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The Run

A THESIS

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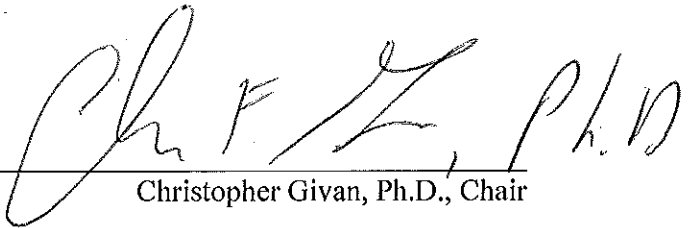
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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The Run is a novella-length creative work that follows Dust, a Marine Corps Reservist who performs military funeral services all across Nebraska. In his civilian life, Dust is an English teaching assistant at Nebraska Technical University in Bellevue, where he is having a love affair with Inopinée, a married coworker. Dust's mounting disillusionment with the military combines with the stress of his ongoing assignments with Inopinée, whose emotionally-abusive and jealous husband, Dave, has begun to suspect the truth. Dust is accustomed to escaping these pressures by running the country roads outside of Bellevue, but when the forest through which he runs seems to grow strangely responsive to his presence, the various murky threads of Dust's life come together in a pattern he can neither decipher nor escape.

The Run

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All the guards were dead and the money was gone.

Dave stepped back from the entrance and let the shadows of the deep doorway fall over him. In his brigand's cloak, he was nearly invisible when out of direct torchlight, and the comfort of knowing as much gave him time to think. That the guards had all been killed was clear to him from the arrangement of bodies; if any had escaped, some of the dead would have been nearer the door, cut down in their own attempts to flee. But all of them were at or around the smashed table, which meant that there had been no chance to run. The small casket from the table was tipped over on the floor. A paltry handful of silver coins was scattered about its open lid; the rest were gone.

"You hear a scraping noise coming from the side door to the room," Bart said.

Dave's eyes flicked to the side door. His first instinct, trained into him by years as a student of the Royal Thieves' Guild, was to stay hidden, blended seamlessly with the doorway. Even if he was seen by the thing coming down the side passage, he could turn and run down the hall at his back.

"None of the guards ran," Charlie said. "They never had a chance."

"Hey," Bart said. "You're dead. No comments from the dead peanut gallery."

Charlie cracked a beer. "Dave has my preserved head in his pack. I can talk to him."

"First of all, no he doesn't. Second of all, he would have to be a necromancer of sufficient level and skill to perform that kind of sorcery, and he would have to spend half a day executing the proper rituals."

"Third," Dave said, "I would have to have the blood of an orphan or virgin mermaid as spell reagent." He patted his shirt pockets. "Fresh out."

“Exactly,” Bart said. He seemed relieved that at least someone appreciated the rules.

“He *could* have my head in his pack.”

“Even if—”

Dave held up a hand. “It’s okay. I already thought of it, anyway. I knew the guards didn’t run, right? So I would know that I shouldn’t try to run, either.”

Bart seemed dubious.

Dave leaned back and took a Heineken from the cooler. “We can roll it. Wisdom check?”

“Alright.”

Dave opened the Heineken and rolled a die. He narrowed his eyes as he imagined Davanir, Brigand Prime of the Royal Thieves’ Guild of Valdaslin, making a snap judgment call.

The die came up 19.

“Damn,” Bart said.

Dave knew that the thing coming down the side passage would catch him and tear him apart just as it had the guards – if he ran. He could try to stay hidden, but something powerful enough to overcome half a dozen Grantian Noble Guard would likely have either the magic or the infravision to see him in the murky room.

The sound grew. Now, in addition to the scraping noise, he could hear the slavering snarl of ragged breath.

There was no time. The only things in the room were the six dead guards and the empty casket of silver. The room itself had once been a mausoleum chamber, the kind of morbid salon spot that the death-cult Grantians favored for their afternoon wine. When this wing of the keep had been converted into guard quarters, the plush chairs and lounges had been taken out, and only the open sarcophagi in their wall niches remained. The sarcophagi, and—

“This room is old,” Dave said. He glanced at Bart, who nodded guardedly. “The mummies are all in their coffins?”

“Sarcophagi,” Bart said. “The Grantian house cult specifies—”

“Right. If the mummies are old and the room is damp from the sea air, some of the bandages might be loose or even coming off?”

Charlie took a pull of his beer and smiled at Bart. “Yeah they are.”

“One more infraction from dead Level Seven Dwarf Clerics,” Bart said, “and the local temple is going to be out of resurrection scrolls for a month.”

The snarling echoed down the corridor. There was nothing for it but to risk all. Dave leapt forward, peering into the deep niches around the walls. The first two he saw were no good – the mummies there were too old, and their wrappings had discolored and rotted until they were like second skins. But the third was only a few decades in the grave, and its bleached wrappings were still grey and white.

And loose.

With a flick of his wrist scythe, Dave sliced into the wrappings and tugged. He knew he didn’t have time to disguise himself completely, but if he could get just enough of himself hidden—

“Your heightened perceptions tell you the creature is less than ten yards from the room,” Bart said. He sounded gleeful. “You hear strange yipping sounds mixed in with its scraping walk and its breathing.”

Andy had watched the entire scene in silence. Now he looked at Dave and said, “Mirror of Truth?”

“Mirror of Truth.”

“Hey! I said—”

“Easy, Dungeon Lord,” Andy said. “I’m not a Dwarf Cleric.”

“You’re still dead. No advice from dead players.”

“I would have done it anyway,” Dave said. “It’s the only move I have.”

Dave had pushed aside the mummy and squeezed himself sideways into the standing sarcophagus. His left side protruded out into the niche, but from the side door, he would be hard

to see. Working quickly, he draped yards of tacky, reeking bandages over his exposed shoulder and arm.

“It comes.”

A sense of dread preceded the creature into the room. Dave threw a final loop of white bandage over his left leg and, without looking out from the niche, drew a small hand mirror from his belt pouch and slung it onto the bare flags beside the table.

Dave heard a fearsome snarl as the beast saw the bauble, but the mirror’s effect was immediate: a duplicate of Davanir, royal thief extraordinaire, flashed into life above the silver glass.

Dave sipped his Heineken and rolled another die.

Bart followed the die’s progress across the card table. “Seven.” He consulted a chart. “The simulacrum speaks in a foreign tongue to the creature,” he recited, “confusing it into inaction for three rounds.”

Dave smiled, but Andy held up a finger. “Only works on monsters with language,” he said lightly. “Can’t confuse a Slug Ooze by chattering at it in High Elven. Does our critter speak at least one language?”

Bart considered. Dave looked at Andy, who saw him looking and dropped a wink. Rather than try to undermine the ploy, Dave realized, Andy was fishing for information on the creature, which Davanir had not yet seen.

“Yeah,” Bart said slowly. Then, with more conviction, “Yes, it is intelligent enough to be confused by language and speaks a language of its own. All weres do.”

“Weres, huh?” Charlie said.

“I told you— Dammit!”

Dave heard the simulacrum singing something high and lilting to the slavering beast in the chamber. It sounded like a Xilaxian opera, which was fortunate – Xilaxian operas confused

even Xilaxians. He pulled more wrappings from the corpse, against which he was now nestled close as a lover.

In the chamber, the simulacrum fell silent. The were-beast – Dave’s thief senses told him it was a were, but what kind he knew not – came closer. It roared, a terrible sound, and swiped at the image. It did the mirror-double no harm, but its attention was no longer diverted, and with a snarl it stepped over the mirror and entered fully into the room.

It was enormous. With his head half-hidden by bandages and craned to the left, all Dave could see from the niche was that the thing stood at least eight feet and that its head ended in a long, grizzled snout. Its shoulders were broad and covered with hay-colored fur. It sniffed the blood-scented air, casting about for the prey it knew was nearby.

“Werewolf!”

“No,” Bart said. “And what did I say about keeping quiet?”

“I’m not interfering with the game!”

Bart gave Dave with the pained look of a veteran father who has just discovered some new bit of teenage devilry.

“He’s not,” Dave said.

“Werebear!” Charlie finished his beer and crushed the can against the cement basement floor. “Weretiger! Werebull!”

A yammering voice – it sounded, Dave thought with nostalgia, like that of his old friend Charlion, whose noble sacrifice had been the only reason Dave had survived the catacombs of Spider Lake – was going on and on in Dave’s head, listing off possible identities for the monster. Dave tried to calm the inner voice, but it went on. *Werepanther?* it wondered excitedly. *Weredragon? Werepony?*

The thing came closer. In the guttering light of the last torch, Dave at last saw that it had a canine shape. *Werewolf*, Charlion’s gruff voice said in his head. *I knew it was a—*

“Werecoyote, actually,” Bart said.

“I’ll roll a Hide In Shadows check to see if I can – wait. What?”

Even Charlie had paused, one huge hand halfway to the cooler.

“The werecoyote,” Bart said, “is the rarest and most feared of the Gratian beasts. Lighter than its werewolf cousins, it is also more agile and—”

“Werecoyote!” Charlie said. He nearly fell out of his chair with laughter. “Is it going to transform on a full moon and go through your garbage?”

Bart looked at Andy for sympathy, but Andy only grimaced. “A coyote sounds pretty contrived, man.”

In the bloody guardroom, Dave found himself suddenly distracted. Despite the vicious were- uh, werecoyote, advancing upon him, he struggled to concentrate. He remained still, hoping against hope that his white-wrapped left side would camouflage him enough for the beast to pass him by.

The thing came closer. Its maw, brown with drying blood, was half-open. Its black nose wrinkled as it snuffled the air.

It was going to see him. There was danger here. Dave had time for one act. His hidden right hand crept to the spiked club hanging from his belt. It was an incongruously savage weapon for a thief, but its silver head, polished to a chrome shine, was lethal to the creatures that ran in the forests about the keep. He didn’t think he could draw the weapon in time, but he had no other choice, unless—

“Inopinée,” Dave said.

The werecoyote froze.

“What?” Bart said. “Is that a spell?”

“You could say that,” Andy said.

Dave mimed chucking the Heineken at him. “It’s my wife,” he said to Bart. He held up his phone, which was alight with an incoming call. He pushed back from the table and took the stairs two at a time on his way toward the kitchen.

“What’s his hurry?” Bart said.

“He’s ashamed of us!” Charlie said, calling up the stairs after Dave. “He doesn’t want his hot wife to know he’s nerding out!”

#

Davanir made a narrow escape from the werecoyote by cutting the rope to a balcony chandelier and riding the frame of brass and glass globes into the dubious safety of the river outside the castle walls.

Andy had given Dave a ride to Bart’s place for the evening, and as they rode home in Andy’s Subaru, Dave said, “I think she’s cheating on me.”

Suburban lawns flickered past. Under moon, Bellevue looked like any other small metropolitan area. By day, both men knew, the city’s rural roots would show: cornfields glimpsed just behind housing developments, tractors tucked away in stand-alone garages, screen doors with noisy springs. LED street lamps slid bars of white light over the little car as Andy turned onto the Kennedy Freeway.

“What makes you say that?” Andy used the same light tone with which he settled the interminable spats between Bart and Charlie. His first thought – *What is it this time?* – would have been a mistake to put into words.

Dave shook his head. Andy took a careful peek at his passenger. Dave had the kind of simple good looks that people tended to assume went unnoticed by their possessor, but Andy knew better. Other parts of himself, Dave might be oblivious to, but his looks? No.

Andy couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw water in Dave’s eyes. The thought of Dave crying was a frightening one, not because Andy was uncomfortable dealing with emotions but because he knew Dave was; whatever thin thread had brought the idea of adultery back into Dave’s mind, that mind was genuine. Dave wasn’t making this up; Dave’s mind was made up; and a crying Dave, Andy knew, was a dangerous Dave indeed.

“Do you ever feel like you’re being doubled?”

Andy merged into the travel lane and passed an Old Dominion trailer. “What?”

“Doubled,” Dave said. He put a hand out, as though he were going to feel the temperature of the night outside the windshield by placing the back of his fingers against it, but then brought the hand in, indicating the space before him. Indicating the space between himself and the glass. “Like the you you see isn’t the you you are. Like there’s someone else, someone like you. A reflection, almost. A reflected you, out there, someone like you but not you.”

“Have you been getting into Inopinée’s textbooks again?”

“Maybe, yeah. That shit’s not crazy, man. Some of the things those critics say – Heidegger, the authentic self, Cartesian dualism – it’s scary real.”

“Okay.” Andy spread his fingers, giving the steering wheel antlers. “The shit’s real. But you don’t think you’re suffering from a little overapplication?”

“What do you mean?”

“You feel, ah, doubled, right? And you feel – what? That she’s running around on you with this other guy, this you that’s not you?”

Dave sniffed. “Yeah.”

“So maybe you’re looking for validation too hard. You worry that your wife cheats – okay, welcome to marriage. That fear starts to unravel your self-confidence. You feel unsure. Fragmented, or something. You hit the books, thinking you’re looking for wisdom, but you’re really just looking for someone smart to tell you what you think you already know. What you want to hear.”

“I’m not smart?”

“That’s not what I mean.” Andy reached into the center console, retrieved a Kleenex, and held the tissue out to Dave. After a moment, Dave took it.

“I just don’t know why she’s unsatisfied,” Dave said. “I just don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

Andy took them through a KFC drive-thru. By the time he pulled up to the curb in front of Dave and Inopinée's little brick bungalow, they were both sober enough to regret getting into such an intimate discussion in the first place.

Dave thanked Andy for the ride and opened the door. He put one foot on the asphalt outside.

"Hey." Andy reached across, meaning to touch Dave on the forearm, and caught the edge of his hand as the other man leaned out of the seat to stand. "I'm here for you."

Dave looked at him. The odd angle and the lack of light made his face unreadable.

Andy pulled back his hand. *Does he know?* he thought. *Shit, does he know?*

"I know, man. Thanks."

Andy would normally have waited until Dave was safely inside – the neighborhood was a good one, but the bungalow had a high porch and its stone steps had been unforgiving to the drunken gamers on more than one occasion. Tonight, however, he made a show of driving off immediately.

Andy drove home, went inside, took off his clothes, and went to bed. It wasn't until the next morning that he found the Kleenex on the passenger floor mat. Dave had not used it to blow his nose. Instead, he had shredded it, leaving a meticulous pile of tiny, even squares on the navy mat, like dry snow fallen upon a dark sea.

#

Before the rain, before the run, before he met Corporal Neidermeyer's mother, Dust spent an entire afternoon trying to find out if he could speak Spanish. He had always known deep down that he probably could speak Spanish, but he had never given it the old college try.

"*Hola,*" Dust said. "*Me llaman el dusto.*"

"*El gusto es mio,*" the mirror said. "*Se puede me llama Espejo Magnifico.*"

It occurred to Dust that his mirror held rather a grand opinion of itself. The mirror had always been somewhat arrogant; the man he most often saw within it, for example, liked to pretend he didn't have a receding hairline.

“Que tal, Espejo, mi amistad viejo?”

The man in the mirror ran one hand through his hair. Receding or not, the hair was good: rich and thick, with the kind of grey that gave George Clooney his appeal. The man in the mirror wobbled his other hand in the air, palm pivoting on the axis of his middle finger.

“Asi, asi.”

Dust wondered why they called it “the old college try.” Was the college old, or were the people trying old? He doubted the person who had come up with the expression – *la idioma*, to our friends in the mirror – had gone to a shabby technical university ten miles outside the capital city of the fattest state in the union.

Dust was not fat. Dust felt it very important that the mirror understood just how not-fat he was, how the slim ring of pale flab around his middle – not enough to cover the cut shapes of his hipbones or the top four sleek bulges of his abdominal muscles – was not, under any circumstances, a belly. Dust wasn't allowed to be fat. He had the right to remain silent, and the right to bear arms, and the right to otter arms, should he acquire legally the otter to whom the arms had once belonged, but he did not, by federal contractual obligation, have the right to be fat.

“Espera,” the mirror said. The man there turned and leaned, seeking the best angle to minimize the little ring of not-fat at its waist.

“Como?”

“Yo pienso,” the mirror said, *“que estamos adelante de nosotros mismos.”*

The mirror *was* arrogant. Or maybe that was just the Tanqueray talking.

Arrogant or not, Dust agreed. They were, in fact, getting ahead of themselves.

#

Dust didn't mean for things to be so fast-paced. He meant to lay things out gradually, a strand at a time, like wet strings set upon a maple tabletop to dry. There was the funeral work; the end of his time in the reserves; and the crashing, sexpot genius of Inopinée. There was road, and the forest through which it wandered like the dead vein of an animal that had never stood a chance.

But the truth of the matter was that these things all came at him at once, spread out over a period of months and seasons, hammered down at a single blow, dropped into the frame of him like nails. A sequence; a salvo. The truth of the matter was that there was very little truth to the matter, very little accuracy with which he could take aim at reconstructing the tangle of threads which slipped together like a rope and fell, nooselike, over his head.

The mirror said they were getting ahead of themselves, and the mirror was right.

"Begin at the beginning," Dust told the man in the mirror. He buttoned up his vest and cinched his tie. He considered unfastening his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves a little, but didn't want his look to seem affected. Dust knew his forearms looked good; the skin there, stippled by freckles and by the thin, downy pelt of his hairs, appeared more tan than the rest of him, which was pasty even on a good day. His arms were roped with muscle, lithe in their leanness like—

"Are you really going to spend time on this?" said the mirror.

Dust gave the mirror the finger. The mirror gave it right back.

Dust hefted his satchel and went out the door.

#

It was Dust's own fault.

In high school, smart enough to laugh it off and dumb enough to think laughing it off was a good idea, Dust had his share of girls. At the time, he felt cruelly underwhelmed; according to his southern compass, his share of girls should have been somewhere between half and all of the women in the world.

He fell in love, again and again, and by the time he was old enough to realize that all the rest of them were just infatuation and hormones he was in the grip of the last and best, a girl named Bianca. At the time, he had not yet read enough bad novels to know that dating women with European names was the sort of thing protagonists in bad novels did; at the time, it was still thirteen years before the sharp-edged glory of *Inopinée*.

One day in the spring of his senior year, he was walking out of the school library carrying *Catcher in the Rye* – like any good Salingerian, he was stealing it from a place that lent books for free – when the mirror beside the double door caught his eye. The man in it (it would be years yet before Dust came to realize who this man would be) beckoned him over. Dust looked around – *who, me?* – then sidled cautiously over, hoping the sidling and the caution didn't seem conspicuous.

“*Si, muy conspicuo,*” the mirror said, then looked abashed. “I’m not speaking Spanish yet, am I?”

“I think it’s, ‘I’m not speaking Spanish *anymore,*’” Dust said.

“No, no. Over here, the timeline runs right to left. It’s ‘yet.’”

Dust looked at the mirror.

“Sorry,” the mirror said. “Mirror humor.”

A girl with braces walked by; Dust raised his Salinger and pretended to read it, knowing he looked like a phony but too enticed by the mirror-man’s hair to care.

“Is that—”

“George Clooney hair? Nah. Give it a decade.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, of course you’re conspicuous. You’re stealing a book from a library, and you’re slinking around like Willem DaFoe in *Wild at Heart*.”

“I don’t—” Dust said, and then stiffened as a librarian poked her head around a stack and shushed loudly. Dust pointed at the mirror and then shrugged, turning his palms up amicably:

What can you do?

The man in the mirror was pinching the bridge of his nose. “I know you’re young, but if you aren’t going to appreciate my Willem DaFoe references, I don’t know if we can have much of a future.

“Whatever,” Dust said. “What did you call me over here for, anyway?”

“Bianca.”

“What?”

“Bianca. You’re in love with her.”

“Yeah.”

The mirror looked down. Dust looked down. The mirror looked back up and met Dust’s eye. “Swear it off.”

“What?”

“The girl. The in-love. The whole shebang. It’s no good. Swear it off.”

“But she just—” Dust looked left, looked right, and edged closer. “She just let me put my hand up her shirt yesterday.”

The man in the mirror rolled his eyes and slumped forward, bonking his forehead against the mirror in comic despair. The effect was unnerving.

“What do you mean? Why would I give it up?” Dust gestured helplessly. “What have you seen?”

But the mirror-man was gone. There was nothing on the glass but dust.

#

That’s not how it happened.

Dust did it to himself. Bianca went bad, as teenage relationships tend to do when confronted by the oxidizing salts of geography and time, and Dust swore it off. He wanted

nothing to do with being in love; he went down into the bunker beneath his mind and ran through room after room, throwing breakers, yanking cords. The lights went dark, flaring out in great banks like city blocks after a reactor failure. Afterwards, in the new shadows, with only the failing hum of the downcycling circuits and his own hard breathing to break the silence, Dust stood, feeling the weight of the labyrinth around him and knowing that the teeth of its inexorable gears would never turn again, would never find his flesh or grind the grain of his heart.

He turned off the machinery of falling in love and stood among its bones, knowing with the absolute faith of the young that it would stay silent forever.

He should have looked up ‘inexorable.’

#

Dust went in and out of community college with the same enthusiasm he had shown for high school. By twenty-one, he knew that something had been lifted from the stonework of his life, but he didn’t yet have Inopinée to tell him what it was. He had the same vague dissatisfaction with himself shared by all men who have never been soldiers, and so decided to give his brain a rest and become one. He picked the branch with the prettiest colors.

The Marines sank their teeth into him and found him fine. After three years and one tour, they spat him out to finish his contract with a reserve company stationed at Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue, Nebraska. It was in Bellevue that Dust found Nebraska Technical University, where he finished his long-neglected undergraduate degree in English and discovered that the best way to deal with the Corps was to write about it. He liked the writing and the comfy college work at NebTech so much that he stuck at it, enrolling in their graduate program and finding work as a teaching assistant.

At NebTech, the assistants assisted nobody but themselves, which suited Dust; five years with the Corps had inured him to all kinds of instructional challenges. He thought drafting a syllabus, picking a reading list, and coming up with sixteen weeks’ worth of lecture would be no damage, especially since all of it was to be done from the comfort of an air-conditioned office

instead of from a cramped Humvee that local farmers periodically tried to firebomb. As it turned out, he was right.

The damage came the first day he walked into the communal teaching office and met the veteran TAs. They were gathered in a close circle, chatting excitedly about a recently-discovered case of serial plagiarism in one of their classes. Dust stood in the doorway for a moment, soaking up the air. One of the circle, a slim, blue-eyed creature with auburn hair as straight as a razor, craned up, saw him, and waved an imperious hand.

“Shut the door,” this apparition said. Her teeth were the whitest, straightest teeth Dust had ever seen in a human mouth. “I don’t want any students outside to hear what fuckheads we think they are.”

Dust stepped in and shut the door. He hesitated; the imperator gestured impatiently. “Get over here. Take a seat. Look at what this little shit tried to pull.” She threw an errant strand of hair back over her ear. “You must be the new guy.”

“Dust,” Dust said, holding out his hand.

She took it. There was no electricity, no voice from the clouds. There was only a single, dust-filmed light, winking into life on a small console deep within the bunkers beneath his mind.

“Dust?” She laughed. “Inopinée.”

#

He worked side by side with her for a year, filtering in and out of the office, sharing space, bitching about students, but never really talking to her. He was vaguely aware that she was in and out of relationships with men, was with a man, was getting married. He felt the fire of her intellect rolling off her like the light of a rogue star. He was aware – not at all vaguely – of the pure, spike-heeled sex of her, of the velocity of her beauty, a red arch somehow bound to her ambition, to her genius, to her irascible pride.

He dared not speak to her. He was taken by her, but he felt inadequate, and after a time, she was spoken for. She caromed through the academic world like a gunslinger laying down the

law in batwing bars; he ducked bullets, plinking out the notes of his meagre creative writing degree on a rolltop piano to which nobody paid any special attention. Even had they both been single, he could no more have approached her than he could have stepped into the sky and swam for the sun.

Then Inopinée slapped Jackson Beaubridge in the faculty parking lot south of the English building, and after the police and the paramedics finished up with the whole mess, Dust asked her if she would like to go on an adultery with him.

He first became aware of Jackson Beaubridge during his last semester as an undergrad; Beaubridge and Dust both took the same exit seminar course for English majors, and at the end of the term, each student gave a fifteen-minute presentation over their work for the semester. In Dust's case, this was a creative piece, a short story about the forested hills a hundred miles outside the city, hills in which he spent two weeks each summer as a military reservist. Beaubridge was also a creative; his piece was a faux exposé on Modern Jesus. For the purpose of the piece, Modern Jesus was a down-at-the-heels film actor living in an attic apartment in Los Angeles; according to Beaubridge, the chief aspiration of the piece was to make clear to the contemporary reader the degree of perversion inherent in the appropriation of historical Jesus by secular authorities like big media and the federal government.

To accommodate its purposes, Beaubridge insisted, the piece called for a good amount of time travel. Dust couldn't remember if the time travel had been of the H.G. Wells variety or of the *Terminator* variety; he remembered sitting in the seminar classroom, running a quarter across the knuckles of his left hand, and picturing Modern Jesus (A Jesus with a crewcut? A Jesus who texts while driving His Prius?) zapping naked into New York in a flurry of gutter trash and CG lightning and wondering what He might look like riding a chopper in a leather jacket.

He knew almost right away that Beaubridge was a strange duck; he did not know that Beaubridge's particular list of sins included two restraining orders, a conviction for misdemeanor

stalking, and a New Hampshire felony assault charge dropped only after the gentleman in question left the state under legal obligation never to return.

Dust discovered all this in the manner such things were usually discovered: after it was mostly too late to do any good. He would look back later and wonder if it was the revelations about Beaubridge which led to the hospital, or if he, Dust, had been headed there all along, like a marble with a smoky grey center spinning its narrowing gyre toward the black mouth of a funnel.

After class, Dust told Beaubridge that he thought his idea was good, and that he should write it; Beaubridge, who had a British actor's accidental handsomeness but kept it perpetually marred with a look of confused surprise, as though the world had always just goosed him, blinked suspiciously at this advice. But Dust meant it; four-fifths of the writers in the exit seminar, like four-fifths of the writers in every writing class he would ever attend, were pretty much hopeless. Beaubridge, for all his social ineptitude, was a twenty percenter. So roll on, Modern Jesus; write your loaves and fishes across the California sky.

#

A year later, as April gave way with bad grace to the ugly rains of tornado season, Dust saw Inopinée leaving the English building with a lanky, curly-haired man in tow. Inopinée was then no more than a streak of fire across Dust's weeknight world, and that she would have a man in tow was not in itself alarming; comets, Dust knew, came with their own lethal gravity, and cared for the satellites they drew in and burned no more than queens cared for the men who bought their crowns with blood.

Dust also knew the look of unwelcome company when he saw it. The way Inopinée was walking with Jackson Beaubridge on that sharp-winded evening was the way overworked sergeants walked when being accosted by privates with especially asinine requests. Her head was down – this alone was strange – and her gait was rushed. When Beaubridge reached ahead of her to open the door to the foyer, Dust saw her shy away from his arm.

Inopinée's car, an aging, salt-stained Toyota, was parked near the back of the lot. Beaubridge followed her all the way there, gesturing and tossing his hair in his enthusiasm over whichever mad theory he felt compelled to share with her. Inopinée, who Dust knew was no stranger to being tracked by men's eyes or by the hands that followed them, managed to keep him in front of her while unlocking her driver's door. She slipped her bag from her shoulder, palmed it backwards into the Toyota's bucket seat, and began to back in after it. It was when she finally turned, pivoting her hips halfway around to slide into the low cockpit, that Beaubridge reached forward and put a hand on her ass.

Dust had once met an orange cat in Budapest whose temper was as unpredictable as a simile about Danube floods. The orange cat, who was the only cat Dust ever met in Budapest, drew alongside him as he stood outside the airport watching Corporal Fish get his Sicilian defense dismembered by a foldboard hustler with drooping eyes and just enough English to offer twenty bucks a game. Dust reached down to pet the animal, starting with the forehead scratch (as is only polite when confronting a cat across a language barrier), and then moving on to the neck and thence behind the ears. The cat arched, and Dust ran his hand down its spine, putting pressure on its tailbone and eliciting the minute thunder of its purr. Dust was following the game, watching as the old man plucked up Fish's black bishop and tossed it into the graveyard pile with a gummy smile, and so absent-mindedly moved his scratching hand down to the cat's side. He had met enough orange cats in Budapest to know that this was a questionable area for feline fraternization; some cats hated it, and others allowed it only on Tuesdays. It was not Tuesday in Budapest that day, but the orange cat had thus far been so amicable that Dust didn't think twice about taking the liberty. But his Hungarian was poor, and the animal spun against his hand, leaping and striking with glassine grace. Dust cursed, and Fish, thinking the remark was offered as consolation for the loss of his sixth pawn *en passant*, nodded in glum commiseration.

Inopinée whirled, catlike but not at all orange, and slapped Beaubridge. She rose up and out of her car as she did so, and this ejection carried her to within a few inches of his reddening

face. The sound of the slap broke flatly against the stormy air and echoed from the crumbling brick façade of the English building.

Inopinée opened her mouth. At the same moment, Beaubridge took her by the shoulders.

Inopinée began to speak, though speaking wasn't exactly what Inopinée was doing; later, Dust would think of the words *clamor*, *howl*, *shriek*. But at the time, his head was too full of Modern Jesus and orange Hungarian cats.

Dust saw Beaubridge's thin fingers sink into Inopinée's bare shoulders. Her skin was the tan of someone who had been born that way despite bottled-red hair and Irish eyes – not quite the faded orange of a cat in Budapest, but close enough for narrative reference – and as he watched unwanted hands close against it, Dust felt time let go. He knew later that he must have crossed the last two lanes of the lot, and that the crossing must have involved both time and conscious effort.

Baubridge was before him. Dust threw him backwards with both hands.

Baubridge struck the inside of Inopinée's open driver's door, which struck the white flank of the Mercedes parked in the next slot and then rebounded with a tired *sproing* of old rubber-sheathed hinges. It brought Beaubridge with it, and as Beaubridge's fist came forward Dust wondered what James Bond would do in such a situation. He decided later that James Bond would not stand there as the skinny writer in the highwater jeans landed a straight left that mashed his glasses into his brow and tore open the skin there in a crush of prescription glass and bent steel. He also decided later that James Bond would almost certainly not have reeled away at such a blow, and definitely would have avoided at all costs bouncing his head against the faded rear cowl of a 1999 Celica as he went down onto the concrete, leaving a jagged apostrophe of blood beside the fuel door.

In another world, at another altitude, Inopinée dug the nails of her left hand into the ball of Beaubridge's shoulder, probably intent on spinning him around and using those nails against the soft places of his face. Dust heard someone moaning, and wondered at the distance of the sound. He could not decide if the world had actually begun to recede or if he only expected it to

because that sort of sensory disconnection was common in movies, as when Tom Hanks takes a near miss on Omaha Beach and has to get screamed at for forty seconds while he looks dreamily about in a caul of ringing silence.

Dust heard someone moaning. He had no doubt at all that it was him.

Dust tried breaking his plan into single actions, quick, economic motions: one thing at a time. He thought it might help him cope with the burst of broken pain in the front of his skull.

Dust took a deep breath.

Dust brought one leg up underneath himself.

Dust put his hands out, felt someone's palms scrape against someone else's asphalt, and saw the aluminum wheel of the Celica, its proud gleam dimmed by years of brake dust, looming huge and monocular before him, a cyclical Jungian god.

The single actions weren't helping.

Inopinée's door clapped shut. Dust turned his head and saw her dancing with Beaubridge in a mad waltz, their hands up and clenched against one another's clothing. Their embrace had jarred the driver's mirror so that it peered down at the heat-washed blacktop; in it, Dust saw a red-masked man with shaggy hair overhanging his lacerated forehead. One of the man's eyes was painted shut with blood and blades of glass; the skin around the socket was inflated and bruised.

Baubridge slapped Inopinée across the jaw.

The world went still. The red fiend in the driver's mirror twitched its head towards Dust and opened its ruined eye. It was uniformly silver, reflective as glass. In it, Dust saw his own image against a backdrop of smoky, tornadic sky.

The world returned with a roar. Wind sheeted the lanes of the lot and blew the hair from Dust's brow. The cars tilted crazily as his concussed brain struggled to process the fact of his rising.

Baubridge saw him coming and put out a pushing hand.

Dust broke it.

#

The white Mercedes belonged to the Dean of Philosophy, who badgered the officer taking Inopinée’s statement until the officer suggested the dean might be calmer and more comfortable waiting in the back of his cruiser with his hands kept out of trouble. Though unfazed by this proposal, the dean appeared to understand that conversation with the officer promised little by way of restoring the Lunar Pearl paint job of his 1980 450SLC. Did the officer know that this was a color Mercedes no longer offered, one which the dean would likely have to pay out of pocket to have matched at a body shop?

The dean moved on without hesitation to the next available authority figure. This happened to be the emergency medical technician tending to the crust of prescription shrapnel embedded in Dust’s right eyebrow and orbital socket. The tech, poised over Dust’s face with a syringe of lidocaine, regarded the dean in a manner not dissimilar to that of a man considering using a syringe of lidocaine to stab an academic dean into drugged silence. Dust tried watching both the tech and the tip of the needle, which was rather close to his eye; the effort exhausted him, and he slumped against the wall of the ambulance, content to let the tech and the dean stab it out.

“Excuse me? Excuse me?” The dean’s tie was cornflower blue and printed over and over with the words *bibo ergo sum*; Dust thought the tie entirely too clever for a man who bore such resemblance to a giant, overweight Pomeranian in a crumpled pink shirt. Dust blinked, trying to see if he was misreading the slogan, but it remained stubbornly clever. “I am afraid,” the dean said, “that I must insist on collecting the insurance information from the owner of the, ah, the—” He flapped a fat hand at Inopinée’s Toyota, which sat like a patient beast in the early dusk. “The car, over there. You see, the door of that – that *thing* – it has just demolished the paint job on my Mercedes. That’s Lunar Pearl, you know – they don’t make it at the factory in Stuttgart anymore.”

“Sir, please step back.” The tech waved his syringe at the Latin tie.

“They don’t make Mercedes in Stuttgart,” Dust said. He felt the vibration of each word in the slivers of glass around his eye. “There’s a factory in Alabama. Like seventy percent of American-bought Benzes come from there.”

“What?” The dean threw an arm up to shield himself from the needle of lidocaine. “They don’t make Lunar Pearl in. . . in *Alabama!* It is a German car, a piece of German engineering, and it has been mauled by the black paint of that . . . that *jalopy!*”

“Alabama,” Dust said. “Your C-class is a sister-fucker.”

“Sir,” the tech said, “please sit back and relax.” Then to the dean, he said, “sir, please step back.”

“He impugned my vehicle! Officer!” The dean looked around at the cop, who looked displeased at the renewed attention. “This man has resorted to foul language, when all I am trying to do is obtain recompense for the demolition of my Mercedes!”

“Sir,” the tech said, “my partner is just inside the building, there.” He pointed the syringe at the English Department, which loomed under the lowering clouds like the castle of an inhospitable and poorly-funded baron. “I’m sure he’d be happy to hear your grievance and take care of your complaint.”

“At last – some civility!” Round and rumped, the dean spun on his heel and set off across the parking lot.

Dust let his head fall against the cool metal of the ambulance door. “You don’t have a partner, do you?”

The tech spread the fingertips of his free hand gingerly across the outside of Dust’s injured face and slipped the long needle into the swollen skin. “Nope,” he said, and pushed the plunger.

#

“What the fuck, Dave?”

Dust toed the asphalt and tried to find something interesting to look at in any direction other than Inopinée. Later, he would look back and realize that that had been precisely his problem, all along: in a life filled with funerals and French literary reference, she was the only direction of any real interest.

“No,” she said. “No.” She laughed, a sound as mirthful as the row of iron prongs atop a cemetery fence. “No. He’s not a threat to anyone anymore. They couldn’t even handcuff him because his wrist was so swollen from his broken hand the cuffs wouldn’t fit.” She listened. Dust heard the tinny noise of a man’s raised voice. “No. By the time you get here, everyone will be gone.” She sighed. “He’s in a police car. What are you going to do – assault a police officer just to kick his ass? I’m fine. Everyone’s fine.” She caught Dust’s eye and rolled her own. “Get out of the truck. Stay there. Have a beer. I’ll be home as soon as traffic dies down.”

There was more, but Dust turned away from it. He watched the shifting sky and thought about Lunar Pearl paint jobs. The clouds swirled in the pre-funnel movement he associated with the grainy footage from stormchasing news vans; the clouds pumped in and out like the glossy gray membrane of a huge heavenward heart. Dust was pretty sure that the swirling was real and that the pumping was the Oxy.

Inopinée’s husband’s name was not Dave. Dust changed it, after, to protect Dave. Or to protect himself; he wasn’t sure. He was the kind of writer who had the pretentious literary habit of changing names and of giving characters only one name.

Two years before, Dust’s youngest sister had broken her arm in two places while horseback riding at a dude ranch outside Omaha. She didn’t give up riding, but she did give up the Oxycodone the physical therapy docs had prescribed her; she went to Dust in tears, unable to stomach the pain of her knitting bones but even less able to handle the hallucinations she claimed the drug gave her. She threw the orange bottle at the wall of his kitchen, and it went off like a grenade, spitting bullet-sized pills hell to breakfast. Dust drove her to the hospital, where the angels of modern medicine prescribed her something else, and then took her home and went back

to his place. Not wanting his cat to die in a euphoric seizure, he carefully scoured the floor and countertops for every last pill and replaced them in their bottle. For good measure, he had taken the bottle out to his car and tossed it in his glove box.

Now, reeling from the fourteen stitches in his face and totally unaffected by the Motrin the tech had given him, Dust was glad he had done so. He let the Oxy roll over him in big white waves and watched the pulsing sky. He reconsidered his hasty judgment about his youngest sister's dramatic declaration of hallucinatory side effects.

"Fucking asshole. Fucking men." Inopinée jabbed the power button on her phone as though she hoped the little machine could feel pain and threw it into her purse. "He wanted to drive up here and beat Beaubridge half to death." She rummaged and came up with a pack of Marlboro Ultra Lights and a plastic orange lighter. "He's protective like that. Not one of his more endearing traits. I told him someone else had already done the job." She stepped close to Dust, leaning into his shoulder to cut the wind as she lit up. The touch of her skin, made telegraphic by the Oxy or by the candescent air or by the simple realness of her, mixed in his brain with the sweet smell of the tobacco between her fingers. She looked up at him. "I may have also told him that you're gay. Takes the heat off my spending time with a strange man. My husband doesn't appreciate co-ed friendships."

"None taken," he said.

She peered at him, and then pursed her lips aside to blow smoke downwind. "I didn't say, 'no offense,'" she said.

"You're welcome."

She raised an eyebrow. "I didn't say thanks."

Dust noticed that they were looking sidelong at one another; she had barely moved away from him since sidling into his shelter to light her cigarette.

"Are we going to stand here waiting for the philosophy dean to figure out that there's nobody in the English building," he said, "or are you going to let me buy you a drink?"

Inopinée raised her other eyebrow. Beneath the storm-dark sky, her eyes were the blue of granite cliffs untroubled by man. In them, he saw the half-dozen things a married woman might reasonably say to such a proposal.

She said none of them.

#

She took him to Nancy's, a second-story hole in the wall with the big brown spider on its rusting sign. Dust eyed the sign mistrustfully as they passed beneath it.

“What?” Inopinée said, holding the door.

“Gimme that.” He took the door from her and ushered her inside, where the light sundered and fled to hide in the curves of a hundred glass bottles. “I don't trust spiders,” he said. “Especially ones bigger than my head.”

“I love spiders,” she said. “Spiders are honest.”

They claimed a tiny table near the back, next to a jukebox that looked like it had passed its prime around the time a Catholic led the free world. Inopinée dropped her purse into her chair and announced that she had to pee.

“I'll get us drinks,” Dust said. “You don't look like a beer person.”

“I'm not a beer person.”

“What are you?”

“I don't know,” she said, leaning on her chair and cocking her head at him. “What am I?”

“Trouble,” Dust said. He arched his good eyebrow at her. “But so am I.”

That isn't what Dust said.

“Wine,” Dust said. “Red, like your excellent hair.”

She pursed her lips, evaluating him. Now her hip was cocked as well as her head. Dust had no idea how such a tiny woman – he could probably pick her up on one shoulder, and wondered what it would feel like to try – could become such a curve of insouciant elegance.

“Close enough,” she said, and turned to the restrooms.

Dust watched her walk away with the fascination reserved solely for men watching women whose secrets they do not know. He bellied up to the bar, which was empty save for a pair of sullen kids nursing draft beers the color of lemonade. The bartender, a broad man whom Dust was eager to describe, took one look at him and threw a thumb over one shoulder. Dust followed his direction and saw a hand-lettered wooden sign nailed above the long mirror. It read, “No Describing the Bartender.”

“A glass of the house red,” Dust said, “and a hangman’s blood.”

The bartender raised his brow.

“It’s—”

“I’ve read my Hughes,”¹ the man said. “I’m wondering if you know what you’re getting into.”

“With the drink, or with her?” Dust cocked a thumb over his shoulder.

“The drink.” The bartender pulled down a wineglass and produced a pint glass from under the bar. “I *know* you don’t know what you’re getting into with her.”

When Inopinée returned, Dust was eyeing his drink with the same expression he had given the three-foot spider over the door. She hung her purse from the back of the chair, took her seat, and watched him.

“What is that?”

“Hangman’s blood,” he said. “Cure for the common consciousness.”

She sniffed her wine.² “Is your consciousness common?”

“No,” he said. “It hurts like hell.” He poked the pint glass to see if it would bite, and then picked it up and took a tentative sip.

¹ “Hughes is a little pretentious for a literary reference, don’t you think?”

He looked at her. “Are you trying to say I’m a little too pretentious with my literary references?”

“No.” She ran a finger down to the soft cup of skin on the inside of his elbow. “It’s just incredible, is all – how many bartenders have read their Hughes?”

² “What a man you are,” she said. “Would it have killed you to write, ‘she swirled the wine gently by rotating the glass on the table, then took in the bouquet?’ Also, while it’s not as bad as the Hughes, the Pink Floyd reference is a little much, don’t you think?”

Inopinée sipped her wine, seemed to consider, shrugged. “Dust,” she said.

“Hmm?”

“What are we doing here?”

#

The bar was backed by a long aging mirror, the bottom half of which was obscured by the triple rank of liquor bottles standing on their tiered shelves before it and the top edge of which was fringed with a meandering string of blue Christmas lights. Despite these encroachments and the spotted skin of the patinated glass, the man with the broken eye and the woman with the red hair were clearly visible in its depths. They sat at the table for nearly two hours; they drank, and they talked, but never was their talk as direct or as cutting as Dust would have liked it to be. He had the sense of being tested, which was normal enough, he being a man sitting in a bar with a woman he could not truly claim to know; but he sensed also that this test was not one he was likely to pass easily, and this was something new to his reckoning. Dust always tested well, whether at a desk, or at the wheel, or at the mercy of the fairer sex. He was lucky, and perhaps just lazy enough to recognize and appreciate his luck. A harder-working man might have taken fortune as his due, but Dust knew with his grift-born heart that he deserved very little of the things he got.³

And now she was his, this woman who was not and could never be his. His want for her was water he could not cross, whose opposite shore he could not even see. In his innocence, he actually thought that this might be something so simple as an affair. The bunker rooms beneath his mind, coming to life again with their long-disused lights and their dust-bladed fans, could have told him otherwise. The mirror might have told him that this was a thing that would defy his ability to define despair, a thing that would be to his adolescent pain over Bianca as a sunrise to a

³ “You mean ‘few.’”

“No I don’t.”

“You mean ‘No, I don’t.’ With a comma.”

“No I don’t.”

tin lamp, but Dust had never completely trusted the mirror, and so he went unwarned into the warren of Inopinée's heart.

They spoke of trivial things, beginning with the events of the afternoon. Dust learned, to no great surprise, that Beaubridge was not the first man to accost Inopinée in such a fashion, though he had been one of the most frightening; men, she told him, almost always backed down when she called them on their shenanigans.

They wound their way slowly down the spiral of the evening, a journey oiled by drink and lit by the fretful torch of their mutual desire. That it *was* mutual, Dust would not realize for weeks, nor believe for months; that night in Nancy's, all he knew was that she was a firebrand, a mind not only capable of dismantling the most challenging ideas their small, serious faculty of professors could throw at them but more than willing to do so. He could not conceive that such a mind might be interested in his, which was strictly second-string in the literary-genius department. Romantic interest was just as implausible, but the blended whispers of the Oxy and the hangman made probability a dream, and so he pressed ahead.

"He doesn't believe," Inopinée said. The conversation had turned to their fellow NebTech faculty. "None of them do. He doesn't give a shit about what I do. He pretends—" She cut the air with a raft of cigarette smoke. "They all pretend, but even the ones who are supposed to care – they don't really believe. They don't feel."

"Maybe they did, once?"

"Right. They're supposed to be living and breathing this shit, but half of them can't even spell 'Bartholomae.' And having passion about literature? Forget it." She took a drink of wine. After two glasses, she had switched to white. "It took me two semesters to realize I was the smartest person in the department except for maybe one or two of the tenured professors."

"And modest, too."

"I'm serious! Do you know how depressing that can be? You're supposed to be learning at the knee of these older, wizened scholars, but most of them are just full of shit."

#

The problem, Dust decided, was not that Inopinée was married.

The cashier looked for a moment at the B-cup bra on the conveyor before zapping it with her little grey laser gun.

“Water balloons,” Dust said.

The problem, he thought, was that Inopinée was married to someone else.

“I like your uniform,” the girl said.

Dust, who got this a lot, never knew what to say to it. He thought back.

“I get that a lot.”

“I bet you do,” she said. Dust wasn’t sure if she had a bedroom voice because she wanted to fuck him, or because the combination of the bra on the counter and the thought of Inopinée made him think of sex, or because he had been horny pretty much straight through since his twelfth birthday.

In the van, which smelled like the toasted tuna sandwiches Sergeant Soya’s wife packed him for road trips, Dust handed over the energy drinks and the Nutter Butters. Greenfield packed it all into the iced bed of the cooler.

“Jesus,” Dust said. “It smells like tuna in here.”

“I know, right?” Greenfield said.

“Shut up, Greenfield,” Soya said. He put his sandwich on the dash and dropped the van into Drive. “You get the bra?”

“Mhm.”

Soya laughed. Dust wondered how a man who reeked of tuna could remain so charming. “Counter girl look at you funny?”

“I told her it was for you.” Dust tapped the plastic tag appended to the bra. “Extra supportive.”

“Bitch, please. This body is a temple.”

“Tuna temple,” Greenfield said.

Dust threw the bra at him.

“Shut up, Greenfield,” Soya said, and pulled out onto the feeder.

#

Dust ran the bolt, snapped the bolt forward, and shouldered the rifle.

“Fire!”

The volley cut the air, a ragged knife in seven hands. Thin smoke puffed up from along the firing line. Several of the civilians flinched; somewhere in the crowd, a baby began to cry. The blank casing from Dust’s rifle clinked against one of the decorations on his chest and skittered to the lawn, where it shined like a Chinese toy.

“Present arms!”

Taps played. The baby kept crying. Dust fought the urge to sneeze.

The captain called the riflemen to port arms and marched them away. The line turned right, each man a piece of clean clockwork, his blue jacket made black by the gleam of button brass and chrome.

As they filed off toward the van, shoes unsure against the cemetery turves, Dust saw Sergeant Mundaka going down on one knee. The red piping along the seam of his trousers creased like the corner of a bloody smile. The sergeant was an incredibly black black man, and Dust knew he hated the term “African American,” not because he disliked political correctness but because, as an actual African American, Mundaka felt mundane black people had no right to the title. Mundaka’s grandfather had been killed for protesting Idi Amin’s assumption of power in 1971, and his parents had fled to America during the Second Congo War. Mundaka had been six at the time, and he had once shown Dust the long, ruler-straight scar along his ribs from where a Banyamulenge deserter’s machete had opened him from hip to armpit. The scar had grown with Mundaka, as some scars do.

The starched flag the sergeant offered was its own kind of mouth, a folded triangle that settled its hidden weight into the lap of the crying woman in the front row and spoke no comfort.

At the van, the riflemen piled their weapons in as quietly as they could. They piled themselves in after them.

“Jesus,” the captain said. “It smells like tuna in here.”

“Sorry, sir,” Soya said. “Want a sandwich?”

The captain declined. In the bucket seat across the aisle, Dust kicked the bra aside and planted his shoe over it. He doubted very much that the captain would approve of any plans involving a brassiereapult, two dozen party balloons filled with yellow paint, and the Navy barracks one door down from the company motor pool.

Soya wove the van down the narrow graveyard lanes. Dust watched the funeral congregation out the window. The crowd had closed around the family like the edges of a wound.

Dust thought about families. He thought about Inopinée’s family, which he was vigorously and cheerfully dismantling. He thought about his sister, whom he had not called in months.

“It’s not your fault,” Soya said. Dust glanced up and saw the sergeant looking at him in the rear-view mirror. Soya turned to look out the window. A woman in a black dress had collapsed against the man beside her. Her face ran with grief. “Some of these gigs are rough, is all.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Dust said.

So they didn’t.

#

“It’s just trees.”

“Just take the damn picture.”

“Alright.”

Greenfield snapped the photo and handed Dust his phone. They climbed into the van and backed out, tires creaking on the gravel.

“My sister loves this shit,” Dust said. “Treelines, stacks of old tires, country life. She’s a photographer.”

“So you take pictures for her with your phone?”

“Shut up, Greenfield.”

They passed a Love’s and the fattest trucker Dust had ever seen waved madly and blatted his air horn at them. Dust waved back. A group of kids on the next corner turned at the sound of the horn. Dust saw one of them, a girl with coltish legs, point and whisper to the girl beside her.

“Hey, corporal,” Greenfield said, “you think they want a ride?”

“I think they’re thirteen,” Dust said. He waved at the kids and both girls giggled.

That’s a pretty expository way to work your rank into the narrative, isn’t it? the rearview mirror said. Dust ignored it and turned on the radio.

#

“I’m sorry to intrude on your schedule like this,” said the chair, “but I’m afraid we can’t put off this discussion any longer.”

“I understand,” Dust said, “but I’ve been very busy. I feel sort of . . . I don’t know. Lost, I guess. This is all so out of hand. I’m lost in a forest that I didn’t even know was there.”

“None of the forests are there,” the chair said dismissively. “That’s what they don’t want you to know.”

“The forests that aren’t there are A – alive, and B – don’t want me to know that they’re not there?”

“Precisely.”

“That seems a little Modernist, don’t you think, sir?”

“Aren’t you a little Modernist? Isn’t Inopinée?”

Inopinée, who at five-one and a buck ten was literally a little modernist, would likely have had something to say to this. Dust decided not to tell her about it. *How do you know about Inopinée and me*, he wanted to ask. Instead, he said, “Shouldn’t we be talking about the incident with Jackson Beaubridge in the parking lot? That’s why you asked me here, isn’t it?”

“Oh,” the chair said, “right. Let’s try this again.”

“I don’t think that’s nece—,” Dust said, but it was too late.

#

“I’m sorry to intrude on your schedule like this,” said the chair, “but I’m afraid we can’t put off this discussion any longer.”

“I understand,” Dust said, “but I’m very busy at the moment. I’m lost in a forest, or something.”

The chair thought about this for a moment. He leaned back in his deep leather chair and steepled his fingers in front of his chin. “Hmm,” he said at length. “I know exactly what you mean. We all are, aren’t we?”

“I’m sorry?”

“We all are ‘lost in a forest,’ aren’t we? I like the metaphor. It evokes the muddled soul of the academy in the twenty-first century.”

Dust, who hated it when metaphor evoked the muddled soul of the academy in the twenty-first century, said nothing.

The chair leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk. The suede patches on the outside of his coat sank into the thick blotter. “We are here,” he said, “to discuss the incident with Jackson Beaubridge in the parking lot.”

“I thought the campus police already finished their report,” Dust said.

“They have,” the chair said, “but there still remains the matter of professional conduct. The department is concerned about the incident on moral and professional grounds, even though all question of legal culpability has been settled.”

“May I ask who is concerned?”

The chair looked at him over his glasses with an expression that suggested the question was not only inappropriate but thoroughly out of context. Dust, an old hand at looking at people over his glasses, appreciated the finesse of the move even as he bridled under its bureaucratic condescension.

“As you know,” the chair said, “upon hiring, all faculty members consent to comport themselves in a manner befitting our profession and the spirit of the university.”

“Stopping the sexual assault of a colleague doesn’t befit our profession or jive with the spirit of the university?”

The chair pursed his lips. “The intent of the parties involved is not in question,” he said, “but rather are we concerned with the methods used to intervene in the, ah—”

“Rape,” Dust said. “The word you’re looking for is ‘rape.’”

The chair cringed as though the word itself, rather than the act it represented – the act Dust had prevented – was distasteful. He shifted in his chair as though by that movement changing the tack of his interrogation.⁴ “Mr. Beaubridge insists not only that his intentions toward Inopinée were honorable – something his lawyer quite correctly reminded me we cannot disprove – but that your, ah, physical interaction with him was unnecessarily violent.”

“His lawyer?” Dust said. “I thought only people in network dramas got lawyers over things like this. And – wait.” He leaned forward in his chair, unaware that he had raised his voice or that its timbre jumped around the room, careering from zebrawood paneling and ramparts of oiled leather spines. “Honorable? You’re saying the testimony of the other two people present during his *sexual assault* isn’t enough to disprove the monumentally-asinine idea that his intentions were honorable?”

Dust rose. His anger rose with him, magmatic and sudden. It beat in time to his heart; it fumed from him in cinders. The office faced the hall of the department lobby, and that wall was

⁴ “If you say ‘the chair blah blah in his chair’ one more time, I’m going to fucking scream.”

paneled with floor-to-ceiling glass. In the ghost image reflected there, the left-handed version of Dust opened its mouth, its rising teeth as slow and potent as the tines of a steel portcullis. The hole of its throat filled the room with red light.

“I do say,” said the chair, “please sit down.”

There was neither reprimand nor fear in the man’s voice, but Dust stood his ground. He thought about the smell of smoldering book leather.

The chair sighed and fished in the pocket of his grey vest. He came out with a small but crowded ring of keys, selected one without looking, and leaned over to insert the chosen key into one of the lower drawers of his desk. He reached into the drawer and glanced up at Dust.

“While you’re up there, pull that cord.”

Dust blinked. The chair nodded at something over Dust’s shoulder. Dust turned, followed his gaze, and saw the double cord hanging down from the wooden blinds. The twin strands had been woven to look like little hempen ropes, and each ended in a slick tassel of stained wood.

Dust grabbed a tassel and pulled. The heavy blinds came down in a clacking whisper. Darkness dropped over the room in a cool sheet.

The chair came up from the drawer with a heavy decanter. Even in the new shadows of the room, it shone with the carved twinkle of good crystal. The chair set it down on the blotter and followed it with two plain ceramic mugs, pieces Dust recognized from the communal dish pool kept in the cabinet over the breakroom sink.

The chair poured out a dollop into each mug. “If you tell anyone that I wasted Macallan on ceramic mugs, your future in this department will be briefer than a fake Hemingway short story.” He pushed one mug across the blotter at Dust. Dust saw that the cup bore the legend “i don’t always suttler, but when i do, the Cs are silent” in faded green letters on its enameled side.

Dust waited for the chair to drink, then followed suit. The whisky fell into him, gentle as the sun on streambed stone.

The chair swallowed and then held his mug at eye level, as though trying to see through the cracked ceramic to the liquor beneath. “This bottle was aged twenty-five years when it first came to me, and it has only improved since then.” He looked at Dust. “I could say the same about you.”

Dust opened his mouth to object – he was rounding the corner on thirty, and had only been an instructor for the department for six semesters – but then closed it again. The chair was right, of course; Dust had come to NebTech as an undergrad, a junior. The chair had taught the British Lit seminar that had made up one-third of Dust’s first semester. That had been the fall of Dust’s twenty-fifth year.

Dust recalled that the chair, who when Dust first came to NebTech had simply been Professor N.D. Yance, had not once opened the textbook when lecturing over Blake and Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats. He had quoted from poems – recited them entire, in some cases – without so much as consulting a notecard. Dust had been struck by that level of prowess. It was one of the first ingredients in the cauldron of wonder and fear that had eventually spilled over into his mind the unquenchable desire to become a teacher. Where had that wonder gone? He was – what – yelling at this man, at this paragon of letters?

Dust said, “I’m sor—”

The chair tilted his head down and aside, closing his eyes lightly, cutting off apology. “Your remorse is not welcome here. Only your hard work.”

Dust caught half a dozen responses as they flew up from the thornwork of his brain and wrestled them each to earth.

“Between you, me, and the Macallan,” said the chair, “you did the right thing. The right thing matters. These—” The chair waved his free hand around at the bookshelves lining three walls. Dust followed his gesture and caught pieces of countless names: he saw GEORGE GORDON, MEWLANA, and, hiding beneath an overhang, -OSTER WALL-. “These know that

the right thing matters. But in a university department, right does not matter. Politics matter. Funding matters.” He frowned at Dust. “Lawsuits matter.”

Dust bristled. “Is Beaubridge—”

“Mr. Beaubridge has agreed to a settlement arrangement to which the department is quite amenable.”

Dust waited.

“He has requested, by way of reparation, an eight-week independent study. The study is to focus on the revision of his novel-length creative work, with an aim at publication.”

“His . . . ? The Modern Jesus thing?”

The chair nodded.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Dust said. “I mean, it was no gem, but it was workable. Even I gave him some advice about it, if I recall.”

The chair nodded.

“Still,” Dust said, “working with that nut would be a trial. Which faculty member is he going to do the independent study with?”

#

“But if he speaks American English, why are the flyers written in Aramaic?”

“He only speaks English because he picks it up from the minds of his mortal followers.” Beaubridge tossed his head with an impatient flurry of surfer hair. “He still thinks in Aramaic, and so he writes in Aramaic.”

Dust put both hands against his forehead. “He picks it up? The English?”

“Right.” Beaubridge raised his left hand in its heavy white cast and swirled it beside his temple. “With his Psychic Jesus Powers.”

“Psychic Jesus Powers.”

“Psychic Jesus Powers.”

“If he has Psychic Jesus Powers, why does he need to put up flyers to find Mascara Carpathian?”

Beaubridge sighed, slapped his hands on the table, and rose. The effect was spoiled by his only having one good hand to slap against tables. He moved to the narrow library window and stood in its bar of summer warmth. It occurred to Dust that quite a lot of people had been looking out quite a lot of windows lately.

Mascara Carpathian was a three-legged Cocker Spaniel.

“Look, why don’t we call it a day? Let this language thing percolate for the afternoon, and we can meet up tomorrow morning.”

Beaubridge turned to him. In the translucence of the afternoon light, he was beautiful, his side framed by the golden motes swinging in his wake. “You’re giving up,” he said.

Dust exhaled slowly. “I’m not giving up. I just think a quick hiatus would be the best thing right now, is all. Sleep on it.”

“It’s the attic apartment, isn’t it? You think He should have a townhouse?”

This happened at least twice a week. It was only the second week of their eight-week study.

This had happened at least four times.

Dust sighed again. He began to drift out, but Beaubridge stepped quickly back to the table and caught him by the arm. “You never finish anything,” he said.

Dust looked at him. “What?”

“You never finish anything.” Beaubridge waved his clubbed hand. “The only way people get anywhere around here is by ellipsis.”

“That’s life. Life is between the lines. Life is skipping ahead to the interesting parts.”

“Not my life,” Beaubridge said. “My life is all here. It’s moment by moment. I didn’t get to skip out on going to court over this.” He brandished his cast, which Dust saw bore only one sad scrawl of a signature. “I didn’t get to skip the humiliation of all five of my grad school

applications getting rejected. Where's my break? Where's my ellipsis?" He looked at Dust, leaning over the table, and though the self-pity and the trembling sadness on his face were bad, the fury on it was much worse. The sadness Dust could disdain and discard; the fury he empathized with on a level too deep to rationalize against.

What would you have done? someone said. Dust looked around and saw the phantoms of himself and Beaubridge in the light-bleared window. Beaubridge's reflection was behaving well enough, but Dust's had turned in its chair and was watching him with mirror-blank eyes. *What would you have done, had Inopinée ignored you, passed you by, rebuffed your advances? Would you have gone quietly – or would you have pursued her? To what lengths would such pursuit go? What price would you pay?*

Dust shook his head. The image in the glass remained still as a bone in amber. "Not this price," he said. "I wouldn't have followed her into a parking lot." As he said it, he knew it was worthless.

"What?" Beaubridge reached for Dust again, but Dust pushed back in his chair and rose. "What did you say? Hey – where are you going?"

"I can't handle it," Dust said. "Not anymore. Not today. We can be back tomorrow at nine." He headed for the side door set between plain aluminum racks of literary journals. The door had a red pushbar covered with warning labels, but Dust doubted any alarm would sound. He didn't care if it did.

Dust hit the door and went out into a flood of daylight. No alarm sounded. At his back, slipping from his shoulder like an unwanted bag, he felt the last trace of Beaubridge's resentful gaze.

#

Dust preferred not to contemplate the likely complications of his and Inopinée's assignatory habits.

Dust discovered early in his writing career that saying a character preferred not to contemplate something was an acceptable excuse for the writer's failure to properly address the thing not under contemplation.

There were eighty-four elevators in Bellevue, and by the sixth month of their affair, Dust and Inopinée had discovered them all.

The University of Nebraska at Lincoln Center for Medical Studies was a sprawling, multifaceted edifice constructed of chrome and clean stone. It had been paid for by several generations' worth of alumni donations and had come into being as the result of an under-the-table arrangement between U of N and NebTech the intricacies and political nuance of which Dust preferred not to contemplate. The gist of the arrangement was that UNL got to build their chop shop on NebTech land and poach potential NebTech enrollees into its medical program, while NebTech, never the most well-funded of scholastic institutions, would benefit both from a hefty grant given by its richer and better-known cousin and from the free student clinic UNL agreed to operate out of the first floor of the facility.

The CMS boasted four floors that spanned the entire length of its crescent-shaped main building and an additional four that rose in a tapering tower from the center arc of the crescent. The fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth floors housed facilities for various medical specialties; the fifth was the heart center which, despite Nebraska's 28.4% obesity rate, Dust and Inopinée frequently found empty enough for their needs.

Despite her academic sensibilities, Inopinée was a Nebraskan by birth. Dust learned early in his tenure in that state that its natives had one of two attitudes about altitude and consequently about mountains, Ferris wheels, penthouses, elevators, and skydiving. The first attitude was ungovernable phobia; the second, limitless fascination. Inopinée had the latter, and this penchant for heights was especially interesting for Dust because she combined it so readily with her voracious sexual appetite (which Dust often thought about by way of diverting attention away

from his own, which was voraciously and therefore might make him seem lecherous if mentioned in any unofficial parentheses).

The elevator niche in the fifth floor of the UNLCMS gave onto a wedge-shaped sitting area that followed the contours of the building along its outer wall. That wall was almost entirely glass, and the wedge stood apart from the actual reception nurses' desk, which faced the sitting area obliquely at the end of a thirty-yard hall. Of an evening, Dust and Inopinée found themselves riding the elevator to the fifth floor, sneaking across the hallway from the bored nurses, and watching the sun set across Bellevue. Inopinée often leaned against Dust on these occasions, closing her eyes in the greenhouse warmth of the late afternoon, fitting the top of her head into the hollow below Dust's jutting chin. The jut was the result of some vague mix of patriotism, imperialism, and general manness that came over Dust any time he stood on a promontory looking west out over the lands of sunset. There was something Lewis-and-Clarksean, something predestined, about enjoying such vistas; it made Dust itch to plant a flag or spread a map over the nearest table.

On occasion, Inopinée's desire to stand in the sun extended to fits of amorous interest. Here, too, Dust felt the urge to plant a flag or spread something over the nearest table. Inopinée was the map; the map was the territory; his territory was Inopinée. He ran through her like thread through a needle whose stitch will hold long after the garment itself has given way. He ran through her like lead down a blind barrel. There were times when she sat in his lap as he sat in one of the cushy waiting-room chairs that faced the long windows, times when she watched the sunset and he watched the lines of her back as she moved her hips in barely-visible circles against the heat of his crotch. There were times when she let him take her by the hair as they stood facing the light and tip her mouth to his, her side pressed against him, their columnar bodies lines of hard fire drawn in sharp shadow by the westering sun. But mostly, they simply watched the day die, feeling some primal vestige of their race: the sacred silence of high places built to catch the sky.

Mostly, Inopinée saved herself for Washington and the promise of what she and Dust could do there, unseen by the spousal networks of their NebTech world.

Though the fifth floor was their particular haven – they found out quickly that nobody pays any real attention to people entering or exiting hospitals, which are open twenty-four hours a day and where civilians in all manner of dress and undress are no irregular sight – they made use of almost every floor. The elevator car, for the enterprising adulterer, is essentially a free short-term hotel room and escape vehicle all built in to one, and it was not long into their tryst that Dust came to have an unbreakable association between Inopinée and elevators. He began to get aroused at the mere sight of one. His masturbatory fantasies became suffused with elevators; in his head, any sex act that could fit into an elevator did. Womblike and yet with the vertiginous magic of a personal spacecraft, the cozy car met all his vacation needs, if only for fifteen seconds at a time. Every elevator was bound to Inopinée, who was her own kind of escape craft, her own kind of rescue. Dust got in, hit buttons, and went. He didn't even care if it took him up or down.

#

“When we talk about dystopia, it's important that we remember the Gaze.”

The class looked at him. The touch of their eyes made a bouquet of light pressure against his skin. He wondered who taught freshmen that exact blend of sullen attentiveness and deferential insolence. High school teachers? No, the high school teachers probably thought the same thing about middle school teachers.

“The midterm is going to include one or two questions about dystopia, and could include something about Moore, the development of utopia itself, and the etymology of the word.”

That got them. He saw ears pricking; one girl began to leaf through her binder, seeking the syllabus and its breakdown of grade percentages. He droned on, hearing the drone and hating it but knowing that he had left the will to actually do something about it back in the second or third week of the semester. Hell, back in the first or second year of his teaching career.

You've been teaching for three years, the mirror said inside his mind. *How grizzled and tired can you be?* Dust felt an urge to smash the mirror, to drive his fist into it, but he didn't know what the fragments might do to the hot meat of his brain. Nothing good.

"What if we want to write about the movie version of the book?"

Dust looked up. The girl speaking was a redhead, a sign of trouble in which Dust had placed no faith before meeting Inopinée.

"Is a film adaptation a valid text for study and interpretation?" he said. He kept his voice light, knowing they were clever as thieves when it came to detecting whether or not he was fishing for a particular answer. He saw honest thought in some of their expressions and knew he'd succeeded.

The redhead squinted. The freckles on her cheeks seemed reflections of the flecks in her hazel eyes. "Yes?" she said.

Across the room, two or three students were shaking their heads. They froze when they saw Dust looking at them, as though he might cackle with mad joy and drag them out, screaming, to be beheaded for giving the wrong answer.

"I see some yeses and I see some noes," Dust said. He pointed at one of the latter. "Why do we say no?"

"Uh," the boy said. "Cause, like, it's a secondary text? It's not the author's, uh, original words?"

"And the book, the original, is more worthy of scholarly attention than the movie version, right?"

"Right."

"Wrong." He pointed at the redhead, who blinked and bit her lip. "Why do we say yes?"

"A film adaptation forms an independent entry in the. . ." She flipped her notes. "In the dia. . . dialogic?"

"Dialectic."

“Right. In the dialectic surrounding a story, the film is its own text, with its own manifest content to be evaluated on the same level as the ‘original’ text of the book.” She put up her hands and crooked her fingers for the quotes around *original*.

“A little Freudian,” Dust said, “but good.” He caught himself wondering what the redhead’s bedroom looked like. “We cannot valorize the original text simply because it is a book; it’s logocentric to believe that books are automatically superior to movies. What do we know about the causes of logocentrism?” He had quizzed them on logocentrism and ethnocentrism the week before. Now they sat mute.

“We remember logocentrism?”

The simmering sullenness began to return, popping like bubbles onto their faces one by one.

Dust sighed.

#

Dust ran.

In the mornings, the infinite hour before dawn found fog crouched like a predator in the low places along the road, which went west in a series of dipping hills. Dust followed it, watching for cars, waiting for Washington. In his ears, Bob Dylan informed him that, for reasons unexplained, the undercover cop’s sister loved the Monkey Man. On his right, the cute Hobbiton curves of the golf course gave way before the sudden bulwark of the forest, taking the last of the apartment towers with them. Dust was alone with the road.

Overhead, the trees reached across the yellow lines. Their branches were heavy with dew. Their fletched fingers bobbed in the still air as though communicating something too grave for the short-lived minds of men.

“Petals on a wet black bough,” Dust said, and disappeared into the mist.

He surfaced halfway up the spine of the first hill, the one from whose oak-cropped crown could be seen the pillars of downtown, purple with distance. Dust drank the air, leaning into the

incline, wishing for the muscular insouciance of eighteen. He tapped his armband and Curtis Jackson cut off Roy Orbison at 167 bpm.

Dust killed the hill and looked at the world. It fell away in plunges and gasps, each highland an isle of deep green verge and cattle-dotted field swimming in the last of the mist. Ahead of him, the road dove and hove, straight when seen from above but curved with vicious rises at sneaker level.

Dust ran it. The fog closed on him, parting like cool cotton against the stubble on his cheek. The ghosts of trees loomed close on either side, held back only by the tired sag of rusted barbed-wire. At the nadir of the decline, 36th crossed the road at right angles, unharried by stop or yield.

Dust did both. He paused in the fog, waiting for a nineteen-year-old on her smartphone to send him to heaven with three thousand pounds of diesel Chevrolet.

A hundred feet in the air, the arched leaves of the high oaks in the dell beside the road chattered with wind, as though the trees laughed at the sweat clinging to Dust's scalp. No diesel roar seemed forthcoming. He crossed and ran on. He thought about European settlers spreading along the eastern coast of the New World with the calm, wondering arrogance of people who thought they were discovering something. He thought about them going west, the direction of Faerie, down the verdant gullet of a creature they could never truly conquer.

Dust went west. His footfalls were the small heartbeat of an animal on the first floor of the food chain; the mist ate them and pooled in the road, white as an undiscerning appetite.

Something cracked overhead in the branches behind him. He spun and looked, breathing hard. Curtis Jackson had been supplanted by Dr. Dre, who went on incongruously in Dust's ear, advising him on the merits of mixed drinks and the proper criteria for selecting a bitch. The doctor's opinion on the matter of bitches seemed to be—

Dust yanked the earbuds free and looked at the trees. Somewhere in the foliage just off the road, something came to earth with a skeletal rattle.

His first thought was to ignore it and keep on running. His second was that turning his back on something that went bump in the woods seemed very unDarwinian. The fog came off the pavement like desert road-shine and rose up to slip damp fingers into the collar of his shirt.

The longer Dust looked into the trees, the more he realized how thick they were, how endlessly dense their communal bulk must be, stretching back to. . . to where? He unrolled the map in his head and ran a finger north. Three miles to Highway Nine, and then twenty more to I-48, and then nothing but bog to the state line.

It's not just trees, Dust thought. *It's a forest. The forest: one thing, of one mind.* He stood, watching the white columns between the trees. They looked back with the blankness of margins on an unread page, their malice made sharp by the very lack thereof. The sweat on Dust's torso was cooling; somewhere in another world, the sun climbed the dawn but could not yet pierce the veil which wrapped the hills.

Dust bared his teeth at the wood, replaced the earbuds, and ran west.

#

The theatre company had been founded by Valiant MacGready, who had come west in 1939 in the wake of the Great Depression. On the day that Amelia Earhart was officially declared dead, MacGready stepped down from the running board of a rattling Ford stakebed so filled with chickens that it left a plume of dirty white feathers spilling into the dusty Nebraska sky for half a mile in its wake. Its passenger, covered in both dust and feathers but having managed to avoid the worst of the chicken shit, beat the lapels of his coat, thanked the driver, and died thirty-four years later of a heart attack after eating cheese Danish every morning for at least a decade. Somewhere between the thanking and the dying, he put together the Valiant & Boleris International Theatre Troupe. The troupe's founders justified their moniker by employing their stage manager, a mute Chinese national named Hong Fen who could work a trapdoor and close a curtain better than any man MacGready had ever seen.

The facilities built and occupied by Valiant & Boleris were renovated once in 1961 and again in 1988, when they became the annexed property of the Nebraska Institute of Vocational Technology. NIVT, in turn, was purchased nearly wholesale by the University of Nebraska with the intent of creating a Bellevue branch of the U of N system. But this never came to pass, and by the time Dust and Inopinée moved their tryst into the darkened warren⁵ of the theatre company's old playhouse, the place had been forgotten in favor of the newer, fire-code-compliant performing arts center across campus. Most of the land around the old theatre, though maintained by the campus caretaking staff, was lightly-traveled; the nearest functional NebTech building was Vallax Hall, the sleepy administrative building to the north across a trimmed stretch of oak-dotted lawn. Dust suspected that he and Nope could strip to their nethers and ride one another like horses across the greensward between the two buildings without anyone batting an eye. He said as much.

“What did you call me?”

“What? Nope? I can't call you Nope?”

“Nope,” she said.

“Wait,” he said. He slid his hands down her sides. The fabric of her dress was soft and thin. “Are you saying no, I can't call you Nope, or are you just repeating the word? Like, I say, ‘So I walked in, and the salon was full of cabbages,’ and you say, ‘Cabbages?’, and I say, ‘Cabbages!’”

She unfastened the top button of his shirt. “Nope.”

“Nope?”

“Nope.” She pushed him through the curtain. “Nope to Nope.”

It had taken them four meetings at Nancy's and two uncomfortable evenings on the balcony of his apartment to come to terms with their affair. Inopinée, Dust suspected, had

⁵ “That's ‘warren’ twice in fifteen pages,” she said.

“Will you just let me fucking write?” A moment passed. “I'm sorry,” he said. “I'll change it.”

“No, don't. I like the assonance.”

He smiled. “Your assonance isn't half bad, itself.” He lunged for her. She dodged, shrieking, but he caught her beside the desk and tugged her down onto it. The next three footnotes scattered to the floor.

rationalized it all long before; her husband, he knew, had been emotionally neglectful to the point of abuse for years, and even if Dust hadn't come along, separation would surely have been in the works by the end of the summer.

Dust's hands went south until they found the coastline of her dress, and then dived under it and came north again, heading for warmer waters.

She kissed him. She did it slowly, but with no teasing or hesitation. It was a serious kiss, an *Inopinée* kiss, commanding yet without aggression. As always, he froze as she delivered it, his hands halted in their ascent of her thighs, the universe squeezed into a ball and rolled into another room.

"You're thinking about poetry, aren't you?" she said.

"Maybe." He took her lower lip between his teeth, bit gently, tasted lip gloss on his tongue, released. "Maybe not."

"Don't lie to me. Is it Neruda? It's Neruda, isn't it?"

He let her momentum push him against the backstage wall. His hands, unlocked from her kiss, slipped over the front of her. They found the place where the smoothness of her thighs ended in a trimmed triangle of coarse hair.

"It wasn't Neruda." He lifted the waistband of her underwear. "It was Prufrock."

"You can't do that."

He began to move against her. "Do what? Do this?"

"No," she said. She took a deep breath and put both hands on his chest: both possession and pushing away. "You can't make me think about Prufrock by thinking about Prufrock while we're fooling around. You're going to spoil Eliot for me for life. I'll be sitting in a Paris café ten years from now and trying to read 'The Waste Land' or something, and I'll have a Pavlovian reaction and get all wet." She gave her hair a little toss, flipping it back over her shoulder, gazing at him frankly. The toss and the look together were nearly too much.

“I’ll try not to think about poets,” he said, “but I’m not in as much control as you think.”

Out in the rising tiers of the theatre, something groaned and then stilled: the old bones of the building, settling in against the Nebraska wind. The noise reminded him of what he had wanted to say to her since lunch, when she had taken one hand from her salmon salad and had run it up and down the seam of his khakis until thoughts of talk were gone and thoughts of her warmth in the shadows of this place had become a single low note thrumming at the top of his spine.

“I meant to tell you,” he said, and then her fingers found his belt buckle and tugged. He paused to watch her work.

“You meant to tell me what?” She pulled and twisted, letting the silvered bit come free from the last hole in the strap of the belt. “That you came up with another stupid nickname for me?” She bent and kissed his neck, nuzzling aside the collar of his shirt. “Why do men insist on trying to reduce women to truncated, lessened versions of themselves?”

“I don’t know,” he said. Coherent thought had begun to slip down the shaft of his gullet, pushed out by the ballooning need for her. “I wanted to tell you—”

About the run, he nearly said. *About the sounds, out in the woods*. He nearly said it, and if he had, if he had been able to halt her relentless advance,⁶ to stand against the crashing waves of her hands and lips and tongue, then everything that came after might have been different.

“Tell me after,” she said. She pulled his belt free from its loops. Like her kiss, she did this slowly, letting the leather hiss hungrily against the cotton of his pants.

“Nope—”

“No,” she said, and tilted her head back to fix him with her stare. She arched one eyebrow, and this, coupled with the quiet, threatening possibilities suggested by the belt in her hand, utterly unmanned his mind. “I want to hear you say my whole name.”

So he did.

#

⁶ “Oh sure,” she said. “Blame it all on me.”

Dust was unsure whether he was nervous because he had brought three white people to a black funeral at a black church in a black part of town or because the old man sitting beside Grieving Widow Number One reminded him of the blue-vested vagrant who had accosted him in the French Quarter earlier that June.

He had only been in the French Quarter because he was in New Orleans, and he had only been in New Orleans because the military sent him there for a week of training. The classroom instructors, who were also in New Orleans at the same time Dust was in New Orleans, didn't want to be in the classroom instructing any more than Dust wanted to be in the classroom being instructed, so they all ended up in a corner bar just off Bourbon by four each afternoon, downing hurricanes from plastic bongos and fending off the strippers, who strutted from the narrow doorways of their clubs and put their hands on Marines with the bravado of housewives fondling tomatoes at the grocery store.

Dust had been in the Corps for almost seven years. Dust hated the Corps. He also loved the Corps, in the way that second sons loved fathers who were not quite abusive but were absent most of the time and who spent the rest of it either drunk or paying attention to older brothers.

Mostly, Dust hated the Corps.

Dust excused himself to the washroom, leaving a twenty surreptitiously on the table, hoping none of the Marines would notice the surreptitiousness; like most of their breed, they were suspicious of large words. It would be at least fifteen minutes before they noticed he had gone, and if there was any place in the world to lose unwanted company, it was the French Quarter.

He left the restaurant by the back door, ignoring the looks from waiters. He came out on a street whose name he could not pronounce and went left. He passed houses with black fences and crossed sidewalks humped into broken ramps by the roots of bicentennial cypresses.

The air of the city was thick as dirty smoke. Damp as rain, it pressed down on him, on the dreadlocked bicycle messengers, on the shoe-shine boys with their flickering rags and whipcrack voices. It tamped him like a cigarette and frittered away at his edges. It nourished him, sweet and

cancerous. He thought about Inopinée, whose impact some part of him had sensed coming: a barometric drop, the first flutter of palm branches before a stormfront.

Dust walked for the sake of walking. He went down streets that had felt the tread of eighteenth-century traders from Alexandria. He picked directions at random, feeling in the walls of his bones the shifting rhythm of Bourbon Street: a dirty, glittering heartstring whose neon glow touched now his back, now his left side, now his right.

Dust walked. He doubled back, then doubled again, making oxbow paths drawn wide around the salt-scoured fenders of rollicking Cadillac sedans. He went from narrow streets to narrower streets. He let the river of his blind heart carry him downstream. He shrank from the cries of the gap-grinned hucksters, their skins black as dipped walnut, who fronted the trinket shops and open-air bars and the strip clubs with their strobing maws of velvet teeth.

One such crier, the one in the blue vest, plucked the half-empty bottle of Purple Haze from Dust's shocked hand and flung it sidearm at a cat-sized crow perched on a granite bust of General Gustave Toutant Beauregard, screaming, "Die, nigger bird!" The bottle came apart on the general's stony scalp like a little brown bomb; a crest of foam the color of creamed coffee ran down the graven face. The crow, unharmed, flapped insolently into the sky. Its wings made a paper-cracking sound against the humid air.

Dust stepped around the black man the way white men have been stepping around men of other colors for centuries and went on his meandering way. He made a mazy motion, crossing first one street then another, mind burdened in equal parts by wonder at the city around him and an unease for which he had no name. He thought about caverns measureless to man; he thought about sunless seas; Kubla Khan did not make an appearance. He thought about his erstwhile beer, and about the dour lieutenant who had sent him here, and about the slim Marine wife who had the night before befriended both Dust and Coffee on the ferry crossing to their government-issue hotel. Dust and Coffee and Sergeant Felix were due at the wife's bungalow this evening for

dinner; the wife's husband was off somewhere being shot at by Muslims, in the way only Marines can.

Dust knew what all this meant. He walked. He let Bourbon draw him in, a dark mother folding up her child, and wondered as he drew down the dimming lanes if there would be more drinks in his evening's future – perhaps a great many of them.

As it turned out, there were.

#

Dust was still nervous. He was more certain now that the nervousness had less to do with the old man who sat uncomfortably close to Grieving Widow Number One and more to do with being one of three white people at a black church at a black funeral in a black part of town.

Dust wasn't racist, any more than he was. He stood in the back with his white hat clamped down on his forehead in a pinching sweat-ring and periodically leaned infinitesimally to his right to whisper instructions to Greenfield.

The bald funeral director reappeared with the information that would later save Dust a serious piece of guesswork: the flag was to be given to Grieving Widow Number Two, not Grieving Widow Number One. The former, the funeral director assured him, could be told apart from the latter by virtue of her missing arm.

Dust didn't think that both women looked alike because he thought all black people looked alike; Dust wasn't racist (any more than he was). He thought they looked alike because they were to him nothing more than draped silhouettes a hundred feet distant, planted at either front corner of the forward pews. The man beside Number One was neither wearing a blue vest nor screaming at crows.

The preacher finished his music. It was the kind of melodic, communal thunder that Dust never heard at white funerals, where the primary concern of those in attendance seemed to be a contest to discover who could A) outdress the deceased, B) be the highest-dollar whore in evidence, or C) both at once.

Dust did not realize the song of the mourning congregation had hypnotized him until it ended and the preacher said something that tripped the cue wires inside Dust's head. He risked a glance at the corner, where Brown stood holding the electronic bugle. Brown had survived the sermon and appeared not to have swallowed his tongue, lost the bugle, or surrendered the free world in the ten minutes he had been on duty. Impressed and surprised by this display of prowess, Dust called Greenfield and himself to attention. They marched down the aisle.

Number Two wept as Dust gave her a flag designed by men who scarce five generations ago had enslaved her entire slice of the color wheel. The family gathered around her with calm, tidal force. There was something atavistic and primal in their touch. They ebbed and flexed like blood cells against a wound; to Dust, it seemed as though they were a single organism, capable of channeling healing energy into its own injured limbs from some arcane battery totally unknowable to his outsider's mind. One of them reached across Number Two as Dust gave her the flag, taking with her hand the place on the folded fabric that the one-handed widow could not grip.

In his head, Dust heard the bottle of Abita as it broke upon Beauregard's brow. He heard the crackling pitch of the yellow-toothed man's cry: *Die, nigger bird!*

Less than sixty seconds later, Dust gathered his little murder and was gone.

#

By the time Dust thought of Beauregard again, Inopinée was riding him, her hips sidling against his in a rhythm so slow it was nearly circadian. They were clothed – mostly – much to Dust's disappointment, but Inopinée insisted with a firmness like a hand against his chest that they wait until Washington for what she called *la pequeña muerte*. Why Inopinée occasionally used Spanish to express herself, Dust did not know. Perhaps, he thought, she had been spending time with his mirror.

Dust mentioned this aloud.

“I’m cosmopolitan, you fuck,” she said, leaning back to grind her nails into the muscle just above his knees. The lines of her belly, cut like stone in a way that made Dust more jealous than aroused, flattened and flexed as she looked down at him. “It’s only Americans who think someone with a French name has to speak French or wear a beret.”

“People still wear berets?”

She made her noise at him, the one that meant he annoyed her almost enough for her to stop meeting him in places like this, and reached down to pinch him, there.

Dust panted and threw back his head against the hardwood floor, and when he came around she was talking about Baudrillard and the death of the Real, about the reification of the image by generations of fools. Dust, whose deepest understanding of Baudrillard involved almost being able to spell the man’s name, thought about teasing her about reification, but he was afraid she might slap him – not in the way he liked – and devote her attention to berating him over berets, rather than to grinding her pelvis, held from him by the translucent chaperone of her sky-blue underwear, into his. So instead he thought about how Baudrillard sounded like Beauregard, whose name sounded like Beaubridge, and how all three men were French, although doubtless in very different ways. He thought about the line of Abita foam slipping down the general’s granite cheek, and this thought made him think of the foam bubbling up from within himself, of firehoses held in check only by the barest ring of restraint, of spray—

Inopinée was bemoaning the vampirism of the vitality of contemporary cinema, but she was also moaning, little unconscious pants of pink-orange sound which escaped between her denunciations of government’s false hegemony and opened into the air between them like flowers. Something down in Dust’s core quickened. He caught himself dancing on the cliff, blind as Gloucester but in much more peril of plummet; he reached up with both hands and lifted Inopinée an inch into the air.

“What?” she said. Her hips, divorced from their pressure against the third-rail center of him, wove their rune of ruin just above the open front of his jeans.

“I was gonna come,” Dust said.

“The hell you were,” she said. “I wouldn’t have allowed it.”

In the darkness, Dust smiled.

#

The 447th Armored Supply Battalion was a new unit, one cobbled together from the remnants of four demobilized infantry and motor transport companies in the political free-for-all that followed the occupation of Iraq by fifty thousand American troops. A democratic senator from New England, reviewing Defense Department spending reports over Boston Crème and a soy latte, came to the conclusion that the transportation of high-value military materiel would be better accomplished if the trucks doing the transporting had more armor to withstand the roadside bombs that the current variety of foreign heathen seemed inclined to lay along U.S. logistics routes. The senator made several phone calls, a process consisting of putting down the latte – not without regret – and yelling at two aides in sharp suits until the aides could track down three unpaid interns in shirtsleeves and blue ties. Two of the aides were occupied with a difficult logistical problem of their own involving three dozen Boston Crème donuts, a popular piece of senatorial materiel that session, but the third aide proved available to assist the free world by placing several phone calls to various Marine Corps Motor Transport offices around the nation. The last of these calls put the aide in contact with Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram, the Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge at the Marine Corps Motor Transport hub in New Orleans, a place Dust might have recognized if he were present for the conversation. Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram, untroubled by thrown beers or vagrants in blue suits, put both elbows down on the foot-high layer of paperwork scattered in several piles across his chipped desk and informed the aide that nobody in the Corps had ever thought to put armor on the bottom of trucks before. Before the aide could decide if the screaming man on the other end of the phone line was being sarcastic or was merely screaming, Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram made two suggestions. The first would be unfit to repeat on prime time television, and the second was that perhaps the

senator should budget several million dollars to the sergeant major's battalion so that he could organize a motorized company of transport tanks, since that seemed to be what the aide was really asking for.

"Tanks," the senator said when the aide informed him. "Tanks." He sipped his latte and drummed the fingers of one pale hand on his desk blotter.

"Tanks," the aide confirmed.

"Tanks." The senator tried to sip his latte again and found it dry. This failure of the caffeinated beverage system seemed to inspire rather than inhibit his train of thought. "Tanks!" the senator exclaimed, setting the cardboard cup down on the desk with absolutely no impact at all. "Tanks for everything!"

Six months later, Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram and several million dollars came together to organize the 447th Armored Supply Battalion, a unit that rolled out of the bellies of C-130 cargo planes and onto the boiling tarmac at Kuwait City International to the dumbfounded silence of watching personnel.

"More armor?" One flight crewman said to another. "Why are they bringing in more armor?"

"It's a supply company," the other said. "Supply tanks." He rapped the underside of one forearm with his other hand. "More plating underneath."

"Tanks."

"Tanks."

Six months after that, Corporal Neidermeyer was dead.

#

Dust met Corporal Neidermeyer in late September, when the leaves were still mostly green and the weather was just beginning to cool.

Dust did not meet Corporal Neidermeyer.

#

Dust met Corporal Neidermeyer's mother in later September, when the leaves were still mostly green and the weather was just beginning to cool.

The Neidermeyers lived in Ainsworth, a town of two thousand built into an unlikely spine of low, forested hills near the northern border of Nebraska. Dust first heard of Ainsworth when Sergeant Christianson called around to the funeral group to see who could perform a Dignified Transfer at a place called Ainsworth on short notice. Dust did not know what a Dignified Transfer might be, but he gathered that it merited capital letters by the way Sergeant Christianson said it on his voicemail.

The funeral Marines converged on Ainsworth as night fell. When Dust arrived, creeping down the cop-trap main street at nine in the evening, the town had the shaded, buttoned-up look he associated with the opening scenes of 1970s horror films.

Dust caught sight of the funeral home, an aging but austere complex of buildings that was meant to be one story but occupied two and a half due to the tilt of the land on which it stood. He pulled up and into the curving drive and saw several cars backed into the far row of the lot against the chain link. They looked like nocturnal predators skulking at the edge of a water hole. He recognized Heighton's BMW and Soya's SUV. There was a red Chevy truck of indeterminate age – at Marine Corps gatherings, there was always a red Chevy truck of indeterminate age – and that could have meant Torrez or Hull. Dust hoped it wasn't Hull, who had the delicate facial bones of Winona Rider and the horse teeth of Julia Roberts but none of the sexuality or charm of either woman.

He backed into a space parallel with everything else, and looked down the tinted aisle of driver's windows. Most of the men he saw were in uniform, the blue of the jackets black in the autumnal gloom, the buttons and ribbons glinting like stale metaphor washed anew. But nobody was moving or seemed ready to move. He tapped his phone to check the time, and just before his fingertip illuminated the black mirror of its surface, he saw the moon reflected there: a luminous stone lost in a deep pool.

“And all the world will be in love with night,” Dust said, “and pay no worship to the garish sun.” He sensed that his visor mirror, in which he had checked his shave just before pulling into the lot, might have something to say about his selection of tragic stage quotes, and so he snagged the hidden lever beside the seat and rode the backrest down into the shady depths of his car.

Sleep met him there, at least for a time.

#

Something rapped on the window. Dust became the man in the driver’s seat; each molecule of him sifted through the fabric of evening and joined one another in a cautious whole.

There was a shape beside the car. It knocked again. Dust caught the gleam of a class ring: silver, set with a gigantic piece of glass as blue as death’s eye. Perhaps the glass was some other color, and simply looked blue in the moonlight.

The translucent image of Dust in the window, a sly phantom, shifted in its seat. *Perhaps we’re all just blue in the moonlight*, it said.

Dust rolled down the window to shut it up.

“Wagon’s fifteen out,” the figure said. It was Torrez. “The sir wants a run-through.”

Dust made noises of compliance and waited for the figure to go away and leave him alone. Torrez backed away from the door to let him out but did not turn and leave. So far as Dust could tell, this kind of lingering was particular to the Corps, whose adherents never left a man behind, even when the man in question wanted to be left behind so he could nap a little more.

Dust opened the door, stepped out, tugged his jacket straight, and followed Torrez toward the oblong of light thrown by the funeral home’s half-open breezeway door.

The captain stood in the funeral parlor, which had the clean, careworn smell Dust associated with the homes of grandparents. It looked like a place that had been converted from home to business rather than built as such; it lacked the slick, polished arrangement of a euphemistic space, the cloy of plastic smiles and suits not quite cut to fit. Across the parlor, which

had been filled with old wooden pews, a wide door opened onto a hallway. On the stage, separated from the captain by the metal trolley they would slide Neidermeyer onto once he got in from the airport, stood the biggest sergeant major Dust had ever seen.

Sergeants major, as a rule, attend a special school where the curriculum consists of collecting and maintaining inordinately clever coffee mugs, having higher and tighter haircuts than all other Marines, and being bigger than human beings generally have a right to be. Dust had known this since he laid eyes on his very first sergeant major back in boot camp, but Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram, whose name he found assaulting his senses as the huge man's hand engulfed his in a precise and skull-dry handshake, was bigger than all of them. Dust looked at the line of brass buttons that ran down the front of the sergeant major's dress jacket and wondered how long it might be before one of them gave up its losing battle and shot across the room with the speed of a uranium slug. He eyed the jacket itself; rather than imagining the sergeant major pulling the garment on arm by arm, he had an image of the man standing akimbo as a complicated robotic assembly sealed the unlikely uniform onto him one riveted joint at a time.

"That's right, sir," said Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram to the captain. His smile was a white gate in a wall of igneous stone. "Supply tanks." He raised one forearm and tapped its underside with the hand that had briefly obliterated Dust's own. "More armor underneath."

"The 447th, right? I think I heard about you guys," the captain said. "Lot of trouble with IEDs on the highways, still, eh?"

"That's right, sir," said Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram. "That was the main impetus behind the formation of our unit."

"Improvised explosive device," Greenfield said, leaning far over one of the pews to whisper beside Dust's shoulder. "That's what 'IED' means."

Dust started, noticing that Greenfield had leaned far over one of the pews to whisper beside his shoulder. "What did I tell you about compulsively explaining acronyms?" he hissed.

Greenfield kept leaning, only now his lean had a distinctly sulky mien. “Just trying to help.”

“Well, you’re not helping,” Dust said. “On what planet would you expect me not to know what an IED is?”

“Improvised explosive device,” Soya said.

Dust started again and looked around to find Soya leaning in at his other shoulder.

“That’s not—”

“Is that Marine leaning far over one of the pews to whisper beside that other Marine’s shoulder?” said Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram. “That kind of thing wouldn’t fly in the 447th, no sir.”

The captain followed the sergeant major’s gaze. “Hey, you three,” he said, “get over here so we can do a run-through.”

Dust, Soya, and Greenfield got over and ran through. The process of wheeling the low metal trolley out the open door to an imaginary hearse and back, even with the added formality of facing movements, did not seem terribly complicated.

“Tree-borne undetonated reconnoitered device,” Soya whispered as they stood facing one another over the trolley.

“What?”

“That’s what got this guy,” Beatty said from beside Dust.

“When did you get here?” Dust said.

“I heard about those tree bombs,” Brown said. “The Hadjis started hanging them on strings from branches over the road to circumvent the armor plating on the bottoms of our vehicles.”

The six of them snapped to attention, right-faced, and received the imaginary coffin from the imaginary hearse.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Dust said.

“Sure it does,” Brown said. “The armor’s all on the bottom, see, so when the bomb is—”

“I know what the fuck the bomb does,” Dust said, “but you’re telling me the Iraqi insurgents hang it from trees over the road?”

“Well, yeah. Sure.”

Soya said, “Did you just say, ‘yeah, sure,’ to your corporal?”

“No, sergeant. I said, ‘yes, sir.’”

“Don’t change the subject,” Dust said. “Stick to the slapstick at hand.” He looked at Brown over the imaginary coffin. “Have you ever been to Iraq?”

“No, corporal.”

“It’s a fucking desert. Not a lot of trees by highways.”

They slow-marched the trolley into the parlor.

“Not bad,” the captain said. “Try it again.”

“Aw,” Beatty said, “I thought my line about the bombs was pretty good.”

“Not the dialogue,” the captain said. “The trolley.”

“Thank God,” Greenfield said. “I’m not sure if I could lean far over that pew to whisper beside your shoulder again.”

“Shut up, Greenfield,” Soya said.

Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram made a face. He said, “It smells like tuna in here.”

#

The tree-borne undetonated reconnoitered device that had taken Corporal Neidermeyer’s life began its existence as a six-pack of Diet Pepsi on an assembly line in Qatar, where Russian interests left over from the Cold War maintained no fewer than five seaside resorts-cum-soft drink production plants. Somewhere between Qatar and the Al Anbar freeway down which the 447th Armored Supply Battalion plied its trade, an enterprising partisan whose sister had been killed in an accidental precision drone strike on a goat compound outside Tikrit drank the Diet Pepsi and replaced it with enough homemade glyceryl trinitrate to cut a Seven Eleven in half.

Because of the brutality of war and the living conditions engendered thereby, most of the Diet Pepsi was consumed at room temperature.

The primary mission of the 447th was to meet the logistical materiel demands of every permanent base in the northern third of the country without incurring the heavy roadbed IED losses suffered by more traditional supply battalions. Though it accomplished this objective admirably, over the course of its maiden tour the unit lost no fewer than four of its enlisted men to tree-borne undetonated reconnoitered devices. Corporal Neidermeyer, Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram explained, was the latest of these.

“But Iraq’s a desert,” the captain said. Across the room, Dust looked at Soya and rolled his eyes. “Where are they finding the trees to hang the bombs from?”

“That’s the damnedest part,” said the sergeant major. “Nobody knows. I met an intelligence officer Navy side who claims to have evidence that the insurgents are actually growing the trees in hidden training gardens and then transplanting them beside the road. The Navy man told me the bastards sneak out every night, risking detection by our infrared satellites, to water the trees so they’ll grow tall enough to someday hang a bomb from. I don’t believe it, myself.”

“Neidermeyer,” Dust said.

“He was the second casualty last month,” said the sergeant major. “Had his head up against the inside of the tank hatch, listening to the radio. Damn tree-borne device tore the top half of the tank right off.”

“Neidermeyer,” the captain said, shaking his head in sympathy.

“Neidermeyer,” Soya agreed.

“No,” Dust said. He pointed out the open door. “Neidermeyer.”

The men all turned. The deep square of night framed by the door was awash with the growing glare of headlights.

“Places!” the captain said, leaping for the door with the urgency of a grenade jumper.

Dust followed the rush. The hearse pulled into the parking lot.

They did everything over again, this time with Neidermeyer in attendance. His weight lent their procession a literal gravity that made Dust lean in toward Soya, who walked across from him, matching step for step. This, then, was a Dignified Transfer, the official term that had so intrigued Dust. Six men, guided by the captain and with Sergeant Major Sergio Marjoram looking on, marched Corporal Neidermeyer from his penultimate carriage ride to his penultimate residence. They marched under cover of night, with breath fogged into steam by the cut shadows of the doorway. The funeral, an event that would draw out almost every resident of Ainsworth, would be done by light, in the long golden hour before sunset, to the call of rifles and Harleys and bagpipes. But Dust and his band were caliginous, and their dignity went unwitnessed.

They placed him on the rollers and it was done. Flag sat over coffin and coffin sat over Neidermeyer and Neidermeyer, perhaps, sat over them all, possessed of the effortless grace of the grave, something not of death's house but of the dressing women and men pin up around its door.

Beatty broke wind. "Sorry," he said.

They broke up, drifting the way men between periods of work do, waiting for the captain's call that would herald the arrival of Neidermeyer's family, who – one o'clock in the morning or not – were driving in from all points to view the body before checking in to whatever dismal motel a town like Ainsworth could offer. Avoiding the cold coming in from the open door, Dust drifted deeper into the funeral home. Past the viewing parlor, the place opened into a sprawl of hallways and tight corners; one door opened abruptly onto a steep descent of stairs, at whose bottom was a blind turn into a shadowed room. Beatty and Dust stood by side, looking down; all they could see from their vantage was an old hardwood vanity with a big ovoid mirror, pushed against one wall of the little basement landing.

That's where they keep them, Dust thought, wondering what the wall in the basement would feel like, were he to press the pads of his fingers against its peeling paper. *That's where*

Neidermeyer is going. He was suddenly glad that the angle of the stair prevented him from being able to see directly into the mirror and prevented the mirror from being able to see out at him.

“Go down there.”

“Fuck, no. You go down there.”

Beatty shivered for effect and made a noise. He moved off, poking about with the quiet, intrusive deference all funeral Marines have for churches and funeral homes. Such places were where the Marines plied their trade, but despite this, they remained the houses of an eldritch and faintly-sinister trade.

Dust stood for a moment longer, looking down the darkened stair. The light from above spilled down just far enough to outline the delicate crystal knobs set into the drawers of the vanity. The curved edge of the mirror was a jeweled shadow of oiled smoke.

“Family!” the captain said from just behind him. Dust nearly slipped off the top step.

“Places! Let’s go!”

#

Since April, Dust had worried about reconciling his own fundamental reality with the increasingly-strong feeling that he had become a character in a story.

I am a man, he thought, standing at parade rest in the back of the parlor. *I am an animal subject to death and to violent instinctual drives.*⁷

All of the Marines stood in a line – they were good for that – and watched the family watch Neidermeyer. The family was paying its respects. The family was singular, but made of many; the respects were also many, or at least, presumably, plural. Dust wondered how many respects Corporal Neidermeyer, late Marine Corps Tank Operator, had earned in the desert; Dust wondered how many his family would pay now, and for how long. The Corps had trained

⁷ “This is from John Zuern, at the University of Hawai’i,” she said. “You should credit it to him.” She sniffed. “Also, Lacan is junk science.”

Neidermeyer to live, and paid him to live, and now they paid him to die, and they paid Dust to help him die.

There were no mirrors available to tell Dust that he was becoming melancholy, but he thought it anyway. Neidermeyer was a sufficient enough reflection of Dust to serve as mirror, but Neidermeyer was unable to lift the lid of his coffin, or sit up, or tell Dust that he was being melancholy.

Dust thought about Neidermeyer lifting the lid of his coffin, sitting up, and telling Dust that he was being—

Soya elbowed him meaningfully. “Cut that out.”

On Dust’s opposite side, Greenfield leaned forward infinitesimally. Even in his peripheral vision, Dust could tell that Greenfield had learned a lot about leaning from his experience leaning far over pews to whisper by Dust’s shoulder. “What was that, sergeant?”

Soya leaned incrementally more infinitesimally than Greenfield so that he could see Greenfield across from Dust. Dust felt for a moment like a tree around which two jungle creatures peer at one another, trying to decide which is predator and which prey, but then remembered he was scared of jungles and so gave the simile up.

Greenfield, acquiescent, leaned back into place. “I know, I know,” he said. “Shut up, Greenfield.”

The image of Neidermeyer coming up for air, of four grey fingers pushing out from between the padded lips of the coffin halves like the crowning heads of some unspeakable clutch of monsters, stuck to Dust’s mind. He could not banish the thought of the sunken mask, held up by the starched collar of the dress jacket, rising over the silk rim of its final bed like an unlit moon.

That’s what he is now, Dust thought: a celestial body. A weather effect. Mist on the burning cusp of the sky.

“Detail,” Soya said, “attention!”

Dust paid no attention, but his body, patriot to its nation by way of betrayal to its own mind, reacted as though on strings. He snapped straight, and was still marveling at this involuntary feat of muscle memory when Soya called the right-face and the forward march.

#

Dust ran.

The sky was a sullen blade of cloud. It lay against the earth, promising winter. Dust drew edges of cold air into his lungs, where they opened in reluctant fans before scraping his throat on the way back out. He waited for this painful rasp to subside, as it always did between miles one and two. He thought about how deep the trench of his love for Inopinée was taking him. He thought about how dangerous it must be for her to carry on with him when her heart was still half in the grave of her marriage and her husband was the jealous kind. He wondered what would give first: marriage or affair? When one of them gave, cracking apart like a rotten hardwood floor, what would be waiting in the crawlspace beneath?

Dust ran.

He and Inopinée had still not seen much of one another over the hot months. Commuting one to the other would have been hard, given that their mutual place of employment was a small university and, thus, during break became a ghost town populated only by the specters of administrators and those students too poor to move home for the summer. Dust had coped with the loss by throwing himself into the funeral game, taking job after job, driving the van with the government plates to more than two dozen corners of forgotten rural Nebraska between April and August. Most of those corners were sad shitsplat towns where some ancient veteran or other had finally keeled over. Dust suffered the hundred-degree heat, the driving July rain, the interminable company of Soya and his toasted tuna sandwiches. Dust played bugles and presented flags to weeping widows. Dust tried to put Inopinée from his mind by occupying it with the brisk business of domestic death; by Labor Day, he met only moderate success.

Now it was mid-October, the air unseasonably cold with the year's first soft freeze, and the macadam beneath his sneakers was grey with a scrim of frost. Dust ran, following the fog of his breath east. Ahead of him, the forest waited, silent in the new chill.

At the third mile, he began to pass the old barbed-wire fence with its hand-planted stakes of gnarled hardwood and its bald tires every hundred yards. The tires, cracked by years of heat and rain, hung from the stakes like the collared hoops of some monstrous toy. Painted on each in flaking white paint were the words KEEP OUT.

Dust ran. The old fence flickered past, its frailty unbroken, the forest growing right up to its triple line of rusting wire and pressing above and through those lines with the eagerness of an unfeeling beast. The fence was losing the battle to contain the wood; only the flat demarcating line of the road stopped it, and that only at ground level, for the highest boughs of the trees stretched high and wide over the asphalt, sometimes joining with their fellows to the south.

And the roots, Dust thought. Gerard Way warned him that the sharpest lives were the deadliest to lead. *Some of these oaks look about as old as God. How deep must their roots go? Deep enough to join and mingle in the dark beneath the road? Almost certainly.* He pictured long brown fingers, boneless and implacable, knotting together with a whisper of wet soil, communicative of some unknowable, urgent wish.

If you think of it that way, Dust thought, *this forest goes on damn near forever.* The idea fell upon him: the forest as a single organism that stretched for unseen miles above and below the eye of man. He ran through an endless tunnel made by the trees, a pipe caged overhead by the grasping canopy and underfoot by the hidden roots.

He passed a tire. KEEP OUT, it said.

#

Dust met Inopinée's husband on the seventh-and-a-half floor of the Hilton Magnolia the week before she and Dust departed for the conference in Washington.

"There you are!"

Dust looked up. He was in the stairwell, ascending toward Eight, the floor where the NebTech English Department had leased the Valencia Lounge for its annual faculty soiree. He had been looking down, watching the slim rectangle of open space in the center of the well as it grew in a column beneath him; at the sound of the voice, he turned so quickly he nearly lost his balance.

Inopinée stood, cigarette in hand, eyes bright with distress. For a moment, all he could see was the latter, the way her over-broad smile and cocked chin spoke of unease, and he did not notice the man beside her.

Dust had taken the elevator to the fifth floor and then, wanting to put some distance between being in an elevator and seeing Inopinée, had exited the car and taken the stairs. He had known her husband would be here, but the shock of the meeting was surprisingly strong.

He reached them. "I was just saying," Inopinée said, "that one of our TAs moonlighted as a professional pallbearer. And now here you are!"

Dust couldn't remember the last time he'd heard a natural exclamation in her voice. The ones she was using now were as genuine as tin. He looked at her, searching her eyes for the source of her discomfort, wanting to put his hands on that source and squeeze it until it stopped moving.

It came to him the instant before she spoke again.

"Dust," she said, "this is my husband, Dave."

Dust turned, the hinges of his neck creaking, and saw—

No, he thought, *I don't want to humanize him. Not even here. Especially not here.*

"Good to meet you," Dust said, shaking hands.

The man Dust refused to describe said something about Dust's being a writer. Dust turned to Inopinée, hoping his glance conferred the magnitude of his outrage at being described, delineated, to this . . . this Other Man. For her husband to have even a casual knowledge of him seemed a betrayal.

Don't be absurd, he thought. *Of course she told him about you. She has to survive, doesn't she?*

Dust looked around, wondering if there was a mirror somewhere in the tall stairwell.

"Dust is a writer," Inopinée was saying. She crushed her cigarette against the side of a fire-suppression-system pipe and flicked it away. "He's writing about his funeral work with the military. Black humor."

"A story about a guy who finds humor in military funerals?" said the man Dust did not look at. "I don't know. Sounds like it might not work."

"It's probably a terrible idea," Dust said. "But that's what NebTech pays us for: molding minds and writing bad ideas."

The man laughed. Dust wanted to punch him in the throat.

Inopinée delved into her purse and came out with a compact. She peered into it and smoothed the subtle line of her eyeshadow with her fingertip. "It sounds fascinating," she said. "You two just don't have any faith in the modern novel. Just because a piece of writing doesn't have sex and car crashes and monsters doesn't mean it's not worth reading."

Dave seemed unimpressed by this endorsement. He looked from Dust to his wife and back again. Inopinée, busy with her makeup, seemed not to notice this scrutiny, but Dust felt the sweep of the man's gaze as keenly as though he were Frodo, crouching in an ashen defile under the red light of Barad-Dûr.⁸

"Who wants drinks?" Dave said. "No offense, but if I'm going to endure a whole floor full of academics, I need a beer."

"Half a floor," Dust said.

"What?"

⁸ "I don't get the love affair between men and *The Lord of the Rings*."

"It's the greatest fantasy epic ever written."

"I guess." She waved a hand. "This still seems overdramatic, though. How afraid of the husband can he be?"

"Have you met the man's truck?"

Dust flapped a hand at the stairwell sign. “It’s floor number Seven and a Ha—”

Inopinée kicked him in the shoe.

“Seven. Tank Seven. Or a Heineken. Please.”

“Good deal.” Dave turned to his wife. “White wine, sweetheart?”

“Please.”

“Coming right up.” He clapped Dust on the shoulder. “Don’t run off with her.”

“No promises.”

#

The night went on. In its left hand, it held both Dust and Dave. Inopinée’s two men flipped across the dusky knuckles of that darkling paw like silver dollars rolling over the fingers of a street magician.

Dave squeezed through the press of elbow-patched blazers and made his way to the bar. There were two bartenders on duty, both young women, but even they seemed hard put to keep up with the demands of the crowd.

Academics, Dave thought, and signaled one of the girls. She nodded at him, then finished shaking a martini. Her uniform blouse and vest moved against her as she shook. Dave looked her up and down, trying to find a way to describe her even to himself, but he felt strongly that he could not do so.

The girl poured the drink, handed it to a sloppy man in a crumpled pink shirt, and then came down the bar toward Dave. The sloppy man sipped his drink and leered at her as she walked.

“What’ll it be, honey?”

“A white wine, and a, uh, Tank Seven? Do you have that?”

“We do. Good choice. A real man’s beer.”

“Make it two.”

“Sure thing.” She turned and bent to retrieve the bottles from a fridge with a clear glass front. Dave turned and scanned the crowd. He hated feeling out of place. He hated looking like he felt out place, hated scanning a crowd in a way that made him look like a man seeking a way out. The bartender came up with two beers and went about pouring the wine. Her interest in him felt like the light of a distant fire against the back of his shirt.

There – between a pair of talking heads, Dave could just see across the big room and out onto the wide balcony. The French doors leading from the room were closed, but the night without was well-lit, and the profiles of Dust and Inopinée were clear even from such distance.

She’s at it again, he thought. She’s almost on top of him. She has hers, so why not take yours? Why not give this bar girl a spi—

“Here you are, honey.”

Dave turned. The girl had both bottles open and the white wine in a stem glass. “That’ll be twenty-four.”

Dave put down a twenty and a ten on the bar. He took up the bottles by the necks in one hand and the wine in the other.

“No change,” he said, and hesitated. “Tell me something.” He leaned in. “If my number was on one of these bills, would you call it?”

The girl leaned in. She put a hand over Dave’s hand, as though helping him keep hold of the glass of wine. One of her fingers slid across the band of his ring. “Is your number on one of those bills?”

“No.”

“Then I guess we’ll never know, honey.” She scooped the bills from the bar with one slow sweep of her palm and dropped them into the register at her hip without looking down.

Dave started to turn, but the girl tapped his hand. “Now, you tell me something.” She tilted her chin at the stem glass. “Is that wine for you?”

The girl laughed. Dave wanted to punch her in the throat.

“No,” he said, withdrawing his hand. He looked away, seeking and finding the two shapes out on the balcony. “I prefer red.”

#

“It’s all part of the act,” Dust said. “I’m not actually sulky. I’m just feigning.”

Dust was not just feigning.

“You are not just feigning.” She stuck a cigarette between her lips and produced a Zippo the color of elevator brass. Dust reached for her hand, meaning to light her up, but she pulled back quickly. “People can see us!”

Dust took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But you know how I feel when you pull away.”

Inopinée took a deeper breath. “I wouldn’t have to pull away if you remembered that we are in public.” She lit up, sucked the cigarette into life, and pointed the glowing tip at him. “You may not have to face consequences if our adultery gets discovered, but I do.”

Dust opened his mouth, but Inopinée brandished the cigarette at him. He shut his mouth. He felt like he was in a scene he could not get out of. He thought of Beaubridge, asking for ellipsis.

“And we will get discovered,” Inopinée said, “if you keep acting pouty when we’re around other people. I can’t tolerate it here. Hell, I can’t tolerate it in private, but I do.” Dust looked out at the city, but Inopinée toed his shoe with the edge of her pump. He looked at her. “I do because I love you,” she said. Her eyes were lit by the cigarette and yet veiled by its rafter of smoke. “You know I want to touch you, to be able to touch you without everyone around us condemning us for it.”

“I know,” Dust said.

She blew smoke at the night. “We’re going to have our time,” she said. “We’re going to have a whole week in Washington.” She dropped her lashes and smiled. “You can touch me all you want, then.”

“That’s not all I want, you know. I’m not just—”

“I know. But it’s a lot of what you want, isn’t it?”

“Of course,” he said. “But even that part of our relationship is complicated.”

“Dave.”

“Right. You know I’m not jealous in that way, but the thought—”

“No.” She kicked him again and tilted her head. “Dave.”

Dust turned to look out over the city, and held his phone up as though taking a picture. In its black mirror, Dust winked at him and then looked left and jiggled his eyebrows at the reflected crowd. The image there was tiny and blurred, but Dust saw Dave, weaving toward them with three drinks held high.

“Who is that with him?”

Inopinée started to turn and then caught herself. “I don’t know,” she said. “I didn’t see. Now I can’t look, or it will seem suspicious.”

“Your obvious concern about looking suspicious looks suspicious.”

She kicked him again.

He smiled. “Sorry.” He put down his phone and turned back to her. “Okay,” he said, “just follow my lead.”

“Alright.”

Dust gestured out at the Bellevue skyline, a glittering tangle of gems against the pink tail of the vanished sun. “Which is why the so-called glorious evolution of technology only serves the hegemonic power base through an increase in the availability of the panoptic mechanism.”

“But you can’t read *Discipline and Punish* purely as a critique of social systems. You have to account for the complexity and the nuance of—”

“Of Foucault, right?” Dave smiled and held out the wine.

“Oh. Thank you, honey. Yes, Foucault. You even pronounced it right.” She slipped an arm around him. “Have you been reading my textbooks again?”

“Maybe.” He held out the pair of beers to Dust. “Here you go, man.”

“Thanks.” Dust took one. The place around his ribs, the place where Inopinée’s arm touched Dave, felt cold. He turned to the man Dave had brought in tow. “Professor Yance, how good to see you again.”

“Hello, Dust.” The chair turned to Inopinée, who lit up as he took her hand. “Inopinée. Your husband said you were out here.”

Inopinée looked at Dave. “I didn’t know you two had met,” she said.

“We talked at last year’s Christmas party,” Dave said. He grinned sideways at the chair. “She was enjoying herself quite a bit, so she may not remember.”

Inopinée bridled, but the chair gave her the same downward tilt of the chin that he had given Dust in their conference over Beaubridge. “Miss Inopinée is our hardest worker in the department, and she is more than entitled to a little relaxation now and again, hmm?” He took in Dust and Inopinée with his glance. “Dave and I talked quite a bit last year when he saw some of my old tabletop Dungeons and Dragons figurines on my bookshelf. I think I’d quite forgotten they were there, but Dave recognized them at once. It was so good to catch up with a fellow player. So few young people enjoy the classics, these days, hmm?”

Unsure what to say to this, Dust nodded sagely. Inopinée and Dave were ignoring one another in a meaningful manner. The chair gathered all three of them with his eyes and cocked his brow at Dust. “How is our mutual friend doing?”

Inopinée frowned. Dust could not tell if this was in puzzlement at the chair’s question or part of her effort to avoid being reeled in by Dave’s arm.

“Beaubridge is doing well,” Dust said. “Modern Jesus sends his regards.”

“Beaubridge? The guy who—” Dave looked from Dust to the chair and back again. “How do you know him?”

Dust did not see the panic in Inopinée, but he felt its feverish edge warm his left side. Had she known that her husband, jack of all jealousies, master of none, had had even a passing

acquaintance with English Department Chair Professor N.D. Yance? *Of course she hadn't*, Dust thought, *or she wouldn't have risked withholding from him that I was the one who rescued her in the parking lot.*

He took the chair's elbow, turning him gently away from the couple. "On that note, professor," he said, "I was wondering if I could ask your advice about something." As he turned, he looked back at Dave, who was watching him steal the professor. Inopinée's face was an open field of guilt.

Dust dropped Dave a wink and then turned back to the chair. He guided the older man slowly away from the balcony and spoke in a hush. "I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to discuss Beaubridge's work outside of confidence," he said. "I had a question about the viability of his chapter over transvestite orangutans."

The chair allowed Dust to steer him toward the doors. He was the picture of polite interest: an elder scholar, a consummate statesman of his craft, deigning impartment of wisdom to a promising apprentice. His countenance betrayed no knowledge of Dust and Inopinée's complicity in one another.

#

"What was that about?"

Dave was turning toward her as he spoke. Inopinée shuttered herself. "I think he wanted to spare us any discussion of that asshole."

Dave frowned. "The chair? He seems nice."

"No, no." She put her arm about his waist. It was like laying a block of wood on a stone hearth. "Doctor Yance is wonderful. I was talking about Beaubridge. Dust is the one working with him on his novel."

"That's fucked up." Dave sipped his beer. "The guy tries to sexually assault you and he comes out of the deal with a free internship."

The deal, Inopinée knew, was an independent study, not an internship, but she said nothing. She wondered if Dave thought his current level of concern over the incident interesting given his total lack of availability on the day in question. She doubted it.

“I think Doctor Yance wanted to avoid a scandal. He’s an amazing man. Did you know he has three PhDs?”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” She knocked back half her glass of wine at a swallow, not caring if he saw or if he inferred anything from it. “He speaks four languages and is a licensed veterinarian in something like eight countries.”

Dave peered at the two retreating men. “How do you know all this stuff about him?”

Inopinée shrugged. “You hear things.”

“Like what?”

Entertain me, Inopinée. Tell me a story, Inopinée.

She cut her eyes sideways at him. She couldn’t tell if he was fishing for something, or if she was.

“Like what?” she said.

“Yeah. What do you hear about him?”

Tell me a story.

#

Nathan Donovan Yance first felt the back of his father’s hand when he was three years old.

The war chest was not particularly large. It was not particularly heavy. It was neither mysterious, nor sinister, nor fraught with sacred promise. It had begun its existence as a traveling trunk whose royal blue canvas had been cut, it was claimed, from the roller blind of Napoleon’s Waterloo carriage by a corporal of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. The fusilier died from a gangrenous bayonet wound three weeks later, but the swatch of canvas, washed clean of blood

and Dutch soil by his pregnant widow, was rolled away with several bolts of cloth in the attic of his hereditary cottage outside Dorchester until 1824. In April of that year, the widow – remarried and pregnant again with her fifth child – was struck and borne down by a team of black stallions who had broken free of their master’s carriage. The only two times the widow came into contact with any part of a carriage in her life were when she washed and put away the roller blind and when she was trampled to death by the stallions.

The night before Nathan Donovan Yance left for university, he spent the better part of an hour standing hunched over beneath the sloping roof beams of his father’s house, holding his packed valise in one sweating hand. The other he held over the oiled canvas of the war chest, which seemed to repel him just slightly, as though the skin of his palm and the faded blue fabric shared a positive magnetic charge.

The estate of the widow, including the remainder of the fusilier’s meager military pension and all of his belongings, passed on to her new husband, a textiles merchant who did most of his business out of a pair of warehouses in Exeter. The merchant managed his late wife’s estate well enough until 1828, in which year he was accused of murdering by strangulation one of his stepdaughters. This child, it was said, had an especial liking for certain of her late mother’s belongings, among them the bolts of silk and canvas she had kept in the attic of her first husband’s cottage. After the child’s death, her eldest brother – first son of the corporal of fusiliers – absconded from his stepfather’s home, taking with him certain items of sentimental value from his late mother’s estate. The son did not know the story of the small roll of navy blue canvas, but he reckoned it doubly sentimental as beloved of both his late mother and his late sister, and so it was among the items he acquired.

The textile merchant was working alone at night in the upstairs office of one of his warehouses on the second Tuesday of August, 1831, when some of the manufacturing machinery in the main room of the building began to operate of its own accord. The building, which was empty save for the merchant himself on account of the late hour, was later reputed to have been

haunted by a vengeful spirit in retribution for the strangling of the merchant's stepdaughter, a crime for which the merchant had been narrowly but completely acquitted three years before. The strange operation of the manufacturing machines was recorded as part of the county constable's report, which was based almost entirely on the eyewitness testimony of seven local fishermen who had been at the tavern across the way from the warehouses when the noise began. Only three of these fishermen, the constable later reported, were brave enough to enter the warehouse once the merchant started screaming.

It took the constable, the county coroner, the coroner's two assistants, and a local veterinarian the better part of a day to extricate the pieces of the merchant from the machinery into which he had fallen and most of a second day to assemble and identify him. By the time anyone thought to seek the fusilier's eldest son for questioning, the lad had crossed the channel for Cherbourg and points south with all his worldly goods in a steamer trunk. This trunk was unrelated to that of Nathan Donovan Yance save for the inclusion in its depths of a certain thin roll of royal blue canvas; the trunk's owner was unrelated to Nathan Donovan Yance until the summer of 1832, when a tall, well-made youth of about nineteen years took as residence the loft room above the dairy barn of one Madame Charmaine Martinez Poussière, giving the name Robert N. Yance on the torn slip of parchment which Madame Poussière used as a lease contract. Madame Poussière, who bore a striking circumstantial resemblance to the late wife of a late British fusilier corporal named Nancey, told much of her life story to her new boarder over coffee and seed cakes on the morning he came to inquire about the room above the barn. Her small farm was three kilometers outside Marvejols, in a narrow basalt valley through whose trench ran the Colagne. Not one of the seven hundred inhabitants of Marvejols had ever heard of Corporal Nancey, and if they took note of a British youth boarding with Madame Poussière, they did not do so for long; the dairy widow's husband had been a Spanish national, and in a country commune scarce a hundred leagues from the Spanish border, such familial commingling was not uncommon. The presence of British soldiers – and the fusilier's son, though having no claim to

military enlistment, looked very much the part of a strapping young rifleman or grenadier – was likewise unremarkable, for though most had gone home to their chilly island almost a generation ago, enough had stayed and taken wives even in the remote regions of France to make their presence and language regular, if not especially palatable.

Robert Nancey, son of Donald Reginald Nancey of the Royal Fusiliers, was never again seen in Britain. Four years after Robert N. Yance took the room above Mme Poussière's dairy barn, the court records for the arrondissement of Mende make note of the marriage between one M. Yance and Mlle Elise Poussière, only surviving child and sole inheritor of the Poussière estate. The records make no mention of dowry, and so if M. Yance paid five francs to a Marvejolian boardwright for the construction of a modest traveling trunk and supplied a roll of fine royal blue canvas for the upholstering thereof, history has lost its lien on such knowledge.

Nathan Donovan Yance's father was neither a fusilier nor aware of his French heritage. He was a construction foreman who, for all of Nathan's living memory, had spent twelve hours each day, six days each week, on the clock at residential housing sites in southwest Detroit. He had never touched a drop of alcohol, so far as his son knew, and so when he struck his children, he struck them with none of an alcoholic's sloppiness or inaccuracy. He also never developed the habit of spending his paycheck on booze, and the resultant lack of penury preserved the blue canvas war chest from barterdom, even when a Windsor pawnbroker offered \$500 cash for it.

When Yance unpacked his few belongings in his dormitory room at Wigglesworth Hall – Harvard had not been the only Ivy League school to offer him admission, but it had been one of the most generous with its scholarship packages – his new roommate, a laconic German national named Freitag, commented favorably on his vintage traveling trunk. Two years later, when he and Freitag and a six-foot-tall Stanford finance major with gorgeous blond hair sat out on the roof of Wigglesworth and killed a thirty pack of Old Style, Yance confided that he had stolen the trunk out of some poorly-formed notion of vengeance for his father's physical abuse. Freitag had

hugged him fiercely; in the watery light of dawn, the pair of them had dragged the finance major downstairs to Yance's bed, where she slept like a corpse for the next thirteen hours.

As though the brass hasp of the trunk had a twin buried beneath Yance's ribs, and as though his revelation to Freitag had unburdened that second lock, Yance began to give serious consideration to actually opening the war chest during his junior year at Harvard. By that time, he knew that his initial interest in Elizabethan-era drama – Marlowe, Johnson, the Revenger's Tragedy – was far secondary to his love for obscure British romantic poets. He began to read daily the poems that, by the time of Dust's undergraduate attendance at Nebraska Technical, would be as familiar to his memory as the lines of his own hands.

The morning he finally opened the trunk, the sky outside his window was an unfurling sail of leaden cloud. Freitag was out, probably in the basement of Widener playing an illegal Dungeons & Dragons session, and so the dorm room was silent save for the rhythmic ghost of a pounding hammer as some distant neighbor hung pictures.

Yance undid the ancient brass hasp and lifted the lid. A puff of dust rose out from the lip of the old wood; Yance waved it aside as though dismissing his father's disapproving soul. Within were two uniforms, folded neatly so that the collar and the decorations beneath the lapels faced upward. Their faded fronts were laced with winter's thin light. Yance put out a hand and brushed the line of ribbons on one, the glittering silver of the iron cross on the other. He patted down one starched collar and saw his father's name – his own name – stenciled in greying ink across the cloth. As he pulled back his hand, he heard a crinkling sound. His first thought was of the collar-stays that come tucked beneath the lapels of new dress shirts, but his father's uniforms were far too old for that. He prodded two fingers against the breast pockets, the tops of which showed just above the sharp fold of the jacket. He heard the crinkling again, but felt nothing in the pockets. He felt around the edges of the jacket – it was a neat square, its sleeves tucked carefully back, and its edges met the sides of the trunk's interior. Yance's fingers scraped against the upholstery, which bore not fleur-de-lis but tiny designs of delicate flowers – tulips, he

thought. The flowers had once been brown or perhaps even bronzed, but now they had faded to the sepia of old photographs.

He pried up the starched square of the jacket and found the folds of pressed trousers. The cloth of the trousers – wool? gabardine? – was more richly-colored than that of the jacket. At first, Yance thought this discrepancy was the product of the deeper shadow in which the trousers were hiding, but he tugged gently on them and brought one leg into the light. The leg was indeed darker than the cloth of the jacket, and he wondered for a moment where his father had kept the uniform before secreting it in the old French trunk. What foreign sun had fallen, day upon day, on the face of the coat?

Yance dug up the coat and trousers and set them carefully aside. The space beneath was filled with paper. The stacks of pages had once been neatly aligned, but long storage had tossed them into a rough-edged pile. He put his hand down onto the top sheet and ran dusty fingertips across its surface. It was rag paper, cottony to the touch.

Outside the window, a trio of girls crossed Massachusetts Avenue at a trot, their scarves whipping in the wind. The sky threw a handful of dry snow against the lower panes. The sound it made was tiny, barely a scratch on the air, but Yance started and turned, as though expecting a ghost.

A long moment passed. A shorter moment followed, hurrying to keep up.

Yance reached into the trunk whose skin had once shielded the Emperor of the French from unwanted sun and removed the topmost sheet. It read HERMAN MELVILLE in unremarkable type, and below that—

“Isle of the Cross,” Yance said. His voice, round and heavy with the richness that would command the attention of two generations’ worth of liberal arts students, rolled up into the oak-paneled ceiling and dissipated into the day’s slim light.

#

“When did his mom—”

“At the funeral,” Dust said. “As I was heading back to the van.”

“So you did the dignity transfer from the hearse into the church just so you could take him back out again the next morning?”

“Dignified Transfer. And it was a funeral home, not a church. But yeah.”

Inopinée rolled her eyes. “Men and their military terminology.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just—well. I don’t talk about this.”

She took his hand. They had been sitting apart – he had discovered through several misadventures that it was impossible to touch her and simultaneously maintain a meaningful and complex string of conversation – but now she moved to sit beside him. He balked even as he felt the first swells lap at the shore of his physical need for her, but she twisted away as she sat on the bench and then leaned into him.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she said. She shook her head a little, making her hair dance. “Play with my hair.”

Recognizing that this was as deeply-apologetic as Inopinée knew how to be, Dust obeyed. He combed his fingers up to the nape of her neck. He pressed, kneading the crossed threads of muscle which wrapped the back of her skull in a thinning layer, and she moved against him, sinuous and catlike and seemingly unaware of her own effect. Oaks shaded them with a lattice of shifting branches. A pair of joggers went by, bright leggings flashing. Two hundred yards away, just off the path where the wood opened onto the railroad tracks beside the river, a police cruiser sat with its windows down.

“The Dignified Transfer is just to make sure there are Marines there to handle him when he comes in from the airport. One of our staff sergeants met his plane at the hangar when it landed in Lincoln and oversaw the body all the way to Ainsworth; the seven of us were there to move him from the hearse to the undertaker. It’s an extension of the funeral service, really, though nobody sees it. Marines taking care of their own, and all that shit.”

“The funeral was huge,” she said. “I remember seeing it in the paper.”

“It was in all of them. The Omaha and Lincoln papers covered it, and every town paper in the northern half of the state ran nothing else.”

“I heard that. Why?”

“Small state,” he said. “Not a lot of dead teenage veterans, I guess. And the 447th was somewhat famous as a unit. The media got wind of the novelty of the idea of using tanks for logistical missions, and so when all the tree-borne unexploded reconnoitered device deaths started happening, that unit was the one the news touted as a martyr for the American cause.”

Inopinée snorted.

“My little fascist,” he said, and darted in to kiss the edge of her ear before she could twist and accuse him of confusing socialism – her true calling – with fascism, in which she only dabbled on weekends. “You remember that CNN report on the teddy bear caravan that got ambushed by rebels north of Baghdad?”

“I haven’t watched CNN in about twenty years.”

“Alright, then – NPR. You get that beamed directly into your brain, don’t you? Some kind of global commie network?”

“You think because we’re in public I won’t murder you, but you’re wrong.”

“The 447th – Neidermeyer’s unit – was the one that was carrying humanitarian supplies to some bombed-out village—”

“Bombed out by whom, hmm?”

“By Islamic fundamentalists, actually. The PLO, I think. It was some little town near the Syrian border, near Mosul.”

“You’re saying all these names like I have a clue what they are.”

“Syria? You’ve never heard of Syria?”

“Well, yes.” She paused. “That’s on that sea, right?”

“It’s called the Mediterranean. Where all your ideals come from.”

“Do you always waste this much time trying to be clever, or do you sometimes have things to actually say?”

He wove his fist into the hair at the nape of her neck and tugged her head back so that she was looking up at him. “I was saying,” he said, “that the 447th was the unit that got blown up by terrorists while it was bringing teddy bears and Rubik’s Cubes to Iraqi orphans, and so a dead Neidermeyer was a bigger deal than any other dead Nebraska military kid.” He leaned down and kissed her sideways, first pressing her to him and then pulling her away by the hand tangled in her hair. “And you were distracting me.”

“Was I?”

“You were.” He let her go and went back to combing her hair. “The funeral was huge. The entire town couldn’t have been more than eighteen hundred strong, but there were more than a thousand at the funeral home, and the procession from there to the graveyard was more than three miles long. I’ve never seen so many bikers with guns on their hips in my life, even on TV. We had eight flags.”

“Eight?”

“Everyone in his family wanted one.”

“And you can do that?”

“It’s his family. They’re the ones paying for the funeral. They get the SGLI. It’s their show.”

“SGLI?”

“Life insurance. Four hundred grand.”

They were at a park on the Mall in Washington. It was a stunningly perfect day in April. Dust spent no time at all describing it. The academic conference they had come to attend was proceeding mediocly, though the host hotel was especially luxurious. He and Inopinée ordered room service every night. He had spent half an hour chasing grapes down the slopes of her

reclined skin and hunting them out of the bedclothes with his teeth while she lay laughing against him.

Despite such times, the friction that had found its way into their tryst at the faculty party remained. They had both looked forward to consummating their lust for one another during the trip, but a string of strange coincidences had intervened. Dust's mother had called him to say that his aunt Beatrice had finally passed away – Hep C, he later told Inopinée – and then, on their third night, Inopinée's period had started half a week early. Dust was beginning to feel that the universe was against the idea of them making love.⁹ They had done other things. Inopinée gave him what she could with, he knew, more enthusiasm than he would probably have been able to muster had he been in her position.

Something about their time together had changed on the way from the airport to the hotel. They had looked forward to Washington as a space of stolen days. They were the only two from NebTech in attendance at the conference, and for the first time in their affair, they could walk down the street arm in arm or hold hands across a white tablecloth. Dust expected this freedom to enhance their affection for one another, but instead it seemed to drain something vital from them.

Inopinée's eyes were closed. He thought she had drifted, but then she reached out across the silence and said, "You're thinking about it."

"Mmm."

"Don't 'mmm' me. I know you're thinking about it."

"Yeah. Okay."

She reached up and put a hand against his neck. He suspected she meant to caress his cheek, but the awkward angle had made her misjudge the distance, so his neck seemed the best she could do. "Maybe we weren't meant for legitimacy," she said.

"What?"

⁹ "It's called fucking," she said. "Just because you do it with tenderness and grace doesn't mean it isn't called fucking."

“You heard me.” She pulled back her hand and sat up. She looked out between the old oaks at the curving arm of the Hudson and then turned to him. There were tears in her eyes. This happened rarely enough for the occurrence to scare him.

“Inopinée—”

“Maybe this is all we get.”

“Why would you think that?”

She huffed at him. Dust found himself thinking about the day he had followed her and Beaubridge out into the parking lot beneath a spinning April sky. An Inopinée who huffed was as rare and disconcerting as one who put her head down while walking or shied away from a man as he opened a door for her. “How can you think otherwise?” she said. “Look at where we are. We’re supposed to be on honeymoon, here. Your poor aunt and my ninja period: that’s our vaunted escape.”

He took her hand. “Coincidence. Shit happens.”

She laughed her mirthless laugh. “This week? This one week? It doesn’t feel like coincidence. It feels like the world sending us a message. We can’t even pretend to be a legitimate couple.”

“This kind of thing happens to legitimate couples, too,” he said. He spoke quickly, irritation crowding his words. He took a deep breath. He spent his days manipulating entire classrooms of hormonal, emotional teenagers into doing his bidding and his weekends folding flags for bereaved widows, but Inopinée’s dismay frightened and confused him.

Dust tried to focus on assuaging her dismay instead of on wanting to get laid.

“He’s getting more and more suspicious, you know,” Inopinée said. For a moment, Dust thought she might be talking about his penis, whose unemployment was foremost on his mind. Then he realized she meant her husband. “I just feel like maybe we can’t survive as a normal couple. Maybe we’re destined to be outlaws.”

He laughed and held her.

“What?”

“Your despair makes you dramatic.”

She turned to look at him, eyes alight, but he held out a hand. “I love you,” he said.

That gave her pause. He cupped his other hand over his nose and mouth and beetled his brow. He began making guitar sounds from behind his makeshift mask. When Inopinée realized he was producing the opening chords to “Wanted Dead or Alive,” she lunged at him, laughing, but he leapt up and took off around the bench, twanging an imaginary guitar.

By the time she caught him, he was shouting in a growly pirate-outlaw voice that he had seen a million faces and that he had rocked them all. They collapsed in the grass beside the jogging path and she covered his mouth with both hands. He hummed the chorus anyway, wiggling his eyebrows in time to the song. She put a hand over his eyes, then found she couldn’t stop his singing with just her other hand, so she bent and kissed him into silence, holding his eyes shut.

The whole thing was in general going poorly, and the experience was proving more emasculating than Dust was willing to bear.

In fact, he wasn’t even willing to bear it in prose.

#

Time went on. Entropy increased.

Dust began to believe that Inopinée was right. Where were they going, he wondered, that his shiftlessness couldn’t cause them problems? What would they be when the spy-game chic of the affair wore off, as eventually it must, and they became – what? A dating couple? Roomies? The end of his time with the Marines loomed close, and somewhere, something loomed in a manner other than close, and Dust ran.

Dust ran. At the crest of the hill, he looked down into the dell where 36th crossed his road. There was no mist; late fall had yielded to the cold clarity of November, and the tunnel of trees over the intersection was topped with yellow light. The road itself dipped into the shade of the

hollow, and the mouth it made was edged in darkness, like the crumpled space between the clenched fingers at the side of a fist. Dust took the decline in loping strides, keeping the weight on his instep, feeling the treachery of the cool asphalt as it stole his articular cartilage one step at a time. The ditches to either side of the road were deep here, carved out into branch-strewn gullies by years of spring floods. The golden hour draped the land with mellow fire. Dust moved in and out of the sun's sparse warmth as the trees of the wood reached over him, their branches bobbing like the heads of old men in grim agreement with one another. Their shadows followed him west, first across 48th, then across 60th, then past 72nd. At each crossing, Dust looked north and south down the long line of the intervening lane. He wondered how many bad poems had been written about a tree overhanging a country lane and how many miles he could run before his feet began to bleed.

At 84th, there was no sign, only a battered metal pole with a dented octagon the color of faded blood affixed to its upper quadrant. Dust had never been out this far, and he slowed to a walk, peering at the spray of shotgun pocks across the faded white letters on the sign. The old tires hung from the staked fence along the road in a long, irregular line, their paint the only evidence of recent human activity for miles. As Dust stood parked between KEEP OUT and STOP, the last glint of day slipped over the rusting top of the pole and was gone.

Dust felt his thighs cooling with the pleasant hum of heavily-worked muscle. Already, his calves were drawing up and settling against the bone. He took off, rocking heel-toe to rest and stretch his calves. His left knee, nominally disabled since his tour, registered the impact of this change and protested at once. He shifted back to a forefoot strike after a quarter mile, balancing muscle tension with joint stress, listening to the pumping column of his body for pain as a pianist feels her keys for discord. The evening washed over him, the trees growing taller and wilder, the oil of his sweat slipping away into the air. So intent was he on the run that he did not feel the mantling twilight until it was well settled upon the road.

Behind him, in the high grass at the foot of the rusted pole, a long rectangle of beaten aluminum stared at the purpling sky. The sign was painted a reflectorized Kelly green. Printed across it in white letters barely visible between the broken weeds was the number 86.

#

The road ended half a mile after the last intersection. In the fading light, Dust made it to within a hundred yards of the three shining yellow squares on their corrugated spikes before he realized what they were.

End of the line, he thought, halting before the low rail from which the signs rose. Beyond them, the forest retreated for perhaps ten yards, as though honoring the idea of the road, and then rose up in a wall of foliage so high that Dust had to crane his neck all the way back to see the sky beyond it. The cloud-tracks there reflected a hot pink that was draining toward indigo even as he watched.

Shit, he thought, *what time is it?*

As if in answer, the forest rippled and waved. A line of leaves slipped free from the face of the wood and scratched across the rough asphalt at the lip of the road. For a moment, Dust felt an urge to step over the low rail – it was the curved steel kind one saw lining the embankments of twisting California cliffs in movies about people who drove off the edges of curves – and to simply walk into the mouth of the forest. No more running; no more writing; no more funerals; no more Inopinée with her questions and her challenge and her refusal to be what he had tricked himself into wanting. He thought about stopping all of it, all the silly business of trying to fool the world into the idea of his own immortality, and of walking into the woods, where that which was truly immortal might live.

The bare branches of elms, thrust out from the coniferous arms of their evergreen neighbors, dipped toward the road.

Dust took a step forward. In his ears, the sound of his music fell away, and from some other source, from some idea of forests that was the apotheosis of all forests, came the gathering

chorus of woodland under night; he heard crickets, and twigs turning under small weight, and a mockingbird's cry. Over it all rose the rising ululation of cicadas, cicadas by the tens of thousands entrenched in the looming wall of the forest. It was the call of the wood, the voice of something which had never spoken language yet which knew the final tongue of Dust's heart.

He stepped forward again, and when his right foot landed half on asphalt and half in the pad of perennial mulch and leaf-rot at the edge of the wild, the noise of the land fell away. It had never been there to begin with, of course – a November forest has no voice other than the wind, which brooks no argument – but it fell away from his mind and left him suspended for that one tentative pace in a cocoon of perfect, crystalline silence.

Into that silence rose the roar of an engine, loud and jarringly artificial. Dust realized he had been hearing it, hidden beneath the illusion of the woodsong, for at least half a minute. He recognized the sound of diesel combustion, and it was close, so *close*—

Dust took his foot off the path and turned.

He made it halfway around before the truck struck him.

#

Dust began to look for himself among the dead. He did this not because he feared death – at twenty-nine, the certainty of his own demise had yet to pierce his veil of personal immortality – but because the funeral work compelled him to find himself in the Marines he bore to the grave. At first, the connections were superficial: like the dead, he was a Marine, he had served in a foreign war, he wore the uniform. Names and biographies and facial features began to assail him as he stood at parade rest over the ends of coffins or as he spread the flag to the sound of Taps.

When he first began to run the long country roads at the edge of town, he thought he was running to somewhere. He imagined himself seeking some sacred distance, some woodland shrine, some forgotten trail. But his search for the dead, for his own name in the rolls chiseled into crematorium walls, made clear that he was not running to; he was running from. It seemed damned cliché to run from death, but it also seemed preferable to the alternative.

After they sent off Neidermeyer to the growl of Harleys and the solemn watchfulness of the huge crowd, Dust pulled the captain aside and asked him what Neidermeyer's first name had been. He was desperately afraid that it would be Dust, or Dustin, or Dusty. Anything beginning with D could have been a threat. Dust did not know what it might mean, should he finally find a dead Marine with part of his own name, but he knew it would be bad, would be a sign of slippage. First it would be a coincidence of name, and then he would start seeing himself on the cheaply-framed photographs propped up on little flower tables beside the coffins, and then—

“Albert,” the captain said. He had delivered each of the seven flags to their respective family members; Dust had never seen the man look so tired. “Albert Christopher Neidermeyer.”

Dust exhaled. The captain turned away. Dust wandered back toward the van, a process made haphazard by the scattered crowds of attendees still gathered around the fresh grave. He detoured around a group of bikers, their hips heavy with revolvers in leather holsters, and wove between the lines of flags planted along the car path.

As he neared the van, a woman detached herself from a huddle of somber suits and came toward him. Dust was walking with his head bowed, both to cut the late sun with the visor of his cap¹⁰ and because he was mulling over the names Albert and Christopher, searching them for hidden and malicious significance to his own. He did not see the woman's eyes or the way her fingers hitched and twitched at her sides as she drew near.

One of the other mourners turned. She was a teenager, pretty in a slim black skirt and cardigan, and when she saw that the woman was no longer by her side, her eyes widened. She

¹⁰ “It's called a ‘cover.’” He made a hand motion. “A Marine would never say ‘cap.’”

“Nobody cares.”

“I care.”

“You men and your military terms. He's not even saying it. He's thinking it.”

“A Marine would never think ‘cap.’ He would think ‘cover.’”

“Yeah, but your reader has no idea what a cover is. You have to use something else.” She grinned. “I'm sure if we put our thinking caps on, we can work it out.”

“You think because we're in public I won't murder you, but you're wrong.”

called after the older woman. In the general hush of the cemetery, her voice was a shot across the bow; Dust, lost in introspection, heard nothing.

“Excuse me?” The woman’s low, sensible heels scratched on the twin gravel ruts of the car path. “Sir? Excuse me?”

Something about the woman’s voice, which sounded as rough and ragged as the stones under her feet, broke through Dust’s reverie. He looked up. His expression was the plastic mask of polite disinterest that was as much a part of his funeral uniform as his rows of ribbons or his white belt.

The woman was still two yards away, but she had altered course to intercept Dust as he moved toward the van.

Dust smelled hay. He had time to think, *No, that’s not right; it smells like tuna in here*, and then the woman was upon him, one shaking hand held out in greeting. Dust took it.

“I’m Rhonda Neidermeyer,” the woman said. “I just wanted to thank you for what you did today.”

“It was my honor, ma’am.”

“Mom!” The teenager in the cardigan was moving. Her heels, Dust saw, were entirely too high and sexy to have any business navigating cemetery soil. “Mom!”

“That’s what Albert said.” The woman was looking at Dust’s chest. Her voice was flat as a January lake. “He said serving his country was an honor.”

“Mom! Leave him alone!”

“Ma’am,” Dust said, extricating his hand, “I’m very sorry for your lo—”

“Why did you kill him?”

Dust blinked. The teenager approached. Some reptilian part of Dust’s mind tracked her progress, seeing how the thin cardigan enhanced the curves of her breasts, how the tank top beneath flattered her stomach.

The woman clutched Dust. After her slow, shiftless movement on the way over to him, her speed was astounding. She shot both hands up – for a moment, Dust was sure she was going for his eyes – and hooked them around the back of his neck, and then her weight was against him, impossible in its burden of anguish. He felt something – it might have been her cheekbone – press against the little iron cross of his marksmanship badge.

“Mom!” The girl reached them. She put a hand on the older woman’s shoulder.

The woman wailed. The girl drew back her hand as though burned.

Dust had heard of people wailing in grief before. He had even met some of them. But Neidermeyer’s mom was making a noise that did not so much evoke grief as define it. She pressed her face against the rack of ribbons on Dust’s jacket and screamed. Strands of her hair, which was plaited atop her head like whorls of chocolate ice cream over a cone, tickled his chin. He saw the crowd from which the woman had come; they stared at him as though he had by some secret signal triggered the scene before them.

The girl reached out again and took her mother by the shoulders. This time it was as if the latter was burned by the touch. She renewed her cries. The noise cut the sky like carrion fowl. There were words in her howling, Dust realized. He listened, but could not make out what they were.

The woman paused to suck in a wet, sniffling breath. Dust wondered what the front of his dress jacket would look like after this. He had done some interesting things in the uniform, but the snot of the bereaved was new to him.

“Come on, mom,” the girl said. “Let’s go.” She glanced at Dust. Her eyes were hard, nearly accusatory. Two men – family or friends, from the suits – helped her detach Neidermeyer’s mom from Dust. The quartet headed back the way they had come.

The shadows of trees shook the boughs overhead. Wind passed across the skin of the yard and left Dust unstirred.

He turned and fled without a word. When he reached the van, he found Soya and Greenfield already inside. Greenfield hauled back the sliding door. “Holy shit, corporal,” he said. “That was like watching a car crash.”

“Shut up, Greenfield. Close the door.” Dust looked out the tinted glass and saw people staring. He felt inordinately safe in the van, as though if any of the mourners really had a problem with him they could not simply walk over and knock on the window.

Soya was in the front passenger seat, looking out across the cemetery.

“Hey,” Dust said, “did you see that?”

Soya glanced back and shrugged. “Yeah.” He turned forward and opened the glove compartment. The smell of tuna flooded the van. “Honestly? After all the buildup, I expected more.”

#

Does this count as a car crash? Dust thought. The little clearing beyond the road, hemmed on three sides by the lowering boughs, was a column of cool air whose capital was the sky. He passed through it, drawn toward the wall of trees at the clearing’s west edge. His shins struck the folded steel barrier and he had enough time to wonder at the height of his gaze, at the power of the arcing thrust under whose power he now found himself thrown, and then he was tilted forward, spun by the impact against the rail. The sky moved out of his view. The left side of his body was a blank white sheet, a toneless ringing, like the sound in the ear after one comes up from a great depth of still water.

If it was monsters Inopinée wanted, Dust thought he could supply them.

How about what followed me in the mist last month? he thought. *How about what’s waiting for me out in those trees?*

How about me?

Dust, turning in midair with the momentum of his flight, saw the road rotate back into his view. He thought he would get to see the truck, the agent of his flight, but when he came around,

he saw only the blinding flair of blue halogen eyes, their beams amplified by the chrome smile stretched between them.

Something roared in Dust's ear. It was the diesel. It was his own cry of exultation and pain. It was the forest itself, surging rhythmically with the same midnight-guitar grace as Bourbon once had done, calling with the sweet grime of rot, waiting to fold him in.

#

He entered the forest. The tip of a branch wrote a line of fire across his left cheek. The green arm of a low cedar tousled his hair as though with affection.

The light diminished in volume but not in clarity. Past the initial barricade of foliage, the trees stood widely spaced, as though grown apart through mistrust. The ground was full of hillocks and soft ridges upon which ran lines of indigo bush and fern; between these were little troughs filled with leaves and the detritus of the wood. Dust pushed aside the frond of one fern and went forward, wondering at the feel of the damp frond against his skin.

Ferns? he thought. That can't be. I must be seeing things. Maybe I suffered a fall.

He giggled a little at this. The sound, dry and weak, sank into the bed of leaves underfoot and vanished, leaving only a fecund silence that seemed somehow reproachful. Gone was the song of the wood, the whirr of its insects, the hushed consortium of bough rubbing bough. Gone was the road, if indeed it had ever been.

Dust touched his left side with the heel of his hand. There was no pain. This surprised him, though he could not have said why; he recalled nothing of the crash, which had gone to the same place as the road. He recalled only light, and a crackling roar, and the touch of a huge hand pushing him up and into the wind.

He recalled none of these things, and only thought about them later, to make himself seem more mystical.

Dust was not mystical. He passed through a clump of ferns that could not possibly be growing in a forest in rural Nebraska and found himself on a rough path of fine loam which wound north to south across his line of advance.

“Where are you going, Robin Crusoe?” he said. The forest ate his mutter and made no response.

Dust turned right and headed south.

#

A single diesel rumble moved through the trees like the call of a hunting cat.

Dust turned and looked back. The patchy northbound trail ran from view. Somewhere down its shady corridor, fenced in by branch and cloud, a man lay on his crushed left side, his stunned flesh hot against the decomposing forest floor.

Dust did not look in the direction of the road for very long. He went south. Now and again he touched his side. The ribs there felt both pliant and sturdy, as though he were made of two half-developed photographs overlaid against one another. The air moved against his skin, which despite the November chill was flecked with sweat whose smell bore both the run and fear.

November? he thought. *Is it November?*

Dust exhaled, feeling fear, and the fear came out of him in a pale plume. It did not feel like November. It felt like the dead of winter.

When had he worked in the library with Beaubridge? Eight weeks in the summer, hadn't it been? The meeting with the chair – he of the leather chairs – had been at semester's end, following the fight in the parking lot, which had happened in tornadic April and had immediately become canonized as departmental legend.

Spring. Summer. Fall. Where had he fallen when the truck hit him? Had he struck one of the trees reaching onto the road? Had he landed in the soft loam of the clearing at the end of the pavement? Was he tangled in the guardrail like the twisted frame of an Italian roadster driven too fast around a blind curve?

That wasn't me, he thought, and even as he dismissed the idea as nonsensical – who else would have been this far out, pounding pavement on the backroads at December's edge, risking mastication by the chrome teeth of some hillbilly's dualie? – he felt the bare beginning of a way out take shape somewhere in the back of his mind.

That wasn't me, he thought again. *Someone else got hit by that truck*. He turned the though over, checking it for cracks, tapping along its equatorial ridge.

His foot struck a stone. The thin running shoes translated the pain clearly.

“Sore-footed.” Dust licked his lips and felt them rough. “Galled. Refractory.”

Ahead, the path opened. Light swept across hayfield grass. The light was a fine blend of early starshine and the last spark of a vanished sun. The grass might have been a clearing or a grove, or a field, or the broad swath of a running brook. Dust heard something rustle: it was faint, and could have been water, or wind, or blades of wild hay drawn across the sleek flank of a passing animal.

Dust set foot in the open space at the end of the path. Sound fell back into the barren arms of the trees.

It was a field: a great, rolling field, rising on his left until it met the moon on a low ridge, where three trees met the low sky. Ahead, the land arced down toward a gentle bowl. The forest's edge, thrown out to his right in a grey curve, followed the line of a fast brook. Down near the bowl's basin, where the brook nearly peeked from the trees, water ran shining between clusters of oak and cedar.¹¹

Dust looked out over the grass, feeling anticipation for something he could not name. He heard again the rustle of something sinewy and lean as it slid among the stalks of high hay. *Was I*

¹¹ “And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.”

“What?”

“It's an allusion. An allusion for your illusion.”

“That's very British.”

“It's not British,” she said. “It's American.”

“Seems British to me.”

really in that library with Beaubridge? he thought. *Was I really in Washington with Inopinée?* *Was I really ever here? Am I here now?* Wherever *here* was, he seemed not to mind being at it. He was afraid and he was cold – he had thought they were different, those sisters – but he did not mind. He wondered in a languid way if he were dead.

“The night-fires are going out.” He beat his heels against the soil to warm his legs.

“Oxford is very pretty, but I don’t like to be dead.”

Dust shook himself. He felt heavy. He was too much metaphor. He was pinned to the one-way glass of some cosmic fourth wall by temporal linearity. He walked out into the field, away from the words and the whispering wood. Somewhere, a man groaned into damp ground; Beaubridge waved his clubbed hand in frustration; Inopinée lay with her hair out around her in a crimson fan; blood from a deflated lung pooled into the smiling curve of a broken rib.

Where were the Marines? Where was the funeral work? Where had Neidermeyer gone? Where was the flag-draped death Dust had borne across green grass?

Out here, the moon whispered. *Out here in the high hay*.

Something slipped along the edge of the field to Dust’s left, hiding in the deeper shade of the trees. The moon, leaping from its perch on the eastern ridge, was a glossy coin the color of parched bone. The man there, his face written out in crater-runes and meteor shadow, was Dust himself.

Out here, the moon said. *Come out here*.

Dust reached into his pocket – it was his left pocket, and the hand he put into it felt at once whole and as shattered as churchdoor glass – and came up with a little cue card, a square of ivory stock textured to look and feel like linen. On it was written a single line of poetry: the line he was supposed to speak boldly before striding out into the menacing field.

Dust looked at the line and then flicked the card aside. “Fuck you, Lord Tennyson,” he said, and strode out into the menacing field.

He pushed through an endless sheaf of pale hay stalks. His body vanished from the belt buckle down. Almost immediately, he heard the thin rasp of something moving in alongside him: some low animal, breasting the grass, snuffling for his scent. Somewhere across the field, water ran against banks of clay. A sound that was not a water mill beat the darkness. Dust thought again of the glimmer of hope he had felt back on the path: the idea that somehow, somewhen, this was not him, *he* was not him, the man lying in pain back behind the guardrail was not him.

A ball of nacreous light took hold of him. Under the leprous moon, Dust went on.

#

He had felt this same sense of peace before, backstage at his high school performing arts center. There, he would climb the ladders to the catwalks in the empty hour between the end of school and the beginning of theatre rehearsal. Enshrouded by the skirts and curtains of the stage, he would stretch out on the metal catwalk path. Up there, even had someone turned on all the lights, Dust would be unseen, for the stage floods were below the walkway, pointing down. Thus hidden above the sleeping stars, Dust would close his eyes, feeling the cold grid of the walkway floor press against his shirt. He would feel the transparent, utterly unbreakable immortality known only to teenagers and to the users of very hard drugs. He would feel these things and feel nothing else.

The only time else he had felt such peace was with Inopinée. With her, he became as calm and flat as millennial ice over a mountain lake never named by man.

Dust wanted to keep reminiscing about peace – it was, unsurprisingly, peaceful – but part of him remembered that he was in the forest, in the high field in the forest, and that long shapes were drawing closer to him across the dry maze of hay. That part, coiled about the base of his brain, drawing heat from his spine through its silken scales, knew that peace has no survival value.

I like this interlude, Dust thought. It's better than the last one.

You can't keep running forever, the moon said. Dust looked up at its voice, and saw that its fat disc had indeed followed him here, to the shapeless space between forest and . . . and wherever he would go once the illusion of forest was gone.

Is it an illusion?

Of course it is, the moon said. *And of course I am. I'm just a mirror for what you already know. And you're just a hatchwork of broken bones lying beside the end of the road, chasing denial into the woods.*

Denial of what? Dust thought. The silvered light began to fade. He looked again and saw that the osseous orb of the moon was shrinking back onto itself, waning in the space of seconds.

"Denial of what?" Dust said.

Nothing answered. The moon was gone.

#

"Death? Is that what you want from me? Because I swear to God, if you don't grow the fuck up, that's what one of us is going to get. I'm just going to snap, and that's gonna be it."

Dust put up his hands, palms out. "Don't be dramatic."

"Dust." Inopinée's eyes flickered, their lids squeezing and then flaring open. Her mouth was a flat white rosebud in the taut skin of her face.

"Okay." He drew his hands back and apart; now he looked like a man surrendering to a bank robber. "That was a mistake. You're not being dramatic. You're really pissed. I get it."

"Do you?" Her voice was a line of fire, thin and yet lethal: a rapier, a sniper's laser. "Because when I say this is going to end in death, I mean it." He waited for her to gesticulate, but her hands were still. Her composure was terrifying, and Dust, who remembered the sound of a 7.62 NATO bursting the brick beside his cringing head, found himself sweating. "What do you think Dave would do if he found us right now, or heard about our little trip to Washington?"

"Nothing even happened in Washington!" Dust said, and immediately regretted speaking. It was not so much that it was the wrong thing to say as that there were no right things to say.

This was a chessboard on which there were only wrong moves. There was nothing to win here; there was only Inopinée, the love of his broken, shitty mess of a life,¹² lashing out with the pain of a cornered animal.

Inopinée rose in her seat, powered by pure fury. “Nothing? We were *naked* together, Dust. I’m so sorry my *fucking period* got in the way of you having a good ole time. I guess rolling around naked in bed and then letting you come on me was ‘nothing.’”

Dust looked down. This was all folly.

“We’ll just tell my husband that it was nothing. I’m sure he’ll understand.” She threw her hair over one shoulder. Dust had never found cause to think of the words *fearsome* or *imperious* in such an immediate sense. “I told you we had to be careful. We’re not in high school. When I move away from you, I’m not saying I don’t like you, or that we can’t go to the dance together. When I move away from you, it’s because if certain of our colleagues find out about our *adulterous affair*, they will tell my husband. And my husband will beat me to death. Is that nothing? Is that nothing enough for you?”

They had been out with half the English Department at Nancy’s, where four beers had convinced Dust against the mirror’s better judgment that running his hand up and down Inopinée’s thigh under the table was a good idea. Ironically, the mirror itself had nearly betrayed them; the girl sitting next to Inopinée, a shameless gossip named Miranda, had glanced up to order another mimosa and had come within an instant of seeing the reflection of Dust’s fingers massaging their way towards the crotch of Inopinée’s jeans. Inopinée had slapped Dust’s hand away at the penultimate moment, but the ensuing awkwardness between them had not been lost on Miranda, who would surely be watching for any future behavior out of the ordinary. Dust had spent the remainder of the evening sulking and failing miserably at pretending like he wasn’t sulking. Now they sat in Inopinée’s car, and Dust found himself unable to breach the space between the seats.

¹² “This is a little self-piteous, isn’t it?”

Inopinée fell silent. Dust looked out the windshield at the empty lot and the sky. The margin between the two was made by the black shapes of bare trees on the north end of campus, cutouts infringing on the stars. Dust's anger fled through the glass like heat. He closed his eyes and pictured an obsidian lion-bodied giant sinking flank by flank back into the endless wasted dunes. He opened his eyes.

"I can't do this," he said. "I thought I was strong enough, mature enough, to do this . . . to do this right, to balance my own needs and yours well enough." He reached across the seats, crossing the cold, and took her hand. He was certain she would withdraw it. She did not. Her tolerance for him, he thought, seemed tireless.

"It's not tireless," she said. "It's very, very, very strong, but it's not tireless. Sooner or later, I will withdraw."

He held her for a moment. "Are you reading my mind?"

"I don't need to. You're totally transparent to me."

He blushed. She squeezed his hand. "And that's a good thing. I know you've been trained to hide it, to close it off, but you can't do that. You have to let me in. If you can let me in, we might have a chance."

This was not their first argument. He had trod on her toes before, always through the kind of brute, childlike rage that had been a staple of his emotional diet for as long as he could remember. It had served him so well in schoolyard tussles and in the Corps but was useless as an atrophied limb in academia, and it was worse than useless with Inopinée who, usually delicate as diamond, became so eminently fracturable in his hands.

Dust looked down at his hands. There was danger here. No matter what he tried to do, he and Inopinée always seemed to come back around to this kind of fight. There was danger here, and if he did not find a way out and beyond and through, it would do more damage than either of them could control.

There was danger here.

The susurrus of haystack against hide had risen in intensity and volume. It grew and split around him, becoming the stereo sound of two or more moving objects. They were flanking him.

Dust thought about pack predators: lions, dolphins, wolves, butcherbirds. Wolves made the only sense, given the circumstances, but there were no wild wolves left anywhere near urban Nebraska. The only thing that might come close would be—

Understanding came to him in the instant before the coyotes began to howl. Their calls leapt across the high grass, passing through Dust's bones with an atavistic resonance so pure he nearly stopped moving. He had heard coyotes before – packs of them still lived and hunted in the hills around Camp Pendleton – but never this close.

Never as prey, a voice said above him. Dust looked and saw the moon. It hung, full as rotten fruit, from the black branch of firmament that oversaw this fell wold. The color of it – silver overlaid with the yellow of ancient parchment – had not changed, but the Dust in the Moon was gone. In his place there leered a craterous canine skull.

The coyotes called again, their voices fusing and then breaking apart into jagged noise. At a distance, Dust knew, a pack of crying coyotes sounds like a gang of howler monkeys murdering several infants during a housecat orgy. Up close, he now discovered, they sounded like the mad denizens of some unfriendly alien world. The din drove spikes of terror into the soft places of his ears.

Something rustled the hay at his left hand. A body, long and lean and grey-furred, breasted the stalks with the calm menace of a sharkfin cutting water.

Dust ran.

As though waiting for this signal, the calls fell off into something that sounded like laughter. The dogs were running.

Something crossed his path on a diagonal. Dust watched the coyote emerge from the grass and vanish back into it at a stride, moving with the muscular grace of a quadruped that relied on such strength for its daily meal.

They're toying with me, he thought. Panic shot thin fingers down the lines of his nerves. He couldn't outrun the animals; they had the advantage of speed, and likely that of endurance as well.

This is ridiculous. I'm not even here. I'm lying on my mutilated side, bleeding to death into my own stomach from a catastrophic internal hemorrhage, while Inopinée's husband sits in his idling truck with the heater on, watching me die and having a sandwich.

If he died to being eaten alive by coyotes here, would he through some asinine magic snap back to himself so he could die to being crushed by a truck beside the road? Dust did not know, but the idea gave him no particular comfort. He kept running. The cyclic whickering of the grass as his sneakers and legs churned through it echoed his breath, which came fast and sour yet showed no sign of giving out. All the miles in the fog were paying off.

Another coyote whipped across his path, growling and snapping. *Not enough*, its passage seemed to say. *Not nearly enough*.

Dust knew this was true. The moon was right, he realized; he was prey. There had to be some angle to play, some advantage he could press. He spun his mind, waiting for a solution to fall out from between the folds and lay before him like a carefully-indexed map.

Nothing came.

The image of a map persisted. Dust thought about the road, and about the long lines of north-to-south city lanes crossing it. The brook he had seen, in the low ground off to the southwest as he entered the field: where was it? Was it close enough, was it wide enough? How well did coyotes swim? Pretty well, probably. Still, there was nothing for it but to try.

He angled right, hearing and feeling the crying coyotes shift with him, knowing they were closing around him, waiting only for some unknown signal to pounce. If he could make it to the low ground—

Low ground. The thought pulled him up short. He stopped dead, seeing the black inked lines of a topographical map laid out in concentric bird's-eye whorls.

Coyotes braked and slid around him. From somewhere close came a sound he doubted many other humans had ever heard: the high-speed collision of two sprinting prairie wolves, tumbling and biting and howling as they rolled over one another in their effort to stop and turn.

Dust laughed at the noise and then reached into his pocket. Immediately behind him, something came bounding through the hay with a growl and skidded to a halt, throwing dirt and haystalks against the back of Dust's bare calves.

He paid the animal no mind. His left hand came out from the pocket of his running shorts. Pinched between index finger and thumb was a tiny black line of ink. It was a tiny letter "I." It was warm against his hand, as though infused with the care of the person whom it represented. Dust didn't know how she could know that he was in need of aid or how such aid could have reached him here – wherever *here* turned out to be. Such concerns of logistical reality felt absolutely unimportant here, in a place that could not be, under the lunatic eye of a gibbet moon whose face was now neither man nor dog but some horrible fusion of the two.

The coyotes came for him.

Dust threw the line of ink into the hay at his feet. The land before him erupted, crashing away into a slope so steep it was almost a cliff.

Dust felt rather than saw the coyote lunge at him from behind. Without thinking, he stepped forward into empty air.

#

He tumbled down the precipice, rolling on shoulders and knees and cocked elbows. Bruises blossomed on his skin.

Something crashed by him. It was a coyote, spinning and yelping, throwing tufts of fur as it spilled end over end. Despite the fearful plummet of the hill, Dust began to laugh again.

The slope eased abruptly, riding out into level land. The grass here was lower and less dense; Dust could not see the brook, but its voice was unmistakably louder than it had been a minute ago. He let his wild roll carry him into a lopsided jog, and focused on regaining his equilibrium, moving forward with as much speed as he could muster. Behind him and to both sides, he heard the yammering cacophony of prairie wolves coming to earth. Something cracked; something screamed in pain. It made no sense that he should have more success navigating the new precipice than his four-legged pursuers, and so Dust chalked it up to the only thing he could think of: he had expected it, while the coyotes had not. Whatever fever-dream or nightland this forest might be, it was their home turf, ground they knew, and his reconstruction of its topography had startled them. He didn't think about this for very long; he threw himself, body and mind, into the run, into following the brook's call. What new device he might use to thwart the beasts once he got there, he had no idea.

He had gone only a hundred yards when his left side began to give out. The flesh on that side had been in a sort of blue haze ever since leaving the road; his bones felt as distant as a mountain horizon, and his skin was the no-temperature of novocaine. It was as though part of him had been left with the body beside the guardrail, locked in the loss and pain of that impact, though Dust himself had remained essentially functional. But now he felt a fuzziness creeping into his fingertips, into the ball of his shoulder, into the lean lines of his thigh. His steps on that side began to falter.

The water was close. He could smell it now: a pungent, slippery odor that made him think of fecund algae over wet stones. Something snarled and leapt at him; he surged ahead, stumbling down the first of the little declines made by the field as it dipped toward the stream basin, and the coyote missed him by a space he did not care to measure.

Now his breath came hard. It felt like a locked block of sandstone in the left side of his chest. He sucked at the cold air, needing a gale and getting only small puffs.

The brook loomed. wide and deep with the runoff from some twilit highland. It chortled and swirled before him. His left foot sank into a patch of boggy ground, and his unfeeling ankle buckled. He went down on both knees, listing to port.

The grass sang as long shapes pushed their way out of it and into the clear marshland beside the water.

“No,” Dust said.

A coyote came for him. He spun on his bad side, raising his left fist – it was little more than a club now, as rigid and undextrous as a hand in a white plaster cast – and swung at the sound of the snarling maw. He felt contact and heat, and was rocked away. He fell, put out his good hand, righted himself, and saw the dog veer away with blood on its nose.

I just punched a coyote in the mouth, he thought. I have reached the pinnacle of absurdity.

“Nope!” he said. He laughed again. The laughter was a bright peal of color bouncing off the water like a skipped stone. He looked around, seeing the that water reflected in a dozen pairs of tiny eyes. “Nope!” he told them. The spark of laughter came again, not a flare this time but a beacon, a lighthouse beam on a far shore. “Nope,” he said, wonderingly, and his laughter rang up into the bare trees and flew away into the hungry night.

The coyotes lunged.

“Inopinée,” Dust said. The word struck them like fire.

He reached into his pocket again and came out with a handful of little black lines. He put his palm flat before his mouth and blew; the lines scattered out over the water, finding one another, slipping into angles. For a moment, Dust thought they were building a bridge, and then he saw the square shape of their form, rising from the thin surf of the running stream like some Arthurian artifact, and he smiled.

The coyotes balked and shied back toward the hay. Inopinée's name burned in the air before them like a brand. Several of the animals turned and bolted.

Dust rose on his one feeling leg. The other he dragged behind him. The river muck tugged at his shoes. *Don't go*, it said with the moon's treacherous voice. *Stay. Stay with us. Stay in the night.*

He pressed on. The car of the elevator was made from ornate hardwood beams and was faced on three sides with glass. He couldn't see those sides – the doors, inscribed with gold leaf, faced him and cast deep shadows – but he could see the cheery light spilling from them onto the river's dancing skin. The car ran with rivulets of steam and water as it rose. It halted just before its lower edge broke the surface. Dust heard the polite *ding* of its chime. He reached for the doors, thinking, *This was all an illusion, anyway. The forest, the field, the coyotes. I was probably never in any real dan—*

With a guttural cry, one of the coyotes lunged forward and sank its teeth into the outer edge of his left hand. Even through the deadening double-exposure effect that gripped his entire left side, the pain was immediate and immense. He screamed and tilted under the weight of the leaping dog.

Emboldened by their fellow, other coyotes scampered forward. The bog slowed them not at all; they were lighter than their prey, and lithe where he was half-paralyzed, and their weight was distributed over four paws instead of an ungainly two.

With a mighty effort, Dust rose from his bad knee to his feet, tearing his injured hand away from the animal as he did so. Wrenching the flesh free was more painful than the bite had been. He screamed again, though this time the agony in his cry was blended with desperate triumph. Blood streamed out and tattooed the black water; the inky patterns it made spun away on the lively current.

The coyote came back. Dust reared back and kicked at it with his club foot. Either the luck of his unfeeling limbs held or the beast's bloodlust made it sloppy; the blow connected, and the beast turned away, howling.

Another came forward on the opposite side. Dust turned, laborious in the mud, trying in vain to accomplish some measure of backward progress toward the elevator while fending off the attack. The animal was close. Its eyes were alive with blood. This time, Dust had no purchase against the mud to aim a blow. He licked his lips and said, "In- Inop—"

The coyote barked, cutting him off. It was no good, anyway; what fear the lissome fire of the first incantation had etched into their bestial hearts had faded to embers, and the new spell had no potency against them. The air was poisoned with the copper of his blood; they could smell their victory now, smell their supper. Even Dust knew that words have no power over a predator whose ear has pricked to the bloodsong of her prey. Blows might still keep them away, at least for a time, but Dust was half-mired, half-frozen, and nearly spent.

The elevator. He had to reach the elevator.

The coyote nearest him began to growl. The sound grew with the linear finality of an approaching train. The others took it up, and soon the night had quieted save for that rising chorus of vibratory threat.

Dust bent, scooped a fistful of river muck from the skirt of the stream, and threw. His good hand was his weak hand, and the throw was poor, but the coyote wasn't expecting it and had – he hoped – little experience with prey who threw mud in defense. He didn't wait to see if the animal ducked aside, but turned and lumbered for the car.

The water sloshed and pulled around him. One of his sneakers – the pair had been \$170 at a specialty running shop in Omaha – slipped off, sucked down by the goop on the streambed. He made it to the doors with just enough time to realize that he had forgotten to calculate how much time it might take to open them.

Behind him, the many-voiced growl came apart as the coyotes splashed into the water. One of them began to shriek like a child in pain.

Dust flailed out, batting at the panel to the left of the door. His numb, lacerated hand struck metal and rebounded with a spike of pain; he imagined bright glyphs and curves of blood smearing onto the polished brass. He couldn't see the panel because the light shining from the glass sides of the car backlit its front, which was dim above the reflective water.

Reflective.

Dust looked down. His reflection, chopped and splintered by the waves of his passage, looked back.

“¿Tienes fuego?”

The man mirrored in the water blinked.

“¿Encendedor! ¿Me das fuego?”

For a moment longer, the reflection was still: a perfect replica of the Dust aboveground. Then it moved, patting itself down from chest to hips. A coyote landed in the river, which was here thigh-deep, less than a yard from Dust's right leg. It floundered and snarled, splashing Dust with cold water. The man in the water shattered and came together.

Jesus, he thought, this is it. Killed in a dream sequence that doesn't even make any sense. What is it they say about dreams? If you die in a dream, you die in real li—

The water at his thighs flared orange with dancing light. The mirrored man was holding the lighter very close to the surface. Some dispassionate corner of Dust's mind saw that the lighter was a brass Zippo the same finish and color as the elevator itself.

The panels of the car shone with serpentine ripples thrown off by the water. The control panel was on the left, not three inches from the limit of the blood marks left by Dust's numb and flailing hand. There was only one button: a burnished golden circle with the word DOWN inlaid in onyx glass upon its center.

Dust punched it. The doors slid open before he had even drawn back his hand, as though they had wanted all along to help him out and had simply been waiting for the stupid man before them to make them work.

Another wild dog splashed into the water beside him. It paddled furiously, its upheld face full of dull hate. Dust vaulted up and into the elevator, whose floor was on a level with his hips. The interior of the car was paneled with spotless mirrors on all three sides to a height of perhaps three feet, above which rose the clear glass walls that transmitted the light he had seen from the bank. In the mirror on the opposite wall of the car, he saw a shape rising from the water at his back, its flashing maw distended with water and ropes of spittle. He tried to turn, to round on the thing with upraised hands and at least bar it from reaching his neck or throat, but his numb hand slid in its own blood on the slick marble floor of the car and he slumped forward, unable even to shift aside.

In the mirror, Dust whirled on the coyote and smote it across the snout with the Zippo's little flame, which instead of puffing out grew into a fan of golden fire as it arced through the air. The mirror-dog shrieked like a woman in labor – there were a lot of womanly shrieks the animal could have reminded Dust of, but he would later swear that it was that particular kind of wail its howl of pain resembled – and fell away with a huge splash. Dust felt water patter down on his back and exposed neck, and then he was rising out of the river, pumping good leg and bad in an ugly jackknife motion to scramble over the lip of the car. Another coyote lunged through the water, closing its teeth into the laces of his remaining shoe, but at the same moment Dust's good foot, covered only with its drenched athletic sock, gained purchase on the inside corner of the door and he shoved, tearing the laces from the thing's jaws with a purr of shredding nylon. In the mirror, his reflection turned to face the door, waving the lighter to ward off further incursion.

The reflection looked back over its shoulder. “*¡Botón!*”

Dust braced himself on his good arm, rose on one knee, and threw his bleeding, clubbed hand at the interior panel. In the mirrors on the walls, the reflection of the lighter he did not have

was flickering; the flame, once bright as a torch, was now nearly gone. The pitchy edge of the stream writhed with glint-eyed shapes.

Something crashed against the frame of the elevator, once, twice, a third time. Dust slipped with the impact; his hurt hand missed the DOOR CLOSE button by an inch and a half.

“Fuck!”

Dust fell, scrambled, swung again. As he reached, the elevator shook a second time. Something sharp squealed against the brass frame just without the doors. The thing throwing itself at the car did not feel like a Labrador-sized coyote; it felt like a fucking bear.

Something was roaring. It might have been the river, or the massed cry of the coyotes, or the voice of a huge diesel truck, snarling out in the woods. It might have been Dust himself.

His throbbing, gory hand smashed into the button. The doors slid toward one another on silent runners. Dust waited for a hairy paw – or perhaps a hairy hand, like Jack Nicholson’s claw in *Wolf* – to clamp down into the car at the last second, blocking the doors and sending them retreating back into their alcoves, but nothing came from outside save a final breath of hay-scented wind.

The doors closed. The elevator descended into silence.

Dust fell back, cradling his bleeding hand to his chest, and let the darkness close over him.

#

The elevator chimed. The doors slid open.

Dust came back to the semidistant sound of bustle and beeping. The bustle involved footsteps on linoleum, the rattle of metal on plastic, and the fast voices of people with no time not to be listened to. The beeping was the risk-free, mirthless warble of a modern office phone – several, in fact.

Dust raised his head from the floor of the car and saw a spinning corridor the color of week-old lime pulp. It was peopled by fuzzy figures who crossed in and out of view.

Sleep snatched at him. Consciousness threatened to secede from the empire. Dust lowered his head and closed his eyes.

“—which is why we’ll get nowhere so long as the board keeps pulling the funds from—
Sir? Jesus. *Susan!*”

Dust opened one eye. Things happened.

“Susan! Page Station Four and grab a gurney!” The voice turned. “Sir? Sir, can you hear me?”

Dust moved.

“Please don’t move, sir. If you can hear me, blink your eyes.”

Dust tried to blink his eyes. Success was questionable.

“Can you describe the nature of your injuries, sir? Where are you hurt?”

“Aanb.”

“Head? Your head hurts?”

Dust raised his club hand. Feeling was returning. He swallowed. The tide of pain, of memory, ebbed. The numbness on his left side was retreating, leaving a detritus of broken pilings and bone-strewn shore. His words emerged slowly, their tips barely visible above the liquid level of his voice.

“Hand.”

“Don’t move, sir. Are you hurt anywhere beside your hand?”

Dust started to shake his head, but didn’t want to get yelled at for moving.

“No.”

This, technically, was a lie; his shoulder throbbed with the impact of his roll down the new hill, his calves and hamstrings sang with fatigue and the onset of cramp-tightness from an overlong run without proper cooldowns and stretches, and the place over his right eye where his face had met the flank of Inopinée’s Celica burned as though that impact had occurred yesterday rather than almost eight months ago. Given his mouth’s unwillingness to form complex words

like *hand* and his body's general desire to sink into the floor and die, Dust did not think it practical to try relaying any of this.

“What about your back, sir? Is your back or your neck hurt? Anywhere down your spine?”

Dust shook his head. He still feared being yelled at for moving, but given the nature of the latest question, he thought a demonstration of his functioning spine might be in order.

Something snapped. For a bad moment, Dust thought it might be something in his neck, but then he saw that the woman crouching over him had donned the kind of glove that came with an elastic wristband. She looked the way a German Panzer tank might have looked, had it been reduced to about two hundred pounds of packed muscle and stuffed into a pale blue set of hospital scrubs. She pulled on a second glove.

“I'm going to check your neck and back for injuries, sir. Do you have anything sharp on you, or is there anything else I should know before I touch you?”

Emboldened by the success of his previous head-shaking efforts, Dust shook his head.

Hands ran lightly down his neck and shoulders, touched his back, and then moved under his armpits.

Dust began to drift.

“Sir? Sir, try to stay awake, if you can. We're going to lift you now, okay?”

Dust tried to rise. The gloved hand put him back down.

“We're losing him.”

Someone else moved into his view. “I can—Jesus, what happened to him? He looks like he got hit by a car.”

Dust suspected this was directed to the tank woman, but the question brought to mind the worry of what he might have to say later on, when the question was directed at him. “Got—,” he said, and coughed.

“Sir, please lie still.”

The gloved hand came toward him. He waved it aside. “Got hit,” he said, and that was as far as he made it before the black laughter spiraled up out of him, rising on leathern wings. “Got hit by a car!”

“Is he bleeding out?”

“No. He’s just delirious. He’s had a cold coming of it.”

“No,” Dust said. “No Eliot. No describing the bartender.”

“My name is Ellen, sir. Can you hear me?”

“He is delirious.”

“I told you. It’s just the worst time of year for this.” Ellen’s hands moved over him. “There’s no way he got hit by a car in the elevator. He’s been reading too many bad action novels. Sir?” A hand touched his cheek.

Dust turned his face away from the hand. “Such a long journey.” The hand came back to his flesh.

“Sir? We’re going get you on this gurney so we can get you some help for that hand. Susan – yes, lift his left – okay, on three. One, two, three!”

#

“I’m fine.”

“Sir, please sit down.”

Susan and Ellen had been joined somewhere by an orderly the size of a European police car. Six hands kept him from the open door.

“I’m fine. I need to go.”

“Sir, we don’t even have the x-rays of that hand yet—”

“I’ve got to find my friend. There might be coyotes. I’m going.”

“Sir, please don’t move.”

“Look, I need – wait. Didn’t we do this already?”

#

The receptionist looked up politely from her magazine.

Dust thought about what a person looking in a hospital for someone hit by a car might say to a receptionist who looked politely up from magazines. It seemed like the kind of encounter that happened all the time on daytime television, but now that he was actually here, he felt at a loss.

Dust thought, *I should have watched more daytime television.*

“I’m looking for someone who’s been hit by a car. Have anyone like that?”

The receptionist stared. Dust realized that his question most likely bore a suspicious resemblance to the kind of question asked by a person who had just hit someone else with a car. Around them, the hospital continued, its memory the membrane between birth and death.

Birth or death? Dust thought. He shook his head. Had the forest followed him here?

“Is there a name?”

Dust considered. He flexed the half of his left hand that wasn’t bandaged. It hurt, but the pain was coyote-bite pain, not hit-by-a-diesel-truck-and-left-by-the-roadside-to-die pain. The rest of his left side, aside from the aches and bruises brought by his flight, felt whole.

He tried himself anyway, just to be sure: “Dust.”

“Dust? Is that a first name? Do you have a last name?”

Dust realized that, for a military man, he gave out his surname with surprising rarity. He gave it now, but quietly, as though afraid someone might overhear.

“Just a moment.” The receptionist spun and launched herself, chair and all, toward an open doorway inside the high curtain-wall of her counter. When she got there, she leaned in.

“Marcia! I need a register check!”

The receptionist rolled back over and smiled apologetically at Dust. “Just one moment,” she said.

A thin woman with a bird’s nest of bright blond hair poked her head around the doorframe. This, Dust deduced, was Marcia. “What’s up, hon?”

“He’s looking for a—” The girl looked back to Dust.

Dust gave his name again.

The girl repeated it to the bird’s nest, which quivered slightly at the quietness with which the name was given, as though disapproving of the silly attempt at secrecy.

“Hang on a sec.” The bird’s nest disappeared. A moment later it returned, tilted to the left so that Marcia could hold a phone headset between ear and shoulder. It was the kind of headset that came with a padded arc of molded plastic glued to its dorsal side to reduce neck cramps. “Linda? It’s Marcia, down in reception? . . . Mhm. . . Mhm. Do we have anyone up there brought in from a vehicle incident?” Marcia glanced at Dust and smiled the smile of bank tellers and phone operators who are equally amenable to the success of the errand they are pursuing and the sudden death by meteor strike of the person for whom they are pursuing it. “Yeah, it would be today. . . No, it would be a male . . . Right. Sure.” She glanced at Dust again. “On hold,” she mouthed.

A moment passed.

“Yep. Yeah, I’m here . . . Three? Great. What are the numbers? . . . Uh-huh . . . two-seven . . . three-one. Got it. Thanks!” She craned around the door to replace the phone and came toward the reception counter. “They’ve got three accidental traumas up on the fifth floor,” she said. “Only the first one was from today.”

Dust felt himself smiling faintly, but behind the expression, his tongue had withdrawn toward the back roof of his mouth, which had gone as dry as. . . well. “The first name,” he said, feeling each word drop from his lips with the weight of stones. “Is it Dust?”

The bird’s nest hesitated. “Are you family?”

Dust closed his eyes and exhaled. “I— no. Just please. Is it Dust? If it’s Dust, I’m family.” He felt a wry grin try to twist the right side of his mouth and sucked in his lips to keep them under control.

Marcia exchanged a glance with the receptionist and said, "It's not Dust. I'm afraid I can't give out positive information to non-family."

Dust's left side pulsed with the warmth of living skin. The feeling had been there all along, ever since the elevator, but he had not noticed its vitality until now.

"I'm sorry, sir. If you have a specific person you're looking for, I can direct you, but unless you know the name, I can't—"

"Dave," Dust said. He put his uninjured hand on the high counter, where it pressed against the fake marble Formica to keep from shaking. "The name is Dave. White male, about thirty-five, six foot, probably one-eighty." He ran his left hand up and down along his side. "Hit by a car, left side all—" He swallowed again. Something clicked in his throat. "Left side all banged up."

Marcia hesitated again. Her eyes darted to the pink Post-It onto which she had been jotting during her consultation with the fifth floor. She looked back up at Dust and nodded. "Room five twenty-seven," she said.

#

He moved down the fifth-floor corridor, feeling sensation bleed away from him as he walked. It was a curious feeling, as though a layer of paint were being stripped from everything around him as he passed, as though a thin but permanent cloud was passing over every light in the world.

The illusion he had wound around himself was leaving. The dream of the forest – *Dream?* he thought, looking down at the bandage on his hand – the spell it had woven over his mortal encounter with the steel grille of a cuckold's turbo diesel was fading. Not ending, precisely, not *finishing*, the way stories in movies and books finished, but draining away, like warm water from a basin whose plunger has been pulled by a careless hand. *What happened to me*, he thought, *and where is it going?* He looked back, but the elevator up which he had come

was lost around a bend in the hall. He looked down at his shoe, which sagged from his foot with its cut laces pointing in all directions.

She's not down there, he thought. *She's up ahead, in room five twenty-seven.*

On his left, another bend in the hall concealed the light from a room door. Someone had decorated the molding and lintel with a vine whose leaves were clever paper shapes, and a hand-inked slip of stationary was clipped over the number placard beside the door. Dust could not make out what room it had been; the stationary bore the number 86, struck through with a slash of black ink. Below this, unmolested, was the number 926.

This is meaningful, Dust thought.

This is not meaningful, Dust thought.

A voice was coming from the room. Dust drew abreast of its door and saw that the shadows of the room were thrown back by the swinging light of a candle flame. He did not think they allowed candles in hospitals, but he could not see the flame itself, only the shadows and shapes cast on the wall. Perhaps it was not a candle but something else entirely.

“The ways deep and the weather sharp,” the voice said. “The very dead of winter. And the camels—”

The voice was warm, male, measured, but with a tin edge, as though it were reciting something to which it could assign no joy.

“—lying down in the melting snow. There were times we regretted the summer palaces on slopes, the terraces—”

That's not a man, Dust thought. He paused outside the door. Five minutes previous, had someone told him that he might be given pause in his death-march toward what he felt certain would be the end of his and Inopinée's love – himself in a bed, Dave in a bed; it amounted to the same – he would have denied that such pause was possible. *That's not a man. That's a machine.*

“—the camel men cursing and grumbling and running away, and wanting their liquor and comma—”

Dust thought—

“—comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma comma—”

“Leaned Momaday on the keyboard – let’s give that another shot.”

Someone coughed. The measured voice cut off sharply in mid-comma. Something shuffled and clacked.

Someone else spoke: “How can you read and type at once?” Another cough.

“If you’d read Momaday, you’d understand why I can’t put him down.”

The moment broke. The candlelight on the wall seemed scraped there, like the residue of yellowed paint. The measured voice took up again, but its tinniness now was the clap of a rusted latch turning in an unlocked door.

“—and the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly and the villages dirty—”

No longer at ease, Dust continued down the hall.

#

Room 527 was thinly-veiled in shadow. Against its wall, the head of the bed sat nestled in the kind of tubes and stands and wires Dust recognized from television dramas, although the real thing seemed cheaper and flatter than he had expected.

Dave lay in the bed. His left side was a white-wrapped ruin.

Dust stood in the doorway for a long time, long enough to notice the slight movement of the drawn blinds, whose hanging slats were not still, as they had at first seemed, but now and again caught the breath of the overhead air vent and snicked together, clipping off threads of light from the outside world. The body in the bed moved in the same way: subtly, without the initial appearance of animation. The chest rose and fell, and little green lines on a black screen beside the heavy plastic rail declared the presence of life. Something beeped quietly in time. That was all.

“You wanted this.”

He started and looked around. Inopinée sat in one of two hospital-issue chairs lined up along the interior wall, just to the left of the door where the shadows were deepest. Her cheeks, framed by the lines of her hair, were grey with tracked tears. Her eyes were twin sapphires cut with the clean lines of hate.

“Look at him,” She rose, levering herself up from hands that lay along the plain wooden armrests of the chair like the beringed hands of a monarch, and came at him. “Look at him,” she said again, her voice light and sibilant as a desert snake.

Dust could no more have obeyed her command than he could have looked away from the advance of an actual snake. He took a step back, then stopped and made himself step forward. He went to her, not knowing what he would find when he reached her, believing more in the slap of her palm or the rake of her nails or even in a knife in his flank – for all her urbanity, Dust knew there was steel in her – than in any chance of an embrace, of a way back. It seemed to him that, though he stood in a literal doorway, there were no exits from that place, no ways out for—

“For whom?” Dust wondered if she could read him that clearly, or if there were something else, some perception in her he had not yet known. A woman who could send an elevator to a dying delirium-forest could probably read the occasional thought or two.

She stopped a foot from him. The space between them coalesced into a cloud of sharp-edged shapes, like a mosaic of broken tiles: grief, lust, fury, joy. The potentiation of the moment came from his blindness, from his total and absolute lack of knowing what could possibly come next.

“No escape for whom?” She raised an eyebrow at him in her old way. He looked for the playful girl, the quick of favor and affection that had always lain beneath any anger they might feel for one another. He did not detect it. “No escape for you? For selfish little Dust? That was always your way.”

He put out a hand, meaning to thrust it into the blender of emotion the space around her had become. She flicked her gaze at it, and his gesture withered. He felt the wind of her rage,

beating from her in hot, dry gales, like the whirling drafts from a dragon's wings, and it was all of him to hold his ground, to simply persist in the face of such power.

"That was always your way," she said, "and now you've got your way, haven't you? They didn't say the word "coma," but they danced around it very nicely." She narrowed her eyes. "You're the creative writer. You wrote this. You wanted this."

He felt his own anger, gathering in response to hers. It was a vast feeling, as of an army a million strong, coming together twenty or a hundred at a time, crossing moors and valleys and sun-drenched plains. He wanted to protest, to argue the nonsensicality of her anguish, to use the words Man has used since he climbed down from the jungle trees and stood upright: *It's not my fault*. But there was something else between them in the mild chill of the tiled room, something she hid masterfully but which their stolen months together let him see. It was her despair: the naked, soft need of a woman alone, a vulnerability he knew she hated more than anything else under sky. It shone through the wall cloud of her anger like a diamond in a field of unlit glass, and its presence disarmed him.

He went to her. The mosaic between them broke apart; he sloughed off its fragments, heeding their cutting touch no more than a rolling boulder heeds foliage. Inopinée's resistance was infinitely more difficult to overcome, but he felt its spines and pressed himself onto them.

"Don't fucking touch me," she said. Her eyes sharpened. Their threat was infinite.

He came on.

She slapped him, not once but twice: hard, accurate blows across each cheek. The stone on her engagement ring sliced a line into the skin over his left cheekbone. "No. Dust, n—"

He took her in his arms, a feat made possibly only by his overwhelming size in relation to hers, a sexism written into their biological frames. It was like embracing lightning.

"Thank you," he said. The words dissipated into the soft net of her hair. She had been struggling violently against him, threatening to tip both of them over onto the tiles, but now she stilled. She pulled, and he let her draw away enough to look him in the eye.

“What did you say?”

“Thank you.” He put one hand on her cheek. “For the elevator.”

Her mouth opened. Even through the dregs of her anger, her shock was palpable. He wondered if she’d ever been surprised before.

“The only person,” he said, “who wanted this as much as I did and was close enough to my narrative is the person who would send an elevator as my escape route. I threw the ink at the margins, but the elevator came from them all on its own. Your elevator. You wanted this. Your coyotes – what do they represent, I wonder? – nearly killed me after his truck nearly killed me. But I forgive you.”

He thought he would lose her. He thought she would protest with renewed ire. But she simply sank into him, as she had so many afternoons standing before the tall windows of the fifth floor CMS lobby, as she had in their long elevator rides coming back from those trysts.

He held her, and she sobbed against him, and he sobbed atop her, and it was only after some time – a minute? a moment? – that he saw their position in the room had turned them so that now he faced the open doorway of the tiny hospital bathroom. The door itself lay flat against the wall, facing the bed; in the long mirror set into the back of the door, Dust saw the back of Inopinée’s head, his own face . . . and, in the background, Dave, lying still.

Dust thought about the future. He thought about how well things might someday go between him and Inopinée, and about this strange secret they had birthed.

No exit, he thought. No way out.

In the mirror, the reflection of Dust raised its eyes. It carefully disentangled one hand from Inopinée’s shoulder and raised a single finger. Behind him, in the depths of the glass, the figure in the bed raised its left hand and mirrored the gesture.

One way out.

Dust looked at his reflection and gave it the barest nod. It nodded back.

In the mirror, the white-wrapped figure rose from the bed and began to come toward the glass. Inopinée's head was lowered against Dust's collarbone; his own back was to the bed, and it seemed to him that the air he felt against him coming from that direction was cold.

The figure in the glass came closer.

Dust's left side began to go numb.

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The receptionist looked up from her magazine and read the screen.

"Marcia?"

The nest of hair made its appearance. Its majesty was the majesty of the Wizard of Oz, materializing above his emerald throne. "Hmm?"

"I thought . . ." The receptionist trailed off. Her eyes flicked back and forth between two columns of data.

"You thought . . . ?"

"Uh, yeah, the three vehicle incidents up on five?"

"Yes, dear."

The receptionist popped her gum. The receptionist was chewing gum. "I thought that cute guy asked if one of the first names was Dust."

"He did, hon." The Wizard began to get impatient. "What's up?"

"Well," the receptionist traced a lacquered fingernail down the glowing face of the monitor. "It's just that – look at this."

With the indulgent sigh of an elder sister humoring her sibling for the seven hundredth time, Marcia made her entire self known. She crossed from the doorway to the forward reception counter on feet protected by the kind of huge, eternally-clean, ergonomically hideous nurse shoes that fly in the face of men's fantasies about naughty nurses.

Someone neither woman saw crossed the reception room, went through the sliding-glass foyer, and disappeared into the gauzy November gloaming.

A thin breath of autumn air coasted back from the closing doors and tossed several sheets of stationary across the counter. Marcia snatched at a memo, cursing benevolently. The receptionist drew her light jacket about her shoulders with a shiver. On the screen, in the row beside ROOM 527, the word DUST gleamed with fading phosphorescence.

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