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revealing all your
dirty little secrets

down in the dirt



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The Peculiar

Edward Rodosek

"Tara," Marcel glanced at me over the newspaper, "the Bodoni Circus came into town yesterday."

"Bodoni? I've heard about it." I didn't stop mincing the greens I was preparing. "Shall we go?"

He smiled. "You don't care a pin for circus shows, Tara. But I know you're mad about the fortune-telling."

I stopped my work and gazed askance at him.

"Okay, okay," he consented. "We could take a peep. Maybe they have some interesting animals."

I chuckled. "I hope you don't try to bribe some tamer to allow you to wash an elephant like you did last time."

The doorbell buzzed and Marcel glanced through the window at the front yard. "It's Bill. He surely brought me the last issue of *Threatened Nature*."

I saw him talking with the postman. Then the local tramp, Ida, hobbled along the sidewalk pushing her shopping cart and Marcel gave her some change. Coming back, he waved at their neighbor, Stillman, who was out watering his geraniums.

Our cat, Kitty, entered the kitchen with Marcel. When he bowed down and caressed her Kitty jumped up on a chair. He gave her a small vanilla cake from the jar.

"Why do you feed Kitty so much?" I objected. "Look how fat she is."

"Oh, she's just mad about those vanilla cakes," he said smiling.

Our old Ford inched through the dense crowd in the City Amusement Park.

"It's hopeless," Marcel said. "We'll never find a free parking space."

"Look," I shouted, "there on the left!"

He made a sharp curve into the last free space. I stepped out of the car onto the soaked grass, but the mud presented a slippery obstacle.

"Give me your hand, Cinderella," Marcel said, "or you'll lose your shoe."

I chuckled. "Oh, Prince Charming, thank you so much. Where is the ticket office?"

We started to hustle through the crowd to a deafening roll of drums. A brass band thundered, and sawdust stuck to the mud that was already caking our shoes. Finally, we managed to find seats on a bench pressed

between a fat man and a mother with a whimpering baby on her lap.

The show was already in full swing; in the middle of the arena, a huge cage was set and the tamer in it cracked his whip.

“Look, Tara,” Marcel’s eyes widened. “The tigers—four, five, six! Aren’t they magnificent?”

Soon the workers removed the cage and the elephants came in, holding one another by the tail. After them riders appeared showing their customary skill on the galloping horses, and then not too brilliant trapeze artists, and then a pretty dull snake-man. There were all the usual circus appearances but none of them were any more than average.

I glimpsed at Marcel who was trying to subdue his yawning. I neared my lips to his ear and he nodded with relief. While we got up and squeezed out of the big tent, the uproar behind us became more bearable.

I took Marcel’s arm and we walked along the row of brightly decorated stalls and countless little twinkling lights.

“Where do you wish to go now?” he asked.

“Wait,” I said. “I think we shouldn’t need to search for too long.” After several steps, I stopped and pointed to the left.

“Aha, I knew it; *that* was the real reason we came here.” In a loud voice he read the worn-out inscription over the entrance to a small cabin. “‘*The Omniscient Fatima—your past, your future, useful advice for you*’. Oh, what a cliché! Do you really want to enter?”

“What a silly question. Give me a tenner.”

He sighed and handed me the bill.

“Will you wait here for me, Marcel? I won’t be too long inside—ten, maybe fifteen minutes at most.”

“That’s out of the question. I’m going to find a tent with beautiful young belly dancers. Maybe they’ll also serve the arrack and an opium pipe.”

I frowned.

“Okay,” he added. “I’m going to look around the nearby stalls and I’ll be back here in twenty minutes or so.”

When I went out again—confused and disappointed—Marcel wasn’t there yet. Of course, I had only been inside five minutes.

I still couldn’t grasp why had the fortune-teller behaved in such an odd manner. After she had taken the tenner, she offered me a crystal ball, prophesying from coffee grounds or reading the future from my hand.

Madam Fatima was babbling all the time while I reached out my left palm and she held it under the table lamp. Instantly she became silent and her bronzed face went noticeably numb. She released my hand, got up,

gave the tenner back to me, and began to excuse herself.

“Sorry, Ma’am. Regretfully I couldn’t see anything from your palm. My magic power is helpless in your case; that happens sometimes, you know.”

She neither replied to my question nor did she listen to my objections.

“Sorry again, Ma’am, no hard feelings.” Then she helped me, gently but firmly, out of her cabin.

That damned gypsy must have been nuts, no doubt about that. And I was crazy for persuading Marcel to visit that silly circus. I should simply forget the entire incident.

I took a walk to the nearest sweets stall and ordered a coffee. After about twenty minutes, I decided to return to the fortune-teller’s cabin.

Marcel wasn’t there yet, so I ambled through the stalls looking around. Then I noticed a dark, lonely figure standing aside with his back to the crowd.

“Hey, Marcel!”

He turned as if he had just waked up and his strange, absentminded gaze amazed me.

“Where have you been, Marcel? Is everything okay?”

He nodded without saying a word and stepped up to me. Then he pulled the car keys out of his pocket and without looking at me, he headed toward our car. Trying to keep pace with him, I looked at his profile and noticed he was ... he was different in a way.

His expression was severe, lips tightly pressed, a protruding chin, his gaze fixed straight forward. Had Marcel always been that way? No, it was different. For heaven’s sake, I surely know my husband after seven years of marriage.

His silence made me nervous. “Did you find anything interesting?” I inquired.

Marcel shrugged his shoulders, still avoiding my eyes.

I wanted to know and I didn’t want to stop asking until I found out. “You’ve certainly visited the lion’s cubs? Or a hypnotist? The House of Ghosts?”

He shook his head repeatedly and that irritated me. “Damn it, don’t be so mysterious! Where have you been?”

Marcel hesitated. “I was at a peddler’s. His tent stood at the south end of the alley.”

“At a peddler? What was he selling? Did you find anything worth buying?”

Marcel shrugged again. “He didn’t have anything I wanted. So we just talked for a while.”

“You talked with a total stranger—what about?”

“Oh, I don’t remember. About this and that. Nothing in particular.”

“I don’t believe that,” I commented. “It must have been more than *nothing in particular* for you to look so absentminded now.”

“I am *not* absentminded.” His voice became gruff. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

He unlocked the car and we scarcely entered as he drove away even before I had time to fasten my seat belt.

Neither of us broke the silence all the way home.

Marcel garaged the car while I went upstairs to our bedroom. I undressed and stretched out on the sheets. There were no signs that my husband would come after me. I picked up a book but after some time I realized I didn’t have a clue what I was reading. So, I turned the light off but I wasn’t sleepy at all. I lay on the bed, miserable, hopeless, exhausted, and confused. Finally, I went to the bathroom, looked for a sleeping pill, and washed it down with a gulp of unpleasant tepid water.

All I needed now was a good, long sleep. In the morning, everything will be okay, as always.

I didn’t know how long I had slept when a brutal hand grabbed me and turned me over on my back. What ...? Only a moment later I realized it was Marcel.

“Hey, wait!” I protested. “If you suddenly want sex, this is not a way to—”

Marcel’s hand covered my mouth and before I managed to push him away, he parted my legs with his knees. I resisted and tried to tumble aside but his body was heavy. He took me violently, without any kisses, and without any foreplay, as if I were a whore. He didn’t care a bit about my rage and it didn’t disturb him in the least. I felt only disgust and shame.

Luckily, he finished quickly and tumbled from me on to his side of the bed. Tears of despair fell down my cheeks; I started to strike him with my hands, I punched him with clenched fists—his back, his arms and legs and the pillow with which he protected his head.

Finally, I could only sob. I tottered to the bathroom and started to rub my body with a soaped sponge. I stayed under the warm shower so long I nearly fell asleep in the shower. Feeling dizzy I descended the stairs into the living room, grabbed a pillow and a blanket and lay down on the sofa bed.

The sun streaming through the living room windows woke me at eleven. I had a swollen tongue and a repulsive taste in my mouth. I got up and then I recalled what had happened the night before. An odd mixture of feelings flashed through my mind—disbelief, anger, and humiliation.

Marcel was on duty, thank God, so he wouldn’t return before six. By

then I would have to decide what I should do. How I should behave? What would be proper to say to him? But, that wasn't just an ordinary quarrel, damn it! It was ... It was something I couldn't understand. It was as if I had dealings with a stranger instead with my Marcel, my husband, whom I had known all those years.

I pondered at least a dozen possibilities about how I should behave and I discarded them one after another. Not scolding, not reproaching, not a threat of divorce—nothing seemed proper to me. I pattered around the house, tried to tidy up the rooms, displaced things aimlessly and then put them back. Before I realized the time had passed, I heard the well-known sound of Marcel's car.

Oh, God, was it possible that it was already six o'clock? My pulls fastened, my mouth was dry and my palms wet. I sat down in the armchair against the door so I could see his face the moment he entered. I heard Marcel's steps coming near and then he entered the living room.

"You are *not* Marcel, are you?" I heard saying myself. "Who the devil are you?"

"I don't know what you are talking about." He needed only a few seconds to overcome his first surprise. His gaze seemed soulless.

"You are not my husband." I stared at his stern features. "I want my husband—I want my real Marcel to come back! He shall love me again, the way he loved me earlier, all those years!"

He glared at me. "Tara, you're either drunk or out of your mind." His voice was restrained, his attitude steady.

"What ... Oh, God, what happened at that damned peddler's? What has that devil done with you? Did he implant something in you ... some demon?" I was on the brink of tears and I felt my fists clenching so hard my nails thrust into my palms. "Answer me, damn you!"

"Why should I answer you?" His voice remained indifferent. "You just said I was not your husband. I'm somebody else, a stranger. Therefore you haven't any right to ask me personal questions." Calm and self-controlled, he walked into his study and closed the door.

I wanted to go after him and confront him head on. I wanted to say him he had no right to treat me the way he did. But I couldn't do that. All my arguments seemed unconvincing and my entire imagination vanished.

I was still sitting in the armchair when he came out of the study dressed in an old sweater and flannels. The odd thing was that I felt an embarrassment while he obviously didn't. He took armfuls of books from the shelves and carried them out into our backyard. I was dumbfounded for among these discards were five or six complete bounded volumes of

the *'Threatened Nature'*, his favorite magazine.

Not long after that, I noticed the smell of smoke. I went to the window and saw Marcel burning the magazines inside an old steel barrel. I didn't understand. He loved these magazines and before yesterday he had been literally obsessed with reading them.

I went to the kitchen to make a sandwich or two, for my own supper only. While I was buttering my bread, I heard a painful groan from outside and noticed something white flying past the kitchen window. What—?

I rushed to the window just in time to notice our white cat running away from Marcel, who watched it scornfully. He kicked it! He kicked Kitty, their beloved pet that he'd always caressed and spoiled!

My blood was boiling. I had patience when he treated me rudely but that was too much! I won't allow him to wreak his malice on the poor animal. I rushed through the entrance hall but Marcel was already getting into our old Ford. Then he turned the car onto the street running over a neighbor child's bike.

"What are you doing, you bastard?" I shouted with rage. Then I realized that wasn't an accident for he braked, and backed over it again distorting the bicycle. Then he accelerated down the empty street.

I was dismayed. Who could I ask for help or at least for advice? My parents were dead, my only sister was somewhere overseas, and my best friend Sophie was in the maternity ward at the hospital. What about an adviser for married couples or a shrink? Oh, no. They would surely demand I should first talk reasonably with my husband.

I shook my head. Maybe that was the only way. I mustn't give up after the first try. I have to persuade Marcel to listen to me and both of us have to try understanding each other. Calmly, as two adult, civilized people.

Hours passed, and then it grew dark but Marcel still didn't return. Late in the evening, I went upstairs to our bedroom. I grabbed Marcel's pajamas, two pillows and a blanket. I held them as far from me as I could—and carried them downstairs to the living room. Tonight I was going to sleep in the bedroom. In the locked bedroom.

Again, I waited in vain for hours waiting for sleep. And again, I had to get up to fetch a sleeping pill. The living room was still empty and quiet.

The slanting beams of the rising sun woke me up. I heard Marcel's steps from below and the opening and closing of the living room door. While I descended the stairs I saw Marcel's bedclothes folded up where I had left them the night before. So, he didn't come home until morning. He'd never done such a thing during all seven years of marriage.

He entered the room and this time he didn't avoid my gaze; he only nodded to me.

"Marcel, do you have a minute or two for me now?"

"Of course." The words weren't hostile; in fact they were strangely neutral.

"We must talk about what happened. I will be open-minded and I expect you'd be the same, okay?"

He shrugged. "I've nothing to hide. I also wouldn't lie to you—if that is what you mean."

"Everything ... Everything is different since we came from that ... oh, hundred times cursed circus! I haven't the slightest idea what that damned peddler has done to you. But it had to be something awful—something evil."

His attitude remained calm. "Why are you thinking that way?"

"Listen ... Marcel." I could barely utter that name. "From that evening you became a total stranger to me. And probably I became a total stranger to you, too."

He tacitly shrugged, obviously agreeing with what I'd said.

"Help me to understand; at least that much I deserve after seven years of marriage." I had to dry my tears and I hated that emotional response of mine. "You ... You have to give me back my Marcel as he used to be. We both must take certain steps, together."

"What do you propose?"

"We must go back together. I mean to the place where all this began. Let's go to the circus again. We must find that peddler and force him ... No, we can offer him money. I have quite a lot of my own savings. We can pay him, as much as he wants. All I want is that he lifts that spell from you, for heaven's sake. Marcel?"

"Okay, if that's all you want." He spoke as if we were going out for a newspaper. "And forget about your savings; he wouldn't claim any money from us."

I wondered about Marcel's swift agreement. No objections, no irony—was that possible? Marcel led the way into the garage while I grabbed my purse. My hands were trembling so hard my keys fell on the floor.

There were not nearly so many visitors as there had been that fatal evening. Many of the market stalls were still closed, including the Madam Fatima's cabin and I was frightened the peddler would already be gone, too. Marcel drove along the main alley to the end and then he stopped in front of a large tent.

The peddler's tent was entirely different from all the others. A black,

semi-translucent foil was strained tightly over a kind of slender, deceptively fragile framework. In front of the tent an empty, smooth plate, resembling black glass, was placed. It seemed to me the plate hovered inexplicably, without any support, about three feet above the ground.

The peddler was standing in front of his tent. A tall, self-confident figure, donned in a black mantle, black hood over his head, huge sunglasses, black beard, and a mustache. His lips were blubber, sensual, like on the pictures of Pan chasing a frightened virgin.

My mind got instantly blank. I couldn't recall any of the words that I'd earlier prepared to say to him. Marcel was the one who restored the situation. He stepped forward and said calmly, "I've been here earlier, remember? The day before yesterday, in the evening."

"Oh, yes, of course." The peddler's sensual lips widened in a kind of demonic smile. "You were the one who was interested in— Well then, let's forget that. What can I do for you now?"

"I have ... We have a sort of complaint."

"Really? Such things happen to me very rarely. Still, I'm wholly at your service. You'll tell me what seems to be wrong and I'll try to correct that." While the peddler was talking, I had a feeling his black glasses were fixed on me. "Perhaps it would be better if we talk inside my tent? After you, please!"

He flashed a smile at me, politely stretched his left arm, a door-size part of the tent slipped aside, and we entered.

During the first part of our ride home, Marcel and I remained silent.

It must have been raining meanwhile for on the uneven parts of the street surface many puddles remained. That district was sparsely populated so walkers were rare.

Each time Marcel noticed a puddle near the sidewalk he drove the car close to the kerb and splattered a pedestrian with muddy rainwater. That seemed to me so funny I chuckled at every such occasion, especially when the wet splattered person responded by using strong language.

"Hey," I made a comment, "you missed that one."

"That wasn't my fault," he objected. "The puddle was too small."

Then, I noticed a vagrant doberman so I called Marcel's attention to it.

"You better fasten your seat belt," he said, as he sharply turned aside and stepped on the accelerator. The dog began to run for its life in a zigzag manner. I stooped forward as far as the seat belt allowed me, licked my lips, and watched the exciting chase. Marcel kept twisting like a professional racing driver, speeding up and breaking violently. Three or four times we nearly got the doberman but then it found a gap in a hedge and

DANCING WITH CHAOS

Mel Waldman

Dancing with Chaos, hidden beneath its shroud,
I whirl and swirl, a majestic dancer am I, and
how beautiful this dance would be, if I were there;

But like the ghosts of Grand Central Station, I am
far away, and if you discovered my secret landscape,
your eyes would capture illusion, never me;

If I were there, you'd grasp who I really am, but
dancing with Chaos, I am invisible, and far away,
like the ghosts of Grand Central Station,

who were part of the city's soul, until they traveled
downtown one autumn day, oblivious of destiny;

and when the shroud of white dust fell from above,
we wept, covered by a deafening silence

swooped through it.

"What a pity!" I said. "Still, you were wonderful, darling."

Several blocks from our house, we saw the old local tramp Ida carrying an apple in her hand. About the time she started to push her shopping cart over a stripped crossing Marcel put the engine in neutral, and we silently drove close behind her back.

Then he pressed the horn.

The old woman gave a shriek, her cart overturned, and all her belongings strewed on the asphalt ground. Her apple rolled slowly across the entire width of the road until the kerb on the other side stopped it. I roared with laughter when I saw she was pressing her hand on her chest, her eyes horrified by fear.

After Marcel locked the garage, a thought occurred to me.

"Listen, Darling," I said, "maybe we could pay a visit to the Stallman's this evening. What do you say?"

"Sure," Marcel said. "We could chat a little, play cards, and even afford ourselves some drink. Was that what you had in mind?"

"Yes, Darling. Besides that we could suggest to the Stallman's that we should go to that peddler ... I mean ... to the Bodoni Circus, all together. They have three children so it wouldn't be too hard to persuade them."

"That's a good idea," he said.

BLOOD HUNGERS

Aaron Stout

Pete said, "Hey, wait... Wait, I think he's dead," but at first nobody paid any attention. They were flipping curses, having fun with it as they kicked the kid. Pete said again, "I think he's dead," and that time Ron heard him. Ron said, "No way," but stopped his kicking, and then Nick and Louis stopped too. They looked down at the unmoving boy.

Nick said, "What?" and Pete said, "He stopped moving, you guys don't see he stopped moving? I don't think he's breathing," and Ron said, "No fucking way," but it was Louis who got down by the kid and checked. He put his hand in front of the kid's mouth, then pressed his fingers against his neck. He shook his head a little bit, said, "Feels like he's dead," and then, "I got blood on my hand." That bothered Louis, which was why he was almost strictly a kicker. He'd let Ron and Pete and Nick start in with the punching, and he'd kick them once they were on the ground.

Louis stood up and wiped his hand on his jeans. Clean before, now they had a single dark streak just below the right pocket. They were all looking at each other, the body of the boy in the center of them. Pete said, "What the fuck did you guys do?"

Louis said, "Us?"

Ron said, "I don't see how we could have killed him. I just hit him a little."

Louis said, "Man, all I did was kick his stomach a couple times."

"Guys, shut the fuck up." Nick kneeled down by the body, feeling around it.

"Should you touch it?" said Pete.

"We already touched him," Nick snapped.

"I mean should we touch him more?"

Nick stood up and glared at Pete. "Shut up, dammit, shut up, okay you fuckin pansy?" They did. Only Ron, Nick's brother, ever much argued with Nick, but Ron looked as scared shitless as everyone else. Nick got down by the body and looked at it. "I think we busted his head too hard. Man, somebody got him in the temple." He stood up, shaking his head. "Fuck!" It was a quick, angry exclamation.

"We have to get rid of the body," said Nick. Ron stood up and started walking away. "Ron, get back here," yelled Nick, but Ron said, "Sorry guys, I'm out," and kept walking. Nick ran behind him, grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back, whispering something in his ear the others didn't hear. Ron, looking sullen, came back to where the others stood.

Louis asked, "Anyone know this kid?"

But he knew they didn't. They never knew the people they jumped; they were just looking for some fun, a little action, whoever walked their way. It was probably someone from school, but Louis didn't recognize him.

"I think he was in my science class," said Pete, and everyone looked at him.

"You think?" spat Nick. "What's his name?"

"I don't know, it was a big class and school was a month ago, man. I don't know him, okay?"

"We have to get rid of the body," Nick said again. "We have to get rid of the body, now." He paced the alley, absently rubbing his left cheek. They were in the shadows, certainly, but the street where they grabbed the kid was ten feet down, and there were houses on either side of the alley, both some distance away. On one side of the alley was a fence; its shadow obscured most of the body. One arm was flung out into the light, the hand closed into a fist. A ring glittered red in the setting sun.

"Why don't we just leave it here?" asked Pete, and Ron started nodding.

Nick was furious. "What the hell is wrong with you guys? How many people have we jumped here?" The correct answer was five, but nobody said anything. "You think people don't know what we do here?"

Ron said, "We've never gotten caught," and Nick started trembling he was so angry.

"If this body is found here we're all in deep shit. Deep shit!" He glared at each of them in turn. "You guys do whatever the fuck you want. I'm getting rid of this body because somebody has to and I guess that means it's going to be me." He leaned into the shadow of the fence and started to hoist the body up by the arms. Louis grabbed the legs, then dropped them suddenly and turned into the fence and vomited. He turned back and grabbed the legs again. Nick said, "Man, you all right?" and Louis nodded.

"Where are we taking him?"

"Down to the creek," said Nick, "maybe the underpass?"

"There's that old shed there," said Ron, "but how are we going to get it there?"

"My old man's probably sleeping," said Pete, "I can take the car." Pete's house was only a little ways down the block. "Be in some trouble if he finds out."

"You have to go get it," said Nick, "and hurry." Pete ran off down the alley. Nick said to Louis, "Help me drag it behind this bush till he gets back." So they pulled the body over behind a bush. The grass and weeds were bent where the body had been, and there was a little blood on the

fence, but you had to get right up next to it to see it in the light. “Everybody don’t stand so close,” Nick said. They all backed up a little. “Don’t look so guilty,” he told them, so Ron put his hands in his pockets and Louis sat on the ground.

A few minutes later Pete pulled the car into the alley. No one had passed. Pete jumped out of the front seat and opened the back door. “I brought this blanket, don’t get blood on the seats, please don’t get blood on the seats.”

“Are we putting him in the back seat,” asked Louis, “or in the trunk?”

“Man, just hurry,” said Nick, his hands shaking and sweat trickling down his cheek. They spread the blanket over the back seat and Ron and Pete hoisted the body onto the blanket. Nick slammed the car door shut. He turned to Pete and said, “Drive. I go with you.”

“Where you going to put it?” asked Ron.

“Shut up,” said Nick, walking around the car to the passenger side. “You two walk home, act regular, don’t say anything ever.” He got in the car, slammed the door, and watched Pete climb into the driver’s seat. Louis started down the alley. Ron looked into the back seat of the car, glared at Nick, then turned to follow Louis.

Ron’s house was past Louis’s, in the same direction, but neither was very far. They didn’t make it to Louis’s house before he started crying. It was just a little bit at first. Ron didn’t say anything. Then it turned into big wracking sobs. Ron gently said, “Geez, Louis, get a hold of yourself.” Louis turned to him, crying harder, and leaned into him, and Ron had to catch him. Suddenly they were hugging in the middle of the sidewalk, with Louis bawling his eyes out. Ron said, “Louis, someone’s going to see us.”

Louis said, “Oh my God oh my God.” He was sobbing too hard to say anything else.

Ron said, “Come on, Louis, stand up and we’ll walk to my house, okay? Someone’s going to see us.”

Louis stood up and sniffed a couple times. “Right, all right. Yeah.” They started walking down the street again. In a bit Louis had settled down and looked normal, except for puffy eyes. He said, “I don’t know, Ronnie, I don’t know about this.” Ron didn’t say anything. Louis walked a little more and said, “We have to completely forget about this.”

Ron said, “Yeah? So get started.”

Louis grunted, but he was beginning to feel better, and could tell Ron was starting to get irritated. “I’m sorry,” he said, “Hey, I’m sorry. I’m just a little shook up.”

“Me too,” Ron said, “But you can’t just act like a fool.”

"I know," said Louis.

"Look," Ron said, "We can't talk about this, you know?"

"I know," said Louis."

"And Louis," said Ron, now stopping and talking very seriously, "Listen. You have to forget all this. And I don't mean so we don't get caught, but yes, so we don't get caught. But you need to leave this behind us. You know? You have to get over it. You have to forget it."

Louis nodded. "I know."

Ron started walking again and Louis followed him. They didn't say anything until they had arrived at Ron's house, and Ron said, "Play some Playstation?" and Louis said, "Sure," and Ron started flipping through games. Louis sat down on the couch, leaning his head back. He was tired, drifting off. He said, "Man, you play, I'm gonna catch a short nap," and Ron said, "Okay, cool," and Louis drifted into sleep.

*

When he woke up he was lying on his side on the couch and someone had put a little blanket over his legs. He kicked it off, stood up, and stretched. There was an opening to the kitchen on one side, but though he could hear Ron's family having dinner, he couldn't see into the kitchen through the wall that cut the two rooms in half.

He could hear Nick talking, and his whole body started to shake as he remembered what had happened. He sat back down on the couch, trying to be quiet, not wanting them to know he was awake. Nick said, "I just don't why we have to always be having people over, that's all." He sounded tense but not particularly angry.

"C'mon, Nicholas, it's Ron's friend." That was Ron's mom, slightly pleading but mostly disinterested. But she was firm when she said, "Look, he's spending the night, Ron already asked before you got home, okay?"

There was no response, just the click of silverware on glass plates. Louis got up quietly and went upstairs to Ron's room. He shut the door, sat on the bed. Flipped through some comic books. He was getting a headache, bad.

After a while Ron came in. "Woke up, huh?" He said. Louis nodded, not looking up from The Fantastic Four. Ron said, "I'm so glad I don't have to work tomorrow, get to sleep in."

"Yeah," Louis nodded again. He closed the comic book and looked up at Ron. "Hey, what's up with your hair?" he said.

Ron looked confused. "What?"

Louis stood up and set the comic book down. "What is that?" He squinted. Ron kept flinching away. "Hey, stay still," Louis said, peering

intently at Ron. "I thought your hair was frizzed out weird or something, but that's not what that is."

Ron said, "What what is?" He was starting to sound scared.

"Man, it looks like you're smoking. I mean, like you have smoke coming off you."

"Louis, shut up," Ron said. He pushed Louis away, kicked through some clothes over to a mirror, inspecting himself. "I don't see anything." He looked back at Louis. "Quit fucking with me."

Louis came over and stood behind him, looking into the mirror. He could see it clearly, even through the mirror, not what it was, true, but that it was. "You don't see that?"

"Fuck you," said Ron.

"That's weird," said Louis. "It's on me, too." He started looking at his arms and hands.

Ron scooped The Fantastic Four off the bed and sprawled out over the blankets. "Man, shut up." He opened the comic book somewhere in the middle, looking at the pictures. Louis had a pinched, concerned look on his face but didn't say anything.

Restless, Ron threw down the comic book and stood up. "I'm going up on the roof," he said. A segment of ledge outside Ron's window made it pretty easy to climb onto the roof of the house, and in the middle you could sit down between two sections of the roof and not be seen from the street. Ron pulled the blinds up on the window and pulled it open, stepping up and around and disappearing. After a moment, Louis followed him up to the little enclave, where Ron was lighting a joint.

Louis sat next to him, and Ron silently passed him the joint. Louis looked up at the stars and the crooked sliver of the moon as they passed the weed back and forth.

Not long later, Nick climbed up to join them. It was hard to gauge his mood in the darkness, but he sounded irritated when he said to Louis, "Man, why are you spending the night?"

Louis said, "What?"

Ron said, "Jesus, Nick, it would be strange if he didn't spend the night. And be quiet, you want Mom to know this place is up here?"

Nick lowered his voice to match their quiet tones. "Louis, you aren't freaking out, are you?" He sat down and took the joint. "Cause if you're freaking out, I'll kill you."

Ron said, "He's fine."

It was too dark to see if Nick had any of the strange smoke coming off of him. Quietly, Nick said, "Listen. We took it down to the shed by

the underpass, but we thought about it more and we don't think that's good enough. It's too close. Tomorrow we're going to take it farther, out to Huntsville."

"Why didn't you take it there already?" Ron asked.

"Pete couldn't take the car that long."

Louis said, "Someone's going to find it in that shed."

"Overnight?" asked Nick. "We put it in plastic and covered it, I don't think so. And there's nothing right now that points it to us."

Ron shook his head. "Then why not just leave it."

Nick hesitated a long second. "It's too close, it's too much us. People know about that shed, you know that. I asked Mom if I could take the car to Brownsburg tomorrow, she knows I'm supposed to go see Andie anyway. I just think that's better."

Ron said, "What about Andie?"

Nick said, "She'll cover for me."

Ron said, "You're gonna tell her?"

Nick said, "Hell no. I'll tell her something else." That seemed to satisfy Ron. Nick had pretty much taken over the joint, but nobody said anything as he took a final hit and pinched it out. He stood up. "Look, we can't tell anyone anything about this, ever. I mean that. Wouldn't hurt for you guys to find something to do tomorrow, make yourselves a little visible. But that's it on talking about this. It's over and done. Got it?" They made little sounds of agreement, and Nick climbed back off the roof and disappeared.

Louis lay down on the incline of the roof, looking up at the stars again. He said, "I think he had that smoky stuff coming off of him, too."

Ron said, "Who, Nick?" Louis nodded. Ron said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Louis said, "Never mind."

Ron said, "Yeah, you're starting to freak me out," and then he, too, got up and disappeared off the roof. Louis lay there, looking at the stars, feeling a great tightness growing in his chest. Gradually, he started to cry, the constellations blurring into watery sparkles.

When he climbed back into the room, Ron was already asleep on the bed. Louis stretched out on the floor, quiet and still, but unable to sleep for most of the night. When he eventually drifted off, his sleep was dreamless.

*

Ron woke him roughly, with, "Take a shower, we're going to Billy's birthday party."

Louis squinted, the light from the window hitting him painfully in the eyes. "I thought we weren't going to that."

“Now we’re going,” said Ron, with finality, so Louis pulled himself up off the floor and out into the hall.

After showering, he borrowed some of Ron’s clothes. He told Ron, “I think I got a little blood on my pants.”

Ron gave him a sharp look and said, “So? Throw them out.” And he held out the room’s trashcan, half full, with no trash bag. Louis tossed the pants. “Keep those,” Ron said, indicating the clothes Louis had put on.

“Thanks,” said Louis.

In the sunlight through the window the stuff coming off of Ron looked less like smoke to Louis and more like a shadowy cloud. It was easier to see in the daytime. He didn’t say anything about it. The cloud around Ron was dark, but not the black it had looked last night — more of a burnt grayish-brown. Around his own hands, Louis could see a similar darkness. When he went to fix his hair in the mirror, he could see it all around him. It looked dark, black, shaded but without color.

They went downstairs where Ron’s sister, Lisa, was watching TV and reading a magazine. She was fourteen, two years younger than Louis. Something in the magazine was entertaining; she was looking at a picture and grinning with enthusiasm.

Ron said, “Hey, where’s Nick.”

Lisa looked up, said, “Nick went to see Andie, he probably won’t be home till after supper. Mom went over to Stan’s.” She looked at Louis and smiled. “Hi, Louis, I like your shirt.” It was really Ron’s shirt. It was bright yellow and said, “Dare to Say No to Drugs” on the front.

Ron disappeared into the kitchen. Louis said to Lisa, “Thanks,” and, to make conversation, “what are you reading?”

Lisa showed him the cover: Cosmopolitan. She giggled and said, “Hey, do guys really think like that?” She pushed the article she was reading toward him. Louis read the title, “Guys Uncensored, The Dirty Thoughts Men Have.”

Louis, blushing, said, “I don’t need to read that.”

Lisa stopped smiling, seeming suddenly embarrassed. “Sorry,” she said.

Louis looked at her, said, “Okay let me read it,” and took the magazine. But he didn’t look at it; he was looking at the haze around Lisa, not nearly as dark as his or Ron’s. It was a rich reddish orange, full of shadows and highlights. Lisa’s hair was loose and frizzy, and there was much of it. Now Louis could see wisps of this reddish-orange color escaping from the blonde curls and around her face.

Lisa became shy under his scrutiny. Fascinated, Louis watched the color around her dim to a much softer, pastel red. “What?” asked Lisa,

“What is it?” Her nose and brow wrinkled.

“I don’t know,” said Louis. He knew he shouldn’t say anything about the colors. “You’re getting really pretty.” But he knew that wasn’t the right thing to say, either, though it was true. All the color came vibrantly back around her, and she grinned big, and said, “You think so?” He hoped she didn’t tell Ron or Nick he had called her pretty. He wanted to take it back. Instead, he said, “Yes,” handing the magazine back to her without reading it.

“I just got up, I haven’t even gotten ready yet,” she said. Ron came back in, then, and Louis self-consciously took a step back from where Lisa sat on the couch.

“You want some pop tarts?” Ron asked Louis. “We got strawberry.”

“Yeah, strawberry,” said Louis, and Ron disappeared back into the kitchen.

Lisa asked, “You guys going somewhere?”

“Yeah.” Louis sat down on the easy chair across from the couch. “Billy’s birthday party, I guess.”

“Really?” Lisa leaned forward, excited. “Can I go?” Louis shrugged. Lisa said, “I got invited, I can go, you don’t mind, do you?”

Ron came back in, saying, “Lisa, shut up, no you can’t go.”

Lisa ignored Ron, looking at Louis as she repeated, “Please can I go?”

Louis said, “Yeah, you can go, if Ron says okay.”

Ron narrowed his eyes at Louis, but said, “Okay fine. We’re leaving in five minutes, we’re not waiting around.”

Lisa jumped up off the couch. “I have to go get ready,” she said, smiling at Louis, “and take a shower and everything.”

“We’re not waiting around,” Ron repeated.

“Louis, don’t let him leave without me,” Lisa said, disappearing up the stairs. To Louis, Ron said, “Quit hitting on my sister.”

“I wasn’t.” Lisa reappeared at the top of the stairs wearing only a towel. She walked to the upstairs bathroom, not too quickly, not looking at them. Louis looked away, back at Ron, who was frowning.

There was a dark look in Ron’s eyes Louis wasn’t sure he’d ever seen before. For the first time, Louis thought then of Ron as a killer. As someone who had killed. Of course Louis, too, was someone who had killed, but now he saw Ron as something different, something to fear. He believed in Ron’s friendship. But the act of killing, as unintended or accidental as it had been, had revealed them, Louis recognized, as animals, and Louis doubted if they could be trusted with life, and with their own judgment of it.

Louis shivered and followed Ron into the kitchen. Ron handed him a glass plate with two pop tarts on it, toasted brown. He bit into one. Ron pulled a box of cereal out of a pantry and stuck his arm into it, grabbing a handful to dump into his mouth. Chewing, he said, "I didn't want to take my sister."

"I know," said Louis.

They were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening. They walked around the wall to see Nick throwing himself down on the couch.

Ron said, "I thought you had left already."

Nick looked up, and Louis could see he was sweating. "Guys, listen, it wasn't there," Nick said. He wiped at his clammy face. Then his eyes focused and he looked closely at them for the first time, at their faces, then at the pop tart in Louis' hand. During this time Louis watched the dark smoky shadows around Nick suddenly tighten, pulling in, taking on the barest hint of an orange cast.

Ron said, "What do you mean it wasn't there?" Sounding irritated. "What, you mean the body?"

"Shut up!" said Nick once, quickly, glaring suddenly at Ron. Ron turned his profile to Nick, looking toward the kitchen, clenching his jaw, just as Lisa came running down the stairs. It was obvious she could feel the tension in the room. She slowed, silent as she came down the last few steps. She had put on some jean shorts rolled tight at mid-thigh, and a pink t-shirt with a cartoon ghost that said "Spooky" right across her chest. Nick looked at her, then back at Ron. "Are you going somewhere?"

Lisa said, "We were going to Billy's birthday party."

Nick looked somehow offended. "Billy's birthday party?"

"Yeah, man," Ron said, impatiently, raising his eyebrows meaningfully as he added, "You know, we just felt like going out somewhere."

Nick shook his head. "No, no you aren't."

Louis said directly, "You told us to go somewhere."

Nick looked hard at Louis, then said, "Yes, I did." Silently, Louis handed him the pop tart. Nick took it and bit into it. He turned back to Ron and spoke while chewing. "Hey, let's go talk for a minute, okay?" He stood up and brushed by Lisa on the stairs. Ron followed, glancing at Louis as he walked by, eyebrows raised a bit, expression unreadable.

Lisa came the rest of the way down the stairs, looking quizzically at Louis. "What was that about?" She seemed mostly unconcerned with the drama between her brothers.

Louis shook his head a little and brushed it off. "Nothing, you know, Nick said something and Ron got his feelings hurt." Lisa nodded as if that

explained everything. "You look nice," Louis said.

Lisa blushed and said, "Thanks, I got this shirt for two dollars at thrift town."

"It's cute," said Louis. He sat down on the couch. Lisa hesitated, then sat down next to him. Louis said, "I'm not sure we're going to Billy's birthday party after all."

"Yeah?" said Lisa.

"Yeah. I think Ron might have to stay home."

"Yeah?" said Lisa. Then, after a brief pause, "Maybe you and me can go."

Louis looked at her. "That would be fun," he said, "but I don't think it would be a good idea."

Lisa's lips tightened into a small frown as she looked down at her feet and scratched her knee. Louis watched her, a bit overwhelmed at the way she almost looked on fire with the sun streaming through the reddish haze around her. His inexplicable visions were growing clearer and brighter, and he found himself caught between the desire to stare and the self-conscious need to look away. He was very anxious about this, ashamed of his vision - too real to be ignored - and made inarticulate by the fear of being discovered. After an awkward silence, Lisa picked up the remote to the TV and turned it on.

It was in the middle of a re-run of The Simpsons. Louis had seen it before, but it was entertaining and he loosened up a bit. At one point when she laughed, he felt Lisa relax into his side, leaning into him. From the corner of his eye he could see the top of her head. Little tendrils of amber smoke rose from her still damp hair, and when he breathed in the flowery aroma of her shampoo, he had the strange and fleeting idea that he was seeing the scent of her rising into the air.

He started to feel very odd and nervous. He stood up with the sudden desire to move around, excusing himself with, "I should go see what's up with Ron." At the same time, Ron and Nick started coming down the stairs. He froze, his knee still touching Lisa's knee on the couch, but neither of the two brothers were paying any attention to him. Ron's eyes were red and swollen, like he had been crying, and Nick still looked agitated and a bit confused.

All Ron said was, "We might be leaving in a little while, no rush," and went into the kitchen. Nick didn't say anything at all, or even look at them, as he too turned the corner into the kitchen.

Both were out of sight when the phone rang. Lisa was quick to pick it up, before it had even finished the first ring. "Hello?" she said, then held it by her knee as she yelled into the kitchen, "Nick, it's Pete." She put the

phone back to her ear. Louis could hear Nick from the kitchen as he picked up the phone, yelling back, "I got it." Lisa kept the phone to her ear, with no intention of hanging up. Louis shook his head at her, taking the phone from her hand and returning it to the cradle. Lisa leaned back into the couch, grinning at him.

He shrugged at her, as if to say, what's so funny, but she just kept grinning. He could tell she was in a good mood, a fun mood, but he couldn't match it. "You don't know anything about anything," he told her.

"I know enough," she said. She turned her attention back to the TV, a slight smile still on her face. Louis turned and left her there, following Nick's voice into the kitchen.

"Bring it over here," Nick said into the phone. Louis sat down at the kitchen table, across from Ron. "Just bring it over here," Nick said again, impatiently. He hung up the phone and looked at Ron, then Louis. He stood up abruptly and walked over to the kitchen door, looking into the living room. "Lisa, go somewhere," he said. He looked back into the kitchen, at Louis. "Louis, take her somewhere, please."

"Sure," said Louis, but all the urgency and hidden anxiety was starting to give him a headache. He said, "You guys going to tell me what's going on?"

Nick, still looking out the door, said to Lisa, "Were you and Louis going somewhere?"

Ron said, "We don't know what's going on."

Lisa came into the kitchen, saying, "Are we going to that birthday party?"

Louis didn't want to go to a birthday party. To tell the truth, he wanted the quiet of his own home, which would at this time be empty. He could sense Nick's and Ron's desperate desire to fix things, to protect themselves, to cover their tracks, but he himself was feeling separated, frustrated, and he was starting to get angry. Leave me out of your plans, he wanted to say, look what you've already done. They all looked at him, waiting. He shook his head and said, "I'm going to walk to my house. I don't really feel up to that party."

Nick said, quickly, "You and Lisa are going to your house?"

Louis could tell Lisa didn't like that, the way Nick was trying to get rid of her. He felt a small rush of anger at Nick, at the way he was always pushing people around. Ignoring Nick, he said, "Lisa, you want to come to my house for a while?" She shrugged like it didn't matter, but Nick could see she did want to go. "Come on," he said, and left the kitchen. He went straight to the front door and out, only looking back to see if Lisa was following. Neither of them spoke anything until they had turned the corner two houses down.

“How far is your house?” asked Lisa, who had never been there.

“Not far,” Louis said, giving her a little smile. She seemed to sense that he was not in the mood for chatter, merely following along beside and slightly behind him.

In the fresh air, his claustrophobia and the strange sense of urgent frustration were fading. He was surprised at how comfortable their silence was, now, outside away from her house. On the other hand, he felt far from normal. His mind was full of things; he knew he could share none of them with Lisa. She was easygoing and funny. He liked her, but they didn’t know each other well enough to be called friends.

After the events of the previous day, as the hazy clouds of smoke had appeared around his friends, he had called into question his own perceptions, and even to some degree his own sanity. He had been, not frightened, but certainly concerned. My mind is playing tricks on me, is what he thought, which meant, It’s not to be trusted.

But now, in the daylight, sanity seemed to matter less. In the open air, the vague sense of ugly unease started to fade and his visions took on a spectacular beauty. He slowed enough that Lisa was walking beside him. He wanted to look at her without her notice. In the sunlight, unimpeded by shadow, she glowed. Not in the metaphorical sense – well, yes, that, too – but in his own vision, with a clean, prismatic, jewel-like highlight of green surrounding her.

The whole street was lit up in the same way. There were trees along the sidewalk, each lit with its own fire. The grass in the yards and along the street, dry as it was under the summer sun, sparkled as though covered with dew.

Louis was transfixed. He slowed to a stop, taking it in. Lisa stopped too, looking at him with her head cocked to one side and her brow furrowed. Still, she didn’t say anything. He wondered for a moment if she could see it the way he was seeing it, the world lit up like a giant crystal disco ball. But there was nothing in her eyes that hinted she shared his vision. She was looking at him, simply, waiting for him.

He looked up at the sky. Beads of white danced in his vision. The sun was behind him. He could feel its heat on the back of his head. He turned to look at it, with no feeling of impending danger, just simple curiosity. But it was too bright, dazzling. For a moment he could see the sun, rainbows dancing around it, not the blazing white he was used to. Then he felt his eyes burning and watering, a pain in his head that felt like he was splitting.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground with his eyes closed. He could feel Lisa beside him, holding his arm. She was saying, “Danny? Danny, are you okay?”

He opened his eyes, but to his alarm nothing changed. “I can’t see,” he said.

“Are you okay, Danny?” she repeated.

“Why are you calling me Danny?” he asked, that just registering. And then, the alkaline taste of fear on his tongue, “Why can’t I see?” But to his relief, the darkness in his eyes began to lighten. His eyes watered, and now the black gave way to soft, great smudges of light, a bright crystal violet, and blue around it that he decided must be the sky. He blinked, trying to clear the liquid from his eyes.

“Danny?” Lisa said again.

“I’m not Danny,” Louis said, his voice a tight arrow of frustration. Now his eyes were clearing. He blinked again, tears streaming down his face, and when he opened his eyes he could see Lisa in front of him. “I’m not Danny,” he repeated.

She was holding tightly to his arm, and he saw her own tears with surprise. “What?” she said, “Who’s Danny?”

Louis said, “You called me Danny,” but she quickly shook her head.

“No, I didn’t.”

Louis said, “Why am I on the sidewalk?”

“You fell over,” she said. “You were moving funny.” He started to stand up. She grabbed his arm and pulled to help him. In a moment, he was standing again. “Are you all right?” she asked.

Louis didn’t know; he didn’t know what had happened. As far as he could see nothing had changed; the things of the world still glowed with eerie light. He remembered looking at the sun and felt a shiver of fear. Is that what did it? he wondered. He turned his back to it without looking up at it. “I’m fine,” he told Lisa, and began walking again, toward his house.

“Maybe we should go back, Louis.”

“I’m fine,” he said again.

Lisa shook her head, refusing at first to walk with him. He shrugged and continued on down the street. She started to follow after a moment, but they had only gone a short distance when Pete’s car came crawling down the street toward them. He pulled up next to them, the window down. “Louis,” he said.

“Hey, Pete,” Louis said. “Going to Nick’s?”

Pete nodded. Lisa said, to Pete, “Pete, take Louis with you.” There was a taut urgency to her voice, and Pete’s eyebrows came down abruptly.

“Why?” he asked, “What did he say?” To Louis he sounded suspicious.

Lisa looked confused. “I think he had a seizure or something.”

Louis shook his head. “I did not,” he said, “I didn’t have a seizure.”

But Pete was looking at him closely, now. “You don’t look too good.”

“I’m fine,” Louis said.

“You aren’t freaking out, are you?”

“No,” Louis said shortly, “I’m not freaking out.”

Pete looked at him for a second, then at Lisa. “Get in the car, Louis.”

Louis said, “Pete, I’m fine.” He started walking toward his house again. “Come on,” he said to Lisa. She followed, leaving Pete idling his engine by the side of the road behind them.

“Louis,” said Pete, “come back here.”

Louis ignored him. He heard the car door open and shut. Louis didn’t look back, but he could hear Pete’s feet behind them, and wasn’t surprised to feel a hand on his shoulder. Irritated, he looked down at Pete’s hand, curling tightly onto the fabric of his t-shirt. He was wearing a ring Louis hadn’t seen before (but he had, hadn’t he?). It was silver, of a snake eating its own tail, with a single red jewel for an eye. The red jewel glared in the sun. The strange dark smoke rose from Pete’s hand, but the ring itself had its own quality. Looking at it, Louis again felt his eyes watering, the splitting pain in his head. He felt himself losing his balance, Pete’s hand sliding off of his shoulder as he fell forward. He held his hands out to stop his fall, but by the time they touched the ground he was no longer aware of them.

#

He was lying on his back again, looking up into the sky. Pete was leaning over him, blocking out the sun. He looked panicked. Louis said, “You okay, Pete?”

Pete said, “Louis?”

Louis said, “Yeah, what?” At the same time he became conscious of the sound of Lisa crying.

Pete said, “What the fuck is wrong with you?” Louis started to sit up, and Pete pushed him back into the ground. “What’s wrong with you, why are you shaking like that?”

Louis said, “I’m not shaking.” He wasn’t, as far as he could tell. But then Pete took a hold of his shirt and he did start to shake, but it was Pete who was shaking, not Louis.

Pete said, “Quit freaking out.” He repeated it, louder, “Quit freaking out!” and then he screamed into Louis’ face, “STOP FREAKING OUT!!” Spittle flew from his lips onto Louis’ face, and Louis pushed him away with a sudden heave that sent Pete sprawling.

Louis stood over Pete, leaning back on his hands with a shocked look on his face. “I’m fine,” Louis said. Lisa wasn’t exactly crying, but her face

was blotched and her hair was a bit mussed and most of her brilliant light had darkened to little tendrils of brown smoke. Louis said, again, "I'm fine," but he didn't feel fine, he felt like he was losing his mind.

Lisa said, "Louis, you had a seizure." He shook his head at her, a silent no, but instead of continuing to his house, he walked around and opened the door to the passenger side of Pete's car. He sat down, closed the door, leaned back and closed his eyes. He could hear Pete and Lisa talking, but he ignored them. He wanted his splitting headache to go away. He tried not to think. He heard Pete getting into the car, Lisa climbing into the back seat, where they had carried the body just the day before. He kept his eyes closed, resisting the temptation to look around, the insane impulse to check for blood on the seat.

When they pulled into Nick's and Ron's driveway, Louis's headache was still going strong. He opened his eyes as the car came to a stop, opened the door, got out. He said nothing to Pete or Lisa. He didn't knock on the door, he never did; he just opened it and walked in. Nick and Ron were sitting on the couch watching TV. It seemed very dark after being outside. Nick and Ron looked up from the TV, squinting toward the door. Louis ignored them and went into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and took out a Coke, popped the tab and drank from it. He sat down at the kitchen table. He could hear Pete now, in the other room, and Lisa, and now they were all talking, too loud. He didn't pay any attention. He shut his eyes. He tried not to think. He drank from his Coke and hoped for his head to stop splitting.

#

No one came in to check on him there. He didn't know what they were doing and didn't care. He was grateful, as gradually his headache faded and he felt okay to open his eyes. His head was free of pain and felt reasonably whole by the time he finished his Coke. The other room sounded empty. He got another Coke from the refrigerator and sat and drank it. The kitchen was lit coldly white by the fluorescent bulb on the ceiling. He finished the second coke and got up and left the kitchen.

The living room was as empty as it had sounded. Louis went up the stairs, to Ron's room. It too was empty, but the window was open. Louis climbed out the window and onto the roof. They were all there except Lisa: Nick, Pete, and Ron. They were arguing about something, but they stopped when Louis climbed up to join them. Though they all seemed stressed, their looks weren't at all accusatory. Ron motioned him to sit down, so he did, next to Ron, in the shade.

Nick said, "Here, look at this," handing something to him. Louis took

it. It was an envelope, unmarked on the outside, with a card in it. On the front of the card it said:

BIRTHDAY DINNER

For

“Danny Glass”

July 27, 7:00pm

1506 Arquette Ct.

YOU ARE INVITED!

The name, “Danny Glass,” was handwritten, and on the inside of the card was this message, written in the same hand:

Hey Pete,

I’d love it if you came to my birthday dinner on Wednesday. Bring your friends. You know the ones I mean.

Danny

Louis read it twice, then handed it back to Nick. “Who’s Danny?” he asked.

“Who do you think?” Pete asked, shortly.

Ron said, “Pete found that in his dad’s car this morning. Don’t really know when it was put there.”

Louis said, “I thought you didn’t know him, Pete.”

Pete said, “I don’t know him, okay? He was in one of my classes, I don’t think I even ever talked to him.” There was an aggravated edge to Pete’s voice, and Louis realized Pete was not nearly as calm as he wanted to seem.

Louis said, “This can’t be from him.” They all looked away as if they had no answer to that. “It can’t be from him,” Louis insisted again, “he’s dead.”

“Maybe he’s not,” Ron said quietly.

Louis shook his head. “No, you all saw him.” But there was something about them all, especially Nick. For the first time, color rose around all of them other than black and grey. A pale yellow haze surrounded all of them, though Pete’s had something of a sickly greenish cast. Ron and Nick looked calm, besides, at least more relaxed than they had since yesterday. “You guys are planning on going to this thing tonight.” He was beginning to feel numb, it was all coming too fast.

Ron said, “Yeah, we already decided.”

“I just want to know what’s going on,” Nick added.

“It’s a trap,” Louis said, because it didn’t make any sense any other way. “You don’t really believe today is this kid’s birthday, do you?”

“A trap for what?” said Ron. “From who?” And that was the thing. There was no way it made any sense.

“Someone’s playing games with us,” Louis said. “Look at it, someone

knows what we did, we're being set up."

Nick looked at him, his mood unchanged. "You think we don't know this is some kind of set up? So what? You know it's not the police, you know it's not something they would do." He was speaking for Louis' benefit, not arguing, this Louis could already tell. It was decided. "I just want to know what's going on," said Nick again. "I've been going crazy." Louis had no reply to that, nothing to argue on that score, of course. "It's just after four now," Nick went on. "We're going to take Mom's car at around 6:30. You coming?" He already knew the answer; they all did.

"Yeah," said Louis, still shaking his head. "Yeah, might as well."

They all seemed relieved, but Louis felt none of it. When Pete said, "Smoke a blunt?" Louis waited while it was rolled, and he hit it when it came around. But he kept his eyes half-closed and imagined himself far away, separate from all of them.

#

But he felt much less separate from them standing on the porch in front of 1506 Arquette Ct. Over the past two hours trepidation had begun eating its way into his nervous system. Louis could feel it in them all, a sweaty apprehension that caused them to avoid each other's eyes and clench their jaws shut. The weed extended the moments too long, blurring curiosity and fear into a strange sense of waiting.

He had not been to this house before, but he had passed it many times. He had always considered it something of an eyesore. In a neighborhood where a single birdbath could be considered decorative, this yard stood out for its numerous rock decorations, elaborate shrubbery, and wooden figures like ducks and pixies.

They crowded onto the small porch like trick-or-treaters, silent as Pete rang the doorbell. None of them knew what to expect. Louis tried to picture the face of the boy they had beaten to death and could not. Were that face to appear in the doorway, he wondered if he would recognize it.

But when the door opened, it was a woman who stood there. Louis did not know her, but he had seen her before, often, working in the yard. She was ugly – not grotesquely so, but too much sun over too many years had burned her skin into a blotchy brown. Of course he had not before seen the strange play of light he saw around her now, as to Louis's eyes she seemed enshrouded in a viscous inky indigo that obscured the play of her features in the shadow of the door. She was smiling, showing teeth that were possibly dentures.

"You must be Danny's friends," she said, "Please, come in."

She pulled the screen door open. Pete shrugged, the tiniest motion of

the shoulders, then stepped through the door. The others followed, Louis bringing up the rear, self-consciously pushing the door closed behind him. Nick let burst an awkward cough, then said, "Is Danny around?"

The woman, leading them down a hallway, said, "He was getting ready, it seems he isn't done yet." She stopped when she came to a dining room, ushering them in. "I'm his Aunt November. I've wanted to have a special dinner for Danny for a long time," she said. "I'm so glad you could come." The dining room was elegantly prepared. The tablecloth was white with subtle satin trim and still showed marks from having been folded. Louis wondered if the woman could sense their anxiety. The table had not been entirely set, though silverware and napkins marked each place, and a flower arrangement stood in the center of the table.

The utter normalcy of everything made him want to scream. Danny was nowhere in sight, and Louis was unsurprised. He was convinced the boy was dead. He found the possibility of Danny's being alive somehow embarrassing, and cruelly contradictory to the heaviness he felt on his spirit.

Seated at the table, across from Louis, Nick said boldly, "So how has Danny's summer been?" No doubt he thought he seemed casual, but to Louis there was a discernable tremor in his voice. Louis looked at the strange woman, Aunt November, taking advantage of her face turned in profile, wondering what she knew, or didn't know.

"You should ask him when he joins us," the woman said, her casual tone too easy, too friendly. She made a quick gesture with her hands, palm to palm, almost like a silent, sliding clap. "Soup should be ready, coming right up," and she disappeared through a swinging door. It swung back towards them, like a pendulum, and through it Louis glimpsed a section of kitchen, dominated by a huge oven and a stove top covered with pans.

Ron said, in a quick whisper, "She's going to eat us," expelling a short bark of a laugh. Louis shot him a look, but Ron went on, less whisper and more of a taunt, "Like Hansel and Gretel. 'My, what a big oven you have, the better to fry you with.'" He started to laugh bitterly again, but Pete was suddenly snarling at him, his upper lip pulled back with such savagery that Ron flinched. Pete seemed about to say something, but instead he dropped his lip back over his teeth, and the silence stretched until Aunt November's return through the swinging door. She was still smiling as though this were a normal dinner party, carrying bowls that she deposited around the table. She disappeared back through the door.

"What about poison?" said Nick, quietly, after the door closed. "She could be trying to poison us." Ron was nodding as if he'd already thought of that.

Pete said, "I don't think she even knows," but the others looked at him like he was crazy. No one had time to reply; a second later the woman returned again, this time with a mid-size pot of soup and ladle.

"It's borsch," she said, placing the bowl in the middle of the table, next to the flower arrangement. "That's a traditional Russian beet soup. The recipe has been in our family for generations." They looked at the soup, the bright redness of it, and no one made a move to take any. November sat down at the head of the table, took the ladle and filled her own bowl. They watched her spoon a few bites into her mouth with evident pleasure. "Please," she said, when no one moved to join her, "help yourselves."

Louis was watching her with fascination. The deep murky blue cloud around her was thickening, becoming almost completely opaque. The room, though not brightly lit, was far from dark; still, except for her eyes, her features were becoming increasingly hard to make out.

The room was too silent. Aunt November said nothing as she ate her bowl of soup. The boys wanted to demand answers, but no one quite dared.

Louis was the first to take some of the soup. He sensed the woman's smile as he started to fill his bowl. The others looked at him without expression, waiting. Too much waiting, Louis thought. Too much waiting. The soup was red like tomato soup, but thinner, and had vegetables and tiny bits of meat. It tasted delicious. The warmth of it in his mouth gave him a rush of courage. He said, to Aunt November, "How old is Danny today?" He ignored the others, each adopting their own reproving look.

Aunt November, on the other hand, smiled as though they had shared a secret joke. "He is seventeen."

Louis forced a smile of his own. He said, "I only met him once." He paused, but the woman didn't respond. He said, "He seemed nice." Only after he had spoken did he recognize the finality in his tone, and the tinge of solemnity that made Ron, across from him, look down into his empty bowl.

November still smiled, but it seemed to Louis her eyes grew colder. All she said was, "Yes, he is." Her gaze trailed off into the distance. Then she looked at him sharply, saying, "You must be Louis."

That shocked him, but he tried to keep his face clear and his voice even. "Yes, how did you know?"

Aunt November said, "Danny told me about all of you. He was looking forward to your visit."

"Really?" Louis said, "I wasn't sure he'd remember me." The indigo blur around November darkened at this, but she sat silently, her expression unchanged. He said, "I'm sorry, we should have introduced ourselves. This is Ron," who looked up from his bowl and nodded once before look-

ing back into his bowl. “This is Nick,” who mumbled “nice to meet you” and couldn’t seem to hold back a scowl, and finally, “This is Pete,” who didn’t look up or say anything at all.

“He is blessed to have such friends,” said November, with apparent warmth. “He’s always been a very quiet boy, rather like you young men seem to be.” She gave them all a sweeping glance, then continued eating her soup.

Louis continued eating his as well, noticing with surprise that he had almost finished the bowl. He said to Ron, rather pointedly, “This is delicious, you should have some,” which made Ron scowl and November’s smile widen.

“Yes, please,” said November, “you simply must try the borsch.” When the others still didn’t reach for the ladle, Aunt November grabbed it herself, scooping soup into Ron’s bowl, then into Nick’s, then into Pete’s. Ron and Nick mumbled quiet thanks. Pete said nothing, but after a moment, all began eating the borsch.

Louis finished his bowl of borsch, and pushed it away from him. Aunt November finished hers as well, and they regarded each other across the table, the others still sullenly slurping their soup. November smiled and stood up. “I will go see what’s taking Danny so long.” She opened the swinging door into the kitchen and disappeared.

Immediately, Nick gave him a savage look and whispered, “Quit talking to her, Louis.”

“I thought you wanted to know what the hell was going on?” Louis demanded.

Nick shook his head furiously. “She doesn’t know anything, can’t you see that? She’s trying to get information out of us, can’t you tell?” His tone was impatient and condescending. “She knows he’s dead. I don’t think she knows we did it.”

“She knew my name,” said Louis.

Ron said, “Yeah, now thanks to you she knows all our names.”

Louis said, “You don’t think she did already?”

Pete said, “I’m telling you, she doesn’t know anything.”

“Who cares?” Ron demanded. “Who cares? I’m just going to eat and get out of here, I’m tired of this shit.”

At that, Pete got a strange pinched look on his face. “Why don’t we just leave now?” he asked. But he didn’t stand up, and neither did anyone else.

For his part, Louis’s head was starting to hurt again, with that strange splitting sensation, like someone was gently sawing through the center of his forehead. He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, the other three were looking at him anxiously.

“What?” he asked.

Ron said, “Are you okay, Louis?”

Louis said, “I’m fine,” though his eyes were blurring some, and he had to blink a lot. He wiped at his forehead, at his eyes, and realized he was squinting.

Pete asked, “What’s going on with you, Louis?”

Louis, confused, said, “What are you talking about?”

But then, the door to the kitchen swung open and Aunt November returned, carrying more bowls. Humming softly, she exchanged the bowls she was carrying for the bowls of borsch, most of them uneaten. Stacking them precariously, she exited. “Pot roast will be out in a moment,” she said as the door swung shut behind her.

Immediately, Nick whispered furiously, “Shut up! All of you! She only knows what you all tell her!”

The door swung open again as Aunt November returned, with an oven mitt on one hand, the other protected by a washcloth, awkwardly carrying a large pot. Steam curled up around the glass lid where the handle of a spoon protruded. She put it in the middle of the table, dropping the mitt and washcloth next to it, then she took the lid off the pot and set it on the oven mitt.

“Our family’s special pot roast,” she said, a proud glint in her eye. “Traditional recipe.”

It smelled delicious, similar to the microwaveable turkey potpies that were Louis’s favorite, and despite – or perhaps because of – all the tension he felt a pang of hunger gnawing. Nick, impatient, said, “Miss November, is Danny coming?” Aunt November didn’t respond. She took the big spoon and the bowl in front of Nick and filled it with pot roast. She did the same with Pete’s, then Ron’s. Nick pushed his chair back a little bit and made a small show of looking at his watch. “It really is getting late,” he said, as she filled Louis’s bowl.

Aunt November raised her eyebrows at that, but filled her own bowl before saying, “Really? There’s a lot of food here, I’d hate to see it go to waste.” She picked up a fork and took a bite, chewing assiduously, eyebrows still perked too high on her forehead. “Delicious,” she said, and took another.

Nick’s eyes flicked away from her and down, giving in, and he pulled his chair a little closer and picked up his own fork. With his silent permission, all the boys started eating, except Louis, who was watching with fascination the strange yellow steam that was coming off the roast. He had never seen colored steam come off food that he could remember, but the

others didn't seem to notice, so he too was silent, his own eyes betraying too much color recently.

He still hadn't taken a bite, when Pete suddenly made a face and spit into his hand, saying, "I think I bit into a bone," then, looking into his hand, "that's not a bone. What is that?" They all tried to lean over to look into his hand, but it was Louis who had the best angle.

"What is that?" he asked, "is that a snake?" He could see it was, though, it was a snake eating its own tail, and he had seen it before. "Pete," he said, "isn't that your ring?"

Pete looked at him, puzzled. "This isn't a ring," he said, but Louis knew better, knew it to be a piece of a ring he had seen before.

"It's part of a ring," he said. "You were wearing that ring, I saw you."

But Pete was shaking his head firmly. "I don't wear rings," he said, "I don't like rings."

"I'm sorry, did your ring break?" interrupted Aunt November, with sympathy, "Is your mouth okay?"

"It wasn't my ring," said Pete, indignantly, but then Nick startled them all by attacking his food with a vengeance, with such wildness that Ron snorted.

"Damn, Nick," he said, "hungry?"

Nick barely slowed down. "Shut up," he said quickly, decisively, and kept attacking his bowl. The others, astonished, were silent, even Aunt November, eyebrows still raised, smiling benignly. In less than a minute, his bowl was empty. He set it down with a smack, and looked November in the eye. "Done?" he said, definitely more of a question than a statement. But after Aunt November nodded slightly, there was no hesitation as Nick pushed his chair back and left the dining room, hurrying down the hall and out of the house.

In the silence, Aunt November began humming again. The song was easy to recognize; "happy birthday to Danny, happy birthday to you."

Dully, Louis said, "Shouldn't we wait for Danny to sing happy birthday?"

"Oh, Danny," said November. "Poor Danny." She was still smiling. "Danny's at the table now."

"You're crazy," Ron said. "What is this, a séance?" But Louis knew it was more than that, and maybe Pete did too – the expression on his face was unreadable.

"You expect us to eat this?" he asked. He knew what it was, he understood now what this madwoman had done. And now he felt the borsch, or whatever had been in the soup, heavy on his stomach, and a sharp pain, a splitting pain, again through his head. His throat spasmed, and he swallowed, hard.

VENAL HOT WINGS

Scott A. Russell

Her plump

Tongue rasps oily
Flesh from steaming bones

And her dexterous digits
Like a child's
Pile them neatly

On a second plastic plate.

Six little lives
Are sucked clean between her lips
In the name of decadence,

Her eyes fixed on mine,
Her legs lascivious and

Insinuating beneath the table

(love laughs, a mouthful of fire
love smiles, lipstick with gore)

November was still smiling, but her eyes had taken on a cold distance. "Little boys think they can do anything," she said. "What, you don't have the stomach for it?" Her tone was contemptuous.

Louis didn't answer. He was tired of her indigo glow, and now he could see his own spark red around his hands. Angrily, he grabbed his own fork and took a bite. He expected a lance of pain in

his brow; instead, to his surprise, the pain lessened and the colors around November noticeably dimmed. He took another bite, the pain slowly evaporating. He thought wildly, it can all go back. Of course nothing could go back, he knew that more than ever. But bite after bite, as the tell-tale colors faded around November and his friends, he felt sanity returning. He understood that he would not be ill, that his stomach and intestines and liver and whatever else he didn't know about would do their proper job. In time whatever he put into his body this night would leave it, and the body would go on. Indigestion would pass as it always did.

Louis bit. He chewed. He tasted. With difficulty, he swallowed. Eventually, his bowl clean and his vision clear, he left the table.

LAUNDRY

Gabe Herron

There's a laundry mat down the street
with a sign at the front window that reads
"No Drinking and Washing same time."

It's written on the back of a paper placemat
with the Chinese zodiac printed on the front

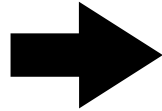
I'm a rabbit.

The place is open twenty-four hours a day
and it makes me wonder what gets laundered here
late at night

when no one is around.

BIO

Mel Waldman, Ph. D.



Dr. Mel Waldman is a licensed New York State psychologist and a candidate in Psychoanalysis at the Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies (CMPS). He is also a poet, writer, artist, and singer/songwriter. After 9/11, he wrote 4 songs, including "Our Song," which addresses the tragedy. His stories have appeared in numerous literary reviews and commercial magazines including HAPPY, SWEET ANNIE PRESS, NEW THOUGHT JOURNAL, THE BROOKLYN LITERARY REVIEW, HARDBOILED, HARDBOILED DETECTIVE, DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, ESPIONAGE, and THE SAINT. He is a past winner of the literary GRADIVA AWARD in Psychoanalysis and was nominated for a PUSHCART PRIZE in literature. Periodically, he has given poetry and prose readings and has appeared on national T.V. and cable T.V. He is a member of Mystery Writers of America, Private Eye Writers of America, American Mensa, Ltd., and the American Psychological Association. He is currently working on a mystery novel inspired by Freud's case studies. *Who Killed the Heartbreak Kid?*, a mystery novel, was published by iUniverse in February 2006. It can be purchased at www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/, www.bn.com, at www.amazon.com, and other online bookstores or through local bookstores.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

Mel Waldman

On a bus, in the wasteland of the Southeast Bronx, I sat next to a young woman in a white uniform. She screamed into her cell phone: "He's no danger to the children."

Ten seconds of silence.

"Don't believe in statistics. Just because he killed the dog..."

Five seconds of silence.

"He's not gonna hurt the kids. You see, it's good he got rid of the rage."

Three seconds of silence.

"Damn you. He ain't no murderer! I mean, killing a dog don't count. He's really very gentle and..."

One second of silence.

"I couldn't love no man who would harm my kids. No way."

She got off the bus. Her right arm looked bruised, I believe. Or was it my imagination?

I stayed on the bus until I got to the medical center. My first therapy patient waited for me outside the seething building which was still closed. The sun was blazing on this beautiful summer morning.

It was too early for violence, I thought. Yet the metamorphosis had already begun. Contagious and insidious, the raw rage crept into my being, filling me up, and ripping my soul apart in a secret abattoir.

Before the beginning...

Will Sue remember to feed the dog?

He couldn't let it go. He thought it'd be different but it was the excruciating same. He sat at his desk. He'd been "working late" more and more, staying in the office after everyone left, sitting in the dark trying to work up the nerve to go through with it.

Will Mark pass Driver's Ed.?

Who's gonna pick up Brittney from soccer practice?

He'd had the gun for weeks now, got it at Dick's Sporting Goods. The decision was made but he hadn't done it yet. Every time he called Sue to say he had to work late again he figured it'd be the last time he talked to her. He'd revised the note on his computer until it was the most efficient, clear, and direct suicide note he was capable of writing. He even pulled out a thesaurus when he was working on it. That was the problem.

I'm Hungry, should have gotten the foot-long for lunch.

I need new socks, these have a hole.

Are those knives on the infomercial really that good?

He'd been waiting for something to happen, that's why he was still breathing. He'd been waiting for the moment of clarity, the moment when your whole life flashes before your eyes. It never came. He tried to force it. He was especially determined now, trying to think about his legacy, about how he'd be remembered, what his lasting impact on the world would be, if he'd ever be understood and appreciated for what he had to do. It didn't work.

Could I have gotten a better deal on the gun?

Should I have used pills instead?

I wonder what's on TV tonight.

It pissed him off. The last few moments of his life were ticking away and all he could think about was nothing. A million things but nothing. Just all the crap that slowly takes you over. The crap that might as well be a strung-out crackhead with a knife in the subway because it mugs you just the same. It takes everything from you. You can't stop it. It laughs at you because it's in your head and you can never get it out.

Will I feel it when I pull the trigger?

Will the janitor have to clean up my guts?

It wouldn't stop. There was nothing poetic about it. Nothing inspired or beautiful or tragic or even terrible. He was about to blow his brains out but it was just another thing, just another member of the parade of endless, meaningless thoughts that marched through his pathetic head 24 hours a day. That's why he had to do it.

I wonder how long until they find another assistant sales manager?

A PRE-EMPTIVE POEM

Anthony Gee

When I was 32
I thought I could smell death
for the first time
my friend Saul said
he had smelled it
but he was only 29.
I wonder if it was
the same dead body?

When I was 32
I could label all my organs,
feel them slither
and pulse
and twinge
like eels eating
one another's tails,
it's at this point
I know what you're thinking:

“O, pondering
the moribund,
o, poetry faggot
feeling more than us
and not telling it
like it is.”

But hey,
I'm just telling you
what happened
to me.

I know what you're thinking.

big

Anthony Gee is the lighthouse keeper on a rocky shore of broken tourists, otherwise known as Australia. By day he does various menial, yet character building jobs and by night he writes poems and short stories, draws silly pictures and fronts his band, The Handsome Women. Anthony fears nothing save for big cockroaches and blank sheets of paper. His favourite colour is probably the same as yours. You can write him or smite him at: gee733@hotmail.com or www.myspace.com/the-handsomewomen.

DRESSING A DREAM

Ryan R. Ennis

Lydia Gimple burst into her daughter's bedroom on a humid September afternoon in 1947, causing the high school senior to flinch as she sat before her dressing table. Lydia had a new dress draped across her arm.

"Ma, what's the matter?" Allison asked, staring at her mother's image through the vanity mirror. The girl clutched the V-neck of her plaid robe. It wasn't like her mother not to knock, but the woman was carried away by the moment. If the evening went as Lydia hoped, her dreams would finally come true.

A smile spread across Lydia's face. "On my way home from work, I walked past Sandra's Boutique and saw the perfect dress," her mother explained. "It was half off—so I had to buy it for you." Lydia laid the sleeveless light-blue dress with a lace collar and button-up front across her daughter's bed.

Allison was about to turn around and have a better look at her mother's surprise, but Lydia directed her daughter's face back towards the mirror. Allison's long reddish hair was still wet from a recent shower, so Lydia pushed up the towel that had rested around her daughter's shoulder and dried her daughter's curly tresses with it. Lydia next picked up a pink brush from the table and slowly groomed Allison's hair, careful not to damage the tangled ends.

"What's going on? What's all this attention for?" Allison said, creasing her forehead.

"Oh, Allison, please don't do that," Lydia said. "If you keep scrunching your forehead, wrinkles will develop there. It happened to your aunt Susan . . ."

"When can I see the new dress?" Allison asked.

"In a minute, dear," her mother replied. "I want to make sure your hair is brushed properly. Otherwise, it'll end up frizzy."

"The way you're acting, Ma, I'd swear you're having someone important stop by today. What are you up to?"

"Allison, you have such a suspicious mind! I'm not up to anything. But Mr. Wainwright's son, who now owns and runs the Westwood Hotel where I work, is coming for dinner soon."

"Really . . . ? How did you manage that?"

“Well, I boasted how I can make an excellent cheese soufflé. He fired his personal cook a few weeks ago and says he’s tired of eating out at restaurants, so naturally he was more than happy to accept my invitation.”

“I had no idea . . . you were interested in Mr. Wainwright. Isn’t he a little young for you? He must be in his early thirties, and you’re forty—”

Lydia used her hand to cover her daughter’s mouth. “You know it’s not polite to reveal a lady’s age—I raised you better than that.”

Allison gently flung her mother’s arm away. “Do you need me to run to the store for anything?”

“No, I have all the ingredients. The only thing I need you to do is look as pretty as you can for Mr. Wainwright. Make sure you put on some rouge and lipstick.”

“What? You have to be kidding! Ma?”

“Allison, you’re very pretty and smart—a great catch for any man.” Lydia threw her arms around her daughter’s shoulder and hugged her briskly. “You’ll be eighteen in only a few months, an adult, and many men will be interested in dating you. Besides, I was already married by the time I was your age,” Lydia reminded her daughter before exiting the room.

Lydia retraced her steps down the hall and went into the kitchen. She took out a few eggs and a block of cheese from the refrigerator, and then a large mixing bowl and grater from one of the cupboards. Within no time, the cheese soufflé was baking in the oven.

While slicing the zucchini for a side dish, she daydreamed about what her future would hold if Mr. Wainwright fell in love with Allison. Since her husband’s death five years ago, Lydia found it hard to make ends meet. For almost a year, her thoughts had been consumed with how she could set aside enough money for a new sofa in the living room. Now, though, her mind was focused on beautiful clothing, furs, jewelry, and the limousine that drove Mr. Wainwright to work; surely he would be generous to his mother-in-law once he and Allison married. After all, Lydia often overheard him brag to his friends at the hotel that he had “money to burn.” Perhaps he would even invite Lydia to move into that enormous house he had on Norcrest Street, where the most affluent owned properties in their town of Havensville, New York. It was as if Lydia were walking through the movie screen of a Hollywood picture about the rich and famous, more than ready to join the actors.

But then the doorbell rang, abruptly shutting off the film projector of her fantasy. She put down the knife and answered it.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Gimple,” said Candice as she stood on the door-

mat. She was her daughter's classmate and friend. "Is Allison home?"

"Yes, but she's busy right now," Lydia replied. "Can she call you later?"

"Well, can she talk for just a bit?" Candice practically pleaded. "I forgot what the homework is for civics class. Allison is always so good at writing down assignments and sticking them in her textbook. I'm on my way to baby-sit for Mr. Mercer's kids down the street, so I dropped by for a minute."

"Very well—but promise you won't keep her."

"I promise."

Lydia motioned for Candice to wait in the vestibule; then she walked down the hall. More composed now, she knocked at her daughter's bedroom door. "Allison? Did you try on the dress yet?" There was no response.

Lydia opened the door and walked in. "Allison?" she repeated, but her daughter wasn't there. She then hurried to the adjoining bathroom and looked in. Again, no Allison. "Where is that girl?" Lydia murmured to herself. Returning her gaze to the bedroom, Lydia found the new dress still lying untouched across the bed. Had Allison bolted out the side door? "Allison has always had a stubborn streak," she thought aloud. A hot, pulsating sensation moved from her rapidly beating heart and settled in her forehead, causing her head to throb. What was she going to do?

All of a sudden, the doorbell rang again. Who could it be now? Lydia wondered. Was Mr. Wainwright here already? She glanced at the clock on her daughter's nightstand, observing it was 5:00 P.M. Presently, she couldn't remember if she had told Mr. Wainwright to come at five or five-thirty.

"Mrs. Gimple, I'm looking out the side window and see Mr. Wainwright on your doorstep," Candice called out. "Do you want me to let him in?"

Lydia had to think quickly. Fortunately, Lydia hadn't gained any weight over the years. She was still the exact size that she had been in high school, the same size Allison was. Fitting into that dress would be no problem; she loved its simple yet stylish design. Lydia had watched too many movies over the past few years at the downtown theater to give up on her ambitions. On the big screen, her favorite actors were always resourceful no matter how difficult the situation could be.

"Yes, Candice!" Lydia yelled back, running her daughter's brush hurriedly through her shoulder-length hair. "But tell him I'll be just a minute!" she added.

the one at mardi gras



Janet Kuypers
from the chapbook "Dual"

I was at mardi gras last weekend and I got a bunch of beads from parades (no, I didn't lift my shirt for them) - and a friend of mine had a balcony on bourbon street, and so we were on it on friday night, and the swarms of people stretched for over a mile. it was a mob, no one could walk and the crowd just kind of carried them along. and all the men expected women to get naked for them for beads, and from my balcony I would see every few minutes a series of flash pops, coupled with a roar from the crowd, and I knew a woman lifted her shirt for the screaming masses. I refused, however, to strip for drunk strangers, when I knew they all expected me to, being on a balcony and all.

so men would look up at me and stretch out their arms, looking up inquisitively, as if to ask either for me to give them beads or for me to strip. and since I wasn't stripping and had plenty of my own beads, I decided to turn the tables and see if men would accept the same conditions they asked of these women.

when they looked up at me for something, I would say, "drop your pants." they would look up at me, confused, because the women are the ones that are supposed to be stripping, but in general I got two responses from the men: either they would look at me like I was crazy and walk away, or they would shrug, as if to say, "okay," and then they would start unzipping their pants. then they would make a gesture to turn around, as if to ask, "do you want to see my butt?" and that's when i'd yell, "the front," and then they'd turn back around, with their pants and their underwear at their knees, and start moving their hips (which I never asked for, by the way).

so over the course of the evening I managed to get at least twenty men to strip like this for me, and I was amazed that there was this society, this microcosm of society, that allowed this kind of debauchery in the streets, a sort of prostitution-for-plastic-beads form of capitalism.

so I was reveling in this bizarre annual ritual when this man, average to everyone else, wearing grey and minding his own business, decided to look

up at me. so I asked him to drop his pants, and instead of disgustedly leaving or willingly obliging he crossed both hands on his chest and looked up at me, as if to ask, “you want to me do what? you naughty, naughty girl.” and he smiled and looked up at me, and it occurred to me that I finally found someone in this massive crowd that thinks they way I do.

now, new orleans has a population, from what I hear, of about one million, but during mardi gras there are about nine or ten million people, and all I could think was that of all these people here, I finally found someone who wouldn't blindly do what I asked, but at the same time wouldn't think I was crazy for asking.

of course as I looked at him I also happened to think that he was stunning, by far the best-looking man I had seen that entire night, he looked like he had style, like he was self-confident, but then again, I'm near-sighted and was on a balcony drunk at mardi gras.

we hit an impasse when he wouldn't strip and neither would i, so his attention was eventually diverted to other balconies. but I noticed for that next half-hour that he never left from under my balcony, and every once in a while he would still turn around and look up at me. oh, boy, I was thinking the entire time, I know this is no way to start a relationship, hell, I'm sure this guy lives nowhere near me, and I haven't even had a real conversation with him, but he's damn near perfect. and all that time we were screaming and partying at mardi gras, he would still occasionally turn around and make sure I was still there.

and finally he looked at me, signalling that he had to move on with his friends, and I held up my index finger to make him wait and then I threw a bunch of beads at him. part of me threw them because he was a good sport, putting up with my taunting and still not giving in, but a part of me threw them because I saw in him the strong values and the sense of self-worth, the sheer love of life, the desire to be alive, that I possessed all along and have always longed for in someone else.



coquina

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

1

I can't imagine the number of times I've been there visiting Florida, Christmas with my parents a plastic tree decorated with sand dollars and red ribbons, eating Christmas dinner and listening to Johnny Mathis. and after the Irish coffee, father with his brandy snifter in hand mother and the other girls putting away the dishes, the carolers would come, walking in front of our home singing "We wish you a Merry Christmas" over and over again. we would walk outside and the cool breeze almost felt like Christmas after the hot, humid days. and we would stand on our driveway smile and nod. you could see down the road all the candles in paper bags lining the street. and for a few lights the bag burned.

2

and we would take boat rides off the coast, my parents and their friends, to a tiny island. dad drinking beer sometimes steering the boat (being on control), the women sitting together in the shade worrying about their hair. I would sit at the front sunglasses, swimsuit and sunburn feeling the wind slapping me in the face and turning my head away from the boat into the wind away from them .to face it again. docking at a shoreline, everyone jumping out little bags in their hands; the women go looking for shells the men go barbecue. after an hour or two the sandwiches, potato chips eaten, the soda and beer almost gone, we turn around and head back. we have conquered.



3

and I remember the coquinas. the little shells, you could find them alive on the beaches north of the pier in Naples. going to the beach I would look for a spot to find them. I felt they were all my own. they burrowed their way into the sand to avoid the light, worming their way away from me. I unearthed a group of coquinas once, fascinated with their

color of their shells, the way they moved before they could hide. I collected them in a jar, took them home with me.

what did you teach me? what have you taught me to do? is this it? is this what it has become? is this what has become of me? of you? of us?

and I took them home.

I added salt water and sand, but I couldn't feed them. I realized soon that they would die.

so I let them.

Understood

Janet Kuypers
from the chapbook "Dual"



Isn't it funny how irony can grab a hold of you and turn you upside-down?

Actually, irony doesn't do that to you - it does everything else to you, and everyone else sees the irony.

A father owned a bungee-jumping company, and one day he had his family with him and they wanted him to jump. Because, I mean, it's a safe thing, you know. And it was his wedding anniversary, and he said Okay, I Can Do It. And he got up there and he got strapped in and the kids turned the video camera on.

And yes, he was strapped to the rope, but the rope wasn't strapped to the crane.

The rope was strapped to nothing.

And his own children got to videotape their own father struggling for the end of the rope, or the end of the ledge, or safety, or anything.

And this is a true story, I tell you

And he had nothing like this happen before, and this is the irony that everyone else saw. Because it wasn't irony that got a hold of him and turned him upside-down. it was gravity, and mistakes, and everything that could go wrong.

Which did.

It was something that got a hold of you. Something, I tell you. and everyone else after the fact understood.

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revealing all your
dirty little secrets

Down in the Dirt
Alexandria Rand, editor
AlexRand@scars.tv
<http://scars.tv>

Scars Publications and Design
829 Brian Court
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

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