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A Collection of Stories

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A Collection of Stories

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Table of Contents

Candy Bar	1
Ron and Tony Suit Up	11
Costco.....	31
Colleagues	43
Gateway.....	56
Saul and the Man in White	66
Speechless	74
In the Gallery.....	104

Candy Bar

Ike told me the new kid was from North Africa.

We were on the school playground, waiting for some other kids to show up after church or whatever it was the Christians did on Sunday morning.

“How do you know?” I heaved a jump shot that barely grazed the rim.

“I asked him.” Ike rebounded the ball and tossed it one-handed toward the basket. The ball missed everything but looked good doing it. Somehow his misses looked better than my makes.

“You spoke to him? Mike said he smells funny.”

“I didn’t notice any smell. You should find things out for yourself.”

Sometimes Ike sounded much older and wiser than a fifth grader, which I was pretty sure he did just to make me feel bad about myself. Ike was not smarter than me, or any nicer or better looking, for that matter. But he had the good fortune of being, if not popular, than not *unpopular*.

“His clothes look like they’ve been passed down from five older brothers,” I said, trying to dribble between my legs but instead bouncing the ball off my foot.

“They’re old, all right,” Ike said. “But they’ve been taken care of.” He pick up the ball, dribbled behind his back and made a hook shot.

“That yarmulkah thing is going to make life hard for him,” I said.

“It’s a kufi, to be precise,” Ike said. “And you’re probably right that it’s going to cause some trouble.”

Ismael arrived at Shady Oak Elementary in early November. Up until then, fifth grade was going pretty much like the previous grades, except some kids had started puberty a bit ahead of schedule. James Russell's voice was down an octave, unless he yelled, at which point it broke into a falsetto, which made me laugh, which made James give me a death stare. Also, a few girls were wearing bras, though only Venice Schultz had obvious bumps on her chest.

The black kids and white kids still kept separate everywhere except on the playground, and even there a basketball game could end up being black versus white when the numbers allowed. Shady Oak, North Carolina was mellow for the South, but still the South. Although Ismael was a very light shade of brown, I figured he would fall in with the black kids, since being "black" seemed only to require not being white. But Ismael, frail and lost looking, did not fall in with anyone.

Ike and I represented half of the Jewish population of the fifth grade at Shady Oak. We did not dress or speak differently from the other kids—no *yarmulka*, no Yiddish--but nonetheless we could never escape the feeling of being on foreign soil. Our town had more churches than restaurants, and a good handful of the kids were born again Christians who were never satisfied with my answers as to why I didn't love Jesus.

"Don't you know he died for your sins?"

"I don't think he would have bothered if he'd known I was Jewish."

"Jesus died for all of his father's children. How can you not be thankful?"

“I’ll be sure to thank him next time I see him.”

And so on.

Holidays were especially challenging. When they made us sing Christmas carols in music class, I usually just moved my mouth silently. Refusing to sing would have brought unwanted attention. Ike had taken to belting them out louder than anybody in the class.

“If you can’t beat them, join them,” he said.

He had a terrible voice, and I suspect the music teacher didn’t ask him to sing quieter only because she didn’t want to be accused of anti-Semitism.

Starting in third grade, in the early 80’s spirit of inclusivity, they threw in the *dreidel* song, at the end of which I always stated that every *dreidel* I’d ever seen was made of plastic, not clay. Nobody was interested.

Ike was right, as usual: Ismael was from Algeria. When the teacher explained this to the class, the boys got right to work.

“I’ll cheer-ia for that,” said Jimmy Sydell. Laughter.

“*Allegria*. That means happy in Spanish,” said Tommy Schroeder in his rusty lawnmower voice. “He must be a happy kid.”

Mrs. Waverley kept her cool, as always.

“Algeria is in northern Africa,” she said. She pointed to a region on the pull-down map.

“What language does he speak?” Missy Sundstrom asked.

“Why don’t you ask him?” Mrs. Waverley responded.

Missy turned toward the table where Ismael was sitting, but before she could ask, Ike, who was sitting next to Ismael, answered, "He speaks French, Arabic and a little English."

"Are you an Islam?" Tommy asked Ismael directly.

"Yes, he's a *Muslim*," Ike said.

"Not to be confused with moron, which is somebody who doesn't know basic facts about geography and religion," I added.

At least ten pairs of eyes glared at me. Patience with my smartass know-it-all-ness was already wearing thin, several weeks before Thanksgiving. My vow to keep my mouth shut was not going any better than my efforts not to stare at Venice's chest.

"Is that what the funny hat is for?" Tommy asked.

Mrs. Waverley intervened. "It's called a Kufi, and there is nothing funny about it. Many Muslims wear them. Let's show Ismael that we are open minded here at Shady Oak."

Tommy rolled his eyes then turned to me and mouthed, "You're a stupid gay Jew." Tommy was Jewish on his father's side.

On his third day in the class Ismael got caught with his hand in Tina Cabrera's lunchbox.

"That's why they shouldn't let poor kids come here!" she screeched.

Tina was as stuck as they come, so nobody was too upset with Ismael for messing with her stuff, but everyone's guard was up. Anytime something went

missing—a Caprisun , a scented eraser, a pencil troll--Ismael was the first and last suspect.

He never got caught in the act again, but he also never defended himself when he was accused. When called out, he would turn quickly toward his accuser, lips quivering. His gaunt face and bulging eyes and quivering lips expressed all of humanity's guilt.

One day in early January Ike said, "We should be friends with Ismael. He's probably lonely."

"Don't you think we're unpopular enough without being associated with the new outcast?"

"Speak for yourself," Ike said.

He had a point. Ike was quiet and kept to himself a lot, but everyone respected him, and he never got teased. I should have taken notes from him on how not to antagonize your peers.

"Well, next time we play four square let him join," I said.

"No, we have to invite him," Ike said.

"We do?"

"If you were in a new place and everyone acted like they hated you, would you jump into a group of kids and start playing a game you've never even heard of?"

Ike was in wise and mature mode. It pissed me off.

That afternoon at recess, Ike did go over Ismael and ask him to play four square. Ismael shook his head and just stood there looking at his shoes, but after a

few minutes tiptoed over to the court and got in line between me and two other kids waiting for a free square.

“Do you know how to play?” I asked him.

He shook his head. His eyes were huge, the expression both eager and terrified.

“You have to bounce the ball in somebody else’s square. If they miss, they’re out, and everyone moves over a square. If you make it to the king square, you serve.”

“But you won’t make it there,” added Joey Pinsky.

I snorted. It felt good to be watch somebody else get put down. But it felt bad to feel good about such a thing.

As it turned out, Ismael had good reflexes and held court for a good seven or eight rounds. I looked for a trace of pride on his face, but his saucer eyes just stared back at me, inscrutable.

The next morning, before first bell, a group of kids got hold of Ismael’s kufi and started to play keep away. Ismael chased after it frantically for about thirty seconds, then gave up and started crying.

“Give me that back!” he yelled between sobs.

“Come get it, you freak,” Tommy Schroeder wheezed.

Ike and I were watching the whole thing transpire. I had a warm feeling from being an observer instead of a victim. Though I had never been outright bullied, I

was teased plenty--for being a nerd, a lousy athlete, a nose picker (I was caught in the act once, maybe twice, but this was enough).

Ike was outraged.

"Leave him alone!" he yelled to the unruly mob.

"They'll give it back when the bell rings," I said.

"They need to give it back now."

Ike strutted toward the keep away gang, yelled, "Give it back, assholes." He could be pretty fearless. Maybe it was because he'd never been teased. Or maybe it was because his dad was a big shot doctor. Or maybe he just had more character than the rest of us.

At first, nobody responded to Ike's intervention.

"Give it back or I'm going to get a teacher!"

This was bold. To stand up for a kid who was getting picked on was honorable, and even the biggest bullies would respect that. But to bring a teacher into the mix was simply not done. Ike lived by his own rules, though. Tommy grabbed the hat from another kid and tossed it to Ismael, who put it on, then walked toward the classroom with his head down, his cheeks wet.

"I'm impressed," I said to Ike, hoping to hide my shame behind nonchalance.

Ike just nodded and chewed his lip.

After that nobody actively tormented Ismael. Instead they ignored him in the most aggressive manner possible. Occasionally, between lessons or in the cafeteria, Ismael looked my direction, and though I resisted his gaze, I could feel his eyes

enveloping my world, discerning, weighing. Surely he knew how glad I was not to be him. This thought made me feel powerful.

One day Ike asked Ismael to sit with us at lunch. I objected.

“This will not turn out well,” I said.

“Why?” Ike said.

“He steals food.”

“He has his own lunch.”

“It’s school food,” I said. “He gets the free lunches. That won’t keep him from wanting our dessert.”

“Relax,” Ike said.

After that, whenever I sat by Ike at lunch or found him on the playground, Ismael was there. He rarely spoke, and at times I almost forgot about his presence. When a fourth person was present, usually James Culbertson, I could feel a shift in dynamics, with Ike and Kyle forming a partnership of intellect and wisdom, Ismael watching I silent awe. I was thinking that I should find other companionship, maybe one of the two shy, soft-spoken Japanese kids who didn’t know enough English to find me annoying. But I stuck it out, out of loyalty, I told myself, but actually out of fear that if I left the circle, I’d never be allowed back in.

One lunch period in early January my Hershey bar was missing.

I mentioned this to Ike when Ismael got up to throw out his lunch tray, which he scraped clean, mushy peas included.

“So, you don’t have chocolate,” Ike said. “Big deal.”

“You don’t think your new best friend stole it?” I said, pointing toward Ismael.

“When? We were all sitting here the whole time you were eating.”

“Maybe he stole it earlier in the day,” I said.

“Maybe he didn’t.”

“It was him,” I said. “I know it and you know it. You won’t admit it, though, because you’re trying to make some kind of point.”

“I’m not making a point,” Ike said. “I just don’t think Ismael took your stupid candy bar.”

Ismael was now back at our table, fidgeting and picking his cuticles. I was certain he was guilty. I had never been so certain of anything in my life.

Ike was showing Ismael something in his notebook.

“You took my Hershey bar,” I said, looking right at Ismael.

“What?” he said.

“Don’t act confused. You took it. I don’t really care about the food, but I want you to admit it.”

Ismael squirmed a little.

“Just admit it,” I said, “and I’ll forget about it. I won’t tell anyone. I just don’t want you to take my stuff anymore.”

Ismael said nothing, just stared at the wall, his eyes seeming to enlarge until they threatened to devour the rest of his face.

Ike sighed and pulled something out of his pocket. It was my Hershey bar. He smacked it down on the table.

“You should apologize to Ismael,” he said in the same tone I’d heard his father use to scold me for leaving a mess in their house.

“You should apologize to me for taking my candy bar,” I said, my voice rising.

“You needed to learn the hard way,” Ike said.

“Learn what?”

“Not to judge,” Ike said. He stood up and walked toward the exit to the playground, throwing out his half-full lunch bag on the way. Ismael looked at me for a moment, then he followed Ike.

I sat for a minute, then picked up the Hershey bar and threw it toward the trashcan. I missed. I ran over to pick it up before anyone could yell at me.

I decided to put it in my pocket. I was thinking of giving it to Ismael. He was obviously hungry. He ate the peas, for God’s sake!

Plus, the way I saw it, nobody could get mad at me for a small act of kindness, right?

Ron and Tony Suit Up

The uptown 3 was packed, the air conditioning was out, and at least two babies were crying so loud that Tony had to shout to be heard. Standing with head next to Tony's armpit, Ron could feel the sweat soaking his military fatigues. He wanted to go to an adjacent car, but he didn't dare interrupt Tony mid spiel.

Ron's mind drifted back to his second and final phase of basic training at Parris Island, when he couldn't get a bullet within a foot of the target.

Why can't you shoot straight, meathead!

I don't know, sir! I just can't!

He did know, actually. It had a lot to do with seeing his father's disembodied face hovering in front of the target. But he did not want to get into this with the drill sergeant or anyone else.

Then the bed wetting started, cold sweats, screaming nightmares and crying fits. After a couple weeks of this, they discharged him. Failure to adapt.

He moved to Brooklyn, went back to flipping burgers, and was on the verge of becoming an assistant manager when his old high-school drinking partner Tony Santorino asked him to come share his apartment.

Tony looked at Ron in his military garb and laughed.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" Ron said.

"You."

“Fuck you. You’re dressed just like me.”

“It’s not the outfit, man. You look great. I’m just picturing you in the army. That’s the funny part.”

Ron gave Tony the finger and pulled out his phone to use as a mirror. The scar he’d painted on his forehead looked convincing enough.

“And why do I have to be the retarded one?” he asked,

“Not retarded,” said Tony, patting Ron on the shoulder. “Wounded in the head. In Fallujah.”

“Same thing.”

“You’re not showing much respect for our fellow wounded warriors.”

“This is all wrong.” Ron put the phone in the leg pocket of his camouflage pants.

“No, the war is wrong. The way our veterans are treated is wrong,” Tony said. “We’re just restoring some balance to society.”

Ron looked out the window of the tiny Flatbush studio. He saw Larry, one of the homeless guys who collected recyclables on their block. Larry was the most clear-headed of the bunch. He drank and smoked anything he could fit in a rolling paper, but he’d never shot up. Larry had also flunked out of Marines training, about fifteen years back.

Ron and Tony were living in Tony’s father’s apartment. Tony was allowed to use it on condition he never tell his mother where his father was hiding. Since the boys were living rent free, any money they brought in could go for food, booze and

good times. But their pathetic paychecks barely covered food and the cheapest booze, and their only good times involved drinking it.

One day Tony read a newspaper article about women, poor but not homeless, carrying babies, not always their own, bringing in hundreds of dollars a day from handouts.

“We could be doing a lot better than we’re doing,” he said.

Their first gambit involved photos of a fire-ravaged building and some bandages. Tony’s speech to the passenger went something like this:

As you can see, our Bronx apartment has been destroyed by a fire. My brother here is still undergoing intensive treatment for his burns. He was lucky not to be killed. But now we’re on the streets, trying to pay medical bills and get back on our feet. Something like this could happen to anyone at any time, and I pray it never happens to you. I hope you’ll find it in your hearts to help us out in any way you can. No donation is too small or too large.

Ron had told Tony it would never work. You could drive a truck through the holes in the story. For starters, if the whole building were destroyed, wouldn’t the landlord be responsible for finding them housing? And didn’t the city government intervene in these kinds of situations? And, Ron asked, “Won’t they wonder why we aren’t at work? Because, I mean, we were paying rent before the, before the fire, so we must have had some income. . .”

“Relax,” Tony said. “You’re forgetting some facts. First of all, we’re white. Second, we’re not junkies. Third, I’m good looking and have a beautiful speaking voice. And fourth, people are suckers.”

“I don’t feel right about it,” Ron said.

“Nobody’s going to give us any money they really need. And even if we’re not totally on the level, it’s no worse than the way your average corporation treats its workers. Did McDonald’s ever give you an honest day’s wages?”

“No,” Ron said.

“Then shut the fuck up and put those bandages on. And try to look in pain.”

Tony was right, just as he’d always been right in high school. He knew which parties had the most kegs and when to leave before the cops arrived, what sob stories to use on each teacher to get those few extra points, which girls Ron should stop pursuing because they would only lead him on then break his heart, not that Ron ever listened.

They brought in two hundred twenty dollars I three hours the first day. It was tedious but exhilarating. Free money. Who knew? Ron managed his guilt by telling himself that Tony would be doing the same thing without him, only less effectively. Drinking also helped.

But the profits dwindled after a couple weeks. Maybe the truth had caught up with them. Maybe Tony was losing the vigor in his spiel. Maybe somebody else was using the same story. Perhaps begging schemes, like everything else, trend, then go out of fashion.

“I think wheelchairs are where it’s at,” said Tony.

“No fucking way,” said Ron. “That’s a whole other level of lying. It’s disrespectful of handicapped people.”

“I’ve watched the guys in wheelchairs, man. They make twice what we’ve been making.”

“If you want to do the wheelchair thing, you can sit in it,” said Ron. “I’ll do the talking.”

“It won’t work.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“First of all, your New Jersey accent will piss everybody off. Secondly, I won’t look pathetic enough.”

“I’m not pathetic,” Ron said. “I just pretend to be pathetic.”

“Right. I know. And you’re good at it. I can’t pull it off the same way. You’re the better actor. Hell, you should be in theater.”

“You mean that?”

“Sure thing, man. You could be a star.”

“Actors don’t make much money.”

“The famous ones do.”

“I don’t see it happening.”

“No, probably not. Go find us a wheelchair. Make sure it looks beat up.”

Ron found a wheelchair on Craigslist for fifty bucks. One of the wheels was noisy and the brakes didn't work. He didn't think he would need breaks. If it started rolling out of control, he could just jump off.

Tony was right, of course. They made 300 dollars per day with the wheelchair scheme. Tony rotated stories, to keep things fresh. Sometimes Ron had been in an accident. Sometimes it was a hereditary condition. Once he said it was from a gunshot wound, but nobody gave that time. Tony was baffled.

"The gun talk scared them off," Ron said.

"But I said you were an innocent bystander."

"I don't think people believe in innocence anymore."

"No, I guess not," Tony said.

After a week in the wheelchair, Ron felt a new empathy for the people who actually had to use them.

"I mean, it's a pain in the ass getting around in this thing. I never knew how goddamn slow the subway elevators are. And what if you live by a station with no wheelchair access? I would not want to be handicapped in this city."

"So don't be," Tony said.

"You're missing the point. As usual."

The next day Ron gave his half the earnings to a man with no legs at the West 4th Street station."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" Tony yelled. "We worked hard for that money."

“No we didn’t. And I’m done with the wheelchair. Find us a more honest scam or I’m getting another fast food job.”

The wounded veterans idea came from a TV news story about Iraq war veterans who had slipped through the cracks in the system and were living on the streets.

“That’s an outrage,” Tony said.

“So now you’re mister socially conscious?”

“No. But these people risked their lives for their country, and now they’re homeless?”

“You’re right,” Ron said. “It’s pathetic.”

“So let’s do something about it,” Tony said.

“You want to get into politics?”

“No, we’re going to hustle on behalf of these neglected veterans.”

“You want to donate our proceeds to the VA?”

“No. Never give to an organization if you want to help people. They’ll just waste it on posters and pamphlets.”

“I think you’re exaggerating.”

“Maybe. But if the VA is so fucking great, why are veterans living on the streets?”

“Maybe they don’t know where to get help,” Ron said.

“Well, they will now. From us. Ron and Tony. Wounded warriors.”

Tony turned to Ron and saluted. Ron got up from the sofa and saluted back.

“So we’re going to fundraise for all of the homeless vet’s of New York” Ron said.

“Including ourselves.”

“Naturally.”

They got military fatigues from an army surplus store.

Tony persuaded a friend who worked at a T-shirt shop to print up wounded warrior hats and T-shirts. They had a picture of one soldier attending to another who was lying on the ground.

“How much did you waste on that stuff?” Ron asked.

“Nada, my friend. I said we’d give him ten percent of the proceeds.”

“Seems like a waste. I don’t see why we need the extra crap.”

“It makes us seem legit.”

“But we are legitimate this time. We’re giving half the money to . . .”

“I never said half.” Tony was shaking his head. “I was thinking more like twenty percent.”

“So if we’re pocketing eighty percent,” Ron said, “how are we any better than the organizations you didn’t want to give to?”

“Because we’re not wasting the money on fundraising. I don’t have time to do the math, but . . .”

“OK, fine. Twenty percent. But that still doesn’t explain why we need to waste ten percent on hats and T shirts.”

“You and I know may know we’re a legitimate operation,” Tony said. “But the people on the train do not. You know the guys who give away sandwiches and juice boxes?”

“Yes. They work for some organization called . . .”

“Called bullshit illegal panhandling on the subway. How much do you think it costs to make a basket of PB and J on white bread?”

“I don’t know, maybe twenty bucks?”

“Right. And how much do you think those guys bring in from donations to pay for their ‘program?’” Tony made quote marks with his fingers.

“I don’t know. Probably a lot more than twenty.”

“Shit, Ron. We pull in a few hundred a day with nothing but bullshit stories and your dopey, pathetic face.”

“Damnit, Tony!”

“OK. My bad. But you see my point about the sandwich guys. Now those guys have been in business for years. And if they can make a killing with sandwiches and juice, just imagine what we can do with awesomely embroidered hats and T shirts and a killer war story on top of it.”

“Remind me the story again?” Ron said.

Tony went over it.

Ron really didn’t like the fake head wound, but Tony believed it was the only way to arouse the necessary pity and guilt. Plus it was the best explanation for why Ron didn’t talk. Tony did the talking. That was the rule, had been since adolescence.

Ladies and gentlemen. We are sorry to disturb you, but we need just a moment of your time. I'm Sergeant Avery and this Lieutenant Caraway of the U.S. Marine Corps. We've both recently returned from our third tour of duty in Afghanistan, where Lieutenant Caraway was wounded by a roadside bomb. Although we are lucky to have the support of our friends and family, many veterans come back with injuries and PTSD and cannot maintain jobs or a stable life. Many of them end up living on the streets. On behalf of the Wounded Warriors Association, we are raising money to help these people who have sacrificed so much for your safety and freedom. If you can find it in your hearts to give even a little, our brave fellow warriors will be so gratefully. We have hats and T shirts for those who give ten dollars or more . . .

Ron pictured himself at Parris Island, stopping to vomit in the middle of a run, taking too goddamn long to lark up his boots, remaking his bed fifteen times to get it right, biting his lip to keep from crying whenever a drill sergeant got up in his face.

He had signed up to honor his dad, a reservist who had been sent to Desert Storm only to get a staph infection that kept him hospitalized until the operation was over. By the time the next Iraq war came around, Ron McClure, Sr. was unable to serve due to a host of medical conditions brought on by a lifetime of drinking, smoking and fornicating. The old man, who had proven his toughness in plenty of bar fights, often spoke wistfully of the combat he never saw. When he died during Ron's junior year of high school, Ron vowed to make it to the front and thereby close the loop.

But when it came time for shooting, and that face started to appear in front of the target, Ron realized pitied his dad more than he loved him, wanted to forget him more than honor him.

When he left the camp, he moved to New York City, hoping the big city would inspire his artistic side. He had never done any painting, but in middle school he was famous for drawing caricatures of teachers in the nude. Instead, he was caught up in the real driving passion of most New Yorkers: staying afloat.

He and Tony had to push they were through the crowd to reach the people sitting on benches. Sitting people gave, standing people didn't. Ron thought that between the heat, noise and accumulating body odor, people would be far from charitable, but he was wrong. They got three fives and a ten out of that car.

The train stopped at 14th street and Ron and Tony got out.

"Semper fi, bitches," Tony said.

Ron carefully dabbed the sweat on his forehead. He didn't want to smudge the scar.

The results spoke for themselves. They made three hundred bucks that day, quit after rush hour, went out for drinks.

The third beer loosened Ron's mind and tongue.

"The money is nice, Tony, but this shit is eating away at my soul."

"Your soul needs to get over itself," Tony said, snapping in the direction of the bartender. The bartender turned, and Tony pointed at his empty bottle.

“We’re cheating people out of their hard-earned money,” Ron said.

“You don’t know how they got their money. They probably stole it from somebody else.”

“No, most people are honest,” Ron said. He sucked at his Budweiser bottle.

“Not most of the people I know,” Tony said. “Except you.”

“You meant that?”

“Mean what?”

“That I’m honest?”

Tony nodded, laid down a ten-dollar bill for the beer and refused the change.

“But what we’re doing isn’t honest, Tony. We’re pretending to be people we’re not. Heroes, no less.”

“Soldiers aren’t heroes,” Tony said. “They’re just doing their jobs.”

“Then what was all that crap about helping the poor, neglected vets whose country has let them down? Did you mean none of that?”

“I don’t know,” Tony said, and drank half his Coors in three gulps. “All I know is, what we’re doing beats flipping burgers. That makes *me* feel like *I’m* being used.”

“You’re more comfortable using others.”

“Something like that.” Tony drank the rest of the bottle and sauntered to the bathroom.

The next day, Tuesday, it was ninety degrees by ten AM. Standing on the subway platform, Ron wondered what others thought of him in his military fatigues, a giant scar on his forehead, flushed and glistening with sweat. Did they believe his

act? What would they think if they know that not only was he not a real soldier, but that he wussed out of basic training because guns—*not guns, meathead! Rifles! Your gun is for fucking!*—made him wet himself and that his father, god bless his soul, was too much of a sad sack to even get sent to die in the desert. What would they think if they knew how he let Tony drag him into situations he didn't want to be in, made him the straight-faced wounded warrior wheel-chair bound retarded sidekick so they could spend their nights drinking shitty beer at a bar instead of at home?

Most likely, they wouldn't care. People are too caught up in their own shit to worry about somebody else's story. Unless, that is, you shove that story in their face and make them feel so sorry for you or so horrified at their own selfishness that they give you their hard-earned, money without pausing to consider the many ways in which your story makes no sense whatsoever.

But what if you tested the limits of their gullibility?

As they got on the F, jostling with the other passengers who were actually trying to get somewhere, Ron yelled in Tony's ear, "Keep you fucking mouth shut. I've got this one."

Tony shook his head frantically, in vain.

Ladies and gentleman. I hope you are having a pleasant ride in one of the few NYC subway cars with air conditioning that works. I am Admiral Bilko and this is Lieutenant Barker of the one hundred and third airborne. We've recently returned from our third tour of duty in Uzbekistan making our great nation safe from terrorism. As you can see, I've suffered a severe head wound and my partner here, well, something

just ain't right about him. So we need money. It's the only way we can feed ourselves and continue to keep you safe and warm.

Tony played along, nodding in agreement, making eye contact with anyone who didn't look away.

An elderly brown-skinned woman reached into her purse. She pulled out a pack of gum and offered Ron a piece. He took it.

When the train stopped at West 4th Street, Tony dragged Ron off, smacked him hard on the back of the head.

"What the fuck was that?" he yelled.

"Indulging my creative side," Ron said.

"You pull something like that again, I'll toss you on the tracks."

"I won't. It's out of my system. The creativity, I mean. I'll go back to being your silent sidekick. Remember the Backroom Shuckers?"

That was the band Tony convinced Ron to quit the football team and join. Tony sang lead. He never had hit a right note in his life, but he had stage presence. The girls screamed for him before, during and after every show. Ron was a solid rhythm guitarist but was a stiff, nervous wreck on stage. His musical contributions were completely lost on the drunk and stoned audience. Soon Tony disbanded the Shuckers so he could join a more promising band. Ron swore off music for life.

They got on a Brooklyn bound train. Tony thought they'd better lay low the rest of the day.

On the train, mostly empty, was a man with no legs and a long beard, wearing army fatigues and a dog tag. His wheelchair looked a lot like the one Ron had used. He had a sign that said "Vietnam Vet. Homeless. Please help." He breathed through a tube in his throat.

Ron reached in his pocket, pulled out his wallet.

Tony grabbed Ron's arm. "Don't, man," he said.

Ron freed his arm, pulled out two twenties and a five, hand it to the man in the wheelchair. The man nodded and put the money in a pouch around his waist. The only sound was from his breathing apparatus. He rolled away.

"Jesus, man," Tony said. "That guys just another junkie."

"Junkies need money, too," Ron said.

But there was a little more to it. Take away the beard, grime and ten years, Ron thought, and that guy looks a lot like my old man.

Not to mention, the tracheotomy was a nice touch.

Talk about authenticity.

Some mornings Ron woke up and told himself he was done. He'd give it Tony straight. *I can't do it anymore. It's wrong, and you know it. I've followed you and your bad ideas long enough . . .*

Then he would think about the smell of the grill, taking orders from pasty, pimple faced managers or, worse, becoming one of them, and hold his tongue for another day. And the money kept coming.

He could, of course, pursue other paths to prosperity. His mind was perfectly suitable for college, if he could regain the focus he lost right around puberty. But the space between where he was and where he wanted to be was broad and hazy, and then there was Ron in front of him, in his Stars and Stripes boxer briefs, and it was impossible to think, period.

One day in early October they ended up on a car with another pair, a black and a Latino, using the same shtick and pulling in more and bigger bills. Tony noticed, too, and, distracted, he lost the conviction in his voice. That only made sixty four dollars that day.

“Those guys were the real deal,” Ron said at their ritual trip to the bar. Lately, Tony was drinking four beers for every one of Ron’s.

“They’re both good talkers.”

“Maybe they’re really soldiers.”

“No. Their boots were laced wrong,” Tony said.

“Good eye. Then what’s their secret?”

“Teamwork. Two voices are better than one.”

“Then let me talk.”

“We’ve been over this. Those two were both buttery smooth. I love you, Ron, but buttery smooth you are not.”

“We could make it work, if we structured it right.” Ron looked at his half-empty, warm beer and forced himself to take a sip. Because it was a bar, and that’s what you do.

“We’ve seen what happens when you talk.”

“That was an act of rebellion. I would stick to the script.”

“You say that, but sooner or later something would give. The underlying problem is still there.” Tony slammed his empty down, snapped for the bartender.

“Underlying problem?”

“That you don’t believe in what we’re doing. You’re conflicted.”

“I didn’t realize you were such a fucking psychologist. How do you know how I feel? When was the last time I complained?”

“I know you, Ron. You’re a good person. Naïve and mostly useless, but good.”

“So you’re admitting that what we’re doing is wrong.”

“No. Not wrong. Just ... not totally on the level.”

“And this whole time I thought you believed your own bullshit.”

“I do.” Tony paid for the next round, which meant Ron had another beer and a half to contend with. “But not because it’s honest.”

“You’ve lost me. If you believe in it, then you have to think it’s honest. Unless you’re a sociopath, which you’re not, right?”

“I don’t know, man. I believe in it because we’re beating the fucking system. But there may be more straight forward ways of beating the system.”

“Like going to school and getting a decent job?”

“Fuck no! That *is* the system.”

“So then what?”

“I’m working on that. Just give it some time.” Then, for the first time ever, Tony left an unfinished beer on a bar.

The next day Tony was back to form, as were the proceeds. But in Tony's mellifluous assertiveness Ron sensed a change. Tony sounded like a caricature of himself, somebody delighting in his own absurdity. It was working now, but absurdity is a difficult condition to sustain.

And sure enough, two days later, a Friday, Tony did not want to work.

"We don't get sick days, you know," Ron said, standing over him.

"Fuck off. When did you become the boss? I need a break. Everybody's entitled to a break."

"If you take a break, it means I have to take one, and I want to work. I don't need a day of sitting around thinking about how shitty my life is."

"Your life is fine, man." Tony stared at the ceiling as he spoke. "You've got me taking care of you. You're making more money than the whole McDonald's staff combined."

"You're taking care of me? I think the word you're looking for is *exploiting*."

"Nobody's being exploited. We're partners. You've chosen to be my business partner."

"OK, I'll play along, Mr. CEO of Panhandling Inc. As long as we're business partners, I want to make money."

"Then go make it. Here's your chance to use those pipes."

"Have it your way."

Ron got into costume, minus the scar, because he could not be one with a head injury today.

As he headed for the door, Tony shouted from his bed, "I still get my cut. It's my idea you're using."

Ron said nothing, gave the finger to the empty hallway behind him.

He headed to the subway. The train took longer than usual to arrive, or so it felt. Ron watched the people on the platform, many of whom periodically craned their necks over the tracks in hopes of spotting a train. He had become a very astute observer of fellow humans since he'd started working the trains. And the quality he observed most, even in couples holding hands and mothers holding babies, was loneliness. Ron felt their loneliness in his chest. It was too much to bear.

"Ladies and gentlemen . . ." The train was unusually empty for early rush hour. "I'm sorry to bother you this morning, but I ask for your attention for just a minute."

"Shut the fuck up!" a rumbling voice shouted from the far end of the car. Ron pretended not to hear. He also pretended not to see a young Indian woman guide her toddler away or the several sets of eyes looking at newspapers and phones.

"I've recently returned overseas, from fighting in, in, oh you know the place. Where they send assholes like me to die. And we go there to die for your, for your. . . I'm supposed to say freedom. That's why we go fight and die. Because we're free. All of us, right? Free to be here, and do what we do. I'm fucking free, god fucking damn it!"

An elderly woman looked up and shook her head sadly.

“I’m sorry, OK. I’m sorry I’m not doing this right. I wanted to prove something. I’m sure you can understand that.” He looked around for a pair of eyes to meet, but everyone’s eyes had better things to look at.

“Look, people. I’m here because I need money. I need it at least as much as the rest of you do. I was working my ass off every day making shitty food that clogs your arteries, until one day my friend, I guess you can call him that . . .”

Then, over the course of several stops, Ron told the whole story, going back to his dad and training camp and the art career he hadn’t even tried to start, up until this very morning. Passengers got off and on, as they always do, and soon the car was full. Nobody listened, but Ron didn’t care. He would finish his tale.

“... until today. And today I said to myself, ‘Ron, if you’re going to keep doing this, if this is who you are, then you have to be able to do it yourself. You have to embrace the life you’ve chosen. Only it’s not going too well, as you can all see. Or not see, because you’re not looking. And why would you look? There’s nothing to see here. Nothing at all.”

The train reached Penn Station. Ron watched many passengers of all shapes and sizes head for the door, as many others waited impatiently to get on. He wished he were one of them, waiting impatiently to get somewhere. If only he could make a decision.

At the last possible instant, he slipped through the closing subway doors. He walked down the subway platform and up the stairs into Penn Station. From here, Ron could go just about anywhere.

Costco

“There’s a lot more to this job than just serving pizza,” said the manager, Austin Gurganis.

Jared Summers felt several inches shorter than Austin, though they were both right around five foot nine. He looked at the customers eating their \$1.50 hot dog and soda combos, frozen dairy product swirls, brisket sandwiches, chicken bakes, and pizza slices. Nobody had yet ordered the grilled chicken Caesar salad. His first day at Costco, about three months ago, Jared had gorged himself on leftovers at the end of the day, was up all night with stomach cramps, swore the stuff off for life. He had to admit that it all went down easy.

“Look at these chicken bakes,” said Austin. “There’s cheese dripping out onto the tray. That’s not appetizing. You have to get these out of here.”

Jared waited for a prompt. To take too much initiative was demeaning. The prompt came promptly.

“So, are you going to get these out of here?”

Jared took out the tray, dumped the blemished chicken bake’s into the trash. A chicken bake, Jared was thinking, was a cross between an eggroll, a burrito and a night at the sports bar with a bunch of guys who wanted stay in their college fraternity forever. *Time to move on, fellows. Ready, on three...*

Jared noticed a girl, age eight, give or take a year, so pale that the skin around her eyes was pink, watching him and Austin. The grownups were oblivious, too busy chomping and slurping, calculating how fast they had to eat to make it back to

work on time. You could not, by any sane reckoning, beat the prices here. Granted, to come to a warehouse store just to eat would be pathetic, but if you could justify it by buying, say, a year's supply of aluminum foil, it was a way to beat the system.

One young man in a crisp suit was polishing off a hot dog and looking at his phone. He seemed to be about Jared's age, twenty-three. Surely this person would be returning to a much more dignified place of work than a wholesale store food counter. He clearly had more focus and ambition than Jared had ever been able to sustain for more than a few days. Two months ago, his first day donning the paper hat and learning to clean the frozen yogurt machine, Jared had told himself this would be his last menial task type job. But in those two months he had taken no action to change anything. He usually got high, write stream of consciousness fantasies about the life he would someday lead, tell himself that tomorrow he'd get down to business, reapply to school. *Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...* Cliché but true.

"And this display case. Have you looked at it any time recently?"

Jared nodded.

"And you saw, what, sparkling clean glass?"

Jared shook his head.

"No, you certainly didn't. There's grease stain that have been here for hours, if not days. So what are we going to do?"

"Clean it?" Jared said.

"Right. We're going to clean it. It's part of our job."

We means you.

The girl, hopped up on whatever soda or artificial juice was in her cup, stood up and started twirling.

Jared thought about all the ways children were and were not as innocent as they were cracked up to be. Children could be cruel and stupid, just like grown ups, but they had the ability to live in the moment. Jared remembered the precise moment when he lost this ability himself, very late into adolescence. His oldest brother, Brad, had called at an odd hour...

“Too much spray,” Austin said. “It’ll leave streaks.”

Jared was absentmindedly wiping the display case.

“Remember,” Austin said, “Your job is to make the food appealing to the customers.”

Austin wanted to say he thought it was his duty to scare them away from the food, but then he remembered the last time he had spoken so honestly to a supervisor. That was when he worked at the American Cancer Society warehouse in Oakland, during a year off—it turned out to be several years, and counting—from college. He was living with his dad, who thought some West Coast air and mellowness might help Jared get his shit together.

The job, a placement from temp agency, involved filling out orders and packing them into boxes. The orders for anti-smoking campaign materials—posters, key chains, buttons, pencils, hats, T-shirts and plaques-- came in on computer printouts. The order or operations was to grab a printout, go around with

a cart to the shelves, which were labeled with codes that matched the codes on the printout. Once all the items were gathered, you had to put them in boxes, taking care not to waste any box space. Then you weighed the boxes and printed shipping labels. At about four in the afternoon, Pablo, the UPS guy, came by to pick everything up, yammering to anyone in earshot about his latest sexual exploits as he carted boxes to the truck.

The first day the whole routine was new and interesting. After that, Jared could feel his brain melting. It wasn't so much from the tedium, which Jared could alleviate by, say, memorizing the eight-digit codes for specific posters, also by smoking up a little before work. No, the problem was the smooth jazz station the supervisor blasted from a table radio in his office. Weed made good music better, bad music worse. It was like spending all day in an elevator or a dentist's office, with all the anxiety that these places provoke.

One day he politely asked the supervisor, Bill Olsen, to change the radio station.

"Why would I want to do that?" Bill said.

"Because, to be honest, that particularly radio station creates an inhospitable work environment. For me, anyway."

Bill nodded, went into his office, and turned off the radio.

"Better?"

Jared nodded.

That afternoon the temp agency called. They would need to find Jared another placement.

“How long have the Brisket sandwiches been out here?” Austin had a peculiar way of seeming to make eye contact even when he was staring at something else, in this case a row of brisket sandwiches.

Jared shrugged.

“If they’ve been sitting more than a few hours, you need to toss them. Would you want to eat a brisket sandwich that’s been sitting out all day?”

Jared shrugged again. The man in the suit was crumpling his hotdog wrapper, looking right in Jared’s direction. Was he watching and judging, feeling pity for his humiliated peer? No, he was looking right through Austin, to some glorious triumph in the distance. Then he left his trash on the table and went for the exit.

“You need to see things from the customer’s point of view,” Austin continued.

Jared saw a Chinese family sit down with a tray of hot dogs and drinks: One Pepsi, one Diet Pepsi, one lemonade. He thought about the Chinese one-child policy and wondered if Chinese families in America also followed it. If so, that meant there were many, many Chinese American children without siblings. Jared wondered what his own life would have been like without siblings, instead of the two older brothers that immediately let him know his place in the family order.

Most of his memories of Brad and Larry involved them sitting on him, pummeling him or competing to see who could string the most insults together without taking a breath: *Jared is a wheezy-cracker-mother-humping-butt and ball licking cum-eating lesbian punk rocker.*

You call that a string of insults? No, Jared is a wheezy-cracker-mother-humping-butt and ball licking-cum-eating-ass-munching-semen-filled-asscrack . . . and so on.

Once Jared took a can't-beat-them-so join-them-approach. *I'm a dog-semen-slurping, old librarian butt licking . . . and so on*, for a good ninety seconds. The brothers nodded in acknowledgment of his feat, then resorted to sitting on his head and twisting his nipples. From an early age Jared had learned to accept servility.

But did they even still have that policy in China? How would you enforce such a thing?

The Chinese boy's father was yelling at him. The boy just looked straight ahead, unflinching. The man kept yelling and yelling, then suddenly stopped. The man and the boy both took bites of their hot dogs. Then, when he was done chewing, the man resumed yelling. The boy was still chewing.

"It looks like you're low on veggie pizza," Austin said.

"I'll go see if there's more coming out," Jared said, gesturing toward the kitchen.

"You should not have to check. This kitchen should be operating on a schedule. A fresh pie comes out every fifteen minutes, regardless."

"Sometimes they're a little slow back there," Jared said.

"That's because they don't respect you. They know there's no consequence if they're slow. If you hope to become anything other than a server, you need the kitchen staff to respect you."

Austin went back to the kitchen and yelled in Spanish.

Jared knew that the Mexicans working in the kitchen would do whatever it took to get paid and not call any attention to their selves. They appreciated Jared for minding his own business. When Austin went back to yell at them in garbled Spanish, they made gestures of respect, but what they actually felt was fear. Fear only makes the pizzas come out faster until the cause of the fear is gone.

Jared liked the idea of being a manager, the sense of responsibility, being a decision maker, even if they were insignificant decisions. But he knew he was not manager material because the moment somebody questioned his authority, he would crack.

“To be an authority, you have to feel like an authority,” his father used to say.

“It’s up to you to make sure things run smoothly here,” Austin said.

Jared watched the Chinese family take their trays to the trashcan. The father was no longer yelling, but he was glaring at the boy, then at his mother, then at the boy again. Jared wondered why the man was so angry at his family.

In Jared’s family, his mother was the angry one. She didn’t yell or glare, though. The anger took the form of burnt toast, kitchen drawers in disarray, dust and cobwebs, unmade beds, and relentless silence. In hindsight, the rest of the family could have helped with the housework, but his father had a conventional view of gender roles, which the three boys drank in with their weak, poorly mixed chocolate milk.

One day, Jared told himself, he would apologize to his mother for not being more sensitive, for taking her for granted. He was trying to figure out a way to say it

without feeling that he was betraying his father, who after all, had been a very loving parent and was probably doing his best as a husband.

Austin returned with a steaming, veggie-laden pizza.

“A little assertiveness will go a long way,” he said.

Jared nodded and placed the pie in the empty space in the glass case.

“You forgot to slice it,” Austin said.

“Oh, I was . . .”

“You were going to wait and slice it after customers started ordering pizza, slowing down the whole process?” Austin shook his head in disgust.

“Right. So I’ll slice it now.” Jared reached for the slicer. He really needed to get one of these to use at home. He often made frozen pizzas, cursed at the awkwardness of cutting it with a knife, which always dragged half the cheese with it.

“You shouldn’t have to be reminded about these details,” Austin said, before retreating to the kitchen to yell in more Spanish.

The phone rang at 2 a.m. Jared was in his single dorm room during his second year at SUNY Purchase.

“Dad’s in deep shit,” Brad said.

“Huh?” Jared was not remotely awake, but he could ever ignore a ringing phone.

“Dad. Our father. He called me, crying. Well, he wasn’t crying on the phone, but he had been, I could tell.”

“Brad?”

“Yes, asshole, it’s your brother Brad. Wake the fuck up and listen.”

“I’m trying. Just slow down.” Jared tried to take a deep breath, coughed. He really needed to start smoking through water.

“OK. I’ll go slow for the retarded people in the audience. Our father, James Walker, is in trouble with the IRS. He has been way, way, way underreporting his income from the car lots. For years and years. He could go to prison.”

“Shit.”

“That’s your response? Shit? It’s fucking horrible. And this whole time he’s subsidizing your college smoke fest.”

“Did you call because you’re worried about dad or to bust my balls?”

“I called about dad. He told me not to tell you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. You’re the baby. Innocent. Or some crap like that. How should I know? But now you know.”

“Should I do something?”

“Yes, you should. But you won’t. Because...”

Jared hung up and lit a joint. He stayed on campus the rest of the semester but did not go to another class. He told himself he’d get back in gear once the dust had settled on his father’s situation. That was three years ago.

“Listen . . . Jared.” Austin had returned to the counter and was looking at Jared’s nametag. He smelled of cigarette smoke. The dose of nicotine may have explained the uptick in his mood. “You seem like a nice, honest young man.”

“Thanks,” Jared said, thinking that when he got to Austin’s age, which he guessed was around 30, he hoped he would not feel compelled to call a 23 year old “young man.”

“I know this isn’t your dream job. To be honest, managing here isn’t my dream job either.”

Jared looked for the pale girl, founding crawling under a table. Why weren’t her parents paying attention? Should he intervene? It was not pretty under those tables.

“What *is* your dream job?” Jared asked.

“Since you asked,” Austin said, rearranging sandwiches for no apparent reason, “it involves cars.”

“Selling?” Jared asked.

“Not just. Customizing. Engines, spoilers, systems, tinted windows, the works.”

“My dad is into cars,” Jared said.

“Huh. But you’re not?”

“It didn’t work out too well for him. Cars are OK, I guess. I wouldn’t want to own one in the city.”

“That’s why I live in Jersey,” Austin said. “I’ve got a Mazda RX-8 with some mod’s that make it, let’s just say, it’s a no joke.”

“Sounds like fun.” For the first time in recent memory, the smell of the pizza made Jared hungry. What would happen if he grabbed a slice and starting eating it in front of Austin?

“I take it to some parking lot races. You should come watch. See another side of your manager.”

“Sure,” Jared said. “So how you are going to make your car business happen? I mean, I guess you get paid more than me here . . .”

“Start small, dream big, my dad always said.” Austin adjusted his paper hat.

“My dad was full of inspirational quips, too,” Jared said. “They’re not so helpful in reality.”

“Not unless you believe in yourself,” Austin said. “I believe in myself. Do you believe in yourself?”

“Sure. Why not?” Jared said.

His dad did not end up in prison. Used car salesmen were low priority as far as criminal prosecution. He lost all his assets, would be paying back taxes for the rest of his life. His second wife left him. Jared’s brothers would have nothing to do with the old man. Jared called often, promised to visit when he could afford a flight to California, which, at his current salary, would be never.

The cashier called for a brisket sandwich. Jared reached for one and passed it over to her.

“I have to check on some things in the back,” Austin said. “You’ll do things the way I showed you?”

“Don’t worry,” Jared said.

“It’s my job to worry,” Austin said, then left.

The pale girl, now hopping on one foot, then the other, was leaving the store with her mother, who was managing two shopping carts filled mostly with baked goods. Maybe she works in catering, Jared thought. Or maybe she’s going to freeze them for the long winter. He hoped she wouldn’t let the girl gorge herself on muffins. Too much fat, too much sugar. Not good for a growing body.

He noticed a long line had suddenly appeared at the register. The orders would be coming hot and heavy. Jared prepared himself to seize the moment.

Colleagues

“See you at work, I guess.”

Joe forced himself to look at the dashboard and not at Aisha, who had her hand on the door handle but was not pulling it.

He was fighting the urge to reach for her, pull her head toward him. He believed he would let her.

Was this the voice that tells you to go for what you want because it will feel good, or the one that tells you to jump over that railing into the abyss because honestly, what’s to stop you? Was Aisha love waiting to happen or merely the sabotage of life as he knew it?

On a freezing November night, at a party in honor of a retiring math department colleague, Joe McDermott learned that Aisha Buledi lived a block away from him. She had taken the train to get to the party and was happy to accept a ride home.

“I cannot in good conscience let a fellow math geek take the subway when a better alternative exists, especially with the inevitable re-routes, delays, and people vomiting in your general direction.”

Aisha smiled and said, “OK,” resting a hand on his arm. Joe wondered if she could feel the new bulges in his arms, from the extra reps he’d been doing on the tricep machine. He was trying to restore his teenage physique, which had given way

to a bit of paunch and a lot of slouching. He blamed domestic tranquility and a lack of work-related stress for the over-eating and lack of activity. But since taking advantage of a free month at the gym, he was turning back the clock, slowly.

Aisha had joined the department just the previous semester. She spoke the Queen's English with a faint Urdu inflection, always wore crisp business suits and kept her hair in a tight bun. She had a stud in her nose. Joe found the touch of informality alluring. He wondered what she wore at home.

Joe's fiancée, Amber, blond-haired, sleepy-eyed and button-nosed, was informal to the core. For Amber, dressing up meant ironing her blue jeans. In this regard, she would seem to be a good match for Joe, who in high school was nicknamed Sloppy, not so much for the way he dressed but for the way he carried himself, easing about from spot to spot without apparent purpose, seeming to fall into rather than enter the room.

He was a late bloomer. High school, in Little Neck, took him five years, college in Albany seven. Then, after a series of mind numbing office jobs, the tumblers in his mind fell into place, and the safe opened. He was, it turned out, borderline genius at math. He earned a PhD in three years, without breaking a sweat.

Joe had intermittent fantasies about several of his colleagues. The fantasies were not about sex so much as the mundane realities of day-to-day life. What would it be like to wake up to somebody other than Amber? What would Andrea or Renee or Chandra look like in a nightgown, no makeup, hair disheveled? How would they

look naked, with no bras to shape breasts, no outfits to hide curves, spots, cellulose, stray hairs and scars? How would they smell before they showered and after they showered?

More than this, he wondered how being with somebody else would change him. Amber was steady, kind and supportive. He could always “be himself” around her without fear of judgment or rejection. But what if he didn’t want to be himself so much? Maybe he wanted to be challenged by somebody who would not accept his shortcomings, would force him to be more than he was. Maybe with the right partner, he would be motivated to publish groundbreaking articles, write books, become department chair, win awards, scrawl his name on the walls of history.

It was improbable but not implausible.

Of all his colleagues, Aisha, with her layered elements, intrigued him most. He had only a few facts: she was from Pakistan, spent her adolescence in London, got her PhD at Columbia.

The rest of her story he had to invent: a family that rose out of poverty thanks to its loyalty to the Bhutto regime, a furtive trip to London to escape political unrest. The parents, homesick, ultimately returned to Karachi, but Aisha, now fifteen fully immersed in Western life, stayed, living with family friends who had no children of their own. She held onto her family’s adopted aristocratic formalities, did not indulge in sex, drugs or rock and roll, but she was a free, modern, independent woman trying to balance the contradictory aspects of her identity. She missed her parents terribly, knew that she would hardly see them before they died

because they were too tired and set in their routines to travel and she was afraid of the damage she would do if she brought her saucy attitude back home. She came to New York because she wanted to see if the hype was based on any reality and, finding out that much of it was, stayed for good.

Compelling bullshit, this narrative.

In fact, he had only ever exchanged pleasantries with her. Aisha was always reserved and cool, but never cold. He had convinced himself she liked him more than she liked her other colleagues, though there was no concrete evidence to support this notion.

Amber, who was from Kansas, had been instantly knowable. She was a librarian at the Graduate Center when Joe was working on his dissertation. He was having trouble finding a book in the stacks. She helped him find it. He liked the way she scanned the shelves, her body seeming to merge with the books.

“The last guy who read this, like sixty years ago, misplaced it,” she said. “But I know you’ll do better.” She squeezed Joe’s hand as she handed him the book.

Perhaps the Irish half of Joe was drawn to somebody with unmitigated all-American credentials, a sort of immigrant insecurity in his DNA, though he was third-generation American born. Or maybe he valued her plainness—she was from the plains, even—which suggested stability over time. Amber provided comfort but no mystery. He loved her like a favorite pair of shoes that you will repair many

times before replacing. Wearing new shoes for the first time is a great thrill, but buying shoes is expensive.

With the exception of Professor James Mack, who had been at Queensborough Community College since before Joe was born, only the more recent department hires were at the party. They were all grateful to the retiring colleague, Ellen Sturgeon, who had served as a wise, nurturing mentor, giving good advice about how to survive the politics of the place, about who could and could not be trusted. A full-time appointment at City Tech was highly esteemed, and one false move could cost you tenure.

The more senior people in the department thought Ellen Sturgeon was a whack job.

Kaiju Dempsey, the host of the party was Japanese; her husband was white. Her apartment was decorated with a mix of Buddhist devotional art and classic rock memorabilia. Joe assumed—incorrectly, it would turn out—that she was responsible for the Buddhist stuff and her husband for the rock and roll. After his second saki bomb, he mustered the courage to ask Kaiju about it.

“The rock and roll is all me,” she said. “My husband is the wannabe Buddhist. I was raised Catholic.”

“I really need to let go of my cultural assumptions,” Joe said.

Hillary Gilchrest, who was five foot ten and so pale-skinned that blue blood vessels showed on her forehead, had been listening from a few feet away and joined the conversation.

“That’s funny,” she said. “The same kind of thing happened to me the other day. I’m friends with a mixed race couple. I was at their house looking through the music collection. About half of it was jazz and 60’s soul, the other half was cheesy country. Of course, I assumed that the cool music was hers. The woman, I mean. She’s the black one. But then during after dinner drinks she gets up and pulls out a Kenny Chesney CD and puts it on, and her husband looks at me and rolls his eyes.”

Joe nodded in genuine affirmation of the story and its implied moral.

Then Wanda Forsythe, the only black full-timer in the department, came over.

“I heard you talking about jazz,” she said. “I love jazz. My boyfriend is taking me to see Michael Buble next week . . .”

Joe ducked out of the circle in order to get another drink and find another conversation. Then, envisioning a scene of getting pulled over for a DUI with Aisha in the car, skipped the drink.

After another half hour of floating from chat circle to another, Joe had had enough, but he had to be considerate of Aisha. He did not want to drag her out if she wanted to stay longer, nor did he want to be passive and stay another hour on her account, especially since she might be staying only out of consideration for him. He settled on a middle-of-the-road approach, passing by the couch where she was sitting under the pretense of reaching for the guacamole, and in the process said, “Just let me know when you are ready to head out.”

“Whenever you are she said.”

“About twenty minutes,” he said.

He was ready to go right away, but leaving a gap seemed like good form, and though he wanted to tell himself otherwise, the truth was that Joe wanted to impress her.

In the confines of the car, he could really smell her for the first time. It was a buttery smell overlaid with a high-end skin care product. Lavender? Perhaps. The odor was familiar from crossing her path at work, but in the confines of a car it was far more intense. He knew that if he leaned even an inch closer to her it would overpower his faculties of reason.

He could hear the opening drum beats of “Paint It Black” on the radio. If alone, he would turn it up to a deafening volume. When Amber was with him, he turned the radio off because she liked the volume low, and he would rather have silence than music playing too softly, which had the effect of gnats buzzing in his ear.

He looked at Aisha and saw that she was nodding her head with the music.

“Maybe I should turn it up,” he said.

“Maybe you should.”

He turned it to his usual spot on the volume knob, then two clicks further. He wanted to see what she would tolerate. She smiled.

He pulled onto the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, both of them bobbing to the music’s thronging, primal pulse. Then it faded out, and an ad came on. He turned the volume way down.

“That was the first departmental get together I ever actually enjoyed,” she said. “I mean, compared to the other places I worked.”

“Math people aren’t generally known for their social skills,” Joe said.

“Including me. That’s the reason I got into math,” she said.

“But seriously . . .”

“But seriously, I prefer to be around people of ideas more than people who like to chit chat.”

“Our colleagues have ideas, I’ll give them that,” Joe said.

“And some are kind of cute,” she said.

Joe glanced over at her and saw that she was wrinkling her nose. Self-reproach? He knew nothing of her gestures.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “I’m not used to drinking.”

“How much did you drink?” he asked.

“More than usual.”

“Oh, that much.”

“The music’s back on,” she said, pointing to the radio.

It was Traffic, “Dear Mr. Fantasy.”

“I used to live off this song,” Joe said.

“Maybe you should turn it up.”

“Maybe I should,” Joe said, and turned it up even past “Paint It Black” volume.

He started to sing along, an automatic response, then was about to stop himself, remembering somebody else was in the car, but then saw she was mouthing

the lyrics herself, occasionally emitting a faint squeak that might have been singing, or perhaps a bit of her soul slipping out of her windpipe.

She turned and noticed him looking at her.

“Sorry,” she yelled over the music. “That’s kind of how I sing.”

Joe turned the music down.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said. “Whatever comes naturally . . .”

He thought of Amber, who was no doubt on a home improvement TV show binge. When they were together he insisted on more challenging entertainment, foreign films and such. As he explained it, TV shows made everything too easy to digest, making his brain cramp up. At such commentary Amber would shake her eyed and raise one eyebrow. He knew her gestures well.

Aisha’s voice broke his reverie, but a little too late for him to process what she’d said. The last word was “music.”

“Sorry, I missed that he said. Something about music?”

“Yes, spacey. I said I dig your taste in music.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Where did you learn to say ‘dig?’”

“I dated a jazz musician in London,” she said.

“Jazz musician? That’s not part of the narrative.”

“Narrative? You lost me.”

“Never mind,” Joe said. “Talking to myself.”

He was tempted to ask her about her life, what happened in between Pakistan and his Civic hatchback, to see if any of the story he’d invented were near

the mark. But then he would be getting to know her too well. She would become too real for safety.

“What was wrong with the people at your other jobs?” he asked.

Bob Seger’s “Old Time Rock and Roll” had come on, and resisting the urge to comment, he simply turned the volume all the way down. This was that it was one of the few songs Amber would ask him to turn up.

“I always felt like an outsider,” Aisha said.

“Was it a cultural thing? Were they all white?”

“Well, they were, but that wasn’t the problem. It was something else. Something about their attitude toward work. A lack of irony, maybe.”

“You mean they were all convinced that what they do actually matters in the grand scheme of things.”

“You don’t think it does?” she asked.

“Teaching college math matters as much as anything else, I suppose. But I wouldn’t want to be around people who get off on it.”

She looked at him.

“Sorry, that’s crude.”

“No,” she said. “It’s perfect.”

“Perfect how?”

“You’ve helped me finally understand what I didn’t like about those people.”

“You sure that maybe they weren’t just assholes?”

She laughed. The sound reminded him of the wind chimes on the door of his childhood home.

They were at their exit.

“You can let me off anywhere,” she said.

If this were a date, he would of course take her to her door, even if he had no desire to be invited in. This was not a date. He was giving a colleague a ride home. His fiancée was waiting for him.

But it was cold and starting to rain.

“Not in this weather,” he said. “Tell me where you live.”

She told him. It was two doors down from his own place.

“Wow, we’re literally neighbors,” he said. “It’s funny we haven’t bumped into each other even once.”

“The world is small, but it’s also big,” she said.

“True enough,” he said.

Another truth: he could love this woman. Maybe he couldn’t love her more than he loved Amber, who coddled his soul and defined his place in the world, but he could love her differently. Aisha held an allure that Amber never had nor would. He had lived without allure for a long time, could probably continue to do so forever and only miss it when it crossed his path, as it was doing now.

They were in front of her townhouse. If Amber were with him, he would offer to let her out while he drove around, possible for a long time, looking for a

parking space, but she would inevitably choose to stay with him. Her steadfastness could not be faulted.

Aisha put her hand on the door handle but didn't pull it. She looked at him. Her nose ring sparkled in the light from a nearby streetlamp. He could make out little of her face, except for her eyes. The eyes reached for him.

Joe was conscious of his breathing and hers. He paid close attention to this breathing so that he could have no other thoughts. He hoped that she had no other thoughts than their breathing, either. The radio made mosquito noises. He turned it off.

"Joe . . ."

"Yes . . ."

"I'm . . ."

Breathe in. Breathe out. What is Amber watching? Is it something I could handle for five minutes? What would I say walking in after kissing Aisha? Or more than kissing Aisha? Would everything be different or only more intensely the same?

He heard Aisha's voice but forgot to listen to what she was saying, completely missed it.

"OK?" she said.

"OK what?" he said.

She laughed for just an instant, then frowned. "Spacey."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." She shook her head, smiled, sighed.

Aisha opened the door, stepped out, then leaned her head back into the car. Joe focused on the shadow on the dashboard, avoided looking at the woman casting it.

“Joe.”

“Aisha?”

See you at work,” she said.

“Right. At work. Monday.”

Still watching the shadow, he heard her dig her keys out of her pocketbook and open her door. He waited until he saw lights on before driving off.

He would take his time looking for *just* the right parking space.

Gateway

The man behind the check-in desk wore a plaid shirt and a thick beard and had a face like a ball of socks. He told Roger he'd need to leave a fifteen dollar deposit for the TV remote, if he wanted it. The check-in area of the Yonkers Gateway motel was about twenty feet squared. Other than the desk, where the man sat behind thick glass, there was a vending machine that had five kinds of snacks and seven brands of condoms.

"Guess you get a lot of remotes stolen," Roger said.

The man shrugged. "Fifteen dollars," he said.

Roger went ahead and handed over a twenty. He was going to need the TV. He hadn't brought anything to read, nor would he be able to concentrate enough to get through a paragraph even if he had.

Back home, Melody was probably reading a fitness magazine, or perhaps a memoir by a woman who'd empowered herself by getting divorced. Melody had the ability to read under any circumstances. It seemed unfair, her ability to duck out of reality and into text. By now, she had probably cleaned the Merlot off the walls and picked up the shards of glass.

To get to Room 214, Roger had to go outside and up flight of stairs. In the parking lot a car was blasting synth-heavy *bachata*, the music competing with male voices yelling in Spanish. The yelling was drunken but not hostile.

The floor of the room was bare tile, and Roger made a decision not to take his socks off. The tiny bathroom had a bar of soap but no shampoo. Roger would have to wash his hair with the soap in the morning if he was to avoid meeting clients with an oily mop on his head. At least he had remembered floss and deodorant. He had thrown the toiletries and clothes for work into a large suitcase. There were several smaller bags he could have used, but the suitcase felt like right choice. It sent a message of some sort.

The light from the ceiling, glaring off the tiles and white walls, was interrogation-room bright, so Roger turned it off and tried the bedside lamp, which gave off only a faint glow, more than enough light under the circumstances. He flipped off his shoes, sat on the bed and turned on the TV. The first channel was a public access network, with two men chatting and laughing in Hindi. Roger flipped through the channels, passing medical dramas, police procedurals, cooking shows and cartoons, until he landed on a video of two women in the act of oral sex. Roger went ahead and masturbated. He came faster than he expected, pulling a lightly used tissue out of his pocket just in time. He would not have been the first person to ejaculate on this bed, probably not even the first person this evening, but he was determined to maintain his standards of decorum.

The orgasm gave him a few minutes of clear headedness. *How did I get to this point?*

The night had started like many others of late. He asked Melody, about her classes, the situation with her father. They talked about how Frankie was doing in kindergarten. His teacher loved him. How could they not? He was having a little trouble with counting, but the reading was coming along. And so on.

Roger thought if he could keep the mood light, make her feel heard and appreciated, she would soften. Maybe he would be allowed to touch her, get her past the point of resistance and get, however briefly, inside her, and then they would be right back on track.

He put a hand very gently on her thigh, but she swiped it away.

“What the hell?” he said.

She shushed him. Frankie was asleep, the walls were thin.

“Do I disgust you that much now?” he said.

“No, you don’t disgust me. I’m just not ready for closeness.”

“I’m not looking for closeness. I’m looking for sex.”

She shook her head and bit her lip.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just get really frustrated is all. Let’s keep talking.”

And they did, about his work, about her photography. *Just keep it afloat* Roger kept telling himself. But after a few minutes the conversation died. Roger went to the kitchen to pour a glass of wine. “You want some?” he asked. She said no.

He came back to the sofa to find Melody flipping through a cooking magazine.

“So we’re done for the night?” he said.

“We can keep talking,” she said.

“Don’t sound so enthusiastic.”

She sighed loudly.

“And don’t sigh at me!”

She shushed him, still looking at the magazine.

“Look, if you want me to leave you alone, just say so. But don’t sit here and rub your detachment in my face.”

She looked up. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just talk to me.”

“I just didn’t want to go down a bad road. We can keep talking.”

“But not about bullshit.”

“Talking about our lives is bullshit?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t want to get into stuff now.”

“No. You never do. If not now, when?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well I do know. Now. We have to talk now.”

And then he tried to get to the bottom of it. Her distance and coldness, the way she recoiled at his touch, no matter how gentle, the way she would light up in the presence of others and go dark for him. To all his questions, she said, without passion or malice, “I don’t know.” Until he found the right question.

“Have you been looking at other guys?”

“No,” she said. “Not actively.”

“Not actively? What the hell does that mean? You’re passively sizing up new sex partners? If you met the right guy you would passively fuck him in front of my face?”

“Calm down. I haven’t done anything.”

“But you would.”

“Of course not.”

“Bullshit.”

“I wouldn’t. But this has been hard for me, too. I miss passion. I miss intimacy.”

And what set him off was the pathos in her voice. She could not let him near her, and it was breaking her heart. He was the victim and the oppressor all wrapped in one rapidly aging thirty-five year old body.

“I’ll bet it’s been fucking hard,” he said.

He stood up, and Melody tensed. He looked at the wine glass in his hand, then at her face, beautiful in its hurt. Roger felt a flutter in his stomach, then a pulsation up and down his arm. He strode, with urgency but without hurry, to the kitchen and rocketed the glass toward the wall above the sink. The crystal tinkled against the drywall and seemed to suspend for a moment before plunking into the dishwasher. For five seconds, Roger stared at the wine dripping down, so cliché and suggestive against the white wall. He could feel Melody standing at a safe distance behind him.

“If you touch anything else, I’m calling the police.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll be long gone before they get here.” Then he went to the bedroom to get the suitcase.

The glass throwing had mainly been for show. After all, he'd had the wherewithal to go into the kitchen and aim toward the sink, to minimize the mess. In his teens and twenties, Roger had left holes in the drywall of a number of rooms, always in response to romantic frustrations, but he had so far controlled himself in his marriage. He knew Melody, dedicated to calm and poise, would not tolerate anything more aggressive than a raised voice. Tonight was the first time he'd broken anything in Melody's presence. She had, after all, crossed a line.

Walking out to sleep at a sleazy motel was not for show. It was a wresting of control. He had seen the place every day on his way to work in Mount Vernon and knew it would serve perfectly as his bottom. If he could survive a night here, he would start to bounce back up. He would wake up and much of his old life, with its warm and snug sense of certainty, would be restored. Melody would see the errors of her ways, miss him terrible and want him to come from work early so they could start making up for last time.

In the meanwhile, he had a nearly full packet of tissues and a porn channel. He would use all available resources to get through the night.

He was just finished with round two, thinking his body might be ready for sleep, when his phone buzzed in his pocket. It was his mother. For the past few weeks, ever since he let slip that his marriage was going through "a rough patch," she'd been calling at least once a day. Though he hated to admit it, he liked the attention. But not tonight. What would he say? "Hi, mom, can't talk, I'm in sort of

solitary confinement in a room that's usually rented by the hour." And then he'd have to tell her the rest. Or lie. Better to just let the phone ring.

He wanted a drink. He'd thought to bring the half a bottle of Jack Daniels along, but this was the wrong symbol. It would have diminished the controlled fury of his exit.

But a nip or two sure would not hurt right now. Who was he kidding pretending he did not want pity, even if he had to provide it himself? He could probably find a liquor store not too far away. That was one thing you could count on in urban America. But he had made a vow, of sorts, not to leave the room. It was to be the womb from which he would exit, reborn, into a healthy marriage. If he left to soon, he would find merely a dark parking lot on a desolate strip of Yonkers Avenue, miles from anywhere lively enough even to be called depressing.

He also regretted not bringing a book. He'd ejaculated out much of his anger and anxiety, and his brain was crying out for stimulation. The TV would have to do. He slipped through a bunch of public access channels and settled on the local news. The story was about a Bronx family whose home had burned down. The children thank goodness, were safe, but the dog was unaccounted for and everything they owned was decimated. Roger not need feel sorry for the victims, crying in front of the smoldering remains of the house. No, he envied them. Their losses were tangible. Their suffering was newsworthy.

Roger flipped through channels until arrived back at the pornography. Now it was featuring two women, a skinny brunette and plump redhead, advertising an

escort service. The number was on the screen. Roger could call. This would be fine revenge, indeed, and if he were ever to avail himself of a hooker, this would be the night. But he didn't call, not because he knew it would leave him empty and lonely, but because it would violate the solemn, penitent spirit of the night.

He turned off the TV, tossed the bedspread on the floor and lay on his back, momentarily wondering if they washed the sheets in this place. Staring up at splotch of light on the ceiling and listening to a siren fading away, Roger fell asleep.

The phone was ringing. Roger instinctively reached for the bedside table, smacked the lamp, then fumbled around only to remember he'd left the phone on the bed after his mother called. He grabbed it, but too late to answer. It said "Melody." The time was 3 a.m. His heart, more awake than his brain, leapt at the possibility that she had called to apologize, suddenly, horrifyingly aware of her coldness and unfairness. She would ask him to please come home because she could not sleep without him holding her.

Then his brain came around and told the heart to take it down a couple notches. More likely, she needed something. Frankie had a high fever or the carbon monoxide alarm had gone off. Or, at best, she was worried and wanted to make sure he hadn't gotten himself into trouble. If it were an emergency, she would call again. If it was just to check on him, fuck her, she could wait. And if it was what his heart said, better to leave well enough alone.

But he could not fall back asleep. The air felt liquid thick and he thought he heard a buzzing coming from the walls. Roger remembered the time a cricket had

ended up in their bedroom during their honeymoon in Puerto Rico. They'd been making love and Melody had fallen quickly asleep, as she always did. The sound was unbearably loud and shrill and seemed to come from everywhere. Roger listened through the pain enough to approximate the cricket's location. Then, just as he was about to get out of bed, naked, limp and covered in their mutual dried sweat, the cricket would stop. He'd lay back down, drape his arm over Melody, whose body nestled into his, and almost fall asleep when it started again, thirty fingernails on chalkboards right in his here. After the seventh round of this, Roger got serious, turned on the light and hunted for the little green fucker until he found it just outside the bathroom. He could have let it out the window to join its cricket brethren in song, but he wanted to send a message to all the would-be sleep disturbers of the world, so he crushed it between thumb and forefinger and tossed the carcass in the toilet. He glanced toward Melody, suddenly afraid she'd been watching, but she had slept through it all.

In Room 214 the buzzing grew louder, like a slow gathering swarm of wasps. Roger rolled off the bed to see if he could locate the source, but the closer he got to the wall the fainter the sound became. When he stepped back, it grew louder. He tried approaching the wall at various points around the room, but each time the effect was the same. Roger lay down on the floor to see if it was vibrating, but down there, all was silent. Roger stood up and lay on his back on the bed, trying to listen to his breathing, following the advice of the soft-voice man on Melody's guided meditation CD's: breathe in, breathe out, push aside all thoughts. But the breathing

was drowned out by the noise: thousands of wasps, a giant's weed whacker, a tone-deaf whisky-voiced soprano screeching arias just for him.

The sound, Roger knew, was not coming from the walls or from the floor or from outside. It came from inside himself. He was not hallucinating, simply processing too much information at once. And since he could not silence the sound or ignore it, he tried to drown it out. He put a pillow over his head and moaned, long and deep, like a cow in labor. The moaning felt righteous, it drowned out the other noise, and Roger thought, with a flicker of hope, that in this sweet guttural despair he could fall asleep. He could wake up in silence and peek outside, see a nearly empty parking lot and hear the morning traffic building on the highways. Roger would get himself as clean as he could with a small bar of body soap, put on clean boxers, and get back his fifteen dollars for the remote. He had no need for souvenirs.

Saul and the Man in White

Saul Levy, wearing gym shorts and a sweat-darkened tank top locked his bike to a lamppost outside the Judaica store in Kew Garden Hills. On the Main Street sidewalk, women in long skirts and headscarves were herding children into bakeries, grocery stores and kosher restaurants. There were no men in sight.

Saul had come to buy a gift for his fiancée, Pauline, who was about to complete the process of converting to Judaism. Her decision, when she announced it about a year ago, had filled Saul with equal parts gratitude and awe. It was the single greatest act of devotion anyone had ever committed on his behalf. Although Pauline had found much that she loved in Judaism, she was converting first and foremost for Saul, out of a desire to be more a part of his world. Saul found this ironic, for he did not feel himself part of any world whatsoever. He was certainly not part of the world in which he had come to shop. He called this part of town, dominated by ultra Orthodox families “the shtetl.” The people—the bulk of them, anyway--lived in strict accordance Jewish law and tradition and the social mores of nineteenth century Europe, but with far more shopping and dining options.

Saul was not exactly a “twice a year” Jew, a reference to those who only went to synagogue on the High Holidays. He was more like a ten times a year Jew. He dragged himself to the occasional Shabbat service because it made him feel grounded, that he was part of something bigger than his own struggles to make ends meet and maintain a modicum of self-respect. Since meeting Pauline, he was going more often, usually at her request. He neither loved nor hated the experience.

Praying for him had about the same effect as going to a spinning class. He did look forward to it, found it tedious and mildly unpleasant but left feeling better about himself. He never went two weeks in a row. This would have brought him too close to embracing a world view at odds with his hard-earned rational cynicism. The notion of omnipotent, eternal, vengeful and merciful God with a special love for the descendants of Abraham was fun to consider but impossible to embrace.

When he entered the store, Saul found about twenty men, some in slacks and button down shirts, some in black suits and black hats, facing the street. They were holding prayer books, mouthing words, chanting, shucking, bowing. Saul had walked smack dab into the middle of *mincha*, the afternoon prayers. It was not the orchestrated, orderly method of prayer to which he was accustomed. The Orthodox prayed together but alone, expertly, fast and furious.

His first instinct was slip quietly out of the store and return in a few minutes, when the prayers would be finished. He would feel awkward just standing there, sweating in his gym clothes and even more awkward browsing the store shelves, while everyone else was communing with God. But he made himself stay. He should have to sneak out like a thief. This was a retail store, not a *beis midrash*. And he was, after all, a Jew, though he did not practice as these men did.

As he was mulling over his options, he heard a voice from behind.

“Here, take my *siddur*.”

Saul turned and saw a short, pink-faced man with a long beard wearing a white linen suit and a gleaming white *kippah*. Saul did not remember seeing the

man when he came in, which was curious, since the man was standing very near the entrance.

“No, that’s OK. I’m just here to buy a gift for somebody,” Saul said.

“You are not a Jew?” the man said.

“Yes,” Saul said. “But . . .”

“You are going to say, ‘but I don’t usually *daven*.’”

“Yes. And I just came from the gym and am pretty sweaty, and the prayers are already half finished.”

The man nodded in silence for several seconds before speaking. “God will always welcome your prayers, no matter when you start.”

The man’s voice wielded compassion and reverence. The white suit and long white beard gave him an aura of mystery and spirituality, like a prophet visiting from a long bygone era. Saul was familiar with many stories of Elijah, always dressed in white, showing up in moments of crisis to perform acts of kindness. But Saul was not facing a crisis, merely a moment of awkwardness. Surely the man in white was a mere mortal.

Saul tuned into the men chanting, muttering, sputtering, sighing, and bowing. He both envied and dreaded their air-quivering fervent devotion. He recognized snippets of prayer, but it was all happening so fast. Saul thought about the time he had found himself, by an accident of circumstance, paired up with a college tennis player, rather than one of the middling intermediates with whom he usually hit. Same game, twice the speed and power. Saul could only get his racket on one of three shots, soon found himself with legs numb, lungs burning, on the verge of tears.

These men, who had prayed three times a day since childhood, were equally out of his league when it came to prayer.

But the man in white continued to hold out his prayer book until his arm started to shake, and Saul could not in good conscience refuse any longer. He took the book with a forced smile. Thinking that using his bike helmet as a head covering would be, at best, in poor taste, he grabbed a small black *kippah* from a shelf behind him. He would have to buy it, of course, once it had been on his sweaty head.

The *daveners* had reached the *amidah*, the nineteen blessing spoken silently to whomever or whatever was listening. The *siddur* was only Hebrew with no vowels. Saul's Hebrew reading was clunky, and his knowledge of the prayers was fragmented. So he moved his finger along the page, hoping he appeared to know what he was doing, bowed when he saw the other men bow. He occasionally glanced at the man in white, who was deep in prayer, without the aid of the book.

If Saul could only find the right page in the *siddur*, he would recognize some of the words and could fake his way through to the end. But there were no headings, no page numbers, much less a table of contents. He flipped through the pages frantically, feeling more and more lost and defeated. He felt like quitting, tossing the book back to the man and saying, "Sorry, I tried, but this isn't me. These guys have been feel these prayers deep in their hearts, while I've only ever dabbled in Jewish tradition, and I don't know what most of these words mean, and I feel nothing when I say them. And if I did feel something, I'd be terrified."

Then he glanced again at the man in white.

Although the man was facing the street, Saul felt he was looking at him the whole time, urging and comforting.

So instead of quitting, Saul decided to try a little harder. After all, amidst the gasping and stumbling, he had managed to hit one wicked forehand, heavy with topspin, past that college kid. He stopped looking at the book and started to pray silently, trying to tune into a voice inside that said, "This is your tradition, these are your people, praying to your God, who is everyone's God. Just accept this as true, for the moment."

He was still trying to tune into that frequency when a tall man in a black suit standing to Saul's left read the Mourner's Kaddish in a booming voice, which everyone punctuated with an "Amen," and then the prayers were done. The spiritual fervor dissipated immediately. Some of the men pulled out cell phones and started texting or talking. A couple started browsing the shelves. Most of them just left without a word. Contemporary life had resumed.

Saul scanned the room, taking in the shelves full of kiddish cups, candle sticks, hand-washing chalices, Challah covers and cutting boards, havdallah sets and menorah's, some made of glass, some silver plated, some ceramic, none of them delicate or subtle or, by Saul's standards, beautiful, but all of them insinuating a life sanctified and circumscribed by tradition. The boundaries were both comforting and revolting.

He looked at the wall shelves lined with books of Talmud, Torah commentary, *kabbalah*, biographies of Jewish sages and saints, and his heart sank at the realization of all that he did not know of his heritage. To even scratch the surface

would take years of study. He could learn, at least a little. Maybe Pauline, eager to be immersed in Jewish life, would encourage him. Then again maybe her conversion would make him more complacent. *I've brought another member into the tribe. Isn't that enough?* And perhaps he did not want to embrace these traditions, only to know them well enough to reject them with peace of mind.

Saul remembered the *siddur* in his hand. He turned to give it back to its owner. But the man in white was gone.

Saul took the prayer book to a man behind the counter.

"Somebody loaned this to me and disappeared before I could give it back. I can leave it with you in case he comes back."

"I believe you were meant to keep it," the clerk said.

"This is something that happens regularly?" Saul asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean a holy man in white magically appears and gets a skeptical Jew to pray, then disappears. And this book will be a reminder of what I've experienced and will steer me toward a path of greater observance and devotion. I've read stories like this. And now I'm the protagonist."

The clerk raised an eyebrow.

"But I don't feel transformed, if that's what you're thinking."

Silence.

"So if it's all the same to you, I'd like to leave the book here and not have to put it in my bag with my sweaty towel."

The man behind the counter nodded and smiled. "I think you were meant to keep the *siddur*."

"There's a lot of nodding and silent acknowledgement of mysterious truths going on around here," Saul said. "Too much for my taste, frankly. Next you're going to tell me to step outside and I'll actually be in Jerusalem. That's how these things tend to go, right?"

"No," the man said. "You'll still be in Queens."

"So what's with the 'you were meant to keep that *siddur*' bit? Did the man in white tell you to say that?"

"I never saw a man in white," the clerk said. "But if a devout Jew handed you a *siddur* and left without it, he probably wanted you to keep it. He wouldn't have forgotten it."

"But a man in a white suit handed it to me," Saul said. "Are you saying I imagined that? Because if there was no man in a white suit, how did I end up with this prayer book in my hand?"

The man shrugged. "Many things happen every day that we can't explain. It's just that most of these things we don't notice."

"You are very wise and mystical for a store clerk," Saul said.

"It's good for business," the man said. "So what was it you came for?"

"A mezuzah," Saul said, taking a deep breath. "For my fiancée. She's converting." After a moment of silence, Saul added, "*Baruch HaShem*." Praise God. The words felt strange in his mouth, and his own voice seemed to come from far away.

The man behind the counter smiled and swept his arm across the display of mezuzah's behind him. Saul fretted over his choice for several minutes before choosing one made of wood, decorated with images of Jerusalem. He paid for it, along with the scroll to put inside, waited while the clerk wrapped it, then left the store.

As he stepped outside, he turned around, half expecting to see the store front transformed into the Holy Temple, but all he saw was the same old sign: Judaica Gifts. The *siddur* was in his left hand, the gift in his right. He put both in the front pocket of his backpack, so they wouldn't touch his sweaty towel, then got on his bike and started the uphill journey home.

Speechless

Emil was hiding from Marisol. She was after him.

Even if he had the tools to communicate, Emil would not know what to say. He had run away, panicked, back to the party to find sweet Mindy, who would console him, take away the shame. He considered washing his hands, in case the smell was as obvious to everyone else as it was to him. He had never had his fingers inside a girl before. The smell was not, as lacrosse-team lore had it, fishy. It was more like sweet clay. Marisol, too, with her reddish hue, was like sweet clay. He had put some dimples in the surface, but he would sculpt no further. She was flying back to Costa Rica tomorrow.

Marisol was one of ten Ticos and Ticas who had come on a two-week exchange program in early January to Greensboro, North Carolina. Their summer break was in December. Some kids from Grimsley High would go to Costa Rica in July, during the Costa Ricans' winter break. Marisol expected Emil to be one of them. He had been planning on it himself, but now he was afraid to even consider it.

One of the Ticos, David (Dah-veed), was staying with Emil's family. David was a Vulcan-eared ravenous imp who ate everything in sight, even the boxes of candy he had brought the host family as a gift. Within three days Emil's mother started asking, "How much longer do I have to keep feeding this thing?" Emil had hoped his guest would help him improve his Spanish, but since David's only interests, besides food, were video games and *manga*, they did not have much to talk about.

Emil hardly even registered Marisol's presence for the first week. His eyes were too focused on Irina, lanky with rosebud breasts and flying saucer eyes, hips ever ready to twitch. But those big eyes looked right past Emil, even when he mustered the courage to fake-salsa dance with her at one of the visitor-host gatherings. She had a serious *novio* back home, said David. *Chingate, Dah-veed.*

Marisol was short, broad-shouldered and muscular, full in the chest, with a square but delicate jaw, button nose and perfect teeth. She was on the Costa Rican national swim team, had a chance to be in the Barcelona Olympics. Also, she was stone deaf. Her speech was clipped and throaty, mostly incomprehensible, especially to somebody with a B minus in Spanish III.

Emil first became entangled with Marisol for the first time the night of the snow storm, a week into the visit. The whole gang, eight Americans and eight Costa Ricans in all, were gathered at Mindy Jones' house for pizza and a movie. When the first flakes appeared, the exchange students screamed and ran outside. They had never seen snow before. It accumulated quickly. Marisol was trying to get the powder to stick together into a ball, kicking at the ground each time the ball fell apart. The snow was too dry. Emil, eager to assert his manly gringo competence, came over to help, managed to form a small ball, but it, too, fell apart when he put it on the ground.

They switched to sledding. Marisol climbed into the plastic sled behind Emil five times, each time managing to land on top of him when the sled overturned at the bottom of the hill. It was not a steep hill. She was making it tip. Emil liked the compact solidity of her body on top of his. But who was she?

Inside the house, waiting for water to boil for hot chocolate, Marisol's friend and interpreter, Lydia, pulled Emil aside.

"Marisol likes you."

"Quien es Marisol," Emil said.

"My friend there." Lydia pointed. "The one who was all over you outside."

"Entiendo. Ella esta sorda, no?"

"Completely. But I help you talk to her."

"Puedes hablar ... como se dice ... con los manos?"

"Yes, I speak sign language. In Spanish and English"

"Cool. Por que tu ingles esta tanto bueno?"

"My mother is American."

"Well, I feel like a jackass."

"Don't. You're cute when you try to speak Spanish." She smiled and patted him on the head.

When everyone went into the den to watch *Breakfast Club* on the Jones' 26-inch Zenith, Marisol gestured for Emil to sit next to her. He slid over, hoping nobody saw. Then she wanted him to lie down with head in her lap. She expressed this pointing to his head, then her legs, then gently pulling him downward. Emil tensed. He did not want Irina to see him with another girl. She would not be jealous, which was exactly the problem. And what would everyone think if he got involved with a deaf girl? Emil was already dangerously close to being seen as weird.

Emil did not like to base his decisions on other people's opinions, had in fact made a conscious decision at the beginning of high school to be his own man, regardless. He did not want to look back ten years later and wish he had shown some character, resisted conformity. But relationships were another matter. They defined the way others judged you and the way you judged yourself.

He glanced at Marisol. She made sad eyes at him before he could look away. He could not do this to the girl. He put his head in her lap. She immediately began playing with his hair, caressing his face, putting a finger in his ear. Emil liked it but fought the pleasure.

At the point in the movie when the kids in Saturday detention start smoking a joint, Emil got up to use the bathroom. Marisol followed him all the way to the bathroom door. He pointed inside, indicating that he was going in for private business. She grabbed his head and kissed him, driving her tongue deep into his mouth. Emil had kissed a girl a couple times before, but those were tentative, limp-tongued exchanges. Marisol's assertiveness was something new, a jolt to the system. He wasn't sure what to do with his tongue. Girls were a puzzle, generally speaking. A deaf Costa Rican Olympic swimmer, now that was a conundrum. He decided to go ahead and use his tongue with equal vigor. She moaned softly. Emil pulled himself away, gently, and went into the bathroom.

The following Monday, Marisol and Muria found David in the courtyard outside the cafeteria near the end of lunch period.

“Marisol wants to know if you have a girlfriend,” Lydia said.

“No,” Emil said.

“Well, you do now,” Lydia said, turning toward Marisol.

Marisol gave Emil a smile that made his skin prickle. The smile said, “I want you. Completely.”

“I have to use the restroom,” Lydia said. She didn’t, of course.

Marisol pulled out a small notebook and wrote, “Te quiero mucho, Emil.”

He took the notebook and pen from her and turned toward a nearby table to use as a writing surface. She grabbed his head and turned it toward her, pointed down at the notebook. He understood. She wanted him to write in front of her. This was a conversation, not a passing of notes.

“Te quiero, tambien,” he wrote. As long as the conversation was limited to three and four word sentences, he would be OK.

“Estoy triste porque casi no pasamos tiempo juntos. Hay que aprovecharlo,” she wrote.

“Si,” he wrote. Did his inner conflict show up in his handwriting?

“Te quiero ver en la noche.”

“No es possible,” he wrote. He had lacrosse practice, then homework, plus she was staying with Larry Sumner, who lived far away. And what would they do, anyway? Write a conversation in the dark?

Marisol frowned. She was not going to press him on the issue. He was grateful. And he hated himself.

At camp the previous summer, Emil had followed Courtney Germaine around for three weeks straight. She never tried to get rid of him, but she never showed the least interest. On the second to last night, he found her making out with Gary Snodgrass, who had his hands in her shirt. Emil watched for a minute, then forced himself to leave. He resumed following her the next day. He would go to great lengths for a girl who did not want him. For somebody who did want him, there was always an excuse.

Emil grabbed the pen from Marisol's hand.

"Pero tenemos la fiesta en la casa de Ernie el miercoles!"

At this she smiled, then locked her lips onto his. He kissed her back, hard, keeping one eye open to make sure nobody was watching.

At home, David gave Emil a wry smile and said, "Estas contento con tu novia?"

Emil shrugged.

"El cuento es . . ."

Emil held up his hand to ask for silence. He did not want any gossip about her.

"Bien." He made a lip zipping motion. "Marisol no es tan bonita como Irina, pero . . ."

"Chingate, David."

He'd meant to think it, not say it. David's eyes went wide for a moment, but he quickly reverted to the wry smile. Then he went to the cupboard to rummage for candy.

In Spanish class the next day Mindy, in her New Jersey accent, was full of questions. If not for her nasal voice and conspicuous bleached upper-lip hair, Emil would have found her attractive. Or maybe he did find her attractive but was determined to find reasons not to. In any event, she was kind to him. Perhaps it was because she had only moved to Greensboro last year, ignorant of the local social codes, one of which said that there were way cooler kids than Emil to befriend.

"How do like it with that deaf girl?" she whispered. The class was doing a review worksheet while Senior Mendes graded papers.

"It's a little awkward," said Emil.

"I think it's cute," she said.

"Cute? What does that mean?"

"It's cute that you have a girlfriend. You're so sweet and shy."

Senior Mendes looked their direction. They shut up until his head was back down.

"I'm not that sweet," Emil said.

"You're sweeter than most guys. I bet you know how to treat a girl right."

"Sure. I guess."

"But you probably drive them crazy. Mysterious quiet type."

"You say so."

In fact, Emil kept quiet because he did not think anyone cared to hear his voice. Being ignored was better than being disliked. Emil thought there were worse things than being ignored. He avoided crowds, hated parties, sat alone when the lacrosse team rode to away games, while everybody else sat in the back talking about beer and pussy and sticking their nude asses out the window. Emil liked the idea of being part of the gang, but he could not summon the bravado to participate in the rituals. And nobody ever asked him to. He wondered what life was like on the girls' lacrosse team bus.

The past couple years, he had noticed girls looking his way fairly often, but always the plain looking scholarly types, never anyone with social status. Emil didn't necessarily want to date a popular girl. He just wanted to be wanted by one of them. He hid from the girls that liked him, saved his sexual curiosities for summer camp, where any transgressions would be a secret between him and the trees.

"You be careful with that girl, Emil. She could get you into all kinds of trouble." Mindy tapped Emil's head with her pencil.

Emil was suddenly a shifting between his legs. He looked down. Baggy jeans, thank goodness. His loins and his better nature were not on the same page these days. He wondered, though, at this arousal. Was it from the mention of Marisol or Mindy's talking and tapping?

Emil and David and Mindy and her Tica, Carlota, arrived at Ernie's party before Marisol and Lydia, who were both staying with Ellen Stevens. David and

Carlota started playing cards and Emil and Mindy started chatting by the fruit punch and ridged potato chips.

“You anxious to see your little *sordita*?” Mindy said.

“She has a name. And you shouldn’t label people by their disabilities. Didn’t they teach you this stuff in New Jersey?”

“I was absent that day. Anyway, I’m just teasing. I think it’s adorable.”

“That’s she’s deaf?”

“That you don’t care that she’s deaf.”

“Well, it makes communication a little awkward. But talking with girls is always awkward. Right?”

“You don’t seem awkward to me.”

“That’s different.”

“What do you mean?” Mindy’s face was scrunched.

“I don’t know. You don’t make me nervous.”

“Because you’re not so into me, right?”

Emil held his breath.

“It’s OK. I can live with that.”

“Mindy . . .”

“Relax. It’s fine. I’m your friend.”

“OK. To friends, then.” They clicked their plastic juice cups together.

Emil was about to try the onion dip when Marisol entered, walked right toward him, gave Mindy a brief death stare, and took Emil by the hand.

“Quien es la chica?” she wrote. They were standing in the hallway near the bathroom. Emil thought about the last time they met outside a bathroom. She had been happier then.

“Se llama Mindy.”

She yanked the pen from his hand. “Ya se su nombre. Quien es a ti? Quieres a ella?”

“Una amiga. Nada mas. No sea celosa.” Did he just use the subjunctive correctly?

“De veras?” she wrote.

“Claro,” he wrote.

“OK,” she wrote.

Then she put her arms around him and squeezed. His chin pressed against her shoulder, her breasts pressed against his midsection. He felt himself getting even harder than he had been in Spanish class. He breathed in the citrus smell of her hair, bit her ear. He felt her breath speed up. Then there were footsteps. He jumped back.

“Hola Emil y Marisol.” Here indeed was Senior Mendes, after all. He signed something to Marisol. She smiled and signed back. Senior Mendes went into the bathroom. Marisol pointed his direction and circled her finger around her ear. Crazy. Loco. They both laughed, then went back to the living room holding hands.

When Emil noticed Mindy looking at them, he let go of Marisol’s hand. When they sat down on the couch, Marisol started signing with Lydia and Mindy was

practicing her Spanglish with a few of the Ticos. Emil sat and breathed with relative ease. He had never been so glad to be left alone. It was a lot of pressure, being wanted. After a few minutes he snuck off the couch checked to see if the punch had been spiked yet. Emil was not much of a drinker, but right now getting buzzed seemed like as good an idea as anything else. No luck, though. Still just fruit punch.

Emil looked over at the sofa he had abandoned. Mindy, Lydia and Marisol were having a three-way conversation. Marisol was signing to Mindy, and Lydia was translating. Were they fighting? No, everyone was smiling. Were they laughing about him? He wanted to go over and find out, but this would seem desperate. So he just watched.

Suddenly Mindy noticed him watching and called him over. He went.

“You shouldn’t leave your woman alone like that,” Mindy said, pinching his arm.

“Why? You going to steal her from me?”

Mindy blushed.

“That was just a joke,” Emil said. “I wasn’t thinking...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mindy said. “She really likes you. You need to spend time with her.” Mindy and Lydia went off.

Marisol and Emil started writing.

“Vas a venir a Costa Rica en el verano?” she wrote.

“No se.”

She drew a frowny face.

“No dije ‘no,’ he wrote. “Solo es que no tengo plans yet.”

“No quiero vivir sin verte,” she wrote.

What the hell was he supposed to say to that? Did she want to get married?

“Voy a tratar,” he wrote. This was the best escape he could come up with.

Then he drew a tic tac toe board.

Three O's and two X's into the second game, she put her pen down. She grabbed Emil's hand and took him down the hallway, past the bathroom and out a back door. How did she know the house's layout? On the back patio they made out. Emil did very little with his hands. He was self-conscious, with so many people, including his Spanish teacher, inside. Nonetheless, after a couple minutes he had to pull away to avoid ejaculating.

He thought of the first time he had come while awake, about two years ago, watching soft porn on a premium cable channel, with cameras sweeping over dimly lit bodies, hovering over the breast and hips just long enough to make you want to freeze time and dive into the picture to reach for the concealed parts. He was alone in the house. He wasn't touching himself, but something took over, caused a delicious tremor, left a gluey pool his boxers. He ran to the bathroom, panicked. He knew this was natural, but it felt so uncontrolled, automated. He loved and feared the release. After that he took to masturbating frequently in order to gain control over the whole affair. But if you were dreaming, all bets were off. And if you were with a girl who wanted to crawl inside you, so much could go so wrong. What would he do if he had to reenter the party with that sticky mass in his pants?

There was one more get together on Friday night, at Mindy's house, before the Costa Ricans flew home Saturday. Emil did not see Marisol in school Thursday or Friday because the Ticos and Ticas went shopping Thursday and sight-seeing in Cleveland on Friday. In a week-long relationship, two days is a long time. Emil wondered if he'd even recognize Marisol when he saw her.

He fought with himself about whether to look forward to the party. At times, he pictures himself in Marisol's embrace, exploring her in ways he had never explored anyone, living out one of his Showtime adult feature fantasies. And then she would be on a plane, taking all the consequences with her. He could sort of imagine Marisol exploring him, going to the places the movie camera would not. The thought made him shudder with excitement and terror.

At other moments, he chided himself for even having such thoughts. He was using the girl. There was nothing between them but physical sensation. She wanted more from him, a connection but he could not fathom her silent world, just as she could not fathom his noisy one.

On the other hand, she had been the instigator.

Emil and David arrived at the party early. Emil had built in extra driving time because he tended to get lost, but he did not get lost. They helped Mindy and her mother put snacks in bowls, lay down tablecloth and move furniture. The living room was to be a dance floor.

"So you can dance with your amor," Mindy said.

Emil sighed.

Mindy was wearing a flower-print dress, not the usual blue jeans and Bon Jovi sweatshirt. Her chest was larger than Emil had realized. The hair above her lip was gone. Wax? Magic? Did she do this for him? He liked this notion.

“Can I be honest with you?” Mindy said.

“OK.”

“I think you really like that girl but won’t admit it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Emil said. “She’s leaving tomorrow.”

“You sound sad.”

“I don’t feel sad.”

“You should.”

“OK. I’ll try to get sad. Because you said so.”

“If I were you,” Mindy said, gently holding Emil’s hand, “I would make the most of this evening. Don’t live with regrets.”

“Sure,” Emil said. He liked the way she held his hand. Like she was glad to hold it but could easily let go.

Marisol and Lydia were the next guests to arrive. Lydia gave him a warm smile and a kiss on the cheek, then disappeared. Marisol was wearing a short dress, without stockings. Why wasn’t she shivering with cold? She came to Emil, hugged him and started kissing him right there in the living room. Apparently she did not care who saw. Emil was sure everyone was watching and pulled back.

She spent the evening holding Emil’s hand as if it belonged to her. She stood by him as he engaged in one awkward conversation after another.

At one point David punched him on the arm, made fucking motions with his hips. *Chingate, David.* What did that pipsqueak know about sex?

Then again, what did Emil know about sex?

Emil tried to keep tabs on Mindy, who seemed very happy conversation hopping. He did not want her, but he felt a need to keep tabs on her. Marisol he wanted in spite of himself. He thought of faking an illness so he could go home, avoid any and all messiness, resume his normal, uncomplicated life. But he would have to explain himself to Marisol, and he could not even explain himself to himself. So he kept handholding and mumbling small talk.

At 9:15, a few of the Costa Ricans and hosts were starting to salsa. Emil spotted Irina in the mix, but did not feel the usual pang. He was too full of the scent of Marisol, citrus, flowers and warm earth. He took her toward the front door, without a single sound or gesture. The action was not conscious, but it was assertive. Something in him wanted to make this happen, now.

Outside in the driveway, an automatic light on the garage, blinding, went on. They both squinted and moved to the side of the house, where there was a bit of grass between the side of the garage and the fence between properties. They started kissing, lips grabbing at each other, tongues pushing and shoving. Then Emil's hands started to twitch, and this time he did not restrain them. He unbuttoned her shirt halfway, reached in. She put his hands up his shirt. The skin on her hands was soft. He grew bold. He put his hand under the short dress, squeezed her butt. It gave resistance. This excited him. He reached around to the front, to a finger inside her underwear, felt a bit of wetness. She moaned, then reached down in his pants.

He gasped, and it was over.

She pulled her hand out, wiped on the side on the side of the garage, started kissing his neck. Emil wiped his hand on the back of his jeans and slowly backing away.

She grabbed his hand, he pulled it back.

Then he was running inside. He had to find a sink to wash all this off. It was all so terribly wrong. He should not have wanted her, should not have let her want him. Now they were bound by bodily fluid. She had a claim to him. He had let something loose that could not be put back.

Don't be a dumbass, Emil! This was supposed to be a moment of triumph, getting his semen onto a girl's hand, the kind of thing you're supposed to describe in grotesque detail during stretches lacrosse practice. But instead Emil felt a nauseating guilt, a fracturing. He had taken a step toward somewhere he did not want to be and could not go back.

He stumbled upon Mindy before he could get to a sink. Could she smell it?

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You're pale. You look like you're about to pass out."

"It's just. Oh, never mind," he said.

"No, tell me." She took his hand. That same hand. If only she knew.

"I did something."

"You killed Marisol?"

"No, of course not. I just, I did things, I don't know. I did too much."

“You had sex? That fast?”

“No.”

“So what’s the big deal?”

“I don’t know.”

“Whatever you did, you’d better find that girl before she finds you.”

“Help?”

Mindy shook her head.

Emil went toward the bathroom, but before he made it here he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, and there was Marisol, eyes wide with bewilderment.

She pulled him toward her, squeezed. He did not have the heart to pull away. She would want to know why he had run off, and he could not possibly tell her. He could not even explain it to himself.

She started to pull him toward the front of the house. She wanted more of him. He pointed to the bathroom. He went in, washed his hands, wondered. If he stayed in there an hour, would Marisol wait? Probably.

He was only in the bathroom a couple minutes, but when he came out, she was gone.

He looked for her, but could not find her. He passed by David, who said, “Tu novia se fue.”

“Adonde se fue?”

David shrugged.

Emil ran to the front door. He noticed Mindy dancing with one of the Ticos. He wanted to trade places with him. He had no desire in him at this moment, for Mindy or anybody else, but he did not want anybody else to want Mindy or for her to want anyone. But all this would have to wait.

Maybe Marisol would be in the spot beside the garage. He went. She wasn't there. She was nowhere outside. He was relieved and shattered. He wanted her to be gone but wanted her beside him. He wanted her forever and never. He went back inside.

Mindy found him.

"Marisol and Lydia left all of a sudden. They looked upset. What the hell did you do?"

"Nothing. I did nothing."

And for the most part, this was true.

Michael Chesapeake considered the two roads ahead of him.

On one, his life continued more or less as he had known it for the past two years. The defining feature of those two years was Linda. Linda was, like Michael, 40 years old. She was beautiful, in a plain way, light on her feet, soft spoken, kind-hearted and patient almost to the point of absurdity. Privately, Michael had nicknamed her "Forbearance." Were Linda to find out about this pet name, she would almost certainly take it with, well, forbearance.

The other road, lit up as far as the eye could see with Vegas-worthy neon excess, was one of mystery, the thrill of the unknown, and the promise of something like eternal youth. The guide down this path, should he choose it, would be Vanessa, a fellow participant in Michael's writing workshop, which met once a week in downtown Manhattan.

Vanessa was 25, short and stocky, athletic, twitchy and radiant with youthful ambition. She was less pretty than Linda, but fifteen years was worth a lot. Michael, though not yet in a full-blown midlife crisis, could not get out of his head the idea of being with somebody who would always have more years to enjoy life than he did. Sure, he was in great shape at 40, but what about when he hit 50? At that point, wouldn't being with a 35 year old give him a needed boost?

Vanessa was not a very good writer, nor did she show any promise of becoming a good writer. Whereas Michael's work was raw but vivid and eccentric, Vanessa wrote like a modestly gifted eighth grader.

Michael was surprised at himself for being attracted to someone not only lacking in talent but also apparently unaware of her lack of talent.

"Did you like my story?" she asked after her first story had been read and critiqued, a month into the workshop. Michael had casually (he hoped) asked her to get coffee with him.

"I stand by what I said in class," Michael said. "You have a good concept."

"In other words, you don't like my writing," she said.

"I wouldn't go that far. It could use some polishing."

And she bought it, no questions asked.

Michael realized that he held for Vanessa the allure of an older, wiser, mentor, just as she held for him the allure an eager pupil. The notion of a relationship with a student was creepy and thus arousing.

The potential thrill of Vanessa tormented Michael in the hours during and after the weekly class. At all other times, the road already travelled was perfectly satisfactory. Michael had always preferred comfort over drama.

He and Linda had both been divorced for several years. They could talk about their marriages without hesitation or awkwardness. The rightness of Linda helped Michael finally figured out what was wrong about his ex-wife. His wife had *needed* Michael's love, which made him reluctant to give it. Linda merely desired it, and he found he had a steady supply.

"Since I met you," he said to her once, "I feel like everything I've been through was leading me to you. I was on a path to somewhere great and didn't even know it."

She said nothing, but held him tight, kissed his forehead and said, "I love you."

Such luxurious balm, those words.

But happiness, Michael suspected, can easily become mundane. He expressed as much to his friend Jill over two-for-the-price-of-one happy hour margaritas.

“The problem,” he said, “is where do you go from there? From happiness, I mean.”

“I didn’t realize happiness was a place,” she said.

“It is. So is misery. I’ve lived in both places. The rent is cheaper in misery.”

“Well, yeah,” Jill said. “The rent is always cheaper in places that suck.”

She followed his metaphors better than anyone else he’d known. In fact, she understood him better than anyone else he’d known, which was precisely the reason he never wanted to be in a relationship with her. They’d flirted with that possibility, and with each other, on a few drunken occasions, but they’d never been naked together.

“The thing is,” he continued, “when I’m in misery, I know exactly what I want—I want to get out of there. And I don’t care where I end up, because anywhere else is better.”

“Especially happiness,” Jill said. “Which is where you are. So stop being an asshole about it. I’ve been living in what-the-fuck-ever-land for years. You want to trade places?”

“No,” he said. “I just don’t want live in happiness so long that I forget what anything else is like.”

“I see your point,” she said. “I didn’t appreciate Forest Hills until I spent a week in Cincinnati. We need contrast.”

“Something like that,” he said.

Though he gave himself plenty of reasons for taking the writing class, deep down Michael knew it was about the women he imagined--perky, bright-eyed and brilliant--cooing over Michael's quirky-yet-seductive prose. In the years since his divorce, Michael kept discovering that he appealed to twenty-something women in a way he never did when he was in his twenties himself.

"Paternal lust," Jill called it.

Michael, crestfallen, had countered, "Has it occurred to you that maybe I'm just a stud?"

"Yes, it's occurred to me," she said. "But there has to be another explanation."

Michael believed being in a committed relationship increased his appeal to other women.

"They can sense my unavailability," he said. "Forbidden is sexy."

"You'd better believe it," said Jill.

"But what if I made myself available? Would the magic fade?" he said.

"Yes, but maybe not right away."

"This is all just speculation, you realize. I don't have the heart to philander."

"I know," Jill said. "That's what I love about you."

He was always impeccably honest with Linda, down to the smallest detail. One night he cancelled dinner plans with Linda so he could go to trivia night at a local bar. "I'm sorry," he said. "I really need a dose of male camaraderie." In any previous relationship Michael would have come up with a plausible excuse, a lie. But with Linda, always the truth.

She accepted it without a hint of complaint.

“It’s important to have balance in our lives,” she said.

Michael worried he was becoming too good for his own good. He pictured himself devolving in a 1950’s TV dad, then further devolving, slowly but surely, into a smiling plastic bear, full of honey.

Michael’s second submission to the writing workshop got mixed reviews. The other two men in the class—neither seemed to be very serious about the craft of writing--found it hilarious. Only one of the women in the class liked it. The others found it “strange,” “confusing” or “a little offensive.” Vanessa declined to comment.

The story was about a man who joins a cooking class in order to meet women. The protagonist, Moses, is in a long-term relationship, feeling suffocated. He isn’t ready to break up with the woman, Beatrice, because he is afraid of being alone, a condition that often leads him to excessive drinking and other self-destructive behaviors. The cooking class is the perfect solution. Moses tells his girlfriend that he had always wanted to learn to cook (which was somewhat true) and that he is looking forward to making elegant meals for the two of them (also true). He does not tell her that he is hoping to meet someone younger and sexier.

Moses knew he was being immoral, and he hated himself for it. A few years ago, maybe even a few months ago, he would never have considered such a course of action. But since his mother’s cancer diagnosis, Moses felt pressured to do things quickly. He could not wait until his relationship with Beatrice became unbearable. He needed an exit strategy. Was taking a cooking class to meet

women the right thing to do? Of course not. Was it the only thing to do?

Check.

As it turns out, the cooking class is mostly made up of gay men, and rather than meeting the woman of his dreams, Moses is forced to question his sexuality. He ultimately concludes that he is, after all, mostly heterosexual, and that he does not enjoy cooking.

After class, Vanessa approached Michael.

“I liked your story,” she said.

“Thanks,” said Michael.

“It felt very real. Ridiculous, but real.”

“That’s kind of what I was going for,” he said. “Ridiculous but real, like life.”

“I wish I could do that in my writing. You know, make it feel real.”

“Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn’t,” Michael said. In fact, her writing had a clumsy artificiality that made him wince, and he could not imagine her ever evoking any deep feeling in the reader.

“My brother is gay,” said Vanessa. “He met his partner in a cooking class. So that was kind of a funny coincidence.”

“Quite,” said Michael.

“I wouldn’t worry about the people who found it tasteless,” she said.

“Nobody called it tasteless. A couple were uncomfortable with the subject matter. Not everyone is at ease with the darker aspects of reality.”

“No, I’m pretty sure I heard somebody say it was in poor taste,” said Vanessa. “But that’s not important. What’s important is that I think you are very talented, and I think you are going places as a writer.”

“That’s very nice of you to say,” said Michael. “But right now I’m going for a beer. Would you like to join me?”

She went.

He had not planned on this. He had envisioned himself going for a drink alone, then going back to Linda’s. He would tell her about this class, she would talk about her day, they would watch late night TV or maybe a home improvement show, make slow love and fall asleep holding each other. He could not imagine anything much better.

But here was Vanessa, bouncing on her toes, promising to turn the clock back a decade and a half, drench him in release, confusion and regret. It was too much to resist.

Michael drank more than usual, so that when the time came to make a choice, he could make it without hesitation or self-reproach. He knew that a moment would come when he would have decide whether to go home with Vanessa, which he was sure she wanted him to do. And if he did this, he would have to lose Linda. He would not be able to stay with her if he cheated on her. He could, of course, simply not tell her, but he would not be able to live with himself as a liar. And if he told her, it’s

quite possible she would forgive him because that's the way she was. But then he would not want to be with somebody who would forgive him for such a thing.

The sensible thing to do, he told himself through the drunken haze, would be to go to Linda, where he was always welcome. She would tend to his mind and his body, render him safe secure, satisfy his body, fall asleep with her head on his chest while he stared at the ceiling cursing himself for taking the easy way out.

"When did you decide you wanted to be a writer?" Vanessa asked. She was playing with the stirring stick in her vodka cranberry. In the background a Lionel Richie song was barely audible in the din of the pub. Michael, trying to keep the sounds organized in his head, did not reply.

"Hey, Mr. Spacey . . ."

"Oh, sorry. Me? Writing? Let me . . . Who said I wanted to be a writer? I mean, I like to write. I think I'm good at it . . ." With the third gin and tonic in his system, Michael could not stop the half-formed thoughts at the portal to his mouth.

"Yes, you are good at it," she said.

"But being a writer, that's something else. That's a whole other life."

"What *do* you do?" she asked.

"For money, you mean? I'm a lawyer."

"You don't seem like a lawyer," she said.

"Funny, I don't really feel like a lawyer most of the time. But I get the job done."

"You sound sad when you say that," she said.

This was the last thing he needed, for her to sound empathic, insightful. He needed her to be childish, just a fantasy made flesh, so his choices would be clear. But she was, in fact, a human, with all the layers to which humans are entitled. Given time, he could love her, perhaps as much as he loved Linda. It would be awkward and cliché, loving a woman a little more than half his age. It would be like one of his stories: clever, daring, fun, and shallow. But the compulsion was real, growing stronger by the minute and the sip.

Halfway through the next drink, she stood up and took him by the rest. "You're coming with me," she said.

"Yes, I suppose I am," he said, then took one last wistful look at his gin and tonic.

Vanessa lived in a studio just a few blocks from the bar. The place was a mess, with clothes piled everywhere and stacks of papers on the small dining table. The TV was on when they entered.

"You leave the TV on all the time?" Michael asked.

"No, but sometimes I forget to turn it off."

"Odd," he said.

"I'm full of little quirks," Vanessa said.

She sounded, at that moment, like a teenager. And, in a way, she was, relatively speaking. Michael suddenly recalled an awkward night out his senior year in college. He had finally made inroads with a freshman that joined campus newspaper staff, where Michael was a section editor. He had flirted with her for

months, or at least he thought he was flirting, before she ever initiated a conversation with him. He asked if she wanted to go see a movie or something, and she said yes, without enthusiasm. The night ended with the girl passed out drunk in his bed. He had not touched her. After she spent an hour talking about the pros and cons of staying with her high school boyfriend, Michael had no more desire for her. After that, he swore he would stick with women his own age or older.

But that was another lifetime, Michael thought. And what have you done with your life that you have the right to be such a purist?

He sat on her futon, she sat next to him and turned off the TV. He rested his hand on hers, told himself he would go no further.

“You’re not single, are you?” she asked.

He shook his head. “But what makes you so sure?”

“Why would you be? You’re smart, talented, good looking, have a good job.”

“You’re right. I’m a veritable treasure chest of desirable qualities.”

“But you came home with me. This means something.”

“You wanted me to, right?”

She nodded and smiled, and he could resist no more. He reached out for Vanessa.

They embraced, then they kissed. She took her shirt off. He left his on. He squeezed her breasts and she shuddered, then he started exploring further and further down until she gave a giant gasp and sigh, then they lay on the uncovered futon, she snoring into his chest. Michael had not even gotten hard. Perhaps this was a sign of good character. It could also have been the booze.

Two hours later, Michael woke up and started thinking of stories to tell Linda.

He arrived home at her place at 2 a.m. Linda was asleep on the couch, but she sat up as soon as Michael entered.

“Where were you? Why didn’t you respond to my texts?” She sounded sad and sleepy, not angry.

“Sorry, my phone was out of batteries.” This was not a complete lie. The phone did go dead while he was at the bar with Vanessa. “I was worried about you,” she said.

“Sorry,” Michael said. “I didn’t mean to make you worry.”

“But where were you?”

“I went out for drinks with somebody from the workshop. She wanted to talk about my story.”

He was waiting for Linda to say “*she?*” with a jealous edge, but instead she said, “Oh, that’s nice.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” he said. Perhaps she knew the truth and was lying to herself, or perhaps Michael was a smoother operator than he’d realized. Or perhaps she simply did not care. Linda also had her layers.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said. He thought he should shower, scrub off all traces of Vanessa, but that would be confessing too much, to himself. And besides, he did not believe anything of her had left a trace. It had all been so fast and superficial. He could easily convince himself it was a story he had written, with a thinly drawn

protagonist and a flimsy narrative arc. He had not chosen a path, but he had not left the one he was on, which was choice enough, for now. Jill would find this all hilarious, if he had the courage to tell her.

Michael and Linda got under the covers nude, as they always did, but they did not make love. Linda fell asleep with her back to Michael, as Michael draped his arm over her, breathing in time with her breath, inhaling her love, exhaling his own.

In the Gallery

The docent was talking, but nobody was listening.

We were all trying so hard not to look at the young woman sobbing into her boyfriend's shoulder.

I assumed that they were a couple because they stood much closer together than any other two people in the group, their arms almost touching the entire time.

It's possible, of course, that they were just friends or even brother and sister—they had similar blond hair and in the right light at the right angle you could see a resemblance. Then again, don't partners in a couple often start to resemble each other after a while?

I noticed her sniffing in front of Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*. Was it something in the painting that set her off? Maybe it reminded her of an awful letter she'd received. Maybe the letter had been from the very man on whose shoulder she was now crying. In that case, it could not have been a break-up letter, because here they were at the museum together. More likely, it was a letter from a previous lover. She would have been over him by now, now that she'd found this guy who was touring the museum with her.

My point is, the blond woman was crying. She was making a heroic effort to be quiet about it, but you could see her shoulders shaking and pretty much feel the tears turning to steam on the man's shoulder. The docent kept her focus and kept talking about the Turner landscape behind her. Everyone else was furtively looking

at the woman emptying her soul onto the man's shoulder. He, in turn, pretended to focus on the speaker while rubbing the girl's back.

It was my girlfriend's idea to do the tour. I usually just wing it at art galleries. If I really want to know the whole life story of a painting, I'll look it up on my own. Natalie insisted that we should do the tour at the Frick, though. She'd heard good things. I consented because it seemed like a small price to pay for a day of intra-couple harmony.

Right as the tour started, though, Natalie got paged by the hospital and had to leave. We'd already paid for the tour, so I decided to stick it out on my own. This was a mistake.

What I love about art galleries is the intimacy between painting and viewer. The painting opens a window into a world, and I enter it. It's a very private thing. But when you have a bunch of knuckleheads looking at the paintings at the same time, you lose the intimacy. In its place you get people trying to impress each other.

"Personally, the best Rembrandts are in Amsterdam. Still, this one is very fine. Yes, very fine indeed." That was a gray haired man with impeccable posture. It probably killed him to keep his back so straight. I'm sure he was dying to hunch over just a little, but he was determined to put on a good show for everyone.

One plump middle-aged woman had an endless supply of moronic questions.

“Why do the subjects always seem to wear such dark colors? You’d think they’d want to look a little more cheerful.”

Another pair kept whispering to each other and giggling. They must have been very funny things they were whispering, though I can’t imagine what funny thoughts came to mind looking at, say, Turner landscapes. There is nothing funny about those paintings, with cliffs and buildings and ships so drenched in ethereal light you hold your breath waiting for everything to explode.

And then there was the waddling bald man who couldn’t help sharing his sense of wonder at everything.

“Just look at that use of shadow! Sublime!”

After a few paintings of this commentary I saw the docent biting her lip, fighting the urge to shush him. I wouldn’t have had that kind of self-control, which is one reason I would not be a good docent. That and the fact that if I spend more than an hour in a museum my brain starts to tingle and I feel a need to run around screaming profanities. The same thing happens in libraries. In noisy, crowded train stations I don’t have these problems.

The only two people in the group that didn’t bug me one way or another were the blond couple, if they were, in fact, a couple. I’d put them in their early 30’s, probably German, or perhaps Dutch. It’s not particularly important, of course, whether they were German or Dutch or South Africans for that matter. They could have been from Des Moines for all I know. Or Queens. But I was curious. If I were more of an extrovert I might have asked where they came from. Natalie was often

encouraging me to be more outgoing, but I was not inclined to change my personality on her account.

I fell into watching the blond woman's face at each painting. Mostly she smiled. A couple times she traded knowing glances with the man.

I first saw her frown in front of the Degas. This I can understand. The young ballerinas are just a little too beautiful and fragile. You just know something terrible is going to happen to them as soon as the teacher turns away. Or maybe the teacher is going to do the terrible something. Either way, those paintings make me uneasy, but I can't help but look at them. I imagine the blond girl felt the same way, or at least something similar. Anyway, she frowned.

The frown, it turns out, was merely foreshadowing to what happened at the Vermeer.

It happened quickly. She looked at the painting. The docent started talking. The girl's filled with tears, which started to cascade down her face. Then her head was on the man's shoulder.

To his credit, the man showed no alarm or discomfort. I'm sure this took great restraint on his part. If Natalie started sobbing during a museum tour I'd be mighty uneasy. My instinct would be to escort her away from the group. I'm pretty self-conscious about public displays of emotion, whether it's my own emotion or a companion's. Frankly, I'm not comfortable with emotion, period, and a museum tour is just about the last place I'd want my feelings to start flooding out.

When I was eight I was separated from my parents at the Smithsonian. The Wizard of Oz display caught my eye and I ran to look at it while my parents were still looking at something else. After a couple minutes staring at the ruby slippers, I realized I was by myself and couldn't see my parents. They weren't where I'd left them.

A savvy child would have found a guard or some other trustworthy looking grownup to ask for help. I was not a savvy child. I just cried until I more or less melted into a warm, wet ball of fear and despair, right in front of the Scarecrow. When my parents found me there they looked more embarrassed than relieved.

That experience may have been the beginning of my lifelong preference for going to museums alone. That way you don't have to worry about losing anyone, or anyone losing you.

I make exceptions for girlfriends because it helps prevent friction. Natalie is not a bad art museum companion. She doesn't ask stupid questions, and I find her observations thoughtful, if uninformed. It may be a while before I forgive her for the tour, though. And since when does she plan meaningful activities when she's on call? And she was paged right at the start of tour? The whole thing is a little suspicious.

The blonde girl pulled it together at the next painting. The shoulder of the man's Tommy Bahama shirt was soaking wet. The girls' eyes were red, of course, and her face was flushed, but she looked better than you'd expect of somebody who was just sobbing for a good three minutes. She may have been younger than thirty.

I almost asked the blond couple where they were from, though what I really wanted to know was why the girl was crying, but that's not the kind of thing you can just ask a stranger. In fact, at the Van Dyck portrait of Frans Snyders I made sure to stand near them, and I started to lean in toward the man to ask, but right then the docent got very excited about the painting—"This is one of my personal favorites!"—and I lost my nerve.

The docent was going about her business with total concentration, but I know she was bursting with a need to know what the girl had been crying about. We all were. I could feel the rest of the group resisting the urge to stare at the couple—let's go ahead and accept, for peace of mind, that they were a couple—instead of the Van Dyck.

Normally, the devil himself could not pull me away from a Van Dyck. His subjects with their angular faces and elongated, feathery fingers are as real and alive as anyone you're likely to meet on the Upper East Side.

Except this girl who'd been sobbing a minute ago and was now pulling herself together, while her man played it cool, she was just a little more real. She was here and now. And looking at that girl, I thought. I could love her, given time. I could love almost anyone if need be.

And If I were a painter, this is what I would paint.