

Dissolution

A NOVEL

STEFAN
MOLYNEUX

Dissolution

By Stefan Molyneux, MA

Host, Freedomain

www.freedomain.com

Chapter 1

For much of his life, Robert's mind was centered on curves.

Learning curves, bell curves, the curve of a woman's abdomen between ribs and hip – grading on a curve – and now, driving to Wasaga Beach – the curves of the road, and the slowly declining curves of his attraction to Chloe.

Chloe – clingy...

These words always merged in his mind. She wasn't that way, of course – she was openly affectionate, without guile, supportive and warmhearted and funny – and her curves were not bad, not at all, but – well, there was no way around it, in Robert's mind – she had curves, but no curveballs. She had lines, but no spikes. She was predictable, and Robert was young enough to believe that *predictable* was the same as *boring* – and he was a little bit too vainglorious to put "predictability" into the category of "integrity," which, with regards to Chloe, definitely applied.

He met Chloe at a frat party – he was standing outside in the dark, with toilet paper streamers hanging from the tree branches behind him. She was standing in front of a phone stand, listening to the receiver, her thumb jammed into the opposite ear – and he found that both strange and a little exciting, that she would put her thumb in her ear rather than her forefinger. She also seemed to be muttering, which was confusing to Robert, because he couldn't imagine the other person could hear her over the inevitable Howard Jones song that was shaking the window frames.

Once Robert realized that she was checking a message, he felt strangely touched, in an oddly dusty part of his heart, that she would check in with someone in the middle of a party. He waited until she disconnected, then tried to connect.

"How can you do that when it's so loud?"

She smiled at him, obviously eager to please, and he had a sudden flash of the girl as a chubby tween, staring breathlessly and hopelessly at the jocks as they swung past in their jeans and letter jackets. *She's been ignored, and still believes it was for good reasons*, he thought with a sudden shimmer of sympathy.

"A friend of mine was interested in a guy, and wanted to know if he was here," said Chloe.

"You're a good friend then," said Robert.

She cocked her head and frowned. "Is there any other kind?"

And there it was – a little shudder of truth, flashing like a confused robin rocketing between two broken windows in a dark garden shed. *Of course there is no other kind of friend than a good friend*, thought Robert. It was so simple, and revealed so much about her – and about him.

"Well – is she coming?"

Robert fully expected her to reply: "Is who coming?" He noticed that most of the young women around him – well it wasn't exactly that they played dumb, but they always seemed to be kind of stalling for time, or putting useless questions in the middle of conversations. It was a hard habit to figure out, but it was everywhere.

Instead, Chloe said: "No, the guy she's after is not here."

"Single-minded and vaguely loyal, those are real pluses!"

Chloe smiled: "If we are going to have a conversation, don't I need a name? I'm Chloe."

"Robert." He made no move to shake her hand, or touch her in any way – he had heard enough about 'misunderstood' interactions – and seen one lawsuit – from his father's company.

"Nice to meet you, Robert. Why are you out here alone?"

"My ears are ringing."

Chloe grimaced. "No kidding, I have no idea why it needs to be so loud – do people have such terrible thoughts that they need to be continually drowned out? They're courting permanent damage in there."

"Yeah, I have to watch my hearing, I played trombone in a brass band."

She smiled, then frowned, not sure if he was serious.

There was an awkward pause as they both cast about for topics.

Robert gave up. "What are you drinking?"

Chloe grimaced. "Oh, I don't really drink. I hate hangovers, and I never lose my – sense of identity or whatever, so I just watch everyone get dumber and dumber for an hour or two, then go home."

"That must be disappointing."

Chloe pursed her lips. "I guess so, but I always have hope."

For what? Robert was about to say, but stopped, feeling his upper-middle-class flowering of *cringe* bursting in his chest.

"I don't have hope I guess," said Robert. "But my buddies need a wing man, and I'm frankly pretty ambitious, so I need to keep my contacts dubbed up to the max."

Chloe laughed. "So you get them a girlfriend now, and they get you a job later."

Something like that, Robert was again about to say, but his heart again seized in his chest at the empty predictability of his words.

There was another pause, then the phone in the booth rang and she smiled at him apologetically before taking the call.

Robert stood around for about ninety seconds, until it became clear that Chloe was in a conversation. Trying to catch her attention, he tipped an imaginary hat, then headed back into the party.

In the synthetic musical din and endless haze of nicotine and marijuana smoke, Robert blinked in surprise, his eyes stinging, his hand over his chest.

It felt as if something was suddenly now – missing, and an odd memory of his oh-so-chatty mother emerged, from when he was very little. She had finished a complicated jigsaw puzzle, and framed it to hang on the wall - but just as she held it up, she noticed that a little piece was missing, right in the center. It was a stormy scene, with a boat man hanging on for dear life, and the puzzle piece that was missing was where his face should be. His mother was very upset, and forced the family to search everywhere, and Robert could tell – even at his young age – that she was fighting the urge to accuse someone – or *everyone* – of sabotaging her two-month-long project.

Shortly before leaving for university, Robert had been looking for an old binder in the basement, and came across the ancient jigsaw puzzle – still missing the man's face – and felt a sudden sentimental pang at the general category of lost things in the world.

Somewhere in the universe, the atoms of that jigsaw puzzle piece still existed – probably the piece *itself* still existed – but it could never be found, it had fallen into a vent or been thrown out by accident – he could not imagine how a piece right at the center of the jigsaw puzzle could have just – vanished. It was not like an edge piece that could have been brushed off by accident – and that cold day in the basement, with all the skin-dust of endless leftover ping-pong games floating in the late afternoon sunbeams slanting through the high windows – Robert had felt absolutely sure that someone had taken the sailor's face. It could have been his brother Shane – perhaps this was the start of his brother becoming a corrosive, compulsive thief – or it could even have been his father, who never expressed marital conflict directly – but Robert felt suddenly certain that *someone* had been angry at his mother and had stolen the center of her puzzle. His father would have thrown it out – always overcautious – but his brother would have kept it in a

secret place, and fingered it from time to time, running his dirty nails along the edge of this stolen fragment of his mother's heart in vengeance for... for...

But then, of course, since Shane had the mind of an addict long before he became addicted, he would have forgotten it, or lost it, in one of the – what was it, three houses? Four? – that they had lived in since the jigsaw puzzle house, and now – or at least then, when Robert was looking for his old binder – Robert knew that the sailor's face, the jigsaw puzzle piece, the heart of his mother's pretend art – that there was no way that it would ever be found or retrieved.

His father would never admit taking it, and if his brother had stolen it, well, facts were forever getting lost in the mirrored maze of Shane's endless defenses. Robert knew this: *If you are around insecure people for long enough, you accumulate their lies like a winter roof accumulates snow – except without apologies and restitution, lies just accumulate until the roof collapses, at which point you better be far, far away...*

If my brother had stolen that puzzle piece, I could offer him \$10 million to admit it, and he would walk away from that money rather than ever confess to a moral fault or any tendencies to pettiness...

And tonight, at the house party, after talking so briefly to Chloe, as his ears and nose were assaulted by extremities, Robert felt that a tiny piece of *him* was now missing. He had felt complete, now he felt incomplete – it was not like losing a tooth, but rather like finding out that you narrowly missed out on a big inheritance from a distant relative. You did not feel particularly poor, then you found out a fortune had flashed past without you knowing – and *now* you felt poor...

Robert was not overburdened with a sense of connection – his family was typical upper-middle-class – they bonded over activities and board games and status and health and pricey hobbies and environmentalism and a hatred of populism and vaguely aristocratic concerns for those less fortunate. They viewed their own good looks,

athleticism and ease with people as personal virtues, as if they had forged their identities and accents and contacts from exactly the same materials as those available to the twitchy children from broken homes. *We are all given the same opportunities, the same materials, the same freedoms – why should we be ashamed of making more of our lives than others choose to?* They did not naturally possess the kind of humility that leads to deep connection – vanity is the ultimate mirrored moat that keeps other souls at bay – and so the best they could manage was a sort of sterile proximity of muscular praise.

Robert's father was an oddly aggressive accountant, well known for his hostile tennis habits and occasional blackout drinking. He had married the pretty girl by relentlessly promoting his own future success, paving the way forward with bricks he promised to turn into gold. She had surrendered to this – well, outright *bribery*, Robert sometimes thought – without much complaint or regret. His parents had achieved an almost perfect work/life balance, avoiding the age-old trap of a man who works too hard to provide promised wealth, and a woman who resents him for never being home.

At least by the time Robert was eight or nine, his father worked less, and had outsourced some of his business travel requirements to underlings, and his mother never seemed to complain about her husband being – in the first deadly word of dissatisfied housewives – “unavailable.”

She had also avoided the upper-middle-class trap of starting a flower arrangement business or catering company or little cupcake shop – a faux-independent side hustle that would have eaten his father's time mercilessly, and almost inevitably lost far more money than it made – thus prompting her cry – the second deadly word of dissatisfied housewives – that he was “unsupportive.”

No, Robert's mother seemed apparently well-satisfied with the money her husband made, and happy to trade his time away for material possessions. She enjoyed decorating, and had good taste, but never went crazy with fireplaces and indoor fountains and – well,

she did have one sudden fit of spending and installed a giant stone pizza oven in the backyard – which was never used – but that was excusable due to its rarity.

His parents had ways seemed well-balanced, making the necessary compromises in order to get along – not particularly in love – and lust was unimaginable of course – and they trundled along like two people whose paths happened to cross on a long and boring hike, and filled the time up with fairly aimless but diverting chatter about the things they saw, hoped to see, and had already seen. They were people who had to fill their time up with something – and that could be anything, except originality.

Then, two things had occurred, in relatively quick succession.

Curves, so to speak...

The first was that his brother had become perhaps the laziest addict in human history.

His older brother Shane had graduated from high school a year early and gone to university to study art and graphics design – he had been bitten by the scribbling bug early in his teen years, and had cranked out massive amounts of medieval fantasy art and bug-eyed anime at the expense of social skills, sports, girls, deodorant and sunlight. He scribbled endlessly on paper, then sort of turned into paper – pale, flat and easily impressionable.

Both his parents sighed and wrote tuition checks more out of any lack of practical alternatives than any foundational enthusiasm for Shane's graphical talents. His art was technically good, but woefully derivative – he was sort of a high DPI photocopier rather than a creative visionary. But what else could be done? He preferred his own company, which is usually a sign of social anxiety or giddy vanity, but in Shane's case he just never seemed to connect with others to the point where they would have anything practical to offer him.

His parents were utterly unaware of one of the gravest dangers of an education in the arts, which is exposure to other cornered artists. Most parents want their children to find their "own people," so to speak, not as often realizing that if their children are weird, hanging out in academic funhouse mirror-mazes with other weirdos only further distances them from the world of relative normality.

As a teenager, Shane's social contacts swirled around the socially scornful – and often secretly self-cutting – world of Goths and Renaissance Fair fans and their oddly-dressed fellow travelers. The girls had all grown up without fathers, circled and prodded – and sometimes pursued – by unrelenting maternal boyfriends and other leftovers of the extended families that had somehow survived early divorces or breakups.

These girls took forever to answer questions, pondering what unguessable blowback might follow any pronouncement – had little to no sex drive, and dressed to repel all but the most desperate. Romance was to be scorned and mocked – everyone was supposed to be "friends" – which meant: *listen for eternity while I trauma-dump with absolutely no plan to escape or change anything.*

When Shane got to university, his heart was immediately one-shotted by Regina – who always claimed that her name rhymed with "fun." She pulled him into a world of endless introspection and unrelated "insights" – and taught him to always analyze his dreams with the most negative possible interpretations – and drew him like a siren of the underworld into Jung's mandalas and collective unconscious and exploring the deeper mind like a newly discovered dark continent – and she promised Shane that his art would improve, that he would finally "be himself," and that she was a gatekeeper to the ultimate goal of *authenticity*.

Shane fell into the role of acolyte with very little resistance – Regina was his muse, his Medusa, his Beatrice, his guide in the underworld that led – not to the truth, but to *unity* and *connection* and *inspiration* and every other form of undefined positive – nothing that could be measured, nothing that could be completed, nothing that

could be built upon – and he pursued her into the swamp of manipulative mysteries like a hypnotized zombie following a dancing will-of-the-wisp into a soggy swamp without end.

Regina murmured with eerie intensity about *what it means to be human*, and *exploring the connection between the 'now' and 'forever'* and *authenticity* that, ironically, only she could judge.

Shane fed Regina's vanity – Regina fed on his deference, obedience and worship. She had enough sex with him to get him hooked, then claimed that their relationship had moved *beyond the physical*, and demanded that they share auras and massage odd body parts. She did not go as far as the cliché of opening *chakras* – but almost, almost...

And then, she fed him drugs.

Regina spoke of Shane's secret unhappiness, his obedience, his lack of self-expression and authenticity, his alienated essence of being *young, white and bourgy* – factors common to most young people, and all young artists – and whispered that the cure was *enlightenment*, and that *enlightenment* was in fact nothing more – or less – than a WMD carpet-bombing of brain-altering chemical compounds.

It's like twenty years of therapy in a single night, she said – *there is no such thing as a bad trip, it's the only way to contact true reality, to see beyond the physical and feel beyond the historical* – she constantly promised and swayed and seduced Shane with the hint of a reality beyond the mundane accessible only to those who erased absolutely *everything* about their former selves.

To **not** be who you are is to be **everything**, she would murmur, repeating of course the words of a sinister older cousin who had introduced her to drugs when she was twelve. She would not define evil as evil, so she pretended evil was good, and thus did "good" by corrupting others in turn.

And to some degree, Shane *did* find genuine relief and release in these drugs – but it was the release of a return to infancy, without rational boundaries or clear communication or moral responsibility.

And to be fair, there *was* a burst of creativity in those wild months – a lack of restraint and self-criticism that produced a significant improvement in Shane’s technical skills and emotional visions – but the void being produced by Regina’s mysticism and the corrosive drugs – the liberation that came not from the achievement of new standards, but the abandonment of *all* standards – produced dark grueling visions from Shane’s hand – dead robots dripping down stairwells, hollow-eyed Victorian housekeepers holding dead birds before moon-faced children in tiny golden cages, shadowy eyes at the edge of vision staring at the viewer, cats in an alley eating vaguely human forms – all kinds of demonic visions came pouring out of him as the borders and boundaries of his personality collapsed.

And the abyss that Shane stared into on Regina’s drugs began, inevitably, jumping into his peripheral vision as he played hackey-sack in the quad, or traded cash for food vouchers in an acquaintance’s tiny painted-brick dorm room, or followed a black-haired woman with auburn roots as she climbed the stairs to the music practice rooms – dark shapes would flit into view, and he would turn around – and they would vanish. He tried explaining this to himself as a trick of the light, or a random deficit of vision, but it kept happening, and he began to – slowly (and he resisted this quite seriously) feel that he was surrounded by entities that he had summoned with his self-dissolving explorations – like the darkest of ducklings had bonded with him because he happened to stroll past. He felt followed, and intruded upon, and never alone.

Shane became jumpy, slept poorly, and – he knew it – became annoyingly clingy with Regina. She had no sympathy for his decay; she gave him the very clear impression that he must have done something wrong, that everyone else gained insight without

becoming paranoid, that he had to fight and find his way back to the "path."

In other words, after dissolving his scant will so he could pursue the unknown, Regina then armed and reinforced the peripheral shadows in his endless battle.

Shane went to therapy – the University had a very busy mental health department, as can be imagined – and the therapist referred him to a psychiatrist who spoke with him for ten minutes then wrote him a prescription for a lifetime of pills.

A kind of deep spasm of survival instinct had Shane throw the prescription away, then take it back, smooth it out, and file it in a book he would never read. Shane holed up in his room, quit the drugs, quit Regina – "rhymes with 'done'!" and tried to regain his sanity. He was lost, without religion, without guidance, without morality or philosophy, battling the inevitable entropy of his mindless opposition to discipline with muscles atrophied after years of isolation, inflated self-praise and untested expertise.

And in his isolation, in his silence and mad inner pursuit of anything real and true, Shane began to brush up against the *essence* of the modern world...

He had visions of the world and its maps as multicoloured tax farms for human livestock. He got a sense of the threads that bind every imaginary individual to the media and propaganda and programming designed in blinding white chambers to steal the eyes and souls of all its subjects.

He had visions of the old world, his grandparents' world, where a man in a tweed suit could kiss his slender wife, go to the office for eight hours, and afford a lovely house, a white picket fence, a safe neighbourhood, four children and a car well worth tinkering with.

Shane became obsessed with staring at the videos of this old world, from the early twentieth century to the 1950s, with people in suits buying newspapers and staring strangely at the novel camera lens.

They were all dead, was his constant thought – but it was their *world* that had died, through government-borrowed bribery and the greed of new slapping flesh liberated from reproduction and responsibility. Shane imagined the pixelated faces and deep-set eyes trying to warn him, but the warning came decades too late – all the tragedies that had consumed their world were set in motion long before Shane was even born.

It felt so strange to be trapped in a theatre, forced to mouth lines at gunpoint, holding a script written by spider-walking dirty-nailed hands long dead. The lost freedoms, the lost honesty, the lost self-expression, the lost upward mobility, the lost – Shane did not even have the words for it, those had been lost as well... But the world that *is* is a hell of manipulation and degeneracy and the promise that liberty from rules breeds liberty from consequences, that if you smoke enthusiastically enough, you will never get cancer...

And nothing was entertaining to Shane anymore - it was all just programming, and the world was making children insane far faster than the scant healers could make them sane, and the lemmings that flowed off the cliff pretended to fly, but just fell forever and ever, beyond the reach of any 'amen'...

And so Shane fell back into his depressed and isolated teenage years, into his rebellion against the shallow hollowness of his parents, and since he no longer had the optimism of his art, he hovered above the endless vacuum of a life lived in reaction, rather than with purpose. To recoil, like a child's hand from a fire, is not to live, but rather just to survive and strive to avoid damage. Prey must always and forever react to predators, to predation itself, to sniff and startle and flee and kick, not with purpose, but in a wild zigzag of desperate survival. To survive the next five seconds is the only purpose, and whatever needs to be sacrificed to not be swallowed is greedily discarded...

Shane instinctively felt the greatest gap between generations in the history of the world, which was the boomers to the millennials. The boomers inherited a world of relative reason and predictable

purpose, of stability and familiar demographics and a clear sense of the relationship between effort and reward. For the boomers, deferring gratification paid dividends – for millennials, deferring gratification was a fool's quest, like storing ice in blinding sunlight. Time horizons had shrunk to almost nothing, so Shane's generation grabbed whatever happiness they could, barely thinking of long-term costs, because the mathematical spinal fluid that fills the soul of every intelligent person had calculated that the current system which had absorbed them was utterly unsustainable – the debt was too high, the unfunded liabilities too great, the demographic tensions too unstable... By the time things were going visibly wrong, the entire foundation of society had virtually rotted away. The whispers of misdirection at the beginning of these catastrophes had passed unheeded, and like a smoker who throws away his pack of cigarettes at the diagnosis of lung cancer, all that was left was a hysterical reaction to oncoming disaster – *prevention* had turned to dust decades before.

Shane had never voiced these misgivings, but he felt them deep inside, in the bowels of winter instincts designed to gather enough food for the family to survive the cold. His instincts for sustainability had been perverted to the cause of general environmentalism, rather than personal cultural survival. His generation had been pillaged and sold off to foreign bankers to such a degree that they were like slaves with a chance to drink themselves into oblivion – why stay sober, when self-erasure is the only chance to escape the endless consciousness of enslavement?

Drugs propelled Shane out of propaganda; they gave him the X-ray vision to see beyond the blowing curtains of the relentless lies of those in power. Everything was laid bare to him – nothing was accidental, no character or plot or story or perspective was an open-hearted exploration of the human condition, but rather a set of programming cues designed to make the sane and perceptive always appear mad and bigoted.

What was called “art” was merely a seductive inoculation against sanity – art was a surreptitious and unctuous home invader, a charming “bro” who asked to crash for a night on the couch, and ended up evicting you from your own abode.

Art substituted aesthetic arguments for lived experiences, so that people ended up living and judging not in reality, not through their own senses, but in the shadowy Platonic fire-flickers of manipulated perceptions. 110-pound women could take down beefy bouncers; people picking up guns for the first time took down legions of trained soldiers – casual sex was breezy fun, women didn’t need men, men were foolish and extraneous – all was a play to vanity, to ‘coolness’ and smug superiority; only losers were vulnerable. Women aged into hard-faced District Attorneys without ever regretting being alone and childless. People abandoned their personal lives and goals for the sake of pursuing endless Peace Corps causes around the globe, and aged out of relevance without a single sad backward glance. Young omen traveled endlessly, with suspiciously expensive tastes and hotel rooms, and fell with loud predatory joy on the latest farmers-market or cathedral or coffee shop and made endless peace-sign duck-faces that blocked at *least* a third of whatever background they were trying to show.

When the horror of his awakening dragged him down to the bottom of society, Shane found his visions unbearable. He felt he saw faces like masks stapled to endless tentacle necks; the tentacles burrowed down into the darkest coldest waters, to an ocean-bed octopus the size of the whole world that moved the sea-faces and summoned works and expressions from its own endless lust for power and control – and sometimes it made “bro” a word that everyone used, and other times it cooked the minds of the young in pretend language – and sometimes it threw an animated body high into the sky, and everyone worshipped the well-lit rag-doll for five minutes or fifteen years, and everyone envied people who were famous – and, as a result of that fame, could tell no truth whatsoever. And anyone who dared to talk about the octopus – the *puss* – was branded as crazy and subjected to wild accusations and feverish lawfare, and

those who had been worshipped were slowly disassembled to the jeers and barking laughter of their former fans. And everyone who spun without pause from cheers to jeers was walling and sealing up their own prison with their unreflecting betrayal – not of their idols, but of their own former selves. *If I can turn on my hero, all **will** turn on me... If I betray because I am told to, the Octopus will disassemble me to the wild cheers of all former friends...*

Shane fell through this darkening ocean, seeing the tentacles and their roots, and began to test for actual thoughts in those around him. He went to parties and scanned for any words – *anything* – even mildly original or curious or daring. He ran through a Bukowski underworld, scanning for anyone who was not the mere tip of yet another tentacle, chanting incantations of safety and predictability, to avoid being drowned in ostracism or disassembled by the tentacle-masks pretending to be other people.

He spoke a few words of illumination, or curiosity or skepticism, and saw the weird nuclear-wind ripple of shock and horror in the tentacle-masks around him. He could see the tentacle-programming assemble an instant phalanx of Roman shields and twitchy spears, guarding and threatening to mock and warn against any further utterances. Of course he was called a conspiracy theorist and a BBS lurker and a *hater* and a *bigot* and a *racist* and a *sexist* and – whatever, these were just mad spell-words designed to show allegiance to the Octopus and avoid commanded social destruction...

And Shane felt all the fears that others would not feel, and understood that slavery had just shifted from top-down to slave-on-slave enforcement. *We now patrol and chain each other* – and he imagined one night that tsunamis came from the deep belly-laugh of the ocean-bed, world-encircling Octopus, the dark primal god of the new cult of sacrifice, and Shane imagined that all the Aztec priests who tore out the hearts of children had *nothing* on the new acolytes who tore out and hurled away their *own* hearts, their *own* thoughts, their *own* souls - and that of all the new information that the new Internet spread, the most important, the most fundamental,

was the fear of ostracism and attack, and that rendered all other possible information useless – *worse* than useless, because people were inoculated against any facts that opposed narrative, and all that could be spread was fear and the empty conformity it bred.

And Shane reached out to men, in the hopes that *bros* might be a little more curious and practical – but the *bros* were reaching out for the women, and women ruled the discourse. A boy in university was given the convoluted nickname “Louis” because he was a good-looking guy with thick dark-framed glasses who reminded everyone of Clark Kent, Superman’s alter ego. Louis CK – Clark Kent, you get it.

“Louis” was suddenly revealed to be a bigot or racist of some kind, because his father taught biology in Nova Scotia, and he questioned the dogma that race was *only* a social construct. He was ostracized, ignored, shunned, rejected, and ended up having to leave the university. One comment, one question, and his life was changed forever. He was attacked in society, in classrooms, on blogs and web sites, and his name was forever associated with the most evil condemnation possible for a young white male.

There was no redemption arc, no apologies or forgiveness or recovery, no court of appeal, no facts that could be presented or reviewed or accepted. The fact that Louis did in fact accept that race was *largely* a social construct, but not *solely* so – did not matter. The Octopus waved its tentacles, slapped on the requisite feral masks, and the demonstration, the sacrifice was made.

There is no recovery from the murder of a social reputation. Resurrection is out of bounds for mere mortal biology, and the purpose of these sacrifices was not to breed conformity in the victim, but rather obedience in all who witnessed it. The children slaughtered by Aztec priests were not being punished or corrected – it is the *mob* that is being whipped.

And at the bottom, in the depths, at the base of the tentacles, were the *drugs*. When Shane realized that he was now in cursed

possession of some actual truths, and that he was going to have to swallow them forever and ever amen – and that being possessed by the truth meant that you could no longer pass through the cathedral doors of social acceptance, and had to either go through the humiliation ritual of lying to everyone in order to survive, to coat yourself in zombie innards in order to pass, or to wave and sway in the hopes of hiding the fact that you have broken free of the tentacles, of the Octopus, and your reward was participating in the same five talking points over and over again, for the rest of your life – or to turn away from the cathedral of the dead, of endless pews with tentacles and masks masquerading as people, and be cast into the ashen streets of those cursed by truth who would trade any major sense in order to return to the pink swaying kelp-beds of the tentacles, the Octopus, the empty masks of comfort... To live in a graveyard, or to be homeless – what choices enlightenment gives us all!

Shane could not rejoin, he could not escape, and so he turned back to drugs, to self-medicate the endless agony of truth, the facts and reason that turn you into endless jumpy prey...

And in a slow radiating detonation, Shane's drug use spread out through the family – in waves, in curves – and began to swallow up everyone's time, attention and resources.

Robert felt the impact from a distance – in his parents' whispered tones and angry phone calls – and felt - beyond reason, below reason – that depth led to *disaster*, and the only way to survive the quicksand of introspection was to gather enough material possessions to keep you buoyant.

Desperate to avoid depth, art, self-reflection and the slow decay of navel-gazing, Robert pursued the central hedonistic God of the upper-middle-classes – wealth, status, possessions – as if the debt-demons of math and cultural decay could be kept at bay by white pillars and investments in electric cars.

And he put all his hope in this equation.

And kept it there all the way through Chloe, until he met Helen and *her* curves on the beach.

Chapter 2

Robert had always taken a perverse pleasure – and pride – in his ability to nap on a whim. Occasionally he had to fake it, just to keep his reputation intact, but for the most part he could easily slide down the greasy pole of sleep wherever he lay his head.

Robert was no stranger to petty vanities. He could swim underwater for two pool lengths; when he went snorkeling with Chloe, he loved showing off how deep he could dive (which gave him water in the ear for weeks, and a strange, foreboding twinge in his left groin). When he was twelve, he experimented with various ways of walking, hoping that others would see him and say: “Yeah, he walks kinda funny, but he sure gets around fast!”

Robert loved the water, and would go swimming in the school pool two or three times a week, becoming a good diver. He imagined that, as he finger-scrabbled along the bottom of the pool (which gave him a strange comfort in his belly) that one of the adult male swimmers would see his ability and end up recruiting him for a new undersea settlement he was planning.

Robert was surrounded by *commentary*; he surfed on an endless sea of summoned syllables. He would stride into a room wearing sunglasses, his shirt opened to his lean stomach, beer commercial themes running through his head. He patterned himself after various celebrities, played penny-ante poker, trash-talked other boys in beach volleyball, cultivated self-consciously cool musical tastes, and subtly scorned all the imperfections that surrounded him. He wouldn't say a girl was *heavy*; he would sympathize with her *food issues*. He would never call a boy a *dweeb* or *nerd*; he would empathize with his *obvious lack of social skills*.

Unconsciously – for the most part – Robert, like most modern mammals, was in a constant process of *positioning*. Where did he stand in the hierarchy; was he perceived as high, low or medium status? If he could doze on a beach after lunch – even if he had to

fake it – he was high status, because he was free of anxiety and so comfortable in his own skin...

When he lay on the sand at Wasaga Beach, just before he met Helen, Robert was only half-dozing, floating through the vague orange constellations of shimmering eyelids below a fierce microwave of sunbeams. He was experiencing an odd sensation of *rising*, or floating, as if the sun were a giant magnet or tentacle-pulling gravity-well summoning and coaxing him up from the sand, past the thick hot air into the chilled airless reaches of lower space, where he could somehow breathe while surveying the turning Earth below like a god, an Aztec priest with a heart in his hand, looking at the *multicoloured map of tax farms* – a phrase his brother had muttered once. The end goal of superiority is distance from all humanity, as a farmer views his livestock...

And then, Robert's eyes opened of their own accord – he thought of this often in later years, how they opened without him willing it – and he suddenly remembered a Tobermory cottage morning after a night of hard drinking when he was startled awake on a couch by a roller-blind suddenly rising loudly, poison in his liver and pain in his eyes...

Robert's eyes tore open, as if clawed, and he fell in a muffled mental 'thud' from the low reaches of vain space to a mere flat layer of pink flesh on a lake-front beach.

His eyes opened, and his head lifted, moved by an invisible tentacle, turning to his right...

And – and he saw *Helen*.

The moment he saw her, Robert looked around for Chloe. She normally sat placidly nearby while he napped, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Thank God, he thought – again, involuntarily – and then: *She's no bookmark...*

And looking at Helen led him immediately to his mother...

Something that drove Robert's mom quite mad was his father's habit of buying bookmarks by the score and putting them between the pages of books that they both knew he was never going to finish. At one point, about a year ago, she had actually counted the bookmarks – *they mess up the aesthetics of the shelves!* – and used a calculator to show him that he almost certainly had insufficient life left to finish all the books he had bookmarked over the decades.

Then she tried to put the final nail in the argument by grabbing random books and demanding that he explain where he was in the book, what he had bookmarked, and why he had stopped.

With only a few exceptions, Robert's father had been able to answer these questions with unruffled efficiency. Then, he had said: "Do you want to tour the basement and count your unfinished craft projects? How about your half-done puzzles, *babe?*"

Listening upstairs, Robert knew that any pause that lasted more than two seconds was an admission of defeat. He could almost hear the revving of his mother's mind, scrambling for a way to escape the trap.

No, she just sighed as if she were above such petty squabbles, and left to go to the gym. Robert heard his father chuckle and put the books back on the shelves.

Did he hear his father murmur: "I got you, I'll keep you safe...?"

Hard to say. Unfettered access to parental thoughts is so, so rare...

And dangerous.

When Robert first looked at Helen – her form of course, since he didn't know her name – something coalesced in his heart, and his attachment to Chloe – brittle, fading – snapped all at once.

She was a bookmark...

It was true, all at once.

Chloe was a bookmark because no one envied him for having her.

But *Helen*...

She was in a red bikini, electric with energy. Her limbs were an antagonistic challenge he barely understood.

Robert's first view was of her sticking the landing from a half-hop cartwheel. She had no ripples, even from such an energetic maneuver – and Robert could not tell whether she was showing off, or was profoundly unselfconscious.

He felt a stir of excitement, at the primal male fantasy of finding a hot woman who has no idea how hot she is – an amalgam of adult body with childish mind that does not bode well for the maturity of the gazing male.

*If she **knows** how attractive she is, I'm doomed*, thought Robert.

Again, without willing it, Robert clambered to his feet. He shook his head and raked his hands through his thick black hair, feeling the coarse beach sand scatter down his back.

He glanced left and right, and saw – or rather *felt* – the admiration and lust of the men – and a few women – on the beach. Mothers averted their eyes. Girlfriends and sisters rolled their eyes.

Robert knew he had to talk to her; he also knew it was entirely dishonorable.

And Robert suddenly realized – the realization hit him from his gut – that he had never experienced much anxiety approaching women because he had never really cared... *Just a collection of bookmarks*, he thought.

Like Chloe.

Robert strode down to the water, feeling sweat in his palms, dripping down his lifeline.

Everyone can see me approach, he thought in sudden unease. His first thought was of all the men on the beach turning to each other – speaking Spanish for no reason at all – and making quick bets on whether he would get her number, or crash and burn.

And only then, when he was ten feet or so from Helen, did he even think – with a distinct prickling feeling down the back of his neck – that Chloe might be bringing him a light beer from the noisy boardwalk, only to see his bronzed viper-shaped back rising over the new girl in the red bikini.

He cared about *that*, of course, but not too much...

Robert felt his heart constrict as his path intersected with Helen. His mind was focused, madly goal-oriented – and utterly blank.

She looked at him and laughed. It was perceptive, but not unkind.

“Whoah – frat boy cliché alert!” she said, her eyes sparkling.

“Says the girl in the red bikini doing awkward cartwheels on the beach.”

“Excuse me – that was a round-off!”

“You didn’t argue with the ‘awkward’ part though,” he smiled.

“Oh, you’re so heading into law. Make my day, tell me I’m wrong.”

“I’d hate to contradict you – we just met.”

She cocked her head. “Feels like I’ve met you before.”

“Because I’m such a cliché?”

She smiled. “Oh, nobody is a total cliché. I’d give you an ‘eight.’”

“I can live with that.”

“I’m Helen.”

“Robert.”

“Are you here to swim, or talk to me?”

“False dichotomy.”

“What is your primary motivation?”

“You.”

She smiled and shook her head. "Nooo, I don't think so. You're a 'form' guy, not a 'content' guy."

Robert hesitated, then decided not to play dumb. He laughed. "Crap!"

"You're going to tell me that you're a 'content' guy?"

"You're going to tell me that you're a 'content' woman?"

It was her turn to hesitate. "You'd accept that if I were in a burka?"

Robert leaned in conspiratorially. "I walk the beach, I know who's looking. It's baked into our DNA. You know what's – what's happening."

Helen laughed. "Lure 'em in with my bikini, hope they appreciate my eternal soul?"

"I think that's a fair assessment."

"So now I should show you a picture of my mother, so you can look beyond my youth?"

"Make it your grandmother. I'm a dedicated man."

Helen considered him for a long moment. The men on the beach held their breaths.

"You're a smart guy. Confident, though that could just be youth and upbringing."

"Like those factors don't apply to you, red-bikini test-tube baby?"

"Less than you might think," she said, a moment of sadness brushing past her face.

Robert waited.

Helen spoke her digits, then gave him a dazzling smile and turned to walk back the way she came.

"Wait, what?" he cried.

She pointed up the beach, strolling off with a lyrical sway to her hips, her blonde hair drifting like a noose of tiny ropes.

Robert turned, and saw Chloe stepping delicately towards his abandoned towel, a golden bottle of light beer in her hand.

He felt guilt – but not really internally, not in comparison to some universal standard of behaviour that he had fallen short of. Robert had been raised post-religious, but pre-philosophical, so he hung above a chasm of hedonism and bottomless self-regard. It was important to be *perceived* as good, but not a sucker – to focus on your own pleasure and preferences, but also to throw some scraps and crumbs to either side, to the less-fortunate and the ever-wanting. Like any common thief, the problem was not *doing wrong*, but *getting caught*.

Robert looked into Chloe's approaching form, at her eyes and blowing brunette hair, scanning for the outrage that could trigger any self-recrimination. Under an empty sky, his generation could bypass guilt by evading criticism – he had picked Chloe in part because she did not nag – but her equanimity also freed him from the necessary constrictions of a robust conscience.

"*Who was that?*" he expected her to say – thus offering him a chance to "explain" his tentative betrayal. Or, maybe, "*She was pretty,*" or something like that.

Chloe certainly glanced at Helen's disappearing form – and she almost shrugged; Robert could see the impulse deep in her skeleton – her *marrow* maybe – but nothing materialized on the surface.

A few jeers floated down from the watching males.

Robert and Chloe ignored them.

"Thirsty?" she said, offering him the beer.

Robert flashed a smile and took a deep swig. "Thanks."

Scattered applause from the higher regions of the beach...

"Let's walk," said Chloe. Was there a flatness to her tone? Robert couldn't tell. He wasn't sure if he wanted to walk – in case Chloe wanted a more remote place to start demanding answers.

"Sounds good," said Robert, his mouth suddenly dry. *Am I just a bastard? Would a bastard even **ask** that question?*

They walked for a minute or two in silence. Robert frantically cast his mind about for something to say, a topic to discuss, but his innards felt frozen and vaguely depressed.

"My heart is pounding," said Chloe suddenly, and Robert felt that this was the start of a much longer, deeper conversation, an entrance into an inner debate she had probably been having for weeks, maybe months.

He frowned, pretending ignorance. "Why?"

"Oh, because it's a cliché," she said. "We've been going out for fourteen months, and I am a traditional kind of gal, and I never really know what your intentions are."

Robert laughed awkwardly. "No, it's a fair question."

"What do you think the question is?"

He swallowed – then swallowed again. "Well, it's the – where are we going, what is our commitment, what does the future - hold?"

"For a man aiming to be a lawyer, you are ridiculously imprecise."

"Go on?"

She rubbed her chin. "I mean, I get that there is a span between us. I think you're more attractive, like physically. You are definitely ambitious, you made that clear... I'm not sure if I'm an accessory, or a – like, placeholder?"

A bookmark, thought Robert.

"It's a beautiful day," he murmured. "Do we want to define all the beauty away?"

Chloe frowned – almost scowled. “What?”

Robert laughed. “Sorry, *that* was a fortune cookie. I mean... Look - we get along, we have fun, we merge, we gel, we vibe... The future? I’ve been focused on studies, marks. Grades... Pleasing the unpleasable. You know...” Robert waved his hands around. “There’s this canyon I think, in me, between this beach, like today, and what my parents have. Do you know what I mean? Like a fog bank. How do I get there from here? I get the career stuff, too well I think sometimes. I get the law degree, the articling, the bar, working dog’s hours, grinding up the ladder to partner, becoming a benevolent elder statesman of the profession, doing good deeds in the world without needing funny hats, secret handshakes or tiny cars.” He laughed again. The words were just tumbling out. “But going from *this* to what my parents have – that’s the challenge. I mean, do you want what your parents have, Chloe?”

She pursed her lips, Robert watched her delicate toes driving slightly into the wet sand with every step. “I... The commitment, sure. The steadiness. Yeah... I guess happy marriages seem to be on the endangered species list, so if I end up with the general – shape of what they have, I’d be pretty content. It’s hard to model the future on the past though. Of course.” She sighed, obviously impatient with herself. “It would be different. It would have to be, by the nature of... But some basics should be the same. You know them. They’re happy in their roles. Their stations...”

A slight wave of sadness and nausea enveloped Robert. The plaintive hungry-banshee wail of floating seagulls echoed overhead, as their wide wings wobbled in the wind.

“And you?” prompted Chloe, uselessly finger-combing her brown hair back in the crazed lake breezes.

Robert paused. The twin predators of *honesty* versus *status* tore at him from great distances on either side. “I... I guess I want the material possessions. Don’t look shocked, I’ve never hid my - acquisitive side... I *like* the cars. The house is great. That backyard

made me like - king of the neighbourhood, unquestionably. I like that we don't really have to worry about expenses. My mom still does sometimes, on like the most random things, but my dad talks her out of it pretty easily." Robert imitated his dad. "*Well babe, we have like a hundred times the income and assets we had when we first got married, so you need to think of a hundred dollar purchase the way we used to think of spending a dollar kiddo!*"

Chloe laughed. "That's pretty good."

"Copy/pasting lectures is totally my specialty," said Robert. He paused for a moment. The honest words were sinking away from him, almost out of reach. He grabbed at them wildly. "I'm – I think I view – don't hold me to this – I think I see life like a state of nature. Not like kill-or-be-killed... More like, you go hunting and you bring back meat for your family, maybe your kin, or something like that. But not your strange neighbours, or those who did you wrong, who cock-blocked your ambition or spread *rumours* or something like that..." *What am I saying?* he wondered – but that pretend-confusion was only at the surface. Deep down, he knew *exactly* what he was confessing to.

"Goodness..." murmured Chloe, and Robert took that word in a thousand different directions in his mind.

"Maybe it's a white male thing," said Robert, surprised at these words. "I mean, society is kind of in a state of nature with me, with us. At war... We have to carve out what we want, you know?"

"Is it that?" wondered Chloe.

"Feels like that," said Robert, slightly defensively. "Or something like that."

"I think you'll always land on your feet though."

Robert shrugged. "Maybe. But my kids. Our sons. I mean, look at us." He held out his pale freckled arms. "We don't even tan really."

He could feel her discomfort with the conversation. He ploughed on regardless. "I mean, who do I owe my – moral allegiances to? The

boomers?" He laughed bitterly. "Yeah, thanks for the debt and affirmative action and stuffing the whole world into the value of your home." He took a deep breath. "I kind of feel – I'm just thinking of this now, thanks for this conversation, like really – I think I feel kind of – *unparented*. You know? I was taught manners, for sure, and I have this amazing ability to be both enviable and unoffensive... The weirdest superpower... What am I saying? Like – just yesterday I was trying to think of a piece of advice that my mom or dad gave me that I still find helpful or – useful to this day... Or maybe in the future. It's crazy... I couldn't think of *anything!*"

Chloe nodded slowly. She took a hair-tie from her wrist and tried tying her writhing hair back. "Go on..."

This was a phrase Robert now used often, which he had gotten from Chloe originally. "I don't know... Like, I know you think of this stuff, I admire that... Like: what is my life about? Like the - meaning? I don't know. I guess I think more about: what is my life *for*? Not meaning. The end goal. End *game*. Like a spy story. Get back alive with the right prizes. Win, I suppose... By what rules though? And – what is the fight? Status, money, success, sure... What would I do to get them?" Robert blinked. "Whatever it takes, I think... I think I offload my conscience to others frankly. To you, perhaps..."

Chloe nodded slowly. "You want me to get mad about the girl in the red bikini."

Robert shook his head slowly, his eyes stinging. "Wow. Wow..."

"Don't you?"

"Where – where would you get that from? That's quite a leap..."

Chloe said nothing. She glanced at her feet, then out at a giant shadowy vessel on the horizon, bringing shoddy foreign goods from beyond the edge of the world.

"What was that about?" murmured Chloe – almost asking herself more than him.

"Oh – our paths just intersected when I was - heading to the water. We just like - chatted."

"Right, as you would have if she were an elderly Asian gentleman."

"Come on, that's unfair! I've – I've chatted with elderly Asian gentlemen!"

Chloe said nothing. Robert felt that she wanted to look at him, but was afraid of becoming too emotional. She touched his arm, and he automatically flexed his muscles.

"You know," she said sadly, "when I was coming down from the boardwalk – I walked for like 20 minutes to get your favourite beer – I was looking for that little hollow under your ribs."

Robert said nothing. It felt like an incoming *coup de grace*.

"You wouldn't have sucked your stomach in for an elderly Asian gentleman. You did for her – what was her name?"

I didn't get it, Robert wanted to say, but it felt too dismal to lie. "Helen."

She nodded again, slowly. "It's so funny..." she murmured.

"What?"

"Well, it's just that – you're so into status, but you didn't think of me, in that moment. Or maybe ever, I don't know. That feels unfair, but maybe..."

Robert swallowed. "What do you mean?"

A tear escaped the eye closest to Robert, staring straight ahead. "I don't think you can process – or feel what it's like to be bringing your boyfriend his favourite beer and have everyone watching you, knowing that you're just – you've just been made a special kind of idiot."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean, *Robert*, is that – how would you feel if *you* were coming down from the boardwalk with my favourite drink and saw me half-draped over the hottest guy on the beach?"

"I wasn't..." Robert felt his anger and his nausea rise.

"Please..." she half-murmured, half-whispered. Then her voice rose, like a sigh from a wound. "Your moment of status came at *my* expense, *Rob!*"

She's using my name to mean 'steal' thought Robert wildly.

"What... I..."

She stopped walking and turned to face him. "Can you admit that?"

"I... don't know what to say..."

She scanned his face, her eyes darting from one orb to the other, like in the movies. He remembered naming the constellations of her freckles, making up stories, a lifetime ago...

Robert cleared his throat. "I'm sorry – you were upset."

Chloe lifted a finger. "Don't. Do. That. It's not about my *feelings!*"

"You are hurt."

"That's not better!"

Robert felt as if he were falling down a deep hole in his own body.
To admit fault – what is the point?

Chloe sighed so deeply that it was like she was deflating. "You want someone – higher status."

"What? No..." He stopped, unconvincing even to himself.

She nodded slowly. "She would – you would be proud to introduce her to your future partners..."

"That's – decades down the road..."

"You don't deny it. And you just sketched out your whole life plan, like five minutes ago, all the way to old age – 'elder statesman'..."

Robert struggled for something to say. He suddenly remembered a used boat his father had bought years before. The three males had spent most of their summer trying to keep it above water, rather than actually sailing it anywhere. Finally, his father had allowed it to be towed to the middle of the harbor and used as the base for a buoy...

Robert's tongue finally became unstuck. "I don't... I just talked to her for a few minutes."

"It's my bad..." murmured Chloe, and Robert's heart fell apart. "You keep telling me the same things, and I keep not listening. My dad always said that everyone tells you everything about themselves in the first five minutes. Outside the party, when we met, you didn't know what a good friend was. You were just there to get girls for your friends so they would get you jobs later..." She laughed sadly. "And what did I say? 'I always have hope.'"

Robert thought: *I feel like I'm watching a good thing evaporate right in front of my eyes...*

Chloe pursed her lips. "But..." She took a deep breath, and Robert remembered her eyelids fluttering right before she jumped off a cliff into a deep quarry lake about a year before. "It's not even you... You are too much of a temptation, Robert. Funny, smart, handsome. Good family, for the most part. Even the tragedy of your brother adds a weird kind of depth... You're kind of devilish. Sorry, I don't mean that – religiously. You offer money, you'll make a ton for sure. Comfort. Status. You'll cheat I think, but it would be discreet. In another city. On business. And you'd get tested... Nothing I'd find unless I really started looking..." She waved her hand. "It's not even about you, I don't mean to insult anything. You never talk about the right thing. Cool stuff, sure – you said we 'vibe' right? Nothing about *love*." Her brown eyes widened slightly. "And I know you do – feel things. But – but - this is all a criticism of *me*, Rob!" Chloe rubbed her white knuckles against her forehead, leaving pale tracks. "I *know* all this about you, I have from the very beginning. And this is the saddest thing – pathetic really! You've always been kind of up front

with me, you don't hide anything in truth..." Her voice caught in her throat. "It's not like we've been going to church... I really *hate* excuses! Damn it! Who am I to complain that you're really into status, and looking to trade up forever and ever amen, when I am with you – to a large part – because of *your* high status! I went for the highest status male, the alpha, then I'm somehow mad when *you* go for the highest status female, the alpha?" Her voice faltered. "Live by the sword..."

Robert swallowed, his eyes stinging in the sandy wind. The lump in his throat felt wider than his entire neck.

Chloe put her hands on his shoulders and leaned forward, as if she were nauseous. He had to lower his head to hear her soft voice.

"I was so – godly when I was younger, Rob... And I saw your great face – you do give great face you know – and it was surrounded by toilet paper. Kind of a hint. Sorry, that's mean..." She sighed heavily, sadly. "Do you know how many people warned me against you? It took like a *year* to turn my parents around. 'Don't judge a book by its cover' I told them. And maybe I'm addicted. Sorry, not like your brother... But I see this great future, comfortable. High status. Good looking kids. I hate that it counts, but it does... Or maybe if I didn't care, it wouldn't... You wait for the bus long enough, it feels like death to start walking. And if I rearrange your features in my mind, or blunt your ambition or obvious amazing skills – if I change the outer shapes and trajectory of what is – you – then I fall away from all this. Like that!" Chloe snapped her fingers and took a step back. "And I fall back towards God, or something eternal... Something good, outside the icing and comfort of – all this." Chloe shook her head, shivering suddenly. "You can provide me everything except your *soul*, Robert. And I wanted that because – because you are primed for status and success in a way that is hard to comprehend. For me anyway... And it's *tempting*, damn it! And I'm sorry. I'm sorry for judging you by a standard I am failing myself. You should pursue Helen." She nodded decisively. "Yes. Because... You should pursue Helen for the same reason that I was pursuing you. Or someone just

like her... It's the same principle. Who am I to condemn it? All I really have to do is *learn* from it..."

All the words had finally escaped from Chloe, like the last gasp of an open-mouthed balloon.

The wind whirled around them, shaping and reshaping their hair as Chloe's words reshaped their minds and hearts.

Robert felt almost a kind of possession grip his innards. His voice emerged, deeper and rougher than he was used to. Chloe started and almost took a step backwards.

"Status, that's it? That's the whole – damnation? Yeah, she's prettier than – both of us. I had a moment of weakness. But to be – portrayed as some kind of – devil because I am ambitious? Was Jesus Himself not ambitious? Was Socrates? Kim Campell? You want to do good, you need resources. You give to charity, excellent, maybe a bit premature but I admire the impulse Chloe. Can you give what you do not have? Maybe I am a kind of combine-harvester, I just scoop up resources like a machine, sure, but – niceness? That's the job of you, *your* occupation – you can give to charity from what *I* make! And things are getting tougher, our kids will need resources, I am not going to apologize for being ambitious and – very capable, as you said. Men make, women give. Nothing wrong with that. You miss church? Well who gives the most to churches? Men. Not women. Men! Who pays the most taxes for all the social programs you like? Men. Who protects women, the country? Men, overwhelmingly. I know you're not a feminist, Chloe, but I swear sometimes it's like you don't want to even acknowledge the differences – let alone celebrate them!" He cupped her chilled cheeks in his sandy palms. "And I love your moral side, Chlo. I do. And I am disgusted that I was drawn to talk to that woman. And I am a contemptible hound dog and a status-seeker and like a raw-knuckled fighter and I *will* step on the faces of rivals to get the kill for my family. Totally. And if you don't want that - ok, fine, then you should follow that impulse I guess. But you're just trading one trouble for another. There are no solutions, Chloe – only tradeoffs.

You get a – nicer man, ok, then you'll just watch him lose out to men like me and be broke and cry on a worn-out old couch because the world is so *unfair* – and then you'll think back to this beach, to today, and realize that this – whatever - stand you think you're taking is just – vanity. 'Act in haste, repent at leisure.' Are you *sure*, Chloe? Will you *never* regret going for a less – ambitious man, *never*, over the next like half a century? When you live in a basement and your kids can't afford to go to the dentist?" Robert exhaled mightily. "Yeah, maybe I am too material... I don't really care... I don't have the tools or desire to tinker with my nature. But you can be the heart and soul of the family, Chloe. The *community*. I can be the calloused bloody hands, you can be the tender nurse for the underdogs if you want... We can be a team – the oldest team in the world. Hard men and soft women. It's worked for thousands of years, you want to take a hammer to that formula because I sucked my stomach in for bikini-girl?" Robert shook his head violently, as if to clear water from his ears. "I *will* be faithful – I'm a little shocked at my callousness, Chloe – more than a little. I have taken things with us for granted. I am really sorry for that... You are right at the center of my heart, you know - and I owe you more than words can say... And I get that I look like a bastard right now. And I look that way to myself. But don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, babe! High-T ambitious men have to have the right to make mistakes and learn from them. It's not like every charity you support in your life will be flawless! You'll make mistakes. And I have. And I'm sorry. But there's no need for us to..." He held up his hands and widened them apart. "We're getting to a kind of root truth about us, about life perhaps. And this can be a new chapter. Something even more honest. But not the end. Not the end, Chloe."

Robert was almost panting. Chloe gazed up at him, at the streaked sunlit clouds over his black tangled hair.

"God you're tempting," she murmured.

Robert smiled down at her, pulling her cold body close. "So – be tempted!"

Chapter 3

Driving home from Wasaga beach with his friend Derek, Robert felt a strange giddiness – opportunity and shame, eternally combined in the heart of a man aiming to trade up his girlfriend.

Derek was mellow to the point of slow-motion. He grew up on Late Night with David Letterman, and had caught a serious personality infection from Paul Shaffer. Droll, distant, nebbishly cool, slow-walking and slow-talking, he was a reasonable foil to Robert's generally calculating and manipulating mind.

"Still not suuuper-comfortable with Chloe making her own way back, Robbie..." Derek drawled.

Robert shrugged, playing chase-the-static with the radio knob. "She's getting a ride back with a friend."

"Yeah, my sister too... Maybe they'll hang together, take a flower-painted VW love bus back to the big smoke..."

Robert paused. He was constantly managing the end-points of conversations, heading off any corridors with descending steps and dank walls.

"Don't know much about your sister..."

Derek shrugged. He was slightly balding – an early 20s curse – and he constantly tugged his hair to cover over his widow's peak. "Not much to know. Two years older, total 'it' girl. I was a bothersome younger brother. I wanted to hang with her pretty pretty friends. She moved out at 17, older guy, the usual..." He laughed sardonically. "We never had much in common. Guys would befriend me just to talk to her. Not smart really, but cunning. Given a gift we all want, no real idea what to do with it all. You know..."

Derek had a habit of vaguely discarding thoughts with little to no indication when he was done. "So what really happened with Chloe bro?"

It was Robert's turn to shrug. "Nothing really." He wanted to say: *I was just chatting with a girl on the beach and Chloe totally freaked out!* but he knew that (a) it was unbelievable and (b) being with a psycho jealous girl did not reflect well on him – Chloe was pretty, sure, but not enough to get away with *total* craziness. "School is like this amniotic sac, you know?"

"Oh yeah..." Derek lazily turned the wheel to pass an ice-cream truck which apparently had its music stuck on even though they were on the highway. "A state of 'no time' for sure. Except for my hair exiting stage-like-everywhere. I think that's why it happens... Older guys with hair don't really feel the passage of time. Super-scalp reminds you that time is passing, settle down my son..."

"But you're not settling down..."

Derek laughed. "Welllll, I have a year or two until I go full 'Count Chocula,' so I might as well get my oats sown now bro-bert... Before my forehead becomes a five-six-seven-eight head... But seriously, I always liked Chloe. Crossed my fingers that y'all might go the distance..."

"It's strange for sure. Things were good, then we're just – done. Gone."

"You - fight for her?"

Robert paused. "I... Didn't really. I'm never sure how much fight I have - in me?"

"Brooo! I've seen you almost descend into manly fisticuffs over a parking space. You argue a point – don't fight me, I know – even after you know you're wrong. I've personally witnessed you flip a 'Diplomacy' board."

"I'm punchy. Not 'fighty' though..."

"You're doing it now. Hair splitting distinctions without a difference..."

Robert often thought that Derek pretended to be slow so he would forever be underestimated. "I fight for principles. Not people. People

can defend themselves.”

“What are your principles, Rob?” murmured Derek.

“What are yours?”

“Not my turn, I didn’t bring them up.”

“Freedom, justice. The American way, but with maple syrup. Honour. Dignity.”

Derek laughed. “Okay, Superman... You don’t fight for people because that makes you feel – subjugated.”

Robert snorted. “What?”

“You’re not a big fan of letting people know you need them, Robbie-boy. That gives them power over you. It’s not that complicated bro.” Derek glanced over, and Robert caught the sight of his two bulbous heads reflected in Derek’s mirrored shades. “I get it, your brother is... But there was a hiccup with Chloe, and you just – what – what did you do?”

“I wanted her to beg...” said Robert with simple honesty.

“For what?”

“For me...”

Derek laughed sadly. “Because you’re all that.”

“I’m – some of that.”

“Good looking. Ambitious. Good family, bro excepted. Socially poised. I get it...”

“You make me sound – so shallow...”

Derek said nothing.

Robert said: “What are your principles?”

“Hedonism, then virtue,” said Derek instantly. “University is for fun. Then I get serious.”

“Hedonism is not a principle!”

"Depends what you mean by the word kiddo. It's an organizing metric. I'm playing the field until I find a women I really admire. Then I'll lock in."

"Will she admire a hedonist?"

Derek pursed his lips. Robert could tell that he had struck some kind of blow. Then Derek waved his hand nonchalantly. "She'll see beyond all that. So – what was the incident with Chloe?" His voice slowed even further. "The proximate cause? The excuuuse?"

"I talked to a girl on the beach..."

Derek 'tsked' between his teeth. "She's not really the jealous type..."

"It wasn't that exactly. I am a bit of a dog. But isn't it her job to keep my eyes from wandering?"

Derek shrugged. Robert could tell he was thinking of something else.

"Annnnd?" said Derek.

"So we went for a walk, and had one of these weird super-compressed conversations. Lots of blind alleys, you know? Like we woke up in a minefield and just – went dancing."

"Dunno what that means..."

"I've been – thinking of our conversations over the past – like 14 months. A lot of fun, she can be a blast... She's way less nervous on roller coasters than I am... And we've made a lot of plans. Done tons of stuff. That whole Algonquin hike, the rock-climbing where we met the jumpy girl and the himbo - that cruise she 'won' that cost a fortune. Always planning, always doing, always talking. But..."

"What does it add up to?" murmured Derek. "Take on Me" suddenly burst in through the radio, and Derek stabbed at the power button. "Hate that goddamned song..." he murmured with sudden bitterness.

"A lot of syllables..." sighed Robert. "Like that documentary on gold-panning. So much sand, so little gold..."

"You cut through the noise, found the signal," said Derek.

"It was like we didn't even know each other."

"She deserved better," said Derek suddenly.

"I guess you're past the hedonist phase now..." said Robert, quite shocked.

"She *did*, bro!" said Derek with sudden passion. "Why should... Why can't you *fight* for her?"

Robert shrugged, suddenly angry. "Didn't want to."

"Now who's the hedonist?" whispered Derek, but it was a dud bomb, they both knew and felt it. "But – you had a lot invested. Didn't you?"

"Shared experiences. Sure..." Robert's voice was tight. He was acutely aware that they still had an hour of driving ahead of them.

"Did you think of marrying her?"

"I... didn't..."

"Want to, or even think of it?"

"Why are you so...?"

Derek took a deep breath. "It's your life bro-ski."

Robert wanted to say: "What's that supposed to mean?" but he had sworn off movie cliches 10 months before. He had even memorized the top fifteen.

"*You* thinking a lot about marriage, Derek?"

"Chloe is one of those girls... Most times it's just pucker-lipped self-portraits, you know... So self-conscious. An ad. Not really feminine, just cool and – like - above it all. Fun for a while, but there's no one really there. She escaped that. Dunno how. Don't know her history..."

"Well *you* can date her!" Robert was about to say - then changed his mind, and bit his tongue. *An hour to go...*

Instead, he said: "She's a sweet girl for sure."

Robert could tell that Derek wanted to know more, but was keeping his cards close to his chest for some reason.

"Your life, your choice..." said Derek, then put on a Southern accent.
"But it's a dayam shame!"

Robert laughed, and they turned to insulting their professors, which thankfully ate up the remainder of the drive.

Chapter 4

Robert was always keen on making an entrance. *Keen*, as in *keen edge*, a bladed knife, a slicer and dicer of social status. He had once watched a young Asian man in a dark nightclub walk into a black pillar, and *still* refuse to take his thick sunglasses off. Robert had raised his beer in silent tribute as the man groped his way around the column and strode confidently into the rainbow epileptic dry ice.

He was never sure where the impulse had come from, and how it had hardened into his innards, but he always wanted to be *cool* – not sophisticated – and superior and cold and ironic and amused. Narrowed eyes, a slight grin, side-swept hair, tight jeans, a black T-shirt and a blowing Hawaiian shirt.

Robert wanted to inhabit *this is a guy who...*

He never really wanted to answer that question, but more to have other people wonder.

This is a guy who has access to a snow-white boat...

This is a guy who is really good at cards, though he rarely plays...

This is a guy who gets backstage at concerts...

This is a guy who can mogul on a ski hill...

This is a guy who knows a cool guy in any cool city you care to visit...

This is a guy who doesn't really date around, but who doesn't want to settle down...

This is a guy who wins through silence...

This is a guy who knows what an f-stop is, and how to re-chain a motorcycle...

Robert wanted to *sweep* into rooms – particularly party rooms – like a Japanese rocket-train, pushing all the turbulent air ahead of him,

pulling all the focus and attention in his wake.

He wanted charisma, not morality. He wanted to be envied for his status, not admired for his virtues. He fundamentally wanted *approval* - and so could never cause any trouble for the truly corrupt.

Like most people addicted to being cool, Robert's mind constantly orbited his body, giving or stripping points for hip or cringe behaviour. He was a living 3D calculus of high vs low status – so-and-so was embarrassing, must avoid; this other person was of value - sidle up and exchange knowing glances.

Robert liked women, and had all the standard-issue early-twenties lusts, but women were mostly vanity accessories, there to make them both look good. He had a running joke with Derek – who constantly aimed above his sexual-market value – that Derek would always be perceived as a security guard, not a boyfriend. Derek's view was that he was perfectly content to be an ironic dip-down for girls addicted to slumming - and disappointing their vain parents of course.

Robert was considering joining a frat – foolish for his last year perhaps, but it could really help his career in the long run – and so he picked up Derek and went to a party at the house of Upsilon Zeta Alpha Pi.

Derek was not a joiner, but he enjoyed a good mingle. He gravitated to the Gamma group he referred to as the 'Oort Cloud' – after the distant icy soup that birthed comets a third of the way to the nearest star. The 'Oort Cloud' was composed of those oddities and 'quirkazoids' (Derek's label) that hung around parties in a dank parallel universe that even the Theatre Kids recoiled from. Derek was not a part of the Oort Cloud, but enjoyed exploring their quirky lower-intestine complications of reactive thoughts and raw poked emotions.

As Robert and Derek strode into the party, the wall of funk – both smell and music – slammed into them, invading nose and ears

respectively. The cliches were endless – and endlessly comforting. It was always the same party, the same archetypes taking on the same roles, one empty soul animating a hundred different indifferent bodies, like tentacles of pretend individuality reaching out from the blind blob of a central unformed body.

There was the table-dancing girl, holding an empty shot-glass while her top lurched dangerously, surrounded by the ‘whoo’ girls with their semi-snarling heads cocked to one side as they waved their skinny arms above their freshly-shaved armpits. There was the guy who could actually grow a beard, who had a barrel-shaped body and back hair cresting his METAL-BAND T-shirt, who was always encouraged in alcoholism and – sometimes – fistfights. He was always called “Moose” or “Tiny” or “Bruiser” or “T-Rex.” He never dated, but roared like a wildebeest and drank beers any which way but through the actual opening, shot-gunning his way to legendary lurching Rasputin “still standing” status.

There was the sinister Dread Pirate Roberts guy, always dressed in black, who gave the impression of carrying disabling potions and powders in his medieval belt pouch. Girls drank near him at their peril. He always dropped a 20-sided dice at some point.

There was the rare smoker, constantly waving a dangerous cigarette, who always seemed to be telling fishing stories.

There was the gf-hunter, circling from girl to girl with increasing desperation, yelling into her indifferent ear as her cocktail eyes roamed the party looking for anyone – anything – to escape the vague estrogen stench of his neediness.

There was the Greek chorus of second-tier frat boys roaring with forced laughter, telling improbably “entertaining” stories in a circle, who grabbed other men and gave them noogies as they struggled to get past, forcing laughter from clearly-annoyed betas.

There were the “I was so drunk” guys, who shouted that no good story ever started with “I had a salad,” and who took surreal pride in informing anyone in the vicinity that they woke up once because

someone at a party had tried to take their beer. They talked about their annoyance at anyone at a cottage who suggested "Pictionary" or "Twister" instead of listening to "Red Hot Chili Peppers" while half-doing on the wavy dock of infinite hangovers. All enthusiasm for intellect, clarity or sober socializing was mocked and attacked like an alcoholic antibody fighting any and all infections of authenticity.

Ah yes...

Even though they were not invited, there were the theatre kids of course, hiding out at the bottom of the garden, hoping that their dank and brooding mysteries would somehow draw girls down to their apocalyptic Eden, and that their Diet Cokes might be mistaken for absinthe. They sneered at the "wastoids" and strove for endless superiority in their bottomless irrelevance. They had no social power, and so worshipped at the bloody altar of *talent*, imagining endless revenge fantasies where the frat boys drove them to awards ceremonies and begged them for autographs and cast-off groupies.

There were the heavy girls as well, mothering the pretty girls and keeping the boys at bay, striving to appear weightless in their polka-dot scrunchies, thick glasses and wide-wide crocheted cardigans. They were all feminists, of course, hoping to turn the more popular girls against men, and so cripple the competition.

There was always the one eating-disorder girl as well, who levered her skeletal frame up and down the stairs like an asexual praying mantis, being perfectly *normal* and *friendly*, letting the madness of her body run riot through the shocked senses of everyone else. She snacked constantly, forcing everyone to assume a brutal bloody purge at 3am. She was neither accommodated nor avoided, but seemed to just - pass through people.

There were the unabashed boy-crazy girls – never as much the reverse – who swarmed attractive men and leaned in and laughed huskily and touched forearms whenever remotely possible. These girls always aimed at men above their station, subsidizing their scant value with easy sexual access. They got handsome men to

indifferently sleep with them; they were used and discarded like paper plates, but never learned their lessons. They usually clogged the pipeline to the tribe of heavy girls, who accepted their broken selves with the green venom of blaming only men for the bad decisions of women. In earlier times, the boy-crazy girls would have settled into plump lower-middle class fertility and food-delivery community-building – in these corrupt end-times, they got sanded down by desire and greed into splintered fragments of their former selves, doomed to dissatisfaction and backward-revising dreams of a potential for commitment from alphas they could never have actually realized.

There was – increasingly – the room (or sometimes entire *floor*) of druggies – from the mild cases who tried to make the over-genial crowd laugh by pretending to be surprised when they found their feet – to the more hardcore, thousand-yard-stare cases who might be up for three days in a row, due to their blind consumption of unmarked pills that scored them strange Satanic social points. Indifferent to survival, careless for the future, they escalated the “I was so drunk” crowd by embracing the “I woke up in a hospital getting my stomach pumped” crowd – which was not destined to remain a “crowd” for very long...

This was a world without ethics, where the media demons had separated the young from any and all wisdom accumulated by their elders. Nothing moral could be learned, so everything had to be reinvented, like mammals starting over as amphibians – or fish perhaps, or even further back. The grim evolution of hard-won lessons over tens of thousands of years were all cast aside, and the rules that had prevented problems were scorned and discarded because those problems were rarely to be seen, and the young turned into mad souls who tore down the walls that kept the sea at bay, because the town had not been flooded in living memory...

Youth was considered beautiful in both body and wisdom – a combination that has never existed in the history of this or any other world...

These desperate young were like water pouring on the top of a mountain; they each cascaded in pre-determined but unpredictable rivulets and rivers down the jagged rocky wastes of the mountainside, pooling and spilling and overflowing in the endless gravity of their untutored hedonism, aiming for what felt good in the moment, what satisfied lust and desire and status and envy today, tonight, *now* - like cunning apes trying to pick zoo locks, any escape was accidental - joyful, and utterly un-reproducible. What worked yesterday never worked tomorrow - but habits are hard to break, so decaying repetition and blind hope was all they had. They were like children who refuse to learn how to play billiards, and just hit the ball stupidly hard in the hope of randomly producing a cool shot that could be cheered for its one-time accidental "brilliance."

This was the second time that Robert met Helen, and it was this meeting that sealed their fates – or, rather, cemented the fact that all their prior vanities and avoidances had now set their iron wheels on the train tracks of inevitability.

She was a goddess, pure and simple. All the avatars of uncanny-valley plastic-surgery beauty that infested the minds and loins of the young in the age of endless CRT screens seemed to manifest in her form, like a fractal key turning an impossible lock.

Helen's beauty was a snapshot, a scalding tattoo on Robert's empty heart – a super-stimulus that jolted his deadened nerves back into jumpy life. Helen was throwing her head back and laughing, a perfect tendon in her neck inviting a sudden jugular nuzzle. She was surrounded by a gaggle of mid-tier boys, doubtless gathering fantasies for later rather than imagining a real chance in the here and now.

Immediately, Robert wanted to position himself in the best possible light. His mind and heart detached from his body – as they so often did – and raced around the room like a novice director, trying to find the best combinations of lighting, companionship, activities, gestures and expressions to place the leading man in the most positive possible light.

*Should I be drinking, swigging, pounding my fellow pirates on the back and roaring over past hilarities? No, she would view that as a cliché. Should I try to draw a bevy of mids around me, like a dank moat she would have to step over? Should I stand in the corner and brood, frat-boy Heathcliff-style? Full of secrets and superiority and mystery, bound to the bottom but somehow still above it all? Should I be in a rush to leave, and brush past her and pretend to be surprised? Have someplace much better to be, maybe flatter her by postponing my next adventure? How do I get Helen to know that I'm not with Chloe anymore? Is that even **better**? Maybe she **likes** to steal boyfriends... Should I perform some physical feat, bench-press a bench perhaps? No, way too caveman... What if she's – and I've known pretty girls like this – what if she's drawn to the meat-man muscular types? Should I bump chests with the chug-monster wearing the Metallica T-shirt..?*

Robert glanced at Helen with all the tentative fear of a man trying to stare at an eclipse. He had to absorb her mood and purpose and nature, but he couldn't linger on her visage, for fear that she would glance at him and see his confused plotting, and sneer in utterly justified contempt...

Robert took a deep breath, trying madly – like all over-thinkers – to calm the cocaine-hamsters in his endless brain-wheels and let his instincts take over. But when he contacted his second brain – his gut – it was telling him to flee...

He glanced again at Helen, but she was gone.

Oh no! he thought in panic. *I can't go scanning for her now, that's so desperate!* He had a sudden vision of radar operators in Dover in 1940, squinting for incoming German bombers.

Something poked him in his back. He thought it was Derek, but his laconic friend was trying to manage his social anxiety by feverishly drinking in a dark corner. He turned around and Helen was smiling at him.

He smiled back.

"I changed my number!" she called out.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, sorry, I handed you my digits in Wasaga and then I had to change my number. Occupational hazard I suppose. But I wasn't playing you. Rob, was it?"

"Yeah," said Rob. *Should I pretend I don't remember her name? No, too obvious, too cringe...* "Helen – nice to see you again?"

"Where's your girlfriend?"

"We broke up."

"Oh, not that day on the beach I hope." Helen bit her lip. Robert really liked that she did not pretend to be anything other than the bombshell she was. "I'm not vain, but I've seen it before... False modesty is a form of hypocrisy."

"Is that a quote?"

She laughed. "I'm not that smart. I read it somewhere. I suppose it takes some brains to appreciate it though."

"Why did you change your number?"

Helen wrinkled her nose. She had one of those faces that looked fantastic even when distorted. "I had a stalker."

"Oh gosh. Really?"

She smiled quizzically. "I'm not sure what to make of your surprise. But yeah. Flowers on the porch, endless calls, bad poems in my inbox, dragons and desire, like ELO lyrics. It's all so copy/paste. Everyone is sooo original..."

"What – how long did that go on for?"

Helen shrugged. "It's a predictable pattern. Interest, charm, devotion, obsession, talking, rage – then they quit. Latch on to someone else."

"You should get married!"

Helen laughed sarcastically. "Get a nice brute of a protector? Why should that be my life? It's not my fault men have the self-restraint of a bonobo."

"It was just a thought."

"Who should I marry? Who would you choose for me, here?"

"What is your type?"

"No, no – you said I needed protection. Find me a guardian!"

Robert glanced around the dank and hazy room. The massive bearded guy was chugging a silver-canned beer sideways. Robert pointed. "He would protect you, but then you'd have to marry another guy to protect you from *him!*"

Helen laughed. "Nah. I'd have to hire someone to protect him from his alcoholism. He'd tell me he was just a social drinker, but then he'd be desperate to go to a party every night of the week! I quit smoking last year. I always told myself I was only a social smoker, but I realized I was striking up conversations just so I could have a cigarette."

"And that just got you more stalkers..."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah... I remember you being smarter than the average bear..."

"Well I guess you'd have to be protected either by strength or money. Some guy who could wrestle a gator, or a big house with big walls and a private driver."

"Why a private driver?"

"The prettier the girl, the worse driver she is."

Helen laughed. "So my driver should not be a pretty woman."

"She'd have to be a better driver than you."

"You give the most convoluted compliments, Mr Robert."

"Who do you know at the party?"

"No, too boring. Try again."

"No – you go."

Helen pursed her lips, unoffended. "Did you break up with your girlfriend because of me?"

"In other words – am I going to become a stalker? Well I'll tell you two things. First – no, we did not break up because of you, but because of me. And second, I did not know that you had changed your number."

"Because you never called."

"Right."

Helen paused for a moment. A man with a very thin moustache tried to hand her a drink, but she waved him away impatiently. "What about you caused the breakup?"

Robert leaned in. "My ambition."

She laughed. "Nooo, that's not it."

"I don't want to talk about – my last girlfriend."

"So? Neither do I. But a girl who collects stalkers like psycho Beanie Babies has to do a little vetting."

"So – I'm in the running?"

"A smart good-looking ambitious guy like you? Remember what I said about false modesty, Mr Rob."

"What do you want to know?"

"What about you ended the relationship?"

Robert shook his head slowly. "That's a great question."

"Stalling is not an answer."

"What if I don't know?"

Helen did not bother to reply.

"Sorry," said Robert. "Yeah, I know... Can I tell you outside?"

Helen hesitated, then nodded. She took him by the hand – which felt unbearably intimate – and led him through the kitchen, out the screen door and down the bowels of the lower garden, where the Theatre Kids were showing off various accents and sword-fight moves.

Helen turned to him and waited expectantly.

Something about the placid nature of her expression pulled the truth from Robert like bubbles rising in beer.

"Yeah, it was me," he said simply. "She didn't make me look good enough. She was – recreational. Like a bookmark."

"How is a bookmark..." started Helen, then shook her head rapidly. "How long did you know that?"

"I never really thought of it." Robert's voice suddenly caught. "My brother is a drug addict. Like, he kind of was, then he wasn't, now he's just kind of – in between. I don't know if he'll ever be himself again, Helen."

She nodded slowly. "I'm so sorry." She gestured at the house, at the pulsing lights and blowing curtains. "Everyone has their sad story, and just - dances around. So that's why you have this strange sudden depth at times. Were you close?"

"When we were young, yeah. Isn't that what everyone says? We played all the time as kids. Together. I guess – I don't know, I guess it becomes a competition after puberty. You're after – the same things maybe? I've never been overweight, but he constantly called me 'fatty.' But bro had some bad acne, not gonna lie."

"Being the more attractive sibling has its trials..." said Helen distantly.

"I'm not sure how comfortable either of us is in our own skin. Skins?"

"So he does – did – drugs. What do you do? Girls?"

Robert barked a laugh. "No. Not really. Study maybe? My dad is a striver – my mother too, though she mostly does it by encouraging my dad. Nagging him almost." Robert sang softly. "Maybe you're just like my mother, she's never satisfied..."

"My parents were strivers..." murmured Helen.

"How did they – overcome that?"

"Just – gave up. It's not the same as acceptance."

"No, it's not," echoed Robert simply. "But about – Chloe. I always talked about being ambitious, but it was just a – mating display. Cringe, I know. But then, like I saw you, and – my god, it all suddenly became real."

"The prize..." whispered Helen.

"Like I was going to have to get my – shit together. You know? Not waste my potential, that would be depressing as hell."

"Is your father happy?"

"He's happy if mom is happy." Robert laughed suddenly. "You have some truth spell on me, you witch!"

It was Helen's turn to laugh. "Now stop avoiding and tell me why you broke up with Chloe." She shrugged. "Or don't."

"She deserved better. And I deserved more."

Helen waited.

"She needed someone who was there just for her. And I wanted someone who would be better for – my future."

"Pretty girls are money machines. I stalked you, you know."

Robert blinked. "What?"

"I watched you from a distance. Chloe was pretty you know. Is."

"Maybe handsome boys are money machines..."

"Ah, but the combination! The *power couple*..."

“What were you stalk... looking for?”

Helen smiled. “There was a bit of chemistry. On the beach. No?”

“Yes.”

“Just getting – the lay of the land. The competition.”

“Do you really have – competition?”

Helen shook her head. “You’d be surprised. I’ve lost out to a few good girls.”

“She was a good girl. Is.”

“And here you are.”

“I feel kind of cursed.” Robert bit his lip. “Sorry, not you, not here... Like - I want to just stride the world. Not for history, I’m not that crazy...” He thumped his chest. “Me big man on campus... In business. I can’t imagine being happy without that. I’d feel totally – cursed. But that means a life of discontent. Striving, climbing, climbing. Never satisfied. No lazing on the couch. Going from an ice bath to work to the gym to dinners surrounded by super-strategic small talk. You know?”

“Beauty is the same damn thing...” said Helen softly. “What the hell am I supposed to do with it? I’m hungry all the time. I have to work out. Like – I *have* to! And your ambition can last your whole life – what do I get? Five years? Maybe ten? No, I know I’ll look good when I’m older. But it’s not the same. The innards keep aging. The eggs die every day. 90% gone when I’m 30! And – I don’t know, this is weird for our first real conversation...”

Robert almost giggled. “Hell it might be *my* first real conversation ever!”

Helen smiled without mirth. “Everyone envies you. Like the poor little rich girl. It’s a burden. Like if you were really loaded – maybe you are – you could dress down and show up on the bus. I can’t really hide anything about me. The plain girls envy me. I envy the

plain girls. They envy the attention I get. I envy the attention *they* get, you know? Because it's just for them..."

"Poor little pretty girl..." murmured Robert.

A sudden sparkle came into her eyes. "Ah, but you're never allowed to complain, right? It's like everyone is dying of cancer, so you're not allowed to whine that you might need glasses."

"I think that – the least unsatisfying life is where you're the most honest about your ambitions."

"Like us, tonight."

Robert threw back his head and laughed. "This is like the most romantic – and the least romantic – conversation I can imagine. We're literally talking about a kind of – relationship - but we're haggling like Moroccan street vendors!"

Helen's eyes narrowed. "How has feeling your way forward worked out for you so far? Or me?" She leaned forward suddenly. "Why didn't you call?"

"How do you know I didn't?"

"I got a second line."

"Is that technically 'changing your number'?"

"Close enough."

"I didn't want to lie," said Robert simply.

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't want to talk about Chloe, and I wasn't sure if you saw her."

Helen nodded, "Complicated. So I ended up being kind of misleading."

"Did you have a stalker?"

"Yeah. Yes. And I should have dropped the number. But I kept it because I wanted you to call. I'd get like twenty messages, and then

have to listen to stalker-boy twenty times hoping you'd left a message."

"I felt – dirty." Robert's voice caught again. "She deserved better."

"Why?"

"Why..?"

"Oh please don't be one of these guys – they're everywhere – who babies women and thinks we are all just lost poor angels only acted on by male decisions. I don't know her from Eve, but I guarantee you she wanted your ambition, your money-to-come, your status, your looks..."

"Like my mom..." whispered Robert.

"Get on ze couch!" barked Helen in a faux-German accent. "Please, don't strip Chloe of her choices. We're not angels, Mr Robert. We have our greed and vanity as well..." She paused. "That's my advice anyway."

His mind blissfully blank, Robert leaned down, took Helen in his arms, and kissed her deeply. Her mouth opened.

The Theatre Kids screamed and started quoting Romeo and Juliet.

Chapter 5

Robert's heart was pounding, and his neck was itchy. Helen had over-starched his collar, and the sulphur-grit of Toronto seemed to be infiltrating the cotton noose around his neck.

His new tan dress shoes were too tight, his belt cinched his waist, and his neck strained from stiffness, as he tried not to disturb his carefully coiffed hair.

Robert's life was aimed at comfort, since comfort brought status – the comfort was often feigned, but never to this degree.

He slid through the revolving glass doors of the firm of Warren and Baron Legal Solutions. He looked slightly up, worried that his neck was flowing over his collar, and once more cursed the workload of the law student. He had no time for the gym, no time for sports, and his brain had been turned into a constantly-nagging detail-obsessed robot of definitions and loopholes. Just last night, he had thrown on the animated movie of 'The Hobbit,' trying to unwind, and had become totally fixated on the contract Bilbo had with the Dwarves, and had driven Helen to distraction by clenching his fists and railing against all the assumptions and holes and undefined terms. She had replied that his rants were about as mature as a grown man watching a cartoon of a child's novella. Robert had replied that novellas topped out at forty thousand words – max fifty – but The Hobbit was over ninety thousand words long. "Still not a movie for grown-ups," she railed, to which Robert growled that she was moving the goalpost. "Stop lawyering me!" she replied, before storming out of the student apartment they shared.

I have the most important interview of my life in the morning, and she can't shut up and support me! he cried in infinite self-pity. Robert had taken an over-the-counter sleep aid and went to bed, imagining Helen out pulling a wake of male admiration as she stalked the streets, fiery in her outrage in a way that made her even sexier.

He pretended to be asleep when she came home at one in the morning. Helen sighed loudly three times, then pretended to sleep as well.

As he approached the receptionist, Robert's heart was pounding, a deep drumbeat over the churning tension in his gut.

Robert was ushered up to the top floor – *well played*, he thought. *Most literal – how to get to the top!* and sat in a large room with a dozen other candidates.

This was annoying, but vaguely inspirational. *They want me to see my competition, to check my level of confidence...*

It was strange that a named partner would bother interviewing interns, but it did make the firm even more desirable.

Most other applicants were neck-deep in their phones – but there was one young man sitting stiffly, staring straight forward. Raw-dogging reality, no distractions. *Wild...*

Everyone who was called in strode forward confidently, and came out making jokes, as if the interview had been the greatest fun possible in a merely mortal timeframe.

Robert's instincts were to provide a counter-narrative, so he did not *stride in* when his name was called; neither did he flash a wide grin and shake hands hard and stare deep into his interviewer's eyeballs. He entered the massive mahogany office as a humble acolyte, tentative and unworthy - but willing to be instructed in arcane mysteries.

Peter Warren was an archetype of the elder silver-haired statesman. His swept-back locks showed an aristocratic widows-peak; he had slight bags under his eyes, signaling a strong work ethic in both his profession and his skin-care regime. Triangle lines radiated from nose to lip-edges, giving him a severe look, but his eyes had a curious gentleness to them; Peter had a face that straddled the Old and New Testaments. Damnation and forgiveness were not at war in

his visage, but rather sat together in a Zen state of yin/yang contemplation.

Peter's office was a kind of ebony lair – deep mahogany warred with even darker woods to suck up all the sunbeams blasting in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The view was designed to give a Mount Olympus vibe, and Robert felt a childhood echo of the scene in *The Lion King* where Mufasa tells his son that they own everything they see...

As Robert approached the enormous desk, he noticed something curious and deep.

Peter's photos were turned away from him, towards visitors, and showed him skiing, with a beautiful family, giving speeches and standing with various top-tier political and business figures. No entertainers, of course – the law was serious business. Robert appreciated the extremely unsubtle positioning of the photos – clearly designed to impress and intimidate – and wondered if Peter ever turned them back towards himself.

Doubtful. He was already impressed with himself.

"Robert," said Peter, looking down at a folder in his hands. It was disorienting for a moment because it sounded like Peter was introducing himself as Robert.

"Mr. Warren," said Robert, extending his hand.

Peter did not look up. "I don't shake hands," he said. "I can't get sick."

Robert sat down. His mind whirled. *I call myself an expert in status?* He felt like a chess noob whose soul depends on winning a match against a grandmaster.

Nothing to do but wait...

"You're not a natural," said Peter, closing the folder decisively and starting Robert straight in the face.

It was shocking, the eye contact. There was a naked presence to Peter's gaze, which seemed both exquisitely vulnerable and utterly dominant at the same time. It was curious, judgmental and superior, and Robert got a strange – almost supernatural – sense of a lack of regret, of self-criticism – of – of – *conscience*? That word – almost medieval to Robert – leapt into his mind from his gut-brain for the first time in years. Robert felt a strange giddiness flood his system, as if he were being chased in a dream and suddenly discovered he could fly.

He smiled. "Well, since I am neither unnatural nor supernatural, I don't follow, I'm afraid."

The last two words echoed in Robert's mind. He was not afraid of Peter exactly – more his *response* to Peter.

Peter smiled in faint appreciation. "Maria Callas was not a natural singer, but she worked like hell. It's not a problem, just an observation. You decided on law, I can see that. Some people read case law when they are kids, dream about it from the crib. You chose it. A practical choice – but the opposite, too."

"Ah," murmured Robert. "Because if it's practical, you lack the passion, which makes it impractical again."

Peter *tsked* in appreciation. Apparently, he enjoyed not having to explain himself. He touched a paper in front of him, not breaking eye contact. "I've got a list of questions. They're from HR. What do you think of HR?"

Robert paused. This was a test of honesty, he knew that. It could also be a trap. He could get hired, then reported to HR. The pink ghetto was notorious for its tight-lipped pant-suited savagery. "Necessary, I guess. These days. But there was nothing like that when the real industrial revolution was going on."

Peter nodded. "You think Henry Ford had an HR department?"

Robert shook his head.

Peter still held his gaze. "Top business is the last male space. We'll lose it, like everything else, but you can even enjoy the fall of Rome if you know what's coming, and you're prepared."

Peter stood up abruptly. Robert admired how fluid and instantaneous Peter's impulses were. He did not *decide* to stand up. His body commanded altitude, so his brain lifted in response.

It would be such a cliché, thought Robert, if Peter clasped his hands behind his back and murmured an end-times soliloquy to the layered carpets of concrete spread out far below him...

"I'm not supposed to hire white males," said Peter softly. "Are you a free speech guy, Robert?"

"Yeah – yes. Of course."

"Why?"

"I don't trust authority... Political authority," added Robert quickly.

"And?"

"I'd rather evaluate bad speech than have 'correct' speech dictated to me. No one knows enough to judge what will be true in the future. Every new – every *important* new fact or theory seems insane or corrupt. Our beliefs harden, then refuse to change, and get wrecked by new ideas. The boomer mind..."

Robert paused, his heart pounding again.

"Go on. Don't be afraid..." said Peter softly.

"My mom. My dad a bit too. But not just them..." Robert's mind was scrambling, trying to figure out how to navigate this absurdist conversation. *Tell the truth!* screamed his mind. *RUN!* bellowed his gut. "It's everyone of a certain – generation. They can't handle any real truths. You have to coddle them, like toddlers. They're just programmed by the TV I think. Though my dad doesn't watch much. I have to tiptoe..."

"About what?"

“Oh God, everything.”

In a strangely intimate tone, Peter said: “I want to ask you for your most controversial opinion – or fact – but we have HR, so I won’t. Women just get annoyed and change the subject when they’re wrong. Like toddlers, too, I guess. But they have power through politics. They vote more than men. Like boomers vote more than young people. Gerontocracy, gynocracy, ... Rule of the old and the female. Almost the mirror image of a meritocracy. Participation ribbons versus getting picked last because your throwing arm sucks...”

Peter turned around. Robert had the sudden thought that the older man had not blinked once during the whole conversation, but some shark or lizard membrane would rise from below his eyeballs after Robert left his lair.

Peter said: “You’re not a natural lawyer, but you are a thinker. HR has made me hire so many idiots that I don’t bother with the standard questions anymore. People just look them up and come up prepared and programmed. I hate anything – inauthentic. Everything is so fake that there’s not even a word for... being genuine. Why do you want to be a lawyer?”

“To be you,” said Robert simply.

Peter closed his eyes and leaned slightly forward. “And – what is that?”

“The top dog. Here. You have power. Influence. Authority. Money. You do good.”

“You were right until you started pandering.”

“You don’t do good?”

“I do good for me and mine. My family. My colleagues. My tribe. Society? Were you bored in school Robert?”

He sighed deeply. This was easy honesty. “Always.”

"But you were forced to go. And your parents were forced to pay for it. Did you get medicated?"

Robert shuddered. "God! Almost. I had to stop showing signs of boredom. Of restlessness. I trained my legs to be still. Kind of – torture. I had two friends..." Robert's voice thickened suddenly.

Peter leaned forward even further, his ice-blue eyes widening like yawning mouths. "Go on... Be honest."

Robert took a deep breath. "They got – medicated. It seemed to cost them – everything. Like, their souls. They weren't bored anymore I guess. They *weren't* anything anymore..."

"Those godforsaken pills weren't around when I was a kid," said Peter softly. "I was so bored I tried climbing out a window. The teacher tried to pull me back in, and I fell. Cracked my head something fierce. 'Never the same,' my mom said after that. It's true. I was *better*. I woke the hell up. I saw me and society, squaring off. I don't want to do good in society. That's just slavery. I am different as hell, sure... But I am a money machine, so people don't care. I could wear a belt of children's scalps, they wouldn't care. Just pump the green, you can take all the red. And I love the law. The law is a language of extraction. And it's like dogs. It's not about right or wrong. Logic or madness. You know this, I can see it, Rob. It's only and forever about who is least afraid... And I don't feel it. Caution, perhaps. But you do. But you don't have to. Whoever feels fear first loses. And you *feel* that – halfway between caution and fear. You don't need it, Rob. The fear. It's an enemy. It's how you are controlled. Broken. Enslaved. Be cautious. Be not afraid..."

Robert wanted to jump up and embrace the older man.

Instead, he said: "I would do anything to work here."

Peter said: "It's what you have to *stop* doing that opens these doors."

Chapter 6

"You sure this ain't gonna be weird?" asked Derek for the fifth time.

Robert pulled into a narrow parking space on the fifth floor below ground. He was inordinately proud of his ability to pull into tight spots without slowing down.

Confidence is king, baby!

"*Hell, bro,*" he said, mimicking an Appalachian accent. "*Ah don't know. I guess we're all just tryina be sophisticated and stuff!*"

"It's just a matter of *fit*, right?"

"Yeah, sure, of course. You guys fit, me and Helen fit... Like gloves..."

"Good," said Derek, biting at a hangnail on his thumb. "You're handling this like a champ. A pro."

Robert shrugged tightly. "My bro is hanging by a thread. I think I'm working for Satan. You and Chloe are barely on my radar, bro. No disrespect."

"None taken. It's strange though. I want to praise her, but I don't want you to think you missed out. She's totally solid."

"It's fine," said Robert decisively, unbuckling his seatbelt. "Water under the bridge."

Derek paused for a moment, then also got out. The oily smell of a subterranean garage slithered into their senses. "Well, it's just a drink and some bites. Old friends, a shuffled deck..."

Robert clapped him too hard on the back, feeling sudden anger.

"Ow!" grimaced Derek.

"Man, you gotta hit the gym, bro," smiled Robert. "How do you know who you are if you don't even lift? You're just a fear machine, riding the rails of compliance."

"Like you're such a hardbody!" cried Derek, pushing his fingertip into Robert's puffy belly.

"I'm like 'Scandinavian weight-lifter' strong these days. No more abs, I might need to lift a tractor or two!"

Derek laughed, and the tension diminished somewhat.

Upstairs, at the restaurant, the five gathered at a narrow table with a snow-white tablecloth. As usual, the two couples sat side by side, facing each other, while Shane, Robert's brother, sat awkwardly at the end.

"So," said Robert expansively. "How the hell is everyone?"

Chloe smiled. "Well. Good, thanks!"

Helen glanced at her and said: "Pretty much the same as this morning."

Derek said: "You grilled me on the way over, so to keep Helen up to date, the exciting life of accounting has me gripped in its fist. I'm making money, but losing my freaking eyesight baby..."

There was a pause. Shane was staring at his plate.

"Shane?" prompted Robert. "You wanted to get together, feel like saying something?"

"It's a twelve-step thing," mumbled Shane darkly, then cleared his throat. "But we can get to that later."

Robert sighed heavily. "Nooo, Shane, we'll get this out of the way now." He sighed. "You gonna apologize again?"

Shane's face colored. "Well I owe you – all of you – that."

Helen shrugged. "Hasn't affected me much, to be honest..."

"But through Robert, it does..."

"Just – get it done, Shane," said Robert impatiently.

Chloe put her hand on Shane's forearm. "Take your time though. How – how are things going?"

"I'm – backsliding," said Shane softly. Everyone but Robert leaned forward to hear him better.

"Not with the drugs... With life, I guess. I like – got a job at the Sally Ann. Just warehouse stuff. With a bunch of ex-cons and – well, hardcore drug recovery guys. Everyone asks me what the hell I'm doing there? I don't know..."

Chloe said: "How long have you been – clean? Is that still the word?"

"Yeah, that's fine..." Shane's eyes suddenly cleared, and his voice rose. "I got a call from Regina the other day. That *bitch!*"

"Hey!" cried Robert. "Keep it down!"

Shane appeared not to hear him. "She wanted to know if I had seen her passport. So she's shown up in an adult magazine, and some sheik is flying her out to Dubai for..." He shuddered. "I couldn't have scripted it better myself!"

"Oh, gross!" said Derek.

"Forget her!" said Chloe. "How are *you* doing?"

Shane refused to raise his eyes. "You mean, down here at the bottom of trash planet? Heh - I'm king of the underworld, baby! I rule everyone who never follows the rules. Do I have her *passport*? If I did, I would have sold it to some voodoo witch to break her freaking *back!*"

"Calm *down!*" said Robert sternly. "Man, you're going to end up with even *more* to apologize for..."

Shane took a deep shuddering breath and sat very still as the waitress took their orders for drinks. Robert tried to get everyone to order food as well, but the ladies demurred, citing confusion, a complicated menu and female nature.

After the waitress left, Shane took another deep breath, and leaned forward, his eyes moist. "Yeah, so sorry... Like you care about Regina and her goddamned passport. I just fell into the wrong hole..." He laughed bitterly. "And – you know, I've spent a lot of time apologizing to everyone – just – just freaking *groveling!* And yeah, I've screwed up, you know? Yeah, you know. But – not you Helen, or you Chloe, but the wonder-twins here... I know I'm older, but hey, couldn't you see that I was falling into the wrong hole? Y'all just leaned over and waved as I freaking dropped! Buh-bye Shane! It's like that question in school when we were kids, remember?"

Shane's voice was rising. Everyone sat very still. The waitress approached, then withdrew quickly.

"What happens if you fall into a hole that goes right through the Earth?" continued Shane bitterly. "Everyone stuck up their hand and said: 'Oh I know I know! You go down, past the middle...' He traced the imaginary fall with a hand. "...then you bounce back up, wayyy up, then down, then up, then you finally stop wobbling and just hang there in the middle." He winked at everyone. "But I got it. Right away. Didn't even have to think about it. Because it was a freaking *premonition*, bros! Oh no, you fall, and the gravity of the world increases above you, right, and you just slow down and come to a complete stop, right at the center of the world, the earth, and you just – hang there, as far as possible from the surface and all its people. Just hang there, forever, floating. Stuck..."

Shane was almost panting. His voice lowered to a whisper. "And Regina – rhymes with 'fun,' remember? She pushed me in, bro... She was the hole, and she pushed me in, and I just – vanished. Did you notice? It seems, my friends, that you did not. So – who was supposed to notice, that I was there for like years, and then not there, for months. Who noticed I was gone? Mom? Dad? You, Rob? What about you, Derek? No, forget that, you were too new... I hung around, right? I *de-materialized*, bros, and y'all noticed *nothing!* Like we were waiting for the bus, and I got taken by a lion-ess, and you noticed *nothing*. Didn't look up from your freaking *newspapers!*"

"All right," said Robert heavily. "All right. Would you feel better if I apologized for not saving you from purple-haired nose-ring Regina? Would that help you lower your voice?"

Shane's brown eyes were wide, cynical. "I deeply appreciate the sincerity, Rob. Warms my heart..."

Robert leaned forward. "You need to take responsibility for your own life, Shane. No one forced you into that – relationship." He lowered his voice. "Or the – drugs. You could have called for help at any time 'bro.' You think I would have hung up on you? You kept all your secrets from me. From mom and dad. From Derek. From everyone. You decided to go it alone my guy. And that's where it got you. You didn't need anyone, right? Mr Solo, Mr 'too good for any advice.' Your choice. Your choice..."

Derek said: "Whoah, Rob. Easy. Easy, kiddo..."

Robert took a deep breath. "Sorry, everyone. It's easy to lecture when you haven't spent half a decade waiting for the call from the ambulance and wondering where to get Naloxone on the black market."

"Oh yes, my *hero!*" snarled Shane. "My caped crusader. Mr Status Merchant, Mr Social Climber. Mr Trade-in-my-girlfriend-for-a-hotter-model. At least I *understand* my addiction, bro! Yeah, this is an intervention, but not for *me*. I can't go back and undo Regina, but I can warn our good friend Helen here about Robert and *his* addiction. You see – I..."

The waitress put down their drinks, said: "I'll give you some time..." and fled again.

"You see," said Shane, ignoring his club soda, "I am what is called the 'identified patient.' I am the *obvious* addict. Rob here is not obvious. The unidentified patient..."

Helen's cheeks turned red.

"Oh, shut up!" cried Robert. "Goddamned loser!"

Chloe clutched Derek's hand under the table.

There was silence around the table; an eye in the storm of general social chatter.

"He's a status addict," said Shane softly. "He didn't bother rescuing me because I was low-status, Helen of Troy... Regina was low-status. He couldn't dirty himself, *besmirch* himself, because we were trash and the stain and the stink might stick to him. And that's fine, that's OK for you. As long as you never stumble or burp or gain eight pounds or get too depressed to have sex or don't show well in the mannequin window *he* calls a social circle. Just a bunch of shiny cars in a shiny showroom that look great but can't actually be *driven* anywhere! You see? A salesman with nothing but words and greed and a hook baited with money and prestige and conditions. See, our parents don't love unconditionally, so I fell for Regina and he falls for you..."

"Shut up!" hissed Robert, his face red. "Do *not* compare Helen to that trailer-park trash you called a girlfriend..."

"Chloe is a better person though," said Shane softly.

Chloe opened her mouth, then closed it again. A slight fire of vengeance burned deep in her brown eyes.

Helen laughed. "Oh, 'better' is so subjective my friend! For who? For what?"

"For whom?" corrected Chloe.

Helen shot her a venomous look. "Nit-picking is sooo attractive!"

Derek cleared his throat loudly. "Guys, come on... We've got some tension, I get that. But seriously? This is getting ugly."

Shane cackled. "Unveiling an ugly statue doesn't *make* it ugly, Derek... Go back to feeding off the scraps of Robert's leftovers..."

Derek's face darkened. He laughed awkwardly. "That's how addicts roll, right? Unbelievable levels of emotional manipulation..."

"Terrorists..." murmured Helen, brushing her blonde hair back.

Shane said: "That's just a word for someone no one listens to. Emotionally."

Robert leaned forward. "Ok, just so we don't get kicked out of this restaurant. Permanently. What is it you *want?*"

"You've known me close on a quarter century," murmured Shane, his eyes suddenly wet. "And you have no idea. That's just passive aggressive *bull!* 'Oh Shane, you're so crazy that no one could ever *possibly know* what you want or need.'" Shane raised a finger. "Don't appease me, bro. Don't placate..."

Shane seemed to run out of energy all of a sudden.

The waitress appeared. "Sorry, I need you to order, it's mad busy at the moment."

To the obvious disappointment of the waitress, they ordered a few quick-bite appetizers. She smiled tightly and vanished again.

There was silence at the table – a tiny black hole of contemplation in the mad chaos and noise of the braying drunk-golfing cacophony that surrounded them. They all suddenly *heard* the endless noise of their society - the barking laughter and self-conscious preening that surrounded them like a sea of subconscious echo-location predation.

All the silent sentences that growled and pulled everyone forward in their endless race to the endless grave, like slaves hauling on splintered oars whose groans could never be heard by the coiffed and bleached aristocrats sauntering carelessly above deck...

"I am *better* than you / I *need* something from you..."

"Look how *sexy* I am / love me for my spiritual essence..."

"I *need* you to look up at me..."

"I am superior mostly due to my innate gifts and unchosen family connections..."

The din, the noise, seemed unbearable all of a sudden. The scraps of conversations felt obscene, like listening in on a priest receiving prison or deathbed confessions. A spiraling escalation of desperate noise – the clamour of the unloved, seeking to climb on the ashes of each other’s hearts, slipping and stumbling and bellowing laughter over an endless advertising chyon of glamorous success. The men tried to sleep with the women; the women tried to bag hotter men than their friends; the waitresses – and waiters – praised and flirted for money; the gray-haired manager circulated like a begging courtier licking the boots of his patrons; people charged into the restaurant and argued about seating with the hostess; the drab pudgy people on the sidewalk cast envious glances into the glass-enclosed shark-aquarium of endless striving, and everything and everyone was trapped in a perfect whirlpool of falsehood and manipulation and status, and no one could stand to ever be alone, and everyone dreaded waking up at 4am and not being able to get back to sleep, because they could not hurl money at the merchants of distraction to escape their own thoughtlessness, their hollow emptiness and fear of authenticity – and no one could show any nervousness at all, even in the end-stages of their former civilization, when debt and dissolute money and unfunded liabilities rose up like a bear over a crying crib – they babbled and played and typed and dictated and fiddled while their cities burned – and no one was ever allowed to talk about the simple math of their own coming executions – that they all participated in bribing the poor to stay out of their neighbourhoods – *here, have as many children as you want, get free rent and subway rides, just stay **away** from us!* – and they all knew that the money was running out, and they all knew that the bars of the raging poor were almost chewed through, and rather than restrain spending and retrain ignorance, they withdrew to their cloud castles, their silent new-treed streets that ringed the hellscape of the inner cities, and fled out into the countryside, to cottages and resorts, to get away from the well-armed math of their own demise.

And everyone – everyone around them, babbling and bribing and biting – knew all this simple math, that civilizations end not through

force or war or corruption, but through *math* – numbers were the armies that marched and stole and destroyed without resistance... An enemy that cannot be named will always win, which is why silencing words is the first and final act of invasion. You can defend your house from invaders – but not from ghosts and radiation and odorless gases...

Numbers were the conquering army of the modern world – just as they had always been.

If one side of an evenly-matched battle can kill ten percent more than the other, it wins.

Numbers win...

If a man's immune system can kill enough bacteria or cancers, he lives. If not, he dies.

Numbers.

Birth rates.

Numbers.

Falling IQ.

Numbers.

Rising obesity.

Numbers.

Demographics.

Numbers.

Lowered academic standards.

Numbers.

Take in more calories than you expend?

Obesity.

Take in fewer?

Starvation.

Numbers.

Those cultures that evolved by living or dying through numbers could no longer talk about numbers.

Do I have enough food to feed my family over the bitter winter?

Numbers.

Invade a body, disable the immune system, death results.

Make a system unsustainable, prevent people from talking about that unsustainability, the system dies of its own silenced inertia.

And like tinnitus, the silenced nerves trigger endless whining and screaming and growling.

Greed replaces sustainability.

Status replaces morality.

Sex replaces family.

Travel replaces wisdom.

Desire replaces happiness.

Money replaces love.

Perfection of the flesh replaces beauty of the soul.

Dominance replaces conscience.

Impressing strangers replaces respecting family.

Noise replaces conversation.

Stimulus replaces contemplation.

And, most of all...

Giddy suicide replaces sustainable self-respect...

All these thoughts raced about the table of five – an instinct bequeathed by their ancestors currently crying out from their dusty

graves – unvisited for generations – to stop and think of the future – not of just their own petty selves and lusts – but of the world to come. A wealthy young man thinks of consumption – a lonely old man dying of consumption thinks only of his regrets... The world is an ornate gift shaped and handed to you by your ancestors – to pursue only your *own* pleasures and preferences is to burn through a glorious inheritance for the sake of tickling and appeasing merely mortal nerves. Everything around you – around these five young souls – is the result of the deferral of gratification – and it is all destroyed by those greedy for giddy joy in the mere moment. A man stores food for a long winter by deferring gratification – by working more and eating less – and one greedy stomach can end the entire bloodline by sneaking food for the sake of passing midnight hunger... Respect numbers, or numbers end us **all**...

Robert took a deep breath and said – loudly, but not too loud for the desperate clamour of the restaurant – “Ok, let’s reset. All right?”

There was a moment of sudden sober silence – which miraculously spread through the entire giant ornate end-times dining room – as if everyone took and held a breath at the same time...

Derek said: “Yanno, every seven minutes there is a lull in conversation, kids – which you can fill by reminding everyone that every seven minutes, there is a lull in conversation. It’s a self-healing wound.”

“Not now, hon,” murmured Chloe, looking slightly queasy.

The waitress brought the appetizers and set them down without a word. She was clearly training them not to return – willing to lose a tip in the here and now in order to make room for more hungry and generous customers in the future.

Numbers...

Shane looked up, oddly at peace for a moment. The shiver of eternity and avoidance that had sprinted up the spines of friends

and family gave them all – all the addicts – something in common for a moment.

“What?” he said, without a shred of tension or emphasis.

Robert paused. Unguessed words are always where the honesty lies, but they are hard to shoulder through.

“I did fail you bro,” he said softly. A ripple of feeling ran around the table. Robert raised his napkin and spat out his bite of calamari. “I’m not hungry...”

No one seemed to be breathing. The noise had returned to the restaurant, but it was muted, like rats sensing a possible predator – the beast of truth that might be stalking its natural prey – distraction.

“I did,” he repeated. His face went limp, like sails abruptly emptied of wind.

Everyone waited. No one had anything to say. Well – they were now suddenly *aware* that they had nothing to say, rather than just endlessly *saying* nothing, as was their habit.

Robert was toying – playing, like children do, very seriously – with his next thought. ‘*Is*’ or ‘*but*’? “What I did *is* bad,” or “*But* I have an excuse...”

No one dared to even breathe, let alone speak.

Robert took a third route – an offshoot of the second...

“However,” he said. “I’m not mom or dad. And for someone to speak, someone else has to listen, bro!”

Shane said nothing. He just stared at the white tablecloth, at the slowly-congealing grease of the appetizers. Below the table, his fingertips ran softly along the rough edges of the fabric – a self-soothing gesture he practiced as a toddler, at night, wrapped in his swaddling sheets.

"Come on, man!" Robert said, suddenly loud. "I made endless fun of her. 'Twitchy witch,' remember?"

"I do..." said Shane softly. "It was – a lot of jokes."

Derek said: "Hey Shane, I remember you half-dragged us to her birthday party with her – kind of a coven, bro! Candlelight, purple lipstick, blackout curtains – she wanted to pull out a Ouija Board for the love of Odin! I told you man, 'woo-woo' turns into 'woe-woe.' Remember?"

"It all seemed like a – joke though," said Shane slowly. "Like some sketchy carnival ride you know isn't *really* going to keel over. And it's not like *you* all never dated anyone sketchy..."

"It wasn't Regina though," murmured Robert. He repeated it, louder.

"What was it then?" asked Helen – a little coldly, but not without curiosity.

Shane stared at his younger brother, as if squinting into the white sun over a nonchalant firing squad.

"I dunno..." said Robert. "Like – mom and dad just kind of – float around each other. Sparring, sort of. I'm not sure I want what they want..."

"You said that, on the beach..." said Chloe sadly. Helen shot her a look.

Robert said to his brother: "What do you want out of life, Shane?"

Shane laughed bitterly. "Not being asked what the hell I am doing there by stumbling ex-druggies at Sally Ann, that's for sure!"

Robert raised his voice. "Stop being glib! You want a serious conversation, stop just – doing that!"

"I'm sorry," said Shane instantly, automatically.

"Me too," said Robert, suddenly softening.

Helen said: "Should we – stay? I don't know what I can, like, contribute to – this..."

"This is my life, Helen," said Robert, not turning to her.

Shane narrowed his eyes. "The short form of 'Robert' is 'Rob.' What is the short form of 'Helen'?"

Robert's fingers closed into fists. "Stop it!"

"Now *that's* a robust defense!" cried Shane. "I wish you'd had that for me..."

Robert snorted. "Everything I say just gets – deflected. 'Let's have a real conversation' you say – then I try to be real and you just – bob and weave. Do you all see it? Is that just – me?" He leaned forward to his brother. "You know that all this – nonsense – just leads to – self-destruction, right? Do you see that? Do you *know* that?"

"I do," said Shane simply.

"Why not turn from that – path?"

"Towards what? I don't want what anyone has. And what I wanted, well that's just... There's no path."

"Art?"

"Yeah," said Shane with infinite sadness. He laughed softly. "I wanted beauty, once upon a time. Remember that? I drew dragons and knights and princesses and good old Teutonic forests. Nymphs, dryads. Beauty. Nobility, I guess. Post – Regina, though, my hand turns dark every time. Devils and eye sockets and toothless homeless. I can't move my fingers towards – beauty."

"Possession," said Chloe suddenly. Her eyes were defiant. "Yes, you are all so sophisticated, but these questions have all been answered for thousands of years. Millions maybe. You just don't want to listen, because... I don't know why. Vanity maybe. Responsibility. Even you, Derek my boy..."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Helen.

"Ah, Eve!" laughed Chloe, suddenly free of fear. "Shane, you met a demon. You were tempted, and you sinned. Yes, it's all so unsophisticated, I know... Fedora-wearers... But nothing you have done for the last five years has cured this – disease. Right, Shane? And you don't have to believe in the 'God' thing – I know that's tough for the secular crowd, raised like – well, like the apes you descended from. I struggle with it too, sometimes. But evil is real. Everyone condemns everyone else, but no one seems to believe in evil..." She turned to Robert. "You think any of this is real, or new – or novel? It's one of the oldest questions in the Bible: *Am I my brother's keeper?* He met a demon, a witch. Maybe she serves powers even *she* doesn't understand. Shane..." Chloe leaned forward, her voice lowering. "She promised you everything, then left you with nothing, right?"

Struck by the sudden intimacy, Shane could only nod, his eyes brimming.

"That's the oldest devil's bargain. I'm not asking you to believe in a guy with horns and goat legs, but – the myth, the story, the analogy if you like – that's very, very real. What did Regina offer you?"

Shane swallowed. "Enlightenment."

"How?"

"Basically... Sex and drugs."

Chloe nodded slowly. "Right, right... You – didn't have to earn it."

"What?"

Chloe struggled for words. "It – just - *happened* to you. Like a pill to lose weight... You didn't – don't - have to choose, or pursue, or struggle. Enlightenment - happens – to you. You're passive. Acted upon. It's like - you don't have to study acting or go to auditions. You're just discovered, like in a diner..."

Shane scowled. "It happens though..."

Chloe shook her head slightly, throwing off his distraction. "What was the – enlightenment *for*? I mean – what was its purpose? What was it going to give you?"

Shane quoted Regina's long-dead words – so accurately they could hear her small-town Nikina accent. "'It's like twenty years of therapy in a single night.'"

Chloe's face was tight, emphatic. "Right – for *what*? What was that therapy supposed to do for you?"

Shane's face crumpled. "Make me – successful. Give me visions. Like Dali. Picasso. I could paint what was – what the drugs revealed – and become famous. Warhol. Successful. Like..."

"Like – what?"

"Like Robert..." murmured Helen, a strangely satisfied look on her face.

"Yeah..." whispered Shane, and they all leaned forward. "Yeah... Maybe."

Robert said: "I'm not really that – successful..."

"Careful," warned Helen.

Shane took a deep breath, lost in that most ancient of battles: cynicism at war with tears. "Oh, right, lawyer-boy. Got your own office, a – not-bad looking girlfriend..."

Chloe interrupted him, raising a hand to silence Robert. "But Shane – he's just another kind of Regina – in his own - small way. That's why I left him after Wasaga... He's tempting..."

Helen said: "What he offers is real. Just – not everyone wants it. Or can handle it."

Derek opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Chloe turned to Helen. "I'm guessing he makes, what, 120k? You are an admin assistant clocking in at, what, 40? You make a third. What does he get in return?"

"What do I bring to the table?" sneered Helen, tossing her hair.
"Honey, I *am* the table!"

Chloe opened her mouth for a rebuttal – everyone could see the acidic words forming on her tongue – but then she cocked her head, as if listening to other words.

"Shane," she said. "Why does your mother love your father?"

Robert barked out a laugh. "Here's how to turn a lunch into a dinner!"

Shane said: "I – don't know. Like Rob says, they're always sparring..."

"He makes a lot, though, right?"

Shane exhaled in a rush. "Oh yeah... But she works..."

"Sure, I get that. She stayed home to raise you..."

Robert said: "Uhhh, no... Not really..."

Chloe's eyes widened. "No? I thought you said..."

"I think I lied. Back then..."

"What do you mean?"

"I guess – I wanted to – not be the kid whose mom went back to work. I was – I mean - we were raised by our grandmother. But she died, so we went to an aunt. She got remarried, then we had a nanny. She was too pricey – and not super-stable. Then we went to daycare..."

"Oh – I'm so – sorry."

"Why?" snapped Helen. "Nothing wrong with daycare. They're professionals, unlike moms who just – make it up as they go along."

"It's not – natural..." Chloe struggled to silence her next words, but everyone could hear them anyway. Chloe wore no makeup. *Like your face, Helen...*

"Nothing about this restaurant is - *natural*," said Helen tightly.

Chloe turned back to Shane. "She offered you a shortcut, Shane. That's really tempting. Robert offered me one too. I know..."

"Hey!" cried Robert.

"Do you want to *help* your brother?"

He closed his mouth.

"Shane, you have to find something about yourself that someone can love. You know? Like - it has to be something about - goodness. I think we love goodness. Like you said earlier, about your art. Beauty. You got infected with ugliness, the ugliness of this - shortcut. I hope I'm making some sense... I'm not even talking from myself, directly... The only thing worse than Regina's broken promises would have been if she *didn't* break them. Right? I mean - if you'd been successful because of... You're playing dead, like a soldier on a battlefield, so you can live again. Be reborn..."

"I'm not religious..." whispered Shane.

"I get it," said Chloe urgently. "But the stories explain *something*, you know? Something in our minds, our hearts... Nothing else seems to work. Does it? You're close to the bottom, love, but there's always a - further down. Come on - you have to push against the shortcuts, Shane. Your salvation doesn't lie in Robert apologizing, or in breaking Regina's back through her passport - that was kind of funny though..."

"What does it lie in?" whispered Shane.

"Fighting the evil. The easy. Not in Regina. Not in Robert. Not in your parents."

"Then - where?"

Chloe put her hand on Shane's forearm. "Stop playing with the tablecloth, Shane. That won't save you either."

"Ok... What will?"

“Doing good...” murmured Chloe.

Shane’s eyes were wide, frightened, cynical. “What does that – even look like?”

“The opposite of your heart, I think. Follow your desires, your soul – dies. You need some discipline. Come on. Show us a picture of your room, Mr Bachelor. Pigsty, I bet. You eating well? Exercising? Getting regular sleep? Video games and afternoon breakfasts, right? You want to be happy? Stop being lazy and ugly!”

Shane stared at Chloe for a long moment, then threw back his head and roared with laughter. The laughter washed through the restaurant, and everyone – except Chloe and Derek - had a sudden urge to flee.

Chapter 7

Robert and his father John were too similar to get along.

Fathers and sons can get along if they share universal values – but status is not a universal value, because it is win/lose – like two pieces of paper being pushed together on a tabletop, one has to slide over the other.

John wanted to be a father, because it was expected, and it would be shameful to appear infertile. People who choose to live without having children are considered oddballs – shallow, selfish... You have to network, and networking means bragging about your children – subtly, of course, with all due humility and the self-erasing language of ‘they did it all themselves.’

This way you can brag about *genes*, which cannot be replicated or surmounted.

John was a calculator, a workhorse, a lofty machine spitting out numbers and intimidation. His wife, Jean, once complained about John’s endless complaints about his bosses, and he went in the next morning and quit in a cold rage – at his bosses, his life and his wife – and shocked her by announcing that he was starting his own company immediately.

These kinds of shocks reverberated throughout John’s family on a regular basis. Jean’s brother once – half-jokingly – referred to John as a ‘money nerd’ – and John never initiated conversation with him ever again. “I won’t be rude,” was the best concession Jean could wring out of him.

Because Jean’s family never talked about anything of substance, emotion or meaning, this rift could never be healed. John referred to them as “emotional hemophiliacs” because no cut, wound or scrape could ever be healed. The family structure was a house of cards welded together with iron avoidance – people were angry but joked – were sad but danced anyway – were lonely but endlessly got

together – genuinely smiled in pictures while plotting a vengeance that everyone knew would never come.

Children were a form of performance art – encouraged but not mentored – praised but not tutored – trained but not empathized with. Servants of vanity and status, flashy mirrors of empty egos and goose-steppers in a mirrored parade of ticker-tape and bright-eyed servitude.

John started his company, shamelessly stole customers from his former employers, and took out a second mortgage to fund his very expensive offices. He was threatened with lawsuits for poaching, but he had such a perfect frozen face of rage and cruelty that people flinched and blinked at the idea of taking him on in court. They feared the kinds of lawyers he would hire, the kind of counter-suits he would file and the vicious rumours he would spread. Like a shark in the ocean, frictionless hunting was his element.

Once, when legal action was threatened over lunch, John replied:

“Hey, would you rather face a big dog on land – like a rabid husky or a pit bull – or a tiny two-foot shark in the deep ocean?”

His aggressor had been bewildered. “What?”

John had picked at his white teeth with a toothpick, stretching back his cheeks so his molars were visible.

“Most people choose the shark. That’s stupid. That will get you killed. With the dog you can climb a tree, get to safety. Throw a rock. Hit it with a stick. Even if it gets on you, you can gouge an eye.” He laughed. “Both, if you’re lucky. You’re both in your element, right? On land. Used to gravity and momentum...” John leaned forward. “But in the ocean, you’re in the shark’s world. Right? What are you going to do? It can just circle you and be patient. One little *chomp* every half hour. Every hour. Then you’re bleeding. Even if more sharks don’t come, you can’t really fight it. It can come up from below. And when it bites, you get weaker and the shark gets stronger. You’ve got to use your arms to stay afloat. No trees to

climb. No rocks to throw. Just bleeding and waiting and panicking.” John leaned further forward. “You just have to *think* about it... Right?”

The lunch ended abruptly. No legal action ensued.

John let out his feral side only occasionally, but with such intensity – and always without apology – that it could never be forgotten.

John had once eaten a bad banana, and had avoided them for the next five years. He had resolutely refused to bike on roads after the narrow wheel of his 10-speed got lodged in a sewage grate – this was before they all got replaced with diagonal slots.

The battles between Robert and his father were the stuff of family legend. John was always demanding that his sons take advanced adult courses in night school – Robert took a course in computer architecture, but spend the night classes programming a space game - in the language BASIC no less, which meant it was crushingly slow – and he was rebuked by the teacher for playing a game – even though he stopped playing in order to show the source code.

John bragged about this for months – “My son is doing adult computer classes” – until Robert finally told him that he never finished it – he just went to the mall across the street when dropped off and wandered around – but John was strangely Zen about it all. Bragging rights had been achieved, after all, and it wasn’t as if anyone he had told about Robert’s course would demand a transcript for proof. Doubt and skepticism were so ‘lower class’...

John attracted employees by endlessly talking about ‘excellence’ and ‘dedication’ and ‘commitment’ – and he paid well on an annualized basis – but woe to any employee who calculated his or her hourly rate after all the endless overtime was factored in.

John lured employees into working 50-70 hours a week by creating an abstract – and largely imaginary, to be honest – ‘time bank,’ wherein overtime stacked up and could be traded in for days off.

This appeasement technique was wildly impractical – the workload was so intense that days off for, say, hernia surgery, were grudging and theoretical, since interoffice emails – and even calls – would pile up that night, and into the next day.

To his credit, John never referred to his company as a 'family' – but that was because even his most idealistic employees would have laughed at the idea. John was so focused, so intense, so supernaturally wedded to the cult of 'excellence' that the type of Fezziwig bonus benevolence that 'family' companies manifested would have been ridiculously incomprehensible.

John was all about the *job* – the *job* was the local cult deity, the stone Aztec altar where youth, fertility, eyesight and relationships were all sacrificed under the iron knives of professional intensity.

In former eras, John would have been a slit-helmeted warlord, charging from the semi-brave middle of his horse-thundering army, screaming at rusty blades and faltering hearts, split on the knife-edge of life or death, victory or enslavement, conquest or a cut throat.

If the *job* was dodging spears and beheading the hesitant, John would have been perfect – he came from the same stock that ensured that the sun never set on the British Empire – able to sharpen souls with stirring words, and wring murder out of even the gentle with the passion of his bladed tongue.

Alas, the age of conquest was past, and men like John were shuffled into the realms of narrow-eyed exhortations under fluorescent lights, whipping the inexperienced into frenzied attacks on evasive numbers, endlessly updated regulations and over-complicated spreadsheets.

Tax season was the peak of his annual battle, and he savaged the 'unprofessional' for wanting sleep and hobbies and maybe a few scraps of love. He turned accounting into a war with competitors. 'Laziness,' the demands of sleep and sex and friendship – all had to be sacrificed for the sake of the *job*...

John made very good money, which he dutifully turned over to his wife to spend on all the useless bric-a-brac that makes up ninety percent of the modern economy. On the rare occasions that Jean could wrangle him into a mall, John would wander like Genghis Khan at a yoga retreat, shocked and appalled at all the useless and ridiculous crap that women stuffed into their homes. *Like magpies with soda-can tabs*, he thought, as his wife asked him to rate three different lamps at the Bombay Company.

John would think back on his student days, when he slept on a broken futon and woke up one morning with a pigeon on his chest. He collected coupons and froze submarine sandwiches to eat later – always forgetting to defrost them in time and having to crunch his way through the frigid mess as he ran to class.

Was he happier now, or then?

John was self-aware enough – just – to understand the dangers of nostalgia, but the plain fact is that he *was* happier back then. Life was simpler, he didn't have to endlessly juggle other people's needs and wants and mindlessly nod at their incomprehensible desires.

*I was happier then, but I would not be happy if I were still **there**...*

That was the general curse of later middle age. When John was 25, he was doing a post-graduate degree in accounting, and he got his own permanent desk at the library – right by an impossibly tall window that faced a lush Toronto park. He would read his books and take his notes in a giant couch, warmed in a soft summer haze, until he drifted off to gentle and pleasant naps. He had no car – not even a transit pass – he just biked everywhere, summer or winter; spending almost nothing and needing even less. He was a monk of numbers and deferred ambition.

John did not study to get rich, but to be practical. He once came across an article about a man who had fought in the Second World War, who said that his war years were the best years of his life. It was incomprehensible to John in a way - but from another angle, he deeply understood it.

He felt a sudden rage one evening, picking up yet more 2-for-1 sub sandwiches, when the James Brown song "This is a Man's World" came on the tinny speakers.

"Bull!" he muttered, suddenly aware of how far the world had strayed from his ancestors. The ancient world of farming, of hunting and singing and taking days off to kneel and contemplate life and love and the eternal mysteries – how trampled by high-heeled pumps that world now was!

The world was run by red tape and caution and rules and con-goddamned-sideration! Sensitivity and empathy and caressing and protecting feelings – that was the estrogen quicksand of the modern world, and he felt a deep testicular revulsion at the streets and the stores and the crazy people that women had clamoured to be let out of asylums and all the women with debt-laden fake degrees being well-subsidized to consume garbage and never produce babies.

John walked past the stores, across the grimy pavement with its pink flatware of age-old bubble gum – and he looked at the shops, at who they served and what they sold. He walked past the museum, past the prom-dress vanity boutiques and Italian coffee bars and dessert cafes and flower shops and it was all so *girly* and he vowed to walk until he found a store for men – just for men – not fashion shops selling what women liked to see men wearing, but something for men alone...

And there was nothing. Nothing at all.

The world of men is dead – we live in a soft claustrophobic womb now...

His own father – back from the war – handed over his paycheck and drank softly, steadily. His mother spent and nagged, driving his father deeper into drink and John out into the world the moment he could. After the cursed Grade 13 he skipped home – and town – for a year of manual labour and recovery from the estrogen overdoses that shape modern manhood into blind surrender or rebellion – nothing so extreme can provoke anything in between.

And he vowed to make a world for men – for excellence and dedication and commitment and the serious evisceration of anything sensitive and feminine and over-solicitous.

So the night that Jean complained about him complaining, John remembered his vow – hard to recall, since the world is always designed to distract us from integrity – and thought: *complaining is feminine* – and he quit the next day, and never explained or complained ever again.

John required this of his sons as well. He lectured them on the foolishness of complaining – said it was the job of women to complain, and men to shut up and make things right.

“Complaints come out of the stupid theory that life is supposed to be *fair*. ‘Fair’ is just a weak word used by idiots to claim something they didn’t earn. Never complain, boys. You want something, go out and get it. *Make* it! Make it yourself, or make the case why it should happen. My company’s accountant – yeah, dentists need dentists – wants some computerized system upgrade. Nags me, reminds me, sends me brochures. And I keep telling him the same damn thing. ‘You want me to buy it, make the case!’ But he’s the single son of a single mother. Useless for that kind of stuff. His mother just complained and got stuff. He doesn’t have a clue how to make a robust case. A *male* case. ‘I’m unhappy, fix my problems!’” John shuddered. “Euch! But he’s a wizard with numbers, knows the law – and doesn’t know his own worth, so he’s gold to me! He wants me to give him money, and I keep telling him: Give *me* money and we’ll talk. How much time and money will this software upgrade save me? It costs \$20,000, plus 3k a year in support, how does that put money in my pocket? Is it going to save me 10k a year? So it pays for itself in just under three years – don’t forget the support costs, boys – so then he’s putting money in my pocket, 7k a year going forward...” John held up a warning finger. “But, when does it need another upgrade? Five years, another 20k? Not worth it. But he wants it, so he nags for it.” John laughed harshly. “Not to me anymore, but to others. Tries to get me *en-circled*. Manipulative –

haha, the word 'man' shouldn't even be *in* that word, let alone at the start! *Womanipulative* more like! Don't ever be like that, boys. Earn it, or forego it. There's nothing else..."

The pattern of sons – the eldest the conformist, the younger the rebel – held true in John and Jean's household. John's prickly nature – excess masculinity perhaps – provoked excess femininity on his wife's part. She railed against his dominance, but needed his dominance too much to effectively undermine it. She loved the mansion, the infinite credit cards, the country club and vacations. She learned to live without much love, but this left her disaffected, discontented. She could not show any of this, of course, since that would have torpedoed her battleship of infinite status, so all her friends thought she was blessed with affection, rather than cursed with alienating social altitude.

Mothers starved of affection always target a vulnerable child. They hold on to the childhood of that offspring far too long, trapping him (in this case) in limitless language, twirling their hair and spilling secrets and thoughts and impressions like endless amber rolling over a paralyzed insect.

Any movement of the boy – of Shane – to escape the descending nets of his mother's rambling provoked instant impatience and aggression. (Once, in Boy Scouts, his tent softly collapsed and folded over him, releasing all the rainwater and almost suffocating him, and he leapt awake from a dream of his mother that perfectly embodied her garrulous exploitations.)

And so Jean sat between Shane and the escape door in a sunroom, in the movie theatre room – and even, if she felt particularly needy, in his own room. She would bring him some milk in the morning, then milk him dry with snared listening. He would gulp his milk and want more, but Jean would ignore him, and the white-rimmed glass would hang in his hand, until he retreated into the corner of the wall, piling up his blankets in a futile imaginary wall of defense...

"So, your father has seen fit to book a spa day for me, Shaney – and I know it's not for me – not by a long shot – and it's just because it's a holiday weekend, and he can't do three days with me in a row. It's the Executive Package, haha, which is rich because *nobody* can do four hours at a spa on a Monday if they're an *executive*! And he sits and grins at me like I'm an idiot - a child - and can't see *exactly* what he's up to! Sipping his coffee in that stained college mug that I've thought of 'dropping' about a thousand times! 'For you, my dear, because you work so hard!' It's not *clearly* sarcastic enough that I can – respond, fight back, whatever. But it's a dig. I'm working hard on my business, but he doesn't care!" Jean shuddered. "I look at this time when you and Rob are gone, out in the world, and it's just me and this house and that – ghost, that money machine... I do love him, of course, he's given us the world, but it's like living with a lottery ticket..." She laughed. "That's unfair, because a lottery ticket wouldn't keep me – confined. Touchless... Sorry, that's not for you... How are things at school? How are your friends? Is there any – girl that you like? I haven't noticed you drawing so much lately, why is that? I know Rob is your father's shadow, but you're more – like me. You *yearn*..." Jean laughed again. "Like a Disney princess, 'I want, I want...' Men like your father run the world, they make everything – but we make everything - worth *while*, you know? A house isn't a home without paintings on the wall. He builds the house, we hang the paintings. *He'd* live in a cave with straw for a bed if it wasn't for – people like us! But only the house seems to matter. That's all that is – appreciated." Jean's face turned suddenly bitter, and Shane backed himself even more tightly into the corner – still holding his empty milk glass. "And he gets *his* appreciation, that's for sure! His income and customers and employees fawning all over him, like a drill sergeant of dollars! His awards, all on the wall – like a dozen of them, and only one picture of his family – me in the background – on his desk!" She snapped her fingers. "That's what I'm worth. And I got him a lovely framed portrait from our wedding day, and delivered it to his office, looking so pretty, and he just – scowled and said he didn't want people to see how much he's aged. And he hasn't aged that badly, damn him! It's different for men, you'll see... You just

slowly turn into these – wooden natives, Indians. We just bloat and fold over and sag. You just harden – at least he does. We get wrinkles, you just get – character lines. And I would be happier – believe it or not – if he showed at least *some* interest in something other than work – not even money, he doesn't care as much about that, it's just to stuff in my mouth and shut me up I think sometimes – even if he flirted with – other women. He could you know, he had 'mad game' – as you would say – when he was young. Not 'younger' anymore – just 'young' – we crossed that wrinkled Rubicon years ago. And so I get wrinkles, he just gets – character creases. Unfair!"

And she would go on and on, for reasons that Shane could never understand. What was the point of all these words? What did they achieve? They flowed over him; he was an embedded pebble in a storm-swollen, leaf-laden stream, and he was trapped and helpless - and airless - under turning sticks and tumbling minnows and rippling storm clouds half a universe above...

And when he was ten, Shane had to have a scalp cyst lanced, which was surprisingly pain-free - at least after the numbing injections around it – and he thought at once of his mother's endless rambling – inflicted only on him, which rhymed with his name – SHAME – and thought it was that words somehow swelled and grew within her like an infection, and she had to release them before they overwhelmed her, like vomiting after food poisoning...

Which meant that Shane was a kind of poison - receptacle.

When he was doing a river walk with a shy girl he liked, a frog jumped on her, and she screamed and threw it away – and it landed on his head, comically, and peed down his neck. Shane had laughed – not wanting to alarm the girl – and released the frog, but he spent the rest of the walk down the churning river – he was catching crayfish, she stayed on the bank – railing against his inner mother. Words grew within her, like tumors or infections, and she threw them at him - *into* him – rather than be bloated and destroyed by their endless multiplication.

And Jean didn't need agreement or pushback – or even acknowledgement it seemed – she just needed trapped carbon dioxide in the vicinity. Her barbed exhalations of rambling language just needed other exhalations – slow, measured, cornered – to merge with and overwhelm.

And so - Shane was inevitably drawn to art. He was so traumatized by language that he could not write, or sing, or act. He got lost in his own imagination when trapped by his mother, so immobility and creativity merged within him. He drew mostly in defense to start with – when he smelled his mother's afternoon decaf floating down the hall towards him, he would pull open a sketchpad and pencils – always ready, like a chameleon's camouflage – and tell his mother that he was in the middle of drawing.

About half the time, this would work. The decaf would pause before his door, almost sniffing like a predator striving to determine whether the rabbit was too deep in its warren, then slowly recede – perhaps waiting for him to emerge...

The other half of the time, the door would open and the chilling words would enter: "You draw too much, take a break!"

Jean was apparently an expert in every form of excess except her own.

And then Shane would be trapped, staring at his drawings of a sad old man lost in a maze of hedgerows, and he would hear his father and younger brother yelling at the hockey game downstairs – knowing that the predation upstairs was spattering the jugular optimism of his young soul all over the off-white walls – the ceiling even – and not caring at all... It was like ancient Christian conquistadors whistling and strolling past the bloody altars of bitter-mouthed Aztec priests disassembling the chests of drugged children for the sake of their darkest deities...

Shane *resented* that he was stuffed into the yawning maw of his mother's language – there was no compensation, no reward, no

thanks... *Here, take my wife, kid, so I can get some fun out of my scraps of free time...*

And so Shane was *not* given over to sports the way that Rob was. Shane was *not* encouraged to date. Shane was *not* driven to friend's houses for sleepovers and weekend hangouts. Shane had to be kept in the house, like a little tow-haired fire extinguisher for the slow maternal word-flames that always erupted, but never consumed.

You appease the matriarch, we'll do the manly stuff...

It was hard not to become bitter at the ease at which Shane was sacrificed to maternal loneliness – or the fact that Jean's loneliness was to a large part generated by her selfishness in the pursuit of the pretense of 'conversation.'

How many lonely people are isolated by their selfishness? No one wants to be used as a lined-bag receptacle for endless words, so the vicious circle is inevitable, endless... If Jean had shown more interest – any interest really – in others, they would have enjoyed her company. Desperate grabbing in a dangerous ocean does not result in an excess of rescue...

Shane grew to feel that, since he was sacrificed, he was owed... Justice required that he be paid – but to be paid, the debt had to be acknowledged, which did not seem about to happen at *all*...

The dismal physics of dysfunction in families only operate if they are never named. And the whole family resisted Shane growing up and moving away, since that would unleash his mother's words on everyone else. He was the dam, the dyke, the Van Allen belt, the shades in the face of the eternal eclipse, and he had to stay *exactly* where he was, so that the selfishness of everyone around him – his mother, to talk, his brother and father, to avoid his mother's talking – could continue...

And the day, that day, that changed everything – or revealed everything, it's always hard to tell – was the day that Shane asked for something, and chickened out of everything.

John had the cold-hearted practical man's disdain for creativity – practicality is about control; creativity is about relinquishing control. Practicality defines the goal, and the steps to achieve it – creativity unravels an impulse, a deeper intuited truth, and feels its way forward like an octopus exploring coral. Practicality is the ambition; creativity is the dream...

John always felt that creativity was the consolation prize for impractical souls – *You can't actually **build** a bridge, but maybe you can **paint** a picture of the bridge that competent men actually put together. You can't have a dynamic, dominant and heroic life, but perhaps you can scribble a story about imaginary heroes, or sketch how their armour might have looked...*

The outlandish nerds into Star Trek, Star Wars and comic books all worshipped heroes - yet were the farthest creatures from heroism that could be conceived of.

Imaginary heroism was like a vampire to John – it sucked and drained and provided the *feeling* of courage, while strengthening the neurotic musculature of cowardice to Olympian levels.

Pornography for the soulless...

He had scorn for the 'scribbling' (as he called it) – and impatience, and incomprehension, and scorn – he viewed Shane as a loser, a dark-room-dwelling mole - as a failed beta for the successful launch of *Robert*.

The circularity of this was lost on John, who viewed his own life and status as the ideal – and thus viewed all divergences of opinion or outcomes as woefully inferior – to be pitied and insulted – and even encouraged perhaps – but never accepted as equal.

Thus does an athlete who wins Olympic gold view all other athletes and their choices – *Not bad, but not **gold** either bro!*

This was why John won in business – and why he lost with Shane...

It is very hard for children to overcome the impressions their parents have of them. If your father considers you a loser, any kind of

winning means breaking the bond and outgrowing his contempt. People who demand that you stay small to conform to their vanities – well, their expectations require that for them to be something, you have to be less – or nothing, ideally.

John criticized his eldest son for cleaving too much to his mother – but never lifted a finger to rescue him from her. He scorned his son for his creativity and art – but never shouldered him into the practical realm of empirical achievements. To confront the underlying reasons for Shane's behaviour – well, that was a self-sown landmine that would cost him far more than an arm and a leg.

It was a very early morning when half of the truth came out – a dawn time of honesty, before the distractions of the day do their sunlit dirty work on any shreds of integrity...

John was up early because he was destined to be a savage soldier, but was born in the wrong age. Getting up early pleased his masochistic puritanism, gave him status at work, and helped him avoid the emotional quicksand he felt his family was always trying to envelop him in – *except for Robert, of course, that surface Paladin of noble appearance...*

Shane was up early because he wanted to talk to his father. He was 16.

"Morning Dad," he said, moving slowly into the bright kitchen. His father turned from the coffee maker in surprise.

"What the hell are you doing up?" he demanded, then narrowed his eyes. "You've been to bed, right?"

Shane sighed. "I'm in my PJs, dad..."

"Well I don't know..." said John. "Do you do – coffee?"

"No thanks..." Shane sat heavily at the breakfast table, next to the dying ferns and vines that Jean forbade anyone else to water.

The awkward pause commenced – a pause that Shane interpreted as critical, and his father experienced as intrusive.

"You want something?"

"Yeah... You got a couple minutes?"

"Couple *of* minutes. We're not in a trailer park for God's sake!"

"Ok..." Shane took a deep breath and pushed his hair back from his forehead. "So I'm – university is coming up, right, and I – I know you don't really like the art stuff, but that's my thing, dad. My – calling? Goofy, I know... It's what I do, and it's what needs to be done. You find cool things in numbers, in business I guess. I find cool things in lines and colours and – like a whole visual. And I'm *good* at it dad. I don't just doodle. What do you say?" Shane swallowed, his cheeks red. "'Scribbling...'. But it's not that. I get – real interest. Mr. Shaw says I'm really good. I had a crowd at the Art Fair, like 'ooing' and 'aahing.' Yeah, it's a crappy Art Fair, but if I'm the best in school, I might be the best – somewhere else..."

John scowled. "Don't use up your few minutes on this kind of rambling, Shane. Have some respect for my time."

"I want to..." Shane shook his head rapidly. "No, you're right... Listen... I'm going to art school."

John nodded slowly. "And..?"

Shane blinked. "And – it's not free..."

"And..?"

"Well... Like, you make too much money to – for me to get a scholarship. Right? And I – I don't have enough savings to pay for it all. I mean, it's like – tuition. Room and board, unless I want to live on the TTC. Actually, you can't even get there from here dad..." Shane was suddenly emotional. "It's – the suburbs. Of course, you know. But I need to be – downtown, right?"

John sat down slowly, setting his coffee next to a coaster depicting dancing ducks. Somewhere upstairs, Jean started having a nightmare...

"Your. Point..." he said slowly.

Shane frowned in confusion. His mouth was dry, his heart pounded. "I need – I need – Dad!"

John laughed grimly. "My God..." he murmured, a half-smile twisting his lips. "You want to be an artist. Like every other idiot and his dog. Ok... That's being the – ultimate entrepreneur..." He sighed. "You have to *sell yourself*, son. Do you know that? Do you? You have to pound the pavement holding your heart in your hand and - *beg* people to buy your art. To let you even show it. You think my company was just *handed* to me? No! I hustled like a son of a bitch! I worked it out once. I spent 82% of my time begging people – companies - to be my clients. I was 28 years old for Chrissakes! Who cared about me? Some clients from my old boss, sure – but then *he* came at me with lawyers – and I stood alone. Who believed in me? Just me. Not even your mother!" John's mouth was a bitter creased line. "And I had to *make* people believe in me. No one can judge you – at least at first – they only judge how you judge yourself!" His eyes darkened. "And I didn't sit in my PJs across from an investor and say..." He imitated his son. "'Uh, uh, I need, I need, could you maybe... Uh! Uh!' Jesus! I might want to fund this – art stuff, but..." John sighed, obviously fighting for self-control. "Like when Robert had that paper route, he *hustled*, remember? I'm not saying he's some golden boy, but he - gets it. Up and down the street, getting people to subscribe. He doubled that route in what – two months? So if *he* wants to go into business, be a lawyer, good for him! I'm all in. Have you ever tried to sell your art, Shane? You go to these - what, Renaissance Festivals? Are there any artists there? People at the farmers market sell their – wares, right? There's got to be some way to monetize this stuff. I don't know, it's not *my* field. But you want to do this for a job, right?" John rubbed his fingers together. "For money, for an income. How are you going to do that? Years from now? *After* art school? Why would I fund someone – or anything – who can't get off their ass and get behind what they make?"

Shane's lower lip was trembling. "It's not a – paper route, dad..."

John pointed a finger at Shane's face. "Don't! Don't be obtuse. You know what I am talking about. Like – if you wanted to be a rapper, right? That – LL Cool J, I was reading about him. 16 years old! He didn't just record his crap in his room – he paid to get his records made, then he drove everywhere, to every club and DJ, begging them to play his – music, I guess. Took years of persistent effort. It's not about making art, kid – it's about selling art – you can make it, sure. Can you sell it? Or is it just – a hobby? Are you a dedicated singer, or is it just – karaoke? I'm not funding a hobby, son."

"Well, but..."

John waved a hand. "Go on, say it. Let's have it out."

"Did you make a lot of money as an – accountant, or – entrepreneur, before your father paid for your – school?"

"Go on..."

Shane shivered. "It's – sorry, I'm not emotional, just cold... You got funded, and *then* you proved yourself. That's all I'm asking – for..."

John laughed harshly. "My dad was useless – yeah, he paid a bit, but... Look. Shane. You don't... Accountants don't need to prove themselves as accountants as teenagers – except for not – dating... Accountants – who the hell wants to be an accountant? Everyone needs one, no one wants to be one – so the market solves itself. Yeah, I had to sell myself later on, but I – I got a job out of university because I got great marks and I was eager. And even then - man, it was a recession, I had to pound some serious pavement, and ended up getting my first job by fluke, because – you'll find this funny I bet – because one of the hiring managers was a customer of mine, from back in the bygone days when I used to deliver newspapers. And he remembered me, the old bastard. Paper always on time, rain or shine. So he hired me. And when I went solo, 99% of people didn't want to give me the time of day. Being an artist is being an entrepreneur. The art – yeah, you've got it. I think, I guess. I like some of it. But – hustling? Walking over broken glass to get your stuff out into the world?" John leaned forward. Shane suddenly

realized that his father had not brushed his teeth, and the fetid coffee-laced morning breath gave him sudden nausea. He imagined scraps of zebra hanging from his father's yellow-rimmed teeth...

John said: "I don't see it in you, son." He shrugged. "Sorry. Not trying to be harsh. Just real. Honest. You want to take the road less travelled, you better have a good map and an endless will."

"How - much did you have to pay, dad, for university?"

John leaned back and whistled. "Five hundred dollars a year."

"And you got – loans? Grants?"

"Grants," said John promptly. "A grand. And I paid \$150 a month for room and board. I lived in a frat house at first, then off campus. Off campus was \$175, \$88 each for me and Rich. I could get by on about \$400 a month, all in."

"And you worked summers?"

"Yeah... Yeah, of course. Waitering. Then temping. I made good cash. More than enough to pay for school..."

"And I want to work. But dad... Do you know how much tuition is?"

"No."

"Like \$2,500."

John's eyes widened. "Per semester?"

"No, that's for the year... And renting a room in Toronto?"

"No idea."

"Like \$300. Not high end, just a step above mold and druggie roommates. I've done the math, I know you like – numbers. It's over \$10,000 a year. 7.5k living costs, 2.5k tuition, \$500 additional fees..."

"So – a four-year degree..."

"Yeah. I know, over 40k... Yours was 7k a year, 28k in total. It's 70 percent more – but wages haven't gone up that much since you

were – younger, dad. You know, wages have stagnated. So it's like way more for me..."

"Over forty thousand..." murmured John. "Jesus H... That's more than a whole house in Toronto..."

"Yeah, way back in the day... I mean - you knew about college for me, dad. You're the big accountant, don't you have a college fund saved up for me – what are those tax-free things?"

"RESPs," said John distantly.

"And you got paid, like a dollar an hour in the 60s? More when you were temping of course... \$2?"

"Yeah, I got that..." John's eyes were distant, processing. "Wow..."

"So 60 hours paid for your tuition... 18 for rent and – food, at the frat. I..." Shane's eyes were wet. "And you're too rich for me to get grants... I can't – do it, dad! You could... It's a different world."

"Yeah, OK. I'll have to run those numbers, but... Jesus! I'm out of the loop, sorry..." John cleared his throat, a vulnerable look flashing across his face. "But... But, ok, you're right, it's a different world, ok... But – so you have to adapt to that, right? Money meant more back then, but... That means you can't – screw around. You get it?"

"Dad!" cried Shane. "I'm not trying to – screw around! It's my dream..."

"Yeah, but it's my – funding!" The vulnerability vanished; the stern lines reappeared. "So – things are different... So *you* have to be different!"

"But you keep voting for..."

"What? What?"

"Well, you keep voting for – more and more. Stuff, right? You always told me – us – about the national debt, dad..."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"The national debt..." murmured Shane miserably. "More and more... Welfare, health care. Migrants. Foreign aid. More and more. Dilutes the money, right? You remember that talk – about counterfeiting? 'Bad for art, bad for money,' you said."

"That's just – economics," muttered John, with a guilty flash of Boomer regret.

"That's what I inherit..." said Shane.

"You're blaming me for the Liberals?" demanded John. "I can't promote the Conservatives - I'd get no clients!"

"So you – have to make – compromises... Right?"

"Everyone has to!" snapped John. "That doesn't mean – every mad dream has to eat up the price of a whole *house!*"

"I guess..." Shane cleared his throat. "I guess I'm just asking for – for my education. You got some – money. I mean – dad, you got grants. You got grants, and I get – debt... I mean, you support this – system that buries me in tens of thousands of dollars of debt just for being born... That's over half a house in your – youth..."

"Stuff that self-pity," said John dangerously. "It's – repulsive!"

Shane shook his head slowly, his cheeks red, his eyes watering.

The conversation died in their eyes and ears.

"Why..." he said.

"Why? Why – what?" demanded John.

Why did you abandon me to mom? Shane desperately wanted to ask.

But that would be – blackmail?

No...

Far too honest.

Far too real.

His father's vanity would turn that question back on Shane. *Why did you want to hang out with your **mommy** all the time?*

It was a no-win situation.

All Shane could do was hope and pray for an eruption of conscience.

None of his hopes or prayers were answered, however, so he embraced nihilism, worked incredibly hard all summer, and sailed into the inevitable dark arms of Regina...

Chapter 8

Robert hated insomnia, because it made it harder to act jovial and energetic during the day.

Shane had a conscience; his father did not. He could not tell about his mother, because she was so outward-focused that it was hard to penetrate any of her inner processes – it was like trying to see what was beyond a searchlight pointing right at you.

Robert wondered on occasion if he had a conscience. Chloe had one, for sure – he felt the agony she experienced when breaking up with him – the regret, the concern. Her tenderness towards Shane was unmistakable.

I kind of loved and hated her for that... thought Robert in the dark. Occasional lights swept over the ceiling from the headlights of turning cars – reminding him of endlessly sitting in the back seat of the family car with Shane as a boy. Shane pointed at the windshield wipers going back and forth, back and forth – forever – one approaching the other, the other arcing away.

“That’s us...” whispered Shane – and again, a turning car lit up his face through the rain-streaked window, rivulets coursing down his cheeks like a waterfall of sorrow.

They used to pick rivulets at the top of the window and watch them race down, to see which of theirs would win, but the game got annoying to Robert, because it was so – *passive!* Years later, he realized that Shane liked the game because he never really won against Robert – either Robert didn’t play Shane’s games, or Shane lost to Robert’s. Robert always shied away from any sphere he could not win in – so Shane loved the rivulet ‘game’ – and also the ‘which one is highest’ card game ‘War’ – “Not even a game!” sneered Robert, grabbing the entire deck. “Let’s play 52-card pickup!”

“Sounds great!” cried Shane eagerly.

Robert had hurled all the cards across the room. "Go pick 'em up, Shaney! All 52!"

Shane had gone to gather them all together, since he would have gotten in trouble otherwise.

Robert felt contempt for his older brother – a radioactive wave that seemed to leech the strength from Shane's bone marrow. Robert had seen a terrifying figure once at a coffee shop, when his mother argued with a barista about filling up her personal 'to go' mug instead of killing dolphins with paper cups – and Robert had seen – from his relatively low vantage – an *old fool*. A man in his – Robert was too young to even guess his decade, but super-old – was giggling and joking with another barista – pathetic, begging for attention, exorbitantly tipping just to get a forced laugh from a pretend granddaughter – and Robert had felt his young spine chill with terror.

That one can be old, and still a fool...

The next year, Robert had been at a movie, and listened to two old women bickering about the number of calories in popcorn – *Depends on the amount of butter really!* – and had turned around to see a *very* old woman arguing with a merely old woman. The merely old woman said: "Mom fat isn't bad for you! Read something published after 1950!"

The nagging and insulting had continued in whispered intensity all through the previews – and Robert had sunk down into his seat, appalled to his bones that people could get that old and still be petty idiots! He wished his father were there, to turn and snarl at them to "Grow up and shut up!"

But he was just a kid, so they would have turned on him ferociously, then called the manager, whined and lied and gotten him kicked out – and he really wanted to see "The Devil and Max Devlin."

You can't fight manipulators, his instincts warned him, because no one can see lies, or liars...

It's why he hid downstairs with his dad when Shane and his mother were upstairs. He didn't even really care about hockey – it was so hard to follow the puck on the curved screen – but he knew that pretending to cheer downstairs was infinitely better than being droned to death upstairs.

His mother had tried that rambling stuff with him, but his dad had half-stormed into the sunroom and rescued him, making up – it always amazed Rob, how fluidly and effortlessly his father lied – a baseball tryout at school the next morning, and so the need to practice catching and throwing in the back yard until the moon rose and the satellites drifted through the over-dark – only visible to Robert's young eyes...

His father never chatted, never asked questions. He observed keenly, barked orders for improvement, encouraged *excellence* – and nothing else, really. He assembled Robert's skills; just as Jean disassembled Shane's connection with the outside world. When coaching, John no more *chatted with Robert* than he would have started a conversation with a cabinet he was assembling. Don't engage, just grimly build...

Now, as a new lawyer, Robert's days were so busy – reading, red-lining, asking and researching – that his mind only came out to play at night. He had been working at Warren and Baron Legal Solutions for just over a year, and already needed glasses. Peter Warren had assigned him to an underling to be 'brought along' – but had recently started including Robert in meetings with clients – "Just to observe, don't talk!"

Robert's days felt like being shot out of a cannon, flying through curved computer screens and past heavy law-library books, past scowling faces and imminent-disaster scenarios – and then landing on a sticky bus seat at the end of the day, hoping that he would not be followed and attacked on the lure of his expensive suits.

Helen got home before him, since she never had to work late. She was a secretary to the CEO of a suit company, who constantly flirted with her and told her she was destined for better things. She would make up grand goals just to wind him up – “I want to be a filmmaker!” – and he would offer to introduce her to the right people. She would always find ways to avoid these meetings – “Still working on that screenplay” – and he would get impatient, and tell her that there was more than one way to get where you wanted to be in life.

“Touch your ear!” he said once.

Helen raised her left hand and touched her left ear.

“That’s one way,” he said, flashing her a grin. “Check this out!” He reached his left hand over his head and touched his right ear.

He looked so ridiculous that Helen had to bite her cheek to keep from laughing out loud.

“See?” he said smugly. “I’m touching my ear, right?”

“Right...” she murmured, apparently lost in rank admiration at the Zen wisdom of her guru boss.

“Think outside the box, you can end up on *this* side of the desk, my dear!”

But you inherited this company from your daddy, thought Helen, but of course kept her mouth shut, because bonus season was almost upon them. She knew that her boss gave her extra to help *encourage her potential* – which she deeply enjoyed spending on lingerie for Robert’s eyes only. Cucking pathetically desperate men was a constant hobby of hers.

Another car swept by the window – the rent was cheap, but the tiny house was on a corner, so turning drivers constantly stared through the windows in daylight, and headlights lit up the room at night.

"Go to sleep!" whispered Helen suddenly, startling Robert from his reveries. "Why are you up?"

"I don't know!" said Robert peevishly. "Why are you up?"

"I always know when you're not sleeping..." said Helen shortly. She plumped her pillow and sat up slightly. "Is there something on your mind?" she asked slowly, mechanically.

Good fake empathy! thought Robert – not without admiration. "I'm thinking about the past..."

"That's a great way to wreck your future, bro!"

"Peter..." He sighed. "You know, I'm doing these meetings now."

"Yeah, the monk-meetings, where you can't speak..."

"Right. I catch him – looking at me. Peter. Like... Even more than the client sometimes."

"He's gay for you. I said that, first time I met him. My gaydar is beyond reproach."

Robert laughed softly. "No – bi, maybe. Not gay."

"Same difference."

"Oh I hate that phrase."

"Live with it."

There was a pause. They were barely play-fighting, nothing personal.

"So... There's this guy, I'll call him Joe. Today... So he's being sued. Nothing criminal, although maybe it should be. He runs this real-estate development company. He's been getting investment for a housing development. Nice brochures, good web site, great prospectus. Building is supposed to start next month. He's told everyone – his investors – that the permits are all secured. But he only applied like last month. And it's in – well let's just say it's a year at best till anything gets approved..."

Helen's eyes were dark, amused. She played with the cotton rose on her breastbone.

"So this other guy, a lead investor, he goes to the building site, and of course it's just – a field. A big field. Joe did buy the land, so it's fenced, but of course there's nothing there... No workers, no – I don't know, what are those little construction buildings called? No machines, no diggers – nothing. And this investor goes and hires a private investigator, digs up some kinda shady stuff on Joe..."

"So? You defend your clients, right? Outcome is up to the jury."

Robert smiled, slightly sadly. "Yeah, no, I'm not being some kind of cliché babe. I don't care about defending – well, helping defend – people who are guilty as hell. That's the job. Surgeons shouldn't be surprised at blood, I get it..."

"So – what?" Helen was still impatient, but now also a little curious.

"So I'm grinding through discovery, and I come across a hidden folder on Joe's server. I just happened to have 'show hidden/system' files turned on, because..."

Helen waved a hand. "Ok, don't 'nerd' me back to sleep, kiddo!"

"Right... So I go into this hidden folder..."

"Why?"

"Didn't even think about it. I saw it, I might have to testify. So I go in, and there's a bunch of documents and emails..."

"And you just – dug in?"

Robert nodded.

"Well that was dumb."

Robert nodded again. "Well, can't undo it now..."

"Sooo – what was in this buried treasure?"

"Oh, it's terrible... It's Joe telling his accountant that it's all mostly smoke and mirrors. Saying he doesn't have the permits yet – and

telling him to wire \$500,000 to an account in the Cayman Islands. Seriously shady."

"So, you turn that over... Does it become fraud?"

"I... doubt it. Could be. He loses, for sure... Looks pretty bad for us."

Helen smirked. "Oh, but you get such a great reputation for integrity and following with honour the glorious letter of the law!"

Chloe would never have said that... thought Robert suddenly. *She would have taken this seriously...*

"What?" demanded Helen, suddenly suspicious.

"Oh – it's just that – I told Peter about all this..."

"Oh, crap!"

"Yeah... And he said it's all just – draft documents. Incomplete - rambling, like a diary I think he said. And to just – delete it. He gave me a disk that deletes files so they can't be recovered. And he said to take any hard copies offsite and shred them – and pay in cash."

Helen grinned. "The man is decisive!"

"I don't..." Robert hesitated. Helen's heart felt like an ice wall.

She said nothing, staring straight ahead.

Robert was silent. It was some kind of test, coming from her.

After a minute, she sighed explosively. "Please don't tell me you're having a moral crisis. I don't have a barf bag handy."

"I'm – no, I'm – cautious."

Helen pursed her lips. "Cautious is good... I mean, what are the odds of getting caught?"

"I've gone down all the avenues. Shredding is good. Burning might be better. The files are totally gone from the server, I looked that up. This program writes five sets of random data over the deleted

sectors. That could be detected on a physical audit. But they'd need cause for that. A warrant..."

"But they don't know what they don't know, right? Isn't that the beauty of discovery?"

Robert laughed. "I can see why your pervy boss always tells you your destined for bigger and better things!"

"I am big brain," said Helen simply.

"No... No one's going to find out. But I am bound by professional ethics of course. You know, the Law Society's code."

Helen barked a sharp laugh. "Oh come on! That's just for – public consumption, you know that, right? Like how we pretty people always say that looks aren't important – but we always end up with each other! It's just noises we make so we don't get lynched!"

"I'm supposed to report him... And I'm still kind of fresh out of Law School, right? It's – it feels like – cheating."

"Oh God, Robert! Life *is* cheating! Did you earn your pretty face? Did I? What about your family's money and connections? It's *all* cheating! Even our – your school smarts, my street smarts... It's all instinct and luck and – who the hell knows? Just..." She took a deep breath, to quell the eruption of her caustic cynicism. "Babe... It's just a..." She glanced at the red numbers of the alarm clock "3:33 in the morning thing. You saw – god, what was Peter's total compensation?"

"2.8 million..."

Helen laughed giddily. "Be nice not to have cars staring in our windows all the time, right? I don't care about a yacht, but some comfort, right? And he got there with his – ethics. And all his partners. That's the way the world is, babe. You don't need me to tell you that. The Liberals stole – what, a hundred million? Don't you rail against the national debt all the time? It's all theft and – cheating. You either take, or get taken from..." Her face was tight,

almost alien. "And you know who gets taken from? All the dumb people who worry about *taking*..."

"I know... I know. I think of what my dad would say. It's a real cliché... 'The only crime is getting caught.' And I don't care about this Joe guy. Or his investors really. Just a bunch of greedy Boomers wanting something for nothing. They raised kids who don't want kids, so they just need to prop up the value of their real estate... They don't care about my generation, why should I care about theirs?" He shuddered suddenly. "It's just – it gives people power over me. To break – ethics in this way. And I hate hate *hate* losing power."

"Who has power?"

"Peter, of course..."

"But he's implicated," said Helen smoothly. "He gave the orders."

"There's no proof of that. It's weird. It's like he – likes me, or wants to bring me along. Groom me..."

Helen laughed.

"But – I also know that he would dump me like day-old coffee if I proved – inconvenient... And if I try to report him, he can just turn it on me somehow. I'd need to get proof..."

"You can record him, right?"

"Yeah, that's legal... But hell on wheels, that's quite an – escalation. Taking down a senior partner. A named partner. I'd never work in the field again..."

"Well," said Helen smugly. "That's your answer then."

"What?"

"Hah – if you're honest, and follow your professional ethics, and get Peter disciplined – or disbarred – and no other lawyers will touch you with a ten-foot pole, then the whole profession is corrupt, and you either join them, or learn how to make their coffees!"

"I..." Robert started his sentence automatically, then realized he had nothing to say.

"Tell me I'm wrong! I dare you!"

Robert frowned. "Yeah..."

"You see? It's all for show. My boss is married, but it's just for show. Your dad is super-successful – just for show. Your mother got a nose-job..."

"Whoah – wait, what?"

"Oh! I guess that was girl-talk then." Helen leaned forward and spoke slowly. "Your – mother – got a – nose job!"

"Why?"

"For – show. Try to keep up, Robbie dearest."

"Wow."

"That's why you didn't see her for a few weeks last fall."

"Should I have – noticed that?"

"Well, you are a man. It was subtle. But effective."

"Ok..." Robert shook his head slightly. "Only Shane is not for – show..."

Helen nodded soberly. "Yeah. I used not to think so – suffering addict artist – but he's real. That's the consolation prize for having nothing to show... But hey, hey – Robert!"

"What?"

"Forget about being used. Revealed. You've got to grab your power."

Seeing his confusion, Helen grinned and plunged on.

"Peter wants you to do something – unethical, right? Right. So – use it. Get a leg up. Get a bonus. Do some tit-for-tat, for the love of God!"

Robert's eyes widened in the dark. "Hold – his feet to the fire?"

“Jesus, how do you think he got to where he got to? Playing by the rules? Do you love me?”

“What? Yes, of course.”

“Welllll, did you get *me* by playing by the rules? Or were you with clingy Chloe when you stalked me on the beach at Wasaga?”

Robert smiled thinly. “Damn, that bikini...”

“My figure is why we don’t have kids... Even I wasn’t playing by the rules. ‘Oh, look at little old innocent me, just doing my playful cartwheels in my red bikini!’” She laughed heartily. “It’s all a game, Robert. Don’t stop playing now – you’re way too young!”

Chapter 9

"I can't stand it anymore!" cried Derek, falling face-first onto the couch.

Even though he couldn't see her, Chloe nodded slowly.

"Take your time," she said.

After a moment, he rolled over, grinding the heels of his hands into his eye sockets.

"Oh it's all just so – so – mealy-mouthed..." He struggled to sit up. "That's the weakest kind of condemnation, but I'm far too ironic to talk about it Old-Testament style..."

She sat in an armchair, opposite him. Light from the dusty condo windows washed over them. (Dusty only on the outside, of course – Chloe kept an immaculate home...)

Derek said: "You're the moralist in the family, you know. I am – not..." he finished lamely.

Chloe said nothing.

"I just – rebel against it. Always underquoting clients, telling them – lying, Chloe – *lying* – how long something will take, then just extending and milking – everything..." His voice lowered, as if he thought the walls had ears. "And it's, like, *everywhere* babe. Vendors lie to us, we lie to clients, clients mislead us. Just a weird merry-go-round of falsehood. I feel like I'm going into meetings with Monty Python coconuts, pretending to have a horse..."

"That is tough," she said neutrally.

"I guess I thought my life would be something – more than being like some Middle Eastern street vendor hawking crap to scared tourists..."

She was quiet.

Derek glanced at her with irritation. "Nothing to say?"

Chloe smiled slowly. "I've said my piece. Many, many times..."

"Oh, I heard *that* secret sigh," he said with a scant smile.

"You have a problem, I want to help you, my lover! My husband. We exist to help each other. But if you don't want my help, I guess all I can do is listen. Right?"

"Your help is mad, Chloe. Just – mad..."

"Go on..."

Derek raked his fingers through his hair. "I can't just go – start a business. That's for – older people. More experienced people. I don't have any access to – capital. It costs like 50 grand to start an accounting business, bare minimum. Right? Where are we going to dig up that kind of scratch?" He waved his hands. "I know, I know... Take out a second mortgage..."

"That's not all..."

"Or – yeah, like sell the condo. Cash in hand. Go rent like hobo gypsies. But – we have so much invested in this place, Chloe! I can't – risk all that."

"Do you love money, Derek?"

"What?"

"Do you love money?"

"I... What?"

"I don't," said Chloe simply. "I grew up poor, now we have some money – good money, you're great at your job. Am I happier? When I was a kid, we did everything for free. Played in the woods, built forts, fished with string and curtain hangers. Climbed trees. We all got dirty and happy for free..."

Derek laughed. "That wasn't – my experience..."

"Yeah, I remember. That story of your dad's. Not really a story, but... Everything you and your sister did was like a hundred dollars. Play centers. Mall trips. Sports. Everything cost money. I've lived both sides. Am I happier with money? Yes and no. I think of our kids – what are they going to do stuck in a condo? We should rent a place with land, right? Get some animals. Not just pets, which are lame. Real animals. Eggs, meat, manure. You know? Kids that play in the dirt and collect tadpoles. Not these bubble-wrapped kids that can only exist in some kind of – external structure. Like your gaming, right? When I was a kid, we had to make up and enforce our own rules. If you cheated, you just – didn't get invited back. Kids went to play somewhere – else. It was like a ghost town. We played sports without any coaches or – umpires... Haha, I was about to say 'vampires.' But you see what I mean?"

"What about my – gaming?" Derek's face was slightly guilty.

"So you played games at arcades for – prizes, right? Everything was – regimented. Controlled. You never had to negotiate anything with the other kids. Like tag – does touching only the tip of the shirt count? What do you do if you're playing 'Marco Polo' and the kid opens his eyes? Not out of danger, just – cheating? Hey, that reminds me of your work. Like – the point of play as kids is to negotiate and learn real penalties for cheating. And everything you did – and do, a bit, I guess – is regimented..."

"What does that mean?"

"Like when you play – your game – it's the computer that enforces the rules. The – server? Right. You never have to negotiate. It's all an – external structure. Is that better?"

"Well, there's less – conflict. About the rules."

Chloe nodded energetically. "Right, right... But is that – better? Your parents paid so you had almost no conflict as a kid..."

"Well, except my sister..."

Chloe shook her head in mild frustration. "But that wasn't fighting about - rules, just - stuff. And you never really got to - or *learned* to - resolve those conflicts, right? You just got all hoity-toity and - civilized. Cold. My brother and I fought, for sure, but we found a way to resolve things and - move forward. We're close now, right? In a way you and Helen just - aren't..."

"We are a tad - formal..." admitted Derek.

"Yes..." Chloe paused. "I think that - because you've always had money, like your family, that you're terrified of losing - of being broke." She laughed. "It's like - prison. If you've been to prison, you know it's not so bad, right? But you've never been to... Hang on, erase that, that's a terrible analogy. But you know what I mean..."

Derek's voice lowered again. "It's - but how did you handle being - looked down on? Like, the old clothes. The four-color car. The Franken-bikes..."

"It actually got down to - deodorant, believe it or not. My bro got pulled aside by the gym teacher and told he smelled. Nicely, but not much fun..."

"Your parents didn't notice?"

"We lived in the country. Everything was - vivid..."

"Right... So how did you handle it?"

Chloe laughed. "Oh, the usual. By being - superior?"

"Superior?" Derek was genuinely surprised.

"Oh yeah! We were the beasts of the jungle, you all were just - delicate and hysterical house cats. Always sniffing, allergic to everything. Constant ear aches and runny noses." She shrugged.

"We were natural, you were - unnatural. Zoo animals. You need your hypoallergenic food and your shots..."

Derek shuddered. "Oh, man! The idea that you weren't vaccinated..."

"It's a scam," said Chloe simply.

"I know – your case..."

"You think the only corruption is in business? Accounting? You guys are total *amateurs*. War, medicine, funny money – those are the real crimes!"

Derek laughed bleakly and shook his head. "Every time I sit down with your mom I feel like I'm losing my mind!"

"She's gone half-blind researching this kind of stuff. But I never got sick..."

"I don't know how parents live with that fear..."

"That's how they get you, right? 'Lemme inject the kid, or he dies!'"

"Creepy..."

"It is. But anyway, we don't have to decide that – just yet. Your job. You were raised by hovering parents, bubble-boy... You don't know how to manage risk..."

"And you do?"

"I do know that risk can't be managed. You embrace it or you don't. And there's no such thing as 'no risk.' I mean, you became a gamer because your parents wanted you in the house. Because you lived in the burbs and there are cars and scary neighbours and busybodies who call the cops if a kid is out unattended..."

Derek shook his head sadly. "There was like no one in my neighbourhood. Like a neutron bomb. All the parents worked. Kids came home from daycare at like 6pm. They had to eat, do homework, bathe – they weren't allowed out really. Me either. Saturdays were for errands and family gatherings – somewhere else, or in the backyard. All I heard was people having fun on the other side of houses. Maybe I could see the side of a bouncy castle. But all the food was totally foreign, mostly people spoke – well, not English. I was invited, but it wasn't really – inviting, you know? Like my friend Sirdar, he was from Turkey, and I – his parents gave me a big glass of milk, and I almost threw up, it was full of sugar... He always

used to say 'Off the light, Dirk! Off the light!'" Derek laughed. "What do I have to do with an extended Turkish family where no one spoke English? I didn't know any of the games, and Sirdar would just - race off and play with his cousins..." Derek's eyes were distant, sad.

"Right, so you - stayed home."

"Especially when I got older. My mom freaked out whenever a van came down the street. God help the driver if there weren't any logos - or even worse, windows..."

Chloe smiled. "And we were broke and could play anywhere, with anyone. Not a lot of Turks in the deep northern woods..."

"You grew up in a squash court. So white..."

"Well it was efficient for play," said Chloe without offense or defensiveness. "And we learned how to manage conflict and risk. Like rope-swinging. I tried to do what my brother did, and my arms just - gave out, it was the strangest thing, like they just said a total 'nope' and dropped me on the rocks in the river. The same river I hiked through and cut my foot on something. Felt down, my finger went totally into my foot. Hobbled back, got my stitches - man I still think that doctor didn't freeze me enough, because I was making jokes and he was a sadist maybe, because it felt like an amputation. And my mom got into this mad fight with the nurse about a tetanus shot - apparently the shot is more dangerous than tetanus, and the nurse said: 'She could DIE, there's no cure for tetanus' and even threatened to call CAS, but my mom stood firm and threatened to sue and grilled the nurse on how common tetanus was, and if she'd even seen ONE case, and it was pretty cool. I was just young enough to not die from cringe - I admired her resolution. Then - and now. Not so much in the middle, my middle teens. My mom is good at figuring out risk. We went out and played, and I got - I needed six stitches, but you just staying inside, like a house plant..."

"I played sports!" protested Derek.

Chloe's lips curled in faint disgust. "Yeah, but - it was *organized* sports! Totally gay!"

"Man, if political correctness ever becomes law, you'll get the death penalty!"

She laughed. "Don't be retarded! So you're like a – one variable guy. I mean – your parents didn't throw you off your nerd-box because they only thought of one variable – *he's safer at home* – but they didn't think of anything else. That's your mom I bet!"

Derek was curious. "Like – what?"

"Well, all the social skills you missed out on by staring at screens." Chloe held up her hand. "And yeah, I know, you were talking online sometimes – but not learning how to manage any real risk, any physical danger – or how to negotiate rules. You know? And you did get – kind of soft. Anxious, a little, right? You don't know how to enforce rules with good humour, it's all – deadly, so you avoid it. Wait, I'm sorry, that's too absolute. Your caution is a good balance to me... We'd live in a tree house if I had my way... But we do need something – in between." Her eyes twinkled suddenly. "And I have a thought about all this..."

Derek blinked. "Wait, these weren't your thoughts?"

She laughed. "Silence! When did you first – talk about all this work stuff being – unbearable, babe?"

Derek frowned. "Maybe like – two weeks ago?"

Chloe snapped her fingers. "Perfect. Exactly!"

"Um – what?"

"So I've been dreaming about my childhood for like two weeks straight. People coming to life at night I haven't thought of in *years*... I don't even remember some of their names, which is shameful, because I used to take this weird pride in remembering everyone's names. Remember that night you grilled me on all the names of your childhood friends? The Jamaican guy who never paid

you back, your friend with asthma who could honk like a moose, the British guy now studying to be an optometrist who used the word 'orgasm' instead of 'organism' in science class, and who played 'Nayrab the Ay-rab' in Dungeons and Dragons?" Chloe giggled. "See? I even remember the name of his *fictional* character! And I'm back on my rope-swings as a kid and stealing my brother's Halloween candy because I'm a greedy pig and being spun on the tire until I threw up and singing into hair dryers on sleepovers and teaching that city kid how to catch a crayfish while he just whined that they reminded him of *cocker-roaches* – hey, that's how he said it – and all that stuff just comes up like a geyser from the past, and I couldn't figure out why. And then you, my dearest of dears – you at almost exactly the same time find corruption – I can say it, I'm totally Old Testament – unbearable and want to – clean house in a way. You see?"

"I don't – see what you see..."

Chloe leaned over the couch and kissed Derek's forehead.

"Life is coming, my love..." she murmured.

Derek blinked. "What?"

"From me... From *us*..."

"I... Oh my god!" Derek reached up and pulled Chloe down on the couch with him. "You are – big with child?"

She smacked him gently on the head. "Hey, I'm not 'big' with anything, buster!" She laughed. "But I will be... I will be..."

"That is – oh my god Chloe, that is – wonderful!"

"I thought you might be happy!"

"Happy? I'm – over the moon! How did you know?"

"Oh, mysterious voodoo ways..."

Derek paused, then bit the side of his thumb. "Oh, man! I can't quit now!"

Chloe sighed. "Fifteen to twenty seconds, bro!"

"What?"

"You were happy for fifteen to twenty seconds..."

"No, it's not that... I am thrilled. And I'm just – touching base. Quitting is off the table. It's kind of a relief, actually..."

Chloe took a deep breath. "Why is quitting off the table?"

"It's – because..." Derek shook his head rapidly. "Forget that, it's time to celebrate!" He jumped up from the couch. "Take you to Chippendales, get you nice and drunk!"

Chloe laughed again. "You can dance for me, big boy! But seriously, why not quit now?"

"Because – the baby?"

"You devil you!" Her face was serious.

"What?"

"Does your child – your beloved child – want filthy money, or happy and moral parents?"

"I... I feel very uncomfortable with that question."

"Yeah, because of your parents... Sorry, that was *way* too abrupt... Look, love – I'd rather live under a bridge than take dirty money..."

"It's not dirty! It's just – mildly compromised!"

Chloe's face was very still.

Derek swallowed.

Silence reigned.

Chapter 10

"Golf is just for people who can't handle squash," said Peter, brushing back his silver locks.

Robert laughed. "A good walk spoiled, as the old saying goes..."

"Don't quote people, Robert," said Peter impatiently. "That's like stolen valour – stolen brains."

Robert nodded. He hated his boss's constant – what, nagging? Corrections? Exhortations to be better? He felt inferior, but there was no clear way to higher status without submitting to the humiliations of being groomed. The "Eliza Doolittle" treatment was the only way to the top it seemed.

It was almost inevitable that Peter participated in only high-status hobbies and sports. Rock climbing, skiing (of course), squash and tennis – bowling was, apparently, only for lower-class losers – and horse-racing. Peter owned "Blaze of Whimsy" – a fast horse, well bred and well trained, which won him significant purses and roamed around the country in a little horse trailer.

"See?" said Peter proudly, showing grainy pictures on his latest-model cell phone. "Horses used to pull us, now we pull them – progress, kid!"

This was not a mentor-mentee relationship – nothing special, Peter made that very clear to Robert. Peter had acolytes, a stable – disciples perhaps – and cycled through eight or so interns and new hires. This kept them all hungry and submissive, caught up in tight panicky strangled competition with each other – and their own demons as well, which seemed destined to win, inevitably.

But Robert had Helen, a glowing ace up his sleeve – a diaphanous goddess who raised his status beyond the stratosphere. Robert refused to play the "ah shucks how did I land *her*" card – he skated close to the edge of treating Helen with contempt – like "She'll do..."

Implying that he settled for Helen was a bold strategy – especially as Robert battled his weight starting right after he left university. He was prone to gaining both muscles and fat, so he looked great when he worked out, and terrible when he didn't. As an avid exerciser, he had developed a 3-4k calorie consumption habit, which worked as long as his muscles ate it all – but he lagged on lowering his intake when his muscles turned flabby and indifferent to food, so it all went to his waist, to the strangling body-hug of visceral fat that turned him into an addict of the slow permanent sucking-in of the belly that should have given him abs, if anything could be seen below the wobbly quicksand of excess eating.

But of course Robert knew – with all the tuning-fork instincts of the social climber – that his indifference to Helen's beauty transmitted to humbled onlookers a truly Biblical sense of Robert's own romantic prowess. *She must be an addict to something*, people thought. *He's not rich, he's not famous, he's not super-athletic or lean, it must be something between the sheets...*

That was worth more than gold, in the only currency Robert really knew or cared about. Men defer to money, power and sex – three sides of the same coin, so to speak.

Peter had invited Robert to join him at the Shield Club – a super-exclusive and upscale social and athletic club in downtown Toronto. Snow white linen, towels as soft as clouds, hell-hot saunas, spotless premises and crystal decanters of lime-water by every sink – it was like a slice of heaven for sinners. Ten percent of the price of the Shield Club was who was there – ninety percent was who was excluded.

It was a haven away from wives – Robert had yet to meet a high-status male who admired his wife – admiring wives was apparently the male equivalent of women over forty pretending to be married to their cats. Wives were for status, and appearing normal, spending money, pursuing useless pretend 'businesses,' and producing children. "Can't live with them, can't live without them..."

“You want to spend money, you have to let me network!” cried the husbands while packing up their gym bags. “Ezekiel will be there, he’s a money-machine looking to make a deal...”

And so kitchen remodels were held hostage until the men got to escape. Vacations and jewelry and the black psychosis-inducing infinite-credit card spend-a-thons were all put on hold until the men could go and hobnob and talk business in gasping sweaty saunas – in the same way that women whose cash was put on hold would be ‘too stressed to have sex’ until the hold was released. It was all transactional and nakedly capitalist – often literally – and it was all frankly acknowledged and even appreciated, just as children prefer playing in yards with fences rather than open borders.

And the wives, of course, came with all the satanic powers of the modern State... All the wealthy men knew that their wives – especially if they had married young – could take half or more of everything they had made at any given moment. Marriage was the husband and wife – and the State, the thug who always took the woman’s side and would *love* the process of disassembling the husband.

Robert did wonder how many of these ‘alpha males’ were in fact gay – more than a few, he guessed, from the crotch-glances he got in the communal shower, and their general impulsivity and amorality. Everything seemed a burden except vanity, which was a propulsion and a guide.

To what..? Robert would sometimes wonder – but had to slam that trap-door shut immediately, lest he fall into a chasm of curiosity, and thus wisdom.

Peter knocked sharply on the tall clear plastic door of the squash court, jabbing a forefinger at his watch. “Time, gentlemen – time!”

The irritated players finished their point and came out, both men pretending to be less winded than they were, to show off their quasi-Olympic cardio health.

Peter gave a speech to Robert while driving him to the Club.

“Be aware that I don’t ‘play’ sports. It’s all practice for war – and society is *all* war, don’t be fooled. I don’t care about your feelings. I don’t encourage anyone. I war to win – as everyone should. I won’t hold back. If you are bad, I don’t care. War is at its most humane when it’s both savage and short. If you beat me, I’ll shake your hand and learn your secrets. If I beat you, do the same. I dominated squash in university. I made one of my opponents bleed from the nose...” Peter laughed. “Just from exertion, I didn’t even hit him. I urged him to keep playing, but he pussied out... He was so surprised. ‘Push through’ I said over and over. ‘Just like being born!’ God his face was hilarious!”

Robert took the place of a sponge, just soaking up strange words and tangential lessons – and he thought of his brother Shane, who sponged up all their mother’s words without even getting paid.

Idiot, he thought.

And squash with Peter was a brutal combat. A cruel Aztec ghost stalked the square white chamber with them – the red lines around the court like streaks of childish blood. Peter’s intransigent will to win was like a force of nature – impossible to resist, like gravity, except for the briefest of moments.

But youth had its way with Peter’s aging muscles, and Robert did dare to win a game, slashing ferociously at the ball – even pretending he was about to hit hard, then doing a gentle corner lob.

Robert could feel Peter’s rage and resolution increasing – and it was fascinating to experience the older man’s mindset, which was not anger at Robert, but hatred of losing. It was not personal – Robert could imagine Peter raging against a ball-machine on a tennis court, lusting for victory over a circling mindless metal arm...

Again, Robert briefly wondered *why* Peter was so competitive, had such a hunger for – not victory exactly, but *domination*. Over what?

Why?

The word 'excellence' floated through his mind – but his fading conscience nagged at him that there was also 'excellence' in love and friendship and virtue and – well a lot of other things...

It took *excellence* to dominate, of course – but a dedication to domination was also a deficiency in – in...

The ball – so fast it was barely visible – took over Robert's mind, and his tremulous questions scattered like seagulls before a charging boy...

In the end, Robert won one game, and Peter won six.

Interestingly, Peter did not hide his own tiredness, but leaned over and panted without shame. Robert did not understand that the older man was signaling his willpower and resolution, his power to overcome even the fading will of his aging body...

Afterwards, in the sauna – Robert was curious if Peter would go fully nude, and was grateful to the reprieve of a shielding towel. Peter was clearly in a contemplative mood.

"You didn't let me win," he murmured, his eyes closed, his sweaty silver hair pressed against the cedar wood walls.

"I'm not getting out of this sauna before you either," smiled Robert.

"Good lad... They'll recover our super-pruned bodies in the morning... That would be nice..."

Robert did not blink; he was not surprised. Peter often made comments about wanting death – or at least not being overly concerned with its imminence.

"Of course," continued Peter, "they'd have to dispose of our bodies. To avoid a lawsuit... How would they do it?"

Robert pursed his lips. His lungs were full of wet heat. "Tough. It's the security cameras that are the problem. Not our bodies *per se*..."

“Good... Work in legal phrases. So – I’d put our bodies through meat grinders – they have them in the kitchen. Be funny to feed us to members, but that’s kind of risky... Do you know that there are a hundred and twenty five thousand calories in the human body? Probably twice that for an American...” Peter laughed, then coughed in the boiling air.

“So – grind us up, then that’s easier to dispose of... Find your local pig farm, they’ll slurp us up like popsicles, and we come back to haunt the world as bacon and pork rinds. Our afterlife is a lower-class colon... Fitting...”

“But the cameras?”

Peter leaned back further and closed his eyes. “I got rid of the bodies. You do the cameras. Remember – your life is on the line...”

“Well – I’d... You can’t just erase them, too obvious...”

“They can’t sue without evidence. No evidence, no body, no problem...”

“Yeah but – I’m younger, remember from squash? Deleting video is a known problem, so everything is probably backed up in real-time... But that would be local too, probably only moved off-site once a day – or week more likely. No, that would be weird, unless it’s required for legal or insurance reasons. Members need their privacy... I don’t think there are many cameras inside this club – entrance probably. Exits – possibly...” Robert smiled. “And of course we died from our own competitiveness – we weren’t murdered. So the club would want to pretend we left. So they just fake that we’re gone. They take our cards and back-date signing us out to the night before... Get rid of any security footage, that’s not too hard – and there isn’t any in the changerooms anyway. So that’s it – they check the last time we show up on security footage – hell nothing would even need to be deleted! They just fake us leaving the club some reasonable time after we last show up on the security cameras, and then get rid of the bodies by grinding and feeding...”

"They probably have a sewage vent somewhere, they could flush us down there too..."

"Yeah, perhaps. That does leave a trace though..."

"True, but less and less each time you pour something down. Lots of blood and guts in restaurant garbage..."

"Everything gets diluted..."

Peter opened his eyes and stared at the wood next to Robert's head.

"Something about the world, Robert... Most people can't – conceive of a prestigious club like this grinding up bodies and flushing blood and faking us leaving... Do you know why?"

"I... I find it hard to conceive of..."

"Yes," said Peter impatiently. "But why?"

"I can't - think of myself in that position."

"What's the worst thing you've done, Robert?" Peter smiled. "You don't have to tell me – I don't even want to know - I mean, I think I know already... Do you have that in your mind, the worst thing you've done?"

"Yeah... Yeah..."

"And you go about your day and you make your dinner and your money and you make love to that goddess who puts up with you and you wrangle with your parents and complain about me – of course you do!" Peter's voice grew softer and softer. "And how often do you think about this beast, this ghost that lives within you, this *worst thing*?" Peter paused. "No, that's a real question. You can answer it – HR is hell, but can't stand this kind of heat..."

"I – don't think of it often..." murmured Robert, feeling as if he were falling back past spiraling stars, through super-heated space.

"Most people would guess it's about Chloe... But I know it's about your brother," whispered Peter.

"That's... crazy!"

Peter waved a weary hand, then stood up and spilled more water on the hot sauna rocks. The rolling heat poured from the ceiling and down Robert's back.

"So that's your – worst thing. And people think that there's some *really* worst thing – like grinding up bodies and feeding them to pigs – that they would be unable to live with." Peter laughed softly, his face a wet sheen of suffering. "I saw 'Macbeth' once – I got kicked out for laughing. It's a freaking *comedy* Rob. This guy is a killing machine who can't sleep because he cleared his way forward by offing the old man who turned him into a killer. It's funny, a stupid morality tale to keep the dumb peasants in line... 'Don't kill your rulers, kids – that's super bad!' And the rulers kill and steal at will, by the millions and billions... You think presidents can't sleep because of Vietnam? Haha, it's absurd. Genghis Khan, so tortured by all that torturing. Did Stalin or Hitler lose sleep? And everyone thinks that there is some line – and there is, I can see, for most people. But not all... Not all..." Peter exhaled slowly. "The people who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Nagasaki – they pressed a button and vaporized a couple of hundred thousand people. Mostly women and children. Some took ten years of sickening before dying... Monstrous, inhuman... You know, I have dreams of pushing that button. Not that I'm dying to. I just - wonder if I would. Those women raised the children who brutally tortured those POWs, the Australians in particular. They tested bio-weapons on them, froze and thawed them, grew bamboo into their flesh, beat them for hours, dissected them without anesthesia. Their moms raised them, taught them, made them who they are. Should they be immune to blowback? No evil men without more evil mothers... I don't want to push that button, but I dream about whether I would – and I know I would. I'm lying... My dream is more about my life afterwards. Would I be bothered? Would I be Macbeth? Would I wake in sweats from bad dreams? But my dreams are great, after the button. I'm barbequing topless, my wife is thirty years younger, no kids in the house, do whatever we want. It's heaven..."

Robert felt unreal, dreamier and dreamier. The heat was consuming him, his limbs felt leaden, immobile. Peter's voice continued – and Robert kept thinking of his mother's voice, and his brother's hollow trapped ears, filled with neurotic words and the endless estrogen of transient inflicted perceptions.

“And I have done wrong – what people *call* wrong, Robert. It never feels that way for me, though I'm scared it will. It might. It's like I'm an archeologist cracking some Egyptian tomb, and the native helpers all run away, because I'm going to get the mummy's curse. And I'm scared of it too, sure, I'm mostly human – but I'm more curious, so I excavate the body and study the death-ropes and rituals, out in the sunlight. And I wait for the curse. Will I get leprosy, will bricks fall on my head, will I get hit by a bus, or my luggage go missing? And I wait, because I am a scientist, an empiricist – I wait for the curse to strike, but it never does. I wake up because I have to pee – my bladder wakes me, never my conscience. And going through the world with these superstitious native guides and helpers – precious little help to me – is like being an Olympic athlete competing in the Special Olympics.” Peter laughed sadly. “It's so unfair. People get their gold and then get hit by this – curse. The curse of regret, of conscience. But it's like voodoo, I guess. If you don't believe in it, it just doesn't – affect you, you know? Do you know that?” His voice was whisper-quiet. “It's the greatest secret, Robert, my son... Everyone around you is crippled by conscience. Paralyzed, frightened by punishments they have to first believe in in order to ever experience. And I was willing to believe in it, Robert. I wanted to. I killed animals, when I was a kid, trying to summon my conscience. I even tortured them, trying to get the feel of being good. Or even wanting to be... The animals suffered...” He laughed softly. “I guess their parents could push that button and irradiate me... But the animals suffered so that people would not suffer... From me... We do animal testing all the time, Robert – for makeup and skin creams... This was to save people from me, to make me feel bad for doing wrong.” He sighed. “But I never did. I mean, I can fake it. A good actor can fake a limp, a disability – and I can fake a conscience, I

can fake empathy. It's needed, sometimes. And from – this is a great secret, Robert, don't make me show you – I went from animals to mental torture to people. Their actual lives. I've broken hearts, Robert. I still do. I can't tell you how many people I've sued – men, mostly – who have committed suicide. And it pisses me off, it's like killing yourself because you lost at poker. It's weak. And for two of them, Robert – I even went to the funerals. In disguise of course. At a distance. And they went into the ground and everyone cried and sang stupid sentimental songs – I could murder that ditty 'Imagine' – pure nihilism – and I waited to feel bad – hell I wanted to feel bad. It's like if you wake up from an accident and you can't feel your legs, that's bad, right? You want to be in pain, or you're kind of dead. I don't want to be dead, Robert. I want to have life in my limbs. But all the folks at the funeral crying – it was like – you'll get this when you become a dad, I hope you do – it was like a kid crying because they dropped their last bit of ice cream into the gutter. They weep and wail but it means nothing really – most things kids cry about are stupid, pointless. And you have to indulge them, I guess – though that's more the work for women really – but from the larger scope of history it's all eugenics and war and torture and murder. Like England became civilized because they killed the psycho one percent every year, until only the rigidly polite were left. And I know that could mean that I should be killed, but it takes the psychos to behead the psychos, right? Until there are only a few executioner psychos left, and then they all go into politics and – and law, obviously, Robert. So I've kind of – killed people, let's be honest. It's just the cleanup of the weak, who really cares? The other weaklings, crippled by bad feelings for necessary and helpful actions... And you are bothered by what I have asked you to do, with the real estate case. You don't want to delete the server files. You're thinking of reporting me. I get that. Fine. Play around with – decisiveness. Good! See if you have a conscience. But you don't, Robert. You fake it. And that's fine, camouflage is essential in - in war." Peter laughed. "Do you see how frank I can be in a place where it's impossible to record? You will toy with reporting me, and fulfilling your obligations to the code of conduct for a lawyer, to professional ethics. But you

will be blocked – that terrible decision will be blocked by your lovely wife, your Helen – because she is one of us, of me, I can spot that from the other side of an airplane hanger, Robert. You'll play with doing the 'right thing' – obeying slave morality, same thing of course – and she'll talk you out of it, and you will become a compromised realist who understands that 'morality' is just a castrating lie designed to keep people like us from naturally – and justly – ruling the masses who clamour for freedom but secretly want us to control them – and I'm not trying to change who you are, dear Robert – just stop you from pointlessly fighting who you are. You are a killer, Robert. Like me. And we kill illusions. Don't be ensnared by these silly ethics Robert. We win, we accumulate, and we control. Or we die, as surely as we have killed..."

Peter's voice continued its downward spiral into moral madness – and monstrous power – until Robert awoke from shocking ice water to the face, lying in the changeroom, staring at the painted ceiling, with Peter's anxious face hovering over him.

"You passed out, in the sauna, idiot. You lost. But tell me – how much do you remember?"

Chapter 11

Shane rolled over, dreaming of giant insects buzzing through his hair.

It was 2pm.

He awoke with a start.

His phone was buzzing. He stared at the screen.

Satan was calling.

That was his label for his ex.

His heart pounding, he gingerly touched the phone, almost expecting it be radioactive, molten, sulphureous...

In the vast emptiness of his existence – his newer “friends” were dropped along with the drugs; his older friends found him too depressing to hang out with – Regina beckoned like an ancient siren.

Shane worked indifferently, sorting donations at the Salvation Army, fending off the uncomprehending pity of his co-workers, who roundly mocked his amateur status as an addict of less than 12-months duration. Through missing teeth, rheumy eyes and strange scars, under scant or greasy hair, their haunted eyes shone like million-year-old sinners scorning a new arrival to Hell.

“Once an addict, always an addict,” they chanted – proud of their self-defining, self-slaughtering labels. They used to cut themselves with knives; now they cut themselves with slashing syllables.

They were empty – most of them had been horribly neglected; many horribly abused, and they steadfastly refused to abandon the steaming definition of ‘addict’ that had been branded into them by their torturers. One man showed him the burn scars on his back from scalding water; a woman showed him piercings in places he didn’t even know were candidates for metal; an old man spoke with a fresh bitterness utterly at odds with the ancient origin of his wounds, complaining about the older brother who introduced him to

the drug scene more than half a century before, and who was long dead...

As they were stuck in their self-definitions, so also, were they trapped in time...

Emotional and spiritual growth had stopped the moment they started to self-medicate the masochism inflicted on them by their sadistic parents. They self-attacked viciously – to stop the lacerations, they drugged their inner parents, as if they were prisoners who could never escape, but could find momentary peace by roofie-ing the guards...

Shane resisted these definitions – he hated the idea that he was to spend the rest of his life permanently haunted by an eternal devil of self-sabotage. The apparent curse was that if you stopped defining yourself as an addict, your addiction would return. You had to live with the clanking ghosts, and prostrate yourself to them every morning, and tend to their grey wounds and listen to their endless whispering excuses and justifications – *just like mom* - because if you moved homes, or tried to drive them out, they would return to haunting not just your house anymore, but your heart, your soul, and take you over entirely.

Serve addiction, or become an addict...

Serve the dead, or become dead; these are the only options...

And because Shane had vaulted out of life's generally-accepted course, he was now beyond any comfortable narrative – and therefore social ease. Those with greater luck view the unlucky as *inferior* – it is an inevitable vanity. The tall scorn the short; the pretty roll their eyes at the plain; the intelligent mock the unintelligent...

Shane could not easily explain his life, and so he had to either pretend, or remain alone. He knew it was a downward spiral, but he also felt the fading of any muscles that could possibly reverse it.

“What have you been up to, Shane?”

What the *hell* could he answer?

“Drugs, sex, decay, dropping out, predation and paralysis...”

Dysfunction is the long shadow cast by evil; to acknowledge and sympathize with the broken is to see the evils of the world, which ejects us from the comfortable story of success being the light that springs from virtue.

Most who are successful – money, status, power – are corrupt beyond words. The modern world is addicted to recasting lies and violence as excellence in virtue. *He is rich because he is hard-working, and provides great value...* Actors and musicians are successful because they seal their lips about the evils of the entertainment industry; executives are silent about the bloody machinery of State power that holds their profits aloft and their competitors at bay. Reporters serve political power with greater avidity than the lowest court toady simping for a brutal queen. Scientists are slaves to the conformist brutality of the peer-review system; tenured professors who cannot be fired are pre-selected for their ability to ponderously lie in support of current propaganda; salesmen lie for money; politicians dangle hope before the desperate masses, and then conceal the threats they receive after winning office, ending up as slaves to the shadowy enemies of the people who can never be clearly identified...

And people strain to stay sane by blindly ignoring the evils all around them. They are in a war, but pretend to be barbequing in a syrupy summertime of peace and tranquility – and when the silent shots explode someone’s head or leg, they rigidly smile and step over the writhing or spastic body, waiting for it to sink into the soil of their indifference so they can ask if anyone wants more coleslaw...

There are no lions – that is the constant mantra, and to serve this delusion, the lions never roar, move silently, and mostly strike the isolated. They exist as vague bundles of streaking brown bloody fur, deep in the peripheral vision of those who refuse to ever turn their heads.

And those who survive the attacks – who could show the scars laced with predatory hair – are isolated and ignored.

Lions are a conspiracy theory...

The greatest predators are those who cover up for the real predators.

*Take my brother, sure – just don't show yourselves to **me!***

The lions – the devils – stride the world unmolested, certain of the knowledge that they will never be named by the sane – for the simple reason that those who name them are always called insane – or evil, even better!

Only the paranoid fear predators!

Having been preyed upon, Shane was now crippled by the isolating knowledge that predators exist, and attack the unprotected.

All that has to happen is that the predator is named – and then they flee.

They approach and attack only those who are unprotected – who are ringed by those who refuse to see predators – mostly because they are predators themselves...

Shane was paralyzed because he still did not truly understand that his family had isolated him, which is why Regina so easily struck him down.

John, Jean and Robert should have protected Shane – but they had all exploited him, in their own ways – John through contempt; Jean through an avalanche of words; Robert through the superiority he aped from his father...

How can we protect someone we have exploited?

And so Shane was unprotected – and that lack of protection – that prior exploitation – invited Regina in – lashed him down, tenderized him and closed his eyes and disabled his fight-or-flight animal self-protections. And through Regina came the entire underworld of

second-class predators – the druggies, the dealers, the nihilists and raging communists; the sex addicts whose every grin and gesture stank of rank seduction; the verbal abusers who only opened their mouths to slash and wound with razor tongues – infecting others with the gummy bacteria of permanent definitions... *Loser, weirdo, psycho, selfish, asshole...*

The pathetic and vain were down there too, in the gutter and sewage – those who were so trashy that they could only feel superior to the worst dregs of the dying city. The pretend-ambitious were there too, hiding their scant art and crowing about their glorious futures only to those trembling on the precipice of death.

They had all been stretched and snapped on the early racks of sadistic parents and teachers and priests – they all found strength and power only in the management of their illness – which meant that any sustainable health triggered panics of alien incompetence in them. A doctor makes his living in the management of illness and injury; their lives sustained themselves the same way.

Thus a beaten boy becomes a boxer. As a child, he has no power to stop the beatings; all he can do – the only power he has – is to manage his *reactions* to being beaten. Without being beaten, he has no power or control at all. The anxiety triggered by a peaceful life – *I have nothing to manage, nothing to control – I am out of control, like my abusive parents* – drives him to the gym, to the ring, to beat and be beaten, to feel the sweet relief of familiarity and the power of managing his rage, pain and fear.

Abuse is a *language* – when English-speakers move to an alien country, they join the ex-pat community, merging with relief among those who speak the same tongue. Chinatown, Little Italy – immigrants cling to the familiar, to the culture they know.

It is the same with abuse.

Wherever victims go, they find other victims who speak the same language, and a diaspora of the broken takes its mournful limbo place in the heart of any city – broken souls bound together by the

invisible razor-threads of familiar bloody language and endless self-attack.

Shane had leapt out of that world, but he was back in the world that gave it birth – his home, his room, his escape from his family that flowered into an escape from reality.

And now Satan was calling.

Shane ran his nail-bitten forefinger over the tiny screen.

Is hell better than limbo?

Is pain better than nothing?

Is being exploited better than being alone?

Shane answered the call.

“Yes?” he whispered.

“Shane?”

“Yes...”

“It’s me, Regina...”

“I know...”

There was a pause.

Shane’s mind was dead, receptive, inert.

She cleared her throat. “How – how are you?”

“I’m... good. I don’t really know how to answer that... How are you?”

“Terrible...”

His heart leapt slightly. His mouth was suddenly dry.

“I have so much to... Listen, I don’t know how to... Can we meet up?”

“I don’t...” Shane swallowed. “I have to work...”

“Oh?” Her tone brightened slightly. “Where are you working?”

“Oh, it’s just... Sorting...”

There was another pause. Shane’s heart was pounding.

Her nails were clacking on something hard. “I... I’m in rehab. Have you... Are you...”

“Yeah...”

“We did each other some real damage kid...”

“Yeah...” *But you started it*, Shane wanted to scream. He jumped out of bed in order to control his tongue.

She sighed, and he got a whiff of vague impatience. “Did you – did you hit bottom?”

“No. But I saw it...”

Regina laughed harshly. “Well I did buddy. Bam, right down. I mean, there are different bottoms, y’know? Mine was getting arrested. Gives you street cred, but it’s no fun for sure. You run, you get beat. Down at Cherry Beach, phone books on his face. I was just there for the ride, I didn’t even want the money, I was gaming bingo, no worries there bud! But it all went down in Chinatown. I didn’t even really like the slant-eyed son of a bitch, but variety is the yellow spice of life, am I right? I was just killing time, watching the show... And he was so easy to needle, and you know how much I love that bloodsport, right? And the dumb hick fought the cops when they busted his deal. Jeez, that adrenaline, it’ll be the death of me...” She laughed again. “It’s all court-ordered. Just because I ran. Boy, they beat him bloody... Roughed me up a little too, the un-gentlemanly bastards. So we were both ‘resisting arrest’ – badass! And the only way I stay out of prison is mandatory drug treatment. Anger management too. Therapy. The whole stupid show. All these concerned faces. I have to nod and smile and ‘get it.’ That’s all. That’s freaking *all!* Yeah, I was abused as a kid – well you know that, right? Played “doctor” with a little Mengele, a true Kevorkian. White coats and bloody buttons.” She took a deep breath. “Sorry

Shane, I'm totally jittery, off everything except shitty coffee. I'm all over the map. Does this make any sense at all?"

Shane was pacing his small room, three strides then turn around... "I – get the general gist."

"So there's this apology – component. You know? Of course you know. And I guessed you were in a program. And I smiled to myself, like twenty times a day, just waiting for your call. Your "So sorry Regina" stop on your apology tour. And I got so mad that you never called. Maybe you ditched my number? Never mind, don't answer... So this sad-faced therapist I got – a real droopy hound-dog – asked me what you had to apologize for... And I just – stopped, you know? My motor-mouth just – fizzled. You were a sweet kid, Shane..." Her voice thickened with sorrow. "And I was a big bad witch who led you astray. Please tell me you kept up with your art. You had real talent, a real brush... I'd hate the idea that that – stopped. I never stop talking because I'm really scared what people will say back. Like I want you to answer, but I'm terrified that your – answer will just – break me in two... Like my little doctor did... Do you want to say something?"

"I – don't do art anymore..."

"Why not, Shane? Because of me?"

"I made my – choices... One of them was you..."

"No..." murmured Regina. "I wasn't... I chose you, little lamb... I cooked you..."

"Why – why are you calling, if you don't mind?"

"To apologize," said Regina – her voice suddenly losing its insistence. "You were a sweet kid, and I led you astray..."

Shane swallowed dryly. "I... Yeah, you kinda did..."

"And – I guess you're not in school anymore... I never saw you around, after we... I thought maybe you transferred, but I knew the truth. I know. How is life? Have you – recovered?"

"Well – I'm not getting worse..."

"Are you – clean?"

"Yes. Yeah."

"That's – that's good, Shaney. Is this a useless conversation to you? Don't answer that either. I'm stalling. Goddamn it!" she suddenly shouted. "Why is it so hard? I'm – I'm sorry, Shane. I screwed you up. I know that. You had to pay for my little doctor. I understand that much, though I don't understand – why. And my little doctor was – at least he had the excuse of being a kid. Well, years older than me, but... But I was older than you..." Regina laughed self-consciously. "Probably still am... I knew better. But there was something about you, Shaney, that just – drew in people like me... It was going to be me, my man, or someone else. There's no way your tender ass was ever going to get away unscathed. But I've been thinking about you." Her voice broke again "I did you wrong, Shaney my little lamb... I – harmed your soul I think. Broke your trust. And I – I just want you to know that – not all women are like me. Or that Chatty Cathy who raised you... Don't lose hope, Shane. Don't give up on – love. It's still within us. We can heal. I don't know how the hell, but we can..." Her voice was strengthening. "And I might still go to jail. Don't get stuck in revenge, please, I'm begging you – and you know how I hate to beg... The universe has avenged you. I spend so much time in clubs I have like permanent tinnitus, this crazy whine of conscience and stupid choices. And my brain is half-fried. You can tell, right? My gums are shot, I have to eat everything at room temperature. I've had two abortions, so I'm ringed by little offspring that will never grow out of their – Orange Chicken phase. And I'm older than you, which makes me kind of evil – but I still have a long way to go, and I don't know how I'm going to – make it, Shane. You have no idea what I've done, but you're still my first call... Say something!"

Shane's heart bled in his chest. "Well... I hated you for a while. But – I'm sorry you're suffering now." He laughed sadly. "Maybe that's – better than what I've got..."

"What's that? Don't let me interrupt you!"

"Just – nothing, really..."

"Your job?"

"Total crap. Keeps me out of the ER – just..."

"Oh God! I'm so sorry!"

Shane's soul was at war. "My heart is – totally pounding..."

"Mine too..."

"I don't know what to say..."

She took a deep breath. "Just – tell me. Say it..."

His face crumpled. "I – can't! There's nothing to say..."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing – really... Yeah, it was messed up. A dark place..."

"You wish you had never met me..."

"I don't – I don't even know who I would be if I'd never met you..."

"But you're not happy."

"No... I'm – nothing."

"I hate that. Don't do that..."

He laughed harshly. "Don't do – what? Don't do being nothing? This is the kind of maze that used to drive me nuts!"

"You're right. You're right, Shaney. I'm sorry. But – this is weird, on the phone, right? Is it just me? I feel like I'm arguing with myself, just a voice in my ear. That's not healthy... Please meet with me. It will cure all your memories. I used to be so pretty. You'll never be taken in by prettiness ever again, I promise you. You're still addicted to London Fogs, right? My treat, as many as you want... It's part of the cure, I – really want you to know that... Hang on, I have to get some water, my mouth is so dry, I'll just put you on speaker..." Her voice became distant, tinny. "You still there?"

“Yeah...”

“Just twenty minutes... Even less! You can look through the window, see what an ugly mess I am, then just walk off with a spring in your step. Total victory. I bet you still look great, you’re *that* kind of addict – I always preferred your look to Robert’s, sooo preppy! Just – a tiny short meeting, a hug and closure – or maybe we have enough in common to be friends, right? Being an ex-addict is like the loneliest thing on the planet, like there’s no one, am I right? Come on, Shaney – you can pick the place – I know, the one with the bookshelves and old cards and window nook we always used to make out in – it’s like a five minute drive for you – and it’s a real sacrifice to me, kiddo, I lost my license two years ago, you know... Come on, what do you say? Please, please, please? I can be there in 45 minutes... I can put a big smile of your face, I promise you!”

The afternoon sunlight slid in through his blinds. Shane had no work today, and was hoping to sleep away his solitude. He felt a stirring of romantic memory at her mentioning making out in the corner sunlight of the café.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes please...”

Her voice was distant. “What? Sorry, couldn’t hear...”

“Yes. Yes, let’s meet...”

Wild cheers erupted through the tinny microphone – along with groans and boos.

“Ha HA! Pay up!” cried Regina in exultation. “You all said there was *no way* I could get this loser to meet up with me. I, Regina, Queen of the Simps, have now decisively proven you wrong. Y’all owe me eight hundred dollars, nerds!” She picked up the phone. Her voice jumped in clarity, deep into Shane’s ear, his brain. “Come and help me spend all this money you helped me earn, Shaney love! Let’s PAAARTY!”

Shane threw the phone from him like a sudden serpent, and sank against the wall – against his teenage grunge band posters, as

Regina's tinny laughter and the cheers and boos of the damned washed over him like scalding erasing static.

Chapter 12

The shadows on the wall looked like giant spiders, lengthy and foggy and reaching.

The multicoloured nightlight spun reds and yellows across her face; the gliding rocking chair went back and forth, the squirming continued in her lap, and Helen felt that she was losing her mind.

Months ago, she had hurled the digital clock out into the hallway, enraged by its endless scrolling time, marking every single *second* of her isolation and exhaustion.

Her heart was a boulder; hard and mossy and crawling with insects. The life that had come from her reached and needed and gurgled and shat and drooled and stuck out its tongue and tried to smile, and she gave it polite attention, to be sure, but it was all a form of “cocktail eyes” - when she was at a party, and approached by a crusty and incomprehensibly confident man, and signaled her boredom by gazing around the room, her face glazed over with blank indifference.

Go away, go away, go away...

But her baby would not go away.

Her baby was relentless.

Invasive.

All-consuming.

Selfish...

Of course the thought was mad – *he’s just a baby!* – but Helen chose not to drive it away. The alternative to being offended by her new life was... Was... A passageway that led down into darkness, to dungeons, to hell itself probably, it didn’t really matter. *That way madness lies – the first step turns into an endless chute, and I slide forever...*

Helen's mother Sharon did come over from time to time, but there was a strange jealousy – she had always been jealous of Helen's beauty – but now she envied its fruits – Robert's wealth and looks and status.

Sharon was brisk and efficient and taught her baby management – wipe, swaddle, burp and feed – but took no delight in the child.

This was not an infection for Helen. After the pain and – well *rage* of birth, she held her newborn son in her hand and – and...

She was angry at Robert, of course, because he showed up and squeezed her hips and wiped her forehead, but he fell asleep four hours in, and she saw him hunched over in a ratty armchair, sad spiderweb drool hanging from his mouth, and she felt repelled by him.

If I wake him, he will need some goddamn thing or another! she thought savagely, squeezing her eyes shut. *He wanted this baby, pressured me like **hell** to have it – now he snoozes and drools while the baby elbows its way out of me like some marble-eyed space alien!*

Robert was awake when his son was born. He repeatedly refused to cut the umbilical cord, and she was too tired to argue with him. They took the baby, weighed and tested him, then wrapped him up and handed him over.

The tiny scrunched face; the malign lips stretched over red ridged gums – the squirming, the loss of comfort, the reedy screeching – *we've both been kicked out of the womb, kid*, thought Helen – or rather, the thought *had* Helen, since it arose within her like sudden vomiting.

And Helen smiled and cooed, of course, and made all the gestures, but felt like a bad actor, self-conscious and sweaty. It was like she was pushing and pulling levers and pulleys in her mind; moving facial muscles and making throat sounds that approximated happy

motherhood, while all the time wondering if she was about to get fired by the director...

And she had heard of post-partum depression – but that was nonsense for her, of course – *what is the point of all this shapeliness if I don't like motherhood?* It would be like inheriting a billion dollars and being a basement-dwelling hoarder.

And so she waited. Sometimes she felt boredom with - or hatred of – Robert – but she had learned to out-wait her various devils. The light would hit him a certain way, or he would be sleeping attractively, or made a joke that triggered a belly-laugh, and all would be well in her heart. Clouds were not forever, dawn followed night, storms gave way to sunshine, blah, blah, blah.

So she mime-cooed and stroked her son's face and breast-fed and – waited.

Helen remembered a time when she was a little girl – maybe seven or eight. She had demanded to ride the bus on her own, and on coming back, she had gotten off two stops early.

Clutching her little polka-dot purse, she had waited and waited – having to pee fiercely.

Two buses passed by, heading somewhere else, not stopping.

Two men offered her a ride – one in a white van, one in a purple convertible.

She shook her head, afraid to speak.

Even then, men liked her.

Eventually, as the dark gathered above her, she walked, hoping against hope to get to anything familiar. She knew what houses and cars and lampposts and streets and trees were, of course, but none of them clicked into any recognition, into any friendly neighbourhood comfort patterns.

When she finally made it home, she fled to the bathroom and then collapsed on the dusty sofa.

“You silly thing!” cried her mother on hearing the story. “That was the last bus!”

Helen was angry then as well, that her mother had sent her out on such an edge-case journey. She never knew how long she had waited. All she knew was that the bus never came.

And, as a new mother, she waited and waited for her love to come.

She tried. No one could say that she didn't. She listened to sentimental Chris de Burgh and Paul Young songs. She read “The Giving Tree” in a soft voice, trying to wake her inert lumpen-heart. She watched her son sleep, and only saw him gathering his strength to invade her and draw more resources.

She knew he was not there to feed *her*, but goddamn it, was it so impossible to ask him to respond in some manner!

His dark eyes scanned and searched and rarely blinked – perfect little orbs of scathing indifference – and Helen read with dread all the possible neurological problems her baby might have – but – the little *shit* – he opened up his beady little heart to Robert, who poked and twirled him and strengthened his legs by helping him push against his hands when he lay on the floor.

When Robert stuck out his tongue, Justin reciprocated.

When Helen did the same, her baby just stared.

All the rejection I heaped on men is returning to me in a surly ten-pound pink bomb! Helen thought – not hysterically, but with depressed karmic calculation.

Her best friend as a little girl used to make Helen giggle endlessly by randomly picking out things that were *judging them...* “That cat is just sitting there – judging!” she would cry while they were eating snickerdoodle cookies – half her mother's food had ridiculous names – *bumbleberry, bubble and squeak, monkey bread, toad-in-the-hole...* Or, on seeing a slanted tree – “That tree is leaning over – *judging!*” Owls judged – elephants especially. Not giraffes though, they were just too goofy.

And now – and now...

Justin judges... thought Helen. *He gurgles and pulls my hair and smiles at my husband and drains me dry and doesn't care about my beauty one bit – and judges me as wanting, because I have coasted on sex appeal my entire adult life – and slightly before, let's be honest.*

And tears would flow, in the slow-rocking, endlessly-squirming rainbow room – but they were like rivulets lunging down a glass of cold water – they had no emotional impact, they solved nothing, released nothing, it was indifferent rain that only brought more clouds. She remembered an old song “The Sky is Crying” – and remembered thinking what a cheesy analogy it was – *clouds are not sad, only crops are thirsty...*

So Helen leaked milk and tears – but kept her secrets sealed up.

The shame and isolation was profound, and Helen realized that there was no one who could help her. In between manic bouts of invasive play, Robert mostly complained about parenthood. “Gained a son, lost a wife,” he would grin, teetering between humour and bitterness. He was impatient with her – “Jeez, let *me* stay home all day playing with a baby, rather than go blind red-lining endless contracts, see how much I complain!”

And Helen did not fight back, did not complain; she felt like a window complaining about the view. She grew to hate the small house – the inherited drapes, the dark-wood kitchen cabinets, the mis-matched plates and cups, the mystery implements in the drawers, donated by her mother in case she ever wanted to mash potatoes slightly more conveniently. It was all a pretty prison – even a hotel suite could be lovely, until the moment that it was locked from the outside...

And the days just crawled, on and on, like a lost desert soul refusing to die of thirst. Helen had to will herself to stop staring at the clock – she stowed away her watch and wedding ring, from frustration and resentment respectively. It was her and the baby – feeding,

cleaning, trying indifferent patty-cake games and reading fairy tales with no intonation for any of the characters. The giant droned 'fe fi fo fum' as if murmuring through a yawn, and the wolf threatened Little Red Riding Hood as he were whispering complaints in a quiet theatre. Everyone was the same, everyone droned, and Helen checked off her mental lists mechanically – fed food, read book, changed diaper...

She turned on the TV when she felt the darkness closing in, and Justin stared goggle-eyed at the random jumpy cartoons – he loved the singing frog song, and Helen learned it by heart, and would sing it over and over, in a dead jazz whisper, as Justin stared at her.

Stared, and judged.

When is Daddy coming home so I can come alive?

Soon, kiddo. The robot minder is almost out of power...

And Helen knew that Robert would be hungry and tired and annoyed at the drive, and that she should have an apron and a hot meal and a contented baby and be out of her sweatpants – but it felt like lifting a giant tree-trunk off numb and broken legs – impossible; the only thing to do was lay back, stare at the webs of tree branches dissecting the sky, and wait for help or death...

And Robert was drained by work, and Helen was drained by motherhood, and they scratched at each other in frustration, two starving souls squaring off over a plate of plastic fruit.

And Helen knew that Robert was good with Justin in part to show her how easy it was – and that angered her, but the anger turned into a leaden weight in her heart and sweated its useless tears in the darkness.

And Helen could not turn to other women – her mother, having transferred her management skills, came by less and less, and mostly complained about her dad anyway – because other women always viewed Helen's beauty as a threat, and thought her life was

perfect, and Robert so handsome, that she found herself sealed off by female paranoia and envy.

Yeah, like I would ever go for your slob husbands, with their ringed-armpit t-shirts and black socks and sandals.

And the men kept their distance, sensing their wives fears – and the neighbourhood was mostly empty during the day anyway. The toddlers went to daycare; the moms and dads went to work – and evenings were for baths and food and fighting about TV time. Maybe kids roamed a little – an hour or two – in the summer, on Sunday afternoons, but the daycare kids were so wild that Helen was afraid to take Justin out. And the moms glared at her, and the dads averted their eyes, and she was shut up in the glass castle of her own looks.

And even her body had bounced back after birth – with little effort. Sure, she breast-fed Justin more than was technically necessary, and did leg-lifts while watching “Dora” – but her hourglass figure seemed to take less than an hour to return. (This further annoyed and alienated the wives of course.)

Helen cocked her head as she heard movement from down the hall. She waited for the inevitable groan and gas that signaled her husband had awoken. He took forever to get up, which used to annoy her no end – since she had to leap up to take care of a screaming baby. He lingered on the toilet, had to take endless girly baths because his skin was just so dry, and it was easier to stew in baby oil than apply moisturizer. He lounged like a *pasha*, a Lord of the Manor, while she was just a scullery maid used for diaper cleanings and sexual release.

Robert bothered her less and less as time went on, though – but there was a terrible price to be paid for that, which was that nothing felt terrible at all – or good, or funny or ironic or deep – or *anything...*

I don't hate my husband – the thought blew like limp leaves through Helen's mind – *and the price of that is I cannot love my son...*

"Hey babe," murmured Robert, poking his head around the doorway. "You been up for a while?"

"Yeah..." said Helen.

There was a pause. Robert felt an impulse to show sympathy, but – well, *he* didn't get sympathy for work difficulties, so why should she?

"You need any help?" he asked.

Helen shook her head. Robert watched as the rainbows slid over the part in her blonde hair. Helen watched his eyes. He did not glance at his son. She might as well have been holding a stuffed animal.

Robert nodded. "Well, brace yourself. This might get ugly... My mom filmed it, the monster..."

"Ok," said Helen listlessly, and Robert felt the flash of anger that Helen refused to feel.

"Hey," he said, "is it three scoops of coffee and 5 of water, or the other way round?"

It's been three years... The anger didn't rouse itself. Robert's household incompetence was a force of nature, not to be resisted without courting madness...

"Three coffee, five water..."

Robert paused in the doorway, obviously wanting the interaction to go better – and even more obviously resenting that it didn't.

"It's the right decision babe," he said, gesturing at the multicoloured prison. "I mean, this... We can't go on..."

Helen stood up abruptly, clutching at her son like an insecure man forced to hold his wife's purse in a food court. "Yeah, I know. I'll make the coffee..."

Robert grinned. "With the baby. Like a one-armed bandit. I need to shave and whatnot, I'll be down in a few!"

He blew his wife a kiss. His sudden bursts of selfish good humour also used to bother Helen...

She made her way downstairs, her left bicep stiff and sore from constant baby-holding. Justin dozed fitfully. His bassinet was in the living room, next to the kitchen. She tried gently lowering him in, but his eyes blew open and his fingers clutched at her hair.

Always with the hair... thought Helen dully. He never cuddles; he just clutches and grabs and pulls...

She viewed her baby as a machine of need – which made her a machine of provision, like a robot feeder or the tall bottles that drip water for hamsters.

Sitting with Justin was ungodly boring – he clutched at everything, and squirmed constantly if under-stimulated. So Helen had to carry him around the room, showing him paintings and books and appliances – to the point where she felt like an empty resentful airplane flying *his majesty* from distraction to distraction.

“So here we open the drawer to get the coffee filters...” Helen murmured. She read once that talking to your baby about what you were doing was good for him – it was likely nonsense, like that Mozart music con – but she continued, because any voice was better than silence and endless crying. She resented the fact that Justin rarely looked at what she was doing; he just stared at her face – never quite at her eyes though. His mother was convinced that he was staring into the twin voids of her nostrils, searching for her soul...

Judging, and finding wanting... said her long-gone childhood friend in her mind..

“How is ‘his nibs’ this AM?” said Robert energetically.

‘His nibs’ was a nickname that Justin had earned by half-chewing Helen’s nipples off whenever he breastfed. ‘Nibs’ was short for ‘nibbles’ of course. Robert enjoyed the aristocratic tone. Helen did

not. She also did not appreciate Robert humming the theme from "Jaws" whenever she unbuttoned her nursing bra.

*What do you do when **everything** about someone bothers you?*

Shut up about it, came her mother's voice. *What, you don't think he has **his** complaints?*

Her mother's philosophy of marriage was that you didn't love it; you didn't fight it; you just 'put up with it.'

'Putting up with it' meant closing your mouth. If a man knew you were upset, you've failed as a wife. Master the tight smile, submit and keep him dumb, domesticated and happy. "Fight him at home, he'll lose out at work, and then where will you be? Living under a *bridge*, that's where!"

Homelessness figured prominently in all her mother's calculations. A family was always just one frown or missed payment or denied affection from trying to keep babies warm by holding them over steaming street vents.

And, for some reason, Helen had no fight left in her. It had travelled through her umbilical to Justin, who seemed to fight her on everything...

"Helen?" said Robert, faintly aggrieved at not being answered.

"Oh he's good," said Helen. "How was your sleep?"

"Good – great!" grinned her husband, unaware that his wife asked that question only to confirm that he *never* asked it back...

Robert strode forward and patted her arm in passing. He yanked the carafe off the coffee maker – without checking to see if it was finished brewing – leaving a trail of brown liquid.

Even as recently as a month ago, Helen would have cried out in frustration and anger.

Now, she faintly welcomed the mess.

Gives me something to do later...

Robert glanced over his shoulder. "Are you still doing a cup a day?"

"I am. Yes." *Why is this still a mystery? Ah well, I spent my youth being incandescent; I can spend a few years being utterly invisible...*

Robert poured her a steaming cup and held it out to her.

"I'm holding the baby, Robert," said Helen evenly. A box of rat poison flew through her mind.

"Yeah, sorry," said Robert, putting the coffee cup on a hand towel. Helen watched the coffee dripping down the sides, onto the white fabric, like brown blood.

"So!" he said. "What do we need to do to get ready?"

"I packed during the night. We're good."

"That's great, good job! Is there anything I need to do?"

"What do you mean?"

Robert blinked "Well – is there anything that I – for..?"

Helen sighed. "Just – do what you need to do. For work."

Robert paused. "Do you really need me to – come? I mean – I'm happy to, I want to – but Peter wants me to meet with a client at 9:30, and I need to go over the case files. I can do it, but it will be crazy tight."

Helen stared at him. "When did he tell you?"

"When? Oh Lord, you know him. As I was leaving."

"Last night?"

"Yeah... Look, it slipped my mind. I just – remembered, checking emails this morning."

Helen felt a faint impulse to insist that Robert show her the email – but why? What was the point. If you think someone is lying to you, why bother checking up on them? It never ends, because they just change strategies...

Helen pursed her lips, shifting a complaining Justin from one arm to another.

"I'd like for you to be there," she said.

Robert stared at her. He suddenly leaned forward, kissing her cheek and brushing her hair with his free hand. "You're beautiful day and night, babe!"

"Mmm. So you're coming?"

"Yeah. Of course. If you need it – me – I'm there!"

So passive! thought Helen – again, without anger. *Why try to get out of coming if you're going to come anyway?* Her mother's answer came: *To be magnanimous, of course! Let him have his little trophies...*

Yeah yeah, or we'll end up living under a bridge... Her mother's voice joined hers at the end.

Robert straightened up. "How – how long do you need?"

"We have to be in the car in five."

"O-kay," said Robert, as if she had surprised him unjustly.

You can keep 13 client files organized in your mind, but you never know when we have to leave...

Robert finished wrestling Justin into the car seat – Helen was often trapped at home because Justin simply refused to let her strap him in – and slid in beside him. Justin also refused to sit in the back seat alone.

"Ya know," said Robert, "I was just reading the other day that for every infant life saved by car seats, like hundreds of babies weren't born because three kids means you have to upgrade the car." He paused. "Crazy... Yeah, Justin, that's right – daddy's making conversation, but mommy is focusing on driving, which is a *good* thing! Safety first, right bud? Oh crap!"

Robert's phone buzzed, and he answered it.

"Hey Pete. Peter, sorry. Yeah, just dealing with the spawn this AM... She's good – Peter says 'hi' – I'll get on that. Yes, I know. You're right, he doesn't pay the bills. Jesus it's like a sauna in here – Helen, can you up the AC? Sorry. Yes, I will... Thanks. OK..."

Peter's tinny voice vanished and Robert folded his phone.

"Safety first, babe, but can we step on it a bit? Peter's having a minor conniption..."

They arrived at the daycare and had to spend eight sweaty minutes looking for parking. Twice they hovered like vultures over a minivan spilling over with kid toys, before being waved away by impatient mothers in lululemon leggings. Once they turned into a parking space, only to be blocked by a moped.

"What the *hell* is a moped doing in a daycare parking lot?" snarled Robert, pulling at his collar. Helen had recently won the starch battle, so his neck was red.

"Employee, I guess..." murmured Helen.

"Yeah... Almost there, buddy, mommy's doing her best..."

Justin cried when Robert pulled him out of the car seat. His left arm got tangled in a strap, and as his father yanked, Helen was suddenly reminded of watching Robert half-lose his mind untangling Christmas tree lights.

"Robert!" she cried.

"Well you do it then!"

"I can't! He only wants you..."

Robert blew through his lips, the sentence of blame falling to mist with his spittle. "Come *on* buddy, work with me here!"

The dreaded pause of *inhalation* half-froze Helen's blood as Justin gathered for a good old scream.

My god he's like a pufferfish...

"Is his arm red?" asked Helen. Surprised and resentful glances from other mothers washed over her, as they tried to comprehend why a hooker/mistress was involved in dropping off a man's kids.

"No – god, it's fine!" Robert's face was red with rage against the ordinary impediments of an average life.

"No binkies!" cried Helen as Robert jammed a pacifier into Justin's mouth.

"Well, we can't hand him over *screaming*, Helen!"

Some old fire flashed up. "So what – we just yank it out like the pin of a grenade, hand him over and *run?*"

"Well if *you...*" Robert obviously bit his lip, perhaps in the hope that Helen would finish that sentence in the most self-destructive way possible.

Helen cocked her head. She would never be accepted by the other moms anyway, so why not cause a scene. "I – what, Robert?"

"Not the time..." he muttered, stroking his son's hair so hard that his little chin jerked back and forth.

"Ohhh – you mean if Justin liked me more, he could stay home?" Helen's voice was even, restrained – but with a clear signal that roof-blowing escalation was just one misplaced syllable away.

Robert glanced around and ducked his head. "I didn't say that..."

"Oh, *such* a lawyer!" spat Helen.

"Yeah. It's on the card." Robert leaned forward dangerously. "It's what's paying for daycare, kiddo. Because I can't pay someone else to do *my* job!"

Helen's face turned white. "Oh man... Oh dear. You didn't just say that... You know that I know a *lot* of lawyers, right?"

"I'm – hey, sorry. I'm sorry. Now we're all upset..."

"You're not the goddamned *weather*, Robert. You make choices!"

"I did. I do. Bad choice. I'm sorry."

Helen took a deep breath. "I don't – think you can take that back. The mask came off, Robert."

"It was terrible. You are a great mother. He's just going through a 'daddy' phase..." Robert tried to take her arm. "Look, it will pass. I promise you."

Her lips curled. "You're just – appeasing me because you have to get to work..."

"No! No, I promise you..."

A single older father carrying two baby bassinets glanced at Robert with sympathy – *How's that hot/crazy matrix working out for ya bud?*

"I mean – I do have to get to work. Of course..." Robert trailed off helplessly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just – be something. Different."

Robert single-handedly pulled out his notebook and pen from his jacket pocket, flipped it open and started writing. "Ok, got it. Nice and detailed... 'Be... different.' Yup!"

Helen's nails itched to scratch him to the bone.

They glared at each other, one on the sidewalk, one by the car - the sun too bright for their eyes, the truth too bright for their souls.

Justin screamed, his tender mind torn by tensions far beyond his senses.

Robert held out his hand. "Come on, babe... We can talk about this later. We've *got* to get him *in!*" he finished urgently.

Suddenly, Helen had a flash of a day without either Robert or Justin. A hot bath, maybe doing her nails. Some stretching, a yoga video... Cyber-stalking old flames, old friends... Finding out if she looked better – and so feeling better... A nap. *Five* naps...

"You're right," she said. She stepped forward, and Justin screamed even louder. "Don't worry kid, mean old mama isn't going to rip you from daddy's precious arms..."

Inside, a middle aged woman with scraggly brown hair smiled broadly as they entered. Names, medical history and paperwork were all checked. Both Robert and Helen wondered if the woman was deaf – she didn't seem to even hear their screaming infant.

"So often the same," she said gently. "They complain and complain, but they're always fine..."

"Yeah..." said Helen uncertainly, realizing she had to raise her voice over her son's volume. "It feels strange to – drop him off, in this state."

"Aw, that just means he loves you, right dear?" She touched Justin's cheek, and he recoiled from the faint odor of foreign spices.

The woman's face hardened almost imperceptibly. "So – he'll learn. We're not so different..." She stood up suddenly. "Now you must go. Dragging it out always makes it worse. Don't torture him, ok?"

"Ok..." said Helen, struck by a sudden internal tearing, near her heart.

Robert stuck out his hand. The woman shook it.

As they turned to go, Justin screamed even louder. He rocked back and forth in his bassinet, striving mightily to spill out.

"My god he thinks we're never coming back!" whispered Helen uselessly. No one – not even herself – could hear her.

The woman rose suddenly – so decisive it was almost menacing.
“Now, please – leave. The longer he cries, the harder he is to settle.
You must trust us!”

And so the couple fled the scene, out into the parking lot, away from
the screams of their baby, and leaned against the car, nauseous
under the rising hot sun.

Chapter 13

Shane awoke with cloth on his face.

“Up time, kid,” said his father, a dark outline in a bright doorway.

Reaching up, Shane pulled a pair of jeans from his head.

“Conference time,” said John decisively. He left, leaving the door open – which always angered his son. It was a kind of ownership, a territory-marking, that felt humiliating.

After dressing, Shane made his way downstairs, his mind thick with memories.

He held onto the banister, remembering the first time Robert had encouraged him to slide down. He had had fallen off. Robert had caught him, and in that moment of safety and security, Shane had buried his little head in Robert’s chest and arms, feeling liquid love releasing in his innards like a happy yolk.

Shane had been an anxious child. The irrevocable DNA strands of his personality rebelled against the genetics of his father’s mind, finding no comprehension, no quarter, no truce. The immature tall father is annoyed by his short son’s stature – when pressed, of course he admits it is ridiculous, but that doesn’t alter the bedrock of the gene wars that flame across the world – and, so often, within individual families.

There was too much distance between Shane and his father – and too little between Shane and his mother. Early sibling closeness was abandoned by Robert, who fled Jean’s needy quicksand to the alien sunrise heights of his father’s granite soul, leaving his brother behind, and below.

Shane glanced at the landing where he had been allowed to make a blanket tent while his father was away. He remembered falling asleep, as lonely as an abandoned space traveler, listening to

Robert's hesitant steps approaching and receding, warring between sibling connection and the inevitable seduction of peer status...

As long as Shane could remember, Robert had always been encircled by a caustic moat of brittle friends, eager to slam any affection for his tagalong self. It had enraged Shane at the time; everywhere in the world, he heard that blood was thicker than water, and you do for family, and family is everything – but within his own family, he was nothing – less than nothing, an annoyance, an irritant, an environmental biohazard of terminally low status that had to be hid and fled from at all costs.

And the 'friends' – the jeering peers, the laughing disconnected masks washed up from the bottomless storms of bad families – they guarded Robert, and offered him status and success and girls and laughter and approval – on the condition that he betray his kin, his brother, his own flesh. Like a gang member who has to kill to prove himself, Robert had to murder his heart to gain favour from the soulless.

When Robert had married Helen, he had been enmeshed friends with Greg, a small funny bitter man. They were often up all night trying to work out their weird conflicts, and Greg had once given Robert an entire case of empty beer bottles and demanded that he hurl them against a wall to 'discharge his anger.'

Greg truly lived the premise that Robert was inhabited by strange demons that had to be expelled through submission/humiliation rituals. Punching pillows, 'getting laid,' speaking his mind in dangerous situations – all these were promoted – demanded even – by Greg, who had some sort of mad-monk Rasputin tyranny over Robert's mind.

When the Sarah McLaughlin song "Adia" came on, with the lyrics:

Adia, I do believe I failed you

Adia, I know I've let you down

Don't you know I tried so hard

To love you in my way?

It's easy, let it go...

Greg carelessly remarked that this was exactly how Robert felt about his mother. Robert was surprised, disoriented. It didn't feel *deeply* true, but Greg always said that it was impossible to see yourself from the outside – which translated into the absolute that no cheap 'insight' that Greg had could ever be challenged without being labelled as 'defensive.' If Greg labelled you as 'X,' and you disagreed, well then clearly Greg had 'hit a nerve' and the diagnosis was confirmed.

Shane hated Greg – Robert diagnosed this hatred as resentment that Greg had 'taken me away from you...'

This was the problem – every emotion, every disagreement, was viewed through the most petty potential lens. *Hey, man, Greg can't just be manipulative, petty and controlling – you only have a problem with him because he's so perceptive, and you hate not him, but what he can so clearly see in **you!***

It was all so gross and obvious, but for Robert it was a strangely seductive kind of quicksand – all the more strange because Greg had nothing to offer him professionally. (The reality was that Robert kept betraying himself because he could not admit that he had perpetually betrayed his brother – which Peter deeply sensed – but that grimmest of lessons was still to come in his life...)

A week before his wedding, Robert had a long conversation – monologue really – with Shane.

"Shane, you are my only brother. Everyone knows that – everyone knows how close we are, that's a given. So you are automatically my best man, you know that, right? Now I know you have some – issues with Greg, but we are pretty close, and he has really helped me with my commitment issues with Helen. Probably saved the whole relationship to be honest. He's done this long-weekend seminar about action and commitment and standing for what you

believe in. He just – demanded to know what was standing in my way, why I was so hesitant – and he said, this is so obvious in hindsight, of course – he asked me if I *genuinely* thought I could do better. Such a – like, simple question, right?” Robert laughed. “Better than Helen? You know, we once came out of my room, and Greg was kinda snarky and asked ‘Hey guys, what were you *doing* in there?’ and Helen just said: ‘Hey, man, sometimes you just need a good screw!’” Robert laughed. “Fearless, right? It sounds a bit cringe, but it – worked, in that moment. She’s not intimidated by him at *all*, it’s so great! Anyway, Greg said that he is the number one reason we are getting married, so he should be the best man. And I said, what about Shane, and Greg said that you are automatically the best man in everyone’s mind, so I get a ‘wedding best man.’ That make sense? Sure it does. So you are my best man, Shane, in my heart. But at the wedding, Greg is my best man, because he made us get married by calling me out on my procrastination, my cowardice. Don’t look hurt, bro – you would have done it I’m sure, but you’re too close, it’s too personal, and you have your own – troubles. So really man, don’t take this the wrong way, but he’s been so – instrumental in my life, that he can’t be just another ‘tux in the crowd’ – that’s his phrase. He’s foundational to my marriage, and I want him to be foundational to my – our wedding day – and you are already, by blood...”

And the justifications went on, and Shane was cornered, because the ‘conversation’ was just a ritual, since Robert had already made up his mind, been programmed by Greg, and this was all just *ex post facto* justification. The execution order had been decided weeks ago; the presentation of evidence was only in the nature of justification, not evaluation.

He could no more defy Robert than he could his mother...

And so Shane had agreed, and hadn’t raised a fuss, because he was wise enough to know when a battle could not be won – to choose a new buddy of three month’s standing over his own brother of over a

quarter century was such a wild idea that it could never be rationally defended – and thus could only be enforced by will and sophistry.

And so Shane had been demoted to penguin-extra at Robert's wedding. He was allowed to give a short speech, but Greg had basked in the spotlight and waxed eloquent and given the glowing couple strange praise for their 'potential' and 'possibilities' and came with no date and talked to no one except Robert and tried to leave early, right after his speech – until – until...

Greg had vanished from Robert's life right after the wedding, which had angered Shane to no end – to have sacrificed your own – and only – brother for the sake of some wannabe-guru suction-pad – how gross and weird was *that?!?*

But Shane didn't learn the truth until quite a bit later in life, which was that it was his father John who performed the exorcism.

John had followed Greg out into the parking lot after his speech.

"Greg," he called.

Startled, Greg had turned around, his bushy Eastern-European eyebrows hunching together like wrestling caterpillars.

"Mr John? Is that you? I can't see..."

"Where are you going?"

"Well..." said Greg, in that patient "it's obvious" tone he used so often. "Home – home, I guess. Why?"

"Why are you leaving so soon?"

"Why – does that matter?" Greg laughed self-deprecatingly. "I'm not much of a party person I guess."

"Was it you..? Is my son right that you demanded to be the best man?"

"Demanded? No, no... Please, that's not – fair language. I made the request." He smiled broadly. "Made my case..."

“Why?”

“Why? Well, because – Rob and I are close, of course. We know each other in – deep ways. I wanted to be a part of the celebration.”

John advanced under the white light of the parking lot lampposts.

“Why – best man though?”

“I think I am the best man for – Robert. I am working for his – best interests...”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Something about you is – not right.”

Greg took a deep breath. “Quite a broad – category. Categories perhaps. Do you want me to be – frank?”

“Honest men don’t ask that.”

“Fair, fair...” Greg wagged a forefinger. “Smart..! Well – you want to know why I – wanted to be Robert’s – best man?”

“I have asked already.”

“Sure, sure... Just checking...”

“Well?”

Greg lowered his head slightly. “It’s a delicate matter, Mr John.”

The older man said nothing.

“Your family – well your family has its issues. Shane is not doing so well. Robert had some – maturing to do. Helen is a delight, of course, but even she would get tired of – waiting, after a time... Do you see what I mean?”

“How old are you?”

“What? Why?”

“Here’s the deal,” said John, taking a step forward. “I won’t stall by asking you why you’re asking questions. You do the same.”

“All – right,” said Greg, ducking his balding head slightly. “Forgive me, I’m not used to a drink or two. What was the question?”

"How old are you?"

"Thirty one. Why? Sorry, forget that. Yes. Thirty one."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Is she here?"

"Don't answer a question with a question. Especially a bitchy one."

Greg's eyes widened. "No. No girlfriend."

"Boyfriend?"

The younger man laughed. "No."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Well – there is what pays the bills, and what the heart wants, you see?"

There was a pause.

Greg said: "Was that a question? I have lost track, sorry... I am a courier, and I work in an office from time to time..."

"A temp..."

"Yes."

"So you have no girlfriend, you have no career, and you make about 20k a year. Do I have that about right?"

"Sure... Sure, yes." Greg drew himself up to his full height – which was still shorter than John. "And are you going to say that I have no right to give advice on these – on the basis of this?"

"Your speech was – offensive, Gregory. You praised only what they could become, not who they were."

"Ah, but we all have – potential, do we not?"

"You mean, the potential to become a bike courier and a temp in his thirties?"

"Not all success is – material."

John pursed his lips thoughtfully. "It's stupid to state the obvious as some sort of profound wisdom." He took another step forward. Greg's left hand went into his front pocket. "So yes, let us say that not all success is – material. Granted. Are you successful in – courage, Greg?"

"I – I think I am courageous. Yes."

"Good," murmured John. "Good... So now, brave man, tell me how I have failed. Here. Now. To my face."

"I feel – alarmed..."

"Right. That's what courage is for. Do you believe in the right of reply?"

"I... Yes, I do. In courts."

"You have passed judgement on me. Fair enough. Tell me TO MY FACE!" John's voice erupted almost against his will it seemed.

Even in the white overhead lights, Greg's face went pale. "You are not in a – stable mood, my friend."

The obvious rejoinder – *I'm not your friend* – passed through John's face and made no sound.

"You have criticized my children. The children I raised. But you have not given me the right of reply..."

"How – not so?" cried Greg. "Robert can bring my criticisms – my feedback – to you, and you can reply..."

"Hearsay," said John, taking another step forward. "To. My. Face."

Greg swallowed, then squared his shoulders. "If you like... Why do you think you are not close to – Shane?"

John nodded slowly. "I will indulge this. He has always gravitated towards his mother. It happens. My brother was the same. He's dead now, so he has no – right of reply."

"Did Shane – gravitate towards his mother... Please, can you take a step back? Thank you. It seems to me that – Shane was more or less – left behind with his mother."

"They like to talk. I don't know – everything that they talk about, of course."

Greg narrowed his eyes. "Did Shane – enjoy these conversations?"

John snorted. "He wasn't – locked up there. I could hear laughter."

"His too?"

"Watch it, Greg," said John in a low voice.

"Is that a - threat?"

"It is – a consequence."

"For what?"

"For trying to take my family apart."

"If I step on a footbridge, and the bridge breaks, is that my fault?"

"Why did you not become a therapist, if you care about fixing families so much?"

"I am really not comfortable in this conversation..."

"It's because then you would have some professional ethics. Responsibilities. You would be – policed."

"Am I being – policed now?"

"You are being – confronted... You value courage. And honesty, you value that too?"

"Yes – yes!"

"Am I supposed to be dishonest with you? Lie to you?"

"Because you think I – threaten you?"

"You are a little worm to me. A slimy-tongued saboteur..."

Greg swallowed and took a step back.

"You take petty power in controlling younger people with these weird words and – theories of yours... They look up to you, because they don't know better. And I don't know how to catch you, to be honest. You wriggle and dodge – and you're good at it, I credit you... But there's something – bad in this. In you. You're a failure criticizing the more successful. And I figured it would pass, like – food poisoning. Then I heard about the 'best man switch' right before the ceremony. And you're just passing through; either Robert will stop listening to you, so you'll go and prey on – someone else – or, he'll keep listening, and things will get so bad that you'll have to bail, or get beaten within an inch of your life..."

"What are you – talking about?" whispered Greg.

"Consequences..." murmured John. "Stay away from my family."

"Why..." Greg's voice was dry. "Why – why does he have to come to me for advice, then, Mr John? Why has he for years not married Helen?"

"Why do you CARE?" thundered John. "You're just a – buddy!"

"I do care. I know it has not been a long time, but I do care about Robert..."

"Are you gay?"

"Ah! Is this the only way that one man could – care about another?"

"It's just – weird. I've seen this before. With my brother, in the army. A 'friend' who attached to him like a – like a – leech..."

"And if you are so good at – seeing this, then why was Shane with this – with Regina?"

"Oh I had words for that little minx too, don't worry about that."

"So you just – backfill? You raise children who make bad decisions and then you just – threaten those who care?"

"Regina didn't care! What the *hell* are you talking about?"

Greg waved his hand. "But I do. But from your perspective, I am bad, Regina is bad, and you have to corner us in dark places and set us straight by – by towering over us. I have my keys in my hand, step back!"

"Are you still – tough, friend?"

"I am – done with this conversation."

"No problem," said John, rigid in a pleasant mask. "We can pick this up next time we see each other."

"We... What?"

"Well, they've got a new place together. I'll be hanging out a lot, it's a bit of a fixer-upper, they need help." John laughed. "Not that you'd be any good with tools. But I am. I am a whiz with power tools. Not quite an expert. But pretty close... And this conversation is in private. I am Biblical that way. You got a problem with someone, you talk to them one on one. Face to face. Not behind their back, like a gossiping little *girl*. After that, if you don't get resolution, you confront them in public. So I'll be there, most likely. And if I'm not, I soon will be. I've asked Helen to let me know when you're - coming over. And we'll keep having it out, my friend, until I am satisfied..." Keeping his hands spread out in the open, John leaned in. "Because I think you like to whisper in the shadows, not talk directly. A saboteur, not a soldier. And I hate that, Greg. I *hate* it! But we'll sort it out, over time, over and over, until – resolution is achieved."

"And what is – resolution? For you?"

"I don't know. But I'll know it when I feel it."

The two men stared at each other in the dark parking lot – the sounds of disco pulsing out from the rotunda, the rainbow lights shifting over their still, set faces.

Shane turned the corner of the living room, and saw his father sitting spread-legged on the cream-coloured couch, while his mother

sat hunched over on the loveseat, staring at the off-white carpet.

Shane's wasted months – 18 or more – suddenly arose within him, as timelessness suddenly fell away from his soul. The photocopied days were suddenly revealed as bleeding paper from a finite stack, reduced every day to less and less, by nothing at all.

Shane suddenly noticed his parents aging faces – the sags, folds, creases and papery skin. The slow waterfall of bulbous flesh was falling from their skulls.

"Sit down," said Shane's father – not unkindly, but with a bedrock kind of firmness that did not bode well for the continuation of procrastination.

Shane sat, playing with his own thumbs.

"Get it over with," he said dully.

His mother cleared her throat. "What – do you think is coming?"

Shane smiled without mirth. "Exit, stage – everywhere."

John's voice was strangely gentle. "Well, we do have to – something has to change, wouldn't you say?"

"Something is changing!" Shane's words sounded hollow, even to him.

"Shane dear, you are still off the – drugs? Right?"

He nodded. "That's never coming back."

Jean nodded. "I knew that, but it's a relief to – hear."

"What are you pulling in a week, son?"

Shane swallowed. "I guess, 300?"

John nodded slowly. His eyes were suddenly wet. "I want to – get inside you, son. Shake things off, move you around. I know you have things tough, your generation – we had it tough, in our own way. But not like this – lying around. I know you're not lazy, that was never an issue when you were young, I remember having to yell at

you at three in the morning to stop drawing or reading or – whatever you were doing. When you want to do something, nothing can stop you – so I guess I don't really know – what has stopped you..."

Jean pursed her lips. "We're not trying to be any type of – therapist, of course. But I suppose..." Her voice trailed off, her eyes averted.

"Just – talk to us, Shane. We're kind of sailing the ship here, and it sort of feels like – I don't know, you're some kind of stowaway. You know?"

Jean's face crumpled, and she suddenly burst into tears. "Are you – broken, Shane? Did she – break you? I can't stand it, these thoughts, like if I went back in time and beat her off with a 2 x 4. Kept you safe from that – that witch. It's my job – our job – and we just let you get - taken, or eaten alive, or something – like that."

John leaned over and patted the back of her liver spotted hand. "Okay, Jean, we don't have any time machines, we have to work with what – is."

Jean would – or could – not stop crying. "Such a tender toddler, so – clingy, but in a good way. I just want to take you in my arms like a piece of clay and – undo everything or remake everything or – I don't know!" Her sobs overcame her.

Almost against his will, Shane jumped out of his armchair and knelt before his mother. His voice was thick with emotion.

"Mom, it's not – I'm not trying to – I don't want you to feel this way – we don't run the world, but the world just - runs us over... That doesn't mean what I want it to mean... I'm just – lost, and unprepared. I don't know what I want, everything feels – hollow and useless – like me. I can't get any traction, on the ground. Everything I want for my future is like – it's like wanting to build an intricate sandcastle, but the tide is coming in, it's all for nothing, it's going to get just – washed away."

John nodded slowly. "Everyone – everyone, if they're honest, has those feelings. At times. I look at my work, my office, my client list, my email inbox and sometimes it's just a bunch of – things, atoms, like white pixels and black space that I'm just shuffling around."

Jean shot a confused look at her husband.

Shane sank back on his heels, running his hands through his hair. "I know you guys want to help, and I – I appreciate it. I really do. But it's like I had a – like a journey to the end of my life and back, and it just adds up to – nothing. And there is a part of my brain that feels broken like two – hands, reaching across a – chasm, but not able to even touch fingertips... That doesn't mean anything, I'm not trying to be poetic, but my life feels like nothing in the face of some kind of – eternity. And I've been walking, I go around to our old neighbourhood, in Don Mills, and – there's no one there that I recognize, it's just a foreign country, everything we were has been – erased. And that's all just – spreading, the world feels half underwater, so that's why I stay – upstairs."

Shane's wild emotional words struck deep chords in his parents.

"So – and – you guys, your generation – you were supposed to keep us safe – I don't mean from people like – that witch – Satan – but a larger – whatever, I don't know, whoever is hidden and in charge. You were supposed to defend our – culture, our history, our – way of life, or something like that. I walk around and I feel like I've been transported to the other side of the world, 100 years ago – do you know what I mean?"

Flashes of guilty fear rocketed past his parents' faces.

"Like I know that – Robert has joined the – the gang, the world or whatever – and it's working for him – at least for now, I don't know... He's got his – wife, that's great although... But I – something in the drugs or the – whatever the hell that was, that relationship – it all gave me a vision of everything that was coming down the – pipeline." Shane wagged a slow finger. "And I think – you guys know about this, a little, maybe deep down, which is why it's so hard for

you to – correct me, or whatever this – intervention is. And I don't know who is responsible for the decaying state of the world – maybe it's entropy, maybe it's Aztec demons, maybe it is – boomers... But there's something – something we can't talk about about the failing state of the world, and of the land our ancestors – built, which is a real shame – I mean a real shame, it's kind of shameful, but nothing can be said, and so – nothing can be fixed..."

John whispered: "I don't know how to answer that, it is very vague."

Jean cleared her throat and said: "How can we help?"

John shook his head. "It's not about helping, Jean – we talked about this, please!"

Shane raised his red eyes. "Then – what is this about?"

John's lips closed briefly into a tight line. "It's about – change, son. Things have to change. Time moves on, no matter how – stuck we are."

Shane laughed bitterly. "Yeah, got it, dad. Time is linear, I appreciate that."

"It's April 17. You have two weeks to find a place."

Shane stared down at the carpet, wondering if there were still any of his skin cells embedded in it from countless hours of roughhousing.

His mother's breath caught in her throat.

There was a long silence.

"So I'm supposed to – just get a job with good pay and benefits, and a nice apartment in the city – do you have any idea what the economic conditions are out there, dad? We've got like a quarter of a million people pouring into the country every year, willing to work for – nothing, and willing to stack bodies in a bachelor apartment like cordwood..."

"No racism!" cried his mother automatically.

Shane's shoulders sagged. "It's not about race, mother – it's just – supply and demand, cause and effect – all the things you taught me since I was a little kid, dad! I mean – it's not like they are bringing in a million boomer accountants to drive down your wages, right? And as a white male..."

Jean's face was pale. "I won't hear this kind of talk! Robert is doing just fine!"

"Yeah, for regulated professions, the effects are – slower, I get that. I just – I don't understand why you feel such empathy and sympathy for foreigners and immigrants, but not – not for your own flesh and blood – doesn't that seem a little fucking strange to you?"

John said: "These – foreigners, as you call them, are very hard-working, very dedicated – and they pay their bills on time, which is why – one of the main reasons why we have this lovely house."

"Yeah, I get that... So maybe they work hard, some of them – but that just drives down wages for everyone else. No, let me speak, for God's sake! So maybe they work hard and it's hard for me to get a job – and maybe they drive up the price of housing, so it's harder for me to – start a family – or maybe they don't work so hard, and end up taking up space and healthcare and tax money and god knows what!"

"What the hell have you been reading on the Internet?" demanded John.

"I don't – hate immigrants, you know that – everyone's an immigrant at some point – but it makes things – more difficult, in some ways, you have to understand that at least!"

There was a long silence. John and Jean's cold faces glowered down at Shane's hunched form.

"I really don't like this habit of blaming everyone else for your own problems," said John. "Next thing you know, it'll be the capitalists, right? There are countless people doing very well in this life. No – immigrant forced you to date Regina, or push that – poison into your

veins. Nobody's guarding the outside of your room, making sure that you can't leave the house. If you want me to sympathize with you – and I do love you, son, I do care about you, believe it or not – then you have to give life everything you've got – no holds barred – nothing left in the chamber – and if you do that, and somehow all of these mythical immigrants bar your way, then I will be happy to listen to you about these – theories of yours. But it seems to me you are looking more for excuses than solutions, and I'm frankly sick and tired of funding – that!"

Shane looked up, his eyes narrowing. "Okay. Okay. So, I pack up my belongings in my old kit bag and smile and trudge on, like a happy hobo!"

"That's a pretty pathetic and poetic way of saying that you have to get a job when you are 30 years of age – and yes, I mean a real job, something for the future, something with sacrifice, where you're not just hanging around with a bunch of losers feeling vaguely superior!"

Jean said: "John, please..." She reached forward and stroked Shane's greasy hair. "Of course we want the best for you, my dear – and we want to help, more than anything, but what we have been doing – clearly – clearly, it hasn't helped."

There was a moment of silence. John clapped his hands on his knees.

"Shane, son, it's a done deal. I'm happy to lend you the car, I'm happy to drive you around, I'm happy to – help you out with a down payment or deposit or whatever you need. You can borrow my old beater for a couple of months if you need it - but this – this ride is over. Do you hear me? And you can get mad at us and the government and the immigrants and the job situation and the housing crisis – but getting mad at everyone except yourself has done actually nothing to get yourself out of this hole – in fact, I think you are deeper in than when you first started – and that's on us. We are your parents, we have been paying these stupid bills and

not requiring you to lift a little finger around here. And that ends today."

Chapter 14

The sobs felt like they would never end.

Justin's innards were like an epileptic balloon animal, twisting and rolling and leaking salty sorrow. He lay on his side, feeling like the floor was tilting and rising towards the icy stars beyond the blue.

Disasters spilled from his mind – his father had to save penguins from a burning zoo; his mother was trying to save her eyes as she mouth-breathed life back into a narwhal. Criminals teemed through the city, striking and stealing, and his parents had to summon their fellow crime-fighters to take them on in some desperate last stand.

Why leave me if nothing is – nothing is – happening? Justin's brain cried out – screamed out – while a more practical – colder – part of his soul saw his mother and father sipping their infinite coffees behind the wheel of their giant grey car, phone-scrolling and laughing as they drove over rainbow bridges under showers of gold and gems.

They're – they're having fun while I...

And with all the mighty rage of his compact frame, Justin railed against his abandonment. The burnt lady reached out with her arms, a rigid smile coating her yellow teeth. Justin took a deep shuddering breath and squeezed his eyes shut.

The feeling floated beneath his words: *If I empty myself of tears, I will be fine all over again...*

"Just-eeen," said the burnt spicy voice. The voice was syrup; the eyes caustic. "Come, let us play with the Lego!"

A hand closed on his wrist.

All at once Justin felt the fight go out of him. The will of the woman entered him and became his physics. No plea would reach her; no tears would erode her destination. It was like trying to flap your

arms if you fell off a slide. The concrete still met you with metallic mouthy blood.

Being half-pulled down the hallway, Justin saw a white-blond little girl hiding under a paint-spattered craft table. Eyes wide, she raised her forefinger to her lips.

Justin looked away, as if he could buy her ten seconds more safety by refusing to daisy-chain any downward glances from the burnt woman.

They passed by the baby room, where two obese women chatted while chunky babies rolled around on the stained floor. One woman was holding a soggy saggy diaper; the other was pointing at something on her phone.

The burnt woman brought Justin to the bright green door – the cold metal peeking through the ripped wounds of flaking paint. Justin wanted to touch the metal, to see if it was a different temperature, different texture, but the burnt woman snatched his hand away.

The cacophony flashed onto his face as the green door opened. Justin could see and evaluate – with the flashing instincts of any prey species – the boiling battles being constantly waged between the *builders* and the *breakers*. The builders were trying to make houses and bridges out of blocks, while the breakers were constantly knocking them down. The builders were trying to play snakes and ladders, or push broken little three-wheeled cars down the remains of tattered town-road carpets, while the breakers ran over, across and through everything that could be assembled to even marginally extend the attention span.

The children only ever picked up by one parent fought to bring their chaos to the two-parent kids. The kids new to daycare quailed back before the 'lifers' who taught them the ropes by choking them in small corners.

"Are you hungry, Just-eeen?" asked the burnt woman.

Justin shook his head. He never had any appetite at daycare. Everything was covered in mucus, and he could not spend his whole eternity washing his hands – no matter how many times his parents got angry at him for ‘Bringing *another* bug home!’.

His dad would sniffle and tower over him and get angry because he had to go to *court* and how was he supposed to win if he was dripping snot everywhere? And why didn’t his pretty mommy want to stay home, since it cost so much for daycare, but she really really wanted to work for the man at the suit factory – which always meant superhero costumes to Justin, so maybe that was understandable.

Kids breathed and bubbled snot and mucus – and phone calls were apparently made to parents, because being sick meant the kids had to stay home, but that never worked for Justin – he could be bleeding from both eyes, it seemed, and that just meant dropping him off in sunglasses and then his mother later yelling that he must have got it from some kid at daycare *that very day...*

And there were the sugar-free kids who had occasional cakes made from watermelon, but that was about it, and all the sugared kids were always trying to get them to eat candy and cookie crumbs. And there were the reader-kids – Justin felt most sorry for them, sometimes – who were just trying to get to the end of a story before the book was ripped out of their hands, or some breaker-kid would tear out the last page and sell it back to them for a cookie or piece of candy.

And Justin had a friend who felt more like a sympathetic refugee or cell-mate – Ralph the pale boy, who liked to tell endless stories with a lot of farting, and who would walk the perimeter of the playground during lunch or outdoor time with Justin, and talk about dinosaurs and trains and airplanes and war and the hope that he would get to fight a real dragon someday – maybe on another planet, he said, in a rare concession to prosaic reality.

And Justin would talk of the island he would build when he was older – an island where he would breed lizards and big cats and hunt for fish with a spear, because hooks were kind of sissy – and build his own hut because houses were also sissy, and name every shape on the moon all for himself, and learn to live without any ships bringing him anything – but that Ralph could totally come and visit – and stay if he liked, and where there would be nothing brightly coloured except fruit and fish, and no burnt women or jigsaw puzzles with missing pieces or toy cars with broken springs and the hard hot rain would wash all germs free from everything, and the days would be spent exploring and lazing on sunny rocks that put you to sleep with their warmth.

And Justin and Ralph would be called in and lectured at for being 'anti-social.' Afterwards, Ralph would talk about his Aunt, who had never married and actually knew magic tricks, and gave both boys hope that a female might actually one day be welcome on their island, and provide some benefit other than food and shelter and nagging.

And the really dumb kids sat sagging under the monkey-bars, staring listlessly and rousing themselves only for the occasional offered cup of water – and Justin tried to remember the color and location of the cups – like watching a magician - because he was OK catching colds and sore throats, but was terrified of catching *dumbness*, and spending the rest of his life being nothing, and staring into nothing...

And the lonely kids would latch onto Justin, because he was good-looking and sort of kind, but they brought out a special demon in Justin's chest, because they were germs worse than anything except dumbness, because they stuck to him, droning on about their Japanese cards and Lego sets and caterpillar books, and never asking him anything, just endless monotone drivel about things he neither understood nor cared about – and their strange whispered superiority, their creepy invitations to join a club he would surrender a bloody pinky to stay out of – and boasting about faraway parents who obviously didn't like them either.

And the days were endless; the noise and chaos and barely-restrained yelling of the adults created violent static in Justin's mind – and incomprehension, that he should suffer and fear so much and yet have his suffering and fear remain so invisible to his parents – and his stone-faced granddad and chatty leaky grandmom – and everyone else.

It was like being lowered into a trashy underworld every day, and writhing and dodging and trying to paint only to have glass jars of murky water splashed onto his medieval scenes – and then kids eating glue and pinching *hard* under the table – and then occasional flashes of grace and civility, like when the good-looking guitar man came and sang Raffi songs and all the women smiled and shone and patted their hair and spoke softly for once.

And the cries of shock and sorrow floating down the hall from the baby room, and the chaos and sadness of pickup time, when children burst into tears as their parents reappeared – and the terror of the children whose parents came late – wondering if they would come at all...

And when his mother came to pick him up, she never asked what he had made that day – at least, after the first few times – because he said it had all been broken or wetted or destroyed in some stupid way or another – and she would compress her red lips and not want to hear any more about his day.

Occasionally she would chat with the burnt woman, smiling and shaking her head knowingly – but that was to show Justin that they were friends, which meant that the burnt woman would tell tales on Justin, and that would be bad...

And it was not warmer on the way home, in the car – he was not closer to another human soul – but it was quieter, because his mother often had a headache and didn't want to listen. She talked sometimes, about things that were scary – not because he understood them, but because his mother didn't understand that he *didn't* understand them.

All he knew was that his father would ruffle his hair and read his phone over dinner and – and then, after a solitary bath, Justin would nestle in the crook of his father’s arm and listen to his favorite story before blending their flesh together in gentle sleep...

And in his dreams, Justin was alone on his island, exploring his closed orange eyelids under the silent white sun, because colours and people and peers were just – overwhelming.

Since Justin was flooded with endless violent noise, only at night – in a solitary world of distance and unreality - could he even *feel* the possibility of peace...

Chapter 15

Derek groaned, hot flashes of guilt searing his chest.

Chloe had been up most of the night. Anna was teething, which meant a lot of crying and painful breastfeeding.

Sometimes, babies seemed to be little more than bags of liquid – mucous, drool, poop and pee – as if their physical form was a kind of mirage hovering over a puddle of life-goo.

Chloe did not complain though – which seemed almost superhuman to Derek, who was a bit of a complainer, to be honest – he accepted this term, but rebelled against being labeled a ‘whiner’ – probably because of the accuracy of that word.

There was a thump at the door, and he saw his son’s pudgy foot thrusting in.

“Daddy!” Branden cried. Beaming through a face filthy with murdered food, he carried a wobbly tray into the bedroom.

“Mommy said no juice, but I snuck it!”

Derek sat up in alarm. Chloe laughed at spilled liquids – “All kids come from spilled liquid” she said brightly – but Derek had been raised by an OCD-mom, and felt ancient fear at any and all potential wobbles.

“Let me help you with that buddy,” he said, trying to kick the covers aside. *What the hell, does my wife staple them to the mattress?*

“I – got it daddy!” said Branden, gritting his teeth.

We never really grow up; our parents just get more and more internalized. Derek’s heart pounded as his son approached the bed. He cheered Branden on internally, but didn’t dare say a word.

It was the absolute curse of the family that handovers were almost always disastrous. Passing anything meant everything being fumbled

and falling – it didn't matter if it was baby wipes or a wallet or keys or a cup of coffee...

Frowning mightily, Branden stumbled and staggered forward. His tray of eggs and toast and a juice cup flew from his hand, straight at Derek.

Derek tried to catch the – what, eggs or juice is better? The toast was a lost cause; it would fall butter and jam side down due to the malevolent forces of demonic physics – egg yolks on the duvet could be contained; juice could seep – horror of horrors – into the *mattress* – which was about as great an evil as could be conceived of in his childhood home. It was the difference between cushion covers, which could be removed and cleaned – and the actual *couch*...

Derek managed to catch the plate of eggs and toast, but one landed – face down – on the duvet. With his other hand, he grabbed at the flying juice cup – orange juice splashed up his forearm – *at least it's not cranberry, that would be like absolute **blood!*** – but he managed to keep it on the duvet at least.

Derek growled through gritted teeth – “BRANDEN, BE CAREFUL!”

Branden stared at him, cocking his head slightly. Derek almost expected him to burst into tears, but he just laughed and leaned forward conspiratorially.

“Mom says it's duvet day, don't care daddy!”

Derek's mouth opened, then closed. He felt a weight lift off his rigid shoulders. He smiled and put the plate and cup on the nightstand. He wiped his arm on his T-shirt, his mother hovered in his mind, snarling and scowling.

“Did you make all this yourself?”

“Yeah! Do you love it? Happy Father's day, daddy!”

“It's – wonderful. Let's kick off the duvet, so nothing – soaks through, okay buddy? PULL!”

Branden's sturdy frame yanked the duvet off the bed – and Derek suddenly thought of the strange strength of little boys, and how useful that was on farms...

"Move it to the hardwood, ok?"

"Okay daddy..."

Derek felt an almost-sting of tears. His own father had died last year, and he was constantly reminded that he could never use the word again without the fatal letter 'X'.

Derek suddenly felt confined and sticky in his bed. He was about to leap up when Chloe appeared in the open doorway, Anna burbling at her breast.

"Did your Father's Day start sufficiently messy, love?" she smiled.

"Oh man... Torture, really. My mom would have – do you remember this? 'Had a conniption.'"

She laughed. "Whatever happened to that word? It's as dead as a dodo."

"Well, it's not because my mom stopped having conniptions, I can tell you that!"

"Yeah," nodded Chloe. "Three calls already this morning. She really wants us all to come by, love."

Derek ducked his head. "I know..."

"She says she's dug up some old videos of your dad when they were courting... She has an old – projector. Needs help getting it set up."

Derek groaned. "I don't want to..."

"I know," murmured Chloe. "I know..."

"Do you – think I should?"

She pursed her lips. "Look – it's Father's Day. Not Mother's Day. Ow, Anna, gentle! My dad wants us over too. We could spend the whole

day in the car, which I know sucks for you, you half-live in Sir Volvo...”

“What do *you* want?”

Branden cried: “Are you going to eat, daddy?”

“Yeah, buddy, sorry, I’m starving...” Derek eyed the congealed eggs on the plate, covered with speckles of crumbs. He gritted his teeth and bit into the rescued jam toast.

“Try the eggs, daddy! They were the most work!”

“In a sec, I will, I promise...” Derek raised his eyes to his wife. She walked past the foot of the bed and sat in an armchair in the corner. She beamed at him – a smile so broad and joyful that it felt like a solar flare in his heart.

“It’s your day, love – whatever you want, we’ll make it work.”

He swallowed. “It’s just that – I mean...” He lowered his voice. “We went to my mom’s for Mother’s Day, and you’re way better than her...”

Chloe just looked at him. “Tell me more...”

She always said that ‘Tell me more’ was more important for a marriage than ‘I love you.’

“I mean, your parents are great, like living gods really. They set the standard. Your dad has totally helped me – unwind, you know?”

Chloe laughed. “Oh, I know!”

“Mom is an hour away. I mean, really... After my dad – despawned – I told her to move closer. ‘All my memories are here’ – no, they’re in your heart, mom. It’s so inconvenient. I mean, when this pair grow up and we have grandkids, I don’t care if they’re on the moon, we’re like – right there...”

His wife smiled and brushed Anna’s curls from her forehead. “You hear that, Annie? It might *sound* like a threat, but really it’s not...”

Derek laughed.

Branden said: "I'm bored!"

His father nodded. "And you have every right to be – all this terrible 'big person' talk!"

"Deeespicable!"

"I agree! Do you want to go to Memaw's, Derek?"

He shook his head. "Her candy smells old!"

"I think it's prehistoric," murmured Chloe.

"What about Grandmaws?"

"Will Granddad be there?"

"Oh, he never goes anywhere."

"Oh yeahhh!" cried Branden. "He's like a billion years old, but he's such a great horsie!" His voice lowered. "And he has – like guns. Pew pew!" The boy jumped all over the bed.

Chloe laughed again, shielding Anna from any wobbly mishaps.

Derek took a deep breath. "I tell ya, I – it's Father's day. I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to do anything. And I feel bad, Chloe – I mean, you've been up all night..."

"Don't worry about me, I'm thrilled to be spending more time with Annie..." She leaned down and kissed her baby daughter on the forehead. "Smells heavenly, let's have a dozen more..."

"She really doesn't blink," murmured Derek, joy breaking free within him.

"She is always watching..."

"Wazowski!" cried Branden, completing a line from "Monsters Inc."

Derek laughed. "Right, right..."

"Hey," cried Branden. "Father's day, so – hooky? No lessons today?"

"No lessons today, kid."

"Yay! Let's go catch crayfish!"

"I'm not sure about that, buddy. Daddy worked hard all week..."

Branden frowned suddenly. "To *hell* with numbers!"

Both parents cried: "What?"

"That's what you said to mommy. I heard!"

Derek ducked his head. "Yeah... Yeah, I probably did. Sometimes work is like schoolwork, you know? It's good for you. You have to do it..."

"But you don't have to love it..."

"Right, right."

"Derek," said Chloe seriously. "It's your day. You work so hard for us. My job is way more fun than yours. I love you for that." She blew him a kiss. "What would you do if there were no obligations?"

"Come here and I'll show you..."

She laughed. "Assuming a family-friendly rating..."

"I'd love – I'd love to sit in the backyard – sunny today? Good – just sit there, chatting, playing some catchy-throwy with Branden, singing Annie's favourite frog song, have some potato salad and a beer, just – chat and sit and play and maybe doze a bit. Just a – nothing day, would be everything."

Chloe smiled. "As his Majesty commands, so shall it be!"

"And I'd like you to handle all the – all the calls, and saying 'no.'"

"Oh, so *I* have to deal with your mom's pauses and – disappointment. Haha, no worries, muh patriarch. Play with your son, eat your eggs, and Annie and I will go and talk your mom off the ledge... Won't we Annie? Your negative feedback is crying, isn't it, precious? Hers is pauses you could lose an airplane in. But we will let her be silent and not falter, right kiddo?"

Chloe blew another kiss at Derek, scooped Annie to her chest and walked towards the door.

“Launch time, Branden!” she whispered in passing.

With a massive *WHOOP*, Branden gathered all his strength and leapt towards his laughing father, who braced himself for an incoming wrestle-bomb.

Chapter 16

“Just tell them to get their asses over here!” snapped Helen, waving one arm at knee-length while holding the baby with the other.

“Justin! Stop hitting my legs!”

Robert stared at her, amazement and lust still shivering through his bone marrow. Even with her hair like a rat’s nest – even in sweatpants and an old t-shirt – even snarling, red-faced – his wife was still beautiful.

Justin sneezed, snot flying all over Helen’s calves. “I don’ *wanna* stay home, it sucks! Take me to my friends!”

Helen groaned. “You’re sick, kid. Your eyes are literally red. We’d never get you in.”

“I don’ *wanna* stay home!” repeated Justin defiantly. “School is fun! Better than here!”

Robert winced.

Helen didn’t seem to notice.

“You’re just gonna spend all day with the baaaby!” cried Justin. “It’s booring!” He sneezed again and danced around Helen and the baby. He thrust his head right at the pudgy little face, chanting: “Sammy is a baaaby, Sammy is a baaaby! Sammy is a baaaby!”

Helen shoved Justin’s face away.

“Don’t get your filthy germs on the baby, for God’s sake Justin!” She whirled on her husband, who visibly flinched. She took a deep breath, then spoke evenly. “Rob my eternal sweetheart – get your parents on the line and get them *over here!*”

“I don’t know if... They’re probably busy...”

Helen mimicked Robert’s mother. “Oh, we’re *sooo* excited to be grandparents! What a thrill, if there’s *anything* we can do, never hesitate to ask!”

"Oh but – my mother just sort of – says stuff, Helen... You know that..."

"ROB!" Helen half-shouted. Even Justin paused in his pummeling. "We had kids... Remember your dad droning on about our ancestors and the Middle Ages and our responsibility for the lineage your precious brother won't likely continue... 'It takes a village, we'll be that village...' They *both* said that!" Helen's voice broke slightly. "And – and how many times have they come by – *without* me having to do all the work! Oh, you barbeque, sure, but *I* make my famous platters, I clean the house, and put out a trough of wine – and they're here in a heartbeat. But to actually *help*... This is the day. This is the day! You've got court. I *have* to go into work. My boss is a germophobe – you know that – and Justin is like a walking bioweapon..."

Robert leaned forward, his stomach in knots. "Just – just – leave him in the car, it'll only be a few minutes..."

Helen's eyes widened. "You want me to go to *jail* Robert? Leave a sick kid in a *car*!?! Are you insane? Are you that frightened of big ole daddy that you can't even try to hold him to his word? Hell just get your mom over here. I don't even care if she drinks..." Helen paused. "No, that's not true. But – you get how desperate I am – *I have to get to work!* This audit is killing Arash, he needs me! Just make the call." She pursed her lips. "Or cancel court. Your choice..."

"You're – you're supposed to be on mat leave!"

Helen nodded slowly. Samuel squirmed in her arms. Justin bolted from the room.

"We're all a team," she said slowly. "My parents are away. Arash needs the paperwork by end of day. You have court. Your parents are – Jesus, Rob, they're like 15 minutes away!"

"I know, I know... I don't know why they don't come..."

Helen's voice lowered dangerously. "Don't try to get historical on me, Rob. You have thirty seconds. Make the call, or I will. You think I

have anything to lose? They treat us like *lepers!*" Her face widened in mockery. "Oh no, if I tell them what I really think, they will – what, not come over any more? They have *no leverage, Rob! Nothing! They are the laziest fucking grandparents on earth! You think I enjoy having your mother come over and run her fingers over every surface and make that face! Your dad, constantly giving me that passive-aggressive shit about my 'potential'?*"

Samuel started crying. Robert held up a useless hand.

"We had babies on the promise of help, and they are fucking us over! Get on the phone and get them here!"

Helen burst into tears and lowered her face over her baby's red head. "Shhh... Shhh... Mommy's just a little bitty fucking *stressed* kiddo..."

Robert had to spend ten minutes looking for his phone, his heart pounding the whole time. Life felt utterly out of control – there was so little grace in the variables. One factor changed, and the whole house of cards trembled on a cliff-edge...

With one eye he looked for his phone; with the other, he looked for Justin.

Probably in the basement... he thought. *Among the old boxes and spiderwebs...*

The basement was another bone of contention. When they moved, Robert loved the attic, and Helen hated the grimy basement. In a flush of manipulative enthusiasm, Robert promised to finish the basement – with his dad – if they bought the place.

At least once a week, Justin disappeared from the backyard into the basement, and Helen made grim jokes about tetanus shots and kill-room coal cellars. She refused to go down, and her demands to finish the fucking basement had devolved into cutting remarks about inevitable disappointment and working extra hard to make Robert's attic space as beautiful as possible.

Robert's father, John, loved sending over pictures of grandly finished basements – stuff with marble counters and built-in bars and pool tables and all other sorts of crazy expensive nonsense. Robert made noises about costs, but John always replied: "Where there's a will, there's a way, son!"

Robert had started grinding his teeth at night – his dentist said that he could just spend money building his teeth back up if he wanted, but Robert got top-and-bottom mouthguards instead, which he absolutely *hated* having to clean and insert every night – and the drool that always spilled out when he took them out in the morning. He noticed that he always clenched his jaw when on the phone with his father.

John was king of useless bromides. "Where there's a will, there's a way," was one. Another was: "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." Or: "Anxiety never solved a single problem." Or: "People judge you by how you judge yourself..."

These fortune-cookie clichés – delivered with all the grandeur of ironclad philosophical proofs of free will – never *once* translated into anything useful in Robert's life.

Many years before, Robert had gone for an early morning Saturday breakfast with his father. He had risen before dawn and disappeared before Helen woke up.

They met at a dark truck-stop diner with Boomer-humour placards on the wall and a sign behind the cash register promising a \$10 surcharge for difficult customers. The waitresses were all single-moms with smoky voices and bulging figures who called them 'hon' and traded jokes with strange aggression.

When Robert and John settled into their rye-eggs-fried-tomatoes breakfast, sipping bilge-water coffee with an aftertaste like fresh batteries, John started talking about a golf game.

Why doesn't he ask why I called him so urgently? wondered Robert. *If I just let him ramble, will he ever ask?* The image of his brother, drowning under their mother's waterfall of endless chatter, arose in his mind and he felt a twinge of bitter humour and deep sympathy for his broken brother.

"Dad... I hate to interrupt, but I've got something on my mind..."

John frowned, a clump of yolk hanging from the left cleft of his wrinkled lip. "Kinda rude, son..."

"I know – maybe..."

"You just invited me out to – what, dump?"

"Dump? What?" Robert shook his head rapidly, his palms sweating.

"No, it's just... I have an – issue."

John nodded slowly, sighing deeply. "An issue," he repeated neutrally.

"Yeah..." Robert's voice caught, and he suddenly hated the fact that he was sitting across from his father.

John scowled. "Well – spit it out kid!"

Robert's face flinched, ducking slightly. "Maybe it's nothing..."

"Oh, don't be like your mother!" snapped John. "Should I? Shouldn't I? Do it or don't!"

Yoda's ancient words spun through Robert's mind. "Do or do not, there is no 'try'..."

Yoda might be more helpful, he had Einstein's eyes...

"I don't know dad, it's a bit out of your wheelhouse..."

John inhaled mightily, then exhaled. He said: "I'm not here to make your decisions for you, Robert."

"I know, I know... So there's this – thing, with Peter..."

John clapped his knee. "Peter, what a force of nature. Great guy! I'd rule the world with ten of him!"

"Yeah... Well..." Robert leaned forward, glancing at his phone. He picked it up and put it in his back pocket.

John's eyes narrowed. "What, you think it's listening in? You think you're that important?" He laughed harshly. "Give me a break!"

"No, it's just that – that Peter wants me to do something – against professional ethics, really..."

John cocked his head. His voice rose slightly, and Robert's heart beat faster. "*Professional* ethics? So not ethics, not really. You know there has never been a single instance of demands for professional regulation coming from actual *customers*? It's always the hook-nosed 'professionals' getting together to conspire against the public and keep out competition. Like doctors in the past..."

"Dad, please lower your voice..."

John laughed again, rapping his knuckles on his paper placemat. "You think there are spies in this dive, making notes on these crappy plastic tables?"

Robert's face reddened.

John's laughter diminished into an indulgent smile. "Okay, son," he murmured. "Let's play make-believe and be spies... What is the old problem?"

"Did you – did you ever get in trouble with your regulatory body?"

John snorted. "Me? God no. I reported a bunch of people though. It's a good tool for dealing with..." He winked. "...others."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah! So – what has our good friend Peter got you up to?"

"I've found some – files that hurt our client's case. It's real estate. He sold a development on the – saying that he already had the permits..."

"Sell the future, buy the present... So what?"

"Well he – hadn't even applied, and the process takes forever."

"So – what? He's just shitty at bribing, this client?"

"Well we can't recommend – that of course..."

"Oh come on, you're a smart kid. Do the dance. Hint, suggest, step back and forth over the line..."

"Well it's kind of – gone beyond that. I can't give any details, because of privilege, but I really don't want to delete these files, you know? Peter has a pretty good cover story, but you know... I'd be in his debt, you know?" Robert grimaced. "That doesn't seem like a – good place to be, you know?"

"Stop saying 'you know'," snapped John. "It's stupid and redundant. Just record him and keep copies of whatever you need."

Robert's mouth and throat went dry. "Wh – what?"

"Did I stutter?" demanded his father.

"No... So – like mutually assured destruction?"

John frowned in disbelief, taking a sip of his coffee. "Worst sludge on the planet, I never learn..."

"That's your – solution?"

John laughed. "It's not 'my' solution kid. It's the only thing that works. Yeah, Peter is a shark, an admirable son of a bitch, he'd sell you out in a heartbeat for a mocha latte and a hand-job – so yeah, you need leverage with someone like that." He snorted. "What, you don't think he's got a file on you? He's probably recording everything, kiddo! Mutually assured destruction is balance in nature. It's kept my marriage going... Unless you want to rely on people's 'integrity' and 'conscience.' Wrong profession for that, Rob. Wrong planet probably." He mimicked his son. "*You know?*"

They had talked some more, and Robert gained no wisdom at all, but a knowledge of predatory mechanics second to none...

Finally, he found his phone and called his father.

“Hey kid, what’s up?”

The dreaded wind noise blew down all Robert’s hopes.

“Where are you, dad?”

“On the course with Steve and Keith, why? What’s it to you?”

“We – we really need some help today, dad.”

“One sec!” John called to his golf buddies. “Yeah, what?”

“Well Justin is sick and Helen absolutely has to go into work, and I have court and...” Robert’s voice wobbled. “We – just really need some help.”

John sighed mightily. “Well, I could probably swing by Helen’s work after my game and get whatever she needs...”

“No, she has to go in...”

“Well, that kinda sucks for you...”

There was a pause.

John’s voice was impatient. “Anything else?”

“Dad! We really need some help here! You’ve seen the kids – what, five times in the last year?”

“Oh, is this going to be a ‘big topic’? Don’t panic, son. It’s – unmanly.”

“Dad! Just – we need you – or mom – or both preferably – to drop everything and come over...” John started to speak but, in a sudden flash of resentful energy, Robert talked over him. “And YEAH, I know we should have made prior arrangements, and I know it’s inconvenient, but you yourself – let me SPEAK dad, I’m still talking, I’m still talking – I’M STILL TALKING!” Robert took a deep breath.

“You and mom both promised you would help out, that we could call

you any time, that you would do anything to... Yeah, but you were in the room dad, you didn't disavow..."

John's voice was ice-cold. "Are you finished? Do I have your permission to speak now?"

Robert took a deep shaky breath. He hated the idea of giving his father 'permission' – but also knew that his father would say nothing until he did.

"Yeah – go ahead."

"Thank you, that is very kind... Your mother is doing some volunteer shit on the other side of town – Richmond Hill, I think. I am here with friends. Collectively, we've spent about a thousand dollars to play today. ONE MORE SEC, SORRY! But yeah, I want to help. So, I'll pay for whatever service you need to take care of – Justin. Just him? What about the baby?"

"Samuel is going with Helen. We – we can't get a service that fast dad. Giovanna went back to school, Fiona is travelling again."

John's voice softened. "Well it's a hell of a pickle, no doubt... I mean, this is why I always droned on about contingency, you know, backup plans..."

"Dad – you and mom *are* the backup plan..."

"Yeah, sure, but I'm all the way out here and..." John's voice lowered. "You know what things are like between your mother and – and Justin. She's still got welts from his teeth..."

"Well – well maybe if you all spent a little more time with him – with them – with us!"

"Ok – ONE SEC, I KNOW – ok, I'll play... When was the last time you invited us over?"

"Helen says..." Robert's words froze in his throat.

John's voice was low, deceptively friendly. "Helen says – Helen says *what*, Robert?"

“She – she misses you guys!”

John roared with laughter. “Don’t even try! Do you know when *Justin* is lying through his teeth? Sorry, I’ve got to go or the slowest golfers in the universe are going to play through...”

“Dad! Please!” cried Robert with a familial desperation he only recalled last feeling with his brother’s drug addiction.

Dead air.

Helen came downstairs breastfeeding Samuel. Her thin breasts were covered in red gum marks.

“Well? What’s the story?”

Robert lowered his head slowly. “I have – I have nothing... Nothing on him. No leverage with the old bastard...”

Helen opened her mouth, but was interrupted by an unholy tinkling crash from the basement.

Chapter 17

“Hey buddy!” Robert gave Shane a giant bear hug.

“Good to see you, bro,” said Shane, surrendering to the wet embrace.

They stood outside a café on Bathurst. The hot Toronto summer day lanced into every sense – blinding sunlight slid over passing cars – the shouts of vendors and stench of sauerkraut drifted past, and the heat came in equal measure from the blue sky ringed by tall buildings, and the gum- and tar-infested sidewalk beneath them.

“How are things?” cried Robert. He had dressed down for the lunch – Shane knew it, and both loved and hated the concession. He knew that Robert downplayed his own success, which was humiliating – but he also secretly loved the control he had over his older brother.

“You know... Good...” Shane’s voice trailed off. He cleared his throat. “And you?”

“Oh, you know... Can’t complain. Not that anyone would listen if I did! Speak of the devil!” Robert lifted his arms and waved his hands wildly over his head. Turning around, Shane saw Helen’s scowling face as she half-dragged her two sons along.

Wow, gal’s getting some super-wrinkles, thought Shane with a little thrill of joy. Curtain’s coming down on those looks... Nothing to see here anymore, friends – just see yourselves out...

“I can see you Robert – I’m not blind!” snapped Helen, jerking her arms forward and letting go of her sons as if she were a fisherman flicking a catch into a boat.

The youngest, Samuel, was in tears. Justin’s face was, as usual, a brick mask of indifference.

Robert sighed. “What’s the matter?”

Helen leaned over Samuel. "Well, Sammy..." Robert winced, knowing how his son hated that name. "You want to tell your father what the problem is?"

"Mom... Mom *yanked* me!" cried Samuel, his six-year old face a red hymn to infinite injustice.

"Oh you liar!" hissed Helen.

They were standing in the middle of the sidewalk. The passing crowds instinctively parted around them.

"I'm – I'm not *lying* mom!" cried Samuel. He rolled up his sleeve and presented his arm to Robert and Shane. "Look!"

There was a faint set of red stripes on his arm.

"What – what happened?" asked Robert carefully.

Helen straightened and tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear.

"Well, that's a great question, husband of mine... What happened, Sammy?"

"Don't call me that!"

Justin sneered. "Yeah, he's not a *sandwich*, mom!"

"Did you get out the wrong side of the car, Sam? You almost ran into traffic!"

"I wasn't *gonna*!" cried Samuel, tears streaming.

"Oh, and I'm supposed to just know that, am I? We talked about being in town. It's *dangerous* here! You're old enough to know better."

Justin laughed. "Unless he's just an idiot..." He held up his hand to prevent his father from responding. "What? You always tell me to look at every possibility!"

"That's not helpful. Justin!"

Justin blinked innocently. "What? It's not helpful now to look at every possibility? Man, this family is confusing. Y'all are just making

it up as you go along!”

“Justin!” barked Robert, clenching his fists. He stepped forward and crouched on his heels in front of Samuel. “Buddy...”

Shane’s ears pricked up. *That’s what he calls me!*

“Buddy, what’s going on?”

“Mom *pinched* me!”

“Were you getting out on the traffic side?”

“Yeah, but she was taking forever. I have to pee!”

Justin laughed. “She was checking Facebook. She’s going to be an influencer and sell adult diapers!” He leaned over his younger brother. “Maybe if *you* had a diaper, Sammy-kin, you’d be ok, *too!*”

Samuel tried to hit his brother’s taunting face. Robert grappled his youngest son close.

“I HATE HIM!” screamed Samuel.

“Hey buddy...” Robert’s face was strained, pained. “Let’s get inside for some pancakes, OK? What do you say? I can take you to the bathroom...” He shot a look at Justin. “Why do you have to be this way?”

Justin smiled. “Oh, so I have to stay off screens, but mom can sit for ten minutes scrolling on her phone so she can delay having lunch with this – *loser!*”

Shane blinked. “What?”

Justin looked down. “Nothing, bro. Let’s just – eat, ok? I’ve got soccer practice. I’m not doing carbs.”

“I didn’t...” Helen bit her lower lip.

Shane could read the situation easily. Helen could not say she never called Shane a ‘loser’ – because Justin would tear her apart. She could not admit it either.

So, they just went into the café.

The cashier – old enough to be the owner – took one look at Samuel and her lip curled. She took some menus and sat them at a large round table.

After Robert brought Samuel back from the bathroom, they all sat for a moment in silence.

“I like that will,” said Robert suddenly, loudly.

No one replied.

“Come on, Helen – it’s kind of cool. Right? Samuel fights when he believes he’s in the right. Don’t you Sam-wise? Mom might have had to grab you, but you didn’t like it, and you will battle to the – end – to make that case, right bud?”

“My arm hurts.”

“Yeah, but Toronto drivers are nutcases, bud. Texting and driving – probably some are playing video games with their feet, what do you think?”

Samuel smiled. “Foot-craft?”

Robert laughed – a little too loudly.

“Toe-tally!”

Justin stared at his menu. “Ok, dad. Just – take it down a notch, mmmkay?”

Helen put her hand on Shane’s arm. “Sorry, Shane... This is life as parents. You can’t get an adult word in sideways. Kids all the time, all day.”

Justin pretended to cover up a laugh with a cough. “Until you get a notification...”

“Justin!” cried Helen in exasperation. “Can we just – not?”

Justin raised his wide eyes. “What, lie every time we open our mouths? Were you on the phone when we parked, mom? Did

Samuel have to pee? Did he say that? How many times did you say: 'Just a sec' while scrolling your phone? Then he gets out – thank God, I don't want to drive home in the stinky-kid pee-mobile – and you cursed and grabbed him – hard. I winced, and I don't even..." He took a deep breath. "Should I go on?"

"I think you've said enough," said Helen icily.

"Buddy!" said Robert, leaning towards his brother. "Sorry, we're all as – squared away as we're likely to be... What's new in your world?"

Shane paused, his cheeks reddening. "Oh, not too much. Things are good at – work. No new promotions, but – well, the upper echelons are all lifers, so I have about as much upward mobility as a U-boat commander..."

"And – and what – do you – are you doing with your free time?"

"Any girls?" asked Helen.

Shane frowned. "Over 30, they don't like to be called that of course. They think 'girl guides.' 'Girl scouts.' It's tough..."

"Are you dating – at all?"

"Occasionally. I chatted with a – woman, here, a few weeks ago. But she had like \$17,000 in credit card debt from her ex-boyfriend, so..."

Justin laughed. "So that's like – a year's salary, right? To pay for another dude's leftovers..."

"Justin!" barked Helen, her face white.

"Oh. Sorry. Are we back to lying again? Maybe you can get those flags they use at the airport - you know, to guide planes. So, I know when we're supposed to be lying..."

Helen took a deep explosive breath. Justin shrugged and closed his mouth.

Shane said: "The blueberry pancakes here are fantastic." He leaned towards Samuel. "Do you like pancakes, Sam?"

Samuel shrugged, looking down.

Robert laughed. "He's more in the 'French toast' category. Anything with cinnamon, right bud?"

Samuel said nothing, still rubbing his arm.

The waitress came and took their order. Helen had only coffee – Robert had pancakes (despite the look from his wife); Samuel had French Toast, and Justin had a plain omelet with tomatoes on the side.

More silence.

"So, Helen," said Shane. "Any luck on the work front?"

"It's a cursed existence," she said heavily. "No computer skills. Aged out of the 'pretty secretary' gig economy. I'm trying makeup tutorials online, but the comments are... 'Dinosaur' this and 'boomer' that. Brutal. Apparently no one over 12 uses Facebook. I've had a few remixes though..."

Robert laughed. "Harsh, but funny..."

"I saved one," said Justin eagerly. "Here..."

He turned his phone to Shane, thumbing the volume to max.

Helen scowled. "Do we have to?"

"Come on – it's *funny!*"

Shane squinted at the sight of Helen putting on makeup – making chimp noises for some reason – and then there was a cut to the 'Jurassic Park' actors looking goggle-eyed at dinosaurs – then another cut to Helen, her mouth stretched wide, making throaty T-Rex roaring sounds.

"It goes on from there. She rips into a school bus..."

"Can we – turn that down please?" said Helen wearily.

"Oh wait, this is the best part!"

Shane watched as Helen's face dissolved into the melting Nazi visage from 'Indiana Jones' – with screeching sounds from some sort of owl or pterodactyl.

"This finally got me some status!" chirped Justin happily. "It's done more views than everything she's ever done combined. I keep saying: 'mom, just lean into it. Get a dino-outfit.'" He wiggled his chest. "A bra with little T-rex arms. Chase kids at a park, at daycare.' She doesn't listen. She's looking for pride online. Good freaking *luck*, I say!"

Samuel's voice was hot with anger. "Stop being mean!"

Justin tried to 'chuck' his younger brother under the chin. "Just trying to help the maternal unit, kiddo!"

"She doesn't like it."

"Yeah, well, I didn't like school or daycare either. We just have to suck things up in this life..." Justin leaned down and made vile slurping noises. Samuel cried out, leaning back and raising his arms.

"I..." Shane swallowed, unable to look away from the tiny theatre of cruelty. "I... How are things with you, Robert?"

"Oh, wending my way... Peter wants me to go to Vegas with him this weekend, for a conference. My liver can't take those trips anymore. My hernia is acting up again, and he wants to play tennis all day and drink all night. Man's a vampire, it's weird... Black magic..."

The food came.

"Want me to cut it up, bud?" asked Robert. Samuel shook his head, clearly miserable.

More silence. Everyone chewed for way too long, as a way to escape conversation.

Justin suddenly pushed his omelet away. "Well, this tastes like shit..."

"That's not cool bud..." murmured Robert.

"Jesus, those eggs are as old as mom's... Seriously, you should sue them, dad..."

"Stop it!" cried Samuel, clapping his hands over his ears.

"Oh dear..." said Justin in mock-sympathy. "Mr Wee Sensitive gonna have a wee meltdown?"

A car backfired on the street. Justin turned to look.

Samuel launched his face at Justin's back.

Justin cried out in a strangely high-pitched tone.

"You little bitch!" he screamed. "He fucking *bit* me! You psycho!"

Robert leaped to his feet. "Annnnd we're done! Helen, get our things. Sorry Shane, we've got to bug out. It doesn't get better from here..."

With quasi-military precision, Helen and Robert scooped up their belongings and Samuel, who was now grinning from ear to ear.

Justin pulled up his T-shirt. "Look at that!" he cried, trying to see the damage to his back. "It's like a dental record, you little *bitch!*"

With tragic smiles and downcast eyes, Robert and Helen struggled out of the café. The other patrons averted their eyes, not even pretending to have sympathy.

Shane sat at the table, calculating how many meals he could squeeze out of the leftovers, then feeling a sudden stab of rage when the bill came.

And a deep, deep desire for revenge...

Chapter 18

Helen swore she would not cry as she drove home.

It was her birthday tomorrow.

The big 4-oh.

She had forgotten it completely, for the moment.

She felt rage against the wipers that *never cleaned the goddamned window!* She held the lever, spraying washer fluid uselessly over the sunlit dusty insect graveyard that obscured her view.

When she was a child, she used to look at the road, and tilt her head to 'fly' the double-dots on the glass as if they were the wingtips of an airplane.

For almost a year, Helen would lean her sickened head against the glass in the back seat, as her parents bickered constantly in the front, turning away from their nagging venomous profiles, watching the light and dark slide over the car as they drove past the blue sky, green trees and grimy buildings carved with verbal filth.

She would daydream that lobster-handed aliens had taken over the Earth, and the flickering sunlight and shadows were the eons of liberation and tyranny. As her parents wrestled for endless control – over each other, their marriage – and, occasionally, terrifyingly, the road itself – so did Helen imagine mankind struggling for freedom from crustaceans in giant space helmets.

And on a sunny stretch of highway, where only the sky-scraping lampposts occasionally barred the sun – the darkness invisible in a blink – it was easy for Helen to believe that final liberation had been achieved, and the helmet-halo lobster-lords had been banished forever...

But then one late afternoon Helen opened her eyes to the car being swallowed up by a black tunnel, and there were no parents in the front seat, only lobster-claws holding the steering wheel, and

strange chittering sounds as the giant insects argued, probably about the best way and place to eat her alive...

And then Helen had woken screaming from her dozing, and her parents immediately started arguing about who had upset her more, and why, and just listen for once, and how dare you, and I never said that you liar and you always and you never and on and on, and Helen realized suddenly that she dozed because oblivion was heaven compared to bickering, and being unconscious was paradise compared to the senseless operations of her scalding senses – and she strove to doze again, to escape the endless hornet’s nest of words in the front seat, and she had a vivid dream – vision really, of Grace Kelly sweeping into a shiny sports car, seeing that flawless skin stretched still-tight over perfect bones, her whirlpool of coiffed hair bouncing slightly as she closed her eyes in the racing screaming wind, her eternal future as a blinding sun forever at the center of petty asteroids flogging her chemical images for fiat currency, a white captive in a desert slave-auction, haggled over by fat greasy men with oily foreheads and beads in their beards – and Helen vividly pictured – *saw* even, in skin-cell detail that her waking eyes could never hope to deliver, Grace Kelly’s love of the mountainside that shredded her flesh from her bones, because to be beautiful and haggled over was exhausting – and the fundamental exhaustion was to have to go along with the endless lie – the lie that she was interesting for some reason *other* than her looks – and both her parents were very attractive, and all it got *them* was bickering everywhere they went and a little girl in the backseat who yearned for a quick death, because dozing was better than waking, and death was just super-dozing...

Helen was fascinated by wounds and death. She craned her head to identify roadkill; she sat up late among the bodies of the fallen watching gory movies during sleepovers; she would sneak medical textbooks from a friend’s house and sit in the bathroom paging through elephantine legs and tumours and eye surgeries and goiters and sebaceous cyst lancing and feel prickles of horror that sometimes felt like the only reason her heart had to keep pumping...

And when her friend Amelia showed her – showed her a slender metal nail she had pushed through the ball of her thumb – her friend Amelia who listened to King Kurt, and Echo and the Bunnymen, and Joy Division, and never ever wanted to be in a room alone with Amelia's older brother – when she showed Helen the emo drama and deep cave help-bellow of cutting yourself, Helen stood on a precipice – knowing her own frail alabaster beauty, she felt – merged with – Amelia's thirst to destroy whatever the lying world called 'beautiful' – and Helen felt like a priceless work of art bought and sold to dodge taxes and fund crimes – and that liberation from evil regretfully meant destroying whatever evil called 'beautiful,' because whatever evil lusted after always fed crimes, and to sacrifice goddesses starved evil of power...

And Helen did toy with self-harm, but a strange anger – so different from Amelia's bottomless despair – possessed her, and rather than destroy herself to spite liars, she would become a flawless siren in order to rule over this serpentine world...

So she turned to obsessive exercise and an eating disorder and cultivated a sunny personality and complained about tummy aches and kept mountains of stuffed toys on her bed and lost her virginity to a sweaty desperate quarterback among the stuffed animals – feeling very much like a stuffed animal herself – but kept herself spiritually pure for a steady alpha that she only met at Wasaga that blinding day on the beach...

In her car, pushing 40, Helen felt another one of her rocket stages falling away – this had been happening more and more. Her scant breasts drooped; her knee-skin began to sag, fine lines radiated from her eyes – she had regretfully given up laughter years before – and her belly protruded no matter how many sit-ups she did. Robert was getting gray and craggy and had developed cold robot crease lines along his cheeks and wore his extra weight with bulk and authority – but she was fighting her plumpness with desperate losing attrition; if she dieted, she slept poorly, which put haunted

shadows under her eyes, and ironed her facial skin into aging paper. If she gained a little weight, youth filled her face out somewhat, but she got neck cricks checking out her cellulite in the mirror.

Her sons' skin was like cream; hers like cracked beige paint. Robert's face aged well; Helen just - dried out...

And battle-lines had hardened between them. Robert had no respect for his wife's 'career.' He did not roll his eyes, but he never asked questions or drilled into her difficulties; he never felt the need to woo her boss the way she had to woo Peter. His needs always came first – and yes, dammit, he did make a lot more money, but life was about more than *money*, Robert! Yes, sure, I'll believe that when you stop spending...

Helen gritted her teeth, staring at the hypnotic flashing of a car – BMW, of course – that had its signal on but refused to change lanes.

She refused to rehash marital arguments in her mind; they led nowhere, and what was the point of trying to win an argument with a skilled lawyer with almost fifteen years of experience? Trying to beat Robert in her mind inevitably led to her fantasizing about beating him with a spatula, which alarmed her by both alarming and exciting her...

"That little..." These words had only been spoken once, but Helen heard them all the time now. "That little 'career' of yours..." "That little project..." "That little paycheck..." "That little meeting..."

Helen's job was a vain hobby to Robert. She knew that – she also knew that she couldn't torture that admission out of him – another occasional fantasy that required high shiny boots, a swinging light-bulb, a dingy basement, and a much younger body. "Just tell me the truth," she would purr, straddling him and kissing his wounds as he wept blood and *submitted*...

Helen blinked and shook her head suddenly, as if chilled droplets had hit her inner ear.

Arash, her boss, had summoned her first thing that morning.

He was an Iranian – no, no, *Persian* he always said – who was as smooth and subtle as a Japanese bullet train. Irresistible as all truly certain people are, he had been brought up in the garment industry, sewing by candlelight even as a child, before being scooped up and transported to Canada at the age of nine. Obsessive and fastidious, he dressed to absolute perfection and lined up everything on his desk at perfect right angles. (Helen would mess with his crossword pen from time to time, changing its angle slightly, but it was always fixed without complaint or comment.)

He was friendly in that certain manipulative Middle Eastern manner – calling people ‘my friend’ and shaking their hands slowly with both of his, and doing them favors and remembering their wives birthdays – and was not beyond calling someone “boss” in particularly tough negotiations – and he was a servant to them, and controlled them that way, by making their vanity dopamine-dependent on his ‘respect’ and ‘submission.’

Arash was very successful, and flirty in a way that never quite made it to HR, because he had a swarthy intimate pirate air to him that women preferred to ‘complain’ about only to each other, rolling their eyes and touching their collarbones, rather than to the cold-eyed Karens in HR who lived only to buzz-kill whatever threatened to be enjoyable at the office.

“Oh, that’s just Arash being Arash,” they would murmur. He insisted on first names at all times, and would not even answer to “Mr Ahmadi,” simply staring into space until the magic syllables were uttered, which unlocked his sparkling eyes, good graces and grandiloquent gestures.

He had only faint traces of an accent – even when upset, his inflection rarely faltered – but he had veered more towards British phrases than coarse Canadian “ehs” and “yahs” and “aboots.” His son was a hockey player, and Arash would shout from the cold stacked metal pews “Good SHOT!” as if his son were blasting away at skeets on a Scottish moor or languidly playing a 3-day cricket match.

"Helen, thank you, yes thank you for joining me..." Arash smiled that morning as Helen entered his office.

See – that was the sort of thing you could never get Arash on – "joining me..." It *was* flirty – everyone knew it - but he seemed so innocent that the Liberal women – all the women it seemed – felt a slight flutter of attraction, but just told themselves that they should be tolerant of his turns of phrase because he was an exotic immigrant.

"How are you? Can I pour you a coffee? I have new beans from Somalia, exquisite on the tongue..."

Helen almost laughed at the image of Arash in a Sultan's outfit spoon-feeding her Somalian coffee froth. He was hospitable to the point where you felt you might need a pregnancy test...

"I'm well, Arash." Helen flicked her hair back. "No coffee, thanks though." She opened her notepad – yellowed paper, leather-bound - that Arash had gifted her after picking it up at a Renaissance fair his daughter dragged him to. She had to shred her notes every night before going home.

Arash sighed, settling back in his leather chair. "Ah, but this will not be needed..." he murmured, waving his hand.

Her senses alerted, Helen had the urge to undo a button on her blouse. She shook her head, almost imperceptibly.

"It has been... more than ten years? Since we – got together, during the day..." He interlaced his fingertips. "Bound together in this – mission – to reclaim the – old ways of dressing and being..."

"You are philosophical this morning."

"You should see me late at night. That is when I am truly – philosophical..." He leaned forward suddenly. "But I am sad today – which I now regret telling you, because the news is about – you."

Helen blinked. "Me?"

Arash tsked between his teeth. "You know, the business world is full of... It's hard to say, but it needs to be said I think. We have to make money, but the mission should underpin – all that. Money is the means to the mission. My late father used to tell me about the old days, the old ways, in Iran, before the Revolution." He laughed softly. "The women had legs like giraffes, gazelles, and the men dressed as if for job interviews, every day." He leaned forward further, miming eating. "My father would shave and wear a tie every day – even Sundays, after church, and eat like this, because he hated any mess on his clothes." Arash laughed. "My mother used to say that if my father were to be shot, he would be more troubled by the hole in his clothing than the wound to his body... And I do love this – civilization represented by this office. It may be a losing mission, to fight against..." His lips curled. "...*casual Fridays* and *business casual* – but it is a fight worth – going down for. You cannot really say a harsh word in fine clothing. Women don't nag in wide-brimmed hats. Have you ever seen a child running wild in a restaurant if he – and his parents – are well-dressed? Fine clothes are the soft skin of civilization itself – they remind us to be more than animals; to approach the Platonic, the angelic, and to have thoughts and actions worthy of our apparel. You know, I once spent a day in sweatpants, as an experiment, and ended up eating a whole bag of Doritos and wiping my hands on my – behind, I'm sorry to say. I went from man to animal in a single day..." Arash shuddered. "Never again. I would sleep in a suit if I could, it would give me more civilized dreams..."

Helen nodded slowly. She quite enjoyed his ramblings – she got paid either way.

Arash sighed deeply. "And you have been..."

Helen's ears pricked up. *Past tense?*

"...an intimate part of that mission. You have a flawless – clothing sense, and a magnificent way of – displaying those clothes. You are a credit to apparel, yourself – and me, of course. I love the clothes,

of course, to the degree that my wife long ago gave up on jealousy. But I am rambling, and being a coward."

Helen said nothing. Her heart was pounding.

"How is Robert?"

"Well. He's good."

"And his career? I saw him in the paper – three weeks ago?"

"Yes..." (Helen never said "yeah" around Arash.) "He's going from strength to strength."

"Excellent! And the boys? How is your – lineage? They are well? Strong?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Gooooo... That gives me some peace..." Arash sighed again. "I tried my best, Helen. It is all these – damnable computers..." (Arash was the only person Helen had ever heard use the word 'damnable.')

"You have always talked to travel agents, hotel clerks – you put me on a conveyer belt from strength to strength, I hope you have always felt appreciated for that, Helen..."

Helen swallowed. "I have, thank you."

"So of course there are all these new web sites and programs for scheduling and managing appointments. It was my daughter that told me, the minx. 'Why are you so old-fashioned?' she keeps wanting to know." Arash leaned forward conspiratorially. "She wears sweatpants when I am not home, I see it when I come home early, I would rather she were..." He waved his hand. "No, that thought is unworthy, the tweed forbids it. But these vendors keep pestering me, and they presented to the Board last month, and we have a little – Iraqi – who has run all the numbers and made all the promises, and we don't – need ten support agents..." (Arash always called her an 'agent.')

"...we only need two."

"Am I..."

"Yes, let go I am so sad to say." Arash got up and started making a coffee using the small gun-metal machine on his desk. "Even if you don't drink it, indulge me for making it..."

"Eight of us are – going?"

"Well, I should not speak of the others, of course, but your math is – spot on."

"But – Arash – it's been thirteen years! You dress Robert. We've socialized together – like countless times. We go to Vegas. I've – you know I've constantly been poached. Recruited. I've never even *looked* at another boss!"

"I know, I know... This is like a – breakup. But Robert is doing well, and you have – recruiters, eyeing you from the wings. This should give us both – comfort..."

Helen was about to speak, but Arash held up his hands.

"It is – a sad day, my friend. I love the numbers in fashion, but not in business. But we all answer to someone. I have these - bean counters. They say we can save a million dollars a year. That is a lot. I hate translating people into fabric, but that is a lot of clothing. Two stores in good locations. And if we do not take this money – it is lying on the table – others will, and do better over time. And then we are all on the street, and bad clothing takes over, and we all get buried in sweatpants and Doritos. I cannot lose the mission without a fight, my dear Helen – and I did fight for you, and you know that I did, but also I have not helped you, by making you write everything on paper and avoid computers – but I have seen so many lawsuits, and I am in the downward slide of life. So everyone knows that you have no computer skills, which is my fault. And the new hires, well they are less than half your cost. And I have to get a cell phone. It is a tragedy, but – but perhaps this liberates you to do – even more with your life. I have been most selfish over the years, Helen. I have kept you for reasons of – great affection. We both know that you could rule the world, like your namesake of old, instead of trailing after me at conferences and reminding me of my obligations. I

always try – I got this from my father as well – to look at problems as opportunities. Why not start your own company, Helen? You are more than capable. Or take an MBA and rule some kingdom? Why should Robert have all the...” He pushed the tiny coffee cup forward and shook his head. “No, I will not speak anything against our good friend Robert. Helen. How is your heart my friend?”

The swarthy kindness, the gentle directness, caused Helen’s ice-people heart to sweat sudden sorrow. “I’m – shocked. Sad. It’s – a lot to take in.”

“Yesss. Yes. And perhaps you can take some time to enjoy your children before they flee the nest. The teenage years are like the toddler years, you have to watch – *everything*. And Robert is doing well. This could be a good time to – reassess. But I hate that I am giving you advice, it could be seen as me – believing that you cannot – think of these things yourself...”

Arash’s soft voice trailed off, his dark chocolate eyes narrowing slightly with medieval concern. He sat in stillness and patience.

Helen took a deep breath. “When is this... When does this all – take effect?”

Arash spread his hands expansively. “The computer beasts are all ready to go. We don’t need you to stay and train anyone. We have a generous severance of course – though I lost the big war, I won this much. You can stay if you want, but there is no real need. Take the time, take the money. Reassess. Regrow. Re – align. Think of this as liberation my dear...”

Helen felt sudden anger in her chest. Rage almost. She had an urge to fling the tiny hot frothy coffee cup at Arash’s perfect beard.

“My dear...” repeated Arash, drawing back slightly. “You are – upset.”

Helen took a deep breath, fighting for self-control. Scraps of useless protests flew through her mind, falling unspoken from her lips like tossed baby birds bouncing down a cliffside.

"I – I don't know what to say..."

Arash nodded. She could see immigrant tales of hardship and opportunity forming in his throat, but somehow – for once – he restrained himself.

"Again, I am sorry."

"No – it's – it's. I just need a moment..."

"And some privacy I fear," said Arash decisively, the steely CEO soul emerging in a flash. He stood and crossed his office to the ornate door. "Take the room for as long as you need. Use my phone if you need."

Arash closed the door – with relief, Helen could see – or imagined, she wasn't sure which.

Stung by a sudden compulsion to move, Helen stood up, walked around the desk, and settled into Arash's plush chair, scowling at the residual warmth.

She pictured dictating to a younger version of herself, bringing her along, grooming her, sharing secrets and gossip. She imagined men filing past her desk, wanting and promising and betraying her in equal measure. She imagined having a beard and balls and a hairy carpet-chest and assuming control without having to manipulate or be attractive or – or...

And here her imagination faltered, and a sudden lump formed in Helen's throat.

Who am I without my looks?

She had sailed into Arash's employment on charm and humour and his obvious appreciation of her looks. The women who worked for him referred to themselves as his 'harem' – Helen was called the 'first wife.' Men appreciated a pretty face – this was not a sexual risk for the most part, although one manager had to be fired after literally stalking Helen and taking pictures of her inside her home.

She had the power to please men, to raise their status – and thus their income – and for this she had been paid mightily – too much, this had always been a risk. She was paid to be pretty; her subsidy was fading, and she was falling back to the position of having to compete with – to compete with – *younger women...*

Was this the source of her rage? She was certain that the two new women were younger, prettier – and thus conveyed higher status. Helen was no longer a hot young thing, but a sort of faded auntie. Her pay was no longer prestige, but charity.

Who am I without my looks?

Well, I can still be a trophy, but my boss would have to be 90 or so...

The image of Anna Nicole Smith arose in her mind – and Princess Diana, for the first time in years.

Who defers to me when I am fading? What is a watercolor worth after a day in the washing rain?

Ach, it was all too pathetic, too poetic. She wasn't a fractured statue or a stained ballgown.

She was just – aging.

Replaceable.

Mortal...

Chapter 19

"Shane?" murmured Dr. Gunnar.

Shane did not turn his dark eyes from the white wall. There was a beige stripe angling down towards a corner shelf with a slightly dusty plant and a picture of a serious, wide-eyed baby.

Is that his baby? wondered Shane. He felt the creases in his jeans pressing against his buttocks. This new chair was harder than the last one. Pamela's couch had been like quicksand; this was like a brick.

"I don't like this 'sitting in silence' stuff," said Dr. Gunnar. "This isn't a 'safe space.' I can see that you've had a few female therapists. I'm not going to be – like that."

"You..." Shane cleared his throat. "You get paid – either way."

Dr. Gunnar snorted. "I do. But I'm a thief if I take money without providing value. It's been ten minutes. That's enough for now. I can give you another ten minutes next week. But now you have to talk."

"Oh, God," groaned Shane. "It's like – do I have to tell this stupid story again? For what?"

"Well, your family is – concerned... But you know that. And don't really care."

Shane sighed. "I know, I'm a heartless son of a bitch."

"I didn't say that."

"Oh, I know how this crap works, doc. You say something leading, I complete the thought, then you say 'Ahah, that's projection, kiddo – we've uncovered your secret self!'"

Dr. Gunnar laughed. "Go on..."

"Why? You make all these connections and give me these insights – and yeah, I'm honest, it feels good for a moment or two. A day or

two. But it's just a sandcastle. A house of cards. Tide comes in, wind blows..."

"Insights are just a drug, Shane."

"Wh – what?"

"Well, you took drugs, right? Hallucinogens? You had visions, right? Saw 'deeply' into the nature of things, of life..."

"Yeah. Saw too much..."

"Well, what did you learn?"

Shane paused. "I learned that – everything is kind of an illusion. People don't really exist. They're just – programmed robots. Garbage in, garbage out. Irrelevant. Trying to get close to people is like – like trying to make a baby with a refrigerator." He sighed. "It's like that – Milgram experiment. Like everyone will torture you – and two-thirds of people will kill you, if someone in a white coat just – nudges them in that direction." Shane shuddered. "Life isn't like a zombie movie. *It is* a zombie movie. Society eats brains, and shits out conformity. Emptiness. A void of fragile and angry opinions pretending to be alive..."

Dr. Gunnar nodded slowly. "I get that. That couch is just a conveyer belt of broken people. Everyone starts to look like a patient after a while. My wife calls it the 'countdown to crazy.' Meet people, have some fun, then *bam*, they open up and they're all nuts. 'Surface level only,' she says. 'Nothing deeper, or we're doomed..."

"What does – what does she do?"

"Oh, same as me. But not as well. For men at least."

Shane cocked his head. "No? Aren't you – not supposed to talk about your life?"

The older man shrugged. "Meh, that's just a power play. Like the cops can interrogate you, you can't interrogate the cops. You know?"

Shane said nothing.

"It's a big problem. The red pill, the blue pill – and the black pill... So your – insight, that no one is real – sorry for the philosophy 101 Shane, but – does that include you?"

Shane snorted. "I'm the least real..."

"Go on..."

"I'm just a – cliché, you know? If I were a character in a book, the editor would say: 'Hey, that Shane character is kind of a cliché, you need to flesh him out, make him more real, more believable. Give him some inner dialogue. Right now he's just a piece of cardboard saying: "Don't do drugs, kids, mmmkay?"'"

Dr. Gunnar nodded.

Shane laughed bitterly. "Come on, doc, ask me if I agree with the editor! 'Do you *feel* like cardboard, Shane?'"

"That's a good imitation."

"Empty as an echo..."

Dr. Gunnar pursed his lips. "Your parents talked about Regina. She introduced you to drugs?"

Shane nodded.

"Do you have any contact with her now?"

"I resist stalking her on socials."

"When did you last talk?"

"Oh, it's been a – while. Years."

"What did she last say to you?"

"Oh, she needed some paperwork from me – and she asked me what the lyrics were to a Queen song – 'I'm Going Slightly Mad.'"

Dr. Gunnar laughed. "Subtle..."

"Well, she never was that..."

"So, the drugs told you that everyone was a robot... Does that make them - dangerous?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, zombies are dangerous..."

Shane took a deep breath. "No – not dangerous, really. Just – boring. Predictable. 'I hate McCain / I love McCain.' That sort of thing. 'We must help the poor / helping the poor harms the poor.' 'Men are bad / men run the infrastructure.' I could go on and on, but – everyone seems like... I used to play a lot of video games. Time taken... And there were these – characters in the games, they'd give you clues or sell you armour or whatever. And you could choose your dialogue options, like scroll up and down. Dialogue trees, everything pre-programmed... Nothing outside the fixed choices. That's people, you know. I know you know. Like my dad. Ask for help, it's all Boomer 'lift yourself up by your bootstraps kiddo, like I did.' Like clockwork. Tick tock. Like a bomb. And my mom – well she's all tears and guilt and this kind of weird support that feels like your bones being pickpocketed. 'We have to find some way to move forward in this life, Shaaaane...'" He shuddered. "Death-march to nowhere..."

"And you have a – brother?"

"Oh yeah... He's fucking perfect. A perfect beast. Like a Terminator. Wealth, power, status... I'm like the crazy uncle, sound-proofed in the attic."

"How does he relate to your – life situation?"

"Non-life situation... He's given up, doc. I get it. I don't blame him. I would too. I have..."

"What does that mean – given up?"

"Oh, you know... Like I heard the sirens, and got the sailors to cut me loose, and I swam a decade ago into death, and I'm just – frothy and floating and waiting – for the end..."

"For death."

Shane sighed heavily. "No, doc, I am not any kind of imminent threat to myself or others. I'm not going that route again. No drugs, no lockups, nope nope nope!"

"Okay. I have to make a note of that."

"Do what you want..."

"And your job?"

"I'm the proud owner of like 20 ex-cons and druggies who weigh clothing for a living. Master of the damned. I work at a thrift warehouse. And no, I don't enjoy it – but at least I don't have to fake anything. My guys, they know all about the zombies... You're either a zombie or a recovering zombie who finally sees the zombies..."

"So – no recovery is possible then."

Shane paused. "No, no, I guess not..."

"And that is where you are – stuck."

Shane scowled. "No, that's where we are all stuck. You and I, we're going to get into this battle. You'll tell me to be happy, I'll say that happiness is bullshit. You'll fight my depression, I'll hit back at your 'happiness' – and I'll land some blows, doc, there's a reason you're therapist number five. You sell a fake cure called 'going back to sleep' – un-knowing what is so – obvious... But it's like – when you grow up speaking English, you can never unlearn that. Like if you're in another country, forty years later, fluent in a whole new language, and the barbers are chatting away in English, you can't *not* know what they are saying. You can pretend to ignore the implications, sure, but comprehension is not – subject to willpower. You know?"

"So most people are – programmed, like video game characters."

"And me too, doc. I'm a boring cliché too."

"And me..."

"Yes. You."

Dr. Gunnar pursed his lips. "So – you come to therapy for your dad."

"And mom. It makes them happy. Gives them hope that – something will change. They're getting old. It's a small kindness."

"And you have no hope of change."

"I like analogies."

"I know."

Shane sighed, "You ever have dreams about flying?"

"Yes, of course."

"And then you wake up – and – do you try to fly, in the day?"

Dr. Gunnar laughed. "No."

"Right. It would be crazy to fly. Or try to. Flying was just a dream."

"So – authenticity is a dream. Only robots are real."

"Yes. Yes."

"And there is no waking up from that nightmare, because you have already woken up."

"Right."

"And I sell the illusion of waking up, because I have not woken up."

Shane cocked his head. "Not sure about that one, chief. What percentage of the world is – dysfunctional?"

"I'm not going to ask you to define... Well, around the whole world – most of it, of course."

"Percentage."

"All in all? 95%. Maybe higher."

"And you are in the enlightened single digits?"

"Yes."

"So – how do you do it? Seeing the skinless?"

“The – what?”

“You ever look at a beautiful woman, and – you know, they say that beauty is only skin-deep, and that is because if you peel off her skin – couple of millimeters really – she’s just tendons and hanging eyeballs and – tooth-roots. I can’t see skin anymore. Just – muscles and bone and tendons and walking – blood. You must see the same thing, Dr. Gunnar. Like that kid in ‘The Sixth Sense.’ ‘I see dead people.’ ‘I see sick people.’ Do you just – turn it off? You have special contact lenses that put the skin back on the skinless? If you’re – healthy – healthier – well we put people in asylums who really see that the world is an asylum. Women voting to import men who will attack then, and never changing their minds. Everyone siding with the most irrational, screwing over the most reasonable. Society saying it cares about children, but herding them into these terrible violent schools and...” Shane’s voice caught. “...and drugging them – the boys – for being bored – and – and – using babies as collateral to – to get money to buy votes...”

Shane’s eyes were red.

“And the internet – the internet brings the truth, and the truth is that there is nothing but lies in the world, that Satan, the Father of Lies, runs everything, and I know that sounds – fundamentalist, but that’s not me – God, I wish it were, because I can see the Devil everywhere, but can’t find my way to God at all, maybe that’s all there is, and the Devil told us about a made-up god just to torture us more...”

Dr. Gunnar took a deep breath.

Shane said: “How many sane people in your family, your wife’s family, your social circle?”

“I can’t give – therapy to people I know...”

The younger man’s lips curled in contempt. “Dodging. And *you’re* the professional.” He held up his hand. “Now you’re going to say that it’s not appropriate to talk about *your* life – but that ship already

sailed, Dr Cop. And you won't answer the question honestly, because we know that it's almost none, and you only get out of bed because you ignore that fact. And I bet you have friends who are totally screwed up, and have never asked you for help – even a reference – and you trundle along like a blind little Thomas the Tank Engine: *Chug chug, no matter, I can't save all the fish drying out in the tide pools, but I can save this one and that one, and I am a good little Tank Engine because I still think there is a sea out there I can toss the fish towards* – but it's just a desert, you're really just killing the fish, taking them from their last home and tossing them gasping into the sand – and if they had pockets and wallets you'd take those too, just as you're taking my dad's money!"

Dr. Gunnar's cheeks were coloured.

Shane stared at him. "Not so much fun when the rabbit's got a gun, hey doc?"

"That's – quite a case."

"Therapy is mostly bullshit. But there's a great coffee shop next door, I get a half-liter of milk and a spicy Jamaican patty after this nonsense, goes down smoooth... And my dad still pays my rent..."

"Is your brother – successful?"

Shane barked out a laugh. "Sure, ignore it all... Yeah. Yeah, he's successful. Makes a fortune. Formerly gorgeous wife, but only aristocratic women age well, trailer-park girls just get wrinkled and trashy... Meth for breakfast anyone?"

"So – successful people are failures because they're blind – and – waking up makes you a failure because you've learned the truth that everything is a lie..."

Shane nodded. "Yeah, and I'm such a bullshit artist that I even hate it when my 'oh so deep' thoughts are reduced to their essential components." He paused. "Yes."

"And telling the truth..."

"Oh, that gets you killed."

"Go on?"

"Oh, come on. Plato, Socrates – or ostracized – Aristotle. Jesus. Galileo. Or tortured. You know, the doctor who suggested it might be wise to wash your hands before sticking them in someone else's innards was driven out of his profession and tossed into an insane asylum where he ended up being beaten to death by an orderly. Even Freud, that cocaine psycho, was threatened if he exposed child rape among the Austrian elites... So he betrayed the child-victims by pretending that they secretly wanted to have sex with good old mommy and daddy... And you – you lot are just drug pushers, right? I've had a dozen speeches on 'brain chemistry imbalances' and whenever I ask for the medical test to prove that – or even which 'meds' I should take – I just get this thousand-yard pharma-cock stare..."

"I don't prescribe..."

"Yeah? But you don't fucking speak out about those who do, right? Psychologists aren't organizing to protest the endless drugging of kids and those who have – woken up, right? Do you believe in the 'chemical imbalance' theory? Huh?"

"I... There's no robust evidence to support it..."

Shane snorted. "Prevarication. You don't want to stick your head over the parapet. Imagine if you spoke up and truly threatened a multi-*billion* dollar rip-off, doc. You'd get a horse's head in the bed and your kids would vanish on the way to school. Druggies kill for fifty bucks, kiddo! Drug *pushers*? You've got to be kidding me."

"Take a breath, Shane..."

"Yeah, yeah. You got a panic button under there, doc? Gonna have me hauled away?" He laughed. "You know, one *psycho-iatrist* laid out a bunch of meds on his desk and told me to pick one. Or two. Or a few. He didn't care. He just wanted to get his fucking money. After talking to me for ten minutes, he wanted to fry my brain with SSRIs

and benzo's . And if they are sooo goooooood, why is mental health getting worse and worse and worse? When they started washing their hands, like surgeons, infections went *down*, right? Now everyone's getting crazier, even though you lot claim to have found the cure! And you're scared, Dr Gunnar. Not because I'm angry. But because I'm *right*."

Chapter 20

Robert awoke with a start from endless dreams of German discos.

He had been crowd-surfing through discordant house music – rave, techno, all the stuff in his son's taste in 'music' that drove him insane – surrounded by smoke and lasers and willow-limbed gyrating dancers in floating cages – and a skinny-armed woman had reached up to catch him, but her mouth had opened as wide as a trapdoor and he had fallen into the bottom back of her drug-dry mouth as her blue lips closed behind him...

And he woke in the vague dark of a midnight hospital; the beeps and burps and whines of life-monitoring – *no longer 'life saving'* – equipment echoed around him, going in and out of sync in maddening atonal rhythms.

Sleep was hell these days. Robert remembered once waking up after a frat party at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. He had a little grandfather clock on his wall that chimed randomly, and he had slept through all that, and the grinding passage of the garbage truck, and the thumping bass of the 90s party soundtrack that had been put on to energize the cleanup – and he had awoken with a full bladder, an aching head, and a cotton mouth – but he had slept for eleven hours, no break, and no vivid dreams, just the kind of vague foreign-language previews that teased him with the possible value of recalling and ruminating over, but which sank like a kicked beer from a pier into the shallow lake of the past.

And he awoke back then in a state of almost perfect blankness, with the self-consciousness and empty purpose of an indifferent cloud, rolling through the sky in an invisible midnight.

This was all before the unease, the complications, the endless variables that shifted and booted his nervous system from highs to lows in coruscating ripples that should have been subtitled with seizure warnings.

Robert was plagued by the belief that happiness could only occur when everything was going right at the same time. But that never happened, so Robert was never happy. He spent six months grumbling over a pulled tendon from a squash game – when that got better, he got a strange growth on his neck that turned out to be excessive sun exposure, cured with frozen nitrogen. Then his wife got a lipoma, then his youngest son stopped eating, then his eldest son had a weird massive conflict with his friends over whether Roseanne Barr should lose weight – then one of the two air-conditioners in his mansion broke and froze over – then his rear balcony started leaking, and he had to spend \$20,000 to repair it, and Helen took on the inevitable fight with the insurance company – and almost lost before Robert strafed in with his legal powers.

And then, and then, and then...

There was always something askew, something that needed to be fixed, someone who desperately needed to be talked in or out of something essential – and Robert felt like a circus performer, shot out of a cannon at dawn to land spread-eagled in his bed at night, shaking slightly and humming like an eternal tuning fork, opposed to all the atoms that lined up forever to thwart his simple will...

And like all middle-aged professionals, he had Amish dreams of buying country land and learning how to farm and pulling calves from giant vaginas and shaving down his gut by hurling bales of hay high in a dusty barn and staying up late reading paper books by candlelight and finding out what on earth sheep-dipping was and why hay had to be left for weeks in tight cylinders in ploughed fields and all the mysteries of growth and distribution that fed all the stressed-out city dwellers.

And Robert broached this dream with his family, occasionally, tentatively, but Helen just laughed at him and held up her stiletto heels, and his sons said that the Internet “sucked total ass” in the country, and how the hell were they supposed to game over DSL? And it all became impossible, and Robert became slowly possessed of the great and deep fear of the provider – that he was a barely-

tolerated wallet; a conveyer belt of free things rolling squarely towards those who rolled their eyes at his mere existence.

And I still have twenty years to go... he would think dismally, staring at his phone in the middle of the night, as the fan-wind washed over him. And then twenty more after that...

Death did seem comforting, in a way. *When I was young, I had money and 'getting laid' worries... Now I have professional worries, and I can see the health worries starting to emerge, like hungry gophers dying for a meal...*

And then my parents will get old, and need my help. And my gums will recede and I will have money, but nothing I can buy beats being able to sleep for eleven hours straight at the age of 21 and wake up to a blank slate of unhurried possibilities...

Justin had laughingly demanded that Robert do a long jump with him, when they were walking past a high-school field. Justin flew through the air and landed like a drunken grasshopper, then tauntingly demanded his father follow suit.

"Come on, 'senior discount!'" – a nickname that had unfortunately stuck because Robert hated it.

And Robert had to do the calculation – the benefit of doing a long jump versus the cost of hurting hips, ankles, knees, back... *Hands and fingers, knees and toes, all can snap when young life goes...*

And he had to make excuses, and realize that he had crossed over from youthful vitality to middle-aged caution, and that his body was no longer a machine to be taken for granted, but instead a kind of aging tank that had to be caressed and coaxed into lurching towards battle.

And sleep was light; Robert felt in a state of perpetual fight-or-flight, and could count the one to two seconds before waking up and various black-flag worries unfurling in his mind.

You dream of wading through a yellow-speckled field, and wake in prison, and the only few seconds you get of waking freedom is the

fading of the flowers before the bleak frame of the steel bars...

And the dreams – oh God, the dreams... Terrors and unease and flash-bulb social exposure of personal crimes... Letters from his regulatory board, referencing real estate and his boss Peter. His wife had tentacles for eyes and his sons had turned to stone. His food was transformed into gold and all his doors and windows were welded shut with bird-shit and his arms were crossed over his chest as he skidded through water-tubes that turned into fleshy intestines before he fell into an endless flaming landscape...

And he had a dream of begging his brother Shane for drugs, in the hopes that wild waking visions would calm his nightly madness. His bed felt like a portal to an insane asylum where the doctors giggled and tightened various screws. And his doctor offered benzodiazepines, but Robert did his research and shrank back; and Helen offered massages but quickly pointed out that Robert had the muscle mass of your average manatee, which made him tense muscles she still couldn't feel...

And his sons fled to peers who had the dark language arts of drunk stub-toed sailors with Tourettes, and they started using the kind of language that would have seriously gotten him and Shane beaten within an inch of their ungodly lives had their own father heard even a hint of it – but that was the scene these days, apparently, innocent peach-fuzz faces spitting syllables like a blind ape with a machine-gun, and there was nothing to be done about it, since they were too big to beat - and, as they constantly chanted, it's "literally, not that serious!"

And they were always gone, and when Helen yelled at them that they treated the house like a hotel, Justin laughed and barked back that a hotel would have a better towel service, and did this mean they could *finally* get bedroom fridges?

And there was shock, and incredulity, and constant complaints – all while knowing that 'kids these days' is an endless cliché of the aging – and most of all there was helplessness and a kind of supernatural

fear of the callous and random young, and what on *earth* was supposed to happen when the aging got actually old and needed some kindness and fluffed pillows and pill-counting and ass-wiping?

“Well,” said Helen bitterly. “That’s what immigrants are for, right? We don’t trust our kids, so we have to pay foreigners...”

Robert’s breath caught in the dark white room. The machines counted out the stair-steps down to the grave. Who thinks of their heartbeat when they’re young? Older, sicker – yea verily unto death – each beat is not a continuance of life, but rather a descending metronome of “one less, one fewer, last few, last one...”

“Who the fuck is that?” croaked the voice.

The bars of moonlight streaming in through the blinds lit up Peter’s silver hair, as thick as ever. Robert’s was thinning, but his days would likely be longer. Trading hairs for heartbeats seemed a pretty damn good deal at the moment.

“Hey, Peter, it’s me, Robert.”

“What the fuck are you doing here? Come to give me some work, bro?”

“No, your wife – she had to go, and asked me to sit with you.”

“Jesus Christ, I’m dying, I’m not some fucking toddler. Go on, go out, be in the light, pour one out for...” Peter’s whisper-crackle voice broke into coughs.

“Easy, easy...” said Robert, scooching his chair closer. He forgot that the chair was on wheels, and skidded into the side of Peter’s bed.

There was silence for a moment. Peter grimaced, his perfect crease-lines folding into an origami of silver-fox handsomeness.

There was a slight vulnerability in Peter’s next whisper. “Is it really dark in here, or are my eyes just fucked?”

“No, it’s dark,” said Robert quickly. “You want the lights on?”

“Fuck no... Gives me a migraine...”

There was another pause.

“Well, you haven’t been by so much. I can hear even when I’m out, you know. Eye in the sky. Ears in the fears. Fed in the bed...” Peter laughed weakly.

“Half your cases landed on me,” said Robert.

“Yeah, the cases. The company. The immortality...” Peter turned his haggard face to Robert, his sunken eyes already like skull-holes, as if the bones were eating up the paper skin. “Jesus, Fiona put a slide-show up the other day. We watched it together. Fucking depressing. Me skiing, looking cool. Me giving a death-mask blowing on a fire in Algonquin. Water skiing like a bragging asshole. Jesus, I lived in the eyes of others, Robert... That year I took up drumming. What was the point of that? No point, just wanted everyone to point at me...” Tears escaped the older man’s eyes, his brow contracted in woe and pain. “And my kids. Fucking vultures. They come by just enough to stay in the will. I want to leave everything to the Taliban, I swear. They know how to treat women. My lawyer says it’s not enforceable. That’s how fucking complicated it all is – I need a lawyer. We pile up books on the balls of the population, but it pays for all this end-of-life care. You know they wanted to euthanize me, right? Give me the ‘pain free’ option. MAID they call it. Medical Assistance In Dying. Like maids who – clean up. I paid like ten million dollars in taxes, Rob. Then I need something back, and they just – come at me with a poisoned lance!” Peter laughed again. “I don’t blame them... I’d do the same thing. We’re just pets to them, and you put down pets, right? But they gave me a money-printer... Endless books, rules, regulations, laws – lay down enough fog and suppressing fire, you need a sherpa to get to your own goddamned bathroom...”

More coughing.

Robert put his hand on Peter’s arm. Peter jerked it away.

“Jesus Christ! Don’t do that! I’m so fucking hopped up that every touch feels like the devil come to drag me downstairs. Those black-eyed nurses are like the minions of Satan... ‘We’re just trying to make you comfortable...’” Peter’s eyes swivelled to him. “Do you believe in Hell, Robert?”

“Me – I – no...”

“You know how it - plays, right? The devil gives you everything you want, nothing that you actually need – and then, when it’s too late, everything gets revealed to you, and the cost to come is unfurled, and all the benefits are shown to be bullshit, and nothing means anything, and a life of vanity and prestige and – and status – is for – for what? Same bed, nothing but bullshit in your wake.”

“I... Ok.”

“How is that kewpie sex-doll of yours? That cracked China bling-bling?”

“Helen is – she’s good. She’s trying – she’s aiming to be a life coach now...”

“Hahahahaaaa,” wheezed Peter. “My wife wanted to open up a florists, then she designed jewelry... I think there was ‘life coach’ in there somewhere, too... And you have to do the marketing and make the web site and fund it and finger lies into the spreadsheet and – and just *be supportive, honey!* Wives are the most expensive fucking hobbies men have... Consume, consume, consume... Money, time, attention, taxes, sperm, support. Vampires and black holes, the whole lot of them...”

Robert wanted to ask his former boss exactly how many meds he was on, but refrained.

“Are you in a – lot of pain?”

“Oh, they juice me like mad... I’m also adjusting. I’m like your brother...”

Robert took a deep breath. “Is there – anything I can do?”

"Haha... We've often wondered..."

Robert smiled. "You want me to read you something? Find a movie? You want to – talk?"

"Do your kids listen to you?"

Robert laughed. "They pretend to, if they want something..."

"Why? *Why* don't they listen? Really..."

There was a pause. The machines beeped, the countdown continued...

"I don't know," said Robert. "We're old, we're dinosaurs, we pay for everything..."

"But know the value of nothing..."

"Yeah, that's the quote. But – I feel like I have no authority. No weight. Like a god you can just – disbelieve in... Like I'm there-not-there. Like an ATM. Of course, that's not just the kids..."

"Did you – do you live a good life?"

Robert took a deep breath. "I... I provide. I help people. I give to charity. I'm – productive. I – I've reproduced. I – don't know what to say really... You?"

"Oh, I've fucked it up truly gloriously. People are just – things to me, Robert. I – you know, when you try to open the kitchen drawer, and the fucking spud-masher is all like: no way bro! – that's people for me. I love massages – I still daydream about the last one, of course I didn't know I'd get the call two days later. And I was lying there thinking: *I'm paying for the hands to keep moving and the tongue to stay silent...* If I could hack the hands off the body, Saudi-style, that would be way better... You ever get a chatty masseuse? Fuck me, that's the worst. *I don't want to hear about your endometriosis you crazy bitch – just grind my gears until I weep tears of blood onto the floor.*" Peter laughed. "It's - literally – not that serious..."

Robert smiled.

"So, I use people. I hear they don't like it, just rumours of course... If you have utility for me, well and good. If not, well go chat with a masseuse and pretend you're in love... So that's what is so funny... I'm not of any – practical use for my government anymore. My business partners. My friends. My family. My wife comes so she won't be seen as – heartless. Just a theatre of ghouls... My kids – you know what my fucking son said to me, last time he was here..." Peter laughed bitterly. "Last time probably... He said: 'Hey dad, quick question' - man I hate those girly 'uhhh, hear me out' social-media passive-aggressive jabs – he said: 'Hey dad, did you ever visit me in daycare?'" Peter chuckled. "What does that even mean? How do you – how do you – how do you – hold a grudge for that long? This was before webcams, but I always made sure he was ok... But Jesus, I said to Fiona, *you better hang on to your jewelry, kid - you'll need to barter it for a Jamaican nanny to give you reggae sponge-baths in your dotage...* Yeah, I went out in the world and made my place, my lair. Why is that a crime? I thought my father's face was a receding bald spot for the first ten years of my life. He was an anesthesiologist, he put everyone to sleep... What did he tell me? 'Keep your wits about you, son...' Great fucking advice. And damn, now, at the end, I seem to have misplaced my wits... Oh well, I should take his shitty advice to the grave with me. Who needs love when you have a new bike every year? Do you think I have treated you as a – a thing, Robert?"

Robert paused.

"Oh, come on, spill it... What am I going to do, take you to court?"

"Well – we had a – professional relationship. You're a bit of a show-off, I get that. I'm that too, a bit. More than a bit. That's Helen... But you have a lot to show off..."

"I never pre-judged my own abilities, kid. That's the real vanity. Thinking you know what you're capable of. You can just – will things. And I wouldn't have to treat people as – things – if they weren't just – sitting there – in my way, forever. Most people have the self-direction of a fucking – statue, Rob. A log in the road. Drive over, go

around, or just – move it, toss it out of the way. I’m the only living soul in a world of mannequins...” Peter laughed. “I’ve talked more with you tonight than my wife in the last year.” Peter’s voice broke. “I kind of – hate her, Rob. Everything she says is a lie, everything she has is stolen... I’m a vending machine; you only love the treats, not the cold metal spirals. Whenever she is looking at me, I know she is thinking about snacks, you know? Everything she can eat when I am dead and gone and beyond nagging her about her weight. She’s going to totally pull the pin on the ‘fat grenade’ Rob. It’s going to be epic. She’s gonna end up in an intergalactic circus. They’ll bury her next to me, and the worms will all cheer. The moon will change its orbit. Bulk Barns will close down... I’d haunt her if I could, tell her to drop the fucking donut, but what if ghosts have noses and I have to smell that godawful perfume of hers for eternity?”

Robert opened his mouth, then closed it. He felt frozen, paralyzed – and had a strong memory of Shane, upstairs, trapped in the vortex of his mother’s whirling words... *Sucked into the black-hole of her lonely dying mind...*

“But you’re a good kid,” said Peter with sudden gentleness. “You supported me... You knew my secrets, never betrayed me... You know, if you had reported me, I would have taken it. I wouldn’t have turned you in. I think – I think I wanted you to... I can’t enforce my own rules, who can? That’s why we need God. A truncheon. Disgrace would have saved me from my family. Maybe I was trying to goad you into – into...” Peter’s face crumpled. “Into – making me a little better... Bro, you just – you just – followed me down, you son of a bitch. No resistance at all. Even the Devil gets bored with such easy conquests. Like who wants to climb Everest if they lower it to twenty feet and put a fucking escalator in? Everyone I meet, my whole life, I tempt and bribe and sniper empty threats – and everyone folds, and nods, eyes shining and dead, and I clip another soul to my belt and none of you – NONE OF YOU – ever push back or even think of doing the right thing and rescuing me from myself, from whatever is inside me that wants to – infect others – and – and

you knew I was doing the same thing, every year, to every new intern, to all the weak shiny faces that fold into corruption without even a SHRED of a spine – and you were FINE with that, Robert! FINE with me rolling like a combine-harvester over endless fields of fresh souls, as long as you got your mahogany office and fucking parking space! But the wood and concrete is made of hope and virtue and happiness – the numbers in your bank account is a record of the souls given up to evil – that you delivered unto evil – and that should give you comfort, Robbie-boy – it does to me... How could I have been different if the world is always the same? How can the mama bird stop feeding if the chicks are always hungry?"

Robert felt a bone-deep shiver. *I want to turn the machines off to stop the noise...*

Peter's voice dropped into a conspiratorial whisper. "But you – but you *did* think of resisting me, didn't you, Robert? That's why I always talk about Helen – you know that, right? And you went home and you lay in bed with your *wife* and whispered about doing the right thing, and taking on the eternal battle, ridiculous and CGI it seems to be in a world that has abandoned God, and is abandoned by God – and you looked at the shadows on the ceiling and listened to your hot little Eve whispering that it was impractical to be good, and I had power and money and prestige and status, and we can't *afford* to take him on, honey – be sensible, be practical, give him what he wants, this is the way the world works, there is no such thing as good and evil, there are only atoms and space and comfortable reproduction, and the world nails up those who try to do good, and I won't follow you off a bridge if you drive in that direction, and here are my boobs and let's forget about all this nonsense and go and get the cheddar honey, the soul is just an inflicted made-up ghost implanted in our minds so we fight the useless battles of more cowardly animals..."

Robert had ceased to breathe thirty seconds ago.

Peter turned to stare at him.

And it was Robert's own face.

And that is how Robert died.

Chapter 21

Shane's eyes were red as he entered Dr Gunnar's office.

"Ok..." he muttered. "Ok..."

He almost charged at the couch, turning and sitting in one fluid panicked motion.

His brown eyes were wide, rimmed with dark shapes; the shaded half-moons of sleeplessness hanging beneath them like restless hammocks.

"Ok..." he repeated. "No bullshit time, doc. I'm – I'm sorry..." His voice caught. "I've been an asshole..."

Dr Gunnar nodded.

Shane laughed bitterly. "So – no argument. Fair, fair... You – you have any siblings, doc?"

"Two brothers and a sister."

"Are they – are they doing well?"

"Ha, well they're not in the 5%, but – yeah, overall, not too bad."

Shane's hand was on his mouth – his words escaped like lost prisoners through the bars of his pink fingers. "He just – he just – he just fucking *died*, doc!"

"What? Your brother?"

"I've got to – I've got to – get all this down, you know. Before I forget. Because I will, I think. No, I know. Every little thing just – you know, just – goes into the grave with you... Everyone stands around just – mourning what will never be known. How many times you dreamed about elephants. How many – how many times you read the word 'the.' How many times you make love to someone while thinking about something else. It can't all just – go. But it does. He has – he had two kids, you know. They're kind of assholes.

Well not the younger one, he's kind of cool. But that older kid, Justin, he's a poster boy for execution by peer pressure..."

"Look, Shane – just – tell me. What happened?"

"So he goes in for hernia surgery. Curse of the sitting class. And something gets nicked, down there. And he has to go back in. And just – dominoes, you know, sometimes with your health it goes that way. You go in for a cut finger, you touch the wrong doorknob, you get sepsis, they intubate, and you just – exhale into eternity, you know? He was gone in a wink, in a finger snap... And I – I fucking *loved* it, doc. I was rooting for bad things. You know that thing, where you like some celebrity, like sexually I guess, and then she gets engaged, and you just feel this little thump of disappointment? Like you're going to run into her at some coffee shop, she's in town for a concert or a movie premier, and you just brush elbows and end up – bumping uglies, you know, and then you're in all the papers as just some – unknown dude. In a hat. Waiting to get dumped because you can't handle the lifestyle, the – exposure."

"Your brother..."

"Yeah I know," snapped Shane. "So I got a little – lift, you know, when Robbie's life went south. Tits up. His wife aged like a prune – yay! He got a gut – yay! His kids turned into this Japanese boy band from hell – yay! He was stressed – yay! Because he was living a pretty good life. Compared to mine. You know, they say 'as close as brothers' – a total lie! As close as brothers seem to be, laughing and arm-wrestling on the table while kicking each other in the balls underneath. Not enough mom, not enough dad, not enough food, not enough – love..." Shane's voice broke again, and he jumped up from the couch, pacing back and forth in the expansive office, his Skechers brushing the industrial iron gray carpet.

"I did – nothing for him, doc. Sniped at him. Set my will against his, like a little *bitch!* You know, that bullshit smile when something goes against my will – for him. 'Heyyy, that's great Rob, congrats!' And you force him to pivot and – and..." He took a deep savage breath.

“And ask you and pump you up and yeah, oh it’s gross, you get this thrill of triumph and – and domination over him, and it’s so stupid and petty. He was J Crew cool and smooth and tall and had this floppy great hair and beat me at sports, like all the time, and he never saw fit to lower himself into my canyons of competence and play – and play ‘Caves of Chaos’ or Unreal Tournament or anything like that. He’d try, sure, for a like minute or two, but he always had something better to do, somewhere *cooler* to go... And – and he left me with *her* for like a decade...”

“Her?”

“Mom. That broken hydrant of endless words. Drowning the fuck out of me. But – damn, doc, why does it always come too late? I never – Jesus, this is horrible to say – I never thought what I would have done in his position. Would I have abandoned me, if I was him? Fuck yeah. Like – not even a hesitation. The certain answer was out – within me – before I even finished asking the question. I never said anything to him about Helen. She was a hot red flag from the get-go. She was only going to lead him to a worse place. Reinforced all his – all his...” His eyes filled. “Jesus, doc, we’re both addicts.” Shane’s face crumpled. “And – and he tried to help me with mine... But I never – I never helped him with his... No, fuck it’s even worse than that... I drove him towards her. ‘Oh, she’s great, Rob, you can’t do better.’ I didn’t deliver the drug, but I talked it up like hell. He was a better brother, and now he’s fucking *dead*...”

“Ok – sorry to sound like a cliché, Shane, but take a breath. Slow down.”

Shane cocked his head. “You think I’m manic, doc? Got ‘pressured speech.’ No. Nothing like that. I’m just waking up to the basic fact that I’ve been a colossal intergalactic asshole for like forty years. It’s a lot. It’s a lot of – asshole – to take in...”

“When did he die?”

“Like yesterday. That’s why I wanted this session.”

"I'm really sorry, Shane. How is your heart?"

Shane backed away from the dark desk, the high windows over the grimy canyons of downtown Toronto far below. "Oh, fuck, don't ask me *that*, doc! It's a bladed graveyard..."

"Poetic, but unclear..."

"Yeah, pretty syllables leading nowhere... I resented him..."

"Yeah, I got that. Stop stating the blindingly obvious like it's some earth-shaking insight..."

"Yeah, sorry to muscle in on *your* territory." Shane shook his head rapidly. "Sorry, doc, just more – asshollery... But it's like – it's like no one told me that time was passing. I kept all my hair, I work with my hands, my back, so I'm slim. I don't see much sun. I don't have any real worries – just resentment, and buried panic... So I'm like – not aging. And I take weird pride in that. I got carded like five years ago. You know how happy that made me feel? But – but – it's like a painting, doc, sitting in the basement under an oily cloth saying 'Hey, *my* colors aren't fading!' But – but it's because I'm – unfinished, and underground, and no one cares to look. I look young because I've never grown up, doc. No one wants to – to look at me. So I don't age. I'm 'well preserved' – but not through care. Through – indifference. Laziness. I mean, you look like shit, doc, but you're doing well in the world. Doing good. You have lines because you worry, you frown. You have kids, they have to get by. You worry about them. Christ above, like a month ago you mentioned that your wife was – sick, and I just kept talking about my parents and my sad girlfriends and *still* Regina and my fucking warehouse, and I never even thought to circle back... I don't even pay you, and all I talk about is myself."

Dr Gunnar took a deep breath. "She's not – she's not better..."

"Oh no! What – what's going to happen?"

"We don't know. It's Canada, so we have to go to the States to get healthcare. We can see a specialist here in six months. Maybe. Pay

all these taxes, then pay to fly to the States and pay out of pocket.”

“Well, immigrant business takeovers aren’t going to fund themselves,” said Shane bitterly, clenching his hands. “Sorry, that’s political bullshit. I’m sorry, doc. I hope it – it works out.”

“Thank you.”

Shane fell to his knees as if slammed by a giant invisible fist. “Oh God, time goes by so fast. Nothing changes in the frame, but the movie seems endless. I don’t feel time, but my body – my body does. I wish I had a period, some kind of metronome that shows the – passage. But we’re like tanks, like bricks. Just copy-paste day by day. You’ve got bookmarks. Births, deaths – sorry – like babies and christenings if that’s your bag... I’ve got blank pages. I last saw Regina like – twenty years ago. What the fuck have I been doing?” Shane took a deep breath. “I mean – I don’t want to panic...”

“Why not?”

“Why – what?”

“Well, isn’t this the perfect time to panic?”

Shane leapt to his feet, held up his hands and backed away. “Oh, doc, please, don’t rev that engine, I’ll fucking *faint!*”

“No, you won’t. Listen, Shane. I’m really sorry about your brother. I mean - try this. Imagine you’d talked to him on his – on his deathbed. Just you... In the dark. And he knows he’s dying – stay with me, this is important. What would he have said to you?”

Shane burst into tears. “Oh Jesus, doc, I know the answer to that before... Before... Jesus, he would have begged me to step up and save his sons. To give a shit about his family. To – to comfort his wife and kids. To be a fucking uncle, rather than a selfish wreck!”

“Yes... Yes...” murmured Dr Gunnar. “Go on...”

“I can’t...” Shane sucked down deep gulping breaths for a minute or so. “It’s such a cliché... I last talked to him like a month ago. He offered me a job. ‘I hate that warehouse for you, bro!’ he said. I

took offense. Why? Because I'm an asshole, as I said. I defended the warehouse like it's some spiritual Shangri-La. I can't even repeat the grimy fortune-cookie bullshit I spewed. Why did I hate him so much? He was just doing his thing, being – being Robert. I felt so superior because his kids were going wild, running feral. But what do I have? A basement apartment and some dusty 90s CDs I throw on to pretend I am freezing time... God I loved making him feel helpless. So we had something in common. What an asshole. I forgot his kids – my nephew's – birthdays more times than I remembered. But don't worry, doc, I sent them a few emojis, so we're all good. Christ, and now I have to try and build something up with them... Oh, they're going to make me pay. It's probably too late..."

"Ok, please forget about them for a moment," said Dr Gunnar, his voice rising. "You are a language engine, Shane. It's actually really impressive, and kind of – intimidating. Like a display of swordsmanship – impressive, blinding, but – impossible to get close to. So slow that shit down. Take a deep breath. Take a seat. Good. Now you're going to have to do the toughest thing in the world, and shut up for a while."

Dr Gunnar took a deep breath and stood up.

"You can talk yourself in and out of anything and everything, Shane. It's – again, impressive, but unstable. But there's one thing you haven't realized – yet. And here is where I earn my daily bread. Are you ready? No – don't answer that, I can't take another manic journey. No, that's colloquial, okay? Everything you say – you know that the only real addiction is to excuses, right?"

There was a pause.

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it again. His brow was furrowed, his cheeks red.

"The only real addiction is to excuses," repeated Dr Gunnar. "And that's all you say, when you strip all the syllables away. Why did your

mother talk to you all the time? *At you I mean...* Yes, you can answer."

"Well – she was lonely..."

"Right. And why did your dad – why was he so distant and critical?"

"Well – he disapproved of me. Of my – of my art and dreaminess and sensitivity."

"Right."

"You seem smug."

Dr Gunnar smiled. "I am smug when I'm right. Your mom excused talking you half-mad with the excuse called 'loneliness.' That gave her *permission*, Shane. Do you see? Your dad used his – incompatibility - with you as an excuse to be harsh, to be critical and – dismissive. Hang on, we'll get there. Trust me. I listen for a long time, then I talk. *We do what we give ourselves permission to do, Shane!* You've had money worries, right?"

"Yes... Yeah, of course..."

"Did you ever think of robbing a gas station to pay the bills?"

"Well... No, of course not."

"Right. It's not on your list of approved solutions. You don't give yourself permission to rob gas stations, so you – you never even – consider it. You ever read 'Crime and Punishment'?"

"Read it? I fucking *live* it, doc."

Dr Gunnar laughed. "That whole book is all about what Raskolnikov gives himself *permission* to do... And Hamlet – do I give myself *permission* to kill Claudius? Your whole – your whole life is about what you give yourself permission to do – and what you deny permission for... You give yourself permission to work this shitty job – and really, let's not kid yourself, that is like me teaching swimming to toddlers. You give yourself *permission* to blame Regina, your mother, your father, your – your late brother, I'm really sorry again.

What infected you was not your mother's talking, your dad's coldness, your brother's – superiority – but – and it wasn't even Regina's drugs. The real drug was *permission* – to blame Regina, to blame the drugs... What does your life look like without – without *excuses*, Shane?" Dr Gunnar's voice slowed and intensified. "Do you even know who you are without these goddamned excuses? Can you *speak* without self-justification? Do you know why your language is so florid, so stellar, so pressured? Because you are making fiction out of every moment, Shane! You are making lies out of every waking choice! You blame your bad relationship with Robert on your past, on your resentment, on your mom and dad and – and Helen, that's right? Yes. Her, too. You think you're alone because of Regina and the drugs. You react – you react all the time – I'm sorry, this was supposed to take longer, but we don't have time... All you do is react – and to react, you have to have excuses. Otherwise you have to do something other than react, which is to make an actual goddamned choice! But you cannot make a choice if you are infected – *infested* – with excuses, Shane! No, I'm almost done, shut it..."

Dr Gunnar leaned forward over his desk, his knuckles on the mahogany wood top.

"What do you want to do if you have no excuses, Shane? You are in your forties. You've wasted - years on excuses. What if you took your language skills and passions and capacity for – for fiction and creativity – and peeled those away from your excuses and put them to good use? Yes, you should panic. Because it's almost too late, Shane! Doors close *all the time* in life. Bang, bang, bang – it's a drum-roll of missed opportunities. You want kids? You need a woman ten years younger, because you're so indecisive – and you're indecisive because you give yourself all these excuses. A few more years, it's all over. Do you get that? Do you? You're almost out of time, Shane. It's long past time to panic. Your brother died. Sad. Tragic. *But at least he fucking lived, Shane!* What do you do except lurk in the basement staring at a wall and playing 'How Soon is Now?' and pretending to be deep? You're not deep. You're just – flat. Your brother died. I'm sorry about that. Go to his funeral. Cry,

wail, weep. Fine. But if there's one thing you can do to honor his passing – it's to take all those excuses and bury them with your brother. His life is over. *Take the lesson and work to begin yours!*"

Chapter 22

Helen leaned forward, her head on the steering wheel.

She could hear all the noise coming from inside the house – the farm, really – and had to compose herself, to quell her rage.

“Kind of dramatic, hey mom?” said Justin from the passenger seat. Samuel sat in the back – he always lost the ‘shotgun’ battle - his white headphone cords snaking up through his long brown hair.

Helen said nothing. Justin sighed and went back to scrolling his phone. “Take your time. I’m in no hurry, that’s for sure...”

Helen took a series of deep breaths. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She tried to remember a day that she had not wanted to hammer and claw Justin’s face. She had to go back a long, long way...

“Thanks, boys,” she muttered.

She saw in the rearview mirror that Samuel knew she had said something, but decided not to take out his headphones. This was a choice everyone made in the family. Every day. You heard something from another room, or downstairs, and asked someone to repeat it, and then, mostly, you just made vague noises and hoped it wasn’t too important.

Justin in particular had a terrible habit of muttering, and then impatiently claiming that it just wasn’t important if asked to repeat his words.

Helen tried to give him some latitude because of Robert’s sudden death. But that was quite a while ago by now, and – *well hell, kid, everyone loses their parents eventually, stop gumming up the machinery with all this Hamlet muttering...*

Samuel had managed to hang onto his essential sweetness somehow – but paid a ferocious price from his brother, and any higher-status children at school that Justin had influence over –

which was most of them. Samuel was never invited any place cool, and had to hang out with the Dungeons and Dragons and theatre kids.

Justin snapped: "Come on, mooother... Saddle up. The sooner we get in, the sooner we can get out."

Samuel's head bobbed along to his music. He never took out his headphones when his brother spoke.

"Ok..." exhaled Helen. "Thanks..."

She shook her head slightly – more of a shiver – and opened her door.

Her sons behind her, Helen mounted the three moss-covered steps to the front porch.

As she approached the door, it ripped open and a stream of screaming children came pouring out.

Helen flinched, but they parted around her family with the precision of mountain goats.

Her brother Derek charged out, growling and clawing at the air, a giant Viking helmet on his head. He had grown a short beard that was flecked with gray.

"Arrrrrgh, pirate time to eat the children!" he cried. "Oh, hey, Helen, we had just about given up on you!"

"Yes, sorry, the traffic..." she said thinly, but silenced herself at a snort from Justin. "We left late..."

"Is there still food?" asked Justin.

"Yeah... Yes, head on in and help yourself. We've done presents..."

"Oh, right!" said Helen. She turned around to instruct Samuel to get them from the car, but he was already carrying them. "Thanks..." She hugged her brother briefly. "I can't believe you still have the energy..."

Derek touched his forehead to hers. "Oh, well ever since I snuck that last one past the goalie, I've been a renewed man... Good to see you, sis."

He lifted his head and charged down the steps after the children, growling and scattering them like a rabid bowling ball.

Rolling his eyes, Justin stalked past his mother and went into the house.

Chloe and Derek's house was an ancient farm cottage on land that had been sold out and shrunk down to a little over two acres. It had settled so much over the decades that it was both terminally cozy and had a slight drunken Dr Seuss air, since there were no strict right angles anywhere to be found. The front hallway snaked a little to the right like a subway making a turn; the doorways had been painted and stripped so many times that they were halfway to becoming hobbit holes. The rooms were small; the windows tight, and the ceilings low. On the rare occasions that their kids visited Helen's house, they loved the size and air, but always looked forward to getting back to their lightless cozy cubbies and watching the bees and hummingbirds flit through the ivy that grew past their windows.

Chloe smiled happily as she came out of the kitchen.

"Helen!" she cried, reaching forward for a hug, her hands hungrily opening and closing.

Helen felt tears sting her eyes as she surrendered to Chloe's warm embrace.

"Thanks for coming," murmured Chloe. "I know it's still hard..." She pulled back and looked around. Samuel stood slightly awkwardly behind his mother; Justin had disappeared into the kitchen, doubtless in search of food.

"Samuel, my gosh how are you? It's been an age!"

"I'm well," said Samuel, blushing.

Chloe narrowed her eyes. "Are you too big to hug? What's the protocol these days? My kids never get away..."

"I can... Yes." Samuel stepped forward.

Chloe frowned, staring deeply into his eyes.

"Don't make me cry, Auntie!" warned Samuel with a smile.

"I just... I know your mother takes such good care of you, but her heart is – on the mend too... Are you – are you ok?" She shook her head slightly. "Sorry, dumb question. How are you... Just – how are you?"

"Pretty sad," said Samuel simply. "I'm stuck on side three of this old album called 'The Wall.'"

"Well, Pink Floyd is like permanent funeral music," sighed Chloe. "I miss our talks. I know I'm busy, but you know the line is always open. I feel – a bit odd chasing you. The last time – what, the last time we did anything was the butterfly conservatory. Wow... And – are you – is there any kind of – female activity on the horizon?"

Samuel stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing. "I've – never heard it put quite that way before... Like some storm-cloud rolling in..."

Chloe smiled, glancing at Helen for the briefest of moments. "Well, women can be like that..."

Helen smiled. "We are so sorry for being late."

"Think nothing of it. Let's go get you settled. I'm so sorry your parents couldn't make it."

"They are going to cruise themselves into early graves..."

Chloe led them into the sitting room, where two babies cooed and played with wrapping paper on the floor, and a variety of adults sat around in extremely plush couches and armchairs.

"You know John and Jean, of course..."

Chloe made introductions, then left to put on a pot of coffee.

Samuel stood by the loveseat, twining his fingers together behind his back.

John leaned forward. "How are you, kiddo?"

"Oh, you know... Hanging in there..."

Jean nodded slowly. "Still such a shock..."

John turned to Helen. "And the finances are... The life insurance covers – what you need?"

"Oh, yes. Thanks. I've been thinking of getting back to work. Circling back to my contacts. I even left a message with Peter..."

"Peter, Robert's old boss?" whispered Jean, her eyes wide.

John scowled. "That bastard – that bastard who worked Robert into the grave? You..." John glanced around and lowered his voice. "You stay away from him. You hear me? You know, I warned Robert that Peter would be the death of him... Nights, weekends, all that travel... Dangling 'partner' in front of him all the time. But that son of a bitch had some kind of hold over our Robbie... Something – wrong, unholy..."

Jean leaned forward, reaching for Helen's hand. The other adults shuffled up and away, taking their babies, aware that deep feelings might be soon spilling over.

"Helen, you know that life is mostly just to be – survived, right? We weren't harsh as parents, you know? I was too soft, John perhaps – a little too hard. It's OK, dear, this is a world that just – crept up on us, you know? We never really saw it coming. Everything is so different. The neighbourhood is... So different..."

John put his palm on his wife's hand. "Ok, dear, that's – all right. It was nice of Chloe and Derek to invite us all here. You missed quite a spread."

"I'm sorry we're so late." Helen lowered her voice. "Justin didn't want to – come... The connection is just – Derek was Robert's best friend, of course, and – he is godfather to Samuel. But that's just kind of a – convention..."

Jean gestured to Samuel. "Come on, sit down, let me see you! Are things any better with – your brother?"

"Sure, sure..." said Samuel blankly, sliding down a giant cushion. "I mean, we move in different – circles. But we get on, in our own way..."

"Well, you take after your mother," said John decisively. "Justin is all me!"

Samuel grimaced.

Jean softly punched John in the arm. "Don't say he's like his mother!"

John smiled, baring his teeth. "Didn't I say that Shane always took after you?"

"And I don't know that *that* was the right thing either!"

"Well at least he's still..." *Alive* was the unspoken word. It was somehow even worse that it was spoken only in the mind, not in the air. And the word was stopped without effort, without trailing off. The thought just – terminated.

"I was there last week," said Jean in a deep thrilling voice. "I put flowers at least twice a month. I always wonder if I'll see you there. Or Justin. Not you, Samuel, you can't drive alone yet..."

"I can't..." said Helen, her voice shaking.

Jean folded Helen's hand in her own. "I know, I know... I knew him a lot longer than you did, dear... When he was just a wee thing... When he would sit in his crib and just - wait for me to get up. So quiet. So serious. And sooo pretty. At least three people – no, four – said he should be a model. As a baby, a toddler, and once in his teens. Now, looking at Justin Bieber, I shudder at what might have

been... And smart – I swear he could have done jigsaw puzzles blindfolded, by touch you know... But cold a little too. Distant. Not like my Shaney. Maybe a little like Justin. Hot and cold – my ‘taps’ I used to call them. But that’s me and John here. But not unfeeling. Loyal – to a fault... Once he decided he was on your team, he would give you the shirt off his back. As long as it wasn’t one of those Hawaiian horrors he loved.” Her lower lip jutted out. “But he stuck by you, right Helen? Never wandered. Stuck it out...”

Helen’s eyes narrowed. “Sorry, what do you mean by: ‘stuck it out?’”

“Oh, nothing bad, of course. I know you had your ups and downs. That’s marriage. A marathon. Endurance, you know? Life. When you’re young, you think that suffering is always just for others. Like getting old. It will just – part around you. Pass you by... But it doesn’t. Teeth and death and aging and – and bad backs and knees. John lost a knee because he took a bad hit in football, what – over fifty years ago? I had a horse step on my foot as a kid and I have so much pain at times. Life just – lies in wait for you. Like a very slow trap, *bang*, around you it goes. And Robert was happy. I mean, I think so...” Jean turned her anxious eyes on her husband. “Did he talk to you about – that? His life?”

“He was happy, Jean.”

Helen swallowed. “Of course he was...”

Jean frowned. “He just – do you remember those – lines, under his eyes. And he gained so much weight... And all – all those money worries. He – he kept a kind of – line of credit with us, Helen. Did you know that?”

“What?”

“Oh yes! His pay would go up and down... And everything was so – expensive. He even – was put on probation or something like that – for – what, three months? Do I have that right?”

John’s mouth was a thin line. “Jean dear, we don’t have to talk about that...”

"No, it was three months, I remember, because it was coming up to Christmas... And he kept looking for work and – he would come to us, sometimes, and need money. Peter finally saw the light and brought him back, but he wasn't the same after that, really. Had to do everything the big master wanted. Like a serf, a coolie. 'Jump, jump!' 'How high?' I don't think he wanted to tell you, Helen. Did you – did you not know anything about the finances? My husband is the accountant, but I know most of it. That's how we were raised..."

John stood up abruptly.

"Jean, we really do have to go..."

"Stop telling me what to do!" snapped Jean. "Give it a rest, it's been almost fifty years!"

John spread his hands helplessly. He pointed at his temple, then shrugged.

Helen cleared her throat. "I should probably go get – look for Justin. Make sure he leaves some food for spring..."

Jean caught at her arm. "Don't go, dearie!"

"I'll be back... I'll..."

Jean was staring at the fabric of Helen's blouse. "You always dress so beautifully... I could never..." She laughed suddenly. "I had a budget, you know. For the first – eleven years of marriage? \$35 a week. I used to buy clothing by the pound. At the very place Shane works at. This must have cost a fortune..."

Helen opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"Oh for God's sake, Granny, just say it!" barked Justin from the doorway, chewing loudly.

Jean blinked. "Say - what?"

"That good old greedy Helen worked dad into an early grave."

There was a shocked silence.

John's face darkened. "That's not what we..."

"Oh, come on!" sneered Justin. He held up his hand and counted down his fingers. "She wanted the most expensive house – in the most expensive neighbourhood. And the most expensive clothes. Just point your camera and ask, that blouse was like three hundred dollars! Back in the day. Not that she wears them for long. And new cars. And isn't it better to have the latest iPhone than a still-breathing husband, mommy?"

"Justin!" Helen's voice was soft with horror.

He leaned forward. "Remember all those vacations he couldn't make, mom? Oh, he was just sooo buried at work, right? He was *broke*, mom! Buried at work? Work buried *him*, mom – and you held the fucking *shovel!*"

Everyone's mouth was open.

Chloe stood in the crooked doorway, carrying a tray holding a pot of coffee and various mugs.

"Ohhhh," she exhaled.

Justin turned to her, panting slightly, his cheeks flushed.

"Hold off," said Chloe evenly. She walked forward through the frozen tableau and put the tray down on the ottoman.

She turned to Justin.

There was an odd sense in the room that an actual adult had arrived, and all empty foolishness would be dealt with.

Helen's voice was still shaky. "You can't – you can't just – *unsay* things, Justin!"

Her son's lower lip jutted out defiantly.

Samuel stared at the carpet, showing only his whirlpool of blonde hair.

Justin said: "I will only talk to Aunt Chloe."

Chloe nodded slowly. She took Justin by the elbow and led him through the silent house. Everyone waited in stillness, aware that the rare shark of truth had been dropped into the aquarium.

In the back yard, under the chilled darkening gray skies, Justin ran his fingers through his dark hair.

"I feel like shit," he muttered.

"I don't even want to be near the house," said Chloe. "Come on, let's walk the trails."

They walked in strange lockstep down the lawn to the tangle of trees at the foot of the garden.

After a minute of hunting, Chloe found a tangled path.

"Wedge in here, it opens up in a sec. My neighbours keep warning me about hunting season, but I think we're good at the moment."

"Wouldn't be so bad to catch a stray," muttered Justin darkly.

Under the canopy of twisted tree branches, they walked down faded ATV tracks, stumbling slightly.

"These trees got kind of massacred," said Justin.

"Bad ice storm," said Chloe, tucking her hair behind her ears. "So – what's going on, Justice?"

"Holy crap, I'd forgotten that nickname..."

"That was you, as a kid. Damn, I thought you were going to be a lawyer for sure. You – do you remember this? You had a mock trial to figure out who got those Raffi tickets?"

"Wow, yeah... I'd rather die than be like dad though..."

The words hung in the air. Feet squished around random frozen puddles.

"What was it like for you and – your dad, Justin? Before he died?"

Justin let out a low whistle, then blew through his lips. "What do you think?"

"I'd rather... No, you know, that's a fair question..." Chloe took a deep breath. "I never got the sense that you and Robert were close. Or your mom... You've always had this – kind of like a cyst around your heart. You'd do anything for your friends – your peers – but not much for your family."

Justin's eye widened, and his head jerked back. "A... cyst?"

"Sorry, that sounds terrible... Totally the wrong analogy, I'm really sorry. You have a big heart. I know that. It's sort of – unmanaged, though. At times."

Justin nodded slowly. "It's an old story. Totally clichéd. 'Oh, me 'n' dad were sooo close when we were younger, but as time went on we just – grew apart.' But it's kind of true." Justin's voice suddenly caught in his throat. "Do you ever, like, have a day you wish you could go back to and – start all over? Like you took a wrong step and just thought, ah, no worries, I'll turn back in a bit. But that step – those steps – just kept on coming, and you look up in a totally different land with people who don't speak – your language. And you're on your own..."

"Yeah..." said Chloe softly, remembering that day, decades before, when Robert dumped her for Helen. "Sometimes those steps are for the best though."

"Like, I had a game of Monopoly with my dad that lasted for – two weeks, I think. It was just for us. And I invited mom and Sammy to join us near the end. It was me and mom versus dad and... Man, we had fun. Lame and goofy, but..." He took a deep breath. "I sometimes think that I would like to slow time towards the end of that game. I have these – pictures in my head. Everyone laughing and whooping... I'd like to stay there, I guess... Things didn't get better after that. And we never had another day like that again... Like ever... Why not? Why have that kind of – fun – if it's never coming again?"

There was a long moment of silence.

“What, nothing to say?” asked Justin slightly peevisly.

“I don’t...” Chloe touched her collarbone. “That hit me in the feels. Yeah, that... My dad and I – we get along well, he’s pretty great – but I have that kind of thing too, like he – we used to go river-walking and catching minnows and crayfish and – we went maybe twenty times, and yeah... There is a time which is the last time, but you never know that at the time... You just think that life is what it is, but life is about losing old things and getting new things. And we like the new things but... But we never really remember to mourn the old things, that are lost. Like you have that Monopoly set in the house somewhere, with everyone’s fingerprints on it, maybe even the atoms are still vibrating from laughter years ago... And we have this new window – these endless videos and pictures – that keep people alive, like they never stay in the grave, because we can summon them back to life with thumb-swipes...”

“It sucks to peak early,” murmured Justin.

There was another moment of silence.

“But that tongue of yours...” said Chloe eventually.

“Yeah...”

More silence.

“I never knew – when you last saw your dad. Or talked to him.”

“Oh, fuck... Sorry. Yeah, that blows. He found some vaping shit and got all pissy. ‘Oh your health, son!’ Like his fat ass could talk to me about...” Justin took a deep breath, dropping his caustic tone. “I’m so going to hell... I mean... Are your parents happy, Aunt Chloe?”

“Yeah... Yeah, they are. Content. I can’t imagine, but that’s such a different time of life...”

“My parents weren’t happy. I mean, your heart should fucking sing when your – husband sails into the room. I’m... I’m not cynical about that. Fly into each others arms, grab-assery all around, I’m a total

fan... But they were just – tense with each other. Like some stupid dance of dominance. Who's right, who's wrong – who *cares*? What's the fucking prize at the end of all that? Wrinkles and a fucking *urn*, that's what..."

Chloe glanced over and saw a tear rolling down Justin's golden sunset-lit cheek. He wiped it away angrily.

"I can't stand waste you know. Even Samuel with his stupid video games. Biggest lesson my dad gave was when he – wasn't there. Life is short... You've got it right... Make babies, live big-hearted. You're like the most real person around..."

"Thank you."

"And I'm not easy... I know that. I do – you're right – I do save my best side for my friends. Mom irritates me..."

"Go on..." Chloe smiled. "This is a safe space..."

"Oh, you just want dirt on your old rival... Come on, I know all about it - mom keeps secrets like a sieve... You won, Queen Auntie, in the end. Derek is a great guy. Your kids – love you... But you – you stayed with them, right? Where did I go? That stupid daycare, where I was just attacked for – for being of the 'less-dancing persuasion,' you know? My best friend – jeez I still remember his name, Ralph – just woke up one day dead, some congenital heart thing, right? No one even knew. No one asked..."

"Did you – say anything?"

"Fuck, I hate – imposing. Like Grandma, she just – corners you and talks your ears into atoms... I'm not going to go crying to mom and dad and get all weepy and ask all about death... They don't..." His voice caught again. "They don't – they only notice my moods when they're shitty. Like mom absolutely *refuses* to get maintenance on the car... She never drops it off, she just bitches when it doesn't start... She never thinks of the car until it doesn't work. I think she has an eating disorder, and can't – can't see beyond herself. Samuel just – erases himself, because she doesn't – see him..."

Justin's breath was coming short.

"And – you?"

"Stop probing I'm begging you. Just have some kind of opinion. My therapist - just 'ahah' and 'hmmm' and – and – nothing ever gets said..."

"Well – if I talk frankly... When I was younger, I had a friend who – she wanted to know what I thought of her boyfriend, and I said he could be kind of aggressive at times... Then later she was fighting with him and she said: 'And you know who else thinks you're a total asshole – Chloe, that's who!' And I spent like a week thinking I should call him up and set him straight but I just – never did... It all faded away... And later he dumped an entire can of garbage on her head..."

"You think I'll use what you say against mom..."

"I'd hate for you to get – to have your loyalties tested in that way..."

Justin's voice was soft. "I'm almost out though..."

"But those ties last a lifetime..."

"When I was like 12, I built a treehouse, just to... Holy crap, like one night my mom and dad both fell asleep on the couch, and I'm like always hungry, so I come down for cereal, and..." Justin shuddered. "They both had their eyes open. Dad was snoring... And I went up to them, it was like some horror movie... Their eyes were open, but they were asleep. And it was all – lights on, nobody home... Nothing was in there. Just - everything they say – said – is so predictable. I don't know what *you're* going to say – do you know how *refreshing* that is? They were just – empty robots." Justin's voice lowered again. "Nothing of value was lost... He's gone, but – I am totally strict with myself about this stuff, because I hate waste... Everyone asks me – well they did – like, how I am doing, how am I handling the loss, and I – like am I the only honest person in the world, because when I was home, like after school and just chilling, reading or listening to music, and I heard the garage door open because one of them came

home, I didn't... God help me, I didn't like it. I didn't want to talk to them. Just NPC shit about homework and responsibility and 'don't do drugs kiddo.' Nothing surprising... And maybe I'm some ADHD thrill junkie but I need *some* stimulation in a conversation, right? It's like these subtitles came up with their words – I could almost see them in my mind – before they even spoke. Distracted automatic robots. What do you think?"

"It breaks my heart that you don't miss your dad..."

"I tried this – test, not too long ago. I fed his emails and texts into an experimental AI and had a conversation that was – like *exactly* the same as when he was alive. Or – pretended to be..."

Chloe exhaled sharply. "Man, the things you say... I'm not – you're – you might not be wrong, but it's like a horse-hoof to the chest, do you know that?"

"I know... But man, I've seen what happens when people just – lie... For what? For attention? Money? Mom loves attention, she's starving to death right now – she's talking to this total crypt-keeper because he's rich as fuck... And money? Dad made bank, sure, but so what? They were always on the edge... Just a slave with golden chains, just stupid shit..."

"But you can't just live in – reaction..."

Justin stopped and turned to look at her, his face unreadable. "Why not?"

"It's not – authentic..."

"Hippie word... But hey – what if what you're reacting to is – inauthenticity?"

Chloe laughed faintly. "That's too complicated for me..." She looked around. "This is the end, here. We call this the 'Leech Pond' because that's the only life we've ever found here..."

Chapter 23

Shane woke up on a hard cold mattress, the sun streaming on his face.

He rubbed his cheeks lazily, still somewhat surprised at their smoothness. He had never been quite able to grow a beard, but liked the scruffy look, so used to shave once a week perhaps. But, since meeting Beatrice, he shaved every night, in the bath, because she preferred a clean cheek.

He had dreamed of an impossibly beautiful young woman who had fallen in love with him, hoary and aged as he was in his 40s. They had met on a plane, and he had searched an all-inclusive resort to find her asleep in a hammock, her thumb in her mouth.

Shane was possessed of a kind of liquid peace he had not felt in 20 years, since he had last done drugs. The work he was doing with Dr Gunnar – which led to Beatrice – was deeply disturbing and unsettling, and had fiercely reawakened his addiction.

He realized that he had lived small and simply because all larger desires led back to the drugs – to his demon, Regina, who he still stalked on social media – and, even in the shadowy distance, to his vague father and omnipresent mother...

Because all desire led to drugs, Shane had denied himself all desire... *How do I **want** without wanting what is bad for me?* was the essential question he had been unable to answer.

And so he had lived in the undergrowth for over twenty years, a mouse dodging the feet of his own dinosaurs of need and want, hiding and scurrying and burrowing to avoid death – but also life...

He had dated the strange castaways of the modern world – women who had fled toxic clans to clawing isolation – social animals bereft of society, of feedback and the foundations of joy: family and children and community...

They dangled sex but hated sex. They were pretty mazes of acidic distance. They trauma-dumped and then tried to act perfectly normal. They complained of loneliness then ghosted. They marked their distance and dysfunction with strange haircuts, nose-rings and dusty-crusty makeup, moving like shadowy crabs on the seabed, everything oblique and sideways, pincers forever at the ready, copy-pasting their own childhood rejection with every new encounter.

They all lived in the underworld of gig work and transient economic scraps. Courier, temp, secretary, mover, gardener, waitress – the list of pass-through jobs without stability or a future was endless, like bubbles over a waterfall. They all lived in a forever-now that flashed by in a blur of decayed aging, without markers of births or deaths – and by the time they became creaky and wrinkled, life was gone in a blur of sterile self-management, manipulation and avoidance...

And then the inevitable depressions came - horribly, bottomlessly – and dangerously, for all too many. Kicking in at around 45 for women – a little later for men... Living outside of time because the past was so horrible backfired terribly, since time always wins in the end – the “end” being time’s final victory. Living as if you are not aging keeps the appearance of youth – more time to move, less wear and tear on the body with pregnancy and parenting, less stress in the moment, more time for the appearance of self-preservation – but it is all borrowing against a ghastly, inevitable bill – the bill of aging out of the dating market, the chance for children, the possibility of a career with greater challenges than terrible newly-minted bosses...

And people started – just - vanishing from Shane’s life. He was no longer certain if others were ghosting him – or if they had just – become ghosts. He blocked them on his phone, terrified to look them up online, for fear of finding a tragically unread death notice and a rainy funeral attended only by bitter immediate family, an ancient priest and one ghost-eyed addiction counsellor who was deeply contemplating quitting her career.

And Shane had the *void*, of course... The void he had been circling and avoiding his whole life – and he got a chill late one night when he noticed that the word ‘void’ was the center of the word ‘avoid’ – to avoid a void was his quest from terror to nowhere...

Side-quest... he thought dismally. *Everything in my life is a side-quest...*

Shane became obsessed with minor characters in movies, wondering about how they chose the actor, what his career was like, whether he went on to better roles, or just quit in useless disgust...

“It’s like - he’s needed for the movie, but he could just be *anyone*,” he had said to Beatrice just the night before. She always smiled at his odd obsessions. She didn’t really have any of her own.

“But there are no small roles, only small actors, right? I watched a play a friend of mine was in, and there was this maid who had like five lines in the whole – thing. But she did this ghoul make-up and had a zombie voice and she just – totally stole the show! She got applause whenever she came in. Like the director had to be sleeping with her, to let her make such an – upstaging choice. It’s like the whole play was about her – what drugs she was taking offstage, how terminal her insomnia was, why she was allowed to watch the kids – if she even did... She pulled the whole audience’s attention offstage when she left – we were like water-skiers, you know?”

Beatrice listened and smiled and stroked the back of his hand, like a nurse comforting a dying patient. Her ministrations did calm him down. Shane had always had a manic desire to be understood, to be seen from top to toe, inside-out, but his endless explaining words changed his own mind as he spoke, so it was like trying to paint clouds on the reflection of a lake – the brush rippled the canvas, and nothing could ever be reproduced with certainty.

Even Beatrice seemed like a strangely dangerous under-written character – a guide from another world. She smiled and stroked and murmured and agreed and listened and kissed his forehead as he fell asleep and was always awake when he woke up, even in the

middle of the night, and she seemed so convenient that he once had the urge to ask anyone else at the coffee shop if they could see her, which was ridiculous, of course – they literally called out her name when she ordered her coffee.

But she liked him and gave him great feedback and was a good kisser and they fell into a happy and secure companionship with remarkable rapidity, and he felt a great release of tension, and she was like a drug, but a drug without danger – the opposite of Regina, the opposite of his mother, because she listened to his endless talk and gave pointed replies and rebuttals that helped calm him down and sleep well for the first time in forever.

They had plans for the morning. Shane called her after brushing his teeth.

“Yo, good morning!”

“Well, hi there!”

“Listen, you don’t have to come today.”

“I know.”

“Are you – are you sure?”

“If it’s important to you, it’s important to me.”

“That’s – how did I get so lucky?”

Beatrice laughed. “I guess I am the wish your heart made...”

“Thanks. I am going to dress up, do you mind?”

“I actually have something nice from my cousin’s wedding. It’s not too showy. Perfect for a gravesite...”

“I appreciate that. It’s strange that this is how you meet my mother.”

He could feel her smiling over the empty air. “I’m looking forward to it... She’s been such an influence...” Her voice turned slightly anxious. “But you’re sure your dad won’t be there?”

"Oh no. Certain. He's never been back since – the funeral. He just – sails on, like he still has kids. Two kids I mean."

Beatrice paused. "Ok. That's good. Your mother I can take. I'd have some – words for your dad."

"And you'd say them too. You're so honest it's – unreal."

"Thank you."

Beatrice didn't care that his car was old. She didn't care that his suit was ill-fitting – since falling in love, Shane had started exercising. She was fine that he was a little late. She was the first even-tempered woman he had ever met. *Except for Chloe of course...*

"I know we are new," said Beatrice, checking her curly red hair in the visor mirror as Shane pulled away from the curb, "but I still don't have much of a sense of how your brother... Sorry, what was his name again?"

"Robert."

"Thanks - Robert's death - affected you."

"I think it brought me to you," said Shane simply.

"Well, I'm glad for that – but – what do you mean?"

"I... Well... Like people always forget how competitive siblings are. I mean brothers – at least for me... We were at war a little... Perhaps a lot. I just – we just disagreed so much. It was crazy... I hated his surface-level stuff and his – materialism and – showiness. I hated... No, that's too strong. I had – issues with his parenting. He provided, he played, but he never really... taught, if that makes any sense. Wisdom. Like – his eldest, Justin, used to come and hang with me, and – and – oh God, I can't lie to you Beatrice..." Shane swallowed and wiped his eyes.

"Are you OK to drive?"

"Yeah, yeah... It's just – these are all old wounds. Stupid stuff. I just – with Justin – his – Robert's youngest avoided me like the plague –

with Justin, I did poison-pill just a little bit... I always vowed I would stop, but..." Shane's voice hardened. "Come on, it wasn't like there wasn't anything to criticize... Helen – that's Robert's wife – was a total vampire. Pretty as hell..." Shane laughed bitterly. "Like literally... She dumped the kids in daycare so she could suck up to this Middle Eastern weirdo and milk her looks – not even for money, I did the math with Justin once, on the bus... Her income barely covered childcare costs. She just preferred strangers to – to family, you know? I don't understand that, it's like – a different species. Robert bonding with his boss, flailing around on the squash court until he got – got his hernia and died. Fucking died trying to impress a stranger – his boss was *like* a stranger at least, you know what I mean... And Helen – slobbering all over her boss, going all over hell's half-acre, just for scraps of pennies she didn't even need. And Robert, living for his clients, selling his soul... Like - Jesus, one night he comes to me out of nowhere and keeps me up all night, chewing his fingernails, and telling me all the – terrible, compromised shit he had to do... The worst stuff, because it wasn't bad enough to provoke a really strong reaction, just a slow poison, not a blow to the face... And I listened, because I knew a little bit about corruption, and I actually held his head as he cried... It was all clear to him – he apologized to me for not caring more about... Like, even back to when we were kids, to saving me from mom – like he knew it all – how he fucked with my friendships and never invited me anywhere, so I ended up always alone... And he – Jesus, Beatrice..."

Blinking furiously, Shane pulled into the grimy parking lot of an abandoned gas station.

"I mean holy shit, Bea... He wanted to see all my art – like the stuff I had drawn and painted ever since I was a kid. I had some of it, like online, and we spend like three hours going over each piece – and my God, he had the most amazing things to say about it all. Like – bang on stuff about composition and colour choice and – just – I don't want to get too technical, that's not the point – but he was bang on, and I was amazed at this – totally different brother, you know? Like he was a twin who actually gave a shit... And he left at

dawn, to make sure he could... And we hugged and had all these promises, and we'd never be so far apart ever again..."

Shane shook his head, framed by darkening clouds like a funeral pyre.

"And it – like it just – never happened again. And I didn't hate him before that, because I thought he was just this – lumbering tank of ignorance and vanity – but all that – like genuine sensitivity and perception – perceptivity – and I loved him so much that night, and forgave him for – everything. Like it never happened. And that was my brother, Bea... Free of – all malign influences. His boss and my dad and fucking Helen... That was the Robert if he'd chosen Chloe... I don't know if he ever knew that... You know?"

Shane took a deep, shuddering breath.

"And it – and it – just – never came again. 'Little by little, we never met again...' But that was it. Window opens, you look out to a – tremendous view – then it just – closes, like BAM, down into your neck, and your head just – falls down the wall. I never met that Robert ever again... And then... Oh shit man, then I hated him. You know that... For sure. Because he wasn't a tank. He wasn't blind... He could see everything... It was like the opposite of a blink. For one moment, one night in his life, his eyes were open... You know? And he was like a cold brick when we got together next. His promises to care about my art, myself – anything other than fucking Helen and looking good – all gone... And oh shit, Bea – that was like a week before I went back to Regina, and – man – if – I don't know, it's all related somehow..."

Beatrice was stroking the back of his right hand, where the scars from his drug use were.

"Have you talked to Dr Gunnar about all this?"

"No... Man I haven't thought of – that night, since – like years... I... Maybe this is why I've never gone to his grave. Unless I have the urge to piss... Mom had to twist my arm out of its fucking socket to

get me to go today... She can't get dad to go, but I am her forever-puppet... I literally can't stand the guilt..."

Standing over his brother's grave, Shane felt nothing.

Beatrice was silent, standing slightly behind him.

"I poisoned his son against him..." he murmured.

"I know. You said that."

Shane turned his head. "Are you ok? You sound impatient..."

"No, it's fine. Where is your mother?"

"She always stops to get flowers. 'Get the flowers, feed the bees, there's an ounce more sweetness in the world' she always says. Get ready for the word-a-thon though..."

Beatrice said nothing.

"Are you sure you're ok?"

Her eyes widened. "You have a wasp on your hand..."

Shane looked down, and the largest wasp he had ever seen was walking over the back of his drug hand, sniffing with its pincers.

"What the fuck," he whispered. "Some Japanese monstrosity..."

"I'm allergic," said Beatrice, taking a step backward.

Shane laughed. "Sure, abandon me in my hour of need."

"Seriously. I could fucking *die*, Shane!"

"Wow... I remember Regina saying shit like that, all the time."

"Why aren't you freaking out?"

"I..." Shane frowned. "What's to freak out about? Little guy is just curious..."

Shane saw the abdomen rise, and a stinger like a needle plunged into his skin.

"Oh wow..." he murmured. "It hit the scar tissue... I feel nothing..."

"GET IT AWAY!" screamed Beatrice, her face ghostly white.

"He's going again, the little bugger..."

"FOR FUCK'S SAKE!" cried Beatrice.

"Jesus you sound just like Regina..."

Shane took a deep breath as the little poison flowed into his veins again.

Beatrice screamed as a cloud of giant wasps arose from beyond Robert's gravestone.

BELOVED SON, FATHER AND HUSBAND

Your love, guidance, and strength will always be with us. Rest in peace.

Shane collapsed on the grave of truth under the granite of lies.

And that is where Jean, his mother, found him, on her son's grave, dead of an overdose, in the blinding sun, curled up and all alone.

Chapter 24

What am I up to today? thought Helen blearily, staring at her peas.

Her veined and spotted hands rested beside her plate – a flowered monstrosity with curled edges and ducklings in the middle.

She remembered how, as a child, she had been told and scolded that she couldn't leave the table until all the puppies and kittens at the bottom of her bowl were visible. Her brother had always tried to help her by surreptitiously sneaking food from her plate, but her parents had gotten wise to this ploy, and chased him out of the kitchen until her bowl was squeaky clean.

Derek would peek around the white rounded wall edge - which always reminded her of icing, to the point where she had to refrain from taking a bite out of her own house – and would give her a manic thumbs up, encouraging her to finish the torture as soon as possible. His hair always spiked towards the ceiling, and his freckles slid into his cute little wrinkles as his grin widened.

Helen could not remember a time where she lived without a little knot of shimmering tension in her stomach. Her earliest memories were of seeing her parents arguing in useless shrillness. Her first memory was of sitting in a baby stroller in the dark gum-searing cold, at a bus stop, under a street lamp, as her parents bickered and argued, their foggy breaths at war in little ripples and whirlpools and eddies of air and dominance. It was like puffs of gray ghosts were crawling out of their mouths and raging at each other with lazy expanding fists. They emerged with great energy, got caught up in the endless swirling of snowflake air, and faded into nothing – like the endless unresolved arguments of her parents.

When Helen got older, and she first looked at pictures of her parents when they were younger, her mouth dropped open.

Her father had been a kind of low-rent lumpenproletariat, with an honest-to-goodness mullet - *business up front, party in the back* -

and a ratty Jimi Hendrix T-shirt. He was tall, lanky, with lazy sunglasses, great hair and an easy smile. He was definitely the leader of various sports teams, was the first among his peers to get a motorcycle, and sailed into early alcoholism without any hiccups or speed bumps. He was a party dude, great at bowling and poker, not much into reading, and bad and impatient at assembling anything – furniture, model airplanes, his own future. He talked a big game about his potential, but mostly to get laid. He claimed to have endless business ideas, was going to get into the trades, make money at gambling, pool or poker, praised his own ability to “hustle,” and strongly hinted that he was not overly constrained by legal concerns. He had expensive tastes, expensive hobbies, expensive items – and extremely ill-defined sources of income. He lived without a shred of self-doubt, which gave him easy soulless dominance over his weedy peers.

Helen’s mother had been – well, sexy, there was no other way to describe it. There was an embarrassing excess of pictures of her draped over her boyfriend’s motorbike, or at the beach – in a red bikini, no less – or seductively sipping a drink out front of a movie theatre, or giving a half-smile while peering over obviously-borrowed eyeglasses.

When Helen first saw the photographs, the colours had yet to fade, although the resolution was fully Polaroid potato-cam - making her parents look even younger and more distant.

As Helen grew up into her high single-digits, her father flailed financially, and her mother gained weight.

It drove her mother mad with frustration to watch her father energetically embark on moneymaking ventures, and then fade and falter as the easy money failed to immediately materialize. He would spend money on equipment, advertising, renting space for a landscaping business, or tire sales, or an RV lot, or junking cars – and he would be the lord of his domain, hiring friends and playing big shot, making phone calls and spending money – but would never track income versus expenses, hired too many people, hated coming

down on his lazy friends, and ended up in a grim and drab variety of bankruptcy proceedings, corporate dissolutions and poverty barrel-scraping. The constant tensions about income, expenses, work and laziness drove Helen's mother into vengeful overeating – even as a child, Helen could read the clear brutality of the equation: *if you won't make money, I won't stay thin...*

As her parents' relationship deteriorated, her brother Derek gravitated more towards their father, while Helen ended up mostly avoiding their mother. The lack of achievement, affection and sex meant that almost every syllable her parents spoke to each other was like a sword-swish, grazing skin and drawing faint bruises and light blood.

Helen's mother would always try to give her twisted, self-justifying "life lessons," such as:

- Don't ever believe men
- Your looks will fade
- "Love" is a business
- Don't ever settle
- Once you are surrounded by losers, there is no escape
- Hope is not a plan

And so on and on...

And of course as her mother gained weight, the marital fights only increased – once, her father drove his wife for a picnic about 10 kilometers away, and then took off in the car, forcing her to walk home. When she finally arrived, sweaty, exhausted and humiliated, he praised her for "finally getting some goddamned exercise."

She spent too much on food; he spent too much on alcohol and his friends.

She refused to consistently exercise; he refused to consistently work.

She had no discipline; he had no discipline.

She was fat; he was lazy.

She was forced to be the disciplinarian, because he was just the “daddy buddy.”

She refused to take responsibility; he never grew up.

She gained weight because he stressed her out; he was stressed out because she was fat.

These bloody circular whirlpools of endless blame had absolutely zero exit points. It was like two shattered Saturn-rings of hearts swirling down into a bottomless black hole.

As she got into her early teens, Helen understood that her mother had an eating disorder – she ate out of stress, out of anger, out of a desire to avoid sex, as punishment to her husband, as a humiliation ritual for them both – and to keep him poor, by making him look trashy.

Terrified of any future mirroring of either of them, Helen began starving herself. She truly felt that she would rather die than turn into her mother, so when she was forced to eat, she just went to the bathroom and made herself throw up. No one ever knew about this, although Helen was sure her mother had her suspicions, because she made endless jokes about the number of worms that must be living in Helen’s intestines, since she never gained weight, no matter how much she ate.

But Helen had vivid dreams of her slender mother lying in a deep grave, her extended family all around the hole, shoveling actual flesh onto her slender frame, literally burying her in fat.

And because Helen was thin and very pretty, the cool girls at school – the cheerleaders and gymnasts and dancers - who always stood with one foot at 90° from the other – allowed her entrance to their extremely upwardly mobile female potential.

They were slender like rockets, like javelins, which meant that only the sky was their limit when it came to upward mobility.

“The ‘fats’ stay at the bottom,” they would say, while scrutinizing whatever magical combination of protein and rice would keep them

one step away from death's door, in the "Goldilocks zone" of hotness – slim enough to be super-attractive; not so skinny that you lost your period...

My hands never used to have veins, thought Helen, staring at her rounded claws. And those liver spots are like the ultimate slow-moving clouds, that only fade when I do... They will spread until I am the exact colour of old ash...

Her eldest son came into the kitchen.

"Mom, are you done? We have to go..."

"Ok, ok..." Helen felt a deep twinge of unease - the unease she had felt her whole life, except briefly, when Robert first began to make real money.

"Sasha has finished packing all your toiletries, is there anything else that you need? You know you'll be gone for quite a while, right?"

"No, no..." muttered Helen, still staring at her hands. "Yes, yes..."

"Sorry to hustle you along, mom," said Justin briskly. His beard was salt-and-pepper, his hair was thinning, his belly was spreading...

His father aged quickly as well, thought Helen. Must be something in the family line – my grandparents stayed well-preserved, our genetics are like jam or a fridge, or a freezer...

"You need a haircut." Her words were automatic, toneless.

"You're right, I will get one on the way back. Thanks for the reminder!"

He seems too happy, thought Helen – again, with a deeply tolling bell of unease in her innards.

Justin helped her off the stool, gripping her thin shoulders a little too tightly.

"Don't want you to fall now!" he said, a little too loudly.

Justin's wife came in, carrying an overnight bag. Her long brown hair – suspiciously even in its colour – was tied back in a severe ponytail. For some reason, Helen had a vague memory of pulling it at some point in the past, probably in some kind of game...

"Hi, Sasha!" said Helen, shrugging off her son's tight fingers.

"Hey there, nice to see you, mum!"

Helen smiled. She always loved Sasha's English pronunciation: *mum*, not *mom*.

Sasha smiled back, but there was a tension in her chocolate-brown eyes.

"All sorted?" she chirped.

With a sudden stab of real anxiety, Helen said: "I'm not – I'm not – are you actually sure that I'm ready for this kind of trip? I don't... I haven't seen my friends in forever..."

"Oh, this is totally the right time," said Justin easily, gripping her elbow and steering her towards the front door. The hallway and its various doors and arches were made of the same soft rounded icing as Helen's long-lost childhood walls, a whole lifetime and half a world away... She almost expected to see Derek's cherubic freckled face peering around the corner, inviting her to *finish her damn food and come play!*

"Is – is – where is Derek?"

"He's – he's going to meet us there, luvvy," said Sasha softly, glancing at her husband.

"And – and my - grandkids? Are they coming along for the ride?" *I wonder how many bottles of beer on the wall that ride will be?*

"No, not at the moment, but they will call you after you disembark."

"I miss them," said Helen simply.

"And they miss you, too, mom. Come on!"

Still gripping her elbow, Justin half levered his mother down the mossy steps.

“Not so fast!” snapped Helen. “One fall... I’m skin and bones, I’m not going to bounce you know!”

“I know. Sorry, mom.”

“Will you be okay on your own?” asked Sasha anxiously.

“I’m old, I’m not dead!” said Helen peevishly. “Leave me with what I’m doing...”

She took her slow, cautious steps to the shining angular vehicle with the wing doors open.

She held her arms out in front of a door. “Now I’ll take some help, thank you very much!”

Both Sasha and Justin rushed to help her in.

“That’s a hell of a lot of luggage,” said Helen, craning her head after settling into the plush seat.

Justin smiled. His teeth were slightly ringed with yellow. “Well, you’re going to have a – a trip, quite a long one...”

“Lord it looks like you’re going to dump me into space!” laughed Helen.

Justin leaned forward and whispered something into the steering wheel.

The car glided forward, driving itself.

Helen clasped her hands to her chest. “God above I simply cannot get used to this!”

“It’s kind of freaky,” agreed Sasha. “I still prefer driving myself, but they don’t make those cars anymore.”

“The world marches forward!” cried Justin heartily. “You want some music?”

"No, no..."

"I've got some old 80s stuff here, a total reminiscence mix..."

"No, that's fine, but thank you..." Helen's voice trailed off. Her eyes widened as she looked out across the shining city, past the flying drone advertisements and other empty cars. "I wish your father could come..."

Justin nodded slowly, distantly. "Yeah... Yeah..."

Sasha said: "I'm so sorry I never got to meet him. His photos are totally impressive. What a stud!"

Helen laughed. "Oh, when he was younger, yes... He didn't age quite so well – he worked so hard, it was crazy, he had this boss, a real creep in a way, long gone now of course – and I was just thinking, last night – I dreamt of him..." Helen's voice caught in her throat. "You don't know, you're still quite young, but when you get old, you circle right back to your past, like a movie you loved so that much you start watching it again, right when it's ended... I guess when you don't have as much to look forward to, all you do is look back – but it's like the past is looking into me instead. I'm – I'm – sort of obsessing about all the mistakes I made, all my bad decisions... It's all so pointless, because – what can I do now? But I suppose if you get cancer, you think of every single cigarette, bang bang bang, nails in the coffin – and maybe you wonder which cigarette it was that got you..."

"You had a good life," said Justin briskly. "No need for regrets."

"It's kind of nasty, in a way," murmured Helen. "All these doors open up, when you get near the end, and everyone pokes their head out to say 'hi' at least one last time. And they haven't aged – I almost saw little Derek around the corner in your house just now... And I dream so strongly – I don't know why, because dreams are supposed to prepare you for the future, I think, which doesn't make much sense now – I dream so strongly that I wake up and can still smell whatever I dreamt about for like half an hour... Even your

father... When you're married – well you guys know this – it's not like your two - bodies, your flesh – become one – except in your children – but your smells mingle, and in a way that's kind of what you miss – after... I never met another man who smelled like your father, that's probably why I never remarried, just became this – endless nurse... But I dreamt of your father – and enjoy your sleep, kids, you're always half awake when you get old – and he was playing squash, believe it or not. With his boss..."

"Peter..." murmured Justin.

"I know his name," snapped Helen – then her voice softened, almost immediately. "And it was the strangest thing... Robert – your father – drew a kind of sword to play squash with, and he hit that little ball really well with the flat of the blade. And this was when he was young, and slender, not old and – rotten... Because everyone comes around the corner as if they've never aged, they say that memories are well-preserved – well, everyone is well preserved in them as well!" Helen laughed. "And he's hitting the ball back so hard, and so well, that Peter gets all red in the face and he's just slipping in sweat and getting – oh, he was *really* competitive, that guy... He's getting really angry, but he bends over to tie his shoe – Robert said he used to do that, just to catch his breath, and Robert brought the sword right down on Peter's neck. I'm a gentle soul, so I thought there would be like flowers or butterflies that would - come out - but it was just – blood, just blood, really dark, dark blood... But it wasn't a nightmare, which was weird... Robert was kneeling over Peter and demanding to know how he was going to hide the body, which doesn't make any sense of course, but it's a dream, so it's not supposed to! And Robert..." Helen's voice softened even further. "Robert just – grew these giant angel wings that flapped really slowly and put these – ripples on the pools of blood - and he just..." Helen's hands floated upward. "Arose, you know? And there was this skylight, and Robert just folded his wings and rose through the skylight..." A tear rolled down Helen's cheek. "And I so wanted to go with him... To be with him, in heaven, I don't know..." Her voice deepened suddenly. "But I was stuck in the bright light with the

body and the sweat and the blood, and I couldn't get up and be with – him..."

"It's okay, mum..." said Sasha, putting her palm on the back of Helen's trembling hand.

From the front seat, Justin turned his head briefly. "Well, maybe the dream is telling you that Dad could have lived if he'd stayed off that squash court. My trainer tells me that you just can't be on a squash court after 40, it's just a matter of time until you just..." He snapped his fingers in the air.

Helen frowned. "Stayed off the squash court... But he loved that game..."

Justin snorted. "No, he didn't... He just did it for career advancement, mom. He was as fat as..."

"It's okay, Justin," said Sasha firmly. "Bygones..."

Justin took a deep breath, rubbing his beard fiercely. "No, you're right, you're right... What's the point?"

They rode for a few minutes in silence, the belly-hum of the car vibrating their seats ever so slightly.

After they arrived, Justin jumped out of the driver's door, walked around and helped his ancient mother to her feet.

"Concierge?" asked Sasha.

"Yeah, yeah..." muttered Justin. "We've got to get home to the kids... It's summer, they get behind on their homeschooling..."

"I still find it so strange that you never put them in..." Helen frowned, then shook her head slightly. "I was a career woman, so I had to..."

Justin turned a snort into a bitter laugh.

Helen stared at the mountain of suitcases. "Are you sure that's not too much luggage? I'm so used to airplanes..."

"No, it's good - it's good, mom. Don't worry, we've got it all – `sorted`!" He used his wife's accent for the last word.

Helen laughed. "God, I've always loved an accent!"

A young Indian man with a sunburn came down to help them with the luggage.

"Wow," he said.

Sasha glared at him, shaking her head slightly.

He shrugged, piled all the suitcases into a golden cart, then pushed them up the concrete ramp towards the low brick building.

Helen frowned. "Is this – is this..."

"Yes, this is where you embark – they just need to see you inside to check your papers – I've got them right here, I'll hand them over when we check in."

Helen took a step backwards. "I'm – I'm not sure..."

"Come on, mum!" cried Sasha energetically. "It's going to be wonderful!"

Helen's voice was weak, tremulous. "Why – why can't anyone come with me?" She burst into tears. "I don't know anyone here..."

Justin pursed his lips. "Come on, mom! Remember when you dropped me off at daycare? I cried too. I was alone. I didn't know anyone. What did you say to me?" He walked up to her and put his hands on her thin shoulders. "*It's all right, Justy... You'll never be alone... I'll always be with you in spirit... Like a pretty ghost... And you said – do you remember? There are things I have to do... Don't worry though... You'll make friends before you know it! And you called it a 'playcenter.' Do you remember? And you couldn't make it, even when I...*" He glanced at Sasha, then lowered his voice. His

forehead almost touched his mother's bowed head. "When I – peed myself. Do you remember?"

Helen was openly sobbing now.

"And you..." Justin's voice was thick with compressed emotion. His thoughts raced, chasing themselves. "And you were busy, right mom? You had things to do, so I had to make my way among... strangers. Right? I mean, it makes sense. You had that boss – God, what was his name? That Persian minx. You spent years with him, serving him. Not me. not dad. Not – not Sammy... You fought with dad, but always said yes to..." Justin frowned mightily, then his eyes widened. "Arash, that's right. God, you'd think I'd remember, I literally had an Internet alert set up for his obituary. He died like twelve years ago. Lived to a ripe old age. And you worked for him for thirteen years, right? Thirteen years – oh man, I did the math once, our good friend the late great Uncle Shane taught me the value of spreadsheets when I was just a little, little kid – on a bus of all places! 32,500 hours. 50 weeks a year times 13 years times 50 hours a week, because you had a wee bit of a commute, hey mommy? 32,500 hours spent with Arash rather than – your family. And for what? When I was a baby, a toddler, you – you didn't make much after my daycare expenses. Uncle Shane showed me. I came across that folded lined yellow paper a month ago. He was 'Mr Legal Pad,' remember? You made about forty cents an hour after – after paying for everything. Daycare, extra car, commute costs, clothing and cleaning costs. Car insurance." Justin laughed. "Man, he had worked it all out. And I – do you remember, calling me 'Mr Little Big Man' and saying I was fine to be home with Sammy when I was eight and he was – like really little. And he cried and cried, such a sensitive little guy..." A tear escaped Justin's right eye. "And I was just – helpless, right? I couldn't fix him. I couldn't be his – mommy. Or daddy. Like *he* was ever around... I couldn't go anywhere. I had – nothing to say to him. I mean, forty *cents*, mom? What was I going to say to little Sammy? 'Mom is off slaving away for medieval child-labour wages, Daddy is working to keep her in handbags and – and pencil skirts...' I can't – I couldn't comfort him because there was no

– no comfort to be had. You dumped us for *pennies*, mom... And he pissed me off. He always has. *Just – just fucking give up hope, kid!* But he wouldn't. Fuck, he *still* doesn't! And – yeah, it's maybe kind of paid off for him, he's a crypto zillionaire in a gated compound with his fifty kids, but..." Justin sighed. "But he sends his best, mom." Justin made air quotes with his fingertips. "'Kinda-mom.'" His lips curled in disgust. "But it's all right... Your – your generation just – existed as a warning, and we've learned all we can... Vanity and thoughtlessness and predatory selfishness... Y'all got eaten by *demons*, mom. Total inability to admit fault. Worshipping at the altar of pride and 'tolerance.'"

Justin shuddered viscerally - and decided to say none of it.

Instead, he whispered: "Mom, you have to go..."

Helen's breath was coming short. Her hand was on her sunken chest. "I've – I've been living with you – for years..."

Justin nodded curtly. Sasha averted her eyes.

"Yeah... Yes. It's fair. More than fair, really. I mean – Uncle Shane told me that you went back to work – what, six weeks after I was born? Is – was that right?"

Helen was gasping. "I don't... I don't – I took what I was - allowed..."

"Oh, come *on!*" cried Justin suddenly. His feral face composed itself almost instantly. His thoughts raced. "You chose strangers – an Iranian – over me 'n' Samuel, mom. You chose to *look* good, not *do* good. I – I want you to think of all those little memos and – emails and – and invoices and whatever the fuck you did in that little office – oh right, not emails, no computers, right? Thirteen years... It's all been scrapped and dumped and turned to garbage, shit and ash now, right? Your actual sons are alive, all that career shit is dead – but you lived for everything that dies, not for anyone who actually lived. Where is Arash now, mom? Dad? Shane? Where are all your ancient boyfriends? Where is my babyhood, my breastfeeding..."

Uncle Shane told me all about – all about *pumping*, mom, back in the day..." Justin's face was twisted in revulsion. "You would crouch in a corporate toilet with a – a like fucking *vacuum cleaner* attached to your nipples, right? Did that – did that ever seem – ever seem a little *odd*, mom? Looking down at a tube robot rather than a baby's – my eyes? Sammy's eyes? Jesus, you were back at work even faster with Sammy than me, mom! It was disgusting! Why even bother having children if... If some swarthy Middle Eastern oily scam artist..."

Justin took a deep breath. He glanced at Sasha's pale face.

"You're quiet," she murmured.

"Sorry, babe. Damn, I'm going to have to take a pilgrimage to Dr Gunnar's grave. I'm... There's no need to be so angry. Mom – you gave me like – six weeks. I gave you two years – little more, in fact." His voice dropped to a murmur. "But – hey, no worries, right? I am busy. People need me. I have things to do, places to go. And I promise you – I *promise* you, mom... I'm making more than forty cents an hour."

"Why?" Helen's voice was fully panicked, screeching. "Why say nothing, all these – all these years? I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry... I didn't know... I was lied to... Everyone said... Be your own... Have your own income, in case... And your father – he approved..."

Justin's mind was a snake eating its tail. "Oh, dad *hated* your money-grubbing, mom. Don't you remember him - mocking Arash? Oh God and your jewelry line and that 'life coach' bullshit. Remember your five clients, mom? Hey, maybe they ended up here, and you can trade life secrets and fortune-cookie bullshit..."

"YOU'RE SAYING NOTHING!" cried Helen, her face red.

Justin exhaled mightily. The thoughts raced through his head. "You had no idea I was unhappy? Christ, I remember being dropped off, mom. Crying and crying. You come home every night, I'm angry and Sammy's eyes are as red as fucking blood, and you just had your

little mimosa and rubbed your temples and told us to stop bothering you. Because we *were* a bother, mom, let's be honest... You didn't enjoy motherhood. Not really. You think I never noticed the difference between you and Aunt Chloe? I know all the stories... Damn I used to..." His breath came short. "I used to dream *she* was my mother. God she was – she kind of led me to Sasha, you know that, right? Doesn't matter... She's sitting on her matriarchal throne with – everyone around her, just – laughing and loving. That family saved my life, mom... From you. And dad... That walk in the woods..."

"Justin..." said Sasha gently. "Come on... It's all..."

"I know, I know. There's nothing to be done... I sound ridiculous to myself, bitching about things half a century ago... I mean, we've got a great..." Justin took a deep breath and compressed his lips. "And – and she was just a giant marker of everything *not* to do... She – you, mom – taught me everything. Like your uncle what's-his-name, who smoked himself to death. 'At least he taught me to never touch cigarettes,' you said. You did, mom... You taught me that family is more important than strangers, than prestige, than some stupid pretend-career... And this place is costing me *way* more than forty cents an hour, mom... And yeah, maybe they'll end up feeding you through a tube, like you fed me through a robot... But you'll make great new friends, and you'll just have to be brave, because I am just – *busy*..."

And with that, Justin kissed his mother's sagging cheek, and walked arm in arm with his crying wife to the patiently waiting car, as the young orderly half-dragged Helen up the smooth steps to the end of the story.

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