

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

When Things Look Like This

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Writing

by

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Chair

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

When Things Look Like This

by

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It took no more than a moment for Otto Grant to end his life on December 30, 1962, but twenty-seven years later, Otto's daughter, Annabeth, is haunted by the legacy of his suicide.

In her novel, *When Things Look Like This*, Amy Burton Forrest conjures the fractured world of a man suffering from debilitating depression in the face of Cold War anxiety, the pressures of capitalism, and the fear of hereditary mental illness. Otto's life revolves around his work as a banker in San Francisco, family life in Marin County and stolen days at his ranch in California's Anderson Valley. His world is richly textured and full of meaning, so why did he have to die? As a beloved daughter struggles with her father's honor, his violence and his affection, *When Things Look Like This* argues that time and memory are fictions and that it is impossible to truly know even those we love most. Over the course of fifty sections, Forrest relies on the accumulation of details and memories to create a narrative about family, social class and the creative act of remembering.

*Propriety.*

Fog sits heavy on the village, which is cupped in the cleft of golden hills, close enough to the sea to smell it. They come down out of their houses—Craftsman or Italianate or mid-Century Modern houses. Houses crammed full of lovely things and lovely food and little children in shiny mary-janes or short pants. Children who stay behind because children should be protected from death.

The women all try to look like Jackie Kennedy: hair pouffed, skirts a-line, pearls lustrous. The men arrange their faces into something funereal instead of something that would rather be teeing off across the bay at the Olympic Club. Some of them judge Otto harshly, bastard should have known better, clean the gun with the safety off, what do you expect? Some of them just feel bad for the kids.

In their dark suits and dresses they flock to St. John's, which crouches in the fog. The road is overarched by huge sycamores and oaks. The fog condenses and drips lazily, luxuriously. It plops on the roofs of their cars as they approach the church. These people have expectations. Even the weather must comply. Mere dripping would be annoying – an everyday drizzle, but these large, soft plops are resonant, rare, as though someone has arranged for depth of feeling.

They sit in the pews and wait. There is music. Only Pauline and Edie know that it is Brahms. Oh, one or two others, maybe, like Gabrielle Weidemann, but she is unfairly advantaged, being German. So, Brahms. *Ein Deutsches Requiem* is for the living, not the



lost, which is why Pauline chose it. Susan Minot, the organist, is only frustrated by it. Pauline should have known better, in her opinion, than to ask for such a piece. Without the chorus? One set of hands? Too much. She plays with her lips pursed in disapproval, but nobody knows the difference.

Otto's women are all there, Isabel, Pauline, Edie, Karen, Anita ... There are others, too, the wives of co-workers, his children's lovely fifth-grade teacher, even his mother-in-law, wearing a platinum wig and black pearls like pigeon's eggs. Karen wears a cheap pink linen suit and matching pillbox hat. It would have made him feel sad to see it. She always had that air of trying too hard and getting it wrong. Pity had made him want to fuck her. She sits in the second pew, thinking that having been his secretary makes her practically family. She sobs until Pauline – whose black eyes are dry – looks back at her, holding her gaze until Karen's sobs turn to hiccups. Karen doesn't understand propriety. She is all heart.

The fog has burned off by the time they begin to leave the church, decorously, in twos and threes. They crowd on the stairs, stop on the concrete walk, shade their eyes against the brightness. They are stunned by it. How is it that they have never noticed that the trees along Lagunitas Road avoid the churchyard as if by edict? There, across the street, the elementary school sits coolly surrounded by old oaks, pines, even a silvery olive, but there is none of that protection, here. The mourners are exposed, fragile. Life seems delicate under this sun, under the scrutiny of a life lost so brutally. They all feel as though they've just recovered from a terrible illness, standing on shaky legs, suddenly ravenous.

They begin to gather together to discuss it, quietly. It is sensational, after all: a gun, blood, a beautiful widow.

Three of Otto's four children—Eddie, Will and Mac—stand with their mother in an informal receiving line. Pauline takes advantage of a tiny lull in the sympathy to lean towards Eddie.

Where is your sister? she says.

Eddie just shrugs. Annabeth is nowhere to be seen. Has she ever been there? Eddie and Will bend their heads together and whisper. Nobody remembers seeing her.

Karen stands near the family. She leans on her husband's arm, sobbing uncontrollably. Eddie watches, one arm around her seven-year old brother, Mac. Finally she shakes Mac off and steps out of the receiving line. Will says something, and reaches for her. She shrugs him away and walks toward Karen and Paul—that is the husband's name, Paul.

Hello, Eddie says. Her voice is clipped.

Karen gives her a sweet, soggy smile. Hello, dear, she says, and leans forward as if to hug Eddie.

Eddie stiffens at the intimacy and refuses the hug. Please leave, she says.

Pardon? Karen stops with her handkerchief half-way between pocketbook and nose.

Edie is barely contained. Her voice shakes with anger. We don't need your cheap tears here, she says. Please have some consideration for our loss.

But I ... Karen begins, but Edie does not hear her. Edie is gone.

*You should have been there.*

Ten years passed before my sister Edie told me the story of Daddy's funeral. You must understand: Edie is a natural storyteller, but she doesn't embellish. If I tell you that Edie said something, you can believe it. Edie is eminently trustworthy. She raises horses in the desert. I don't know why I would tell you that people who live in the desert and raise horses are trustworthy, I suppose it isn't something you can assume. But really, how can you be full of shit in the desert? It strips you bare. I hate it there. I only visit in the winter. Sometimes there is a dusting of snow on the hills around Edie's house, then. She and I weren't close for years after Daddy died. I married, she married, we both had children. Eventually we returned to the easy rapport we'd had as children.

Annabeth, you need a job, Edie says. Go back to work.

Substitute teaching? No. Human beings are horrible when they're twelve. It's like permanent *Lord of the Flies*.

Okay, then find a hobby. How about tennis? Edie laughs as she says this, as if tennis is funny. She is probably right.

She didn't tell me the funeral story as if to say, you should have been there. She was merely filling in details. I don't know whether or not they noticed that I was missing at the funeral. I put in that part. I didn't even tell Danny about the funeral. There was a

ballgame that he wanted to watch. They were so angry at me, you understand. I didn't want to make him angry, too.

Angry is what I expected. What I did not expect was dead.

I don't remember thinking of Mother and the others or even considering whether I'd go.

I don't remember deciding not to. I don't remember the ballgame. Of course I don't remember the ballgame. Danny's voice was loud when he watched a ballgame, then.

He'd cheer and cuss as if they could hear him, as if it would make a difference.

If I try to imagine how I might have felt, then, what comes to mind is lucky.

*Sorry.*

A piano accompanies a baritone performing melancholy German Lieder.

Rural Northern California: Otto gallops a Palomino horse bareback across rolling golden hills. It is his horse. They are his hills.

An affluent suburb of San Francisco, a well-furnished, midcentury-modern living room: Otto kneels at a glass-topped coffee table playing Parcheesi with a teenage girl. It is his younger daughter, Edie. She is fourteen but still wears her hair in braids. She hesitates, then moves her second tiger. He looks at Edie for a long minute, then picks up the board and throws it across the room. He stands and walks away, limping a little from kneeling on the floor for so long.

A dark hallway is lined with family photographs: the shadows are deeper at the end of the hallway so at first it is difficult to determine whether Otto and Pauline are fighting or making love. It has the fierceness of combat, but the lips, the tongues, the thrusting. They are mostly clothed. They bump a console table and an arrangement of roses in a crystal vase slowly falls to the ground. At the crash, Pauline breaks away from Otto and rearranges her dress. She laughs and steps gingerly out of the mess. Otto zips his trousers and bends to pick up shards of crystal.

Sorry, he says. Turn on the light.

Don't be silly, she says. Edie will do it. She'll be home soon.

The shards of crystal clink against one another. There are roses like fallen soldiers. Otto continues to pile shards of crystal atop a larger piece of the vase. There are roses like pickup sticks. The puddle smells swampish. Pauline's footsteps disappear down the hall.

In the parking lot of the Cloverdale Frosty Freeze, Otto sits in the driver's seat of a 1956 Bel-Air station wagon, repeatedly throwing his head back against the headrest. Eventually he stops.

On a silvery jacquard pouf in the fitting area of an upscale women's boutique just off Union Square, he waits. He smiles when a pretty teenage girl with short-cropped brunette hair and a snub nose steps out of a dressing room in a full-skirted, ice-blue cocktail dress. She twirls for him. His eyes fill with tears.

On a busy city sidewalk at midday, he strides purposefully in a navy-blue suit, brown fedora and a camel overcoat. Women stop to watch him pass. He turns through the doors of a large bank and passes from the sunlit sidewalk to a deeply shadowed interior. He stands still and people move very quickly all around him as they go about their banking business in shadowy sepia.

He paints at an easel set up near a large window. The room is furnished as a study, or den. A large desk occupies the center of the room. There is a green-shaded lamp. There is a big leather chair. The rug is a red and blue bokhara. The painting is packed full of brightly colored—falsely-colored—tree-trunks in a strange wood. The earth at the base of the trees runs with blood which begins to pour out of the painting and run in a steady

and growing stream across the wooden floor and out the door. The door should open onto a hallway, but instead there is only blinding sunlight.

Again in the den: there is no sign of the painting. He stands beside the leather chair. The door opens. A lanky boy walks in and shuts the door behind him. Otto pulls off his belt, quickly. In close up, Otto's face is beaded with sweat. His right arm arcs a brown-leather belt into the air again and again.

He drives the Bel-Air station wagon fast along a twisting country road. Scenery alternates between scrubby hills and deep redwood forest, it all flashes past in shifting patterns of light and dark, as if driving through dappled sunlight. Once or twice as the low evening sun falls upon Otto's profile, his round, silver-framed glasses flash opaque.

The baritone stops singing, coughs, apologizes. There is the sound of someone bumping into a microphone. Sorry, the baritone mutters again. A door closes.

Headlights swing across the front of a white frame house. Gravel crunches under the car tires. The car door slams. Crickets chirp.



*I can speak without fear of reprisal.*

Silence. The scratching of a pen. A thumbnail dragged across paper. Lemon-scented furniture polish, old books.

*What I haven't told you...* Otto thinks, drawing his thumbnail hard across the thick paper so the crease is knifelike.

He tucks the letter—merely a date: December 30, 1962, and a single line, nothing more—into an envelope and licks it. That pasty tang. But since no one has yet returned alive from this place, *Ich werde ohne Angst vor Repressalien Antwort*. He writes a name in black ink and then sits back and looks at it. On the desk a bronze owl doesn't weigh down any papers against the gentle onslaught of the breeze that isn't there.

*The same anxiety.*

Otto wakes from a dream of his father.

You talked in your sleep, Pauline says.

He doesn't reply. How hard it is to put dreams into words when we can still hear the voices of the dead. His father wore the shearling coat he always wore that year he spent on the farm in Hayward. They would visit on Saturdays, Otto filled with fear of his father and the pleasure of a farm. Once, there were baby lambs. Otto had been twelve, then, and now he is forty-two. He hasn't thought about that place in a decade, at least, and is astounded that the details can be so clear after all that time. In the dream, his father stood in the pasture beyond the fence and shook with cold. Father wasn't allowed to go beyond the fence, and yet—there he was. Otto tried to warm his father by rubbing the arms of the shearling coat but then Otto was chilled to the bone and shivering and his father opened the jacket wide and Otto leaned into his father's warm flesh. The heat of his father's body seeped into him and he began to cry.

Remembering, he turns his head to the window. Fog whitens the pane. Prickling shame at the yeasty scent of his father's skin, the clamminess, the decay. But still, the odd, dream-world reassurance of flesh on flesh that would have horrified him in the light of day. Pauline stretches on the other side of the bed—reaches over to rub the bald top of Otto's head.

Arise and greet the day, fool, she says.

He sits and swings his feet to the floor. The floor is cold. It is November, after all.

Years before, upon waking they would wrap themselves up in one another. His pale, freckled limbs intertwined with her silky, olive-brown ones. Otto would take Pauline's musky warmth into the day, not his father's clammy madness. Neither of them recalled this any longer. Now they were rolled up in filmy, clinging webs of their own making.

You said. Then you. But I.

Utterly bound. Spiders roll up other things like that. Little meaty victims. Otto and Pauline were more like ... what? What else rolls itself up in the way spiders roll other things up? Each in his own lonely bundle. Her own lonely bundle. Caterpillars? Do caterpillars ever get in there and then panic? Realize that there's no fucking way they're ever going to be a butterfly, that it's just going to end for them like that: all bound up and desperate, just an ugly, unfulfilled mush of thwarted insect potential?

It is like that.

Sometimes it is like an elevator going too fast in a shaft that never ends. Waiting for that lurching drop that means the elevator has arrived. The lurching drop that never comes. And is the elevator going up or going down? He can't decide. Or: a gibbet so far from the ground that the rope uncoils and uncoils as he falls through the air. The hangman stands far below, looking up into the blue, blue sky, eyes shaded against the glare. A bird flies by. He falls. Waits for that lurching drop that never comes. For a

certain period of time there isn't any difference at all between flying and falling. There is the same elation. The same anxiety.

Sometimes it is joy welling up into a mad urge to dance—only he doesn't dance. Anything, then. He will dig into the earth in his garden, move plants around for no reason other than he must dig. He will leap about with the dogs in the driveway until the bitches are so excited that they nip and snap at one another. He'll cry over nothing: something in the paper. Yesterday's front page photo of an elephant wading in the sea while two little children played nearby. That was all: an elephant, two children, the sea. The blurb said it was in Brighton, England. What the hell. It was the magic of it that got to him. The children would look up from their play and realize that an elephant was right there. Not a dolphin, or a seal (though those had their own degree of charm) but a fucking elephant in the sea in Brighton, England. Imagine that. The headline above it something dreadful all in caps: *MYSTERY CRISIS IN U.S. CAPITAL*. What apocalypse did that portend? Barefoot Khrushchev with a shoe in one hand a nuke in the other. But then that elephant. The contrast of it maybe. World War III probably right around the corner, but the animals and little children so woefully ignorant of it Otto had wanted to beat his arms against his chest and cry. Instead, he had lowered his coffee cup into its saucer with an ineffectual clink and had blinked several times behind his glasses before anyone had noticed.

There are days when it feels normal rather than nuts. There are days at the ranch—Queenie when she sees him coming. Tosses her golden mane and comes loping up to greet him. Cicadas too loud in the meadow by the river. The canvas so white in the

sunlight. Cadmium yellow! Cadmium red! Cadmium green for the love of God! Those cadmiums. He paints all day until the feeling goes away. Then he is cold and hungry and the painting isn't good enough. The hills lumpy and tired. The oaks violent against the golden grass. How could he have been so stupid?

*For the flowers and the dresses.*

In the distance: joyful laughter, voices calling to one another, crashing surf, traffic and city sounds, but very subtly, and only for flavoring. Sea-smell, exhaust, clean-washed hair.

That is not all.

Crissy Field in the sun with Annabeth. Her head on his shoulder, his arm tight around her. Waves from the bay crash against the fort wall. Their half-closed eyes. He feels rather than hears her laugh: through her ribcage, sweater, his sweater, his ribcage. Nerve endings understand, 'my daughter is laughing.' Send the message to his brain. The abstract machinery of laughter. She rises up, rests her chin on his chest.

Daddy, she says, someday I'm going to tell my children about the flowers you bought for my twelfth birthday party, do you remember? You filled the playroom with them, tulips and irises.

Pink roses, he says, stroking her hair.

Yes, she says. There were pink roses.

He thinks: thorn-tipped, cruel, unscented. The underside of eyelids half-closed against the sunlight. *Zunge, Lippen, Fingerspitzen*. When there isn't anything left you always want more.

He would like to be remembered for his thoughtfulness, for the flowers and the dresses.  
For the caresses. If his thoughtfulness stems from remorse for his violence, no one will  
ever know.

*Third day of fog.*

Water against the sides of a ferryboat. The wake breaking gently behind it. A foghorn, intermittently. Sea-smell, subtle fish-smell. (When the car door opens, warm bodies and—subtly—dirty socks.)

The fog is as thick as it gets. Mid-October. Third day of fog. He's alone on the outer deck of the ferry. It's nearly dark—the not-quite nearly-dark of heavy fog. There is only whiteness where the City should be. He can't see the bridge or Alcatraz or Tiburon. He's like a blind man. The water is there, beneath him. He can hear it. He grips the wooden rail with both hands. The sticky-wet of railings in public places. His briefcase is at his feet. He turns and kicks it under a nearby seat. It is the work of a clumsy moment getting over the slippery rail. A cello, a single cello, of course, in this fog, this nearly-dark. An ending like this. The drop to the water is unexpectedly brief. He thought the water was farther away than it was. The water is warm and full of light, it cannot be the bay. It is, though. Sharks circle and the detritus of a hundred years' heavy commerce litters the sea floor. Mermaids singing in chambers wreathed with seaweed. A bell chimes. The ferry bumps against the landing in Sausalito. Otto stands and drops his coffee cup in the trashcan. It is suddenly cold as he exits the ferry into the fog, finds his footing on the pier. That dizzy feeling of standing too suddenly. Pauline and the children are often late, he hopes they won't be tonight. He's starving. He waits at the curb and watches the others drift off to their cars, or away on foot into the fog. Soon, he stands alone. The car to the ferry to the bus. The bus to the ferry to the car. And over again. His



days trace inevitable paths across the bay. Loud voices inside, no voices and too lonely in the fog outside. To the bus and then on foot down Stockton Street to the bank. To the bus to the ferry to the car. Once in the car almost home. Loud voices inside and too lonely there, too. The car is beige and blue. Today was not the day that the Russians bombed America. Key policymakers worked out a major international decision they were forbidden to discuss. The gamma rays begin at the core, melt your insides first. He knows that much. What frightens him most is feeling it begin and knowing that his children are feeling it, too. Not being able to get to them. Knowing it will all be over in a few minutes. The sweeping blast that will knock them across town, but not kill them. Then, after a minute, the melting. He feels himself to be a prophet of a kind, or a harbinger. Is that the word? He doesn't tell anyone, that isn't his job. His job is to *know*. What is the word for the knowing? Something stronger than intuition.

Buddy, do you have a light?

Sorry, no.

Footsteps on the concrete. Muttering in half-deserted streets. The bay gently breaks against the ferry pier. He doesn't want to be one of those crazies who stand on the street-corner with signs, and this distinction is dangerous: it begs the question—which keeps him awake nights—*is* he one of the crazies, or does he know? The car is Twilight Turquoise and India Ivory. Here—in the yellow evening fog—headlights sweep across him. He blinks. The door opens to laughter. It is steamy from the bodies inside.

Just in time, he says.

*Is this what they call madness?*

I was only his daughter, I wasn't to blame. Still, I feel guilty, even after twenty-seven years. I eloped, then he shot himself. It feels too much like cause and effect. The left-behind probably always think there might have been something to say. I don't know. It's utter revisionism to think that I ever would have spoken to him about any of this, even if I had known.

Daddy are you sad?

I was an obsequious, squirming, little puppy who pees on the floor she's so happy to be seen. Puppy doesn't speak, she only craves. I didn't want to be the puppy anymore (not to mention the fact that I would have been beaten for peeing on the floor). I just wanted to be gone. It is too late, anyway. To turn the brittle, yellowing pages of a scrapbook is not to seek forgiveness or understanding; it's just to walk alongside history for a little while.

Objects, memories. The corduroy blazer he wore in the house. Camel-colored, it hung in his closet, afterwards, the elbows bowed with wear. I have it still, in the back of my closet. The smell of him is long gone but the memory of it lingers. My sister and brothers tell me stories. They say, how can you not remember that? You were there. I write everything down and then shuffle the pages. Then I write some more. Mother and I don't speak so I can't ask her for confirmation. What I don't know I will imagine. I knew him best, after all.

There are lonely days when I'm so sad I can't move off the couch. I don't even know why, it's ridiculous. The face in the mirror belongs to some wrinkled woman that I don't recognize. Of course it's not grief for him, not after twenty-seven years, but Daddy stands in for unnamable sorrow.

I lie in the half-dark and read until stacks of old paperbacks pile up next to the couch. I like the old ones best. Those white men who've fallen out of favor: Eliot, Hardy, Milton, Beckett, Joyce. Daddy peeps out at me from the dusty pages. These lonely white men and their lonely-man tales.

I wonder sometimes whether I suffer from hereditary depression, or a hereditary inability to make sense of reality. Is this what they call madness? I cry and pull at my hair. I writhe in agony and sob until I find myself still again, facedown in a damp patch on the upholstery. On the days that I can work I pull back the drapes and laugh at that old idea of *hysteria*: middle-aged women losing their purpose. Middle-aged women losing their grip: that's me. I think that's the difference between Daddy and me. Daddy didn't know how to laugh at himself. Daddy didn't know how to be wrong.

Danny is like an old dog lying so quietly in his bed in the corner of the kitchen that you forget about him until the old habit of opening a can of dog food at dusk makes you remember to pet him. Only instead of a dog bed it's a wheelchair. And instead of a corner of the kitchen it's in front of ESPN. His head always lolls a little to the left and

down, so I park him in such a way that he can see the screen if he raises his eyes. I don't know how much he can see, anyway. There were a few tough years when he just fought everything, but it's easier, now. Hospice comes twice a day. It won't be long.

Guillermo is here today, trimming the honeysuckle that grows rampant along the front fence. The whining, mechanical sound of his equipment is a humming subtext to the television. He is at work outside. I am at work inside. The coffee is bitter and strong

*Traitor.*

Annabeth takes the bus into the city from Berkeley. She hasn't seen her father for six weeks. She wears the black and white houndstooth dress that he likes, a black hat, white gloves. She carries a copy of *Madame Bovary*, in French. It makes her feel terribly worldly. She meets him at the bank where he has Saturday morning business. When she was younger she would file his papers and arrange his desk. Now she sits in the corner and reads. Sometimes she watches him while he works. His hair is an orange nimbus around the edge of his bald head. He pulls at his temples sometimes when he is thinking and then checks his clenched fist, ostensibly for loose hairs, which he then drops on the carpet. This reminds her of the way he picks his nose sometimes when he is driving, rolls the booger between his finger and thumb and drops it out the window.

According to their old scheme, Otto and Annabeth will have lunch, and shop. Then something else: Fort Point, or the de Young, or to Nanabel's for cocktails. He will expect her to come home for the weekend on a late-afternoon ferry, but he won't notice until it is too late that she hasn't brought overnight things with her.

Tadich Grill: Male voices, uneven tempo, unexpected, boisterous dynamic shifts. So quiet the clinking silverware. So loud the voices obscured. Rich cooking smells, fish, garlic, lemon. Mens' cologne. That underlying scent of past cooking, like a faded memory of other meals.

You don't talk about him very much, Annabeth says.

But you knew him, Otto says.

She shrugs. Only a little. More when we were little. He was more like a faraway uncle than a grandfather.

I didn't have a grandfather at all. A mussel is muscle, tensed against the onslaught of his soup spoon. He gives up and pushes it to the side of his bowl. Probes between back molars for a bit of scallop. Chews it. Surveys his pretty daughter and sips bourbon. Her short-cropped black hair. Her blue eyes, angled above girlish cheeks. Those blue butterflies on velvet from his long-ago collection. He thinks about the ladies' boutique just off Union Square where they will go to buy her a dress after lunch. He likes to be surrounded by ladies things, silky, softly-scented things. Gentle things.

I always liked the way that his golf sweaters felt against my cheek when I hugged him. Then I got too tall. He smelled like cigars and peppermints.

Bay Rum, he says.

Yes? Do you know, for the longest time I thought they were divorced?

I know. He laughs. Mother called me at work after she told you.

Yes. She says it ruefully. I was trying to be grown-up and non-judgmental, and Nanabel laughed at me. I always felt sorry for him—not living in the nice house, living in that icky place in San Pablo.

He makes a sound between his teeth. It's more complicated than that, Annabeth. Pity, he says. He dismisses the word with a shake of the head.

No, of course, I know that. That is not what I meant, at all. I meant ...she sits, deflated.

A group of businessmen chortle loudly nearby. It is dark inside the narrow restaurant. She dips her bread into rich broth. A drop of broth dangles on her chin. He points toward the mirrored wall. She follows his gesture and upon seeing her reflection, quickly wipes the broth away with the back of her hand, then quickly repeats the action with her napkin.

Sorry, Daddy, she says. Her face is anxious for forgiveness.

His smile grants her this. He swirls the dregs of bourbon and ice cubes in his glass.

*Jettisoned at fifty. Of course, nobody. You'll be glad you said Johnnie Walker Red. Haw haw. The hell he said, and then he left, just like that. Security they really need...can be dissolved without. Traitor.*

She raises her eyebrows at him. Traitor, she mouths.

He laughs, a rare, genuine laugh.

She laughs too, proudly.

Of course, nobody. Their complicity goes unnoticed.

She wants to talk about Pops, who is ten years dead, now. She is in love. Madly so. It makes her stupidly compassionate for men who need succor. In hindsight this is how she sees her grandfather: a wild man in need of succor. His life a lonely orbit outside of the family system. She simultaneously wants out of the family system and pities Pops for being outside it. These things cannot be reconciled.

She has always known that her grandfather suffered from shell-shock. Her father's stories are liberally peppered with *when Pops was at Agnews*, and *when Pops lived on the farm* (only recently has Annabeth realized that the farm was a different sort of incarceration, not just a pastoral phase like Daddy's ranch). She's known about the institutions, the low-class jobs Pops held down, across the bay from where his wife and son lived. Was this out of shame or necessity? It was all very strange and romantic. But now—too late—she wants to know what it looked like. How did they even know that he was mad? Did he clutch and rave like the men at the bus station, or at Union Square? She wonders about the thin line between what one thinks and what one does. She has imagined killing her mother. Butcher knife, pillow, frying pan. At what point does one just cross the line and take their pants off in public, for example? She doesn't know what any of it means.



*Wait 'til your father gets home.*

He hates them all. Hates them. To think he's actually wanted to come home from Los Angeles for this. It is an Indian Summer evening in October, and the balmy air floats in the open sliding glass door, but he's insensible to it. He thinks over his children as if assessing the enemy: the blue-eyed girl? She's gone to college. He doesn't even miss her. She can die as far as he's concerned. The one with the brown braids? Her too. The youngest boy? Hell, he doesn't even know that one. Is that kid even his? The fire of it races through him, he wants them all gone, the faceless, nameless brats. Wild thoughts strike him like swarming bees. His fingers clench around a bronze owl paperweight that sits upon his desk. He lifts it, winds up as if to pitch it through the window so fiercely that he grunts with the force of the throw. At the last second, he doesn't let go and stands, defeated, imagining that he's thrown it at them instead: their smashed-in faces, their flowing blood. A pang.

What they don't understand is how much self-control it takes him to pull out the belt, to smack them on their bottoms appropriately, instead of beating them with his fists, his belt, whatever is handy. Later, he'll feel differently. Already he feels differently—with every minute he gains enough distance from his own anger that he doesn't really want them maimed or badly injured. He just wants them to learn, but it's always the same: the hose snakes across the yard, uncoiled, there is mud in the entry hall, Mac's mouse has died from lack of feeding, they have been rude to their mother. Did you think ahead? Did you ask permission? Wait 'til your father gets home. Otto isn't even unpacked, yet.

The sweat-rings on his shirt from the regional meeting in LA are barely dry. Pauline had poured him a drink while she'd listed the infractions and then had sent the children into his den one at a time to be punished. It makes him sick that he's been gone for three days and this is what he is good for. They don't come running to him in pleasure. They cower and won't meet his eye. There is still dinner to be endured. He stares unseeing out into the tops of the nearly-bare liquid-amber trees outside his study. The owl is still clenched in his fist.

*Repeat.*

Ask the librarian for permission, there is a sign that says so: *if you wish to view microfiche, please see a librarian for assistance.*

Choose the proper boxes from the wooden drawers (San Francisco Chronicle, October 1-15, 1962. October 16-31, 1962. November 1-15, 1962. November 16-30, 1962. December 1-15, 1962. December 16-31, 1962).

The librarian will load the first spool. The dark strip goes under both sets of pins that hold it against the base where the light shines through it and projects it onto the monitor somehow. See how it's tucked in here, how it winds around the spool on the other side?

The image of the text shows up on the screen to the left of the machine. The text moves forward or back depending on which button is pressed. There might be an answer, here, somewhere. He read the paper, fanatically. He talked about Castro, Khrushchev. He talked about the local things: the little murders and betrayals. The thefts, bankruptcies. He would cry over the personal-interest stories. A crippled child. A sports hero.

The trickiest part is the zoom button: if pressed the image will come into better focus, but if held down for too long the image will slide out of focus the other way.

When the spool on the left is empty and the spool on the right is full, push the reverse button and hold it down while the strip jolts joyfully back onto the first spool in an

uncontrolled whoosh like somebody spinning the merry-go-round and it seems as though something will go wrong but it doesn't.

*Big Peace Hope Rises in U.N. Third Day of Fog. L.A. Stampedes in a Food Panic. Crisis Won't Alter Nixon Campaign. Nobel Prize for John Steinbeck. Why the U. S. Will Not Back Down.*

Replace the spool with a new one that shows the same things in varying patterns: War, red-scaries, shifting markets. Plane crashes! An amazing number. Air travel has apparently become much safer in the past twenty-five years.

A young woman wearing headphones sits at the next machine. The tinny sound of some unrecognizable rock music is audible. But let's face it: there isn't exactly a lot of hubbub to camouflage the tinny rock music. There is a row of plants on the shelf above the microfiche machines. And a map of the world on the wall. The Soviet Union is huge and red. There are ferns. Detestable ferns.

Think about this: you want the headphone-girl to know that you can hear her music.

You also want her to know that you know that to her you are probably invisible.

Consider smiling broadly at the girl and bobbing your head in time to the music, maybe even clapping along, but then decide against it.

Laugh at the idea of bobbing head and clapping hands. She wears too much eyeliner and you wear none. She has one shoulder falling out of her sweatshirt.

Look for clues. But what kind? The Cuban Missile Crisis. You didn't remember. Of course: you were in love. The advertisements are hand-drawn: *Roos/Atkins this special sweater created especially for us*. Both of your shoulders are completely encased in a blue and white oxford-cloth shirt. A pink lambswool sweater is tied loosely around your neck. One shoulder somehow seems racier than if she were showing both. What would mother say. You know this is bullshit but it is still what you think. You don't even like mother. If you bobbed your head and grinned at the girl, she would think you were crazy.

Consider buying a Walkman for Danny. Decide that it is a good idea and resolve to buy a Walkman for Danny. Danny did like rock music, once upon a time. The Rolling Stones over and over in the Karmann Ghia before Nina was born. The Who. Cream. You always liked the name of that band. Cream.

Imagine tucking the headphones over his ears and slowly turning up the volume until the guitar track from "Sunshine of Your Love" is very slightly audible: *Ne ner ner ner ner, ner, ner, ner, ne NER ner. Ne ner ner ner ner. Ner. Ner. Ner. Ner NEEEEER ner.*

Smile. Imagine wheeling him into the sunny patch near the sliding glass door. Imagine that he likes it there although he cannot tell you so. He hasn't been able to tell you so for two years, but you are sure of it.

*200 Mice in Stanford Girls' Dorm. A Castro Note—He'll Give Up the Bombers. Go Ahead... Take it With You! Sony 7 Transistor Pocket Portable. Successful Test of a Minuteman.*

Push the reverse button so that the black strip jolts joyfully back onto the first spool in an uncontrolled whoosh like somebody spinning the merry-go-round and it seems as though something will go wrong but it doesn't.

Replace the spool of microfiche with another one. Repeat. Repeat.

*Little man means Mac can breathe.*

It is nearly dark but Mac kneels amongst the rosebushes in the front yard in Kentfield. He has a metal bowlful of pumpkin innards and a silver fork. He digs into the earth with the fork, pries loose some clods. He takes one in his hand and crumbles it. The dirt is dampish, with stringy bits. The stringy bits remind him of the stringy pumpkin innards, only the dirt ones feel damp-dry and the pumpkin ones feel gunky. He separates a few pumpkin seeds from the dangling mass of pumpkin innards and pushes the seeds into the hole. He pats down the loosened earth. He repeats this action three more times, so that a few tiny earthen mounds lie between the several rose bushes. He goes to the hose-bib in order to water his seeds. He has seen his father do this, he knows it is the next step. At first, the water comes out of the hose too quickly. It sprays hard into the dirt and makes a hole. Rather than reach for the handle in order to turn down the water, Mac reaches for the hose. He is shaken by the strength of the hose. It pulses with life and resists him. He turns with the hose in his hand. Water rebounds off the side of the house back at him. He is soaked. Lost in this battle with the garden hose, Mac does not notice a car pulling down the hill and into the driveway. He points the hose at the first of the little seed-beds, but the force of the water turns up the soil. A flat seed appears, white in the roiling mud. The water digs into the earth. It makes another hole. He doesn't know what to do. The hole is very interesting. It never occurred to him in his nearly-seven years that one could dig a hole with only water. Suddenly, the water stops and a hand is on his shoulder.

What's this, son?

His father is there, then. Mac is frightened. He hasn't thought ahead. He hasn't asked permission. It is very silent without the water. He still holds the hose, which dangles, limp, in his hand.

You were watering?

The voice is far away. Mac looks up. The purple sky is far away, far beyond his father's head. I planted seeds.

You planted seeds? What kind of seeds?

Daddy's shoes are shiny black against brown mud. Daddy's navy pant cuffs rest just shy of brown mud.

Pumpkin seeds.

Ha ha ha.

Daddy's laugh is far away.

Pumpkins need to be planted in May, little man. Where did you get pumpkin seeds?

Little man means Mac can breathe.

They were carving the pumpkin and I asked for the seeds.



Carving the pumpkin? Otto sucks air between his teeth. I forgot about Halloween. He tousles Mac's hair. We'd better get busy, he says.

*This will make him nearly invisible.*

Otto stands in the bathroom and drips water onto the flat, black disc in the little pink case. In past years he'd burned the end of a cork, let it cool, and then rubbed that on his face, but his face only looked sooty, as if it were dirty rather than painted intentionally. He'd used shoe polish once, but the smell gave him a terrible headache and took three weeks to completely disappear. Like blackheads in every pore. Disgusting. The little brush is too small to be of use. He rubs a finger around on the wet disc of mascara; the surface softens as the makeup liquifies. He marks black stripes on his face, then massages the mascara onto his skin until his whole face is black. It's much nicer than the black of a burned cork, although he rather liked the greasy look of shoe polish. This will make him nearly invisible. He feels like humming. He attempts to put Pauline's mascara back in order by rinsing the case and dabbing it dry with some toilet paper, but the paper gets stuck on the surface of the mascara so he gives up. Now, crouched behind the Bel-Air, the mascara has dried and his face feels extremely tight. He rubs at his cheek, but he only feels stubble.

Besides a face-full of mascara, he's wearing a white dress shirt drenched in ketchup, old black wool trousers and a black ski cap. He grips an axe. The goal is not only anonymity, of course, but also to make the axe and the blood-soaked shirt really pop. Give the neighborhood kids something to think about when they're falling asleep. He chuckles. He waits. He looks back at the house. Annabeth is standing in the kitchen window. He waves, but she doesn't see him. He suddenly feels dangerously invisible.

He imagines that it is Annabeth's house and some man—dressed and painted as he is now—crouches outside her window, watching for her. He shivers and shakes his head a little to ward off the thought. He tries to get his head back in the holiday spirit. This is his annual tradition. He waits until the costumed neighborhood children receive a cookie from Pauline and begin the climb back up the steep driveway. Then, he runs after them brandishing the axe and screaming. The children invariably scream, too. Nothing really makes him feel quite so happy. Once, he tried to get Pauline to do it, too, but she told him not to be ridiculous. He realizes more and more that he is a prankster stuck in the body of a middle-aged bore. He could have been a clown, or a magician. Maybe he will learn a magic trick. That one with the Styrofoam cup and the water, and you tip the cup and the water doesn't come out. He knows the secret to that one but he can't remember what it is. He thinks his children have inherited Pauline's sense of humor. Hearing voices in the street above, he crouches low, pulse racing for joy. Bodies hurtle, foot-slapping down the asphalt drive. *Aaaaaaaaaah!* say the voices. He peers at them through the windows of the Bel-Air. Laughing, they pour around the sides of the car and surround him. He feels silly.

Mr. Grant? says a voice.

Daddy?

Will and Edie and several of the older neighborhood children gather around. Did we scare you? Did we get you? Ha ha, they say. Edie is proud of her father's game. Will feels slightly embarrassed. In this world the lines between children and grown-ups are

very clearly defined. In this moment, they blur. The neighborhood children will remember it, later.

Eddie is a gypsy with a head scarf, earrings, and a trailing skirt. Will is a hobo. He's put something on his face to look authentically dirty and hobo-esque. There is a ghost and a girl dressed as...a mother? He can't tell. Curlers in her hair, a bathrobe. There are others. He reaches out a hand for Will's cheek. Will flinches.

Otto looks at his hand. Cork? he says.

Will smiles and his white teeth flash bright in the light from the lantern by the door.

*She will make you bleed.*

Pauline wears tennis clothes or Levis and a man's white shirt-crisply tied at her waist. Her hair is cropped short. She is gap-toothed and leggy, olive-skinned and tall. She likes to wear a rope of pearls. When she takes them off she sniffs them—they hold her scent—and rubs them against her teeth. The grainy texture reassures her, somehow. It vibrates within her like a cat's purr. The grit means they're real. She coils them in her palm, they're alive with her body heat. She slides the mass onto the shiny surface of her dressing table. The mahogany is topped with glass—she's slipped photographs and bits of memorabilia beneath it, photographs, theatre tickets, five curled locks of baby hair—and the pearls rattle onto it in a glossy pile. She isn't the kind of woman to seek reassurance from anybody. She is shiny like a knife's blade. Draw her against your skin and she will leave a crimson line. She will make you bleed. She has enemies. Even her children are not her allies, but only because they are full of need.

She says, if you withhold affection from your children they will do anything for your approval.

This is true, up to a point. But they soon learn that can't need a woman like Pauline. When they are grown, Pauline's children will have conversations that go something like this:

If she were an animal, Mother would be the kind that eats its own babies.

God, what animals eat their own babies?

Black widows, I think.

I don't think black widows, someone will say, doubtfully.

Wolf spiders, Mac will say confidently. Mac will know things like this. Wolf spiders eat their own young. Also some kinds of fish.

Well, that's Mother.

And then they will all go quiet, fondling their wineglasses, separately worrying that she would choose to eat only them, and would leave the other three siblings to flourish.

*Strategy though, nevertheless.*

Otto at work: a minor figure in a Public Company with Thousands of Employees. One of thousands facing crushing insignificance, yet in the face of this, leadership! Financial services. The clinking sound of coinage or chains. Cultivate. Trusting. Relationships. Beneficial to the District. Region. Nation. World Leader. Tremendous excitement and energy! Business program. Consult, then. Industry change, promote. Plan, execute. Sell. Sell! Customer service expectations. Strategy.

Did I say that already?

The smell of whiskey. Leather, cigars, aftershave, starched shirts. Strategy, though, nevertheless.

- Breathe quickly before water level rises above head.
- Inspect strategies that will lead the district to the highest levels of success in exceeding customer service expectations.
- Inspect strategies to blow the sales plan sky high!
- Facilitate training for managers and team members focused on meeting customer needs, providing effective coaching and product knowledge.
- Focus on accumulation.
- Focus on upstanding.

- Focus on tomorrow. And then the next tomorrow. Skill set. Social metrics and. Commensurate skill set. Drinks. Tennis. Never golf. The most successful December ever! Region expert. Management positions manage career expectations.
- Integrate and adopt effective business plan.
- Adjust expectations.
- Year to date: Selected as. Twice selected as. Not selected as.
- Fail to maintain the kind of attitude that inspires confidence.
- Allow anxiety to overwhelm and nearly fucking castrate. Management. Anger management.
- Develop and implement a Quarterly Market Plan for the Northern portion of the Pacific Coast.
- Sit in the gloaming behind a laminate desk and stare at the phone.
- New metric: pick at fingernails until they bleed.
- Integrate vast amounts of antacids to ameliorate excruciating pain from ulcer.  
Most significant pain increase to date!
- Develop a strategy for getting away from.
- For getting away.



*It is harder to climb out of the small space than into it.*

Layered voices intrude into Otto's Sunday afternoon. *Soviets Say U.S. Broke Its Pledge*. First, whooping boy voices and running feet. Then girl voices, high-pitched with excitement. Laughter, then silence. He holds his newspaper still and cocks his head to listen. Will tiptoes past the doorway. *K.O. Polio Today—Step Two*. His buzz-cut accentuates the smallness of his head atop a stem-like neck. A twelfth-year growth spurt has caught him in its awkward grasp. He pops his head back around the door frame and puts a finger to his lips, but it's no good.

Mac's shout is gleeful: found you found you found you.

*Don't condemn yourself to baldness! Get the facts!* Otto chuckles and turns to the business section. The telephone rings, once. Twice. Three times. He can't tell if the phone has ceased to ring because someone has answered it or because the caller has hung up. It gives him an odd unresolved feeling that he doesn't know why the phone stopped ringing. *The Chronicle Recommends: Governor: Richard M. Nixon*. There is laughter again, from a distant part of the house. From where he sits he can see his roses bending and stretching in the midday sun. A large-boned blonde girl runs through the doorway and then stops abruptly when she sees Otto.

I'm sorry, she says and begins to turn away.

Wait, Otto says. He mimes for her to hide behind his chair.

The girl looks around the room. He wants to shout at her, trust me! It is the only reasonable hiding place! He is intimately familiar with the hiding places in his home and if he successfully hides this girl (is it Mary? Margaret? He cannot recall her name) it will feel like a momentary victory. He gestures again, impatiently—she must hurry!—and leans forward so that she doesn't have to brush against him as she steps on the armrest and then clambers behind the chair. He leans back again and can feel her bumping against the back of the chair as she arranges her long limbs in the small space.

Mmmm, he hums a warning and makes a show of rattling his paper again as Edie rushes into the living room.

Daddy! Who is it? she says. She stops in front of his chair.

No! he says, and rattles the paper at her. You're bothering me. Go away. As he says this, he rolls his eyes backwards, raises his eyebrows and tilts his head toward the space behind the chair.

Edie takes a step forward. It occurs to her that it can only be Marjorie behind the chair; neither of the boys would have presumed to climb over Daddy while he sat in his chair.

Marjorie, come out, I know you're there, Edie says.

Otto rolls his eyes at her as if she has spoiled something.

She realizes that she's disappointed him but she's more annoyed at Marjorie than worried about his disappointment. She doesn't bother to keep the frustration out of her voice.

Marjorie, come *on*.

Marjorie's head pops out. Her face is flushed and joyful. She gets stuck half-way over the chair back. It is harder to climb out of the small space than into it.

*Premier Khrushchev may have meant what he said when he told President Kennedy October 27 that he was "ready."* Otto focuses on his paper. Pleasure in the game has already passed. *A shabbily dressed man robbed the cashier's cage in the crowded lobby of the Fairmont Hotel of an estimated \$1200 to \$1500 last night.* Otto's chest grows tight as he turns the pages. Time passes so quickly. Guns, bombs, money, women. Information flows past him, high-speed, dangerous. He feels panicky as if he were caught in the current. As if he might be swept away. None of it means anything. It occurs to him that this stockpiling of information is the same thing as storing treasure in a burning building.

*This place is the whole damn world.*

Father leans in close to whisper to little Otto, there's a secret place under a board, just there. Father gestures at a corner of the wide, brown-painted porch. Nobody else knows about it. It's where I keep my things. We're not allowed to have any things, you know – personal things – but I have something hidden there, something for you. Otto leans away, concentrating upon breathing through his mouth. Oh, Father, he thinks, you smell like the time something died in the wall. Father leans closer. Otto leans hard against the wicker arm-rest. A pattern of woven ridges will rise on the tender skin of his thigh just below the hem of his gray-flannel shorts. It is something to anticipate.

I don't want to see your secret cache, Father! Otto thinks in a silent cry that is worse than no cry at all. I will bite the skin around my fingers. The blood that wells up will taste like climbing a rusty fence. There is a blue butterfly among the flowers beyond the railing. It skims and flits. I will pin that blue butterfly down on velvet and photograph it. The blue butterfly is in my palm, fluttering, fluttering. If I watch the butterfly I can't see you scabbling in the corner of this horrid porch.

Look alive, Pally, Pete says to himself. Inventory time. Treasure lurks within a slit in his thin mattress. His long thief's fingers caress an engraved silver lighter, several packets of cigarette papers, chewing gum, a small bundle of cannabis and a wrist watch. The ownership of these things is no longer debatable. Once Pete controls them, under the unspoken rules of this place, they belong to Pete. He determines their value on the

asylum market. Hangs onto them until the market will tolerate a steeper price. Pete pulls out the watch. It is an Elgin, gleaming gold with a rich crocodile strap. He hefts it gently in his palm. Holds it to his ear to hear the soft *tick-tock*, admires the perfect expanse of unbroken crystal. His own wrist watch was unreadable after the crystal was smashed in a brawl over a packet of cigarette papers. He puts the strap ends about his wrist and holds them there—there isn't time for him to fasten it properly. Someone could come into the ward at any moment. In fact, someone does. It is only Joe, a mumbling, one-eyed, chronic case, *mind you it has nothing to do with the dark scepter I had expected that it was the looming air of doom I believe such predetermined aspects will quite possibly approach the level of medium discomfort at one end of the spectrum and significant distress at the extreme who can tell?* Joe says. Pete picks his nose ostentatiously with one hand while slipping the wrist watch back into the slit in the mattress with the other, the *tick-tock* muffled by batting.

I know you had a birthday, Father says, returning to the bench with something held hidden in his hands. He looks at Otto, confused. Otto sees spit in the corners of his mouth. Which birthday? he says. Ten, Otto says. Ten, Father says. Ten is too many. I cannot allow ten. His tone is lighthearted, but Father being funny is too close to Father being ill. Otto is not fooled. Father picks up one of Otto's arms and tries to strap a wrist watch on it, but stops suddenly, looking down at the wrist watch.

Pete, you god-damn syndicator! he cries.

Otto jumps back. Father stretches out a hand but Otto is out of reach. Something is in Otto's path. He stumbles and nearly falls.

Isabel clicks toward them on her little heels. She has come from a meeting with Felton's doctor and the asylum superintendent. I am too loud, she thinks. In her own ears her footsteps reverberate unbearably. I am too heavy with want and worry. I want to catch them at being father and son. I worry that Felton still wakes berserk from dream-worlds he can't explain. They tell me that they fetter him before he sleeps. I'm sure it's for the best. There will be pleasure in seeing them together, at least. She arrives at the end of the porch just as the boy stumbles backwards. She is too late. Ah, I am too late, she says. I see them break apart. Felton cries out, Otto trips in his hurry to get away. I see Felton broken-hearted.

My darling, Isabel says.

Otto turns away, he does not want to see her kiss Father's cheek. She will lean in close. She will breathe in Father's rotten smell (Mother, who always smells like a song) and be tainted by it somehow. He looks back at them after all – seeking her revulsion to authenticate his. Mother doesn't seem to notice the rotten smell. She looks at Father as though she is worried, and pats him on the cheek with one gloved hand.

Isabel resists the feeling of revulsion, replaces it with love. I love you, she whispers past her gag reflex. She runs her fingers along the back of his hand.

What is that? she says. What happened to your watch? Oh, this is not your watch. Your watch was finer than this, Felton. You wore it on your right wrist instead of your left. I noticed that when we first met. The hairs on your arm were reddish in the sunlight. A man played a fiddle on the street and smiled a benediction at us as we walked past. I wore a white scarf. You are very thin, Felton. Is the food terrible, here? It was terrible at the orphanage when I was a child. Completely unpalatable. I didn't bring you here so you'd understand anything about my childhood. I didn't mean that at all.

Father is distracted. This is not my watch. I do not know where my watch is. I wanted to give my watch to Otto, but this is not my watch. Isabel, he says. He plucks nervously at her sleeve and hisses at her. Help me find my watch. We must be careful, or they will take it from me. Only Pete knew where it was, Izzie. Pete took it, you should ask Pete.

Shhh, shhh. Isabel says. She wants to reassure him. She does not want a fuss. Why did you have it, Felton? Why didn't you give it to me for safekeeping?

I wanted it, Izzie. I wanted it, here. He looks around, agitated. I wanted to give it to Otto for his birthday.

Felton, Otto's birthday was two months ago. It is April, now. Felton, did you have a watch when you arrived? Are you sure? She thinks that his watch is probably somewhere safe within the asylum. The Superintendent must have a protocol for valuables. Felton, she says, sweetly. She doesn't want the visit ruined. She wants it to be very gay, like a trip to the boardwalk at Santa Cruz. Felton watches the few sparse groups of visitors and

patients who cluster along the porch speaking softly or not at all. Felton, are you looking for someone? Oh, I give up, she says.

Otto sucks bright blood from the chewed edge of his fingertip. Mother, what is a syndicator? he says. Mother? But she is suddenly struggling to keep Father from leaping away. Pete, Father cries. Pete, goddammit.

Pete slouches along the visitors' porch, then slips back inside when he sees Grant yelling and waving a fist at him. It seems that the visitors' porch is not the ideal location for Pete at this time. Grant wouldn't have even had the wrist watch if it weren't for me, he thinks. He feels injured. Buddy had to relinquish the heirloom when he became a member of the establishment. All the heirlooms gotta be relinquished upon entry to the premises. Yeah, I liberated it from Spiller's office for him. But it's not my fault that I need it more than he does. My philosophy is straightforward. Joviality. Camaraderie. You don't get apple pie like this on the street. I gotta play this right, I don't have anyplace else. Grant, he's got a wife, that kid. She makes good money, too, he said so. I might not even keep the wrist watch. Elise Watkins in the laundry wants to buy it. She's getting married to that guy Waible who works the morgue. Then again, this place is the whole damn world. If *Tick-tock* indicates relevant temporality and I control the gleaming watch *tick-tock*, then I control the time and thus, the world.

Mother tries to quiet Father, she leans in and whispers in his ear. He brushes her away as if she were a fly. She laughs from deep in her chest, like she knows a secret. She puts her hand on his shoulder.



Otto turns and steps quickly down the stairs. His feet crunch upon the gravel walk. Pete, Father says again, angrily. And then Otto is far enough away. I do not know what syndicator means, he thinks. If I stop here, five paths radiate out from where I stand, as if I am the hub of a wheel, the center of everything. I look up, up into the blue and the world spins until I think I will fall into the earth. A seagull appears and cries out to me.

Ha, seagull, ha! I say. I lift my gun and shoot.

I want you to remember me, Felton, Isabel says. I want you to think of my body, grown unaccustomed to love beneath my pretty clothes. When you think of my body, what do you feel? Your breath smells of fear and rot, and your hands shake in anger. Your voice says only, *Pete* when it used to say *Isabel*. What do you remember? You used to make me laugh when we walked down Chestnut Street. You'd fall into a funny gait just to amuse me and I would have to stop walking to catch my breath and wipe laughing-tears out of my eyes. I am full of war, I am soft and wet with longing, but not for you, for myself, probably. Or for the sake of longing.

I am no longer Felton, I am only waiting. I will pry the broken crystal from the face of this cheap substitute and watch Pete through the shifting prisms until the time is right: to spit in his stew, to piss in his bed, to cut his sheets to ribbons so he shivers in the night. The porch has grown gray and shaded, fog rolls in from the bay. I can hear the slithering sound of it rolling in, the damp ribbons of it curling across the lawn, across the gravel walk.

There used to be sun, here. Isabel, I am cold, Felton says. The day is ruined. I am so tired. Do not cry my dear, do not cry.

It is cold and I want a bath, Otto says from the center of everything. He shivers, a small and lonely figure in the sudden fog. The clocktower chimes three. When the fog rolls in it feels like night, even if it's only three.

Otto cocks his head. He had heard footsteps crunch the gravel but doesn't see anyone near him on the walk.

Hello? he says. The visibility is poor. Sound moves strangely in the fog. He chooses a path and walks until a crow takes flight with a loud *caw*. Otto startles. A tall fence, looped high with barbed-wire, is to his left. A large palm tree looms.

Hello, someone says.

Otto rounds the wide base of the tree and sees a man standing there, very still.

Hello, Otto replies.

The man looks at him out of the corners of his eyes, but does not move his head.

I don't live here, Otto says, unnecessarily.

Of course not, the man says.

The boy kicks his toe in the gravel until a patch of dirt appears. Father wanted to give me a wrist watch for my birthday, he says, but it was stolen. Father thinks someone named Pete took it. Do you know Pete?

The man laughs, carefully, *ha ha* out of barely-parted lips. Oh, yes, everyone knows Pete, the man says.

Father called him a syndicator, Otto says, but I don't know what that means.

The man laughs again, his strange controlled laugh—as if he were a statue. As if a statue could laugh. Syndicator is a word that Pete uses to describe himself, the man says. It means a person who makes connections between other people and benefits from those connections.

Oh, Otto says, like a businessman?

Yes, something like that, the man says.

He reminds Otto of a schoolteacher. His eyes are bright and focused upon Otto's eyes.

Does your neck hurt? Otto asks.

No, but my head is glass, the man says. I cannot move it – it might shatter.

Otto nods, seriously. He is simultaneously relieved and disappointed. He wonders if Father knows the glass-head man. Is it painful? he asks.

No, but thank you for asking, the man says. It's more that I'm very aware of how painful it will be when it does shatter.

Yes, Otto says. I can imagine. He doesn't consider whether or not the man's head is actually glass—he easily navigates the space between skepticism and compassion. He thinks about all of the ways in which it might be difficult to have a glass head. People roughhouse. They throw things. Otto is an athletic boy and has been beaned in the head more than once. He thinks it might get a little crazy in here for someone who has a glass head.

He shakes his own head sympathetically. Do you need anything? he says.

The man's eyes fill with tears. He blinks very carefully and the tears do not fall. Otto looks out past the barbed wire. On the other side of the fence, fields roll away into the fog. There are houses here and there, like scattered shadows.

It would be strange to live there, he says.

Yes, the man says.

Otto looks back at him, realizing that without turning his head the man cannot see the houses.

The houses over there, Otto says, beyond the fence.

Yes, the man says. I know.

*Ragtime.*

She is at the piano. It is what she does in the same way that other women talk on the phone, or read or embroider. Pauline bends over the keyboard, swaying. She'll play you Chopin if you ask nicely, but she prefers Boogie Woogie or Ragtime. She can play anything so it sounds like Ragtime. The children hunker down in various corners of the house, licking their wounds. She would have punished them herself, of course, but she feels strongly that punishing the children is the man's role, somehow particularly necessary for the man-children. When the children are naughty she pauses in the midst of whatever she is doing, cigarette loose in the corner of her mouth, and freezes their hearts with a single phrase: wait 'til your father gets home. She needs a man, a bold man, a violent man, a real man. She is a little afraid of Otto herself and the fear mutates into sex. His skin is dry, papery, and holds a spicy scent, like sandalwood. After sex it takes on her scent. A mirror reflects the sense of sight—his skin is like a mirror for scent. It is a strange, intoxicating way of getting a sense of oneself. She breathes it in and receives an image of herself as overwhelmingly vulnerable and feminine. She loves it.

Once, she confessed to her eldest daughter: people say about me, that Pauline, she's a tough cookie. They say bitch, broad, battle axe. With your father I don't have to be the tough one, I can just be a woman.

She doesn't understand this: when a bold, brave woman confers her own power on a man, it makes that man more powerful, but it emasculates him, too. He can't ever let

down his guard. He can't just be a schmuck—farting, picking his nose with one hand, scratching his balls with the other. He always has to lead the charge. She doesn't ever think about this. She would only see it as weakness, anyway. She is like a general on horseback who watches the battle through a telescope from high upon the ridge. Otto always has to lead the charge. But what kind of mother thinks of parenting in terms of military strategy rather than diplomacy? She doesn't protect them: that is their main complaint. What kind of mother doesn't draw a line on behalf of her babies? Hide them behind her voluminous skirts so the monster has to pass through her before he gets to them? Pauline doesn't wear voluminous skirts. He would have seen them, anyway, past her tennis-skirted legs, past her slim bluejeans.

Mother, mother, they murmur and she looks up, blankly, head tilted to one side, picking out a rhythmic, low-register tune with her left hand while she slides her teeth across the rope of pearls that she holds in her right. Grainy pearls. Silky ivory. In Otto's den a belt smacks against a child's silky bottom. Pauline can't hear it for the ragtime rattling her baby grand.

*A furtive sort of encyclopedia.*

You just need to be fucked, my sister says, from five hundred miles away.

I am forty-five years old, I say, and I don't think I know what that means.

Ha ha, Edie says, but I don't laugh.

It is dark outside and light inside and I can see myself reflected in five big panes of glass that make up the walls of my living room. Curled on a white sofa. Embroidered pillows instead of chintz. The ficus tree is so tall it bends as its head hits the fourteen-foot ceiling. My sister held tightly against my ear, the phone cord bisects the living room from sofa to wall. There are crickets. A faint, nighttime smell from the jasmine creeping up the pillars to the deck.

I have a Dorothy Hamill haircut, Edie, I say. I wear clothing from Talbot's. Doesn't that preclude fucking?

Nothing precludes fucking, Edie says. It's all in your attitude.

I feel like I just got sideswiped on the freeway. Equal parts ill, angry, frightened. My body, Edie, I want to say. I'm forty-five. They would have to see me. However, that would be insensitive; Edie's in worse shape than I am. And I'm not a widow, yet.

We always used to say *lovemaking*, I say. Is that out of fashion, now? Do you have to do it differently in order to call it fucking? I am only half-facetious.

Eddie laughs.

I want to know the answer suddenly. There should be a place to look up this sort of thing. A furtive sort of encyclopedia to turn to after too much pinot noir. I imagine it as a dissolute library. Mood-lit stacks full of books that address what is au courante in the world of lovemaking. Drug use, too, I think. May as well throw that in there, but I think of that word *porn*. It always makes me think of a farm, I don't know why. The fecund burgeoning? Maybe just because of corn. There are actually women in this world—here, in 1985, full-grown women with children—who don't know these sorts of things. And anyway, I think, what about AIDS? Who wants to take a chance on that just to feel alive, again? Just to feel desired?

There should be ways to find out that don't require a complete loss of identity. I imagine trying to figure out the right thing to wear to the degenerate library. I imagine getting dressed in a skirt suit and pearls. I laugh. Obviously, a skirt suit and pearls is not appropriate attire for the furtive library. I get stuck on imagining getting dressed because I do not have the right clothes for anything furtive. But...I imagine that I check my purse for lipstick and car keys and then slam the front door until the harvest-gold, bubbled-glass pane rattles in the middle of it. I imagine that I drop dramatically to the ground for a good cry because of course there's no way I can go to that library to find out what you have to do to *fuck* these days. And, dammit, if I discover the answer that I suspect I already know (tongue lips places back a tense arc unprecedented loss of control forbidden orifices primed) that means I'm not the kind of woman who doesn't know that sort of



thing and I'd rather maintain that designation than maybe somehow benefit from the loss of it.

...was drunk as hell and fell into the fire and her son was there and saw the whole thing can you believe it? Edie says.

No, I say. I don't believe it.

On the other side of the glass windows, beyond the black, the trees go on and on.

*Your money's worth.*

Car engines, tires on busy streets, horns. Buses, voices, feet on pavement. For a brief second, a ragged voice calls out, War With Russia! The End is Nigh! This is suddenly muffled for a minute, and then gives way to the hushed voices of financial commerce. Money. The high-ceilinged smell of monumental public structures. Bottled, it would be called, "archive" or "bureaucracy".

A prudent man is concerned with all of the possibilities of commodity and exchange: did you get your money's worth? Well, did you?

From Montgomery Street into the revolving door. A heavy bronze-edged door. Once within the confines of the door, he stops. It is suddenly quiet. How profound to be neither inside nor out. He's never seen it in this way before. How much more elegant a solution is a revolving door, than one that merely opens and shuts. A revolving door implies process. Transition! It is like death, but with the option of choice: rather than passing through to whatever's on the other side, you can push on and return from whence you came. Also, the bank would be a terrible kind of afterlife. Some temporary kind of monotonous space. Those Catholics and their limbo. He looks at the metal surrounding the heavy glass plates of the door. Rubs his hand on the push-bar. It is polished clean. Is it bronze? He wonders if anyone inside the building knows what kind of metal it is. He is doubtful. He is stopped between inside and out. Dead Lazarus, come to tell them all. Come to warn them of something unspeakable. But Lazarus doesn't speak. Through the

heavy pane of glass, through the empty quadrant of revolving door, through another heavy pane of glass he sees a woman in a fox stole push forward into the door. The door begins to move. It forces him forward. He hadn't thought of that: another person's movement can affect your decision whether or not to. But by then he's delivered into the bank, blinking behind his glasses. Another woman moves past him to enter the revolving door. A child-faced girl-woman. Their eyes meet. An orchid is pinned to the front of her pillbox hat. She shouldn't be wearing an orchid, he thinks. Orchids are for old women. She should be wearing violets. He thinks of his mother.

A woman in white looks in a compact while she waits in the teller line. Another woman stands behind the window, her bouffant hairdo testament to an early rising. Two more women—heads bent toward one another—part as he passes between them. Now he's Moses. That's funny. He wonders what's put all of the biblical allusions into his head. Revelations, that's it. The madman on the sidewalk with his doomsday tale. He turns to watch the women pass. One turns back with one raised eyebrow. Winglike. His briefcase jogs against his leg—the corner a sharp pain against his knee. There are women everywhere. It is Wednesday. Skirt-suits and dresses and hats. Like a window at Magnin's. They meet and pass things to one another. Piles of files, slips of paper, money in slithering clinking exchange. Where are the men?

The bank is tawny browns and golds. It smells of new carpeting and money. It is no limbo, but a sleeping beast. It stretches, purrs. A woman kneels to rubs its belly. It lunges, bites her arm off at the elbow. She runs screaming from the building. A moment's trouble with the revolving door (that heavy bronze, Otto thinks), which swings

slowly round until the screams disappear into the chastened tumult of the Financial District. It would give a shock to the man out there worrying about the Russians to see a woman with her arm just bitten-off spring out of the revolving door and go bleeding down the street. Give him something to really worry about. The room is full of prey, scuttling along, heads down. Otto watches, as any hunter would. What can be made of this thing? What meal, what chase, what sleek furred object to sell? He is the wrong kind of hunter, though. He's not the kind of hunter that arrives back in civilization with the skin of the grand beast in his baggage. He would not survive the savannah. Some poison shrub, wildfire or accident of fate. A venomous serpent at the waterhole at dawn. Grant! Someone hails him with a cautious hand. It is his boss, Cole Arnold, known locally as The Cheese. Like that, a cautious hand signals Otto's worth. He is only an instrument to be of use. He nods. His hands are full. Briefcase, cashmere coat and hat. Karen is sweetly pink-suited outside his office. He pats her shoulder as he passes her desk. A gazelle at the waterhole at dawn.

*One doesn't say, my father is insane.*

More and more, his father creeps into his thoughts. Otto is his mother's son but he isn't self-aware enough to understand the sense of chivalry that is the source of his grudge toward Felton. When he thinks about Felton he doesn't feel love or sympathy, he feels disgust and anger. The feeling grows stronger. He is so unbelievably angry at his father. He thinks about the tall white house on the cliff where he grew up. Pangs of filial devotion are reserved for sympathy for Isabel's loneliness, her bravery. Not for memories of his father's struggles with mental illness or his bloated, painful death.

The tall, white house on the cliff in San Francisco was purchased with Felton's family money, of course. Mother's job was excellent, particularly for a woman in those days. She sold insurance, just like a man. She bought her own furs, collected antiques on a trip to Hong Kong in 1953. Felton drifted in and out. His life was the culmination of events and conditions that were out of his control. The disorienting line between sanity and not. Between two social orbits: San Francisco with a maid and a cook and a wife. A chaise lounge on the sun porch. Starched shirts. People who called him "sir." The one-room apartment in San Pablo, a few blocks down Mission where he worked as a dispatcher for S. E. Johnson Trucking, Inc. That one room apartment the final in a long line of incarcerations: the farm in Hayward with the barred windows, Agnews, home again, Agnews, home again. The hospital, Agnews, home. Otto battered his head against all of this as if it were a brick wall. As if he grew bloodied and concussed from the action. Again and again against the wall of these facts. His father could have taken

action along the way. His father could have gotten on a train and saved them. His father could have made other choices. They would have been better off. The shame, the constant grief.

Memories of childhood: sepia-tone like photographs. More like objects or insects than memories – small, ancient things captured in amber. A black lamb called Licorice on the farm in Hayward in 1927. It went back that far. Even farther.

His earliest memory was a midnight Christmas: father pulled the tree down in a fit. Tinsel everywhere, the broken crystal goose it landed upon. Mother cradling it as if it were a child.

It was a wedding gift, she said. It was a wedding gift.

The little boy behind the door with his fingers in his ears. Pajamas wet at the crotch from fear.

But a little black lamb on the farm in Hayward: Licorice, it was called, and it climbed into his lap. It let him feed it a bottle of milk as if it were a baby. He tries to hang onto the feeling of happiness that this memory triggers but he may as well try to grab hold of the dust motes that dance in the beams of light that shine through the window. The memory fades back into anger and that burning awareness of the ache in his gut.

The rickety stairs to the apartment in San Pablo. Father's lonely-man food: ground beef, bread, apples, gin. Coffee and cigarettes, an everlasting flask of whiskey. Unnecessary, ridiculous frugality. The pointless martyrdom of it. As if he'd lost his caste as well as

his mind. The two-way radio on the desk in the corner. The trucks went where and when Father told them to. He grew friendly with the drivers. The radio hissed flashes of red-eyed, road-sore consciousness. Company for his father's exile.

Everything's a strike against you once you've been condemned.

Fathers are surgeons and missionaries and serial killers. They are garbage men and mailmen and comedians. There are repercussions. One doesn't say, my father is a serial killer. One doesn't say, my father is insane. One says, I do not have a father.

*Balm against the long night.*

The trip on the ferry is his favorite part. He usually arrives a little after nine. Karen is always at her desk. Of course, certain days he has to spend visiting the nine branches that he oversees as District Manager. On those days, he drives. Then, his favorite part of the day is difficult to assess: sometimes there is a good lunch. That place in Berkeley with the *Provençal* tablecloths and the *boeuf bourguignon* that rivals his mother's. Sometimes there is a lucky moment: a little silver-painted knight that he finds in the gutter in Oakland. He should have taken it home to Mac, but instead, it rides around in the bottom of his briefcase. On the second of October he'd made it all the way out Pine to Mother's without missing a single light. Well, sure, there was that extraordinarily stale yellow as he turned onto Presidio, but again, a straight shot on California all the way to 28<sup>th</sup>. That was something.

Your financial acumen is sound, but frankly, Grant, some of the fellows don't like you. I like you, hell, I think you're great, but you've got to rein in the jabs.

Jabs?

Yeah, the sense of. Irony is the word I'm looking for, I think.

Sarcasm.

Yessir, that too. Financial acumen is sound. Watch the sarcasm.



Sarcasm is what gets him through the day. A typical workday involves several run-ins with fellows you can only avoid socking in the eye by resorting to sarcasm. Financial acumen. People skills. A keen sense of detail.

A recent acquisition of the American Trust Company complicates the struggle. New little fighters with sharp teeth frothing around in the bloodied water. What's a fellow to do? Cole Arnold's route didn't work for everyone: marry the daughter of the board president, rise from branch manager to President and CEO in six years. Otto and Arnold were both forty-two. Arnold was a C-student at Cal and now he was the youngest guy to head a major U.S. bank, and Otto was stuck at District Manager because of sarcasm. In his last role he'd grown profits to 110% and year to date solutions to 116% in the first eight weeks of his leadership. He had district and regional leaders eating out of his hand. He built excitement and energy around the business program. None of this literally means a thing. They are words. He could show you what it looked like, but by the time your coffee was cold you'd be staring out the window, watching for that goddamn pigeon to fly by again just to relieve the tedium. YTD, profits, benefit, cost, her tits, her ass, goddamn, ka-ching, ka-ching. You wake up for a minute over lunch, but the drinks make you drowsy, and they all pretty much sleep through the early afternoon anyway. There is a late-afternoon surge of commerce again before close of business and the next round of drinks. YTD, profits, benefit, cost, her tits, her ass, goddamn, ka-ching. Damn Cole Arnold to hell.

It gets dark early. The fog. The phone feels slightly sticky. It can't possibly be from the

fog outside the bank windows that don't open. He makes a mental note to ask Karen to clean it. It rings and rings on the other end. Finally, her breathless voice, echoing a little in her polished hallway.

Mother, I'd almost given up.

Hello, darling, I ran for it. Tell me about your day while I catch my breath.

Oh, it was the usual. Where were you?

Mary and I had a Dubonnet.

How nice, how is Mary?

Fine, Dick doesn't have much time left.

I'm so sorry...What are you making for supper?

Oh, I'll make popcorn later. She laughs again. He thinks she is probably a little tipsy.

Mary and I ate all the cheese this side of Paris so I'm not hungry.

What kind?

*Fromage*, she says.

He laughs. Very good Mother, he says.

Thank you, darling, she says. Camembert, actually. So, work?

The same. You?

Yes. Pauline?

She's gotten a job teaching at Branson's.

Good heavens. She doesn't need a job! Has she become bored of tennis and the piano?

Otto laughs. Seventh grade, if you can believe it.

Oh, the poor dears, Isabel says, and Otto laughs again, traitorously.

The conversation goes on. Listen to the way that she cossets and approves. Her voice still performs the same function that it performed when he awoke from a nightmare as a child: balm against the long night.

*Annabeth, Goddamn.*

It is almost dawn in the kitchen at Otto's ranch in the Anderson Valley. A stovetop coffeepot percolates. Drawers open and close. Water turns on and off. A bird sings, *te-hou te-hou*. Otto clears his throat of mucus, and then snorts and swallows. Coffee is poured into a mug. The pot is set firmly upon the counter. Morning sounds in an empty house.

A silverfish crawls up a blue, stoneware jug full of dead flowers, behind which is an old-fashioned, black and white photograph of a pale woman holding a chubby baby. The baby—Otto's father, Felton—wears a long white dress.

The room is comfortable, lived-in. A long, white, Formica table surrounded by white, molded chairs crowds next to a Queen Anne highboy. The walls are painted egg-yolk yellow. Otto's strange, lurid landscapes crowd three of the walls. The other is dominated by a stone fireplace. A low, blue velvet chair, a large brown leather chair and an orange tweed loveseat squat companionably in front of the fireplace. The wooden sea-chest that serves as a coffeetable is piled with paperback mysteries. Board games are stacked in corners. There are dusty family photographs everywhere.

Otto walks into the room carrying a mug. He looks out the window into the gravel yard. He gulps the coffee, and slurps and smacks it. He has burned his tongue. Otto picks up a silver-framed snapshot of a teenage girl with short-cropped brunette hair and a snub nose.

She looks into the camera, her lips slightly parted, as if in surprise. Otto stares out the window, still holding the photo in one hand and the coffee mug in the other.

Annabeth, goddamn, he says.

Outside, it is light enough to be called day.

Otto mucks out an open-sided shelter in one corner of the horse paddock. He wears a broad-brimmed hat, a blue linen shirt, gloves and a bandanna to protect his skin from the bright sun. A wheelbarrow stands ready, piled high with clean straw. A pregnant Palomino walks nervously back and forth. Otto stops shoveling for a minute to watch her, then goes back to his work. She paws at the ground and whinnies. Otto puts down the shovel and goes to her. He pats her neck and flank, runs a hand along her swollen belly.

What's wrong darling? Baby bothering you? He murmurs softly and strokes her neck. That's what they do, Queenie. That's what they do.

Queenie butts her head against him, looking for a carrot. He rubs her nose and leans into her.

She's gone to college, my girl. What do you think of that? Gone, gone, he says softly.

Queenie snuffles, paws the ground again. Otto imagines sympathy. He goes to a patch of grass and pulls some for Queenie to eat. She won't take it. He tosses the grass to the ground. It lands in a neat little pile. Otto sniffs the green acidity of his palm.

After a moment, Queenie bends and nibbles the grass where Otto tossed it to the ground.

Picky, Otto says, and laughs.

Otto's sweat-soaked shirt clings dark-blue to his back. Seven of the twenty or so fruit trees have freshly turned basins. He digs for the hell of it. The sun is high in the sky. He pauses and throws the shovel down on the dry ground. He plucks an early Navel orange off of one of the trees, peels it and eats it. It is early in the season so the fruit is sour. Juice drips off his wrist as he separates the fruit into segments. It drips onto his workboots. Citrus oil, dry earth, sweat.

Two just-split earthworms in the freshly-turned chocolaty soil wriggle towards their separate destinies.

A crow lands on the horse-pasture fence, and caws.

The sun is a relentless overseer.

Otto wipes his mouth on his sleeve and takes off his hat. Eyes closed, face to the sun. What he sees behind his eyelids: a glowing, variegated, pulsing red that shakes a little with the effort of keeping his eyelids closed.

Amplified sound: a honeybee, a car on the country road, hawk crying out from above.

Otto's seven fresh basins yawn into black pits. The trees are ludicrously full of ripe fruit. In slow motion seven naked Ottos fall backwards simultaneously into the pits. The honeybee, the passing car, the crying hawk crescendo. Seven naked Ottos cover their ears as they fall. The seven naked Ottos' arms are heavily freckled from bicep to

fingertip, otherwise their bodies are eerily pale and blue-veined and look carved from some unearthly material.

One clothed Otto opens his eyes. Disoriented. He still feels as though he's falling.

He puts his broad-brimmed hat back on, but lightly, so it just rests atop his head at a crazy angle. He kicks dirt over the orange peels and wipes his mouth on his shoulder. He stoops to lift the shovel off the ground and begins to walk back toward the barn.

A man's voice begins to speak, but softly. Mr. Grant... Otto continues to walk. Mr. Grant ... the voice is memory-soft. A repressed whisper. The words are indistinguishable, the *hissssss* of Ruggles' voice in Otto's head may as well be the wind in the sycamores.

Midday sunlight streams into the ranch house kitchen. Otto puts a lump of butter in a cast-iron frying pan and waits for it to melt.

Tom Ruggles, a red-faced, fast-talking man with wavy golden hair that looks shellacked sits plumply on the edge of Otto's desk, next to a nameplate that reads, "Otto Grant, District Manager."

Otto doesn't look at the man. He sorts through papers, some of which he places in his open briefcase, some of which he puts into various piles.

Midday sunlight streams into the ranch house kitchen. The butter is melted. Otto lifts the package of steak out of the sink where he'd left it to thaw in the morning. He unwraps

the beef and drops it into the pan. He stands over the pan, spatula poised. The meat sizzles.

Tom Ruggles speaks. So, you know what I said next, I said you better believe I'm gonna drive, buddy, I think it's pretty clear I'm in no condition to walk! He picks up a dark-green, glass ashtray and examines it, then puts it back down on Otto's desk. Hey, listen to this, he says, why did Raggedy Ann get thrown out of the toy box?

Otto rifles through a pile of documents and jots something down on a yellow pad.

Ruggles continues, because she kept sitting on Pinocchio's face, and moaning, "Lie to me!" Ruggles laughs and slaps his knee. He accidentally hits his own reflex spot which makes his leg kick. He looks surprised, but then laughs again, harder. Didja see that? Hilarious! he says. Grant, he says, what did the egg say to the boiling water? Grant? Grant! He leans toward Otto and snaps his fingers.

Finally, Otto looks up from his work.

What is it, Tom? he says.

I said, what did the egg say to the boiling water?

Boiling water? Otto says. I don't know.

The egg said, how can you expect me to get hard so fast? I just got laid a minute ago. Ruggles doesn't laugh. He watches Otto, who also doesn't laugh.



Grant, I heard something interesting, Ruggles says. The tone of his voice is more serious, now. A little sly. A little snide.

Yeah? Otto says.

Your daughter was over the other night.

Hmmm? Otto doesn't want to give Ruggles the satisfaction of seeing him curious.

Your daughter and Danny Fleming, Otto. He and I go way back.

Who is Danny Fleming? Otto says.

Jesus, Ruggles says. You don't know Danny Fleming?

No, why should I?

Ruggles is looking at him, hard. You should talk to your daughter more, Grant, he says.

Otto pushes his glasses up with one finger and his fingernail scratches the skin at the top of his nose. There will be blood on his washcloth later and he won't remember why. So, Annabeth is socializing with Tom Ruggles now? Betrayal rises like sudden seasickness. He pushes the thoughts away.

For chrissakes, Otto says, don't you have work to do?

Nope. Ruggles laughs.

Otto returns to his papers. I have two other branches to manage, Tom, he says.

Yeah, well. Annabeth told Connie...he picks up the green glass ashtray again and tosses it into the air. He attempts to catch it again, but it crashes to the desk where it nicks the shiny veneer. He picks it up. Oops, he says.

Otto takes the ashtray away from Ruggles.

Ruggles starts again: As I was saying, Annabeth was talking to Connie about her rough childhood.

Pssh, Otto scoffs. He buzzes the intercom for Karen.

Yes, Mr. Grant?

Karen? Can you please come here? Otto says.

Ruggles leans forward. His eyes dart excitedly. He speaks in a rush, now, as if he's decided he'd better get on with it before he loses control of the scene. Your daughter said she had a painful childhood. He feigns punching himself in the jaw and makes a noise like *pchoo*. Spit flies. The sound effect makes it comic. Painful, he says again, nodding conspiratorially. Lucky she came through it with that pretty face intact, yeah?

Otto's laugh is grim. He speaks in a low voice, what his children call his danger voice. Whatever punishments my children have earned— and they have earned them, you can be sure of it—are none of your business. And whatever your wife thinks Annabeth told her, whatever you think you know about me or my kid—which is goddamn nothing by the way, doesn't have a goddamn thing to do with the bank. Now, how about a little work?

There is a knock on the door that sounds like a question.

Yes? Otto says.

Do you need me? Karen's voice is high-pitched and anxious.

*Baaaa*, Ruggles says.

Come on in, Karen. Thank you, Otto says. He turns to Ruggles. Allright Tom, he says.

Ruggles chuckles and shakes a finger in Otto's face as he passes by him, *tsk tsk*, he says.

Midday sunlight streams into the ranch house kitchen. Otto turns the steak in the heavy, cast-iron pan. The tap drips into the wide sink. He revises.

Ruggles leans forward. His eyes dart excitedly. He speaks in a rush, now, as if he's decided he'd better get on with it before he loses control of the scene. Your daughter said she had a painful childhood. He feigns punching himself in the jaw and makes a noise like *pchoo*. Spit flies. The sound effect makes it comic. Painful, he says again, nodding conspiratorially. Lucky she came through it with that pretty face intact, yeah?

Otto just looks at Ruggles for a minute. Then he stands and walks slowly to the door. He opens it and gestures for Ruggles to leave. Ruggles won't meet Otto's eye as he exits.

Midday sunlight streams into the ranch house kitchen. Otto goes to the freezer and retrieves some slices of store-bought bread. He puts them in the toaster. He revises.

Ruggles leans forward. His eyes dart excitedly. He speaks in a rush, now, as if he's decided he'd better get on with it before he loses control of the scene. Your daughter said she had a painful childhood. He feigns punching himself in the jaw and makes a noise like *pchoo*. Spit flies. The sound effect makes it comic. Painful, he says again, nodding conspiratorially. Lucky she came through it with that pretty face intact, yeah?

In one easy motion, Otto stands, chambers his right fist and then lets it fly at Ruggles' jaw. The impact sends a tooth flying out of Ruggles' mouth on a string of bloody spit. The tooth hits the cream-colored lampshade and leaves a crimson streak.

Midday sunlight streams into the ranch house kitchen. Otto's toast pops up. He lifts the steak onto one of the slices of bread and tops it with the other.

Ruggles bends to whisper in the ear of a heavy-set young man who sits at an enormous desk with a nameplate that reads, "Cole Arnold, President." Cole Arnold sits up, surprised, and then suddenly looks out to meet the eye of the observer.

Midday sunlight streams into the ranch house kitchen. Otto runs cold water over ice in a jam-jar. He takes this and his plate out to the porch. The screen door slams shut behind him. He takes a bite of his steak sandwich and chews thoughtfully. He spits a bit of gristle into his palm and flings it into the gravel beyond the porch railing.

Ruggles sits at what was previously Otto's desk. The nameplate now reads, "Tom Ruggles, Junior Vice President."

Ruggles walks past a line of desks along one wall of the bank. Otto sits behind one of them. Ruggles stops and hands a sheaf of papers to Otto with an ironic air. He stoops to look more closely at Otto's nameplate, which reads, "Otto Grant, Who Didn't Get Promoted Because His Daughter Sold Him Downstream."

He shoves papers in a briefcase and asks Karen to call Pauline. Tell her I'm going to the ranch, he says. You're not leaving now? Karen is wistful. He taps her on the shoulder with his hat as he passes. Have a good weekend, he says.

In the deep shade of the ranch house porch, Otto sits in a cane-seated rocking chair and eats the fried steak tucked between two buttered slices of toast. Next to him on the railing the jam-jar is opaque with condensation. He chews thoughtfully. His land rolls down to the country road, crosses it, and then spreads out until it reaches the Navarro River a half-mile off. Wooded hills rise above the river. The sky is very blue.

A rocking chair creaks against worn floorboards. A dog barks in the distance. A drop of condensation slides down the side of the jam-jar which is still half-full of water. Otto looks into the distance, in reverie. The chair ceases to rock. Otto's eyes close.

A black spider scuttles out of the cane seat of the rocking chair and falls to the ground.

Male voices whisper, a rustling, throbbing polyphony. One voice begins and another joins, saying the same words a split-second behind the first voice. The language sounds familiar, like a prayer, or a curse. He can't quite make out the words.

*O, for that warning voice, ... The Apocalypse, heard cry in Heaven ... the Dragon  
 ...Came furious down to be revenged ... Woe to the ...that now, While time was, our first  
 parents had been ... their secret foe... 'scaped his mortal snare: For now Satan, now first  
 inflamed with rage...To wreak on innocent frail Man his loss ...his flight ... Yet, not  
 rejoicing in ... fearless, ... cause to boast...dire ... Hell within him; for within him Hell  
 He brings... nor from himself, conscience slumbered; ... the bitter memory Of what he  
 was*

The voices whisper and weave. The dark room like some Elizabethan cavern wavers in heat-haze. A long oaken table occupies much of the space. The fireplace holds meat-hooks and a blazing fire. The floor is covered in sisal matting. There is a giant cheval-glass angled beside the fire. It reflects the profile of a beautiful woman who sits smoking at one end of the table. It is Pauline. She is very thin, olive-skinned and sharp-jawed. Her salt-and-pepper hair is fashionably styled in a short, puffed and waved coiffure. She is sultry. Her eyes are rimmed with black makeup, but otherwise her skin is bare. She wears a heavily-embroidered purple kimono. She watches Otto, who sits at the far end of the table in his undershirt, peeling bits of meat off of tiny metal skewers. He sweats profusely.

Occasionally, Pauline pauses in her smoking to reach a hand right into the fire to pull out a red-hot scorpion. This she takes delicately between her fingers (still holding the cigarette between the two first fingers of her left hand), and removes the stinger, which is sparkling metal and has a bit of barbecued meat clinging to it. She hands this to Otto, who acts as though it is terribly hot—although Pauline hasn't seemed to notice the heat at

all—and adds it to the small pile of tiny, scorpion-meat kebabs on the table in front of him.

Otto pulls the meat off of the stingers carefully, avoiding the barbed tip of the stinger. The meat clings to the metal with sinew, as though the metal were bone. Otto must scrape the meat away with his fingernail in some cases. He puts the meat to one side and stacks the metal stingers in a small pile.

The room grows redder as the heat rises. The flames leap about. The overlapping voices continue to whisper: *Sometimes towards Eden, which now in his view ...his grieved look he fixes sad; Sometimes towards ... the full-blazing sun...in his meridian...Then, much revolving, thus in sighs began. O thou...diminished ...to thee ...But with no friendly voice, ...to tell thee how I hate ... That bring to my remembrance from what state... Till pride and worse ambition threw me down ...And wrought but malice*

Pauline gestures impatiently. That's enough, she says.

Otto starts, surprised, and then stands and pulls off his shirt. His skin is flushed from the heat. Pauline approaches him, the kimono falls away. Her body is lean and beautiful, barely marked by time and five pregnancies. She strokes his arm with the back of one hand as he chooses one of the metal stingers and with a quick motion and intake of breath, flicks it into his own chest. It catches in his skin. He reacts as though it is terribly painful, and can barely resist pulling it out of his skin. Pauline rolls her eyes and takes a drag of her cigarette. He picks up another stinger and repeats the process. Again, and

again, he flings the tiny stingers at his own flesh, gasping and writhing, until his skin bristles with them.

She leads him toward the fire and kisses him, gently.

Pauline puts her cigarette out on Otto's back.

The scene wavers in heat-haze.

Pauline raises a thigh against Otto's flank. He slides a hand beneath it and pulls it higher. He kisses her deeply. He strokes and grips her waistline. They kneel and then lie prone. Otto knocks the bottom of the cheval glass so that they can see their mirrored reflections writhing on the sisal.

Otto caresses the back of Pauline's neck, as if to bring her head (which is arched back in pleasure) forward to meet his mouth. Instead, she quickly turns her head and bites the meaty base of his thumb.

He gasps and turns her over, taking her hard from behind. The heat rises still further. The air is red with it, undulating with it.

The whispering voices increase volume. The fire crackles and embers leap onto the sisal. It begins to burn.

Little licks of flame surround the coupled bodies. Otto and Pauline don't seem to notice, they keep rocking and moaning, shifting position. Their glistening flesh begins to brown and tighten. Pauline rears up so she's kneeling, but upright, with her raised arms clasped



behind Otto's head. He slides his hands up her body and grasps her breasts. She collapses against him, he lowers her to the ground again.

The flames roar. The voices reverberate.

Otto and Pauline begin to roast. They do not stop fucking. Their skin is shiny and curls away from the meat and sinew. Their hair singes, droplets of grease run down their roasting flesh and fall onto the matting. The tiny skewers have long since fallen out of Otto's skin. They sparkle on the matting. The meat of their bodies browns, becomes so succulent that bits of it fall away from the bone as the figures move against one another.

Reflection in the cheval glass: roasted Pauline suddenly falls to the ground, the flames are high around her. Otto tries to gather her up, but she is only bits of meat and bone in his roasted hands.

The roaring sound ends suddenly. There is a moment's silence.

A piano accompanies a baritone performing melancholy German Lieder.

Otto wakes with a start in the cane-seated rocking chair. The sun is low and the rolling hills glow golden in the late afternoon light. Otto uses his forearm to wipe drool from the corner of his mouth. He rubs his eyes and then looks out at the view as if to establish where he is.

He stands up, and starts for the screen door. He turns, retrieves his plate, the jam-jar and paper napkin from his lunch, then goes inside. The screen door slams behind him.

*Next question.*

Did they even like each other?

They were sexy people, I suppose they had what people think of as chemistry.

We wouldn't have called it chemistry then.

No.

No.

They all agree.

I don't think we even knew what chemistry was.

I still don't know what chemistry is, I say, and they all laugh.

He had that mixed-up cruelty and gentleness thing that some women adore.

Mother was outright sexy, with that gap in her teeth and that curly hair and the throaty voice.

A masculine sexiness, like Jane Russell.

Yes, that tall, broad-shouldered thing, that air of authority. He appreciated a strong woman.

He was very bold but he didn't like being in charge of anything.

He was gentle with animals.

D'you think Mother thought that meant that he would be good with children?

In a way he was. This was met with snorts of derision.

He was! In a way. I mean.

Sexy wasn't a word that people used then, not in the way they use it now.

I have to say I'm disgusted by this conversation, Annabeth, ask a different question.

Sexy didn't have the same connotations then as it does now.

It was the kind of word that you'd use to explain something gone wrong. A bad influence.

Hot wind and the scent of jasmine, baby.

Oh shut up, Edie.

I wonder sometimes what people thought afterwards.

How can we know what they thought of each other. I don't know what they thought of each other.

They were so cruel and distant.

Everybody was, though. All of the parents.

But especially ours.

Yes.

Except the Johnson's. Oh, the Johnsons. They were so sweet.

They were Atheists, though.

What does that have to do with anything?

Do with what?

More wine?

Yes, yes!

The Johnsons.

What?

You asked what the Johnsons' atheism has to do with their parenting style.

Oh, that.

Well. I'm turned around. I thought we'd be looking back at Richmond.

No, see, the city's right there.

God, look at the lights on the water. So beautiful.

Yes.

That their atheism was a sort of moral laziness, like their parenting.

I loved them.

I have to interject here.

Can we read it now, Annabeth?

No, nobody's ever going to read it, probably. Edie, are you an atheist out of moral laziness?

No, darling, intellectual rigor.

Well then, you can't say the Johnsons....

Yes, yes, but it stemmed from the same kind thing as what made them go sailing on

Sunday mornings rather than heading for church.

God, sailing with the Johnsons, remember that? I want that boat.

I know, seriously.

Was it out of spiritual rigor that they made us put on church clothes and go to Sunday school while they slept in?

Were they sleeping in?

A different kind of rigor, if you know what I mean.

Do you know, I never even thought of that, holy shit. Was that what all the parents were doing? Like sanctioned Sunday morning nooky?

Gross.

Interesting how we've worked our way back around to sex.

Everything is about sex.

Annabeth, you're so raunchy for a prude.

I didn't even say anything, Will! That was Jenny!

Next question.

Did you love him?

...

Come on, people, let's not all talk at once. I thought that would be an easy one.

You were the oldest, you don't remember.

I remember.

It was different for you, he didn't get crazy until you weren't a kid anymore.

He wasn't crazy.

Yes, he was.

Don't say that.

He wasn't crazy!

You said you wanted us to remember and then you have the balls to question our memories? Fuck you.

Shh shhh, Will. Let's talk about the Johnsons' boat some more.

How sick is it that we'd rather talk about whether or not our parents were sexy than whether or not we loved them?

I was just scared shitless. Even his love was warped. The tickling. Annabeth, even you can't have forgotten that.

No. Until you wet your pants.

I finally figured out if I just went ahead and wet my pants first thing it'd be over sooner.

Taking a chance on that one, sir.

Taking a chance on everything. But you could walk past him sometimes and he'd stroke your head. Remember that? Like all the love he had to give was in his hand right then.

That's what you always hoped for.

That's why it was so horrible.

Eddie tamps out a cigarette in the lacquered Japanese dish that Mac's wife, Jenny, gave her to use as an ashtray. Jenny hovers with the wine bottle. Smoke wafts across the table and toward the bay. They all gaze at the city lights across the water. Annabeth writes furiously in a notebook. The siblings' husbands and wives are accustomed to the way the siblings banter, the easily re-opened wounds. Three of them are round-two spouses, the round-one spouses having either left or been replaced. The remaining round-one spouse is in hospice care. Soon, there won't be any round-one spouses left. Eddie's second husband yawns and surreptitiously checks the time. It is only nine-fifteen. Too early for the conversation to have reached this wounded pitch. They are arguing about a teacher, now, a fifth-grade teacher they all had who was purportedly in love with their long-dead father. He could recite this part himself: Miss Lonberg with those Mayan features, no she was Jewish, and those clothes—bohemian before it was chic. And she always asked



us if Daddy was coming to back to school night, do you remember? *Do you remember?*

Jesus, let the man rest. He goes inside to pee and to see if he can find a ballgame on TV.

*How do you pronounce, Slevje?*

Otto reads the newspaper on the toilet. *An Outbreak of Peace*, the headline proclaims. Outbreaks of peace aren't actually peace, he thinks, just not-war. His pants are around his ankles and the slight draft from the window above the shower, which is open, is pleasant on his bare thighs. *Red Pledges All Over. China Orders a Ceasefire; Pullout of Cuba Bombers.* There is a photograph of a man. He lifts the paper so that he can see the photograph more closely. There are actually five photographs in a vertical row. He unfolds the paper so he can see all five. They aren't in sharp focus—that blurred effect of newsprint emphasizes something about the photos; he can't place what. He doesn't stop to analyze further than this. A man stands as if on the edge of a precipice. It is a sort of precipice. There is text beneath the photographs.

*Joseph Slevje of Pittsburgh, 60 years old and jobless, climbed the Fort Pitt Bridge yesterday.*

*Photographer Charles Boyle followed him up the superstructure pleading fervently...*

*But he ignored Boyle and leaped, dove down 250 feet into the Monongahela River.*

*A police launch was waiting below and rushed Slevje's broken body to a hospital...*

*But he had accomplished his wish, dying within minutes of multiple injuries.*

Otto stares at the photographs. The bottom photograph could just be a black and white blotch on a darker ground. A sleeping cat. Two bowling pins, knocked-down. A lady's dress, fallen off the laundry line. If the blurb hadn't said that it was a man hitting the Monongahela he never would have known that it was a man. Otto's face twitches and he realizes he's squinting so hard in an attempt to make his brain recognize the shape as a dying man that his muscles are in rebellion. He thinks it's a little nuts that they put this on the front page. What if Mac had seen it? None of the photographs show the man's face. He wishes that he could see the man's face. Not to memorialize him, just to see if there is any sense of recognition. Otto wants to know, does he look like *me*? He holds the front section of the paper in his left hand while with his right hand he rests a long strip of toilet paper on his right thigh and proceeds to fold it carefully into a neat pad. In the back of his mind is a nagging problem: the neat toilet paper pad is in the middle of a dirty dilemma. On the one side: newsprint-ink from his fingers. On the other, well. A dirty tush. He is fastidious about these things and considers taking a second shower. His stomach hurts. He returns to the jumper. Charles Boyle pleaded with the man. What did Boyle say? And at what point did Boyle make the choice to lift up the camera and begin shooting? Did the documentation force Slevje's hand? If Boyle had only pleaded, but not begun shooting photographs...would it have been different? He imagines himself as Slevje. Yes, he thinks. After Boyle takes the photograph of him standing on the precipice, there is no way out but down. The Fort Pitt Bridge. Would a photograph be in the Encyclopedia? His bottom is sore from sitting for too long. He flushes. His belt buckle jangles as he buttons his charcoal pinstripe slacks. He washes his hands, carefully. Ivory-scent, thick white lather. The towel is damp from his shower. He leans

forward on the counter and looks closely at his own face, but in separate sections. The eyes behind their spectacles. The nostrils with their reddish shadows. The upper lip. He bares his teeth. His teeth are yellowing. His jawline, the bone so close beneath the skin.

*I was flying above the ship like God and I was the first to drown.*

Isabel wakes from a dreamless sleep and listens. Dissonant humming. Two male voices—fearful, tense—in two different keys. Fear startles her into her dressing gown and makes her forget her slippers. She pauses in the doorway of Otto's bedroom with one hand on the light switch. Ah, Felton, she thinks, and flips on the light switch. The humming sound ceases abruptly. The scene is illuminated: Felton bends over Otto's bed, shielding his eyes with one fist, which holds her favorite boning knife. Otto's torso and legs lie still beneath the matelassé coverlet. I am out of options, she thinks. No, she thinks, *no*, and flips the light off again, as if blanketing the scene in darkness will stop time.

Moth-er! Otto hisses. His voice breaks on the last syllable, but she's already flipped the light back on.

Oh don't fuss, she says, you know he won't hurt you, he's just frightened.

But he *is*, Mother, Otto says. Get him away!

Felton is diminished, dazed. He sways back and forth as if dangling from the end of a rope. Isabel gently takes the knife away from Felton, drops it to the floor and kicks it under the bed. She puts her arms around Felton and begins to lead him out of the room. Over Felton's shoulder, she glances at Otto. He is right: Felton has drawn blood. It is bright on the edge of the sheet and on the collar of Otto's striped pyjamas.

Be brave, my darling, she says to him. I'll be right back.

Felton sobs noiselessly against her. She is almost as tall as he is, but he is so awkward, so heavy. They make their way to the guest room. She helps him back into bed.

Felton? she says, but he curls into himself with his back to her.

She closes Felton behind his door and locks it. She makes chamomile tea. Otto sits up in bed and sips.

I was dreaming of a shipwreck. I was supposed to save all the people who were drowning. Their arms flailed and scabbled at me through splintered openings in the deck. Bodies drifted down into the water—their hair floating around like mermaid hair. I was above the ship looking down on it and I was below the surface of the water, watching the bodies drift down towards me. I was flying above the ship like God and I was the first to drown.

The cut beneath his ear is shallow. He flinches when Isabel cleans it, but it will heal quickly. There will not be a scar.

Isabel locks Otto's door from the inside and sleeps curled in the chair by the window.

Felton is gentle over breakfast. He doesn't say anything when Otto walks into the room, he just stirs his coffee. There is a shiny silver coin on Otto's napkin. Otto pockets it.

*Like the wrong kind of Buddha under the wrong kind of tree.*

In 1960, a large northern California retail-banking system and the second oldest financial institution in California merged to form an even larger and more powerful bank: two tributaries ripple in golden streams of coin. The jangle and clash is deafening at the junction of the two tributaries. Beyond the junction the banks are lined with people who raise their voices in song. You can't hear them singing over the torrent of coin against rock. You can tell that they're singing by the way their bodies sway, openmouthed, in a unified rhythm. You can tell they're joyful by the pinkish glow on their faces, by their smiles. They raise small children to their shoulders so they can see the unforgettable sight. They toss things to one another, sandwiches, cookies. Lucky trinkets. They throw hats into the sky. The air is redolent with the metallic smell of moneymaking, the festival smell of people gathered: body odor, food, waste. Otto does not celebrate. Otto watches, and waits.

This merger combining California's two most venerable banks resulted in the United States' eleventh-largest banking institution. After this merger, the bank's commitment to international finance accelerated. New offices were opened in Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Nassau, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Caracas, Buenos Aires, and Singapore. Opportunity abounds, so why not for Otto? On the one hand, he is lucky to have a job. Lots of fellows lost jobs in the mergers, replaced by younger men, men less tainted by cocktails and war. Granted, his own choices served to undercut him in a way that limited his potential. The sarcasm, of course. And no golf. He sits in the meadow beneath an oak and paints badly;

like the wrong kind of Buddha under the wrong kind of tree. He's not trying to reach enlightenment, he's just trying to survive. He knows he's an ass. *I am an ass*, he thinks. Full stop. You don't have to move past that, or make excuses. You just accept assdom and then see what happens. He is just waiting to see what happens. Maybe that is his mistake. If he had leapt into the air to catch the falling showers of gold, like the others, leaned over the torrent with a bucket (and really, are we talking about gold, here, or luck, or joy? Does it matter? And he'd done just fine. The house in Kentfield, the Boonville ranch, he was well invested, well-insured, and there was Mother's money, too. Why didn't any of that matter? ). If he had fought them off, shouldered them out of his way so that he could arrive home with armloads of the stuff: look Pauline, look what I have brought for you. Annabeth, I am sorry. Little ones, I don't even know you, come closer, whisper your stories in my ear. Psssh. A fool. He was a fool.



*Edie will remember what the others will choose to forget.*

Hairbrush.

Brown belt. Monogrammed buckle=worse.

Black belt.

Rolled-up newspaper.

Cloth napkin. Merely folded if it's a mild infraction like elbows-on-the-table. Twisted and knotted for interrupting, contradicting, fighting.

A fork. Only once, in the back of Will's hand, Took forever to heal.

Umbrella. Not so bad, there's a lot of give in those spines all tucked away among the folded fabric.

The iron. It was on. Annabeth has a scar on her shoulder but she denies that it happened. We were there, but we don't argue.

STAY AWAY FROM HIS GOLF CLUBS. God, I thought I was going to die, that was the first time for me, I'd just turned seven.

Bowls of things:

Hot oatmeal.

White rice.

Mayonnaise. We were eating artichokes, he thumped it down on my head like a hat so mayonnaise glopped down my face and got in my eyes. My hair was greasy for two weeks. The never-ending greasiness was worse than Father's face when he did it, like he hated me, like he wanted me to die right then from having a bowl of mayonnaise dumped on top of my head—did he actually think a bowl of mayonnaise could kill me? Was he that mad?—and mother didn't do a thing. Annabeth went to get a wet dishtowel, “Don't move, Edie,” she said, so sweet, and I didn't even cry. Will ate my artichoke. I love artichokes, I can't remember what I did wrong.

Lolly's leash. It is leather. Hilde's leash is some kind of woven material; he never hits the dogs.

Back of his hand.

Back of his hand.

Back of his hand. Instead of a wedding band he wears a signet ring that belonged to Mother's Father and it broke one of Will's teeth. Mother told Dr. Bisbee that he'd fallen, but he hadn't.

The doorknob of the door to his den. On more than one occasion when we've been the correct height and his timing has been good, he has slammed the door just right and clocked one of us in the back of the head as we hurried out of the den to lick our wounds.

The car door that time he was furious and slammed it. The top of Annabeth's middle finger fell right off into the dirt, but I think that was an accident. Mother didn't even walk around the car to comfort Annabeth, she just said, "The keys, Otto," and handed him the keys so he could drive Annabeth to the hospital to have it stitched back on. They didn't do a very good job, it's tilted at the tip as if the doctor had been at the martinis when they called him in to stitch the finger back on and he wasn't quite paying attention. It's too bad, too, because Annabeth is the best of any of us at the piano and she could use that finger.

Fishing rod. But we all should have known better, I mean, it was obvious how it would end when we got laughing at the way he reeled in the fish like it was a whale and then it turned out to be practically a minnow. Mac thought it was funniest, and we got laughing at Mac's laughter and Father can't stand being laughed at. It wasn't Mac's fault—he was only three. Mother mostly kept him in a cardboard box then, as if he were a pet. Even when she played bridge! Will and I couldn't ever decide if it was because she liked him best or least. I used to love to see his little brown eyes peeking over the top of the box like a monkey. He's the only one of us who has brown eyes, the rest of us have blue. He would chew on the edge of the box so it was all ruffly from toothmarks and wetness. It doesn't start until we're seven, anyway. Seven is the magic age. Mac will be seven in March. That's five months. He has five more months.

Brown sheepskin slipper.

*Jumping off of the bridge is out.*

Otto understands betrayal and anger. Otherwise, sexuality. And a tenderness that is something like being hungry—a reeling sort of feeling like standing up too fast with low blood-sugar. Otto's stomach almost always hurts. This awareness leads him to explain things in terms of bodily functions. When his children are cranky he turns to them and says in a firm voice, you need to move a bowel. Of course, his children think this is hilarious and use it liberally on their friends. For example, a neighborhood child will say, I was at the Dinkelman's treehouse first! And Edie will roll her eyes in disagreement. You need to move a bowel, she'll say. Or, Will's friend Gary will say, Orlando Cepeda is going to bat better than Mays next season because he's younger. Will's response? You need to move a bowel. Otto knows that it has become neighborhood slang. Sometimes he thinks it's funny.

Otto is often tired, so tired that he wants to die. When he is that tired he sometimes thinks about dying. Who doesn't think about ways of dying, occasionally, when one is bone-weary?

Jumping off of the bridge is out: he imagines the bloated, purple body. He pictures a uniformed figure leaning out of an ambulance boat and hooking him over the edge of the boat so he flops onto the deck, soggy and fish-nibbled. Pills are too difficult to obtain and do not look like an accident. The insurance pays triple for accidental death.

A car crash definitely looks like an accident but cannot be counted upon. A coma is far worse than death. Disfigurement is likely, and the family would be further deprived of a father than they would be if he were only crazy so it defeats the purpose. And anyway, he doesn't have the kind of luck required to drive a car over a cliff and actually die from it. It's always the heedless rebel, the natural athlete, the lucky, golden-boy whose luck has run out that dies that way. The successful, solid, family man dies of a pre-dawn heart attack, a golf-course aneurism, cancer. His father died a horrible death of prostate cancer. Talk about bloated and purple.

*He tries not to think about the foal.*

It's like with people, Hawkins says, same as first aid. You check the gums. Lift the lips and press hard on the gums. If the pressure causes them to go white, but they turn pink again fast, then the horse isn't in shock. If the gums don't turn pink again—if the place you pressed stays white and only goes pink again slow, then you've got a problem. What do I do then, Otto says to the veterinarian. He's wrapped the phone cord around and around his index finger so that his finger has turned almost blue. When he unwinds the cord the marks show dark red against his skin. They you walk her, Hawkins says. Just walk her anyway. Don't let her roll. What's she been eating? Just the regular feed Ray gets at McCrory's. She a dirt-eater? No. That's good. Your dirt eater colics regular. Gets mixed up with the hay in their gut. Like trying to pass an adobe brick. Huh huh. Hawkins chuckles. Otto doesn't. She could have a parasite, too, could have eaten something toxic. Any number of things. There a lot of gut sound? What? Otto says. When you put your ear to her belly, is it rumby or quiet? If it's quiet then she's blocked up. If not, it's probably something else. It's rumby, but the baby's rolling around in there. It's hard to tell. Well, walk her for twenty minutes, then let her lie down for a little bit, then up and walking again. See how it goes. You got my number—let me know if you need me.

In the afternoon Queenie is a pig. She bolts hay and feed and then hangs her head and swings it back and forth. Otto puts his ear to her belly but he can't tell anything. She's

colicked once before, but Otto hadn't been at the ranch when it happened. Fortunately, Ray had been. Ray is the nearest neighbor to Otto's ranch in the Anderson Valley. He also works on Otto's land, and is particularly good with Otto's horses. He is a caretaker, of sorts, but more than that, he is a friend. Otto considers calling Ray, but is ashamed of his own ignorance. He feels like the weekend rancher that he is.

Come on, lady, let's walk, he says.

He climbs through the bars of the fence but Queenie sees the halter and bolts a hundred yards, then stands again, head hanging. She finally takes the halter and he gets her out of the paddock, but after ten or twelve steps he hears *eearugh* and turns to see her fold and flop onto the ground. Come on, come on, silly girl. She's down. He takes the end of the leather halter and whips it onto the ground as if he's going to whip her. Up girl. Up, Queenie. She rises slowly and begins to walk again. A few minutes later she flops down again, a giant, limp rag doll of a girl. This goes on for an hour. At dark he pens her in the barn and calls Hawkins.

On the way across the yard he can hear Queenie thrashing in her stall. He dives in and dodges her flailing hoofs, tried to get close, something, anything to make her stop. He jumps around in the stall like he's having a fit. There's nothing he can do. She's not supposed to roll. Hawkins said he wasn't to let her roll. Finally, she lies on her side, panting from exertion, pregnant belly a high, hard arc. Suddenly, it seems as though she's stopped breathing. Her side no longer rises and falls. He drops to the barn floor beside her golden head. Honey, no, he says. He rests his head on her flank. Whose pulse

is it that pumps in his ear? His? Hers? The foal's? Her eye is bright. Is it watching him or is it still? Queenie, Sweetie, now come on, he says. He scrambles through the straw and around her quiet legs; he pulls her head up toward his face. Her lips are slightly parted. He holds his hand in front of her nostrils. Is that her breath or a goddamn draft? He presses hard on her upper gum. When he takes his thumb away the tissue stays pale. He holds his mouth against Queenie's and breaths hard into her. Her lips are rubbery and thick with saliva. He leans toward her chest and pumps two, three. Ten times, he bears his weight down hard on her chest. His lips against hers, he breaths hard into her again, holding his hands against the sides of her mouth to funnel his breath into her lungs. It is hard to make the air go in. His mouth to hers, the engineering is all wrong. He pumps again. Goddamn, the foal. It is too early for the foal. He keeps this up even after he hears Hawkins' truck in the yard.

Ray pats him on the shoulder, tugs a little at his shirt. Come on, now, he says. Otto backs away from Queenie. He wipes his mouth on his shirtsleeve. Pulls off his glasses and wipes his eyes on his shirtsleeve.

You're here, he says to Ray.

Hawkins called, Ray says.

Hawkins, gets to work with his hoses and his mineral oil. She's just an animal, just a dumb beast, Otto thinks. He tries to feel nothing toward her. His gut is in agony, too. I



feel it, sweetheart, he wants to say, hang in there, baby, I love you. He can't speak in front of the other men. He's already made a fool of himself for the love of her.

Can you save the baby?

Hawkins' head is down. This one's not gone yet, he says.

The water sluices across the dark floor of the barn. But can you, he wants to say. Can you? The answer is no.

It was the shock that got her, Hawkins says to Otto afterwards. Shock's the biggest bugaboo. That one doesn't colic regular, huh? Otto doesn't speak, so Ray does. She did once, two years ago, he says. The vet shakes his head and yawns. Too bad about the foal. Otto's arms are folded tight across his chest. His eyes are moist. He's leaning against the side of Hawkins' truck, but he rouses himself a little and says, coffee? Hawkins shakes his head. Nah, thanks much. Going straight home to bed, he says. I'll send a truck for the body in the morning.

Otto is too tired to sleep. He sits on the sofa in the dark and sips bourbon from a teacup. The morning seemed so far away. There had been dew on the grass. There had been crickets. He tries not to think about the foal growing cold inside her mother on the dark floor of the barn. How utterly dark it must be inside that body. He sobs in spite of himself.

*A horse by any other name.*

They all lost touch after Daddy died and Mother moved south. Edie saw Ray years later, in the parking lot of the Frosty Freeze in Cloverdale. Long legs unfolded out of a red Mustang, and by God, it was Ray. Eighty-two years old and still 6'2." Jesus, that man could fill out his Wranglers. His wife, Anita, long dead. They talked of this, and that, of Edie's horses, so of course the conversation came 'round to Queenie. Of course. Queenie, the pregnant Palomino who got into the sorghum after it froze. Daddy even gave her mouth-to-mouth, he was that desperate, but Queenie died and the foal too and Daddy was inconsolable. Came home two days later a different man and nobody understood, it was just a horse.

A horse, by any other name would smell as sweet.

Otto sits at the dining table, hanging his head. Short ribs, braised in vinegar and red wine, pureed rutabaga, Brussels sprouts. It must be fall. He looks up, suddenly realizing where he is. Home.

Where is Annabeth? He says, and then, realizing his mistake (Annabeth is at Berkeley, he knows this) flushes and says, I mean Edie.

Hello? Edie says from the far end of the table.

Mother looks up quickly, frowning at her tone. Edie does not meet her eye. She looks at Will instead. Will studies his plate.

Yes, of course, Otto says. He pushes back his chair and stands. The children do the same.

Mother, I wasn't finished, Mac says in a loud whisper.

Sit down, then, she says. Her tone is abrupt. She cuts a new potato carefully in two, the silver blade of her knife a dull shine against the dull shine of the table, the candlesticks, the china.

Yes, Mother, Mac says, and he begins to eat, again. He is seven. Father's oddities mean less to him than shortribs.

Will and Edie stand on opposite sides of the table with their arms loose at their sides, trailing white linen napkins like failed surrender.

Who will tell the children that their horse is dead?

*A chipmunk next to the picnic table.*

He can see her golden head through the open door of his office. She comes when he calls her name—Karen. She is tawny in the late-afternoon light. She often arrives late, breathless, pink-cheeked. She is light where Pauline is dark. He doesn't not-love Pauline. Love doesn't have anything to do with it. Karen blushes and bobs her head shyly when he speaks to her, so he speaks to her softly, as one might do with a little animal. A chipmunk next to the picnic table. And what it feels like when the chipmunk comes close to your shoe. Aw, the adorable, darling little thing. The surprise of being chosen by it for some communion that was beyond the usual hum-drum. She is the kind of woman who takes care with her appearance: perfect maquillage, perfect coiffure, and then appears with her dress tucked into the back of her pantyhose, or with a small chunk of booger nestled in her pale nose hairs, or arrives back from lunch with a tiny bit of lettuce lodged between her teeth. It amuses Otto to wonder if she thinks of him when she discovers these flaws later, on her own. He imagines her catching sight of her own reflection in the green-painted hat-stand in her little entry-hall. He imagines her anguished little cry: how long has it been like this? Did Mr. Grant notice? The poor dear. She isn't the kind of woman he would have married, but she makes him feel good, powerful. Just when her kittenish femininity begins to bore him, she has some kind of mishap that he has to fix and she thanks him with grateful tears in her big blue eyes. It

gives him a rush to be necessary, to feel as if he is helping her by being her mentor and her guide.

She drops hints as she gathers papers and files them in the tall cabinets that line one wall of his office: The ranch must be beautiful this time of year ... Your family must have such fun together, there...Oh, I couldn't ...My husband would wonder ...what?

Highway 128, just past Boonville? ... Gosh, maybe someday.

But the day she makes the drive is a working day, the whole family is pitching in to paint the porch. White all around, the ceiling sky blue. She pretends to want to help, but is as inept as he'd have imagined she would be. She isn't even very good at dictation, come to think of it. It was her attitude that recommended her. She isn't inept later, in the barn, her skirt hiked up by her own hand, the better to straddle his leg while they kiss.

*She is a survivor.*

Pauline is filled with the buzzing, hazy feeling of deep anxiety. She tells herself she doesn't care. She tells herself that she is secure in her role: mother, wife. She is inviolable. How could he get on without her? He can't, that's how. She just has to wait. When she is eighty-six she'll zip around Phoenix in a tomato-red Mercedes that she'll have bought in Bavaria with her second husband and shipped home. She'll be part-owner of a gold mine in Australia. She'll have helped discover the most productive tourmaline mine in the world. She'll be alright. She doesn't know these specifics, of course, but she's always had a general feeling that she is a survivor. The panic of losing Otto to another woman, to death (she doesn't see these things as particularly different, actually) is just like the death of her first baby boy. The key word to her is *losing*

Psychoanalysis is far from experimental, Otto. People find it quite helpful, she says, intending to go on about a recent article she has read.

He slams the newspaper down on the table and leaves the room without speaking. She applies lipstick as if it were an antidote to something. She rubs a finger across her teeth.

*Now you're surprised?*

The children think it is a secret. They aren't old enough to know that some secrets are things that everybody knows, but about which nobody speaks. Because they think it is a secret, they want to protect their mother from it, or punish their father. Ideally, both, though neither is more likely.

It happens in this way: Will and Edie play gin rummy one November afternoon at the ranch. Edie splays bony as a colt across the floor. Will curls into himself, alternately picking at a blemish and arranging his cards into melds. They are fiercely competitive and lost in the game. Edie knocks, but Will has less deadwood. A fight is narrowly averted as Mac flies through the door and speaks, breathlessly.

Daddy's ... Karen ... barn.

What? They say, Mac ... what? They have trouble understanding him at first, he stands with his hands on his knees, panting.

Daddy's kissing Karen in the barn.

Will looks at Edie. Well, there you go, he says.

I'm. Going. To. Vomit. She says the words carefully, theatrically.

God, Edie, so dramatic, Will says. Now you're surprised?

Eddie bares her teeth at him and growls. Rrrrr, she says.

Mac kicks the leg of an end table. Hey! You guys.

Eddie gathers the cards and began to shuffle them. She is very good at shuffling.

Will picks up a dog-eared novel and folds his knees against his chest.

But, Eddie ...

What is it, Mac? she says, irritated.

Will looks up, quickly.

What? Eddie says to Will.

You sounded just like Mother, Will says.

Eddie huffs, shakes her head, mutters something.

Mac hovers, anxiously, watching the cards flow in a fluid arc from one of Eddie's hands to the other. What should we do? he says.

Well, Eddie says. We can a) tell Mother, b) tell Daddy, or c) do nothing. Which would you prefer?

Mac stubs his sneaker against the edge of the worn rug. Eddie grabs his ankle so he'll stop kicking and looks at his face. Honey, it was an accident, or some dumb game or something. Forget about it, okay?



A game?

Yes, you know. Stupid, grownup stuff.

You probably imagined it, Will says from behind his book.

I didn't, Will.

You might have, right? Edie says. Like a misunderstanding, or like when you dream that you can ride a bike, and then you wake up and think that maybe you can ride a bike, because you dreamed it?

Does that work? Mac said. He doesn't yet know how to ride a bike.

No, but that happened to me. I was so relieved that I'd learned in the night and didn't have to try again with Daddy yelling at me the whole time. I was wrong, though.

But you know how to ride a bike.

Yeah. It was a long time ago.

Mac squats down next to her. Edie, he says, imploringly.

Yes, she says, I know. She hands him the deck of cards. You deal, she says

*Beautiful.*

Male voices. Wind in the sycamores. The *hurk-hurk-hurk* of a turkey, but only for a minute. Woodsmoke and burning kerosene. Dry grass and earth.

Ray points at the bird. So pick it up.

Otto grabs the turkey by the neck and tries to grasp its legs, which kick violently. Ray and Otto laugh.

He's a good one, Ray says.

Otto wrestles the turkey to the ground and holds it there by kneeling upon it. They're at Ray's house, high on the ridgeline above the Anderson Valley. Otto's ranch is below, on the other side of the Navarro River. It is almost Thanksgiving. Otto reaches toward Ray for the knife.

Back of the throat? he says.

Yep, Ray says. Hang on, he's strong.

The turkey still tries to free its feet from Otto's left hand. Its white feathers are full of dirt. It bucks under Otto's knee. This is what death looks like, with his scythe, his scabbling claws.

Alright, bastard. Otto straddles the bird, the body clenched between his knees. The knife-handle is worn bone. It is warm and comfortable in Otto's hand. He leans forward on a surge of adrenaline and plunges the blade into the turkey's open beak, levering it from one ear to the other. Blood pours out of the turkey's mouth into the dirt. It is bright red against the turkey's beak, but nearly black against the earth. Otto's gorge rises. He is seven and wakes in the black of his room with a hand firmly across his mouth, a sharp pain at his throat. He tries to scream behind the hand, but it comes out a muffled *mmmmh*. Someone stands over him, making small humming sounds. They aren't music. *Mmmm. Mmmmh. Mmmmh*. The room hums with muffled fear. He knows his father by smell, by the deep metallic timbre of the sound. The light comes on with a click. He closes his eyes—it is too bright and he's afraid to see his father's face. His mother speaks calmly from the doorway. Her voice comes nearer and the pressure on his mouth is released. He lies very still with his eyes tightly shut. His heart hurts it beats so hard. The edge of the sheet is wet against his neck.

There you go, Ray says.

The bird stops struggling, the heartbeat ceases.

Allright, Otto says and gets unsteadily to his feet. Ray laughs and puts a hand on his arm.

It can get to you if you're not used to it.

It's not that, Otto wants to say, but instead just nods and breathes and stuffs things back into the compartments where they belong. Ray hefts the limp bird onto the worn wooden table. The head hangs down, still bleeding onto the earth. A vat of water is nearly boiling on a gas burner nearby.

Mike the headless chicken, Ray says.

What? Otto says.

You ever hear about that famous headless chicken?

A headless chicken? Otto says. No, never heard of it.

Yep, it lived for six months or something after being butchered.

Doesn't butchered pretty much imply dead? Otto says, laughing.

Yeah, make a liar outta me, Ray says. It was ten, maybe fifteen years ago. Chicken didn't die, whatever. Made the guy a lot of money.

How? Otto says.

Traveled around, like a freak show. People paid to see it.

Paid to see a headless chicken? Otto says.

Well, the head was still a little bit attached. Just a little bit of skin, Ray says.

Otto says, did you? Pay to see it?

Nah, Ray says. You imagine Anita going for that? Huh.

Must have been before TV, Otto says.

Ray chuckles. The water boils merrily under a blue sky. Otto lifts the dead weight of the bird and dips it by its feet into the boiling water. Ray counts aloud to sixty.

Smells like Thanksgiving already, Otto says and slings the bird out of the water and onto the table.

The feathers pull out easily but there are so many of them. Ray and Otto pile the wet feathers into a cloth sack on the table. They have turkey feathers stuck to their hands and clothes. As they work some feathers dry in the afternoon air and flutter loose, drift across the yard.

Does Anita do something with those? Otto says.

Ray looks at the feathers. Nah. What, like a featherbed? Or an Indian headdress? *Woo woo woo woo woo*, he begins to holler, then Otto throws back his head, too, and they holler to the sky like boys, *woo woo woo*.

You sound like a train, Ray says.

Nah, Otto says, you sound like a little girl.

The turkey's head and feet go in the compost pile. The neck goes in a bucket of clean water. Ray shows Otto how to cut out the anus without puncturing the membrane behind

it. He sticks his hand up inside the turkey and suddenly leans into it making a horrified face and yelling as if something inside the turkey got him. Otto laughs like crazy. Ray pulls out a handful of innards. Intestines dangle wetly. He slices open the gizzard to show Otto the tiny stones inside. He reaches back in, then holds his hand out to Otto. It is the silent heart, lean, dark, glistening.

Beautiful, Otto says.

Ray drops it into the pail of water with a plop.

*It is not too late.*

Children laughing. Footsteps in crunching leaves and then tromping *pit-pat-pit-pat*, billygoats gruff across a wooden floor. Sweaty, outdoors-scented children. Cinnamon, cloves and orange peel.

In a boisterous array—for the rules are different at Anita and Ray's, they needn't ask for permission, they needn't think ahead—his children arrive, breathless from the hike up the ridgeline.

Anita is Ray's wife. She dyes her hair red and is particularly fond of Otto. Otto's children love Anita because she thinks that they are perfect and they know it. They love her because she always has homemade sugar cookies in a jar that is shaped like an owl. An actual cookie jar. Sugar cookies dipped in sugar. They lick their fingers and Anita smooths their hair and croons to them in German. She doesn't wear an apron. Otto likes her big white teeth.

*Hallo, Toller, moechtes du auch ein Blaetschen?* she says.

*Na, selbst verstaendlich Schatz, ein Zucker Blaetschen bitte. Ich bin ja nicht anderes als die anderen Schurken.* Otto laughs. Of course he wants a cookie. He is no different from his offspring. It is good to be spoiled.

*Ja, die sind trollich Shurken*, Anita says, and hands the plate of cookies to Otto with one hand while she pulls seven-year old Mac to her for a hug with the other.

The scoundrel part is right, anyway, Otto says. Will makes a snorting sound and Otto turns to look at him quickly so Will knows that there will be a consequence later.

Unless the sugar cookies, unless the moist, spice-scented air?

On the hike home the children speak pretend German to one another, full of *g* and *sch* and *ck* in the back of their throats. Spitting and laughing. Otto shakes his head and laughs, too. Still, it doesn't ever occur to him to speak German to them. He forgets about Will's rudeness until after the children are in bed. It is not too late for punishment, but Pauline is in a generous mood, and the promise of sexual release makes him generous, too.



*They are loud and lethal.*

In the advertisement, the men look very happy and utterly focused. *Roos/Atkins Sportsman's Shop. Let's Talk About Shotguns!* October 23, 1962 was a Tuesday.

Twenty-seven years later, Will says he doesn't know when Daddy bought the Mossberg. The new Mossberg which was never shot, so it didn't kill him. Daddy was killed by the Remington .12 that belonged to Will. One of the men in the advertisement—the man in the light-colored shirt—is showing the other one features of a Browning Lightweight Autoloader. Ostensibly. Their bodies are pressed against one another so both men can look down the barrel of the gun. Why do they both need to look down the barrel of the gun? The man in the light-colored shirt is in a bad place, recoil-wise. Now that I know what recoil is. Way too close. Maybe one of the men is showing the other man how to shoot. Maybe they just like standing close together and the gun is an excuse. Daddy would never have stood that close to any other man, recoil or no recoil. I only just realized that.

Do you want this? Will asks as he hands me an index card.

The handwritten list is short:

1932 Winchester Model 61 Octagon .22

1951 Browning Superposed .410

1957 Remington 870 Wingmaster .12

1962 Mossberg 500 .12

Funny, I say. I remember a great pile of them.

There were seven, he says. These are the only ones I remember. I sold them all, eventually. Mother had them in storage. You know how she is, one day she called me up and said, come get your guns.

*Your* guns, I say, how Mother.

Huh, Will makes a snuffing sound that is half-agreement, half-irony. It was after I got married. Tracy wouldn't have them in the house so I sold them. I probably would have sold them anyway.

Will, did you ever hunt again after he died?

No, I loved the ranch but I only hunted with him because he expected it. It wasn't exactly my style, even then.

*Professor*, I laugh.

Yes, he says, smiling in agreement. He flicks at the list of guns with a thumbnail. The Remington was mine.

So. Is the twelve because it was smaller than the twenty?

My brother's laugh is a gentle one. No, he says. More powerful, actually.

So Daddy shot the other .12? I say.

No, he shot the .20, mostly. It had been Pops'. The Mossberg had never been used. That was always a little curious.

I am stupid about things like this. Why was your gun more powerful than Daddy's?

He made an ironic face at me. Who are we talking about here? he says.

True, I say. That manly thing.

Of course. He said he'd buy me a .20 when I mastered the .12. Huge fucking recoil on that thing.

Recoil? I say.

When it kicks you in the shoulder after it discharges, remember?

I shake my head at him, I never shot a gun, I say. He only took me once and I cried and he wouldn't talk to me all the way back to Kentfield.

He laughs. Well, I did, he says. You remember how skinny I was? The recoil would just about knock me over but I wound up pretty good at it out of sheer terror of what would happen to me if I screwed up. I was more scared of him than I was of the gun. I couldn't use my right arm for days after hunting I was so bruised. It probably wasn't such a bad thing for me in those days, though.

*Pffft*. I say in protest. That's what he would have told you, anyway, Will. I stare at the list for a while. Will gets us tea. The smoky taste of Lapsang Souchong. Will, I say, that time I went with him, I carried that gun around for four hours and never shot it, but he

made me clean it anyway. He stored the guns unloaded, always, because of Mac.

Remember? You just said that he always shot the Winchester. He was cleaning the Remington—your gun, the gun that killed him—but he only hunted with the Winchester.

Will shrugs. We always cleaned them immediately. He might have been cleaning it for me again, so that later he could be angry at me for not cleaning it, Will says. That would have been like him.

I am suddenly frustrated at my brother: why can't we just say that he killed himself? He shot himself with your gun, Will, so it would look like an accident. Or, so it would be more likely to kill him if it was more powerful, right?

Then why not the Mossberg? He wasn't cleaning it because there wasn't some possible punishment in it. He fully intended there to be some consequence afterwards, some lesson for me. That's why it had to have been an accident.

I don't even understand how you can be questioning this, Will.

How is Danny? Will says.

That's all anybody wants to know. How is Danny? How is Danny? Danny is Danny, I always say, cheerily. Danny is fine. The subject change is intentional, but just as he doesn't want to talk about our father's death, I don't want to talk about Danny. He has a bag of piss and shit strapped around his leg, brother, I would like to say. He drools. He can't hold his head up anymore. I don't remember when it wasn't like this. Why can't we talk about suicide instead?

*And the fear.*

I never could have been a cowboy, regardless of how much I love horses, he says. I couldn't have stood the loneliness. He takes the plateful of bacon from Pauline and puts it on the table. Looking back on it later, it seems to all of the children that their childhoods were spent seated around a table: the yellow Formica one at the ranch, the mahogany one at home in Kentfield, their mother's mother's table in Pacific Heights, under which there was a raised spot in the rug that rang for the help when you stepped on it hard. Their father's mother's where the food was so good you hardly noticed the ocean beyond the French doors. Did you want to be a cowboy? Mac said. Shhh. Edie said with a quick look at him. Eat, Mac. She nodded at his plate. He picked up his fork and held it in his lap while he looked expectantly at his father.

No, no no. Not any of it. All I can remember is waiting for Father to tell Mother what he had for lunch. And the fear.

*You can't inherit that.*

Back to Kentfield. It is Thanksgiving and Nanabel arrives in her mink with most of dinner in the trunk of her Packard. There is an acid undertone to the event, though Nanabel is silly with the children and Mac and Edie pretend to be a bear, lumbering around the living room, growling, while both wearing Nanabel's mink over their heads. Nanabel laughs, but Otto can't stand it and leaves the room. Nobody knows why.

Isabel and Pauline are in Pauline's kitchen. It is as awkward as Thanksgiving is when two women who dislike each other try to share a kitchen.

Something's the matter with Otto, Isabel says.

Something new? Pauline says, archly.

Isabel pauses with an olive half-way to her red, red lips. The sarcasm isn't helpful, dear, she says. Her tone is light, but anyone would recognize it as a warning.

Pauline raises her eyebrows and slices celery into matchsticks. The relish-tray is all that is left to prepare. Of course, Isabel has also allowed Pauline to prepare the gelatin salad, for it wouldn't have made the trip across the bay very well in the trunk with the hot dishes. Isabel imagines that Pauline's gelatin salad is from a box. She nibbles another

olive. Carrots and olives and gherkins already lie in separate sections of the depression-glass dish. The turkey that Otto butchered is in the oven. The dishes that Isabel unpacked from the Packard are either in the warming oven or waiting in the butler's pantry. Creamed onions, a green bean casserole with bacon and chanterelles. Two sorts of mashed potatoes (sweet and white), a sausage stuffing that they packed inside the bird three hours before. A pumpkin pie and a chocolate meringue torte. Isabel respects culinary traditions, but does not agree that pumpkin counts as dessert. She picks a wavy black hair off of Pauline's white sweater.

It's just that he seems different, lately, and his father at the same age ...

Pauline interrupts, Pops had shell-shock. You can't inherit that.

No. Of course, Isabel says, but she hesitates.

What are you not telling me, Pauline says, gesturing as if the knife in her hand were meant for some more dangerous purpose than finishing off the relish tray.

I don't know, Isabel says. She has those hooded eyes, those Asian lids, who knows where she got them, she is Irish, through and through. They were inscrutable, those eyes. She doesn't say: it had always been so easy to say "shell shock"—it was so common, then, and it didn't imply flawed genetic material. But there had never been consensus about Pops' disorder, and now Otto.

Pauline's guard is back up almost immediately. She drops the tiny celery sticks onto the relish tray. He's fine, Isabel, she says. He needs a vacation, that's all.

Wasn't he just at the ranch? Isabel says.

Yes, he was, Pauline says. She wants to smoke. What he went through would have upset anyone.

Isabel looks blank.

He didn't tell you?

Tell me what?

We lost Queenie. He fought like crazy to save her but she died. And her foal.

Oh, you mean the horse! Isabel says. I did hear about that. Is that what this is all about?

Pauline stares at her. She wipes her hands on her apron and then takes it off. She tosses it on the back of a chair, but it falls to the linoleum. Lolly, the lanky red setter, trots over to sniff at it. Isabel follows her out of the room. Click-clack go their heels on the yellow linoleum.

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They are arrayed, starched, pressed. Otto asks his mother to say grace.

For what we are about to receive may we be truly grateful, she says. She raises a glass and smiles brightly. Who's like us? she says.

Damn few! they cry, glasses raised. Mac is a half-second behind the rest so his *ew!* is a solo.

Isabel smiles at Annabeth. I haven't seen you lately, dear. How is school?

It's fine, Annabeth says.

Classes are going well?

Yes, I ... Annabeth begins to respond but Pauline interrupts. Aren't you cold? she asks, eyeing Annabeth's strapless, mint-green dress. What Pauline meant to say was, that color doesn't suit you, that dress is for the wrong occasion, what have you done to your hair? Mothers pick at their children when they know they are lost, pick and nag, as if they want to provide reasons for the leaving.

Annabeth shakes her head. She dresses only for Danny Fleming. Danny Fleming who said he might come by after dinner. She has butterflies in her belly. She is ready to fly. Without any words she is saying goodbye.

Otto carves. He licks his fingers as he piles up meat: dark on one platter, white on another. He licks and carves, licks and carves. It is an electric carving knife. It buzzes

and then catches on bone. Mac puts olives on his fingers and waves them at Nanabel, who disapproves of poor table manners, but has taught the children this trick, herself. She shakes her head gently at Mac, who grins at her and eats the olives directly off of his fingers.

Otto holds the carving fork out to Annabeth. Pope's nose, he says.

Oh, thank you Daddy, she says, taking the fatty bit.

It doesn't shift Otto's mood to be benevolent. He burns with discontent. He ought to recognize the feeling as envy, but if he'd had that recognition and known what to do about it, he wouldn't have been Otto.

*Doors.*

Slamming doors. 1. A bedroom door. 2. A heavy wooden front door. 3. A car door.  
Eucalyptus and something else. (What does escape smell like?)

A door slams.

Another door slams.

With a small overnight case in one hand, Annabeth walks quickly down a brick path towards a showy black car that waits at the sidewalk. As she approaches, the passenger door swings open. The car door slams. Annabeth leans to quickly kiss the man who is driving. She doesn't look back at the building—a sprawling Tudor on a Berkeley side street with three large Greek letters above the door. The car drives away.

*Some exploded flower drum song.*

Sorrow sometimes smells like a hard frost in a northern city. Petroleum-based fumes freeze like a sneeze in your nosehairs. Like right before you cry.

Otto and Edie walk slowly down a concrete sidewalk. The doubled sound of footsteps clicking quickly down a concrete sidewalk. As if the soundtrack is out of synch with the film.

In and out, Otto says.

Yes, Daddy, Edie says. She puts her hand in his. His hand is like a glove that is too big. Her hand gets lost and slips around inside his until she can't hold on anymore. She puts her hand back in her wooly pocket.

They approach a large Tudor house with painted Greek letters above the door. *ΠΒΦ*. It does no good to wonder why.

Go ahead, Otto says, and Edie presses the bell. It rings deep within the house. The kind of ringing that is a buzz, more felt than heard. A window opens above. Otto looks up and two peering, girlish heads retreat back into the house. Footsteps, then a matronly-looking woman in a brown-print dress. Fullskirted and jowled. She looks at Otto, then Edie, then back at Otto.

Your wife wasn't able to come? she says. This kind of situation. The mother.

No, Otto says. He pushes Edie ahead of him into the dark-paneled foyer. Female giggling from a distance. Running feet like playful ghosts around the gallery up above. A record crooning a stupid male voice he doesn't recognize.

The room is messy and very feminine. Some exploded flower drum song, redolent of nailpolish. Two college-age girls are seated on a low divan in the corner. They look up in surprise. One of them has her foot in the other's lap.

Normally we don't have gentlemen in this part of the house, the matron says. Girls, she says, and tilts her head toward the door.

Oh, of course...they mutter a little and needlessly dither for a minute while they watch Otto out of the corners of their eyes. They leave.

The matron opens a wardrobe. Here are her things, she says. Oh, one moment—she disappears but returns immediately. I've sent a girl up to the attic for your daughter's trunk. She may have loaned things out to other girls, but I can't possibly be expected.

No, of course not, Otto says.

The matron stands at the open wardrobe with her hands on her hips. Dresses crowd. The floor is piled with scarves and shoes and handbags. Goodness, didn't she take anything with her? she says.

Thank you, Edie says. Edie often errs on the side of forthrightness. The matron looks blank.

We'll take it from here, Otto says.

Well! The matron says, and then they are alone in the room.

They pile things on the divan until the red trunk arrives and then Edie kneels down and transfers the slippery piles from the divan into the red trunk. Edie is quick, her movements are sure. Otto moves slowly, as if drugged. He lifts an ice-blue dress with a very full skirt off of the pile. He looks at it for a brief moment and then wads it up and stuffs it in the trunk. He moves more quickly, then. They finish in no time at all.

Sit on it, he says and Edie climbs atop the trunk. He clicks shut the brass locks. The trunk, upended, slides along the floorboards and bumps behind them down the stairs.

The matron waits at the door. Tell her I wish the very best for her. I'm sorry to have to do this. Rules are rules.

I'm sure she'd understand, Edie says. We haven't spoken to her but when we do.

Otto interrupts as the red trunk bumps through the doorway. Edie, that's enough. Come on, now.

Merry Christmas! the matron calls out behind them.

*Bits of broken mirror on the bathroom floor.*

Coffee, fog in the redwoods, a perfumed candle—Tuscan blood-orange—that Nina brought from a handcraft shop in Middlebury and that only partially masks the hospital-smell of my dying husband.

I have three brightly colored leotards and matching headbands. I sweat so much that when I get out of the car at home there is a damp leotard-shape on the driver's seat.

Nina laughs. That's disgusting, Mother.

I know! I love it though. Can I get you more coffee? She holds out her blue mug and I take it. Nina has begun drinking coffee in college. She sips with her eyes narrowed. She's next to the hospital bed that we set up in the living room. She's holding her father's hand. His breathing is labored and irregular. He has pneumonia. The hospice nurse says that it is very common at the end. This is why Nina is home.

You look good, though, she says.

I just smile, but what is nicer than approval from one's children? Like being called back to active duty.

How is your project?

I shake my head. It's like bits of broken mirror on the bathroom floor.

She laughs. *Nil posse creari de nilo*, she says.

What's that? I only got the nothing part.

Nothing can be created from nothing. It's Lucretius.

Oooh, fancy, I say, to cover my hurt at that nothing.

She has the good sense to look a little embarrassed. She went to Middlebury to study classics but she's been spending all of her free time making jewelry in the jewelry studio and is thinking of majoring in biology. I don't see the connection between these things, but it is probably a boy. Beaded bracelets all up one arm and only a camisole in this fog. She says that her blood has thinned in Vermont.

I want to ask her what she means by nothing and nothing but I don't know how without crying, so I'm just quiet instead. It isn't a comfortable quiet. It's a seething quiet and I remember Nina now. She doesn't worry about collateral damage. She means that I am nothing my memories are nothing Daddy was nothing his death was nothing my project is nothing my family is nothing so she and her father and I are nothing? I can't see what's at the heart of the thing. I don't really want to. I meander my way toward it, blindfolded. The damp leotard-shape on the car seat is enough. Coffee in a blue mug.

I'll read to Daddy, okay? she says and reaches awkwardly for the novel without letting go of Danny's hand. The novel is fat. She presses it flat against the bed with her free hand.

I close my eyes. Her voice has a nasal, slightly anxious quality that is heightened when disembodied from her richly feminine form. Danny continues to breathe. The clock ticks in the entry hall.



*Prost.*

Men speaking softly. Occasionally laughing. Many clinks of glassware, ice-cubes. The pop of a champagne cork. Bourbon. Men's cologne. Wool, shoe polish, the scent of fine old things: paneling, carpets, furniture. (What does self-importance smell like?)

Otto is jostled by the elbow. There's someone I want you to meet, a voice says. Otto nods, smiles, shakes hands with a new member, a...*mhnnmhmm* fellow at Stanford, Otto doesn't quite catch it. He promptly forgets the man's name.

It's very interesting, the nameless man says, looking around the gallery at the exhibit of Otto's work.

Thank you, Otto says. He isn't sure the man meant it as a compliment. His hands are cold from holding his iced drink. He moves to stand against a wall of the gallery. It is tucked behind the bar—thus the clinking, thus the laughter—deep inside the Bohemian Club on Taylor Street.

A ring of gluckspilze, those redcapped toadstools that are lucky in Bavaria, beneath a black-trunked tree, like a dangerous, grasping mother watching over her warped and hooded little offspring.

Looking down upon a European village. The narrowed scope of it is like looking into an Easter Egg—the sugar kind, pink-iced, violet-bedecked. On closer inspection it isn't a holiday scene. The village is peopled by drably clothed folk. Their backs are

hunched. They trudge lonely trajectories in the snow. When things look like this nobody is happy. When things look like this everybody has a secret. When things look like this there is either no hope or only hope. The narrowed scope of it is like looking up from the inside of a sugar Easter Egg the inside of which is suddenly darkened by a bulging orb that closes off the sun. The drably clothed people run, screaming. Where can they hide?

Otto's suited cronies bend and peer. They forget about their glasses, which tilt and pour. Scotch whiskey splashes to the floor.

The trees march in rows, bloodied, as if by the reddest sunset, or sunrise. Or perhaps blood. There is soft murmuring. Someone coughs. He stands in the doorway. *Shit*, he thinks. The feeling of being judged and found wanting. He hadn't sought glory, but he had sought ... what? Some recognition of vision, at least? The bloodied trees march. There are greengold hills dotted with oaks. The paneling is oak. There is a bronze sculpture of an owl on a pedestal in the corner. Otto raises his glass of bourbon toward it. The Cheese turns his head just in time to intercept the gesture and looks around awkwardly. *Me?* He seems to say. *Me?* Then half-raises a glass in turn. *Shit*, Otto thinks again.

Bavaria during the war? Little Stockham is suddenly at his elbow.

What? Oh, yes. After the war. Rehabilitation...

Ah, Stockham peers up at him and pushes up his glasses. Otto sympathetically pushes his glasses up, too.

Displaced persons biz, eh?

Something like that, Otto says. So ... Otto tries to remember anything interesting about Stockham other than his lack of stature. Is he a surgeon? Otto used to care about this sort of thing, but he doesn't anymore. Or, the pressure of the show is getting to him. He didn't think he'd hate this so much. You know Bavaria? Otto says.

Stockham tilts his head to one side and surveys the room. Only a little. I also came late to the war.

You're a surgeon?

No, Stockham looks surprised, then says, psychiatrist. He bites the word off as if it tastes bitter.

I see, Otto says. The feeling of being judged and found terribly. Being found. He gestures toward the paintings that line the room. What do you make of this, then?

Stockham thinks for a moment. *Verrückt*, he says, and grins.

Otto laughs grimly.

Stockham shakes his head with a little smile. No diagnosis, sir. I'm not at work, and they're beautiful. He lifts his drink.

Otto fears this man. What can he see? Otto clinks his empty glass against the rim of Stockham's, Bad luck with an empty glass.

*Prost*, Stockham says.

The Cheese walks toward them with a swagger that is less pomp than a way to deal with balancing his impressive girth and staying upright at the same time. Stockham slips away with a murmured apology. Here's our artist! The Cheese claps Otto on the shoulder. They are nearly the same age, but The Cheese always plays patriarch.

Otto nods like a goddamn frightened schoolboy. His gut tightens.

Quite a show. That one...The Cheese gestures toward a naked redheaded woman lying like an effigy on a table in a farmhouse kitchen. He waves his puffy hand as if it can speak for him.

Otto is at a loss. He wouldn't have shown that one to The Cheese, necessarily. Afterthought makes him wish he'd protected it better. A friend of mine, he says, and then laughs as if it is a joke.

Well ... yes. The Cheese says. You made us bankers look like we have a little extra going for us among these other sods, eh?

Something in the way he says it makes Otto think of congratulating Will after a particularly poor baseball performance. Will would rather be reading or playing chess. Otto would rather be. Otto would rather be.

He should have seen the evening brought to its knees. Felt a little glow of triumph, well-deserved. Instead, pride flickers and dies. Anxiety twists words of praise into ugly things. He is afraid.

*The father doesn't say, I bought it for you.*

The boy, Otto, receives a kit with which to make a working trebuchet. When he first opens the box he is disappointed. The box is full of pieces of soft wood. The nearly-white kind that he can press with a thumbnail and leave a groove. He looks at the pieces inside the box. Some of them are very small. He looks at the cover of the box again. There is a drawing of angry-looking Medieval men next to the trebuchet. He has tin doughboy soldiers but it's not the same thing. He looks at his mother to say thank you, but she shakes her head at him and smiles a little. He looks at the father and thinks. The father has been gone since the previous February and Otto isn't accustomed to his presence in the house. They tiptoe around one another, they eye each other, as if sizing up whether or not the other will be acceptable. Still, the drawing of the toy on the outside of the package looks interesting. He knows things about weapons. He has a book about medieval warfare. He would like to say to the father: the people who operated them were called gynours. They could throw thousands of stones in one day. They sometimes used corpses when they ran out of stones. He would like to say this, but he does not. Otto loves quiet work: gluing things, cutting things, painting things.

Thank you, he says to the father.

The mother sits on the ground with her knees tucked beneath her. She is wrapped in a pink silk dressing gown. It has very wide sleeves that gape so the boy can see all the way up the inside of his mother's naked arm when she lifts her coffee cup to sip. Creamy. Her armpit a dark shadow. Her head leans against the father's knee. Occasionally, the

father strokes the mother's hair, which is a soft, warm brown. The mother has strange, hooded eyelids that made her look sleepy. Otto loves the mother's sleepy eyes. The father is lately arrived from the farm where he lives. Otto went with the mother to visit several times. Otto likes the farm. Otto likes it better when the father is at the farm. He wants the mother's full attention. He wants the father's full attention. Look at it with me, Father, he says. I want you to look. I want you to build this with me.

The father doesn't say, I bought it for you: it was the last one that they had at the hobby shop, and your mother said that I didn't need to bring you anything in particular because Santa knows that you're a good boy, but I wanted to buy you something, myself. I don't know you well enough to know what to buy for you. Mother had to tell me what you'd like. I don't remember what I played with as a boy. I believe I played with sticks and rocks. A ball if I could find one, but a ball is lonely if you're the only one around to play. As you know, I had only sisters. It was Idaho, then, and the silver mine hadn't begun producing, so we were the only children for forty miles. The father doesn't say any of this. The father doesn't say anything. The boy is too young for stories of silver mines. When he is old enough to listen there will be other things to create distance between them. The tree glitters with tinsel and tiny lights. The house smells of bacon and coffee and mother will make crepes filled with sour cream and boysenberry jam when the presents are finished.

The boy doesn't like the look in his father's eye. It is faraway and cold: as if he were looking out the window at a rainstorm.

*If only they could bottle it.*

Darling, Pauline says, as Otto seats himself at the dining table, what did you have for lunch?

The rest of them sit waiting, napkins in their laps. Will, stonyfaced. Mac, still red-eyed and sniffing after a visit to Otto's den. She smiles at Otto, encouragingly. A gold bangle sways on her wrist as she cuts Mac's meat. The other children wait for Otto to lift his fork so they may begin. They know how this nightly ritual goes. Before they may eat dinner, he has to describe lunch: as though the real nourishment he gains from the meal doesn't take effect until he's named it all for their mother hours later. He spins it all out in a litany. The prime rib thus, and the vegetables, so ... he sips his drink occasionally, gestures with his highball glass so the ice clinks.

Mother smiles, nods. Was it a lunch meeting?

No, Otto pauses, then stands and moves to the sideboard to refill his glass.

With Eddington?

The silver tongs make a scraping sound in the icebucket. Yes, Otto says.

Mother returns Mac's plate to his placemat. I thought he and Bonnie were in Italy for the holidays. Capri or something. Did he say anything about Capri?

Otto returns to his seat. No, he says. He clears his throat.



Not a word is spoken until their plates are clean and Daddy has put down his fork and knife. They flirt with him, then, try to cajole him into being present for them.

Daddy, do your part for us. Yes, Daddy, do. A chorus of voices.

Otto had had a role in last summer's Bohemian Grove musicale. Mother just watches. She frowns when he is silly. He is flattered by his children's attention. He doesn't do it out of remorse, he just likes the power of making them laugh. He stands up, pulls his oxford cloth shirt off until it hangs off of the back of his head, like long hair. The song is nonsense, he played the part of a pirate wench. He twirls one of the sleeves of his shirt as if it is a lock of hair. He undulates. They laugh—louder than the song warrants—until tears spring up in their eyes at the way his belly moves in his undershirt. At times like this it feels as though the family can coast along on a current of accord.

If only they could bottle it, spoon it between their parents' lips in a daily dose—the happiness-equivalent of castor oil.

Later, when they are alone: What excuse can he give her? He had lied. It had slipped out so easily. Lunch with Bob Eddington was a simple alternative to the shameful truth. He took it, *yes*. He doesn't want to remember the disorienting embarrassment of the art exhibition. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but remembering that room full of his paintings—he thinks it might have been easier to stand there in his underpants than display his private daydreams for his business associates to gawk at and misunderstand. She thinks he was with Karen, of course. He lets her believe this. He cares about the protection offered by the misunderstanding more than he cares about her jealousy.

Her ice clinks, too. The glass has a picture of a cable car on it in black and red. The kind of thing tourists buy to take home to Missouri, he thinks. The glass arcs across the room. Dregs of vodka and an ice-cube or two catch the light as they fly from the glass. He ducks, easily, and the glass shatters against the base of a brass lamp.

Shh, shh, he says, and moves toward her, but she is surrounded by the insurmountable sizzle of her anger. After that he sits in an armchair and mostly waits for the yelling to stop. He yells a little, too, but there isn't any passion in it. Usually her ire alone is enough to whip him into a frenzy. Jugular standing out blue against the pallor of his skin. Tonight he just doesn't care.

Why won't you fight, goddammit, she says.

I don't give a blue hell about any of it, he says. He is so tired. He can hardly keep his eyes open. He thinks he really should get to the doctor. Something is wrong with him.

She gets right in his face, lips twisted into a sneer. Sitting there so calm, you think you're better than me? Fuck you. I have a right, you know. I have a right. Where are you, Otto? Inside there? She knocks with her fist upon his hairless forehead.

Don't, he says, and pulls her fist away. There is a little struggle. Her wrist is bruised.

It's a little chaotic inside my head right now, he says, not meeting her eye.

You think? she says, sarcastically.

It goes on, and on, finally, exhausted, she turns to leave the room, but pauses in the doorway. The Eddingtons are still on Capri, Otto, she says.

*Now? Tomorrow? When?*

Christmas tree, bourbon, burning firewood, nostalgia.

Is that it, then? Pauline stands with a cardboard box on one hip. Otto reaches behind the Christmas tree and plugs in the cord.

Yes, he says.

She disappears with the final box. He stands and looks at the tree. He squints to make the colored lights blur into one another.

Here. Pauline is back. She has taken off her apron and is holding two crystal glasses of eggnog. Obediently, he takes one and sniffs it. His gut hurts so badly that even the idea of the rich, eggy drink makes him gag. He puts the glass on the coffeetable.

Ouch, he says, massaging his belly.

Go to the doctor, Pauline says. She doesn't add, *for chrissakes*, but it is implied. Do you want to sit for a minute?

Otto looks at his watch. Nah, it's five till. If I sit down I won't get up again.

It is the usual ritual: he and Pauline decorate the tree after the children go to bed on Christmas Eve, then wake them up at midnight after “Santa Claus” comes. It’s an awful lot of work, and they fight like demons from the stress of it, but he likes to do it this way. It’s the way his mother did it. He asked her once how she managed it, all alone. She said that it was always one of her favorite nights of the year because she knew how happy he was going to be when she carried him into the living room, all sleepy and half-terrified that Santa Claus would be caught in the act.

Not really room to sit down, anyway, Pauline says.

The sofa and both armchairs have been commandeered as Christmas props. Five stockings recline plumply along the sofa as if they have just finished an opulent meal. Pencils and Hershey bars protrude from their tops. They are embroidered with *Mother*, *Father*, *Edith*, *Willis*, *Malcolm*. The one that says *Annabeth* is empty. It is in the box that Pauline just put in the corner of the guest room where it will stay until they take the tree down on January first. The chairs are heaped with presents.

Pauline finishes her eggnog. Ready?

You wake them up, Otto says, and I’ll pour another round.

Fine, she says.

He chews a handful of Tums and barely has time to pour his eggnog down the drain before he hears excited voices in the living room. So quick—they can't have even been asleep, yet, he thinks. He fills a jigger with straight bourbon for himself but refills Pauline's glass with eggnog from the blender. His hands shake, he doesn't know why. He has tears in his eyes. He doesn't want to do this. Now, tomorrow, when? he thinks. Not now.

Santa came, Daddy, Santa came! Mac squeals.

Eddie is bright-eyed, watchful.

I wasn't even asleep, yet, were you? Will says to her.

Otto sits on the floor with his back against one of the chairs and stares into the fire. His reverie is broken when Pauline nudges him with her toe.

Is there one there for Eddie? She gestures at the pile of packages on the chair behind him. He checks labels and tosses a lumpy one to Eddie.

Is this yours? he says.

I don't know, she says, shyly. Is it for me?

Looks like it, he says.

The wrapping falls away to reveal a dress. She lifts it to her shoulders and kicks out a leg to check the fullness of the skirt.

Thank you, Daddy, she says. She is pleased with the red and brown floral material.

There is a red grosgrain bow beneath the bust, and a crinoline. It will be perfect for cotillion, she says. Daddy, did you pick it... she begins but Mac interrupts.

Look, look, look he says. He holds out a tooled leather holster. A pearly gun-handle juts out of the top.

Gee, Edie says, acting impressed. She wants her father to talk to her more about the dress but now he's staring at the tree as if came from another planet.

Lemme see, Will says and hops over the top of the coffeetable to get a closer look at Mac's new gun. He kicks Otto's bourbon over.

Dammit, Will, Otto says.

Mac starts to cry.

Shhhh! Will says, you didn't even do it.

I kn-kn-know, Mac says.

It's just bourbon, it'll dry. Otto says.

The children look at one another in astonishment: what does it mean if no one is to blame?

Well no wonder, Pauline says. It's two am. Bed, now. And don't you dare let us hear your voices before eleven.

Otto lies awake until five. His mother, alone. That is a sorrow, but he's convinced that she'll be better off. He wonders where Annabeth will be for Christmas. With Danny's family? He rehearses what he'll say when he next sees her. No daughter of mine. If you think. His jaw is clenched. He's so wired that when he imagines jabbing his finger in pointed emphasis at his own rhetoric, he pokes at the sheet. It puffs a little. Pauline stirs. The alternative is that he won't see her. He walks through the dark house and into the kitchen. The phone book is in a drawer on the back side of the fireplace. It's warmer in the drawer than in the rest of the kitchen, though the fire is burned down to ash. Fleming, Audra M.. Fleming, Berenice. Fleming, Carl J. Fleming, Charles L. Fleming, Daniel R. Otto's heart leaps at this found *Danny Fleming* until he realizes that the entry goes on to include the Audra M. in Sausalito. Eight other Flemings, but not the one he's looking for. It is nearly seven when he finally sleeps.

*What is the difference?*

Tearing paper. A wooden drawer opens, then closes. A match is torn free from a matchbook, then scratched alight.

The dark desk was his father's father's. It is nearly dawn. There is a lamp, shaded with green glass. A banker's lamp. Pauline bought it for him as a banker's joke. What is the difference between a dead banker in the road and a dead cat in the road? There are skidmarks around the dead cat. The pool of light it casts is focused on an envelope. Rich cream against the polished wood. He stares at it for a long time. It is almost light out when he picks it up and tears it in half. He pulls open a drawer and finds a matchbook. Trader Vic's. The small sulfurous scratch and whiff. The paper burns evenly. He drops it into the wastebasket. In a moment it is nothing but ash.



*And thus.*

That he would be District Manager forever.

And thus, expendable.

And thus, a fool.

That his children would despise him.

That he would be mad like his father

That there isn't anything left that gives him pleasure.

The things that he would miss:

*It is Saturday.*

In the kitchen, Edie forages for food with her friend, Marjorie Johnson. Marjorie is not a fairweather friend. It has been three days since Otto died, and the refrigerator is stacked full of sympathy offerings. There is some Christmas-y pleasure to be found in peering beneath the foil, plastic wrap, waxed-paper coverings.

Why didn't anybody bring tomato aspic? Edie says, digging around the Frigidaire. Her search is unsuccessful, though she unearths a lime one with cucumber and chopped egg, a mountainous one that is nearly clear and smells of fish, and several of the fruity variety in which canned mandarins and tiny marshmallows hang suspended. The girls heap their plates with cold cuts. No bread, Edie says.

More cookies than the goddamn girl scouts, though, Marjorie says.

Edie makes a sound that would have been a laugh a week earlier. The girls sit crosslegged in a patch of sunlight on the yellow tile floor. Pale yellow appliances circle watchfully around them. A dog scratches at the door and Edie rises to let in the liver-colored shorthair. Edie shoos her away from their plates. They forget about her before the tapping sound of her nails disappears down the hall.

Full, Marjorie says and pushes her plate away.

I can't stop, Edie says with her mouth full of cookies.

Stop, Marjorie says.

Mmmm, Edie makes a sad noise and snatches at one more butter cookie before Marjorie can take her plate away. She leans back and closes her eyes. A sunbeam hits her full in the face. There are cookie crumbs on her lower lip and the front of her sweater. With a sense of desperation and anxiety she thinks about which of the dishes she'll try once she stops being so full. Marjorie washes their plates and leaves them on the drying board.

In the hallway, the shorthair is curled against the closed door of Otto's den.

Hilde misses him. Marjorie says, as if it were a question.

Edie opens the door; the dog startles and scrambles to her feet. The smell is enormous—too big to be contained in just one room. Goddammit, Edie says. Behind her, Marjorie gags or gasps or sobs.

After an hour of scrubbing, Edie's dishcloth is rusty and her arm aches. Sliding glass doors stand open. There is a small deck and a view of treetops. It is very cold but the death-smell has dissipated somewhat. A bucket balances on the leather desk chair. Pinkish-grey bits of matter float in dark water, some of which has slopped onto the leather seat of the chair. Edie doesn't care; her attention is focused on removing the splattered stain on the wall behind her father's desk. At first they thought it was just the wall, but Marjorie found blood and bits of matter all the way across the room. Marjorie systematically pulls books off the shelf and wipes them clean. She separates them into two piles: one for books too badly bloodstained to keep, another of volumes to replace

on the shelf once it's wiped down, too. The dishcloth that Marjorie uses to clean the books is embroidered with a little girl in a blue dress and a black lamb and says *Tuesday* in orange cross-stitch. It is Saturday.

Are you sure? Marjorie had said when Edie had given it to her to use, but Edie had just dipped her rag (a teapot with flowers, *Thursday*) into the bucket and begun to scrub the wall.

Edie, does your mother maybe want it left alone? Marjorie had said.

Edie had paused in her scrubbing and looked over her shoulder at Marjorie. It's *mother*, Marjorie, she had said. She either expects me to do it, or she's leaving it for Mildred. I don't want Mildred to have to do it. Her face had softened. You don't have to help, she had said.

They do not speak while they work. The light changes and the air coming in from outside grows colder. It gets dark early, now.

Edie breaks the silence. Marjorie, I think it was there for too long, it won't come off.

Marjorie looks up from her piles of books and considers the mark on the wall. Some of it is because the plaster is wet, she says. Her face brightens. Edie, what about bleach? Bleach might work. Actually, should we maybe use bleach anyway? Or Lysol? To disinfect?

God, Edie sighs. Probably. She looks at the bucket and sets her jaw. She is furious that she couldn't just shut the door on this horrible mess. She is furious that nobody will thank her for it when it becomes obvious that the mess is no longer there. I'll switch out the water, she says, and means it, but she stuffs her mouth full of cookies while the bucket fills in the yellow sink. Bleach fumes overwhelm the taste of the butter cookies, but she chews and swallows anyway. She looks unseeingly out of the window above the sink. Again and again she crunches the cookies into a sweet mush in her mouth and swallows.

*That idiotic sympathy face.*

Annabeth and Pauline sit together in the living room. Annabeth cries with her head in her hands. Pauline smokes and watches a small, brown bird hover outside the window. It fusses and chitters at something that she cannot see. Perhaps a larger bird. She thinks that she will have to move away from this place. How long will it be before she can sell the house? How long before people stop tilting their heads and pursing up their mouths when they see her? That idiotic sympathy face. The boys have sought refuge elsewhere in the neighborhood. She doesn't wonder where.

When they first met she had felt a sense of loss—as if meeting Otto was the same thing as losing him. He was, he was, he was. Full of life. As if he were a much bigger man packed into the skin of Otto. Bursting with it. She remembered it, now.