



Epiphany

Short Stories

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Down in the Dirt
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SCAR

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You should never open the cellar door

I.

“So, what do you think, son? You like it?” The man who asks the question and suggests that his son may have something interesting and valuable to say is not my father. He is my uncle; mum’s brother. And he is not talking to me but to my 11-year-old cousin, a weak boy with blond hair and thick glasses. Seated on the floor, he busies himself with small metallic toy-cars—why does he not want to play with me? Because I am too young for him, certainly. He has more important things to do, like answering strange questions.

My uncle pours a small quantity of an unusual tinted liquid in the biggest and most elegant glass I’ve ever seen. And then he smiles. Hesitantly. Waiting for an answer to the question he has just asked.

My cousin starts by looking at the cork, a nice black cork with small white dots. He seems to be satisfied with it. Then he sticks his nose in the glass and noisily sniffs and gulps the liquid. His eyes seemingly closed, it’s not easy to determine, he starts mumbling some words as if they were coming from who-knows-where. Then, more clearly, with this low voice, he speaks of bouquet, “nice, mmm, depth and well balanced” does he say, of fruits, “raspberries, certainly a Pinot but with blackberries too, an assemblage I think, a Bordeaux”, and sun and spring, “it dates from a very sunny and hot year, its body is a bit strong for me”... So many wonders that seem to me as unrelated to wine as wine is unrelated to me. After all, I am only 7. I barely know what wine is. And my father keeps telling me that I will drink wine later and that I have time to get used to alcohol and that I will grow older and then ... maybe ... if I like it... But for now, I have to wait and gasp at the show of my cousin. I do not know if I like it but it does not make a difference. It’s impressive. “How does...”. I begin a sentence but my father shushes me, “Will you let your cousin...”. “I see”, interrupts my uncle. He bursts out laughing and shouts to my mother, “Your husband will never change, huh! Ah Ah Ah”.

And to me, “Come with me boy, I’m going to show you something important”. He puts his hand on my shoulder and leads me to the other side of the house. My cousin resumes his game with the small cars. We arrive at the end of the hall. On the right, there are three steps and we are in front of a door. Huge. All metal, with a lock that seems as big as my hand. “You see this?” he asks me. I feel his hand heavy on my shoulder. “You see this cellar door? The wine comes from here, from behind this door”.

What? What does he mean ... wine, this beautiful liquid from a cellar? We too have a cellar in the basement of the building where we live. I've been down there with my father. Its door is small and wooden. The room, it's only a room, is small and narrow and humid. And inside we keep an old mattress, the suitcases that are too big to be kept in the apartment, and my bicycle. No wine can come from such a room. I don't understand. I am about to ask my uncle how this can be possible when I feel his face close to my ear. "You have to be careful", he murmurs, "you should never open the cellar door".

II.

We went to my uncle's house and we lunch there, regularly. My father did not really like it but mum wanted to chat with her brother and with my aunt. And every time, my uncle poured a small quantity of wine into a big glass, sometimes it was red, sometimes more yellow. And every time, my cousin said crazy things that fascinated me. I did not understand what he was saying and why it was so remarkable and why my uncle was so proud of him and my father remained silent. I only listened to what he said, trying to memorize the words he used and the expressions and the sentences, even though I did not drink wine. Drinking was less important than listening. And trying to understand what was going on in the cellar, behind its huge metallic door.

I used to go back down there, too. I sat on the steps and looked at the cellar door. Sometimes I touched the knob, without turning it in fear it would open. Or I put my ear at the mouth of the padlock to listen. Nothing. A cold metallic silence. Maybe I could try to look through the opening of the lock... Maybe not ... What if I saw something?

Once my cousin came and he sat close to me. He asked me what I was doing there and I was not able to answer. He asked the question again. "Nothing", I said. "Nothing? You can't do nothing, this is impossible". He was older than me and cleverer. I told him: "I am looking at the door of the cellar. Your dad said that this is where that the wine comes from. Is it true?"

"- Of course. Do you think that my father lies? There is wine in this cellar. This is what cellars are made for ..."

"- There is no wine in our cellar. We park my bicycle in the cellar."

"- Impossible. You cannot park a bicycle in the cellar. You have to park your bicycle in a garage. A cellar is for wine". And he left. I did not hear any sound coming from the other side of the door, that was closed and cold.

III.

Years passed. At school I learned that wine is made from grapes, after a long process of transformation, and not in cellars. But I also knew that my uncle had not lied to me. I was sure of that. And my cousin knew so many things about wine. All this remained strange and impossible to understand.

Eventually, I found an explanation. Helped by a friend of mine, a girl who was peculiar herself. She was very intelligent. I trusted her and I told her the whole story, starting with the cellar and the wine and my cousin. Everything. She smiled as if she had understood immediately. The day after, she came with a full bag of books. "You have to read these and then you'll know". So ... the solution was there ... maybe I had to be cautious. I put the bag aside and did not open it. Of course, when she asked me about the books, I miserably lied "Wow ... incredible, incredible". "You have to read them, I tell you, you have to read them", she kept saying, "if you want to understand what's going on under your uncle's house".

She was so certain that the books would reveal the answer. there was the solution. I opened the bag, spread the books on my bed and looked at the covers, which were golden and black with twisted faces and traces of red-blood. Lovecraft, Matheson ... these names did not tell me a thing. I selected one book and opened it and started to read. It took me all night and the next night to finish it. During the day, at school, I was dizzy because of the lack of sleep. But also because of what I had read. Then, I took a second book, and a third one. All the stories were similar. They were terrifying, but they were also very helpful to me. They were about big houses with huge black cold cellars, huge stairs that went deep under the earth and were inhabited by frightening creatures. Normal people like me or mum or my father disappeared in them. This was it. At that time, I was too young to understand what parallel worlds meant. And my uncle knew that, of course. He just told me what he could, that there was a mystery down there, under their house and that it was preferable not to know the secret. One in the family was enough, my cousin should know, period. This is why my uncle had warned me not to open the door. This is why he always asked his son to tell him about the wine. This was also why I should believe what he said about wine.

IV.

I tried to keep in touch with my cousin, bringing him wine each time I invited myself to his place. I asked him the question I remembered his father had asked, "So, what do you think? You like it?" and I mentally took note of what he said. When something he said was particularly interesting I went to the bathrooms and wrote it down. But it was not so difficult. Most of the time, he repeated more or less the same things. And I became quite learned, without drinking much of the wine I was able to describe the quality of wine with the words of my cousin. I did not open the door but I had discover the secret of the cellar.

In the beginning, I did not care. I was even pleased by the tricks I was able to play. Especially when I went out with girls. I offered them a glass of wine and asked them the ritual question, “So, what do you think? You like it?”, and since most of the time they were not able to answer, I also gave them the words to go with the wine. Not my words for sure, but powerful ones altogether. And they loved that. How nice it was to see their eyes glitter with pleasure. I could not help repeating them.

It lasted a while, but for some reason I started to feel ill at ease. The conviction that I was cheating everybody, my cousin, my girlfriends and myself tormented me. I also became certain that someone was spying on me, especially when I was dating. In the middle of less and less passionate kisses, I frantically turned my head away. Where were they? I did not see anybody but it did not mean anything to me. These were the people from the cellar. I had no doubt of their presence. Years ago, they saw me while I was seated in front of that door. Maybe some of them had slipped out of the cellar while my uncle went down to look for a bottle. But they have not forgotten me. They knew everything about me and my poor tricks. I had no choice: stop dating girls or no longer pretend to be an expert.

I hesitated. I enjoyed both. But then I met Cassandra. It was the grand opening of the museum of R. They had built a new pavilion and there was a big feast and I was invited by chance as the guest of a guest ... I saw her as soon as I entered the room. She was standing in front of a picture, not particularly beautiful and not well dressed. But she attracted me. I spent most of the evening following her and at the very second she was alone, I was next to her. “I’ve always wondered which wine these guys had in their glasses”. It was not premeditated, it was all I found. She turned slowly her head, looked at me and laughed. It was so violent, crazy and at the same time pure as crystal. A faction of second, this laugh stopped all the noises. Of course, it was a Rembrandt. The name rang a bell. I was not really sure. Her eyes half-closed, she started to describe the painting, speaking of the density of the colors, “a dark painting but it smells of sun and of spring” did she say, and the depth of the characters, “their eyes are so intent”, and the movement, “it is so lively, probably one of my favorite paintings”. I was confused. I had no education about paintings and did not know that one could be so precise about them. I did my best not to be definitively ridiculous. “This is the same with wine”, I said, “Would you accept an invitation to drink a glass of wine?”. Once again, no premeditation. She agreed. I knew I was in love. I also knew that I had no choice now. I had to be true to her and to my cousin and to myself to gain her heart.

V.

It took me time. I had to choose the right bottle. I had to be sure of what I would say. I would not use my usual tricks and play with my cousin's list of adjectives. I had to choose precisely those words that would reflect my feelings exactly. So I went to see Marie-Hélène, the French girl who sold wine close to my apartment. I proposed a deal: I would buy her most expansive bottle, we would taste it together and she would help me to understand what this wine was about. She was more than surprised, "You almost know wine better than I do", she replied, "I am unable to teach you anything". "Remember what you told me when we met for the first time? And you want me to believe that you are ignorant". Yes, I had tricked her too. I wanted to explain that she was mistaken, that I was a kind of fraud and that I knew nothing about wine. Too difficult. Too risky. I insisted: "You just have to teach me about this one". She smiled. Eventually, I convinced her. And eventually the Day arrived. I was ready.

Cassandra was seated at my right on the nice couch I had bought a few weeks before. Can I say that she was more beautiful than ever? And that my conviction that I was close to something great was firmer than ever. Tonight, I would offer her a really expansive wine, coming from an open cellar, whichever it was, in which there were no dark forces at work and I would be able to explain to her why this wine was exceptional. And if all of this had some sense, it would happen. And, of course, I had invited my cousin. He was seated on a chair in front of me, would understand what I meant. The cellar door could remain closed or be opened for the rest of eternity, it would not change a thing.

I gave them glasses, big and elegant glasses such as those my uncle gave us when we were young. My cousin's wife said she did not drink, not even this one because she did not know anything about wine and it would be wasted on her. My cousin replied that he would give some to their son, who was playing at his foot with cars. The little boy resembles his father and his grand-father quite closely. He looked at the glass through his thick glasses. He stuck his nose in the glass, noisily sniffed and then gulped the liquid. And then ... all the words I heard coming from his mouth, all the words that I've heard from his father's lips and that I've used for so many years. It was as if I were speaking through his mouth or as if he were speaking through mine. All my lines, so patiently and so exclusively rehearsed for the love of my life stolen by this little thing.

This night when Cassandra kissed me adios— I never saw her again — I understood what my uncle had said, "You should never open the cellar door".

Therapy

I.

18 years old. No problems with drugs, love, or family.

Life, I decided, was okay, even if mine was dull and it crossed my mind that I was made for more. For really big stuff, like walking on water or demonstrating the extended version of the general theory of relativity, the latter of which I eventually chose.

I went to university, majored in physics (with a minor in theology, just in case) and then met professor Richard F—A most remarkable man, indeed, cute with his perfect four-seasons tan, he was a mediocre lover but a magical teacher and a superior scientist who pushed me into the doctorate program in nuclear physics. Under his supervision I worked four years and wrote three hundred and forty-four pages — including seventeen pages of references and thirty-two of appendixes — that answered some technical questions and demonstrated a few theorems. But, and no need to document it, I knew that I had messed up somewhere. Kind of fantastic. I had started a pilgrimage to Saint James of Compostela and at some point I managed to take a wrong turn and ended up in the middle of nowhere, where I stood the day I had to present and defend my work.

The feeling of failure, still vague and imprecise before the defense, was crystal clear and definitive after the carnage. There I laid, in a pool of blood, with my throat slashed and my skull split open, brains strewn all over the place. But there was no fear, no pain, no frustration. I was supercool. In the morning, I had gulped two Xanax with my coffee for breakfast and the questions the members of the committee kept asking struck me as inappropriate. The murmurs coming from the audience seemed to be more pertinent, even though I did not understand them very well and I had to make guesses as to who was saying what. I also tried to understand what my supervisor thought of it all. He sounded tired, absent, eyes wide-open as if he had smoked something to forget that nothing good could come of this and he had always known it. Shit, I was not the only one who did not want to be involved in the proceedings.

Later in the day, the president of the committee solemnly declared that I was doctor in nuclear physics. No one applauded and I could not blame them. I felt no satisfaction or relief or sense of achievement or anything even a little bit positive. When one of the graduate students, a Peter or Philip or Paul or whatever told me: “They were tough on you”. I thought, “Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, I hate you and I could kill you”. Instead I said, “No kidding?” He did not reply. I asked him if I looked like a mongoloid idiot. He said nervously “OK. You did bad, really bad”. “Thank you, I appreciate sincerity. You honest peo-

ple are unable to lie, “ I answered back. I guess he was relieved. He probably figured that I’d punch him in the nose. Or worse, in the groin. He said. “You’ll never get a position”. After a moment he added, “Never”. I laughed. “Is that supposed to be a problem? Teaching physics 101 to undergrads? God, no thanks”. He looked surprised. “Why did you do all this? The thesis and everything”. “Professor F. hired me as a research assistant two years ago, and I love this job. Do you understand? I love it”. I was not lying! I had a small office next to professor’s, where I welcomed his students, mostly to listen to them complaining or crying or gossiping. I prepared coffee for them. Sometimes I baked cakes at home and offered them one and we staid there chitchatting together. That was perfectly okay with me and definitely what I was looking for. Disappointed? No way.

II.

There are some who say that’s when I started to drink. Not wrong to be honest, but not entirely acute either. With professor F. we had this habit of a glass, or two or more, in the evening, after classes and students. I knew that he would be tired when he came home after a good, full hard day’s work. There was a big armchair, gift from his first wife, in front of the fireplace. He sat there to relax and closed his eyes. One day, I had an argument with someone at administration and I opened a bottle of white wine early in the afternoon. I offered him a drink. This is how it started, this drinking-together habit. I even had the impression that it was important to him, this very moment when he re-opened his eyes and, there I was, in front of him, like it was the moment he had waited for all day. During classes, when he was teaching or when students were answering his questions; during the meetings when his colleagues were arguing over he budget of the department or about the next professor they would hire and even when he was driving back home, I knew that the only thing he had in mind was drinking. And what obviously was his joy became mine too. I knew I had to put as joy and pleasure as possible in the drinks I offered him. At first, I chose wine— profoundly red when I wanted to be serious or a cheerfully yellow when the sun was still shining, in spring or early summer. But I discovered that what he was more interested in the color, than in the taste to be honest. And I learned the art of blue, red, green, and yellow cocktails. After days of reading articles and treatises and technical books, I absorbed myself in small books that explain how to mix two or three sorts of alcohol together, to add fruit juice and ice in order to attain a very precise tint. Fixing those drinks requires some skill, I can tell you that.

What I am trying to say is that I did not start to drink after the defense. Professor F and I had this little ceremony going on for three years or so. Until the last evening.

It was the end of the semester. and Professor F. gave a party at his place. Plenty of food and big bowls of colored, syrupy alcoholic cocktails that I had prepared. My favorite was the reddish-orange — because it was the most difficult to keep stable — but most people seemed to prefer the golden one. I surveyed the guests. There was no one I was acquainted with intimately. No one with whom I wanted to enter into complicated discussions. Next to me, alone with an half-empty glass, was a mathematics professor. I asked her if she liked the drinks. I told her that I had mixed them, drunkenly proud. She looked at me and replied “I thought you had a doctorate in nuclear physics”. I laughed too carefully, and said, “God, no, you must be mistaken. I work at the Wholefoods”. Thirty seconds later, I left and went back to my apartment, a one room-one bathroom just above the Chinese restaurant on Main Street. It smells so bad it’s as if I lived in the restaurant itself. But I would be alone and there was probably half a bottle left somewhere too.

Professor F. phoned me the next morning. He told me that he was leaving the University, a promotion, somewhere on the west coast, big deal and our story was over and it was better not seeing each other anymore. His voice was sweet and calm, just as it was whenever he told me to rewrite or rethink a chapter in my thesis. “What will you do with your doctorate?” I hung up the phone and yelled Fuck, Fuck, FUCK. My head was aching. There was a strong smell of fried spring rolls everywhere. It was almost eleven, the Chinese were opening the restaurant.

III.

My pleasure is to fancy that it did not take them long, a handful of minutes, to decide that my contract would not be renewed. Pride. There was not much to discuss. But then, I had a question for myself, another one: end of episode one or end of the story?

I have enough time to think during my shift at Red’s, a small coffee shop at the corner of Brings and 7th. Five tables and a few chairs, barely two per each table. No need for chairs. People don’t stay. They take their coffee or whatever they buy and pay and leave to drink it in their car or in any friendlier place. No wonder. The room is narrow, dark and stinks. I don’t know exactly where the odor comes from. My boss does not know either. We don’t even know what kind of smell it is—hard to tell—sour and mild at the same time. When I started to work there, I washed my hair every evening until I realized that no one cares. It’s no longer a problem. But the cold still is. My boss doesn’t want to spend the money to heat the place. I tell him, “Really, I am cold, we are in December, I am cold” and also “We are in April, I am cold”. I cough and blow my nose and I show him my fingers, “Look at my knuckles.” He tells me, “Bring a sweater, and that will do it” or “Gloves, it’s gloves

you need”. That’s what he says when I complain. But he is wrong, of course, a sweater is not enough. I freeze, my feet freeze no matter how many pairs of socks I wear. And there is no use in suggesting that customers would like to have a warmer place to seat and drink their coffee. He knows perfectly well that almost no one wants to do that. And the ones who would like to stay are not welcome, besides me I mean. And he also tells me, “You don’t like the job? If you don’t like the job, you can leave, I’ll find someone else”. Red is the only one who gave me a job. Period.

I have been there for two years, four months and a few days, and I do not want to complain. The good thing is that I am alone all day long. I just have to do what people ask me to do, “Good morning sir, how are you doing today, sir, how would you like your coffee sir?”. There are some who say “a regular coffee, medium cup” and I repeat, “a regular coffee, medium cup, sir” as if there was someone else behind me who is taking the order! I stick a medium styrofoam cup under the machine, press a button, release it when the cup is almost full, put a lid on it and turn back to the counter “\$1.75, Sir.” That’s it. And then, “Have a nice day,” sometimes when I feel it. I just have to follow the instructions. I don’t have to use my brain, or what’s left of it. Sometimes, when there is no one in the shop, I take a sip at the bottle I hide under the counter and that’s it. Not much. But enough to keep the cold away.

After two years and four months and a few days, no one has ever asked me anything about having a doctorate in nuclear physics or about wanting to be a research assistant all my life, like why are you doing *this* job! My boss did not even ask me what I did before I entered his coffee shop for the first time. After two years and four months and a few days I only remember that I wanted to stay there until I had decided whether it was another episode or a new story.

Life is made for really, really big stuff.

Memories, forever

I.

It is one of these glorious Sundays that springs sometimes offer. An impossibly blue sky and a sweetly salted breeze coming from the sea that cools down the temperature in the city. A perfect moment. A gift. Everyone enjoys it because it will not last and will never come back. Even Dan is going to relax too, very soon, in a few minutes.

“Dan, are you with us?” asks Barbara, his second wife. They married two months ago.

“Yes, I’m coming”, Dan answers. Installed in a *chaise longue*, he gazes at his wife and her children and grand-children playing in the swimming pool. “Just checking the meetings planned next week” and he opens his leather-bound datebook and, ahead of him in the coming week, here it is, written in red ink, the only non-professional event mentioned among many business appointments: next Wednesday, it is the cat’s day.

II.

Dan does not need any datebook to remind him this damned Saturday evening, about 7 years ago. He remembers the whole incident. He remembers that he was back home after a tennis game that he had won—winning, even an inconsequential game against an old friend, always filled him with confidence and satisfaction and the feeling that he had a firm grasp on his life and that he had got over one more obstacle, reached for another bar on the ladder of life. He remembers the beatitude he was feeling on entering their apartment this very day, welcomed by darkness—the lights were off—and silence—just a slight undisturbing noise, the gurgling of the central heater probably. He remembers how the anticipation of a drink, alone, seated in his favorite arm-chair had almost made him shiver. He remembers how, an instant, he felt better than ever. He also remembers how it disappeared. Instantaneously. From the living room, he heard the voice of Margot, his wife—*shit, she is there, why she is not ... elsewhere*— who was saying something that he had not understood.

Dan patiently removed his shoes, and put them away in the closet, gone to the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror and then started to cautiously wash his hands. Most of the time, he did not pay attention to what his wife said. Nothing premeditated, nothing against her, personally. He was only careful and conscientious about what *he* was doing. And that Saturday evening, focusing on the clear water rushing out of the faucet and the soap foam covering his hands, he also wondered why she was staying in the dark. *Another of her whims.*

Not exactly. Margot had prepared a surprise for her husband and, knowing that he would not like it, she wanted him to discover it at the very last moment. She was shouting now, “I said, darling, do you listen, I told you that I did not expect him that early. Do you hear me? Did you win?”

“Yes, I won”, he cried back, decided not to hurry, “Easily, it was against ...” and stopped. The gurgling noise was more precise, clearer and it no longer seemed likely that it was the heater gurgling. But rather an ... He ran to the living room. “What’s that? Did I hear a ... an animal?”, a flash of panic in his voice. He hated animals of all size, form, breed or species—actually, he hated the small ones and feared the bigger but did not admit it—and he could not imagine, not even a split second that there was one in his apartment.

His wife laughed, “Yes, darling, absolutely, it’s a cat”.

He turned the lights of the living room on and there they were. Dan remembers the shiver than run down his spine at this precise moment. She was seated in the armchair he had plan to seat, and this should have irritate him. Any other day, he would have asked a litany of questions—*why has it to happen this way? Is there a sort of necessity for you to behave like that? Are you malicious? Stupid? Both? Why do you always make the wrong decisions, and choose what I dislike the most and hurts me. Like being seated in my armchair.* But his eyes were attracted by the strange animal she was holding in her arms. Is it a cat? The normal shape of a cat, yes, but with leopard-like dots, a big round head and sharp teeth and piercing green eyes. A cat? A louder than usual growl. A cat? Dan looked at it without comprehension, then back at her and down at the animal again. *A cat?*

“Wow, it’s a panther or a lynx or something like that”.

“No, darling, more a leopard than anything else, actually but it’s an Ashera, if you must know. It looks like a leopard, maybe but it’s much, much smaller. Same size as a house cat. It’s just an expansive house cat but a house cat all the same”.

“And what does this thing do in *my* apartment?”, a flash, as the words came out of his mouth, a sequence of images and sounds that came from his brain, throughout his tensed nerves to his mind and consciousness, the doorbell was ringing and he opened the door and there was, benevolently smiling, a neighbor, thank you for having taken care of the cat, it was very kind and everything was be over and he was going to have a drink and seat in his armchair. But nothing had materialized and his wife said, “Darling, this is our cat” and then to the ... cat, “Say hello to your new daddy”. *Am I hearing that? Daddy? My God, what is it?* “Say hello to our cat, darling”. And then she was speaking to the cat again, “Say hello, Freddy”.

“Freddy?” Dan almost felt sorry for the poor animal, *What a ridiculous name?*, “Our Cat?”, he asked looking at her like she was crazy. “Don’t tell me you bought a cat, please, no, ...”, he hesitated, *my God, please, tell me it’s not happening.*

“Funny reaction, darling. Money, money, money, is it what you can think only to?” and, after a long pause, looking at him accusingly, “you do not buy a cat, darling. This is a living being”. And then, smiling again, radiant and purring as the ... cat, she was a human being mimicking an animal, she turn back, patted its head, “My little baby, baby, baby, baby”.

“Are you insane?”, Dan had shouted, “*Are-you-insane?* Yes, you are insane. This is not a baby. This is not a human being. You and I already have two children. Are they not sufficient?” *You have a husband too*, had he planned to add but carefully avoided any mention to their marriage.

“We do have children. Two, yes. I am perfectly aware of that”, her voice was calm, indifferent and she had not mentioned him neither, “How would I forget our children? I love them and I sacrificed everything I had to to raise them. You remember, I quit my job because you told me that I would need time and you were right. You were not much helpful ... and ... and ... don’t you understand that I need someone to spend time with, someone who is not complicated, who does what I want, who ... No, you do not understand”.

A kid, a grown up kid with a plastic doll and she believes this is a human being.

“Oh, yes I perfectly understand. Look at it, this is not a house cat, this is a leopard, a fucking beast, a savage creature and I can’t believe you did that to me”. His voice had rise to a ridiculous piercing falsetto, almost hysterical.

“But this is a cat, darling and, yes, he is ours, I adopted him”. She was not lying. This is how the guys at the local animal shelter officially call the procedure. Adoption or not, living being or not, leopard or not, the price to pay had been substantial. A 5-digit figure shocking to any average man or woman, those who do not care what an Ashera is or wether they exist or not. And know of normal ways of spending their husband’s money. *My God.*

III.

Moments later, in the middle of the night—another precise memory, 3.17 said the green light of the alarm clock – and, fists and teeth clenched in *fear*, he would not have been ashamed to admit, Dan was trying to fight sleep away. He knew the danger to have a so-called cat in his home from when he was a kid. He easily imagined the animal jump on the bed in a freakish fit and gouge his eyes away with its sword-like paws and then eat them ignoring his terrible cries of pain. *Impossible, keep calm, it won’t happen.* His wife had eventually accepted to chain it at the other end of the apartment. *Thank God.*

But convincing her has not been easy. She has refused to lock it outside, where it belonged, “On the balcony?”, did she say, “Don’t even think of it”. He had insisted. Calmly and then, no longer able to control himself, he had threatened her and warned her that he would not hesitate to throw the animal through the window or drown it or burn it—he cautiously avoided to look at the cat while uttering his threats, of course, but felt his small and clear eyes set upon him and he did not like that, at all. And he did not like hearing this loud growling-purring noise either. Especially now, *is it not louder? No, it’s closer. I am sure that it has freed itself from the leash. What is this happening? Why? Do I deserve that?* And this is when he caught from the corner of the eye a dark shape against the false darkness of the urban night. Its eyes, small golden slits, set on him. He turned very slowly, cautiously his head. *Oh my ...*

For some reason, maybe to break the spell, Dan thought that he should say something. “What do you want?”, he asked in the direction of the animal, and added “Go away, I want to sleep”.

“Hi man, nice to see you again”, replied the cat with a soft and gentle voice.

Dan almost choked with fear. *Is it talking? I must be dreaming, of course, I am dreaming, breathe, breathe, breathe ...*, but the cat was speaking, saying: “No, you’re not dreaming, it’s me, don’t you see it’s me”. *Wow, what a dangerous game to play and you’d better not step in; it will drive you mad.* The cat, again, “After all this time, quite normal if you do not recognize me”. And it chuckled, or it is what Dan heard, a cat chuckling. It was unbearable and Dan almost shouted when he said “I-do-not-know-you, got it, cats don’t talk so don’t bullshit me and go away”.

“Oh, okay, I confess, it was not me, maybe a great-great-great uncle or a friend or even the friend of a friend, but I know them and this makes us buddies”. Dan was trying to get a grip again on the situation and he pretended it was not happening and it did not work. The cat was going on to make a point, as if it was here on purpose. “And it was a long time ago, I agree, and you were young, granted too, and who can blame a young guy for throwing animals from the third floor, for pushing fireworks in a poor youngling’s asshole and ... worse, did you do something worse? I can’t remember”.

Yes, it was a long time ago and yes, he did make mistakes and no, he had not forgotten anything—like these acts contributed to develop a capacity to memorize more precisely more details than any normal man. But he was another man, he did not doubt about that. And he did not doubt either that no judgment could fall down on him in the middle of a night through a cat. The messenger of some god? Of the devil? *It does not work like that.*

He hesitated. Should he wake up his wife? She would laugh at him and then would probably get angry at his stupidity. Without tuning his head, he whispered “Go away, leave me alone, Go away” but the cat was no longer there to listen to him and his wife was snoring besides him and everything was quietly normal again. *Oh my ... Bloody tricky bastard, gone as swiftly and silently as it had arrived and capable of talking with that, no one would believe me.* He would have to be cautious, now, on his guard and attentive like he was a stranger in his own apartment, among his family. It was not new. But on this very night, the feeling that their life had been calamitous since the first day after their marriage overcame him and was in his mind when he woke up and the green figures on the alarm clock by the bed indicated 9.58 am. To him, who had always got up around 5.00 am because he did not sleep well, this was just an additional disturbing sign. As were the loud music and the fragments of a conversation – the voice of his wife and the laughs of his children – coming from the kitchen. She was probably recounting their quarrel but he did not understand what she was saying. He felt lonely and depressed. The irritating growling had ceased but it did not soothe him, and he could not believe the cat had gone after their discussion and it has been just a bad dream. Indeed, the *imaginary* cat was there, lying, half-sleeping in the kitchen. He had seen it as soon as he had entered the room.

V.

For a few days—yes, Dan also remembers that— he decided that the cat was imaginary. There was *no* cat. The strategy failed. The quasi-continuous growls and purrs and the noise of the paws on the floor were impossible to ignore and continued to make Dan nervous. He was always looking around him to find out where the cat was, always listening to any noises in case it would be the cat. Starting for no reason. He was afraid to eat something in its presence, for he was certain that it would jump at him and hurt him. And he did not like that the cat sometimes slept on their bed or sat down in his favorite armchair.

So, what next? Not so many alternatives were available. He told Margot and the children that they had to get rid of the animal. She replied with a warm laugh but the warmth was swept away by the inelegant bitterness of the tone with which she said “No way. I will keep it for me and for the kids and you’d better accept it”. It was the last sentences she exchanged with him. The children, *God knows where they sleep*, had disappeared after this last incident. And the cat ... each and every time their paths crossed, Dan tried to kick it but, most of the time, he missed it. Once he even had tried the worn-out belt that his father used to punish him and that left red painful marks on his legs and thighs and with which he had also punished his kids when they were young. *After all, if it was good for me and them, why would it not be for an animal?* He felt an extreme and insane joy and lowered his guard. It was just another mistake.

There were other awful nights. He he lied down, fists and teeth clenched, afraid of both the cat *and* the darkness. The same fear that overwhelmed the kid he was, years ago, during those endless nights, when he was lying in the darkness of his child's room and his parents refused to let a small lamp on in his room. It was like going to bed in the dark just for the sake of going to bed *in the dark*. He always got up very tired and very sad and unsure about what to do. Unsure about *why* all that was happening. And it was all happening again. *Why? Is there a reason?* One morning, he was exhausted when he got up. But he had made a decision. It was definitive: he had no other choice but cooling the cat. *A first-class one-way ride to where it belongs.*

It took Dan a few days to sort out an effective solution. This was easy, after all it was just an animal and not a human being. The only way that had appeared possible was poisoning it, simple, neutral, as detached as possible. Then, a few more days to polish the plan, which poison to use, rat poison had seemed imperative, a form of irony that pleased him, where to buy it, a supermarket would do, and how to force the cat to eat it, not a problem, once in a while his wife left it at home and he would manage it quite easily.

And that was it, ... *bye-bye, Freddy* ... who died with evident pain. The silvery foam at the corners of the mouth, the painful stiffness of the limbs and the immense void in the eyes had struck him as pathetic but not particularly remarkable. He had done what he had to do, Dan had thought going to bed the night after he had killed the cat. He had slept like a 3-year old baby.

VI.

“Dan, are you with us?” asks Barbara. They married two months ago after a long, interminable divorce procedure. “I’m coming”. His ex-wife did not bear very well the death of the leopard and the children had seemed affected, depressed too. “Just checking the meetings planned next week”. Wednesday, the seventh anniversary of the day he had poisoned the animal—not a human being, not even a house cat—and it’s written, in red ink, the only non-professional event mentioned among many business appointments in his leather-bound datebook. But no, he has not forgotten and does not need any help to remind him the incident.

Me and myself

I.

He said, Paul phoned me yesterday.

I said, Really.

He said, Really, the phone is over there, on the table. I asked the nurse to help me with the phone.

I said, I know where the phone is. Paul is dead.

He said, Dead? How come he phoned me this morning?

I said, I don't know. Perhaps it was not him. Perhaps no one phoned you.

He said, Really, how come you know that.

I said, Paul died three years ago.

I didn't know when Paul died. I didn't know *if* he died. Or which one died. One of the Pauls living on earth probably died three years ago. There are so many of them. God bless his and the others' soul. I didn't even know whether or not my father ever met a Paul. All I knew was that I had not seen my father since 19XX, when mom and him had just split and I had rushed away from him and his curses and his blows, letting him shout after me, yelling that I was not his son, that I was a moron, a dope fiend and I would end up like the morons, the dope fiends I was hanging with. All I knew was that, today, 25 years later, I had rushed back after a Doctor Jenkins had called to tell me that my father was dying from stage 4 stomach cancer at the Herington Municipal Hospital, Herington, Kansas and that they had not been able to identify any other relatives and if I could come, there was a small chance I would see him alive. All I knew was that, yeah, okay, I had told myself, why not, it is time to settle our lives, eventually, to tell the old bastard one last truth before he left us. And here I was, at 7.30 pm, after a nonstop drive from New York City, after miles and trucks and large regular-coffees-with-no-milk and doughnuts and pseudo-food from Taco Bells and KFC and Wendy's, after 25 hours spent in a fucking car. Here I was, seated in a vinyl-covered uncomfortable armchair, small-talked by my dying father about a Paul I didn't give a shit about. The same story again. Old bastard. "I'd better check with the nurses if someone came or phoned", I said under my breath.

The small glass-walled nurses' office was down the hall, next to the vending machine, next to the waiting room, next to the elevator and next to the emergency stairs. Three nurses were in the office. One guy was sitting on the desk, his back to the hall. He was talking to two fat college-looking girls who were slumped in plastic chairs, exhausted after a day's work or bored or

despaired or indifferent. It was not their pain and suffering they were supposed to look after. They did not seem interested either in whatever it was the male nurse was telling them. I bought two diet Pepsis and rapped on the glass-door of the office. It was useless. The door was opened and they had seen me arriving through the glassed-walls of the office. The male nurse stopped talking.

“Hey there, how’s it going?” I said cheerfully.

The girls did not react.

“Sir, good evening, how can we help you?”, asked the male nurse with a soft voice, almost a whisper, dark and charming. I explained that I arrived a few minutes ago from New York after a long drive, that it has been exhausting you know, really boring I added with a smile.

The girls were still without reaction. Fucking illiterate pigs. They probably have never been to New York.

The guy flashed a friendly and beautiful smile that lightened his pale-blue almost transparent eyes. His lips were full and red. His skin was dark, tanned and his face was nicely framed by brown curly hair. I could tell that he was dedicated. *Empathetic* was the word I would have willingly used to describe him, even though it was the first time I met him. I liked that. His nametag read ANTHONY. He asked again if I needed some help for anything. I looked at the girls and back at him. Anthony. Nice name. I said, “Thanks, certainly later”. I smiled back. I left. In the elevator, I realized that I had not asked about the people who have visited my father. Or phoned him. I already knew the answer. My father did not know any Paul. One of his tricks. An easy one. He could do better than that. But I might ask later.

II.

Next day, after a good night’s sleep and a long hot shower, like I always used to take, I gave a call to my boss’ secretary. I didn’t like her and it’s reciprocal and we both know that. It makes our relationships easier, helps smoothing out rough edges. I said that I would be away for a few more days. She sighed. Meetings were planned for the rest of the week. I will miss them and I had never missed a meeting. She said that she hoped that there was nothing wrong. “No”, I said. “Not really. My father is not well. Not as well as I expected” but I did not give any details about him dying and about me wanting to stay to tell him something important. Private matters. It was none of her business, of course. But she said she was sorry, although there was no need for her to feel this way. It was not her father. Maybe she was simply being polite, typical from a middle-class woman. Or maybe she cared for her job and her workload and my absence meant more unpleasant work for her to do. She had to tell our boss that I would miss the meetings. It will piss him off and will shout at her for no reason. I didn’t care. Maybe she did and she was sorry.

“When will you come back?” she asked.

How would I know? I’m no doctor. I am just a salesman. I didn’t answer. I said, “Now I have to go to the hospital.”

Again, she said that she was sorry. I hung up on her and left the room. In the lobby, I asked the concierge how to get to the Municipal Hospital by foot. On my way I stopped at a coffee shop and bought a large regular-coffee-with-no-milk and a cream-cheese-bagel. These have always been my favorites. The guy behind the counter was black and I wondered if there were many black people around here. I smiled at him. He had wonderful arms, strong and muscled. Beautiful. There was a bluish scar on his left cheek, a soft spot under his eye. Charming. It reminded me of the first boy who kissed me. I asked for a refill of coffee and also a second cream-cheese-bagel.

It was 10.30 when I knocked on the glass door of the nurses’ office on the second floor of the Herington Municipal Hospital’s cancer ward. They were three again, two men and a woman. They looked as stupid as the two girls I saw the day before. “Good morning sir, how are you today, what can we do for you?”. I said I wanted to see Anthony. “You a friend of his?” asked one of the men. “No, no, not a friend. My father is over there, room 216. Mr. Persky. I just arrived yesterday from New York to see him”. “Anthony does the night shift, starts at 8:00 tonight” he said and after a silence he added, “I’ll show you the way to room 216”. I replied that it’s not necessary, that I was there yesterday and I would easily find my way back to my father’s room. It would not be a problem. “OK, I thought that”. He stopped and added, “This way”. I knew the way.

When I got into the room, my father was sleeping. I took a newspaper, sat on the same vinyl-covered uncomfortable armchair I was seated in the day before. There was no TV in the room. I took the newspaper I had bought with me. A local waste-of-paper in which not even the sport section was readable. I started to feel bad. Nauseated by the hospital odors. From too much bad coffee. Car-lagged—I am sensitive to time difference, even between ET and CT. I eventually fall asleep and slept the whole day away. At 6 p.m. I decided to leave. I did not want to walk back to the hotel after dusk. My father hadn’t said a word, hadn’t even opened an eye. They probably stuffed him with sedatives, sleeping pills of some sort. He would not suffer. And would not hear what I have to say. My truth. I was frustrated. I was finally not allowed to defend myself.

At the nurse’s office, I asked the girl if Anthony was there or if she knew when he would be there. “Tonight, yes, tonight”, she said. “Night shift until the end of the week. It starts at 8 p.m.”. We were a Tuesday. My father was supposed to die before the end of the week. This is what Doctor Jenkins had told me on the phone.

III.

Wednesday. A hot shower and a breakfast. A Large-regular-coffee-with-no-milk, a cream-cheese-bagel, the black waiter and his strong muscular arms and the tiny blue scar under his left eye. The hospital, the vinyl-covered armchair and the newspaper. And hours spent dozing with my dying sleeping father. Anthony was still doing the night shift and what could I say to my father?

Later that day. Doctor Jenkins was in the room. He shook me awake and asked if everything was okay and if I had any questions. I thought about it but I didn't have any. He stood there, in the room, looking vaguely at my father, then at me, saying nothing. He left. He had nothing to say either. After a while, I left too. I needed to move. Move. Move. Shake my life. It was the middle of the afternoon but I went to a diner and asked for something to eat. I drank beers too with my cheeseburger and watched sports on the huge flat-panel LED TV set. Exactly the sort of TV I wanted to buy. Nice stuff. Cool. Easy. The TV was tuned on ESPN-U. I watched four back-to-back broadcast of the same SportsCenter. I drank the beers and then I drove back to the hospital.

The cancer ward, second floor. I went to the nurses' office. Anthony was there, alone. "Hi man," I said. I was relieved to see him. "Good evening sir," he said. "I was looking for you", I replied and asked "Could I stay a moment with my father tonight?". He said that what was happening to my father was so sad and that he was so sorry and so depressed to see people in this situation and people like me, suffering. How kind of him. I could tell that he was *really* caring, feeling something true for my father and for me. That was good. I liked that. I asked, "Could you show me the way, please?". Yes, of course he could. We walked along the hall and then we were in my father's room. Bip-bip-bip-bip, there was an electronic noise and green lights in the room. We stayed a few minutes without moving.

I felt him close to me. I felt his warmth. I had not anticipated that it would happen and that I would find that so exciting. His smell, too, was unbelievable. I had a hard-on like I had not had for weeks, months maybe. I raised my left arm and stopped. I left in a hurry, running in the corridor. I heard Anthony saying something behind me. It sounded like "I understand" or was it "Don't leave."

In the bar, there was a NCAA football game. Bowling Green vs. Buffalo. I drank. I was drunk after a while.

IV.

Thursday could just have been another day. Except that it was not. It started with a bad dream. Anthony was dead. It left me uncertain and nervous.

I was in the hospital. All the lights had been turned off. I groped my way to my father's room and to his bed. A sheet was covering his face. I removed it and it was not him. In the bed, obviously dead, was lying the nurse. Anthony. I woke up shivering, covered with sweat and with a painful hard-on. It was 5.47 am. I left the room and drove to the hospital. I parked on the other side of the street in front of the main entrance. The parking lot was almost empty. It was now 6:14 am. At 6:14 am in this part of the world no one is outside wandering in the streets. A dark, gloomy and quiet place to die. Or to live. At that time, I was looking for life. I waited for Anthony. The night shift would probably end soon. And then ... then, when he finally left the hospital — it was 6.49 am — I engaged my car in the street after him. I followed him. It was exciting. I was a teenager again, when I drove in empty streets looking for lovers and when I returned home in the mornings and my father had a used leather belt with which he beat me just because I was home late. He did not even know what I was doing. My father ... I u-turned to go back to the hospital where I found my father awake. The eyes opened, at least. Eventually. Time to speak to each other, man to man.

He said "Yesterday your brother came."

I said, "My brother came. Yesterday."

He said, "Yes, your brother, Paul."

I said, "I don't have a brother".

He said "Paul is your brother and he brought me a cake his wife had cooked for me and showed me a picture of my grandkids."

I said, "I don't have a brother, you're being ridiculous."

He said "Of course you have a brother but you are not married and don't have children, uh?"

A brother? I could have a stepbrother, true enough. After all, who was this man lying in this bed in front of me? My father? Yes, my father and he had a life without me and I had a life without him. I had spent all my life without a father. Without a mother or without a family. But if I had a brother and if the old fart was not lying why could the doctors not have found him and why did they call me? And why didn't I see him when I was there — because I was there. Why were there no pictures of the grandkids and any cake left? The same story again. False Pauls to trick me. Again. There was no Paul. No brother. No more father. What could I tell him that would be important for both of us? Nothing, actually. I decided to leave and go back home. Before that, I would spend the night here, at the hospital. I would wait for Anthony.

I said, "Anyway, he is dead."

I left. I went to the hotel, checked out. The girl at the front desk told me that they would charge the night because it was a late departure and I had not warned them. I said that I didn't care and I could not have warned them because my father had passed away suddenly in the afternoon and I wanted to leave right away. She said, "I am so sorry sir, really sorry. All my condolences." She was tall and skinny, so skinny that she could probably not *really* feel anything for other living beings. "Why do you say that, it was not your father" I replied. I folded the bill and put it my trousers' pocket. I left. I put the suitcase in the trunk and drove to the hospital.

I asked Anthony if he could come along to my father's room. What had happened the day before had given me the creeps. I don't know if I wanted it to happen again or not, I said. Of course he said and he accepted. He was the kind of man to accept this kind of request. MY request. And again we were in the room. The smell was stronger than the day before but I could feel Anthony's presence next to me. Cooler than the day before. Different. But he was the same man. I turned towards him, put my left arm around his waist and raised my right arm towards his face. "What the hell" he cried and pushed me away. "Come on, please, come on" I said and I tried to touch him again. This time he pushed me violently. I swayed backwards against the bathroom door that was unlocked and it opened under my weight and I fell on the floor. I saw him opening the door of the room. A ray of light came from the hall and enlightened the room. Anthony slammed back the door. I was alone in the dark, seated on the floor of the bathroom and I still had a hard-on. I unzipped my fly and began to masturbate myself. It was short but really good. I stood up, washed the sperm off my hands and left. It was 9:05 on my watch. I was in the elevator when I realized that I had not given a look at my father. What for? He was sleeping. Again. It wouldn't have changed anything. I could call on my way back home.

V.

In the middle of the night, I stopped to put some gas in my car. I ate a cheeseburger and drank a cold diet Pepsi. The vague smell of the antibacterial soap on my hands reminded me of the hospital. I gave a call from a public phone on a highway service area. The nurse on duty told me that my father had died the day before at about 9:00 in the evening.

The Garden

I.

I spent 5 years in a psychic ward with therapy, out of the world. They had insisted on shaving my head — but I did not let them touch my beard, which was quite a bushy mess after all those years. We had a kind of deal. I let them give me pills, in the mornings and evenings, all kinds of pills. There were group sessions that I attended and they also sent me to the doctor. Doctor Jenkins, every week, twice a week. I did not know how that was supposed to affect my health condition. The collective sessions were hard enough, more difficult than the pills but less difficult than those meetings with Doc. We sat in his office in big leather, perfectly new, armchairs, and I was asked to tell Doc things, anything that crossed my mind, thoughts and feelings, facts and speculations. I remained silent, did not say a word. I did not dislike him. I just did not want to talk to him. What kind of decent man asks personal questions about someone else? Speaking to someone I had just met, even a doctor. It's sick, I thought. Mum always warned me against strangers. My sisters told me, be autonomous, you don't need anybody, they shouted to me and count on yourself and so on. They went to play with their dolls, left me with grand-pa who was deaf and mute and half-paralyzed. His whole life was cast in silence and immobility. We spent our days together. Every day! Both alone.

Also, I was confused with the noises I heard and I had heard for years. The pills did not change a thing. It was like insects, a snake or a mouse or a rate rattling on a metallic grid. A machine, humming and going slowly dead. Blood rushing in my ears. My skull, the bones, cracking when I pressed my hands on my ears. Simply perhaps meaningless noise. A car in the street. Strangers walking pass me, I hated them. A radio broadcasting a program taped years ago and fading. Water in the pipes, gurgling. Someone peeing and flushing the toilets.

When it stopped, I found myself seated in Doc's office and back with the questions that I did not want to answer. I said "I'll pass on this one" or "I think I see what you mean" and then "Thanks for asking". I ignored why I had to thank him. I did it, out of politeness. And he would say, "Okay, we'll see next Thursday" if we were one Tuesday or "Okay, we'll see next Tuesday" if it was one Thursday. In the meantime, there were more pills, white and blue and orange and pink. And when I was back in Doc's office, there were more questions about what I felt and again what I felt is not to talk about. Repetition was boring and tiring. My head ached. My stomach ached. My muscles, arms and legs were tense and aching too. Remaining seated was hard and harder each and every week.

One day, I said that I'd write, if anything. I had never written much but I loved pens, all forms of pens and the sound they make on the paper. Doc liked the idea and he told me that he liked the stories too. He knew these were stories but he said they were full of the answers he had looked for. And, after a while, he said "You can leave, go back home". I did not know what to say, except that "I don't have a place to live". He was pleased to see that I was ready to speak to him. Ready. His word and his explanation. I did not understand. I was not aware of what had changed in me. Old feelings were still there. Maybe more profound. Doc gave me some tricks to control them. He said it would never disappear. "They are part of you", he said. But he trusted me and in all the time we had spent together. He trusted me enough to let me go and work and to attend daycare at the hospital.

II.

"The Walkers, they are friends of mine", said Doctor Jenkins. "I am going to phone them and they'll find something for you to do", this is what he told me. It was the day I left. The day he gave me the keys of a one room apartment they had found me on Martin Luther King Jr driveway. It was close to the I-82 and just behind the railways. There was the constant murmur of the cars on the highway and the honking of the train that I listened to all night long.

I wondered what kind of people friends of Doctor Jenkins could be. I wondered why they would offer me a job. Why they would trust me. Why I should go. But I went. It took me 2 buses, about one and a half hour to reach the place, Burbank Heights, where Professor Walker and his wife live. It is a swell place, on the top of the hill, east of town, where you find all kinds of rich people and big, impressive, beautiful houses hidden behind high fences and thick walls, with no names and no doorbell to ring. Classic music came from the Walker's house. Cars were passing by very fast and very close, their drivers looking at me. Rain was falling and I had no umbrella, drops hitting me hard on the head and rolling into my eyes. My clothes were heavy with water. It was a different time zone. I felt insecure.

A woman opened the door and asked me what it was I wanted. She was skinny and dressed in black and she stared at me with great care while I explained what I was looking for. I said “Doctor J. believes that I am ready to work and he gave me your name and address and has probably phoned you”. She kept staring at me and did not reply, not a single word and then she turned and walked back inside the house. I heard her shout “Honey” in a very acid voice and, a few minutes later, a tall man came out. He had an open face and grey-white hair and a checked shirt, like grand-pa wore. He said that his wife did not believe that I could work for them but he had suggested that I could tend the garden. “How does it sound to you?”, he asked. “Yes, sure, no problem”, I replied but I was not sure at all. I know nothing about plants, flowers, trees, anything. I did not tell them. I had no reason to. I could learn. “OK, then, you can come back next Sunday morning”. We shook hands and I left.

They immediately realized that I ain’t no gardener. On my first day, Professor Walker told me that I could begin with pruning the laurels that were close to the entrance door. He brought me tools – big scissors – and a pair of gloves and let me stay there with my questions. There was a big bush, a mass of green leaves and red and pink flowers on one side of the door. Were they the laurels? Or was he speaking of the one on the other side? A really big, impressive, mass of green leaves with pinkish flowers. They were different. Not knowing which one to do prune, I did both. Wrong choice. Mrs Walker blushed, red with anger. She could not believe that and was it possible to make errors like that and that now, now, it was awful, it had taken years to have a tree like this size and now it was destroyed, awful. Her eyes were glimmering with tears when she called her husband for help. But Professor Walker said it was no problem actually, just a tree you know, a living being for sure but—but and that I could come back, it was no problem. Really. He smiled at me. Mrs Walker did not smile. After that, she spied on me, following me in the garden, asking “Who told you to do that?”. I replied, “Professor Walker told me” and she asked “Are you sure?”. Of course, I was sure. What the hell.

Sometimes, the Walkers went to the mass 3 blocks down the road. I would never have guessed that there was a church in that neighborhood. Professor Walker gave me instructions and tools and the gloves he had offered me and they left. But, I didn’t really feel like working when I was alone. I did not want to take risks. Making another mistake? No, thanks no. I sat on a white wooden bench. No one could see me from the street; it was very calm and quiet.

Children playing in neighboring gardens, birds and squirrels flying from one green tree to another tree with a different green. The colors were cooling me down. I smoked a couple of joints and left, most of the time before they were back from the mass. It happened that the mass was shorter or something and here they were. Mrs Walker was the one who shouted, not pleased to see me sitting on the bench. She told her husband, look he has done nothing at all, look how slow he is and she added that we should get rid of him and that he is weird. She complained almost every time since I started working there. I did not care. Neither did Professor Walker. OK, OK, he said. He was always very calm. And he said also don't worry darling and we are not paying him for the work he does or he does not do, you know that darling and then he came and proposed me, Do you want a lift? I have something to do in town. Whether or not he had something to do in town, I did not and it was none of my business. I accepted the offer, "Yes, yes, thank you". It saved the bus fare. I am pretty sure he did not tell his wife about the extra bucks he gave me when he paid me in the car. He added to the \$40 they paid me each week, even if I lived in a rent-free apartment in a house owned by a charity organization.

I suppose I could have tried to find other jobs, perhaps ask Doc at the hospital for his help, again. It was tricky. I did not like going to the hospital and had not seen the Doctor since the end of the therapy. Better stay away from the other crazies and the nurses. I preferred calling the Walkers. I asked if there was not an extra-something I could do in the garden and they would give me extra-money and it would be very, very generous. When Mrs Walker answered the phone, it was very difficult. She was a tough woman. One of those devout who think that one has what one deserves. Always telling me that I made so many mistakes, that I should stop drinking and take the pills they prescribe and go to the hospital and stay there for a while, that they would hire me again after. It angered me and it made me cry too. I found that unjust. I said, "I take my pills. I go to the hospital to have my prescription renewed". But I did not tell her that I didn't take my pills. Not regularly, at least. There was a stack of boxes next to my bed. Some empty. Some as new, untouched. I forgot because I substituted booze and weed to normal medication. She added then that I should go to the church, they knew a priest who would be glad to help and after long minutes of preaching, she would eventually give the phone to her husband. I would hear her whispering, you know who it is and you know I no longer want him to work for us and also you have to kick him out of our garden. She knew I was listening. And her husband, professor Walker replied gently, OK, OK, don't worry darling and then he told me that I could come. He gave me extra-work to do and extra-money. He was so cool.

III.

It was not the money I liked most in the job. Not even Professor Walker's kindness. I loved being in the garden, it was the only spot in which I felt okay. Positive about the present. My mind wandered away from bad memories, away from why I went to the hospital, from the accident, the stove or something else that exploded and the house where we lived with my wife and our six-year old daughter that was burned to the ground. I forgot about the hospital and the therapy. The pills and Doctor Jenkins. It was just there and now. It was cool. I got the habit to go up there and, when the Walkers were absent and the house was closed, to enter the garden and spend time, seated on the big wooden bench. I smoked the joint I had prepared and drank 1 or 2 beers. I had this notebook with me, one left from the hospital, and I wrote. It was lists words such as ... TREE, THREE, trees (one tree, MANY trees) Birds friends (birds are my friends) NO insects/insectsNO/No/NO ... yes/YES ... a bench (a white bench/the bench is white). Capital letters are fun. The spaces left between the words were to be filled up later. It would make a story. It was the same kind of words I had put down for Doctor Jenkins at the hospital. And I was brought back to the therapy even in the garden. I threw the notebook in a trashcan. But I kept on going to the Walker's garden.

Once, it was one Sunday in May or June and the Walkers had told that there was no need to come, they were visiting one of their children in Seattle and they would be back late in the night. This Sunday was beautiful, a day for being outside in a nice and calm place. I was upset because I needed the money but it was a good opportunity to propose Jenny to come. Jenny had been my girlfriend for a few weeks already. She was skinny and short, a face with big sad eyes, and a mind crazy like heaven and hell together. She had bursts of anger that were frightening but she could also be clever, capable of telling you something that looks like the truth, that you could simply disMrs and forget. I liked her very much. And I wanted to please her and to show who I really am

The sun was already high when we took the buses to Burbank Heights and walked to the Walkers' and went in the garden and sat on the bench. I said to Jenny, make no noise, do not let anyone know that we are here. And she did as I told her. We smoked and we had a great day, stoned and relax. It was dark when we left and Jenny said that I should put some pot somewhere in the garden, No one would notice, she said, they don't know what it is, right? I did not reply.

IV.

A few days later, I asked Jenny again to spend some time in the garden of the Walkers and she mentioned again that I should plant some pot. And again some days later. I said, "Shut up, shut up". I shouted. She seemed to have only that on her mind. Nothing else more interesting, like spending her time with me. I said "I just want to enjoy, keep cool and relax". That was true. I did not want much more than that.

Jenny did not get it, she laughed, said I was a loser. I said okay, but I don't know where to get seeds to plant. This was not a problem. She brought seeds and we started to plant the stuff in the back of the garden. I knew where the tools and gloves were. I took them and did the job. Jenny was smiling, laughing out loud, calming down, shouting and laughing again and cooling down a little bit again. She was on the verge of one of her fits.

Suddenly Mrs Walker was there, on us, shouting like a devil that it is not the proper way to treat people who treat you properly and rightly. Her voice was hard and aggressive. She said that she is going to call the police and so on and so on. I lied that her husband had asked to come and that since it was Sunday my girlfriend had came along. She did not buy it. She repeated that she would call the police and that she would call the police. Again and Again. She walked to the house, slammed the door and locked it. I thought of the days I spent in the garden alone. It was before Jenny and it was super cool then. Coolest place in the world. Jenny was probably thinking something else. She started crying and shouting and run for the house, following Mrs Walker. She banged the door. She insulted Mrs. Walker. "Open that door, you fucking bitch, open that fucking door", she cried and she punched the door with her fists and she kicked at the door with her feet. I grabbed Jenny before Mrs Walker could open the door. But she was actually not planning to do that. I understood that as soon as I heard sirens coming.

VI.

They sent Jenny to prison. I was sent back to the psychic ward. Professor Walker did not do anything for me. Doc said I was hopeless and he was disappointed and sad. I am sad now, too. I miss the garden very much.

Candies

I put the hands in the pocket of my coat, an Armani leather sport jacket I recently bought at a charity sale organized by my friend Donald T. It had costed me \$ 1550, quite a sum if you think about it and even for me. But I have no regret nor remorse. It was a good decision. The coat is wonderful, comfortable and beautiful. I feel like a teenager wearing it. At 52, this is a pleasure one cannot ignore. No, I do not regret the \$1550. But I am less sure about the candies I brought with me. It is for my brother.

Doctor J. says, do you want to see him?

We are just in front of the elevators. He met me there because he is so shocked by the accident and he knows how terrible all this is to me and to the family. He would show me the way and answer all the questions I wish to ask and give me all the details. It is his job. Helping is part of his job. He is willing to help. It is a small man with a ridiculous crown of dark hair around his head. He speaks with a gentle voice. Almost a whisper.

I say, is it safe?

He says, safe? what do you mean safe?

I slightly unfold my hands, and the tip of my fingers touches the candies in the bottom of my pocket. Through the plastic bag which envelop them, I feel their shape. I can almost recognize the shape of the pieces I bought at Candies for love, 2450 Dennison avenue. I have to drive almost 30 minutes to go there but I like their shop. They have all the sorts of candies you might want. The smell is so cool. The colors too, soft and gentle, spring-like. It was not my first time there. I buy there for christmas, for birthday parties.

I say, safe, I don't know.

He says, you don't have anything to be afraid of. The situation is stabilized.

I hesitate. There was this time when I brought candies for a friend of my wife. It was awful. How could have I guessed that she was on allergic? To candies? I suddenly remember that my brother has always had bad teeth. It strikes me that indeed our mother forbade us eating candies when we were kids because he had bad teeth and he did not take sufficiently care of them. He was so fragile. I could not eat candies either although I had no problems with my teeth and was strong as ten men. It makes me shivering. I feel bad about the candies.

Doctor J. says, So... do you want to see him?

I say, yes, sure but do we still have time? And I check the hour on my Bell&Ross chronograph.

Doctor J. says, nice watch.

I say, yes, thank you, my wife offered it to me for Christmas, last year, I think she got it in New York. Expensive, but it worth it.

He says, I guess.

I say, yes, I guess.

He says, well, it's up to you. Take your time. I know it's not easy. If you need some help, I shall be in my office, at the other end of the hall. What I can tell you is that you have nothing to fear. The situation is under control and perfectly stable. It is unfortunate I know because you might expect more from us after four months of coma.

He leaves. I look at him walking away to his office down the corridor . He goes past the vending machines, the nurses office and turns on the left. The soles of his shoes ridiculously squeaks at each of his step.

I think, 4 months of coma, yes. I take the bag of candies out of my pocket and put it in the trash-can close to the elevator and press the button and leaves. As the cabin moves down, one level after the other, ding-ding-ding, I think I could have kept the candies for myself.

Alms

2.35 am shines on the alarm clock that lies on the floor next to her bed. It was 10.23 pm when she went to bed. There were no nightmares tonight. She didn't dream either (or does not remember that she did). She simply drifted in and out and in and out of blank sleep. Now, she is out of it for good, and she knows that she won't catch it back before soon. She looks for something else to do. Excitement. Life. Hope. She gets up. It's now 2.47 am. The bedroom is dark and comfortable with its smells of dirty sheets. *Time, my God.* Raising her arms above her head, she removes the "Mickey-loves-Daisy" t-shirt she wears at night and that she bought for her husband when there was a sale at the Dollar General store at the corner of Broad and Markham. She saves and uses it as a nightgown for those days and nights when her husband is absent (*the bastard, shit*), away, traveling by plane, from one airport to the other, going through airport security check points and catching yellow, black, white taxis, eating in restaurants, eating chinese food because it's what he prefers (*and how she hates chinese food, the substance in her mouth when her tongue touches the meat or the vegetables or the noddles, even the rice she doesn't like that*), drinking coffees in the mornings (*with milk and sugar*) and whisky (*with water and ice, he has no preference about whisky*) in his hotel room in the evenings, working hard for his big company and having sex with Alex, Sydney, Candice, Sam, (*that's him, being attracted and aroused by girls with this type of first name*), all of them, cheating her or not actually (*is it cheating if she knows?*), and at home she wears his t-shirt and feels his odor, no need to qualify it, it's his, his odor is on her. Now she rolls the t-shirt in a ball and she throws it on the empty bed. Naked, goose-fleshed, she tiptoes out of the room. She closes the door gently, goes down to the hall and sits down on the floor in front of the telephone. Then, she lies down on the poor quality carpet that covers the floor of the hall of the small house. When they — with her husband — moved in, she rented a special, highly sophisticated cleaning appliance and scrubbed very carefully the carpet. Small brown dots remained. It is stained, but clean. It is perfectly safe to lie on it, even if naked. She feels all the carpet threads against her skin. Each of them connects to her body, slightly scratches her skin and leaves its imprint on her. They are small metal thorns or spikes and she is one of these asian monks, an indian magician. She is a fakir, capable of lying naked on a bed of metal thorns or spikes. It is dangerous for anyone except for her.

A dog barks. She hates dogs but finds reassuring to hear one at this precise moment. It's a connexion, a wire with the world. She smiles and starts dialing numbers on the receiver, eyes closed, careful not to look at her hands, not to

look at her fingers. She lets them doing what they want. She does not want to think to, does not want to know, to remind the numbers she is dialing. Her brain has to be left out of this. She just hopes that they are doing a good job, dialing a correct, real phone number. She hopes that someone, a real person is going to answer her call. *Ring ring ring*, it makes in her ear like an hesitation, on which side the coin is going to roll? Crossed fingers, she waits and then she hears someone. It's a man — *again*. “Good”, she thinks. She pushes her back, her shoulders on the floor, eyes still closed. Her body shivers. Her hands tremble, her arms too and her position is not comfortable.

“Hello” the man says. “Hello” she says. He says “Yes”. “Hello” she says again. He says “Yes, who are you? Do I know you? What’s going on?”. It’s always the same sentences she hears them saying when they pick-up the phone and answer her call. Even the tone of the voices barely changes, they are afraid of something, or excited and hopeful. Excited like dogs. Tonight, it is a hoarse uneasy and worried whisper. He does not want to be overheard by his wife or his children or her lover — maybe *his* lover but she thinks that he is not gay not with this tone of voice. He says, “Myra, is that you? Myra? Are you alright?”. (*who is Myra?*) She says, “No, no, it’s not Myra. You don’t know me. We don’t know each other”. She could lie, of course and pretend she is Myra and tricks him into a fake game. The *ring ring ring* the telephone made still vibrates in the back of her mind. She doesn’t pretend. *Ring ring ring*. It mixes with a the metallic honk of a car. She wonders if it’s happening in her street or in the phone. The dog is no longer barking. Where is her husband tonight? Alone? Or not? Probably not? She How would he face the situation with his habit of all the girls he has fucked instead of fucking her. She almost asks her about his wife, Myra, or her lover, and him cheating her, or the reverse (*does it happen, really?*) but she waits in silence. Her left arm, with which she holds the receiver and is lifted to her ear, stiffens because of the lack of blood (*or is it because there is too much blood?*). In a few seconds, the man is going to say something. She doesn’t even anticipate. She knows. Sometimes they hang down. It’s rare. They always say something. Why wouldn’t they? They always want to know, worried and excited, it’s how they are, she knows that *now* after all this time calling people at night when her husband is not at home. She just has to wait before they start talking to her.

The man whispers and it makes his voice coarser, more aggressive than before. “What do you want? You know what time it is. Fuck. Who are you? WHO! THE! FUCK! ARE! YOU!”. *A fuck-type of angry guy and he is angry now, obviously*. Maybe it is because he actually wants to fuck her and cannot disguise his sentiments. Probably, if he could, he hit her and tear her clothes and rape her. It frightens her. She tenses up, feeling his aggressiveness oozing, a

wound bleeding over her, through the phone, disturbing her good moods, spoiling her phone therapy. She rapidly drops a few words of apology, “I am so sorry, I am so sad and desperate. I mean my life is so empty. Miserable. I think I could kill myself”. She wishes she could listen to his answer but she can’t. She switches the phone off.

She feels no pain. She feels no cold. Nothing, except her arm ankylosed and the malaise of a failed phone call and the self-pitying fear that has now invaded her. She slips two fingers in her throat and she coughs and saliva, bile, blood maybe fill her mouth. She spits on the carpet that she then touches, pressing the tips of her fingers on its thorny surface. She won’t be able to dial another phone number, face someone else. She now lacks the energy to face someone else. She needs to rest. Anger and violence is frightening. It is also as difficult to bear as perfect empathy, when they are trying to be nice, when the man says “OK, ok, we don’t know each other, but if you call me in the middle of the night, it’s because you need help. Do you need help? Are you alright? If you need help, I’ll help you, I won’t tell anything to my wife, when do you want to meet, do you want to meet, that’s why you are calling”. She says abruptly, “No”. This guy also wants to fuck her and he is also a pervert but he won’t say it, doesn’t even dare acknowledging it for himself. She puts the receiver down on the carpeted floor. She hears the voice echoing through the phone. She does not understand and doesn’t want to understand. She doesn’t want to hang down but she doesn’t want to be involved more deeply into this either. *He won’t trick me. Not that easily, at least. The bastard. I hate their hypocrisy. Why would he want to help me if he doesn’t know me? How could he help me?* After a while he hangs down. She switches the phone off and lies down on the carpet.

After a few hours of sleep, she wakes up. She move her eyes first to check where she is. Then, inside her brain, she plays with the idea of moving her body and then she moves her hands and legs and she stands up. “Will I take a shower? Will I take a cup of coffee? Tea?”, she says, her voice clear and loud. She almost shouts. She goes back to the bedroom, opens the door and looks for the the “Mickey-Daisy love you” t-shirt on. It’s 7.13 am. The bed is still empty. Now that her husband is gone, she has not much to do. She reaches for the small, finely decorated pill-box that is besides the alarm clock. She sticks her tongue like a snake would do to sting you and catches two of the white pills she likes so much. She rubs her tongue on her palate and saliva starts filling he mouth. She swallows the pill. Maybe tonight she will try again to reach someone. Maybe tonight it will work. She will find a real connection with real people. She decides to take another pill and to go to bed. She needs rest before she can try again. Or maybe her husband is back today and she will tell him.

Dead or Alive

I.

It starts well for a Sunday. like it is NOT a Sunday AT ALL. 9 something am. big friendly grey clouds have invaded the sky. the air is cool. rain is coming. it smells spring and sun, bush fires and dry dirt. It is one of THOSE cool days. I haven't slept for the last 2 days. I am truly and perfectly alone in my small apartment—no friend left and my wife had insisted to divorce me some time ago and she brought the kids away from me. I am out of job—two days before, I lost a deadly job in which I never had much interest. BUT I feel great. Free. I am slobbering drunk. but I feel REALLY GREAT. I am achieving something.

I stand up. I sip the wine left in my glass. My body is tired. My legs are too tired form me. I stagger to the window. I open it and say "I AM THE KING OF THE WORLD." Nothing happens. Outside, the parking lot and the street are dead like hell. I go back to the couch, lie and say again "I AM THE KING OF THE WORLD." I am alive. The place is alive.

I switch the tv on and put a dvd in the player. a movie always helps life running high and good. it is one of the movies I had picked up just before I was fired. my boss had told me that I was a good for nothing and that he'd rather do the job himself than let me harass other employees. "PLEASE", I had said. I was dumb. I wanted to tell him how sorry I felt. He had raised his hands, "Don't. No need to apologize". You're WRONG." Exactly what my wife kept saying to our children. "HE is WRONG. Don't TRUST him" She did not like me either. BUT: I am as right as any one of the others and it makes a hell of a difference when people don't like you. They don't even know what they want you to do. They just complain. and hate you. You can do your job. be a good husband. they don't see it. they ignore it. they are soulless. BAS-TARDS.

I press the on button on the remote of the dvd player and relax on the couch. Victoria Paris appears on the screen dressed like a roman goddess. She is not my favorite porn actresses. I'd rather see Scarlett Johansson in a transparent toga. Now, Scarlett Johansson, she is a hot number. classy. and those eyes. you really feel like she is looking at YOU. like she wants to fuck YOU. but Victoria Paris, that's another story. LOOK AT HER, undulating like a snake and disguised as a goddess. Anyway, she's more life than most people I know. And it's still a good Sunday.

And then, all at once, everything collapses. someone is ringing the bell and bangs on the door of my apartment.

II.

Now, this is the type of things I truly hate, someone banging on the door or knocking or ringing the bell when NO ONE is expected to do that. The REAL surprise. Fuck. How it upsets me. Of course, I have nothing to hide. Not even that I am toying with my dick in front of a rented and bad porn movie. but I feel like I am doing something wrong. It makes me feel bad.

I reach the remote, kill Victoria Paris' fake moans. the movie goes on in silence. Keep moving baby, I'll be back VERY soon. I gather my bathrobe about my waist and walk to the door to quiet down whoever is making all that fucking noise. "SHIT, AREN'T YOU GOING TO STOP", I say through the door, "I AIN'T BUYING NOTHING. LEAVE ME ALONE." I hear a guy laugh and he rings the bell again and he bangs on the door. again. I am in no mood to kick him back to hell. Standing does not make me any good. I am drunk. almost sick. "Come on, open that door, Bobby, open that door." I wonder if I REALLY recognize the voice. I think I do. It cannot be what I think it is. I open the door. Yes it is but I cannot help. I startle. I raise one hand. to check that it's real. that it is happening. that he is not as cold as a dead fish.

"Hey Dave", I say. It's Dave. Big Dave. We haven't seen each other for what? 15? 20? years. I know the exact figure but I don't want to remember. he was my best college high school university friend. We shared books. shared ideas. shared dreams. shared clothes. shared love. shared bottles of wine, pizzas and hamburgers, cigarettes and pot. We were together, always together, two sides of the same life. I trusted him. I loved him because he was always there for me. I imagined he was until until he vanished and left me behind. Then, I hated him. I was sure I had done something wrong. I felt sorry for ME. and I hated HIM. It was a long time ago.

"Hey Dave" I say again. I am not sure what he expects me to say. I think I should have shave. take a shower. sleep more these past 48 hours. drink less. drink more.

He steps back and looks me over.

He says "You don't want to close your robe."

It is an old and stained robe. There is no belt to close it.

I say, "Yeah Sure." I hold it against my waist.

I say, "What's the necktie for?" He doesn't answer. Now, he is that kind of guy. the kind who wears ties on Sundays. ties and a \$500 suit, a pink striped shirt and black leather perfectly shined shoes. And doesn't understand when one asks what's for. I am the kind of guy with an old stained bath robe.

He flashes a all-white-full-of-teeth smile, like it is one of those great moment we had to be happy with. after all these years. DEAR GOD.

He says "Ready for a coffee" as if he were thinking "who should not?"

I say "Why not. Just let me put something on."

He says, "OK, I'll be downstairs, in my car, the black SUV."

I say again, "Let me put something on." I close the door and walk back inside. Has Dave seen Victoria Paris being banged on the screen of my TV set? I turn the volume up. Victoria is crying her pleasure out loud. she has her way of doing it. it's cool and she's good. she likes it. the guys with her enjoy it too, in a peaceful and quiet way. but I've lost interest in it. I no longer enjoy it. I take a shower. leaves the apartment. Vic Paris is still moaning. Outside it's wet. it's raining. Dave is in a black SUV, waiting for me.

III.

He says, "Where are we going."

I say, "We could go to Denny's." Denny's is my favorite place miles around. It's one of the rare places where I feel safe. At home. Alive. They use powdered eggs for their omelets and a special artificial mix for the pancakes and the syrup is artificial too. Who cares? Not me. I like that.

Dan says, "I'll drive." I usually walk because I no longer have a car. But Dave has a car and he wants to use it. it's funny. the world looks different. like we are in a space shuttle and we are going to Pluto. except that we are just going two blocks away from my apartment, two crossings, two traffic lights. not the hardest place to reach in the world.

"Hey Johnny, how'r you doing today?", she says. she is Juliet. she is one of the regular waitresses. my preferred one. she is a nice girl. kind inside. soft and honest. everything is simple with her.

"Hey Cassie, fine. What about you? And the kids, are they okay?", I say.

It's a joke between us. Juliet, bah. I don't like that name. And she doesn't like mine. She suggested once that she could call me Johnny, if I did not mind. I did not and I decided that Cassie is cool too. Cassie and Johnny. Dave looks puzzled. "Yeah", I say, "I know." There is not much I could say. It's our joke.

We take seats in the back of Denny's main room. from here I can see the traffic in the street. the rain falling. I can see whoever enters the place. whoever leaves the place. I can also see the other customers. It's Sunday. The place is crowded. full of noise and color. and it is quite something. Next to us, a couple is having breakfast. The guy is alright. he has nothing special. average. But the girl. I've always wondered how THOSE girls could be interested in THOSE men. she is largely above the average American woman. above the average American man too. maybe she is French or British or she comes from Mars. She is cute. sexy. a perfect haircut. a beautiful nose, a bit too long but exciting. her voice rings high and cool. she reminds me of Vic Paris and it makes me smile. I look at her. She looks back and smiles too. I like that. but I wonder what she expects from me.

Dan orders coffee. I order a coffee too and a shot of whisky. Cassie says, "You should drink less Johnny." She is right. But I drink. whisky or wine. anything. Not Dan. He is not the kind of guy who drinks whisky on Sunday mornings. I know it. I feel it. It is because of the tie and the suit and the shirt and the shoes. Or it is the reverse. When Cassie asks him if he needs anything else with his coffee. No, nothing thanks. I was right.

Cassie's gone. Dan says "Did you make her?"

I say "Make her?"

He says "Yes, make her."

I say "You're nuts. she is the mother of my children."

He says "The mother of your children."

I say "I am kidding."

He says "You are kidding. Yes." and also "So you didn't do anything."

I say "Of course no. She has GOOD vibrations."

He says "Good vibrations."

I say "Yeah. she is positive. she is 100% life. pure life."

He says "You have changed, no?"

I say "I bet I have. I am better now."

He says "You are better now."

I say "I've improved myself."

IV.

Cassie brings us what we have ordered. a decaf with a shot of whisky in a small glass for me. a coffee for Dave.

"So" he says.

So, I think. But I don't say anything. because I don't feel like saying anything.

Dave starts it off. the conversation. which is NOT a conversation. He does not feel like listening to me. He speaks about HIS life. Not all his life. Just bits of it. How recent, I don't know. He does not give dates. The marriage with Lise-Ann and the divorce with Lise-Ann. the marriage with Sandra and then the divorce with Sandra and the marriage with Sylvia. no divorce yet. they are happy together. him working hard. him working VERY hard and making a lot of money, big money. they have three cars, a black LEXUS SUV and a dark-blue Bentley that he almost never used, that remained parked, waxed and polished, next to Sylvia's own SUV. that is black too, shiny and classy. Which brand it is, he does not say. He does not say either what Sylvia does with her life. I might have asked but I don't. It's too late. I lose tracks. My concentration breaks. I see Dan's lips moving. but his words get lost. I am completely out of it. My mouth smiles against my will. My mind is away. I remember that last night I had a dream that Scarlett Johansson wanted to have a baby with my father. it made my mother hysterical. I was sad. my brother was jealous. I don't have a brother in the real life.

I say, “Cassie, bring me another one.” Did I REALLY think that I owed him an apology or something? DEAR GOD. I wave the small empty glass like a WHITE flag. But Dave resumes his speech. He leans towards me — maybe he realizes that I am no longer following him. he puts his hands on my shoulders and holds me tight. “I am doomed”, he says. “Women and cars and money. I am doomed.” He says that he has always missed me. all we did together. the parties. the girls. the ideas. we were idealists but that was good. that was life. that was his fate and he has lost it. all that happened after me was nothing. artificial. the death row. I was life. now he was back in town. we were friends. friendship never dies. He shouts “FRIENDSHIP NEVER DIES”, like he is singing a Bon Jovi song. That’s RIDICULOUS. his voice is out of tone. his eyes red. And he starts CRYING. I can’t believe it. Gently at first like a man. then hard like a baby. then harder like a crazy baby loosing control. Oh shit. What I am expected to do, I don’t know.

I stand up. I am sick. Sickness has replaced everything in me. I am just a mass of SICKNESS. I put my hands on the table. I stare at Dave and I walk out of there. I feel people are looking at ME. The cute blonde is looking at me. Cassie is looking at me. Probably Dave too is looking at me. I hear him saying “I’m sorry.” I’m NOT. I think, “MY DEAR GOD, WILL YOU BRING ME BACK TO REALITY.” I wish I was home. back to my life. back to Vic Paris. all beautiful flesh and hot blood as she is, she is not that BAD. maybe there will even be some wine left.

Epiphany

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Sing Your Life, The Beauty and the Destruction, c&d v167.5 (Writing to Honor a Child, author edition), Blister & Burn (the Koyars edition), S&M, c&d v170.5 Distinguished Writings editor edition, Living in Chaos, Silent Screams, Taking It All In, It All Comes Down, Rising to the Surface, Outspokes, Chapter 38 (v1, v2 & v3), Finally, Literature for the Sassy and Elite (v1, v2 & part 1), a Wake-Up Call From Tradition, (recovery), Dark Matter: the Mind of Jean Koyars, Revolution, (Dreaded), Get Your Buzz On, Janet & Jean Together, go-on, Taking Poetry to the Streets, the Game-Plan CD-Rom Edition, the William Word, Deal, Prepare For The Day, Insurance, Living in a Big World, Polling the Trigger, Venture to the Unknown, Janet Koyars Enriched, Star's an Open Book, "40", Section and Other Studies, the Studies of Women, Prominent Pen (Diary) edition, Harassment, the 2012 Bookends, Wrecks, Chant's Elements, Justice, Today Today Today Today, a Plow's Worth 1,000 words (author set book and book on hand), Life in Color, Post-Apparition, Down Through Life, Under the Sun (photo book), Parfait Holiday, Revamped, 100 Million Ours on the Moon, Let me See you Stripped, Part of my Path, Rays Soak Life & Death, Say Nothing, (Yuhuuuu), when you dream tonight, the Parable, Table of Poetry, a year long January, the Voyage, Infamous in our Prime, Anis Nic: an Understanding of her Art, the Electronic Windmill, Changing Women, the Swan Road, the Significance of the Frontier, the Svetovatore Unapologetic, Harvest of Gems, the Little Monk, Death in Méjago, Memento Mori, In the Palace of Creation, R.I.P., Bob the Bumble Bee, Remnants and Shadows, I Saw This, the Drive, Thomas at Tea, Crying Down Nineteenth, Blue Collar Ballet, napsin, in Your Heart the Apoptosis's Testaments of God, the Adventures of the Key to Believing Bear, Anis Nic: an Understanding of her Art (second printing), **Duck Under / Charlie Newman**, 12 Times 12 Equals Grass, a Marble Node Pauline Berchese with a Marble Apple in her Marble Hand, Challenge of Night and Day and Chicago Poems, Lighten Up, Not Far From Here, Watershed, You Have Finally Won, Avenue C. Suburban Rhythms, Down Syndrome, the Dark Side of Love, the pill is a man's best friend, Angel's Syllable is Good Boss of Devil's Spine, Poems and Stories from The Blue Collar Book of the Dead, Cat People, Death of an Angel, Ghosted, Science: A Curmudgeon's View, Ghost Dancers Leaping from a Tone, the 4-D Window, Open Wounds, Amne Junkie, Interstices, Gunther, Cats, Scream Cloud Island, when the World was Black and White, a Petal Under Pavement, the Holy Sea of CEE, Book 15 "Thousand to Volcanoes, Lost in an Echo, I Was Charles Bresson's Secret Hestago, Eradicate Bond, Royal Donor's Death Scene "His of This, Understood, Alcoholic Shotgun, Champagne - Hot Water, How a Bull Believes, the Thing in the Lounges of WagonWheel" (I Come in Arival), Portlands from Exile, the Five Stages of Blackwell, Stay in Formation, Shadowing Other Footprints, the Girl Next Door and Other Poems, Major Arcana, Sim Poetrie Nulle est Glorie, Short Takes, Seeing Strangers, Re-Veiling Icons, The Tribes Justice Drove Out of the Land, Bitchery of the Innocent, Hammer-Chaind, No Roof — No Ocean, Dancing at the Abyss, a nation of assholes with guns, the Blazing Hands of 100 Drummers, Make the Wind, /, the Planner, the Corrosion, the Pyre On Which Tomorrow Burns, Cowboy Hats and Railways, Give What You Can, Come Fly with Me, out of the Web, Don't Tread on Me, Entering the Ice Age, Entering the Ice Age, the Line to Power, Fear the Forsaken, Falling Into Place, Unknown, Forever Bound, Exploding on the Scene, Moving the Earth, Autumn Again, Ink in Smoke, No Return, Wrapping It Up, Link in the Chain, Shot out of a Cannon, Incubate Ink, a ew era, Ideals, Friction, See Drift, and Then be Moved, Approaching Front, Beyond the Gates, the Curve of Arctic Air, Idea, a Mad Escape, Testament, the New Deal, the Captive and the Deed, When the Walls are Paper Thin, Nighttime City, Suggested Torture, Down in the Dirt v084, Clearing the Debris, Skeletal Remains, When the World Settles, Along the Surface, into the White, Life... from Nothing, Down in It, Wake up and Smell the Flowers, Looking Beyond, See the World Burn, America the Lost, Catch Fire in the Treetops, Wisdom in Broken Hands, Symbols Mottled, Grounded, Perfectly Imperfect, Pull the Strings, am I really extinct, Home at Last, Spiraling in a Rural Story, Treading Water, Black Cat, Bad Influence, Too Many Miles, the Paths of Least Resistance, hello goodbye goodbye hello, When the Walls are Paper Thin, Planets Apart, Planets Apart, Nighttime City, the Breaking, Suggested Torture, New moon, a Perfect Solitude, 4 Feet Under, The Fire, the 23 Engines, Scalded Birds, Being Bold, the Blind Eye, the Role the Effort the Yell, Siphoner & Swardist, Slate & Marrow, Blister & Burn, Kiss & Repeat, Survive & Thrive, (not so) Warm & Fuzzy, Torture & Triumph, Oh, the Elements, Side A/Side B, Balance, Chances Theory, Writing to Honor & Celebrate, Distinguished Writings, Breaking Silence, Unlocking the Mysteries, the Book of Stars, We the Poets, Life on the Edge, Revealing all your Dirty Little Secrets, Decoy Remnant, Chant Remnant, Hope & Creation, Bending the Curve, Layers of Creation, Dark Matter, Survival of the Fittest, Crawling Through the Dirt, Loving the Groundwork, Weathered, who, Ink in my blood, (boom) (4 editions), Enriched Poetry, c&d Enriched Press, Enriched with Dirt, An Open Book, Literary Town Hall (2 editions), Prominent Pen (2 editions), 100 Words, the 2012 Literary Date Book, It Was All Preordained, Cultural Touchstones, the Mission (issue edition and chapbook edition), Purpose, Falling, Cheap Thrills, After the Apocalypse 2013 date book, After the Apocalypse (poetry edition), Entanglement, Guilt by Association, don't forget it, don't listen, read, bare minimum, Poet as Sociopath, Drowning, Art is not Meant to be Touched, the Beaten Path, a New Pen, Need to Know Basis (reduced edition and extended edition) and the "need to know" 2015 literary date book, one Solitary Word, What Must Be Done, Adrift, Salvation, the 2016 literary date book anthology, the Cresson Few, Spotlight in the Sanctuary, from Smoke, the Intersection, a Stormy Beginning, Clouds Over the Moon*

Compact Discs

Alan's Favorite Wine the Janna tapes, Koyars's First (MP3 Individual), Winds and Flowers the beauty & the destruction, The Second Aging Something is Something, The Second Aging Live in Alaska, Pines & Koyars Live at Café Alaba, MPainter Orchestra Rough Mixes, Koyars Seeing Things Differently, SD/50 Tick Tock, Koyars Change Rearrange, Order From Chaos the Entropy Project, Order From Chaos the Entropy Project, Say So One Day, Koyars Stop, Koyars Masterful Performances and CD, Koyars Death Comes in Threes, Koyars Changing Gears, Koyars Dream, Koyars How Do I Get There?, Koyars Contacts+Conflict+Control, the DMJ Art Connection, the DMJ Art Connection, Koyars Questions in a World Without Answers, Koyars S&M, Koyars W2R0 Radio (2 CD set), Alan's Favorite Wine, Oh (audio CD), Life At The Café (3 CD set), the DMJ Art Connection Indian Flux, the DMJ Art Connection Meme: Depressive or Something, Chantic Radio Chantic Radio Work #1, Chantic Radio Chantic Radio Work #2, Chantic Radio Chantic Radio Work #3, Chantic Radio Chantic Radio Work #4, Chantic Radio Chantic Radio Work #5, Chantic Radio the Chantic Collection Collection #01-05 (5 CD set) etc. (audio CD, 2 CD set), Chantic Elements (2 CD set), Chaos in Motion (6 CD set), SD/50 Searching to a Halt (EP), FR&J Two for the Price of One (EP), Kiki, Jake and Haystack An American Parrot, Koyars/the Bestard Tito/Paul Baker/the Juliana Powers Trio Fusion (4 CD set), podcasts the Evolution of Performance Art (13 CD set), Koyars Live (14 CD set), the DMJ Art Connection the Things They Did to You (2 CD set), Koyars Saying a Psychiatric (3 CD set), Koyars St. Paul's (3 CD set), Koyars the 2009 Poetry Game Show (3 CD set), Koyars and the Hellman of South Africa Burn Through Me (2 CD set), Koyars "40", Koyars Section and Other Stories, Koyars the Studies of Women (amazon.com release), Koyars "Delira Yo'ca" (4 CD set), Koyars "Latter it Out", Koyars "What We Need in Life" (CD single), Koyars/Archievel, "Across the Post" (3 CD set).