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# Joy Home

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# **Joy Home**

Jeff Henebury

So there are these two guys on the beach. One is taking a really long time making this sand castle, and it's getting really intricate, with sand turrets and little slits in the sand turrets for imaginary crab archers to use their bows and such. The other guy's carving a huge monument out of this boulder, a statue where a scurvy-looking sailor is wrestling with this big ol' ship's wheel, in memory of all the long lost sailors in the sea. The boulder guy got a big fat mayoral commission. The sand castle guy has gotten sand down his pants and little else to show for it. Pretty soon the boulder guy starts teasing the sand castle guy, hey that's a nice sand castle you got there and what'd they pay ya with sand dollars and too bad it'll be gone by high tide and whatnot, nothing too clever 'cuz the boulder guy's not too clever. But of course the sand castle guy's got this Zen Buddha patience about the whole thing, as he turns to the boulder guy and smiles and says but ah, who is truly the wealthier among us, when I at least have assurance and knowledge of my impermanence, and the fleetingness of my mark here on this earth, etc. The boulder guy grumbles about that being a big excuse for never leaving nothing but a small mark and so forth. But back up from the beach for just a second. Grab an inflatable tube and float with me somewhere in the waves and look. It's nice out here. And why are they out there, working in the sand? Wouldn't it be more comfortable for them to just plop down and let it all wash over? What is it that causes assholes like them and us to pretend like we're constructing something worthwhile, moving towards the completion of a project, in light of so much evidence that one way or another, it's hopeless? Is it even a brave thing, these toils on the beach? Or are we all just the assholes making a ruckus, the guys who insist on

playing horseshoes during vacation while the smart ones are sitting down, shutting up, and doing nothing at all except enjoying the ride?

\*

“Edgar let’s just try them.”

“No.

“You have no idea how comfortable they’ll be.”

“No.”

“Like pillows that you strap your feet into and walk around in.”

“I said no.”

“Edgar, please, do it for me. Just this one morning.”

“I have ass cancer, ma’am. I can do and wear whatever the fuck I please.”

She pulls a face. “*Colon* cancer, Edgar. Colon cancer.” She’s been holding a pair of shoes; now she lets one drop to push away her hair. “And it’s not even very *serious* colon cancer.”

There’s some truth to what she’s selling. My ass cancer isn’t very “serious.” If a scale existed of ass cancer seriousness, mine might even break into “lighthearted” ass cancer territory. I’m in no pain. Nothing aches, or shakes, and there’s been no chemo; my hair deserves to be in ads for elderly hair products, in conjunction with words like “volume” and “luster” and “durability.” The cancer’s just sort of there, floating around my brain as an unpleasant fact next to rainforest devastation and nuclear holocaust, filed under “things that could kill me but probably won’t today.” As far as nursing-home-bound, cancer-carrying seventy-four year olds go, I’ve got it made.

Still, though. Cancer's cancer, and the non-cancerous ought to act sympathetic. Plus I've only been in *this* home for a couple of days; my grace period as the new guy hasn't even worn off yet; there is no way I'm going to put on those shoes.

This nurse is currently waving a brand new pair of too-white shoes in front of my face. She's got great legs, this nurse. You can tell even though she's got a hideous pair of women's scrubs hiding them. Her face is that orange color you see a lot of during Minnesota winters, with women shying away from tanning beds because they're afraid of the cancers but still desperate as hell to stay "tan." Someone ought to tell the bunch of them they look "irradiated." She's done pinning her hair back behind her ears. Now she waves the shoes in my face, back and forth, back and forth, like a thurible from the days when I used to go to church. I don't like being reminded of church.

I try to play it cute and give her a smile. "Sorry sweetheart. I start walking around in shoes like those, I'll lose all my sex appeal. Then what'll you ladies have to look forward to?"

She acts like she hasn't heard me. If a nurse doesn't like what you're saying, she'll just ignore it; it's much easier than actually engaging in a dialogue, like you'd have to in the real world, with real people. "Just think how much easier it'll be on you," she says. "And on me. Everyone else has been at breakfast for forty-five minutes already. And we're still up here trying to get dressed."

I grit my teeth a little; this shame thing they do is one of the things that always gets to me. Like I'm inconveniencing everyone's day just by showing up late for breakfast.

What's going on is that most of the turkeys in here wear lace-less sneakers with the too-white everything and those straps, those whatdoyoucallem straps, with all the thousands of tiny hooks that feel like fuzz and that fasten together silent but when you pull them apart they go RIIIP, which is a way louder sound than any piece of footwear has a right to make. But they're easy, these strapless too-white shoes. They look like the light-up shoes of a kindergartener that have lost all their batteries, but they slip on and off real easy. And meanwhile, I still insist on taking the time to lace up my shoes; and this, according to my orange nurse, is proving unacceptable.

"Tell them to eat away, sweetheart." No one really likes being called a sweetheart—it's sounds like some disgusting dish that only British people could eat, like meat pies and haggis and Marmite—so I'm always sure to slip it in when I'm angry. "And go ahead and join them. Tell 'em to leave me a few strips of bacon on a plate and I'll get to it eventually."

She gives a sigh, nurse code for "You're being difficult." Her scrubs are pink and decorated with hearts and puppies and puppies wrestling with hearts. It makes you wonder if this is the last place on earth where girls are expected to put on girly shit to go work, all these uniforms with hearts and flowers and Betty Boops that seem required by nursing law. Or maybe certain women like this one just prefer it.

"But then breakfast will be all cold, Edgar. And you don't won't a cold breakfast, do you?" She smiles at this, like the logic's untouchable, and starts reaching for my feet.

In my head I'm thinking *that's what microwaves are for, dumbass*, but I keep that one bottled. I've been booted out of enough homes to know when to stow the sass. Instead I throw my hands up in the air and say, "No, please. Thank you but no." That's as

clear as I can hope to be sometimes. If I trusted myself I'd tell her what my dad told me, that a man's shoes are just about the surest way to tell what kind of a man he really is. That cars and clothes and houses can all lie with enough money, but that finding the right pair of shoes takes time and effort and care about how you present yourself to other people. That while these wingtips might be getting on in years, I wasn't ready to tag them out, to stop caring enough to swap for those lace-less kindergarten shoes. Those straps, I am suddenly remembering, are called Velcro straps. But my mouth doesn't talk the smooth shit it used to, so I keep it short and simple. "Thank you but no."

"Okay, *fuck*," she says, and the patient smile is nowhere to be found now. "We go through this fucking shoe routine *every goddamn morning*. Just put on the goddamn slippers and cut the shit, okay? Okay."

She starts reaching down for my feet, saying, "Here...we... go...." and pulling the untied wingtips off my feet. I panic. I say "No," and trying pulling my feet away from her, but I'm sitting on the edge of the bed, there's no place to go and even if there was, this orange bitch is strong. She wrestles off my right shoe. I don't know if she's making up that 'every goddamn morning' crap or not, but I *do* know that if she takes away my shoes then it's curtains for the wingtips, I'll be sentenced to a lifetime of roaming the world in Velcro. There's a fog around my head a lot of the time but right now it's crystal clear. I don't command my left foot so much as root it on as it suddenly leaps up and gives the nurse a solid whack on the chin.

There's a moment where nothing seems to move. Nurse Orange strokes at her chin with one hand, feeling for blood or permanent injury while staring me down. She kind of looks like one of those old Greek statues of musing philosophers, holding her

chin as she contemplates life's great mysteries. Here, of course, she's contemplating the best way to throttle me without losing her job. I close my jaw back up and give her my best sneer. "That's the smartest you've looked all morning," I tell her. "Now give me back my shoe."

She shakes her head and snarls. "Son of a *bitch*, your life just got miserable." She's still holding my shoe, I notice. She picks herself up from her crouch by my feet and brandishes it at me like a club. "You know what I'm going to do?"

"What's that?" I'm kind of enjoying myself. Sure, there's a good chance I'm about to get clobbered, but suddenly it's a real person she's shouting at, instead of a senile old fart. The puppy talk's long gone. She leans down real close and whispers into my ear.

"I'm going to neglect the *shit* out of you," she says.

I try to give my best laughing-in-the-face-of-danger laugh, that "Ha ha haaaaaw," kind of thing, in order to keep the mood up. It comes out sounding more like a wheeze. The whole ordeal is starting to make me feel sleepy. She notices.

"Go ahead, take a nap. And when you wake up, see if I get you to come downstairs. See if I bring you meals, or bathe you, or clean up your shit once your ass gets all incontinent."

You can feel yourself start to fade, is what people don't realize. This old age feeling, this disconnect and tiredness that you can't even come close to fighting. It doesn't just flip on and off like a light switch. It's more like listening to the radio as you drive out from a city, pushing further and further into the country. The signal starts



strong and picks up static in tiny little increments, like a pocket gathering lint. You travel a long time before the signal's fully gone.

I'm fading pretty badly when, miracle of miracles, my body provides me with a rebuttal. Something wells up inside me, and I'll tell you, it's a *gassy* something. I let off a long, slow fart, then cup my hands and fan it in her direction as best I can.

She gets the idea. "Fuck this," she says. "Give me those shoes."

"No."

"I said give me those shoes!"

"No!"

"The *fuck* is going on here?"

We both freeze and turn towards the doorway. She's standing in the frame with a sack full of dirty sheets and there's no way to tell how long she's been standing there. The way she plants her feet says long enough. Even I can remember this nurse's name. Nurse Barhydt.

The orange nurse draws herself up again. "We were just..." She looks at me again, then back at Barhydt, and I can't tell which one of us she loathes more. "You know what, actually? Fuck this shit." She drops my shoe. "The fuck was I smoking, thinking about working with old people. I could make more money at *Denny's*. And I could get a *job* at *Denny's* too. Know why? 'Cuz I'm *legal*."

It takes me a second to realize she's not talking to me. She's almost at the door, and Nurse Barhydt steps into the room to allow her to storm out but she stops before leaving. "Because I was *born* in this *country*. Because I can do my psych rotation *anywhere*. Because I'm too fucking... too fucking..." she's stuck looking for the right

words, and I find myself wondering what she'll do with her scrubs once she leaves. Will she be a nurse somewhere else, or quit entirely? If she quits, will she keep them as pajamas, or throw them away?

“Too fucking what?” Barhydt asks. Her fists unclench, and she's back to Bruce Lee-levels of calm, the kind of calm you know you shouldn't fuck with. “White, maybe? Well.” She looks the other nurse over. “You're actually kind of... orange,” she says.

The girl says nothing, tosses her hair. She tells us both, “fuck...this...shit,” emphasizing one word at a time, and leaves. Young people seem to think that if they say an insult very slowly, it becomes a more devastating insult. I can hear her clomping down the stairs, and then nothing. Barhydt turns to look at me. The static is starting to swell and grow again. I ask if I might take a nap, please.

She shakes her head. “Breakfast first,” she says, and moves forward to help me with my shoes. It's then that we both hear the crash from next door.

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One of the guys in this place, he's got a line. He tells anyone who'll listen that the walls in this place are like the women on TV nowadays: too thin to be worth a damn. Now personally I like skinny women just fine, and this guy's got the Alzheimer's, so he'll sit there repeating that same joke all day; I do my best to avoid thinking about him; but hearing that crash, the words come back quick. These walls *are* thin. Thin enough that I wake up to the pissing and shuffling and wake-up noises of senile early risers every day at four in the morning, thin enough to hear complaints if I dare stay up past nine in the evening, and *definitely* thin enough to know when a body-sized something has hit the floor with force in the next room over. Barhydt is out the door before I can even think

about rising. I hear her give a few knocks on a door. She says, “Frank,” waits a tick, and then starts to push on through. There’s no lock on the doors up here, in case one of us forgets where we are and freaks out and tries barricading the door. I start kicking the remaining wingtip off my foot. No time for laces. If I wanted to see the action, I had to move.

It could be a barricader. Even without locks, a few manage to drag furniture and light stands and (at one home) even record players in front of their doors. Some do it for the attention, for a nurse to have to come to the door and plead to get in. For the chance to feel in charge of *something* again, if only for a minute. Some get to thinking that if they can only keep the home on the outside then they’ve won, that all these nosy people and all the problems they drag around will vanish from their lives. It’s the equivalent of clamping shut your eyes and sticking fingers in your ears and chanting Lalalalala, but actually *believing* that the rest of the house has disappeared. People are capable of some pretty serious self-delusion, you’ll find, until they realize that their private little universes don’t include bathrooms. For most barricaders, though, they set up barriers out of fear. The ones with memory problems wake up and start wondering, “Whose house did I break into and fall asleep in? Are the people downstairs calling the cops? How the hell did I just pull a Goldilocks?” Their impulse to stay hidden is the same as for werewolves, or at least well-intentioned Hollywood werewolves, when they chain themselves up at the approach of a full moon; they think they’ve done something terribly wrong that they have no control over, and that given the chance, they’ll quickly do so again. I grab my Stetson from off the bureau and walk out the door. Barricaders are always fun to watch.

Barhydt is out by the foot of the stairs, yelling at someone to call an ambulance and to come help her up in Frank's room, with fucking haste. For the moment she's too distracted to notice me. I take the opportunity to do some snooping on my own.

She's left Frank's door ajar, so I nudge it open with a tap of my foot. These are my last pair of nice black socks without holes, and walking around on the wood floor without shoes is attracting dust to them like magnets. This would normally piss me off to no end. I find myself not caring as I take a look around.

The room is laid out the exact same as my own. The twin windows are on the same back wall, overlooking the same stretch of the house next door. His bed's squared against the same corner, as well as the bureau and the closet. It was like visiting the tract housing in the neighborhood I grew up in, where you'd stop in at a neighbors and never have to ask where the bathroom was, because your housing plans would be exactly the same; up the tiny staircase, to the left, the door at the end of the hallway.

But the similar layout shines a spotlight on all the differences. The place is disgusting. Clothes are thrown all over the place and a fine layer of grime coats everything from the ceiling fan to the floor. My room smells like fake lemon and doesn't have a speck of dust to speak of, that type of hostilely dirt-free zone you get when someone who does not live there is doing all the housework. Less "tidy", more "disinfected." Most rooms here feel like a snobby hotel or bed-and-breakfast, and all you can think of are the people who slept here before. This room hasn't been disinfected, though, hasn't even been *livable*, in a long, long time. I'm nearly too busy taking in all the filth to notice the man splayed on the floor. At least until he starts groaning.

He's a big man. Old age hasn't squeezed all the fat and juices out of him yet, and his blue jeans and red button down bulge a little around a gut. The guy is laid out on his back in front of the bed and I lose a little respect for Barhydt, for not helping the guy to his feet. I take a step over to see what I can do.

He hears my feet approaching and his eyes shoot open. They're wild, disoriented, unfocused. He doesn't seem to have a clue where he is. This can happen when people fall here. A fall can shatter what little reality you've managed to retain. "Easy there, Frank," I say. Up close, I realize there isn't a damn thing I can do for the guy. He must weigh 160 pounds, easy, and I haven't exactly been hitting the gym in recent years. There's an unset alarm clock on his bedside table and it keeps blinking 12:00, 12:00, in angry red dashes. I wonder how many days it's been flashing like that. "They're gonna get you a doctor and fix you up good," I tell him, just to say something.

This gets his attention. He looks at me and says, "Do *not* resuscitate." He stops to do some major-league grimacing and sucking at his teeth, in pain. His hair is bright white but the three-day stubble on his face is red. I find this very distracting. "Please. Just let me go. Yes?" He's looking directly at my face now. Down on the floor like that, I must appear upside-down and looming, authority-figure like. He's got the wrong impression.

"You've got the wrong idea, buddy. I'm just a nosy neighbor." I point my finger at the wall. "See? I came from right over there." But now I'm thinking; *is* that the side I came from? Or should I be pointing to the other wall? Which way did I turn to get here? If I choose the wrong direction I might end up wandering the halls all morning, peeking my head into other people's rooms, making an ass of myself as usual. I shake this feeling away. Deal with one thing at a time.

“Fuck.” Frank rides another wave of pain, a big one, by the looks of his face. When it subsides he looks more focused. He looks up again and seems to notice my hat for the first time. “Fuck. Edgar, is that you?”

I run my fingers along the edge of my hat. Where’d he pick up my name? If it weren’t for Barhydt shouting his name up and down the hall, I wouldn’t have known his. This guy could be a stranger on the street for all I remember. Still, I smile. If you’re going to forget faces you’ve got to learn how to fake it. “Sure is,” I say. “Know anyone else in this dump that looks this handsome?”

He’s not amused. His eyes dim like Morning Glory’s shutting down for the night, conserving their energy for someone more useful. “Well just kill me, if you can,” he says in a voice with no oomph. “Smother me. Stomp on me. Do *something*.”

“Hey,” I say, then nothing else. Even for a dump like this, this guy seems to want out bad. I look for a pillow, something soft, to put under his head. As if that’d make things better.

“Edgar!” says a voice by the door. “Get *out*!”

I turn. It’s a not so speedy a process nowadays. Requires a lot of tight shuffling steps. It’s Barhydt, back with another nurse I don’t quite recognize. They’ve both got lifting harnesses on, the type dockworkers use for strapping themselves to heavy objects. But when the other nurse moves to Frank to start picking him up, Barhydt shakes her head.

“We can’t move him,” she says. “Something’s broken.”

The other nurse bends down, checking Frank’s forehead and pulse while taking a look around. She sucks at her teeth at what she sees.

“Such a mess. The fuck was that girl *doing* up here, is what I want to know.”

“It’s too bad she quits, I cannot kill her,” Barhydt says. She drops down next to Frank too, and then notices me still standing there. “Edgar, you need to get *out*. We have to be having space. Do you understand?” Her voice has that strained patience adults get when they’re annoyed with small children, trying not to yell, since they know the child doesn’t know better. She thinks I don’t know any better. The whole thing makes me want a cigarette. I leave the room without saying a word.

I consider my options in the hallway. Part of me wants to head back to my room and open up the stash of Camels I keep hidden in my desk, to sit down and open my window and smoke discreetly until the whole affair starts to make sense. But I was getting hungry, and I still wasn’t entirely sure which direction my room was. That left me with Frank’s suggestion: *do something*. Something like going downstairs, getting some grub, and finding the one person I knew who would talk to me about what just happened, who might provide some answers on why this Frank guy wanted out so bad. I needed to talk to Maria.

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The stairs here are solid and oak and I use both hands on the railing. You realize at a certain age that stairs are the enemy and you respect them as such. A plastic and steel contraption runs down the entirety of one side of the staircase, ruining the classic feel of the place. No idea what the device is meant for. I make a mental note to investigate it later, and then laugh at the idea of my remembering a mental note. I make another mental note to buy a pen and some paper. If I can remember *that*, I’ll be getting somewhere. I hear voices and smell bacon from the next room as I reach the bottom of the stairs.

The room is shut by a set of swinging doors with no handles and I enter it as I would a saloon. You can't pussyfoot around when you're entering a saloon. You push through with Old West determination, and you keep your hat on at that whatsthe word angle, the angle that shows insolence, and you let it be known that you're on the job. I was going to enter this room and demand some answers and maybe pick at some bacon, if it was complimentary. But my entrance fails to get any reaction. Fails to get anyone to even rise up their heads from their breakfast plates. It throws me off balance. And looking around, it seems like I'm the only person in the room without shoes, with my socks hauling along a herd of dust bunnies behind them. Even Velcro shoes would be better than this. The hat angle I am looking for is a rakish angle, I remember, but it seems too late for that now.

It's a dining room. There's one long table, a huge and ornate wooden thing that was clearly made for a bigger room; there's barely enough space for a person to get around its sides. Mismatched plates and mugs advertising "I hate Mondays" and "Breast Cancer Fun Run 1996" sit right next to big shiny industrial serving platters, the type of trays that keep weenie wraps warm at Holiday Inn convention centers. I get lost in this layout. The shiny trays make the breakfast seem professional, catered, the type of thing where people get paid to smile at you and drop the food on your tray; but the bric-a-brac mugs and plates look like they belong to a real home. Was someone going to serve me, or should I help myself? This is my first breakfast; usually I'm still upstairs working on my laces. I look around to see what the others were doing.

Nine people sit around the table. There's only two people who seem to actually be eating, both of them bald, exceptionally wrinkled, and struggling to command shaky



forkfuls of what looked like quiche into their mouths. The quiche falls off of one guy's fork and hits the carpet with an eggy splat; the man stares at it for a moment, and then starts kicking it underneath the other bald man's feet. Four others, all grey hairs, stay silent on the opposite end of the table and ignore their food. They're staring at the burgundy-colored walls like people listening to a radio will stare, kind of detached and intensely concentrating all at the same time; whatever they're thinking about, wherever they are inside their heads, it's got nothing to do with what they're seeing. In the middle table is another nurse, conspicuous for being the only person under fifty, or sixty for that matter. She's watching three women with a look of mild concentration, two brunettes and a redhead who seem to be having a heart to heart. The brunette furthest from me is Maria.

I write the four wall-starers off as loonies, the bald men as depressing and possibly contagious. I'm still not convinced that baldness can't be caught like the flu. Maria looks busy but she was still my best shot at finding out about Frank. The lady tends to know things. Maybe she knows what was causing Frank so much grief that he'd rather be smothered and stomped than to live here. I take an empty seat by the nurse's side, across from the chatting ladies, and wait for my turn to speak.

The nurse gives me a small smile as I sit down. She's a black lady—all the nurses here, except that orange girl from this morning with the serious distaste for my choice in footwear, are black or brown ladies—and to label her fat seems unfair but she certainly isn't skinny. Young and healthy-looking but in sort of a dumpy way, probably having eaten vending machine Fritos for the past ten years while rushing between patients' rooms since nurses, as a rule, have no time for real lunches. After the quick smile she ignores me, bringing her attention right back to the women. I didn't feel the need to

interrupt. I grab a piece of toast off of a tray, but the butter and jam were out of reach, and rather than asking for these I decide to nibble at it plain. The toast had gone cold and it had never really been toasted enough in the first place and I was essentially eating plain bread, but it gave me something to do with my hands as I listened to the first brunette, the non-Maria brunette, begin to speak:

“The problem with your cake this week Laura is that there’s barely a token effort to keep to theme. The flowers, these roses you’ve created here, they’re beautiful, but they’re also universal; there’s no attempt that I can see to incorporate the bride and groom’s interests. Also, this shape, it’s a bit...*coffin*-like, no? So long and tall and narrow, and with the roses—again, they’re beautiful—but I’m not sure if this is the impression we want to be leaving on the client.”

I search around for signs of a coffin-cake. But the shiny trays hold sausage and quiche and what looked to be Belgian waffles; certainly no cakes. A knock echoes in from the room next door and peering over the swinging dining room doors I see Barhydt hustling down the stairs. She lets two men in the front door. They’re wearing matching sky blue polo shirts. They’re carrying a stretcher. They head up the stairs together, not bothering to be quiet, but nobody in the dining room says a peep.

The woman next in line at the kitchen table, hair one of those terrible dye jobs that aims for natural red and results in curdled strawberry milk, pink in parts and distinctly lumpy, starts talking. “As for you, Tressa, your problem ends up being on the other end of the spectrum. You’ve obviously made an attempt to incorporate the client’s list of interests, but it might be, ah... a bit too *many* interests, if you know what I mean. There’s just so many things going on here, this particular cake is so busy, I’m not really

sure what the unifying focus is. It comes off a little hodgepodge. That said, some of your detailing here- like this dartboard you've created going around the edge of this layer—it's absolutely breathtaking. You've got a real gift for detail, Tressa, and it shows here. I just wonder if it shows too much."

I check the nurse's reaction to all of this. She's still wearing a look of some detached and mild concern, as if the local news had just told her that a favorite vegetable might be killing her; what she was listening to was probably guff, but her interest was nevertheless piqued. She's wearing a nametag, which reads "Nurse Abrasia." Maria starts to speak. I can't help comparing her to the curdled-looking redhead sitting beside her. Maria's hair gleams such a convincing shade of chestnut brown, contains such convincing wisps of silver, that it might even be her natural color. And below the table, I know, are legs that any woman of fifty would commit felonies for. When she starts to speak she looks across the table and begins to stare me down.

"I was really worried about this week. Cakes are such a specialty to some of the other chefs in this competition, and I come from a much more restaurant-oriented background. Flans and pastries and creams and so on. So while I know I *know* cakes, I guess I still, I consider them a weakness of sorts. And with... with... shit."

She stop talking and stops staring at me and begins searching the air around her for an answer, suddenly a young girl again in that particular state of panic of taking a test and reading a question and knowing that you know the answer but not recalling it for the life of her. "Shit," she says. "It's on the tip of my tongue. She's talking about what's at stake for her... and..." she trails off. The other two women make a show of avoiding looking at her. Though the rest of the table stays silent and makes no show of breaking

their routines—the four grey loonies keep staring at the wall, the two bald men continue kicking quiche back and forth between them—I get the feeling that all of them are tuned in to Maria’s apparent failure. The nurse, the Nurse Abrasia, says, “...And with \$50,000 on the line, any possible weakness is enough to get you thrown out. So I really need to give it everything I got this week, and just pray that it’s enough.” She smiles. “Am I correct?” She stays smiling, but I didn’t find her expression all that comforting. “Yes of course,” says Maria. Her hands sit folded on the table. They go through little tremors and spasms like they want to throttle something, blame something, whatever they can find. “The \$50,000 bit. Of course. They must mention that ten times a show. I knew that. I *know* that.” Then she throws me a look of absolute loathing. All I can think of is how sexy this woman becomes when angry.

The two men in blue Polos come back down the stairs. This time, the stretcher is carrying Frank, and the guys are clearly having a tough time with his weight. There’s a lot of heavy breathing. Barhydt leads the weigh and helps where she can. A cart is waiting at the bottom of the stairs and they place Frank and the stretcher onto this. Barhydt gives Frank’s hand a squeeze and tells him to hang in there and be tough. I can’t make out Frank’s response. It sounds like a moan.

Frank is led out the door. During this whole process, the people in the dining room don’t comment on any of it. They look away and the first brunette lady says “Terrible, terrible,” but that’s it, no one asks “Who was hurt” or “Is Frank okay” or even “Was his room bigger than mine, and if so may I have it.” It hits too close to home, I figure. There’s nothing to shake your delusions about this place and your status here like

seeing a gurney carried slowly down the stairwell. This is a nursing home, it reminds you. You are here until you're not.

Not knowing what to say, but feeling I ought to say something, I try bringing it back to this cake business. I say, "Well that sounded very good to me." When no one responds, I try again. "What... *was* that, exactly?" Nurse Abrasia responds. She doesn't look at me, doesn't take her gaze away from the angry brunette. "That was a scene from *Top Chef: Just Desserts*," he said. "And Edgar's right. That was very good. *All* of you." She smiles again, and I don't find her reassurances reassuring; she has the look of a teacher wanting to write down some failure of his pupils, but reluctant to do so right in front of them all. I had to repeat Latin three times in high school; it was a look that I had learned to know well. Amazing that I can remember that tidbit, but not this nurse, and not Frank, both of who know my name and could be strangers on the street as far as I'm concerned. But that's the way it seems to work, for some reason; the older a memory is, the longer it sticks around. And I count myself lucky. So I drop a few names. For some of these guys, it's all going to get scooped.

After a moment the nurse excuses herself, leaving her quiche untouched. Before she leaves the room she looks over at me.

"And I heard from your daughter, Edgar. Anna said that she's not going to make it with this weather, and that she's sorry, and that she will try her best to make it tomorrow."

I wait for this to mean something to me. Nothing clicks. No daughter falls into place. I'm gathering looks left and right, the baldies are watching, Maria is watching, and it's almost a nice feeling, how clear my mind is of anything resembling an answer. What

comes to the mind is stepping on the tail of a horseshoe crab, which are like giant sea spiders with shells and viciously pointy tails, and having the tail cut right through my foot. I don't know when this was or where this was, but it happened, I know it happened, and the feeling of pure dumb blinding emptiness that the pain caused was this same kind of clear. Almost... almost rapturously empty. I've cleared my mind for a daughter, but a daughter does not float up.

But I can't act like an idiot in front of all these people. I nod as if this means something to me, and the lady leaves the room. Everyone looks away, and the feeling fades.

When the saloon doors stop swinging and it's clear that the nurse is gone, the curdled-looking redhead places a soft hand on top of Maria's and gives it a squeeze. Maria can't stop looking at the table, the loser stare, the pitcher who's blown the game stare of utter desolation. I can't stand it. I much prefer her angry. "Looks like you blew it," I say, trying to get a rise out of her. Her friends give me a look like moldy death, but Maria doesn't even look up.

None of the women speak for a while. At the far end of the table, one of the gray-hairs, a woman in a University of Minnesota sweatshirt, starts talking. Her gaze hasn't shifted. As far as I can tell, she's talking to the wall. "My nephew, he *loves* his new job. At that other place he was stuck behind a desk all day. Now he gets to move around outside and talk to people. Isn't that nice?" One of her neighbors breaks off her own staring contest with the wall long enough to glance over at her, then slowly shake her head. "Sounds too dangerous," she says. Then both go silent again.

The three women were watching this exchange. It seems to strike a chord. “We need,” the redheaded woman says, “To get out of here.” The black-haired woman nods. “It’s been long enough. We are ready.” After a moment both of them stared down at Maria, who let out a long breath before picking her head up. She speaks to them while looking at me.

“Edgar’s just jealous because he can’t remember his ass from his elbow, most days,” she says, then sighs and rubs her eyes with her fingertips. “And it *is* time for us to leave.”

I smile. “Don’t mean to slow you ladies down,” I say. “But before you skip out, Maria and I need to talk.”

\*

We’re sitting in Maria’s room. She’s got a flashing purple beta fish floating on a roll top desk, and it’s trying to pick a fight with a makeup mirror propped up against his tank. A healthy-looking lotus plant poses on her windowsill, showing off its white petals and the yellow stigma couched inside. Maria’s one of those types that flaunts her ability to keep things alive. She likes to have plants and fish and people dependent on her, like she’s trying to prove to the home that she’s not dependent on it. Me, I just concentrate on my own two feet. Which reminds me. I’m still missing my shoes.

“So what is it today, Edgar?” she says. She’s reaching around in a desk drawer, either looking for something or making sure everything’s in place. “You forget where we are again? Your daughter’s name? What’ll it be?”

I try to stay focused. It’s not easy. I don’t even need to blame the old age; the legs Maria’s showing as she prowls around the room in a sundress are enough to distract. I’m

fuzzy on the specifics of the whole “where we are” and “what’s my daughter’s name” issues, but know enough to get by. Couldn’t tell you the name of this place right now, but it’s a nursing home, and it’s about as fun as public television. Couldn’t tell you the name of my daughter right now, but she’s visiting tomorrow, and she’s certain to be a swell gal. I try to gather myself by looking out the window. It’s snowing.

“It’s snowing,” I say. “Why are you wearing a sundress?”

“Or maybe it’s something tougher today. Working on the crossword puzzle, maybe? They say that it helps delay memory loss. Need help finding a synonym?”

“Maria.”

“Or Sudoku, if words aren’t your style. Little boxes filled with numbers. You’ll hate it but it just might add whole minutes to your active brain life.”

“Maria.”

“And olive oil, and sushi, and keeping out of the sun...”

I sigh. Maria’s memory is sharp as hell, but she slips up in other ways. Once she gets going on a tangent like this, she’s *gone*. She’s not ignoring me. She simply can’t process anything outside her train of thought. I wait her out, let her departure run its course. I try to focus on why I’m here. Frank. The dead guy next door.

“And low stress levels but not *too* low stress levels, and being read to as a child, and a healthy sex life.” She’s back at the drawer that she’s already rummaged through, searching it again. “And eggs, possibly, though that seems to change back and forth.” This time she makes an “aha” sound and comes out with a half-empty bottle of Tanqueray. She looks at me for the first time since she started talking. Her face carries



none of the enthusiasm of her voice. It scares me a little, when she gets like this. It always does.

“Have you noticed that, Edgar? About eggs. They can’t ever seem to decide on whether we should be eating eggs. Why is that? They seem pretty basic compared to, say, nuclear power. What’s the lingering mystery residing in eggs?”

I take the opportunity to jump in and get her back on track. “What do you know about a guy named Frank?”

She pauses. The obsessive thought train’s shattered. It’s like watching gears fall back into place after a moment of fluke mechanical breakdown. Her whole body recomposes. Watching her for the first time, you’d swear it was a one-time thing, this lapse into herself. She recovers from it so fully that it’s difficult to imagine such a fade happening ever again. Until it does.

There’s a tumbler in the roll top desk and the fish darts away from the vibration as she smacks it down and pours herself a drink. It’s a large drink. She doesn’t mix it, and she doesn’t offer me a glass. I know better than to ask for one—gin makes me fearsomely sleepy these days. I also know better to offer sympathies for her lapse, or to try and tell her to take it easy on the hard stuff. Maria is allowed to give me shit when I fuck up. I’m not extended the same courtesy.

“Frank,” she says after a long moment. “Fat guy. Wears lots of sweaters. White hair on top of a red beard, which God only knows why he doesn’t shave that off. Doesn’t he live next to you?” She looks at me. “Suddenly interested in being a good neighbor?”

I try to face her but keep getting sucked in by her window. She’s got a nicer view than I do. My window faces the side of the house next door, a flat ugly ranch-style thing

that even by my low entertainment standards never has anything interesting going on inside of it. The husband's fat and watches too much TV from the living room. The wife's fat and watches too much TV from the kitchen. I can't take too much snooping; I know that one day one of them will lumber to the other side of the house and fuck the other fattie, and the prospect of the offspring of such people fills me with a great sadness. But Maria's window looks out into the backyard.

"Something like that," I say. "That was Frank that got carted off this morning."

She takes a gulp and sets down her glass next to the fish tank. The beta starts sizing up the gin bottle, darting at its image, ready for a fight.

"I was wondering who that might have been," she says. If there's tenderness in her voice, I'm missing it entirely. "Thought it might've been Helen. That lady who falls asleep on people all the time." She snorts. "You can't tell, with the ones that don't snore. They look dead as dead can be."

"It was Frank," I tell her. "I went into his room after I heard him fall. Big guy. Made a hell of a thump."

She looks at me with her head all cocked to the side, like she's got a question she's dying to ask but knows I can't answer. Or maybe not dying to ask. I shouldn't say that, probably, in here.

"What's up?" I ask her.

"You just walked right in to his room?"

I shifted a little. Her room only had two chairs, and the old wicker one I was sitting in kept scratching my ass with broken thistles. It wasn't the pleasant type of

scratch. The chair was making me sore, and the nice view and winter sunlight had me blinking off sleep. I'd have to hurry this up.

“Of course I walked in,” I say. “Guy was hurting. And I’ll tell you, what I saw in there wasn’t pretty. Frank was raving for someone to put him out of his misery. The nurses couldn’t believe the hellhole condition of his room. The nurse in charge of taking care of him up and quits today. And there didn’t seem to be anything for him to even trip over, which makes me think he threw himself to the ground. The moping for death, the fall, the room itself—the whole situation smelled rotten.”

Maria finishes her drink. She holds the tumbler up to the light, looking for any last drop; when she finds one, she shakes it out over the fish tank. I thought about saying something, but I stop myself. So what if her fish gets drunk? It was probably just as bored as we were.

When she sees that I’ve finished talking, she looks up at me. A long moment crawls by. “So?” she finally asks.

“So what kind of thing are we dealing with here then?” I asked her.

She gives me a look with way less sympathy than she gives the fish. It’s like she figures that the fish at least has an *excuse* for being stupid.

“What are we *dealing* with here?” she says. “What do you *think* we’re dealing with? A bad case of ‘living in a nursing home.’” She laughs and starts pouring herself another drink. Maria’s speech doesn’t slur; she just starts to sound tired with everything, exasperated. “A case of the ‘being old and frail and without much to live for’ blues. A case of hip bones like spun sugar. A case of...”

I say, “Maria,” but she continues. I know she’s gone, so I let her go. Words tumble out of her mouth and I don’t bother to pick them up, they’re useless, like so many birdseed shells littered under a feeder. I miss filling up bird feeders. It was one of those parts of landscaping work that I’d have done even if no one had paid me. The orchid that sits on the window, I notice, isn’t as healthy as I first thought. A few leaves lay in a neat pile at its base and I tell myself to remind Maria, once she’s worked all the words out, not to overwater the plant. Orchids really only need an ice cube a week to live. Or maybe it’s not overwatering; maybe the plant, like the fish, is being fed with spare drops of gin. The sunlight is making me sleepy. I’m getting no answers here. I stand up to leave the room, knowing Maria wouldn’t miss me, and decide to take one last look out the window into the backyard. I freeze.

A deer stands outside in the snow. I’m watching from a second story window but I make sure not to make a sound. The deer takes long strides and lifts its legs up high every time it wants to take a step. It finally stops to sniff at a pine bush, the only green thing visible in a yard of white and brown. I blink and the deer looks up and I don’t know shit about deer, and I wonder if they can hear something so quiet and soft as a blink. Then the animal poops, spewing little black pellets all over the base of the pine bush, and runs away. I feel an odd sort of pang as it leaves, less like a headache than a muscle cramp creeping its way into my brain. I assume it comes from being left alone.

“Edgar’s on the case. The case of an old sick man who has nothing to do but die, dying. An Alzheimer-inflicted former landscaper turned detective takes the case of the fallen fairy. The case of an old man with no friends or relatives who falls in an empty room, and does it make a sound. The case...”

I grab Maria. I've never done that before. I want to shake her but she's right about the spun sugar hips; a shake can lead to bad places. So I just hold her. I look her in the eyes. She's stopped talking, but she's still wearing her empty face. The gin makes the whole process slower.

I decide to ignore her jab about Alzheimer's. She's got me mixed up with someone else; I'm here for ass cancer. "What do you mean," I ask, "about Frank being a fairy?"

A look of disgust crosses her face, so I know she's snapping out of it. "Don't tell me you *forgot* about that," she says. "The days his 'brother' came in? The brother who kissed him on the lips before he left?"

She starts pulling away, and I let her go. "That must have gone on for years, before the 'brother' stopped coming about a month ago," she says. For the first time she looks at me with actual concern. "Edgar. We talk about that all the time. That's a pretty big slip-up, even for *you*."

Her two friends, the black-haired and redheaded harpies from the breakfast table, burst in. "We've done it," the redhead says. "We've figured it out." She notices me by the window. Gets embarrassed at not seeing me before talking, then angry.

"What the hell's he doing here? I thought you two were through."

I'm not sure what to make of that, or with the knowledge that Frank was a fairy, or that I've supposedly known it all along. But like I've said, I'm good at faking.

"Leaving, is what I'm doing," I tell her.

I put on my hat and walk out the door.

\*

And as for the whole landscaping thing:

Landscaping is one of those nice manual labor routine-building gigs, like delivering mail or mopping up floors, where the longer you've been working at it, the quicker you can get the job done. A rich guy's lawn in Edina that might have taken you five hours the first time you worked it but as you move through the season its starts taking four hours, then three, then eventually one and a half. You kind of get to know the branch layout of the shrubs, and the way to lay out the mulch without drowning the kind of pathetically small daffodil patch that the wife insists she's "tending", and how close you can bring the lawn mower to the edge of the driveway before the machine starts spitting grass clippings all over the asphalt, which pisses off rich people to no end, seeing evidence of yard work on their driveway, since the grass clippings seem to remind them of their parent's homes, childhood lawnmowers, the fact that their dads were out there mowing on Sundays and that now they don't even know how to mount one of the landscaping mower machines, which are fearsomely complicated and have you actually standing up and pulling on levers and treading pedals as you prowl along the green. So you get the routine down, and not only are you doing the job quicker but your landscaping is actually *better*, since you've come to know the yard, and so both parties are happy—the rich guys have a beautiful lawn which they can yell at their children for walking on instead of using the foot path, and we landscapers get to charge the same amount we would if had taken the full five hours. Everybody wins.

Except it turns out that we don't have a fucking clue with what to do with all of this free time except drink. Because you find that the alcoholism rates among mailmen

and janitors and landscapers and other routine-creating manual labor gigs is just phenomenally, are-you-sure-this-is-the-correct-statistic-questioningly high. You've finished your day at one and for most guys it's a question of whether to drink at home in front of the TV, if you've got cable and no wife/kids hanging around before five to nag you, or you collect at the bar and take advantage of the pre-evening happy hour deals and shoot the shit. It's not a seedy, degenerate-type activity; it's what most people do when they get off work and feel the tremendous pressure to capital-R-Relax in a properly stress-reducing way; these guys just get to start their relaxing and unwinding process about four hours ahead of the white collar crowd. And like anyone else who feels stressed and mistreated and that their work is basically unsatisfying and beneath their intelligence and way more demanding than most other people's jobs (which except for the 'I love my job!' assholes, we all pretty justifiably feel), they take their Relaxing and unwinding time seriously and feel obligated to themselves to use it to the fullest extent. Which leads to functioning alcoholism nearly all the time.

The only real exceptions are the freaks. Some guys are too socially awkward to be invited to the bar, and when they go home they're too busy getting obsessed with weird shit to ever care much about drinking. Jesus guys are the most visible example, since they've all decided that you need to hear about their lifestyle ASAP, and will gladly hang out on conspicuous street corners and bus stops until you do. But many other people take quieter, weirder routes in dealing with their maddening amounts of free time. I once had a landscaping boss by the name of Garaty who, as a fully grown man, became obsessed with Walt Disney World—as in the place itself, in Florida—and who spent all his time and money finding deals for trips to Disney. He would go, and he would come back with

collectible gold-lined plates featuring Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, and he would tell everyone over the roar of the hedge clippers what a time he had, how Disney World in the autumn differs from Disney World in the summer (less tourists, same rides, about the same sun). Then he'd start the saving-up and deal-finding process all over again. Normal dude, quick to laugh, good boss, kind of gassy going to and from worksites in small cramped trucks: his consuming free-time passion was for Walt Disney World. This can, incredibly, sustain a life.

My personal freak trait was that I loved my wife. A lot. Enough to actively want to spend time with her whenever I could. In most cases that'd leave me with nothing to do except maybe whack off lovingly to her image until she came home from work, but I was lucky. She worked in one of the few places I'm aware of that people from the public can just walk in and hang around for hours and hours: the library. I avoided the bar and the television and Walt Disney World and would hang around the wife that I loved as she worked afternoons at Ramsey County Library-Highland Park Location.

So I read, okay. While Rachel was busy putting books back on shelves or helping grandmothers remember the names of books they were recommended thirty years ago (mind you these are mostly pre-computer days, so when a lady comes in and says "I'm looking for a book, and I just *know* it has the word 'crow' in the title somewhere," that can be a half-hour or more of playing guessing games with the card catalogue system), while I sat my ass down in the nice corner with the nice light from the series of windows that even the bum contingent came to recognize as my territory, I read. Rachel would stop by and kiss the back of my neck and ask about my day and drop me off a new book and I read. She always thought she was surprising me with her back-of-the-neck kisses



that she was sneaking up on me and even though I heard her moving through the plush carpet I never turned around, always acted surprised, because they felt good and I didn't want them to stop. We had kind of a system going. She'd drop me off some good ol' fashioned murder-mystery shit, *The Big Sleep* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, tough-talking detective dudes she knew to be my favorite. Then she'd switch it up with a "better yourself" book, heavier shit, guys like Joyce and ladies like Austen and this Russian whose name always sounded to me like Don't-Ski-Ef-Ski, and I always pictured him all bundled up in Russian furs while trying to convince his friends that skiing was a horrible, dangerous pastime: "Don't ski! Fuck skiing!" With most of these books I just sort of opened them up wherever and read a few lines and then stared out the window. Sometimes I'd play cards with a bum. But I got it, with these books. Maybe not all of it, but I saw why smart people like Rachel adored these books. Sometimes we'd be back at home talking in the kitchen and I'd say "Hey that's kind of like what that one guy was talking about in that book today," sort of as a frame of reference to whatever we were talking about, and Rachel typically wouldn't say shit, just give me a smile. Not patronizing or anything. Just a funny kind of smile. And in one of those weird memory things that I don't quite know how to feel about, the face that she's wearing when I remember her always has that smile, every time. I can't remember her angry, or crying, or even laughing. Just the smile.

I don't read much, anymore. I am searching for a new freak way to avoid Relaxing. There has to be some way to hide the time.

I'm back in the hallway, fighting the stiffness and the sleepiness away, trying to make sense of the mess of information that Maria's just saddled me with. Frank being a fairly complicated things. I myself didn't care much—I like to think of myself as a progressive, hate all the world's people equally kind of guy—but these homes could be nightmares for queers. Most had managed to make some sort of life for themselves, had hung on long enough to escape their small town hells; thrown into claustrophobic houses full of Reagan nostalgics (or in some cases Reagan *supporters*; there's always a handful who believe that the Gipper is still Chief), all that's taken away. Suddenly they're the high school fag all over again, the kid whose parents took all their possessions and dumped them in the front yard and burned them when they (the kids) thought it was finally safe to tell them (the fire-breathing, gasoline-toting redneck parents) the truth, but its all worse, somehow— since this time around, they've already experienced something better. Most of the homes I've been shipped to had gays who went right back into hiding, once they saw the lay of the land; you haven't seen hate until you've seen wheel-chair bound old ladies ganging up on a suspected dyke until she cries. Stuff like “The man can't sit with us,” or legs stuck out when the lady's walking, or just complaints, just non-stop, muttered complaints, whenever she's in the room. I start walking towards the staircase. If Frank had been making out with dudes, and if people knew about it, there'd have been trouble.

But the staircase isn't empty. A nurse stands on top of the staircase, and I recognize her as the same healthy-dumpy nurse that had been at the kitchen table, talking to Maria and friends about nonexistent pastries. No idea what her name might be. She is

walking down the staircase and next to her floats a man in a wheelchair and suddenly I realize what that hideous metal thing on the staircase was for.

The guy sits in a wheelchair, which sits on a platform attached to the metal thing on the staircase. This contraption is creeping down the stairs and we are talking a *slow* creep. The nurse isn't doing much besides keeping the man company and the man, whose tiny silver eyebrows seem hopelessly outmatched by just way more ear hair than any one person has a right to, this man is a hand-talker. He's pointing and waving and stabbing to make points as he jabbers to the nurse and floats a slow mechanical float down the stairs.

“So let me tell you something here Ms. Abrasia.”

“Yes Albert.”

“My sources tell me that as a nurse in such a place, you see some pretty unpleasant things.”

“Oh?”

“Aesthetically unpleasant.”

“Watch your hands by that railing Albert.”

“Open-mouthed chewing and farts without even attempts at discretion, on a pretty much daily basis.”

“I know we're moving slow but if your hand gets caught in it-”

“Which is why I feel comfortable sharing with you, and only you, and possibly Edgar the occasional vegetable-man up there, my absolutely top-notch poop story.”

“Mr. Anzalone, please, the hands.”

“...”

“...Mr. Anzalone?”

At which point they're only a quarter of the way down, there are snails holding up the lower end of the snail family which could outpace this contraption, and the Albert guy lowers his hands and gets kind of a glazed look for a second, and I remember something the Irish side of my family used to say about the Italian side of my family, that if you made them all sit on their hands, they'd suddenly become the quietest fuckers on earth; but then the glaze is gone and the hands shoot up in a "touchdown" kind of gesture, and Albert continues-

"So this shit, Miss Abrasia, and I hope you don't mind the term between friends, but this shit is motivated by both ethnic food from that godawful excuse for a kitchen down there, and black coffee. Which Nurse Barydht has repeatedly told me not to drink anymore, sensible woman that she is, which I forget sometimes, in my old age."

"Albert let's talk about something nice."

"It's a very distant, wrong-side-of-the-tracks cousin to your standard law-abiding stool. More like..."

"..."

"..."

"Mr. Anzalone?"

"So I tell you now, I watch. These types of disasters, you can't help but watch. And I notice-"

"-Mr. Anzalone your hands-"

And it's true that Mr. Anzalone's hands are getting more animated, less Italian Auntie and more Crazy Person on the Bus, jerky flails as they pass the two-thirds marker-

“-Just one second here Katy I notice that upon water impact shit explodes, a million little shit satellites floating out in every direction before slowing down, and sinking, and do you know what I think of-”

“Mr. Anzalone *calm down-*”

“-I think of the Big Bang, Abrasia. I think of stars and suns and magnesium exploding outward from the central point, *my* central point, before slowing down, and sinking, and everyone’s wondering when the slowing down turns into stop, and what that means, but Abrasia I’m thinking, I’m peering between my legs and staring at the bowl and regretting the black coffee and I’m thinking-”

At which point he actually *does* hit the railing with the back of a flailing hand and the sleeve of his flannel gets stuck in the space between metal rail and wooden staircase, and the machine must sense the resistance because it makes a beeping sound like a backing up truck and stops its slow creep, and the nurse says “Albert!” and the guy’s just stuck there, three quarters of the way down with his arm suspended above his head by a piece of flannel, not in any pain but as soon he’s caught and the hands stop moving his eyes start to glaze more than ever, but he turns to look at me, since I still haven’t moved from the top of the stairs, yet. And this guy I figure is definitely kind of a dick, definitely referred to me as a part-time vegetable, but try not feeling a tiny bit bad for the guy as he sits like a lopsided scarecrow that’s traveled too far away from home, and he looks at me and he asks “But what does it matter if it stops, since it was all clearly such a piece of shit to begin with?” And I’m feeling for an answer despite myself, searching the pockets of my pajamas, finding nothing.

\*

“Do we need any help in here?” It’s Barhydt. She pushes through the saloon doors and behind her follows the whole breakfast crew. Apparently they hadn’t left yet—and really, where could they have gone? The bald duo is in front, looking excited. The grey-haired fuckers do *not* seem to like standing and they are all looking pretty seasick, searching out for the next place where they can sit back down. Barhydt calls out, “Maria! Norma! Pearl! Music time!” and the three women come sulking out of Maria’s room, ignoring Albert and me as they pass us on the stairs, looking less than pleased. No one seems particularly shook up about Albert being stuck on the staircase, and only the nurses seem to have enough hearing to wince at the alarm still bleating from the machine.

“We’re fine,” says Abrasia. She pries the sleeve free and presses a button to start the machine moving again, going down. The guy in the wheelchair is muttering to himself now, and sometimes his clumps of ear hair twitched when he shakes his head, and a few audible poop references still make their way up to me but the guy’s hands and heart don’t seem to be in it anymore. Barhydt gives a “follow me” gesture to her mass of old people, sort of a looking over the shoulder and a smile and a bobbing of the head all at the same time, and says, “Music time, people!” She starts to move.

The mass behind her half-shuffles, half-walks across the foyer in the direction of what looks like an entertainment room. I can see the corner of a television stand and beige couches. I start wondering if they might pass me by without comment. “Music time” sounds shitty and aimed at kindergartners and if these people are all in the entertainment room then the nurses would surely follow, leaving the coast clear for me to poke around a little bit. The wheelchair lift finally reaches the bottom of the stairs and starts lowering the chair and the man to the ground with that same sound descending

forklifts make, kind of a mechanical sigh. I'm looking on and looking past the crowd like I've got something else to do. I scrunch my eyebrows and squint and look impatiently behind everyone, as if waiting for a train that should have arrived five minutes ago. I've gotten *good* at looking impatient and busy and pissed, had created a career out of it in landscaping, standing just outside of people's front door and explaining the bill while they hung just inside of it, uncomfortably propping their swinging screen doors open with a spare hand, which made the whole thing feel like I was delivering pizza, which would often confuse people enough for them to start giving out tips. I would stand and discuss their bill and glance over my shoulder repeatedly, looking more nervous than impatient, like if I didn't finish this up and get back to mulching *right now* their whole lawn might collapse in an instant, and people had always believed that this was a man that had other things to do. Barhydt walks by, and the baldies walk by, and then the three women and two of the grey hairs and I'm just starting to congratulate himself when the second-to-last grey hair, an Indian guy wearing grey sweatpants that sit miles above his belly-button, slaps me on the ass.

It isn't a particularly *hard* slap—more like a feeble tap, if anything—but it had been no accident, and the man keeps walking like nothing happened, and it took me a second to gather myself. My sympathy for Frank and elderly gays everywhere flies out the window. “Poof!” I yell at the man's back. The word feels funny coming out of my mouth, too British and proper, and I know that it's probably outdated, that a whole new arsenal of devastating slurs and insults has likely risen up and replaced my own. But I do the best I can with what I have. I manage, “Goddamn... you little goddamn fairy!” and still the guy walks on, his sweatpants seeming to defy gravity as they ride *up* his body

instead of down, threatening to eat his whole torso. Most of the group has entered the entertainment room by now, yards away from old people earshot. The last grey-hair, a tiny man who seems to be balding not from the top of his head, but from the sides—the top-head-hair looking just fine, even distinguished maybe, a full palette of blacks and grays and silvers, while the sides and the back languish near hair starvation—this guy turns and faces me. “He’s just fucking with you, Edgar,” he says, pulling out some of the remaining hair above his left ear, and I can tell his hair-pulling wasn’t a nervous habit, because this guy isn’t nervous. It just seems to pass the time for him. He looks me over with interest. “The guy’s a totally vacant lot upstairs. Can’t help it. And normally, let’s face it, you don’t give a shit.” The healthy-chubby female nurse comes up behind us then, pushing a still muttering Mr. Anzalone, and she tells us in the singsong voice of the perennially cheerful to Hurry up fellas, don’t want to keep the nice young lady waiting in there, and she more sings the *up* and *fellas* more than she says them, and draws out *waiting* into *waiiiiting* in there, which the forced cheerfulness just about drives me up the fucking wall, but she ushers us all towards the entertainment room, and I’m with no choice but to follow.

\*

I enter and survey the scene. There’s that same smell, that same cleaning-product lemon, which I’d first on my furniture upstairs. Looking around at all these old people, I wonder why a different smell still hasn’t hit: the old people smell. The kitchen had been full of stale breakfast smells and the foyer had too much open space but this room had no excuse, it was cramped, it should have trapped it, that... *stink* of all those other homes, the smell of old people packed into tight quarters, made up of, what: moth balls used for



preserving sweatshirts bought forty years ago yet still worn daily, armpits of guys too feeble to risk the broken hips that a wet shower floor threatened, and (worst) that medicinal reek which seeps from the pores of the overly medicated, like battery acid, like copper pennies in large quantities, less like a smell than something distasteful finding its way to the back of your throat; and I look around and see all these people now sitting in couches or being helped into couches and not enough of them in wheelchairs, only a few like Mr. Anzalone in wheelchairs, they're old but mostly mobile, arrayed comfortably in front of a makeshift stage in front of a fake fireplace; and it all looks and smells too much like somebody's living room, nothing like the nursing homes that came before. And for the first time today I grow afraid. If this isn't a nursing home, where the hell am I?

I take a seat in the closest armchair and look around the room some more. On the couch closest to me is Helen, a lady with curly grey hair, sleeping on the shoulder of a man in a Twins hat. She doesn't snore but when she breathes out she goes "Heh," almost a tiny laugh. The guy she's sleeping on, a large dude with bug-eye-inducing glasses, sits as still as he possibly can, glancing at Helen nervously, clearly unsure if he's intruded on her space or if she's intruded on his couch and what would be the best course of action, either way. The ass-slap guy sits in what looks like a chair stolen from the kitchen table. He's holding a plastic pill box in one hand and a glass of water in the other, and when he concentrates on the box-holding hand the guy's water-holding hand starts to shake, and vice versa, until he seems to decide on just holding both items straight out in front of his face, palms up, like the blind lady with the scales they put in front of court houses. The healthy-chubby nurse goes over to help him and I start feeling a bit better, a little less

afraid. There might not be as many wheelchairs as I'm used to, but the place fits the bill of nursing homes in other ways. These people are all batshit crazy.

I look around the room some more and see that the room was decorated with... amateur art, might be a nice way to put it. The walls are littered with colored construction paper covered in squiggles which I thought might be they meant to signify leaves, some of the squiggles look a little like autumn leaves, or perhaps stick figure people collecting fall leaves. Or maybe they were aiming for something deeper and more abstract, "The Eruption of Mount Helen as seen by the Leaves, Magic Marker on Construction Paper"; I've never been good at reading into art. I figure it must be the drawings of grandchildren, the kind of thing parents put on their refrigerators and grandparents store in their purses and show the checkout girl at Walgreens, unprompted, holding up the line for ten minutes or so as they explain which grandkid did this and what grade this grandkid was in and why this child was an especially special child ("She just *loves* horses!"), in addition to the ten minutes or so spent rummaging for the ninety-nine cents off Kleenex coupon that expired last October. But then I notice that under each of these squiggle-arts is a photograph and a name, a name written in purple magic marker and done by a way less shaky hand than whoever had made the drawings. The steady name handwriting is the same for all of them. The photographs are all of old dudes and ladies, and I start recognizing some of the faces from the dining room, and it becomes clear that these weren't *grandchild* squiggles but *grandparent* squiggles, each done by the senior whose name and photograph were closest. The photos must all have been taken on the same day because they all seemed to capture old people outside and sitting on picnic tables and midway through a bite of hotdog. I study the faces. Some of these people I know to be

batshit, they're the crazies sitting around me right now, but put a camera in front of their face and command them to say cheese and they all... *react*, I think might be a good word for it: there are bashful smiles and goofy smiles and efforts to finish a bite of hot dog before the photo and not one of them doesn't seem to know what's expected of them. They are all making photo faces. Which is kind of creepy, in a way, I think: not knowing your name or what you ate ten minutes ago (*shitty toast, really shitty toast*), but being able to pretend like you know all these things long enough to document.

I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself for puzzling all this out, for honing my detective chops in preparation for Frank's big case, when I notice my own photo. It's up high on the wall, next to Maria's photo (who's not smiling at all) and one of the bald quiche-eating guys from the dining room, who smiles in his photo despite having ketchup all over his shirt. That guy's name, if the purple magic marker names can be trusted, is Roy. And between these two, there I was. Neither smiling nor unsmiling. Eyes so empty of intent you can't look at them long, even in a photo. The drawing, *my* drawing, supposedly, didn't feature any red or orange leaf-like squiggles; it had a smiley face drawn with suspiciously unshaky lines, in the same purple marker as the names had been written in. So unshaky that if a grandparent received this drawing from a grandchild, even the most trusting grandparent might question whether there had been a little help with the teacher on this project, maybe; it looked like whoever had been writing the names had just threw it on there, to have *something*.

The photo, I figure, must have been taken while I was sleeping. My eyelids probably opened up in still-sleeping surprise when the camera flashed. Then they probably drew the smiley face because they knew me, knew that Edgar Jones wouldn't

put up with summer camp style, arts-and-crafts bullshit. But then why the hell was I outside in the photo, if I had been sleeping? Outside and sitting at a park bench?

I tell myself that I should ask around about Frank, try and see what the word among the living room gossip set was. I don't. I don't talk to the other residents. I sit and stare straight ahead and search for a reclining lever on the sides of my chair and wait for time to pass.

A door opens on the other side of the room and out from what looks to be a bathroom steps a girl. She's putting away a makeup case into a shiny silver shoulder bag and "girl" is definitely the operative word, here, not "woman," freckled and pale and with a face you can just tell begs for the opportunity to scrunch up with unreasonable child-like fury when she doesn't get her way. A no arguing and/or reasoning type of face. It's matched by the type of red hair that just can't be imitated because it's *not* red, really, more an outrageous orange that somebody took a torch to, for a long time, to temper. I wonder for a second if this was the motivation for Maria's friend to try out her own terrible shade of red, but then get distracted. It becomes impossible not to notice as she steps further into the room: her boobs are gigantic. The type of big where there'd be no point in even attempting to hide them and so, apparently, she didn't, I'm losing count after four undone buttons and not feeling the need to count further, finding it impolite. Twenty-five tops, age wise. Her stage is constructed of three of those low stepping platforms you find in gyms all pressed together, which only gives her about six inches of height and about three feet of maneuvering room. But she doesn't seem to mind as she smiles and grabs a microphone from off the TV stand and jumps on up.

“Hi again, everyone.” A few polite smiles answer her; the two bald men, seated in the front row of armchairs, give a hearty “Hello!” She smiles down at us all. “I’m so glad to be able to come here, again, you guys. You all don’t know how much you’ve come to mean to me. How much better I feel about myself.” Another smile. “*You* guys are all the stars, here, really. We’re going to try something a little different, tonight; instead of a cappella, it’s time to bust out the ol’ karaoke machine. And because you’re all such stars, I’d like to start ... with...” She picks up a folder that’s been sitting next to the microphone, a big black thing with KAREOKE NIGHT written on both front and back, and starts flipping through it for what seemed like ages, considering several pages and muttering “No that’s fucking boring” each time, which she never seems to notice when the mike picks up; but finally she stops flipping and shouts “Wishing on a Star, by Rose Royce! Track two-one-one-two! Hit it!” She strikes up a pose and waits for the music to start.

Nothing happens. After a minute the chubby nurse sighs and picks up a handful of remotes from off the TV stand and starts pressing buttons. A tiny karaoke TV, which I hadn’t noticed before, sits on the floor between the two bald guys in front. The monitor faces the stage and the singer sits staring at this, waiting for the nurse to figure out the remotes and the music to start and the words to appear on screen. It takes the nurse a full five minutes to figure out—the TV stand was one of those home-entertainment black holes where about forty different remotes get piled, controlling everything from cable to VCR to the light dimmers—and when the music finally starts and the tiny TV turns on the girl says, “Oh...hmmmm...” The TV is so ridiculously tiny and low to the ground that it’s almost impossible for her to make out the lyrics on screen, but she seems

reluctant to abandon her stage and get closer, because she doesn't move: instead she hunches low and squints and starts belting whatever words she can make out. The two baldies in front turn to each other and smile and nod and even try to give really slow and arthritic high fives, which fail at elbow height: hunched over like that, there were now whole cities with less cleavage than the singer is showing.

“And I wish on all the... what? oh rainbows, I'm wishing on the raiiiiiinbows, and the... people? Does that say people? Who really dream...And I'm not even gonna try this next line, sorry guys...but I'm wishing on tomorrow, praying it'll whatsthatword coooooome...”

I figure she must have been in jail. She must have been in jail, and this must be her community service, and there must be some contract or something that says she can't quit or she'll go back to jail and the home can't fire unless she *really* fucks up because otherwise this atrocity would not be allowed to happen more than once. I'm actively praying for what little remains of my hearing to abandon me. Faced with this singing, I find myself appreciating the simplicity of strip clubs. I don't even like strip clubs, very much, finding them poorly lit and pricey and I had always embarrassed myself by engaging the strippers in small-talk, questions about their lives, I had never cared if the girl with tassels on her boobs had any pets yet I always asked strippers that question, and if she had lived in the area long, and what kind of mileage did she get in a Volkswagen, anyways? I hate small talk but I hate feeling sleazy even more, which quietly watching a girl undress then throwing money at her was pretty much the *definition* of sleaze to me. But right now, I find myself reminiscing, romanticizing the quaint and simple rules of strippers. They just show their boobs, and dance, and if you really aren't into it you can

get up and go. Whereas to leave this show would be the height of rudeness, I knew. I try to make myself fall asleep.

The girl finishes her first song. Seniors as a rule do not applaud for anything; they smile and say things like “How nice!” but applause requires an energy that their hands cannot sustain, and it’s embarrassing for both parties when they try, less a sharp clap than the sound of two dead fish being smacked against one another; kind of wet, and weak, and pathetic really, only serving to remind everyone of former strength gone sour. *I* could clap, of course, but I choose not to. I keep my hands in my lap and give a grimace that might, under certain light and distance conditions, resemble a smile. But the two baldies clap, they applaud like crazy and they must have strong hands because it comes out sounding like pretty decent applause, and they run out of gas quickly but the girl seems to appreciate it. She smiles and says “Thank you Thank you” and she takes a bow so low that nipple is now entering into the picture, poking out a bit from behind a bra clearly not cut out for the kind of heavy lifting her boobs are requiring, and the room goes a funny kind of silent. Then from somewhere on my left, a familiar voice calls out, “Hussy!”

I look over. Maria. She and her two friends are holding down their heads as they tried to suppress giggles. On their laps is what looked like the incomplete skeleton of a giant quilt and all three of them are pretending to sew, trying to look innocent, but suppressing the giggles was clearly just making the need to giggle even stronger, because all three of them shake with quiet laughter, and it really couldn’t be more obvious where the jeer had come from. The girl on stage says nothing. Fury creeps its way onto her face and her lips get real narrow and pursed but she stays quiet, coming up from her bow and making a point of not adjusting her shirt in any way, not letting it show they’d gotten to

her. And I was actually feeling kind of sorry for the girl when the bald man on the left turns around in his chair and points a shaking finger at the three quilters and shouts, “Maria, you dried-up bitch, leave the poor girl alone!”

Maria stop pretending to sew. “You watch your mouth, Roy,” she says. “You better watch your mouth.”

“Fuck you,” Roy said. The healthy-chubby nurse is looking wary and Barhydt says, “Hey, hey. Everybody calm down.” The Roy guy waves them off like mosquitoes and stands up and says that he’s just sick of these women’s bullshit, that he’s just sick of it, and some of the other residents are saying “My goodness” and “How rude” but Roy is really getting into it now, he just keeps saying I’m sick of it, I’m tired of it, but gradually his voice gets softer and softer until he’s just repeating I’m tired, I’m tired. The other bald man—and all of a sudden I remember the other bald man’s name, Ted, the guy’s name is Ted—the bald Ted is looking up at the bald Roy and he looks more scared than concerned, he raises up a hand and tries patting Roy on the back, which I know is the one tender gesture that most men come equipped to bear. But when Roy feels the pat on his back he spins around and he stares at Ted he looks like he is going to punch him, and he says, “Don’t you know what’s going on, here? Don’t you know what they’re up to?”

A male nurse, a large guy in green scrubs, comes in to the room from the foyer at all the noise. He isn’t needed. Roy is spent. He sits back down.

Some of the other residents are complaining in loud voices about all the rudeness and the swearing. They talk like this was something that took place far away and long ago, a tragedy that they heard about on the news: “And I just couldn’t believe how *rude* that man was! And the shouting!” Most residents just stare. The male nurse walks up to



the girl on stage and whispers something in her ear, and she's clearly upset but when he's done whispering she says "Okay fine baby but you *owe* me," which the microphone picks up.

I look over at Maria and her friends, who seemed to have just come to an agreement over something; they had been whispering with bowed heads but now sit up straight. Without saying a word, all three pick up needle and thread and start working on the quilt, and quilting is one of those skills I don't know a goddamn thing about but they seem pretty good at it, never getting in each other's way as their hands flick in and out of the cloth. The woman on stage announces her next song in a monotone. "This one is 'Too Close', by Next," she says, and starts singing in the same monotone, and this time it only takes a minute before I pass out in the chair. It isn't a good sleep. In one of those strange half-sleeping, half-awake states, I dream that the male nurse is raising a baby with the terrible-voiced singer, and that we are all at a picnic together, the singer and the nurse and the baby and me; and in the dream the sun is shining, and we are all enjoying hot dogs, and everything is lovely except for the baby, who keeps begging me to take a picture, because it will last longer.

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I think about sci-fi and fantasy movies, sometimes, in here. Nursing homes won't ever play them since they're so violent and a lot of the residents with head issues can't tell the TV aliens from real life anymore. The ability to say "It's only a movie" seems to fade once you've been wearing Velcro shoes for a certain amount of time. But I miss them. Whenever I needed to unwind, whenever the impulse to throw Rachel's book of the

week out the window started picking up strength, it was always sci-fi and fantasy that let my brain shut down.

What gets me now is that all of those movies had self-sacrifices. Someone will need to stay behind on the space ship to fight off Vader while the Millennium Falcon makes its escape. Or like in *Conan the Barbarian* where Conan's busty lady friend makes a deal with the devil to save Conan's life, and within fifteen minutes she ends up taking a poison arrow to the heart for her troubles. Or in any low-budget drive-in that involves nuclear ants or vicious aliens, in a scene so prevalent that it must be required by federal law to be included, where everyone's running away from the alien-bug hordes and one guy gets mortally skewered by an alien bug and he says "I'm a *goner* but leave me here so I can buy you guys some time, and take a few of these dirty sons of bitches with me, machine-gun style, etc." (It also seems to be the one scene where you can cuss and not get slapped with an R-rating. Like if they die within twenty seconds of cussing, the cuss doesn't count). The character's either someone's heroic dad, or a rough-around-the-edges type that's come to see the light, or a love that could just never be. The self-sacrificer shoot a couple of whatever it is that's killing him or her, call the creatures "you dirty sons of bitches," and then explosion. Predictable, brain killing, and an amazing amount of fun to watch.

But here's what I've been thinking about: none of these guys ever have to wait around for a very long time, after they've declared their intention to self-sacrifice and yelling "Go...Just go!" one last time to their reluctant-to-leave friends, before the death that they've resigned themselves to is delivered. The fiendish nemeses are always just around the corner, filling the tunnel with howls and ever-growing shadows. It's like an

eight-second time frame between “I am resigning myself to death” and then an explosion of heroic death; waiting around any longer seems inconceivable. What would they do to fill the time? Pray? Sigh dramatically? Polish their weapons? Floss, one last time? The idea of an imminent, self-sanctioned death just does not gel for anything longer than these quick few seconds. After half an hour of waiting for the end, if the Joy Home is any indication, these characters would likely give up all pretense of bravery and start craving TV, to pass the time.

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The walls seem thinner this morning. I wake up back in bed and for a while this is all I manage to process—that there’s a frailty about the room that wasn’t there the day before, and that the walls must be to blame. That if I felt like it, I could take a deep breath and blow them all out like so many birthday candles. One strong sigh and I’d flatten everything and let the room breathe free. It’s bullshit, of course. They’re the same split-pea-soup green walls that I woke up to yesterday, thick enough to dampen the neighbors’ snores but thin enough to notice when the snoring stopped around 3 a.m., and I had wondered if the neighbors were having trouble sleeping, too, because I sure as hell was having trouble sleeping. I open up my eyes some more. Barhydt is in the room, standing by the window. She hears me start to sit up in the bed but doesn’t look over.

“There are deer, down there, again,” she says.

I look her over. Dark-skinned, with more weight on her than girls are supposed to have these days but the pounds looked good, like they belong there. Barhydt’s the only female nurse I’ve seen that doesn’t wear the girly scrubs, the ones with sickly-sweet crap

all over them; hers are solid blue, every day. I wonder if she carried me in here after I passed out in the living room. Her arms certainly look strong enough for the job.

“Myself, I do not like the deer,” she says. “Rodents. Like big bounding rats. And pooping in our bushes, always, also.”

She gestures with the back of her hand at the window, as if swatting the deer away like a fly. Then she turns and looks at me. “But I know how you like them. That they are the... remembrance of your wife. Yes? The deer?”

She’s smiling, expecting an answer. But it’s the first thing in the morning. Her English is fuzzy, I’m fighting off sleep and bogus theories about the walls, and I’m not entirely sure what she’s talking about. My wife was a librarian. What did she know about deer?

I smile back, trying to think of something nice to say. “I couldn’t sleep at all last night,” is what comes out. “People kept snoring. The hell was going on with the guy next door?”

The smile fades as she gives me another sort of look. “Edgar, no one is in the next door room, at this moment,” she says. She breathes in like she’s going to say more, and then lets the breath out slowly. “Let’s go to breakfast,” she finally says.

It takes a few beats for it all to come back to me. The man on the floor, moaning in misery and asking to be taken out of it, permanently. The fairy, if Maria was telling the truth. Frank.

“Frank’s not back yet?” I ask her.

She breaks her gaze and goes back to looking out the window. I don’t think she’s watching anything, anymore. “Frank is no longer with us,” she says.

I think about asking whether this means he's been transferred to a different home, or if he's staying in a hospital, or if he's been permanently shipped to greener pastures. I don't. "No longer with us" was pure evasive bullshit. If Barhydt was hiding answers, something must be up.

"Let's go to breakfast," she says again.

I nod but tell her to go ahead. First I've got to put on some clothes; and today, I'm not going anywhere without my shoes.

\*

There were pleated khakis and a blue polo in the room's chest of drawers. I recognize the oak furniture from yesterday but it takes me longer to recognize the clothing as my own, pieces that Rachel had bought for me. Rachel. Everything this morning had a story, even these clothes had a story, and they all seemed to come back to Rachel. The day I retired, she had brought home a whole new wardrobe of sky blues and lime greens and brand-name labels like LaCoste and Nautica. This had been the one step we took towards achieving an active retirement: as if through the act of buying the proper clothes, the worlds of sailing and golf would be alerted to our presence and come running. But I never minded. She was trying, I liked the way my arms popped in the shirts, and fuck golf, really.

It takes me twenty minutes to get dressed, another half hour to get the wingtips on and laced. The hallway is silent. The unlocked doors—the unlockable doors—stand open on either side, the rooms pastel-colored and empty, and normally I'd take the opportunity to do some light snooping but right now I can't seem to bring myself to it. Questions of

Rachel shuffle alongside me. When was the last time I saw her? Why can't I remember her old? Is she at another home? More likely, I knew, that she would be dead. But then where the hell was the grief? Shouldn't it be following me around, weighing me down, tripping me up like these (dammit) untied shoelaces?

I stop at the head of the stairs to tie them back up. Bending down is a bitch, but attempting the stairs with untied shoelaces would be suicide—and unlike Frank, I'm not at that point yet. Too many loose ends. Voices drift up from the bottom of the staircase and I take a look. There's a family down there—mother, father, two kids and a granddad in a wheelchair—gathered beside the entrance door. The drop-off of a new resident; you can always tell by the expressions. The mother and father and children have the sad faces of people giving up their puppies for adoption. Sad, but determined, because they know it's for the best. The children hide behind their mother's legs while she talks to the grandfather. The father wraps his knuckles against the wood of the doorframe. He puts his ear by the wood and listens intently, as if the doorframe's soundness would somehow evidence the overall quality of the home. Not wanting to interrupt but not wanting to hide, either, I keep working on my laces and standing by the metal wheelchair contraption on the stairs as I wait for the family to move.

“Dad.”

“It wouldn't be a bother.”

“Dad we've talked about this.”

“I could help you out with the kids, even.”

“And I know you know we've talked about this.”

“Make them breakfast and drive them to school.”

“Drive them to school?”

“Sure. And breakfast.”

“Dad, *drive them to school?*”

“Sure. Do they like eggs, yet?”

I fart somewhat loudly, but if any of them notice it they all seemed intent on not looking up.

“Dad please let’s not talk about this again right now. Let’s talk about something—I hear they have painting, here.”

“And I know you say there’s no space, but I really could just go on a sofa. Or anything.”

“Dad.”

“Don’t mind at all.”

“Dad.”

“Kind of like it, in fact. Going to sleep with the television on. Reminds me of the city. The noise.”

“Please, dad.”

“And I know you need help with the kids. And I could drive them to school.”

“...”

“I think, if I put enough cheese on them, they’d eat scrambled eggs. And then-”

“Dad you drove your car off the road and into the goddamn Minnehaha Falls. You hit a fruit stand, dad. You ran over a duck.”

“...”

“You just can’t anymore, dad.”

“...”

“Dad?”

“Or even just on the couch, Marissa. I’ll be fine.”

At which point a lady comes from the back of the house and says to the family that the paperwork is ready, and that if they’d just accompany her for a moment they could finish things right up. I’ve never seen this lady before, and she doesn’t seem to belong working here. She’s white, for one thing, and older, and her smile doesn’t look tired or plastered on like a stewardesses’. But she’s got a clipboard and a nametag and the air of somebody who’s in charge; probably the management, swinging by for the day. “Ms. Abrasia will take you to the dining room, Mr. Roberts,” she says to the granddad, who doesn’t respond.

Now she’s looking above the granddad’s wheelchair, talking to the mother and father. “Ms. Abrasia is one of our nurses,” she says. “Most of our residents are at breakfast right now, and we like to introduce new residents as soon as possible.”

“What’s for breakfast?” the father asks. His suspicion sounds forced, like an infomercial host questioning his own product: “But can the Ronco Potato Musher really slice *and* dice? Why yes it can!” When your life involves as much daytime television as mine does these days, you could smell this kind of fake skepticism from a mile away.

“Belgian waffles,” she says, and smiles. “I made them myself.”

“Belgian waffles!” the father shakes his head in wonder, as if Belgian waffles were a luxury only recently wrestled out of the hands of Europe. Having now inspected the soundness of both the breakfast menu and the doorframe, this man seems completely



satisfied with the home. “Tell you what, wouldn’t mind a Belgian waffle breakfast myself, every now and then.”

He tries winking at his children but they keep cowering behind their mother’s legs, not wanting to catch oldness from the old people home. I’m finished tying my shoes, just standing up there and waiting for the family to leave, willing the grandfather to say, “Let’s switch places, then, so you can eat Belgian waffles all the goddamn time,” or something more clever, but he just sits staring at the mother, his daughter, who can’t seem to stop staring at the wall.

The nurse comes in for Mr. Roberts. It’s the same healthy-chubby woman as the day before. The manager lady says, “Thank you, Abrasia,” before leading the family into the back of the house, and I decide it’s finally safe to go downstairs. The nurse hears me shuffling and looks up. “Edgar,” she says. “What’s up with you? You sleep like a teenager!”

I decide to hate her. I nearly forgot how she sang her words instead of speaking them, but *Edgaaaar* and *teeeenager* brought it right back. And why should I rush to rise at four am, or whenever it was that the rest of these people woke up? I don’t understand old people’s fascination with rising early. Do they have international calls to make, business with the Japanese that requires a mix-up of time zones? Still, I smile. To piss off a nurse, who certainly knows where you sleep and where your pills are, is never a good idea.

She smiles back. When I finally reach the bottom of the stairs she says, “Edgar, I’d like you to meet Mr. Roberts.” I reach down my hand and Mr. Roberts reaches up and

shakes it. The man's grip is soft, but his hands are surprisingly warm. "How do you do," I say. "I very much distrust the Irish," is the man's reply.

I take my hand away. Mr. Roberts looks up with mild interest. If there had been any anger in the man, maybe I could have socked him. But he said it like he might comment on the weather, if a small cloud had passed over the sun. More a topic for conversation than anything else. Just a friendly remark of distaste.

The nurse frowns. "Mr. Roberts, that isn't very nice," she says. Mr. Roberts twists around in his wheelchair to face her. "Or the blacks," he says, and again without a trace of anger; it's almost like he doesn't want her to feel left out of the conversation. "I don't much trust the blacks, either." Her frown turns into something harder. She pushes his chair towards the dining room without another word.

She stops for a moment by the front door of the house. The family had left it ajar. Closing it, she pushes some buttons on a black pad with an electronic readout sitting above the lock. It makes a happy kind of computer sound and lights up red and something in the door clicks shut. I'm shocked. "What the hell is that?" I ask.

She looks at me, confused about what's confusing me. It's clearly so basic to her. I might as well have asked what an automobile was, or how sweaters work in keeping people warm. "The lock, Edgar." She points. "It's just a lock. Some people here, they just can't wander off, you know? It's not safe."

The reasonableness of this makes want to cry. I hadn't really *planned* on escaping, unless it turned out that Frank had been murdered or something awful, and whoever was guilty was out for more. Every time I thought about leaving, I'd get stuck on where it was that I was supposed to go. Find my daughter? Where? But an electronic

lock took the possibility of escape, however slight and stupid that possibility was, and squashed it like a particularly fat bug. I had trouble with ATM machines, for God's sakes; I'd always make them start speaking in Spanish by accident halfway through; picking an electronic lock was just never going to happen. And it was the *safety* thing that killed me. Not only was I stuck here, in this most boring of imaginable jails; it was for my own *safety*, too.

"I haven't done anything wrong," I tell her. "I didn't run over any goddamn ducks. I don't deserve to be here."

"Me either," she sighs, and Mr. Roberts sighs too, to feel included, and we all enter the dining room together.

\*

It's a room defined by sitting. Ted, the bald guy, and the male nurse from yesterday sit in one corner, with the nurse chopping up Ted's waffle, and with the waffle sitting in a puddle of syrup, looking soggy. Roy, the guy who had bit Maria's head off and Ted's constant companion in baldness, is nowhere in sight. Ted keeps pouring more syrup onto his waffle and the nurse keeps asking him to stop it, please. Sitting in the same seats as the day before are Maria and her two friends, quilting all at once, talking all at once, and they didn't even pretend to be listening to each other's voices or even to their own, just sending out whispers with no meaning or purpose other than to drive away the silence. The Indian guy is also present, also sitting. He makes kissy faces at himself using the reflection of the polished silver warming trays. There are gray haired people sitting and staring at walls and there is bacon sitting in slowly congealing grease and the only thing that might be said to be rising is the breakfast smell, with the waffle and bacon and

artificial maple syrup all mixing up and greeting me at the door, but even this only lasts a moment; after a second I get used to the smell, and it becomes background, and settles back down.

“I don’t trust small groups of people,” Mr. Roberts says. No one looks up. “A big group, you can lose yourself in. No group, you can enjoy some peace and quiet. But a small group...” he sighs. “Small groups force small talk. You know?” He looks to Nurse Abrasia to see if she agrees. “Don’t you just hate small talk?”

“You’re the only one talking, Mr. Roberts.” She wheels him to the side and plops a waffle in front of him. “And no one’s gonna mind if you decide to keep to yourself. Syrup?”

“I don’t-”

“Good.” She pours him syrup and goes to talk to the male nurse, calling him John. John seems busy trying to convince Ted to put down the syrup dispenser. Ted’s saying, “I have my rights, dammit,” while shaking out the last drops of the syrup. I scratch my ass and then stretch, looking over to see if Maria and her friends had seen my arms in the polo, but they don’t look up. Talking all together like that, it almost sounds like a different language they’re speaking.

The waffles turn out to be delicious. I help myself, not understanding how most of these people survive; they always seem to be in the dining room, but never seem to eat. A while later the manager and the family come in. The family say goodbye to Mr. Roberts and all give him hugs, and Mr. Roberts says “Take me with you!” to the family and calls her daughter’s husband a thieving bastard. They leave quickly. The manager plops down

next to me with a sigh. “How are the waffles treating you?” she asks me. She grabs a plate of her own.

I tell her, “Fine.” Then, “How could you do this?” I don’t mean to say it out loud, but it comes out anyways, and it hangs in the air next to the smell of cold bacon.

The manager finishes her bite before responding. “I don’t know. It’s my passion. I love the chef lifestyle, I suppose. I think I’m getting better, but—”

“Not the food. The guy. *This* guy.” I point at Mr. Roberts, who was telling the Indian guy just what it was about Indian people that bugged him. “Frank, he died, what, twelve hours ago? And you replace him already?” I shake my head. “Guy’s bed is probably still warm. It’s sick.”

“That isn’t true, Edgar.” She dabs at her face with a napkin. She’s calm. “Frank died eleven days ago.”

“Bullshit.” I hadn’t meant to say that out loud, either, but the waffle is making me feisty.

“John,” The manager calls. “Please come here.” The male nurse abandons Ted to his waffle-soaking and walks over. He’s a big guy; I try to flex my forearms, fill out my chest, but if he decides to sock me I know I don’t stand a chance.

“Could you tell us, please, when Mr. Mead passed away?”

“Frank?” He scratches his chin. “Must have been.... two weeks ago? Approximately? A little less, perhaps?” And I’m glad he’s not pummeling me, but there’s a sinking feeling in my gut anyways. This nurse, and the manager, too: what reason do they have to lie about the date? My memory’s spotty these days, sure. Show me someone who *doesn’t* forget his wallet every now and then. But eleven *days*? Now my stomach

makes itself into a tight knot. How could so much time have slipped through? And why can't I remember a goddamn moment of it?

I decide to blame my stomach troubles on the waffle. "Cooking," I tell her, "Is a stupid pastime." I push my plate away, which might have made a bigger statement if I hadn't already eaten the whole damned thing.

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"People call it an art. It isn't. *Art* is art. *This* is bacon."

"I suppose that's true."

"*Overcooked* bacon."

"Some people like it crispy."

"It's a woman's job."

"Well that's a bit backwards."

"And it's pointless. You work hard on it, put yourself into it, enjoy it for a while, and then it's over. Forgotten. People forget what they had for breakfast just in time for lunch."

"That's not true."

"Unless it's asparagus, which you remember because you can smell it in your piss for a week. Or if it's shitty and makes you throw up, and then you remember it for making you sick. Either you forget or remember how awful it was."

No one is staring. I'm not creating a scene. The women continue weaving, and Ted has pushed away his first soggy waffle and is busy drenching a new one. The room is so entrenched in sitting that it's difficult to imagine anything rising or moving forward, ever, except perhaps to find new, more comfortable places to sit. They'll move to the

living room soon, I know. In search of more cushioned pastures. I find myself imagining the first fish, or fish creature, that ever flopped out of the ocean and breathed gasping fishy breaths on some sandy beach, and I wonder if that poor creature had been motivated by sitting, too, looking only and ever for a less damp place to rest its scaly ass. A voice, a single fragment of the women's talk, distinguishes itself and floats over to my ear: "The spotlights were so bright, there were nights I felt like a plant under grow lights." I look over. Which woman had said it? Maria? They all seem so calm, talking to no one, weaving a pointless quilt. Which one of them was lamenting some past performance career? But it's impossible to tell. Their voices blend again.

"There's history in food," the manager says.

She's playing with her waffle. She's blond, this manager, that sort of pineapple-innards blonde you find on middle-aged women looking for a dash of *something* in their lives. She cuts her entire waffle into bite-sized pieces before eating any of it, which I approve of, but she makes the cuts with one hand, with the broad side of her fork, which I don't like. It makes her waffle pieces all jagged and imprecise.

"There's serious history in food. Have you ever heard of the Boudin Bakery, in California? They did a thing on them. The Food Network. They've got this sourdough starter there... do you know how bread is made, Edgar?"

"Yes," I answer automatically. I don't; I just hate looking stupid.

"Yes. So their sourdough starter, the stuff they mix with the flour, this bakery's been using the same stuff since they started in 1849. Not the same recipe, mind you, but the same actual fermented *stuff*."

She finishes cutting up his waffle, skewers several of her bite-sized pieces, and brings them to her mouth all at once. I watch with mild revulsion. What was the point of making bite-sized pieces if you were just going to eat four of them at a time anyway?

“And they’ll bring out the starter dough, and mix in more flour and water to it, and then they’ll make the bread; but they always keep a tiny portion of the dough for the next batches’ starter. So even though they add more ingredients, and the individual batches are all eaten... forgotten, if you want...” she shrugs. “Some portion of the starter remains. It’s constantly changing, but in body, it’s been the same since the Gold Rush. Isn’t that neat, Edgar?” She turns to me and smiles.

And I’m about to argue some more when it hits me, why my loud complaining hasn’t caused a scene, why the manager can shrug off my insults so easily; it was simple; I’m not something she can get mad at. That to this lady I’m just a raving old man like that racist Mr. Roberts, someone you want to smack but can’t because it would be like smacking a crying baby. Some irritating and senselessly wailing baby that you know has no control over itself and so you tell yourself to be patient with it. I had blanked on the existence of the last eleven days like normal people sometimes blank on what they had for breakfast, and she was humoring me. This is a realization I don’t want to deal with. I start hoping to forget this, too.

“You know, we should start bread making classes,” the manager’s saying to herself. She dabs her chin with a napkin after every bite to prevent syrup from collecting there. “It’s good exercise for the hands, and therapeutic, too. Then we could...”

“Where’s Roy?”



I look down the table. It's Ted, tapping the top of the syrup bottle to get out the last drop. Jim must have gone elsewhere, because Ted's been left to his own devices; a collection of drowned waffles float in the plates in front of him, like the dried-out husks of water lilies.

"Ted, just look how much food you're wasting. You ought to be ashamed." But the manager's not looking so calm, now; rising up out of her seat, she fidgets with her nametag while shooting glances at the three women. They stop their nonsense whispers and look up, watching the manager as she makes her way down the table to Ted. Her steps are shaking the sitting spell right out of the room.

"First Frank gets moved out. Now Roy. You think I don't notice?" Ted's waving the empty syrup bottle like a conductor's baton. "I notice! And, worst of all, the nurses are stealing my stuff!"

A rumble runs through the sitters, even through the gray hairs; some of them start nodding vigorously. One shouts, "That woman stole my pen cap!"

A lady who I swore was brain dead—she hadn't looked up from the wall once—snaps up and yells, "That man stole my panties!"

The manager reaches Ted and leans over, talking slowly and face to face. She speaks loudly enough that I can hear from this side of the table.

"Ted. You're confused. Frank fell and got hurt, didn't he? And Roy... Roy was acting out, wasn't he? I hear he was bullying you. So now he's *not* bullying you. Isn't that better? And *no one* has stolen anything. Would you like to go check your room? Let's go check your room."

Jim reenters the room. Together with the manager he helps Ted up and they walk him towards the swinging doors, with the women still eyeing the manager as she passes and with the manager giving a constant stream of comforting words to Ted. She stops at the door and looks back at me.

“Oh and Edgar, before I forget, it’s Thursday,” she says. “So your daughter will be coming in at four.” I don’t say anything but she doesn’t seem to expect a response. She leads the three of them as they push through the saloon-style doors. They swing once, twice, three times, making kind of a creaky screen-porch door sound; then they’re absolutely quiet, and no one’s talking, and the room sits still once more.

\*

About Barhydt and the half fear, half reverence thing everybody in the home feels when she enters the room in a certain way:

Barhydt keyed up a car once, is how the legend goes. Shut off the TV for a while and wait until the nurses leave the room and endure fifteen minutes of elevator-type silence, the type of silence when it’s just you and one other person in an elevator, and you feel like there’s got to be something the two of you can communicate about, but since you haven’t been outside yet and haven’t seen the weather forecast you’re stuck listening to the Bings of passing floors and watching the numbers flick on and off as you make your way down to the lobby in a silence that shouldn’t be; but if you endure it, if you wait this silence out, then someone in the entertainment room is bound to tell the story. It’s all very cloak-and-daggers, tough to pinpoint the specifics. In part that’s because it’s got the feel of a naughty story that you’re not supposed to tell, like spreading around the rumor that Ted’s got titty magazines hidden in his room, and even though we’ve never been told

not to tell it (the Barhydt rumor; we get told not to spread the Ted rumor at least twice per afternoon), the story just feels *dirty*. The other reason for murkiness is that this supposedly happened some time ago, and passing a story down in nursing home legend is something like playing a game of telephone with drunk English as a Second Language students, a favorite pastime in the immigrant-heavy landscaping world; intentionally or not, the story is bound to get mangled.

Still, everyone's telling starts in the parking lot of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. This part is remembered because we remember what we like to complain about, and the Joy Home residents *love* to complain about the Walker Art Center. "Once a week field trip, is what we get," a resident will say. "And they bring us *there*? The wallpaper is made of eyeballs! The art was a bunch of logs and colored lines! It was *terrible*!" Forget Madonna, forget skateboards on the sidewalk, forget bellbottom pants—elderly rage really takes off in modern art museums. It hits in some primal gut, when the world has left your standard of beauty behind in favor of something you can't even approach. (Rachel tried to point me in the right direction, and I guess I can see the *idea* of it, but I kind of agree—straight lines and soup cans don't speak to me). Anyways *something* happened with Barhydt, and it happened in the parking lot of the Walker Art Center, twenty-five minutes and a Mississippi River away from the Joy Home in St. Paul. These are the only definite facts.

But we all love hearsay so here it goes: Barhydt is driving the Joy Home van, a white Ford with two hands cupping a barn swallow embossed on both its sides, and she's enduring the complaints about location choice and car sickness and wanting to go home from the back seats, when a station wagon does a no-look pullout from its spot and very

nearly smacks the Joy Home van head-on. Barhydt is too shocked to even think about using the horn. Most sources place the time of year as mid-summer, in one of those early mornings that make Minnesota kind of a take-your-breath-away-beautiful place for a handful of moments per year, with the light playing all sorts of tricks and softening everything to coral-reef levels of color and vibrancy. You half-expect to see angelfish roaming around the lawns of Saint Paul instead of the rabbits and squirrels some days. I used to have a thing for coral reefs.

*Anyways* the point being that it's saying something to say that this sedan, even with all the right-light early-morning Minnesotan magic going for it, still managed to look like shit. It was one of those station wagons with the fake wood paneling that you don't see much of anymore, sporting serious dents and bruises and with rust spots actually seeping through the fake wood paneling like angry breakouts of pimples. The station wagon pulls across into the next row of spots—it turns out it actually wasn't *going* anywhere, and that they'd almost killed everyone only to pull into a spot slightly closer to the entrance—and they park and a family pours out and they start yelling and gesturing at Barhydt like it was her fault. They are all beefy in this family and they look like the type of people who take the annual State Fair very seriously but they are clean and they are on a family outing to the art museum and they are trying. They are also shaking their fists at Barhydt in unison and calling her all sorts of names that won't be repeated here. (Okay fine towelheadterroristLadyOsamabaddriverbitch, but that's *it*). A family finding bonds over anger, and then they turn and leave without once looking back. Satisfied that the exchange was over.

It would be easier to hate them if they weren't a family, or if they were a family but had no small children, or if they were a family with small children but were driving one of those sporty Italian cars that screams idle wealth. And you best believe that there were people in that van who have called Barhydt all that and worse, who'd had amicable conversations about their new haircut with her in the morning and then clawed and scratched at her face the very same night, wanting to get out, wanting for their medication to stop making the walls swirl so sinisterly, wanting to see someone bleed just to break through the boredom. But when she parked the van in the handicapped spot, walked over to the van, and proceeded to scratch in every word that the family had shouted, from the Bitches of the mother to the Poop Heads of the knee-high son, no one let out so much as a sigh.

Ted said it made it horrible metallic screech, like nails to a blackboard, every time she dug in a line. Maria says no you fuckhead, you couldn't hear the metal at all, that it was only the paint that got carved off, paint and the plywood paneling of the fake wood. I tend to doubt both of them, since both insist I was there. But only Helen, the lady everyone always expects to find dead due to her habit of falling into soundless, motionless, mouth-wide-open sleep in whatever couch she's occupying, claims to remember what happened next. She always seems to wake up at this exact moment of the story, and more than once it's been suggested that she's not actually sleeping, when she's sprawled out on those couches, but rather waiting all day, conserving energy and holding on for this one moment until it comes time to release it. She'll give a yawn and a stretch and tell you that Barhydt came back to the van and that everyone was expecting tears, or an apology, or a fast getaway back to the Saint Paul suburbs. Instead she opened the

doors and started bringing down the car's wheelchair ramp, clearly ready to go about the field trip as planned; but before helping anyone down, she paused.

"This is not for forgetting," Barhydt commanded. "This, you are not allowed to forget."

Everyone has tried their best not to. Sometimes, all you have to do is ask.

\*

I'm back in the bedroom, a towel kicked under the doorframe, my window cracked open just enough for me to stick my mouth out of, smoking. Camel Filters are a shitty brand but it's what the cleaning lady buys, she leaves them on top of her cleaning cart and I steal them, one-two, one-two at a time. The lady's a wrinkly bastard. Not the fun kind of janitor who stops and shoots the shit with you but the bitter kind, the dirty looks and muttering and "why do I have to clean these moron's shit"-attitude kind. She's in her forties but with a face showing two years for every one she's lived. The type of smoker that lights a new cigarette with the one still burning in her mouth. She'll never notice my theft, and if she did, fuck it. She's probably the one person in here I can afford to have on my bad side.

I can see the guy in the house next door. Don't these people have blinds, window shades, anything? Or do they think that old folks don't do any snooping? His wife doesn't seem to be around. He's wearing her bathrobe, a giant pink cotton thing, studying a box of food while waiting for the microwave to go off. I haven't read any food boxes in years; everything in here comes out on the shiny silver trays. Arnold Palmer was on the last Wheaties box I remember staring at over breakfast. Who was on the Wheaties boxes, these days? Was Batman still shelling out Corn Flakes? That fat, pink-bathrobe-wearing

son of a bitch doesn't know how lucky he has it. I want to look away, but there's no where else to look.

"Mrs. Wilkins? Mrs. Wilkins? Ah, shit."

It's Abrasia again. She's in a room somewhere down the hall but her words come in clearly. It's quiet up on this floor; everyone else is downstairs, watching TV.

I hear a few footsteps out of the room, down the hallway, stopping at the head of the stairs. "Barhydt!" Abrasia calls out. "Some help!"

I ash my cigarette. Even with the door toweled and the window open, it's not a perfect system; there's still some smoke smell wafting around. There are more steps, heavier, coming up the stairs. "What's the problem?" a voice with a lilt asks. Barhydt. If she smells the smoke, I'm in for it.

"Mrs. Wilkins had another accident," Abrasia says. "We're going to have to lift her."

Abrasia makes a tongue-clucking sound and that's it. That's the maximum volume her impatience goes. Her anger, though, is another story. The two pairs of feet pass my room in a hurry. They don't seem to notice anything, but I know they're in a rush now; the return trip will be a different story. I look around my room for something to use as a fan, or a spray to cover up the scent, or something. Smoking in these places is like smoking in a hospital; people act like it's *you*, you and your cigarette, that made them old and feeble. It occurs to me that I don't remember exactly what it is I own in this very small room.

"Mrs. Wilkins? Mrs. Wilkins?"

"She's a bit, ah.... out of it, these days, Barhydt."

“A bit? She’s not even *here*. Frank and Roy are the ones who leave? Not Mrs. Wilkins?”

“Yeah, well, it’s all about not rocking the boat. You know? Frank and Roy got complaints; Mrs. Wilkins hasn’t gotten any complaints. Lift on three. Onetwothree.”

There’s a set of light grunting, then Abrasia whistles. “You kind of got to be impressed. Little lady like that, got *that* much shit in her?” Barhydt clicks her tongue twice. I’m at my desk, searching for a fan, or a bottle of cologne. Something. But all there seem to be are papers.

No conversation for a while, just the slight, shuffling sounds of people cleaning. “So how are you finding the work, here?” asks Barhydt.

Abrasia says “Fine, fine.”

She waits a moment and says, “At least they’re easier than kids. I mean they’re *like* kids, sometimes, but they got way less energy.”

Then, after a couple of ticks, she adds, “But yeah so what I’m *really* having trouble wrapping my head around is how comfortable it’s all supposed to be.”

There’s the silence of boundaries being crossed. It doesn’t sound like Barhydt was expecting a real answer. Still, she humors her. “How so?”

“Well okay so like conceivably, this is the way to do it. Right? The whole dying thing.”

“The dying thing?”

“Like people *hope* to die this way. This comfortably. I mean the waiting list to get in here’s so long, you basically have to win the fucking Medicare *lottery* to get to die in here.”



“Like Manager Judy says: in a bed, with quilts. Surrounded by caregivers and loved ones. Homemade food. Non-flouatescent lighting.

“*Flouescent* lighting, I think. But exactly!” Abrasia’s saying this all sort of breathlessly fast. She’s excited, which is saying something; good moods are tough to hold on to when you’re covered in someone else’s shit.

“Like, people die all the time, and when you compare it to dying in Joy Home, there *is* no comparison. Like how people dying on the news. Right?”

“You’re saying you’d rather die here, is what you are saying.”

“I’m saying... so here’s what was on news last night. The news said there was this one wicked pissed off African mosquito, straight out of Africa, who just chugged across the Atlantic and with his last like tiny mosquito breathe, this little dude, he straight bit some lady on the ass and gives her ass all sorts of jungle typhoid malaria shit that her ass couldn’t even *pronounce*, let alone combat with immunities. So her ass ballooned up like ass cantaloupe then just fell the fuck off. That one mosquito straight wasted her ass. I mean *that’s* how you could die.”

Barhydt’s silent for a while, trying to make sense of it all. The papers on my desk all seem to be bills, or bank statements. One form’s got POWER OF ATTORNEY on it, and a sticky note with curly handwriting that I can’t make out. A chick’s handwriting, undoubtedly. They had marked the end of the signature with a heart sign.

“...Most mosquitoes cannot travel so far. A few miles, at most. An ocean... this seems very far.”

“Or then okay fine, but that’s just *one* shitty death. Take the news from the night before. This guy, this normal guy in Turkey, he’s just walking down the street, like no big

deal, you know? And then you know those dudes on TV who just get crazy excited about holidays and elections and shit, and shoot their guns into the air, for like no good reason, at like nobody in particular? So there's this guy walkin' down this street, and here are dudes with AK's celebratin' Free Jamba Juice Day or some shit, and he's just walkin' an' walkin' an' then BAM! Bullet hits him straight on top of the cabeza! I mean *that's* how some people die."

"You might want to watch less TV, Abrasia, I am thinking. The residents, it doesn't last in their heads if they watch TV all day. But *you* should not watch all the TV that they watch. It's not good for your head."

There's a sound like a fart from the room they're in. A small voice says, "I'm so terribly sorry." Both nurses say, "It's no problem at all, Mrs. Wilkins," in cheerful voices, and they promise to get her cleaned up. I'm checking the desk drawers. Most contain only papers. But there's a box in the bottom drawer, and when I open it up there's a half-empty bottle of perfume in the shape of a star. And underneath the perfume lay photographs.

The women are silent for a while, cleaning, but Mrs. Wilkins doesn't say anything more, and after a while Abrasia can't seem to help herself.

"Or take this very *morning*. They were talking about this dude in Japan. Totally normal chill dude okay? And he goes to this one bomb sandwich place 'cuz fuckin' *everybody* in Japan's been talking about how he needs to try this papaya-an'-bacon sandwich they have there, and he was all like 'papaya and bacon what the *fuck?*' but he goes anyways 'cuz weird shit with bacon always ends up bein' so fuckin' good. But so just in the last week, while he wasn't payin' attention to the news cuz' his fuckin' pet

parakeet gone and got eye herpes again an' he had to fuckin' take care of it again, so just in the past week there's been this crazy fucking finding that papayas are just super fucking good for your internal organs, like your heart and spleen an' shit. So you know the Yakuza? Now the Yakuza are just scoopin' up all the dudes they find that eat papaya an' kidnappin' 'em an' sellin' their bomb internal organs on the black market. So he's at the sandwich place and is all like, "One Papaya-Baconator please!" and this one Yakuza dude whose eatin' in there he's like, "man this guy like lives for the papaya, furreals," and then the Yakuza straight kidnap him and cut out all his spleen and feed his toes to the fuckin' parakeet! I mean *that's* how you could die!"

"No one has died of such a sandwich. What kind of news have you been watching?"

"Really really bad news. But Barhydt you *could* die of these things, is what I'm saying. Right?"

Barhydt doesn't respond. I spray the perfume bottle around the room. It's not too heavy like most of the perfumes I've been forced to sniff, the cloying, suffocating tangs you encounter when getting hugs from aunts. This was like... like if someone had spilled quality vanilla extract all over a pile of grass clippings. Jesus. It's Rachel's smell. Not her morning smell, when she got out of the shower and ran cocoa butter through her hair, but her going-out smell. Her night-on-the-town smell. It comes back so quickly; I almost forget I've been missing it.

"Right?"

"Fine. One could die this way, yes."

“And one should conceivably, with zero questions asked, prefer this place to that sandwich.”

“Yes.”

“But after working here. After seeing... this. Would you?”

And the pictures. Myself, I don't know how years younger, with an awful moustache and a shirt that has GARATY'S LANDSCAPING and grass stains all over it. Rachel, without her glasses, hair in those massive curls that she could never get rid of, wearing a white hospital gown and looking exhausted but thrilled. Holding a baby. The daughter, visiting today. I cannot remember her name.

“Would you?”

“Mrs. Wilkins, we're going to take you back downstairs. Okay? We're going to lift you into the wheelchair. Okay? On three. Onetwothree.”

A door opens a few rooms down and I hear the footsteps of the nurses. The wheelchair doesn't make a sound; they keep the wheels well oiled; nothing squeaks. I'm trying to think why I have hidden this box, this perfume, these pictures, and for the life of me I cannot recall.

Barhydt sniffs as she passes by the room. “Something smells fantastic,” she says.

Abrasia doesn't respond right away. I can hear the chairlift-type sounds of the machine used for moving wheelchairs down the stairs as it starts up. Mrs. Wilkins, apparently, doesn't like the machine; she whimpers and starts to cry.

“Myself, I'd take the fucking sandwich,” Abrasia says, very softly. The machine reaches them, and Mrs. Wilkins is loaded, and very slowly they begin their descent.

\*

A Boy Scout troupe stops by the home in the early afternoon. They bring a small dog that jumps onto all the ladies and laps at their faces. All the residents, like they had in the photographs lining the walls, know just how to react. They tickle the dog's belly and laugh when it licks their faces and say "Oh my!" when it poops on the rug. I'm lounging away the hours until this daughter arrives in one the living room's overstuffed armchairs, and I can't help smiling. The kids are excited, the residents are happy, and the little white terrier spasms and jumps and seems to suffer low-grade ecstasy-seizures from its joy at so much attention. You only catch glitches in the details: a boy scout asks a woman if she's ever owned a dog, and the resident looks at the boy as if he were a particularly hard crossword puzzle that she knows she's got no chance at figuring out, and mutters something like "Oh, I suppose so..." before lapsing into silence. Then there's a tough stretch of seconds until the dog runs by their feet again and the resident's eyes light up once more.

The air feels sour when they leave. Nurse Barhydt turns the television on and goes to the kitchen to make Rice Krispie treats for afternoon snack. The channel she chooses will be the channel for the rest of the day; the idea of a resident rising and walking over to the television and picking out the proper remote and finding a suitable channel while the rest of the room watches their struggles—it's inconceivable. *Days of Our Lives* followed by *Rachael Ray* followed by *The Doctors* followed by *Doctor Oz*. *Days* features a doctor shaking his head and explaining that somebody's cancerous mole had taken a turn for the worst. *Rachael* features a doctor cheerfully explaining what bad cholesterol is and how it contributes to a slow and painful death. The *Doctors* doctors use a fancy slide

show to explain the causes of vaginal odor, and the *Doctor* doctor introduces a product that fights excessive breast sweating. It looks like a tiny pillow that lodges between the boobs. Everyone in the audience gets one for free; even the men clap and cheer.

I let these doctors slide over me as the four o'clock hour draws nearer. A daughter. There are images that point to a daughter. The back of a girl in purple overalls and a purple flowered hat, waddling down the street next to Rachel's sundressed leg and only coming up to her knee. Driving a stuffed Rudolf the Reindeer across town at midnight when it was forgotten for a sleepover. Tiny tears that I could wipe off with a single finger, delicately, like removing a stubborn eye booger. Maybe the water-dampened voice of a girl singing in the shower, and maybe the smell of blueberry shampoo making its way out into a hallway, but that might have been something different. It would help if I could remember the song she was singing, but it's difficult to think with all the noise.

"Excessive breast sweat is not only no fun, it can be *embarrassing*, right ladies?" asks the doctor.

But there are the daughter things I know I don't know: what color of vegetable she absolutely refused to eat. An original hair color. Whether it was funk or rock and roll that she blasted from an upstairs bedroom at floor-vibrating, shock-your-parents volume. The first toy or concert or animal that ever made her go pleasepleasepleaseIwantIwantitIwantit, and her reaction when of course she got it, and how long it took for that unbelievably desirable thing to stop being so desirable and start living in the closet. Whether I was driving Rudolf the Reindeer back *from* a sleepover where she left it, or whether I was dropping it off at house where she was spending the

night, and if I was thinking she was too old to be doing this, or if I was thinking of anything at all. How it felt to have noise in a house, the child noise, the unstoppable wrecking ball of noise that a child throws off the walls. There is no sound, in my memory of the house. There isn't even a house. There is only the kitchen, and myself and Rachel and that smile, and there is no room for anyone or anything else.

“Eggs and cholesterol, now that's a trickier subject,” says the doctor.

This catching up business, it's like watching your favorite television show when you're convinced you've missed an episode. Where it's the same characters doing the same old stuff they usually do, except now they've added a new character, and everyone on the show is treating this like it's no big deal. I always hated when this happened on TV, Dallas and The Six Million Dollar Man-level crap; when it happens in real life, with such a major character as my daughter, I'm not even sure where to start. And so I watch TV.

“We thought it was just a beauty mark, but it's bad. *Real* bad. She has entered into a coma,” the doctor says. Then he and a nurse start kissing and moaning right on top of the patient.

“You know, I haven't had sex in approximately forever,” the Doctor says. “You'd think the world would have the decency to stop talking about it in front of me.”

I blink. That last one wasn't from a doctor. I look to my left and there's Maria, sitting on the sunflower couch all by herself. The flowers on the couch's fabric are fading, with the greens of the leaves turning yellow and the yellow of the blossoms vanishing into white. Next to these dying fake flowers she looks older than when we

talked last. Her hands are folded in her lap and the quilt she and her friends have been working on is nowhere in sight.

“Where are your friends?” I ask her.

She’s still watching the TV. “It’s not that their talking about sex *offends* me. It’s just frustrating.”

“I think this is the first time I’ve seen you today without your friends.”

“Like a joke that *every* television character is in on, and I’m not.”

“Or without a quilt, either.”

“Or maybe not a joke. Maybe... maybe it’s like having too many photographs of a vacation, after the vacation is finished.”

“I was starting to think that the three of you were dykes or something.”

“Like when you’ve enjoyed yourself, but you keep looking at reminders of all your past fun, once the fun’s all over,” She sighs and puts her hands up in a shrug. “It can get you down. You know?”

“Maria.”

She looks away from the TV to face me. Her shirt is purple and shows most of her arms and they are not the arms of an old woman. These are arms that can lift a gallon of milk from the fridge and conquer the tight lids on jars of tomato sauce, strong arms, with no spider veins or swinging fat. I look at my own arms and tell myself to take up quilting, or bread making, or whichever form of gentle exercise that feels the least gay; compared to Maria’s, my arms need work. I looked up and ask her, “Why are you here?”

She seems startled for a moment, and then starts to laugh. “I thought you were going to ask me about your daughter,” she says. “On Thursdays around this time, you’re



typically quizzing everyone about what Anna's like. You really *do* seem to be doing better, Edgar."

For what feels like the tenth time today, I've got no idea what to say. I say, "Mmmmm," and leave it at that. A gunshot echoes from the TV, some commercial for a police drama, and people start complaining. "No violence," a gray-hair mutters. "Why all the *fighting*?" asks another. Then the commercial changes, and an infomercial for the Xpress Ready-Set-Go Oven begins. A woman on the TV tells the room that for the next half hour, we should be prepared to be amazed. Everyone settles back down. The show seems to be an unspoken favorite.

Maria watches the television for a moment. "We tried memorizing parts of this, once," she says softly. "It plays every day, so we thought it'd be easy. But we didn't factor in how hard it is to memorize boring stuff." She shakes her head and brings her attention back to me again, with a look somewhere between annoyance and disdain. I can't tell if the look is for the infomercial or for me.

"What do you think would happen, Edgar," she asks, "If you could live forever?"

I hate when women do this. I asked her why she was here; what was wrong with a straight answer? "Then I'd be *really* fucking old," I say. "Instead of just old."

She doesn't smile. Her eyes have that dullness about them, which means she's either slipping into one of her spells, or drunk. Perhaps both. "That's true," she says. "You'd be really fucking old. But imagine the stuff you'd see, living forever. Just the mind-boggling, overwhelming amount of *stuff* you'd encounter."

"If you don't want to answer the question then you don't have to."

"And the longer you lived, the more you'd encounter, and the more you'd learn."

“I could live my life without knowing why you’re here, probably.”

“And at first what you learn is great, and super useful, and you live a better life because of it.”

“And on the whole I think I actually *would* rather hear about my daughter.”

“But you’re living forever, remember. And after a while, you’ve experienced so much, learned so much, it becomes impossible to do *anything* anymore.”

“Have you met her, before? You said her name was Anna. Have you met her?”

“Do you believe in God, Edgar?”

I stop responding. On screen, the woman brings out an older man to give color commentary while she prepared an Easy Express Omelet. The guy resembles what I might have looked like if Rachel and me had taken up the lifestyle of the polo shirt: an active retirement kind of guy. The TV-Edgar looked strong and active and tan and I figure this guy was probably still sailing and golfing and fucking, still picking up women like Maria, an old tan parasite leaching off Floridians with dead husbands. His tan looks like a tan that you *worked* on, too, the outcome of oils and stopwatches, of flipping over and over, again and again, at just the right times and intervals.

“I am *really* excited about this omelet, Kathy,” the TV-Edgar says.

“I hope you brought your appetite,” says the Kathy woman.

“Why would a grown man tan?” I ask. “You’d think he’d have better things to do.”

Maria considers the man on the television for a moment. “I know you don’t,” she says. “Believe. You’ve told me you don’t. Some poetic bullshit from a book. *The Unfamiliar?* The ‘gentle indifference of the world?’”

“It’s *The Stranger*,” I tell her, irritated. When had I told her about one of Rachel’s favorite books? But she isn’t listening.

“I used to believe in God,” she says. “Or gods, actually. A whole bunch of them.” She sighs. “But they kept living, and learning, and eventually they became... *pussies*.” She looks shocked at herself, then smiles and throws her hands up. “I hate that word! But it fits. They stopped being able to do *anything*. Like a kid writing a paper whose read way too many sources, and doesn’t even know where to start anymore. *Paralyzed* by too many sources.”

In a way, I think, Maria had answered my question. It seems obvious why she’s here, now: she could memorize the lines from shows, fragments of conversation, but she was also totally batshit crazy. It’s depressing. I like when beautiful women are crazy, but this was the wrong *type* of crazy. “You know that omelet actually does look good,” I say, trying to shift her attention back to the real world. On the television, a pile of eggs with green peppers steams on a plate.

“A perfect omelet in only ten minutes!” TV-Edgar says.

“It’s nothing! That’s nothing! This is only the beginning!” the woman cries. “We now move on to... *deep-dish pizza*.”

“But so this was happening to me, too,” Maria says. She isn’t looking at TV-Edgar or real-life me anymore, but at the faded sunflowers on the couch. She traces the washed-out linings of the petals with her finger. “I could feel it, and my friends could feel it, too, and we hated it. Placidity... inaction... was not our thing.” She stops tracing petals and moved on to the stems. Wherever one stem ended, she lifts her finger and skims the couch until the next stem began.

“So we decided to take drastic measures. To try and *decrease* everything, narrow perspectives back down.” She stops tracing entirely. “And what better place to do it than a home for memory loss?”

“So you’re crazy, then, Maria.” I say. I look at the television while speaking, addressing my words to the miniature pizza steaming on screen. “Could have saved us both some time if you just said you were crazy. Now you’ve ruined the show for me. I’m lost.”

“It’s an infomercial,” she snaps. “I’m sure you’ll pick it back up.”

Neither of us speaks for a while. The room watches the oven perform cooking miracles, spewing out chocolate brownie cake, paninis, upside down pineapple cake, steak with caramelized onions and mushrooms. A giant flat cookie that the woman calls “something of a cookie-pizza hybrid,” dubbed a cookizza. “Four minute hors d’oeuvres, I don’t even believe it,” TV-Edgar says. The tanned man can’t believe any of it. “You say you’d put this steak against *any* other steak? That these are *low-calorie* turkey meatballs? That you can save *seventy percent* off your kitchen energy costs by cooking with your Xpress Ready-Set-Go oven? Kathy. Kathy. Let me tell ya. My grandkids are gonna love this cake.”

The color of the Kathy woman’s hair is the dull burnt red of quality cedar mulch and not a single gunshot rings out during her infomercial. No one runs on the show, or makes any sudden movements at all, and they don’t have any lectures on sweaty breasts or smelly vaginas. TV-Edgar and mulch-hair woman smile, and talk, and eat delicious looking food. Every time they prepare to open the oven (which looks to me like a waffle iron painted red), their eyes go wide and their mouths form O’s and for a moment you

aren't 100% sure if it's going to come out okay—perhaps the steak had burned, or the cookizza really *had* been too good to be true— but then they'd lift the lid up and *yes* everything is alright, the smiles return bigger than ever, and tan TV-Edgar gets to sample another treat. It's like a baseball game with nothing but homeruns and delicious baked food, crispy outsides and gooey insides. The infomercial, these actively retired seniors, deliver happiness fresh from the oven every forty-five seconds.

The guy with the Twins hat sits on the same couch as yesterday. He starts poking everyone around him and gesturing towards the TV. "Fuck," he says after each poke, and then nods at the infomercial in approval.

I stop ignoring Maria. "Do you think that guy on TV kind of looks like me?" I ask.

She's been resting her head on one arm, not paying attention to the show, playing with the couch's flowers again. Now she angles her head up to face me. "You want to know why I'm not upset about you calling me crazy, Edgar?" Maria asks. I say nothing and regret asking her anything. The woman's incapable of answering simple goddamn questions.

"I'm not upset because we've had this conversation already, Edgar. *Last* Thursday. And the Thursday before *that*. It's kind of gotten to be our little ritual, actually. Your pre-Anna warm-up. So that's why it doesn't bug me. And I'll tell you something else."

She leans in closer, nearly whispering in my ear, and there's an overwhelming smell coming off her. Something like pine trees with more bite.

"Jesus, is that gin?"

She smiles. “Maybe. But listen, now, because this concerns you. You remember Roy, right? The one who pissed me off?”

I lean back. Her smile vanishes. “We are narrowing our perspective, Edgar,” she says. “We our losing our experience. You ought to get Anna to take you away.”

“I’m pretty sure,” I say slowly, “That you’re just a drunk old lady.”

“And I’m pretty sure that your fatter and paler than that guy on TV,” she says. She stands up and wipes her hands on her skirt, also purple. “But I still think you’re cute. So ask her. Get Anna to get you out of here. This place is no longer safe.”

“What happened to Frank? Where’s Roy?”

“They’re right next door, idiot. They’ve only ever been right next door.”

She walks out of the entertainment and I hear her start walking up the stairs. Her arms might be strong, but she still takes stairs like an old person; the steps come slow and shuffled. I bet Rachel would have kicked her ass at climbing stairs, if she were here. I think about this for a moment.

Would Rachel be coming with Anna?

The local news at four is just starting. “Tonight... is a stress-free life actually *killing* you?” the anchor asks.

“Edgar, your daughter Anna is here,” says a voice.

I look up. It’s Barhydt, leading in two ladies. “And she’s brought your granddaughter, Tabitha, too. Isn’t that nice.” Barhydt smiles and leaves the room.

I congratulate himself: there’s at least one thing I’ve remembered correctly today. Giving this woman, my daughter, a hug, I find myself lost in the smell of blueberry shampoo.

\*

“I’m sorry?”

“I said you look great today, dad. That shirt. You look really sharp.”

I smile. Anna smiles. She doesn’t show her teeth.

We’d moved to another room. The Multimedia Room, Jim called it when he brought us in. A single computer occupies the corner. The woman using it is a gray-hair with viciously sharp and bony-looking elbows that stick way out from her body as she types; she looks like a senile driver that had swapped the steering wheel for a keyboard. Her hands are even in the ten and two position. The room’s otherwise empty except for me and... why do I hesitate? My daughter. And my granddaughter.

“We barely made it today, dad,” this daughter says. “The roads all got slicked over. We must have past, what, three cars that had skidded out on the way here?”

Anna’s wearing a man’s coat. It’s a sharp pea coat, and she looks good in it, but it’s definitely a man’s coat. She also has cheekbones, high and noble-looking things sitting way up on her face, which confuses me even more than the coat. Where had she gotten cheekbones? I came from jowly stock.

“At least. Maybe more. Thank the car gods for the Volvo Station Wagon.”

And this granddaughter. Where the hell had Tabitha come from? In her early twenties. So *tan*. Not black-dark, but definitely on the darker side of amber. Or olive. Can people be amber-colored? And that *hair*.

“You should put chains on your tires,” I say. I’ve never done this personally, but it seems like a solid car-advice-giving thing to say.

“Mmmm,” says Anna. The woman on the computer is typing away, one finger at a time, muttering “Dammit, Craig, what are you up to now?” Anna’s hair is as short as mine; if she had been anybody but my daughter, I might have labeled the haircut “dykish”. On her, the word is “modern.” Either way, she looks good.

“I could buy a harpoon,” the grey-haired woman announces, “for only seventy three dollars.”

I study the back of my hands. Tabitha turns around and asks, “What would you need a harpoon for?”

The woman snorts. “As if *that’s* what was important.”

This granddaughter has the type of hair that you could substitute for wearing a scarf. It’s long and brown and thick and she could wrap it around her neck and ears and head and be sufficiently bundled for winter. And would probably still look beautiful. Where was this long brown hair coming from? No one in my family looks like this. Where came this amber-olive skin?

Anna clears her throat and smiles. “So how are things with your girlfriend, dad?”

I look up from my hands. “Beg your pardon?”

“Your girlfriend? Maria, I think her name is?”

“No. What? No. Besides, what would your mother think?”

Anna and Tabitha trade looks, and I realize immediately that Rachel is dead. That she’s probably been dead for some time. It comes less as a crushing loss than as an embarrassment over slipping so badly in front of the girls. I still can’t remember her passing away, too much, in the specifics; I probably could if I thought about it more, or saw more photos, but now isn’t the time for that. And besides, isn’t she better off? The



prospect of losing another eleven consecutive days looms up. Would I really wish that on anybody?

“Surfing the internet is not about the *buying*. It’s about the *community*.” The woman sniffs. “I thought young people were *good* at the World Wide Web.” Tabitha groans and shakes her hair.

I put up my hands in apology. “Sorry. I forgot about your mother passing away. I get confused, sometimes, here.” There’s a pause and I tried to think of questions concerning the weather. What comes out is, “Sometimes I wish I could leave.”

Anna smiles another tight-lipped smile, and I feel like sticking my head in an oven. What was I doing? I’d just seen Mr. Roberts pleading with his daughter to take him home, crying like a momma’s boy being dropped off at summer camp. Was I really going to pull that same act?

“But, you know, that’s life, sometimes. And I’m doing fine, here. Good food,” I say. “Hot women.”

Both Anna and Tabitha laugh at that one, and I smile, too. How nice to reach an age where even the *thought* of me finding women sexy is a joke. Anna reaches across the coffee table and gives my hand a squeeze. “I know you’d rather not be here, Dad.” Her hands are like ice.

“Your hands are like ice,” I tell her.

She laughs. “I lost my gloves. Well, one glove. But I feel weird just wearing the one glove. So it’s basically the same as losing two gloves, isn’t it?” She laughs again. “Can’t have one without the other. But you should feel Tabitha’s hands. She’s still scooping ice cream.”

“And now I offer *sixty*-three dollars, and the bargaining begins,” the woman says.

Tabitha stares at her hands, and then reaches them over to me. She grasps one of my hands with both of hers, and I’m less alarmed by the cold I feel than the calluses in that grasp, hard little bumps that dot her palms and fingers. They have no right to be on such hands.

“Oh my,” I say.

“It’s the stupidest goddamn job in the universe,” Tabitha says. She takes her hands back and studies them, turning them over. She wears no nail polish. “Who needs ice cream when it’s this cold? And if I have to sing for another tip, honestly, it’s over.”

I look to see if Anna reacts to her daughter saying “goddamn”, but Anna just smiles. She doesn’t have any nail polish, either. “They have to sing every time someone drops a tip in the tip jar, dad. Even if it’s just a quarter, everybody’s got to sing.”

I try to think of something to say about singing and tip jars. I can’t say, “Oh my,” again. There’s a silence. “You used to love ice cream,” I finally say. I’m guessing but it feels like a safe guess. What kind of kid doesn’t like ice cream?

Both of them laugh. With teeth, even! They look at each other again but it’s a happy kind of look. “That’s right!” Anna says. “Vanilla milk shakes! She complains but I think that’s why she stays. As much free ice cream as she likes.”

“She loved ice cream,” I say. “Couldn’t get enough of it.”

“And all those ice cream cakes for your birthdays?”

“Oh man I used to *live* for ice cream cakes.”

“Loved it. Like she was born eating ice cream.”

“It must have been all the milk shakes I had when I was pregnant. Got passed down, somehow. Got carried over.”

“And how you used to cut all the cakes, Papa? And that time when a boyfriend asked for a piece of cake, and you told him the lawn needed weeding first?”

“I tell everybody in here: you’ve got ice cream, you better keep away from my granddaughter.”

“And if he says he won’t accept sixty-three dollars, I walk away,” the woman says. “I’m just browsing. I don’t *need* this. I can always walk away.”

Tabitha nods. “Shrewd bargainer. Got to make sure she’s getting the most harpoon for her money.”

Anna gives her a look, a do-not-antagonize-the-old-people look, but then starts laughing, and then Tabitha’s laughing, and I join in and we’re all laughing together, their shoulders relax and teeth are all over the place and we’re happy. Finally they start making end of laughter sounds, those exaggerated sighs you let out at the end of a really good belly laugh, but I don’t want it to be over. I’m on a roll. Ice cream is tapped so I look around for something else, anything else to talk about, and I notice that my granddaughter is wearing a necklace. No nail polish or earrings on either of them but hanging from Tabitha’s neck on simple black string was a small shell.

“That’s a very pretty necklace,” I say.

Tabitha opens her mouth. Her right hand reaches up and grabs the shell like she’s afraid someone might steal it. She looks at me, then at her mother, who’s back to giving tight-lipped smiles. She says Thank you, Papa, then asks to excuse herself to go to the bathroom. When she leaves her hand is still on the necklace.

Anna's quiet for a moment. When she looks at me she smiles but there's no teeth and the no teeth is a kind of a punishment for me, I think, even if she doesn't know it. "I brought down the papers," she says.

I smile back. I decide not to ask any more questions. Outside a dog barks, and there's the thump and scratching of a squirrel jumping onto the roof, and I listen, and this is the first real reminder of a world outside the home that I've experienced all day. The visiting families, the boy scouts, even this daughter and granddaughter—these girls, this lesbian-looking girl with high cheekbones and this amber-looking girl with too-thick hair and too-hardened hands, girls who looked frightfully superior to anything I could suppose to have fathered—all these visitors leave the outside world waiting at the door when they came inside the home. Because the outside world would remember them, all their various shapes and forms, and would open back up for them when they left the home, and it would be a happy reunion; but it would not enter the home. Whereas in here... what is happening in here?

"I don't know if you remember... but we discussed these last week, Dad? The power of attorney forms? And we read through them, and this week we just have to sign."

Whereas in here the outside world is being erased, gradually and slowly. Narrowing down into a split-pea-soup-green bedroom, a dining room with swinging doors, a living room, a foyer. A multimedia room, for guests. Maria, crazy as she might be, was right about one thing: it's a good place to narrow perspective. Anna is saying "And it's important to do this now, because if we wait and the state declares you incapacitated then we're fucked, dad. Excuse the language but we're fucked. We have no

idea where they'd put you," and I'm watching her mouth move without really taking anything in, and Tabitha still hasn't returned.

"Because really, it's all about the community," the woman says again. She's stopped typing and has her hands folded in her lap. "And even if it doesn't work out, I can just walk away."

I fold my hands in my lap, too. "Did I do something," I ask.

Anna has shown her teeth exactly twice since she got here, once when she laughed at my joke about hot women and once for my made-up memories of ice cream. Every time she smiles, I find myself missing them. "No, dad," she says. "But you made her that necklace." She still hasn't removed her pea coat. I wonder if she's cold, or just reluctant to settle in.

"It was one of the shells you brought back with you. When you and mom went to... was it Hawaii? Somewhere in the Pacific. For your honeymoon." We both look out the window, then, to where the squirrel from the roof had jumped onto a tree and was busy chasing another squirrel. Why do they chase each other in winter, I wonder. Shouldn't they be busy hibernating, eating, sitting. "I miss mom a lot, this time of year," Anna is saying. "She was such a character."

What hurts, I think, is not the process of forgetting the shell, my wife, my daughter, the ocean. What hurts is still being able to comprehend the reminders. I remember, now, an older wife. A wife that loved winter. Something about the quiet it produced, she said, a feeling of stillness so complete that even in the city, you expect deer to start appearing left and right. It was a deer-producing silence, she had said. Her hair had been long and brown and impossibly curly and her cheekbones had been way up high

on her face and the winter was why we had never moved from Minnesota. Why we had never made it to the Pacific.

“People keep disappearing,” I say.

“You mean from here?”

I didn’t, but that was true, too. “Yeah. From here. They leave and no one here tells us shit. What’s next door? Somebody said they get moved next door.”

Anna opens her mouth, then closes it. She seems to be deliberating the best way to break something to me. It’s the same face Barhydt made this morning, when she fed me that “no longer with us” garbage about Frank. How much to tell him, that face is asking. How best to avoid upsetting the Edgar. I get angry.

“And you can just tell me, Anna. You won’t be ruining Christmas for me. I know Santa isn’t real.”

She smiles by biting her lip. Like the manager, she doesn’t want to get upset at me. “It’s just... that’s the hospice center, next door, dad.” She rubs her hands together and I appreciate why older relatives are always telling younger relatives to gain weight; it hurts to see them look cold. “You’ve... you’ve been in there before. In this home, the Joy Home, people have memory problems, but most are physically a-okay. Like you,” she says, and reaches over to give my bicep a squeeze. There’s a moment of panic at being grabbed before I remember who she is, that this is okay between family. “You still got those landscaping muscles. But if people get sick, or their Alzheimer’s gets so bad that they can’t function, they move next door.”

“Jesus.” I pull my arm away from her. “Was anyone going to tell me this? Or were you just going to stick me there, too, when you feel like it?”

She closes her eyes like I've smacked her. Takes a deep breath.

"We're not hiding it from you, dad. We went on a tour of the place. You said you hated it here the least of all," she said. "That you at least liked the breakfast, here. And that next door... that at least you knew what to expect, next door. After mom."

I nod. Trying to calm down. Trying not to let it show that learning each of these things, these recycled facts that I've so clearly come across before, is like a kick to a full stomach. That feeling I had in Maria's room, the muscle cramp that's made its way into the brain, returns. I had wondered why this place didn't smell like death, why most people were still up and walking around, and now I had my answer; a home exclusively for Alzheimer's; a home for brains turning to mush faster than bodies could keep up. And if I'm here, then my brain, too.

"So it's not ass cancer, that I'm in here for, then."

Anna wrinkles her nose. "*Colon* cancer, dad. And no. Well, yes, you have it, but at its current rate it'll take forty years to be lethal. The Alzheimer's seems to slow other diseases down, somehow."

I nod, and think about leaving it at that, but I have to ask. Have to be certain.

"Is there any chance," I ask her, "that my memory will recover?"

Anna switches her gaze from the window to me. "No, dad," she says. She pulls her pea coat closer to her, and I decide she really is cold. The woman on the computer still sits and waits. "I'd be lying if I said there was. You'll have good days, and bad days, but over time it's only going to get worse." She then went on to relate this to the papers, and how important it is for us to sign the papers, but I wave her off. Of course I would sign them. She's told me exactly what I want to hear.

\*

I sign the papers and we talk some more because they don't want to leave immediately after signing the papers. Then Anna says that she's got to get Tabitha home. The word "goodbye" is never used. Anna says "I'll see you this weekend dad" and Tabitha says that she'll see me soon. Then we embrace, and the women leave, and it's Anna that starts crying immediately upon closing the home's door. Tabitha lights a joint and they sit in the car and smoke it together, still visible from the living room window, telling funny ice cream stories of the Edgar of the old days until they are sufficiently blazed and laughing and can drive back home. After I return to the media room, where I make up facts about tempered steel to make the computer woman feel excited about her purchase of the harpoon. Sometimes it's not about the community, I tell her. Sometimes it's about owning a kick-ass harpoon capable of piercing all sorts of sea creatures and buying it at a bargain, too. I make up stories about the Pacific and am generally in a very good mood. Because I'm starting to suspect what Anna doesn't. That in here, we have a chance at narrowing it down to zero. That for us, moving towards losing everything was the only chance at getting better.

\*

I wake up and it's not even dawn and the bed I'm lying in is not my own bed. I'm in Maria's bed. Next to me lies Maria.

She wakes up when she hears me stirring, turns over, and looks at me. Then at her watch.

"Overslept," she says, and she sighs, but she's got a little smile. "I guess you tuckered me out."



It's gray outside the window and looks like there will be more snow any moment now, like all the snowflakes are waiting for someone to make the first drop. It's got to be before five. When I don't respond, she looks at me again.

"Anything?" she asks. "Anything at all?"

I pull the covers further up my body. I'm naked. She sighs again, says, "I guess I didn't think so," and then rolls over so I'm facing her back. She's naked, too. She doesn't say anything more but her breathing is shallow and it doesn't sound like she's asleep. I sit up. My shoes and my clothes are by the foot of the bed but I ignore them. I walk across the room. On Maria's desk next to the fish tank is a single sheet of paper, a list of names, with FRANK and ROY on the top; a list of those that she and her friends want kicked out. And sitting on top of the list, in hornet yellow packaging with at least five warning labels, is a bottle of rat poison. It seems like I'm not the only one who's been stealing from the cleaning lady.

"I would avoid the waffles, next time they're served," she says from the bed. I can feel her watching for my reaction but I just nod. It might be a dream; and even if it isn't, if I just wait long enough, the memory will pass just like one. I don't bother to say goodbye or collect my shoes and clothes. Out the door, into the hall. I decide to take the wheelchair lift for a ride.

It moves just as slowly as before, and I've got to say: I kind of enjoy the trip. It's like a black-and-white movie entrance, where the stars are always floating down a marvelous staircase in soft lighting, making an impression on those below. I even think about trying out a bow but decide against it. And just as I reach the bottom, just as the

machine is sighing and lowering me gently to the ground, there's the sound of jangling keys and the front door unlocks and Abrasia walks in to see me naked.

There's a moment of silence. She looks much less surprised than I'd expect under the circumstances, and I'm a little proud; she seems to be settling in quite nicely.

"Someone fell," I tell her. "I came down as quickly as I could."

"Fuck," she says. "Is the night nurse here?"

She's already moving. I tell her I don't know and she starts cussing the night nurse and her three-hour breakfast breaks as she hustles up the stairs. She's left the front door open. I wait until she's up and out of sight, and then slip on out as quiet as I can.

The cold hits like a punch to the nuts. One of those really bad hits where the pain comes in waves. The first breath is all brute force and your lungs empty out with an OOF sound but it's tolerable; it's the second wave that seeps all the way inside to your stomach, shoving itself down your throat and twisting and squeezing everything on its way. I wonder what month it is. It feels like a January.

Still I trudge my way into the backyard. The front yard and driveway and surrounding streets don't interest me, they're just new places to feel lost in, but I remember the view from Maria's window and I want it again. I move alongside the house next door, and at one point I see my fat neighbor through a ground-floor window, sleeping on the couch, with the television turned on for company. He's still wearing his wife's pink bathrobe and I wonder if maybe she's left him, and how I would feel about that, either way. It depends on if it motivates him to get off his ass and do something: I need more interesting things to watch from my window. The backyard opens up and there, on the other side of the house, stands the hospice building. A few brave little

snowflakes start falling, all by themselves in this first wave but more will follow. I have seen this building and I have been in this building before.

This was Rachel's hospice center. With the remote controlled beds that could move the top half of the bed up and down or the bottom half of the bed up and down but no buttons that could make the bed more comfortable. With the room that they kept her in with two other shaved-headed ladies and the hallway outside it and the nurse's station a few doors down that all had five or six different kinds of beeping instruments going all at once and the beeps were quiet enough that you didn't hear them at first but persistent enough to drive you mad once you did. Rachel's room had a wall clock that made a tiny clicking sound every time it snapped past a second and why would you give volume to a second when all Rachel had left was enduring and waiting for time to pass. Rachel's wall clock had seemed to be glued to the wall because I could not tear it off. Rachel's wall clock had been susceptible to blows from a smuggled-in hammer. Rachel had said that the room was just fine. That at least the breakfast was good. And this is where she died. I'm shivering but I don't move, because where is there to go.

It's not just seeing the building, her building, *the* building where we said our goodbyes. Something about Maria brings it back to me, and Anna, and Tabitha and Ted and the rest of the nurses and crew, not in its entirety but in clumsy little puzzle pieces. The fragments don't add up to a complete set and I'm still full of holes and incomplete swaths but enough comes back to know how Frank and Roy must be living, if Ted and Roy got moved into hospice. They did the best they possibly could in there with Rachel but Rachel had been too far gone to notice much. For Frank and Roy, for the fairy and the troublemaker stuck in there solely to get rid of them, it'll be a nightmare. They still have

enough brains to hear the quiet of the dining room, not the peaceful quiet of being alone but the maddening quiet of a crowded room with nothing to say. They'll still get that chill from passing down a hallway full of empty people parked in wheelchairs, they wheel them out of their rooms and clump them all in the hallways, and it's well-intentioned, it's for giving them each other's "company" but it's worse somehow, they look like so many abandoned grocery carts, metal wheeled empty things scattered across a parking lot in random clumps. Frank and Roy will kill themselves, if they have the life left in them to do it. They'll kill themselves or they'll go into a depression so deep they cease to be, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. Mystery solved, case closed. All I can do is hope they stop remembering soon. All I can do is hope for them to cease to be, and hope that before I get sent there, that I'll be gone, too. In the front, I can hear Abrasia running out of the house, calling my name. She seems to think I went down the street, because her voice is getting softer.

But that'd okay, I think. If it all goes. Even this. I don't really use my brain for heavy lifting anymore; the way I figure it, my brain deserves to rest. It's the threat of remembering what I've forgotten, *again*, that scares me all the way down. Learning about more humiliations every day, remembering more friends and loved ones that had died or that I no longer saw, more things I had been but was no longer. And Rachel, flitting back and forth, living to me one day and nonexistent the next, nothing until a building looms or a deer bounds or a star-shaped bottle of perfume is released into the air. I don't want it. If I can't have everything, the grief, the joys, the memories that for good or bad make me *me*, I don't want any of it.

The snow falls softly. I look away from the building and back into the yard and see a deer, pooping by the pine bush. The cold is either getting more or less severe, depending on which way you look at it. Barhydt's voice has joined Abrasia's and it seems to be getting closer but I cannot be sure. The deer finishes up and sniffs around the bush, not worried about the yelling or the cold, seemingly in no hurry at all. I smile and watch and smile and watch and look forward to a time when a deer produced under softly falling snow means nothing to me at all.