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Hanging Gardens

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Hanging Gardens

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Brett Jordan Boham

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## The Pact

After showing his parents the official letter of acceptance from the University of Delaware, as well as the attached provision for a partial academic scholarship, Paul said he was pretty tired and went downstairs to his bedroom and locked the door, assuming that he wouldn't be bothered for the rest of the night. A short time later, his parents showed up at his door and announced in gentle alternating voices that they needed to see him in the dining room because they had something important to show him too. He declined, reminding them what he had said about being tired, but they insisted, reminding him what they had just said about the importance of the thing they needed to show him.

"Fine! I'll be up in a minute!" Paul waited for the sound of their footsteps to disappear before nodding at his girlfriend Maggie, his signal that the coast was clear. She leaned forward on the edge of the bed and put her glasses on and took a drink of water from a cup spotted with soap stains. Her breasts hung thin across her chest. The flush in her cheeks disappeared. She could transition from fooling around to not fooling around so fast it made him worried, made him wonder if his moves were getting through to her. She didn't even stop to catch her breath. It was like nothing had happened. He sat next to her and pulled his jean legs right, waiting for her to say something. When she didn't, he did.

"You got a splinter in your butt again. Sorry about that."

"Please call it my 'ass.' I don't like the way you say 'butt.'"

Paul stood up and straightened his legs and walked in a circle, glancing at Maggie to gauge her mood. She kept her eyes on the carpet, taking labored sips from the cup like she was drinking vodka, and drinking it alone. He said her name as a question. She looked up and nodded at the door.

“Your parents. They’re waiting for you.”

“I know. But I still have an erection.”

“Well it’s definitely not going anywhere if you stand there thinking about it. You should do something unrelated.”

“Something unrelated to an erection?”

“I don’t know. You swore to me you’d sand the windowsill before I came over. Maybe now would be a good time to do that.”

“I did sand it, I swear.” Paul walked over to the half-open window and rubbed his hand along the bottom frame; admittedly, it didn’t feel like something that had been sanded. It was an old house. “I guess I didn’t do it for long enough.” He heard Maggie put the cup on the bedside table and curse under her breath. He liked that she held him to a high standard, even when it came to little things. But he also felt that she exaggerated his flaws. Not that he’d ever mention it. He prided himself on being the kind of person that didn’t need to be complimented all the time, didn’t go looking for pity just because. “I’ll sand it again.”

“Or you could tell your parents that I’ve been spending the night so I can start using the front door like a normal person. They won’t care. Do you think they’ll care? I don’t think they’ll care. They’re basically hippies.”

“They’re not hippies. They’re definitely not hippies.”

“Maybe they already know. I bet Diane already knows.”

“Please don’t call my mom ‘Diane.’ I’ve told you that before.”

“She asked me to call her ‘Diane.’” Maggie picked up her overnight bag from the floor and dug through it until she found a hair tie; she pulled her hair back so her ears were visible and crossed her arms over her breasts. “Last week at Maloney’s, when we were waiting for the food to come and you went and played on that old Galaga machine for, like, thirty minutes, your mom and I had this great conversation, and she asked me, more than once, to call her ‘Diane.’ And yes, I told her you wouldn’t like it. But she said she got to pick what she got called and you got to pick what you got called and that was that and I agreed with her. We got along great, actually, your mom and me. If anything, she’d probably be happy if she knew I was here right now. She’d probably want to hang out.”

“You don’t know my parents as well as you think you do.”

“Whatever. I don’t want to get into a pissing contest about who knows your parents better. Obviously, they’re your parents. All I’m saying is your mom asked me to call her ‘Diane.’ She practically demanded it.”

“And I’m telling you, for the last time, don’t.”

“Oh, yeah? Are you demanding me? Are you putting me in my place? Is that what’s happening? Am I being put in my place?”

“You always do this!” Paul grabbed the bridge of his nose and took a breath. “You try to make everything about your personal rights but not everything is about

rights, ok? There are things besides rights. And this relationship is going to be much stronger when you start appreciating that.”

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Don’t condescend to me. And don’t pretend that you care more about this relationship than I do.”

“I’m not condescending to you,” he said. She didn’t respond. He said it again, less assuredly. “I’m not condescending to you.”

When Paul and Maggie first started dating, after meeting at a Model United Nations conference at the downtown Sheraton, there was more or less a seamless transition from the world of simulated diplomacy to the world of their relationship. And for a month or so, it worked. The brash magic of a couple teenagers pretending to be seasoned adults. They would fight about capitalism and music and the current state and future trajectory of human sexuality, and they would laugh and wrestle and take off each other’s clothes. The fooling around was an extension of the fighting and vice versa. But in recent weeks, the fighting had become something different, something darker and less innocuous, and it didn’t seem like it was going back in the opposite direction any time soon. Then again, Paul didn’t want to hurt her. She was only a sophomore. He just wanted to prove that, whatever his flaws, his point of view was essentially more authoritative than hers. But it was hard to get this across because when she wasn’t criticizing him, she was babying him, neither of which allowed him any kind of foothold. He needed a foothold.

“Look, I’m trying to help you,” Maggie said.

“I know. But I really, really don’t want you to.”



“I just think that maybe—” Maggie stopped, bit her fingernail. “Maybe if you told your parents that I’m here and got everything out in the open, you wouldn’t be so hesitant when it comes to physical intimacy.”

“Hesitant? You think I’m hesitant? I think I’m pretty aggressive. Not overly aggressive, of course. I just— You’re the one that doesn’t really seem—You think I’m hesitant? But I always go first.”

“You’re very giving. I’m not disputing that. But you have your limits. You know you do. You know what I’m talking about.” Maggie uncrossed her arms and sat forward on the bed. “We’ve got to talk about it, Paul .But don’t worry. I’m not going to pressure you to do anything you don’t want to—”

“Just stop, stop it, stop it.” Paul felt a pain in his head and sat down on the edge of the bed. He knew what she was talking about but he didn’t want to talk about it because he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t understand it himself. Early in the relationship, they had proceeded through the initial stages of physical intimacy at a steady pace, at least by his standards. They’d been naked by the end of their first night together. He’d even gotten a full view, top to bottom, when she’d stood up to change the music. Shortly after that, they’d made it to oral sex. Followed by reciprocal oral sex. But since then, they’d been stuck in place. And although Paul was committed to the things they were currently doing, it was also becoming clear that he was the one preventing them from going any further. In theory, he wanted to have sex with Maggie. He even masturbated to the thought of it when he was alone. But in practice, he couldn’t go through with it. He didn’t know why. But he knew that

any hope he had to be the authoritative one in the relationship would evaporate as soon as he tried to explain himself. He touched his jeans to see if his erection was still there; it wasn't. He realized he had become very quiet. Maggie had too. She took a laminated library copy of *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* out of her bag and turned over on her side away from him and opened to the first page. He could see the splinter. It was visible at the top of her thigh, just below her cotton panties. He put his hand on her skin next to it and pressed down. She didn't protest. He used the index finger of his other hand to force it out. She kept her eye on the book the whole time, wincing a bit but saying nothing. After he'd gotten it out, he felt more at ease, more in control of himself again. He felt the relief of having paid a debt. He put the splinter on the bedside table and stood up. "Ok, I'll tell them you're here. I don't know what they want to show me so there might not be a natural transition, but I'll find a way. I swear."

Maggie took her face out of the book and looked at him and he leaned down and gave her a quick "back to normal" kiss before realizing that they hadn't actually come to any sort of resolution on the sex question, and that he still hadn't told her he'd been accepted to Delaware on a partial scholarship and would be going there instead of Swarthmore (if he got into Swarthmore), and it hit him all at once, the awareness that relationships never reached a point of permanent sustainability. It would always be like this, always in state of half-collapse. Maggie pulled back and looked at him and her face went flat and tired and he guessed that some or all of his thoughts had surfaced in his expression, and he started to say something but didn't

know what it was and stopped before anything came out and kissed her again and turned and left the room.

There was a piece of old hotel stationary lying on the dining room table halfway between Paul and his parents, its edges turned up, its dimensions warped. The letterhead, written in a thorny Gothic font, said *Hotel de Paris; Montreal, Canada*. Paul knew about the Hotel de Paris. It was the two-star shithole where his parents had spent their three-day honeymoon in 1982. It was also a reoccurring bone of contention in the family because, despite the photographic evidence, his parents had never allowed themselves to say an unkind word about the place. When Paul flipped through the family photo album labeled *First VCR/Wedding/Honeymoon* and pointed out the ugly carpet, the tacky lamps, the narrow beds, they'd only smile and say, "Ah, the Hotel de Paris. Lovely." And when he tried to correct them, "You mean Montreal, right? Montreal was lovely," they would insist, "No, no. The Hotel de Paris. Loveliest hotel we've ever stayed in." And even when he gave them the benefit of the doubt and suggested they were conflating the physical space with their emotional state at the time, they would shake their heads and maintain, with simple conviction, "No, it was truly lovely." He hated being the one trying to convince them that their honeymoon hotel was a shithole. He really did. But, like most reoccurring arguments with his parents, he couldn't stop because he wasn't defending a personal opinion; he was defending the objectivity of shared experience. He was trying to bring them back to reality from wherever they had drifted to.

Paul looked up from the piece of stationary and found his parents watching him from the other end of the table. He couldn't say for sure but it looked like they had changed clothes and taken showers at some point in the last hour. They were breathing heavy and their hands were so firmly entwined that their veins were nearly bursting. But their faces were calm with looks of happy expectation. He had never seen this level of suppressed energy in them before. He wondered if it was strange for them too.

People often mistakenly referred to his parents as "hippies" because of their easygoing nature and their lack of discernible occupations and their appearances. His mother had long thin hair and she typically wore it down over her face or else interrupted it with a random braid or two and tucked it behind the clunky, hexagonal frames of her prescription glasses, the same glasses that she'd worn since the late 1970s, a fact that was also verifiable in the family photo albums. His father was bald and skinny and wore flannel shirts, often with a few buttons undone and a pastel tank top visible underneath; his face and head had the bone structure of someone with a high intelligence, and he was vague enough in the way he spoke to keep this impression afloat, even though he'd failed out of La Salle after his freshman year and hadn't read a book other than an unauthorized Mike Schmidt biography in the ten years that Paul had been keeping track. They weren't hippies. They didn't have an ideology. They were just sort of friendly and unopinionated and irrelevant. And it pissed Paul off when people called them "hippies" because it gave them far more credit than they deserved.

“Well?” Paul asked, nodding at the piece of stationery. “What’s this?”

“We want you to read it,” his mother said.

Paul leaned forward and looked closer. Underneath the letterhead were a brief handwritten note and a pair of signatures, illegible from where he sat.

“Is it a confession that the Hotel de Paris is a shithole?”

His parents laughed their weird benign little laugh and looked at each other and widened their eyes and nodded. They had no problem maintaining eye contact while they laughed. It made Paul uncomfortable.

“No, you scamp,” his mother said. “It’s not a confession that the Hotel de Paris is a shithole because the Hotel de Paris isn’t a shithole.”

“Lovely place, the Hotel de Paris,” his father echoed.

“It’s a shithole. It really is. But let’s not— Just tell me what this is.”

“It’s self-explanatory,” his mother said. “Please read it.”

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***Hotel de Paris  
Montreal, Canada***

***This is a pact of love and mutual understanding. This is real. If we, the undersigned, make it to our 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2012 without getting divorced or legally separated, we will jump hand in hand into the Schuylkill River.***

***Agreed to this date, the 20th of November 1982.***

***Diane Cronin  
Teddy Cronin***

---

Paul put the piece of stationary back on the table and smoothed it out with his hand until it lay flat. His mind was blank. He saw the words on the page and he knew what each one meant, but he struggled to make sense out of them as a whole. Later, when he looked back at this moment, he would recognize it as a defense mechanism. But for the moment, he just felt disoriented. "So what? You're— You're going to jump into the Schuylkill River? But it's filthy."

"In parts," his mother agreed. "But you understand what we mean, right?"

"We probably should have been clearer," his father said.

"Look baby, I know this hard. I do." His mother pushed her hair off her face with her free hand. "But I need you to understand. We're going to jump in and we're not going to come back."

"Wait, what? What are you— So this—" Paul stopped and caught his breath and his awareness returned in a frenetic rush, as though someone had jabbed a pin into his brain. "This is a suicide pact?"

"No," his mother responded. "It's a pact of love and mutual understanding. Like it says there in the first line."

"A pact of love and mutual understanding that requires you to kill yourselves at the same time. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"This is a fucking suicide pact! Why are you showing me this?"

“Why?” His mother looked to his father for reassurance. His father squinted and rubbed his chin but said nothing. His mother continued. “We have to show you. We can’t keep this from you. It’s too important.”

“That’s right,” his father confirmed. “And now that you’re in college and you’re grown up, we figured it was the right time.”

“I just got into college a few hours ago.”

“Plus,” his father barreled on. “We know how much you like family history. You’re always digging in those old photo albums.”

“Oh,” Paul leaned back in his chair. “So this is history. This is all in the past. This isn’t still something you actually plan on—”

“Well, no,” his mother cut in. “We still plan on doing it. Assuming we make it to the big 3-0, that is.” His mother squeezed his father’s hand. His father smiled at her and leaned into her neck and whispered something that made her laugh quietly and he kissed her on the cheek and she kissed him on the cheek and they hugged and made sounds of deep satisfaction and shared affection without opening their mouths. Paul watched them, even though he didn’t know what he was watching. He wished there was someone else in the room he could look to for recognition but he was only an old child and these moments had always been his to bear alone. These moments. These incomprehensible moments. Like the time they told him they were moving him downstairs so they could make his former room into an aviary, a project which, as yet, remained unfinished. Maybe he should’ve seen this coming. The pact. It had been there all along, after all, stuffed in some drawer. His whole life, it had

been there. Everything his parents had ever said to him, they'd been sitting on this. And those debates about the Hotel de Paris. Jesus. He couldn't locate his feelings. He knew it wasn't good, the pact. But in what sense wasn't it good? The fact that they were so comfortable with themselves didn't make it any easier to comprehend. If they had been sadder, paler, at least there would have been a certain internal logic. But this was another reality altogether, unlike his own.

"What is wrong with you?" Paul said, breaking their trance. "How do you expect me to respond to this?"

"Those are two very different questions, baby."

"Alright, let's start with the simpler one. How do you expect me to respond? What do you want from me?"

"Honestly," his mother started, sliding her chair down the table toward him, taking his hand in hers, "we don't know. You're your own person. We respect that. We've always respected that. We just want you to respond honestly. That's all. We're open to any sort of feedback."

"Feedback? Ok. Here's some feedback." Paul pulled his hand back from his mother and cracked his knuckles. "First off, I think this is bullshit. I don't think you're actually going to go through with it. I think this 'pact' is just a product of having no moral compass and too much free time. Second, fine. Do it. Kill yourselves. You're your own persons too and I wouldn't want to get in the way of your self-realization. Honestly, I wouldn't. And third, just for argument's sake, besides being absurd, do you have any idea how selfish this is?"



“Selfish?” his mother asked. “How is this selfish?”

“You have a kid. You can’t do this kind of shit when you have a kid. You can’t even think about it. And I’m not saying that because I’m scared or because I don’t think I can survive without you. I mean, I’ll be 28 in 2012 so I’m not worried about that. I’m just telling you so you know what other people are going to say, because you’ve never been very good at gauging other people. ‘How could they do that to their son?’ That’s what other people are going to say.”

“I know they will,” his mother acknowledged. “But, to be fair, when we made this pact, we didn’t have a son yet.”

“That’s right,” his father confirmed. “And we didn’t plan to either.”

“Jesus Christ,” Paul shouted. “Jesus Christ!”

“We love you, baby,” his mother said. “But we love each other more.”

“Jesus Christ!” Paul didn’t know what else to say. “Jesus Christ!”

“We didn’t plan that either,” his father said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs. “When we had you, my father told us to expect a little love loss. He said we wouldn’t be able to love anything as much as we loved you, even each other. But it never happened that way. Like your mother said, we love you a lot. We do. We just love each other more. We can’t help it.”

Paul felt a lifeless calm settle over him. He picked up the piece of stationary and read the pact one more time, lingering over the phrase “hand in hand.” Then he set it on the table and pushed it away and got up and walked in an uneven circle, ending up with his back to the dining room. He looked at his mother and father’s

wedding photo on the living room mantle. It was blurry from a distance but he was so familiar with the image (it had been on the mantle for as long as he'd been alive) that he might as well have been standing directly in front of it. The photo showed the front walk of St. Dominic's Church in Mayfair. His mother's family (who came from Kentucky) stood on one side. And his father's family (who'd been in Philadelphia since the Monroe administration before fanning out in recent decades as far as Northern California and Tampa Bay) stood on the other side. His great-grandfather Patrick Cronin, a former bootlegger who died before Paul was born, was there, slouched in a wheelchair in the foreground, as was his mother's aunt Vivienne, a pianist who'd once backed Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner at the Grand Ole Opry. They came from talented, charismatic stock, his parents, but had inherited none of it. Their lives were unambitious and uneventful, punctuated by lazy delusions and silly little dreams that were easily discarded. The aviary, for example. They knew nothing about work or achievement. Their steady income owed to stable investments made by the previous generations. The house was an inheritance too. The only worthwhile thing they had done in their whole lives was to find each other. And they knew it. They knew it even then. They stood at the center of the photo, halfway down the stairs, beneath a cascade of rice and laughter and wild shouting, and might as well've been alone on a porch swing in the Poconos. They were looking at each other with calm and absolute regard, as though at a mirror. And if you got close enough to the photo and stared at it for long enough, it became difficult to distinguish their faces and say who was who. Paul wondered now if that's when the pact had been

born, in that moment. Or if had been born even before that. He turned back to his parents. They looked at him, waiting for him to speak.

“If you love each other as much as you say you do,” Paul said in a soft voice, “why don’t you want to live as long as possible?”

“Because,” his father said, “we made a pact not to do that.”

“This is the kind of thing you understand or you don’t,” his mother added.

“I don’t understand,” Paul said.

“I wish we had a better explanation,” his mother continued. “I really do. But when it comes down to it, it’s simple. We are who we are and we want what we want and we can’t change that.”

“Of course you can,” Paul said. His mother and father shook their heads in unison, indicating they could not. Paul got up from the table and walked towards the stairs that led down to the basement. Before he reached the stairs, his mother said, “Take some time to think about it. We’ll talk again soon. But please don’t tell Maggie. We want to keep this in the family.” Paul turned back and looked at her and she smiled and nodded at the floor. “Sound travels in here. You know that. But don’t worry. We don’t care. It’s your life.” Paul knew she hadn’t meant it negatively, but in his current state of mind ‘it’s your life’ felt like a curse of damnation. He turned away, ashamed by how emotionally outmatched he was, and shuffled down the stairs quickly so they wouldn’t see his eyes go red.

Maggie had barely moved. She was slumped a little lower down against the headboard and held *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* so close to her face that it hid her eyes and exposed her breasts, which lay resting on her chest, flattened to their maximum circumference. Paul stood in the door and watched her. He was deeply attracted to her in moments like these, moments of quiet physical abstraction when her body was just a body, not a mind masquerading as one. Maybe if he did it now, he thought, it would be over before either of them knew what had happened. Just a big ol' cathartic fuck to clear the air. That's what he needed. That's what she needed. She wasn't a virgin, after all. He could be aggressive; it wouldn't hurt. And once he'd gotten one out of the way, it would be easier the next time, he assumed. Do it, he told himself. Do it now. Do it right now.

"So? Did you tell them?" Maggie asked from behind her book, then lowered it until her eyes were visible. Paul released the fists he'd been making and let his shoulders drop and sort of smiled.

"Yes, I told them," he said. "They didn't care."

"See? What did I say?" She put the book on the bedside table and moved to the edge of the bed. "What did they want to show you?"

"Nothing. Just a little— Just family stuff."

"Were you— Were you crying?" she asked, standing up and moving toward him, putting a hand on his cheek.

“What? No, no,” he said, pushing her hand away. “My mom had a bowl of hot peppers out because she’s making quesadillas for my dad and I thought they were sweet peppers and you know I’m not good with hot foods—”

“Peppers? Really? I heard shouting. I heard you shouting.”

“That wasn’t anything. Family stuff. Don’t even worry. You know my parents. They push my buttons without meaning to. Seriously, it’s nothing.”

“Well, I don’t believe you,” Maggie said. “But, I do know something that will make you feel better.” She jumped back into bed, turned over on her side, and patted the mattress. “C’mon. We don’t have to hide now. We’re like just another couple in the house.” Paul had a sudden vision of his parents having sex. He had never seen his parents having sex so it was all conjecture. The closest he’d ever come was finding a box of condoms in his dad’s dresser when he was looking for dress socks. He’d taken one for himself. It was still in his bedside table. His turned away from Maggie and sat in his desk chair. She sat up. “Paul? Seriously, what happened?”

“Can you imagine being married for thirty years?”

“C’mon,” Maggie scolded him. “You’re not going to tell me what happened but you are going to make me talk around it in circles. No way. I’m not doing that. Just tell me the truth. What did they want to show you?”

“What about kids? Do you want to have kids someday?”

“No! I don’t want to have kids! I’ve told you that before.”

“I know. I just thought maybe you’d changed your mind.”

“Changed my mind? When, in the four months that you’ve known me, have I given you any indication that I might be interested in committing to a traditional marriage or procreating? There are certain basic principles that I plan to have established before I leave high school so I can build the rest of my life on a stable ideological foundation, and the most central of those principles is that I am not built to be a wife or a mother. Now, tell me. What happened?”

“Nothing happened. And what’s the point in being so absolute? You’re sixteen. People change. There’s no point in saying that something is or isn’t going to happen. It’s the future. What do you know?”

“Are you seriously trying to shame me because I don’t want to have kids?” Maggie stood up from the bed and began to put on her pants, socks, and shoes as she continued. “That’s so fucking ridiculous. You realize how ridiculous that is, right? You don’t even want to have sex.”

“No,” Paul countered, grabbing her bra from the floor and handing it to her. “It’s not that I don’t want to have sex. It’s just, my parents are always home. They’re up there now. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“Oh yeah? What about last weekend?”

The previous weekend, Maggie had been hired to pet sit for her parents’ friends, the Silvers. She had invited Paul along because they would have the house to themselves. The Silvers lived in a two-story colonial in Narberth and owned 34 pets: 3 dogs, 8 cats, 7 birds, 4 rabbits, 11 fish, and 1 pig. The house had been dimly lit and smelled like a wet jungle. And the noise was incessant.

“All those pets,” Paul said, at last. “It was weird.”

“So let’s get a hotel room. My cousin works at the Bellevue. He can get us a discount. Or we would save up and go back to the Sheraton. That might be kind of nice, you know. Kind of nostalgic.”

“Honestly, Maggie, you don’t seem that crazy about the stuff we’re doing now. Maybe we should establish more of a base before—”

“I’m bored with the stuff we’re doing now!” Maggie clenched her jaw and swung her bra at Paul, hitting him on the shoulder. He looked at her unflinchingly. She seemed surprised by herself but didn’t apologize. Instead, she wound up and hit him again, and said, “Ok, I’m done.” Then she sat down on the bed and held the bra in her hands for a moment before pulling it over her shoulders and snapping it herself. “Be honest,” she said. “Are you attracted to me?”

“Of course I’m attracted to you.”

“Do you think—Do you think you might be gay?”

“Maggie, don’t be ridiculous. I know this is difficult. It’s not easy for me either. And I swear, it’ll happen. It’ll happen very soon. But don’t say shit just to annoy me. You might go too far and regret it later.”

“I wasn’t just saying shit,” Maggie continued, pushing her arms through her blouse and buttoning it. “You always spend so much time with Matt and you don’t really have any other guy friends so—”

“I got into Delaware,” Paul cut in. “I found out today.”

Maggie finished buttoning her shirt but didn't continue her thought. When she was done, she stood up from the bed, and looked at him and kissed him and said, in a formal tone of voice, "Congratulations."

"It's only an hour away without traffic."

"49 minutes, actually," she corrected him.

"Even better! And I have so much control over my course schedule and I was thinking of squeezing all my Friday classes into the morning so I could be back in Philly by the time you get out of school. And you said your parents might let you have the Audi next year so we could switch off weekends. We could even meet midway in Wilmington, give your hotel idea a try. I've heard Wilmington is a really underrated city. They have an art museum. It has a few Pre-Raphaelites. I mean, I don't really like the Pre-Raphaelites but still—We can make this work, Maggie. I'm serious. We can definitely make this work."

Paul looked at Maggie and smiled and nodded vigorously. He knew he wasn't being convincing. It was the way he said, "I'm serious." And then the way he said "definitely." And the way he was nodding. He didn't even know why he was trying to be convincing. He had never planned for their relationship to extend beyond the summer. It was only a high-school relationship.

"What about Swarthmore?" Maggie asked.

"I know, I know. But the thing is, I got a partial scholarship from Delaware. And I don't even know if I'll get into Swarthmore. It's competitive."



“It’s competitive for a reason.” Maggie let her eyes linger on Paul after she said this, then smoothed out her shirt. A warm breeze came through the window and kicked up a few papers on his desk. The breeze felt good but Maggie walked over to the window and shut it and wiped her hands together. Whenever she got fully dressed, she always had to do things. “Swarthmore is the third best liberal arts college in the country,” she continued. “And I’m not just pushing it on you because I want you to be closer to home. I’m not clingy. You know I’m not clingy. It’s just a flat out good school. It’s almost a great school.”

“I don’t think I want to go to a liberal arts college, though.”

“Why not?” she said derisively. “Are you going to be a scientist? Are you going to be a fucking scientist, Paul?” She laughed and shook her head as she grabbed her book from the bedside table and stuck it under arm and tossed her bag over her shoulder, then looked around to see if she’d left anything in the room. Paul watched her with growing contempt. He didn’t know why the idea of him being a scientist was so funny. He was in AP Physics and he wasn’t the best student but he did pretty well. He thought about saying something but there didn’t seem to be a point. Any hope he had of being the authoritative one in the relationship was dying before his eyes and all he could do was let it die. He had no desire to defend himself anymore, to argue, to demonstrate competency. If they continued to see each other, his only driving impulse would be to hurt her.

“Seriously, though,” Maggie said, after inspecting the room to her satisfaction, “what are you thinking about majoring in? What do you want to do?”

“That’s a big question.” Paul looked at her flatly. She was already at the door when she met his eyes again; but his expression made her stop with her hand on the doorknob and wait for him to continue. “And I don’t want to tackle any big questions right now because I think we’re breaking up.”

“What?” she said. “Are you serious?”

“You feel it too. I know you do. You know it’s over.”

“Don’t tell me what I know. You don’t know what I know.”

“Name one thing you like about me. Off the top of your head.”

“I like your eyes. I like your voice. I like your commitment to extracurricular activities. I like your political leanings. I like the things you talk about when you smoke weed. I like your laugh. I like the clothes that you wear to school. I like the movies you like. I like your work ethic. I like how gently you take splinters out of me. I like your name. I like the way you give oral sex and I assume I’ll like the way you have actual sex. I’m not the indecisive one.” Maggie took a step toward him. “Name one thing you like about me.”

Paul opened his mouth to respond, then stopped. He had a list. He’d even written it down a few weeks prior, during a free writing exercise in AP English. But he was afraid that if he trotted it out now he might talk himself into staying with her. It started with her breasts. Ended with her singing voice. He’d email it to her in a month. He was good at writing conciliatory emails. She tolerated the silence for longer than he thought she would. At least a minute.

“Fine,” she said, at last. “It’s over.”

Maggie walked quickly up the stairs to the ground floor. Paul followed behind. When they got to the front door, Paul's parents called to them from the living room. Maggie turned and looked at Paul, then marched into the living room. Paul followed after her, saying, "Wait, let me," but when they got there, it was Paul's mom who spoke first. Apparently sensing that something was troubling Maggie, she said, holding one hand out, "I understand it might not make sense. But it's our decision. It has nothing to do with Paul, or you." Behind her, Paul's father muted the television and nodded his assent. "What?" Maggie asked. "I didn't—," Paul started. "You didn't tell her?" his mother cut in. "No, of course I didn't tell her." Maggie whipped her head back and forth between Paul and Paul's mother before saying, almost screaming, "What? Tell me what? What happened?" No one responded. She made an angry grin and stuck up her middle finger in general and threw it around the room. "Fuck you all then. Fuck this weird fucking family. I don't care. I really don't." She walked towards the door but turned back one last time. "Diane, quick question. At any point tonight, did you make quesadillas for Terry?" Paul's mother looked at Paul's father; he shook his head "no." Paul's mother turned back to Maggie, shook her head "no." Maggie looked at Paul. "Fuck you most of all."

After Maggie left, Paul went to the living room and turned off the lights and looked through the curtains at her car, parked down the road. She sat in the driver's seat for about five minutes before turning on the ignition; she waited another five before turning on the headlights and driving away. Paul waited for the sound of her car to disappear before returning to the living room.

“I’m going out,” Paul said to his parents, who had resumed watching their television show. “I don’t know when I’ll be back.” His parents responded with loose assent and said they were available to talk if he wanted to but that it was ok if he didn’t because his life was his own. Paul went to the phone in the kitchen and dialed Matt’s pager and went and sat in the driveway. He took several deep breaths and let the night air fill his lungs. He couldn’t wait to be in Matt’s car.

Paul met Matt Savitz in the summer between seventh and eighth grade when they both ended up playing for St. Denis (“The Saints”) in Region 32 of the Catholic Youth Organization Boys Basketball League. Neither of their families attended services at St. Denis (or even lived within the parish) but the CYO had long since relaxed its stance on parish solidarity in favor of filling out rosters, particularly when it came to families, like the Cronins and the Savitzes, who registered after the regular deadline. Not that Paul or Matt really cared when they ended up as the only two kids playing for St. Denis who didn’t live within a one mile radius of the church. In their own ways, they had both started to harbor feelings of superiority that had nothing to do with team sports and it was this, more than their shared outsider status, that drew them into each other’s orbit.

Matt brought a black marker to the first game of the season and spent his ample minutes on the bench sketching tattoo designs on his hands, arms, and thighs. Paul sat beside him for most of the game and kicked himself for not having thought of something similar. The next game, Paul brought a pack of cards stuffed in his

shorts so he could work on his sleight of hand. It was an away game at St. Aloysius and the sidelines were so cramped that Paul ended up hitting his elbow against the wall and spilling the cards on the court during a crucial possession in the fourth quarter. The ref had to stop the game while Paul got down on his hands and knees and picked them up. Without saying anything, Matt got down beside him to help. Paul muttered “thank you” and the two kids picked up the cards together in a quick, workmanlike manner as though it was their purpose for being there in the first place. After play had resumed, Matt asked Paul if he’d dropped the cards on purpose. Paul said that he had. Matt laughed and gave him a tattoo of a gun.

After that, they intentionally screwed around at practice and suffered minor, unverifiable injuries to guarantee that they would have the maximum amount of time during games to sit at the end of the bench and talk to each other. Their earliest conversations consisted of heckling the players they hated most, though never loud enough for anyone but themselves to hear. They targeted the gawky, the weak, the dumb. But mostly, they targeted the overachievers. The point guards who called plays on every possession. “This is rec league, dude. Nobody knows what ‘Michigan Strong’ means.” The shooters with elaborate free throw rituals. “You’re wasting everybody’s time. You look stupid and you’re wasting everybody’s time.” The centers who took charges. “What? Did you seriously just take a charge? This is rec league, dude.” Eventually they lost interest in heckling and transitioned into more serious topics. Computer hacking. How the mafia worked. Types of drugs. Making money in the stock market. How to juggle multiple girlfriends at the same time. Most

of Paul's information on these topics came from books and movies. Most of Matt's came from his private intuitions about human behavior.

The following year, Matt's mom got remarried to a plastic surgeon with a four-story house in Wynnewood and Matt ended up attending the same private high school as Paul. In the interim, Paul had grown a few inches and developed a more intellectual persona, carrying around second-hand copies of *Gödel, Escher, Bach* and *The Gulag Archipelago*, and openly stating ardent opinions about the long-term costs of American interventionism; Matt, meanwhile, had put on a few pounds and started habitually wearing a backwards Phillies cap, keeping his head tilted at a slightly upward angle and projecting a demeanor that one of his teachers described as "remotely thuggish" in a progress report. Nevertheless, Paul and Matt found it easy to pick up where they'd left off, retreating to remote corners of campus before school, between periods, after school to continue the conversations they'd begun on the St. Denis bench. And though, at times, they treated each other with the wariness of rivals, the stronger impulse was of a growing commensurateness, something more like a partnership than a friendship. They had no doubt they would be of use to each other in the future. And above all, being around each other taught them to take surface lightly. Paul's books. Matt's swagger. It was just two different languages. And like any languages, when you translated from one to the other, they ended up saying the same thing. Still, Paul and Matt didn't entirely discount each other's personas; they made use of them when convenient. Saying he was friends with Matt made Paul look like less of a pussy. And saying he was friends with Paul made Matt

look like less of a dummy. Not that Paul thought of himself a pussy or Matt thought of himself as a dummy. But certain things weren't self-evident. They required signs, badges. And in this way, Paul and Matt wore each other proudly.

At the beginning of their senior year they even collaborated on a business endeavor that, for a few months, made them the most talked-about kids in school. It came to Matt one morning as he was driving in circles through the residential blocks that surrounded the campus, searching for a sliver of curb space because he hadn't scored a spot in the fall quarter parking lottery. "It's not our fault that we're late every day," he said to Paul, who was seated beside him. "This wouldn't be a problem if they had fucking valet parking." Matt had experienced valet parking for the first time the previous weekend when his stepdad took him and his mom to dinner downtown at Buddaken, and he'd been referencing the experience ever since. Paul liked the idea and decided to take it to the next level, scheduling a meeting with the Headmaster and preparing a formidable PowerPoint presentation. Matt took it to the next level after that, coming up with a brand name, YoungLux Valet Services, and filing for a trademark. The plan was to hire Seniors who didn't have first period class to be valets, excluding any applicants with subpar driving records and prioritizing students on scholarship, assuming they would be more grateful for the opportunity to make some extra bucks, not to mention the opportunity to get behind the wheel of a rich kid's Escalade. The Headmaster was so impressed with Paul and Matt's initiative that he made YoungLux Valet Services the subject of his keynote address at the annual Alumni Fundraiser Gala, championing the rise of what he called an

“entrepreneurial class” at the school that was reenergizing the culture by providing an exciting alternative to the old dichotomy between “legacy class” and “scholarship class” students. And although Paul and Matt couldn’t figure out a way to make YoungLux profitable (losing \$25/week on average), they had no problem making the business popular; some days the line at the valet stand snaked out of the school parking lot and onto Montgomery Avenue. But on the Friday before Holiday Break, one of their drivers flipped a Dodge Durango in a cul-de-sac while trying to do a hairpin 180, totaling the vehicle and breaking a few ribs. The Headmaster revoked YoungLux’s honorary “business permit” without so much as a conversation. By that point, however, Paul had already made the experience the fulcrum of his college essay, taking full credit for the rise of YoungLux and excluding any mention of Matt, who was applying to schools that didn’t require essays as part of the admissions process. Matt said they should fight the Headmaster’s decision, pointing out that oil companies didn’t get shut down after one tanker spill, airlines after one hijacking. But Paul urged his friend to take YoungLux for what it was, a good start, and move on to bigger and better things.

Matt pulled his black Mitsubishi Eclipse GT to a stop at the intersection of City Avenue and Lancaster Avenue, the line that separated the city from the suburbs, and took a joint from behind his ear and lit it and hit it and passed it to Paul, who hit it but not for nearly as long and coughed and passed it back to Matt, at which point the light turned green.



“You hold it,” Matt said, pushing the Eclipse to 20mph before it cleared the intersection, then leveling it out at 60mph.

“Ok,” Paul said, holding the joint down between his legs and cracking his window and steering the smoke outside with his free hand, trying to be subtle in case anybody saw. It made him nervous to have drugs in his possession indefinitely, but he didn’t want to give Matt any reason to doubt his composure in moments like these. When Matt picked him up an hour earlier, he was on his way to West Philly to buy an ounce of weed and two dozen Adderall from his dealer Louis, a bearded Libertarian with a BS in Engineering who lived in an 19<sup>th</sup>-century Victorian house on Baltimore Avenue with five other recent Drexel graduates, three of whom were sitting on a ring of sofas in the front room when Matt and Paul entered, their faces lit by open laptops. Louis called from upstairs. Matt bounded up after the voice as Paul followed behind. It was the first time Paul had been in Louis’s house, although he’d heard plenty about him; he took it slow.

There wasn’t much light in the house. But there were at least three different triphop songs playing from at least three different directions. And there was a dog barking. And somebody having sex, or laughing, or choking. And a television, and a video game in progress. The way the confluence of sounds hit his senses, Paul thought the house might be endless, breaking off from the front into unseen hallways that spun in endless circles into endless rooms.

Matt grabbed Paul by the shoulder and pulled him into Louis’ bedroom, which had a high ceiling and ornate molding around the edges and stacks of books

against the wall—Hayek, Friedman, Proudhon, Thoreau—and a homemade desk covered with drugs and a stack of posters for a public debate at The Ethical Society about the merits of legalizing marijuana.

“One of my old professors is going to be on the panel,” Louis said, when he saw Paul looking at the posters. “That dude has the most reasonable arguments for legalization you’ve ever heard. He could persuade fucking Rick Santorum, I swear. You should seriously check it out.”

“Are you in support of legalization?” Paul asked.

“Are you serious?” Louis laughed. “Of course, man.”

“I just thought that dealers were generally opposed to it. Won’t it kill your market overnight?” Paul knew there were good arguments on both sides of this issue but he pretended not to know and let Louis preach. Paul intended to get as much out of this experience as possible. He glanced at Matt to see if he was listening. He wasn’t. Not closely, at least. Matt was slumped in a camping chair in the corner, studying a glass water bong shaped like a shotgun; he put the bong in his mouth and pretended to shoot himself in the head. Matt had been getting more and more into drugs since the dissolution of YoungLux and Paul couldn’t be happier about it because it allowed him to tag along into rooms like this one. Paul nodded as Louis transitioned from the legalization of marijuana to the fallacy of gun control laws. Whatever the *Zeitgeist* was, Paul thought, it had something to do with this room. Not exclusively, of course. But there would be other rooms. Paul picked up Louis’s copy of *Road to Serfdom* and flipped through. There were exclamation points on several

pages and little sketches of dollar signs and bullets with smiley faces. Louis asked Paul if he was familiar with Hayek and Paul nodded and said something about how fascism could grow from the best intentions and Louis slapped his knee and shouted “Exactly! That book, man. I couldn’t live without that book.” Paul nodded again; he’d read a lot of books for his age, but he’d never read a book he couldn’t live without. The trick, he thought, was to accumulate without committing, to have enough at your disposal to be inside and outside of every conversation at once. Matt said it was time to go. Paul watched him pay for the drugs with a handful of bills, then took one last long look at Louis’s room. He told himself he had to get smarter. Then he told himself he was smart already, smarter than anybody else he knew. He didn’t know why he let himself get so worked up by people like Maggie and his mom and his dad with all their bullshit when there was this whole world of fearless possibility constantly in motion around him that he had no problem keeping pace with. He wished he could go to Delaware tomorrow. Everything would fall into place in Delaware. It felt good to think that.

But later, as the Eclipse crossed over City Avenue for the second time that night and wound through the curling chiaroscuro streets that constituted his stomping grounds, past outdoor malls and historic squares and vacant train stations, Paul felt a stroke of panic. He’d felt it before. The fear of futility. The awareness of some permanent falsehood that would outlive him. He could name it but he couldn’t avoid it and he knew it was coming across in his face and he didn’t want Matt to think the weed was getting to him like it had in the past but he also couldn’t bring up

abstractions and hope for empathy. There were certain limits to their friendship and that was one of them. But he really, really didn't want Matt to think that the weed was getting to him so instead he took a hit and spit out the first easy explanation for his behavior that came to mind.

"I broke up with Maggie."

"Oh shit, man," Matt said, reaching out and taking the joint from him as a kind of consolation. "I thought you looked upset. It's for the best, though, right? You can't go to college with a high school girlfriend."

"No, of course not," Paul conceded.

"And you said Maggie wasn't good at sex, right?"

Paul nodded and murmured assent. He had said that.

"So? Sounds like a fucking win to me," Matt concluded, before taking a long hit with his free hand. "It's cashed," he said, then rubbed out the joint in the ashtray. They didn't speak for a few minutes after that, until Matt said, "We can listen to something else if you want." For most of the night the stereo had been cycling at random through one of Matt's mix CDs: Juvenile, Tupac, Bone-Thugs-n-Harmony, Silkk the Shocker, DMX. Matt hit pause as he flipped through the CD organizer strapped to his visor, keeping half an eye on the street. "What about that Radiohead you gave me? Shit sounds good when you're high." Paul had never concealed the fact that Radiohead was his favorite band and he knew Kid A would make perfect sense at the moment but he was in no mood to be appeased and he pushed play on the

stereo and let the mix resume. "I'm cool with this," Paul said. "Alright," Matt said. But the way he said made Paul sit up in his seat and crack his knuckles.

"Have I ever told you that I come from a line of criminals?"

"What, for real?" Matt asked, laughing. "Organized crime? I fucking knew your parents were shady. Is that how they make their money?"

"My parents?" Paul stopped and thought about his parents. "I'm not talking about my parents. I don't want to talk about my parents."

"What? You said your 'line,' didn't you? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about my great-grandfather. My dad's dad's dad. Patrick Cronin. He was a bootlegger in Philly in the 20s. You know, Prohibition—"

"Yeah, I know about Prohibition," Matt cut in. "I know all about Prohibition. What did he do? Distill? Deliver? Enforce? I know all about it."

"He was more of a middle man. He was crazy, though." Paul stopped and laughed and wiped his eyes. He could feel himself getting really high. "He had so many stories. He was such a hustler. He used to drive out to Lancaster County in the middle of the night with one of those old-time delivery trucks, and it would be really quiet and empty out there on the farms because all the Amish people would go to bed at six o'clock so they'd be fast asleep by midnight. And he would just fucking steal all their corn." Paul started laughing, couldn't stop. Matt started laughing too. "I'm serious," Paul continued, after collecting himself. "He would just steal all their fucking corn." Paul started laughing again, which got Matt going so hard he had to pull the car over in an empty Wachovia parking lot because he couldn't see straight.

Matt laughed until he coughed. Paul laughed until his stomach hurt, then he caught his breath and finished his story. "I'm serious, though. He was fucking smart, my grandfather. Because, here's what he would do, he would take all the corn back to Philly and the whisky distillers would pay top dollar for it because they could get, like, four gallons of whiskey out of each bushel. Four gallons out of each bushel! I mean, what a fucking commodity corn was back then. You know what I mean? It's all about knowing about commodities."

"Commodities, commodities, right, right," Matt echoed, closing his eyes and leaning back in his seat.

"And I kind of feel bad for the Amish but it's such a great fucking story and he's my grandfather and what are you going to do?" Paul was silent for a moment. Matt looked like he might be asleep. Paul studied him out of the corner of his eye; his friend had a thick-featured profile that became sort of timeless when it wasn't active. Like a stone bust. He felt safe around Matt. He felt in constant completion with Matt. He felt a simple bond with Matt. He felt stalled around Matt lately, stunted, off track. He wondered if their differences had become too pronounced. He wondered if they would be friends a year from now. It was easy for Paul to imagine what Matt would be like in a year. It was impossible for Paul to imagine what he himself would be like in a year. Still, he felt safe around Matt. And that wasn't cheap, when there were so many things that scared the shit out of him if he was being honest, so many thoughts that were dark and bottomless, so many people that made him sick to his stomach and made him wonder whether it was really worth it when there was so little

possibility for understanding. Paul could never tell Matt how much their friendship meant to him and he could never ask for pity or for sentiment; but in Matt's presence, in silence, in secret, he leaned on him and felt lighter.

"I got into Delaware," Paul said, at last. "I'll probably go."

"That's great, man," Matt said, without opening his eyes.

"What about you? Have you heard back from anywhere yet?"

"Got put on the waiting list at Rosemont, but you know about that already."

Matt opened his eyes, looked out the front window for a long second, and closed them again. "Other than that, no, nothing."

Paul straightened in his seat and said something about how Matt would most likely get into Rosemont once everything was said and done, and that he shouldn't be worried. Matt said he wasn't worried. Paul said "ok" and turned and looked out the passenger side window at Wachovia; there were posters in the bank windows that showed families seated around small dinner tables and elderly people seated around small dinner tables and a single man and his checkbook seated around a small dinner table, under slogans like "Financial Solutions for a Worry-Free Future" and "Plan Now, Succeed Later." Paul looked back at Matt, at his heavy stone features, and wondered if he would make it, or if YoungLux would be the last thing he ever did that wasn't crippled by nepotism or routine. Matt was tough; he was direct; he was whipsmart when it counted; but if anything, all that was a disadvantage these days. Matt would have been better off in the age of Prohibition. He would have been a riser back then. But now, he got put on waiting lists. It was unjust. It was shameful.

Paul cleared his throat and decided to tell Matt every one of his own flaws and fears, to drown Matt in weakness and confuse all his impulses until something new swam out of him. Something new. Paul decided to tell Matt that he was a virgin. He decided to tell Matt that he was a liar and coward. He decided to tell Matt that his parents were going to kill themselves without a single regret. But instead Paul said, simply: "I don't want to go home tonight."

Matt opened his eyes and grunted and said he didn't want to go home either. But neither of them knew where to go instead so they just drove around in circles without talking. Eventually, Matt said he was hungry and suggested they hit up the Havertown Wawa for some hoagies and snacks and drinks. Paul said he couldn't think of anything else better to do. The mood between them had grown more casual, more disposable. Paul felt embarrassed about the things he had almost said to Matt in the Wachovia parking lot. Matt could fend for himself. And if he couldn't, well, that was life, wasn't it? Paul made a resolution that he would stop thinking so much and stop being so reckless with his emotions. He needed to have all his mental shit in order before he went to Delaware. He couldn't still be figuring out how to regulate himself when he got to college; by then, it would be too late. But it was so hard to clear your mind after you'd spent all night thinking.

Paul rolled down the window and stuck his head out as Matt turned the Eclipse onto Eagle Road and slowed to about 40mph so the breeze coming in wasn't so sharp against their skin. On either side of the road, a sprawling church cemetery spread out towards the horizon; Paul could make out the shapes of tombstones and



the cenotaphs in the darkness. The cemetery was familiar to him; he looked ahead and sure enough saw the long, squat stone church and the four-sided stone crucifix on the roof and the gated steps where his dad used to drop him three nights a week with his high-top Reeboks slung over his shoulder.

“Holy shit,” Paul shouted into the car, “St. Denis!”

“Yeah,” Matt shouted back at him, “the old days!”

“Hey, hold up, hold up,” Paul said, as they passed by the front of the church, straining to read the sign, “Pull over, pull over.”

“Why?” Matt asked. “I’m hungry.”

“Just pull over. I got to do something.”

Matt pulled the Eclipse down a side street, parked against the curb. Paul got out and ran back towards the front of the church as Matt swallowed one of the Adderall and stuck the pill bottle in his pocket and followed him. Paul was standing in front of the sign, staring at it in disbelief. It was more or less a standard church sign, backlit, with plastic black letters squeezed into rows. It said, *For god so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. – John 3:16.* Paul walked around the sign and examined it closely, banging his palm against the frame and shaking the padlock to see how tight it was.

“What are you doing?” Matt asked.

“Look at this,” Paul said, pointing at the sign. “Doesn’t this piss you off?”

“What, the sign? The Bible? What?”

“Whoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life,” Paul read, in a loud oratorical voice before turning to Matt and widening his eyes and shaking his head. “Nope. That’s not true.”

“So it’s not true. So what? Let’s go.”

“It’s not true, Matt! You say it’s not true. I say it’s not true. And yet, these fuckers can just put it on a sign all day and all night and nobody can stop them. It’s a sign! It’s supposed to mean something! This is a lie!”

“They don’t think it’s a lie, though.”

“I don’t care. People shouldn’t be allowed to put whatever they want on signs. They can think whatever they want, sure. But signs are different. There should be higher standards for signs.” Matt shrugged. Paul stepped back a few feet and looked up the front of the church towards the top. “I don’t know if you remember but I always used to get to practice first. My dad would drop me off right here, on these steps, and he’d always find some excuse to be early. Now, I think it was because he didn’t want to see any of the other parents because he was afraid to talk to people his own age. I don’t know. I used to sit out here for a solid ten, fifteen minutes by myself before anyone else showed up. And I used to read whatever was written on this sign, because I wouldn’t have anything else to read. It was always some Bible verse or something that sounded like a Bible verse or some general announcement about vacation bible school. Anyway, while I was sitting here, waiting, I would rearrange the letters on the sign in my head so they spelled out different words, different sentences. And I would try to come up with the dirtiest thing I could come

up with. I got pretty good at it. I wish I could— I can't remember any of the good ones—They were really dirty." Matt laughed a little. Paul stared at him and asked, "Do you still have those tools in your car?"

For his previous birthday, Matt's stepdad had given him a starter set of tools that were meant to address any sort of roadside emergency and told him to put the tools in his trunk and leave them there just in case. Jumper cables. Flares. Drill with about two dozen bits. Small hammer. Larger hammer. Paul took the larger hammer out of the box and walked back towards the St. Denis sign. Matt followed behind, without raising any concerns. Paul swung the hammer at the padlock about ten times to no effect before Matt took the hammer and swung it once and broke the padlock in two, loudly.

There were 117 letters (including the citation) in John 3:16. Paul laid the letters end to end on the grassy patch at the base of the sign and walked around them in a half-circle, putting his hand to his mouth and narrowing his brow in concentration. Little words jumped out at him immediately. FLOG. GOLF. FISH. YELLOW. DILDO. But nothing in the way of a coherent dirty joke or a cryptic threat or even a complete sentence. "Just hold on, I'll get it, I'll get it," Paul said to Matt, who rubbed his stomach and shrugged. After another minute, Paul still hadn't found a decent rearrangement. He knelt down and moved the letters around, trying to conjure something so filthy it would make him puke. But nothing came to him. Matt said they should just go. Paul insisted on staying. Matt walked up and stood behind his shoulder and looked down at the letters.

“I see something,” Matt said after a minute. “Move away.”

Matt knelt down and grabbed two handfuls of the letters and rearranged them until they spelled, *God is a wet vagina*. Matt looked at what he'd done and nodded with pride. Paul stood over him and nodded too and admitted that it was perfect. Matt pulled out the Adderall bottle and shook it and said, “Amazing what you can accomplish with the right kind of drugs.” Paul agreed, but when he started to put the new arrangement of letters back on the sign, Matt stopped him and said that he should be the one to do it. He had solved the problem and he should be the one to finish the job because it was only fair that way. Paul conceded and left Matt to his work and picked up the leftover letters and carried them behind St. Denis to where the dumpsters were. Before throwing them away, however, he set them on the asphalt beside the dumpster and tried to make something out of them. But the best he could come up with was *Get boner food son* and that didn't make any sense. He threw the letters into the dumpster in frustration and started back towards the front of the church. There was a breeze sweeping over the cemetery and it hit him and sunk into his eyes and nose and ears; he put his hand over his face and looked up at the sky and made out a star or two through the streetlight glare. It was good, he told himself. It was good that he and Matt had done this. It was something for them to remember; and for it to happen at St. Denis, that added a nice poetic twist to the whole thing. Paul let out a little roar of satisfaction as he turned the corner toward the front of the church and was immediately blinded by the red flashing light of a police cruiser and the pointed glare of a flashlight and the sound of a man

yelling in his direction. He panicked and turned to run when another police cruiser pulled up behind him onto the front lawn of the church and a shadowy figure jumped out and wrestled him to the ground.

When Paul regained full control of his senses, he found himself sitting on the ground with his back against the stone wall of the church and his hands cuffed together behind him. He wanted to yell Matt's name but decided it was probably a bad idea to start yelling things when you were handcuffed. Who knew if these guys were even real cops, he thought. No, no, he corrected himself, that's dumb. They're definitely cops. He could see both of them huddled together and talking about fifty yards away. They had cop uniforms and they drove cop cars. Clear your head, he told himself. Try not to seem high. Take stock of the situation. Remember all the basic facts about yourself so you don't stumble over them when asked and seem like you're lying because that's a slippery slope.

It was difficult for Paul to see the church sign from the angle at which he was sitting but after positioning his shoulders in a way so as to gain some leverage, he pushed himself off the wall and craned his neck to the side and was able to catch a quick glance of the sign before falling back against the wall. The clear plastic cover was still open and there was a single row of black letters spelling out *God is a wet vagina* against the bright white backdrop. It wasn't as funny as he had imagined it would be. Of course, much of that had to do with context. The context of the cops, sure. But the context of the sign too. Signs that size were built for at least two lines of text. At least. *God is a wet vagina* looked stark, almost haunting in the middle of all

that white space. It looked like the final realization of a dying man, or a defeated civilization. It looked sad. Paul pushed himself off the wall again and looked for Matt, spotting the red flash of his Phillies cap on the opposite side of the sign; it appeared that Matt was sitting on the ground too, facing in the opposite direction from Paul. How much had happened already, Paul wondered, in terms of questions and answers and accusations. How much was going to happen from here on out. He had never been so thoroughly at the mercy of the law before.

The cops turned and looked at Paul and he stopped moving and straightened his back. One of the cops was a little older, maybe about fifty, and the other cop was a little younger, maybe about thirty. Neither of them looked to be in any kind of rush as they chatted easily, pointing at Paul, pointing at Matt. Eventually, the older cop approached Paul, hiking up his pants and kneeling down.

“Alright, son,” he said, taking out a pad of paper and pen. “I’m going to ask you a few questions and I need you to tell me the truth, alright?”

Paul pursed his lips and nodded his head.

“I can’t write down that you nodded,” the cop continued. “I need verbal answers and I need them spoken clearly. Can you speak clearly?”

“Yes,” Paul said. “I can speak clearly and I understand what you’re saying and I’ll tell you the truth about whatever you want to know.”

“That’s good. Now’s let’s start with the easy stuff. What’s your name, your age, and your home address?”

“My name is Paul Cronin. I’m eighteen years old. And I live at 7137 Wayne Avenue, Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, 19082. And my parents’ names are Theodore and Diane Cronin. And I— I’m sorry, I can’t remember what else you need to know. I’m a little nervous, as you can imagine. Not because I’m guilty of anything but because this is an inherently nerve-wracking kind of situation. I’m handcuffed and you’re a police officer and it’s very late.”

“You’re doing fine,” the cop said. “Just take it easy.”

“Thank you for saying that. It means a lot to know that you don’t get off on being menacing or anything like that. This is the first time I’ve had a major run-in with the police so I don’t really have a frame of reference.”

“You’re a smart kid, aren’t you?” the cop asked, not as a question, but as an observation. “Eighteen years old too. You must be about ready to go off to college. Where are you going? Harvard? Princeton?”

“University of Delaware. Most likely.”

“Fighting Blue Hens!” the cop exclaimed, laughing a little. “Yeah, that’s a good school. Always wondered what a blue hen was, though. Do you know? I bet they tell you when you get in. Go on, what’s a blue hen?”

Paul opened his mouth to respond then stopped and made a thinking sound. Can I say it’s a hen that’s blue, he wondered. No, that’s a smartass answer. But what other answer was there? The cop continued to look at him, waiting for him to respond. At last, Paul said, “I think it’s a regional species.”

“Right, right,” the cop said, nodding and writing something down on the pad. Paul thought about qualifying his answer with “then again, I don’t know for sure,” but he didn’t want to introduce an extra level of uncertainty into the conversation so he stayed quiet. “Alright, Paul,” the cop went on, “let’s get down to business. We caught your friend Matt over there red-handed defacing church property. Pretty serious offense. We also got him on breaking and entering, general vandalism, and trespassing. And we found a bottle of prescription meds on him that I’m going to guess he doesn’t have a prescription for, plus some marijuana in his car. Is there anything else we should know about?”

Paul couldn’t see Matt from the position he was in and he didn’t want to make any sudden movements. He couldn’t believe how quickly they’d gone from being free and alone to being fucked. Matt more so. Paul couldn’t tell if the cop was manipulating him, but it sounded like he might be able to gradually extricate himself from the situation over the next few minutes. The cop repeated the question, “Is there anything else we should know about?” And Paul couldn’t think of anything else to say besides “no,” so he said, “No, sir.”

“And I’m going to guess that you just came along for the ride, is that right? Little bit of thrill seeking with badass Matt but then you got in over your head and didn’t know how to say stop. That about right?”

Paul didn’t know what to say to this. The cop smiled and put his hand up and said, “It’s ok. You don’t have to answer that. I’m just putting the pieces together for myself more than anything. We’ve already got the facts we need and we’re willing to



let you off with just a trespassing citation, because, let's be honest, that's all you deserve, but in order to do that, we're going to need you to come down to the station and make an official statement that says that Matt was the one who defaced the sign and he did so intentionally and so on. Basic stuff."

Paul could tell what this looked like from a distance. It looked like a moral dilemma. It looked like a test of loyalty, the big moment when he stood up for his friend or betrayed him for the sake of self-interest. And maybe that's what it was. But being in the moment, it didn't feel like that at all. It felt like a simple equation with a single choice. The cop knew all he needed to know. Everything he said was more or less true. Everything except the fact that defacing the sign was Paul's idea, as well as the fact that Matt never would have stopped if Paul hadn't insisted. But what was that? That was nothing. That was context. Still, Paul sat in silence, unable to find the impulse to speak.

"Alright, Paul," the cop said. "I've been doing this for a long time and I know what you're going through. Believe me I do. But let me speak frankly because I know you're a smart kid and I know you don't need the dumb down. If you don't cooperate with us on this, we're going to arrest you for all the same things we're arresting Matt for. We won't have a choice. And I personally can't speak for the Admissions Department down there at Delaware, but if I heard that one of my incoming students left that blasphemy," the cop pointed at the sign, "on the outside of a Catholic church, I wouldn't be too confident about his worthiness as a student, not to

mention his integrity. I'd say, 'that doesn't sound like a true Blue Hen to me.' Hey, 'true blue,' 'true Blue Hen,' that's good. You can use that if you want."

"Please stop, sir," Paul said, at last. He still didn't think this qualified as a proper moral dilemma, but he couldn't deny that he was making a choice solely in the name of survival. He was choosing to survive rather than to fall on his sword or go up in flames. And there should've been a sense, at the very least, of physical relief, but he couldn't locate it. He realized, then, that there was no honor in survival. But no easy alternative either. "Ok. I'll cooperate."

Paul and Matt rode to the Haverford Township police station in separate cars, Paul with the older cop and Matt with the younger cop. When they arrived, Matt was taken into the back for booking and Paul was taken into a small side room, not an interrogation room like the kind he was familiar with from police procedurals but more like a secretary's office that was unoccupied, and told to wait. Sometime later, the older cop entered the room and asked Paul to confirm some basic statements about the events that had taken place, more or less what they had already discussed at the church, and then the cop handed him a pen and asked for his signature at the bottom of the official report.

"What will happen to Matt?" Paul asked, after signing his name.

"He can tell you all about it tomorrow," the cop said, sliding the official report into a manila folder and standing up, "if he still talks to you." The cop's manner had changed; his face was cold and firm. Nodding at a phone on the desk, he told Paul to call his parents to come pick him up.

“It’s almost 3am,” Paul said, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Could I have the number for a taxi instead?”

“Are you fucking kidding, kid?”

When Paul’s dad arrived, about half an hour later, the older cop explained the circumstances, his manner avuncular again. He said that because Paul was only an accessory and not the primary culprit, he would be receiving a trespassing citation, which came with a \$100 fine payable within thirty days. Paul’s dad, who was clad in a faded green beanie and a black trench coat and cotton pajamas, nodded eagerly at everything the older cop said and echoed with “okay, okay, sure, sure.” The older cop added that just because Paul was getting off with a citation that didn’t alter the severity of the crime in which he was involved and that Paul’s father should have a serious conversation with Paul about the sanctity of private property and religious freedom and so forth. Paul’s father agreed that those were important concepts and led Paul out of the station. Before the door swung close behind him, Paul looked back and saw the older cop watching him, and grimacing.

“Oh man,” Paul’s father said, as soon as the police department disappeared from the rear view mirror, “that was nerve-wracking, wasn’t it?” He shook his head from side to side and exhaled and seemed genuinely distressed. “When you called and said you were at the police department, your mother thought it might have something to do with what we talked about earlier. But I told her you wouldn’t say anything about that. I’m glad I was right.”

“Yeah, dad,” Paul said, looking out the window as they passed by St. Denis. The sign was empty and unlit. “Believe it or not, I’ve got other things in my life to deal with than your and mom’s shit.”

“But just to be clear,” his father continued. “You can’t— You’re not going to tell anyone about that, right?”

“No!” Paul shouted. “I’m not going tell! Who would I tell? Nobody wants to hear about you. Nobody cares.”

“Ok, that’s good,” Paul’s dad said, in the same gentle tone of voice that he said pretty much everything. “Because it would really hurt your mother if anybody else found out. That’s part of it for her.”

They rode on in silence for another few minutes. The streets were empty and the only sound that could be heard was Paul’s father humming and singing scattered lyrics to classic rock radio. First “Hungry Heart.” And then, after a brief commercial break, “Sultans of Swing.” Paul turned and looked at his father and wondered how he’d describe him to his friends at college next year. “He’s the kind of guy that has a loose appreciation for Dire Straits.” Paul imagined his father not existing. His face, his arms, his voice. All of it gone forever.

“Can you turn off the radio for a minute?” Paul asked. His father held up his finger for a second until the line *They don’t give a damn about any trumpet playing band* finished (apparently it was his favorite line), then clicked off the radio and turned his attention on his son. “Look,” Paul continued, matter-of-factly, “I’m not sure how you expect our relationship to proceed from now on. But I just want to let

you know that I'm not going to spend the next ten years trying to dissuade you from doing what you say you're going to do. My twenties need to be a very focused and productive decade for me and I can't let anything get in the way of that. I can't let your pact get in the way of my life."

"Of course," his father chimed in. "That's the last thing we want. We've always said your life is your own and—"

"Just stop talking, please," Paul said, putting up his hand. He could feel tears welling up inside his head for the second time that night and he tried to strengthen his mental resolve to keep them from coming out, but as soon as started talking again, he couldn't keep his voice from breaking. "Don't do it, dad. Please. Don't do it. I'm begging you. Don't do it."

His father slowed to a stop at a red light and kept his eyes on the road. Paul wasn't technically crying, but he couldn't prevent all the little supplementary sounds of crying from coming out, the sniffing, the heavy exhalations. "I hear what you're saying, son," his father said, at last. "And honestly, I don't know what I would think if I was in your position. If my father had said this to me when I was your age, I don't know what I would've done. But, I think the best thing you can do is to accept that this is what your mother and me want."

"But why?" Paul asked. "Why do you want this?"

"Your mother—," Paul's father started, then stopped and cleared his throat. "Everyday I spend with your mother is a lifetime of happiness."

"That doesn't make sense. You guys never do anything."

“I really hope that one day, you find someone you understand completely. Someone that finishes you. And I don’t mean Maggie. And I don’t mean Matt. That’s not really any of my business, anyway. But I think there’s someone out there that’s going to blow your mind. I really do. And when you meet that person, maybe, maybe you’ll understand. And I hope that I’ll be around to meet that person and give them a hug. But I can’t guarantee that I will. I’m already finished.”

“Then why not just kill yourselves now? Why wait?”

“Well,” his father said, “because we don’t want to break the pact.”

Paul turned and slumped down in his seat and gave the physical signs that he was done talking. His father reached out and turned the radio back on, just as “Sultans of Swing” was ending. It hadn’t even taken the whole song for them to have that conversation, Paul noted, though, granted, it was a long song.

When they got home, Paul’s mother was awake, sitting in the living room, watching infomercials in her nightgown and smoking a cigarette. Paul had never seen his mother smoke before. Paul’s father went into the living room and took the cigarette from her and put it out in an old glass of water on the coffee table and whispered something in her ear while Paul stood in the entranceway. His mother looked up at him and smiled and nodded, as though in confirmation of a shared assumption. “I’m going to bed,” Paul said, and walked away.

Instead of going downstairs to his bedroom, however, Paul walked up the stairs to the second floor and down the hallway past the master bedroom and into the room at the end that had used to be his bedroom as a child but had long since

been cleared to make room for the aviary. There was no aviary, of course. Just a bunch of empty cages, and a set of shelves with bags of wood chips and bird food, and strips of puckered wallpaper on the walls with pictures of blue jays and parrots and brown thrashers and bald eagles and cardinals and woodpeckers, some in flight, others perched on implied tree branches. It hadn't been difficult to get this far, Paul recalled. It had only taken his parents a weekend's worth of serious work. But the step after that, the final step, the essential step that would have actually qualified it as an aviary, the birds, that had been too difficult for them. Paul retrieved a few sheets and pillows and a blanket from the hallway closet and set them down on the floor and laid down on his back and stared through the bars of the empty cages at the night sky beyond the window until he fell asleep.

During the following decade, Paul remained silent about the pact. He didn't mention it to anyone, not his roommates, not his occasional girlfriends, not his aunts or uncles or cousins. He didn't bring it up to his parents either, as he'd promised. And they would only mention it themselves about once a year, usually around the time of their anniversary, sometimes explicitly—"well, just five years to go"—and sometimes more implicitly—"it's important to live without regrets"—but never with the slightest hint of melancholy.

Paul's twenties, however, did not turn out to be the focused, productive decade he had hoped for. Sure, he had some interesting experiences and he traveled widely and learned a fair amount about politics and philosophy and computers and

high finance, but there was always a loose, amateurish quality to the whole thing that never gave way to authority in any given field and inevitably left him with a panicked sense of personal failure. After working for two years as a concert promoter at a medium-sized venue in Baltimore that catered to EDM aficionados, he decided he needed a radical change in circumstances and moved to Seattle to do an MBA at Seattle Pacific University (not his first choice but he'd heard they had a reputation as an up-and-coming program) and soon after scored an internship in the marketing department at a search engine optimization company called UpTick that operated out of the renovated top floor of an old textiles factory near the waterfront. It seemed like the start of something. It really did. But after a year of no promotions at UpTick and no productive relationships at SPU, with the exception of a professor who'd said he had the "subtle charisma of a future VP," Paul felt more alienated and ineffective than he'd felt in his entire life. It was so hard not to be a middleman, he thought. It was so hard to distinguish yourself when all of your skill-levels were more or less approximate to the national averages. He thought back to his years with Matt (who he hadn't spoken to since high school) and wondered what had changed since then. And in this state of mind, with seemingly no other options at his disposal, he began to perceive his parents' impending suicide as an opportunity. He researched his family's investments and various business interests and planned and waited.

On November 14 2012, Paul woke up at 7am. He knew his parents usually woke up around 10am and he didn't want to be asleep as long as they were awake



on their final day. His on-again girlfriend Karen rolled over in bed as he was leaving the apartment and asked him where he was going. He said he just felt like getting up early and having a walk. She nodded at the window; it was raining more heavily than usual. He held up his umbrella and shrugged.

He walked around his neighborhood for a while in the rain and then stopped at a pharmacy and picked up copies of *Wired*, *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *The Economist*, *Harper's*, and *Scientific American* before taking a bus northward to the University. He spent an hour at a coffee shop on campus, reading all the articles in *The New Yorker* that interested him and saving the other magazines for the plane ride the next day. At 11am, he attended his three-hour seminar on Managerial Economics. And at 4pm, he put in a couple hours at UpTick, finalizing a proposal for using LinkedIn as an advertising platform. In between class and work, he double-checked his plane reservation and got a haircut. After work, he took another bus to a rental car agency south of downtown, picked up his reserved champagne-colored 2011 Toyota Avalon and drove back to his apartment. Karen was at work so it didn't take long for him to pack all his clothes and toiletries. He got back in the rental car and drove one hour north of the city to a large estuary and nature reserve on the edge of Puget Sound called Padilla Bay. The rain had stopped. He parked and took his phone and walked as far as he could across the acres of eelgrass meadows that spread along the edge of the bay without losing a signal. When he reached the limit, he sat down and stared at the water and waited.

Shortly before 9pm, his parents called from the house phone in Upper Darby. Their voices were calm and gentle as always, and they passed the phone back and forth between them and told Paul how much they loved him and how proud they were of him and how they knew he was going to be a success because he was too smart and ambitious to be anything else. And they asked him where he was because they could hear wind and water in the background and he told them to listen closely because he had a surprise. He put the phone on speaker and held it up as high as he could. "I'm at this place called Padilla Bay. It's known as the best place for bird watching in this area. I know how much you like birds." They laughed and said how sweet of a gesture it was but that they couldn't really hear anything that sounded like birds. And Paul tried to walk closer to where the bird sounds were coming from but started to lose signal and his parents said they had to go so he stopped walking and took a deep breath and said, "I understand. Goodbye."

Paul sat down on the eelgrass. He had strayed closer to the bay and the grass under him was mixed with mud and saltwater. But he was too lost in thought to notice. So far, everything had gone as planned. He had indicated to his parents that he had come to terms with their decision and was at peace with it and wouldn't hold a grudge, all of which was true. And he had tried to do something sweet for them on their final night to show that, despite the past, he loved them deeply, which was also true. And finally, he had prepared himself to return to Philadelphia and use the Cronin family investments to finally gain a foothold in the world, which was good.

And yet, despite all these forces contributing to a perfect clarity of purpose, he felt that he was wrong about everything.

Paul put the phone back in his pocket; he knew it was purposeless to call them back because they wouldn't answer. There had been no hesitation, no doubt in their voices. Right this moment, he told himself, they were driving to the Schuylkill River to fulfill their pact. Right now it was happening. He looked out over Padilla Bay and the Puget Sound beyond and told himself these simple facts over and over, hoping that by repeating them he would absorb their factuality. Right now, they are doing it, he told himself. That is true despite you. That is true whether you believe it or not. He wanted so badly to believe what he was telling himself because he knew that by not believing it he was giving into every soft, sentimental, superstitious impulse that somehow had survived his education. But even now, even as it was happening, he did not understand it. And because he didn't understand it he couldn't believe it. He stood up and tore the phone from his pocket and called his house and waited for his parents to pick up.

## Massive Debt

“Single mothers make the best debt collectors. Don’t believe me? Believe me. They’re killers, man. Big game killers. Because the thing is, they’re not collecting for themselves. And they’re not collecting to impress me. They’re collecting so their kids can eat. Try coming up with an incentive structure to beat that. You won’t. Just put them on the phone and get the fuck out of the way. That’s my business model. I’m kidding, of course. My business model is much more complicated than that. But I’m serious about single mothers. They fight the war.”

Matt liked to walk while he talked. He didn’t pace, though. He didn’t wander. He knew exactly where he was going. One of four self-designated “motion targets” spread throughout his office like the points of a compass. The rectangular back windows overlooking the parking garage. The rounded lip of his desk. The fireproof file cabinet near the door. The floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the rows of cubicles. He moved between his targets with swift, measured steps, stopping briefly at each to pop a hard stance before moving onto the next. It was a method he had adapted from a blog post called “Top 5 Ways to Show Them You’re Da Boss.” Matt loved reading lists online. They reinforced his belief that every aspect of life was competitive and hierarchical. He would click on anything that said “Top” or “Best” or “Greatest.” Lazy catalogues like “33 Ways to Maximize Your Creativity” didn’t hook him. But “20 Greatest Bridges in the World;” he’d stop whatever he was doing to

read that. And when he reached #1 he would smile and nod, as though in the presence of a kindred spirit.

“Don’t misquote me, though,” Matt warned, slowing to a stop in front of his desk and leaning against the rounded lip, arms crossed. “I’m not saying I only hire single mothers. Not all the women that work here are moms. And in case the DBO or the BBB comes knocking, I’ve got evidence to prove it. I videotape all my interviews and I never ask about marital status or family history. That’s on record. It just so happens that the skill set I’m looking for coincides with single motherhood nine times out of ten. It’s a pattern. It’s important to know your patterns. And if anything, giving a competitive edge to single mothers is a good prejudice. It goes against most common prejudices and it’s got nothing to do with race. Seriously, nothing. I don’t even think about race. I’ll hire any race on record. And if I had to choose, I prefer non-whites. Just take a look at my fucking payroll.”

Matt was already in motion toward the front windows as he extended his hand to indicate the serpentine pattern of cubicles that extended from just beyond his office all the way to the back wall. The support columns and dummy corners had made it difficult, but Matt had managed to fit as many cubicles into the space as was legally possible. 5,000 sq feet. 95 cubicles. When a rep from the fire department was doing compliance checks in the building, he whistled when he saw Matt’s floor, and said it was the closest you could get to non-compliance without actually being non-compliant. Matt still told that story.

“You see,” he said, pointing at the tops of heads, the various hairdos kept in place by Plantronic headsets, peeking over the tops of the cubicles. “Black. Hispanic. Asian. Indian. White, sure. Half black. Arab, I think. And we’re like one big family. That’s what I’m most proud about.”

The thing that Matt was most proud about was the organizational scheme of the cubicles and the way the different departments were seamlessly and efficiently aligned from front to back. To the uninitiated, the floor might have seemed like a single homogenous blob of work, but, in fact, it was a complex, multi-level organism. The first couple rows were 0-30 days late, basically courtesy calls, polite reminders. He put his sweeter souls here, his saccharine. Women with little girl voices. Little bit of sex. They were devious, sure. But you’d never know it until it was too late. Sometimes you’d never know at all. You’d go the rest of your life thinking you had a moment with the twenty two year old senorita who called you because your title loan payment was two weeks late. Running perpendicular to them along the center wall was 31-60 days. These were the pragmatists, the taxpayers, the mothers with two kids in high school. If you owed Matt money, these were the last human beings you were going to hear from. After that it was the animals, the natural disasters, the angels of death coming for your car, your house, your beach house, your boat, your co-signer, whatever collateral you were foolish enough to sign over. 61-90. 91-120. 121-180. 180 plus. Recovery. The voices got colder in Recovery. The tattoos thicker and higher up. There were less birthdays. And they weren’t even the last row. At the very back of the floor, their heads barely visible, were his Skip Tracers. His ninjas.

They had their own IP addresses, their own phone lines. Most of them went by pseudonyms. He never asked what they did; he only asked for returns. Front to back, it was a thing of beauty. Matt could stand at his office window and watch the debt flow and grow outward. It was like a sewer. A sewer of debt. And all his women in the thick, keeping it liquid.

“Look, the bottom line is, I don’t have to justify myself to anyone. I’m a small business owner. I’m a job creator. I’ve got my own way of doing things and if you don’t like it, that’s why the State of Pennsylvania calls it ‘at-will employment.’ You’ll notice I’ve got a pretty small office, though. I’m not the Scarface type. I don’t like to sit in the castle and count the gold. I’m a grinder. I like the grind. I spend most of my day on the floor. You’ll see me around. And besides, what would I do with any more space in here? I don’t need a wall to hang my diplomas on because I don’t have any diplomas. That’s why most people have offices. To hang their diplomas. Waste of space, smart people. And when I say ‘smart people,’ I don’t mean people who are smart. I don’t mean you. I mean spacey motherfuckers. People who think but don’t do. That’s why I like you. That’s why I hired you. You’re smart and you’re practical. You’re a doer. And like I said in the interview, there’s plenty around here to do. Our internal server needs a big time security overhaul. We’re in a competitive industry; that thing has to be bulletproof. And a bunch of our computers are running slow. And somebody in Recovery needs a Java update. Everyday there’s something new. So you’re going to have your hands full. But listen, kid, I don’t want you to think of

yourself as just some kind of IT drone. If you show up on time everyday and bust your ass, who knows how far you could go here?”

The kid’s name was Daniel Marx; he’d been sitting in a rolling chair in the middle of the office since 8am, following Matt’s movements and nodding profusely. Matt had hired him in response to a Craigslist ad: “Entry Level IT Technician Needed for Call Center.” It was now 10am and Daniel had been steadily sipping from a Venti Starbucks cup for two hours; he looked like he was struggling to keep himself from pissing his pants but he kept nodding. Matt liked to give all his new hires the office performance. It left no doubt in their minds as to who was in charge and it gave him an opportunity to work on his material. His mission statement. His values. The kind of things he imagined he’d say to a group of investors in a Wall Street boardroom one day. Every new hire got a slightly different version. It was a work in progress. Since Daniel was the first male he’d hired in months, he’d tried out some of the gender stuff. Admittedly he’d hit the single mother note a little too hard. But single mothers were on his mind lately. And besides, it was just Daniel Marx; the kid would be gone by month’s end. Despite all the stuff about “who knows how far you could go here,” Matt just needed him for some one-time repairs and all the full-service IT companies in the area were so fucking expensive. Like, \$125/hr expensive. He’d gotten Daniel for \$12/hr. No benefits. No parking. But so what? Work wasn’t a guarantee; it wasn’t a given. And the more people who realized that, the better for everybody. Every person with a job should be in constant fear losing it, Matt thought. That’s the kind of country he wanted to live in.



“Before we go out there, a final word of advice.” Matt stood beside the door, one arm on top of the fireproof file cabinet. “Let’s say you’re in the break room and you’re having your lunch and you’re getting a vibe off one of these ladies out there and you want to pursue it further. That’s fine by me. But do your homework first. I’m serious. Single mothers come with a lot of baggage. And some of them aren’t even technically single. They’ve got husbands in jail or the army. And the ones that are single, it doesn’t mean they’re free and clear. Maybe they’ve got some lunatic ex-husband lurking around somewhere out there. Best thing to do is, ask me. I know all my employees top to bottom. I’m talking full background checks. I’ve got a corporate account with LexisNexis. Just ask me and I’ll tell you the truth: stop, go, or proceed with caution. Cool? In this, as in everything, don’t think of me as your boss. Think of me as the guy that’s got the keys to the kingdom.”

When Matt opened the doors on Credit Recovery Solutions LLC in May 2011, a few days before his 26<sup>th</sup> birthday, his financial advisor E.J. Stanzione gave him a piece of advice: “If you treat this like a front, it’ll seem like a front.”

At first, Matt didn’t understand what he meant. In previous conversations, they’d agreed that the reason for choosing debt collection was that it seemed like a shady operation to begin with. It wasn’t, of course. It was perfectly legal. But it had plenty of negative connotations. Most fronts were public services. Waste disposal, transportation, etc. Industries that satisfied customers, improved communities. Nobody in his right mind would try to hide behind debt collection. It was like trying

to hide behind a dartboard. And besides the negative connotations, there were all the regulations and the constant audits. It was just a flat out bad idea. But that was exactly what made it a good idea. Hiding in plain sight and all that. Plus, Stanzione knew a talented accountant who had about ten years experience in the mortgage industry, and she swore that two and two would always equal four on the books no problem as long as there was enough money coming in to maneuver with. "So I just keep the money coming in and stay out of sight, right?" Matt asked. "I'm just the name on the letterhead."

"Wrong," Stanzione returned. "You're the face. You're the brain. You're the beating heart. Starting today, you're not a drug dealer. You're a debt collector. You're a business owner. That is what you are."

"I don't know," Matt said, running his foot along the freshly vacuumed carpet. They were sitting in rolling chairs in the empty suite in the Conshohocken Business Center that was set to become Credit Recovery Solution's headquarters, waiting for the cubicles and computers to arrive. "I kind of thought this would be the last time I'd be in here. I prefer being behind the scenes."

"No, no, that's not going to work." Stanzione stood up and walked in a circle, scratching the silver hair that grew out of his head in thick waves. "You said, 'behind the scenes.' I like that; let's go with that. Let's pretend that we're not making a business for a second. Just a second. Let's pretend that we're making a sitcom, a primetime sitcom. What's your favorite sitcom?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "I guess 'King of Queens.'"

“Are you serious? That hasn’t been on for years.”

“I don’t really watch much television. It’s boring.”

“Ok, fine,” Gene said, waving his hands in front of him. “Let’s say you turn on ‘King of Queens’ and you see the name ‘Kevin James’ in the opening credits, right? But as soon as the show starts, Kevin James is nowhere to be found. He never enters. He’s not in any of the scenes. And the strangest part is, none of the other characters are even talking about him or asking where he is. It’s like he doesn’t exist. Except the show’s still called ‘King of Queens Starring Kevin James’ so you start asking yourself, ‘What the fuck is going on with this show? Something’s weird here.’”

“Yeah, that would be weird,” Matt conceded.

“But now reverse that. Let’s say you turn on ‘King of Queens’ and Kevin James is in every scene and he’s making jokes and he’s getting into trouble and getting out of trouble and driving the action. You don’t think twice. You just sit back and take it for granted because it’s the most natural thing in the world.”

“So you want me to be Kevin James?”

“I want you to be Kevin James and Ray Romano and Jerry Seinfeld and Kelsey fucking Grammar all in one!” Stanzione clapped loud. “We’re making a sitcom called ‘Massive Debt’ and you’re the star, ok? And if you’re not here everyday in this office chewing up scenery, it’s going to look very, very weird.”

“But why can’t somebody else be Kevin James?”

“Because I think you can do it.” Stanzione sat back down in the chair and caught his breath. Matt chewed at his thumbnail and tried to imagine himself as

Kevin James; he had a similar build as the actor, sure, but their faces were different. Stanzone said he had something to celebrate with and pulled a pair of fat cigars out of his jacket pocket. Matt thanked him and they sat in silence for a few minutes, blowing smoke towards the track lights and the ceiling tiles.

Matt's stepdad had introduced him to Stanzone after he found several hundred thousand dollars in cash stuffed in empty paint cans in the garage. "Don't tell me anything," his stepdad said to him. "But promise me you'll tell Stanzone everything." Matt asked why he'd never mentioned Stanzone before if they were such good friends. "He's not *my* friend," his stepdad said. "He's my money's friend. Everybody in this city needs a guy like Stanzone."

Still, Matt was resistant at first. Stanzone was old and loud and enjoyed himself a little too much. And Matt had worked too hard during the past seven years scratching out a market for himself to start adding associates to his payroll just because his stepdad said he had to. But when Stanzone looked him in the eyes and said, "Without me, you don't have a business; you just have a bunch of cash in paint cans that you don't know what to do with," Matt conceded that the man had a point and started listening. And ever since, even though they technically weren't partners, Matt had allowed Stanzone the voice of an equal, mostly because the things that Stanzone said always seemed to motivate him.

When Stanzone came back from flushing the cigars, he looked at Matt and said, "Alright, here's the deal, I can get somebody else to play 'the boss' if you want. I know a talent scout in New York who specializes in this sort of thing; it wouldn't be

hard. I mean, it's another expense, but— Alright, look, if we're going to do this, why don't we really fucking do this? Why don't we do this better than anybody has done this before? You're in this room right now for a reason. You deserve to be here. And I'm in this room right now for a reason too. I believe in you. You're not just another client for me, kid. I've been doing this for a long time and I'm seen a lot of up-and-comers and I'm telling you, you've got some special. I know you do. And what, you think I want to be doing this for the rest of my life? Hell no. I'm looking for the pony that I can retire on. And I think it's you. I think you got what it takes. But we got to be smart about this from day one. And so when the fucking DBO pays us a courtesy visit and demands to know who's in charge, I want Kevin James the Debt Collector with a Heart of Gold to bust out of his office with the biggest fucking grin on his face and the biggest fucking punchline on the tip of his tongue and the fucking laugh track raging behind him. I don't want the stand-in. I want the real thing. And then, after the DBO leaves to go suck each other's dicks, you and me can go have a few cigars and a few whiskeys and laugh about the whole thing. Because, and you've got to believe me on this, beyond the numbers and books, the one thing that's going to keep us out of jail is a good performance."

"How come you know so much about show business?" Matt asked.

"I used to work in pornography," Stanzione said. "It's all the same."

During the next two years, Matt gave an increasingly convincing performance as the star of "Massive Debt." He bought a condo in Conshohocken, near the office.

He filled his closet with generic power suits from Jos. A Bank and stuffed his drawers with earth-toned polos and regular fit jeans. He started watching more television and going online more and reading more magazines. He bought a bunch of books about finance and accounting and business management and made flashcards with common terms and acronyms. He got a dog and a vacuum. He modified the tone of his voice and the way he walked and the facial expressions he made when he was standing idle. Above all, he talked more. It was hard at first. He would trip over industry terms and get headaches and rely on “fuck” and “shit” too much. But it got easier over time. And eventually it was the easiest thing in the world, practically an instinct. He made a mental catalogue of anecdotes, jokes, generic comments about gentrification and Zagat’s ratings, and doled them out with conviction. Matt guessed that he’d spoken more words since he’d turned twenty-six than he’d spoken in the previous twenty-five years of his life combined. And according to Stanzone, that was the icing on the cake, the voice. That was the sign that the front was complete. And no matter what Matt did at night, the voice was always there the following morning to remind him of the person he had decided to pretend to be.

By the time that Matt turned twenty-eight, however, an unexpected change had occurred. He started taking more pleasure in his daytime persona than in his nighttime persona, and began to identify himself with the front more than with the behind. He liked the office life. He liked the unique satisfaction of legal employment. He liked ordering coffee in a suit. And when he walked around the rows of cubicles, he liked the feeling of authority and benevolence that it gave him. He stopped

thinking of himself as a drug dealer. Credit Recovery Solutions LLC was something he could be proud about, something he could tell his kids about. The problem was, the business didn't really exist; sure, it existed on the books. It existed numerically, statistically. But it was fundamentally an illusion.

Matt led Daniel Marx across the call center floor with his hand planted firmly on the kid's back, stopping every row to introduce the new hire to his army of women. Matt knew every woman's first name and even though he didn't pronounce half of them correctly, he knew how they were spelled and knew which face went with which name. "Juanita! Ananya! Hiexen! This is Daniel, new IT guy! Don't bite his head off all at once. Let him get settled, give him an hour, then start tossing all your computer problems his way! Ok, cool!"

As Matt pushed Daniel towards the middle of the floor, he spotted Linh Nguyen with her back to him, and circled towards her. Linh was one of Matt's 30-60 day late callers, and one of his biggest producers overall. Matt recorded all of the calls that came in and out of his office for quality assurance but sometimes he would take the recordings of Linh's calls home with him and listen to them for pleasure. She had the kind of voice that suggested that she had carried more weight in her life than a normal person would carry in ten lives. There was gravity in the short, plain way she put sentences together, and a total lack of uncertainty. She was incapable of giving the impression that she was not in control in a given conversation, and yet

she never came off as domineering. She was like the voice of some absolute, eternal law that could not be contradicted.

“I understand the point that you are making, sir, but the fact is that you entered into a legally binding agreement with our company when you signed your name on that contract, and that contract clearly stipulates that any checks returned for insufficient funds will be penalized with a \$15 fee added to your principal balance.” Matt stood behind Linh, listening to her, then threw a thumb’s up at Daniel, who sort of shrugged and nodded his head. Few people were capable of recognizing Linh’s genius; it was too much under the surface. But Matt didn’t mind; that made the appreciation of her more of a rare aptitude. Matt bent down close to her headset so he could hear the customer’s voice on the other end, blasting out in angry, helpless little squawks that didn’t provoke so much as a bead of sweat on the back of Linh’s neck, as she said, “I don’t understand what you mean by ‘fair,’ sir. Either it’s on the contract or it isn’t. And in this case, it is.”

Linh was wearing a white blouse with a loose collar; Matt looked at the skin on the back of her neck, then further down, and saw a thin red scratch mark running horizontal across the top of her shoulder blades, made by a fingernail, his fingernail. He told himself he had to be more careful about leaving marks. But it was hard to avoid leaving marks without sacrificing some of the intensity of their lovemaking. They didn’t have far apart sex. They didn’t look in different directions; they didn’t position their bodies end to end. They had close up sex. They laid face to face and



hugged and squeezed and scratched and pulled and did everything possible to make their two bodies into one.

“I’d be happy to send you another copy of your contract, sir,” Linh continued, her voice unchanged, “with the relevant portions highlighted.” Matt threw another thumb’s up at Daniel and pointed at Linh and nodded approvingly. Daniel nodded back and smiled broadly.

Matt looked at the personal items spread around Linh’s cubicle. Most of the items he was familiar with. There was the bottle of antibacterial hand soap. And the rubber plant. And the miniature flag of Vietnam next to the postcard of Ha Long Bay. Sometimes, in bed, he’d tell her that he’d never wanted to travel until he met her; he’d say he wanted to go to Vietnam. She’d say maybe, maybe. Next to the postcard on her desk were three small photos arranged in a shared frame: the first was of her parents; the second was of her family, her 8-year old son Phillip and her husband George; and the third was just of George, clad in his camouflage army uniform, standing in a desert somewhere in the Middle East, holding up his hands in the shape of a heart. Besides these familiar items, there was one new addition to her cubicle, a tiny heart sticker affixed to the photo of George.

The last time Matt and Linh had been together outside of work—the previous Sunday afternoon after Linh was able to get a babysitter for Phillip—they laid in bed and Linh said that her marriage was over. She said that George had changed; she said she couldn’t communicate with him anymore; she said the distance was too much. And above all, she complained that George seemed to enjoy being away from

his family, seemed to like being at war more than being at home. Matt sat up against the headboard and pulled Linh's head up so she was resting on his chest, and rubbed her hair and asked her to marry him.

"What?" she'd said, alarmed, pulling away. "I'm sorry, Matt. I don't think I gave you the correct impression. Just because my marriage is falling apart with George, that doesn't mean I can just jump into marriage right away with someone else— with my boss. It wouldn't work."

"Why not?" Matt asked. "I love you."

"I love you too," she said, and touched his face. "But there's just too much standing in the way. It's impossible."

"Name one thing standing in the way," he pressed her.

"Really? Ok... Well, you don't know my son that well."

"I can make an effort," he insisted. "I want to make an effort. I mean, that one time, at the company barbeque, when I showed him how to make paper airplanes. Didn't we get along pretty well? I thought we did."

"Yeah, yeah, you got along great. But that was ten minutes. We're talking about an entire life together. We're talking 24/7."

"I just said it was a good start. What else is there?"

"Well, there's the big thing, obviously," Linh said, letting her words linger in the air and looking at Matt and widening her eyes. When Matt didn't finish her thought, she continued begrudgingly, "Matt, you've told me what you actually do for a living. I don't know why you did, but—"

“It was a moment of weakness, ok?”

“Ok, I understand. And you can trust me to not say anything to anyone. But, besides putting me in an awkward position with everybody at work, how can you expect me to take you seriously as a husband? I’m not going to marry a drug dealer. I’m not going to let a drug dealer raise my kid. I’m sorry.”

Matt got up from the bed and put on a pair of boxers and a shirt and walked onto the balcony of his condo. The sun was about to set and the sky was streaked with purple; the air was cold. He could see the Conshohocken Business Center in the near distance. It glowed like a jewel. He returned to the room and sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Linh. She looked back at him with sympathy in her eyes, but not with love, not passion. “What if I gave it up? What if I was just a business owner? Women have married their bosses before. As long as it works, nobody has a right to criticize it. And we work, don’t we?”

Matt snapped out of his memory as he heard Linh’s phone call coming to a conclusion. “Alright, sir, well I’m sorry you feel that way.” Linh hung up the phone and turned to Matt. “Hello, Matt,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, Linh, I just wanted to introduce you to our new in-house IT Specialist, Daniel Marx. Linh, this is Daniel. Daniel, this is Linh.” The two employees nodded at each other and smiled. “So, Linh, if you’ve got any issues with your computer or you can’t print or anything like that, just ask—”

“Daniel, I’ve got a question for you,” Linh started, removing her headset and rolling her chair so that it faced away from her cubicle. “On any given workday, I’ve

got approximately 100 accounts in my queue. That means at least 100 people I've got to call in a single day, not including references, insurance companies, and so on. And that's the same for everybody else here." Linh waved her hand towards the other rows of cubicles. "But, in terms of keeping track of these calls, everybody here has their own system. Most people, me included, use a spreadsheet. But it's kind of a pain in the neck and it involves a lot of manual entry. But, during my lunch break the other day, I was reading about these software programs called, um, Customer Relationship Management—"

"Oh, CRM software," Daniel cut in, nodding. "Yeah, yeah, there's tons of great options for that. Streamline your whole operation. Get everybody on the same page. You guys seriously use spreadsheets as your call logs? That's crazy."

"Yes, it is," Linh echoed, looking at Matt. "It seriously is."

"Well, alright," Matt said, hiking up his pants. "Let's get one of these CRM programs, then. If it's going to help us, we need it. We need it!"

"You need to talk to Mallory, then," Linh responded. Mallory was Stanzione's accountant. She worked out of a private annex in the office. "I brought up the idea to her yesterday and she said we couldn't afford it."

"Really?" Matt said. "How much does it cost?"

"About \$2,000 a month," Linh responded, "depending on the brand."

"I'm sure we can afford that. Mallory was probably just being overcautious. I'll talk to her. I want my women to have the best."

Matt smiled at Linh and then put a hand around Daniel's shoulder and led him to the back wall of the office and showed him the cubicle assigned to him, gave him his login passwords and a few initial tasks, and left him alone. After stopping by the bathroom to splash some water in his face, Matt walked to the annex and knocked on Mallory's office door. She looked up from her computer, lowered her glasses from her nose, and directed Matt towards an empty chair opposite her desk. Matt cracked his knuckles and sat down.

"Is this a door open conversation or a door closed conversation?" Mallory asked, her voice flat and humorless.

"Door open for now," Matt responded. "But we'll have to see how it develops. Linh says she needs this software that's going to help her do her job better and I trust her so let's just buy it. Ok?"

"How much does it cost?"

"She said she already talked to you about it. She said it costs \$2,000 a month. We can afford that, right?"

"No," Mallory said. "We cannot."

"You've got to be kidding? Why not?"

Mallory nodded at the door to her office. Paul got up and slammed it shut. He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket but he ignored it. When he sat down again, Mallory continued, "We cannot afford any added expenses at the moment, Paul. We can barely afford payroll this period. And I've been trying to talk to you about this,

but you seem insistent on ignoring me. And at this point, I don't have any choice except to bring Mr. Stanzione into the conversation."

"No, no, don't do that." Matt scratched his head. "Just tell me, what's wrong, and what can I do to fix it."

"Can I speak bluntly?" Mallory asked. Matt nodded. "Sell more drugs."

"Ok, that's too blunt." Matt glared at Mallory. She held a hand up in apology. "But, I thought we were doing good this past year, regardless of the, um, revenue stream you just mentioned. I mean, everybody's working their asses off, there's no denying that. And I'm really starting to figure out how this all works."

"I think that's the problem, Mr. Savitz," Mallory said. "You're starting to figure out this business, sure, but you haven't fully figured it out yet. And in the meantime, we're stuck between two worlds, financially speaking."

"It's not like I've been ignoring the other thing."

"I didn't say you were. But, based on these numbers, you haven't exactly been giving it your full attention either."

"Thanks for your feedback," Matt said, standing up. "But just buy the fucking software, alright? I'll figure out the rest." Matt threw open the door and marched towards his office. He took his phone out his pocket on the way and looked at the missed call. It said "PAUL."

## **Hanging Gardens**

The Cronin family business was real estate. More specifically, it was a single seven-story apartment building with an abandoned storefront at 950 Noble Street, just north of center city Philadelphia, which the locals called “The Gardens” because there was a faded awning over the ground floor windows that said “The Gardens” in white cursive lettering, even though there was nothing about the building or the adjacent lot that remotely suggested verdure.

When Patrick Cronin bought the building outright in 1928 (having quietly retired from the illegal liquor business when his boss and his boss’s top associate were respectively shot and stabbed to death in separate incidents over a two week span), the surrounding blocks hovered somewhere between lower middle class and regular middle class. No one would call it a fashionable district; no one would call it a ghost town either. During the day the streets were inhabited by scattered crowds with at least a little money to spend, housewives and teenagers and city transit employees on their way to or from work. And it didn’t take much cajoling for Patrick to sell his cousin James on the promise of the neighborhood as an up-and-coming commercial district, seeing as James had already been looking for a place to open a corner store and preferred doing business with family anyway. In July 1929, James signed a binding two-year lease for the storefront unit. Patrick threw in the awning for free. James named the grocery after a painting he’d seen in the Museum of Art

called the “Luxembourg Gardens at Twilight.” He wasn’t much of an art aficionado, but he could tell it was a good painting.

Patrick made it through the 1930s unscathed. James did not. The Gardens Corner Grocery and Dry Goods Emporium went bust six months after Black Tuesday and James moved to Ottawa because he’d heard about work there. Before he left, he sold all his private possessions to pay the remainder of the lease. Patrick told James that he wished he could’ve wiped the debt clean but that the times were the times. And James told Patrick that even if such an offer had been made, he would’ve turned it down flat. “The Gardens wasn’t meant to be, but you were good to me. You gave me that awning for free. I owe you.” Patrick nodded and hugged James goodbye and never told him that he’d also gotten the awning for free, thanks to an aspiring sign maker who’d needed an opportunity to showcase his work. James died two years later in Newfoundland, without a wife, child, or home address.

Patrick, on the other hand, never lacked for a place to stay. At the very least, he always had that. Some months, he was the building’s only tenant. But those months were few and far between. For the most part, business was good. There was always some friend or friend of a friend who needed a place to stash a few guns for a week, or a sack of drugs, or a girl. That was how Patrick met his first wife Lucrecia. They married within a month of meeting and moved outside the city to Upper Darby Township and had a couple of kids, including Glenn, Terry’s father, who assumed ownership of 950 Noble after Patrick died in 1963. Being the oldest, Glenn was the rightful heir to the building, but he would’ve gotten it anyway. It wasn’t a prized



commodity among his siblings. His sister Teresa and his half-brother Jeremiah tried to have the building razed. When that failed, they told Glenn good luck being a slumlord and moved to San Francisco.

Glenn couldn't blame them. The building looked like shit. And without his father's criminal connections, the only way to make money was to raise the rent on the legal tenants and to try to find a business for the storefront again. The former usually worked. The latter never did. The neighborhood had thinned after the war; most of the foot traffic now was accidental and fleeting. He did get close to leasing to a funeral parlor once, but ended up stymied by about a dozen or so state regulations. Nothing ever replaced The Gardens; and yet, the awning remained, more expensive to remove it than what it was worth.

Whenever Glenn described the building to other people, his friends at the Lion's Club for example, he had to admit that it sounded like the worst kind of asset, a real sinkhole. And yet, despite its problems, 950 Noble never failed to turn a profit, pumping out just enough money year after year to keep the Cronins in the suburbs and the Cronin children in private schools. First Glenn and his wife Sarah. And then Teddy and Diane. Before he died, Glenn referred to the phenomenon as the "pragmatic miracle of real estate" and warned Teddy not to question it. Teddy had no problem not questioning where his money came from. He'd go months without thinking about the building, without thinking about getting a job, without thinking about work at all. It didn't resonate with him as a concept, which was probably one of the reasons he didn't have any friends other than Diane. In a sense, the Cronins

were addicted to the building. As long as it existed, they didn't need anything else. But it wasn't a golden egg. It wasn't going to make them rich or popular. It just sustained them. Presumably it always would. As long as they didn't expect too much from it.

Paul stood opposite the building, leaning against a discontinued mailbox, smoking a Misty Menthol cigarette. Although he'd never been a smoker before his parents died, he resented the suggestion that their death had caused him to take up smoking. It was the context. Not the cause.

While inventorying their possessions after the funeral, he'd found a small promotional pack of Misty Menthols in the top drawer of his mother's bureau. The manufacturer's date on the bottom of the box said "Aug 1990." Only one was missing from inside. Paul thought back to the night they'd told him about the pact; the cigarette he'd seen his mom smoking, it must've been from here. What did a twenty-two-year old cigarette taste like, he wondered. Pretty bad, as it turned out. Still, he smoked three in a row with his head sticking out of their bedroom window, flicking the butts at the mildewed marble birdbath in the backyard.

"Hey," a voice shouted from nearby. Paul turned and saw a black Lincoln MKX parked at the end of the block. The heavily tinted driver's side window was cracked just enough to show a thinning crop of blonde hair above an oversized pair of black wraparound sunglasses. Paul nodded at the driver, stubbed his cigarette against the mailbox, and approached the car.

“You can smoke in here, you know,” the driver said as Paul climbed into the passenger’s seat. “It’s a fucking campaign car. It might as well double as a humidor. Speaking of, can I get one of those?”

Paul pulled the Misty Menthols out of his pocket; it was a slender box, outlined in pastel green, with a logo at the center that looked like a Boca Raton beach house curtain enjoying an afternoon breeze.

“Fuck you,” Paul said, preemptively.

The driver laughed and lifted one hand in the air, as though to revoke responsibility for any assumed opinions, and grabbed a Misty with the other, dexterously flipping it into his mouth before taking out the car cigarette lighter and pressing the butt against the coils. “Believe me,” he said, after taking a drag. “I have no room to talk. I do a monthly appointment at this pedicurist in Harrisburg that puts fucking kiwi on my cuticles. Fucking kiwi.”

“That’s hardly the same thing,” Paul said.

“You’re right. When it comes to buying cigarettes, you at least have a choice to be masculine. Does Wawa even sell Mistys?”

“I bought these online. And I used your name.”

The driver laughed and punched Paul in the shoulder. The driver’s name was Brian Linnant. He was engaged to be married to Paul’s paternal half-cousin Melinda. He and Paul had known each other for less than a month, but they were prepared to take a major interest in each other’s livelihoods. It had all started when Paul made an offhanded comment at his parents’ funeral about how he could really use a joint

but couldn't find a working number for the West Philly dealer he used to buy from. And Brian, who'd been standing behind him at the buffet table and had already downed four glasses of Pinot Grigio, said, "That won't be a problem much longer, having to get pot on the down low." Paul assumed that Brian was talking about the general trajectory of American culture and laughed flatly and said "Yeah, in some states, sure. Never here, though." But Brian carried on, "I'm serious, man. Mark my words. I've said too much, I've said too much."

Later, when Paul was talking to Melinda's father, Jeremiah Cronin, Jr., he was surprised to find a reason to take Brian seriously. "Apologies for my future son-in-law," Jeremiah said, running a firm hand through his ponytail, keeping it streamlined. "Brian doesn't usually drink this much but he's under a lot of pressure right now. He's in politics. He works for this State Senator from Pottstown, David Joyner. I don't know if you know— You've been away for a while, right? You probably haven't heard of Joyner. He's been getting a lot of local press lately. They call him the next Ed Rendell. You know, big personality. Reformer. Progressive. But in a blue-collar kind of way. Might run for governor in 2014. Brian says he's leaning toward Congress, though. Personally, I hope he stays in Harrisburg. There's so much work to be done here. But I know Melinda would love to live in DC. She's doing a political science degree at Penn. One more year. Anyway, Joyner's up for reelection next November and the campaign's already in full swing so Brian hasn't been sleeping much. It's like Christmas, these elections. Every time they start sooner and sooner. Eventually it's just going to be one big uninterrupted year-round holiday-

themed election. America.” Jeremiah rolled his eyes and looked at Paul and laughed. Jeremiah had moved his family from Northern California to suburban Philadelphia five years earlier when he took a job at Bryn Mawr teaching in the Religion Department, and ever since he’d acted like he was doing the state a favor. The sage coming down from the mountain to bless the village of his ancestors. “Did you know my father was friends with Mario Savio at Berkeley?” Jeremiah continued. “You’re probably the only East Coast Cronin who would appreciate that fact. You’re not a true East Coast Cronin, though, are you? No, I don’t mean that in a bad way. Look at your face, you’re so pissed. C’mon, what can I say? I’m not a true West Coast Cronin. Just a couple of mongrels, that’s what we are. Couple of lost souls.” Paul nodded vigorously without smiling, like an animal trying to shake free of a restraint, then slapped Jeremiah on the shoulder and started back towards the buffet. Jeremiah grabbed him by the arm as he was leaving and added, “I’m really sorry about your mom and dad. They were great people.”

The next day, Paul got Brian’s number from Melinda and nailed him down for coffee at La Colombe, even though, as Brian said, he “literally only had seven minutes to spare.” Paul didn’t know what he wanted to say to Brian; he didn’t know what he expected. He just had the sense that if they sat down and talked some morsel of mutual interest would float to the surface. Paul was serious about staying in Philadelphia, but he knew he had to start making connections. His conversation with Brian was muted at first. Brian talked euphemistically about state politics and apologized for anything he may or may not have said at the funeral. “I’ll say anything

when I'm drunk." Paul didn't believe Brian but he didn't know what he was hiding either, didn't know how to hook him. It wasn't until Paul mentioned the building that Brian stopped eyeing his phone and shifted forward in his seat and asked direct questions. They talked about the building for an hour.

"You weren't lying," Brian said, shifting in the driver's seat to look as far as he could in every direction. "There is nothing around here." Brian rested the cigarette in the ashtray and took a digital camera with a zoom lens out of the center console and started snapping pictures of the building, the adjacent lot, the street. There was an auto repair shop next door, the carcasses of several wrecked taxis and service vehicles scattered in front. Further down the street sat a small corner convenience store with a deli. In the opposite direction, there was nothing but the rusted husk of an impossibly baroque factory, the kind that only existed in the industrial northeast; the kind you couldn't imagine a single living breathing person inhabiting, much less an entire workforce; the kind that probably churned out something small and essential in secret. There were no pedestrians on the streets. In the near distance, the city whirred like an idling engine. "I mean, I'd never even heard of Noble Street," Brian continued, thumbing through the photos he'd just taken. "But when you told me the nearest intersection, I thought for sure there had to be something around here. But Jesus Christ, there is nothing. Fucking nothing. And yet, it's so central at the same time, so accessible. You see this kind of thing in Berlin. I studied abroad there for a year. *Niemandsland*, they call them. No man's lands."

“Yeah, but Berlin had the Wall. What’s Philly’s excuse?”

“Unions,” Brian answered, almost immediately.

“Asshole,” Paul said, smiling. “I thought you swung left.”

“When I’m speaking for my boss I do,” Brian said, returning the camera to the console, picking up the cigarette, taking a quick drag. “When I’m speaking for myself, I’m more of a— I like to think of myself as a libertarian.”

“All sorts of people like to think of themselves as libertarians.”

“It’s funny,” Brian said, turning his head toward the east, “if this building was ten blocks that way it’d be a performance space by now. Or a fucking artist’s loft.” Then he turned his head back toward the north. “And if it was ten blocks that way, it’d be, I don’t know, a crack den? A flop house?”

“Are the unions responsible for that too?”

“Did you check on the closest school? Closest church?”

“Yeah,” Paul answered, pulling a small notepad out of his pocket and flipping it open. “Closest school is seventh tenths of a mile. Closest church is three tenths. Maybe a little less depending on the route.”

“What kind of church?” Brian asked.

“Buddhist,” Paul answered, checking his notes. “Buddhist temple.”

“We can work around that. Where’s the closest Catholic church?”

“Same as the school. Seventh tenths.”

“It’s a fucking miracle,” Brian said, smiling. “This must be the only spot in Philly that isn’t within half a mile of the Catholics.”

“Plus,” Paul continued, indicating the building, “the interior is going to blow your mind. It’s a lot bigger than it seems from out here, particularly if you knock down a few walls, which won’t be hard because they’re basically crumbling as it is. And I know I mentioned the top floor skylight, but you’ve got to see it to believe it. Finest piece of construction in the whole building. Gives you so much light on that top floor. And the storefront is ready to go as a retail space. Honestly, can you imagine a better building for this project?”

“No,” Brian said plainly. “It’s perfect.”

“So, what do you say? You want to come in, take a look?”

“What, go inside?” Brian shook his head. “No, I can’t do that. Too much risk. I’m not even officially here right now. I told you that.”

“C’mon, who’s going to see you? It’s a no-man’s land. You said it yourself.”

“That’s not the point,” Brian said, taking a final drag on the cigarette before snubbing it out in the ashtray. He rested his back against the window and looked at Paul directly, rubbing the clean-shaven cleft in his chin with his thumb. Paul felt he was being sized up and tried to return a look of confidence. At last, Brian asked him, “Why do you trust me?”

“Easy,” Paul answered immediately. This was one of the questions for which he’d prepared an answer. “Mutually assured destruction. Cold War dynamics. You and your boss have as much to lose as I do.”

“No, we don’t,” Brian said. “We really don’t.” Paul sat up in his seat and stuttered to find a response. Brian held out his hand. Without thinking, Paul gave



him another cigarette from the pack. Brian lit it, took a drag, and continued, “Just think about it for a second. If me and my people cover our tracks—and trust me, we will cover our tracks—we won’t lose anything if the project fails. Granted, we have a lot to gain if it succeeds. You do too. But the risk, that’s all on you. Your money, your time, your asset. Not to mention your family legacy.” Brian took another drag on the cigarette and let the smoke out of his mouth slowly. “I’m not trying to discourage you from moving forward. It’s very plausible that everything will work out exactly as planned. But if not, it’s on you.”

“I really don’t need a lecture on responsibility from you,” Paul shot back. “Keep in mind, the only reason we’re here today is because you got drunk at my parents’ funeral and started spilling secrets.”

“Exactly!” Brian said, waving the cigarette at Paul, forcing him to hold up a hand in defense. “That was fucked up! Why aren’t you holding that over me more? Why isn’t that on the tip of your tongue every time I get a little condescending? You need to toughen up, Paul. You really do.”

Paul’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he held up his hand to Brian while he retrieved it. The name on the screen said “MATT.” Paul had left a voicemail for his old friend a few minutes before Brian had showed up. He hadn’t expected a call back so soon, if at all. Matt hadn’t shown up to his parents’ funeral and he hadn’t seen or talked to him since returning to Philly. But after finally tracking down Louis, who now lived alone in a colonial in Narberth and drove a black Mercedes, he learned that Matt had been keeping busy. His chest went heavy at the thought of seeing him

again. "That's my partner," Paul said to Brian, nodding at his phone. "I'll call him back as soon as we're done here. Do you want to pick a date for a follow-up meeting, after all the initial shit gets sorted?"

"Not exactly," Brian said, removing an outmoded mobile phone from his inside coat pocket and handing it to Paul. "After today, your only contact with me will be through this phone. My number's saved in the directory. You call me. You wait. I call back. No texting. If necessary, you can also use the email account we set up for you. But no attachments. And make sure to activate the IP encryptor that we installed on your laptop before sending or reading anything."

"So that's it," Paul said. "We're good?"

"We're good if you're good," Brian confirmed. "And I know I don't have to say this, but you can't mention anything about this to Melinda or her dad. They won't understand." Paul nodded and said "of course." Brian snubbed his second cigarette in the ashtray and turned the car back on. "In that case, the only thing left is the contract. You'll get it in the mail in about a week. You won't recognize the names or the companies but just trust it. It's all us." Paul nodded as though he'd been through all of this before a hundred times. He caught a quick glimpse of himself in the rear view mirror and thought about the nights that he had spent in Matt's car in high school, driving around and dreaming of interactions like this one. He wished Matt was here now to hear what he was hearing. Sure, Matt had probably been in similar situations during the past decade. But not to this degree. This went all the way to the top. "You said you had a partner?" Brian asked him.

“That’s right,” Paul said. “We go back. I trust him.”

“Ok. Again, that’s on you. But I’ll make sure there are places for two signatures on the contract. Both of you sign and send it back to the address listed on the envelope and then we’re in business.”

“Sounds good to me,” Paul said, holding out his hand.

“Wait,” Brian said, ignoring Paul’s hand. “Who the fuck is that?” Brian nodded out his window at a female figure that had stopped in front of the main entrance of the building; she was hunched over, rifling through a plastic bag, the curvature of her spine visible even from a distance under the silk robe that was draped loosely over her body and didn’t appear to be giving her any protection against the cold. Her face was hidden behind a tangled mass of white curls as long and broad as a lion’s mane. “I thought you said all the tenants had been removed.”

“She’s the last one.”

“There’s always one.” Brian shook his head, then buckled his seatbelt and put the car in drive. “Well, figure it out. It would be a shame to have to kill her.” Brian had meant it as a joke, and Paul knew that he had meant it as a joke, and Brian knew that he knew. They were on the same page. But something unchecked in Brian’s voice had made the threat seem real. Paul didn’t laugh. “C’mon, we both know I’m kidding. Now get out of my car and get to work.”

Paul crossed the street and entered the building by a side door. He removed a color-coded key ring from his pocket and tried a few different keys before he found

the right fit. In their will, his parents had left him two items pertaining to the building: the Deed of Ownership and a paper bag containing 127 unlabeled keys. Everything else of importance he had to get from the building manager. There was no skeleton key among the 127, though. And it had taken Paul a full weekend to figure out which key went to which lock, and even after he'd labeled the keys and divided them among a new set of key rings according to a system, it was difficult to remember the finer points of the system and which label meant what. Still, that had hardly been the most difficult part of taking over ownership of the building. The most difficult part had been dismissing the manager and the maintenance staff and evicting all of the tenants. But Paul approached it as a test of his resolve, and was determined not to let sentiment interfere.

After a few hours of research online, Paul had started the eviction process on the first of December. He'd left Thirty Day Notices stapled on all the doors and made himself available in the lobby during business hours for questions, comments, and concerns. As it turned out, nearly every tenant had some sort of contract or lease agreement, but no two of them were identical. Some of the older tenants even produced handwritten contracts, signed by Patrick Cronin himself. And while none of the contracts promised anything in the way of stable rates or sustainable living conditions, most of them had grandiose term lengths. 5 years. 15 years. 40 years. "Why did you sign a forty year contract?" he asked. "I hate moving" was a response. "I didn't read it" was another.

But Paul had sworn to Brian that the building would be empty by the New Year and he'd already devoted so much time to imagining what he was going to do with the building once it was evacuated, that he never considered changing course, or even modifying course. He also reassured himself with the thought that he was doing the tenants a favor. The building was no sort of place to live. And furthermore, if you were going to live in Philadelphia, you might as well live in a more vibrant corner of the city. Sometimes all people needed to improve their lives was a push in the right direction. He started sliding flyers for the Drake and the Dorchester and the River Loft Apartments under doors, and leaving stacks of them in the lobby and the laundry room. But only eleven of the ninety-six active tenants moved willingly. The rest stuck by their contracts.

Without telling anyone his intentions, for fear of being dissuaded or declared insane, Paul used his parents' savings, as well as the money that came to him from their life insurance policies (they had two-year suicide clauses that allowed for a reduced payout) to buy out every last one of the tenant contracts; and, for those that still threatened legal action, he negotiated a variety of private settlements, the most lucrative of which required him to pay three months rent for a one bedroom condo at the Symphony House on Broad. After all was said and done, his parents' bank account was reduced to a \$14 overcharge, which he paid from the little bit of money he'd made at UpTick, leaving him a total of \$379 to his name. But, he told himself, at least the building was empty. Almost empty.

Paul climbed the stairs to the fourth floor and stood in front of number 407. He put his ear to the door; he could hear Janet Wexler moving around inside, pulling out drawers, flipping on the television, pulling the lever on a recliner. Janet Wexler. The first time he'd knocked on her door to tell her about the eviction, he'd almost screamed when he'd seen her face. It wasn't that she was old. Plenty of people were old. It was that she was so old. Incomprehensibly old. Ancient. Primordial. Her skin had the texture of a long dormant volcano. Her mouth was a wet yellow hole. Her bones were prominent; every one of her bones. But above all, it was her left eye that remained in Paul's memory. Or, more accurately, the gaping cavity where her left eye had presumably once been. It was the most gruesome wound he had ever seen on a living person; it was literally a hole in her head, with layers of muscle and tissue peeled back and scabbed over around the edges. It was difficult to know how anyone could have sustained such an injury and remained alive. But there she was.

On his first visit, Paul had simply thrust the Thirty Days Notice at her and exhorted her to read it and moved on to the next apartment. But that, apparently, hadn't been enough. Now, as he stood at her door again, he felt like a shivering little boy in a folktale, seeking shelter at the witch's den, until he reminded himself that he was the owner and she was the tenant.

"Are you home, Miss Wexler?" Paul said, after knocking. "It's Paul Cronin, the building owner. I need to speak with you." After a minute, the door opened and Janet Wexler stood before him. She had a black patch over her eye this time, which made Paul take a deep breath of relief, but as for the rest of her, she was only wearing a

lace slip that barely covered her body. "Can I come in, Miss Wexler? There's something I need to discuss with you." She backed away from the door, saying nothing but leaving it open, and disappeared back into the apartment. Paul entered the apartment and closed the door behind him.

After directing Paul to a chair in the main room, Janet Wexler disappeared into the kitchen; a minute later, Paul could hear a teakettle screaming. The main room was predictably dim, as the only window looked out on the back alley and the brick wall of the building opposite. There was a small television that was playing a soap opera and a few landscape paintings on the wall and boxes stacked up along the walls, but not much else, no signs of family, no pets.

Janet Wexler returned with a single mug of tea and handed it to Paul without speaking and sat down on the chair opposite him.

"Thank you for this," Paul said, taking a sip of the tea before setting it down on the table. "But I'm afraid I have some bad news. We're going to be renovating this building to make way for a new business venture and we have to relocate all the existing tenants immediately. Including you."

Janet Wexler put a finger to her mouth and let it disappear inside. Her good eye narrowed as though she was making sense of what Paul had said, but she didn't say anything in response.

"Do you understand, Miss Wexler?" Paul asked again, leaning forward in his chair and showing her the notice. "You have to go."

Janet Wexler moved her mouth as though preparing to speak and then pushed out a shaped breath that sounded like, “Why?”

“Why? Are you asking me, ‘Why?’” Paul said in return, as Janet Wexler put her hand in her hair and leaned back and didn’t speak again. Why? That was the question on Paul’s mind, as well. Why are you like this? Why did it come to this? And not just why, but how? Paul looked at the patch over her left eye and pictured the wound underneath. He wanted to ask her. He wanted to know, how did it happen? But instead, all he could find to say was, “How do you pay your rent each month, Miss Wexler?” She didn’t respond.

After packing most of Janet Wexler’s clothes and personal effects and scattered toiletries (lots of unused perfume, not much else) in a suitcase he found in the bedroom closet, Paul escorted her into his parents’ Volvo, parked around the corner, and drove her to a small hotel in northeast Philadelphia that stood in close proximity to a grocery store and a public park. He used his last \$379 to pay for two weeks of lodging and then took her to her room; before he left, he turned on the television to the first soap opera he found.

Matt got to the Pyramid Club early. He had only been a member there for less than a month but the greeter already knew him by name. He wondered if that was a good thing or if it meant he was going too frequently. It didn’t matter. He would be a member of Apple Brook or Butter Valley Golf Club in another week, as soon as the application processes were finished, and then he could split his business lunches



between here and there. He hoped for Apple Brook; better connotations. He had to remember to tell Paul all of these things, but not all at once. He had to dole it out casually, as though nothing depended on it.

The Pyramid view spoke for itself, though. 52 floors above the city. 30 miles of visibility in every direction. Any place with this kind of view was obviously the dwelling place of power. The first time Matt ate lunch at the Pyramid, with Stanzone, he couldn't stop staring at the William Penn statue on the top of City Hall. From this height you could see the lines in Penn's face. Since then, though, he'd gotten used to the view; now he looked out the windows with the same frequency and enthusiasm with which you'd look out your bedroom window.

Remembering that the Parkway was Paul's favorite part of the city, Matt had requested a table that faced the northern windows. It wasn't a gesture. Matt didn't make gestures. It was a play. Matt turned and looked out at the Parkway while he still had a chance. He didn't want to be looking out the window when Paul arrived; he wanted to be looking at his phone or his watch. But Paul wouldn't show up for another ten minutes or so.

Beyond the art museum, the Channel 6 Zooballoon floated over the trees of Fairmount Park. It was painted silver to look like an elephant's face rather than its normal tiger stripes. Matt had read about the elephants online earlier in the week; the Zoo was doing a special African Elephant exhibit starting in mid-January. Apparently, it would be the first time the Zoo had housed elephants since 2009. Matt wondered if Phillip, Linh's kid, had ever seen an elephant in person. Probably not.

Where would he have seen one? The circus, maybe. But the only circuses these days were the weird ones with all the gymnastics and stuff. No, there was no way he'd ever seen a live elephant in person. Matt would take him. That would probably count as a gesture. Maybe he did make gestures, after all.

"I'm looking for Matt Savitz." Matt heard Paul's reedy voice behind him and turned away from the window and took out his phone. Then he heard the greeter bringing Paul to him and he told himself to play it cool.

By the second beer, however, Matt was loudly describing to Paul the sexual tastes of all the women he'd been with in the past decade, including a 38-year old charity organizer he'd met through a mutual friend who loved having bottles of champagne poured on her and then licked off.

"It was like she was afraid of wasting it," Matt said, laughing. "She would make sure I licked off every last drop. She would say, in this sort of demanding voice, 'You better get it all, you better get it all.' It was weird. Because at first, when you're pouring the champagne on her, it's like you're in charge, and she's losing her mind. But then, when you're down there, licking it all up, it's like you're her slave or something. I don't know, man. I don't know."

"That's crazy," Paul said, and took a long drink from his beer. "I dated a Harvard professor for a while." Matt raised his eyebrows and tipped his beer toward Paul, who elaborated, "Well, an adjunct professor. That's like a part-time professor. But still, Harvard. Not ashamed of that one."

“When I was still living at my parent’s house,” Matt started, “I fucked this Kenyan long distance runner twice. And I know that sounds like a stereotype, but I’m dead serious. She got 4<sup>th</sup> place at the Philly Marathon last year, in the women’s division of course. That was after we’d stopped fucking. She was a development manager; she would oversee construction sites and make sure everything was up to code and so on. Pretty amazing fucking job for an immigrant, right? And get this, and I’m not kidding, she told me I was ‘well hung.’ Coming from a black woman? C’mon! I’m taking that one to the grave.”

“Have you done anal?” Paul asked.

“Of course,” Matt said. “Tons of times. I dated this girl who worked at the airport; she preferred anal. How old have you gone?”

“Can’t say for sure,” Paul said, scratching his head. “Early 40s, I think. Born around the time of the moon landing. How about you?”

“58,” Matt answered without a second thought. Paul laughed and slapped the table and called him “crazy.” Matt shrugged. “I’m after experience, man. Experience. I started later than you, in terms of fucking. I’ve had some catching up to do.” Matt knew that Paul hadn’t lost his virginity in high school, as he’d claimed at the time. Several months after Matt’s arrest, after he’d gotten kicked out of school, he’d run into Maggie at a party and she had told him the whole story. Still, Matt wanted to see if Paul would keep the lie going. And sure enough, Paul nodded and shrugged his unconditional agreement. “Mine owned a bar,” Matt continued. “My 58-year old. What did your 42-year old do?”

“She worked at a bar, actually,” Paul said, leaning back in his chair. “Her name was Karen. It was a bar/restaurant. Like a gastropub, I guess. They had pretty good food. She’d get free dinners every night and she’d bring me the leftovers when she came home. Their burgers were better cold.”

“What was the sex like?” Matt asked.

“Well,” Paul thought, rubbing the back of his neck, “it was very much, like, turn-taking sex. I’d usually get off first, any way I wanted to. And then she’d ask me to roll over on my back, and she’d lie next to me, and she’d get herself off while she fondled my balls. It sounds weird but it was kind of nice.”

“That’s not weird,” Matt said. “I’ve done weirder.”

“I’m serious, though,” Paul continued. “It was like we were two symbiotic animals or something. Co-dependents. It was very primitive. And then, afterwards, we would lie in bed and listen to the rain and she would tell me stories about seeing The Replacements in their prime. It was fucking great, to be honest. She was from Minneapolis. The Replacements are a band from Minneapolis.”

“Sounds like you were pretty close,” Matt said.

“Well, yeah, we were basically dating.”

“And you didn’t know her age? What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t know,” Paul said, shrugging. “She seemed self-conscious about it so I never asked her. I thought I was doing her a favor.”

“Fuck that,” Matt declared, waving his hand at the nearest waitress for another beer. “Fuck self-conscious chicks. That’s the real reason women are still not

equal to men in society; it's their own fault. I love women's rights. I love feminism. You know me, I never liked the girly type. They're boring. It's so much more satisfying to fuck a powerful woman."

"You dating anybody at the moment?" Paul asked.

"Dating?" Matt scratched his chin. "Nope. You?"

"Well, no. I've only been back for a few weeks."

"Right, right," Matt said, nodding. The waitress brought him another beer and took away the empties. Matt asked Paul if he wanted another beer. Paul said no, just a glass of water. Matt reminded him that he was paying. Paul still stuck with water. After the waitress had left, Matt took a long drink from the beer, looked casually out the window, and then turned to Paul. "Listen, man, I'm sorry I didn't go to the funeral. And I'm not going to lie and say I was away on business or anything like that. I just didn't where we stood. We hadn't talked for so long. And I honestly didn't think you'd want me there. That's the truth."

"I appreciate that," Paul said, nodding. "I do."

"How you doing? It must be fucking rough."

Paul turned and looked out the window. He ran his eyes from the base of the Parkway to the museum and then left them drift westward. There was a little sliver of the Schuylkill visible between the highways. "I'll make it."

"Well, let me know if you need anything. Besides this lunch, I mean." Matt laughed a little. "I'm serious, though. We go back."

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” Paul noted. The waitress brought his glass of water and he took a long sip. “So, no hard feelings? About, you know, the past, things that happened?”

“Hard feelings?” Matt asked, in disbelief. “Are you kidding? That night was the best fucking thing that ever happened to me. Honestly. When I think what would have happened if I had gone to college instead— Jesus Christ. No, no. Best thing that ever happened to me, getting arrested. And you know why? Because I got up the next day, I calculated my losses, and I got the fuck to work. I mean, it was no fun spending the night in jail while you slept in your bed. But whatever.”

“You do seem to be doing pretty well for yourself,” Paul noted, scanning his eyes around the dining room of the Pyramid Club. “You’re like some kind of fucking wunderkind or something.”

“I know what means, by the way,” Matt said. “And yeah, I’m doing well.”

“I know,” Paul said. “I know what you do.”

Matt looked at Paul, who looked back at him without flinching. Matt tried to figure out what Paul was thinking. Was this a shakedown? No, that wouldn’t make any sense. It wasn’t like Paul had any real leverage. Was this just an old friend looking for a handout? In a way, Matt thought, that was worse than a shakedown. Either way, it was Paul’s move to make, so Matt simply said, “A lot of people know what I do. I’ve gotten very good at self-promotion.”

“I talked to Louis,” Paul continued. “He’s a hard man to find.”

“He doesn’t live on Baltimore Avenue anymore, if that’s what you mean.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Paul leaned forward. “He’s got a nice house.”

“Well,” Matt said, “what can I say? I like to take care of my people.” If Paul knew how Matt made his money (and it seemed like he did), Matt had no intention of hiding and whimpering. He made sure to look at Paul coldly, as though to say, “don’t assume that you’re still my people.”

“It’s crazy, though,” Paul said, “to think that we used to buy from him. And now, he’s selling for you. That’s crazy.”

“I used to buy from him,” Matt clarified. “You never did. But yes, things are different now. Things are very different.”

“Things are always different,” Paul said. “Things are never the same. Every day, every year things are different. For example, if you don’t make some major changes in your business model by the middle of next year, you’re going to find yourself bankrupt. I promise.”

Matt finished his beer in one long gulp and set it on the table and pushed it away from him, and leaned forward. He looked at Paul, pleading with him not to go down this route. But Paul just smiled smugly back at him, so Matt sighed and asked him, “Paul, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“Maybe we should go somewhere else.”

Half an hour later, Matt and Paul were sitting in Matt’s black Escalade in the parking garage under the Mellon Center, 54 stories below the Pyramid Club. Paul had just told Matt the whole story. David Joyner was gearing up to spearhead a bill to legalize medical marijuana in Pennsylvania; in secret, he had already shored up

sufficient votes, as well as securing the Governor's support, and had begun to carve out a smooth legislative path to get the bill submitted and passed before the moral outrage industry had a chance to react. Joyner was planning to use the passage of the bill as the centerpiece of his re-election campaign, and several of the bill's prospective co-signers had made similar plans. Public opinion had shifted wildly over the past year in Pennsylvania in favor of legalization, owing largely to the financial successes of the legal marijuana industry in Washington, Colorado, and elsewhere. And with Pennsylvania's economy still in turmoil (nearing, at times, on bankruptcy), it wasn't hard to make the case for pot's massive lucrative potential as a taxable commodity. Joyner, furthermore, was far from neutral when it came to the commercial potential of the product. His master plan was not just to legalize marijuana, but to make a profit from it by investing heavily in the first generation of Pennsylvania's licensed pot dealers.

"And that's where we come in," Paul continued. Matt listened intently from the driver's seat, arms crossed. "Day 1 after this bill gets passed, there's going to be a line running from the state capital to the fucking Atlantic Ocean of dealers and entrepreneurs trying to get licenses to sell. So, if you're Joyner, or Joyner's friends, the question is, how do you know who to invest in? And the answer is, you have to rig the game in your favor.

"Legalizing marijuana for medical purposes doesn't mean that suddenly you turn around and there's dispensaries on every corner. The amount of regulations and codes and limitations in this bill is going to be staggering. It's going to take most



dealers a year to read the fucking thing before they can even think about applying for a license. But, if somebody, let's say us, had a copy of the bill ahead of passage, and was able to get a head start on compliance, they'd be very much ahead of the game, wouldn't they?"

"Wouldn't that look suspicious? If it took one company a day to go live? And it took everybody else a year?"

"No," Paul said. "It wouldn't look suspicious. It would look exceptional."

"What kind of regulations are we talking?" Matt asked.

"Typical city zoning kind of bullshit. You can't be within half a mile of a church or a school. Etc. Etc. But, here's the kicker, you also can't have a dispensary or grow house within a *mile* of another dispensary or grow house. That means, if we get a license for my building, we will have the only fucking legalized marijuana shop in center city Philadelphia."

Matt cracked his knuckles and looked out the windshield. Then he turned to look at Paul and let a broad smile break out on his face; he punched Paul in the shoulder and laughed.