The second excuse

Gordon William Reeder
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The second excuse

by

Gordon William Reeder

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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Chapter 1

Madame Librarian

Sharon had been on her feet all day, and the only thing keeping her there was the idea of a drink. She stood at the circulation desk and listened to the clock on the wall behind her. The library was quiet, but Sharon knew it was different in the next room, where an adult in a tiger outfit read twenty kids stories and sang them songs. Most of the kids’ parents were in the reference room reading newspapers and wishing they could smoke. The desperate ones were outside pretending to ignore the heat. Sharon watched as they smoked and talked on cell phones and concentrated on looking bedraggled and important. What did it matter to them that a man was masturbating to the art books in the second floor washroom? Sharon had seen the man go into the stacks an hour ago. He came by whenever the temperature was over eighty, and so he had been studying the art books every day for two weeks.

Sharon was planning the library’s weekly convocation, and she had a list of things to do before she left. Every week the library brought in an afternoon speaker; often the person was from the university, although the library had also hosted numerous politicians and authors. Sharon was responsible for the food and drinks afterwards, the chairs being set up, and the event being advertised. Normally it was no big deal, you got some cookies and soda and maybe twelve people attended the lecture, but this week the speaker was odd. An old woman was walking across the country, and she was impossible to get ahold of. For all her boss’s assurance, Sharon didn’t know if this woman was going to show up at all. No one really knew where she was—within walking distance they assumed—but just thinking about it drove Sharon nuts.
Really that was not what was bothering her—she was mad, had been mad, and didn’t know what was causing it. It could have been anything; Kara was going off to college, they had begun to take care of Armatage’s grandfather, and Armatage himself had become withdrawn. Sharon couldn’t put her finger on it.

Sharon had a pile of CD’s in front of her that she was idly checking in. When the phone rang she picked it up and transferred the call to the reference desk. Sharon looked up as the masturbator man walked past her. Sharon stared at his eyes, but he did not look at her. His hair lay greasy around his ears, and his jeans had an open tear through which she could see his underwear. Both knees were patched and peeling. He did not exit the library, but walked to the community calendar and pretended to study it.

It was library policy to not allow loitering—it said so on the door—but the staff did not do much to enforce it. Maybe only five percent of the patrons used the library as a resource. Most people simply came in to read magazines or science fiction novels and fall asleep in one of the hard-backed chairs. Sharon could sleep, right then, on her feet. That’s what she’d do; she’d go home, drink some wine, and fall asleep. She felt like she had not slept for a month. If the library started to kick out loiterers, there would be no need for staff. They could pretty much lock the door. Even allowing for loiterers, the entryway was empty, except for the masturbator. He stood twenty feet from Sharon, and she could smell him, moldy food and urine, and it infuriated her that twenty kids sat chaperoned by a stranger in a cartoon suit while this guy wandered around looking for who knew what opportunity. How could the parents just sit outside and give Sharon this responsibility? She felt like there needed to be protections; those children, all children, needed to know that there were some safe places.
"Sir. Excuse me, sir." Sharon's voice was louder than she wanted it to be. The vagrant turned around, his eyes heavy, and Sharon was surprised by how young he looked. He nodded as if to say, "Do you mean me?" and walked towards her. She had not wanted him to come near her. She had only wanted to yell at him from afar. Already she felt overpowered by his smell—tunafish and booze. Her first instinct was to pretend she'd been talking into a speaker phone, or maybe answering a voice in her head, but she had been talking to him, and now she was trapped. Sharon looked around the room for an exit, at the parents outside. How long could cigarettes last?

"Yes?" The man crossed the room and now stood in front of Sharon.

"Do you have a library account?" Sharon shuffled the CD's from one stack to another. It was always best to hide behind authority.

"Why no, ma'am, I don't live here." Sharon was surprised at how alert he seemed.

"Well, would you like one?"

"I don't think I have much of a use for one actually. I'm only planning on being here a few weeks more." He became distant for a second, as though a thought had come upon him that was not altogether pleasant. It was August, after all, and he would probably be moving south for the winter.

"Oh. Well." Sharon could see he wasn't listening. "You know it does not cost you anything." Sharon felt that if she could get him on file she could affect his behavior. How could you masturbate around people who knew your name?

"Price is no object." He tilted his head towards her and laughed.
Was he flirting? Sharon looked around for someone to help her, but the lobby was empty. She wanted him out of her library immediately. "Well. It’s just...We, we don't allow loitering." There, she'd said it.

"Loitering? Do I loiter?"

"Well you come in here every day and…" She almost said “masturbate” but she didn’t.

"And?"

"And you never check anything out. You go to some back section and look at those art books." If he understood her, Sharon didn’t see any expression of guilt.

"Excuse me." He looked around like he was suddenly lost, and then he leaned into the desk as though he had a secret. "But isn't this a public library?"

He was! God dammit he was flirting with her. Sharon straightened her skirt and stood behind the computer screen. She wanted to put as much space between them as she could. "It is."

"And are the books here to be looked at? Or is the library just a portal for internet porn?" He did not seem upset, but Sharon knew he could snap in a second. She wished he would leave. She had hoped that she could offend him and he’d leave. But he did not seem even mildly offended. He was flirting with her.

"There’s no need to get crude. No need at all. You come in here everyday and hide yourself up in some...corner." She had almost said “masturbating” again.

"We have all sorts of people here, kids and old folks, and they have the right to a clean friendly place."
"It's my clothes?" The man took a step back from the desk. "Do you not like the way I look?" He spread his arms out as if asking for her appraisal. Then he began to look at her, slowly and with deliberation. She felt his eyes as they moved from her face to the large freckle on her neck, then down the cut of her blouse to her breasts. She knew the desk blocked the view of her skirt, but the man leaned in anyway, pausing for two or three seconds, his neck craned over the counter, just imagining what was under there. When he was done the man looked up into Sharon's eyes. "Excuse me," he said without apology. "You've obviously been studying me some. I just thought I'd play catch-up." He stood up straighter, his eyes more alert. "And I'm glad that I did. You are a very beautiful woman." He did not wait for a response, but simply turned and walked out of the library.

Sharon didn't move. Poor man, something was clearly not right. He held the door for the parents just starting to return to the building, and bummed a cigarette from one of the stragglers.
Chapter 2

Shank You Very Much

The police lights flashed before he was even driving fast. He noticed them right after he turned through the intersection, and he pulled over. The sky was gray with afternoon heat and the street was empty. It was ridiculous. He had been driving slowly, and he had not done anything wrong. He had performed the very essence of the exercise. Approaching the stop sign, he'd slowed down. While Armagatage may not have reached an exact stop, ninety-nine percent of the time his hesitation worked just fine. Previously, he would have said one hundred percent.

It was just after five o'clock on a Thursday afternoon, a rush-hour August afternoon, and somewhere the city was teeming with people. But the streets where Armagatage Shanks was driving were empty. It was too hot for anyone to be outside. Maybe in an hour children would come out to play baseball on the grass when the sun began to settle into the west. There might be a small hope of cooling then. By eight or nine, drinks in hand, the youngest father's might pitch tennis balls to the kids. The humidity might break. Wives and mothers might push strollers along the new smooth sidewalks, their eyes alert for neighborhood change. Armagatage would not be out there—his kid was past wall-ball age, and his wife, Sharon, if she was anywhere, would be hunched and muddy in her garden.

Rush-hour had been one mile away when Armagatage had swung through the wide streets of his neighborhood and turned right onto Zion. The corner was empty and flat, and he could see the whole world as he pulled up to that stop sign. He was driving on Grand Canyon, and he was going to take a right on Zion, go two more blocks, take another right turn on Bryce, and then be home.
Armatage was in his own mind, and it was not as though he had zipped all the way through the intersection. He was safe. He was slow. He was thinking about Sharon, and his daughter—she was going off to Wesleyan in two weeks—and his job. The officer took his time walking up to Armatage’s car.

"We’ve been getting complaints," the officer said, "about people not stopping at these corners."

"I stopped." The outside air filled Arm’s car, and he broke into a sweat. He wondered if he looked suspicious. A housefly flew past his face and landed on the houseplant which sat wilted in the passenger seat.

"I didn’t see you stop." The officer spoke from behind Arm’s left shoulder, as though he was afraid that Armatage might pull a gun and shoot him. "It looked like the ‘ol slow’n go to me."

At forty-one, still young himself, Armatage had never met such a youthful policeman. Something in the man’s face suggested weight loss. Armatage read the officer’s nametag. He looked the officer in the eyes. "I thought I came to a pretty good stop, Officer Ross. I guess I was thinking about work."

The officer put his hand on the driver’s side window. His fingers folded over the hot metal door. Armatage flinched as he realized his second excuse had unfolded the lie.

"I was right behind you," Officer Ross said. He bent towards Armatage’s ear and practically whispered. "I watched as you barreled through that intersection."

"Barreled?" Armatage repeated. He felt better because he knew he hadn’t barreled, and now he had caught Officer Ross in a mistake. He turned to look at Ross. "Don’t I need a bigger car to barrel? Something American?" Armatage and his wife both drove Hondas.
"I’m going to check your license, and I’ll get you right out of here." The officer ignored Armatage’s comment and walked back to his car.

Left alone, Armatage had to decide if he should roll up his window or not. He was sitting in front of his neighbors’ houses having transgressed some minor civil law at less than five miles an hour. He was not upset, but it was stupid. The inside of his car flashed red then blue. Neighbors moved curtains aside to watch him. To tell the truth, he had no idea if he had stopped at the sign or not. The road was so empty he had not been paying attention at all. He had been talking with his wife—not actually speaking with her on the phone, but in his head he was preparing, telling her that he had quit his job.

A chubby man in shorts had stopped on the sidewalk and was staring into Armatage’s car. Armatage stared at him through the leaves of the stupid houseplant he’d buckled into the passenger seat. The man’s head was shaved. He wore a white t-shirt with a pink collar and the silhouette of a naked woman on the front. Both of his arms were tattooed, and he held a baby in one arm. The baby was adorable. Her round head sat underneath a pink cloth hat with a matching silhouette. That was unfortunate, and Armatage felt bad that her father was such a thug. He knew it was hard enough to raise children when you were honest. The girl was smiling and pointing towards Armatage, so he waved. Suddenly shy, the baby buried her head in her father’s shoulder. The thug looked at Armatage and frowned, gave him the finger, and walked down the street. Armatage thought, "I’m gonna blow that guy up." Then he laughed.

Armatage had not quit his job but had been fired. The way he saw it, he had allowed himself to be fired, practically requested it, but he wanted Sharon to see that it was his choice. As he was driving home from work, before the police officer nabbed him, he had
been practicing the conversation that would make Sharon understand how Armatage felt it was okay. Even with a teenage girl, college payments, twenty years left on their thirty-year mortgage, two cars, a dog, and an increasingly incoherent grandfather, Arm felt it was a good idea if he no longer went to work for Madison Mutual.

"Mr. Shanks?" The officer was back at his window.

"Sir."

"These are neighborhood streets, and you're going to have to come to a complete stop." He handed Armatage the ticket for seventy-five dollars. "Slow down. Don't be in such a hurry. We have been getting complaints."

"So I hear," Arm said, and he sat there. The police officer was already walking back to his car. It was only two blocks before the turn onto Bryce Street, his street, and Armatage was in no special hurry to get there.

Normally a police officer would wait until the ticketed car moved out into traffic. They wanted the offender to leave thinking that the eyes of the law were watching. Armatage, however, waited for Officer Ross to sit down, his partner smiling as he shut the door. Then Armatage stuck his arm out of the window and motioned the officer forward. Three brisk waves, designed to get the officer moving, but the he stayed put. Armatage was willing to wait, but the officer showed no sign of moving. Briefly, it was a standoff.

"Cops," Armatage said, he started his engine and headed home.
Chapter 3

The Nekked Neighbor

Armatage was home a moment after he left the cop. He turned onto Bryce and the cop stayed on Zion. In one smooth motion Armatage pulled a u-turn and parked in front of his house. He reached for the plant to his right, and then stopped himself. The wilted leaves and broken pot—a part of him hated that thing. He rolled down the windows and left the plant buckled into its seat.

The front door to his house was unlocked and he walked straight in. The downstairs consisted of a living room and dining room, separated by a narrow hallway, with a kitchen in the back. While the rooms looked typical, they were arranged oddly. The kitchen was short and wide; it could be entered from either of the two side rooms, or by simply swinging to the right of the stairway. Armatage passed around the stairwell and into the kitchen. His wife sat at the counter-bar snapping beans. She looked up when he entered and then shook off her wet hands right before he kissed her.

"Good day?" she asked, returning to her beans.

"Good," he lied. He looked in the fridge while they conducted their marriage pleasantries, talking about his grandfather, Kara, the dog, and work. Armatage stared into the refrigerator and was tempted by nothing. He crossed to the sink and filled a glass with water. The window over the sink looked out into the backyard.

Armatage's house rested at the top of a small hill and afforded him a good view of his back-door neighbors. He didn't really know his neighbors. He knew no one's name and tried to avoid eye contact at all costs. Grass, longer than Sharon liked it, ran the eighty feet from
his porch to the chain-link fence at the back of his plot. The grass had not been cut since Kara had tried to start the mower with diesel fuel instead of regular gasoline.

"What's that guy doing?" he asked his wife.

"Huh?" She was halfway through the beans, and a large puddle had seeped out from around the colander and threatened to drip off the counter.

"This guy's in his yard with nothing on but his belly and some shorts." Armatage looked at his wife and then back towards his neighbor. The guy was young, maybe twenty-five, and fit. He wore a dark little mustache that sat ridgidly on the top of his lip. "He's tied his shorts up, or something, so that they expose extra outer-thigh."

"Put some ice in that water. You're probably overheated," Sharon said.

"You should see the amount of skin this guy is showing." Armatage looked at Sharon. "And all of it is wet."

"Armatage!" Sharon did not look up.

"Have you seen this? He's practically naked."

"If I had, do you think I would be sitting here now?"

"No. Seriously," he said. "This is just odd. I don't think I've ever seen him before. And he's out there, wiping his face and toweling his body down. Is Kara inside?" He looked around the room.

"What are you talking about?" His wife snapped a bean at him with that special disappointment wives have.

"Look at this. Who is this guy?" Armatage drank all of the water in his small glass.

"He looks disgusting."

Sharon slid off of her stool and moved next to Armatage. "He's fit enough," she said.
"Ughh." Armatage re-filled his glass.

"It's hot, he's fixing the windows or something. Look, he's got a ladder out."

"Maybe."

For a moment they stood watching the man. The neighbor didn't do much more than walk from one spot to another. He wiped sweat from his brow and took his shoes off. He walked around in a circle wiping himself with a towel. There was a bottle of something on the ground and he stooped to pick it up. After drinking, he bent at the waist and put his shoes back on. The sun sparkled off his tanned wet back. Then he walked in another circle. His grass was cut to the quick and Armatage felt stung by the comparison. There was a mud line where the man had edged his driveway. The neighbor hung the towel over his shoulder. It was the toweling off that really got Armatage. The neighbor rubbed his crotch once, then again, and it was not perfunctory. His short blue shorts looked faulty. Armatage was afraid that a nut might pop out.

"He's preening like a peacock," Armatage said.

Sharon took the glass from Armatage and poured the water into the sink. She took the glass to the refrigerator and filled it with ice, then with filtered water.

"You know," Sharon said, handing the glass back to Armatage, "I learned a long time ago that you have to be careful. It's fine to watch someone and make fun of him, but where does it get you? I think if you're really paying attention it gets you in trouble. Just having you sit there and make fun of that guy makes it harder for me. Every time I go out I know someone is making fun of me. How can they not be? I mean, what is that guy doing anyways? Washing his car? Coming back from a run? Tanning? Does it matter? Does he look worse than I would if I was outside in this heat doing whatever he's doing?"
"That's the point, though," Armatage said, raising the glass as a thank you. "You are not doing what he is. I am not doing what he is. What the hell is he doing what he is doing for?" Armatage drained the glass then refilled it from the sink. "It's weird, and it's odd. And look at him!"

"I see him. I see him just about every day." Sharon left the sink and went back to her beans. "His name is Glenn, and I think he drives a truck. Maybe he's renovated his whole house. Maybe he's painted it and replaced the windows. Maybe he gardens about as much as I do. And you don't give a shit about your neighbors, so you don't want to know any of that. So then, he's just a guy passing time, and who am I to judge that? Who are you?"

"Come on, Minge." He looked at her, stung by her rebuke. "I'm not judging. I'm not commenting. But look at him wiggle his ass! Don't get mad. I mean, I don't really believe that the guy exists."

"Look at my arms." Sharon wagged her arms. The flesh jiggled in the way it does for women after the age of thirty-one. "Look at my stomach. Look at the freckles on my legs. I shouldn't wear skirts or short sleeves because of people like you." Sharon laid her wet hands on the counter. "Because if I listened as I walked down the street the giggling and mocking would be something terrible."

"Minge" Armatage said, reluctantly turning his back on the strange pervert. "You're beautiful. Everyone looks when you go down the street." Armatage meant this. He knew he had more than he deserved. "And not because of the way your stomach sticks out over your belt, or because of the birthmark that shows through your make-up." Without thinking, he turned back towards the window. He glanced at Sharon. "And what's more, I wouldn't have you any other way."
"You should know by now that I don't give a rat's ass what you think of me. And don't call me Minge." Sharon set down her beans and began to leave the room. She stopped in the doorway, agitated beyond the scope of the conversation. She smiled. "Stop spying on the neighbor and go change. I want dinner to be ready at seven for once."
Chapter 4

Fire and Ice

"He was arrested as a juvenile for lighting fires in abandoned garages," Julie Olsen said as she stepped out of the cruiser. "No one would have cared much if there hadn't been someone spending the night in one of the garages. He spent two years in Juvee seven years ago. That's all that's in his file."

"And you think he's responsible for the Robertson fire?" Jeremy Ross asked.

"Don't know. Probably not. But it never hurts to ask. He's burned down more than just one garage. I know that. There were about ten warehouse fires, nine before he went in and one when he came out, and I think he did those. I bet I can get him to confess to the old fires."

"You do that, and I'll buy you dinner." Jeremy's face was red as he said it.

"You're on," she said.

The street was quiet. There were no children out, and the dogs were too hot to bark. Julie and Jeremy were side by side as they walked up the porch steps. A quarter-sized moth sat on the screen door. Julie knocked although she had already decided the guy was not involved. She knew it when she saw he had just edged his sidewalk. The whole neighborhood was too nice. Still, they were there, they might as well ask. She knocked again.

"Probably he's not involved. He's been out for five years and doesn't even have a moving violation."

"Maybe he's seen some young punk walking around," Jeremy said. "Takes one to know one."
Julie shrugged. If she got this guy to confess then she'd take Jeremy up on his invitation. Ross was odd, she wouldn't deny that, but he was odd in an endearing way.

A tall man opened the door, a half-empty water bottle in his hand. Julie gave a nod of hello. She hoped he knew she was the one to worry about. The man only wore a pair of running shorts; he was drenched in sweat although he did not appear to be out of breath. Watching his eyes Julie knew that he'd been observing them for some time. He offered no pleasantries, merely standing in his door frame, the wire screen door still separating them. Julie loved these little dishonest dances. She wasn't like a lot of cops who needed total control. She was comfortable. She would get hers when it mattered.

"Good evening. I am Officer Ross and this is Officer Olsen."

The man stayed silent.

"You Glenn Roberts?" Ross asked.

"Can I help you?" Glenn looked at Ross, then Julie. He smirked.

"You can help me by telling me that you're Glenn Roberts" Ross opened the screen.

"I learned a long time ago," Glenn said, "that I'm whoever you say I am."

"That's fine with us," Julie said. She didn't want Jeremy to get pissed and had to restrain herself from touching him. "What do you know about the fire over on Yellowstone?"

"Not heard about it."

"It's been all over the news."

Glenn stayed silent. He seemed to be trying hard not to stare at her eyes or her breasts and was unsuccessful at avoiding either.
"You didn't see it? The news?" She looked at Ross. He was leaning against the door frame, but he was not relaxed.

"Nothing older than the news." Glenn finished his water in one gulp. His shorts stuck to his skin.

"An old couple died."

"Except maybe old folks."

" Been running?" Julie asked. People hate to be asked the obvious.

Glenn spread his arms wide as if to say, "Look for yourself."

"You got plans for tonight?" Julie hated when people did not answer her questions. She moved close to Glenn, so that the three of them were basically all standing within the door frame.

"Work in the morning."

"Trucker, right?" Ross said, leaning forward.

"Yup," he said, refusing to move backwards. He gave up avoiding Julie's breasts and stared openly. He looked for about as long as it would take a first grader to read a sentence, then moved his eyes slowly to her face. "Officer Ross," he said, cocking his eye towards Jeremy. "How do you stand it? She looks so soft."

Before Ross could speak, Glenn was off his feet and face-down on the ground, half inside the house and half out. A boot rested on his neck.

"Listen," Julie said, twisting a little with her toes. "We can bring you in, you can miss a day of work, maybe keep your job. We'll be nice. We'll call them and let them know we have you. We'll explain you were arrested on suspicion of arson. They'll understand."
We'll tell them you burned, what, ten warehouses?" She paused to let the information sink in. "I mean, it's not like you go near warehouses anymore."

"I lit up a garage, that's it. I was fifteen. I haven't burned any warehouses." Julie's toes pressed more firmly into his neck. There was shoe polish on his chin. "I didn't burn that house down," he said. His voice was soft and squeaky.

Ross had a funny look on his face. His hand started towards Julie but stopped. His cheeks had turned openly red.

"I never said you burned the house down." She let up a little with her foot.

"I aint burned nothing since those two garages back before I was eighteen. Shit, any old guy gets a little singed and here comes your big boot up my ass."

"Size nine." She pressed down harder.

"I don't know shit about that. I haven't lit a fire since I was eighteen."

Julie Olsen grinned at Ross. She had only a hunch about those warehouses. "You were in juvee till you were eighteen."

Julie removed her boot, and Glenn slid away from them, sitting against the porch railing. "You can arrest me. Shit, you can arrest anybody." He pushed himself up and winked at Julie. "But if you excuse me, I got a date tonight." He stepped around Julie through his front door. "I didn't burn nothing down, and you know it."

"I think we both know exactly what you've done."

"I'm shutting the door now, and next time you come by," Glenn started to sing, "Don't knock, if you don't know my Rotweiler's name."
Chapter 5

Famamily-o

Showered and dressed and downstairs, Armatage was surprised to find his daughter sitting out on the deck. "What are you doing out here?" Kara was seventeen, and unlike most girls her age, she was not sitting in the sun wearing a bikini.

"I was stuck inside all day." She wore a plain white tee-shirt and shorts. "Got to feeling claustrophobic."

"Doesn't seem like we've cooled off any."

"Some maybe. Not much."

"Do me a favor, would ya, and light the grill." Stepping inside Armatage grabbed a beer and the plate of steaks Sharon had set out. He was back on the deck in a second.

"Don't cook one for me," Kara said. She had not moved from her seat.

"Want a burger or a brat or something?" he asked. "Want some?" He held out his beer.

"No thanks."

"Sure? You used to like drinking out of my beer," Arm kidded her. He'd never lost the younger brother mentality; if he couldn't entertain her then he was going to bug her. He bent over to turn on the gas.

"I was like, five."

"Five, fifty-five, it's the same thing to me. I know you don't want to hear that, but you'll feel the same way." The blood rushed out of his head as he stood up. "Shit, Gordon still thinks I'm five." Armatage had taken the igniter switch apart and been unable to reattach it.
"Half the time Gordon thinks I’m his wife."

"You and Mom both." A lighter hung off the side of the grill. He picked it up and sent it through the grate. "Go get yourself a glass and we’ll share."

"No thanks. I’m fine." She propped her legs on the porch railing and folded her arms over her stomach.

"Won’t eat my meat," he said, plopping the steaks onto the cold grate. "Won’t drink my beer. What else can a father offer?" Shutting the lid, he pulled a chair up next to her, mimicking her posture.

"I don’t know, Dad, what?" She looked at him, and Armatage was surprised by her vehemence. Whenever Kara got sullen it made Armatage uncomfortable.

"I got a ticket today," he said, hoping to fill the silence.

"Speeding?" she asked.

"No. They don’t even have a name for what I got, but it’s dangerous." He hadn’t told Sharon about the ticket. "I guess it’s called a slow ’n go. You ever hear of that?"

"You ran a stop sign? Dangerous."

"You think so too?" He shrugged.

"You should know better than that," she said, a smile breaking onto her face.

"That’s what I like to see." He reached out and slapped Kara’s thigh. "So you all packed up to go to your hoity-toity little school?"

"In my head I am." She looked over the fence into the neighbors’ yards.

"This place is that worth leaving?" he asked.

"Come on. It’s time." She said it slowly, as if she hoped he’d finally understand.
Armatage went to flip the steaks. He was hurt, and he did not want Kara to see. He hoped Kara was not racing away. "Go get the family. These bad boys will be done in a minute." The gas grill shot flames up over the meat. He closed the lid.

Kara sat. Red in the face, she looked over-heated. Armatage could not tell if she was ignoring him or just not listening. He sat back down.

"So, it looks like I'll be able to drive you out. I'll be able to get off work."

"Oh, great. I was kinda looking forward to the bus, though."

"Well, I mean. You can go that way if that's what you want. I just thought this would be nicer"—he hesitated—"familiar."

"But you're right." Kara swung her legs down, and sat up as though about to stand.

"It would be fun. Whatever you think is best."

"We'll talk." Armatage felt great. His daughter was beautiful and kind and she wanted to drive across country with him! "Now go get Gordon and your mom, dinner is ready."

After the steak and the green beans and the salad had been passed around, Armatage cleared his throat. "I have some news." He looked over his family.

Kara and her great grandfather kept on eating. Sharon stopped eating and waited for Armatage to continue.

"I have some news," he said again. He sat across the table from Sharon. It was not a huge table, but when full of drinks and food and people its six feet seemed pretty long. Sharon seemed roughly a mile away. Armatage was not sure if he was happy about this or not.
"I accepted a severance package today." Armatage spoke casually. He hoped to seem above reproach. "I have two more weeks at the office, and then I'll be done."

He did not wish to discuss why he had been fired, and he did not wish to discuss what the future might hold. He wanted the information out. He'd been fired, and he wanted Sharon to see it was an ordained, unavoidable fact.

"Fired? Oh Arm, I'm sorry." She looked concerned, not angry. "You've put ten years into that place."

Kara looked at him but stayed silent. Armatage felt like it was his duty to give a family speech now. He did not have one. He had a wife and a kid, a house, and a dog, and a grandfather whose head was increasingly filled with funny ideas. Armatage woke up early enough to get to work, and he went to sleep in time to get a good night's sleep. His wife was his friend. Kara scared him. His dog hardly knew who he was. He didn't have a speech to give. He shrugged.

"I guess I'll figure it out," he said, picking up his fork in a gesture he hoped would end the conversation.

"What did they say?" Sharon was not ready to let it go just yet.

"I don't know. You know." He stayed quiet for a full minute. "They said the usual, 'Thanks, but sorry. Good work, but...''' Armatage picked up what was left of his beer. "I don't know. I knew it was coming, and I didn't care. I couldn't care. I tried, but..."

Armatage looked at Gordon, whose head was down. The old man had been living with them for a little over six months, and sometimes Armatage thought Gordon was doing better, making more sense. Armatage felt Sharon staring at him and wished that she wouldn't. "I
knew it was coming," he shrugged. Then he shrugged again. "Kara, would you go get me a beer?" His daughter stayed at the table.

"Well, it isn't fair," Sharon said.

"It's fair."

"Arm, no. Ten years deserves loyalty." She was leaning over the table, trying to get closer to him.

"I wanted it. I saw it coming and I practically volunteered."

He didn't want to talk about his job. He wanted to get up and walk out, to wander around the streets and find himself an ugly bar and talk to some guy that had grown ugly in it. This wasn't an impulse to redeem himself, or to suffer some glorious ignominy among barflies; he wanted to become small and to disappear. He wanted his soul to shrink and shrivel and to fall into a deep stupid sleep.

"Sharon, I don't want to talk about this." He looked at her, and seeing her anger, he shrugged. "I don't know what the fuck my problem is."

"Then don't. Fine. Don't talk about it." She stood up and left the room.

Armatage was free to do whatever he wanted. He sat there.

"We were poor as dirt," Gordon said. "Poorer."

"Not now." Armatage interrupted the old man and did not feel bad about it. He'd had about all he could take of Gordon's stories. "Kara, would you get him cleaned up? I'll clear the table." He stood and got himself a drink.

When he got back to the dining room Kara and Gordon were gone. He sat down at the table. The television was on in the living room. He heard Kara turn on her stereo.

Armatage wanted to get out; he wanted to go for a walk, but he did not get up. He did not
respond to the pushing in his chest. Instead, he drank half of his new beer. He was at once compelled and frighten to leave his chair. What else was new?
Chapter 6

White Anglo Sexy Policeman

Jeremy Ross lived in a new apartment building not far from the Shankses' house. He'd thought living in the same neighborhood that he patrolled would be a good idea, but in reality it had not mattered one bit. In fairy-tale terms the apartment he lived in would have been made by the second pig; sticks and twigs and twine seemed to hold the place together. None of his doors opened properly or shut flush. The carpet curled up at the edges. Still, Jeremy spent his nights there, watching TV and eating ice cream with his dog Lady. A bowl for him, a bowl for her.

Jeremy lay on his sofa, a blanket across his legs, while Lady slept on his shins. The television was on and silent. A wasp crawled about the top of his window frame. It wasn't a huge wasp, but it was lively. Every minute or so it would buzz from one portion of the window to another. Each time it had done this, Jeremy caught his breath and waited for it to land. He'd seen the wasp about fifteen minutes earlier and his first instinct was to grab for something to smack it with. His shoes were in the closet, and he did not wish to dirty a magazine with wasp goop. He held the useless magazine lightly in his hands; Lady grumbled at his indecision. Finally, he decided to do nothing. He would ignore it, and if the wasp respected him, he would respect it.

Julie was young and soft, and so finely textured that Jeremy felt he might cry if it ever came to that. To what? To defending her. He found that he could either think about the wasp or Julie, and he did not know which was worse. He had wanted to kill that kid today. The way that punk had looked at her and talked to her. Jeremy knew that he had a problem.
They were co-workers, partners, but when he was with her he could not think straight. He found himself staring at her, wanting to touch her. She was going to cost him his job.

He had smelled her once already. She was not the type of person to wear perfume, and it was not the type of job for which you wore perfume. You would not smell her simply by walking past her. Jeremy had stood behind her to see her computer screen. She had called him over to look. He’d bent over in that casual co-workerly way. His hands had been safely on his own thighs. He was not leaning directly over her back, which might have been enclosing, but at an angle, from the side, forty-five degrees. His feet and head were next to her, his body—see pelvis—was as far away from her as his short neck would allow. But he was not a prude around women. He was not like one of those TV sit-com guys who gag and guffaw whenever cleavage is flashed their way. He was polite and dignified and level-headed, everything he figured women would be interested in. He was focused on Julie’s question when a scent came off her hair, or her neck, and everything went blank.

Her smell caught him and any thoughts of dignity left him. Ross’s head started forward towards the nape of her neck. His head bobbed slightly, and in his mind he was already in there, his nose and mouth and chin and eyes buried within her hair. It would have been perfect, dissolving into her soft cool skin. But it would have been terrible and then gotten worse. Jeremy couldn’t imagine. Thank God in heaven something caught him and against his will he’d backed away. Jeremy could not tell if she had noticed, but when their eyes met she’d seemed cool.

Since then everything had shifted. He could not talk to her without blushing. Everything he said seemed certain to give him away, every joke seemed a hopeless plea for attention. He found himself trying to protect her, trying to keep her away from problems. Or
worse, he found himself not wanting to interfere, standing by and watching, trying to make it seem like he wasn't protecting her, when really he should have had her back. He was completely off balance. Tonight, with that punk, he'd let things go too far. He would teach that kid a lesson. But more, he wanted her to know how he felt, and the impossibility of telling her made him hate that kid even more.

Something in the room shifted. Jeremy Ross held his magazine and watched the television, but his focus was on the wasp. It had crossed a boundary. Slowly, but irrevocably, the mid-sized wasp had begun to inhabit Jeremy's portion of the apartment. A clear betrayal. After all, Ross would be going to bed, and then what? Was he supposed to simply trust that this wasp, which had now strayed exactly half of the room away from its window, would not slip under his door and sting him while he slept? Jeremy was in no way sure that would be a prudent assumption.

He looked at his watch. Eight-thirty, too late to call her. Good. For the first time tonight he took a breath. He relaxed. It was eight-thirty, and she would have eaten. It was too late, ridiculous. He'd look like a turd.

In a clear display of aggression, the wasp flew off the ceiling and into the kitchen, brushing Ross as it passed. That did it. That was it. Lady growled as his feet slid out from under her. He wound the magazine into a tight cylinder, and moved into the kitchen, army style.

Should he call her? He stopped in the doorway. The wasp had perched on a slice of watermelon magnet. Ross's face itched where the wasp had scraped him. He moved slowly, one step, then two, the magazine both a shield and a sword.
Could he just call her? Could he just be bold, not blunt? "Hi Julie. Ross. I was looking through a magazine and found this recipe...Oh, *Food and Wine*...No, my mother gave it to me...it's not bad, really...but. What I was calling for was to ask if...you do eat meat right?...Ha ha, you never know these days...I was wondering if you would be interested in having dinner with me? Lamb."

It was ridiculous. He was not the type of person who could do that. He had just left her an hour ago. He took his frustration out on the wasp, knocking it to the floor. The wasp spun in a circle, wildly flapping its broken wing. Jeremy picked up one of his big feet and smeared the little Benedict into the kitchen floor.

Jeremy was not a drinking man. Living alone, he saw no point, but he wished he was drinking right now. He wished he had something that would occupy his nervous energy. Drinking, smoking, religion. He had to move Lady in order to sit back down. She lifted her head and growled softly. "Little brat." He needed God or a vice, but was not sure he could stomach either. He thought about masturbation, but somehow that seemed disrespectful. He glanced at the window where the wasp had been and felt a slight shame. He'd not feared being stung so much as being invaded. He was stuck and would remain stuck until bedtime. Lady lay at his feet and wouldn't move. All Jeremy could see was her bum, not the rectal anus part, but the two lumpy humps of tush. The television was still silent. The phone stood in its cradle at his elbow. He didn't touch it.
Chapter 7

Kara

The first thing she did when she entered her room was to push the dresser in front of the door. They could knock, but they could not come in. Her room was like any other teenager’s room, pop-star posters on the wall, a black and white print by Ansel Adams, a corkboard photo collage. The second thing she did was to call her ex-boyfriend, Josh. He knew it was she so he didn’t answer. Kara had seen him ignore calls hundreds of times. She left this message on his cell:

"I’m leaving for school next Thursday. It looks like I’ll be taking the bus. I’ll probably be the only girl showing up at Wesleyan in a bus. How funny is that? My dad started making noises that he’d drive me. He just lost his job. Mom seemed pissed, but they both said I’ll still be going. Maybe I’m a bitch, but that’s all I really want. I want to get out of this shit-hole town. Sorry, it’s not a shit-hole. I just need to get out.

"Anyway, I want to see you before I go. I’m not mad at you anymore, and I have something I’d like to give you. You can come over tonight and get it. Come in the back way. But listen, I’m not going to pester you, and this is the last time I’ll call."

She didn’t really have anything to give him. She wouldn’t mind if he got something, VD maybe, but that was out of her hands now. What else do you give a guy who dumps you three weeks before you go off to college? She heard he was already dating a cheerleader. Kara didn’t really give a shit, and really, the way things were going, a clean break was probably necessary.

Her room had a single window which looked north into a neighbor’s house. Her double bed was made neatly and topped with a red and white comforter. There was no head-
board, but night tables stood on either side. She had an old computer on a desk facing her bed, and a bulletin board filled with pictures cut from magazines or taken with friends during the summer. She had not bothered to remove Josh's picture. It hadn't seemed necessary; she was leaving the bulletin board behind. She looked at him, big and stupid, perfect for high school.

Kara made sure the dresser was as close to the door as possible. She pulled out the pregnancy test from the drawer. Who knew if she was pregnant? She didn't feel pregnant, but she could not deny that she was late. It could be the heat, and she'd been running every day. It could be the stress and the excitement of going to school. She didn't know. There was no bathroom in her room, so, although it was gross, she was going to use her trash can. She'd clean it up. She was being paranoid anyways, so why not be stupid, too?

She read the instructions on the box then pulled down her pants and squatted over her can. The tinkle made an erratic noise against the metal. Kara was not sure if she'd managed to hit the stick for the full five seconds. She wiped off the bottom of the stick and put it on her desk. The test line showed up almost immediately. One line good, two lines pregnant.

She had three minutes to kill, so she removed Josh's picture from her board and replaced it with Colin Farrell. The men she hated, competing for board space.

She could have a baby at school. She'd have roommates and friends, and they could help her out. She did the math. If she was four weeks pregnant—that's one month—she'd have the baby some time in May, right when school ended. Maybe she could arrange to have her finals taken early. Her mom could fly out to help. If she could get through her freshman year, everything else would be smooth. She could do this.
It had been one minute. She wasn't going to look until the time was up. She picked clothes up off the floor and threw them in her closet. She put her trash can in there, too. Later tonight, after everyone—including her neighbors—were asleep, she'd dump the can out the window. She'd wash and disinfect it tomorrow, stupid and gross, but easy. She turned on the radio. She looked at her cell phone, no messages. She could have an abortion. She went over to her CD folder and flipped through. She had to wait the length of a single song, and it was interminable.

She looked at her watch, two and a half minutes. Her parents could help her out, and she could have an abortion, but that was not even an option. She could look now, right? She looked. Two pink lines ran across the face of the tester. One strip safe, two strips Prego. She felt sick, queasy and gripey all at the same time. It was not an option, and she'd have to apologize immediately. Her temples began to sweat and she smelled urine everywhere. She had someone to apologize to. Everything was unreal. Opening the window, she stuck her head out into the humid night, but it was not refreshing. She was going to be sick.

Lying on her bed, she thought, I'm sorry. It's not an option, and I shouldn't have thought that way. Kara took deep breaths to control herself. She was being funny, that's all. She would still go to college, the first semester at least. No one needed to know she was pregnant. That fast, she made the decision: nobody would know until it was obvious. You and me. It's just us, and the seven hundred people I'll rope in to help us. Later. Kara touched her stomach. She felt queasy, but better. She put the stick in the box; the box she put in the back of her dresser where she covered it with sweaters and cold weather clothes.

What should she do? What could she do? She sat on the bed and waited. She waited for Josh. Her stomach clenched. She didn't want him to come over now. She didn't want to
see him at all. It was his. Unless it was God’s, it was his, and the last thing she wanted was for him to know about it. That meant she couldn’t stay here. Even if she knew he was not coming over, he still might. Now that she didn’t want him to, he would; it had been that type of relationship. It was nine o’clock, and if he was coming, he would be there soon. She couldn’t chance it—she had to get out of her room.

She opened the window and crawled out onto the roof. At the back of the house she slid over the side and was able to put her foot onto the deck rail. It was easy and safe, even for a girl in her condition. How do you think she got into this condition anyhow? Holding onto the drainpipe for support, she climbed down. Once on the grass, she had a decision to make. If she went to the front she would pass the living room. If she went to the back, the kitchen. She could see both lights were on, but she thought her odds were best in the back yard. She stayed as far north as she could, climbing the chain link fence and landing on her knees. The grass had not cooled enough to dew.
Chapter 8

The Art of Attraction

Malcolm had not meant to fall asleep, so when he woke up he was confused about where he was. He was sitting in a chair in the corner of what had been his sister’s room, and the woman he had been dreaming about still lingered in his head. He had only recently cleared his sister out of the room, and it still held the smell of her make-up and perfume. They had mixed with his dream and become the smell of the librarian. Malcolm shook his head, trying to wake himself.

At just past forty he was not the kind of man to still be living in the family home, and he didn’t. He’d come home for the summer to take care of his mother, and he had not yet gotten used to the fact of waking and sleeping in her house. All his patterns were off, and he would sleep from five until nine in the evening, and then be awake the rest of the night. Sometimes, when the night was quiet, this was good; Malcolm could stand at the easel and paint. But more often he felt reluctant to move, worried his restlessness would wake his mother.

To tell the truth, he was not so much taking care of his mother as he was watching her die, although this was not entirely his fault. He watched her weaken, her stamina decrease, and her voice grow softer, while she refused any attempts of help. She was not rude or angry, but Malcolm felt like she resented his presence, like he was a metronome tapping out her final moments. It was just after nine. Pushing himself from his chair, he went to check on her.

"You feeling alright?" Malcolm asked, as he walked into the kitchen.

"No." The old woman wore a long nightgown, her bare feet sat purple on the floor.
"Anything I can do?" He poured himself the last of the coffee and unplugged the pot.

"No."

"Good." That was how they spoke these days, simple questions and one word answers. Together they avoided any mention that she might be dying.

He left his mother sitting in the kitchen, and walked back into the room he called his study. The room was small. Its single window faced into the wall of the neighbor’s house, so it was private, if oddly lit. He had only placed two things in the room, his painting supplies and the straight backed chair. The walls were bare but two toned where his sister’s pictures had hung for fifteen years. At first he had intended on painting the room, making the walls bright and uniform, but as he worked in the room he found that the faded walls absorbed the electric glare.

He felt the painting he was working on was progressing, and he was pleased with it, but he did not pick up any paint. She had bothered him all summer. He knew her name—Sharon—and he had been watching her, wanting to talk to her, but had been unable to create the courage. He knew she was married and that was part of what stopped him, but the other part was more difficult to isolate. The best he could do was say she made him feel young, immature, pubescent.

When he’d begun to talk to her this afternoon, his flirtation had been natural, the tone he adopted outside of his control. He did not mind that she thought he was a vagrant. That was funny—it gave him the sense of being mysterious. Malcolm replayed the conversation in his head, and except for a single thing he’d said, he’d enjoyed every moment of it. Not wanting a library card because he did not plan to stick around felt like a betrayal.
On the one hand it was simply accurate, the agreed plan. He would spend the summer here, doing research, painting, and watching over his mother. In the fall they would make decisions; he would stay, or his sister would come, or his mother would leave. But something about the library card stuck with him. At the end of the summer he was not planning on coming back, and he did not think his mother would live the three weeks until he left. He'd watched her grow weaker, become less communicative, and had decided she no longer had the will to live.

But he had not admitted that to himself until he denied the library card, and he denied his mother as well. He did not want to paint, and he did not want to sit in this stuffy little house. He knew Sharon's home number and was tempted to call her. He wanted to take her to dinner and take her to bed. He had not been to bed with a woman since school ended. But he could do none of those things. His mother was dying in the next room, and she wanted to go to mass at six in the morning.

Malcolm looked at his painting and forced thoughts of Sharon away. He had long ago decided that the human body was a fine subject for art, but his sexual fancy was not. He could no more paint a lover than he could view a lover painted. It seemed to him outdated that artists would still think they could mine the depth of their hearts for meaning. Meaning, he knew, was ephemeral. Meaning in art was doubly so. Malcolm wanted to present meaning like it was a movement caught from the corner of your eye. He painted realistic paintings with anachronistic, implausible, images. Michael Jordan in an Indiana gym, Jordan in the foreground, his muscles, like Superman's, bursting from a tight high school uniform. He painted an urban midnight of chemical plants and coal stacks, and populated
them with boys and girls carrying umbrellas and holding hands. He painted race-cars blurred with speed, and song birds perched on their antennas.

Most often people told him that race cars did not have antennas, and that Larry Bird, and not Michael Jordan, was from Indiana. He was okay with that, and he took their remarks humbly. Then when he went home he painted his critics' faces into lumps of deer turd. Each one of his finished pieces, the ones he kept, had been painted over four or five other attempts. Malcolm enjoyed the depth this layering engendered; he liked to think of the art critic who fell in love with the painting of his face painted as a donkey's ass. The face, the ass, and the donkey visible only to Malcom.

Malcolm painted for two hours and he did not think of the librarian once. He was working on a picture of a lake shore at night. He worked from a photograph he had taken last summer from a canoe. The camera was facing east, and caught a sliver of the moon peeking up over the trees. Near the bottom of the photo, right off shore, two loons swam. Malcolm deleted the loons, and inserted four bear cubs sitting around a campfire. So far he had resisted the temptation to place a VW Bug or a school bus behind them. The joke seemed funny to him, reflexive, but he also knew it would be repetitive.

As much to stop himself from making mistakes as from fatigue, he put his paint brush down and went to get some coffee. He knew how his art worked, and he knew that the bus would have to be painted, but he wanted to forestall that moment for as long as possible. He felt if he resisted making the mistake for a long time he could disavow it in the future. But he also knew that the bug or the bus would be what enabled the painting to sell.

His mother was still at the table. He had no idea if she had moved or not. He went up to her and gave her a kiss.
"Feeling well?"
"No."
"Any pain?"
"No."
"Is that a real no, or just a complaint?"
"That all I do around here? Complain?"
"No. You also drink coffee and smoke."
"I shoulda drowned you when I had the chance."
"Well, I'll be in the shower, if you want a second chance."

He kissed her again, his guilt making him more effusive than normal, but he didn’t go to shower. The kitchen had a sliding door that led to a small porch and Malcolm stepped outside. He walked down the steps and out into the backyard. A barn owl hissed, and its friend replied. Malcolm walked into the garage, not bothering to turn on lights. The ball sat behind the door, right where it had always been. It was crusty and flat, but would serve his purpose. He left the garage and walked into the alley. The netless rim was illuminated by the street light on the corner. He lofted a shot, knees creaking as he tried to jump, and the ball fell well short of the rim, landing with a thud on the cement. Gravity stuck it where it was, and it didn’t even bother to roll an inch. Malcolm didn’t bother to go get it.

Malcolm thought he heard thunder, but when he looked up the sky was clear. He did a knee bend, and another. His joints felt as though they were full of glass. He left the alley and went inside. The basketball sat like a half moon in a starless night.
Chapter 9

Anything for Nothing, Nothing for Anything

Mosquitoes and crickets slapped against the kitchen windows, and lightning bugs sparkled for the attention of their mates. Armatage Shanks emptied his final beer. After collecting the five green bottles in front of him and rinsing each one in the sink, Armatage placed them carefully in the basket marked "Recycle." He slid open the kitchen door and let his old dog in; she walked straight past him. If Armatage was going to be up at six he would need to be in bed soon. Armatage walked through the downstairs, turning off the lights and television. When he was done he walked up the stairway in complete darkness.

Armatage took pride in his ability to navigate through his darkened house. Sharon had removed the normal things, tables and laundry baskets, from the hallway, so there was very little chance Armatage would hurt himself. He was halfway through the hall when he stopped short at a sound. Although there was nothing sinister or frightening about the sound, it was not normal. For the second or third time that month Armatage heard the round, private, giggle of his grandfather. It was not a laugh meant for other people to hear.

That the eighty-nine-year-old Gordon was laughing in the bathroom did not mean he was masturbating—Armatage didn't know if masturbation was still possible at that age, and it didn't sound like that kind of a laugh—but Armatage was unsure of what exactly else you would be doing laughing in the toilet while the rest of the house was asleep. Armatage was faced with a dilemma, and he placed his ear next to the door while he thought. Should he give a hearty and parental knock and ask, "What are you doing in there?" After all, Kara's room was right next door. Or should he be especially stern and say, "No dicking around in there," and then laugh to himself at his pun.
Armatage did the same thing he had done on the previous times he'd encountered Gordon in the bathroom. He did nothing. He left Gordon alone, feeling bad that the old man was stuck living at his house.

Armatage’s room was somehow darker than the hallway, so he assumed Minge was in bed, although he could not see her. He stumbled quietly into their bathroom. When Armatage flipped on the wall switch a dim table lamp lit the room. The rose-colored walls seemed to glow. Sharon had picked out the color, and Armatage had spent two days scraping, sanding, priming, and painting the crooked little room. He wasn’t a fan of the color, but his opinion had never been asked for. He would have told her it looked like the boudoir of a whore. He laughed, then he caught himself and paused, waiting for his laugh to fade away. A sleeping whore. He laughed again, listening, but this time it was different. What he heard was adult and controlled. Gordon’s laugh was simple but devious. Arm tried again. He lowered his chin, his face peering over his potted-belly. He let go of a quick, timid guffaw, this was closer. He tried to believe everything he did was ridiculous, but the sound he made was nothing like Gordon’s.

Armatage stood in front of his mirror and squeezed his blackheads. The man was eighty-nine, and ever since his wife had died he'd been telling stories. Armatage squeezed a long thin strand from the top of his nose. The thing was impressive, and if it had not curled upon itself it would have measured more than six inches. What the hell was wrong with his family? He'd been fired, his daughter wouldn't get him a beer, his grandfather spent hours making up stories from the Depression, and his wife no longer liked his nick-names. Without a doubt he deserved some of this, had maybe even courted it, but to have everything pile up at once was beginning to border on the stupid.
Armatage was not really worried about Kara. She’d had a bad day. Armatage was probably just frustrated that she was leaving. And Sharon was just nervous. She’d come around. But Gordon had never been like this. The whole time Armatage was growing up, Gordon had said maybe a hundred things, and “Get the hell out of here” made up probably fifty percent of them.

Armatage unzipped his pants. Standing over the toilet, he tried to decide whether he saw a slight lump on the spine of his penis. Halfway up the underside, it protruded maybe two millimeters past the skin. Armatage had never seen any discoloration, and it caused him no pain. His middle finger moved over the area in question. He wasn’t sure if it was really there. He knew he’d always been a bit of a paranoid, and he zipped his pants. He was not inclined to worry about a lump which did not hurt, which he wasn’t sure he could see, and, half the time, couldn’t feel. Although he’d never asked her, he’d been waiting for Minge to say something. Armatage figured he could continue to wait.
Chapter 10

Family Matters

Her mother was speaking, but Julie wasn't really listening; she held the phone away from her ear. Her mother was a transplanted New Yorker who never forgave herself for leaving the City, and as a result, though she had moved nearly thirty years ago, she still carried the thick Staten Island accent. She sounded like a cross between Frank Sinatra and Bette Midler. It was okay to sound like Fran Drescher if you had to, but after midnight, over the telephone, it took all of Julie's resolve not to hang up. Anyway, they had the same conversation every time, and Julie did not feel like being an active participant in what was coming.

"It's no life Julie. I've been in this state for over twenty years, and I will never get used to it."

"You can leave."

"I can't just pick up and leave, Julie." Her mother took a breath as though she was talking to an imbecile. "Your sister is here. I have a job here. That's all I have left."

Julie did not feel like rising to the bait. She lay naked and freshly showered between new sheets. She loved the feeling of coming to bed half wet and climbing into cool, clean sheets. She was constantly buying new sets of sheets to replace ones that had worn out from over-washing.

"It's not as though you're ugly," Julie said. "And you're young. You could find some man, buy an RV and see the country."

"I've lost all my family once. I am not going to do it again."
When her mother started making sweeping generalizations of misery, it was time to hang up. It was not worthwhile for Julie to try and defend herself, but she tried anyway.

"You are not going to lose us." Julie's sister Margaret had gone to Ohio State, and now that Margaret had graduated, she lived three blocks from their mother. It would take something like a hurricane or flood to separate them.

"You know Margaret's boyfriend isn't from around here. And you're..."

"Mom, I'm sorry." Julie had interrupted, and she knew she was rude, but she didn't want to hear about how she didn't have a boyfriend, and how she had abandoned her mother, and how her mother was going to die old and alone, an alien in a foreign country. "I've got to be up early in the morning."

"Fine. I'll call you on Sunday."

"Good. I love you."

"Good."

_I love you...Good._ Her mother was such a little bitch sometimes. Julie knew why but did not really understand. Her father had dragged the family to Ohio, and her mother had never really forgiven him. The sheets were warm and wet where Julie had been lying. She felt bad about her mother. She should not have called her a bitch. She'd been a fine mother, just compulsive. But why couldn't she just go back to New York?

The alarm clock on Julie's bedside table was the only light in her room, and it cast a lime green glow over everything. Her clothes were lying in the doorway to the bathroom. A second, and tonight unnecessary, blanket was bunched on the floor. The walls held framed posters of famous paintings: Matisse, Cassat, Degas. On her bedstand were two books:

_Making Sense of Your Fertility Signals_ and _The Man With the Golden Arm_. A glass of water
and a thermometer sat on her cycle charts. She did not believe in the moon cycle or lining up with all of her friends, and she was not planning on getting pregnant, but she wanted to make sure she was healthy and operating on a schedule. She wanted to know what was coming when. In college she'd been on the pill, and when she came off it, the resultant weight gain and body acne had concerned her. Her doctor said it was not the pill's fault, it was simply the phase her body would be in anyway, a matter of diet and exercise, and the pill had done nothing but cover up the imbalance. Every book she read more or less agreed, but Julie didn't really buy it. Chemicals were chemicals, and although some were found in nature, it didn't mean it was wise to mess with your natural balance.

Julie sat up. The room was hot, and sweat gathered on her temples. She looked at the clock, sighed, and lay back down. A light rain splashed against the window, and Julie could hear that the wind had picked up. She would have to be up in six hours, and although she was fresh and awake now, she knew that by morning chances were she'd sleep through her alarm.
Chapter 11
Cold War

Sharon was only half sleeping when Armatage crawled into bed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just, I'm just unhappy."

"And me?" Sharon said. She felt sorry for Armatage, and wanted to help. But what she wanted to say was, "Where do you get off acting as if you are the only person whose shit stinks?" She didn't say that. Instead, she reached her hand out and stroked his head.

"I know," she said. "Nobody likes to get fired."

"It's not getting fired. Okay, it is a little, but it was before that. It was almost as much having not been fired for so long, as it is to be fired now. I have been waiting and waiting to be found out, and now that they got me, I just wonder who else will?"

"That's ridiculous. You know damn well there's nothing to find."

"They're going to find what they already know." Armatage lay on his back, his hands folded under his head.

"It's late. And you're not making any sense," Sharon said. "I'll tell you what, you roll over and go to sleep. Tomorrow I'll make us reservations downtown. We'll spend a night out of the house, see a movie or a play, have a nice dinner, get drunk."

"I don't want to go to sleep. It's all I do." Armatage stared at the ceiling. His petulance grated on Sharon. "It's all I do. I sleep. When I'm awake, when I'm at work, on the bus, I'm asleep. I'm not saying I'm bored or anything. I don't know what I'm saying."

"You're saying you don't want to go to sleep." Sharon's patience was not running out, but she was tired, too. She knew Armatage only meant half of what he was saying. That's the thing about depression. It seems so immediate that it discolors all the things you enjoy.
and makes you think that you hate them and will always hate them. "You're saying you are depressed, and that you want to make an appointment with some doctor so that he can give you a clinical name."

"You don't have to be mean."

"Dammit, Armatage. Every time I comment I am either stupid or mean." Sharon got out of bed. "Just God dammit."

Armatage watched as Sharon walked into the bathroom. He did not move his head, he only followed her with his eyes. She was in there for five minutes, and he spent the time she was gone staring at the ceiling. He wanted someone to feel his frustration and anger. And he wanted to forget it, to be a larger person than his anger. But he also wanted to share it. He heard Sharon when she walked into the room, but he did not watch. When she was back in bed the room was quiet. Not silent. Armatage was breathing; he could hear Sharon breathing. He listened to the hum of the forced air, and the frustration that lay between them. Armatage focused on the pit in his stomach, probed at it, and enjoyed it. He knew he was looking for reasons to get at Sharon, but he was also trying to be better than that. He wanted to blame her for something, for Kara leaving, for being mad that Gordon was living there, for not having any clean socks. Yet he also wanted to let all the negative energy flow out of him, to forget it. The effort to control himself confused him, and several times he opened his mouth to speak, sometimes to yell at her, sometimes to apologize. But he never said anything, and closed his mouth as quietly as he could.

Sharon stayed awake for some time. Not depressed, just mad. She didn't probe her memories, and when she heard him open his mouth, she waited for what he might say. She tried not to be bored. Sharon knew he was trying to relax himself, she could feel the tension
surrounding him like a shield. As his breath slowed and he drifted off to sleep, Sharon's anger grew. The wind picked up outside, rattling the screens. She worried over the lone oak tree in their back yard, old and rotting. During every storm since they had moved into their house, Sharon had listened to the wind and thought, "This is the fiercest wind yet." She feared every storm, waiting for the crash of her tree falling to earth. She'd calculated the angles: a south wind would probably mean the tree took out the neighbor's fence, a west wind the backside neighbor's garage, a north wind would land the tree safely in their own back yard. The only real danger would be wind blowing from the east. That wind had blown only once or twice in the years they had owned the house. They were in all probability safe. Still, it was their tree, it was rotten, and Sharon felt guilty for not taking care of it. She knew it should come down, but she loved that tree. It had been, before they knew it was rotten, a reason for buying their house. The wide canopy of tiny leaves gave the yard character, and it stopped their yard from looking like everyone else's. When they'd first moved in they had geared up to rake torrents of leaves in the fall, but instead, the leaves shriveled on the limbs. If they fell at all, they disappeared by the time they hit the ground.

Gradually, worrying about the tree calmed her, and Sharon fell asleep. The sun shone above her yard like weak tea. A light breeze, like a child blowing on a pin-wheel, caressed the tree. For no reason, the tree fell. Answering the riddle, it came down in a long soundless arc, into the neighbor's yard, its trunk split in two. Sharon watched through the walls of her house as inside the trunk dogs and cattle and foxes left their now destroyed homes. Fifty, maybe a hundred animals came out and grazed in her knee-high grass. Sharon wanted to walk out and touch them, apologize for ruining their home, but she was afraid of the foxes and the wolves and the raccoons. The sun lit the animals like cartoon characters.
Peels of thunder woke Sharon to a room flashing with lightning. She heard rain against the roof, and her mind immediately went back to her tree. She would feel terrible if it fell down. Armatage lay in the crook of her shoulder. He was awake, and Sharon turned her head, kissing him on the forehead.


"Arm, do you still love me?" The question surprised her even as she asked it.

"I'd sure like to try to," he said. His voice was bright. "But I am getting older."

She pushed him away, and his voice swam with the song. "It doesn't matter what you wear, just as long as you are there. Every guy grab a girl everywhere around the world."

"I mean it. Do you?" Sharon had followed him as he rolled away and now had her arm around him. She bit his ear.

Armatage hemmed and hawed, pretending to think. When he was fourteen Armatage dated a girl for an entire year. In that time they came close to losing their virginity to each other. As it happened, they didn't. After they broke up, Arm didn't lose his virginity for three years, three years longer than he considered healthy. He held Sharon's arm to his chest and thought about that girl. He had no idea what had become of her, but he remembered the only lie he ever really told her. They had been to a beach party with twenty or thirty kids. They'd built a fire and played frisbee until the police came around to send them all home. During the party his girlfriend went off with her friends and Armatage played frisbee and went swimming until, by accident, he started talking to a different girl. This new girl was tall and straight, the type of girl you never noticed in school but who sprouts up in July with perfect posture and a blue flowered sundress. Instantly she made Armatage want to be taller,
to stand straighter, hold his stomach in tighter. She was a drill sergeant of love, and
Armatage loved her immediately. They talked, and she laughed. His girlfriend was off with
her friends, and this other girl lay in the sand laughing at his jokes. Her shoulders and arms
seemed unbearably easy to touch.

Nothing happened. When the policeman came and they were sent packing, Armatage
found his girlfriend and the two of them set off for her house. It was still early when they got
there, and they stayed in her front yard kissing and teasing and watching whatever stars they
could see. After a while, because she was a perceptive girl, his girlfriend asked him,
"Armatage, do you love me more than anyone else?" And Armatage, who had not exactly
been in the yard, who had not exactly been paying attention to the girl he had been dating for
some time, said, "Of course I love you more than anyone else."

"I mean it," Sharon repeated into the storm-lit room. "Do you?"

"Sharon, I love you more today than I ever have."
Chapter 12

Young, Pregnant, and Progressive

Kara was tired, her feet were red and sweaty, and they had begun to blister. Her sandals were loose, not made for walking, and her calves burned from holding them in place. It was silly, really. It was summer, and she was young and in shape. She should be fit and ready to run a marathon, but here she was, sore-footed and ready to sit down. A stiff rain was growing heavier, and lightning she’d been watching for an hour clattered over her. Kara had walked far enough that she wondered how she was going to get home, although she knew she did not have to go home at all. She worked at five, and every morning she was out of the house before anyone got up. If they didn’t know she was gone, then they wouldn’t miss her. Besides, she didn’t feel tired. Her feet were tired, but she felt active and alert. She crossed over Garfield Street, a connector road that was lined with small businesses. In front of her lay a lake, and south of her a reserve of trails and wetlands.

She crossed through a parking lot, and then through the small park that separated Garfield from the lake. There had been cars in the parking lot, but she had not seen anyone. It was just as well if no one saw her. The lake was covered with a green slime and wrinkled by six-inch waves.

She walked south along a bike path until it cut between two strands of trees. She turned into the lakeside strand and made her way to the water. Sitting on the retaining wall, she undid her sandals and slipped her feet into the water. She knew she should be careful of the lightning, but she was as invisible to the world as she could make herself and figured the odds were in her favor. Even with the rain the night felt warm and thick, and as she kicked her legs idly, the lake did not feel much different. She knew she should be thinking, she
should be feeling, but she felt incapable. She leaned against the trunk of a tree and was shielded somewhat from the rain. She tried to envision school and her pregnancy and realized all she could do was wait and hope she got things right. Rain the size of tear drops puddled on the algae, and Kara closed her eyes—not sleeping, but resting—to the receding thunder.
Chapter 13

Common Cause

Carol Halberg lay uncovered in her bunk. The motorhome was dark and closed, and Carol had not so much been sleeping as trying to continue breathing. She threw her feet out over the edge of the bed, and her back, swollen from yesterday's walking, was slow to follow. It almost refused to bend at all.

With her feet she felt the spine of her young companion asleep on the floor. He was wearing only boxers, and his strong smooth back was turned to her. Even in the dark, even without her glasses, she could see his body clearly. She was too old to blush, but she smiled to herself. You dirty bird.

Since they were in no hurry, she let Sammy sleep. She'd had him for a just a week, but already she knew she was blessed by his company. His was a face she had seen in other places, on television, on the heads of good people, fair people. He'd be leaving, and although Carol knew someone would take his place, she didn't know what she'd do without him.

What she needed was water and rest. Heat and the sun had stretched her skin tightly over her bones. She needed to sleep on a bed of cucumbers and seaweed, but she'd spend the day walking ten miles and talking to every person who would listen. The politicians and the police would ignore her. The waitresses and the bums sleeping in the culverts would help her learn what she needed to know. She would walk and she would talk and she would remember.

Carol was too old for death, and it held no interest for her. Death does not stop anyone; living was what stopped them. What people call the afterlife Carol knew was really
just recycling and decay. If she got the chance, Carol wanted to come back as a mosquito. That was the bird for her. Not migratory or a scavenger, the mosquito lives, breeds, and dies. Carol had been lucky so far, but she wanted to come back with a shorter lifespan next time, and if she could cause a bump or two along the way, so much the better.

It took her a while, but she managed to exit the Airstream without waking Sammy. The boy could sleep on nails. There was a portable table and two chairs alongside the old camper. Carol used the front of her nightgown to wipe the table down. She lit the stove and put water on to boil. Crickets and kingbirds serenaded the clearing sky. Lightning in the east was surrounded by the purple of the coming dawn. With disjointed fingers, Carol tuned the portable radio. A hillbilly rocker sang about dirty diesels and homewreckers.

Carol was a woman who knew a thing or two about movement and ecotones, about how to live forever, and how to die a time or two. What she knew wasn't anything to brag about, and was available to anyone who paid attention. Her life stretched out before her in the wildest manner, and she remembered. In the mornings she remembered her husband, dead five years. She remembered their house and their garden and their friends. She remembered the vibrant lives she had seen grow brittle and hazardous. Mostly she remembered America—almost a dirty word these days. Her father had known a man—just ten years older than him—who had known Lincoln, the president and emancipator. How odd to think of Lincoln as a contemporary, merely a grandfather. How odd to be able to reach back and be able to touch something so real, and yet so ephemeral. Carol had been a part of nothing but history. She remembered Debs and the Hoosier Poet, Joe Hill and Big Bill Haywood, Sacco and Vanzetti. She remembered food lines, the IWW and Emma Goldman, the Black Panthers and Freedom Riders, young Malcolm and Martin. She remembered both
wars and all the murder that never qualified. Mostly what she remembered was when people mattered, tried to matter, thought they could matter, before everything had been sold out from under them and could only be bought back at a loss. She remembered the myth of the golden age and the great leap forward, and was old enough to wonder if any of her memories had happened. She was smart enough to wonder if any of it mattered, and if it didn't—if it doesn't—then Carol was smart enough to wonder what the hell hope she had? She had lived through history, but she was not historic.

The trees dripped rain, and stars as young as kittens twinkled down. A cup of coffee steamed in front of her, and Carol rubbed her wrists, her elbows, her arms, her shoulders, her temples, her thighs, her knees. She would have rubbed her calves and ankles and her swollen feet if her back had let her. She enjoyed the freedom of being out of her back brace, the freedom of slouching in a chair and kicking her feet out in front of her. She'd let Sammy sleep so that she could stay free. She was tired of the fifteen pounds in her back pack, of the silly ribbon that kept her hat on tight. She was tired of the lumpy motorhome bed, of baked beans and tuna fish. She was tired of her day-glow vest and the whistling trucks it protected her from. But this was one tough lady, and all things considered, she wasn't tired of much. A cat or coon flashed its eyes at her, and a cough came up through her chest. She tried to keep it quiet and failed. It was after three o'clock in the morning. It was August, and the temperature hovered around ninety. Carol Halberg had been on the road for seven months.
Chapter 14

Toilet Humor

A door opened into the second floor hallway at the Shanks’ residence. Two veined feet stepped into the hall. The feet were naked, as was the body to which they were attached. A second door opened and a light briefly filled the hallway. The door closed and the hallway was dark. The hallway held its breath. The sound of urine splattering on porcelain. An old man laughing. The toilet flushed, and the sink was turned on, then off. The process was repeated. The door opened but no light poured out. It had been extinguished. "I remember where we hid it," the old man laughed. "I remember where we hid it." The two feet danced into the hallway, and the original door opened, then shut. Peace at last. The hallway clock chimed four times.
Chapter 15

Broken

Glenn Roberts awoke in the still dark, and he wished that it wasn't. The stillness didn't bother him, but the darkness did; he was not yet meant to be awake. He had kicked the blankets off himself and over the edge of his bed, but now that the storm had passed his air conditioner had caught hold, and he shivered on his wet sheets. A woman danced in his head, a John Travolta boogie, the locomotion, the twist, the surf, the Macarena. The damp cotton drew heat away from his body, and Candy, his cat, slept on the pillow next to him.

He felt guilty and aroused. He was not fully awake, and the world did not make any sense. Is sense a condition for consciousness? If it is, what is real? And if anything can be real, how can we distinguish it from what is not? He rubbed his neck where the cop had stomped on him, and turned on the television.

The pre-morning morning news was on. An advert for the healing power of rice was on. Archie Bunker was on. One Day At a Time, Different Strokes, Cheers, Seinfeld, M*A*S*H, NASCAR, Poker, The American President, Welcome Back Cotter, The Green Party National Convention—all this was on and more. Yet once Glenn had raced through the channels he switched the television off. He needed something. Action. Excitement. Sleep. He needed to stretch out his body and get rid of the tension that was threatening to become anger. He retrieved the covers from the floor and closed his eyes. One breath, two breaths, three. Deep ones. They didn't work, so he kicked off the covers, and jumped out of bed. Candy lifted her head but didn't get up. He pulled on socks and shorts and shoes. Candy was fine; she'd fall back asleep. He pulled his laces tight, tight enough to restrict blood flow, and was out the door.
The night was warm and damp, and water sat in puddles and ponds waiting to evaporate, but the air didn't want it, couldn't hold it. Glenn Roberts stood in his back yard and watched the houses around him. The Miller's house was dark, the Abernathy's television was on, someone was walking around the Turner's kitchen, and the Shanks' bathroom light was on. Glenn's legs began to rock in a quick, jittery shiver. Water dripped from trees and mimicked the sound of rain. He was almost positive her name was Sharon, and she had a husband and a kid.

Although Glenn had moved in more than two years ago, he didn't know the people on the block, and he had never walked around introducing himself. He knew where they worked, and he had a good idea of how much they drank, how much they fought, and who was overextended on their credit, but he had never been in their houses, and he was certainly not friends with any of them. He watched things—someone had to. When the McAlester's had been out of town and someone broke into their house, it was Glenn who'd called the police. He watched and he noted and he thought, but he did not enter into conversation lightly.

Glenn bent his head down towards his ankle, his shorts tightening up over his ass. Somehow Sharon was different. She was older than Glenn, and he found himself watching her whenever he could and, although he didn't like to admit it, performing for her. His torso swayed back and forth, and he stretched out his neck. When the light went out in the bathroom, Glenn figured he was ready. He followed his sidewalk around to the front of his house and took off.

He ran at a quality pace, lifting his knees up over his waist and concentrating on extending his stride. His feet were kicking up spray from the road, and by the end of the first
block he was soaked. His under-arms, his head, and his legs were all covered with perspiration. Even his breath was moist and foggy. The street lights, the sidewalks, and the houses oozed swamp gas, but he pushed through it. In six minutes he'd run a mile, in twelve minutes he'd run two and reached the end of the sidewalk. Usually this was where Glenn turned around, but Sharon was still dancing, her fingers running up and down his spine. He had to be at work by seven-thirty, but he stepped lightly off the curb and into the road.

When the idea of sleeping with Sharon had first come to him a year ago, he had enjoyed the idea of having a crush. It was funny to think of sleeping with an older woman, but also exciting. He started to enjoy watching her as she moved around her house. He figured out her schedule and saw her frustration when she was with her husband. He imagined they were growing closer, and the first time he'd used her to masturbate—a rain-soaked entanglement in the back of her mini-van—he'd felt guilty. When they met at his fence over mutual yard work, he was sure that she knew all about him. He felt lucky to be sweating already, or she'd have seen him blush.

All summer Glenn spent every possible minute in his back yard. He began a garden, putting in three raised organic beds. He painted his house, and just yesterday he finished replacing all the windows that faced the Shanks' yard. He found that when on the ladder, he could see into their kitchen.

The memory of her dancing was like electric shock under his skin and Glenn ran faster, completing the third and fourth miles in under ten minutes each. He was not counting, but it was the fourth night in a row he had dreamt of her. He was beginning to believe it was more than dreaming, that she was coming to him and asking for his help. Glenn was beginning to believe that Sharon needed to escape from her house and that he could save her.
He was sane enough to realize he was being ridiculous, that when Sharon danced in his
dreams he was merely being tempted, but at the end of the fourth mile, the temptation was
still with him. He felt it like he was being watched; it was as if he had just passed under a
tree where a mountain lion was sitting. He ran faster. Sharon was still haunting him—asking
him for help—and he could not turn back until she stopped.
Chapter 16

Broke

The road was two lanes with wide shoulders, but Glenn ran down the center line, pushing water out, breathing water in. He was drowning in all the water, his breath a hoarse wheeze. He ran past small farms with red barns whose paint was molding and peeling off. In two years, the fields of corn and mint and onion would be gone and in their place would be monotonous triple-wide streets that would meander stupidly among twenty thousand identical houses. Identical rooms, drapes, yards, bikes, kids, babysitters and policemen would grow old together.

When Glenn had run five miles, he stopped. His heart felt as though it was going to explode out of his chest. He still had to run back. He bent at the waist for a moment to catch his breath, then straightened up and placed his hands on his head. He was going to catch his breath, stretch, and go home. On the side of the road, in a small pull out, an old woman sat next to an old aluminum motorhome. She sat, wrinkled and stooped, in a green nightgown, staring off into space. Hopefully she was not driving the vehicle. Hopefully she was just a grandmother tagging along on her son’s family vacation. She sat at a small table, and a double-burner stove glowed green under a coffee pot.

"You sure are up early." The old woman spoke, but he had not seen her mouth move. If he had to guess her age, if he was on TV or something, he’d say eighty-five. He smiled. It just wasn't every day that you saw eighty-five-year-olds camping by the side of the road.

"I wasn't sure I really saw you."

"Not many people are."

Glenn was not sure how to respond to that. His shoes sank into the gravel shoulder.
"I'd offer you some coffee, but I don't imagine you'd be interested." She looked at him from head to toe, and smiled.

"I'm fine."

"I have water inside. I could get you some, but I don't want to wake-up my young friend."

Young friend? Glenn smiled. He imagined an eighty-year-old grandfather asleep under an army blanket. Now that he was next to her, he thought she was much older. Her face was covered in wrinkles, and those wrinkles were wrinkled. They formed deep canyons upon her face, canyons piled upon side canyons. A person could get lost in there, and Glenn had to look away. He'd have to tell the announcer that she was ninety-five, maybe a hundred.

"That's all right," he said. "I don't want to cramp up on my way back." Glenn looked at the Airstream. There was a long scratch that ran down its side. He looked through the trees at the farm beyond them. The corn had tasseled and was taller than he was. "If you don't mind my asking," he said, "what are you doing out here anyway?"

"I couldn't sleep. When you get as old as I am, you go to bed late and wake up early."

"No, I meant out here, off the side of this road?"

"I'm walking."

"You are out walking? And I guess you’re pulling that Airstream as you go?" Glenn laughed.

"No," the old woman said. "My young friend pulls it."

"And how old is your young friend?" Glenn laughed and laughed.

"Listen, young man, you can just move on and continue with your hamster exercise."

Her eyes were a watery blue, bloodshot and moist, but they looked right through Glenn.
"You think you know things. You think it's funny to laugh at an old woman walking, then go ahead. Ha Ha Ha." She threw her head back and Glenn saw more gizzard then you'd see on a rooster.

Her dry cackle cut into Glenn. He was not used to being ridiculed, at least not so publicly. He shifted on his feet, sweat hanging to him like velvet. "I'm sorry," he said.

Carol sat easy. She'd spoken harshly, but at five a.m., who didn't? She'd met all sorts of people—odd-balls and wanderers. She'd spent nights sleeping in culverts among men she could only imagine slept on knives and guns. She'd been alone and she'd felt safe. Some of the men spoke nonsense, of course. Some were a lug short of a nut, a dollar short of a cent, but Carol had simply tried to listen and understand.

Carol had walked out of the depression, the dustbowl, and to her there was no shame sleeping by the side of the road. It was where you slept when you were broke but not broken. What she learned, when she listened to those men and women—and surprisingly often children—was that even after seventy years of walking with their grandparents’ feet they were not broken. They might be dinged and bent and scraped, but each of them—the ones who proposed marriage or wanted to dance around the campfire, or who held their hugs twenty seconds too long—they were all somehow grand. Carol knew they might not even be good people, that some were criminals, most had seen jails, and all had been in fights. But she felt safe with them. Unaccountably safe. And as she walked, more and more it was for these men and women and children. So this little punk, all smug and laughing, though he made her mad, didn't upset her.

"I'm sorry, I..." Glenn repeated.

"Don't be sorry, be better."
Glenn was caught up. His throat tightened and went dry. It was too strange: the humidity, this lady out in the middle of nowhere. He felt sure it was a trick of the light. But what right did she have to correct him? She didn't know shit about him. He laughed again nervously.

"Aren't you...Isn't it...I mean." Old. He wanted to tell her she was old. "Don't you get tired?"

"Who's tired at five in the morning? I mean what the hell are you doing out here anyway?"

"Running. Staying in shape."

"We're what, five, ten miles out of town? And you think I'm crazy for walking ten miles a day."

"Not crazy, I guess. Just, aren't you nervous?"

"I'm ninety-five years old. Of course I'm tired, but what is there to be nervous about? My husband is dead, my best friend is dead. I am ninety-five years old—what is there to be afraid of? Death? Where would you rather die? Outside walking, or in some starched sick bed somewhere, dazed by narcotics and packaged food? No sir. I am not tired. No sir. I am not afraid. You are going to think I sound paranoid, but I am not; you have to be afraid to be paranoid. Big business wants you to be afraid. They want you to be paranoid. It used to be enough to keep whites and blacks apart, but they stopped making enough money that way. Don't mistake me, they still make their money. Now they want the whole country divided, to fight and squabble over nothing." It was a habit, this speech making, and she was not inclined to temper it. If she had learned anything, and she had learned many things, it was that people listened. They might look disinterested or angry or stupid, but people listened
and they remembered. That's what advertisers banked on, and it was what she was counting on. "Listen." She looked at the young man and her eyes were gentle. "Listen to people complain about the service they get, and all of the expenses passed onto them. It used to be that business understood that they had to provide service. Now some asshole decided they have to charge for everything. Most of the time when people are talking about the glory days, they are either lying or confused. But it's not a lie that you used to get things for free. You did, and nowadays you get nothing and pay for it twice. Listen, don't believe me. Walk away, and go home. I am just some crazy grayhair on the side of the road." She'd gone too far. It was early, and the day was looking to be wonderful, yet here she was being foul to this nice young man. This was not her. Something felt wrong. She was not afraid of him, she wasn't hardly afraid anymore, but he'd put her on guard.

Glenn was bruised. He'd never known his grandmother; she was dead before he was born. He’d never known his father either. He had his name, Robert, but not his last name. His mother always said she never knew it. He realized now that when he’d seen this woman, he’d thought she might be his grandmother, sitting there waiting to help him. Did he need help? Glenn sat down. He looked at the woman. He thought about smoking, but obviously had no cigarettes on him.

"We seem to have gotten off poorly." The radio was telling them to go west and realize their dreams. "My name is Glenn." He held his hand out to her.

"Glenn. Carol." They sat for a moment, looking into the brightening sky. "Listen," Carol began. "I'm sorry. I've been mean. It's just, something set me off." She was quiet, but not finished, so Glenn waited. "Listen. Do you hear that cowbird?"

"I hear a bird."
"There's more than one." Carol reached and turned the radio off. "The cowbird is going, glug-glug-glee." She said it once slowly, and then repeated it at normal speed.

"There, did you hear it?" Her hand pointed in the direction the call had come from.

"Sure."

"Do you know what a cowbird does?" She paused. "Perhaps it's more important what they don't do. They don't build nests. They mate and then lay eggs in the nests of other birds. One egg in each nest. Sometimes they even remove whatever eggs are already in the nest. They are essentially parasites. Their eggs are larger, their incubation times shorter, their chicks larger than the birds whose nests they use. When a chick hatches, it has a couple of ways of out-competing the host bird's chicks; it either kicks the competitor's eggs from the nest, or, if the chicks themselves are already hatched, it shoves them out. If that doesn't work, if they are too big to push out, well the cow bird is bigger, and it simply sticks its mouth out further and with more strength. The poor parent birds expend all of their energy feeding the intruder and their own hatchlings starve. The host-birds for cowbirds are the song-birds, warblers, vireos, sparrows, and tanagers. Small, wonderful birds, all full of personality. As the cowbird grows, it becomes comical in the way sick things are comical. By the time it leaves the nest and fledges, it has outgrown its parents. The damn thing is twice the size, three times the size, of its host bird. You go walking through the woods and you see this young bird calling and calling for food, demanding it. Then this little chippy sparrow flies up with a bug or a worm in its mouth, and sticks its head into the giant bird's mouth. Right into the mouth of the lion. It's confusing, and if you didn't know better you would think the world had been turned upside down. Children feeding their parents. It's the oddest most grotesque thing you've ever seen. You'd think you were going crazy. And you
are going crazy, because you are that sparrow." Carol stopped talking and caught her breath. "And the real shame of it is that you are the cowbird, too."

Glenn was pretty sure he understood her, and he was pretty sure she was nuts. But she was listening to the birds, so Glenn listened as well. His legs and back were getting stiff from inaction. Running home was going to hurt. He looked forward to the trip. *She’s crazy right? She’s old and she’s crazy.* Discomfort was what he needed. He needed to forget Sharon, to work her out of his system. He’d gone for a run and bumped into this crazy old lady trailing some rusted camper across country. She probably had some drooling old man asleep in his long johns, dreaming about Patton and shit on a shingle.

"You’ll have to excuse me," Glenn said. "I’ve got to get home and get to work." His back cramped as he stood but he didn't let it show. "I'm driving to Indy today." He didn't know why he'd told her this. He walked to the street, his hands on his hips like he was stretching. He felt like the old man in the Airstream. He could feel his calves ripple with every step. He was tense and happy. He bounced up and down once, then took off with an awkward gait. It felt bad to be in motion, and it felt good.

"Well, have a nice trip." Carol watched him run down the road. Not a nice man, that one, although she certainly had not been very polite. She wondered at her dislike. After all, he didn't do anything, exactly. But she knew she was right, and she was fairly certain he wasn't nice. The Airstream opened and Sammy stood in the doorway. He was twenty five, trim. His brown hair, curling over his forehead, gave him a look of intelligence.

"Visitor?" he asked.

"Good morning, Sammy, you sleep okay?"

"Nope. I slept like shit," he said with pleasure. "You?"
"Not a wink." Carol smiled and peeked through the trees to the horizon.

With his first step, Glenn forgot the old lady. He did not look back and he did not wave good bye. He was not convinced that he'd really spoken to her. He forgot her and tried to forget Sharon as well. The world was brighter, hotter and stickier, but somehow the slime had dissolved. There was traffic now, and Glenn was forced to be more careful, to run on the side of the road. Sharon echoed through his head, and although his legs trembled and his lungs burned, he could not shake her loose. He ran faster. Often he was running on the gravel shoulder and he had to work harder to maintain his pace.

His hands clenched, Glenn ran straight for the edge of town. When he came to the first sidewalk, he tried to hop over the curb, but he stumbled. His left toe kicked the cement, and his right leg was not fast enough to catch him. His arms flew out over his head, and he executed a mini roll, keeping him off the bridge of his nose. Still, he fell hard onto his right hip and bounced his head off the sidewalk. Lying on his side his legs bicycled the air. His first instinct was to scramble back up like a wrecked marathoner, but when he tried to stand, pushing his palms into the sidewalk and raising his head as far as it would go, his legs failed to make solid contact with the ground and he stumbled again. He turned onto his back and lay still.

He was breathing. His mouth was open, and his hands were thrown up over his head. He listened for that bird Carol talked about, but he didn't think he could hear it. He felt blood roll down the side of his face. He heard pleeease-kaae-tee and peter-peter-peter but he couldn't hear the bird Carol had talked about. He was not hurt, and he figured when the time came he would, in fact, stand up. When the time came, he felt he'd be able to run the two
miles home. But not just now, not just yet. The wet grass was different from his sweat. It was cooler, fresher.
Glenn felt fine. The cut on his cheek was nothing, and his side barely hurt. He could stand up, and when he did his knees did not even creak. He was fine, but he made sure. He took one step, and then another, and he was walking. He was stiff, his legs were a little sore, but it felt good. He walked the length of the street, ignoring the dogs that barked from behind privacy fences. At the corner a stop light directed the morning traffic; three cars waited going east, two waited going west, and he thought, red light red light run it. There was no traffic moving north or south. A convenience store sat with an empty parking lot on the far side of the street. Glenn realized just how thirsty he was. He’d lost what, thirty gallons of water? He managed to trot across the street, his back straight and his knees hardly bending. Crossing the parking lot, he entered the store. A young girl, maybe seventeen, sat on a stool behind the counter. She did not look up when he entered.

Glenn looked at her as he passed. Her uniform shirt was wrinkled and moist, her stringy brown hair hung long over her shoulders. It looked like she was reading a magazine, but Glenn could not tell if she was even awake. He thought about passing a hand in front of her face, but he didn’t. He left her alone. The ceiling glowed a sickly yellow that turned his skin jaundiced. The hotdog spinner rotated a lonely wiener. There was a soda fountain and an empty coffee machine. Glenn reached the wall of refrigerated coolers and opened one; he almost collapsed as the cold air hit him.

"Pick something or close the door."

Glenn let go and the door swung closed. He looked at the girl, but she was reading her magazine. The nerve of her. Ten seconds. He had the door open ten fucking seconds,
and she felt like she could yell at him. Who the hell was she? Who was she? He should just walk out. She wouldn't even look at him.

Glenn took a breath and tried to calm himself. He was tired and sore. An oasis of Coke and Pepsi products glistened in front of him. He placed his hand on the cold-case door and glanced at her, but she didn't move. This time the refrigerated air did not stop him, and he reached for a bottle of water, a dollar seventy-five. He closed the door quickly and looked. Her head hadn't moved. She was going to go far, had gone far, maybe next year she could be assistant manager. The bottle of Aquafina in his hand, Glenn walked to the back of the store, looking at the chips and pretzels, the boxed donuts, Little Debbies, Cow Pies. A thousand items processed and forgotten. Picking up a box of chocolate donuts, he looked at the girl. Nothing.

Glenn put the donuts back on the shelf and ran his fingers over the display case. They flittered over bags of hard candy, caramels, corn nuts, cashews and peanuts. Near the front of the store he picked up a bag of sunflower seeds. The girl flipped a page of the magazine, but she still did not look at him, so he put the seeds back. The water was already soaked with condensation, and Glenn rubbed it over his forehead, his sweat mixing with its sweat.

Glenn worked his way to the back of the store. He looked at the household goods, the boxes of crackers and cookies, the Dinty Moore beef stews. He looked in the beer case, and immediately he was thirsty. He could buy six now and drink them on the way to Indy. He'd been up for what, three hours already? He'd eat and go to work. What would the problem be with that? It was nearly lunchtime for him anyways. What about just a forty? He opened the case and stuck his hand in, but he did not grab anything. He was being stupid. It just wasn't worth it; he'd get fired for sure.
"Door. We can't sell till ten."

He looked over his shoulder, but she was not looking at him. He'd been in the store maybe five minutes, and not a single person had come in. It was early, but not that early. Glenn worked his way up to the front of the store, paying no attention to the candy boxes his hand ran over. His eyes never left the girl's face. Halfway down the isle Glenn executed a small half turn. A sort of sweeping two-step. When he was facing the girl again his free hand was in his pocket, the hand with the bottle was extended to the counter.

"Just this then." He placed the water on the counter and extracted a small cloth running purse from his pocket. "What are you reading so intently?" Glenn arched himself over the counter to see the magazine in the girl's lap, his eyes strictly avoiding her breasts.

"Magazine," she said, and let it fall to the floor. She looked up at Glenn for the first time, "a dollar seventy-five plus tax, comes to a buck eighty-nine." She did not hold out her hand.

As soon as Glenn saw the eyes he knew who she was. Sharon's daughter. His breath caught in his throat. She was not as beautiful as her mother, but he would know those eyes anywhere. He wondered if she knew she was not as attractive. He wanted to ask her if it made her mad. He dug two dollars out of his change purse and held them out. She did not take them but kept looking at him. She's flirting with me. I am having sex with her mom in my dreams, and she is propositioning me. It was more than Glenn could take, and he dropped the money on the counter. "Keep the change," he said, and walked out, forcing the hinge as wide as it would go.

Glenn walked away from the convenience store. He drank his water slowly and ate the Baby Ruth he'd stuck in his pocket. The heat was rising, and the world had somehow
gotten wetter. Maybe he was hallucinating—it was pretty hot—but the entire way home he felt the pressure of the girl's eyes on his back.
Chapter 18

Plantasia

The morning after he'd been fired, Armatage went through his little routine with all of the gusto he'd employed for the last ten years, less every day. The difference was that the dread—although not gone—was lighter, more social in nature. Arm was embarrassed that he'd have to accept the nods of condolence and condescension as he walked past co-workers, but he had been embarrassed before—he'd been embarrassed almost constantly for thirty-five years—and what was a couple of days of better-you-than-me condolence?

He shaved, he showered, and then he crawled back into bed with Sharon. "I love you Minge," he said, pawing at Sharon with apology and lust. "I'm sorry that I'm such a fuck-up."

"Go to work Armatage." Sharon rolled over, pulling the covers over her head.

Armatage made his way downstairs, let the dog out, and brought her back in. He made coffee and ate cereal. He loved Sharon, and he missed her. And he hadn't been lying last night, not exactly. Although he didn't think he loved Sharon less, he felt guilty, like he was prepared to love someone else if an offer came his way. He walked out the front door, his eyes focused on the car as though he were a busy man with a heavy duty. The heat was stultifying, but he plowed right through it.

It was only when he reached the car and saw the plant that Armatage remembered the window was open. Armatage felt more than anger. His wife had bought the plant for him in some half-baked notion of Christmas cheer. She had wanted to give his desk some personality to try and counteract the dull grayness that sat all around him, and it had caused him nothing but trouble. He'd abandoned the plant on the corner of his desk, where
occasionally something happened—a coffee mug tipped over, a stack of files slid from their shelf, a colleague's jacket swung out too freely—and the plant would be knocked over and scattered across the floor. Regardless of the catalyst, the result was the same each time. Armatage cursed as he struggled over his rounding belly to pick up as much of the soil as he could. What dirt wasn't easily gathered he swept under his desk, and after four, maybe five accidents, all that was in the pot was a dusty excuse for soil and a sad, dying house plant.

Needles fell off in vast Christmassy droves, the stem turned a light black, and if Armatage thought about the plant at all he thought, "I should throw that dead thing away." Then, sometime in late April he came to work and the plant was gone. He sat at his desk and stared at the dusty ring where the pot had sat. At first he figured the custodian must have taken mercy and thrown the wreck away. However, the plant had not gone. It had actually just been moved, elevated to a higher shelf, a home with less traffic and less chance of accident. When Arm looked up and saw the plant hanging above his head, a slight ray of sun fell yellow across it. Armatage had never thought to move the plant. The phone rang, and while Armatage responded to some mindless request, he watched his plant almost glitter in its new location.

He wasn't sure it was the same plant. His plant was green, but only in the most shallow definition of the term. This plant, suspended above his head, was vibrant. Strong, tall shoots rocketed over the side of the container and searched for avenues of further growth. Armatage stood up for a better view and felt a little queasy. The container was the same, and he could see the branch nub he had chewed off in a special pique of boredom. It was his plant, the same plant. Arm reached out and brought it down, the pot heavy in his hands. Did Sharon come in and replant this? Damp potting soil rose to the rim of the pot and Armatage
could smell all of the earth worms and decay that went into its making. He wanted his plant back and put it in its original place. Immediately it shrank, brown banana spots sprung up over the needles, the needles themselves looked drooped and stale. Armatage looked at the higher shelf where he'd found the plant; he could not see any ray of light. When he looked around for a possible source—he was forty feet away from any window—he could not identify one. Had he imagined that light?

What did he care? He didn't want the plant hanging over his head like a celestial omen. The plant remained by his side for the rest of the day, prone as it was to spells of tipping and incidents of dirt loss. By five o'clock Armatage was almost certain he was able to identify further, palpable signs of decay, and they comforted him.

That the plant was moved when Armatage came into work the next morning did not surprise him. That there was a note taped onto its pot, did:

Armatage,
The respect of your house is the respect of yourself.

—Gandhi

I have taken pains to see that your houseplant survives. I think you will find both its needles and its soil do better in this elevated position. As I do not enjoy gardening I would appreciate not having to undertake this project again.

There had been no signature, but now Armatage knew who the plant whisperer was. His boss, a twenty-four year old boy from the east coast, Boston or New York or Somewhere Great like that. He was, in fact, more than an amateur horticulturalist. He was on the promotional fast track, an organization freak who barely constrained the scorn he felt for Armatage and the other, older employees.
So Armatage had left the plant glittering and strong in its constant, almost freakish, sunlight. It thrived in its new location; buds could be seen between the leaf and stem. Sitting above him in that pleasant light, the plant's re-vitalization meant something that Armatage did not want to think too hard about. It called out to him, *change your ways*, in a voice that was so insistent that he often had trouble speaking on the phone. Sometimes, when he was particularly bored, he would stand and, grasping the plant with both hands, begin to shake it. He had a ready excuse if anyone asked. "Simulating wind," he'd say. "Making the stems stronger." But it wasn't until he put the plant back down and continued to hear, *change your ways*, that he understood the plant would need to die.

He found himself fixated on the plant, and entire days would pass in which Armatage never answered his phone. A co-worker would walk by to say goodnight, and Armatage would realize he had never unpacked his bag. Other days were fine. He would walk into the office, turn on his computer, and never give the plant a thought. He was almost sure, about ninety-nine percent positive, that it had been a complete and total accident Wednesday when the plant tumbled from its perch. Armatage had even cried, "ehhhh" as he watched the potted plant arc slowly towards the ground.

As Armatage lifted the plant from his car seat, careful not to break the cracked and taped pot, Armatage knew the cause of his downfall, but did not blame the plant. You can, he thought, dislike shrubbery, but it was an exercise in frustration to blame it for anything. Armatage carried the plant to the side of the house and dropped it into the trash. The loss of his job, he thought, might be directly related to, but was not the responsibility of, the house plant that Sharon had brought to liven his desk at work.
Chapter 19

Career Opportunities

Captain Smith did not say anything as Ross opened the door. All Smith did was hold up a piece of paper for Ross to take. It was Ross's request for transfer, but the form he had filled out was barely legible. A big red X had been scrawled from one corner to the next with one of those Magnum markers. How could he feel anything but sheepish when he was forced to walk into his boss's office to receive a big red X?

"You want I should pin this to my back?" Jeremy said, trying to sound Jersey.

"Sit." Captain Smith was a big man, six three, six four when wet, and getting close to three hundred pounds. In his fifties now, he'd been a real bruiser, but an unusual one, at least in police circles. He was as smart as he was rough, and he'd always been careful to give himself a future aside from his fists. He had risen quickly to captain by bringing in drug headlines and the ward vote.

To say that Jeremy was afraid of Smith would be an understatement. Captain Smith was known for revenge, and that made him a powerful cop who people tended to defer to. He was also known for not knowing when enough revenge had been exacted, and that made him a dangerous cop, one who people were afraid of. When Ross had filled out the form for transfer, he'd not been thinking. He was not one of Smith's boys, so he'd assumed he was replaceable. But he was not one of Smith's boys, so he was suspicious.

"What'd I do to you that you want out?"

"Nothing. It is simply personal." Jeremy felt good that at least he was not lying.

"Personal like needing to be closer to your mother?"
"My mother is dead, sir." He was not made sad by her memory. In fact, he had to try not to smile at his unexpected advantage.

"Sorry."

"No need, it was a long time ago." Jeremy was making constant eye contact and was shocked with himself.

"Still, mothers are saints." Smith's mother was in a nursing home. He brought her to the Christmas parties and the summer picnics, wheeling her around in her chair and being cursed at for never bringing his ex-wife to visit.

"She was, sir. Yes, sir. And your mother, sir, is she doing alright?"

"Fine, fine. Her facility is nicer than you might imagine." Smith looked hard at Jeremy, who knew that Smith's mother lived there for free.

"I looked at the place for my mother, sir." His transfer request was getting sticky in his hands. He'd made a mistake. "It was nice," he said quickly. "But she was too sick."

"So if it's not family, then what sort of personal is it? I want all my men to be at home here. It's the only way we can win. We need to be like brothers."

"It's just," and for the first time since Jeremy sat down he took his eyes away from Smith's. "I've been here seven years and its time for a change."

"Change? That's not personal. Change implies there's something here you want to get away from. If you have a problem with me, or one of my men, I need to know it."

"Sir? No sir." For the first time Jeremy realized his predicament and instantly he was kicking himself. And then he kicked himself for that. He forced his eyes up to the captain's. If Smith had seen any of Jeremy's indecision, it did not show. "I have no problem with you.
I have no problem with..." He hoped waving his hand would allow him not to lie. "I was just hoping for something more...suburban."

"Can't do it." Captain Smith sat straight in his chair. The floor must have been tilted or something because he seemed about a foot taller than Ross. "You're a good man Ross, good man. I don't want to lose you."

"Thank you, captain, but..."

"Well, we'll sit on it then." Captain Smith was out of his chair. It was always shocking how quickly the big man could move. After his quick rise, he took his time coming around the desk. Ross felt like his demise was going to come slowly. He had no idea what the Captain was going to do, and he was not sure he even cared. He sat there passive in the face, but inside he was berating himself. He was smarter than to open himself to this attack. He knew better, and yet it had happened.

"All things personal pass,"Captain Smith said. "Sit on it for, let's say, a month. We'll talk then. In the meantime, you're right—even goldfish tire of their tanks. I'll see what I can do to spice things up for you around here." By the time he was done speaking, Captain Smith had made his way behind Jeremy, and he now had his hand on Ross's shoulder. Smith worked the shoulder like a doctor looking for a sprain. His big knuckled fingers drove through the muscle and into the joint.

Jeremy knew enough to sit and take it. If he was lucky and acted stupid enough, it would be all the punishment he'd get, and everything would be forgotten. So he sat facing the Captain's empty chair and pretended he was receiving a brotherly embrace.

"That sound okay?" The captain moved so that Jeremy could see him.

"Fine."
"Then, I'm sure you've got a deskload of work to do."

"Thank you." Jeremy stood, and again made himself look at the captain. He was a good five inches taller than Jeremy, and Ross could not see any agitation at all. He stopped himself from wondering if this was a positive or negative. "I'm sorry for taking up so much of your time," he said. As he turned to leave the office a drip of perspiration fell from his armpit and ran down his side. It was cool and trickled down his side until it was absorbed by the band of his underwear. At the door he paused and turned back towards Captain Smith.

"Sir?"

"Ross."

"About those new things to do." He took a breath. "I'd like that." He turned and left the room, hoping to shit that he would, indeed, like them.
Chapter 20

She Wore Red Shoes

Sharon was a little unsteady as she stepped from the bus to the curb. The shoes she had chosen to wear—the only shoes, she'd told herself, that matched her red skirt—were a bit higher in the heel than she was used to. On flat ground she was fine. Besides, any extra wobble worked to her advantage. It was only steps and inclines that troubled her. The skirt and the shoes were new, as was the blouse and the hairstyle. She carried the plant that she'd picked out of the garbage. It was old and grey, but she did not think dead.

As she walked up the sidewalk to the library, she knew she was late, but she was not rushing. She felt good and free. Already the benches lining the walk were full of old men waiting for the periodical room to open and young mothers waiting to get themselves and their children out of the heat. Sharon walked past them casually, ignoring the slightly hot feeling on her right heel. She could not ignore it completely because she had no urge to be one of those ladies who have hot fashion shoes and large protective bandages, but she did not have a pair of conservative shoes in her handbag.

Sharon went through the front door but locked it behind her. The men on the bench watched her, but they knew there was no use asking to be let in early. Two dozen roses sat on the edge of the checkout desk, their petals matching the color of Sharon's skirt. She set her plant down; it looked even deader contrasted with the roses.

"Hello?" Sharon called out in greeting to whoever had beat her into the library. Hearing no reply, she made her way to the periodical room.

The magazines had been straightened and alphabetized the night before, the newspapers ripped from their rods and flung down in a pile to be recycled. Only two papers
still hung in the rack, the Sunday editions of the Times, and the State Journal. Today's newspapers sat in a pile just inside the doorway. Sharon hated when people left tasks for others to finish.

"Oh, Sharon, I didn't hear you come in." Gracie, a woman about Sharon's age, walked into the room. "Don't you look nice." Sharon was down on one knee, like she was about to enter a church pew, and her red skirt showed off her tanned legs.

"Thank you, Gracie, I just bought this outfit last weekend." Sharon unfolded the front pages. She enjoyed the way the skirt shimmied when she moved. It was not exactly clingy, more like flowy spandex.

"Flowers and clothes, that Armatage sure must have done something wrong."
"Armatage does something wrong on a daily basis, but he never gives me flowers."
"Then who are those flowers from?"
"I assumed Arthur had sent them."
"Why would my Arthur send you flowers?" Sharon saw that Gracie was only half kidding.

"No, sent you flowers."
"I don't know about that," Gracie said and started to leave, "but whoever sent those flowers must have done something really wrong."

Sharon had not been particularly nice to Armatage. He'd lost his job, after all, and now she felt guilty. But he had been moping around for so long that she felt justified. She strung the last paper just as the first old man walked in. Living with Gordon had heightened her reflexes, and Sharon instinctively tensed and waited for the pinch, but the man ignored her, walked past, and picked up a paper.
Which was worse, Sharon wondered as she left the periodical room, being pinched and prodded by old men, or not even being considered? Which was worse, lying next to Armatage so mad that you could not sleep as he pretended to be interested, or having a large body pillow separate the two of you so that you slept like a baby? Sharon had not planned on dressing up for the day, but when she saw the plant in the garbage, she decided the pampering should start immediately. She'd gone back into the house and changed, and now she was glad she had. She rinsed her coffee cup and filled it with water. The plant's soil was not dry, but it had been through a lot. Sharon poured as much water as would fit in the pot. She looked at the roses, but the vase was already brimming, so she drank what was left.

The old woman was supposed to begin speaking at four, and as far as Sharon could tell, no one knew where she was. Sharon had even watched the news last night in hopes that they did a story on her. But they had spent fifteen minutes on "Arson on Our Streets – A Special Report" and the rest of the time on the beginning of football training camp. Sharon dialed the old woman's cell phone. She walked over to the roses and looked at the card.

"Sorry to have upset you. You are beautiful." It was signed, "The Vagrant."

"Shit, shit, shit." Sharon's heart was in her throat. She glanced around to see if anyone was looking and dropped the card into the trash. She wanted to drop the flowers in on top of them but at the same time was thrilled they were sitting there.
Chapter 21
Changing Places

Malcolm helped his mother into her chair, took his coffee, and left his mother in the kitchen. He no longer felt like painting. He wanted to run away. Church always made him feel like that. He had no idea why his mother went, since she no longer had any friends in the congregation and the hour and fifteen minutes she was there gave her such a nicotine craving that she was a shaky mess by the time they left. It was not an easy thing to notice; she shook and quivered as he led her inside just as much as when he led her out, but the inner turmoil, the anger she felt as he helped her outside, gave her away.

But mass was at six-thirty, so Malcolm had been up before the sun, shaving and showering and helping his mother get dressed. He wanted to shower again; even though it was nearly one hundred degrees already and the AC was barely maintaining a heartbeat, Malcolm wanted to surround himself with warmth. Sharon came back to him, as she had been ever since they'd spoken. He'd been thinking constantly about how it would feel to touch her, and as he sat in church, deaf to the homily being delivered, he'd imagined that the grace of God had really come from her.

After mass they went for breakfast. He was not sure why. Possibly because they had done it the first week he was back, when he was still jovial and trying to make the best of everything. Now it seemed pointless. They sat across from each other and drank coffee. She would smoke, and he would look through the newspaper. Maybe she would order a plate of wheat toast, and he would get pancakes and eggs. They'd both leave half of the food behind, but they would sit there for forty-five minutes, and he'd say, "Do you want anything else to eat?" and "Ready?" when he sensed she wanted to leave.
And she would say, "Nah, toast is fine," and "Okay," or possibly, "Let me finish my coffee first." And that was all the talking they would do. The rest of the time they were apart and up inside their own heads. Malcolm had no urge to get inside his mother's head. When he thought about it, it seemed dusty and full of sharp corners. The type of place one would come away from poisoned, or needing a tetanus shot. So he tried not to think about it. He tried to read the paper and fiddle with the crossword.

Malcolm did not feel like painting, but it was still early so he went back to work. He didn't feel he could be at the library until this afternoon. But the painting in front of him was almost done and so no longer interesting. He spent an hour staring into space, looking at his painting and trying to imagine it without—what he was now positive was—an MGB, its top down and a big red cooler sticking out of the trunk. That, at least, suited his sense of irony. How could a bunch of bears fit into an MGB? Or a Bug for that matter? He knew a bright red or yellow Bug would make the painting sell better. Nazis. He'd paint an MGB.

When he heard his mother fall, it did not immediately register. The silence that followed was what caught his attention and sent him running to the kitchen. His mother was lying on the floor, her house dress bunched up above her thighs. She looked up at him when he came in but did not say anything.

The ambulance took no more than five minutes, but to Malcolm it felt like forever. He tried to not move her at all, because they had told him that if she had fallen there was a good chance she had broken her hip, but he wanted to smooth out her skirt. He sat next to her and counted, up to sixty and then he started over again, trying at once to measure and to ignore time. He did not keep track of the number of times he started over. In those CPR
videos someone was always sent out front to alert the ambulance driver, and he worried that
they would not find his house. Malcolm sat by his mother and smoothed her hair.

Two police officers arrived first, a man and a woman. The woman came inside while
the man went to wait for the ambulance.

"Your son trip you again?"

"Yup." For the first time in weeks he saw his mother smile.

"Well, we'll see that doesn't happen again." The officer looked up at Malcolm and
winked. "You just sit still, and we'll make sure he didn't break anything."

"I think I'm okay. He's been over-sensitive ever since I dropped him on his head. I
told him not to call you." His mother started to move, but the officer told her to be still.

When the ambulance came, they rolled his mother onto a stretcher, but they decided
she didn't need to go to the hospital. She had a cut over her eye, but her hips and knees were
fine. Malcolm saw that she had changed. While the paramedics were there she was talkative
but unhelpful. His mother would not tell them how she fell, merely repeating the story the
cop had given her. "Malcolm tripped me." She said it again and again, to the point where
Malcolm became concerned that the paramedics would believe her.

When they left, Malcolm helped his mother lay down. "Why'd you tell them I tripped
you?" he asked.

"It was funny. I was hoping they would arrest you." She looked small in bed.

Malcolm closed the blinds in her bedroom. He felt like he should play the role of adult and
kiss his sick child's head, but he didn't.

"Well, I guess I fooled them again," he said. "You get some sleep. They're sending a
nurse over at two." Malcolm closed the door. He had time to kill but did not feel like
working. In the kitchen he poured himself a cup of coffee and sat in his mother's chair. "He tripped me. He tripped me. He tripped me," he told himself, pretending to smoke a cigarette.
Chapter 22
Lover Don't Go

Armatage Shanks had been at work for some time but had done little else besides look at the hole where his plant had been. None of his co-workers had said anything, no condolences or good lucks. In fact, they had stayed as far away from him as they could. Piles of files sat on his desk waiting to be loaded into corrugated boxes. The boxes themselves leaned un-constructed off the edge of his desk. His computer screen had gone into sleep mode, but Armatage ignored the weaving, space age lines. He still heard his plant echoing above him, urging him to change his life; he heard Gordon telling him about riches for the taking. When his phone rang, he looked at it as if it were a foreign object. What did he care? He was being a fairly good example of why you fire people on Friday and never ask them back. So what if someone had business to throw his way? It wasn't Arm's business anymore. What the fuck did he care? He had a plant to listen to, a plan to devise. But Armatage was loyal. He reached out his arm and answered the phone.

"Hello. This is Armatage Shanks."

"Armatage?" The women's voice on the other end sounded familiar and oddly apologetic.

"This is Armatage."

"Oh, Armatage. I'm...I'm sorry." When she apologized, Armatage recognized the voice.

"Sorry, for what?" he asked, looking over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching.

"Your job. Oh Armatage, I didn't know. Honestly I didn't."
"My job, what? I lost it. So what? What does that have to do with you?" The words caught in his mouth and he knew the answer.

"I...Oh, Arm. I'm your replacement."

"Oh Arm nothing. I'm glad I'm gone. It's time." Saying it out loud to someone that wasn't his family was the first time Armatage thought that maybe it wasn't time. He looked at his desk, his files. He knocked the mouse on his desk, bringing his computer back to life.

"Ten years defines someone. This is not how I want to be defined."

"Well good for you." Her voice rose with forced good cheer. "I'm glad you feel that way." Armatage heard her re-arrange herself. His back was tight. When she began to speak again it was with her middle-management voice. "As I understand it, you will be leaving next Friday." She paused, but Armatage stayed silent, so she went on. "On the following Monday I'll be taking over your position. Stew wants me to enlarge it somewhat, to focus a little more on people management, but I'll be handling your clients as well."

"I thought Thomas," Armatage hardly stumbled over her husband's name, "didn't want to live in the city."

"Well..." her voice was caught somewhere between professional and personal. "We've, I've, we've compromised on that. Anyway, I was calling because I'll be done here next week. I thought...I didn't know it was you Armatage." Her voice was soft and sad. "I guess I still need to ask. It's just...I'm sorry."

"For what?" He knew, but why make things easy?

"It's just that this is awkward. They offered me a transfer and I took it." She rearranged herself again. "What I called for, I was just thinking that next week, I'll be done over here, and I was thinking that you could walk me around. You could, you know, show
me how you handled things. Introduce me to clients, show me your files. I never thought they'd let you go. People there like you, Armatage. You could really help my transition."

"Sure." Armatage didn't want this. The idea of this woman hunched next to him around his—her—desk made Arm's hair crawl. "Call me when you know more, and we'll have lunch." He said it without thinking about it, but as soon as it was out of his mouth he wished he could pull it back.

"That, that would be nice." She didn't sound very sure that it would be nice. "How about Monday then?"

"Fine."

"Good."

"Monday then." Arm thought he'd know more by then, have a plan, present a stronger front. If Armatage dreaded anything it was looking lost in front of this woman.

"Bye then." Armatage thought he could hear relief in her voice. "Armatage?" She wasn't ready to let him go.

"Yeah?" He was almost breathless as he said it.

"Armatage? You there?"

"I'm here."

"Did you see a doctor? Did they say anything?"

Armatage was quiet. The office was busy, but nobody spoke very loudly. You could hear a hundred conversations, but not really listen to any of them. Armatage wondered again who this lady was. Two months ago they spent the night together and she had not returned Armatage's calls since, and here she was taking his job and bringing everything back up.

"Did you see a doctor, Armatage?"
"No."

"Armatage." There was real concern in her voice.

"You are the only person who thinks it's there." The idea of Sharon sprung up on the phone and both of them took a deep breath.

"I know it's there."

"Well." Armatage had no desire to keep talking about this. He was angry at her for bringing it up. Angry at her for taking his job. "We can study this topic further Monday."

The crudeness of his remark was intentional. She had not returned his calls, and to think that she was concerned over an imaginary lump frustrated him. Some people would say "angered," some might say "made him mad," but Armatage tried hard to truly identify his emotions. And while he was not great at it, he knew enough to figure that most anger was merely frustration personified.

He was frustrated, and he wanted her to know it. Something had been left unresolved between them, and he didn't like the idea of her poking around at him—especially around at his penis—to try and resolve it. Now was not the time to settle anything, and Armatage knew it. He could hear her breathing and was half a second from apologizing but held back.

"I'll see you Monday?" he said, and was instantly mad at himself for his placating tone.

"Okay, I'll get you right at noon."

"Great."

"Great."
Chapter 23
Nickel and Dimed

The cell phone ringing from inside the school bag she used as a purse could wait. It was after two and her replacement had yet to show. Kara was tired of sitting on the same stool for eight hours, but she did not stand up. What had she done? She'd made coffee, sold some beer, pushed the button that turned the gas pumps on, cleaned up a slurpy spill, and restocked the hot dogs, the cheddar dogs, the hamburger dogs. What she'd done was sit on her ass all day waiting for John to replace her, and now, at almost a quarter after two, he was nowhere to be seen. At one forty-five, the phone behind the counter had rung. It had rung again at one fifty, one fifty-five and one fifty-nine. Kara had not answered any of the calls. If John had called and told her he'd be late, she'd have to stay. She could sulk and complain, but she'd have to stay. If he never called, she'd close the store and go home.

There were four customers in the store right now. Well, two in the store and two gassing up outside. One of those outside would be coming in to pay—his wife was already using the toilet. The other was paying at the pump. Most of the time, seventy-five percent of the time, people who paid at the pump did not come into the convenience store.

The other two people in the store had been there for nearly ten minutes. One was an old lady who spent almost half of what remained of her life in the convenience store. Her name was Gloria, she was wrinkled and bent, and she came to the store three or four times a day. Kara imagined Gloria walking home with her half jug of milk and her six eggs. She would get to the door after a forty-five minute trip and think, "coffee," and then turn right around. She'd buy her coffee and a donut, because it was almost lunch time now, and wander
home again. Walking in the door she'd think, "dish soap," and turn back around. Maybe the
poor woman was like Sisyphus, forced to shop forever, one item at a time.

The other customer was not a customer at all. It was a ten-year-old boy who'd hung
around the store since June. Mostly he would shuffle through the magazine rack.
Occasionally he'd buy a big soda and try to talk to Kara. She'd been watching him steal
candy bars all summer and was just about sick of it. She'd kick his little ass right out of the
store and close up. She wasn't going to stay a moment longer than she had to. She had
things to do.

When the man and woman drove off, the parking lot was empty. It was after 2:20
and John had still not shown up. Asshole. The only shopper was the ten-year-old boy.

"Get out of here." Kara said. "I'm closing the store. And," she said as she walked
around the counter towards him, "if I catch you stealing anything else I will pound your face
uglier." She reached into the boy's short's pockets, pulled out two candy bars, and pushed
him out the door. She was about to lock it when an old lady in an orange vest and straw hat
asked to use the toilet.

"I was just about to close for lunch."

"Thank you for letting me in," she said, pushing her way inside. "I'll only be a
second."

It took Kara five minutes to turn off the open sign, the gas sign, the beer signs, and
make the pumps inoperable. She was supposed to count her drawer and stick the fuel level,
but she blew that off. A convertible pulled into the lot. Its driver tried the pumps then ran to
the door.
"Closed." Kara mouthed to him, pretending she could not hear him through the glass. She hoped the weird old lady did not come out of the bathroom just then.

"I need gas," the motorist yelled.

"Out of gas," she mouthed. She was not a bad person, but sometimes she loved to lie. People were ridiculous and she was just trying to help them see that.

"Please?"

"Sorry." She shrugged, and the man walked back to his car. His tires squealing as he left.

Kara was supposed to sweep the floor at midday, she was supposed to make sure both rest rooms were clean, and the merchandise was tidy. She sat on her stool and waited for the old lady. A dented and rusted Airstream pulled into the parking lot. Shit, she was not going to give them anything.

A young man came out of the driver side. He was tall and bronzed, and Kara would have opened the door for him. But he did not ask. He moved into the shade of the motorhome and sat down with a book. He wore a straw hat and a silk-screened tank top which read "Mud Puppy Ball."

"Thanks, honey." The old lady was standing in front of her.

"Sure."

"I see that my ride is here." The lady winked at Kara and made for the door.

Obviously the woman was crazy. Kara stepped into the heat behind her and locked the door from the outside. It was two-thirty and she'd been at work since five, but she no longer felt tired. She wanted to go and speak with the boy. She was supposed to go home, but it seemed silly to her. "You leave Gordon alone for five hours while you go to work but
want me to baby-sit him for the final three?” Why was she spending her summer working if she had no free time in which to spend her money? Kara watched as the old lady walked up to the boy—oh shit, it was her ride—and laughed and flirted with him.

"So you don't have free time?" is what her father asked. But he was just a smart ass, and that was why Kara loved him.
Chapter 24

A Dog Story

"This your ride?" Kara asked. She looked at the Airstream, but really she was looking at the boy.

"A friend of mine gave it to me." The woman held a flag of the world which rested on her right shoulder. Under the earth were the words "Across America."

"You driving across America?"

"Walking." *She must be as crazy as a bat.*

"Walking across America?" Kara asked, as politely as she could.

"Ten miles a day." The woman looked at Kara and smiled. "I'll make it to New York just before my ninety-fifth birthday."

"No shit!" Kara was incredulous.

"Shit." The golden boy said.

"Sammy, be nice," the woman said. "People get to be confused."

"Every person, every day?" He was tall and tan and Kara could hardly keep her eyes off him.

"Unfortunately," the woman laughed, her face jiggling with happiness. "But listen," she said to Kara. "I've got to be downtown by four. I'm speaking at the library."

*She's the crazy woman!* Laughing out loud Kara said, "My mom is the librarian that's putting the convo together."

"Well, she seems to be fairly certain Carol won't show up," Sammy said. "She's been calling us non-stop."

"She's been worried."
"I'll be there. I'll be there," Carol said, "but I have to go now." She gave a quick wave and headed off.

Kara found herself standing with Sammy. She realized that she'd been up all night, and there was no doubt that she was a mess. He was watching her, but Kara had no idea what he was thinking.

"I gotta go," he said. "I've got to plan for tonight." Without waiting for Kara to say anything, Sammy walked around the front of the Airstream and jumped in. The old motorhome started reluctantly, a large plume of smoke rolled out of the tailpipe. Sammy waved absently as the motorhome began to move forward.

Kara stood alone in the driveway. She heard Sammy honk as he passed Carol, and watched him until he drove out of sight. Without thinking, she started to run. It was too hot to run very far, but Carol was only about half a block ahead.

"Hey," Kara said, "can I walk with you?"

They were walking at a good pace, faster than Kara would have walked by herself, and lawns now separated the sidewalk from the street.

"I don't think I could do this," Kara said.

"Walk? I couldn't have done it when I was fifty. I might not have been able to do it two years ago. My mind was too busy. I'd have fretted too much about each step."

"Are you going to do it now?"

"Do what?"

"Make it. Get to Maine?" Carol looked awfully old, but Kara also thought she looked awfully young.
"Unless I die," Carol said. "And I don't feel like dying just yet." They walked along with the old lady taking two steps to every one of Kara's. In the heat, at this hour of the day, the neighborhood was deserted. The road was quiet. But the old woman found things to watch in just about every yard. She evaluated people's gardens, pointed out different birds, barked at people's dogs.

Kara was pretty convinced the lady was crazy, but she also thought she was wonderful. "Are you walking for the earth?" Kara felt stupid for asking the obvious.

"Yup, but I've got this flag for another reason. Outside of Albuquerque I was attacked by one of those reservation dogs, a sad limping mongrels that lived in tire rubber and ate field rats. He came across me right at dusk, and this flag saved my life. Don't laugh, it was March, and cold. You never thought the desert got cold, but at night, with a wind, it must have reached near zero. We'd awoken to the lowest grayest sky you could imagine. The wind was twenty miles an hour gusting to forty. The world couldn't make up its mind between rain or sleet or snow, but everything was wet. The trucks on the highway didn't care; they roared past at eighty miles an hour, showering spray and grit. Sammy wasn't with me yet, and we didn't have the motorhome either, just an old Cadillac convertible.

"My dear friend Judy was driving, and she wasn't like Sammy. She was eighty, with poor eyesight and high blood pressure. That day did her in. After we reached Albuquerque she left, and I don't blame her. So I'm walking as far over onto the shoulder as I could go. It was cold and wet, and I had no real idea where Judy was. Visibility was no more than a hundred feet. Suddenly a truck came hurtling past me. That was always a scary thing, no matter the weather, but I've grown accustomed it. That is how life is. I don't have a choice, so I adapt. But somehow this truck hit a puddle right when it passed me. I remember the
truck coming up. I remember the company. It was a Bulkmatic truck, it said so right over the cab. So he hit this puddle or whatever it was, and he sent up a sheet, an absolute wave. Have you ever been to the ocean? It was like that. If you're body surfing, and the wave crashes, not around you, but on you, and you get knocked down and thrown whatever way the wave wants you to go. It was like that. Only the wave was made of sleet. I remember the truck, and I remember standing there under this wave of shit. It was shit, all grey and black, and I could see rocks and pebbles in it. Hold on now, you think I'm exaggerating. I can see it in your eyes. I have pictures. Well, not of the wave, but of the aftermath. Just listen. I remember standing there and I thought, this is it. If I wasn't dead I'd be broken. I was standing right on the lip of the shoulder, as far from the road as I could be, one foot from the drainage ditch, about a fifteen foot fall. I think I sorta hunched, and leaned into the wave. That's the other thing about life—always lean into it. Well, this wave crashed all the way around me. Engulfed me. Sammy would say, 'made me its bitch'—but he wouldn't say it to my face. It knocked me down, about half way down the drainage ditch, but it didn't hurt me. The rocks just missed me, or bounced off me.

"Here's the best part. I was covered. Not soaked, but covered in ice. I'm not kidding you, it was like that stuff at Dairy Queen. It hit me and stuck—to my clothes, my face, my hair. I shook myself off but nothing came clear. So I laughed. In a way it was amazing. I was in the middle of New Mexico, and all of a sudden I'd been transported into a Jack London story. What else could I do? I laughed and got up. Judy was about five hundred yards ahead and I walked to her. It was hard. You think the flag and this corset get heavy"—Carol lifted up her shirt to expose the thick corset, and Kara could see the metal support than ran up Carol's back—"But try walking under fifty pounds of ice. It took me ten,
twenty minutes to walk that far. When I got there, I was shaking so much, and laughing so much, that poor Judy thought I was dying. Get this, she didn't even see me walking up. Here I was with all of this day-glo, and I was so gray and dirty she didn't even see me. I made her take pictures, and I stood for five minutes while she documented the ice stuck all over me. She thought I was crazy, probably what drove her off. Then I got naked, right there on the side of the road. Who'd care. I stripped down and threw my clothes right into a black bag and climbed into Judy's sleeping bag. This was all before noon. I climbed into the back seat, Judy into the front, and I slept. I wasn't really cold. I'd expended so much energy that I was warm, but I was tired. I slept until four.

"When I woke up it was winter, and at least half a foot of snow had fallen. We still had five or six miles to go. This is where the dog comes in, and in a sense we were lucky. The weather got so bad that cars—even trucks—got off the road. Not all of them, but traffic was less, and it was slower. I was able to walk so that Judy could drive right behind me with her flashers on. We did our five miles that way.

"It had never really gotten light that day, but it was evening and getting dark when I heard this dog barking. I didn't care. Maybe it was a coyote and maybe it was going to start howling. But it got closer and closer, and something told me to be worried. Maybe I responded to the pitch in its bark, like it was trying to warn me. So I tensed up. I'm not scared, mind you, I've never met a dog that didn't run from a good kick in the stomach, and I could have just hopped in the car, but I was alert.

"All of a sudden this German Shepard mutt jumps out into our headlights. Its front paws were stretched in front of it, its rear end was high, its hackles seemed frozen six inches above its back. It didn't bark, but gave a long low growl. At first, when it jumped in front of
me, I hesitated. I was startled, but then I kept right on walking towards it. That is what you have to do. You can not be bullied by these things. It didn't move, so I yelled at it, something like, 'Yah' or, 'get on,' but it stood there. I had the flag up over my head, trying to make the dog think I was taller than am. Think about it, the thing probably weighed eighty pounds. And I am right about my age, ninety-five. It could have eaten me and then had poor Judy for dessert. But I kept on and when I got close enough, right before it decided to jump, I biffed it on the nose. One good clean jab with the flag pole. I imagined making its eyes tear. The yelp from the thing was so pitiful, it sounded like a pinched baby. It jumped back maybe twenty feet, and for a second resumed the same posture. Its tail stuck out straight behind it. If anything, its hackles were raised higher, and it looked ready for more. I kept walking. My flag was still held high, only now I choked up a little higher, I wanted my jab to have more reach. But I didn't need it. When I was five feet from the poor girl, she turned on her side, then her back, and with her tail between her legs, she yipped for me to pet her. Of course I did, a quick friendly pat on her belly, then I kept moving. And we walked the rest of the day together.

"When I was done walking we made a camp, ate soup and bread and cheese. The dog hardly left my side. She loved me so much. Her and I slept under a tarp, but she stank, and she farted all night. By morning it was like a dream, almost like none of it had ever happened. The wind had died, the sun had come out, and by the time I dragged my old bones out of the tarp, the dog was gone, the snow and sleet were gone, and only the ground was steaming."
"That's the west. One moment the world is ending in an apocalypse of weather—I mean only in the desert could I die of a tidal wave—and the next day it's gorgeous. You can see for miles and the rock absolutely glows in the sunlight."

Carol’s story had brought them into downtown. Kara had walked along in silence, not noticing the heat or the people who slowed their cars down to look. When she realized where they were, Kara began to believe that Carol would make it all the way to the east coast. More than anything, at that moment, she wanted to walk along with her.
Chapter 25

The Shank

The night that they had spent together started out great with a dinner full of idle flirting. Madeline was beautiful, her tan, slim features shining through her thin black dress. Her expression was carefree, and as she sat across from Armatage her desire was magnificent. They had come far enough over the phone to know that there was no risk—not to each other—in admitting their passions. They had spouses, sure, and they were risking them, but they had both gone so far, compromised so much of their marriage already, that the consummation was merely climax. They sat across from each other without coyness or doubt. But still there was tension, delicious unrequited anticipation. Armatage had been unable to think of anyone but her for a month. He had dreamt about the feel of her, the smell of her, the taste of her. In many ways the dinner was not designed to create attraction, but only to help define it. In fact, they met for dinner, instead of meeting at the hotel, because they wanted to prove the affair was about more than sex.

That she had a hotel key in her purse, and he a change of clothes and condoms in his car, did not put pressure on them. They sat across from each other and talked. Not about their lives—they didn't mention their spouses or their children—they talked about each other, the restaurant, the weather, their jobs. They reveled in the illusion that once, finally, they could be themselves.

"How's your steak?" Armatage asked.

"Good. Yours?"

"Good."
"This is a really nice restaurant. I like all of the antiques. Look at those dolls, aren't they beautiful?" Madeline talked about things that Sharon never would have—and if Sharon had, Armatage would have mocked her relentlessly—and Armatage listened as though Madeline's ideas were wonderful and new.

They drank a bottle of Bordeaux and laughed, and when the bill came Armatage joked about an expense account, but he paid with cash. The waiter never came back with change.

Although they had arrived separately, once they left the restaurant there was never any question. They made their way to his car and drove to her room. The night was hot, and Armatage began to sweat before the AC took hold. As he drove he began to worry about his smell, but he had no cause. They were making love the moment they entered her room. It was sweet and hot, and Armatage got lost in trying to press himself all of the way through her.

Her hotel was a motel, just off the expressway, a two story job with entrances at every wing. They parked in the back of the building and didn't need to pass the front desk. They made love once. It was as hard and vocal as they could make it. She sang in Armatage's ear and chided him from the beginning. "Is that all you can give me?" And when they were done, soaked and waiting for the energy to continue, she found it.

Madeline was in the crook of his arm, idly stroking his pubic hair, playing with his tired penis, when she stopped. She actually rose onto her knees and dragged her hair across his belly. How long had it been since he'd gotten a blow job? Her face was close enough that Armatage could feel her breath on his nuts. But she never took him into her mouth. She rubbed her thumb over an increasingly turgid area, and squinted.
"Armatage?" she said after what seemed like five minutes.

"Huh?" He wanted to squirm out of her hold that had suddenly become clinical.

"You got a bump there." Her voice sounded professional.

"Course I got a bump. It's a dick." He didn't mean to be crude, but he wanted her to remember its purpose.

"No, I mean, a lump kind of bump." She looked up at him with something like concern.

"Huh? Where?" He sat up, trapping her hand between his thigh and stomach. This embarrassed him and he held in his breath so she could free herself. But she didn't move her hand, and that embarrassed him more.

"Here." Her thumb pressed into a spot that she thought might look pinker than the rest. It was difficult for him to see properly over his stomach.

"Let me see." He grabbed himself, finally freeing his penis from her hands. "I don't see anything." He rolled out of bed and went into the bathroom.

"Run a shower, maybe it'll show more if it's hot."

Armatage was hot enough that the idea of a hot shower was not appealing, and besides, he was nervous that she would come in with him. The way she had handled him made Armatage think of those scoliosis exams gym teachers put kids through. He latched the door and started the shower.

Using the hotel soap, he washed his hair and his pits and his crotch. He saw nothing and felt nothing. He knew his penis better than it was polite to express, and he'd never felt a bump. He washed his face and finally he washed his feet. He took his time drying off. If she had tried to enter the room, he was happy to have not heard her.
When he left the bathroom, Madeline lay on her back, her hands folded behind her head. She had brought the sheet up to cover herself. Her thick hair fanned out over the pillow. If it had been twenty minutes ago Armatage would have jumped on her, wrestled the sheet off her, and had his way with her. Now, instead, he walked around the bed to find his side. She followed him with her eyes, tired but alert. They asked him what he'd found.

Madeline rolled towards him as he got in, but Armatage quickly began to play the sensitive man. "Roll over," he said, "I wanna play the spoons." Sharon always thought that was funny, and Madeline was no different. Rolling over, she turned her cheek to be kissed. Armatage complied, and raised up over her to find her lips. When they had kissed, he sent his bottom arm between the pillow and her neck where he could curl it back onto her breasts. With his top arm he placed his penis right up against and gently into her ass-crack.

They stayed like that, Armatage running his hand up and down her sides, until he had become too aroused to stop and Madeline had become too sleepy to continue. Armatage rolled onto his back, pulled his arm out from under her, and fiddled with his penis in a more functional way.

He had never mentioned Madeline to Sharon, and had hidden his lust from her, but Sharon had inhabited it anyways. Even when he was atop Madeline, even in the heat of passion, he'd been aware of Sharon, and wondered what she'd be thinking. Armatage did not imagine her being shocked and devastated and angry. He imagined her as a coach or critic, saying things like, "Tuck your ass in." Or, "Slow it down." Or "Come on now, grind. Pay some respect to the poor woman."
Sharon's imagined critique was why Armatage had never gone to the doctor. Half of the time he did think he had a lump, but when Madeline Meeks had been busy identifying the location, and Armatage had sat up to look for himself, he'd had Sharon looking over his shoulder, and she hadn't seen anything. If he'd heard about the lump from Sharon, he'd have taken care of it instantly. But to hear it from this sexy woman whose hands had somehow suddenly lost all of their lust and became matronly was too bizarre for Armatage. He'd put it off, waiting for Minge to notice and say something. But she never had.
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