Diner Etiquette: A short story collection

Sean Hooks
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DINER ETIQUETTE

a short story collection

by

Sean Hooks

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ABSTRACT

Diner Etiquette
a short story collection

by

Sean Hooks

Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair
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Diner Etiquette contains ten short stories, all set in New Jersey, dealing with a variety of characters and experiences. The collection is an exercise in genre study as well, or at least in genre subversion. The mob story, the post 9/11 fable, quasi-magic realism, a novella, all are contained within. Despite an overarching literary conceit of genre exploration, the dramatic invention of the collection deals more with long-form minimalism and a desire to thoroughly and realistically explore what it’s like to live and work and exist in contemporary America in the shadow of New York City.
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GAMESMANKSHIP

“Tyler. Tyler Jenson.”

“Just call me Augie,” says the rotund young man in the baby blue sweatshirt and baseball cap. He extends his hand and Tyler shakes it firmly.

Tyler sits down and fiddles with the small tableside jukebox. He is a tall, broad-shouldered guy with a tanning salon tan and a lot of gel in his hair. “I’ve never been to this diner. I usually go to Five Star or the Colonial around here.”

The Tick Tock Diner is located on Route 46 West in Little Falls, New Jersey, between Little Falls Trophy Shoppe and Golden Bear Driving Range & Miniature Golf.

“This is quieter,” says Augie. “Less Montclair State kids. I hope I’m not taking up too much of your time.”

“Well, I am a busy guy, but I always like being interviewed.”

Augie adjusts his baseball cap, raising it only slightly off his scalp. He is self-conscious about his prematurely balding pate. “You’ve been interviewed a lot?”

“This is part of the interview?” asks Tyler. He pulls two quarters out of his pants pocket and places them on top of the jukebox, but does not insert them.

“Um, yes, hold on a sec.” Augie opens a black composition notebook. A junior at Fairleigh Dickinson University and currently a reporter for his college newspaper, The Equinox, Augie sometimes fantasizes about becoming an author, though his major is...
Journalism and not English because a job at a newspaper is a more pragmatic goal. He finds a blank page and, in all capital letters, writes Tyler’s first name in the center of the white space at the top. “You look different than I thought you would,” he continues.

Tyler’s face rumples, expressing disdain. The collar of his Brooks Brothers shirt is immaculately starched. “Why? How’d you expect me to look? Like some geek or something?”

“No, no. Well, maybe. I mean, board games aren’t really something... You look more like a basketball player or a football player than-”

“Thanks, thanks a lot. And yeah, I’ve been interviewed before. I don’t know about ‘a lot.’ Games magazine is the biggest publication so far. But my father, he’s sort of my agent, he’s trying to get me in Rolling Stone or Sports Illustrated. He says I have the look for a mid-winter human interest piece.”

“Cool. Other than Games, you’ve been interviewed mostly by online publications?”

“Yes.”

“Are you gonna play a song?” Augie asks, nodding toward the jukebox.

“Eventually.”

A young pixie of a waitress, Ann according to her silvery nametag, comes over and asks if they’re ready to order. Augie makes a deferential gesture to his subject.

Though he opens the menu and flips through it, Tyler doesn’t actually read anything. “Just give me an order of chicken fingers, with honey mustard, and a Coke with lemon.”

She writes it down and looks at Augie.
"The hamburger deluxe. And water's fine for me. Thanks."

The waitress takes their menus and leaves.

"So, when did you start playing Monopoly competitively?" Augie asks.

"Around seven and a half."

"Currently you're twenty-three, and you won your first tournament at twelve. Is that correct?"

"I was in the finals at eleven but I got unlucky. That's the thing about Monopoly; despite all the strategy and expertise, luck is still a significant factor. No matter how far you can push your opponent off his game with aggressive play, there's a chance he'll continually get lucky rolls."

Augie writes quickly, employing a lot of shorthand. "I see. So despite all your skill, Monopoly is still a game of chance?"

"Yes and no. Luck is definitely an obstacle, but in the long run I win a lot more often than I lose. And if you put me up against a rank amateur, the odds are really stacked against him. You have to be mentally prepared to play against me or I just break you down."

Augie nods. "Interesting. And how do you go about it, breaking your opponent down?"

"Well, I can't give away my secrets, can I?" Tyler smiles. His teeth are noticeably white. He tones down the toothiness but keeps a half-smile in place while checking out two thirty-something women who enter the diner and sit down in the non-smoking section. "You like older women, Augie?"

Augie blushes. "I dunno. Not really. Well, sort of, if they're pretty I guess."
“Older women are the best, man. They really know how to fuck. And they do all
the work. All you have to do is sit back and enjoy the ride, my brother.”

Augie giggles and looks down. “Let’s try to keep this on topic.”

“Right, right. Professional. Gotta take every interview seriously, even if it’s just
the college newspaper.”

Not knowing how to respond to what he views as an insult, Augie leafs through
his notebook. “Well, I know you don’t want to give away any of your strategies or
techniques, that’s cool, but what about just general stuff? Like, is Boardwalk really the
best property?”

“No. Not at all, actually. I hate fucking Boardwalk. I usually find it to my
advantage if an opponent gets Boardwalk and Park Place. Especially early in the game.
And trading them one of those for, say, something in the reds or the oranges, is always a
killer move. Especially if it’s something like Illinois Avenue, which is statistically the
most landed-upon square on the board. Or New York, Saint James, Kentucky; any of the
reds or the oranges, plus cash of course. See, most players don’t know how to play
Boardwalk and Park Place properly. They get overconfident and it affects their gameplay
in general. They think they’re getting the best properties but all they’re really doing is
depleting their resources while I’m already building houses and hotels.”

“Interesting. So you like the red and orange groups the best then?”

“Hey, I take ‘em over Boardwalk and Park Place, but that doesn’t necessarily
mean they’re the best.”

“Well, according to Scientific American,” says Augie, “the reds are the best
properties to have.”
“Hey, did a little research there. I know that article. April of ninety-six. All about probability. That’s one of the staples.”

“How about…” Augie scans his notes. “How about Irvin Hentzel?”

“Nice try.” Tyler smiles again. “Math professor at Iowa State. In nineteen seventy-three he won widespread acclaim for publishing the first comprehensive paper analyzing the mathematical probabilities surrounding the game. His study, ‘How to Win at Monopoly’, is another staple.”

“So to be a great Monopoly player you have to read all the literature?”

The waitress walks by, places their drinks and two wrapped straws on the table. Tyler unwraps his straw by tapping it on the table and immediately plunges it into his soda, slurping down half the glass. Augie sips delicately from his water, ignoring the straw.

“Anybody can read the fuckin’ literature,” says Tyler. “That’s not what makes me great. That’s merely a prerequisite for greatness. You gotta be able to use what you learn, to exploit that information. Same thing during a match. Everything an opponent does is information. How they move their token, how they roll the dice, the clothes they wear, their body language. I observe, take it in, and process it. Then I use it against them.”

Augie jots down Tyler’s comments. “So the most important skill-”

Tyler grabs Augie’s notebook and peruses the notes under his capitalized name. “Don’t you think you should write it down word for word?” He slides the notebook back to its owner.

“Um, no. I mean, I’m recording this whole-”
"Recording it?" Tyler leans toward Augie, nosing around the interviewer’s side of the booth. "With what?"

Augie grins and nods toward the area beneath the jukebox. Hidden amongst the diner table detritus (the ketchup bottle, the beveled glass diner-issue salt and pepper shakers, the big metallic napkin holder, the rectangular ceramic dish with the Sweet ‘n’ Low, sugar, and Equal packets arranged in a flag-like pink-white-blue sequence) is a small grey cassette recorder. "I find that I get a more honest first impression if the subject doesn’t know they’re being recorded right from the get-go. I always ask for permission by the end. In fact, I usually bring it up about ten or fifteen minutes in, just so they know I’m being straight with them."

Tyler leans back, extends his arms over his head and makes a bridge with his large fingers, pushing them outward with a cracking sound. "That’s actually a pretty clever idea," he says. He spreads the salt and pepper shakers apart. "Smart, hiding it back there. Tricky move. I didn’t even notice."

"Thank you." Augie grins again.

Tyler picks up the mini cassette recorder.

"Um, don’t um... Be careful with that."

"What do you think I’m gonna do?" asks Tyler, waving the recorder around.

"I don’t want you to erase it, by accident."

"Actually, I didn’t think of erasing it, but now that you mention it..." Tyler’s finger caresses the red record button. He stares at Augie until Augie looks down.

"I have other interviews on there, not just yours. Please don’t... Stop fooling around, man."
He knows better than to grab for it. Ignore the bully, Augie’s mom taught him when he was teased about his weight in grammar school. If you don’t give them a reaction, they’ll leave you alone.

“Whatever,” says Augie. “Do you want to continue the interview or not?”

“Fine.” Tyler places the tape recorder in the center of the table. “Might as well have it out in the open now.”

“OK. So you started playing competitively at seven and a half, but how old were you when you first learned how to play?”

“I was four. Maybe still three. My parents taught me. I was an only child.”

“I wasn’t,” says Augie. “But I grew up one town over from you.”

“Which one?”

“Clifton. You’re from Nutley, right?”

“Yep. Fucking Nutley High was a joke. I was smarter than all my teachers.”

“Smarter...than...teachers,” Augie mutters, scribbling the information into his notebook. “Which piece were you when you were a kid? Is it the same one you use now, competitively?”

Tyler smiles. Not the overtly toothy smile. And not that appraising half-smile he flashed when the two older women walked in. This smile is more genuine. “The car. I was always the car. I am always the car. When I was first coming up I used to have to deal with not being the car because token selection is based on rank. But now that I’m the national champ and number one ranked player, I always get to be the car. I sorta miss being the iron sometimes, because it has its own advantages, but the car is the only way
to go. Some players like to play with the horseman because it’s the tallest piece, but that’s usually overcompensation, a power trip.”

“What’s so great about the car?”

Tyler shoots Augie an incredulous look. “What’s so great about the car? Isn’t it obvious? It symbolizes mobility, progress, innovation, wealth. Everything my game is about.”

“Oh. What was that you said about the iron?”

“Ah, the iron. The iron is the smallest piece. Occasionally people forget it’s even there. Which is good, because sometimes – usually late in the game when there’s just two players left, but it can happen earlier on, when there’s still three or four – the last thing you want to do is roll those dice. The iron is so small that sometimes people skip right over your turn. Or you can hide it next to the houses and hotels. If you place it just right and they aren’t paying close attention, your opponent can’t tell what square it’s really on. Not that I encourage cheating, and not that I’m often in a position where I’m behind, but if you’re desperate you do what you have to to win. Which token do you use, Augie?”

“Um, I’m usually the dog. When I was a little kid we had a-”

Tyler laughs. “Oh man, you would be easy. Anyone who picks the dog is a cakewalk. The dog is for the same superstitious losers who bring their stuffed animals to the table or try to sneak in personalized non-regulation tokens.”

“The piece someone chooses says that much, you think?”

“Totally. Women mostly choose the thimble. My mom was the thimble.”

“My mom was always the thimble too,” says Augie.
"It’s a very mom type of piece. Domestic. Younger women sometimes pick the shoe, or the dog, like you, but there’s not many younger women."

"Most tournament Monopoly players are male then?"

"Overwhelmingly. There’s a few broads, but they’re usually older. A lot of the best players in the world are young – thirteen, fourteen years old. And with them, there’s almost as many girls as boys. Though they’re girls that don’t have much potential. Not that the boys do either but-"

"Don’t have much potential?"

"Yeah, they’re usually little fat girls, or girls with acne and braces. No little hotties like you see on MTV with push-up bras and belly shirts who look like they’re nineteen. Not that the older players are gonna be doing any modeling any time soon either. See, my looks and my size intimidate a lot of people. They’re losers, you know. No self-confidence. Mentally weak. I roll right over ‘em. The toughest opponents are young white males in their teens. Rotten little overachievers. The products of soccer moms and corporate dads who think it’s sooo cool that little Jimmy has a knack for eco-fucking-nomics."

Two plates are delivered by their waitress, Ann. Augie carefully picks the tomato off his hamburger and closes the bun.

"Thanks, hun," says Tyler. "Good job." He dips a chicken finger into one of two containers of honey mustard. "Now this is good fuckin’ diner. They actually give you more than one honey mustard. I hate having to ask for more. Cheap-ass Greeks."

"The food here is really good," says Augie. "And the service too."
Tyler nods and munches on his chicken. “Oh, and the fucking top hat,” he says with food in his mouth. “I forgot the top hat.”

After carefully chewing a mouthful of hamburger, Augie asks, “What about the top hat?”

“Dude, the top hat is cheesy. The top hat is for guys who take it way too seriously. Every tournament, some guy, who always plays the top hat, shows up in full Mister Monopoly regalia. You know, like the guy on the box: tuxedo, mustache, walking stick. They’re hilarious. Usually halfway decent players, but anyone who’s that sadly obsessed doesn’t stand a chance against me in the long run.”

Augie pops salt-dusted french fries into his mouth two at a time.

“No ketchup?” Tyler asks.

“Nope. I don’t like ketchup. I don’t like tomatoes.”

“Fries without ketchup? Suit yourself.”

“So you were saying that you think the fact that you’re... conventionally attractive is an advantage in the tournaments?”

“After the tournaments, too.” Tyler laughs. “The players are almost always god-awful butt-ugly, though I have had sex with at least one opponent, but there’s a lot of hot sisters and bored wives or girlfriends that come and watch me thrash their husbands and boyfriends and brothers. Nothing turns women on more than victory, the winner. And the fact that I just beat the piss out of the guy they’re with? They doubt his masculinity and become attracted to me. Not that they don’t doubt it already in most cases. There’s always a big gathering after the tournament in some hotel bar. Get a few margaritas or bay breezes into these chicks and they treat me like I’m the quarterback who just won the
Super Bowl. They ask to see the check, which is hardly ever more than a thousand bucks, but they act like it’s a million. See, that’s why I’m so tough to beat. I’m not in it for the prize money. Some guys tense up when they get to the final table. They’re happy just to be in the top four because they know they’re getting something, even if it’s only twenty-five or fifty bucks for fourth place. They think that’s a form of winning. But it’s not, especially on the occasion when I wind up bangin’ some guy’s wife upstairs while he’s still down at the bar, drunk on cheap wine, showing his bronze medal to a bunch of nerdy high school kids and forty-year-olds in cardigan sweaters.”

“You certainly don’t lack confidence.”

“It’s what makes me great. Not just at Monopoly, but in life. I’m someone who’s winning. Bangin’ chicks, driving a nice car, living in a phat house, with a pool, that’s what it’s all about. And yeah, people will say that’s superficial, that I’m not getting anything out of life, just shallow pleasures. Fine, it’s true that I’ve never had a real job in my entire life, but I’m not just some spoiled rich kid who’s had all these advantages. It’s nice to be rich and white and pretty, with a father who has a lot of influence, but what I am is a winner, the winner. I’m not gonna pretend I’m some regular Joe, because I’m not. I’m destined for bigger things. While they’re slaving away at an office all week, I’m out by my pool, looking at online porn on my laptop in between making stock trades and drinking Grey Goose screwdrivers. And I read books, for motivation.”

“What kind of stuff do you re-”

“So how’s that for shallow?”

“Hey, you don’t have to convince me. I had to call and harass your dad like ten times just to get this interview.”
“Yeah, how come so interested? You’re obviously not a tournament player or someone who’s obsessed with the game. Why interview me? Shouldn’t you be writing about some lesbian professor who just got a grant or the latest hazing scandal with the lacrosse team?”

Augie polishes off his hamburger and finishes his water. He crunches some of the ice cubes as well. He’s taking his time, making Tyler wait. “I just needed to do a local interest piece. And it had to be a one on one interview. Tournament monopoly player sounded like an interesting story. Although, if I wanted to psychoanalyze a bit, I would probably say that, in the Games article anyway, you reminded me a little of my brother.”

“What does he do?”

“Nothing. He’s dead.”

“Oh shit. Sorry, bro.”

“He was a real overachiever. Six years older than me. Skiing accident in Vermont.”

“That fucking sucks, dude. I’ve always avoided skiing, myself. Too much risk. So how was he like me?”

“Well, he was a chess player. And, as I’m sure you know, Monopoly isn’t even in the same league as chess. But in that interview you mentioned Bobby Fischer being your idol or something. Maybe that’s what made me want to do this – subconsciously I was reminded of my brother. He was like you, in some ways. Successful at his game at a very young age and all that. But it made him overconfident. He was drunk the night he died. Hanging out with these girls, who were underage I think, and some of his buddies. Skiing at night. Winning so consistently, from such an early age, I think it can lead to
overconfidence. Overconfident people interest me.” Augie musters up some courage and looks right at Tyler. “So, maybe what I want to know is, what’s gonna be your downfall?”

Tyler chuckles. He cracks his neck and looks over at the jukebox. “Let’s see, what to play.” He begins flipping through the songs. “I went out to get something to eat with this guy, some dude named Jamie, after I beat him in the finals of the Massachusetts Invitational. We were at some diner, not nice like this place, more of a truck stop, somewhere up in New England. He was a real cheap bastard. Jewish, of course. He bought three songs on the jukebox and picked the longest ones he could find.” Tyler turns away from the jukebox and looks right at Augie. “He picked, like, ‘The End’ by The Doors, ‘American Pie’, and some long-ass Pink Floyd song. And he kept buying me beers. Fucking cheap domestic swill that was on two for one special, at some truck stop diner in New England nowheresville. It was funny. I won, yet he insisted on buying the drinks. I think it made him feel better to be subservient to me. Like he owed it to me to kiss my ass because I beat him.”

Augie is nodding along, listening attentively.

“You boys want anything else?” asks the waitress, as she begins to clear the table.

Tyler smiles at Augie. Not the genuine ‘I’m always the car’ smile. The overly toothy one. “Wanna buy me a drink there, mister college newspaper?”

Augie reaches into his pocket and pulls out a roll of bills, mostly ones but with two twenties on the inside. “Well, the paper does reimburse me for all interview-related expenses. Up to forty bucks, as long as I have receipts.”

“What kind of beers do you have?” Tyler asks the waitress.
“Coors Light, Budweiser and Sam Adams. And Heineken. Let me just take these back to the kitchen, OK? I’ll be right back.”

“Sure thing…sweetheart.”

The waitress turns back and makes a fake frown before giving Tyler a half-smile. Augie shakes his head as she continues back to the kitchen.

“That’s the great thing about diners,” says Tyler. “The waitresses never get annoyed when you call ‘em sweetheart, honey, good lookin’. Though they tend to dislike Flo. But anything that sounds like something a husband in the fifties would call his wife makes ‘em titter like schoolgirls. Regardless of their age. It’s a weird phenomenon.”

“Here,” says Augie, dropping two quarters on Tyler’s side of the table. “Since you’re taking forever picking a song. Might as well go for the whole dollar and get three. More cost effective than the one song for fifty cents.”

“Nah, one song is all I want.” Tyler pushes the quarters back to Augie, who pockets them. “I want it noted in the interview. Something symbolic, you know? One song that plays in the background during your interview with the arrogant, self-absorbed Monopoly guy who grew up in Nutley.”

“And what have you selected?”

“OK boys, you wanted some drinks?” Ann the waitress has returned.

“What were the choices again, baby doll?”

“Alright, mister attitude, that’s about enough. What’s a nice guy like you doing hanging out with this character?” she asks Augie.

“I’m interviewing him for my college paper.”
“Oh really? And what makes him worthy of being interviewed? You athlete of the week or somethin’, sugar?”

“Ahh, see Augie, the little lady knows how to play the game.”

Augie smirks. “Sorry about him, we just met today. He’s a world champion Monopoly player.”

The waitress laughs. “I didn’t know there was such a thing. Champion Monopoly player? Like, the board game?”

Tyler flashes her the half-smile. “Number one ranked player in the country, darlin’. How many people can say they were ever ranked number one at anything? It’s a humble position, but a position nonetheless. A title.”

“And what are we drinking at this table, mister Monopoly champion?”

“Augie? See, you gotta ask him, he’s the man with the petty cash. Monopoly isn’t quite as financially rewarding as you may think. Though that is my Mercedes out in the lot.” He gestures toward the window. “The black convertible. Can’t see it too good ‘cause it’s getting dark. But if you want, I’ll gladly take you for a spin after your shift.”

She shakes her head. “You’ll be waitin’ a long time, Casanova.”

Tyler feigns disappointment. “Your loss... Ann. Anyway, what’re you buyin’ us, Augie?”

“What would you like?”

“No no no. Your cash, you choose the beer.”

Augie thinks for a moment. “I’ll have a Coors Light. A Heineken for my friend, though. Can’t have him drinking domestic beer and driving a Mercedes.” He winks at the waitress but she doesn’t see it.
“A convertible one, give him his due,” she says. “OK, one Heineken and one Coors Light. You guys got I.D.?”

“Um, sure.”

“Come on now, sugar, do I look under twenty-one?” Tyler produces a handful of plastic cards and a wad of cash with a hundred on the outside. He places the money on the table and flips through the cards. “Yeah, here’s my license.” He hands it to the waitress. Augie is ready with his as well.

She quickly scans their birthdates and hands them back. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” says Augie.

“It’s your birthday?” Tyler asks.

“Two days ago. Finally legal.”

“Sweet. All the more reason for a drink.”

The waitress peers down at Tyler’s wad of bills. “Petty cash, eh? Looks like you have more than enough to cover it, mister moneybags. Is that real or is it Monopoly money?”

“Looks green to me,” Tyler says without a pause. “And those aren’t singles underneath the hundred, sweetheart.” He picks up the roll of cash and stuffs it, along with the various cards, back into his pants.

“You guys are a trip. I’ll be right back with your beers.”

“Got a song yet?” Augie asks.

“Alright already.” Tyler gives real attention to the song titles, slowly flipping through the jukebox. “Here,” he says, inserting the quarters and punching in a number. “Happy now?”
Dion and the Belmonts come on, the song is “The Wanderer”. Tyler sings along with the first few lines:

Oh well I'm the type of guy who will never settle down
Where pretty girls are, well you know that I'm around
I kiss 'em and I love 'em 'cause to me they're all the same
I hug 'em and I squeeze 'em they don't even know my name
They call me the wanderer yeah the wanderer
I roam around around around...

“Gotta love the oldies,” says Augie.

“Hell yeah. That’s one of the great things about Monopoly too, it has a history. Invented nineteen thirty-three, sold to Parker Brothers in thirty-five by Charles Darrow, from...?”

“Atlantic City, right?”

“No, he spent time there though, and as I’m sure you know, all the streets in the game are named after real places in Atlantic City. So he is sort of a Jersey boy made good. But he was originally from Germantown, Pennsylvania.”

“A lot of people think he basically stole the idea,” says Augie. “It's ironic, how the game’s backstory patterns its content as, like, this cutthroat capitalist venture-”

“Ah whatever, man, he did what he had to do. Almost all the famous inventions in history have some story like that about the guy who doesn’t get the credit, the partner who got screwed over. The guy with the idea never gets the glory. I chalk it up to Darwinism. The strong survive. Hell, it’s still the biggest-selling board game in the world.”

Ann arrives with their beers. Augie simply nods. Tyler smiles the broad, predatory smile and lifts his bottle. “To our lovely server. That’s what they call you guys these days, right? Servers?”
"I guess. That’s more of a chain restaurant thing, though. Here on the diner circuit we’re more old fashioned."

"Oh, hey, I’m sorry Ann," says Tyler, admonishing himself. "I should have asked you to join us. You got time for a cold one? It doesn’t look too busy." He surveys the nearly empty diner.

"Can’t drink on shift."

"I thought you were old fashioned, that this was an old school diner. Working gal like you can have a quick beer with your favorite customers. Hell, fucking Dion’s on the jukebox, sweetheart." Tyler raps on the edge of the table with his index fingers and pings the neck of the Heineken bottle with his knife, all in time to the song.

"You guys are crazy. Well, technically I only have another fifteen minutes ‘til quittin’ time, and my one other table looks ready to go. Let me tidy up in back, I’ll punch out and change my clothes and then maybe, just maybe, I’ll come out and join you for a beer. OK?"

"How’s that sound to you, Augie? We could use a little female company, right?"

"That’s fine," Augie says a little too loudly. "I’ll just finish up my interview so that we’re done by the time you get…ready or whatever."

"OK, see you then." The petite waitress scampers away.

The song on the jukebox fades out. Augie consults his notes. "So, yes, Monopoly is the best selling board game, but chess and checkers are actually more widely played, and Scrabble is quickly moving up-"

"I want to kill this waitress," Tyler mutters, head down, picking at the label of his beer bottle.
“What was that?” Augie chuckles, having misheard Tyler’s murmuring. “You want to kiss her? Kiss her where?” Augie snorts.

Tyler grabs the tape recorder, clicks the stop button, and places it back on the table. He raises his head, looks Augie in the eyes. “I want to kill this waitress.”

Augie fake laughs. “What? Why would... That’s not really that funny. Good thing you turned off the tape recorder. Wouldn’t want to ruin your suave image.”

“I want to kill them all, bro.”

“What are you talking about?”

“All the women I fuck. I want to fuck them, and then kill them.”

Augie lowers his voice, looking over his shoulder to make sure Ann isn’t coming. “The women you fuck? You think she’s gonna-”

Tyler cuts him off. “Dude, I’m gonna fuck her. It’s already done, over, in the bag. See, that’s what guys like you don’t understand. That’s why you never get laid. Right? Augie? You don’t get laid a lot, do you?”

Augie says nothing, he is looking everywhere but at Tyler’s face.

“I’ll take that as a no. Yeah, you’re probably not a virgin. You’ve gone to a couple parties, though you didn’t in high school, and you probably got drunk one night and banged some chunky chick with glasses from your Sociology class. Maybe you’ve even had what you consider a girlfriend or two. But you don’t get laid. You don’t fuck a lot of women. It’s obvious. First of all, you don’t have the looks. You’re pudgy, an ex-fat kid probably. You’re pale, you’re already starting to lose your hair. You got no confidence, brother, no attitude. You never once looked that girl in the eyes. You can’t even look me in the eye.”
“Hey man, whatever, this isn’t about me.” Augie begins to get up. “I came here to do an interview—”

“Sit down,” Tyler says calmly.

Augie does, and continues, “To do an interview with you. And I even told you about my brother, and about how maybe that’s why I wanted to meet you, and you insult me?”

“I’m not insulting you, bro. I’m helping you. You need to be more aggressive. Don’t you see that?”

“Hey, I don’t define myself by how many women I sleep with, man.”

“Whatever. You can’t even talk aggressively. Tell me I’m an arrogant prick. That it doesn’t matter how many girls you fuck, ok, girls you fuck is the expression, not sleep with, and then maybe I’ll believe you, then maybe I’ll back down. But this quasi-liberal college bullshit about how you do or don’t define yourself ain’t gonna work on me, Augie.”

Ann, in a t-shirt and jeans and carrying a backpack, exits the diner. Augie and Tyler glance out the window and watch her go through the foyer, down the stairs and into the parking lot.

“She’ll be right back,” says Tyler.

Augie seethes, his complexion pinkening. Tyler smirks at him, waiting for a response. He ignores Augie and peels the label completely off his empty Heineken bottle, then pares it down until he has just the red star.
“So that was just to get a rise out of me?” Augie’s voice is strained but controlled, a journalist’s measured inquiry. “Because you want to make me more of a man or something?”

Tyler finishes his Heineken and gestures toward Augie’s half-full bottle. Augie takes a sip.

“Finish it. Don’t wanna look like a lightweight in front of the lady.”

Augie pounds his beer and looks to Tyler for a response.

“Well, I do like getting a rise out of you and throwing you off whatever little plan you had. I don’t like being used, whether it’s for your one on one interview requirement or to resolve your issues with some deceased sibling. No offense intended, I was touched by that actually.”

Through the window, Tyler smiles at Ann, who doesn’t see him. She’s checking herself out in the passenger side mirror of her sky blue Jeep, which is parked right next to Tyler’s Mercedes. She pulls the Jeep’s door handle to make sure it’s locked, and turns without noticing Tyler inside the window, looking down at her.

“But I’m serious. I’m gonna fuck her, and then I’m gonna want to kill her. That’s how it is, every time. And it’s getting harder to stop myself. I’ve been holding off the whole way around the board.”

“The board?”

Ann ascends the steps outside and enters the foyer. They can just make out a slice of her from their table, specifically her tight, girlish ass, as she inserts money into the cigarette machine.
“Nice ass, no?” Tyler says to Augie. “So yeah, the board. She’s number forty. The big four-oh. Boardwalk. I’ve made it all the way around. I started when I became national champion. There’s been thirty-nine girls since then. And I’ve wanted to do it to each and every one. Right after I shoot up in them, and I almost always get them to let me fuck them without a condom, that or I do ‘em up the ass; but right after I’m done, I just wanna roll off them and smack their heads against the headboard until there’s nothing but a bloody mess in my hands.”

He extends his large, masculine hands over the center of the table. “And I’m thinking tonight, tonight I just might have the balls to finally do it. Take her to a motel, get her to put the room in her name. I’ll be paying, cash of course, so why would she refuse? I’ve got it all planned out. She’s nice and small too, easy to move the body.”

Ann saunters over, tapping a pack of Marlboro Lights against the underside of her thin wrist. She sits down on Tyler’s side of the booth and pulls a cigarette out of the freshly purchased pack. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Go ahead,” says Tyler. “Can I snag one?”

She turns to him, admiring his well-constructed jawline in profile, and slides the pack over. He jams a cigarette into his mouth and waits for Ann to finish lighting hers, then leans his face in to partake in the flame from her lighter.

“How ‘bout you?” he asks Augie.

“Whose are these, again?” says Ann.

“I’m sorry, Annie, didn’t mean to be presumptuous.” Tyler’s territorial smile looks downright menacing, shrouded in a curl of smoke and broken, almost cracked, by the cigarette hanging from his lower lip.
“Would you like one?” she asks Augie, shaking her head at Tyler.

“No thanks. I don’t smoke.”

Tyler raises his eyebrows up to the top of his smooth, sloping forehead. “What a surprise, a non-smoker. See? Told you.”

“Told him what?”

“Just something we were talking about while you were out there admiring your pretty face in the mirror.”

“Oh god, you saw me?”

Tyler throws his arm over the back of their side of the booth and looks at Augie. “Hey man, why don’t you go over to the counter and get us three more beers?”

Augie hesitates.

“I’ll go,” says Ann, starting to get up.

“Nah, you stay here. Come on, Aug, don’t make the lady get back on her feet. She just got off a long shift. I’d go, but then she’d still have to get up. Here,” he pulls out his billfold, “I’m buying. Heinekens all around.” He tosses a folded hundred-dollar bill at Augie. It lands on the table.

Scraping up the hundred, Augie slides out and rises to his feet. “Hey, just, a quick thing, for the interview, before we get drinking. Um, were you serious about that last subject we were talking about?”

“Dead serious, bro.”

Augie does not respond.

“It’s a pun,” Tyler laughs, amused by his own wit. “Relax.”

“What are you guys talking about?” asks Ann.
The hundred-dollar bill unfolds and dangles from Augie’s fingers. “But, didn’t you say...didn’t you say that Boardwalk was overrated?”

“Oh yes,” says Tyler, putting on a serious expression, addressing Augie and Ann as if they were an audience. “Boardwalk, along with Park Place of course, is not the best property. The dark blues are only fourth best. And you were right, statistically the reds are number one. Oranges are second. Then the greens. But the thing about Boardwalk is, like I said, I don’t like to play it, because it’s dangerous, but it’s also a challenge. And if I have to, if I absolutely have to play it, there’s only one way to do it. You wait and wait and wait, until you have enough capital to put hotels on both properties. Then you just stay patient and hope they land on you.” He looks at Ann and grazes her shoulder with his fingers. “And when they do, you absolutely fucking murder them.”

Tyler picks up the dormant tape recorder, engulfing it in his large fingers.

Ann admires the smooth, tanned surface of the backs of his masculine hands.

Augie walks away, off to retrieve the first of numerous rounds of Heinekens.
THE GROUP

“I have my own way of drinking coffee lately. Of waking up. Of facing the morning.” Rob Earle drops his hands from the table and folds them in his lap. “Otherwise I feel, you know, like I’ve talked about. And that’s a terrible way to face the morning.” Rob looks down at his ginger ale. “I pour a shot of Glenfiddich Scotch into my New York Yankees mug that I’ve had since I was a kid. Then I pour in the coffee, once it’s hot. Then I tap in some cinnamon and stir it all with this long metal spoon we stole from a cafe, on my first date with Liz. She slipped it in her purse.”

The others wait for Rob to continue. Roy Hill glances down at his coffee, milky but still steaming in its diner-issue Syracuse china. Tara Goldman knows that Liz must be Elizabeth, the woman responsible for Rob’s presence here. She notes that this is the first time he has referred to her by this shortened nickname. Always the formality of ‘Elizabeth’, and Rob’s already lowered head would dip down a little farther as he said her name. After three years, she wonders why the sudden change. Tara organized, and is now the moderator of, the group. Dennis Guthrie glances out the window, at the drizzle and the mist, common in October and November around the Jersey Shore. He looks at his car, a red 1999 Honda Accord. His partner, Morris, wanted the red. Dennis preferred black but he deferred. His tendency for deference, he believes, is what cost him his Morris.
“Sometimes I listen to records while I drink my coffee,” Rob continues. “Old seventy-eights. I like the sound. More natural, with the hiss.”

“Right on, brother,” says Dennis. “I prefer vinyl too.”

A waitress comes over. “Anyone need anything else?” She is not young, like Tara’s daughter Emma was.

Emma was a waitress during college, not at a diner but at one of those omnipresent chain restaurants. The four members of the group look at each other, making sure no one wants anything. “Just the check;” says Tara.

Always ‘the group’. Sometimes ‘the gang’ or ‘the crew’. Never ‘the support group’. “Gotta see the group at the diner tomorrow.” “Sorry, not tonight, meeting with the gang.” “The crew over at the Princess Maria.” Route 35 North, Wall, New Jersey is the location of the Princess Maria, its silver facade augmented with bright teal panels and, on the roof, the requisite neon sign. And they all have their individual monikers for the group. Roy calls it ‘My White Folks’. Tara refers to it as ‘Sufferers, Incorporated’. To Dennis it is simply ‘Diner Time’. Rob thinks of it as ‘Suicide Watch’.

Friday nights after group, Rob drives into Belmar, to St. Rose Church on Seventh Avenue. In Belmar, the avenues are numbered and the streets are lettered. Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band was named after the corresponding location in Belmar, though Bruce is more commonly associated with Asbury Park which is a couple towns north. Belmar is where Rob lives from Labor Day through Memorial Day. The summers he concedes to the Bennys, northerners who come down to usurp his Jersey Shore, the beaches and bars he grew up with. ‘Benny’ is a derogatory acronym used by Jersey Shore
natives to refer to intruders from the northeast: BERgen (county), Newark & New York - BENNY. But Rob is happy to take their money. He rents out his residence during the summer – walking distance from both the bars and the beach is a big selling point – and the money he makes supplements his income and covers the yearly renovations, which are usually minor.

St. Rose is an undersized building across the street from the library, the town hall and the police department. Rob had been going there every Friday even before Elizabeth’s death. He went to engage in the sacrament of Confession, though she mocked his devout Catholicism. She would sit at home and wait for him to return, and then they’d go over to Federico’s for dinner. Fridays meant Italian food. No meat on Fridays during Lent, Rob followed that old Catholic rule, and eventually it extended itself over the rest of the calendar year. Elizabeth, originally from upstate New York, never complained. She loved the food at Federico’s. They didn’t make pizza like that back in Buffalo. Federico’s Pizza. Main Street Cheese Steaks. The Parker House in Sea Girt for mini-hamburgers and shellfish. Squan Tavern in Manasquan for chicken dishes. Rod’s in Spring Lake for steak. All the places they’d eaten together, places Rob doesn’t patronize anymore because they remind him of her. When he thinks of these places, his gaze drops, his mind wanders, the suicidal impulses emerge. Just get in the car and drive a hundred miles an hour into an embankment or a concrete divider. That underpass where Routes 35 and 71 cross. Rob never did manage to convince Elizabeth to accompany him to St. Rose, so now it is a sanctuary for him, a place to clear his head. But he no longer attends Confession.

By the time the group finishes at the diner and Rob drives back to Belmar, Confession is long over and all the repentant sinners have departed, the small
congregation scattered, spending its Friday nights however Catholics from the Jersey Shore spend their Friday nights. Perhaps getting an early start on next week’s sins. The priests are gone as well, but they don’t lock the doors and there’s never been any squatting or vandalism. The Bennys don’t bother the church or the municipal buildings. The side door is always open, though you have to turn the doorknob just right and give it a firm tug. In the beginning, there would still be a lot of candles burning when Rob got there. He didn’t think they were from others who’d lost their loved ones, just from parishioners who felt a need to cry out to their god, to notify him of their presence, to ask for his help getting through a traumatic time. Now, three years later, there are rarely any candles still lit by the time Rob arrives. If there are, he blows them out and enjoys that smoky extinguished candle smell. He kneels and crosses himself, and he always lights one of the blue candles, never the red, although that goes against the church’s unspoken rule about gender. Elizabeth had a pretty blue dress that Rob really loved. Prussian Blue, she’d said the color was. A slit up the leg, but not so high as to be sluttish; just the slightest glimpse of her cleavage, and only if she leaned forward a bit. She didn’t have large breasts, but they were perfect to Rob, who adored her body. ‘Just right’ was his way of thinking of her, like Goldilocks tasting the baby bear’s porridge. Elizabeth was not voluptuous, nor was she petite. Her body wasn’t athletic or overly-muscular, but it wasn’t soft and pudgy either, nor was it frail and weak. Just right. Just Elizabeth. Just Liz.

The group originally had nine other constituents in addition to the current members, thirteen in all. Only one of the other nine lasted more than six weeks. Their foursome is dedicated, they still meet on a weekly basis. About a year ago, Tara implied
that maybe they should cut it back to once or twice a month, but the other three preferred
the idea of a weekly meeting. Tara, the oldest member of the group at fifty-one, still has
her husband, but then again, she is the only one of the four who lost a child.

Tara Goldman works for Schlossbach Realty. The office is in Belmar but they
rent as far south as Point Pleasant. Her clientele consists mostly of Bennys, everyone
from the just-out-of-college crowd looking for a place to throw parties on the weekends
and play drinking games, to young couples looking for a romantic weekend abode, to
retirees who come down for the crabbing and fishing. Tara’s the whip-smart woman with
the reading-glasses hanging around her neck who looks like she’s doing ten things at
once when you walk in to ask about a summer rental. She’s got a customer signing a
contract while simultaneously chattering into the phone, giving addresses and quoting
prices. She’s sipping cold coffee from a lipstick-stained Styrofoam cup and offering free
doughnuts. She’s a dervish of gestures and gesticulations, half-getting up and half-sitting
down and jotting scribbles on her desk-sized calendar, snapping her fingers at coworkers
to garner their attention, digging through file cabinets and desk drawers for paperwork.
She has a knack for organization. She looks like she knows what she’s doing, always a
pen behind her ear. You want to trust her, to believe her. She gives off the aura of
someone who’s been living down here her whole life, and she knows which houses have
leaky washing machines in the basement, which have gas grills in the backyard that
actually work, which have year-rounder neighbors who’ll call the cops if you play your
music too loud or drink beer outside.

She asked her husband Frank if he wanted to join the group but he dismissed it as
too feminine for him. He wasn’t the least bit surprised that one of the members was gay,
and was curious about the other two, one white and one black, why they weren’t ‘dealing with it like men’, like he was. “I grieve in my own way,” he told Tara. “Doesn’t mean I didn’t love my daughter!” He yelled it, but not at her. He comforts her as best he can.

Frank feels that is his role as husband; providing reassurance is part of the job description. But Tara can tell that he is not comforted himself. Emma was twenty-two, just out of college. It was her first job, only there three months when she was killed.

Frank is angry. His hatred is specific. “I know the difference. Those people at the Welsh Farms on the corner, where we get the milk sometimes, they’re from India. They’re Hindus, not Muslims. They work hard. Harder than most Americans. We’re either poor and lazy or rich and stupid in this country. Benefiting from their daddy’s hard work and some cheap nepotism, or sitting on their asses listening to rap music and waiting for a welfare check. They ain’t like that at the Welsh Farms. Nice little store they got there. Keep it in the family I bet. No outside workers skimming the profits. I don’t have anything against those people making a living. People from India. I got no problem with the Indians.” He was once a proud Democrat, and as a young man he supported Tara’s ‘women’s lib’ causes. He still thinks of that aspect of her fondly. A wife who’s fiery, feisty, tough. A rebel. A spitfire. His kind of woman. But Frank watches a lot of television these days. Those political talk shows. Angry people like himself, who stoke his hatred, even now, almost four years later.

Rob stays a little longer than usual this night, talking one on one with Roy Hill. There is no policy, official or otherwise, which says that everyone in the group has to
leave the Princess Maria together. Stragglers, solo or paired, though never three, sometimes stay to have dessert or to listen to another song or two on the jukebox.

Roy, at age thirty, is the youngest member of the group, and Rob is four years older. "My peoples just don't know what to do, how to help me," says Roy. "It's a black thing, you understand? These people have seen shit, shit has happened to them – the riots and all, then the gang shit, so they ain't much for outsiders. I grew up Asbury, just like them. But Cidra was, you know, she was light-skinned and she worked up in The City and all. 'All the way up there, she work?' Peoples be acting like she worked on the moon."

Rob shrugs and nods.

"They look at you funny if you go to Monmouth Mall instead of Freehold, like you a Tom sellout 'cause you shoppin' at the white mall. Cidra just thought they had better stores at Monmouth, that's all. And I liked it better, too. Freehold ain't got no movie theater. Monmouth, I could sit in the movies, go see some comedy nonsense or whatever to pass the time. I don't go to the movies anymore, man. I don't know, it reminds me of her or something. 'Cause of all those times that I'd kiss her on the cheek and we'd split up for the afternoon, she'd do her shoppin' and I'd go in the movies. I'd always tell her not to spend too much money. And she'd give me this face, man. Like, 'I make more money than you anyway, nigga.' But I loved her. I'd smile watching her walk away. Little ass bouncing. Black folks don't like that, if your woman ain't got a big ass. Made me happier than a pig in shit, though. She was beautiful to me." Roy leans back, throws his arms up across his side of the booth. He's the only black person in the diner.
besides one of the waitresses. “Your woman was a looker, too, man. You showed me a
picture once, remember?”

Rob nods. His favorite picture of the two of them together, crabbing on Long
Beach Island, a friend leant them the house for a week, charged a nominal rent. They’re
standing on the deck overlooking the lagoon, a crab trap dangling from Rob’s right hand,
his left hand snapping at Liz’s waist like a pincer, her in that silly fisherman’s hat,
smiling.

“So, what’s up wit’ you, Rob? You all quiet tonight.”

“Same ol’ same ol’ with me, man. Just taking it a day at a time.”

“How’s work?” asks Roy, who mans the counter at a liquor store in Bradley
Beach.

“Slow. Give it another month or so. When it gets colder and pipes start to burst.
Then people need a plumber.”

Roy laughs again. “Funny, the way you say it. You don’t act nothing like no
plumber. Look like you should be in sales or something, a suit and tie man.”

“I have my business degree. Started my own little plumbing company in my mid-
twenties. Bought the house before I was thirty. The revenue from the summer rental gets
me through the fall. I don’t work the hours I used to, though. Before I lost Liz I had two
vans and two trucks, six to eight guys working for me at all times. Then, after she was
gone, I got with, you know, like we talk about, with the depression and all that crap. So I
sold the vans and one of the trucks, let my guys go, gave ’em a little severance. Just kept
Buddy, this old-timer. He’s a real plumber.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned him before, in group.”
“He’s always good for advice, knows every problem you could possibly come
across. And I don’t mind doing the dirty work that he isn’t limber enough for anymore. I
got tired of sitting on my ass in an office all day, sending out other guys to do the work.”

Roy finishes his coffee. He’s about to try to wrap up the conversation when Rob
continues, unprovoked. “He called me Bobby the other day. Nobody calls me Bobby. I
hate it. We were on the phone. I had to call him up and ask him something and I don’t
know if he thought he was being funny or if he forgot my name. Buddy’s been a little
flaky with remembering names lately. He’s getting up there.”

Roy chuckles, not knowing the appropriate response or what Rob wants. This is
what ‘my people’ feel like, he thinks to himself, when I start talking about Cidra and how
lonely I am without her. That feeling of not knowing what to say or do, of how to reply.

Rob’s head is down, avoiding eye contact. “Liz called me Bobby when she was
mad at me, to bust my balls. ‘Damnit, Bobby Earle, listen to me for a second.’ Or kinda
like, you know, making fun of me. ‘Little Bobby has to go to church again.’ Or, ‘Bobby
can’t eat meat on Fridays.’ But never when other people were around, that would’ve been
disrespectful.” The word in his head was ‘mean’ but Rob had a notion that black guys
place a lot of emphasis on ‘respect’. “It was only when it was just the two of us, alone
somewhere. But I fucking hated it. Now it’s like I miss that too, you know?”

Roy now has the common ground he was hoping for, he doesn’t feel unresponsive
and confused anymore. “Yeah, I know. I know exactly what you mean. Them little
arguments, the private shit, in the bedroom usually. Women get under your skin like that.
But that’s why we can’t forget ‘em. Can’t move on.”

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Rob nods, raises his head. He makes awkward eye contact with Roy. They both look away and start to fidget with their coffee cups.

“Alrighty then,” says Rob. “I’m gonna hit the road.”

“Yeah, me too.”

They each stand and add an extra buck to the tip then walk to the parking lot together.

“Good talk, man,” says Roy. “Dennis was getting on my nerves this week. Can’t talk to that dude straight up. I can talk to you, you know, man to man. All that gay shit about his ‘partner’ and all. I mean, I ain’t no bigot or whatever, and I think we gotta be more, I dunno, more tolerant, like they say. White folks, some half-Jewish lady, gay guy; my peoples up in Asbury wouldn’t be havin’ it.” Roy laughs, short and loud. “I don’t know why black folks be hatin’ on gays and callin’ them faggots all the time, but I just don’t relate to him, man. Like, your woman, my woman, the mall, the movies, that picture of you and your girl, that shit you were saying about her busting your chops, calling you Bobby; that shit I can relate to, you know what I’m saying?” Roy fishes his keys out of his pants pocket.

Rob nods. “Yeah, I do. I like Dennis well enough, that’s just how he talks. He gets real emotional. We’re not like that.”

“A man’s gotta keep stuff in here a little bit,” says Roy, pounding the side of his fist against his chest. He exhales and his breath turns to steam.

“Maybe,” says Rob, stopping beside Roy’s car. “You’re right, though, about stuff you can relate to. That’s important. We can all relate about that one thing…” He tails off, his own breath turned into an icy cough.
“Relatin’, that’s what this is all about. For sure.” Roy unlocks the driver’s side door of his car, an old Buick. “Seat gonna be cold as a motherfucker,” he laughs. “Winter here for good now.”

“Looks like it,” says Rob, rubbing his hands together. “Not blowing any of that settlement money on a new car, huh?”

“Nah, I gave most of it to my mother, put it into buying her a house. Couldn’t spend it on myself. She’s in Long Branch now.”

“Yeah, I’m the same way. It’s just sitting in the bank. Anything I bought with it would be tainted. It’d remind me of Elizabeth. In the wrong way.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Alright then, I’ll see you next week.”

“Peace.”

“Later.”

Rob walks to his truck, a black Ford pick-up. Sometimes, late at night, usually right after Labor Day, after the tourists had departed, not to return until next May, Rob and Liz would drive up and down the beach in his pick-up. The cops didn’t patrol much once the town went back to the locals, especially not during the week. They’d have sex in the bed of the truck, look up at the stars, cuddle together under a blanket. Rob can still drive the truck, but he can’t take it on the beach, and he wouldn’t think of lying in the bed. The weekend after she died, he burned the blanket.

He climbs in and closes the door, puts the key in the ignition and listens to the idle, waiting for it to warm up. Black, gay, lost her kid, whatever, Rob thinks. They haven’t held a steak knife in their trembling hand, naked and shriveled in a luke-warm
bath. They haven’t walked into three different sporting goods stores to examine
handguns. They haven’t hung sacks of peat moss from their ceilings, seeing if the beams
would break or not. And they certainly didn’t spend twenty minutes in the ‘remedies’
aisle at CVS, reading the backs of boxes and bottles of pills, writing down their
ingredients and looking up the effects of overdose on the internet.

Tara writes in her notebook. She doesn’t think of it as a journal or a diary, just her
notebook. She’s filled more than one of them since that day, the day she lost Emma. “The
day she was taken from us,” Frank often reminds her. “She wasn’t lost. She didn’t die in
some freak accident. She was murdered. By the fucking Arabs.” Frank is part Jewish,
non-practicing, as is Tara, but he thinks of himself primarily as an American. Tara writes
in her notebook immediately after group, and only then.

Today was a good meeting. Roy and Dennis will never see eye to eye but that’s
nothing new. I thought Rob was getting better, that whole Liz thing, but tonight he
seemed withdrawn and depressed again. Not as open. I asked if he’d been having any of
his urges lately, to hurt himself, and he avoided the question. Then Dennis jumped in
about the high rate of suicide in the gay community and Roy got annoyed that he was
talking politics and not sticking to the rules of the group. I think it’s important to let a
discussion evolve naturally. It was me who started all that stuff about keeping it personal,
about us, helping each other to ‘heal.’ But even I get tired of hand-holding and
pleasantness all the time. It’s OK to argue and debate things. We’re all adults. I like to
hear what other people have to say, people who aren’t like me and Frank. That’s what I
like about the office, so many different people come in who all want the same thing: a
vacation, a respite from their day to day lives, from routine. If only they knew how lucky they were. They don't know what it's like to have a real break in your routine, a real change in your life, something you can't come home from. But that doesn't mean you should go over the edge. That's why we have the group in the first place. And Rob makes me worry sometimes, that he's going to go over that edge. I'm still worrying about him now, ever since group let out tonight. I don't want to lose anyone else.

Rob found out about the group one night at St. Rose, during the immediate aftermath. He went for his regular Friday night Confession, but once he got there the whole thing felt like a charade, so instead of getting in the line to declare his sins and ask for absolution from one of the priests, he went over and lit his first blue candle for Elizabeth. There were other people doing the same and he overheard a tall woman who was crying mention something about a group that was starting up at the Princess Maria Diner. A lady from the neighborhood was starting it, the tall woman was saying, and there would be no politics, no yelling about revenge or bombing anybody into the Stone Age or turning someplace into a parking lot. The tall woman Rob overheard, Cheryl, was one of the nine who lasted the first six weeks. Rob wonders if those people got better, or if they got bored with it, or if they just had too many other things to do. They seemed so busy. They were doing what the powers that be advised – they were getting on with their lives. They'd come to the diner wearing their work clothes, suits and uniforms, and they'd gather in a corner in the smoking section, pushing two or three tables together. Rob likes the group better now, without them. It's more intimate. One booth, by the window, just the four of them.
As Roy did, Dennis became a part of the group by responding to a notice in the Asbury Park Press. Dennis was born in Asbury Park in 1957 and moved out as part of the great white exodus after the riots in the summer of 1970. They lasted for five days and, in total, forty-six people were killed. That was the key event that solidified the decline of Asbury Park as one of the premier resort communities on the Jersey Shore and effectively turned it into what it is today, an urban ghetto speckled with the ruins of a forgotten way of life – a desolate and decrepit boardwalk, empty storefronts, the skeletal wreck of a carousel, the crumbling exterior of an arcade. His family moved to Freehold, the white section, in the middle of the school year when Dennis was in the eighth grade. By midway through high school he’d figured out he wasn’t like his friends, not in his thoughts about girls anyway. He became interested in music, began hanging out with some other guys who played instruments. They started a little rock band, with Dennis on piano and keyboards. Springsteen and Southside Johnny and that whole music scene was going on back in Asbury Park, at the Stone Pony on Ocean Avenue, a bohemian nightclub amidst the near-literal rubble of the once teeming vacation enclave. Dennis and his friends would make the thirty minute drive down Route 18 and sneak in (they weren’t yet eighteen at the time) and watch the future stars of New Jersey rock ‘n roll. Then, after high school, as their talents progressed, they named their band The Shoreline Skydogs and got some gigs of their own in Asbury, though rarely at the Pony, and only as the opening act to the opening act, if that.

Though he didn’t ‘come out’ until well into his thirties, Dennis started having sex with men in his late teens and early twenties. After a set, the other guys in the band would get drunk and try to impress the local girls as best they could – “We might be opening for
Mountain on Long Island next weekend," or "We just sent our tape out to Columbia Records, Bruce Springsteen's label." Dennis would drink with them, and he'd put his arm around a girl or two, but as everyone started to head home at two or three in the morning he'd drive up the Garden State Parkway (less cops than on the local two-lane highways) to Sandy Hook, to cruise for men at a gay club called The Point. He still takes an HIV/AIDS test at least once a year, forever paranoid because of his promiscuity during that period of his life.

Dennis doesn't play anymore, doesn't even own a piano or keyboard. He's a salesman at a high-end furniture store in Rumson. The clientele is affluent, as is the surrounding area. Springsteen and rock star Jon Bon Jovi both have houses in Rumson. Bruce came in with his wife Patti one night. It was Labor Day, the third day of September the year Morris was killed, and the store was pretty empty. Dennis didn't get the sale (a transplanted Benny from Ridgewood named Manny Larkin did) but he did say hello to his boyhood idol, and mentioned that as a teenager he'd often heard Bruce and his bands play at small clubs like the Student Prince and the Upstage, and of course the Stone Pony. Bruce was amicable and shook his hand, said he remembered the lead singer from Dennis's band, a tall, skinny guy who looked like Duane Allman. Dennis remembers telling Morris about it that night, meeting 'The Boss'. Morris never understood Dennis's fascination with 'straight music'. Morris's musical tastes from that era ran more toward David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed. "But as long as it made you happy," he said. "And I like Bruce now, ever since he did that song for Philadelphia. That took guts, and he seems open-minded. His fans though, ugh, all those working class bigots. I read this novel, Denny," (that was his pet name for Dennis when they were alone) "And this
professor, in the book, was talking about how most people who work with their hands or are good with mechanical things seem to be bigots.” Morris laughed. “It’s sad but true, isn’t it? All these church-going fundamentalists. And it’s not that they’re conservative. No, they’re smart enough to vote Democrat, protect their own interests. But there’s just so much racism and misogyny and hatred in a lot of those people, so much intolerance. Don’t you think, Denny? I wonder why that is.”

The morning of his death, Morris was feeling ill. He got up to go to work but was coughing and looked pallid. Dennis was stern at first. “You’re not going to work today. You’re sick, look at you, you probably have a fever.”

But Morris took his shower, got dressed, and ate the breakfast Dennis had cooked for him as if nothing was wrong. He never missed work and especially couldn’t now, there were rumors of a promotion and a big raise on the horizon. His superiors and co-workers at Morgan Stanley didn’t know anything about Morris’s sexual preference, and he felt it was none of their business. Back in New Jersey he was ‘out’ – at the clubs and bars, in the way he spoke and dressed, holding hands with Dennis in public. But up in The City, at the big downtown offices, Morris was navy blue suits and wingtips and his hair parted on the side. And so, that day, Dennis deferred. “OK, fine, just make sure you pick up some meds. Take something for that cough.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Morris as he left. “You go back to bed. You don’t have to be at work until ten with your little armoires and ottomans.”

“At least some lozenges,” Dennis called. “That cough sounds really bad.”

Morris hopped into the red Honda and sped off into the early morning. It was supposed to be a beautiful day, perfect fall weather.
Rob sits alone in his apartment, drinking Glenfiddich straight from the bottle. This is something he hasn't done in a long time, not since the beginning. Even in his drunken state, he makes sure to leave a little at the bottom of the bottle for tomorrow's coffee. The coffee is an important routine, a tradition. Like how the black guys in those rap videos talk about pouring some of their malt liquor on the ground for their dead homies. Rob isn't listening to hip-hop, though, he's listening to the *Nebraska* album by Bruce Springsteen, and not the CD, the actual vinyl. It's by far the most depressing and defeatist album in the Springsteen canon, a sparse slate of acoustic tracks recorded in a bedroom in Central Jersey in the months after the election of Ronald Reagan. The song "Atlantic City" is playing, its lyrics detailing a man's moral deterioration as his debts accumulate and he can't find a job. He's telling his female companion (you don't know if it's his wife or his girlfriend or some hooker he's pouring his soul out to) about how "last night I met this guy and I'm gonna do a little favor for him." And he knows he's crossing a line he can't step back from but he's so far down that he begins to consider the idea of reincarnation, saying, "Everything dies, baby, that's a fact, but maybe everything that dies someday comes back." The rest of the album is no reprieve. A mass murderer. A car thief. A guy shoots a night clerk and gets sentenced to ninety-nine years in prison. A young man returns home after years of estrangement, looking for his father, he goes up to the front door of his parents' house, the house he was raised in, and finds that his father doesn't live there anymore. A small boy wishes his parents had the money to drive more than "brand new used cars". The last line of the album is hardly a reassurance, and
perhaps it is even an expression of disbelief, when Springsteen sings, “Still at the end of
every hard-earned day people find some reason to believe.”

Rob places the bottle on the counter next to the kitchen sink, right by the coffee
pot. He knows he’s too intoxicated to drive, but he puts on a jacket, reaches in the pocket
and pulls out the keys. He recalls Elizabeth’s face. Her eyes and lips, and the way he
would brush loose strands of hair out of the way to see the whole of her expression. He
has a moment of pause, not wanting to endanger anyone, to cost somebody their Liz, and
throws his keys across the room onto the couch. At his desk, Rob opens the middle
drawer and rummages through it until he finds a neatly-folded napkin with a phone
number on it, one he’s never actually called, though it’s a person he feels he knows pretty
well. She can help me, he thinks, as he stumbles into the bathroom, wondering if there are
enough aspirin and sleeping pills in his medicine cabinet to get the job done. He doesn’t
want to be a failed suicide, though he believes in his heart that there is no afterlife, no
shining light, no Elizabeth with glowing wings and open arms waiting to embrace him.

“Are you OK, Rob? You sound a little...off.”

“I’m drunk.”

Frank eyes Tara from his recliner, where he sits watching Larry King interview
someone whose daughter has been kidnapped. That same spot where he sat for a week
straight, watching the TV, praying that their daughter would be found alive. They never
found her body, not even remnants. The funeral was conducted over an empty casket, a
blown-up picture matted on black cardboard at the wake.
“Well, what can I do for you? What are you looking for?” she says to Rob. This is the way she talks on the phone at the office. She is conscious of what she’s just said, and knows this isn’t how you’re supposed to speak to people on the phone in ‘real life’. During those first days, when Emma was still ‘missing’, the phone rang non-stop. She got into a habit of letting Frank answer it, or of just letting it ring. When she did answer she didn’t say hello, she didn’t say anything at all, she just closed her eyes and hoped, and waited for the caller to speak.

“I need your help. I think I might try to kill myself tonight. I don’t want to, but what if I get started and can’t stop?”

Tara looks over at her husband. He is paying attention only to the screen of their oversized flat-screen television, his posture leaning forward, and in his face she can see the growing rage as a panel of experts discusses who may be responsible for the missing girl in Iowa, someone else’s daughter. “Where are you, Rob? Are you at home?”

“Yes. But I need to go out.”

“I can pick you up, it’s not that far.” Frank glances up at her again. Tara covers the receiver. “It’s someone from the group,” she informs him.

Frank throws up his arms as if to say – I can’t control my wife, she’s gonna do what she wants to do, but whatever it is, I’m not leaving this chair.

“What’s your address? You’re in Belmar, right?” She carries the handset into the kitchen and takes a pen off the magnetized memo pad stuck to the refrigerator. Tara used to leave messages there for Emma when she was in middle and high school, usually things that needed to be done before Tara got home from work. Even though it was only a list of chores, Tara always signed it, “Love, Mom.”
“Don’t come here,” Rob says. “I’ll give you somewhere else you can meet me. It’ll be safer there.”

“OK, where is it?”

“Seventh Avenue in Belmar, between E and F Street.”

Tara enters through the side door of the church. Rob had propped it open with a stone. He is kneeling at the foot of the bank of candles. Two are lit, both blue. He turns and stands unsteadily. “Come in.”

Rob removes the stone and closes the door behind her. Tara looks around.

“Quiet.” She can smell the alcohol on him. “Here by yourself, I assume?”

“Just me and my memories.”

Tara is unsure of what to say.

“It’s not normal, you know,” says Rob.

“The church being empty?” Tara runs her hand along the chipped and faded lacquer of a pew and surveys the near-darkness.

“No, us. The group. It’s not normal to still be needing it three years later. We should be better by now.”

Tara looks at Rob’s face. In the dim light it is hard to interpret his expression.

“Well, it’s a long process-”

“Oh, come on, Tara. Enough! People lose loved ones all the time. Mothers and fathers lose daughters and sons. Husbands lose wives and wives lose their husbands. Children lose their parents. People get killed every day, especially that day. So what makes us so fucking special?”
Rob slumps his shoulders and looks downward, the defeated expression Tara is familiar with. Though she is not a Christian and this place holds no sacredness for her, it is still a church, and she is surprised to hear him curse here. “But we’re getting better. I think. Isn’t that... Doesn’t that count for something?”

Rob sits down in the nearest pew, Tara stands above him. “I don’t know what it counts for,” he says. “Counts. Like someone’s keeping a tally? A grief scorecard? I don’t think it works that way. I think I’m just weak and pathetic.”

Tara sits down next to him. “Are we all weak and pathetic then? Me? And Dennis and Roy?” She really wants to know the answer. It is something she has wondered herself, if only in more tactful words.

“I don’t know,” Rob mumbles. “I think if Liz could see me now she’d be ashamed. Not touched, not proud.”

“You’re blaming—”

“Myself? No. I’m just tired of waking up feeling the same way. Nothing changes. That’s why we’re not normal. Normal people just heal, naturally, without meeting at some diner on Route Thirty-Six and griping about their woes. Time is supposed to heal all wounds. It doesn’t matter how you lose somebody, it just matters that they’re gone. And normal people come to terms with that. They maybe go to a gravesite on Easter or Christmas, they leave a wreath or some flowers, shed a few tears, and then they get back to living their life. What makes us so different?” He turns to Tara as if she can provide the answer.

Tara nods, thinking. “We all share the same tragedy.” It’s a guess, a suggestion.
“So do a bunch of other people. The people who came to group and stayed for a month or a month and a half and then left.”

“Because they left that means they’re better?” Tara asks. “They’re healed?”

“Maybe they are,” says Rob. “Who are we to judge? Just ‘cause we’re still obsessing over it. Who’s to say we loved any more then they did? The whole thing, the group, it’s kind of arrogant, don’t you think?”

“Well, I don’t know about-”

“I’m sorry,” says Rob. “I don’t mean to be offensive. I know you were the one who started it and everything.”

Tara remains still for a moment, then rises and walks over to the rows of candles.

“Did you light these?”

Rob murmurs in the affirmative.

“Why did you light them if everything we do is pointless and futile?”

“I don’t know. Just a habit. This place makes me feel comfortable, better. That’s how the diner was, at first. A little refuge where I could relate to people who were going through the same thing I was.”

Tara touches the glass cylinder surrounding one of the unlit wicks. “Would you mind if I lit one for my daughter? I’m not a Christian or anything.”

“Go ahead,” says Rob. He stands and moves behind her. “You don’t have to be Catholic or Christian to just light a candle.”

“Well, it is a church, Rob. It’s different than lighting one in my house.” Tara smiles and turns to the candles.
Rob zones in on the back of her hair, the grey she no longer bothers to dye flickering in the half-light. “Don’t worry, go ahead. If you want to light one, light one.”

“Just one, is that the rule?”

“One per person.”

“Who’s your other one for?” She turns around. He’s right behind her, almost touching her.

Rob grins, he does not look down or away. “It’s for me.”

“A candle for the living as well as the dead?” Tara asks, trying to gauge Rob’s mental state.

“Something like that.”

“No,” says Tara, trying again. “What I mean is, you’re planning to be living, right? Rob?”

“For a little while,” he chuckles and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I haven’t done anything to myself. I’m just a little drunk.”

Tara finds great pleasure in his touch. It is gentle and warm. “Does it matter red or blue?”

“Whatsoever you want,” says Rob. “Most people do blue for boys and red for girls but I always thought that was kind of silly. And there’s no official rule about it.”

Tara reaches out and lights a candle in the middle of the red section. Rob’s are both in the blue half, one a row above hers, the other near the bottom. “Do I say a prayer or kneel or what?”

“Most people kneel. Just say a little something. Not like a Hail Mary or an Our Father. Your own little prayer.”
Tara kneels. Rob takes a few steps back. She whispers something he cannot hear and then stands. “Was I supposed to cross myself or...”

“No need to concern yourself with technicalities.” He places an arm lightly around her shoulders. “Come up to the altar, it’s an interesting perspective.”

Rob leads her up to the front of the church where there is a wooden altar draped with a white cloth. They stand behind it, looking down at the empty pews. Up in a tiny balcony at the back of the church sits an ancient-looking organ, rusting away. A new and unopened bottle of Glenfiddich, fresh from the liquor store, lies on its side at Rob’s feet, along with a yellowed piece of paper folded in half.

“Do you come to... services here?” Tara asks.

“Mass? No, not anymore. I used to, maybe one Sunday a month, and a couple of the holy days. I came every Friday, though. Confession. You know, to unburden myself. And ever since Elizabeth, I come here after the group.”

“Really? On Fridays, after you leave us?”

“Yep.”

“I always wonder where you all go, what everyone else does afterwards. I go home and write in my notebook.” Tara smiles, a self-conscious confession of her own. She’s never told anyone about her notebook, not even Frank. “I worry about you, though. I worry about you the most.” She takes his hand. It is a motherly gesture, consoling.

He holds her hand, not knowing what to say.

“That’s a lovely old organ up there,” says Tara. “Looks like it could be an antique. Does it still play?”

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“I don’t think so,” says Rob. “I’ve tried to find a way up there. I like to explore this place when nobody’s around. It’s the curious little kid in me. Going into the back rooms, that sort of thing. I’ve seen all the chalices and serving dishes, you know, for the Eucharist and the wine. Altar boy robes, priest robes, deacon robes. All different colors for the various holidays and seasons. But I’ve never gotten up to that balcony.”

“A shame,” says Tara. “I like religious music, all the...hymns, right? Or is it psalms?”

“Hymns. I, uh, wanted to show you something.” Rob releases Tara’s hand, bends to pick up the objects at his feet and places them on the altar, standing the bottle of Scotch upright. “Not exactly the blood of Christ, I know.” He laughs, thinking he’s made a halfway decent joke, and opens the bottle. “Anyway, do you like Scotch?”

“Not really,” says Tara. “Frank does. Well, he used to, before the doctors said he had to give up alcohol.”

Rob looks at her, listening.

“Frank is my husband. I’ve mentioned him a few times at group.” Tara titters nervously, not the kind of sound a woman her age often makes. “He won’t come with me. I used to try but...But no luck. He drank Scotch sometimes. A different brand, though. Scotch on the rocks.”

Rob tilts the bottle toward her. “You want?”


“Come on,” says Rob, his face pleasant and warm, non-threatening. “Don’t make me drink alone.”
“OK, but only one swig,” says Tara. “I never liked the taste of Frank’s Scotch, but maybe this one is different.” She takes the bottle and looks at the black and gold label, the shiny green glass.

“Isn’t it a pretty bottle?” says Rob.

Tara nods. “Dufftown. In the Highlands of Scotland,” she reads from the bottle. “You know, I’ve never been to Europe,” she says.

“Me neither,” says Rob. “I’ve never flown over an ocean.”

Tara lifts the bottle to her lips and takes a sip. Her mouth twitches a little and her face scrunches up. “Never did like this stuff.” She hands the bottle to Rob. He takes a large gulp, screws the cap back on and returns the bottle to the altar.

Rob picks up the well-worn piece of paper. “I found this stapled to a telephone pole. The night after. Wednesday night. ‘Cause I knew right away. Instinctively. On the surface I was still hoping that the phone would ring and it would be her, that she was still alive, but deep down I already knew, she was gone for good. And I pulled this off the pole and looked at it. It was so sad.” He hands the folded piece of paper to Tara.

Tara opens it. It reads:

LOST
BLANKET

My daughter lost
her special yellow knit
blanket on Sunday morning
We would be VERY HAPPY
to find it! Please call
(908)227-9036

“I never brought this up in group,” says Rob. “I guess it was something I figured the others couldn’t relate to. Elizabeth and I had started talking about kids. Not marriage,
I knew that wasn’t her style, but kids. She was even starting to look through those baby
name books, had her favorites all picked out. And she was always asking me to play
along.”

Tara looks at the paper while listening to Rob, then gingerly places it on the altar.

“‘Come on, Rob,’ Liz would say. ‘Just one name, just say something.’ Or, ‘How
about Bobby?’ she’d say, as a joke. I hate being called Bobby. So eventually I’d always
say the same thing: ‘All I know is that if it’s a girl I’d want to name her Elizabeth.’ And
then she’d blush and get all embarrassed or flattered or whatever. But I meant it. I wanted
to name our daughter after her.”

Tara looks away. She is thinking about how she and Frank deliberated for months
about what to call their daughter. Frank wanted Sara. “Something at least a little Jewish,”
he said. “For my father’s sake, may he rest in peace. But not too Jewish, nothing funny
that’ll make her stand out in school.” Tara wanted anything but Sara. “Come on, Frank,”
she’d say. “A mother and daughter named Tara and Sara? That’s no good.” Frank felt the
name Emma was too generic, too goyish, but eventually he conceded. Tara didn’t tell him
(and never has) that Emma Goldman was the name of a World War One era feminist and
writer, an activist who fought for women’s suffrage and birth control rights. She was also
an early libertarian and anti-war protester. On their way to the hospital, his wife in labor
pains, Frank turned to her from behind the wheel and said, “If it’s a girl, you can have
Emma. But if it’s a boy, it’s Frank junior. Fair?” And Tara said it was.

“I like kids,” Rob continues. “I got little cousins, and I think I have a niece or a
nephew now, out in California. My sister Natalie lives out there. She doesn’t come back
here, to New Jersey. She’s her own person. We don’t talk much. She called that day,
though. That night. Once the phone lines got calmed down a bit she got through. I told her that Elizabeth was missing. She never knew how serious we were. To her, Liz was just her brother’s girlfriend. But we talked every other day or so, for a while. I guess she felt obligated. She knows all my old friends are married or moved away. Said she didn’t think I had a lot of ‘support mechanisms’ around me. It was Natalie who advised me to look for something like the group. Then, that Friday, I was in here, lighting a candle, and I overheard that woman Cheryl mention the thing at the Princess Maria, the first meeting. Once I told Natalie I’d started going to the diner with you guys, she called once a week instead of every other day. Then, after about four weeks, maybe six, I guess she felt I was gonna be alright, so she stopped calling altogether. Her sibling responsibilities were met, her good deed was done.”

Tara picks up the piece of paper again. “That is sad. Poor little girl.” She starts to cry. Rob puts an arm around her. Tara crumples to her knees, drops the piece of paper, and Rob crouches beside her, rubbing her narrow shoulders. “It’s OK. It’s OK.”

“No, you’re right,” she says. “What’s wrong with us? We’re supposed to be adults. We should be stronger,” she sobs. “Stronger than that.”

“Oh, don’t listen to what I said, drunk as I am.”

Tara stands and goes back to the candles. Rob watches, then follows her over, stepping down from the altar after retrieving the piece of paper. He pockets it and moves closer to her.

“People are so stupid,” says Tara. “Like if there’s a god, he’s sitting up in heaven looking down at every little church in every little town in America. It doesn’t do anything. It’s just a flame. A little fire. And then tomorrow somebody else lights a
different fire. And we go through our days and we watch TV and we go to work. Renting people their little cottages, their little beach houses, their escapes. For a week or a month or the whole damn summer. What fun it must be.” She wipes her eyes and sniffles.

“When she was oh, maybe six I think, Emma made friends with this little girl named Annie. The family was from up in Bergen County, the town of Rutherford, I remember that. Frank was in the office when I rented them the house, visiting me on his lunch break like he used to do. They took a place in Point Pleasant, on Atlantic, two blocks off the beach. Frank started talking to the husband, who was the team doctor for the Giants. They went on and on, about football. And the wife was there, and the daughter, Annie. I had Emma with me when I went to give them their keys. I used to take her to work with me a lot back then, during the summers. She loved it, going to the office with Mommy. I wasn’t going to be one of those parents who let their child be raised by some stranger, some babysitter.”

Tara stares at the candle she’s lit. Rob stands behind her, not touching her.

“And this woman, Claire was her name, she was pleasant and friendly, a house mom. Didn’t have to work, her husband made a lot of money. I gave her the keys and she said, ‘Oh, what a beautiful little girl. What’s your name, sweetheart?’ Emma was so shy. She hid behind my leg and looked up at me. ‘This is Emma,’ I said. ‘She’s going into first grade next year.’ And Claire got all excited. ‘Oh, this is my daughter, Annie, she’s going into first grade, too.’ So I showed her around the house and all the little details: how the stove was fussy in that unit, how to open the shutters on the second floor, what days to put out the garbage. And we got to talking, you know, just two married ladies gabbing. And I looked down and Emma was playing with this girl Annie. They seemed to
be getting along and it was nice, a little friend for Emma, who was always so quiet. Claire said we should get together on the weekend. You know, go to the boardwalk and take the kids on the rides and all. Win them stuffed animals, eat hot dogs and cotton candy and salt water taffy. We went every Saturday, all summer. Me and Frank, Claire and her husband, the rich football doctor, and Emma and Annie. Frank loved the boardwalk. He was a show-off. Always trying to hit the bell with the sledgehammer or knock over the bottles with a baseball. And he would spend twenty dollars playing the same number on some stupid wheel, just to win a teddy bear or a box of candy or a little sweatshirt that said Point Pleasant, New Jersey on it.”

Tara lights another candle. She lights the whole row. One big line, straight across.

“It was a good summer. After the boardwalk we’d go back to their rental for drinks. Claire and I would chat about ladies’ stuff, and Frank would carry on with the husband about all the things the Giants needed to do to be better next season. But before we knew it the summer came to an end. It was Labor Day, and we went down to the beach and the boardwalk, same as usual. Afterwards, we went back to their rental, helped them clean up and pack their things. Emma and Annie were playing in the backyard, running all over the house. Children love empty houses. Sometimes, Emma would come with me to inspect the units at the end of the season for the September assessments. She’d hide in the closets and be scared of the basements. She’d jump on the beds and ask me to look in the freezers for left-behind ice cream.”

Tara lights all the candles in the red section, the brightness illuminating her. She turns around and looks, clear-eyed, right at Rob. “So we said our goodbyes and exchanged phone numbers. They told us they’d try to get the four of us tickets for the
first Giants home game. We could go to the game and then afterwards maybe out for dinner and drinks. We said that would be great. We told Emma to say goodbye, that she wouldn’t be seeing Annie anymore on the weekends. They waved to each other, you know how little kids do, but I guess she didn’t really get it. The concept, it didn’t sink in. So, the next Saturday, she wanted to know why her friend Annie wasn’t coming over. ‘Why no boardwalk? Why no beach?’ And that Monday was the first day of school and Emma cried and cried. ‘Where’s Annie!’ she screamed. ‘I want to go to school with Annie. I’m not going alone, I’m not going alone!’ She threw a real fit, my little daughter. I brought her down to the school but she flopped on the ground and squealed and turned red, tears streaming out of her like a faucet.”

Tara sits on the kneeler at the foot of the candles, her back to them.

“So we went through that, Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday. And I would always give in and take her to work with me, to the office. She just sat in a corner. I tried to get her to draw in her coloring book or look at her Highlights magazines, but she didn’t want to do anything. It was like a protest.

“The school said they couldn’t take her inside hysterical like that. Not that I would have left her, but they said I had to get her under control. They couldn’t have a little girl freaking out in the middle of the first grade classroom, it would upset the other children. Frank always said that school and Emma’s academic progress was my job, that he didn’t know about kids the way I did. The way a mother does, that was how he phrased it. But Thursday morning came and Emma was already crying at the breakfast table, so he called into work and said he’d be late, and he told Emma that he would take her to school that day.
“They walked out to his car, she was still sobbing and crying, and he put her in the front seat and backed out of the driveway. Then he stopped the car, right there in the middle of the street. Got out and went over to the passenger side, opened up the door and told Emma to get out. She did. He took her little hand and walked her back to his side of the car. I was watching it all from the window. He said it was better not to have me around; it might distract her, a mother’s presence. Then he got back in and sat Emma on his lap and told her she could drive the car.”

Tara stands up and dabs her eyes, backlit by the wall of burning candles.

“You see, Emma’s favorite ride that summer was these carnival cars that just sort of went around in a circle. Little miniature cars and motorcycles and convertibles and pick-up trucks. And they would go up and down a little bit on these ramps and you could turn the steering wheels and honk the horns and rev the handles on the motorcycles. That was the first ride her and Annie went on, every weekend. Sometimes they’d sit in the same car, sometimes they’d go on different ones and pretend one was chasing the other. Sometimes – you know how it gets down here on the holiday weekends – sometimes it would be pretty crowded and there would be a line, and the people who ran the ride told them to share a car with other people’s children, because some of the vehicles could fit three or four kids. But Emma hated that. She would get out of the car they put her in and move to another one with Annie, one that only held two people.

“So there I am, looking out the window, and Frank put her little hands up on the steering wheel of his car, a big old Cadillac we had then, a blue one. Annie always loved fiddling with the power windows and the ashtrays that lit up inside when you opened the lid. I couldn’t see her face that day, as Frank stepped down on the gas pedal and they
drove off down our street, real slow. He said he let her drive two or three blocks, all by herself, didn’t put his hands on the wheel once. You know how it is once the summer ends, the streets are empty. He said she swerved a bit but he never had to grab the wheel. He just said, ‘Straighten it out there, captain’, and Emma did. And from that point on she went to school fine. I took her the next day, a Friday, and that was that.”

“That’s a great story,” says Rob. He goes over and extends a hand to Tara. She takes it and inhales, a deep breath.

“We all have stories, Rob. That girl who lost her blanket. I know how that mother felt. Desperate. So desperate she went around tacking up posters on telephone poles. I can relate to that mother. And I can relate to you, and how you feel about Elizabeth, how much you miss her. Your Liz. And Dennis and Roy have their stories too, we’ve heard them. And the ones they haven’t told us, they’re still there. They’re still important, aren’t they?”

Rob drops her hand and looks at the shining bank of candles. “How come you only lit the red ones?”

Tara smiles. “I didn’t want to impose on you and Liz over there in the blue section. Figured I’d let those two stand out a bit.”

Rob nods. “Did you ever get to that Giants game?”

“No, and they never called. Claire and her husband. Damn Bennys. Emma would still bring up Annie’s name every now and then. Took her over a year to forget. Through the next summer. We still took her to the boardwalk a lot, and Frank still played all the stands and games, and Emma went on the kiddie rides by herself.”

“You never had other children?”
“No. Just Emma. I um, I think I’m gonna go now, Rob. You alright?”

“Yeah. I feel a lot better. Thanks so much for coming. Let me walk you to your car.”

“Don’t you need your Scotch?”

“Nah, I’ll leave it for the priests. They must get tired of cheap red wine all the time, even if it is the blood of Christ.”

Tara laughs, then realizes where she is and covers her mouth.

“Maybe I’ll go back to just regular coffee in the mornings,” says Rob. “Change my routine.”

“Oh, right, you were telling the group you drink that stuff in the morning.” Tara winces.

Rob walks over and holds the door open for her. “In my coffee, with cinnamon, not straight up.”

“I remember.” She smiles and her teeth chatter. “Cold out here. Winter’s come.” She starts to shiver and wraps her arms around herself. “Is it alright we left all those candles burning?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Rob stands beside her, hands in his pockets. “Well, thanks again for coming down. I’m sure a suicide intervention isn’t the best phone call to get in the middle of the night. So really, thanks.”

“No problem,” says Tara. “You’re a sweet man, Rob. Tonight was just an extension of the group. Finding something to live for, that’s what the group is for, right? But I don’t know if that’s enough. For you, for me, for any of us.”
“No, it’s not enough. But I’ll be there on Friday. I like hearing what Roy and Dennis are up to. It’s nice having a little circle like that. You need friends in this world. Me and Roy keep talking about catching a basketball game or something, go up and see the Knicks or the Nets, or maybe the Sixers down in Philly. And Dennis is always saying I should check out a concert in Asbury Park. He can’t believe a Jersey Shore native like me has never been to the Stone Pony. Supposedly Asbury isn’t as bad as it used to be, they’re trying to build it up again. Bunch of people been giving money for a restoration project. Springsteen donated a million, I heard. I’ve been hesitant to ask them, though, to go do something together. I’ve always thought it was important to keep it in the diner, in the group. Suicide Watch, that’s how I used to think of it.”

Tara laughs. “That’s morbid. I think of it as Sufferers, Incorporated. That’s not much better, is it?”

“I’m changing how I think of it, though,” says Rob. “Maybe we should view it more as just a group of friends.”

“Maybe,” says Tara. “Anyway, it’s too cold to talk about it now. I’ll see you on Friday, we’ll make that the first order of business – What is the group? Where do we want it to go? So it doesn’t become stagnant.”

Rob nods. “Sounds good. See you then.”

They walk away from each other. I should’ve asked her for a ride, Rob thinks, realizing that he doesn’t have his truck, that he walked here, that it’s freezing. After a bitter-cold walk across Belmar he enters his apartment and turns up the heat. He grabs the bottle of Scotch and finishes its contents in one gulp, then tosses the bottle in the trash. The Nebraska album he’d been listening to is still on the turntable. Rob removes it, puts
it back into its sleeve and turns the stereo off. The mood just isn’t right anymore. Rob never bought Bruce’s most recent album, for the same reason he doesn’t go to Federico’s, or the Squan Tavern, or Main Street Cheese Steaks. Too close to Elizabeth, too personal. But maybe tomorrow, he thinks, I’ll start something different, a new routine. Plain coffee. Maybe a cheese steak for lunch, or a couple of slices. Maybe head down to the local record store and pick up that last Springsteen album, the one about rising up, about overcoming what happened on that sad autumn Tuesday.
Serena was a wobbly, penguin-like child. Quiet and shy. Recently turned four years old, and talked very little for that age.

"Why did you have to name her Serena?" asked the husband.

"Why did I name her? I thought it was a joint decision."

Janice, a petite woman of five feet in height, puffed her cigarette, in rare disregard for the pre-arranged rules about which rooms in their house were smoking-friendly and in which the practice was banned. She had quit smoking almost completely during her pregnancy, allowing herself only nine cigarettes, one each month, at the counter of the Empire Diner in Parsippany, New Jersey. Even during the last two months, on leave from work, she maintained this practice. She went in the afternoons and sat at the counter, the second stool from the end. Only once was it occupied, forcing her to wait for a retired truck driver named Ed to finish kibitzing with two of the waitresses, Henrietta and Josephine. Janice had a routine. She sat there and ordered a cup of black coffee, smoked her one cigarette, a Parliament, and bought some strawberry Twizzlers on the way out. Her husband Richard detested her smoking but accepted it as long as she agreed to the condition that it be done only in areas not frequented by their only child. This relegated Janice’s habit to their bedroom, the adjoining half-bathroom, and the backyard. He also asked her never to smoke in front of Serena, and she concurred. Janice was a rather
chipper woman of twenty-eight years, and though her face was beginning to show subtle lines and wrinkles, her high-pitched voice and pixieish countenance made her appear young for her age.

Richard, a full decade older than his wife, looked younger than his age as well, despite a silver-flecked beard and unstylish glasses, and his wardrobe was almost always casual. He was often seen around town, stopping to talk with local teenagers outside Forest Deli or Dunkin Donuts, discussing music or movies or general affairs with individuals half his age, and with no self-consciousness whatsoever. He played softball for the regional phone company, where he had been employed for just under twenty years. He took losses in the playoffs of his softball league hard, falling into a minor depression for a day or two after a particularly tough defeat. The thing Richard took most pride in was the general vigor with which he lived his life, coupled with the fact that he was merely a high school graduate. He'd never attended college, and never wanted to. In high school his grades were unremarkable, his after-school hours spent nearly exclusively at Cappy's Pool Hall in Morristown where, along with his brother Robert and an assortment of wannabe hooligans, he matured into quite the pool shark. He first visited Cappy's after he quit football his freshman year, despite varsity-level athletic talent, because he didn't get along with the coach. From that point on, Richard found himself disinterested in team sports and he did not participate in them until just three years ago, a year after Serena was born, when some of the younger guys in his garage started up the softball team in the summer. What gave him such joy in his work league games was the camaraderie of a bunch of guys, and one woman, managing and coaching themselves. This reflected his hands-off approach to parenting.
"OK, fine, you’re right," he told his wife. "I don’t even mean it in a negative way. It’s just that she doesn’t look like a Serena to me."

Janice stubbed out her cigarette in a copper-colored ashtray that had been in the house when they bought it. "What does she look like?"

Richard smirked.

"Besides a penguin," said Janice.

"Hey, it’s not a put-down. Penguins are cool."

"Yeah, they’re cool alright." His wife tapped her foot at him, an endearing gesture from their younger, pre-marriage, pre-Serena days indicating that Janice was attempting to scold her husband while also enjoying his boyish sense of humor. "But really, Richard, what does she look like then?"

"I don’t know. I just know what she doesn’t look like."

Serena’s speech was clear, but slow and halting, lacking the fluidity that most children achieve by the start of year four. Her voice was a staccato sing-song that often had the effect of making the listener believe that more was to come. As soon as Serena received any attention, as soon as she knew an adult was listening to her, waiting for her to continue, at that precise moment she ceased talking, often turning her back on the listener and wobbling off to some unrelated task.

Recently, Janice had been spying on the child while she was asleep. She’d roll out of bed, careful not to wake Richard, and slip into her daughter’s room. Serena never talked when she napped during the day, only when she slept in her bed at night. Serena mumbled in her sleep, but very few words were clear to Janice. The words were usually

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slurred, though Serena’s mother had caught a couple of clear ones, notably “ducks” and “fire engine”. These two in particular had recurred on multiple occasions.

Mother and daughter were attending one of Richard’s softball games, Janice seated in the bleachers of Diamond #1 at the county park on River Road. Serena paid little attention to the game, and her mother let her roam around but kept a watchful eye. A lot of the other wives were there, many of them around the same age as Janice. They all knew each other, these locals who went to the same high school, the same grammar schools. Janice was an import, originally from Northeastern Pennsylvania. Richard was the local, but he was considerably older than these women and their husbands. He knew some of them – a tall redhead named Samantha who was referred to as Sammie and a tough-looking Greek woman who everybody called Scoots – but even in those cases Richard knew them only casually, usually through their older siblings. Janice was the outsider. They weren’t unfriendly to her, but they seemed to relish discussion about a shared past she wasn’t part of. She longed to share a cigarette with them as they stood in a tight-knit circle, discussing their children, but her agreement with Richard about not smoking in front of Serena kept her from indulging this communal wish.

The crack of the bat was followed by a foul ball whizzing just past a small boy of four named Dylan, Sammie’s son. Her long, curly red hair bobbed as she ran up to the boy and grabbed him by the arm. She smacked his hand, a reprimand for playing too close to the field. He had been carving lines in the dirt with his toy cars as Serena stood above him, observing. Janice approached her daughter.

“Hey, sweetie. You were watching Dylan play with his cars and trucks?”
Serena nodded. Her mother brushed dirt from the front of Serena’s pink overalls.

“What was he doing with them?”

“He made shapes,” was Serena’s guttural response.

Janice crouched down, placing her back between the playing field and her daughter. “What kind of shapes did he make?”

The ground where Dylan had been playing was a spiraling collection of curlicues and figure eights. Mother and daughter stared down in silence.

“What’s that?” asked Janice, pointing to a large circular portion.

Serena gave no reply.

“That’s a circle. Remember circles?”

A continued downward gaze was her daughter’s only reply.

Janice scratched an obvious square into the ground with a long but unpainted fingernail. “How about that one? What’s that called?”

“Sk-ware,” Serena said immediately.

“Good. Good girl. Smart girl.”

Serena did not smile or show any recognition that she was being praised.

“Now what’s this?” Janice pointed back to the circle.

Serena looked down at the spot, then back up at her mother’s face, but said nothing.

“Come on, mommy just told you. It’s a cirrr…”

After a few seconds it was clear that Serena was not going to give the desired response.

Another crack, followed by a cheer from the small gathering in the stands. Someone on the opposing team had hit a home run.

“Well, they’re the best team in the league, Molly’s Tavern,” said Richard, while driving. “Boy, they could hit.”

“You don’t seem too upset,” said his wife. “That’s good.”

“Can’t get upset when you’re just overmatched. I mean, some of those kids played in college not that long ago. That guy Baker played for Rutgers. Nicky Alongi’s brother, the shortstop, he played at F.D.U. They should be able to beat us, some hodgepodge phone company guys. Hell, even their uniforms were top notch. They had colored socks and everything, not just a t-shirt with a number on the back like our little team.”

“At least you went two for four. Hear that, Serena? Daddy had two hits tonight.”

Serena rubbed the sides of her car seat with her hands. Hits and their relative goodness in the world of men’s league softball made no impression on her calm, contemplative demeanor.

“You want to go for some ice cream?” asked her father, glancing in the rearview mirror.

“No,” said Serena. “No ice-keem.”

“Hmm,” her mother huffed. “That’s a new one.” She turned around and looked at her daughter. “You don’t want ice cream?”
Serena shook her head.

“You still wanna go?” Richard asked his wife.

“Yeah. Maybe she’ll change her mind when we get there.”

“No ice-keem,” said Serena, unprompted.

The parents exchanged one of their customary ‘kids are weird and never stop surprising you’ glances.

“Our daughter seems rather opposed to the idea of ice cream,” said Richard.

“No ice-keem,” Serena said again, more forcefully.

“Geez. OK, we won’t go then,” said her mother.

They drove in silence for a few blocks, past Main Street, which was home to Jim Dandy’s, the local ice cream establishment, and headed back toward their house. At a stop sign, with no cars behind them, Richard turned to face his daughter. “Last chance for ice-”

“No ice-keem!” Serena banged the metal sides of the car seat with her fists.

Richard pulled his head back around and faced the road. “OK then, the little lady in the car seat has spoken. No ice-keem.”

Janice glared at him. She had asked him not to mimic their daughter’s baby talk. The doctor said it stunted verbal development.

Richard lifted his foot and the car began to drift toward the intersection, but instead of accelerating he pressed back down on the brake. “Do you want to go somewhere else?” He looked at his daughter in the rearview mirror. No response. “You want to go to the diner, hun?” he asked his wife.
“The diner? Where all your teammates go with their wives who don’t know me. And they talk about Parsippany High, and the roller rink, and Gametown, and the mall, and Greenie’s parties, and whatever else you people did around here growing up.”

“So? We’ll just say hi and then get our own table. Or we can sit at the counter.”

A car pulled up behind them. Richard put on his left blinker, his mind already made up.

“Alright, fine,” said Janice. “We’re going to the diner, missy,” she said to Serena, turning around again to study her daughter’s expression. “That OK with you?”

Serena clapped her pudgy little hands and giggled.

The Empire Diner, located on Route 46 East in Parsippany, New Jersey, was an exceptional diner. There were no video games or cigarette machines in the lobby. The chandeliers looked almost ornate. The water glasses were thick crystalline tumblers, not yellow-tinted relics that went out of style in the early 1960s. What it lacked in ‘character’ it made up for in genuine cleanliness, a feeling that the glass, brass and Formica were all scrubbed on a regular basis.

A few members of Richard’s team sat with their wives around a large table in the rear. He waved to them as he stood patiently beside Janice and Serena, following the instructions of the Wait To Be Seated sign. Not the typical white lettering on brown cardboard like most diners; this sign was a black felt letterboard, the kind you would see outside a hotel meeting room or a wedding hall. A distinctively Italian-looking woman walked over, sharply dressed in stockings and high heels.
“Good evening. Welcome to the Empire Diner. Where would you care to sit tonight, smoking or non?”

“Non,” said Richard.

The woman turned toward the dining area on their left, where Richard’s teammates were stationed along with an elderly couple and a family with two pre-adolescent children.

“Actually,” Janice said, nodding toward the right, “Would it be possible to get at a booth, by the windows?”

“Of course. That’s the smoking section, but I can put you at a big corner table and keep a table or two in between. How’s that sound?” She turned and crossed over to the more traditional-looking side of the diner, booths lined up against the windows, no tables and chairs.

“Do you mind?” Janice asked her husband. “You know I always feel more comfortable in a booth.”

“Sure. They’re more private anyway.”

The Italian woman, who looked to be about forty, with perfectly applied make-up, smiled another broad red smile and strode toward the booths. Janice and Richard followed. Serena did not.

“Come on, sweetie,” said Janice. “We’re gonna sit in a booth.”

Serena remained still, staring straight ahead, moving neither toward the L-shaped smoking section of booths, nor toward the more spacious non-smoking room of tables and chairs and Richard’s teammates. The Italian woman stopped just before the turn in the L. Behind her stood Richard, then Janice. All of them looked back at the stubbornly
motionless little girl in the pink overalls. Janice whispered a “sorry” to the Italian woman as she scuttled back to collect her daughter. But Serena fled, past the Wait To Be Seated sign, past the cash register with the bottles of alcohol behind it and the array of gum and cigarettes and candy bars beneath, past the twirling, glass-enclosed tower of cakes and pies. She ran right up to the counter, where a middle-aged waitress with limp blonde hair and a name tag identifying her as Angela peered down at the girl, as did the lone customer sitting there, a youngish man with pale skin and a receding hairline who, stirred by the kinetic scene, looked up from the pages of the entertainment magazine he was reading.

“Come on, silly,” said Janice, lightly encircling her daughter’s wrist with her thumb and forefinger. “Let’s go.” She gave a little tug but Serena yanked free of her mother’s grasp and grabbed onto the silver stem of one of the stools at the counter, the second from the end.

“She wants to sit at the counter,” Richard called.

“Well I want to sit in a booth, remember?”

“Oh come on,” he said, walking over with a grin on his face. “What’s the difference? It’ll be fun. We can order I-C-E-C-R-E-A-M sodas. Just like at an old-time soda fountain shoppe.”

Serena was fiercely gripping the base of the stool, her hands reddening from the effort.

“Fine,” said Janice, defeated. “You win, I’m outnumbered.” She took the seat at the end of the counter.
“Relax there, killer,” Richard said to his daughter, squeezing her around the waist. “You look like you’re trying to choke that thing.” He lifted her up over the back of the seat, her fingerprints clearly embossed on the shiny cylindrical stem. “There you go, right between me and mommy.” He placed her chubby derriere into the back of the stool, right where the thick round seat met three vertical silver backings. “Hey, you fit in there pretty good.”

Richard sat down on his daughter’s left. Serena plopped her hands onto the speckled black Formica counter, which for her was just above shoulder height.

“Can you see OK? Or do you want to sit on mommy’s lap?” Janice reached for her daughter’s waist.

Serena held up her right hand. “No, mommy, I’m fine. I can see. There’s cereals right over there.” She pointed to a case behind the counter which held, along with a honey dew and two cantaloupes, several single-serving boxes of cereal. “Frosted Flakes, Captain Crunch, Special K like daddy eats.”

Richard and Janice stared at the tiny cereal boxes a good five or six feet away, behind glass.

“Rice Krispies, Total.” She was naming them in order, from left to right. “Apple Jacks, Cheerios. And they’re missing one.”

At the end of the line was an empty space.

“Pretty good eyesight there,” said Angela. “You sure know your cereal, cutie pie.”

Besides the waitress being noticeably impressed, Richard felt the presence of the young man, eavesdropping on this cereal-listing girl and paying little attention to his magazine.
“I guess she really wanted to sit at the counter,” said the Italian hostess, who positioned herself at the cash register as the older couple from the non-smoking section approached to pay their check.

“Yeah, I guess,” Janice mumbled, to no one in particular. She looked at Angela’s narrow face. “She isn’t usually this talkative.” She turned to Richard. “Especially in front of strangers.”

He scratched his beard and adjusted his glasses. “Guess she’s glad she’s at the diner, sitting at the counter.”

“What can I get you all to drink?” Angela asked. She filled in a sugar dish with little packets of Equal, Sweet ‘n Low and regular sugar, reordered the danishes, muffins and bagels, and told the magazine-reader that his sandwich would be out in a minute. All as she awaited her customers’ responses.

“I’ll just have a water to start,” said Richard. “How ‘bout you, pumpkin?” he asked his daughter. “What do you want to drink?”

Serena looked right at Angela. “Coffee,” she said loudly.

The waitress laughed out loud. Richard could feel the magazine guy’s attention again, but he laughed amiably, as did his wife. Janice saw the young man smirk and felt pleased that the stranger couldn’t help but laugh at her suddenly humorous daughter.

“You’re just full of surprises tonight, miss talkative. I think you’ve already exceeded your word quota for the week.”

Richard felt that he needed to explain the situation to Angela. “I’m on the same team as that table in back,” he pulled at the front of his uniform, “They always come here after games. But we usually take this one here for uh,” he paused, “for ice cream, at Jim

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Dandy’s over on Main Street. But tonight she said she didn’t want any, so we came here.”

Serena was nodding. When it was clear that her father was finished speaking she looked at the waitress again. “Black,” she stated.

“Black what?” Angela replied, looking down at the countertop. “This here?” She scrawled an extra-long fingernail across the Formica. “Right, this is black. Colors and cereals she knows.” She looked at Janice, a congratulatory gesture between mothers. “How old is she?” she asked Richard, not wanting to ignore him.

“She’s-”

“Let her answer,” Janice interrupted. “The doctor said it’s better to let children respond for themselves.”

They all turned to Serena, who held out her right hand, palm up, and proceeded to count off each of her fingers, starting with the pinky. “One-two-three-four.”

Angela shook her head in admiration. “And you look young for your age.” She smiled at her own attempt at humor. “But I don’t think your parents want you drinking coffee.”

“No black?” Serena inquired.

“No coffee,” said her mother. She paused though, just for a second, a thought passing through a mind. “Hmm. Well, actually, I could go for a cup, but I think you’re better off with a soda. You want a soda?”

“Soda brown,” said Serena.

“Right, soda’s brown. You want a Coke then?”

Serena shrugged. “No black. I want a Coke then,” she told the waitress.
“Sure thing. Hold that thought.” She darted back into the kitchen and seconds later reemerged, placing a hot roast beef sandwich in front of the young man, who had become re-engrossed in his magazine. “Here you go, roast beef sand with gravy on the side.” Angela returned her attention to the family. “So, one Coke, one water, and did you want that coffee?” she asked Janice.

“Um, I usually don’t drink coffee at night, but yeah, why not? You guys have good coffee.”

“I’ll take it!” Angela yelled to the Italian woman, who was leading a group of three older men to the smoking section. “Put ‘em at table fourteen.” She picked up a glass, scooped in some ice, squirted in the Coke and placed it in front of Serena. “Here you go, sweetheart.” With her free hand she was already pouring Richard’s water from a tall jug.

“Thank you,” Serena said politely.

Angela handed Richard his water. “One water for the gentleman. And how do you take your coffee, ma’am?”

The lonely reader had closed his magazine and was enjoying his roast beef sandwich. His gaze drifted over to the family on his right.

“Black,” said the mother.

Richard had just orgasmed inside his wife from the doggy-style position. This was out of character for them. Janice liked it when he came while on top of her, in missionary. She also enjoyed making him ejaculate in her mouth. But never during sex from behind. Couldn’t see his face that way, and she loved his expressions. Not in a demeaning ‘my
husband makes stupid faces when he comes’ sort of way, but just because she felt that it was now an integral part of the experience for her, something she had gotten used to. A pattern.

After returning from the bathroom in his boxers, Richard sat on the edge of the bed. “That was something at the diner, huh?”

Janice, who had retreated under the covers, sat up against the headboard and stroked her husband’s bare back. “With Serena? Yeah. She was a regular miss chatterbox.”

“We didn’t get the ice cream sodas.”

Janice massaged Richard’s broad, rugged-looking shoulders. “No. No we didn’t.”

“It was nice, though.” He paused, taking a deeper breath than normal. “Hearing her talk like that.”

“Yeah, it was. She’s just a late bloomer with talking. She’s pretty much potty-trained now. Finally.”

Richard sniffled. His voice cracked when he spoke. “I was, I was really starting to, you know.” He was holding in his feelings, on the verge of crying.

Janice swung her legs out and put an arm around Richard. “What’s the matter? Are you upset?”

She was upset. Richard had only cried in front of her a few times, mostly before they were married. There were a lot of occasions when he got moody, or sad, or depressed, but he almost never cried.

He looked at her, eyes glassy. “I just thought...I was starting to think that, that, that maybe she had a learning disability or something.” He sniffled again.
“Oh, no, honey, the doctor said she was just shy. Remember?”

Richard sighed and rubbed his eyes, wiping the moisture away. “I know. I just, I
don’t know what I would’ve done. If she was, you know, slow. Not that I would love her
any less.” His back straightened, the traditional masculinity returning.

“Oh course not.” Janice stroked his neck, right beneath the hairline. “Of course
not.”

“It’s been a week, and she’s said all of about five words to me. I don’t know what
she says to you in the daytime, but she’s a mute when I’m around.”

Janice smoked her cigarette, a Newport Light, and stared at the driveway. Serena
was napping inside.

“Well?” her husband continued.

“Well what?” She snuffed out the butt in an orange plastic ashtray.

“Does she talk during the day?”

“Not much.”

“How about at the park, with the other children? Maybe she just doesn’t like
talking to adults.”

“She plays well enough. The other children are generally nice to her. Even though
the other day some kid took her pail in the sandbox. But Serena just waited until the boy
got bored, and when he went to play on the monkey bars she took it back. When he tried
to take it again she covered it with her arms. He made one grab at it but she pulled it
away. She’s pretty strong. Didn’t say a word, though.”
“Great.” Richard twirled his softball bat and sat down in a patio chair across from his wife, under the yellow and periwinkle striped umbrella of their backyard table.

“She’s just not a talker, Richard. It doesn’t mean she’s not…intelligent.”

He shook his head. “Whatever.”

“Fine, whatever then.”

Richard glanced at his wife’s wrist and nodded, an unspoken inquiry.

“Five forty-five,” she said.

“Alright, let me get down to the field. You guys gonna come watch me tonight?”

“If you want.”

He stood up and headed for the driveway. “OK. See you then.”

“Your daddy won tonight,” Janice said to Serena, who was seated on the roof of her father’s car. “When he comes over, say ‘Yaaayyy, daddy!’ OK?”

Richard sauntered over, waving goodbye to a couple of his teammates. “Hey silly, what are you doing on the roof?” He picked Serena up and swung her around. She did not smile or respond in any way. Her father placed her lightly on her feet. Her mother looked at her expectantly.

Serena said nothing.

“Congratulations mister big winner,” Janice said, holding out her hand for a high five. She looked extremely youthful in this pose. Richard tapped her tiny hand with his palm.

“Can you give your daddy a high five?” Janice asked, modeling the youthful gesture again, hoping her daughter might copy it.
Serena waddled to the car and put her hand on the rear door handle.

Richard shrugged and walked over, then opened the door for Serena. “Hop in, sweetheart.”

Serena scrambled up into her car seat, a child repeating a routine. Janice strolled around and got in the passenger side. Richard stood outside an extra couple of seconds, watching his daughter. She was oblivious to the man on the other side of the glass as Janice buckled her in. Richard joined them inside the car and turned the ignition.

“Let’s get a little A.C. in here.” He turned on the air conditioning. “Warm out tonight.”

“Yeah. You made some really good plays,” said his wife, smiling.

“Eh, I got up six times and only got one hit. That’s pretty crappy for softball.”

“But you guys killed ‘em. Fourteen to six. And that one catch you made was really good. Everyone cheered. Defense is just as important as batting, right?”

“I suppose. I think most people, when they play softball, or baseball, I think they mostly look forward to hitting. That’s your moment to shine. You’re all alone up there. Everybody’s watching you. You only get to do it a few times each game. I think that’s what people who play live for. That moment in the batter’s box when the pitch is coming in and you get to swing the bat. In the field it’s easy to daydream, drift off. You think about your day, you look in the stands for your girlfriend or your family or your friends. But when you’re up at bat you’re concentrating, hard. You don’t care about the boss, or the mortgage, or the car payment. You just care about hitting the ball. It’s peaceful and filled with tension all at once.”

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“Very philosophical,” said his wife. “What do you think, funny face?” she said to her daughter. “You like hitting better? Or fielding?”

Richard scrutinized his daughter in the rearview mirror. Serena shrugged. At least it was a response.

“So where do you want to go tonight, Serena?” he asked. “Ice cream or the diner?”

Serena squinted into the rearview mirror. Her expression was clear to Richard. It said: What are you, a dummy? You know the answer to that question.

Janice turned around and took her daughter’s hand. “Daddy asked you a question, Serena. Where do you-”

“She wants to go to the diner,” Richard cut in. His statement exuded confidence. Serena squeezed her mother’s hand, a squeeze of expectation.

“Angela’s working the non-smoking,” said Josephine, their waitress, a portly woman in her fifties with obviously dyed black hair. “And Henrietta’s got the smoking section. Just the three of us on tonight. Been pretty busy but it’s dying down now.”

“Oh,” said Richard, disappointed that Angela wasn’t working the counter. Serena had sprinted up to the same stool again and they had managed to commandeer the same seats at the end of the counter. Richard, attempting to recreate the circumstances of his daughter’s ‘coming out’ last week, was worried that this new, older and less extroverted waitress might hamper his daughter’s willingness to be as chirpy and astute as she was on their previous visit.

“What can I get you to drink?” Josephine asked.
"A water for me." Richard looked over at Janice, hoping his face would convey that he wanted her to order the same thing as last time.

"Coffee; black, please," said his wife, assuaging his worries.

Both parents looked at Serena, as did the waitress.

"Josephine," Serena said with enthusiasm, pointing at the woman’s name tag.

The older woman cracked a smile. "Yep, that’s me, kiddo. Good reader," she said for the parents’ enjoyment. "Especially at such a young age. Even knew how to say the P-H."

Richard smiled.

Josephine leaned into the counter. "And what’s your name?"

"Serene."

"That’s an interesting name. Pretty."

"Seren-a, actually," said Janice.

Her daughter frowned up at her, only for a second, then turned back to Josephine.

"And what do you want to drink?" the waitress asked.

Serena patted the counter with her hands. "Ice cream sodas."

"Alrighty. A water, a black coffee, and an ice cream soda." She looked to the parents for approval, making sure it was OK.

"Sodas, sodas," sang Serena, patting the countertop some more.

Richard was ecstatic that his daughter was speaking eloquently again. "Actually, give us three ice cream sodas," he said. "Make mine chocolate."

Janice played along. "Um, do you have strawberry?"

"Sure."
"What kind do you want, Serena?" asked Janice. "What flavor ice cream?"

"Coffee." Serena giggled at her mother.

Josephine again waited for parental approval.

"Sounds good," Richard said, beaming.

"Alrighty," said Josephine.

Angela came walking by as Josephine prepared the family’s order. Richard made sure to catch her eye.

"Hey, it’s the perfect family. You guys won tonight, huh?" she asked, nodding at his uniform shirt, bright orange with a black silhouette of an old-fashioned rotary telephone.

"Yeah. Big win."

"Guys in back are happy. Michelle Rios had two home runs they said."

"She’s one of our better players."

"And how’re you doing?" she asked Serena, placing her hand on the back of the child’s stool.

"Good. We’re getting ice cream sodas."

Angela laughed. "She’s a pip." She waited for a group of three teenagers, two boys and a girl, to file behind her, and then followed them to the register. "I’ll ring you guys up," she said.

The lead teenager paid the check, took the change and handed it to the other male in the group. "Tip, man."
The other boy scurried over to their table and left a few bills and some change before walking back, slower, working on his masculine stride. “You got cigs, bro?” he asked.

The lead teenager pulled a pack of Marlboro Reds from one of the many pockets of his baggy shorts. “I got two left. You got any, Marla?”

Marla shook her head. “Get a pack of Parliaments,” she said as the strutter returned to the group. “You got enough money?”

“Give me a couple bucks,” he said. Marla looked to the lead boy, who pulled two singles out of his wallet and handed them to her. She then handed them to the strutter.

“Pack of Parliaments, please,” he requested of Angela.

From her seat at the counter, Serena spun around in her stool and watched the transaction at the register. “Parliaments,” she said aloud, spinning back around to face the counter as the teenagers made their exit.

“Yeah, they bought Parliaments,” said Richard. “Bad habits start early.” He winked at his wife.

“Mommy cigarettes,” said Serena.

Richard looked at his wife. Josephine brought over their initial drink order, Richard’s water and Janice’s coffee. “Ice cream sodas’ll be up in a sec.”

“Mommy cigarettes?” Richard asked his daughter.

Serena nodded.

As far as Richard knew, his wife had been faithful in keeping to the rule that she not smoke in front of their daughter. Janice threw up her hands. “I don’t know where she got that idea.”
Richard, still elated by his daughter’s newfound loquaciousness, remained calm. He truly believed that his wife would not smoke in front of Serena. And as far as Janice could remember, she never had. “Maybe she saw a pack lying around somewhere,” said Richard, trying to lead Janice to confirm this theory.

“Maybe,” she said, an expression of genuine puzzlement on her face. “She could have gotten into my purse or something.” Janice looked down at Serena, who was staring straight ahead, arms up on the Formica countertop. “But I don’t even smoke Parliaments,” she whispered to her husband, behind the back of her daughter’s seat. “All I ever smoke is Newport Lights, you know that.”

Richard’s face was skeptical. “Talkative doesn’t mean right I guess.”

“I haven’t smoked Parliaments since before she was born.”

“Wish I knew,” said Richard, who had just been orally satisfied by his wife. “Do you think that diner has significance to her somehow? I mean, if we took her to a different diner, not that we would, but if we did, would she be just as chatty?”

Janice stood in the bathroom, rinsing her mouth after brushing her teeth. She spat into the sink. “I dunno. Maybe. We should take her tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, back to the Empire. To see if she talks. Maybe it’s only—”

“No no no. We can’t break the pattern. We’ll wait until next week’s game, on Monday.”

“What if she gets talkative before then?” Janice climbed on top of her husband and kissed him on the mouth.
Richard stroked her hair and tickled the back of her neck. "I doubt it."

Janice rolled onto her side of the bed and pulled a cigarette from the pack of Newport Lights in the drawer of her bedside table.

"How can you smoke right after brushing your teeth?"

His wife lit her cigarette and took a drag. She shrugged, then got up and walked over to the half-open window.

"Well," said Richard, "I'm curious to see what happens next Monday."

"We're still going to the mall on Saturday, right?"

"Sure."

"Maybe she'll get excited in the toy store. She usually gets a little more talkative there."

Richard shook his head. "Not the same. She points at something and says 'toys' and 'please'. That's not what she does at the diner. We'd be better off taking her to the food court than the toy store. At the diner she has...conversations."

Janice gazed outside, puffing her cigarette. "You know, I used to go to that diner when I was pregnant with her."

"Once or twice. We'd go for the early-bird dinner, remember?"

"No, by myself."

"Back when you were working? What, for lunch with your co-worker buddies or something?"

"No. I went once a month. Alone. Even after I took my leave, the last two months. It was a tradition."
Richard watched his wife open the screen and flick her cigarette butt out the window. “Just drove there by yourself?”

“Yep.” She closed the screen, left the window open a crack, and slipped under the covers next to her husband.

“To eat?”

“No, to look at the paintings,” she said sarcastically and turned to face him. “I would get a coffee. And eat a brownie,” she lied, having vowed never to confess to Richard that she had smoked during pregnancy. “Every time the same. A black coffee and one brownie. You know, pregnant girl stuff. Cravings.”

Richard pulled the blanket up and cuddled into his wife, drawing her warm backside to him. He draped his forearm across her waist and rubbed her stomach. “She was in the womb, I doubt she remembers going there,” he chuckled.

Janice put her own hand on the back of her husband’s. It was half the size of his. She thought of her daughter’s hands, with those chubby, childish fingers. They were about half the size of her own. I’m lying to my husband, she thought. I never ate any brownies. Why didn’t I tell him that I always sat at the same place at the counter? The stool where Serena sits. Where she gets all talkative.

Monday night was a scorcher. At six o’clock the temperature was still hovering at well over ninety degrees and the air was thick with haze and humidity. Not a single person was sitting in the bleachers, which were in the sun. The sky was cloudless. The teams had considered canceling the game. A small array of girlfriends, wives, children, and Michelle Rios’s fiancé Alex, who was prompted to come by his girlfriend’s good
showing in last week’s game, sat under a big elm tree near the third base side of Diamond #6. The view wasn’t as good, but the relief from the sun was a blessing. Diamond #6 sat on the opposite side of River Road from the other five diamonds and the majority of the county park. But Diamond #6 was the best field, and now that the league had gone into its playoffs, all the remaining teams played their games on the same field, the only one with a fence in the outfield, so there was a chance for real over-the-wall home runs. Behind the big elm tree was a small pond and the start of the bike path which crossed over River Road, past Diamond #1 and the swings and see saws, off into the trees that lined the river.

Janice spent most of the game talking with Sammie. Normally, Sammie chatted with her high school friends, reminiscing about old times and complaining about husbands and children. But on this day she was lured over by Janice’s compliments regarding her hair.

“Yeah, I really like what you did with it,” said Janice, feeling more talkative and outgoing than usual. “Really, I mean it. And usually I hate it when women compliment each other about new hairstyles. Because nine times out of ten, as soon as the girl with the new hairdo leaves they wince behind her back and whisper, ‘Oh, isn’t it awful? It’s sooo short. It makes her look so much olllder.’”

Sammie giggled. “Yeah, that’s what we usually do. Scoots cut hers short last summer. It looked awful, but we all said, ‘Yeah, yeah, it looks cute.’ Cute, we said. It made her look like she had cotton in her cheeks. So you really do like it, huh?” she asked, still skeptical. Sammie reached up and scraped the back of her now-exposed neck with her fingernails. Her frizzy mop of red hair had been cut down to a short bob, the natural
red augmented with blonde and orange highlights. It was soft and straight and short. A crisp red-orange flame.

“Yes, totally, sincerely,” said Janice. “It looks great.”

Sammie smiled. “So, your little girl, she likes to play with my son, Dylan.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that too. They seem to get along.”

“That’s nice, when they’re young like that. Before they get all...silly, with boys and girls and all. It’s good to have male friends. I wish I still hung out with guy friends myself. He gets jealous though.” She waved her hand at the field.

“That’s a shame,” said Janice. “I know what you mean, though. I don’t have a whole lot of male friends or anything, but I hang out with a couple of the guys I used to work with. They’re married too. We go out for drinks sometimes, once every month or two maybe. Just the three of us, no wives or husbands. Richard is really cool with it.”

“You’re lucky.” She punched Janice lightly in the arm. “Older men are so much more mature. And he looks good for his age. Really um...youthful.”

“Thanks.”

“Is he still,” Sammie dipped her head from side to side. “Still, you know...getting it done?”

Janice laughed out loud. “Oh, sure, definitely. He’s thirty-eight, not sixty.”

“Right, right. I’m sorry. I just, I dunno, stupid question.” Sammie was embarrassed. Both women were reminded that they didn’t really know each other very well. Sammie turned to check on her son. “Dylan, don’t go too close to those things,” she yelled.
Dylan wheeled around sharply at the sound of his mother’s admonishing voice, then returned to his business. He was straying away from the elm tree, back toward the pond. Serena was nearby, watching him. He was trying to chase after the ducks.

By the sixth and final inning, Richard’s team trailed the power plant workers 6-3. The phone company’s opponents were a talented but inconsistent and occasionally lackadaisical team. Their uniform was a black t-shirt with a marijuana leaf on the front, and underneath was the word ‘plant’ in big green capital letters.

After the phone company’s leadoff man walked, the second batter beat out a rolling grounder that the third-baseman bobbled. Their power-hitting catcher struck out swinging, and clean-up hitter Michelle Rios, who had played at Rutgers and was the only player on the team with any athletic experience at the college level, took a mighty hack but popped up to the first baseman in foul territory. This meant Richard was up with two outs and two men on. He was the fifth hitter, a significantly glamorous spot in the batting order. His teammates were confident. Richard was a patient hitter. He waited for his pitch and always made contact. In slow pitch softball, players usually only strike out if they’re swinging too hard, trying to hit a home run every time. Richard stood in the batter’s box and watched the pitcher, a lanky guy with a ratty goatee, throw three straight balls. He would gladly take a walk and load the bases.

Near the outfield, on the third base side, the wives and girlfriends and children and Michelle’s fiancé Alex were all huddling closer to the field, cheering on the phone company squad, chanting Richard’s name. In their collective clamor, however, two of the
children had stayed behind. Dylan and Serena were halfway around the pond, chasing the ducks. At the far end of the pond was a grassy rise that led up to River Road.

The next pitch to Richard was a strike. He was taking all the way. The count sat at three balls and one strike. He adjusted his glasses and gripped the bat tighter. This feels like real pressure, he thought. He experienced a sense of amazement at professionals who could do this in a stadium of fifty-thousand people. Due to this mental wandering, however, he lacked the complete concentration necessary to hit soundly, because the next pitch was right down the middle, and he hit it hard, but well foul, a line drive off of first base, into the still-empty bleachers.

The count was full. He heard Janice’s voice, “Come on, Richard, you can do it, honey.” He stepped out of the batter’s box for a second and then right back in. His mind was composed. He heard only silence, and all he saw was the big round sphere in the pitcher’s hand.

By this point, Dylan was halfway up the grassy hill on the far side of the duck pond. “Where’s your daughter?” Sammie said to Janice, tapping her lightly on the arm. “She should see her daddy hit.”

Janice panicked. She knew she had gone far too long, too many seconds, minutes even, since she had assured herself of her daughter’s whereabouts. A flash image popped into her mind, of Serena wandering out into left field, getting smashed in the face with a ball hit by her own father. But Serena was nowhere in front of her.

“Oh fuck,” Sammie said tersely. She ran away from the field, toward the pond. “Dylan! Don’t go into the street,” she yelled. River Road was a busy thoroughfare, the setting sun glaring off the windshields of the cars.
Janice could see that Serena was still at the foot of the hill. Her daughter wasn’t nearly as fleet footed nor as accomplished a climber as Dylan. She knew if she ran she could get to her in time. Dylan, however, had already crested the hill and was climbing over the guardrail. He had one particular duck singled out, and it was standing near a sewer grate at the edge of the curb.

“Dylan!” Sammie screamed. “Come back here!”

The boy stopped for a second, in recognition of his mother’s voice, but the duck was just too close now. He was going to touch that duck, and that’s all there was to it.

Sammie was past the elm tree and almost at the lake, her hair stiff and barely moving as Janice trailed behind her. There was a heavy thud, more than a crack, and a lot of cheering, mostly from Richard’s teammates in the dugout. The parents and children and girlfriends were distracted from the game by the drama ensuing as the newly short-haired Sammie ran toward River Road, screaming at her four-year-old son.

A pair of police cars whizzed down River Road with their lights and sirens on. The duck fluttered and moved briskly away from the boy, almost as if the bird had been deliberately teasing Dylan, waddling away just fast enough to keep the boy chasing it. But it was startled by the whoosh of the police cars speeding past and it became frantic, quacking and darting out into the street. It was still a young duck, easily frightened, with little knowledge of that human invention called the automobile. Dylan followed it into the street as his mother scampered up the hill. Sammie scooped up Serena and, in her panic, inexplicably plopped her down on her butt at the top of the hill, much closer to danger than Serena ever would have gotten by herself.
The bellow of a horn, followed by an ear-piercing bell-siren, made little Serena clasp her hands over her ears— a fire engine was cruising down River Road at just over forty miles an hour. Cars had pulled to the side to let the emergency vehicle pass. Dylan tottered out in front of a white Acura to follow the duck but was startled by the loud noises, which buckled his legs. His mouth dropped open, his head turned to the left, and he stumbled off his feet, out into the fire engine’s path.

Sammie was hurdling the guardrail at the end of the slope when she saw Dylan fall. From her angle she couldn’t see her son as the fire engine blew its horn in a painfully loud burst, swerving at the spot where her son had fallen to the ground. She dashed into the street and knelt beside him. Janice made it to the sidewalk, where Serena had gotten up from her seated position and was reaching out toward Dylan.

Janice’s hands squeezed around her chubby toddler biceps. “Let go,” Serena said, struggling against her mother’s grip.

“No, just stay here a second, honey,” said Janice, praying that Dylan hadn’t been hit.

Sammie felt the hot black pavement beneath her knees and saw her son’s eyes flutter open. He rose to his feet of his own accord. Sammie grabbed him by a tuft of his hair. “Jesus fucking Christ, how many times have I told you!” she screamed. Dylan started crying. She hugged him to her chest and smoothed his hair back down. She sighed, a long long sigh, and lifted him in her arms. She carried him back to the sidewalk, through a gap in the guardrail, and as the driver of the white Acura got out and asked if the boy was alright, Serena continued to struggle against her mother.

“What is it, honey, what is it?”
Serena pointed to the road, where traffic had yet to continue on. The duck was a mess of blood and feathers. Its head and beak had been torn from its neck.

Sammie brushed by Janice with Dylan sobbing against his mother’s shoulder. Janice released her grip on Serena’s arms and let her daughter lead her out into the street. Janice put up her small hands in a stop signal to the driver of a car attempting to maneuver around the duck carcass.

“Honey, you don’t need to…” she said to Serena, not really knowing why she was allowing her child to pilot her into the middle of River Road to examine a particularly gory piece of dead water fowl.

Serena bent over the mutilated animal and cried, but she spoke no words, and made no sound.

Before taking a spot with his family at the counter of the Empire Diner, Richard felt compelled to approach the pushed-together tables at the back of the non-smoking section. His game-tying home run had been merely the beginning of his accomplishments. After he made a diving catch in the bottom of that inning, he also, in extra innings, advanced the phone company into the second round of the playoffs with a game-winning single. There was much slapping and shaking of hands, teammates were offering to buy him drinks, and there was a good deal of overconfidence regarding next week’s impending match-up with Molly’s Tavern, the undefeated number one seed, the team with Baker and Nicky Alongi’s brother that had handily beaten the phone company boys just weeks earlier. Despite being hero of the day, Richard turned down all offers to
sit and have a drink, saying simply, "Sorry guys, it's my own little tradition. Gotta sit at
the counter with my wife and my little girl."

Angela was back on counter duty. The Italian hostess was helping Josephine in
the non-smoking section due to the large contingent of Richard's teammates and their
assorted spouses, children and significant others that had made the trip to the Empire to
celebrate. Richard ordered drinks for his family and grinned at his daughter.

"Daddy had a good game tonight, sweetie," he said, and tickled Serena's rib cage.

Serena laughed. It sounded just the slightest bit forced. Richard had become
convinced that the child wasn't ticklish. She had never laughed, not in all the times he
had come home from work, patted her little head, and tickled her in the same spot.

"He should be very proud," said Janice, with just the right dose of sarcasm. After
all, it was still only work league softball. "Daddy might get a special treat of his own
when you go to bed tonight, Serena. A little dessert."

Richard grinned. "Sounds good to me."

"Some whipped cream, maybe," said Janice, with a teasing wink of her eye.

"Surprise me," said her husband.

Three local firefighters entered the diner and walked over to the non-smoking
section. One of them lightheartedly scolded Dylan as another gave Sammie a big hug.
She looked across the section and caught Janice's eye at the counter. "OK, one," Sammie
mouthed to her, as the same firefighter shook Sammie's husband's hand. One male
friend, Janice assumed correctly, and felt a developing relationship with Sammie that she
promised herself to try and carry on after softball season. She needed to start making
friends. As much as she surely didn't miss work, and as much as she genuinely enjoyed
her role as a stay-at-home mom, being at the house all day with Serena got boring sometimes. Janice pictured herself sitting in the park with Sammie, two mothers, watching Serena and Dylan playing in the sandbox, sharing their toys and building sandcastles.

Angela handed out their drinks: one water, one Coke, one black coffee.

"Josephine tells me you had ice cream sodas last week," she said, directly to Serena.

Serena nodded. "No ice cream sodas this time. Special desserts. Whipped cream, maybe."

Janice laughed, Richard blushed a bit. "Yeah, she's learning alright," he said.

"Sorry," Janice said to Angela. "She's just repeating something I said."

"Well, we've got lots of desserts, honey. Why don't you go over and take a look."

She pointed to the tall spinning rack in the cylindrical glass case. "If it's OK with mom and dad."

"Sure," said Richard. "Go ahead, Serena, pick out whatever you want." He lifted her up out of the stool and pushed her gently on the behind. She hesitated, then walked steadily over to the dessert case.

One of the firemen, the one who had hugged Sammie, was escorting the sharp-dressed Italian woman with the perfect make-up to the cash register. "Give us that big bottle of Absolut," he said. "And a pack of Parliaments."

"We're paying you back," yelled Sammie, her arm around her husband's shoulder, the team's leadoff hitter. He held up a twenty dollar bill.
Sammie’s fireman friend paid for the purchases, thanked the Italian lady, and started back to the non-smoking section but paused behind Serena, who was studying the cakes and pies.

“Hey, I heard your dad was player of the game tonight,” he said to her.

Serena looked up at the man, who had helped put out a chemical fire just two miles down River Road from the spot where their truck had nearly run down Sammie’s son Dylan. “Congratulations,” said Serena, as Michelle Rios’s fiancé Alex walked behind the fireman, on his way back from the bathroom.

“You got it,” said the fireman. “Congratulations are in order. But tell your dad,” he pointed to Richard, “not me.”

Serena flashed a big smile up at the fireman. He smiled back. “Go for the chocolate layer cake,” he whispered, leaning over so Serena alone would hear him. As he did so, the pack of cigarettes fell from his shirt pocket. It tumbled across the floor and Serena pounced on it.

“No, no, you don’t want those, honey,” he said, chasing after her as she ran back to her stool.

His fellow firemen and the others at the table laughed and hooted, telling him to come on already with their vodka and cigarettes.

“Mommy, mommy,” Serena giggled. “Have one, have one.” She patted the seat of the stool on which she had been sitting, the second from the end. “They’re your cigarettes.”
The fireman reached over and softly plucked the pack from the toddler’s hands. Serena frowned but did not resist. The firefighter nodded his apologies and walked away. She mounted her stool without any help.

“I’m a good climber, mommy,” she said.

“Yeah yeah, you climb great. But mommy doesn’t smoke cigarettes.” She looked at Richard. He stared back.

“OK, well, I do,” Janice admitted to her daughter. “But I don’t smoke that kind. I don’t know why you think that.” She pulled a pack of Newport Lights from her purse.

“Mommy smokes these.”

“Green,” said Serena. “Not the blue.”

“Right, the green pack, not the blue one.”

“Pack,” said Serena, scratching her head to show that she was thinking.

“Rectangle?”

Janice smiled and looked over at Richard. He was smiling as well. “Yep. The pack is a rectangle,” she said, putting the cigarettes back in her purse.

“So,” said Richard, “did you see anything you liked in there? What did the nice fireman say to you?”

“He said I should get chocolate cake. Chocolate layer cake.”

“Sounds good to me,” said her father.

“No.”

“No?”

Serena shook her head. “No chocolate layer cake.”

“OK, what then?” Janice asked her.
Serena clapped her hands together. “Brownie. You like brownie, right, mommy?”

Janice paused, thinking, contemplating things that logical people wouldn’t contemplate. But she waved the thought away, literally, throwing both her hands up in front of her face. “Sure, why not. Hopefully they have good ones here,” she said.

Richard squinted when he looked at her. That was all, though. He didn’t put it together. He didn’t think to ask her why she had just said that after telling him once before that she’d eaten brownies here on multiple occasions. He merely looked down and tickled his daughter again. She squealed and wrenched her portly little body about.

“Stop it, daddy, that tickles.”

Richard relented. A hand slapped him hard across the shoulders. He turned around and saw Michelle Rios, arm in arm with her fiancé Alex. Michelle chewed on a strawberry Twizzler.

“I hope when we have our first daughter she’s as smart as yours,” she said to her teammate.

“Thanks,” Richard and Janice said in unison.

“Thanks,” said Serena.

They all laughed.

“Are you...” Janice gestured toward Michelle’s flat stomach.

Michelle was finishing her red licorice twist and couldn’t speak just yet. Richard jumped in, “If she is, she’s the best hitting pregnant woman who ever swung a bat.”

The young Miss Rios crumpled the Twizzlers wrapper in her hand. “I don’t think so. Do I look pregnant?” She blushed, betraying knowledge she already, if only subconsciously, possessed. “Anything’s possible. For some reason I’ve been eating these
all the time lately. They say you get cravings when you’re pregnant, right? Anyway, this is Richard, today’s hero,” she said to her husband-to-be.

He shook Richard’s hand. “I’m Alex, Michelle’s fiancé. We’ve, um, been going out since high school, even though we went to different schools. I grew up here in Parsippany. I remember you. I always hung out in front of Dunkin Donuts. You would talk to me and my buddies. You would tell us stories, and tell us to stay out of trouble and stuff. One time though,” he peeked at Janice, “I remember, you gave us directions to some place that would sell beers to underage kids. And it worked, man. Some place in Morristown. They sold to us, no problem. We had a blast.”

Janice forced a scowl at her husband.

Alex chuckled. “He told us not to drink and drive, though. And we didn’t. We all crashed at some girl’s house.” He poked Michelle in the arm.

“Yeah, I wonder who that was,” she said. “I was still drunk the next day at practice.” Michelle punched her fiancé’s arm, harder than he had poked her. “You gonna be a ballplayer like your dad?” she asked Serena.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really watching the game,” she admitted. “I was playing with Dylan. We were chasing the ducks. We wanted to pet them.” Her face scrunched up as if stifling back tears, a preternaturally adult gesture of restraint. “The duck got squished. It made me very very sad. I cried.”

Michelle patted her head. “Aw, that’s so sweet. I like animals too. I hate to see anything die.”

“Wow, she’s a really good talker,” Alex said to Janice and Richard. “My little cousin is around her age and he sounds like a retard half the time.”
His fiancé punched him in the arm again and scolded him in Spanish for talking that way about his cousin. “Yeah, you’re a good talker,” she said, bending down and addressing Serena again. “You’re supposed to talk to them directly,” she said to Alex. “Don’t talk to the parents like the child isn’t there.” She threatened another punch. Alex blithely cowered away.

“You read that in one of your books? She’s always reading,” he stopped himself in mid-sentence and turned his face from Janice to Serena. “She’s always reading these books about having babies and we’re not even married yet.”

Michelle shook her head. “It’s OK to talk to the parents too, just not all the time. But she is a sweet little girl. It’s like she’s so...happy.”

Serena turned away from Michelle and busily sipped at her Coke through the straw.


He looked over at his wife, then at his daughter. She finished her Coke and was watching with great expectation as Angela came walking toward them carrying three brownies on plates. Janice was looking right at him, praying he wouldn’t say that their daughter looked like a penguin.

Richard smiled. “She looks serene.”
I have the cat.

We used to fight about it all the time, me and my girlfriend Kohl. She named it Marcel. Pretentious bitch. After Marcel Proust, the writer, the French writer. She has this fetish for French shit. I went with her to Paris for a week this summer ‘cause she kept hounding me about how great it was, going on about how much fun she had there some semester in college. I don’t call it Marcel, I call it ‘Puss’. You know, like Puss in Boots. My father read those books to me when I was a kid. I think it’s a perfectly normal thing to call a cat. Kohl said that we live in the age of irony now, and something about postmodernism, she started talking about a book by some Gatsby guy and how the main character’s name is Dick Diver. So I laughed. And she said, “See, you just proved my point, no author would be able to name a character Dick Diver now without people laughing.” But I think that’s different, totally different, than me calling a cat Puss.

That’s how I got it to come to me. Kohl leaves the sliding glass door on her balcony unlocked, so I climbed up there. She’s got a second floor apartment, so I just had to jump up, grab the guard-rail and pull myself over. I’m a pretty athletic guy, tall, played basketball in high school and even some afterwards, at a little local school, Caldwell College. I dropped out. Played for two years, though. How many people can say they were a college athlete, even if just for two years? So yeah, I climbed over the railing and
opened the door and called to the cat, "Here, puss-puss-puss." He was hesitant at first, but then he came right over. He knows me, I play with him when I’m over her place. I scooped him right up.

Don’t worry, I’m not gonna hurt the cat. Hurt her I’d like to, the cheating cunt. She’ll miss the cat. She says she loves the little fucker but she never plays with it, she just pets it and tells it her problems. She was basically the same way with me. And she wasn’t even that good at petting, if you know what I mean. Jews aren’t usually too good in the sack. She’s the third damn Jewish girl I’ve dated in the last couple of years, and they’ve gotten progressively worse. More jappy every time.

She’s been fooling around behind my back with a doctor. That’s every Jew broad’s fantasy, right, marry a doctor? His name is J. The letter J, can you believe that shit? I assumed it was Jay, but then I found out it was just the letter, J, so yeah, he’s a fucking bastard, obviously. What kind of douchebag has a first name that’s just one letter? Anyway, he’s a neurosurgeon, or he’s gonna be one soon or something, works at Columbia Medical Center over in The City. She’s always breaking my balls about, “We should move in together, get a place in Manhattan.” Like I could afford that. She thinks people who live over there are better, more cultural or some shit.

I fantasize about kidnapping J, like I did with the cat. But I’d need a gun. I don’t have a gun, but I fantasize about it nevertheless. Just go up to him on the street as he’s walking out of his medical building. Have a car running. Stick the gun into his stomach and tell him to keep quiet and get in the car. If he screamed or made a scene, I’d tell him, I would shoot. That sorta fantasy. After I got him in the car, I’d make him direct me to his apartment, assuming he lives alone. Handcuff him to the bed. Ask him how many times
he’s fucked my girlfriend, if he fucks her in the ass, all that sorta shit. Cut his clothes off with scissors or a knife and tell him to get his dick hard. I have a pretty big dick, so I’d be surprised if his is bigger than mine, but you never know. If he’s hung like a moose I’d at least have to give her credit for that.

Agewise, I’m pushing thirty. I live in Hoboken, New Jersey. I’m inheriting my father’s diner soon, it’s called the Malibu. It’s on Fourteenth Street and Park, right near the viaduct on the north end of town over by the border of Weehawken. Malibu’s a shitty name for a diner in New Jersey, I’m thinking about changing it. Malibu sounds like a motel down the shore. Malibu is an ugly type of Chevy that nobody seems to drive anymore. Malibu is that pussy-ass rum in the white bottle that chicks drink. Great location, though, the diner, right there on the way out of Hoboken, if you’re heading toward the Lincoln Tunnel or Route Three. Location’s real important when it comes to diners. And for some reason, that part of Hoboken, there ain’t a pizzeria within a three block radius. They can give you competition, especially nights and weekends, when the bars are closing. A lot of times people will just hit one of those joints for a couple of slices ‘cause it’s quicker than sitting down at a diner. But honestly, that’s not too smart a move. Why hurry? You want to sober up, drink some coffee, get some real food in you, absorb the alcohol before you get on the road and head back home. Pancakes, eggs, toast, hash browns; that’s the way to do it. Soak up that beer and liquor, avoid those DWIs.

I put the cat in the laundry room. Kohl’s building in Hasbrouck Heights doesn’t have washing machines so she usually brings her stuff over here. She hates going to the Laundromat, thinks she’s above it. I threw in a load and sat him on top of the machine and closed the door to the laundry room. I live right across the hall, so I would’ve known
if someone was coming to use the machines, but almost no one uses the laundry room on this floor. He likes the dryer better than the washer, I think. He sat on top, all nice and warm on his tummy. He just hung out up there and purred a little bit, looked real content. There’s no pets allowed in my building but the super’s never around so, I don’t know, I’ll find something to do with the cat. No matter how much she begs I’m not giving him back. I’m gonna tell her he’s dead, that I threw him in the incinerator. Fucking bitch.

Bed sheets, a blanket and some towels was all I was washing, so afterwards I threw all the freshly dried stuff in a laundry basket and he jumped right in there. He doesn’t shed much I don’t think, and I’m not allergic to cat hair, so I figured what the hell. I’d already bought a litter box, it’s in my kitchen next to the refrigerator. It was a premeditated catnapping, I confess.

I was about to make myself some coffee but then I thought maybe go over to the diner and check in on the place, get coffee there. Everything’s free for me, the owner’s son. My name’s Paul, by the way, should’ve mentioned it sooner. And yeah, I’m Greek, we own a lot of diners. It’s a stereotype, but it’s true. What the hell, they’re good businesses. The small business owner is the engine of capitalism, that’s what my dad says. We don’t really gouge the customers either, like some places do. We give you a fair price, still only ninety-five cents for a cup of coffee. My father says that sticks in people’s heads, the diner where a cup of coffee is still under a dollar. We do jack up the prices on some things, like all diners do. Cereal. You know, those little single-serve boxes. Orange juice. Though I’m planning on upgrading to Tropicana and giving different choices – lots of pulp, some pulp and no pulp. Melons. For some reason every diner overcharges the hell out of people for half a cantaloupe or honey dew. We put whipped cream on it and
serve it nice and cold on a plate, but still, I can’t see why people would pay those prices for melon from a diner.

You know what I was just munching on? Ginger Snaps. That’s a good cookie, Ginger Snaps. Underrated. I saw ‘em on the shelf in the cookie aisle this week and I was like, shit, I haven’t had Ginger Snaps in forever. They’re a little pricy, but so are most things in the cookie aisle. It’s weird, I only like to eat the unbroken ones, the full round circles. The half-moons and little crumbled pieces I don’t eat. I use those to make pie crust or in gravy; Ginger Snaps make a good base for brown gravy. I can cook pretty good for a guy. It helps with the ladies, they swoon over a fella who can cook. You know, when I take over, maybe we’ll sell cookies at the diner. Right now we sell pastries, danish, cakes, torts, got a good cheese roll, all sorts of desserts, but no cookies. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I saw cookies at a diner. Maybe a black and white cookie or an oversized chocolate chip once in a blue moon I see, but nothing too appetizing-looking. I want to get some of those premium, gourmet-type cookies, the soft chewy ones. Chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, macadamias. Put ‘em on the dessert menu – Three Cookies. Served on a plate with a little confectionary sugar or some caramel drizzled on there. Classy it up a bit. That’s my little brainstorm.

I’m not planning on changing things too much, diners basically run themselves, my dad tells me, as long as you have reliable help that doesn’t steal from you. He’s always yelling at me about the Jewish girls. It’s not like I dated them on purpose, it just worked out that way. The other two, at least they didn’t cheat on me. The first one, Jess, she was just too young. She was twenty-one, right out of college, it was awkward. We had different mindsets. Your mindset changes a lot from your early twenties to your late
twenties. The second girl was Bonnie. She was cool. A little arty for my tastes. Good
painter, though. Her day job was in fashion design and clothing, a buyer-slash-model or
something. Not like a catwalk model, she wore stuff around the office so the higher-ups
could see what it looked like on a real person instead of a mannequin. She was tall, nice
breasts, really curvy body, shaved all over. She had this fixation with body hair, it
repulsed her. Fun in the sack, though. I liked her ‘cause she was outspoken and
aggressive and I like that in girls, kinda gutsy or feisty or whatever. My mom was like
that, didn’t take shit from nobody. Anyway, we were just different people, me and
Bonnie. She always was taking me to museums and galleries and I felt out of place with
all those people who knew a lot about art. Some of the stuff was really well-done, you
know, I was impressed. There are some really talented people out there. But a good
amount of it was crap, too. Anyway, we broke up and got back together a few times, and
then we tried to stay friends for a while but it didn’t stick. She dated a few other guys and
told me about it and I would tell her about my dates, or some girl who rejected me at a
bar and shit like that, but eventually we stopped calling each other. Then there was Kohl.

“Franny, hey, it’s me.”

An extravagant yawn. “Hey Kohl, what’s up?”

“Paul stole my cat, I just know it. I called the police and they gave me some big
runaround about a report and a warrant-”

“Wait, Paul stole your cat? Why would he steal your cat?”

“Because he’s been insane lately, like I told you last night.”

“I didn’t talk to you last night. We talked-”
“Ri-ri-right. Two nights ago. Whenever. When we talked. Last time I saw him he
was being all crazy and suspicious, asking me questions all night. Then with the yelling
and cursing, in public like that.”

“Well, it is his-”

“Yeah yeah, it’s his dad’s diner, but normal people don’t freak out like that in a
public place, whether you’re the owner’s son or the owner-to-be or whatever. That’s just
crazy. He’s crazy. Using the f-word, loud, like I told you. And everyone staring. Uck.”

“Well, like I said the other night, he must know about your little infidelimous
thingy. That’s the only good expla-”

“Shit. Shit and damnit and shit, Franny. He stole my cat! What if he hurt him? I’ll
kill him if he hurt Marcel.”

“You’re sure, like absolutely sure, he did it? Cats can get out of places. And
sometimes they hide. Are you sure Marcel isn’t in the apartment?”

Kohl looks around frantically. “Marcel!” The requisite panic in her voice. “He
always comes when I call. Mar-CEL!”

Franny winces and holds the phone away from her face. “Geez, Kohl, you don’t
have to scream in my ear.”

“He’s not coming.” Kohl scampers around the apartment, looking for the cat. She
is not at all athletic, she certainly doesn’t ‘run’ around the apartment. She scampers,
perhaps like a frightened squirrel. “He’s not here. That bastard took him. My little Marcel
is dead somewhere in a trash can,” Kohl sobs.

Franny consoles her, tells her Marcel is still alive, that Paul would never hurt an
animal. Kohl is such a drama queen, Franny thinks to herself. “Listen, Kohlie…” She is
using her soft-and-calming voice, a voice she uses in her daily interactions with her pre-kindergarten classes. Franny is a fledgling schoolteacher, of only the very youngest children. First graders are the oldest kids she’s taught. “…forget the police and all that. Just settle down, call him, and calmly-”

“Calmly? If I call him I’ll curse him out, I really will. He can’t just take my cat and…”

There is probably a muted fourteen-inch television set on in Franny’s bedroom. She still lives with her parents in Nutley and works Friday and Saturday nights as a bartender at a chain restaurant in Clifton Commons. She makes good tips, which supplement her middling schoolteacher income, and Franny sees no reason to quit her night job or move out on her own just yet. The big plan is to get an apartment together, her and Kohl. In the summer, they’re going on vacation to Las Vegas together, when she doesn’t have school to deal with. Kohl said she would take a few days off from her job as a receptionist in the Human Resources department of a temp agency in Carlstadt. She wears a headset, hands people a form on a clipboard to fill out, types at a computer. Her hair always looks nice. Her outfits are flattering but not at all sexual. She uses a professional-sounding voice, both on the phone and with the walk-in clients. The girly voice she uses when she and Franny chat on the phone does not make an appearance at work.

Kohl is not the kind of person who would notice that a voice, an aural means of communication, cannot really make an appearance. Only something visual can make an appearance. Franny wouldn’t have noticed that either. Nor would Paul. Paul’s father would have, though. Mr. Papamarkos is a man who is proud of his knowledge of the
English language, which he learned after immigrating to the United States as a young child. He was born in a port town called Raphina, not far from Athens, and still speaks competent Greek. “Wait a moment, wait a moment,” he would have said. “Now hold on there. What’re you saying? How can a type of a voice make an appearance? It is not Sinatra on The Tonight Show singing ‘My Kind of Town’ or ‘I Got You Under My Skin.’ He used to guest host too, back in the Seventies. I remember.”

Paul’s father is a big Sinatra fan. The music, the movies, even the pinstripe suits and that whole quasi-gangster image. He relishes his diner’s proximity to a sign that sits on the other side of Fourteenth Street, diagonally across from the Malibu and near a Hess gas station, which reads: “Welcome to Hoboken – Birthplace of Baseball and Frank Sinatra.” The old-time diner man has a sixth sense for visitors from other parts of the state or country. If they’re sitting at the counter he sniffs ‘em out like a police dog, and he can’t wait to play the tour guide, to talk about Sinatra, the locations from On the Waterfront, and how, yes, baseball was born not in Cooperstown, New York, the location of the Hall of Fame, but “Right here in Hoboken, New Jersey. The game of baseball. Have you been to Cooperstown? It’s a dump, a middle of nowhere hick town. No way baseball was invented up there. Too cold. Too cold to play most of the year. Upstate New York? Please. No, no, right here in Hoboken. It’s Dutch, the name Hoboken. Just like New York.” At which point he will face eastward, down the length of the counter, as if there were a window right onto the Hudson. “New York used to be New Amsterdam, of course. If you’re going to the city I can tell you some good diners over there as well. Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens. I know a good diner in every borough. Can’t recommend any New Jersey diners, though. Wouldn’t want to help the competition.”
"Paul, this cat is not yours. You must return it."

"Come on, dad, she-"

"No, Paul. Listen, Paul. Son, you know better than that. To take what is not yours? I should smack you. Your mother and I, rest her soul, we did not raise our son to steal."

"You didn’t raise me to cheat on people, either," Paul grumbles.

"Yes, yes, she cheated on you. Despicable. I warn you about these Jewish, but do you listen? No. So now maybe you learn. But the cat, this Marcel, he must go back. You must return the cat." Paul’s father straightens the sugar packets, examines the silverware for dishwater spots. They are sitting at a table in an otherwise empty corner of the Malibu Diner. “You have to call her up and apologize.”

"Apologize!"

Paul’s father raises one hand in a gesture that clearly means: I am your father, I know of what I speak, you will contain your exclamatory reactions and hear me out.

“You cannot steal. Apologize for stealing her cat, and if this woman has any honor, any decency whatsoever, she will apologize for sleeping with another man. If she is decent. Jews are not indecent, not all of them. She may surprise you, it might all work out neatly; she’ll come clean and you’ll return the cat and life will go on. You will find a new girlfriend – beautiful, funny, smart; all the things you want. Just be patient, maybe try a, no, I won’t even say it, but I should, so yes, maybe try a Greek girl. That would be nice. You’re right, I know she doesn’t have to be Greek to make you happy. But probably lay off the Jews for a while. They just cause you grief.”
Paul is shaking his head, avoiding his father's glance, noticing things he wants to change about the diner. The faded wallpaper. Out of place wall sconces that clash with the décor. An old grease-stained clock hanging behind the counter. But Paul's always liked the old movie posters that have been up on the walls since he was a child eating free soup and hoping for a treat from the boxes of candy in the glass case underneath the register, a nougety Twix or a crispy Whatchamacallit. Ocean's Eleven, Point Blank, The Killers, and of course the framed On the Waterfront, signed by Elia Kazan and Marlon Brando, that hangs above the bottles of alcohol behind the register. His father recently confided its approximate value to Paul along with the fact that it is insured for an exorbitant amount of money. Paul does want to add a couple of newer movies though, stuff the younger generation has seen. The post-bar crowd always comments on the Ocean's Eleven: 'Oh, that's the original, with all those singers and shit? I just know the remake with Brad Pitt and George Clooney.'

"I thought going to France might help him. Make him more cultured. French men are so much nicer. Not a bunch of alpha male jocks and meatheads. They're more mature, they know about art and literature, they speak multiple languages. They dress well," Kohl says with extra emphasis. "All the guys around here with their shiny shirts and gold jewelry and greasy hair."

Franny tries to interject. "That's just one type of-"

"Or otherwise they're so preppy, in their overpriced shirts with some stupid slogan or logo on the front. Or some girlie-looking sweater and khakis. Or worse, the
ones who are too cool to dress up at all. They wear an old t-shirt and sweatpants, or those
Nike sports-suit things. French men wear jackets and ties, and not just to work.”

“Paul dresses well enough. I’ve never seen him in a tie or anything, but he’s not
totally clueless either.” Franny is sitting in her bedroom, on the same bed she’s had since
she was in middle school. Kohl stops pacing, she looks anxious to go. Franny stands up.
“Toss me my keys, I can see you’re getting antsy.”

Kohl plucks the keys off a shelf full of stuffed animals, scattered upside-down
CDs, and empty liquor bottles that Franny has turned into vases. The orange poinsettias
in the Grey Goose Citroen vodka bottle look particularly cool.

Franny rummages through her purse. “Let me make sure I have my license with
me,” she says. “I don’t know why you can’t drive.”

“He knows my car,” says Kohl.

“It’s Hoboken. It’s full of cars. There’s never a spot and we’ll probably have to
park like eight blocks away.” Franny finds her wallet. “OK, let’s go. But you should at
least think about just maybe sort of apologizing for the Bobby Schoendorf thing.”

Kohl looks at her friend. “Oh, god, that’s who you thought I meant?”

“Yeah, couple weeks ago at Whiskey Bar. That Thursday night. The Mike Dalton
Band was playing. They do such good covers.”

Kohl hasn’t thought about Bobby Schoendorf since that night. “How would Paul
know about that?”

“Isn’t that why he took Marcel? To get back at you, you said. He must’ve found
out that you, y’know, like we said, C-H-E-A-T’ed.”
"Oh, I'm sorry Franny, I should have explained better." Kohl giggles. "Not with that dork we went to high school with. All we did was kiss. Maybe he squeezed my ass or something. I was drunk in an alleyway behind the Whiskey Bar for god's sake." She clicks off her friend's bedroom light. "No, I think Paul knows about J, the doctor. I'll tell you the rest on the way. Let's go."

"Damn it, sometimes this door is open," says Kohl.

Kohl and Franny stand in the foyer outside Paul's apartment. There are mailboxes to the left, door buzzers to the right. On the floor is a stack of free weekly newspapers, *The Hoboken Reporter*.

"Ring his bell?" Franny asks.

"He has one of those intercom thingies. What if he asks who we are?"

"I could say I'm a strip-o-gram," Franny says, seriously.

Kohl thinks for a moment, her head lilting from side to side. "It's not a horrible idea. What guy wouldn't let a stripper in? I know there's no camera in here, so he can't see us." She looks around the vestibule. "Does he know your voice?"

"Over one of those things? I doubt it." Franny spontaneously presses Paul's doorbell. It buzzes. There is no response. She presses it again, a long, honking buzz. They stand there waiting.

"Looks like he's not home," says Kohl.

"He could be in the shower or something."

"Well we can't just hang around here. Unless you want to see if someone who lives here comes home, or goes out."

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Franny shrugs. "I dunno, just wait for somebody to open the door? Isn’t that kind of suspicious? And that still only gets us in the building, not into his apartment."

"I guess. Let’s check around outside." They exit the vestibule. Kohl turns and looks at the exterior of the brownstone. "I’m trying to remember which one is his window. It’s on the basement floor."

She leads Franny around the building, a short cast iron fence separates them from the brickface of the outer wall. "We could hop this, but it’s sort of a drop to the bottom."

Inside the fence but between the sidewalk and the actual building is a four-foot-wide gap, one story deep. "Don’t want to break an ankle."

"There’s gotta be some way to get down there," says Franny. "Stairs or something, no?"

Kohl shakes her head. "Not from outside the building. I think you have to get through that outer door to go down there."

"Apparently a little more impenetrable than your apartment," Franny jokes.

"I was just stupid. I leave my glass doors unlocked. I’m sure that’s what he did. Climbed up to the balcony. He did that one night and scared the hell out of me, said he thought it was romantic. I told him he was lucky he didn’t get maced."

"So what do you want to do now?" asks Franny. "Want to get a drink? Whiskey Bar’s right around the corner. So’s the Green Rock. Or what about Hobson’s?"

"No, I don’t want to drink, I want my cat back." Kohl taps her foot. She’s wearing expensive-looking but affordable boots, black. "Maybe he’s at the diner."

"The Malibu?"
“Yeah, he keeps going on about what he’s going to do with it when his father gives it over to him. I tell him his dad’s still going to be the boss. Paul’s father loves that place. He’ll be there more than Paul, I’d bet money on it.”

“I like the Malibu. I dig the old movie posters,” Franny notes.

“Really? I think they need some new ones. I mean, they’re pretty dated.” Kohl starts walking back to the car. “So come with me and we’ll check it out. Is that alright with you?”

Franny follows her friend. “I suppose. If you don’t want to go for a drink. Might as well do something. They have awesome mozzarella sticks there. Good sauce.”

“If Paul’s there we’re not staying to eat. I’m just telling him to give me back Marcel. The asshole.”

Franny stops next to her car, a black VW Jetta. “If I’m at the Malibu I’m getting mozzarella sticks. I’ll get ‘em to-go. You go ahead and make a scene or whatever you have to do. I drove, I’m getting mozzarella sticks.”

“Fine, be that way,” says Kohl. “But I’m not going to make a scene.”

Franny unlocks the doors and they get in. “So you never finished telling me about J on the way here. Was he good?”

“I guess,” Kohl says unconvincingly. “I mean, I do feel a little guilty about it, going all the way with him. But we really like each other. And he’s a doctor. He’s a man. Paul is still a boy, even though they’re the same age. Doctor J wasn’t too much in the size department, though. More like doctor four and a half.”

Franny’s eyes widen. “That small?”

Kohl nods and puts on her seatbelt.
Maneuvering the car out of a tight parking spot, Franny tries to reassure her friend. “Eh, the size of the wave isn’t that important. How was the motion of the ocean?”

Kohl looks thoughtfully at the ceiling of her friend’s car as Franny turns right onto Washington Street. “It was good, fun. He’s well-built, strong in the shoulders and chest area. Pretty. I always wonder if I’m doing enough, you know? Like, giving him enough attention. I just like talking to him. He’s a good listener. I guess from being a doctor. He’s like you; he listens to me, puts up with me talking about myself and my little day to day complaints and problems.”

“You need to stay on top of inventory. Keep an eye on the stock. You never know when there’s going to be a rush. You never want to have to tell a customer you ran out of something. Even the littlest thing can make them a non-returning customer. They want their sandwich on marble rye, you need to have marble rye.”

Paul nods. “Inventory. Got it.”

“It’s important,” says his father, turning the bottles of liquor behind the register so the labels all face out at the same angle. “And neatness, of course.” He appraises the rearranged bottles until he is satisfied. “Make sure they clean the bathrooms hourly. Twice an hour on weekends, or if it’s busy. The waitresses know to keep the counter clean, but sometimes they forget to rearrange the bagels or the danishes. You don’t want empty spaces. Cluster things together. The coffee cake. The cheese roll. They forget that sometimes. Then you wind up with a counter full of half-empty pastry trays. Looks unprofessional.”

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"I'll keep it professional, dad, you know that. With a few updates, like I was saying. Some new posters maybe. The décor, the...what did Kohl always used to say...the aesthetics."

"Yes, yes, the Jews know their interior decorating."

"Oh, god." Paul peers out the front door.

"What?" His father is startled, and immediately looks to the floor. There was a rat once, in 1991, and occasionally a mouse needs to be killed. Paul’s father is afraid of rats and mice, and not just from a business standpoint.

"Speaking of the Jew." Paul nods at the door as Kohl and Franny enter the diner.

"See, told you he’d be here," Kohl says to Franny. "Hello, Mister Papamarkos." It is a greeting laced with effrontery, a false subjugation granted to the parents of boyfriends. "Paul." She nods at him. "Can I speak with you outside?"

Franny smiles and looks at the bottles of alcohol, wishing she was at the Whiskey Bar drinking an Absolut & cranberry that a cute guy bought for her.

"I’m with my father here. Business. If I wanted to talk I would have called you."

Kohl looks at Paul’s father. He is shorter than Paul, and thinner, but more sure of himself. This is his home, his native habitat; he is like a gila monster in the Arizona desert. Paul is built more like the rest of his generation, just a little too large. Too much like a truck instead of a car. Paul’s father has always driven Cadillacs. That’s how a vehicle used to take up space, in length. Nowadays it’s all about height and width. "It has to do with Marcel," says Kohl.

"What about him?" Paul snaps.
She looks to Franny for reassurance, a teammate, someone to block for her, to pass the ball to, someone to wave her off and catch the pop-up. But Franny is noodling with her cell phone and has drifted over to the counter. She actually turns her back to Kohl as she takes a seat and orders a cup of coffee and mozzarella sticks. Kohl steps closer to the register, looks at Mister Papamarkos for assistance. If she was a Greek girl he would have relented, given her the implied privacy she so obviously wished for. But she is not a Greek girl. She isn’t even all that pretty, the patriarch thinks to himself. Her face is too long and horsy, her hair straight and limp, hardly any make-up. She is nothing like the movie stars of the past that adorn the walls of the Malibu. She wouldn’t have to be Greek if she looked like Angie Dickinson. Paul’s father picks up a stack of paid checks impaled on a sharp implement next to the register and begins leafing through them.

“Admit it, Paul. Just admit it. Then we’ll figure out what we’re going to do.”

“Admit what?” He is proud of his cool, and feels like he’s performing well under pressure. He’s not blushing or looking away. He is being direct. Directness, he’s been taught by his father, implies honesty.

“Mister Papamarkos?” says Kohl. Abandoned by Franny, who is pouring sugar into her coffee cup and trying to garner the attention of two guys in leather jackets at a two-seat booth near the counter, Kohl faces her soon to be ex-boyfriend and his father and digs down deep into that proverbial well, the well of pride, the place people tap into when they need to summon up the courage required for interpersonal confrontation, and asks, “Do you know what your son did? Did he tell you?” Her face softens, the horsyness
vanishing, the expression of a hurt child taking its place. The old standby, strength through weakness.

Paul’s father is of a generation that cannot bear to see women cry, especially young ones. And Kohl isn’t crying, she’s in control, of herself and of the situation. She knows how to make herself look fragile even though she is not, just like the women in the works of French authors like Victor Hugo and Gabrielle Colette. “He took my cat,” she says to Paul’s father, though her eyes are focused on the green and white tile pattern of the floor just to the left of the mat she is standing on. The mat is orange and blue and says Malibu Diner in big cursive letters, with the address and telephone number underneath.

Clearing his throat, Paul’s father looks around his diner. He wants badly to step out from behind the register and find something else to do, to let his son fight his own battles, to use this opportunity to instill responsibility and discipline in Paul, as if his son were still a child. But he is being addressed directly, and so he cannot evade the circumstances. “Are you sure that Paul…” He can’t do it, he can’t lie. He thinks about putting his arm around Paul, but decides against it. He looks back at Kohl. She stares at both of them, and her expression is not one of pleading. It is filled with scorn. The justifiable anger of a victim of theft.

“You never pet him or play with him, you know,” says Paul. “He likes it better at my apartment. I let him sit on top of the dryer in the laundry room. He enjoys that. It’s nice and warm on his belly, and he purrs to me. He never purrs at your apartment.”

Franny, feeling she is not being given her due attention from the expensively jacketed male patrons, has turned her attention, and her swivel-stool, toward the Kohl-Paul-catnapping debacle as she waits for her mozzarella sticks.
“You don’t know what Marcel and I do when you’re not around. I play with him.” Kohl’s tone is self-righteous, and getting loud. Paul’s voice had risen as well.

Two customers, a middle-aged couple in their forties or fifties, a black man and a white woman, both well-dressed, enter the diner. Paul’s father takes this opportunity for reprieve and slides out from behind the counter with two menus.

“Welcome to the Malibu. I’m the owner, Mister Papamarkos. Your first time here, is it?”

“Yes ‘tis in fact,” says the black man.

He is obviously refined, an educated man. Southern, thinks Paul’s father, based on the accent. Alabama is his first guess, Mississippi his second. “From out of town, are you?” he asks.

“He’s from out of state,” says the woman, in a high nasal voice. A blue-blood liberal is Mr. Papamarkos’s assessment. Has to be, to be coupled with a black man at their age, even a well-to-do one such as this gentleman, who is certainly her husband. She’s not at all southern, she’s the one who has ties up here in the New York/New Jersey area. They’re in town for a week or so, he posits, visiting, maybe attending a wake or a funeral. One of her parents has died is his guess. “I’m originally from around here,” she says. “Grew up in Weehawken. When I was a little girl I used to come in here with my father and sit at the counter. We’d order milkshakes. This is my husband, he’s from Loueasy-Anna. We’re in town for some family business.”

The black man nods solemnly. One out of two ain’t bad, Mr. Papamarkos thinks, and Louisiana is close to Mississippi and Alabama. The woman is wearing a lot of jewelry: rings, necklace, bracelets, a watch. She sports high heels, trendy cosmopolitan
ones, not old-school stilettos or pumps. He is glad that his son and the Jewish girl have had enough tact to pause their argument until after he has seated the mixed-race couple.

“Smoking or non?”

“Is the counter smoking?” the woman asks.

“No, not anymore. Had to change that to keep up with the times. Smoking area is a nice size though, there are booths and tables, whatever your preference.”

“I want to sit at the counter,” she says in a high, excited voice. “Can you hold off on your cigarettes for an hour?”

“Of course,” says her husband, with the deference of a man whose wife has just lost her father.

Mr. Papamarkos leads them to the far end of the counter, a good distance from his squabbling progeny and his catless Jewish girlfriend.

“Well, I do play with him, that’s all I was saying,” says Kohl. “How could you possibly know what I do when you’re not around? Which is most of the time, Paul. I mean, I don’t sit there and read a book when you’re over, but you know I read books, right?”

Paul is not faring well, his father thinks as he returns to the argument. “Is there a problem that I could be of assistance with?”

“Mister Papamarkos, Paul is mad at me, and with good reason.”

This astonishes Paul, hearing her admit her culpability. That line takes Franny by surprise as well, but her mozzarella sticks are arriving, and she is momentarily distracted from her eavesdropping as she gives a polite “Thank you” to the waitress and tells her, “I love the mozzarella sticks here, they’re the best.” She looks at the plate with unconcealed
glee. Paul’s father overhears her comment and hopes the bi-racial couple has as well. The waitress smiles and tells Franny to let her know if she wants dessert, or more coffee.

“I did something I wasn’t supposed to,” Kohl continues. “I made a mistake. But that doesn’t give him any right to break into my apartment and steal my cat, my Marcel.”

“You broke into her apartment?”

“I didn’t break in. See how she exaggerates? I came in through an open glass door. I just slid it open. I didn’t even step inside the apartment. The cat was there in the living room. And she calls it Marcel, I call him something else. He was pleased to see me, and he came right over when I called. And it wasn’t just for revenge. I thought he’d be a cool pet to have around, that he’d have more fun at my place. Be happier.”

“I see.” Mister Papamarkos is pensive, he knows his son is in the wrong but doesn’t want to give the Jew the satisfaction. Nonetheless, what’s right is right. He says, in as non-committal a tone as possible, “Paul, you must turn over the cat. Whatever other issues you may have between you, the cat is not yours. Go downtown to your apartment and give her back the cat. That is the only way, the right thing to do. I’ll manage here just fine.”

Kohl and Paul look at each other. Franny dips her warm, gooey mozzarella stick into the marinara sauce and takes a bite. She’s eaten half of them and realizes that, based on Paul’s father’s dictum, she will have to consume the rest of them quickly, or ask for a to-go box. She thinks hard, trying to arrange some scenario which will allow her to stay and eat them in peace. Maybe Paul can drive Kohl back to his place.

“That would be excellent,” says Kohl. She wants to rub it in, to laud it over him, but she wants Marcel back, and doesn’t want to make any more of a scene than she
already has. And she has her nobility; she doesn’t have to stoop to taunting, she is the victor. “Franny, are you almost finished with your mozzarella sticks?”

Franny finishes chewing but swallows a little sooner than she would have otherwise. She looks down at her plate as if it had just been placed before her. “Not really.”

“Well, we have to go to Paul’s and pick up Marcel.”

“He doesn’t like Marcel,” says Paul. “It’s a stupid French name. He likes Puss. Like Puss in Boots. He’s a Puss in Boots-type cat, not a Marcel.”

“He’s my cat. I named him. We’ve had this discussion before. How can you keep saying that? Puss. It’s so sexual.”

“To you maybe,” Paul says in a huff, plucking a jacket off the coat rack next to the umbrella stand. These appurtenances are old, but he plans on keeping them both. Diners should have coat racks and umbrella stands. He likes the cigarette machine as well. Maybe a video game, though, he thinks, a coin-op, like in bars, a golf one. A lot of yuppies come to the Malibu. Yuppies like golf. And Paul knows a guy, a bar owner from Edgewater, who could probably get him a discount. “You can stay here and finish your food, Franny, we’ll be quick. I need to say some things to Kohl alone anyway. OK?”

Kohl expects her friend to say “no” to Paul in some fashion, to insist on coming along. Kohl is not looking forward to ‘facing the music’ regarding Paul’s knowledge of her tryst with J. But Franny plucks another mozzarella stick off its crisp bed of lettuce and dunks one end in the marinara sauce. “OK, I’ll just wait here. I’ll talk with Mister Papamarkos.” She smiles at the older man.
He is flattered. Now that’s a good-looking young woman, he thinks. What’s wrong with my son, dating the Jewish girl when this little knockout is her best friend?

“So this is your diner, huh?” Franny says. She knows that men like to discuss things about which they have knowledge and experience. “I always like coming here. The old movie posters and stuff. Nothing much changes. You can count on it.”

“Thank you. I like to keep things consistent. But I change a little bit, to keep up with the times. Those things, for example.” He points toward the mozzarella sticks.

“They weren’t on the menu when I first took over.”

The white woman comments to her husband. “Mozzarella sticks. That’s New York, New Jersey. No po’ boys and beignets up here. And there isn’t fish in everything.” She shakes her head. “I made him order a taylor ham sandwich,” she calls to Paul’s father. “He’s never had one. Made me eat crawdads and gumbo and all that stuff, now you’ve gotta try some of my food. We went for pizza the other night. He loved it.” She smiles, one of her first in a while Paul’s father thinks.

“Yeah, that pizza was awful tasty, better’n any I had in N’awlins. I’ll give y’all that up he-ah.”


“Not really,” says Paul’s father. “Just well kept. It’s autographed by Mister Marlon Brando, and Elia Kazan, who was the director. They’re both deceased now, of course. That increases the value or something. But it’s a bit morbid, I think, things becoming more valuable because of death. I wouldn’t mind getting Eva Marie Saint’s signature on there too, while she’s still with us. She’s originally from New Jersey, from
Newark. But she lives in California now, and they say she rarely comes to the East Coast.”

Franny finishes her last mozzarella stick and swivels to look at the poster behind the register. She dabs her mouth with a napkin. “That Marlon Brando was a good looking guy back in the day. They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.” She glances at the oblivious two-some in the leather jackets.

Paul’s father moves down the counter, knowing that he won’t charge Franny. He’s the kind of man who believes that pretty women deserve free things sometimes. Sitting there all by her lonesome, looking like that, what’s wrong with those two dopes at table six? He glances at their broad, chuckling faces, their well-coifed hair and clunky watches, as he moves down the counter to speak to the well-dressed couple.

“So, this here is Hoboken. Not quite as glamorous as New Amsterdam there, across the Hudson River, but we had Sinatra first. Yeah, he sang ‘New York, New York’, but he was a Jersey boy through and through.”

“What was that ‘bout Amsterdam?” the black man asks.

Paul’s father leans against the counter. He knows he’ll relinquish the day to day upkeep soon, he has to, his back is getting worse every day, and so is the colitis. But Paul better not try to keep me from coming to visit, he thinks. Just visiting, of course, not checking up on him. If he can’t remember to stock the candy rack or if he pisses of Joe Piero, the cake delivery guy, that’s his problem, I’m not helping clean up his messes. But I need these stories, this interaction with the living. Mister Papamarkos thinks highly of Brando and Sinatra and Angie Dickinson, but the company of the dead just doesn’t cut it, it just isn’t enough.
He informs Franny that her meal is on the house and smiles at her, nothing lecherous, a fatherly smile. “I used to read *Puss in Boots* to Paul when he was a little boy, that’s why he likes the name,” he confides in her. “If he couldn’t sleep, I’d give him some warm milk and some Ginger Snap cookies and read him a story. *Puss in Boots* was his favorite. It’s a wonderful children’s book. Written way back in 1697. By Charles Perrault, a Frenchman.”

I gave back the cat. What else could I do? My dad was right, I couldn’t just steal her cat because she cheated on me. She’s still a bitch and a tramp for doing it and I’ll never forgive her or get back with her, but it is her cat. Marcel. I’m gonna go visit him, though, when she’s not home. I’ll pet him and play with him and call him Puss. Maybe sneak him out to the Laundromat, put him up on the dryer. He can help me start a conversation with a lonely but attractive cat-lover doing her laundry. It’ll be easy, I know when Kohl works, and even after what happened she’s still not gonna lock that goddamn glass door. Stubborn Jew broad. That’s just Kohl, I know how she is, she’ll never change. With her French fetish and her jappy...

Eh, who cares if she’s Jewish, I know that doesn’t matter. I like all types of people. The doctor boy won’t last long, he can do a lot better than her. Still, I wouldn’t mind giving him a little talking to, just on principal. My dad always said that women cheat on you for a reason. That’s his idealism or something. I know idealism isn’t the perfect word. Kohl would know the perfect word. She is book-smart, I’ll give her that. My dad gets that stuff, that idealism, from his movies and his ‘old man of the sea, I’ve been at this diner forever’ schtick. He’s worldly-smart. I really love the old guy, but I
know he won’t stop coming around, pestering me, making sure I’m on top of everything: the upholstery on the chairs, that ugly orange mat with the name and the address, leaks in the kitchen ceiling on rainy days, what to do if the health inspector comes, his rodent paranoia, all that sorta stuff. I can’t get away from that. It’s all he has. He loves the place. I’ll make my changes, and it’ll help business, then he’ll be proud, when I show him the profits. I’ll do it on the computer, set up a graph, make it easy for him to understand. Gotta keep up with the times, I’ll say. What if they open a pizzeria nearby? Gotta keep our hold on the after-bar crowd.

I’ll start dating a new girl soon, I’m sure. Franny’s looking really good these days. If she wasn’t Kohl’s best friend she’d be perfect for me. She seems like more of a listener. Kohl was talking all the time. Not that I need to hear myself go on and on. But I catch myself sometimes, telling stories to people. Must be uh, what do you call it...hereditary.
Chris Ricci was a sneering kind of kid who evoked laughter in a way that made you feel guilty afterwards. A racist joke, a disparaging remark about homosexuals or the mentally retarded, but always presented in a way that made it quite clear, to anyone with the slightest amount of perception, that he wasn’t really serious, that his anger was a scrimmage, his hate-humor an attempt to win friends and approval, to display a cocksure masculinity. Chris is twenty-five now, and only slightly different from the hard-eyed, derision-spewing teenager I met when we were both fifteen.

He was the new kid on the basketball team, a transfer from Belleville, a town in Essex County just on the other side of the Passaic River, across the bridge from the Arlington Diner. He was a shooting guard and I was a power forward. My position unthreatened, we became friendly the summer before junior year during off-season conditioning – lifting weights and running the track four days a week. It wasn’t required but we were both basketball-only athletes. A lot of the guys on the team played other sports, usually football or baseball, occasionally track or soccer, so their attendance at basketball-specific off-season workouts was sporadic at best. We did not have a swim team or a wrestling team at our high school. We certainly didn’t have lacrosse or field hockey or any of the other rich kid sports that the schools in upper Bergen County had.
Our high school was decidedly working class, located in North Arlington, the southernmost town in lower Bergen County.

Chris was with me on New Year's Eve 1999, going into 2000, the millennium, Y2K. I got into a fight at a bar down on the Jersey shore, Jenkinson's in Point Pleasant. Chris didn’t know what the fight was about, didn’t know who was right or wrong, who said what to whom, or who threw the first punch, he just knew, coming back from the bar, crossing the dance floor with a plastic cup of Coors Light in his hand, that his friend Ron Hodge was throwing hands with somebody. He jumped in, took a few swings, connected with a couple of them, and managed to grab the guy I’d been fighting and head butted him in the eye before the bouncers threw us out and had us arrested. After we were released on our own recognizance with a handful of summonses, Chris said his only regret was that Jenkinson’s sold their beer in cups instead of bottles; he ‘really would’ve liked to crack that blonde kid with the fucking goatee.’

Ricci’s in trouble these days. Owes money to the wrong sorts of people. I don’t think he regrets it. He just figures he got unlucky. That’s what he’s told his friends, when we’ve asked, but I know he had the acuity all along to realize that he was going to go bust eventually. He liked playing the part of the gambler, though. While we were all busting our asses at shit jobs or away at college, he was making thousand dollar bets on a Tuesday night Yankees-Mariners game. I remember coming home from my little liberal arts college in the summer and we’d sit around Kerr’s basement apartment, Chris would always be asking if he could use Kerr’s phone to call in a bet or check on a line. This was back before cell phones were omnipresent. Sometimes we’d all play poker, the most anybody would win or lose would be a hundred bucks or so. It was chump change to
Ricci, and he was always upset when people started going home, saying they’d lost too much money or had to be up early in the morning for work. If it was up to him we would’ve played all night, and when the sun came up whoever was winning the most money would treat for breakfast. He didn’t care if he won or lost, that was more the prerogative of me and King, both thinking we were real card sharps. Ricci just loved the action, the camaraderie, the bullshitting and storytelling and him pointing at the highlights on *SportsCenter* saying, “I knew Randy Johnson was due for a loss. Got a great price on the Yanks tonight, really cleaned up. Diner’s on me, boys.”

A lot of times I was the only one who’d accompany him because everybody else said it was too late, they needed at least four or five hours sleep before work. So did I, but I was working afternoons and nights that summer at an independent bookstore in Hackensack, harboring dreams of having one of my own books on the shelves someday. Ricci always wanted to keep the night going, to keep his rush alive. At the diner he’d tell me about his excursions to the Meadowlands Racetrack, where he mingled with exotic characters and professional gamblers who were all a Mikey or a Joey or a Bobby. Late enough at night, he said, you see some weird stuff at the track. Some guy kneeling on the floor next to a pay phone, telling his wife he couldn’t come home because he’d lost their last dollar on a ‘sure thing’ named Duchess Hanover in the twelfth race. The twice-monthly Japanese Nights when the track would simulcast races from the Far East at two o’clock in the morning, Ricci the only non-Asian face in the building other than the janitorial crew. Even the pari-mutuel tellers were Asian. Rarely, he said, were bets made in English. Better than that, he told me, was the Australian racing, Monday through Wednesday, about an hour after the last live race. The grass was a really bright green
over there, he said, and almost all the races were on turf, not dirt tracks. He used to promise to take me all the time, but I never made it.

Always conscious of his ethnicity, Ricci refused to wear cologne, viewing it as an unfortunate stereotype of ‘his people’. He was familiar with the reputation of New Jersey and New York Italians as loudmouths and meatheads, driving around in sportscars that went out of style in the ‘80s, sporting gold chains, chest hair protruding from a shirt that was unbuttoned a few buttons too many, reeking of Drakkar Noir. Ricci dressed casual, conservative, no shiny Nike pantsuits, no expensive leather shoes, no hair gel. He saw himself as Italian, but also as a suburban white kid who just happened to have a little more cash in his pocket than the rest of us. I don’t know when he started losing, really losing, but it must have gone on for quite a while. Now, supposedly his father is thinking about selling the house in Belleville, the one Chris and his two brothers were raised in. Mark is a successful entrepreneur who started off as a mortgage broker before opening his own business, Tip-Top Car Wash in Nutley. Rob, also known as Gonzo or Nutcase, who is even more quick-tempered than Chris, makes his living as a DJ, catering to all sorts of crowds, whoever’s willing to pay, be it a nightclub in The City or a wedding hall in West Paterson. Chris is a long way down now – loan sharks, mafia – and word is he owes at least forty large, though some have postulated that it’s as high as fifty or sixty thousand. King said some guys showed up at his house and pulled a piece on his father, who told them, at gunpoint, that he didn’t know where Chris was. Espo’s friends on the force told him that Ricci was a suspect in a couple of robberies. Jaworwicz, who works at the state prison in Rahway, said he knows a guard who loaned Ricci two grand and never got it back. The guard is a known leg-breaker for a Chinese mobster named Mr. Woo.
Mr. Woo has the biggest house in North Arlington, his name in Chinese characters etched into the side on an ostentatious four-story exposed-brick chimney. He is best known for shooting a guy to death. Well, a particular shooting, probably one of many. They found seventeen bullet holes in the guy's body, including shots to both eyes. Mr. Woo's lawyers got him off by claiming self-defense.

Needless to say, Chris's situation isn't even 'serious' anymore, it's something else, something I can't find the right word for. I want to say 'dangerous' or 'fatal' but that sounds overblown, fake. I just know he's gotta get the hell out of here, and fast. He called me for the first time in months last night. I'm driving to meet him at Jefferson Park, where we shot hoops together back when we were fifteen, and all through high school. Ricci was the first person I told about losing my virginity. Not because we were all that close, I had better friends on the team, but he just happened to call me at the right time, wanted to know if we had practice the next day, and I was bursting to tell somebody. I had sex for the first time my senior year in high school, three o'clock in the afternoon or so. I remember, in the middle of it, hearing little kids making a lot of noise outside, walking home from Washington School, which was just down the block from Trisha McGregor's house. Her parents were away on vacation, in Las Vegas. She was riding up and down on top of me and I was all proud that I wasn't coming right away and outside I heard little kids talking nonsense and yelling like kids do right after school lets out, and that's always stuck in my head. We were dating for a while, Trish and I, and I'd already asked her to senior prom. She said yes, but not long after that we decided not to attend, to go down the shore for Memorial Day and prom weekend, to skip the school-sanctioned festivities and the tux and the dress and the smiling teachers who you realize don't have
much of a life outside of school. We’d both gone to junior prom, each with different
dates, so we’d already done the dressed-up-like-adults scene. We thought it was cooler to
blow it off, and a lot of our friends were planning on skipping too. Eventually we broke
up because of it. At the last minute she decided she wanted to go, said she didn’t want to
be forty years old and regret never having gone to her senior prom. I’d already given
Mount the deposit on a hotel room in Wildwood, so I told her to go without me. That was
the proverbial last straw for her, and for us as a couple. We’d only had sex four times in
total. A good amount of fellatio and cunnilingus, but only four notches in the intercourse
column. I told Ricci about that first time and he was so excited for me. He’d already been
with a few different girls by then and he thought Trisha was hot. ‘Well, you know, hot for
a pale, blonde mick broad. Sweet girl, though. Great body. You’re fuckin’ lucky, Hodge.
Good for you.’ He wasn’t the best player on the team, and he wasn’t the flashiest, but he
had the most consistent baseline jumper I’ve ever seen. Anywhere else on the court he
was a decent shooter, above average, but from that baseline, and it didn’t matter right or
left, he was flat out deadly. Give him just a half-second opening, and if you weren’t right
on top of him with a hand in his face, he’d drain it every time.

Tonight, at Jefferson Park, he’s missing far too often, even from the baseline. I
don’t think it’s just because he’s rusty, or out of practice. He’s scared, distracted, he can’t
concentrate. ‘Shooting around’ is usually a pleasant and unstrenuous activity. Especially
now, a bit older, in my mid-twenties, the body just starting to decelerate, that fractional
decrease in dexterity, quickness, stamina, recovery time. A few more aches, some
stiffness, the lift in my jump not what it once was. When we were younger, shooting
around was a by-product, not an activity unto itself. It was something you did because you didn’t have enough guys for a game yet, or afterwards, having had numerous full court ‘runs’, as the night wound down and there was barely enough light to shoot by, shooting around was a time to bullshit with friends, to talk openly about girls or grades or parents in a way that retained its masculinity.

Ricci’s hair is still curly and brown, and his flat-footed shooting form is the same, but the ball just isn’t dropping through the net like it’s supposed to. He collects a rebound, puts up a five-footer, misses that, then finally makes a lay-up before tossing the ball out to me at the top of the key. I make two in a row, move to the right elbow, make one there, move out to the right wing and miss off the back iron. Ricci lopes after the ball and chucks up a deep three-pointer from the left wing. It swishes through.

“Nice shot.”

“Luck.” He shakes his head and dribbles the ball over. We’re the only two people on the court. Jefferson isn’t the hot spot anymore, and word is Roosevelt is getting all the games these days. “Thanks for coming, man. I hope you don’t mind I called you. Espo’s hours are funny. And you can never rely on King. We were never super close, you and I, but I know you won’t bullshit me. Right?”

“Sounds like me.”

He bounce passes me the ball. I tuck it under my arm. “So, the buzz is that you’re in the hole big time. All sorts of rumors.”

A smile. “Yeah, yeah. You know how people talk.”

There is a strange pride in his smile, a gambler’s pride. It doesn’t matter that he’s lost fifty thousand dollars, it matters that he had that much riding, that much action, that
much juice. It’s a ‘balls are more important than brains’ brand of logic. Ricci isn’t a
dumb kid, but he’s not at all proud of his intellect. He was a slacker, a B and C student
who easily could have gotten As, gone to a good college, all of that. Then again, growing
up with three brothers must be weird. Maybe that has something to do with it. I only have
a younger sister.

I raise the ball as if to shoot but decide not to. “What’s your plan?”

“Get out of Dodge, I guess.”

“What does your family say?”

“They’re worried about me. They know I’ve gotta go somewhere. We were
talking about Italy. I’ve always wanted to go. I hear it’s beautiful, but I’ve also heard that
English doesn’t get you far over there. I only know a little Italian. I can read it and
understand it, but I can’t write it or speak it. Dad was always strict about that, making us
speak English. Didn’t want us talking like the niggers who work for him.”

Ricci’s dad is an old school Italian, bigotry and all. Most of his employees are
non-white. He’s a foreman in the baggage department at Newark Airport. Chris gives me
a look, he knows I disapprove of his casual racism. “Yeah, yeah, I know all black people
aren’t niggers. Some of ‘em can speak English, sure. They wear a suit and tie and have
good jobs. They act white. But you’re born in this fucking country, you should be able to
speak the language. If a spic can’t speak English right away, that I understand. Shit, my
father was an immigrant, still has a thick accent, but he made sure we all learned English.
Beat us with the belt if we didn’t get good marks. Especially in Reading and English.
Although that D in Math back in fifth grade caught me quite a whipping. You’ve seen the
scar. So I kept up my grades until high school. But you know how I was, by then I was

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too big for him. Those were fun times.” He gazes off, remembering our high school experiences, the positive ones anyway: playing on the basketball team, going to parties, hooking up with girls. Well, trying to at least, and occasionally succeeding, though usually in the retelling a kiss became a blowjob and fingering a girl became banging her behind somebody’s garage.

We’re the kids who loved high school. I’m shocked by how many people say they hated their high school years, how they wouldn’t go back if you paid them. Alright, so maybe they were nerds or outcasts, they had bad skin or didn’t get invited to a lot of parties. So what? I was a jock, sure, but I never picked on anyone, never stuffed some guy from the chess club in a garbage can or a locker. I participated in some of that corny shit myself – yearbook, student council, the newspaper. I was even on the dance committee. Ricci was betting football back then. Started taking bets from half the guys at our high school, distributing parlay tickets. Got in trouble for supposedly stealing an exam at the end of his junior year and was going to be expelled. But he had a good defense. He didn’t break into the school or purloin a teacher’s property, he didn’t jiggle the lock of a file cabinet or desk, he just found someone who had taken the same class the year before and memorized their graded copy of the final. It wasn’t his fault that Mister Santiago was too lazy to change his exam from year to year. But Chris had to photocopy it and give it out to his friends in the class. He didn’t even charge for it, quite a gesture of generosity for someone like Ricci. If he’d kept it to himself they never would’ve noticed. But Chris wanted to be liked, he loved the idea of being ‘the connection’.

“Yep, good times we had,” I concur with his statement.
He shakes his head. “I miss it. Miss it a lot. Anyway.” He extends his hands, a gesture signifying that he wants me to pass him the ball. He takes one hard dribble, drives to the hoop and lays it up left-handed. He catches the ball before it can hit the blacktop and passes it out to me. “Show me a dunk, Hodge.”

I crouch and rise back up again, trying to loosen my knees. “If I still can.” I take a couple of dribbles and center myself on the court.

“The only white kid on our team who could really dunk, with style. That was important. Chad being able to was no big deal, all mulignanes can dunk just about. But I remember the pep rally senior year. He’d graduated the year before, so you and Mount were the only guys who could slam. And fat Mount with all that height could only do it if he was standing right under the basket. He had to jump off two feet. But you, you really got up. I remember homecoming. Ran out in a pair of jeans and a button-down shirt, swooped in and threw one down with two hands, pulled yourself up on the rim. That was sweet.”

Grinning, I remember that impromptu dunk during the pep rally before the homecoming dance our senior year. It was King’s idea. He ran all the way down to the supply closet by the athletic offices, got a ball and brought it back to the gym. He wanted to throw me an alley-oop, but I was scared we’d fuck it up. Those things require perfect timing and King was pretty lit by that point. By lit I mean drunk, if you’re unfamiliar with that particular bit of vernacular.

I give the ball Ricci passed me a hard bounce and squeeze it in my hands. I’ve never been able to palm the ball, which makes dunking with one hand more difficult. But I give Ricci what he wants, feeling like I’m granting a sentenced man his last wish. I back
up a bit, take a few dribbles forward, then stride down the lane and slam it through with my right hand.

"Atta boy, Hodge. Here, ship it."

I pass him the rock.

"Gotta make my last shot." He backs up all the way into the left corner along the baseline, behind the three point stripe, his feet nearly touching the point of the triangle that is the intersection of the two out of bounds lines. He eyes the baseline jumper, his signature shot, and fires. It's just short, he didn't put enough air under the ball. It caroms right back to him off the side of the rim. He didn't even have to shift his feet. "I won't miss twice in a row. Not from here. This is my spot." He launches again, a perfect swish.

"Alright, we both made our last shot." He steps out of bounds, off the court. "Let's go."

"Go? Go where?"

"We gotta take a little drive."

I'm extremely wary. Ricci knows a lot of shady characters who engage in seriously illegal shit and I think, for just a second, that he might be taking me to do something really unpleasant. I start to wonder what it might be. Does he have a gun in his car? Drugs? Are we going to 'collect' from someone?

"Don't worry, puss. I'm not taking you anywhere scary. All you Bergen County boys, you North Arlington guys, afraid of a little living. I know how you are. Seriously though, it's nothing like that. I just want to go to a diner, grab something to eat."

"Oh, OK." I exhale and trot up behind him with the ball under my arm. I toss it way out in front of him, but with heavy backspin, so it'll bounce right to him. It does. He dribbles it to his car and tosses it in the backseat. I wonder, just for a second, why he
doesn’t put it in the trunk, but I don’t ask. I don’t want to see the inside of Chris Ricci’s trunk.

He starts the engine and locks both doors. Even back when he was winning, he never blew his money on a car. He’s had this Nissan for a while now. Reliable, affordable, a ’94 Sentra I think. Grey. A pedestrian looking automobile, nothing that would stand out. I contemplate how many people know this car, if they know the license number, if it’s safe to be seen driving around in it. I get this image of us getting out of the car and being riddled with bullets, like Bonnie and Clyde, like Sonny Corleone in The Godfather. I feel a pang of guilt and look over at Chris. He puts in a CD and presses play. I know before the first note that it’s going to be Eric Clapton.


“Nah, we’re going on a little road trip. Different diner. Something new.”

“New?”

“I told you, don’t worry. We’re going far away from all that shit, not toward it.”

“Alright. I believe you.”

“Better fucking believe me. You’re my friend. That’s why I never asked any of you guys for money. I’m loyal like that. Trustworthy. Remember after King and Missy Sereika broke up and she was coming on to me? One of the hottest girls in our class and I turned her down, stone cold. I’m not gonna mess around with my friend’s ex. Just not right.” He rolls down the driver side window and spits. “Just not right. Remember New Year’s Eve? The fight? Down the shore?”

“Of course.”
“I remember after we got out of the police station and went back to the Belmar Motor Lodge. Me, you, Espo, King and Laurie. We were all sitting around talking, and you guys were going on about how fucked we were, how we’d have to go to court and everything. Laurie was saying we should get a lawyer. Espo and King feeling guilty because they weren’t in the fight, saying they would’ve had our backs. Man, I was sitting there thinking: If this is the biggest problem we have, we should consider ourselves lucky. I realized, Ron. I realized it then. I realized I was hanging out with normal people. My friends. My buddies. I was so immersed in that world, that other world, it started to seem normal. Driving around on pick-ups with Bruno, him smacking people in the knees with a crowbar, it seemed normal. Free dinner at Umberto’s in Little Italy and then a Lincoln Town Car up to Yankee Stadium, tickets already taken care of, on the arm; seemed normal. All that bullshit those guys talked, who they knew and how much money they made and their coke and their smack and their cars and houses, twenty-five year old guys and already owning big-ass houses with built-in swimming pools in the backyard, strippers in the hot tub on a Friday night at four in the morning. Carrying around wads like this,” he holds out his right hand about the thickness of a BLT from the Meadowlands Diner or a turkey sub from River Road Sub Shop, “in their back pockets. Seemed normal. I got sucked in. Sucked right in. But that night, sitting around that motel, listening to them worry about us, that made it clear. It made me realize what I was doing, the life I was living, the people I hung around with, that it wasn’t normal. And that was part of the attraction in the first place; I know that, I’m not stupid. It was extreme, surreal. But it was insane.”
“Hey, everybody needs something,” I say as Chris pulls onto Route 17 North. “A little escape. The real world gets boring, so we try to liven it up, give it a little excitement. We de-normalize. That’s what drinking is, right? It puts you in a different state of mind, something a little insane, surreal, all those things you were just saying.”

“I guess. I got hooked, though. I was like an alcoholic, just I was addicted to action, not booze. Mister gambling man. Then I tried to quit. I called the one-eight-hundred number. You guys all know that, right? I went to a few meetings and everything. Got that job delivering pizzas, went to the VFW hall every Tuesday for a month and sat in the circle. ‘My name is Chris and I have a gambling problem.’ Then I deliver a pie to Hank Banks’s house. He starts talking about old times. I was a real big shot, he says, back in high school and all, him and his buddies all looked up to me, and he’s wondering what I’m doing with myself these days. I’m standing in his driveway handing him a pizza. We get to talking and I tell him it’s just a part-time job, that I’m still connected. Then he says he needs a new bookie, his guy doesn’t pay on time or some bullshit. What do I do? Like a dumbass, no will power, I say ‘Yeah, sure, let me hook you up, Banks, I’ll be your middleman.’ So I start taking bets from him. A few weeks later I’m sitting in the Silver Bell every night, that shitty little locals bar on the Belleville Pike, on a rickety stool with no back, waiting for the pay phone outside the bathroom to ring. I jotted down what they wanted, started calling in bets. Not mine, of course, I was still mister going-straight, Tuesday night meetings, but before you know it I’m trafficking bets for fifteen, twenty people. Then what? Then I gotta collect. Then I gotta deliver to Bruno, who introduces me to this guy, I won’t even say his name, but a real connected guy, like straight out of the movies. And that’s what it was like. It was like a movie, Hodge, all the
stuff I idolized in high school, *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* and all that shit. Like a freakin’ movie. Stopped going to the meetings, started delivering more than just pizzas.” Ricci snorts, but there’s a smile buried underneath. “And that’s how it went.”

I don’t say anything, I just look out the windshield as we approach Route 23 and Chris takes the northern spur. “You watch this new mob show?” he asks me. “*The Sopranos*?”

“No really. I saw the ads for it and all,” I say. “It looks like one of those shows that doesn’t know what it wants to be. Like, is it a comedy or a drama?”

“Hm, that’s a good question. I don’t know. It’s serious, but with a lot of humor. It’s pretty realistic, that’s what I like about it. And it’s cool to see a show in New Jersey for a change. I get tired of always New York all the time. It’s interesting, you know, to see the landmarks and stuff, what you recognize and all. They film right up on Ridge Road and Kearny Avenue.”

“I know they have Pizzaland in their opening credits. That’s pretty cool.”

“That’s what I’m gonna miss. Places like Pizzaland, Roma’s, Paisano’s; real Italian food. Wherever I go, I know they won’t have stuff like that.”

“By the way, where are you taking us here?”

“I told you, little road trip. Gives us time to talk. I prob’ly won’t be seeing you guys for a while. Besides, I think better while I’m driving.”

On the stereo, “Layla” ends with the bird tweet and “Wonderful Tonight” begins.

“Road trip to where?” I ask. “And what do you need to think about?”

“Do you have anything better to do tonight?”

“Well, I don’t have any plans, per se, but—”
"Then quit yer whinin’ already. Per se. You’re not gonna see me for a long ass time, OK? Maybe never again. All I’m asking for is a little company, a little faith, a little trust.”

“I trust you.”

“Alright, if you say so. ‘Cause I trust you. Just stop looking so worried, like I’m gonna make you stand lookout while I stick-up a gas station or ask you to beat somebody down with a baseball bat.”

I laugh, though even to myself it sounds more like a ‘nervous chuckle’.

“Remember Ralph Capezolli?” Ricci asks.

“Of course.”

Ralph was a funny guy. Not an athlete, like we were, but he was always popular, well-liked, a grade older than us. Typical class clown, but smart and witty, not that stupid, look-at-me-I-have-a-condom-on-my-ear kind of humor. He was hanging out with some of his friends at the St. Michael’s Carnival, his senior year. They have it every Memorial Day weekend. People from the neighborhood all bring their kids, and lots of high school kids come in from the surrounding towns to hang out and check up on the guys and girls they don’t get to see every day in school; it’s basically a lot of flirting and catcalling that usually goes nowhere. Ralph got in a fight with some Asian kids, nobody knew where they were from. He was hitting on some girl who was with them and it somehow erupted into a big racial thing. Some people nearby, who didn’t even know Ralph, started getting all loud, calling the Asian kids chinks and japs and slopes, said to go back where they came from, this wasn’t the place for them, that sort of nonsense. Nothing too serious happened though, it wasn’t even a big brawl. Just Ralph and a couple
of his buddies and maybe three or four Asian kids – a few punches, a little blood, eventually they all got thrown out. Ralph and his crew were standing outside the fence gabbing with the local cops, giving them a description of the outsiders who everyone blamed for the ruckus. “They looked... Oriental. The girl was smoking hot. Tall, thin, nice tits. The guys were dressed like homies; you know, the baggy pants and crooked hats and shit. Otherwise, they were just... Oriental. Or Asian, whatever they want to be called these days.” Eventually, Ralph said his goodbyes and walked home by himself. He got jumped. They had baseball bats, whoever it was, though everybody assumed it was the Asians. Who else could it have been? Capezolli wasn’t the kind of kid who had a lot of enemies. I don’t think they even took his wallet or anything. Ralph was brain damaged, still is. He can walk, but his gait isn’t steady. We used to see him out at the bars all the time when we first turned twenty-one. The quick wit was gone, though. He used to sip his bottles of beer through a straw, real slowly. I guess his mouth or throat or jaw or something never healed right. He was pitied. Girls talked to him and gave him hugs and put their arms around his waist, but they never hooked up with him anymore. He got a lot of consoling smiles and kisses on the cheek. There was talk of revenge. His best friend, this kid Daly, went out and bought a gun from some guy outside a liquor store on Chester Avenue in Newark. He said if he found those kids he’d shoot them for what they did to Ralph. He went out on weekends, with whoever was a little drunk and wanted to start shit, and drove around half the towns in the area – Secaucus and Cliffside Park, Rutherford and Carlstadt – asking about a tall, good looking Asian girl, giving vague descriptions of a short Oriental guy with longish hair, well-built, sort of tan for a Japanese or whatever, and ‘talked like a real hard guy.’ He went back to the carnival the
next year, each night, waiting with his black market pistol in his pocket, surrounded by
Ralph’s old friends, but there was never any resolution, no opportunity for vengeance
arose. Daly hung in there though, even went back a second year, by himself, two full
years later, long after everyone else had given up and gone on with their lives, long after
Ralph Capezolli was a sad story, a folk tale, a bad luck parable of warning – someone
you should be glad you weren’t.

“Why’d you bring him up?”

“No reason,” says Ricci. “I mean, that was just shitty luck. Poor guy. He was one
funny-ass fuckin’ kid in high school. If you went out and saw Ralph somewhere, at a
party or whatever, or hanging out on Ridge Road in front of Gino’s Pizza or the Dunkin
Donuts, and he was telling a story, you stopped whatever you were doing, you excused
yourself from whatever conversation you were having, and you went over by him. You
knew you were gonna laugh your ass over, period. It was guaranteed comedy.” Chris
exhales, a long hard breath. “I had to do that sometimes. You know, guys who owed.” He
pauses, concentrates on the road. “I kind of enjoyed it, to be honest. I figured they were
getting what they deserved. No one put a gun to their head. No one told them to get in
that deep. I knew I was in deep myself, that I was doing it because I owed, so instead of
delivering pies or working a regular job like you and Kerr and King, I was swinging a bat
at some poor soul who couldn’t come up with the cash. Same as me, mind you, I never
felt superior. I just said I enjoyed it a little bit. Hitting somebody. Taking it out on them.
But I always kept Ralph in mind. Every time I took a swing. I never hit anybody in the
head. Never. And even those big fuckin’ goons – Bruno, some cat we called Frankie
Balls, this dumb cracker with a Southern accent named Warren – even those guys, I got
right up in their faces and told them, ‘Don’t you dare hit this man in the fucking head. You understand me?’ And these guys were huge, Ron, they could’ve broken me in half. But they always nodded their heads and did what I told them. They’d done it before, cracked people in the melon. They’d sent guys to the brain surgery ward, killed people even, I know they did. But not when I was around. Not if I had a say. You gotta have justice, order. Those guys were chaos. Stupid, drugged out, money-hungry animals. I felt like shit. Not because of what I did, I was doing what I had to do, but because I had to be seen with those assholes. They’d say let’s go to the diner or let’s grab a slice or let’s hit a titty bar, and what could I say? I couldn’t look like a punk. I couldn’t say, ‘Sorry guys, I gotta go home.’”

He turns up the volume as “Cocaine” comes on. Clapton was always Ricci’s favorite. He has the lesser known albums, the bluesy stuff and all that, but he never got tired of the hits either. Something about the repetition, he once told me. After you hear a song a few hundred times it becomes part of you, he said, part of your make-up, your constitution. You find yourself being reminded of it in your day to day life. You meet somebody with a certain name and it reminds you of a Clapton song. You make choices about relationships based on his lyrical maxims. You learn how to stimulate some action, get some satisfaction and find out what it’s all about; how to shoot the sheriff and not the deputy. And Ricci knew Clapton didn’t write those songs, but those were the versions he’d internalized, so they were Clapton songs to him, he’d listened to them that many times.

“But yeah,” he continues, “when I wanted to, I could assert my will, impose it on ‘em, like a good coach, like Bill Parcells, best head coach the Giants ever had. All those
players could’ve kicked his ass – big fucking moolies from the ghetto who barely avoided
a stray bullet from a driveby when they were nine, corn-fed white boys from Nebraska
who were six feet tall and two hundred pounds by the time they were in eighth grade,
crazy-ass niggers who could crush his little white head like a beer can if they wanted to –
but he kept ‘em all in line. They were scared of him, actually scared, terrified of a fat old
man with grey hair who used to coach at little River Dell High School right here in North
Jersey. Winning Super Bowls. Why? Why did they listen to him? Same reason those
steroid-eating mooks listened to me; because I was smart, a lot smarter than they were
anyways, and they knew it. ‘Cause I could talk a little bit, sound intelligent, I had a good
vocabulary and knew how to use my voice. That’s all it was. Now you on the other hand,
you’re smart, but you don’t use it, you stay within the lines, you don’t break any big
rules. Yeah, you shoplift books or whatever from that place you work at, maybe movies
or CDs from the mall or something like that. Petty stuff. I’m talking about the real shit
here, Hodge. This is the kind of stuff you should be writing about. What it means to be
smart. Smart enough to control people twice your size but not smart enough to quit when
you’re ahead. Smart enough for uh, um... for good taste in music.” He turns the volume
down so I can hear him talk. “But not smart enough to keep it so your brother isn’t
having a ‘sit down’ with some guy in a back room at Romanissimo’s restaurant in East
Rutherford, or some thug pointing a gun at my father in his own house.”

“So that really happened, huh?”

Ricci nods. “Went after my family. That’s how they do it now.”

“Maybe I will try to write about it. I mean, I’d change the names and everything-”
“Don’t do it because you think it’ll have some sort of impact, though. Writing it down can’t change things. Two years ago, if I read some story about a guy who fucked up and got in over his head, I wouldn’t have done one damn thing differently. See, you’ve always thought that way a little bit. Even in high school. Arguing with the teachers about politics or the election or why marijuana should be legal, about how stupid and hypocritical it is that you can go in the army and vote and drive a car at eighteen but you can’t drink until you’re twenty-one. Writing stuff down or getting published, and you will, man, I’ll see your book in a fucking B. Dalton’s in the mall one day, or one of those big ass Barnes and Nobles they’re putting up all over, and I’ll say, ‘I knew that guy. Ron Hodge, that was my boy. Best shot blocker I ever saw. Had twenty-two rebounds in a game against Dumont. Dunked like a mother fucker.’ But write for yourself, man. Write because it makes you feel good, or because you just want to tell stories, but don’t write because you want to change things or make people think differently. ‘Cause they don’t. You can’t reason with people. You can’t tell them not to fuck up.” Chris shakes his head and reaches for the volume but I speak before he can end the conversation by retreating into his Clapton.

“So why bother hanging out with me tonight? You said you wanted to get together, talk about stuff, and you’re doing a lot of talking, sure, but what’s my part? What do you want from me?”

“I thought I wanted advice, help.”

“Well, do you?”

“I dunno. I might still need your help. You know where I’m taking you?”
“No, I trust you, remember?” I shoot him a smirk, he replies in kind. Ricci always had a better smirk than I did.

“Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” comes on. The CD is on shuffle, his portable Discman plugged into the cigarette lighter and jammed into a space below the tape deck with a piece of cardboard to keep it from skipping.

“We’re going to a diner,” he informs me. “Like I said. But we’re going up north, and west. Sussex County. Town’s called Wantage, I think. The Sussex Queen Diner.”

“What’s so special about the Sussex Queen?”

“It’s way out there. It’s where I am, all the way out, floating adrift with just a life preserver, a boat with no oars, out past the final marker, all that shit. Metaphors. You write, you know all about metaphors.”

“I guess.”

“It’s the northernmost diner in New Jersey. I think.”

“How do you know about it?”

“The computer. I was at Espo’s house one day a while ago, he has AOL and all that shit, and I found it on the internet or whatever. There’s actually a website about diners in New Jersey. They rate the food, say how long each one has been around, give directions. So I’ve been going to a bunch of them. It’s not like I can eat at my dad’s house. And all the places around the towns by us, the diners and pizza joints and delis, too many people know me, I could bump into the wrong so-and-so and wind up in the backseat of a car with a goombah on either side, taking me somewhere nobody wants to go. So I floated out into the unknown waters a bit, stayed away from towns where
anybody knows me. You can eat good at a diner, even if you’re just about broke. I still manage two meals a day. Breakfast I eat pretty light. It’s helping me stay trim.”

I hadn’t noticed it before, but Ricci is looking thin, thinner than I’ve ever seen him.

The diner is definitely way out in the boonies. I feel like I’m not in New Jersey anymore. This feels like Pennsylvania, the Dutch country, though I haven’t actually driven through PA, anything west of Philly anyway, in a long time. Last time was when I was a kid, went to Hershey Park with my parents and sister. I remember how tedious the drive was, how repetitive and boring the scenery. An occasional billboard about hex signs or the Amish people, maybe some cows or horses, that was about it. We stopped once on the way there, at a toy train museum. I was never really into that stuff when I was a little kid. I collected action figures, *Star Wars* and *G.I. Joe* and *Transformers*. I liked building things, Lincoln Logs and Legos, but I never got into model trains. It was impressive though, that museum; it was basically all one room, like a warehouse, filled with this massive train set that went around the whole place. It was a microcosm, I guess you’d call it – mountains and tunnels and bridges, with a pedestrian walkway for the tourists and a railing that kept you just far enough away so you could reach out and brush the top of a miniature tree, but not close enough to interfere with the train tracks or the house with the water wheel or the tiny plastic people, the crossing guard and the fire fighters and the farmers.

The Sussex Queen is in a wooded region of the state, ‘way out in the sticks’, the dark northwestern corridor, a place without many streetlights, with hardly any traffic,
where you can see a lot more stars than you can from the neighborhoods we grew up in, a mere ten miles or so from New York City. The diner is almost empty, post-dinner hour on a weeknight. It isn’t near a major interstate, so there aren’t any truckers. Maybe in a little while there’ll be some local teenagers stopping in for some breakfast fare after a night of drinking in someone’s basement, playing ping pong or darts or pool, listening to CDs, phoning up members of the opposite sex or prank calling the less-than-popular high school teachers. But not now, now it’s like we’ve got the place to ourselves. Not even any old people around. There’s usually a few old people in every diner, sitting in a booth, reading a paper and slowly sipping a steaming cup of coffee or tea, even in the middle of summer, dipping their toast in their soft-boiled eggs, calling the staff by name as if they were their now-grown children, sitting at the counter and telling stories about the ‘good ol’ days’, the waiters and waitresses inflecting their words and enunciating more clearly than usual, feeling bad for them, feeling sorry for them. Pitying them. I wonder if the old people ever resent it, that over-niceness, or if they think it’s something they’ve earned, like senior citizen discounts and AARP benefits. I think it’s probably the latter. People my age are a bit sensitive about being condescended to, but I bet they’re just happy to get any attention they can, someone who will smile and listen to their story, even if that story is just not to overcook the hash browns, what kind of toast they’d prefer, or how they used to have a neighbor who had maple syrup just like that. Our waitress is an older woman herself, friendly and nice, but I get the feeling she knew immediately that we weren’t locals, and though she hid it well, there was an air of suspicion about her, like if she asked our names she’d assume our response was a lie.

“Not exactly a happening place,” says Ricci.
I nod in agreement, looking around at the off-white walls, wondering if they’re supposed to be that color or if it’s the product of mildew and suffusion, of years of fried food and airborne grease.

“But that’s what I like about it,” Chris continues. “I feel safe here.”

I rarely call him Chris. I’ve always called him Ricci, and there have been multiple occasions where I’ve introduced him to people as such and they later had to be corrected because they thought I’d called him Richie, as if that was his first name. We were always a tribe of last-namers, me and my high school friends. Espo is a Chris too, last name Esposito. Kerr’s a Brian. King’s first name is Don. His parents didn’t know that soon after naming their pale-skinned son with the Black Irish hair, the infamous boxing promoter of the same name would rise to notorious celebrity. I’ve always been Hodge to my home friends, although my college friends and some subsequent buddies I’ve made at various jobs and such, a lot of times they call me Ron. Girls usually use my first name as well, but I don’t particularly like it. I think it’s kind of sexy if a girl calls me Hodge, though I’m not quite sure why. There’s a familiarity to it, I guess.

“So, I forget, are you a hundred percent mick, Hodge?” Ricci asks me after we’ve placed our orders: a ‘Happy Waitress’ with black coffee for him, a cup of hot tea and a taylor ham on a hard roll, double meat, with a side of french fries for myself.

“No, actually I’m part kraut,” I snicker. “I think I’m seventy-five percent Irish, twenty-five percent German. Something like that.”

“You know any Gaelic?”

“Nope. Maybe a word or two I picked up from a movie or a U2 song, that’s about it.”
“German?”

“Danke schoen, auf wiedersehen, Reichstag, der Fuhrer. gesundheit. That’s about the extent of my German.”

Ricci nods, looks down into his coffee cup. No sugar, no cream. “So you wouldn’t know how to say the word ‘name’ in either of those languages?”

“Sorry, can’t help you there. It’s ‘llamo’ in Spanish, I think. Or ‘nombre’ maybe. It has to do with when you use it. I remember that from Spanish class, Miss Perez. You were in there, right? No, wait, sorry, that was sophomore year, you couldn’t have been in that class.”

“I took my two years of Spanish in Belleville, before I moved in with my mom. By the time I got to North Arlington, I’d had enough of it. Every high school only seems to have Spanish or French. Maybe Latin in some of the richer schools. I dated this girl from Ridgewood, she took Latin. She liked to have her ass eaten out. She was crazy in bed that girl. Michelle. Michelle Rizzo.”

“That’s good to know.” I grimace at her sexual proclivity. “I needed that particular bit of information.”

“What, you’ve never given a girl a rim-job?”

“I dunno, I-”

“Alright, that means you have.” Ricci laughs, but the laugh ends abruptly, like a sneeze that was supposed to come and never did.

“I don’t know Latin either,” I say. “And I don’t know how to say ass-muncher in Spanish. Miss Perez never taught us that one. ‘Culo’ is ass, I think. What’s eat? ‘Comienza’? ‘Comer’? Something with a C.”
"I think so. Spanish and Italian have some similarities. *Stiamo mangiando.* That’s Italian for like, ‘We are eating.’ *Nome,* that’s the word for name. See, I know how to say it in Italian, and that’s my point, that’s what you don’t understand, Hodge. That means something to me, my name, my heritage, being an Italian man. You think of yourself as American, right? Not Irish, not German."

"Right."

"I do, too. I’m an American. But a part of me says I’m Italian. I guess I get it from my father with his Italian flag in the house and the soccer games on TV and so on. It became a part of me, part of my identity. Then I met a bunch of guys who felt the same way, who cared about their culture, even if it was in a fucked up corrupted way that they got from mob movies and caricatures on television. It’s important, and it’s just...it’s hard to explain to you, how I got sucked in, the allure of it, of being a Mafioso, a connected guy. That’s the real underclass, *la cosa nostra,* which is literally ‘the thing ours’."

"I thought it meant ‘our house’. Like in Spanish, *casa* is house."

"Nah, ‘our house’ in Italian is ‘*nostra casa*’ I think. Like I said, I don’t know it well enough to go to Italy. But my point is, you’re the kind of guy who thinks and writes a lot about struggle and politics and people being oppressed. Well, that’s what the Italians were when we first came to this country. America. Named the country after an Italian but then we got shit on. Guinea, ginzo, greaser, grease-ball, guidos, dago. Wop. You know what wop stands for?"

"It’s like a, like a slur, against Italians. It means people from Northern Italy, right? As opposed to Sicilians?"
“Yeah, it can mean that, the blonde-haired Italians whose bloodline never got contaminated by the Moors, North African niggers who invaded Sicily and Southern Italy back in the day. But it’s more of a symbol, a... what the fuck, uh, an anagram, right? Anagram? Like Scuba?”

“Acronym.”

“That’s it. Anagram is when you mix up the letters in a word, my bad. Anyway, wop stands for ‘without passport’, or ‘without papers’. It’s what they’d stamp on our documents, my ancestors’ when they came over, because there were so many people fleeing Italy and coming here, to New York and New Jersey. And you know all about the discrimination and how the mob started, how Italians couldn’t get a fair shake in the legitimate business world so families got together and started doing their own thing, providing what regular businessmen couldn’t – whores, gambling, drugs, alcohol during prohibition, all that shit. And I know,” he cuts me off before I can even respond, “I know it’s not like that now. Most of the guys I was working with were suburban kids from decent enough homes, they just used it to feel like tough guys, like somebodies. Goodfellas? Please. They weren’t good fellows, they were lowlife scum, myself included. You, you’re normal, untainted. All you guys from high school are, from North Arlington. These other guys, though, this other life I got involved in...”

Ricci tails off. He looks back into his coffee, takes a sip.

I do the same from my hot tea with milk and sugar. “Alright, so I’m like the pure, non-criminal, inexperienced one. So what?” I say to Ricci. “We’re different people. But that doesn’t mean you’re like them, it doesn’t make you a scumbag. You wouldn’t have got wrapped up in all that if it wasn’t for debts, right? I mean, a lot of us gambled, you
just got in a little deeper than we did. I don’t know what I would do to try and pay off that kind of money. Whatever I had to, I guess.”

“I thought of going in the army.” His reply is quick and obviously honest.

I can’t quite conceal a smile. “The army? You?”

“What, you don’t think I could take it?”

“I didn’t say-”

“I’m a man’s man, I never backed down from my father or my brothers, even when I was a kid, the youngest, the runt of the litter. Never backed down from a fight with anybody. I was a good athlete. I never even threw up after running suicide sprints or the stairs, like a lot of the guys on the team did. Remember pre-season, how Coach DeLong made us run?”

“Yeah, we ran alright, but the army is serious, Chris. Basic training isn’t basketball practice. They’re all about discipline and rank and you can’t mouth off or do your own thing. You can’t just quit if you don’t like it. You’re stuck.”

“I’m stuck now, man.”

“Look, I’m not saying you couldn’t handle it, or that you’re not tough enough, I’m just saying I don’t think it’s you. No way could I picture you in the army.”

“I don’t think it’s me either. That’s why I’m not going. But I thought about it, for a while. I pictured myself in the dress uniform, like Pacino in the Godfather, coming home after a long absence, with a nice lookin’ girl on my arm and-” Ricci cuts himself off as the waitress arrives with our food.

The taylor ham sandwich is tasty, but not remarkable. The best taylor ham sandwiches are from either the Saddle Brook Diner or the Suburban in Paramus. That I
know of anyways. Kerr is always raving about some place in Parsippany by where he used to work.

Ricci orders another cup of coffee. He’s fidgeting, like he’s got something gnawing at his mind. He pinches out five sugar packets and then puts them back while waiting for his refill to come. It does, and we eat our meals in relative silence.

“So, what is the right move for you then? If not the army…”

“Eggs were good. Hot, but not overcooked.” Ricci wipes his mouth with his napkin. “I’ve got a plan.”

“Uh oh. A plan, eh?” My voice must convey my skepticism. Ricci does best at things he does instinctively. Like that baseline jump shot, there was no planning to it, it just came naturally to him. Planning’s what got him in trouble in the first place. The stories he’d tell us about how he was going to parlay his winnings, how he was going to win five in a row and then bet five or six grand all on one game, and if he hit, he’d take us all on vacation, on him; to Mardi Gras he said, and we’d all get laid, to Las Vegas during the Final Four, to Miami to hang out in South Beach, to wherever the Super Bowl was being played that year. The promises he made to his friends while he was planning those big scores, promises that never came to fruition. Always an apology, a ‘can’t miss’ that missed, sometimes by a mile, sometimes by a half a point.

Ricci smiles at my ‘uh oh’. “That’s a fair response. Part of the plan you won’t like, but part of it you will. It involves me leaving the country.”

I turn my hands palms up, signaling that I need more information. He obliges, and continues.
“North-a-ways.” He extends both thumbs and gestures upwards, as if giving an enthusiastic review of a new movie. “I don’t have a job lined up, but I’ve got an apartment. Not gonna have a TV. Don’t want to be tempted to start betting again. Gonna write a memoir maybe. Like you, I’ll try to be an author. Maybe I’ll get to a hockey game or two if I need a sports fix. Not the NHL in a big arena, just some local team, the minor leagues, nothing I could bet on. They love their hockey up there in Canada, I hear. And supposedly it gets warm enough to play basketball outside in the summers. Or maybe I’ll join a men’s league, bunch of old duffers chucking the ball around a middle school gym or a rec center, each guy puts in five bucks a week to rent it out. I hear it’s cheap to live up there.”

“What about your debts back here? Does this mean you’re not coming back?”

“Prob’ly, Hodge. Prob’ly. Five or ten years at least. Mark thinks it’s a good idea, smart place to go. So does dad. I told Nutcase Rob too. He’s still pissed at me ‘cause they dragged him into Romanissimo’s, but we patched things up well enough. Maybe I’ll find a girl, settle down, get married. Maybe kids even. If everything works out like it’s supposed to.”

The waitress comes over to check on the out-of-towners. We ask for the bill. When she brings it over I grab it but Ricci shakes his head. “No no no. On me.” He flicks two fingers in a ‘give it’ gesture, beckoning for me to hand it over.

“How can I let you pay knowing how broke you are, how much you owe?”

“I don’t owe so much. Not anymore. And I still need that favor from you.”

“What favor?”

“The one I was just getting to.”
This time the ‘uh oh’ is only in my head. My eyes probably widen a bit at this point, and Ricci probably notices. I’ve felt like a friend this whole time, a confidant, someone giving sage advice. That feeling is gone. The word ‘favor’ knocked the air out of me, like an elbow down in the paint, underneath the basket, fighting for position for a rebound. Ricci was a guard, so he didn’t have to do much rebounding, his job was getting back on defense to protect against a fast break.

“I’m of two minds about it myself,” says Ricci. “I think you need to do this, for experience, to de-normalize, like you were talking about. But talking time is over. You’re never gonna be a great writer if you always play it safe, middle of the road, even-keel, all those type of expressions. You gotta get your hands dirty, you gotta live a little bit. You gotta do a favor for an old friend. Even though I banged Trisha McGregor behind your back while you guys were dating. That’s my confession. She didn’t give a shit about the prom, man. I told her to say that shit about nostalgia and regrets. We got a hotel room in The City, went to a Broadway play that night, front row seats. What can I say? I had a good week betting the NBA playoffs and felt like spending some money. She fucked my brains out at the Milford Plaza. I even got her to let me put it in her ass. First time, she said. You never asked for that, never tried. I did, though. It was tight, but I got it in there, for a little while. She said it hurt too much so I pulled out and we did it regulars. Your first time girl. Anyway, that’s a little extra motivation, a plot element. Add to the uh…the duality, the conflict, the internal, you know, whatever you writers call it. Tension and all. It’ll make for a great story, trust me.”

“You really-”
“Yep, really. I’d never been with an Irish girl like that, with real blonde hair, not
dyed, and no tan, her skin all soft and milky white. Long time ago, though, right?”

It is. And to be honest, I don’t really care. I don’t feel furious. I don’t feel
betrayed. I don’t even feel angry. Trisha McGregor just got divorced. Kerr told me. He
ran into her at the mall, her and her best friend from high school, Jen Nolan. Both of them
had already been married, Kerr said, and both already divorced. Only twenty-five and
already a divorcee. Must be weird. I haven’t even seriously contemplated marriage, never
once did a girlfriend even bring it up. Which reminds me of Ricci’s dad.

I didn’t talk with Chris’s father a lot. When I was at his house I avoided the old
guy. He was large and surly, and never seemed to like my fair skin, my light hair, my
diction, the way I spoke the English language so fluidly, so naturally. I got along fine
with Ricci’s older brothers, we made small talk all the time, but not so with his father. If
he and I were in a room together it was an uncomfortable silence. But this one time, he
asked me if I had a girlfriend. I said yes, though it was a lie. I’d kissed Kristyn Moran at a
party the previous weekend, one of Greenhalgh’s big bashes, but it turned out I wasn’t
the only guy she’d made out with that night; ‘gone with’ we used to call it, like as in, ‘So
man, did you go with her or not?’ I never even called Kristyn for a date. Ricci’s father
congratulated me though, because I told him she was my girlfriend, and he said he
wished Chris had a girlfriend. He said that when people got old, like him, relationships
didn’t mean anything anymore, they were safety nets, instruments of routine and
repetition, like your job. “Just two people who are scared of being alone,” he said, “that’s
all a relationship between old people is. When an older person loses a spouse, what do
they do? They get all social, they decide they want to interact with the world again. It’s

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their only way of staying alive, of passing the time. The women, they volunteer at the library, reading stories in the children’s section to the little American boys and girls who are not old enough yet to go to school. The men, they join the Elks, they go play golf.” He snorted at the word ‘golf’, a rich man’s sport that was thoroughly beneath him, his working class snobbery. His accent was thick, as usual. ‘Galf-uh’ was how he said it, like he would’ve spat the word on the floor if he could.

“Alright,” I say, trying to sound angrier at Chris Ricci than I am. “I’ll bite. What’s the fucking favor, ya’ backstabber?”

Ricci grins. “Hey, I used a condom, man. And at least you had her first. Besides, you guys broke up right after the prom thing, so I’m guessing you never even fucked her anymore, after I did.” He pulls out enough cash to cover the bill, leaves an above-average but not memorably high tip, leans over the table and lowers his voice. “It’s in the trunk of my car. That’s what it’s all about. Had to do it, Hodge, to get out of the hole. They were talking about hurting my family, big time. My brothers, my dad, the whole horror story. They said if I did this favor for them, they’d forgive my debt. Well, most of it anyway. I’ve still got a few minor things outstanding. Two Gs to some small-timer prison guard who works with Jaworwicz of all people. Little shit like that. But the big debts are all swept away. I had to. Just remember that, when we get to the car. Had to. I’ve got a spot all picked out. We get rid of him, then I disappear into the night, catch a bus heading north. You drive my car back to North Arlington and leave it in front of Jefferson Park. If anyone asks, you say we played ball, and then you drove off in your own car, with me still there, shooting baskets by myself.”
He leans back, crosses his arms over his chest. He looks satisfied, happy. He’s not
smiling, and I don’t know what I look like, other than scared. He summons me closer
again. I lean out over the table. I can’t remember the last time I was this close to a male
face. I can feel his breath on my nose, hot and moist, his eyes on mine, fixed with Ricci’s
utter belief in the concept of trust. I’ve been chosen because he trusts me. “Don’t worry,
there’s no blood, it’s already in pieces, in the trunk. It’s no one you know. I didn’t even
know him myself. He was a bad guy. A thief. A nigger. OK, Hodge? OK?”

I sit back too fast, the booth hitting me hard, right into my lower vertebrae,
reminding me of its presence, padded but firm.

“Come on, let’s go do this. Just nod and say OK. Alright, Hodge? Ron?”

I’m motionless.

“No, no, no. Snap out of it. Wake up. Daydreamy fiction time comes later. We
gotta go. Can’t stick around looking suspicious. Here, I’ll tell you a joke.” He smirks,
looks around. “What’s the difference between a black guy and a bag of shit?”

I glance down at my empty mug, wishing for some reason that there was still
something in it, instead of a wilted tea bag on the saucer, strangled by its own string. I
ponder the idea of duality, of two worlds; I contemplate the notion of malice, and the
concept of guilty laughter.

Ricci gets up from the table and winks at me, a friend delivering a punch line.

“The bag.”
Brad Kestor sits in a booth, at a diner, across from his adopted son Eric. Mr. Kestor is a middle-aged ex-salesman who tonight is wearing tight black jeans and a faded David Bowie t-shirt. His skin is light in color and his hair is artfully mussed, just the right amount of styling gel. He is a single father. Eric is an only child who already knows he is adopted. It is the young man's sixteenth birthday and on this day Brad will reveal an even more important secret to his son.

A waitress, her silver hair worn in a bun, hands them menus and asks if they'd like something to drink.

"I'll have something fruity, no, make that a bloody mary, please. And my son..."

"Just a Coke, please."

"That's nice to see," says the waitress. "A teenager who isn't embarrassed to have a meal with his father."

Eric and his father both smile politely. No reason to be rude to an old woman whose greatest crime is being un-hip. By agreeing to dinner with his father at this particular diner, Eric knew he was in for some amount of traditionalism, a world lacking irony.

"Seems like a nice woman," says Brad. "Probably has kids that are all grown and moved away that she misses."

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“Yeah,” says Eric. “Probably. Not a grandmother yet, but wants to be.”

“Exactly.” Brad turns the dial of the old-fashioned jukebox. “I love these things. A lot of the newer diners don’t have them anymore, or if they do they’re those newfangled digital ones. These are old school. And it looks like this one still has lots of old songs.”

“Cool.” Eric has no aversion to his father’s taste in music.

The waitress sets their drinks on the table and smiles before leaving.

“Quaint. That’s what that woman is,” says Brad. “Downright quaint. See now, a touch of quaint isn’t such a bad thing. Too much quaint, however, I cannot tolerate. Vermont was quaint. I lived there for a while, did I ever tell you that?”

“Maybe. I get your old haunts mixed up sometimes. You have so many stories.”

“I couldn’t take it after a while. It was just too tacky. Painfully fucking quaint. Close to Canada, though. Canadians are yummy.”

Eric unwraps his straw, stabs it into the glass, and sips at his soda.

“Maybe if I had been closer to Burlington I would’ve liked it more.” Brad notices Eric consuming his beverage and raises his own glass. “A toast, my boy, a toast. You don’t just grab a drink and start gulping it down, you have to do it with grace. Civilized men and women drink gracefully. How someone drinks tells you a lot about their character. Even if it’s just a soda. If it’s served in a glass, you drink it with grace.”

Eric lifts his Coke.

“Cheers,” says Brad, clinking his own glass against his son’s. “And happy birthday, Eric.”

“Thanks.”
"Do you feel...older, more mature?"

"No different than I felt yesterday."

"That makes sense." Brad samples his drink again, his pinky finger extended from the glass. "Just OK, as far as bloody marys go. But drinkable."

Eric rearranges his silverware so that it’s all on the right side of his plate, in ascending order according to height. The spoon is right next to the plate, then the fork, and on the outside, the knife.

The not-quite-elderly waitress returns to take their order. "So, what can I get you gentlemen this evening?"

Brad nods at his son.

"I’ll have the, uh, the chopped steak, with the mixed vegetables, and mashed potatoes, no gravy."

"Soup or salad with that?"

"Um, what’re the soups?"

"Chicken Noodle, Beef Barley and Minestrone."

"I guess the Minestrone."

"And for you?" She pivots toward Brad.

"Steak, eh?" he says to Eric. "Bad for the heart," he confides to the waitress with a grin. She smiles in return. "Is the caesar salad any good?"

"Excellent."

"Alright, just a caesar salad for me then. Gotta stay trim. Oh, and a couple of glasses of water."

"I’m sorry," says the waitress. "The busboy should have brought them over."
“Not a problem. I’ll take mine with a wedge of lemon if you can. Eric?”

“No lemon for me, thanks.”

The waitress double-checks her notepad, collects their menus and heads to the kitchen.

Brad continues scanning through the jukebox. “Ah, Elvis Presley. The King. I lived in Nashville for a while, that’s as close as I ever got to Graceland. It’s a place I’d like to visit one of these days. I never had time when I was down there.”

“Work?” Eric asks.

“Yes. Always selling, always selling. It’s amazing how much Elvis memorabilia they have around there, in stores and such. He is an American icon, though, and I know my iconic creatures.”

“Elvis was pretty cool.”

“Yes, he was. Gorgeous too, when he was younger. The Marilyn Monroe of the male gender. Though I was always more partial to women with dark hair, myself. Dark dark hair against fair skin, with the red lipstick. Women don’t look like that anymore, like the old movie stars. The women of your generation, it’s all blonde hair and tan skin and those garish colors. Ugh, those outfits they wear. But I guess you find that attractive.”

“I don’t just like tan blonde girls,” says Eric.

“That’s good.”

The busboy arrives with a mumbled apology and their respective glasses of water.

“Thanks,” father and son say in unison.
Brad glances back at the jukebox. “And Hank Williams too, they’ve got. You would not believe how many people in America listen to country music. Living here in New Jersey your whole life I’m sure you haven’t been exposed to all that much of it.”

Eric shakes his head. “Nah, not really.”

“All over the South and the West, country country country. New country, old country, country and western, bluegrass, rockabilly, all that stuff. Hundred-mile stretches of highway where you can’t find anything but country music and bible readings on the radio.”

Eric grimaces at the mention of the bible. “Well, religion is one thing we agree on.”

“We agree on more than you want to admit. I understand, though. It’s not cool to agree with your father. And I’m not against groups or gatherings or people believing what they want to believe and expressing it. It’s that fundamentalist Christian mindset, that’s what irks me. A lot of the kids in school religious?”

“Yeah, and patriotic too. They’re all into standing up with their hands over their hearts and reciting the pledge of allegiance.”

“And you’re not?”

Eric finishes his Coke and moves his straw into the water glass. “I stand up and all, but I don’t put my hand on my heart. And I don’t say all the words, just the ones I agree with.”

“That doesn’t make you un-patriotic. Just different, unique, not gonna follow along without questioning things. That’s good. Nothing wrong with celebrating our differences. Tolerance is important.”
“I’m pretty tolerant. Like, of different types of people and stuff.”

Brad Kestor nods at his son.

“So, now that I’m sixteen and all, can you tell me about the scars?”

“What scars?”

“Come on, you know which ones.” Eric points to his father’s legs, which extend out the side of the booth and are crossed at the ankles. “I mean, I haven’t seen them in a while, because you never wear shorts anymore, but I remember them from when you would come home sometimes, when I was living with grandma. It would be the middle of August and you would walk around in those old army-looking shorts.”

“You remember that, huh?”

“I was like nine or ten, I wasn’t a baby.”

“I know, I know.”

“And I asked you about them once, remember?”

“Vaguely.”

“I used to pester grandma too. She never told me, though.”

“She’s not your real grandmother, I don’t know why you insist on calling her that.”

“I’m sorry, I know your mother is dead and all. That’s just what I’ve always called Mrs. Ellis, grandma. I’m not gonna change it just because you’re around more now.”

“OK,” says Brad. “Fair enough.”
“So,” Eric continues, “can you tell me? I mean, I figured it was, I dunno, like, from a fight? Or maybe it had to do with sex or something, and that’s why you didn’t tell me?”

Brad laughs. “Sex wounds?”

“I dunno. Why won’t you tell me?”

“You really must not remember as clearly as you think. If you saw them now it’d be pretty obvious what kind of scarring it is.”

Eric sits upright in his chair, expecting a story, one he hasn’t heard before.

“They’re burn scars.”

“Oh,” Eric winces. “You were in a fire?”

“Long time ago. Ancient times, ancient times. Way before you came into my life. Before I was a full-time salesman, even.”

“How old were you?”

“Pretty young in the world. Not unlike yourself. I was a nonconformist too. I was different. So they burned me.”

“Who?” Eric says, anger rising in him.

“I was stupid, cocky. I can’t believe I let them catch me, put me in that kind of... I was captured, I guess is the only way to put it, by some people from the town I was living in. They knew what I was and... and they burned me. Tied me up and burned me.”

“What you were?”

“Yes, Eric, what I was, what I am. I-”

The waitress arrives with their plates of food.
“I’ll tell you after we eat.” Brad smiles, trying to settle the mood so they can enjoy a meal together, father and son.

Eric looks at his father, who turns his attention away, toward the jukebox. Brad spins the dial and finds a song to play, something to lighten the mood as Eric tends to his dinner. His father drops quarters into the machine.

“I love those early sixties girl groups,” Brad says, and ‘Then He Kissed Me’ by The Crystals begins to play.

Eric peers up expectantly in between bites of hamburger-steak and mashed potatoes.

His father is attending to his caesar salad, finishing his bloody mary. “Patience, Eric. I want to wait, anyway. Someone is meeting us tonight. Should be here soon.”

“Is it someone I know?”

“You’ve never met.”

“Oh.”

They return to the consumption of food, that most basic task of mastication and digestion.

“Well, tell me a different story while we’re waiting for the big mystery guest,” says Eric.

“What kind of story?”

“You know, one of your road stories.”

“Ah, so many stories. So many places. I could tell you about living in Jackson, Mississippi with an old woman whose mother had been a slave. I could tell you about the utter emptiness of Montana, a sort of beautiful desolation. Living here your whole life,

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you don’t have much concept of open space. New Jersey is the most densely populated state, you know.”

“Yeah, I knew that. That’s why there’s so much traffic, right?”

“Right.”

“I don’t care. I can’t wait to get my license.”

“In Montana you can get your license at fifteen,” says Brad. “Earlier than that for farm vehicles I think. It’s twenty times larger than New Jersey with about a tenth the population. New Jersey also has the lowest suicide rate in America.”

“Really? I know a kid who killed himself.”

“Yes, the basketball player.”

“I didn’t know him all that well or anything. It was my freshman year and it was only like a month into school.”

“You got out early that day. I remember.”

“Oh yeah, you were back from the road, you were around sometimes then.”

“It’s the lowest because suicide is something people do in private, and because suicide is often a result of isolation. New Jersey has very little of either, privacy or isolation. People come into contact with other people everyday here. All kinds.”

“Where else was cool besides Montana?”

“Lots of places. There’s a little park I love in San Francisco. A beach in Southern Maine. But there’s also places in this country where I wouldn’t dare show my face. I was an alcoholic for a long time, you know. Made a fool out of myself, made a lot of enemies. Thankfully that’s under control now.”
“Did you start drinking because of what happened with the uh, with the incident you just told me about?”

“There are slums in Iowa,” Brad muses. He hasn’t really heard his son’s question. “That surprised me. And New Orleans was always a fun town. I felt at home there. I felt that in very very few places, though. In Las Vegas I felt that. Not just because it was wild and crazy and free, but because everyone there was as transient as I was. It’s like a big neon crossroads of people from all over America.”

“What about Jersey, how do we stack up?”

“Oh, just fine. All kinds, like I said. Packed to the gills. Close to New York City and Philadelphia. The Jersey shore is wonderful. Then there’s South Jersey, and the Pine Barrens, people forget about that part of the state. There’s a reason why it’s called the Garden State. It’s not all urban and suburban. There’s a highway that’s as lonely as any, right here in New Jersey. And I’ve been all over this country.”

Eric nods, tips some ice cubes into his mouth.

“And not only by car, but sometimes by train,” his father continues. “The train has its own quality, an antique quality. Riding the trains reminds you of this country’s history. Flying too, that’s a great feeling. I used to fly a lot when I was younger. But nothing beats driving alone, at night, under the moon. I love driving at night.”

“I can’t wait.”

“It’s a big ritual, your indoctrination into the world of drivers. That was my life for a while, cars and music.”

“Piano, right?”
“Keyboards, piano and organ. That beat up old Steinway at your ‘grandmother’s’ house, that used to be mine. What a relic. We were just a ragtag garage band, never played much more than school dances and such. Opened for some national acts when they came through town, that was our apex.”

“What were you guys called again?”

“A Crowd of Drifters.”

“Oh, right. You used to have that big book of pictures in the basement.”

“It’s still there I think.”

Finished with their meals, the waitress comes over to clear the table. “How was everything?”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

“Anything else I can get you?”

“You want dessert?” Brad asks.

“Um, I dunno, maybe just a coffee for me,” says Eric.

“Coffee? I didn’t know you drank coffee.”

“Just every once and a while. Usually when we hang out at Dunkin Donuts.”

“I think I have room for dessert,” says Brad.

“We’ve got some of the best cheesecake in the state.”

“That’s quite a claim, but I don’t think I have that much room. Do you have any sorbets?”
“No, sorry. We’ve got cheesecake, strawberry cheesecake, Oreo cheesecake, chocolate mousse, ice cream; oh, and creme brule. It’s not on the menu, something new they’re trying. It’s a little fancy for my tastes but—”

“Let’s give that a shot.”

“OK, one creme brule, one coffee. Anything to drink for you?”

“Do you have capuccino?” Brad asks.

“Yes we do.”

“A capuccino then. And we have a third party arriving shortly. He may desire a beverage as well.”

“OK then, be right back.”

The waitress departs with their empty plates.

“So you’re not gonna tell me who’s meeting us here?”

“I want you both to be fresh.”

“Is it a man or a woman?”

“No comment.”

“Old or young?”

Brad doesn’t reply.

“Come on, tell me something at least.”

“Why so persistent?”

“I dunno, sometimes I get nervous when I meet new people.”

“Nervous? There’s nothing to be nervous about. It’s not an interview. It’s just, it’s about time you knew something about me.”
The waitress reappears, places a cup of capuccino and a creme brulet in an oval dish in front of Brad, and a cup of coffee in front of Eric. He immediately empties two packets of sugar into the cup and rifles through the tiny single-serve packets of creamers and half-and-half on the saucer.

"Excuse me," Eric says to the waitress.

She turns, awaiting his inquiry.

"Can I get milk instead of cream, please?"

"Sure. What kind of milk?"

"Um, I dunno, I guess two percent, if you have it."

"No problem."

Eric stirs the sugar into his coffee as Brad delicately breaks through the cinnamon-dusted crust of his baked custard dessert. He lifts a scrumptious-looking portion aloft with his fork. "You ever have creme brulet?" Brad asks his adopted son.

"Nope."

Brad slips the contents of the fork into his mouth and savors it a bit before swallowing. "Mm. Tasty. Not the best I've had, of course, but a nice little treat. This used to be my favorite type of dessert. This or Bananas Foster."

"Is that with rum, and they set it on fire or something?"

"Yes."

"I saw it on TV, some cooking show."

"Want a taste?" Brad portions out another dollop and holds his fork sideways over the middle of the table.
Eric leans forward and partakes of the creme brule. “Not bad. I like the cinnamon.”

Brad takes another sip of capuccino. “Yes, the cinnamon. It’s a tasty spice.”

“I love tasty spices,” says a man standing over the table.

“Ah, Stephen,” Brad says boyishly. He stands up and gives the man a hug. “So glad you could make it. This is my son, Eric.”

Eric doesn’t know whether to join his father and this Stephen in standing, or whether he should remain seated. He chooses the latter and shakes Stephen’s hand. Eric takes notice of how clean the man’s hands are. He will forever associate Stephen’s hands with those of a doctor, though he will never learn the man’s profession.

“Excuse me,” says the waitress, reappearing beside Stephen’s tall, thin frame.

“Here you go, two percent.” She places a small silver canister of milk on the table. Eric pours some into his coffee, stirs it, then sips.

Stephen sits down on the same side of the table as Brad, who gives Stephen the inside of the booth. The waitress quickly brings over another place setting.

“Anything I can get you, sir?” she asks Stephen. “Do you need a menu?”

“No, I’ve already eaten,” he says in a voice that sounds out of place at a diner. It is more the voice someone would use at a fancy restaurant while ordering wine for a date.

“I’ll just have a Perrier.”

“We don’t have that,” says the waitress. “Sorry.”

“A seltzer, perhaps?”

“You got it.”
Eric scrutinizes the man’s face. He looks younger than Brad, but for some reason he suspects that the two men are close in age. Perhaps this is an old bandmate, or some other cohort from his father’s past. Maybe a fellow salesman. Eric admires the man’s leather jacket. It looks comfortable and broken in, the color a perfect blend of black and brown.

Stephen unzips the jacket but doesn’t take it off. “So what have you been telling this young man about us?” he asks Brad.

“Nothing yet, actually. Just been reminiscing. Telling stories. Father and son stuff.”

“Wouldn’t know about that.”

“Stephen doesn’t have children,” Brad informs Eric.

“Oh. Are you married?” Eric asks.

Stephen looks to Brad.

“Here comes your little seltzer,” Brad says as the waitress places it in front of Stephen. “And the check when you get a chance, please.”

“Got it right here.” She adds the seltzer to the check, retallsies, and hands it to Brad.

“Thank you so much,” he says. “Excellent service should be commended.”

The older woman blushes, and walks away.

Brad Kestor takes some cash from his wallet and places a few bills on top of the check. Stephen sips at his seltzer water after examining the cleanliness of the glass. Eric has a grim feeling that he is about to hear something he doesn’t want to know about his
father. Nonetheless, his curiosity is piqued. Even though he is starting to feel pretty sure of what his father’s secret is, he wants to hear it from Brad himself.

“By the way,” says Stephen, “remind me to ask you something about those photographs, the ones we took by the lake. And thanks for the advice about that new sunblock. You’re right, the sun is awful. My skin feels moisturized, younger.”

Brad smiles at Stephen. Eric stares at the tabletop, not knowing what to say. Brad abruptly stands up and beckons. “Both of you, follow me.”

Stephen and Eric exchange a glance. They are equally puzzled. That queer look in Stephen’s blue eyes will stay with Eric for many years. The man in the leather jacket and the adopted son of Brad Kestor rise and follow him across the diner.

Brad walks briskly under the hanging ‘Restrooms’ sign in a corner of the diner next to the kitchen. There is a small vestibule with a pair of pay phones. The door for the women’s bathroom is on the right, the men’s on the left. After pushing open the men’s room door, Brad waits for his companion and his son to enter, then locks the door behind them. They are alone in a medium-sized restroom outfitted with a sink, two urinals, one stall, and a paper towel dispenser. There is no mirror, there is no automatic hand dryer.

“This is rather odd, even for you,” Stephen says to Brad.

“Yeah, what’s up with the bathroom?” Eric is nervous. He doesn’t know what’s going to happen, but he’s quite sure he doesn’t want to see it. It’s one thing to hear something, to be told something, it’s another thing to actually witness it.

“I asked you to come here tonight, Stephen, because it’s about time Eric knew something about me. I can’t hide it any longer, son.”

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Brad places his arm around Stephen’s shoulder and brushes the back of the man’s neck with his fingers. Stephen is startled. This is an awkward venue for such a revelation. Nonetheless, he gingerly wraps his arm around the small of Brad’s back.

Eric tries to project an air of calm, that teenagerly stand-by, to act unimpressed by anything. “OK, so you’re... So that’s just the way you are, that’s cool. I’m not gonna love you any less. But why are we in here?”

Brad caresses Stephen’s cheek and looks at him. Stephen enjoys the way Brad touches his face, fingers slipping down again to the back of his neck. Brad takes his lover’s head in both hands and pulls him in gently. Stephen closes his eyes.

Brad’s hands squeeze tightly, one at the back of the head and the other across Stephen’s mouth. He leans into the man’s neck. Biting into flesh hasn’t tasted this good in quite a long time. He feeds on the attractive gay man from New York City, there in a mirrorless bathroom, at a diner, in New Jersey, in front of his son. Eric’s face is pale. So is Stephen’s. Brad’s is flushed pink with exertion, consumption. The source depleted, he drops the limp carcass to the ground, its head smacking against the bathroom floor.

“Go ahead, before it gets stained.” Brad nods at the corpse, wiping the blood from around his lips. “It’s OK, I could tell you liked it. Taking a trophy from each victim is part of the cycle.”

Stunned, Eric complies, bending over to remove the man’s leather jacket. He lays it across his arms like a burial shroud, his father throws his arm across his son’s shoulders. The teenage boy is almost as tall as Brad himself. “Here, I’ll carry it for you,” says Brad, grabbing the jacket in one hand. “You’re obviously in shock.”
Jack Tucker is slightly sweaty, slightly overweight, slightly balding. He doesn’t wear a hat; he is not ashamed of the natural regression of his hairline. Shame is not Jack’s forte. After turning off the highway and into the parking lot of his destination, he takes a space in front and finishes listening to “Tea for One”, a Led Zeppelin song you don’t often hear on the radio, and once it’s over he turns down the volume so as not to be surprised by a blast of music when he gets back in and starts up the car. He switches off the ignition and gets out, locking the doors behind him with the miniature remote control on his key ring.

It’s a beautiful spring Saturday in northern New Jersey. Jack Tucker is unaccompanied. Across the highway, on the southbound side of Route 17, is the Garden State Plaza mall, where Jack just finished shopping for his wife’s upcoming birthday. She’s a Libra, the symbol of balance. He bought her some perfume (at Sephora), tickets to a Broadway musical (at Select-A-Ticket), a CD by a female pop-country singer (at Sam Goody), and a t-shirt with the name and number of her favorite New York Yankee on the back (at Champs Sports). He refused to eat at the mall’s food court, unappetized by the likes of Wendy’s Old-Fashioned Hamburgers, South Philly Steaks, and Sbarro Pizza, though he did stop at the Orange Julius stand for a large version of the titular product, the majority of which is still unconsumed. Jack doesn’t like to drink beverages
while he drives, fearing they’ll distract his concentration from the road. He is a conscientious seatbelt wearer. He never forgets to signal before turning. He fears a heart attack, despite being only fifty-one years old. And he is regularly screened for prostate cancer. But he still likes Led Zeppelin, goddamnit, and they still rock. Jack was pleased to see today’s teenagers still wearing Led Zeppelin t-shirts in the mall, though if his daughter ever brought one of those kids home, with their long hair and their leather jackets and their air of recreational drug use, Jack would be mildly perturbed, he would be vigilant, and he would urge his wife Katherine to ‘have a talk with Suzy, mother to daughter’, but he wouldn’t forbid the girl from dating such a boy, nor would Jack judge him prematurely.

Jack sits outside his eatery of choice, on the front bumper of his silver Toyota Avalon. It’s the same as a Lexus, he tells people – same body, same engine – just a lot cheaper, since it doesn’t have that ostentatious gold L on the hood. He sits there, warmed by the sun, enjoying his Orange Julius. It’s good enough, but it is not delicious. A generic confection, it doesn’t quite have that homemade taste, it’s just not the same kind of Orange Julius his parents bought him as a treat from roadside stands when he was growing up just outside of Syracuse, New York. That said, it’s a damn fine beverage nonetheless: fruity, cold, refreshing. He’s glad he chose ‘the Julius’ over an overpriced bottle of Snapple, though he does have a weakness for their peach iced tea. He is thankful that the Garden State Plaza has an Orange Julius location at all; it’s not one of the more ubiquitous chains, it’s no McDonald’s or Dunkin Donuts. Or Starbucks, with their expensive yet overrated coffee, thinks Jack, their stupid names for everything and their chipper employees always asking-
“Hello, mister.”

Jack, interrupted from his ruminations on Starbucks, turns to his left. Standing there, in the parking lot of the Suburban Diner, is a young man in a black suit, white shirt and loosened black tie. He is sweating, his hair matted and windblown. Though not particularly handsome or ugly, he has a jittery energy about him, and what appear to be the faded remnants of acne scarring on his cheeks.

“Uh, hello,” says Jack.

“How’s it going?” asks the young man.

Jack thinks for a moment. This young man appears to be sane and cogent, not a vagrant or beggar, though he may be some sort of religious zealot, thinks Jack, wondering why he’s wearing the black suit, this kid really, who can’t be more than twenty or twenty-one.

“Going pretty well.” He sips at his still ice cold Orange Julius. “Just was at the mall.” He gestures with his head and shoulders but does not turn around. “Felt like coming here for some lunch. Well, a late lunch.” Jack looks at his watch. It’s almost four. “Instead of eating that mall food, you know?”

He assumes that the young man does know, that if he’s from this area he knows the Garden State Plaza quite well, in all its immensity, its wealth of attractive women of all ages meandering about its quadrangles, women that Jack notices and visually enjoys but does not lust after abnormally, in its traffic-causing vastness, its job-providing enormity, its parking hassles, its overly frosty air conditioning, its surly security guards prowling the promenades looking intimidating but underpaid, not at all in the mood to chase down a brave but reckless shoplifter.
“Ah. Yes. The mall.” The young man shakes his head and looks down at his feet. Jack does likewise. The kid’s shoes are dusty and scuffed, marred with dirt and grit, and they do not look all that comfortable. “You were over there shopping, I assume?” He peers brazenly into Jack’s backseat, looking for evidence of purchase.

Jack glances to the right but does not look inside his car. He takes another sip of Orange Julius. “Yeah, why?” The notion of theft creeps into Jack’s mind. What would I do if this kid pulled a weapon on me? A steak knife purloined from his parents’ kitchen, a friend’s father’s poorly secured handgun, a small but effective blackjack hidden in one of the suit’s pockets.

“Just curious, man, no need to be hostile. I’m not going to rob you or anything. I don’t want your possessions.”

“Well that’s good.” Jack smiles, trying to lighten the mood. “Young kid like you, looking like you have a lot of potential.” He eyes the suit. “Didn’t think you were a hold-up man.”

The youth is silent for a moment, thinking. “Hmm.”

Jack raises the beverage to his mouth but does not quite get the straw to his lips.

“Because I’m a white guy. In a suit. Right?”

“What’s that?”

“I mean, I exude quote-unquote, potential, because I’m white, like you, and I’m dressed in a suit. I’m non-threatening. I probably have a good job somewhere, a nice car, like you.” He nods at the recently washed high-end Toyota. “Maybe if I was black or brown, with baggy pants, wearing a do-rag, or a Los Angeles Lakers jersey, then I’d look more like a hold-up man.”

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Jack laughs, sincerely, thinking about his musings on teenagers in Led Zeppelin t-shirts, about his properly adjusted, non-judgmental, tolerant considerations regarding his youngest child, his fifteen year-old daughter Suzanne, who goes by Suzy. She's a Cancer, her birthday is coming up soon, too. "So you're um, you're saying I'm a racist?"

The young man utters another "Hmm" and looks Jack over. "Well, I wouldn't go that far. I just think people make certain assumptions based on appearances. You seem pretty cool as far as I can tell. Maybe I just caught you at a bad time; the mall gets me all out of sorts too. Maybe you're actually somewhat intelligent."

Jack chuckles.

The young gentleman in the suit continues. "Maybe you're just a cautious guy."

Perceptive kid, despite the youthful condescension, Jack thinks to himself, I describe myself as 'cautious' all the time. He uses the word most often at work, in explaining himself to the younger and more aggressive salesmen. Salespeople. Jack is always quick to qualify that definition of himself, as the 'cautious man'. "Yeah, I'm cautious, sure, but I know how to have a good time. Took my wife to South City Grill a couple weeks ago on a Thursday night, that's the most popular night there you know, tough to get a reservation. It's a pretty hip spot, you should check it out, especially a young guy like you, making decent money. Good place to go to impress a date, girlfriend, wife." Jack is proud that he gambles illegally on football, through a middleman named Joey, who once introduced him to Mike, the actual bookie. He is proud that his middle child, Shane, is living in Oregon and working as an environmentalist with his 'life-partner' Caitlin, and that both have been arrested numerous times protesting the unethical treatment of animals or the destruction of the natural foliage and wildlife of the American

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Northwest. He is proud that he and his wife still have sex regularly, in a variety of positions and locales, and without the assistance of any pharmaceuticals.

“Maybe you’re just careful, wary,” says the young man in the suit. “Not much of a risk-taker. Safe, suburban. You live where, Emerson, Ridgewood? Wife and a few kids. Maybe they’re grown already, out of the house. You’re doing some weekend shopping, at the mall, spending your earnings from the eight-to-six, five days a week, super-secure, well-paying job. Picking up the new CD by some classic rock band that’s lost half its original members, that hasn’t put out a relevant album in two decades but still tours every other year with replacement guys and a steep ticket price, playing songs that were popular in the seventies. Maybe upgrading your television. Maybe buying a new pair of slacks or some dress shirts for work, or an affordable pair of sneakers for the weekends or your twice-a-week trip to the gym to try and get in shape.”

“You make a lot of assumptions, chief,” says Jack. For him it is boldness. “It’s a bit impolite, isn’t it? For strangers talking in a parking lot. I mean, you don’t know me. You take a few guesses based on my car and my appearance. My race. Now who’s prejudging?”

The kid laughs, loud and forceful, as if Jack has just said something genuinely funny. “Sorry. I, I’m like that. I’m not good at curtailing my impulses. My therapist says I have no inside voice. I’m all loud and up in people’s faces. Sorry, man. Sorry. Just, living in this country pisses me off. Being around all these malls, the commerce and the materialism. All these spoiled rich kids and plastic-surgeried housewives and golf-playing doctors and lawyers. I grew up here, in upper Bergen Country. One of the richest counties in the country. Four malls in this town alone, in Paramus. Four. Shopping and
buying and selling. The machine, the system, all that shit. It’s a cliché, I know, ‘What do you have to rebel against, you grew up with money, you had a comfortable upbringing and a good education and all that.’ Well, that education taught me that people in other countries don’t have it so great. And more often than not it’s our fault they don’t.

American greed is spreading itself worldwide, raping and pillaging and taking what we want without anyone’s permission. Imperialism, aggression, invasion. War all the time. Colonizing a bunch of countries to suck up their oil, orphan some kids and rape a few women in the process, spread democracy, Americanize their culture. All that gets on my nerves, man. So, I’m sorry. Sorry to vent it at you. I...I just learned a long time ago that keeping it bottled up is no good either. Then you explode and you hurt somebody, or yourself. And how predictably American is that, right? Violence.”

Jack is thinking about how he is not doing what he intended to do. He wanted to sit on his front bumper and finish his Orange Julius in peace, off the roads, out of the Route 17 traffic, getting a little sun on his arms, for the first time this spring, really. Sit in the sunlight, drink his beverage, contemplate the upcoming summer, daydream about floating around in his backyard pool, drinking a beer, or maybe enjoying a frozen Milky Way bar. His wife, her breasts large and heavy with her soon-to-be forty-nine years of age, but she still has a reliable body, a comforting and womanly body, and they enjoy holding each other in the water. But instead of doing all those things he is being lectured about American hegemony abroad by some local leftist in bad shoes and a black suit.

“So what’s with the suit, kid? Is this your version of evangelism? Accosting lonely white guys in the parking lots of diners? You do this next door at Barnes and Noble, too? Telling people they bought the wrong books? Or maybe down the road there,
in front of that patio furnishings joint, criticizing people who spend two thousand bucks on a statue of a giraffe when that money could feed a starving family in Bangladesh for a year.”

“Well, that’s a good point, sir, about the patio furniture, the bronze giraffe. That’s not such a bad idea, actually. Those people should be yelled at. But the suit doesn’t have anything to do with that stuff. I just got out of a funeral.”

Jack feels regret, remorse, he blames himself for judging the boy so harshly, for prodding him like that. Maybe someone close to him has died, a parent or sibling, and his misdirected anger is a way of seeking refuge, sanctuary, someone to talk to, even if it’s to rant about topics that are usually reserved for public television, late-night talk radio counterprogramming, and academic discourse at universities. But then Jack wonders about something much more concrete – his first impression of the kid was that he was on foot, and had been for some time. The sweating, the soiled shoes. Where was his car?

There’s no cemetery nearby.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Where was the funeral?”

“Beth-El Cemetery. I’m not Jewish or anything, but-”

“How did you get here? Are you meeting people inside the diner?”

“No. They were going to a Bennigan’s afterwards, for some drinks and reminiscing, forced cheer. I hate those chain restaurants, don’t you? I prefer diners. And I didn’t drive here. I walked.”

“That’s a mighty long walk.”

“Probably a couple of miles at least. I cut through Van Saun Park. I used to go there when I was a kid.”
"I took my kids there, too. They still have those pony rides? They all liked that, riding a lap around the corral on a little pony."

"I was partial to the playground myself, loved climbing, but I went on the ponies a few times. I don’t know if they still have them. And yeah, it was a hike, but I like walking. I’m done with cars for a while. I can afford one, but it’s more interesting to see how real people live. People who take the bus to work, to that mall.” He nods across the highway. “I’m usually just about the only white guy on the bus. If there are one or two others, they’re retired old men, widower-looking guys. Everybody else is black or Hispanic, an occasional Indian or Asian. I feel a bit awkward, but then I think about how they must feel in the mall, or at Starbucks or something like that, always being outnumbered.”

"I’d assume you wouldn’t go to Starbucks." Jack quickly takes a big sip from his Orange Julius. It is still coldish, but it’s passed the zenith of its perfection. The consistency is more watery as he approaches the bottom half of the cup.

"I don’t. Hell no. I don’t even go to Dunkin Donuts anymore, though I miss their coffee. No corporations for me, I only eat at privately owned businesses. There’s a place over in Glen Rock, Jackie’s Bakery, I get my doughnuts there. Doughnuts are a good meal, filling. You don’t have to eat for a while after three or four of those bad boys. Especially the cream-filled ones or the jelly doughnuts, anything heavy. Fills you right up. The clientele is mostly white, because it’s in the middle of Glen Rock, but I like it there. I know the girls who work the counter in the mornings, Louisa and Tammy. Louisa’s a first-generation American from Columbia, just got her citizenship. Tammy’s a black woman from Paterson. Louisa lives in...shit, I don’t remember, she told me once.
Somewhere pretty far. Harrison, maybe. Or Kearny. Someplace by Newark. She comes all the way up here for a dollar more an hour, and because there’s always overtime. She used to work at a bakery closer to home but she didn’t get enough hours. Plus, it wasn’t as safe, she said, getting there at four in the morning, a woman all by herself. Anyway, I don’t want to pester you. Are you going in the diner?”

“I was planning to.” Jack takes the lid off his Orange Julius and peers inside the cup, which has the company logo on the outside. He stirs the remnants with his straw, trying to restore the ideal consistency, knowing his attempt is in vain. “They make really good taylor ham sandwiches here. Taylor ham and egg on a hard roll, I love ‘em.”

“No cheese?”

“Yeah, most people go taylor, egg and cheese. I don’t really dig cheese. Trying to watch my weight.” Jack pats his small but noticeable bulge. He is wearing a white polo shirt. The mallet-swinging horseman is red. “You were right about that part, I am going to a gym now, but not just twice a week, I go every other day. I have discipline.”

The young man nods. “I used to eat taylor ham when I was a kid. I’m a vegetarian now.”

“Like my son.”

“Your son’s vegetarian?”

“Yeah, Shane is, the younger of my two sons. Him and his... well, his girlfriend, though she’s more than that. Can’t say wife, since they’re not married. Might as well be, they’ve been together for twelve years, since he was sixteen. But they don’t ever want to get married they say. My oldest, Bobby, he just turned thirty, he’s a meat eater, likes his
beef. We go out for a steak dinner every month or two. Nothing wrong with eating meat, and nothing wrong with being a vegetarian, that's how I look at it. To each his own.”

“Hmm.”

Jack takes the penultimate sip of his drink. “What? No good? That’s a pretty good policy, I think. To each his-”

“Well, putting aside the sexism of the statement for a second, aren’t some things inherently better than others? I mean, when it comes to killing, I think we should start saying no, not ‘to each his own’. If you support killing you’re wrong, if you support peace, you’re right. Now, I’m not a complete pacifist, although it’s hard to knock Martin Luther King and Ghandi, and Christ, who despite what all the conservatives say, was pretty much an anti-war guy last time I checked. Not in favor of the violence. Though he did kill animals. In the bible it says animals have no souls. But they’ve done these experiments with dolphins and monkeys and stuff; they’re very smart animals and they definitely have feelings and can experience pain and communicate at a high level. They have a lot of human characteristics.”

Jack smirks. “That’s why I don’t eat dolphins and monkeys. I eat cows, lobsters, the occasional chicken. I stay away from the higher end of the food chain.” Satisfied with his defense, Jack takes a hard pull from the straw and swishes the last of the Orange Julius around in his mouth before swallowing. “Don’t worry, I won’t litter.” He folds the lid in half and places it inside the cup. He does the same with the straw and deposits it all in a nearby trash can. Jack is a Pisces, born March 3rd, the same birthday as Alexander Graham Bell.

“You got that at the mall?”
“Yep.”

“Orange Julius is a subsidiary of Dairy Queen, I think.”

“So? What do they do, torture bunny rabbits? Pollute the rivers and oceans?”

A big smile from the young man in the suit. He pushes his hair back, off his no longer damp forehead. “Alright, I get it, man. I’m sorry, real sorry. I am, honestly. I get going with my discussions and rants. It’s just nice to have someone intelligent and thoughtful, who listens and takes me seriously. You’re a good listener.”

Just like my strategy with customers, thinks Jack. The hard sell works for a lot of guys. People. But not for me. I win over a customer by listening, by keeping quiet, by finding out exactly what they want. They all want something, they all have a vision of the perfect wall-hanging, the perfect area rug, the perfect nap and texture and color for the wall-to-wall carpeting in their den, or their office, or their finished basement. Jack exudes a thoughtful intelligence through his listening. And when he does talk, he can speak competently on a variety of topics: baseball, home decorating, architecture, landscaping, cars; the things the wealthy client likes to talk about. Not politics, not religion, not the news, not taxes or zoning laws or the educational system in town X or the crime rate in town Y. Those are ‘keep away’ topics. This kid would make a terrible salesman. He is the antithesis of a good salesman. Yet Jack’s impression is that the kid is trying to sell him something, to push something on him that he doesn’t want, the way the young bucks push the merchandise at the store, trying to hawk Oriental rugs on families who pull up in decade-old minivans, trying to convince a couple under the age of forty that they should buy a grandfather clock, that a marble coffee table and a standing halogen is the best option for a single woman who comes in looking for an endtable and a reading lamp.
This kid is of a generation, and despite his adoption of some of the hippies’ peace, love and understanding mixed with some of punk rock’s in your face rebellion, he’s a young man of another generation, with values that are not as easily categorized by the mind of Jack Tucker. The upcoming revelations are the young man’s most startling yet.

“Well, I’d like to continue listening, and taking you seriously, but I really should be getting inside,” says Jack. “Want to have time to eat my taylor ham sandwiches without being rushed. I promised my wife I’d be home by five-thirty, and there’s still gonna be traffic on the roads by the time I’m ready to go, so…” Jack stands erect, ready to head into the diner.

“Or, sure, sure, don’t mean to trouble you.” The young man looks away, at the highway, the cars whizzing by. He puts his hands in his pockets and continues to stare.

Jack can tell the kid doesn’t want him to go, but he doesn’t want to ask if he can join him either, he wants Jack to invite him. He doesn’t go that far, but the usually cautious Jack Tucker does decide to engage him once more. “Hey, just out of curiosity,” he says to the kid, in a respectful tone, “Who was the funeral for?”

The kid turns around, a sheepish look on his face. A caught-doing-something-you’re-not-supposed-to look, thinks Jack, remembering incidents with his own children. Bobby, who at 17 drove his father’s car down the shore without permission and got arrested in Seaside Heights trying to buy beer underage. Shane, at 14, whose own arrests would come later, opening the closet door in his bedroom to reveal three small cats, purloined from the house of a noted animal abuser in the neighborhood. Suzanne, just a few months ago, the only child still living at home, a scared version of the look as she sat at the dining room table with both her parents, discussing the presence of condoms
amidst the items that spilled out of her purse on her way out the door, supposedly to meet up with friends at Fair Lawn Lanes, a local bowling alley.

"Nobody I know," says the kid.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn’t know the woman. Charlotte Mays was her name. I go to a different funeral just about every day. I almost never know the person in the box."

"Wai-wai-wait, let me get this right. You go around attending strangers’ funerals?"

"Yeah. I’ll tell you all about it. Let’s go inside, though. If you don’t mind joining me, or me joining you I should say. I’ll order a salad. And I won’t even silently judge you for eating a dead pig’s ass. You know that’s where taylor ham comes from, right? From the ass?"

Jack sighs, a patient but curious sigh. He knows he will hear the kid out, it’s in his nature, Jack the listener. “Alright, yeah, I guess I know it’s from there, but so what? It tastes good. And it’s not like it’s a big old slab of pig ass.” He can’t help smiling. “It goes through a long process before it winds up between the bread, I’m sure.”

“And I could tell you some nasty things about that process, the dirty little secrets of the meat industry and such. But I’m not gonna do that. You’re nice enough to let me keep you company, so I’ll keep personal politics and vegetarianism out of it. I’m sure your son has told you enough about it.”

“Well, we don’t talk about it much, his being in Oregon and all. No taylor ham at all out there. It’s a regional food, you know.” Jack takes a step toward the diner as the
owner of the car parked next to his, a large SUV, beeps off its alarm and waddles toward the vehicle. The man must weigh at least three hundred fifty pounds.

The kid moves over alongside Jack and they start toward the diner, but not without the young man shooting a protracted look back at the behemoth man and his equally sizeable vehicle. "Guy poisons his body, then he poisons the air. And takes up half the road doing it. A real considerate man, I'm sure. A good god-fearing American; keeps a flag on the porch, supports whatever war happens to be running, watches the fireworks on the Fourth of July. Yeah, that's really something to be proud of, we celebrate our country's independence with the explosion of simulated bombs. It's easy for us, because we've never had innocent civilians bombed from above. That's not how they celebrate in Dresden, I'm sure. Or Tokyo. And of course then there's Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States is, after all, the only country in the history of the world to ever use atomic weapons on human beings. Easy to shoot off those fireworks when it's never happened to your women and children, right?" He punches Jack lightly on the arm. His eyes are wild and wide-open, his limbs jittery beneath the baggy suit.

Jack wants to argue, to talk about the necessity of violence during wartime, about collateral damage and the unfortunate nature of civilian casualties, but he's conditioned himself to disregard political tangents, and he's actually more curious about the random funerals. They ascend the stairs and walk through the vestibule, into the diner proper where they wait in silence to be seated. They get a table against the window facing the highway. The big SUV pulls out of the lot just as they sit down. The waiter gives them their menus and says he'll be right back to take their drink orders.
“Alright, let’s keep it civil if you’re gonna be sitting with me,” says Jack. “No political tirades in here, OK?”

“Fair enough.”

“Good. Now, I have to admit, I am intrigued by the funerals thing, so let’s go back and wrap that up first and foremost.”

“What can I say, it’s an addiction.” The young man peruses his menu. “Oh, god, sorry. I’m Jerry. My first name is actually Jarred, but I prefer Jerry.” He reaches his hand across the table. Jack shakes it firmly. “Good handshake, man.”

“It’s an important tool in my profession. I’m Jack.”

“Hopefully it’s nice to meet you. I hate how people say that right away: ‘nice to meet’cha.’ How can they know? Maybe the person is a real jerk. Or maybe you just won’t get along with them. You seem cool so far, but I want to hold my judgment until the end. Hopefully it’ll be good; I’d like to be able to say, ‘It was nice meeting you’ and mean it. I might even say ‘sir’, out of respect for my elders or something. No offense, I’m not saying you’re ancient or anything, but you are like more from my parents’ peer group.”

Jack snorts out a laugh. “Peer group, huh? Well, that’s probably true, about your parents. How old are you? Since we’re discussing age.”

“Twenty.”

“Almost there. The big two-one.”

“Doesn’t matter much to me. I don’t drink. I’m straight edge. No drugs, no alcohol. No meat. There’s a lot of nos in my life. I just like keeping my body pure and healthy and all that.”
“How about your head?” Jack flips open the menu, though he already knows what he wants. He looks at the beverage options. He is debating between iced tea and pink lemonade. He settles on the latter, and both are ready to place their main orders along with their drink requests when the waiter returns. Jerry orders a house salad, no dressing, and extra croutons. Jack requests two Taylor ham and egg on a hard roll.

“What were you asking me?” says Jerry, as the waiter makes sure he’s jotted everything down before taking away their menus.

“You were talking about austerity. Purity of the body. Then I asked about your mind, if that was pure and healthy. I mean, the going to strangers’ funerals is a little...abnormal, no?”

“Abnormal isn’t so bad. I’ve been abnormal for a while now,” says Jerry. “Mental health issues.” He taps the side of his head with his knuckles. “Hyperactivity and stuff. Disorders. But I’d rather not go into all that.”

Reticence, thinks Jack. For the first time, reticence. Even for an extroverted member of the pop psychology raised, go-ahead-and-wear-it-all-on-your-sleeve-it’s-nothing-to-be-ashamed-of generation, he decided to hold something back there. But Jack knows not to press him, to be patient, to be calm and wordless. This is a crucial time in establishing trust with a customer, so goes his own internal monologue. Give them some space, nine times out of ten they’ll expound on their own. They’ll clarify, and without you seeming nosy or suspiciously interested in their private affairs.

Jerry reorganizes the fork, spoon and knife, moving them all to the right side of his placemat. “I’ve had issues ever since I was a kid, but going to the funerals is a calming thing, a coping mechanism I think is the technical term. It’s formal. I have to get
dressed up for it. There’s an etiquette to be followed, and it’s a respectful, quiet etiquette. Not two of my strong suits, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. It gives me structure, a daily regimen, like taking a vitamin, or jogging.” He glances around the diner, re-straightens the silverware. “Jack. Jack’s a good name, an old school first name. But you seem pretty up-to-date, modernistic, otherwise you couldn’t stand talking to me at all, right? I mean, a more traditionalistic type of guy would’ve blown me off back in the parking lot, suit or not. Orange Julius or not.”

“I suppose so,” says Jack. “I’m proud of being open-minded, even progressive, but not too progressive. I think you can learn from all sorts of people. To be honest, it’s a bit of an adventure, meeting you, an unexpected part of my day. I enjoy being by myself; in my car, at the mall, it’s nice to get away and do things solo sometimes, go on little everyday adventures. Go to a movie, go shopping, whatever, just do it by yourself. It’s part of the reason my wife and I have such a good relationship; we know how to give each other space. We’re not one of those co-dependent couples who can’t do anything separately. I know a lot of guys like that, women too. I don’t know how they do it. No matter how much you love someone, after a while you get sick of their presence if it’s all-consuming and constant. Gotta break things up, have other outlets besides work. You’re not gonna both enjoy the exact same things all the time.”

“Hmm. That makes sense.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Um, not really. I’m kind of a spaz around girls. I have a low self-monitor. That means I don’t censor myself and I just say whatever’s on my mind. Girls tend not to like that. They don’t want honesty, they want some guy who’s gonna be romantic and cute
and lie to them in all the right ways. It’s not a sexist thing. I support a lot of women’s
groups, feminist groups even. There’s still a lot of discrimination based on gender in this
country. Outright oppression, systemic sexism, body image manipulation, the glass
ceiling; these aren’t dormant concepts.”

Their drinks arrive, a glass of water for each and the lemonade for Jack. He sips at it as Jerry downs his water. “Mind if I have your water too? That long walk, I’m pretty thirsty.”

Jack nods. “Sure, go ahead.”

“How’s the lemonade?”

“Not bad.”

“Certainly getting your allotment of citrus today.” He takes a small sip from his new water glass.

“Yeah, between this and the Julius.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a salesman. I work at a furniture store. We also sell rugs, carpets, a bunch of stuff. High-end mostly. A lot of Mercedeses and BMWs in our parking lot. The same set that buys those giraffe statues we were talking about.” Jack chuckles.

“It doesn’t piss you off? I mean, having to hawk your wares to some snobby, spoiled rich people just to make a living, to support your family.”

“Well, they’re not all snobby. And they’re not all spoiled, either. A lot of them have earned their money through years of hard work.”

“Man spends his youth attempting to attain wealth. He then spends his wealth attempting to attain youth. Confucius.”
Jack examines his knife and fork. They are clean, but with some dishwater spots. "Well, I’m enjoying my age. No mid-life crisis here. I like being a father and husband, always have, and I started pretty young, only about a year older than you and I was already married with a kid. Sure, the family life has its drawbacks, it’s not always kisses and hugs and sugary sweetness, it’s work in its own right, but I’m not some ambitious guy who wants to conquer the world. Simple things make me happy. Orange Julius. A good taylor ham sandwich. Little adventures. Conversations with the likes of you.” He smirks.

The young man does likewise. “How quickly we can change our opinions when we just take the time to get to know the Other with a capital O, when we stop being scared of everything. I mean, fifteen minutes ago you thought I was gonna carjack you.”

“Oh, stop it. I never thought-”

“Sorry, sorry. You were just being cautious. I forgot.”

“Hey, believe what you want. I’m fine with my caution. I am at peace with my caution.”

“Any of your kids have mental problems?”

Jack, taken aback by the non-sequitur, considers the question for a moment. “Not that I know of.”

“Not even when they were little?”

“I don’t think so. Nothing major anyway. Shane had a speech problem in the third or fourth grade. He stayed after school, took some extra sessions with a speech therapist, and that cleared it right up. Suzy reads some morbid books, but I don’t think she’s truly unhappy. She’s not one of those suicidal young girls who cuts herself or anything like
that. And Bobby was the model child; healthy, smart, good in sports and in school. He was a lot to handle as a teenager, got into some fights, and there was a silly vandalism phase he went through. Even in college he was still a bit of a hothead, but I don’t think he’s mean-spirited or enjoys hurting people. He’s just a sizeable man who doesn’t like backing down.”

“Is that your only personal exposure to violence, then? I mean, have you ever been robbed, assaulted, held up, house broken into, anything like that?”

“Nah. Been lucky that way. I was in a few fights as a kid, but that’s about it. I mean, I live in a pretty low-crime area. I go into The City a few times a year though, used to take the whole family to Yankees games in the Bronx all the time. Never had any problems. If you keep your head up and your wits about you, if you perceive what kind of people you surround yourself with, I think you really reduce your odds of winding up in a problematic or violent situation.”

“Hmm.”

“Why? How about you? Were you a reckless kid or something? I mean, you’re still only twen—”

“I have spells. They’re not really full-on seizures,” Jerry lowers his voice. “Just little episodes, incidents, moments. Just moments. I freak out, to use a term from your generation.”

“Freak out?” Jack takes a similarly hushed tone.

“Yeah. I flip out, go off, get a little crazy, can’t control myself. Those type of phrases. It’s a good thing I don’t drink. I’m definitely the kind of person who might crack somebody with a beer bottle or a pool cue if I had one in my hand.”
“Wow. I’m surprised to hear you say that. You seem pretty... Well, yeah, I mean, you’re a little... You’re an extrovert, that’s all I thought.”

Jerry snickers. “That was a very cautious sentence. You’re probably a damn good salesman. Not the hard sell type, but I bet you put up solid numbers by the end of the year. You get a commission or whatever, is that how it works?”

“That’s the majority of my income, yes. So when’s your twenty-first birthday? Coming up soon?”

“Not really. December twenty-fourth. Capricorn.”

“Christmas Eve, huh?”

“Yeah, I always got screwed on presents. My childhood kinda sucked. I was heavily medicated. Lots of psychotropic drugs. Trying to control me, keep me from having the seizure things, and to prevent me from lashing out, hitting other kids or whatever. I went away to camp every summer. It never worked out but my parents kept sending me. Stupid asses. One year, oh, I was around seven, maybe eight. They let me do archery. That was a real bad idea.”

Jack suppresses a chuckle. Jerry notices.

“It’s OK, man. You can laugh. You don’t have to be uptight about everything. It was a scene, though. I was like that guy in Texas who started shooting people from that tower. I ran out on the archery course and behind the targets was like this upgrade, I don’t know what you call it, a rise up into the woods, like a little hill. The other kids saw me, but they just kept shooting their arrows at the targets, like they were taught. You would think they would take the opportunity to shoot at me, running out there like that. Just shoot me in the butt or something. But they didn’t, they did what they were conditioned
to do, programmed, though most people would use the phrase 'well-behaved', or 'disciplined'. They didn't even yell out 'Hey, get out of there' or anything. And my counselors didn't notice either. They were too busy flirting with the girl counselors in tight little shorts. The archery guy, he was this dirty old man type. Always hitting on these teenage girls. I still remember that, being eight years old and knowing he was bad, that he shouldn't have been telling them how nice their bodies looked or how well they were developing or whatever. So I shot at him first. From up on my little perch in the trees. I don't know how I carried so many arrows, I was just a little kid. Nailed the fucker right in the eye, first shot.” Jerry cackles, almost uncontrollably. His voice rises but he curtails it. He is expending a lot of effort keeping command over his volume. “It stuck in there too. ‘Fuck, shit, goddamnit, my eye. I’m hit in the eye. Aaah!’ He started flailing around like a fish in a barrel, man. And screaming, I mean screaming like a baby when it falls and hits its head. That loud, just-shut-it-up-at-all-costs baby-screaming, this big old archery instructor. And the counselors didn’t know what to do, they were high school kids making five bucks an hour. Somebody eventually called out, something about a nurse or the nursing station or get a doctor, I don’t remember exactly. I just reloaded and started firing those arrows. Ptt-thuu, ptt-thuu, ptt-thuu. Missed with a couple in row, but then wack, some little girl, right in the neck. Tamara, little black girl. She didn’t scream at all. Her eyes just got real big and white in her dark brown face. It felt like you could see those eyes from a thousand miles away that’s how big they got. Then I shot the rest of my arrows, hit a couple other kids and a counselor or two, but nothing that stuck, just flesh wounds.” Jerry laughs. “That was probably the worst, but I had a lot of incidents at camp. One summer I became obsessed with pulling out my, you know, my unit there, and
whizzing on everybody. I liked doing it in the lunchroom for some reason. Every Friday.
Friday was hot dog day. I would turn to the kid next to me and say, ‘That ain’t a wiener,
I’ll show you a wiener.’ Then I’d hop up on the tabletop and whip it out, start spraying
the whole table like it was an uzi. ‘And here’s the mustard. Psszzz. And a little relish for
the next table over. Puh-shhhhh. Here’s some sauerkraut for ya, Miss Hemmings. Spla-
dow.’

Jack cannot help but laugh, despite knowing that it’s wrong to find humor in the
disclosures of a disturbed young man who, apparently, used to be a lot more disturbed.

“See, after the first couple of Fridays,” Jerry continues, “they thought sitting me at
the head table, with like the people who ran the camp, would help. Miss Hemmings was
this old hippy with the frizziest mop of hair you’ve ever seen. It must’ve taken her
forever to get all my pee out of there. I don’t know where I got so much urine from, but it
was a scene, man. One year pissing, the next year it was hitting people in the head with
rocks, or pushing kids in the pool. I was a troublemaker, that was my designation. So I
went in an institution for a while. After the elevator incident. That was the final straw, the
camel-breaker. Locked me up, fed me the serious drugs.”

Jack is about to say something, to try to give him a compliment for overcoming
such traumas, but Jerry isn’t done.

“That’s what it all traces back to, I guess. My anti-imperialism rants. When you’re
locked up, man, you know what it’s like to be someone’s bitch. To be fucked over. Not
literally, the people who worked there were usually pretty cool to me. I wasn’t like raped
by orderlies or anything. But you can’t do what you want. That’s what the mall people
don’t understand, how much freedom they have, how easy it is to take for granted your
car and your money and the ability to splurge on a new pair of jeans. They put you in a room and lock the door from the outside. Your parents visit and they look at you different. You're tired and drugged out all the time. I don't want to be high, man, that's why I don't drink. It sucks being out of it, it sucks being not yourself. I'm still supposed to take shit every day, pills and all. I don't. I take 'em when I want, when I feel like I absolutely have to or I'll have a fit, a freak-out. But anyway, be grateful for what you have, man. Your normal kids, your normal job, your wife and your backyard. You got a backyard, right?"

"Sure. I own a house. There's even grass in the backyard. The real green stuff, not sod." Jack doesn't want to mention the pool right now, he feels guilty for having it. He feels compelled to continue though, not to rub the normality of his family in the kid's face, but out of some atavistic pride. "A swing set. A basketball hoop. Never took any of it down from when the kids-"

"No pool?" says Jerry. "You look like a pool guy."

"Um, yeah, we have a pool. Above ground, though. Not like some fancy dug-in pool with a slide and deep water and a diving board. I wish I had a built-in pool, but not with three kids, we could never afford it."

"Why not do it now, treat yourself and your wife?"

"Eh, we're getting older, and it's only really good for three months out of the year. We're content with our little above ground pool."

"Content? Can't be content in America, man. You gotta want more-more-more, better-better-better. That's capitalism, no? Aspirations, jealousy, wanting what the rich and famous people have, envying thy neighbor and coveting their goods."
“Hey, I see rich people everyday. I don’t need what they have. I don’t need that bronze giraffe. I don’t need the fancy pool, the Lexus, the Oriental rug. I know those things are made by two-hundred little kids who work under horrible conditions and make twenty cents a day and start to go blind by the time they’re fifteen. I know that shit. I’m not ignorant. I know what you’re talking about. But what can I do? Nothing really. So I enjoy what I have, like you said. I don’t take it for granted. Not just the big things, like my family or my job. The small things. Diners. Taylor ham. Orange Julius.”

“Speak of the devil,” says Jerry, as the waiter approaches with their plates.

He stops at the tableside and asks if they need anything. Both decline. Jerry lifts his fork and pokes at his salad. Jack dives right into his halved-sandwiches, finishing the first of four in what seems like two bites.

Jerry smiles. “Now that’s a man who likes his meat.”

“Hey, shopping makes me hungry.” Jack dabs the corners of his mouth with his napkin. “That’s a bigger than average mall. I bet I walked a mile or two today myself going from store to store.”

“Well, enjoy.” Jerry lifts some lettuce and a crouton to his mouth with the fork.

“This place makes the best taylor ham and egg.” Jack starts on the second of his four half-sandwiches. “I’ve had some that are just as good, Saddle Brook Diner has really great taylor ham, but none better.”

They consume their food in peace for a few minutes, lubricating their meals with the occasional sip from their respective beverages. The waiter stops by as they look to be nearing completion, Jack on the last of his sandwich halves, Jerry scraping the bottom of his salad bowl.
“Would you like any dessert, sirs?”

Jack looks at Jerry. “Go ahead, get something. Meal’s on me.”

“No no no. I insist on paying for my share.”

“Ah, come on, you’re just a kid, you’re not even old enough to drink. I got it, I can afford it.”

“No, Jack. I won’t let you pay for me.”

The waiter stands there looking uncomfortable, the semi-smile affixed to his face starting to look strained and false.

“Can we see the menus again?” Jerry asks.

“Sure, I’ll bring two right over.”

“Fine, suit yourself,” says Jack. “Shoulda known you weren’t the type to accept generosity. You probably view it as charity, condescension.”

Jerry shrugs, doesn’t make eye contact, and waits for the waiter to return with the menus. He does, then leaves to attend to another table. Jerry flips open his menu and scans the inside of the back cover, where they list the desserts, children’s meals and senior citizen specials. “Maybe just some fruit,” Jerry mutters. “Strawberries or something. You getting anything?”

Jack examines the choices. “Let’s see… Strawberries, you said? Maybe on top of some cheesecake. That sounds good. Strawberry cheesecake. You want to split it? They give you a really big slice here. You can have all the actual fruit off the top. I mostly just like the strawberry flavoring, the gooey red sweet stuff.”

The waiter returns and takes their dessert order, and the menus, and heads for the kitchen.
“So, uh, you were saying something about an elevator,” says Jack. “That was the
decimal straw, you said.” He knows he should leave it alone, it was another example of
reticence on the kid’s part, but Jack’s curiosity has gotten the best of him. That happens
on occasion, but usually it’s just a minor hiccup, something that can be easily smoothed
over. Jack rarely loses a sale because of a sporadic loss of concentration or an odd
moment of inquisitiveness.

“You don’t want to hear it, man.”

“Well, if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine, but-”

Jerry looks out the window. “Still sunny out there. That’s one thing about the
spring, days start getting longer. But they start getting shorter again not long after, around
late June. People forget that. The first day of summer is the longest day of the year. After
that it’s all downhill, the slide toward August and September, when the days start getting
noticeably shorter again. Fall. Autumn leaves and Halloween. Daylight Savings Time.
People like that night, the fall back, gives ‘em that extra hour of sleep. But soon enough
they’re complaining, like it’s never happened before, ‘Ugh, it gets dark so early now.’
We have short memories, human beings. I remember being inside for Daylight Savings
Day. The extra hour is no fun for somebody waiting to get out of imprisonment. ‘Cause
that’s what it is. Sure, it’s better than like an actual adult jail, and I’m glad I was in there
instead of juvie, but it was still the worst time of my life. That was probably the single
worst day of my life, the day the clocks turned back. That or the day in the elevator.” He
smirks at Jack, who can tell his curiosity is going to be sated, though he regrets asking.
He feels like he’s invading the kid’s privacy, his personal space. He wishes, just for a
split second, that he’d avoided the whole encounter, that he’d never met Jerry, that he’d
done what he set out to do – drink his Orange Julius, feel the sun on his arms, eat a taylor ham sandwich or two, in this diner, alone.

The waiter provides their dessert, sets down the bill, and quickly departs, leaving them with Jerry’s last revelation. With his fork he stabs one of the strawberries off the top of the large piece of cheesecake centered on the table and pops it into his mouth whole. It is not a small strawberry, Jerry’s chewing is vigorous and audible. Jack pulls the dessert a bit closer and slices into the strawberry-syrup-covered cheesecake with his fork, lifts a large portion to his mouth, the red ooze of strawberry topping drooling down the side of the cake, just slightly reminiscent of blood on human skin. “Mm,” he says, enjoying the combined textures of the crust, the cheesecake, the strawberry flavoring, and the aroma and residue of the actual fruit.

“Alright, fuck it, I’ll tell you the elevator story.” Jerry samples another strawberry, putting it in his mouth whole again. This time he impaled it not on the fork, but on his knife.

Jack noticed that, but continues to partake of his cheesecake, always the listener.

“It was at the mall, not the one across the street. Paramus Park, just up the road here, on Seventeen North. Good old north. Anyway, I was sixteen, just starting my senior year of high school at Paramus Catholic. I didn’t go there for the religion. I already knew all that was bullshit, I just thought it’d be a better experience than the public high school, and my parents had the money to send me. Wearing that uniform every day was confining, but people still find ways to express themselves. The shade of the color of your grey pants. Your shoes. Your ties. I had a bunch of different ties, girls always complimented me on them. That was the only time girls would ever give me compliments.
about my physical appearance, and it was about my ties. I had pretty bad acne through a lot of high school. And the girls, they always had hairdos to express themselves, make-up, the length of their skirts. But anyway, so I’m at the mall.” Jerry skewers another strawberry with his knife and consumes it. There are two left. “Good strawberries. Fresh. I’m at the mall applying for jobs, not because I needed the money, but because I wanted to work. I argued with my parents about it. You’d think normal people would encourage their only child to work, to learn responsibility and all that. But they just wanted me to study and get good grades so I could go to an Ivy League college and then they could brag to their friends about where I was and how well I was doing and visit me once a semester to marvel at the campus, at the oldness of everything, and take me out for lunch at some fancy New England restaurant that’s been around since the eighteen-hundreds. I filled out an application at B. Dalton, the bookstore, a few other places too; something in the food court, an ice cream place I think, and a clothing store or two, The Gap I remember, maybe one or two others that aren’t there anymore. I hadn’t taken my meds in a really long time, and it was a long day, stressful, walking all over the mall, trying to convince people that they should hire me, even though at sixteen an employer has to deal with all that crap like working papers and only being able to work you at certain times or for a fixed number of hours. And I hadn’t eaten much for breakfast, maybe that was part of it too.”

Jack is silent, attentive, his mind is not drifting off. He has trained it not to wander or wonder. Stay with the words, whatever the customer’s saying, no matter how banal it sounds. You never know when an important detail will come, when a sale-making piece of information will subtly emerge.
"Anyway, it was September, but the weather was still really hot and humid and I guess a circuit breaker blew or something. The power in the mall went out, the auxiliary power kicked in and some of those emergency lights came on, but the elevator just stopped, we were stuck between floors. There were three other people in there with me. A glass elevator, that’s what they have at Paramus Park. That’s what did it, I think. The fact that I could see out of it actually made it worse, more claustrophobic, not less. I started hyperventilating. The other people in the elevator were all looking at each other. This white guy said, ‘You alright, kid’, in this sort of gruff voice, like he was saying, ‘I’m such a big man, nothing phases me, I’m not scared, I’m Bruce Willis, I’m an action hero, I’ll get us all out of here.’ There was an older woman, maybe early sixties, three or four shopping bags in her hands. She was panicking. I remember how she clutched her bags like they were a life preserver, like if she just held on tight to those bags everything would be OK. I said, ‘There’s not enough air’, and then I really got excited, I must have looked crazy. My eyes get all big and bugged out when I get excited, right when I’m gonna lose it."

Jack scoops up the last sliver of cheesecake without taking his eyes off Jerry, who seems a little excited right now, the hand holding the knife trembling just a bit as he spears another strawberry off the plate and chews it gratuitously.

Jerry finishes chewing and jabs the tip of the butter knife gently at Jack. “The last person on the elevator was this black guy, a security guard. Older man, and those guys are usually retired cops, but not him I don’t think. I’ve always thought of him as some kind of manual laborer, somebody who worked construction when he was younger, something like that. He was stiff looking, like he didn’t walk too well. Back problems
from too much heavy lifting, too many years on the jobsite earning just enough money to make a living while his white co-workers called him a nigger behind his back for thirty years. Eats his lunch alone in a corner of the food court, that's the kind of guy I think he was. Tired, beaten. He said something rote and predictable like, 'Calm down now, son, there's plenty of air.' That he definitely said, I remember him saying there was enough air. And me not believing him. I started to freak out. Ran right into the black guy, drove my head into his chest, I was squeezing him in sort of a hug around his waist. I don't know what I saw or thought after that. Well, I guess I saw his gun, and I was just too tempted not to try and grab it. It pulled right out. I wonder if they're still like that. Probably. It's not like some rent-a-cop at Paramus Park mall is gonna have the cutting edge equipment. But I know real cops' guns have this mechanism now where it's almost impossible to pull it out if you're not the person wearing it, you have to push it down and then forward all in one motion to get it out of the holster. But all of a sudden I'm in a stopped elevator, feeling like I'm about to asphyxiate, and I've got a gun in my hand. Started waving it around. Hero man wasn't so tough anymore, he was ducking and throwing up his arms like a scared little kid who doesn't want his older brother to punch him in the arm anymore. No superhero moves then, when I had the gun. I put the barrel in my mouth, and that shut everybody up. Complete silence. Then my eyes rolled back in my head, and I blacked out before I could pull the trigger."

Lancing the last of the strawberries, Jerry looks hard at Jack across the table. He holds the strawberry in mid-air, above the tabletop. "So, are you satisfied now?"

"Satisfied?"
Jerry devours the last strawberry. He jabs the rounded point of the knife at Jack’s chest again. “Come on, you’ve been living vicariously this whole time. You like to hear other people’s stories, their problems and worries and woes. Their shitty little lives make you feel that much better about your own. About your prim and proper American family. You’ve never been close to tragedy, to trauma. To you, difficult is more traffic than usual on the highway, the filter on your pool breaks, the weekend you were planning to go down the shore it rains. Oh, the horror.”

“Listen, Jerry-”

“Aren’t you even pissed off? I’m calling you a spoiled brat, a grown-up American brat, right to your face, and you just sit there and take it.”

Jack surveys the area around them, curious if anyone in the diner can hear them, not wanting to be part of a scene. “Put the knife down and I’ll tell you. What are you trying to do, look threatening? You’re lucky if you could break the skin with that thing.”

Jerry complies. He puts the knife down and assumes the posture of a listener, folding his hands under his chin while resting his elbows on the table.

Jack exhales. “OK then.” He thinks about his day, about the woman who sold him the perfume at Sephora. An orangey-tan woman of at least fifty years of age who was sporting surgically enhanced cleavage beneath a mauve colored v-neck jacket. He thinks about the ticket broker, and paying him almost twice the face value for the Broadway musical, Jack failing in his attempts to bargain the price down by speaking through a hole in the Plexiglas, then cordially thanking some pale, hook-nosed employee for ripping him off. The girl with the dyed black hair and the tattoos and the piercings who glared at him like he was the lowest parasite on earth when he brought his un-hip CD up to the counter.
The muscle-bound, wavy-haired kid at the sporting goods store, asking him if he’d like to apply for a credit card and save fifteen percent on today’s and all future purchases. He looks at Jerry in his black suit. “Yes, I’m non-confrontational. And I’ve been lucky, fine, you’re right about that. I have a lot to be thankful for. I hit a home-run. And I did it by taking it. By not standing up for myself. By letting customers yell at me and be abusive to me and return things I knew they never wanted in the first place and lie about prices they saw at another store and fight and argue and bitch and moan and complain, all because they’re trying to save a measly ten percent. I do all of it, every day. I give in, I succumb, I sell-out, I bend over and take it. For forty, fifty hours a week, whatever it takes. But come the weekend, I have my family and my house and my pool. I read the paper, I have a drink, maybe an Orange Julius from some company owned by a mega-conglomerate corporation that’s shitting up the atmosphere and importing goods made by slave-laborers in some Southeast Asian hellhole. And so what? I like that Orange Julius. I don’t care where it came from, or how it got here, or how it should be better, realer. I don’t think about whether I deserve what I have or not. And if that makes me a spineless worm, an ugly American, so be it. You keep going to other people’s funerals. See what all your learned intellectualism and youthful angst and empathy for your fellow man gets you. Nod sympathetically at the mourners, throw your flower on the grave, laugh at them for getting a drink afterwards at Bennigan’s, or some other chain restaurant, or some sports bar. While you pester strangers in parking lots outside a diner on Route Seventeen. Or, more likely, as you get older, you’ll be heading to some bar in the middle of the day on a Saturday afternoon. A nice privately owned place with hard-working minority bartenders and waitresses. And you’ll sit there, alone, sipping a club soda, ranting about the state of
the world, an angry middle-aged man, all by himself, the guy who everybody in the bar
looks at and listens to and then shakes their head and says, ‘Man, that guy sure is pissed
off, I wouldn’t want to be him, I wouldn’t want to be that guy.’ OK, Jerry? How’s that
sound?’

Jack is about to stand up, to head out to his car and turn on the radio. Maybe
there’ll be some more Led Zeppelin on the classic rock station, he thinks, a good one, a
song you don’t hear all the time. But Jerry picks up his knife with both hands, holding it
horizontally, twirling it around between his index finger and thumb at each end. He looks
at his reflection in the mirror of the blade. “I’m sorry. Like I said, I’ve got a lot of work
to do. Healing and such. Gotta control my temper, my impulses. I’m sorry, really sorry.
I’m sorry I messed up your little Saturday outing to the mall. But you had your Orange
Julius, and you had your taylor ham sandwiches. Didn’t you? I didn’t keep you from the
things that give you pleasure. I won’t be coming back here anymore, Jack. Don’t worry
about bumping into me. I won’t bother you ever again. I’m just really sorry. But if I ever
need some furniture, or a grandfather clock, or an Oriental rug, maybe I’ll come see you.
I’ll bring you some doughnuts from Jackie’s Bakery. You can share ‘em with the other
salespeople in the break room, maybe even the stockboys and the secretaries and the
delivery drivers will get one. You’ll be everybody’s best friend. You like making people
happy. That’s not such a bad thing. I’m sorry, I just like making everybody mad and
angry. ‘Cause I think that’s what we should be. But we never will. You can’t be angry
when you have so much stuff. Nice new Toyota, the steady job, the pool in the backyard,
the well-adjusted kids, the wife waiting for you at home. The statue of the giraffe.”
Jack picks up the check, examines the figure circled at the bottom. He leaves a few bills that cover the total and add up to an eighteen percent tip, and then heads for the door without a word. Jerry watches out the window as the silver Avalon pulls onto Route 17 North. He stands, adds a five dollar bill to the tip, puts down the knife he was still holding and, after looking around the panorama of the diner and glancing briefly at the tabletop, he makes his way to the bathroom, to urinate.
This particular diner looks like something from a black and white movie. The lion roars, the orchestral soundtrack swells. The characters are all in place. It’s a Tuesday evening in early autumn in southern New Jersey.

Joni sits at a table, a woman not used to dining alone. She was named after her mother’s favorite musician, Joni Mitchell, though this Joni’s hair is short and dark, not long and blonde. She is young, employed, unmarried. She fancies herself a good cook, a token remnant of traditionalism in her modern disposition, and misses making dinner for her now ex-boyfriend. Lemon chicken with a broccoli-stuffed baked potato was the last meal she made him before they broke up. Joni is a stenographer at a municipal court. They handle society’s lesser crimes – vandalism, disputes over property lines, motor vehicle infractions – nothing terribly serious. Session has let out for the day and Joni is talking into her cell phone about how she longs to do some skiing in the near future. “Maybe next weekend. Are you doing anything? We could drive up to Vermont,” she says to the party on the other end of the line.

Jean is on his cell phone as well. He is originally from New Orleans, where his experience was in seafood restaurants, not diners. You wouldn’t know he was a chef turned short order cook from his appearance; he looks refined and cultured, like a professional musician used to playing the clarinet in a jazz band rather than a man who
makes grilled cheese sandwiches and Salisbury steak. He is out of uniform and standing next to a phone booth with a rarely used pay phone inside, though sometimes people take a seat on the accompanying bench and talk on their cell phones. It had a door at one time in its history, but not anymore. The booth’s mahogany wood is starting to crack and strip but its presence lends the diner an element of permanence, denoting an establishment that’s been around for a while, a reliable place. Jean has worked here for three months and enjoys the temperate kitchen. His co-workers are all American-born second or third generation Hispanics who have never been to their homelands – Puerto Rico, Columbia, the Dominican Republic – and though they know how, they refuse to speak English to each other. They complain about Jean’s kitchen in their various Spanish dialects, and after a few busy hours they’re panting for a glass of water. The humidity and the heat, they cry during the summer months: *hace calor, es humedo.* Jean laughs and shakes his head. Back in Louisiana he sweated off five to ten pounds a day in the cramped and dimly lit kitchen of a restaurant on Esplanade Avenue in New Orleans, the border of the French Quarter and the Faubourg Marigny, then went home reeking of fish. He is sweating a bit today, but due to nervousness, not humidity. His wife Sue is in the hospital attempting to give birth to their first child. He was by her side all night and morning, but he cannot afford to miss work. Currently on break, Jean is in the middle of a double-shift that will not end until well after midnight. He tells Sue he loves her, and that he wishes he could be there with her.

A third man at the Grand Palace Diner in Berlin, New Jersey is actively engaged in a cell phone conversation. He is talking with his lawyer. They are discussing the man’s will. This is Lionel. He is dying, alone and unloved. The cancer has spread too far, and
the doctors have informed him that death is imminent. He wants to enjoy the last weeks
of his life, but he is a lonely middle-aged man. Twenty years ago he was engaged, to a
waitress named Rebecca, but they never married. She left him for another man. Lionel
had subsequent relationships for a decade or so but hasn’t been seriously involved with a
woman in over ten years. He frequents a local strip club but does not enjoy prostitutes, he
tried that once and decided it just wasn’t for him. Lap dances and bought smiles must
suffice.

The fourth, and last, cell phone conversationalist in this scene is Felix. He placed
the call to his mother from the parking lot. She answered as he got out of his pick-up,
which once belonged to his father, and closed the driver’s side door behind him. He
announced that he’d found a job as he entered the lobby of the Grand Palace and stopped
there momentarily, listening to his mother’s glee before entering the dining area and
securing a seat in the non-smoking section. His mother tells him a factory is as good a
place to work as any.

“Yeah, I know, ma. It’s steady work,” he says. “Full time. I start next week, after
I pass the drug test…I took it today…I had to…I know it’s an invasion of priv-…Monday
through Friday, eight to five, twelve bucks an hour, with benefits and an automatic raise
after three months if they decide to keep me. It doesn’t seem like it’ll be too hard. I have
to get a pair of gloves, though…No, work gloves, ma. Like the kind dad used when he
did his gardening…Yeah, the ones with the blue trim…Don’t bother, I’m gonna stop
somewhere on the way home and pick up a new pair…Right, sorry, on the way to my
apartment. Your house will always be home, ma…Yes, I know I’m always welcome, but
I’m not gonna be a scrub, bumming meals off you all the time.”
Felix is twenty-two years old. His parents were both born in Germany and immigrated to the United States when they were babies. They eventually wound up in Philadelphia, where they met during high school, their shared German heritage an ideal icebreaker. Later, after they’d married, they decided to leave the city of brotherly love in search of an affordable starter home, which became a permanent one, in a safer neighborhood with better schools. They chose southern New Jersey over eastern Pennsylvania, and perhaps not coincidentally the town of Berlin, where Felix was conceived, born and raised. He graduated high school, went to college at Stockton State for a couple of semesters, then dropped out and took a series of low-paying dead-end jobs: food delivery for a fried chicken joint called Cluck-U, security guard at an M&M/Mars plant, order picker at a Toys ‘R Us warehouse. These days, Felix is getting to be quite a pool player, good enough to win some money at it. For a while, it was hard to find people willing to bet on the game who weren’t just as good as he was. They weren’t notably better, but nor did he have any advantage or edge, so winning or losing usually felt like it came down to luck – a ball that just didn’t drop, an untimely scratch, an awkward break. He enjoys playing, always has, and when he practices consistently, as he has lately, he can literally feel himself improving, that unique sensation of obtaining skill, of maturation, of approaching mastery. Felix and his friends were regulars for a few years at the local pool halls (Castle, Herbert’s, Lucky’s, before it closed down, and Player’s Choice, the last being his favorite, out on White Horse Pike, a road that if you keep driving it east will eventually lead you to Atlantic City) but recently his buddies have been less willing to accompany him, preferring bars and nightclubs to the pool halls they frequented, out of necessity more than love of billiards, back when they were not yet
twenty-one. Felix was the only one who truly loved and understood the game, but there are only so many places you can go in those years before reaching the legal drinking age, especially if you’re not in college. The driving range, the miniature golf course, the arcade, stopping for some cheap eats at Roma Pizza, drinking beers at Danny Flynn’s house because his parents went away to Ocean City almost every weekend; that was about the extent of it.

Felix ends the conversation with his mom, after wishing her his love, and flips open the menu. He did not notice the dancer in the corner. If he had, he would’ve been struck by her beauty, of course, but he might have felt something else – a link, a bond, a connection, a desire to know someone because they are in some indefinable way very much like yourself.

The dancer’s name is Sky. Sky Lisabeta Gallagher. Her parents weren’t quite hippies. They liked to think of themselves as nonconformists, rebels, but at heart they were believers in the American dream, Democrat-voting capitalists who both worked to forge a little life for themselves in the South Jersey ’burbs. Sky has an older sister named Kelly and a younger brother named Donald; she got the peculiar moniker in the family. Her parents are self-professed animal lovers. As a child, Sky’s home was filled with cats and dogs and ferrets, salt water and fresh water fish, an iguana named Persephone and a snake named Artemis. “Artemisssss” was how she greeted it when she heard its hissing and tried to speak its language, a child’s attempt to communicate with an animal. This was when she was eight, the age at which she most enjoyed watching the two reptiles behind the glass of their large, well-lit cages. She started to feel bad for them by the time she was ten, and by thirteen she was challenging her parents, saying that if they truly
loved animals they wouldn’t keep them penned up, ‘imprisoned’ is the word she used, if
they were real animal lovers they would let all their pets go free. Her siblings chided her
and told her to relax, but Sky never did. She denounced her first name and went by
Lisabeta during what she now thinks of as her coke-slut phase, the latter high school
years when her love of the white powder and the development of a suddenly curvaceous
figure led to a lot of backseat fumblings, fuckings and snortings, in a variety of orders.
She has been clean for almost five years now, has retaken possession of her first name,
and though still five feet ten inches tall, her weight has dropped from one-hundred fifty to
one-hundred ten pounds. Her bra size has diminished from a full D to at best a big B. Her
stomach is taut and hard, her arms are sinewy and muscled. Sky is still wearing her
dancer’s garb; today she didn’t bother to change or shower after her workout. Sometimes
she showers at home, sometimes at the studio, depending on her mood, but the routine is
always the same – from work (a five hour a day secretarial temp job in Lindenwold) to
the dance studio (two and a half hours minimum) to the diner (preferably the same corner
booth) to home (her apartment) and then, on most nights, right back out again, to the pool
hall (until she’s tired). The majority of her dance colleagues are extremely strict with
their diets, though they burn through seven thousand calories a day. Most are chain
smokers. Many are vegetarians or vegans, and if they knew she ate at the Grand Palace
Diner, right there off the Berlin Circle, at 1932 Route 73 South, they’d be either very
envious or very scornful, or perhaps both. The Grand Palace is a longer drive for Sky, it’s
farther from the dance studio than the Berlin Diner or the White Horse Diner, both
located on the southbound side of the White Horse Pike, but she likes this diner the best.
It exudes comfort, safety. There is something reassuring about the symmetry of the
layout, the smell of the freshly cooked food, the friendly waitresses, the regular clientele, and that old wooden phone booth. Sky looks comfortably alone, but always inspires a second glance, or even a stare, because she is just too beautiful, too beautiful to be by herself. Tall, thin, good-looking women aren’t supposed to be unaccompanied, especially at a restaurant, and a diner at that. People who eat by themselves at diners are primarily men, older men, men who look like they’ve been working hard for many years, or, to be more accurate, life has been working them. If a woman does come in alone, it’s generally a single career gal, often a none too pretty one who hides behind a newspaper or magazine, getting a quick bite to eat on her way to or from an apartment shared with a spoiled cat, or maybe it’ll be one of the large, lonely, overweight women who work at the strip mall across the circle, at Dunkin Donuts or Sweets Bakery, at Kinney Shoes or the various no-name low-end clothing stores. Maybe a widow or two, though if they were half as attractive as Sky, they wouldn’t be eating alone for long. There is something not right about it when people see Sky by herself, though in many locations this doesn’t inspire that second look, as people assume she is on her way to or from some venue where she will be received by the masses, appropriately surrounded by friends and suitors and sycophants.

There is no singular reason for this detached behavior of Sky’s, no simple ‘answer’. There isn’t a childhood experience that scarred her, nor are there any other Psych 101 explanations: no chemical imbalance, no aversion to public places, no phobias, no irrational fear of germs or of being physically accosted, no speech impediment or schizophrenia. She simply prefers it this way, sans companionship. The last time her mother called, Sky could feel her hinting at something, trying to find the courage to
inquire if her daughter was a lesbian. But Mrs. Gallagher never did get up the gall to come right out and ask. Instead, she kept mentioning old male high school classmates of Sky’s, ones she knew were still single, and saying things like, “Well, some of the dancers you train with have to be masculine, they can’t all be, you know... They’ve got great bodies those male dancers. I’ve seen them; strong, gorgeous men. Shoulders and arms and all that good stuff. Don’t you think so? I mean, maybe since you see them all the time you don’t notice...” Sky tuned her out and thought about other things, about playing pool. She visualized angles on shots. She considered the light but solid heft of her three hundred dollar Joss cue stick. Playing in a tournament in Atlantic City, at the Taj Mahal, on a Brunswick table. Fantasies about making the finals, going up against the likes of Karen Corr or Allison Fisher. Or even Johnny Archer or Earl Strickland, as it is Sky’s opinion that gender distinctions in the game of pool are archaic and unnecessary. Pool is viability, it is life, an exigent rush, a stimulation of the senses. The bright round balls, the light blue stain imprinted on the cue ball, the ‘twap’ of a flawlessly executed shot, the ‘clack’ of a nine-ball combination, the ‘crunch’ of a perfect break followed by multiple ‘thud’s into the pockets, two balls sunk already and all set up to run the table. “You’re not going out alone at night again are you?” Her mother’s voice had brought her back into consciousness. Then came the predictable questions, the rejoinders about the ‘unsafe environments’ she frequented, how that could lead to ‘regression’, Sky’s mom’s euphemism for snorting fat-ass lines and blowing three guys at the same time, a story Sky once told her mother when she was seventeen and came home zooted out of her mind to a 4am mother-daughter kitchen table confrontation. It was ‘the truth’ she screamed at Mrs. Carol Gallagher. “It’s what I do, I like it. Are you happy now, mom? Is your curiosity
sated?” Middle-child rebellion perhaps, if an extreme form. And it was only close to true – there were actually four guys, and she was fucking one of them while she sucked the other three off. Two of them came on her face, the other two she couldn’t remember how or if they finished. Why she tweaked the story just that little bit, gave her mom that tiny sum of restraint, of omission, of mercy, is something Sky does not know. That conversation was years ago, the phone call with her mom was a month ago. Sky doesn’t bring her cell phone out with her anymore. She leaves it at home, and when she gets in she checks to see who called. She doesn’t get many callers, and on the occasions she does, they’re people who can wait, whose desire to contact her isn’t really all that urgent. They’re just bored and lonely, Sky thinks to herself as she looks at the names on the phone’s illuminated screen, people who want me to listen to their petty dramas.

A waitress comes over to refill Sky’s coffee. The dancer’s head is on the table, her face turned sideways toward the wall.

“Sleeping?” the waitress asks.

“No. I’m awake,” says Sky. “I’m thinking.”

“More coffee?” The waitress holds out the coffee pot but does not pour without confirmation from the customer.


The waitress complies. “Anything else? Dessert?” She has waited on Sky many times before and never has the dancer ordered dessert. Nonetheless, it is something she feels she must ask. Maybe this will be the day she’s in the mood for a slice of cheesecake
or a dish of ice cream. Sky shakes her head. The waitress tries to interpret Sky’s last statement; she wonders what it is that is tiring, the performance, or thinking about it?

“My hands are cold,” Sky mutters and rubs them together.

“Yeah, they skimp a bit on the heat in here,” Donna says. “They won’t turn it on unless it’s like forty degrees or colder outside. And the door’s been opening and closing a lot tonight.”

“Just the check, when you get a chance,” Sky says politely.

“Sure thing, hun.” The waitress departs, off to tend to another table.

Sky stretches her long legs, arches her back and yawns. Her hair is pulled off her face and tied in a black scrunchy. Her sweatpants are grey, her tank top with built-in sports bra is black lycra, faded from wear and washing. Donna brings over the check. Sky leaves the tip on the table and takes the bill to the cashier. The owner is manning the register tonight. He spends a lot of time micro-managing the staff and overseeing his business. Sky knows him only as Mr. Preysing. As she approaches, he is talking with a patron who is waiting for a table, a man by himself with a notable facial scar. It looks like the right side of his face suffered severe burns long ago, and all the technology and surgery of the medical industry, all their modern miracles, weren’t quite enough to give him his normal face back. Unbeknownst to Sky, this is Dr. Lewis Stone. He has a doctoral name, a doctoral countenance and posture – the self-assuredness, the deep, soothing voice – but this is not the mythical doctor that women lust after. His shoulders are broad and his chin is masculine, but the deformity ruins the fairy tale. This is a man who often eats alone. Mr. Preysing is speaking with him the way one speaks to a regular; there is a jovial comfort between them, the result of near-daily routine. A waitress, not
Donna but Maria, grabs a menu and leads the doctor to a table by the window. The damaged side faces the outside world as he fiddles with the sugar packets. He needs them to be ordered and neat, no pinks mixed in with the whites or blues. The same for the salt and pepper shakers. They must be centered on the table, one on each side of the sugar packets, the salt on right and the pepper on the left. He folds his hands and stares at the tabletop, making sure it has been properly cleaned since the last patron ate there. Tonight there are no scraps or remnants, but there have been in the past: the crumbs of bread crusts, the tiny torn-off edge of a straw wrapper, granules of salt, soup spillage, a cold fleck of wrinkled yellow that was someone's scrambled egg. Lastly, the fact that he is not the kind of doctor that women lust after is rather irrelevant, since, in the last year or so, Dr. Stone has finally admitted to himself that he is a homosexual.

Sky gets in her car and drives home to her apartment. There she will shower and listen to music. She will not dance to it. Sky prefers music you need to concentrate on, music with 'good lyrics'. She sits sedentary and motionless, settled into her couch, sipping hot tea, and listens to the likes of Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan and Carole King, Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen. But tonight it is John Lennon, his first, and in Sky's opinion best, solo album, better even than many of his Beatles records. It is on this album that John sang “I don't believe in Beatles, I just believe in me” and “I was the Walrus, but now I'm John” and “A working class hero is something to be.” He was, at that stage in his career, distancing himself from his earlier incarnation, his previous life as a member of a band, and asserting himself in his new form, as an individual. John had Yoko, though. Sky has no such companion, no much-talked-about 'soulmate'. She goes to the closet, retrieves the case that holds her cue stick, and heads back out to her car.
Felix enjoys the process of going to the pool hall, the routine of it, the ritual. He stands outside his truck, runs his fingers through his shaggy hair, rubs his chin. Felix does not shave everyday, and is glad he won’t have to for his new job. He likes a little stubble, a little scruff. He wears a long-sleeved denim shirt, unbuttoned, and underneath it a t-shirt advertising Pat’s King of Steaks on 9th Street in Philadelphia. Where your cheese steak alliance lies (be it with Pat’s, their across-the-way nemesis Geno’s, or occasionally some hipster cheese steak snob who says he prefers neither, that his Philly cheese steak of choice is Jim’s or Tony Luke’s) says a lot about a person. Felix is a Pat’s man, although his all-time favorite cheese steaks are made by the White House Sub Shop in Atlantic City, on Arctic Avenue, one of the streets that didn’t quite make the cut for Monopoly. His pants are worn but comfortable, olive-colored corduroy tonight, wide wale, and his low-top Nikes are dusty and well-broken in but otherwise clean, tied extremely tightly, with the laces tucked in.

He smiles at Sal behind the counter, who tonight informs him that Felix’s favorite table, Number 5, has just been vacated, by some loud young men, most of whom attend the two-year community college in nearby Williamstown. Sal is fat and unkempt and doesn’t like to move from his tall, cushioned high-back stool. Felix is fine with this, and though he wonders what a guy like Sal does when he’s not manning the counter at Player’s Choice, he never wonders for long. This is because Sal is reassuring, a permanent presence, a guy who looks the part, who has the right aesthetic for his occupation. Sal is downright friendly if he knows you, though he often comes off as surly to first-timers or once-in-a-while patrons. He doesn’t like customers who haggle over the rate or ask for specific tables if they aren’t regulars. His size and gruff speaking voice do
not make him any more ingratiating. Felix has been coming here for years, though, and now that he is often alone, and coming more regularly than ever, he finds himself talking to Sal more and more, legitimately curious as to how business is going, how the tables are holding up, what the story is with the hall’s liquor license. “That’s more Tony’s domain,” Sal tells him. Tony Rose, the owner, is a local success story. All-county athlete back in the ’70s at Camden County Regional High and now an entrepreneur, Tony owns a limo service and two locations of a recognizable national rental car franchise along with the pool hall. The liquor license query is just small talk for Felix, who never drinks while he plays. He’s never drank here at all, actually, and is still a bit peeved about a time a few years ago when Player’s Choice issued the policy that after 10pm it was twenty-one and over only. The liquor license has been lost and reinstated and reconfigured more than once since then, as the laws regarding where and when and how alcohol can be served change rather often in South Jersey.

Felix, who still has a high score (the initials F.V.G. are second from the top) on the old school coin-op Galaga video game that Sal and Mr. Rose keep next to the pinball and the soda and snack machines, won his third straight Players Choice tournament last night, so tonight he’s a bit of a celebrity to the regulars. The first week was mostly luck, he was just screwing around with some 6-Ball, a game he rarely plays. It was a rainy Wednesday night with thunderstorms, lots of lightning and some flooding on the roadways, and the tournament only signed up seven other players. Then, last week, he won the Monday night 9-ball, and the same held true yesterday, making it two weeks in a row and running at that particular tourney, one of the bigger ones, usually drawing at least twenty entries. Tonight he feels like Tom Cruise in *The Color of Money*, the Martin
Scorsese-directed sequel to The Hustler. He’s like that suave cat in the Warren Zevon song that’s playing in the background as Cruise wipes the table with his opponents, all the while fingerling his pompadour hairdo and twirling his cue stick like a gunslinger, like Roger Daltrey swinging his mic at a Who concert. Tonight, Felix doesn’t just walk in, he makes an entrance, he struts and swaggers into the pool hall. He tosses hellos and throws out salutary waves like candy to children, like beads at Mardi Gras. He nods his head with a cocky smirk that says: I’m a working man, a soon-to-be legitimate wage-earner, a tournament winner, and a natural born pool shark. The smoking section is smokier, the drunks at the bar yelling at the baseball games are louder, the women look hotter, with their cleavage spilling from lower cut shirts and their asses framed in tighter jeans than usual. Sal’s smile is bigger and brighter. Felix’s senses pick out tiny details from long distances. The smell of someone’s strawberry bubble gum, the metallic flick of a Zippo lighter, the ticking of the clock as the minute hand moves forward a half-inch and covers part of the maroon-colored seven-ball on the face of the billiards-themed timepiece over Sal’s head, in between a mirror that says Miller Lite and one of those Thank Goodness For Guinness posters, the one with the ostriches. Felix isn’t looking to gamble tonight; he plans to methodically set up and knock down ball after ball, diligently trying to improve his game, politely declining any requests for a head to head match. Felix will rarely play with a stranger anyway. Occasionally one of the old timers, Junior or Pete or Monty, will throw five or ten bucks a game his way, but he can beat them all with ease now. It’s that next step he wants to get to, where he can consistently beat the semi-professionals who play for a hundred dollars a game, or better yet, winning real tournaments. That’s the challenge, the competitions in Atlantic City – 9-Ball and 8-Ball and the ever harder to
find game of straight pool. The drive into Atlantic City at night, those lights appearing out of nowhere along the shoreline in the distance, is Felix’s favorite sight in the world. His favorite smell is the scent of blue chalk-dust that hits his nose as he opens his case, extracts his Lucasi cue stick, and rubs the tip with a brand new Master chalk. After a quick survey of the room, Felix leans against the counter and looks at Sal.

“Go right ahead, Number Five is all yours, Flix,” says Sal, monosyllabizing Felix’s name in a way that, for just a moment, seems fatherly. “I was just about to save it for ya’, in honor of your stellar performance recently.”

Felix nods and heads to his table. He does not powder his hands but goes right for the rack, arranges nine balls, and strides down to the opposite end to break.

And Perhaps Sal is feeling a little paternal this evening, like a man moved to protect his child from an unpleasant truth. He neglects to inform his Flix of the secret that he, the ever-observant manager, possesses. He doesn’t tell his boy that tonight, he knows Felix is not the best player in the room. No, not tonight, my son. Tonight, she is here.

Sky Lisabeta Gallagher has been coming to Player’s Choice on a daily basis for the last week and a half. She usually plays four or five days a week, and mixes up her pool hall of choice, but she’s starting to feel more comfortable at Player’s than at the others, there’s something quaint and reassuring about the place. Her schedule has not coincided with Felix’s until tonight. He’d been coming in the late afternoons and early evenings, she at late-night. She takes notice of the guys who play alone, since she is almost always the only woman in the pool hall by herself. She knows there are stares and mumbles, and even, on occasion, a group of guys at the next table over will huddle together in a ragged circle until one of them has the courage to come over and ask what
such a pretty girl is doing in a place like this, and all by her lonesome. Her response is a curt, “Just working on my game.” If the man in question is bold enough to ask if he can play with her (there haven’t been many), she replies, not coldly but concisely, “Sorry, I don’t play with amateurs.” Said male is usually sufficiently rebuffed. Only once did she actually have to ask a manager to intervene to get someone to leave her alone, and only once did she accept an opponent’s advances. Here at Player’s Choice, a month ago, a man approached her, at least forty, maybe older, with a greying ponytail and numerous faded tattoos; she recognized him from a tournament she’d played down in Delaware and thus did not make the ‘amateurs’ comment. She said she wouldn’t mind playing a few games, but warned the man about how competitive she was, that she would “play serious, to win”, and he accepted. No one paid them much attention. Just two pool hall loners shooting a damn good game, no money on the line, could’ve passed for a father and daughter. Sky never gambles. It’s not in her character to do so, it gives her no rush. She knows all about rushes and adrenaline and ‘that feeling’, that in-the-zone feeling. It’s what she lives for, the potential to somehow experience that high again, without the help of cocaine. She lost the first two games to the stranger. He won the lag, broke solidly, sinking the three, and then ran the table for two and a half racks until he missed a relatively easy but complicated-looking and unnecessary massé shot on the six ball in a corner pocket. He got cocky, tried to show off, and failed. From there, Sky made a difficult combination on the nine, sunk two balls on her break, and proceeded to run off six tables in a row. She knew she could continue busting him up all night, and he was the type of guy who would’ve only gotten worse, who would’ve overextended himself that much more, squeezed too tightly, tried too hard, because he couldn’t stand losing to a
girl. The only thing that saved him was that it was a weekday, and Player's Choice was closing up at 2am. Theirs was the last of the twenty-six tables with the light still on above it, and she got the impression that the guy was about to beg Sal to let them stay for one more game, maybe even pay him off to do so. Even if she'd beaten him ten or twenty in a row, he was the type who thought he could save some pride if he went home winning that last game. But there was little chance of that happening, and that peculiar and inexplicable restraint descended on Sky again. She took mercy on the tattooed, ponytailed stranger. As he started walking toward Sal, Sky assessed the situation and came to the conclusion that he was pathetic but not dangerous. He didn’t look to be the kind of guy who had a wife at home he’d beat on because Sky had whipped him at pool. If anything, he reminded her of the kind of aging ex-hippie her dad might have become, before he cut his hair and got a day job and decided he and Carol should start a family. Sky had no regrets about calling it a night, stowing her cue and walking out, the light above the table still lit, with a goodbye wave to the stranger, and another to Sal, as she made her way to the parking lot.

Tonight, Sky is playing alone in a corner, on Number 26, a poorly lit table with worn-down felt, massé scuffing, and even a few well-covered up but still visible cigarette burns. She knows that at most tournaments it’s not all like you see on TV, where it’s always top of the line tables, shiny Olhausens or Brunswicks. No, that’s only for the finals, the stuff you see on ESPN that’s been edited for time constraints and voiced over by announcers. In bigger tournaments, with a lot of entries, the opening rounds often take place on less than perfect equipment, even in the nationally sponsored, well-organized Atlantic City tourneys and pro-am events. There’s a chance she could be matched up
against a full-time professional on a table just like this, so why not practice here at
Players Choice, where they run specials that will let you play for as little as a dollar an
hour. That’s during the daytime however, those bargains don’t apply right now, as it is
moving toward late-night, already quarter to eleven.

The talent in the room is relatively strong, as a lot of the best locals show up on
Tuesday nights. Castle closes early during the week and Herbert’s is full of yuppies on
Tuesdays because they have ‘trivia night’ at the bar and hold a 50-50. At Player’s Choice,
unlike Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, there are no scheduled tournaments taking
up the tables, and the guys who play for money usually hit the bar circuit on the
weekends but sure up their game on the cheap during the week, so even the semi-pro
gamblers are here on Tuesday nights. It’s without question the best night of the week,
both in terms of quality and quantity of players. And tonight, with the new job, the recent
hot streak, and that built-up reservoir of confidence, Felix is better than all of them,
except one.

In between racks of 9-ball, Sky saunters casually around the hall, wearing a red
and black baseball cap with the letters UNLV on the front, a memento from a trip she
made to Las Vegas with a guy she met who attended that university. This was back when
she was still a teenager. It was over the summer after her junior year of high school, and
he was a rich college kid eager to spend daddy’s money to bring the hot girl from New
Jersey out to Las Vegas, where he was “sure she could make a shitload of money”
stripping, which would keep them flush in “Tony Montana-sized” amounts of coke. Sky
got out there in that desert heat and after a day of snorting lines by the rich kid’s pool, her
skin was burned bright pink and blistering. He’d neglected to advise her to wear
sunscreen and she looked more like an ER patient than a stripper-to-be. The rich kid was repulsed, accepted a goodbye blowjob (after Sky denied him intercourse) and paid for her flight back to New Jersey. The hat still fits really well though, nice and worn-in, and Sky doesn't believe in negative associations, of tokens from her 'sordid past' having any sort of talismanic power over her in the present. The cap looks good on her, feminine. It pulls down nice and low and manages to conceal enough of her face so she maintains an air of mystery as she strolls around the tables, observing while trying to keep from being observed. Most guys don't have the courage to try and look under the brim of her cap anyway; they notice her walk by, then wait till she's far enough away before they check out her ass, the way her breasts press out her shirt in profile, the ponytail that pours out the back of her cap. She knows they leer and murmur and cajole, but she doesn't care; none of them can play, not at her level. These guys don't even know the rudimentary basics. Pool, Sky believes, like everything in life, comes down to duality, to two things. Everything in its most basic form is still splittable until you get down to the prime elements, those two essential components. Not one, not three – two. Duality. The skills Sky possesses that make her a strong pool player are simple. Geometry and concentration, that's all it comes down to. Whether or not to go for a combo, to play a safety, to kick at a shot with a cue ball frozen to the rail, those are concerns filed under the category of 'proper strategy', and all that is secondary. The primary ingredients are angles and attentiveness – intense, unbreakable concentration. Concentration is touch, placement, English. It is power, authority, and command. It is practice and discipline. Almost anyone can attain it through perseverance and a commitment to bettering your game. The geometry however, the 'seeing', this is not something that can be learned. You
either perceive the table the right way or you don’t. You can put your finger on the felt and tell a recreational player to “Just hit it here” a million times, but they’ll never absorb it, it’ll never come to them naturally, instinctively. You have to know it cold, it must be inherent, innate, intuitive. Sky’s instincts have never been a problem. She was right that time at Carla Brady’s party when she avoided the spiked bag of yayo that sent Jenny Ostroff and most of her minions to the hospital, almost killing Randi Fanticone. She was right about the three black guys at the Joyce Kilmer rest area on the New Jersey Turnpike who were giving her a ride home from Bonnie Long’s place in New Brunswick at four in the morning. They reeked of empty bathroom sodomy, and so she ran screaming, not caring if they thought she was a racist, because she knew what they were thinking of doing with her. She was right about her mother’s affair; she knew that the man who came over during the day while her dad was at work, who smiled and patted her six-year-old head, that he was doing something with her mother that would make her father sad if he knew about it. And he never did. Sky hates to admit it, but she knows that he is a weak man, that he brought his miserable middle-age on himself, that he could have been something better, something different, something more. An inventor, that’s how she liked to think of her father when she was a kid, a guy with a lab in the garage who was going to change the world someday. Not a nameless mid-level executive for a pharmaceuticals giant. Most of the crowd here at Players Choice are men like her father. Weak, feeble men squandering their natural gifts. Their mediocre talent is devoted to a parlor game, a simple one at that, which can be traced to the pre-Renaissance European lawn sports of the 1300s, right up through the American developments of the early 19th Century – Charles Goodyear’s pioneering work in the rubberization of the cushions, the shift from
wooden tables to slate, the move away from ivory balls, John Quincy Adams and billiards in the White House. None of these men know any of that, though. It’s just a game to them. Most of them haven’t even seen *The Hustler*, Sky thinks to herself, and maybe a handful have heard of Willie Mosconi, though hardly any could tell you a significant thing about the man. Maybe Sal could. Maybe Junior or Pete or Monty, on their sober days. Those men who used to have potential, who used to really be players, who used to be instinctive.

The shaggy-haired guy in the denim shirt is nothing to speak of in the cerebral department, this is Sky’s assessment. Probably a manual laborer, less than a thousand on his SATs, poor in the verbal section. Hence, probably not much of a talker, a limited vocabulary. But they’re better that way, thinks Sky, at least they leave you alone. He’s easily intimidated by women, and unlike the ponytailed stranger, who couldn’t stand to lose to them, this guy is the opposite, he goes easy on women because they’re the ‘lesser sex’. Women are only conceivable as mothers and wives, daughters and sisters to guys like this. Yeah, they’re kind and gentlemanly and chivalrous, that is to say condescending, probably the kind of young man who calls his mother on a regular basis, who maybe even still lives at home. He’ll keep playing, he’ll always be around the game. He needs it, the attention of his peers, the superficial rush. Not the rush of adrenaline that comes from winning, but a type of rush that comes from putting on a performance, from showing off for a crowd. The kind of pool player who will eventually give up match play and become a trick shot artist, if he has any tenacity. He’s probably already practicing, Sky thinks. Instead of working on his combinations or his safeties he’s putting cues and bridges on the table, knocking balls off of chalks, shooting with his eyes closed, behind
his back, conjuring up some unearthly massé that’ll look brilliant when performed correctly, but that’ll scuff up half a dozen tables’ worth of felt before he gets good enough to stick it with any consistency. But don’t underestimate him, Sky thinks. Maybe you’re seeing too far ahead, letting that vision, that concentration, get a hold of you, instead of you holding it. Maybe those black guys weren’t going to assault you in the bathroom of a deserted rest stop. Maybe, just maybe, Sky reminds herself, sometimes you’re wrong.

Because Sky doesn’t know. She doesn’t know that Felix is every bit as friendless as she is, that the only individuals he talks to on a daily basis (at work he knows he will mostly listen, he’s not an extrovert, and doubts he will be easily integrated into the working class camaraderie of the factory worker) are his mother and his little black dachshund, Edmund. And he knows it’s pathetic, that the only entity he has to confide his triumphs and failures to is a short-legged canine, but he loves his pet and enjoys wrestling with him on the carpeted floor of his ‘living room’. He worries that his apartment is too small for the dog, that Edmund is unhappy there, that he misses the half-finished basement of Felix’s mother’s house – the textured nap of the braided rainbow-colored throw rug on his paws, the way the exposed concrete floor must have felt so cool and refreshing on his taut dog-belly.

Sky had numerous dogs growing up, but her favorite was a chocolate Labrador named Fuss. Each sibling had their own dog, and Fuss was Donald’s. Sky was perturbed that the male child had gotten such an athletic and playful dog, a running dog, a muscular dog, whereas the dogs the Gallaghers purchased for her and her sister were always small, scared creatures, weak of voice and bladder. Sky saw in this an intrinsic sexism that her
sister Kelly never recognized. The same way she and Kelly were always advised to go to a state college, to commute instead of living on campus. Kelly went to Rowan and, though she got a bachelor’s degree in business, she now works as a dental hygienist in Voorhees. Donald is currently in his senior year at LaSalle, living with roommates he met as a freshman in the dorms, now with their own house actually, where they play a lot of beer pong and throw parties twice a month.

Felix is an only child, admittedly a bit of a mama’s boy, whose father is serving time in prison for shooting a black man outside a Quick Check in Camden in an argument over money, money Felix’s father was owed from sports bets, mostly baseball, some college basketball. He said at the trial that he didn’t mean to shoot the man, didn’t even usually carry a firearm, but that it’s unsafe for a white guy to be in Camden picking up a large sum of cash without a gun, which “just went off”, he said, the bullet striking the unarmed victim, unfortunately, in the heart. It was ruled an accidental killing but Felix’s dad still got a ten-year sentence for manslaughter, which is at the high end of the scale in New Jersey, where accidental manslaughter of that kind carries a term of five to ten. The association with organized crime, the previous arrests for gambling, petty theft and transporting a minor across state lines (a date with the then underage girl who would become Felix’s mother) didn’t help, nor did their relative poverty and inability to secure a top-notch lawyer. Felix visits his father twice a year, on the old man’s birthday in May, and in December, a week before Christmas. They talk about many things, but they always mention, with disgust, how Atlantic City still hasn’t legalized sports betting.

When Sky dances, she gets extremely nervous right before the performance, before she takes the stage. Even as part of a group routine she feels equally exposed. She
vomits beforehand, and her skin grows cold, her hands especially lose their feeling. She is thankful she doesn’t need to use them much as a dancer. A dancer’s focus points are the hips and the feet, and to a lesser extent the legs. The key is balance, a centered-ness, the use of the diaphragm and the spine and the arrangement of the dancer’s weight. It isn’t stage fright so much as it is a trembling nervousness. It’s even worse afterwards, backstage. Sky sits in a corner, avoiding conversation, not receiving guests or audience members like the rest of the troupe. Sky is the pale girl sitting away from the group, all by herself, who scares the aunts and uncles, the cousins and friends of her fellow dancers. Her body shakes uncontrollably, and she often curls herself up on the floor and clutches her knees to her chest until the shakes go away. Her teeth chatter, her lips turn blue and numb, her eyes grow wide and unfocused as she stares at the area near her feet, the arches of which are tensed and concave, the toes grotesquely shriveled, the nails unpainted.

She can tell he is going to come over and ask to play with her. He isn’t a professional, but she gets the impression that he plays the game compulsively, because he has to. In the outside world, he doesn’t enjoy confrontation; this is his outlet for competition, for sport. It is an addiction, the need for human opposition, though they are addicted to different parts of the game. Sky has a kinship with addiction that allows her to recognize it in others. He is pretty and shy, she thinks, though the hair is a bit much; it is too obvious, a shield, a faux recklessness, a rebellion against his boyhood, she theorizes, probably the kind of kid whose parents parted his hair on the side, who wore a nice new suit to his first communion, maybe even a bowtie. How can I see so much, she thinks, and are they accurate, these perceptions, these guesses? Felix looks over from table 238.
Number 5, empty except for the cue ball. He’s proud that he’s run the table, Sky thinks, a single rack of nine balls, and she has to hold back a snicker.

Be cool, Flix, he tells himself, adopting Sal’s just-bestowed nickname. You’re the man, Flix, be confident. She’s by herself, she won’t laugh, prodding a friend’s ribs to share in her rejection of you. She’s dressed down, with that hat, and she looks like she takes her shots quite seriously, with great concentration, though Felix’s own concentration has been fixed more on her fetching appearance than her astute play. The sassy ponytail, those longer than average legs, that tallness of form and figure, the thin yet muscular shoulders. He wants to see her eyes.

He’s standing there with his cue stick at his side, the empty felt of Number 5 behind him like a freshly plowed meadow. They’re about the same height, and so he tilts his head, this shaggy-haired young man, dipping it slightly to the side, trying to make eye contact beneath the pulled-down brim of Sky’s hat. She turns her back to him, and rotates the hat around so it sits backwards, the bill facing him, along with her long and narrow back, her denim-clad rear-end, the slightest glimpse of her fair-skinned ankles extending out of her white sneakers. She can feel him coming over without looking up to see his reflection moving closer in the snack machine across from her, that Plexiglas-enclosed rectangle of Fritos and Twizzlers and Crunchy Doodles.

"Excuse me," he says.

Polite, thinks Sky. Yeah, definitely a mama’s boy. She turns to him, open-faced, the big hazel eyes, no make-up on her pink cheeks, noticeably full lips.

Felix’s face is squinched, trying to look hard and masculine while smiling at the same time. It does not mask his nervousness. The actorly pool champion swagger doesn’t
apply here. "I saw you playing by yourself and, uh, you seem pretty good and all, and I
don't know if you're waiting for somebody, or just playing by yourself on purpose, but-"

"I'm not waiting for anybody," she says, leaning back against the table. "What,
you figured I must be waiting for my boyfriend?"

"Uh, no, not necessarily. Maybe friends or whatever. Not too many people shoot
alone, especially girls. Just, 'cause I play here a lot and, you know, I've never seen you
here before."

He wants me to ask him something. Sky posits, to be inquisitive, to say something
like: 'Oh, you must be pretty good then, how often do you play here?' She refuses to give
him that reaction. "I come here a bit myself," she says. "Well, recently anyway. I used to
play at Herbert's, but a lot of the people who go there now are jerks. The after-work
crowd with their loosened ties and their cell phones and their brand name vodkas. I go to
a pool hall to shoot. I don't need all that extraneous nonsense."

"Cool, cool."

"The guy who runs this place is nice to me, now. He was a little suspicious at
first, probably because of, like you said, gender. But he's alright now. He knows me, I
know him, we nod and smile at each other and go about our business. He stays up there
on his stool, I make my way around down here, work on my game."

"That's Sal, he's a good guy when you get to know him."

Sky already knew his name.

"You ever play the tournaments?" Felix continues.

"Here? No. Do you?" Probably, she thinks, and he's maybe even won a couple,
and is proud of it, like he was for running one whole table.
"Yeah, a little bit, little bit. They're fun. I've won a few, but I'm not a professional or anything. I just love the tournament format. Elimination and survival, something primal about it. I try to get out to A.C. once in while."

"Oh really? What tournaments have you played in A.C.?"

He lists a few, and she recognizes the names and places. He looks vaguely familiar to her. She tries to remember if she ever saw him at a tournament, but she knows she hasn't; that hair and that sheepishness, a quality most people wouldn't notice but one Sky would make a mental note of immediately, these are not things she would forget.

A flirtatiousness develops between them. In Felix, there is a boldness that would not have been present a month and a half ago, before the new job, before the three tournament wins. He thinks he's seen her somewhere before but cannot remember where. By getting herself and Felix thinking about Atlantic City pool tournaments, Sky neglected to consider the diner — her sanctuary, the Grand Palace — where earlier tonight she sat alone in the corner, her head on the table, while Felix took a seat on the other side of the diner, telling his mom about his new job and how her house would always be his home.

They chalk up their cues and, with a lag for the break that is close enough to be a tie, but which an outside party (Junior) declares a victory for Felix, a relationship is formed.

They ate dinner together at the Grand Palace every weekday for two weeks. The relationship lasted three times that, a month and a half. They had sex, but Felix was reticent and Sky was easily bored. Sex wasn't her rush anymore, if it had ever been. Felix
was overwhelmed by her size, her tallness. What filled him with awe and marvel when Sky was fully clothed quickly turned to intimidation when he was faced with all that lean flesh, that long, slender nudity, that flat chasm of space between her breasts and her pubis. They enjoyed each other’s company, neither was particularly chatty and they liked it that way, a couple who appreciated each other’s unawkward silences.

Sky’s favorite part of the relationship was playing with Edmund in Felix’s apartment (she refused to call him Flix, as he once asked her to, saying that he thought it sounded cool, that even the guys at work called him that now). Edmund was a tough little dog, ugly but lovable, aggressive yet playful. He had a fierce but harmless growl he emitted whenever Sky picked him up and rubbed his belly. Edmund eventually squirmed away and stood at Felix’s feet as he played some music on his stereo. He didn’t have too many of Sky’s favorites, and she chided him for being from New Jersey and having only one Bruce Springsteen album, *Born in the U.S.A.* His response was that he worked at a factory, had a father in prison, and hung out in pool halls; he didn’t need to listen to Bruce Springsteen songs, he lived them.

Felix enjoyed having someone to play pool with who was better than himself, a teacher. They played six games the night they first met, with Felix winning only once. But it was the last rack, and he was never sure if Sky let him win, maybe because she liked him, or thought he was cute, or just wanted to be merciful and let him have that solitary triumph. He bested her a few more times during those six weeks they dated, but mostly she took the part of instructor and he the role of apprentice. She taught him the importance of concentration, and even bought him a few trick shot videos. In the post-breakup period, he has started saving up for a bigger apartment and his own table because
Sal said there was no way he was letting him practice “all that crap” on the tables at Players Choice because “Tony would have both our heads.”

Felix is at the Grand Palace Diner for the first time since Sky stopped taking his calls. She’d told him that she ate there every day, even before they met, and though he believed her, he was curious as to whether it was the absolute truth. It is a Tuesday in mid-December.

Joni the stenographer is dating the singer in a cover band, a guy named Mike Dalton. He loves her beef stroganoff, her lasagna, and her lemon chicken with baked potato, the kind that looks like it’s exploding with broccoli. He tells her that as a musician he’s always traveling, and gets tried of eating all his meals out of plastic cartons or with public silverware. She is genuinely happy, a girl who is proud that she has a new boyfriend. Her smile is wide and authentic, even though her left leg is in a full cast, the consequence of a skiing accident.

Jean’s wife Sue is sitting in a booth with their infant daughter Monique, who lies in her carrier with a white stocking cap on her head. Jean comes out from the kitchen carrying food for himself and his wife, and a dollop of applesauce he will attempt to feed his daughter. He refused the waitresses’ assistance and said they should enjoy the slow night, not spend it carrying a fellow employee’s food for him. He puts the plates down on the table, goes back to grab a couple of drinks, and tells Sue he loves her. He sits down across from her but quickly gets back up again to kiss his wife and daughter on their foreheads before returning to the opposite side of the table.

Lionel is still alive but is starting to look emaciated and sickly. One of the waitresses, Maria, spends a little more time with him than she does with most customers,
just making small talk, trying to keep him company. She can tell that he is dying, and that he has no one.

A large, overweight woman sits by herself with her eyes down, her unkempt hair going grey. She sighs and stares at the menu, awful thoughts and unpleasant memories running through her head, a person who has been mercilessly teased about her appearance since she was seven years old. The weight just never went away. She’s tried diets and exercise and even yoga, and is now trying to save up enough money from her job at Kinney Shoes to get her stomach stapled.

Dr. Stone is talking with a young intern, a man he hopes is gay. His companion is notably short for a man and going bald though he is only in his early thirties, but he once told Lewis that he thought appearance was “the most overrated thing in the world”, and that all he wants is someone he can love. They are discussing the diner in a way that makes it obvious that this is the intern’s first time here.

“The Monte Cristos are really good, and so are the omelets, if you want breakfasty food,” says Dr. Lewis Stone. “Dinner-wise, they make a good London broil and an excellent meatloaf. The chicken dishes are just so-so, I wouldn’t recommend those.” He looks around the diner, his disfigured side toward the window. “Little slower than usual tonight. That’s what I like about this place. Some nights it’s busy, some nights it’s half-empty. Sometimes it’s quiet, sometimes there’s a great loud din. People stop here, they eat, they go home. The Grand Palace. They come, they go, but nothing ever happens. It’s like its own reality, its own dimension.”

The intern chuckles. “You spend a lot of time analyzing diners, Doctor Stone?”
"Ah, what do you know, you’re originally from Georgia, no matter how well you hide that accent. I’ve been to Georgia, and your little Waffle Houses don’t have anything on a good New Jersey diner. Yeah, yeah, I can afford fancier places, proper restaurants and what have you, with their foie gras and medallions of filet mignon, but that’s not who I am, regardless of my profession or what I can afford. I’ll tell you what, though, if things stay nice and friendly between us, maybe I’ll take you to a fancy place, on me. Wherever you want, if fine dining’s your thing, five-stars and all that. The Ryland Inn, La Campagne, Jeffrey’s, I know all those places. Any of the best restaurants in Jersey. You name it, sport, I’ll take you."

"OK then, sounds like a plan. As long as we’re together I know you’ll be…healthy."

"Healthy? I’m the doctor at this table. Why wouldn’t I be healthy?"

"Nothing, nothing," says the intern. "Just, you know, I see you by yourself a lot." He maintains eye contact longer than a straight man would. "And I don’t like that, don’t like it at all. A man without a partner is a dead man, that’s an old saying, you know, the whole ‘loners die young’ thing. Wouldn’t want you to be a loner, Doctor Stone." He blushes and looks down at his menu.

Felix has brought flowers with him, and carries them at his side as he surveys the diner. No sign of Sky. This time next week he will be visiting his father, and all he’ll be carrying is a handwritten letter inside a Christmas card from mom. Donna seats him in a big booth since it’s so empty. If it were busier she would have saved it for a larger party, but Felix looks like he might be meeting a date here, with the flowers and all, so why not give them some room. She remembers him coming in with that tall, skinny woman for a
while, the dancer, but she’s been alone again recently, without Felix, sitting at the corner table by herself. Donna assumes they’ve parted ways and hopes he is meeting a new girl tonight. She brings over a glass of water as he peruses the menu, the flowers beside him on the seat. He is about to order when Sky walks in. He sees her over Donna’s shoulder, knowing the waitress is blocking her from spying him. He goes ahead and orders the spaghetti & meatballs and a Coke.

Sky nods to Mr. Preysing (his first name, she has discovered, is Wallace) who tonight is playing maitre d’, and walks toward her traditional seat in the corner. On her way there she notices Felix, sitting by himself, and though she has made it clear that “it’s over”, she is not one to be rude. Ignoring him isn’t an option. She strides toward him and stands next to his table, knowing from his strained smile that he hasn’t accepted the finality of her decision, the permanence of it, the reality of the fact that their relationship has ended. She notices the flowers, and knows immediately that they’re not for someone else. She asks if she can join him, knowing he’ll eagerly say yes, but that doesn’t mean she can just sit down at his table without asking first.

“Sure, sure, I just ordered,” says Felix. “You want anything?”

“Well, I’m going to eat, but I don’t think we should sit-”

“I picked these up for you,” he says, raising the flowers and extending them across the table. “I remembered how you told me you eat dinner here every day. They’re not, you know, not to try to get back together or anything, just to show that I still care about you, and that I still like you, as a person. Dancers like getting flowers, right?”

Sky stifles a sarcastic grin. “Not this dancer. Flowers always make me think of funerals, of death.”
“Oh.” Felix retracts his arm. “You don’t want them then?”

She knows he will be hurt but she cannot accept them. “No, sorry.”

Felix nods sullenly. “Guess I’ll give them to my mom. She likes flowers. She’ll appreciate them.”

Sky doesn’t react to his subtle barb. “I don’t want it to be awkward for you, if you see me in public. Here, the pool hall, wherever.”

“You’re sticking with Players Choice?”

“Not exclusively. I like Sal, and I know the tables there now. That Number Five is the best, you were right about that. But if it’s going to make you uncomfortable, I can just as easily play at Castle.”

They sit in silence. Sky grabs Donna’s attention and asks for a menu, just in keeping with diner etiquette. When it’s brought to her she looks it over, though she knows well what they offer, she even knows the specials, based on what day of the week it is. Tonight is Tuesday, so the chicken cacciatore, the spaghetti & meatballs, the Happy Waitress, the spinach ravioli, and the bacon & Swiss burger are all on special. She feels like Eggs Benedict though, and plans to order it when she finishes with Felix and moves to her own table. She can tell that he wants to ask her something, a question is there, gnawing at him. His hair is still cut short. During their brief stint as a couple Sky told him that she didn’t mind his facial stubble, found it attractive actually, but that he’d look better with a tighter haircut. She was right, and they both preferred the shorn-haired Felix.
“So, uh, I was playing with Edmund last night,” says Felix. “I think he misses you. He doesn’t make that roo-roo-rowww sound for me, like he did when you would squeeze him and scratch his belly until he wriggled away. He liked playing with you.”

Sky feels a cry coming on, but suppresses the tears. She is not a cries-in-public girl. “I always liked Edmund. He’s a tough little dog. And I don’t dislike you, Felix, I just need to be, you know, by myself.”

“I remember that one time, we stayed up all night and then came here to get breakfast when the sky started getting light. You were saying that, about how you like to be alone. I guess I didn’t take it seriously or whatever. I thought to myself, nobody really wants to be alone. I figured everybody likes being with someone, in a couple.”

“No, not everybody,” says Sky. There is a hushed moment. “I’m gonna go now, Felix. I hope your mom likes the flowers.” She stands, ready to move to her own table. She is about to put a hand on Felix’s shoulder but decides not to. “And I never said I wanted to be alone, I said I wanted to be left alone. There is a world of difference.”

Felix nods, holds back tears of his own.

The dancer ambles over to her corner. Her back is straight, her head is tilted up, the convulsions left behind at the studio. She smiles just the slightest bit as she passes the big wooden telephone booth and takes a seat, alone and content, at home in this world, like the ghost of Greta Garbo.
I read this book once, the protagonist's name was Clay. It was supposed to be a symbolic name, I guess. He was a malleable guy. Not physically, but morally. He confided in the reader that he was attracted to the ugly parts of the world, that he had an inexplicable urge to see the worst in people, to see if all those things you hear about actually happen. I sometimes wonder if I'm getting that way, attracted to the 'dark side' of life. Not so much as a participant, but as an observer. I have this need to see things firsthand. I don't believe in religion or god or an afterlife. I'm more of a science-minded guy. I require proof.

We've finished playing poker at the firehouse (Wells is a volunteer firefighter in town and they have this hall that the firemen rarely use, down on River Road, so we meet there on Wednesday nights to drink beer and play cards) and Kearns and Makowski are sitting in Kearns's car, trying to get me to go to a strip club with them. Kearns's parents are separated. They live at opposite ends of town. Lyndhurst, New Jersey is only about a mile long, but there's something about it, for certain people, that makes them not want to leave.

Rob Kearns is what you would call stocky. He was never fat, and he did play baseball in high school, but he's never been thin or athletically built. He's been trying to write a screenplay for the last two years, while smoking pot almost daily and spending his
meager income on rent, car payments, strip clubs, diner food, and a two-month sojourn to Ireland with Makowski’s sister, whom he dated for a while. Eventually they broke up, benevolently, although Makowski never really seemed to have a problem with his best friend dating his younger sister.

Mark Makowski, or Mak, not slight of build either, is the younger brother of a local superstar. His older brother Jeff played baseball at Fordham, after an all-state career at Lyndhurst High, and right after college he was drafted by the Cubs but blew out his knee before he ever played a game of minor league baseball. Mark Makowski’s claim to fame is that he knows more about porno movies than anyone I’ve ever met. His collection is well into the hundreds, maybe over a thousand. He started it in high school, back then he was known as ‘the connection’. If a fourteen year-old freshman wanted to see some fucking, he could go to Mark Makowski, hand him twenty bucks, and pick any tape he wanted from the shelves in Mak’s bedroom. The videos were in plain view, though he did have a lock on his bedroom door. I always wondered if his parents knew about his hobby, but I never asked. In those pre-internet days when we were in high school, his library was all VHS. Now he’s upgraded to DVDs, though he still has a few tapes that he refuses to part with. He says a lot of the classics aren’t available on DVD, flicks from the ‘golden era’, as he calls it, of full bushes, feathered hairdos and guaranteed real breasts.

“Come on, Liss,” says Kearns, toking a joint in the firehouse parking lot, even though Wells repeatedly warns everyone not to smoke pot there. “Indios. Best Brazilian girls in Newark.”

“What happened to Temptations?” I ask.
“They close too early,” says Makowski. “And I hate Passaic. Too fucking far. No good diners to go to afterwards, unless you want to go all the way to the Saddle Brook.”

“I could go for some diner,” I say.

“Then you gotta come to Indios,” says Kearns. “That’s the routine. First the titty bar, then the diner. Right, Mak?” He passes the joint to Makowski.

“I wouldn’t mind getting something to eat, but I’d prefer to see some ass first.”

Mak puffs and passes back. Kearns takes the joint, extends it out the window to me. His breath turns to steam as the heat that’s turned up to high inside the car begins to bleed out the open window.

“No thanks,” I say. “You know I don’t smoke.”

“Gotta offer, though. That’s the protocol,” says Kearns. “Can’t break the protocol.”

“Well, call me on my cell after Indios and I’ll meet you at the diner. Where do you guys usually go? Lyndhurst Diner? The Sky Dive?”

“Nah, nah.” Kearns pinches out the joint, after moistening his fingers, and places it in his shirt pocket. “Tops. In East Newark, right by the Harrison border.”

“Oh, that’s a good diner. That place is always full of cops, though. You go in there reeking of weed?”

“And titty bar,” says Makowski. “The sweet smell of cheap perfume and lonely old men.”

“Whatever, we know half the guys in there,” says Kearns. “Everybody we graduated with is a goddamn cop now. Gianella and Venancio are like furniture in that place.”

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I nod, acknowledging the truth of this statement. A surprisingly large number of our high school friends and classmates are now in law enforcement-related occupations—Corrections Officers, Port Authority, local cops. “Anyway, it’s freakin’ cold out here,” I say. “You got my number, right?”

Kearns pulls out his cell phone and double checks. “I think I got your old number, from your parents’ house. Give me your cell.”

I recite the number, twice, fantasizing about a couple of taylor ham and egg sandwiches with french fries. “How long you guys gonna be there?”

“They kick you out at two, sometimes a little earlier,” says Makowski. “What’s today, Wednesday? Yeah, let’s get going, Rob, it’s quarter to one already.”

Kearns cranks up his stereo, “Riders on the Storm” by The Doors blares out. “Talk to ya, Liss,” he yells. Mak nods at me.

Nodding back, I rub my hands together for warmth. “Later. Have a good time.”

I go inside and help Wells finish cleaning up. He takes off, tells me to lock the door on the way out. He trusts me. I watch a little ESPN SportsCenter on the TV they have there. By two o’clock Kearns and Mak haven’t called, and I don’t feel like sitting at the counter of some diner all by myself, so I drive into Newark, but not to Indios, home of questionably-aged Brazilian strippers and predominantly non-English-speaking patrons. Instead, I go to J.J.’s, an all-night hot dog truck that parks on Bloomfield Avenue right off of Broadway. I consume four dogs and a can of black cherry soda and drive back to my apartment in Hoboken.
My roommate Craig isn’t a very good looking guy. I wouldn’t call him ugly, but he’s never had a whole lot of success with women. He gets dates, but when he does he needs to drink at least six beers in the apartment before going to meet up with the girl. He’s shy, and I’m starting to think it’s appropriate to classify him as an alcoholic. As soon as he’s in the door after work he downs a few cans of Bud Light from the 30-packs that are always in our fridge.

He’s pushing thirty, a couple years older than me. I think he would really benefit from the presence of a girlfriend in his life. He goes out a few nights a week, often by himself, usually to concerts over in The City, at small clubs and such, nothing mainstream. He’s a big fan of the underground/alternative/indie/punk music scene.

Afterwards, he sometimes hits a strip joint or occasionally a massage parlor. He’ll drop anywhere from a hundred to a grand at a strip club, mostly in the V.I.P. room, where he assures me he always busts a nut or two in his pants.

He has a funny story about this one time he went into an Oriental massage parlor. Usually you go in, he said, and you can tell right away that illegal shit goes on there. You know it, they know it, and there’s a hovering atmosphere of acceptance and complicity. You pay up front for the massage, then you go into a little room and some Asian girl comes in and tells you to strip down. You lie on your back on the table, she gives you a quick rubdown, then she pulls out your johnson for the happy ending and quotes you the extra charge. If you assent and show her some more cash, she finishes you off and sends you on your way. But on this particular occasion, Craig walked into some place he’d never been before, near Madison Square Garden. It was after the opening round of the Big East Basketball Tournament. He took a date, this girl he met the weekend before at a
bar in Hoboken, and she wound up ditching him to hang out with some guys that were sitting next to them. So, full of self-loathing and depression, he wandered around mid-town and found this massage place. He went in, paid the guy at the counter, as usual, but this time the guy told him to go in the room, strip down, and lie on the table on his stomach. Craig did as he was told, the multiple bars he visited between the end of the basketball game and his trip to the massage parlor sufficiently numbing his skepticism.

He went into the room, closed the door behind him, and lied on his stomach on the massage table. Put his face in the padded hole. He heard the door open and felt a sense of anticipation, at what the girl would look like and what she was gonna do, mingled with a vague fear that his ass was hanging out there in the wind, exposed to whoever just walked through the door. What happened next, he said, was an unexpected shock of a different sort. A bucket of hot water was splashed on his back. Startled, he turned over and there was the little Chinese guy who took his money out front. The short, stoutly built man grunted and gestured that he wanted Craig to roll back over, onto his stomach. Craig complied, and the man went over and started rubbing his back, neck, and shoulders. After a while he pulled over a stool, climbed up even with the table, and started walking on Craig’s back. Then he hopped down, clapped his hands and grunted again, nodded toward the pile of Craig’s clothing, and exited the room. Craig got dressed, came home, and told me all about it before he passed out. He snores like a motherfucker, too.

Besides being a volunteer firefighter in Lyndhurst, Wells is also a transit cop. He’s partners with this guy Sandy, who’s younger than me and already married. I was invited to his bachelor party in Atlantic City but I didn’t go. It was mostly their cop
friends, not my buddies from high school. McFarlane went, said it was hilarious. They all went to a nightclub and according to him, these cops, who are all married, were making out with girls on the dance floor, and then took them back to their hotel rooms. He wasn’t condescending toward them, the others guys, but he did say that he didn’t have any part of it. He and Wells kept an eye on Sandy and took him down the street to Bare Essentials, a strip club across from Trump Plaza where they let you B.Y.O.B. They kept Sandy company, bought him a few lap dances, and laughed about all those married guys hooking up with skanky Hispanic club chicks.

Wells is single but he’s been dating the same girl for about four years. I assume he’ll be the next to get hitched. McFarlane was the first of my high school friends to get married. He works at a car dealership. In high school he was the best athlete in our class, recruited by a lot of colleges for both baseball and basketball. But he couldn’t stay healthy, kept injuring his knees, and dropped out after only two semesters at Rutgers. I’m hanging out with him and Wells at Marty’s Tavern. It’s their favorite bar in town and they’re known and recognized as regulars, unlike myself. The tape of a recent high school football game is playing on one of the televisions behind the bar; the owner’s son is the quarterback for Lyndhurst High this year. Marty’s has a pool table and a dart board. I’m not that great at either game, and I’m particularly bad at pool, so I usually try to hang at a table or sit at the bar and keep things conversational. They’re both wizards at bar games and like to challenge other patrons, and sometimes the bartenders as well, but this night, for whatever reason, we just sit at a table and drink, quite heavily.

“You still go down to Grafton Ave?” Wells asks.
McFarlane smirks. “Nah, not really. Not in a while, a year or so. I hadda cut that shit out. I got a kid now. And it’s fucking dangerous, bro. Diseases and whatnot. I mean, the cops I don’t worry about, but healthwise...Hell, you know how it is, you been there.”

“Not recently,” says Wells. “I had the same concerns. I stick to the Emerald Club these days.”

“That place in Belleville?” I say. “I’ve never been in there. It looks like a dive.”

“Oh it’s a shit-hole, alright,” says Wells. “I go on my off days, during the afternoon, while Jen’s at work. Then I go home, take a good shower, and wait for her to come over and hang out.”

“You’re hanging out with her a lot these days,” says McFarlane. “You getting engaged or what? I’m tired of being the only married guy.”

“What do you mean? Sandy just got hooked. And Jerry from the firehouse—”

“Nah, nah; you guys, our circle. You all are still pussy-footin’ around.” He looks at both myself and Wells.

“Hey, I’m happily single,” I say.

“Yeah, I know, mister I live in Hoboken with my college friends. What about you?” He looks at Wells.


“I could tell you some stories about that kid,” McFarlane says to me. “I bet he still goes down to Grafton once in a while. Lying bastard.”

“You think?”
“Oh, he was addicted worse than me. Did he ever tell you about the time we didn’t pay?”

“I don’t think so. No.”

McFarlane laughs. I smile, his laugh contagious.

“Alright, this is on the down low, OK? Don’t be going around telling everybody.”

“Of course,” I assure him. People have always tended to confide in me. I don’t know why. An eye-doctor once told me that I have wide-set eyes, and that wide-set eyes inspire trust in people. Maybe that’s what it is.

Wells returns with three fresh beers.

“This is the last one for me,” I say.

“Pussy,” he responds, and clinks his glass against McFarlane’s and my own.

“Hey, who’s driving you home, wise-guy?” I ask him.

“I could walk. And who are you to say I can’t drive myself? You’ve drank almost as much as me.”

“Lay off,” says McFarlane. “Liss is reliable like that.” He looks at me, gives a nod of approval. “Can drive us to a real diner in a little while. I get tired of always going across the street to the fucking Sky Dive after drinking in this place. Their food is mediocre, at best, and they don’t even stay open twenty-four-seven. Sometimes they close for a few hours on weeknights. What kind of diner is that?”

“Fine. I’m sorry,” says Wells, contrite in his drunkenness. “I was just joking around. You know that, right Liss?”

I nod. “Yeah, no problem, man. McFarlane was just gonna tell me about one of his Grafton Ave runs.”
Wells perks up. “Which one? The time you were eating the White Castles while that chick was blowing you?” He laughs. “The time that mulignane cop followed your ass?”

“Nah, a different time. I drove. In my old Explorer. It was the two of us, me and you. You were in the passenger seat…”

“Oh, god.” Wells winces. “You’re gonna tell him that story?”

“Eh, we’re all friends here. It’s a good story. That’s all that matters.”

We all sip our beers before McFarlane begins.

“Now, you’ve never been to Grafton Ave, right Liss?”

“Nope. I mean, I’ve driven by there on the way to White Castle or J.J.’s, but I’ve never partaken of any of the ladies or their services.”

“You should,” says Wells. “At least once. You ain’t had a blowjob until you’ve had a crack-whore blowjob. I mean, those girls are down there and they’re taking care of business. It’s like there ain’t nothin’ else in their world for that little bit of time except your fucking dick.”

A woman walks by on her way to the bathroom, not a fellow regular who they recognize on sight. “Alright, you don’t have to yell it,” says McFarlane. “And who’s supposed to be telling this story anyway, eh?”

Wells puts up his hands in a defensive posture. “Sorry, just trying to clarify the types of services that are provided.” He puts his hand on my arm. “We ain’t never fucked any of ‘em, Liss. Just so you know.” He removes his hand. “Screw that.”
“Anyway,” says McFarlane. “So we’re cruising Grafton one night, I don’t know, two, three in the morning. Just me and Wells, in my old Explorer, you remember when I had it, right?”


“Brick red. Man, I miss that truck. Nice and high up. Can’t afford that shit no more. A wife and a kid and a house are fucking expensive. Which is not the case for the ladies at Grafton Ave, as I’m sure you know.”

“What, twenty bucks or so?” I ask.

“Twenty? On a weekend, for a white girl or a good looking spic, maybe.” McFarlane chuckles. “Usually ten,” he says seriously, bequeathing knowledge upon my ignorant soul. “But for some reason, this one time, me and Wells here went together, only time we did that, I think. So we get the girl in the car,” he says, his voice lowering further. Wells and I both lean in closer, huddling over our beers. “Black girl. A little beat-up looking. I remember she had a broken tooth. She apologized about that at the beginning. But a good body.”

“Great body,” says Wells.

“Anyway, we pull over on some side street by the railroad tracks and turn out the lights. We get her in the backseat for some reason, which I never do; just in case you gotta make a quick getaway, right? So she starts blowing me and Wells, you were feeling her up and fingering her pretty good if I remember correctly.”

Wells looks ashen, maybe even ashamed.

McFarlane continues. “So she’s sucking me off, all business, just like Wells said, bam bam bam, head going a mile a minute. I blow my load and she opens the door and
spits it out. Which was sorta bullshit; she should swallow it, right? Then she closes the
door, tells us it’s another ten if Wells wants one too. We said it was twenty up front for
the both of us and she knew that. She started arguing, saying she was working hard and
she didn’t know we were gonna be fingering her and playing with her tits so that’s why
she’s charging us extra. So Wells gets all pissed off, pulls out his badge and tells her to
give us our twenty back and get the fuck out of the car.” McFarlane cracks up laughing.

I shake my head, for a lot of reasons. Wells leans back in his chair. “Hey, I didn’t
hit her or anything, man. Don’t make me sound like a dickhead. I mean, yeah, maybe I
shoulda let her keep the twenty, but who gives a fuck, really? Compared to some of the
tricks she turns we’re as good as it’s gonna get, couple of young white guys in an
Explorer.”

“I guess. I was shocked though, dude,” McFarlane says directly to me. “He goes:
‘I’m a cop, so we’re not paying.’ I almost shat myself. I still had my dick half out, he’s
grabbing the money back and pushing her out the door, then I’m trying to scramble my
shit together and get back in the driver’s seat. We pulled outta there like hell on wheels,
man. That was a trip.”

“I dunno,” I say, “that’s pretty bad, though.”

“Yeah, maybe,” says McFarlane, finishing off his beer. “But what are we
supposed to do, feel guilty? Long time ago. Grafton Ave.”

“I like the White Castle story better,” says Wells.

“Yeah, but all my other stories, nobody can confirm ‘em, you know? That kinda
pisses me off. I was there all by myself, so as far as you know I could’ve been making
that shit up about the White Castles. You know how skeptical this kid is,” he gestures at
me. I’m the only one of the three of us without a crucifix around my neck. “Now I got you to back me up and these guys’ll know I’m not bullshitting. Ain’t no storyteller, I ain’t gotta make shit up or, what do you call it, elaborate on the truth? Exaggerate, that’s what I mean, exaggerate. Right, Liss?”

I nod my head, while in my mind I basically equate their actions to rape. I don’t confront them with this, but getting blown by a hooker and then not paying for it by threatening her, what else would you call it?

It’s Monday night so we’re at the Stadium Club, a sports bar in Secaucus. We’re all in a fantasy football league together and we congregate every Monday during the season to drink beer, eat wings and bar pies, and watch the Monday Night Football game. I usually get there late because I don’t punch out of my crappy job in retail until nine. The Chiefs are leading the Packers 14-10 early in the second quarter when I arrive.

I’m greeted with a chorus of drunken cheers and find a seat at the far end of the table, near the restrooms, with a poor view of the nearest television. A waitress in a green and white Jets uniform, tied in a knot to expose her midriff and cut with a scissor around the neckline to show some cleavage, comes over to take my order.

“What are you guys drinking?” I ask my friends. “Pitchers?”

They respond loudly in the affirmative, and I can tell they’ve put a number of them away already.

“Alright, just a glass then, and I’ll have an ice water on the side too, and uh, Kearns, you want to split a bar pie?”
He wipes orange buffalo wing residue from around his mouth. A dollop of bleu cheese hangs from the corner of his lip. “Yeah, whatever, Liss. Sounds good. I’m getting tired of these wings. Too spicy.”

“And a bar pie, please.” I smile diffidently at the waitress and notice that she has real breasts and isn’t wearing too much make-up. Even her fake waitress-smile is pretty reserved. This reassures me just the slightest bit about the status of the human race.

“Sure thing. Pint glass, a water and one bar pie. You guys ready for another pitcher yet?” she asks the table at large.

“You got it, sweetheart,” says McFarlane.

“Definitely,” Makowski concurs.

Half the bar cheers and half the bar grumbles as the Packers intercept a pass and return it to the Chiefs’ ten yard line. The waitress leaves.

Makowski nods at her ass. “Eight?” he says to McFarlane.

“Thatta boy, Pack,” says Wells, clapping.

“You got money on the game?” I ask him.

“Just the ass, or the whole package?” McFarlane responds to Makowski’s question.

“Both.”

McFarlane cranes his neck and tries to get a better look at the waitress as she maneuvers over to another table.

“Yeah, I got a little twenty-timer on the game,” Wells tells me. “But I also got the Packers defense in the league this week. I need some points from them if I’m gonna catch Mak.”
“Oh, right, you’re playing Mak’s team this week,” I say, in reference to their fantasy football match-up.

“Ass is nice,” McFarlane says. “Eight sounds about right. Face is kinda plain, though. Can’t tell about the titties, too covered up. Overall I’ll give her an incomplete, though I’m leaning more towards a seven. Maybe a seven point five.”

Makowski nods. “Hey, I’ll bang a seven point five.”

“You’d bang a three point five,” I say. Those who hear my line laugh. Makowski shrugs and nods at me in agreement.

“How’d’ya like that interception, Mak,” says Wells. “That puts me and you almost even. If the Packers get a couple of sacks and Holmes doesn’t score anymore I can catch you.”

“Yeah yeah.” Mak sips his beer and belches. “You ain’t catching me this week, Wells. I’m taking the overall points lead in the league, too. And I bang all types, Liss. All shapes and sizes. And colors. You know that.”

Everyone laughs.

“You’ve banged black girls?” Tuttle asks him. Tuttle lives in Hoboken, same as me, but in a much nicer apartment. He works in The City, on the stock market for Merrill Lynch. “Or what about Indians? You never hooked up with an Indian, did you?”

“What, dots or feathers?”

“Either.”

“Well, Tuttle, I’ve banged a few different black girls.” Makowski glances up at the game for a second; the Packers got stopped on third and goal and are bringing in the field goal unit.
“What kind of black-” McFarlane starts to ask him.

“Real ones. That I met in the world, wise-ass. Not hookers. I don’t do that shit, unlike some people I know.”

“Hey, I never fucked a hooker,” McFarlane says loudly.

“Whoa whoa, settle down,” says Tuttle. “Lower your voice, man.”

“And um, a girl I hooked up with that semester I was at Jersey City State,” Makowski continues, answering Tuttle’s other question, “I think she was part Indian, like Native American-Indian. Just a small part, though. India-Indian, or like Pakastani or whatever? No, never done that. That’d be tough. That smell, curry or whatever it is, I don’t know if I could handle that. Those kind of Indians are probably the ugliest race. Some of the Middle Eastern ones are pretty hot, though. I got a couple of flicks with some nice Egyptian girls, and I think maybe Iranians too. They know what they’re doing.”

Tuttle nods. The Packers make their field goal. There is moderate clapping and cheering as the game goes to commercial. The waitress brings over the bar pie and two pitchers of light beer then leaves.

“Seven point five,” Makowski and McFarlane say in unison.

“Just not quite an eight,” says Mak, who pounds the rest of his beer and reaches for one of the new pitchers.

I polish off my four slices of bar pie pretty quickly. Being on my feet all day at work makes me hungry. Nothing like wasting my college degree working a job that any high school kid can do. At least I’m an ‘assistant manager’ now. And it still amazes me, the crap people buy. The lamest movies, the most unoriginal music, songs you hear
eighteen times a day on the radio. And books; don’t even get me started on the shite these people read.

“How was work today?” Kearns asks me, sounding legitimately interested.

“Eh, same old same old.”

“Same shit different day, right?”

“Basically.”

“Take that last slice, man. I’m good.” He pats his ample stomach. “Gotta start trying to keep my weight down.”

I grab the last greasy but great-tasting slice.

“I thought you were gonna hring me that screenwriting book this week,” he says quietly. He doesn’t want to take any ribbing from the guys about his writerly ambitions.

“Oh, right. I forgot. I’ll bring it Wednesday, give it to you after poker.”

“Don’t forget.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, we were real busy today. How’s that thing going anyway?”

“Coming along,” says Kearns. “Coming along. It’s hard to find time to write, I’m always so tired from work. I get home, grade papers, make some dinner, maybe smoke a J or drink a couple of beers, watch a little TV. By that time I’m starting to get sleepy. Eh, I need a woman is what I need. Someone supportive, to keep me on my toes, help me organize my time so I can work on the script.”

Tuttle punches him in the arm playfully. “You wore out Makowski’s sister and now you need a new old lady, huh Rob?”

Kearns grins. “Nah, it wasn’t like that, man.” Makowski becomes silent at the other end of the table. He heard something about his sister and is now trying to listen in.
“She was a good girl,” says Kearns. “Still is. She just couldn’t put up with my shit anymore.” Kearns always seemed to be really nice to her whenever I saw them together, and besides being a bit lazy and delusional about his Zen-Kerouac dreams of becoming a writer and traveling the globe, he’s a genuinely good guy.

“What are you clowns bitch-gabbing about down there?” asks McFarlane.

“How Mak’s sister dumped Rob’s ass,” says Tuttle.

“Oh, that again. She probably got tired of waking up in a puddle.” McFarlane laughs.

Makowski remains silent. Kearns responds to McFarlane’s insult. “Hey, a couple of times. That’s what happens when I drink too much, I piss the bed, it’s no secret. It’s just water and beer, what’s the big deal?”

“What’s the big deal? Pissing yourself on a regular basis isn’t a big deal?” McFarlane needles him.

“That’s not why she left me,” Kearns mutters. Only me and Tuttle hear him.

“Hey, no offense to Mak,” Tuttle whispers in Kearns’s ear, “I know you and him are boys and all. But the sister, man, forget the bitch, you don’t need her. Go out and find somebody better, right?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Rob says, glancing up at the game as the crowd roars again. Holmes just broke a big run for the Chiefs. “She was a nice girl, though,” he says. “I dug her.”

I’m the only one who hears him amidst the din.

“Big play, Wells, big play,” says Makowski. “Your defense isn’t gonna keep getting interceptions all game. Holmes already has about seventy yards now.”
“Fine,” says Wells. “You’re probably gonna beat me this week. I can still win the hundred bucks I got on the game, though, I’m getting three points.”

“Sweet,” says Makowski.

“I think I’m gonna head out early tonight,” says Wells. “Maybe catch the rest of this one at home.”

“Bullshit,” McFarlane says loudly. “You’re goin’ over to Jen’s for some pussy.”

“At least I don’t have to go home to my old lady and take care of the kid,” Wells fires right back. “And Jen’s asleep already, she’s gotta be at the salon early tomorrow morning.”

The waitress obviously heard McFarlane’s pussy comment and stepped back a bit as she was approaching the table. “Can I get you guys anything else?” she says, moving in toward the table again, smiling less than before.

“Just the check, honey, just the check,” says McFarlane. She backs away. “Hey, I hear ya, Wells, I was just breaking your balls. I gotta get up early tomorrow, too.”

McFarlane’s cocky demeanor slips just a bit. He leans back in his chair. “Fucking work, man.” He shakes his head. “It’s gonna be a rough week.”

Makowski slaps him across the shoulders. “Eh, sleeping in isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” Makowski is twenty-six years old and still delivering pizzas. This is buffeted by some occasional porn sales, although everyone assumes he slings yayo on the side, or at least weed, probably while he’s out delivering pies. It’s just something none of us has confronted him about directly, even the cops in our group. If he were to tell anyone it would be Kearns, who pleads ignorance whenever we ask him for specifics regarding Mak’s potentially illegal sources of income.
The Chiefs complete a pass over the middle for a touchdown. Lots of cheering, lots of booing. Almost every customer in the bar either has money on the game or is in a fantasy league. The waitress arrives with the check. Everyone reaches into their pockets. Tuttle stands up and distributes the rest of the last pitcher between himself and Kearns. “Help me finish this off, Rob.”

I throw a few bucks toward McFarlane, who is doing the collecting. “Hey, a little short there, Liss.”

“I was here maybe thirty minutes,” I say defensively. “I had half a bar pie and one beer. You guys had about six thousand wings and who knows how many pitchers before I got here.”

“Whatever. You know we always split it evenly.”

“And you know I always come late because of work, every week, and I throw in my money and I don’t say anything and I never complain, even though I never eat or drink as much as you guys.”

“Here,” says Wells, tossing in an extra ten. “He’s right, I’ve noticed that myself. Liss always gets here late and pays a full split. And we’re leaving earlier than usual tonight. We usually stay at least through the start of the second half.”

McFarlane adds Wells’s contribution to the pile of money in his hand. “Hey, I didn’t tell Liss to take a night job. But alright, if that’s how you guys want to do it. Personally, I wouldn’t feel right about Wells paying part of my share.” He gives me an extended look. “But that’s just me. That’s just how I am.” He adds an extra ten of his own. “I’m putting in a little extra, give a nice tip, y’know. These girls work hard. And she wasn’t bad,” he watches our waitress, now filling beer mugs behind the bar. “Maybe a
seven point six, seven point seven,” he says to Mak, who throws him an extra five. A few of the other guys throw in extra tip money as well. I toss in a couple more singles, not wanting to look cheap in front of my friends.

“Alright, that’s good,” says McFarlane. “That’s like thirty something percent. So who’s driving me home?”

“You know what, let’s hit the After Dark,” Wells says to Keams, nudging him in the shoulder. “I ain’t got no lovin’ to go home to tonight. Jen gets pissed if I wake her up for sex.”


Mak cracks his neck and stands up, putting on his leather jacket. “Nah, wish I could, but I got some shit to do tonight. I’ll drive McFarlane home, though, it’s on my way.”

“What’s the After Dark?” Tuttle asks.

“Go-go bar,” says Kearns. “In Newark.”

“Oh god, that dive off Route Twenty-one?”

“McCarter Highway, technically.”

“Aren’t they all like fat Puerto Rican chicks and shit?” Tuttle asks.


“Nope.”
“You gotta check it out,” says Wells, the four of us now in a circle. “It is a dive, but some of the girls are pretty good looking actually. They’ll have the football game on. We can get some lappies, drink a few beers. What do you say?”

“Who’s gonna drive?” I ask.

“You got your wheels with you, right Liss? How about you and Tuttle go in your car, and I’ll take Rob with me.”

“You OK to drive?” I ask.

“Sure,” says Wells. “I’m fine. I’m a cop now. Even though it’s just transit, that’s good enough if I ever get pulled over. Badges gotta respect badges, that’s how it works.”

“Alright,” says Tuttle. “Let’s check it out.”

“You’re up for this? I figured anything less than Scores wouldn’t be good enough for you anymore,” I say. Scores is an expensive and well-known strip club in The City.

“Those places over in The City are a friggin’ rip-off,” says Tuttle. “If my bosses weren’t paying for everything through the expense account you think I’d be going there?”

“Alright, whatever, let’s go,” I say to Wells. “I think I know where it is but let me follow you just in case.”

“So how do you like Hoboken?” Tuttle asks me as we turn off Route Three and onto Route Twenty-one South. He’s been living there for over a year and I only moved into my apartment with Craig a few months ago.

“It’s pretty cool. I mean, it’d be real convenient if I worked in The City, like you. I definitely miss out on that part of it. I actually have to drive farther to work now.”

“Still at that uh, that big chain place with the movies and books and CDs and all?”
“Yeah.”

“You looking for anything else? I mean, no offense, but you were always one of the smartest kids in our class, you got a degree from a good college…”

I nod, turning down the football game on the radio. “I hear you. And yeah, it’s a job with no future, I know that. But I make enough that I can live on my own now, out of my parents’ house.”

“That’s gotta be a relief. I remember when I first moved out, it was—”

“Oh yeah, big relief. Love the freedom, the independence.”

“How’s your roommate?”

“Cool guy, we went to college together. He works in finance too, for Morgan Stanley.”

“Good company,” says Tuttle.

“He pays a larger share of the rent ‘cause he’s got the bigger bedroom and his own half-bathroom and all. But yeah, so far I like it. Lots of restaurants and bars, always something to do on the weekends, and a lot of my friends from college live in Hoboken. Close to The City, if I ever want to go to a museum or a play, take a date, whatever. You hang out at that place Darby Phil’s, right? That’s only a few blocks from my apartment.”

“Usually. Especially Friday nights after work,” says Tuttle. “I get on the pool table, run game for a while, get hammered. The bartenders, they all know me now, so they hook me up with drinks and stuff. And I’m like you, I’ve got my college buddies in town.”

“Oh yeah, I met some of those guys. Michael and J.K. And your old roommate, what’s his name again?”
“Sabin.”

“Right, Sabin. He’s a funny kid.”

“We just had his bachelor party last weekend. At the Peninsula Hotel in The City. Real swanky joint. Michael set it up. I feel downright poor next to that rich bastard.”

“Good time?” I ask, keeping an eye on Wells’ car in front of me.

“Crazy, Liss. Put McFarlane’s bachelor party to shame.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know where they got these girls,” he says in a confidential tone, “or what they were on, but they put on some show, man. I mean, it started out just like McFarlane’s, you know, two girls, typical lesbian show. Kissing, licking each other, nothing insane. But then they start eating each other out, like hardcore, and rimming each other’s assholes. Then they had us all sit in a circle and they went around climbing all over us, pulling dudes’ pricks out, giving little blowjobs to each guy, rubbing their crotches in our faces. Spreading their pussies and assholes, Liss, grinding them right in your grille. Both of ‘em hot as any of the girls at Scores. Tall, tan, tits out to here.” He gestures with his hands. “They had this bag with them. And after they went around the circle, rubbing their cunts in our faces and working our dicks, they start pulling out all these toys and shit. Double-ended dildoes, vibrators. One of the chicks stuck a candle in the other girl’s ass and lit it. Then she crawled around the circle with a lit candle sticking out of her ass. I couldn’t believe it.” He shakes his head and exhales.

“Damn, that’s pretty crazy,” is all I can say. “Any, you know, side-work?”

“I think so. J.K. told me they wanted an extra five hundred to double-team Sabin. We woulda all chipped in, but he wasn’t interested. Sabin’s a good kid like that. He
wasn’t gonna have sex with those sluts two weeks before his marriage. Michael’s new roommate, some guy Stan from Louisiana, went to Tulane, he’s got this funky New Orleans accent, I think he fucked one of ‘em for two or three hundred. Michael said he got a blowjob from the other one. Didn’t even have to pay, just gave her some cocaine. Honestly, I wasn’t interested. I figured if they were doing all that shit they were probably just high priced whores. They coulda had all sorts of VD – the herp, the hiv, who knows, right?”

“Right,” I say. Nothing else coming to mind. Wells makes a left at the first light after Twenty-one turns into McCarter Highway and I follow him down a hill into the industrial section of Newark.

The After Dark is, as they’d said, a go-go bar. In New Jersey, if you serve alcohol you’re not a strip club, the girls have to wear bikinis and the club can get fined if they show anything more than that. It’s a dingy black building located right at the beginning of McCarter Highway, in northern Newark, near the borders of Harrison and Kearny. The parking lot is well-lit but its accessibility to the highway is a bit unsettling given Newark’s reputation for car theft. There are four of us, including a cop, so I’m not too worried about getting jacked or jumped, but I wish I had The Club or an alarm as I lock the car and Tuttle and I get out.

“Well, let’s see what this shit-hole has to offer,” Tuttle says.

Wells parks next to us and gets out with a big smile on his face. “You homos made it here without getting lost, eh?”
Kearns comes over grumbling about how Wells wouldn’t let him smoke a roach on the way over. “Just kidding, Liss,” says Wells. “I know you’re always reliable behind the wheel.” He and Kearns lead the way into the After Dark.

Inside, it’s noticeably poorly lit. There’s a low, empty stage to the left and a cashier’s desk to the immediate right where they check your I.D. and charge the seven-dollar cover. A small Hispanic man, to me he looks Cuban, takes our entry fee and we walk over to the bar. There are no tables, just chairs next to the stage and stools at the bar. The other patrons are all about twice our age and mostly Latino. There’s one old white guy at the far end of the bar, and two black guys are playing 8-ball at one of two worn-down pool tables. There doesn’t appear to be a V.I.P. area or lap dance room, and there are women’s and men’s restrooms in between the stage and the pool tables. We maneuver our way to three stools and a woman who has to be in her early fifties comes over to take our drink orders. This is quite a surprise; at every other strip club I’ve ever been to the bartenders are even hotter than the dancers. The bartender girls are usually dressed scantily but they don’t strip or go on stage or give lap dances; they just pour the drinks, smile, and expect to be tipped. This woman looks like she could be a grandmother. Maybe the proprietor’s wife, I think to myself. She has short reddish-brown hair and is dressed in a conservative black blouse and jeans.

“What can get you?” she says, with a noticeable Russian accent.

Tuttle orders a Heineken, Kearns and Wells get Coors Lights, I request a Jack & Coke. There aren’t quite enough open stools to accommodate all four of us.

“You guys sit, enjoy yourselves. I’ll stand,” says Wells. “God knows I’ve been here before.”
The older woman pours our drinks. Tuttle pays for the round, after rebuffing Wells’s numerous attempts to chip in. I observe that the place doesn’t really have a ceiling, just some exposed beams and insulation and the underside of the roof. As my eyes continue to adjust to the darkness, I peer down the length of the bar. At the far end is a single television playing the Monday Night Football game. Sitting or standing down there, near some of the customers, are women. They are white, but they don’t look like the girls you’d normally see at a strip club. One is noticeably overweight, a pale and flabby ass hanging out of her garters. She turns around and I can tell that she must be in her forties or so, her face caked in thick makeup. She is swiveling her ass into the crotch of a man on a stool as he occasionally feeds singles between her breasts and squeezes them through her lingerie.

I tap Wells’s shoulder. “So what’s the deal, they just grind on you right here at the bar?”

“Basically,” he says, sipping at his Coors Light. “You give ‘em a dollar every half-minute or so. It works out a lot cheaper than lap dances at nicer clubs; you know that bullshit, twenty or thirty bucks for a five-minute song. Yeah, you don’t get the privacy, but nobody’s really looking at anybody else’s business here, you know what I’m saying?”

I chuckle. “I guess. Are the girls all…older?”

He smiles. “They do have some grammas here. Usually I let them go by, save my money for the younger chicks.”

“So there are, like, girls then? Twenty-something and stuff?”

With a snort he extends to his full height and scans the bar. “This ain’t Stiletto’s or The Gallery, man. You come here for the service, not the quality. But yeah, it looks a
little thin on talent tonight. Not all Russians look like tennis players, bro. Usually there’s one or two girls on the stage, too.” He tips his beer bottle toward the vacant stage, a black plywood platform with a fingerprint-mottled pole at one end.

I turn to Tuttle. “Not exactly Scores or the Peninsula Hotel, huh?”

“What, when these guys said Newark this was basically what I was expecting. Maybe a little worse.” He laughs, sips his beer.

I smile. “Worse? Worse would send me screaming for the exit, man.”

Tuttle laughs again.

“Don’t be so negative,” says Keams. “Give it a chance.”

Two girls come out of the women’s restroom and climb onstage.

“See,” says Keams. “Right on cue.”

These two are noticeably younger. One is clearly better looking than the other. The less attractive of the two has a long, horty face, thinnish hair and bad teeth, but her body is small and petite, not too much to complain about there. The other one is a legitimate knockout: blonde hair, pretty face, full lips, and large, real-looking breasts. Neither of them can dance, they waver and shimmy like willows in a slight breeze, swaying back and forth to severely out-of-date techno music.

“I think they played this song at our eighth grade dance,” Wells says with a snicker.

“She ain’t hot, Liss?” Keams nudges me, nodding at the blonde.

The overweight older woman with the garters has made her way over and bounces her ample bottom into Wells’s crotch as he leans back against the bar, working on his Coors Light and trying to watch the girls onstage.
“You want dance?” Her English is broken, it sounds like ‘ju von dahnz.’

“No thanks, sweetheart. I’ll pass.” He pats her flank and gazes over her head, encouraging her to move down the line, toward the rest of us.

“How you do, honey?” she says over Kearns’s shoulder. He has wisely swiveled around, away from the girls on stage, and is now facing into the bar. Tuttle and I do likewise, knowing we are next.

Kearns gently rejects the woman. I do the same. Tuttle spins around and lets her rub her fleshy body against him for a minute or so and gives her a couple of singles. She continues on to the next stool.

“Hey, I felt bad,” Tuttle whispers to me.

Wells walks down to the far end of the bar, feigns watching the pool players for a minute, gets a closer look at the football game, then returns with a stool for himself and sits. “There we go.” We all lean back against the bar to watch the two girls onstage. Their efforts have not increased. The song ends, they step down from the stage and are replaced by an older black-haired woman who had been working the far end of the bar. The hot blonde girl and her wiry friend come right over to us.

The less attractive of the two tells us they are from the Ukraine. Her accent is evident but she knows more than just a few words. The pretty girl is virtually silent, and seems to know only a few key phrases: ‘I can danz vor you.’ ‘Dolar, please.’ ‘Tank you.’ They speak a lot of Russian between themselves as they ‘dance’ for us, wiggling their asses or breasts up and down the crotches of our pants. The less attractive girl is more bold, she strokes a hand over our cocks and holds open her bikini top so we can reach in and fondle her breasts and pull at her nipples as we feed her dollar bills. It takes me a
while to get the hot girl. Wells and Kearns each spend a good thirty or forty bucks on her, which lasts a while in this place. By the time she gets to me the game is nearing its conclusion, the Chiefs have a sizeable lead in the fourth quarter. Wells moans that he is going to lose his hundred-dollar bet.

The horse-faced girl was pleasant enough while I waited. She grinded well and could carry on a halfway decent conversation at the same time. She said she was downright ecstatic to dance for young white men, as was her friend. They’ve been in America less than a year, she told me, both hailing from the Ukrainian city of Kiev. I felt like I was in a foreign country myself. This is the sort of thing I always associated with Southeast Asia – Cambodia, Burma, Thailand. She was smiling, affable and deprecating; we were nice, rich American boys, she said. I stifled a laugh when she said ‘rich’, thinking of my own grim financial outlook – the dead-end job, rent, gas, student loan payments, over-priced car insurance. She gave her name as Marina, and her friend’s as Ruth. I asked how they treated her here. She didn’t really answer, and instead asked me if I was Russian or Polish. I told her no, I’m American, so are my parents and grandparents, though my lineage is a mix, mostly Scottish and German. She insisted that I looked Slavic and asked if I had a girlfriend. She told me that she and Ruth had no boyfriends; they wanted them though, nice young men like ourselves, she said. I felt guilty. She’s riding my erection with her asscrack and telling me how happy she is to be here in America. She lives with the other girls in Brooklyn, she informs me. There is a van that takes them back there after the After Dark closes. She warns me not to mention anything that she is telling me to anyone because the bosses don’t like it when they say where they live.
"You like how I touch you?" she asks, her tiny hand lingering on my erect penis, pressing it against the side of my thigh and rubbing it through my pants.

"Yes, you’re very nice."

She pulls back the strap of her bikini. "You like how I touch, you give extra. For special dance." Her hand continues to slide around the outline of my cock.

"Oh, I’m sorry, yes, thank you." I give her three or four singles and push her back a little bit. "We can just talk, you know. You don’t have—"

"I have to make money," she says and smiles. She shrugs her narrow shoulders and tilts her head to one side. "Money to live."

I force a grin. "Yeah, I know, that’s how it is. Food, bills, place to live, that whole... thing." I turn back to the bar and finish my drink, the cola-sweetened whiskey stinging my lips. Wells orders me another without asking. Marina moves on to Tuttle, Ruth moves over to me. She is beautiful. I cannot strike up a conversation with her. She is less liberal in her grinding and rarely turns around, but instead remains facing away from me, bent over slightly between my legs, bobbing her ass up and down in my lap. I want to see her face, and her breasts, but she simply will not turn around. I slip singles into the side of her thong until I run out. Then I break a twenty buying another beer for Tuttle. I notice Wells and Kearns looking over at us. They’ve already been serviced and are now watching our reactions as much as they’re watching the girls. Eventually, Ruth turns and squeezes her breasts together in front of me, a wordless plea for another dollar. I comply and try to cajole her to speak. Marina leans over and addresses her in Russian. In her own language, Ruth is slightly more talkative. Marina is loud and giggly, hanging off Tuttle’s lap sideways as she converses with Ruth in Russian and explains to me that
her friend is not as fluent in English as herself. "She is shy and young," Marina tells me. I notice, for the first time, that Marina is quite drunk, her eyes glassy, maybe high on something other than alcohol as well. She sloppily drapes her arms around Tuttle's neck and kisses his cheek. He allows her to finish one more grind then squeezes at her hips, implying that he wants her to get off him so he can partake of her better-looking accomplice. Ruth leaves me; she flashes a small, forced smile of departure and starts to dance for Tuttle. Marina moves down the bar to an overweight Hispanic man in a ratty t-shirt, dusty jeans and workboots. He looks like he's been here since he got off the jobsite of whatever manual labor occupation he has.

"See, Liss," says Kearns, noticeably drunk now. "Admit it, you had a hard-on. The fucking After Dark, can't beat it."

Wells giggles, inebriated as well. Both are chain-smoking cigarettes. "It's a trip alright." He sifts through his wallet. "Managed to drop sixty bucks here." His open wallet displays his transit cop I.D. in a plastic window. "I don't know about 'can't beat it', though," he says to Kearns. "The Emerald Club has its merits, too."

"Side-work?" says Kearns.

"Yeah, but I don't go for that too often. It's kinda shady. I remember one time this girl in there was basically begging me to fuck her. Fifty bucks, she said. She had to be strung out on something serious. Crack, heroin, who knows."

"Youch," says Kearns.

"That would've freaked me out," I say. "I'm surprised these places let that go on. I figure they'd be worried about losing their licenses, getting busted for prostitution."
“They know who to take care of so they get left alone,” says Wells. “This is fucking Newark and Belleville we’re talking about. You think they don’t do side-work here?”


“I don’t know,” says Kearns. “Mak says they don’t here. He knows about that stuff usually.” Kearns finishes his beer.

“Eh, maybe not all of ‘em, but most. The majority are doing something extra on the down low, I’d bet,” says Wells. “You offer one of these girls a hundred, maybe two hundred, she’d give you some side-work, big time. There’s gotta be an office or a back room somewhere in this dump.”

“You want to get something to eat when Tuttle’s done?” Kearns asks.

“Definitely,” says Wells, after finishing his beer. “J.J.s? A little belly-buster chili dog with the hot onions?”

“Nah,” says Kearns. “I had dogs for lunch, Cousin Ben’s. Zipped over there in between classes.”

“What are you teaching these days, Rob?” I ask, legitimately curious. I haven’t asked him about his job in a while, as a teacher at St. Mary’s High in Rutherford.

“Mostly gym and driver’s ed, same as always. I’ve got a remedial history class this year, that’s new. I like it, but it’s a lot more work. Lesson plans and textbooks and all, even though it’s like the slow kids or whatever.”

“Still coaching football, freshmen?”

“Yep. And assistant on J.V., scout for Varsity. Working my way up the ladder.”
"I hear ya."

"You like Cousin Ben's the same as J.J.'s?" Wells asks him.

"I don't know. J.J.'s has great dogs, but Ben's has some really good toppings."

"Better toppings than J.J.'s?" says Wells. "No way. Ben's ain't got the hot onions."

"True, true. There's this place in The City I like too. Gray's Papaya. Me and Mak always go there afterwards if we go clubbing on the weekends."

"I've had those," says Wells. "They make good dogs."

"Anyway, I vote for diner tonight," says Kearns.

"Diner sounds good to me," I say. All of a sudden I just want to get out of this place. Their cigarette smoke is right in my face, not that they're gonna stop once they get to the diner, and I can smell Marina and Ruth's oversweet perfume getting into my clothes, lingering on me, an after-scent. I finish the Jack Daniels & Coke that Wells bought me, downing it quickly, and begin to chomp on the ice. Tuttle stands up, and Ruth moves down the line to rejoin Marina as they huddle around the Hispanic man.

"I gotta hit the pisser," says Tuttle. "That girl was fucking hot. What a body. And you can tell those things are real. Nice face. Pretty. Young too, I bet. Younger than us, anyway."

We all nod our acknowledgment, Kearns and Wells wobbling drunkenly as they stand up. Tuttle heads to the bathroom.

As we wait for him to return, the raven-haired woman has taken the stage again and the 'gramma' from earlier tries to dance for us once more. We all turn her down apologetically. Marina giggles and smiles at us as she walks toward the women's
restroom, arm in arm with Ruth. I wave a curt goodbye. Tuttle emerges from the
bathroom and we head out to the parking lot.

“Maybe I should drive all four of us,” I say.

“And leave my car in this fucking war zone?” says Wells. “Hell no. We’ll go to
Tops, it’s just across the bridge. Tops Diner OK with you guys?”

Tuttle and I nod our assent, as does Kearns.

“Alright,” says Wells, fumbling his key into the driver’s side door-lock. “Meet
you there.”

We commandeer a booth near the window. The waitress is an older woman, a
grizzled but cheerful veteran of the New Jersey diner scene who brings us four ice waters
and says she’ll be right back to take our orders. I flip through the jukebox.

“Yeah, hook up some tunes,” says Kearns. “Got any Doors on there?”

“No Doors,” says Wells. “You’re all the time with The Doors. That shit depresses
me. Find something upbeat, dude. Here.” He tosses a pocketful of change onto the table
and picks through it for quarters. “Get the three songs for a dollar. We’ll each pick one.
Except you, Kearns, you lost your privileges with that Doors comment.”

“Whatever. Morrison fucking rocks. Hey, who in this diner likes The Doors?”

Kearns yells

“Keep it down, Rob,” says Tuttle.

“Nah, nah, they know me here. Tell Julio in the kitchen that Rob Kearns is here,”
he shouts. “Tell him I want my usual. A monte-cristo, extra ham, with fries on the side,
and a diet Coke. And, oh yeah, make the fries disco.” Kearns and Wells laugh hysterically.

I glance at Tuttle. He shakes his head, but smiles.

“Come on,” says Kearns. “Lighten up, you guys.”

“‘Make the fries disco’?” Tuttle asks.

“You don’t know what disco fries are?” Kearns says incredulously and shoves Wells, who he’s sitting next to. Me and Tuttle are on the opposite side of the booth. “He doesn’t know disco fries.”

Wells shakes his head in disbelief. “Doesn’t know disco.”

“Disco just means with cheese and gravy,” I tell Tuttle.

“Tuttle, I’m disappointed, I’m not gonna lie,” says Wells. “All that working in The City and living in Hoboken, you’re forgetting your roots, man.” Wells says it jokingly, but I think there’s a hint of underlying seriousness.

Two policemen enter the diner. I nod at Wells and Kearns, whose backs are to the entrance. They turn around.

“Uh oh, the real cops are here now,” says Wells, loud enough so they can hear him.

Gianella and Venancio come over to our table. They are both well-built and olive-skinned with short dark hair. They look large and intimidating in their dark blue Newark Police Department uniforms.

“Bust up any crack dens today?” Wells laughs.

“Still ticketing cars outside the bus terminal, eh Wells,” says Gianella, the larger of the two.

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“That’s me, keeping the world safe one parking violation at a time.”

The waitress interrupts to take our orders. Gianella and Venancio move over to the counter.

“Just order me a coffee, G. And whatever you’re getting,” says Venancio, who drifts away from the counter. “I still got half a sandwich from Stosh’s back at the station.”

“Dirtbag. You know I love Stosh’s.”

“Shoulda answered when I called your cell phone.”

“Two taylor ham, egg and cheese on a hard rolls and two coffees, to go,” Gianella says to the counter waitress. “Hey, did you wind up betting the Chiefs?” he asks his partner, who has moved over to the cigarette machine.


Gianella nods at the television behind the counter as Venancio saunters back, tapping a pack of cigarettes against his wrist. “Score just went by,” says Gianella. “You woulda covered. I told you the Chiefs were a lock. You shoulda sent it in.”

In terms of the music, I pick “Sugar Mountain” by Neil Young, which Wells says is ‘too slow’ and ‘almost as bad as The Doors’. Tuttle chooses “Atlantic City” by Bruce Springsteen. It too is dirge-like, though it sparks a discussion about getting together a trip down to A.C. in a few of weeks, maybe for New Year’s. After much perusal of the tableside jukebox, Wells selects “Nothing Else Matters” by Metallica, to keep with the ‘Gloomy Gus theme’, as he calls it, but ‘at least it’s a rockin’ band’, he adds. The two Newark cops’ sandwiches and coffees arrive at the same time as our meals and we bid
our sarcasm-laced goodbyes as they carry their to-go bags out into the bitter-cold post-midnight winter.

“They’re lucky to be back on the force, that’s all I gotta say,” says Wells, after they leave.

“Yeah, whatever happened with that whole thing?” I ask. “I thought they were on probation.”

“There was like an investigation or an inquiry or something,” Wells explains. “They were in a tough spot, I’ll give ’em that. Brand new on the force, something like that breaks out, they get involved. Wrong place at the wrong time. At least they didn’t try to cover it up. I think that’s why they let them back.”

“What would you have done in that situation?” I ask Wells.

“What’d they do again?” Tuttle asks. “They beat up some pedophile, right?”

“Yeah, it’s still a brutality case, though,” says Wells. “Ain’t like he was convicted yet. But supposedly the guy was guilty as sin. Serial sex offender. Little boys. Cops can’t stand that shit. So a few of the guys got a little rough with him at the station. Gianella and Venancio were in the room. No one’s really said how much they participated, or if they were just there or whatever. Me? I probably would’ve wanted to whale on the guy a little bit. If anybody deserves it it’s a child molester. But I don’t know, I think I would’ve let other guys do it. I’d just hang back and make sure nothing got out of control. And if people got busted, like the Newark guys did, then I probably would’ve done the same thing as G. and Venancio. If Internal Affairs came around asking about it I’d tell ’em what happened. I don’t believe in all that ‘blue wall of silence’ bullshit. I’m supposed to
‘take one for the team’ and lose my job because of some other knucklehead’s fuck-up? Screw that.”

“That’s good to hear,” I say to Wells. “That you think that way. All that loyalty to the force stuff always disturbed me. Cover-ups and police brutality and such.”

“It’s a rough world out there, but you still gotta stay in control, that’s how I look at it. Do what you gotta do to get through, right?”

Keams is picking at the remnants of his disco fries, half-asleep, smearing a fry through the melted cheese and gravy trails.

“You still awake, Rob?” I say.

He snorts. “Course. I can stay out another two hours if you want. Only need a few hours sleep, all my lessons are set up for tomorrow. You want to find an after hours bar?”

Wells puts his arm around him. “We’re taking you home, guy. After hours bar.”

He shakes his head and laughs. “You’d be passed out in five minutes. Like after McFarlane’s bachelor party, at the Red Shingle. Girls shaking their asses two inches from your face and there you were, passed out, head resting on the bar.”

“I remember that,” says Tuttle. “They threw you out eventually. I was just at a bachelor party last weekend. I was telling Liss about it on the ride to the After Dark. That place was bad news, man. I mean, those last two girls were alright, but how did you guys even find a place like that?”

“Mak took me there a year or so ago,” says Keams. “I don’t know when I told you about it,” he says to Wells.
“Makowski. He still owes me a flick,” says Wells. “I forgot to ask him about it at the Stadium Club.”

“A flick?” says Tuttle. “What, like a porn?”

Wells nods, signals to the waitress for the check.

“I forgot about that part,” says Tuttle, mostly to me. “They had a bunch of DVDs at the bachelor party, before the dancers showed up.” He nudges my knee under the table on the word ‘dancers’. “Some pretty extreme shit.” Tuttle lowers his voice. “This one scene, it was hilarious, the guy is banging this girl from behind, right. He’s got her bent over, I don’t remember if he was fucking her in the ass or not, but anyway, everything’s going along pretty normal and all of a sudden he shoves her head through the wall, like this plastic, fake-Sheetrock looking wall, and on the other side is the bathroom. He’s fucking her from behind and out of nowhere, no warning or anything, he shoves her head through the wall and into a toilet bowl. It was classic.”

“I love it,” says Wells. “I love all that shit. I get tired of seeing the same old stuff all the time.”

“That’s a little sick for me,” I say. “I don’t like to see violence mixed with sex.”

“Come on,” says Wells. “It’s all staged. It’s not like they were raping the girl, right? Hell, I wouldn’t want to see that.”

“It wasn’t even a real toilet,” says Tuttle. “He wasn’t trying to drown the girl for god’s sake, it was just for show. Like Wells said, something different, for laughs. I didn’t have a hard-on ‘cause half her body was in another room and her head was in a toilet, I—”

Wells laughs loudly. “Just picturing it, man. It’s funny.”
“I had a hard-on,” Tuttle continues, “because she was a hot-ass girl with big cans and a nice ass getting nailed from behind. That’s all. The rest was just guys goofing around and yukking it up at a bachelor party.”

“Hey, it’s just not my scene is all I’m saying.” I get up to go to the bathroom. “I gotta piss before we get outta here.”

“I wouldn’t mind nailing that blonde from the After Dark from behind,” says Wells, a little too cockily, as I head away from the table. It sounded forced, a person trying too hard to impress a couple of guys he’s known since grammar school.


“And I do her in any position I want,” Wells says defensively. I stop before entering the bathroom, curious to hear his rationale. “I hit that ass, too,” he continues. “All the time.”

They quiet down as the waitress approaches and deposits the check. The guys are all smiles and cordiality with her, and she in turn seems almost motherly toward them. She tells them to drive careful and stay warm, to be safe and have a good night. They thank her vigorously for the great service and I head into the bathroom knowing we’ll leave a good tip.

I get back to my apartment in Hoboken at around 3am. Craig is sprawled on the sofa. The television is on, but muted, and a CD is playing on the stereo, some hip, of-the-moment alt-country band.

“Hey!” he greets me enthusiastically, perking up from his slouch.
“What’s up, man? Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’m just winding down.”

“Big night on the town?” I take off my coat and gloves. “Cold out there.”

“Definitely a ‘sucks to be homeless’ night. I was walking around in The City like this.”

He is still wearing his jacket, unzipped, displaying a trendy retro Adidas t-shirt underneath, and a well-worn pair of jeans. His low-top sneakers are still on as well.

“What were you doing in The City?”

“Went to see a couple bands over at Bowery Ballroom.”

“Anybody good?”

“These guys were alright,” he says, referencing the group whose music is currently playing. “I bought their CD, and a t-shirt.” It’s lying next to him on the couch. He tosses it over. After I look at it I fold it in half and hand it back to him. “They always have the hottest girls working the merch stand,” he continues. “I wind up buying shit, trying to talk to them. It doesn’t go well,” he says, drunk and self-deprecating. “I blame myself.”

I chuckle and take off my shoes, which I’ve had on all day, through work, from one to nine, then all night as well. I tumble onto our other couch. They’re both pull-outs.

“No luck with the ladies tonight?”

Craig leans forward, picks up the remote control and changes the station to ESPN, avoiding my question for a moment. “Who won the football game?”

The highlights come up on the screen just as he asks me. “Chiefs,” I inform him.

“As you’ll soon see. The condensed version.”
“You bet ‘em?” he asks.

“Nah, I don’t bet too much anymore. Just fantasy.”

“Oh, right, your league with your high school friends. And yeah, no luck with the ladies, as you can see.” He waves a hand at the apartment, empty except for the two of us. “No takers. I talked to a few girls,” he continues. “Fat broads, you know me.”

“All it takes is one girl and you’ll get some confidence back,” I assure him.

“One? If she’s a supermodel maybe. Nah, I’m to the point where I almost like it now, trying for the ugliest girls in the place. The pretty ones, yeah, they’re nice to look at, but they’d never hook up with me in a million years.”

I shrug, having heard Craig’s laments many times before. I notice that there is a copy of the Village Voice next to him, where the t-shirt was, opened to the back section, the escort ads. “You didn’t order any hookers did you?” I ask.

“No, I’m being a good boy. I was thinking about it, but now that you’re here I know I won’t. That’s good. Keep me from spending money.” He pauses. “I’m a douchebag, you know. I gotta stop this.”

“The late night self-loathing sessions?”

Craig chuckles. “Yeah, they’re not getting me anywhere either. And I’m sure you’re sick of hearing me bitch. No, just, I mean, I hate myself afterwards. I order these whores and the girls come over here...” He tails off.

“Come on, it’s not like you do it all the time. Once or twice, right?”

“More like four or five times now. But I come home alone, and-”

“You’re not always alone,” I cut him off. “In the four months or whatever it is that I’ve been living here, you’ve hooked up with more girls than I have, by a lot.”
“Come on, Liss. That hairy hippie girl? The forty-year-old Puerto Rican broad with the two kids? The crackhead?”

“She wasn’t really a crackhead.”

“Whatever, coke. The girl was a jittery mess.”

“What about the little punk rock girl you met at the Continental, the Ramones tribute? Wanda. She wasn’t bad,” I say. “Don’t you still see her sometimes?”

“I called her tonight to see if she wanted to go to the show with me but she was doing shit with her college friends. She’s still pretty busted, but yeah, better than I usually do. At least she isn’t obese.”

“She’s downright thin,” I say. “Alright, her face maybe isn’t so great, but what the hell, she’s a nice girl, smart, you like the same music.”

“Doesn’t like sex, though. She’s all weird about it. Like bi-polar weird. Either she gets all wasted and lets me put her in ten different positions and fuck her on the windowsill, or she’s all shy and defensive. I think she was abused as a kid, the way she talks about her dad and stuff.”

“Damn. That’s not cool.”

“I’m not fucking cool!” Craig yells, standing up.

“Dude, don’t go breaking shit.”

Craig kicks the coffee table. “I’m a fucking loser! I’m sitting here about to call for a hooker, and they send them over, Liss, and it’s so fucking sad. They’ve been out working all night and I take ‘em to my room and I pay ‘em and it’s not even enjoyable. They have to use K-Y jelly because their pussies don’t even get wet anymore, ‘cause they’re worn out, dried up from being fucked all day. Then, if I try to be nice, and just
talk, they say I can’t do that. This one little Asian girl, Vietnamese I think, parents probably killed in the war, she kept whispering to me and gesturing. She points to her bag and I look in there and there’s a freakin’, like a baby monitor in there. ‘They listen,’ she whispered in my ear. ‘Don’t talk to me. They don’t like it.’ And then she points to all these bruises on her body. They don’t want them talking because they’re like fucking slaves these girls. Their bosses or pimps or whatever they are think that some guy is gonna feel sorry for them and give them a lot of money or tell them how they can get out of the business. They get shipped here from some other country, it’s not like they have a choice—"

“Everybody has a choice,” I say, feeling confrontational. “You always have a choice. The problem is the government. If prostitution was legalized it would cut down on all that shit, the pimps and the beatings, the mistreatment and the disease. So why can’t it be legal? It’s consensual. If two adults—"

“It’s not like that, Liss! Don’t give me all your liberal, book-learned bullshit. These girls are living shitty fucking lives and no, they don’t have a choice. They’re manipulated, sold into this country by their families when they’re still underage half the time. And it’s my fault! I call them up and talk to some scumbag and give him my address and my phone number, and my goddamn credit card number, and they send a girl right over. And I know it’s wrong and I know how it works and I fuck ‘em anyway!”

Craig picks up our telephone and smashes it repeatedly against the table on which it had been sitting until it is broken into pieces. He kicks the coffee table again and storms off toward his room, punching a hole in the wall on the way. “I’m a fucking fool!” he screams and slams his door.
I shake my head, knowing I just have to let him sleep it off, that he’ll pay for the damages out of his own pocket, that it’s just the product of frustration and rejection and too much alcohol. Tomorrow night I’ll come home from work and we’ll sit on these same couches and everything will be fine and normal. We’ll talk about sports and music and girls, which actresses we’d like to hook up with if we could, if we were rich and famous. We’ll gossip about our friends, about whose girlfriend is cheating on him, whose roommate isn’t holding up his share of the rent, who’s getting a new car or moving to a different apartment or getting engaged. We’ll complain about the government and talk about how we don’t have enough time to read anymore and bemoan the horrible state of modern movies. Just like we always do, two guys, two buddies, working for a living, doing what we have to, getting by.

Two weeks later and it’s another Wednesday, poker night at the firehouse. The guys are talking about the Giants’ disappointing season, how poorly they’ve been playing lately. McFarlane proudly announces that his son can walk on his own, but quickly points out that it’s a pain in the ass because now they have they have to watch him that much more closely. Wells’s partner Sandy is playing with us for the first time, and he’s got pretty solid poker skills. Kearns and Makowski have just finished telling us about some party they went to in The City where they wound up doing ecstasy on some rooftop.

I win a pot with a bluff. Sandy’s the last person in with me, but I can tell he doesn’t have much to play with. So I bet the maximum, five dollars, and after a little deliberation he folds. I turn over my cards with a smile and he shakes his head. “Nice play, man,” he says.
“Thank you.” I rake in the pot and stack my chips neatly.

“So, you guys hear?” says Makowski. “After Dark got raided.”

My attention is piqued. I haven’t been quite able to forget about the place. It has some sinister allure to me now. I’ve contemplated going back, I even mentioned it to my roommate Craig, told him he should check it out. He’d spend a lot less money there than in the V.I.P. rooms of over-priced strip clubs in The City. Part of me has even been wanting to go back by myself. That desire to see ugliness and corruption and the ‘dark side’, like I was talking about in the beginning. Or maybe I’ve just been lonely and horny and I want to fondle some breasts and get a cheap quasi-handjob.

“Raided, eh. For what?” asks McFarlane.

“What do you think?” Makowski chuckles. He begins to shuffle the cards and announces that the next game will be five-card draw. We play dealer’s choice. The hand I just beat Sandy at was Kearns’s selection, seven-card stud.

“Told you they were doing side-work,” says Wells.

“Maybe,” says Makowski. “Some of the girls they force to, but most just do it for the extra money.”

“Oh yeah, you guys went that night after Stadium Club. I forgot all about that,” says McFarlane. “Too much shit to keep track of these days. I almost forgot Melissa’s birthday. It’s the day after tomorrow. I went out yesterday and bought a card and some gift certificates and made a reservation at Centanno’s.”

“Jesus Christ, McFarlane,” says Wells, “take the girl to a different restaurant once in a while. Me and Jen saw your car in Centanno’s lot on a Friday night a couple weeks ago, we were going into Blockbuster Video next door to rent a movie.”
“Hey, it’s a nice place, good food, affordable, and right here in town. What do you think, I can afford to spring for five-star restaurants in The City on two day’s notice?”

Wells looks at his cards, calls the initial bet. “Just saying, man.”

“Yeah, just saying. When you and Jen get married and you’ve got a kid and a mortgage and thousands of dollars of credit card debt, you come talk to me then, chief.”

Sandy laughs.

“What are you chuckling about, newbie?” says Wells. “You’re lucky I even invited your ass tonight.”

Sandy throws his chips into the pot. “I raise.”

“And now you’re raising, too?” Wells calls grudgingly and tosses in his chips. McFarlane folds, as do I. Kearns and Makowski both call.

“I got the best hand.” Sandy grins. “Just letting you fellas know.”

“Alright, how many you need?” says Makowski.

“So the After Dark is what, closed now?” I ask.

Makowski distributes the correct amount of cards per everyone’s request. “Yeah, for a couple weeks probably. They’ll open back up but it won’t be the same. There’ll be all different girls, probably a new manager; it’ll be all strict and lame. Supposedly the new hot spot is Vic’s in Irvington.”

Kearns leads out with a bet. “I think Liss liked the After Dark,” he says to Makowski. “There was this hot blonde there that night, like I was telling you.”

“Yeah, Ruth,” Makowski says, distracted, trying to pay attention to the betting.

“I’ve had her.”
Wells calls, and Sandy raises again. Mak folds, Kearns calls and Wells throws his cards in with disgust. “You’re treating for eats later if you keep winning like this,” he tells his partner.

“Alright, show ‘em,” says Makowski.

Kearns turns over three nines, Sandy shows a straight. “Got lucky,” he says. “I had open ends and I hit it.”

“I shoulda known that when you only took one card,” says Kearns. “What’d you pull?”

“The king,” says Sandy, as he collects his winnings.

“Alright, one more time around the table,” says Wells. “To Kearns. He gets last deal. Gotta get up for work tomorrow.”

Everyone grumbles accordingly.

“Speaking of the After Dark,” Wells continues, “I was talking to Venancio yesterday, bumped into him and Gianella at the gym. Those two fucks are inseparable.”

“Probably fags,” says McFarlane, shuffling the cards for his deal.

“Anyway,” says Wells, “I gotta give them credit, even though I like to bust their balls. Newark P.D. ain’t no joke. They were out all night, ‘til four in the morning on, what was it, Sunday night I guess.”

“Shit, it was fucking cold Sunday night,” says Makowski. “I was out making deliveries.”

“They were on the banks of the fucking Passaic River,” says Wells. “Dragging up two bodies. Two foreign chicks, they said probably Russian, from the bottom of the goddamn river.”
McFarlane stops shuffling, beers are placed on the table, and everyone waits for Wells to continue the story.

"Who knows, mighta been from the After Dark," he continues. "They didn’t have any real identification on them. There was a purse dragged in that may have belonged to one of them, Venancio said. Nothing but an old fake I.D. inside, and it was all water damaged."

"How were they killed?" McFarlane asks.

"Shot?" Sandy guesses. "Back of the head?"

"Beaten, Venancio told me. Lots of head trauma. Probably a baseball bat or a pipe. Their hands and ankles were tied. They were pitched into the river after they were dead, probably off that bridge right by Tops Diner, or maybe the next one down, that old blue bridge by the Hess gas station. Some kids reported the bodies on Monday afternoon. They were playing soccer over on the Harrison side, that park on Passaic Road."

"I think that’s Kearny," says Kearns. "Where that park is. Not Harrison."

"On Monday they were playing soccer?" Sandy asks. "In that cold?"

"Harrison and Kearny are big soccer towns," I tell him. "Those kids play all year round. Mostly Hispanic, first generation, barely speak English. A few white kids too. The Ninety-Four U.S. World Cup team had three guys from Kearny on the roster, all starters."

"Yeah. Harkes, Tab Ramos and Miola," says Wells.

"That’s really insane," I continue. "People don’t recognize that enough. How many guys on the World Cup team, Wells? Twenty, twenty-five?"

"I think twenty-three," says Wells.

"And three from the same shitty little town in North Jersey."
“Hey,” McFarlane interrupts, “How’d we get onto spic-ball soccer? What happened to the hookers? I thought Wells was telling us about two dead hoes at the bottom of the Passaic River.”

“How do you know they were hookers?” I ask. “All he said was Russian girls, foreign-looking.”

“Get real, Liss. What other kinds of girls wind up beaten to death, tied up and chucked in the river?”

“Hey, all Venancio said is that his guess was that they might’ve been working at a club or something, in Newark. Hell, a lot of these chicks, they keep ‘em locked in some house somewhere, it’s all run by the Russian mob,” says Wells. “Sick shit. The girls come over here thinking they’re gonna get a legitimate job, but they wind up as like a house-cleaner or some other bullshit, for somebody’s illegal immigrant uncle or cousin, from Russia or wherever, who happens to be connected to the red mafia. So they order one of these girls from the homeland. They come here and they’re like live-in servants, making maybe two hundred dollars a month. They can’t live on that and they can’t speak much English and everybody they know is Russian and mobbed up, so they get stuck in some go-go bar. And more times than not it’s just a cover for a prostitution den. I feel bad for ‘em, I really do.” Wells reaches for his beer.

“They still got it better here than back in Russia,” says Makowski. “I’ve talked to some of these girls, alright. I know what’s what. You think it’s cold out on the Passaic River at four in the morning? Try the fucking Ukraine winter. So yeah, it’s fucked up and all, but they board and shelter these girls in a house or an apartment, and it’s not always a prostitution thing. Usually it’s not in Newark, either, it’s over in The City, the outer
boroughs. They get a bed, food, spending money, a warm room. They’re overjoyed. That’s a haven compared to starving to death, only heat is from an old fireplace in an ex-communist tenement in some former Soviet republic, Estonia or Latvia or wherever. If they gotta strip naked in front of a web-cam or rub their asscrack on a few dicks every night, so be it. They do that for a year or two, they learn a little English, they get a job as a maid or a waitress somewhere."

Everyone is silent. We respect Makowski’s knowledge of the industry. But I don’t want to let it go just yet. Maybe it’s guilt. “Fine Mak, but then how come these two girls wound up washed up on the shores of the dirtiest river in the Northeast? They sure as hell aren’t gonna learn English and become waitresses. I saw something on Channel Nine about this once, but I didn’t really connect it to the After Dark, even when I went there. I guess it was just willful ignorance. But a lot of these girls are teenagers, man. Or some of them were even educated people over there. They can’t speak English, but in Russia, or wherever they’re from, these women were teachers and professionals and shit.”

Nobody says anything for a couple of seconds. Makowski nods. “Hey, you gotta pay a price to live in America.”

McFarlane starts dealing. “Alright, enough of this depressing nonsense. Let’s play some cards. The game is Texas Hold ‘Em, just like they do it on TV, boys.” He rubs his eyes to stay awake, takes a sip of his beer. “I need this pot, I’m losing tonight.”

At around noon the following day, I’m getting ready to drive to work. Thursday, not much to look forward to. I’ve got some time before I have to leave, so I log onto the internet looking for stories about the two girls Wells told us about. There’s a couple of
short blurbs, ‘unidentified females’ is all they really say. A few quotes from cops about how cold it was by the river, the gruesome nature of the corpses. One was a blonde, the other a brunette. Both apparently of Eastern European descent, probably Russian or Slavic. Assumed victims of a random assailant. Probably prostitutes. Nothing new. I also do a Google search for the After Dark and turn up a message board on Stripclublist.com.

A pretty disturbing mix of comments. Here’s a short list:

Eddie B.: alright, who’s the scumbag piece of undercover trash who got the A.D. busted?
Mertz: Dude, they were turning tricks on the side. Two girls told me the last time I was in there I could take ‘em both to a hotel for four hundred bucks. Just outta curiosity I said how ‘bout two hundred, and they said OK. I didn’t do it though. That would be just asking for AIDS.
Eddie B.: Shit, Id kill a bitch if she gave me the hiv, kid. How long you think they’ll be closed down for?
Mertz: At least a month I bet. Like the time they caught that mayor’s aide there, remember?
Dee: Hey guys! Heard the A.D. got shut down. If you want a good time come see me and my girlfriend’s at Hott 22, on Route 22 West in Union, NJ.
Publius: closing this place down was the best thing Newark PD ever did, hopefully they have the same luck at joints like Utopia
Eddie B.: so is that place Vic’s over in Irvington the new place to go then?
Tanyya: For hot Brazilian girls come to Indios. Best club in Newark. I swear. I’ve worked here two years and we all kno how to please you guys.
Eddie B.: Vic’s was all it was cracked up to be, just like the old A.D. but without all the grandmas and old babushkas. Spanish and Asian girls mostly, twenty bucks and they work your tool til it spits
Client: Saw Anna from the A.D. at Fantasys and she said a lot of the old A.D. girls are working the massage parlors in Brooklyn
Joey: Bon-Bons last night was pretty lame. No ‘hand massages’ and they don’t even
grind on your lap that good. I recommend looking elsewhere.

There’s a lot more, but at no point is there any mention of the two dead girls. I share this computer with Craig so I immediately make sure to erase all traces of my visit to Stripclublist.com. Not because I’m ashamed, but because he was looking at a lot of online porn sites a few months ago and got freaked out because he wound up on some mailing list that was sending him what he thought was kiddie porn. Ever since then he’s been a real hawk about making sure we don’t having anything to do with shady dealings online. For a while he was sure they were gonna bust in the door any minute, looking to arrest him on a possession of underage pornography charge. I told him not to worry, that he didn’t do it on purpose, that he got subscribed to some creepy spam list and it wasn’t his fault. The last thing I read about my subject of interest is from a different website, an interview with an author about his recent visit to Moscow:

The majority of Russians are extremely poor, but everything in Russia is very expensive. The crime rate is insane. Something like seventy-five percent of children live in poverty. In the United States, it’s common for teenagers to earn pocket money by working at McDonald’s or Burger King. In Russia, they work as prostitutes. It’s part of growing up. Russians’ ability to travel abroad is very strictly controlled, and it’s quite obviously done so they won’t get any funny ideas about what freedom feels like.

I log off, shut down the computer and head off to work, hoping traffic won’t be too bad today.

It was a pretty busy Thursday night at the store, and there were even a few halfway interesting customers. I talked with this one guy for about forty-five minutes. He was looking for Ingmar Bergman films on DVD and I turned him onto the Criterion series. They put out the best DVDs, especially if you’re looking for foreign stuff or
classics. He seemed lonely, said he liked having someone to talk about films with face to face rather than online in chat-rooms. Then there was this teenage girl, an alternative type, the dyed black hair and the black plastic-framed glasses, some punk and indie rock band pins on her knapsack. Great little body. She would have been gorgeous, by society’s standards, with a little make-up, some blonde hair dye and an hour at a tanning salon. I could tell she doesn’t run the popular crowd, doesn’t realize how good-looking she is. The guys her age probably don’t either. Attractive, articulate high school girls who come in by themselves are quite rare where I work. I always liked those girls back when I was in school, the ones who weren’t interested in cheerleading and the jocks and all that, even though those were the cliques I ran with. They were cool girls; smart, a little angry, on some mysterious quest I couldn’t quite relate to, a desire for liberation and equality, a rejection of the external, the superficial. She reminded me of them. She was looking through our tiny poetry section and she saw me shelving DVDs nearby, asked if I could recommend any good poets. Said she’d read a lot of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, some Bukowski, but she wanted to move on, try something less angsty. I didn’t know what to say, I wanted to tell her to savor her angst, and her youth. I was pretty intimidated by her. If she only knew how much power she had, just as a cute young girl with an un tarnished appreciation of art and the world, how attractive that was. And it wasn’t that I was lusting after her in some Lolita-ish way, it was more that I wanted to be her, to go back to a more innocent time in my life, before I was what I am now.

I’m driving home from work after I stopped for a drink with this kid Jared. He’s new to the store, only twenty-one and just moved to New Jersey from Florida so he’s still all eager to go partying and drinking and trying to meet girls all the time. He’d been
asking me to go out with him after work for a few weeks, so tonight I finally accepted. We shot pool and threw some darts at a local bar in Elmwood Park called The Underpass. I held my own at the latter but he killed me at 8-Ball. I’ve always sucked at pool, I can never calculate the angles. We had a few beers and a couple of shots. I was about to ask him if he wanted to stop at a diner or something, but it was a little weird, just two guys, not knowing each other that well. So we shook hands, said ‘see you at work tomorrow’, and split up. Heading back to Hoboken now, I’m a little drunk, and really hungry. I decide I need some J.J.’s so I change highways, take 21 South toward Newark. I throw down four dogs while I sit in the front seat of my car, parked behind J.J.’s truck with the doors locked and the heat blasting. This is the kind of night I would have headed over to the After Dark to explore my ‘dark side’, I think to myself. I finish my hot dogs and root beer and turn onto Broadway. Where it intersects with Grafton Avenue I slow down, curious, wondering about the veracity of McFarlane’s stories. There’s an all-night chicken place with a bunch of black guys inside, some outside as well. It’s a well-known spot to get weed, x, coke, who knows what else. I make a u-turn and do another pass, turning off Broadway onto Grafton. To my right is a lone white female, her legs poking out the bottom of a fake-fur coat. I pull over and roll down the passenger side window.

“Anything I can help you with tonight?” I ask.

She smiles; crooked teeth, gaunt face, pallid. She’s older, late thirties, maybe forty. Her voice has no trace of an accent as she says, “Isn’t it the other way around, sweetie? Well? It’s less than zero out here. You want me to get in?”

I unlock the door and push it open.
Wednesday, 7:24am

The sun has just risen on a cold February morning. George opens the driver’s side door and sits down inside the van, carefully placing his camera inside its case on the floor. On the passenger seat is a pair of binoculars. Both the camera and the binoculars are high-end, professional-quality equipment. The camera is mostly for personal use. The binoculars are for his job, and that will be his next stop, 123 Berry Street, the Sorengren residence, to stake out a young man, record his comings and goings, and report back to his boss. He has been tailing the guy for almost three weeks and there hasn’t been any sign of drugs. The first week and a half it was night-work, now George is on him days. He reaches under his seat, retrieves a notebook and pen, and enters the time as he leaves for Berry Street. He pulls out of the parking lot of the Heritage Diner on River Street in Hackensack, New Jersey. The diner is three blocks from the Bergen County Jail Annex, nine blocks from both Main Street and the downtown district. He is on his way to the home of the big blonde Swedish kid, as George thinks of him. The kid usually leaves for work between 7:35 and 7:55, sometimes stopping for breakfast at Bobby’s Deli or McDonald’s, occasionally carrying what looks like a bagged lunch, perhaps made for him by his mother, who he lives with. The girlfriend, who George hasn’t seen him with that often, does not sleep over. The Swede is employed in the men’s clothing department at
the old Sears and Roebuck building on Essex Street. There aren’t many free-standing
department stores left in this part of NJ, so close to Paramus and all its malls. Nothing
shady seems to be going on at Sears, where it is easy for George to blend in as a browsing
customer, to stake out his subject’s place of business and observe the actions of this
young man who works in retail. It doesn’t appear that he is doing anything suspicious in
the break room or the bathroom either; George has checked both places numerous times,
usually not long after the subject’s departure. After following the kid home and lingering
outside the Berry Street residence for an hour or so, George decides to call it a day. He
drives to Penn Station in Newark, to take pictures for the contest, but also to do some
reconnaissance of his own.

Wednesday, 11:00pm

“Claire. Hey, Claire!” yells Max, Claire’s boss and the owner of the Heritage
Diner, as the car pulls out of the lot. The pale blue Honda, which Claire sometimes
borrows from her boyfriend, drives off.

After returning to the warmth of his diner, Max hands a rubber-banded wad of
money to his wife, Mrs. Calliope Hirsch. “You’re here earlier than me tomorrow,” he
says. “Make sure Claire gets this in the morning. And ask her what the hell that nonsense
was, leaving early without even asking.”

“I hope everything’s alright. She looked terrified. Like she just got bad news.
Maybe a phone call or something. She might come back tonight. Should I call her? We
have her number, don’t we?”
“It’s not like Claire to run out like that, and without even an explanation. An hour into her shift only. She’s never done anything like this before, the most reliable waitress we have. Now this? It must’ve been serious, that’s her tip money. Left it on the old sink outside my office. Looks like she had a pretty good day, too.”

Calliope tucks the wad of cash away. “OK, Maxy.” The way she says it sounds like ‘moxie’. Her husband is forty-five years old and looks his age. “That reminds me,” she continues, “I have a girl coming in to interview for the waitress job in the morning.”

“Right. Unless she just seems terrible, hire her please. We need the help on the weekends and at night. I don’t like to see you having to assist the girls the way you’ve been doing lately. You should be able to relax while you’re here, not be on your feet all day and night.”

While retrieving the money, the middle-aged proprietor did not see the dining check lying on the floor underneath the sink, probably carried there by the breeze of a passing body. On the back of the check, torn from Claire’s pad, stained with what looks like grease and ketchup, is a note. It reads as follows:

Dear Mr. or Mrs. Hirsch,

I wanted to leave this in the office but it was locked and I must leave in a hurry. I apologize for the manner of my departure but please distribute this between Sissy, Bridget and Lauren. Tell them I enjoyed working with them and that they were always kind to me. As were you both. I’m sorry, again, to have to tender my resignation in such a non-personal manner, without any notice. Best wishes and good luck to you all.

Sincerely,

Claire Belle

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The note is face down on the cold grey floor. Before midnight, Eddie the busboy/janitor will sweep it into a dustpan and deposit it in the trash. The following morning, the morning the Russian girl will make the discovery, is garbage day on that side of Hackensack, the county seat of Bergen County, New Jersey. Claire’s note is well on its way to a landfill before the detectives get around to sifting through the diner’s trash early Thursday afternoon. After making their statements in an empty diner, around midday, when the lunch crowd would normally be swelling, Max and Calliope decide to give the wad of money to their nine year-old niece, Conchetta. Max was never one to go out of his way to cooperate with the police, especially regarding the investigation of a former employee, and a good one at that. The money, he feels, is none of their business.

The gift is a small generosity, given to the daughter of Max’s youngest brother, Abel. Calliope cannot have children and Conchetta, who everyone besides Max and Calliope calls Connie, is their favorite, for those most traditional of reasons – because she is the youngest and the cutest.

Connie is surprised, and very grateful for the present. Nine year-old children do not often receive gifts of cash, rolled tightly in a wad and fastened with a rubber band. She thanks her auntie and uncle and gives them each a hug. This gesture makes both Max and Calliope aware of their own individual loneliness.

For Max, it is the loneliness of a virile man who, due to a resolute sense of loyalty to his wife, has never mentioned adoption or sought other means of baring children, who often takes his wife’s hand and tells her not to blame herself; who insists on leaving the room if she is going to cry. He has vowed to always be there for her, to support her, until death parts them, but he cannot watch her cry. For that he does not have the stomach.
For Calliope, it is the loneliness of a barren womb, an empty house. A maternal pulse throbs in her right breast like another heart whenever she thinks about children, and how much she wishes she could bear one of her own. These palpitations, these inexplicable poundings in her chest, always conclude with a brief episode of crying which contorts her face and convulses her body. Calliope is a young-looking thirty-nine, yet she has never seen in Max any jealousy or fear of infidelity. She feels that he enjoys walking down the street with her, hand in hand, that he likes being seen in public with her, not because she’s some sort of trophy wife, but out of legitimate pride. And she enjoys the walks as well. She notices the gazes of other men, but never responds with so much as a half-smile or an extended second of eye contact. She is too busy imagining a tiny set of hands linking her and Max at waist-level. A small body walking through town with them, perhaps on their way to look at the Christmas display at Sears, or to the Memorial Day Carnival behind Saint Mark’s Church, or trick or treating on Halloween, dressed as a princess or a superhero.

“Put it in your piggy bank,” is Max’s advice to Conchetta as he crouches down to her height. She can smell cinnamon on his breath. To Connie, that cinnamon scent is one of her uncle’s defining features, but it is hardly ever noticed or commented on by adults.

“Buy something nice,” Calliope says as she reaches out a hand and tousles her niece’s hair. “Some dolls or toys, whatever you want. Just don’t waste it all on one thing. Make it last.”

“How much did you give her?” Calliope asks her husband, after the child is out of earshot.
“Not my business to look at Claire’s tips. It felt like about a hundred or so, assuming there was a twenty and maybe some tens or fives under the singles.”

Calliope is relieved to be away from the diner, the questions, the traumatized new waitress. “A hundred dollars.” She exhales sharply. “That’s a lot of money for a little girl nine years old.”

“Hey, after what happened at the diner tonight…” says Max. His thought tapers off unfinished.

In her room, Conchetta slips off the rubber band and unrolls the money. The bills on the outside are singles, but inside are several hundreds, ten to be exact, along with a fifty and two twenties: $1,094 total. She doesn’t tell her parents, Abel and Marlena. She doesn’t tell uncle Max and auntie Calliope. She tells only her best friend, Hanan.

Max worries about his niece’s nearly constant companion because she is an Indian girl whose family then migrated to Jordan before moving to the United States. He once told his brother Abel, “There will be talk, your daughter being friends with one of those people. Myself, I don’t care where a person comes from, but you know how people are, with terrorists and all that going on. They are very close-minded, prejudiced.”

“They get along fine,” said Abel’s wife Marlena. “That’s all I care about. She only lived in the Middle East a short time. Her father is from Jordan and a Christian. Her mother is from India. And I bet if anybody ever said anything to Hanan, Connie would stand up for her.”

Max and Abel muttered and shrugged their assent.

“Besides, who cares what other people think?” said Marlena.

‘Hanan’, in Arabic, means mercy. In Hindi, it means murder.

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Wednesday, 6:51pm

George Tennant steps out of his van and trundles toward the East entrance to Newark Penn Station. He runs a hand through his prematurely greying hair and heads to the main lobby. There, he looks up at the big round clock, staring down at him like the single eye of a cyclopean god, the god of time, the god of the trains. A god rooted in Americana, in an era when the country relied on the railroads in ways it no longer does. Here, insulated from the outside world, the commuters still wear suits, though the material is lighter, no one wears hats to work anymore, and there are more women, of course, imitating the behavior of the corporate males. People glance at their watches and amble about, half-reading their newspapers and magazines, buying their round-trip tickets, their pre-work coffees, their post-work beers. A rarely acknowledged maintenance man sweeps dust and debris into a corner with a pushbroom. George buys himself a bottle of Snapple, his favorite brand of iced tea. He cracks his neck and back and knees. He thinks of himself as an old twenty-nine.

The train is supposed to arrive at 6:50pm, and it is just about right on time, as usual. It runs on the Northeast Corridor. George puts on his New York Yankees baseball cap and pulls it down low, adjusting his camera as he waits at the bottom of the marble and stone staircase that leads up to Line 7. This is where Melissa Dubchek transfers from the New York-Newark train to the Newark-Princeton. George wonders what she will be wearing today. Last Wednesday she wore a pink sweater, a garment not previously observed, though it did not look new. The Wednesday before that it was the Gucci pantsuit, a weekly favorite. George has taken copious notes chronicling her daily attire. In
two days it will be Friday again. Fridays mean casual dress, and in the summer they brought the possibility of cleavage or stockingless legs. But George prefers the winter, likes things left to the imagination a bit. He admires the brevity of a wool hat, the glamour of a purple scarf, the aristocracy of a pea coat.

Awaiting Melissa’s arrival, George notices a woman who reminds him of his girlfriend, Kate. A squat, muscular girl with very short blonde hair and a prominent jaw. Probably a swimmer, he thinks, just like Kate. Melissa is Kate’s best friend.

Kate Abernethy lives in Princeton, New Jersey four months a year, during her summer and winter breaks. During the school year she attends West Virginia University. She swims competitively and is in the final year of a five-year program in Elementary Education that culminates in both a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree. Her apartment in trendy Palmer Square in Princeton is a fifteen-foot cube with a Murphy Bed and a tiny adjoining bathroom. It is similar in size to her dorm-like college apartment in Morgantown, but much more expensive. The cost derives from location. Palmer Square is a thriving cultural center, teeming with independent film theaters, privately owned ice cream shops and pancake houses, and benefiting from the looming presence of adjacent Princeton University, which at this time of year spews forth an eruption of sweater-clothed young intellectuals and culturalites who descend on local cafes and bookstores as the second half of the semester begins, yearning to be seen walking briskly across campus talking with one of Princeton’s many famous professors of note — a Toni Morrison, a John Nash. Kate’s stay in New Jersey this winter is scheduled to end on Saturday afternoon, when she will drive back down to West Virginia.
George Tennant snaps his photos. Black New Jersey Devils sweatshirt, hair tied into a ponytail with a red scrunchy, headphones, swooshie pants and running shoes. Must have changed at the office, to make the train ride more comfortable, George muses, the removal of heels and skirts and blouses, the corporate uniform. Melissa changed gyms a few months back, in September. He is not being paid to track Melissa, and George knows what he’s doing is categorizable as stalking, but all he keeps thinking of are Beatles lyrics. ‘Love love love. All you need is love. Love is all you need.’ He takes care to remain unnoticed by Melissa not because he fears being caught, but because he doesn’t want to scare her. The legal or ethical ramifications of his habit are irrelevant, his attitude is a completely altruistic one – people get scared if they think they’re being followed or watched. He doesn’t want to frighten this woman he desires, so he makes sure he is unobserved as he spends another evening staking out Melissa Dubchek on her way home from work.

Thursday 11:01am

John Abernethy is sixty-six years old. Kate is the youngest of his five children. Her three older sisters are all married, with kids of their own. Kate is the cool young aunt. Jeremy, her older brother, and closest sibling in age, was last known to be living in Oregon. He refuses to communicate with the family. Kate last spoke with him two years ago, as he was endeavoring to kick whatever addiction he had going that month. The rest of her family had written him off as the unsavable, drug-addled black sheep a long time ago, but Kate persisted in writing letters and emails, and made phone calls when she
knew of a number where he could be reached. After he entered the Hooper Detox Center in Portland, they talked once a week, for a month. Four times in thirty days. Four weeks straight. The fifth week, no call. Then, week six, after phoning Hooper and being informed that Jeremy was no longer a patient there, he called. He said he needed to confess something to her. He apologized to Kate for molesting her as a child. Kate does not remember the events he described. They did not happen to her. She wonders if it was a drug-altered memory of something he had done to some other girl, or whether the entire thing was a hallucinated confession for an act he never committed. He told her she was ten when it happened. Ten. Kate would have remembered that. He described her bedroom and what she had been wearing, and his descriptions were accurate: four-poster canopy bed, hutch full of stuffed animals, Philadelphia Phillies t-shirt and a pair of turquoise pajama pants. But it had never happened. He never fondled her, never showed her his penis. She certainly never touched it. Was it all just a fantasy he never lived out?

Something he had wanted to do to Kate but never did? She tried to convince him that he hadn’t done such things, but he started crying, and hung up the phone. She believes he committed suicide, but every now and then she searches for him on the internet. He was once a big music fan and often posted reviews of concerts on various websites. For two years now, Kate Abernethy has had no luck finding her older brother.

Kate sits with her father in the house she grew up in, a house empty of children now, and lacking the presence of John’s wife, Kate’s mother, who died four years ago from breast cancer. It is a house he refuses to give up, consistently repeating that he does not want to sell it and move to a smaller place. Ever since the stroke, which he is recovering from quite well, he is attended by a nurse a few times a month, and Kate’s
older sisters drop by often with his grandchildren to keep John company. This day, Kate asks him about her brother, his only son, as she sits on the couch in the living room, her father in a recliner with a blanket around him. He gets cold these days, it's the one thing he blames on the stroke. “Just can’t keep my extremities warm,” he gripes. John rises up a bit in his chair and looks at her hard, comprehending. This will be a ‘serious’ discussion.

“Jeremy,” he says, clearing his throat. “Jeremy was always trouble. You know that, Darlin’.”

Darlin’ is his pet name for Kate. Her older sisters are Bon-Bon, Tuffy, and The Comedian. Jeremy never had a pet name.

“Yeah, I know, but he was a good person,” says Kate. “He was always nice to me. He wanted to be a musician.”

“That goddamned guitar his mother bought him. I told her piano lessons. ‘Piano lessons, that’s the way to go,’ I said.” He coughs. “‘That’s the way to instill some discipline.’” His face is fierce, concentrated in his memory of a disagreement involving two members of his family who are no longer with him.

“You think it was because you weren’t strict enough with him?” Kate asks, implying through her tone that she doesn’t think that was it at all.

“I think we got spoiled.” He spits the words. “Your mother and I. Three daughters before him and you not long after. We forgot how to raise a boy. Hell, I don’t think we ever knew. Times were changing. When I was young, boys went in the service, all boys. Into the Army. Marines if you thought you were something special, a real gung ho type. But everything’s a mess now. Not just with boys. Everything.”
Kate leans over the edge of the sofa, reaching out to her father, and takes his hand. It is thin but hard, not the way it was in the hospital after the stroke, cool and limp. “It’s not your fault,” she says. “Sometimes kids just turn out how they turn out and it has nothing to do with how they were raised.”

A tear falls from her father’s eye. He lets go of her hand to wipe it away. “We didn’t know how to do it. Maybe I shoulda stayed at work longer before I retired. I was too young. Thought that was the greatest thing about being a cop, retire at fifty-five; thought I was gonna start up a tackle shop in the storefront over on the square, by where your apartment is now. But I never got it going. I was sitting around the house, like an old man, and Jeremy was still young, just starting high school I remember. That wasn’t good for him to see, me hanging about. Maybe if his mother raised him by herself, without me around…” He looks to his daughter, waiting for her to disagree, to tell him that he’s wrong.

She complies. “Oh, come on dad, don’t be silly. That had nothing to do with it. You still worked the security desk at the university a couple days a week, Tuesdays and Thursdays, I remember. And you always fished on Wednesdays with Mister Wilhelm, as far back as I can remember. Jeremy’s only six years older than me. I was in the same situation. And I think I’m doing OK, in life and all.”

The man under the blanket sniffs. “Bring me the Kleenex, Darlin’, would’ya please?”

Kate brings her father the box of tissues. She has an impulse to pull one out and dab his face, but she knows he is far too proud for that. His hand shakes the slightest bit as he raises it out from under the blanket. This is the first time Kate has seen him cry.
since her mother’s funeral. She looks down at her father, he smiles up at her. It is a strange sensation. This is how she looks at her nieces and nephews, watching them in their cribs and playpens. Small and silent, but with a clarity of expression in their face, a calm defiance. Her father is calm as well. Kate remembers his anger, at the doctors, at everyone, at god, for taking his wife away. She wonders if he still has that fury left in him. She steps back and is about to return to her seat on the couch when he speaks.

“I love you so much, Darlin’. But I wish you wouldn’t cut your hair so short. Women should have long hair.”

She is about to reply, to joke about her short hair, to say something about Jeremy, something stupid about her haircut as a way of trying to be the good son he couldn’t have. But her father’s mind has already drifted in that direction. His body is fixed and motionless, his tone of voice is one of complete resignation. “Your brother was unlucky. I knew it from the start. An unlucky child. An unlucky man.”

Thursday, 8:56am

Connie and Hanan linger behind the candy and cigarettes counter near the entrance, temporarily presiding over the register at the Heritage Diner. School is on ‘teacher’s holiday’ week and the diner makes a good babysitter for the children. Calliope is in back, in the office, interviewing a potential waitress in accordance with Max’s dictum that they need another girl for the busy shifts, though now she is concerned that they might also have to replace Claire, who didn’t come back last night and hasn’t shown up this morning to retrieve her tip money.
Two police officers, young detectives who come in often, approach the register. Hanan goes to retrieve Calliope. If a customer comes up to pay their check while Connie’s aunt is doing the interview and none of the waitresses are nearby, the children have been told to run and get her.

One of the men places their check on the counter along with a twenty. The other addresses Connie. “Making sure everybody pays their bill?”

“Yes.”

“Are you doing a good job?”

Connie gives them a bored child’s nod. Calliope trots over, collects the money, files away the check, and gives the officers their change.

“And a pack of Marlboros,” says the detective. “Lights.”

“Smoking is bad for you,” says Connie, after hopping off her stool.

“Yeah, I know,” the man says with embarrassment. His partner laughs. “My wife is trying to get me to quit.”

Connie nods her head. “She probably wants you to smell better.”

The second officer laughs again. The first smiles meekly.

“Stop it now, Conchetta, these are fine young boys, they don’t need to be harassed by you. Thanks as always for coming in.” Calliope smiles, hands them the readjusted amount of change and the pack of cigarettes. They nod their goodbyes and exit the diner.

“Where’s Hanan?” she asks her niece.

“I don’t know. The bathroom, I think.”

“I’m almost done with this interview, I’ll be back in a couple of minutes. Try to get one of the waitresses if someone else comes up.”
"I can do it."

"You can do it?"

"I can count money. So can Hanan. She’ll double-check me."

"I know, honey, I know you could do it, but I think the customers feel a little more comfortable if it’s an adult."

Connie puts on a frown.

"Sorry sweetheart, maybe when you’re a little older."

A pair of customers walk in together, commandeering Calliope’s attention.

"Smoking or non?" she asks them.

"Smoking."

Connie hands her aunt two menus from behind the register and Mrs. Hirsch leads the couple to a booth.

Hanan returns. "There’s blood in the bathroom," she says.

"What kind of blood?" Connie asks her friend.

Hanan shrugs.

The waitress who was being interviewed, a tall, angular Russian girl with black hair and blue eyes, leans her head out the kitchen doors, making sure she hasn’t been forgotten about. Calliope jogs over to her. "Sorry about that. See how busy it gets here? And this is an off hour, tail end of the breakfast crowd. You should see it between six-thirty and eight."

"Yes. May I use the ladies room?"

"Sure. It’s right down there," Calliope points. "We’re almost done with the interview anyway. I think you’re looking pretty good for the position."
The waitress smiles, the smile of someone who needs a job and is about to get one.

Calliope returns to the register. Connie is back up on the stool, drawing in a notebook with a black-marbled cover, her name printed in capital letters in the white box in the center. Hanan is crouching next to her, straightening the candy on the top shelf of the display case. “You need some more Junior Mints, Mrs. Hirsch.”

Connie closes her notebook and places it on top of the menus. “Can we get them from the storeroom?” she asks, eyes wide with glee. The storeroom contains the cases of candy from the wholesale warehouse, paradise to a nine-year-old.

“OK, go ahead, but don’t open a whole new case unless you have to. Try to find an already opened one and bring two cartons.”

As Connie and Hanan scamper toward the storeroom, a loud scream comes from the direction of the bathrooms. Everyone in the diner stops what they’re doing, even the two girls in mid-run, on their way to candy heaven. All heads turn toward the source of the scream.

The door to the bathrooms slams open. The Russian girl rushes out and runs over to Calliope, slamming her arms across the older woman’s back in a hug. Her weight pushes Mrs. Hirsch against the register counter.

“My god, what is it?”

The Russian girl is weeping. “It’s dead,” she whispers into Calliope’s ear.

_Thursday, 2:00pm_
"The newborn was found in the ceiling. Skull caved in. Probably struck in the head with a blunt object."

"Or slammed against a wall."

"Possibly."

"It's a hell of a thing."

"It's an awful thing."

"What made her look up there?"

"Blood. I guess after being up there all night it soaked through the apron and then through the ceiling. The little Indian girl saw the bloodstain above the stall. There were a few drops dried on the floor as well. We're trying to get a hold of the overnight waitresses and the janitor guy, see if they noticed anything. The Indian girl then told her friend, it's all in my notes. Mrs. Hirsch was in back doing an interview. The woman she was interviewing for the waitress spot went in to use the bathroom. She saw the same thing as the kid, so she pushed open the drop ceiling, and found it."

"Why'd she go through all the effort of standing on the toilet and removing the ceiling tile?"

"Curiosity, I guess. Wanted to know why the place she was planning on working at had fresh blood stains on the ceiling in the women's room."

"Just curiosity?"

"She's got a clean record. Not acquainted with the mother. She's only been in the country a couple of years. Has all her paperwork. Application for citizenship's pending."

"How 'bout the father? Any chance the Russian girl might be acquainted there?"
“Eh, it’s possible. But I don’t think anybody sent her there. She was scared when I talked to her. Terrified. What she saw she wasn’t expecting.”

“Imagine that, seeing a bloody fucking mess wrapped up like that. Then you unwrap the apron and you find a fucking-”

“Exactly. She’s not involved.”

“Just unlucky, huh? In the wrong ladies room at the wrong time?”

“Yep.”

“You’re sure? The Russian broad isn’t maybe another girlfriend the guy keeps on the side or something? We still don’t know shit about the father, right? Miss Belle kept that hidden, too?”

“Yeah. And I don’t think they’re necessarily a couple, Belle and the father. He could be some guy she banged one night and never saw again. That’s my hypothesis for now. Though I reserve the right to change my mind if more evidence appears.”

“No one noticed she was preggo, huh? How the fuck do these people not notice?”

“Baggy polyester, white and black clothes, apron. Gertrude was six months in before she showed at all. Even at the end, she still wasn’t all that big.”

“How is ol’ Trudy these days?”

“Hey man, watch it. It’s not my fault my wife’s got an old lady’s name.”

“By the way, that girl was funny last night, about your cigarettes. What was she doing there in the morning though? Ain’t these kids supposed to be in school?”

“Spoken like a man without children. It’s teacher’s week. Winter recess or something like that. Hackensack grammar schools don’t get a Spring Break, they get their week off in February.”
“Crazy how it went down, the Heritage of all places. That girl though, she had your number, man. She-”

“I know already. You’re talking more about last night than the case today.”

“Hey, she was funny. She was all over your ass. Who wants to talk about dead babies? Anyway, so you gonna take Gertrude’s advice, try to quit again?”

“Not now. Not with this case.”

“Alright man, let’s wrap this up, I’m fuckin’ hungry.”

“Can’t hit the Heritage.”

“It won’t stay a crime scene forever. I wonder, you think this’ll hurt their business at all? It’ll be in the news.”

“Nah. They’ve got good food, reliable service, a great location, that’s all people care about in a diner. Anyway, let’s finish this. The weight of the corpse was...”

“Six pounds, seven ounces.”

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_thursday, 5:46pm_

Claire Belle is scared. She looks at the big, boyish, blonde man lying on the bed. The child had, she remembers, a flash image in a black void of non-recall, the faintest covering of white-blonde hair on its miniature blood-covered scalp. She remembers nothing else about it. She looks away from its father, out the window. A nice fall day.

“What are you thinking?” she asks.

“Nothing. What is there to think?” The father’s name is Nick Sorengren.

“Should we be staying here?”

“It’s as good as anywhere else,” he says. “I’m comfortable here. I know it. Here.”
“Don’t you think they’ll come looking for us?”

He sits up and sighs. “I don’t know. Did you tell anyone about me?”

She sits down next to him on the bed. “No.”

He takes her hand in his. “And no one knew you were pregnant?”

“No. I…” Her hand is clammy, cold.

He rubs it, trying to warm her up. “I don’t think you’re OK,” he says. “You sure you feel alright?”

She says nothing.

“Women lose a lot of blood giving birth, I think. Maybe that’s why you’re so cold?”

Still nothing. She is staring out the window, thinking about how it looks like such a beautiful day. A perfect day for a walk in the park with a husband and a stroller. A day for smiling young mothers.

“Are you depressed?” he asks.

She shakes her head.

“Because that’s a common thing too. Post-partum depression. I saw a special about it on HBO one night. And there’s this other disease, something by-proxy, where women kill their babies—”

She stands up and leaves the room without closing the door behind her.

Hearing her descend the stairs, Nick rises and exits his bedroom. “Claire?” He steps out to the second floor landing and peers over the banister. Claire is talking with his mother; apparently they did not hear her come home.

“Are you sure?” Nick hears his mother ask Claire. “You look a little pale.”
“Yeah. I’ve just got a headache. Good night, Mrs. Sorengren,” says Claire. She heads out the front door.

Her response to one of Nick’s questions was a lie. She did tell someone about him. There was a little girl who often hung around the diner, a relative of the owner, Mr. Hirsch. As Claire sat cramping up on her break one day, she distracted herself by drawing with some of the child’s colored pencils. She was sitting on a stack of boxes in the storeroom, where she ate her lunch on days when she wanted to be alone, to think, to not have to talk to the other waitresses or Calliope.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said to the child, who came in running an errand for her uncle. “Are these yours?” Claire grabbed a fistful of pencils and some sheets of papers and held them out to the girl.

Conchetta waved her hand. “It’s OK, you can use them.” Claire put the items down. Connie sidled over and peered at Claire’s sketch. “What are you drawing?”

“It’s a picture of my...my boyfriend. Nick.”

“He’s handsome.”

“You think?” Claire smiled, warmed ever so briefly by the girl’s compliment. “The way you draw him he looks handsome.”

“He is. He’s very pretty. Very pretty.”

“Boys can be pretty?”

There was a faraway look in Claire’s eyes that only an adult would notice. She wanted to give little Connie a hug, but could not muster up the courage. A pain twinged in her side and she stood up, drawing in hand. She felt a kick inside her belly as she
gently folded the paper in half and tucked it inside her apron. “That’s just the word I use when I think about him.”

“Oh.” Connie put on a puzzled face, a child expecting an adult to continue, to elaborate and explain, to enhance their knowledge of the world. If Claire noticed the girl’s expression, she did not interpret it as the inquisitive gesture it was.

Thursday, 6:59pm

As George lowers his camera, panic-induced adrenaline floods his system. Melissa is looking right at him. He scolds himself internally for forgetting his Yankees cap and in his alarmed state he almost drops the camera, fumbling it in his hands and scrambling to catch it before it hits the floor. Melissa strides toward him in her black leather boots and tartan skirt, the beautiful limbs he admired from a distance now marching his way with far too much purpose. He has been recognized.

He turns and moves down the stairs, trying to lose himself in a crowd, making his way into the main lobby. Behind him, the pace of Melissa’s gait increases. He is walking quickly but not running, he does not want to attract attention. In his attempt to appear nonchalant, he refuses to look back, and cannot notice that Melissa is gaining ground. He is almost to the exit, but as he reaches out to push open the door, Melissa’s extended finger falls on his shoulder like a needle on a record.

“Hey,” she says.

He turns around to face her.

“George. What’s up?”

“Oh, hi Melissa.”
“Didn’t you see me up on the platform?”

“Um, no, I guess not.”

She points to the camera, still clutched in his hands. “What were you taking pictures of?”

George looks down, turning the camera around in his hands. “Just, you know, of the architecture and stuff.” His response is not a complete lie, though he omits the fact that he was also staking her out, that he does so five days a week, and has been at it for close to six months now. “That’s the oldest platform in the station, Number Seven on the Northeast Corridor. I think it looks particularly interesting at rush hour, with all the people streaming through. It’s stupid, but I was, well, I do some amateur photography. I try to sell stuff once in a while, and there’s also this magazine that’s running a contest—”

“Oh yeah, Popular Photography, right? The architecture of public places of transit. I’m a bit of an amateur photog myself. Kate should’ve told me you were into photography.”

George’s hands steady, he drapes the camera strap back around his neck, straightens his shoulders, and looks at her. Her face is perfectly symmetrical. A small round head, cute nose, delicate chin. Strands of long, light brown hair drape the sides of her face, sticking out from a jaunty pink wool hat. She looks like a J. Crew model. The cover model.

“I usually transfer to the Princeton train right around now,” she continues.

“Oh, on your way home from work?”

“Yeah. Today was a killer. How was your day?”

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That was so nice of her to inquire, he thinks. No one ever asks me about my day.

“That week it’s mornings. They’re getting brutal. Waking up at five a.m. Sometimes a little earlier even. It’s frigid out, hard to leave that bed. I look out the window and there’s nothing out there but silence; cold, dark and damp.”

“Sounds rough. At least you get done early, though. That must give you some time to work on your artistic pursuits.”

“True.”

“That’s a beautiful camera, too. Way better than mine.”

“Thanks.”

“What exactly do you do again? As your job?”

“Well, I sorta work for this guy, he’s like what most people would call a private-”

A commuter walks in between them as another trainload of people scurries past, out into the world.

“Hey, let’s go somewhere and talk,” says Melissa. “I could use a drink. You want to join me? I mean, if you’re not busy. I’d rather take the later train anyway. It’s less crowded and it’s an express.”

George feels his heartbeat quicken. He never believed that actually happened. He figured it was just a shorthand people use for getting nervous and excited. His body temperature rises. He feels warm, sweaty. Unconsciously, he raises a wrist to his forehead and wipes across it. “OK, sure, I’m up for a drink.”

They walk in the direction of Passengers, the in-station bar and restaurant. “It’s so funny running into you,” says Melissa.

“Small world.” Yeah, real original line, George thinks.
Melissa laughs. "Small world indeed."

George smiles. Not a goofy one either, he thinks, proud of himself. Just enough to show that I’m laughing with her, that I’m self-assured, a laid back guy.

“Well, it was lucky I caught you. You sure you’re not busy? It looked like you were leaving in kind of a hurry."

“I was just trying to beat the rush.”

Melissa nods and smiles. “It’ll be so funny when I tell Kate I bumped into you here. I really do need a drink today. But I could never go to a bar alone, like some alcoholic loser.”

“Yeah, I know, I don’t like drinking alone either.”

“In the summer, me and Kate would go out for drinks sometimes, in Princeton, after I got home from work. But by that point it wasn’t really a relief anymore. My body had already absorbed all the stress during the train ride. This’ll be fun.”

George doesn’t think he’s any good at talking to attractive women, at crafting witty repartee, so he remains silent, trying to look cool and confident.

“What’s your poison, George?” she asks as they enter the bar.

“Mixed drinks usually. You know, gin and tonic, Scotch and soda, maybe a rum and Coke if I want something sweet.”

“Awesome. I like liquor, too. Vodka’s my favorite. Kate always drinks wine. I drink it too, even though I don’t really like wine. I feel obligated for some reason. You know how Kate is.”

“Sure,” says George, anxious to agree with her.
Melissa pulls off her wool cap, hair cascading onto her shoulders like a shampoo commercial. "She can make you feel obligated."

Friday, 12:06pm

"We took him in for questioning maybe two, two and a half hours ago."

"That's him? The brawny-looking blonde guy in Room Three?"

"That's him."

"So, what do you think?"

"I think I was wrong; they were a couple, or are a couple, something like that. Not just some guy she banged."

"He spilled his guts?"

"I would say that's a pretty accurate description. Cried his eyes out."

"His baby?"

"Looks that way."

"How'd we find him?"

"Just showed up."

"He came to us?"

"Yep. He works at the old Sears. Said he was sitting there at work, folding shirts and packing out jeans and khakis, and he was just all of a sudden moved to turn himself in, to let go of the secret."

"Guilt, I guess."
“Not really. He didn’t do anything wrong, except maybe knocking her up in the first place. I highly doubt that he put her up to it or had anything to do with it. He was sad.”

“That she murdered his fucking kid?”

“No, that would be angry. I said he was sad. Not an ounce of anger in him. He looked defeated, drained. His mom is coming to pick him up.”

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-one. Name’s Nick Sorengen. Lives at home, with the mother.”

“How’d he get here?”

“Said he walked. Mom has the car, and he was saying something about how some days he drives to work and others he walks.”

“Cold-ass morning to walk to work. Maybe that’s what got him thinking. What did he tell us about the girl?”

“Not much we didn’t already know. Said she was at his place yesterday. The mom saw her there too, she confirmed it over the phone. He’s worried about her, our Miss Claire Belle.”

“Worried how?”

“That she’s depressed, psychologically damaged. Thinks she might try to kill herself. He also thinks there might be some physical complications from the birth. She wouldn’t go to a hospital.”

“So where is she?”

“Her home address turned up nothing but a surprised old grandfather who she lives with and takes care of. Her parents are both dead, auto accident years ago, and
grandpa didn’t have any ideas for us. She doesn’t have close friends, it looks like. No extended family in the area. I told the grandfather that if she contacts him to call us right away. Said he would. Don’t really know where we go from here other than the routine. Keep an eye on the hospitals and women’s shelters, all that stuff.”

“Man, if I was her I’d be out of this state. Maybe headed into Upstate New York, toward Canada.”

“She’s not thinking that way. She doesn’t think of herself as a criminal trying to get away with something.”

“That’s how she should be thinking.”

“Nah, women aren’t like that. This is one of them hormone things. A chemical imbalance or whatever it’s called. No way she killed that baby because of any kind of malice.”

“What are you, kidding? Come on, man, you saw the corpse. It takes something more than an imbalance to beat in a little baby’s head like that. That’s one fucking cold, sick woman.”

“You’re not married. And you don’t have kids.”

“Don’t give me that crap. A woman who—”

“As a married man, with a wife who’s had two of ‘em, let me just tell you – women are different. Especially when it comes to having children. It changes them. Not that having kids didn’t change me. But it changes them more. Trust me.”

“Liberal horseshit, but fine, I respect the fact that you’re speaking from a position of experience and I ain’t. But still—”

“Shit.”
“What’s a matter?”

“I think big blonde boy’s mother just came in.”

“Put on the happy face, eh?”

“You got it.”

“OK then, let’s do this.”

“Hello Mrs. Sorengren, we spoke on the phone. This is my partner.”

“Thanks for coming in, ma’am.”

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Friday, 7:04 pm

Kate Abernethy and Melissa Dubchek sit across from each other in a booth at the Heritage Diner. A waitress takes their orders and heads back to the kitchen.

“Is she gothy or just really pale?” asks Melissa.

“I think just pale. She looks Russian. Pretty eyes.”

“I thought Russians were blondes. Like you but with longer hair.” Melissa grins.

“Very funny. At least mine is naturally blonde.”

Melissa pushes her hair back off her shoulders. “It’s just lightened a bit, highlighted. A sassy little number, still more brown than blonde though. You know me, what it looks like without anything.”

“Mouse brown.”

“Exactly.”

Kate sips at her orange juice. “Maybe you should just be yourself; you know, be mousy.”

“Better the mouse than the elephant.”
Kate is speechless, thinking for a second that the remark is about her size, her broad shoulders and muscular physique. But after a second look at Melissa, she can tell her friend had no such intent. “Anyway, tonight better be good. This was a hike for me.”

“Hey, I had to get here too.” Melissa is also drinking orange juice, but hers is mixed with Absolut vodka.

“You got off the train at wherever we are, Hackensack, instead of Newark. I drove all the way up from Princeton.”

“I don’t control where they hold the concerts.”

“Where are we going again?” Kate asks.

“Roseland. Fifty-second Street or something.”

“Then why are we at this place, instead of in The City?”

“I figured we should eat before the show. We’ve got time. I’m always eating in The City, and it’s usually overpriced and pretentious. Plus I’ve heard from a few different people that this is like one of the best diners in North Jersey. How come you aren’t drinking?” Melissa asks.

Kate takes another sip of her OJ. “What do you call that?”

“You know what I mean. Why on the wagon?”

“I don’t want to be hungover when I drive six hours back to West Virginia tomorrow.”

“Fine.” Melissa finishes her drink and peers inside the empty glass. “So you’re not gonna have anything to drink all night?”

“Is it really such a big deal?”

“Excuse me for wanting you to have fun.”
"I don’t need to drink to have fun. I just want to listen to some music and-"

"I don’t need to drink to have fun, either. It’s a choice. I want to, OK?"

"OK."

Kate can be so lame sometimes, thinks Melissa. "Well, it’s not a lot of fun drinking alone. I know how you are. You’re gonna be all in your own world, doing your little hippie dance, oblivious to anything going on around you."

"So?"

"So I like to meet people sometimes."

"You mean you like attention," Kate mutters.

"No, I mean just what I said. I like meeting people."

"You like meeting guys. You want to get drunk and dance with hot guys."

"And? So what if guys come up to me and I like that sometimes?" Melissa catches their waitress’s eye and holds her empty glass aloft.

"Vodka in orange juice, right ma’am?" the waitress asks.

Melissa nods enthusiastically. "Well?" She thinks of George, how much fun they had hanging out together the other night, and how she hasn’t told Kate about it. She also thinks about how guys don’t often come up to Kate. Not because she’s particularly unattractive, but because Kate is too aloof, too muscular, too much like a lesbian.

"There’s nothing wrong with it. I get tired of being ignored, though."

"I do not ignore you. How long have we known each other? Have I ever not introduced you to people? Don’t I always say, ‘This is my friend Kate’?"

Kate’s hand squeezes into a fist. "By the guys. Ignored by the guys, Melissa. No one talks to me when we hang out together. That’s not just luck or coincidence. I’m the
pretty girl's chunky best friend. The wingman gets to distract me while his buddy is trying to get in your pants.”

Melissa does not respond immediately. She looks for the waitress with her screwdriver, but sees she is busy taking an order at another table. “You’re not chunky.”

“Whatever. Compared to you I am.”

Melissa grits her teeth. “You are not fat, Kate. Stop it,” she hisses. “Don’t say that about yourself. You’re pretty.” She knows this is a lie; Kate is not ugly or overweight, but that doesn’t mean she’s pretty. Melissa is relieved to see, peripherally, that their waitress is behind the counter mixing her drink. The hiss eases out of her voice. “Besides, if you’re so fat and I’m so pretty, how come you have the nice, handsome boyfriend and all I seem to do is work all day and commute on the trains and rub myself off in bed at night?”

Kate smiles, genuinely. “Oh stop, he’s not so great.”

“Not so great?” You’re not so great, thinks Melissa, be thankful for what you have. “He’s a total sweetheart. He’s cute, good sense of humor, personality. He’s older, mature, experienced probably, not that you tell me anything. He’s got that crazy, funny, spy-thing job. And he isn’t afraid to have a good time. I bet he’s a really fun guy to be with. I’m jealous.”

Instinctively, Kate does not believe this, but she wants to. She wants to believe that for once Melissa is jealous of her instead of the other way around. “When did you become such a George fan? I thought you always said he was sort of blah.”
Melissa’s drink arrives. “Thanks.” She peers past Kate’s head as she takes a sip. “Well, it’s funny actually, I forgot to tell you-” Melissa stops in mid-sentence and waves her free hand at a little girl sitting at the counter.

Kate turns around. “Oh, what a cutie. Hey there little girl.” She waves as well. The girl waves back to them, then returns to her artwork. In waving to Melissa and Kate, her colored pencil broke from the straight line she had been drawing. She hunches over her picture and scrubs at it with one of those oversized pink erasers that only children use.

Friday, 6:43pm

Claire leans against a pay phone outside a 7-11. She drinks her black coffee quickly, that slightly painful rush of hot liquid going down her throat, warming her belly. She pulls a bus transfer out of her pocket and laughs; she feels like she’s embroiled in the plot of a bad TV movie – baby killer on the run. The tears that well in her eyes are nothing new, they’ve been flowing pretty consistently since the morning after her episode in the bathroom. Claire walks over to the bus stop, under the arc-light. She stands there alone, in her baggy grey overcoat, clutching the crucifix that dangles from her neck. Her arms are huddled into her sides, hands locked together against her right breast. She is praying for guidance.

The bus arrives, the doors open. “Getting in, ma’am?” the driver calls down to her in a flat voice.

Claire looks up, drops her hands to her sides. “No. I got it wrong.”

“So long,” says the bus driver.
As she crosses the street to the other side, where a different bus will take her back in the direction from which she has come, Claire is at peace for the first time since the birth. Her prayer for guidance was a contemplation of circumstances, an assessment of guilt. She kisses the silver icon of Christ hanging from her necklace, knowing she is not guilty. She was sick, and she realizes this because she finally feels better.

Friday, 7:06pm

Calliope sits on the stool at the end of the counter reading aloud from the newspaper, scanning the text beneath a picture of Claire. "Whereabouts of mother still unknown. Turn to page C-8."

She flips the pages as Max listens. He notices one of the counter customers eavesdropping.

"The mother’s name is Claire Belle, age twenty-two. Recently employed at the Heritage Diner in-"

"It says our name?" Max shakes his head. "How can they do that? They did not ask my permission. I am the owner here. I should sue. It should just say: ‘employed at local diner’ or ‘waitress at an establishment in Hackensack’.”

"I don’t like it either, and I don’t think they needed to say that this was,” Calliope lowers her voice to a whisper, “where they found the body. But what do you expect?"

"I expect a little respect of privacy. She isn’t found guilty yet. It should not even say her name.”
Calliope continues. “Hackensack Police request that anyone with information regarding the whereabouts of Miss Belle please come forward as soon as possible. Here’s a picture. Look.” She turns back to the page with the picture and faces it toward Max.

It is a headshot of Claire, from her high school yearbook.

“Terrible photograph they chose,” says Max. “No wonder they can’t find her, she doesn’t look anything like that.”

“Yes, she’s too young in this picture. And her hair was short and dark when she worked here, not long and blonde. Oh, god.”

“What?” says Max, again noticing that the man at the counter is not attending to his chopped steak with onions, his fork resting on the plate as his body leans ever so slightly toward their end of the counter. Max doesn’t have the energy to stare the man’s attention away. The whole ordeal is wearing on him. His only source of income is getting bad publicity, and a former employee is wanted for murder.

“Infanticide, or filicide,” says Calliope, “is often the result of extreme post-partum depression. Purephrial Psychosis is a relatively rare form of post-partum illness that affects approximately one percent of all new mothers. Of those who suffer this psychosis, seventy percent have no history of mental illness. It is the most severe form of post-partum depression and can cause a break from reality in the mind of the new mother.”

“Then she was sick,” says Max, straightening his back and looking out over his diner. He notices that it is not even half full. “She is no murderer. Right? Right, Calliope?”

“I wouldn’t know,” says Calliope, thinking of her own lack of children, her non-motherhood.
“Alright, I’m going outside to see if I can fix the sign. Bridget said she noticed when she came in, the ‘I’ in Heritage is blinking on and off again. And I need some air anyway.”

“Be careful on that roof,” says Calliope. She folds the newspaper in half, tucks it under her arm and walks to the register counter where Connie is waving to two female customers, an attractive young woman and a short-haired tomboyish one. Calliope smiles at the little girl whom she loves so much and drops the newspaper in the small wastebasket behind the counter. Connie erases part of her drawing.

“Waving at the customers again, Conchetta?” She puts on a fake scowl and tickles the little girl’s rib cage. Connie squeals and doubles over.

“Careful you don’t fall,” says Calliope. “Your parents will have my head.”

Connie hops down from the stool and looks up at Calliope. “I’m getting too old for tickling, auntie.”

Calliope strokes her niece’s hair. “A child is never too old to be tickled.”

Friday, 7:14pm

“Hey, a little service here.” Abel good-naturedly slaps the register counter with his palm, breaking his daughter’s concentration. Connie looks up from her artwork.

“Hi, dad.” She immediately resumes drawing.

“They leave you up here all by yourself, sweetheart?”

Connie nods and remains focused on her work. Calliope waves from behind the dining counter. She refills a customer’s cup of coffee then walks over. “This is a surprise, Abel.”
“I expect my daughter to be paid if she’s going to be doing your dirty work for you.”

Calliope smiles at his sarcasm and gives him a hug. “What brings you here this evening?”

“Got out of work at a decent hour for a change. Marlena told me the little cashier here was at the diner, so I said we might as well come and pick her up. Grab something to eat while we’re here.”

“Oh, you’re eating, let me get you a table.”

“You haven’t been snacking on candy all day, have you?” Abel asks his daughter.

“No.”

“What’s that you’re drawing?”

“Table for three then,” says Calliope. “Or, wait, let me give you a booth?”

The front door opens. Marlena enters with Hanan.

“We’ve got four,” Abel says. “Figured we’d bring Hanan to keep the little artist company. How’s everything been since, you know, yesterday? I heard they wouldn’t let you reopen until six this morning.”

Calliope waves her hand, trying to forget it all. “We’re just trying to get back to the normal flow of things.”

Connie looks up from her nearly finished drawing. It’s a skillful piece of artwork for a girl her age – a sketch of the Heritage Diner, as seen from the outside.

“Hey, that’s pretty good, sweetheart,” Abel says, peering over the candy case.

“Looks just like this place.”

“Thanks. Hi Hanan.”
"Hi Connie."

"Getting bitter cold out there," says Marlena. She takes off her coat and folds it across her arm.

Hanan slides behind the counter and looks at Connie's drawing from the artist's perspective. "Miss Donnelly the art teacher always gives Connie compliments."


"It's not finished yet. I've got to put in the people. Me and Hanan and auntie. And the waitresses."

"Well, when you've got a finished product," says Marlena, "I'll put it up on the fridge. How's that sound?"

"Can I keep it in my room instead?"

"Sure, but don't you want it out where people can see it?"

"Not really."

Marlena smiles. "OK. Keep it to yourself. Whatever my daughter wants." She looks at Calliope. "How're you holding up with all this craziness with the waitress?"

Calliope puts on a smile as well, that feeling of regret throbbing in her right breast. "It was a shock, but I'm trying to move past it. So is Maxy. Anyway, let's sit you all down, get you fixed up in a corner booth with a lot of room. Pass me four menus, Conchetta."

Connie complies.

"Where'd you find a spot, honey?" Abel asks his wife.
“Oh, just across the street, on Summit. Didn’t want to take up room in the lot, I know Max and Calliope don’t have that many spaces. Wanted to leave those open for customers.”

“You didn’t have to do that. Besides, business has been slow all day. The lot hasn’t been nearly full. Hopefully it’ll pick up tonight, the post-midnight scene.” Calliope leads them to a corner booth knowing she won’t allow herself to be here for the overnight, the drunken Friday night patrons asking inappropriate questions and making crude jokes about what happened. She takes Marlena’s and Abel’s coats and drapes them over one arm as the family and Hanan file into a large semi-circular booth. Abel sits on the far left with Marlena next to him, then Connie, and Hanan at the other edge. “I’m helping out at the counter tonight,” Calliope continues. “Sissy called out, said she was sick, it’s Lauren’s day off, and Bridget’s already got a bunch of tables. So you’ll have the new girl, Kristina. She’s Russian, but her English is excellent and she’s only been in America two years. Beautiful girl.”

“Can you put my drawing somewhere, auntie?” asks Connie. “It’s not done yet, and I don’t want to get food on it.”

“Sure.” She gently takes the child’s drawing in her free hand. “Anything for my favorite niece. I’ll put it in Maxy’s office.”

“Thank you.”

An elderly couple at a nearby table stares at the people in the booth, mostly at Hanan, who tonight is wearing a sari. Her head dips down, avoiding their glances. She notices them looking at her and tries to ignore it by concentrating on her menu.

“I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” says Connie. Her friend slides out to let her pass.
Friday, 7:12pm

The door of the Heritage Diner opens and the two young detectives, the regulars, enter and seat themselves at the counter.

“What can I get for you, tonight?” Calliope asks, returning to her counter duties. After dealing with them yesterday in their professional capacity, Calliope cannot quite look at them the same way. They are no longer young and boyish to her, they are now men.

The officers glance at their menus, not really needing to; they know what is offered and what they want.

“I’ll have the pork chops with applesauce and mashed potatoes, no gravy. And an iced tea, please.”

“Give me the chicken, with sweet peas, and I’ll have the mashed potatoes also, with extra gravy, if you can. And a Coke.”

Calliope jots down their orders without her customary smile and provides their drinks before heading through the swinging doors to the kitchen.

“Never liked gravy.”

“No gravy on anything? How come I never noticed that before?”

“We never really get full meals, dinners. It’s usually late, we mostly get sandwiches, or eggs and bacon, breakfasty stuff.”

“Yeah, you usually get taylor ham and egg on a hard roll. No cheese. And no ketchup on your fries either, I’ve noticed.”

“Exactly. I’ve never liked condiments and toppings.”
“What do you mean?”

“Gravy, sauce, syrup. Ketchup, mustard, mayo. None of ‘em. Just never been my bag.”

“You don’t like spicy foods either, right? I remember one time I asked you if you wanted to hit that Thai place on Main Street and you made a face like...like I don’t know what.”

“I blanched, I’m sure.”

“Blanched. That’s a good word there, bright boy. So, what’s your deal? Who are you, mister bland?”

“I like things au naturel. Pure and undisturbed. I don’t even like it when different foods touch each other on the plate.”

“Fucking weirdo.”

“I am how I am.”

“Bet this place is gonna lose business. For a week or two at least, maybe longer. It’ll be a tough month.”

“Probably.”

“Shame, best diner around.”

“It’ll pick up. The owner, that guy Hirsch we questioned, he knows what he’s doing, you can tell just by talking to him, by how he wanted to open back up again as soon as possible. Did you see him outside? That was him futzing around with the sign on the roof when we pulled in. Nah, they won’t suffer any in the long term. These local news stories don’t last in the public memory. Something new will come along to grab their attention and it’ll go back to being the good old Heritage.”
“Instead of that place where some lady killed her kid in the bathroom.”

“Hey, keep it down. Show a little respect.”

“Sorry, sorry. My bad.”

“The woman who took our order is the owner’s wife. I took her statement yesterday while you were talking to the Russian girl.”

“Oh. Shit. What’s she doin’ taking orders then?”

“Probably just helping out. Maybe Claire Belle was supposed to be on counter duty tonight. I bet she’s having the waitresses take care of the tables and she just does the counter. The counter’s easy.”

“Mister bland’s got it all figured out, eh?”

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_Friday, 7:15pm_

George looks at his cell phone and checks the time. Is irony the right term for it, he wonders, as he contemplates the diner he photographed just two mornings ago, before all the calamity and chaos he read about today in the news, the news that now involves the big blonde Swedish kid. He’s done with that hire now, and will be going down to New Brunswick on Monday for a new assignment, a cafe near Rutgers University. The owner is suspected of cheating on his wife with one of the waitresses, a college student.

His boss was more skeptical and inquisitive than usual regarding George’s attentiveness to the Sorengren stake-out, given how it concluded, but he knows George is a reliable worker. He never falls asleep on the job. He is careful, cautious, he doesn’t draw attention to himself. He takes good notes and lots of them. He keeps an eye on the local newspapers. He has connections inside the police department. One of those
connections called him this afternoon, and told him that Nick Sorengren showed up at Hackensack Police Headquarters on State Street that morning. Apparently, his girlfriend killed her newborn infant right inside the same diner George had been trying to photograph every morning this week. The big blonde Swedish kid George had been working ‘owed somebody money’ and ‘may be involved in drugs’, that was all the boss told him. But Sorengren never showed any signs of use or addiction, and he certainly didn’t appear to be a dealer. What George wasn’t told was that his employer had been hired by Andrea Sorengren, mother of the subject.

Andrea was worried about her twenty-one year-old son, her only child. The boy lived at home and in the last month or two had become increasingly depressed, rarely leaving his room. The boy’s mother came to the conclusion that Nick was on drugs. There was money missing from her purse on multiple occasions, and also from an envelope that Andrea kept in an envelope in her desk, next to her insurance documents, an emergency fund in case she ever needed cash on short notice. All together it was less than a thousand dollars, but she wanted to stop what she thought was a drug problem early on, before it escalated.

George gazes in at Kate and Melissa through his binoculars. Melissa takes a sip of her Absolut and OJ, her pink lips pressing wetly against the edge of the glass. George’s heartbeat quickens again. After sharing a few drinks together the other night, Melissa had given him a wonderful hug and a kiss on the lower part of his cheek, near his mouth. She even gave him her phone number as he walked her to her train. “Just in case you ever want to talk,” she’d said. “About Kate. Or whatever. You’re a really cool guy.” A cool guy. He’d grinned like a child eating forbidden candy. Those words meant so much more
coming from Melissa, compared to the routine compliments given to him by his pedestrian-looking girlfriend. He wondered what it would be like if he had a picture of him and Melissa standing together, arm in arm, if he would be more proud of it, if he would be anxious to show it to people. George rarely shows anyone the small picture of him and Kate that he keeps in his wallet.

He sighs and picks up the top newspaper in a pile on the passenger seat, the Bergen Record. He peruses the story again, looks at the old high school picture of Claire. Poor guy, he thinks, and not for the first time that day. “He was probably scraping up money for an abortion,” he says aloud, “not drugs.”

A small brown girl in a sari looks right at him as she walks across the parking lot with a tall woman who does not look like her mother. George unconsciously dips his head, pretends he is fiddling with the radio. The little girl had caught him, a strange man sitting alone in a van, with the engine off and the lights out, in the back corner of a diner parking lot, holding a pair of binoculars and a newspaper and talking to himself.

He smiles at his own foolishness and a sense of mischief rises in him. He looks back at his cell phone and pages through a list of names until the cursor falls on ‘Melissa’. Still self-conscious after being observed by the Indian girl, he looks around, making sure no else is walking past his poorly lit corner of the lot. He tosses the newspaper back onto the passenger seat and raises the binoculars. His finger presses the ‘send’ button.

Inside Melissa’s purse, her cell phone rings. Kate stops munching her egg-white omelet and glances at her friend. “Aren’t you gonna answer it?”

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“Eh, it can’t be anyone important,” Melissa replies. “You’re already here, and nobody else ever calls me.”

“Just answer it. I don’t know how people can just let their phones ring like that. Aren’t you curious?”

Melissa pulls the phone out of her bag and looks at it. “No name, and I don’t recognize the number.”

Kate stares at her friend, waiting for her to answer the phone. It continues to ring, a Mozart concerto.

“Fine, I’ll answer it, just so you’ll stop gaping at me like that. Hello?”

Content that her friend has answered the phone and not wanting to seem nosy, Kate turns and looks outside the window. A gamine young woman in a baggy grey overcoat is ascending the front steps of the Heritage Diner.

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_Friday, 7:19pm_

Claire Belle surveys the diner. Connie is on the way back to her table from the bathroom. Claire looks down at her and smiles. “Hi.” She reaches down and fingers the child’s hair. Connie does not pull away. Calliope doesn’t notice Claire immediately as she emerges from the kitchen with two large plates for the detectives at the counter.

“Anything else I can get you fellas?” she asks. She used to address them as ‘boys’.

“No thanks.”

“We’re good.”
It is then that she notices Claire standing near the entrance, arms at her sides, looking around the diner. Calliope walks over to Claire and grabs her wrist. Connie is still standing nearby. A large group of customers comes streaming through the door. “Conchetta, do auntie a favor and tell Kristina to seat these people.” Calliope grips Claire’s arm and leads her toward the double doors of the kitchen, keeping herself between the counter, on her left, and Claire, on her right. They proceed through the kitchen, past the storeroom, and into Max’s office. Calliope closes the door behind them.

“What are you doing here?” she gasps. “The police are looking for you. There’s two detectives sitting right out there at the counter. You’re lucky they didn’t see you.”

Claire looks directly at Calliope. “I couldn’t just run away. I was about to, but I couldn’t. I don’t have anywhere else to go. This place was like a home to me. You were always so kind, you and Mister Hirsch. You treated me like a daughter.”

“Oh, hi,” says Melissa. “Wow, you’re the last person I expected it to be when I answered the phone. I’m at a diner with my friend Kate,” she says a little too loudly, starting to get buzzed from the alcohol. “An old friend from college,” she whispers across the table. “A guy.” She returns to normal voice and speaks into the phone. “No, no bother, it’s nice to hear from you... I had a lot of fun too... You think? Yeah, maybe we should, I dunno, get together again some time.”

Kate shakes her head. “Right, nobody ever calls you,” she mumbles, thinking about how she and George rarely speak on the telephone anymore.

“Really? No, New Brunswick isn’t too far from Princeton... Yeah, I guess. I could come after work. I’ll try to get out a little early, we’re not that busy right now... Wear
something nice? OK. What, are we going out to a fancy place or...Aw, that’s so sweet, thank you. Well, I don’t want to ignore my friend, I should probably get going.” Melissa laughs loudly. “Yes, obligated, exactly. Anyway, I’ll talk to you soon. Now I have your number...OK, I’ll put you in my phone as soon as I hang up...Yeah, I’ll be looking forward to it too...Bye.”

Melissa presses the ‘end’ button and quickly assigns George’s name to the number displayed on her phone.

“So there’s an old college flame you’ve been hiding from me?” Kate asks.

“Something like that.”

“What’s his name?”

“George.”

Kate chuckles. “That’s funny.”

“What?”

“Uh, my boyfriend is George.”

“Oh, right, that is funny,” Melissa says with a smirk. “Your boyfriend.” She gulps down the rest of her drink.

“Listen, I can’t stay with you right now,” says Calliope. “I’ve got customers. You might have to wait here awhile. I want to get those cops out of here before we figure out what we’re going to do.”

Claire pauses, contemplating her situation. “I think maybe I should turn myself in. I know why, why it happened. I didn’t do it on purpose. I just...it just happened. I was sick. And now I’m better.”
“Honey, cops don’t wanna hear that,” Calliope says with a pitying smile. “They’ll arrest you. You’ll go to court, they’ll ask you all sorts of questions.” She steps toward Claire and gives her a hug. “I know you didn’t do it on purpose, sweetheart,” she says into the girl’s ear. “But not everyone knows you. What if they don’t believe you? You’ll go to prison. We have to do something else. The legal system is not merciful.” She releases her hug and steps back. “Just wait here, OK, don’t move. I’ll be right back.” She steps toward the door. “Promise you won’t leave this room.”

“I promise, Mrs. Hirsch.”

After getting Kristina to seat the large group, Connie walks back to her table. Hanan slides over, leaving Connie on the outside of the booth. She nudges her knee into Connie’s and whispers, “Was that…?”

Connie nods.

“We should help her,” says Hanan.

Connie looks at her friend. “Help her?”

“She was always nice to us. We should be nice to her. That is how it must be. Whatever else she did doesn’t matter. She was kind to us, we must be kind in return. That is the right way, the correct thing to do.”

“What are you girls whispering about?” Abel asks.

“Nothing,” says Connie. “Can me and Hanan go to the storeroom? We have to talk about something.”
“Your food will be coming soon,” says Abel. “There’s nothing in the storeroom but candy and temptation. I don’t want you ruining your appetite. Wait until after you eat if it’s so private that you can’t discuss it here, that you have to whisper.”

“Oh, girls are allowed to whisper,” says Marlena. “Go ahead.”

Abel gives his wife a disapproving sidelong glance. “Just be back before your food gets here,” is his fatherly warning as Connie and Hanan scramble out of the booth.

Marlena pats her husband’s wrist. “Girls need to have our secrets that we can only share with our best friends.”

“Hey Melissa,” says Kate. “You mind if I ask you something?”

“Sure, fire away. But we should get going to the concert soon.”

“We’ve got time, we don’t need to see the opening act.”

“I guess,” Melissa says. “Why, what’s up? Is it about George?” She grins. “He’s not bad in bed or something, is he?”

“No, he’s fine in bed.” Kate giggles self-consciously before taking a more somber tone. “It’s something serious.”

“OK. Lay it on me, sister.”

“I don’t want you to feel obligated to listen to me,” says Kate. “It’s just that you’re my closest friend.”

Melissa looks at her empty glass for a moment, contemplating. “No, I don’t feel obligated. What’s a matter?”

“You remember a few weeks ago, I was all upset because it’d been two years since the last time I talked with Jeremy, and how I um, how I think he, you know-”
“Committed suicide.” Melissa’s tone is reassuring, the voice of a friend. “I remember.”

“Right. That.”

“Well, that’s really hard, Kate. I’d be upset too if I didn’t know where my brother was. I’d probably think the same thing.”

“There’s something he told me the last time we talked. Something that I was sure wasn’t true, just a, a product of his drugged-out imagination or something.”

“What?” Melissa asks.

“He said that he molested me, when I was a kid, when I was ten.”

Melissa stares at her, waiting for Kate to continue.

“And I don’t remember that at all. Not at all. But what if I just blocked it out or repressed it or something?”

Melissa presses her fingers to her temples and looks at her friend, a friend she has often taken for granted, a friend who just wasn’t as lucky in the appearance department, a friend whose boyfriend she’s just scheduled a date with. “I don’t know what to tell you, Kate. I’m not...I don’t know anything about that subject. I mean, I had an older cousin who got a little frisky when we would wrestle, when I was younger. His hands would drift in certain places and stuff. I was around that age, nine or ten or something. I just, you know, after a while I avoided him when our families got together. But it was nothing serious. That happens to every girl, right? And guys too, probably. Everybody has the weird uncle or cousin, or some camp counselor who gets a little too touchy. I mean, what exactly did he say he did to you?”
Kate’s head dips down, she stares at the tabletop. “Nothing too graphic. I mean, he didn’t say he raped me or anything. Just that he showed me his dick or something, and, like you said, got a little too hands-on. I mean, I almost wish he did, ‘cause at least then it would be something tangible that we had, something that happened between us. I can’t stand it, I keep picturing him dead somewhere, some unidentified junkie. It’s awful.”

“Well,” says Melissa, after a few seconds of pondering. “The only advice I can give is to just not think about it.”

Calliope is busy tending the counter when she sees the front door swing inward. She starts to go over to greet incoming customers but soon realizes that it’s her husband Max, returning from his tinkerings on the roof. Having waited patiently at the edge of the dining area for Calliope to be distracted or to move from behind the counter, Hanan and Connie walk through the kitchen doors without being seen. They look first in the storeroom, but it is empty except for its usual contents: cartons of cigarettes on the left wall; cases of liquor on the right; condiments, cleaning products and other diner-related accoutrements along the back wall; and cases of candy stacked and scattered across the dusty floor.

The door to the office opens inward and Claire is startled. She stands up impulsively but then sits back down, on the edge of Max’s desk, as she realizes it’s just the two little girls. In her right hand is Connie’s drawing of the diner.

The girls stand there, looking at her. Hanan says “Hello.”
Claire waves at them with her free hand. "Hello." It is much wearier than the waves from the two young women who had smiled so widely and waved so enthusiastically at Connie.

The children exchange a glance and step a little closer to Claire. "How are you?"

asks Hanan.

"That's a good question. I guess I'm OK. A little cold. How are you?"

"We're OK too," says Hanan.

"I'm sorry," Claire says to Connie, "you always catch me with your art things. This is a really good drawing, though."

Claire extends the sheet of paper to Connie, who takes it and places it on top of an unopened box of cinnamon-flavored Dentyne gum which sits on top of a small filing cabinet. "Thanks. It's not finished yet. I still gotta put in the people. I'm gonna put in me and Hanan, and my auntie and uncle, and the waitresses. I could put you in if you want. I really liked that drawing you did of your boyfriend. Do you still have it?"

"No. I mean maybe. I don't remember. I was going to give it to him, but I never did."

"Well, we're sorry we bothered you," Connie says, stepping toward the door, but Hanan remains motionless, and then speaks up.

"How come you put your baby in the ceiling?"

Claire's head dips down, eyes staring at the linoleum floor. She is silent in this position. The girls wait. Her head rises.
"My boyfriend Nick, who you saw that drawing of," she gestures with a limp hand to Connie, "he gave me money for an abortion. That's something people do when they don't want to have a baby. You guys know what an abortion is?"

The girls nod.

"I figured you did. Kids know so much these days. Well, they're expensive, and Nick was all ready to help me pay for it, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to have the baby. I never told anyone that, not even him. I figured eventually someone would notice, and help me. But my belly never got that big, and when I did start to show, I covered it up, I kept it secret. It happened in the bathroom, in a stall. I sat down and just... somehow it came out. I couldn't believe it. I think I was in shock. I remember seeing the umbilical cord. But I don't remember anything after that, not until the next day. I don't know how I got home. I don't remember how I got out of the diner. I know it must sound hard to believe, but that's what happened. Somehow I even lost the money, that Nick and I saved up."

"I believe you," says Hanan.

"Me too," says Connie. She reaches into her pocket and extracts the wad of bills. She holds it out to Claire.

"Where'd you get all this?"

"My auntie and uncle gave it to me. I carry it with me, to keep it safe. I heard them talking about it. They said they found it here."

"Here in the diner?"

"Yeah, on the sink right outside."

Claire looks at the child.
“Is it yours?” Connie asks. She takes the rubber band off and stretches her hand out further.

Claire leans forward. She takes the money and leafs through the wad. On the back of one of the hundred dollar bills is a sketched drawing of a flat, rectangular building with few windows. The front door is blackened in and shaded.

“We spent a little of it,” says Hanan.

“We didn’t know it was yours,” says Connie.

“I don’t really need it anymore. Too late for an abortion now. You keep it.” Claire extends her hand, offering the money back to Connie.

Connie accepts, looking at the bill which is now on the outside of the roll. “Don’t you want the one you drew on?”

“No, that’s my rendition of the clinic, I never even went inside. I bet you could draw that building a lot better than I did. You have a talent, a gift.”

The young girl puts the rubber band back on the roll, and returns it to her pocket.

“We have to go back and eat with my family,” says Connie.

“Oh, yes, don’t let me keep you.”

The girls turn to leave.

“I wish I had my baby back,” Claire whispers. “I miss her.”

“It was a girl?” says Hanan.

“I don’t know. I think so. I only remember the umbilical cord, and blood, and a tiny patch of light blonde hair. Was it a girl? Do they know?”

“No,” says Connie. “It said in the newspaper it was a boy.”
Hanan walks over to Claire, places her brown hand on the young woman’s pallid forearm. “That’s all over now. It is the past. The only thing to do is to not think about it, not any more.”

“This fine lady taking care of you gentlemen alright?” Max asks the detectives at the counter as he puts his arm around Calliope’s shoulders.

“Excellent, as always.”

“Great food, great service. That’s why we come here.”

“Do you need anything else?” asks Max.

“Nope.”

“Just the check.”

Calliope tallies their bill and places it face down between the two men.

“I saw Abel and Marlena through the window on my way in,” says Max. “I’m gonna go say hello.”

Calliope moves over to the register as Max goes to greet his brother. Kristina comes through the kitchen doors with hot plates of food in her arms.

Moments later, Max returns and approaches Calliope at the register. “Their food is out. Abel said to tell Conchetta and her friend to come on.”

“They’re up here?” Calliope looks around and does not see them.

“I don’t know. Marlena said they’re around somewhere. Playing. You know how kids are.”
No, I don’t, thinks Calliope. I don’t know much about children at all. “They must’ve slipped into the storeroom without me noticing. Anyway, let’s go back and get them. Then we have to deal with something else,” she tells her husband.

“Well, after yesterday there’s nothing I can’t handle. What is it? The cook’s slacking off?”

“Um, not-”

“That slop sink in the back room is leaking again? I got the ‘I’ lit up steady now, it was just a loose connection. Cold up on that roof, though. I felt it on my head.”

“How ‘bout I just show you?”

Max yawns and scratches the top of his scalp. “I’m not a young man anymore, my love. Losing my hair. I can feel it.”

Calliope takes Max’s hand. “You are beautiful to me always, Max.” She kisses him on the cheek. It is rare that she is the one giving affection. “What I have to show you is serious. It has to do with what you said, about ‘after yesterday’.”

“What? Is it the cops? They don’t want to close us down again do they?”

“No, it’s not the police.” Calliope peers over at the officers at the counter, one of whom has just stood up. “With Claire,” she whispers, tugging at Max’s hand. He does not move.

“Wait wait wait. What about Claire?”

The second officer stands up from the dining counter; he lays out the tip money, making sure to leave the right amount. They turn around and start toward the register to pay the check.
“Shut up,” Calliope says curtly, squeezing her nails into Max’s palm. She drops his hand and maneuvers behind the register to accept the check from the officer.

“Good evening, Mister Hirsch. It’s nice to be back here under more um, more regular circumstances. Great food tonight, as always.”

“Did I hear you just say something about Claire Belle, sir?”

“I was telling my husband that I hope you find her soon,” Calliope interjects, before Max can answer. “I’ve been reading in the paper, about the post-partum syndromes and all. I mean, maybe that’s what happened to her. I wouldn’t know, I was never able to have children.” Her head dips down. She glances over at her Max then goes about calculating their change. His head dips down as well, averting the officer’s faces.

“I’m sorry,” Calliope continues. “You don’t need to hear my problems. It’s just, this whole business has upset me very much. Do you have children, officers?”

“I do, two daughters.”

“No ma’am, I don’t.”

“It’s a horrible thing that girl did,” said Calliope. “Horrible. But I hope you have mercy on her. Claire was a good person. And I can’t possibly think a woman would purposely hurt her own child. So rare and precious. Don’t you think?”

“I’d like to think there’s a possibility she didn’t do it on purpose. I know how much I love my kids, but you’re right, it’s different for a woman. It was with my wife, especially that first time. Becoming a mother, she was... It’s just different.”

“Whatever, man, you’re a great father. I’ve seen you with your kids. And we’re gonna catch that girl, don’t you worry, ma’am.”

“We’ll keep in mind what you said, about being gentle with her.”
“She wasn’t too gentle with that baby, man.”

“Not gentle,” Calliope says. “No, not gentle, boys. Merciful. Well, anyway, you be safe out there, and thanks so much for continuing to come in. You’re good customers. Loyal.”

“Yes, thank you for your business,” says Max.

The cops nod and say goodnight.

Abel passes by the register counter and is walking toward the kitchen doors.

“Hey, Abel,” Calliope calls out, “What, you want to complain about the food directly to the cook?”

“Just looking for the kids. I told-”

“I’ll get them. They’re probably in the storeroom.” Calliope dashes out from behind the register, pulling Max along with her. “Tell your brother to sit down and enjoy his dinner, Maxy.”

“Go ahead. We’ll send you the girls.”

Abel turns back. Max and Calliope walk through the double kitchen doors. Max opens the storeroom door but the children are not inside.

Outside, the officers walk toward their car. The first detective lights a cigarette.

“I don’t think I’ll ever kick the habit, partner.”

“Eh, most people fail a few times before it takes. It’s hard to quit, to give up that nicotine fix.”

“She’s right, I think, that woman in there. About being merciful. If Claire Belle was my daughter, I’d want the cops to treat her right, no matter what she did. That’s what
happens when you have a kid. You just know, no matter what they do, you’ll stand by them.”

“Come on, man. Even if they commit murder?”

“When you have your first kid we’ll talk about it. But you could be right. Maybe it’s just me. Maybe I’m too soft.”

“Hey, with all the shit we see, I’m amazed I have any compassion left at all. Part of me does think maybe you’re too...forgiving. But another part of me admires that. That you still care after all we’ve been through. Fuck, let’s talk about something else, man. I’ve always said – the only way to deal with this job is to not think about it.”

The girls emerge from Max’s office, Connie closing the door behind them.

Calliope is heading toward them with Max. “Girls! What were you doing in there?” she asks.

“We went there to talk,” says Connie, “but somebody was already in there. One of the waitresses.”

Connie and Hanan walk back to their table. Their meals await them, as does a lecture from dad for Connie and the stares of the xenophobes for Hanan.

Max looks at his wife. “What is this? We have a short staff tonight and the waitresses are taking breaks in my office while my wife is out working the counters?”

Calliope opens the door for Max.

Max maintains his composure upon seeing Claire. “Hello” is all that comes out.

After closing the door behind them, Calliope takes Max’s hand again. “Here she is, come back to us.”
"Well, I need to know right away," Max says, "Why did you do it?"

Claire stands up. "I'm very tired," she says. "You were both so kind to me when I worked for you, I just thought I could come here for some sanctuary. A place to rest."

"Did you say anything to little Conchetta, my niece? We saw her come out of here," says Max.

"We talked about drawing. She drew a beautiful picture of your diner, Mister Hirsch." Claire nods at the piece of paper, face down on top of the cinnamon gum.

"Oh." Max is silent for a moment as he picks up Connie’s drawing and looks at it. He gently places it back where it was. "You didn’t talk with her about what happened, what you did?"

"I’m done talking about that. I don’t even remember it. I... I can’t."

Max huffs and looks at his wife.

"We’re not going to turn her in," Calliope says firmly, squeezing her husband’s hand again. Tears fall from her eyes as she leans into him, hoping for an embrace.

"No no no no! No crying." His releases her hand and grasps her shoulders. "Don’t cry. Please. You know I can’t stand to see you cry. We will give Claire here some money." He lets go of Calliope and looks at Claire. "You left your last day’s tips here, you know. And however much more she needs," he says to his wife. "We will wish her the best, and we will try to forgive her. That is all we can do."

"Do you," Calliope sniffs, "Do you need money?" she asks Claire.

"No. I just needed somewhere to sit for a while, to be alone, to be warm." Claire fingers the silver crucifix around her neck.
“Do you know what you’re going to do?” Calliope asks. Max takes his wife’s hand but she shakes it free.

They wait for Claire’s response. She stands up. “I’m not going to turn myself in. And I’m not going to run away. I’m just going to wait. If they come to get me, they come to get me.”

Max steps forward. “Are you sure? Eventually they’re going to find you.”

“I’m through with all that running around.” Claire moves past them and places her hand on the door. “Thank you again. For your compassion and kindness. I really enjoyed working here. That’s the truth. I’ll miss this place. So long.” She pushes open the door and exits the office, leaving Calliope and Max behind.

“They’re going to arrest her,” says Calliope. “She will be charged with a crime, and they’ll put her on trial, probably send her to jail. It’ll be in the news all the time. It will be terrible. I hope they take mercy on her. She was an awfully nice girl. But unlucky. I know what that’s like.”

Max reaches for her hand. She hesitates, then takes it and sniffs again. He rubs her shoulders and wipes the tear stains from around her eyes. “We can’t have you crying because of this. We’re not going to read the paper or talk about it with the customers. We’re not going to watch the news. We’re just going to go on with our life: running the diner, spending time with Abel and Marlena and Connie and the rest of our family, having our everyday lives. As for that girl and what may happen to her... It’s better to not think about it.”
George watches Kate's car pull away through his binoculars. He lowers them and
turns the ignition, letting the van warm up. He observes a thin young woman in a grey
overcoat as she exits the diner, stepping slowly down the stairs and across the front edge
of the parking lot, then out onto River Street. She looks one way, then the other, then she
crosses the street, headed west. He can see her breath, and the cold wind whipping the
cloth around her legs. She looks familiar, George thinks, maybe I should offer her a ride.
He contemplates asking her if he could take her picture; there is something photogenic
about her countenance, she looks like a person who has lived, who has endured a lot in
her young life. But George does not take photographs of people, and he has never been
one to approach strange women, so he does neither of these things. Instead, he takes out
his notebook and begins to write.

_I know that going out with Melissa behind Kate's back would be wrong. Kate's a cool
girl, and I really liked her for a while, and I know it's a trite and shallow thing to say, but
she just isn't doing it for me anymore. That's what people do, though. They date, they
have relationships, then they move on. I keep thinking about that dead baby. The guy
Nick, the one I was staking out, I think he stole some money from his mother to help pay
for his girlfriend's abortion. She wound up having the baby in the bathroom, in a diner,
and killed it. Stuffed the body in the ceiling. It upset me to read about it. I usually only
write about myself and my problems. I like to keep track of things. Jotting down what's
going on around me. I guess that's why I do what I do for a living. I have a knack for it.
I'm an observer, a note taker. I'm not as good with people. So when a chance like
Melissa comes along, I have to take it, right? I'm going to break up with Kate first,
though. I'm not going to cheat on her. I'll probably screw it up anyway, and Melissa will
come to her senses and realize that I'm a weirdo. A shared interest in photography isn't enough to make someone like her like someone like me. Then I'll be alone again. I wonder how that girl feels, Claire Belle. Out there. Alone. Everyone looking for her. Or that guy Nick, what he's thinking. If I got a girl pregnant, I'd be pretty shaken up. And he's a lot younger than I am. Then she goes and kills it? Anyway, I'm going to go inside the diner now, the Heritage. After all these times sitting and standing outside, looking at it, photographing it, I'm curious what it's like on the inside. This is the last one I scouted. It's the one I want to use. I've been to all the other diners in Hackensack. The Arena is the biggest and most popular. The Tri-Boro Diner was just on TV, in an episode of that show The Sopranos. The Fairmont is a little locals place known for its turkey sandwiches. Plaza 46 is technically in South Hackensack, and it was in the news lately because supposedly some of the 9/11 hijackers met there in the days before the attacks. And now this, at the Heritage. Each one has its own story, and these New Jersey diners always have great food. Hopefully that holds true for this place, which has its story now too: the diner where that girl killed her baby in the bathroom. I think I'm gonna piss out here in the parking lot before I go in. I'd be a little freaked out by the bathroom, even though it'd be the men's, not the women's. I don't want to think about that kid Nick. Or the girl, Claire. Or a dead little baby. Better off that way, not thinking about it.

Claire walks to her grandfather's house. There is no one outside staking it out.

Connie spends the rest of the $1,094 over a period of years, mostly on art supplies.

Calliope goes to the storeroom from time to time, to cry, alone.
Abel and Marlena have another child, a boy. They name him Christopher.

Max runs the diner, time passes, and business picks up again.

Hanan tells her parents she wants to be a doctor, the kind that delivers babies.

Nick continues to live with his mother. They never discuss Claire.

The detectives eat at the Heritage Diner regularly.

Kate’s brother Jeremy never calls her again. She assumes he is dead.

Melissa doesn’t tell anyone about that one awkward date with her best friend’s ex.

George writes in his notebook, every day, and later publishes a book of his photography – a collection of the exteriors of New Jersey diners.
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