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David Nutt

The Corporate Body

Management had stranded me in the reception area. The elevators emptied into a narrow and under-lit hallway that ended in double-fold, bulletproof glass doors, on the other side of which I sat, like a bank teller or convenience store clerk. I buzzed everything in. Visitors. Spouses. Interviewees. Deliverymen and their packages, handcarts loaded with parcels. Employees returning from the restroom, their hands unwashed. I occupied the shady, neutral territory that protected our office from the exterior world. I was its only insulation. Everything funneled through me.

It was my job to man the phone lines and make coffee, smudged photocopies, and trivial office assignments that didn't require a business degree or technical training or the slightest aftertaste of intelligence, although a receptionist I surely was not. I was not a flight attendant or black-tie restaurant hostess. I did not take coats and names. Instead, I spent whole afternoons mentally rearranging the waiting-lounge furniture. I ordered up lunch for meetings, dinner for late nights, ice cream for ice cream floats. I dusted the fingerprints off computer monitors and desktops, and I got down on my knees to tidy the plush, indented carpets of company executives. Emergency custodial tasks. Somebody had to check the mousetraps in the file room. The tampon dispenser in the ladies' lav wasn't stocking itself.

During the lunch-hour lull, I hid behind stacks of annual reports piled high on my desk, thinking of islands and isolation tanks, the insularity of where we worked, listening to the muffled wail of city sirens outside. If I had a corner room, something windowed, perhaps I could see the ambulance lights like tiny blips on a radar screen far below us. But I was forced to rely on the field reports of coworkers returning from lunch.

"—I could've ate my own intestines it would've tasted better."

Charlene Hanover was lugging a large shopping bag through the glass doors. She spotted me behind my paper barricade and winked hello.

"What's it like down there?" I asked, interrupting.

"Four-alarm fire around the block. Real smoky. One of those terrible orphanages with no firewalling or shiny red hydrants in front of it. Can't smell a bleeding thing up here, thank god."

"I've had bigger blazes in my pants," Teddy Choler announced, following her into the reception area, grabbing the crotch of his khakis. His fingers bent into a pistol shape, which he sighted on Charlene's hams as she arched over her bag. Teddy squeezed off a few deadly rounds and holstered the smoking fist in a pocket.

Behind them trudged Madeline Madela, an overweight assistant shrieking something bitter and toothy in German, a cell phone buried deep in her neck fat.

"But anyway, back to the pasta . . ." Charlene continued as the sound of her voice trailed off, disappearing around the corner, lost to some far end of the office. If it actually had an end at all. The building's geography was uneven and disorienting, with its identical rooms and meandering hallways, some that circled, others that splintered, but all of it a confused course that made little sense from eye level.

Most days I left a trail of paperclips to find my way back to my desk.

Winsloame hobbled out of Accounting, a vision of argyle and aged corduroy picked out by his dead wife. White hair exploded from his ears, big shaggy knots of it that crept upward like ivy, fringing his head. The flesh-toned plastic of his hearing aid looked healthier than he did. He walked in slants. I didn't know whether to hug him or catch him, so I tried a combination of both.

"My son," he said, reaching for the fax machine behind my desk. He stabbed the floor with his cane, as if plunging a flag into the stiff ice of the Antarctic, and with his free hand he grabbed the fresh pages, then my shoulder. His fingers felt like pigeon toes. He smelled of attic tang and backwashed bourbon.

"The bastards will make an old man out of you. Wait and see," he croaked.

"But you're only getting younger, Pop," I replied, wincing at the dead skin that shingled his hands. Pieces of him were always flaking off. He left pale, scabby piles around the office that even I wouldn't sweep up. I snatched the documents out of his brittle paws and collated them myself. Page after page of endless figures, numbers that ranged to infinity and beyond. Sums that would laughably outlast us.

"You're getting so young you'll end up back in diapers," I said.

"You spineless cocksucker," he grinned, rapping my knees with his cane. "I'll love you to the grave."

I stomped the floor hard.

"This ground beneath us, Winsloame. I'll bet the carpet peels back and someone must have a shovel. We're gonna bury your bones right here."

He gave me another firm rapping, this time my wrist, and he took his collations back to Accounting, the beehive of cubicles and shoulder-high partitions that split that room into even, square-ish blocks of phlegmatic suffering and spite.

I wanted to tell Winsloame to pack his things. I wanted to strap him to his desk and fashion a sail out of his shirt. Send the old fucker out to sea.

Somebody had to survive this.

It was almost four o'clock when I was summoned to the copy room, where I found a group of men crowded around the paper shredder, each with his own stack of documents, stuffed folders, hard evidence clutched to his chest so it couldn't be read. No one wanted to be made an accomplice. I knelt down at the machine and sorted out my tools. Two pairs of pliers, a letter opener, and a bobby pin Charlene wanted back.

"How does it look? Fixable, right?"

"I don't know," I said, wedging in the letter opener. "Someone did a real number on it."

"A number like what?"

I freed my fingers and sniffed the ink-colored substance that stained them.

"Grape jelly, by the smell of things. Looks like there's some bread in here too. Whole wheat. I'm willing to bet we'll find the peanut butter farther down."

"It's because the kitchenette disposal is still clogged, isn't it? Maybe you fix the kitchenette and you won't have idiots sending their lunch through the paper shredder."

"Maybe," I said.

The men filed out of the copy room, tearing their corporate memos into long strips they then folded in half and tore lengthwise, into rectangles, and those rectangles into squares, then triangles. Eventually, they brushed the confetti off their hands and sulked back to their cubicles. After the paper shredder had been dismantled, sponged clean, and reassembled several different times in several different configurations, I moved on to the kitchenette. The sink was filled with stale water. I peered down into the murkiness but saw only my gray reflection, which was soon broken by a water-

logged fortune cookie bobbing along the surface. I rolled up my sleeves and plunged in both arms, and the garbage disposal came unplugged. It wasn't a sandwich at all but a dictionary-sized report, wadded and damp, full of noodles, labeled CONFIDENTIAL at the top of every legible page.

The layout of our office was that of a crossword puzzle, with its dead ends and long corridors, its series of straight lines, uniform boxes, all under construction and easily rearranged, every view a repetition of the one that preceded it. The same views were doubled, duplicated, pasted around the horizon like walls on a gyroscope. In such an environment, perspective becomes hazardous. A person finds himself at odds with right angles. If you clip a corner too sharply, you'll plow into a coworker. Let your eyes sink to the carpet, and suddenly you've cracked skulls with the Senior Vice President of International Distribution. You find yourself constantly wiping blood off the creased foreheads of grimacing, middle-aged men.

Winsloame, this is my advice. Carry a handkerchief. Don't leave your desk when the fire alarm rings. Harden yourself to the idea of living alone.

I returned to my chair. Somehow it felt like the safest, sturdiest object in the entire office. I was socketed into it. We were of a single, wheeled, adjustable, partially misassembled piece, the chair and I. Together, we'd remain anchored, afloat. Life preservers in spite of ourselves.

Pencils, pens, rulers, compasses, four shades of highlighter, several varieties of scissors, of drafting tools, clipboards and binders, tape measures and scales. And paper. Graph paper, construction paper, tracing paper, paper with lines—college ruled, wide ruled—paper that was white, near-white, off-white, not white at all. Boxes of it. Packets of it. Piles and banks and snowy heaps of it. And it was all spilled over my desk. Papery ruins. An apocalypse of office supplies. Post-it stationery squares were tacked to my computer screen like blank suicide notes, and an uncapped bottle of liquid white-out was fumigating the inside of my skull.

I had started on my maps.

The best I could diagram it, all the corporate administrators were—be it through blood, legal name, or alimony payments—in some way related. The Chief Executive Officer was the Treasurer's uncle. The Senior VP of Corporate Development was the stepson of the former, while his own daughter by a previous marriage, the flabby and heartless Madeline Madela, was granted a seasonal internship which festered into an entry-level position assisting the Chief Financial Officer. Her church confirmation sponsor. The Junior VP of Domestic Collection worked beneath his brother, who married the wife of our Corporate Secretary before she divorced him for the Man-

ager of Strategic Maneuvering. Their godson, Teddy Choler the Younger, already VP of Overseas Dispersion at the puppyish age of seventeen, was both the nephew of our Vice President and General Counsel and the second cousin—twice removed—of the Corporate Controller. His father and our President, Theodore Choler, headed the whole body. Our board of directors was likewise a messy amalgam of uncles and sons and stepsiblings of various relation, people merged into network, driven conjointly inward by situation and matrimony, the executive office wedlocked together. Their veins ran with the same communal, inbred blood. The company family tree resembled a wreath.

The air conditioner continued its subaudible hum. I could feel it riding up my nerves, echoing along the fibers and filaments that stitched together my skeleton, like an electrical cord tucked into the molding of my spine, and every one of my organs was set a-tingling by the office whir. Charlene flounced into the reception area and spread herself across the amazing clutter of my desk. She kicked off her heels and swam her stockinged feet in the air, flinging back her arms as if on a spit. The dry office drone grew louder, suggestive. Lewdly feline in nature. Charlene was purring along with it.

"He's quiet as a clam," she whispered, paper crinkling under her ankles.

"He never speaks," I replied.

"People wonder about him. He sits up here all alone and suddenly he has this new project he keeps to himself."

"He's busy mapping the interior landscape."

"With crayons?" she asked, nudging a wax pencil off the desk ledge.

"He needs silence," I explained. "As an objective observer. A scientist in the field. He's documenting the wild kingdom of the heart and head. Studying. Measuring. Supervising."

"Spying?"

"Inquiring," I said. "Inquisitiving."

"He sure loves to make lists."

"He catalogues. He inventories. A person has to take stock."

"For example?"

She wrapped her arms behind her head. Through the gap in her sleeve I could see pink straps, lattice lace, the foam cup of her bra. I could see the soft residue of my own death.

"She's the niece of the International Marketing Director," I said.

"So? Everybody's related to somebody. Would he prefer she had no family? That she was one of those terribly charred orphans next door?"

She lowered her arms and the shirt breach was shut. Another opened as she tugged up her skirt.

"He's moving on to geography next," I said, using the sharp needle of a drafting compass to outline her thighs. "Valleys, gorges, chasms, ravines."

"Clefts?" she asked. "Crevices? Cliffs?"

"Peaks of the human form. Deep cavities of the undead spirit. He may need an assistant to plumb it all."

She heaved herself off my desktop and twirled her fingers around my tie. Like a leash, perhaps. Like a noose.

"This listing stuff can be contagious," she said.

We retreated to the telephone closet, a cramped little room set aside for our corporeal plumbing among the loose wires and stacks of computer equipment, extension cords and outlet plugs and glowing vacuum tubes. Our telephone closet trysts. The switchboards grew heated and raised the airless room's temperature, encouraging the two foreign bodies to peel off the rest of their clothes, which they folded neatly in the corner—skirt and slacks, stockings and socks—in two separate piles.

"Can you hear them in there?"

Winsloame's cane snapped across the desk's width, a shattering wallop that reverberated through the tea-stained wood, up my arms, and into my eyes, which felt veiny with bloodshot. I sat upright and tore a fresh page from one of my notebooks—wide ruled, perforated edges—and used it to towel the drool off my chin. I'd left puddles all over the place. The white-out bottle was still uncapped. Smudges of it had dried under my nostrils.

"I said they're talking in there, goddamn it. Can't you hear them?"

Winsloame thumped my forehead with the tip of his cane, which he then pointed at the closed boardroom doors, repeatedly pantomiming a stabbing motion. "It's my goddamn hearing aid. I can't hear anything."

"That's because you're old and deaf. Pretty soon those will be the least of your worries. There won't be much to listen to when you're sleeping in a soundproof coffin."

"I could still whip you," Winsloame said, tightening his grip on his cane. He could barely keep hold of it. It looked heavier than he did.

"You still could," I replied.

I pried myself out of my chair and threw a phantom punch over his shoulder. Then I took a few jabs at his paunch, his wobbly knees, his replacement hip, and for several minutes I boxed violent circles around him. My notebook page was stuffed debonairly in my shirt pocket like a handkerchief. I used it to wipe the sweat from my eyes, and then I unplugged Winsloame's hearing aid. It was gummy and crusted, like something scraped off the underside of a park bench. Reluctantly, I popped it into my own ear.

"Let's see what we can hear," I told him.

Together we knelt down at the conference room door, my legs assuming a safe cracker's stance, Winsloame's buckling inward like toothpicks. He planted his hands on my haunches for support. Untethered, without hefty shoes on, his body would someday blow away. He was a sail himself.

"They're kicking out the accountants, right?" he asked. "They're giving us all the corporate boot? Tell me, goddamn it. Don't spare my feelings. Don't pull any punches like you did boxing, you spineless pussy."

I shushed him with a fist.

"Something about a reshuffling of offshore divisions," I said. "Consolidating foreign affairs. Auctioning them off. An end to outsourcing. Everything's to be done in-house. Production. Promotion. Customer Service. Wait a minute. Wait a goddamn minute. They're saying a major subsidiary is shutting down. They're saying they don't need so many old geezers crunching numbers."

I could feel his weight weaken and I spun around in time to stretch my arms out like a gurney under his falling shape. It felt like I had just caught an empty pair of pants.

"Son," I said, cradling him. "Have you ever noticed how the elderly resemble pinkish newborns more than they do the living?"

"Go ahead. Make jokes. We're all done for, kid. I might be deaf but you're fucking blind. We'll be lucky if they even let us clean out our desks. The last batch that was fired? Those poor assholes had their belongings mailed to them. Everything arrived in boxes, all busted to bits."

His eyes looked dull and pensive, small flinty things sunk to the bottom of a cereal box. Then came the sniffles.

"Hold on, hold on," I said, shaking him. "I'm making everything up. The corporate boot is staying on the corporate carpet. They're not kicking out anyone, honest. Actually it's the opposite. They're discussing Christmas bonuses in there."

"You fiendish saint of a man." Winsloame grinned. His complexion went from pink to red, as if he were sautéing with joy, rocked to and fro in the bassinet of my arms.

"I hope they have double beds in hell," he said.

I kissed his balding skull and snagged a lonely gray hair between my teeth. He shrieked as I plucked it out.

"That's bleeding adorable," Charlene sighed, clapping together some manila folders as she stood in the hallway, making a crumpled applause. Behind her trailed Madeline, towing a metal cart with only one wheel. She parked it against the wall and trudged toward us like a dislodged dam floating downriver. Winsloame had settled comfortably into my hug. The hearing aid was still wedged in my ear.

"Looks like somebody's been snooping on the executive officers."

"Oh Maddy, don't be a tattletale," Charlene said.

"Yeah, Maddy," Winsloame said, gazing up from my lap. "Shut your fucking yapper."

Madeline huffed back to her cart, which was overloaded with broken keyboards and dry ink cartridges that looked like machine gun clips. After struggling to balance the cart on its single wheel, she grabbed Charlene by her cashmere sleeve and dragged her out of the reception area. I couldn't hear Charlene's laughter halfway across the crossword building. The sounds were lost to some dead end.

"Do you think they'll blab on us? Do you think they'll tell the bosses?" Winsloame asked.

"I think we're safe, old sport."

I corked the hearing aid back into his ear and lifted him to his feet, relaxing my hold, as if I were releasing a drugged animal back into the wild. He was already toddling off when the conference room doors swung open and a rank of expensively suited and moussed men filed out. Their smiles looked stamped into their faces like license plate numbers. I didn't see a single loose thread or white-out stain among them. These were the weekly barbered, the daily shaven, men who coordinated their afternoon restroom breaks around the closing of the stock exchange. And all of them were nodding their heads as company President and CEO Theodore Choler concluded his lecture. Their notepads were flipped open, their pens still capped.

"—but before any of that, we should shed some accountant skin. Too much body weight is slowing us down, making us chubby. I envision a lean, feral, chubbyless corporate torso."

I turned around, but it was too late. Winsloame had already crashed like a paper airplane nose-first into the carpet, his pacemaker like an empty fuselage rattling inside his sunken chest.

I spent my mornings laboring over sketches, crudely drawn maps that traced my movements, occasional excursions, search-and-destroy runs to the kitchenette and back. I was losing sight of the environment around me, and the little I was seeing I pulled closer, smothering it against my chest. The office no longer felt endless. Instead, I felt myself wearing its shape. The office was still the office, an island. But I was becoming something else. An approximation. A smoky afterthought. Something rang through me, tolling my organs, chiming my bones. The office was a shape blocking out the sunlight. I was only its shadow. A space it created. And I was inhaling so much white-out I could taste it drying in my throat.

Winsloame was holding on line two.

"Forgive me Father for I have snored," I said, unable to find my ear with the plastic receiver.

"I don't believe it. Goddamn pink slips are actually pink. You believe that?"

"It's more pleasant that way. They're sending you off with a smile."

"Like a goddamn firing squad shooting honey-flavored bullets," Winsloame sobbed, and the line went dead. On the other side of our shared wall, I could hear him slumped up against the plasterboard, leaking his misery down the front of his sweater, its argyle pattern blurred into abstract, unfathomable designs. I wanted to stuff him in a liquor bottle and send him out to sea. Crucify him to driftwood or desktop. Let the ocean deliver his body to civilization's doorstep.

Somebody must hear how we've suffered.

Teddy Choler strolled into the reception area, carrying a box of pink paper in one arm and dragging an endless strand of holiday garland with the other. Silvery and tinsel, it snaked across the carpet, around the corner. Teddy swept aside my map clutter and perched himself on the desk.

"Copy room. Paper shredder. Looks like ham on rye this time."

"I'm making my maps," I said, pointing to a piece of intricately plotted graph paper crushed under his legs.

"Management will hear about this."

"You mean your father."

"My father will hear about this," Teddy Choler said.

"He'll need Winsloame's hearing aid for that. Haven't you heard? The corporate body has gone deaf."

"Some companies would consider this insubordination."

"I'm busy," I said, still pointing.

Teddy picked through the jumble of notebooks and stray pages, index cards scattered out of order, unnumbered. He looked up, mildly baffled. He was still clutching the strand of garland. He scratched his face with it.

"But you're just scribbling," he said.

"Bartleby the Scribbler."

"I don't get it."

"I don't either," I replied. "But Winsloame is in his cubicle, sobbing, trying to choke down his heartache and roast beef lunch. The company wants to cut him loose. Send him off. Mail his shit in a lousy shoebox. How's a man supposed to work with all this girlish weeping? And why is the ladies' lavatory already out of tampons? I just filled that machine last week. Do they have to bleed so much?"

He hoisted the box of pink slips onto his shoulder, but he left the garland on the floor like a bristly tether that had come unanchored, unattached. It was floating loose.

"Whenever you have a moment," he mumbled, handing me his end. "Hang it over the doorway or someplace people can see it. Christmas party's next week."

He followed the garland around the corner and out of the reception area. The shape of his seat had been crushed into my mapping materials, interred in the paper caskets, the cardboard tombs, and it took both my arms and a large ruler—wooden, metric—to sweep out the ghost of him.

The phone rang. Winsloame again.

"The mouth on you," Winsloame said through his tears. "The beautiful goddamn mouth on you. But the sandwich wasn't roast beef."

"What was it?" I asked, already guessing.

Garland was hung from the ceiling tiles. Jingling bells—like those of a court jester—were taped to the light switches and smoke detectors, and strands of blinking nativity lights had been plugged into each outlet and stapled along the furniture, outlining the room like hundreds of traffic signals alarmed in sequence. Wreaths were nailed to each wall. Leafy arrangements candle-staked on every flat surface. The room was too warm for snow, so I used heaps of cotton embanked across my desk, over my maps. In the middle of the reception area was a large puddle of aluminum foil on the floor, a homemade skating rink. A pot of cinnamon potpourri simmered on a heating plate. A single, lonely menorah had been propped up on the fax machine, until management asked me to find a more suitable location for it, preferably a closet somewhere. I tilted it sideways, nailed it to the wall, and impaled a stuffed toy Santa Claus on its curving candelabra. Wintertime music was being piped through the intercom system. Holiday cheer crackled and barked in every suite.

I was sitting at my desk with a length of garland tied around my neck like a yuletide noose. I pressed the buzzer and in walked Madeline. She was carrying a crate of gift-wrapped wine bottles, which the company had decided to distribute in lieu of a holiday bonus this year. I waved hello with the end of my rope.

"You look ridiculous," she said. She pushed up the hood of her extra-large rented elf costume and plodded into the conference room, where an eleven-foot Douglas fir was hampered with garishly huge ornaments and mismatched lights. People were toasting, glasses were clinking, and in the doorway, among the merriment, I could see Charlene clamped onto the arm of Teddy Choler. She was wearing a black dress that looked taped to her

body. Teddy's hands canvassed her waist. There were too many people to list. My maps just weren't enough.

Winsloame stumbled out of the room, a pair of fake reindeer antlers elastic-banded to his forehead. He was dressed in his spiffiest argyles, his formal corduroys: fabrics crisp and unfaded and darkened with rum. He set his tumbler down on my desk and tried to pat himself dry. The topmost horns of his antlers were tipped in mistletoe.

"You been in there? Christ, it's like a middle-school dance. Accountants against one wall, executives the other."

"At least they invited you," I said.

"A final insult. A final finger in the goddamn eye. Forty years with the company and I should thank them for a goddamn party invitation? A bottle of cheap wine only sissies like you drink? Two days, son. Two days and they're kicking me out those double-fold doors. No goddamn way to treat an eighty-three-year-old man."

"You're not eighty-three."

"No goddamn way to treat a ninety-three-year-old man . . ."

Winsloame fussed with his antlers, straightening them atop his balding, freckled skull.

"Two days," I sighed.

"Buck up," he said, suddenly swatting me with his cane. "We should be plotting our own revolution. Like the French. The Russian Bolsheviks. The Goddamned Cocksucking Americans."

"Battering rams," I suggested.

"Muskets."

"Guillotines."

"The corporate body has begun to bloat. Off with the overhead," Winsloame shouted, swinging his cane like a broadsword. He toppled over and hit the floor with all the weight of a balled-up sock. I stalked around his limp body, listing things.

"I see businessmen tearing off their white collars and attacking each other with baseball bats, with bare hands. A catapult loaded with computer monitors and Lucite telephones. Filing cabinets tossed overboard, out the windows, into the street, exploding like cluster bombs across asphalt. Charred orphans taking shrapnel in the chest and hair and face. We should bring up some TV sets just so we can fill them with gunpowder and launch them off the roof. Just so they can burst in midair. Do you see them, Winsloame? It's beautiful. The television's red glare."

But Winsloame was already asleep, snoring facedown on the reception area carpet, like a chalk outline hastily filled in with corduroy. I could hardly see him in his clothes. I left him sleeping there and ventured into the party.

President and CEO Theodore Choler had taken up position in front of the company Christmas tree, microphone in one hand, a scotch in the other, addressing employees who were now drunk enough to mingle. Everyone crowded in. Teddy Choler was standing front and center, directly before his father, mirroring his every movement, mouthing along to the speech he had helped write. Madeline was hidden behind the tree's branches, twisting knobs and levels on the PA. There were speakers situated in each corner and adorned with snowflakes, cut out of manila folders because I refused to share my construction paper. The speech was the same every year.

"Building a sound corporate body means fighting atrophy, working the muscles, stretching the tendons. Occasionally a disc slips, a ligament snaps. Such are the hazards of loud physical health. Such are the perils of living inside a well-maintained entity. A lean, feral, chubbyless corporate entity. But the risk is worth it. The body is a building. A bivouac. It needs to be reinforced and reaffirmed." He took off his sport coat, rolled up his sleeve, and flexed his biceps for the audience. Not four feet away, his son wildly applauded, whistled, smiling back at the future version of himself. The older Choler draped his coat over his shoulders like a cape and resumed the sermon. "In the coming weeks there will be changes. Consider them exercises. Tests of company strength. Remember all of us are its organs. We toil together. This is the struggle which draws us all into a singular corporeal form. United, we are one body, one corporation. A single soul. Cheers, everyone."

He hoisted his scotch.

"Now let's drink like we don't have any livers."

I found Charlene coming out of the ladies' lavatory. She was shoeless, her heels kicked off and stored elsewhere or maybe lost, and she bobbed up and down on the balls of her cute feet. They were tan with hosiery.

"She's carrying on with all sorts of men," I said, cornering her.

"Somebody sounds jealous."

"She doesn't deny it."

"What's there to deny?"

"Teddy Choler."

"He's the CEO's son, isn't he? One day this body will be his."

"Maybe a trip to the telephone closet would change her mind."

"Not bleeding likely," Charlene laughed as she ducked my arms and fled down the corridor. "Somebody should go back to his little receptionist job."

"He charts the office," I shouted after her, "the office and its employees and the hallways of the heart. He dusts the furniture. He empties the trashcans. He plunges free the toilets you've clogged, the thighs you've closed,

and pretty soon he's gonna have to start buying his white-out in bulk. He isn't just a receptionist. In his spare time he makes maps too."

My voice echoed through my head, dead and muffled as if I were speaking while gagged, locked in a dark closet somewhere. The room was carouseling, the floor tilting in funhouse fashion. Winsloame's rum spilled itself down my shirt and throat and the fiery corridor that emptied into my stomach. He was no longer sleeping on the reception area carpet. It was the wind. The air conditioning turned on full roar. Like an unstaked tent, his body had blown away. There wouldn't be anything to bury, only the calculator on his desk and the empty tumbler of rum I had tossed in the garbage pail and shattered.

Winsloame, I thought wistfully.

I found him in the boardroom, staging a halfhearted, one-man coup d'état of our legal library. Somehow he had managed to scale the bookcase that filled the entire east wall, floor to ceiling, densely packed with subsidiary charters and SEC compliance guides. There he hung from the highest shelf, flailing his little legs back and forth. The antlers were down around his neck like a sunken crown of thorns.

"You couldn't stay dead, could you?"

"How am I doing?" he asked.

"Fine," I told him, "just fine."

A team of junior vice presidents gathered below him, trying to grab hold of the old man's ankles, which were scuffing up the oak paneling, unable to gain traction. There was nowhere he could go. The ceiling kept all of us in. Around the room, company employees continued to chat among themselves, gossiping and gabbing and occasionally looking over to monitor Winsloame's progress. A group of inebriated interns raised their glasses and toasted The Revolution. Theodore Choler was still standing next to the Christmas tree, swinging the microphone around by its cord, seemingly unaware of the accountant overthrowing his corporation across the room.

"All your bullshitting talk of the body," Winsloame shrieked as one of the VPs caught a pant leg. We heard the trousers split. "We cannot be amputated. We are more than just meat. The accounting foot is going to wind up and kick your executive ass."

The VP glanced at his partners, shrugged, and then gave a polite yank. Winsloame's body came floating down. I trotted over to catch him.

"You shouldn't have started without me."

"Goddamn it," Winsloame replied, fingering the hole in his crotch. "God-fucking-damn it."

The partygoers left in dribbles, drunken drabs that stained the office rugs

and left cigarette butts, crumpled napkins, bottle caps, and a puddle of vomit I cordoned off with an upside-down bucket. Somebody had torn off the garland and wadded it in the kitchenette sink. My aluminum foil ice rink was smashed like a broken mirror, reflecting only its own ruin, and the cotton I piled like snow on my desktop had been scraped off and tracked everywhere like the moveable footprints used in dance lessons, choreographing a confused waltz. My maps smelled of cinnamon, dampened with spilled potpourri and water. I pried loose the menorah and proudly fixed it like an angel to the top of the Christmas tree. The stuffed Santa Claus, I set aflame and left burning in Teddy Choler's recycling bin. Midnight had long passed. I was crawling underneath my desk to fall asleep when Winsloame's cane caught me square on the flank.

"Goddamn it, help me up," he shouted.

"You're already standing," I said. "I'm the one on the floor."

Winsloame socked me on the shins. Without anything to lean against, he wobbled like a stack of rubber tires. Secretly, I hoped he'd strap the antlers back on, but it didn't seem likely. He was pointing his cane at the air conditioning vent above the fax machine.

"I'm going up. Let me stand on your shoulders."

I boosted him upward, and he used his cane to knock off the metal grill, which landed on the fax machine, sending paper and shards of plastic all over the countertop.

"Stop kicking," I told him, hoisting him higher and higher, until his bald head and torso fit into the aperture. It was like watching a prison break or a covert suicide mission in the movies. Stories of servitude and captivity, daredevil reconnaissance and escape. A brotherhood of soiled beds. Comrades who leaked hundred-proof blood. I felt compelled to salute.

"It's been an honor, sir."

"Let's see the bastards dig me out of here," he grinned, wriggling himself farther inside the duct, until his cheap loafers had disappeared. I stood on a chair and wedged the dented grill back into the wall. Between the slats, in the thin space between grating rails, I saw nothing of Winsloame, no shape or shadow, no echo or stain. Not even his unbrushed dentures smiling back.

"Winsloame?" I asked.

I retired under my desk.

I could hear their feet padding across the carpet and circling my desk before they climbed atop it. Mountains of paper, my folders and files, notebooks still damp, my favorite writing utensils, all of it was shoved aside and sheeted down as the two bodies struggled out of their clothes. A pair of

hands clenched the underside of the desk edge. Teddy Choler's fingers. I recognized the gold rings he wore like brass knuckles on each fist. But his partner I couldn't place until I saw her legs swimming outward, wrapping around Teddy's calves, his waist, depantsing him with her heels. Her heels bare except for their hosiery, which stayed on. She must have worn garters. Their drunken rocking soon fell into an even drunker rhythm.

"This bleeding body is all yours," Charlene whispered, her mouth somewhere above my ears, breathing shallow against my desk.

The temperature had spiked overnight. I woke feeling oiled and slippery, greased from aching head to stubbed toe, my clothes soaked like a wetsuit to my skin. It must have been a thousand degrees in the office. My lips still burned with rum. My nostrils still smelled it on my shirt. There was no way to map the firestorm raging within the walls of my head, but somehow I could locate every organ behind my ribcage. Each throbbed in its own loud way. Like rusty wind chimes, their pitches were off-key, building into a vibrant dissonance that rang through my chest.

"Where is the asshole?" a voice boomed.

I scurried out from under my desk, hoping to find Winsloame stooped up against it and threatening to thrash me with his cane, but instead it was President Choler, his sleeves rolled up, his necktie wrapped into a sweatband of houndstooth around his head. I collapsed into my chair with a squish.

"The accountant," he said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. There wasn't enough room for both of us under my desk. Maybe on top, but that was already occupied."

I swept my arm across the papery imprint of his son and Charlene Hanover. A condom wrapper was left on my three-ring binder, unopened. I wondered if they bothered to wipe off or simply seeped themselves all over my maps.

"I need to ask Charlene something," I said, wanting to rise, but he hadn't finished his interrogation. My whole desk would have to be cauterized.

"My niece tells me you were friends with the old man."

"The accountant."

"Tell me where he is."

"Winsloame," I said. I tried not to sound too wistful.

"One of the VPs claims he saw a face behind the air conditioning vent in his office last night."

"Which niece?" I asked, still lagging a few questions behind.

"This is a business, you know. A publicly traded corporation."

"A body."

"It has its own ticker and everything. The least you could do is tidy up. Take care of yourself. Clean up some of this goddamn white-out," he growled, stirring his fingers in a thin, milky pool. I offered him a sheet of notebook paper, but he had already wiped his hands on his pants.

"Tell me where the old man went."

"He must've gone AWOL. Maybe he took early retirement. A tropical vacation. Sick leave. Maybe he had a cold to catch. Which niece were we talking about?"

"The Hanover girl," he said.

"Charlene?"

"Of course, Charlene. My niece. My son's cousin. She said the two of you were friends."

"The two of us?"

"You and the accountant, idiot. I don't have time for games. It's a thousand fucking degrees in here."

He tore off his tie, wrung out the sweat in my wastebasket, and stretched the houndstooth twice around his forehead.

"The air conditioning," I said.

"Stupid old fool must have broken something, crawling around up there."

Throughout the afternoon, they gathered at the air ducts. Assistants and interns, corporate officers and their secretaries, a bike messenger making a delivery. They portioned themselves two to a vent. One person armed with a broom or umbrella, the other holding open an industrial-sized garbage bag like a butterfly net. Someone had broken into the custodian's closet and found a shovel, and it was this shovel that Theodore Choler carried with him as he bounded across the office, making last-minute preparations, inspecting tools, scolding a senior vice president for not sharing his ice scraper. Most of the men were shirtless. The women went barefoot in skirts and bras, loitering outside the lavatory, fanning themselves with manila folders, empty envelopes. The Human Resources Department was lobbying to have the whole thing finished by four thirty unless overtime was paid. Rumors of unionizing drifted through the hallways but soon evaporated forever. Theodore Choler triple-checked the building blueprints his son had spread over the conference room table and paperweighted down with fast food cartons, the lunch I had ordered up. They said everything looked ready. Positions were assumed. Weapons were fidgeted with and raised.

"T minus two minutes," Theodore Choler said, handing me the stopwatch. "At zero hour you flick on the intercom and give the signal. Do you know what the signal is?"

"Winsloame," I said.

"The signal is *paprika*. Got it? Say it with me. *Paprika*. You just shout *paprika* and we'll flush the fucker out."

He took the stopwatch out of my hands and tied it around my neck and then sprinted from the reception area. I could hear him running the halls, circuiting the building, his footsteps amassing into a steady patter, which echoed through the office in competition with his actual feet. There was his body and there was the sound of his body. I didn't know which one I heard.

I waited two full minutes. At the zero hour, I pulled the fire alarm.

Dazed coworkers in various states of undress gradually congregated in the reception area until I opened the glass doors and ushered them out to the elevators. Theodore Choler raced into the room, breathless, his shovel in one hand, a fire extinguisher in the other.

"That wasn't the signal."

"Emergency." I pointed my stopwatch at the elevators. "They found him in the elevator shaft."

"Elevator shaft," President Choler whispered dreamily, his voice hushed with awe and admiration. Maybe also a little envy. "He crawled up the building's spine. I never thought of that."

He hustled into the hallway. Once the whole office was assembled there, I shut the double-fold, bulletproof doors, locking everyone out. Then I dragged over the waiting-lounge couch and barricaded the only entrance, the only exit. Faces already indistinct with confusion pressed up against the glass, blurring it with their breath. They looked like smudges of smudges. Melted figurines. Deformed children, the outcome of inbreeding and incest, monstrosities warped and retarded with their own blood. I flicked on the intercom and boosted the output as high as it would go.

"Testing, paprika," my voice said, screeching through the intercom speakers, a fuzzy wail. The music of dueling chainsaws and dentist drills. Out by the elevators, people were holding their ears.

"Testing, Winsloame. Winsloame, do you hear me?"

I held the phone receiver against my chest. The intercom howled.

"That was my heart, Winsloame. That was the sound of Man's infinite loneliness and longing, his terminal case of the existential sniffles. Breaks *your* heart, doesn't it? You were right. They were going to fire you. But that doesn't excuse you upping anchor and abandoning the revolution. Now you're somewhere upstairs in the air ducts, snugly wedged in your aluminum coffin, and I have to do this alone. But I still love you, Winsloame. And I will bury your bones yet."

The Cholers had shoved their way forward and were pounding the doors with their fists. Father and son, linked by blood and outrage, bruising

their knuckles on bulletproof glass. The intercom crackled so loudly I couldn't hear myself shouting.

"Air out the lungs. Evacuate the intestines. I'm going from computer to computer and deleting your files, selling off your stock. Bankrupt the body. Bleed it dry. Don't you realize that's the only way out? Everything here is so insulated, so incestuous. Don't search for yourself, Winsloame. That's my advice. Only dogs and narcissists chase their own tails. That's why nepotism runs so rampant. Solipsism of the worst sort. You people are vampires but you won't drink any blood except your own. The corporate body has been cannibalized. The fucking thing ate itself for dinner and shat out its own dessert."

My words rang through the building, like trapped seagulls squealing and squawking, smashing against hard angles, sharp edges, a death rattle feeding back.

"I'm calling for quarantine. We need to drain the body in order to save it. Flush out the toxins. Bail out the boat. We need to cure us of ourselves. Wipe clean the chalkboard and rinse out the sheets. Bleach and launder, scrub and swab, lave and rinse, repeat. Repeat again. Tidy up the body. Break it down to bits. Repeat after me. Tarnish, pollute, poison, corrupt, taint, ruin and rouse, defile and damage, destroy and deflate. Let's list it all. The ranting and the raging and the rowing. The rioting of the unruly heart. Malinger, malign, libel, slander, abuse, infatuate, infect."

"CONTAMINATE," I shrieked. "CONTAMINATE."

Maybe I had mapped it all wrong. Maybe he was still crawling around the air ducts at night, when the cleaning crews came into the office, lugging their dustpans and brooms and garbage bins and forcing us out of our comfy workspaces, back to the strange, unfamiliar lairs of our homes. Maybe there were tunnels not included in the blueprints. Secret rooms and hidden passages, conduits buried inside other conduits and inside those: clandestine aqueducts into which the old fucker had managed to squeeze, his tiny feet kicking, his bald skull flickering like a damaged lighthouse in the darkness.

The reports would be vague at first. Somebody heard a noise, a dry thump, the missing accountant's cackle above the bathroom, under the elevator floor. A shoelace dangling out a vent. Random incidents and coincidences would emerge from water cooler gossip, and the stories would patch themselves into a quilt of office mythology. He would become a figure of company legend. The corporate body would assume his stooped, slanted, arthritic shape. There would be no culs-de-sac. No unfinished avenues. No loose threads. Everything would tie together and snap into socket, joints

conjoining; a thousand disparate pieces fitting in place. Winsloame was mapping it for me.

Winsloame, wherever you are.

It was in the copy room that I lifted off the metal grill and found his cane, still rum scented, broken in half, smeared with what looked like blood.

But maybe it was only printer ink.