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Humberto: The Fire Next Time

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Humberto
“The Fire Next Time”

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Abstract

“The Fire Next Time” is the opening section of a novel, *Humberto*, that tells the story of a group of people working at a biomedical engineering firm in St. Louis. The section follows Charles, a well-respected employee and leader whose marriage is slowly disintegrating. In the first chapter, a larger-than-life employee, the Priest, joins the company. He befriends Charles while working closely with him. The Priest, however, begins an affair with Charles’ wife, Linda. Charles is put in a difficult position: how should he work with a man he both hates and admires? As Charles struggles with this dilemma, a mysterious and rapidly growing lump, christened “Humberto” by Charles’ fellow employees, has appeared on his boss’ neck. As a result, Mr. Samuels, the boss, has begun acting more and more erratically. Charles, too, feels himself being pulled down a darker and unpredictable path. This novel explores themes of loneliness and loss, anxiety and absurdity. It is also a cross-genre piece, demonstrating realism, satire, surrealism and the fantastic.

Chapter 1

On the car ride from their home in the suburbs to the office downtown, Linda laughed at something Charles said (something stupid but she laughed so hard she snorted) and he was taken by surprise because they hadn't yet resolved the fight from the night before (by the morning, with all the twists and turns in their arguments, he couldn't even remember how the fight had started). Most of the time, Linda wouldn't laugh at all around him until he had explicitly apologized and they both agreed that the fight was over. He took her laughter in the car as a sign of forgiveness. But then she went back to doing all those Linda things that suggested she wasn't ready to talk: sifted through the strands of her hair to unknot an imaginary tangle; prodded the seal of the passenger side window as if probing for a leak; plunged her fingers into her purse, combing through its contents (compact mirror, brush, nail file, scissors, pens, old receipts, phone, charger, Kleenex packet, cinnamon gum, lipstick, eye liner, extra pair of hoop earrings) and the clatter became the substitute for conversation.

Maybe the quickest and easiest way to reconciliation was through humor, and Charles wracked his brain for another joke to tell her as they made their way toward downtown past the no longer used industrial grain elevator, past the hospital complex on the

West End, past the university and theaters in mid-town, past the long-abandoned warehouses that used to shelter lumber and leather and soap, under the shadow of the Gateway Arch and the old courthouse, up Fourth to Pine through wide empty streets built for a more prosperous time. He wondered if cities grew and changed like marriages did—shaped by the ebb and flow of economic and emotional forces into something totally different than what attracted you to it in the first place and you overlooked its original beauty until it snuck up on you in quiet moments.

He puzzled through those questions for a short amount of time, and he suddenly realized as he was pulling into his parking space, his opportunity to resolve their most recent fight was dissipating. If he tried to apologize as they moved across the damp and echoing garage, Linda would say “You always try to apologize when we’re on the move and we can’t really talk it out.” Instead, they moved from the car to the lobby, from the lobby to the elevator, where a woman headed to the seventeenth floor told Linda she really liked her turquoise earrings and Linda touched Charles’ arm and said, “My husband got them for me.” She smiled like she was proud. Linda stepped off the elevator, and they said their customary “see you after work,” and he tacked on an I’m sorry, last night was stupid, but she was already on her way to Rathbone’s department and didn’t respond. Perhaps she hadn’t heard.

Charles and Linda both worked in the biomedical division of the multinational Centrigroup Corp., which occupied the top ten floors of the Kodiak Life building. Each of their divisions were led by the project engineer who molded his office floor to match his personality. Rathbone, on twenty-five where Linda worked, removed the cubes and designed an open and efficient work space because he thought German-inspired office organization was both ugly and un-American. He also liked that when people walked onto his floor, they would see an army of employees at his command. By contrast, a network of cubicles known

as The Maze dominated the twenty-seventh floor where Charles worked because his boss, Mr. Samuels believed that an open floorplan damaged workers' emotional health and productivity. However, he went out of his way to cultivate a "family environment": he encouraged team members to carve their unique identities in the office and to form strong friendships outside of work. He budgeted for team activities and commemorative t-shirts. He and his wife hosted team members for barbeques. The barbeques were only modestly attended.

To facilitate departmental cohesion, Mr. Samuels designed a color-coded diagram that showed where each member of his department sat in the Maze and which team they belonged. At the end of the Maze closest to the elevator, Processors (BLUE) next to PR (RED) next to Electrical and Battery Research (YELLOW). In the center of the Maze, Charles and his sales team (GREEN) flanked by Software (ORANGE) and Design (VIOLET). Nearest storage and the breakroom was Marketing (TURQUISE), the HR rep for the department (PINK), and Mechanical (BLACK). He stationed General Research Assistants (GRAY) at the in-between cubicles. Despite Mr. Samuels' best efforts, new employees would inevitably lose themselves in the corridors of the Maze to be found later holding up their diagram and saying, "I'm looking for...?"

As Charles was entering the Maze, Mr. Samuels called him into the office. "You're really going to like me today." He stood in front of his desk, hands behind his back. He rocked forward to the balls of his feet and back down again. Mr. Samuels was just tall enough to be noticed as tall, and he tried to reduce his size in one on one interactions with his employees so he would seem less intimidating. He was effusive in his enthusiasm, sometimes more cheerleader than authority figure, though today, Mr. Samuels seemed a bit more amped up than usual.

“I’m promoting you to assistant project manager for the Extracorporeal Shockwave Lithotripsy project. Exciting, right?”

“Of course. Big surprise.”

“Comes with a nice pay bump.” Mr. Samuels leaned in and gave Charles a forceful smack on the shoulder. A red spot had bloomed on Mr. Samuels’ neck just left of center, perhaps irritation from shaving or from too much starch in his shirt collar. The shape and shade changed ever so slightly as he smiled. “You think you’re up to the task?” The spot clearly irritated him, his fingers pulled at the edge of his collar and he thumbed the skin on his neck.

Charles pictured late solitary dinners at his desk, could hear the crinkle of white deli paper, feel dry bread, taste the lettuce and cheese oversaturated with mayo. There’d be evenings on the couch, Linda watching TV while Charles pecked at the computer on his lap, his groin uncomfortably warm, wrists and fingers aching. But then he imagined where he might be able to take Linda with the extra money. Glacier National Park. Or Arches. Or Denali. They could road trip and set up camp along the way in a new tent, fall asleep with the smell of wood smoke on their skin, wake to the sound of rain drops gently splattering against the nylon. “How much?”

Next to the stacks of ESWL papers, Mr. Samuels’ redheaded Irishman cactus looked like a tiny totem. Mr. Samuels swept the stacks into a now bloated expandable. “Definitely worth your while, and I’m currently arguing with the higher ups to allocate the greatest possible raise. I should warn you, though, that assistant project manager is not an easy job.” At that moment, Charles felt his first spike of self-doubt similar to times when, while hiking up rocky pathways and crossing steep drop-offs, he would start to lose his footing and he

would have act immediately and leap onto more stable ground or fall. His hands closed into half fists and he had to concentrate to relax them again.

“I’m ready for it.” He broke his eye contact to settle his anxiety, but he felt his attention drawn to the spot on Mr. Samuels’ neck, and a feeling Charles had a hard time describing—somewhere between stupor and curiosity—made him linger for a second too long. He quickly focused on the picture one of Mr. Samuels’ kids had drawn hanging on the wall over his shoulder. The scene depicted what looked like a balloon-animal man fighting a monster with teeth and claws and fire that burned from its eyes. The man, labeled Dad, held a gun and a shield, and he stood between the monster and a small group of cowering people, each labeled (Mom, B-B, Me, Lil). The balloon man spat a word bubble at the monster (Eat Blaster you vile Creature!) as he sprayed laser fire. Mr. Samuels rapped the picture with his knuckles. “I’m a regular old St. George.”

“Or Beowulf.”

“But who’s the monster in that?”

Charles bent his mouth into a thoughtful frown and nodded.

“I’ll let you sort through all this stuff today and tomorrow and then I’ll fill you in about where we stand and what is realistic at this point in time. Last chance to announce any reservations.”

“I’m ready to take the next step.” What great news to share with Linda. He could see the turn of her mouth, hear the softening of her tone. Perhaps they would celebrate over Thai carryout.

Mr. Samuels smiled, and the spot darkened. “Great. I knew you would be. I already have the intern relocating you to the desk outside my office. No space for a cube, fire hazard, I’m afraid. So you can’t hide when I need to grab you.”

“You make it sound like we’re betrothed.”

“Charles! I knew I’d like working with you.” He swept his arm out toward the hall and lowered his head in mock bow. “Your desk awaits.” Charles tossed his project pack on his new desk, an appendage protruding from the outer cubicle wall. Mr. Samuels hadn’t been exaggerating: a desk and chair had been set up adjacent to the perimeter of The Maze. So far, the intern had provided a laptop that had not yet been removed entirely from its packaging, a phone whose line trailed along the carpet without connecting to a jack, a surge protector still coiled, two wide mail trays which together took up almost a quarter of the desk’s surface. A pair of scissors, a roll of tape. Charles ducked into the Maze, past the Processors and PR and Electrical and Software to cubicle among the sales team he had worked with for the last few years. A milk crate strapped to a dolly stood next to his desk like a lonely sentry. He piled the records and his notes from the MRCoG project into the crate, placed the framed pictures of his son Brody on top along with a sumo wrestler bobblehead given to him as a gag gift (this guy really looks like you, Charles) by one of his team members, Asshole Kevin. He tucked in a couple back issues of *Runner’s World*, a company newsletter from the end of the previous calendar year that featured Charles and included a blurry inset black and white photo of Charles’ face. He slid a letter Linda had written him years ago, his first workplace love note, between the side of the crate and the stack of papers. As he wheeled the dolly out of the cubicle one of his sales members, Word Nerd Jim, said, “Flying the coup, huh?” He was jotting down an answer to the daily *New York Times* crossword puzzle. “It keeps me sharp amidst a string of sales calls,” he’d once explained.

Charles set the dolly vertically and leaned on the handle bars the way he had seen the custodial staff do when they were on break. “Yep. A little promotion. But I’ll be down the way just outside Samuels’ office.”

“Before I knew you were getting relocated, I caught the intern removing the name plate, and she couldn’t tell me what was going on, so I was worried you’d quit. And I thought ‘Charles you sneaky bastard.’ What a clever way to indicate you’ve abandoned us. Absconded in the night. Though I’m thrilled to see you’re still here.”

Charles was surprised to see the empty nameplate holder. “They move quickly.”

“I bet your wife is elated about the promotion.”

“Absolutely. She’s got some special celebration planned after work today.”

“Excellent. I’m sure I’m not overstepping if I say everybody in your old sales sector is happy for you too.”

“Thanks. Good luck with the new guy. I hope he’s a more demanding leader than I am.”

Word Nerd Jim held up his pen, mouth pinched until he scribbled letters down. “If that’s the case, Kevin and I are going to revenge prank you so badly for abandoning us.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page then. Don’t be a stranger.” Charles tilted the dolly back and pushed it down the avenue of the Maze. Linda’s longtime office friend, Natalie, waved to him as he walked by, and Charles fought the impulse to trot over and tell her.

Back at the desk, the two mail trays had been replaced with a multi-tiered one, hastily assembled, that looked like a collapsing structure. The laptop was open and running updates, its plastic coverings lying crumpled like sloughed off skin. Next to the laptop was a new stack of files with “ESWL” written in black letters on a post-it. Two IT workers were unspooling a long phone line and running it along the base of the Maze toward one of the interior jacks. Charles had a chair now, though it leaned back like a drunk riding the bus late at night.

Charles spent most of the morning arranging his workspace and outlining ideas for how to coordinate the various teams developing the project. He drafted a multi-colored chart on a banner of butcher paper and was hanging it up on the exterior Maze wall when his coworkers streamed past him. He called out to Word Nerd Jim and Asshole Kevin when they walked by. “What’s going on?”

“Did you not read your email?” Asshole Kevin said. “Urgent Message for Samuels Team: Important meeting don’t be late! Another day, another all-important meeting.”

“His liberal use of exclamation points makes my skin crawl,” Word Nerd Jim said.

“This meeting is about what exactly?”

“Some big update for the upcoming ESWL project,” Word Nerd Jim said. “Maybe Samuels is going to announce your promotion to the whole team.”

“Congrats.” Asshole Kevin said. “But if anyone should have gotten a promotion it should have been me. I routinely kick your ass in sales.”

“Don’t listen to him, Chuck.” Word Nerd Jim leaned a bit closer and lowered his voice pretending to offer a secret. “Anxiety over becoming a father is keeping him up at night.”

“Right.” Asshole Kevin scoffed and ran his fingers through his hair. “If you mean that I’m excited about having a kid, then yeah. Maddy and I are overjoyed to become parents.”

Word Nerd Jim winked. “You can tell he’s practiced that line for his wife.”

“What would you know about this, huh?” Asshole Kevin puffed his chest and flared his nostrils adopting what Word Nerd Jim called his Mafioso face. “You haven’t even had a sniff at a long-term relationship.”

“Jim just likes getting you revved up,” Charles said. He wagged his finger at Jim.

“How many times do I have to tell you to play nice?”

“Okay, dad.” Jim hung his shoulders and dipped his head, and someone watching from a distance might believe Charles was scolding him.

“You guys done or should I go onto the conference room without you?”

“Wait just a second,” Charles said. “Let me call down to Linda. She might be able to pop up for Samuels’ announcement.” He dialed her extension and counted the number of rings while Kevin rolled his eyes and cocked his head toward the conference room. He mouthed “hurry up.” Charles pretended not to notice. Instead, he bobbed and muttered pick up pick up pick up. Her voicemail message sounded breathy, almost seductive. Charles felt embarrassed that in front of two colleagues he could not get ahold of his wife so she could attend the announcement of his promotion. “Hey. I was just calling to see if you wanted to come up to Conference Room A on twenty-seven. Samuels is making a big announcement, and I think you should be here for it.” He caught both Jim and Kevin looking at him (AK was rapping his knuckles against the top of the Maze wall) and he worried that they might think he was begging, so he said, “If you can’t, no biggie. I’ll fill you in later. Bye.” To the two of them: “Must be away from her desk.”

Jim slapped Charles’ back as the three of them made their way down the exterior of the Maze to the conference room, and Charles’ confidence swelled. This meeting was all about his promotion. Even if Linda couldn’t make it to the announcement, public recognition was sexy, and Charles could play up the importance of his position and how Mr. Samuels praised him in front of his entire team. All the good news would surely put an end to their recent fighting. But when he entered the conference room, the Priest was standing at the front next to Mr. Samuels. The last remaining employees were leaking in, and even

though the conference room table had been wheeled outside, the room was going to be tightly packed. Charles felt the urge to tuck himself in the blanket of relative anonymity. He and Kevin and Jim wedged themselves into the protective center of the Centrigroup herd.

Mr. Samuels leaned toward the Priest, rotating his body away from the cluster of employees, and spoke to him quietly. He tipped his head back and laughed a guffawing sort of laugh that overpowered the rest of the employees' chatter. In that moment, Charles could see the red spot on Mr. Samuels' neck trembling. And the Priest (though no one yet knew about his previous ministry and no one would give him the nickname for another week or two) smiled politely, his teeth peeking through a tight mouth. The Priest wore a glossy navy pinstriped suit, no tie, white button down collar open, and he stood out against cream-colored walls with coal-gray carpet like a solitary flower in a rocky desert.

“What makes this new douche so important that Samuels is forcing me to stare at his ugly mug preventing me from watching U.S.-Algeria?” Kevin said.

“Doesn't look very douche-y from here,” Jim said.

“Since when do we talk to each other?” Kevin said.

“Okay—”

“USA! USA!” Kevin chanted as he pumped his fist in the air.

Mr. Samuels asked for quiet and, with arms spread wide as if he was trying to gather in his flock, Mr. Samuels introduced the man up front. “Let's give a warm Centrigroup welcome to our newest colleague, Mr. Walter Hunt!” His smile stretched wide and he applauded enthusiastically, overly so, it seemed to Charles. The red patch on his neck seemed a darker more intense red. “Mr. Hunt, or Walter, has impressive credentials as an accountant with several organizations fulfilling multiple leadership positions. I am convinced he will not only be a vital member in the development of our newest and potentially greatest

project to date, the Extracorporeal Shockwave Lithotripsy project, but also a key member in the future growth of Centrigroup.” The room responded with genial applause. However, when the Priest spoke for the first time, the room was transfixed. He was so handsome many in the room later said (even Asshole Kevin would have to admit “he’s a decent looking guy”) with his strong jaw and cheekbones, piercing eyes, and broad shoulders that they couldn’t believe he didn’t have a child or two stashed away somewhere. His shaved head, in concert with his other facial features, made him look younger and more virile than his forty plus years.

But the thing that grabbed the employees of Centrigroup the most was Walter Hunt’s voice. It was music, it was hope. Even Charles felt a tug in his chest when he heard it.

“One thing I would like to get out in the open because it’s slightly unusual,” the Priest said, “is the fact that I used to be a Catholic Priest. I want to let you know because this aspect of my history was bound to be unearthed at some point, and I don’t want anyone to think I’m some sort of undercover religious operative trying to evangelize the community here.” Most in the room laughed, including Mr. Samuels, whom Charles thought laughed a bit too much. “I don’t want to get into the gory details at this point, though I’m not ashamed of this aspect of my life and would be happy to talk about it in more detail in a more collegial setting should any of you have some burning questions. That said, I do have an extensive background in counseling, so Mr. Samuels has agreed to let me act as an informal counselor should any of you need to work through any sort of struggles. Confidentiality is guaranteed, barring urges to murder or maim someone.”

A wave of laughter surged through the conference room.

“So my office door—”

“Cubicle,” Mr. Samuels said.

Another round of laughter, and the Priest joined in. “Yes. My cubicle door is always open. I look forward to getting to know you all very soon.” All the employees except for Charles, and Gary rushed forward to introduce themselves to the Priest (“Yes, I did introduce myself to the Priest,” Asshole Kevin said later, “but I didn’t freak out like everyone else.”). Instead, Charles worked his way against the surge toward the door hoping that he might reach Linda before she took lunch. After breaking through the jostle of bodies, Charles suddenly felt eyes on him, and he realized that Gary, the office oddball, was standing in the hall outside the conference room looking at him as if he had something on face. “Hi Gare,” Charles said to diffuse the awkwardness. Gary nodded, his eyes heavy like a sad bulldog’s. His mouth sagged at the left corner, his face expressing perpetual discomfort. Gary had been given the nickname “Creepster” because of the way he shuffled through the halls of the Maze on twenty-seven, the way his small mustache sat on his upper lip, the way he stared instead of looked at people, the way his body seemed to quake beyond his control. Usually he kept to himself. No one knew his last name (no one seemed to care to know), and Charles couldn’t think of a time when he’d had a conversation with him. Gary nodded as if to acknowledge the greeting, and his head and shoulders trembled, and Charles wondered whether being hemmed into the large crowd terrified Gary. It had never occurred to Charles before this to feel sorry for him. “Why waste the lunch hour waiting to meet this guy, right Gary? I say we squeeze out of the room. Beat the rush.”

Gary nodded quickly and unevenly. His mustache quivered as he opened his mouth to offer a response, but his words seemed to dissolve before they could escape. Charles, in that moment, felt what it must be like to be overlooked again and again, and he began walking with Gary. “Lunch’ll be on me.” But he looked back over his shoulder and saw Linda standing at the conference room door, and he felt a stir of excitement that she’d

gotten his message and come up to see him, so he said, “Hold on a moment, Gary,” and he made his way back down the hall toward the conference room. Except Linda didn’t see him. She turned her shoulders, and when Natalie emerged from the pack of people, they hugged and chatted and headed toward the elevator.

He turned to Gary, but by that time, Gary was shuffling toward the records room with quick, uncertain steps, as if he was treading on ground that could crumble at any moment. Charles returned to his new desk, set up his voicemail, rotated in his creaky chair, felt the world wobble.

Chapter 2

Big news, Charles said while he and Linda ate carryout Italian at the kitchen counter. Mr. Samuels promoted me to assistant project manager for the ESWL development.

That's great! Linda reached over and gave Charles' hand a squeeze. Is that the kind of promotion you want?

Of course. It's a huge honor.

But you won't be working in sales, and it's what you're really good at.

Charles took a bite of garlic bread, dusted his fingers off over his plate. I'll still be coordinating with the sales team, maybe even training them. And I'll be coordinating and motivating the multiple teams, which is what sales reps do anyway.

Okay. But have you thought about how much extra work Samuels is going to ask you to do.

That's to be expected. It can't be a promotion without extra responsibilities.

But have you really thought about it. Being at his beck and call.

It won't be like that.

How much more is he paying you?

Still being finalized.

She clacked her fork against the plate. You're doing the work without getting a guaranteed raise?

No. Not it at all. Samuels has already promised a nice pay bump. He's negotiating to get me as much money as possible.

Has he shown you a specific amount? Has he told you when this raise will take effect?

Not yet.

I worry he's going to take advantage of your willingness to be a good employee.

Why would he do that?

Happens all the time.

Not Samuels. You'd understand if you worked for him. He's not ruthless like Rathbone.

Rathbone wouldn't do that to anyone unless someone provided him the opportunity.

Are you even happy for me?

Of course I am.

Doesn't really seem like it.

I'm tired and I have a headache. Congrats again. We'll celebrate soon, but I need to go upstairs and lie down. Soon she was gone, and Charles stared at the half-eaten spaghetti plate and the barstool now empty. He remembered that he had never actually apologized for the fight they had had the night before.

He cleared the dishes from the counter, dumped the uneaten spaghetti into the trashcan, soaked the dishes in the sink. He wiped down the counter which felt colder than expected as if they hadn't just eaten dinner there. That he was able to hear the squeak of the

washcloth gliding across the countertop drove him crazy. The feeling lingered but he didn't exactly know why, and he resolved to keep busy. He rummaged through the shelves of the refrigerator, pulled out leftovers in unmarked Tupperware containers. Popped each lid a crack. Waited for the smell to hit. Leftover roulette, he joked to himself, something he stored in his mind so he could tell Linda later. If the contents of the Tupperware smelled relatively fresh, he peeled back the lid to see what was inside. If edible, mark initials (mashed potatoes- MP; roasted broccoli- RBr). But, if the odor was rank or he could see mold, he tossed it in the trash, container and all. The sound of the containers landing in the trashcan bottom was surprisingly exhilarating. From downtown. And one. And one. The empty barstools, he imagined, were giving him a standing O.

Soon he ran out of Tupperware and the imagined cheering vanished with the force of a slammed door. A silence settled into the first floor. It was in those moments that the house felt too large for Charles and that nagging unnamed feeling returned. Why did they have a six person dining room table if they were eating at the kitchen counter most nights? We should sell, he'd once said to Linda, not that long ago. We should get a place that better fits us.

How can you say that? She'd squished her upper and lower lips together to exaggerate the extent of her displeasure. I bet as soon as we moved we'd realize we'd need something like this again.

Charles roamed through the first floor. He flipped on the living room lights and examined the pale blue paint on the walls. The color looked faded and the sight of it made Charles irritated. He and Linda had decided to paint it a vibrant red years ago and, if he remembered correctly, they'd even bought paint. He touched the walls with his fingertips and then went to the garage through the door in the mudroom. He found many more cans

of paint stacked in the corner on top of an old folding table. From the junk box, he pulled out a rusted can opener and pried the lid off several. The sickly-sweet smell of acrylic emanated from the can. A yellow (bathroom?). Two greens (bedroom? kitchen?) Finally, the red, two cans, but it didn't have the brightness he remembered, and he had a memory he couldn't quite bring into focus that the first time they'd purchased the paint, it hadn't turn out to be quite the shade they'd hoped for. He knew it was somewhere else, perhaps in a closet, perhaps in the attic.

Charles made his way back through the house checking closets, even the one where the fanciest coats hung. No cans of paint. On his way to the attic, he noticed a long scar in the ceiling cut by years the slow drip of rain water and he remembered mopping up the wet floor many times. The buckets he'd set out during a hard rain. The discussion of roof repair. There were other projects too. Putting in new tiles in the downstairs bathroom. Laying carpet and putting up dry wall to make the basement a recreational area. Reorganizing the library. Charles found himself in front of miniature spires of books on the library floor. In the corner under the cloak of a white sheet stood panels of dark-stained wood meant for building a bookshelf. Charles sat in the aristocratic-looking leather chair in the corner and turned on the lamp that leaned beside it. The chair was firm and more comfortable than he remembered. Charles picked up a book from the top of one of the stacks, Michener's *Poland*, and he opened to a random page and began reading. "A Pole is a man born with a sword in his right hand, a brick in his left. When the battle is over, he starts to rebuild." The image seemed so odd to him (he envisioned a man toppling structures and immediately placing bricks on top of ruin). But the line spoke to him in an unusual way. His life seemed to have entered a constant rebuilding phase, and he wondered if this was what his marriage had become or whether, as he hoped, this was just a difficult phase. He flipped a few pages. "A

soldier lives always for the next battle, because he knows that before it arrives impossible changes can occur in his favor.” Huh. It seemed like recently Linda had been on the lookout for any minor problem to start a fight around. And hadn’t he, at times, reveled in the conflict, preferred it to the alternative?

He read on for a while until the book, and his eyes, began to get heavy. He propped the book vertically on top of the stack to remind him that this was a project he should have finished and turned out the light. He moved past the arterial crack in the ceiling up the stairs to the second bedroom where Linda had fallen asleep, her clothes still on, lights still burning.

§

During the first few weeks at Centrigroup, the Priest became something of an office phenomenon. Charles had only worked with him once during a brief meeting with Samuels and two others, but colleagues talked about the Priest in the halls of the Maze, in the breakroom, as they passed by Charles’ desk. “He helped me talk through the issues I’ve been having with my father,” Janet in sales said.

“During his lunch break, he helped me build a workable personal budget,” Andrew from mechanical said.

“He healed me,” Trevor from electrical said.

“Metaphorically. Right?” Charles said.

On the Tuesday after the Priest joined Centrigroup, Charles witnessed the Priest’s power firsthand when he’d gone to review copy with Gertrude in PR. Even before he’d seen her, Gertrude had not looked well: her complexion was gray-yellow and she seemed to move about unsteadily. Her body seemed to have shrunk ever so slightly, and her clothes seemed to hang unevenly off her frame. Her makeup seemed a bit sloppily applied, her lipstick bleeding off the edge of her lips above her chin. Still, she smiled when she’d walked to her

cube, a quicker tighter smile, and raised her traveler's mug of coffee when she waved as she always did. She hung her purse on the hook in her cubicle, smoothed her skirt and blouse. She flexed her left hand after she logged into her computer, rotated her wrist, examined her veins under the light.

Charles found her at her computer, stooped. "Gertrude, I want to talk to you about this—are you feeling okay?"

Her head rotated like, and her eyes took an extra half second to find Charles' face. "Oh, I'll be fine. I think I'm coming down with something."

"Go home. We'll cove—"

Gertrude let out a loud bleat, and Charles flinched because he thought she had become irritated at his suggestion, but then she repeated this uh-uh-uh-uh, her mouth suddenly twisted open, her eyes glass orbs, her arms flapping, legs convulsing. She seemed both Gertrude and not.

Suddenly, she fell.

Charles neither rushed forward nor retreated. He was neither hero nor coward. Gertrude's cube seemed to contract at its center and expand at the periphery as if the edges had been cut away and space had been unfurled like a rolled up banner. He crept forward, hesitated, called Gertrude's name softly and sweetly as if speaking to her in the wrong pitch would scald her.

She didn't respond and he called for help. Several people stuck their heads out of their cubicles (Sashvat from processor design, Helen from battery development, Nestor the copy writer) and some even ventured into the hall to see if Charles was playing a joke on them.

But the Priest was there before Charles even realized he had arrived. He said, “Help me move the chair out of the way and protect her head.” He cradled her head as if it was a priceless artifact.

He said: “Shield her arms from hitting the desk, but don’t restrain them.”

He said: “How long has she been seizing?”

He said: “To your knowledge, has she had seizures before?”

He said: “Call an ambulance.”

An “I’m on it” shouted from somewhere behind Charles. Gertrude vomited on the Priest’s right hand and wrist, and he remained steadfast in his concentration. His arms and shoulders bobbed along with Gertrude’s head, and he looked at her face the way a parent would a sick child. Charles tried to imitate his calm.

Gertrude’s convulsions slowed, then stopped altogether. The Priest checked his watch. Sashvat, voice quick and breathy, said, “The paramedics are on their way.”

“Thank you,” the Priest said. “You did good.” He started speaking softly to Gertrude as he checked for breath and pulse.

“Is she going to be okay?” Charles asked. His head was throbbing, his ears hot, and he felt sweat accumulating on the small of his back.

“She’s not recovering in the way that I’d hoped. Sometimes these things can signal a more serious problem.”

“What can I do?”

The Priest looked over his shoulder. “Are there oxygen tanks and masks on one of the floors?”

“Not here, but.” Charles realized that Trowbridge’s lab on the floor above. “Sashvat, go with Andrew from mechanical up to Trowbridge’s lab and bring down a tank of oxygen and a breathing mask. Quick!” Sashvat rushed off.

The Priest continued his attempts to revive Gertrude. He locked his hands together, left palm to back of his right hand, and began pumping rhythmically on her chest. He checked her breathing, pressed down on her chest again and again and again. Charles could see the surge of the Priest’s muscles.

A breath. Eyes fluttering, opening. Gertrude lifting her head, the Priest crouched, susurrating face to face. She tried to stand and he shadowed her, guiding her back to the ground, repeating it’s okay it’s okay. Charles could see the admiration in the eyes of all the Centrigroup employees, and he felt useless, discardable. He knew he should feel only relief.

Sashvat and Andrew returned with the oxygen tank and mask, and the Priest helped Gertrude sit up while he secured the mask on her face. When the EMTs arrived shortly thereafter, they strapped Gertrude to the stretcher, checked her vital signs, asked the Priest questions about what first aid steps he took and what symptoms he observed. They thanked him for his quick response. People watched as the EMTs hurried her down the central corridor of the maze to the elevators. The whole floor seemed to hold its breath for one beat, two. Then the worry evaporated, and people applauded the Priest, clapped him on the back, called him a hero (“Did you see how he did all the right things to keep Gertrude safe?” Helen said. “He got to her so fast. It’s like he’s a superhero who can sense when people are in danger,” Sashvat said. “He’s a man of action,” Ben said. “I’d let him rescue me,” Amy said.)

Mr. Samuels, face flushed, peeked out the door to see what the celebration was about.

§

By midsummer, the Priest had become a bit of a celebrity at Centrigroup. Not only had the story of saving Gertrude's life spread throughout Centrigroup's floors, but it also had been reported to one of the local news stations which sent a camera crew to interview the Priest (the segment included a reporter reenacting the episode, including pantomiming a seizure and tumbling off the desk chair to the floor; snippets of the Priest's account were spliced in with the label "Office Hero" across the bottom of the shot). There was so much intra-office chatter about the Priest that some on Mr. Samuels' floor believed he was a shoe-in for the employee of the year award presented at the annual Centrigroup Employee Appreciation Picnic, even though he had only been working at Centrigroup for just over a month at the time of the award's presentation.

The picnic had grown into a large affair. What had started as an annual potluck where Rathbone celebrated the achievements of his team became a Centrigroup-wide gathering (something that Rathbone now rarely attended). The company rented out a pavilion, a grilling shelter and the green space around them, including a softball diamond and a concave grassy field called The Bowl kids loved to run up and roll down. On the flat ground between the two pavilions dozens of tables were draped in blue plastic sheets and balloons bearing the Centrigroup logo adorned each centerpiece. A blues rock band, The Living Loving Maids, played on the pavilion and people lined up for barbeque at the smaller shelter.

Charles arrived late and agitated. Linda had decided to stay at home—an arbitrary decision, it seemed to Charles—and no amount of arguing could convince her to leave the house. The afternoon heat had become an oppressive mantle and patches of sweat had darkened his light blue 28th Annual Centrigroup Company Picnic t-shirt under his arms and

at his chest, and he had inexplicably acquired a wedgie. Charles walked around the bowl, tugging at his shorts as discretely as he could while searching for a co-worker to chat with and pull him out of his mood. He grabbed a bottle of water from a cooler and drank half of it. Down in the bowl, a maelstrom of children played while their parents drank from blue solo cups in the limited shade: two boys rolled down the hill, three girls raced up it to see who could get to the top, one kid was holding another's legs like a wheelbarrow and navigating the slope of the bowl, others were throwing balls and shooting water guns and yelling and laughing.

Charles paused for a moment to listen to the sounds of the children. Laughter rung in his chest like a bell. It was a sound he took for granted, something he found himself missing. He remembered the time he and Linda brought Brody when was two or three, and he, uncertain in his ability to run up and down the sides of the bowl like the older kids, watched from behind Charles' leg with a quiet fascination. After a few minutes, he became bold enough to take a few steps toward the edge, then retreat, laughing as he bumped back into Charles' arms. He must have been two: the way his long hair swooped and swirled before he gotten his hair cut regularly, the way he plunged the middle and ring fingers into his mouth when he was worried or mesmerized, the way a word acted as an entire sentence. Charles could see the exaggerated steps in the grass and the squeals as kids rushed past. He tried to hold the memory in the present together as long as he could.

Charles made his way to the softball fields where colleagues battled their children in the annual Centrigroup Parent-Child Kickball Championship. Mr. Samuels stood on the mound, ball at his hip. His weight gain in the past month was alarming: his chest had become bosomy and his abdomen puffed out his picnic tee. The red patch on his neck had grown into a ping pong ball-sized lump. Mr. Samuels squared off against his daughter, Lily,

with a runner on second. To goad her, Mr. Samuels turned to his outfield and waved them forward. “Light hitter,” he chided, and the four parental outfielders took three steps in. “Easy out now, easy out.” Lily knitted her little brow. Mr. Samuels brought the ball to his chest, brought his arm behind him, and wheeled around, faking a throw to second. The runner, Terrence Malcolm, one of the few black children at the picnic, slid hard into second. “You better watch yourself, T-bone!” Mr. Samuels said. “Next time you won’t be so lucky.” Terrence stuck his tongue out when Mr. Samuels turned his back.

Mr. Samuels corkscrewed a high-bouncer that caromed to the right away from Lily. She kicked and the ball glanced off the side of her foot skittering to the backstop. Lily stumbled and slow-fell to a seated position on the infield dirt. “You don’t have to hit a homerun for your mom and me to love you,” Mr. Samuels said.

Lily stood up, dusted off her shorts, and peered at Mr. Samuels, her brow tightening further, her mouth a straight line. She readied herself in her stance, right foot back, hands at her sides, fingers wiggling—no movement otherwise. “I’m sending the same pitch. See if you can hit it this time.” And Mr. Samuels did, though he spun the ball even more tightly as he released it. The ball would have rolled past the plate well outside, but Lily strode to meet it three feet in front of the plate, circling it like a boxer having found the perfect hole. The ball soared into right field.

It sailed over the head of the right fielder, landing just inside the line and shooting into the corner. Lily, a bit surprised, hesitated until she heard the fair call. She rounded the bases with determined strides, arms and legs churning, ponytail swaying. Terrence sauntered home backwards. The right fielder, Gina, mechanical engineer, whom Charles had only met a few times in passing, booted the ball to the second baseman, who threw the ball to Mr. Samuels as Lily hustled down the third base line. Mr. Samuels pivoted and fired home.

In previous years Mr. Samuels had closely policed the rule against hitting anyone at or above the shoulders (and below the belt for men), even arguing that not only should kids get an extra base if hit above the shoulders, but also parents should forfeit a run. Some people would say the throw stayed high because Mr. Samuels side-armed the ball, hand under it slightly, causing it to lift as it headed home. Others would say the throw was a laser right at little Lily Samuels' head. Either way, the impact of the ball hitting Lily's face knocked her sideways off her feet. Parents and children alike gasped, and Mr. Samuels, mouth open, face drained of color rushed to Lily's side. However, Lily, determined to score, stood on shaky legs and stomped on the plate. Mr. Samuels knelt beside her, shaking his head apologetically.

For a second, a hush seemed to fall on the park. It was the last quiet moment Charles would get for the day. "Hey there, Chuck!" Natalie and another woman came from the direction of the bowl. "Some kind of party, right?"

"Right. Even during a recession, Centrigroup knows how to throw a party."

"Charles, have you met my partner, Sandy?"

Charles extended his hand. "Yeah, we met at the—"

"I remember. Christmas Party?" Sandy said.

"That's the one. Good to see you again."

"Is Linda here?" Natalie asked.

"No. Unfortunately not feeling well. She sends her best."

"She is a dynamite woman, Charles," Sandy said. "I hope you're treating her like a queen."

"Of course."

"Or someone else will," Sandy said.

“Have you guys checked out any of the activities?” Charles said. “Won any prizes?”

“Not yet. We’re thinking of entering the hammer throw,” Natalie said. Sandy gave a sidelong glance.

“Nat told me about this new guy, the Priest, who’s some kind of superhero.” Sandy said. “And I found his interview on the internet. So incredible. I hope I get to meet him.”

“Charles was there when the Priest saved Gertrude’s life,” Natalie said.

“No way. Were you freaking out?” Sandy said.

“Sort of. I didn’t know what was going on.”

“Is the Priest here?” Natalie asked.

“Haven’t seen him.

“Is Gertrude here?” Natalie asked.

“I thought I saw her.” Charles turned back toward the picnic tables where many people had coagulated. “Somewhere over there.”

“Let’s go talk to her,” Sandy said. “I want to see the flesh-and-blood her.”

“You know she’s going to make a full recovery, Charles?” Natalie said.

“I’d heard. Honestly, I haven’t seen her since.”

“You need to see how she’s doing,” Sandy said. Soon the three were picking their way through the crowd looking for Gertrude, she a living relic graced by the Priest. Instead, they found Asshole Kevin with his wife, Maddie. “Lovely to finally meet you,” Natalie said. “We’ve heard so much about you.”

Maddie had that healthy expectant mother look. As she shifted her weight, Charles could tell that she was doing her best to mask her myriad of discomforts, perhaps a sore back, cramping calves, immense pressure in her ribs, nights of interrupted sleep.

“Will this be your first?” Sandy asked.

“Yes,” Maddie said.

“We couldn’t be more excited,” Kevin said.

“Boy or girl?” Charles asked.

“Girl,” Maddie said.

“We hope to have a little girl sometime soon,” Sandy said. Maddie’s mouth formed a quiet O.

“Some of us feel more ready to be parents than others,” Natalie said.

“What do you do?” Sandy asked.

“I work for a nonprofit that gets community kids writing and publishing their work,” Maddie said.

“She’s not going to say it, but I will,” Kevin said. “She’s great at what she does, and they’re really going to miss her there.”

“I really like working there, but it’s the right thing to do to step away from it to stay at home with the baby.”

“She works almost exclusively with low-income kids. And it’s incredible.”

“Sounds like it’s a big loss for them,” Charles said.

Kevin and his wife moved on with the flow of the picnic goers, and Charles and Natalie and Sandy resumed their search for Gertrude. “Never thought he’d have such a beautiful and gracious wife,” Natalie said. Charles nodded to himself.

When they found Gertrude, she was seated at one of the tables, her husband at her side. She looked smaller than Charles remembered her even on the day of her emergency. Her voice was small, and Charles had to lean over to make out her words. She was doing okay. Coming along slowly. Still tired. Wanted to be out with people. There were other things Charles didn’t hear, but he noticed the effort she exerted to talk to him and Natalie

and Sandy. And he saw the parent-like worry in her husband's face, so he said, "Gertrude, it's so great to see you back on your feet again. We'd better get in line for some lunch. You want us to bring you back anything?"

Gertrude shook her head like one of those animatronic figures at a museum. Her husband gave a soft smile. The three of them left Gertrude and made their way to the buffet lines with buns and burgers and brats and potato salad. Cookies and cake and lemonade and punch. Darius, Terrence's father, came over and invited Charles to sit with him and his wife and three children. "And Linda too, of course. She's here?"

"Sick today. Killing her that had to miss this."

Darius smiled a kind of sad smile as if he could see through Charles' worn out phrase. One that said I'm sorry we haven't hung out more. That said I want to help but I don't know how. "That's too bad. Even so, me and Sharise would love to catch up with you. Terrence would be happy to see you too."

"Thanks." Since Darius had transferred from Mr. Samuels' department to Trowbridge's to work on surgical instrument design, he and Charles had seen each other less and less. "I'll make my way over there in a bit."

Word Nerd Jim worked his way up to Charles in line, half eaten corndog on his plate. "Do you ever get the feeling that this company picnic is meant to distract us?"

"No," Charles said. "What do you mean?"

"Have you seen the latest sales figures on the Tru BMI scanner?"

"How about no work conversations right now, okay? What's the word for that?"

"Verboten."

"That one."

"What's this?" Natalie said.

“Tru BMI.”

“I heard about that,” Natalie said. “Oof.”

“What’s the word on the HR front?” Jim said.

“Nothing yet. Other than we’ve been cced on some chains between the higher-ups. Seems like an uncomfortable holding pattern.”

“Can we?” Charles said. “Please?”

“Just thought you should you should know, boss man. My sister and I are sitting down that way if you’d like to join us.” He nodded his head to the left, slightly.

Clouds loomed overhead. “Jesus, looks nasty. I hope the rain holds until after we get to eat,” Sandy said. “This might be the only time we get through the line.” They piled their plates with chips and brats and burgers. “Go grab another plate, you two. I’ll hold your spots in line.”

They placed their plates on a nearby table. Jim introduced his sister to them. Amy from HR introduced her husband Mack. Gary shuffled past, cup in trembling hand, talking to himself, alone as usual. Darius caught Charles’ eye and waved at him to come over. Isabella, the intern, chased a kid across the grass. “Hey, there’s Linda,” Natalie said.

“Wait, where?”

“She just walked up.”

“Where?” He saw her at the edge of the Bowl scanning the crowd. Charles called her name and waved to her, but his voice was lost in the buzz conversation, the low drumroll of thunder. The band began to play “Stand by Me.” Linda cut left toward the tables opposite the food line.

“I gotta go talk to her.”

“Get a plate for her. We’ll flag her down.” They moved up the line back to Sandy. “What took you so long?” Sandy said in mock irritation. “I’ve had to fend them off. The rabid horde.” An excited murmur rose from the crowd: the Priest stood in the middle of the seating area as if he had appeared out of nowhere. “Sandy, quick! The Priest, you have to meet him. There’s something about beautiful people where I just want to touch them. His bald head. His noble bones.” Natalie and Sandy left the line and dropped their plates off and made their way to the Priest, along with Brenda, Mr. Samuels’ administrative assistant, and her husband and baby; Franklin from R&D and his girlfriend; the perpetual bachelor Tom Higgins; the twice-widowed Miriam Long; Bobby Jones and his wife and mini-clutch of evangelical Christians; Bernie the agnostic; Tammy the atheist; many people whose faces Charles remembered but whose names he could not place. Was that Darius and Sharise?

“Fuck this,” Charles said to no one in particular. He thought he saw Linda somewhere in the growing cluster, and he pushed his way through the throng of people to her, squeezing through an elbow here, a hip there. Someone knocked his plate into his chest and burger and lettuce and chips and potato salad bounced off his shirt. He dropped the rest and pushed forward. The stink of them, their excitement, heightened his anxiety. People reached to shake the Priest’s hand and say a kind word to him. Parents introduced their children to him, encouraged him to hold their babies. All of the sudden Linda was beside the Priest. The crowd seemed to tighten as the Priest began speaking to Linda, looking into her eyes. Charles called out to her as the crowd bucked against him, and his breath shortened as he struggled against the tide. A man’s curly beard brushed his face, a hand grazed his butt, and someone stepped on his right foot. Charles’ stomach pitched, overwhelmed with dread, and his body slowed, until the urge to touch the small of her back, speak her name, renewed his push. The wind changed direction and the sunlight dimmed and Charles felt sticky with

sweat. Linda and the Priest were walking toward the open grass shoulder to shoulder, and there was nothing he could do about it.

A tap-tap from the speakers grabbed his attention; he hadn't even noticed that the band had stopped playing. "Good afternoon." Mr. Samuels' voice shuddered through the air. "Can anybody— Can everybody hear me?" The crowd paused while there was a rustling and muttering from the stage. "Ah that's better. Good afternoon Centrigroupers! For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mr. Samuels, and I am a project engineer in the biomedical division of Centrigroup in the imaging and diagnostics department. I will be your MC for the afternoon. Take a seat, take a load off. Enjoy your lunches!"

The Priest and Linda were growing smaller and smaller on the horizon as the crowd of now disappointed Centrigroup employees meandered back to their seats. Charles worked to slip between the creases. "Pardon, pardon."

"Before we get to the all-important raffle, I would like to announce the winner of the Centrigroup Employee of the Year Award, something that gives me great pleasure to do because he happens to be one of my own." Charles felt what was coming and he shook his head. Even Samuels. "This man has gone above and beyond as he's assisted me in the development of the ESWL device that will revolutionize the field of medicine in how it treats cysts and tumors and clots, swelling Centrigroup's revenue in the process of course." A polite chuckle drifted through the crowd of employees, most of whom were now seated. "Bad joke, sorry. But back to our recipient. He's been the model assistant project manager while enduring a harrowing personal tragedy." Though the crowd had dissipated, Charles felt as if he was being squeezed. "I continually marvel at his dedication, productivity and professionalism throughout his ordeal." Fuck. He could no longer see them. How could he

not see them? “So, without further ado, please welcome the Centrigroup Employee of the year, Charles Vaiana, to the stage!”

At first, the crowd seemed surprised not to hear the Priest’s name, instead looking for a man whose name was little known outside of Mr. Samuels’ department. Charles had finally emerged on the far side of the landscape of tables caught between the pull to the stage and the desire to find Linda. “Charles? Where are you Charles. I know you’re out there somewhere.” Soon the employees murmured his name, louder, louder, and the decision was made for him. “Here! Here!” someone cried. Mr. Samuels surveyed the crowd, his hand a visor. “There you are! Get your butt up here!” The employees clapped and cheered. Charles threaded his way back through the picnic area toward the pavilion. His toe throbbed, his elbow tingled, and he felt light-headed. Part of him thought it was a joke. Him. Really. The initial clapping subsided and was followed by a long period of quiet. Charles heard whispers to his right, to his left. Had someone said that he was so brave? Most days he felt sedated. Clearly, Linda didn’t share their belief. He felt sick at the thought that everyone had seen her strolling through the park with the Priest. Aware of all the eyes on him, he smiled and brushed the front of his shirt, tacky from ketchup and mustard and grease. By the time he reached the pavilion, the sky had been painted dark gray. Mr. Samuels wrapped him up in an awkward hug, pushing Charles’ face into the nexus of his shoulder and chest. He smelled like eggs pickling. The growth on his neck quivered and seemed to inflate. “Say something,” Mr. Samuels said.

“What?”

“To the people of Centrigroup. Anything. You’re an inspiration.”

Here the mic. Here the pulpit.

“Anything.” Mr. Samuels nodded and the little lumpet bounced up and down. “Go on.”

Grabbing the microphone, Charles faced the crowd and searched for the Priest and Linda beyond them. The wind gusted through the picnic area. Cups toppled and rolled and napkins fluttered and danced. “I don’t know what to say.” He scanned the darkening horizon. “First, I guess, I would like to—” A large crack of thunder tore through the sky and the employees and their families gasped. Some followed with nervous laughter. “Wasn’t me, I promise.” More polite anxious laughter. “Um, I guess I should say thank you to a few people, right? But only a few so we can get to the raffle like Mr. Samuels said. First I would like to thank—” He’d spotted them, far off in the distance, two microscopic figures against the grey so close they could be touching.

He wouldn’t lose her this time. He would run out to her and he would embrace her and kiss her and whisper her name and tell her things would be better, they would.

Rain began pouring down. The Centrigroup employees and their families shrieked and rushed to the pavilion for shelter, and before Charles could react, the pavilion was packed with wet refugees. A wall of gray surrounded the pavilion. Linda and the Priest had disappeared in the mist.

Chapter 3

On a rainy weeknight in October, Charles returned to the office after hours to play a prank on Asshole Kevin. He had just come from a happy hour wings special with Kevin and Word Nerd Jim—\$8.00 for 30 wings and \$4.00 domestic pitchers till seven—and Kevin, after drinking a pitcher and a half on his own had said, “Did you ever figure out who wrapped your car in cling wrap last week?”

“Or who wrapped your phone in rubber bands?” Jim had added.

“Or put that escort service number in your speed dial?”

And so on. “Wait you guys—” Charles had said.

After several more minutes of being the butt of the joke, Charles downed the last of his beer and hurried out of the bar determined to hit Asshole Kevin with the best workplace prank any of them could conceive of. He didn’t have any idea what he was going to do to Kevin when he got there. In his mild fog and agitation, he was confident inspiration would hit him once he got to Kevin’s cubicle. The empty office was a bit eerie, the motion sensor-triggered lights flickering on revealing the abandoned corridors of the Maze, the industrial

hum whirring somewhere in the walls, floors or ceilings, the doors of the executives' offices gaping open, the sound of the rain pelting the panel windows. The air smelled like disinfectant and the carpet compressed stiffly under Charles' steps. Even though he knew he was the only one on the floor, he worried that someone might find him creeping around at an odd time or that someone might emerge from one of the darkened offices. Mr. Samuels' door stood ajar, and Charles felt beckoned to step into the darkness and root around Mr. Samuels' desk, for what he wasn't sure, perhaps some insight into what his continually expanding neck growth was. He resisted the temptation and made his way through one of the Maze's pathways until he arrived at Kevin's desk.

No ideas came to him.

He removed Kevin's stapler and all the extra staples, but realized Kevin could just grab another stapler from the supply closet.

He emptied the contents of Kevin's center drawer, sculpting a mound of paper clips, tacks, post-it notes, note cards, pens, pencils, and highlighters. The pile looked not so much funny as it was a mess, and Charles felt so embarrassed by his lack of originality and effort that he straightened the workspace and reorganized the drawer so it was neater than before.

He pulled pads of post-its from the supply closet and decided to blanket Kevin's entire cubicle with them, walls, desk, phone, keyboard, monitor. The prank was tedious and his progress was incredibly slow, so he pulled off the few he had stuck to the desk surface, crumpled them into a large ball and threw them down the corridor. He hurried back to the supply room and rifled through all the shelves (he could white out his cubicle name tag; he could color in the letters on his keyboard with sharpie; he could glue his desk drawers shut; he could line his chair with tacks just underneath the seat fabric), until he found a poster displaying the hazardous materials warnings hanging above the copier, and he pulled it down

from the wall and made a hundred copies of it. He would cover the cubicle, computer and desk with copies of the sign, and everyone who walked by would laugh because the implication would be that Kevin and everything he touched were hazardous, yes. And Jim would call it something like a “memorable jape.” And he could put a note in the center that just said “Guess Who, motherfucker.” He grabbed two extra rolls of tape before heading back to the cubicle.

When he returned to Kevin’s desk, something was different: Charles felt it before he saw it, almost as if there had been a change in the airflow throughout the empty floor. He scanned the cubicles then the row of executive office doors. On the second scan, he noticed Mr. Samuels’ door was closed, an ember of orange light seeping from the border. The thought that Mr. Samuels might find him mid-prank gave Charles a twitch of anxiety, so he walked toward the door to provide Mr. Samuels with an excuse as to why he was there afterhours. He was sure he would think of something plausible.

Charles stopped short of the door because he heard the muted voices of a man and a woman, their rhythms slow, their tones intimate and flirtatious. He couldn’t believe it: he had discovered Mr. Samuels in the midst of an affair. He backed away as quietly as he could, intending to gather up the papers he left at Kevin’s desk and slink away down the stairs.

But something called him back. A small voice, seemingly from outside his mind, urged him to creep up to the door, gently turn the handle, open the door a crack, and catch Mr. Samuels in his moment of extramarital lust. What a story he would be able to tell Kevin and Jim. “What a salacious yarn,” Jim would say.

His curiosity was inflamed. How would a man like Mr. Samuels, whose body had continued to expand month after month, seduce anyone? And how could either of them navigate his now egg-sized neck bulge? Would the lump change hues? Would it change

shapes? Would it swell from the excitement and rupture? Would it requisition so much blood flow that Mr. Samuels would be unable to perform? Did the woman in question fetishize tumors? Charles had read, sometime after the bulge's first appearance, that some cultures have believed men with such growths to be extremely sexually potent. What if, now, Mr. Samuels was able to seduce and satisfy women like a Greek god?

Charles' felt as if his whole body vibrated from a mixture of excitement and anxiety, and he had trouble steadying his hand. Though he would not be able to explain it, he feared what the growth might become. That, as a result of Mr. Samuels' anger, it would swell to an enormous size. That its palpitations would become rapid, raging. That the growth would radiate so brightly that Charles would never be able to look at anything else again.

He crouched by the door and pressed down on the handle slowly until he felt the latch release. Before pressing the door open, he calmed his breathing. His back tightened, his knees burned, and he shifted his weight forward slightly, nudging the door inward just enough for him to see into the office and glimpse Mr. Samuels' desk.

Here's what he saw: the shoulders and the back of the head of someone standing in front of the desk, and two women's legs dangled on either side of him—feet wearing some kind of black heels—as if straddling. The woman's face and most of the rest of her body was obscured by the man (perhaps she was leaning back seductively). He knew, in that instant, without knowing how he knew, the Priest stood before him. The woman, her voice really, shook Charles to the core. She said: "Forgive me father for I am about to sin."

Linda's. The same that sang Whitney Houston off-key in the shower when she thought Charles was down in the kitchen. The same that read to their son, making different voices for each of the animals. The same that whispered in his ear heavy and breathily in black-ink night.

Now, most men would have burst into that room and grab the Priest by the shoulders and fling him to the floor and roar, mouth frothing. Most might even grab their wife by the wrist and yank her out of the office into the hall despite pleas what they're doing was painful and some might even turn and hit her in the mouth or the eye (perhaps assuring the end of the marriage right there), but Charles was not one of those men. He was a man who understood reality as a series of possibilities where when one facet is proven to be true, all other avenues are closed. There is ambiguity in the recognition of a voice. But if he were to shove the Priest aside and see Linda sitting on that desk (perhaps fully clothed, perhaps partially unclothed) there would be no denying the reality of the thing he feared most.

Instead, Charles ran the fastest he could remember running in his life. Down the hall, left past the break room and into the far stairwell, down twenty-two flights to the lobby. He sprinted across the lobby to the garage access, bounding up three flights to the Prius. He barreled down the ramps, taking wide turns, almost colliding with the gate arm as he tried to exit. Rain splattered on his windshield as he sped along downtown streets, ducking around cars, and running lights. He was shaking so much that he had trouble seeing straight and keeping the wheel steady. He pulled into a gas station and banged on all the surfaces in range with forearm, wrist, forehead, fist. He stopped when his hands throbbed and he noticed blood trickling from a cut above his left eye.

Lightning threaded its way across the sky and thunder clapped and he felt its concussion travel from the edges of his car into his steering wheel. Charles stepped into the rain, letting water overwhelm his eyes, nose and mouth. The downpour washed the blood from his forehead. His clothes hung heavy on him like a layer of dying skin. He spread his arms wide, touching the street lamp pole with the tip of his right middle finger and

wondering whether a lightning strike would hit him first from above or below and whether he would be able to tell the difference.

“Sir?” a woman called from under the gas pump canopy. “Are you okay?” She stood at the edge of the overhang just out of reach of the rain. “Are you hurt?”

What should he tell her? “No.” His voice sounded heavy and he wasn’t sure the woman heard him.

“What are you doing?” She sounded more afraid now that he told her he was uninjured.

“Just trying to enjoy the rain. Isn’t it nice?” His smile was an imposter.

She frowned as if she was trying to understand a foreign language. “Would it help if I got you a coffee or something inside?”

He filled up the largest cup, the monster 28 ounce of weathered Styrofoam, and why not? She offered on her own, he was soaked and needed something to warm him, and if you had to weigh the sin of taking advantage of a stranger’s kindness against the sin of screwing your husband’s co-worker on his boss’ desk, you’d probably ask for one of those giant bottles of Jim Beam to go with it. As it was the lady waited patiently as he filled his cup, selected the type of creamer he wanted and fumbled with fastening the lid on top. He looked up at her and grimaced apologetically and she smiled at him as if he was doing something kind for her. She had a pleasant face, soft kind eyes, laugh lines around her mouth, chestnut hair pulled into a ponytail that fell onto the back of her long red raincoat. She was about Linda’s height but with a slighter build. She trailed him as he walked up to the counter, shoes squishing with each step. They walked out together and she wished him a safe drive home and he thanked her for the coffee, resisting the urge to hug her.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle and the newfound quietness made Charles uneasy. It was as if the woman's kindness had mollified the storm. He wasn't ready to calm down. He climbed into the Prius and locked the doors. He turned the radio to a classic rock station and cranked it louder than he thought his ears could stand. He removed the coffee cup lid and tossed it onto the backseat. The repeated thud of the stereo's bass caused his hands to shake. He brought the cup lips and felt the heat radiating from the top, steam clinging to his chin and cheeks and the underside of his nose. He drank the coffee in gulps, his tongue, mouth and lips burning, a voice in his head screaming at him to stop, another demanding he sac up. Coffee spilled out the corner of his mouth and down his chin, onto his shirt. He drank until he thought he might spit the coffee out and he took a short break and drank again. When he was finally finished, his mouth was raw, and he threw the cup in the back seat with its lid.

Still, he couldn't go home, not yet, he couldn't be the first one home. He rode down Clapham Street barely faster than a roll, past a series of restaurants and pubs to see if he could spot any couple or lone man who looked as miserable as he felt, but he only found pleasant, civil people. Disgusted, he drove home.

When he pulled into the driveway, the only evidence of Linda's return was the flickering light of the TV through the window. Charles gathered himself before stepping out of the car. He probed the cut above his eye with his forefinger for the boundaries of its tenderness, and he dug at it with his nail. He rearranged his still wet hair in an attempt to cover it. He pinched his cheeks and slapped his skin to return the glow to face he'd once had from drinking the hot coffee. He thought of silly pep talks that under different circumstances he would laugh at. *All you do is win. You're hung like a beast: all you have to do is show her. You're so money that a famous sculptor will etch your face into the side of an overpass on a toll road outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma.*

Linda was stretched on the couch, her limbs overwhelmed by gravity, her hair a tangle, and her pumps were strewn on the floor (the same as the ones in Samuels' office?) as if someone had thrown them to the ground intending to make a mess. In the dark, Charles could not tell if her eyes were open or closed, and when he shut the door and stepped into the room, she did not move.

He stood by the couch for one minute, two. Linda was streaming *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* on mute, and Juliette Binoche was wearing a fedora. From the pile of clothes that was Linda, a groggy voice said, What are you doing standing in the dark?

I just got home. Why is the house like this?

I must have fallen asleep. You know how tired I've been.

Charles switched on the lamp and the room flooded with light. He blinked rapidly as his eyes tried to adjust to the sudden change, but Linda writhed and clamped her hands over her eyes. Jesus! What'd you do that for? You could have warned me at least.

Sorry.

Realization crept over Charles in a series of minor shocks, and he hid his epiphany. It was the way he'd observed almost exact replicas of this scene several times before on nights when she'd said she'd gotten a ride from Natalie after hanging out with some of the women from the office, and she'd drape herself on the couch as if her body was unraveling. Now it meant something entirely different: the way Linda's shoes (the same black kitten heels) were cast onto the carpet like casings; the way her earrings, necklace, and bracelet, all gifts from Charles from a birthdays or Christmases or anniversaries (he didn't remember which, honestly) were clumped together in a pile on the side table; the way her hair was swept and whirled; the way her body sank into the cushions; the way her eyes struggled to open and her limbs quivered as she attempted to lift them from the couch, not so much from the fatigue

of the work day, but from the exertion of a sexual liaison. The absence of her wedding and engagement rings (surely he must have noticed she'd not been wearing them earlier), the lack of tan lines on her ring finger.

Are you well?

She stretched and yawned, her upper lip sticking to her teeth, her throat and tongue quivering in a way that made it seem like she might bite down on him if he stood too close. Will you be a babe and get me something to eat. Something to munch on. She turned up the volume of the movie.

Sure. Charles felt heavy as if Linda had transferred her lethargy to him. He trudged mechanically, his limbs moving as some autonomic response, his executive function having been switched off. He flipped on the light and pulled out a mango from the fruit bowl. Mango okay? he called. He couldn't decipher Linda's response over the audio. He massaged the mango's skin under the stream of the faucet and watched water drip onto the cutting board as he held it a few inches above the surface. There was something he wished he might say to Linda so she would jump up from the couch, run into the kitchen, wrap her arms around his waist, stand on her toes and kiss the back of his neck. He knew it was there buried under his numbness and anger. He sliced the two broad sides of the mango, then the final two strips along the edge of the nut. The flesh dropped easily to the plate and juice ran down his fingers, the blade. Just last week he read a story of a murder-suicide: husband finds out wife is having an affair, confronts her, shoots her, shoots self (faces, each), bodies not discovered for three days, nasty cleanup Charles assumed. He couldn't imagine himself doing that—his anger was dull and corroding, not wrathful. But it would be so easy, wouldn't it? A slice here, a slice there.

He laughed to himself and wondered how Linda might react if she knew his wandering thoughts.

He handed Linda the plate of mango and a spoon. Mango? Hon, I was hoping for something salty and unhealthy.

It's restorative. Charles removed his wet dress shirt and dropped it on the floor.

What are you doing?

Going for a run.

It's almost ten.

Charles pulled off his undershirt and dropped it in the vicinity of his dress shirt. He kicked off his shoes and pulled down his pants, throwing them off to the side. He stood tall in his underwear.

What's gotten into you? Can't you undress upstairs like a normal person?

I got a few things on my mind I gotta sort out.

What about all this— But Charles wasn't interested in what she might say now: he bounded up the stairs and pulled on his running clothes and laced up his training shoes. When Charles returned, Linda was scooping out the mango with her teeth, the spoon having dropped to the floor. He was hit with a pang of longing, so he said I love you before bolting out the front door not waiting for the love-you-be-careful-don't-go he knew would not come.

§

The hunger for competition had returned two years ago. Charles entered his first 5K in almost a decade and, during that decade, he had become the old man he and his college teammates used to believe they would never become. At the starting line, he sized up the others and, based on the combination of girth and gray the runners in his age group had,

Charles decided that he was going to worry about keeping up with the some of the top younger guys. Though he had begun running again a few weeks ago after almost a half-year hiatus, he felt he could still maintain a strong pace and, with the prod of trying to prove to this crowd that he was still young enough to compete, he felt he might win. He tried not to ogle at the girls as they stretched and took their warm up jogs, not to long for a slimmer, more active Linda, to suppress the urge to impress them with his maintained athleticism and prolonged youth.

When he settled on a runner to pace, he wasn't sure if it was because he believed the guy would win or if it was because he seemed to flirt with many of the young bouncy women running in the race. True, the guy was tall with long legs and a lean muscular frame, but he corralled his long hair with a white NBA headband, and his shoes and shirt were both ordinary and somewhat worn. Charles decided he would beat him too.

The starting line was right next to a large pavilion with a candy cane roof, and the course followed the network of paths that weaved through the park among the trees. The racers, about a hundred fifty in total, lined up shoulder to shoulder and, when the starting tone sounded, Charles surged off the line vying for a position at the front. He felt like a predator on the hunt.

Headband loped to the front of the racers with his long strides as if he was gliding across the pavement. Charles trailed just behind him in a pocket of runners, all hoping to maintain position. Charles pushed into the second place slot and, as one of the others challenged him, he surged forward to assert his place. He smiled to himself as, one by one, the challengers for second dropped back. The morning was cool, and light from the rising sun fractured against the leaves. Birds sang their calls and responses and squirrels darted in the grass and spiraled up tree trunks, but Charles focused on only Headband and his

fluttering hair. At the mile mark, Charles felt strong and content to place second behind this graceful runner—there was something soothing in his gait. At the mile and a half mark, still feeling strong and hunger returning, Charles viewed Headband as a caribou bumbling across the Canadian tundra in terror while he was the pursuing insatiable wolf who would bring him down.

At mile two, Charles decided to make his move. He churned forward, closing the gap between him and Headband, who seemed to have maintained the same stride from the beginning. Headband glanced back at Charles as he approached and accelerated reestablishing the distance between them. A fire burned in Charles' chest, but he pushed himself to maintain his pace. He felt his hips over rotating, his arms breaking out of their slots and slicing across his body. Headband would not beat him.

Headband looked back and said, in surprisingly unlabored tones, "See ya, old man." His strides, for the first time became quick and determined and he surged forward, expanding the distance between him and Charles. A spark pushed Charles to max effort and, for a moment, the coach in Charles head repeated, don't let the pretty boy beat you, and he ignored his body's alarm bells. Despite Charles' desperation push, Headband's lead grew larger and larger, and the internal coach said, Nope you're done old-timer, and Charles' energy plummeted, his legs felt leaden, and his pace slowed to a jog. His deep huffs sounded like sobs. At the two-and-a-half-mile mark, Charles heard the steps of the runners behind him a small parade of those he had left behind streamed past him with consistent and calm strides. The flutter of panic that he was a failure was snuffed out by cramping muscles. The game was up.

Charles finished eleventh to Headband's first, second in his age group, and one spot behind the girl Headband had been flirting with just before the race began. When he crossed

the finish line, he veered over to the water station, grabbed two cups, pouring the water on his head, and collapsed onto the grass. His head pounded and he felt like he was being buffeted on roiling water.

“Hey old man,” a voice said over him. Headband loomed like a spire. “Stand up for a bit. Don’t want you passing out.” He extended his hand for Charles to grab hold of.

The pressure in Charles’ face narrowed his vision and the sight of this imagined offering of help him. Something about Headband’s hand and forearm seemed illusory, and Charles hesitated to lift his own arm. Mottled clouds masked the sun, and Headband was covered in shadow. For a moment, Charles thought he might be able to pull Headband down, but Headband drew Charles to his feet with one easy pull. “You ran pretty well out there. If it was a two-mile race, you might have overtaken me.”

Charles replayed this memory as he ran through the streets of his neighborhood on the wet pavement, wondering if he could tell anyone from his running club about his discovery of Linda’s affair, perhaps even Headband (whose name was Dylan) himself. Charles made the turn down a long steady hill past quiet houses and apartments and a couple of neighborhood restaurants. Their lights reflected off the puddles, and the sound conversation from the covered outdoor seating mixed with the sounds of Charles’ breathing. His feet hitting the pavement. Charles tried not to look in at the faces of the diners: he wanted them to seem him fly by and marvel at his speed and concentration. The sidewalk was a bit slick and his legs were fighting his upper body and, though he was not breathing heavily, he found he couldn’t run much faster than a semi-rigorous jog. He replayed the moments of the race and his churn to catch Dylan, then the images of the Priest standing before Linda to spur him to a sprint, but each attempt failed. He trudged past the diners with

heavy steps and he knew that all they saw, if they noticed anything at all, was a wilting body tottering past.

After Charles had rehydrated and recovered his breath at the end of the first race, Dylan invited him to brunch with some of the other runners and, since Linda had declined Charles' invitation to watch him run, he went along. As a post-race routine, Dylan and his friends would brunch, ordering heaps of breakfast tacos at a local Mexican diner and split them among each other. Chorizo and egg. Black bean avocado. Potato egg and cheese. Salsa verde. Too tired to do much talking, Charles listened, and he was amazed at how carefree this group of runners was and how young he felt around him. Even the guy in his early forties (the one in his age group who'd beaten him) glowed. And so Charles ate and ate until his lips and tongue burned so much it was uncomfortable to move them. He drank two large cups of water, though it barely helped. He ducked into the bathroom, dabbing his eyes and cleaning out his nose. He realized, noticing the flush of red in his cheeks and the heavy soreness in his legs, that he felt lively again. When Dylan asked him if he wanted to join their running Meetup group, he said yes.

Over the next year and a half, he trained and trained. He joined Dylan and the others in the mornings before work when the sky was a mixture of pre-dawn purples and grays. He ran with them in the autumn rains, in the still sharp air of winter. He raced on Saturdays, finishing several places behind Dylan each time. They ate carne tacos and whole racks of ribs and ban mí hot dogs together. They went ballroom dancing at Casa Loma, watched late night screenings of cult classics.

When Charles returned from his labored run, he wiped his shoes on the mat, flicking drops of rain from his hair and arms. Linda had fallen asleep and scenes from the movie played on. Charles removed his shoes and tucked them in the cubby by the door. Linda was

wrapped in the blanket, and only her face and her right hand were visible. He leaned down to kiss her forehead because it felt like the appropriate thing to do, though he stopped himself midway, his face lingering a few feet over her, lips about to pucker (what might she have said had she woken up at that time). When he realized what he was doing, he was filled with a particular self-disgust. Still, before he went upstairs, he tucked the blanket around her.

Chapter 4

Of course, at Centrigroup the next day, Charles was paired with the Priest. Charles had just overheard the excitement (someone had broken into Mr. Samuels' office the night before, might have been an act of corporate espionage) when Mr. Samuels gave the order. "Walter has been handling the cost projections of the ESWL, and I want to make sure that you and he are on the same page." The jumbo egg-shaped pod on Mr. Samuels neck seemed to throb with irritation. Mr. Samuels was wearing black sweatpants to the office to cover up his rapid weight gain. ("Washing machine conked out," he'd said, and Charles had responded with an "I hate when that happens.")

"I can slide him the summary, no big."

"Teamwork. How are we going to build it if we don't partner with each other?"

"My place or his?"

Mr. Samuels tilted his head toward the Priest's cubicle (which happened to be Charles' former one), so Charles decided he would be as productively unproductive as possible. He shuffled and reshuffled irrelevant documents, slid them in and out of the

expandable folder he would carry over to the Priest's until he was certain Mr. Samuels was deep in his office. Charles scanned his inbox and counted three he could respond to right away (Asshole Kevin's link to an article about an Obama conspiracy didn't count).

Dear Mr. Thibault,

Thank you for your in-depth feedback on St. Agnes Hospital's test use of the Centrigroup Tru BMI Units...

Dear Dr. Underwood,

I appreciate your interest in coming to Centrigroup to speak to our engineers about your preferred methods of mitigating the effects of tumors and polyps in the colon...

Dear Ms. Gradiola,

I'm emailing to request an estimate on the production and shipment of Centrigroup's Enhanced MRCoG units...

Charles hadn't yet finished the request to Ms. Gradiola when he felt the Priest standing over him. "Hi Charles." His smile was disarming. "Samuels told me you'd be coming by with the specs on the ESWL, am I wrong about that?" And of course that reminded him of the scene the night before, where he believed Linda had said, "Tell me how wrong this is, Father," and the Priest had said, "This is *so* wrong."

What was on his desk: a brown-bag lunch that included an avocado, a blueberry muffin he had picked up at the snack stand on the sidewalk outside Centrigroup's building, a peanut butter and marmalade sandwich on multi-grain wheat; a stack of blank index cards that he intended to use as a means of organizing his work and running schedule over the next two weeks; a picture of Brody hanging upside down from the backyard tire swing; his opened laptop, unplugged; the latest issue of *Runner's World*; the folder of ESWL project specs; a metallic mesh cup that held a cluster of pens and pencils surrounding an archaically large pair of scissors whose handles were speckled black and silver, ones that Charles couldn't recall ever using. But now, he could see himself plucking them from holder and thrusting them into the Priest's neck just below the curve of his jaw—the handles of the

scissors would become a rusty-red brown—and this threat to his marriage would be laid to rest. And now, a perfect window of opportunity had opened; Mr. Samuels' door was closed and no one was walking the corridor by his desk. He could claim the Priest attacked him and no one would be able to dispute it.

But the Priest's physical strength and positional advantage stopped him. Even if Charles could grab the scissors quickly, he would have to stand and jab before the Priest could react. And what if Mr. Samuels opened his door right then, and what if Word Nerd Jim or Natalie or, God forbid, Linda came down the corridor just as he attacked. Too many potential witnesses. Besides, Charles had avoided engaging in violence throughout his life, the thought of it made his body shiver and his hands shake. He believed that what separated people from animals was the capacity not to harm others when angry or afraid. Would his attacking the Priest rob him of his own humanity?

The flair of rage passed, settling as an undercurrent of resentment. The Priest, after all, was not the only person party to Linda's betrayal. There was something, too, in the way the Priest was looking at him. The words "am I wrong" might have irritated Charles for their condescension, but here they seemed like a genuine question of the Priest's misunderstanding. Charles couldn't put his finger on it, but the Priest had a certain quality that softened behaviors Charles found maddening in other people. "You're not wrong," Charles said. "I got caught up in some loose ends I need to take care of. I'll see you over at your desk in a bit."

"Good." Again, a seeming genuineness.

At the Priest's cubicle, the Charles reviewed all the facets of the ESWL project with the Priest line by line, articulating the purpose of each preliminary decision and projected

cost. Every so often, the Priest would interrupt and say, “Can we cut this?” or “Is this the cheapest option?” And Charles would make note and say, “I’ll look into this.”

For hours, they settled into a back and forth rhythm with Charles describing the different elements and projected costs, and the Priest asking questions, until the Priest said, “You hungry?”

Charles had forgotten about eating. His head throbbed and his hands ached and his stomach felt the way it did just after a race, inflated and dull. But he knew that this might be the only moment that he could get away from the Priest. “I could eat.”

“Atta boy. My stomach’s been growling for the better part of two hours, but you were churning through this stuff like a champ, so I didn’t want to disrupt your momentum. And I didn’t want to look like a wuss in front of you.”

It was at a moment like this that Charles wished he was gifted with a quick tongue. Later, he would think to say, “Only a narcissist would worry about that,” (not great, he knew, but nothing fueled by contempt really is), but instead he said, a bit too sympathetically, “Not at all.”

“That’s a load off my mind.” The Priest flashed a smile in a way that made Charles feel ashamed for not understanding the banter and the integral part he might play in it. “So what do you say? Take thirty and grab a bite? I don’t imagine you allow yourself to take more of a break than that.” He lifted his corduroy jacket from off his chair and swung it over his shoulder.

“I brought my own lunch.” Charles started to back out of the Priest’s cubicle.

“That’s right, the brown-bagger. Your discipline reminds me of some people I encountered in the church. A quality I never had anyway.”

“I’ll bet.” Charles worried he may have given himself away. “Since you left.”

“True. I always admired the dedication, though.” The Priest squeezed the bridge of his nose with the tips of his fingers as if he was about to clear his sinuses. “Well, maybe next time. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be wandering the corridors of the Maze begging someone to grab a bite with me.”

The Priest headed down the hall toward the elevators, which could take him down two floors to Linda’s desk, and a panic tickled Charles gut: if he did not intervene, the Priest persuade Linda to go with him for a late lunch, and then to motel for a quickie, which then could lead to an overnight liaison, which then could turn into a series of quickies and liaisons (the idea made the room shift, and Charles had to brace himself against the bristly cubicle wall), which would then lead to Linda divorcing him and marrying the Priest and giving birth to his children, the prospect of which made Charles’ skin itch, so he said, “Walter, I’ll go with you. You’re buying, right?”

The Priest stopped, turned, smiled. “Of course. I don’t have anyone else to spend the money on. Sliders good for you?”

Charles avoided eating fried food and too much red meat, but he said, “Sounds great.”

At Ajax’s Burgers, the Priest equated his generosity with a license to plumb the depths of Charles’ personal history. With a mouth full of mini-buffalo burger, the Priest said, “Charles, I’ve heard that you’ve worked at Centrigroup a while. Tell me about your time here.”

Charles the sriracha on his grilled chicken sandwich burned his nostrils. “What do you want to know?” His mouth burned (he hadn’t really known what sriracha sauce was), his upper lip was sweating, and his stomach felt uneasy. He readjusted himself, sliding back and forth on the ruby red vinyl to appear more comfortable than he was. A heating vent at the

base of the wall near the table belched hot dry air and Charles suddenly felt as if he was being interrogated.

“Whatever you feel like telling me. I want to understand what makes people tick in a place like Centrigroup.”

The lunch rush was long gone, and the fall afternoon light cast a distracting glow on the room. Charles became aware of the conversation the wait staff was having near the grill counter, and for some reason, the possibility that they might hear what he had to say made Charles even more hesitant to answer the Priest’s question. He drank water to cool his tongue and buy time. “It’s not a bad job.” His voice sounded tighter than he’d intended.

“But you. You come to work every day, sit at that desk outside Mr. Samuels’ office, work with a diligence not found in almost any other employee, and you don’t complain, don’t falter. It’s incredible.”

“Not really. I’m just doing my job.”

“Ah yes.” The Priest began spinning the ketchup bottle on the table. “Of course you would say that.”

“What should I say instead?” Charles glanced at the frame posters to hide his irritation. They depicted snapshots of an America that barely registered with Charles, a white all blond family smiling in their polished baby blue T-bird; a father and son playing catch with multi-fingered mitts; a boy, freckled and green-eyed tossing a newspaper onto the front stoop of a house on his morning route; an aproned housewife with a blond ponytail setting a tray on the dinner table for her husband and 2.0 children. At first, Charles assumed that the placards were relics from the past that the Ajax’s Burgers executives had unearthed and thought would contribute to the old-timey ambiance. But then he noticed that the housewife, instead of serving her family a home-cooked meal, was setting down a tray of

Ajax Burgers. And the paperboy was distributing papers with Ajax advertisements. The father and son baseball players were wearing Ajax baseball caps. Charles began to laugh, and the Priest said, “What? Is the question funny?”

“Not at all. I have no idea how to answer it.”

“Such a good company man. Not willing to put your own wants before the company’s.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I have an idea, company man,” the Priest said. “Let’s call it a day. We’ve plowed through enough material to last us through the week already. What do you say we grab a beer at Gordo’s?”

“I don’t know how I can turn that down.”

At Gordo’s, the Priest won all the parlor games. He ran the table in pool twice, obliterated him in both Cricket and 301 (Charles’ darts seemed to have a hard time sticking into the cork), and he shut out Charles in foosball even though he played using only one hand. Charles told himself that he wasn’t trying anyway, that if he’d tried at these games when he was younger, he wouldn’t even have to try now. Besides, if the Priest challenged Charles to a race, or something that really mattered, he’d surely win.

The sun had set, and Charles reached for his jacket. “It’s been fun, but I think it’s that time.”

The Priest pushed down on Charles’ forearm preventing him from putting on his jacket. “You can’t go yet. We’ve barely started. I know this other bar down the street that has great specials all night. Let’s go.”

“I should probably be getting home. My wife—”

“Clearly isn’t waiting for you back home for dinner because you haven’t called her yet. Come on. Shoot her a text. Tell her you’re out with a friend and you’ll be back no later than ten.”

“Nine.”

“Nine-thirty. What we’re doing is essential to workplace chemistry.”

The Priest’s pitch was surprisingly persuasive, the way his tone was a combination of power and gentleness, the way his eyes locked onto your face with a determined hope. “All right,” Charles said. He texted Linda, saying only that he was out and would be home late.

“Where to?”

“Good man.” The Priest led him a few blocks over to a place that was already full of people whose voices Charles could hear even before they turned the corner. Inside, they found a man enlisting people to compete in an arm-wrestling competition. “What do we win?” the Priest said.

“Entrée for you and a friend.” The man scribbled on his clipboard. “You in?”

“Hell yeah,” the Priest said. “Both of us.”

“I’m not so sure,” Charles said.

“Don’t listen to him,” the Priest said. He gave the man both their names. “I’ll see you in the championship match, company man,” the Priest said.

Charles lost in the first round in under five seconds to a beefy-armed college senior, then in the consolation bracket to a man with a bushy gray beard and a wiry physique who smelled like rotting peanuts. He felt a soreness in his thumb when he shook the old man’s hand.

Charles looked for the Priest to tell him he was leaving. But the Priest wasn’t among the men at the bar vying for the busty bartender’s attention, nor the people drifting under

the globe lights hanging in the courtyard, nor was he in the bathroom with ironic and subversive messages scribbled on the walls. Charles felt light headed, so he returned to the bar to get some water and an order of fried pickles. As people sat down, Charles gave a nod, but he didn't say a word as he dug his fingers into his basket and popped the pickles into his mouth. Linda hadn't responded to his message, so he thought he should text her "I'm out having quality time with your lover" (or something like that). He brushed the screen with his fingertips leaving a smudge of grease and a trail of breading, wiped his hands on his slacks, and paid his tab. He would ask the Priest where he went when he saw him in the morning. He'd grab a coffee before he hit the road.

A large group of both men and women had gathered tightly-packed around one of the tables, bent low like a series of compressed springs waiting to uncoil. Charles made his way over, pulled up a chair and stood on it so he could see what was happening inside the circle. Sitting at a table was the Priest, elbow on the table, sleeve rolled down, hand open. His forearm was compact and hairless, as if he'd shaved it, with an Omega tattooed on it in dark ink. It was a forearm you'd see projected onto a movie screen. The man who sat across the table was larger than the Priest, though not overly so, but he looked menacing, mouth crooked as if readying to spit, brow compressed, eyes narrowed. The Priest maintained eye contact, his eyes even brighter than before.

The two men bumped fists and locked hands. The official reiterated the rules and peered at the two men's grips, watched as their bodies shifted into position. When the official signaled the start, the menacing man surged against the Priest's arm. For his part, the Priest stayed calm, his face focused, betraying no duress, and though his arm tilted, his wrist didn't break, and he pushed it back upright and began exerting pressure on his opponent's thumb and wrist. Charles was amazed by the aesthetic bulge of the Priest's muscles, the way

he refused to let his arm move, the way he methodically gained leverage, the way he stayed almost unaffected in the face of a seething grunting man. The way, in an instant, the Priest drove the other man's arm down to table surface.

The ring of people cheered as if they had been a part of something momentous. The official held up the Priest's winning arm and declared him the champion. A few men came up to him and shook his hand. A hundred fifty years ago, money would have exchanged hands and some people would have argued over the legitimacy of the contest, and the Priest would have taken a shot or two of whiskey, stood up, and left the bar with his posse. Instead, the official gave the Priest a couple of coupons, and Charles climbed down from his chair. "Sorry I didn't make it to the final," he said.

"Company man! Come join me for a free meal." They both ate large, overly greased burgers on puffed up buns. Charles felt a type of muted enthusiasm to be the one who ate at the Priest's table after his win, though he didn't want to act like a fanboy. With the Priest, it seemed, almost anything was possible.

When Charles returned to the office, it was after ten and Mr. Samuels was waiting for him. His tie was loose, his jacket a bit ruffled, and his hair stuck up on one side as if he had been running his hand through it repeatedly. The growth on his neck seemed larger and more alert than before, palpitating with a kind of impatience. "So how did it go? You two were gone so long, I thought you guys out looking at condos together." He laughed at his own joke.

"I'd say it was a productive day all around," Charles said. "Got through lots of numbers into the afternoon. Then got in some quality co-worker relationship building time." Charles packed up his laptop and power cord. He organized the papers on his desk into neat little piles.

“Great to hear. I’m sure you’ll be back at it tomorrow, bright and early.”

“You bet.”

Mr. Samuels turned to leave, but waved his left hand in the air as if hailing a cab or reaching into the air for an epiphany. “I forgot to ask you something.”

“Like I said, I’m looking forward to working with the Pr-Walter tomorrow.”

“No, no, something else.” Mr. Samuels suddenly looked withered and the lump drooped, the color drained from his skin. “Did you hear about the break-in in my office last night?”

“I did. It was bouncing around the office this morning. Didn’t catch any details.”

“I want you to look at something.” He trotted over to his desk and motioned Charles to follow. “Look here. First thing I noticed was my bitty cactus was out of place, and I thought, huh, that’s odd.” The lump throbbed, a type of agreement. Had it actually grown in the twelve hours since Charles had last seen him it? Or perhaps he imagined it, his day with the Priest taking more out of him than he realized. “It was as if the cactus had up and relocated to a different part of the room. I thought I had lost my mind.”

“Couldn’t you have placed the cactus somewhere else without even thinking about it?” Charles thought his voice sounded a bit too desperate. “I do that all the time.”

“That’s what I thought, at first.” The growth paused as if it was holding its breath or striking a dramatic pose. “But then I noticed a trail of his dirt had been spilled on my desk and that he was slightly crooked, as if he’d fallen out of his little pot.”

“That is odd.”

“Exactly. And as I swept the dirt into the trashcan, I noticed a few of my stacks were all twisted, and even a few pages had fallen to the floor.” Samuels crouched on his hands and knees and pointed to the place on the floor under the desk where he had made his discovery.

“So what did you do?”

“What do you think I did?” The growth was surging now, straining against Mr. Samuels’ skin. “I took an inventory of everything in my office.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

Mr. Samuels smacked his fist in his open palm. “It was! Took me most of the day, though.”

“Anything missing?”

“No. That’s the weird thing, Charles. Nothing was taken, as far as I could tell. But that doesn’t mean documents weren’t photographed. First I thought this was an act of corporate espionage, but I now wonder if it’s a message from one of the other Centrigroup management teams. Intra-office terror, if you will.” He brushed the spines of his little cactus with his fingertips. “The emails that’d been disturbed! Very important indeed.”

“Couldn’t it have been a mistake by one of the cleaning crew?” Charles noted the arrangement of the desk and he tried to determine, based on where they were situated now, how close they were to where Linda was sitting last night.

“That’s what makes it so clever. This whole thing looks like some kind of innocent mistake. But the cleaners rarely make mistakes like this. And when they do, they leave a note, something like ‘Sorry for the error and what inconvenience it has caused.’ And usually they leave a candy bar or a handful of mints. And look at this.” Mr. Samuels pointed to a tear at the corner of his desk pad that was barely noticeable. “See? Proof of intrusion, clear as day. Someone or some people went through everything on and around my desk to find some details about the ESWL project.”

Charles imaged what might have happened last night: he could see the Priest hoisting Linda onto the desk after she had pulled down her panties in the way she did during

moments of passionate desperation, could see her knocking the cactus over with her left ass-cheek; she would have leaned back at first, as the Priest fumbled with his belt buckle, her right hand grazing the stack of papers, dislodging the top few and sending them sailing to the ground in a wide arc, perhaps without noticing; he could see the Priest righting the cactus, placing it further away from Linda's trembling body, ignoring the trail of soil that had scattered across the surface of the desk; he could see Linda reaching for the Priest's hardening manhood, caressing it in the way she liked to do; he could see the closed eyes, the contorted faces, hear the heavy breathing, the ascending pitches in their voices; he could see the frantic movement when they realized they were being watched, Linda hopping off the desk, her trailing hand catching the desk pads' corner. The half-moon of condensation on the desk's surface. Charles felt as if he might vomit or faint or both, so he sat on the stiff office couch. "I feel sick."

"It sickens me too. I do my damndest to develop innovative products for Centrigroup and to build a convivial efficient team. Almost like a family. Right?"

Charles rubbed his eyes to wipe away the residual images in his mind. "Betrayal from family is the most difficult."

"Exactly. And it kills me, *kills*, to think that someone is trying to disrupt what I have worked so hard to build."

"So do you have any idea on who might have done this?"

"I was going to ask if you had any insights."

Charles thought of the cactus on its side, the papers falling, how you couldn't help but see his desk when entering or leaving Mr. Samuels' office. Could Linda be fired for entering Mr. Samuels' office when he wasn't there? Rathbone, or someone from his department, would be the most likely candidate for an act of corporate espionage, but

suggesting that might lead to Linda getting in trouble. Could he suggest Trowbridge from twenty-eight and avoid causing trouble altogether? Samuels would likely pursue whatever name he gave him hard. “Right now I’m too stunned and exhausted from the day to think straight.”

“You’re a wise man, Charles. We shouldn’t be rash about this at all. Let’s sleep on it and strategize in the morning.”

“Have a good night, sir.” The office had settled into the post-workday exhalation, the relative amplification of the industrial hum, a multitude of halogen lights whining before extinguished by timer, the sigh of computer fans after shutdown, the sound of air puffing through ventilation shafts. The occasional sounds of office doors closing. The absence of human voices. The sounds and feel of the air mirrored what Charles had felt the night before, and an anxiety that something else unexpected and damaging was about to happen lingered in Charles’ mind.

“Charles? Are you still there?” Mr. Samuels’ voice called from the belly of his office.

“Yes.”

Mr. Samuels appeared in the doorway. “Thanks again. Really.” His smile was tired. The bulge seemed to waggle appreciatively.

“For what?”

“For being so reliable. I can always count on you.”

Chapter 5

For the next several mornings, Charles reported to Mr. Samuels before going to collaborate with the Priest. “Remember,” Mr. Samuels would say, “you need to be as discreet as you can. Report back to me anything that he might say about the intrusion into my office. Oh, and I need you to make sure the figures on the ESWL project are still airtight. We can’t go over budget.”

And Charles would say of course, of course, and trudge over to the Priest’s cubicle. On most days, the Priest dressed very sharply in pressed shirts and glossy ties, but on one November morning, he wore a black cardigan and reading glasses, and he was hunched over a stack of accounts receivable from the last three Mr. Samuels-led projects. He looked out over his glasses at Charles and, for a moment, Charles wanted to imagine that a passive father figure had replaced the Priest. He wanted to confide in this version of the Priest, to make him proud.

But then the Priest removed his glasses and stood, face bare, chiseled, blue eyes shining through bloodshot whites, defiant at the prospect of aging, and Charles was facing his adversary again. “Nice specs.” Charles tried not to smile.

“Contacts giving my eyes fits. I was telling Samuels that I feel grandfatherly today.”

“The cardigan.”

“It’s just so drafty. Or something’s wrong with me.”

“There’s always that.”

“So today, I figured we’d dial up the fun a bit and do some comparative analysis.”

“You know how to inspire your fellow man.” As on most days, Charles squeezed into the cubicle next to the Priest, and they talked about projection vs. reality, the Priest using the revenue-to-investment dollars to assess the overall value of the previous projects. He examined the projected sales of the ESWL compared to the budget, then compared the figures for the projected sales of the ESWL to that of the previous projects.

Charles answered all the Priest’s why questions until he developed one of his own.

“Why are you so concerned about all these angles?”

“Hasn’t Samuels’ told you? I’m on joint assignment. It’s true that I’m working as one of two chief accountants for this project, but I’m also auditing the project as well as Mr. Samuels’ department.”

“For what reason?”

“Of course he didn’t tell you. Of course. He wants you to think so highly of him.”

“You’re saying Samuels didn’t tell me about this because he’s worried I would think less of him.”

“Yes. And I get why he spun something to the entire floor a couple of months ago. Some people might lose their jobs, and folks aren’t going to be happy about that. Maybe that

was a directive to Samuels from above. We can't have panic reducing productivity, can we?" In his cardigan and glasses, his smile looked less charming than it did vindictive, though Charles couldn't tell if the Priest had germinated his kernel of disdain for the higher-ups or the members of Mr. Samuels' team. "Anyway, in my opinion, it was wrong of him not to have told you."

"Clearly." So this project assignment wasn't about who may or may not have been in Samuels' office at all.

"You probably shouldn't tell him I told you. Best to keep it close to the vest."

"Of course. Back to work then?" At that moment, Charles caught sight of a small framed picture of Linda, one taken in the last month or so, tucked underneath the desktop monitor. Her expression was one of mock surprise as if she had been caught taking off her clothes (and perhaps she had; Charles couldn't see anything below her neckline). She was wearing the same *how dare you* expression Charles had seen when he would tease Linda, for the way she pronounced demonstrative (as de-mon-STRAT-ive), for the way she snorted when she laughed hard, for the way she sometimes misjudged the space between her body and a table or doorpost she was walking by. And it now the look was saying to the Priest *how dare you photograph me naked*. In the photo she was happy in a way Charles had forgotten she could be. How could he have been so careless? His anxiety and bitterness returned, his knee began to bob. "I forgot I have to run something by Samuels."

"Oh." The Priest frowned like a grade school disciplinarian. "Everything okay?"

"Absolutely. Just slipped my mind this morning. Might be a while."

Charles pulled Asshole Kevin and Word Nerd Jim out of their cubicles and told them to come with him down to Gus's snack shop at the lobby and when they asked what this was all about, Charles shook his head and held up his hand. When Kevin opened his

mouth in protest, Jim jabbed him in the arm and said, “Just listen,” and they both followed Charles out of the Maze. On the elevator ride, Charles felt hemmed in, the anxiety of revealing what he knew about the Priest pressed against him like a too-tight pair of pants. His leg continued to vibrate. Kevin must have sensed the tension too because he filled the silence with stream-of-consciousness chatter. “This baby girl thing, man, it’s heavy stuff. This little helpless hairless wailing creature is your responsibility. Her life is in your hands. And the whole thing is beautiful, the way she jerks her little body, the way she smells. The wife is transformed, obsessed in a way I’ve never seen her obsess before. But then there are the midnight wakeups and the never ending peeing and shitting. And the leakage man, the outfit changes. And all the stuff we have to bring every time we go somewhere. Madness.”

“But worth it?” Jim said.

“I guess.”

Charles was glad when the elevator reached the ground floor and the rush of air hit him. He made a bee-line for Gus’ Snack Shop.

“Slow down.” Kevin said.

At Gus’, Charles bought an overpriced bag of Hot Cheetos and a jumbo soda and sat down at the nearest table. He shoved a handful into his mouth, relishing the tingling sensation he felt on his gums, though he hardly ever ate snack food and he always regretted it moments later. But for now, stress eating was keeping him sane.

“Woah, big guy,” Kevin said. He brought over a Red Bull and a slice of cheesecake, and Jim trailed with a large Gatorade and a bag of pork rinds.

“How can we counsel you if you’re so flighty?”

“Remember, Charles, we got your back. No matter.”

“Mostly,” Kevin added. I could envision a few cases where I might switch allegiances...”

Charles told both of them what he'd seen that night when he had returned to the office to retaliate with a prank (I thought the stack of “hazardous materials” signs was weird! Kevin said.), and he told them what he saw in Samuels' office, and he told them how, the next day, the *next day*, Samuels had paired him with the Priest for the foreseeable future on the ESWL project, and though he omitted his initial impulse to stab the Priest and the shameful realization that now could like the guy, he told them about Mr. Samuels' request that he spy on the Priest and the Priest's revelation of the audit. “That is fucked up,” Kevin said.

“I have no words,” Jim said.

“I don't know how I'm going to get through this stretch of project without snapping,” Charles said.

“And he could determine whether we have fucking jobs.” Kevin swallowed his bite of cheese cake in one noisy gulp.

“He wouldn't recommend the big bosses terminate all of us, would he?” Jim said.

“He wasn't clear on that point,” Charles said.

“I got it.” Kevin snapped and pointed at the space between Charles' eyes. He'd consumed the Red Bull in two long gulps and his words began tumbling out of his mouth. “Why don't you confront the Priest? Tell him to leave your woman alone or else meet him in the garage? And me and Jim Boy over here will spring out of hiding if things get hairy.”

“That would be quite an efficient way to facilitate our joblessness.” Jim said. “Why don't you tell Linda you know all about it?”

To Charles not talking about the affair meant it was much less able to harm him, and when Linda decided one day to break it off with the Priest and come back to Charles fully, he would act like nothing had happened. But they would both know the unsaid. “I got Linda under control.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got a long-term plan. It’s deliberate, not easy to explain.”

“How’s arguing with Linda gonna help us anyway?” Kevin said. “You’re supposed to be the smart one here.”

“It’ll help Charles. That’s what we need to focus on. We have more control over how the Charles navigates his marriage from here on out than we do with how the Priest recommends us to the big bosses. The question is, how can we accomplish both things at once?”

“Guys, we don’t need to try and solve anything here, I just wanted to—”

“Oh man, I got it. I so got it. You guys would be fucking lost without me.” Kevin motioned for them lean close. They would, he said, organize a series of pranks to disrupt the Priest’s work. It would be similar to what rebels facing an occupying force would do (works great in *Red Dawn*), and most of the “attacks” would be carried out by Kevin and Jim themselves, since Charles wouldn’t be able to be implicated in any sort of sabotage, so he would provide distraction so Kevin and Jim could do their thing. Should they let Samuels know? “Not yet,” Kevin said. “Too risky. We gotta see how he reacts first, see if we can trust him.”

“This sounds a little ridiculous,” Charles said.

“Often what’s necessary to fight tyranny seems ridiculous.”

Charles wouldn't go that far, but he decided to help with the disruptions. They decided to call it Operation Gorilla (because we're engaged in office guerrilla warfare and "guerrilla" sounds like "gorilla" and gorillas are badasses, and we need to be badasses in all this, Kevin said).

"This will take some pressure off you," Jim said. "Because you're fighting a two-front war, and you need to focus on the Linda front."

"Couldn't have said it better myself. That's why I keep this guy around."

"I'll do my best," Charles said. And even though Kevin was a bit of an idiot and the plan that he cooked up was juvenile and impractical and likely to get them in a lot of trouble if they ever tried to carry it out, Charles felt reassured that these coworkers supported him.

"Thanks for the afternoon snack."

"I'll expect lunch delivered to my desk tomorrow." Kevin said.

"I think what he means to say is 'no problem,' as in we're happy to help."

Back on twenty-seven, Charles returned to the Priest's cube to find it empty. He noticed the picture of Linda again and, perhaps emboldened by the talk from downstairs, Charles crept over to the desk and turned the frame face down. He hurried out of the cubicle and took a seat at his desk.

Mr. Samuels must have been waiting for him. "I saw that you dashed out for a bit. Any updates? The arrangement still working smoothly?" The lump on his neck seemed to twitch.

"So far, so good. Seems like we're getting into a rhythm." Charles wondered if Samuels suspected the Priest had tried to win him over by undermining Samuels. He felt like a double agent whose allegiances were constantly shifting. "What about on your end? Any news about the project I should be aware of?"

“You’ve been keeping good records of what you’ve been working on, right?”

“Have you been getting my updates via email?”

Mr. Samuels nodded and spread his arms wide. “Ah yes, those. Nice work there. But I wasn’t sure if you’d have other information to share with me in a more detailed report.”

“I can compile all of it together, with any other process notes you need.” Truth was he’d not been documenting anything other than the relevant project information. He’d let his emotional guard down.

Mr. Samuels offered a broad smile. “You, Charles, may be the most valuable employee throughout the ranks of Centrigroup. Next week, then.”

“Sure. See you tomorrow.” Charles decided to take the stairs. He didn’t want to share the elevator with Samuels or the Priest or anyone really. As he descended flight by flight, the percussion of his steps echoing off the concrete walls calmed his thoughts. Here, he thought. Maybe here things weren’t so bad after all.

§

In the meantime, the growth on Mr. Samuels’ neck continued to expand and the employees in his department couldn’t help but notice. They gave it many names: the Lump, the Wad, the Growth. They said it reminded them of a beached whale. Someone even joked that it was so fat it was more like a heap of beached whales. They called it the Hump, the Glob, the Nugget, the Protuberance. Word Nerd Jim even suggested that, if the growth was not linked to some type of lymphoma, it could be a goiter, manifesting because of an acute iodine deficiency. “What the fuck?” Asshole Kevin had said.

But the name that stuck was Humberto.

Kevin had said, “It’s like a lazy piece of shit that just hangs on for a free fucking ride.” His words fell on the rest of the employees like an epiphany. “He reminds me of this

fat-fuck wetback named Humberto that just sat around chomping chaw while others did the landscaping on my yard.”

News of Humberto’s misdeeds bounced around the office: “He’s immigrating on Mr. Samuels’ neck” or “Humberto is using Mr. Samuels as his green card” or “Did you catch a whiff of Humberto? Damn– he reeks!”

Strangely, Charles felt as if Humberto reflected Mr. Samuels’ moods. For example, when Mr. Samuels was calm Humberto undulated at a constant rhythm like a heartbeat at rest. When Samuels was excited, Humberto throbbed faster and faster, his complexion changing from Mr. Samuels’ pallid tone to a soft bright red like a flushed face. When Samuels was disappointed, Humberto slowed down his pulsations, taking the position of a scolding father. Impatient, Humberto quivered in short staccato bursts.

Of course, Charles was repulsed by Humberto (one could imagine the accumulation of grit and oil and sweat under Humberto’s folds). He found himself avoiding Mr. Samuels for long periods of time, which meant he found himself hunkering down with work in the Priest’s cubicle whether the Priest was at his desk or not. That picture of Linda upright again, its expression a challenge.

Or, if he had to be in the vicinity of Mr. Samuels and Humberto, he would make sure the office door was open and he was standing so Humberto couldn’t hang over him like an overripe gourd and that Mr. Samuels was at least an arm’s length away.

But there was a competing impulse to touch Humberto, prod it to see what sort of thing it actually was. Would it be firm like a chestnut? Or would it be squishy like a water balloon? Or would it be soft and pillowy like the fat cheeks of a child?

Whenever the impulse struck, Charles felt the anxiety hit him like an icy spear boring into his lower abdomen, and his hand flinched as if temporarily paralyzed. He felt his breath

become shallow, and it wasn't until Mr. Samuels moved out of reach or the little voice of reason in Charles' head said, "terrible idea," that his breathing normalized and blood returned to his face.

In a recurring dream, Charles saw his son in the kitchen at the sink, washing his hands, back facing him. The sound of the water was like a churning rapids. Charles would reach to him to make him turn down the water, but he would realize he can't just scold him for using so much water, so he would he must show him that even though he was telling him to stop, he still loved him. And that expression was so clear in his mind at the moment Charles was reaching to Brody that he was filled with joy. The same thing happened each time: Charles' hand would rest on Brody's shoulder. Charles would begin to speak. Brody would turn, Humberto throbbing on his neck like the bubble on a frog's throat, and all Charles' words would disappear forever.

Chapter 6

Let's go out to dinner tonight. Charles said to Linda. To our old favorite.

Linda was planking in the middle of the living room floor. She was in the midst of what she called a "fitness blitz" because, she'd said, she wanted to feel healthier in body and spirit. Charles had hoped they might exercise together. Why don't you come running with me some time? Charles had asked.

Are you kidding? You'd just tear off up ahead. There'd be no "running with."

I'd stick with you.

Maybe when I feel like I'm in better shape.

As Linda planked, Charles watched her legs tremble, her core twitch, her body rock under pressure. So, dinner tonight?

You have terrible timing. Her face was shading darker and darker red.

The beeper sounded and she released herself from the pose, resting belly-down on the carpet. Well? he said.

Give me a moment. Her words came out in a burst of air. She turned over on her back and rested her wrist on her forehead. I've got a lot of—

A lot of what?

Things on my mind. Pressure at work. I think I just want to take it easy after this workout.

Come on.

You come on. I'm tired.

Take a shower. I'll call The Duck, put in our name, and get out of these work clothes. Come on. Linda sat up and pursed her lips at him. We don't have anything to eat here, anyway, he said. We're both here with no commitments. When will there be a better time? He could see possible excuses churning in her head. It'll help you de-stress. I promise.

Fine. You gotta give me at least a half hour.

Absolutely.

As Linda showered, Charles shaved in the second bathroom, plucked noticeable nose hairs, and clipped rogue eyebrow hairs. He rubbed lotion on his face and hands and spritzed himself with cologne. He dressed in his white button down with light blue checks and a starched collar, his black slacks crisply ironed, and a tan jacket. He gave his shoes a quick shine.

Jesus, you look fancy, Linda said as she dried her hair. I thought we were going casual tonight.

I just thought I'd look nice for you.

But now I have to match you. This was supposed to be a de-stresser.

Don't worry about it. I don't care what you wear.

It doesn't matter whether you care or not, she said as she gently negotiated the tangles. I have to look as good or better than you. Otherwise we'll get stared at.

Do you want me to change?

No.

It won't take much time at all.

No. I think it's kinda sweet. But only kind of. Now quit bothering me and get out of here. She flashed him the smile he'd been missing.

While Linda dressed, Charles imagined them sharing a glass of wine together after dinner in the kitchen or living room, something they hadn't done for years. The bottles of wine and wine glasses were stored on the top shelf of the pantry, so Charles brought over one of the barstools to reach up there. He squinted at the wine labels, chose a Malbec because he remembered having a glass of that before and liking it well enough, and wrapped his fingers around the glass stems. As he was stepping off the barstool, he lost his balance and dropped the glasses as he tried to catch his fall against the pantry doorpost. The glasses shattered on the floor and the stool made a loud scraping sound as it shifted.

Is everything okay down there? Did you hurt yourself?

I'm fine. Just a little accident. He placed the bottle of wine on the counter and got a broom and dustpan. He scanned the floor any glint of light. He crouched, got on his hands and knees, lowered his face inches to the floor. He swept and reswept where any shards might be.

What are you doing?

I was trying to get a bottle of wine and some glasses in case we wanted some wine after dinner, and I somehow lost my balance on the barstool.

Linda allowed her amusement to show. And you complain about waiting for me. Are you ready?

Just about. Charles gave the area another quick sweep and emptied the dustpan. There. Now I'm ready. He took Linda's arm and walked her to the car, opening the door for her. Linda gave a small curtsy: what a gentleman!

Charles was so excited that his left leg shook even as he sat in the driver's seat. He celebrated this victory in his mind: I've won, I've bested the Priest, she hasn't fallen out of love, we'll work through their difficulties, we'll remember this night as the one that turned the marriage around. In his excitement, he'd forgotten that maybe he should be talking her. Or did she prefer the silence? Linda was following the trees with her eyes as they passed. It's been a pretty fall this year, she said.

Yes. Yes it has been. They never talked about weather, and he tried to decipher her mood in the tone of her voice. Could she be trying to hide her own excitement?

After they parked, Charles hopped out of the car saying, Hold on, hold on! while running around the back. When Linda started to open her door, he said wait, wait, wait! and Linda pulled the door shut. He opened the door for her, tipping an imaginary cap. Madam. She laughed, saying, This night just keeps becoming more and more formal. Don't say that, he scolded with a smile. Then it's going to seem like work. I just want things to be very nice for you. Okay.

As they walked the block and a half to The Duck, a man walking the other direction on the other side of the street said, Date night! Both Charles and Linda convulsed with giggles. Okay, okay, you win, Charles said. It's turned into more than just a casual dinner out.

Ha! I knew it, I *knew* it! Linda said. You have to pay for the whole thing, then.

Fine, I guess. Charles said. But all I wanted to do is give you the best for the evening. She took his arm and squeezed. Everything was working better than he could have hoped.

They were seated at the U-shaped booth in the corner. The lighting was muted but not dim, and the dark wood paneling and exposed brick gave the restaurant a refined, but not uninviting, feel. Isn't this nice? I'd forgotten. Linda stretched her arms and ran her hands across the leather upholstery. I could take a nap here. You'll carry me out, won't you?

I'd have the wait staff toss you out.

Ass! You sit on the other end from me then.

Charles played along, and when the waiter came to take their drink orders, Charles said, We're having a fight. The waiter expressed mock sadness. Well, I'll give you a bit of time to reconcile, and hopefully by then you will have made up enough to decide on some tasty entrees. Charles inched closer to Linda as he eyed his menu. Pulled pork sandwich? Scoot. Brisket tacos? Scoot. Half rack of ribs? Scoot. Full rack? Scoot.

If you're getting ribs, you can't touch me until you've scrubbed your face and wiped your hands with one of those wet naps.

Like a toddler?

Exactly.

You know how my love for ribs overwhelms my maturity and intellect.

Oh! Remember when— and Linda launched into a story about one of the last times they came to The Duck when, in rapt fascination, they watched a man churn through a rack and a half of ribs oblivious to the mess he was creating, getting sauce on his cheeks and chin, his hands and halfway up his forearms. That story reminded Charles of the time when they took Brody to Kate's pizza and, though he seemed to like the pizza, he had sauce and cheese matted in his hair and behind his ears. And that reminded Linda of the time they went with

Brody to the Tuckers' when he was thirteen months old and they gave him his first taste of lemon, laughing at how shock registered on his face, his mouth twisting, his tongue and lips trying to push out the lemon pulp, his eyes watering and face reddening from the betrayal. And Charles recounted that time when they were newly married when he played that prank on Linda where he got her to eat tripe by saying it was just a new type of noodle, and her reaction was so strong she ran to the bathroom and vomited. The two of them talked and laughed until halfway through the meal when Linda got a phone call and excused herself to answer it.

By itself, Linda's excusing herself to answer the phone in the middle of a meal was not unusual. They'd fallen into the habit of taking calls from friends or relatives long ago, at first because of the belief they would only call at dinner with important news, then because of the mutual unrelenting desire to escape a stale present moment. But, this time, Charles noticed how she lowered her voice, shielding her mouth with her hand, striding toward front of the restaurant as if the only thing that mattered in the world was the voice at the other end of the line. He tracked her as she walked past the host's station and out the door.

He resolved to wait until she came back to finish eating, but after he twice rebuffed the waiter as he attempted to take Linda's plate, and after he listened to the argument the couple to his left was having about remodeling the bathrooms, and after he'd drunk a glass and a half of water, he decided he couldn't wait, so he stripped each rib clean, scooped out all of the macaroni, downed his iced tea, and took a bite out of Linda's cornbread. He sent her a text: where'd u go? When the waiter asked if Linda was okay, Charles smiled and said yes of course, and he ordered the fudge brownie with vanilla ice cream to come out in ten minutes. He decided he couldn't stay in the booth by himself anymore, so he went to the

restroom, splashed water on his face, forced himself to pee, scrubbed his hands under hot water, and dried them in one of those high-powered hand driers until his skin felt crisp.

Linda was stirring her green beans in little circles around her plate (she apparently hadn't noticed the bite Charles had taken out of her cornbread) when he returned to the table. Who was on the phone?

Oh, my sister. Apparently her husband is threatening divorce. After I listened to her and she'd cried it all out, I told her, go ahead and do it, give him what he's asking for, you know? But she's all worried about getting tangled up in a custody battle for Savannah. Very sad.

Oh. Charles felt guilty for assuming the worst about Linda.

Sorry I left for a while there. When I saw her calling, I sensed it was something big. She took a small bite, clacking her teeth against the tines of the fork. Didn't mean to dampen the mood like this.

No, no, no. You don't have to pretend to be happy on my behalf. Charles didn't communicate the second half of that thought: couldn't she still be happy because they're out having a good time together?

And she squeezed his hand, saying, Thank you, though her expression seemed to say she understood what he hadn't said. What was there to do after that? Linda didn't eat any more of her dinner, so they boxed it up, and Charles paid the check, hoping that the car ride home could help lighten her mood and salvage the night.

When they walked in the house, Charles took Linda in his arms and looked into her eyes. What are you doing? She broke eye contact and looked at some part of the wall past his left ear. He kissed her cheek, her neck, her chin. Her lips were unresponsive to his, skeptical, lukewarm.

Let's sleep in the same room tonight. His breath splashed on her cheek, and her eyes darted to points around his face.

I don't think—

Please.

I don't. It's not a good idea.

What do you mean?

I'm not ready. I'm not.

Charles' whole body tensed.

Ow, she said. A little tight.

Letting her go: Sorry.

Not ready? How long have we been sleeping in separate rooms? Two years? When will you be ready?

I— I don't know.

God.

I'm not doing this to be—

Dammit.

Mean. I'm trying to be honest. I don't know when I'll be ready.

Don't you think this is a bit hypocritical? Going out for dinner. Acting all cozy lovey-dovey and coming back all cold?

What about how the night was supposed to be casual? No expectations?

I kind of hoped—

Maybe I did too. But I'm not making excuses. I'm just not ready. Linda went upstairs to the bedroom with the twin-sized mattress and the posters and the puzzles. Charles went

to the master bedroom with the queen and the puffy comforter and the his and hers wooden dressers and the standing bedside lamp that tilted as if it were about to keel over.

§

For reasons Charles couldn't quite explain, he and Linda began talking less and less. Their car rides to work were punctuated by the churning engine and whisper of cars going past. They hardly ate together. And though Charles wanted to cut through the tepid air between them, he didn't know how.

So he plunged himself into outside pursuits and, surprisingly, the rest of his life was going great. He began training in earnest once again, running with his racing group five times a week. He monitored his diet, tracked his progress in his training notebook, talked race strategy with Dylan. At races, he finished top in his age group, usually only a place or two behind Dylan.

At work, too, he forged ahead. With the Priest's help, he'd provided a detailed outline of the Stage I budget (ESWL prototype development) and began drafting the budgets for scaling up production, marketing and training salesmen. He and Samuels received briefings on software design. They sat in on a proof-of-concept demonstration in the lab where an engineer broke apart a crystal under a microscope using a high-frequency sound emitter. In the lab, a symphony of low hums. The technician projected a microscopic sample of a grayish-blue crystal. What Charles saw next, he couldn't explain. The engineer flipped a switch, a green LED glowed the once singular crystal became many small ones. The engineer shut the device off. "It uses very high frequency sound waves to heat up and fracture the crystal."

"So it's done?" Mr. Samuels said. "All we need now is to scale up?"

“Not yet,” the engineer said. “We need to test it to penetrate into deep tissue in order for it to work. But we’re getting there.”

“Right. Deep tissue,” Charles said.

Mr. Samuels put his arm around Charles, Humberto inches away from Charles’ cheek. “I told the CFO you were indispensable and I was right. This project can’t be stopped now.”

All the while, Asshole Kevin and Word Nerd Jim carried out a series of missions to annoy the Priest, and Charles tried to act surprised at the results of Kevin and Jim’s actions. On Monday, Kevin moved the Priest’s thermos of coffee from his desk to the breakroom when he went to the bathroom, and the Priest spent a half an hour looking for it. “I must be losing my mind,” the Priest told Charles. “I don’t know how my coffee ended up there without me realizing it.” On Tuesday, Charles asked the Priest to come work at his desk, and, while he was gone, Jim loosened the cable that connected the Priest’s monitor, mouse, and keyboard to his computer. “I’ve never seen that before,” he’d told Charles later. “Has that ever happened to you?” On Wednesday, before the Priest came into work, Kevin poured water on the seat of his desk chair, and he told Charles they would need to move their meeting. “I think something is leaking in the ceiling,” he said.

“Better report it to maintenance,” Charles said.

On Thursday, Jim threw away some spoiled meat in one of the barrel-sized trashcans from the maintenance closet and wheeled it to the unoccupied cubicle behind the Priest’s (Stanley Henson, one of the other accountants, the one who normally occupied the desk, was on vacation). “I couldn’t for the life of me figure out where the stench was coming from, but it became too distracting. At first I thought it was somewhere in my cubicle the smell was so powerful,” he’d tell Charles later. He filed his second complaint to maintenance

in a week. On Friday, Kevin replaced all the white office paper with lavender (it's my favorite color, he'd said), and when the Priest printed out his weekly analysis for the big bosses, including relevant primary documentation, he got a binder full of "something that looked like an Advent candle," he'd tell Charles later. "I didn't know we could even print in any color other than white. What idiot would leave that much lavender colored paper in the printer?" As it turned out, the higher ups weren't too bothered by the color change. "It adds a little flair," they were reported to have said.

The most encouraging part of Charles life, however, was that Linda began riding home from work with Charles regularly again. No more talk of "evenings out with the ladies" and no more late-night returns home. If Linda was home eating dinner with Charles (albeit without saying much at all), then she wasn't out with the Priest. Sometimes they ate at the table, sometimes on the couch watching episodes of *Frasier*, sometimes they went out for movies and shared a large popcorn, and sometimes, after a long day, Charles would walk Linda up to the second bedroom and she would offer her cheek for him to kiss.

Chapter 7

It was a bit of a surprise when Charles noticed one of the suitcases had wandered out of storage and was sitting, half full of Linda's underwear and other clothes in the closet in her studio. Maybe she never finished unpacking after the last trip they took almost two years ago, he joked to himself. While dumping the clothes out and kicking the suitcase into the closet, a sneaking paranoia settled on him, so he shoved the clothes into whatever drawers they would fit in and logged into her email, checking for an airline itinerary. He rifled through her desk drawers and underneath her sketches. He checked the online credit card statements for any travel charges.

Nothing.

Why did you have a suitcase out in your office earlier? he'd asked her.

Why were you in my studio? You never go into my studio.

Do I need permission to go into certain rooms in my own house?

I'm sorry I assumed you respected me enough not to go through my things.

Charles covered his face in both his palms in an attempt to prevent his frustration from seeping out. So where were you planning on going?

I had thought about taking a little trip up to visit my sister, though I didn't end up going.

Why would you plan to see your sister without telling me? Don't you think I'd be a bit worried if you were just suddenly gone?

Of course. What a dumb question. The idea came out of nowhere. Her dog was hit by a car when little Helen was watching. The kid was traumatized, and my brother-in-law was gone on some kind of business.

How come you didn't?

She said she didn't want me to spend the money, that Albert was coming home early, that Helen would—wait, why am I being grilled about this?

What really happened?

She walked away at that point and, for a moment, Charles felt guilty, as if his asking caused his sister-in-law's dog to be hit by a car. Which was stupid, he knew, but he knew pursuing it further wouldn't end well. You want me to call my sister and fucking demand she tell you her dog died, she would say. Jesus.

He took a different approach. I put all the clothes in the suitcase back in their drawers.

Why are we still talking about this? I'm not even going.

I figured—

Why are you going on about a stupid suitcase? Are you trying to assign blame to me for something?

I wasn't. I—

What would you call it then?

Why are you being so aggressive right now?

I'm not. Did you go through my drawers?

Yes. To see if you had stashed away a travel itinerary in one.

You can really be an asshole sometimes.

It was the most they had talked in weeks.

Over the next several days, Charles found Linda's suitcase in various places around the house: in the kitchen, empty, with a note attached to it that read, "Where am I going?"; in the back of the Prius filled with rolls of paper towels and again in the shower with its own pink loofah; on the dining room table, half way in the washing machine, on the couch full of his running gear. And whenever Charles asked Linda to help with some kind of chore, she said Well, I'd better because I wouldn't want this to become a Suitcase Debacle. Charles cursed her under his breath only after she'd left the room.

A week after the original Suitcase Debacle, when Charles was in the kitchen pulling gel packs from the freezer after a truncated run, he heard the thump of a large object hitting the floor. He strained to hear the opening and closing of drawers as he tucked two gel packs in individual sleeves and wrapped one around each shin. Walking on his heels, wobbling as quietly as possible, he steadied himself using counters, walls, doorposts, chairs. He climbed the stairs, holding his breath for the entire ascent. He crept up to the bedroom door, extended his hand to push it open, but Linda was suddenly standing in the doorway, roller case trailing behind her. Her head shook, and her hair swayed back and forth across her face. What are you doing here? I thought you were on one of your twelve-mile runs.

Charles looked from her hand to his shins. Splints acting up and I don't want to get stress—where are you going?

My sister got a new puppy. Albert's out of town again.

And she—

Yes. Will you please get out of my way? I'm late. The doorbell rang and both Linda and Charles glanced out the window at the car idling in front of their house.

Who the hell is that?

My ride.

But who is giving you a ride. The gel packs had slid down too his ankles and his skin was stiff and raw from exposure to the cold. He wanted to reach down and pull off the packs, but he worried Linda would push past him as soon as he took his attention from her.

Natalie.

Linda. Don't. Please.

Don't?

Look at this now. Look at it. Look at me.

I see you.

Not just me. This. Think about what this does to Brody.

I don't know what you're talking about. Can you let me pass? My arm is cramping from holding my suitcase like this. And I don't want to keep Natalie waiting.

She turned to step around Charles, wheels and all, but Charles blocked her passage and held his hands up in front of him as if he was trying to pacify a snarling dog. I know, he said, about the Priest. About you and the Priest. It was his last chance.

Linda's face twitched as if his words had pinched her skin. Is that right? Linda cut back the other way and Charles grabbed her shoulders. Let go of me. There was a desperation in her voice even though she tried to hide it.

Linda. Linda. That's the Priest down there. That's him, isn't it?

Linda twisted in his hands. Does it matter?

The doorbell rang a second time. Charles gripped her shoulders tighter. I need to hear it from you. I'll let you pass. I want you to say it. Give me that at least.

You can see for yourself.

He shook her, and she lost her balance trying to free herself from him, stumbling over her suitcase and crying out loudly as she hit the ground. There was a forceful knock at the door, and a voice called for Linda.

I didn't mean— Are you hurt?

Get away from me. Get away.

Please. Linda. I need to hear it from you.

She rose with a strength and fury Charles had not seen. Out of my way. She pushed past him and he reached down to reposition his ice packs.

Tell me. Before you go.

The suitcase bumped down each stair until the wheels whirred against the floor. Charles stayed in the hall and listened for Linda's answer. It was the sound of the door closing and, in its wake, silence.

§

Or maybe that's not exactly how it happened. Maybe she fell over because he hit her (her face was awfully red as she tried to leave).

Or maybe he pushed her and she jumped up and hit him (he had a headache and his jaw was sore).

Or maybe he didn't put his hands on her at all; maybe she fell over her suitcase because she's rather clumsy, and perhaps his aching head and jaw stem from his allergies).

And maybe he didn't merely cower at the top of the stairs.

Maybe he chased after her till she opened the door, and he had seen the back of the Priest's head in the car, looming and terrible beast.

Maybe he went outside on the front stoop and the Priest, having returned to the car, was nothing more than a shadow.

Maybe he had yelled at them from the bedroom window that overlooked the yard, his voice cracking from the strain, his face burning, until he ran out of breath.

Or maybe he ripped out the screen and hurled Linda's jewelry box out the window, the one she had left behind in the confusion, as she and the Priest loaded her suitcases into his car, and it fractured and tumbled on the walkway.

§

For a while after that, as soon as Charles began falling asleep, he was thrust back to that moment, hearing the front door close and waiting Linda to break the emerging silence and come back to him and, when she didn't he awoke suddenly with the feeling that he needed to track her down and bring her back. Most nights, he slept in truncated segments, getting out of bed in the morning exhausted, drifting into half sleep where Linda left him again and again. He relived her departure when he dozed on the couch, at his desk, at a stoplight on his way back from work, at the table after taking his first sip of coffee, his forehead nearly squashing his bran breakfast muffin.

About two weeks after Linda had in reality left him, Charles found himself, soon after Linda's departure, running down the stairs and trying to yank open the front door so he could call to her. As he pulled at the door, he heard his name called, at first softly as if from far away, then louder and louder, and he believed for an instant that Linda was coming back to him.

But he was nudged awake, and he found himself returned to a community center conference room next to a man he had just met a half hour before. “Thought we’d lost you for a moment there.” The man’s nametag read “Thomas,” and Charles couldn’t remember to what extent he had introduced himself to Thomas, though he remembered the man saying, “Just call me T,” and thinking that the nickname made him sound like he was still in high school.

Each time Charles awoke from these Linda-inspired half dreams—whether naturally or because of someone’s intervention—he felt a rush of confusion and panic, as if the present reality was surging toward him and he would never be able to decipher it in time. His surroundings came back to him in pieces: the fluorescent lights made him feel a bit queasy; he had been here before, though not for a while; the air in the room had the taste of ozone, like the air that leaks out the back of a refrigerator; he came here under his own power, part of him wanted to be here even; the woman speaking in the front of the room was talking about the death of her daughter and the people sitting around the conference room table were here to listen to her; he was at a meeting for parents whose children had died run by an organization called Open Arms; he had come here to talk about the loss of his son, Brody, though he now believed he had made a mistake, so he said, “What the fuck kind of name is T?”

T shot his laugh out of his nose. “What kind of lame-ass goes by Charles when he could go by Charlie or Champ or Chuckles?”

The woman to Charles’ left shushed them, and Charles tried to pick up the thread of the woman’s story. The daughter had died recently. Car accident? No, boating. She drowned; the woman, who used to love beaches and swimming could not go near any body of water

larger than a community park pond. She was trying not to blame herself or her husband. Her relationship was strained: that was all she would elaborate on at that time.

“Thank you for sharing today, Kendra,” the moderator, whose official Open Arms nametag read “Pam” in bold green letters, said with a smile, though Charles saw the same sadness in her face as he did in Kendra’s, and he remembered the reason why he and Linda had decided to attend Open Arms meetings was the moderators were grieving parents themselves, though they were much better trained to carry their agony.

When Pam turned to Charles, he was worried she might scold him for nodding off during Kendra’s talk, but she said, “Charles Vaiana, welcome back. I know it’s been a while.” She paused as if trying to figure out whether Charles should have been attending the meeting with a spouse, though today only one husband-wife duo was in attendance. “Would you like to share a bit of your story?”

He flattened his palms on the surface of the table and pushed up as he stood. The legs of his chair scraped against the vinyl tiles. His knees shook and his stomach leapt. He surveyed the faces sitting around the table, none of whom he would call old, though they seemed to carry their sadness in a way that made them seem more tired than their years: twelve in all, only two others fathers. He clenched his abdomen to make sure his voice came out strong. “Brody’s death hit us like a lightning strike,” he said in a voice that only vaguely resembled his own.

§

“How are you doing, bud?” T said in the hall of the Open Arms counseling center. His mouth was surrounded by wrinkles, though his face still looked young, and Charles thought he must have laughed a lot. He waited until the other participants and Pam the moderator

were out of earshot. “My first time sharing, I cried like a little pussy. Maybe that’s the real reason why my wife left me.”

“Envious you could cry it out better than her, no doubt,” Charles said.

“See, I knew you’d be able to pull it back together quickly. I had this feeling just from chatting with you.”

“You some kind of talent evaluator?”

“The best in the biz. Unfortunately, my only talent is to identify the talents in others.”

“Too bad you couldn’t have helped me out before Linda abandoned me. You could have told me I was making a big mistake by marrying her.” Charles felt both regret and freedom when he spoke those words.

“Didn’t work for my own. I guess I have a significant blind spot. Glad to hear I’m not the only one.”

Speaking to T, Charles felt comfortable for the first time in a long time, as if he didn’t have to perform or manage what he was saying. However, the resulting pause in conversation made him uneasy as if any lingering silence would trample any friendship that was just beginning to sprout. The needles of anxiety prodded him to speak. “Why did your wife leave you? If you don’t mind.”

T looked suddenly tired, as if he had just realized how exhausted he actually was. “I suppose you won’t believe me if I told you it was because she hated my nickname.” He shook his head and chuckled. “Our daughter died when a drunk driver t-boned the car I was driving, passenger side after running a red.” T’s eyes began to tear-up, and he rubbed his face. “You’re just trying to figure out how big of a pussy I am.” He gave Charles a forceful but friendly shove, and Charles rocked back on his heels. “Anyway, Marilyn said she didn’t

blame me for what happened, since I didn't see it coming, but I think she couldn't help but, especially since I walked away with just a few cuts and bruises. The weight of the blame just snowballed, I guess. It really wasn't one thing. Gabby was our only kid."

"Brody was ours."

"It seems as if Marilyn said it was my fault once or twice, but I don't know if that's a result of me replaying our conversations over and over again and knowing what she was thinking. Sometimes I have to argue with myself that I didn't cause Gabby's death because there's this little whisper that says I didn't do enough to protect her."

"Yeah, me too. Except it has to do with maybe it's that I passed on fucked up genes or missed some kind of warning sign or something. But that voice only gives me more what ifs."

"What's funny is, Marilyn was a way worse driver than me." T laughed from the barrel of his chest.

"Good news," Charles said. "You're only a little bit of a pussy."

T wiped his brow in mock relief. "Thank God." He checked under his armpits and felt his lower back. "Sweating like a little bitch though." They both laughed until Pam approached them, and they clammed up, worried that merely showing signs of happiness would offend her.

"I'm glad you two have found something to laugh about. Big step." She twirled her necklace around her thumb. "Charles, could I? Excuse me T." He waved her off, and she drew Charles aside. "Did you attend a session with me a couple weeks ago?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Because I recognized your name from the registry, but I didn't recognize you."

“Pam, I don’t really know you, so don’t take this the wrong way. Are you joking with me?”

“I’m not. Someone attended with your wife a couple weeks ago and signed in with your name.”

“Pam getting on your case for dozing, Charles?” T called.

Charles flashed a smile at him. “I’m never going to hear the end of it.”

“I know it’s not really my business,” Pam lowered her voice even more. “But I thought I should let you know.”

“Thanks.”

“Feel free to talk about it; people attend and talk about spousal troubles all the time. If you’re comfortable with it.”

Acid anger spiked up Charles’ chest up to his throat. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Chapter 8

Word soon spread throughout Centrigroup's 27th floor about the fact that Linda was now arriving to and leaving Centrigroup HQ each day with the Priest instead of with Charles.

"Another heartbreak for him," Helen said. "I wonder how he will cope."

"I knew this was going to happen," Vicki said. "From the first day the Priest was here. He had his eye on her, and I'm pretty sure that the Priest is the kind of man who gets what he wants when he wants it."

"You absolutely did not call it," Mel said. "You were too busy staring at his butt."

"This just seems wrong," Sashvat said. "How could he do this? How could he ruin a man's life like this? I used to like him, but I don't know anymore."

"He's such a nice man," Gertrude said. "Such a good heart."

To avoid the etchings of rumor he walked the halls of the Maze like janitor in an airport, shuffling, hoping not to be noticed. He ate lunch in the eighteenth floor cafeteria alone under the column of floodlights where he felt alternatively gifted with rays of hope and pressured to confess. He imagined Centrigroupers on all floors referred to him as "that

wandering specter.” Or spectacle. He never asked the Priest what he did outside of work and the Priest never tried to share. He drove to and from work with the windows down to sweep away any thoughts dwelling on Linda or why she left, but he only managed to mess up his hair and lose a couple of memos to the highway.

On his bravest day, Charles descended to twenty-five where Rathbone lurked with his mad dog stare and his throaty growl to talk to Linda into someday returning. Without the comforting walls of the Maze, Charles felt vulnerable as if some overworked Rathbonian might intercept him with an energy that could be read as either enthusiasm or hostility, demanding to know why he had descended to twenty-five. Or, Rathbone himself might determine, arbitrarily, that his mere presence as a foreign body in an unadulterated and highly efficient machine was a danger to the mission of his department. Out of all the department heads, Rathbone was the one Charles feared the most. He was brilliant and cantankerous and, if he didn't like you, he could get you fired or demoted or, at the very least, get your desk moved or your parking spot revoked. Rathbone had a way of making a benign question such as “Who the hell are you?” seem like a challenge to someone's fundamental reason for existing.

Worse, Linda could see him coming from one hundred feet away, and Charles could see her defenses raise as he approached her work station. She dropped a large stack of files on her desk (the resulting thud like a cannon shot) and turn to the nearest co-worker, tugging on his sleeve, but he motioned vaguely to the other side of the floor and continued walking. Charles flashed a smile he'd used many times before to ask forgiveness. Can we talk about what happened last week?

And Linda looked startled if she hadn't considered the possibility that Charles might want to understand what finally pushed her to leave. I don't have anything to say.

There's got to be something we can discuss now. It's not like we barely know each other. I know you better than anyone.

You'd like to think.

Stop. Let's behave like adults. No need to make up hurtful things.

What a ridiculous thing to say. Are you listening to yourself?

Look. I know and you know and probably a lot of people here know that our marriage has taken a lot of hits over the last two years. But we shouldn't throw in the towel so easily.

Will you keep your voice down? Linda said. Other members of Rathbone's department had begun stealing looks over their shoulders. Fine, she said. I'll talk to you, but no more than five minutes. An empty conference room. A closed door. Sit, Linda said. I want it to look like we're having a civil interaction.

Charles complied, and a chair acted as buffer between them. He reached his hand out across the gap. You look beau—"

Stop it. Or I'll walk out.

Charles retracted his hand and leaned back, the inching away. In this moment, all that mattered was the sunlight streaming through the window on the space between him and Linda, Linda, and the space between. Can I ask one question?

Linda nodded, touched her eye with her middle finger.

Why?

She spoke to him as if he was standing in the corner. I'm finished.

What does that mean?

Her mouth moved in an odd way as if trying to prevent her from speaking. When a relationship reaches a point where it can't be fixed, there's no point in staying in it.

Is that what you really think? Charles took a long audible breath. All I want is for us both to be happy. All I want.

I am happy now.

There it is again. He leaned forward and wagged his finger at her as if he had uncovered a great contradiction. This is what I'm talking about. You're saying things intending to be hurtful.

I'm not. You said you wanted us to be happy, which I assume is a true statement, and I truthfully answered that I am happy now. She turned to look at him for the first time and she flinched at the sight of his finger extended toward her face.

Do you love him?

Charles—

More than you loved me?

Goodbye, Charles. Rathbone will flip his shit if people take too much personal time.

In an instant she was gone, leaving Charles only an empty conference room, a closed door.

§

After a week full of office chatter (after Charles' failed attempt to win Linda back), the Priest found Charles at the end of a long day and said, "Hey, man. Want to grab a drink with me before you head home?"

And what could Charles say at this point? So he smiled and said, "Sure thing." And the Priest put his arm around Charles the way friends do and said, "It's on me. No argument."

They found themselves at Third Shift, a bar that used to cater to industrial brewers and shippers after they'd finished their night shifts before they went home to their wives and kids who were about to get up for the day. The front windows were small like squinting eyes

“I know there's bit a lot of talk going on at Centrigroup,” the Priest said. He took a swallow of his beer draining a full third of his pint glass. “And I think it would be good that you hear something from me directly so you don't get misinformation from these rumors.”

It sounded reasonable enough. But hadn't Charles seen Linda get into the Priest's car with his own eyes? Charles took a much smaller sip from his beer than the Priest had. Even so, somehow beer made its way up his nasal cavity, and his nose burned. “Okay.”

“First, let me say I admire you as colleague, and I've really enjoyed working with you over the last few months. And I'll be sure to let the board hears a favorable review of your performance when I convene with them next week.”

Charles felt grateful, as if he needed to hear something like that. “Thanks. I've really appreciated working with you as well. Very professional and congenial.”

The Priest smiled. His face looked neither menacing nor duplicitous. “Thanks, man. That means so much to me. More than you think.” He placed his hand on Charles' shoulder. “Truthfully, I didn't know she was your wife until after she left. She told us to keep the whole thing quiet because, as she said, her husband had friends in the company. So I did.” He swallowed another third of his beer. “You need another?” he asked and, after Charles shook his head, he nodded at the bar tender and held up one finger. “The same.”

“And truthfully,” the Priest said, “I didn't expect to fall in love.” He finished his beer right as the bar tender set down his second. “Thanks. As I was saying, I didn't expect this at all. But it happened.”

“Is that so.”

“It is.” The Priest leaned over the bar. “Hey Jimmy. Can we get some peanuts over here?” The bar tender grunted something that was unintelligible to Charles.

“What I’m saying is who thought someone our age would be able to find love again?”

“Well.” Charles wasn’t sure if the question was rhetorical or not. But he knew, ultimately, he wasn’t looking to fall in love again.

The bartender put a basket of unshelled peanuts between the Priest and Charles, and the Priest thanked him and grabbed a handful and crushed them in his fist, his fingers rolling like a wave, his forearm muscles bulging. He let the shell fragments drop onto the bar top. “But this, this has been the most transformative thing for me. You, of all people, should understand what I’m talking about.”

“In general or specifically?”

“Always funny.” The Priest tossed the peanuts into his mouth. The amount of dust and fragments on the bar top was impressive. “What I’m trying to say is that once you find love—a type of enduring love—you can’t set it aside, even if it causes a bit of damage along the way. And I won’t.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Charles plucked a peanut from the basket, felt its rough shell with his fingers.

“I know the circumstances we find each other in aren’t ideal. Far from it. And I understand if you’re experiencing some frustration right now. But some things can’t be can’t be changed, they’re out of our control.”

“Both of ours?”

“Of course. Don’t you see it?”

“Is there something I’m missing?”

The Priest laughed and slapped his palm on the bar. The peanut shell fragments scattered, some even fell to the floor. Charles cracked his own peanut and set the shell gently on the bar top. “You’ve always been unflappable, and I really like that about you. Instead of getting irritated, you respond with humor.” The Priest’s smile, once kind, looked wearied, as if he had run out of all the reassuring looks he had given Charles before. This, it seemed, was the last straw.

“What you’re saying is you love Linda, and you can’t help it.”

“Right.”

“And you won’t stop because you can’t.”

“Right.”

“Because eternal, unassailable love is a rare thing. A precious commodity.”

“Charles, it was as if you were reading my mind directly.” The Priest swallowed more of his beer, but he sat as upright as ever. “You still thirsty? Come on, let me get you another one.”

Charles’s beer was still three-quarters full. “I’m doing okay.”

The Priest’s eyes were bright and blue even in the darkened tavern. “Nonsense. You need to catch up. This stuff isn’t much more than water, anyway.” He signaled to the bartender who was ready for the pour. “But that’s not everything,” the Priest said.

“It’s not?”

The Priest pressed his hands together as if beseeching. “There needs to be healing. And before there is healing, there needs to be acceptance.”

“On whose part?” Charles looked at the pair of nearly-full beers in front of him, and he felt despair climbing from his gut up his ribs as if ascending the rungs of a ladder. He began to doubt the accuracy of the Priest’s judgment of him.

The Priest leaned his body on the bar and placed his foot against one of the legs of Charles' barstool, able to topple Charles' seat with a sudden push. "I know you've been suffering. I can see it in the way your body hangs, the way you move about the office. And I don't want you to suffer like that, I hate to see it. There's wisdom in the teachings of the Buddha: once you are able to let go of your unfulfilled desires, you can stop suffering."

"Is that true?"

"I believe it is."

Charles lifted one of his beers and held it close to his mouth so he could eye the Priest a little more closely. Wouldn't it be nice if he could accept what the Priest was saying. Charles could say "Linda, I'm done with you" and "Brody, I'm done with you" and "I'm a new man." He would continue his ascent in Centrigroup (maybe taking over for Samuels should he be let go), and he would have an ally throughout the whole process in the Priest. But the Priest's face looked unusually tight. For the first time, it didn't have the hopefulness that drew so many people, Charles didn't feel as if he could make himself better than he was when he looked at it. Instead, his mouth was tight, his eyes narrowed, his mouth pinched. Charles couldn't prove it, but he sensed there was something the Priest knew that he didn't want Charles to find out, or there was some power Charles had over the Priest but didn't know it. He drank a little and put the beer down on the surface a little too forcefully. The beer splashed on the laminate and ran down the sides of the glass. "Isn't acceptance a precursor to failure?"

"Depends on your perspective."

"I'm going to be honest with you. I don't know what you expected me to agree to or concede—"

The Priest smashed some peanuts on the bar top with the palm of his hand. The beer trembled and Charles felt the vibrations run up his arm to his back. The Priest picked out the peanut pieces from the ruined shells. “Not the time to be delicate any longer. Charles, it’s time for you to move on.”

Charles thought he felt his barstool shift. “Move where? To a different department? Different office?”

“Of course not. We’ll maintain a professional and productive work relationship. There’s no need to mess with a good thing.”

“So as a consolation for losing my wife, I get to keep my job.”

“I wouldn’t characterize it that way exactly.”

A woman sitting at a table behind them shouted, “You have to consider the suffering of the animals!” Both Charles and the Priest turned to look at her, and she gave a thumbs up to both of them. “I’ll call all the members of city council, the mayor, my state reps, the governor, the SEC.”

“How would you, then?” Charles said.

“Look at it this way: if you insist on trying to get Linda back, you’re entering a quagmire. This conflict is unwinnable for you.”

“A quagmire?”

“Like those messes the U.S finds itself in in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

“I understand the concept.”

“Or Russia in Afghanistan. Or anyone in Afghanistan. Point is, each time some military hawk thought ‘we can win this thing.’ Not only that, but it would ultimately beneficial. And then things went to shit pretty quickly.”

“And how does this apply to our situation here? Am I the Americans and you’re the Afghans, or is it the other way around?”

“If you cut it out now, things’ll be easy. The divorce will be quiet and conciliatory, and you’ll be able to rebuild a happy life for yourself. You’ll get to keep the house, for instance.”

“Is this some kind of weird threat? You sound like a despised politician.”

“No. I just understand how these things work. I’ve met with a lot of couples over my time—individually and together, both when they were encountering mundane and solvable hurdles and when their problems had become irreconcilable.”

“Which is this?”

The Priest looked around the bar as if scoping the place for support. The bartender had disappeared to the back, perhaps for a smoke break. Two men in the corner were massaging their heads as if they were already hung over, even though it wasn’t even six. The woman who had been talking loudly on her phone was singing along to the in-house music. “You wouldn’t want any unnecessary legal headaches, would you?” the Priest said.

“You should look at it this way,” Charles said. “I’ve just heard you say that you’re not willing to give up the enduring love that you’ve found, and I agree with you in principle. But I had already found mine. Why should I stop fighting?”

The Priest finished his second beer and rose from his seat. Charles’ seat wobbled and he had to steady himself on the bar. The Priest tossed a few bills on the counter and said, “I’m glad we had this talk, Charles. I’m confident you’ll see things our way eventually.” He waved to the bartender and walked out.

Charles cracked some peanuts, rolled them in his palm. He felt a hand on his shoulder; it was the woman who had been yelling on the phone. “I feel bad for you, I do.”

“Have you been listening?”

“Your soul is hurting. I can see it in your face. You remind me of one of those poor caged rabbits that the nasty scientists are holding prisoner.” Her hair was long and gray and frizzy, and it fluttered when she moved her head. Her mouth was soft, but her teeth were crooked and yellow-brown. “They’re being held in labs at Centrigroup just down the street. They’ve been heroic through it all.”

“The rabbits?”

She held a clipboard and pen out to him. “Would you sign my petition?”

Chapter 9

Though he had not said anything explicitly, Mr. Samuels had made it clear, when he'd introduced Isabella to his staff members, that she was romantically off-limits. "Isabella is a great girl, a stellar college student, a girl who has her whole life ahead of her, and someone I've known since she was little. She's like a niece to me." he'd said. "She is very bright and very professional. Treat her as a colleague, a capable co-worker. She will not take any advantages because I'm close to her parents, nor should you take advantage of her generosity and willingness to prove herself in this office." She'd stood next to him as he made his rounds, smiling diplomatically, head dipped slightly. "I have set up a Google Doc where you can sign up to use her skills. If you feel that she is not working up to her potential, let me know, and I will handle it. Of course, I will look out for her, but I am fair and I won't be doing her any favors." Isabella had shifted uncomfortably at that point, brushing her hair away from her face and behind her ear. "Understood?" Mr. Samuels continued walking. Isabella gave a wave and a half smile as she followed Samuels on the rest of the office tour.

Was Charles physically attracted to her? He went back and forth on that. She didn't have any striking features and her hair didn't shine (it was a bit frizzy) and her eyes didn't seduce (her left one tended to wander if she didn't wear her glasses) and she didn't have an ass that went on for days (an ass of a little boy, Asshole Kevin called it), but all of her physical attributes seemed to complement each other. What she did have was a cool assuredness and a quick wit that she could deploy when the situation required.

"Oh man," Kevin had said. "Can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm really digging what Isabella has to offer."

"Like an office case of Stockholm Syndrome," Word Nerd Jim said.

"That's really offensive," Kevin said. "I have a cousin who suffers from that. Anyway, I would like to spend time getting to know her, if you catch my drift."

Charles did, too, but he didn't want to be crass about the whole thing. Instead, he paid her a compliment in the form of a poorly-executed corny joke while she was crouched between stacks in the filing room wedging a brown expandable folder into a nearly impervious wall of other brown expandable folders, saying, "Aren't you glad you opted for that cushy office job that really challenges you intellectually instead of taking that one where you spend your time outside all day, wasting away your brain cells by the pool?"

Without missing a beat, she said, "Absolutely. I also hate being able to see more than a foot in front of my face." The file she was trying to cram on the shelf slipped from her hand and did a backwards five-eighty summersault, spilling the contents on the ground. "Shouldn't we be all digital by now?" she asked.

Charles laughed, then felt bad for laughing since Isabella could have interpreted it as him making fun of her misfortune, but she laughed too and Charles asked if she needed help. "No. I'm a grown-ass woman." He supposed she was.

But Charles thought he might help her out. He ordered a new shelf to be sent to the filing room so Isabella wouldn't have to fight with the papers and folders when she was in there. When he asked her how the new shelf was working out, she said, "You sent it? Thanks for adding some work for me. I had to move all the files around. It took all afternoon!" She said it with the type of smile that suggested, in addition to thinking her joke clever, she tacitly appreciated his attempt to help her out. The next day, he dropped off a caramel latte at her work station with a note, saying, "For all your trouble reorganizing the records." Later in the day, a note written on a post-it appeared on his desk saying: "Thx 4 new furniture really brightens room." And later that afternoon, at the end of update on processor and cloud sync design, Mr. Samuels said, "Can I ask you a favor? Isabella's ride can't pick her up till late. I can't give her a lift home today, and I don't want her waiting around or taking the bus."

"Not a problem."

The final hours of the day flew by. "Ready to go, shelf guy," she said. The drive over to Isabella's was the most fun he'd had in a while. She was funny and quick on her feet. He laughed a lot and she, perhaps more importantly, laughed at his jokes. When the "Do you ever think about the likelihood that our universe is a computer simulation of another universe's reality? That some alien race is using us as avatars to live vicariously through our experiences?"

At first Charles laughed because he'd never heard something so absurd. "What a wild thought. I can't say that I have." He laughed again. "Is this something you're concerned with?"

"You mean does it fill me with existential dread?"

"Something like that."

“Not really. We either are or are not a simulation, right? I’m fascinated by the plausibility of the thing.” For the rest of the ride, she launched into an explanation of Simulation Theory, the idea that post-human intelligences could create supercomputers with consciousness to behave identical to human civilizations in the context of a virtual universe so these intelligent beings could accrue data on eons of both large and small scale social behavior in a matter of seconds (Charles stopped her once to say, “Is this what you’re studying in college?” to which she exclaimed “I wish!”).

“I’ll have to think on this a bit,” Charles said when they arrived at her house. “You got any more questions for me to consider?”

“No. Sorry for nerding out on you there.” She looked down at her hands.

“I found it illuminating.” They lingered for a moment. Sudden silence, nervous glances. “Get out of here,” Charles said. “See you in that spacious file room.” She said a quick bye as she hopped out of the car. (Or maybe he imagined the linger, the passage of time exaggerated in his mind.)

In front of the guys, he made sure not to bring her up in conversation, though he participated when she became the primary topic. At lunch a few days later, Asshole Kevin said, “Goddammit, Isabella is tempting me again.”

“I’m sure that’s what your wife wants to hear,” Word Nerd Jim said.

“Fuck you. That’s why I’m telling you and not my wife. And I’m not going to act on it.”

“Yet. You notorious slayer, you.”

“I’m not even trying to fuck her, douchebag. I’ve made a resolution to be a one-woman man now that I’m a dad, you know, so I can keep the family together.”

“You’re a reformed sinner,” Charles joked.

“Born again husband,” Jim said.

“Well, I’ve seen first-hand how infidelity wrecks a marriage,” Kevin said, turning to Charles, right hand raised, a. “No offense man.”

“Not Kosher,” Jim said.

Kevin held out both hands, palms up, in protest. “I’m sorry, okay? Whaddya want me to say? Charles knows I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“I gotcha, buddy. No harm.”

“See? I can’t explain myself well when a chick’s occupying my thoughts.”

“Don’t fall off the wagon,” Jim said.

“All it takes is one drop,” Charles said, leaning in and swirling the water in his glass.

“Ha ha, funny,” Kevin said. “I get it, I get it: feeling tempted is the same as being a creepizoid. At least I’m not stalking her...”

Before Asshole Kevin could finish his sentence, Charles’ swallowed his breath and his blood ran cold. Did Kevin know he’d become friendly with her?

“...like that weirdo Gary.

“Maybe you see him stalking her all the time because you’re stalking her.” Charles could breathe again.

“I don’t even know why I try to talk to you guys seriously.”

“Right. You, taking things seriously.”

“Really Jim? Think about that next time you wanna complain to me about how you think the reason you don’t have women flocking after you is that you project a new ‘21st century soft masculinity’ and girls ‘just haven’t acclimated to it’ or some shit like that.” Kevin grinned as Jim’s face reddened. “No, I’m *serious*.” He thrust his hand up in the air, marking the height of his seriousness. “Gary gives me the creeps, and whenever I see Isabella, I see

Gary looking at her or pretending not to look at her or walking after her or, I don't know, being generally skeevy. Gives me the fuckin' chills."

"Maybe it's coincidental," Charles suggested. "Or maybe she's been helping him on a project."

"No way. Too many times. I don't buy the work explanation either. What does he even do at Centrigroup? Do either of you know?" Both Charles and Word Nerd Jim shook their heads, confirming Asshole Kevin's suspicions. "Exactly. And Charles, why the hell are you coming to his defense?"

"I'm not." Charles began to sweat. Had he protested too much? "I just don't think we should make such heavy and consequential assumptions, you know?"

"Shit," Kevin said, his voice a scratchy whisper. "There he is!"

"Where?" Both Charles and Jim craned their necks to spot him.

"Heads down, geniuses. We can't all be caught staring at him."

Gary was at the front door of the restaurant scanning the tables. His hair looked wild and his body seemed to be filled with nervous energy. The hostess spoke to him, and he answered in short responses, his mouth closing so quickly as if to bite down on them. The hostess pointed vaguely toward the back of the restaurant where Charles and the others were sitting, her arm sweeping in a wide arc. Gary nodded and walked toward the three. "He's heading our way," Jim said.

"I think I'm gonna ask him to join us."

"Kevin, I don't think that's a good—"

"Yeah." His face was rigid and his eyes didn't waver. "We should take time to get to know our friend Gary, don't you think?" When Gary was about two tables away, Kevin stood up and said, "Hey Gary! What a nice surprise running into you here. I'm just grabbing

a bit of lunch with Charles and Jimbo here. Won't you join us?" Gary didn't so much nod as trembled in what Kevin took as a yes. "Great." He put his arm around Gary and pulled him into the booth.

Charles and Jim smiled at Gary ("Hi Gare," they said in unison), then they pressed their mouths tight and bugged out their eyes.

Kevin was all smiles. "So tell me, buddy, how ya been? How's work going?" His arm was still around Gary's shoulder.

Gary avoided eye contact with everyone at the table. "Good. N-no complaints."

"Excellent," Kevin said, his smile so wide now his gums showed. "All of us here were just wondering what kind of work you've been doing and who you've been working with."

Gary tried to separate himself from Kevin, but Kevin tightened his grip. "Lots lots lots of things. S-s-amuels sayzzz I-I'm very help-full."

The waitress came over and dropped off another menu and Kevin told her they needed a few more minutes. The light buzz of conversation that permeated the diner made the present moment seem surreal to Charles. If everyone around them was content, then how could something terrible happen?

"That's great, buddy. But you didn't answer my entire question. I'll slow it down. Who. Have. You. Been. Working. With." He jostled Gary with the annunciation of each word.

Gary looked at both Charles and Jim, his face an expression of pleading. "S-s-samuels. S-s-s-am-ule." His mouth

"Is that all?"

"Come on, Kevin," Charles said. "This isn't funny."

“I’m just trying to get to the bottom of this,” Kevin said. Gary tried to pull away, but Kevin grabbed his wrist and yanked him back into the booth. “Stay right here, buddy. We’re just getting to know each other. Who else?”

“Kevin.” Charles reached out and tapped him on the elbow.

“S-s-sam. U. Elsss.”

“Who else?”

“Sam. Sam. Sam.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen the way you’ve been creepin’ on—”

“Kevin!” Charles spoke louder than he’d expected, nearly shouting, and even Jim flinched a bit. “Enough.”

Kevin let Gary go and Gary stumbled as he stood up. “I’m going to be keeping my eye on you,” Kevin said. “So you’d better be on your best behavior.” Gary shuffled out of the diner and Kevin began to laugh. “Did you see how scared he was? I think that takes care of it.”

“I’m not hungry anymore,” Charles said.

“Me neither,” Jim said.

“Oh come on,” Kevin said. “He’s not hurt, and this way we know he’ll think twice about creepin’ on Isabella.”

Charles got up from the table. “Jesus. Don’t condemn people until you’ve got all the facts on them.” He wasn’t sure if he was referring to Gary or himself.

§

A few weeks later, when Isabella asked for another ride at the end of the day, Charles said, “Of course. Anytime.” In fact, he had been waiting to give her a ride so he could tell her all the reading he’d done after their first conversation. In the car, he told her what he’d

learned about quantum mechanics and theoretical cosmology. About the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. The Multiverse. String Theory. Eleven dimensions. All because she posed that silly question. What he didn't tell her was he became fascinated with the idea that his life was one of a potentially infinite number of Charles Vianas, that there were an infinite number of Brodies who were growing up, going to high school and prom and getting married. Lives where he and Linda were together, proud grandparents. Perhaps Charles was enduring the suffering so that all the other Charleses in all the other multiverses would not have to bear the burden. It gave him a bit of hope.

Perhaps he would share his theory with Isabella someday, and she would listen to it without laughing and say, "Yes, that's correct. That's absolutely correct."

Isabella spoke about entanglement and particle symmetry and orientation, even explaining that quantum theory posits that a person's mind might exist in a different state after death.

"Like an afterlife?" Charles said. His words rushed out of him like a wind. He hoped she might say that Brody was still alive somewhere, somehow.

"Sort of. I don't think a theoretical physicist would say this proves the Pearly Gates, but it suggests that physical death is not final. Though we don't understand what state we might be in. I don't really understand it all myself."

As they approached Isabella's neighborhood, she said, "I have another weird question for you."

"Go ahead."

"Can I see your house?"

"My house?"

“I know it sounds super weird and of course you can say no, but my parents are going to be home, and I can’t deal with them right now. I just need a bit of a breather.”

Though his house was empty, Charles felt as if someone might call his name at any moment. He led Isabella past the living room with one red wall, past the crack in the ceiling, past the loose floorboards. “This is nice,” she said. She turned this way and that.

“Nicer than you thought?”

“No, no. Not at all. But.”

“But something else?”

“But why does a man need an entire home to himself?”

“He doesn’t. You hungry?”

“Yes. And do you have any coffee? When I go home, I have to write these damn blog posts for a philosophy class.”

In the kitchen, Charles arrayed the fruits and vegetables on the table: eggplant and cauliflower and tomatoes and kale. Blueberries and avocado and mango. “Do you have any frozen pizza?” she asked. “I’m starving. But not for healthy food. For greasy processed food.”

After a brief pause of disappointment, Charles said, “I can’t make any promises.” He pulled out a meat-lovers. “Will this do?”

“Of course.” She shifted her weight, touched the deposits enveloping her pelvis. “I would love to be in the type of shape you’re in, when I’m—”

“You can say it. Old.”

“No. I don’t mean old old. I mean.” She reached out in front of her as if to pluck the missing words out of the air. “More experienced.”

“Nice work. You’re not so bad on your feet after all.”

After Charles put the pizza in the oven, Isabella said, “Can I see the rest of the house? The upstairs?” So Charles took her up the stairs to see the never-used guest room and the hardly-used second full bathroom. He brought her to Brody’s room where she lingered longer than he thought she would, touching the shelf of books and half-built Lego fortresses, running her hand along the Batman comforter, sifting through the small shirts and pants hung in the closet.

When she suggested “let’s go to the bedroom,” Charles felt a small trill of excitement, but he soon realized both the words and tone she used were meant to make fun of the idea that they would ever have a sexual relationship. He followed her there, watching her hair flutter with each step. She seemed not to notice the mess, the piles of clothes, the unmade bed, the dresser drawers open, the broken jewelry box with bracelets and rings and earrings scattered around it like spilt blood. She immersed herself in things that Linda had left behind. She held up a sweater to her body, felt its knit. She pulled the hems of dresses, fanning them out like bird tails, twisting them to see the fabric’s memory, feeling the texture on her fingers. The *shik-shik* of the hanger hooks scraping against the closet rack was the most noise Charles heard in the room in a long time, and he pictured what it used to be like and what he hoped it would be like again until Isabella yelled out, “Oh cool! Retro!” She held up a summer dress with the pattern of sunflowers against a dark back drop. Linda must have had that dress for close to twenty years. “Can I try it on?”

“Sure,” Charles said. Isabella disappeared in the master bathroom. Charles scooped up some of the clothes on the floor and dumped them in the hamper and pulled the sheet and comforter over the mattress. He swept dust from the windowsill and a cloud of particles and tufts danced in the air and some got in his eyes and nostrils and he sneezed. The room

looked a little cleaner at least. He listened for the smoke detector in case the pizza began to burn, and had he left the kettle on?

“What do you think?” Isabella gave a three quarter turn one way then the other. She curtsied, smiled. “Fits pretty well, doesn’t it? A bit loose from old age, but that can’t be avoided.”

The dress didn’t really fit well: Isabella’s shoulders were too narrow and the dress bunched up along parts of her torso, but Charles didn’t disagree.

Isabella removed the lid from the broken jewelry box and sifted through the array of jewelry. She picked up a ring with a large opal at the center and turned it in the light before sliding it on her onto her middle finger. She unclasped a bracelet and draped it over her forearm. “Is that real gold?” she asked.

“I have no idea. Probably not.”

Isabella shrugged and fit it around her wrist. She selected a necklace with a silver chain and an emerald pendant. “Would you help me put this on?” She turned her back to him and lifted her hair.

“Sure.” The response that he should help put on jewelry, in-grained years ago, kicked in before he realized how much he didn’t want to. But by that time he held the spring ring clasp between his thumb and forefinger and was trying to draw the tiny lever back with the tip of his nail and fit the tiny loop in the opening in the clasp. His hands trembled at the effort, and the clasp jumped out of his hand and fell across her back. “Shit. I’ll get it eventually.” As he retrieved it, he noticed the tangle of downy hair on the back of her neck up to the base of her skull, the mole on the left, the small white scar that could have been from chickenpox or perhaps an act of mild sibling cruelty. He might have done this for a daughter, once.

“Thanks!” she said when the necklace was secure. At the dresser, she examined the series of pictures on top. “Are these pictures of your family?” she asked. She lifted a small frame, a 4x6 of Linda and Charles and Brody at a park with large concrete dinosaur sculptures in a simple black frame. Brody sat high on the neck of a brontosaurus, a look of worry on his face.

Charles placed a hand on the frame and guided it back down to where it had stood. “I think we should go down and check on the pizza,” Charles said.

Back in the kitchen: the kettle wasn’t on, and the pizza was overdone, but not yet burnt. Charles set out a plate on the table, handed Isabella the oven mitts and the pizza cutter and said, “Knock yourself out.” He filled the kettle and set it on the burner. The pizza cutter made a light squeaking noise as Isabella wheeled it across the pizza.

“Taste?” She held a small wad of melted cheese and meat and blackened crust.

“No thanks.” Charles scooped grounds into the French press.

“Can we sit at the dining room table? It looks so nice.”

“Sure. Grab placemats and napkins from a drawer over there.”

The sound of drawers opening and closing. A complaining kettle. Charles arranged his own plate of fruits and vegetables while the coffee brewed. Isabella was already seated at the table when Charles brought over the coffee and the fruit. “I really like to see how different people live,” she said.

This moment was what Charles had wanted for a while now. He imagined Linda sitting across from him (wearing something other than the sunflower dress), saying things like wow, these pan-seared salmon fillets are incredible.

“This pizza is so good,” not-Linda said. “Even though it’s a bit done.”

And these capers! Linda said.

“Ow, I think I burned the roof of my mouth,” not-Linda said.

I have an idea: let’s plant a vegetable garden in the back yard, Linda said.

“Live a little, Charles. Have some pizza with your health food,” not-Linda said.

I love you, Linda said.

“Mm-mm,” not-Linda said.

§

After Charles dropped Isabella off (after she had returned the dress and jewelry), Charles went to the bar closest to her house, just for one drink, he told himself. The bar stood on the corner, its broad windows radiating a frosty halogen blue. Most of the other customers were young and preppy and confident and good-looking. They wore oxford shirts open at the chest, blazers and cardigans and loafers without socks. They wore tight summer dresses with sharp cleavage even though the early spring nights could be quite chilly. They strutted in four-inch stilettos. Walking across the room was a demonstration in power. In his rumpled slacks and untucked button-down and scuffed dress shoes, Charles felt like a dad who had dressed to embarrass his child. He ordered a whiskey soda, and sipped it, head down, at the bar. Charles was an abnormality, damaged and disheveled.

The music pounded in his ears, many of the yuppies leered at him over their shoulders. Charles began feel excruciatingly exposed, so he texted Darius and T to see if either wanted to meet up with him at the bar, and they both said, no, not tonight, next time though. Charles considered texting Jim and Kevin, but he was almost done with his drink by that time, and he thought, no, no, time to go back home, but at that point one of the yuppies came up next to him and said, “What are you drinking?” and when Charles said told him whiskey-soda, the yuppie said to the bartender, “Two whiskey sodas.”

Charles and the yuppie began chatting—the yuppie’s name was Malcolm—about the bar, the neighborhood, city politics, the recession. When Malcolm’s drink was finished, Charles pointed to the glass and said, “Another?” Charles bought another for each of them, and Malcolm took Charles over to the table where his friends were sitting, introducing him by saying, “This is Charles. He’s a cool guy.” To prove it, Charles ordered a round of drinks for the table, and soon he was nestled between a guy and a girl whose names he couldn’t quite remember but who he felt connections to even though he couldn’t explain why. One of the yuppies at the table bought another round of drinks, then Malcolm bought another. Charles felt what it must be like to be the Priest. The night ended with a roulette of hugs and declarations that he would, most definitely, hang out with them again soon.

Though now Charles, who had not anticipated staying so late and drinking so much, had to figure out how he would get home safely tonight, or how he would get the car in the morning, or how he might find a place to sleep tonight and get up early enough to get the car before work. Or whether sleeping in his car on a Wednesday night was a viable option.

The night had cooled quite a bit since Charles had dropped off Isabella and, when the wind fluttered past him, he felt cold. Didn’t Mr. Samuels live nearby? Hadn’t he gone to Mr. Samuels’ for a barbecue one summer? He could remember which house it was, for sure. He even knew the street name, Lawrence. What he knew, if he knew anything at all, was the house had a forest green door with a brass knocker and no awning. Charles cut over to Lawrence and began jogging up the hill saying green door green door green door. In the darkness, it was hard to distinguish between black and dark green and blue, so Charles veered into people’s yards to get a closer look, the softness of the grass a relief from the unyielding asphalt. Soft music of steps. This one was black and that one was gray and, besides, that one had a gate on the side and Mr. Samuels’ didn’t have a gate. And then he

found a door that was green, unmistakably, and even the brick seemed right. An awning hovered over the door, a silent guardian. Charles thought, at first, that his mind was playing a trick on him, or had Mr. Samuels built an awning? He must have misremembered the awning. He rang the doorbell once, waited, and again. After what seemed like minutes, he knocked, the fleshy part of his balled up fist thudding the wood, casting the deep boom to all corners of the house. It worked: light emerged from an upstairs window, and Charles thought he could hear sound of a voice rumbling down the stairs. Mr. Samuels would be so surprised to see him.

Only Mr. Samuels didn't answer the door. A man perhaps twenty years older than Mr. Samuels with less hair, all of it gray, broad shoulders, a significant gut, though tight not flabby, a weary weathered face, strong cheekbones and a wide nose. Charles couldn't see the man's hands, but he knew they were strong. "Why are you pounding on my door in the middle of the night with my wife and grandkids sleeping?"

"Um. Is this the Samuels residence?"

"Who?"

It occurred to Charles that he was on the wrong street. "Terrence Street!" Sprinting down the sidewalk, he laughed at his carelessness and shook his head in an exaggerated manner, imagining what the man might say to his wife the next morning or to his co-workers the next day. He continued to shake his head in that hyperbolic way since the motion made his face feel caressed by the cool air.

If someone had been out walking the dog or returning from the closing shift at one of the neighborhood bars, she would have seen Charles sprinting and shaking his head and laughing all at once, and she might have thought him a little unhinged. She would have seen, too, his foot catch a raised section of sidewalk and the resulting stumble, arms flailing like

propellers, the slow motion full-body slide on the asphalt. The resulting motionlessness. And if she stayed around long enough, the resurrection where Charles brushed off his clothes, examined his scraped hands and knees and the new hole in his slacks. Finally, the limp down the street.

When Charles stood in front of Mr. Samuels' house at last, doubt pumped throughout his body, his optimism knocked out of him from the fall. Though he didn't know what he looked like, his throbbing ribs, his raw hands, his turbulent stomach allowed him to picture himself as some kind of destitute refugee. Should he let Mr. Samuels see him this way? What sort of confidence would Mr. Samuels and Humberto have in him if he woke Mr. Samuels in the middle of the night looking like some kind of beggar? Charles almost slinked away to avoid the humiliation, but then he imagined Mr. Samuels answering the door in pajamas, his night blindfold pushed to his forehead. He pictured Humberto wearing a miniature matching blindfold, and he couldn't help but laugh. His loneliness dissipated.

Charles rapped the door much more gently than before and, to his surprise, Mr. Samuels opened it almost immediately—was he expecting Charles?—his eyes already trained on Charles face. “Charles!” His face registered authentic shock while Humberto, hanging limp, began to stir. “What happened?”

What could he say? He would have to start at the beginning, but he didn't have the strength for that, not now. “Sorry, sir. Could I? Crash on your couch?”

“Of course, of course. It's big, comfy, and leather.” Mr. Samuels swept him into the house with his outstretched arm. “It's a good thing you caught me during one of my late night wanderings because otherwise I never would have heard you.”

Charles smiled with half his mouth. Humberto, now active, pulsed you're safe with us, and Charles couldn't help but follow.

Chapter 10

When Charles found out, he felt so stupid for not recognizing the signs. After spending months trimming down at the start of her affair with the Priest, Linda gained the weight back. Even though she began wearing baggier clothes to the office (another telltale sign), Charles noted, but did not reflect on, the fact that Linda was gaining weight in all the places the husband should notice—her cheeks and chin, her boobs, her back. But even before the weight gain and the wardrobe change, Charles realized her skin looked clearer and more vibrant. He'd observed these things in fragments when he made a point to personally deliver copies of the ESWL progress to Rathbone's assistant (it was customary to provide brief updates to the other department heads when a new project was in development) so he could see how Linda looked in the months since they'd last spoken. A voice in the back of his mind would say "has she gained a bit of weight?" or "doesn't she look a little tired?" or "a flowy top again?" but he never seemed to put it together. Until a "Congrats on the Little Blessing!" card was mistakenly placed on his desk.

Natalie told him in the most reasonable counselor-colleague voice possible: “There’s no way you should have known. You’re not living with her anymore.” As if that made him feel better. He couldn’t argue with the practicality of her statement, so he tried to win her over on moral grounds. “Don’t get me wrong,” Natalie responded. “This is devastating. I’m as heartbroken as I can be, though obviously not as much as you. Even Sandy said to me that the news made her depressed when I told her last night, and she doesn’t even know you guys well.” Charles’ eyes were watering at this point, and Natalie handed Charles a *Panera* napkin (Live Consciously. Eat Deliciously. Cry Conspicuously.), and he mashed his nascent tears. “But we have to recognize,” she continued, rubbing his shoulder, “that we can’t undo what’s happened here.”

Charles nodded vigorously, as if to disperse his anguish. “Right. She’s keeping the baby.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“You didn’t hear about how well my last attempt went?”

“I heard something. You know Linda tells me everything. Not saying that you should one way or the other, but I think you should—” Natalie held up her hand, stifling his protest, “—if, IF you want to.”

“Forgive me for saying this, but I think you’ve gone fucking crazy.”

“Apology accepted, on account of your duress. I’m not telling you to confront her. I’m saying just talk to her.”

“And say what, exactly?”

“Tell her how shitty you feel. How devastated you are by this. Seriously. You guys were married for almost fifteen years. You loved each other.”

“I still love her.”

“That’s what I meant. You love and have loved her, so you should be able to communicate honestly.”

There was a certain intoxication in her illogic; Natalie avoided saying Linda no longer loved him, nor would she say that the key to him being able to speak to Linda about how all this made him feel was not whether he loved her, but whether she loved him. Okay then. He saw himself sidling up to Linda, bent and broken, exposing his wounds to her, begging she grant him reprieve from his pain. How would that look? Weak. Pathetic. Insane. He would not bow his head to her, he would not grovel asking for kind word, a pat on the head, a false hope. No: he would only approach her if he knew she would give love in return. “I don’t think it will do any good.”

“Okay.” Natalie patted his wrist. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help you. Sandy makes great blueberry cheesecake.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Okay.” Natalie’s eyes seemed small and sad and tired, and Charles wasn’t sure if she was expressing actual sadness for him or if she was just caught up in the moment. “Actually, there’s one other thing. Do you know when she’s due?”

“Mid-September.”

“Christ. That soon? How did I not see it earlier?”

“She hid it well.”

After work, Charles found himself in a small gun store on Watson, looking at the glass case of handguns the way he used to look at rare comics and baseball cards in the comic store when he was younger: he knew they were valuable but they seemed so mundane on display.

“They’re just as pretty outside the case,” the solitary clerk said. “You’re allowed to hold one if you want.”

Charles hadn’t realized how long he was letting the fog of his thoughts roll over. “What, here?”

“You’re new to this, ain’t ya?” The clerk already understood the answer. “We take it out so you can feel the weight of it, see how the grip fits in your hand, hold it the same way all those movie stars do on the big screen—though I wouldn’t recommend doing that once you load it with ammo, because you could seriously injure yourself in the process. Hell, you can see how badass you look just carrying it around.” He bent down, unlocked the back of the case, slid the door open, and pulled out a sturdy-looking handgun. “Here.” He thrust it into Charles’ hands. “Lift, point, examine the chamber, check the heft of it.”

Charles flinched as if someone had given him a scorpion.

“It’s not loaded.” The clerk removed the magazine and tilted it toward Charles so he could verify it was empty. “See?” He snapped the magazine back in and pulled the chamber open. “Nothing in the chamber, either. Nothing to worry about. Point away.” The clerk turned the gun around, held it by the muzzle, and offered the grip to Charles. “Go on.” He nodded once like a parent giving permission.

Surprised by the weight of it, Charles fumbled the gun, catching it before it fell onto the case top (Woah there!). He clicked the safety on and off, put his finger on the trigger without squeezing (You wanna rest your finger on the guard to the side). As he pointed it at various points around the room, the clerk talked about its safety features, when it might jam, how often to clean it, why it’s a great first gun for people looking to protect themselves in their homes.

“So whaddya think?” The clerk’s eyebrows, extremely bushy, were arched, his brow wrinkled.

“I’ll take it,” Charles said with only a fraction of the clerk’s enthusiasm.

“Good man. Standard ammo?”

“You bet.”

“One or two boxes?”

He bought two boxes of ammo—what would it matter?—and paid for the gun and ammo in cash. “How long’s the wait time?”

“You’re in luck. The law in our great state doesn’t require an iota of wait time. So you can walk out of here a proud gun owner. Anything else?”

“Um, yeah. How do you load the gun?”

The clerk’s face was tight, Charles suspected, because he was trying not to laugh, but he must have noticed Charles’ desperation because his expression softened. “I’ll show ya. Come on back to my office and I can teach you.” The office was cramped and disorganized with stacks of papers and catalogues and magazines. The clerk set the box of ammo, the empty magazine, and the gun, chamber cover pulled back, on a small folding table. Holding each part of the gun up for Charles to see, the clerk explained what they were and how they worked. He showed Charles how to load the rounds into the magazine one by one, the proper way to insert the magazine, how to hold the loaded pistol when aiming so he wouldn’t hurt his hand, the proper steps to completely unload the weapon. There was a gentleness to his instruction. “I think I heard another customer come in, so I’m gonna let you work on this on your own. Just make sure you don’t discharge the weapon in here.” He laughed, but then said. “I’m only half kidding. Make sure the safety is on at all times.” Charles practiced again and again, pushing the rounds out of the magazine, ejecting the

chamber, searching the floor for the lone bullet, then reloading all over again. He discovered a rhythm in both the loading and unloading, and soon he could tell that he made a mistake if he heard a sound out of place. When the clerk returned, he made Charles demonstrate that he could properly load and unload the gun. “Again,” he insisted when Charles finished the first time. It took five flawless loadings and unloadings for the clerk to be satisfied. “Safety and technique are paramount. Lots of people wanna get their hands on a gun because they think it looks cool or makes them powerful—here and elsewhere—without caring a lick about safety. But part of being a gun owner is being responsible. I hope you remember that.”

Charles said he would, and he thanked the clerk as he left.

The gun and the two boxes of ammo (why the hell did he think he should buy two boxes of ammo?) in a plastic bag, just as if he had gone to Macy’s or Nordstrum’s, just a casual buy, something in season, something on sale, summer clearance, whatever. He wondered whether people suffered buyer’s remorse when they bought a gun, or whether he would, really. The proof would be in the performance, he guessed.

Huh. The proof would be in the performance. That was something his father had said, and Charles always hated thinking about how he might be like or become his father.

Why would you hate to be like me? Imaginary Father asked.

Do you really want to know?

Of course I do, Imaginary Father said. I’ve lived a full life and I’m living a full afterlife, so I think I can take any criticism you levy.

You sure?

Sure as sand.

What the hell does that mean?

Sure as sand? You’ve not heard that before?

No, I have, but it doesn't make sense, if you think about it. Sand is always shifting; it's never sure.

But it's always there. Think about the Sahara. Loads of sand there.

Impeccable logic.

Look, I didn't make it up.

Right.

What I'm saying is, whatever you have to say, I'm sure I can take it.

Ok. I didn't want to be old and weak. I saw you mind falter, too, and I swore to myself I wouldn't waste away like you did. I hated seeing you worry about what would happen to me and mom. I feared and loathed the person you had become even though it wasn't your fault.

Ouch. That is one of the most devastating things that I've heard on either side of life or death. Is that how you remember me now?

Sometimes. Not all the time, but not infrequently.

Double ouch.

I'm sorry I said anything really.

How do you think Brody remembers you?

Dad, what does that have to do with anything?

Aren't you going to leave a note?

Doesn't that seem a bit complain-y and self-important?

I don't know. I've never left one.

And Charles decided he wouldn't leave one because it wouldn't change Linda's mind, it wouldn't erase the child she was carrying, it wouldn't destroy the Priest. He realized a few things: if he was going to do it, he would have to do so now because, once he lost the nerve,

he wouldn't get it back; he was alone in his car in his driveway, under a moonless sky, no Imaginary Father to see it through with him; the bag with the gun and the ammo were in the front seat next to him.

He pulled out the gun and disengaged the magazine, loading the shells one at a time, all ten of them though, as he realized later, he could have only used one. Making sure not to pinch his skin, he locked in the magazine, engaged a round into the chamber, and raised the gun toward his mouth. It seemed unexpectedly heavy, almost too immense to hold, and his hand shook as the muzzle inched closer and closer. The night seemed impossibly dark and vast, and Charles felt as if he was tiny, as if his body had shrunk, unable to support the oppressive weight of the pistol. He could not feel the seat against his body. It was as if the seat itself had become an immense isolating alien plain, separating him from his only access of escape. The doors seemed unreachable, and the air inside the car was heavy and cloying. At that moment, he saw what it would be like to die. There was a breeze that tugged and tugged at his skin, jarring loose one spec of his body the size of a grain of sand. In its place, where you would expect to find lower layers of skin and muscle and connective tissue, there was nothing, just a gaping hole of blackness. Charles felt the terrifying wound of that absence. The breeze continued to blow, and soon other flecks of himself were dislodged, creating an ever-expanding cold blackness. He saw himself scattered like dust, wiped away as if he'd never existed. No soul, no breath of life kept his memory alive.

Suddenly, he was back in his corporeal present: he felt the pressure of the seat against his body, and he smelled the mixture of his own sweat and anxiety with years of ferrying he and Linda and Brody around. He was crying, and tears stung his cheeks, while the weight of the gun became heavier and heavier. Once he was gone, would nothing of what he'd done in his life matter? Would the history of his love and life with Linda be

snuffed out? Would a part of Brody disappear? He spoke to himself things he knew to be true: Linda and I had a love that was pure, we had a son, his name was Brody. We built a home together, we traveled across the country, we tried to do the best we could. We built a son. We traveled across our pure love the best we could. We tried, together, a home.

Charles removed the magazine and ejected the chamber round. He smoothed his hair, wiped the sweat from his upper lip. He set the pieces of the gun in the bag as gently as he would a sleeping child.

§

The next day, the Priest and Linda went on a vacation. Rumor was they had taken all of their vacation days and they would be gone for an indeterminate amount of time.

Though no one could agree where or why they left, everyone could agree on one thing: “They’re not coming back.” But what about the fact that Linda was going to have a baby? At her age? “People do crazier things, who knows?” Glen from software said. “I bet the Priest has been transferred to the Centrigroup offices in Kansas City or Chicago and they’re looking at places to live,” Hannah from the mailroom said. “No comment,” Mr. Samuels said.

Charles went to Natalie to find out the truth. “Where did they go?”

“I can’t tell you. You know that.”

“Don’t tell me as the HR rep, tell me as Linda’s friend.”

“Charles.” She turned back to her computer and typed so hard on her keyboard that Charles knew it couldn’t be healthy for her carpal tunnel. He hurried to the Priest’s cubicle and cluttered his de-cluttered desk, searching through his drawers, his trashcan, his filing cabinet, his mail tray. Nothing nothing nothing. He asked the IT guy, Spencer, if there was

any way that he could take a look at someone's email. "Isn't that a question of legality?" Spencer said.

One day, about two weeks later, they were back as suddenly as they had left. They brought with them Wisconsin cheese and sausage. Apples and blueberries and cherries. They even shared some famous custard from the Dells. The Priest said it had been a family emergency and that they were staying put, no need to worry.

"Now we're one big family again," Gertrude said.

§

The good news was that, after the ESWL prototype successfully targeted and demolished crystalized and calcified foreign bodies within deep tissue in all trials, Mr. Samuels and his team had the green light to manufacture one hundred to be used in trials (a formality, really). From there, they would train doctors and technicians and sell the ESWL around the country. The other good news was that Mr. Samuels was personally acknowledging Charles' contribution to project's success by taking Charles to lunch at one of the city's best restaurants, the Horn & Claw, on the top floor of the Kodiak Life building. But a lunch with Samuels also generated several problems.

Problem #1: Charles felt an immense anxiety at the thought of looking at Humberto, akin to looking at the corona of the sun.

Problem #2: Charles felt an equally immense fear if he does not glance at Humberto, a fear he might miss something sublime and irretrievable.

Problem #3: When Charles looked at Humberto, he could not do so directly. If he let his eyes linger for a moment too long, he would become hypnotized by his rhythms. And, at that point, Humberto might puff himself up and spit and rage.

Problem #4: He felt as if he was the only person who understood the truth about Humberto scientist on the brink of a paradigm-shifting discovery, though at other times he wondered whether he assuming a reality of his own making.

The experience seemed positively Old Testament. Be awestruck in the face of the supernatural.

Which put Charles in a particularly difficult situation at this lunch, when he took his place at the table across from Mr. Samuels. Sure, he'd had a lot of practice avoiding looking at Humberto directly ever since he first manifested himself as a little lumpet. He'd survived a number of close confrontations with Humberto by burying his face in charts and tables, by using unsuspecting engineers or accountants or hospital administrators as buffers. But now there was nothing between them but a single miniature candle on top of a white cotton-polyester tablecloth.

Charles turned his body to the right to avoid looking at Mr. Samuels entirely. The restaurant offered a panoramic view of downtown. At just past noon, sunlight streamed through the south-side windows. To Charles' left, barges trundled down the wide and murky Mississippi. Painted across the ceiling was the subject of a neocon's wet dream: a series of scenes depicting the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs, the events of which a patron could follow from start to finish should he choose. The banquet: wine is guzzled, the Centaurs get drunk, and they snatch the bride-to-be. The Battle: a clash of hoof and sword, the implied rapes of women, men skewered by sword and spear, Centaurs cornered and dismembered. Finally, the Lapiths triumphant. Underneath the interplay of heroism and depravity, elder statesmen of the business and legal community shuffled to their tables, too large jackets drooping on wilting bodies.

Though Charles wasn't facing Mr. Samuels, he could feel his hulking outline intruding on the periphery. Centrigroup's prototype Tru BMI Scanning Gun® would classify him as Obese Class III. Asshole Kevin had once said that the only good quality Mr. Samuels had as a project manager was he was too big to ignore.

He tottered on his chair like a circus elephant balancing on a ball. "...for all your hard work."

"What?" Charles said without facing him.

"I said I would like to make a toast to you for all your hard work on the ESWL."

A tumbler on the table, two fingers, neat.

"Scotch. You've earned it." Meaty hand already holding a glass across the table.

"Could I get some ice or—"

"It's a thirty-year. You must taste it unaltered."

Charles raised his glass, his eyes fixed on Mr. Samuels', resisting Humberto's pull. Humberto spilled over the neckline of Mr. Samuels' black t-shirt and onto edge of his jacket's lapel, pushing upward against his jaw. Charles felt his gaze drawn from Mr. Samuels eyes to his cheeks, so he ducked his head down and focused on the far corner of the table. Mr. Samuels leaned in and Humberto burst into Charles' field of vision. "Up here, Charles. I'm not some piece of meat." He laughed so hard that his chair rocked and his belly bumped the table. Scotch pitched in Mr. Samuels' glass and trickled down the sides to the tablecloth. "Whoa! Man overboard! We'd better drink this quick. To you, Charles. The ESWL couldn't have been completed without you. Here, here." He took a long sip and held the scotch in his mouth before swallowing. "Taste the ashiness. Feel those spicy notes coming on strong." Humberto shuddered as if savoring scotch.

The scotch tore its way down Charles' throat. He coughed, his eyes watered and, through the tears, Humberto rippled, surrounded by a multi-colored halo. It was strange really: Charles, in the midst of hacking and sputtering, felt calm while looking at Humberto. He slowed his undulations in a way that relaxed Charles' breathing and quieted his diaphragm. With it came this sense of serenity, as if Charles could once again—

“You with us? Hello? Earth to Charles.” Charles nodded, rubbing his eyes and coughing into his fist.

“Now.” Mr. Samuels thrust his face toward Charles, his enormous belly pushing the table toward Charles. Humberto swooped forward like a fat-bellied orangutan traversing a forest canopy. “We talk about the next project: figuring out how we should get rid of the Priest.”

Before Samuels could elaborate, KEN, the waiter asked to take their orders. Charles ordered the grilled red-tailed snapper with cauliflower and baby carrots. Samuels rattled off a list of dishes: a grilled filet of swordfish with lemon butter and rosemary and a side of mashed butternut squash, a mead-glazed beef shoulder roast with roasted potatoes and portabella mushroom and a side of grilled asparagus, a 6oz duck breast roasted in a brandy and lemon-pepper marinade alongside grilled brussel sprouts, grilled rabbit doused in a light gravy on a bed of fried octopus. “Bring them out as soon as they are ready,” Mr. Samuels said.

“I remember your son,” Mr. Samuels said. He took a long drink of scotch. “I remember the tragedy of his passing.” Humberto throbbed sympathetically.

“I think about him every day.” He felt deflated, his limbs numbed, and he flexed his fingers and swirled the glass, watching the scotch rise and fall like waves.

“You want another?” Charles waved him off and Mr. Samuels took a deep breath while Humberto puffed up as if to ready himself for a large admission. “I have two critters at home,” Mr. Samuels continued, “and I would be a wrecked man if either one of them became seriously ill or died, so I have boundless admiration for your ability to carry on. I don’t know how you do it.”

“You just do.” Charles couldn’t think of any other way to explain it.

“Very philosophical.”

Charles impatience needled at him. “What does this have to do with the Priest?”

“On top of that, I can only imagine how much harder it must be now that Linda has left you.” He drained the rest of the scotch, holding it in his mouth, then thrust the glass out to his right and raised it so KEN could see it. A ruddiness spread across Humberto. KEN plucked Mr. Samuels’ empty glass. Mr. Samuels pointed a fat finger in Charles’ direction. “You sure?” Charles nodded and Samuels belched. “Suit yourself.”

Charles felt heat rising in his face and his jaw clenched, though he hoped Mr. Samuels couldn’t tell how irritated he was getting. Why was he twisting the knife into Charles’ wounds? He had enough scotch in his glass to splash in Mr. Samuels’ eyes.

On cue, Mr. Samuels said, “My primary goal is not to piss you off, far from it.”

Charles felt suddenly cold. He remembered, once, encountering a flabbergasted and nearly raving Asshole Kevin pacing back and forth in the break room. “It’s like Samuels read my fucking mind. I was gonna duck out early and pick up a puppy from the shelter for my wife because she’s been a bit down in the dumps lately, and I told everyone I had a meeting with a client. But Samuels sees me at the elevators and says ‘Consider a pitbull mix.’ How could he have known? I told no one. I went back to my desk because I was so spooked.”

And Charles now felt what Kevin must have. It wasn't the feeling that Mr. Samuels had read his body language and made an assessment, it was the sensation that Mr. Samuels was somehow intruding on his mental space. To give himself the feeling of control, Charles said, "I'm not pissed off."

KEN handed Mr. Samuels his next scotch and shuffled off. "Right," Mr. Samuels said before taking a sip. "You absolutely have the right to be pissed off, though you may want to channel your energy elsewhere. I would be absolutely furious with the Priest if he had attended a counseling session with my wife pretending to be me."

Charles almost tumbled out of his chair. "How did you—"

Before Charles could finish his question, KEN and another server swooped in to deliver their orders. Plate after plate was arrayed like a defensive wall. The combination of dishes created a rapidly mutating aroma, sweet to savory to tangy. KEN also handed Mr. Samuels another scotch, though Charles hadn't realized he had downed his third. "And I'll bring over dessert as soon as you signal," KEN said before leaving.

Mr. Samuels tucked his napkin in his shirt collar and sliced and shoveled and scooped food into his mouth with surprising speed. His mouth and hands worked back and forth across his field of plates, tearing into all the different dishes almost simultaneously. Mr. Samuels' cheeks bulged as his jaws worked furiously, and Humberto wobbled and jiggled like a bowl of jello shaken over and over. Mr. Samuels' eyes bulged under compressed brow, unblinking for nearly a minute. Charles could not look down to start eating his own lunch. He was arrested by both fascination and revulsion. And Charles wasn't the only one: a number of the patrons at the surrounding tables were muttering among themselves in tones of disapproval and stretching their necks like fledglings in a nest, wrinkled, mouths agape.

Charles noticed Mr. Samuels choking as soon as his windpipe became clogged. Mr. Samuels' body hitched, his belly colliding with the table. His arms stretched out wide, knife and fork pointing toward the Centaur murals, and his mouth formed a surprised O. Seeing Mr. Samuels eating, Charles had believed Mr. Samuels eyes could not have opened any wider, but now they looked as if they were being squeezed out of their sockets.

Humberto began to turn red first, and his undulations became bright and frantic. The redness spread up Mr. Samuels' throat and in his cheeks. Mr. Samuels' lips trembled, the O of his mouth collapsed, and his nostrils flared. Humberto turned an inky grey-blue. The knife and fork dropped noiselessly to the soft carpet, and his hands pawed at his throat.

Charles had never seen a man suffocating before.

But he had seen a fish lying on the bottom of a canoe, gills expanding and collapsing like bellows, mouth opening and closing in a noiseless plea (Brody was a fish). It was strange because, in that transition from joyful consumption to arrested breathing, Mr. Samuels seemed to regress to a bestial state, his eyes empty darting orbs, as if they could only look but not really see. His mouth opened and closed. Humberto swelled. For a moment, Charles wondered what it might be like to watch him die. Perhaps the regression would be steady until the final moment when Mr. Samuels' body stopped being a live entity, merely a collection of now decomposing organic matter. It wouldn't be fair for Charles to let Mr. Samuels die, but neither was it fair that Brody had died so young while Charles stood by helplessly watching. And, perhaps, if Charles did nothing, no one would notice.

If you asked Charles about that moment later, he would say of course he wouldn't have let Mr. Samuels die, that such an idea was barbaric and inhuman, that he was slow to recognize what was actually going on, that for an instant he believed Mr. Samuels was playing a trick on him, that he sprang to action as soon as he recognized the gravity of the

moment. While this explanation would not be entirely dishonest, Charles may not have done anything at all if not for pleading ripples from Humberto: in the moment where he compared Mr. Samuels to an animal, he could not deny Humberto's humanity.

Charles leapt from his chair and rushed to Mr. Samuels' aid, stationing himself behind Mr. Samuels' right shoulder. Charles looked down the landslide of his belly and realized he would not be able to wrap his arms around it to perform the Heimlich. "Stand!" he shouted in Mr. Samuels' ear. "Get behind your chair." He placed both hands under Mr. Samuels' right arm and tugged him up to his feet, directing him behind the chair, pushing his torso forward so that the top was positioned just beneath his sternum. So he hoped. Charles clasped his hands together and pounded the middle of Mr. Samuels back. The gray-blue shade bled out of Humberto and up the side of Mr. Samuels' throat. Charles struck Samuels harder, faster, again and again.

Charles felt Mr. Samuels shudder when the partially-chewed mass was dislodged and ejected from his throat, and he heard the heavy gasping and coughing as Samuels stumbled backwards, his arms whirling and grasping for something to hold onto. Charles braced himself to catch Mr. Samuels KEN must have seen Mr. Samuels wave his arms demonstrably because he snatched a glazed dessert and strode toward them, lighting the dish on fire. From the corner of his eye, Charles saw the approaching bouncing flame and he turned to wave Ken off. Mr. Samuels tumbled backwards before Charles could reposition himself for the catch.

Charles crumpled like a flower under a heavy boot.

The floor shook, dishes clattered on the neighboring tables, and drinks sloshed over the rims of their glasses. Nearby patrons retreated outside the crash radius, offering speculative murmurs instead of helping hands.

KEN lunged forward, free hand extended, to try and slow Mr. Samuels' fall. The desert plate tilted forward, and the flaming mound of merengue and ice cream toppled from the dish and bounced off Mr. Samuels' belly, rolling along the carpet until it meandered to a stop and the flame expired. The patrons' murmurs transformed to titters.

KEN helped Mr. Samuels shift off Charles, and both he and Charles pulled Mr. Samuels to his feet. "Sir, are you all right? Do you need me to call the paramedics?" He dusted off the back of Mr. Samuels' jacket and guided him to his seat.

"I feel fantastic. Cleared out. Rejuvenated."

KEN stepped on the edge of the partially-chewed mass that rose from the carpet like a swollen node. "We'll clean this up shortly. Would you like me to remove any of your plates?"

"Not at all. I look forward to enjoying the rest. And be sure to bring Charles absolutely anything he asks for. Another scotch, Charles?"

Charles, still a little short of breath, said, "I'm all scotched-out for the moment."

"We'll see if we can soften his resolve before the end."

KEN nodded and turned to leave, but Mr. Samuels called him back. "Ken, would you check if there are any more Alaskas left? I feel let down having missed that one."

"I'll see what we have in the freezer."

Mr. Samuels ate more slowly and with a few extra chews. Charles made sure to cut his snapper in small bites. For many minutes, they ate in relative silence. Mr. Samuels churned through his dishes, and Charles chewed quietly and listened for gossip about what had just transpired. He was sure that if they weren't talking about Mr. Samuels' choking and his own heroics, they would be soon, on their way back to their offices, as their personal

drivers ferried them back to their houses in the suburbs, to their wives or mistresses, to acquaintances at cocktail parties when they were in need of a story to break the ice.

“You said,” Charles began after the background chatter had died down, “our next project was to get rid of the Priest. In what way?”

“Disgrace him,” Samuels said. Humberto seemed to reawaken from the shock of the choking. “Get him fired, block his bonus. Allow him only the minimal severance package. Get Linda to dump him, that’s for sure.”

“But is that realistic? I know about the joint assignment the Priest has.”

“Oh.” Samuels covered his eyes as if to hide his embarrassment. His lips drooped at the corners, then his tongue leaked out the right side of his mouth. Humberto swelled and billowed like a sail in wind. Mr. Samuels let out a long guttural moan, as if he was in pain. The noise drifted on and on like an unrelenting current. Humberto became brighter and brighter while Mr. Samuels’s seemed to fade under a shadow. Humberto moved in a way that seemed to beckon Charles forward. How could he deny him? He leaned forward and gazed into the burgeoning undulations. His field of vision blurred around the edges and his face felt warm and his saliva tasted acidic.

He didn’t describe to anyone what happened next because it terrified him. It was as if he had been picked up and pulled through a liquid membrane, then dropped into a slanted parallel universe. He could have been there for days, but he probably was only there for seconds. Humberto was white-hot against a darkened canvas and Charles shielded his eyes (or felt he had to shield them). Humberto spoke, he was sure of it, in a voice that was a multitude, neither high or low, gentle or grating, but unsettling. *Kill him.*

Chapter 11

Before Humberto's suggestion, the notion that the Priest could be killed had never entered Charles' mind. It now lurked in the substrate of his consciousness. The next day, the Priest called in sick so Charles looked over the drafts of potential sales scripts the team would use to pitch the ESWL to renal specialists and oncologists.

Sales Representative: How effective could your practice could be if you had a device *that could kill the Priest and get your wife back? You have a gun. You could go to his apartment now—he's alone. Knock on the door very gently, smile when he opens it, reach into your jacket and—*

Charles shook his head and continued reading.

Sales Representative: ...device that could not restore the health to the kidneys and the renal system, but also provide a *painful death. You should make it as painful as possible. Maybe shoot him in the kneecap first, yes, then the shoulder and let him lie there weeping in his own blood, acutely aware of the dissolution of his mortal consciousness.*

He pinched himself on the neck to break the daydream. As he hurried to the water cooler, the echoes of voice reverberated in his mind. Wash out the terrible thoughts, he said

to himself, two cups of water: one, two. In the bathroom, he splashed his face and did twenty jumping jacks. His breath was shallow and his knees ached similarly to how they felt two hours after a long run. When he returned to his desk, he said to himself, script script script, all I need to do is review the script.

Sales Representative: ...provide a painless procedure and a swift recovery. The Centrigroup ESWL© will cut costs by reducing the number of procedures, the invasiveness of said procedures, and the risk incurred by performing them. Using the ESWL, you can *KILL KILL KILL*.

Not much later, he stood inside the Priest's apartment, his journey there a series of impressions (picking up the gun, weaving through traffic, turning the knob of the unexpectedly unlocked front door). Entering the Priest's apartment uninvited and unannounced was like putting on another man's dirty clothes. Charles' skin tingled and he drew pinched breaths through his lips to avoid inhaling the Priest's odor, he tried not to touch anything. So he felt a head from the soles of his feet, the stiffness in his knees, the gun hammocked in the inside pocket of his jacket pressing against his ribs.

He scanned the apartment as his eyes adjusted to the sudden disappearance of light swallowed by cloud-covered skies: in front of him the apartment opened into a kitchen-living room hybrid, small strip of stools tucked against a bar and double sink that separated kitchen from living room. Pots and pans hung from a rack drilled into the wall. The stove wedged into the corner, flanked by the refrigerator. Cabinets open like mouths agape. Beige carpet covered the living room floor. A couch whose cushions rested on the ground, a coffee table covered in dishes. It was as if the Priest and Linda were unprepared to live together.

To his left, a hall led to a single door, partially open, to what Charles assumed is the bedroom. He half expected that door to open and for the Priest to emerge, so he slowed his breathing and listened for movement elsewhere in the apartment. He initially entered the apartment because, when he'd knocked, he thought he heard a voice tell him to come in, as if the Priest was expecting him. He counted the number of beats he could feel in his ears until he reached thirty-one, and he determined the Priest must not actually be home. The reason for his entry was no more than a trick of the mind.

Still, he moved with caution, pulled deeper by the certainty that he would find evidence confirming that Linda was happier when they were still together. What grabbed his attention is the spread of sketches on the dining table, all of them Linda's. One of the Priest shirtless from behind, his pronounced trapezius muscles, rippled lats, rounded shoulders. A tattoo, half visible, curling around his upper arm, darkening his triceps. He looked back over his shoulder, his mouth in a partial smile. Another was a self-portrait of Linda, face angled downward, hair falling to the top of her breasts. Her expression was obscured, and her hands cradled her pregnant belly. Charles flung that sketch to the floor and found one of Brody. One where he was seven or so, three years before he died. Charles folded it twice and stuck it in his outer jacket pocket. His head felt like it was under enormous pressure, as if he was on a plane about to land, its cabin not yet adjusted to the change in pressure. His legs quivered, and he yanked a chair back from the table and sat, one hand massaging his brow, the other tugging on his earlobe, a way to remind himself to slow down. Take one breath, then another.

He had doubts he could actually kill a man, so he revised his strategy:

He would tell the Priest to leave his wife. He would tell him no more than twice.

He would show him the gun. Yes, just show him.

If he says no, shoot?

A voice from a hidden chamber of his mind says, Of course! Fuckface! At that point he could see himself pulling the gun out of his jacket, pointing it at the Priest's chest (he doesn't have the confidence that he will hit him square in the head) and fingering the trigger, but that was as far as his fantasy would take him.

In this moment of quiet, the absurdity of his plan reared up like a lunging bear. It was clear that he had lost, that Linda had made her choice and that no amount of threats or pistol flashes would change her mind.

Then Charles noticed a sketch of Brody as he might have looked now at twelve or thirteen, his jaw and cheekbones more prominent, his expression the smirk of a confident teenager, his hair swooping across his forehead, and Charles felt that same roiling mixture of anger and despair as when he found out Linda was pregnant. He arranged the drawings of the Priest and teenage Brody so they were side-by-side, then he picked up Linda's self-portrait and placed it next to the other two. His laughter emerged from his throat dry surprising him. The Priest had everything he wanted. Now.

A noise from the bedroom, Charles was certain this time. The sight of his hand pulling out the gun from his pocket in the way he had just envisioned it—the bend of his wrist, the cord of his tendon, the curve of his thumb—generated a kind of vertigo, and Charles lurched forward. He steadied himself at the bedroom door and a scattershot of memories coalesced into a mosaic of his life, and he thought that yes, every instant has led him down the path to the present. All that stands in his way was the door, which opened surprisingly easily.

When Charles was a sixth-grader and he was starting his walk home from school, a girl in the class above him (a girl whose name he didn't know but whose face he'd recognized) called him over and said, "Hey. I found something I think you should see." And what could Charles say to a girl who was a whole year ahead of him? There was something in her stride, something in the way her hips moved from side to side, the way her butt filled out her skirt that made Charles feel uneasy. He realized, even as he would have sworn to his guy friends that girls were smaller and weaker than boys and there was no way some girl could overpower *him*, he could do nothing but follow her. So he trailed a good three feet behind her as she traipsed down the alleyway past the dumpsters and the stacks of cardboard boxes, past the broken bottles and the dark residues on the light gray pavement through a gap in a dilapidated fence and into a field overgrown with grass and tires and cinderblocks.

He didn't see anything at first, and he immediately felt stupid, certain that this older girl was making fun of him. He said, in a voice not much louder than a whisper, "Where is it?"

She leaned her head close to his, the strands of her hair brushing his cheek. He could smell her sour skin. She pointed out toward a reedy clump. "There," she said.

Charles squinted and nodded as if he had encountered the transcendence of the thing she was showing him. If Charles weren't so nervous, he might have thought of the scene beautiful in its downtroddenness (or perhaps he would have thought of it as a good place to bring the guys later to climb and explore), but fear that he was about to be humiliated made the field itself seem hostile.

"See it?" she said. Charles couldn't tell if the pitch in her voice was one of irritation or excitement. He nodded as he scanned the field: tire, cluster of beer bottles and cans, panels of rotting wood.

And then he saw it. At first, he thought he was just looking at a shoe lying among the detritus, but then he noticed the cuff of a pants leg and, a couple of feet away, the unmistakable blossom of an upturned hand. “What is it?” he asked. He tried not to give name to his dread.

She laughed and there was a note of cruelty in it. “God, you sixth graders are such *babies*.” She held a cigarette between her lips and was sparking a lighter.

“I don’t think you should be smoking.”

She took a short puff on the cigarette, sucking in her cheeks like a kid making a fish face. “Haven’t you ever seen a dead body before?” The smoke tumbled out of her mouth like a snake slithering through the grass.

He hadn’t seen a dead *human* body before, but he had seen a dead cat and various unidentified road kill. And when he was five, he’d been the first in the house to find the guinea pig, stiff and lifeless, and he’d been teary-eyed when he and his parents lowered him into the ground in a duct taped shoebox. And he’d been to his grandfather’s funeral, watched the pallbearers carry the closed casket down the center aisle knowing that yes, there was a dead body *inside* which, if *Night of the Living Dead* had any truth to it, could push off the lid and sit up. “I have. I just haven’t seen one outside. How’d it get there?” He imagined the man sitting in the grass smoking cigarette after cigarette, wheezing and coughing the way his leathery-skinned Uncle Sylvester did, then finally lying down, his breaths becoming shallower and shallower, and closing his eyes as if sleeping. And he pictured this seventh grade girl in the field in the dead man’s place, cigarette between two fingers of her upturned palm.

“How am I supposed to know? Found it yesterday.” Another puff, another compression of the gills.

“Should we tell the police? Or a grown-up?”

“What would they do? He’s already dead.”

The seventh grade girl made a certain kind of sense and she did seem even older with the cigarette in her hand. Charles kicked at the dirt, chipping away the brittle clumps.

“Maybe he’s just knocked out.”

“Exactly like he was yesterday. Hasn’t moved an inch.” She dropped her cigarette on the ground and stomped on it like she was attacking an insect. “Even put my hand above his nose to see if he was breathing.”

“Was—”

“He wasn’t.”

“Oh.” Charles wished he hadn’t followed the seventh grade girl to the field, hadn’t seen the dead man lying in the grass, hadn’t asked questions that made the seventh grade girl call him a baby.

“If you think I’m lying, you can go check yourself,” the girl said.

“I didn’t say you were lying.”

“What if I am? You don’t know me, sixth grader. I could be making up this whole story. That could just be some drunk who passed out.”

Charles didn’t really know what that meant, but he understood that he couldn’t back down from the challenge that the older girl had presented. “Are you coming too?”

Her scoff was like a hiccup. “No. I already did it. Are you scared, scaredy?”

“No.”

“I’m going to tell all your sixth grade baby friends that you wouldn’t go to the body and that you were more scared than a *girl*.”

“I’m going.” He stepped around glass fragments and what he imagined were sharp rocks, and he took a jagged path toward the body. Over strips of cloth, eggshell fragments, a

pile of shit he hoped came from a dog. His legs tensed, ready to spring at any sign of movement. The stench was overpowering, and Charles turned away when it first hit his nostrils. It was the worst kind of thing he had never experienced before (he didn't remember his gerbil smelling like that), and he hadn't yet learned about the various processes regarding the decomposition of organic material.

“Go on! You're almost there!” the girl called.

Charles nodded and pulled his shirt up over his nose. He picked up a metal pole he found lying in the grass, and he held it close to him, his weapon against the impending terror. He crept as noiselessly as possible, pole extended like a spear, ready to strike.

This memory hit Charles when he entered the Priest's bedroom and saw him lying on the ground. For a moment, when he stood in front of the Priest's fallen body, he saw both things at once. The memory was gone in a blink, and what was right in front of Charles was terrifying and hard to understand: the Priest lying prone on the carpet, unmoving, dark blot thick to one side of his head like a warped halo. At first, Charles jumped back, ducking his head, and looking behind him. Was there someone else in the apartment? Charles listened, and all he could hear was the wind rushing through the crack in the partially open sliding door that led from the bedroom to a small balcony. Charles moved along the wall to the door and shut it.

Charles was careful to step around the blood that has soaked into the carpet. He slipped the gun, unfired, into his inside jacket pocket. He curled into a crouch, barely breathing, as if trying not to wake someone sleeping. And if Charles focused on the Priest's face (eyes closed, mouth still) and ignored the crushed skull, the dark blood, he might have thought that the Priest had just decided to take a nap in the middle of the bedroom floor.

So it was done: the Priest was dead. Charles shifted his weight and sat back against the bed, rubbed his face, and laughed, this time with his whole body: his hand bouncing against the bridge of his nose, the gun quivering in his jacket, his knees wobbling, chest heaving. Once the laugh started, it felt as if he would never stop, and he pictured himself, sitting on the floor, laughing at the dead body of the man he hated the most, who he came to kill, who was already dead. His face tingled and he lost the feeling in his limbs; it is as if they were fading out of existence. His body had been transformed: for a moment, his was not a human body that lived and strove and thought, his was one that had been repurposed to laugh. His lungs were the bellows, his mind broadcast the images to fuel it, the muscles in his abdomen and chest and back and shoulders served merely as support. The rain outside lashed the roof and the exterior walls of the apartment, resembling applause. With each bodily convulsion the weight he had been carrying for months leaked out. He has not had to kill after all, and it was over.

His laughter eventually petered out. In the resulting stillness, the questions were slow to come: why was the balcony door open? Why was the front door unlocked? Who would kill the Priest before him? And what if someone else was in the apartment? He flinched when he heard a small exhalation and feeling returned to his limbs quickly like they had just been burned. The Priest's lips fluttered and a gurgle of blood and saliva trickled from his mouth. The Priest was still alive and Charles had never been so terrified to be wrong. He scampered to his feet too quickly and stumbled backward, knocking his knee on the corner of the bed and colliding with the dresser on the wall to the right. The room shook, a framed picture of Linda and the Priest fell to the carpet. Once Charles steadied himself, he held his hand an inch over the Priest's nose and mouth, what he couldn't do as a sixth grader. The breath weak, a sign of life ebbing.

A litany of concerns:

Don't die now.

Call for help.

Don't want you to die.

Get rid of the gun.

Phone in the car. Storming outside.

Linda cannot know what he has come here to do.

Stop the bleeding.

Charles found towels dutifully waiting for him in the linen closet in the bathroom. He plucked them off the shelves until his arms were full and he hurries back to the Priest. Pressure, but not too much. One towel soaked through, and his hand is wet. Number two, the same. The realization that the Priest would die if Charles didn't get help came more as a reaction than rational thought, and he darted to the kitchen, the living room, the hall in search of a phone. Nothing.

There was only one thing to do: run, against the wind, against the thick rain, against his own paralyzing fear. Run.