers, though I did save my company half a million last year.”

“So you are making a positive contribution somewhere.”

Amanda had never thought of it like that. “Yeah, I guess so, but data analysts are a dime a dozen. They could replace me anytime with anyone.”

“You must be very intelligent, yet you seem to think your life is meaningless,” Sal concluded, his eyes still fixed on hers.

“Well, ‘You’re nobody till somebody loves you.’ That’s my theme song.”

“Amanda, I want to tell you something personal about myself, but I don’t like talking to you from so far away. I’m going to come a little closer. So we can talk better.”

“Okay.”

He advanced a couple of yards. “Fifteen years ago I stood on this same bridge, just about where you are now, ready to do what you were going to do. I had just moved here for a new job and had found a house for my family to live in. My wife and two children, a seven-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son, were flying down to join me. The plane crashed. They didn’t survive.”

Did he say that to all the jumpers? Amanda could see his eyes moisten, though.

“I went on a drinking binge and lost my new job before I even started it. Death seemed like the only way out of my misery. I wanted to be with my wife and children again.”

“What happened?”

“A policeman tried to talk me down. I told him my life wasn’t worth living. He said it wouldn’t be until I made it worth living again. He did that by helping people, and eventually that’s what I did too.”

Amanda responded with silence, pondering his words.

“I guess what I’m saying, Amanda, is that you can wait your whole life for someone to come along and love you, and that person may never come. But that doesn’t make you a nobody. No, you can go out right now and start loving people who need love as much as you or even more so. It may not be exactly the kind of love you were looking for, but all love is good. And I have a feeling that you have a lot of love to share.”

“I think I do, but how would I do that?”

Sal took several steps closer. “Do you know how many orphaned children there are in this town who need someone to be a big brother or a big sister to them, how many victims of domestic abuse there are who need someone to confide in and to support them, how many sick people and shut-ins there are who have no one to visit them, how many elderly there are who have lost a spouse and whose children are too busy to see them, how many homeless persons there are who need someone to serve them a hot meal? There is no shortage of people to love.”

“And do you think they could love someone like me back?”

Sal moved within an arm’s distance of Amanda. “There’s only one way to find out. Won’t you give it a try? If it doesn’t work, this bridge will still be here a few months from now.”

He reached out his hand. Stunned, Amanda looked into his eyes, which had never left hers the whole time. Dare she take his hand?

Sal didn’t withdraw it, but waited. How could she refuse? At last Amanda reached out her hand, and Sal took hers in his. Slowly he started walking her back to safety.

God, it felt good to have a man hold her hand, even if just for a minute.

Four or five yards from the shore, Amanda, still feeling the effects of the drinks, lost her footing, broke her grip from Sal’s hand, and fell into the river. The moment she hit bottom, she

began thrashing with her arms and legs but could not raise herself to the surface. Panic seized her. When she was living, she wanted to die. Now that she was dying, she wanted more than anything to live. In her imagination, death had meant a peaceful release from suffering; in reality, it inflicted a terrifying agony. She was doomed.

The second after she fell, Sal jumped the railing and plunged feet first into the water. He swam behind Amanda, looped his arms under hers, grabbing her shoulders, and used his powerful thighs to push off the bottom. Although the river was no more than ten foot deep at this point, he barely managed to get both their heads above water for a quick gasp of air before Amanda's weight pulled them both back down. He could not possibly swim towing her to shore. The next time, Sal pushed off the bottom and backwards, coming up for air again and sinking to where the water was a foot less deep. After another four bobs, Sal had brought them to where they both could stand with their heads above water, the two of them coughing and panting.

"You saved my life," Amanda said and threw her arms around Sal's neck.

"But you're the one who decided to live," Sal said, patting her on the back.

"Yes," Amanda said. "Yes."

Sal led Amanda out of the water, and they trudged together, dripping wet, towards the squad car.

To Amanda's right the sun was starting to set, lengthening the shadows of the trees. It would rise again in the morning. Behind her the river continued to flow and would do so through the night and into the next day. Perhaps it would dry up someday, but it would never stop flowing of its own accord. Her life too would go on. Of course, she would die someday. Everyone did. But she would not end her life today. Tomorrow Amanda would reach out to someone else the way Sal had to her.

The Package

In bathrobe and slippers Carl van der Val shuffled into the kitchen, still squinting from the morning light. The only good thing about getting up early on Sundays to go to church was that Darina, his wife, already had the coffee brewing. If only she understood how hard it was for him to wake up and smell it. But no. She bounded out of bed every morning, wide awake and fully refreshed, did her exercises, and then started chatting before he knew what hit him.

“Good morning, honey,” Darina said, flitting up to him and kissing him on the cheek.

Carl returned her greeting with a nod. As a rule—and an almost inviolable one at that—he never uttered a word before his second cup of coffee.

“Sit down, sweetheart,” Darina said, “I have something exciting to tell you,”

How could anyone be excited about anything at this hour? Carl filled his mug and silently obeyed, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

“Guess what,” Darina said, beaming.

Carl raised his eyebrows as if to ask, “What?” then took a sip of coffee.

“You’ll never believe it.”

Peering over his glasses, Carl made a face that said, “Really?”

“Do you give up?”

Carl shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

“I’m pregnant!” Darina shrieked, bouncing on her chair and clapping her hands together.

Carl looked at her wide eyed, setting down his mug.

“But I thought you’d be happy. You said you wanted a child.” What disappointment in her voice.

“Uh, I am . . . and I do,” he said at last, violating his cardinal rule. “It’s just that . . . ”

“What?”

“They’re going to lay off two of the five pharmaceutical sales representatives at work, and since I’m the youngest and the most inexperienced, I’m the most likely to go. In this economy I don’t know where I’ll find another job.”

The young couple sat there in heavy silence until it was time for Carl to get ready for church.

* * *

The moment Carl stepped into work Monday morning to pick up the day’s drug samples, Blake Barterman, his immediate supervisor, was waiting for him. “Carl, I need to see you in my office before you head out for your appointments.”

Oh, boy, this was it. He was getting canned. What was he going to do now? His stomach in knots, his chest tight, his breathing shallow, Carl followed his supervisor down the hall and into his office.

“Take a seat.” Blake pointed to a chair in front of his desk as he ensconced himself behind it. “As you know, these are hard economic times, and I’m forced to let two of our sales reps go.”

“Yes, sir,” Carl said and braced himself by gripping the arms of the chair.

“It’s been a difficult decision for me.”

Carl nodded, waiting for the blow.

“With just three reps instead of five, we’ll all have to pick up the slack. I need someone who can cross over the lines and fill in where needed.”

“Well, I am certainly willing to help out any way I can, Mr. Barterman.” Perhaps his supervisor hadn’t decided yet. Did he still have a chance? He breathed a little more easily.

“The person I keep will sometimes be called upon to do things that are not strictly in his job description.” Blake looked at Carl as if he were reading his reaction.

“Anything you ask, Mr. Barterman.” Carl wanted to appear eager but not desperate.

“It will sometimes involve doing certain things after hours.”

“I don’t mind working overtime. Not at all.” He was already working long hours, driving up to a hundred and fifty miles a day.

“And I’ll need to count on your complete discretion.”

“Of course.” Carl suddenly had an uneasy feeling in his gut. “Discretion”—what did that mean?

“You’ll have to be a real team player.”

“I’ll go to bat for you, Mr. Barterman. Just give me a chance, and you’ll see.” Carl knew Mr. Barterman liked baseball metaphors, and it seemed like a good thing to say, but he didn’t really know what he was getting himself into.

“Well, then you’re on the team. Congratulations.” Blake stood up and reached across the desk to shake Carl’s hand. “We’ll talk again soon, and I’ll have a special little assignment for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barterman. I won’t let you down.”

Out in the hall, Carl was glad that he had made the effort to get up and go to church yesterday morning. Now his prayers had been answered. He reached for his phone but stopped. Of course he could call her, but he wanted to tell Darina the good news in person. He could hardly wait till evening.

He was going to be a father, and his job was secure. Could things get any better? Carl floated through the day; nothing could bother him. Every time the thought of the “special little assignment” came up, he put it out of his mind. It was probably nothing anyway.

* * *

“Hi, honey,” Carl called out as he stepped through the front door. He could smell dinner on the stove. An Indian curry. Mmm. He was hungry. When he entered the kitchen, he saw Darina stirring a pot—without her usual glass of white wine on the counter next to her. He smiled when he thought why. Drawing close to her, he kissed her on the cheek. “Turn off the burner for a minute, and come sit down. I have something to tell you.”

They took their usual seats at the kitchen table, which Darina had not yet set for dinner.

“Mr. Barterman called me into his office first thing this morning,” Carl said. “He’s going to keep me on.”

“Oh, Carl, that’s wonderful,” Darina replied, clapping her hands. “That means he’s happy with your work.”

“You know, I hadn’t thought about it until just now, but he didn’t even mention my past job performance. He was only interested in what I would be willing to do in the future.”

“He’s probably just trying to figure out how he’s going to manage with three sales reps instead of five.”

“It was kind of strange. He said he needed somebody who could cross over the lines—or did he say ‘cross the line’?—and do things outside the job description, after hours, discretely. Then he said he was going to give me a ‘special little assignment’ in the near future. For some reason I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Why, Carl, that just means he trusts you.” She looked directly into his eyes.

Kindhearted Darina, always seeing the good in people, never the bad. “I’ve been so happy all day about becoming a father and keeping my job that I guess I didn’t notice how uncomfortable I felt deep down.”

“Oh, Carl, no matter how well things are going, you always find something to worry about.” She took his hand and squeezed it. “Just wait. Everything’s going to turn out fine. You’ll see. Now you go relax, and let me finish dinner.”

“Okay,” Carl said. “You’re probably right. As usual.” He got a cold beer from the icebox, went to turn on the television for the evening news, and didn’t give the matter another thought.

* * *

When Carl came into work that Friday morning, Blake Barterman stood waiting for him again.

“Good morning, Carl. How’s my pinch hitter?” Blake had taken to calling Carl his “pinch hitter” ever since he decided to keep him on the “team.”

“Ready to get into the game, sir,” Carl said with a good-natured grin, continuing the baseball metaphor and enjoying his position of trust.

“Come on down to the dugout for a minute, Carl. Let’s talk a bit before you set out today.” Blake had also started calling his office the “dugout” with Carl.

A minute later Carl was sitting in the same chair he had sat in on Monday in front of Mr. Barterman’s desk. How different it felt now. Not just the chair, but the whole office and the conversation with his supervisor.

“About that special little assignment I mentioned, Carl,” Blake began.

“Yes, sir.” Carl sat up a little straighter.

“I need you to deliver a package for me.” From behind his desk Blake took out a package wrapped in plain, brown paper with nothing written on it and handed it to Carl.

“That sounds easy. What’s in it?” It was an innocent question.

“You let me worry about that,” Blake said sharply.

Uh-oh. Mr. Barterman had just thrown him a curve ball, and he hit a foul.

“I need you to give it to someone who looks like this fellow.” Blake took his phone, scrolled down to the picture of a young man, and held it up for Carl to see. “Here, I’ll just send it to your phone.” Blake tapped a few times on the screen and then put his phone away.

Taking out his phone, Carl confirmed that he had received the picture. “What’s his name?”

“You don’t need to know that either,” Blake said.

Oh no, strike two. Carl had just swung and missed.

“Meet him at the docks, Pier Seventeen, tonight at ten o’clock, and hand him that package.”

“Ten o’clock? That’s kind of late, isn’t it?”

“Carl, are you going to play ball or not?”

Had he just struck out, or was he still in the game? “Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Barterman.”

“Then step up to the plate, boy,” Blake said, obviously playing hardball.

“Don’t you worry, Mr. Barterman. I’ll knock the ball out of the park.”

“Good. When you give him the package, take a picture of him with your phone. Show it to me first thing Monday morning. That way I’ll know you delivered the package, and to the right guy.”

“Yes, sir.”

Taking the package, Carl left the office. It was a whole new ball game. So this was what the big leagues were like.

Outside Blake Barterman’s office, Carl took out his phone and looked more carefully at the picture. Thick, dark hair. An olive complexion. Sort of a Mediterranean look. Carl had the strange sense that he knew this man. Not that he had ever been introduced to him, shaken his hand, or spoken with him, but he had definitely seen him somewhere. And more than once. Was it at church? So many people worshipped there. Or maybe the fitness club where he worked out? He saw hundreds of people there. Maybe this guy was a member of their softball league. Twenty-some-odd teams played in it. Well, he couldn’t stand there racking his brains all day. Even if he couldn’t place him, Carl knew this man from somewhere. He was sure of it.

* * *

Carl went to the drug supply room to get samples for the day’s appointments. For the third time this week the door was unlocked. That fact irritated Carl as much as the sloppy

bookkeeping system in use. Why wasn't Mr. Barterman more vigilant? He was only inviting abuse. But what could Carl do? He was just a rookie on the team; it was his first season.

Standing before the shelves, Carl remembered, as he did there every day, his father's agony in the final stages of his battle with bone marrow cancer. How helpless he felt six years ago at eighteen, watching his father die. That experience had motivated him to study pharmacology and to specialize in analgesics. In his own small way he wanted to spare other people his father's pain.

But wait. Something was wrong. What in the world? A large number of narcotic samples were missing. Where did they go? Carl suddenly became aware of the package he was holding with his left hand. Was it possible? No, it couldn't be.

Carl held the package up to his ear and shook it. Hmm. Impossible to tell for sure what was inside. But why did Mr. Barterman not want to say what was in it? Why hide the identity of the man he was supposed to give it to? And why the meeting so late at night?

Carl started to feel sick to his stomach. Was he about to do something illegal? If he refused to deliver the package, Mr. Barterman would just fire him and hire back one of the people he had let go earlier in the week. On the other hand, if he was diverting prescription drugs to the black market for Mr. Barterman and got caught, he would be arrested and sent to jail. No one would believe he didn't know what was in the package. In either case, how would he support his wife and child?

All the happiness Carl had felt at becoming a father and the relief he experienced at keeping his job vanished. In their place came a sick feeling that none of the drugs in the supply room could have dispelled.

* * *

After his first appointment Carl left the Emergency Care Clinic, located in a strip mall, and headed towards his car. Three slots to the left of his, a car pulled in, and two men in suits got out. Wait a minute. Was that the dark-haired man with the olive complexion? Carl whipped out his phone and checked the picture to be sure. Yes, he was the one all right. The man he was supposed to give the package to was about to go into the coffee shop next door with his associate. So that's where he had seen him. He was a regular at Carl's favorite coffee shop.

"Excuse me, sir," Carl called out.

The two men stopped and turned around as Carl hurried over to them. When the other man brushed his suit jacket back to put the car keys in his pocket, Carl saw a police badge fastened to his belt.

"Are you police officers?" Carl said.

"Detectives," answered the man Carl recognized.

"Boy, am I relieved to hear that," Carl said. "I have a package for you."

"For me?" The man looked surprised.

"Yes, I think so." Carl held up his phone to show him the picture. "That's you, isn't it?"

The man laughed. "No, that's my kid brother. He's a year younger and a little smaller, but we could pass for twins. His name's Emilio. Mine's Nico . . . Nico Fratellini. This is my partner, Dick Yeager."

"I'm Carl van der Val," Carl said and shook both men's hands. "Can I buy you gentlemen a cup of coffee? I think I'm in trouble and need your help."

Fifteen minutes later, after Carl had told the detectives of his suspicions and his predicament, he sat stirring his macchiato. "What do you think, detectives? Are my concerns justified?"

“Without a doubt—at least if I know my kid brother,” Nico said. “Here’s what I want you to do: tonight at nine-thirty meet me at Pier Seventeen, and bring me the package.”

“What then?”

“Then you go home to your wife, and I’ll take it from there.”

“But what about my job?”

“It’s your supervisor who has to worry about his job, not you.”

“Thank you,” Carl said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to be late for my next appointment. I’ll see you tonight.”

He shook their hands again and headed out the door to his car.

* * *

Dick Yeager watched Carl van der Val walk out of the coffee shop. “So what do you have in mind for tonight?” he asked his partner.

“I’m not really sure,” Nico said, cupping his mug with both hands. “But I’ve got to do something. This is getting out of hand. I’m really worried about my brother.”

“I didn’t even know you had a brother. You never talk about him. What’s got you so worried?” Leaning back in his chair, Dick sat silently while Nico thought.

“It’s been going on since we were in grade school,” Nico said after a moment. “I was not only older but bigger and stronger too, and school came more easily to me. Because of that, I got more of the attention and praise for doing well in academics and sports. Maybe Emilio felt he just couldn’t compete.”

“So, if he couldn’t get positive attention by succeeding, he looked for negative attention by acting out. Even negative attention is better than no attention. That’s classic. We see it in kids all the time.”

“Yes,” Nico said, nodding in agreement with his partner. “But it’s much harder to see it when it’s in your own family. It started with misbehaving in class, being disrespectful to the teachers, getting into fights with the other kids. Then, when we were teenagers, it was vandalism, petty theft, and smoking pot. But he didn’t grow out of it the way most kids do.” Nico sighed and shook his head.

“What’s he up to now?” Dick dipped a chocolate biscotto into his coffee and took a bite while he waited for the answer.

“Who knows? I haven’t even seen him the last few years, and we never talk on the phone. Maybe he avoids me because I have a real job and he doesn’t, and that fact makes him feel like a failure. Or maybe my being a detective feels like judgment and condemnation to him. Perhaps he’s just trying to avoid an arrest. Whatever he’s up to, I’m sure it’s no good.”

“Would you arrest your own brother?” Dick leaned forward for the answer.

“If I had to, though I would take no pleasure in it. But it may be the only way to stop him from reaching the end of the road to self-destruction.”

“You want some backup tonight?” Dick asked.

“No, this is family business. I’ve got it covered.”

Hmm. That answer didn’t sit so well with Dick, especially since drugs were probably involved. Was his partner playing the lone ranger out of his Italian machismo or because he was up to something crooked? Dick knew the temptation: the detective’s low salary, ready access to drugs confiscated as evidence, their high street value. The easiest of easy money. Yet, if he asked, his partner might take it as an accusation, and Dick knew better than to try to persuade Nico to accept backup he didn’t want or believe he needed. He sat there in uncomfortable silence.

Finally, Dick looked at his wristwatch. "Time for us to get going."

"Okay," Nico said. "It was nice of that young guy to buy us coffee."

* * *

After Darina had washed and Carl had dried the dinner dishes, he said, "Honey, I've got to go out tonight, on business."

"At this hour?" Darina asked, her tone betraying her disbelief.

Carl winced. "It's that 'special little assignment' I told you about, though I don't like it any more than you do."

"Well, be careful, honey. According to the weather report, a fog should be rolling in." Darina yawned. "Oh, I'm dead. Time to hit the hay." She kissed him goodnight. "Wake me if I'm asleep when you come home, so I'll know you made it back safely."

Carl smiled. Since Darina got up a couple of hours before he did, she was as listless in the evening as she was perky in the morning. He always found the contrast amusing. "Okay," he said, reaching for his jacket. With that, he was out the door.

* * *

The weatherman was right. Soon Carl was driving through low-lying patches of fog. The closer he got to the docks the thicker it grew. With the headlights illuminating ever less of the road in front of him, Carl had to reduce his speed. He worried about making it on time. What if Emilio got there early? Or Nico got tired of waiting and left?

Suddenly, it hit him. It was all too easy. The detective pulling up at exactly the same time he did at the coffee shop, claiming to have a look-alike brother, meeting him alone at the pier, offering to solve his problem but giving no details as to how. What if it was all a setup? Maybe the detective was tailing him to size him up. He could have invented that story about a brother to

keep his partner in the dark. Now that Carl knew his identity, the detective might shoot him at the pier and dump his body in the water. What if he was just another dirty cop? He would never see Darina again; his child would grow up without a father. What had he gotten himself into? Whatever it was, at this point there was no way out.

When Carl finally turned into Pier Seventeen, visibility was zero. The fog sat as thick as split-pea soup, and the headlights shone no more than ten or twelve feet ahead. No sooner had he stopped the car than a man stepped into their beams. Was it Nico or Emilio, or were they one and the same? He had no way of knowing as he rolled down his window.

“You’re late,” the man said, now standing next to the driver’s door. “It’s almost ten.”

“The fog slowed me down.”

“Did you bring the package?”

“Of course.” This was his last chance. Should he put the car in reverse and floor it?

“Give it to me.”

With the motor still running, Carl got out and handed the man the package. With that his fate was sealed. He waited helplessly to see whether the man would draw a gun.

“Now get out of here. My brother will be here any minute.”

Carl turned to get back in the car then stopped. “Wait. I have to snap your picture for Mr. Barterman. Stand in front of the car.” The headlights lit up the man’s face just enough for Carl to get a good shot of it. Then he got back in the car and sped off as fast as the fog would allow.

What a relief. At least he had gotten out of there alive. Carl never felt so safe and secure as he did that night when he climbed into bed, kissed Darina on the cheek, and snuggled up next to her.

* * *

The man at the pier leaned against the hood of his car, his arms folded, the collar of his jacket turned up against the damp cold. Behind him the package rested on the hood. A few minutes later he perceived, by hearing rather than sight, the arrival of a car. He heard the engine go dead. Then the sound of a door opening and closing. Footsteps coming his way. The squeak of boards under someone's feet. A figure approaching almost to arm's length.

"Nico! What are you doing here?" the man exclaimed, obviously stunned.

"My job. What are *you* doing here, Emilio?" Nothing in his voice revealed a fraternal bond.

"Uh, I was just coming out to get some fresh air."

"You were coming to get this package." Nico pointed to the one behind him on the hood.

"Hey, I don't know nothin' about no package," Emilio said in a wise-guy accent he must have picked up from his associates.

"You scratched your nose when you said that. That's your tell. You're lying."

Emilio stuffed his hands in his pockets. "I ain't lying. You got nothin' on me."

"I've got a package with stolen narcotics, a picture of you from Blake Barterman, and his instructions to deliver that package to you, as well as a witness who is willing to testify to all of it."

"Well, I ain't received no package. You can't charge me with nothin'."

"You've received plenty of packages in the past. When we arrest Barterman for the theft and illegal sale of narcotics, he'll fold faster than a poker player with a bad hand." Nico stared steel-hard into his brother's eyes. "Who are you working for, Emilio?"

Emilio looked down and muttered, "The Signorelli family. I'm just an errand boy. It's no big deal."

“The mob? Are you trying to get yourself whacked?” This was far more serious than Nico had thought.

“A man’s gotta earn a living.” Emilio looked up. “You gonna arrest your own brother?” He sounded as though he had just been betrayed. “Some kind of family loyalty you got there.”

“It’s for your own good. It may be the only way to save your life.”

“You’re gonna break our mother’s heart.”

“You did that a long time ago by the life you lead.”

“That’s cold.”

“The cold, hard fact is that she cries for you every night.”

Right then a fog horn sounded from a ship in the harbor. When Nico instinctively turned his head in its direction, Emilio spun around and ran, disappearing into the fog. Nico could still hear his steps and sprinted after him. Within twenty yards he had caught up to him. A hard shove from the back sent Emilio sprawling to the ground.

“I always could outrun you,” Nico said.

Emilio rose to his feet, dusted himself off, then suddenly took a swing at his brother. Ducking, Nico avoided the blow. When he rose, Emilio swung again, landing a punch on his brother’s jaw. Nico swiveled to the right from the blow, pivoting on his left foot and raising his right leg, completed the circle, and planted his foot squarely on the side of Emilio’s head.

Standing straight, Nico looked down at Emilio, who lay dazed on the ground. “You forgot my martial arts training.”

“I should’ve brought a gun.” Emilio struggled to his feet, holding the side of his head with his hand.

“I brought mine.” Opening his jacket, Nico revealed a pistol in a shoulder holster.

“So, now what?”

Nico didn't take that question as either an admission of defeat or a surrender. But his brother had to know he was at an impasse. There was no way out.

“I'm good friends with the DA, and he owes me a favor. Of course, I can't promise anything until I talk to him, but I'm pretty sure he'll go for a deal. If you tell us everything you know about the Signorelli family's operations, you'll get a reduced, maybe even a suspended, sentence, and we'll put you in witness protection. Don't cooperate, we'll book you, put the word out on the street that you're a snitch, and release you on your own recognizance. You can take your chances with the mob. Maybe you'll make it to trial; maybe you won't.”

“That's some choice.” Emilio dropped his head and slumped his shoulders.

“Turn around, and put your hands behind your back.”

“You're gonna cuff your own brother?”

Nico answered not by word but by deed.

* * *

The first thing Monday morning Blake Barterman called Carl into the “dugout.”

“Did you deliver the package?” he asked without any preliminary greeting.

“Yes, sir,” Carl said.

“And you took the picture?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me see it.”

Carl took out his phone, pulled up the picture, and handed the device to Mr. Barterman.

The latter gave a big smile.

“That’s him all right. He’s put on a little weight, though. Well, living the high life will do that to you. Carl, my boy, you’re batting a thousand. You’ll be a heavy hitter in no time.”

Just then Detectives Fratellini and Yeager walked through Mr. Barterman’s office door.

“Are you crazy? You can’t come here,” Blake screamed. “We can’t have any direct contact. And you brought someone with you? Get out of here, now!”

“Mr. Barterman, I’m not who you think I am. I’m Detective Fratellini, Nico Fratellini, from Metro Police. And this is my partner, Dick Yeager. We are placing you under arrest for the theft and illegal sale of narcotics. Stand up, sir, and put your hands behind your back.”

“You’re way out in left field, detective, way off base. I didn’t steal any drugs. It was the kid here. He did it.”

“He’s the one who brought your illegal activities to our attention,” Nico said.

Blake turned crimson. “Why, you little bush leaguer,” he yelled, shaking his fist at Carl.

“I followed your instructions to the letter, Mr. Barterman: I delivered the package at ten o’clock to someone who looked like the picture you gave me and then took his picture to prove it. That’s exactly what you told me to do,” Carl said, standing up for himself.

“You’re fired,” Blake shouted, still red in the face.

“No, he’s not,” Nico said. “But we’ve got a package of narcotics with your fingerprints on it, your picture of the intended recipient, who happens to be my brother, Emilio, and now two witnesses against you. That’s three strikes. You’re out.” Nico cuffed him and started leading him away.

“I may be down to the last inning, but it ain’t over till it’s over,” Blake said as though he still had some clout.

* * *

With Mr. Barterman gone, Carl didn't know what to expect the next morning. When he arrived at work, he walked down to his former supervisor's office. The door was open, and he peeked in out of curiosity. Behind the desk sat an older gentleman.

"Ah, you must be Carl van der Val. I recognize you from your picture," the man said. "Come in, and have a seat. I'm Brian Elder, from upper management."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Elder." Carl took a seat in the same chair he had sat in twice before.

"Carl, we're very happy with the way you've conducted yourself in this Barterman affair. You nipped something in the bud and saved the company a lot of future embarrassment and money."

"Thank you, sir."

"We would promote you right into Barterman's position, but you're a little young for that. So we're going to give you a handsome raise and start grooming you to be a supervisor a couple of years down the road. Do you think you'll be up for that?"

"Yes, sir. I'll hit a home run for you," Carl said.

"I'm not really much of a baseball fan myself. The game's too slow for me. I'm more of a basketball kind of guy."

"In that case, I'll slam-dunk one for you, sir."

"Carl, I think you and I are going to get along just fine." Mr. Elder stood to shake Carl's hand. "Now you go about your business, son."

"Yes, sir," Carl said and did just that. He didn't mind changing metaphors—he just hoped he wouldn't be a referee who had to call a foul.

The Tragedy of Stevie-Jay

“Hello, Stevie-Jay,” the coffee-shop owner called out from his doorway when he saw his next-door neighbor approaching from across the street. “Fine morning, isn’t it?”

“Ah, good morning, my friend,” Mr. J. said in his Portuguese accent, cheerful despite how business was going.

No one in the entire neighborhood could pronounce his real name, Estevão Joalheiro, so they called him “Stevie-Jay” or just “Mr. J.” But he didn’t mind—it made him feel more like an American.

Between the coffee shop on the left and Mr. J.’s modest watch-and-jewelry shop on the right, someone had parked a motorcycle on the sidewalk. Perhaps the owner was having a cup of brew at his neighbor’s place.

Mr. J. pushed the button on the remote to raise the roller shutter over his store front, then unlocked the door, entered, and switched off the alarm that Wednesday exactly as he had every workday at 8:45 for the last thirty-two years. First item of business: read the mail delivered yesterday just before closing. Most of it was junk, but one letter caught his attention.

Dear Mr. Joalheiro:

We regret to inform you that, owing to the high incidence of crime in the area where your store is located and to the nature of your business, we find ourselves forced to cancel your dealer inventory insurance. Enclosed is a check reimbursing your premium for the remainder of the quarter. We apologize for any inconvenience this action may cause and wish you the best for the future.

Sincerely yours,

The Friendly Neighbor Insurance Company

Mr. J. had been robbed twice at gunpoint in the last twelve months, and the police never recovered his merchandise, so he had to find a new policy immediately. But what company would take a risk with him in this neighborhood? And even if one did, how could he afford the premiums, which were sure to be higher? He had to start calling insurance agents during his lunch hour.

At precisely 9:00, Mr. J. flipped the window sign to “Open” and began spraying and wiping down the three glass counters housing his collection of wristwatches and pocket watches, rings and bracelets, necklaces and earrings. He might not have a customer all day, but he wanted to show his wares to their best advantage.

Just as he was finishing, he looked down and saw his right shoe was untied. He bent down to tie it, but the shoelace snapped when he pulled on it. Fortunately, Mr. J. had a back-up pair in a drawer of his desk in the back room. He picked up his cleaning supplies, went to set them down on the desk, and took the spare laces out of the drawer. Leather this time. He held one end of the laces in each hand and gave them a good tug. Ah, these will never break, he thought. They could support my entire body weight. Mr. J. was a man who appreciated quality, even in shoelaces.

As soon as he had put in and tied the new laces, the bell rang, and the door swung inwards. A customer!

Mr. J. came out to greet the prospective buyer and saw two young men wearing black ski masks and leather gloves, pointing handguns right at him.

“Freeze, old man.”

While one held a gun on him, the other smashed the countertops with the butt of his pistol and filled a black bag with the watches and jewelry.

“Open the safe,” the first commanded.

“No, I-I can’t.”

The first stepped behind the counter and pistol-whipped him, breaking his nose. No sooner had he slumped to the floor than the robber started kicking him in the ribs so hard he could hear them crack. The young thug then yanked him up by the arm, stuck the muzzle in his face, and shouted, “Open the damn safe, or I’ll blow your head off.”

His whole body aching, his fingers trembling, Mr. J. opened the wall safe behind the counter, scarcely remembering the combination. The second robber emptied the contents—several stacks of cash and four high-end watches left from more prosperous times—into his black bag.

As soon as they turned to flee, Mr. J. grabbed the gun he kept beneath the counter. The second robber spun around and fired, hitting the old man in the left shoulder.

Knocked against the wall, but still on his feet, Mr. J. struggled out the door, aimed at the rear tire of the motorcycle speeding off, and shot, but missed. He squeezed the trigger again . . . and again . . . and then collapsed on the sidewalk.

Just before the motorcycle rounded the corner some forty yards away, the young man seated behind fell off, clutching the black bag, and landed half in the street, half on the curb. The driver screeched to a halt, stomped down the kickstand, and sprinted to his accomplice. Jerking his arm to pull him to his feet, he met only dead weight. He snatched the black bag, raced back to the motorcycle, and bolted off.

Evidently someone had called 911. When the paramedics raised Mr. J. to his feet to help him into the ambulance, the merchants, customers, and passersby assembled there applauded. Down the street a man from the coroner's office was zipping up a body bag.

* * *

Buz Starek, the Channel Seven assignment-desk chief, hung up the phone. "Where's Williams?" he yelled.

"State Capitol," someone answered.

"How about Johnson?"

"Same place."

"Then where's Browning?"

"Down at City Hall."

"And Rutgers?"

"At the Convention Center."

"Hell, who's left?"

"Young."

Starek sighed a late-middle-aged sigh. "Get him in here."

A minute later Reese Young appeared before him. "Yes, sir," he said.

“I just got a call that an armed robbery went bad down on Cross Street in the old commercial district.”

“As opposed to all the armed robberies that go well?”

“Get your smart ass down there and find out what people are saying. I want it on the news at noon. Here’s what we know so far.” Starek scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to Young.

“I’m on it, Buz.”

“That’s Mr. Starek,” he said as the novice reporter left the room. “Hey, Greg. You go along. Keep an eye on the kid. Don’t let him get out of line.”

Greg Abner, an assistant editor from Buz’s generation, nodded. “Will do.”

Twenty minutes later the news team arrived at the scene, shortly after the ambulance had left. The crowd had not yet dispersed. While the cameraman hurried to set up, Young positioned himself, microphone in hand, immediately in front of them. The cameraman gave the signal, and he began:

“Thirty years ago this commercial district on the edge of downtown catered to the well-to-do. Today, after decades of white flight to the suburbs, the bars on the windows and the roller shutters over the doors tell a different story—a story about poverty and the crime it breeds among the hopeless. One of those crimes took place this morning just feet from where I am standing, when a merchant, Mr. Joalheiro, shot and killed a nineteen-year-old boy who had allegedly robbed him. Let’s see what these people have to say about the tragedy. Ma’am, can you tell me about the shopkeeper?”

An overweight woman wearing a blue smock with her name stitched on it in white answered, “Mr. J.’s a real nice man. Always friendly to everyone. Everybody likes him.”

“And what can you tell us, sir, about what happened here today?”

“Stevie-Jay did what we’ve all been afraid to do,” a burly mechanic said, still wiping the grease from his hands on a red rag. “He stood up to those punks. Every shop owner on this block has been robbed at least once. He’s sixty-seven years old, but was he afraid of them? No way.”

“That’s right,” a man wearing a butcher’s apron chimed in. “They shot Stevie-Jay in the shoulder, but he still went after those damn criminals. He was protecting all of us. He’s a hero.”

Reese Young turned back towards the camera. “It’s a sad day in America when a teenage boy is gunned down in the streets and the people support vigilante justice—”

“Cut!” Greg yelled from behind the cameraman. “Put a Band-Aid on that bleeding heart of yours. You’re a reporter, not a social commentator. Take that last part from the top, and stick to the facts this time.”

* * *

Mr. J. suffered no bone or vascular damage from the gunshot wound, though the kicks to his side cracked his seventh and tenth ribs. When he awoke in the hospital room after surgery, his wife and son were sitting at his bedside.

“*Como estás, meu amor?*” his wife asked with tears hovering on her eyelids.

“*Estou bem.*” He groaned from a sharp pain in his side as he propped himself up on his right elbow—a sling immobilized his left arm—and immediately fell back down.

“Dad, everyone in the neighborhood is calling you a hero,” his adult son said, beaming. “You really showed those crooks this time.”

Just then the door opened, and two men in gray suits entered.

“Mr. Joalheiro, I’m Detective Lex. This is Detective Cosmo.”

“Did you catch the other robber? Did you recover the stolen property?” Mr. J. asked in a tone that blended anxiety and hopefulness.

“We’re here to question you in connection with the shooting death of Robin Latro. You have a right to have an attorney present.”

“What? Me?” Mr. J. was shocked. “But I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“This is outrageous,” his son exclaimed.

“Are you willing to answer our questions now?” Detective Lex continued without acknowledging the son’s outburst.

“Uh . . . no. Not without a lawyer,” Mr. J. said, full of apprehension.

“The doctor will release you in forty-eight hours. We’ll take you down to the station for questioning then.” Turning, they left as abruptly as they had entered.

“Ay, *Deus meu*,” Mr. J. moaned as much from apprehension as from the pain in his side. This turn of events was not at all what he had expected.

Shaking their heads, his wife and son gave each other a look of utter bewilderment.

* * *

“Well, I guess this is your story, Young. Here’s the address of the family of the kid who got shot. I want an interview for the ten o’clock news.”

“Right, Buz.”

“Mr. Starek.” The assignment-desk chief eyed Greg Abner, who nodded and rose from his seat.

About thirty family, friends, and neighbors were standing in the yard holding candles when the news van pulled up at the modest house just after sunset. A blown-up picture of an angel-faced Robin before he started shaving stood on an easel in front of the house.

“This is Reese Young reporting live from the Latro residence, home of the teenage boy mercilessly shot to death in the streets yesterday morning.”

Greg almost interrupted. Instead he gave him a hand signal to tone down the rhetoric.

“Let’s hear from the grieving mother. Mrs. Latro, what does this outpouring of support say about your son, Robin?”

“He was a good boy. Everyone loved him. But he needed money. His girlfriend was pregnant, he didn’t have a job, and no one would hire him because of his record. What else could he do? He was just riding by on a motorcycle, and that man tempted him with all those nice things in his window. Maybe my boy made a mistake, but everybody makes mistakes. I mean, everybody steals something every now and then, right? He didn’t deserve to die just for that.”

The pregnant girlfriend took the cigarette out of her mouth. “That bastard shot my boyfriend down like a dog. Only a coward shoots you in the back. What kind of man does that? He’s not even American. And who’s going to pay for my child? I hope he rots in prison.”

At that point an imposing, silver-haired gentleman in a dark-blue suit stepped forward, took the microphone out of Reese Young’s hand, and faced the camera squarely.

“I am Rhett Conrad, lawyer for the Latro family. We are bringing a wrongful death suit against Mr. Joalheiro in the amount of two million dollars to cover eighteen years of child support, forty-five years of lost wages, and his family’s emotional pain and suffering. Robin had trouble in school, but the schools didn’t help him. He had problems with the law, but the juvenile-justice system failed him. He looked for work, but the workplace refused him. He was crying out for help, but society turned a deaf ear. Now he’s dead, and someone has to pay.” He handed the microphone back to the reporter.

“A grieving family is seeking justice against the cold-blooded murderer who—”

“Cut!” Greg shouted. “How many times do I have to tell you? Leave the editorials to the editors. You report the facts. Just the facts.”

* * *

When the police took Mr. J. into custody late Friday morning, word spread through the neighborhood faster than celebrity gossip. The other merchants banded together to organize a march on Sunday afternoon in support of their comrade. As soon as he heard, Campbell Sheuster, a conservative running for the district’s city-council seat, volunteered to speak at the rally. Working-class anger and fear filled the air with the sweet smell of votes.

With the news crew in place, Greg Abner grabbed Reese Young by the lapels.

“Look, kid, don’t screw up again. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

The rookie reporter stood ready, holding his microphone. As the throng of marchers approached, the cameraman signaled.

“This is Reese Young reporting live from Cross Street. Less than twenty yards from me a crowd of demonstrators advances, carrying banners that read ‘Free Stevie-Jay’ and chanting, ‘Stevie-Jay leads the way’. . . Excuse me, sir, can you tell me why you’re marching here today?”

“To support Stevie-Jay. We’re taking the streets back from the criminals. This is *our* neighborhood.”

“And you, ma’am. Why did you come out today?”

“Because I’m sick and tired of the crime and violence. If the police won’t protect us, we have to protect ourselves. Stevie-Jay is leading the way. He showed us how.”

Another woman added, “We’re putting the criminals on notice: you come to our neighborhood, you die.”

The crowd continued their march to the end of the street, where a makeshift platform stood. When they stopped in front of it, Campbell Sheuster stepped up to the microphone and looked out at some fifteen hundred faces.

“The namby-pamby liberals in City Hall tell us we should understand criminals and feel sorry for them. I say we introduce them to the joy of breaking rocks.”

The crowd cheered.

“Are we going to coddle the criminals?”

“No!” they roared.

“Are we going to pamper the street punks?”

“No!”

“Are we going to humor the hooligans and hoodlums?”

“No!”

“Are we going to baby the bandits and burglars?”

“No!”

“Or are we going to gang up on the gangsters?”

“Yes!” the crowd screamed in a frenzy.

“Crack down on the crooks?”

“Yes!”

“Fight back at the felons?”

“Yes!” The alliteration was working its magic.

“Stevie-Jay sits in a jail for doing what the cops are too cowardly to do.” Sheuster raised his right fist in the air and cried, “Free Stevie-Jay!”

“Free Stevie-Jay!” the crowd echoed with fists raised as well.

On YouTube someone posted an amateur video of the rally, which scored two-and-a-half million hits in two days. The national news picked up the story. The next day a Facebook page entitled “Support Stevie-Jay” counted 1.6 million “likes.”

* * *

When two officers led Mr. J. to the interrogation room that Monday, Detectives Lex and Cosmo were standing in the corner waiting, while Mr. Schirmer, the court-appointed defense attorney, sat at the table. Across from him sat Mr. Klaeger, a representative from the district attorney’s office. A harsh light hung from the ceiling above the table, washing out the pale gray walls of the barren room.

Still in pain, his left arm in a sling, Mr. J. shuffled to the table and took his seat next to his lawyer.

“Mr. Joalheiro, we’re charging you with manslaughter, which carries a maximum sentence of twenty years,” Mr. Klaeger said.

“But I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the victim here,” Mr. J. said, squinting from the harsh light.

“You shot a man in the back and killed him.”

“It was self-defense.”

“He was on a motorcycle almost forty yards away and posed no further threat to you.”

“We are prepared to argue in court,” Mr. Schirmer interjected, “that by stealing his livelihood the robbers *were* threatening his life. They got away with approximately one hundred twenty thousand dollars’ worth of cash and merchandise. Everything my client had was invested in that inventory. He just lost his insurance, and, with no cash, he can’t replace it. He has no way to earn a living, pay his rent, or buy food.”

“Your client should have let the police do their job. They are there to arrest criminals and recover stolen property,” Detective Lex said, stepping forward from the corner.

“But they didn’t do that the first two times I was robbed,” Mr. J. protested.

“My client has a point,” Mr. Schirmer said. “The police aren’t keeping him safe. He has to protect his livelihood. That boy had quite a record. What was it, some fourteen priors?”

“Law enforcement is not a matter for private citizens,” Detective Cosmo piped in from the corner, leaning against the wall. “This isn’t the Wild West. We can’t have him playing cowboy.”

“I see from the case file that they found the getaway vehicle abandoned by the side of a road,” Mr. Shirmer said. “A slug was lodged in the tailpipe. They found another slug in the asphalt. That proves my client was trying to shoot out the back tire of the motorcycle. The death was an accident.”

“Your client doesn’t have a permit for a firearm,” Mr. Klaeger said, “and the gun was unregistered. Anytime you discharge a weapon on a street with pedestrians and motorists, you are willing to kill whoever the bullet happens to hit. The slug the coroner retrieved from the victim’s body proves that. What if he missed and that bullet hit a child?”

“Let’s not talk in hypotheticals. My client was seriously provoked. They broke his nose, cracked two of his ribs, and shot him in the shoulder. He acted in a state of extreme emotional disturbance.”

“That’s why we’re charging him with manslaughter instead of murder.”

“He has enormous public support. He’s a kind of folk hero. Maybe your district attorney should think about that come election time.”

“The election isn’t for another year, and the public has a very short memory.”

“But twenty years in prison? He has no prior record. He poses no threat to the community. He regrets the boy’s death and is willing to express his regret publically. He’s a hard-working small-businessman as well as a family man. He’s highly respected in the community.”

“We’ll seek the maximum only if we have to go to trial.”

“What are you offering?”

“Three to five years in prison followed by five years probation and three thousand hours of community service.”

The attorney whispered in Mr. J.’s ear. Nodding, Mr. J. whispered back.

“My client is sixty-seven years old. Twenty years is a death sentence. He’ll take the plea.”

“We’ll draw up the papers.”

Soon the two officers returned and led Mr. J. back to his cell. His head hanging low, Mr. J. shuffled slowly along. He couldn’t believe what was happening: his life was over—his business ruined, his money gone, a civil suit filed against him for two million dollars.

“But I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t do anything wrong,” he kept repeating, near the point of tears, to no one in particular.

Night fell on a broken man. Thirty-two years in this country, and all for nothing.

The next morning they found Mr. J. hanged to death in his cell. Had they known, they would have removed his shoelaces.

Rehabilitation

“Hey, small fry!” Chuck Andrews shouted in the main hall of Belleville Middle School, and all the eighth-graders turned around, chuckling, to see how the short kid would react.

“Small fries are something you order at McDonald’s. Is that really the best you can do?” Curtis Klein then launched a repartee worthy of Cyrano de Bergerac: “How about ‘my miniature man, my diminutive dwarf, my miniscule midget, my little Lilliputian, my minikin manikin, my vertically challenged chap, my pint-sized pygmy pupil, my stature-stunted student, my half-height homunculus, or my tragically truncated troll?’ Did you cancel your subscription to *Reader’s Digest*? The section called ‘Word Power’ is written just for the lexicographically lacking.”

Curtis’s verbal pyrotechnics delighted the group of students as much as a fireworks display on the fourth of July. With Chuck deluged by this alluvion of alliteration, they were still laughing out loud when the bell rang for them to go to class. Chuck stood there tongue-tied for a moment before he followed them to the classroom.

The sting of his public humiliation still fresh, Chuck thought to take his revenge by sending to all the members of his class a text message that read: “Curtis likes his math book more than girls. He wants to marry it.”

As soon as they stole a glance at their phones, the other students had to suppress a snicker. A few seconds later they received another text, this one from Curtis, who had yet to meet the quadratic equation he couldn’t solve in his head: “Yes, Lady Mathematics is the richest woman in the world, and after our wedding her fortune will be mine.” Another—this time insuppressible—snicker indicated that they all sensed the truth of his words.

“I don’t know what’s so funny,” the teacher wheeled around from the board to say, “but I want it to stop now, or else there’ll be extra homework tonight.”

Bested again, Chuck grasped that he could not join battle with Curtis on the verbal front, where he was outgunned. He would have to fight the way men have been fighting since Homeric times: in hand-to-hand, or perhaps foot-to-foot, combat.

The next morning as Curtis was proceeding to class, Chuck deftly stuck a foot out in front of him and give him a little shove on the back. Curtis went sprawling across the floor, his books, notebooks, pens, pencils, and graphic calculator radiating outwards in centrifugal motion.

“You ought to watch where you’re going,” Chuck said.

“Yes,” Curtis retorted, “at least as much as you watch whom you’re tripping.”

As he walked off, Chuck made a point of accidentally stepping on Curtis’s calculator. The onlooking students did not grant him the approving laughter he was seeking, though. No, he had just crossed a line. Witty bantering was one thing; mean-spirited bullying was another—a difference entirely lost on Chuck, who could not fail to perceive the silent censure of his classmates.

Chuck decided that he would have to avoid open conflict and engage in guerrilla warfare. The next morning while Curtis stood at his locker getting his books, Chuck passed closely by and bumped him hard, then continued on without missing a step, like a hockey player shoulder-checking an opponent into the boards and skating off. Dazed by the blow, Curtis could not fire off his usual witty comeback. Although Chuck had maneuvered so subtly that most students didn't even notice the attack, two girls standing at the next locker did. "God, what's your problem?" the first said. "Jerk!" the second added. Before long, word of Chuck's unprovoked broadside had spread, and his once sure-footed social standing tottered on the brink of collapse.

* * *

That evening Chuck's father, a beefy, brawny, burly construction worker, saw him moping about. He set down his beer and muted the wrestling match on television. "What's wrong with you?"

"This kid in school's making me look bad."

"Well, is he bigger than you?"

"No."

"Then beat the crap out of him. How many times do I have to tell you? Don't take nuthin' from nobody."

Chuck knew he could count on his father to give him good advice. Shortly before the bell rang for class the next morning, Chuck saw Curtis go into the bathroom. He glanced around to make sure no one was looking and followed him in.

"Hey, Curtsy, you know how we fix shrimps in my family?"

"No."

"Like this," Chuck said and punched him in the stomach as hard as he could.

Curtis doubled over in pain and fell to the floor. Grinning with self-satisfaction, Chuck strutted out of the bathroom, sorry only that no one else was feasting on his triumph but glad that he had tasted a first course of revenge without being seen. His father, at least, would congratulate him. Indeed, when he told his father what had happened, the latter patted him on the back and said, "That's my boy. He ain't no punk."

* * *

Over the next couple of weeks the harassment continued. Chuck practiced and perfected the art of covert attack, ever more inconspicuously insulting, threatening, bumping, shoving, elbowing, hitting, and tripping, so that Curtis dropped his books in the hall or his lunch tray in the cafeteria. As much as his camouflaged aggression gratified him, however, it did not compensate for his steady loss of popularity with the other kids. The next time Chuck happened to find himself alone in the bathroom with Curtis, he had an inspiration.

"Hey, Curtsy, how much money you got in your wallet?"

"Just my allowance. Why?"

"How much is that?"

"Twenty-five dollars."

"Fork it over."

"Why?"

"It's for protection."

"Protection from whom?"

"From me!"

His hands trembling, Curtis took out his wallet and handed two tens and a five to Chuck, who then punched him in the stomach, leaving him doubled up on the floor again. That transaction became a weekly occurrence for the next couple of months.

* * *

For Curtis the regularity of the persecution began to feel like Chinese water-drip torture. He found it difficult to concentrate, lost his appetite, and had trouble falling asleep but woke up with nightmares after he did. For the first time in his life he made a “B” on a math test. He even played sick once or twice so he could stay home. Yes, he could have told his parents or a principal what was wrong, but he feared further ostracization. He did not want to seem even weaker than he was by having his parents intervene on his behalf, nor did he want to face retaliation by Chuck if they did.

Gradually he formed a plan.

“Has Chuck been bothering you too?” Curtis asked Drew Austin, a small but slightly larger kid than himself, an audio-and-video technophile, and Curtis’s best friend—not that there was any competition for that job.

“Yeah, he has. But what can we do about it? He would beat the crap out of us if we tried anything.”

“Well, I have an idea. Listen.” As they walked together, Curtis whispered the details to Drew.

The next week at the regularly appointed bathroom shakedown, Curtis positioned himself just in front of the last stall and waited for Chuck to appear. When he did, Chuck said as usual, “Give me the money.”

“What if I don’t?”

Chuck whipped out his father's switchblade, which he had brought from home. "Then I'll cut your heart out," he said with a grin.

Curtis handed over the money according to the prescribed ritual and took his punch in the stomach, doubling over and falling to the floor. When Chuck had left, Drew jumped down from the toilet seat on which he had perched himself, as though hiding in the Trojan horse, opened the stall door, and came out.

"Did you get it?" Curtis asked, pulling himself up.

"Did I ever! Just look."

Drew held up a smart phone. By raising it just above the stall door, he managed to capture the whole scene. The switchblade definitely worked in their favor.

* * *

When the time for the next weekly exaction came, Curtis and Drew had both assumed their positions of the previous week. Chuck entered as always and demanded his money.

"You might want to look at something first," Curtis said.

"What?"

"Drew, come out and show him."

Drew stepped out of the stall and played the video for Chuck. "So what?" Chuck said.

"I'll tell you what, my knife-brandishing, hebdomadal extortionist. We caught you on tape committing armed robbery, a felony offense, for which you can receive a determinate sentence of incarceration until the age of twenty-one in the state juvenile corrections facility. If you attempt to bully us again, we will send a copy of this video to the principal, the president of the school board, the municipal police, the county sheriff, and the district attorney."

“Yeah, well, what if I just smash your phone?” Chuck relished the idea of wreaking further mischief.

“I’ve already transferred the footage to my home computer,” Drew shot back, “and enhanced both the audio and the video. Just one click of the mouse, and off it goes.”

Chuck did not understand everything Curtis had just told him, but he grasped enough to know that he had stabbed himself with his own knife. “Okay, okay, I’ll leave you guys alone,” he said and turned to leave.

“Not so fast,” Curtis said. “Not just us. Everyone. The bullying stops here. Understand?”

“Yeah, okay,” Chuck said with no sense of commitment.

“Then there’s the matter of the restitution of your ill-gotten gain.”

“The what?”

“You are going to pay me back all my money. You have one week. Same time, same place. See you then.”

“Fat chance.” Chuck laughed.

Drew held up his right index finger and flexed it several times. “My finger is just itching to click that mouse.”

“Oh, man,” Chuck whined. He had already spent most of the money, and knew he couldn’t get it from his father, who would beat the crap out of him for being a punk.

The following week at the scheduled time, though, Chuck paid Curtis in full with money earned by the sweat of someone’s brow, though not necessarily his.

“There’s your money. That’s it. We’re done.”

“Hardly. We’re just getting started. For next week you’re going to read a book on bullying and write a book report on it. There are several in the school library.”

“What? Are you kidding? No way! I don’t even read books for class.” Chuck hauled back to punch Curtis in the gut the way he used to.

“The book or the video,” Drew said, moving his open palms up and down to simulate the scales of a balance. “You choose.”

As though Lee had just surrendered his sword, or rather his switchblade, to Grant at an Appomattox bathroom, Chuck sighed and said only half audibly, “Okay.”

The following week Chuck came with his book report. “Here it is,” he grumbled, submitting two handwritten pages to Curtis. He knew better by now than to walk away.

“Did you learn something about yourself by reading that book?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He muttered his words, looking down at the ground and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. When was this torture going to be over? He couldn’t wait to get out of there.

“Good. For next week you are going to write a two-hundred-fifty-word essay on why you bully and how your bullying affects your victims.”

Chuck moaned but didn’t even bother to protest. Like a soldier in the Light Brigade, “his was not to make reply, his was not the reason why, his was but to do or die.” He hated the self-confrontation Curtis was forcing upon him, but at least no one else knew about.

When he handed in the essay the following week, Curtis gave it a cursory reading, then concluded: “Your grammar is atrocious, your spelling is even worse, but it will serve the purpose. Now you’re going to shoot a video of yourself reading the essay out loud and post it on YouTube. You have one week, at which time you will report back to me here.”

“For everyone to see? Like hell.” Curtis hauled back again to punch Curtis, proving just how hard old habits die.

“Just one click of the mouse. Just one little click.” Drew had taken out the ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket and clicked it each time he said the word “click.”

Chuck had never found himself matched with an opponent he could not vanquish by physical strength. Like a defeated Samnite soldier taken into Roman slavery, Chuck lowered his arm and obeyed his new master. At the appointed meeting the following week, Curtis, who had watched the video and sent the link to all his classmates, told him, “Well done, or at least well enough. Now you’re going to apologize in person to all of your victims, and do one good deed a week for each of them to make amends for your bullying. Keep a log of your good deeds—what you did, when you did it, and for whom—and turn it into me at our regular meetings. I’ll be verifying your records.”

Later that week, a girl he liked to tease was taking her science project home at the end of the day. Chuck rushed to open the door for her.

She smiled at him. “Why, thank you, Chuck. That was mighty nice of you.”

A little embarrassed, Chuck smiled back. He had never noticed how cute she was.

As the weeks rolled by and Chuck, at first reluctantly, went about his task, he noticed the other students’ attitudes towards him were starting to change. They smiled when they saw him, they said hello to him in the halls, they sat with him in the lunchroom.

Chuck liked these changes and no longer went once a week like General Custer to face Sitting Bull at the bathroom of Little Big Horn.

“What do you want me to do now?” Chuck took the initiative to ask at the next meeting.

“I hereby dub you the bulwark against bullies, the paladin of their prey, and the vindicator of all the victims in the school.” Curtis tapped him on each shoulder with an imaginary sword, a gesture that mystified Chuck.

“Huh?”

“ From now on whenever anyone is bullied, it will be your job to stand up for them and stop the bullying.”

“Oh, okay. I can do that.” Chuck smiled, confident of his size and strength.

By threatening to beat the crap out of anyone who bullied someone else, within a few short weeks Chuck had eliminated bullying at Belleville Middle School.

Three Unforgettable Days

That Tuesday morning began like any other morning. All around him students were joking and laughing, but Kemp Armstrong, a junior in high school, sat at his desk, his American history book to the left, his spiral notebook open in front of him, and his pen in hand, ready to write down everything the teacher said. The bell rang at 9:05, the teacher began his lecture on the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, and Kemp started writing.

Suddenly, a crackling came over the intercom. “Faculty and students,”—it was the principal’s voice, quavering—“America is under attack. We are patching the CNN report live from New York City into the closed circuit television. Please direct your attention to the monitors.”

It was 9:20, and the first image was flickering onto the screen mounted in the upper right corner of the front of the classroom—a tall tower with a massive hole torn in it near the top, flames raging within, and dark smoke pouring from the hole. Never had Kemp seen anything like it. Was there an explosion inside the tower? For those who had just tuned in, the reporter soon

repeated that at 8:46 a.m. American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. They were now watching footage shot just minutes after.

What a terrible accident, Kemp thought, forgetting for a second the principal's announcement. The reporter continued that at 9:03 United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower, and new footage aired simultaneously to show it. Upon impact a huge ball of fire rose from the tower, and a mushroom cloud of pitch-black smoke billowed into the air. Once might be an accident, Kemp thought. Twice is an act of war. Just now had the principal's words sunk in. But who could attack America? Kemp sat in a stunned silence resembling a state of suspended animation. For a few moments, he didn't even breathe, as if the shock had literally knocked the breath out of him. He couldn't believe it. Unable to make any sense of the attack, he felt his anxiety rising. His breathing now returned, rapid and shallow; his heart was racing; his head was spinning, his limbs weak.

"Oh, my God!" the girl in front of him cried, bursting into hysterical sobs. "My dad is on that flight." At once students gathered around her. Two of them each held one of her hands. Shy around girls, Kemp hesitated. He wanted to comfort her, to tell her she was not alone, to show her he cared, but he felt unsure of himself. Finally, he rested a hand on her shoulder. That human contact probably comforted him more than it did her.

Up until this point the class had witnessed destruction, fire, and smoke from afar. Now the television screen brought them closer to see people jumping from the towers to their deaths. Some two hundred of them. These were not actors, and this was not a movie. For the first time, Kemp was seeing real people die a real death. He watched in horror, and his blood ran cold, sending chills down his spine and shudders through his body. What if *his* parents had been on

that plane or working in one of the towers? An only child, he would be all alone. His heart broke for the girl in front of him.

The reporter narrated the events over and over, adding fragments of information as they trickled in, and the screen showed the same images time and again, as though the attacks were repeating themselves nonstop. But soon a new report came in: at 9:37 American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the first floor on the western side of the Pentagon. Live footage showed the Pentagon on fire, part of it collapsed. Who could believe that the Department of Defense of the United States of America lay in flames and ruins? The very sight was an outrage. Speechless and immobile, Kemp wanted to scream, jump up, and strike out at someone. He felt pressure in his head, tightness in his chest, the clenching of his fists. Was there no end to the terror?

In real time Kemp and the others watched the collapse of the South Tower at 9:59 and that of the North Tower at 10:28. People ran screaming in panic away from a tidal wave of smoke, ash, and debris that pursued them down the New York City streets and threatened to engulf them. Upon all of lower Manhattan a flood of smoke submerged everything from the ground to the tops of the skyscrapers.

In between came word that United Airlines Flight 93 had crashed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It was all too overwhelming. Shock, disbelief, anxiety, grief, horror, indignation, outrage—by the end of the period the overload of intense feelings had left Kemp in a state of emotional numbness.

Throughout the day, story after story emerged of the courage shown by firefighters, police officers, and rescue workers, four hundred eleven of whom died trying to save their fellow New Yorkers. The unprovoked attacks striking at the symbols of American security and prosperity, the loss of innocent life, the destruction of property, the heroic self-sacrifice of so

many—all of it was unspeakably painful to see but not so much as the scenes broadcast later of thousands of Palestinians dancing for joy in the streets and gloating over a wounded America.

* * *

At 8:30 that evening Kemp and his parents gathered in the living room in front of the television for President George W. Bush's address to the nation. His words "disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger" resonated deeply with Kemp. At the same time Kemp drew consolation and hope when the President declared: "Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shattered steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve." For the first time Kemp felt not like a private individual but like the citizen of a nation and the member of a people. Rescuing survivors, burying the dead, consoling the bereaved, clearing the debris, rebuilding the site, bringing the perpetrators to justice, defending the United States against its enemies—these were the tasks that lay ahead, and Kemp wanted to join his fellow Americans in accomplishing them.

Kemp turned in early that night, but before he got into bed, he did something he had not done in a long time. As the President had asked, he knelt by the side of his bed and prayed for "all those who grieve, for the children whose world has been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened." In a single day the world had changed, and life would never be the same. September 11, 2001 was a day he would never forget.

* * *

The next morning Kemp awoke in a daze and went about his daily activities like a sleepwalker. His body performed the motions—school, sports, family dinner, homework—but his mind was elsewhere, as though in a bad dream but unable to wake up. For the next nine days

he would focus on the task at hand only to have his concentration dissolve into a confused anxiety after a matter of seconds. Who did this to us and why? Will they strike again? When?

Yes, America had been attacked before, at Pearl Harbor. But Kemp knew exactly who did it—the Japanese. And why—to conquer Southeast Asia without American interference. His father, who shared Kemp’s interest in American history, had explained those events to him. Now things were different. Kemp knew nothing of the private individuals who had carried out the attacks or of their motives. Who in the world would want to hurt America and for what possible reason? He craved answers.

On September 20 President Bush addressed a joint session of Congress. Kemp and his parents gathered again in front of the television. Dressed in a blue suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie, with a small American flag pinned to his lapel, Bush mounted the podium slowly and with dignity, to hearty applause. He spoke seriously but calmly, and his demeanor began to quiet Kemp’s anxieties.

“Americans are asking,” the President said, “‘Who attacked our country?’” Yes, that was Kemp’s question exactly. He felt as though the president were speaking directly to him. Sitting on the edge of the sofa, Kemp leaned towards the television. A terrorist group named al-Qaeda was the culprit, led by Osama bin Laden and supported by the Taliban. Although Kemp had never heard of any of them and knew nothing about them, he felt relieved to have a certainty firmly in his grasp.

“Americans are asking,” the President continued, “‘Why do they hate us?’” Yes, why? It was as though the President were reading Kemp’s mind. Again he peered intently at the television screen and pricked up his ears. They hate us because of our democratic freedom of religion and speech, our freedom to vote and to disagree with one another. Instead, they want to

seize power and impose their radical beliefs on everyone else, as the fascists, the Nazis, and the communists had before them. Yet America had won out over these enemies, and it would defeat the terrorists too. The President himself said so: “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain.” Finally, things were beginning to make sense to Kemp.

* * *

On October 7 the United States military began its strikes in Afghanistan. Kemp bought a large map of the country, hung it on his bedroom wall, and marked every operation with a pushpin. Each morning at breakfast he read the paper; every evening he watched the news; time and again he looked up geographical locations on the Internet. In a large notebook Kemp kept an almost daily record of the events and his interpretations of them.

Kemp’s was not simply an interest in current events or even in politics. The world was far more complex and dangerous than he had realized, and he felt driven to understand it and his place in it. How could so many of his classmates just want to get back to normal, planning their college careers, following their favorite sports teams, listening to pop music, playing video games, or just hanging out? He couldn’t comprehend it.

By the end of 2001 Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban no longer occupied the limelight. Kemp had learned there was an “axis of evil” consisting of nations with totalitarian aspirations who hated the United States for its democracy and freedom. At the very center of this axis stood Iraq, led by the diabolical dictator Saddam Hussein. Not only had he murdered thousands of his own people, he also possessed stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons. Moreover, he had ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to unleash them not just on neighbors like Israel but even on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Kemp felt vulnerable. And, as if these weapons of mass destruction were not enough, Saddam Hussein was seeking to

acquire weapons-grade uranium for nuclear bombs. If he did, there would be no limit to the carnage he could wreak.

Kemp firmly believed the United States had to depose and disarm him, destroy his weapons of mass destruction, liberate the Iraqi people, set up a new regime, and preserve the peace and freedom of the world. Who else could do it? This was a war of right against wrong, of justice against tyranny, of good against evil—an apocalyptic battle of biblical proportions. On the night of the September 11 attacks, the President had said: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Even if almost none of the Arab states supported a US invasion, if the UN Security Council refused to provide a mandate, and if our strongest European allies, France and Germany, opposed the war, the United States would have to do what had to be done. Alone, if necessary. In more than a decade since the Gulf War, Iraq had grown weaker and the United States stronger. If the US had beaten Saddam Hussein then, Kemp concluded, we would beat him twice as badly now, and finish what we had only started before.

Kemp was sure that the Arab states would love America after the US soldiers had uprooted this noxious weed from their soil, and history would look favorably upon his country. In fact, he was now thinking of majoring in political science in college next year and entering public service when he graduated. Perhaps his name would go down in history too. He relished the thought.

On October 2, 2002 Congress passed a resolution authorizing the use of military force against Iraq, and on March 20 the invasion, dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom, began. President Bush delivered his “Mission Accomplished” speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1. In a mere six weeks America achieved what it had set out to do, and Kemp was swelling with pride in his country.

Secretly, though, he was sad. A senior in high school now and just barely eighteen, Kemp had not been able to take part in the operation and had to follow it from afar. He would have given anything to be a part of it.

On Thursday, June 5, 2003, Kemp graduated from high school at a 6:00 p.m. ceremony. Afterwards one of his classmates hosted a cookout to celebrate, but Kemp skipped the party. He had something important to do the next morning, and he wanted to be at his best.

* * *

On Friday morning the Army recruiter took Kemp's height, weight, and medical history and made sure he had no drug use or criminal conviction in his background. Then the recruiter asked, "So, what makes you want to join the Army, son?"

"America is at war, sir, and it needs good soldiers."

"Mmhmm." Looking weary, the middle-aged man in uniform nodded. "After the 9/11 attacks, a lot of kids have wanted to enlist. Most recruiters would just sign you up, but I want to be straight with you."

"Okay." Kemp swallowed, not knowing what to expect.

"Most youngsters these days think of war as high adventure and glory, but it's not a video game."

"Understood, sir."

The recruiter knit his brow in seriousness. "Do you know how many soldiers come home wounded or die on the battlefield?"

"Casualties are a part of war, sir." Besides, something like that wouldn't happen to him.

“Even when soldiers escape physical harm, they often come back with psychological issues. PTSD is serious problem among veterans, and a growing number of them commit suicide.”

“Yes, I’ve read about that, sir.” He, of course, was made of stronger stuff.

Looking down, the recruiter shook his head. “I hate to admit this, son, but the sad truth is that many wounded veterans do not receive adequate care. Because VA hospitals are underfunded, they sometimes deliver substandard health services or do not cover all injuries sustained in war. In my opinion, it’s a national disgrace.”

“Yes, sir,” Kemp said. “America’s veterans deserve the best.” But what need would he have of a VA hospital?

“I couldn’t agree more,” the recruiter said. “So, you understand the risks involved in joining the Army?”

“There’s a high price to be paid for freedom, sir, but it’s worth every penny.” In his mind, Kemp pictured a Distinguished Service Cross, a Purple Heart, or maybe even a Medal of Honor pinned to his chest.

“Then let’s talk about what comes next in the enlistment process.”

After they had done so for another twenty minutes, Kemp left in high spirits.

* * *

Friday evening at dinner his mother asked, “So, Kemp, what are your thoughts about the future?”

“I’m not just thinking about the future,” Kemp said. “I’m doing something about it.”

His mother, about to take a bite, paused midair with a forkful of mashed potatoes.

“This morning when I went out, I spoke to an Army recruiter,” Kemp went on. “I’m going to serve in Iraq.”

His mother’s dropped fork clanged on the plate. “But, honey, the war just ended.”

“Saddam Hussein hasn’t been captured yet, there are still pockets of resistance, and we have to find the weapons of mass destruction. We can’t let them fall into the hands of the insurgents.”

“But that sounds so dangerous, and you’re still so young. Why don’t you go to college, and maybe find a nice girlfriend? You never had one all through high school.”

“The Army will pay for my college education, and there will be time for girls later. Right now I’ve got more important things to do.”

“He’s eighteen,” his father chimed in. “He’s a man now and can make his own decisions.” Turning to Kemp, he continued: “Son, you are joining the long line of Army men in our family who have proudly worn the uniform. I served in the first Gulf War; your grandfather fought in Vietnam; and your great-grandfather in Korea.”

Kemp had no need for a lesson in the family history, which he knew by heart. “And don’t forget Uncle Jack,” he said.

“Uncle Jack joined the Navy,” his father quipped. “That doesn’t count.” He chuckled at his own joke, and Kemp did too—his mother did not.

“But, son, I’m proud of you.”

“I’m still worried,” his mother said.

Kemp’s father cocked his head to the right and raised his left eyebrow, as if to say, “What do you want? She’s a girl.”

Nodding slightly in acknowledgement, Kemp enjoyed the manly understanding between his father and himself.

* * *

Initially Kemp had thought he could just sign the necessary papers and ship out to Iraq. But he could not even take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery until June 16. In the ten days that remained, he immersed himself in the McGraw-Hill study guide and took practice tests for each of the ten areas. The minimum acceptable score was thirty-one. When Kemp sat for the test at the local National Guard Armory and made a ninety-three, his Army recruiter started taking him much more seriously.

“You’ve got a good head on your shoulders there, Kemp,” his recruiter said when he gave him the test results.

“And there’s no way those terrorists are going to take it off my shoulders,” Kemp joked, smiling at his success.

In spite of his fine performance, Kemp had to wait until July 14 to travel to the Military Entrance Processing Station at Fort Lee, Virginia, where he would undergo a physical and be fingerprinted for an FBI background check. He bought a large calendar, hung it on his wall opposite the map of Afghanistan, and circled the fourteenth in red. Every night he marked a black X through that day’s date. During the intervening month he continued to follow the progress of the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. He read up on Iraq’s geography and history and on its people and culture. To everyone’s amazement, he even taught himself the Arabic alphabet so that he could read street signs and store names and learned a few simple phrases in that language.

The day finally came. After Kemp had passed his physical and background check, he spoke with a service liaison counselor.

“Do you know what you would like to do in the Army?” she asked.

“Infantry,” Kemp said without hesitation.

“Well, with your ASVAB scores, there are lots of possibilities open to you.”

“Ma’am, my father was an infantryman, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather too. It’s in my blood.” He didn’t tell her Uncle Jack had joined the Navy.

That answer settled the matter. Once an officer had administered the oath of enlistment, he shook Kemp’s hand and said, “Welcome to the Army, soldier.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kemp said. “I feel as though I’ve just come home.”

When Kemp returned to his family home, he drew a red circle on his calendar around October 18, the date his One Station Unit Training would begin at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. He would go through ten weeks of Basic Combat Training and four additional weeks of Advanced Individual Training. Although he was already in excellent physical condition from high school basketball and track, Kemp began rising at 4:30 a.m., as he would have to do in basic training, and going for a five-mile run. He would then eat breakfast and an hour later hit the gym to lift weights, working opposite muscle groups on alternate days. After his program of personal study and dinner with his family, he was in bed at 9:00.

The first week of basic training Kemp was the only recruit who could do a hundred pushups nonstop. His drill sergeant said admiringly, “Armstrong, you’re fit as a fiddle.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kemp replied, pleased with the recognition. “Now as soon as you tune me up, I’ll be ready to play.”

When Kemp finished his training on January 26, 2004, he had two weeks' leave. The first thing he did when he got home was to circle February 9 in red on his wall calendar. On that day he was to report to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he was assigned to a unit that would deploy in a month. Kemp took a pocket calendar with him to Fort Bragg and circled the deployment date in red. What if he were the one to capture Saddam Hussein? He imagined the President inviting him to the White House to receive a commendation.

* * *

On March 8 Kemp arrived in Iraq and joined a patrol unit straightaway. The real work had begun, and the job wasn't easy. Day after day the temperature exceeded 100 degrees, and Kemp always had sand in his eyes and mouth, his shoes and socks, and even his underwear. Dressed in his desert camouflage uniform, he often carried sixty pounds of gear and equipment. He ate his ready-to-eat meals out of a brown plastic pouch. Some nights he slept without a tent on a cot in the open. After a fifteen-hour shift, he was tired. A shower came as a rare luxury.

Although Kemp had read about the heat, the sand, the work, the food, and roughing it in the open, actually experiencing it was another thing entirely. Nevertheless, in spite of the physical discomfort, Kemp was happier than he had ever been. He was finally doing what he wanted to do, answering a noble call, making a real difference. Often he thought of how proud of him his father must feel, and his mother would eventually realize she had nothing to worry about.

Kemp's squad went door to door, street by street, checking buildings for insurgents, weapons caches, and explosives. Sometimes they raided a building, when they had intelligence that terrorists or kidnap victims were holed up there. Part of their work lay in having the locals fill out census forms so that they could get a better idea of who was where and of how many

families had been displaced. Whereas some Iraqis welcomed them with mint tea and their diamond-shaped samoon bread, others refused to talk out of fear of retaliation by the insurgents. Still others praised Saddam Hussein as the leader of the resistance against the foreign invaders and cursed Kemp and his comrades as American dogs. Then there was the occasional sniper fire and the sporadic car bombs to contend with. Corpses of murdered Iraqis sometimes lay in the street. Most of the time the locals just stepped over them as they went about their business. Kemp's squad tried to identify the victims and assisted the police in capturing the murderers.

So the work continued month after sweltering month. On Friday, September 24, Kemp set out with his patrol early in the morning as usual. The same relentless sun. The same hot wind. The same gritty sand. Not far away, still within eyeshot, people were shopping at the open-air market, and children were playing with a ball in the street. Around nine in the morning, Kemp suddenly saw a brilliant white flash and heard a deafening thunder.

Everything went black.

* * *

When Kemp came to and opened his eyes, he was lying in bed and observed a woman dressed in white at his bedside.

"Where am I?" he stammered.

"The Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, just ten minutes from Ramstein Air Base," the nurse said.

"In Germany?" Kemp asked, utterly confused.

"You were medevacked in yesterday and underwent surgery immediately."

"Surgery for what?"

"Your left leg."

Kemp reached down, felt with his hand, and found a bandaged stump about four inches above where his knee should have been. Inside him something froze. He turned mute, unable to respond to the nurse.

“There was some sort of explosion,” the nurse explained. “Maybe a landmine, maybe a homemade bomb. The doctors weren’t able to save your leg, but they did save your life.”

Kemp still did not respond, staring blankly in front of him.

“I know it’s a lot to absorb right now,” the nurse said. “But I’m sure you’ll want to talk to someone about it later.”

Kemp just shook his head no.

Nevertheless, an Army chaplain stopped in on him that afternoon. “Hello, Kemp,” I’m Reverend Santos. I just wanted to drop by and see how you’re doing.”

“I’m fine, sir” Kemp said, now that he had had a few hours to think and recover from the initial shock. A soldier first of all, he had to stay strong.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. You know, Kemp, a lot of people who lose a limb go through a process of grief, depression, or anger. Some of them feel helpless, hopeless, and fearful of the future.”

“Not me, sir. I knew the risks involved when I enlisted. I’m proud to have served my country and sacrificed for it. I may not get a Purple Heart, but this stump is my badge of honor.”

“Well, I must say that is a positive attitude. Still, people who have suffered your type of injury want to be productive. Perhaps I could help you find a vocational retraining program.”

“I’ve discovered I have a knack for languages, sir, and I’m hoping I can retrain as a linguist and learn Arabic to be an Army translator and interpreter.”

“Now that sounds like a good plan,” Rev. Santos said. Then he paused. “For a lot of guys, though, there are other, more sensitive issues. Losing a limb can deal a real blow to your sense of masculinity and your feelings of sexual attractiveness and capability.”

Kemp blushed. “I’ll be fine, sir.”

“Well, okay, then. I just wanted you to know that I’m here and that you can talk to me at any time.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

Of course, Kemp told the chaplain what he himself wanted to believe but didn’t really, and, without knowing it, the reverend had hit a raw nerve. Kemp didn’t have a girlfriend, and his high school classmates had sometimes teased him about not dating. Not that he had no interest in girls. On the contrary, Kemp wanted to focus on his studies and his career so that, when the time came, he would be in a good position to marry and start a family. He even dreamed of raising his own son to continue the family tradition and become a soldier. But what woman would ever want him now—now, when he most needed a woman to comfort him? Kemp felt like half a man.

In a single day Kemp’s world had changed again, and life would never be the same. September 24, 2004 was the second day he would never forget.

* * *

During his recovery Kemp read the newspaper every morning, in part to distract himself from his misery. It was also a kind of luxury since he couldn’t get a paper very often in Iraq.

On October 1, he read that the day before, September 30, the Iraq Survey Group had released the Duelfer Report. His eyes grew wide as he read its conclusions. The ISG found no evidence that Saddam Hussein was attempting to resurrect the nuclear program that ended in 1991 after the Gulf War. In that same year he had destroyed his stockpile of chemical weapons

and had not renewed it since. Four years later, in 1995, he abandoned his biological weapons program, and nothing indicated to the ISG that he had reactivated it. In short, there were no weapons of mass destruction. Kemp's entire reason for enlisting in the Army, for his call to serve his country, and for his great personal sacrifice did not exist. Just one week later his whole world had changed again, and life would never be the same. September 30, 2004 was the third day he would never forget.

* * *

At that moment Rev. Santos happened to pass by.

"Chaplain," Kemp called out.

"Yes, Kemp," Rev. Santos said, approaching. "How are you doing?"

"Not so good. I think I need to talk to you after all."

Rev. Santos nodded. "Well, I'm here for you. Why don't you come by my office this afternoon, say, at two o'clock?"

At the appointed time an orderly rolled Kemp in a wheelchair down to the chaplain's office, stationed him in front of the chaplain's desk, and left, closing the door behind him.

Rev. Santos came out from behind his desk and sat in an armchair catty-cornered to Kemp.

"I'm glad you came in," he said.

"Have you seen this?" Kemp asked, holding up the newspaper.

Rev. Santos took it and glanced at the headline. "Ah, yes. The Duelfer Report. I imagine it comes as quite a shock to a lot of young men and women in the service."

"What did I lose my leg for?" Kemp said, fighting back tears of indignation.

"You're feeling lied to and betrayed."

Kemp nodded.

“And angry that you were deceived.”

Kemp nodded again.

“And you don’t see how you can go on.”

Kemp nodded one more time.

“Let me ask you a few questions, Kemp. Why did you want to come to Iraq in the first place?”

“To defend our country against terrorists and to liberate the Iraqi people.”

“Did you do that to the best of your ability?”

“Yes.”

“If you were called upon again to defend your country and to come to the aid of an oppressed people, would you do it?”

Kemp paused. “Yes.” He himself had just realized that he would.

“Even after what you know now?”

“Yes.”

“Even if it meant losing your other leg?”

“Yes.”

“Or dying?”

“Yes,” Kemp said and hung his head, shaken to the core by the truth he had just discovered about himself.

“Kemp,” Rev. Santos said, “you have served with honor according to the highest principles of the Armed Forces. The American people owes you its gratitude and respect. In this

case, it seems the intelligence community failed the President and his advisors, and the President failed you. But you did not fail them.”

Kemp shook his head no, staring at the floor.

“You have a long road ahead of you—being fitted with a prosthetic device, going through physical therapy, learning to walk again, retraining for a new job, coming to terms with your loss. How do you do it? With your head held high.”

Kemp lifted his chin and nodded yes. The terrorists had mangled his leg; they would not cripple his spirit.

The Interrogation

“We can put a man on the moon. Don’t you think we can tell when you’re lying?” Detective Adams said in his Texas drawl. He bent over to rest his palms on the scratched-up table of the interrogation room. Across from him fifteen-year-old Zac Reinemund sat unresponsive on a metal chair. The stark fluorescent light washed the color from the walls.

In the summer of 1969 the whole country was swelling with pride that an American, Neil Armstrong, was the first man to set foot on the moon. Zac Reinemund, however, didn’t exactly see the connection between lunar landing and lie detection. At a loss for an answer, he could feel the muscles in the back of his neck tighten, his heart beat faster, and his palms start to sweat.

While the detective stood bent over, waiting in vain for a reply, his white shirt gaped between the buttons. His gut hung well over his low-belted, blue slacks, and his pant legs stopped about three-quarters of an inch too short, exposing his white socks.

“We know you’re lying,” the detective said. “Why don’t you just confess? Admit it—you broke into the house across the street and stole the money.”

Zac tossed his long hair out of his face. “But I didn’t do it!”

What else could he say? Detective Adams based his accusation on the sole fact that the neighbors saw him sitting on the curb strumming a guitar the evening of the burglary. So, he committed the theft because he played the guitar, and the detective knew he was lying because the Americans had beaten the Russians to the moon. What sense did that make? He felt like a character in the theatre of the absurd. In the absence of hard evidence or logical arguments they had played ping-pong with the paddles of accusation and denial for over half an hour now. Zac had made no progress in convincing the detective of his innocence.

Then Detective Adams changed his tack. “Here, take this pencil and paper, and write these words: ‘I’m sorry I did this, but I needed the money for drugs.’”

“What? You want me to write a confession? No way. I’m not doing it.”

“No, it’s not a confession. We need a handwriting sample. Just for comparison. You don’t have to sign it.”

Reluctantly, Zac complied. When he had finished writing, Detective Adams examined the paper. “Uh huh. Just what I thought. We found a note in the house with these words, and I would say your handwriting is almost a perfect match. Here, take a look at it,” the detective said, handing Zac two pieces of paper.

Zac compared his handwriting with the thief’s and saw that they had both printed rather than written in cursive. Additionally, they both had used a Greek “ε” for the lower-case Latin “e.” Although their styles of penmanship showed some differences, the similarities unsettled him. Could it be that . . . ? No. How could it? His stomach churned, his chest hurt, and the strength drained from his arms and legs.

“You see? Pretty much identical, huh? I’d say that about proves you did it, but just to put the last nail in the coffin we’re gonna give you a lie detector test while our handwriting expert looks at your writing sample. Come this way.”

* * *

The moment Detective Adams opened the door of the interrogation room, Zac’s mother rose to her feet from a chair in the hall, as though she were a defendant about to hear the verdict. Zac could see the anxious expectation written on her face and wished he could comfort her. Even more, he wished he were a little boy again and could run to her to be comforted.

“Well?” she finally said.

“We’re going to give him a lie-detector test, ma’am,” Detective Adams replied without inviting her to accompany them or even mentioning the option of having an attorney present.

“We’ll be back in a bit.”

Sighing, Zac’s mother sat down and twisted the tissue she clutched in her hands. Another long wait.

Detective Adams led Zac down the corridor to a second bare room that, like the other one, contained only a rectangular desk with a metal chair on either side. On top of the desk sat a polygraph machine, an intimidating contraption with a mass of tangled wires and five long, thin needles poised on a sheet of paper from a thick roll.

Detective Adams seated Zac at the long edge of the desk so that he faced a blank wall, while the polygrapher occupied the other chair, observing Zac from the side. Once the detective had placed a blood pressure cuff on Zac’s upper left arm, strapped two air-filled tubes around his chest and abdomen, and attached sensors to the first and third fingers of his right hand, the test began.

“I’m gonna ask you some questions,” the fat, bald polygrapher explained in the same Texas drawl as the detective’s, “and this machine here is gonna tell me if you’re lying.” He took another puff from his cigar, which filled the room with its stench.

“That’s right,” Detective Adams chimed in. “If we can put a man on the moon, we can sure as hell tell if you’re lying.”

“Okay. Let’s get started,” the polygraph operator said. “Do you drink coffee?”

“I tried it once, but I didn’t like it.”

“Just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ boy. Nothing else. Do you drink coffee?”

“Uh, no.”

“Do you drink tea?”

“Not very often.”

“Just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ I said.”

“No.”

“Do you use drugs?”

“No.” The question sounded like an accusation, and Zac could feel his hands start to shake.

“Did you break into the house at 4503 Westland Drive?”

The polygraph operator had suddenly increased the volume of his voice, and Zac started at the forcefulness of the question. His heart was racing.

“N-no.” They’ll never believe me, he thought.

“Did you steal money from the house you broke into?”

The polygrapher’s voice had become even louder. By now beads of sweat were breaking out on Zac’s forehead.

“But I didn’t break into the house.”

“Yes or no. Did you steal money from the house you broke into?” His tone of voice was growing angry and impatient.

“No,” Zac said, feeling nauseous and faint.

“After you broke into the house, did you leave a note that said, ‘I’m sorry I did this, but I needed the money for drugs’?”

Zac remembered how much his handwriting resembled the thief’s and felt as if he were going to be ill. “No.” He could scarcely get the word out.

“Damn it!” shouted Detective Adams. “We can put a man on the moon! Do you understand? A man on the moon! How are we not gonna know when you’re lying?”

“He’s lying all right,” the polygrapher said. “The machine says so.”

Detective Adams unhooked Zac from the measuring instruments and led him back down the hall to his mother. The moment he arrived, a uniformed police officer walked up and handed the detective a note. Detective Adams glanced down at it and then looked up, addressing Zac’s mother. “He failed the lie detector test, ma’am, and according to this note here our handwriting analyst says that his handwriting matches the thief’s, but we have to send it to the crime lab in Austin to be one hundred percent sure. You can take your boy home now. We’ll call you when we get the results from the crime lab, and then we’ll go from there.”

* * *

In a daze Zac staggered out with his mother. How could his handwriting have been a match when he didn’t write the note? And he was telling the truth. How could he have failed the lie detector test? He had heard about split personalities. Was it possible that he had one of those, that his other self did things he didn’t even know about? The very notion of it unnerved him. Did

he have amnesia? He saw a movie once about a man who had committed murder and couldn't remember it afterwards. Was he like that? Maybe he had been sleepwalking. Could he have gotten up in the middle of the night and broken into the house while he was still asleep? Perhaps he just didn't remember it the next morning. As improbable as any explanation seemed, Zac was beginning to doubt his own sanity. His handwriting matched, and he failed the lie detector test—there had to be an explanation, but he didn't know what it was.

“Are you okay?” his mother asked once they were inside the car.

“Yeah, I guess so. I didn't do it, you know.”

“I know, honey.”

At least she believed him.

Zac's father returned that evening from a business trip. From his bedroom Zac could hear his parents talking in the kitchen.

“What? I come home, and my son's in trouble with the police?” his father said, raising his voice.

“No, he's not in trouble,” his mother countered. “It's all just a big misunderstanding.”

“It's that damn rock-and-roll he listens to, and those hippie friends he hangs around with. I knew they would get him into trouble.”

“He's not in trouble,” his mother repeated. “It will all work out.”

“The hell it will.”

“Sh. Lower your voice. He can hear you.”

He's only worried about what his business friends will think if they find out, Zac thought. His reputation. He doesn't give a damn about me. But Mom still believes in me. She stood up for me.

That night—it was Friday—Zac tossed in bed more than he slept. There was no further discussion of the matter over the weekend, and the silence hung heavy in the air. When the phone rang late Monday morning, his heart stopped. The crime lab. The results were in. Was he guilty? Mentally ill? Zac dashed to the phone.

“Hello,” he said, out of breath.

“Is Sissy there?” a girl’s voice asked.

“It’s for you,” he called towards his sister’s room, walking off and leaving the receiver of the wall phone dangling by its cord.

For the next week and a half every phone call nearly provoked a panic attack in him. His nerves were frayed.

* * *

Wednesday of the following week, Zac’s mother shopped for groceries while the kids were at the municipal swimming pool. Returning home, she pulled the station wagon into the garage, opened the tailgate, and took out the first bag to carry it into the house.

I didn’t leave the door open, did I? she asked herself. No, I couldn’t have.

She stepped through the open door from the garage into the kitchen and set the bag of groceries down on the counter. Before going back to get the next one, she needed to use the restroom. When she walked into the master bedroom on the way to her bathroom, she saw that the top drawer of the dresser was open. She knew she hadn’t left it that way and hurried to check its contents. Oh, no. The pearl necklace her husband had given her on their first wedding anniversary—her only real piece of jewelry—was missing. So was the cash they kept in a small box there. Then she saw the note. It read: “I’m sorry I did this, but I needed the money for drugs.” She ran to the phone with great joy and dialed her husband’s office number.

“Hello.”

“Honey, I have great news! We’ve been robbed!”

She couldn’t wait for the kids to come home from the pool and tell Zac. She had forgotten all about the ice cream melting in the back of the station wagon.

The Judge

“Let me see your license, son, and proof of insurance.” Officer Wright shined a flashlight into the eyes of Justin Richter, fifteen years of age.

All thumbs, Justin fumbled in his wallet. “Uh, here’s my license, officer, but I’m driving my friend’s car, and he doesn’t have insurance,” he said, squinting.

“This is a learner’s permit, boy. You can’t drive without an adult present in the front seat.”

“I know, but I was just trying to help my friend. He’s not feeling well.” Justin glanced at Dion, a seventeen-year-old who had invited him to the party.

“Have you been drinking, boy?” Officer Wright leaned closer to the open window.

“No sir.”

“Well, I can smell alcohol and”—he sniffed a couple of times—“and marijuana from here. Step out of the car, both of you.”

Once they had, a plastic bag of marijuana lay in plain sight on the floorboard of the driver's side. Dion had set it on the console between them when they got into the car to leave. As soon as Justin had started the engine and pulled out, it slipped off and fell in front of his seat.

"Boys, I'm taking you both into custody for possession of a controlled substance. You're gonna have to go down to juvie."

"But I don't have any drugs," Justin cried. "I've never even used drugs. The drugs are his." He pointed to Dion, standing by the passenger's door.

"That don't matter. If you're in a car that's got drugs, you're just as guilty as him."

"But . . ."

Dion took off running across a field beside the road and into a wooded area, so Justin was left holding the bag . . . of marijuana, and Justin knew that the policeman would not chase Dion, giving him the chance to run in the opposite direction. As a bird in the hand, he was worth two in the bush.

Oh, why did he go to that stupid party, Justin asked himself, sitting in the back of the squad car. He didn't even have a good time there. When they offered him a bottle of beer or passed him a blunt, he said he was Dion's "designated driver." What a lame way of saving face! He wanted desperately to fit in with them. But he didn't. Not only did he not get drunk and high with them, he didn't even have any tattoos or body piercings. He didn't cut classes with them, tag fences with them, or shoplift with them. And that couple making out in the corner—they were sure to end up having sex before the night was over. What if a girl had come on to him? He wouldn't know what to do. Let's face it: he was a total loser. A scared little boy afraid to enter a dark room. He had been trying to get in with the cool kids. Tonight Dion had given him his big

chance by inviting him to the party, and he blew it. He would never be cool. And now this, just for rolling through a stop sign.

* * *

At the juvenile detention center they booked Justin on the charges of driving without a license, driving without insurance, driving while under the influence, and possession of a controlled substance. They fingerprinted him, issued him an orange jumpsuit, and escorted him to a “room”—a small cinderblock enclosure with a stainless-steel sink and toilet. Across from them stood a concrete bench topped by a thin, plastic-covered mattress. The thick steel door clanked heavily behind him, shutting him in.

If this box qualified as a “room,” he had been living in a five-star hotel at home without knowing it. Justin turned and looked out the tiny square window reinforced with iron mesh.

Trapped, Justin banged on the door with his fists and kicked it with his feet. The sound thundered through the section.

“Let me out of here,” he screamed. “I don’t use drugs.”

No response. The guard sat oblivious at the center table, busy with his paperwork.

“I wanna go home! Let me out of here, you stupid bastards!” he yelled, making himself hoarse.

Justin kept up the banging, kicking, and swearing for a full thirty minutes. When he finally wore himself out, he sat down on his “bed,” his hands and feet throbbing with pain. Of all the hundreds of kids who had passed through the juvenile detention center, he had just realized, not one had ever won a fight with a steel door.

He thought about his mom. Surely they would call her, but they would have to leave a message because she was at work. She would come home and worry because he wasn’t there.

What would she think when she found out he had been arrested? Justin closed his eyes. “Drunk and in trouble with the law. Just like your father,” he could almost hear her say. Although she had never actually said those words to him, he feared them more than anything.

The next morning they brought Justin before the judge for a detention hearing. The judge assigned him a public defender, ordered him detained, and set an adjudicatory hearing for two weeks later. Evidently his mother had gotten the message. She lost half a day’s wages by taking off work to come to court. Without saying a word, she looked at her son and shook her head.

* * *

Gregory Lambe, Justin’s young public defender, had been practicing law for just over a year but had never once tried a juvenile case. Minutes before the trial Mr. Lambe sat on a bench outside the courtroom, his open briefcase at his side. In his hand he held a sheet of paper on which he had outlined his strategy to contest the results of the breathalyzer test. He slowly read the four questions he had typed up, trying to memorize them as he did, so he wouldn’t have to refer to his paper while cross-examining the prosecution’s witness:

- 1) Can you prove the breathalyzer was properly calibrated?
- 2) Did you test my client to determine that he did not have abnormally high levels of acetone, which the breathalyzer can falsely identify as ethyl alcohol?
- 3) Did you test whether my client had an elevated partition ratio of breath alcohol to blood alcohol?
- 4) Can you prove that the machine did not measure mouth alcohol from belching or acid reflux rather than blood alcohol?

In his mind he rehearsed how he would destroy the credibility of the witness after each question: What? You can’t even prove that the breathalyzer was properly calibrated, and yet you

dare to adduce its unreliable results as evidence against my client? The cumulative effect would be devastating.

Then Mr. Lambe leafed through the numerous pharmacological studies he had stuffed into the expandable organizer of his briefcase. They would furnish scientific proof that at least thirty nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, many of them available over the counter, can cause a false positive for marijuana on a urinalysis. When he finished, he put the studies back and closed the briefcase. Rubbing his hands together, he relished the thought of ripping the prosecution's case to shreds.

His victory would taste all the more delicious given that Chief Assistant District Attorney Ken Wolfe, with fifteen years of experience prosecuting juvenile offenders, was opposing him. That year the district attorney was retiring, and Wolfe was running for his seat. Although Justin had admitted to driving without a license and without insurance, he denied driving under the influence and possession of a controlled substance. Only the latter two offenses figured in Mr. Wolfe's formal petition to charge Justin, since gang violence fueled by the drug trade was growing worse in their small town and local residents feared for their property and personal safety. Lambe understood that drug convictions were the racehorse Mr. Wolfe was riding to electoral victory, and he was about to knock Mr. Wolfe right off his high horse.

* * *

Inside the courtroom, the two lawyers faced off like David and Goliath, except that David didn't have a slingshot. The prosecution did not introduce either a breathalyzer test or a urinalysis into evidence for the simple reason that neither the detaining officer nor the detention center had conducted one. Instead, it relied on Officer Wright's testimony, and Officer Wright in turn relied upon his olfactory sensibilities.

Mr. Lambe was holding a weapon with no ammunition.

“Do you have any questions for this witness?” the judge asked him.

“Yes, your Honor.” Mr. Lambe rose to his feet and buttoned his suit coat, struggling desperately to formulate a question in his mind as he approached the witness stand.

“So, uh, Officer Wright, you say that you, uh, smelled both alcohol and marijuana on my client, is that correct?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

“Well, uh, how do you know, sir, that the smell was not coming from the other boy in the car rather than from my client?”

“Because there was two boys, and I got two nostrils. You do the math.”

At that flippant response everyone in the courtroom broke out in a hearty laugh, everyone except Mr. Lambe and Justin, that is. Even the judge could not completely suppress a smirk.

“Any more questions for this witness?” the judge asked, obviously striving to regain his composure.

“N-n-not at this time, your Honor.” Mr. Lambe sensed they were all laughing at him rather than at the officer’s remark. Like a scolded child sent to stand in the corner, he slunk back to his seat.

* * *

The prosecution introduced the bag of marijuana as physical evidence, called upon Officer Wright as an eyewitness to Justin’s intoxication, and summoned the guard on duty the night of his detainment to testify about his drug-induced behavior. For its part, the defense had no physical evidence, since no tests were done, and no witnesses of Justin’s sobriety, since Dion had run and was never caught. It had nothing but Justin’s word.

The time for closing arguments had come.

“Ladies and gentleman of the jury, look at this young man.” Mr. Wolfe extended his right arm, pointing his index finger at Justin.

“What do you see? An ordinary teenager? No, a potential murderer! With no regard for his own life, the life of his passenger, or the life of any person in our town, he got behind the wheel of a car, when he does not even have a driver’s license and when he was drunk on alcohol and high on drugs.”

He turned to face the jury squarely. “Would you allow your child to ride in a car with an unlicensed, intoxicated driver? Would you want your son or daughter, your husband or wife, your mother or father on the streets when he was out menacing pedestrians and motorists alike? It was only by the grace of God that he didn’t kill someone, and that someone could easily have been you or one of your friends or loved ones.”

Mr. Wolf pointed again at Justin. “Look at him. What do you see? A poor, misguided youth who deserves our pity? No, a dangerous criminal preying on society! We must protect ourselves from monsters like him. If you let this young criminal go free today, what will he do? Suddenly reform and become a model citizen? Absolutely not! Once a criminal, always a criminal, I tell you! He will think that he has gotten away with using drugs and with driving under the influence this time and that he can get away with it next time too.”

Mr. Wolfe walked over to the jury box and rested his palms on the rail, peering at each juror in turn from left to right. From this point on his voice crescendoed with each sentence.

“When he kills someone—and it is only a matter of time until he does—will you be able to look into the eyes of the family and friends of his victim and say, ‘I was the one who let him go?’ A man who fires a loaded gun into a crowd may not be trying to kill anyone in particular,

but he is certainly willing to kill someone, and so is the one who drives under the influence. If you let him go free today, you might as well put that loaded gun into his hand and tell him to shoot into a crowd. What is more, you will be making yourselves his accomplices since you are giving him a deadly weapon.”

Mr. Wolfe raised his hands and opened his arms in a broad gesture. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I call upon you today to protect yourselves, to protect your loved ones, to protect us all, and to take this criminal off the streets.”

He held his arms outspread until the echo of his final words, which seemed to hang in the air, had died away.

No one remembered Mr. Lambe’s closing. Not even Justin’s mother, who once again had forfeited half a day’s wages. The jury reached a unanimous verdict on the first and only vote. When the foreman read the words “guilty on all charges,” Justin turned around to look at his mother. Her eyes expressed deep sadness and disappointment.

* * *

The judge ordered Justin into a secure residential treatment facility for a minimum of sixth months and a maximum of two years. In addition to compulsory attendance at school, Justin would learn military-style discipline, undergo rigorous physical training, take psycho-educational classes, attend AA meetings, and receive counseling.

The first day at his placement Justin lost another fight with a steel door. He sat in his cell, fuming about the father who abused him, the mother who was always working and had no time or energy for him, his friend Dion, who ran off and abandoned him the night he was detained, Officer Wright, who falsely arrested him, and Mr. Lambe, who scarcely presented a defense. Above all, he hated both Mr. Wolfe, who had lied about him, and the judge, who had sentenced

him, and he vowed to himself that someday he would take revenge. How else could he right the wrong done to him?

* * *

With his white hair and beard, Mr. Rede, Justin's counselor, presented a grandfatherly aspect. Had he been a father figure instead, adolescent males would have inclined to challenge him and engage him in a power struggle. As it was, his good-natured smile tended to disarm them, and his lively interest in their stories encouraged them to open up.

"Justin, we've been talking for three or four months now, isn't that right?" Mr. Rede asked at their weekly session that Thursday afternoon. He had a plan in mind.

"Yeah, that sounds about right." Justin slouched in his chair.

"Let's spend a few minutes reviewing and taking stock, okay?"

"Okay."

Mr. Rede looked down at his handwritten notes. "Let's see. You told me your father died of cirrhosis of the liver when you were five and the only thing you remember of him is that he was a violent alcoholic who used to come home in a drunken rage and beat your mother until she lay helpless on the floor, right?"

"Yeah, and I used to hide under the bed because I was afraid he would beat me up too."

"Right. And you said you felt guilty for not protecting your mother and ashamed because you weren't big and strong enough to do so. You also said that after your dad died, your mom had to work two jobs and that she left the house before you got up and didn't come home until you were ready to go to bed. I think you told me once that she might as well have been a ghost. Now, what did she do again?" Given his heavy caseload, Mr. Rede did not always recollect the details he had not written down.

“She worked at a factory during the day and cleaned offices at night, but she didn’t make much money. We never had enough.”

“Oh yes, now I remember. And because she had to work all the time, you pretty much had to fend for yourself, right?”

“Yeah, I had to fix my own food if we had any, wash my own clothes, which I didn’t do very often, and get myself up to catch the bus to school. Sometimes I didn’t make it.”

“So, you lost your father to death and your mother to work. You were practically an orphan, weren’t you?” Mr. Rede looked Justin in the eyes when he asked that question.

“Yeah. You know, it was really bad when my dad was beating up my mom, but then at least my mom and I held each other afterwards. She knew I was scared, and I knew she was hurting. But after my dad died, it was kind of worse because I almost never saw my mom at all. I thought she just didn’t want to be around me.” Justin hung his head.

“You know, when they have it bad at home, some kids find a kind of second family at school, but that didn’t happen to you, did it?”

“No. The teachers just stuck me in the very back of the class and never called on me, probably because I didn’t really go to school all that often, and I didn’t know any of the answers anyway.” Justin still hadn’t raised his head.

“And the kids weren’t so nice to you either.”

“No way. Sometimes they made fun of me because I was real different. I can kind of understand it now. I mean, I didn’t take a bath very often, I never combed my hair, my clothes were dirty and torn, I probably smelled. But most of the time they just played like I wasn’t there.” Justin finally looked up.

“Yes, it must have been pretty lonely.” Mr. Rede looked at him directly again, lowering his voice a bit. “I’ll never forget the time you told me that you always sat by yourself in the lunchroom and that if you didn’t bring a lunch and didn’t have any money, you waited out lunch period in the bathroom.”

“Mmhmm.” Justin nodded in agreement.

“Justin,” Mr. Rede said in his grandfatherly way, “I want you to remember how we talked about letting go of the guilt and the shame. It wasn’t your job to control your father’s violence and to protect your mother. You were just five.”

“I know. I’m working on that.”

“Good. We may never know why your father drank. But we do know that he just didn’t know how to cope with his problems without alcohol and that when he drank, he took out his pain and frustration on the people he loved the most. And we can be pretty sure that your mother didn’t want to leave you alone, but she had to work to keep you alive. It must have broken her heart not to be with you, but she worked so much because she loved you.”

“Yeah. I get that now.”

“Nevertheless, the adults in your life let you down in a big way. For whatever reason, your parents abused or neglected you. Your teachers didn’t take an interest in you or try to help you either, and the juvenile justice system failed you as well. Yes, you took a big risk going to that party, and you did break the law by driving without a license and without insurance, but you were wrongly convicted on possession and DUI charges, and that is why you are here when perhaps you really shouldn’t be. But those were the cards you were dealt. The question now is: how are you going to play them?”

“What do you mean?” Justin sat up from his usual slouch.

Mr. Rede leaned forward, knitting his brow in seriousness. “I mean that you have a big decision to make, Justin, perhaps the most important one you have ever made and one that will determine the course of your life in the future. In just a few short years you are going to be an adult yourself. Are you going to be like the adults who failed you, or are you going to be different?”

* * *

Mr. Rede had probably asked that question or a similar one hundreds of times to no effect, but it appealed to Justin’s adolescent idealism, giving him a sense of mission to become someone important, and to his equally adolescent feelings of superiority, allowing him to think himself better than those who had failed him.

Without much experience of the adult world of trades and professions, Justin gravitated towards those with which he had come into direct contact. Gradually he formed a plan to become a lawyer, one the exact opposite of Mr. Wolfe, who had lied about him and wrongly put him in the prison they called a “treatment facility.” He would fight for truth and justice.

Released from his incarceration and back in his old school, Justin attacked his studies with the fierceness and tenacity of a junkyard dog latching onto a bone. Before long, he found his teachers taking an interest in him and offering to tutor him after school. His senior year, his school counselor helped him get a scholarship to a junior college and financial aid. Over the next several years the pattern of academic success rewarded by scholarships repeated itself, and Justin completed junior college, transferred to a university, and went to law school. His mother took off work to attend each of his graduations. How proud she was of her son, the lawyer. She told him so herself. Five years later he ran for judge of a county court at law and was elected. The seed planted by Mr. Rede’s question had sprouted, matured, and borne its fruit, though Justin Richter

had by now lost something of his high adolescent ideals, and the Don Quixote fantasy of a knight errant righting wrongs yielded to the more mundane concern of earning a living.

* * *

Passed over for promotion time and again, Officer Wright worked the same beat for twenty years. When the blue-gray Mercedes rolled through the stop sign, he switched on his flashing lights and pursued. The Mercedes stopped in the next block, and Officer Wright approached the vehicle.

“Let me see your license, sir, and proof of insurance,” he said, shining his flashlight in the driver’s face.

“Do you know who I am, officer?”

Officer Wright knew exactly who he was. “Your license and proof of insurance, please.”

“I’m Ken Wolfe, chief assistant district attorney,” the man said, slurring his words.

“Have you been drinking, sir?” Maintaining professional decorum only added to the enjoyment of the role reversal.

“I could have your badge, officer.”

The hell you could. “Please step out of the car, sir.”

“Your badge. Do you understand? I could have your badge.”

“Step out of the car now.” He was the one giving orders here. For all its monotony, the job had its unexpected pleasures.

Ken Wolfe opened the door, took one step out, and fell flat on his face.

When Officer Wright had lifted him to his feet, he cuffed him and said, “Mr. Wolfe, I am placing you under arrest for driving while intoxicated.” It was a fine day when the little guy got to stick it to the big guy.

* * *

Never elected district attorney, Mr. Wolfe was only the shell of his former self. A few years after Justin's adjudicatory hearing, his wife was killed in an automobile accident involving a drunk driver. That experience would have turned many people away from alcohol forever, but not Mr. Wolfe. Perhaps he began drinking hard to numb the feelings of grief and regret that he did not know how to handle. Or perhaps he was trying to put himself out of his own misery by slow suicide. Whatever the case, he had accumulated two DWI convictions, though because of his position with the district attorney's office, he avoided fines, jail time, and loss of his license. Now he stood in court to be arraigned on his third DWI charge, a felony offense with a possible two-to-ten year prison sentence, and there was nothing more his colleagues could do for him. He had to take his chances with the justice system like any other drunk driver. Was he about to see how bitter his own medicine tasted?

* * *

"Next case," Judge Richter called out.

"The State of Texas vs. Ken Wolfe," answered the bailiff, "on the charge of driving while intoxicated."

Judge Richter jerked his head up to look at the man he had so hated fifteen years before, the man whose eloquent lies had deprived him of freedom for so long. Suddenly he was a teenager again, and all the self-righteous indignation he felt at the false charges of driving under the influence and possession of a controlled substance came surging back up within him. He had sworn revenge on Mr. Wolfe, who didn't recognize or even remember him, and now his moment had finally come. After Wolfe's attorney entered a plea of not guilty, Judge Richter set a date for the trial.

* * *

Released on his own recognizance but placed on administrative leave, Ken Wolfe spent the two weeks before his trial doing what he always did in his spare time: drinking. The morning of the trial was no exception. Skipping breakfast, he poured himself a shot of whiskey, just to “steady his nerves.” When he felt the smooth trickle down the back of his throat and the warmth in his belly, he began muttering to himself. How dare they accuse him, Ken Wolfe, the chief assistant district attorney? The nerve of those people. He poured himself another shot. Who did they think they were anyway? Those arrogant little bastards. They obviously didn’t know whom they were dealing with. But just wait till he took the stand. He would show them, as well as his own lawyer, who had advised him not to testify. As he relished the prospect of demolishing the prosecuting attorney, he poured himself another shot. That little upstart had no idea what he was getting into. But he was about to find out what it meant to tangle with the great Ken Wolfe. One more shot for the road.

As soon as Mr. Wolfe was sworn in, Cyrus Voigt, a young prosecutor who worked under Wolfe in the district attorney’s office stood ready with his first question.

“Mr. Wolfe, I want to begin by asking you point blank, were you, on the night in question, driving while intoxicated?”

“Of course not. That’s ridiculous.” The very notion offended him.

“But we have heard testimony from Officer Wright that you were.”

“Well, it’s his word against mine. And he’s just a beat cop. I’m the chief assistant district attorney.” He sat up a little straighter and stuck his chest out.

“Officer Wright testified that you were so drunk you fell flat on your face.”

“That’s nonsense. I merely tripped when I got out of the car.” What? This lanky kid never stumbled?

“Your blood alcohol level was .16, twice the legal limit.”

“That means nothing. I can hold my liquor better than most people.” He was doing it right now, and no one even suspected.

“So, you do admit you were drinking on the night in question?”

“Drinking? It wasn’t even real booze, just a little beer.” Big deal.

“Exactly how many beers did you drink before getting behind the wheel?”

“Why are you doing this to me? I don’t deserve this. After all my years of service, this is how you treat me?” It was all so unfair.

“How much beer did you drink, Mr. Wolfe, before you drove?”

“You’re just trying to bring me down. Are you after my job? Well, no one can take my place, I tell you. No one.” This was getting to be too much.

“Mr. Wolfe, how much did you have to drink that night?”

“Look, you little punk, you work for me. I can have you fired. When I’m done with you, you’ll never work anywhere again. I’m the chief assistant district attorney. Do you understand? The chief assistant district attorney!” He banged his fist on the rail in front of the witness stand. Without realizing it, he had just driven the last nail into his own coffin.

Ken Wolfe was the only one in the courtroom that day surprised by the verdict: guilty.

* * *

The moment of sentencing had arrived.

Over the years, Judge Richter’s memories of his father’s abuse, his mother’s neglect, his friend Dion’s abandonment, Officer Wright’s wrongful arrest, Mr. Lambe’s incompetent defense, and the judge’s unjust sentence had lost their emotional charge. But his anger at Mr. Wolfe had lain smoldering all this time. Although his initial thoughts of revenge had receded into

the background, Judge Richter remembered the prosecutor's speech as though it were yesterday. He could almost hear how Mr. Wolfe had written him off as a "dangerous criminal" and a "potential murderer," though he had become the "model citizen" Mr. Wolfe denied he ever could be. On the contrary, it was Mr. Wolfe who was "menacing pedestrians and motorists alike." It was he who had "gotten away" with driving while intoxicated twice and who thought that he could "get away with it the next time too." Indeed, it was "only a matter of time" until Mr. Wolfe killed someone with his drunk driving. If Judge Richter did not "take this criminal off the streets" by sending him to prison for ten years, would he "be able to look into the eyes of the family and friends of his victim and say, 'I was the one who let him go?'" Would he be putting "a loaded gun" into Mr. Wolfe's hands and telling him to "shoot into a crowd"?

Judge Richter thought long and hard—so long that the silence in the courtroom became uncomfortable, and everyone started fidgeting. Finally, he spoke.

"Mr. Wolfe, fifteen years ago you sentenced me to six months to two years in a secure residential treatment facility. Although I was completely innocent of the charges of driving under the influence and possession of a controlled substance, I can see now that my time in that facility was the best thing that ever happened to me. Today, I am going to return the favor and give you a second chance, one my own father never had."

He paused to make sure of himself before proceeding. "Mr. Wolfe, I could sentence you to ten years in prison. After due consideration, however, I hereby sentence you to a two-year residential treatment program to be followed, upon return to life in the community, by weekly sessions with a parole officer, a substance-abuse counselor, and an AA sponsor for a period of eight years. May it do you as much good as it did me."

What would ten years in prison have been like for an assistant district attorney? Even Mr. Wolfe had to admit he had been wrong. That fifteen-year-old boy did change: he became the Honorable Justin Richter.

The Language of Dreams

The living do not see what the dead see.

A fleeting pinpoint in the flux of space and time—that is what the living see. They gather the tiniest shards of a shattered past into their memories and, with the thinnest lines, sketch colorless images of the future. But the dead see all that has been, all that is, and all that will be. Doubt not. I know whereof I speak, for I am dead.

The living work in the light of day and sleep in the dark of night.

Not so the dead. Until they cross over, they dwell in the gray between time and eternity. They do not sleep but wake. And while they wake, they work, not with hands but with hearts. They work to right their wrongs, so that they may be at peace and then pass beyond. Believe me. I know, for I am dead.

The living talk at one another and keep on talking. Rarely do they listen.

When the living speak to the dead, the dead hear. But when the dead speak to the living, the living do not hear. The living have not yet learned to speak or listen; the dead have. Not

through signs, nor visions, nor speech can the dead speak to the living, but only through dreams. I know, for I am dead.

When I was among the living, I made a discovery. I discovered the precise center in the brain where contentment resides. Furthermore, I deduced exactly what chemical compound would stimulate that center and render the human subject perfectly content with his or her lot in life. I thought my work would eliminate all human discontent, all longing, all contention, and thus would usher in an era of universal happiness and peace. Oh, what fools are the living! I was wrong.

Now that I am dead, I see my discovery would allow the master to tyrannize the slave, the strong to exploit the weak, and those-who-have to deprive those-who-have-not. The oppressed would remain forever content with their lot and have no reason to rebel. Where there is no urge to change, all reform, discovery, and innovation cease. Now I see what I could not see before: discontent is God's greatest gift to humankind.

Before I cross over, I must accomplish one thing. I must eradicate every trace of my discovery from the face of the earth. If I fail, I shall become the greatest scourge that ever smote the human race. Oh, may I succeed, for only then shall I cross over in peace.

Yes, yes, I know. You doubt my words. Why? Because you are living. And the living cannot comprehend. But the dead know. Trust me. I understand, for I am dead.

* * *

"I had the strangest dream last night," Dulcie Dromer said.

"Hmm," Dalton Rayne, her analyst, answered from his leather chair, if you could even call that an answer.

"Nothing actually happened in the dream. I just saw Dr. Weismann holding a folder."

“A dream fragment then.”

“No, I don’t think so. That was the entire dream. But it was unlike any dream I’ve ever had. It had something numinous about it. Something otherworldly. When I woke up, I had this eerie feeling that I had visited another realm.” Just talking about it sent a tingle down her spine.

“And what do you think the dream is saying?”

“I don’t know . . . He was my mentor. Almost like a grandfather. He was eighty-two, but in great shape. Perfect health. They said he died of a heart attack. But I had my doubts. They never did an autopsy. Maybe the dream is telling me something about his death.”

Dalton Rayne set down the pipe he liked to hold but did not smoke during his sessions. “Dreams are always symbolic statements about the dreamer. Perhaps the dream is telling you that your need for a mentor has died. It is time for you to strike out on your own.”

“Maybe. But the folder seemed significant. It must have contained his secret research on satisfaction centers in the brain and how to influence them. He shared his work with me and, as far as I know, mentioned it to just one other person, Dr. Steele.”

“You said that name with a sneer.”

“Well, I don’t like Dr. Steele very much. You know what he did? He took the research of my friend Amalia and published it under his own name without giving her any credit at all. But I guess I’ll have to learn to live with him. When Dr. Weismann was here, Steele was the number-two man, but now that Dr. Weismann is gone, Steele is number one.”

“You were saying you thought the folder significant.”

“Yes. In his will Dr. Weismann left me his intellectual property. But after his death, his home computer was wiped clean. There was nothing on it. Perhaps the dream is telling me to find out what happened to his work so I can continue it.”

Dalton Rayne shook his head. “More likely it’s saying that his work was lost with him. It’s time for you to develop your own folder, so to speak, to find your own original line of research.”

* * *

The living chase after mere semblances of the good, for they do not see the good itself as the dead do. When I was alive, I sought to advance the welfare of humankind. Yet in my blindness I would have destroyed it. The man who murdered me and stole my work deemed fame, wealth, and power good. Upon his death he will think otherwise, I assure you.

The living feed on phantom fruits that only increase the hunger they promise to satisfy. But the dead have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their eyes are open, and they are like unto gods.

Impure are the hearts of the living because they see and crave mere imitations of the good. When the dead see the good itself, they desire it alone. That sole, all-consuming desire is purity of heart. Blessed are the dead, for they are pure of heart.

* * *

“Any interesting dreams this week?” Dalton Rayne asked, resting his cheek in the palm of his hand and the suede elbow patch of his tweed jacket on the arm of his chair.

“Only one,” Dulcie Dromer answered. “Again it was more like a snapshot than a movie. A single image. I saw a vial with the label *Tincture of Aconite Root*. And, just as after the last dream, I awoke with an uncanny sense of the supernatural. There was something dreadful, something awesome, about it.” She felt a shudder run through her entire body.

“Aconite root. I’m not familiar with it.”

“Some people think that, taken in very small doses, say, one or two drops, it fights the onset of colds and the flu. But half a tablespoon can cause respiratory paralysis, ventricular arrhythmia, and cardiac collapse.”

“Well, that’s not much to go on. Any idea how to interpret the dream image?”

“I’m wondering if that’s how Dr. Weismann died. Just a little bit of that stuff could have given him a heart attack.”

Dalton Rayne ran his hand over his bald head. “Well, as I told you last week, I’m quite sure this dream is not about Dr. Weismann. It’s about you.”

“But why would I dream of aconite root? And why would the dream image be so powerful? I don’t have any experience of aconite or any associations with it.”

“Maybe it’s about finding the right balance in your life.”

“How so?”

“Since you no longer have a mentor, you have to establish yourself as a scientist in your own right, which will take great effort and dedication. But too much work will kill you, metaphorically speaking, just like this aconite stuff. Life can’t be all about work.”

* * *

The living act but do not see and do not know. Although the dead see and know, they cannot act—except upon the dreams of the living. Why dreams? Because in sleep the living come closest to the realm of the dead. Sleep is their nightly practice for dying. In sleep the living see darkly, as in a mirror. The light of day hurts their eyes, and so they dwell in caves. In sleep they rest their eyes upon dim shadows, the phantoms of dreams.

The blind lead the blind among the living. But in death the people who walked in darkness see a great light. On those who live in the land of the shadow of death light has shined. The dead must work while there is light, yet they can work only through dreams.

When death lifts the veil from their eyes, it lames the dead. It trades strength of limbs for sight of eyes. Imagine a dead man lying on a cot, sitting in a wheelchair, or standing with a crutch, but not walking, and you will have an image of him. Yes, the living are blind; the dead are lame.

The dead speak an unknown language, an arcane tongue, the images of dreams. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

* * *

“I had another dream, sort of like the other two,” Dulcie Dromer said at their next session. “But this one had an action. A single action. I saw a bottle of red wine, about one-fourth empty, corked with a stopper and sitting on top of a liquor cabinet. Next to it stood an empty wine glass.”

“Mmhhh,” Dalton Rayne said, stroking his goatee.

“A left hand appeared—I couldn’t see whose—and held the bottle by the neck while a right hand unstopped it. Then the right hand emptied the contents of a small flask into the bottle of wine and restopped it. At that, both hands withdrew from my field of vision.”

“That doesn’t seem much like the two snapshot dreams to me.”

“When I woke, I had that same mysterious . . . no, *mystical* . . . impression of something from beyond our world, something transcendent.” She felt an almost electric current shoot through her body, just remembering it.

“But there is nothing unearthly about a bottle of wine.”

“I’m not talking about the content of the dream, but the origin. Dr. Weismann drank one glass of red wine religiously every day. For his health. I wonder if someone poured tincture of aconite root into his wine to cause a heart attack.”

With his index finger Dalton Rayne pushed his wire-rimmed glasses, which had slipped down, back up to the bridge of his nose. “Now wait a minute. Let’s respect the integrity of the dream image and not go mixing different dreams together. Besides, you’re a scientist, and there’s no scientific evidence of life after death. You can’t possibly believe in those religious superstitions.”

“I didn’t say I believed in them. But why do I keep having these dreams? They give me an overwhelming feeling of both fascination and dread.”

Dalton Rayne sighed. “Dreams tend to repeat themselves until you get the message. You keep wanting to take them literally as being about Dr. Weismann, which means that you are not understanding them. Instead, you should interpret them symbolically as being about yourself.”

“Well, how would you understand it?”

“We’ve been talking about how you can come into your own professionally while finding the proper balance in your life. It could mean that when you work, you work wholeheartedly, but when you play, you should play with the same involvement. Don’t water down the wine, so to speak.”

That interpretation did not convince her.

* * *

Rob Steele refilled his glass, his third scotch so far.

“I’m glad you all could make it,” he said to three of his guests standing at the hors d’oeuvre table.

“It’s a wonderful Christmas party, Dr. Steele,” a lab assistant replied. “And this sixth-floor apartment is simply stunning.”

“Oh, this isn’t just the traditional office Christmas party. We’re also celebrating my promotion to department head and honoring our dear friend Mort Weismann, whose shoes I hope to fill.”

Just then Dulcie Dromer stepped up to join the small group.

“Dr. Weismann was a wonderful man,” a research fellow said.

“Yes, and a good friend,” Rob Steele replied. “You know, I consulted with him on a paper I’m about to publish. I don’t mean to boast, but I wouldn’t be surprised if I won a Nobel Prize for it. I think I have discovered the global-satisfaction center in the brain and worked out the formula for a drug to activate it. Soon it will be possible to take a pill and experience perfect contentment. Human misery and suffering will be eliminated. For the first time in history the human race will be happy.”

“That’s incredible,” the research fellow said.

“It’s so exciting,” the lab assistant added.

“This is history in the making,” a young professor declared.

You’re lying, Dulcie thought and took a big gulp of wine from her glass.

“Excuse me, Dr. Steele. Where’s your restroom?” she asked.

“Upstairs, at the end of the hall.”

* * *

About to exit the restroom, Dulcie stopped. Didn’t her mother teach her better? No, she really shouldn’t. But, then, curiosity only kills cats. When she opened the medicine cabinet, she

saw a beta blocker, a statin, a fibrate, various antihistamines and decongestants, a cough suppressant, and tincture of aconite root.

Oh, my God. The dream. It's true.

Walking back down the hall, to the right she noticed Dr. Steele's dimly lit home office, with a sliding-glass door to the balcony. On his desk sat an open laptop. Below, the guests chattered, and the music played. All alone on the upper floor, Dulcie stopped. Dare she? There was no one to see her. But what if someone came up and caught her? Perhaps she could make up an excuse, even if nothing came to her at the moment. After the aconite, though, she had to know. She had to. No matter what.

Dulcie hurried behind the desk, shook the mouse, and clicked on the map of the hard drive. Music. Games. Photographs. Videos. Various technical programs. And documents. Scores of documents.

Wait. Did she hear footsteps down the hall? Someone might be coming.

She ran her forefinger over the wheel of the mouse, quickly scrolling through the documents. Mostly work-related files.

There. One entitled "Satisfaction Center." She opened it and began skimming the text. Almost the exact words Dr. Weismann had used to tell her about his research. That had to be it, the file that was wiped from Dr. Weismann's home computer.

Oh, no. Footsteps for sure. Someone was coming. Rummaging frantically in her purse, Dulcie found a flash drive. She stuck it in the laptop, copied the file onto it, and then deleted the file from Steele's machine.

After two more scotches, Steele himself was staggering up to use the restroom. Perhaps he saw Dulcie out of the corner of his eye. He kept walking at first, then stopped, and backed up.

“Hey, what are you doing there?” he cried, slurring his words.

“Uh, I was just going out on the balcony to get a bit of fresh air.”

She pulled out the flash drive and clutched it in her fist, then opened the door and stepped out into the night.

Steele started after her, bumped into the desk on the way, and then followed her onto the balcony.

“What do you have in your hand, behind your back?”

“Oh, this? It’s just a cigarette lighter. I was going to have a smoke.” She was careful not to show it.

“Let me see it.”

“Dr. Steele, I think you’ve had a little too much to drink. Why don’t you go back inside and let me enjoy my cigarette?”

“You were looking at my computer. Now you’re holding something small in your hand. It’s not a cigarette lighter. Is it a flash drive? Why, you were stealing my research!” He shouted the last sentence loud enough for the guests below to hear.

“No. It’s not yours. You stole it from Dr. Weismann.”

“That’s a lie. I merely consulted with Dr. Weismann.”

“He told me he consulted with you. The research was his. You must have killed him and stolen his work. I saw the tincture of aconite root in your medicine cabinet.”

“That’s outrageous. You tell that lie to anyone else, and I’ll sue you for slander,” Steele said, pointing his finger at her but wobbling from side to side.

“He left his intellectual property to me, but his home computer was wiped clean. And now his research shows up on your computer.”

“Give me that flash drive, or I’ll have you fired. I’ll ruin your career. I’ll see that you never work again.” He was shaking his fist now, still unsteady on his feet.

“I’m going to expose you as an impostor. Instead of going to Stockholm for a Nobel Prize, you’ll be going to prison for murder and theft.”

“Give me that flash drive, or I swear to God I’ll throw you off this balcony.”

“This research is mine now. You’ll never get it back.” Once again she felt the tremendous charge of energy from the dreams.

Steele lunged at her, wrested the flash drive from her hand, but in his drunken state lost his balance and fell over the thin wrought-iron railing. Shrieking, Dulcie saw him hit the pavement headfirst. The guests below must have heard her screams as a pool of blood spread out from his skull.

A second after Steele hit the sidewalk, the flash drive he had been clenching bounced into the street. An eighteen-wheeler ran over it, crushing it to bits.

Twenty minutes later the police took Dulcie Dromer into custody. It all happened so fast.

* * *

“Where am I? What has happened?” Rob Steele said. “An excess of light blinds my eyes, yet I see more clearly now than I ever have. Within, I have passed from darkness into light, but all about me is gray. What manner of place is this?”

“Welcome to the abode of the dead,” Mort Weismann greeted him.

“Oh, what have I done in my blindness? I now see my hunger for fame, my greed for wealth, and my lust for power for what they are: empty vanities. What was I chasing? Things more insubstantial than the morning’s haze, a whiff of smoke in the air, or the foam on the crest of a wave. What a fool I was!”

“Do not be disturbed, my brother. Only the wise can see their former folly.”

“You still call me ‘brother’ after what happened?”

“Here all is forgiven the living, who know not what they do. At last my work is finished.

Yours is just beginning.”

“I am eager to set about it. My only desire is to put things right.”

“Do not forget the one wrongly accused of murdering you and stealing your work.”

“I will do everything within my power.”

“Your power is that of the dream. Use it wisely. I must cross over now to eternity, where I shall meet you again. Peace be with you, my friend.”

“And with your spirit. Farewell.”

At that, Mort Weismann embraced Rob Steele.

* * *

“Thank you for posting my bail,” Dulcie Dromer said. “I could never have afforded it.”

“Well, I remember what it was like to be in the early stages of a career. Just don’t skip out on me, okay?” Dalton Rayne said, joking.

“Don’t worry.” Dulcie laughed.

“So, how are you doing after everything that has happened?”

“Well enough. I mean, even though I didn’t like Dr. Steele, I certainly didn’t want him to die.”

“Yes, that was a terrible accident.”

“And I’m very upset that Dr. Weismann’s research has been lost forever. I think he was counting on me to continue his work.”

“But you will develop your own research interests in time.”

“Maybe I should be worried about the trial, but I’m not. They can’t prove that I pushed Dr. Steele off the balcony, and now that the flash drive is destroyed, there’s no evidence that I stole anything from his computer. I have a strange sense of peace about it all.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that.”

“I had another dream last night. In it Dr. Weismann and Dr. Steele were talking together. I don’t know where—it didn’t seem to be anywhere in the real world. And then they embraced. When I woke up, I was filled with a heavenly peace. It was sublime.”

“Very interesting.”

“I guess you were right. Two dead men can’t embrace. So the dream can’t be literally true. It must be symbolic.”

“Yes. I suspect that Dr. Steele represents ambition, which ultimately killed him, and that Dr. Weismann represents the wisdom gained from experience. It’s good to be ambitious—to have high professional goals and to strive to reach them. But that ambition has to embrace and be embraced by wisdom. Perhaps that is what you’ve learned from this whole experience.”

“Perhaps.”

* * *

The living do not see what the dead see. Although the living are blind from birth, there is no sin in that. Their blindness is not a sickness unto death. When they die, the mud will be washed from their eyes, and they will see. There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed: what is done in darkness will be brought into the light; what is told in secret will be shouted from the rooftops. Yea, the lamp will be taken from under the bushel basket and placed on the lampstand to give light to all in the house. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

Magnum Opus

When the wall phone rang early that Saturday morning, Thomas Dushek got up from the breakfast table, where he was enjoying coffee with his wife, Angelina, to answer it.

“Hello . . . Ah, yes, good morning . . . What? . . . When? . . . How bad is it? . . . Where is he? . . . I’ll be right down.”

He hung up and stood for a moment in disbelief.

“Who was that?” Angelina asked.

“Nadiya Geiger. She said an eighteen-wheeler ran a red light and broadsided Arthur’s car last night when he was driving home from the performance. He hit his head against the window on the driver’s side and suffered a severe brain trauma, something called a subarachnoid hemorrhage. He’s in a coma. Nadiya’s with him at the hospital. I’m going there now.”

During the drive to the hospital a rhapsody of memories flooded Thomas’s mind. He recalled how he had met Arthur in the Music Department of the local university when they were both freshmen, he studying composition and Arthur the violin. From that day on they became inseparable companions, spending countless hours together listening to recordings, attending

recitals, and discussing classical music. Once they had completed their undergraduate degrees, they went on to earn a master's together, after which Arthur joined the city's symphony orchestra while he began work on his doctorate. They had been best men at each other's weddings and godfathers of each other's children. For the forty-two years since they first met, they had remained in daily contact. Arthur was his second self, his alter ego, his musical soul mate, and Thomas loved him more than he did his own brother.

As soon as Thomas entered the hospital room, Nadiya rose from her chair beside Arthur's bed and flew into his arms.

"O Thomas, I'm so afraid we're going to lose our dear Arthur." She wept on his shoulder.

Moved by her tears, Thomas felt a lump in his throat. He wanted to cry with her but decided he had to stay strong.

"Don't talk like that, Nadiya. Arthur's a fighter. He's not going to give up, and we're not either. Don't worry. He'll pull through this. You'll see." He squeezed her tight.

When they released their embrace and Thomas saw the array of wires and tubes attached to his unconscious friend, his knees nearly gave out from under him. He staggered to Arthur's bedside and took his hand. "O Arthur, Arthur" was all he could say. With his back turned to Nadiya, he could not stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks.

From that day Thomas spent every spare moment at the hospital, sitting with his friend. The doctors had put Arthur on medication to reduce brain swelling and intracranial pressure. Every two or three hours the nursing staff turned him from side to side, and a physical therapist came twice a day to exercise his limbs. All to no avail. In three weeks and two days Arthur was dead. He never regained consciousness.

* * *

When they returned from Arthur's funeral, Thomas said to Angelina, "Sit down, honey. There's something I have to tell you."

They both took a seat at the breakfast table.

"You know how music is my whole life. If I can't compose anymore, I have no reason to live. I mean if something ever happens to me like what happened to Arthur—I'm in an irreversible coma or a permanent vegetative state or something like that—then just let me go. Let me die. Don't keep me alive artificially. I don't want to linger for months, or even years, if I just exist but can't really live. Promise me you'll let me go."

She did.

For the next three months, though, Thomas felt as if he had already died. He was just going through the motions of life without really living it.

Then, a sudden inspiration resurrected him: he would compose a requiem in honor of his friend. It would be a six-voice contrapuntal work for violin, viola, cello, flute, clarinet, and oboe, each voice in the style of a different historical period—medieval, Renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, and contemporary, yet all blending together and harmonizing with each other. Although instrumental, he would pattern it after vocal models from each period. Yes, he would immortalize the spirit of his friend in music. It would be his *magnum opus*, not the longest, but certainly the finest, work of his life.

It was a splendid April morning, and Thomas walked out to his car with a new-found spring in his step and a whistled tune on his lips. He decided to lower the top on his little Mini Cooper convertible so that he could feel the sun on his brow and the wind in his hair as he drove to teach his advanced music theory class at the University. When he had gone a mere three and a half blocks, however, his foot slipped off the gas pedal and his hands off the steering wheel as he

slumped towards the passenger's seat. He felt his face, neck, trunk, arms, and legs going limp, as though his body were no longer his own. Try as he might, he could not raise himself up, lift his head, or even open his eyes. Thomas did the only thing he could do—nothing.

His car had jumped the curve and landed half in the yard of a man still in his bathrobe coming out to get the morning paper. When the stunned man ran up to the car, he saw that the driver could neither move nor speak. Had he suffered a heart attack? He called 911.

* * *

Angelina rushed to the hospital as soon as she received the call. When she stopped at the ICU desk to ask which room her husband was in, a physician who happened to be standing there addressed her.

“Mrs. Dushek, I am Dr. Asa, the attending physician on your husband's case.”

“How is he, doctor? What happened?” She winced, awaiting the response.

“Your husband suffered a massive stroke while driving to work, which resulted in what we call total locked-in syndrome.”

“What does that mean?” She felt herself reeling and tried to steady herself.

“Your husband suffered damage to certain parts of the lower brain and brainstem, while his upper brain remained unaffected. We thus have reason to believe that he is conscious, but his entire body is paralyzed. All of his senses are probably intact, but his eyelids are closed, and he can't open them on his own, so he can't see. And he could probably taste food, but he can't move the muscles needed to chew or swallow, so we have to feed him through a tube. Because he's completely paralyzed, he can't speak or blink an eye or even squeeze someone's finger. He can probably hear what we say to him, but he has no way to communicate with us.”

“Oh my God, that sounds terrible. Will he recover?” On the verge of fainting, she nearly lost her balance.

“It’s possible—we know of at least two people who made a full spontaneous recovery from locked-in syndrome—but it’s unlikely. Ninety percent of patients with this syndrome die within four months. The remaining ten percent live longer, but their condition does not improve.”

Angelina heard nothing after “full spontaneous recovery.” Thank God! Her Thomas was going to be all right; she knew it in her heart. Now she felt silly she had worried herself for nothing. She flitted into her husband’s room but stopped cold at the sight of the wires and tubes connected to him. Unnerved for a moment, she pulled herself together and kissed him on the forehead. He seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

* * *

“I have good news, honey,” Angelina whispered in her husband’s ear. “The doctor says you’re going to make a full recovery. You’re going to be just fine.”

Thomas could indeed hear his wife, who tended to hear what she wanted to hear, and knew she was terribly mistaken but had no way to tell her.

“I think your body is just saying you need to rest. Arthur’s death was such an unexpected blow, and you always work so hard anyway. It was probably just too much stress. So, you just rest and relax, dear, and when you’re ready, you’ll wake up and be all better.”

Thomas groaned mentally. By now, in total darkness and unable to move a muscle, he had grasped the severity of his condition. When Angelina left for the evening, he had a realization, one that shattered him: the requiem he was going to compose for Arthur, the work that had given his life new direction and purpose, would be his requiem as well. In the unity of

friendship, they seemed in life to share one soul in two bodies. Now they would share one spiritual anthem in two deaths.

Thomas knew he would never again put pen to paper. Given that stark reality, no ensemble would ever perform his requiem, no audience ever hear it, no recording ever preserve it for posterity. No matter. Although it would come into being in his mind, exist only in his mind, and pass out of being with his mind, once it had taken shape, his requiem would be like a Platonic Idea. It would exist eternally in its ideal being as a musical form. From that moment on, the composition of his requiem became his all-consuming passion. Thomas understood that he was racing against the clock to complete it. If only God would grant him enough time. He never prayed so fervently in his life. The next morning he began his work.

* * *

As the inspiration for the first section of his requiem Thomas decided to take the plaintive *Dies irae* or *Day of Wrath*, a Gregorian chant from the medieval Mass for the Dead. It was a confession of guilt and a prayer for mercy addressed to God as judge. He sang it through several times in his mind, allowing himself to sink into the mood of the melody and the text, feeling it more personally than he ever had before. Then he began to improvise, mentally humming notes without words, until an original melody had taken form in his head. He hummed this melody over and over until he had memorized it so well that he would be able to recall it note for note at will.

Assigned to the viola, this base melody was to form the first of six. To harmonize the other melodies with it and with each other in counterpoint, he would have to visualize it written on a staff with an alto clef. Thomas could mentally place the notes on the staff as he hummed them in his mind, but as soon as he stopped humming, they disappeared from before his mind's

eye. If he could not see them, he would find it difficult, if not impossible, to harmonize them or to revise later the harmonies he had written. He panicked.

For an entire week Thomas practiced all day every day visualizing a single melodic line on the staff until he could see the whole thing like a page in a book. It was exhausting.

Angelina continued to visit him every evening after work. For the first week she repeated her mistaken assurances that he would be “just fine.” When he did not “wake up” from his “rest” as she had anticipated, however, her tone began to change.

“Thomas, you have to wake up. You can’t just lie there indefinitely.” Her voice had an irritated edge to it. “We were both going to take an early retirement in a couple of years. After all those years of working and raising kids, that was finally going to be our time together. Just the two of us. I’ve waited so long for it. We were going to travel. But how can we if you’re like this? You can’t do this to me. It’s just not fair. I don’t deserve this.” And she burst into sobs.

Thomas knew her grief was speaking, a grief she couldn’t face yet. How he wished he could console her.

* * *

The next morning he began work on the second section of his requiem. The base melody would first sound alone on the viola and then repeat in each subsequent section. Above it he would write another original melody, this time for the clarinet, inspired by Luther’s setting of Psalm 130, *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* or *Out of the depths I cry to you*, a melody in the Phrygian mode and a stately, solemn confession of the need for grace. As before, he sang the hymn several times in his mind, immersing himself in the meaning and mood of the words and music. Then, above the viola score, he visualized a blank staff with a treble clef for the clarinet and experimented with placing notes upon it. After each measure he hummed the clarinet melody

to himself from the beginning and then imagined how it sounded played with the viola melody, checking the harmony as he went. The work proved more challenging than he had expected, and he often lost his concentration. This time it took two weeks until Thomas had composed the two-voiced counterpoint, could hear both melodies distinctly in his mind, and visualize them clearly on the page.

During that time Angelina's irritation gradually turned into desperate pleading.

"I know how much you love your work, Thomas, and I admit that I sometimes complained about the long hours you put in. I felt hurt that you spent more time with your piano than you did with me. Even on the weekends. I confess I felt jealous of your music. You seemed to love it more than you did me. But I promise, if you will just wake up and get better, if you will just come back, I'll never complain again. I'll be the best wife I can be to you." Again she wept.

If only Thomas could tell her how much he loved her, infinitely more than his music. She was the one who inspired all his compositions, and he lived to share them with her—something he would never be able to do with his requiem. Why had he worked such long hours? Only to make her proud of him. Her encouragement and support meant everything to him. If only he could tell her what a good wife she had been.

* * *

In part to lift his own spirits, in part to add contrast to the first two voices of his requiem, Thomas based the oboe melody, to lie just above the clarinet part, on the more hopeful aria from Händel's *Messiah* taken from Psalm 16: *But Thou didst not leave His soul in hell; nor didst Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption*. He had established by now his work routine, humming the model, visualizing the existing score plus a blank staff, and composing a new melody measure by measure.

Of course, the addition of each new voice beyond the repeating existing voices added a layer of complexity that required a greater power of visualization, ability to hear the multi-voiced composition, and memory. Thomas found the work steadily more taxing and himself more fatigued at the end of each day as his strength ebbed. Some two and a half weeks later he had completed the section.

Angelina now showed signs that her initial optimism, irritation, and promising had receded into the background, while grief had finally come to the fore.

“O Thomas, we’ve been together for thirty-six years, but now I feel so all alone. Your body is still here with me, but your mind and your heart are far from me. I miss you so much. Soon, I fear, even your body will be taken from me. Please don’t leave me. I can’t bear to be without you. I’ve heard the phrase a million times, but I never understood what a *broken heart* was until now. I miss everything we had, and I miss everything we were still supposed to have but never will.” Her tears were more bitter than ever.

How could Thomas tell her his mind and heart were with her even more than before? He couldn’t. His heart was breaking too.

* * *

Angelina’s tears at his bedside reminded him of Mary grieving at the crucifixion of Jesus. Originally, he had planned to base the fourth part, for a violin between the viola and the clarinet, on a *Kyrie* from one of Mozart’s *Requiem* Masses; now he had changed his mind in favor of the graceful yet profoundly sorrowful second movement of Hayden’s *Stabat mater*, entitled *O quam tristis et afflicta—Oh, How Sad and Afflicted*. The addition of his own original melody inspired by Haydn took a full three weeks, leaving him drained of strength and even weaker.

By the end of that period Angelina gave evidence of a change. Perhaps she had wept all her tears of anger, fear, and sadness, at least for now. She was no longer tearful.

“I know I’ve been selfish, Thomas, thinking only about what I wanted and what I needed. I entirely forgot that five and a half months ago you told me you never wanted to live like this and asked me to let you go. I didn’t remember that until now, perhaps because I couldn’t bear to. But I know that you want to go rather than stay like this, and maybe you need to also. Don’t worry, my dear. I’m going to speak to the doctor today about taking you off of life support. I’m going to give you what you want. I will always love you, just as I have always loved you. You are the love of my life, my dear Thomas, and I want to give you what you want.”

O God, no, anything but that, Thomas screamed in utter silence. Please don’t let me die until I have finished my requiem. Grant me this one last mercy. I beg you.

* * *

Although he had little strength left, Thomas had to work harder and faster than ever. He mentally added a blank staff with a bass clef for a cello part below the four-voice score he had already composed. On it he would write a melody based on the *Libera me* or *Deliver me*, a responsory from the Office of the Dead, set by Giuseppe Verde in his *Messa da requiem*. It formed a prayer for deliverance from eternal death at the last judgment. For Thomas it became a prayer for deliverance from death before he completed his own requiem.

* * *

Angelina caught Dr. Asa in the halls of the ICU.

“Doctor, I think the time has come to take Thomas off of life support and to let him go.”

Dr. Asa straightened up to his full height. “Mrs. Dushek, I am in the business of saving lives, not taking them. I don’t kill people.”

“For God’s sake, I’m not asking you to kill my husband. I’m saying that it is time to let him die a natural death.”

“There’s no reason for him to die.”

Angelina planted herself squarely on both feet. “There’s no reason for him to live. What kind of life can he have when he can’t do any of the things he loves?”

“But we have no reason to think he’s in any pain. He’s not suffering. Why not let him live?”

“Because you’re taking away his dignity. You feed him through a tube. You turn him every two hours like a sack of potatoes. Someone else has to toilet him and bathe him. You take these extraordinary means just to keep him hovering between life and death.” Her voice had crescendoed.

“Providing nutrition and hydration are hardly extraordinary means of preserving life.” The doctor’s tone was becoming more strident. “We use them every day with thousands of patients across the county.”

“That makes sense when the patient has a chance to recover, but Thomas doesn’t.”

“I told you at the beginning that there is almost no likelihood of a full recovery, but that doesn’t mean that he might not make some progress. If he could even blink an eye, he could communicate. Jean-Dominique Bauby in France wrote an entire book that way.”

“But it’s not what my husband wants.”

“He can’t communicate. We don’t know what he wants.”

“I do.” She was confident of herself.

“Does he have a living will?”

“No. But he told me a little over five months ago what he wants.”

“Did he put anything in writing?”

“Well, no.”

“Were there any witnesses to this conversation?”

“No. It was just the two of us.”

“How can you be sure that he didn’t change his mind?”

“I just know. I’m his wife.” Her self-confidence was eroding.

“You mean you think you know. I’m sorry, Mrs. Dushek, but without a court order we are not going to discontinue his treatment.”

“Then I shall just have to get a lawyer.”

Angelina made an appointment with an attorney that afternoon.

* * *

The next morning she flurried into Thomas’s room.

“I’m afraid the doctor wasn’t very cooperative. But I’ve spoken with a lawyer, and guess what. He is good friends with a judge who often presides over end-of-life cases and supports the right to die. The lawyer feels sure he can get us a hearing in just two weeks and is confident of a favorable ruling. You’ll only have to endure a little longer, my love, and then it will all be over. Then you will have what you want.”

Inwardly Thomas recoiled in horror. He didn’t want to die. Not yet. He had come too far with his requiem to leave his work unfinished now. With five sections complete he had only one to go, but the final labor of visualizing five full staves and one blank staff to be filled in daunted him. His strength had all but abandoned him, and now he would have to strain every nerve, or all would be lost. Angelina was acting out of kindness. But how could kindness be so cruel?

There remained the highest voice, a flute part, to be based on Arvo Pärt's setting of the Canticle of Simeon, *Nunc dimittis*, the first line of which declares, "Lord, you now let your servant depart in peace." More than anything Thomas wanted to make these words his own, which he could do only if he completed his requiem. The simplicity and economy of Pärt's setting was perfect to inspire his final section.

Thomas worked feverishly for the next twelve days, though he began to fade in and out of consciousness. On the evening of the twelfth day he finished the draft of the final section. He spent all his waking moments, which came and went, on the thirteenth day visualizing the six-voice score from beginning to end, listening to the melodies and harmonies, and making minor revisions. When he awoke on the morning of the fourteenth day, the date of the court hearing, he listened in his mind to the entire composition. It was glorious. Yes, he had done it. He had written his finest tribute to his beloved friend, Arthur, and he had prepared through musical meditation and prayer for his own death. It is finished, he thought to himself.

Thomas inhaled peace and satisfaction and sighed out a big breath—his last.

Glossary of Names

Almost all the names in the above stories are chosen for their meanings, which are listed below by story.

The Winner

Vicky: short for “Victoria” (Latin), meaning “victory.” Vicky wins all the bets.

Chance: both “luck” or “fortune” and “risk.” Chance is always willing to take a risk and try his luck, betting with Vicky.

Ventura: luck, fortune (Italian).

Val: short for “Valentine” (Latin), meaning “strong”

Hammer: the tool. As a roofer Val Hammer wielded a strong hammer.

Rocky: like a “rock”

Steinmann: stone man or stonemason (German). Rocky Steinmann was a bricklayer.

Sarge: short for “sergeant,” which comes from the Latin *servire*. Sarge served in the Marines.

Rules Are Made To Be . . .

Mila: dear, gracious (Russian)

Milligan: bald (Gaelic). She shaves her head out of compassionate solidarity.

Connie: constant, steadfast (ultimately from Latin)

Kahler: bald one (German). She faces her cancer and chemotherapy steadfastly.

Alexis: protector, defender (Greek)

Miles: soldier (Latin)

Mrs. Krabbe: crab (German)

Flint: refers to the hardness of the stone

Steinherz: stone (Stein) heart (Herz) (German). He is an unfeeling principal.

Henry: home ruler (Germanic)

Dean: as in English, referring to the senior member of an organization. He is the president of the school board and “rules” the family of the school.

Newman: new man

Duke: leader, general (Latin). He becomes the new principal.

Fathers and Sons

Reuben: from the Hebrew meaning “Behold, a son.”

Abbot: father (Greek). Reuben is a son who has to confront his father before he becomes a father himself.

Hope: the meaning is obvious. She is hoping to have a child.

In the Cold of the Night

Dolores: sorrows (Spanish). She is grieving the loss of her youth, marriage, and son.

G. I. Joe: an “average Joe,” and yet a hero

Light in the Darkness

Vic(tor): the short form is meant in the police-jargon sense of the victim; the long form is the Latin word *victor*, the victorious one

Dolens: the one who is suffering or in pain (Latin)

Viazo: around 1500 the word meant “voyage” in Italian and appears in the title of a work by Niccolò da Poggibonsi. By happy coincidence for this story, it means “I rape” in modern Greek. A real, though rare last name, it was borne at least by Àngel Toldrà Viazo, an Catalanian editor of postcards.

Paulie’s Fight

Andrew: man (Greek)

Freeman: = free man

Colleen: girl or young woman (Irish). Andrew and Colleen Freeman are a man and a woman who want to become free from each other.

Paulie: the diminutive of “Paul,” which means “small” (Latin)

Courtney: short (ultimately from Latin)

Retiro: retreat, retirement (Spanish). By moving to Retiro, Andrew is retreating from his family and retiring from his responsibilities.

Fateful Choice

Jonathan: God’s gift (Hebrew)

Janet: feminine form of John, same meaning

Maddox: fortunate (Welsh). Jonathan and Janet were fortunate to have one another and were God’s gift to each other.

Heiler: healer (German)

The Measure of Love

Maksim: the greatest (Russian, ultimately from Latin). He was a great painter and sociocritical voice in Russia.

Liubova: love (Russian). She discovers her father's love for her and herself as a loved person.

Radomil: dear (*mil*) care (*rad*) (Slavic). He is the only one who cared dearly for Maksim.

Payback

Lance: refers here not to a spear but to a sharp instrument, such as a needle, that might be used to "lance" a boil, for example. Lance considers using a needle to kill Mr. Sauvage.

Michaels: the rhetorical question "Who is like God?" (Hebrew), implying the answer "No one."

Dr. Michaels does the right thing, refraining from using the needle, but not out of any religious motivation.

Sauvage: savage (French)

Jason: healer (Greek)

Lalos: perhaps from Greek. If so, it would mean "talker" or "talking." Jason Lalos is a speech therapist, thus one who talks to heal those with speech impediments.

Family Burdens

Red: is meant to suggest a fiery temperament.

Heissman: in addition to recalling the athlete and suggesting size and strength, the name literally means "hot (*heiss*) man" in German, not in a sexual sense, of course, but in an emotional one. He has a quick temper.

Spike: a nickname, given without further explanation.

Agudo: sharp (Spanish). He is a "sharp spike," apt for his aggressive provocations.

Prediger: preacher (German)

Goodman: = good man

Russell: little red one (French). He looks up to Red.

Brotherly Love

Joshua: savior (Hebrew). He saves his brother's life twice. He has the nickname "Citizen Cane" and plays the part of the biblical Cain, the envious brother.

Pascal: Passover (Hebrew). Joshua Pascal is "passed over."

Abel: a homonym of "able." Abel is the "able" one in the family.

Gracie

Gracie: grace, favor, kindness (Latin)

Marter: torture (German), but a homonym with "martyr." Gracie shows kindness but is martyred.

Dr. Marter: "doctor" originally meant "teacher" (Latin). Dr. Marter attempts to teach Gracie about the dangers that lead to her martyrdom. His name suggests that he may suffer the same fate as she.

Eric: ruler (Norse). He is the team leader.

Amy: beloved (ultimately from Latin). She is Eric's wife.

Nuwairah: small fire (Arabic). She is the team's cook.

Tahir: virtuous (Arabic). She is an innocent child.

Qismah: destiny, fate (Arabic). She believes her daughter's condition is their punishment for their sins.

Nasir: helper, protector (Arabic). He protects the family by his faithfulness to his religion.

Kifah: struggle (Arabic). The child struggles with a disability.

Husam al Din: sword of the faith (Arabic)

el-Hashem: the crusher (Arabic). He murders Gracie.

Note: the imam's sermon is based on the following verses from the Quran: 2:190–191, 4:76, 9:005, 61:004, and 8:17.

The Violin

Darien: wealthy (Irish)

Chapman: a buyer and seller (Old English, related to the German "Kaufmann"). Darien Chapman is an art and antiques dealer.

Folton: fool's (*fol*) town (*ton*) (Old English). Darien considers the antique dealers in that town fools.

Hamstead: home (*ham*) place (*stede*) (Old English). Hamstead is the place where Darien lives.

Geigersville: violinist's (*Geigers*) (German) town (*ville*) (French). Geigersville is where the violinist lives.

Theodorus: gift of God (*Greek*)

Mousa: muse (Greek). Theodorus Mousa is divinely gifted with inspiration from the muse of music.

Otto: wealth, fortune (Germanic)

Kaufmann: buyer, trader, dealer (German). He is Darien Chapman's purchasing agent for items of great value.

Friday Night

Patrick: father (ultimately from the Latin *pater* via the derivative *patricianus*)

Solus: alone (Latin). Patrick is a father who has been left alone by the death of his wife and the adoption of his daughter.

Désirée: the one desired, longed for, yearned for (French)

Winona: daughter (from the Dakota language)

Delicia: pleasure, delight (Latin)

The Confession

Kent: born of fire (a contraction of the Scandinavian "Kennet")

Conley: purifying fire (Gaelic). Kent Conley's purification is born of fire.

God Bless America

Cristóbal: Spanish for "Christopher," the Christ-bearer (Greek). He is meant to be a Christ-figure.

Pura: the pure one (Spanish)

Diego: possibly the “protector” (Spanish, ultimately from Hebrew)

Mr. Reichman: rich (*reich*) man (German)

Madeleine: from Magdalene (Hebrew), the repentant sinner of the Gospels

Chase: a hunter or “chaser” (Middle English)

Argent: silver, money (French). Chase Argent is a chaser of money.

The River of Life

Amanda: nominative feminine singular gerundive of the Latin *amare* with various senses, one of which is “the one (yet) to be loved.”

Bristol: the site of the bridge (from the name of a city in England). Amanda Bristol realizes at the site of the bridge how she is to be loved.

Orvos: doctor (Hungarian)

Doug: short for Douglas = dark river (Scottish)

Lethe: the classical river of forgetfulness (Greek). Doug Lethe is a “dark river of forgetfulness” in that he can’t remember Amanda even after being told who she is.

Sal: short for “Salvatore,” which means “savior” (Italian)

Retter: rescuer (German). Sal Retter saves Amanda from suicide and rescues her from the bridge.

The Package

Carl: man (Germanic)

van der Val: of the trap (Dutch). Carl van der Val is a man caught in the trap set by his supervisor.

Darina: fruitful, fertile (from Gaelic). She is pregnant.

Blake: black (one possible meaning of an Old English word)

Barterman: a trader. Blake Barterman trades drugs on the black market.

Nico: victory (Italian from Greek). He wins out over Nino.

Fratellini: plural diminutive of “brother” (Italian)

Emilio: rival (Italian from Latin). Nico and Emilio are brothers, and Emilio has always rivaled Nico, though in negative ways.

Dick: used in the slang sense of “detective”

Yeager: hunter (probably an Anglicized spelling of a German name). Dick Yeager, along with his partner, is a detective hunting for criminals.

Signorelli: little lords (Italian). They are the leading family of a criminal organization.

Brian: perhaps “high” from an old Celtic element

Elder: older. Brian Elder is an older gentleman from upper management.

The Tragedy of Stevie-Jay

Estevão: crown (Portuguese from Greek)

Joalheiro: Jeweler (Portuguese from Latin)

Buz: contempt(uous) (Hebrew)

Starek: old man (Slavic). Buz Starek is an older man contemptuous of the younger generation.

Greg: vigilant (Greek)

Abner: “my father is a light” (Hebrew). Greg Abner is the vigilant father figure.

Reese: enthusiastic (Welsh)

Young: youth. Reese Young is the enthusiastic youth.

Lex: law (Latin)

Cosmo: order (Greek). Together the two detectives represent law and order.

Robin: = robbin’

Latro: thief (Latin). Robin Latro is one of the thieves who robs Mr. J.

Rhett: advice, counsel (Dutch)

Conrad: brave (*con*) counsel (*rad*) (Germanic)

Campbell: crooked mouth (Scottish)

Scheuster: shyster (a spurious eponym)

Schirmer: defender (German)

Klaeger: prosecutor (German)

Rehabilitation

Chuck: nickname for “Charles” = man, warrior (Germanic)

Andrews: man (Greek). The bully Chuck Andrews is a “warrior man.”

Curtis: courteous (Old French)

Klein: small (German). He is courteous and small, the exact opposite of a bully.

Drew: diminutive of Andrew, meaning “man” (Greek)

Austin: venerable (ultimately from Latin). He is a venerable little man.

Three Unforgettable Days

Kemp: champion, athlete, warrior (Middle English)

Armstrong: of the strong arm

Santos: holy, consecrated (Spanish, ultimately from Latin)

The Interrogation

Adams: man (Hebrew). He is “the man.”

Zac: short for Zachaeus = pure (Hebrew)

Reinemund: pure mouth (German). Zac Reinemund is telling the truth.

Sissy: nickname for sister

The Judge

Justin: just (Latin)

Richter: judge (German). Justin Richter grows up to become a just judge.

Wright: a homonym of “right.” Officer Wright presumes to be right, and the court takes him as such.

Dion: a short form of “Dionysos” (Greek), the god of wine, revelry, fertility, and dance.

Gregory: watchful, alert (Greek)

Lambe: homonym of “lamb.” Mr. Lambe comes well-prepared to trial but is no match for Ken Wolfe.

Ken: born of fire (Gaelic)

Wolfe: homonym of “wolf.” Ken Wolfe is a fiery orator who devours Mr. Lambe like a wolf.

Rede: counsel, advice (Old English). He is Justin’s counselor.

Cyrus: young (Persian through Greek)

Voigt: overseer, bailiff, lawyer (Middle High German). Cyrus Voigt is the young lawyer who prosecutes his boss, Mr. Wolfe.

The Language of Dreams

Mort: short for Mortimer (from *morte mer* = dead sea). By itself Mort means “dead” (French).

Weismann: wise (*weise*) man (*Mann*) (German). He is a dead wise man.

Dulcie: sweet (ultimately from Latin)

Dromer: dreamer (Dutch). She is the sweet dreamer, whose dreams become sweet only in the sense that they turn out to be true.

Dalton: valley (*dal*) town (*ton*) (Old English)

Rayne: counselor (Germanic). He is a mundane counselor, incapable of a spiritual view of things.

Rob Steele: homonyms for to “rob” and “steal”

Amalia: work (a Latinized form of a Germanic name). Perhaps she identified herself with her work, which Dr. Steele stole from her and published under his own name.

Magnum Opus

Thomas: twin (Hebrew)

Dushek: soul (Slavik). He and Arthur are “twin souls.”

Angelina: little angel (ultimately from Greek)

Arthur: no known etymology. The short form “Art,” not used in the story, nevertheless suggests that music was his art.

Geiger: violinist (German)

Nadiya: hope (Ukrainian). She hopes her husband will recover.

Asa: doctor (Hebrew)