

## STILL LIFE

by David Klein

### Part One

#### 1

Jane answers late-night phone calls on the first ring. "Yes," she says, listening, nodding in the dark, one hand already smoothing her hair into place. Then she hangs up and dashes off to the hospital, leaving me to curse the ruin of sleep. I've acquired this peculiar habit living with her: I sleep well only when she is next to me.

This time she nudges me.

"Someone is asking for Vinny," she says.

No one calls me Vinny.

Jane hands over the receiver and watches carefully.

"Hello?"

"Vinny?"

One person calls me Vinny.

"Dad?" I get out of bed, naked, my feet tensing on the cold hardwood floor. "Is that you?" I walk out of the bedroom, descend the stairs in the dark, one hand on the banister for balance.

"Your voice sounds different, not the way I've been remembering it," he says. "You never came to see me, Vinny. All these years. But I'll forgive you. Your mother brought me home tonight, I'm all settled in. It's so good to be home."

"Mom didn't give you my number."

"Your mother's asleep," my father says.

"Of course she's asleep. It's the middle of the night."

In the ensuing pause I hear the deep, low wheeze indicating that Jack Howell is thinking. More like misfiring synapses.

A light flicks at the top of the stairs; Jane is following me. I get as far as the front door and stop. What am I going to do—escape bare-assed into the winter night? I am trapped.

My father says, “There's ice on the lake. Not enough yet for skating, but it's there, it's taken so long to freeze this year. Remember how smooth it can be? I'm looking out there now, what an incredible view. And the moon is brilliant tonight, round and full.”

I look out the window and twist my neck and sure enough there's the moon, just like he says. The same moon he's looking at right now. I imagine the lake, too, through the leafless gap in the trees that winter opened like a cathedral door. I remember the silvery expanse of the season's first ice. What my father says is true. When ice forms, if there is no snow, if the wind has not rippled the new crystals, there is a day or two, sometimes only a few hours, when the first thin sheet of ice becomes both a mirror and a window. Look from one angle and you see the bottom of the lake—the murk and old logs and bloated plants—then from another angle, just by blinking, you can see the reflected clouds and sun, at night the moon and pinpoint stars. The clarity is magnificent, the colors true and vivid. We called it a miracle.

“Can you see the moon tonight where you are, Vinny?”

“Yes.” My voice flat, response clipped and curt.

“I'm home Vinny,” he says. “And this time it's for real, not just a weekend pass.”

“Is that what Mom said?”

Jane is behind me, mentally recording every word I say. I must be careful with my words, for her and for him.

“But I don't know where you are,” he tells me.

I say, “It's late. You should try to get some sleep.”

“Vinny, I have something important to tell you. That's why I'm calling.”

I wait, but he doesn't continue. Finally, “What is it?” I say.

“When are you coming home, son?”

*Never.* I tell him I have to go, and hang up. A firework pops in my chest, embers flare up my throat and down my stomach. Inside, I'm burning; on the outside, exposed and shivering without clothes. I squeeze the phone as if trying to crush it in my hands. It doesn't ring again.

“Vincent,” Jane says.

“I'm freezing, I have to get in bed,” I say. I hurry back upstairs and scrunch down under the covers, curling like shrimp to get warm again. Milky rays of moonlight slant behind the curtains. Jane sits on the edge of the mattress, keeping her distance.

“At least look at me.”

I turn, grudgingly, trying to think fast.

“Vincent, you told me your father was dead.”

*Damn.* I have been accused before of saying and doing things that I no longer remember. If Jane says I told her my father was dead, I probably did, early in our relationship, when we exchanged family histories and I stated my father had passed away years ago. But from what? Did I say cancer or heart disease? A car accident or in his sleep? I must have kept my story simple. Jane is a doctor. If she asked questions she could trip me up.

Now she nudges my memory: “You said he drowned one summer in the lake by your house.”

Oh, right, I remember now. It's amazing how much easier it is to forget a lie you tell than one you hear. “I meant my grandfather drowned,” I say, but I'm caught on the ropes, I'm about to go down.

“You made a mistake like that?”

“Well . . . he is dead—for me. My father. We don't have a relationship.”

“Is that really how you want to answer? Have you been keeping a secret from me all this time? Have you been lying about something like this?”

Once she gets started, Jane storms me with questions, one after the other they rain on me. Her careful phrasing opens the opportunity for me to lie even more, dig my trench hopelessly deeper. I never know which question to answer first, which she asked first, which are rhetorical, so I duck them all, hiding under an umbrella of shrugged shoulders and confusion and bad jokes.

“It's a long story,” I tell her. “I didn't want to bore you with the details.”

“That is such bullshit,” Jane says. She looks at me differently now, clinically, perhaps like a wound she must treat. She is quickly re-assessing everything I've ever told her, dividing each statement—I'm sure she remembers them all, has them safely locked up with her Phi Beta Kappa key—into what she believes and what might be a lie. How about the time I told her how much I love her? Or how beautiful she is? Or that because of her I'm happier than I've ever been? Were those all lies, too?

They weren't. I swear they weren't.

“I'm sorry,” I say.

She can see how distressed I am, and rather than make me face a gale she tacks toward a gentler wind, for now.

“Why did he call you so late?” she asks. “Are you an entire family of owls?” This is her own joke, which is a play on my last name, Howell. The same as Thurston Howell III from that old TV show, *Gilligan's Island*. What an unlikely bunch of morons that was to get shipwrecked together. I used to endure jokes in school, back when Gilligan re-runs were popular. Hey Howell, where's Luvie? Another one was: Howell you doing Thurston? Howell you ever get off that

island? There were others, too, I don't remember. I used to swear I'd change my name as soon as I was old enough. Now, since I can never get back to sleep again after Jane is called into work, she calls me Owl. Secretly I like it. I'm intrigued by an owl's vigilant eyes, its nighttime predatory habits, the clean query of its language: who? who? who? Always left unanswered.

Jane's last name is Oujima. I have yet to think up a joke in return. Not much rhymes with Oujima, except the last part of Hiroshima, which is not funny.

Also not funny is how she has grouped me with my father: two insomniacs, a family of owls. I will rage against this coupling, as with all comparisons between myself and that man. I want nothing to do with him. There is a reason I said he was dead. Many reasons.

"Come on, come back to bed," I say.

The other member of our household, Matisse, is up, kneading and purring on my chest. I smother him with strokes, his fur floats, butt arches in the air. I move him aside, then turn to Jane. "I shouldn't have kept this from you."

"Vinny. I've never heard anyone call you Vinny. That name doesn't sound like you."

"It's not. I hate it."

"Your cheeks are wet. Are you crying? Tell me—what is it about your father?"

"No, please, not now."

She slips under the covers, still wearing her robe. Immediately I reach for her, inside the folds, find her warm skin, nudge closer to annex myself to her. I kiss her neck. I must lose myself in her flesh, salve myself with her body, forget that phone call from my father.

She resists. "No, not now. This isn't what you want."

And so it starts. This is the first time she's turned down an overture to make love; we're still that new and sparkly—or were until five minutes ago. But I don't blame her. She doesn't know what to make of this new and unsettling discovery about me. She wants an explanation, but in convincing detail, not abortive late-night whispers. You do not lie to the person you love about whether your parents are living or dead; there must be a darn good reason for withholding such information. So what is it, Vincent?

Jane waits me out, but I have nothing to say. Finally she looks at the clock: 3:20 a.m. Her shift starts at seven. For Jane, late night phone calls have always meant explosions at foundries, highway pile-ups, a psychotic gunman opening fire in a diner. She races to the hospital to stabilize burn victims, straighten broken limbs, dam blood draining from wrecked bodies. I've seen her dressed and out the door in less than two minutes, not even stopping to brush her teeth. She has revived people declared clinically dead, has felt life slip irretrievably away in her arms;

then she'll come home in the evening, kick off her shoes, put her feet up on the couch and watch TV while I cook dinner. It's an arrangement we both like.

But whatever is going on with Vincent now will have to wait. She must be fresh for the morning. She fluffs her pillow, sighs, turns away from me. No good night whisper. No kiss, no embrace, no removing of the robe.

Within minutes, she is snoring lightly. She can always sleep, no matter what, a skill she picked up in medical school when a few minutes of downtime on twenty-four hour shifts provided her only chance to recharge. Now she will snooze for three hours before the alarm goes off.

I, on the other hand, lie awake, shackled and rigid. Fear grips my joints like arthritis. It has color but no shape: blue, indigo, claret. Shadow but no clarity. A blur of doubt. Perhaps there is a familiar face hidden within its bruise shadows, if you look closely, which I don't.

I lie bleary-eyed and ashen until dawn.

## 2

I have coffee and a toasted bagel with peanut butter ready for Jane. She takes her coffee with a splash of cream and a shovel of sugar, waits for the steam to settle, then gulps it down in three lukewarm sips. I prefer mine boiling and black.

With my coffee I swallow a Ziemat, my new mood helper. About two months ago I finished a series of paintings I'd been working on for over a year. I loved the paintings, then I hated them. I had this huge letdown and couldn't paint. I couldn't even hold a brush. My hand felt weak, almost atrophied. I stopped eating, I started drinking too much. I hit the weed again. I turned bleak, and Jane, my sweetheart and savior, my personal physician, came home one day with a prescription for me. I didn't ask her to get me anything; I wouldn't have occurred to me. But I accepted the pills eagerly, and took them as needed. My blues faded.

There are no side effects, except a dry mouth and the need to pee more. I don't get stoned or even fuzzy or numb. There's nothing transportive about the drug, it doesn't take me to a higher plane or anything like that. Rather, I feel firmly planted, fortified, like I have a solid defense to ward off anything that might want to attack, from inside or out. The world isn't so dark, either. I've recently started working again on new paintings for an upcoming exhibit.

I don't take the pills all the time. I dole them out like survival rations, afraid to ask for a refill. I think of it as a special occasion medication, like when your father rises from the dead and you haven't slept because of it.

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Jane carries her bagel to the bedroom and eats while dressing. Coffee in hand, I stand in the doorway and watch her. Between strokes with a mascara brush she glances at me through the vanity mirror. She is beautiful, and, at the moment, angry. Her eyes are a stunning chocolate brown, almond shaped with hooded lids, her face a unique geometry of creamy angles. Often she appears exotic beyond my dreams; other times not, more like an alien of the Orient whose face I can never decipher. How disorienting to live with someone and constantly wonder what enigma huddles beneath the flesh. It's no surprise I'm always trying to get in there, always drawing and painting her. By any measure, she is a knockout. I'm not ashamed that physical beauty is important to me when it comes to women, which is probably why I've had so few of them. I once broke off a relationship because I couldn't warm to the shape of my partner's mouth, its tiny handlebar-like ends curling when she smiled; its proportions just never looked right to me. I know that's shallow and she had other fine points, but we all have standards and tastes and I couldn't get past her mouth; besides, my mistake wasn't rejecting her but rather starting up with her in the first place when I knew a key aesthetic was missing. I'm sure I've missed opportunities for meaningful and mature relationships, but at least the path I've chosen has gotten me to Jane, the first woman I can imagine a future with. It's true—I've never been in love before, until now. So I'm not sure how it all works. But at a minimum, Jane has no obvious physical flaws to send me packing, although I might have a few that don't meet her standards. If so, she hasn't mentioned them yet.

We met six months ago when a police cruiser brought me to the emergency room of Millard Fillmore Hospital. I'd struck a pothole riding my bicycle, was ejected from my saddle, and smacked my head on the pavement. No helmet. This happened at the bottom of a hill just as I approached a busy intersection. I was going too fast and couldn't swerve because there was a car on my left, the curb on my right. My acrobatics created a huge traffic jam. A crowd gathered and someone called for help. I blanked out and woke up and blanked again. The police came and didn't wait for an ambulance. They stuck me in the back of their car on a hard plastic bench seat that was okay to bleed on, which I did. I thought I might be dying. I was so scared. I was trembling. I'd been beaten up before and in a car accident and banged my head and cut my mouth, but nothing like this. I didn't know if the throbbing, pressurized sensation like a balloon being inflated in my brain was the sign of impending death or just a surface scratch.

In the emergency room I drifted in and out of consciousness and kept reaching to hold Jane's hand while she tried to assess my condition. She looked like an angel from a long forgotten dream of mine, and as soon as I realized she wasn't the angel of death coming for me I tried to kiss her. She gently but firmly pushed me away. I babbled senselessly, she told me later. I insisted I knew her from somewhere, I asked her over and over where we'd met. Where are you from? How do I know you? Why are you so familiar? She smiled and told me to keep still, cleaned gravel out of my wound, sewed twenty-seven sutures into my skull and wrapped my head. She admonished me for not wearing a helmet while riding a bike.

The next day I returned to the hospital with the bandage and a huge headache. I apologized for my behavior and said, "Don't I know you from somewhere?" She let me buy her a coffee after her shift and I tried to kiss her again.

She is a third year resident in emergency medicine, originally from Seattle but having found her way to Buffalo for medical school and staying on for her residency. At thirty, she is three years older than me but looks five years younger. There are no spider webs nested in the corners of her eyes, no furrows etched in her forehead. Only a slight dryness to her skin, and a tendency to scale and parch where the flesh is stretched tight over her prominent cheekbones. She is aware of this and rubs lotion on herself every night, detailing her face and neck. "Look how I'm aging," she often says, surprised and resentful, as if this were a predicament unique to her.

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"I'm mad at you," she tells me now, holding my gaze in the mirror.

I repeat the obvious. "He isn't dead."

She turns and faces me so we're not eyeing each other in the mirror. "You can go on."

"He's been hospitalized for a long time. In and out. I don't know if he's got manic depression, but he's got something. Schizophrenia? Dementia? I don't know if he's been labeled. I don't know if it's physiological or psychological or both or neither. I stopped trying to figure him out years ago."

"It's called bipolar disorder now, not manic depression."

"Whatever the name, he probably has it."

"Is he on medication?"

"Lots, according to my mother."

"When did you last see him?"

"There's no reason for us to keep in touch. We have nothing to do with each other, nothing in common."

She considers this statement for a moment, then says: "He's your father, isn't he? If my memory of biology serves me right, there is a connection here. You said he's back at home? Did you know he was coming home?"

"My mother didn't tell me. Sometimes he was home for weekends."

"If he called you and he's back home, then maybe he's better."

"I doubt it." The thought of him back in the house under the watchful and sad eyes of my mother twists my stomach. How can she stand it?

"I'd say he's reaching out to you," Jane suggests. "You didn't answer my question: When's the last time you saw him?"

"Ten years and eight months."

"Not that you're keeping track."

At least I didn't add the fourteen days.

"When I get home tonight maybe you can tell me the whole story, if you want."

No, I don't want, but I can see I'm going to have to.

She puts down the mascara brush and starts with eye-liner. "You shouldn't have lied to me. It was a breach of trust."

"I know, I said I was sorry, and I am."

"Did you think you'd get away with that story forever?"

"I wasn't thinking," I say, an honest answer. The concept of forever had not entered my mind when I lied to her about my father. I looked neither into the future nor the past, but simply had said what came natural to me, albeit through years of practice. Only recently have I considered Jane and I might have a future together and that errors in reporting such as this one might come to light and require further clarification.

"I guess you figured I'd never get around to meeting your parents," Jane says.

"When we first met . . . well, I didn't know," I say. "I've been saying that about my father out of habit."

She sighs. Demerit for Vincent.

"What are you doing today?" she asks.

"Getting my story together."

"Other than that."

"Painting. Some chores around here. Go for a run. I guess just the usual."

She applies a pale pink lipstick and smacks her lips together. Then she is finished. She pushes her chair back and is on her feet, moving toward the door, stopping long enough to kiss me, briefly, her face serious, distracted, thoughts already turning to work.



I say, “Hey, there was something in the paper about a guy at the hospital who had his whole left side amputated in an accident.”

She stops and looks at me.

“He's *all right* now.”

There is a slight stall, but then her smile comes, half-hearted, but it's the first time her mouth has moved in that direction this morning. “Funny,” she says.

“Tell that one to your doctor buddies.”

“You okay?” she asks. “I mean, that joke was really bad.”

“You laughed.”

“Sort of—just to be polite.”

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After Jane leaves, I call my mother. If my father answers, I'm hanging up, but I hear my mother's voice, the same cheery hello whether she's won at church bingo or is suffering a migraine headache.

“Vincent, I'm glad you called. I wanted to talk to you.”

“What is Dad doing home?”

“Oh, did you talk to your sister already? I was going to call you today to let you know.”

“Celine didn't call me, but Dad did—in the middle of the night.”

“He's been having trouble sleeping with the change in environment, but your father's doing so much better. He's cut way down on his medication.”

“Is that a good idea?”

“It's what he wanted—and to be home. It's what I want, too. I'm retired now and I can be here for him.”

“I'm worried about you there alone with him.”

“Don't be silly. Everything is going to be all right, Vincent.”

“Calling me in the middle of the night is all right?”

“He misses you so much. You can't give your father a few minutes after all this time?”

“So his doctors said it was okay for him to go home? They released him, right?”

“Your father didn't need to be released. He wasn't being held against his will, you know. It was completely voluntary.”

I guess I knew he wasn't a prisoner, but I want the doctors to bless the idea of my father returning home.

“You'll call Celine if you need help?”

“Your sister stops over every day.” She pauses, then adds, “Maybe you’d like to come up one of these weekends. We could have the whole family back together. It’s been a long time.”

“That’s hard, Mom. Jane usually works one weekend night.”

“You don’t have to answer now, but give the idea some thought.”

I thought I already had answered.

“How is Jane?”

“She’s great, really. I feel pretty lucky. I’ve never been happier.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her.”

“You will, don’t worry.” But with my father there, I’ve missed my chance to bring Jane home to meet my mother. There’s no way I’m going now.

My mother must hear me thinking, because she says, “Vincent, the past is past and there’s nothing we can do about it. Your father’s a different man now. We should all look forward, that’s what I say.”

“You’re right, Mom. Believe me, I don’t want to think about the past, either.”

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I pour myself another cup of coffee and head upstairs to the spare bedroom I use as my studio. It’s not big but has two north facing windows offering a painter’s light. There’s an old fainting coach with frayed fabric where I pose Jane and a bar stool I sit on sometimes when painting. My pails and tubes and brushes are everywhere and the room smells like paint thinner and oil. The hardwood floor is so splattered you’d have to sand it down an inch to see the grain. Stacked five and six deep against two walls are my finished paintings stretched on frames. On a third wall I tack my works in progress; easel in the corner.

The painting I’m working on now, a six-by-four foot canvas, depicts a boy skating on a frozen lake, smooth as a window. He wears a white scarf like a bandage wrapped around his head and his mouth is puckered and tight, as if he were whistling. He’s captured mid-stride, one leg trailing behind him and leaving a groove in the ice from the blades of his skates that etch an impossible pattern for a skater.

This morning when I look at the painting something is wrong, there’s no depth or meaning, it’s all surface, and not just because so much of the composition is the flat ice, gray and white and blue. I like my paintings to tell a story, actually two stories—one story inside another—but this work lacks narrative. Plus the spatial mechanics are wrong. In fact, I’m afraid I have to start over because the boy in relation to the ice is out of proportion and his figure too far to one side; the trailing etched pattern in the ice isn’t enough to balance the elements.

I stare at it for a long time. I don't know what to do. How could I have thought this almost complete? It's shit, really—and I know I'm not going to get any work done this morning.

But I won't stand here in agony, trying to force my hand. And I won't impulsively paint over the canvas, not yet. Besides, it's still not completely dry from yesterday. I'm one of these oil paint freaks who considers acrylics second rate material, even though many respected artists use them. Maybe it's just because oils don't dry as quickly and that prevents me from painting over my work after a knee-jerk negative reaction, like the one I'm having now. I've found it's better to look at my results for a few days before making any decisions.

The decision I do make is to leave the studio and shut the door behind me, then start my routine for those days when I can't paint. I make our bed and wash the few breakfast dishes, leaving them on the rack to air dry. I keep the house tidy, the least I can do given that I don't pay anything toward the mortgage.

Not that Jane cares. Left alone, she'd pick up her clothes only when she runs out of clean ones to wear, which happens about once a month. Then she'd either do laundry or go shopping. She has a magnificent wardrobe crammed in the bedroom closet like a ten-person family in a two-room apartment. She'll scrub the tub on the rare occasions she wants to take a bath instead of a shower—or more likely I'll scrub it for her. She is not deliberately lazy or a slob; she is an emergency room physician, accustomed to orderlies cleaning up the bloody mess. She's just not the domestic type. Household chores are not part of her consciousness. Unlike me, who doesn't have a job, who stays home most of the time. I have plenty of time to mop the floor.

You should have seen her house when I first moved in. Half the windows were painted shut. Some of panes were cracked. Two treads on the stairs were loose. The bathroom tile chipped. Jane's house is a hundred years old, one of Buffalo's Victorian-era gems, a cedar clapboard structure on one of the only streets in the city with elms still growing. Most of these trees disappeared years ago in a plague of Dutch elm disease. The trunks grow tall and straight, and the branches, bare now, reach up like an alluvial fan at a river's mouth. Jane's front and back yards are small but well maintained, thanks to me. The yards are connected by a narrow driveway running a chute between Jane's house and the one next door, ending at a one-car garage at the back of the fenced property line.

Before Jane met me she either hired someone to do everything from cutting the grass to replacing the hot water heater, or left it undone. Her homeowner's toolkit contained two items: a checkbook and a phonebook. She hasn't the time or skill for home repair, but wanted to live in a real house and not some condo like most single professionals do. She said that would make her feel too lonely.

Last month I put new tile around the bathroom sink, dark blue with a splash border of gray. I made a few mistakes which I filled with grout; Jane didn't notice. She acted like I'd performed a miracle, as if laying tile stood on par with saving lives in the ER. I also installed a hardwood floor in the kitchen. Jane pays for the tools I need, saying it's cheaper than hiring someone to do the work. I also do all of the cooking. Nothing fancy, but I can open an empty-looking refrigerator and come up with a meal, and Jane will eat and praise anything I make. She's got it pretty good. So do I.

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After picking up inside I go out and sweep away a dusting of snow that fell early this morning. It's been a strange winter and everyone's been talking about the weather: mild with hardly any snow. A typical winter brings about thirty inches or more of lake effect snow by now and sub-freezing temperatures every night.

While sweeping the porch steps I hear the phone ring four times and stop. It rings again fifteen minutes later, but when I go inside to get a drink there are no messages. I doubt it was my father, who wouldn't be so ordinary as to call during the day.

I go back to my studio but this time I get so anxious I can't even look at my painting. I turn and shut the door hard as if I'd just seen a monster in there. Take the day off, I tell myself, don't force anything. I decide a run is what I need. I change into running gear and strap my watch on. When I open the door, Matisse runs out, sits on the front stoop and licks his paws. Sometimes I wish I had a dog who could run along with me, but dogs are too extroverted, undignified, sticking their noses in strangers' crotches and squatting anywhere. You always draw attention to yourself by calling to them a hundred times when they run off to chase other dogs. I prefer the clean and stealthy dignity of a cat, an animal you'd never expect to come when called and so you don't bother embarrassing yourself shouting after it. I'm willing to pay the price of a cat's occasional indifference.

I check my watch and start out. Some days I run randomly around the neighborhood, up and down blocks of neatly arranged houses, skimpy lawns covered with frosted leaves that never got raked, streets lined with parked cars. Other days I run down to the river, the current gray or blue depending on the sky, along the break wall as far as the rowing club and back, timing how long it takes. Anywhere from forty to forty-five minutes.

I opt for the break wall and rowing club today because who knows how long before it gets snowed in and frozen over. I start out and barely break a sweat when suddenly my father is there cheering, cajoling, urging me on, stopwatch in his hand, yelling at me to lengthen my stride, breathe through my nose, relax my shoulders, keep my head up. Quit being such a lazy little shit!

He'd show me how if he could. He'd run my ass into the ground. I remember he always horned in on the coach's territory, complaining to him that the team didn't train hard enough, and that I should run the mile instead of the half on the track. He thought I was a slow starter—a “late bloomer” he called me—not ready to kick into gear until I had few laps under my belt. The coach was kind enough not to say anything to me about my father's disruptive behavior. I never looked my father's way during a race, although from the corner of my eye I could see his arms flapping like flags, hear him shouting, feel him like ants on my back. I ached to win for him, but the only time I ever placed first was in the one race my father didn't attend. It was a soggy cross-country meet under a steady downpour in Moreau State Park. A lot of runners lost their footing and fell; one kid from Glens Falls got his foot caught and broke a bone. I have a heavy stride and kept plodding, sometimes sinking up to my ankles and sucking out my shoe with an abrupt jerk of my leg. I splatted along, slipping but staying up. When I crossed the finish line first I was so ecstatic I dove into a mud puddle and slapped and rolled around.

After that lone victory I got the reputation of being a mudder. My father hadn't been there because he'd accidentally locked himself in the attic that afternoon while looking through some old boxes and was stuck for hours until my mother got home from work. When I told him later I'd won he didn't believe me until he read the results in the paper the next morning. He said, “Did you have to win when I wasn't there? Did you do that just to disappoint me?”

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On the break wall separating the canal from the swift Niagara River, a few bundled fisherman hold their poles in the water; they've been here since first light, with buckets of live bait, hoping to catch a sturgeon or bass. I smell the smoke of their cigarettes and pipes as I pass. Right now I'm between pain. The first and last miles always hurt, before I'm warmed up and after I'm worn down, but in the middle of the run I feel light-headed and high, the way I used to get smoking pot. My father recedes and I'm no longer in a race but have become a gazelle loping across the savannah; I am an Indian returning victoriously from the hunt, my moccasins padding silently along the wooded trail; I am a perfectly-tuned engine; a healthy pumping heart.

I turn around at the rowing club and as soon as I start back the pain sets in, a stab in my side, and my father is there at the finish line, waving frantically, yelling at me to pick up the pace, pick up the pace, where's your kick! He's gaining on you! You're falling behind!

By the time I make it home I'm blinded by my own sweat. I've come in a disappointing second. I didn't have enough kick at the end and was passed in the last hundred yards. I look at my watch: forty-six minutes. What a sorry dog. Caught from behind, the worst thing that can happen.

The clouds are breaking up, but not my overcast mood. My father is home again and has found me. I know what he did last night. He palmed his pills and roamed the house after my mother had fallen asleep. He found my mother's address book hidden in her coupons drawer and looked up my telephone number. He stalked after shadows in his pajamas. He watched the moon inch across the sky. He studied the still lake, searching for ripples, unexpected eddies, waiting for ice. He called me. He counted the stars and wrote the number down on a piece of scrap paper. My mother found him this morning, asleep on the living room floor, or in the cellar, his head resting on a pile of dirty clothes.

### 3

Jane comes home late from the hospital after a busy shift. Usually she tells me about the patients parading through the ER that day, but today she volunteers no details. She does not want to be close. She doesn't notice or mention all the work I've done around the house. I've made one of her favorite dinners—lasagna—but she only forks the noodles around on her plate. Usually we love Italian food, stuffing ourselves and then rubbing each other's belly. Not this time.

She wants to know more about my father. She wants to know what he has done that compels me to tell people—even the woman I love, *especially* the woman I love—that he is dead.

I tell her I don't want to remember. I don't want to think about him.

"So you can forget about him, just like that?" she asks.

"I'm trying to," I say. "But if we keep talking like this it's going to be hard."

Her eyes drill me. I shouldn't have said that; this is no time to make jokes.

"Everything's a big joke, huh?"

"I don't think it's funny. I just don't want to talk about it right now."

"Vincent, if you can't talk about this to me, who can you talk to?"

"No one. And that's the way I want it."

"Keeping your feelings pent up can break down your immune system. The link between psychology and pathology is clear. A lot of sickness is related to repression."

"It causes a lot of those broken legs you see in the ER?"

"Apparently it also makes people mean."

"I'm not repressing. God, I despise that kind of talk. There's nothing wrong with me, I'm not crazy, I'm not mentally—"

"You're blowing my comments out of proportion. I just want you to be able to talk with me about something that's painful to you."

"—and I'm never sick. Have you once seen me catch a cold? I don't even get sore throats. I don't even sneeze." I regret my sharp voice, but can't tone it down. Anything related to my father brings out the worst in me.

I get up and clear the table.

"You're missing the point," Jane says.

She waits a few minutes before asking, "Did he hit you?"

"Never," I say, turning back to her from the sink. "It wasn't like that at all." Perhaps if he'd been some violent alcoholic who beat me in drunken rages it would be easier to explain. You can empathize with hate if it had spawned in the clammy cellar you were locked in. Your lies and denial can be forgiven if you'd been raped by your parent. But I endured no such tortures.

Jane tells me she's here for me when I'm ready, then says good night and goes upstairs. I hear the bedroom door shut, a symbolic gesture only, because there's no way I'm sleeping on the couch over this. I'd rather move out now and sleep on the street, if that's the case. But maybe not tonight, it's twenty-four degrees outside.

—

The thing is, I don't like to dwell on the past, it can remove you too much from life at the moment. You start tracing patterns, how you got here from there, deciding this or that was fate, or someone's fault, or a wise or foolish choice. You interpret and deconstruct your own history, and the next thing you know you're lost in this labyrinth of time trying to formulate some meaning out of your life experiences and haven't got a clue to what's happening in the present. I don't want to go back. I won't. Jane may have shut the bedroom door on me, but at the same time she's trying to force open another door, and pushing me from behind to go through it, and I'm afraid that next room doesn't have a floor, and that I could fall a long way down.

Yet the creeping idea of losing her over this miscommunication makes me ache. It makes me angry. I'm unable to follow the incredibly inane plot of the made-for-television movie I'm watching about some guy's wife who's plotting with a surgeon to kill her husband when the doc operates on him. I wait until the end anyway, giving Jane the chance to fall asleep. I hate arguments in bed, which should be the safest and most comforting of cathedrals, the place where you seek shelter after a fight, not an arena in which to stage one.

But Jane is not asleep, just lying in wait for me. When I undress and climb in we both stare at the ceiling and she lets me hold her hand. The sheets are cool. The wind groans, and tree branches crawl up and down the roof like a pack of clattering rats. Another chore for my list: pruning the trees.

Without facing me she whispers. "Vincent." She leans into me, crosses one leg over mine. Matisse exits the bed.

"I will tell you something," I say.

"Tell me."

How do I start? Like I said, it wasn't all horrible. My father played with me. He took me fishing and taught me to play chess. But he never hit me ground balls or threw me football passes. We never flew kites or chased each other in the woods or wrestled on the living room carpet, although I wanted to do all those things. He walked with a slight limp and his back swelled whenever he exerted himself; he had been a Marine and was shot in the war during the invasion of Saipan.

He played by assigning me something to do. "Run to the stop sign and back and I'll time you," he'd say, rolling up his sleeve and checking his watch. My father wore his watch so the face was on the inside of his wrist; he had to twist his arm to see the numbers. The first stop sign was a quarter mile away. "Ready . . . Go!" I sped off; so began my career as a competitive runner.

My father loved to mark time. Our house had many clocks. He read calendars. I remember once we sat down together with pencil and paper and figured out how many minutes we'd been alive. We even added the 1,440 extra minutes for each leap year. My total at the time was almost five million. I'm up to fourteen million something now.

Another day we played *Dig to China*. He set me up with a shovel and told me where to dig under the lilac bush in our yard. He said if I reached China before dark he'd give me five dollars. On my first thrust with the shovel I scraped a few chunks of a broken dinner plate. "See?" my father said, standing over me, waiting for this discovery. "You're already finding pieces of China." He set his watch and went back inside the house. He monitored my progress from the family room window.

It was spring and the lilac bush had begun to blossom. A thick perfume scented the air around me. I dug with crazy kid energy. I expected any moment my shovel would break through on the other side of the earth, and Chinese people wearing wide-brimmed hats and silk robes would pop up through the hole, nod their heads and thank me. They'd stay for dinner; my mother would make her version of chop suey and we'd eat with chopsticks. Maybe the day after I'd get to go to China.



I dug. My hole got wider, deeper. I dropped to my knees and worked out wedged-in rocks. I stabbed and shredded roots with the shovel. I sweated and the dirt stuck to my skin. When the soil became clay I chopped at it with the shovel point. Flower buds fell into my hole when the breeze shook the lilac bush. I didn't find any more pieces of China, but I kept digging. I was an explorer, the Captain Nemo of dirt.

After a half hour my father came back out and said that's enough and handed me a crumpled five dollar bill which he smoothed out on his pant leg first. In his other hand he held a plastic garbage bag by the twist tie; he dumped it into the hole. It landed in my quarried pit with a dull thud.

"We found Tony dead," he said. "It's a shame."

My father took the shovel from me and filled in the hole over the top of Tony. What took me a half hour to uncover, my father, grimacing because of his back, filled in three minutes, with me standing by his side, sad-eyed and crying.

---

My mother told me, gently, that Dad had crushed Tony's head in with a hammer. He had mistaken my cat for a rat while he was down in the basement checking the fuel level on our oil tank, and Tony surprised him on top the warm furnace. My father limped around after him, finally cornering him near the laundry sink.

"You understand it was an accident, don't you?" my mother said.

I nodded, although I didn't understand. I had picked Tony out from a litter of our neighbor's cat. I had first choice. He was a gold and black butterfly tabby, his stripes a fascinating network of color in his fur. His eyes were green as leaves. For three years he slept on my bed every night, no one else's. He was my best friend, more than any human.

Later, I went back out in the yard to see where we had buried Tony and found my mother standing there smoking a cigarette, her shoulders curled forward and arms crossed in front. She was facing the lake and didn't see me. She held her cigarette between two fingers and raised it up. A few seconds later I saw the stream of smoke she blew into the air. She lowered her hand, waited, and took another puff. I turned and went back inside without saying a word. My mother was a smoker! I had no idea.

---

After supper I took my fish bowl from the bay window in the family room up into my bedroom and placed it on the dresser next to my bed. I sprinkled some food in the water. Will Wonderfish, my goldfish with the translucent tail, was my second best friend.

I covered the bowl with one of my t-shirts.

I listened to my parents talking in the kitchen. I could hear their voices through the floor registers, which carried sounds into every room and made me think of ghosts. Whenever the furnace was on you could hear a faint whistling sound from the vents. When people first came to our house they often remarked about it, but we had gotten used to the sound and hardly noticed. My father said it was the spirit of the house whistling. My mother said something was caught in the ducts.

I couldn't make out their words, but I think they were talking about me. My mother had a soft voice that rustled like sheets pinned to the line on a breezy day. My father's was the wind, more of low groan. Then I heard my father's voice rise like a thunderclap and I pictured him with the hammer in his hand, bits of Tony's fur and blood stuck to the heavy steel head. I hurried out of my room and to the top of the stairs. Then I fell.

There was no landing or turn halfway down our stairs, just a straight steep descent on wooden risers and treads thinly carpeted with a frayed gray runner. The banister was stained mahogany and ended in a totem pole-like newel post. I somersaulted down, careening once off the wall and once off the banister, then sideswiping the newel post at the bottom. I struck the legs of a table in the hallway and crashed a vase of pussy willows to the floor.

My parents hurried from the kitchen. My mother shrieked and knelt down beside me. I had hit my forehead somewhere along the way—probably on the newel post—and there was blood in my eye. I was surprised how little I really hurt, but when I saw the terrified look on my mother's face I started to cry. She brushed back my bangs and tenderly felt the lump already forming. I said I couldn't see. Then I threw up.

"Jack, you'd better call Dr. Abrams," my mother said.

"Don't move him," my father said. "It might not be safe."

"Vincent, Vincent," my mother whispered, wiping vomit from my shirt with a dish towel. "It's okay, honey, it's okay, sweetheart."

"What a day," my father said. "First the cat, now this. What's the date today, can someone tell me? I need to know the date."

"Dr. Abrams!" my mother reminded him.

Despite my father's advice not to move me, my mother lifted me and half-carried, half-led me upstairs into the bathroom. She stripped off my soiled clothes and wet a washcloth which she used to clean away the blood that had dribbled into my eye. She went in my room and came back with clean pajamas which I put on. I had stopped crying. My father was standing in the doorway now. "He's on his way," he said.

"Where else do you hurt?" my mother asked.

"Everywhere," I said.

"Where does it hurt the most?"

My father loomed over me, a big double crease in his forehead. "My eyes," I said. "I can't see."

My mother kissed both my eyes. "Dr. Abrams is coming right over," she said. "He'll be here any minute. How did this happen?"

"He pushed me," I said.

"What? Who pushed you?"

"Somebody."

"Vincent, there's nobody in the house but us. Who could have pushed you?"

I didn't answer. My mother guided me into my bedroom and helped me get under the covers. She had me lie still while she held the cold washcloth on my forehead. When the bell rang my father went downstairs to answer the door. There were footsteps on the stairs—I counted them, fourteen; I had fallen a long way—and then Dr. Abrams knocked at the bedroom door even though it was open. "Hi, Maureen," he said to my mother, then looked at me. "Did we have a tumble?" His voice was calm and measured.

Dr. Abrams was our family doctor and he still would come to our house. He lived halfway around the lake, and we could see his house from ours. It was one of the nicest houses around. They painted it almost every year, a brilliant white, even the trim. Our house was dark green and fronted by trees; you could hardly see it from Dr. Abrams' house.

Dr. Abrams was the tallest man I'd ever known, about six feet, six inches, with wide shoulders and a bald spot on top his head you could only see if he bent over. He told me he played basketball in college. He had silver hair growing from behind his ears and even out of the ears themselves. His teeth were huge, too, but straight as piano keys. His face was bony and it looked like his skull wanted to pop out in places. He was ugly, but I liked looking at him. Maybe not ugly, just more unusual and interesting looking than most people.

My father had stayed downstairs. My mother got up from the bed and made way for Dr. Abrams, who hovered over me now, his breath smelling like food. I'd heard that people with more money ate dinner later, even on weekends.

"He says he can't see," my mother said.

"Okay, we'll take a look here." He went to put his medical bag on my dresser, but my covered goldfish bowl took up all the room, so he set his bag on the floor instead and opened up both sides. He brought out his stethoscope. First thing he looked at my head, which had stopped

bleeding. I no longer felt warm liquid running through my scalp. "That's quite a bump you've got there, buddy," Dr. Abrams said, his thumb lightly touching my wound.

"I'll leave you boys alone," my mother said, and backed out of the room.

"Just a minute, Maureen," Dr. Abrams said. He got up and walked my mother out into the hall, where they whispered to each other for a few minutes. Then Dr. Abrams came back in. He listened to my heart, nodding as he did so. "Still ticking," he said. He unplugged the stethoscope from his ears. "Your mother told me about what happened with your cat," Dr. Abrams said. "Sorry to hear of it."

I closed my eyes.

"So, what's this about you not being able to see? That could be a problem." He asked me to open my eyes and he pointed a light into each of my pupils. Then he held up two fingers in front of my face. "How many fingers?" he asked.

"I told you I couldn't see."

He held up three fingers. "How many this time?"

"I have no idea."

Then he popped me the bird, held up one finger, the middle one. It happened so quickly my face completely betrayed me. Dr. Abrams smiled and grabbed my chin between two of his fingers. "I think if you keep some ice on that bump you'll feel better real soon. The cut is just a scratch, but the scalp has a way of bleeding a lot."

He packed his instruments in his bag and stood up. "Your father got confused," he said to me. "It was an accident, Vincent. Just like your fall. These things happen. No one can explain why."

"Okay," I said.

I asked my father later. "Was it an accident?"

"There are no accidents, Vinny," he said to me. "There are only tragedies and miracles."

—

We lived on Kenano Lake in upstate New York. About half the houses were summer homes only; the owners boarded the windows right after Labor Day and went back to live in the city. I lost a lot of friends then. We lived there in the winter, too. Our house sat on top of a small knoll that sloped through tree roots and clumps of crab grasses down to the pebbly shore. From our family room we could look at the lake through a view framed by two chestnut trees. We had a crooked dock at the shore and a row boat tied up during the summer. My father hated motorboats and wouldn't allow us to have one. He said they were too noisy and upsetting to nature. I felt the same way. Sometimes at night, when the wind blew, I lay in bed and listened to our rowboat knocking against the dock, like someone shy at the door.

Our house was deformed, with rooms added on like mutated appendages. Block-shaped additions sided with a strange asbestos shingle shamed the turrets and porches of the original structure. My parents were not to blame for the eyesore of the additions, only for purchasing the house with them already built. “We were planning a big family,” my mother told me once. “Although that didn’t exactly turn out.”

As a child, before I knew about tacky, I liked the different styles; it was like having more than one house. Several corridors inside led nowhere, and one door opened onto a brick wall. My bedroom was one of the original rooms, with high plaster ceilings and tall windows that stuck a lot when I tried to open them. In the winter, I stood over the heating vent and leaned my forehead against the cold window panes and watched snow pile up on the frozen lake.

If you follow my father’s classification system, Tony’s death was a tragedy in our family, but we had miracles, too. Me, for instance. I was born when my mother was forty-four, my father fifty. In most families such late babies are called accidents. But my parents never used such language—I was always a miracle, a blessing, a present from heaven. Sometimes my father called me “The Second Coming.”

As a kid I had my parents all to myself. My sister Celine is twenty years older than me. I suspect she was the accident, since her birthday is six months after my parents’ anniversary. Celine got married the year I was born. She and I have never lived under the same roof, and when she stayed over with her family, on holidays, the bathroom would smell powdery and sweet after she finished in there.

Celine’s husband, Uncle Raymond, owned a construction business and gave me summer jobs when I was in high school. That’s how I learned to bang nails and fix things. I also have twin nieces one year younger than me who have stunning blue eyes and are difficult to tell apart. Denise and Donna. Because we were so close in age they never called me Uncle Vince. When they came over we played in my fort Dad built in the chestnut tree in our yard. It was like a wobbly raft on a river of leaves because some of the nails were loose. I never put up a sign on my fort saying no girls allowed or anything stupid like that. I even helped Denise and Donna climb up. We played spaceship and pirates in the fort. We took turns being captain. They caught frogs with me on the shore of the lake and I played dolls with them. They sometimes fought with each other but I never fought with either of them. I loved them and promised I’d marry them both.

One day in the tree fort Denise told me there had just been a big earthquake in California and all the buildings shook, some of them even fell. People died. Her father knew someone who’d asked him to move out there because there were so many jobs putting the buildings back up.

“I hope we don’t go,” Donna said.

“Maybe I can come with you,” I said.

“But if we go it won't be forever,” said Denise. “That’s what Daddy said.”

We played earthquake by jumping up and down on the floor and shaking the branches we could reach overhead. The fort rattled. Donna screamed and Denise yelled “Earthquake!” I stomped as hard as I could.

The fort collapsed at the spot I was jumping. It happened so quickly I don’t remember falling, only being on the ground. We fell about eight feet through branches and leaves. Denise was lying on the ground next to me, crying out. Donna didn’t fall. She'd held to a support and lifted herself onto a branch.

My father and Uncle Raymond saw it all from the window. They came running out. Denise's left arm was bent at a right angle halfway between her elbow and wrist. I could see the bone sticking out. She was bleeding.

Uncle Raymond lifted Denise into his arms and ran towards the car. By now my mother and Celine had come out. Celine helped Donna get down from the tree. Donna stayed with us while Uncle Raymond and Celine went to the hospital with Denise.

My mother hugged me. She asked if I was okay, and I said I was.

“I told you to put more nails in it,” my mother hissed at my father. “I told you ten times it wasn't strong enough, but did you listen to me?”

Dad said nothing. His face had lost its color and he looked at me, as if he expected me to say something. Then he stared at the tree and the dangling planks of broken lumber.

“Do you ever listen?” my mother said.

“I do,” said Dad. “I try.”

We went back inside and my mother gave Donna and me an Orange Crush to share. Neither of us spoke. As soon as my mother walked into the other room, my father moved his face close to mine and I shrank back. “I saw you jumping out there,” he said. Then he turned and marched out of the room.

Donna said, “You were, you know.”

The next day my father took down what remained of the tree fort. He separated the wood into two piles: what he wanted to save and what was no good. We had a bonfire with all the throw away wood, and baked potatoes in aluminum foil. Denise had her arm in a cast and everyone paid attention to her, except me, even though she told me the accident wasn't my fault and she wanted me to be the first to sign her cast. I also stayed away from my father.

---

Shortly after Tony died, my father, a bank manager in Oneida Falls, started missing work, just a day here or there. I noticed only because I don't remember him ever staying home from work before then. One day I came home from school and found him in bed upstairs. He told me to sit with him. He had his suit and tie on underneath the covers and he smelled like peppermint from sucking hard candy. I ran my hand over his rough face, the whiskers on his cheeks sprouting like silver blades of grass. He'd always had gray hair, that I remember, which he combed back to reveal a high forehead bisected by a widow's peak. There were only a few lines in his face, but they were deep. Two tracks crossed his forehead, and on each side of his eyes were engravings he called his face fingers. There were no lines around his mouth, which did not move much when he talked. His smile was small and quick as an eye blink. It would suddenly be there, suddenly gone. Denise had told me he was a very handsome man.

"What happened in school today?" he asked.

"Tim Connelly threw up on the floor," I told him. "It was gross."

"Threw up. He should have stayed home. That's why I stayed home."

"You threw up?"

"No, but if I'd gone to work I would have thrown up."

"Can I stay home with you tomorrow?" I asked.

"No, Vinny, tomorrow's a school day."

The next day my father didn't come downstairs for breakfast. I was eating a bowl of Trix in the kitchen. My mother had the ironing board set up and was pressing one of my father's shirts. She stopped every few minutes to sip her coffee.

"Is Dad going to work today?" I asked my mother.

"You're darn tootin' he is."

"What does darn tootin' mean?"

"It's instead of 'damn right' which I don't say, because that's swearing."

"You just swore."

"Only to explain. Now eat your breakfast."

"I am eating."

"Jack!" she yelled up the stairs. "What are you dreaming about up there?"

A few minutes later my father came downstairs. When he walked in the kitchen I laughed; even my mother smiled.

My father wore his striped blazer with green checkered pants and his red and blue bowling shoes. Beneath his blazer he had on his University of Wisconsin sweater and his Buffalo Bills tie.

On his head sat the old fedora I had recently worn for Halloween when I charcoaled my face and begged as a hobo.

“For heaven's sake, Jack,” my mother said. “I swear you are such a goof sometimes.” But she wasn't angry; my mother had a sense of humor—she had to, being married to my father.

She eyed the clock on the kitchen wall. “You're going to be late,” she told him.

My father sat down at the table. He picked up a spoon and dug into my cereal. Several sugar corn balls dropped off on the way to his mouth.

“I'll never be late again,” said my father. “I've retired early. Look, they gave me a watch.” He held up his wrist. He had on my Superman watch, the face of which did this trick of changing from Clark Kent to Superman when you moved it or looked from a different angle.

“Is this part of your joke? If it is then—” Mom stopped and looked at me. Her smile had vanished as if it had never been there. “Come on, you're late for school,” she said to me.

“I'm not late,” I said.

“Maureen, nobody's late,” my father said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means I'm going to stay home and eat Trix all day.”

Mom practically pushed me out the door then. I had to wait fifteen minutes for the bus, and it was raining.

I found out later my father had lost his job for approving bad loans. He hadn't told anyone. I heard Mom talking to Celine on the phone the next day and she said, “He just handed it out like candy.”

I imagined Dad in a clown suit, handing out candy and balloons to kids at the zoo. Once we took a trip to the Bronx zoo, and Dad had stopped and chatted with the guy who sold balloons and pinwheels. After, when we walked away, me clutching a pinwheel and a cone of cotton candy, Dad said, “What a life, huh? Handing out balloons. That's the kind of job for me.”

—

I remember being really upset with my father about Tony, but one day I did something equally horrible. I was cleaning out my goldfish bowl, which I did by netting Will Wonderfish and transferring him to one of my mother's mixing bowls filled with water, which I made sure was the right temperature; then I strained and rinsed the coral stones and fake plant and put fresh water in the fish bowl. I was methodical and careful, always following the same routine. But this time when I went to move Will from the mixing bowl back into his bowl, he flipped out of the net and fell on the floor. He started flopping around like crazy, and I kind of panicked because he looked like he was in pain and dying. I tried to get him with the net and then with my hand, but he



flipped away and then I moved my foot wrong and stepped on him and killed him. I had to flush him down the toilet. A burial at sea, my father called it.

After that incident, I sort of understood how these things can happen, even though it wasn't quite the same. I mean, it's not like I was stalking my fish. I didn't mistake him for a shark I had to defend myself against or anything. My case was more one of stupidity, but still a tragedy.

#### 4

Jane calls from the hospital. She says that after work a few of them are going for drinks at McGill's and would I like to join her at four-thirty?

"I could use a beer," I admit. I've passed another day without painting. I haven't touched a brush in a week.

"We'll go out for dinner after," Jane says. "You don't have to cook tonight."

Excellent. The house frau gets a night off from domestic duty. I'll take it.

McGill's is a few blocks from the hospital on Elmwood, a shift-change hangout for doctors and nurses. Jane seldom goes for a drink after work unless something interesting has happened that day that must be discussed and dissected. What this time? A patient punching a doctor, or vice-versa? A man accidentally swallowing a four-penny nail? Or something big: a new and incurable disease discovered on Jane's shift? I confess a fascination of medical tragedies and miracles, and listen raptly when they are told, although to hide my voyeurism I wear an expression of general disinterest and disgust.

Most of Jane's colleagues are geeks. I knew a number of pre-med types in college because the chemistry building was next to fine arts; they were geeks then, too, socially stunted but brilliant and sharp as lasers. On the few occasions they partied they went for it like goons let out of their cages. They threw up a lot, then spent the next day in the library with a hangover. They haven't changed much, from the drinking habits I've witnessed whenever I meet Jane and her mates after shift change.

Although Jane has an IQ that probably weighs as much as I do, she remains an anomaly among these people. She isn't much of a drinker because she gets an allergic rash from alcohol, and is too beautiful to be considered a geek, although when she doesn't wear her contacts she can be one of those women you don't notice until she takes off her glasses and lets her hair down and

then you're shocked by the sudden transformation of the librarian into the porn star. She told me there was a turning point for her during college, when she was studious and introverted and viewed by others as the smart Asian kid riding in the fast lane to med school. She almost slipped over the edge into eternal nerdiness. She said she was saved by a streak of passion she couldn't control well and several failed love affairs with the wrong kind of person. That kind of stuff can open your eyes to the world and bend your heart some. It bent mine.

Her male colleagues look at me with a mixture of envy and disdain, and treat me with marginally acceptable bedside manner. They think I'm a parasite who needs a haircut. But I understand their point of view: I have what they want—I have Jane. Therefore I am in a position of strength and can like or at least tolerate them, as long as they keep their distance from her.

—

When I arrive, Jane is sitting at a table with five others, four men and a woman. I recognize everyone except one of the men, who sits next to Jane. He doesn't have the geek look: he's tawny-toned, square-shouldered, with thick, dark eyebrows and long lashes, his black hair freshly trimmed on all sides. He might have stepped off the pages of a men's fashion magazine. His eyes are on Jane, but not only that, his arm snakes across the back of her chair, his hand just inches from stroking the back of her neck. That won't do.

Jane is talking and the others listen. It is unusual to see her as the center of attention during group conversation. She notices me and stops talking, smiles and waves me over. Everyone turns to look.

"Hey all," I say.

"Vincent! What's happening?"

I slap Dr. Bob's hand. Nod and wave to Steven Stark and Angela Lewell.

I stand next to the new guy but he stays planted in his seat. At least he moves his arm off the back of Jane's chair to shake my hand. Jane introduces him to me: Ian Martinez, an internist, new in town. He has a large hand and long fingers, but a limp fish grip.

"Do you mind if I sit next to Jane?" I ask.

"Hey, if you need to."

*Hey if you need to?* Maybe what I need is to pull the chair out from under your butt and watch you drop to the floor.

Dr. Martinez hesitates a few seconds as if waiting for me to confirm my need for him to move, then gets up and finds another seat. I slip into his warm chair. I kiss Jane. Her lips are salty from peanuts. Someone pours me a glass of beer, from which I take a long, cold swallow.

Also at the table is Gary, who is an orderly, not a doctor. “I’m allowed today because I’m part of the story,” Gary says. “I didn’t know this gathering is usually doctors only.”

“We told Gary he could sit here as long as he buys the beer,” Steven Stark says. He’s a thoracic surgeon who has married and divorced two different women he’s operated on. This puzzles me. If he’s seen the inside of someone—their heart, even—doesn’t he hold an advantage, shouldn’t he know if they’d be good mates? I said this once to Jane, in reference to us. Since she’s sewn up a large slice in my head, she’s been forewarned about what’s in there and has inside knowledge of me. “Tell me what you saw,” I asked her. She said, “I didn’t see anything. I worked with my eyes closed.” Jane claims I tell a lot of smart-ass jokes, but I think my skill is starting to rub off on her.

The others at the table are Angela Lewell, an oncologist whose husband died last year of cancer. This was before I’d met her. She is the oldest of the group, around fifty; she took a six month leave of absence after George died. Jane told me Angela almost quit medicine, she’d lost her faith. I get sad whenever I see her. Dr. Bob, a balding, skinny attending who works ER with Jane, is the group drunk. His real name is Robert Winston. He makes the most noise and has the least interesting things to say. His lips are shaped wrong; they look like clams and are always moving. Once, in front of Jane, he invited me to a strip joint. I belched in his face. When Jane complains about work, his name often comes up.

“Jane was just telling us a great story,” Dr. Bob says.

“Start again so Vincent can hear the whole thing,” says Gary. He turns to me. “This one’s too much. I was there, I can vouch for its truth.”

“Once upon a time . . .” Dr. Bob prompts her.

“Okay, okay,” Jane says. “This large woman came into ER today,” says Jane.

Dr. Bob cuts in. “Come on, Janey, be descriptive. Set the scene for Vince. This wasn’t just a large woman, this was a linebacker. Over six feet, at least two sixty, thick as a barrel. Could have made the Bills this year.”

“They could use a real linebacker,” says Stark.

“All right,” Jane says. “Stop interrupting and I’ll tell the story.”

“I’m just adding color,” Dr. Bob says. “The phrase ‘large woman’ does not do justice.”

“Well, have some sympathy for the poor woman,” Jane says. “She’s practically in a coma.” But she cracks up, which I’ve discovered doctors can do quite easily when discussing seriously ill or injured patients who are not within earshot. It’s either in very poor taste or the summoning of a superstition, like knocking on wood or tossing salt over your shoulder. When Jane laughs, she hides her mouth with her hand and blushes, leftover habits from wearing braces as a teenager.

“Excuse me,” Angela says. “I have an appointment. I know how this one ends.” I hear something sinister in the way she says 'ends' and I perk up for a particularly grisly story. Angela gets up and Ian Martinez stands and helps with her coat. “Have a great time, everyone.” Goodbyes are said and Angela leaves. Stark says something to Dr. Bob I can't hear. There is a brief pause before attention returns to Jane.

“Onward,” Dr. Bob says.

Jane resumes her story about this big woman who rumbled into the ER like a boulder, crashing against walls. She seemed ageless, anywhere from mid-twenties to mid-forties. One of the admitting nurses who tried to slow her down got crushed against the reception desk when the woman caromed off a gurney. A security guard tried to pin her arms in a lock behind her back but the woman shook him off when she doubled over and howled. Sweat gushed like spring runoff down the folds and hills of her face. She screamed out she was dying, she was having a heart attack. “I can't breathe! I can't breathe!” she kept repeating, all along huffing like a freight train. Suddenly she stopped. She lowered herself to the floor and panted. Jane was the first doctor to reach her. The woman was too big to move, so Jane started vitals right there on the floor. Blood pressure dropping but pulse skyrocketing.

“It took me and three others to get her onto a gurney,” Gary says. “I pulled a muscle in my back.”

The woman became more coherent. She started telling Jane about terrible, burning pains in her chest. Jane asked questions. What had she eaten? Had she taken medication? Nothing unusual, the woman said.

“Just the usual two dozen cupcakes,” Dr. Bob chimes in.

Jane asked her name. The woman mumbled a response Jane could not understand. At first she suspected ruptured appendix, although the woman had no fever. She lifted the woman's sweater and felt the area, navigating through folds of flesh and coming upon a hard mass, probably a tumor of some type, ignored far too long. She thought about getting her to x-ray. Jane worked quickly. All this had happened in less than a minute.

Then the woman started writhing again and kicking. She screamed like she'd been gut-shot. Jane retreated beyond the range of flailing arms and legs. When the woman settled again Jane tried to slide her hand beneath the woman to feel her back. When did this start? Have there been any other symptoms?

The woman said she'd been leaking.

Leaking?

From down there.

When Jane looked she discovered clots of blood and half the placenta hanging out of the woman's vagina—an image that prompts me to lower my glass without drinking. Within ten minutes the woman was in surgery. The placenta had almost completely separated from the uterine wall and the baby was blue as ink from lack of oxygen, but the surgeon pulled him out and got him on a respirator. Estimated twenty-seven weeks gestational age; weight: 2.5 pounds.

The tiny boy was now tucked into a warm incubator in the NICU, with respirator and feeding tube, while the mother bunked in her own berth in the adult ICU. She'd lost a lot of blood and was barely conscious after the C-section. Her identity remains a mystery. She'd come in with no identification: no wallet, no money, no car keys, no dog tags. No one knew how she'd gotten to the hospital. She's been too weak to answer any questions. She hasn't asked about the baby and Jane isn't sure the woman even knows she has a baby. The only thing found on her person was a pack of cigarettes, Merit 100s.

"Figures," Dr. Martinez says, shaking his head. "No wonder she had a preemie."

"She's also a diabetic," Jane adds.

I say, "I don't understand. You mean she never knew she was pregnant?"

"It seems that way."

"What I don't get is how anyone could have fucked her in the first place," says Dr. Bob.

"Hey, someone fucked you," Stark says. "You're a father, aren't you?"

The energy that had carried Jane through her story has drained off. Whatever had been humorous has turned sad and Jane's face is blotchy and heated from the beer she sipped. She squeezes my hand under the table. "The poor baby doesn't even have a name," she says. "And what kind of life is he going to have with that . . . with *her* as a mother?"

"The baby is alive because of you," Ian Martinez says. "I wish I could have been there to see your work. You, my friend, are a hero. A heroine," he corrects himself. He nods across the table to Jane and raises his glass.

I raise my glass as well. The others do the same. "To Jane!" I say.

"To the baby," Jane says.

"To the blue baby," chimes Dr. Bob. "Baby Blue!"

—

We leave the bar and I ask Jane where she wants to eat. I like her to pick the restaurants because she's the one who pays the check.

"Ted's," she says.

"Hot dogs?" It's the half a beer she drank telling her story that gave her the munchies. Her face is flushed from it. Part of her is a junk food queen, and I have become her loyal servant.

Even though I'm willing to cook, and clean up after, sometimes she craves a hot dog or taco or burger and we go out to dinner at fast-food restaurants, and like it.

We order and take our food to a picnic table in the enclosed dining area. Jane eats her hot dog with a thin line of mustard. I use condiments lavishly, layering ketchup, mustard, hot sauce and onions until the hot dog itself is all but obliterated. We also have different styles with the French fries. I dribble ketchup over the entire plate. She squirts a small pile off to the side and dips each fry individually. We compromise: some dribbling, a small pile.

A nearby table is occupied by two tired-looking parents and four kids, one little one strapped into a stroller facing us, sucking on a bun. The other kids slurp sodas. I'm still interested in the miracle birth. I find it almost impossible to believe that woman could be pregnant for months and never know it. What about morning sickness? Or missing her periods? Or hormonal changes?

Jane tells me someone of that woman's size almost certainly has malfunctioning hormones to begin with. And the weight gain wouldn't even be a factor, it was a small percentage of total body weight.

"She's very unhealthy," says Jane. "If she doesn't change her lifestyle soon, she won't live to see her son grow up."

"Maybe she'll be inspired to take better care of herself," I say. "Now she has something to live for. They say reasons to live must come from within the self."

"That baby certainly came from within her," Jane says.

"Think of it—something hidden in you for months, alive and growing and you're so out of touch with your body you don't even know it."

Jane is worried for both mother and baby. If she doesn't take care of herself, how can she take care of a baby? It seems like too many of the wrong people are having children and not enough of the right people. At this rate the human stock will degenerate; we'll become a weakened, vulnerable species. She says this as a scientist with knowledge of genetics, not to be mean or hurtful.

Jane, of course, is the right people. She talks about having a child—in general terms, nothing concrete. She terminated a pregnancy once, when she was still an undergraduate, a consequence of that unchecked streak of passion that saved her from being a total geek. She didn't know the boy very well. She says she wants to be a mother someday, but doesn't yet hint that I should be the father of her child. I've told her before I do not want children. I probably mentioned this around the same time I told her my father was dead. It's not because I don't like kids, but I know I'd do a terrible job as a parent; I'm sure I'd make all those mistakes psychologists warn against

and that children in their adult years look back on with bitterness and blame. But that's only part of it. Mostly, I'm afraid of passing on my genes, the same ones my father passed to me.

I tell Jane she has plenty of time.

"Not as much anymore—I'm not getting any younger," she says. "You have to plan ahead. You need financial stability. You need the right partner, someone committed to the same life you are. Either that or you have to be willing to go it alone."

I wonder if she's thinking of ditching me so she can find the *right partner*, one who will support his family. I don't want to lose her.

But plan all you want—and make the gods laugh. You can't control the future, or the past, for that matter: It has a life of its own, it can devour you like a disease, choke-holding the present. For example, I have not felt better for telling Jane about my father, although she has. For her, intimacy was created; for me, a slippery surface. She said when I told her the part about the way Tony died and me being blind she loved me more, and the incident about how I stepped on my fish broke her heart. She gets it now that my relationship with my father might have been the source of some trauma, but still thinks I should reconnect with my father and establish a new relationship and that we should try to understand each other.

Jane also said she wishes she knew me as a child, that we'd grown up together and learned everything about each other; she blushed when she told me this, but I understand what she means. Lifelong love, is what she means. Forever, is what she means. I feel the same way. I have this photograph of her from when she was four years old. It's black and white and she's standing in a party dress next to the stairs on the front porch of her home. She's squinting into the camera, her black bangs trimmed on slight angle. I cherish that photo. I've got other photos of Jane, but this is the one I carry in my wallet. If anyone asked me if I had a photo of my girlfriend I'd have to pull out this one and then I'd be viewed with suspicion: Is this guy some kind of pedophile?

Jane leaves the last two bites of her hot dog and I finish it up. The family sitting near us packs up and starts out. It's a big production with all the kids getting their coats on and searching for mittens and hats on the floor.

One of the older kids pushes the stroller past us and Jane and the baby look each other. I see the hunger in Jane's eyes, maternal lust dominating her expression the way it can in some women once they hit thirty. Jane's right, there's not as much time, not anymore. She feels every tick of the clock like an itch she's dying to scratch.

"Poor Baby Blue," Jane says, after the family has gone. "He won't have a good mother to raise him."

“You don’t know for sure,” I say. “People can change. She might get healthy again.” But this last part sticks in my throat because I don’t believe it. People don’t change; they are who they are, and very few of them can be trusted. And anyone who breaks your trust once is capable of doing it again.

“I wish I hadn’t lied to you about my father,” I say.

She’s surprised I’m bringing this up now. “We’ve been through this, Vincent. You don’t have to keep telling me.”

“But it’s out there. I can’t take it back.”

“You don’t need to take it back,” she says.

## 5

Thursday is Jane’s day off and we go to the Albright Knox. I’ve been aching to see the Carl Wessel show since it opened last week but promised I’d wait for Jane because I wanted to share the experience with her. Jane knows more about art than I expected her too; she acquired her knowledge in a college art appreciation elective she had taken to provide relief from the bruising pre-med curriculum. A survey class doesn’t go into much depth, but Jane remembers everything she’s ever learned. She’s the smartest person I’ve ever known, yet still chooses to be in a relationship with me. I wish I knew what I was doing right with her so I could do more of it.

The problem today is that neither of us is in top form. Jane is down because Baby Blue is now an orphan. The mother, still unidentified, suffered a stroke at the hospital the other night and died with the crash team hammering on her chest. The woman had so many medical problems that not knowing she was pregnant turned out to be far down the list. Diabetes, high cholesterol, something called Gaucher’s disease, cirrhosis. Evidence of heavy smoking and alcoholism. Talk about not living long enough to see your child grow up; Jane nailed that prediction right out of the gate.

Now there’s a baby in the NICU growing stronger every day but with no one to live for, no family to claim him, no one to visit and cheer him on—except Jane. She looks in on Baby Blue at every opportunity and she sat with him for two hours after her shift last night. The police are hunting for relatives, searching for dental records of the dead mother, although it’s unlikely any teeth marks will be found: she didn’t fit the profile of the dentist-going type.



I've never seen Jane so dispirited; that's usually my role. I tried telling her the baby has a chance of being raised by a good mother after all. A loving family will adopt him, he'll have a safe and stable childhood. I even tried telling her that in a way, it's better for the baby that the mother's out of the way.

I must not have been very convincing, because Jane didn't cheer up much.

As for me, I've caught a minor cold, my first in years, its cause I'm sure directly related to my earlier smart talk to Jane about how healthy I am. *Do I ever get sick? Have you ever seen me even with a cold?* Another few statements I'd like to take back. But I find the cold interesting, so far: I get to blow my nose and sneeze, two sensations I rarely experience. A sneeze is especially exciting, the sudden violence of its explosion, and the instant afterwards where you must assess the contents of your brain. Sneezing is risky business, full of doubt and suspense. Did anything get ripped apart in there? In comparison, blowing your nose is dull, about the equivalent of pissing through your nostrils.

—

I show my card at the entrance to the gallery. Jane gave me a membership to the Knox as a birthday present because I visit here so often. The same overweight man is at the ticket counter every time I come. He wears a khaki uniform and looks like a head attached to a huge, rolling sand dune. He's seen me here often enough that he acknowledges me with a nod.

"Good morning," I say, taking back my card.

We enter the museum and I lean to Jane and say, "Maybe *he's* Baby Blue's father."

She gives me a look: Baby Blue's orphan status is not a laughing matter.

I hold her hand and we walk on.

Few people are in the gallery at this hour of a weekday morning. Mostly the elderly and the lame, to tell the truth. I see two wheelchairs. A few students wander with notebooks and pencils. A mother pushes a stroller with a squeaky wheel that wobbles in its socket like a bad eye. Anyone who speaks does so in a whisper; we are in a church, or a tomb. There is homage to be paid, reverence to be felt. Someone's heels clack guiltily on the tiled floors.

The museum is divided into two sections. The older section, built for the American Expo at the turn of the twentieth century, is marbled and columned, with ceilings high enough to play ball under. The walls are lined with the European paintings that are part of the permanent collection, the familiar names everyone—even Jane—has studied in school and that galleries covet, as if there were only a dozen or so painters that even existed from previous centuries and if you didn't have them you were a second-rate gallery. That kind of exclusionary attitude aggrieves me. But the paintings are masterpieces, I admit, and representative of a range of styles and techniques.

Many have religious themes: the second coming and the rapture and miracles at Cana. Others are impressionistic landscapes, vases of brilliant flowers, nudes of peasant girls, stunning portraits of kings and military generals.

I have seen these paintings many times. Each time I notice something new. A slant of extraordinary light that defies a source, an epic-revealing expression on the tiny face of a background character. I stand close and study detail, trying to separate the whole into its technical parts. Of course this is impossible with a painting. It's like trying to understand how a book was written by examining each word separately, out of context. It merely becomes a vocabulary list, all its texture, tone, and style destroyed. A painting dissected is dead, its lifeblood snuffed in a scattered wreckage of disembodied brush strokes.

There are several small transition halls on the way to the new wing. In one of the halls is *The Yellow Christ*, by Paul Gauguin, a crucifixion scene with three forlorn women kneeling in front of the cross.

"That's an unusual background," Jane says. "It doesn't look like Mount Calvary."

Rather than barren and brown, the background in the painting is rolling green and yellow hills and a few trees, with a couple of houses and a rock wall, straight out of France.

"He used Brittany as the setting," I tell her. "And the face of Christ is the face of Gauguin."

"He painted himself as Christ?"

"He believed he suffered for a great and noble cause—in his case, art. He was yet another painter who had no financial success during his lifetime."

Jane sighs. "Is it a prerequisite for all artists to suffer this way?" She's referring to my own situation.

I shake my head. Jane doesn't know many artists. "No, suffering is not a prerequisite. I don't think it's even helpful or inspiring."

"I don't know how you do it," Jane says. "I'd never have the temperament to be an artist. Or the talent and creativity."

At least she's productive as a physician; at least she contributes to the betterment of society.

My other problem, a much bigger one than having caught a cold, is I'm still not painting, and each passing day is one day closer to my first solo show. I've exhibited in group shows—once at the university's new wing and twice in the lobby of the Birchfield Building—but mostly I've slotted into no-name, no-audience venues. That's about to change. A new gallery is under construction in a loft space above Nietzsche's bar in the Allentown neighborhood where the art scene actually has a detectable pulse. I'm friends with the owner, Elena Martell, who has a passion for promoting local artists, and she invited me to inaugurate the gallery, called Nietzsche

Hangs, when it opens in a few months. Elena said I should expect art reps and local buyers to show up. It's my first real opportunity to gain broader exposure and demonstrate my legitimacy as a painter. I want new work completed for the event. By coming here to see the Wessel paintings I've placed a lot of desperate hope in finding the inspiration to paint something decent.

In the next hall is one of my favorite paintings, by Henri Matisse, depicting two of his beloved subjects: women and goldfish. He was a magnificent artist with a tremendous eye for color and color harmony. The faceless fleshy nude is perfectly balanced by a vase of flowers and the bowl of fish, all set against a blue and yellow background, with pale green accents on the window and water in the bowl. I'd give almost anything to own this painting, to gaze upon it every day.

The other two halls hang abstracts. One small room is devoted exclusively to Clifford Still, whose paintings remind me of torn drapery or spilled syrup and do little to inspire me. In another room are two Jackson Pollock paintings, frenzies of dripping, swirling energy staring each other down from opposite walls and make my heart pump; then on the far wall a Rothko to break the tension, a rich and soothing color field painting of yellow and orange. I could snuggle up to that one; I'd like a blanket so warm and comforting. Jane stands in front of it for a long time.

—

The Wessel show hangs in the new wing of the gallery, a black glass appendage that wraps four walls around a courtyard. There are a few abandoned benches and tables outside covered with a dusting of snow. Dead leaves whirlpool in the breeze. I love the centerpiece of a bronze sculpture that looks like a collection of various-sized ladders welded together at unlikely angles.

I first saw Wessel's work at the Ontario Gallery of Art a few years ago in Toronto. His paintings are large, six feet by eight, ten by twelve, and there is something wrong in each of them. A family of four enjoys a barbecue dinner in their backyard, paying no attention to the drowned dog in their swimming pool. An adolescent girl stands by her bedroom window, naked, staring out at a willow tree in the distance and masturbating with one hand. In another painting a woman, also naked, lies in a road in the stark beam of headlights cast by a stopped car. It is unclear whether she has been run over. Her eyes are slits. In another painting, a boy and a man sit at a table playing cards. The boy bleeds from his nose and the father has a black eye. The figures and events take place in the centers of the canvases, lit from an unknown source; shadows cloak the edges, as if the viewer were a voyeur standing a few inches back from a peephole, not daring to move closer and take the entire scene. Some of the paintings I have seen in Toronto, others are new, all of them representational of a sinister underside to modern suburban life, not exactly realism but certainly recognizable.

When I last saw the paintings they inspired me not with foreboding or doom but identification. I remembered them speaking to me like a close friend or lover, whispering secrets in my ear, telling me although the world is tragic at least I belonged to it; I was not alone. This was before I'd met Jane and was driving without aim through Canada and the United States, draining my savings. I stayed all day in the gallery. I wanted to sleep there.

"These remind me a lot of your work," Jane says, taking her time in front of each one. "I can see why you like them."

But experience is never the same twice: there is no bite like the first bite, no love like first love. The original impact has been lost, or something has closed off inside me. I still appreciate the paintings, but feel almost embarrassed about my earlier devotion. They seem weird and deliberately self-conscious now. I'm afraid I've imitated his style.

The heat in the gallery is turned up too high, and I can feel myself sweating under my heavy clothes. "It's hot in here," I say. "Let's go outside, we can feed the ducks."

—

We walk down the steps and toward the lake in front of the museum where the ducks float in the shallows waiting for people to feed them. I'd planned ahead and stuffed a few ends of bread into a paper bag and carried it inside my coat pocket.

It's a terrible day for a walk and we have the lake path to ourselves. The cranky sky spits sleet. A purplish glow ripples the gray dishwater overcast and the water and ice reflect the same leaden color. I have my hands shoved in my pockets. Jane, who was smart enough to wear gloves, hooks her arm in mine.

"You're a fine painter, Vincent. Your paintings would not be out of place in this gallery."

"Thank you." One thing about Jane, she knows when and how to stroke. She believes in me; she's not just trying to make me feel better.

"I'm glad you brought me here today," she says. "I love seeing art with you."

We stop at the edge of the lake. The water is mostly frozen except for the creek feeding the lake and a large pool in the center. The ducks congregate at the one part still unfrozen and we toss pieces of stale bread into the water. There's a sign that says don't feed the ducks, but everyone does anyway. Two aggressive white swans use their long necks to get most of the pieces. We try to throw some of the bread out of their range to give the other ducks a chance.

Jane hunches against the cold. "Winter's so depressing this year. And it's hardly even started."

Personally, I have always found comfort in the grayness of winter, in whose long shadows and ephemeral days down-time is tolerated. You aren't expected to be bright. There is no brilliant

sunshine to mock your languor. Winter's burden is dramatic and full of feeling, the bare trees brave and sturdy, hibernating for a spring they know will come. Let the world be gray, it will pass.

But lately, the branches shiver and rattle in my ears like angry bones long dead. I know what Jane means when she says winter is depressing.

She says, "I want to feel the sunshine. I want warmth. And where am I going? Seattle."

She'd made reservations last week to visit her parents next month in Seattle, but right afterward started talking about delaying the trip, hinting that maybe Vincent and Jane deserved a short getaway of their own to melt away the winter blues.

"I want to go to the Caribbean," she says. "I can wait until summer for Seattle, or have my parents come here if they want. What about Martinique? Ian went last year and said it was fantastic."

Ian, the internist from the pages of *GQ*. Jane's been talking to Ian Martinez about favorite vacation destinations. I feel my temperature trying to rise. "Sounds great," I say.

Jane's face is determined. She is working up to ask me something. Then: "What do you think? Let's take a vacation together, Vincent."

"I'd really love to, but that kind of trip is not within my budget."

"Please, not the financial thing again."

The stigma of being a kept man can be a challenge to wrestle, so I bring out my best weapon. "Maybe you'd like to buy me a new wardrobe to take along. Some of those Hawaiian shirts with the wild prints."

"Don't get nasty," Jane says. "Why is a vacation such an awful prospect? I'd much rather go with you than go alone—or with anyone else."

"It's not awful, it's wonderful."

"Then what's the problem? If the situation was reversed, would you invite me?"

"Of course I would invite you. But the situation isn't reversed. And it never will be."

"Is this a male ego thing? Because if it is, it's stupid. This isn't prehistoric times."

"So you want me to take care of the baby, too?"

Big mistake. I can feel her stiffen next to me, her face hardening, sculpted by my sarcasm. Where is this black attitude coming from? I've lived off the generosity of others all my life; Jane and I have an ideal living situation and a loving relationship. This is no time or place to make a stand against her.

"I'm sorry," I say. Another apology.

“You’re such an asshole sometimes,” Jane says. “It’s like you’re trying to make me mad at you. You don’t want me to like you.”

The sunshine could do wonders, I know. But I haven’t earned it. “It’s just that you know I feel bad about living off of you.”

“I don’t see it that way at all. We both contribute to this relationship,” Jane says.

“I feel like I’m not holding up my end of the deal.”

The paper bag with the bread is soggy from the rain and when it breaks what’s left of the bread falls on the ground. Jane kicks the pieces over the edge with her boot, and the ducks attack the remains.

Jane says, “Remember when we first met and we both said we were doing exactly what we wanted to do?”

“You mean me bleeding and you stitching?”

“Ha-ha. The only thing missing was that we were both alone. Neither of us had someone to share our lives with. And now we do. We’re different but compatible. We’re opposites that attract.”

Agreed.

“Now I want to take a break in the sun and I want you to go with me.”

“Only I’m not doing anything right now. I haven’t touched my brush since . . . since my father called that night.”

“Oh,” Jane says. “You think you’re not holding up your end of the deal because you’re not painting right now. If that’s what you’re thinking, then you have all the more reason to get away and relax.”

“I don’t see anything,” I say. “There’s nothing there when I try to paint. I thought coming here today to see Wessel would be my big inspiration, but I don’t feel it.”

“You have to give yourself a chance. Don’t rush it. There’s plenty of time.”

That’s what I had told Jane about having a baby; I guess the ‘there’s plenty of time’ statement is never a very compelling argument.

“Just a few weeks ago everything felt perfect. I was painting. We used to make love. Now—” I trail off.

She jumps all over that one. “What do you mean—*used to make love*! One time we didn’t have sex and you think the world is crashing down.”

“That one time—it was the first time. That changes everything.”

“You know what? Forget I even asked. I don’t want to go on vacation with you. I’d rather go by myself.”

A fit of sneezing wracks me. My brain pops with each one. Is this the big one? Am I going to have a stroke like Baby Blue's monstrous mother?

Jane is asking me what's wrong, and her voice sounds underwater and far away. What's wrong? *I want to go with you to the sunny beach. Please don't leave me behind.* But I'm sneezing and can't stop. And it's more than that. I'm trembling from top to bottom, wet from the sleet, there's this shooting pain in my stomach, and I want to go home and lower the shades and burrow into bed.

## 6

"I love to make your mother smile," my father says to me. "She has a smile as bright as the moon. Do you know how hard it is to make those you love smile?" His voice is low and furtive as a whisper.

I look at the clock, the display reads 2:30. A weight presses on my chest. Breathing is difficult, my nasal passages are clogged like a hairy drain.

"Your mother isn't smiling much," he says. "I think I'm a burden to her. I think it's my fault."

Good guess, Einstein.

"Dad, you woke us up." He has called here twice now, both times Jane has answered, expecting the call into work, and then passed the phone to me. He has not asked who this other person is picking up his calls on the first ring. He has not asked how his son is doing. He simply launches into his own absurd agenda.

"I think there's a period in life in which you smile, and then it goes away," he says. "Be on the lookout for that, Vinny."

"I will," I say.

"Are you smiling, Vinny?"

"No, not exactly. Not at the moment. It's kind of late and—"

"I saw it tonight," my father interrupts. "It's still out there. I was wrong, though. I think it can live in the open air. I think it's coming up to the house. I'm pretty sure it wants me. I have my helper under the bed now but I don't think it'll do much good. I'll just do what I can and your mother—"

"Dad," I say. "Dad!"

There is a long pause. Then, “Vinny, are you there?”

“Dad, you were probably just having a dream.”

“No I'm not having a dream!” he shouts. “I haven't even been to sleep yet! Listen to me when I'm talking to you, are you listening?”

“You'll wake Mom,” I say.

“She's already awake, she's right here.”

I hear a ruffling of fabric, then my mother comes on the phone.

“Vincent, it's so late,” she says, her voice weary and exasperated, as if I'm the one who called and woke them. I can picture her face, doughy from the sleep she's had, tight from the sleep she's not getting, the crisply drawn half-moons of flesh sagging under her eyes.

“Mom, are you okay? Is there anything I can do?” I keep having to clear my throat. My breaths are wheezes, like an asthmatic old man.

“He really appreciates you talking to him on the phone like this.”

“Does he have to call in the middle of the night?”

“You know your father. He wants to make sure you're home when he calls.”

“I don't understand why you brought Dad home. He doesn't sound well to me, he should still be in the hospital.”

“We're doing fine, really, Vincent. I'll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Put Dad back on.”

I hear her hand cover the receiver, she says something to my father, then comes back on. “He wants to go to sleep now. We'll talk in the morning.”

We say goodnight and I hand the receiver to Jane. She tells me I sound terrible. She puts her hand to my forehead. “You're burning up.”

I try to protest, but my head is mossy and thick. When I sit up my balance sways. There is a ringing somewhere deep in my head, the phone that won't stop, my father calling, calling, calling. Why can't he leave me alone?

“Let me take your temperature. I'll get you some Tylenol.” Jane gets up from bed.

Fuck the Tylenol. Where are my pills? I want my line of defense, the jet of black ink I can squirt to hide myself from predators. Ziemat. Give me a Ziemat.

But you're sick.

I'm not. I feel fine.

I said you were sick. You've got a fever, I can tell.

His hand is on my forehead, and then he is on the phone, in his pajamas and robe, standing by the refrigerator and fiddling with the orange-slice magnets.



"Yes, this is Mr. Howell calling for my son, Vinny. For Vincent Howell. He won't be in today . . . Yes, right . . . he has the chicken pox." He winks at me.

"Not the chicken pox, Dad," I hiss.

"What? Excuse me." He covers the phone and looks at me.

"Not the chicken pox, the flu. Tell them I have the flu."

"I'm sorry, not the chicken pox, the flu," he repeats into the phone. "That's right, the flu. Thank you, I will, goodbye." He hangs up and looks at me, his eyes brimming with mischief. "Well, Vinny boy, we've got the whole day to ourselves."

"Dad, I'll get in trouble."

"Am I not your father?"

"Mom will be mad."

"It's all right, son. I'm in charge now."

My mother had just left for her first day of work in a law office in Glens Falls. "One of us has to be out there," she'd said, "and I guess it's my turn. I went to college too, you know."

Mom, sturdy as a tree, a bender not a breaker. Whenever Dad teased me too much, or scared me—and he did both of these—I'd run to her, to the branches of her arms, the rustling leaves of her soothing words. "He's just kidding you," she'd say. "Sometimes your father doesn't know where to draw the line."

She wasn't always so solid, though. That morning, the first of her new job, she had come downstairs and bumped from room to room looking for her purse. "Dammit," she whispered from the next room, one of the few times I've heard my mother curse. No 'darn tootin' this time. She came back in the kitchen with her hands on her hips, her head cocked to one side, as if carefully listening for her purse. She had on a green dress and a silver necklace and earrings my father had given her for Christmas. She wore lipstick, too, red as a tomato. Her long hair was piled on top her head like velvet. I hardly ever saw my mother dressed up. My parents didn't go out much.

"Mom," I said.

"Where is that thing?" she said. "My first day and I'm going to be late!"

"Mom?"

"What is it?" she snapped at me.

"You look really nice," I told her.

Something in her melted, turned fluid. She walked over and with her hand swept the hair back off my forehead, kissed me there. "Thank you, Vincent. My good boy. My love."

I pointed out her purse, which was hidden on the seat of a chair tucked under the table. She checked its contents and snapped it shut. I wondered if she had her secret stash of cigarettes in there. “I’m going to be an executive secretary,” she said. “What do you think of that.”

It didn’t sound like a question—or one she wanted an answer to—so I didn’t respond. I couldn’t decide if she was happy or sad about being an executive secretary, whatever that was. Given the fact she was married to my father, I mostly thought my mother capable of doing anything that needed doing, tolerate anyone, solve any problem, and whether or not it made her happy or sad was beside the point. But I think she was looking forward to getting out of the house.

She left early and it was up to my father to get me off to school, which he didn’t do.

—

First we played Parcheesi, then Pick-up Stix, then Stratego. He won Parcheesi and Stratego; I won Pick-up Stix, because his hands trembled a little and he kept nudging the other sticks. We were big on games in my family; we had an entire closet full of them. I don’t remember my father ever letting me win games, even when I was really young and had no chance of beating him. I had to earn every victory. “You need to learn how to lose,” he’d say, but I wasn’t a kid who threw a tantrum when I lost, maybe because I’d gotten used to losing and expected it, or at least knew early on in life there was just as good or better a chance of losing as winning at almost anything you do. I guess you could call me a good loser, although I remember my father once saying, “Show me a good loser, and I’ll show you a loser.”

That morning my father started teaching me how to play chess. He demonstrated how each piece could move, then set up the board and gave me a quiz. “Move your queen-bishop pawn one space forward,” he’d say.

“Okay, now knight to queen four.”

I thought about each move and executed it.

“Castle to the king side,” he said. I did.

“I said castle to the king side, Vinny, the king side. You’re not listening to me.”

“Yes I am.”

“You’re not a good listener,” he said.

Good loser, yes; good listener, no.

“Enough of this for now,” he said. “What do you say we go fishing?”

“Can we?”

We swam in the lake every summer even though the bottom is gushy and every time we put our foot down near the shore we scared up a cloud of murk. One time something in the water bit

my mother's foot. My father said it was the lake monster. So that's what we went fishing for, the monster.

In the basement we dusted off our fishing poles and put new reels of line on them. We used our strongest line, an eight-test, because Dad said the monster would fight like a whale when we hooked it. I went outside with the shovel and dug some worms, which I put into a coffee can with a handful of dirt.

We kicked through the leaves in the back yard, our poles in hand, heading down the slope toward the water. We wore sweaters and hats. It was October and a squadron of Canada geese flew over our heads, honking under the gray sky.

"Is there really a monster?" I asked.

"It bit your mother last summer didn't it?"

"She said it was a turtle."

"Only to hide her fear of the unknown," my father explained. "But we aren't afraid of the dark and mysterious, are we, Vinny?"

"I guess not," I said, with very little confidence.

"Get used to it, Vinny," he said. "The world is a scary place."

We fished for a while from the dock, casting spinners. We stopped after twenty minutes without a nibble and stood side by side peeing into the water, one of our favorite things to do together. My father's pee lasted longer, but I could fire a golden arc that his dribble couldn't touch. At least I was no loser at peeing.

Then we went out in the boat and tried fishing with worms. I rowed because of my father's back. He dragged a line in the water, and when I boarded the oars I put my line in, too. We didn't catch anything, not a catfish, not a trout. When my father got bored with fishing, he had me row back and forth at the narrow end of the lake, timing how long I took to reach the other side. I did this three or four times until told him I was tired.

"Once more for your old man," he said, and I started out again.

"This will build your muscles up, Vinny," he said. "A man's got to have muscles as well as a brain or else he's not really a man. A smart kid like you, you've already got the brain part."

My father had biceps like melons, which I often felt. On one of them was a tiny tattoo of a sea serpent, no bigger than a matchstick, he got in the Marines. He had this trick where he put the tip of his thumb in his mouth and gave the illusion of blowing up his muscles like a balloon. I was skinny as a comb.

---

After I finished rowing another width of the lake we saw Dr. Abrams. He swam right up until the time the water started to freeze. He wore a rubber wetsuit when the water got cold. He was swimming not far from our boat, first the crawl, then turning over for the backstroke, and then back to the crawl again. Other than our boat, he was the only thing moving in the water. I don't think he saw us.

Every summer there was a swim race across the lake and a community barbecue, and afterward fireworks, just Roman candles puffing out balls of fire and those spark sprayers like the burning schoolhouse. Dr. Abrams lost the race last year for the first time. He came in second to his son, who is thirty years younger than him. There was talk then of having a separate race for seniors, which made Dr. Abrams angry.

"He looks kind of tired," my father said. "How about we go over and see if he wants a ride."

"My arms hurt."

"Keep rowing, Vinny. You can do it."

I was exhausted from the workout my father gave me but I paddled with the left oar to turn us, then rowed towards Dr. Abrams. My strokes were sloppy now. I splashed my father a couple of times when I hit the water wrong with the oar. I sort of did it on purpose. I approached at an angle and watched for Dr. Abrams over the port side. He did the sidestroke now, his face pointed away from us, then started doing surface dives and swimming underwater. He made hardly any splash. He did this a few times, and then he dove under and didn't come up.

I rowed right over the spot where he went under, raising the oars and letting the boat glide.

"Dr. Abrams?" my father called. "Ted!"

I looked down, but couldn't see anything. The water was gray and opaque as a rock, and deep this far out, maybe thirty feet. Everything was very quiet.

"Where is he, Dad?"

"Jesus," my father said. He was standing in the boat now leaning over the side. We were rocking badly. "Did you see where he went down?" he asked me.

"Around here," I said. But I had the feeling that once below the surface, Dr. Abrams could have gone anywhere.

My father pulled off his watch and took his wallet out of his pants. He handed them to me, then dove over the side of the boat. "Dad, don't!" I said, but he was already in the water. He surfaced immediately, his arms splashing around. He slicked his silver hair back off his face. "Shit, it's cold!" he said. I could hear him breathing. He tread water for few seconds, turning his head to look in all directions, then dove under for a long time and finally came up. He took a few more breaths and dove again. He surfaced and stroked twice and was at the side of the boat,

which almost tipped over when he climbed back in. I held to the gunwales tightly, afraid I was going to fall overboard.

My father shivered, his soaked clothes sticking to him. Water dripped from his nose and chin. He continued to scan the surface. "Jesus, Lord," he said. "Oh, Jesus."

We sat there until the water became still again. Finally Dad looked at me. He tried a smile which wouldn't come out and ended by biting his lower lip. He reached over and put a cold hand on my shoulder. "Okay, mate, you better row us back in."

—

When we got back to the dock, my father was completely shaking. His jaw and knees trembled and I could see shivers run through him like jolts of electricity. I think I was crying a little.

"It's okay to cry, Vinny," my father told me. "I'd do it myself if I could."

We went up to the house and before my father changed his clothes he made a phone call.

The police boat came from the other side of the lake. We went back outside and watched its bow skipping across the water, a tail of spray pluming out the back. Sheriff Amico cut the power when he got near the shore and the bow settled. He steered up to our dock and my father held the rope.

"Go with him, Vinny," he told me. "Show Sheriff Amico where it happened."

"Me?"

"Go on, get in the boat."

I hesitated.

"Unless your arms hurt too much," he said. My heart squeezed when he said that. I could feel my father staring at me but I couldn't meet his eyes.

Sheriff Amico held out a hand and I stepped in. The police boat was a lot like other power boats we saw on the lake, except it had a prominent siren and flashing red light in the bow and a long antenna that bent when the boat went fast. Sheriff Amico wasn't really a sheriff; our town didn't have one. I think he was the mayor, or something. He didn't wear a badge or carry a gun.

"Wait for the troopers, Jack," he told my father. "I radioed them and they'll be along any minute."

For really big events we called the state police, like when Mr. Glouber shot a prowler breaking into his house last summer.

Sheriff Amico reversed the engine, then swung the boat around, and leaned into the throttle. The force knocked me back against my seat.

“Just tell me where,” he said, shouting because of the wind and the motor. He had on a thick down vest and his orange hunting cap. An unlit cigar was clamped between his teeth.

I pointed toward a spot straight out from a yellow house I remembered seeing.

“Where?”

“Left,” I shouted.

I tapped Sheriff Amico on his back. He eased back on the throttle and the boat flattened out. “Around here,” I said, although I wasn't too sure anymore.

Sheriff Amico stood up and looked back and forth over each side of the boat. He took the cigar out of his mouth and put it back in. “You take the stern,” he told me. “Shout if you see anything.”

I stared at the long wake and kept expecting something huge and wild to surface. Nothing did. We traveled in a pattern of widening circles, then went back and forth in rows. “You sure it was around here?” he asked.

“I think so.”

Sheriff Amico nodded. He was younger than my father or Dr. Abrams. His hair was still black. I went to school with his daughter, Melissa, who was one of my friends and would later become the first girl I ever kissed.

“No school today?” Sheriff Amico asked.

I shook my head and watched the water. Believe me, I wished I'd gone to school.

We could see other flashing lights on shore now, the state trooper cruiser. Sheriff Amico brought the boat to a complete stop. His face became intense. Only his nostrils moved, up and down, as if he were smelling something. He stopped looking at the water and started scanning the shoreline. I did, too, knowing we weren't looking for Dr. Abrams anymore. The trees were mostly bare and brown, except for a few green patches where pines clustered and spots where the last of the orange and red leaves still clung to branches. All the houses looked much more exposed and lonely this time of year.

Finally, Sheriff Amico turned back to me. “I think we've had enough, Vince. What do you say?”

I nodded.

“God raise his soul,” Sheriff Amico said. He made the sign of the cross and bowed his head. I did the same.

All the rest of the day until dark and the next day two boats went back and forth on the lake in the area where Dr. Abrams had gone down, dragging wire-mesh nets with cable bottoms, trying to find him, but coming up empty.

---

I don't know if God ever raised Dr. Abrams' soul. His body, yes. Two days later, on Saturday, I was walking a deer trail along a rough stretch of shore, skipping stones into the lake. When I bent down to pick up a flat stone I saw the arm, curled around a root sticking out of the water. At first I thought it was a branch, but the white hand, which appeared luminous against all the gray and brown, made me look again. When I moved closer I could see his face, submerged just below the surface. It was sort of rocking back and forth. The cheeks were swollen and blue. The lips were dark and his eyes were open. Leaves stuck out of his ear and the top of his wetsuit. At first I didn't recognize him, although I knew it had to be Dr. Abrams.

I ran back home and told my parents. The police came again. I went with my father to the spot and saw them pull out the body. It took three men. My father stared impassively at the scene, although the grip of his hand on my shoulder tightened. Mrs. Abrams was there, with her son, Philip. They stood off to one side with their arms around each other looking at the ground. I couldn't see their faces, but wanted to know what such grief looked like, so I'd be ready if my turn came. *When my turn came.* I understood that now.

Other people gathered around. A neighbor, Sam Besch, joined us. He owned a grocery store at the junction of Route 32 and Lake Shore Road. He spoke to my father. "Heard you were there when he went down, Jack."

"Me and Vinny," my father said.

"I remember talking to Ted one time at a party," Mr. Besch said. "We were talking about all the ways there are to die, and such. Him being a doctor, he'd seen quite a few. We'd both had a beer or two. You know what he told me? He said he thought he'd die in the water someday."

My father said nothing. He ran a hand under his nose. He hadn't worn a coat to come outside but he didn't seem very cold. I stayed close to him, my head nestled under the crook of his arm.

They were just putting Dr. Abrams' body into a dark green bag. His feet stuck out the end, like two silver fish, and water drained from him.

"I mean, I'm sure it was an accident and all, but it's kind of creepy, don't you think?" Mr. Besch said.

"There's no need to talk like that."

"Come on, Jack, I didn't mean anything," Mr. Besch said. "It's a sad business for all of us."

My father pulled me away. We started walking back to our house, picking our steps over the exposed roots. When we got back my mother was there waiting and she was mad at my father for taking me with him and watching the gruesome task of pulling Dr. Abram's body from the water.

That made her double mad because they'd already had a big argument the other day when Dad had kept me home from school.

"Maureen, Vinny's the one who found him over there. He got a better look than any of us."

"It's not something children should have to see."

"What are you talking about?" Now it was my father's turn to be angry. "You think Vinny doesn't know the score? He's an intelligent kid. He knows all about the secrets of life."

No I didn't. I didn't know what secrets he was talking about.

Later, I asked my father if he was going to die, even though I knew the answer.

"Yes, Vinny, I am."

Immediately my eyes watered. "Do you know how?"

His lower lip curled out. He thought for a few minutes.

"Fear not, Vinny," my father finally said. "Death comes sweetly. It will be soft as cotton candy."

## 7

In a storm surge of energy, and despite my sapping cold and stomachache, I stay awake forty hours straight and finish the painting I've been working on, the one of the boy skating on a frozen lake. I eliminate the long looping groove in the gray and green ice cut from the boy's skate blade and in its place embed just below the surface a face-up and spread-eagled Dr. Abrams. He's wearing his wetsuit and his figure blurs with the detail of the ice. If you look closely he's scratching on the ice, his fingers curled and raw. The skater's eyes are cast down, but he has no reaction to the frozen figure, almost as if he doesn't see it, or doesn't care. I title it *Icy Day*.

Then I go to bed and sleep for fifteen hours, and when I wake in a dull fog I know by instinct my flash of creativity is already a light year behind me. Jane is at work. The house is silent and shadowy, even Matisse is hiding somewhere; I'm alone and aware of a gnawing pain in my stomach, but I'm not hungry. The idea of eating sends nausea up my throat, which burns every time I try to swallow.

I try a Ziemat and wait twenty minutes but the evidence remains; this is no starving artist existential anguish but an actual punch in the gut, perhaps the cold I still can't shake now



mutating into a stomach virus. As a check, I open the door to my studio and look at the painting: yes, I'm still satisfied. The source of my pain must be something else.

I wish Jane were home, and she should be by now, it's two hours after her shift ended and why isn't she here? She's been working extra shifts and I've hardly seen her the last couple days. Neither of us has brought up our argument about the trip to Martinique. I had acted like a baby and regret my behavior. I wonder if she is making travel plans without me—or has already left.

I move to the couch and moan for a while until I hear Jane's car in the driveway.

"Where were you?" I say, as soon as she opens the door. I barely pick my head up to speak.

"Were you sleeping?" Jane knows I'm not the type who lies around doing nothing, unless she is lying there with me. I rarely take naps.

I tell her I don't feel well, these pains in my stomach.

"When did it start?"

"I thought your shift change was at four."

"I went to the NICU to hold Blair. I can hold him now, if I wear mask and gloves. He's so tiny, he's so beautiful."

"He has a name?"

"It's the name I gave him. I couldn't keep calling him Baby Blue, or even Blue, but Blair is close and it's a real name."

"I thought Blair was a girl's name."

"It can be a boy's or a girl's name," Jane says, defenses rising: don't challenge her on the name.

She instructs me to lie back while she presses around my abdominal area, feeling my inventory of organs. It all hurts but no single spot more than any other; her probing produces no sharp or sudden pain beyond what's already aching. While she pokes she pleads: You shouldn't go so long without sleep, you're completely run down, this up and down attitude is unhealthy.

She says the next test is to try food and water.

"When's the last time you ate? Your ribs are practically sticking out."

"Can I show you my new painting?"

We go upstairs and I turn on the light in the studio. I watch Jane's expression change into one of puzzlement as she finally discerns the figure trapped below the surface.

"Is that a person?"

"It's Dr. Abrams."

She looks at the painting from several angles. When she speaks, she's generous to me. "So cool, Vincent. You kind of see it, then don't see it. I guess telling me the story about Dr. Abrams opened something in you that needed to be expressed. I knew you could do it."

"And now I'm done."

"Do you feel like having dinner?" Jane asks.

I hadn't prepared anything. I hadn't even thought about food.

"How about if I cook tonight?" she suggests.

I wonder if she's joking but she's not. She scrambles eggs for us and makes toast and slices up an orange, and while she eats her portion and comments that maybe she isn't such a bad cook after all, I can only force down a few bites and then fork the rest of the food around on the plate. I don't mean to squash her chef ambitions, but I'm not hungry, I tell her. My stomach hurts. I'm going back to bed.

—

The next day Jane is up and out for work before I wake, two days in a row now, which never happens because it's my job to make her breakfast and coffee every morning, and dinner at night. It's apparent that I'm shirking my relationship responsibilities. I'll cook something special tonight to make up for it.

Mid-morning Jane calls from the hospital and says she wants me to come down and get checked out. It's only two miles to the hospital and I decide I can walk, thinking I will work out the pain in my stomach through physical exertion. On the way I stop at a diner because now I'm hungry. I order pancakes and coffee. I sit in a booth and read the paper and after eating I don't feel better or worse, just the same heavy ache in my stomach.

I ask for Jane in the ER and then stand to one side not wanting to join the scattering of wounded and sick slumping in the waiting area. There's a moan and a smell coming from that direction that I want no part of. A few minutes later Jane pushes through the double doors.

"How are you feeling?"

"About the same."

She has on blue scrubs with a white, buttoned lab coat over the top, and an actual pocket protector with pens in it. The tail of a stethoscope hangs from one of the side pockets.

"Ian said he'd make time to see you. His office is in the annex. Follow the red stripe along the hallways until you get to the D elevators, then up to the fourth floor."

"Ian?"

"Ian Martinez. He's an internist. You met him at McGill's that night."

Of course I remember him. The one who recommended Martinique. “You spoke to him about me?”

“Well, yes. Just to see if he had time to see you.”

“Don’t you think you should have asked me first?”

“What for? I’m just trying to help. When you’re sick, and you don’t know what’s going on, you go to a doctor. That’s why I asked you to come down here.”

“I thought I was coming to see you,” I say.

“You saw me last night. Now you’ll see a specialist.”

I’m about to protest, but then Jane leans in to give me a kiss. “Good luck. I hope everything’s okay.”

—

I make my way to the doctor who had his arm around the back of Jane’s chair, the one I had asked to vacate his seat in the bar so I could sit next to Jane. His waiting room is crowded but a nurse calls my name just a few minutes after I check in and I rise and try to walk softly, sensing resentful eyes on me and feeling guilty because I must have jumped the line.

I sit in an examining room for a few minutes and then there is a knock on the door and Martinez walks in. [nurse takes vitals]

“Vince, how are you? Good to see you again.” We shake hands, the same fish grip from him as last time.

“Jane’s talked a lot about you. She tells me you’re a painter.”

“That’s right.”

“She speaks highly of your work. She’s such a great gal, that Jane.”

How does he know how great she is?

“I’ve always admired painters,” Ian says. “I’m a bit of a collector myself. I have an original Motherwell I inherited from my grandfather.”

That must be worth a mint. “Have you seen his work hanging at the Albright Knox?”

“I’ve only been in town a month, and I have a backlog of patients, so I haven’t gotten over there yet. I’d like to see your work, too, sometime.”

“You can hang one of my paintings next to your Motherwell.”

He laughs: not a chance.

Martinez gets down to business and asks me when I first noticed the pain, if it’s constant or sporadic, if I’d changed my diet recently, and this reminds me of the questions Jane had asked the enormous pregnant woman. Was I perhaps unaware of an impending miracle birth—to be followed by stroke, coma, and death? Also, I remember a time when my father went to Roswell

Park for a week and had a series of tests done because he said he had cancer, he could feel it growing in him, pressing his insides. Building a beehive, he'd said. I remember those exact words and pictured industrious insects ravaging him from the inside out. He thought he'd get cancer someday because he spent time in Hiroshima when the U.S. troops occupied after the atomic bomb and radiation lingered everywhere. His tests revealed nothing.

"Any bloody or tarry stools? Change in bowel movements?" Martinez asks.

"No, nothing." My stomach doesn't hurt much now, so I feel stupid being here.

He asks me to hop up on the examining table and lie on my back. He wants to feel around. I tell him Jane already did that.

"She's just the triage doctor," he says.

I begin to sweat while he's pressing on me and when he sticks his hand in my pants to feel my lower abdomen I tighten muscles I didn't know I had.

His hand retreats. "Nothing there," he says.

Great, thanks.

He sits on a rolling stool and backs himself against the wall. He tells me he wants to give me a fluoroscopy, which means I need to drink a mixture containing liquid barium and then stand in front of this x-ray machine so he can get a look at my digestive tract for ulcers.

"You haven't eaten today, have you?"

"I had breakfast about an hour ago."

"Oh, Jane said you haven't been able to eat anything. We'll have to do this tomorrow, then. No eating for twelve hours prior." He pauses, then stretches his arms and folds his hands behind his head.

He asks me if everything is going okay in my life.

"What do you mean?"

"Is anything bothering you, making you upset? That can lead to stomach issues."

Other than I'm thinking too much of my father who I don't want to think about at all and sleeping poorly and painting sporadically and now wondering if you've got a thing for Jane and she for you?

I say, "No, not really."

"Any undue amount of stress? Anxiety can make your insides feel like someone's drilling in there."

I shrug.

"Do you take any prescription medications?"

"Not really. I mean sometimes I take a Ziemat."

“Anxiety med,” Martinez says. “How often?”

“Take as needed. Couple times a week, I guess.”

He sighs, cups one elbow in his hand and scratches his chin. Dr. Thoughtful.

“Everything okay with Jane?” he asks.

I drop my legs from the table and stand up. “Sure, she’s fine,” I say.

“So your relationship is going well?”

“Absolutely. We’re doing great.” He cocks his head to one side and his mouth thins just shy of smirk, thinking he’s caught me in a lie.

Now I’m sure he’s trying to steal Jane.

—

After I leave Martinez’s office I follow the red stripe on the floor, past the wheelchairs and the mop guy and the lady carrying the Mylar balloons, work through the crush of visitors and employees where the red stripe intersects with the blue stripe heading to the main entrance and the green stripe leading to the cafeteria, and I get back to the emergency room lobby and ask the desk person for Dr. Oujima. She checks her screen and tells me Jane is on her lunch break.

“You can probably find her in the NICU, she’s been going there. Take the red stripe to the blue stripe, then . . .”

I’m already on my way, marching like some insane Nazi soldier. The question I have for Jane is whether Martinez is acting alone or as Jane’s agent. Is he seeking my weak spot to leverage Jane away from me or is he working as her private investigator to uncover a deal-breaker reason for her to dump me?

But I should have listened to the desk person’s directions because I end up in the wrong elevator bank riding with a maintenance man and his cleaning cart. I get out with him on the fourth floor and take the stairs back down, find the right elevator and head up to the NICU.

I step out into a quiet reception area where two nurses sit behind a desk area. They smile and nod at me. I walk down a tiled hallway with glass windows on one side looking into a room of incubators, half of them brightly lit and occupied by tubes and hoses and specs of life forms.

Sure enough, there is Jane sitting in a rocking chair gazing down at a blanket in her arms. Several tubes snake from the blanket and connect to digital machines that are part of the incubator. Jane wears a blue surgical mask tied around her face. She doesn’t see me at first and I don’t want to tap the glass so I move back and forth along the windows until she detects the movement and looks up.

She stands with the blanket in her arms and takes a few steps to the window, tubes trailing, and holds her bundle up close for me to see. I know she is smiling behind her mask because of the

crinkles in the corners of her eyes. Love and compassion emanate from her like rays from the sun. I force myself to look and my heart sinks when I see this head no bigger than a baseball; it makes no sense because otherwise all the features are there and in the right places: the eyes and nose and mouth and ears, and the tiny blue eyes are moving around and I think looking at me. There's a tube in the mouth and another in the nose and a third disappearing into the folds of the blanket connected to who knows where. I feel like a crumb for whining about a pain in my belly that's probably only in my head and for getting worked up over this stupid business about Martinez stealing Jane, and my eyes start to water, but when I look back at Jane I see she's crying now and we can't both be doing that, so I force a smile and wave, just with my index finger, a tiny gesture for a tiny being.

## 8

One is black and white striped, like a zebra with gills, another is green and flat as a lily pad. They fin past me, undulating in the clear water. Pink and beige corals fleck the ocean floor. A cartoonish blue and yellow fish with bulging eyes loiters beneath a rock, its mouth puckering for invisible kisses. At the villa where we're staying we bought a book with pictures of the fish and their names. I don't remember any of them now.

I am submerged chest-deep in a salty ocean bath, face down, breathing through a snorkel. I have spent my life swimming across lakes, floating in river currents, jumping from rope swings into water holes, diving under logs and peering through reeds in secluded ponds. But sea water is new. The taste and texture and endless stretch of ocean has opened a new world of water to me. I have not surfaced in an hour; my snorkel sticks up like a roaming antenna in the air. I breathe and dive, using fins to propel me twelve feet into a crevice between two large rocks. A yellowish eel, no more than a foot long, wiggles past. My hands fondle a slippery stripe of sea grass. I think of my pet goldfish, Will Wonderfish. He could hold his own with these other fish in the looks department, although he wouldn't last long in the salt water.

I expel breath and kick for the surface, breaking the plane of water with a splash. I spit my mouth piece and raise my mask. I can hold my breath for almost ninety seconds. It's one of those things you have to practice and time yourself at, plus I have good lung capacity from running. I can take a long look at what's down there.

Jane has been watching from the shore. She waves. She was in the water earlier, but did not stay long. The fish—shy as they are—gave her the creeps, swimming so close. She spun in anxious circles, trying to see behind her, what might be sneaking up on her. Now she is on our blanket, reading her third novel in four days.

This is the first time I've seen her with a tan. After one day in the sun her skin colored to an orangey-brown, and has deepened since, like well-oiled wood, but so much softer and creamier. The contrast with the pale secrets below her tan lines is remarkable.

Each night and morning I thank her for bringing me here. I had almost said no to an all-expenses-paid trip to the healing warmth of the tropics, accompanied by a beautiful woman inexplicably in love with me. A man who says no to such an offer has blown a critical fuse in his wiring. He desperately needs the vacation he is refusing. If I had stayed behind, I would have tailspinned like a plane on fire. I had been ill like I have never been, my body afflicted with the ache of the elderly, my head listing heavily from side to side, my spirit blackened and charred. But my stomach most of all. Who had put a screw to it? I lived on the precipice of vomiting, my stomach constantly on the verge of revolt.

I didn't return to Martinez for the milky drink test, and to be honest I had no real evidence he was making a move for Jane by finding a way to eliminate me. Not by poisoning the barium, obviously, but by using knowledge that he gained from me, against me: discovering the vulnerable spot in my relationship with Jane and turning it to his advantage. I can add paranoia to a list of reasons I needed this trip. Thank God I didn't quiz Jane about Martinez; she would have scorned me off the face of the earth. Of course she wasn't collaborating with Martinez to get rid of me; she was trying to take care of me. All that cold suspicion has melted away in the tropics.

Those were the conditions under which I relented and let Jane treat me to the islands. Jane Oujima: the stabilizer in my life, my ballast. More than that: She is the great love in my life, and I the luckiest man alive. Her support for me comes from all sides. When I told Jane about Dr. Abrams drowning and my father accusing me of not rowing hard enough, she said a memory like that is important—painful, yes, but if you recognize its meaning, you can learn and grow from the experience, you can get past the trauma.

Not all memories are painful, I'm beginning to realize. Not all of them conjure images of dread and resentment. In fact, most of them support my theory that my father and I are nothing alike, to my great relief. Some memories are magnificent mysteries, origins unknown, or perhaps remnants of old dreams. There is a memory I'm experiencing now which I cannot place. As I float in the ocean and look at the trees, the water, the beach—all of it is as familiar as my own back yard. But I have never been in the tropics, and this recognition is more vivid than what pictures in

magazines and movies can implant in you. It is like my experience of meeting Jane, lying on the table with my head throbbing and bleeding, awareness fading and returning, her face leaning over me, close to mine. I knew her. I'd seen her before. I already had her face memorized, a cherished portrait. I loved her immediately—and I do not believe in that kind of love.

I have seen this: the way the palm fronds wave in the wind, the emerald and jade of jungle, the lick and lap game the waves play with the beach, the hundred hues of turquoise in the water. I see as if from a distance, approaching from the sea, moving closer. I do not believe in *deja-vu*. I do not believe in previous lives or lives to come. I believe this is my one chance, which is why wrecking it can be so lethal, and so I'd better not.

---

I sit cross-legged on the blanket next to Jane. There is no need to dry off. Not the slightest chill edges the breeze, even when the clouds clustering on the horizon march in for the daily afternoon showers.

"You stayed in the water a long time," Jane says. "You must be waterlogged."

"It's so beautiful here, so comfortable. I can't believe how great I feel. Have I thanked you for bringing me here?"

"Only a million times. Frankly, it's getting a little annoying."

As for Jane, she needed this getaway as much as I did. She may not have been sneaking around with Martinez, but she was definitely questioning the wisdom and stability of her relationship with me, and battling emotions unfamiliar to her concerning the orphaned baby. Look at the way she fell into tears while holding him. Yet the tears weren't concern for the health of the baby—Blair gets around-the-clock expert care and is thriving; otherwise Jane would never have left for this trip, and he could be strong enough to go home in another month, except there is no home for him. The mother remains unidentified, stashed away on a chilly rollout slab in the morgue. No relatives have been located by the police, though the story has been in the newspaper several times and was even covered by one of the local television newscasts. If no relation shows up, it means foster care and eventually adoption.

We're far down the beach from other vacationers at the villa, no one else in shouting distance. If you stay on the resort's private beach you can also use their umbrellas and beach chairs. Or you can sit in a pool with submerged bar stools and drink rum and fruit drinks out of hollowed melons. We haven't been drinking or socializing with others. This vacation has been strictly private. Down here the beach is narrower, the vegetation dares within twenty feet of high tide. Raucous birds trumpet and flute in the thicket behind us.



Jane turns onto her stomach. I untie the top of her bathing suit and she pulls it from under her. I rub lotion between her shoulder blades. No scars or blemishes mar her back. A faint line of hair descends from her neck down her spine. I can feel it more than see it, soft as down, and I put my lips there and kiss. She turns again and now slips her bottoms off and leans back on the blanket, propped on one elbow with her chin up, naked and stunning to behold.

I wipe my hands on a towel and take out my pad and charcoal pencil from our beach bag. I execute three quick sketches of Jane, two full length and straight on, and one close profile of her torso, where her arm shadows the side of one breast. My hand is steady and fluid through every line. This is what I've been needing: to draw Jane. At home, I have entire sketchbooks filled with drawings of her, detailed face portraits and quick line drawings suggesting her shape. I have drawn her while she's slept, while she's read, while she's taken a bath, while she's sat in front of the TV. I've drawn her naked and clothed. From the front and back. Her angular features and ability to hold one position make her an excellent model. She's not skinny but sleek: her figure lacks pronounced curves—narrow hips, petite breasts—nothing like the voluminous nudes drawn and painted by the early masters of the form.

It took Jane a long time to get used to my pencil and pad. The first time I drew her naked was after the first time we'd made love; we had been out together only a few times and had taken a walk and gotten coffee one Saturday afternoon and then went back to her house and ended up in bed where we kissed for about an hour before starting to undress. The actual lovemaking part took much less time and when we finished Jane fell asleep with the sheets and blankets bunched like a pile of leaves around her feet. I watched the fading light through the window sheers cast a shadow over her figure. I took up the pen and pad of sticky notes she kept on her bed table to write herself reminders. It was a tiny sketch and she woke up while I was working on it. "What are you doing?" Her natural reaction was to pull the blanket up, but I asked her to go back to the way she was. She protested at first, but I showed her the sketch and she relented, although on subsequent occasions, when I had my bigger pad, she was reluctant to pose and she teased me about using this technique to get all my women naked. "All" in this case didn't amount to much, although it's true I've drawn and painted other women, some of whom I've slept with. Eventually Jane got comfortable in her role as a model—as long as I promised to keep the finished works private—and she became skilled at taking her clothes off and letting me stare her up and down. That takes confidence, that takes a bit of exhibitionism, and to my credit I've been able to capture her poise and self-assurance, along with a dark and sultry beauty beyond the persona she displays in everyday life.

I finish my drawings. I wrap the pad in a towel to keep the paper dry and lie down next to her and hold her hand. The best I've ever felt in my life is after I've drawn Jane and before we've made love, a few minutes of suspended time electrified with exquisite anticipation. It would be perfect to make love right here, right now, on our private patch of beach under graceful fronds of palms. We could take a long time, blending and folding our bodies. Tell each other where to touch, even though we already know. Find a rhythm as endless and insistent as the tides lapping at the sand.

We move our blanket out of sight under a stand of palms.

---

The next day we rent a car, since we have only two days left and haven't excursed beyond several hundred yards of our room. I drive first, a white Renault with sticky clutch and a diesel engine that stinks like highway truck stops. The roads are narrow and rutted and treacherous, but we are in no hurry. We have no map. The island is not big. All the road signs are in French, a language neither of us knows. Eventually I ignore the signs and drive by intuition, which means we are lost. I'm fluent in English only; Jane knows a smattering of Spanish.

I've never been any place where English wasn't spoken. In fact, this is my first real vacation. I've gone for camping and weekend trips, flown across the country to visit friends, and driven in squiggly patterns through dozens of states and Canada, but have never actually packed suitcases in the official pursuit of leisure. I've never had enough money to book a trip, and my family did not take vacations because my father believed living on a lake was like a vacation. It wasn't.

Jane, on the other hand, is a seasoned traveler. She has made all the travel arrangements, including reminding me to get a passport. She takes a well-deserved vacation every year. Last year she went to Paris; I wish I knew her then and had gotten to go on that trip and visited the great galleries of the world. She's been to Japan and Thailand, too.

We pass through a tiny hamlet where there's an open market aromatic with fish and seaweed. Wooden bins display an array of seafood and shellfish. The women wear multi-layered cotton dresses, the men unbuttoned work shirts and rubber aprons tied to their waists. Their skin looks rich as caramel. Children pop out everywhere, chasing each other, screaming and laughing. I watch for them in the street. The buildings are a faded stucco, in need of whitewash. Laundry hangs from iron balconies. An air of poverty pervades, but I do not see sullen faces, hanging heads, defeated and resentful eyes; unlike in America, where poverty is synonymous with desolation, with what you don't have that others do. That could be the case here, too, and perhaps I just don't know how to see it.

"Turn here," says Jane. "There's a coast road to the right."

The aqua and turquoise jewels of the ocean come into view. The road meanders along the edge of a cliff where there are no guardrails or signs warning of impending curves. Just off the coast huge rock islands jut up like monstrous teeth from the water. They appear uninhabitable, unapproachable. Trees grow from the top of their peaks.

“You drive, I’ll enjoy the view,” Jane says.

“What view?” I lean across her to look out the window and let the car swerve toward the shoulder of the road.

“Cut it out.” She punches me back into place.

The road turns inland again and we pass through a shady banana plantation, where the trees are planted in straight rows as far as we can see. I drive slowly and look at the bananas. I’ve heard pythons like to hang out in them, but I don’t see any. Then come fields of cane and the smell of burnt sugar as we drive by a rum production facility.

—

We stop for lunch in the next village, where an outdoor patio of a restaurant shaded by palms overlooks the sea from a perch on the edge of a mountainside. Again the color of the water and lush vegetation mesmerize me. I stare, unmoving, although the landscape seems to move, it shimmers and swims like heat waves.

I hear my name twice, from a distance, then a hand passes in front of my face.

“Earth to Vincent,” Jane says. “What are you thinking about?”

I’m not sure I’m thinking about anything.

“Have I been here before?”

“Not with me.”

“I recognize something here—the water, the trees—I’m not sure. Maybe just the colors, but I don’t use these colors much.”

Jane lights a cigarette and blows the smoke away from my face. I’ve found out she smokes, but only on vacations, which I tell her is ridiculous but she thinks is quite intelligent. She likes cigarettes but knows of the deadly results, so she indulges just a few times a year, and seems immune to any addictive effects. A secret smoker, like my mother. I’m discovering vacation is Jane’s time to do whatever she damn well pleases, and she does. She did not pack her serious, professional persona, her bargaining nature with affection, her judging eye. She has been loose, free with her touch, ready to erupt with laughter. She actually took her clothes off on the beach so I could make sketches of her, and then made love with me. At home, yes, lots of times. But on the beach? Is she finally letting me in on the unguarded Jane? I, too, have brought the better Vincent

Howell, the light-hearted and easy fellow who's so hard to find sometimes, the guy unafraid of ghosts, the man who worships every moment with this woman.

"Have I thanked you for bringing me here?"

"Not in the past hour," Jane says. "You'd think I'd just let you into heaven or something. It's just one little trip."

"I thought I signed up for the package deal of fifty so I don't have to go through the blustering refusal routine again."

"Well, you know how the real world is—there's only one vacation per year."

"Yet another reason why we should stay together," I say.

Jane smiles and drops her eyes to the menu; she likes what I've just said. And right now I feel more strongly than ever that we belong with each other.

She tells me 'poisson' means fish, but even I know that. When the server comes, I point to that heading. She nods and I ask if they have beer.

The woman speaks rapidly and smiles at the same time. I have no idea what she says. I mime opening a beer bottle and pouring it into a glass, then raise my hand to my mouth. She nods like she understands.

"The universal language of hand signals," I say. "There's no such thing as a language barrier."

"We'll see," says Jane.

—

We use the bathroom before our food comes. There are no separate men's and ladies' rooms but a single toilet closet behind a heavy fabric curtain on the side of the building. We squeeze into the room together. Jane goes first but won't sit on the scummy seat. She squats and hovers over the bowl, grasping my hands for balance. When my turn comes I kick up the seat with my foot and take steady aim. At least there's a soap dispenser and a faucet that runs cold.

We walk back through the dark bar. There are a few stools and tables and a radio playing a crooner who sounds like a French version of Sinatra. The only person in the bar is a boy about nine or ten sitting on a stool with a pad of paper and cup full of pencil stubs. His mop of black hair hangs over his eyes and he has two large moles on his right cheek. I stop to see what he's drawing. He looks up into the mirror behind the bar, then back down to his paper to draw. Glance in the mirror, back down to the paper. He's working on a self portrait.

He senses me peering over his shoulder and pushes his pad so I can see. He says something in French in a sharp tone.

"What did he say?" I ask Jane.

She doesn't know.

"It looks good," I tell him. "C'est bon." It's one of the few French expressions I have picked up.

He shakes his head. "No." Then rattles off something else. Whatever he's saying he's right. The face on the page looks nothing like him, except for the hair, a series of straight lines which almost mimics the boy's sloppy haircut. The features are out of proportion to the shape of the face. The eyes are up where the forehead should be, his mouth in the cleft of the lower jaw. The moles like polka dots.

I say, "Here, let me show you something." I take one of his pencils from the cup and a paper cocktail napkin from a pile on the edge of the bar. The boy watches me carefully. I sketch an oval and divide it into four slices with lightly drawn vertical and horizontal lines intersecting in the center. "This is how you get the proportions right," I tell him. I know he doesn't understand my words but he nods.

I draw a single eye in the center of the intersection, then two more on each side of it, with five equal eyes going across the horizontal line. Halfway between the center intersection and the bottom of the oval I sketch two nostrils with lines extending up on either side. Then halfway between the nostrils and the bottom I draw a slice for the mouth.

"Now, you get rid of what you don't need." I turn the pencil over and carefully erase three of the five eyes and the two intersecting lines, but the napkin is too thin and I tear it in several places. When I'm finished it's a mess, but I give it to him and say, go ahead, you try it.

He takes the napkin and looks at me and shrugs.

—

We go back to our table where our drinks are waiting, a bottle of rum and pitcher of lemonade. Not the beer I thought I expertly ordered through sign language. Jane shouldn't drink this because of her allergy but starts in anyway, diluting the rum with ten parts of lemonade. Then the fish is served. It does not look like fish. It looks like stew of some type, and is loaded with garlic and hot peppers, Creole style. The heat of the spice makes us drink more rum. Even with her tan, Jane's face turns blotchy and I suggest she stop drinking.

"It doesn't taste that strong," she says. She tells me I was sweet, showing that boy how to draw a face.

"I doubt he understood me, but he's pretty good anyway. He has good control of the pencil, he just needs to learn technique. Maybe he'll be the next Picasso."

"And you'll have helped launch his career."

It would be nice to launch someone's career—particularly my own. But I'm not going to ruin this day by thinking that way now. I just want to savor this moment.

Beyond the patio are a few fat-leaved plants, a knee-high bamboo fence and then the great sea beyond, blue and shimmering until it meets the horizon.

I say, "Maybe when I was a baby my parents took me to the Caribbean and I was too young to remember. But the images remained and now they're coming back to me."

"What was that about a baby?" Jane says.

"Are you getting drunk?" I ask. The color in her face is like a sunset.

"Maybe your parents aren't really your parents," she says. "Maybe you were born in the tropics and sold for adoption in the U.S."

"I wish."

"What?"

"Have I thanked you for bringing me here?"

"Oh, shut up." She starts laughing and covers her mouth.

Soon we've finished most of the bottle. Jane has the giggles, I've got the spins.

"Where are we?" she asks.

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

She finds this weak and worn joke extremely funny. There's a table of locals next to us, older women and men, drinking rum and playing cards. I noticed them a few minutes ago for the first time. They are laughing, too, but I don't think at my Kansas joke.

Then the boy from inside the bar comes out and puts his drawing on the table next to me. "Pour vous, monsieur," he says.

His sketch is much improved. I move the paper so Jane can see it too. The facial features are aligned properly and sized proportionally. It even looks like the kid. He's beaming at me, proud as a new parent. I tell him it's fantastic and try to give it back to him but he puts his hands up and says, "No, no, pour vous, pour vous. Merci."

I thank him and he runs back inside. I fold the paper and slip it into my back pocket.

Now Jane is beaming at me. "Goddammit, you're cute," she says. "You ask me why I love you, that's reason enough, isn't it?"

"I do a good job raking and shoveling," I say.

"Yes, and you look cute doing it."

"You're looking pretty good yourself. You know, I bet we'd have some fine looking kids together, you and I."

“Ha.” She reminds me I once professed my adamancy against having children. Something lame about not wanting to pass my genes on.

No, I don’t remember saying that. I tell Jane she’d look extraordinary if she were pregnant, I could imagine the glow, the gentle waddle to her step. She laughs and says she’d look fat.

Jane lights another cigarette. I stand up to use the bathroom again but when I get out of my chair the world is too wobbly. I reach for the back of the chair and guide myself down. I can hold it a while longer. I hate rum. Actually I hate getting drunk. I say a lot of dumb things I don’t mean to and do things I can’t undo and always have a terrible hangover.

“Where are we?” Jane asks again.

I save the joke about not being in Kansas anymore; that’s the kind of quip that only works once. The breeze picks up and flaps the edges of our tablecloth.

“Vincent.” A frown crosses her face. Something has scared her.

“Right here,” I say. I push the glasses away from in front of us. “Where are we going to vacation next year?”

—

I get lost again driving back to our villa. The sun has set and the landmarks I probably wouldn’t have remembered anyway are now cast in darkness. Plus, I’m not seeing so well. I shouldn’t be driving at all but Jane is worse. For twenty minutes we’ve been singing songs to stay alert—she doing most of the singing, since I always forget words and couldn’t follow a tune if it pulled me along by a leash. Then the singing ends abruptly and Jane says to stop the car. I steer onto a soft shoulder where we are surrounded on both sides by cane fields.

“I’m not feeling so hot,” Jane says. She gets out and pukes into a ditch. I hurry around the side of the car. There isn’t much I can do for her but hold her hair back out of the spray zone. She’s bent over. Then down on one knee. She makes very little noise. Just a slight cough followed by a splash on the ground. It is not a pretty sight, or smell. It makes me want to puke, too, but I don’t. I go back in the car and find some tissues in her purse and wipe her mouth for her. She blows her nose and stands up.

“You okay?”

“God, I feel so much better,” she says. “For a while there—” She clears her throat. Puffiness has invaded her eyes, giving her a squinted, exhausted look.

“What was I thinking of drinking like that?”

“How much fun we were having?”

“Yeah . . . maybe.” She shakes her head.

I look around. Except for some lights on a hill in the distance, the night is black. No moon washes out the explosion of stars.

“Right here,” I say. “With each other.”

“What?”

Jane's suddenly sober. She takes a turn driving. I sort of pass out in the passenger seat.

---

The next day we have to hurriedly pack to make our flight. I'm hungry but there is no time to eat. While I check out, Jane buys two baguettes and we eat them in the taxi on the way to the airport. I keep turning around to look out the back window. “What's the matter?” Jane asks.

“Hmmm? Nothing.”

“You forget something?”

“I don't want to leave.”

We had spent all morning and afternoon in bed, nursing sour stomachs and throbbing heads. I wish I could say we were making love all day, but we weren't. Still, I remember it as pleasant. The illness I felt wasn't in the same spectrum as what I suffered before coming here. This was like the soreness you feel after too much sex. It hurts, but was worth it, and every movement reminds you of pleasure. The other illness hurt, but I didn't get anything in exchange, and it reminded me of death.

Jane slept most of the day, a faint sweat sheening her forehead. I drifted in and out, and had strange dreams of being seasick on a boat just off this island. When I got up I fetched glasses of water. Once I called for room service and ordered a carafe of orange juice. By the time it arrived I'd fallen back asleep and the knock on the door startled me. Every time Jane got up to pee she brushed her teeth, saying she still tasted the vomit; every time she got up the sheets felt incredibly empty. The balcony windows were open and a scented breeze of vegetation and sea air puffed the curtains. We listened to the surf, and voices on the beach or nearby balconies. I surrendered the day to a queasy torpor, that shared with Jane became luxuriant and mystic, a suspended moment beyond or behind which there was nothing to intrude. I made sure we were always touching in some way, either our hands or feet, our hips against each other, her head cradled in the nook of my arm. We whispered to each other, short conversations I don't remember now, but left me craving to be with her forever, in that room, in that condition. I wanted to spend my life with her. I think I told her that. I didn't want to leave.

When the plane lifts off we ascend over the palm trees and the ocean comes into view. Jane sits by the window and I lean across her to see out. Only now that we are leaving do I realize where I've seen this before. Actually, I haven't seen it. My father has.



The trees, Vinny. And the water. You've never seen such color.  
I remember him telling me.

## 9

He wasn't one of those veterans who clammed up when asked about the war, averting his eyes inward where perhaps he had buried the human wreckage of it in a dark room in his soul. When my father spoke about the war he always talked about the landscape.

"We'd approach these islands and I could see white sand on the beaches and a turquoise sea," he once told me. "Sometimes the sun was just coming up and the world was red. And the palm trees were tall and curved, reaching out of the jungle like welcoming arms—it was hard to believe there were snipers in those trees. Vinny, these views are what they take pictures of for postcards. The islands were a tropical paradise—until we landed on them."

I asked him the question everyone wants to ask of those who've been to war: Did you ever kill anyone?

He hesitated before answering. "No, I don't think so."

I didn't believe him. He'd been in combat for months.

I wanted to hear of hand-to-hand heroic battles, my father charging valiantly into the line of fire, wiping out an enemy battery, but he would have none of that talk. When I asked him to tell me how he got wounded, he said, "I was shot."

He let me look at his scar, a tornadoed patch of flesh between his pelvic bone and spine. It didn't look like a bullet hole; it wasn't round at all. It was blotchy, like a broken egg, and mostly white, except one part that ridged and rippled and was red. It was gross, but I touched it, anyway. I think he wanted me to.

"Does it still hurt?" I asked.

"No, not there, Vinny. Not anymore."

"Did it hurt when it happened?"

"Like fire," he said.

I pressed for more details.

“No one found me until the next morning,” he said. “There was a crescent moon out that night and I watched it, knowing your mother might be looking at the same moon. That was what saved me.”

“You had to wait all night long while you were bleeding?”

“It was warm. I used my shirt to help stop the blood.”

“Were all the Japs dead?”

“We got them, Vinny. But they were never all dead. There were always more of them.”

“Dad, how could you get shot in the back? How come not in the front? Did one of them sneak up on you from behind?”

He rubbed his chin, thinking back. “They were everywhere, son. In those trees, those beautiful trees. I remember seeing one jump out of a plant that had these yellow and orange flowers.”

“Wow,” I said.

—

I’ve seen my father cry only once. It was a Saturday afternoon, we were watching an old black and white World War II movie on television. It was about the siege to recapture Corregidor from the Japanese. Every movie that came on my father had already seen, but he watched it again so he could fill me in on background history, and I listened to him, fascinated. He made a big bowl of popcorn and let me drink all the Dr. Pepper I could stomach, which was a lot. We sat on the couch with the popcorn bowl between us. My mother stood leaning against the doorway and watched a few minutes, but didn’t sit down.

In this movie there was a fearless platoon sergeant, played by steel-jawed Gary Cooper, who talked his men into attacking well-fortified caves on the side of a mountain where Japanese soldiers were entrenched with machine guns. All the soldiers thought it was a bad idea, except for the platoon sergeant, who had this notebook he wrote in when no one was looking. He wondered if his men were turning yellow on him. He wrote that the platoon was only as brave as the most cowardly among them. Sometimes he wondered if he were a coward. He thought he’d rather die than live with the reputation of being a coward, but then he couldn’t decide if this feeling was heroic or gutless. He was very complex for a soldier. Before the big battle, he gathered his men and gave them an emotional pep talk about patriotism and loving your country and being men and how they were all fighting for their loved ones back home. He really got his platoon going. They were fired up like a football team before a big game. There were one or two still scared, of course—you could see it in their eyes in close-ups—but when the order came, they all charged. We saw a lot of soldiers die; Gary Cooper was not one of them.

My father cried at this one scene in the movie, it didn't even involve the heroes. One soldier, who had done hardly any talking—he was one of the ones still scared—charged a bunker and dove into it. Machine guns were firing and shells exploded everywhere. In the bunker was a Japanese soldier, already wounded, leaning against sandbags and breathing hard; he'd been shot in the chest. The front of his uniform was dark with blood. When the American soldier jumped in the Japanese guy reached for his gun, and the soldier pointed his gun, too. His hands shook and the end of the gun wavered. “Shoot him!” I yelled at the soldier. But there was a long pause, and close-ups of both their faces as they stared at each other, the Japanese and the American. They both had this same look in their eyes, like they were wondering who the other guy was and all. “Shoot him!” I said again. “What's he waiting for, Dad?”

Then came the sound of gun fire; they both shot at the same time and the camera showed first the Japanese guy, then the American, their dying, astonished faces dropping away from the television screen.

“Why didn't he shoot right away Dad?” I asked. “He could have gotten that guy easy.”

When I looked at Dad for his answer, I saw tears, bright as icicles, dripping down his face. I got real quiet and turned back to the television screen. I snuggled against his chest and whispered, “It's okay to cry, Dad.”

I didn't ask him much about the war after that day, although I still went up to the attic and rummaged through this trunk stored in the far corner underneath a dusty, cobwebby window that didn't open. The trunk was some kind of army box and was green with black metal fittings. It smelled like mothballs and inside were his old uniform and cap and a tarnished medal with a striped ribbon. I tried on the uniform, which swallowed me up. I pretended I was him in battle—one of the few times I wanted to be like him. There were a hundred pictures in that trunk, too, most of them faded. I can't remember what of, but I looked through them a lot.

—

There was one other thing about my father that had to do with the war, indirectly. This was much later. I was in high school, and had stopped hanging around with him because he embarrassed me. Everyone at school knew about him because of the track meets he attended, where he'd be loud and draw attention to himself. He yelled at officials and coaches; he taunted members of the opposing team; he'd stand right by the finish line and throw up his arms in despair or victory.

Everyone pointed at him and made jokes. “Is that your father?” guys used to ask me.

I would pretend not to hear.

Once some guys on the football team kidded me in the showers after practice. I wished we could have had a different locker room, because the football players all had muscles. I had bones. It was humiliating to shower with them. I was sure they had bigger dicks, too, although I was terrified of looking in case anyone caught me, so I would steal quick glances, and anything you look at quickly and turn away from always seems larger than it really is.

“Hey, Howell, we hear your old man's a nut case. Likes to Howell at the moon!”

I turned my face into the spray and let the water fill my ears.

“He just got out of a mental hospital. He’s a psychopath!”

Where had they heard that? He had only been in there for a few days, just for “observation” my mother called it.

“Jack-O Crack-O, they call him! Better watch out, Howell, that stuff's hereditary.”

“Is not,” I said into the spray.

“What are you mumbling about? See—you're already crazy, babbling like an idiot.”

I turned and sucker punched Todd McGuire, who was a star halfback and actually a nice guy. He happened to be the person closest to me. He was bigger than me but dropped to one knee and I kept punching and my fist kept bouncing off the back of his head. He fell right where the drain was. Some guys pulled me off.

“You asshole, Howell!”

“We were just kidding.”

“You’re dead meat, Howell.”

McGuire was bleeding, and he hadn't even been the one to open his mouth and taunt me.

Following this incident, I knew Todd McGuire would beat me up, but he took his time about it, which ruined two weeks of my life. I'd see him in the halls and he'd point to me and narrow his eyes and say, “I’m gonna kick your ass, Howell.”

He did this for days, then he just started pointing and scowling but saying nothing. Then he dropped the pointing and only stared and I knew we were getting closer to a showdown. Some showdown. I was terrified and knew I didn't stand a chance. When he finally confronted me one day in the parking lot after school I just put down my books and sighed deeply, I was so tired because I hadn't been sleeping at night waiting for this. McGuire punched me once in the face, hard enough to knock me down, and I stayed there, curled up and waiting for him to kick me. But he didn't. He let me get up and said, “Now we're even,” and he shook my hand.

—

I hated that people thought my father was crazy, because the guys were right: That kind of stuff could be hereditary. It can get mixed up in your genes. I could be next. To make matters

worse, about a month after the McGuire thing my father showed up at school one morning at nine o'clock. I'd only been there an hour. He had the vice-principal come and get me out of class, making like there was some kind of emergency.

When I walked to the office I saw my father waiting for me. He was standing at attention next to the secretary but not looking at her. He stared straight ahead at the wall where this stupid painting of a drooling dog with lifeless eyes was hung. It looked like one of those paint-by-number jobs done on black velvet. It was the worst painting I'd ever seen in my life, and exactly the kind of thing they hang in the administration offices of high schools. I think it was supposed to be soothing and innocuous, but by now I was interested in painting and considering the life of an artist, and this piece of shit I found highly disturbing.

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"Come on, Vinny. We have to do something important."

Everyone stared at us as we walked down the hall and out of school. I could feel their beady eyes, hear the whispers.

"Is something wrong with Mom?" I asked, when we were in the parking lot. He'd driven our old LTD, and my father rarely drove anymore. He'd been taking a lot of medication and wasn't supposed to drive or operate machinery, according to the labels on the prescription bottle labels.

"Just get in the car, son."

He held the door open for me. I got in.

"What's so important?"

"I missed you today. I thought we'd go for a ride."

"I have a trig test in third period. I can't miss it."

He drove towards Moreau State Park, where sometimes we went sledding when I was little. It was not a pretty day. The sky hung low and almost all the leaves had fallen off the trees. It had rained the day before and the side of the road was still wet. The browns and grays of winter had moved in, like an army wiping out the vivid reds and yellows and oranges that highlight the peak of autumn.

"What'd you learn in school today?" he asked.

"It's nine o'clock, Dad. I wasn't there long enough to learn anything."

He didn't drive fast or recklessly, but he did grip the wheel very tightly; his knuckles whitened. I noticed he drove a long circuitous route—we passed the same green barn on Harley Road twice.

"Dad, are you lost?" I asked. "If you turn on Route 32 up here we can get back to—"

“Of course I'm not lost, we're just going for a drive. How can we be lost if we're just out having fun?”

“Dad, third period starts at 10:20. You said we had something important to do.”

“I love you, Vinny,” he said. “Did I ever tell you that? I love you so much and if I could I'd make it all better.” He put one arm on the back of the seat, around my shoulder.

“Make *what* all better?” I said very sarcastically.

“It's a tragedy how we never say we love each other. Why don't we ever do that? Before you know it, you don't have a chance. So I just wanted to say I love you, son.”

I stared out the passenger side window.

“To be honest, Vinny, I've never loved anyone the way I love you. Not your mother, not Celine. You should never love one child more than the other, but it's only natural, you can't help it. You're my favorite. Of course I love your sister, but with you it's different. We have a special connection. You can't tell anyone this, it's just between us. But you're the most important person in the world to me.”

I spotted two deer along the side of the road at the edge of the woods. A big doe and a little one.

“Is there anything you want to say to me?” he asked.

“I need to get back to school.”

We continued in silence for a few minutes. Then my father leaned closer to the windshield. “My God,” he said, suddenly. “Look at those palm trees. Look how green the jungle is. How lucky we are, Vinny, aren't we lucky to live in such a beautiful world? Aren't we lucky to be here together.”

“Maybe I should drive, Dad,” I suggested. I'd just gotten my license.

“Such beauty,” he said, “all laid to waste. All burnt to a goddamn crisp.” He was staring up at the sky, moving his head back and forth, as if to some awful music.

“Son, do you like flowers?” he asked. “Flowers and dogs. I was just thinking we should get a family dog. Maybe a golden retriever. Would you like to go look for a dog right now?”

“Dad, stop the car.”

“Vinny, Vinny, Vinny,” he said. He put a hand on my knee.

Then he drove off the road. We were on a curve at the time, and he continued straight. When we bumped off the road I hit my head on the roof and bit through my tongue. We crashed through a barbed wire fence and ran over some bushes. My father still had his foot on the gas pedal and the engine raced and tires spun. We hit a ditch and the front end dove and the back end rose up

and twisted. The car tipped sideways and fell against the broken stump of a tree that had once been hit by lightning. My side of the car was down and my father landed on top of me.

The engine continued to chug. I screamed at him through the thick blood in my mouth. "Get off me!" I spluttered. "Get the fuck off me!" I tried pushing him away, but his weight had me pinned. I could feel him breathing hard.

"Dad!" He didn't answer. Blood appeared between his lips and dribbled down his chin. "Dad!"

A few minutes later I heard a voice outside the car. "Are you injured?" someone asked. "Don't move, help is on the way."

I lay underneath my father for what seemed like a week. He didn't move or say a word but I could hear his breathing and even feel his pulse against me. These pink bubbles on his mouth came and went with each breath. It took a long time for the rescue people to get him out. They moved him carefully and lifted him through the driver's side door. There were two guys and they kept giving each other directions. "Hold his head up," said one.

"Get an arm around his waist," said another.

"Slide the board under . . . That's it."

"Stabilize the neck. Okay, on three, ready . . ."

Oh, just yank him out, I thought.

When they finally got him free, I climbed out by myself.

My father rode on a stretcher in the back of the ambulance. I sat up front, with the driver, who used the flashing lights but not the siren. I held a gauze to my mouth to soak up the blood. The driver told me about this horrible accident on the freeway he'd been called to the previous day. Two people dead, one of them burned, the other crushed. There was no need to hurry when he headed to the hospital after that one. I don't know why he thought that story would make good conversation.

—

At the hospital, my father and I were treated on adjacent tables in the emergency room. The curtain between us stayed open. I sat up, but he was lying down, and motionless for a long time. A white ball of gauze was in his mouth, as if he were trying to chew a snowball. I wasn't sure if he was dead or not, until I saw him reach up with his hand when a nurse looked at him. He tried to touch her but she stepped back. A few minutes later he was wheeled away and the nurse turned to me and told me they were going to take some x-rays of my father but he would be okay.

I waited thirty minutes for the doctor. He was busy with other patients behind other curtains. By then I'd soaked through a half-dozen bandages and my tongue wasn't bleeding much anymore.

A lot of coagulated blood was stuck in my cheeks and I kept spitting out into this metal pan so I wouldn't choke. I think it was a bedpan. My tongue felt like a fat sausage and my mouth tasted like copper. It hurt to spit and mostly I drooled out the clots and strings of blood. There was also a bump on the side of my eye from hitting the dashboard. I shivered because I was cold.

When the doctor came he needled Novocain into my tongue and cleaned the wound. That hurt more than when the accident happened. He said, "It could be worse. At least you didn't bite off your lower lip, too."

I tried to ask him what he meant by 'too'—had I bitten something else off? But I couldn't get the words out and he told me to hold still.

He put some kind of wrapping and rubber bandage on my tongue. He didn't say anything else the whole time, other than telling me to keep my mouth open.

My father was just being wheeled back in from x-ray when my mother came in. She was dressed in a navy blue suit from work, and wore a white scarf tucked into the collar of her jacket. She looked at me first, kissing me on both cheeks, then looked at my father and kissed him on the top of his head. He still had the gauze in his mouth.

"Oh my God," she said. She held my hand. "My sweet boy, my sweet Vincent."

She turned and stroked my father's forehead. Her eyes turned bright and wet, but she was looking at the wall, not at me or my father. When the doctor came she straightened up and smiled, and used her business voice, which was deeper and quicker than her home voice.

The doctor told her I'd bitten off the tip of my tongue; there was nothing left to sew on. When I heard this I felt its loss immediately and irretrievably, and I blamed my father; much like the way I felt when my cat had died. What happened to the tip? Had I swallowed it—or spit it out? I longed desperately for my tongue back, and I thought of myself as a freak, an amputee, even though the doctor said my wound would heal nicely and there wouldn't be much difference. My father, however, had suffered a concussion and broken his jaw and right clavicle, and needed extensive suturing in his mouth. His jaw would be wired closed, possibly for four weeks. At least that would shut him up for a while, I thought.

The county sheriff came over and talked to me, because my father couldn't speak. He was the same sheriff called to the scene by a passing motorist who had witnessed the accident. He had helped maneuver my father out of the car.

I could talk now, even though it hurt, and some of my words came out wrong. The sheriff held a pen and clipboard to write down my answers. He told me it was routine to file a report for all accidents. He asked me to "recall the events leading up to the accident." Those were the words he used, I remember, very formal. He didn't just ask me what happened.



Even though I knew it couldn't be true, at that moment I heard my father call out my name from the bed next to mine. I heard him pleading with me. No one else heard, because no one looked his way except me, not even my mother. He sounded like a lamb, I thought. Bleating. Begging. Please don't send me to slaughter.

"There was a dog in the road. My father swerved to avoid it," I told the sheriff. "Then I don't know what happened. We crashed."

"Did you say a log? There was a log in the road?"

It hurt too much to talk. I shook my head.

"It's okay, honey," my mother said. "Take your time. Try to remember."

But I wouldn't say anything else. When the sheriff left I motioned my mother closer to me. She leaned down and when I tried to whisper in her ear some blood shot out of my mouth and got on her cheek. She didn't even try to wipe it away.

"He tried to kill me," I told her. I started crying, which I thought I was too old to do.

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I got to go home that day. Not my father. He stayed in the hospital for three days because of the surgery on his jaw, then my mother had him moved to another place near Auburn, a two-hour drive from our house.

Valley Meadow was a place to rest and recover more than it was a hospital, but everyone knew it was a private nut house. The name alone gave it away. He was going to stay there for a month or so to relax and talk to some of the head doctors, but it turned into much longer than a month. I guess my mother took seriously that business I had told her about my father trying to kill me. I tried to recant my statement but she said the accident was not the only reason my father was at Valley Meadow. My father had been getting progressively worse, she said. Waking up at night from nightmares. One minute relaxed and friendly, the next dark and sour. You know, Vincent. You've seen it. But Mom hadn't recognized all the signs—she didn't realize he'd gotten this bad, that he could show careless disregard for his own son, which was the sure sign he needed real help. She held back tears while she told me this. She said she loved my father very much, and me as well, and would do whatever needed to be done to protect us both. Protecting herself, I realized later, was not on her agenda, or maybe she protected herself by ensuring our safety first.

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My mother went with him the first weekend, and stayed overnight in a nearby motel. She wanted me to come with her but I said no. I'm glad she didn't make me go. I never wanted to see my dad again. My mother thought I'd be lonely at home by myself and she asked if I wanted to stay with Celine. I said okay.

My sister lived in the next town, Lamville, on a shady street with sidewalks, in a white clapboard house, much smaller than ours. Donna shared her room with Denise the weekend I was there, and I slept in Denise's bed.

The first night with Celine and Raymond, my sister asked me during dinner to tell about what happened. We were having spaghetti; Celine had made something soft so I could eat without hurting my tongue, which was still healing. I also had the fading remains of a black eye, which looked worse than it felt. In fact, I liked the colors: green and violet and bluish-gray and red. It was really beautiful. I had already taken several self-portraits of myself with a Polaroid camera we had at home.

I knew Mom would have told my sister everything that happened, but Celine wanted to hear what I had to say.

"Did he lose control of the wheel?" Celine asked. "Or just drive straight off the road?"

I said nothing.

"Vincent, did you hear me?"

"He doesn't have to talk about it if he doesn't want to," Denise said.

"Dad told me there was no such thing as an accident," I said.

"What does that mean?" Celine said. "Is he talking about karma again? He did that once before. Last time I was home I saw some books he was reading. They were about these Buddhist monks or Confucius or something."

"He didn't say anything about karma. But he told me once there are no accidents, only tragedies and miracles."

"God, that's a little extreme, wouldn't you say? I don't remember him being this way at all," Celine said. "Mom made the right decision putting him in that hospital."

"It's not a hospital," I said. "It's a place to rest and get help."

"Has he ever done anything like this to you before—I mean, tried to hurt you in any way?"

There were all those times he made me test the strength of the ice on the lake. The times he made me keep rowing the boat even after I was exhausted. The time he made me climb up on the roof to retrieve our broken kite. The time he tried to talk me into going over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

"He wasn't trying to hurt me," I said.

"That's not what Mom said."

"She wasn't there."

"But Mom said you told her—"

"I didn't tell her anything!" I said, cutting her off.

Celine stopped her cross-examination. Uncle Raymond changed the subject. He said he might get me a job next summer, if I was interested. Sure I was interested. I had this vision of making money, moving out of the house and getting my own place, even though I was only sixteen.

"We'll be putting up some new homes in the development by the Mohawk Reservoir," he said. "I could use someone like you on my crew. My girls don't seem so interested in hammering and sawing."

"Daddy, you wouldn't let us work with you even if we wanted to," Denise said.

"Do you want to?"

"Maybe I do. If Vincent does."

"Well, could be, could be." Raymond winked at me.

"He won't let you," Donna told her sister. "And you know you don't want to." She turned to her father. "May I be excused? I have to get ready to go out."

"Fifteen years old and already in a hurry to go out," Uncle Raymond said. "Daughters. If you have daughters, expect grief, especially if they're this pretty," he told me, but was smiling.

"Oh, please!" Donna said.

I wouldn't be having any daughters, or sons, I thought. Even then, I was wary of my genes, what my father had passed on to me and what I could pass on.

"May I?" asked Donna. "I asked a simple question!"

"You may," said Celine. "After you apologize to your father for your tone of voice."

"What tone of voice?"

"That one," said Celine.

Donna fumed, then mumbled, "Sorry."

"That one hurt, didn't it," Raymond said. He was laughing. Nothing pissed that guy off, although later when I went to work for him I found out he barked at his crew a lot. He told me that was his management style.

"And we should get going, too," Celine said to Raymond. Every other Friday they had a meeting at some club they belonged to.

Celine said to Denise, "You can entertain Vincent tonight, can't you?"

"What do you want to do?" she asked me.

I shrugged.

Donna was going to the movies with some friends. Although she and Denise still looked alike, they tried not to, and acted nothing alike. Donna wore lots of make-up and tight clothes and had a ton of friends. She had long hair which she blow-dried and gunked up with mousse. She never wanted to be around Celine and Raymond, and always criticized them. Denise never wore

make-up and I thought she looked better for it. Her hair was cut straight across at her shoulders and she wore bangs. She read books and was quieter. I'd liked her better ever since she broke her arm when the tree fort collapsed.

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After everyone left, Denise loaded the dishwasher and I washed the pots and pans. Then we played cards for a while: Scat, Crazy Eights, Rummy 500. She beat me in almost every game, which didn't bother me because I was used to my father beating me at games. Despite all the practice I had playing cards, I'm terrible at it. I can never remember what cards were played. Half the time I'd be saving for a certain card in Rummy when it had already turned up.

Pretty soon I said I was tired and wanted to go to bed.

"Do you know what that place is like where they sent your father?" Denise asked.

"What? Yeah, it's so he can rest."

"My mother has a brochure from there. I read it. It's a place for the mentally ill, but not the real serious cases. Not the ones who need to be locked up."

"I know."

"Do you really think grandpa—I mean, your father—is mental? 'Cause if he is, that would explain a lot of things. Sometimes I think I'm going crazy, too. Do you ever feel that way, Vincent? I think there's this big cloud over me with a hole right in the middle and it's trying to suck me through it. I swear I can feel it sucking me, and everyone around me is getting smaller and smaller. Do you ever get that way? Like you're being pulled away from the world?"

"Don't talk like that."

"I know my sister doesn't feel it—she doesn't feel anything real. My parents, if they feel anything bad they never admit it. There's hardly anyone you can talk to about something like this. You must know what I'm saying."

"No, Denise, don't."

"I wrote some poems about it, would you like to read them?"

"I don't want to read your goddamn poems!" I said. I ran upstairs and slammed the door to Denise's bedroom, where I was supposed to sleep. I turned on the light just long enough to get undressed. Her bed had a white comforter on it, and all the furniture was white, too. I got under the covers and shut off the light and lay perfectly still. In bed I could smell Denise, a fresh soapy scent tinged with some kind of flower. I put the sheets against my face and breathed. Maybe I moaned a little.

A while later Denise knocked on the door and came in. In this very level voice she said she needed to get a few things from her closet. She didn't turn on the light. I could hear her rummaging around, moving hangers back and forth.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," I said.

She came over and sat down on the bed next to me. "You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"I do want to read your poems sometime."

The room wasn't completely dark, because there was a lamp on in the hall and the door partly open. A slice of light bisected the floor. The white furniture and sheets almost glowed. I could also see a shine in Denise's eyes. She had one hand on my arm. "It must be scary for you," she said.

"Denise—"

Then we started kissing, or sort of kissing. We hugged, our cheeks touched. Then our lips met. I couldn't do much because of my tongue, and neither of us opened our mouths wide. I'm not sure what happened next. Denise got in bed with me. For a long time neither of us moved. Then we started doing some other things I'd never done before and knew I shouldn't be doing with her, but couldn't stop.

She didn't leave the room until we heard the door open downstairs, then she quickly got up and went to Donna's room. I didn't fall asleep for a long time.

We never talked about it after, and we never did anything like that again, but I wasn't sorry and don't think she was either. Whenever our families got together Denise and I always sat near each other, and looked at each other a lot. Once she posed for me and let me draw her naked. She had a fantastic shape and almost perfect skin with a few dark moles on her stomach but I didn't touch her, even though I wanted to. I was an artist and had to maintain my integrity. Plus, she was my cousin. I gave her the finished drawing and she let me read her poems. She'd written many, and all of them were short—only a half-dozen or ten lines. Each one concentrated on a single image or character that seemed to be disappearing or unhappy. The one I remember most was about a heart that drowned in tears. It got washed down a river. There was another about a girl who was deaf to everything except music from a piano. And one about a black and white photograph of a vase of flowers that was sad because it wanted to be in color. My favorite poem was a funny one about a fish that stayed on the bottom of the ocean because it was afraid to swim. It reminded me of this goldfish I once had.

## 10

I didn't go back to Celine and Raymond's the next time my mother went to Valley Meadow. I wanted to stay home and she said okay. I liked that my father was there—he stayed a lot longer than a month—because on weekends when I had the house to myself I threw parties. All my friends came over and we drank beer and played music and I got to know some other girls. I learned to smoke dope. Afterwards, we'd all clean the house and someone would take the garbage bags of beer cans to a dumpster behind the shopping plaza in town. My mother probably knew, but she never said anything.

I held a deep and resentful hatred for my father then, but I started to miss him, and I went to Valley Meadow once, by myself, about three months following the accident. It was after Christmas, which had been miserable at our house, even though Celine and Raymond and Denise and Donna came over for dinner. That part was okay. I think Denise and I did some kissing that night, but it didn't count, because I just wanted to show her my tongue was better.

It was the morning that had been horrible, just my mother and me opening presents. Mostly me opening. Trying to pretend everything was normal and we were happy. I bought her a pair of expensive earrings and a book, and she got me about a million things. She put the earrings on as soon as she opened the box, and looked ridiculous wearing them in her bathrobe and with her hair unbrushed. They had small sapphires in them. She didn't take them off all day. And she acted like the book was a rare collector's item she'd cherish forever, but it was just some dumb bestseller. She gave me a lot of clothes, including a winter parka, and a new pair of ice skates. We played the same tape of Christmas carols over and over, but they sounded pathetic without my father there, who had a wonderful baritone voice, and knew the words to every song in the world. He sang all the time. Neither my mother nor I could carry a tune, we didn't bother trying. I made pancakes for breakfast, the one thing I could cook well.

After we ate, my mom put on her coat and sat on the porch and when she came in I could smell cigarette smoke on her. Then she said my father would love for me to pay a visit, as soon as I'm feeling up for it. He asks for me every week when she's there and is disappointed that I haven't come.

"You'll be glad you went," she said, "and your father will be thrilled to have you with him. I think he has a number of things he wants to say to you and you should hear."

"I'll think about it."

“He really misses you, Vincent. He needs you.”

“Is he going to get better?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. No one does.”

I went for a walk on the lake, which was mostly frozen over and covered with snow. On one windswept spot near the middle the ice felt weaker, maybe only an inch or so thick. I stared down, trying to see through, and noticed some leaves trapped in the layers. Then the ice cracked beneath my feet and immediately I dropped down to spread out my weight. There is nothing like the sound of thin ice giving way; there is a subdued, muffled popping, as if from underneath a blanket, and you can hear the percussion fade as the crack grows longer. Usually there are smaller aftershocks, like echoes or the creaking of a door slowly closing. I crawled and dragged along the ice back toward shore, and heard another crack behind me. I turned and saw water seeping up through the crack, pooling and spreading like blood from a wound. When I got to the snowy part I stood up and followed my same tracks until I made it back.

I wasn’t as terrified as you might think. I was used to it. My father had me test the ice every year, reasoning that I was smaller and lighter than him and therefore the ideal volunteer for the job. If I was able to walk out on the ice without a problem—such as the ice cracking or me falling through and drowning—he’d then have me stomp up and down, and if that worked okay then he’d come out on the ice with me. I was his canary in a coal mine.

—

The day I visited my father I skipped school, which I’d had so much practice doing, and drove to Valley Meadow myself. I’d thought about going for weeks in advance, and picked a day and decided not to tell my mother. On the way I stopped for breakfast at a roadside diner called Gus’s that looked from the outside like a railroad passenger car. The parking lot was full of pick-up trucks and work vans and a few rusty cars. I sat at the counter, which was a vomity green Formica flecked with gold and silver spears. Who the hell picks these colors?

Without even asking, the waitress poured me coffee. She was thin and very pretty, I thought, even though missing a front tooth on the bottom. I ordered eggs over easy and bacon. I drank my first cup of coffee ever, and its bitterness appealed to me. I didn’t even think to add sugar or cream and to this day I still drink my coffee black. The waitress refilled my cup twice. Most people in the diner ate quickly and left, except a table of two older men who sat behind me and smoked and talked with the waitress about people they knew. I gathered from their conversation the waitress was dating one of the guy’s brother. Through a pass window I could see the cook’s shoulders and head. He wore a bandanna around his neck and a Red Sox hat. I wondered if he was Gus. My eggs came perfect with runny centers the way I like them. While eating I read parts

of the newspaper which were in a scattered pile on the counter next to me. I took my sweet time and even asked the waitress if she had a cigarette, which she did, although I didn't smoke. I think I was trying to act more mature or find out what the big secret was my mother was keeping. The smoke gave me a dizzy buzz. I took a long piss before I left the diner and stopped twice more along the side of the road to pee out all the coffee I drank.

—

I got to Valley Meadow around noon. I almost missed the turnoff because it was just a small sign and a long driveway leading through an obviously planted woods of pine, the trees were lined up so neatly. The place looked like a monastery, a stone square building three stories high with a peaked copper roof turned green. The windows were dark, but there were no bars over them and no fence around the building. Flat, open grounds—now a plate of snow—spread out behind the building, and then came the border of woods. I could hear a stream gurgling somewhere behind the line of trees.

Inside the main door I stopped at the reception desk and spoke to a woman. I told her I'd come to visit Jack Howell. My back felt stiff. I stood there like a goon. I expected to see crazy people climbing the walls and swatting at imaginary enemies, but the halls were empty and quiet. I could hear a TV somewhere.

She asked if I was his son, and I said yes. "How did you know?"

"I can tell just looking at you."

My mouth sank. "Is he here?" I asked, which was the most intelligent response I could come up with.

"Would you like to have a seat for a minute, Mr. Howell?"

"My name's Vincent."

"Okay, Vincent. I'll have someone come for you." She had a soft voice, and even though she called me Mr. Howell, I got the impression she was treating me like a child. Or maybe that was the way they spoke to everyone here.

I sat in a waiting area with a nice view of the grounds. The chairs were plush and upholstered with leather, nothing like you get in the dentist's office. On a table were the usual browsing magazines, but there was also a bookshelf with hardback novels. I looked at the spines: Fitzgerald, Woolf, Austen, Kafka, Sherwood Anderson. There was even this one book, *The Stranger*, by Albert Camus, which I'd read that year for English class, about this guy who is stoic when his mother dies and then feels no remorse after killing a man. I picked it up and started reading and thought it was really weird to have a book like that in a place like this.



I didn't even hear the nurse walk up; her padded soles made no sound on the tiled floor. "Vincent? Hi, I told your father you're here to see him. He's very excited. Come on, I'll take you up."

I closed the book and returned it to the bookcase, then got up and followed the nurse, who wore the white uniform, and even the hat. She walked fast and I was behind her two steps. She kept talking to me but I wasn't paying much attention. I was nervous and could feel my pulse chattering. We walked down a long corridor lined with offices of some type. Then we got to an elevator and she took a ring of keys attached to her pocket and turned a lock to open the elevator door. She smiled at me, and put a strand of hair that had fallen loose back behind her ear.

We got off at the third floor and walked down a similar corridor except the room doors had no glass in them and there were numbers painted on them. My boots were as loud as horse hooves on the floor. I followed her all the way to the end of the hall, then we turned right at a nurse's desk and headed down another corridor. My stomach started hurting from all the coffee I drank. We stopped in front of an open door with the number 327 printed on it. I could see the end of a bed and two pale feet sticking out the end. Seeing his exposed feet reminded me of something, I'm not sure what.

"Here you go, Vincent. I'll be right at the desk to take you back down when you're finished."

"Thank you," I said.

I knocked on the door first, tried to wet my dry mouth, then walked in.

My father had a room to himself, with a window and everything. His eyes were closed and he breathed deeply. I don't think I'd ever seen my father asleep before; he looked peaceful, and younger. The lines in face had relaxed. I stood by his side for a few minutes. He didn't move. I sat down in a chair and waited. The heat in the room was turned way up and the sun shone brilliantly through the window. I took off my coat and put it on the back of my chair. I could see my car in the parking lot. I had just gotten my first car, a gold Ford Torino with a black vinyl roof, and only a little rust. My mother let me use the insurance money from the wrecked LTD.

When I looked back his eyes were open, staring straight ahead.

"Dad?" I said.

Nothing happened. I waited.

"Thought I'd come by and sign you out for a few hours," I tried to joke. "Maybe we can paint."

His mouth opened a crack and a tiny stream of spit dribbled out the corner. I had to turn away for a minute.

"Remember when we used to paint, Dad. Remember those berets we used to wear?"

He hadn't blinked once since I'd been in the room.

"It's me, Dad. It's Vincent," I said. "Vinny," I added.

Nothing.

I hadn't expected this. My mother told me he was doing well and wanted to see me. Even the nurse said he was excited.

He drooled a little more and seeing his spit made my eyes water. I pulled a tissue from a box, moved closer and wiped his chin.

Then he bit my finger, not hard, but I practically hit the roof. I jerked away, as if a snake had gotten me. My father sat up, laughing, his eyes dancing with delight.

"Had you fooled didn't I, son? You thought your old man had gone to that big cow pasture in his brain, didn't you? You should see the look on your face right now!"

I laughed some, more from nerves than a sense of the joke. I didn't think it was funny at all.

"It's great to see you, Vinny. Come here, come closer. Let me have a good look at you."

He pulled me over by the arm and I stood facing him.

"You look great, son. I've never seen you looking better. Bigger, stronger . . ." He squeezed my biceps. "Probably smarter, too. But not so smart your dad can't fool you."

"So how are you feeling?" I asked. My pulse began to settle from the scare he'd give me.

"To tell you the truth, son, I've never felt better. This place has done wonders for me. They've helped me a lot, Vinny."

"Are you coming home?"

He smoothed his bedding, folding the sheet in a neat square over the blanket. "Well, I think so. We haven't talked much about that. I want to stay here until I'm absolutely sure. I miss you and your mother, though. Come on, sit back down. You're making me a nervous wreck standing there."

I pulled the chair closer and sat down next to his bed. His breath smelled sour and lemony.

"So you want to paint, huh? What are you painting these days?"

"In class we're doing still life. It's kind of boring."

"Still doing life? Nothing boring about life. You have to learn to recognize the real world so you'll know when you're not in it."

I laughed at his joke.

"How's track, Vinny? You running like a deer?"

"Track hasn't started yet. And I got cut from the hockey team."

"What the hell kind of coaches they got in your school? They don't know talent when they see it. Those sons of bitches, if I'd been there you'd be playing left wing on the first line."

"I wasn't very good," I said.

"Hockey's a game for thugs, anyway," Dad said. "So you can be on the swim team instead."

"I don't want to be on the swim team." Although I was an excellent swimmer, and probably better than most on the team, I didn't want my enjoyment of the water to be ruined by always having to race and be timed. I wouldn't be on the swim team if it were the only sport at school.

"What about your mother? You taking good care of her?"

"I guess so."

"You better take good care of her. I'm counting on you, son. This is a matter of tremendous importance. She's not strong like you are. I can see that when she visits. Promise me you'll take good care of her."

"I promise."

"Atta boy. Atta boy, Vinny. Don't let anyone you love ever get away from you, promise me that, too."

"Okay, I promise." I wasn't sure what he was asking.

"Just because you love someone, doesn't mean they can't slip through and be gone."

"I know."

"Good God, do I miss you, son. I think about you every single day. It's the only thing sometimes keeping me from going batty in this place."

"I miss you, too," I said. And I did right then. The room was so warm and I missed my father and I wanted him to come home. I started thinking maybe I could drive him home that very day, I could just sign a form and they'd let us go. He seemed okay to me. I never should have said that thing to my mother about my father trying to kill me. Despite my mother's assurances otherwise, I knew that was the reason he was stuck in this bed.

"Absolutely batty," my father said, shaking his head slowly, sadly. "This place is a loony bin, you know. It's for nut cases! If you're not crazy when you come in, you'll get that way real soon."

He motioned me closer. He said, "There's this one guy in the rec room, all he does all day is crumple a sheet of paper. Crumples it up, smooths it out, turning the damn thing into a paper rag. When it falls apart he gets another sheet and starts all over again. Can you believe it?"

"Sounds kinda weird."

"Is that what you think I'm capable of doing? Crumpling up a sheet of paper all goddamn day?"

"No."

"Then what am I doing here?" His voice had changed, had become rhetorical, laden with philosophy. It reminded me of a voice of a lawyer presenting his opening arguments in a movie.

“Tell me,” he said again, “what the hell am I doing here?”

He expected me to answer. “I don't know. Resting?”

He leaned closer to me now with an animal fierceness in his eyes. He grasped my arm.

“Sure you know, son. You're the one who put me here. You think I don't know that?”

I tried to pull my arm away, but his grip was too fierce.

“I know what you told your mother. How could you do that to her! And you don't know nothing, because if I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead. I know how to do it. I've done it a hundred times. You've betrayed me, you put me here!”

“I didn't tell anything!”

“You did you little lying shit!”

I struggled to break free. His hand clamped me like a vice.

“I can't even shave myself here! They won't let me be a man.”

I thought about calling for the nurse.

“Are you listening to me? I can't leave. You've put your own father in prison.”

“You tried to kill me!” I yelled at him.

“I tried to kill myself!” he shouted back.

He let go of me and fell back against his pillows, as if he'd completely exhausted himself. He closed his eyes and when he opened them he looked right at me and spoke softly.

“Vinny, you're probably right. Maybe I wanted to take you with me, because I couldn't do it alone. I wanted us to go together.”

I bolted from the room. The desk nurse stood up and said something that I couldn't hear as I ran past. I got to the elevator and pushed the button but nothing happened. I continued running to the end of the corridor where there was an emergency exit onto stairs. When I pushed through the doors an alarm sounded, not very loud. It made this low whooping noise. I lunged and tripped down three flights of stairs and pushed through another set of double doors to get outside. I'd forgotten my new parka in my father's room but didn't return for it.

—

I never went back to Valley Meadow. How I hated that name! When my mother asked how my visit went, I said, “Thanks,” in the most withering voice I could summon. Then I got all weak and sobby and told her what happened, how my father blamed me for his being there. But I didn't tell her about my father wanting to kill us both.

“I'm so sorry, Vincent. I had no idea—I never meant for that to happen.”

My father stayed at Valley Meadow the rest of that year, and all of the next, then went home. By then I was away at college in Buffalo and wouldn't come home on breaks. My father didn't

stay at Kenano Lake for long. He was shuttled back and forth between the hospital and home over the next eight years, my mother's hopes rising with each trip home and nosediving when he totally lost his wits and had to return. I moved to California, then to Colorado, then Boston, and then I visited some college friends in Buffalo and ended up staying because it was cheap and an art scene was springing up out of the dilapidated working-class neighborhood where my friends lived.

I called my mother a couple times a month and visited home only when my father was at Valley Meadow. I refused to see him again. My mother said he would love to hear from me and I told her no way, not again. At least a call, maybe a letter? she suggested. "Why?" I said. "Why should I?" She had no good answer other than he was my father, but I didn't want a father. Not that one, anyway. I warned her never to tell him where he could reach me. She didn't fight me. I wanted to punish my father but I'm afraid I ended up punishing my mother more, by not visiting her enough, by shutting down any talk—or any listening—about my father.

My niece, Denise, disappeared for a long time. She dropped out of college after two years and went to Mexico with a girlfriend and some guy. My mother told me about it. No one heard from Denise for years. I was afraid she'd committed suicide. But recently my mother mentioned she's back now, living in Kenano Lake. Married, one child. I can't fathom why anyone would move back there, especially Denise, who ached to leave the way a prisoner pines for freedom. I think of calling her up but I never do. I still have a couple of the poems she gave me. I read them recently. They're excellent and I think they should be published.

The end of my tongue is still missing, of course. I have a small, square dam of white scar tissue where the tip should be. I can still taste everything, and it doesn't look weird unless I'm sticking out my tongue, which I don't do often. Jane likes it; she says I can do some things with my tongue she's never felt before.

## Part Two

### 11

I stop at Nietzsche's to meet with Elena Martell, the bar owner-slash-art dealer who likes my work and has invited me to inaugurate the opening of the upstairs gallery next month: Nietzsche Hangs. I used to frequent Nietzsche's before I met Jane, drinking and lamenting my poverty and obscurity with other artists, musicians, and writers. We would congregate here like refugees at a dock, hoping to find a boat that would provide passage to a better life.

My boat is Elena. She is a dry alcoholic who never mentions her drinking past and a lover of the arts who helped transform Nietzsche's from a beery pub into an art bar with open mic readings and solo musical performances and now a new gallery in the loft space above the bar. Elena stands over six feet tall and has the build of a farm laborer. Could she be next of kin to the dead mother who birthed the preemie Baby Blue—I mean Blair? I think this now about every large person I see. Elena is an intimidating force behind the bar whenever there's trouble, which usually doesn't happen with a clientele of morose artsy-fartsy types, but on weekend nights the college frat boys invade the Allentown strip and invariably end up in Nietzsche's itching to punch a fag.

When Elena sees me, she slides me a vodka and tonic and says she'll be right back. She steps into the office and I hear her clomping up the back stairs. I settle into my drink and survey the room. I'm familiar with most of the afternoon crowd. At one end sits this guy Eddie, he's a novelist. I salute him with my glass. He once told me his first book sold only four hundred copies, fifty of them to his mother. He could have given up then, but he's written two others, one that never escaped his desk drawer and one that got published to decent reviews but tanked in terms of sales. At the other end of the bar sits a couple, two guys, discussing ways to make money. One is a sculptor and the other a musician. They aren't getting any money that way and are brainstorming the killer concept. Occasionally one of them gets excited and raises his voice, until the other one shoots down his idea. Would the world really buy kitchen appliances that play Bach instead of beeps?

Elena returns to the bar and hands me a stack of postcards. She tells me they've been distributed to every place of business in the Allentown and Elmwood districts and mailed to a list of more than five hundred names she's collected over the past year, people who are interested in buying art from up and coming local artists.

"That would be you," she adds.

On the front of the card is a reproduction of my *Icy Day* painting, a close-up in which you may or may not recognize a face and hands under the ice with the boy skating over them. On the back in large type is printed: “*Twice Told Stories*”—*Paintings by Vincent Howell*, followed by the date of the opening and my artist’s statement. Writing that piece of salesmanship was an exercise in human cruelty. Elena made me do it, and she’s the one who first used the word ‘salesmanship.’ She told me too many painters have an incomprehensible, esoteric artist’s statement that no one can understand and turns people off. Such as: *I create art to juxtapose the creative energy of the world with the societal pressures of conformity and in doing so express the archetypal tendencies inherent in the human species from our earliest evolution.* Huh? Elena used that statement as an example of an epic failure of an artist’s statement—you hear an artist spout that nonsense at an art opening and you excuse yourself as fast as possible to get more wine and cheese.

Elena told me to write a statement that would accomplish two things: 1) Tell people what my paintings mean to me, and 2) Get people to want them. I wrote thirty-seven versions and showed each one to both Jane and Elena. At first they tried to be positive and constructive but by the end were basically telling me to leave them out of it and just write the damn thing, mostly using their body language to communicate with me, cringing and looking nauseated when I approached with a new draft.

This is the statement I ended up with: “*In my paintings I try to see from a unique perspective in order to capture the story within a story of everyday moments that are in fact rich with meaning. Also, I’ve had a lifelong affection for color.*”

Two sentences, one supposedly significant, one short and honest, distilled from thirty-seven tries. While I hate to think the entire motivation and meaning behind my being a painter can be summed up so easily, I do believe in what I wrote, especially the affection for color part. And a good example of the story within a story is the *Icy Day* painting, where you see Dr. Abrams beneath the ice if you look from a certain distance and angle.

To be honest, I would have kept re-writing the statement; Elena, for one, wanted me to keep working on it, especially the last sentence about my lifelong affection for color, which she said sounded trite. But I finally ran out of time because the cards needed to be printed.

Now, seeing the words on the postcards, plus my painting on the front, I experience a sense of pride and achievement. I paint because I love to paint and have since the day I first took up a brush as a kid, although I have never let myself dream too much about making a career out of painting or becoming a commercial success, having stricken both words—*career* and *success*—from my vocabulary years ago and mostly living a life of material squalor, until recently with

Jane, and only occasionally having pined for more. Sure I had exhibited in a few group shows and even sold paintings, but I knew my chances of success were low in a world where attorneys and investment bankers prosper and artists work as waiters. But Elena nudged my expectations in the other direction. She says I have the talent to get noticed, and Jane says why wouldn't I do everything I can to promote my work. So this opening has become very important to me, and I'd be anguishing over it except I've finished two more paintings since we've been back from the Caribbean and I'm working on one more. The vacation with Jane and opening up to her about my father caused something cold and hard in me to break away and melt, like an iceberg diminishing and becoming one with its environment as it drifts to warmer waters.

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I place one of the postcards on the foyer table where Jane looks at the mail every day when she gets home from work. I'm in the kitchen making a stir-fry when I hear the door open and Jane walk in, then a moment of silence, and then she's right in front of me, waving the card like a winning lottery ticket and backing me into the stove where she kisses me until I feel the flames under the wok singeing my back. I push upright and brush my shirt where it had started to catch fire. A burnt smell fills the kitchen.

"This is so incredible, Vincent, I'm so proud of you," Jane says, ignoring or not noticing that she'd almost burnt me down.

She has a way of making little things appear enormous, as if having a postcard promoting an art show upstairs from a tavern was on par with an opening at MOMA. It's like the time I'd performed a miracle by re-tiling the bathroom.

"It's just a start," I tell her. "Even if nothing comes of it, I'm happy."

"It's an amazing start," she says. "I'm thrilled—and you deserve it."

"I couldn't have done it without you. I have you to thank for so much, you've supported me all the way, even when I was hard to deal with."

"It wasn't so hard. I love you."

It's a regular love fest as we praise each other. I feel our differences melting away like that iceberg and I have this sudden urge to ask her to marry me. My heart rate begins to accelerate as I think I'm going to say the words, and I wonder if I should get down on one knee or is that too lame, but then just as I'm about to speak Jane cuts into my thoughts and tells me she has some good news, too. About Baby Blair.

"They found his relatives?" I ask.

She frowns, as if trying to decide if this would be considered good news.



“Blair is producing enough surfactant on his own and is almost completely off the ventilator. And he knows it. You can see in his eyes he’s so much more comfortable and happy.”

“Surfactant?”

She’s explained this before but has to remind me surfactant is a lipoprotein that allows the inner surface of the lungs to expand properly. Many preemies don’t produce enough of it and end up with respiratory distress syndrome. This was Blair’s problem—one of his problems—which the doctors treated with artificial surfactant and lots of time on the ventilator. The distress appeared to be clearing up in the first few weeks, but then Blair had a setback, although now he’s better again, and this time the improvement should stick.

“That is great news,” I say. “And I’ll bet your visiting and holding Blair has helped him thrive.”

“Oh, I hope so. I like to think so.”

“I’m sure it has—your presence has that kind of effect on people. You do on me. You make me thrive.”

There’s a warm and loving anticipation in the air tonight, although the urge I feel now isn’t the same one I experienced a few minutes ago before Jane brought up the topic of Blair.

—

“Dad, you keep waking Jane when you call this late.”

“Who?”

“Jane. The woman I live with. The woman I love. The person who just answered the phone. You never even say hello to her.”

There is a silent pause—not silent, a moment in which only the icy rain can be heard, a percussion ensemble drumming against the gutters and roof. And from Jane, once again the sigh of broken sleep. Her cheek presses my shoulder. Our legs are sticky together.

“I won’t call again,” he finally says.

“I’m not saying that—but why do you have to call so late?”

“It’s when I think of you, Vinny. I understand you don’t want to see me. You know, all I am is a desperate father begging forgiveness, wanting to see you just once more before I die.”

“What do you mean, before you die?”

“Well, I could live forever and you wouldn’t come see me. But I’ve got some news for both of us: I’m not living forever. I’m gong to die. But what the hell—if our positions were reversed I probably wouldn’t come, either. I’d do just what you’re doing. I’d say no.”

“I’ll come,” I say. The words escape me in a swirling rush, like a muddy, rain-soaked river gushing its banks.

*If our positions were reversed*—that’s the statement that prompts my response. Meaning if he were me, he’d make the same decision not to visit. He’d think like me, he’d be just like me . . . But I never want to think the way his haywire mind thinks, never make the same warped decision he would make. So I have to say the opposite. It’s as if I’ve been outmaneuvered on a flank, my position no longer secure. Either that or I’ve entered an era of goodwill and compassion towards my father, or am simply suffering a moment of weakness in the middle of the night.

“I’ll come,” I say again.

“When?” my father asks. “There isn’t much time, one-hundred-thirty-nine days. The minutes go fast, son. They slip past by the millions.”

Now what? “I’m not sure what you’re talking about—one-hundred-thirty-nine days? What do you mean?”

“Thank you for coming, Vinny,” he says. “You’re a good son. I can go to sleep now.”

That makes one of us. I hand the phone back to Jane. I hand myself to Jane, urge her towards me. What have I just done? I whisper her name, a question.

“Yes, of course,” she says. “I’ll go with you. This is completely the right thing. And you’ll come with me on the next Seattle trip.”

—

In the morning I call back and talk to my mother. I tell her I’m thinking of visiting.

“Your father will be so happy. And me too, of course. It’s been too long. We haven’t been together as a family in way too long.”

“Can I bring Jane?”

“Yes, please. I was hoping you would. We’d love to meet her.”

“Mom, does the date July 9 mean anything to you?”

“July 9? Let me think. No, not that I know of. Hang on, I have the calendar right here. Let me see . . . There is a mark on that day, but your father must have made it. A little crescent moon with a nose. How silly. I don’t know why it’s there.”

“No one could know why, if Dad put it there.”

“Vincent, your father’s doing much better. He seems as healthy as he’s ever been. He’s had to battle a lot of demons, you know, and I believe he’s banished most of them. He’s a very brave man.”

What my mother says is true. I’ve always known my father was brave. At age twenty he traveled by troop ship to the other side of the world. He crawled into man-eating jungles ripe with slaughter. He shot and got shot at. He slept in the mud with snakes while mortars reddened the tropical night. He bled among corpses, praying to join them or not. Years later, he was stalked in

his dreams, asleep or awake. I've imagined him under enemy fire all his life. Who would not feel the pressure? And how does one release it?

I also know something about being stalked in your dreams. Once when I was short on cash I signed up for a dream study at a private research facility that paid me two hundred dollars to record my dreams for three weeks. There was an orientation meeting in which we learned dream recall techniques, such as keeping pen and notebook right next to your bed, promising yourself throughout the day and just before bed you'd remember your dreams that night, speaking into a tape recorder when you woke up, even setting your alarm for intervals throughout the night so you'd be jarred awake during dream sleep. They said you had to remember the dream immediately, there was a window of opportunity lasting only a few seconds after which the dream would be gone forever. Gone where, I wondered; there was nowhere to go but deeper inside the dark gray matter of your own brain.

It was the hardest two hundred dollars I'd ever earned, perhaps the worst three weeks of my life. The recall techniques worked great, unfortunately. I'd wake up at night sweating in terror and aching with pain I'd never known. These dreams—many I've long forgotten now—they were nightmares. Every one of them. Some were about my father. He was the one drowning and I was too weak to row over to him. In another, I was digging a hole in the yard which was actually a grave for him; he stood over me and kept telling me to hurry and dig deeper. Or I'd dream of vicious men hunting me in dark, dead-end alleys. Of former lovers I was relieved to be rid of but whose loss filled me with unbearable regret; they'd make love with other men while I had to watch. Dreams of my hands being severed by table saws, so I'd have to paint with a brush between my teeth. Then this one: my father coming into my room one night shortly after Dr. Abrams drowned. He woke me up. "Vinny," he said. "Could you have rowed faster? We might have saved him." No, that one is a memory.

I got back a fifteen-page typewritten analysis of my dreams from one of the conductors of the study. It was filled with a lot of psychological language about Jung and Freud and integration of the self, the kind of hooey you find in artist's statements. I was told my dreams were fascinating to study and indicative of great inner turmoil and isolation. My Oedipus complex was big enough to get lost in. My shadow was a substantial force (More than the man himself?). It was suggested I seek out therapy, which I did not. A few weeks later I stopped remembering my dreams.

As for being a hero, my father never wanted to be one, but I did, as a kid, although there was no war for me. And I wasn't brave enough, anyway. I wanted the glory without getting my blood spilled. My war experience consists of watching movies and those black-and-white documentaries on television late at night, when everyone else is asleep. My favorite is a series

called *World at War*. I learned all about the Normandy invasion, the Battle of the Bulge, Midway and Guadalcanal. There was an episode about the brilliant Nazi field marshal, Erwin Rommel, who was called the Desert Fox. Another one on Patton, a hard-nosed bastard, but effective. I saw lots of aerial shots from the bomb ports of B-52s, the jelly-bean bombs disappearing into a grid of factories, the silent puffs of smoke that followed. I watched ground shots of whistling artillery and soldiers running for their lives—or toward their deaths. I stared at the relentless grind of tanks, their treads mince-meating the landscape. I was mesmerized by the slow-pan aftermaths of burnt-out cities and smoking, sinking ships. I tried putting myself in those films, among the firepower and fleeing soldiers and black blood, but could not. I would have shivered with shell shock. I would have hid in holes. What can I have in common with my father—a man who earned combat stripes and a Purple Heart?

When I was twenty I smoked weed every day and ignored classes; I barely stole a major in art history during a phase in which I was critical of all art—contemporary or classical—except art I produced. Maybe we all have to go through a period like that to help build confidence, but I'm ashamed now of how ignorant and self-important I acted. I was also denying the existence of my father, mentioning to new friends he'd died, passing this information on a casual basis, trying it out for size and discovering it fit.

But it no longer does. Ten years is a long time. Ten years and eleven months and seven days. I didn't know I wanted to see him again until I told him so, and then it became true, as if it had been true all along but painted over and collecting dust, so when my need was finally exposed I had to squint and cower against the unexpected brilliance of it. Except now I had to work backwards, re-define the past years seen in this new slant of light: that all along I missed this man. Could this be possible? No, I don't think so.

Forgiveness is heroic, Jane tells me, although I don't know if that's on the agenda, and I already know I'm not made from the hero mold. I'm thinking more in terms of recognition—once and for all: Is this man really my father? Am I his son?

Part of me knows none of this would have taken place without Jane in my life—the emergence of memories, the living in one place long enough for my father to find me, the unexpected desire to see him. Her questions, her concern, her building of trust between us, have been my catalyst. In a tight spot I hope I don't hold that against her.

We plan for next weekend. It's a six hour drive, which will get us there about three in the afternoon on Saturday if we leave at nine in the morning. We'll stay the night and the next morning, then come back through Canada, drive through Toronto and visit Niagara Falls on Sunday, which Jane has never seen in winter. That leaves only Saturday afternoon and evening,

and Sunday morning, to spend with my parents. Seen in finite blocks like this, the time seems manageable. I don't go so far as to count the minutes.

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I'm packing my toiletry bag for the weekend when I realize my pills are gone. How could I have run out and not noticed? When was the last time I took one? Weeks ago. I haven't been needing them, not since returning from our vacation. But now I miss them, not because I'm craving but because I want to be prepared. I want my line of defense, just in case. I carry Ziemat the way nightclub crawlers carry condoms—better to come in handy than come in hand, the saying goes, or should.

I hold the plastic bottle and read the label: my name on it and Jane as the prescribing physician, and the instructions to take as needed, not to exceed two pills in any twenty-four hour period. Then I notice something else on the label: this prescription can be refilled one time.

Bless you, love. She wasn't even going to make me ask.

Jane is in the bedroom packing her bag. I call to her from the bathroom. “Got everything you need?”

“I think so. Cold weather, right?”

“Like the north pole.” The temperature has finally become real winter, although we still haven't gotten much snow.

She comes in the bathroom and looks through the medicine cabinet. I palm the prescription bottle and put the toilet lid down for a seat.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Watching you.”

“Well, shit or get off the pot,” she says, laughing.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It's a joke, don't you get it?”

She pulls out her travel toothbrush. The bristles have collapsed into a stiff dry mop. She hadn't rinsed or capped it from our Caribbean trip.

“This is beat,” she says. “I'll have to take my regular one.”

“I could run down to the drugstore and get you another.”

“No, it doesn't matter.” She pulls her toothbrush from the holder on the sink.

“I don't mind. When you take your regular toothbrush it always gets hair on it and stuff.”

“Don't you want to leave by nine?”

“I have a couple other things to pick up.”

She puts her toothbrush back in its place, then tosses the travel one in the waste can.

“This is the last time,” she says.

The heat in my face betrays me. “Okay.”

“They were meant to be a temporary relief, not a permanent crutch.”

“I don’t really need them,” I say. “It’s just a precaution.”

—

At the drugstore I pretend to read the shampoo bottles while the pharmacist fills my prescription. I feel guilty as a shoplifter, and one of the stock boys senses this. He lingers the next aisle over, among the cold medicines, discreetly eyeing me and hoping for a collar. I was a major kleptomaniac as a kid. I’d go into department stores and supermarkets and palm anything, whether I wanted it or not. Candy, boxes of cookies, nail files, combs, screwdrivers. I even stole a woman’s bra once and kept it under my bed. Sometimes I went with a friend, and one of us created a diversion while the other loaded up, but usually I worked alone. With others, you had to have this kind of celebration afterwards, out in the parking lot or in the back of the store by the Dumpsters, holding up your goods like a fresh scalp and whooping it up. I never wanted to celebrate. I felt quiet afterwards, queasy in the stomach. Stealing was a silent, private thrill for me.

Once, just as I was about to leave a store, the manager grabbed my arm. “Just a minute, young man,” he said sternly. He led me back upstairs to the office and told me to put the loot on the desk. All I had was one lousy pack of Juicyfruit gum, not even my favorite. His eyes widened as if I’d piled a stack of gold on the table. He started in on me: “Shoplifting is a very serious crime, blah, blah, blah.” He said I had a choice between his calling the police so they could take me to jail, or his calling my parents. I had to think about my options for a while, which probably surprised him. Finally I said my parents. My mother was at work and my father drove down to get me. The manager made this big stink and had my father sign a release form. In the car he asked me why I did it.

“I don’t know.”

“If you tell me why you did it, then we won’t have to let your mother know. Think of how disappointed she’ll be. Think how her heart would hurt. Now, why did you take it—what was it, a pack of Juicyfruit?”

I said, “Because they didn’t have Doublemint?”

It was the first thing I thought of, and in fact I preferred Doublemint but didn’t see it on the shelves. My father laughed. He didn’t even get mad at me. That was the end of our discussion. But not of my shoplifting. Later, I used to steal paint and brushes when I was really broke, before I had Jane to buy them for me.

When my prescription is ready, I take two pills while still in the pharmacy, then walk halfway home before I remember Jane's toothbrush. I turn around. Back in the drugstore, I study the toothbrush selection and spend fifteen minutes wavering between blue and green, unable to decide which she'd like better. They're both so awesomely beautiful: translucent plastic, the bleached colors. Has anyone ever used travel toothbrushes as an artist's medium, assembling them into patterns or sculptures? Maybe I'll be the first. I finally choose the blue, and at the checkout counter, while the cashier is busy with the customer ahead of me, I pocket a Milky Way.

Walking home, the pills punch up my confidence and set sail to my mood. I laugh about what I just did. Okay, it was immature and a stupid risk, but at it least demonstrated my ability to lighten up. I feel tall and sturdy, as if I had a horse between my legs. In a rash act I pour the remaining pills in a storm sewer, even though I just laid out thirty bucks co-pay for them.

When I get home I give Jane her toothbrush and show her the empty medication container. "I decided I don't need them after all," I say.

She looks at me, surprised, as if I'd just given her a birthday cake, then studies my eyes. Her face contracts. "How many did you take before you reached this decision?"

I hold up my index finger. Jane waits.

I hold up two fingers.

Then I hand her a Milky Way.

—

We take Jane's car, a Lexus, which is as comfortable as driving down the road on your living room couch. By comparison, driving my van is like operating a rusted tractor. Jane always does the driving unless she gets tired. I don't mind. I'm not one of those guys who has to be behind the wheel or else his penis falls off. In fact, Jane is probably a better driver than I am. She takes fewer chances and pays closer attention. I have a tendency to daydream. I've negotiated congested stretches of freeway, maneuvered tight on and off ramps, made tricky left hand turns against oncoming traffic—and later could not recall one moment of the entire trip. I wake up only when the unexpected flashes before me: a car suddenly cutting into my lane, a pedestrian in the street, a sharp curve in the road. People are frightened and concerned about the number of highway fatalities in a given year; I'm surprised there aren't more, especially with drivers like me on the road.

I've been thinking more about the accident my father and I were in. It's hard to remember exactly what happened, it was so long ago. I do remember blaming him, but we were simply having a conversation like any other two people in a car, when suddenly a dog ran out into the road. That's what I told the sheriff; it's not what I told my mother. My father did the natural thing,

he swerved. The roads were wet, slippery. I think there was a dog in the road. I'm not sure. I must have been upset about something at the time to have such a reaction against my father and accuse him of trying to hurt me. Maybe school had not been going so well, or my girlfriend had broken up with me. Or maybe that was the year I got cut from the hockey team. Or maybe he was trying to kill us both, as he admitted to me when I visited him at Valley Meadow.

"What are you thinking about?" Jane asks. "You look like your brain is working so hard. I expect to see steam coming out of your ears."

"The car accident with my father I told you about. I'm not sure anymore how it happened."

"You said he just drove off the road when the road curved."

"I'm trying to remember if there was a dog that he swerved to avoid."

"Why don't you ask your father when you see him?" Jane suggests.

"Maybe. But I doubt he remembers. And certainly he wouldn't remember with any degree of accuracy."

"You might never be able to know for sure how it happened, or your father's intent," Jane says. "Whether he was really trying to hurt you. But asking him can't make it any worse, can it?"

"Maybe I don't want to know," I say.

We drive in silence for a few minutes, then I say, "Tell me something you remember. What's your earliest memory?"

She turns off the radio and thinks for a few minutes. "Until I was five years old my parents had a tailoring shop. There were these long cutting tables and two sewing machines and bolts and bolts of all kinds of material. And we had those dressmaker's dummies. They didn't have heads. That's what I remember. No heads. I can see myself standing under one of those flesh colored torsos as my father draped material over it. I stepped on a pin and a tiny dot of blood bloomed on the bottom of my foot. I remember that. I sucked the blood away."

"Standard emergency medicine, right?"

Snow colors the hillsides, stains gray the side of the highway. Jane pulls into the left lane and accelerates to pass a truck. Dirty slush from the truck spatters our windshield. Jane reaches for the washers to clean it. For a moment, our view is streaked and muddy until the wipers do their thing.

"I have some old pictures of me, though, from around that time," Jane says. "These faded black and whites with scalloped edges—like the one I gave to you. Almost all of them are overexposed. They were taken in the shop. I'll have to get them next time I visit my parents. Sometimes it's hard to know what's a real memory, and what was told to you by others, and what you saw in a picture and then integrated as a memory."

"Maybe it doesn't matter, because if something feels real, then it is. Don't you think?"



“Yes, it becomes real, in a way, because it's part of your memory, but that doesn't mean it actually happened.”

I reach across and put my fingers on Jane's face. She glances at me briefly and smiles, then returns her attention to the road. Already this moment is a memory I'm looking back on ten years from now: *Remember the time in the car when I reached and touched your face? It's stayed with me all these years. What were talking about that makes me remember that day?* The image imprinting, the sensation—the luscious chocolate of her eyes, the cottony feel of her cheek. Ten years from now, when we're still together.

—

I drive the last two hours on roads that ribbon into the swelling, pregnant hills of northern New York. Snow clings to the landscape but there are brown spots on all the south faces. Jane naps, her mouth open like a tulip bloom, her head breezing back and forth with the curves in the road. I drink coffee from a thermos I've brought along. The turbo boost of the pills has run out of gas, and I'm nervous about my valorous decision to dump them earlier. Textbook idiocy.

At one point I veer onto the cindery shoulder and have to yank the wheel to get back on the road. I look over at Jane, she didn't stir. Then it happens again and I realize a part of me is trying to turn us around. I laugh to myself and try to relax. We're almost there. My insides hollow out as we approach.

My dread is confirmed the moment I turn into the long driveway leading to my parent's house: I am coldcocked by a blinding fist of anxiety, which strikes from nowhere and stops pummeling me only when I catch my first glimpse of the lake. By then I am punch drunk.

The lake is a rink of hard green enamel, and even from a distance I know it is the smooth glossy surface of a skater's paradise, windswept of snow. You can skate for three miles without turning around. Far out on the lake are several huts set up by ice fisherman. Smoke from one of the chimneys veins the windless air.

I park behind my mother's car. Jane stirs when I come to a stop. She yawns and rubs her eyes and says, “Are we there? Why didn't you wake me?”

“It's okay, take your time.” I'm not ready, either.

Jane flips open the visor mirror and checks her hair, rubs her cheeks. I practice breathing.

Finally, I step out of the car, sucking cold air, shrugging circulation into my shoulders. Jane gets out and I take her by the arm. We stop at the side of the house under the family room window. The skinny branches of a naked lilac droop like a pouting mouth. “This is where Tony's buried,” I say, scratching away the frosty dirt with my boot to reveal the single red brick I had engraved for a tombstone.

Jane bends down to see the faded inscription: “*Tony-My Cat*,” she reads. “Vincent, how eloquent.”

I hear the front door open and steps on the porch. We walk around and my mother stands waiting for us, wrapped in a wool cardigan, her arms crossed against the chill. The lowering sun sets her against a background halo of fiery yellow reflected off the windows.

“Mom.”

## 12

I bound up the porch steps and hug my mother. She has put on weight, or perhaps I am accustomed to hugging only Jane and have forgotten what it's like to embrace my own mother. I've let way too much time pass without seeing her. She looks wonderful, though, her face sturdy, her eyes warm and reflective pools. I last visited over the summer, when I'd come home for the Kenano Lake Fourth of July celebration and stayed the weekend. My father was in Valley Meadow at the time. My mother spent the first twenty minutes updating me on Dad, and then we didn't mention him again. She acted like an independent single woman. She appeared happy. So much has happened since then: I met and moved in with Jane, I'm preparing for my first solo art show, my father tracked me down—and now I'm here to visit him, the man I had declared dead all those years ago.

My mother turns to Jane. She says, “Vincent didn't tell me you were—” She halts mid-sentence.

“Japanese,” Jane says. “Hi, I'm Jane.”

“I shouldn't have said that,” my mother says. “I just wasn't expecting . . . Please, except my apologies.”

“It's fine, really.”

Then my mother hugs her, too.

“Come on, your father's inside. He's been pacing the house all day he's so excited.”

I take a last gulp of cold air and hold Jane's hand. I brace for the worst, for a climactic moment; for the drooling, evil maniac waiting to pounce on me. The one I said I wanted to see. What moment of weakness had gotten me to agree to this visit?

But the monster isn't here.

Instead, an old man stands near the fireplace, wearing a neatly pressed green flannel shirt and khaki trousers. His back curves over stooped shoulders. He's holding a cane in one hand. Silver hair is combed straight back, revealing a ruddy, healthy forehead, which shines from the fireplace light. Ropes of flesh sag at his neck, betraying his age. I am facing a gentleman approaching eighty years, harmless and peaceful, one who caresses small joys, one who is healing old wounds and putting affairs in order as he waits out his days. His aged look makes me immediately sad, for I have let time pass irretrievably, and already I'm groping for ways to make it up. If I had attached this face to the voice on the phone, I would have been kinder, more patient. I would have been less a weenie and more a man.

He sets his cane against the fireplace hearth and comes to an almost military style attention, his shoulders trying but not quite squaring. Rather than stilted, his movements are slow and graceful, like a dancer finishing to a final pose. His face does not move, except for his eyes, which glisten and dart when shifted to Jane. He stares at her, his brow curling and narrow mouth forming a tiny O. It's as if a streaking bird has cast the quickest of shadows over his face, passing so suddenly I'm not sure it was really there.

"Dad." I almost choke on the word.

He looks at me again. "Hello, Vincent," he says.

We each put out a hand, but instead of shaking we pull ourselves together in an awkward embrace of tangled hands and arms. I can still feel his strength—he is not that old. He smells fresh, like aftershave, but masking a vinegary scent underneath. He pats me twice on the back and lets me go. Then he turns again to Jane. He bows slightly and takes both of Jane's hands.

"My son is very fortunate."

"Thank you, Mr. Howell."

"Jack," my father corrects her. "Call me Jack. Thank you for coming."

"Vincent's told me a lot about you."

"I feared as much," my father says, but he is smiling. "I'm sure I deserved it all."

"How about a glass of wine?" my mother asks. "Everyone sit." She puts glasses and a bottle of red wine on the coffee table, and we gather on chairs and the couch around the fire. On the sideboard by the window my mother has arranged bowls of dip and crackers and olives.

"Celine and Raymond are coming for dinner," my mother says. "We're having a crown roast, one of your favorites." She's recovered from her *faux pas* about Jane being Asian, and seems more relaxed now.

"I could smell it the minute we walked in," I say.

“Vincent made us a crown roast for New Year’s,” says Jane. “He said he got the recipe from you.”

“Vincent always showed an interest in cooking, even as a boy. He sometimes made me breakfast before I went to work.”

“Not exactly. I poured the milk in your coffee.”

“I remember some egg scrambling,” my mother says. She adds, “Denise is coming, too. I hope you don’t mind. She has a husband and a baby now, six months old. A little boy name Curtis. Did I tell you? Wait until you see him, he’s such a doll.”

“Denise?” I say. “I can’t wait to see her.” I turn to Jane. “Remember I told you about my nieces, who are only one year younger than me?” I didn’t tell her everything, though, not about what happened in Denise’s bedroom.

“Sure,” says Jane. “Denise and Donna.”

“What’s up with Donna?” I ask.

“She’s in Vermont,” my mother tells me. “And not having such a good time of things. She’s about to get divorced for the second time. She left her first husband because he was an alcoholic, and then she went and married another man just like the first. Denise made a much better choice. Her husband is a lawyer and he’s very good to her. It’s strange,” my mother says, “If I would have had to guess, I’d have thought Denise would be the one to have more trouble. She always seemed so anxious, so remote.” She reddens a little, as if ashamed for speaking about Denise that way.

My father gets up from his chair and adds another log to the already healthy fire. He uses the poker to arrange the wood. He says, “I’d like to apologize for calling you so late at night and waking you.” He is looking at Jane, not me.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Jane says. “I’m used to it. Sometimes the hospital calls at night when they need me.”

“I have no right to disturb you, but when I want to talk to Vinny, the urge usually hits me very late.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” I say.

“I just wanted to say that. I read in the paper today about a jet crash in Germany. Everyone perished. Everyone aboard left something unsaid in their lives.”

“I think that’s true of anybody,” says Jane. “No matter when or how they die. Even people who have a long time to prepare.”

“Hmmm,” my father says. “But what else is there to tell people except you love them? That’s the only thing you should fear leaving unsaid.”

He has a way of silencing a room. My mother quickly takes up the slack, asking Jane about being an emergency room doctor.

“I work regular shifts but it can get pretty hectic, and sometimes I get called in on busy nights. Actually, I’m thinking of switching to pediatrics,” Jane says, which I didn’t know. I look her way but she doesn’t meet my eye.

“Although it would mean a new residency and I’m not sure I can go through the grueling routine again.”

Before the conversation can continue, the front door opens. Celine and Raymond walk in. We barely say hello when Denise and her husband, Ron, and their baby show up. I get Jane aside and whisper an apology, telling her I had no idea this would be such a big thing. “I don’t mind,” she says. “I want to meet your family.”

The house swarms with activity. Everyone wants a chance to hold Curtis, and everyone has to hug each other and tell Dad how great he looks. They tell me, too. I don’t know that I do, but I know Denise does. She emanates a beauty only a new mother can, milky and fresh, secure in her knowledge that she is the most important person in the world to someone. She smiles more in the first half hour than I’ve seen her smile all her life. Her husband, Ron, is a short, smartly dressed man, wearing black suspenders and wire-rimmed glasses. I think he is the quintessential attorney: sleek, well-mannered, hiding the teeth of a predator. He shakes my hand heartily and says in his Long Island accent he’s looked forward to meeting me. I dislike him immediately, and dislike myself for this severe and prejudiced judgment. He’s probably kind to Denise, a loving father, and good provider for his family.

My sister, Celine, now a grandmother and not yet fifty, looks the way I remember my mother looking when I was younger—warm and slightly wearied, dark hair pinned into a nest on her head. She has the same mouth I do: loose, flexible lips that can expand and contract into many expressions. Raymond seems the same as ever, still built like an I-beam and happy as a springtime tree. He’s lost a lot of his hair on top.

---

Nine of us gather around our dining room table, if you count little Curtis, who Denise tries to steady in a wooden high chair I once sat in as a baby. He can’t sit up straight enough and she ends up holding him in her lap. My father insists I sit at the head of the table, with the long view overlooking the lake, but I protest. That’s always been his seat, I don’t want it. He’s already seated himself in another chair, halfway down the table, between Raymond and Celine, and my mother eyes me and then the chair at the table head and I sit without another word. Jane sits next to me on one side, Denise’s husband, Ron, on the other.

Of course my mother has overcooked. She made the roast with mashed potatoes and gravy, glazed carrots, beet salad and green salad, fresh-baked rolls. There's commotion while platters are passed, wine and water glasses filled, a chorus of praise for my mother, and then a chewy murmur takes over spiked by the occasional ting of silverware striking plates as everyone rushes their food. No saying grace or a prayer of thanks—that had never been part of our mealtime repertoire.

My father speaks first, to me. "Tell us Vinny, where did you and Jane meet?"

"It's kind of a funny story. I had an accident on my bicycle, and Jane was the doctor on duty that night in the emergency room."

He says, "What kind of accident?"

"The kind where you hit a pothole and then your head and then you start bleeding like a leaky engine."

"He needed a few stitches," Jane says.

"Twenty-seven to be exact," I add.

My father looks at me as if I might be trying to tease him. I know what he's thinking: there are no accidents, only tragedies and miracles. The night I fell off my bike I was on my way back from Nietzsche's, the bar I had recently discovered. I had no money for a car and had picked up the bike at a garage sale. I'd only been in town a few months and was staying in a studio apartment in an old carved up single family house rented to destitute painters and musicians. My rent was overdue and I had to pay up by the following week or be out. My savings were gone and I needed to look for a job that came with a paycheck. I was feeling pretty low, and angry; a few drinks helped ease my mood but made me a reckless rider. By the time I saw the pothole it was too late. But a sliced head doesn't qualify as a tragedy, which made this event a miracle: a miracle I met Jane, a miracle she loved me.

". . . What?"

"Would you like more roast?" Jane is holding the serving platter. She'd just helped herself and was offering to me.

"Sure," I say.

Jane gives me the look: *Are you okay?* I smile and nod.

My father thanks Jane for saving my life. She tries to protest, but he insists. "I know what you did for him." He must be thinking miracle as well.

Ron tells me he's an environmental lawyer. He's working on the case of GE dumping PCBs into the Hudson River and the dredging efforts to clean them up. "On whose side?" I ask.

His firm has been retained by GE.

Oh. Figures.

I listen in on other conversations: Denise telling Jane about Curtis' feeding schedule; Celine and Mom—grandma and great-grandma—goo-gooing with the baby; Raymond explaining to Ron the problems he is having with an employee who's afraid to climb a high ladder. There is talk of the weather, the winter that took so long to arrive, the lack of snow. Dad and I have turned silent. We stare, not at each other. I'm watching the moon rise over the lake. My father's gaze roams and returns to the same fixed point: Jane. It is like the attention you give to a favorite painting; there's so much to take in that every time you look away you are drawn back to another detail. Jane's worth a lingering look—but from her lover's father? Yet she's unfazed by the interest she's drawing from him. She glances up at regular intervals to smile at Jack. I stare at Denise. When she catches me looking she gives a quizzical smile.

I join the discussion on how to wean Curtis.

“Don't you just let babies wean themselves when they're ready?” I say.

“Sure, if you want a ten-year-old hanging on your boob,” Denise says.

Everyone laughs; there is more cuddling of Curtis. I tell everyone Jane saved a baby's life when a woman came into the emergency room unaware she was even pregnant and Jane acted fast and got the woman into surgery. The baby was born at twenty-seven weeks and . . .

Jane's hand squeezes my thigh beneath the table. She doesn't want this story told, I don't know why. But it's out there now and she has to answer the questions: You mean the woman didn't know she was pregnant? The baby's going to be okay?

No one asks what happened to the mother, so Jane doesn't have to answer that one.

—

I clear the table and help my mother make coffee in the kitchen.

She says she's glad I brought Jane. “Your father seems quite impressed with her as well. And you've been together for a while now, haven't you?”

“Don't ask,” I say. “Are you going to ask?”

“I wasn't going to say a thing,” she insists.

“It's going well, that's all I'll say. I feel pretty lucky.”

She kisses my forehead. “I'm happy for you Vincent, and I'm thrilled you're here.”

She gets out the cups and I put cream and sugar on a tray. “How does your father look to you?” she asks.

“Better than I expected,” I say. “Older, maybe. And quieter.” My father didn't say another word at the dinner table after the exchange about how Jane and I had met.

“He doesn't sleep well, but he doesn't seem to need much. When he does sleep, he has bad dreams. Some nights he wakes up screaming, but when I ask he says he can never remember the

dream. I suppose some demons never go away. He likes to do jigsaw puzzles now. Big ones, with a thousand or two thousand pieces. For hours at a time he'll work on them."

"Is it good to have him home?"

"And he's staying here, no matter what," my mother says. "I'm retired, and I don't want to be alone now. I can take care of him and it's what I want to do."

My mother lifts a dishtowel covering two pies on the counter—one apple, one pumpkin.

When the coffee is brewed, I take the pot and set it on the tray with the cups.

"When I saw you last summer, I thought maybe Dad wouldn't be coming home again, that you started a new life."

"This is my life, Vincent. Right now. I'm surrounded by my life."

—

We carry the trays and plates into the family room and my mother and Celine serve and pass plates and cups. Jane is sitting next to my father on the bay window ledge. He's found his voice again. She's listening intently to a story he's telling. When she laughs she hides her mouth with her hand, a shy, flirtatious gesture which I usually find endearing, but not this time.

The room has softened under the warm yellowy light reflecting from the fireplace. The corners have receded into shadows. I walk over to Dad and Jane. Jane puts an arm around me and says, "Your father was just telling me the cutest story about you. Wanting to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel! We definitely have to go to that wax museum."

"What?"

My father sets down his coffee cup. "Remember, Vinny? After we visited the museum of daredevils, you wanted to ride over the falls in a barrel. You thought they were real heroes. We built the barrel from some leftover lumber we had, and you were going to ride over the falls so you could be in the record books, too. My God, how old were you then. Eight or nine? I don't know what made you finally change your mind, but I think I had the barrel practically built. Remember we lined it with inner tubes for cushioning? Imagine you wanting to do something like that."

"I didn't want to," I say. "That's not what happened."

"What are you talking about? You practically begged me. I could hardly keep a straight face."

"I can just picture you," says Jane.

My father's laugh is a parody of laugh, he has that rat-a-tat Elmer Fudd kind of chuckle. "Of course, I wasn't really going to let you go through with it," he says.

He sings this goofy song called *Daredevil Dave Will Do It*. Dave would do anything on a dare, including a trip over the falls in a barrel. He parachutes from skyscrapers, and highwire



walks between canyon walls, and he's hit his head so many times he doesn't know his name. My mother hums along, she knows this tune.

Denise tells me I should visit her this weekend. She and Ron have moved into the house that used to be owned by Andrew Glouber on the other side of the lake. "You remember the one?" she asks me. "It's right up against the water. It has a raised dock with those tall poles."

"Pylons," Ron adds.

"I know it," I say. "The place where the burglar got shot."

"We've done a lot of work on the house," Denise says. "We've painted almost every room."

"Who painted almost every room?" Raymond asks.

"Dad helped," Denise admits. "But I picked out the colors."

"We could have used you, Vince," Raymond says.

"Vincent has been doing a lot of painting," Jane says. Then, like a magician, she holds up the postcard promoting my upcoming show. Because of the speed and slight-of-hand with which she produces the card from nowhere, she must have known I would have objected, and I try to get her attention as she holds up the card, mouthing the word NO, shaking my head back and forth, but it's already out there and Jane is telling everyone that I'm having my own show and the gallery owner is promoting it and Jane is so proud and here's the date.

A round of congratulations ensues and I have to answer questions about how I got the show and how many paintings will be displayed and aren't I so excited. My clipped answers **eventually kill the subject matter and then my father gets back into singing mode**. He switches to more romantic songs, and sings to my mother and Jane, holding both of their hands. *Moon River*, *You Are My Sunshine*, *Someone to Watch Over Me*. My mother sits next to him, blushing. His voice, deep as the lake, climbs and falls over a tremendous range, not once faltering or losing tune. He needs no piano accompaniment to keep melody. He gets Jane to join him in a chorus of *Skylark*, and when Jane sings "Have you anything to say to me?" she looks at me, her mouth quivering to hold the last notes.

My mother and I are asked to join, but only half-heartedly. We'd ruin the songs. I don't feel like it anyway. The singing goes on after Raymond and Celine, then Denise and Ron leave, it goes on until my father finally begins to lose his voice, and when we say good night to each other, my father says to listen closely because he has filled the rooms of the house with a soft music that will play through the night, we will be able to hear it through the heating vents.

## 13

Jane and I sleep in my old room. Most of the furniture is the same: the painted dresser with the sticky drawers, the oak desk I etched my initials in with a pen knife (and got in big trouble for). My parents have since replaced my old twin bed with a double, for guests. All the old posters of sports heroes and the model cars and fishbowls and knickknacks are gone, too. Thrown out or packed away, I don't know; I'm not a saver of mementos. But I used to love my room. I never got bored playing by myself. Besides, I had Tony and Will Wonderfish to keep me company, until they died.

I'm naked, but Jane wears a flannel nightgown and socks to bed. She wouldn't dream of sleeping in the nude in my parents' house, although the flannel's hiked up to her waist and my hands rest on the flat plain between the two knolls of her pelvic bone.

I say, "Why did you have to bring out the card and mention my art opening?"

"So I could sing your praises, Vincent. This is a big deal for you and I want your family to be as proud of you as I am."

"You didn't think it through. What if my father gets in his head that he wants to come to the opening?"

"In that case, I've done you a big favor—one you wouldn't do for yourself."

"No, you didn't. If he comes, he'll do something to ruin it."

"Oh, please, don't be so dramatic. I think your father's a sweet man, Vincent. What can he do to you now? Whatever bad things might have happened in the past are over."

Easy for her to dismiss my life. I turn my back on her, speak facing the wall. "What was that comment about going into pediatrics? You're going to change now, after you're almost finished with your residency in the ER?"

"It was just something I was thinking about. I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's because of Baby Blair."

"Emergency medicine isn't the most rewarding specialty," Jane says. "Half the time you're dealing with addicts or alcoholics who passed out on the street, or homeless people, or people who have no health care and come to the emergency room for every cough and bump. I know they need help, but that's not what I had in mind when I went to medical school. I don't know if it's the right fit for me."

I nod in the dark, but she can't see me.

“My father may have charmed you, but the story he told you about Niagara Falls—that's not the way it happened at all.”

“What do you mean?”

I tell Jane the version I remember. It was one of the days he kept me out of school and we got in the car as soon as my mother left for work and we drove all the way to Niagara Falls because I'd never been there. On the Canadian side there was a Ripley's-Believe-It-Or-Not museum, this one devoted exclusively to daredevils who rode over the falls in barrels or other makeshift paraphernalia. I begged my father to take me in. Once inside, there wasn't much to see. There were only two rooms. Pictures of riders hung on the wall and there were remnants of barrels whose riders didn't survive, and other whole barrels of riders who did. About half of those who tried had survived the fall, including female twins age twenty-five who went over tied together in a double-sized barrel. All of the exhibits were tempered by grave warnings of the danger and illegality of such acts.

“I can't stand these kind of people,” my father told me. “Are their lives so meaningless they have to risk them with this kind of stupidity?”

“They did it for the thrill, for the ultimate rush,” I said. “Because they only go around once in life.” I had just read this off a plaque on one of the exhibits and repeated the words to my father.

“Only go around once?” my father mimicked. “All the more reason not to ruin it like this. They're going to die eventually. Are they so frightened of that fact they want to hurry up and get it over with?”

He limped out of the museum in a huff, leaving me behind to ponder the remaining exhibits. Even though I was getting bored, I took my sweet time, because I knew my father had to wait for me.

A little while later I went outside. At first I didn't see him, and got scared he had left me there. Then I saw him standing at the corner, eating a bag of pretzels, which he didn't offer to me. We left for home right away, missing the Maid of the Mist boat ride and the colored spotlights on the falls. We got home really late; my mother was worried and ready to call the police, which led to a big argument between my parents.

The following weekend my father made me carry down to the basement all the leftover wood he'd saved from the broken tree house. He had me hold the boards while he cut them into narrow strips with a circular saw. After each cut he had to stand up and stretch his back. “What are we building, Dad?” I asked. “Is it a secret?”

“You're right, Vinny,” he said. “You only go around once in life, so let's make it exciting. What do you say we take the trip over the falls together?”

“Really?”

“We’ll go together. We’ll be the first father and son team to make it over the falls.”

I knew he was kidding. I was smiling when I told him I didn't want to.

He cut up strips of plywood and bent them into rings. He started nailing the pieces of lumber onto the plywood rings. He told me to get the inner tubes. We had four of them, stacked in a corner in the room where my mother kept canned goods. We used them during the summer as rafts.

My father stuffed the tubes inside the barrel.

He put down his hammer and wiped the sawdust off his shirt and pants. “You know, Vinny, I don’t think it’s big enough to fit both of us. You’ll have to ride yourself.”

“I’m not really going to ride it.”

“Sure you are.”

“No, Dad, please!”

He studied me for a moment, his mouth getting so small it almost disappeared. “It’s what you want,” he said. “You’re the one who wants to be a daredevil. Who wants the big thrill of throwing your life away.”

“No! I don’t. I don’t want to throw my life away!”

He picked up his hammer again, and at first I thought he was going to hit me. He was good with a hammer; he had used one to kill my cat, maybe this same one. I flinched, and protected my face with my arms. But when he swung, the head of the hammer splintered the boards he'd nailed together. One of the inner tubes got punctured, and a stale, farty air flapped out of the rubber. He proceeded to pummel the barrel to scraps, then stood there panting, the hammer still clenched in his hands.

“Son, don’t think people who want to kill themselves are heroes,” he said. “That’s the coward’s way out.”

He told me to sweep up.

—

That was the story I remember. When I finish, Jane doesn't move. I hear her breathing next to me. At first I'm afraid she's fallen asleep. The only sound in the room is the faint whistling from the floor register, a monotonous, unmelodic wheeze, not at all the soft songs my father promised would play throughout the night. The moon pours luminous light through the sheer curtains. I'd forgotten to pull down the shades.

“I can't believe he would do something like that,” Jane finally says.

“I just told you he did. Who are you going to believe, him or me?”

"I didn't mean it literally. It's just hard to imagine, that's all. How can you have such completely different versions of the same story?"

"One of us must be suffering from dementia," I say.

Jane puts an arm around my chest and rests her head on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," she tells me, snuggling closer.

"Me too, for overreacting. I probably don't have the story right, either. It was so long ago, and you're right—it doesn't matter now."

We say nothing else, and soon I hear a change in Jane's breathing: deeper and more rhythmic.

I wait for sleep like a fool waits for the date who has stood him up, knowing with each passing minute the chances grow slimmer, not better. I'm wide awake, alert as an owl. Eventually I untangle from Jane without waking her. I put on my pants and sweatshirt and go downstairs, using the banister to guide me in the dark. I step carefully on the creaky treads so I won't wake my parents.

In the family room, the moonlight has created a shadowy grid on the floor from the mullions in the window. I stand in the illumination and stare at the lake, at the black border of trees piercing the stars. It takes a few minutes for me to realize the scene is entirely still, and that all the movement and turbulence I am experiencing, the churning, the blurred landscape, is jarring me from within.

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I jump at his voice. He says something I don't get and emerges from the darkness where the moonlight had not reached.

"Who's there?"

"Dad, it's me."

"Vinny." He's wearing his old Marine dress uniform, the blue coat, the white hat. There is a red and yellow chevron on his sleeve and medals pinned to the breast. I've never seen him wearing it, although I'd put it on before, as a kid, unfolding the uniform from the trunk in the attic and getting lost in its arms and legs, bringing my mother's hand mirror up so I could see parts of myself but not daring to go downstairs with the uniform on.

"She has a smile as bright as the moon," he says. "We look at the same moon. That's what I told her to remember. That way we would always stay connected."

"Dad, are you okay? How about something to drink?" I rummage in the liquor cabinet for the bottle of brandy, and pour two glasses. I'm not sure if it's okay to let my father drink, but I sure need to. He remains standing, the rigid soldier. He looks pained by his position. His cane is missing.

“Dad, sit down, let's relax a little. What are you doing up so late?”

He sits next to me on the couch. I give him his glass but he doesn't sip from it. I drink most of mine in one gulp and feel the fire down my throat. We sit in silence for a few minutes, watching the moon, the ice. I ask him about the 139 days he mentioned when we talked on the phone.

“It's 128 now,” he says.

“Until July 9,” I add. I had counted out the days. The day my mother said was marked with a little moon on the calendar.

“Right. On July 9, 1944 I was wounded.”

“You never told me it was that day.”

My father puts an arm around me and grips my shoulder. “I thought I had died. I only remember part of the night, feeling very warm and wet. For a while there was the moon, then clouds passed over and rain started falling. I got cold and started shivering, but then the pain stopped and my whole body felt massaged and warm. I knew I was about to die. I had no regrets. I'd found love, I had a daughter. My life had been good. Then when I woke up there were lights in my face. They hurt me. I didn't want them.”

I get up and pour myself another shot of brandy.

“I should have died then,” he tells me.

“Maybe it was a miracle you didn't.”

“No, son, a tragedy. I was supposed to die that night. Instead the war ended, and I was in Japan, where some things happened. But I should have died. It was my time. So now I'm going to die in 128 days.”

“Dad, that's ridiculous. That doesn't make any sense.”

“There was a mistake. Vinny, none of this would have happened if I had died when I was supposed to.”

The last swallow of brandy going down smacks into the dread rising in my throat. My words choke and sputter. “There was no mistake. There was a miracle. You survived.”

My father shakes his head. “No, no.”

“That's what it was: a miracle you lived . . . Mom waited and prayed for you all the time you were gone. She had a new baby at home and they would have been left all alone . . . and—I wouldn't be here if you'd died then. I never would have been born.”

He slowly shakes his head, back and forth once. “You never should have been born,” he says. “It was your mother. She's the one who insisted on having another baby. I tried to talk her out of it, but I couldn't.”

This isn't the first time he's told me that I shouldn't have been born. It's always a punch in the gut, never fun to hear.

"And I was right, in the end," he says. "Look what a terrible father I've been to you." Then he stares at me, his eyes a mix of pity and sadness. "Look at you," he adds.

My fist curls. I want to smack him.

"Are you going to marry that girl?"

"Jane?"

"Don't make the same mistakes I did, Vinny."

"What mistakes?"

"It's not too late for you, but it is for me. I'm going to set right whatever went wrong back then. I'm going to die."

"You're not going to die," I say.

"It's the right thing to do."

I grope for something, anything, else. "What does Mom say about all this?"

He looked at me quickly, narrowly. "She doesn't know. I think I've broken her heart enough. I'm only telling you, Vinny, because I know you understand. You're the one person I can trust, my only son. You're like me, we feel the same."

"No! I don't understand! We don't feel the same at all. You can't do this to Mom. You can't leave her."

He waves off my words. I say, "What about me? What about . . . about . . ." I have to stop because my heart clicks in my throat. I have to breathe.

"Dad, do you remember the story you told Jane tonight, about the barrel and the falls? I remember it differently. I remember you telling me only cowards want to die. People who risk their lives like that aren't brave at all. You taught me that. You taught me real heroes stick it out no matter how hard things get."

His expression has turned blank and flat as a doll's. "I'm no hero."

I'm standing in front of him now. I have him by the collar shaking him, trying to make him understand. His body flaps like rags. His head bobs in and out of the light and shadows. One of the brass buttons on his collar comes off in my hands. I'm yelling at him.

"Dad! Dad! Listen to me!"

The light switches on and my mother is standing in the doorway, clutching her bathrobe at her throat, stray curls of gray hair cascading down one cheek.

"Vincent!"

I let go of my father's collar. He slumps back on the couch.

“What's all this noise? Jack, why are you dressed in your uniform?” She walks over to the couch and lifts my father by the shoulders. He stands up, and comes to attention again. His eyelids blink a lot and his mouth moves in silence.

“What are you doing to him!” My mother glances once more at me—now there are two Howells she can't understand.

I have no answer for her, I don't know how to explain the inexplicable.

She guides my father into the hall and back upstairs, whispering, soothing him on the way. Her voice reminds me of this day when I came home from school and saw something. They had forgotten to close the bathroom door all the way and I looked in and saw my father hunched over in the tub, his hairy legs and bony knees sticking up like fence posts. He hummed and my mother stood over him, still in her dress, and rubbed and squeezed a big soapy sponge over his back and talked in that same whispery voice.

A wide blanket of clouds seeps across the sky, extinguishing the moon. I turn the brass button from his uniform over and over in my hand.

## 14

After a few foggy hours of semi-sleep, I wake with the first gray light of dawn. I wait for the nightmare to recede, to scurry off into my unconscious like roaches disappearing when the lights come on. This doesn't happen. I'm stuck with the bugs.

Just the top of Jane's head shows through the covers. The rest of her is buried snugly in her flannel nightgown and the down comforter. For a moment I consider waking her and together we could sneak out, go back home, pretend we'd never come here. I could forget this visit, really I could. I could forget what my father told me about planning his own death, even putting a date on it. I don't believe him, anyway.

*Jane, wake up. We're out of here and never coming back.*

But I can't just bolt. My mother deserves a better explanation after what happened last night. Instead, knowing Jane will sleep for at least another hour, I quietly dress in running clothes. In the closet downstairs I locate my hat and gloves from the pockets of my coat.

When I open the front door, the air stings like a slap. My breath clouds in front of my face. It's too cold to be called bitter; this chill is flavorless, it is ice. I look up at my parents' bedroom



window. The curtains are closed but the sash is open a crack and a stream of smoke shoots out. A few seconds later, another.

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I hop up and down and do a few jumping jacks and leg kicks, then start out. A jagged border divides the black tree line from the pink sky, which is stitched with high wispy clouds. The last stars cling near the western horizon. I run fast to get warmed up, then slow down once I feel a sweat. I think of nothing except the cramp in my gut, which I focus on, shrinking it down to the size of a marble, then a pea. Another stem of pain sprouts in my chest. I work on that one for a while.

It's a seven mile trip around the lake. I've run the route many times in high school training for the track team. That was years ago. I usually run five miles now, maybe six. I'm halfway around the lake when I realize this, but am not tired. The cramp has quit. The pain has eased. The sky is lighter, the pink giving way to the pale honey color of a winter morning, the sun hiding behind a thin marbling of fresh clouds.

I pass Denise's house, then turn around and run past in the other direction. I do this a few times, back and forth. Smoke curls up from the chimney, but I don't see any lights. Then I hear a rapping on the window pane. I run up to the window and Denise motions me to come to the back door.

"Vincent, are you nuts? It's two degrees out this morning." She holds the door open for me. Nestled in a cradle formed by her right arm and hip, Curtis sucks on her breast. Denise is in her bathrobe, which drags on the floor; she smells like an old bar of dried soap. The heat from the kitchen immediately exhausts me.

"You're up early," I say.

"This isn't early. I have a six-month-old." She hands me a towel. I wipe the sweat off my face, then blow my nose into it. Denise sinks back onto the cushioned window seat.

"You want some coffee? I just made it, you can help yourself." She points to the mugs hanging on hooks beneath the cupboards. "We have to be quiet because this is Ron's morning to sleep in. I didn't expect you to visit until later."

"I wasn't planning to run this way, then when I passed in front of the house . . . We have to leave this morning, so I don't have time to come by later."

I pour myself a coffee and pull a chair from the kitchen table and sit backwards, legs straddling, arms crossed over the back. Denise shifts Curtis to her other breast.

"The place looks great," I say, looking around at the new maple cabinets, the expensive granite countertops.

"We didn't even get a chance to talk last night," Denise says. "That's always the way with so many people around. Come on, tell me, what's going on. Tell me about Jane, tell me what you're doing. I guess you're making it as a painter if you have a show coming up. I want to know everything." She's very excited, but then takes a closer look at me. "What's the matter, Vincent, you look like shit. I'm sorry—I didn't mean that. But you do. You look so tired."

"I had a bad night with my father."

"He seemed fine to us. Ron said he'd never seen him look better."

"Ron hasn't known him very long," I say.

"Well, he looked good to me, too."

"This happened later; everyone else was in bed."

"Grandma told me he was doing so well."

I want to tell Denise what happened, but can't. It's too raw for this hour of the morning. "I never should have come," I say. "I think he saves it all up for me. It's like I bring out the worst in him."

"Maybe it's the other way around," she says.

She looks like she feels sorry for me, which I can't stand, but she also has a tenderness to her face, a fragile, easily broken expression, a look which I've remembered all this time. It's partially hidden by a fullness in the cheeks, a puffiness under the eyes, but it's still there. I've kissed that face.

"Come on, let's talk about something else. You look really good," I tell her. "You look happy."

"I am happy. Who would have thought I'd end up like this. I never used to think about getting married and having a baby. I used to think I'd travel, lead some exotic lifestyle or something. Or I'd be a poet, an artist like you. You really did it, Vincent. You followed your dream."

Curtis finishes and Denise sits him, pats his back until he burps. He wiggles his arms and legs, pawing and kicking at the air, like an overturned bug.

"I used to think about you a lot," I say. "I still have some of those old poems you wrote. Do you remember?"

"You're kidding! God, I'd be embarrassed to see them now. Please, I don't even want to hear about them." A light blush shades her face.

"No, they're excellent, really. I read them sometimes. You wrote exactly how I felt, like the world was so big and just trying to devour us, and that hole in the sky stuff. I still think about you, too. It was a little out there, what we did together. But I'm glad, you know? It was a feeling I'll never forget."

I've said something wrong. Lights are shutting off behind Denise's face, one after the other.

"You don't think about it," I say.

"We were kids," Denise says. "We didn't know anything. I hope you've never told anyone. Please don't tell me you have."

"No, no. I never said anything."

"Vincent, you need to forget what happened."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I don't know what I'm supposed to remember and what I'm not."

Denise drops her gaze from me, stares at the floor.

"Jesus, I feel terrible, Denise. Can I at least tell you that much? I have to tell someone. Jane doesn't want to hear it anymore. No, that's not true. She's been great for me, which is why I don't want to keep leaning on her and telling her how awful I feel. I'll end up chasing her away."

"You look completely exhausted, Vincent. You should go back to bed for a few hours."

"Jane actually thought it was a good idea for us to come for this visit. What a mistake. She encouraged me to rebuild my relationship with my father."

"I'm sorry, Vincent, I'm not sure what to say."

"Everything's so complicated all the time." I have to wipe my face again with the towel.

"It's not, really," Denise says. "You need to learn to simplify."

"What do you mean?"

"Hold out your arms," she tells me, then when I do she puts Curtis in them. I stiffen up like the Tin Man. "Relax," Denise says. "You're holding a baby, not a bomb."

My hands curl around his tiny body to form a safe nest. I pull him in closer against my chest.

"Doesn't that feel better now?"

It does. I get a glimpse of the comfort Jane must feel when holding Baby Blair in the hospital—love in its simplest, warmest, noblest form. No conditions. No minimum requirements. You just give.

Then Curtis spits up all over my sweatshirt. We laugh, and when Denise reaches over with a towel, I take her hand. She lets me hold her for a few minutes, until Curtis spills again.

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My father stands at the stove, flipping pancakes on the griddle. He bellows good morning to me and says I'm just in time for breakfast. Jane and my mother sit at the table, drinking coffee. Jane is fresh from a shower, her hair wet and neatly combed. I can smell maple syrup warming in a pan on the stove.

"What's your time for the mile these days, Vinny?"

"Feels like about twenty minutes." In fact, I'm refreshed after my run and visit with Denise.

“Sit down, Apollo, here's your first stack.” My father hands me a plate and points to the table. He avoids my eyes.

So. I'm to pretend last night didn't happen. Just a scary dream, a night terror dissolved by the morning light, smothered and sweetened with butter and syrup and pancakes. My mother looks at me once, the corners of her mouth move a hint—I know the case is closed. Unless I open it, put it on the table for our breakfast. *By the way, Dad, were you serious about killing yourself? Mom, do you think there should be some intervention here? Jane, how about an opinion from a medical professional?*

“Pass the butter, please,” I say.

My mother suggests I take Jane ice skating, the lake looks perfect. My old skates are down in the basement somewhere, she says, and she or Celine must have a pair down there Jane could wear.

“I don't know,” Jane says. “I've never skated.”

This surprises me. People from the Northeast assume everyone knows how to ice skate. “I can teach you,” I say, already anxious to get out of the house again. “It's easy.”

After breakfast I shower, then we search for skates. Built-in cabinets line one wall of our cellar, across from the furnace. Cardboard boxes, none of them marked, are crammed into the shelves. My mother said she didn't know which one—just open them all until you find the skates. There are at least a dozen boxes, all with tops. I tell Jane to start at one end, I take the other. I dig through boxes filled with Christmas ornaments, old clothes, school books, unused pots and pans, unopened gifts, extra bedding. I come across a box of baby clothes.

“I stopped at Denise's while I was running this morning,” I tell Jane. “I held her baby. Now I know why you like holding Baby Blair.”

Jane stops rummaging, comes to me, says thank you. I kiss her, harder than I usually do, pulling her towards me so my chin bumps hers. When I let go she almost loses her balance.

“What was that for?” she says.

This is my chance to tell her what happened with my father last night, but I can't. It's as if he's put some kind of gag order on me and I'm obeying it. I couldn't tell Denise earlier, now I can't tell Jane. I can't open my mouth. Or I won't.

The box of ski boots seems likely to hold ice skates, but instead is packed with extra wool socks. I'm getting closer. Just as I find the box with the skates I hear Jane say, “Look at this.” She pulls a painting out of a large box containing art supplies and paper. She holds the painting up like a flag so I can see. Its canvas corners are curled in on themselves.

“When did you paint this?”

I recognize the work of the artist. "I didn't paint that one."

"It looks a lot like your work."

I stare at the painting for a minute, swallowing the insult Jane didn't realize she'd hurled.

"I found the skates. Try these on." I hand a pair of white figure skates to Jane. Raw, gray patches mar the leather uppers, and the blades, spotted with rust, clink together like swords.

"Who painted this, Vincent?"

"That's one of my father's."

"You didn't tell me he was a painter." She's fingering through other paintings in the box.

"Come on, try these on." I push the skates on her.

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How can you deconstruct into individual steps such a continuous, fluid dance as skating? I know at what point to bend my knee, I know when to push off with my thigh, stretch with my calf, when to glide, when to pump, how to rhythm my hips and swing my arms. I've skated for almost as long as I've walked, and I don't remember learning how, only knowing how, and I'm not doing a very professional job transferring this expertise to Jane.

I thought it would be easy to teach her. Her muscles are strong enough; at least she's not skating on her ankles. And she's not timid, either. She just can't move. When she leads with one skate, the blade peeks out like the head of a turtle, then sneaks back in. Try putting weight on it, I tell her. Push forward. Don't let your feet slip behind you. She forces the blade out there again, where it stops. She drags her other skate forward to catch up. Keep your weight toward the front of your foot. How do you teach glide, I wonder, how do you learn balance? I circle around, take her hands and skate backwards, pulling her along. She's stretched forward at the waist, her skates move only because I'm pulling her. I turn and skate alongside her now, an arm around her waist, telling her to try a few strides, put a leg out, sway those hips some, fan your fanny baby. Then suddenly she glides away from the pressure I'm putting into her back. Her arms flap like wings, but she stays up. Her strides are tiny and precarious as a baby's first steps. A step and a glide. Step, step, glide. I hold her waist and we go like this for fifty yards, then one hundred, along green, glassy ice as hard as diamonds.

—

When we get back inside, my mother tells us that Dad is in bed; he'd gotten tired and gone upstairs. I could use a nap myself, and will sleep in the car while Jane takes first driving shift. My mother makes tea and slices pound cake. We sit at the kitchen table, rubbing our hands and thawing our faces. Jane flushes with her accomplishment on the ice; I flush because I take some credit for teaching her.

My mother asks if we can stay longer and I tell her that Jane has to get back for work. Then she asks if we'll come back for the Fourth of July weekend. It's the weekend of the swimming race and barbecue. She says this year there's going to be a band and extra fireworks because Kenano Lake is celebrating its 150th year as a town. I've never heard her so enthusiastic about this annual picnic. She used to shy away from it because she said the town was full of gossips and busybodies, and that was one thing she couldn't stand.

I tell her we'll try to make it.

I keep waiting for my mother to mention something about the previous night, but she doesn't. Or, she does, in many ways, none of them verbal. Her voice has been particularly soft today, like the fluttering leaves of a willow in the breeze. We have to lean close to hear her, and when we do she touches us—our hands, our faces. Jane, too. A slight caress on the cheek, a squeeze of fingers. Her lips tremble into these apologetic smiles that flash and fade like the beacon of a lighthouse. I have a second cup of tea, hoping my father might wake up so I can at least say goodbye.

When Jane gets up to use the bathroom, I finally decide I have to say something to my mother. I approach from an angle. "Does Dad put on his uniform often?" I ask.

My mother waits before answering, as if she's adding up in her mind how often Dad dresses up. "This is the first time that I know of."

I shake my head.

"I don't see why it's a problem," she says. "It's not unnatural to revive past memories."

What's unnatural is my father counting the days until he dies, insisting on completing a task that should have been completed fifty years ago in a horrific war. Those are the parts of the costume show you missed, Mom. You only came in at the end when I was trying to shake sense into the man or shake the life out of him and get it over with.

But my father's gag order still holds. I can't tell my mother. And I know she doesn't want to hear—saying anything will create more heartache than it will heal, especially given that my father was most likely bluffing or will quickly forget his plan.

But then she says: "So why were you shouting at your father last night?"

"I think he was kind of sleep walking or something. I was trying to wake him up."

"He does that sometimes. I've already discussed his nocturnal wanderings with his doctors—their advice is to just let it go, as long as he stays close and is not in any danger."

"I guess I was shaking him too hard. I got a little scared."

"I know, it can be that way. I suppose I'm just getting used to the way he is now. He keeps telling me: 'Maureen, don't be afraid, there's nothing to fear.' So I've decided to believe him."

"But you must be upset. I saw the smoke coming out of your window this morning."

"So I like to have a cigarette sometimes," she says. "That's nobody's business."

"Jane does that, too," I say.

—

I get the keys from Jane and load the car. I put her bag and mine in the back seat, and a couple of other things in the trunk. Grime and dried salt brown the sides of the car. I throw a handful of snow on the windshield and run the wipers to clean the glass, then walk down to the lake for a last look, sliding back and forth on my boots. I can see where our blades have etched the ice, choppy patterns at first, then smooth. I follow them out for a ways, turn around and walk back.

My mother tells me my father is awake now, and Jane is upstairs talking to him. I climb the stairs quietly, trying to prepare some kind of casual goodbye, determined not to upset him by mentioning last night.

The door to his room is half open. From the hallway I can see Jane standing next to the bed, and my father's hands, holding Jane's arms near her elbows. I can't see his face. He's saying something I can't hear. Jane is turned sideways to me; what shows of her face is pale as dough, and blotched with red spots that look like the rash she gets after drinking. My father speaks again, his voice husky, rusty, as if not often used. He pulls Jane towards him, not hard, but enough to surprise her balance. She resists at first, then relents, taking an awkward step closer to the bed to keep from falling. His arms reach around her, he draws his face up to the far side of hers and says something. I can see his neck straining. I walk in.

He looks at me and slumps back on the bed. Jane takes two steps backwards and releases a breath, then moves forward again and touches my father's forehead. I don't know if it's a gesture of tenderness or a doctor's assessment. His eyes blink slowly, as if being pushed by weights, then stay closed.

"We came to say goodbye, Dad," I say. Jane moves to make room for me next to the bed. She places a damp hand in mine.

"Goodbye, Dad," I say. He lies perfectly still, except for his lips and jaw, which move like a fish. Eyes remain clamped shut, face fingers straining. He refuses to see me. I remember that trick he played on me when I visited at Valley Meadow, faking sleep and then springing up and biting my finger. I'm ready for him this time, but nothing happens.

"Dad."

We wait a few beats in silence.

"Dad?" Nothing.

I turn to go, Jane's hand still in mine. "Come on," I whisper.

"Goodbye, Mr. Howell," she says.

I tell my mother he's asleep again. She kisses and hugs us both. I promise to call her.

I'm in such a hurry to get in the car I bang my knee on the door and have to limp out to the car. When Jane drives away I close my eyes until we can no longer see the house, then I open them and watch until the last glimpses of the frozen lake are gone. I ask Jane what my father had said to her in the bedroom.

"I don't know what he was trying to say."

"But what were his words? Did you ask him about the barrel thing? Did he tell you something about me?"

"No, it had nothing to do with you."

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"I don't remember, his words didn't make sense, it was all so sudden and unexpected—"

"—Now look who doesn't want to remember."

She turns her attention abruptly from the road and stares at me. Her foot releases from the gas pedal and we coast. "I told you *I don't know*, Vincent. He didn't even know who I was. He was calling me by some name I've never heard. He wasn't making sense. You saw so yourself."

Then she adds, "It's not always about you."

I have no comeback for that comment. I put my head back and close my eyes and pray for sleep, but my mind races at high speed, stopping at nothing, blurring all my thoughts before I can recognize them. Except for this one: what a mental case. He's going to kill himself and he won't even say goodbye to me.

"It's so sad," Jane says, as if hearing my thoughts.

I pretend to be asleep.

—

We cross into Canada at the Thousand Islands and drive past Kingston and Toronto on our way to Niagara Falls. The Canadian side is better for viewing. It has the larger Horseshoe falls, which form a perfect U, and you can stand within a few feet of the edge along a guardrail. On the American side, the water surges over a straight ledge, and from the Canadian side you can see it crash onto a landscape of boulders broken off from above.

On a whim, we decide to spend the night in a hotel called the Mists of Niagara, even though we're only forty-five minutes from home. We even splurge for the honeymoon suite, which is available at a discount in the off-season. I'm not sure why we take it, but at the reception desk we



look at each other and nod yes when asked if we want to upgrade. We can sleep in tomorrow. Jane is working the second shift next week and doesn't need to be back until the afternoon.

From our room we can hear the muted thunder of the falls, an incessant rumbling bass. The balcony door is frozen shut by the mist which ices all surfaces within a quarter mile. What makes our room the honeymoon suite is a hot tub in the bathroom and a heart-shaped bed with a pink spread over the top. Normally, we would make fun of such tackiness, then romp on it. But I'm too exhausted to care. Romance seems far away, long gone over the falls and washed out to sea. My mood has weakened throughout the day on our long car ride, my spirits sagging like a dog left out in the rain—I feel like I've bailed out on some kind of duty—and shortly after checking in I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep, splayed out in the middle of that ridiculous heart. When I wake two hours later, Jane is sitting next to me writing postcards to her family back in Washington.

"Feel better?" she asks.

"A little. I will when my head clears."

We go for dinner at the top of the Skyline Tower, one of those restaurants that does a complete three-hundred-sixty degree rotation every hour to distract you from the mediocre food. I don't care much about eating, anyway. Blue and green and white spotlights beam on the falls below, and the colored mist rises in the air like radioactive smoke. After our meal we stroll along the frozen paths of the park, arm-in-arm so we won't slip, or so if one of us slips the other goes along for the fall, too.

Jane leans her head into my shoulder, we hold each other tightly, yet I sense a gulf between us as deep and wide as the falls themselves. An image plays itself over and over in my mind: my father pulling Jane towards him, his garbled words. What was he trying to tell her? Jane is no help; she won't say. The image of the two of them through the half-closed door gnaws at me like a rat in my stomach.

In the morning we order a continental breakfast from room service, and check out early. Some honeymoon suite. We haven't taken advantage of the heart-shaped bed or the Jacuzzi bath or mini-bar. We go for another walk along the falls. The sun is out, and some of the ice on the railings and walkways has started to melt. More people mill around. An entire busload of Japanese tourists, vacationing in the wrong season, snap pictures of each other and the cascade and the huge iceberg formed in the deep pool just beyond where the water falls.

Jane avoids the tourists, lest she be mistaken for one, and walks me in the opposite direction. We spend an hour looking for the Ripley's museum of daredevils; Jane says she has to see it. I'm not sure of its exact location, but we pretty much scour the entire area, up and down the grid of commercial blocks. I ask someone on a street corner, a teenager smoking a cigarette and talking

to his girlfriend, who's wearing earphones. He says he's never heard of the place. We walk another block and I ask an old woman walking her equally old dog, which limps. She says she remembers that place, it closed down years ago. "Kind of a silly place, it was," she says.

There isn't much else to see. I know about a floral clock nearby and an enormous horticultural park with an intricate labyrinth of bushes, but they would be closed this time of year. We decide to start home. Jane asks if I'll drive because she has a headache.

—

I cross back into the United States about a half-mile downstream from the falls on the Rainbow Bridge, which spans the gorge the Niagara River gushes through on its way to Lake Ontario.

Passing customs into Canada is usually as simple as waving. Citizenship? U.S. Anything to declare? Nope. Okay, go ahead. Crossing back into the States is more challenging. Our customs agent poses like a wanna-be soldier. A lot of these customs guys wear their uniforms like school kids, jackets unbuttoned, shirts wrinkled; this one looks like he took a shower in starch, even his face looks like someone had put an iron to it. He also wears a side-arm, an unusual option at this border, the former honeymoon capital of the world.

When I pull in next to the booth and roll down my window, he sticks his face right inside the car. I can smell his mouthwashy breath. I lean the other way, toward Jane. He studies us—especially Jane—with a calculating stare, as if he were deciding whether to shoot first and ask questions later.

"What's your citizenship, sir?" he asks me.

"U.S."

He leans in farther to get at Jane. She withers under his raping stare. "And you, what's your citizenship?"

"U.S."

"Pardon me?"

"United States," Jane says again.

He mulls this information for a while. "Where did you learn to speak English?"

"What?" The color drains from her cheeks, then returns in splotches. "At home," she says. "Growing up."

Again he digests this answer for a moment. "Where were you born?"

"Washington," Jane says, upset now, but unwilling or unable to be defiant.

"D.C.?"

"No, Washington State. Near Seattle."

He walks around the car to the passenger side and motions for Jane to roll down her window. "What's going on?" she whispers to me.

I haven't a clue. I lower the window on her side six inches.

"Can I see your passport, please?" he asks her.

"My what? I don't have my passport with me. We just came to see Niagara Falls."

"Do you have a valid driver's license or other means of identification?"

Jane digs through her purse for her wallet, her hands shaking. I ask if I can help but she's too busy emptying her purse.

"Excuse me," I say to the guy. "I don't understand what the problem is."

The customs agent merely puts his hand up to dismiss me: *You be quiet, this doesn't concern you.*

Jane finally hands over her driver's license, which he studies for a long time, both sides. "This is a New York State driver's license," he finally declares.

"That's still a valid state in this country, isn't it?" I say.

"Pardon me, sir?"

"New York. You know, part of the USA."

Mistake. I remember once coming to Canada with my parents, and the customs agent asking if we were all American. I thought I was funny: I told the guy I didn't make the team. Get it? The all-American team? For that wise remark we got pulled over and our car searched. Christ, these uniformed authorities could be such humorless, power-crazed subservients.

My quip goes unappreciated. The agent motions us to the search and destroy area. We park in front of this one-story brick building that looks like an army barracks, and two other custom agents approach, ask us to step out, and start searching our car. If they attempt a body cavity search I'm running for it. They ask me to open the trunk. They paw through the contents of our bags. They unzip my toiletry bag and Jane's. They feel under the seats, peer into the glove compartment. They unfold an old blanket I had put in the trunk.

"What are these?" one of them asks me, unrolling the canvases.

"Paintings," I say. He stares for a minute then plops them back in the trunk, not bothering to re-wrap the blanket. Jane, close to tears, squeezes my hand.

Then we go inside and are ushered into a plain room with a table and chairs. Two agents ask the same questions over again; they ask Jane. Where does she live? What does she do for a living? Why isn't she carrying her passport? Don't you know this is an international border?

The other agent tells us there has been a flood of illegal Chinese immigrants smuggled across this border—in car trunks, in boxes, hey, why not try the front seat.

Why not try the toiletry bag?

“My ancestry is Japanese,” Jane says. “Not Chinese.”

One of the agents crosses his legs and shrugs. All the same to him.

This time she does cry.

## 15

He charges with a hammer in his hand, mouth spread wide as a shark's, razory teeth jutting from the borders of a leering grin. He chases my cat around the basement, under the laundry sink, on top the oil tank. I'm watching, begging him to stop in a voice that can't rise above a whisper. Then he's chasing me. He limps behind me but I'm too fast for him. I run circles around the work bench, darting and feinting. Suddenly he's caught up. He grabs me from behind and raises the hammer high over his head, readies to swing, then the hammer turns into a gun he points at his own head. I close my eyes and hear this terrible explosion and when I look the top half of his head is gone, splattered against the white-painted cupboards. His mouth remains, grinning, laughing.

In the distance I hear the piercing howl of a trapped animal. Then Jane is shaking me, calling my name: *Vincent, Vincent. It's okay, it's okay. Wake up.* The howling stops; it was me. It was Howell howling.

I open my eyes and the shadows in the room jump back to their places.

Sweat varnishes my back, beads on my forehead. I've made a swamp of the sheets. Inside its cage, my heart bangs to get out.

Three nights this week, twice last week, I've been tromped on by these nightmares. During the daytime, when the images fade and fright washes out, I can almost amuse myself with the grisly and ludicrous plots of the dreams, but at night they chomp big bites out of me. I feel eaten up. What would the dream research folks think of these home movies?

“Can I get you something?” Jane whispers. “A glass of water?”

“No, nothing.” I get up from bed, go in the bathroom and wipe the sweat with a towel, splash water on my face. I can't return to bed, my ruined bed. My poisoned sanctuary. I hear Jane in there changing the sheets I've soaked through with my sweat, and I feel as guilty as the child who wets the bed.

Downstairs, I open the refrigerator and shut the door immediately, the brightness of its gaping yaw striking me like a spotlight. I close my eyes for an instant and the dream runs again: the hammer, the gun. I'm not even asleep! I snap my eyes open.

Then I'm on the phone, my fingers . . . my fingers, my steady painter's hands trembling like boiling water . . . punching the numbers, getting it wrong, and then I hear an unfamiliar voice: "You stupid asshole, it's the middle of the fucking night!"

I try again. I'm sniffing as the phone rings, I run a wobbly finger under my nose, and then my mother answers, the alarm of a 2 a.m. call echoing in her voice.

"Sorry to wake you, Mom. It's Vincent, I need to talk to Dad."

"Honey, what's the matter? What happened?"

"Nothing, it's . . . Please put Dad on."

A ruffling sound and my father picks up the phone. "You woke us up, son."

"Tell me right now you're going to stop," I say.

"Stop what? I'm not the one dialing in the middle of the night this time."

"You know what I mean. What we talked about—your big plan to go out on schedule. I'm going to tell Mom. I'm going to tell everyone what you told me."

"You won't have to if you keep shouting like that." There's a moment of crackling static, then my father says, his voice a whisper, "I thought I could trust you, Vinny. You're my only son. That's the reason why I told you. If you want to put me in the hospital again, go ahead. If you want to hurt your mother, well, that's up to you."

"I'm not the one who's going to shoot myself in the head!" I realize how ridiculous this sounds, over the phone—or anywhere, I'm sure.

"No one will know," my father says. "No one but you and me. And then I'll be out of everyone's way."

"Dad, you're not in anyone's way."

"Am I in your way?"

"Please don't do this to me. Or to Mom. Don't do it to yourself."

"Maybe I was wrong about you. I never should have told you. Maybe you aren't strong enough—but neither am I, son. I didn't want to be alone in this. I guess we're all weak-kneed when the time comes. Forgive me, will you?"

"Dad, please stop this. Please."

"I know, it's late. Why don't you try to get some sleep. You were probably having a bad dream. Goodnight, son."

Some moments later I'm startled by the recorded voice of an operator instructing me on how to make a call. Jane takes the receiver from my hand and hangs it up. She stands in front of me in her silk robe, nothing else, her hair, black as a raven's wing, nesting at her shoulders.

"What can I do for you?" she asks me.

I lower myself until I am on my knees. I open the front of her robe and rest my face against her warm belly.

"Talk to me," she says. "What were you saying about shooting? What were you talking about?"

"The dream," I say. "I was telling him my dream."

I still cannot reveal to Jane my father's plans—or is it his bluff? If I had a tip of the tongue, the words would be there, but my father has long since removed it, perhaps anticipating this moment years down the line when he would render me his inarticulate accomplice. He has cast a spell of silence on me. I am mute.

—

In the morning after Jane has left for work I call back and talk to my mother. She wants to know what last night was all about. I tell her I don't know—I had this bad dream about Dad and needed to hear his voice. I apologize for calling so late and assure her I won't do it again.

"Not to worry," she says. "I thought you might be picking up his preference for late night phone calls."

No, I'm not. Then I tell her the reason I'm calling this morning: My art show has been canceled.

Her reaction is immediate and instinctive. She treats this news like a death announcement, as if I were telling her someone dear to her has passed away.

"I'm so sorry, Vincent. That's terrible. But why? What happened?"

"Not exactly canceled," I say, backing off. "We're going to reschedule for later. I'm not ready."

"What do you mean not ready?"

"I still need to finish some of my paintings, that's all," I tell her, and promise to let her know when I find out the new date.

There's only one painting I can't finish, and I have no chance at completing it since I've started over thirteen times now, and each attempt is getting worse, not better. At least I was hitting foul balls when I first started on this painting; now it's all swings and misses. For days I've slapped erratic strokes onto the canvas, yet have produced nothing but high wire tension inside myself. My brushstrokes look awful, some of them like inflamed nerve ganglia, others like

flattened cigarette butts. I'm reminded of this article I read in the newspaper about an elephant that paints. Her trainer dips the brush and the elephant curls it around her trunk and swipes across the canvas. Spectators gather to cheer the old gray artist, filming and snapping photos. Not only that, her paintings sell. The elephant has her own gallery at the zoo in Washington D.C. What's more, it's become a fad: now there's a dolphin painter that uses its snout to hold the brush. What chance do I have against such competition?

I try cutting down on coffee, but this only gives me headaches while the jitters and willies still remain. At least I haven't developed any facial tics yet. If it happens, I'm joining my father. We can shoot each other.

—

My show is not actually canceled. Nor is it being rescheduled. In fact, the show must go on—next weekend. I did approach Elena on the topic of postponing for another month and she said I've got to be kidding. Construction on the gallery is finished and the best slot is opening night and she's already mailed the invites and notified the press and taken out a four-color add in *Gusto*, and if I back out now I'd not only be the biggest idiot ever but also a person and artist she completely and utterly overestimated.

She's got quite a bedside manner.

"Over one painting you can't finish! Vincent, you're looking for excuses. Do you want to fail?"

She was right, of course, and quickly turned me around on the matter, but I still don't have the painting I believed would be the anchor of the show and I want this show to be perfect and my best work represented.

"Forget perfect—since when is art perfect?" Elena tells me. "You're just a painter with cold feet."

Again, she's right. Cold feet. And a cold heart, apparently. Here's why: Jane comes home and finds me up in the studio where I never stay after the sun goes down and the natural light has faded, but today I've turned on the work lights and am staring at a canvas that's half of an old painting and half what I've painted new. Neither half is any good and together they suck worse.

"Looks like a bad time," Jane says. "I guess I'll talk to you later."

"What is it?"

"It's kind of important, so I'd rather wait until you're ready."

"No, I'm ready, I want you to tell me. I've had enough here anyway." I can see she's nervous about something. My soul takes on water as I think Jane is about to abandon my wobbly, listing ship, finally realizing she's better suited to the luxurious yacht someone else can offer, her buddy

Dr. Ian Martinez, for example, the hot Latin lover whose feet or heart are probably never cold. I've been such a wreck to live with since we've returned from Kenano Lake and I brace myself for the breakup.

But that's not what she wants to talk about. Her important discussion is about Baby Blair.

The mention of Blair and not a breakup provides temporary relief—until Jane starts explaining. Like a good physician presenting a case, she recounts the medical history and prognosis: Blair has been in the hospital almost four months and has endured and overcome anemia, respiratory distress syndrome, jaundice-causing hyperbilirubinemia and a half dozen other difficult to pronounce ailments, improving to the point where technically he could go home, although he is classified as a 'medically fragile' infant requiring daily nursing care. Medication injections three times a day, regular blood pressure readings, monitor hookups at night, a respirator on standby.

As we know, however, Blair has no home to go to. His unidentified mother was finally buried in a potter's field, a special section of Forest Lawn Cemetery I didn't know existed, even though I've visited that particular graveyard dozens of times. Baby Blair is now in official custody of the State of New York and available for adoption, which could take some time because even though there are many loving couples waiting to adopt babies, there aren't many loving couples waiting to adopt medically fragile infants who will require constant care and ring up staggering medical bills for at least a few years.

That's where the foster care system comes in. One such organization, Nurse Angels, concentrates on placing medically fragile infants in registered nurse's homes, where the babies can be assured of receiving the medical care they need. Nurse Angels has gotten involved in Baby Blair's case and one of the organization's administrators paid a visit to the hospital at the same time Jane was sitting with Baby Blair and they got to talking, and while an ER doctor doesn't exactly have the same set of skills as an RN . . .

"I know it's a really big decision and a huge responsibility, and I would never do this unless you agreed it was a good idea, Vincent."

"Wait a minute—you want to adopt Blair?"

"No, we would just offer Blair a foster home until a family is found for permanent adoption."

"How long does it take?"

"Sometimes it takes a while," Jane says.

"Like a few weeks?"

"Most likely longer. A lot of adoptive parents want to make sure the baby thrives and the bulk of the medical bills are covered. It sounds hard-hearted but in reality it's practical."



*“Medically fragile. Is that an official term?”*

“It’s commonly used in reference to premature babies,” Jane says. “But it’s more a condition or state of being than a specific diagnosis or pathology.”

“Why not just adopt Blair now and skip the whole foster care?”

She’s surprised by this suggestion. “I’d like my first child to be one I give birth to,” she says. “So I don’t know if adoption is right for me—I mean for us. Well, that statement alone sums up the situation. I’m not sure what our future plans are, Vincent. We haven’t talked anymore about us since we were in Martinique.”

She stops speaking and looks away for an instant, at my painting, and then back at me. She says, “If I can help Blair now, I’d really like to. The other thing is that adoption is a long vetting process—there’s applications, interviews, fees. It could take months, and Blair needs a home now.”

“What about when you’re at work?”

“I’d have a nurse come in. Blair would need professional care. Not just anyone can do it. But this is your home, too, and of course having Blair would be a big impact on our lifestyle. He and the nurse would be around during the day, when you’re painting.”

I nod but say nothing. It’s too much to throw at me right now.

“One benefit is that we’d get to see what life is like with a baby, without really making a commitment to having one,” Jane says. Then she adds, “Did I tell you Blair is his legal name now? It’s been put on his birth certificate and everything.”

“What’s his last name?”

“He doesn’t have one yet. He’ll take the last name of the family that eventually adopts him.”

I think it’s a terrible idea to foster this poor baby. I’m in no state of mind and not in the least bit qualified to help care for or conjure up affection for this baby. And this is the simple and irrefutable evidence of my cold heart, so chilled I practically start to shiver from the inside out as Jane and I have this conversation. And as far as finding out what life would be like for Jane and I with a baby around? I’ve already made clear to her I don’t want to have children.

But rather than exposing my frozen feelings to her, I take both of Jane’s hands in both of mine, passing smears of wet cabernet-tinted paint from my fingers to hers, as if we were becoming blood mates, and I tell her she’s the most loving and compassionate and selfless person I’ve ever known, and I’ll support her one hundred percent and do everything I can to help her.

I may have a cold heart, but I also know right from wrong, and also know I’m a few poorly chosen words away from losing Jane. So in this case, I do the right thing.

Jane looks puzzled by my answer, as if she were expecting exactly the opposite response, and then her face softens and she sits on my lap and wraps her arms around me and I breathe in the stringent, antiseptic scent she brings home from the hospital. I can feel love and gratitude flowing through her and into me and I almost want to cry.

She lets go of me and looks around the studio. Usually it's neat, with brushes organized by size in tin cans, paints on shelves, and canvases lined up straight as soldiers. But the last few days have gotten lost and the room looks like a child had come in and started throwing anything not nailed down.

"You're still having trouble," Jane says, a conclusion not a question. "Why don't you forget about this painting? I think you're putting too much pressure on yourself. You've got so many other great pieces you can put in the show."

I nod—her advice is sound but I'm still crushed—and then an inspiration hits me, although not one for my painting. Now that I've assented to Baby Blair coming into our home, Jane owes me, and I take this opportunity to ask her about a refill of Ziemat, just one more, to get me through this slump.

"Vincent, I don't think I can best help you by prescribing drugs," she says.

"I know. But just one more?"

"I do want to help, and I can see you're suffering. Maybe this was a bad time to bring up Blair."

"No, I already told you I think it's a good idea. But I should be at my best if we're going down this road—you know, at the top of my game."

She mentions a friend of hers at the hospital.

"It's not my stomach," I say.

"No, this friend is a psychiatrist," Jane says quickly. "I told him about you."

"Oh, great, what did you tell him—you've got a manic depressive in your bedroom? Oh, right, it's called bipolar now." You want to know what it's like living with a baby? You already do, Jane. You live with me.

Jane speaks in a level, almost monotone voice. "I told him your name, I told him you were a very important person to me, I told him you might benefit from talking with someone on a professional level. His name is James Maser."

"Why do you want to keep sending me to doctors?"

"I'm just trying to help in the way I know how. You can say no if you don't want to go."

"You think I need a psychiatrist?"

"I think there's something you won't talk to me about," Jane says.

“Yeah, and there’s something you won’t talk to me about. I need to know: What did he say to you?”

“He said he’d be happy to see you anytime. He’ll fit you in his schedule.”

“I mean my father, what did he say to you before we left?”

“I told you, I don’t know what he was saying. What does that have to do with this? You’re screaming every night in your sleep. You’re waking up soaked in sweat. You’re anxious all the time. You can’t paint.”

“So you think I should go see this Maser?”

“It’s up to you to call Dr. Maser if you want. And he can prescribe something if he thinks it will help.”

I nod, considering my options. “You really are so good for me. I shouldn’t have gotten so defensive.”

“I love you, Vincent.”

“I know.”

“I want to be with you and I want you to be happy. I want *us* to be happy.”

“That’s what I want, too.”

“And I want to help you through this time. This is your moment, your big opening is coming up. I want you to be proud and happy.”

“And I want to help you too, with fostering Blair.”

And then she does help me. We help each other. Right there in my studio she lowers me to the floor and straddles me and begins kissing my mouth, my neck, my cheeks. I tell her I love her. Her hands cradle my face and soon we slip out of our clothes, smoothly and quietly, and we continue together for a long time.

Who needs a shrink, I’ve got Jane.

## 16

I’ve never seen a psychiatrist; the closest I came was Dr. Abrams, although he was just our family doctor, not a shrink. He took an interest in me after the time I fell down the stairs and said I couldn’t see. Once, at a Kenano Lake community picnic, he asked me what that blind business was all about. He said he found it intriguing, and attributed my reaction to grief I must have felt

over my cat dying. You mean my cat being stalked and murdered, I didn't say. I told Dr. Abrams my greatest fear in the world was going blind, and sometimes I worried about it, and if it happened to me, then I wouldn't have to worry about going blind anymore; I would have gotten the worst possible thing over with and my life could only get better afterwards.

"You're a pretty complex thinker for a kid," Dr. Abrams said.

Even then, I was a painter; it was the loss of sight that scared me the most: the annihilation of color, the absence of light, the death of shadows and patterns and visual form. I still harbor the fear of blindness, and one about losing my hands and having to hold a brush with my teeth or my feet, and another one in which my brain short circuits and a psychiatrist schedules me for a frontal lobotomy. I also think I'm going to drown someday, but that doesn't scare me as much. It just makes my encounters with deep water more charged: snorkeling in Martinique, walking on the frozen lake, standing at the brink of the falls—a strange sensation never reaching climax and completion.

In high school we all had an appointment with the school counselor. It wasn't exactly the same as seeing a psychiatrist, but still I expected a deep psychological probe, and I got very nervous. It turned out to be career counseling. I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said a painter. The counselor, Miss Halpern—who had the largest breasts I'd ever seen and was the heroine of many sexual fantasies and endless tit jokes in my school (that was one of them, the endless tit)—searched through a file of pamphlets on her desk. "A painter you said?" That's right, I repeated. "You mean like a house painter?" No, an artist. She finally handed me a brochure on careers in architecture; there wasn't anything for painters. "Why don't you look through this?" she suggested. I asked if I was allowed to talk about personal problems, since she was a counselor. I could see her squirm in her seat, but she said yes. "I don't really have any," I said. "But I wanted to know, just in case."

I know so little about psychiatrists I'm sure my generalized dread of them is unfounded. I'm sure their work has helped many—but how can the rigors of science coax the ethereal mysteries of our hearts from their shy hiding places? I think of psychiatrists as roping off the soul: the satisfaction they find in labeling, herding, their neat theories of behavior and motivation. I hate the idea someone could know more about me than I do about myself. I don't want to hear any more about my Oedipus complex and all this competition with my father stuff. My father! He's seen enough psychiatrists over the years and look where it's gotten him.

On the other hand, I realize my view of a complex and important profession is narrow and unforgiving. So I should give this Dr. James Maser, friend of Jane, a crack at me. Besides, I could get a prescription for Ziemat, or something better.

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Maser's office is in a professional services annex across Hodge Street from the hospital. Two stories high and constructed from glass and brick, the building has two wings jutting from a central trunk and overhanging eaves in a style reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright. The bricks are deep Indian red and laid in geometric patterns. From every angle it preens with innovation. If I had become an architect like Miss Halpern suggested in high school, I'd design buildings like this one, and I'd be making a lot more money than I do now.

Sitting in the waiting room, I wonder how best to keep my session short, yet effective. Could I simply tell Maser I'm anxious and depressed and need something to soothe me? Or will I have to give him the whole story, regressing to my childhood and playing out multiple roles like some hypnotized schizoid? If he suggests that, I walk.

How much easier if Jane had filled the prescription, although I'm not too mad at her—it makes sense she doesn't become my pill supplier. Isn't it enough I rely on her for every other type of support? Emotional, sexual, financial, etc. Yet, I suspect she has motivations other than looking out for my best interest. She's testing how far I'm willing to humiliate myself to get the Ziemat so she can assess how badly I've deteriorated. And if it's bad, she'll feel justified in leaving me for Martinez.

I've also been getting suspicious about Jane in other ways. Ever since that scene at the U.S.-Canadian border I've begun wondering if she's hiding something. Those border patrol guys generally have a sharp eye for picking out these types. Look at the way she wilted so quickly when asked a few simple questions. We sort of had a fight about it later. I told her she had overreacted given it was a simple misunderstanding, and she practically chewed me apart. She started crying again and said she'd been victimized by racism and sexism while I stood by making sarcastic remarks. That's not quite the way I remember it. She wasn't very cooperative about answering questions. When you start stuttering and stalling of course you're going to raise suspicion. We had to wait a long time before they finally let us go, and in the meantime, I started thinking of a few questions of my own. Who was this person I was smuggling across the border? What did she have to hide? What did she want from me? And all this had to happen at the worst possible time, right after my father says he's going to off himself.

I'm thinking now about that day at the border—trying to be fair and realizing I had acted out of line—when Maser comes out and introduces himself. I'm immediately relieved. I'd call him north of fifty, way too old to catch Jane's eye, so at least that's not an issue, the way it is with Dr. Martinez.

Maser shakes my hand and escorts me into his office, which looks a lot like a living room. There's a green leather couch, which I choose not to sit on, and two matching leather chairs, which the doc and I occupy. His desk, a metal and glass contraption, is busy with papers and photo frames turned away from me. A bronze sculpture on the windowsill looks like a wiggling sperm, or perhaps it's a three dimensional Rorschach blot. On one white wall, three original oils by an artist I don't recognize hang next to each other in triptych fashion. They have been painted with what looks like the slashes left by a putty or sheetrock knife. Greens and whites and grays overlap each other, competing for space and attention, like a sea pounding on the shore; daring splashes of yellow soften the conflict. They're quite good, and I pay them my fullest attention for the first few minutes I'm there. I also realize how much I like triptychs, three paintings that viewed together harmonize yet at the same time create tension because they are separate and distinct.

"My sister is an artist," Dr. Maser says. "What do you think?"

"I'm really impressed. You know, I could sell you a couple paintings for the other wall. Thematically, they might integrate nicely with the kind of work you do."

"Jane told me you're a painter."

"Not right now. I'm in a slump."

Dr. Maser has no shoulders or hips. His chair looks too big for him. He would appear almost comically petite, except for his face, which is angular and full; and his eyes, gray and strong as iron. A strange assortment of lines crisscross his face, all originating from the corners of his eyes, like roads leading off from a main depot to various locations: into the valley of the mouth, the plains of the jaw, over the pass of the eyebrows. His voice exhibits the steady, even pacing of someone who meditates.

"My sister speaks of this slump she gets into," he says. "I've always wondered where it comes from."

"It comes from not being able to paint," I say. "I've been trying to finish this painting for a show I have coming up, but can't."

"Is that why you're here?"

"Well, not directly for that reason. I'll get my painting back, I always do, although probably not in time for the show and until I do the world is pretty messed up."

I help myself to the pitcher of water on the table between us. I pour two glasses and drain half of mine in one gulp. Maser thanks me for his.

"So then tell me, why are you here?" he asks. "What makes you seek out a psychiatrist?"

"Can I be honest?"

He opens his hand, as if showing me something. "I would hope so."

"I came here for Jane. She wanted me to."

"She said that?"

"Sort of. Not in those exact words. But she thinks I'm disturbed and she wants me to get a tune up."

Maser smiles and takes a sip of his water. "Maybe it would be better for you to return when you want to, not because someone else wants you to."

I hesitate and think about this. It sounds like a good idea, but I try to stay focused on my goal: Get the Ziemat. I've heard you need to have goals in therapy. "Well, as long as I'm here I might as well stay."

"Okay, good. So back to my question. What reason do you—Vincent Howell—have for being here?"

A trick question. I decide to skip the fancy dancing and step right on his toes. I tell him I came here hoping he'd write me a prescription for Ziemat, that Jane thought best if he would do it for me, and if he'd be willing I'd be very grateful, and if not, then we could both stop wasting our time, because seeing a psychiatrist isn't my thing.

"Actually, Vincent, it's too early for me to be opening the pharmacy. I don't know if Ziemat is the right medication for you, I don't know if this is a situation that calls for it—or for any medication."

"It's what Jane prescribed."

"I know, I recommended it to her."

"You did? Then you know Ziemat's right for me."

"No, I don't know. We briefly discussed drug therapies one afternoon and I made my best recommendation based on what she told me. Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

"I don't want to talk about what an awful childhood I had. I mean, everyone's got that kind of stuff, right? It's like digging up a corpse. There's nothing left except old bones and rot, the soul of it is long gone."

"Okay, no old bones. Tell me something else."

"You want to hear my psychiatrist joke?"

He shrugs. "Sure."

"How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?"

He waits. I pour myself a second glass of water. "Just one," I say, "but the light bulb really has to want to change."

His laugh is immediate and genuine. “Excellent,” he says. “I haven't heard that one.” He smiles at me. “Really want to change,” he repeats.

“You want to hear another?”

“One per session,” he says. “That's the limit. Let me ask you something, Vincent. When you first started taking the medication, what was going on with you then?”

I tell him about this bout with the blues I had after I finished my last series of paintings, and how it was taking too long to go away and I kind of stopped painting, and that's when Jane brought home the prescription.

“My sister speaks of that, too,” he says. “Euphoria, then a letdown, followed by a dry spell. It sounds like many artists endure these periods.”

“So what does she take?”

“She has four kids. She takes them to sports practice and school activities.”

Maser asks if the subjects of the paintings had anything to do with my blues, but I told him I didn't think so, it's the kind of painting I've been doing for a while now, and although the paintings weren't exactly cheery, I experienced a great release and uplift just by completing them, and I've sold several and have a show coming up where I will exhibit some of the others.

“But now you think you need the medication for other reasons not having to do with the feelings from before?”

I sense I'm being manipulated into confessing a chemical dependency. “I don't really need it,” I say. “I know it helped me during a hard time, I figured it would again.”

“And your hard time—it's just because you're having trouble finishing one painting?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Tell me the last traumatic thing that happened to you,” Maser suggests.

“Other than coming here?”

This time his smile is smaller. A long pause hangs over us. I'm supposed to fill it, and the longer I take the harder it gets, but this Maser is good. He waits me out.

“Okay. This phone call from my father. I mean I made to my father. He's threatening to kill himself.”

“Well, that certainly sounds upsetting.”

I wasn't going to tell him this, I didn't think I could tell anyone. I mean, I haven't even told Jane. But now I spill pretty much the whole story, in synopsis form. In less than five minutes, I review the briefest history of my father's treatment of me as a kid, his sabbaticals at Valley Meadow, his magician's mastery at giving love and taking it away—*now you see it, now you don't*—his extremely annoying belief he should have died long ago, and his determination to do



so now. An entire era of confusion and conflict reduced to a few declarative statements. Exactly what I didn't want to do. I've given Maser an arsenal of firepower, a plethora of "Ha-has!" and "I sees!" which he can toss at me like grenades.

"Do you believe him?" Maser asks. "That he is going to commit suicide?"

"I don't know. He's crafty, he's a bluffer, but he's capable of anything."

"Could you stop him?"

"I could tell my mother, and he'd be put back in the hospital, and then she'd probably die of heartbreak. But either way, one of them goes."

"So your mother doesn't know about your father's intentions?"

"No, only me. He says I'm the only one he can trust."

"Can he trust you?"

"You're the only one I've told so far. Does that count?"

"So trust means not telling anyone?"

"I think that's what it means to my father."

"What if you don't tell your mother—thereby protecting her, as you say—how could you stop your father?"

"I'd have to convince him it's a bad idea, but I can't. He won't listen to me."

"Maybe you don't have to convince him, maybe all you have to do is ask him."

"I've already asked him about a dozen times."

Maser pauses and holds my eyes in his gaze, as if waiting for me to confess I haven't once asked my father not to kill himself, and perhaps I'm encouraging him to do so, and that's the root of the guilt and pain I feel.

Finally, he says, "Let's say you don't try to stop him. Then what?"

"Then he kills himself or he doesn't."

"And if he does?"

"Are you waiting for me to say I think it would be my fault?"

"I'm not waiting for anything. But of course it wouldn't be your fault. You can't be responsible for someone else's actions."

"Right, but it's a tough spot, you know?"

"What about Jane—you haven't shared any of this with her?"

I shake my head.

"Any particular reason?"

"It would be like telling my mother. She's a doctor and would insist we do something to stop him and he'd end up in the hospital again. Same result."

“So really you’ve kept this between your father and you. Yet apparently it’s been very painful for you, it’s consuming a lot of your energy and spirit.”

“That’s true.”

“And you told me that Jane knows you’re distressed, yet you feel unable to share the reason why with her. You can’t confide in her.”

I’m about to tell him about how my father leaned down and whispered something in her ear the morning we were leaving, and Jane has refused to tell me what it was, and how I’m not sure what she’s hiding from me and whether I can trust her. I’ve tried figuring out what he said to her, but it could be anything from “Stay away from my son, he’s inherited my psychotic tendencies” to “You’re lucky to have a man like Vincent.” Whatever he said, she’s not telling me, and so I’m not telling her my secret.

Before I can figure out how to articulate this, Maser says, “Your father doesn’t want to tell your mother the pain he’s going through. You don’t want to tell Jane what you’re experiencing. Do you see any similarities?”

Similarities between my father and me is what he means. That does it. Let me out of here. I begin to sweat and can feel the rivulets running down the inside of my arms. “How about you tell me to take two Ziemats and give you a call next week?”

He takes a long measured look at me; he seems hard at work deciding. “Not today,” he finally says. “How about if we talk again next week?”

“I’ve already said everything I wanted to.”

“Okay, then, one last question, Vincent. Do you want your father to die?”

This is a question I haven’t dared ask myself, and I’m stunned he has asked. I am stunned because I do not immediately say no. All these years I’ve been telling people that my father was dead, and all along I was just pretending. How easy to say those words when they’re not true. How simple to kill him off for convenience. *My father’s dead*. I didn’t need to need to confront that statement, but it’s a different story when you’re asked to serve as the judge.

When I don’t answer, Maser prompts me again. “Do you hope he carries out his plan? Is that why you won’t intervene and tell anyone about it?”

I say nothing, and Maser doesn’t press. Instead, he says, “How about next Friday? Why don’t we set up an appointment for, say three o’clock, in case you think of something else you want to discuss. And if you don’t, you can call me back, say by Thursday, and we’ll cancel. Fair enough?”

## 17

Jane unveils a new dress for the occasion, sleeveless and plum-colored with a hemline above the knee and a scooped neck low enough to display a cleavage, if she had one. A jade necklace snakes around her silken throat. She's tied her hair up with two matching jade pins. A few strands escape and hang down the side of her face, giving the impression she's simply thrown on a dress and piled her hair up and that's all it takes for her to achieve such beauty.

"Do I look okay?" she asks, rotating once in each direction.

"No, you don't look okay. You look amazing."

She's as alluring as I've ever seen her and a dramatic contrast to me: clean jeans and a v-neck gray wool sweater over a white undershirt. Elena had advised me to dress casual and clean, nothing weird, nothing to steal attention from the art on the walls. Jane, on the other hand, let her be a work of art. She is.

"I thought you would hear from your parents," Jane says. "I thought they'd want to make the trip for this."

"I don't think my father is up for traveling these days."

"They didn't even call?"

I shrug. "Come on, let's go, Elena will kill me if I'm late."

We take Jane's car and park on a side street around the corner from Allen. It's early enough that we get a good spot before the bar hoppers invade. Next to the front entrance to Nietzsche's is a separate door opening to a staircase leading to the second floor gallery above the bar. We climb up the stairs to a coat rack and small reception table with the postcards and a price list and a full bar setup, not just the usual cheap wine and bottled water you typically see at these things. It's one advantage of having the gallery inside the walls of a licensed bar. What we don't have is the usual cheese and crackers.

The gallery is constructed within a single high-ceiling space. Two eight-foot walls divide the room into three lanes with passages at each end, so you can walk up one lane, down the next, up the third and by doing so see the entire show. Everything is ready to go. Elena had told me my job tonight is to make the rounds and make sure I talk to anyone who looks interested in my art and to answer their questions; move from conversation to conversation; don't get stuck in one place, don't chat only with people I know. Fine by me, but I had to nix the cheese because I can't talk art while wilting in the face of someone's cheese breath or wincing at the gooey residue caught in their teeth.

“It’s your show,” Elena told me. “If you don’t want cheese, then no cheese, but I’ve got to tell you Vincent, you can be an odd bird.”

Elena is waiting for us when we arrive. She doesn’t call me an odd bird this time; she calls me *master*, as in: “Our master has arrived.” I present Jane. Elena looks her up and down and up again, and says, “You look fantastic.” Jane gives me the arched eyebrow, but I don’t say anything, except to agree with Elena.

“Are you ready?” Elena asks.

“I think I am.”

People could start arriving any minute and Elena tells me she has confirmed acceptances from the art beat reporters from both *The News* and *Gusto*, and there’s a reasonable chance one of the Albright Knox board members might attend, which is as good exposure as you can get.

There’s background music playing through the speakers, some kind of light piano jazz mix. We hang our coats and get a drink—water for Jane, vodka and tonic for me, although Elena cautioned me not to drink. Just one, I decide, to loosen up a tad and celebrate the occasion.

The bartender Elena scheduled for the event can’t be more than twenty, twenty-three tops. Her blond hair is truncated at the base of her neck. Her features—nose, eyes, mouth—are small enough to appear half-hearted, as if the job hadn’t been completed, but anything larger would look crammed on her narrow face. She’s tiny and well-proportioned. Her eye catches mine and she smiles, revealing brilliant white baby teeth. “Good luck,” she says. I smile in return and take the drinks, handing Jane her water.

I had expected to be uptight. I had put a handkerchief in my pocket in case I get the nervous sweats and have to keep wiping my face. In reality, I haven’t been this relaxed and confident in months, maybe years—maybe my entire life. There are a lot of reasons why and I don’t want to analyze a good feeling, but I will admit Jane’s friend Dr. Maser helped me recognize certain patterns in my behavior that absolutely had to be disrupted. When I came home after seeing him and Jane asked how my appointment went, I thanked her for the recommendation and told her my session with Dr. Maser was meaningful and productive; I had even set up another appointment for next week because we had more to talk about. You should have seen the relief in her eyes. It was the look someone has when they are freed from the burden of making a very difficult decision, which confirmed my suspicions she’d been considering calling it off with me, and I had averted that disaster by agreeing to see Dr. Maser.

I don’t blame Jane for her look of relief. I’d been a weight dragging on her and she an angel holding me up and her wings had to be getting tired. I told her this, and then I told her about my father planning to kill himself. The story avalanched out of me the way it had in Maser’s office:

How my father believed he should have died in the war and now he's finally going to right that wrong because he's been a terrible father to me and an awful husband and burden on everyone all his life; he even has a date in mind and told me because I'm the only one he can trust with his secret . . . although clearly not, since now I've told two people—Dr. Maser and Jane. I also tell Jane my father is most likely bluffing, but either way this story stays between us because if my mother finds out she'll panic and put my father back in the hospital and her heart will break, maybe permanently this time. So you have to promise me Jane.

I didn't break down or cry while I was recounting this information to Jane, but I wasn't very eloquent and I stuttered in a few places, and afterwards she hugged me for a long time, saying nothing about what I should do next and who I should tell and how to solve this problem, not even murmuring the standard "*It's okay, it's okay*"—not one word; but it felt like she said everything to me, the perfect response. I've been upbeat ever since, as if Dr. Maser had gone ahead and written that Ziemat prescription for me and I had pilled myself into medicated, oblivious bliss.

After my 'Come to Jesus' moment with Jane, I spent the next few days installing my exhibit with Elena. It took two trips in my van, twenty-six pieces in total, wrapping each painting with plastic and putting spacers between them for the transport. Elena and I discussed whether we should display them in chronological or thematic order, but most of them followed a similar theme so we hung each piece in sequence by the date I painted them, covering three years of my life. We adjusted the lighting and prepared descriptive cards and compiled a price list. That was the hardest part, putting a value on each piece; I went for the high side on every one. Why not?

And the painting I'd been moaning and groaning about not being able to finish? So what. I had something much better to take its place—actually three things. And again, I had Jane to thank for telling me I should forget that one painting because I had many other great ones.

—

I hear people coming up the stairs so I quickly guide Jane into the exhibit area to give her a walk-through before having to socialize with the guests. Jane pauses in front of each painting and nods as if acknowledging its worth. A proud and satisfied smile stays on her face. So far, she's seen them all before: *Icy Day*, *The Doctor is In*, *Road to War*, *Empty Nest*.

Then she gets to the back wall and her gasp is so sudden and furious she sucks the air from the room. "Oh no! Vincent, how could you!"

"What? No. They're beautiful. *You're* beautiful."

"I'm naked on the wall! You have to take them down. Right now!" Her face turns as plum as her dress.

“This is some of my best work ever. Jane, I thought you’d be—”

“My friends are going to be here,” she hisses. “Take them down!”

I say, “Do you know what esteemed company you’re in as a painter’s model? Picasso had Marie-Therese, Modigliani had Jean Hebuterne. I’ve got *you*. Jane Oujima. I’m praising you. I’m kneeling at your altar by displaying these paintings.”

“Oh, my God. Do you only ever think of yourself? I can’t believe you did this to me! You promised you never would!”

Teeming and red, she turns and walks away.

“Jane, wait—Jane!”

The paintings that I knew were so much better than the one I couldn’t finish? They are nudes of Jane. And here they hang on the wall for everyone to see, a fact I never considered might be unacceptable to her. Because after all, *I only ever think of myself!* But I thought of Jane as I worked on them, after we had gotten back from Martinique. All I thought about was her. I had continued to develop the three sketches I made of her on the beach when she slipped off her suit and stretched out on her towel in the sand. I re-created them in larger format and brushed on color and sharpened detail, creating contrast between the dark contours and the tanned flesh and sand, shading with reds and sienna around her lips and breasts and hair.

At first, I hadn’t considered these paintings for the exhibit, but when I looked at them again this past week while going through my work for the show, I knew they belonged. They were my best. More than that, they were my homage to Jane, my inspiration. I mean, this happened during those euphoric few days after breaking the news about my father to Jane, and I was so completely in awe of her, so full of love and trust, so completely attributing my sense of well-being and confidence to her. Everything fell into proper perspective. I saw these nudes in a new way. Three works hanging next to each other showing Jane in slightly modified poses, one looking at an angle from above; another from the side with her face resting against an outstretched arm, her other hand resting on her hip; the third in a partial sitting position propped on one elbow, depicting her from the waist up. I had mounted and framed them as a triptych and signed each one. I titled them as an inseparable group: *Three Nudes*.

When I brought them along and told Elena I wanted them to be part of the show, she admired their quality and said they reminded her of Modigliani’s nudes—which made my heart soar—but she questioned whether they fit thematically with the other paintings in the exhibit.

“The others all have the story within a story theme, you see something different from far away than you do from up close, but the nudes are straightforward. I mean, they’re beautiful, it’s not that—”

“—I want them in.”

“It’s your decision, Vincent, I just want to point out—”

“I made my decision.”

“Don’t be getting all temperamental now.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just important to me. We can put them on the back wall, so they’re separate from all the others.”

I hung the three together and priced them as one, much higher than any other painting. I thought Jane would be proud; I believed I was honoring her, first by painting them and then by displaying them. I wanted to surprise her. I guess I did.

—

Before I can chase after Jane and explain to her, Elena approaches me with two men. I must compose myself. She introduces them as her friends and local art collectors. I accept their compliments and chat for a few minutes—one of them stares at the triptych of Jane on the wall and casts his eyes about looking for the woman who was just standing beside me.

More people have arrived and the gallery is filling up. These are real people who are actually looking at and discussing my paintings. Someone takes a flash photo of *Icy Day*. Some of the people here I know from the art beat around town or from sitting on a stool downstairs in the bar—they’re easy to spot with untucked shirts, unshaven faces, and frequent returns to the drinks’ table. The reporters from the two papers show up and speak with me, mostly covering demographics: age, origin, and such, because the rest they can get from my artist’s statement and their own eyes; but there are others older and obviously moneyed who want to be among the first to acquire the work of an emerging and soon-to-be acclaimed artist.

But because of the outburst from Jane, my balance is thrown off. One person, a man twice my age wearing a black silk turtleneck and gold chain, asks about *Forest & Trees*. When viewed from a distance it’s a landscape of a birch forest yet from up close you can see that the individual trees are not painted but made from cut up newspaper clippings about deforestation and environmental ruin, and the green leaves are painted paper glued onto the canvas. It’s my one painting where I mix other media. We’re standing in front of it, and the guy keeps moving closer and farther from the painting, which is what you’re supposed to do to discern the forest from the trees, but he looks like he’s having vision problems because he keeps removing and replacing his glasses with each bob in and out.

“What inspired you to use colored paper and newspaper?” he asks. He’s expecting an answer about my artistic vision or where I got the idea for this technique, and I had those answers rehearsed, although I can’t remember them now. I’m trying to speak but I’m imagining that when

Jane turned and walked out it was the last time I'd ever see her, and I answer this visitor's question by telling him I was short on money and trying not to use up too much paint; you see, colored paper and newsprint are a lot cheaper. The patron pauses with his glasses in mid-air, and then laughs at what he perceives to be my joke.

I quickly launch into commentary about Henri Matisse: "Did you know that when Matisse was seventy years old and too sick to get out of bed he started doing his paper cut-outs? What I love is he kept being an artist, even after he was ill and couldn't paint. Imagine knowing you're dying and you can't do the one thing you live for, then you find this other way of expressing yourself. He was awesome. He had a lifelong love affair with color."

"Yes, I love those Matisse cutouts," he says, and he looks at the forest and trees piece again, weaving in and out.

—

I don't see Jane for the rest of the evening. She has abandoned the premises and I keep getting reminded of that fact because a number of her work friends show up and ask me where Jane is.

Other than hanging naked on the wall?

"I'm not sure. She was here a minute ago," I say, as if the space were big enough to lose track of someone wandering through the gallery. Steven Stark the thoracic surgeon is here with a six-foot woman wearing three-inch heels. She towers over me and shakes my hand, smiles like an accordion stretched wide. I talk to Dr. Bob and the oncologist, Angela Newell. Ian Martinez, the internist Jane had sent me to see, comes up and gives me a man's firm handshake, unlike previous times when he gave me the limp grip.

"Vince!" He stretches out one arm and opens his hand palm up, as if indicating there is something on the walls I might not have noticed. "Your work is so impressive. I had no idea you were this good."

"Yes, well, people often underestimate me."

He smiles. "No, no. I'm just blown away, that's all."

"I'll take that as a compliment from someone who owns a Motherwell."

"Did I tell you I had a Motherwell?"

He takes a step closer and puts an arm around me, turns me toward the back of the room and we're walking towards the nudes of Jane. He lowers his voice, about to say something confidential. "Wow."

"Yes, thanks."



“You’ve completely captured her beauty and her essence, and I’m not saying this just because I know Jane.”

In what way does he know Jane? Has he seen her naked?

“They’re masterful,” Martinez says. “Anyone will tell you. It’s hard to pull my eyes away.”

Which is exactly the impact I want on a viewer. But not on this viewer. Not on Dr. Martinez.

“You’re a lucky guy, Vince, I hope you realize. With Jane, I mean. She’s such a great girl.”

“I know.”

“By the way, how’s your stomach these days? Feeling better? You must be, with a success like tonight.”

—

The exhibit ends at nine and the last stragglers file out quickly once the bartender closes shop. A few go downstairs to continue drinking. Elena congratulates me. She has placed ‘sold’ stickers next to *Icy Day*, *Forest & Trees*, and *Road to War*. She has verbal commitments on several others. The board member from the Albright Knox said the gallery will hang one of my paintings in an exhibit devoted to regional artists.

“Vincent, this is all great news. But you don’t seem very happy,” Elena says.

“No, I am. I’m thrilled. And I want to thank you for everything.”

“Well, you’re done for the night. You did a great job. Why don’t you go out and celebrate with Jane?” Then: “Where is Jane? I haven’t seen her all night.”

“She got called into work. An emergency at the hospital.”

I go downstairs and call Jane at home. The answering machine picks up. We had driven here together and I have no car to get home. It’s about three miles so I run the entire way, my feet blistering because I’m wearing boots and not my running shoes. I’m sweating by the time I get home and now pull out the handkerchief I’d stuffed in my pocket earlier in case I got anxious at the show and began to drip.

The house is dark, the doors locked. I find the key hidden on the trim of the porch light and let myself in. Jane is nowhere to be found. I’m thinking about where to look next for her when the phone rings. It must be her.

I pick up immediately, ready to apologize and explain my intent—I was really trying to honor her by hanging those paintings.

“How was the show, Vinny?”

“Dad. I told Mom—”

He cuts me off. “I’ve got your fancy postcard right in front of me. This was the night, right? You think you can fool me so easily? I know you better than you know yourself, boy. You wouldn’t cancel your opening if World War III started.”

I say, “Look, I’m sorry—” I’d been ready to apologize, or at least rationalize, but not to my father, not for this. I guess the line forms on the right for everyone I need to say ‘I’m sorry’ to.

“What’d you think I was going to do? Take a knife to your paintings? Burn the place down? Bad mouth your talent to everyone in earshot?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“Always so sensitive, Vincent. That was you. You were afraid maybe I’d say something critical about one of your precious paintings? Embarrass you, would I? Maybe I deserve to be shut out, I can see how you might take that position—but your mother. Did you have to lie to your mother? Do you have to ruin things for her too?”

“I shouldn’t have,” I admit.

“How much joy do you bring to your mother’s life? Not much, these days. And now you deny her this.”

I turn on him. “And what about you? You think you’re bringing her a lot of joy?” I say. “I wanted Mom to come. I wish she could be here. You’re the one I didn’t want.”

And at that moment I think of Dr. Maser’s question: Did I want my father to die? And right now the answer is yes.

I hang up, such a juvenile move. I wait for the phone to ring again. It doesn’t. I didn’t want my father at the opening because I wouldn’t be able to stand any more of his suicidal talk, his countdown of the days. Of course my father would have something critical to say about my paintings—that’s always been the case. I remember one year he was the judge of the Kenano Lake Children’s Art Contest, a yearly event that was part of the summer festival. I was really getting into art at the time, experimenting with drawing, painting, collage, even modeling clay. I entered about eight drawings and paintings into the contest, more than any other kid. Most were depictions of houses or landscapes around Kenano Lake. I had gotten a book recently from the library with photographs of some of the great impressionist and pointillist works. I copied Seraut’s style for a painting of the lake with boats on it. All of the entries were taped to a wooden fence that ran down one side of the community center property.

People came by and looked at the art throughout the day. I hung around the fence most of the time, even forgoing the cotton candy and the carnival rides, and noted every time someone stopped for more than a second or two in front of one of mine. I badly wanted to win a ribbon, and thought my chances were good, although I had competition, particularly from Helen Burden

whose father was a commercial artist and designed ads. But my father was the judge, which would help my cause, and the previous year I'd won second prize in my age group when Mr. Burden was the judge. Later in the day, my father came around with gold, silver and blue ribbons labeled first, second and third prize, and he staple-gunned them into the fence next to each winner. Each time the staple gun went off I felt like I was being shot: once, twice, three times. None of the prizes went to my work. I was upset and probably crying a little and my father said I had to learn to handle disappointment and my own limitations.

My mother said, later, my father couldn't give me a prize—even though my work was excellent—because he was the judge and giving his son a prize would make people suspect favoritism. Believe me, he wanted to give you a prize, he feels bad about it, my mother told me. Not as bad as I did.

—

I file the phone call with my father in my mental outbox; it's like the last dozen phone calls I've had with him: incomprehensible and sharp with anger. I can't deal with it now. I concentrate on Jane. Where is she? If her friends were at the gallery, she can't be hanging out with them. Highly unlikely she'd been called into work, despite my using that excuse with Elena. But I think there's a good chance she's at the hospital, anyway.

I get the keys to my van and drive to the hospital and park in the pay garage, take the walkway to the ER entrance. It's Friday night, the waiting room crowded with the coughs and cuts and cracks that must take a number and wait while the ambulances ferry in the more serious car accidents, the knifings, the domestic assaults. No wonder Jane is thinking of switching to pediatrics.

I follow the red line on the floor, turn off at the blue until I reach the elevator banks. When I get off on the NICU floor, a nurse at the station intercepts me.

"I'm sorry sir, visiting hours ended at seven. You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"I'm not visiting, I'm picking up my wife, Dr. Oujima. I think she's in with one of the babies."

"Oh, yes, well you can't go in there, but you can look in the window."

I go down the hall and peer through the window. The room is in shadows with a few bright spotlights on incubators—to help babies with jaundice, I've learned. Sure enough, Jane is sitting in a rocking chair among the monitors and carts. She's holding Blair, the baby's tiny head tucked beneath her chin. She's still wearing her good dress underneath the surgical gown. More of her hair has escaped from the pins and now curtains part of her face. Blair has only one tube, thin as spaghetti, snaking into his nose, which means he must be getting stronger. Still, it's hard for me

to believe this baby might be coming to live with us, even if only on a temporary basis. I don't know anything about babies, especially weak and vulnerable ones who need constant attention—although I know about an alleged adult who's like that. Even if Jane gets a visiting nurse, there will be times when I have to do something. I can handle a diaper change, but giving shots or knowing the baby needs breathing help are a level beyond. I mean, look at what I did changing the water on my goldfish bowl. I accidentally stomped my fish to death. The only baby I can remember holding is Denise's baby, Curtis. But I told Jane I would do this, I would support her in bringing home Baby Blair, and I'll stick to my word.

I stand at the window and wave. At first I think she is asleep, along with Blair. I tap with my fingertips to see if I can get her attention.

Without looking up at me or even raising her chin she gets up from the rocker and takes a few steps toward the window, paying attention to make sure Blair's tube doesn't tangle or catch.

When she's right on the other side from me I wave and smile and mouth the words *I'm sorry*. She secures Blair in one arm and with the other reaches up and lowers a dark shade over the window, not once looking at me. It's like she's slammed a door in my face, except the only banging sound occurs inside me, my chest thudding in pain.

## 18

I go back to Nietzsche's after Jane lowers the shade on me in the NICU. It's well past midnight by this time and the frat boys and goons have taken over the bar, guarded by a bouncer the size of Goliath who sits on a stool by the front door checking IDs and scanning the crowd. Elena and the woman who served drinks during my exhibit are behind the main bar now. Hands wave from guys trying to get their attention for drinks, but Elena spies me coming in and motions me back to her office.

I wait for her but Elena keeps filling drink orders and can't get away from the bar. I'm too upset to just sit there, so I climb the back stairs to the darkened gallery. I flip on the lights and my paintings come to life. My distress over Jane—and the phone call with my father—eases somewhat. I may be an abject failure at personal and family relationships, I may be an immature partner and an appalling son, but hope remains for my art. If I have to choose one or the other to

be successful at—well, no, I can't make the decision, I refuse to go down that path, and no one is asking me to.

The nudes of Jane are gone. What remains are three punctures in the wall with picture hangars. My first thought is Jane had somehow snuck back and taken the paintings down, perhaps burned them in the Dumpster out back or shredded the paper, the kind of stuff my father accused me of being afraid he would do if he'd come to my show.

"You took off in a hurry earlier." Elena has come up behind me. "Everything okay?"

"Where are they?"

"Sold," Elena says. "That's what I wanted to tell you. You were right about including them in your show. People don't typically cash and carry from a gallery, but after you left someone came back and said he wanted those paintings."

"Who?"

"I got this feeling he'd run out to the ATM," Elena says.

"Tall guy. On the dark side?"

"I tried to tell him he could make a down payment, and that the paintings would hang until the end of the week when we switch over. But he insisted on taking them now, or no sale. He offered a premium over the listed price so I took it. I didn't think you'd mind. You can find something else to hang there for the week."

Elena checks her notebook. "Ian Martinez. I saw you talking to him."

Of course.

"Anyway, Vincent, this is exactly what we were hoping for. Sell some of your work, gain exposure, get noticed. It's all fantastic. But I can see you're exhausted. Go home and get some sleep, we'll talk tomorrow."

—

When I finally have a chance to speak with Jane, the next evening after she gets home from work, I apologize but also try to justify having the paintings of her in my show. I say something again about how I thought I was honoring her. No response. I repeat how she is in good company with other artist's models throughout history. Eye roll. And finally I say it was my right to exhibit the paintings since they are my work and still belong to me.

She gives me an impassive face and I get a little feisty with her, saying I never considered having those paintings in the show could be an issue. I've depicted her a hundred times without her clothes on. I believed she understood and accepted the role of an artist's model. You don't stretch out naked and let someone stare at you for hours unless you're comfortable and confident

about your body. Unless you're at least a little bit an exhibitionist. And you know damn well you're the subject of a work of art, and works of art are created to be seen.

"Are you finished?" she asks.

I guess I am.

She says, "The worst part is not putting them in your exhibit. It's that you didn't ask me first. That would have been the right thing to do, but you didn't even consider asking my permission."

"You're right, I didn't. I should have."

"If you'd had the respect for me to ask first, I might have said yes."

"If I recall, your big concern was you were shown nude and people would see you. I hardly think you would have said yes."

"Well, that was just my initial reaction. But then I realized I look pretty good. I mean, you are a talented artist, Vincent. Still, you broke your promise to me. Before I had let you draw me the first time, you promised you wouldn't show nudes of me to anyone else."

Then I tell her the paintings sold. It was her friend Ian Martinez who bought them, and already had taken possession.

She turns on me and says, way too triumphantly for my liking, "Yes, he told me when he stopped to visit me at work today. And he invited me to his house to see where he's hung them."

—

As you can imagine, the air turns pretty frosty between us. Jane barely speaks to me. I don't have much to say back. We enter avoidance mode, carefully managing our schedules to hardly see each other. She switches again at the hospital and takes the 3:30 to midnight shift; twice she works a double through the night. She spends the rest of the time sleeping, with the bedroom door closed. I think there has to be more than those three paintings carving out this chasm between us.

On Friday I blow off my next appointment with Maser since I know he's not going to write me that prescription; I don't need it anyway. I hate being dependent on that kind of thing, and I don't want to have any more conversations with Maser about my father killing himself or Jane being an understanding and positive influence in my life. I haven't put my finger exactly on it, but I know Maser is part of the reason I'm in this mess with Jane. I wouldn't go to that head shrinker again for anything.

Instead, I'm at Nietzsche's during our allotted appointment time, where I've spent the last few afternoons. I'm drinking frozen vodka, thick as syrup, three or four of them now. Heavy curtains pulled shut over the shoulder-high windows block the afternoon sunshine, although dusty shafts of light beam onto the floor through a crack where the drapes don't meet.

The day bartender is Nate; he's been working here for years. He reads the paper and sits at one end of the bar next to a couple, the only people in the place other than myself. I hope I don't look like either of them, worn and red from years of drinking, weak eyes like a flashlight with draining batteries. That's one reason I don't drink in bars during the day: The clientele are a sad group. And here I am.

A woman approaches the bar and stands next to me. It's the same woman who bartended the night of my art opening, the one with child features and little teeth. She lights a cigarette and blows the smoke right in my face, then quickly apologizes and waves her arms to clear the air.

"It doesn't matter," I tell her.

"Hey, I know you. You're the painter who had the show upstairs."

I nod.

"Even if I didn't know it already, I could tell just by looking at you that you're an artist."

Wow, I must look really awful.

"It's your hands," she says. She takes one of them and holds it in her own tiny hand, and starts petting it.

"You can almost see the energy coming out of a painter's hands," she says. "They never stop moving, they're always holding a brush, always painting in their mind."

"Bullshit," I say, although my hands are moving some.

She laughs and lets go of my hand, then sits on the stool next to me and continues to smoke her cigarette in silence. There's a mirror behind the bar and I study her in the space between the Remy Martin and Calvados. Above the bottles is a hand-painted wooden sign screwed to the wall with one of Nietzsche's quotes: *When you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back*. The entire bar is decorated with other quotes by him, equally uplifting. There's: *Poets are shameless with their experiences: they exploit them*. And: *To forget one's purpose is the commonest form of stupidity*. One of my favorites: *We have art in order not to die of the truth*. And one of my least: *It is always consoling to think of suicide: in that way one gets through many a bad night*.

A dozen others are placed strategically around the bar, above the booths, next to the pool table. They make great conversation openers.

"What about you?" I ask. "Also a painter?"

"God, no," she says. She stamps out one cigarette and starts on the next. "I can't even draw a stick figure. I haven't painted since nursery school when I ate a whole jar of finger paint and got sick."

"That's funny." I turn from the mirror to face her. "So let me guess. If you're not a painter, and not a singer—"

“How do you know I'm not a singer?”

I point to her cigarette. “Diminished lung capacity,” I say. “A poet?”

“No, can't write.”

I examine her again: the small size, but willowy and toned. “I know—you're a dancer. Ballet.”

“Not bad. Used to be, not anymore. I tore my knee. Now I'm just a student, generic liberal arts. Oh, and a bartender.” She looks at her watch, which has a red face and blue hands. “In fact, I'm cutting my American lit class right now. Have you ever read Hemingway? He's dull as a rodeo, and a complete misogynist. Not only that, his syntax reads like an English translation of Japanese television instruction manual. My professor thinks he's a god. He even wrote a book about him. You ever been to a rodeo?”

“No, but I was at the circus once. There was this body contortionist who could twist like a pretzel, she was great. Other than that it was mostly animals getting whipped so they'd jump through hoops.”

“I had this boyfriend from Arizona. He took me to a rodeo once and laughed when I stepped in a pile of cow shit with my good boots.”

“So if you don't go for Hemingway, who do you like?” I don't tell her I've read Hemingway, and loved his work.

“I like artists,” she says. “Painters. How about if I buy you a drink?” she asks me.

“How about if I buy you one?”

“I'm just drinking water.” She calls the bartender by name. “Nate, will you get my friend another drink?” She turns back to me. “You're Vincent, right?”

“Yep.”

“Like Van Gogh?”

“Exactly.”

“Aren't you going to ask my name?”

“Sure.”

“Lauren. Like in Lauren Bacall. You think I look like her?”

“Maybe, a little.” Not in the least.

“You're drunk. But thanks anyway.”

The bartender comes up and sets down my next drink. Lauren asks him if the paychecks are in.

“They're printed, but Elena hasn't signed them yet.”

“Just put his drink on my tab.”



The guy at the end of the bar gets up and puts quarters in the jukebox and I hear Elvis start crooning for someone to love him tender. I swear that fucker's on every jukebox in the world. You could be in an all-metal bar, and every other selection is Aerosmith or Guns n' Roses or the Clash, yet there's always one of the King, no matter what.

The couple starts dancing, more like holding each other up to keep from falling.

Lauren lights up again. She smokes a stubby, non-filter cigarette. "So do you like Van Gogh? Were you named after him or something?"

"He was a great artist, but a disturbed man," I say. "You could see it in his work. Even the paintings he did of irises, you can see those flowers and stalks straining the borders of sanity. Or his night skies. You might say they look beautiful in his paintings, but if you saw those stars in your dreams, you'd be thinking judgment day."

"He cut off his own ear during a fit of madness," Lauren says.

"I know. Then he killed himself."

Lauren nods. Then says, "When I found out I couldn't dance anymore I went on this drinking binge—pills, too—and completely lost it. I ended up in the hospital for three months. They said I tried to kill myself one night when I was really shitfaced. I don't even remember. I mean, I could have waltzed if I wanted to, I just couldn't dance ballet. I'm like that asshole Hemingway. I practically stuck a gun in my mouth." She stops suddenly, mid-drag on her cigarette. "God, what am I telling you this for? I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I say. We stare at each other in the mirror for a few minutes. "My father did that," I say. "Killed himself."

"How terrible. I'm so sorry."

"It was a long time ago, I was only a little kid. I don't remember him at all." I crunch an ice cube between my teeth.

"I really like your work," she says. "I'll be sorry when your paintings come down this weekend."

"I've got a lot more in my studio," I say.

"Yeah? I'd like to see them."

I put a hand behind her neck, she leans toward me and I kiss her. My mouth fills with her tongue and this burnt, ashy flavor, like a nut roasted too long.

Lauren breaks away and lets out a breath. "Nice," she says. She lowers my jaw with her hand and looks in my mouth. "Cool. Look at your tongue. I thought something felt different."

"I bit the tip off in a car accident," I tell her.

We kiss some more. I swallow a lot of her smoky spit. My stomach starts to churn from the vodka and I tell Lauren I have to get out of there.

“You want to show me your studio?”

“No. I mean—I can’t.” I slide off my stool and push through the door. As soon as I step outside, the sun reflecting off the glass windows of a building across the street momentarily blinds me. I close my eyes, take two steps forward, and collide with a woman on the sidewalk. I hit her square in the chest and hear her grunt. She spins past me before I can apologize. The air hangs low, steamy and humid, thick with pollen, as if the seasons had changed during the hour I was in the bar.

—

It’s too early to go home, and even though I’m probably over the limit I get in my van and drive—slowly, cautiously—to the neighborhood where Ian Martinez lives off Chapin Parkway. I park across and down the street from his house, a contemporary geometric structure with leaded glass windows and tall shrubbery hiding most of the property. Elena had captured his contact details from the sale of the paintings, and I had looked at her list. Now I sit in my van and watch the house; I’ve come here three days in a row. I’m waiting to catch Jane taking up Dr. Martinez’s invitation to see her nude paintings and whatever events might follow—which today seems much more likely now that I’ve set poetic justice in motion by making out with a woman I hope I’ll never see again but know I will at Nietzsche’s.

The problem with waiting here for Jane to show up is that I keep imagining Martinez in there having his way with himself while staring at the paintings. It’s an unpleasant image, thinking he might be using my paintings of Jane as sexual stimulation. But what bothers me even more is he’s now getting to see Jane naked more often than I do. It makes my vigil difficult, and I begin to devise a plan to put an end to the situation.

My plan is this: I will come back when I’m sure Martinez is at work, sneak into his house, and take my paintings back. I begin working out the details such as how one actually sneaks into a house, particularly a locked one. Do you try windows hoping one is left open? Use a crowbar to break the hinges on a door? Neither of those seem like good ideas. In fact, I quickly conclude the plan itself is absurd. I try to come up with another plan, but end up falling asleep, maybe passing out. When I wake up, the sun has set and the sky is darkening. It’s past the time Jane’s shift starts, so I figure she’s at work now and it’s okay for me to go home.

I wonder how long we can live together and not see each other.

—

Jane's car is in the driveway. She's either an hour late for work or has shifted her schedule again. Maybe she stayed home to spend the evening with me. Could a thaw in our relationship be in the forecast? I hope so.

I had stopped on the way home and bought a huge porterhouse steak and a bottle of cabernet, planning to cook myself into a meat coma, trade vodka for wine, and numb out in front of the TV. Now I'm eager to trade that productive evening for a make-up dinner with Jane.

I call her name. There's no answer. The radio is playing in the bedroom upstairs, and I find her sitting at her vanity table, squinting under poor light and hemming the inseam on a pair of pants.

"I didn't expect you to be home," I say.

"I came home early," she says, not looking up from her work. Her voice is flat and leaden. Jane has never taken an unscheduled day off since I've known her.

"Are you sick?" I ask.

No answer. Too early still for a thaw?

"I'm glad you're here. I bought a steak and a bottle of wine."

"I'm not hungry." She inches closer to her work, sets another stitch. "You didn't show up for your appointment with Dr. Maser today. His office called here looking for you."

"I'm sorry, I forgot."

"And you were so supposed to meet me at the hospital afterwards for an orientation training on bringing Blair home."

Another commitment I managed to blow off, although this one I actually did forget.

Jane continues sewing the hem, pulling out pins as she goes. A thimble sits like a gumdrop on her right thumb. The radio, an old box, is tuned to a classical station.

"You should have at least called and cancelled your appointment with Dr. Maser," she says.

"I said I was sorry."

"You get charged for no-shows in psychotherapy. Otherwise people would always be copping out at the last minute because they're scared to go."

"You didn't tell me you were paying for this. I thought Maser was your friend."

"He is my friend!" She stabs her finger with the needle and pushes the pants away. A drop of blood pearls on her skin and I go over to . . . do something—provide comfort, suck her finger for her.

"You smell like smoke," Jane says.

"I stopped at Nietzsche's for a drink."

She picks up the pants again and examines her work. Then she throws them down. “Dammit, it's all crooked! I can't work in this light.”

“I’m glad you’re home,” I say again. “We can have dinner together. I’ll make us a steak.”

“What have you been doing?”

“I haven't been doing anything. I told you, I stopped for a drink.”

She leans closer and sniffs me again. “And you smell like perfume. Vincent . . .” Tears pool in her eyes. “What have you been doing?” she asks again. “Where have you been?”

There’s been this coiling in my spine that first started when I left the bar, and I felt it again when parked outside Martinez’s house, even while I was asleep there; it’s been twisting its way up into my neck, getting tighter and tighter, needling pain into the base of my skull. Now, without warning it snaps, firing waves of electricity through me. I suddenly start pacing and flapping my arms, making fists, spewing sounds but no words, false starts and stops, animal noises, and finally I just lay into her. Tell her I don’t give a fuck about that head shrinker Maser, I felt like a goddamn laboratory rat in his office; I don’t need his shitty pills, I don’t need him sticking his claws in me and for that matter I don’t need her doing it either. I don’t need her cross-examining my whereabouts every minute of the day. I don’t need her asking me how I feel or begging me to talk about my father or rebuild my relationship with him. I don’t need her undermining me as a painter by freaking out at my exhibit. I tell her I was fine until she started her doctor routine and probing me top to bottom, wanting to know everything. *What are you hiding from me, Vincent? Why are you lying to me? Tell me about your father. Tell me more.* I was doing fine until then!

Then I get into the baby business and slam her for accusing me of thinking only of myself when in fact I agreed to take Blair in. But I know what she’s up to, it’s just another test of me: Can I do it, will I go along with what she wants, am I good enough for her? What a way to test me, by forcing me to become a foster father to a *medically fragile* baby. If she wanted to set me up for guaranteed failure there wasn’t a better way. If she was conducting an experiment to prove I’m not worthy of her . . . well, congratulations doctor, your hypothesis holds true.

I go on for a while—I have no idea all the things I say—until I hear myself repeating like a skipping record, then I drop on the edge of the bed and bend over and bury my face in my hands.

Jane picks her entry point and starts in. “First of all, you weren't fine,” Jane tells me. “You were depressed, and you weren't painting—and this was before your father contacted you. Remember, I brought you home the Ziemat because you were feeling so down. What a mistake that was.” Her voice hadn't risen a half-note, whereas my tirade had climbed several octaves.

I glare at her and look away. At this moment, for the first time ever, I can’t stand the sight of her. “Well, I was fine before I met you.”

“Oh, that’s sweet, Vincent. That’s great to hear. No. You weren’t fine. You were broke and about to be evicted from your apartment.”

“I don’t even know you,” I say. “You’re the doctor who sewed my head up in the hospital, then you brought me home to be your houseboy and now you’re trying to control me by sending me to a shrink.”

“You’re way out of line.” Her voice seethes. “I haven’t been trying to control you—I’ve been trying to help you.”

“Stop trying to turn me into your goddamn patient.”

Jane lets out a confused sigh. “I don’t understand why you’re acting this way. Jesus, Vincent, just a few months ago we were planning a future together.”

No, I don’t remember that at all, and I tell her so.

“In Martinique—we talked about having a baby together. We talked about spending fifty years together. You were the one who mentioned it. We were . . . it doesn’t matter,” Jane says. “Whatever we talked about then obviously doesn’t apply now. Clearly things are different.”

“Clearly,” I say.

We stare at each other for a long time, fuming and bewildered. I don’t know why I picked this fight, and I don’t even know if I’m the one in it. It’s more like I’m watching myself get mean and behave badly, while on the inside I’m thinking I could never act this way.

“You smell like perfume,” Jane says again.

Here’s my chance to ask her about Martinez. Did she go to his house and see his paintings? Is she abandoning me for him?

Instead I ask her what she and my father had talked about. What did he whisper into her ear? You can’t keep this secret from me.

“What is with you?” she says. “My God, he didn’t whisper to me, he didn’t say anything.” Then she adds, “He kissed me.”

—

After that episode, we have more conversations but don’t exactly fight again. In fact, we agree on a few things. The most profound of which is we are quite different from each other and aren’t getting along that well. I’d said some things I couldn’t take back, and the words hang out there like black clouds above us. I think I told her I didn’t love her; circumstance had brought us together rather than an affinity to each other, and that business at the hospital about me thinking she looked familiar and that I knew her from somewhere must have been some dream I had once or just delirium from my injury.

She doesn't disagree with me. She also tells me that I didn't miss much at the orientation for taking Blair home. In fact, the orientation was canceled, not because I didn't show up, but because a relative of Blair's was finally located. The way it happened was this: Unknown to most of the world, Blair's mother—her name was Dolores Griffin—lived in a small apartment in a building on Genesee Street. She was habitually late with her rent for a month or even two, and each time just as the building manager was ready to serve an eviction notice, she would pay up the past due and several months ahead, as if she'd suddenly come into a pile of money. At the time of her death, she had almost two months rent pre-paid. Those two months passed and then another two, until the building manager knew it was time to knock on Dolores's door again. He got no answer. He rarely saw the woman because she hardly ever went out, and he assumed she was holed up inside avoiding him. He could hear the TV in there. He let it go until the third month, and then went knocking again. Still no answer. Still the TV talking behind the closed door. Finally he shouted from the hallway: "Dolores, I know you're in there. You're two months behind on rent." Nothing. "Dolores, I'm coming in." He listened at the door. He pulled out his ring of keys and let himself into a cold, dusty apartment, the only thing living a pile of fuzzy green mold on the dishes in the kitchen sink. He filed a police report because he thought Dolores Griffin skipped on the rent, and the investigation proceeded quickly from there. Dolores was identified as the woman who gave birth to Baby Blair. Her sister was located in Dayton, Ohio. She has a husband and three kids and they were going to adopt their young nephew.

The bottom line is Blair no longer needs the foster care system, so I don't have to worry about Jane forcing me to be a foster parent to a medically fragile baby.

I feel like a complete loser, of course, realizing how much Jane has been through.

Jane takes a more sympathetic view. "In retrospect, it wasn't fair to you, me wanting to provide a foster home for Blair."

"You've got a good heart, so much better than mine."

"I just felt really bad for that baby. I wanted to do something for him," she says. "And even though you agreed, I knew you didn't want to. This is your home, too."

*Was* my home. Because we agree that I'm going to move out, and after reaching this decision we spend some achingly tender moments planning the logistics of it. In fact, we work on this problem so well together that I for one am nudged by doubts and second thoughts, and I think Jane is, too, but neither of us articulates our feelings.

Jane says I should take my time and find a new place I can afford, and she even offers to help me get started. Naturally I turn down her offer, having some stale morsel of self-respect left. I tell her I'll be finding a job of my own soon enough. I'm sure I'm very employable. I could teach in

one of those adult schools offering art classes: figure drawing, or painting with oils. A class of retirees and divorcees seeking a creative outlet to disperse some of their mortal anguish. They would find me a sympathetic if somewhat distant teacher. Perhaps I'd have an affair with one of my more talented and younger students to keep my heart-breaking skills honed. Or I could get a job with a paint-by-numbers company, dividing the clown's face into clearly marked numerical sections for that professionally shaded look. Or work for a reproduction company, painting "original copies" of nineteenth century masterpieces.

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We come up with the perfect break-up plan. Jane decides to cash in more of her vacation days and visit her parents for two weeks, and during this time I will exit the premises and remove all traces of my habitation, so when she returns she'll find a house that belongs to her alone. And this way there will be no awful goodbyes—punctuated by either tears or shouts (we got that part over with quickly)—no furtive packing, no last kiss for the road, no final wave as I ride (walk? stumble?) off into the sunset. I can store my paintings in a rental locker where people stash all the useless clutter in their life they can't manage to part with yet has no value. Other than that, I own nothing—a few clothes, a handful of books. Maybe I should store myself in the locker, too.

Or maybe I'll disappear for a while. Yes, that's an idea. Jane will leave, then I'll leave; I'll take a huge breath and disappear under water, and while I'm gone—no forwarding address—July 9 will come and go, and whatever my father has planned for that day would be done. I'm sorry, Mom, but you'll have Celine and Raymond and Denise to comfort you. I never stuck around to be of any help in the past so why should I now.

Then, when I surface again the air will be clear. Jane will be out of my life, married to Ian Martinez and expecting her first child. My father will be buried. I'll call home one day from San Francisco or Sedona and hear my mother break the tragic news. I will cry some over the phone, not much, for her benefit.

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The night before Jane leaves for Seattle I stay up late and watch repeats of syndicated sitcoms. I listen carefully to the canned laugh track, trying to distinguish individual voices and imagining a live audience of idiots actually thinking these shows funny. Yet I find comfort in the consistency of character: no one wavers far from the composite of their narrowly drawn personalities. If the husband constantly makes faces at his wife's sexual advances, he'll never spontaneously hop in the sack with her. If the kids like to make fun of Mom and Dad, you don't have to worry about sentimental parent/child bonding. If the father is always annoyed at his kids, there won't be any family picnics. Everyone's a parody, no one a person. When I catch myself

laughing at a one-liner I cover my mouth in embarrassment—a habit I must have picked up from Jane—that I’m one of the idiots entertained by these shows.

I hear Jane in the bedroom sniffing and blowing her nose. Later, when I need to do cry, I take Matisse and go outside on the porch and count the stars. Jane gets to keep the cat, which was really a neighborhood cat I had started to feed. That shows the kind of person I am: I’ll feed other people’s cats and kidnap them for myself.

Sometime in the middle of the night we wake and find ourselves surprised to be in each other’s arms. We have not been touching these last few weeks. We have not kissed or held hands. Certainly we have not made love. We’ve slept in the same bed the way siblings do as children: You draw an imaginary line going down the center of the bed; cross it and die.

Now, in sleep, on our last night and chance, we have crossed the line. For a moment we remain embraced, exchanging fragile caresses, our hands probing like wary antennae; then the phone rings once and stops, and we stop and separate and turn our backs on each other.

## 19

In the morning I drive Jane to the airport. We arrive much too early and sit down for coffee and stare at the runways. It is a low overcast morning, the kind where planes disappear into the clouds shortly after takeoff and those left watching from the terminal—that would be me—experience a flash of incredible panic that the plane has been swallowed by the universe.

If there was ever a good time to apologize for being such an callous and insensitive lout and beg Jane not to leave, this would be it, and I keep waiting for an opening to make my move, but we’re too busy going over the checklist once more: car in the garage, doors and windows locked, food and water for Matisse, water the plants, the light timer set for nine p.m., suspend newspaper delivery until she returns—and all these details make me realize it’s too late to mend our relationship.

“And be sure to leave me the address and number where you’ll be staying,” Jane says.

“I’ll leave it next to the phone. As soon as I know it.”

Jane leans a few inches closer to me. “Are you okay, Vincent? With what we’re doing?”

Hey, it was my idea, right? Or was it hers?

I say, “You seem to be handling it well.”



She doesn't respond at first, perhaps assessing how well she's handling it. Then she says, "Working in a hospital is good therapy because it makes your own pain seem frivolous. No matter how much you're hurting, someone else is suffering more, others are dying."

I try, but find no solace in her words. I've never had much use for the 'it could be worse' line of thinking, which falls into the category of phrases such as 'there's plenty of time.' Like when I was in the car accident with my father, and the doctor, looking at my sheared tongue, said, "It could be worse, at least you didn't bite your lip off, too." I'm lying there with my mouth bleeding and a part of my tongue gone forever, swallowed to be exact, a fact later discovered when I defecated a pink lump, and I'm supposed to find comfort in what the doctor tells me. It can always be worse, in theory, but theory doesn't break your heart; reality does. Jane does. I do.

—

Finally they call her flight. Jane takes my hand and squeezes, not hard, then gets up quickly and shoulders her carry-on. Her eyes seem to be veiled, whatever feeling in them difficult to discern. She verges on expression—a smile or a tear—but averts her glance before either can show.

Our parting is over in a matter of minutes. Standing at the gate, we hug goodbye, stiffly at first, then warmly, regretfully, in a strange pulsating fashion, making moves to let go and then holding tight again; then she's gone through the door without turning around for a last look.

Before going back to the car I return to the coffee shop and eat two stale croissants and read the paper. I look up once and see Jane's plane beginning to taxi down the runway. I imagine the wheels falling off, the wings and engines scraping on the ground. An orange explosion, the windows of the airport rattling with the shock of it. Jane, one of the few unscathed, takes charge of the triage, telling everyone she's a doctor, having the bodies lined up in two rows: breathing and dead; tending to survivors. Then I imagine myself lying in a pile of bodies, unable to move, flames getting closer, waiting for her to pull me out. She tells me to wait my turn, there are people hurt worse than I am. By the time I've run through this dark scenario, her plane has disappeared, my coffee has gone cold. There is an elderly woman sitting at the next table, staring at me over her cup of tea. I wonder if I've said something out loud.

—

The house greets me with the deep silence of a still lake. The houseplants seem to have turned against me in my brief absence, their leaves pointing accusingly. I go to toss the car keys on the kitchen counter and miss; they fall to the floor. I look at them for a minute, then lower to one knee, then both knees, then I'm lying on the hardwood floor that I had installed, my face next to the fan pushing air from under the refrigerator. I'm gulping and gasping and sobbing like a

child lost in the woods, dusk impending, having no idea how I got in this deep or how I'll ever get out. My chest heaves and I fight for breath. Then I accidentally suck a dust ball into my mouth. It gets caught in my throat and I cough and spit out, my cheek still resting on the floor. Then I notice other dust balls huddling in the corners beneath the cabinets, and spots of dried food and grease.

After my little spasm, I feel surprisingly refreshed. I spend the next hour sweeping and mopping the kitchen, then the remainder of the afternoon I dust and vacuum the living room and den, followed by cleaning the upstairs and downstairs bathrooms. Some of the tile grout has loosened in the shower stall, so I replace it. I take a trip to the hardware store to buy a roll of window screening because I remember some of the screens have holes and it's getting to be bug season and Jane gets a terrible reaction to mosquitoes; a single bite leaves a two-inch welt of red swelling.

I charge all the materials to Jane's account, which she'd opened months ago when I was re-tiling the bathroom.

Back at the house, I make a list of every job that needs to be done, and assign myself home improvement duty beginning the next morning. I have two weeks. Over the next several days, then week, I replace some copper piping in the plumbing system where the solder joints had weakened; I install new moldings around two living room windows because the old molding didn't match; I sweep the driveway and sidewalks; I fix the holes in the screens.

At night, I move all the standing lamps upstairs into the studio so I can paint, and also to inventory the paintings and treatments I have on hand, deciding what to keep and what to toss. I spend a lot of time looking at my drawings of Jane. I have at least a hundred of them—charcoal sketches, pencil drawings, even oil pastels—but I don't have the three painted nudes.

I decide I must have those paintings back, for two reasons. First, I can't stand Martinez owns them and is looking at Jane day after day; if anyone else had bought the paintings I wouldn't have minded, but that man has intentions on the woman I love. Okay, the woman I used to love. Still love. I don't know. I only know I can't stand that Martinez has them. The second reason is because I won't be getting Jane herself back, and I want those paintings if nothing else as a way to keep her and remember her.

I've persuaded every woman I've made love with, and others I haven't, to take off their clothes and expose themselves to me for long periods of time. Personally, I could never put myself out there like that. I'd be afraid of getting cold and having my penis shrivel. I'd shake from trying to hold one position, I'd be shamed by my imperfections. I would not want to see what the artist might render. I've taken art classes where models were paid twenty-five dollars to

pose naked on a chair while surrounded on all sides by students with their drawing pads. I've drawn fat women and skinny women, hairy women, tattooed women, women pocked with pimples and sliced with stretch marks, women who stole my breath. Black women, white women. Indian women. Asian women. None of them represented my best work—until Jane. It's like I knew how to draw and paint her before I'd ever met her, how to render and represent her, not only Jane in a specific pose, but her entire essence. It takes more than technical skill to pull off such a feat; it takes a special grace, it takes a unique bond between artist and model. And those three from Martinique: I look at those paintings and see in them a woman in love with the man gazing at her, and a man in love with the woman he is painting. Except I don't look at them. Martinez does.

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The next morning I pay Ian Martinez a visit. I let myself through the gate and walk up to his stoop and ring the doorbell. I wait and I ring again. No answer. There are two tall windows on either side of the door and I put my face up to the panes to look in, but the glass is treated in some way so I can only see vague outlines of a table in a vestibule.

Then the door opens and Martinez frowns at me, as if unsure who I am.

"Vince, I thought you were in Seattle."

"No, just Jane is."

Jane must have told Martinez she was going to Seattle—with me? No, that part he assumed. For some reason this lifts my spirits.

"Okay then, what's up?"

I should have prepared something intelligent to say, a persuasive argument that would demonstrate to Dr. Ian Martinez that it would be in his best interest to return the paintings of Jane to me. Instead, I spew out how I never intended to sell those nudes of Jane, it was a misunderstanding that they had been priced, they were meant to be part of a private collection and I'd like them back and will arrange for his purchase price to be returned.

Martinez casts a tolerant smile, as if I'd told him a familiar joke.

"Vincent, come in." He steps back from the door and lets me pass through the vestibule and into a step-down living room. Where the oriental rugs don't cover, tile floors gleam. There's a sitting area with two fat couches facing each other in front of a fireplace with a bluestone hearth. The walls are entirely white. The paintings of Jane have a prominent spot, on the wall opposite the fireplace, framed on either side by two windows facing a private courtyard. While I had hung the paintings horizontally at the show, Martinez arranged them vertically to fit the space better. They look fabulous, illuminated by track lights suspended from the ceiling.

But the nudes of Jane aren't the only paintings on the walls. There are at least a dozen others, all of them nudes of women, and one that I recognize and move in for a closer look. *Portrait of Doris Trautman*, painted by Robert Henri in the 1920s, an American painter often compared to Manet. I'd seen this painting reproduced in books and sold as a poster. It's a mesmerizing depiction of a dark-haired, red-lipped woman from the waist up, with a symmetrically curved figure and pale breasts and languorous, deep brown eyes. The background is created in blocks of color—browns and ochres behind her head and a maize yellow for the couch or chair she's sitting on. It had to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"As you can see, I'm a collector of a certain type of painting," Martinez says. "I find there's nothing more sensuous and revealing than the nude. Many critics consider nudes to be an artist's practice pieces, but not me. They reveal so much about the artist—his taste, style, sense of beauty, his relationship to women."

"You said you had a Motherwell. I don't think he painted many nudes."

"I have one of his early pieces, before he did the Spanish series. It's on loan right now to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. When I do have it here, it hangs where I've put the paintings of Jane. I guess I'll have a difficult decision to make."

We walk over to that side of the room now. I notice sensors on the window sills. Of course he has his house hooked up to a security system. If I'd tried to break in here and take my paintings back, I'd be living in a jail cell right now. Sure, I may not know where I was moving to after Jane's house, but prison isn't what I had in mind.

"I haven't offered you anything, Vincent. How about a cup of coffee? Or a drink—is too early for a drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Someday, when your paintings are hanging all over the world, I will have these, and I will have insight into you as an artist. I will know what you really find beautiful."

"Will you let me buy them back?"

Ian shakes his head slowly, wistfully. "You have Jane, I have the paintings. Now there's a swap I might consider, but I don't think it will work. I asked Jane—not about trading the paintings for her, of course—but I asked her."

I was right: he'd been out to steal her from me. But I was wrong about the next thing. "Sadly, she declined," Ian adds. "For some reason she seems devoted to you."

Not anymore. I'm sure he'll be finding that out for himself soon enough.

“The paintings really belong to Jane,” I say. “I shouldn’t have put them in the exhibit. I broke a promise to her when I did, and that . . . that started everything unraveling and led to us breaking up.”

He arches his eyebrows and nods. This is news to him, but not surprising.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Vincent. But the paintings are mine now.”

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Back at Jane’s house I start on a bigger project: re-wiring the basement. She had always wanted to put a sewing room in the old pantry, but there were no outlets and only one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. I’m not much for electrical work, but I buy a book to read up on the subject and after a few days of theorizing and planning, I shut down the incoming current and manage to run two outlets from the circuit breaker box and install a switch and overhead lights—all without electrocuting myself. I buy lumber and build a crude cutting table, and carry her sewing machine from the bedroom down into the basement. This new sewing room is nothing fancy, but I’m on a deadline here; I’ve spent nine days on these various projects. I have to be gone in five days, yet I just want to do something nice first so Jane remembers me as someone other than a total asshole.

The next afternoon when I take a break from my work, I dress for a run and step outside. Leaning against the porch railing is a black plastic tarp covering something. I lift the tarp and there are the three paintings of Jane, a note taped to the frame of one.

*Vincent—you owe me one of your paintings, of my choosing, down the road. Don’t forget.  
I.M.*

I don’t know why Martinez returned the paintings, but I’m thankful. Maybe he’s doing it for Jane, knowing that she doesn’t want him—or anyone—to own those nudes of her. I’m also pleased with his deal: that sometime in the future, whenever he chooses, he can demand of me one of my paintings. I believe he’s implying there will be a future for my career as a painter, and it will be a good one, and at some point he will track me down and pick out a painting with significant beauty and value. I like that implication, and when the time comes I will honor the deal.

I take the paintings back up to my studio and lean them against the wall. I thought I wanted them back so I could take them with me and remember Jane, but I will leave them here. They are hers, she’ll never have to worry about them hanging in public view again.

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That night a windstorm kicks in while I’m upstairs painting. The windows shudder and tree branches throw conniptions across the roof. The power blinks on and off. I hear a loud crack, and

a falling branch strikes the gutter just outside the bedroom. The broken gutter bangs against the side of the house, and keeps knocking with each gust of wind.

By morning the storm has passed. I see on TV that the entire Northeast had been hammered by winds and rain throughout the night when two enormous fronts, one hot, one cold, collided and fought. Trees fell, roof shingles blew off, electrical wires came down. Luckily, our house still has power. Over a dozen tornados were sighted, one of them not far from here.

The front yard is a graveyard of broken branches, tree bark, and debris. Three houses away, an entire tree had uprooted and fallen across a parked car in the street, crushing the passenger cabin. In the distance I hear the buzz and choke of chain saws cleaning up the mess. The air is warm and woody, and a steady breeze pushes squadrons of puffy clouds across the sky.

I haul the ladder out of the garage and climb up to the eave with a wrench and screwdriver in my back pocket. I unbolt the broken piece of gutter and let it drop the rest of the way to the ground. I step onto the roof, which is steep here, and hold onto a chimney brace for support. The roof shingles look intact; none of them had blown off in the storm. I put one leg over the chimney and hoist myself up over the peak of the roof, as if getting onto a horse. A swing set lies on its side in the backyard across the street. The canvas awning of the next door neighbor has been shredded; it flaps around like a bullet-ridden flag after a night of battle. Several people are gathered around the tree which has fallen on the car. No one seems to know what to do about it.

I sit up there for a long time, studying the rooftops of the neighborhood. I remember once climbing up on the roof of our house in Kenano Lake to retrieve my kite which had crashed into one of the turrets. My father and I had built the kite out of dowels and Christmas wrapping paper. It flew for less than a minute before taking a nose dive. He held the ladder for me and then followed my progress from the ground, walking directly below me as I traversed the steep roof line. He promised to catch me if I fell, which I didn't. Now that I think of it, there's no way he could have caught me: Our roof was high, my momentum would be powerful, my father's back would not. The kite was wrecked; splintered along its backbone, the paper ripped and crumpled. I reached for the pieces and dropped them to the ground. I stayed up there for another half hour, just watching the sun on the lake, until my father told me to come down.

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I decide I must visit my parents one more time. I can leave this afternoon, take Jane's car for the trip since my van would never last the distance, stay one night, come back and still be out of here a day before Jane returns. The fact is, I have to blow the whistle on my father. Even if he was trying to kill me or both of us that day he drove off the road, I can't let him go through with his July 9 plans. Because I don't think he's bluffing, and if I stay silent, then I have to carry the

burden of not stepping in and stopping him. I've thought a lot about what Dr. Maser asked me: Do I want my father to die? I haven't been able to come up with an answer, and even though Maser said I'm not responsible for what my father does, I am responsible for what I do. It's about time I realized that. My mother's going to be heartbroken when I tell her about Dad's plan, and he'll need close supervision and maybe hospitalization again, but I'm sure she'd rather have him alive than dead, and she'll simply have to accept the situation, just like I've accepted the split with Jane. I had my fit on the kitchen floor, I ate my dust ball, and now I'm moving on.

—

I measure the length of gutter and go inside to telephone a few stores. Every store I call is out of the gutters I need. There's been quite a run on them today. Try next week, they say. So that's one job that won't get done, although I worry about it all afternoon and evening and forget about going to see my father. I don't go the next day, or the day after, either, because I don't want to leave the house, especially when I'm almost done with this painting I've been working on. I hate to stop when I'm on a roll. I have three more days here and don't want to waste two of them driving to Kenano Lake and back. I have plenty of time before July 9 and I'll just wait and go when I leave Jane's for good.

For now I'd rather to sit in my studio and think about whether I should leave a couple of paintings for Jane other than the nudes. As if she really wants my paintings! Sure, she let me hang them on her living room walls, but wasn't that sort of a requirement if you're in love with a painter? I'll bet she'll be thrilled to have her walls back so she can re-hang her framed posters of Chagall that adorned the walls when I first moved in.

Just while I'm thinking of Jane the phone rings. I know it's her. She's calling to make sure no one answers. So I don't. I turn off the machine so I don't have to hear her voice, and I let it ring—ten times! Finally the ringing stops, which makes me sad. I miss her voice. I can see her on the other end, breathing a sigh of relief that Vincent Howell has packed up and cleared out of her life—which is what I'm going to do starting right now. Starting first thing in the morning. Starting in two more days, and then driving up to Kenano Lake and hoping my van will make it. Maybe tonight I'll go back to Nietzsche's and look for Lauren, who I wasn't much attracted to but I could use someone to kiss right now.

Twenty minutes later the phone rings again. This time it's not Jane, because if no one answered the first time there's no reason for her to call back, she knows I'm gone. I pick up the phone so I don't have to hear the ringing continue unanswered; what a lonely sound that is. And I'm right, it isn't Jane. It's my mother.

Well, I don't have to wrack my brains and search my heart anymore trying to decide whether I want my father to kill himself. And I don't have to make the difficult trip to Kenano Lake and tell my mother what he's planning to do and begin a cycle of intervention.

There's a been a terrible accident, my mother says. Jack Howell is dead.

Two months ahead of schedule—I should have known he'd be a conniving cheater. He didn't even give me a chance to save him.

## 20

I park next to my sister's car. The house sits in darkness at two a.m.; a single light casts a feeble glow from the kitchen window. Ours has never been a bright house, even during the day, its mossy green color like a cool and shady pine grove. My mother knew I was coming and I expect to find her sitting in the sour light of the kitchen when I walk in, weeping, a box of tissues at hand, Celine by her side. But I hear gentle snoring from her bedroom upstairs, and I wonder what kind of dreams haunt the recently widowed, the suddenly left behind.

I had driven straight through, stopping only for gas and coffee, and then again when a state trooper chased me down after I had gotten off the Thruway, but was still driving at Thruway speeds. When he asked me what the big hurry was all about I told him my father had just died and I wanted to get home to my mother. He probably heard stories like this all the time. I didn't expect it to work. He was an older, square-headed man, with cropped silver hair and a neck as thick as a log. He stared at me for a long time, then told me he was sorry to hear about my dad. He said to slow down so my mother wouldn't lose the both of us.

Now I'm wired from the trip. I poke around for a beer in the back of the refrigerator and work on a partially completed jigsaw puzzle spread out on the table in the family room. I find it disconcerting my father would leave the puzzle unfinished; that's not like him. The puzzle is a difficult one, with thousands of pieces. The picture on the box top shows a snowy winter scene of a forest with a deer drinking at a stream in the foreground, and gray and white mountains rising in the distance to meet a perfectly clear sky. The frame has been completed and most of the deer and forest. I put together a few pieces of the stream before my eyes begin to sting and I finally climb up to bed.

I scare my sister who has woken up and is walking sleepily toward the bathroom.



“Vincent, I thought you were a prowler.”

“Thanks for not shooting me.”

“When did you get here?”

“A little while ago.”

“Hang on,” she says. She goes in the bathroom and I hear her peeing, then she comes out and I follow her into her bedroom.

“How’s Mom?”

“She seems okay. She didn’t want me to stay over but I insisted. No one should be alone after what happened.”

“He fell off the roof? That’s what Mom said.”

“I can’t believe he climbed up there. Raymond said he’d come over and take a look, but Dad couldn’t wait. A couple of shingles came off and he thought the house was going to be flooded.” She shakes her head.

“That’s Dad for you.”

“I just don’t remember him being so troubled when I was a kid—he seemed perfectly normal to me. Just a regular dad. It’s like you and I were raised by different fathers.”

“I feel like I was raised by two different fathers.”

“It wasn’t until you were born that he started to change.” She quickly realizes she said the wrong thing. “No, I don’t mean it the way it sounds.”

“That’s okay, you’re right,” I say. “That’s when it all started to happen with Dad.”

—

I don’t wake until eleven, and I don’t remember any dreams. I get dressed and find my mother out in the garden, wearing a sun hat, snipping wilted blooms and splintered branches off the rhododendrons. She removes her work gloves and gives me a long hug.

“You came alone,” she says.

“Jane’s in Seattle visiting her family.” I can’t burden her with the news of our breakup, too.

“That’s a shame. I’m sure she’d be a great comfort to you right now.”

This becomes immediately and ferociously true the moment my mother says the words. There is no room, however, for this painful awakening, and I push it aside for now.

“Where’s Celine?”

“She went to the supermarket and drugstore for me.”

My mother shows me where he landed in a flower bed alongside the house; a rectangular patch of red and yellow tulips are still matted down, their stalks crippled and blooms crushed. The

rain has turned the soil soft and dark. It looks like an animal had bedded down there. My gaze rises slowly to the roof of the third story turret, which I guess to be about thirty feet up.

The aluminum extension ladder he climbed still leans against the eaves. A bucket of patching tar with a trowel sits on top the chimney. There's also a length of rope, tied at one end around the chimney, the other end looping on the ground next to us. Everything is in its proper place, untouched, as if this were the scene of a crime and not an accident, the crushed flowers like a taped outline of the victim, the murderer never to be found.

My mother explains he'd climbed up there the morning after the storm; he said there was a leak in the roof that he wanted to patch. She tried to talk him out of it, because of his back, because of his age; she told him he could wait until evening and Raymond would come over and take care of it.

No, Jack Howell would have no such nonsense. "I won't live in a house I can't take care of," he'd said, perhaps forgetting he had spent years away and somehow the house did not fall down in his absence.

He promised to use a rope to secure himself. She watched him from the ground as he climbed the ladder and pulled himself onto the roof, then as he roped the bucket up and placed it on top the chimney. He untied the rope from the bucket and tied one end around his waist, the other around the chimney. She watched until he told her to please go back inside, she was making him nervous standing there with that look on her face, yet he smiled and thanked her for her concern and said he'd never seen her from this high an angle, and she looked absolutely stunning.

My mother blushes as she tells me this part, as if she were unworthy of such a compliment and vain for repeating it under these sad circumstances. Her voice plays soft and fuzzy like an old song on low volume, perhaps one speed too slow. As she continues her story, I picture the entire scene, my father crouching awkwardly on the roof with a bucket of tar and trowel, slopping the thick, oily goop between the shingles; my mother with one hand over her mouth, the other shading her eyes from the sun, thinking that the distance between them—thirty feet—was as far as heaven is from earth.

She finally did as he asked and went back inside, more for her sake than his, and was in the kitchen watering plants on the windowsill when she heard a terrible thud. She knew immediately what had happened, and ran out to discover her husband, already still as a rock, sprawled in the flower bed.

"I don't know . . . I don't know what happened," she tells me. She squints at the ground, as if the answer might be there.

"But Mom, what about the rope?"

She lets out a short laugh. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh. Look, Vincent—the rope was too long. There was still slack in it when he landed on the ground."

There's at least three or four feet of the rope coiled on the ground. If the rope were six feet shorter, or the ground that much lower, he might have been saved.

"He must have slipped up there," my mother says. "It's so steep."

Slipped my ass. He took a swan dive. He bent his knees and arched his creaky back and didn't close his eyes until the instant before impact. His last thought in this world was how sweet the flowers smelled. The rope—that was just a prop to get my mother to calm down and not worry about him on the roof. What a clever man.

And a leak! More nonsense. How would my father know there was a leak? There was nothing but attic under that part of the roof; for weeks or even months a leak wouldn't be noticed as the water snaked down the rafters and studs, and even then it would spread a slow stain on one of the bedroom ceilings before any dripping started.

"Oh, Mom," I say. "Just when he was doing so well." She puts an arm around me.

"I never should have let him go up there," my mother says. "I knew he was in no condition to be doing that kind of chore."

"We both know you couldn't have stopped him," I say. "You could have pleaded on your knees and he still would have done what he wanted to."

"Yes, I suppose that's true. Still . . . I had this feeling when he was climbing up there, he was climbing away from me."

"Don't start thinking that way, Mom. It was a tragedy, that's all. No one could have known."

"Maybe I was overly optimistic about having him at home. I wanted to think your father was doing fine, but that's probably not true. I was only fooling myself."

"No, Mom, you did the right thing. He wanted to be here with you more than anything else in the world. He died around the person he loved most in the world."

The warm and fragrant scent of spring fills the air; buds on the oak and chestnut trees are bursting and strutting the newness of their lives. A thousand mirrors sparkle on the lake. Maureen Howell takes a deep breath, and kneels to straighten some of the flowers. She picks a few of the broken ones to take inside.

"And you know what, Mom? He was doing fine. He was doing pretty well. That's what I thought when I was here last time."

"You're a good son, Vincent."

I tell her I'll clean up out here, and climb up and untie the rope and carry down the bucket of tar and trowel. I close the extension ladder and hang it back in the garage.

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Over a cup of coffee on the porch, we discuss the details of the next few days, as if we were planning a party. There will be no wake; my mother detests them. She doesn't like to see people kneeling and kissing the hand of a corpse, and doesn't want to do it herself. If you can't get your kissing concluded during life, she says, there's no making up for it in death. She also says it's undignified to be painted with makeup beyond all recognition and put on display like some wax museum freak, and I'd better not have that done to her, either. She makes me promise, although losing my mother is the last thing I want to think about now; I'm still convincing myself that Dad is dead.

My father will be cremated the following morning, according to his wishes, and there will be a memorial mass for him at St. Luke's. His body is at the mortuary now and my mother asks if I want to see him one last time, and when I say "Not if he's dead" she smiles. I missed my last chance when I waffled on paying another visit just a few days ago.

"Vincent, he loved you more than you can imagine. He talked about you a lot these past months. He was very proud of you."

Proud of what? I wonder. Un-inviting him to my opening? Rushing him off the phone? Shaking him while he babbled in the middle of the night? Or perhaps proud I'd been able to deny his existence for so many years and tell people he was dead. Or proud of the way I turned him in when I was sixteen years old and accused him of trying to kill me.

Maybe he was proud of me for surviving a childhood with him as my father.

"I remember you came along at just the right time for us," my mother says. "I never told you this before, but I'd been thinking of leaving your father before I got pregnant with you."

*What?* This was news. I wondered if she were making this story up. I said, "I always thought you were happy together, you know, considering everything."

"It was so long ago. Celine was grown up and already gone, and I think your father and I were on each other's nerves. Things had been different ever since he came back after the war, but we had Celine to attend to. When he came home he had an inscrutable side to him that seemed permanently sealed off from me, and that made me angry and resentful. I can't stand closed doors, not in love. Sometimes he wouldn't talk to me for days at a time. He didn't seem upset, just quiet. I asked, but he wouldn't tell me what was wrong, and I never found out. I know those of us who haven't been to war can't imagine what it can do to you, but still, we can remember how things were before they went away. Then when you were born it was like we were honeymooners again—for a while. He sang to me all the time."

She laughs and sets her coffee cup on the porch railing. “What am I babbling about? I never would have left him. In those days it didn't happen at the drop of hat like it does today. Or at the first sign of discord. You made your choice and you made it the right one, and I loved him, most days.” She reaches a hand over and takes mine. “But I'm glad you came along Vincent. I can't tell you how happy you've made me. I didn't think we'd be having any more children.”

She tells me my father talked her into having another baby. She resisted at first, she was getting older, she didn't believe their marriage was strong enough, and everyone knows having a baby is no way to save a marriage. But he pleaded with her, he begged her, he wanted another baby, he wanted to try for a son, and he finally wore her down. And in the end, he was right: A new baby was the best thing for their marriage, a new baby brought them closer together, and most importantly, the baby was me.

“That's funny, because Dad told me just the opposite. He said you wanted another baby but he didn't.”

My mother looks up at the sky for a moment. “Huh. He told you that? Well, that's not what I remember.” Then she turns toward the door and her mouth opens, as if she were about to call for my father and straighten this out once and for all.

How could he have abandoned my mother like this, leaving this woman who loved him and remained loyal to him, making her sort through memories with no one's help? How could he ever have turned a cold shoulder or uttered a harsh word during their difficult times? If he were alive right now, I might wish him dead for such callous behavior. But since he's already dead, I can only wish for what isn't—that he were alive again, so I could tell him a thing or two.

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My mother tells me that in the attic are boxes of my father's old things that have been stored up there for years. She wants me to go up and see if there's anything I'd like to keep; otherwise she's just going to give everything away or throw it out because she can't sort all the stuff, she'd end up crying too much. Also the clothes. She says I can poke through the bedroom closet to see if there's anything I want, since my father and I are about the same size. Were. Are. I'm still that size, anyway. Christ, somebody dies and all of sudden you have to figure out what verb tense to use. No one warned me about that.

“I don't have a jacket or tie for tomorrow,” I say. “I don't even own one.”

“I'm sure your father has a few you won't find too offensive,” my mother tells me. “Look around. Take anything you want.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon finishing the jigsaw puzzle, and talking over a few more details. There will be a reception at the house after Mass, catered by her friend Nancy Pickett. We

won't have to do a thing. Also, my mother's brother, Louis, is flying in from Chicago, and he might stay at the house.

Mostly we work the puzzle in silence, except for when the phone rings, which it does often. My mother answers and accepts condolences, tells people what time the service will be. She says thank you, she smiles into the receiver. I try to fit pieces together; some are completely white, confusing as a blizzard, others have subtle differences of shading and these I group into piles. They will become the mountains. It's a methodical, intensive job, requiring patience and concentration. I didn't know my father still had such a disciplined attention span. Working the puzzle keeps me from dwelling on other things, although I do think it would be nice to have one of my paintings turned into a jigsaw puzzle someday, a thousand scattered pieces someone would actually take the time to put together because it assembled into a picture they wanted to behold. What a dreamer I am.

Just as we're getting down to the last few pieces, the doorbell rings and a florist drops off three enormous sprays of flowers, which were sent by my mother's friends from the parish. The blooms are tied onto these self-standing wire frames and I line them up on the fireplace mantle. They remind me of trophies. The room immediately fills with their sweet scent. I let my mother fit the last few pieces of the puzzle.

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I go up to the attic. The old wooden stairs are almost as steep as a ladder. I put my hands on the steps above and climb into the room. Tufts of pink insulation sprout between cracks in the floorboards, and the exposed rafters look like the bones of a rib cage. Cobwebs hanging at face level connect the cross bracing to the rafters. I walk with my hand in front of me, parting the netting as I go.

The light is poor up here, a single bare bulb hanging at each end of the long room. Boxes are scattered everywhere, stacked three and four high with corridors between them like city streets. The air smells musty and stale. I remember the attic feeling like a sauna in the summer and a freezer in the winter, all the insulation being in the floor. At this time of year, the room heats up during the day and cools at night. Right now the temperature is passing quickly through a comfort zone. I can almost feel it dropping, the sudden chill consuming the air.

The last remains of daylight filter through the dusty cupola window. Underneath the sill I notice dampness on the floorboards, the wet stain spreading across the sheathing. Two boxes near the window have mushy cardboard bottoms.

Ah. So there was a leak.

But that doesn't mean anything, necessarily. My father had told me that only he and I would know, he could trust no one but me, and to everyone else the evidence would point to an accident. Unless of course I snitched, then everyone would know Jack Howell did himself in, and his exit from life would be forever tainted by his act of humiliation and weakness that I revealed. Everyone would know he was a coward. Or is it a hero? I wonder. A coward for bailing out or a hero for charging boldly into the night?

But the date, the date is all wrong. He was too good at counting to miss his target date by all these weeks. Therefore, his death must have been the accident everyone else knows it to be. Only I don't know. Maybe he went for the preemptive strike, knowing that I couldn't hold onto his secret.

This is what my father has bequeathed me: uncertainty and confusion. Just what I need in greater quantities.

I open his army trunk. There on top, folded neatly, is his Marine uniform—missing one button that I tore off and have in my dresser drawer at Jane's—the same uniform he wore the night he divulged his plans to me. Below that is his Purple Heart, in a glass-topped display case. A small wooden box holds several other ribbons and medals. There is a blanket and a folded American flag, a pair of white gloves, and then a shoebox filled with photographs.

I take out the box and drag the trunk closer to the window to sit on. I sift through the photographs, holding each one up to the light. I remember looking through these before; many times I'd sneak up here and invent the stories my father wouldn't tell me, deciding who had died and who hadn't in each photograph. I added sound effects of machine guns and bombs. On the days I was mad at my father I probably killed him off, too. On other days, I became him, a fearless soldier facing enemy fire.

There are two shadowy pictures of burned-out urban rubble, taken close up so it almost looks like a silhouetted city skyline seen from a distance, but most of the pictures are of soldiers and sailors, often shirtless in the Pacific heat, arms around each other. They pose on the decks of ships, on docks, on beaches, beneath palm trees, on walls of sandbags. You'd hardly know there was a war on the way everyone is smiling. My father appears in only a few of the pictures—he must have been the photographer most times—and his chin is always sticking out, his hair buzzed close to his skull. I haven't looked at these photos since I was a kid, and seeing them now forces a revelation on me: I kind of look like my father. The shape of our mouth is the same. The hairline above our forehead. The dark, prominent eyes. It's a familiar face, one I've been looking at a lot in the mirror these past two weeks.

At the bottom of the box is a white envelope, which I open. It contains one wrinkled photograph wrapped in a piece of wax paper, and when I see it, I feel a wrenching ache in my chest, as if I'd pulled a deep muscle I didn't know I had. The grip intensifies, immobilizing me; it expands to a balloon of choking pain, until I remember to breathe. Out, then in. Repeat. I'm suffering under a sudden and enormous weight of regret, the burden of my mistakes.

My hand trembles holding the picture. I finally set it on the windowsill.

This photograph was taken with a different camera than the others, and printed on smaller, glossier paper. The woman just fits within the frame, from head to toe. She leans back against a tree trunk and on either side of her face bare branches hang down. The background beyond the tree is blurry. She wears a plain white blouse buttoned to the top and baggy pants that are too short, as if she were going clam digging. Her feet are bare. Her bangs are cut at an angle and her black hair cascades over one shoulder. She is not smiling, but her abundant mouth is slightly parted, revealing the pearl of teeth. Her exotic eyes seem to follow you from whichever angle you look. She is Japanese.

On the back of the photograph written in faded pencil is the date and place: Hiroshima, 1945, and below that three Japanese characters.

I'd somehow forgotten about this photograph, although I don't know how. I have a bad memory, that's how, not to be trusted. I'd handled this picture so many times I practically destroyed it, tracing the mysterious and beautiful face with my finger, probably going so far as to kiss it, to hold it against my chest as if I could feel the flesh of the woman. I instinctively knew never to ask my father about this photograph, sensing he would have been mad at me for finding it.

Who knows what stories I weaved around this woman, this enigmatic beauty. Perhaps she had been my father's nurse after he'd been wounded, or his secret lover once he became a member of the occupation force. Yes, that must have been it. She was the lone survivor of a family that perished in the bombing, and my father, devastated and heartbroken by the horror around him, had taken to her, first out of pity and guilt but soon falling deeply in love with her, an anguishing and unrelenting love only a soldier immersed in death and ten thousand miles from home can experience; and eventually he left her behind because back in America he already had a wife and child waiting, and a child yet to be conceived many years to come. The decision to leave this woman he loved had ruptured something in him that never completely healed; he never forgot her, and years later pangs of longing and ache crept up on him unexpectedly and he still wondered what had become of her, not knowing that a few short months after his departure, with



her womb cradling a tiny being that would have been his first born son, her sorrow became unbearable and she took her own life, which left me to become his first born son.

I realize now where I've met Jane before. I haven't met her, of course. Yet I have carried around since childhood an image which I had culled from this photograph and then forgotten, only to project again onto Jane when I lay with a broken skull in an emergency room and wondering if I might die. She was the woman I had been seeking, the mysterious angel that had belonged to my father and that I wanted for my own.

I have unknowingly been waiting all these years to discover her, and now that I have, I've left her behind. Not like my father might have left the woman in Japan—making a wrenching choice in favor of someone who loved him back at home; but like an ignorant, unfeeling fool, sabotaging the comfort and commitment of Jane's love, whatever its source—dream or memory or just plain good fortune to have met her—for the chill of nothingness. That's what I did. That's the person I am.

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I'm sitting on the porch in darkness listening to a loon I can't see. There is no moon and an oily darkness cloaks the surface of the lake. From near the shore comes the bird's plaintive call. My father used to tell me loons were the voices of creatures that live under water and can't speak for themselves, and I believed him. Now I listen and imitate the loon's call, and it continues to respond, perhaps to me. After ten minutes pass without my hearing the loon again, I feel the memory of its forlorn notes. Then I go inside and pick up the phone.

I hear Jane's voice and I start making these strange noises and when I can finally speak I tell her I'm sorry for what I've done, how I treated her, but I love her and have ruined everything, it's my fault, and I miss her and my heart hurts, but she is better off without me.

"It doesn't feel better," Jane says. "Not yet."

"And I'm sorry I haven't moved out," I say. "All my paintings are still there, and some new ones—I've been painting since you left. And I didn't get a chance to fix the gutter."

"What's wrong with the gutter?"

"There was this big storm, and the gutter broke. I couldn't get a replacement yet. And I stole your car."

"What? Vincent, I can't hear you. What's wrong with your voice?"

I say nothing for a minute as I try to pull myself together.

"Vincent, are you there?"

"I was just listening," I say. "Could you repeat those questions?"

"Vincent, what's going on? What do you mean you stole my car?"

"I had to drive up to Kenano Lake. My father died. Jane, I'm so sorry."

"What? Your father—Oh, no, *I'm* sorry. When did this happen? Are you okay?"

"Yesterday," I say. "My mother called me, I just got in last night. The funeral is tomorrow. I wish you were here. I don't have a right to say that, but I mean it."

"Do you want me to come?" She tells me she can change her flight to the red eye and be here by the next afternoon.

"But I have your car," I tell her again. "I didn't think my van would make it and I had to get up here quickly."

"Don't worry about the car. Vincent, I'm so sorry about your father. These things always happen at the worst time. Not that there's a good time. What can I do? Tell me."

## 21

The funeral service is surprisingly crowded. St. Luke's Church is three-quarters full. I keep turning around from the front row and looking back at all the faces, pale as pies. I had no idea my parents knew so many people. The priest speaks of my father as if he knew the man well, but in fact my father did not go to church often; my mother did. He refers to my father as a kind man, a devoted husband and father, one of Our Lord's special disciples who gave freely of himself to his loved ones and his community. Jack Howell would be missed by those who remain, yet let us not mourn for he is sheltered in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Personally, I think it's the priest missing him. He's so far off target he needs a map to get back. My mother and I exchange a knowing glance, and I resist the temptation to crack a smile. I'd already done most of my crying earlier this morning, while shaving in front of the bathroom mirror. A dry intellectual acceptance of my father's death had sunk to spot beneath my ribs just next to my heart. At that moment his death, and all death, became for me ridiculously simple and hopelessly complex, and I knew the dichotomy would never change and never balance out, even when my own turn came, which I thought might be next. I watched tears leak lavishly from my eyes, diluting the shaving cream on my face. I remembered my father once saying we all die leaving something unsaid; it's true for those left behind, too. I ached to say what I needed to, yet remained at a loss to what it might be. That I love him. He hurt me bad, but I loved him. I gave

myself a nasty razor nick on my chin which bled for over an hour. I almost had to come to the funeral with a piece of toilet paper stuck on my face.

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After the service, there is a reception at our house, a huge buffet lunch catered by this friend of my mother's whose name I forgot. The spread of food is incredible: platters mountained with cold cuts and cheeses, a half-dozen different salads, sandwich rolls, cakes and pies; there is coffee, wine, beer, even a bartender mixing drinks. Most people eat outside on card tables set up with paper tablecloths clothespinned to the legs.

It's a perfect spring day. Benign clouds cast occasional shadows which drift over us. I'm wearing a gray suit jacket that was my father's, tight in the shoulders and long in the sleeves. He had these kind of monkey arms. My tie is maroon with blue paisleys, also his. My mother wears a cadet blue dress and her face appears relaxed. She smiles and talks, accepts hugs and kisses. People wait behind each other for a chance to say something to her. I wonder what she will do now; I can't imagine her becoming a sheltered widow, only coming out to prune in her garden, going to bed early at night, her life and energy fading quietly and almost imperceptibly. More likely she'll take up tennis and have a boyfriend within the year.

My sister Celine and my cousin Denise look more reserved, but hardly in mourning. Celine's husband Raymond talks real estate with my Uncle Louis. Denise holds hands with her husband and sips from a glass of juice. Everyone seems at ease, as if they had choreographed this day and its appropriate gestures. I, on the other hand, helpless and unprepared, stutter, miss my cues, forget my lines. I can tell my face is doing strange things, like dancing with a limp when I try to speak. I remember a joke my father once told me about a woman who had a baby and the doctor came in and said he had bad news—it wasn't really a baby, it was just a leg, nothing else. “Oh, no! What could be worse!” the woman cried. “It limps,” said the doctor. That one cracked me up, even though my father must have told it a hundred times.

I bump into people and look at their feet, at the grass stains on their shoes, the lint and dandruff on their shoulders. Not at their eyes. I pick the tiny scab off my chin and finger away the drop of blood. I linger around the food, like a pet; I grab deviled eggs when no one is looking and stuff them in my mouth.

Denise finds me and tells me she's started writing poetry again, but isn't about to show her new poems to anyone.

“Let me know when you're ready,” I say.

“You won't like them, Vincent,” she says. “They're about babies and stuff. I'm just doing it for me.”

"No, I'd like to read them anyway. I still have some of your old ones."

"I thought I told you to throw them out."

"Never, and you can't have them back." Then I think of Martinez returning my paintings, and say, "Okay, you can have them back if you really want them."

She shrugs and smiles, then goes to find out who's holding her baby.

A short while later Uncle Louis, my mother's brother, sees me standing adrift; he leaves Raymond and heads for me. "How are you doing, Vincent?" he asks.

"As well as I can," I say.

He seems surprised by my answer.

Uncle Louis is overweight and short, a cannonball of flesh. He looks nothing like my mother. He has one hand in his pants pocket, jingling keys or change. He reminds me of the ticket taker I call Sand Dune at the Albright Knox Museum.

"So what are you doing these days?" he asks. "Your mother says you're working as a painter?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Houses?"

"Pardon me?"

"You paint houses?" I can smell the gin and tonic he's drinking and suddenly I want one.

"Once I painted a house," I say. Uncle Louis jingles his pocket again. "That drink looks good, I think I'll get one. Excuse me."

I did paint one house, not long ago. A huge, sprawling mansion, an Addams family house, with turrets and peaks thrusting into a moonlit sky, a wrought iron gate in the foreground; and behind every darkened window I painted shady faces, gargoyles screaming in horror. You have to look close to see them, but they are definitely there. I called it *Empty Nest*.

My father taught me how to paint. I remember one day in particular. I was supposed to be going to school every day because I was failing two subjects and the teacher had sent a letter to my parents. My parents talked in the kitchen the night the letter arrived. Neither of them raised their voices but there were long pauses in their conversation. My mother spoke the most. I listened from the hallway near the top of the basement stairs. After that, I went to school for a month straight and was almost caught up when one morning after Mom went to work, Dad felt my forehead. "I think you're sick today," he said.

"I better not," I told him.

He got this really long look on his face, like it was the biggest disappointment of his life that I would go to school and he would have to stay home alone.

I asked him: "Can we paint?"

"Yes, sure we can, Henri. Anything you want."

"Okay," I said, and stayed home. Painting was our favorite thing to do together.

We set up our easels in the family room and looked out the picture window facing the lake. The view was more open now that the leaves were down. My father had bought us each a beret. Mine was green and his was burgundy. I called him Claude and he called me Henri, in honor of *Monsieurs Monet and Matisse*.

Dad suggested we paint whatever we saw out the window. I agreed. We positioned our easels at angles so we couldn't see what the other was painting and would each have a slightly different point of view.

We mixed colors and changed brushes and I admit I was impressed with my own work. I'd been taking art classes at the community center. I thought I was hot stuff. First I sketched the lake and trees and the dock, and managed the perspective just right. I even penciled in the houses on the shore. Every detail I saw I added to my canvas with painstaking care. I had also been watching this painting show on television on Saturday mornings where I'd learned a wet-on-wet technique for working with oil paint. I could finish an entire painting in one session without having to wait for each layer to dry.

My paint mixes produced a perfect silvery-blue for the ice, and I shaded the tree bark expertly. The brush felt as comfortable as my own finger. We painted all morning, hardly talking to each other. Sometimes we whistled. One of us would start a tune and the other would follow. One of our favorites was the marching tune the British prisoners whistled in the movie, "Bridge Over the River Kwai." I must have seen that movie ten times.

With my beret on I felt older, old as Dad. We were equals. The same hat, the same easel, the same paper to paint on. We shared the paints and passed colors back and forth. At lunch time Dad made fried bologna and onion sandwiches. I sliced the onions and peeled the skin off the bologna. My father did the frying work. He melted yellow cheese over the top and we ate the sandwiches on toasted Italian bread. We drank Dr. Pepper. Our hands were covered with paint because we hadn't washed them before lunch. I noticed a smear of green on my bread but ate it anyway.

"So how's your painting coming along, Henri?" Dad asked, chewing a mouthful of sandwich.

"Mine's fine. How's yours, Claude?"

"Perfecto."

"Let me see it."

"Let me see yours," he said.

“Not yet.” I didn't want to show my painting until it was finished, because I knew how proud I would be. I wanted to exhibit only my final masterpiece.

After lunch, we left the dishes on the counter and went back to painting. I tried the trick where you extend your thumb out in front of you and measure the perspective of the scene and then compare it with what you're painting. As far as I could tell, I was right on. Dad asked what I was doing.

“Just a little secret of the trade,” I said. I'd seen the thumb technique on the painting show.

“Maybe I'd better try it.” My father stuck out his arm and raised his thumb. He looked at the end of his thumb, and then looked at me. He had no idea what he was doing.

“Hope you get a ride, Dad,” I said. That cracked us both up, but then my dad got this serious look on his face. “Vincent, will you pass the tube of red, please.”

I did so without a word. I could see very well there was not a speck of red in the view from our window, and I was sure my painting would be better than his. Maybe you could use a little red to mix with the brown for the base of tree trunks, but Dad used a big squeeze of paint on his palette. Then he asked for the yellow.

“Sure Claude, here's the yellow. Maybe you want the orange, too?”

He looked seriously at his painting, then gazed intently out the window. “Good idea, Henri. Yes, you'd better pass me the orange.”

I could barely contain my glee.

We finished in the afternoon. My hands were cramped and sore from all the close detail work with the brush. I was sweating and itchy beneath my wool beret.

I revealed my painting first; I was so proud. My rendering was accurate, my brush strokes even and steady, the lighting and color just right.

“Wow,” said my father. “Henri, I am so impressed with your talent. Where did you learn to paint so well?”

I shrugged, the modest artist, the natural talent. “It's called *Winter Lake*,” I said proudly.

He moved closer so his nose was only inches from the wet paint. He squinted, then blinked. “What's this?” he asked.

“What?”

“This here.” He pointed to a spot on the frozen lake.

“I don't see anything.”

“Right you are, my boy. You don't see anything. You haven't developed a vision for your painting, you're not telling a story.”

“Let me see yours,” I said, suddenly defensive.

“I’d rather not.”

“You have to.”

He turned his canvas and stood beside it. I said nothing. The trees and dock and lake weren’t terrible, although the perspective was way off and the objects lacked depth, and he hadn’t put in any of the houses which I’d spent so long trying to get just right. But he did put in something I didn’t. Rising up through a huge crack in the middle of the frozen lake, the sheets and shards of ice falling away from its sides, was a hideous, three-headed leviathan, with green scales and long teeth and tongues of fire and eyes too many to count—they blended into each other, blood shot and evil-looking.

I looked back at my painting, then again at my father’s. His was gory and amateurish. Mine was so much better, and I felt a little sorry for Dad and for him telling me I hadn’t developed a vision for my painting.

“Why did you paint that?” I asked.

“Because I couldn’t paint what you did,” my father admitted. “Vinny—you’re a true artist. You will paint great paintings someday.”

At that moment, I knew I would become a painter. I had talent, I had desire, and my father was the first to see it in me.

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That painting I did of the house with the gargoyles—*Empty Nest*—was part of my showing at Nietzsche Hangs, and someone bought it. I’ve also painted Dr. Abrams many times. I did one of him squatting over a grave in the cemetery. Mud and grass stain the knees of his pants, and he’s leaning down with a stethoscope listening to a shiny new tombstone with his own name on it. Spring flowers surround the grave: tulips, daffodils, lilies. Dr. Abram’s gray hair partially obscures his face; his fingernails are long as those of a fashion model. He holds one hand out towards the viewer, as if asking for silence so he could hear. This one I titled *The Doctor is In*.

And I had another nude in the Nietzsche Hangs show, aside from the ones of Jane. This one was a male figure—although not based on any model—meticulously brushed and seemingly lit from within, almost in a European Renaissance style, except back then they only painted female nudes. Oh, and one other difference: the chest of my nude is transparent and the enlarged heart easily seen, a heart like a red mountain with a troop of tiny, weary soldiers marching up and down its bloody sides. I called it *Road to War*.

My largest and most detailed painting shows the point of view from the rear seat of a car. In the front seat you can see the back of the heads of a man and a boy, which dominate the foreground. On the seat between them is a golden retriever, its head turned to the side to reveal

open mouth and hanging tongue. Its one visible eye notices the viewer. Beyond the windshield, a road curves off into a series of gently sloping hills. In close, the road glistens with rain, and gray, dirty snow mounds along the shoulders. The windshield is streaky. But in the streaks themselves you can see azure skies and tiny, lush palm trees and ripe flowers blooming along the curve of a tropical beach.

This is the painting I'd worked on for so long for the show but could never get right, causing me to panic and get depressed—and substitute those nudes of Jane instead. Well, I finally finished this painting the other day. I realized the problem was that I kept trying to show movement, I always thought of the car as heading somewhere, and so I never got the vanishing point or perspective right. I believed there to be a lot of action in the painting, but eventually it dawned on me there was none, only a single frozen moment—not even a real one—forever denied closure. The car will never safely reach the warm, tropical clearing, the dog will always sit between the man and the boy. I called this one *Still Life*.

There is one other painting I worked on after Jane left for Seattle. This was the most challenging one of all, and I stayed up until dawn several nights. It's also a nude, but this one is a self portrait. I actually took off all my clothes and set up a mirror across from my easel. Talk about a painful and difficult subject. The painting shows me standing in front of the mirror, so you get to see my reflection full frontal, knees to forehead. I wanted to expose myself as much as possible and I didn't pull any tricks like painting tiny soldiers marching on me or little devils whispering in my ear or making my skin look like ice. I'm all there: my cow-brown eyes, a week of chin stubble, skinny arms, droopy dick. And yes, that face I saw in the photographs of my father. I named it simply: *Standing Nude*. It's still on the easel in Jane's house. She can do with it what she wants.

"Paint what you see," my father always told me, his way of teaching me how to paint. And that's what I've done. In the studio at Jane's, my paintings lean against every available wall space, stacked against each other, neatly as books. And under these paintings, buried, are others my father painted when we used to paint together. Some of them are pretty good. I have that one of the lake he painted; it was the one of the paintings I had stuck in the car trunk and the customs inspector puzzled over when Jane and I had trouble crossing the border. I should have hung one of his paintings at my show, in his honor, or at least invited him to see my show, because I remember I used to get carried away and imagine father and son shows, our work hanging side by side in quiet, well-secured galleries. The genius and his mentor. This is no nighttime dream, but one that comes upon me during the day, when I am out for a run, like a sunbeam breaking through the clouds, a warmth I could curl around if only it were there.



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I'm shoving a piece of cake into my mouth when I see a car pull into our yard and park next to the other cars. Jane gets out. She scans the crowd and spots my mother, then starts toward her, almost tripping on the uneven ground because she hardly ever wears heels.

I wasn't sure if she was coming because when I talked to her on the phone I couldn't bring myself to say yes when she offered to catch the next flight; I was too humiliated by my inexcusable behavior toward her. Oh, who am I kidding—I begged her to come; I cried spit into the phone. I told her what I should have been telling her all along: how I loved her and how lucky I was my broken head ended up in her hospital.

I didn't tell her about the photograph though, not yet, which I returned to its envelope and stuck in a side pocket of my overnight bag. If I ever get a chance, I'll show it to Jane and ask her if she knows anyone who can translate the Japanese characters written on the back.

I see Jane speaking with my mother, then hugging her. She lets go and walks towards me. I wipe the crumbs off my face and ask if she's hungry. There's a ton of food left, but I'm doing my best to eat most of it.

"I'll eat in a little while," she says.

I thank her for coming.

"The lake is so beautiful," she says, looking at the water. "Last time it was frozen so I didn't get to see it."

"When I think about it, this was a great place to grow up. I swam every day in the summer. We fished. We skated in the winter."

People are standing near us but I close down my peripheral vision, focus only on Jane. I start right in: I made a terrible mistake, many mistakes. I'm not really this way. I'm a better man than the jerk I've been. Can we please try again? Will you take me back? Can I please come home? She lets me rattle on for a minute or two, then puts a hand to my face to quiet me.

"Vincent, now isn't the time to talk about this. That's not why I'm here."

"I'm sorry. It's just, just . . . Can I at least buy you a cup of coffee?" The same line I used when I returned to the hospital the day after she stitched me up. This offer she accepts. I pour her a cup from the carafe on the table, adding lots of cream and sugar, the way she likes it.

Then my mother comes up to me. She tells me it's time. She looks like she wants to apologize, but I'm thankful to have an assigned task. My mother makes a brief announcement and everyone follows me down towards the water, and gathers along the shore. I step out on the dock and get into the rowboat, the cardboard box cradled under one arm. It is much heavier than I had expected. I row out about thirty yards, not so far that people can't see, but far enough so the

breeze won't blow the dust on anyone. After boarding the oars, I let the boat drift for a few moments. There is a leak in the bottom and my feet are wet, my father's good shoes wrecked. I put the box up on the seat next to me so it doesn't get soggy. I can just imagine my father's ashes getting wet and sticking to the inside of the box and me having to scoop them out in muddy handfuls.

It's such a small gesture, moving the box onto the seat, but the fact that I prevented the ashes from getting wet and ruined makes me feel like I made a smart decision, and demonstrated the beginnings of a new era of better judgment and maturity.

I can hear someone shouting from far away, probably on the other side of the lake, also the sound of an outboard motor. Even from this distance I see Jane's face as if it were only inches from mine, a familiar tenderness I want to caress, a face I will never forget and never let go—if only she'll let me near her again. I want to row back and put her in the boat so she can help me get through this, but I realize everyone is staring at me, their eyes shielded from the sun, waiting patiently.

I must do this quickly. I open the box and dump the entire contents, and the white, bony ashes fall in small, loose clumps followed by a mist of fine dust, which creates a golden veil around me in the sunlight and whispers as it settles on the surface of the water. Or I whisper. *Dad*.

I shake the box empty. The ashes float on the surface for a moment, then begin to dissipate and sink, vanishing into the cool, watery darkness.

I remember this pet goldfish I had with a crescent-shaped, translucent tail and round buggy eyes. He was a magnificent looking fellow. His name was Will Wonderfish. I used to sprinkle food into his bowl and watch the specks float down through the water. He always swam near the bottom, as if he thought he was hiding in the deep water, and was unaware everyone could see him perfectly through the sides of the glass bowl. He waited down there in the depths, and when the food passed in front of him he would dart back and forth, frantically gobbling the tiny flakes.