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The Responsible Neighbor

Jacob M. Appel

All through that hysterical spring, while the terror level swung up and down like a dowsing rod and utility workers dabbled in surveillance, Eric Mitnock joked about turning in the neighbors. *Not only is it our patriotic duty*, the thirty year old toxicologist explained, *but it means shorter lines in the laundry room*. So on the afternoon the FBI arrested two Saudi dental students for videotaping the Kensico Dam, Eric proposed beating a confession from Mrs. Pappas, the widow in 1B who tended the marigolds and impatiens around the stoop. And after investigators charged a Romanian grocer under the Patriot Act with distilling ricin in his bathtub, Eric suggested the building ban castor beans, as it had previously prohibited pit-bulls. His wife tolerated this cynicism. Natalie had once fantasized of becoming an ACLU lawyer, and she assigned Kafka's *The Trial* to her twelfth graders, but a colleague's nephew had lost both hands in an Israeli nightclub bombing, so she'd grown sensitive to competing points-of-view. Fortunately, domestic espionage was the sort of non-negotiable yet remote topic upon which an otherwise happy couple might disagree, like reproductive cloning or Shakespeare's identity—or so Eric believed until that Saturday morning, around one o'clock, when they awoke to the hammering of an unknown fist at their door.

Eric feared the building had caught fire. He pulled his jeans over his boxer shorts, shoved his bare feet into his sneakers. "Where's the goddam cat?!"

"I'll get her," said Natalie. She flipped on the reading lamp.

Eric squeezed his wife's wrist. "I love you," he said. Then he bolted from the room, still struggling into his shirt. The pounding on the door continued—arrhythmic, like a diseased heart.

In the entryway, where he'd expected to encounter searing smoke and flames eating at the rafters, the air smelled of shellac, not melting plastic. Natalie had been varnishing antique furniture. While Eric dragged a mahogany teapoy away from the door—nearly tripping backwards over a UPS package he'd taken in for a neighbor—it struck him that there'd be no swirling inferno. Only police. A SWAT team. Or interrogators armed with brass knuckles.

"Coming!" he shouted.

Eric slid open the deadbolt and unhooked the lower latch. He'd hardly turned the knob when their midnight caller pushed the door in all the way.

"You have my parcel," charged the man.

The accuser was a short, paunchy middle-easterner in his forties. Thick stubble veiled his cheeks, and his nose veered sharply off-kilter. Blood tinted his sunken eyes. In one hand, he waved a narrow slip of paper.

"Your what?" demanded Eric. Natalie came up beside him, clutching the cat to her bathrobe.

"You've taken my parcel," the man insisted. He thrust forward his paper slip.

"Who the hell are you?"

"They left me a note. Here. It says 4D," said the man.

Eric felt Natalie's hand gripping his shoulder. "He's from across the hall," she said. "He teaches singing."

"It's three in the fucking morning," snapped Eric.

"I understand it is late, but my parcel is highly important," said the man—his voice agitated, his accent more British than Arab. "Ah! There it is!" The man stepped toward Eric and retrieved the UPS package, struggling under its weight. "I'll have to ask you not to pick up my parcels in the future."

"I was trying to be helpful. This is outrageous."

Natalie's fingers tightened around Eric's arm.

"They asked me to sign," he said, "so I signed."

"Please," warned the man. "Do not do this again."

Eric watched his neighbor disappear into apartment 4K. (That was where Allan and Judy Landau had lived: For ages, he'd meant to invite the Landaus to dinner, since Natalie and Judy had both gone to Vassar, but they'd split up before he'd had the chance.) "I should call the goddam police," Eric shouted into the empty corridor. Then he slammed the door.

"I *should* call the police," Eric said again—to Natalie. "Who the hell does this guy think he is?"

"What do you suppose was in that box?" she asked. "It looked awfully heavy."

"Beats the shit out of me. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been important enough to wake us up."

"He thought it was," said Natalie

She led them back to the bedroom. The cat hissed and jumped from her arms.

"He seemed so desperate," she said. "I hope he's not up to something illegal."

Eric shrugged. "Do you want me to go ask him?"

"You don't think it could have been explosives?"

"Nope," said Eric. "It was fifteen bricks of cocaine, two hundred indecent photographs of young children and a tusk from an endangered Sumatran rhinoceros. I could tell by the weight."

"You don't think he's a terrorist, do you?"

Eric grinned. "Okay," he said. "Very clever."

He turned to kiss his wife—but she was sitting rigid at the foot of the bed, and she wasn't smiling.

They slept in that morning. The *Sunday Times* had already sold out when Eric arrived at his corner bodega, and Mrs. Greenblatt's no longer had any whitefish chubs, but Eric didn't blame these inconveniences on the jerk in 4K. A college internship at the medical examiner's office had taught him where grudges led—arsenic, digitalis, cyanide. Besides, the day was flawless. Sunlight warmed the breeze. Crabapple blossoms coated the sidewalks with delicate white petals. In the playground on the corner, boys in yarmulkes tossed bread crusts to a pair of Canada geese. Eric didn't mind walking the extra three blocks for a newspaper. He whistled on the way: "Wonderful, Wonderful Copenhagen"; "Paris in the Springtime"; "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." When he arrived back home, armed with a half pound of Bay of Fundy nova, he'd shaken off the previous night's intrusion.

Their building was a six story walkup. It had through successive incarnations been German, Ukrainian-Finnish, Jewish-Italian, boarded-up, nearly razed for an expressway ramp and, because Irving Berlin had composed "Alexander's Ragtime Band" on the premises, preserved as a cultural landmark, but now it housed mostly young artists and couples who couldn't afford Manhattan. Eric had lived there eight years—the last seven married to Natalie. He'd never once experienced trouble with his neighbors. They led their lives. He led his. (Though during these six years he'd endorsed dozens of petitions and purchased countless Girl Scout cookies.) That made his run-in with the man in 4K all the more unsettling. Eric considered pausing on the stoop to ask Mrs. Pappas about the new tenant—if anybody might know the contents of his package, she would—but it didn't seem worth the bother. He merely waved and complimented the old woman on her begonias. In his own apartment, coffee perfumed the air. Natalie had brewed fresh espresso.

"I'm home!" Eric called.

"I know!" Natalie answered from the kitchen.

Eric kissed her on the knuckles. Then on the lips. While she poured the espresso, he separated the newspaper into piles. In his stack went the headlines, the metro, the business. She got the magazine and the week-in-review. Also the obituaries. They'd battle over the travel section—a struggle that usually ended

in tickling, and sex. (He'd once made the mistake of purchasing two papers, with two travel sections, which she'd taken as a personal rejection.) After they made love, she would remain in bed for the crossword puzzle.

"I've sworn off the marriage announcements," Natalie declared. "Jessie Podolnick lectured me on how they're classist. Jessie's that tenth grade cheerleader I told you about, the one who thinks she's a communist. She was pretty convincing."

"Classist?" Eric sipped his coffee. "Charging money for the paper is classist."

"That's different."

"They should print divorce notices instead," he said. "They'd sell more papers."

Eric watched his wife buttering her bagel. He found her tiny hands exquisite; they reminded him of a doll's gloves. "I adore the way you eat," he said.

"You mean you adore that I'm not filling out," scoffed Natalie—but he sensed her delight. "If I looked liked Raymond Burr, you'd sing a different tune."

Eric scanned the headlines. Afghanistan. Venezuela. Equatorial Guinea. How he missed the great Pax Clintonia!

"On the subject of singing," continued Natalie. "I've been thinking more about last night."

"Last night? What happened last night?"

"I'm serious, honey. Maybe we *should* call the police. To be safe."

Eric folded his paper. "And tell them what? That our neighbor is an asshole?"

"What harm could it do?"

"What harm could it do?" echoed Eric. "I can't believe you're even asking that. How do we know the man's story? Maybe he overstayed his student visa. Or he's wanted on some petty drug charge. You're not going to have the man deported—or tortured in Guantánamo, for all we know—just because he woke us up in the middle of the night."

Natalie bit her lip. "It has nothing to do with waking us up. I'm worried about what was in that box."

"Because he's an Arab?" demanded Eric.

Natalie glared at him while she chewed her bagel.

"I'm sorry," said Eric. "I didn't mean that."

He reached for his wife's hand, but she drew it back. She stood up—sending the cat lurching off her lap—and crossed to the window.

"Yes, okay," she said. "That's part of it..."

A knock at the door kept her from completing her thought. A gentle, orderly knock. They exchanged looks to decide who'd answer it.

"I hope you didn't sign for another package while I was gone," said Eric. He

polished off his espresso; the caffeine was already surging through his arteries. "Or it could be the cops," he said. "Maybe the jerk turned us in. To be safe."

Another polite knock. Too polite for cops. Eric navigated a necropolis of partially lacquered bookshelves and opened the door.

It was the man from 4K again—but made over: Clean-shaven. Hair gelled. Sporting a white summer jacket with a red poppy in his lapel like a British colonial on Remembrance Day. He cradled a bouquet of jonquils and purple irises.

"I have come to apologize," he said. "For yesterday evening."

"More like this morning," grumbled Eric.

"Yes. More like this morning. I am sorry."

The man held out the floral arrangement. Eric didn't take it. They stood at impasse until Natalie swept into the entryway and scooped up the flowers.

"You know you terrified us," she said.

"Again, I am sorry. In my homeland, you will please understand, neighbors are not always to be trusted."

"That must have been an important package," said Natalie.

The man removed a mauve handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed his forehead. "From my family in Syria." He shifted his weight back and forth between the balls of his feet and his heels. "Sheet music," he added. "I am a tutor of voice."

"I've seen you putting up flyers at the bus shelter," conceded Natalie.

"Yuhanna Lebaton." The man displayed a soiled card:

YUHANNA LEBATON

VOICE INSTRUCTION

OPERA — JAZZ — MUWASHSHAH — BROADWAY

"Well, Mr. Lebaton..." interjected Eric—his hand still on the doorknob.

"I am interrupting," said Lebaton. "I do not wish to intrude."

"I'm sure we'll run into you," answered Eric.

He pushed shut the door. Natalie tugged him into the kitchen by the arm.

"Now do you see what I mean?" she whispered.

"He's going to be a pain in the ass," said Eric.

"You can't believe there was sheet music in that box. He could hardly lift it. And I'm sure they don't have UPS in Syria."

"So?"

"So I'm worried. We have to do something."

Eric perched himself at the edge of a captain's chair, sharing the seat with a

pair of ornate mantel clocks. The furniture had belonged to his wife's late step-mother. They'd planned to auction most of it on eBay, but Natalie kept putting off the sale. Deoxidizing the bronze handles on the chiffonier. Resurfacing the rosewood scrutoires. She wouldn't even take the dead woman's clothes to Goodwill. "How's the varnishing coming along?" Eric asked.

Natalie ignored him. "I've got it," she announced. "No police. No Immigration Service. All you do is sign up for a couple of singing lessons."

"You are joking."

"C'mon, honey. What does it cost to take a look around his apartment? You've always wanted to go back to singing anyway."

"I'd also like to play professional basketball—but I'm not having myself stretched on a rack. Besides, you know where I stand on this. I'd rather get blown up than spy on people."

"I know. I know," said Natalie. *"Because they who would give up an essential liberty for temporary security, deserve neither."*

Ben Franklin had been right, of course. Eric's own grandfather, a chemist, had fallen victim to the witch hunts of the 1950s. Falsely accused by a former research assistant. Blacklisted as a onetime fellow traveler. The story of Erwin Mitnock's final ordeal—unemployment, shock therapy, suicide—cast its shadow over Natalie's proposal. But this went beyond principle: Their new neighbor struck Eric as a mushrooming threat to his own peace-of-mind.

"Today, solfeggio lessons," he said. "Tomorrow, the Gestapo rips out our toenails."

Natalie clasped both his hands in hers and gazed up at him. "I'm begging you, honey. One quick look around."

This was the same tone of voice she used when she pleaded with him not to eat fugu or not to drive in the passing lane on the interstate. He'd fallen in love with a woman who phoned her own answering machine to make certain her apartment hadn't burned to the ground—and the prospect of another breakdown terrified him.

"You do understand this is crazy?" asked Eric.

"If I admit it's crazy, will you do it for me?"

Eric nodded. "You know I will."

"Then it's totally insane," said Natalie.

She pulled him toward her and rested her head against his chest. She kissed the veins along the inside of his forearm and asked, "Where's the travel section?"

The following evening—after the Homeland Security Administration issued emergency warnings about chemical plants and sea-based attacks—Eric knocked on the voice instructor's door. The toxicologist was exhausted from a

surprise state inspection at the lab. His lower back ached. His feet throbbed. He wanted to produce only one type of music: The sound of his ass against the couch. On the bus ride home, Eric had hoped he'd find the voice instructor away—maybe hospitalized with the summer flu—yet he was secretly pleased when the Syrian answered the door in his bathrobe. Under his terrycloth robe the man wore pinstriped pajamas. A sleeping mask crowned his head like a pair of sunglasses.

"My neighbor," said Lebaton. "What a delight."

"I woke you up."

"Just a nap. Now we are even."

Eric let the remark pass. Nobody in his right mind would equate a six p.m. visit with a one a.m. home invasion, but Eric didn't exactly hold the moral high ground.

"I thought I might take a singing lesson," he said. His words rang false—utterly implausible.

The Syrian rubbed his palms together. "I am so glad. So very glad. Please do come inside and we will begin at once."

"What I meant was—"

"It will wait, whatever it is," said the singing instructor. "I think it's essential to start when one is at the peak of one's enthusiasm."

Lebaton led Eric into his poorly-ventilated apartment. It appeared far smaller without Judy Landau's carefully arranged mirrors and wardrobes. Only inches separated a threadbare recliner from a television mounted atop milk crates. Along the back wall ran a paisley loveseat, missing one antimacassar, and an unfinished wooden bookcase displaying a handful of books. All Arabic titles. Maps of Vermont and the New York City Subway System hung on the closet door. Eric scrutinized the room: the empty takeout tins, the soda cans doubling as ashtrays, the overabundance of granite figurines. What was he looking for? He had no clue how to identify explosives—unless they resembled the red dynamite sticks from the Road Runner cartoons, which he highly doubted. But he also doubted Al-Qaeda shipped bombs via UPS.

The Syrian seated himself at a cocktail piano whose higher keys had lost their enamel. He motioned for Eric to pull up a stool.

"What sort of singing are you interested in learning?" asked Lebaton. "I will confess, Mr. Mitnock, I did not take you for a music lover."

"I don't really know," said Eric.

"Of course, you don't," said Lebaton. He patted Eric on the knee. "This is your wife's idea, isn't it? You can be honest."

Eric didn't answer—what could he possibly say? His career in espionage hadn't lasted twenty minutes.

"I am no stranger to such matters, Mr. Mitnock," said Lebaton. He played scales while he spoke. "Many men come to me in the hope of pleasing their wives, particularly if they have reached a—what might we call it?—a stagnant period. It is far more common than you might think."

"That's not what—"

Lebaton held up his hand. "No explanations necessary. We will make a virtuoso out of you yet—whatever your motives. *When horses are unavailable*, as they say, *one must saddle dogs*." The Syrian stretched his fingers, one at a time, and adjusted his shirt cuffs. "In Aleppo, I taught men in your circumstances traditional muwashshah melodies...but here, maybe, we will start with Cole Porter..."

Lebaton drew his bench closer to the piano. He struck up the opening notes of "Could It Be You"?

The music hardly registered with Eric. He was focused on the numerous granite figurines: statues of dolphins, elephant herds, a club-tailed beaver—deciding whether they might conceal TNT or hollow compartments for blueprints. They didn't, obviously, but he wanted to tell Natalie that he'd tried his best.

"Do you like Cole Porter?" asked Lebaton.

Eric continued scanning the room for contraband. "He's fine."

"I am a great admirer of men like Cole Porter," said Lebaton. "Lorenz Hart. Leonard Bernstein. Does that surprise you?"

"Should it?"

"I am also a Christian," said Lebaton. "A Maronite Christian. Descended from Samaritan traders. That comes as another surprise to many Americans."

"I'm sure it does," Eric said uneasily.

"They like to introduce me as a Christian. That makes me okay."

The Syrian played another few bars of Cole Porter.

"And what about you?" asked Lebaton. "I have heard you work with poisons?"

That caught Eric's attention. "Who told you that?"

"The lady who gardens. I forget her name."

"I just work in a lab," said Eric.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mitnock. You have labored hard all day. It is rude of me to ask about such matters. We will talk more on another occasion, I hope." He passed Eric a well worn libretto. "Now stand up. Let's test your range."

They didn't speak much after that. Eric worked his way through the Porter repertoire. "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To". "I've Got You Under My Skin". "Paris Loves Lovers". He sensed that he'd drifted out of key several times. Lebaton listened. Occasionally, the instructor shook his head. One time, he winced as though he'd caught his finger in a mousetrap. Let's try something in

a lower octave, he suggested. Later: Something less intricate. Eventually, he asked if Eric knew any songs by memory—and they concluded with “Wonderful, Wonderful Copenhagen.” The singing instructor looked as though he’d been ravaged by wolves.

“We may have our work cut out for us,” said Lebaton.

“How much do I owe you?” asked Eric.

“For you,” said the tutor. “Nothing.”

“How does fifty dollars sound?”

“I won’t have it,” insisted Lebaton. “I must make amends for yesterday night. Besides, I do not know many people in New York. It is good to have a friend. Now when would you like your first lesson?”

“I’ll get back to you.”

“Nonsense. Students say that and never return. Please name your time. My schedule is entirely flexible. Would you like to say Wednesday at six?”

“I’ll get back to you.”

Eric retreated toward the door and “accidentally” knocked the granite beaver off the coffee table. The tail cracked loose from the body.

“Jesus. I’m sorry,” said Eric. “I didn’t mean....”

“It’s all right, really,” said Lebaton—but Eric could sense that it wasn’t.

The toxicologist picked up both pieces. Solid stones.

He found Natalie reading the news on the internet. She’d swapped her teaching outfit for sweatpants and a tank-top, exposing her pale, emaciated arms. His wife’s weight loss frightened Eric. Her wrists had thinned so much that he could wrap one hand around both of them simultaneously. At the same time, her fragility fed his affection. He snuck up behind her and kissed the back of her head.

“How was school?” he asked.

“There was a bomb scare in Manila,” she said. “At a mall.”

She spoke as though this has been part of her own day—as though Eric should plan his life accordingly.

“I won’t shop there,” he said.

Natalie swiveled around her chair. “So? Any progress?”

“The man couldn’t blow up a balloon.”

“You found the box?”

“Nope,” admitted Eric. “But you’ve got the wrong guy. For starters, he’s a Christian. And I think he tried to make a pass at me.”

He related his encounter with the Syrian in painstaking detail. Natalie showed particular interest in the questions about Eric’s work—but also found cause for concern where Eric hadn’t: the map of the subway system, the effort

Lebaton made to reveal his religion.

"How do you know he's a Christian?" she demanded.

"He told me so himself."

"And you took his word for it? Did you see a Bible? Crosses on the walls?"

Eric stood beside the freestanding globe and spun it randomly. "Trust me on this one. He's just a lonely singing tutor. He's into Cole Porter for Christ's sake."

"But you didn't find the box?"

"If that box did contain bomb-making materials or grenades or whatever, and Lebaton is some sort of terrorist mastermind, do you really think he'd leave it lying around his apartment?"

"Who knows how these people think? Adolf Eichmann was listed under his own name in the Buenos Aires phonebook."

Eric draped his tie over the chair back. He placed shoetrees inside his loafers. If he said nothing, he hoped Natalie might drop the subject.

"I checked with Mrs. Pappas," Natalie continued. "She says Lebaton hasn't had any visitors in five weeks. Strange for a voice tutor, don't you think?"

Eric fought the desire to answer.

"According to Jorge, he pays his rent in cash."

Jorge was the super who flirted with the female tenants. Eric trusted him far less than he trusted the overweight music instructor.

"Say something, dammit," demanded Natalie.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know." Natalie hid her face in her palms. "Why do I get like this? I just keep thinking of that poor kid with those plastic claws for hands...."

"It's okay," soothed Eric—though he wasn't so sure. "I promise."

He wrapped his arms around his wife's back, squeezing her toward him, savoring the warmth of her body. Even her sobs were delicate. Tiny rabbit-like breaths.

She was the one who broke their embrace. "When is your next lesson?"

"Please, let's put this behind us."

"How can we? Don't you read the news?"

Eric's laboratory at NYU was a news-free zone. His research—developing an antidote for methyl iodide poisoning, a malady common among glassblowers—didn't require waiting for organic tissues to proliferate. Downtime was minimal. The few technicians who'd brought in radios after 9-11 had taken them back home. This sheltered Eric from any breaking story, short of nuclear winter. (What a contrast to Natalie, who checked the headlines between each class period.) On the day of his second visit to the Syrian, the national terror

warning had been reiterated—though trains, rather than ships, were now the target—but Eric didn't know the first thing about it. Nor did he care. His only goal was to wrap up his private investigation.

"So soon," Lebaton greeted him. "You could not stay away."

"I had some spare time," said Eric.

"I understand. Say no more."

Lebaton motioned Eric toward a line taped on the carpet. Instead of playing the piano, he circled his pupil as though admiring a statue—or a nude model. "We must begin with a yawn," he said. "Relax your throat. Let your larynx drop..." This was building a head voice, Lebaton explained. It consumed almost an hour. "Now continue your yawns and repeat the word 'dumb' while holding your fingers against your throat."

"Dumb, dumb, dumb," sang Eric.

"No, longer," objected Lebaton. "Duuuumb. Duuuumb."

"Duuuumb. Duuuumb," repeated Eric. He wondered if the Syrian were making fun of him, the sort of prank one saw on *Candid Camera*. (His vocal lessons in junior high school had consisted only of singing.) Lebaton drank three cans of Diet Pepsi while Eric "sang," but didn't once use the toilet. No opportunity arose to sneak into the man's bedroom or—another of Natalie's ideas—to photograph the Arabic titles of his books for future translation.

"That's enough singing for one day," said Lebaton.

Eric cleared his throat. "Do I pass?"

"It is not a matter of pass or of fail," replied the tutor. "But you are too much like water, taking the tint of all colors. Singing is about expressing your inner secrets."

"I'm not very secretive," said Eric.

"I believe otherwise," answered Lebaton. "Sometimes we have secrets we ourselves do not recognize. Singing releases them."

Eric retrieved his briefcase from the sofa. "Thank you for the lesson."

"Let me make you some tea," offered Lebaton.

"I really can't," said Eric. Then he considered the diuretic properties of tea. "All right, maybe one cup...."

So they sat in the living room and the Syrian shared his life story. Or at least what he presented as his life story. Lebaton claimed that his singing lessons had been highly sought after in Aleppo until his brother-in-law had run afoul of the authorities and been sent to Tadmor prison. Then nothing. Another brother-in-law, an optometrist, had brought him to Liverpool—but the work proved no better. Who wanted to study voice with an Arab where Italian graduate students were plentiful? The brother-in-law urged him to "do it the American way": change his last name to Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninoff; claim he'd been a leading

conductor in pre-siege Sarajevo (The optometrist called this “sticking your best foot forward.” Yuhanna did not know what to call it). For a while Lebaton taught piano to middleclass Indian girls. Not glamorous work, but you had to stretch your legs according to your quilt. Then last autumn he’d befriended the sculptor who’d fashioned the granite animals.

“He is not from Syria either,” said Lebaton. “He’s a married man from Vermont.”

The “either” left Eric on edge. He stood up to leave—defeated by the tutor’s stainless steel bladder. “Thank you for the tea,” he said.

“Allow me to use the toilet,” said Lebaton. “Then I’ll show you out.”

Too good to be true, thought Eric—and it was. The Syrian didn’t close the bathroom door while he urinated, preventing Eric from exploring the bedroom. The toxicologist did manage to photograph three book titles. When Lebaton returned, he placed his hand on Eric’s shoulder. “Wesley will be coming to New York. I do not wish his visit to interfere with our lessons.”

“Why would it?” asked Eric.

“I am glad to hear that.”

Eric grinned—fingering the digital camera in his jacket pocket. He knew that what he’d done was wrong. Totally aberrant. But there was no denying the other reality: His thirty seconds of photo-snapping had been fun.

That night they dined on Lebanese food in Cobble Hill. Babaganouj. Meat-pie dumplings. Sautéed cauliflower topped with yoghurt and pine nuts. They’d been eating at Café Jeita every Thursday since the attacks of September 11th in a show of solidarity with the local Middle Eastern community. Rafiq, the owner, knew them well. (On quiet nights, Rafiq’s wife took Natalie upstairs to see the twins while he invited Eric across the street to his social club for a round of darts.) How could Eric justify his snooping to the restaurateur? He couldn’t. He didn’t even want to show his face. But Natalie rejected his other suggestions—pad thai on 23rd Street, tapas in New Jersey. She was determined to have Rafiq translate the photographs.

The hostess, Rafiq’s teenager daughter, steered them through the bustling main dining room to a cozy nook behind a silk curtain. Images of prewar Beirut decorated the cedar-paneled walls. They sat beneath a photo labeled: Martyr Square, 1971. It reminded Eric of Miami Beach. That was where Grandma Rose had retired after his grandfather’s suicide. It would be so easy, Eric knew, to end this absurd investigation. All it required was one sentence. Telling Natalie that he’d found the box. That it contained bricks. Or music carved onto bricks. Who cared? Natalie would accept anything he told her. It was so easy. But also impossible. That meant lying to her—the sort of small falsehood that would

require ever larger cover-ups.

Rafiq greeted them with baklava and lady fingers on the house. "No darts tonight, I'm afraid," he said. When Natalie explained that they needed several photographs translated—part of a school project for "her niece"—Rafiq was delighted to help. He even chatted with Natalie at length about the fabricated child.

"This picture," said the restaurateur, "says, *Elements of Vocal Technique*....and this one says, *Advanced Riggs Method*." Rafiq smiled. "This third one is by an American. *Blades of Grass* by Walter Whiteman."

Natalie thanked Rafiq and sent her love to the twins.

"Whitman," said Eric. "I told you he was coming on to me. Are you satisfied he's not going to blow us up?"

"This doesn't prove anything," said Natalie. "If you were masterminding a terrorist attack, you wouldn't leave evidence lying around."

"I swear you're driving me nuts. What happened to Adolf Eichmann and the telephone book?"

"I wasn't thinking clearly," said Natalie. "We have to call the police. I just can't see any way around it."

Eric slammed his fist on the table. "You are not calling the police," he said

"I'm a grown adult," she answered sharply. "I can call whoever I want."

Rafiq's daughter entered the alcove to drop off the bill. Eric waited until the girl left. "Of course you can call whoever you want. But I'm asking you not to. Please, Natalie. Let me take care of this."

"Then take care of it, Eric. Or I will."

Eric left Café Jeita determined to resolve the matter immediately, even if that required pounding on the Syrian's door at one a.m.—but how? He could interrupt the man's sleep, but couldn't force his way into the man's bedroom. Nor was he certain what finding the box would accomplish. In order to absolve the voice instructor, he'd have to prove a negative. Never easy. Impossible when his wife construed all exonerating evidence as further indication of the man's cunning. How did they know Lebaton had a brother-in-law in prison? Or even that he was Syrian? According to Natalie, the tutor's story made too much sense. This upset her so much that on Wednesday—the same Wednesday a suspicious knapsack shut down Grand Central Station during rush hour—she stayed home from school. By Thursday, her diet consisted of seltzer and Xanax. She got out of bed only to inspect the Syrian's door through the peephole. Eric hinted at phoning a therapist. She responded by dialing "9-1" on the telephone, holding her finger above the final "1" until he apologized. (*It was the world that had gone insane. Not her.*) She also insisted he continue with his spying.

This wasn't the first time Natalie had snapped. When her father had died, she'd barricaded herself in the restroom at the kosher-style deli on 4th Street and refused to leave for nine hours; a five week stint in New York Psychiatric followed. That ordeal even made the *Daily News*. But this time—well, though he hated to admit it, Eric wasn't 100% sure she'd lost it. Or, rather, just because his wife was decompensating, didn't mean the Syrian wasn't up to no-good. Listening to Lebaton describe his dream of opening a dinner theater on the Cardo in Damascus, sashaying his torso while crooning snippets from *Oklahoma!* and *West Side Story*, Eric couldn't imagine the tutor as anything but a lonely middle-aged refugee. Yet the Syrian dropped numerous anti-Semitic remarks (about Ira Gershwin, Sammy Cahn), one time explaining: "I have nothing against Jews. Only Zionists." He resisted showing Eric his bedroom—despite frequent intimations. And he remained mysterious about the UPS package. When Eric asked point-blank what exactly the box had contained, Lebaton answered: "A gift from my friend." No word of family, Syria, sheet music. Never had Eric felt so torn.

By Friday—when the President elevated the terror level to red—Eric's eyes were bloodshot from sleep loss. He hadn't showered in two days. He'd run out of disposable razors and wore a twenty-four hour beard.

"What is troubling you, my friend?" asked Lebaton.

"I've had a lot on my mind."

The tutor sighed. "Me too. Wesley's coming. Tomorrow."

Eric noticed the absence of old pizza boxes. The carpet had been vacuumed. A draft blew through the curtainless windows.

"He's taking me to dinner at the Carousel Club," said Lebaton. "He wants to spent the entire day with me. What do you think I should do?"

Eric realized the man was asking him for advice—romantic advice. He rose abruptly. "I have to go home."

"I didn't mean—"

"I'm going now," said Eric. "Goodbye."

He picked up his briefcase and walked out the door.

Natalie greeted him at the threshold in a pink sundress. She'd painted her toenails burgundy and tucked one of Lebaton's jonquils above her ear. Eric still had his key in the door when she kissed him hard on the lips.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'm done with the furniture," she answered.

Eric was amazed to see the bookshelves varnished and neatly stacked on either side of the door to the pantry. Gone were the paint rollers, the carpet of

shellac-speckled newspaper. From the kitchen carried the rich aroma of simmering meat. Eric couldn't remember the last time Natalie had seemed so relaxed, so engaged with life—so much the woman he'd married. Certainly not in the past week. Maybe not since her parents had died. She'd even garnished the cat's collar with a scarlet ribbon. All through dinner—lamb chops, Moroccan style—she didn't say a word about their neighbor. Eric didn't dare.

For dessert, Natalie had baked her own key lime pie. It was more like key lime cake—chunks of lime embedded in flour—but Eric washed it down with wine.

"It's awful, isn't it?" asked Natalie.

"Experimental," answered Eric.

Natalie picked up the entire cake and dropped it in the trash pale. "I phoned Judy Landau today," she said.

Eric recognized his wife's tone: a combination of guilt and defiance. As though confessing to an affair she did not intend to end. He kept silent.

"I figured she might have left a spare key with Jorge." Natalie held up a small steel latchkey dangling from a pink rubber band. She smiled. "I was right."

"Jesus-fucking-Christ."

"Jorge will never know I borrowed it. Besides, we're not going to steal anything."

All at once Eric understood that it was he, not his wife, who would use the key. That was the cost for keeping jonquils in Natalie's hair—a high price, but he would willingly pay higher. It was so inevitable, it wasn't worth disputing.

He held out his hand. Natalie folded his fingers around the key.

"Judy and Jorge...?" he asked.

"She said it wasn't serious," said Natalie. "I didn't want to upset you."

Syndicated television was the only frame of reference Eric had for slipping into his neighbor's apartment. *The Rockford Files*. *Cannon*. *Magnum P.I.* From these shows, he'd learned the basics: always wear black gloves; locate a hiding spot upon entering a room. But even as a teenager, Eric had preferred crime-solving to crime-stopping—that brand of armchair detective work practiced by Quincy and Perry Mason. The allure of intellectual sleuthing had led him into toxicology. Housebreaking, in contrast, felt criminal. Far more criminal in real life than it did on TV. Eric even feared the police might arrive while he was in Lebaton's apartment and conclude he was also part of the terrorist conspiracy. If there were a terrorist conspiracy. Which there wasn't.

The Syrian and his friend left the building around five o'clock. The friend, Wesley, appeared much older than Eric anticipated. Maybe sixty, sixty-five. He was also much darker than Eric expected—olive-skinned, broad-faced, possibly

Hispanic or Indonesian. Nothing about this was inherently suspicious, except that Eric had envisioned a lanky, fair-haired Wesley in his thirties. The toxicologist watched the pair's departure: first through his peephole, then from the kitchen window. The two men strolled slowly. When they finally reached the avenue and descended into the subway station, Eric darted across the corridor. He'd wanted Natalie to stand guard—but the pressure had proven too much for her. She'd taken a sedative. Luckily, their apartment and Lebaton's opened onto the same alcove. It was a small, dimly-lit recess that hooked behind the stairwell. The third apartment on the alcove stood empty. Under renovation. As long as the Syrian remained away, Eric wouldn't be disturbed.

During his initial moments in the tutor's apartment, Eric paused in the vestibule to gather his wherewithal. His pulse was racing. His hands quivered. How different the dark, still room looked without Lebaton pacing in circles! The man's entire life was now Eric's to explore—but the scope of his choices left him paralyzed. Should he check the closets? Inside the piano? Then some unknown gear clicked inside him and he walked decisively, as originally planned, into the Syrian's bedroom.

The bedroom was the larger of Lebaton's two rooms. Its central features were a sagging queen-size bed and a long, low-slung bureau. Atop the bureau sat two water-warped cartons and a French horn case. There was also a bag of laundry leaning against a halogen lamp. On the far side of the bed—out in the open—lay the UPS package:

FROM: WESLEY ALVARAO,
12 STATION PLACE
RUTLAND, VT 05701.

Eric opened the box with great care—fearful of what sudden contact might detonate—but there was no explosion. The package contained crumpled balls of writing paper, which, when unfolded, revealed markings in a language he didn't recognize. Indonesian? Some derivate of Arabic script? He spotted a bass clef and the word *adagio*. The scrawl was merely some form of musical shorthand.

He took a deep breath. He dug through the insulation and ran his fingers over a cold polished surface, then reached his entire hand inside and drew out another granite carving. This was larger than those in the outer room. The subjects were two idealized nude men, one sitting on the other's lap with his arm wrapped around his lover's neck. Lebaton and Wesley. That was all.

Eric was repackaging the statue as rapidly as possible when the murmur of voices rose in the hallway. Then he heard the bolt turn. The toxicologist suddenly realized he hadn't scouted out a hiding place. His television instincts kicked in

and he scooted under the bed, dragging the parcel with him. Only then did he sense his mistake: What if Lebaton and his friend made out on the bed?

"I'll pay you back the money, somehow," said Lebaton. "But I just can't do this."

"Do you know how hard I've been working to get you that visa?" demanded another voice—presumably Wesley's. "I don't want any money. What I want is an explanation."

The men's footsteps drew closer. One of them sat on the bed. It squeaked.

"You've met someone else, haven't you?" demanded Wesley. "You love someone else!"

A long silence. "Nothing's happened," Lebaton finally said. "He's just a neighbor...but his marriage is falling apart, so he's been coming over here each day... and I don't know...I thought we agreed nothing was carved in stone..."

"So it's over. Just like that?" snapped Wesley.

The Syrian remained silent. A door closed, then another. After that Eric waited for hours while Lebaton sobbed himself to sleep.

Eric wandered the streets until the sky grew gray with light. He'd read somewhere that Brooklyn was the most diverse city in the nation—that an average resident of his own neighborhood encountered more people from different backgrounds in one week than the average inhabitant of Bangor, Maine, met in a lifetime. He noticed this more that morning. The shopkeepers rolling up security gratings wore turbans and kufis and taquiyahs. Deliverymen in guayaberas unloaded newspapers in tightly-bound dozens. Shirtless children sporting pavas, laughing, shrieking, hosed down the sidewalks and each other. All of these ordinary people went about their business, entirely unaware of Eric's grievous wrong. He'd have no choice but to apologize to Lebaton—to confess and let the chips fall where they may. Natalie would accept that. She'd have to. Not that confessing could undo the damage he'd caused—but it would be a start. And afterwards: Shame? Jail? Who knew?

Once he'd decided to confess, Eric actually felt good. Surprisingly so. He purchased four whitefish chubs at Mrs. Greenblatt's and a *Sunday New York Times* from a vendor in the park. What he wanted most was a quiet breakfast with Natalie, an opportunity to tell her how much he loved her. As he approached his building, Eric was seized with a deep, overpowering longing for his wife.

Then the sirens registered. The fire trucks. Police in SWAT uniforms.

Natalie came running toward him. "Eric! Thank God!"

She wrapped her arms around his waist.

He staggered back a step. "The police..."

"You didn't come home. I didn't know what to do."

"You called the police..."

An explosive anger took hold of Eric—as powerful as his longing had been. "Do you know what was in that box?" he demanded. "Sheet music! Sheet music weighed down by a goddam stone!"

Natalie pressed her body to his. "You're alive. That's all that matters."

Eric staggered backward again, letting the newspaper fall from his hands. He gazed beyond his wife's embrace toward the squad cars, the news vans, the swarming bystanders. He was alive—so what? Where did that leave him? He realized that the singer tutor was somewhere out in that maelstrom, already beyond rescue, another warning of the terror to come.

Syrian Music Instructor Accused In Bomb Shipment.

Suspicious Package Leads To Evacuations In Brooklyn.

"It matters less than you think it matters," Eric said.

He wasn't sure it mattered much at all.