

THE HOLY SPIRIT

by

Ben Farmer
A Thesis
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of
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in Partial Fulfillment of
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of
Master of Fine Arts
Creative Writing

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at George Mason University

By

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Bachelor of Arts
Kenyon College, 2005

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DEDICATION

For my dad

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Thanks to Alan, Roger, and Steve for their help.

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ABSTRACT

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Ben Farmer, MFA

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Dr. William Miller

The Holy Spirit spans a year in the life of the Potters, as tragedy and exceptional circumstances cause a skeptical family to wonder about faith and their shared future. The novel opens in San Diego in the summer of 2008 and closes in eastern Canada early in the following summer.

David and Harry, a father and son, are the principal characters. David's own father has recently been struck by a car and killed along with the family dog. The Potters move to Forest Glen, a new community built on the campus of a 19th Century finishing school in the suburbs of Washington DC. The Potters—Sarah 46, David 45, Harry 21, Vicky 20, and Kevin 17—are among the initial wave of occupants, and move into a Dutch windmill, where they spend the year suffering from power outages as construction and unusual weather rages around them. The new neighborhood's boundaries are Rock Creek Park on the south and west, and 495 on the north and east. To reach the

neighborhood one has to pass either Walter Reed to the southeast, or the LDS temple grounds to the northwest. Forest Glen is the principal setting of the novel.

Harry deals poorly with the loss of his grandfather and the move from his childhood home, and is asked to leave his college halfway through his junior year, shortly after he has met and fallen in love with Maya. David is plagued by an encounter with illegal immigrants on San Diego beaches, ghost sightings, unusual visitors, and his eldest son's temporal problems. Together they write several choose-your-own-adventure scripts that will be shown in the Tivoli Theater, in which David has sizably invested. Harry accidentally impregnates Maya, back from her spring break in Spain, and she determines to raise the child, but not with him. The novel ends with Harry resolving to pursue Maya and return to college.

I

A graveyard and several baseball fields shared a wide, rocky, nameless hill at the center of town, carefully arranged so that the little ballplayers competed out of sight of the stones, settled in a depression so that children called to mourn or reflect on their ancestors might do so without the visible awareness that their friends played alongside. But the illusion wavered in time, as the ball fields stretched to the plain below, and fresh gravesites littered the hill's eastern half, and a child at bat might look up to a headstone perched on a fold above and wonder if his great-grandfather observed his swing. And the wailings of the mourners and the exaltations of the players mingled and multiplied.

Settled in 1814 and, like Rome, built on seven hills, Hampstead found inspiration from the idyllic British heath rather than the logic of geography and despite the fresh brutality of war that must have lurked in the minds of the founders who cautiously withdrew from Baltimore as the enemy neared. The town expanded sleepily for nearly twenty years before a railroad stop emerged between the hills and the Patapsco River. Growth quickened as the wealth of the east flowed through to Ohio, then St. Louis, then California. Quarried stone shaped sturdy homes between river and track, burned out and reincarnated as boutique stores. Chimes welcomed tourists and residents alike to the

fresh-baked bread, aromatic soaps, and oiled furniture of an earlier, quieter time. A narrow main street snaked between the shops and a low retaining wall overlooking the river. The air everywhere was scoured by clean water coursing over rocks, filtered through the sparse pines and rhododendrons rising from the valley below, and atop that low wall one might feel at the summit of the earth, only a few miles from the swampy Chesapeake.

When he was three, David Potter's family moved into a blue pastel Victorian on one of the first narrow streets rockily rising above the railroad and river. His parents purchased the home with the royalties from his father's treatise, *On Life and Living*, the publication of which also earned David's father tenure at Johns Hopkins University, lifting the Potters from subsistence to prosperity.

And Hampstead prospered around them. Railroad offices, quarries and timber concerns survived fires and emerged a historic downtown, frequented by tourists and the families from the hills above, whose husbands worked in business or politics in Baltimore or Washington. Unlike those families, both of David's parents worked—Abraham at Hopkins, and Martha, who chaired the English department at Archbishop Keough High School in West Baltimore. In the evenings, while his father wrote and his mother graded, David sprawled across the old Arabian carpet in the office his parents shared, and read *Treasure Island* and *The Hobbit* and *The Great Brain*, and he fell in love with books and reading and his imagination. The three of them could sit in shared, silent concentration for hours, until a stale, sooty puff from the chimney drew their attention to the untended fireplace, and meals, and less-satisfying parts of their lives.

Better even than the ashy air, David remembered the must of the books in the office, old leather and cloth and paper peacefully fusing over humid Maryland nights. And he remembered the musk of his wild jungle outside, the former Christmas trees and young oak, and birch around the fishpond that sheltered frogs, and azaleas, rhododendron and fern, all obscuring the ivy-sheathed house. He hated to outgrow his forest, to walk to the front gate in a dozen lanky teenaged strides, unable to forget how vaulting and limitless those few trees had once appeared.

As an adult, David could not afford his own Victorian in Hampstead, but he and his wife Sarah agreed on the importance of providing a bucolic setting for their own children. Early in their marriage, with some assistance from his parents, they purchased a tiny stucco house on three acres, fifteen miles southwest of Hampstead. The house fronted New Hampshire Avenue, and the property sloped steeply away from the home, ending in a meandering stream that finally fed the Patapsco. It heartened David to think that Harry, Vicky, and Kevin played in a trickle that fed the river of his youth. Though more rural, the property lay closer to Washington, and David watched frowningly as McMansions and executive estates mushroomed around them on new streets named Paradise, Lily Pond, and Sherwood Forest. By the time Kevin, their youngest, was born, a gas station, a liquor store, a tiny Episcopal church, and a spur leading to the new county dump shared the four corners of the newly minted town of Hope.

Sarah took advantage of the proximity to Washington and found a job producing educational documentaries for Discovery. Following his mother's lead, David taught at The School of the Holy Trinity, The Shit to its older students, where he shared classic

literature with increasingly skeptical young people. Murmurs of impending recession convinced the floundering institution to fold just shy of its Golden Jubilee. Everyone had seen it all coming. Rumors of the demise drifted across campus for years, as funds waned, then dried up completely, as the Prince George's County population from which Trinity drew shifted from predominately white, to predominately black, to black. Though his later students' parents seemed to work jobs as prestigious as their Caucasian predecessors, the endowment dwindled, and the school dwindled apace.

David's parents—immigrants whose relations remained behind in Germany and Russia and did not burden their forward-looking American kin with their wasting and their dying—raised him without dwelling overmuch on final matters. Change was verboten in the Potter household. Teaching had been David's surest means for staving off the cold and the dreary, imbuing him and his family with a measure of youth's imperviousness to fate.

A week out of work, Sarah took David to Granville Morse to cheer him up. Visible from a mile away, the flashing lights coalesced as two police cruisers parked on the shoulder in front of the house. A small black body bag, slick as it had rained, lay between the cars and the driveway, which was cordoned off with flares. David lurched to a stop across the street, and they tore across the road. Harry stood with an officer, and Sarah seized him in her arms. She cried. David looked around, the skidded trenches of a car wildly off the road, blood in the mangled branches of a young Leland Cypress sheltering the house from the road. More tracks, tread from several other vehicles, the grass stamped flat all around.

“Simon?” David asked, tears in his eyes.

Harry nodded. He looked at David and quickly away, back at the house, at their car across the street, at the body bag, back to his father. “Grandpop,” Harry said.

An only child, David spent the early weeks of his sudden retirement executing his father’s will—inheriting money, much more than he thought, between the residual of the sale of the house in Hampstead, various retirement and accident policies, Disney stock, and textbook royalties that had never quite stopped accumulating, there was more than one and half million relatively liquid dollars; fifty acres in northern Quebec, ‘*just in case*,’ his father had said; and the well-compensated duty of distributing Abraham’s library among a short list of the friends and institutions, with the majority going to the University of California at San Diego, where Abraham passed his favorite sabbatical. An early July evening found David in mournful transition, fatherless, jobless, queued up for a plane at BWI.

Heavy wheels on tarmac, stale air, lift-off. Often David wrote letters to his children while on airplanes. Though he preferred philosophies that encouraged the belief that he controlled some measure of his own fate, such ground bound pretensions evaporated into powerlessness on a plane rocked by turbulence, or retracting landing gears. In these heady moments, some version of the Confessional that dominated his thoughts: ‘I am heartily sorry for having ever offended Thee, and I detest my sins, and so on, and with the help of Thy grace, promise to sin no more, Amen.’ And after having done what he could to inspire vague divinity to spare him—but still expecting as much to

be punished as saved—he would take up pen or pencil and set down for his children whichever counsel his adrenaline-rich thoughts deemed most irresistible.

Tonight the big plane ascended tranquil skies subjected to only ordinary buffeting, the cabin rested quiet, a gray-haired woman alongside settled under her blanket in peaceful slumber, but an inner tumult kept David restless, and he clicked on his overhead light, opened his journal, and began writing to Harry.

I know that you've sometimes wondered why I don't, didn't, hold my father in greater esteem. I did. I took him for granted, and I worried deeply about his influence over you and your sister and brother, but I cherished him. I count myself lucky measured against the world's other sons. I wanted more of my father in my life, not less. I can't imagine how the three of you feel, fighting over your mother and I—at least you did a couple of years ago. We always tried to be considerate of the fact that there are more of you than there are of us.

For some reason I can't imagine sharing this with your sister or brother, but whether because it seems like the sort of story that would satisfy your curiosity or because I think you might learn something by it, I've often thought to tell you a story about your grandfather.

*My father once agreed to teach a semester at Radford University early in his career. One of his two courses was *The Military Psychology in Peacetime*. He had served during World War II, but as you know, never fought. I'm of the opinion that this lack of combat accounted for the heavy testosterone on display during his last fifty years. An almost inhuman equanimity describes the soldiers I know, but maybe these are just*

different times, different wars. You read about these guys snapping all the time, but I haven't seen it personally. Not that your mother and I know a tremendous number or anything. It's just a theory.

So your grandfather was about forty—forty-two, because I was eleven—when he took this position. And we kept living in the house in Hampstead, and your grandfather would drive home on Thursday nights (arriving after I'd gone to bed, but usually I managed to stay awake until he got home) and back to Virginia on Monday in time for his evening seminar. But, finally, he took me along with him one week. He had purposefully arranged a light week, and we went hiking and canoeing for three days. On Friday, on the way home, we went shooting. It's the only time that I've ever fired a gun. When asked the question, I either say, as you have heard, 'Once. On a shooting range. Not for me.' Or, if I don't feel like talking about why it wasn't for me, 'Nope. My parents were outspoken pacifists.' And your grandparents, by the time you knew them, were outspoken pacifists. Anyway, this one gun experience of mine didn't last long, which was fine. I felt like I was already, at eleven, too old to begin to learn to shoot, and I remember feeling acute embarrassment. The range was full of happy children, younger than I was, and fathers quick with congratulations. That's how it seemed, anyway. It's the first time I can remember feeling too old for something, something I can remember you complaining about, growing up with Vicky and Kevin, forced by your mother and me to continue in old activities rather than seeking out new ones. I hope you didn't feel that way too often.

Though he didn't ever brag about it later in life, my father had been a trick shot in the Army (corps of engineers), and after frowning over my dismal efforts, he won a pistol betting with the range's owner. In a tweed suit, and with a clearly unpracticed son, he must have looked like an easy mark, but he outshot the owner, seven bullseyes to six, from fifty feet.

My father was excited after the range. I had never seen him fire a gun, and here he was besting the owner of a shooting range. Big talkers tend to be the most surprised when they back it up. Anyway, spirits were high in the Buick that afternoon, and we took a scenic highway part of the way home, 221. Your grandfather kept showing off by firing at squirrels out of the car window, usually leaning over me in the passenger seat on that windy, mountain road. If I had any problems with my hearing, I would probably blame that day. But we headed happily up the road, firing away, missing squirrel after squirrel. As we headed up Bent Mountain, one of his shots ricocheted off a stone and kicked toward a truck that we hadn't seen, sitting in a gravel drive. The spent shot either hit somewhere on the fender, or just kicked up again near the truck, I'm not sure.

The truck—a big, white, pickup—launched out into the road, blocking it. We could have gone around, but only on the shoulder. The driver door of the truck opened. A man got out, holding something, but we didn't see it at first. My father got out of our car. The man was a young father it turned out, but a lousy guy who wasn't paying child support. He had just asked his ex's parents for money to go away. They told him to get lost, and he was still sitting in their driveway after the exchange. (They also told the police that their former son-in-law had a history of violent and aggressive behavior).

The ex's parents said that he'd been sitting there for at least half an hour, before our wayward shot, when they heard him swerve into the street, bang open the door and start cursing at your grandfather. Who shot him. One time. Dead. Just like he'd won the pistol. Outside of the squirrels, he hadn't missed all day.

The police determined that the man had aggressively pulled in front of us, and your grandfather had acted to protect his son—all true enough. My father begged out of the rest of the semester, and to my knowledge, never returned to Virginia. But every year, on October 15th, he gave one thousand dollars to an orphan somewhere in Western Virginia, which when he started doing it was a nice amount of money. That was how I learned about Floyd, and why your mother and I started going to the bluegrass festival down there. Sometimes he would tell me where he was sending the money, so that I would know he was still doing it. Last year he sent the money to an orphan in Winchester. 'I should have been sending it there all along,' I remember him saying.

No one ever asked why your grandfather carried a pistol with him when he got out of the car. That was still the way they did things in that part of Virginia. And if the survivors were white (and a veteran), then pardon them and hope for better the next go round. They knew he was sorry. That it was just an accident. Now in Virginia they just kill everyone. I don't know what's better.

David carefully tore the pages from the journal and folded them over. He extracted *The Voyage of the Short Serpent* from his carryon, and inspected it. A book in letter form about a bishop returning Christianity to Greenland. His father told him to read while traveling. A lightless desert yawned beneath the plane. David fell asleep against

the window and in his dreams the woman became Sarah, and he was grown old beside her, and they floated through the trackless ether together.

He woke to lightning, flickering wildly inside a distant funnel of clouds, and he felt awed to witness such violence from such a fragile place without fear. Soon lights decorated the landscape below, brightening before they dimmed completely into profound darkness. He slept again, and woke to the plane banking as they circled over San Diego, descending rapidly until they dropped below the skyline, rattling high-rise windows on their way through the city back toward the ocean.

Pleasant at first, the velvet air outside the airport felt too close finally, a Caribbean urchin as happy to pick your pocket as sell you a trinket, David thought. He should not feel so good, greasy and plane-drowsy at two in the morning. San Diego rocked with a lilting rhythm foreign with possibilities impossible under the East Coast's smoggy certainty. David bummed a lighter and burned the pages torn from his journal, stomped them out, and threw them away.

One dingy white cab waited alone. It started moving before he named a destination.

“The Westgate,” David said. “Do you know where that is?”

“You got it,” the cabbie said.

There was no further conversation. People did not stagger off planes in the middle of the night eager to exchange pleasantries, David thought, a truth likely known best by men like the one he had temporarily taken into his employ. They drove the wide,

empty streets like the hesitant scout of an invading army. David thought of San Diego as a party town, but it appeared to be a beach town first, closed up early.

The cabby dropped him in a courtyard, and a weary tuxedoed doorman headed for the trunk.

“I just have two bags. It’s no trouble,” David said.

Inside, a woman waited in voluminous orange robes behind an ornate desk, indistinguishable to David’s tired eyes from the other antique furniture scattered amid large plants and other artifacts. She checked him in without mentioning the hour, and handed him not a card, but an actual key, ornately wrought. He declined her offer of a wake-up call, and listened carelessly to her directions on how to use the elevator. On the way to his suite, he touched the walls and found them quilted.

His old man had been proud of his regal taste, and David thought it appropriate to seek out opulent accommodations while conducting his father’s business. There was a foyer, a sitting room with a half-bath, and the master bedroom, with a bathroom that had four doors of its own—one leading to the toilet, one to a closet, and one to the shower room. The suite was so grand that modern conveniences were ill-suited to the dimensions. The television sat twelve feet from the bed, the images murky and uncertain, even with his glasses on. The guest book that he found in a leather-bound binder in the sitting room was suite, not hotel, specific, and told him that beyond the last four governors of California, Norman Mailer, Emmy Lou Harris, and Al Gore had laid their heads where he would tonight. Fond of stories, David settled down in the robust pillows to read the history of the Westgate.

In 1965, recent President Dwight D. Eisenhower, while staying in another (unmentioned) hotel, asked pointedly, 'Is this the finest hotel in San Diego?' Eager to answer such a challenge, local entrepreneur Earl Holding commissioned and financed the Westgate, Southern California's premier luxury hotel. The hotel's first floor is a model of the 'garden room' at Versailles, and boasts one of the first five Steinways ever commissioned.

David took his breakfast, a Benedict with avocado and tomato, on the third-floor terrace while he waited. 'Clear your head,' Sarah had told him. And David knew that she actually thought that a trip to California could be good for him and he trusted her. And he would get to see Timothy. But the upheaval, as much as the grief, had left him feeling distant and unpredictable. David felt everything he had ever kept hidden churned to the surface, secrets like the one that had him staying at the Westgate for three-thirty a night.

'Never be afraid to be the best dressed man in the room,' his father had told him. Abraham wore three-piece suits and fedoras to the classroom, and though he might have been thought untrimmed on Wall Street, he never quite succumbed to the heavy beards and wild hair of his peers.

David wore a cream polo shirt and greenish khaki shorts. He only needed a whistle to step in for the wrestling coach. His sandals, at least, gave him away as a tourist. The hotel would have to suffice, and anyway, David didn't care. He had shaved

that morning in the luxurious bathroom, and he felt grand, fit, young. And ready to meet his enemy.

David finished the eggs and panned the wide, empty terrace for inspiration while he waited for the professor. Deck chairs, an unoccupied pool, strewn tables. He now felt like the general of that conquering army, taking his leisure at the center of town after the citizens mustered only a minimal resistance. From even a modest height, San Diego was not that loud a city, especially considering his immediate proximity to downtown, one block from the trolley. Every taxi in every American city had the same horn, so he could imagine that merely a single obnoxious, offended vehicle polluting the streets beneath him. Across the street, a faded yellow mural covered half of a building dated by its lack of windows.

Caliente! In Old Mexico, the advertisement proclaimed in still vibrant red letters. *Betting Daily on Major US Horse Tracks. Home of the Fabulous 5~10!* Otherwise the panorama was modern, with some Spanish flair among the rooflines until the buildings gave out in the forested hills of Balboa Park and the zoo.

He wanted to talk to someone, and so called Timothy, who he needed to call anyway. David had once felt himself on the privileged side of sympathy—consoling Timothy through a divorce, numerous career changes, and a childless adulthood. Now, Timothy consulted for Novartis, ventured his capitalism, and hobbyed as a certified yoga instructor in a Bikram studio three blocks from his home in Ocean Beach. His amateur photography, many of the shots taken within a mile of his beachfront home, had been featured in *Outdoor* and *National Geographic Traveler*. Years before, after Timothy's

divorce, they'd taken a trip to Quebec, and David had written an article to accompany Timothy's shots of rare food, ancient stone buildings, and reenactors marching over the Plains of Abraham with the Hotel Frontenac luminous in the background.

"David, so good to hear your voice," Timothy said.

"You too. So, I'm hoping to only be an hour here, and I don't want to make too many demands right off the bat, but when I'm ready to leave I'd like to get out of here quick."

"I'm ready to roll. Call me when you're through with the faggot."

"Come on. This is supposed to be the enlightened coast."

"Don't be a baby. Manipulative, power-hungry, intrusive, holier-than-thou types are faggots. Out here anyway, we use it to describe your type-A anal types, not necessarily as a reference to the sexual inclination sort of anal."

"Thanks for breaking that down for me. I'll be about an hour."

Lysander had come to his father's retirement and to his funeral. He hosted David's family for two days while they toured California the summer after his junior year of high school. 'I don't think California is the right place for you,' Lysander had told him. Lysander was tiny and beautiful, five-two, Italian-Mexican, and an anthropologist at the University. The last day they stayed with the professor, David had returned from the beach and found his father and Lysander laughing together. They had both changed clothes, and David's presence was clearly an intrusion.

Today, Lysander wore a pale yellow suit that seemed to absorb the already beating sun. They shook lightly.

“David, let me say again how sorry I am for your loss. I miss your father every day.”

“I’m sure he would have loved one more trip out here.”

Lysander shook his head, swept out the back of his coat and sat down. “We must be content with the trips we have taken. Abraham did not tolerate droll talk.”

David sat himself. “He’d be happy enough that we’re talking.”

A waiter arrived with two espressos, painstakingly arranged the saucers, lemon rinds, sugar, spoons, and withdrew.

“You’ve been waiting for me,” Lysander said. “Your father’s son.”

“Here to do his bidding.”

“And a father yourself,” Lysander continued. “You have three lovely children.”

David drank his espresso.

“You seem well-suited to the role. Abraham complained about the difficulty of raising a child as an academic.”

“I tell people I like it.”

“David, forgive me. I don’t mean to make light by being light.”

“I’m easily confused by academics.”

“My poor manners stem from jealousy of your exposure.”

“Jealousy seems like a funny word for it.”

“Well, our relationship resembled a father and his son more than anything else.”

“Nice of you to say. And that sort of feeling is exactly why I’m happy to hand it all over.”

“The University of San Diego is proud to receive the collection.”

David dropped a lemon rind in his empty cup. “It’s waiting for you downstairs in the lobby. The espresso is on me.” He stood up. “You know that Lysander is the second fiddle in history, the dog that went crawling to the Persians when he couldn’t beat Alcibiades.”

“I’ll take the comparison to any general from antiquity as a compliment.”

“Good for you. Take the books too. I’ll see you around.”

David lightly shook hands with the still-seated professor, and walked the length of the terrace feeling narrow eyes on his back, determined not to turn around.

He called Timothy in the hallway between the elevator and the suite.

“Hey buddy,” Timothy boomed in his ear. “I’m a couple of blocks away. How long do you need?”

“I didn’t unpack,” David said.

Out front, Timothy loomed enormous over a sleek green Lotus, its in-cut sides appearing to draw breath as it idled. Valets circled respectfully.

“Ever ridden in a convertible before?” Timothy asked with a grin. He was so excited—over the car, David’s arrival, the sunny morning—that he appeared to be drunk, which David hoped he was not.

They embraced, David’s head awkwardly coming up to Timothy’s breastbone, as Kevin’s had on him, until recently. Timothy unlocked the Lotus’ tiny trunk from above, and David crammed in his old leather satchel.

“This thing couldn’t hold my groceries,” David said.

“Well, it isn’t what you would call a family car. A man should be able to fit his groceries on the seat next to him. Anytime there’s a lady present, I’m probably headed out to eat.”

“Fair enough.”

“Brother, do I have a day in mind for us,” Timothy said.

“That sounds great,” David said, pleased that he did have better places to be.

The valet opened the door for Timothy. “Did you play basketball,” he asked.

“Yes,” Timothy said.

“High school, college?”

“High school.”

“Oh, you didn’t go to college?”

“No, I went to Harvard. I studied engineering.”

They got in the car, and David waited until they were out of earshot. “You tell people that you played basketball?”

“I got tired of disappointing people. This is better for everyone, and after I lie we can talk about something different. It’s surprising how few conversations you can have with guys you meet for the first time that don’t revolve around sports.”

They turned out of the hotel roundabout and stopped at a red light. Timothy turned to regard him. “David, I’m so sorry. Your father was a great guy. One-of-a-kind.”

“He was that. He was a man. Take him for all that he was.”

“You know I don’t read, so I don’t get whatever that’s supposed to be a reference to.”

“No one reads.”

“Why did you want to stay here?”

“I wanted to impress that damn jockey.”

“Did it work?”

“I don’t know. It wasn’t my kind of place.”

They joined traffic on a boulevard divided by trolley tracks, with wide sidewalks sheltering clusters of older bums on the left-hand side, with vendors on the right, squatting behind blankets displaying movies, cheap jewelry and other black-market wares. Stopped at a red light, Timothy turned to face David.

“So, what happened with your dad?”

“We don’t know exactly. It looks like he tried to stop the dog from going into the road.”

After a few blocks, the people alongside vanished, and they turned onto the 5, heading south.

“Where are we going?” David asked, priding himself on knowing that Timothy’s home in Ocean Beach lay northeast of downtown and the airport.

“Mexico,” Timothy said.

David laughed. “I knew I should only book one night in the hotel. Your place is plenty exotic.”

Timothy shook his head fiercely. “I’ve arranged for us to spend the night with Joe.”

David stopped laughing. “What?”

“Yeah, I told him that you were coming into town, and he said that we had to come down.” They paused at a light, and Timothy’s glance lingered on David until a honk encouraged him to return his attention to the road.

“Into town isn’t Mexico.”

“Well, it’s close enough, once you’ve made it this far.”

Like he and Timothy, Joe was a product of the District’s Maryland suburbs, and had been David’s best friend in high school. They played baseball together, canvassed for Greenpeace together, they talked about going to college together, but Joe couldn’t get into Dartmouth, and they drifted apart faster than David would have thought possible. He and Sarah had visited Joe once in his cramped apartment in the Mission, and it had been a bit uncomfortable. He did not like to think about how few of his old friends had families. David had kept in sporadic touch over the five (ten?) years Joe had been living in Mexico, never touching on specifics, never considering the possibility that their lives might again overlap. Joe was estranged from his own parents, who were doctors in Baltimore, and with whom David still exchanged Christmas cards.

They crossed over the San Diego Bay in silence, watching the street traffic as they headed south through stop lights on the Silver Strand Boulevard through Coronado. Newly redone storefronts framed tanned shoppers.

“It’s really a shame what’s happened to Rosarita,” Timothy said, as though David had asked. “Tijuana’s been terrible since they started busing in peasants from Southern Mexico, and overworking them and underpaying them, and creating shanty towns for them to rent housing in, or building company towns, which are worse, which created a society without the staked interest in opposing the gangs.”

“The cartels.”

Timothy waved him off. “People call them cartels, they’re fucking gangs, and they’re particularly bad now as you know, so the lower-level thugs have moved to Rosarita, because even they want to get away from the violence. So in short order Rosarita has become one of the most dangerous towns around, with a bunch of stupid musclemen walking around with their chests puffed out in new shirts, spoiling for a fight. You would probably be fine in Rosarita until 3pm, but after dark you’re as likely to get shot there as anywhere I know.”

“I wouldn’t have considered you an expert.”

“Well, I haven’t been shot. I don’t know if that makes me an expert or an innocent. Anyway, ninety miles south of Tijuana, you’re in Ensenata, and that’s where the drug lords keep places, so there’s no violence there, except for the port, they have a huge port, and there are definitely regular scuffles, because there’s a lot of cargo arriving through there. It’s a beautiful, old, adobe, Mexican seaside town, but it’s not really a great place for white people to be after dark either.”

“I thought that’s where Joe lived.”

“He’s on the beach, closer to Ensenata than Rosarita. There’s a strip of coast between the two towns where the ex-pats live.”

“Way to sell it.”

“I haven’t started yet. He lives in a villa with an old tiled courtyard where you can sit in the breeze and stare out into the Pacific, and imagine that the water is slowly rising toward you. There’s nothing between the house and the ocean.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“Well, you’ve never seen Joe’s place. Stumble down the sand with caliente blaring in the distance, that’s what you need right now.”

“Can’t we do that from your house?”

“Come on, David. You don’t need me to tell you that there’s a different electricity south of the border. A different smell. The stars are tilted. Make a fire on the sand, get halfway drunk, and appreciate, as best you can, the life you’re fortunate enough to still be living.” Timothy pulled a silver cigarette case from his front pocket, shucked and dramatically lit a joint. He passed the empty case to David.

“You don’t want to wait until we get out of the car? This is a convertible.”

“Of course it’s a convertible. This is California.” Timothy twirled the joint overhead, nearly extinguishing it in the wind. “That’s Iranian silverwork,” Timothy said.

“I told you I’m not going.”

“Well, it’s your vacation.”

Timothy passed David the joint, which he held below the window and did not smoke.

“I understand that my having a beautiful experience has a place in tragic times, and I appreciate your considering me in this way.” David hit the joint as surreptitiously as he could in the sea breeze and returned it. “I’m not going to Mexico.”

“David, your father died. Your dog died. You’re suffering.”

“In my own country. There’s only violence in Mexico. And I lost my job. Pull off the road.”

Mexico had appeared faster from downtown than he’d believed possible. Timothy willingly swung off the 5 and guided them down Tocayo Avenue, past a few streets of modest stucco houses before they turned left on a nameless dirt road, and the suburban development opened onto ranchland, beautiful old parcels in the scrub, staring up at the hills of Mexico. Feeling fortunate enough to not be south to an encounter he was unprepared for, David didn’t ask about their new destination. They barreled along the smoothly paved but unmarked road, past ranches, strawberry farms, and caved-in, abandoned aluminum barns, looking cheap against the low stucco or occasionally wooden structures that huddled successfully against the unbroken wind. A sign advertised Border Field State Park, and the road gave out soon after. A chain blocked the rough track leading deeper into the park, but two civilian pickups were parked alongside Border Patrol SUVs on a patch of gravel in front of several sheds that were chained off to the public.

Timothy parked the Lotus conspicuously among them. “End of the road,” he said, staring suspiciously at the empty official vehicles.

“I can’t believe you thought I’d let you drive me to Mexico in this car,” David said.

“You’re a coward. Let’s take a hike.”

“It would be nice if we still had that joint.”

“You should have smoked more of it on the highway when you had the chance. I’m plenty high. Let’s go.”

They walked around the chain fence that blocked the road, and set off across the scrubland. Though the track to the west appeared perfectly level, the ocean was invisible. Purposeful strides made little sense without the motivation of a particular destination, so they trudged heavily without comment. The sun was high and unimpeded overhead, worst on David’s forehead and nose, both of which would be pink soon, and crisp tomorrow. He hated hats, and so he suffered. It seemed as though the terrain grew more arid as they neared the water, but he knew that to be unrealistic. When his eyes grew tired of searching for the ocean he watched their shadows move alongside, but at midday they cast only a short way north, and equally seemed to make no progress. Yellow horseshit was everywhere along the trail, mostly dry enough that it was possible to imagine the whole unattended surface as powdered horse droppings atop trampled sand. Tenements mounted the southern highlands, with a plume of smoke visibly rising from a cluster of white apartments on the nearest cliff. Closer to the coast loomed a large amphitheater.

“That’s the bullfighting arena,” Timothy said. “I didn’t realize what a great view it had.” He gestured widely with his big hand, topped with blond hair like the tufts of July California grass. “You would pass all this on your way down.”

As they watched the smoke, four figures, a woman trailing three boys, hove into view and finally halted alongside.

“See the fire, boys?”

“Yes, mom,” one of the children responded in a bored tone David recognized from other teachers’ classrooms.

“Why aren’t there sirens?” another asked.

“Good question,” David said.

The mother turned her attention toward them. Timothy, in a tee-shirt and board shorts looming over them all, and him, in his shorts and polo, looking like a teacher snuck away from his group on a field trip. “What brings you out here?” she asked, as though she had the right to.

Timothy looked to him, and so David answered. “We wanted to see what it would be like to walk to Mexico.”

“That’s what we just did,” the mother said happily. “We went to the beach, and we saw Mexico.”

“And it sucked,” said the boy who had spoken up first.

“Oh, I’m sure it wasn’t that bad,” David said. “The beach can’t suck. And, anyway, we’ve always wanted to see Old Mexico.”

The mother beamed. “See, boys. These men are here because they want to be.”

They left without another word, the children now following the woman back toward the cars, and David and Timothy stood without comment, watching the funnel of smoke darken, churning out black smoke now instead of white, before finally sirens did sound from the cliffs above them, though they sounded reluctant, as though they knew they had more important places to be.

“Let’s get a swim,” Timothy said, and he set off, with David trailing him like an unhelpful witness to a crime. Larger homes emerged on the bluffs between the arena and the Pacific, while empty salt flats, poked with red spiny plants, continued to dominate the flatter landscape north of the border. When the dirt track finally emptied onto the beach, David became acutely aware that they had brought no water. He had nothing but his wallet and the skeleton key he kept as a souvenir.

Finally he felt the breeze on his face, and after cresting a dune--the first change in elevation in hours--they saw the blue-grey water, unbroken as the desert they had just crossed, and with less variation, excepting the occasional whitecap out to sea. The sea, like a desert or a lonely mountain, was too obvious a presence not to have a personality, and today it brooded, over what he could not say. The frequent low waves sounded in a restless murmur. He felt that the sea had withdrawn only recently from this low-lying scrubland, and threatened an imminent return. The heat reminded him that the water was undrinkable, useless to every original human purpose. It had not taken long, however, before distance travel contaminated those early desires, and solitary wanderers set off across the ocean in their rafts, satisfied, presumably, in the knowledge that they were no longer where they had been, because, with certainty, they could know nothing else.

There were no other beachgoers, as far as they could see in either direction, though the gentle waves of the Pacific beckoned. They looked up and down the beach. Rather than being welcome, the seeming privacy left David feeling illicit. It was certain that they someone watched them. But no helicopters whirred loudly overhead, no megaphone-enhanced voices blared warning from the ridges above them, no coast guard-types rumbled past on wide-wheeled RVs. Just the beach, looking a bit gnarlier than usual, with its horse droppings and blood-red kelp and emptiness encouraging him to feel as though he walked another, older country.

They ripped off their shirts and stood at the sea's edge.

"No break down here," Timothy said.

"Not too warm."

"Take heart, East Coaster."

Timothy plunged under a wave. The surf was strong but consistent. David squinted and went under.

They swam out, David keeping several bodylengths behind Timothy's effortless stroke. Timothy swam further out, and David strayed toward shore. Timothy swung back around, and they tread just outside the breakers, looking back to the ocean, rippling darkly.

"I'm so sorry your father is dead," Timothy said.

David rubbed sea water out of his eyes and frowned at his friend.

"Come on. What are you feeling, man? What are you thinking about right now?"

“Simon, our dog, loved the ocean. He would run along the surf and bark until we leashed him and dragged him home. He never wanted to go swimming, though. I carried him out a couple of calm days, but he made for shore as quick as his front legs could carry him. Not much of a swimmer, Simon. I’ve seen dogs that swam like polar bears.”

“The kids must miss him.”

“They do. But I think they’re already teaching you in college that your childhood is lost, and that the world you’re poised to reenter is a blasted, post-Apocalyptic hellscape. Tragedy is the expectation. I don’t know what they want them to think, they teach YA smut to college students that I wouldn’t bother with in my classes. And Jesus forgive you if you want to take an education course. Vicky wanted to be a teacher before she went to college. I don’t blame her for changing her mind, though I’ve told her all along the classes don’t have anything to do with it.”

“I’m not that interested in Vicky’s feelings about her classes. Everyone knows that’s not what college is for. I have thought that there are all sorts of reasons why it couldn’t be easy having a daughter her age.”

“Don’t ruin my swim being an asshole,” David said. “It’s never exactly easy having children. Vicky’s amazing, and trustworthy. I just want her to find someone who makes her happy, because she already takes care of herself.”

“So what about Harry?”

“He’s fine.”

They let the waves carry them in to shore.

“You and Sarah must be happy to have the kids out of the house. I don’t know how you dealt with that every evening.”

“Kevin’s still in high school, but, yeah, we’re getting out a bit more.”

“I’ve always admired you for her. Many felt she ate at a different table in the cafeteria.”

“I have been lucky before,” David said. “Might be that it could happen again. But luck isn’t what brought me out here.”

“You said it, brother.”

They emerged from the chilly water, dried themselves with their shirts, and walked on, bare-chested and somewhat refreshed, though the ocean water seemed to cling unnaturally as they continued to Mexico. To avoid the horses’ droppings, they kept to the surf, occasionally skirting clumps of the red kelp that drifted about their ankles. Clouds of flies swarmed the kelp that had washed further inland, the only signs of life before the line of the fence emerged before them.

The border was less formidable than David had imagined. The thin metal lattice extended a mere fifteen feet into the surf. It seemed as though you could scale it or go around it, and it did not look sharp and there were no visible guards.

“You could swim around that, no problem,” Timothy said.

He snapped a picture with his iPhone, and then took one of David, with Tijuana still smoldering in the background.

Variegated umbrellas brightened the sand on the southern side of the fence, and had been apparent long before the hundreds of beachgoers, now visible across the wall,

their possessions and bodies packed so tightly together that David was unable to distinguish any divisions among them, so that they seemed one giant, acephalous family on an outing to the ocean. Outside of the mother and her unwilling children, they had not passed anyone on the mile or so of beach since the trail, though the spiny dune growth had been fenced off to protect it from the absent traffic.

They stopped short of the fence, but well-within earshot of cheerful Latino rhythms that did nothing to dispel David's uneasiness.

"Well, the beach is just as good on our side," David said.

"You could almost swim around that by accident," Timothy said.

"Well, we're all the way here," David said.

"You're not going to touch it?"

"You wanted to go to Mexico, right?"

"I'm not sure if anything will happen."

David took the last few strides and reached up and rested both hands on the metal fence. Fine stuff, light as aluminum, but sturdy. He scanned the landscape, and saw no one watching him, and slowly reached his right hand through, like a soldier hoping to be sent home from the front. He held it outstretched for a long, indrawn breath. In Mexico. Nothing happened, and he withdrew his hand and turned back to Timothy, feeling as though he gazed on his tall friend from a great height.

They trekked back quickly and quietly, not pausing to test the surf as they had on the way out. On the hill above them, the smoke had been stifled in Tijuana and the sirens were quiet. Not long after David began to wonder when they might see the trailhead

branching off through the scrubland, two stout Mexicans on big bays thundered up the beach, rearing up before them before turning aside to plunge in the surf. They looked back from their perches, calling out in laughter-garbled Spanish that David did not bother to try to interpret.

“Do you think they have guns?” Timothy asked, still high.

David shook his head. “They’re only harmless vaqueros. Let’s go.”

They retreated up the beach, and the hooting and shouting died away quickly behind them. As they left the softer sand for the harder packed trail leading back to the car, the ankle strap on David’s Reefs snapped, and as he stood, pondering the last two miles back to the Lotus ignominiously clumping through the dusty horseshit, a pair of girls passed them at the trailhead, riding comfortably, but fresh and seemingly out of place emerging from the barren scrubland. David thought to warn them about the rowdy riders ahead, to say that it was getting late, that there was nothing to find at the end of the earth that you couldn’t find somewhere else, but he just returned the wave from the leader, a brunette his daughter’s age, and watched the palominos lightly pick their way south toward Mexico. They left the beach in search of the car with the thick crescent of the moon already plain overhead in the sunlight.

Two hours later, they sat in plastic chairs at a cheesy, outdoor dive in Ocean Beach, eating fish tacos and watching the sun sink into the Pacific. Both Timothy and the waiter—an older man who paused at their table, lingering longer than David thought reasonable for what he presumed a nightly occurrence—commented that the Green Flash

was the best they had ever seen. David indeed saw a puff of greenish light on the horizon, which seemed to congeal briefly into a face resembling the frowning reflection of some murky underwater god. Continuing to stare after the absent sun, it now appeared that a hazy, forested island grew on the horizon, funnel rather than mountain-shaped, not flickering or effervescent, but an opaque greenish cloud that lingered, resisting for the brief seconds it could before dissipating heavenward.

They returned to Timothy's stucco house, and David waited only briefly in the quiet dusk, before Timothy returned with a four-pack of beers and a blue surfboard.

"Only one?" David asked.

"It's all we'll need," Timothy said, and slapped the board reassuringly.

They walked the half-block to the end of the street, down a staircase, and then traced the path along the cliffs, walking against traffic as satisfied beachgoers returned on their sunset dazed way home, walking alongside each other yet giving every indication that each moved alone, inhabiting a personal, disconnected universe. Small fires flared like tiny stars along the coastline. They descended finally to the cove. A nude boy hastily covered his white rear while an invisible, lilting female voice murmured, "We were just leaving."

They settled in the sand as the couple retreated to higher ground. Timothy opened two beers with the bottom of his flip-flop, passed one to David, and then lit a joint he removed from behind his ear.

"Careful, you don't get anything like this back home," Timothy said. He passed the joint to David.

“I don’t get any of this at home.”

They sat and smoked. Despite the day’s exertions, David felt himself at the beginning of something. From the next cove came vague laughter and a male voice screaming, “Take me,” over and over. David wriggled deeper into the sand. He did not want to be taken anywhere. Hard to imagine he was the oldest man in his family. He felt like a chieftain of a fur-clad, war-ravaged Viking clan. Harry, the surly first mate, Vicky, the warrior-maiden, and Kevin, the berserker. Sarah steering, standing in the stern of their ship, and he, David, rushing the beach, showing his family the way.

“Who’s going first?” Timothy asked.

“Into the ocean?”

“Usually when I do this I have to fight Joe for the board.”

The joint returned to David, and he smoked it in guilty silence.

“You know Joe hunts ghosts now?”

“I had no idea. Is that his job?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not his only job, but he’s been doing it for a while.”

David returned the joint. “That’s hard to picture.”

“He found a ghost in a mansion in Louisiana, and since then he’s investigated a bunch of sites, all stateside. He says he’s not crazy enough to fuck with Mexican ghosts.”

“I can’t believe it. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“Of course I do. Ghosts and aliens, and God.”

“And angels?”

“And angels, and everything.”

“Did you know more people believe in angels than in God?”

“Makes sense to me. They ask less of you. They buzz in, clue you in on something coming up, or tell you that you have to do something, but it’s not their call.”

“Everybody liked Hermes.”

“Exactly.” Timothy buried the joint in the sand and crossed himself. “What’s your favorite part of the Creation story?”

“Usually when people ask a question like that they’ve got an answer in mind,” David said. “Do you really want to hear mine, or did you just want to talk?”

“I happened to have a moment in mind, but now I feel like a dick. What if you tell me something that you’ll miss teaching?”

David thought for a moment. The waves continued to break loudly on the rocks jutting out into the ocean, but the surf, if it even reached them, was a silent placid sheen reflecting the moonlight. “Well, I’ve always enjoyed teaching the Norse creation story. A giant cow lived alone in a frozen chasm beyond measure, licking the walls of ice until, one day, a Giant emerged, Ysir. And the cow nourished him with her milk, and she kept licking, and one day the warmth of her tongue kindled to life a man, and the man and the Giant multiplied. But the Giant grew jealous of the man, Bur, and his descendants, because they were beautiful, and the cow gave them her best milk. And so Ysir crushed Bur, and the men and the giants made war until the first heroes slew Ysir, and built the world from his corpse. His blood became the rivers, his eyebrows, trees, his skull, the ground on which the world stood. But my favorite part is that Odin, the Father of the

Gods, was Bur's grandson. I've always admired a people that believes they birthed their own Gods."

Timothy laughed. "It's a bold claim. So, now I'll tell you mine. From the Good Book. It's the third day, when God created the oceans, and the Spirit of God moved across the face of the water. That line in particular. Then there was light, and all the rest. I think, at night anyway, and under the right conditions," Timothy waved the ember of the joint at the stars, "you can still see the spirit of God in the face of the water, if you look in the right place. Anyway, that's what I hope to see out there."

"That sounds like a lot of Buddhist crap."

"I don't know why. And what exactly about Buddhism makes it the catch-all for Eastern eccentricities?"

"Are you really asking? Because I have no idea."

"Well, I'm no Buddhist, though I find it charming, in an antiquated, 20th-century kind of way, that you need a label for my wisdom. There's no better demonstration of my intellectual superiority."

"Kiss my ass."

"And there's no better demonstration of your physical irrelevance than your refusal to night board."

"I wouldn't correlate a desire for longevity with physical irrelevance."

"But you see my point."

They drank together for a while, agreeable now in the shared awareness that David would be the first out on the water. Finally, he rose to examine the board, which protruded from the sand like a shipwreck. Timothy frowned.

“You’re pretty short, Dave.”

“I’m regular height. I just hang around tall people.”

“Anyway, the board is dark, don’t worry about anything, everything is calm as can be out there.”

“I wish you had another.”

“Another night board? They’re tough to find. They have to be of sufficient quality to trust, but cheap enough to ditch.”

“Easy to lose, anyway, since you wouldn’t be able to see it if it got away.”

“Don’t I know it, bro. If that happens, fuck the board, just relax and bring yourself in.”

“My white belly is going to shine in the moonlight.”

“It would be better if you were tan. You could always just not lose the board.”

David hefted it, and Timothy slapped his back with a beer-dampened palm.

David reluctantly headed to sea.

“When you get comfortable out there, float on your back, and check out the stars.”

There wasn’t a chance in hell, David thought.

The surf was long and the drop extremely gradual—only ankle-deep after the first tiny break, and then a long walk, still carrying the board before he parted the second

break, where he could finally rest the board on the waves, though his feet remained anchored in the sand. Looking back toward land, David discerned Timothy's head, a darker silhouette against the rock. And then with the passing of a cloud, they were indistinguishable. The noise of the surf was plain on the peninsula of rock, and David was surprised at how certain he felt of where he was. Ocean Beach to the north, Sunset Cliffs to the south, and San Diego's millions slumbering beyond. He eased himself up onto the board, and drifted quietly for a moment, until he felt comfortable hugging the board a bit less tightly. He paddled three times with his arms and let himself drift. The cold ocean water quickly warmed in the puddles trapped on top of the board as he floated out to sea.

David cupped a palmful of the cool water and rubbed it into his sunburned face. The water at the shore along the border had felt contaminated, but here the brine that passed between his lips tasted pure. In the open ocean, he was the contaminant. He remembered the end of an old Watameechee legend, one of several Indian fables with which he ushered in each school year, hoping to win his students' regard. 'In the beginning, all the water was sweet. It was the Devil that kept chucking fistfuls of sand in it.'

In the tranquil velvet ocean, David became aware of a gentle rising and falling, so that he seemed to be moving not carelessly out to empty open ocean, but buoyed vertically, toward the stars, as though the entire sea were the strong hand of a confidant masseuse, asking only that he yield to inevitability, asking only that he breathe. To go forth was punishment, to reach up was a fulfillment of the fundamental yearning of man.

But David could not help but think of below as well as above. The black depths beneath were not empty, he would not sink far before striking the kelp, swaying in its infinite rhythms, the lascivious arms of a strangling creature, insatiably waving its silent siren song. And those were not even the arms of the visage he had spotted in the sun's exhalation, a glimpse that portended not the sea that waited patiently to claim its prey, but the sea that rose to smite the prepared and unwary alike, that destroyed without mercy and withdrew without reason, to appear again without warning to destroy again.

The dark reminded him of Harry, and David wished that he could write his eldest from the water as he could from a plane. Only now, he *was* under his own power, he had put himself in this peril needlessly, and he realized himself to be a poor and undisciplined father—one ill-considered decision destroying twenty-one years of responsibility.

Briefly David was angry with Timothy, for getting him drunk and stoned and pushing him out into the ocean, and with Joe, for the ancient grudge his once-friend bore him, and for having made him guilty for not living his life as though it were his own, before he returned to self-loathing. He had not led anyone anywhere. He floated senselessly on the Pacific.

To give himself something else to dwell on, David braced his arms and prepared to roll over—see the stars, Timothy had said—but abandoned the notion as the board started rocking in the promise of rolling over completely. So long as he looked more or less out to sea, everything appeared black—eternal, but still less frightening than trying to force the board around so that he could stare back to the lights of shore. He couldn't be all that far out.

Suddenly David felt the prickling awareness of another energy. First the heat of the ocean seemed to gather to a greater gravity, then he felt a new frigidity coursing through the water beneath him, one he felt must portend the arrival of a giant from the depths, come to dash his feeble hopes and ruin him forever, the green God from the horizon, given form by a squid, or shark, or whale.

In the near but invisible sea, David heard something breach, a hiss that sounded like a fire hose being extinguished. He drew his trembling limbs from the water, steeled himself, and gingerly leaned out over the edge of the board. Moonlight glittered distractingly along the tops of the waves, but squinting, he could see into the clear depths.

Peering desperately into the dark, David beheld a face coalescing out of the watery void beneath him.

He screamed, an irresistible, terrified bray that his body echoed, recoiling away from the ghostly, tortured face beneath the waves. The board rocked, and he pulled it over, hugging it tight as he flipped into the water. And as he submerged, this other took his place in the airy world, so that David frantically broke the surface to a voice beside him screaming, “Ayudame. Pienso ahogarme.”

A Mexican thrashed in the water. “Timothy,” David screamed. He heard more floundering further out to sea. He relaxed his whiteknuckled grip on the board and hesitantly extended the point toward the man who clutched it outstretched and then propped up one elbow like a man scaling a cliff face. He slung up a sodden nylon backpack, and then rested heavily on the board, panting and staring at David. David felt

he could not see the man's face as clearly out of the water. He and the bag reeked like something dead dredged up from the bottom.

“Gracias, gracias. Pienso ahogarme,” the man said.

The calmer tone, the rotting smell of the bag, relaxed David enough that he became conscious of a chorus of voices bawling for deliverance from the sea around him, realized that they were not alone, remembered that the whole world gasped for breath around them.

David pointed toward the beach. “Hang onto the board,” he told the man, speaking slowly. They started kicking. A chunking whir sounded overhead. David saw the searchlight from the first helicopter.

An insistent tide drew them to shore, and Timothy seized David in the shallows, holding him upright as the breakers crashed about his senseless thighs.

“I heard you screaming. I didn't know what the hell was going on. I should have swam out.”

“Don't worry. What's with the helicopter?”

“Must be the Coast Guard. They're border jumpers, I guess.” Timothy looked to the Mexican who held the board and stared wordlessly out to sea. “Sorry. Thanks for holding on to this.” Timothy took the board.

The unintelligible barking of loudspeaked commands drew their attention back to sea. Ladder ropes descended from two helicopters, shining down brightly on heads bobbing in the water, gender, race, or creed indistinguishable in the harsh light.

“Necesita para salir de aqui,” David said.

“Si,” the Mexican said.

They staggered to shore. Lights danced on the ridgeline above them. Timothy handed the immigrant the last beer from the pack, “Buen suerte,” he said.

“Voy al Norte,” the man said.

“Sur, oeste, entonces al Norte,” David said.

The man regarded David for a moment, slung the bag over his shoulder, and set off along the beach to the south. They watched him recede, and in the reflection of the lights and the starlight off the breakers’ foam, saw him begin to pick his way up a cliff. He disappeared over the ridge.

“He’s got no bottle opener,” Timothy said.

II

Harry heard the screeching but did not investigate right away. He lay in bed rereading Egil's Saga, and the shapeshifter was fleeing with his family from Norway. And road sounds were common. But the quiet felt too close. He did not look out the window, just hurried downstairs and outside.

Up the slight hill, past the basketball court and short driveway, a black sedan hissed and beeped in front of the pine trees, front end buried in the turf, wheels and chassis dangling behind it. Harry's grandfather hung limp in the pine trees. There was blood on the fender of the black car, and on the cracked windshield. The driver did not move. Simon lay broken off to the side of the car, and Harry knelt briefly before running to his grandfather.

"Don't bother calling an ambulance," Abraham said, speaking almost normally. His head was bloody, he was torn to pieces, from the tree, from the broken car at his feet.

Harry reached for his grandfather.

"Don't touch me," Abraham howled, flinching impotently from Harry's outreached hand. Harry shrank back. Fresh blood trickled from his grandfather's right eye, already welded shut. He must have turned a little just before, because the right side of his head had taken most of the damage. His left eye shone clearly between bent pine

boughs, like a child peering from cover. His left shoulder and half his face shrugged.

“Better not to touch me now. Go ahead and call a goddamn ambulance.”

Harry ran for the house, but his grandfather called him back.

“Don’t let it all stop with you, Harry.”

Harry waved his hands at the pine trees, the smoking car. “I’m sorry that I can’t do anything. I love you.”

“That’s important, but remember what I said. Not with you.”

Kevin appeared in the driveway.

“Take your brother,” his grandfather said. “Call an ambulance.” His grandfather painfully adjusted to regard the car smoking before him, and from the fierceness of his scowl Harry felt that he might have broken the machine and somehow survived. “That sonofabitch,” his grandfather said.

Kevin got closer. Abraham shifted slowly to face him. “Don’t worry, Kevin,” their grandfather said. Harry could not believe the strength in his voice, how straight his gaze. “Go with Harry. Call for help. Everything will be fine. You’re a beautiful boy. Be kind to your brother and your sister.”

Neighbors had already called the police, and three ambulances arrived in succession, but both men were pronounced dead at the scene.

Three days later, the night before the funeral, the Potters ate their last dinner together in their dining room, and as they had so often, his parents labored together over a summer feast, plattering grilled steaks and chicken and now portabellas for Vicky, and

grilled, buttered corn, homemade coleslaw, watermelon, heirloom tomatoes with vinegar and onion, blueberry crumb and strawberry pies with fresh whipped cream, all introducing their warm musk to the table, making it easier to feel that this was late summer, truly the end of something, and not June, irrevocably fixed as a beginning for Harry, who at twenty, with fifteen years clocked on the academic calendar, was conditioned to think about time ahead in June, to feel at the start of the best part of the year, and his body told him to feel this way, though his grandfather was dead, and though they would leave his childhood home soon, and so he tried, with that part of himself that was becoming an adult, to absorb the heavy smells of food, the lingering traces of candle smoke, the slow advance of night, to force his unwilling, youthful core to admit and accept the change around him.

Vicky moved to New York for an internship, Kevin spent the days at camp, summer pushed on. Harry helped his parents box up the old house and truck it to the new. They had bought an old wooden house modeled on a Dutch windmill in a community, nauseatingly named Forest Glen Park, which a century before had served as a finishing school for the Vanderbilts and DuPonts, and then petered out during the Depression before Walter Reed claimed it for hospital beds during World War II. After the war the government abandoned the property to the wilderness, and much of the campus remained derelict, overgrown, and untouched by construction, which appealed to Harry, but it seemed a strange choice for his parents, one made without much reflection. They were not community people. Both his parents were difficult to talk to—his father dazed, thinking, Harry imagined, about his own father, moving from their family house,

the expanse of occupationless time stretching before him, the submarine of illegal immigrants in San Diego, too much too big too quickly, and in the face of tumult and David's silence, his mother resolute in her positivity, which felt disingenuous, or at least reactionary—so Harry spent his evenings driving the winding roads of his old neighborhood, getting high before he returned home to watch Humphrey Bogart movies until he passed out. Often he woke to his parents' return from that day's first shuttle of goods to the new house.

Harry walked the woods, across the stream past the hunters' blinds and inside the bowl of public land, three hundred acres, that separated them from the sprawl and kept the Patuxent clean. The property sloped steeply from road to river, and a short walk rendered Harry invisible from the house, the occasional rush of traffic more present than his home. No one had said it, which left him to berate himself—*he was lucky his grandfather didn't live long enough to learn what a failure he'd become at college.*

For his twenty-first birthday, Harry and Jack and Rick took Harry's battered Buick to New Orleans, stopping in Chattanooga on the way so Harry could check out the battleground. Savvy enough to disdain the Quarter, they settled on the R Bar and Hotel in the Marigny—a dive that blared metal until four and projected silent movies above the bar, twenty-four hours a day. In late June the city stank unforgivably, of fish and piss and the sweaty unwashed and stagnant water for a hundred miles in every direction and other rancidness that overwhelmed the wafts of spice from restaurants, the dulling smoke of their cigarettes, the perfume of the beignets, and they drank for three days, napping in the early mornings, before they piled wearily back in the Buick. None of them had had sex.

That was the effect Harry had on people, powerful enough to overwhelm even as lecherous a city as New Orleans, where they had danced, danced, the three of them, in crowds, with strangers, but wandered away, remorsefully but with oceanic finality, to drink cheap beer and eat muffalettas.

They had played craps at Harrah's one night, and Harry won—he always won in casinos—turned his hundred dollars into four. And he talked it up as they toured the levis, because they weren't going to go all this way without doing at least a little disaster tourism, and they had seen shows, The Preservation Hall Band in their home venue, and Harry would never forget it. Horns were sexy, and he resolved again to learn the trumpet. Or the coronet. They all swaggered down the street the next day.

And Harry talked enough that Rick and Jack insisted they hit a casino in Cherokee, North Carolina, and they stayed up, playing poker until Harry had taken what Rick and Jack were willing to lose, though he wasn't up much on the night, they were drinking, and finally, Jack slept with a stripper, not a Cherokee, but Jack said that was fine, he'd slept with a stripper and Harry was still a virgin.

July was a misery. They were moved into Forest Glen, and the swampiness and incessant construction left Harry and his parents frazzled. Harry's issues with the new house were straightforward—there was no yard or property, a former point of pride for his parents and an encouraged goal for the Potter children. Harry could picture his parents sitting awkwardly inside their new kitchen, looking out at a team of Hispanic gardeners planting the same little flowers in front of every house.

His parents wondered too often what he felt like doing, and in early August he joined Rick at his parents' beach house in North Carolina. On the break off Hattaras, Harry got to his feet on a surfboard for the first time. A week before school, stupefied from the sun and surf and indolence, and wearing on each other—Rick had started to make a big deal about how much beer he was contributing, where he draped his wet towel—they returned early to Asgard and squatted in their soon-to-be-house, living off hot dogs and cheap beer while they prowled campus and waited for the cafeteria to open.

Except for a large mime camp, Asgard lay empty, awaiting the storm of move-in weekend. They watched one of the counselors put on a show. He did some walking—up and down staircases, the elevator, the escalator—and handkerchief sleight-of-hand, before reaching for a large black cape. He gestured for impressions and pantomimed Madonna, Genghis Khan, and Johnny Cash by lying under the cape and then standing and shaking his hands and strumming the air guitar to applause.

School started. Harry holed up, skipping the trivial first weeks while he worked on his new thesis for his new major—Republicans and Democrats as conservative and liberal Athenians—with Cheney as Nicias, Clinton as Pericles, and Barack Hussein Obama as his Alcibiades. Though the last comparison did not quite fit, and the whole thing would have to be rewritten if Obama lost. Alcibiades never lost.

Harry and Rick shared their five-room ranch house with Alex and Dan, both abroad for the semester—Dan in Spain, and Alex in Oslo with the other Norse Studies juniors. Harry's old program. The house tucked up against the woods guarding the campus' northern approaches, and Harry found the long walks to classes a light tradeoff

for the enormous privacy. Previous generations of students had carved a warren of trails through the woods that led first to large clearings, with makeshift seating and firepits, and then to more secluded nooks frequented by stoners and couples, and then the trails thinned until the woods finally opened onto a stream where old picnic tables slowly returned to nature. The main path leading back to the trails began between two Japanese maples. The trees' red color in spring and the unpredictable behavior of the adventurous or anti-social elements who craved such remove from their fellows inspired their name, The Gate to Hel. Harry saw something romantic in the trees' intertwining, and did not use the nickname.

He and Vicky took a long, quiet walk together in the woods and found a pair of half-buried horseshoe stakes alongside the stream. When they returned, Harry carried a boombox and shoes, and they dusted off the pitch and listened to Gillian Welch and Big Boy Henry, and split two games, and walked back arm-in-arm, satisfied.

He sketched griffons, hydras, and satyr on the walls throughout the house. He and Rick wheeled and then dragged an absurdly heavy old organ from a professor's curb to one of the unoccupied bedrooms, and Harry sent eerie dissonance into the late night darkness as he imagined Dr. Thompson had once fired his guns. Just to probe the blackness, though Harry felt there must be more of himself, wavering ethereally with the dissipating chords, then there could be with a bullet. In the spirit of openness, and for occasional use as a Beirut table, they removed the front door, and leaves and empty cans drifted in and out of the house like a swamp's ebb listlessly marking the seasons.

After a month, Harry made a round of attendances and office visits. He wrote a couple papers, and returned to the thesis. He drank every night. When the alcohol ran out he wandered the woods, sobering at dawn, sitting on a log, talking to his grandfather. Grief did not drive him to drink and do drugs. He had done so for two years, and he did not intend to abruptly stop. But he missed his grandfather, who intruded on him at inopportune times, alone, vulnerable, drunk in the woods, showering, masturbating.

“There have always been people who cannot find their way at a University, Harry,” his grandfather had intoned the one time Harry insinuated that his studies were not proceeding as swimmingly as expected. “Drunks, drug users, thieves, idiots, the rarest malcontents, and cowards afraid to face their first crack at real life with real effort of their own.”

Was there another category for him, Harry wondered. Or rather, how many did he belong to? Speculation being one of the chief pleasures of the living. And Harry appreciated the criticism. His grandfather had been the only member of the family who outspokenly preferred Harry to Vicky, setting her aside like unwanted groceries whenever he tottered into the room. Harry’s parents delighted in his sister’s ability to outstrip him. Seats in the car, picking dinner, movies, plotting routes for drives, all the thinking choices belonged to Vicky. Harry, in spite of his ordinary size and delicate mind, was regarded chiefly as a beast of burden when it came to family utility.

His grandfather knew different.

“You’re wasting that boy, David,” Harry once heard his grandfather scold his father. “You can see he’ll never be a mason.” This in response to Harry’s portion of the drystone retaining wall he and his father sweated into the slope behind the house.

“You should send him to study at Oxford with those snooty toads. He’s got the mind for it. Some people can’t fathom the immensity of the world. Harry can.” To be compared favorably to his father was a rare and awkward pleasure. Abraham had a nearly full passport he enjoyed showing off and looked poorly on David’s disinterest in travel. Harry’s father had been to Nova Scotia and Hawaii, twice each, and, when it had come up in conversation, Harry heard his father comfortably say that he did not have a passport, but that it was important to hold things out for yourself for the future. Harry himself strove to balance the potvaliency of a Viking with the balsamaceous nature of a monk, and did what he could to think no further than the moment.

How did the old story start? From early in the morning, the day had been going badly. Harry hated being sick, outspokenly and passionately, as though despising illness could give him some power over it. He had hated it when he was young, when his parents crammed him with lukewarm, limp-noodled chicken soup and watery oatmeal, and he hated it now, when sickness made it hurt to smoke cigarettes and his friends wouldn’t share joints with him and he appeared pale and affected rather than rugged as he shivered his way across campus. On his own, he now ablated himself with whiskey in place of medicine—it was dangerous to combine antibiotics and alcohol after all—but it was only eleven, and, uncomfortable starting treatment so early, he went to see Vicky.

His sister lived in a single on the top Bellweather Hall near the heart of the small campus, one of several stone residences forced on freshmen and sought after equally by the teetotalers and the ass-kissers among the upperclassmen. Future referees, Harry thought them all, but Vicky, only a sophomore, had carved a place among them and was poised to take over *The Word* next year. Poised over Mark Thompson's cock was how he feared—assumed—she'd secured the position, though Vicky's poetry and essays had both won awards in high school.

Scant weeks into her freshman year, Vicky already knew more upperclassmen than he did. Harry kept to his people, clinging to those he first encountered regardless of compatibility or credo. Proximity took care of the first concern, and the second, though still being refined, was also quickly determined; an intensely wistful and tolerant socializing, where only productivity met with disdain. He lived with Dan, one of the only dealers on campus, who sold pot, mostly, without much help from Harry or the others. And though Harry easily felt guilty, he did not have any difficulty refusing to help Dan with the pushing—his enjoyment of taking drugs stemmed in large part from feeling like it separated him from the general quivering populace, and he yet clung to the elusive notion that something mystical but real emerged while scaling the trying mental precipices of narcotics, a timorous sense that vanished easily when confronted by the crude excesses and extravagant claims of most other users. Living on the fringes had emboldened Harry in ways he had not known to expect. It did not matter if Asgard was a decent and pleasant place; Harry finally existed at the seamy underbelly of something and wallowingly rejoiced in his fatuous misconduct.

But Vicky's presence had introduced unwanted murmurings of responsibility, as Harry remembered what it was to be older, again in the position where some advice and oversight might have been warranted if he'd known what to say. Vicky seemed normal because she was a girl; as far as he could tell there no longer were established standards for how a girl should behave in the new century. Angry? You were standing up for yourself. Depressed? You were smart. So long as you could avoid getting pregnant as a teen, the world assumed the best if you were a woman. If you could manage to appear well-adjusted, as Vicky seemed? You were magical. And his friends noticed. There was an especially fierce frown, an extreme furrowing of the eyebrows, which Harry reserved for when people complimented his sister. 'Oh, so now you're going to tell me about my family,' he hoped the expression conveyed.

Harry's friends had been quick to sense the opportunity his sister's presence created. "Maybe your sister can find you a lady friend," Alex had said after she visited their house for the first time. Being so predictable, so blatant in his need, infuriated him. For Harry, nothing could be worse than being anticipated in love, and he resolved to keep at a remove from his sister's girlfriends. This had proved more effortless than Harry hoped, as his sister associated nearly exclusively with boys. The sole exception, Monica Sellers, grew up in Brooklyn, had modeled pants for Gap, and did not give Harry any indication that brotherly concern for Vicky attracted her in the least. And Vicky assured Harry that her friendships were normal, and mostly non-sexual—not that he thought she should never have sex—and how could he criticize her behavior if he did not have any girlfriends himself?

Thoughts of his family invariably made him feel guilty about his various excesses, awash in the pains his parents had taken to protect him. Their father had stopped drinking when Harry was still very young, and memory teetered between projected thoughts and the real thing. He did remember that his father had once told him that he used to take a drink when he felt stressed, but that there were better ways to relieve tension. His family always used liquid soap infused with eucalyptus, which claimed to release soothing, stress-relieving vapors. And so in high school, while doing the dishes, Harry would soap his hands and imagine that he stood drinking at a bar. Which he had been last night, until thoughts of soaping his hands drove him home to bed.

Harry sought the solace of shadows, away from main paths, skirting copses of trees and skulking behind buildings, hiding from the shrill morning light. He should be in class, and his thesis was behind schedule—he had not done much writing, and when forced to discuss his work, claimed to still be amassing research. Some of the intractable stasis of the Democratic and Republican parties had rubbed off on his thinking. He had put the work on hold and passed his sickness binge-watching season one of *Breaking Bad*, and then rereading *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, to balance out his feelings toward New Mexico. None of it deepened his understanding of the ultimately fatal infighting between conservative and progressive Athenians during the Peloponnesian War. The United States was not beset by plague, and Harry considered it a stretch to compare the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the Peloponnesian War in terms of impact on the body politic. And who was Sparta? It couldn't be China, there was no history, no ancient enmity, and besides, in its especial foreignness and strange wealth, China had to be

Persia, which left Russia as Sparta, and that satisfied the grudge quotient, and as far as land versus sea compared to communism versus capitalism the comparison worked reasonably well—but Sparta could also be compared to Iran and some amalgamation of Muslim states, and that appeared to be the ongoing conflict. Harry couldn't decide. Originally, he had thought himself in possession of a clever topic which highlighted the similarities between disparate times, but he increasingly toiled in the emotionless world of compare and contrast. It was easy to blame the new major. Harry had hoped to find a home with the Classics department, but they frowned on treatises that even hinted at contemporary relevance, let alone a study immediately concerned with current political machinations, and as he refused to be another Poly Sci major from the DC suburbs, leaving History as the only realistic fit. But the change-of-major paperwork collected ash on his desk. History was a refuge for jocks and future teachers at Asgard, as most of the serious, Humanities-interested students pursued the University's flagship major, Viking Studies, which had been Harry's lot as well, until his grades left him ineligible for the required semester at the University of Oslo.

A small village, nicknamed Valhalla, but actually called Centreville—early residents thought themselves at the locus of Ohio—separated the northern residencies from the main campus buildings. Centreville consisted of a bar, bank, post office, college-subsidized general store, college bookstore, and college coffee house. There was still a working phone booth. Alumni relations operated out of a white Victorian, and campus security stood ready to host malcontents or paraphernalia in a garage turned municipal building. Town was three blocks long.

A footpath cut through the center of campus, but Harry never used it. Too visible. He wore ripped khaki shorts and a baseball shirt that read Luddites on the front and 'Progress Kills' on the back, above the image of a wooden shoe. Vicky had given him the shirt for Christmas. He ducked behind the bar, the Grotto, then along a street between the backs of the businesses and houses, faculty residences, the Hillel House, the Women's Studies House, the Sociology House (so close because people could never make up their minds, as the old joke went), and then across a cross street, behind the church, mostly out of sight of the academic buildings, through the President's back yard, and finally among the campus' stately dorms.

Beneath the overhang sheltering Bellweather's rear entrance and the end of his furtive journey, Harry breathed deep and looked out from the stony gloom of centuries into the still-brightening autumn afternoon. Hanging baskets bobbed in a light wind that lifted the slightly-sweaty ends of unwashed hair from his eyes. A fat bee emerged drunkenly from a maze of heavily-laden fuchsia, purple blossoms framed in red and turned demurely earthward, the soon-to-bloom flowers bobbing like hot air balloons or Arabian lamps happily awaiting future pollinators.

Vicky opened the door almost immediately after his knock, without asking who it was.

"Hey, Harry." Vicky looked back into her room at a clock. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Thanks for keeping track of my schedule. I'm sick."

"Oh, sorry. Come in."

She left the door open, and had found a bag of cough drops by the time he seated himself in her desk chair. Vicky tidied her bed and sat on the comforter. A stick of incense had just begun to waft its smoke about the small room, and Abigail Washburn was halfway finished singing her way through a CD he'd given her.

"Hey," Harry said after recognizing the music's source, "Nice tunes."

"Thanks. I always put it on," Vicky hesitated, "in the morning. It's great daytime music."

"Sure," Harry said. He looked around the room, sucking the drop. Unlike Harry, who used the same plaid sheets he had since grade school, Vicky refreshed her linens for college, and now her bed looked like any girl's bed, with its downy, red comforter and heaped pillows. Underneath the bedding, and the fine vanilla smoke of the incense, lurked the musk of damp bedsheets. Sitting atop it, his sister's lightly-tanned skin glistened. She wore a tank top and athletic shorts with *Mount St. Mary's Academy* stenciled on the thigh. Thanks in large part to Monica he didn't even recognize most of her clothes, though the oversized athletic shorts were certainly Mark's. She'd rolled over the waist a few times to keep them up. Harry felt like he'd just caught her running naked to the bathroom, though Vicky certainly looked to be at her ease as she met his gaze comfortably, satisfied that his inspection had led him to a certain conclusion.

"I figured you usually went over to Mark's." Harry said.

"Not usually," Vicky responded. "I prefer sleeping in my own space. And he likes remembering his long-ago days in Bellweather." Vicky laughed lightly. "You don't want to hear this, you're as bad as Dad. Let's talk about something else."

“Yeah, what does Dad say?”

“Not a word. He did mention once that two years is still a big difference, and not in a way that seemed to credit Mark’s interest as a sign of my laudatory maturity.” Vicky looked at him. “And it makes you uncomfortable to think about me having sex. Which is reasonable.”

Oh, Captain, my Captain, Abigail Washburn sang. “Thanks. I’m happy for you,” Harry said.

“No, you’re not. And that’s what doesn’t seem to make sense. You liked Mark. You told me that besides him it was a pack of idiots working on the journal.”

“Is it so hard to understand that I’m uncomfortable with having introduced my sister to her older boyfriend, who may have used his standing to advantage?”

“Oh, come on, Harry. You don’t care about that. Your problem is that you used to want to be editor of *The Word*.”

“I don’t care about that anymore. I’m happy it’s working out for you. And, yes, your relationship does strike me as convenient.”

“For me or him, Harry?”

Harry took another drop out of the bag, unwrapped it, popped it in his mouth, deliberated wadded up the paper and threw it away. Vicky remained perched on the edge of her bed, regarding him intently. “I don’t want to talk about this,” Harry said.

“I bet you don’t. Monica says you need to get laid.”

Good to hear, Harry thought. He would be okay with a pity fuck. “I don’t disagree that that might be a good idea, but I don’t what it has to do with your situation.

And no one would have me, sick as I am. I'm a mucus sieve." Really he felt better than he had in days. His body must have mistaken the tension of the morning flight for actual danger and flushed his system with adrenaline.

"So go see a nurse."

"They don't have the medicine I'm looking for."

"I knew you weren't going to be able to keep any pot around with Dan gone."

"I haven't been out for days. I mean that I haven't been out of the house for days. Anyway, be thankful I'm not a committed user."

"You should be thankful that I'm not." Vicky rummaged briefly in her dresser.

"Don't look."

Harry agreeably closed his eyes, opening them when he felt Vicky press a lumpy plastic bag into his palm. Harry inhaled. "Smells good."

"Well, I hope you feel better," Vicky said. "I'll bring by some chicken soup from the cafeteria later."

"Thanks, sis," Harry said.

Back in the breezeway beneath Bellweather, preparing for another secretive flight across campus, Harry paused to wonder if he would prefer to be a girl. The fuschia continued their innuendo-laced dance. He saw no more bees, just the upside-down flowers, confused enough by the late heat to still be blooming.

The metal door banged open and disgorged Monica, yammering into her cell phone, dressed for yoga in spandex shorts and a sports bra. Leather satchel. She and Vicky professed close friendship, but they preferred living by themselves. Monica

ruffled Harry's hair on her way past. Like he was a little boy. He knew she wouldn't turn and carelessly watched the retreat of her tall legs, the languorous strides of a predatory cat between meals.

He hated the omnipresent telephone, pictured them shriveling their users' insides from the deep cover of a pocket. He'd be standing tall while the senseless crowd-followers whispered to each other from their hospital beds. Small comfort, though. If he were lucky enough, one day he too would have his stay in a hospital bed while strangers tried to save his life so that they might have the opportunity again. Harry lit a cigarette and felt throat sick. He followed Monica up the path, holding his cigarette well away from his body with the tips of his fingers, repulsed, by his actions, by Monica, by the cigarette.

Several times girls had called out across campus, "I want to fuck Harry Potter," but none followed up, and pride wouldn't allow him to chase them down on the near-certainty that they did not in fact mean it. But who should be embarrassed if he walked right up and declared, 'Here I am, have at me.' Instead, the lilting, taunting, come-ons wasted his sleep with dreams of confrontation, waking to limpidly wish that he had followed behind on the chance that he'd find someone as lonely as he was.

Only the sick, the flawed, the deformed, the wretched, the foolish, and the strange saw redemption in him, sought him out as some empathetic refuge, someone who would venerate their idiosyncrasies, where they might be welcomed instead of ostracized or condemned. In what he considered his more penetrating moments, Harry recognized that it must be because they recognized some kinship with him that must run deeper than

general tolerance for petty illegal activity. And since he wasn't physically deformed—beyond a slightly hooked nose, a deeply wrinkled brow, and extreme nearsightedness—Harry concluded that some mental imbalance lurked within him, invisible save to others so marked.

It wasn't too difficult for him to imagine—especially considering his brother—that he was mildly autistic, except for accepting the part where he might never comprehend nor be comprehended by another mind. From observing Kevin, Harry had concluded that autism was a terrifying isolation of a kind everyone experienced in part. Asgard had taught him that humanity's most blissful state is isolation from the world, but amongst fellows.

Monica's ass clenched one cheek at a time in her tight shorts as she strolled away, and Harry followed her from the dorm deeper into campus. She spiraled into the main cafeteria, and, unwilling to intermingle intimately with the masses, he walked away from traffic, almost aimlessly, until the steeply pitched sod roof of the skali emerged from the light woods like a lost Englishman. Asgard itself for all Norse Studies majors, the turf longhouse was the largest structure in the stockade, which Harry and several previous generations of Norse studies students had helped erect.

'Canada can have its L'Anse aux Meadows,' the provost had declared at the ribbon-cutting Harry's freshman year, 'Asgard had Stong.' The compound had taken over a decade of assiduous, largely extra-curricular work from students and faculty, and yet he had been the one to finish it off—winning the twenty person kubb tournament for the honor of hammering the last iron nail into the gables above the entrance, and then

dominating the hnefatafl that followed (only four of them knew how to play, and he often had to remind his opponents of the rules), with everyone rooting against him (a familiar pleasure for any oldest sibling, like being booed by a powerless rival), for the honor of lighting the first fire in the skali. Later that night, he partnered with Alex in the inaugural, unsanctioned NS triathlon, a slog through rock hurling, drinking word games, and Beirut that, while it did not have a formal winner, dovetailed nicely with Harry's strengths. Some days were just better than others. January 7th, 2007, undoubtedly the finest moment of his college career. And in no danger of being exceeded.

A few desiccated stalks of hay poked up from the shadows inside the turf wall. Two years ago a field had been planted inside the stockade, and the plan was to sow and reap them by hand for the stable of Icelandic ponies the school hoped to purchase, but the ponies were too expensive, and the labor too mindless and persistent. Now the school's groundskeepers cut down the stubborn volunteers and left them to molder with the leaves.

Harry tapped the gable for luck and ducked into the longhouse. It didn't look like anyone had built a fire in the skali recently, but Harry checked the other rooms anyway—no one at home in the landowner's stofa, the store room, the kamarr, though the latrine smelled of recent use. He sat on the too-appropriately named set, the wide wooden benches that constituted pretty much the only furniture in an early Icelandic home. Easier to recreate that way. For authenticity's sake, fold-away tables hung in the store room, above old, empty, expensive barrels, but research and the sagas suggested that the Icelanders spent much of their time, and all of their winters, eating, playing, and sleeping on wooden benches amid their belching fellows, and their livestock, if they were poor.

Harry took out a Spirit and tapped a fifth of the tobacco onto the dirt floor. He settled the baggie in his lap and broke up the small bud. Painstakingly, he added half the pot down the narrow funnel of the cigarette and twisted shut the end. He lit it and watched his smoke wander out through one of the small sky-lights cut horizontally through the base of the roof.

Returning to the scene of his Kubb triumph—hurling the pins, accuracy and strength, that was him—made him remember basketball. Harry's groundbound, grappling approach had earned him the pejorative nickname, The Wrestler. At The Shit, wrestling was the province of black kids too awkward for basketball, and by high school most of the unathletic had shifted over to plays or choirs or bands—so it was his school's only sport with a white majority. Steve, the only other white guy who played basketball, was tall and ran like a gazelle, and was about the best leaper on the team. He was lousy at basketball, though.

He should not have asked his dad to stop coaching Trinity's basketball team—his dad said yes immediately, and mentioned that he'd been thinking along the same lines, though he was regarded as an excellent coach, and the team did well in competitive Prince George's county league miles over the head of the prep circuit that Glenelg, Vicky and Kevin's school, played in. The coach who replaced his dad, the one Harry played for—or practiced for, he never got in any games, resulting in awkwardness in hallways at school and quiet at the dinner table, as both Harry and his father felt he merited at least some time, he could play on or off the ball, and was sturdy enough to guard bigger guys, though a couple guys from The Shit went to D1 schools, Trinity was largely stocked with

mediocre players—was a former D1 player who preferred showboats and daps to box outs and getting back in transition, and Harry got splinters and the team stunk. His junior year Glenelg beat The Shit by fifteen (in the annual scrimmage his dad had organized to benefit Prince George's County children's hospital), Harry's mom raised the specter of reverse discrimination at home, and they got a new coach, an AAU guy, the next year, who brought four freshmen in with him, studs, and Harry quit basketball. He could maybe have played at Asgard, but he wasn't going to waste the fall and spring weight training so he could come off the bench for a DIII school. He now saw himself as more of an X-games guy anyway—rock climbing, obstacles courses, ocean kayaking, distance swimming. That might have gotten him onto the Vikings in the first place.

Another short burst of rain swept across the roof. Two spiders scurried down posts, reflections of one another. Harry saw no trace of their webs. He stubbed out the roach and pitched it in the firepit.

Harry left the shadows to wander the compound. A sudden breeze chilled him. The pot hadn't reduced his fear of public exposure, and Stong wasn't the place for it anyway—if a student or professor did come by, there was a good chance that Harry would recognize them. And he'd be the lame, can't-get-over-it kid who sulked around the scene of his former triumphs by himself after getting kicked out of the program. Two o'clock in the afternoon, early October. Buck up, he thought, it's only mid-fall. So was he, he thought. Best not to dwell on the bottom until you scrape it.

Some drunk, or more likely a bunch of drunks, had chucked dozens of ketchup packets at the northern side of the longhouse. Harry felt confident in thinking it the work of other disgruntled NS majors. Stong had been destroyed by a volcano from the north.

That was him. Here to laugh at jokes other people missed.

And to dwell on existential questions like, what did it matter if he compared contemporary American leaders to Greek political leaders more than two thousand years dead? And, if it didn't matter, why hadn't he come up with an idea that did matter, that did have some weight and contemporary relevance? That was the concern for a man as out of place as Harry—though great artists were not appreciated in their own time, it was just as likely that you were behind them through no great machinations of your own, that you were a slouch, a hack, unadaptable as the pygmy sloth.

At the edge of the stockade sat the unfinished knorr. Harry had only seen the ship's naked spine last spring, now boards covered her, with a hole cut for the mast. It might look pretty grand one day. But building an eight hundred year old ship out here in landlocked Ohio? At least he had company in irrelevancy.

Harry hauled himself up onto the Viking ship, a difficult task since the knorr was jacked four feet up in the air, and situated himself in the prow to finagle another spliff with the rest of Vicky's pot. He was feeling better. Like he had been sick yesterday. Vicky didn't keep much pot around, but it was always good. That was a sound practice. Harry had too many people around to keep hold of anything as valuable as decent dope. He bought middies, in the largest quantity he could manage. He finished pushing the crystallized remainder into the partially emptied tube and twisted. These guys here

would have had trouble keeping anything personal. Years on ships. They probably shared a lot more than drugs. Best not to think about it—like steroids in baseball. The point is, no one else was sailing the frozen northern seas in the early 1000s, or the early 1500s, either, so they had plenty else figured out.

Still, his mind recoiled from the image. Heavy limbs awkwardly thwacking into each other. The next graceful man he met would be the first. But his grandfather, his model in machismo, had cherished his scarce gay friends—*the best people you're likely to meet in academic circles*—though they could send him outside to smoke his pipe with a kiss or a hand squeezed across the table.

Harry's bench on the knorr allowed him to see over the turf wall, into the graveyard that abutted the land Asgard had received for the project. The graveyard was large and old, many of the headstones ornate, and it generally looked as though it had sat unchanged for three hundred years. Even so, he could not imagine other than that would win its battle with Stong much as the volcano had, creeping over the turf wall, one body at a time, reoccupying the village. At least the grounds would continue to be used for memorial purposes.

Sounded like something his grandfather might say. More of his wisdom: 'Gallows humor is the *only* humor for intelligent people, Harry.' This one of several comments he only delivered with a southern drawl. He was an excellent mimic, and Harry thought part of the reason behind his own father's reticence around Abraham was the regular imitations Abraham performed from David's early childhood—Harry's father terrified of bugs, Harry's father confusing sand with snow when the family visited the

Rockies, Harry's father frightened to fly, abstaining from trips to London, Rome and Sydney, though he had flown to Portland, Oregon, to visit Harry's mother the summer after college. Harry didn't much like flying either, there was nothing that another living soul did as competently as he did. Rather than trust his life to strangers, he preferred to risk it himself. When Harry could fly a plane, then he would fly. Still, the impressions had been hysterical on Christmas.

Harry left the ship with his spliff and walked east out of the stockade. An opening yawned in the turf escarpment scant feet from the slim wrought iron caging the dead. Too jaundiced to imagine rings in Dante's Hell, Harry instead saw the Viking memorial and cemetery as adjoining tenements welcoming the downtrodden to an even lower rung of poverty. A slim weedy buffer rippled wild and unkempt in the wind. A giant might lie down with his head in the stockade and his toes in the cemetery, but for Harry it was all of one or the other. He held his breath and forded the weeds.

The cemetery gate gave a satisfying creak. Awful to think that every time you happened into a graveyard you were necessarily closer to lying down in one yourself. His steps carried him to an angel holding a thin spear, poised above a grave. Cupidesque, Harry might have said in another setting. *Burr*, the large headstone read, *Being Dead Yet Speaketh*.

"Say what you will," Harry commanded the grave. He whirled to face Stong. That was his grandfather—strong. Outlived his wife by eleven years, long enough that he became fixed for his descendents in ornery bachelordom so overpowering that Harry had trouble remembering his grandmother except through his grandfather's stories. He sat

crosslegged on the path in front of the Burr plot, finishing the spliff and recalling his grandfather's graveyard story.

'Your grandmother wanted to go back to Europe,' Abraham had told him. 'I wanted to go to Thailand and see the Moken. She said if it was going to be water than she wanted the Mediterranean. We settled on Spain and Portugal—I'd just finished *The Poem of the Cid*, and we'd never been to Portugal, so there was still some uncharted territory in there. We spent a couple rainy days moping around Sevilla, or I did, your grandmother said the rain suited such an old city, and we went to the cathedral anyway.'" His grandfather knew when to smoke his pipe when he told a story, and he puffed it here.

'Finally, we rented a Peugeot and took off at half-speed for Portugal. We drove north, away from Cordoba and the traffic, it was early morning, and I swear to you Harry, the sky opened up the minute we were out of that city, and eventually we crossed the Guadiana at sunset and I've never seen such a beautiful landscape in all my life.' Another puff, and the pipe was laid aside so that he gesture.

'I had picked Evora, an old Roman town that had been the capital. The Cid reclaimed in for Alonso in 1165. Bloody fight. And Gerald the Fearless became The Cid. There was an intact Roman wall sheltering a temple to Diana—intact, except that the Moors added twelve feet to it—that hadn't been breached until finally the University broke through to make room for a couple soccer fields. You can imagine what I said to the guide about that. Still, it lasted more than 2000 years, let's see us do the same. There was a chapel near the center of town, it was more than a thousand years old itself, and so sunken in its foundations that it felt underground. Three generations of Franciscans had

dug up the bones of everyone in the adjoining cemetery—this was the 16th century, give or take, and these priests had decorated the inside of the church with the bones of their parishioners—fingerbones radiating out to femurs in concentric circles; rows of skulls on the columns, lighter on the domes where people had rubbed them; ribs, Harry, you’d have thought the rib the only bone in the human body looking at the walls.’ His grandfather arched his hand over their heads. ‘Two murals covered the ceiling, angels and skeletons in symmetrical poses, arched above the manipulations of the groundbound clergy. A *Meditation on Life and Death*, it was called, and that’s where the first priest said he got his inspiration. *No shit*, you wished you could tell him.

One realization that dawned on me, walking around in there, was that we read that it took more than a hundred years to complete. So, for more than one hundred years, people would have been going to worship each week with this morbid sore *unfinished*, and they had to realize, slow as it must have seemed to be going, and as short as life expectancies were back then, that when they died, they were going up on that wall.

‘Old as I am, Harry, I can tell you, I would have found a different church, mighty quick. I’d not have my bones hanging up on the damn walls like you might expect Attila to do with some captured villagers.’

His grandfather had laughed, pleased to still be living, laughing about death. ‘So that’s my charge to you, Harry, promise not to let them string me up like a pickpocket or traitor, and I’ll keep you in my will. And, never, ever, go to Evora.’ He filled his pipe and frowned at Harry’s laughter.

‘Promise me,’ Harry, he said, and Harry had promised. Harry’s grandfather had made no mention of him in the scribblings used to piece together his will.

‘I’m telling you, Harry, the whole scene was disconcerting. A dampness emanated from those bones that five hundred years of refracted sunlight hadn’t begun to touch, do you understand? I’m not embarrassed to say that I was uncomfortable enough to reach out for your grandmother’s hand, not realizing that she was trembling so badly that she couldn’t reach for me. And feeling the bones of her hand made me think to myself, *just which of those bones up there are finger bones, anyway?* and I dropped her hand pretty quick. And when our eyes met, I knew she was thinking along the same lines. What else could have been in her mind? And when we stopped looking at each other, we finally saw, at the front of the chapel, the only intact skeleton in the whole place.’

‘What was it?’ Harry asked.

His grandfather laid aside the still unlit pipe. ‘The skeleton of a small child,’ he answered, ‘suspended above the altar. And alongside the altar, was a tiny coffin.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘*Some meditation*, I thought then, and think now. It’s the worst damn idea I’ve ever heard of. There’s nothing they label as a perversion that they didn’t try out first.’

‘Grandmom must have hated it.’

‘She did, Harry. She hated the whole place. I would’ve given a year’s salary to have just skipped Evora altogether. But then, a whole crowd of Japanese tourists swept into the little church behind us, the problem is that we were alone, and after they shuffled

in, we left, like we remembered that we were allowed to. First and last time I was ever happy to see a bunch of Japs running around with their little cameras, but I sure didn't mind them then.

We got outside, and we walked around in the sunshine, Harry, it was like I had been back to war in the space of twenty minutes, and we didn't say a word, just basked. And then a woman pulled us into her little store, it was also her house, and it was full of pottery that she had made and painted—unbelievable stuff, all blue on white, I'd never seen anything like it.'

'I didn't know you cared for pottery.'

'I don't usually, Harry, but these were trying times. Sometimes you're just happy to be anywhere that isn't where you just were. Sometimes you hop out of the frying pan, and you *don't* land in more fire. That was us, we were ecstatic. I would have stayed in that woman's house looking at her ceramic vases for a year.'

'I've never seen any Portuguese pottery,' he asked. 'What happened to it?'

'That was the last trip we ever took together, Harry. The last trip abroad, anyway. Your grandmother got sick before we flew out of Lisbon, and she was diagnosed with pneumonia by our doctor when we got home. Your grandmother blamed the church. She never got better, and a few months later we found out that she had a tumor in her stomach, they had missed it.

So I smashed all the pottery the day after she died. Every piece. Then I took it outside and dug a hole and threw the shards in and built a big fire over it. After it burned out, I covered up the hole. That's my meditation, Harry. Maybe someday some scientist

will dig up that hole and think some Portuguese captain made an unrecorded voyage up the Chesapeake.’

High, and sufficiently terrified, Harry retraced his steps back through Stong to campus. It was nearly four. Ravenous, he trudged for the cafeteria, but the sounds of instruments warming up drew his steps toward town. The little noodling licks became discernible as a guitar and a banjo—it was so crisp an afternoon that Harry could hear them clearing their throats. The duo had set up in front of the bar, the lowest point in town, and the bottom of a decent, bowl-shaped amphitheater, Harry now saw, and he found a mature oak across the street, in front of the market, and leaned back.

They were still young, but too old to be students. The girl had icy blond hair and pronounced cheekbones, like an albino Ethiopian princess except for the fine, almost stringy, maybe unwashed, hair, but she was beautiful when she sang, and when she familiarly plucked her banjo, she gazed on her partner with such a look of comfortable, confident excitement that it made it difficult for Harry not to wish he received that look from a woman capable of delivering it. And the guy, hair as long as Harry’s but settled into itself, several days stubble, buckskin jacket without the fringe, purple tee-shirt, played his heart out, running through his licks without a thought for the lingering passersby, playing for her.

And almost anyone passing lingered. They sang about trains and chain gangs and sad old towns and angry wives and jealous husbands and murder and love, nothing country or hackneyed, but elegant and sincere. They knew they were good. The crowd thickened up, and though he could still hear fine—people were paying attention—Harry

could no longer see the performers, and he watched the obstructing crowd instead. A girl leaned against an antique lamppost. Her pants were tight yellow cords, and she wore a faded purple shirt with a flared collar and one moccasined foot propped the whole, ephemeral weight of her body off the post. And the sun shone on his back and on her lips, which glistened, and he realized in a flash of wonderful certainty that he would kiss those lips, so assured that it was almost as though he had already done it, and he waited only to kiss them again.

She listened, watching the performers, but distracted, by cars, passersby, finally, him. Her hair curled down her shoulders. They made eye contact a second time, and Harry moved toward her, no longer conscious of music or crowd. Summoned. As he approached it did not occur to Harry that she was doing anything other than waiting for him. Though he often liked people immediately, this was the moment he had been waiting for his entire life. He walked across the street without looking, not breaking eye-contact—he could have heard a car coming at ten miles an hour, but still it was nerve-racking—and then they stood before each other silent for a moment. In awe of each other, Harry hoped. He spoke.

“Has your taste in music always been good?”

A light laugh. A girl who had been complimented before. “Pretty much.”

“Do you play?”

“No. Not really. Some piano.” They both waited for her to say something else.

“They could almost be from Colorado. A little too somber, though.”

“That’s Appalachia for you. You’re from Colorado?”

She nodded.

“I’m Harry,” he offered his hand, and she looked at him in the eyes as they shook.

“I’m Maya.” She looked back at the stage. “You look like you play music.”

“Thanks. I don’t really. A little guitar. I played French Horn until tenth grade.”

“In a marching band?”

“No,” Harry said, “horns were just big at my school. It was a concert brass band.”

“Cool.”

“It wasn’t really my thing.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. He didn’t want to disparage the French Horn, or anything else, in front of her. “I like to sing, I guess.”

“But you’ve had a pack of cigarettes in your hand the whole time we’ve been talking.”

“I’m nervous. And my vocal chords aren’t bothered by a little smoke,” Harry said. He lit one from his pack. “Would you like one?” He proffered the pack, and she took one.

“Sure, thanks.” The breeze stirred her hair, and the sun shone on it, and her brown curls glinted gold. The sun had been out for a while, the day had changed, but Harry only noticed now. He leaned in to light her cigarette, and they drifted together away from the music, back across the street, under the oak where Harry had started.

“So, Colorado. Tell me something else about yourself.” He hoped he sounded as comfortable as he felt.

“I’m an International Studies major.”

“What does that even mean?”

“That I want to travel after I graduate.”

“I guess then that I want to go back in time.”

“You’re a history major?”

“Why do you say it like that?”

“You’re Harry Potter.”

Something in the way she said it made Harry like the sound of his name. It had never sounded so wonderfully, so proudly, in his ears.

“I am who I am.”

“I figured you would have been in for mysticism, or dead languages.”

“Close enough. The magic nowadays is in robotics, they tell me.”

“I believe it.”

“I don’t believe in magic of any sort.”

“A total skeptic?”

“Not really. Just a big believer in the senses.” Harry realized that he had drifted close enough to kiss Maya. He realized it only after her eyes flashed briefly in concern.

“Do you not want me to kiss you?” Harry asked.

“What? I guess that I would let you if you forced it, but I wasn’t thinking along those lines yet.” Maya appeared unperturbed, and remained close to Harry as she spoke.

“I have to get going. Let’s get a drink sometime.”

“You have to go now? You’ve been standing out here for half an hour.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve been watching you. And it’s not the first time.”

“Creepy. I do have to go.”

“Where do you have to go?”

“Home, and then to class. I have a seminar tonight.”

“On Friday? Skip it.”

“Why?”

Harry looked to the sky, and found inspiration. “It’s going to rain.”

Maya laughed, because she wanted to, he felt, not just for his benefit. “It’s for my thesis, there are only four students, and we meet in Shutt’s house. He gives us dinner. I have to go.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Tonight? I don’t know. I’ll definitely check out the De Phis at some point, the party’s just downstairs.”

“You live in Mason?”

“Yup.”

“Which room?”

“This is all really pretty forward.”

“I just want to walk past a few times when you’re not around so that when you do ask me up I’m as prepared as I can be.”

“That’s an awful line, if that’s what that was.”

“Let me walk you home.”

“So that I don’t think you’re creepy? Nice try. I’ll see you later.” Maya stepped forward and gave him a firm hug that she held, and he helplessly inhaled her hair as they embraced, and then she regarded him wistfully, and walked away, and he watched her, and didn’t know what to do except to swoon for a while in the scent of her that remained.

Harry returned home to an empty house, and regretfully showered off any trace of Maya. He stood absently before one of the two sinks in the narrow bathroom, slowly lathering up his shaving brush.

Rick came in and set his dopp kit next to the other sink. “It takes you an embarrassingly long time to clean your body.”

“I wanted to do a careful job.”

“Why don’t you crack a window?”

“And break the seal? This steam is precious.” Harry dipped the brush back in the soap and applied it generously to his neck.

“Do you want me to get your back?”

Harry frowned. He thought of his hair as shrieking hordes of Visigoths, rampaging across his chest, up over his shoulders, and though he wished to deny it, now down his back. His acne represented the burned villages and pockets of disease left in their wake. His mother’s heritage left Rick hairless as a Native American, which made sense, as that’s sort of what Mexicans were.

Rick’s whirred his electric razor to life.

“You’re ruining my moment with that buzzing. I don’t even know why you bother.”

Rick had finished shaving in less than a minute and bent over splashing water on his face. “It’s got to be perfectly smooth. I’m going to be a Smurf. Christie’s coming by to paint my face.”

Harry laughed. “That sounds awful.”

“You should have done it too. Although it pretty much limits you to other Smurfs for the night. No girl that doesn’t already have her face covered in blue face paint is going anywhere with you.”

“I can’t wear the caveman suit.”

“I knew that your heart was crying out for the boy wizard.”

“It’s crying out.”

“I say go for it. Embrace your destiny.” Because Rick’s mother had sometimes called him Ricky Ricardo when he was young he believed that he understood Harry’s pain.

“I’ve got a different destiny in mind.”

“Then I don’t understand why you wouldn’t go with the caveman. You had good luck with it the year before.”

Not quite how Harry saw it. He had gotten a blowjob in a bathroom from a freshman dressed as Catwoman who he thanked profusely and since had mostly managed to avoid. Her name was Aubrey and even small amounts of daylight or sobriety exposed her as unattractive, a bit short and doughy, with odd-Neanderthalian eyebrows shadowing dull eyes and too puffy lips. Sort of how he might look as a girl, he thought, if he were unathletic and slightly brain-damaged. It was easy to picture her drooling. Harry refused

to kiss her, and took all pains to avoid touching her at all, but felt compelled to be polite, meeting several times for coffee and once for lunch in the cafeteria.

“I’m looking for something different. Decent,” Harry said.

“How about a priest? Easy, right?”

“I’ve got a black suit.”

He had worn it to his grandfather’s funeral, of course. Not too many other occasions. He had sweated out Vicky’s graduation in the heat. ‘Don’t let your nice clothes have bad memories,’ Harry remembered being told, likely by his mother, and it was past time to wash the suit clean with a party. He set it aside and found a manila folder which he folded and tore into strips, keeping the first one with the factory-precise line.

He joined Rick in the common room, and they reclined in their towels and lit cigarettes.

“I still don’t know why you wouldn’t go as a caveman.”

“This is going to be better.” Harry held the collar up to his neck.

“It’s not even the right color.”

“I’m a humanist priest.”

Rick snorted. “Hang with me, maybe I can find you a desperate Smurf.”

A neighbor flashed past the open front door. Rick stood up. Harry picked up a charcoal pencil and filled in the shading on a Pegasus.

“I’m taking a shot of vegetable oil,” Rick said.

“Why?”

“It lines the system. I’ll be able to drink all night.”

“I can already do that.”

Rick rummaged beneath the sink, where they might stash cleaning products if they kept them, and surfaced with a small yellow bottle. “Bully for you,” he said, and took a small sip. He spat thickly into the sink. “That should do it.”

“Don’t put that shit in the punch,” Harry said. He put down his pencil and went to get dressed.

They drank at their house, a dozen and finally twenty of them, five other smurfs—only one other guy, Harry could not help but notice. Sociologists conducting an experiment. Harry sipped the punch and gnashed with impatience. Finally they left, walking through town and across campus in a singing, smoking mass, carrying red and blue plastic cups. Rick lurched into him purposefully, as Harry strode ahead of the group, spilling Harry’s punch down his shirt.

“What’s the hurry, man?”

Harry whipped off his coat and brushed it angrily clean. “Nothing.”

“It’s just a little punch,” Rick said.

Once they reached Mason, Harry ditched the others to find a bathroom. He rinsed his hands and ran them through his hair. Not too sticky. Mason Hall, Asgard’s second oldest building, hosted all the Halloween parties. A descendent of the founder had served briefly as President around the turn of the 20th Century, and before the school settled on Norse studies as its calling card, Mason’s light, patrician touch at the helm had been one of the college’s highlights. Now, the Greeks took turns hosting parties in the bottom

floor, five large rooms with concrete floors, defunct fireplaces, and French doors opening onto a large patio that connected the rooms more reliably than the hallway/bar, which could take two full 80s pop songs to navigate. And 80s pop was what blared down the concrete corridors and echoed off the low ceilings, a cover band Harry had seen on campus before. There were a couple alums in the band, and they were—the band—eating it up.

Finally, in the back of the room, where the band played, still crowded, but thinned out from the front of the stage, he saw her, unmistakable, thought wearing a filmy headdress covering her eyes and a puffy-sleeved, lipstick-bright vest that stopped short of her pale stomach, where something gleamed. Several low-slung belts jingled above a floor-length white skirt. Impossibly she danced alone, and Harry moved immediately to remedy the incongruity.

“You pierced your belly button?” he asked.

“Yeah, over the summer. I pretty much had to wear this costume.” Maya frowned at him. “What are you?”

“A priest?”

“What’s this supposed to be?” Maya took the stained handkerchief out of his breast pocket.

“It’s punch.”

“Good. I thought you were going to say you were a diseased priest, or a zombie, or something.” With the tip of her tongue she licked the corner of Harry’s handkerchief.

“Punch,” she said, and tucked it back in his pocket.

Harry looked at her stomach again. “Can I touch it?”

She nodded and Harry put her hand on her flat stomach, felt it tense and contract further as her breath caught. His thumb brushed the stud.

“That doesn’t hurt?”

She shook her head and swayed in his arms, her hands over her head, holding her hair off her neck like a pile of writhing snakes.

Harry did not know how to dance, and kept leaning in to talk to her, because it drew them closer, because she smelled incredible and he breathed her in more deeply each time he leaned forward, because he wanted to talk to her. She played along, they made their way to the wall and leaned against it, lips alternating between each others’ ears.

“It’s weird to think about eating something that might be extinct in a few years,” Maya said, in polite response to some inanity he had proffered, “like tuna. I love sushi.”

“We’re all animals underneath,” Harry said.

“Exactly. How guilty are you?”

“Pretty guilty. I can’t get enough seafood.” Harry let his lips brush the lobe of Maya’s ear. “The abdication of personal responsibility is really a sad thing.”

“We’re all witnesses to genocide.”

“It’s true. It might be a point in favor of cannibalism.”

She laughed, her hair shook in his face. “That’s not the direction I was going to take it.”

“If you live long enough, you might have to take it in that direction.”

“Did you just read *Alive*?”

“No, Herodotus. The Scythians were notorious man-eaters. But for something that basically never happens, it seems to cross my mind quite a bit.”

“You shouldn’t feel bad about your hang-ups.” Maya tapped his collar.

“Ascending to heaven is rare, but that doesn’t stop it from being part of daily conversation.”

Harry laughed. “I don’t have a chance with you.”

“You have every chance.”

They danced to *Shot Through the Heart*, Maya said that she had to, and she jumped through the chorus, her fist pumping, and Harry’s hand sliding from her bare hip down her leg and rising up her stomach.

“That’s not belly dancing,” Harry said as the band retuned.

Maya smiled and sashayed her hips. “Sometimes it takes all night to get in character.”

Harry rose helplessly at the mention of all night, and froze attempting a response.

“I’m going to grab a drink.” Maya held his eyes. “I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Okay,” Harry said.

She sprinkled imaginary dust over his head and swayed away. A while passed. Harry moved to the patio and waited for her to emerge from another opening with her friends.

Girls with baggy tee-shirts revealing slender collars and skinny bra-straps, legs that haunted his idle thoughts, and ugly, tortured hair, burned, dyed, aborted. And Maya

among them, brown hair spilling out among them as she laughed and twirled. And accepted a cigarette from some little shit with an eye patch and patchy beard. All their costumes were full of accoutrement—eye patches, monocles, canes, a bull horn—each hipster hewing to his own disability. And a nurse with a blonde bob to treat them, Harry had already caught a couple glimpses through the strobing light of the party.

Cigarettes smoked, their party returned to the party. Harry returned to the room with the band, fought his way through the crowd, through the hallway, to the next room, where Maya stood in a circle with her friends.

She joined him. “I could see you watching me.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m flattered.”

Harry’s heart sank. “Thanks,” he said. He crossed his arms.

“You could come upstairs if you want,” Maya offered.

“With everybody?”

She laughed. “Don’t be so sad. I just met you a couple hours ago. You’re doing great.”

Harry fell silent, exposed and dumb.

“This belly dancer isn’t me anyway. I’m taking Sex Trade this semester.”

“So, maybe I’ll see you later tonight.” Against all hope and propriety, Harry felt his eyes swelling.

Whether she noticed in the smoky darkness or not, Maya leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, and whisper in his ear, “Maybe. Three twenty-two.”

Alone, he wandered over to the kegs, but could no longer bear the press of bodies inside, and returned to pace the patio, looking up powerlessly at the bank of lit windows on the third floor, feeling sober and breathless. He found Rick at one margin, sitting on the low stone retaining wall, clutching a flask in his overalls and paint, rocking quietly.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

“I tried to eat some mushrooms. They didn’t take. I threw up over there,” Rick gestured carelessly toward the lawn, “and now I’m pulling myself back together.”

“The other smurfs?” Harry said, cheerful in the company of his miserable friend.

“Ditched me to go freak out to disco music and pick berries or something. I don’t know.” He passed Harry the flask, and put his head in his hands.

Harry wiped the paint off on his jacket and took a pull. He clapped Rick soundly on the back. “There’s still time to turn things around. Let’s go to the Grotto.”

They walked halfway back across campus, now noisy with other people’s muffled fun.

They found Vicky and some of the other Wordies mixing it up in the Grotto’s thinning crowd. His sister dressed as a librarian, long gray stockings, short skirt, demure sweater with cards from a card catalog over her breasts and elbows, glasses on a chain. They hugged.

“Thanks for earlier today,” he said.

“No problem,” Vicky shouted, plainly drunk, as she should be, at the bar, as was Rick, as everyone appeared to be, leaving him disembodied with his relative sobriety. An easy problem to fix. They maneuvered to the bar.

He ordered two shots and a pitcher. “You’re looking better,” Vicky told him as they waited for the drinks.

“I’ve had a great day, I think,” Harry said.

“When will you know?”

“This *has* been a great day. My hope is that it was momentous.”

Their shots were poured before them.

“Here’s to momentous days,” Vicky said.

Harry carried the pitcher over to one of the few crowded tables left in the bar—a large concrete room with a few booths and old signs on the wall. Mark joined them and handed Vicky her drink. They shouldn’t have done that shot.

“Harry, good to see you. Happy Halloween.” Mark wore a tri-corner hat with tea-bags dangling from the brim, and his vest and pants were still bright white.

Fastidious.

“Happy Halloween,” Harry said. The tea-bags whirled in Harry’s face when they clinked glasses.

Harry thought of nothing else to say and found a seat at the table. They quickly made their way through a round of drinks trying to remember celebrities’ names, Harry, Vicky, Rick, a couple other English majors—a lumberjack with a long but uneven red beard, a girl wearing a puffy starfish over her torso, and Monica, dressed as an angel. She sat on Harry’s left, and the lacy hem of her white skirt happily ascended her thigh, which he occasionally felt brush against his suit pant.

“The angel and the priest,” Mark said from across the table. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you made a cute couple.”

Fucking Mark. “The faithful are always rewarded,” Harry said. It only took him a moment to think of, he might have only paused for emphasis. The laughter was general, and in it, Monica kissed his cheek. Harry blushed deeply. “Always rewarded,” he said, to say something.

Pitchers arrived, Monica and Vicky went to the bathroom, and the starfish was temporarily the center of attention. She was an English major because her father was friends with Asgard’s writer-in-residence, Lentz, a dapper gent Harry admired because he had written a biography of Sandy Koufax. His fiction was not much read by Harry or the students he knew, presumably it concerned itself with boys coming of age in the 1950s as their parents had affairs and broke apart their families, or maybe it told the stories of the affairs themselves, Harry did not know. Flattered by the attention, the starfish—Harry had not properly been introduced to half the table—broke off whatever more trivial anecdote she’d been sharing with the lumberjack to reiterate the connection.

Like Lentz’ her family was from Ohio, and the professor and her father had attended the same high school, the same class, but they weren’t really friends. Old, hunchbacked Lentz had been the quarterback, and a total jock, according to the starfish’s father, while her father took home the English prize. But they shared an interest in literature, and during their junior year they shared an interest in a senior who swam and wrote poetry. They had all been in *The King and I* that winter, Lentz just had a bit part because he missed the first half of the rehearsals, but her father and Olga Thompson were

the leads, and one night the three of them were driving home after a Friday rehearsal, they'd been drinking, and they dropped Olga off at her house, but they were late, she missed her curfew, and her door was locked. Her parents were inside—they were older, she had several older siblings, out of the house—but they didn't hear her knocking, and found her the next morning nearly frozen to death on the front porch. Her feet and lower legs were amputated the next day, and her hands were amputated a few weeks later. She stopped eating over the summer and died in August.

“Jesus,” Rick said.

“My father spent a year in a seminary after he graduated, couldn't do it, and so worked as a public defender for ten years. He was forty-two when I was born. And neither of them drinks to this day,” the starfish raised her pint glass in salute. They all followed suit, awkwardly. It added up, though. Lentz was a known tee-totaller. Their drinking was interrupted by clamor from another table. Vicky and Monica had been detained on their way back from the bathroom, Harry could make out a wheedling cry, *Angel, Angel*, eerie and somehow familiar. The girls broke away and returned to their seats.

“Horny drunks,” Monica said after they sat down.

“Y'all want to go to a club,” Vicky drawled, and she and Monica laughed together. They were intimidating in their attractive laughter, not girlish, but flush in the awareness of mature power, and Harry desired desperately to be in on whatever they were so obviously clued into, their sense of what they should be doing, their knowledge of the proper way to respond in the face of reality's various drags.

“Miss me?” Monica asked, and pursed her lips at him. He did not know why she was hitting on him. And though he was happy to have her rubbing alongside him again, Harry had not missed her. He felt for the starfish, whose name he would never know, feeling that he had been her, until this afternoon, but now he had somehow discovered himself in step with everything that mattered, back at the imagined center of the universe he and every other living soul deserved.

“I figured you’d make friends,” Harry said.

“Those guys wouldn’t know what to do with me and Vicky.” Monica laid her hand on Harry’s knee. “Though I don’t want you to think bad thoughts about your sister.”

“I don’t,” Harry said.

“Serious, serious,” Monica said. A bell rang at the bar. “I’ll get the last round.” She stood up and leaned her hip against Harry’s cheek, holding the back of his head with one hand. “Keep my seat warm.”

Rather than watch her walk to the bar, Harry looked across the table at his sister, who was watching him now, he didn’t know for how long, and then he found his glass and finished it.

“Momentous,” Vicky said. She leaned into Mark.

Harry felt sick. He resolved to not touch Monica when she came back to the table. Momentous. His sister had not known of what she reminded him.

A man followed Monica back to the table. The jeans and flannel he wore suited him too familiarly to be holiday dress. Monica walked around the table and sat down

next to Harry. The man leaned over the table toward her, his right hand resting briefly on Mark's shoulder for support.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

"What?" Monica asked, humoring him.

The drunk pushed closer, one elbow now heavy on the table between Vicky and Mark, who parted before him. "Let's go dancing."

"No chance."

The man appeared to stop for a moment to consider his exposed position.

"You're missing the best you'll ever have, you hot little slut." He lurched off the table and stood, wobbling and indecent, already in retreat.

"Fuck off," Monica said.

"I'm a great dancer," the drunk mumbled.

"Jesus," Harry said, and reluctantly stood up. The asshole was standing right next to Mark, but the coward wouldn't open his mouth. "Shut up."

"Mind your own goddamn business, bitch," the man said to Harry.

"That's the advice I'd give you."

"I'd advise you to stay the fuck out of my way." His red eyes zeroed in on Harry. His slurring had reached its apex. "Unless you want to get your ass kicked."

The drunk was no bigger than he was, necessarily more practiced in fisticuffs, but certainly lacking in some basic coordination, Harry thought. He took a long sip of the beer Monica had brought. "Let's go outside, asshole." His friends finally looked at him

instead of the drunk. The searing eye-contact, the casual drink, they'd already missed most of his show.

The drunk stared at him in surprise. "What the fuck did you say?"

"I said, if you want to fight, I'm your huckleberry." Harry shrugged, willing to proceed, but unsure of how to. "Let's go outside."

"Outside, you piece of shit? You'll never make it outside." The drunk's fist shot across the table at Harry, but it was too large an impediment, and Harry stepped back easily. The man flailed about with his other arm regaining his balance, knocking off glasses, mostly-empty pitchers, plastic baskets with old fries, as he reared up for another swing. Harry reached across the mostly empty table and shoved the drunk hard with both hands. The man staggered backwards, and fell with a crash.

Everyone stood up, the bartenders rushed over, and by the time Harry got around a still lightly-hallucinating Rick, someone from the other table crouched over the fallen man, a long hair who Harry recognized with a start as one of the buskers from earlier that afternoon. The fringeless jacket was distinctive. And indeed his partner the banjo player sat at the other table, staring daggers at him. The drunk's head had missed the tabletop only to strike the metal foot underneath. Now he pitched about on the floor. Blood oozed out of his mouth. Harry moved closer. One of the bartenders blocked his passage.

"Jack," the musician said, shaking the fallen man by the shoulders. "He's having a seizure," he said to the small crowd.

"I bit my tongue," Jack slurred. He tried to spit the various contents of his mouth onto the floor.

The musician looked at Harry, who raised his hands defensively. "I'm sorry about your friend," Harry said. "You were fantastic earlier today."

The man looked at him uncomprehending.

"The set you played outside," Harry clarified. "Did you go to school here?"

"No." The man looked at Jack with concern, and then up at Harry in challenge.

"Is that okay?"

Harry hadn't meant the question as a challenge. It clearly was not the appropriate time to conduct an interview.

"You should get the hell out of here," the bartender said to Harry.

"He can't leave," the musician said. "He hit Jack."

"He menaced our table," Harry said.

"Keep out of it," the bartender said. "This was an accident, and if Jack has a problem, tell him to come see me tomorrow." The bartender looked back at Harry. "Get the hell out of here." His tone told Harry that he was being favored, not dismissed.

Rick kicked over a chair. "It's Halloween," he said, to the crowd. Harry looked back at Vicky and Monica and Mark, who were watching him, and followed Rick out of the bar.

"You're a hero," Rick said, outside.

"I shoved a drunk."

"Let's take this outside," Rick said. He jabbed at Harry's ribs.

Harry laughed. It always felt vindicating to get kicked out of a bar. "Let's get out of here." Harry started walking.

“Where are you going?” Rick asked. “Home’s the other way.”

“I was thinking about seeing if anything’s still going on at the party.”

“What do you mean? It’s three in the morning.” Rick stopped talking for a second. “You want to wait for Monica,” he said, pleased at his deduction.

“No,” said Harry. “I want to walk down and make sure the party’s over.”

“You just defended her honor, you lucky asshole. She’d totally hook up with you.” Rick jabbed him again. “I’ll just stick around until they come out.”

Harry started walking again.

“Where are you going? To Bellweather? Shouldn’t you just wait around here so you’re not lurking outside their dorm like some kind of stalker.”

“I’m going back to Mason.”

“Harry, don’t be an idiot. This is a real chance, you lucky asshole. She was digging you even before you started swinging.”

Harry turned to argue, but his attention veered to a truck turning onto the empty road behind them. Pickups were not unknown at Asgard, but this one smelled of Confederate flags, and lone candles in windows, and meth, and frustration.

“You drunk fucks oughta get off the road,” said a voice from the cab.

“This is a pedestrian campus,” Rick said.

“This is a Ford truck.”

Harry pulled Rick off the road before he could respond again. Harry made an exaggerated swoop with his hand, “Drive on past.”

The truck rolled alongside at walking pace. In the wan lights of the lampposts, Harry saw Jack's swollen face behind the wheel. At least the guitar player wasn't the passenger.

"You fuckers are taking up my oxygen," Rick said.

"Rick," Harry hissed.

"Don't make me get out of this truck," the passenger said.

Rick stepped back into the street decisively, and, with one impossibly smooth drunken motion, yanked open the door. It must have been an old truck, or it couldn't have moved with its doors open. "Go ahead," Rick said.

The truck stopped moving. "I think I will," the passenger said.

Harry didn't like it—they were bigger—but they'd have a chance to gang up on the passenger before the driver got around. Then the passenger lifted an automatic rifle from the floorboards.

"I think I will, and I think I'll ice both of you fucks."

They ran. Hysterical, powerful laughter sounded behind them.

Harry heard a gunshot, then another. He ran as hard as he could, Rick behind him, drunk and panting. Harry ran faster, not quite waiting for Rick, who had brought this down on them.

Eventually, the exertion and the night air rushing past exhilarated him, and the thought crossed Harry's mind, as it occasionally had, that he lived in a non-fatal world. Then he remembered his grandfather, a man who had not been intimidated by thugs.

Harry stopped running. He heard peeling tires across campus—that truck or another. Everyone was safe. There were so many things he could never tell his father.

His breath raced climbing Mason’s stairwell. He had run here from town, as fast as if he were still pursued. The night felt like it was getting away from him, and he felt he saw a pre-dawn grayness seeping into the sky. He was cold, his suit was sticky, but he had arrived. He waited in front of her door for his chest to stop heaving, and then knocked quietly, three times. Then, three more times, so she knew it wasn’t an accident, or a sound from somewhere else in the dorm. Three more knocks, and Maya opened the door.

“Harry Potter,” she said. Her tone made it sound like she had won a bet.

“I was jumped,” Harry said. It wasn’t what he had planned to say.

“What? Are you okay? Come in.”

“I’m fine. Thank you.” Harry breathed slow and stepped into her room. It smelled like she had that afternoon, honey and vanilla and her warm skin, unfamiliar but not foreign, the scent of a higher plane of existence. Heavy pillows lumped on the ground, a desk hid behind a nook created by the stairwell, and her bed was sideways against a large window Maya was bare-legged in a loose Kurt Cobain tee-shirt.

“Well good.” There was a lengthy pause. “What do you want to do about it?”

“I was thinking maybe we could find them and get some revenge.”

“What? You’re kidding.”

“I’m kidding.”

“So, you were jumped, and decided to come here...”

“I’m a little rattled, and I couldn’t stop thinking about earlier today. Meeting you, and then not seeing you again.”

“That’s sweet. But why wouldn’t you have seen me again?”

“They had an Ak-47.”

“Really? I don’t think I’ve ever seen one, myself.”

“I don’t really know what kind it was. It looked an automatic rifle. And they shot at us, as we ran away.”

“Who were you with?”

“Rick. My friend the smurf.”

“I saw him.” She touched his lightly trembling arm. “Harry you’re soaking wet.”

“It’s been a long night,” Harry said, and realized [how lucky he was].

“Take off your suit.” She still held him by the shoulder.

It was hard to imagine a better reception. “I’ve got boxers on.”

“That’s okay.”

Maya stepped back, and Harry took off his jacket, hung it over the back of her chair, and then removed his pants, and folded them over the coat. He looked at them for a moment, unable to believe how naturally they rested, that he was where he was. He felt as thoughtless, as powerless, as his clothes, and felt that he had waited his entire life for instinct to transcend his superficial awarenesses, his weighing of probabilities, concerns over interpretation or intent.

Maya came back to his side, and ran her hand from his shoulder to his chest.

“Take your shirt off.”

Harry did watching her as he undid the buttons, conscious of his fortune in being welcomed here after a string of perils. More than excited, he felt safe, even as he met Maya's eyes and he realized he had no idea what she intended to do with him. Her face was so close to his. He felt suddenly that they were running out of time. "Can I come to Colorado to see you?"

Maya frowned uncertainly, and then wearily got into bed. They both looked at her clock. 4:06.

"I'm not going to be home long. Christmas week, that's it. But I'll be in DC for a week after that. Maybe we could get together then."

Harry's heart, briefly a dead weight, puffed like a blowfish. "Maybe we could. And if we can't I've always liked wanting things I can't have."

"You're incorrigible." She raised the sheets, showing him her legs. "What if I told you that you could sleep with me tonight or for the rest of your life?"

"What about both?" Harry hardly registered speaking the words.

"Just come over here and hold me."

Maya perched almost on the edge of the bed, and he stretched himself cautiously under the sheets and lay down beside her. He trembled, weakly but uncontrollably, until he began shuddering harder. He did not speak, though he felt he could have. He did not know what to say. His teeth actually chattered a few times. Maya held him, arms around his shoulders, bare leg pressed against his, and finally Harry stopped shivering. They lay quietly together. Several times his night had seemed to be going too long, but now he felt that it had passed in the same hurried breath as all other times. The wind picked up,

rattled clumps of leaves against the window, and then blew off across campus, shaking loose the frailest. Harry remembered the sculpture in the graveyard, Being Dead Yet Speaketh, and he thought of his bones tapping their inscrutable patterns on the windows, and scattering through the air. The rain came and washed everything clean.

III

David and Sarah exited the synagogue arm-in-arm, past the solicitors pushing cards—the teacher’s union picks, the green choices, no Tea Party maniacs here in Montgomery County, thank the Unitarian Gods—and their children poised to collect and recycle the cheat sheets from the recently voted. They prided themselves on not needing to be told how to vote, and so had nothing to hand the children to recycle. Their rep, Van Hollen, wasn’t going anywhere, anyway, except to the Senate in a couple years, Sarah had said.

The still early sunshine heat beat through the windshield, and they shed their coats, David’s bomber and Sarah’s purple trenchcoat, struggling in the confined space.

“I can’t believe people prefer early voting to real voting,” Sarah said.

“Jostling with your fellows, the thrill of casting the ballot, playing the lottery for the future of the country, I get you.” Sarah took his deadpan in familiar stride, having figured out how to make even his dissent agreeable, David thought.

“Those credit cards don’t improve anything, though,” she said, and now it was his turn to be positive.

“This is still a nice place to vote.” And it was. A ten minute drive through a park, against traffic. They had waited in line for four minutes, Sarah had timed it on her phone.

They kissed in agreement, and David pulled out into the parking lot. The line flowed briefly and halted. A tow-truck was attempting to reverse against—through—the line of outgoing voters. Tucked away in the parking lot, a couple huddled around an Audi blinking its hazards. Horns sounded. The tow-truck shuddered its indecision. The cab hung halfway out onto Connecticut Avenue, and late-rush hour traffic snarled on either side.

“Park in the street and let everyone file out,” David said. He rolled down his window and raised his voice, “It’s a day of civic engagement.”

More horns blared. The tow truck inched backwards, nearly to the front bumper of a dark green Cherokee Jeep.

“I don’t know what he’s trying to do. We can’t all back out of the way.” Cars full of incoming voters were trapped on their way in, and a queue began to extend out onto the shoulder, alongside the gridlocked northbound lanes. Those most recently voted milled around their cars, watching the action unfold through the exhaust.

Two suited men, from among the older fellows who had welcomed them at the door, hobbled to the truck. The smaller, stouter of the pair gesticulated wildly at the driver. His white curly hair bounced with the wide sweeps of his arm.

Finally, the truck silenced the beeping insistence of its reverse and lurched out onto the street. Celebratory horns flared up briefly in the parking lot, and the drivers focused on merging into traffic. The two men meandered back to the synagogue, casting baleful looks toward the tow truck waiting on the shoulder. When his turn came, David made a left onto Connecticut, and cruised down to the light at Beach.

“He’s going to win.”

“I think so too. It’s so exciting. Should I call the kids?”

“Vicky’s in class. Harry’s probably asleep.”

“Well, it’s a big day for them. Kevin too.”

“He’ll be able to vote Barack in 2012.”

“That would be wonderful.”

East-West snarled as they approached Silver Spring.

“I don’t believe that tow-truck driver,” David said.

“What did he think was going to happen?”

“Asshole.” A car had swerved out from a parking garage and David’s comment could be generally applied. He ducked in front of the Double Tree and let Sarah off. She leaned back in, and kissed him again. She stood up straight, affixed her sticker to her sleeveless gray turtleneck, just above where it cupped her breast. David waited in front of the hotel. She wore boots and a knee-high, and her gait revealed nothing of her age.

Sarah still mystified him, and at moments like these, David recanted every time he’d accepted his wife’s even-handed, tossed-off rejoinders to his requests of preferences—food, weather, music—how could she decide, when she liked so many. A few years back he had finally pushed her on music, firmly disbelieving his students who said, “I like it all,” concerned that a lack of discernment in the young suggested a lack of intelligence, and certain of Sarah’s, concerned that her lack of stated preferences suggested a secret world of desires hidden from him, and so, pushed on music, finally, agreeably but not firmly, she suggested Motown as her heart’s rhythm (a little hokey but

acceptable, by David's lights), and so they went to three concerts, the last Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings, and David had really danced, starting to get it, thinking about how to incorporate 100 Days, 100 Nights into his classes, and while the crowd was stomping for Sharon's return, Sarah had leaned over and whispered that maybe she didn't care for Motown more than jazz or bluegrass, it was all good with her.

So David backed off. He knew how she cherished her equanimity, her practicality. Sarah approached the world like a first-generation immigrant, and that was how David saw the children of divorce more generally, first-generation immigrants equally likely to work a blue-collar job for forty years as to say fuck it and wile away their twenties as prostitutes in increasingly less-exotic beach towns before hanging themselves after their bodies started sagging with the drinking, the abortions, the loneliness.

Sarah's mother had bombed out as a painter in Trois Riviers, Quebec, where Sarah was born, but her mom, Gisele, never learned French, and—not because of that, but it wasn't helping—Sarah's parents split up when she was two. She and her mother moved to Toronto, and Gisele tried to find work as an actress, and mostly worked as a seamstress. Always afterward Gisele paired a crazy outspoken occupation with her actual, low-wage employment—pet groomer, nanny; fortune teller, department store clerk; romance writer, discount sales shopper—but she had died six years before, and now David wondered mostly what impact she, Gisele, might have had on his children. But the proof of his needing not to worry just now sauntered past the T-Rex guarding this glassy, swanky building, and no one she saw today would know that she and her mother

spent a winter in Toronto without heat, that she still ate ketchup and white bread sandwiches when he met her at college, that she once called snow, 'Poor man's manure,' and then asked him never to repeat it. There Sarah went in her boots and skirt and sensible sweater, freshly voted with her husband, him, who got to welcome her home to their windmill in a few hours.

Sarah finally parted the doors, and walked past the T-Rex and out of sight. David returned to traffic. At the first light, he dialed Harry's room, and waited for the machine. He turned left onto Seminary and dialed again.

"Hello," Harry said. His voice sounded tired and suspicious on the other end, as though he had aged suddenly into a man David disliked. He tried to ignore the heaviness, the phlegm.

"How's it going, son?" He had almost said sport. He wanted to force Harry to remember that he was still more boy than man, that the future with all its potentiality lay before him.

"Fine."

"You're not just waking up, are you? It's almost noon."

"Not me. I've already been to class today."

"Oh yeah? What did you have? I forget your schedule," David lied.

"19th Century World Literature. It was supposed to be great—everybody says you've got to take the Russians with Citrine, even if it's not your major, but he's on sabbatical, and without him the class stinks. The professor is a woman and we're reading a bunch of French poetry. There's still time to drop it."

“Really? You’ve been there for more than a month. You better look into that. I thought you liked Baudelaire in high school.”

“I did. But we’re reading Victor Hugo and Belloc and Rimbaud and Verlaine. It’s weird.”

“Are you going to read anything besides poetry?”

“We’re reading *Madame Bovary* right now. I hate it. It’s sad and awkward and outdated and useless.”

“Well, you’re nearly alone with that opinion. I remember reading *Bovary* my sophomore year.” David paused. Follow up one piece of advice with another, that’s what all the parenting manuals preached. “You’re going to vote, right?”

“Of course.”

“How does that work out there?” David made Ohio sound like Uzbekistan.

“An elementary school hosts it. It’s a half-mile from campus.”

“Well, make sure you make the trek. And your sister, too. Ohio’s an important state.”

“Yeah, but they’re all conservatives out here. I told you about what happened last time.”

David pulled in front of the yet-to-be-restored plantation house and slid the key out of the Prius. “Remind me.”

“Knox County only delivered one functional machine to the school. People waited more than ten hours to vote.”

“Sounds like great dedication.”

“I don’t know. People describe it as the party of the year.”

“I guess you’re sorry you missed it.”

“I am. They say everything’s straightened out now.”

“Just make sure you get down there. Vicky too.”

“I’m going to vote.”

He turned off Linden onto Hume Drive, easing slowly around the workmen to observe their careful deconstructions of the old stone school buildings and the as-of-yet-untouched Coliseum and Spanish mission, made the right onto Dewitt and passed under the low arch of a stone covered walkway and pulled into the court their windmill shared with a large yellow plantation house also awaiting its eventual reclamation. The windmill and a pagoda on the other side of campus were the only two sorority houses fit for habitation, as the other buildings were all attached to covered stone walkways, and the masons wouldn’t be brought in until the builders had recouped some of their initial expense. He slid the key out of the Prius and sat heavily in the driver’s seat with the door hanging open, observing the windmill as though still a prospective buyer.

A round red door that would have been at home in the Shire opened onto a small mudroom and a beautiful kitchen, foreign in its cleanliness and sensible arrangement—they’d always wanted an island in the kitchen—and beyond that three rooms and a bathroom opened shotgun-style off a wide hallway already decorated with Kevin’s painting, ending in the great room, a circular space thirty-six feet across. Twelve foot windows lined the northern wall, providing a panoramic view at the woods that held a castle and an Italian villa, excepting the Coliseum, the grandest of the former sorority

houses, and past them, the LDS temple, shining for the commuters crawling helplessly beneath. It was one of the most spectacular rooms David had ever seen in a private residence, and he thought he might feel some pride in it once they filled it with the proper furniture. There was one more bedroom, Harry's, beneath the great room, and the master suite above. Harry had asked for the basement because it had a private entrance, an old-fashioned cellar door. A small sun porch David felt certain they would never make much use of and another red door had been lately attached to the southern, campus-facing side of the great room, the only part of the footprint that hadn't existed in 1907.

After talking to Harry, David felt cooped up, but neither necessity nor interest suggested a destination—that dreaded, much-rumored malaise of the recently retired, he might worry, if he didn't already recognize it as the feeling that accompanied not knowing how to properly relate what needed relating to his son.

He got his mind off Harry with a recent nagging issue—David could not believe how much of the day his still few neighbors seemed to want to devote to speaking to each other. It was certainly a new problem. Previously their three acres abutted only two other landholders—the Garcias, who kept a somehow-must-have-been illegal pet grooming business that drew about fifteen daily customers, but were otherwise lovely people, on the north, and Bill Giordano and his wife Eileen to the south. In their retirement, the Giordanos operated a landscape business that made more noise than the illegal animal traffic on their other side. The landscapers wouldn't be getting any complaints, as Bill was outspoken about the twenty-two years he had spent as a police. Yes, he had fired his gun, and no one had to ask to hear all about the wild night a few

youth had made the mistake of disturbing the peace in Catonsville. His presence distressed David initially, no teacher of black youth can be entirely welcoming of police, and he and Mary were still young, and liked to have people out to the house. Bill terrified David even more after his children reached high school, and did who knew what with their friends in the woods that dipped to the stream that separated all three properties from parkland.

He had fenced off an acre of their woods, withdrawing as much as possible from the noisy traffic rushing past on New Hampshire with bird feeders, the electronic hum of a hot tub, windchimes, dogs, a line of evergreens—though still the cars persisted, the only constant between the old home and the new—and finally a short stream that bubbled along the unused patio stones leading to the front door, beautiful in spite of itself, but never quite feeling like one of his possessions. Even though the chortling gurgle was undeniably more Zen than the rev of engines, David knew he had traded one artificiality for another, and it never stopped feeling pretentious. A fake stream paled in comparison to what he'd bought into in Forest Glen Park, however.

“I can't believe you want to move to a fake college campus,” Harry had said, not wanting to berate his mother. “Well, we want you to feel comfortable when you come home,” David had responded in kind, though he couldn't believe it either. Children correct one's perceptions in plenty of ways.

“One step from here to assisted living,” he had said to Sarah after they signed the paperwork, “I never thought our decline would be so gradual.” She had reminded him of their reasons—closer to Discovery so that she could be home more with him, walking

distance to the Metro so they could go into the city like they'd always talked about doing after they had their evenings to themselves, but still safely in the woods, reasons that he had shared with Harry, and another besides—in the face of nationwide recession, as housing prices plummeted in Florida and California and the Midwest, the asking price for the adjacent townhomes had risen, from 600 to 700 to 800,000, and now they'd had to stop accepting bids altogether, they'd sold more houses than could be finished in the next two years. And, Sarah had reminded him, they wanted to travel, he wanted to travel—to New Zealand, to Iceland, to Mongolia, and not having three acres to maintain would make it possible to do so.

But maintaining his grounds had been a privilege, and remained the worst aspect of their new home, or at least the easiest complaint to voice. Never one to exercise for the sake of it, David's physique relied on sports and yardwork, splitting wood for the woodstove, raking, repairing fences, weeding and planting the vegetable garden. Here in Forest Glen Park, he didn't have a blade of grass to cut.

He got the gloves when Kevin got home, and they had a catch on the lawn and macadam circle around the fountain, four lions rearing up to spout their excess. Currently the lions were headless, and the fountain way dry. David hoped it would be repaired, but not activated. Wishing in fountains was great, his children had done it, but he had come to feel that fountains shared in the lunacy of Arizona golf courses, blatant in their waste. Old Faithful was a necessary release, a brief reminder of a greater power heaving beneath. As fountains might be a release for the profligacy all around them. Townhouses from the several millions, he had seen in Bethesda the other day. He tried

not to see the sewage of the most wasteful civilization in history in each of the absent—former and maybe future—pulses of the headless lions. While he tossed with Kevin, he let it go.

David had played college baseball. He loved that Sarah went to school with him so he never had to bring it up. Second base, leadoff hitter. He'd acted like a grizzled veteran every second he'd been on a diamond. A serious ballplayer and a serious student. When the other upperclassmen put ex-lax in the Gatorade, they hadn't even told him. He only swished and spat a little water during the game anyway. Nothing in, nothing out, until it was over. The coach, a fat man happy to indulge the lazy stereotype, let David make out the lineup for most of his senior year.

David squatted on the macadam with a catcher's mitt, and Kevin pitched three innings—both sides—from the grassy hill leading up to the fountain. Utterly rational, he played catch with David because he knew his father wanted to. Kevin pitched to counts to satisfy his restless mind, and he pitched equally hard for both imaginary teams because he did not care who won. Kevin had never really rooted for a team, as David could not help but to. For Kevin, a home run was as good as a strikeout, depending on perspective (he would have made an ideal pupil for Hume—a baby cut's his finger/Nazis kill 6 million Jews, try explaining the difference to his son). In this and his overt tranquility he was unlike his peers—several of his classmates exhibited unexplainable attachments to a specific team, usually in a weird sport, like hockey or soccer, and in an unrelated city. The only common thread was that none of the teams boasted threatening mascots, like eagles or bobcats or the wolves. More generic names like the Orange, the Crimson Tide

(though David found that ominous enough, on several levels), even the difficult to realistically create—the Wizards, the Fighting Irish, the Horned Frogs—predominated. The only generalization that held for all specials needs students in David's experience was a universal distaste for mascots. Often at the new school (the only way David thought of Jemicy), other parents had said to him or to Sarah, 'You're so lucky with Kevin. He's so calm.'

There was an air of conscious selection about Kevin's disorder, the placid unfocused smile. Not that different from an acid-washed entrepreneur placating another pitchman, while he counted his money in another chamber of his mind. But there could be no question of altering routines, changing patterns. For Kevin, it would be as unrealistic as expecting a dog to start fetching its own dinner from the pantry, but at this point, any deviation would be equally devastating for David. Their evening routine had been what he told himself he needed after the accident. And, in saying so, and following through, he had made it so. Sometimes they played pepper, or took turns scooping low throws with the first basemen's mitt—Kevin was really pretty good, he had a nice level swing, a little wristy, awkward, too awkward really, as David saw it, but dogged. He hit plenty of line drives. And plenty would have been ironed out if he was as interested as other kids. But he wasn't. He played the games, but when it came to weight training, forget it, and it was hard for him to wrap his head around a three hour practice, David knew from experience. And that was fine as far as he was concerned. He'd almost wept when he found Kevin painting with some of Vicky's forgotten leftovers he'd unearthed in

the basement. It was hard to not subconsciously include gender expectations with everything else heaped upon one's children.

And so, if the weather was right, they played catch or pepper or took grounders for half an hour, every night since David got back from San Diego. Harry didn't usually join in, which David understood, although Harry had pitched once. Tonight the sides played to a 1-1 tie before, unperturbed, Kevin headed inside. Half an hour was his benchmark, not some invented score.

It was still light, still beautiful, and David made Kevin mac and cheese instead of checking the election results.

Kevin wandered with his meal to the main room. Once they had tried to eat as a family, but there had been five of them until recently, and it had been a long time since communal meals were a weekday practice. Harry and Vicky had sports, he was coaching, Sarah was working, something. Kevin could paint while he ate his mac and cheese. It wasn't really dinner anyway. Kevin ate five meals a day and weighed 150 pounds. The calories were going somewhere.

Free for a moment, he went back outside and bunched up newspapers underneath the coals in the chimney. It had been difficult to have to support a country that elected Bush a second time, to put a positive slant on the electoral process, and in the aftermath he had confessed one time to Harry that he thought the country had exhausted its capacity for reason. Not what a son needed to hear from his father. Even if it was true. No reason to discourage a person from politics. Maybe Harry would be the person to save them all, though in the moment it would strain the imagination to conceive of such a scenario.

Presumably McCain's parents felt the same when he crashed his fighter jets on the way to visit his girlfriends across the country. David took every pain not to fill his children with foreboding for the world they would inherit. It seemed impossible that his children would not have it worse than he did in some measures, and it took no great imagination to understand that the dollar had descended already from his father's maturity to his own, and that there was every chance that ashes was the only thing he might bequeath. He cleaned the grill with a brillo pad and went inside to check on his youngest.

The painting had been Sarah's idea. David was usually credited with the good ideas, like the house on New Hampshire. He had found this one too, flipping through the pages of *Weird Maryland* during a faculty meeting. He and Sarah and Simon had taken a long walk marveling at the ruined colosseums and castle and covered walkways alongside Spanish missions and a pagoda and giant steam pipes and other assorted industrial remnants, the faux new aging even more poorly than the faux old, especially the turreted walkways, which hung mostly intact arching over the trees between the blasted buildings, like FEMA agents helplessly identifying areas of need. They carried out a blanket from the car and made love on the stony nub of a bridge that no longer spanned Rock Creek, and lay there longer than it had taken, listening to the merry trickling beneath them while they spoke aloud how they might refurbish one of the dilapidated buildings. Then they had picked the Italian villa, closest to their love nest, and most remote from the campus, its four towers overlooked the river, woods, grand enough to stare down the Mormon temple on its own hill across the beltway, a mirage from any angle with its bright marble, transparent only in its judgment.

David flipped on the radio and washed and sliced the mushrooms. Kentucky for McCain, Vermont for Obama. West Virginia for McCain. He chopped a head of cabbage and put it aside for the slaw. He put two pounds of bison meat into a mixing bowl, added the mushrooms and a diced onion, an egg, Worcestershire, a dash of Old Bay and some crumbled blue cheese. He ducked quickly outside to light the newspaper, and when he returned, the radio carried happy news. Delaware, Connecticut, DC (of course), Maine, Massachusetts, the Senator's home state of Illinois, and happily and decisively, with more than 60% of the popular vote, Maryland, all for Obama. David padded up six burgers and washed his hands. All according to plan. Tennessee and dusty, backward Oklahoma for McCain. He needed to carry California, Pennsylvania and Florida. It wasn't happening. David cracked a beer and walked down the hall.

Kevin's easel sat in the middle of the great room. He had sketched the furniture, the windows of the room, and then had filled the empty space with a mirror of the furniture—sofa, lamps, end table, chairs and dining room table, on their heads. Beads that weren't in the actual house dangled above the imaginary furniture in the yet-to-be-painted painting. There was a feeling of enclosure in the wavering pencil marks, but how he would treat the walls remained a mystery.

He held his son's shoulder for a moment so that Kevin would know that he appreciated what he was seeing. "I'm going out to the grill if you're happy in here. Call if you hear that Obama won."

"Okay, Dad."

Standing on the hill, overlooking Rock Creek and the shadowy ruins across the river, David poured the coals from the chimney into the belly of the grill, clanged the rack into place, laid the six paddies above the flames, and rolled the soaked corn ears against the rim to smoke. He banged the top down onto the grill and then called Sarah with his clean hand.

“Hi, darling.”

“Hey.”

“It’s getting late.”

“That’s why I called.”

“We’re trying to get ready for Monterey. I heard that Obama took Pennsylvania. It’s looking good.”

“Nate Silver called it months ago, I told you we have nothing to worry about.”

“I’ll feel better when he’s actually elected.”

“The Lord loves a working man. Don’t trust Whitey.”

“The Jerk obviously would have voted Obama. I’m still nervous.”

“I couldn’t hold off putting the burgers on. Kevin’s got to eat.”

“So do you. I’ll be right home.”

“It’s funny that you’re only fifteen minutes away.”

“I know. I used to have an hour to decompress.”

“I put two on for you.” David paused. “There’s a bottle of champagne I’m hoping to crack when it’s official.”

“That sounds great. I’m leaving now.”

“I’m sorry to rush you.”

“It’s fine. I need to get out of here. You should eat without me, though.”

“I was hoping to watch the results come in together. It’s a historic night.”

“We can watch his acceptance speech together.”

And they did, though he was on his third Goose Island by the time Sarah arrived, and enormously full from the better-than-usual burgers and homemade coleslaw and apples with cinnamon and sugar—he often ate like a pig when he cooked—and she was preoccupied, her flight was early, and she had to finish packing, and he followed her around their bedroom, trying to be helpful, until she said he looked like a sad puppy. They’d both recoiled, remembering Simon, but Sarah told him to forget it, and helped by stripping off her clothes. They made love and then were too spent to do anything except wander downstairs in flannel pants and tee-shirts to collapse on the couch. They decided to save the champagne for her return, and Sarah poured a glass of bourbon over several cubes for them to share, and they listened to it crackle as they passed it back and forth and reassured themselves that Kevin slept soundly, and finally Obama emerged on the Grant Park stage with his family.

‘Hello, Chicago,’ he said, and there were tears in both their eyes. ‘If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our Founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.’

“We don’t live in a democracy,” David murmured, and then he was asleep until Sarah shook him lightly.

“Let’s go to bed, sweetheart.”

David woke several times that night and finally got up for good at 4:30. He had tried reading, but the light disturbed Sarah, and she, they both were aware, had to be up and functional in the morning.

He had not slept well since his father, since the move. The furniture they had kept—their beds, the large wardrobes he had made from a fallen oak on the property, vases Sarah had turned in pottery class—did not comfort him, its familiarity distressed in the new setting, and he found himself more attracted to the newer furniture, the sofa that perfectly fit the curve of the windmill’s main room, the thick wood of the kitchen island where he drummed his fingers waiting for water to boil for coffee.

A few nights before they had fallen asleep on the couch after watching *No Country for Old Men*, and he woke suddenly, uncovered and cold, with his head next to Sarah’s and their legs thrust in opposite directions, and he said out loud that he was uncomfortable, and she had suggested that he should take off his pants, which he did, not considering it a choice but a command from a beautiful but unfamiliar woman, as he could not, in that dark moment, place who Sarah was, nor exactly who he was, though he knew with certainty that he lay on the couch in the windmill. And he found himself considerably roused, and suggested they lay together for warmth, but Sarah must have recognized his intentions from the heat in his voice, and she told him that she wasn’t going to sleep with him, and he recognized that it wasn’t because of some probity, but because it was three in the morning, and in a flash he knew her and then himself.

He was halfway through *The Plot Against America* by the time Kevin got up. He mixed batter for the waffles. When he heard Sarah in the shower he ground beans, heated water, and dripped coffee. When Kevin emerged, David pressed three waffles, two of which Kevin consumed plain, rejecting the blueberries and real syrup that David ate with a waffle of his own. His son shuffled sleepily toward his shower, and David made two more waffles, drank another cup of coffee and tidied the kitchen while Sarah ate. His lack of certainty as to how to pass the day seemed rawly exposed, as though they had only just realized that he no longer had an occupation. He felt it painfully obvious that he didn't know what to do with this day or any of the ones sure to follow.

All the lonely night, David had been terrified of how happy he had been the preceding day, how reassuring it had been to have a purpose. What a disappointment to be reminded that, in spite of his educated awareness, he was no more able than anyone else to rationalize a lack of daily responsibility.

He carried Sarah's luggage to the car, and they drove the four minutes to the metro. She had offered to walk, but he had insisted.

"Yesterday was wonderful," she said.

"It sure was. It was a great day for all of us. Have a great time. I'll miss you terribly." He meant it. And he still appreciated the pleasantries they exchanged.

"You too, baby. I hope you won't be too lonely while I'm gone."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine. Tell San Francisco hello for me."

"Of course," she said, and then she looked at the watch he had bought for her for her birthday, maybe twenty years before. She opened the door, "I have to go, I'm sorry."

He honked madly as she entered the mouth of the long tunnel, his horn echoed by the car behind him, and he pulled out of the loop and drove back up the hill to the windmill. As he closed the door of the Prius a boom like a cannon blast sounded nearby and he ducked. The noise washed over him, and then, almost like echoes, more explosions came from all across the campus. It was full daylight, and he wasn't certain what had happened until he went inside and saw that the clock over the oven was dark.

In less than an hour a bespectacled man knocked loudly on the front door they didn't use to tell him not to expect his power back for a while.

“You mean later today?”

“I wouldn't bet on today, and I wouldn't bet on tomorrow. There's not many folks moved in yet so we're low priority.”

There seemed no benefit to telling the man that their house was worth three-quarters of a million dollars.

David took Kevin's to a friend's after he picked him up from school, refusing, he hoped not too impolitely, to stay for dinner himself, and headed home. It had not come easily, making friends with the parents of his children's friends—he taught Harry's friends, or he would teach them, and they had only managed to make a half-hearted attempt with the horse people that made up the parents of Vicky's coterie. Kevin had changed schools so many times they hadn't really bothered. Chris, the friend Kevin was staying with tonight, seemed trustworthy enough when he visited. Kevin illustrated fantasy scenes from Chris' imagination, and though at times it seemed a misapplication of the hot flush of youth, it also seemed harmless enough.

He ordered a medium mushroom and sausage from Armand's—Chicago style, in honor of the new President—and got through half with the remainder of his six-pack from the night before. He had not drank for years but found it an easy practice to reclaim. To feel better about his consumption, David decided to take a walk. He slipped on a loose-weave wool sweater and left to explore the still-new neighborhood in the early twilight.

Outside, he tried to pretend that Simon led him away from the windmill into the light woods. Their new home was a haven for dog-walkers—a hardship they hadn't anticipated—but tonight David acquiesced to emotion, and walked off haphazardly, tracing the setting sun in the manner of any other owner on the trail of an animal. He skirted the ravine cut by the stream, in the shadow of the still-dilapidated plantation house and the smokestack which no one yet had figured out a modern use for, until he came to a road crossing it and followed this new trail until it wound around to the Italian villa he marveled over from the windmill's majestic top-storey view. The smaller, empty castle lurked beneath, grim and toothy in the late light. Paving stones lay broken around both structures, but the sculpted branches of the ornamental trees in the shared clearing still arched prettily overhead as their long-dead gardeners had surely intended.

Beneath the increasingly heavy whisper of traffic from the beltway David heard a sudden trickle, and turned to see a white dog lifting its leg to mark a corner of the Italian villa. David looked about, feeling exposed, but neither saw nor heard its owner.

Observing the dog comforted David—white as the visible moon in the pale blue sky—if not fully wild, clearly a mature creature long accustomed to making its own

decisions. A force greater than curiosity drew the dog toward David, and then away, to perch on a low rampart in the manner of a host during a favorite part of a tour.

David cautiously approached the dog's perch at the edge of the clearing, and then followed the mutt down a shattered, once-grand staircase to a small treeless plateau, its integrity preserved by cracked stone retaining walls overhanging Rock Creek. A stature dominated the center of the plateau, a robed, blindfolded woman who clutched the hilt and pommel of a bladeless sword in her right hand. The last two fingers of the statue's left hand had been shorn away with whatever she had once raised aloft. *1867* read the lone etching at the base.

The dog passed the statue without a glance, but waited patiently for David to finish his slow orbit. Once he finished with his inspection the dog disappeared further downhill, and David followed cautiously, parting the cobwebby branches hesitantly, stepping blindly downhill like Harrison Ford from the lion's mouth, and he soon found easy passage between two rows of diminutive, needly pines, their branches tortured so painstakingly in the long ago that they yet defined a tunnel through the brambles and young, weedy oak saplings. He felt an inorganic firmness underfoot, and kicked aside leaves to discover wide stone steps descending into the darkening woods. The steps gave out before the trees, or were buried deeper in the softer loam closer to the river, and he tripped his way through the last of the low pines and finally rose to his full height in the valley. The sun had dipped out of sight, but plenty of light remained. Bats squeaked intermittently overhead. The dog had crossed the low, soggy ground and David followed it onto a peninsula of land cut by two branches of the stream. Crenellations, even more

ornately wrought than the castle's, defined a low bridge across one arm of the stream.

The dog vanished inside a small huddle of stones, but reappeared in an instant, prancing about the entrance. David followed carefully onto the bridge, not wanting the animal to feel cornered, but it skipped out of the way, and David rested his hand on smooth carved stone and ducked under the low arch into the musty darkness.

The slim light pursuing him illuminated a pool near his feet. A few leaves floated in a scatter on the surface of what David first took to be a floor, than, impossibly, a mirror, before finally recognizing it as an old well. As though standing at the edge of a cliff, he fought a helpless desire to jump in, and then recoiled at the thought of the dark stagnant water closing over his head.

He shook his head to banish the urge, and then a light in the wet gloom beneath him drew him back. The moon, he thought, but a quick glance at the ceiling discredited the possibility. The glow emanated from beneath the water, and it brightened, or actually just expanded, the pallid light cast no new illumination though it grew from coin-sized until it nearly filled the small well. He peered closer, squinting desperately, and beheld a round melony blob rising rapidly from the depths. His reflection, part of his mind whispered, but it wasn't his face contorted in agony that stared back at him. The Mexican he'd saved drowned again in the water beneath his feet. David felt something brush his arm, and he screamed, remembering the strength in the frantic thrashings of those foreign limbs, and he lurched backwards, cracking his skull on the low arch. He lay prone on the threshold, and then roused himself, scrambling to his feet with fist ready to defend against dog or immigrant.

There was nothing. He looked up and down the bridge for the dog but it was gone. He waited in the near dark, listening as intently as he was able, but even in his fear could conjure no sounds. More terrified than a child, he peeked back inside, but the pool lay dark and undisturbed.

Outside it seemed as bright as day, and he regarded the well, built snugly into the hillside. Its entrance, humble as a monk's posture, testified to an existence that predated the garish opulence of the sorority houses. Rock Creek trickled past beneath his feet. The castle stood over him on the hill in the wan moonlight that had merged with and now replaced the sunset. The castle's main entrance yawned empty and open, but inaccessible without the drawbridge that once must have spanned the stream. Nothing in, nothing out.

David helplessly prowled the windmill in the strange, pre-modern darkness. He was not used to being alone. School, work, obligations were being met all around him. It was no wonder he had a vision. When his cellphone rang David raced into the kitchen and got it on the second ring. He tried not to think about how much fun they'd had on trips to the bay when they were younger. Sarah was calling from outside the Elbow Room.

"You wouldn't believe how crowded it is now."

"What are you wearing?"

"You don't want to know. A new ensemble I found today trolling the Castro."

"Don't fuck with me, I can't stand it."

"Well, I got you a surprise, anyway, so that you knew I was missing you."

“Lingerie?”

“A surprise. How’s Kevin?”

“I think he knows that you’re gone. The power’s out so I dropped him at Chris’ for the night.”

“So you’re sitting alone in the dark? My darling. I wish I was there with you.”

“Don’t worry about me.” He felt that he sounded miserable, and tried to think of something upbeat. “I got you a surprise, too.” That easily he had something to do tomorrow.

“That’s sweet. I just want to find you waiting for me when I get home.”

“I’ll be here, as impatient as ever.”

“I’m so sorry about the power.”

“I told you this place was weird.” David remembered the face in the well. He couldn’t tell her over the phone like this. “I don’t want to keep you,” he lied.

“You’re not. But you’re right. I’ll call you tomorrow and tell you about the conference.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, darling. I hope you sleep well.”

He drank a full glass of bourbon and reclined on the couch with a baseball bat at the ready. Somehow he slept through the night, and woke to preindustrial quiet and a slight staleness in the air. The few cars driven by the campus’ other early occupiers looked to have cleared out. On balance he had never projected a pioneering spirit on his new neighbors, but still, it seemed drastic to allow a few hours without electricity to push

you out of your home. Not too long ago, people would have known how to make do, at least for a while.

He went out for coffee, but brought it home, and sat on the usually-too-public front stoop in his union suit, drinking his Starbucks and thinking of Gus McCrae, up every morning to tend his biscuits and watch the sun rise over Lonesome Dove. Giving himself quite a bit of credit, but it couldn't be denied that he felt like a homeowner again, temporary though that feeling might be after the Audis and Priuses returned with their neatly pressed passengers. In spite of the friendly woods and whimsical architecture, Forest Glen Park thus far had attracted power couples rather than families with young children who might best appreciate the fantastical surroundings. Another byproduct when the townhomes started in the low-800s. Houses for people that still lived like they lived in apartments. David changed out of his underwear into flannel-lined jeans and a corduroy workshirt and set off to take in the neighborhood denuded of its occupants.

The old college and hospital grounds nearly abutted Rock Creek Park, but three enterprising streets and a few dozen houses, real homes in David's wistful regard, carved a little territory between the public lands. One house in particular had caught his eye, a rambling Victorian that presided over the three streets' awkward intersection. An easy four stories, stone, then brick, then wood, painted a construction orange its owners had allowed to fade with time. Strange old vehicles—three old Chevys, a truck with a bed made of wooden slats, and a grey paddy wagon that looked like a Stassi relic—shared a semi-circular drive that opened onto both Woodstock and Wilton. None of them appeared to have moved in the months since they'd moved to the neighborhood.

IV

The first time God's messengers visited Harry in the new neighborhood, a wet, late January blizzard had knocked out the power two days prior. In two months, Forest Glen would again be the pride of the city, once the leaves cocooned them from the beltway and the azaleas erupted. Now, the old homes and pipes struggled vainly against the weather, and residents groaningly evacuated to the prefab suburban dwellings of in-laws for weeks at a time. Harry's parents were at the beach, taking long, windswept walks and worrying about him. He stayed alone in the darkened windmill, building fires and reading *Sagas of the Icelanders*, enamored with the uneasy quiet.

On the third day he stirred from his heaped blankets and empty Ramen, from his spent candles and masturbation, and dressed warmly to borrow a chainsaw from Knuk. Much of his family's yard equipment lingered yet in storage, hoping, Harry thought, that there might be a return to the wide-open acres out New Hampshire Avenue. A tree had collapsed over the sun porch in the blizzard. He'd heard the crack during the storm, and watched as it swayed drunkenly for hours in the wind before finally falling. One limb skewered its way through the back of the porch just below the shingles. It reminded Harry perfectly of the lance of an Arthurian knight, and he thought of the tree as a jousting lance that struck its target a glancing blow while being flung from the saddle. Amazingly, the screens held intact. The crown of the tree had come to rest in front of the house, and a

substantial broken limb rested on the back of his Buick Century, impeding escape. To try to drag it off would surely damage the old vehicle—already the rear end grated nervously over speed bumps—and he needed a chainsaw to cut the branch into pieces, and another pair of willing hands to help with the lifting.

Up the street, Knuk’s rambling Victorian manor presided over the five-way intersection at the heart of the community. Its owner bent over a merrily smoking cookstove in holey coveralls. With his long white hair and beard, he looked like Joulupkki brewing devilry to frighten the children. He held a mason jar half-full of batter in his right hand, and attended to pancakes with his left. A can of baked beans bubbled alongside the flapjacks. Knuk’s large frame sagged a bit over the fire, arms and legs thinning around his paunch, white tufts of hair poking sadly through his clothes. He was just becoming old, Harry thought.

“Hey, Knuckle,” he called.

“I knew you were there. I’d greet you, but I’m cooking.”

“Smells good.”

“It’s a Perfection,” Knuk told him.

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” Harry said.

“No, look.” Knuk rapped the antique metal hard with the spatula. “It’s from before the war. The Great War. It’s valuable.”

“I believe it,” Harry said. The metal did boast ornate whorls, and the frosted glass looked like it could have decorated street lamps in gangland Manhattan.

Knuk flipped the pancakes and settled the jar of batter into the slush before finally turning to face him. The fire had melted away a circle of snow, and Harry stood on the edge of the receding glacier.

“There were only a few thousand manufactured a year, in the early 1900s. My grandmother had one. She told me all about them—you couldn’t find one during the war. All you needed was kerosene and you could survive for weeks. They’re getting valuable again. I got this one from an old lady who said it was broken. She just had the glass tubes upside down. It was obvious because these little doors are weighted to swing closed so the wicks don’t go out. Fifty bucks. I could probably sell it for five times that tomorrow.”

“That’s great. You’re going to put it online?”

“No, the way things are headed I won’t be able to buy one if I need it in a couple years. I’m going to lay in some kerosene so I can survive a winter without electricity. A little cup of kerosene burns all day long. It makes great heat, too, you could heat up the whole house.”

“I feel it. Why aren’t you cooking inside then?”

“Mary doesn’t like the smell.” He pointed toward the house, where indeed, Knuk’s girlfriend scowled out at them. “I know she’s been smoking upstairs.”

Harry shrugged helplessly and gazed up at the fourth floor where the ornamental circular window did hang slightly open. Looking around the yard, he found the chainsaw and fresh sawdust atop a loose pile of logs.

“I see you’ve been cutting wood. Do you think there’s any way I could borrow your chainsaw?”

Knuk pulled on a work glove to carry the beans, and lifted them and the skillet with the blackened pancakes and took them inside without answering. Harry again regarded the Perfection. Knuk returned, the door ending whatever conversation he’d begun with Mary.

“Why do you need the chainsaw? For the tree that fell on your house? You’re going to need more than this chainsaw. That’s an old oak tree.”

“I thought it was a tulip poplar. I just need to cut up the branch that fell on my car.”

“Why that branch?”

Harry laughed at the question. “I need to get out of the driveway. I’m going to see a friend.”

“Oh yeah? Who is it?”

“A friend from school.”

“You’re going to see a girl.”

“I am.”

“Why is she home? Was she kicked out too? That could be convenient.”

“No. She’s going abroad to Spain. Her program hasn’t left yet. She’s studying Spanish Literature in Seville even though Gabriel Garcia Marquez is her favorite writer.”

“Well, that doesn’t mean anything to me. I don’t have an education. I do know that some older European man is going to have his way with her. She’ll fall in love with him, of course.”

“I have hairy enough legs.” Maya was not his girlfriend, though he had asked her to be. Still, it encouraged Harry when people, even horny old goats like Knuk, thought about their relationship in sexual terms.

“I’m just telling you what happens. Do you want a pancake?”

Harry regarded the congealing batter. “No thanks.”

They walked over to the woodpile, where Knuk rested his foot atop the chainsaw and crossed his arms. “Why don’t you go to Spain?”

“I’m not interested in Spain. I’d prefer to see what’s left of this country before it crumbles into ruin.”

“The United States is the greatest country in the world. That’s a fact, and if you don’t think so, go to Russia. Go to China.”

“You’re the one describing your preparations for Armageddon.”

“That’s just common sense. Preserve the species.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

As though the world suddenly delighted in providing Harry with opportunity, two girls appeared, swinging clipboards as they walked up the steep hill toward them. They bounced along effortlessly in spite of the incline, but reined in sharply when they got a better look at Knuk. Or so Harry hoped.

Like many of the District's children, he had grown up canvassing. He'd worked as regional director of DCPIRG's Montgomery County office for two summers running, though he was adamant about not returning. These two appeared a bit clean-cut for the PIRGs or Greenpeace. In front was a slender blond, with a healthy, open face, and trailing her was a petite girl of Asian descent who clutched her clipboard over her chest. They seemed the only four living beings in creation, and the girls approached Harry after a moment of doubt all around.

"Hi," the blond said. "I'm Becky, and this is Sue. We're with the LDS."

"The what?" Knuk asked.

"The Church of Latter-Day Saints," Harry told him, disappointed in the truth. In spite of their preppy clothes, Sue held her clipboard like an environmental canvasser in training. He dispelled the already-formed desire that they might share anecdotes over coffees laced with whisky, and contempt rose in its place. "I always forget that's what the Mormons are called. It seems like it depreciates the value of sainthood if everyone gets to be one."

"It's an aspiration we hope to achieve," Becky said. She gave a small, hopeful laugh. "We certainly don't think we're all there yet. We just strive to learn and grow so that Jesus one day will pronounce us worthy."

"Well, I don't know about all that," Knuk said. "Harry, you're religious, what do you think?"

The girls turned to him with interest.

"I'm not religious," Harry said.

Knuk shook his head in vigorous disagreement. “You read books.”

“Fine. I have an academic interest in religion,” he said to the girls. “But I haven’t gotten to the 19th Century yet in my survey of world religions, so we’ll have to postpone the conversion.”

“Oh, the Mormon faith is older than the Christian faith, older than the Jewish faith,” Becky said mechanically. Harry wondered how long they would stay. The beards must have been a bad sign from a distance. Surely now that they had seen he and Knuk up close, Becky would want to spirit Sue quickly away so as not to discourage her at a crucial moment in her spiritual growth.

“You’re definitely lucky that Scientology came along. Not that it makes your beliefs sound credible, but I think it’s fair to say their dogma is even more ludicrous.”

Knuk frowned at Harry’s rudeness. “There’s got to be room for everyone’s belief. That’s America. The way I look at it, there’s a two-thirds chance that something good happens after you die. One option is that things stay the same, which would be fine by me. One option is that things get better. And one option is things get worse.”

“What if there’s nothing at all?” Harry said.

“That fits into *worse*. Now, two-thirds odds, I’ll take those odds.”

“There’s reincarnation,” Harry said.

“Damn it, Harry, stop being difficult. Whatever you could come back as fits into one of the three categories. What do you think?” he asked the missionaries.

Becky took Sue’s hand and turned to them bravely. “We have some materials if you’d like to read them over.”

A breeze rattled the trees overhead as the girls pushed onward down another deserted, powerless street, though Harry couldn't feel anything on the ground. He began to feel that he'd been too harsh with the Mormons. Brumal morning had given way to sunny afternoon, and they had shared a piece of it together. Harry wondered what he might have said that would have persuaded the girls to have followed him back to his darkened house, where they could have waited together for the lights to come back on.

When the girls finally receded into the distance, walking through the slush away from the temple they must be returning to later that night, Knuk lifted the chainsaw and they trudged to Harry's house. Knuk insisted on operating the saw, which made Harry feel like a boy.

"Does she live in the district?" Knuk asked after they finished.

"Maya?"

"Is that your friend's name?"

"No. She's from Colorado. Her friend lives downtown."

"Oh yeah? What does her friend do?"

"She's going abroad with Maya. Ellory's mom is a photographer for National Geographic."

"Bet you wish you hadn't gotten kicked out of school so that you could go with them."

"The stupidest decision of my life, though it has competition."

"Don't say that."

"Say what?"

“That you’re stupid.” Knuk pointed suddenly to the back windshield of Harry’s Buick. “Look at that windshield.”

“Ok,” Harry said.

“Do you see that windshield? My parents told me—imagine taking a pebble and throwing it right at that windshield? Why would you do that?”

“There’s no reason.”

“There’s no reason,” Knuk repeated. “My parents told me that when you say negative things about yourself, it’s like throwing a pebble at the windshield of a car. You ding it up, until one day, it just breaks.”

“Your self-esteem. That’s great.”

“Well, it’s what my parents told me.”

“I wonder why Joseph Smith didn’t use the windshield analogy.”

“Some prophets are false,” Knuk said.

With the tree cleared, Harry grew anxious. He turned on the battery powered space heater and rinsed off and shaved quickly in the frigid water before calling Maya on his mother’s cell phone, which she had thought to leave him in the advent of a disaster like this one. Harry refused to consider a cell phone of his own, though he was forced to recognize that without it he would have had no way to get in touch with Maya, and he had no idea where Ellory’s mother lived, so he couldn’t have even shown up at the doorstep if he had been so bold.

Maya had asked for firewood, and Ellory for cigarettes. Harry had bought a bottle of wine in anticipation of the evening, but needed to stop to pick up the cigarettes and he needed to remind himself several times to slow down, as the rear end, overburdened with firewood, swung him around the icy roads. The snow had melted during the day, and was in the process of refreezing as Harry crossed, wishing desperately that'd he'd left an hour earlier. Maryland vied with Florida State on the radio, playing in Tallahassee where it had been 72 earlier. It sounded like Vazquez was shooting too much. It took him forty minutes to cover the few miles to the turreted, white brick townhome in Columbia Heights. He had not even gotten much lost.

Maya and Ellory waited in the street with a shovel. They threw snowballs at him when he got out of the car.

“We have to dig out a parking spot,” Maya said.

After digging, and hauling in the firewood to the living room, Harry stood soaked before the cold hearth in the warm house. Shucked of her wet coat, Maya stood before him in tight, brown corduroys, a well-worn green flannel, and a bleached yellow headband. Her feet had been sockless in her boots, and her toes were red. It devastated Harry that he was too wet to hug her.

Ellory wore a jean skirt over black tights, and a scalloped sweater that perked up her breasts. She had dressed up for him, or more likely, this was how she always dressed. Though he recognized her from around campus, Harry did not really know Ellory. She was an international studies major, so they had never overlapped in class, and he was a recent introduction to most of Maya's friends. On Wednesday they left for Seville, both

fine emissaries to Harry's eye, though he would have cut off his fingers to have them stay.

Maya had dyed her hair a bright, cherry red. "What do you think?" she asked him.

"I saw you two weeks ago," Harry said. He found it to be a distracting perversion of her natural auburn.

"Do you like it?"

"I like your regular color."

"Well, next time you see me it will only be the tips. I don't think I'm going to keep doing it once I get back to school." There it was, the compartmentalizing of Spain into an experience separate from the rest of her life, with its own rules and triumphs.

He and Ellory arranged logs around the newspaper, cardboard, and frozen twigs that the girls had already gathered, and they sat in front of the fire while Maya rolled a joint, grinding pot she extracted from a medicine vial, and then blending it with some loose tobacco from an American Spirit she broke open.

"So, how's Vicky?" she asked.

"Back at school," Harry said. His sister, two years his junior, was beginning her second semester.

"Sorry."

"Not at all."

"So, do you think you'll visit her?"

“I actually helped her take her stuff back last week.” He wished they were talking about something besides his sister, but at least they were talking. “I definitely hadn’t thought I’d be comfortable on campus, and I wasn’t, really, so I just stayed the night and came back the next morning.”

“Oh. So, when do you start teaching?”

“Working, not teaching. But Monday. One more day.”

“Sorry. Your beard looks good though.”

“Thank you. I grew it for the interview, and just emphasized that I *went* to Asgard. I think I’ll keep it so that the kids think I’m an adult.”

Harry situated an empty bottle carefully along the brick of the fireplace. Above his head, the bottom of the flatscreen was blackened and warped from the fire, ancient scars that would answer for any new damage tonight. A young-looking tabby slunk down the stairs and into the kitchen.

“Why do people like cats so much?” Maya said.

“People like kittens.”

“I like plants.”

“Plants are sort of like perpetual kittens... they never stop growing.”

“So plants are always young on the outside? I think you’re right, that people love the idea of growth, or they should love it, anyway. But some people kill plants.” Maya trailed her hand along the inside of her corduroys and Harry moved irresistibly toward her, settling for resting a meek hand on her foot when she noticed his interest.

“Your feet are cold.”

Ellory found him a powder blue, National Geographic-branded, v-neck sweater, and Harry took it to the bathroom where he removed his shirts, and, not wanting to sully the hand towels, dried his torso as best he could with toilet paper, before donning the sweater over his damp chest. He liked standing in a stranger's house, trying on their clothing, hoped he appear worldly and flexible in Maya's eyes. Harry added his socks to the bundle of wet clothing, washed his hands and ran them through his hair, and returned to the party.

Here, as in most of the city, power had been restored, but the girls wanted to mostly pretend they still operated with an outage. Harry found the idea charming himself, despite having known the real thing for days. They smoked the joint and talked about Spain, and then they drank the Malbec he'd brought while the girls sang over Jeff Mangum vocals from a battery powered boombox.

"This is a great house," Harry got around to telling Ellory, while Maya fetched another bottle of wine from the kitchen. They lounged on pillows between the fire and the pullout sofa where he'd be sleeping.

"Yeah. My mom's hardly here, so it's nice to have. My dad lives in New York, so I try to see him during the year, and spend the breaks in DC. Maya tells me you just moved here?"

Harry shook his head. "Just a new house, a little closer to the city. We've lived in the area since I was born."

"Well, how do you like it?"

“Fine. The power’s never on. My dad thinks it’s haunted. There’s an abandoned seminary at one end of the neighborhood, full of statues and the most incredible dilapidated buildings. I showed Maya a few pictures,” Harry said, reminded as she returned with the open bottle.

“Cool. I’ll have to check it out sometime.”

Maya rolled another joint, and Harry shared his experience with the Mormon canvassers. “Why do you think more normal people our age don’t talk about religion?” he asked.

“Because we don’t believe in it, or won’t make time in our lives for it—even if we say we’re going to later,” Maya said, unpredictably wise at the late hour, “and in either case it seems like an unnecessarily scary concept for something we hope is distant and have no real ability to fend off.”

“Let’s build up the fire,” Ellory said. “I’m not ready to go to sleep.” She went into the kitchen, while Harry stirred the coals with the shiny brass poker and added a log.

“Oh no,” Maya said, as Ellory returned wearing a Santa hat, and carrying three little yellow shots.

“Oh yes,” Ellory said. “For Spain. It’s orujo,” she said to Harry and passed out the drinks, “we’re going to be drinking this all the time over there.”

They took the shots, and Ellory collected the glasses.

“I’m not drinking that anymore,” Maya said. “It made me sick last night,” she told Harry.

“We still have a lot of the bottle left,” Ellory said.

“I’m passing out,” Maya said.

Harry stood up and she graced him with a hug that barely lingered before disappearing upstairs.

Ellory twitched into the kitchen and returned with two more shots. “I’m not sure what she’s going to do if she doesn’t acquire a taste for orujo. It’ll make it hell living with her for the semester.” Ellory laughed to show she wasn’t serious and clicked her glass into Harry’s before drinking.

Harry followed suit slowly. Ellory’s criticism of Maya inexplicably aroused him, and only then did Harry realize that Ellory had been waiting expectantly for him to become attracted to her.

Ellory started pushing buttons on the remote. “Do you want to watch a movie?”

“Sure,” Harry said.

“I don’t want to leave the fire,” Ellory said, as the flatscreen purred to life above the fireplace. She lay back on the pullout mattress.

Darkness descended briefly before *There Will Be Blood* opened to the strains of piercing discord as Daniel Day-Lewis clambered over a rocky landscape.

“I forgot how jarring the beginning is,” Ellory said. She lowered the volume a notch, and pulled more of the blankets toward her. Harry felt her leg through its tight against his jeans. When the pulley fell on Lewis’ partner, she moaned softly and rolled away, wriggling her ass into Harry’s lap as he turned protectively toward her. They stayed like that for a while in the darkness, Harry with his body twisted enough to pretend to watch the screen, conscious only of Ellory’s even breathing, the warmth of her small

body, and his erection sliding down his leg toward it. Finally, he relaxed his body until it spooned with hers, the slight movement hiking the back of her skirt higher, and causing the couch to squeak. His right hand shifted, as in an accident of sleep, onto her bare leg above the tights. Ellory sighed and squirmed harder into Harry. Edging his hand slowly around the inside of her thigh, he felt the line of her panties and inhaled loudly. He froze. Ellory stretched languorously and rolled toward him. She put her small hand over Harry's, which rested heavily on her panties.

"I don't think we should do this with Maya in the house," Ellory said sleepily. "You guys almost had a thing."

Harry woke with merciless guilt on Sunday morning, and hurried through his bagel so he could say goodbye.

"I'll miss you," Harry told Maya when he hugged her. He smelled Ellory all over his clothes.

"I'll miss you, too," 'silly' he heard at the end of her goodbye, though she had not spoken the word aloud.

"We'll tell you all about Spain," Ellory said, as he retreated to the door with his bundle of clothes, like a little boy that had peed himself at a party and had to go home early. "You can give me the sweater back this summer."

Harry drove straight to a barber, where he had his long hair cut short. Even with the barber's meaty paws sawing mercilessly away, Harry could only imagine Ellory's

hands on his hair. He returned home, where he lit candles, drank whisky, and passed out restlessly in the early evening.

Monday morning, on the drive to Ilchester, the woods exuded a crystalline patience that Harry gulped in through the open windows, trying to keep himself cold enough that he wouldn't think about what lay ahead, to freeze his mind so that he could lurch numbly through the day. Due to the sustained power outages, and the possibility of morning ice, Ilchester had a two hour delay, so Harry arrived quite early.

He met his classroom's lead teacher, Jackie, a heavy, black-haired woman in her young thirties, who outlined his responsibilities. Each morning, he would help Sydney, a student in a wheelchair, off the bus. The short bus jokes of Harry's prep school upbringing surfaced against his will. He would then shadow Virgil—a second-grader with *significant physical and emotional needs*, Jackie warned him—for the first half of the day, supervise recess and lunch, take a half hour for his own lunch, and then pitch in with the catch-all afternoon Life Skills class, which she taught. Besides he and Jackie, there would usually be another assistant for the class of eight students.

The power returned Tuesday night, but Harry slept through the alarm the next morning, and arrived late, at 9:00 instead of 7:45. He went to the second-grade classroom, and took Virgil to the bathroom, where he watched the boy brush his teeth, and then returned Virgil to class, where Harry apologized to the teacher before trying to help Virgil with addition, and failing in that, with identifying colors and animals. During his lunch, he drove out and bought a pack of Dorals at a gas station when he found only three dollars in his wallet.

Harry left the house unlocked in his rush Friday morning, but again missed helping Sydney off the bus, though he was in time to hold open the main door while Jackie pushed the wheelchair inside, and he took Sydney from there down to her homeroom. Only he and his supervisor would know of his tardiness. He watched Virgil listen to headphones for half their time together. For lunch Harry parked his Buick a mile and a half away on a service road, overlooking a stream where he was shielded from the school, and smoked a Doral and then chewed two sticks of gum. During a discussion with their middle schoolers later that afternoon, Jackie asked for his thoughts on how to treat others.

“Treat others as you’d like to be treated,” Harry said, but it felt like an insubstantial response in the Life Skills classroom, and inaccurate, as bear hugs and Velcro safe pads didn’t rate in plenty of places. “But remember that everyone wants to be treated differently.”

His stomach protested so fiercely to the cigarette he began on the way home that he was forced to ditch it, and spent a half hour in the air-conditionless car, sweating through traffic he couldn’t fathom growing accustomed to and pitying himself. His spirits picked up on seeing the tree still resting solidly atop the house. It pleased Harry when events usually regarded as climactic proved otherwise. The lance still thrust its way onto the screen porch, and he patted the pointy end respectfully on his way inside.

Upstairs, Harry took his lighter, pipe, and pot out of the top drawer of his desk. He dumped the bag onto a piece of printer paper and thumbed it into two piles, one of which he packed in the bowl. He lit it carefully, and held the smoke in his lungs until he

had opened the window. His parents would be home tonight. A loud pounding of the door knocker interrupted his second hit, and he returned his fixings to the desk with swift, paranoid precision. When the knock came again, Harry peeked out his window to find a landscaper's truck in the street.

Comforted by the discovery, Harry descended, noting the week's worth of dress shirts and khakis strewn on chairs in the hopes they'd hold enough of their shape to be worn again. They would have to be gathered, and the dishes washed, after he dispensed with his visitor. Not that canvassers or doorway solicitors could be considered much irritant in a world that had bared itself to the plague of courtesy calls. With actual visitors came the illusion that their message was for you and you alone.

"I'm here, on the screen porch," Harry called once he was.

A red-faced man wearing a denim shirt and jeans stepped through the tree, squinting at Harry while he divested his ponytail of a grasping branch. Whether the Canadian tuxedo, the proprietary stance the man assumed on the stoop under the fallen tree's snowy eaves, or the usual furtiveness of marijuana, Harry's intuition kept him inside the screen porch, where he waited for the man to speak.

"There's another tree down on Forysthe," the man said, as though Harry had complained about this one.

"Yeah, we lose a lot of them in this neighborhood."

"I'm not from around here. Well, I used to be. My name's Ken. I used to live in Brookland, by Catholic."

“Harry.” They did not shake hands because Harry stayed on the screen porch. It amused him to realize Ken thought him the master of the house. The beard fooled him as readily as it did the children.

“So, I do a little business, a little work for some people around here, landscaping, some other things.”

“Cool. You have your own business?”

“No. But I cut down trees, trim hedges, clear brush. This tree looks like it might come down and cause some problems.”

“It already has. But I see what you mean. You should know that this is my parents’ house, and I’ve alerted them that a tree fell on it.”

“Good. Well, I could clean these branches right up with my chainsaw.”

“Oh, it’s alright. It hasn’t shifted, anyway. We’re going to get a tree service to take it away.”

“Oh.” Ken rested his hand heavily on a branch. “Well, we could clear up all these fallen sticks. Do you have any twine?”

“Yes, I think so. What do you need it for?”

“I could bundle them up and haul them off for you.”

“No thanks, Ken. We burn it ourselves, in that outdoor chimney or the fireplace inside.”

“Oh, ok. Ok.” Ken rubbed his bottom lip vigorously. “Can I ask you what you do?”

“I teach.”

“What grade?”

“I work across the grades.”

“Great. Harry, I want to encourage you.”

“Thank you,” Harry said.

“Well, let me tell you something about schools, Harry. There’s nothing more important. I do a lot of work in schools. I play Simon Peter. I’m one of those who lets his hair down to preach. Somebody’s got to do it. Do you know who I mean when I say Simon Peter?”

“The first Pope?”

“Right. You are the rock I will build my church on. So, I have this cross about,” Ken stretched his arms out and hesitated, “well, it’s the perfect size for me to crucify myself on. So, I put that on the wall, and I take a spike,” another pause, “like the ones they used on Jesus.”

Harry nodded, but Ken looked unsatisfied and began rummaging through his shirt, withdrawing a miniature spike on a chain, which he thrust toward Harry in triumph.

“Like this,” Ken said, “and I put my hand on the crucifix, like this,” Ken braced his wrist against the outside of the porch, “and I press the spike into my wrist, like this.”

Harry frowned as the replica instrument found its target.

“Well, I don’t actually push it in, of course,” Ken said. “But I put it up there and say, ‘Do you know who crucified Jesus, children?’” He withdrew the spike and waved it nonchalantly at Harry. “Or, Simon Peter, it works for both, because they were both crucified.” Ken replaced his wrist and the spike. “So, I say, ‘Do you know who crucified

Jesus, children? It wasn't the Romans, or the Hebrews, or the money lenders. It was Me, Ken, and You, Wade." Ken paused. "What did you say your name was?"

"Harry."

"Right. You, Harry, and you, and you, I go on around the room."

"Yeah. I've only been there for five days. I wouldn't even know who to talk to yet."

"I see, I see. Well, kids need to be told what's going on in our country. Do you know who the government describes as terrorists, Harry? I'll run you down their checklist. Here's who the United States government has branded as terrorists. One, Christians. Two, veterans—Ken pointed to himself—I served in Vietnam. Three, gun owners—emphatic point. And, four, End-of-Dayers." Ken raised his arms dramatically. "Maybe tomorrow they're telling you you're in trouble because you're wearing a Real Ale tee-shirt, and that passes a bad message on to your students."

"It undoubtedly would." Harry resolved to stop wearing tee-shirts advertising alcohol on any occasion.

"Well, in any case, you may wonder about that Day of Judgment rap, but the Book of Revelation tells us that the Beast will make fire come down out of the sky so that all can see, Harry. Hiroshima. Nagasaki. And do you know what the best part is?"

"No."

"The Beast marks people on the wrists or forehead. And no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark. That's talking about credit cards. And where do you think

they're going to install the computers in us so that we can do our shopping, Harry? In our wrists and foreheads."

"I've heard something about that, the Singularity. We're scheduled to merge with computers in 2040."

"Not me."

"I'm not too excited about the idea myself, but I'm only twenty-two. I have time to change my mind."

"Well, you can wonder about that last bit, but if you're a Christian, and believe in the Book Revelations, the end is coming."

"I think that it's the responsibility of each of us to stave that off for as long as we can."

"I can't argue with you there, Harry, but the Beast was given authority over every tribe and nation."

"Ken, you're certainly well-versed."

"I am, but it hasn't always been that way. Let me tell you a story, Harry, about faith. Years ago, in the 1970s, I was living here in Washington. I was helping out at a halfway house, and living nearby, and sometimes I'd let one or two of the guys stay in my attic if there wasn't room down the way. Anyway, two guys, one was staying with me, come back one night, messed up on PCP and alcohol." Ken frowned fiercely.

"I've never done PCP," Harry said.

"It's a terrible drug. So, these guys come at me, and wake me up with a knife about this long—Ken widened his thumb and index finger to full extension. Now, I had

experience with knives a lot bigger than that, from Vietnam, but there were two of them, and I had this clear picture of crawling a quarter mile to St. Francis' up the road, the hospital, see? So, they said, get dressed, and I did, and they take me out to my car, and the three of us all sit in front, with me between them, and one says, 'Where's yo juglar?' And the jugular, Harry, if that's cut, that will ruin your whole day. And, people, my sisters, always ask me, 'Weren't you weeping and moaning?'"

Harry shook his head in a no-chance-in-hell kind of way.

"No, I was reciting the 23rd. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And that's where I was, Harry, under the shadow of death. They were threatening to cut my jugular. You will fear no evil. And I didn't, even though I was sitting there between these two big guys, out of their heads on PCP. Because the Lord was with me as clear as I'm with you."

"And so, pretty soon, they put me in the back seat, and I'm lying there, and I'm not frightened, because I knew that I kept a bayonet about yo—Ken held his index fingers about ten inches apart—big under my driver's seat. And, I kept praying to the Lord for his blessing, or permission to use that bayonet, because He tells us not to use violence, but I was trained on how to use that bayonet in Vietnam, and it would have gotten really ugly in that car."

Through the screen, Harry rechecked Ken for weapons, but divined nothing new beneath the denim.

"But I never got permission, because the Lord tells us to trust in Him during adversity, and He promises to deliver us from our enemies. So, they drove me all the

way down to Richmond, where they bought me breakfast with my own money. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Can you believe that? And, as we were eating in the restaurant, who do you think was sitting next to us? A table of cops. Your rod and staff will comfort me. I was living the psalm.”

“Sure,” Harry said.

“So, after they finished eating, they fell asleep, because the PCP wore off, see? And I drove us all back to Washington. I just let the one guy out, because I didn’t know where he lived.”

“Why didn’t you ask him?”

“He was passed out on PCP.”

“So you just left him on the street?”

“It was a long time ago. But, the other guy I knew, and I took him back, and when I stopped the car, I took that bayonet out.”

Ken thrust his hand holding the imaginary weapon toward the porch, and Harry recoiled as Ken leaned in close.

“‘It could have gotten real ugly back there,’ I tell him, because I was in shape still from the war, and it would’ve. ‘You have Jesus to thank,’ I told him, because I still mostly thought about things in an eye for an eye kind of way. But Jesus tells us to forgive our enemies, and we went right on living together for another couple months. And that’s how I found my faith. So now, Harry, I just like to pass my story along when I find the opportunity.”

“People who have trees fall on their homes must make for receptive audiences.”

“The Voice of the Lord is unmistakable.”

BIOGRAPHY

Ben Farmer lives in Maryland where he was born and raised. He graduated from Kenyon College with a degree in history. Since, he has worked as a teacher, an editor, and in a booking agency for musicians. *The Holy Spirit* is his second novel.