

FATMAN'S INFERNO

Anthony Schmitz

“Pimplipper? Is that...”

“More. Or less.”

“But you’re...”

“So everyone says.”

“I was at the funeral.”

“I know, I know. An outpouring, if I say so myself. Touching. The mayor, the governor, a lot of guys like you.”

Little people, in Pimplipper’s world. Truth be told most of us had mixed feelings, or were happy to see him go. Nonetheless. If you were guilty, you called Pimplipper. Not a legal scholar, but definitely wired up. He knew how to get things done.

“You’re looking, hmm, considering the circumstances... Not so bad.”

Which wasn’t true either. He looked like you could hook an air hose to a compressor and blow him to dust. A couple million bits of Pimplipper, floating in space. God only knows what would happen if you breathed it in.

“If you’re... What’s the word...”

“Dead?” Pimplipper jacked an eyebrow at this. He had an actor’s repertoire of facial moves, honed before juries over the decades.

“Sorry. But how many choices do I get? You’re living?”

“Not exactly.”

Pimplipper gave me a poke in the chest. This was like a meeting between two under-inflated balloons. “You given any thought to what you’re doing here?”

“I’m not feeling myself right now” I said.

“A little light-headed, maybe?”

“Now that you mention it.”

“Aches and pains?”

“Jesus, no. First time in years. My hip. My back. They were killing me.”

“That wasn’t what was killing you. Take my word.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Check your suit.”

I take some pride in keeping myself up. I am not what you would call slender, but like other men of substance, I’ve learned that a well-cut garment can make up for a questionable diet and a lack of exercise.

“What’s this, this, this.... *Goo?*”

I scraped my lapel and came up with sticky pink and green blobs. Plus a scattering of seeds, with what appeared to be a gang of dead flies.

“Watermelon? Why am I covered in watermelon? Certainly I did not... Who would...”

“Excellent question! One of many! Who would? Why? What was — *is* — the outcome thereof?”

I’d seen that look on Pimplipper before. He knew what you didn’t, which was a principal source of pleasure for him. He put on a smirk that cost you five hundred dollars an hour at his friend-of-the-family rate, plus you got a view of his significant dental work — white! bright! — while his blue eyes lit up behind his rimless specs.

“Let me clue you in. Something I learned. What, fifty years of seeking justice for my clients. Most of them guilty, but what the hell. You get a view.”

“What are you saying?”

“Who would? A kid. Or, maybe a knucklehead but not a kid. Or a knucklehead kid. Which is to say, the worst. Why? He felt like it at the moment. Able to see two seconds down the road? Highly

unlikely. All now, no then. Ten minutes from now? You might as well be talking about taking a ride around Jupiter.”

“What’s that got to do with this mess? Anyway, you got a wet towel or something? Christ. This is embarrassing. Like I’ve been sleeping in a dumpster.”

“Forget about it for now, okay? You want the particulars?”

“I’m not so sure.”

“The truth. It will set you free.” At that Pimlipper let loose a nasty chortle. It caught in his throat and he seemed, briefly, to be choking. “Well, that’s a load of bullshit. But anyway... What’s the last thing you remember?”

“The last thing? Jesus, Pimlipper. It’s like my head’s an empty closet.”

“I get that a lot. Relax. Don’t think about it. Thinking doesn’t do you any good.”

“I’m in my car, okay? Doris. Doris in the passenger seat.”

“Good. Good.”

“Paint chips. Time to freshen up the kitchen she says. She’s pulling paint chips out of her purse. Can’t look at them now, baby, I tell her. I’m driving.”

“Then what?” Pimlipper’s got that Cheshire Cat grin. If he didn’t know the answer he wouldn’t ask the question.

“Bang! An explosion. The windshield. We’re upside down. We’re sideways. Doris screaming. Off the road. Mud. Grass.”

I’m shaking.

“And...?”

“Quiet. Quiet at first. Then bugs in the ditch. Chirping. Scratching. Birds. Maybe birds. Doris breathing. Gasping. Then.... Nothing. Not until...”

“Until this,” Pimplipper says. He sweeps out his arms, as if he’s welcoming me to his kingdom. It’s not much to look at. A tunnel in limestone. Water oozing from the walls. A thick black pipe slightly raised from the floor. Candles stuck in alcoves cut into the walls. “Our little catacomb.”

“Just you and me?”

“We’ll get to that. One thing we’ve got?”

“Not world class accommodations. From what I’m seeing.”

“Could be worse. Trust me. Anyway, time. We’ve got plenty of time.”

Pimplipper reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a dog-eared notebook. “Let me see. Fadiman, Fadiman, Fadiman. Here, Thomas Fadiman. Ha. It’s been so long since I heard your actual name.”

“I know, I know.” I got hung with the nickname, Fatman, in grade school. Tom, Tommy, Thomas, I only got that from my mother, the nuns at school, and Doris. Even the old man called me his little Fatman.

“Fadiman or Fatman? Your choice.”

“The way you say it, it sounds the same.”

“Okay. Fatman it is. Just to make sure, twelve eight fifty-three?”

“What?”

“Birthdate. Things get messed up.”

“Pimplipper. How long have we known each other?”

“I know, I know. You think there isn’t bureaucracy everywhere?”

“Are we shuffling paper? Or are you going to clue me in?”

“Take it easy. Maybe you don’t want to know. I mean, it’s ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous?”

Pimplipper set a hand on my shoulder. Again, a meeting of the balloons. “You want to know what everybody figures? Death-bed scene. Sun shining through the open window. Curtains fluttering.

Birds jabbering. The wife, the kids, they're all there. Passing the tissue box. They think you can't hear them blubbering but you can. *Oh, he looks like he's at peace. Finally he can lay his burden down. After all he did for us. Always the family first. Do you remember the time he... And that other time, when... And, ha, ha, ha, the way he always...* Next thing you know you're floating up there next to the light fixture, busting loose. Tunnel of light. What the hell, an angel or two. The full ring of bologna.

"Then on the other hand, you got the way it generally goes down. Your case, for instance. You heard the phrase, death with dignity?"

"I used to get mailings from this cremation joint. Prepay, save a bundle. They used to throw that one around."

"Basically another type of barbecue joint, but okay, let's walk this back. You're in your car. Driving down the freeway. Speeding. Seventy five in a fifty five. You got nowhere to go, not really, no rush, nonetheless, breaking the law if I may observe. The point being, nobody is fully innocent. In my considerable experience. What is life but degrees of guilt?"

"Jesus, Pimplipper. That's a little bleak, even for you."

"No extra charge for wisdom. Anyway, you got Doris groping in her purse. Those paint chips. All the shades of blue known to man. You glance at the road, you glance at the chips, you take a look at Doris. Who, you don't mind the observation, was quite a package. What she was doing with you, I..."

"You think I've never heard that before? I have my own charms. Maybe not all of them so apparent."

"I'm talking about the totality, Fatman, the gestalt. That woman. The looks, the brains. A real schemer."

"We're getting off the subject."

“One more thing. Why that stupid little convertible? How did you even get into it? A guy like you, why not a Suburban? A Navigator? A Hummer? Gravitas. Elbow room. Instead of that Shriner clown car. You’d still be alive. Which is another point I got to make. What I hear over and over. If only I had not done this one thing, well, then. But it’s never one thing. It’s a hundred things, a million things. You take this turn in the road and that turn, going back to the first decision you ever made. Do I suck on the right tit or the left tit? All of it leading to the moment we’re enjoying here. You covered in watermelon and dead flies.”

“I think it’s starting to ferment. You sure you don’t have a wet towel?”

“Once it dries you can brush it off.”

“I didn’t really care for the blue. For the record.”

“Doesn’t matter much now, does it? You even notice that pair of kids up on the overpass? Little Buddy Horton and his pal, Balto. I forget that kid’s last name. But both of them, trouble. You could put the pair of them in a cell tomorrow and spare the world a lot of misery.

“These lovely delinquents start the day by stealing some kid’s red wagon. From there they make their way to the community garden, where they had previously noted that the watermelons are ripe. Buddy, being the brains of the operation, observes that since there are too many to eat on the spot, they should load up the wagon and make a getaway.

“If either one of the fools could hold thought for a minute and see it through to its conclusion, well, we wouldn’t be talking now. But no, life’s a video game to the little cretins. They get to the freeway. They get on the walk bridge. They see all the cars below. Wouldn’t it be funny — hilarious! — to drop a watermelon on a passing vehicle! Of course it’s not so simple. There’s a hurricane fence that’s six, seven feet tall. These young felons don’t crack five feet. So Buddy tells Balto to scale the fence and he’ll pass the melons. Figuring if it comes down to it, it’s Balto who’s going to Boys Town.

“Balto drops two or three before he figures out you got to lead a vehicle coming at you at sixty miles an hour. Seventy five in your case. You’d been going a reasonable speed, he would have

missed you by a mile. He's not a fast learner. More a lucky numbskull. But there you have it. Bulls-eye. Smacko. Next thing you know, that's you, tires up, sparks flying. Too bad you never got the roll bar. Would have left you with a little more hair."

"I didn't have that much to start with."

"True. But now instead of hair you got road rash."

"I don't feel anything."

"Of course you don't. It's more an aesthetic deal."

"What about Doris?"

"I thought you'd never ask. To be honest, it speaks poorly of you, Fatman. All sorts of worries about your suit. But this woman, who for reasons nobody can understand, is devoted to you?"

"It's a lot to take in, okay?"

"Tell her that." With that another of Pimplipper's facial flourishes, this time a well-practiced roll of the eye.

"Sad to say, she was breathing longer than you. Consequently, the whole scene. Fire trucks. Cops. Ambulances. Traffic backed up for miles. Jaws of life because the thing has folded up like an accordion around the two of you. Then the fire in that little shit-heap. Out come the hoses, the extinguishers, the foam. They're doing everything but pissing on it. They pull poor Doris out first, it being clear you needed no further treatment. Maybe just a hose-down to keep your precious suit from bursting into flames. Her shoes are smoking from the heat. Not that she'll be needing them. But still. Alive, sort of. They toss her into the ambulance, get her to the hospital. Pointless, but they got to put on the show. Off the gurney, onto the steel table. Lines, fluids, pumping, thumping. You got the better end of this deal, my friend. One, two, you were down for the count. In comparison, peaceful. Inasmuch as violent death is ever peaceful."

"She have final words? Do you know?"

"Fatman's a careless asshole."

“No. She wouldn’t.”

“Okay, she didn’t. Ha ha. Just messing with you. Go ahead. You can ask her yourself.”

...

Doris. As I said, there has been speculation about what she was doing with me.

I have qualities, but Brad Pitt looks are not among them. Whereas Doris put the vroom in the va-va-vroom. The flaming red hair, the trace of freckles, the milk-maid skin. If that weren’t enough, eyes the color of the green light on a semaphore. We would go someplace, anyplace — the mall, Costco, a restaurant, a walk in the park — and I would look around at the normal human beings who passed us by. Which would lead to reflection on the unfairness of this existence; that most people, well, all people, in comparison looked like a soggy bowl of dog kibble.

Of course she was aware of her effect on others, men and women alike. The gawking, the *sotto voce* commentary, the grasping for a reason that what they saw was a scam of some sort. *A nose job, a nose job for sure. That isn’t her natural color. Nobody has peepers like that. It’s some kind of contact lens. If those aren’t fake boobs then tell me what is.* On and on, refusing to believe that sometimes God decides, just for the hell of it, to knock one out of the park. Thus, Doris.

I asked her once — okay more than once — when people say, *What is she doing with you?*, how do I reply? “Give them a little grin. Cock your head. Implying.” At this she grabbed my crotch. She can be a couple steps past saucy. “You hear what I’m saying?”

“I’ll have to give that a try.”

But when I did it never seemed to land right. “No, seriously, Fatman, it’s like you won the lottery when you don’t have a dime to buy a ticket.”

I heard her heels clicking on the catacomb floor. She was still lost in the candle light. Then there she was, like me worse for wear. Some of her hair had burned off. One of her eyes was no longer set squarely in the socket. Plus the watermelon mess. I've seen her look better.

"Oh, Tommy," she said, throwing her arms around me.

Like Pimplipper, she wasn't her former corporeal self. More like a pile of stiffly whipped cream.

I said, "Baby, no matter what this is, at least we're together."

She squeezed me harder. She was pushing halfway through to my spine. "Maybe you better take it a little easy. Until we figure this out."

"Pimplipper," I said, "you think we can have a little privacy?"

"Eventually, sure. You can have an eternity of privacy, But not yet."

"What's the hang up?"

"Paperwork. I keep saying. Logistics. You stay here? Where? You got old pals to bunk with? Old enemies to avoid? Everybody says you're dead, that's the end of your troubles. Believe me, nothing is ever the end of your troubles."

"Nice to see you again, Doris," Pimplipper said, eyeballing her.

"Aren't you... We were at the..."

"Nice crowd, as I was telling Fatman. "You haven't really lived until you see a church packed for your funeral."

"You're dead."

"It's more complicated than that. People think black, white. On, off. Up, down. Living, dead."

"What are you saying?"

"We're in the gray zone here, Doris. Not living, by your strict definition of the word. Not absolutely dead, whatever that is. I mean, who knows? What is your hundred percent dead individual? Are the dinosaurs dead, or are they reborn in some crazy way every time you fill the gas tank?"

“I’m just trying to get a grip here, Pimplipper. Zombies in Zombietown? Land of the Undead? Creatures of the Underworld? What are we going with?”

“That pretty much sums it up. Maybe not zombies by the strict definition.”

“So what are we doing here? What’s the job description?”

Among the things to be said for Doris, she’s a take-charge kind of gal. It takes people by surprise. They figure she’s just a pretty picture, but she’s always thinking six moves ahead.

“I wouldn’t call it a job,” Pimplipper said. “More of an opportunity. Depending on your inclinations.. A chance to straighten some things out. Help those who helped you. Maybe settle some scores. Assuming you have any. Then again, who doesn’t?”

“Mess with the living, is that it?”

“You could put it that way.”

“I thought that was God’s job.”

“A lot of people think that. But no real interest there as far as I can tell.”

“You’ve hashed it out with... What? Him? Her? It? Them?”

“To the best of my knowledge, God does not tell you his pronouns when he sends you email. Nor does he send you email. I’m not sure that when you get down to the details that God actually gives a shit about our problems. Or that there is a God. But then as I said, it’s hard to know. In the underworld as it is on Earth.

“More of a big picture guy, that’s what you’re saying?”

“Maybe a no picture guy.”

“Okay. Sounds like further research is needed. For now let’s deal with what we can deal with.”

“I like that thinking. Pragmatic.”

“Like, what’s this crap all over my dress?”

“Watermelon. Fatman can explain. In as much as it can be explained.”

“You’ve got a wet towel? A sponge? I can’t walk around like this.”

“Marge!” Pimplipper yelled. His voice echoed in the sewer channel. At first nothing in response, Then the faint clatter of a footstep followed by the sound of a shoe being dragged. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

This took a while, what with the condition of her leg. It was broken beneath the knee and flapping with each step, as if it were on a hinge. She did a hop with her good leg and then dragged the other behind her.

“You don’t have wheelchairs down here?” Doris wondered.

“Supply line problems. We’re not on anybody’s delivery route,” Pimplipper said. “Amazon has expressed no interest.”

“Too bad about the hair,” Marge told Doris.

“It’ll grow back,” Doris said.

“Not really.” Pimplipper tugged off his glasses and gave them a polish with his tie. “The dust,” he said. “You’d think with all the sewer water...”

“My leg’s been like this since nineteen fifty eight. You get used to it. No pain, there’s that. Your hair. You could cut what you’ve got left, even it out.”

“Since 1958?” Doris said.

“Untimely demise, as they said at the time. *She had a lot of good years left in her.* So on and so forth at the cemetery. But the dirt hits the coffin lid, it’s out of sight, out of mind. And I did have a lot of good years left in me, or so I thought.”

Marge looked like she stepped out of a commercial on the Phil Silvers show. She wore a pinched waist dress that puffed out and ended mid-calf. Crazy cat-eye glasses with fake diamonds. A poodle cut that was right in style seventy years ago. All of it now tired, used, worn out, filthy. A harbinger, whispered a voice in my head that I struggled to ignore.

“Is it okay to ask?” Doris said to Pimplipper. “Cause of death?”

“Sure, sure, go ahead. She’s not going to get any deader. You don’t mind, do you Marge?”

“At first I found it embarrassing. But then you realize I wasn’t the only one who didn’t die while rescuing some kid from sharks or whatever.”

“So...?”

“Party. Actually in a rowhouse once occupied by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which is sort of poetic. Spring night. Juices flowing if you know what I mean. There’s this guy and I couldn’t tell you really whether he was that much to take in or if it was all the gin fizzes. But next thing I know we’re on the little porch off the bedroom. You had to crawl through the window to get out there. You know how it is. One thing, then another. Then the next thing. Which is me leaning over the rail, looking out at the street, with the hem of this very dress up over my head, like I’m some kind of Good Sister of Late Night Fuckery, excuse my language, and Mr. Wrong, well, you know...”

“I guess he was taller than I thought, or the rail was too low, or the angle was, whatever. But next thing is I’m the Flying Nun, headed for the sidewalk below with my panties around my ankles.” At that Marge paused and tugged at her dress.

“Did you already talk about death with dignity?” Marge asked Pimplipper.

“Yeah, it came up.”

“Could be worse. The company is good. Me and Nelson Rockefeller. Pope John XII. Errol Flynn. Sexual fatalities. Beats dying in a dentist’s chair. Better than ending up a drooling gas bag in some snake pit nursing home.”

“But you missed a few decades in there,” I observed. “If you don’t mind me saying.”

“Oh, time. What is it really? Is this not time? Plus you get opportunities that don’t necessarily exist above,” Pimplipper said.

“Like what?” Doris said.

“We’ll get to that. First we’ve got to get you registered. Marge, can you get the new member material?”

“This will take a minute.”

“No rush. Needless to say.”

“Does she need help?” I asked.

“No, no, she’s fine.”

Marge’s foot-dragging departure resulted in awkward silence. Finally Doris said, “Is there a mirror down here?” She put a hand to her head. “Is it down to the scalp, Tommy? It feels like it’s gone.”

“No, baby. You still got hair on one side. You could even it out, like Marge said. An Audrey Hepburn thing maybe. Different. But on you, cute. With your color and all.”

“I’d still like to take a look.” To Pimplipper she said, “You must have a mirror.”

“Fact of it is, we don’t. Bad for morale. People got enough on their minds without worrying what they look like. Which is not always so good. You got your suicide by gun, your head through the windshield, the cancer of the nose or what have you. People don’t need to be reminded. Trust me, you’re going to be a princess of the underworld. A haircut, maybe some glasses. Considering the eye. Thick frames would take care of the... I’m not calling it a problem. The situation. It’s a situation.”

From the depth of the tunnel, Marge again, dragging a campaign table behind her. She’d tucked a folder under her arm.

“Okay, thank you, dear,” said Pimplipper. “Let’s get down to business.” He grabbed the folder from Marge and flipped it open. “Just the basics. Name. Last address. Past employment. Social Security number. Date of expiration.”

“Expiration?”

“You know how it is. Some people. You say “death” around them, even though they are in fact dead more or less, and they look like they’re going to have a heart attack. Which is technically no longer possible, but still. We try not to be insensitive.”

“What do you do with all this stuff?”

“You’d be surprised, Fatman. Things come up. We might hook people up with each other. You know, pals from their living days. Or keep them apart. Depending. Maybe they got a skill that’s in demand.”

“But they’re dead. Who needs their skills? The world keeps spinning, right? You’re dead and three minutes later who knows your name?”

“It’s more complicated. But we’ll get to that.”

Pimplipper ran me and Doris through his questionnaire. Then he said, “You mind rolling up your sleeves?”

“What, we get a tattoo with a number?”

“Jesus, Fatman, what do you think we are?”

“I don’t really know.”

“Please, just roll up your sleeves. Put your arms on the table.”

He nodded at Marge. She reached into a pocket of her dress and passed Pimplipper something I couldn’t make out. With a surprisingly swift motion, Marge plunged a needle into my arm while Pimplipper did the same to Doris.

Doris screamed, I gasped. “What the hell is this about?” I sputtered.

“We need your signature. On the form.”

He and Marge drew back the plunger on the syringe, filling the tube. Marge reached into her pocket again. She pulled out a shallow gold bowl and what looked like a goose quill.

“In blood,” Pimplipper said. He looked apologetic. “I don’t make the rules.” He dipped the quill in the bowl and handed it to me.

“Shouldn’t I read this?”

“Maybe you should. But what’s the difference? You got someplace else you’re going to go? Just sign.”

Doris and I scratched out our names in blood and became official residents of the underworld.

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Pimplipper put us in what he called the honeymoon suite. This was an indentation off the main channel, with a green plastic tarp hung over the entry. "For privacy," Pimplipper observed.

"No bed?" Doris asked.

"There's the hammock. Double wide. More comfortable than you think."

"A dresser? Or a closet?"

"Sorry to break it to you, Doris. But what do you have to put away? Your possessions, such as they are, are on your back."

"This is it?"

"Think of it as Zen-like. Renunciation of the material world. The grasping, the acquiring."

"Wasn't that you in a mahogany casket?" Doris observed. "Brass handles, as I recall. Flowers carved on the lid?"

"Hell of a box, wasn't it," Pimplipper said, grinning now. "The Elite Floral Mahogany. With the Eternal Rest adjustable bed. Quite a unit. Twenty thousand bucks. But so what! Money! Maybe you noticed, you can't take it with you. Or if you do, it doesn't do you any good. You spend your life thinking about it and then, wham, meaningless. One last splurge. I put it in the will so the relatives couldn't decide a refrigerator box would be good enough."

"Did we miss our funerals?" Doris asked.

Pimplipper pulled out his tatty notebook again and flipped the pages. "No, no. You're set for Saturday. Cremation, right?"

"Pre-paid."

"I hear good things about the ovens. People say it's like a sauna turned up to eleven."

"They like it?"

“Go figure.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “We’re here and we’re there?”

“You can only figure out so much, Fatman. Why is the sky blue? Why is rain wet? Why are we here and temporarily there? Think too much about it and your head will explode.”

“But we can be there?” Doris wondered.

“Up to you. Me, I wouldn’t have missed it. The genuine tears, the fake tears, the bullshit in all its forms. Who gets the money? Who takes over the firm? Then that trip to the boneyard and twenty thousand bucks dropped in a hole. Ha ha! You could hear the cash register inside the kids’ heads. The things they could have bought. Vacation in Mexico. Side-by-side Sub Zero fridge. Whatever. Instead, dirt rattling on the lid of the Floral Mahogany. One more thing about old dad to piss them off.”

“So we want to go, how do we get there?”

“Talk to Marge. She handles travel. She’ll stop by tomorrow morning.”

“How do we know from morning down here?” Doris asked.

“Hit the hammock. Get some sleep. When you wake up, just call it morning.”

...

“Where is everybody?” Doris asked. “Is anybody else here?”

We were tucked into the hammock. It was the kind of thing you’d expect in a Caribbean resort, probably colorful once upon a time. “There ought to be beach boys,” I said. “Piña coladas. Palm trees.” Instead the hammock was affixed to rusted steel hooks set in the dank limestone. The difference in our weight (tremendous!) and height (substantial!) had the effect of squeezing Doris onto my torso. Once asleep she was typically a squirmer. Also something of a snorer and drooler. I had misgivings about how the night would go.

“Listen,” I said. “They’re out there. The others.”

An indistinct buzz drifted from somewhere down the main channel.

“Sounds like a crowd.”

“All of them dead.”

“These are our people now, baby. Best to be open minded. What’s the worst that can happen?

We’re already...”

“There’s always something worse.”

“We got to stay positive,” I said.

“I’m having trouble with that right now.”

“Let’s get up, do some investigating. We sit here, we’ll just stew.”

“You think it’s safe?”

“Like I say, these are our people. We’re in this together, right?”

She gave me a look that did not indicate vast amounts of confidence. “We can’t hole up here forever,” Doris said at last. She pushed herself up and climbed out. The movement turned the hammock into a swing and dumped me on the floor.

...

Give me a minute here to clue you in about Doris. I already addressed the what’s-she-doing-with you situation. To repeat, I have my charms. For now we’ll let it go at that.

How we met? Let’s go back twenty years. There’s a bar down the block, Billy’s Victorian Lounge, which is your typical old white guy operation. Softball teams, bocce ball leagues, meat raffles. Pool table in the back. The occasional Harley in the parking lot, the riders generally candidates for that tv weight-loss show, the Biggest Loser. Living a fantasy life of sorts; born to be wild. As if. Billy’s is not a joint you go to for a French martini, unless there’s not enough ridicule in your life.

I was nursing a Budweiser at the bar, yapping at Billy, eyeballing a baseball game on the TV. You can see through to the room with the pool table. That's how I got my first glimpse of Doris. She was the only customer back there. Nothing wrong with her now, but imagine shaving off twenty years. The baseball game, my Bud, Billy himself (truth be told, he wasn't much of a raconteur, despite his occupation) faded into nothingness. She was the only thing worth looking at in that beer-soaked dump.

"Who's that?" I asked Billy.

He shrugged. "Lives down the block. Doris. The day bar guy, Arne, one of his daughters."

"No, really, Billy. That is not Arne's daughter."

"Why am I talking to you if you're telling me I'm full of crap?"

"I know Arne. I know his wife. If they went out to borrow a bucket full of genes they still couldn't produce that gal."

"Believe what you want to believe. But that's Arne's girl, Doris."

I tried to go back to the baseball game. That didn't work. I picked up my beer and headed toward the pool table. Doris gave me a quick once over, nodded and turned back to the table. Alone, but nonetheless, setting up the hustle, not that I recognized it at first. She'd sink one, miss a couple, call the cue ball a dirty little motherfucker, clear the table finally and then rack up again.

Eventually she looked up at me. "You want to play?" she said.

"Fatman don't want to play no pool. But I will."

I hadn't noticed Lester Smack, preoccupied as I was with Doris. Preoccupied by her everything — the way she leaned over the table, the way she pulled at her beer and wiped at her lips with the back of her hand, the way she pushed the hair out of her eyes, the way she chalked her cue for God's sake. I know that I'm wallowing piggishly in the physical realm here — what about her mind!? What about her qualities? Compassion, empathy, kindness, so on and so forth. Sure, we'll get to that. Go ahead,

sue me for not heading up the high road first thing. But the high road, at least in my fantasies of that moment, was the road less traveled.

Lester and I went back. Grade school. High school. I nodded at him. He gave me his well-practiced sneer. Lester still wore a pompadour. He rolled a pack of cigarettes up in the sleeve of his t-shirt. Levis. Black leather boots half laced. A caricature, not that he recognized it himself. He'd spent a lifetime being a delinquent. Playground bully in grade school, the sadist who would steal your lunch money if he heard it jingling in your pocket. In high school he was notorious for preying on those at the bottom of the pecking order. So many antics at his disposal! He might wrap you up in a wrestling mat, only your head left exposed, and then taunt you with what he took to be amusing patter. "You okay in there, little Fatman? Not getting too warm, are you? Would it help if I gave your ears a good tug?"

His post graduate work included breaking and entering, car theft, street level pharmaceuticals, minor jail time, probation that he was certain to break. His nights of freedom in Billy's Victorian were not destined to last.

"Your quarter," Doris said.

"Watch this, Fatman," Lester said. "I'm putting the P in pool."

To this I thought, you're putting the P in prick. Lester didn't need to know that.

From there it was the oldest story in the book. Lester came out ahead for a while. Doris sunk a few, blew others, feigned astonishment at her so-called bad luck. "I used to play for a couple bucks here, a couple bucks there," she confided to Lester. "But Jesus, I'm out of practice."

And like a fish, rising to the bait — I'm thinking of a bass here, it's big mouth yawning at the surface of still water, stupid and hungry — Lester reached into his pocket and pulled out a five. "Why don't we see if your luck will change?" he said. He pressed the bill against the table with his index finger.

"The way things are going here," said Doris. "I'd just be giving you five bucks."

“Maybe we could work something out,” Lester suggested. I tried to imagine a circumstance where this ploy might have been successful. Couldn’t.

“Let’s just go for the money,” Doris countered. She pulled a small roll from her pocket. Bait for what was to follow.

Lester won the first game when Doris sunk the eight ball, seemingly by accident. “Ain’t that some bad luck,” Lester declared, pocketing Doris’s five. “I’m gonna get you another beer, then what the hell, I’m going to give you the double or nothing deal.”

“I don’t know,” Doris said. “I’m not feeling so lucky.”

Lester looked up at the light that glared down on the table. “Luck,” he said. A contemplative look that I had never seen on him before settled on his features. It was like watching a low-rent Elvis overwhelmed by deep thoughts. “What is luck anyway? You could say I got my share. Looks, health. Roof over my head. In my mother’s house, okay, but I help her out.

“Then you look at Fatman over there.” He pointed his cue at me, gave me a jab just above the belt. “Looks, health? Tell me another one. But he got that college-boy degree. He got that fancy ass trust fund. Does what he wants to do. Money? No problem. He wants to drive around in a Mercedes, that’s what he does. The rest of us stiffs think we’re lucky, living with momma until the PO busts us and ships us back to the joint.”

He took a hard look at Doris and asked, “What kind of luck you think you got?”

“Medium,” she said, racking the balls. “Usually I think things are going to work out.”

“We’ll see about that,” Lester said. “You go ahead and break. I’m giving you a luck boost.”

Poor Lester, who, like that miserable bass rising from the deep, could not fathom how thoroughly he was being played. Of course it’s impossible to know what goes on in the minds of others, what they see, what they can’t, what they choose to ignore, how they delude themselves. I looked at Lester and all I could see was a fish, rising from the deep with a few dim thoughts. Money. Girl. Money. Girl. Then sinking again into a weed-thick abyss.

He won a few, lost more, bought a few more beers, emptied them while Doris discreetly placed those he bought for her under the table. Lester, drunk. Doris, sober. More bills on the table. Fives, tens, a couple twenties. Double or nothing? Tough luck there, Lester. One more time? “You getting awful lucky all of a sudden,” Lester snarled.

Billy poked his head in the pool alcove. “Lester, buddy, maybe you should call it quits before this gal is walking home in your boots.”

“I got my own luck,” Lester replied, “As I was saying. Now and then I do. Have luck.” He wasn’t quite getting his lips around the words.

Doris should not have cleared the table as efficiently as she did. I suppose she was making a point, striking a blow for the matriarchy, putting a period on the sentence that said, Lester, you are a fool. Hard to resist, surely, and yet something like eating the last of your seed corn. Not leaving anything there for the future.

Lester leaned against his cue stick, swaying, catching himself, focusing with difficulty. “You been hustling me,” he said, stating the obvious.

Doris shrugged as she reached for a pile of bills. “Pretty little thing but you a hustler.” He cuffed her wrist but she held onto the money. “Double or nothing, one more time.”

“You don’t have double in your pocket,” said Doris, her eyes pinned on his. “So what’s the point? I’m calling it a night.”

He didn’t let go. She didn’t budge. He squeezed harder. She gasped.

“Lester,” I said. “This isn’t going to end well. No matter what.”

“Who the fuck asked you? Jesus. If this was high school I’d jam you in a locker right now. Toss a couple lit matches through the slot.”

“Sure you would. But it’s not high school. She calls the cops, whose side you think they’re on?”

“Fuck you again, fat boy.

“Fatman, Lester. At least give me that.”

“I’ll call you what I god damn well please.”

At that everything happened at once. Doris jerked her hand free and made to jam the cash into her pocket. Lester grabbed at her arm and yanked. I yelled at Lester and lurched toward him. He swung at me with his pool cue. “Shit, Lester, you broke my arm!” I yelled. Before he could reply, Doris busted him on the head with her cue. He went down like a sack of potatoes. Billy showed up with a baseball bat and observed, “I guess you already solved the problem.”

From the bar proper, Jackie Gallagher strolled in, drawn by the commotion. He was an old school cop even then, gleaming pate, forty pounds overweight, still the hint of an Irish accent, knew everybody’s story, and surely would not bother to chase you down an alley because he could with less effort pick you up at your home the next morning. He knew where you lived. “Once Mister Smack here awakens, I’ll give him a ride downtown. The gentleman will find, no doubt, that his probation is revoked. You good citizens can go on with your lives worry free.”

To me Gallagher said, “We could proceed with an assault charge. Ah, but the paperwork, Fatman.”

“How about a ride to the hospital at least? This arm...”

“I’ll take you,” Doris said.

Even with a plaster cast on my arm, and a load of Percodan in my system, when we got back to my place one thing led to another. And another. A busted up arm was a small price to pay.

...

“Left or right?” Doris asked.

I shrugged. “Does it matter?”

To the left the tunnel disappeared quickly in the gloom. Same to the right.

“Which way is the noise coming from?” The chatter sounded like a hive of bees working overtime.

Indecision frustrates Doris. “This way,” she declared. We headed off with her in the lead.

The tunnel branched off, leading down into another dimly lit corridor that looked identical.

“We’re never going to find our way back,” I said.

“Does it matter?”

“There’s the hammock. The honeymoon suite. Beats sleeping in the dirt.”

“Let’s Hansel and Gretel it.” She scooped dirt off the floor and dumped it on the black pipe, fashioning an arrow from it that pointed the way back toward the suite.

I don’t know how long or how far we walked. When I glanced at my watch, I noticed it had stopped.

“Are we getting anywhere?” I asked.

“How would I know? We’re exploring.”

“Lewis and Clark.”

“More like Desi and Lucy. Abbott and Costello.”

“We can’t sit in one place for eternity.”

“I wouldn’t rule anything out.”

That conversational buzz slowly grew louder. At last we turned a corner and came to a balcony that overlooked a room carved from the limestone. Here and there chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling, the candles putting off a dim glow. The chamber was set up on the order of a high school cafeteria. Rows of tables and benches. Plates, bowls, glasses and cutlery, but no food or drink. A roomful of our people, whatever we were exactly. Not quite living. Not quite dead. Yapping non-stop at each other, a blizzard of chatter that made it hard to think.

“What are they?” I asked Doris. “What are we?”

“Here. Or so it seems. Unless it’s a dream and we wake up. Which would be a good option.”

“Let me say it’s not what I expected,” I said.

“Cremation. Burial, that’s as far as I ever got.”

“You’re a here and now type, babe.”

“Eternity. The afterlife. That type of conjecture. I never took it seriously.”

“I gave it some thought.”

“Catholic school,” Doris said. “They fill your head with malarky.”

“Who knows? Based on what we’re looking at. Maybe they got it right. Those crazy nuns. This could be purgatory.”

“Then shouldn’t we be suffering? I feel okay.”

“Could be there’s a brimstone department. Something for the heavy hitters. Or say it’s more mental than physical. Stuck in the middle, like a bad job that lasts for centuries. No pay raise in sight. Same old junk in the vending machine. Executives get all the good parking. Your soul slowly sucked away. Lightness replaced by despair. Ennui.”

“Jesus, Tommy. Lighten up. We’re doing alright. Considering.”

Nobody seemed to notice us. Then someone stood at a nearby table and pointed our way. Marge. She made her way up the steps carved into the rock, dragging her bum leg behind her.

“Marge,” I said. “You get around.”

“It’s in the job description, getting around. Community engagement. It’s not all paperwork. A lot of it is keeping a finger on the pulse. Who’s happy, who’s not.”

“Happy? Who cares who’s happy?”

“It’s like topside,” Marge said, pointing upward. “You wait until there’s a crisis, it’s too late. Best to throw your dogs some bones before they know they’re hungry. Management 101.”

“You’ve got issues?” Doris asked.

“I don’t. They do.” Marge waved a hand toward the mob that filled the room.

“Like what?”

“Ask them yourself,” said Marge.

She led us down the stairs, hopping on her good leg. She stopped at the nearest table. “People!” she said loudly. Everyone ignored her.

“People?” Doris asked. “That’s what you go with?”

“You’ve got a better idea, let me know. We all used to be people. Now we’re…” Marge paused at this.

“We’ve been wondering,” Doris said.

“Spirits. Sort of. Halfways. Between one thing and another. Assuming.”

“What?”

“There is a next thing.”

Doris gave that a moment’s thought, then shook her head. “Undead. We came up with that.”

“So did George Romero. Myself, I say, halfways. Everyone you see here, halfways.

In-betweeners. Waiting for a train that might take a thousand years to hit the station. If it arrives at all.

“People!” she yelled again, this time pounding the table with her fist.

“What, Marge? What? We’re trying to have a conversation here.” This from a middle-aged manager type, still sporting a full head of hair and a body-builder physique. His aura said, Entitled. For whatever good that did him here.

“Sean,” Marge said, nodding at him “Big operator down here. Thinks he is, anyway.”

“Maybe you can put your pow wow on hold for a minute,” Marge continued. “Or, say, a hundred years. New arrivals here. Thomas Fadiman. Fatman, if you’d rather. Doris Dubotchney.”

A dozen sets of eyes turned toward us. The League of Nations, gathered around a table in the underworld. Black guys. An Indian. Some Asians. A Junior League type in a red slit skirt with pearls around her neck. Accident victims, their faces rearranged. That tormented look of chemo-whacked

cancer patients. One of the Black guys looked like he came out on the wrong end of a baseball-bat assault. The oldest Asian had that half-frozen look of a stroke victim.

“Like a catalog of what can kill you,” Doris noted under her breath.

“Not the half of it,” Marge said.

I couldn’t decode the eyeballing we got. It looked like they were trying to decide which side we were on. But what sides would there be?

“What can you tell us, folks?” I asked. “Key facts. Does and don’ts. We’re all ears.”

“Actually, you’re not. Looks like you’re missing part of one.” This from Sean, the middle manager.

I grabbed at my right lobe. The lower half was gone. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked Doris.

“What would you do about it? Your ear, my hair. Be grateful it’s not your nose.”

“Very bad, nose” said one of the Asian men, who was in fact missing his nose.

“About the key facts,” said Sean. “Since you ask. It depends.”

“On what?”

“Your personal style. You’re a live and let live type? You think in your heart, well, we’re all a little bit wrong, a little bit right?” The look Sean put on let us know what his answer was. Only a chump feels this way.

“Maybe you’re more Old Testament. Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Those who wronged me will get what they deserve. More justice than forgiveness. Or, forgiveness once you’ve got them under your boot.”

“Which way do you get out of this joint faster?” Doris asked. “Maybe compassion gets you points for good behavior.”

“Who says you get out?” Sean said. He turned to his table mates. “You know anybody who got out? For good behavior. Or bad?”

“Some brothers disappear,” said the Black guy with the rearranged face. “DeShaun,” he said with a nod, introducing himself. “Where they go, hell, I don’t know. Up, down. Maybe just wandering around here down some dark tunnel. Lost as fuck. Could be. Course what difference would it make?”

“A lot of uncertainty,” said Sean. “Another key fact. Nobody really knows what’s going on. Heaven, hell, God, no God, eternal justice awaiting, or just the same old inscrutable bullshit where all you can say is, that ain’t fair.”

“Thanks for that, Sean,” said Marge, rolling her eyes. “That’s a big help.”

“Give me a minute here, Marge,” Sean said. “The real key fact,” he said, pointing at me and Doris. “You can get out. Not all the time. When and why, you never know. Solar flares, spring tide, whim of the Almighty, there’s no telling why. You get out, you wander around, you mix it up if that’s what you want. Help out your friends. Settle a few scores. Make things right that you left messed up. When things work out.”

“How long do you get?” Doris wondered.

“How long do you need? You got a lot that needs straightening out?” Sean said, interested in the possibility.

“Everybody’s got unfinished business,” Doris replied.

“Some more than others,” Sean said.

“No way to tell how long you’ll last topside. Might be minutes. Might be days. You could be halfway through messing somebody up and then poof, you gotta head back to the joint.”

“That’s a lot to think about.”

“Might be worth admitting that we’re more or less dead and leave it at that,” I said. “I didn’t manage to make the world so right when I was alive.”

“Think of it as a second chance,” Sean said. “To do what you couldn’t do back when.”

“Maybe that’s enough for now,” Marge said.

She grabbed the two of us by the elbow and steered us away. “Why don’t you lovebirds head back to the honeymoon suite? I’ll stop by later to tuck you in.”

...

Who doesn’t have grievances? To live is to be afflicted! Family, so-called friends, lovers, bureaucrats, politicians, the guy who cut you off on the freeway, phone solicitors, door-to-door sales reps, the neighbors, the boss, workmates, your dog, your cat, the neighbors’ dogs and cats, litterbugs, hot-rodders, gun-toting nitwits, that dim-looking tv weatherman, the mom whapping her kid in the check-out line at Target, the porch pirate who grabbed your Amazon delivery, the Amazon guy who left the package on the stoop in the first place, the fools who argue on the sidewalk outside your house at two a.m., the doc who says you have no need of serious pain medication but insists that you lose, say, fifty pounds, your car mechanic, your handyman, the kid who won’t shovel your walk for less than forty bucks, not to mention anyone who ever uttered the words *listen carefully as our menu options have changed* — and this is to name merely a few of the many who might deserve the dose of misery that, if Sean is to be believed, I might administer.

Where to start?

Funny what comes to mind. The old grudges are the best grudges, having been tended faithfully for so many years. My grandmother was an ascended master in this realm. She lived into her nineties, and what kept her going all those years was the memory of the slights and insults she had endured. She sat beside the gas heater in her poor little house — it had once been a barn and was only crudely converted — and held forth from her rocking chair, informing you, and not for the first time either, of the time just after the end of World War One, when her sister Maybelle made a move on her husband-to-be, George. George being something of a prize in their small town because he was, for one thing, not a corpse rotting beneath the Somme, and, two, not a binge drinker of the same ferocity

as many of his peers. He showed some capacity for earning a living, having escaped what was not yet understood to be PTSD, and had at least an inkling of what the term “good humor” meant. As my grandmother indicted Maybelle for what, the thousandth time? the ten thousandth time?, a tear would snake down her wrinkled cheek. She would sob anew with the indignity of it all, with the nuclear-level betrayal, and she would mutter, this while blessing herself with the Sign of the Cross, *I could have killed that bitch!*

Thanks for cluing me in, grandma.

And yet, the complexity of it. My grandmother saw Maybelle nearly every day. They lived a block away from each other, submerging their murderous passions beneath moderate contempt. Maybelle, a hypochondriac of the highest order, lived to the age of ninety three and complained of her health every day. “She says ouch when she farts,” my grandmother observed. Meanwhile, George and Maybelle’s husband, Hank, were tight as thieves, killing their spare time in the smoke house that George had attached to his garage. Chunks of pork or beef or chicken hung from the rafters, this above an endlessly smoking fire, the walls blackened with years of carbon, the beverage of choice within being wine that George produced from anything that would ferment. Dandelions, cherries, apples, strawberries, all goosed with sugar to achieve the outer limits of alcoholic possibility, this being Prohibition and the options therefore reduced.

Prohibition! Another source of grievance! If only old dead George could have filled a bucket of milk and drowned within it one Andrew Volstead, the dry crusader, Minnesota congressman and namesake of the Volstead Act that put the kibosh on legal liquor sales. Oh, the joy that would have been his.

And for me? I have told myself, given the soul-rotting example set by my grandmother, that I would not thus wallow. Best to imagine that we all have our reasons for the things we do, no matter how belligerent or careless or unkind they may seem. And yet and yet and yet... Do we not all have within our heads a rusty, dented bucket labeled GRIEVANCE, and do we not all need, somehow, to

fill it? With the mundane, day-to-day mini-outrages of our life, but also with those experiences that leave a permanent scar, no matter how trivial or utterly expected they may seem to others, no matter how distant in the past?

At the bottom of my own bucket, this. Hippie days, bell-bottom blues, hair to my shoulders, imagine that, the ability to glance downward and see my dick, it not yet eclipsed in the arc of my belly. Not long out of college, disposed to save the world, hired on at a collective dedicated to patching up the lives of traumatized Vietnam vets. As if a gang of clueless young peaceniks were capable of the task. But what is youth for if not obliviousness and delusion?

Of course I had a girlfriend. I always have. I was not Casanova, but, that said, the clock did not tick too many times between one girl and the other. And so, I lived at the time with another creature of the period. Willowy, athletic. Appalled by the notion of cosmetics. Hair the color of a walnut, that she asked me to whack with scissors when it reached shoulder length. This being not the era for hairdos either.

I am a serial monogamist. I value simplicity more than complexity. The whispering; the sneaking; the lies both small and grand; the guilt; the endless, failed attempt to persuade yourself that guilt is not necessary, that it is the rigid, pointless moral code of our capitalist society (right on!) that is to blame — all of this worked together to keep me on the straight and narrow. I am, generally speaking, satisfied with the moment. Not so my sweetheart.

With her, yes, the quickly closed door at the office, the murmured conversation with another of our workmates, he a Socialist Worker who would could go on at great, confusing and idiotic length about the inevitable triumph of socialism once he had awakened workers who were actually workers rather than overeducated, under-experienced pedants such as himself. Then the little hustles. She was going on a retreat to self-actualize. A weekend of solitary reflection to consider her place, her possibilities, in a world where traditional barriers were or would be torn down. And by the way, could she borrow my car?

Of course of course of course. Smash the patriarchy. Explore the depths of your psyche. Cast off the various yokes of oppression. Also, check the oil before you drive back. There are a couple quarts of ten-thirty in the trunk.

You know and you don't know. You ignore what you can. You lie to yourself just like you lie to others, in the hope that a convincing story will carry the day. When she returned and flopped naked into our bed, I could not help but observe, "Sugar, it looks like you've been clawed by a bear."

To which she mumbled into the pillow, "Something must have bit me. I was scratching at my back all weekend."

Having never taken her for a contortionist, I found this a stretch. Yet I let it go. I chose to believe. Setting aside the obvious bit of conjecture, which was that she had left our apartment, picked up young Karl Marx and repaired to a tourist-town love nest for a weekend of fuckery.

Ha, what a fool I was. It sounds insane to say but nothing in my life had prepared me for such treachery. In the hick farm town where I was raised, to the best of my knowledge nothing went unobserved. An affair? How would you pull it off with the equivalent of the CIA, the KGB and Stasi spying from behind every lace curtain? My grandparents, my parents — it was impossible to conceive of them as adulterers. I had been obliged to read *The Scarlet Letter* in high school, but it described a world that was only dimly imaginable, and did not pertain to the one I inhabited. Years passed before I understood what had happened, and by then it would have been absurd to make a point of explaining to a long-since former lover that I was no longer the blindered moron I had been.

I wondered how Sean or my grandmother would handle this. Let bygones be bygones? Probably not. Impose some form of retribution? If so, what, after all these years, would that even be? Where would it get me?

The grievance bucket probably works best when there is a big hole punched in the bottom.

Already the guiding principle of the underworld was striking me as ridiculous. The past is the past, and there is no setting it to rights. You might hope to learn from the various betrayals, the

cheating and lying, the scheming and falseness, all the potholes (chasms!) on the great road of life.
But to even out the scales of justice?

Good luck on that one, pal.

...

Knock, knock on the plastic tarp.

“You two settled in?” Marge called from the main channel. “Time to turn back the sheets. Ha ha.
Except there aren’t any. Anyway. You mind if I step in?”

“Go ahead,” Doris said. We were back in the hammock. She was squirming around on top of me
again.

Marge limped into the honeymoon suite. “Cozy,” she said.

“That’s one way to look at it,” Doris replied.

“You get used to it. Like everything else. Enough time passes and it’s normal. You get used to not
getting used to. Somebody said that.”

“Hmm.” I knew Doris wasn’t buying this.

“I mentioned the funeral,” Marge said. “Your choice. Some people can’t wait. Pimplipper, for
example. Others, you couldn’t drag them there. How do you want to play it?”

“We have to choose right now?” Doris wondered.

Marge checked her watch.

“That works?” I asked. “Mine stopped. A Rolex. You’d think...”

“Upon death.”

“But yours is ticking?”

“Special dispensation. Somebody’s got to know what time it is. Not everybody. It weighs people down. Anyway, you’ve got three hours. First, cosmetics. Costumes. Some touching up. We should get going.”

“A disguise?” said Doris.

“Disguise. Costume. Whatever. What’s the alternative? You walk in as you but you’re also dust in the cremain bucket? Not everybody is ready for that. Come on. We’ll get you to costuming.”

Again we followed Marge down the damp corridor, her dragged foot leaving an odd track in the sand and dust.

“I can’t believe that’s not painful,” I said.

“Trust me. After sixty years, I’d know.”

“You know the date?”

“More or less. Somebody’s got to keep track. Not everybody, needless to say.”

“What if they did? What’s the problem?”

“You think I know? Maybe you noticed. What we’re talking about here is ambiguity. Doubt. Confusion. Keep everybody guessing.”

“So what day is it?” I asked.

“You’re not listening,” Marge said. “I’m not at liberty to say.”

“Jesus, Marge.”

“Look at the bright side. Are you yourself hurting? Half your ear’s gone. Your head looks like somebody took a grater to it. And I’m not even talking about internal injuries. Would you rather be pain-free or know the day of the week?”

I felt better than I had in years. Sciatica? Forget about it. Arthritis clogged joints? *Adios, dolor!* Whatever else you think about death, it’s painless. Physically, at least. Though that might only serve to open up space for the psychic aspects. The loss. The absence. The sense that there is business that will never be finished.

We walked for a while without seeming to get much of anywhere. Same tunnel through the same limestone. Same dribbling down the walls. Now and then a rat.

“About the rodents,” Doris asked. “Living or dead?”

“Good question!” Marge replied without answering.

Doris waited through another dozen or so of Marge’s lurching steps. “So?” she said at last.

“No idea. You want to ask them, go ahead.”

Marge took a couple turns. Without her we’d never find our way back. Finally she pushed back another tarp hung over a doorway. “Arrived,” she said, ushering us in.

“Moonchild,” she said to the bored looking corpse behind a desk.

“What you got?”

“Funeral. Both of them. Cremation.”

Moonchild was done up in Seventies style. Halter top, India print skirt, the vague whiff of patchouli oil still clinging to her clothing. No visible injury or deformity.

“You don’t mind me asking?” said Doris. “We’re new here.”

“Obviously,” Moonchild replied.

“Cause of death? Rude to ask?”

“Some people get prickly. Me, I don’t care. Overdose. Like James Dean said, I made a pretty corpse. Heroin. All things considered, a nice ride to the hereafter. In a porta-potty at a Dead concert. Appropriately, I suppose. Though if I had to choose I wouldn’t have been sitting in a crapper. Maybe more like a mountain-side covered with flowers. Sailboat on the ocean. That kind of thing.”

“You’ve got your different categories,” Marge added. “Your stupid death. Car falls off the jack, you’re underneath. No jack stand. Bam, flat as a bug. Or, drunk driving, off the road, into a tree. Then you’ve got your too-old-to-live category, nothing holding everything together anymore. Your tragic illness bracket, forty-year old mom with cancer, kid with a brain tumor. Your suicides, which nobody really wants to hear about. Same for your domestic violence. Lovers quarrels. Murders,

intentional and otherwise. Then the combo platters, like your situation. Part murder, part stupid death. Of course your embarrassing death. Those guys who strangle themselves while jerking off. That actor, David Carradine. Or the plug-in vibrator shorts out. Zap. Fried pussy. And I'm just getting started."

"But it comes down to it, dead is dead," said Moonchild. "It's not the journey, it's the destination. How about we get to work? Cases like yours, I start with wigs and take it from there."

She gave Doris a hard look, rummaged in a trunk and came up with a Farrah Fawcett number, a tornado of bloneness flipping this way, flopping that way. She pulled it over Doris's half-shaved skull and chuckled. "On you it looks good," she said. "Sort of."

"I don't suppose you have a mirror."

"I already told them," said Marge. "No mirrors."

"The idea here isn't you look great. It's nobody recognizes you," said Moonchild. "You slip in, you slip out, no one gets shook by ghosts turning up at their own funeral. Usually you got enough going on without adding that."

On me Moonchild dropped an Eddie Van Halen hairpiece, bangs, curls, hair to the shoulders. "This isn't a little, hmm, over the top?" I wondered.

"You come late, you leave early, You find a pew in the back. In the shadows if possible. We get you both hats. Overcoats. Make up. The hair takes care of the ear situation. Maybe a cane for the lady, throw everyone off. Needless to say, you're not sticking around for lunch in the church basement. As much as you can, you're avoiding everyone."

When she got done I myself barely recognized Doris. The wig, the tinted glasses, the overcoat, the cane, the excess of mascara, eyeliner, lipstick, rouge: not flattering but effective.

Doris took a hard look at me and said, "You look like one of those sad-sack rockers with a casino gig. Guys who used to be famous."

"Thanks, baby," I said.

...

A few hours later Marge directed us through another mystifying series of corridors, one as dismal as the other. “Here we are,” she said at last. A few beams of light shone through the manhole cover above. “We pop the lid, you scuttle out, I wait for an hour and we’re out of here.”

“What if it goes long? They got the Latin mass here, and the priest...”

“Sanctimonious blowhard,” Doris added.

“Old school man of the cloth.”

“Whatever. After an hour you’re on your own. When the church bells start ringing, either you’re out of there or you’re stuck.”

“Like Cinderella,” I said.

“A stretch,” Marge said, giving me a skeptical eye. “But have it your way.”

Doris followed me up the rusted steel ladder. I pushed aside the manhole cover. We crawled up onto the pavement of a secluded alley behind the church. There I got my first view of the post-dead world. Nothing much had changed with our departure. There was the church, a pile of white stone with its clock and bell tower that afflicted the neighbors with its dinging and donging on the hour and half hour. The usual litter in the street. Somebody had dumped a couch and mattress on the boulevard. A whiff of weed in the air. We walked around toward the main entrance and stood back to watch the people climbing the wide stone stairway.

“Nice crowd,” I said.

“Hard to tell who’s grieving and who’s celebrating.”

“Little of both for everyone, don’t you think? Our actual friends, there’s a lump in their hearts. But they’re also pleased it’s us and not them. And that other category...”

“What? Non-friends? Enemies?”

“Enemies. A little harsh. Let’s say they’re people who will now have to go to the trouble of finding another target for their bile. They had a comfortable relationship with us, and then we had to up and die. That being for them one more mark against us.”

Enemies. It’s a lot to get into. Forty years ago we moved into the poorest neighborhood in the city. What did we know? The house was cheap. The neighbors, considering that they were drug dealers, were not unfriendly. The city’s policy in general was if you live here, it’s your problem. The cops, should you call them, would inquire, *If you don’t like it, why don’t you move?* Doris raised a ruckus, to which I was a party. With the cadre she organized we got the councilman unelected. We gave the mayor a scare. To the least extent possible, officialdom bent to the will of our mob, but not with a song in their hearts. Hence, enemies. Not to mention the dealers, prostitutes and related customers who were forced to consider a change of venue. Later, the righteous gentrifiers moved in, drawn by the still-low price of a house. They spouted dogma from their private liberal arts colleges, asserting that the police should not be called on our gun-toting, fighting-in-the-street neighbors, that landlords should not be encouraged to straighten out loutish tenants or evict them, that widespread dumping of refuse was simply a reflection of the trauma of capitalism. All of which, on a theoretical level, I could understand, but on the day-to-day, it was nothing I wanted to live with. And so our observations at so-called “community engagement” meetings drew scorn. Hence also enemies among the wet-behind-the-ear crowd, who in any case would be moving out in ten years when the children they would eventually spawn grew old enough to walk the streets alone, and they would say, well, it’s not for us but for young Jacob, or Dorothy, or Jamie or whomever that we are moving to a safer place.

I digress.

Except to add that if all you’ve got is friends, you haven’t really been living. There being so many ignorant people on Earth, if some of them don’t have a serious beef with you, you’ve got to wonder if you’ve been doing your part.

“I’m not saying I’m happy to be dead,” Doris said. “But there’s my dad, weeping for Christ sake. The only other time I saw him with a tear in his eye was when that dog of his, Trixie, got run over by the milk truck. What a mess that was.”

“That’s the mayor,” I said. “Making time in his busy day.”

“It’s an election year.”

“Nonetheless.”

“Suck up to the papist crowd. He’ll be out of here before we are. And look, your sisters.” They were decked out in matching black frocks, cut a little low for a funeral. Whether the color was to indicate that they were in mourning, or to reflect the truth regarding the state of their hearts was an open question.

“Estranged,” I reminded her. There had been some nastiness regarding our father’s estate. They squandered the dough, I kept living the life I’d been living, which was somewhere between sensibly frugal and Scrooge-ish, except for the luxuries I enjoyed. A decent suit. Custom shoes. Cases of wine that deserved the name. The sisters came to me for “loans.” I suggested financial management. That didn’t end well. If they thought my last will and testament was going to make them happy, they were wrong about that, too.

A gang from Doris’s book club flounced up the steps, jabbering, laughing, wiping away some tears. “Ha, I didn’t read the book. Again.” Doris called after them, but they didn’t seem to hear.

“We’re incognito, remember?”

“It’s just... I wonder what they’re saying. The dust in the urn is still warm and I already miss them.”

“We’ll make new friends.”

“All of them dead.”

“Does it matter?”

“I don’t know. You don’t know.”

“Do you feel different? You think I’m different?”

“You could say we’re both worse for wear.”

“But in your heart?”

“I’m not sure it’s beating. Have you checked?”

“Hmm.” I reached into my overcoat and put a hand on my chest. “Seems kind of quiet in there.”

“So.”

“It’s just one more organ. Would you care if your liver was closed for business?”

“What’s keeping our brains going then?”

“That’s one for Pimplipper, baby. I have no idea.”

That’s another thing about Doris. She’s inquisitive. If you’ve got one question, she’s got twenty.

My mode is more go-with-the-flow, dwell in The Now, let things reveal themselves on their generally inscrutable schedule. I imagine the inside of her head as a bee hive. Plenty of buzzing within.

Whereas my own can seem, even to me, like a dark, empty closet.

The church bells began to toll. “For whom? Don’t have to wonder about that,” I said. There was a last-minute hustle into the church, commotion amidst the characters double parked in front of the entrance. “Let’s hit the side entrance and grab a pew in back.”

Did I mention? The church is Catholic hard-core. Mass in Latin. Hates gays, against abortion (what if Jesus had been aborted, the padre frequently inquired), transgenderists too far gone to even appear on the screen. No food shelf or homeless shelter in the basement. A smoking music program, dominated by the works of that passel of European Classical composers. Mostly a historical re-enactment operation for old white ladies who had long since moved out of the neighborhood but saved a soft spot for the oppressive structures of the past.

“Why do you go there?” Doris asked me more than once.

“I don’t really.”

“That’s not true.”

“Okay. Now and then.”

“You think you’re hedging your bets? I don’t know it works that way.”

“If you recall,” I reminded her, “we wanted a church to get married in. We made a generous donation and whammo, the doors opened. Room in the inn.”

“That was twenty years ago. We’re married already.”

“It takes me back. The stink of incense. The tinkling bells. The organ blasting away. That babbling in Latin. It’s like a drug that dissolves your thoughts. Buddhism with Jesus. Quite a show when you think about it. But peaceful. Your mind somewhere else.”

And now the real pay-off, a full-bore funeral with all the juju, to which I was entitled as a congregant in more or less good standing, and as, more importantly, a substantial donor. When the exterior stone needed tuck-pointing, I was there. When the organ required re-reeding, I signed on the dotted line. Hence, the big show. The Knights of Columbus, those ancient Caucasians with their screwball plumed chapeaus and clattering swords. A posse of altar boys, some of them possibly unmolested. Snatches of the Requiem descending from that mighty organ. Clouds of myrrh or whatever it is they sprinkle atop the glowing briquette in that silver censer. Our souls commended to heaven along with all the other dear faithful departed. And, most deliciously, the priest, old Father Shichtenbauer, possibly a former Nazi for all I know, delivering a homily that will, in innumerable ways, reveal that he possesses only a vaguest of idea of who the hell I am, except that he remembers clearly the amount of my annual contribution.

May I rest in peace. Which seems not to be the case. But anyway...

Shichtenbauer ascended the pulpit. Those times he put the bite on me for money, he invited me to his office, pulled out a bottle of excellent port and a pair of glasses, then explained how the transitory rewards of this realm can be translated into the eternal rewards of the hereafter. He himself had not overlooked the satisfactions of this Earth. He was stuffed like a sausage into his cassock. The exploded blood vessels in his nose and pudgy cheeks suggested that the glass we shared was not the

only one he would tip back that day. Now he tapped on the microphone and began the business of laying me and Doris to rest.

Doris, by his account, became Dolores. I was Fatman Fadiman. Our devotion was like a beacon for those aspiring to true faithfulness.

“Who’s he talking about?” Doris whispered to me.

“Nobody. Everybody. He never gets it right.”

“You think he’s losing it? Dementia?”

“How would you tell? His world isn’t all that hooked up to reality. Turning bread and water into the body and blood of Christ. The pope as the actual voice of God. For starters. Crazy, but mostly arrogant. He’s the man. He doesn’t have to prepare. What he says, goes. My advice: don’t listen. Set your mind free.”

The buzzing on all sides increased as Shichtenbauer droned on. “Probably for the best,” observed my former accountant, Jake Brimsbad, from the pew behind us. “Big guys like Fatman, they go down hard. You turn yourself into a blimp, in the end it catches up to you.”

“Yeah, but she kept herself up.” This from Brimsbad’s trophy wife.

“I’ll say.”

“He looked like a walking ad for the Heart Association. Once he popped off she could have had a whole new life. Tough luck for her.”

“A whole new life with that nest egg he had.”

“He had money? They lived in that little...”

“Yeah, crap hole. You get down to it, he was a cheap son of a bitch. If he had a casket I’d check to see if he was taking the moola with him.”

“Even with the dough, what she was doing with him...”

That again! Even in death, inescapable! I wanted to grab Doris’s cane and smack the hypocrite with it. “Easy now,” Doris said. She grabbed my arm and gave it a squeeze.

Her book group had settled in the pew ahead, yapping as if they were at Starbucks. “I wouldn’t call her a gold-digger exactly,” one of them announced. “She always said he had qualities.”

“Like what? Not in the physique department.”

“He had those enormous feet. Like Ronald McDonald. Clown size.”

“You know what they say about big feet.”

“Sure. But who wants to fuck an elephant? They’ve got big feet, too.”

“Hey, language, we’re in a church!” They all laughed at that.

Doris squeezed harder at my arm now. “Easy, babe,” I whispered. “People are shook up. They say things they don’t mean.”

“I wasn’t gold-digging. Twenty years is a long time to dig gold. Those two-faced bitches.”

“Easy, baby. They’re just talking.”

“Because they think I’m dead.”

“Well, you are. More or less.”

“Not so dead that I don’t hear their bullshit.”

The book club gals leaned into each other again. “The pity is,” one of them said. “All that cosmetic surgery gone up in smoke.”

“Those boobs. The lips. Somebody ought to check it out with the EPA. Could be a health risk. All that stuff going up the smokestack. Ought to be an environmental impact statement.”

Ha ha ha. Hilarity! Others turning in their pews to check out the commotion. This setting off more chortling among the book club gals.

“Girls! Girls!” one of them interjected, then in the next breath observed, “I think even her ass was fake. Liposuction. Who has an ass that size at her age? You add it up, what percent was real?”

Ha ha ha again. I put an arm around Doris. She was quivering. “You want to move? A couple pews down? You don’t have to listen to this.”

Behind the wig, the dark glasses, the collar pulled up to her chin, it was hard to get a straight look at her. But there was something in the set of her lips, in the jut of her chin that I hadn't seen before. Or hadn't seen since she smacked Lester Smack in the Victorian Lounge. She muttered something to herself that I didn't understand, as if she were suddenly speaking in tongues.

From his elevated pulpit Shichtenbauer carried on, applauding my generosity, my casting off of that pernicious entrapment, earthly wealth, and my sensible decision to give a portion of my dough — otherwise the root of all evil! — to this very institution, thus furthering the endless work of the one, true, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and, needless to say, acting in accordance with God's will. Which (here Shichtenbauer paused to take a hard look at the questionably faithful spread beneath him) should be the goal of all those wishing eternal life.

If the book gals took this to heart, or even heard it, there was no indication thereof. Instead, the apparent gang leader, the tallest and widest of the bunch, she decked out in that type of expensive potato sack garment that comes in dull, earthy colors, this intended to camouflage, not altogether effectively, the not inconsiderable spread of age, said, "Not to mention her chin. Four, five years ago. I thought, okay, at last, look out below! Those cheeks are heading downtown. Next thing you know, tight as a drum. I wonder how much that cost Fatman."

"You want the ride, you got to pay the carnny."

Oh, the glee! The sputtering! The spray of spittle thereby unleashed from their lipstick-smearred faces! Such happy clowns!

Distracted, I did not see Doris raise her costume cane and bring it to shoulder level. What I noticed was her swing, which brought to mind that of a pro ball player locking in on a high fastball and launching a line drive toward the fence. She got a clean hit right above the ear of the head gangster. Head wounds being what they are, blood spouted instantly, splattering upon that overpriced tunic and splashing on the marble floor.

Before anyone had a chance to react, Doris grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the side door.

We hustled back toward the manhole cover, popped it and slithered downward. Marge waited for us, propped up against the damp wall. “You had enough already?” she asked. “I thought you’d wallow in it until the last minute.”

“We had a little trouble,” Doris said.

“Not really trouble,” I said. “We got out before it turned into trouble.”

“What happened to your overcoat?” Marge said to Doris. “Is that blood?”

“People said some things,” I said.

“That’s usually what happens at funerals. Maybe the Quakers keep their mouths shut. But those priests. Yappity yap. Stream of consciousness. So, what? You murdered somebody in there?”

“She’s probably not dead.”

“The idea generally is you get the costume, you keep your head down, you hear what you want to hear and you leave.”

“I guess it doesn’t always work that way.”

Marge sighed. “I guess it doesn’t. Let’s get back. Pimlipper needs to hear about this.”

...

“You what?” Pimlipper said to Doris. His blue eyes twinkled. He flashed that mouth full of ivories at us.

“I don’t know what came over me.”

“I think maybe you do.” He left that hanging in the air.

“My so-called friends...”

“Ah.”

This was another of Pimlipper’s techniques. Unlike most of humanity, he knew when to keep his mouth shut. He knew how to wait.

“I thought, sobbing,” said Doris. “Genuine grief. Consoling each other. Fond memories. *Doris deserved something better. Sure she did, the poor sweetheart.* Words to that effect. And instead...”

“Yes?”

“Insults. One after another. Like they were talking about a statue. Did they always hate me?”

“Probably yes and no. In my experience. Friendship. There you have it.” He pulled off his rimless spectacles and gave them a swipe with his tie. “And you, Fatman?”

I shrugged. “The usual. What was she ever doing with him. Some cracks about fucking an elephant.”

“The elephant being you.”

“So it seemed.”

“You didn’t clobber anybody?”

“I’m used to it. Plus I always took them for a pack of bimbos.”

“They were my friends,” said Doris, indignant now.

“Some friends. As you now know.”

“You sure kept it quiet at the time.”

“One thing about death,” Pimplipper said. “It sets you straight.”

“So what? What can I do about it?”

“Sounds like you got a start. Banging heads in the chapel. I think you’ll be surprised by the possibilities.”

“Surprise me already.”

“Have Marge take you back to the cafeteria hall. Hang on to your ears. What remains of yours, Fatman. The crew in there will talk them off.”

“It looked like tea time at the nursing home,” Doris retorted.

“So it appears,” said Pimplipper. As always, he communicated the sense that he knew what you did not.

“Marge,” he said. “The two types of inhabitants here. How would you sort them out?”

“In the underworld as it is on Earth. To quote. Sort of.”

“Not really. But I appreciate the sentiment,” Pimplipper said.

“Your two types,” said Marge. “You’ve got your go-getters. Who knows why they are the way they are. Maybe not satisfied with how things worked out. Unfinished business. People they wronged and now they want to make it right. People who wronged them and they want to get even. Justice oriented, you could say. Except that the notion of justice can be... I’m looking for the word...”

“Interesting. Lofty, even,” said Pimplipper. “Also skewed. Eccentric. Disproportional. Bat shit crazy being a further possibility. Elusive. Impossible. A lot of options there.”

“People,” said Marge. “You got your go-getters over here, and over there the riding-it-out crowd, waiting to see what happens. They’ve left the world behind. Scores to settle? They don’t care. Help the living? Not their department. Detached. Accepting. Maybe just unimaginative. Dull or stupid, another possibility. They might keep up with the gossip, the way you’d watch a TV show. But they’re not looking to change the flow of history.”

“They could?” I wondered.

“You mean, like, kill Hitler?”

“That’s a heavy lift,” said Pimplipper. “To the best of our knowledge. What we see is more on the fringes. Trying to straighten things out with the wife, the kids. Dropping off some stolen cash. Brushing back the landlord. That’s on the positive side. On the other hand, maybe somebody leaves shoes on the steps. Maybe the hair dryer falls into the bathtub. If you see where I’m going. Accidents happen, as everybody says. But not everything is an accident.”

“It’s the little people who get it in the neck?” Doris said. “Your Stalins walk?”

“Among the ways the underworld is like topside.”

I hadn’t planned on options. If I gave you my honest opinion, pre-death, I would have gone for one big non-choice, which is to say, nothingness. Off to the land of spent carbon, like all the other

trillions of creatures rotting in the earth. Consciousness obliterated. Memories turned to vapor. Raised the way I was, however — the full bottle of Catholic poison — a thought always nagged at the back of my mind. What if those nuns and priests, unlikely though it may seem, were right? What if there is a heaven and hell, not to mention limbo, and, while we're at it, a purgatory, where the flames are turned down a notch and you're not necessarily talking about an eternity of torture? A place from which one might ascend after — who knows? — days, months, years or millennia of well-earned suffering. Assuming time has any ongoing meaning. Embarrassing to admit it but there you are. These thoughts lived on in a dim little corner of my mind. The child is the father to the man.

“How do we figure out our program?”

“Chat up your fellow inhabitants, for starters,” said Pimlipper. “Get a sense of what's on the menu. You might be surprised to learn that we offer counseling. You think about it for a minute and sure, it makes sense. Who dies? Everybody! Social workers, therapists, school counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, life coaches, tarot card readers, barbers and hair stylists. Jesus, the list goes on and on. They're all here to help. Actually they're here because they're here, but they can't help themselves. They want to tell you how to run your business.”

“So what, we make an appointment?”

“We'll get to that. For now take a crack at knowing thyself, Fatman. Ask yourself some questions. Save yourself some time. Not that it matters, but still... How did you live? How did you want to live? How did you feel about the discordance? Assuming. Who helped you? Who held you back? What's your notion of justice? An eye for an eye? I quote now no less an authority than, well, putatively, God. *The Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies.* You could think about that. On the other hand, the turn-the other cheek crowd. Restorative justice. Reconciliation circles. Do unto others, et cetera. Maybe you feel you had your shot, bygones be bygones. Life is for the living, you're on to the next thing, even if none of us really knows what the hell that might be.”

This observation aggravated Pimplipper. Down came the shades on the pearly whites. Uncertainty was not space he cared to occupy.

“I myself,” he continued, “mostly I believe the past is the past. I did what I could. A hundred years from now... Christ, two weeks from now!... who will remember who we were or what we did? The justice racket, my God, how I labored in the field.”

“Mostly you represented the guilty, as I recall.”

“True enough. Knuckleheads with a big rap and a lot of dough. A niche market. Let me remind you, however, everyone deserves effective representation. I was part of the process. All of us ants, doing our part. But that was then. Now it’s about me.”

“Pimplipper, I don’t say this to be insulting, but wasn’t it always about you?”

“Not an unfair point, Fatman. Though I might differ. Think of all the hundreds of people who freely walked the streets because of my efforts.”

“Murderers. Rapists. Con men. Thieves, white collar and blue. If I’m remembering correctly. A lot of them, if they had never walked the streets again I would have been happier. Cash up front, I’m guessing.”

“Try to get it once the verdict is in! Guilty or innocent. Either way, blood from a stone.”

“We’re getting off the point here,” Doris said.

Doris loves to make a plan and stick to it. A spreadsheet, a day planner both written and pixelated, notifications that pop up on her phone, her screen, an uproar of activity, all of it geared toward deliverables, outcomes, results.

“Okay, okay,” said Pimplipper. “As I was saying. Marge takes you back to the cafeteria and sets you loose among the natives. You’re all big eyes, non-judgmental, taking in the lay of the land. You make some pals. Get a sense where you fit in. Then Marge schedules counseling. Maybe you take some tests. Myer-Briggs, that type of thing. Adapted. For the circumstances. Is your stool dark and tarry? Ha! You don’t have stool anymore. A shit-free environment at a literal level. One less thing to

fool around with! Then you put together a list of priorities. Mission statement. Goals. Action plan. Death. You'll find it can be very purposeful. If that's what you want."

Marge pulled a pocket calendar out of her frock pocket. "I want to get you going just as soon as I can," she said.

"That's my gal," said Pimplipper.

"I'm not your gal," she huffed. "I got here when you were, what, ten years old? I forgot more about this place than you know."

"My apologies. I'm an old school goat."

"School's out. Grow up."

To that Pimplipper looked down at his filthy Italian leather shoes and said nothing.

...

Marge led us back to the honeymoon suite. One corridor looked the same as the next to me. The arched ceilings cut into the soft stone, the black pipe a few inches off the tunnel floor, the gloom countered only by light from candles set into shallow alcoves on the wall. During the wander to our suite we passed only one other resident. He had a bag of candles slung over his shoulder, and held a long silver taper that looked like it had been pilfered from a church.

"How's it going, Bud?" Marge asked.

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me shall never walk in darkness," he wheezed.

"A little blasphemous, but what the hell," said Marge. "This the light of the world?"

"Okay, it's a stretch. You got to admit, it beats stumbling around in the dark," he wheezed. There was a gash in his throat that didn't improve his diction.

"COVID," Marge told us. "A real population booster."

"Straight from the nursing home to the hospital. Got the what-do-they-call-it? Strangleotomy?"

“Tracheostomy,” Marge offered.

“Whatever. Didn’t work, obviously.”

“Tough break,” Doris said. “The nursing homes all locked down. Then imprisoned in the hospital.”

“You’d think. But let me tell you.”

At first glance he looked like your typical escapee from the geriatric ward. Crepe skin marked with bruises, that tonsure hairdo gone wild, nose and ears seeming to melt off his face, posture that called to mind a question mark. As in, how did I become this? Did I not stride the streets? Did I not swagger? Did the girls not love my show? Did we not tangle the sheets, and, in our exertions, flop from the bed to the floor, carrying on nonetheless with our single-minded fuckation until we lay, sweat-glazed and exhausted, upon the bare oak boards? Did I not split wood, hunt wild animals, wield hammer and saw, marry, sire children? Were they not fruitful, and did they not multiply? All of this, and then to have died alone amid the beep and hum of medical sorcery, the primary evidence of my continuing, possibly conscious existence being the green-lit screen that tracked the beating of my ancient heart?

Was he not, in the last moments of his earthly existence, a portrait of helplessness, the difference between the infant and the old man in the hospital hardly worth considering? Both utterly dependent, both non-productive, both demanding the energy of all those around them to remain alive. Feed me. Change my diaper. Guess at what I want, since I cannot speak. But the eyes! See what looks back at you from that hospital bed. A note of insistence, defiance. I was somebody! That person remains, albeit in disguise. You need the wit to see the accumulation of life, the decades of experience, even though your impulse is to note the helplessness and get no further than turning the old man into the baby again. So damn you. See me and then damn your fucking eyes. A plea and a curse, combined in his gaze.

“Let me tell you,” he said again as we staggered down the dim hallway. This to the sound of his wheezing, and Marge’s foot dragging in the sandy floor, and the occasional gurgle from within the black pipe.

“Why the gasping?” I asked Marge. “If there’s no shitting. And no heartbeat. Why the wheezing?”

“How should I know? Memento mori? Except not to remember that you’ll die, but to know you’re dead.”

“Seems clear enough he’s not living.”

“Practically speaking, you need something to push the words out. Lung power. Imagine if nobody down here could say a word. An improvement in some cases. But overall...”

“Will you give me a minute here?” the candleman said, exasperated. “What I’m saying is, what, it’s worse being dead? Look at my so-called living situation. Locked up in a cement-block room. Baby food spooned into my mouth. Endless racket from TVs up and down the hall. Try calling for help if you happen to be sitting in your own shit. See how long that takes. Non-stop wailing from people out of their minds. And that’s better than the hospital! Staring at the ceiling. Beep beep beep all day long. Some goon sticking a needle into your arm every four hours. All this while choking on the COVID crap that fills your lungs. And if you have the bad luck to recover — ha, the absurdity of the word — if you *recover*, you’re back in the nursing home. Ping pong between regions of hell. Thank you, heroes, but why didn’t one of you smother me with a pillow! You ask me, death is an upgrade. Living, what was I? A revenue sector! For the nursing home, the hospital. Any sensible person would have said I’m better off dead. Jesus, if I had a dime for everyone who said so much at my funeral — *he’s in a better place now finally he can lay his burden down he won’t have to suffer no more don’t he look like he’s at peace* — hell, I could have bought a round for every corpse in the underworld. Assuming there is a bar in the underworld. Which I have not yet discovered.

“That true, Marge?” I asked. “About the bar?”

“Maybe in the VIP section. Sixty years and every day I learn something new. Anyway, we’re here.”

She pulled back the tarp that hid the honeymoon suite from view. The candle man continued his wheezing down the tunnel.

“You sweethearts got a lot to talk about. When you’re ready, let me know.”

“How do we do that?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll know.”

...

’Til death do us part. That apparently not the case. At least not yet. Then again, our expectations are so routinely confounded. A virus killing millions. A mob of nut cases storming the Capitol. The oceans rising. Catastrophic floods and fires. Disaster of biblical proportion. Who saw all that coming? Add it up and the fact that we the dead are not as dead as we might have imagined, well, who can claim to be shocked?

What would you not believe, in consideration of all that you routinely accept? Up is up and down is down. The sun rises and sets. Clouds form and dissolve in all their ephemeral beauty. Sightless creatures crawl at the bottom of the ocean. Why not? The universe is boundless. Or maybe not. God is dead. Or just taking a nap most days.

So death did not part me and Doris. It’s a lot to get your mind around, no denying that, but not impossible.

At the moment, Doris is brushing some of the remaining watermelon goo from her blouse. The seeds scatter around her feet. She flops into our hammock and sighs. Then she squirms around to get a hand into a pocket and pulls out her phone.

“You think that’s going to work?” I ask her.

“Who knows about anything?” she says.

She powers it up and sighs again. “No bars.”

“No surprise.”

I leaned against the wall and slumped to the floor. “You’re going to end up filthy,” Doris said.

“No matter what.”

We both went quiet for a while.

“You could say we’re lucky,” I proposed.

“Tell me how. My eye banded out of shape. Half my hair is gone. You look like you’ve been scalped. Your ear is torn off. We’re stuck in a sewer tunnel for who knows how long. A day, a week, two seconds short of eternity? We can’t plan anything. Like we’re waiting on the platform for a train that has no schedule. A train that might take us to oblivion. A train that might not even exist.”

“It could be worse. Give me that. No flames and torment. No endless reminders of the stains on our souls. We’re wandering in the desert, no denying it, except that it’s a sewer. And Marge is no Moses. But she knows her way around. Plus we’ve got each other.”

“So we just hang around for the next few thousand years? See what happens?”

“Some things never get old.”

“I’m trying to be serious.”

As noted, waiting to see what happens is not Doris’s style. She believes the world can be molded to her desires with enough Zoom calls, email, text messages, letters to the editor, a community meeting, testimony at this or that public hearing. This having been her public life, in which she sat on the board of this and that, doing God’s work. Low-cost housing, public gardens, programs for wayward youth — ramming through various initiatives was her idea of a good time. God help you if you were some hapless public official who thought she could be bamboozled or mollified or (the worst, the most idiotic of all possible responses!) ignored. Should you choose to open any of those

doors, soon enough you'd wonder why you hadn't invited a seventy-pound pit bull to gnaw your leg off, those experiences being, no doubt, remarkably similar.

This on top of her job, for which she was perfectly suited. Logistics. This here, that there. And not three days from now but tomorrow. Those trucks had better be on the road, my friend. If they are not pulling up to the loading dock tomorrow, make no mistake, there will be hell to pay. Actually, it might have been more agreeable to make a Venmo payment to Satan himself instead of holding up your end of this conversation with Doris. Watch as she jabs a pen at the line in the contract specifying date of delivery. Pause. Another pen jab at the sub-section labeled Penalties. Pause. Now a jab at the sub-sub-section identifying the mode and timing of penalty payments. Which will not be negotiated, sucker. Not unless you want to be so thoroughly blackballed in the world of logistics that you'll be grateful to end up with a barrel of apples in a donkey cart, going door to door. So much for your career in transport.

But oh, the contradictions. This verbal violence accompanied by a smile from that heart-stopping face, those soft eyes focused on you in such a way that, male or female, you would find your thoughts wandering into a carnal region even while your bones were being broken.

"I know you're serious, baby. I never doubt it," I said.

"We're supposed to just sit here?"

"You heard Pimplipper, right? Death. A time to reflect. Who were we? What were we up to? What did we want? Did we get it? How?"

"You tell me."

For me the answer to most of those questions is, I wanted to keep Doris happy. This for a number of reasons. Most superficially, because Doris unhappy was not an appealing prospect. See above. Of course there was more to it than that. For instance, the contradictory satisfaction of setting off the inevitable response: what's she doing with him? I could walk into a gala for one of Doris's many good causes, all the women bedecked in what they took to be glamorous outfits, the men stuffed into

the tuxedo that might have fit them ten years ago, and me in a bespoke suit, the vicuña wool like butter against my skin, a fragrant boutonnière in my lapel, and this with Doris, the magnificent Doris, on my arm. It was like pulling up to a dive bar in a Rolls Royce. Ha! Those tired old bags with their turkey necks and sagging triceps. You might as well have stitched sequins on a wet paper bag in the gutter. Their husbands in ill-considered suits of durable God-knows-what. Where do you get that thing cleaned? A car wash? And then their miserable comb-overs, the untended hairs erupting from their ears, the clodhopper shoes, as if we existed in a world so dark that Antonio Meccariello had never put needle to calfskin within his Italian workshop. Sure, sure, what does she see in him? Trust me, buddy. Something she obviously does not see in you. Whose arm is she clinging to?

Leaving some questions regarding what I was actually up to. Doris had a fervent desire to right the world. She took the many inequities personally, as problems that could be solved, or at least ameliorated, if only the righteous were engaged and the wicked afflicted. She was equally engaged by either prospect. She could happily rehab your home, or, depending, she could just as happily burn it to the ground. Your choice.

Because I loved her, I helped her where I could. Money, when necessary. Connections, because I had them — old school pals who had ascended in corporate life or politics, my brothers in the local Catholic mafia. Ideas, when she wandered down a dead end by herself. Sometimes Doris' passions and hatreds left her blinded. My gaze was cooler and therefore — frightening thought — my plots and plans were sometimes more cunning. And if you will tolerate this additional bit of self-assessment, because I was not so emotionally engaged with the actual matter under discussion, I came across as less judgmental and inflamed. I could banter, joke, tell you with apparent sincerity that I could see your point even if I thought your point would only be made by a demented clod.

Like Jesus Christ himself, I believed that the poor would always be with us. To that I added the belief that crime and criminals were civilization's constant companions, that litterbugs would always delight in heaving their McDonald's wrappers upon my boulevard, that slumlords would always run

slums, that their parade of tenants — always just a half-step removed from an eviction order — would believe that two in the morning was an excellent time to conduct a shouted argument in the street outside my bedroom window. Doris saw her many activities as efforts to actually resolve society's dilemmas, whereas I viewed my participation in her schemes as existential exercises. I felt an obligation to march side-by-side with her, not because I thought the world would actually change, but that hopeless activity was the ticket price associated with life. And, more significantly, because I wanted to continue to march along with Doris, the benefits thereof being so profound.

Oh, the benefits! Where to start? Not with the carnal dimension, since who won't see that as caddish? Though trust me, I'll get to that. Outside our home Doris was alternately Joan of Arc and Mother Teresa. But close the door behind her and a different person took over. She was all about the home and hearth. She trafficked in spreadsheets, recipe boxes, cook books. esoteric devices, strategies and tools that I would never have known to exist. For instance, consider her cleaning list, neatly affixed to the refrigerator door. Left margin labeled TASKS. These including (but not limited to, not by a long shot) scrubbing under radiators, dusting tops of picture frames, stripping and waxing floors, cleaning bathroom grout, washing all windows, scraping and repainting window sills, removing bugs and grime from light fixtures, washing kitchen walls and ceiling. The horizontal border being a timeline of the months in a year, displaying at a glance when the tasks were to be completed. Weekly, monthly, quarterly and so on. Like a school kid, she would mark the jobs with a gold star as she knocked them off.

Was I so much a fool that I let her take this on by herself? Did I say, *Baby, this is a state of hygiene to which you aspire, but I'm not that kind of clean freak?* For the love of sweet Jesus, no, no, no! I had my own apron, my own rubber gloves, buckets and sponges that I set aside for my personal use. True enough that if she had passed before me, and I had been left alone in our gleaming house, an immediate descent into squalor would have been underway. This sort of punctiliousness was not my style in any sector, excepting haberdashery. But for Doris, for her consideration of me as a

partner, ha, I would have crammed my face under the radiators to lick the floorboards clean. I would have polished the silver with my nose on a daily basis.

And I have yet to say a word about her cooking. She was the type of gal who could open the refrigerator door, do a quick eyeball inventory of the contents therein, and then, look out. Dinner was on its way. I am not talking about frozen this and processed that. Whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables; fish caught by actual *pescadors*, not planet rapers running factory fisheries; meat from farmers with whom she had a personal relationship. We'd drive out into the countryside in our little convertible, bouncing down a rutted country road, the farm dogs leaping and growling at the open window upon our arrival, the beasts close enough to bite off your nose, the farmer himself hustling out to yell, *Down, Cujo, down!* And Doris received like the very Queen of England, done up in her straw hat and ridiculous bib overalls, which nonetheless suggested that there was quite a bit going on beneath the faded denim. We filled the trunk with packaged shanks and roasts and chops, sausages, pork belly, organ meat, whatever, and dashed back to the city. There my love would construct another of her spreadsheets, with a schedule for what should be eaten when, so that nothing should ultimately languish at the bottom of our freezer.

Alright. I know I am piling on now. I recognize that I am creating a portrait of a creature who can barely be thought of to inhabit this world. And yet. After we had cleaned and shopped and cooked. After we had pushed back from the table. After we had lit our fireplace. After we had sat down in our appropriately named loveseat with our glass of sherry or scotch. There my arm draped over her shoulder, her hand rested on my thigh. The heat billowed from her. She was like a potion cooked up by a shaman. Then, after we had blabbered about our respective days and yawned a time or two, we toddled from the love seat to our love nest, our cozy bedroom with its thick curtains, the candles on the bedside tables sufficiently dim to rule out any notion of reading, the duvet as light as a cloud, trapping that intoxicating body heat within, this with the waft of perfume both commercial and naturally occurring from those regions — so close at hand! — of my love. Imagine the prowling

hands, that nibble at my ear, her leg thrown over mine, my own fervent explorations. I'd say that you can guess the rest, but that is probably not true.

As an aside, Doris and I would sometimes stroll through our poor neighborhood at night, when the light from those living rooms, one after another, spilled out onto the street, and we would speculate about the lives within. Love? Bare tolerance? Active contempt? Murderous rage? What percentage per category? Move that into the bedroom now and wonder, how often was the sexual congress of our neighbors a joyful explosion, an all-but-heart-stopping rapture? How often was it an obligation, or an aggression just short of rape? No way to know. Yet another book not revealed by its cover. But within our hide-away? Oh, excuse me while I catalog our structural improvements. It became necessary to affix eight-inch lag bolts that connected the head of the bed frame to the wall studs, this to prevent it from wobbling and banging dangerously to and fro. Similarly, I reinforced the joints with heavy duty glue and steel plates to provide a stable surface for our exertions. These concluding with Doris— glazed with sweat, hair tangled, a bright blush spread across her breast — snoring with her head upon my chest, the inevitable stream of drool escaping from her sweet lips.

I see I've gotten a bit off the track, my intention here merely to say that despite the differences in how Doris and I looked at the world and our place upon it, I was not such a fool to insist that she was wrong and I was right. In light of all else, she was right enough in so many instances that I was pleased to concede the point, so as not to topple my tower of bliss.

Thus the good old days, the remnants to be disbursed according to the terms of our will. Which would no doubt set off a battle. I was the end of my line, leaving only my larcenous sisters and a nest of cousins in San Antonio who might try to get their mitts in the till. Add it all up — the house, the IRAs, the crypto, mutual funds, cash in the bank — it came to about five mil. The nasty surprise for my siblings, Donna and Deedee, was that we left them only an aggravating appetizer, not the full buffet. One hundred thou apiece, enough to buy a Tesla and a couple bags of popcorn. This was more

of a taunt than a gift. They didn't need the money, not that you could tell them that. One was married to a cosmetic surgeon, the other to a dentist. They had money to burn, which they did with alacrity.

The sisters and I had a dust-up while settling our father's estate. He'd had the foresight to buy hundreds of acres of cornfield that, upon construction of an adjacent freeway, became the equivalent of a goldmine. Not unreasonably, this fortune was split three ways upon his death. The girls argued that given the lowball nature of my life, the historical oppression of all females, and their own extravagant needs, their shares should be larger. That no one in a position of authority agreed did nothing to dampen their malevolence. No more invitations to Christmas dinner for me! This being a blessing, since neither was capable of boiling an egg.

After that two hundred came off the top for Donna and Deedee, the remaining four point eight mil went to various do-gooder ends, plus a taste for the Padre Shichtenbauer. Affordable housing, bee habitat, friends of the parks, pals of the library, bikeways, sport programs for felonious youth, your normal run of hopeless causes. No doubt there would be some squabbling there as well. Another one for the not-my-problem file. To me the money might as well have been dust in the wind.

The two things that left me with a pang of departure were the convertible and our house. Little Bruno next door is in for a surprise when learns he is the inheritor of a two-seat convertible sports car. Odds are he'll drive like an idiot and kill himself, but he'll have a good time doing it. He wasn't the brightest kid you'll ever meet. I doubt he ever read the back of a cereal box, let alone literature. But he had the decency to address me as Mister Fatman, and would often shovel my walk, saying, "Don't want to see you flop over dead, Mister Fatman. Snow shoveling, that be the end of many a big man. Tick, tock, boom." For his troubles I'd dig out a twenty, which surely went for weed or beer.

As for the house, it would become the new home of a young couple across the street, they being touchingly lovey-dovey, pushing a pram that held their bug-eyed baby. I liked their look, even if their kid seemed more comical than adorable. We'd had a few brief encounters, in which I was addressed as "sir." Bonus points there. They were renting from a noted slumlord, Laxman Luther, a rent-gouger

and friend to the rat and cockroach. They deserved better. I could feature them on the bed that Doris and I shared. Once little Bug Eyes was old enough to sleep through the night, they might put it to good use. I took them for people who knew something about passion.

But for now I am leaned up against that limestone wall, my fine vicuña suit dusty and damp, while Doris eyeballs me. “If I’m hearing right, it’s not completely over for us. There’s still a chance to be involved.”

“Involved,” I said. “In what exactly? We’re dead. Maybe we could run for the Cemetery Commission, if there is such a thing. Represent the bardo constituency. But I don’t see a slot on the school board.”

“I’m thinking more tactical strike. Enemies of the people. Friends of humanity. Give them what they deserve.”

“Assuming we can get out to do it.”

“We should do what they tell us. Mix it up with our fellow inmates. See what they know.”

As if on cue, I heard a scraping and dragging noise from down the hall, then a rap on our tarp doorway.

“Looks like you two are ready for the next thing,” Marge said.

“How do you know that?” Doris asked.

Marge shrugged and offered us a knowing grin.

“You have the place bugged or what?”

“Yes and no. It’s not what you think.”

“You want to explain that?”

“Let’s stick to the basics for now. What you said about your fellow inmates, that’s a good idea. Get up and let’s go.”

Again we followed her along the maze of corridors.

...

“What do you call this?” Doris asked. “A cafeteria?”

“You could,” Marge said.

“Coffee cups. Plates. Silver.”

“Stainless, actually.”

“Still. But what’s cooking?”

“Nothing. Ever.”

“So why bother?”

“It’s how it is. Have you ever been anywhere where there aren’t all sorts of rules? No shoes, no shirt, no service? Other things that are simply true. Water flows downhill. The sun rises in the east.”

“Usually you put a plate on the table, people expect food.”

“Not here. Everybody asks the same thing at first. But nobody is actually hungry.”

“True enough,” I said. “Death. A great weight loss program.”

“Not really,” said Marge. “Nothing changes. The way you look now, that’s how you’ll look then.”

“Then?”

“Next week. Next century. Next millennium. Assuming.”

“What?”

“That nothing changes. It might. We don’t know. Tomorrow, everything could be different. Probably won’t be. Who can say?”

“But why not food? Make the time go, if nothing else.”

“Maybe that’s the point. Not to make the time go. One more piece of evidence that this isn’t heaven and it isn’t hell. Mostly it’s mildly annoying. Bad lighting. High humidity. Stale air. Just a little bit too warm, don’t you think? And of course the food situation. The memory of food. A decent

salad. Tomatoes warm from the sun. Basil, just plucked. Bits of bacon scattered over it. A hard boiled egg.”

“Now you’re talking,” I said.

“Forget about it,” said Marge. “It’s not going to happen. As far as I know. Though it could. But it probably won’t.”

...

“You’re back,” said Sean, the middle manager. He presided from the head of the table. “You remember us, right? DeShaun. Toua. Carlita.”

“Multi-ethnic. That’s what we’re about,” said DeShaun. “Used to be all your underworld cut up. Brothers be here, Asians be there, all the Latinos doing their thing, white man got his own huddle, figuring how to stay on top. Still pretty much that way, but you also got your new-style dead folk. Dead but woke. Figuring we gotta work together.”

“To do what?” Doris asked.

“Many things,” said Toua. He looked nearly alive, except for his hands and arms. His polyester suit was melted up to his elbows. The skin on his forearms flapped loosely when he gestured.

“You don’t mind me asking, what happened?” I nodded toward his arms.

“Misunderstanding.” He sighed. “Girlfriend. She misunderstands. After the stabbing, sets fire to mattress.”

“She stabbed you and set you on fire? That’s extreme, Toua. Whatever happened to counseling?”

“Last thing I remember, her brother squirts me with fire extinguisher.”

“Hell of a way to go,” said Carlita. She looked like she was on Doris’ wavelength. Light on diplomacy, no shortage of assertion. She had that Frida Kahlo monobrow that gave her a fierce expression. The crooked set to her lips said, *Lookout, irony ahead*. “Bad luck wearing a ten-dollar

suit to a fire. You're lucky the whole thing didn't go up like a can of gas. You think you look bad now. You could have ended up like Joan of Arc. Toast."

"She's here?" Doris wondered.

"Used to be," Marge replied. "So people say. Anybody seen her lately?"

"Maybe she gone VIP," said DeShaun. "Moved up. Moved down. No way to know."

"Working together," Marge said. "That's what we were talking about."

"We're building the brand," said Sean. "I said this last time. You got your dead dead. Dragging their feet around — excuse me Marge, figure of speech, sorry. Not up to much of anything. Time slipping through their fingers."

"If they've still got them," said Toua. "Many people, no hands."

"Sorry Toua, Of course. Your limb-impaired dead. Not necessarily dead dead. Not many of them as active as Toua here, but that's another story. Then you've got your self-absorbed dead. They still want to mix it up topside, but they only work on their own files. The boss who wronged them. The abusive spouse. The sainted mother who deserves better. So on and so forth. Little picture versus big picture.

"Then finally, your socially-involved dead. Still want to make a difference."

"That's what we're talking about," DeShaun added. "Up on the ramparts. Down in the trenches. Standing up to the man."

"*Siempre la lucha*," said Carlita. "The slumlord. The boss who cheats you. You got no papers, you can't complain. Same for the car salesman, sells you the lemon. On and on. The running dogs of capitalism. Agents of oppression."

"What can you do about it?" Doris asked. I could practically hear the wheels starting to turn beneath that rubbed off patch of hair. She focused on Sean, who looked back at her with more than casual interest.

"We got methods," said DeShaun.

“Proven techniques. Maybe not one hundred percent successful. You get your outright failures, your collateral damage. It’s not all perfect. We’re feeling our way. Things happen. Like any job.”

“What was your business?” I asked.

“Ironically, you could say. Insurance. Life, auto, home, what have you. Left a pile for the wife and kids. So she’s loaded. Spends her days on match.com, hooking up with gigolos. No shortage of takers. Good looking woman, plenty of dough. Only problem is the kids, but you got enough money, it solves that problem. I’m not saying there are no issues. For instance, who’s riding my Harley now? Some dude named Ralph. The wife’s arms wrapped around him. All of a sudden she’s born to be wild.”

“You want to get even?” Doris wondered, a note of skepticism in her voice.

“No, no. She cried at the funeral. I was more or less cold in the grave before she started dating. A couple months passed before she was fucking Ralph. There’s only so much you can expect. I’m just saying, death wasn’t a great career move. I had it okay, topside.”

“Looks like you could have had the open casket at least. That’s something,” Doris said. “You’re in one piece.”

If there were a GQ for the dead, Sean could have been in it given a change in wardrobe. Good jawline, lots of black hair swept straight back vampire style, blue eyes that would have given Frank Sinatra a run for his money. Good posture, flat stomach.

“So what happened?” I asked.

“Nothing. Everything. I was getting my teeth cleaned. Of all things. Nobody wants to do it. You got to do it. Hygienist yammering at me, digging around at my gums. Second to last words I heard on earth were, ‘Wider please.’ Before I could open my mouth, my head exploded.”

“Exploded?”

“Stroke. Blood vessel in my brain went kablooeey. Hygienists, I can now say from experience, are not necessarily set up to deal with medical emergencies. She jammed her fingers in my mouth, saying

— last words now — “Wider please sir,” again, louder this time. By the time she figured out I wasn’t just non-compliant, I was as good as gone. Some chest thumping. Ambulance ride to the hospital. All of it theater. They could have spent the time pumping on a rock. Would have done as much good.

“Could have died getting a blow job from my lovely wife. Could have died on my Harley. Could have died in the stands watching my kid play ball. But no. Croaked in a dentist’s chair, getting my gums poked by a hygienist who could have starred in *Marathon Man*. A sadist. Not what I imagined.”

“Yeah,” said Doris. “I didn’t feature death by watermelon.”

“If it’s not tragic it’s absurd.”

“You’ve got some energy left,” Doris observed.

“The energy department, no problem there. Topside, I was VP in the Chamber of Commerce. GOP delegate. On the mayor’s commission for this and that. A go-to guy. Friends, enemies, hangers on, suck ups. The range of human relationships. Being dead, it doesn’t mean all that evaporates. I still want to be involved. There being limits. But it’s not like the road is completely washed out.”

“Give me an example,” Doris said. “What you’ve done.”

“Powerful shit,” said De Shaun.

“Maybe it is not smart to say?” Toua rubbed his hands together nervously, which made a dandruff-like mess of loose skin.

“What they going to do? Arrest us?” said DeShaun. “Ha, man got no pull with the dead. Capital punishment my ass. See where it gets you. You dead, you do what you want to do.”

“No rules at all?” Get Doris excited and she takes on a certain look. Her eyes widen, her lips twitch without quite turning into a smile.

“Maybe there are rules,” Sean said. “I haven’t heard about them. What do you say, Marge?”

She shrugged. “Consequences, possibly. You step over the edge and the higher powers take offense. More of a case-by-case situation. To the best of my knowledge.”

“The higher powers? You got something less vague?” I asked.

“My thought is that something is running this show. I mean, it exists. We’re here. We do what we do. Sometimes people vanish. Your Joan of Arc situation. Though, as I say, she could still be stumbling around. Maybe in a different quadrant. Not much way to tell. Not like there’s a *Daily Dead* newspaper delivered cave to cave. Lots of speculation, assumptions, wild guessing, moronic assertions. Just like topside. The crazier the idea, the more certainty from the nutcase promoting it.”

“Tell her about the grocery store dude,” DeShaun said. “There you got yourself a case of the people’s justice.”

Sean, DeShaun and Toua laughed and whooped with the memory. “He was very bad,” said Toua.

“But the motherfucker got his ass fixed proper.”

“Okay,” said Sean once they settled down. “Everybody here, they’ve got a story, right?” He swept an arm out toward the crowded hall. Hard to tell the size of the crowd. Hundreds for sure. Thousands possibly. The noise of their conversation was tough on the ears. The dead had a lot to say.

“Big grocery store. Asian joint. Always packed. Immigrants buying canned mackerel, hundred pound bags of rice, frozen camel meat, what have you. Everything cheap, cheap, cheap, because...”

“Asian immigrants, very poor,” said Toua.

“Except for the rich ones,” DeShaun added.

“Let’s not get into that right now,” Sean cautioned. “Let’s keep this on the all-men-are-brothers level.

“You got your entrepreneurs,” he continued. “Hard workers. Maybe they operate off a different social construct. Not necessarily benevolent bosses. Maybe more concerned about providing for their immediate family. Might not see a Cambodian or a Karen family as part of their expanded tribe. Which can lead to,,,”

“Maybe you turn into their slave,” said Toua. “You think it’s just a job. And then, something else.”

“Let's say we were aware of that situation. Gentleman named Hung. Big family man. Eight kids. Army of grandkids. Works like a guy who swam across the Mekong with machine gun fire splashing around him. Which he did. Seven, eight years in refugee camps. Gets here finally. Freezes his ass in winter because what does he know about winter? Crouching at the bus stop in clothes that are okay in Thailand but not so great at twenty below with snow up to your eyeballs. Janitor job for starters. Saves enough to open a corner store. Works like a dog. Same for the wife and kids. Buys the place next door. Expands. Buys an abandoned Piggly Wiggly grocery. Filthy dump at first but eventually he gets with the program. Fresh paint, floors cleaned and waxed nightly. Conforms to the health standards, some of them anyway, so you probably won't die if you buy fresh fish at the counter. Everything's good, right?”

“God bless America,” I said. “Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.”

“God bless God damn America,” said DeShaun. “You want to sing *The Star Spangled Banner* together? *This Land is Your Land*? Because it sure as hell never was mine. Guys like Hung, just the latest in a long line of thieves and hustlers. The man always be the man. The face be different but the heart? The same.”

“Let's stick to the specifics now,” said Sean. “We're not fighting capitalism at the moment.”

“Maybe you aren't,” DeShaun countered.

“We look for our common ground.”

“We ignore a lot.”

“We do what we can. Ear to the ground. Eye on the prize. Picking the right battles.”

DeShaun chuckled at this. “We did bring it to brother Hung.”

“I don't get it,” said Doris. “Sounds like a hard working guy. A success story. What's wrong with that?”

“Nothing, nothing at all. Provided you pay semi-decent. You’ve got your work week and your weekends. Health insurance, that’s a nice touch. Vacation time. Just because you suffered, that doesn’t mean everybody you touch should suffer too.”

“I thought you said you were Republican,” Doris observed. “Not Samuel Gompers.”

“I’m a business man. Not a slave driver. Let’s get back to Hung. That being the point. He all but lives at the store. Same for the wife, the kids. It’s not a job. It’s their life. Hung never stops hearing the bullets slapping around him on the Mekong. For him, everything is always at risk. It could all be gone overnight. True enough. His solution is to press his nose harder against the grindstone.

“He looks around at his workers. Mostly he hires Mexicans, because he’s figured out if they don’t have papers they won’t be running to the cops or the health inspectors or the department of this or that. Needless to say, they don’t work as hard as he does. He doesn’t pay minimum wage. A hate-hate relationship. Eight hours and they’re done. Forty hours and that’s it for the week. Hung simmers, exhorts, threatens. Finally he sets his eyes on a handful of slackers. Kids, second generation immigrants. Raised by strivers like Hung but American teenagers at heart. All about the cellphone, the video game, Instagram. They speak English, their parents not so much. The kids translate, explain, figure out the bills, deal with the government. They think they’re entitled to respect. All Hung sees is a bunch of Mexican twerps. Not his people. So he docks their pay.”

“Steals their wages,” says DeShaun.

“Another way of looking at it. He lays the most miserable jobs on them. Cleaning the grease out of the vent fans in the deli. Scrubbing out the walk-in cooler and freezer. They got a problem? He can solve it by calling ICE if that’s what they want. Hung feels he’s still not getting through, so he steps it up a notch. Starts locking some of them in the freezer until the job is done to his satisfaction. But of course he’s never satisfied. And he’s got a thousand things on his mind. So eventually he forgets to let them out.”

“Morning comes, Hung got three popsicles on his hands,” DeShaun said.

“Solid waste problem. Illegal immigrants. No papers. Parents going to run to the authorities? Probably not. What if they’re simply gone? Disappeared? Maybe run back to Mexico. Had enough of life en los Estados Unidos. Taco time in Ciudad Juarez. So Hung loads them in a delivery van and drives to hunting land he owns. Builds a funeral pyre, turns his popsicles to ash. Digs a deep hole, buries the ashes. Covers the hole with leaves and duff. Anybody stops to ask about the kids, he shrugs, says he doesn’t know anything. Kids. Here one day, gone the next. What do you expect? No respect. Unreliable. Better they’re in Mexico, if that’s where they are.”

“How did you figure all this out?”

“Our crew. It’s not just me and DeShaun and Toua. We got all this from Segundo. Another one of our posse. He’ll be around. Related to one of the kids. He was keeping tabs. Of two minds. The kids were lazy little jerks, he said. But still. They were kids. Hung could have fired them. Or he could have traded a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work.”

“Tried to reason with the man,” said DeShaun. “Said he didn’t need to bargain with no ghosts.”

“Hung wasn’t convinced we were real,” said Sean. “We’re not always convinced we’re real, but that’s another story. We showed up after hours. The three of us and Segundo. Segundo being a big guy with tattoos and a hole in his forehead. A nightmare. Hung figuring this is the product of his fevered mind. Or he’s haunted. Which is a way of looking at it. Lot of time spent trying to deal with that in a reasonable manner. Until Segundo is no longer feeling reasonable. He grabs Hung by the neck with one hand, slams him against the wall a couple times and then asks Hung if he thinks that he, Segundo, is in fact not real. He turns Hung around so he can see the blood on the wall, wipes some on Hung’s face, tells him there’s more where that came from.”

“Now we starting to have a conversation, so we think,” said DeShaun.

“We offer him a few options. Basic business practices. Fifteen an hour minimum. Two weeks vacation. Health insurance. Marge drew up a HR package. Grievance procedures. Mediation. Sick leave. Staffing levels. Standard stuff.”

“He doesn’t get with program,” said Toua. “Very bad. Lot of argument. Can’t afford this. Can’t afford that.”

“Point out to the brother that maybe he can’t afford the Mercedes in the lot either.”

“We observe that some of our colleagues were active Teamsters, and though they are, unfortunately, deceased, they would still be interested in the fate of their living worker brothers and sisters. Interested in bringing fair labor practices to his operation.”

“Union-busting lawyers. Says he’ll hire them. Says he knows plenty. Tells us we won’t get anywhere,” DeShaun said.

“Segundo says, ‘ha ha.’ Picks him up by the neck again,” Toua recalled. “Opens the refrigerator door. Says, ‘Best you cool off, compadre. Think about our offer. We’ll be back. Eventually.’ He drops Hung and closes the door.”

“Most times that’s enough. You got four ghosts who show up. They tell you what to do, you do it. Not so hard to figure out. You’ve seen *The Christmas Carol*, you know how it goes. But then you throw in the cultural component, Hung probably wasn’t a big Dickens fan. Could be he just didn’t know. Still. We didn’t figure he’d have any bars on his phone in the cooler. He managed to get through to the wife, who sprung him. We go back and there he is with two security goons. Guns. Uniforms. Badges. I don’t know what he’s thinking anymore.”

“He figuring what?” DeShaun asked. “He gonna kill us? Be too late for that.”

“Segundo very unhappy,” said Toua.

““The guns. The badges. Rent-a-cops,” Sean added. “It triggered Segundo.”

“Trauma,” said Toua. “Body remembers. Even dead body.”

“Segundo had border experiences. Let’s put it that way.”

“Brother goes flippo. Just sayin’, not blamin’.”

“An unfortunate, avoidable end.”

“What are you saying?” Doris asked.

“Twist off,” said DeShaune.

“What? Like a bottle?”

“More or less. If you figure everything from the neck down is the bottle, and your head is the cap,” said Sean. “A real mess. It’s a classic underworld move. Discouraged. But sometimes...”

“Makes the point,” said DeShaune.

“We did a follow-up with the wife, once they got things cleaned up. Probably should have dealt with her all along. A much more reasonable individual. Especially in light of Hung’s demise.”

“You think we’ll be seeing him down here?” I wondered.

“No telling,” said Sean. “Marge?”

She shrugged.

“Mister Hung shows up, he be carrying his head in his hands,” DeShaun said with a chortle. “Be good for laughs. Mischief. Running off with the Hung head. We dead, but we still got our sense of humor.”

...

We followed Marge back to the honeymoon suite. “I don’t see how you find your way,” I said to her.

“Guided by voices,” she said.

“You’re serious?”

“Halfway. You get a sense. The trick is, don’t overthink. Trust your feet. Or foot. Logic only gets you so far.”

“How’s that different?” Doris asked.

“Topside, you’ve got your rules, your regulations, your statutes. People still kill each other, cheat each other, lie, swindle, what have you. There’s the pretense that it’s under control. Regulated. Here?”

No cops, no prosecutors, no court of appeals. You can't look it up. You've got to deal with what you've got. Ambiguity. So. Maybe deception is not necessarily wrong. Maybe lying is justified. The punishment does not necessarily need to match the crime. Steal candy from a baby and maybe you're in for a twist off. Depending. We're making it up out of nothing. Out of how we feel. Of course not everyone loves that. You've got a crowd that loves a sense of order. Or at least the illusion thereof."

Doris gave me a look. So did Marge. I shuffled my feet in the sand. "I've got to choose?" I said.

"It's not like that," said Marge. "You've got to..." She paused at this, searching for the word. "*Become*. Become what you are. You don't decide. In the end you know."

I hadn't taken Marge for a spiritual type. More of a gal Friday from one of those fifties film romps. Organized. Pragmatic. But always, finally, a moment when she pulls off those rhinestone-encrusted glasses and you realize, wow, she's a looker, and maybe a little round-heeled at that.

Just then we heard her name called from somewhere in the gloom. Pimplipper emerged, gabbing with another corpse.

"Doris!" he said. "My favorite ghost!"

Marge rolled her eyes. "He says that to all the girls."

"Ghouls," said Pimplipper's companion. "All the ghouls." He laughed as if this were hilarious.

"Fatman! The accommodations to your satisfaction?"

"You need an answer right now?"

"Don't worry. It's not really a question. You know Duke Black?"

"From the news. Sure. You're both in the same racket, right? Springing the guilty."

"I respect my colleague," said Black. "But it's not exactly the same. Pimplipper was a man of the people. Your meth dealer, your wife beater, cop killer. His bread and butter. The lowly miscreant type."

“Entitled to the best defense money can buy, as I always said. Cash, preferably. Though I was known to take, say, vacation property. Luxury vehicles. I was just getting into crypto, and then boom, game over.”

“Whereas I swung corporate,” said Black. Like Pimlipper, his physique was out of the robber baron catalog. Towering, broad in the shoulder, broader in the belly, like Santa Claus without the ho ho ho. All of this packed inside a suit that discreetly whispered Savile Row. He held a black cane — ebony from the looks of it — with a silver skull at the handle. The same Pimlipperian glint in the eye, as if Black had pulled something over on the world. Which was no doubt the case.

“My people were, oh, less colorful. Your oil company honcho with a burst pipeline situation and a couple hundred acres of despoiled wilderness. Execs from a company allegedly pumping toxic chemicals into the aquifer. Baby poisoners. That sort of thing.”

“My guys harmed their fellow citizens on a one-to-one basis. Retail level criminals. Whereas Black’s people...”

“True. They operated on a broader scale.”

“The Chinese would have beheaded them in a packed soccer stadium,” said Pimlipper.

“But here, they got the type of fair trial that only money can buy...”

“And they walk. And take the severance package. And cash out their stock options. Buy some land, call it a park, name it after themselves,” said Pimlipper. “At worst do a few months or years in a Club Fed.”

“Let’s say there’s the possibility of enjoying a second act. God bless America.”

“You’re still in the justice business then?” Doris asked. Her tone put quotation marks around “justice.”

Black sighed. “I’m making up. To an extent. Some of the things I did... The people I represented...”

“All entitled to a trial,” said Pimlipper. “Let the aggrieved make their case.”

“There’s justice and then there’s justice,” Black allowed. “On those days when we can roam topside, I do what I can. Who knows if it makes a difference. If there is such a thing as making up.”

“You’ve got... what’s the word here?” Doris wondered. “Co-workers? A posse? A gang?”

“Fellow travelers, how’s that? It’s not for everybody. You get the tender-hearted. The bloodthirsty. Everything in between. You want to interview, Marge can set up a time.”

“Interview?” said Doris.

“Like I said. It’s not for everyone. You two should talk it over. Decide how you want to spend whatever this is. Could be eternity. Could be the next full moon.”

Marge pulled that notebook from her dress pocket. “Okay,” she said. “You’re scheduled.”

“For when?” I asked.

“You’re busy?” Like Pimplipper, Marge had a repertoire of eye rolls. This one was extravagant.

“How will we know when to show up?” I said.

“No worries. Mr. Black will come to you.”

Black gave me and Doris a two-fingered salute and locked his arm in Pimplipper’s. He poked his cane in the sand as they toddled down the corridor.

...

How much time passed? Impossible to say. The only light came from those flickering candles. The buzz of distant conversation was constant. No morning bugle. No tolling church bells. No rush hour traffic. Just time stretching into what might be infinity. Or not.

There being no other furniture in the honeymoon suite, Doris and I sprawled in the hammock. Or, I sprawled and Doris piled on top of me. Maybe we slept. It was hard to know. I woke up with a puddle of her drool on my shoulder, as usual. I listened to her snore. It was all touching in a way.

Her lips moved, like she was talking to herself. I wondered often if Doris ever turned off. Of course you never know what anyone else is thinking, but with so many people you believe either you're close enough, or you don't much care. With Doris, however, I felt that the levels of complexity were geological in nature, like Earth itself. That layer of crust. Leaves and grass on the surface. Topsoil. Sand. Clay. Bedrock. The deep, buried mantle, hot and hard. Then the core, where the molten iron raged at ten thousand degrees. I am not saying that her presentation was a deception. You fooled yourself. Goggle eyed, you took in what was there — that cascade of hair, those irresistible eyes, everything that was going on below her neck — and then she would smile, and rest her hand lightly on your arm, and you would imagine that an angel had descended through the grace of a benevolent god who had suddenly taken an interest in your happiness. I repeat, this was not a lie perpetrated by my love; it was, in part, who she was. A pleaser, superficially at least. A charmer who used what she had to get what she wanted. Generally it worked. But sometimes — too frequently, by Doris' own estimation — the subject of her attention believed that beneath that layer of charm and beauty was a vast amount of vapor. And so, for instance, she might be describing, pleasantly enough, why that truck filled with semi-conductors did, in fact, need to be in Lansing by noon tomorrow. And quite possibly she would be met with a predictable number of dodges. "Why, let me explain, sweetheart, our situation here..." or, "How 'bout next time I'm in your shop I buy you a drink and lay out what is..." or, "You don't need to trouble yourself with all the details, but what I'm saying is..." So now, unknowingly, some ignorant, paternalistic, condescending, misogynist chump was lowering himself into the Earth's mantle, where the temperature was lethal. And still, Doris might favor him again with that smile, possibly with her incisors exposed and a narrowing of those lovely green eyes, amidst the suggestion that if the semiconductors did not appear in Lansing on or before the contractually agreed date and time of delivery, well, the matter of payment and the future of an ongoing relationship would be very much in doubt. Say now that the response was, "Well, honey, what I'm attempting to explain here..." Or, "No need to get our undies in a bundle..." This perhaps

expressed with a huff of indignation, or the suggestion that he, always he, was explaining to a twelve-year-old who had, for whatever bizarre reason, risen to the position occupied by Doris. Who had doubtless slept her way to an unwarranted, unreasonable outpost of authority, and was now attempting to crush his balls. Not understanding completely that his balls were not only to be crushed, but were about to be fed to the dogs, those invisible dogs already baring their fangs and scratching at his legs, even though he had not consciously noted their presence. Next he might experience a sentence or two larded with surprising language. As in, “I wonder if you believe this line of bullshit...” And, if not met with immediate understanding of the nature of the conversation, descending to, “The sense I get is you believe you’re talking to some stupid cunt...” Followed by, “I will nail your dick to a fencepost outside an interstate weigh station and the entirety of the logistics community will know you for the twaddling motherfucker you are...” To be followed up with a real-world version of exactly that. Doris had a reputation. A community. For better and worse, she could make things happen.

This was my love, drooling upon the shoulder of my fine but increasingly filthy suit.

I wondered if I would ever have reason to remove it again. I would not say Doris was warm against my body. On the other hand, she wasn’t cold either. More like room temperature. Given the rivulet of drool, some bodily functions were still at work. I gave Doris a gentle shove so I could get at my belly. I gave it a thump. It wasn’t quite what it had been. Not like smacking a timpani, but then again I was doing better than Casper. I wasn’t utterly insubstantial. I sucked in my stomach and pushed past my belt. Anything going on below? Hmmm. Hard to say.

The movement awakened Doris, who murmured, “What are you up to there, Tommy?”

“Checking on the equipment. Wondering.”

“Let me give you a hand.”

Ahhh.

Have I made this clear? Doris is a passionate personality, not a half-way, good-enough type of gal. She gets going on something, anything, and it consumes her attention, or at least that's the face she puts upon it. She pulled my hand out of my trousers and replaced it with hers. A caress here, a squeeze there, some juggling of the various parts. The jangling of the belt buckle, the zip of the zipper, tugging at this and that. Then a seismic shift in our hammock as she positioned herself between my legs. What remained of that pile of hair fell against my bare thighs. "Looks like we're getting somewhere," she whispered.

"Lucky. Do they have Cialis in the underworld? Would it work?"

"Let's worry about that if we have to."

She bent over me, ran her tongue over her lips, opened her mouth. My thought was this: There is a God who is not an unyielding brute. One who leaves us with bits of happiness even in these straits, so that we are not consumed by despair.

But before Doris could act further, there was a rattle at the plastic tarp that made up our doorway. "Lovebirds!" Duke Black stuck his head into the honeymoon suite. "Looks like I'm interrupting. But never mind. Plenty of time for that later. Fatman, pull up your pants. It's time for our chat."

...

Pimplipper waited outside the portal. At first glance you'd think, same suit, same guy. Twins? Oddly, on closer inspection Pimplipper was the more sophisticated package. His shaved head gleamed, even in the dull light. He probably went thirty or forty pounds lighter than Black. That was like comparing seals lounging on a pier; some are bigger, some are smaller, but they're all blobs. Nonetheless, advantage, Pimplipper. Pimplipper's shining skull gave him the appearance, menacingly, of a six-foot tall dick, whereas Black's tonsure — the white hairs erupting at wild angles — spoke mostly of neglect. Beside Pimplipper's ultra-white choppers, Black looked like a product of the

English dental system. The bags hung heavy beneath his eyes. You'd guess Black specialized in DUI, unlawful detainers, minor assault cases, et cetera, given his presentation. It was a testament to his conniving, his brilliance, that his clients overlooked the externals and his ridiculous hourly rate in favor of the results.

"Pull up a pipe," said Black, gesturing with his cane at the sweating black cylinder that ran down the middle of the channel. He and Pimplipper stood facing us as if we were school kids in line for a lecture.

"You had a chance to talk?" Black asked. "Some figuring about your nature? Your desires?"

"I think we fell asleep," Doris said.

"Ha, ha. You call that sleeping, then Fatman is a very fortunate individual."

"We're both lucky," she said with a straight face.

At that Pimplipper and Black exchanged a glance, chuckled.

Then Black said, "Seriously now, back to the big question. How do you want to live? Not that you're exactly living. But still. What do you hope to accomplish?"

"Remind me of the options," I said.

"You've got to look into your heart here, Fatman. The truth is, you've always been choosing. Every day is a choice, is it not?"

"You could volunteer at the food shelf. You could steal candy from a baby. You could give some jerk on the freeway the finger. You could stop and wave kids across the street at the corner. And these are just the little things. Yin, yang, it's everywhere my friend."

Pimplipper took a step closer to where Doris and I sat. "My esteemed colleague is laying out the black/white, good/evil view of the world. But you also got your shades of gray. Those situations where there is no easy answer."

"Truth," said Black. "If everything were straightforward, I never could have charged eight hundred an hour. Complexity. That's where the money is."

“Was,” said Pimplipper.

“Sadly. But what would we do with money here anyhow?”

“Money always finds a way to make itself useful. You flush it down the toilet, you can still say, hey, I just flushed a mitt full of hundreds. Top that, you underpaid chumps.”

“Let me ask you a question,” Black said to me and Doris. “Pimplipper and I disagree on this. So there is no right answer. Well, there is, since I’m right. For me, in any case. But there is room for disagreement is what I’m saying. Let’s remember back to walking on the face of the earth. The day-to-day. The things you did and didn’t do. Did you believe you could give your head a shake, maybe slap your own cheek, wake up is what I’m saying, and do something that would truly make the world a better place?”

I could feel Doris rearranging herself beside me. She sat up straight. She took a deep breath. “Is that even a question?” she said. I could hear that slight tremble in her voice, indicating that if you pushed further her booster rockets would ignite. “Are you saying it doesn’t make any difference whether I go out and strangle a baby or raise a million bucks for a homeless shelter? Tell me why that is not absurd.”

“I defer again to my learned colleague,” said Black, tapping Pimplipper on the toe with his cane. “The counselor and I have explored the idea. Lucky for him there’s no jury to decide.”

Pimplipper clasped his hands behind his back, pushed out his chest. He was possibly more of an actor than a lawyer, but it worked for him either way. “Doesn’t it depend?” he said, more to Doris than to me. “Today, sure. You strangle a baby, the baby dies, cheated out of years of productive life. A harm to the baby certainly. To society, maybe, maybe not. The world would be a better place if a certain number of babies had been strangled. The trouble being you don’t know which ones. With advances in genetic analysis, maybe we can start strangling the right babies. Save the world a lot of misery. Decrease the client base for my living associates in the legal trade. But that’s the way it is with new technology. Winners. Losers.

“The homeless shelter. Sure. But I call as an expert witness Jesus Christ. ‘The poor are always with us.’ Are they not? Why? A million reasons. They have always and will always exist in their tents and their caves. Wandering the streets with their grocery carts. Have you solved the problem or merely offered the world evidence of your righteousness? Important for your brand, but otherwise not so significant. The world being what it always has been and always will be.

“And I limit myself now to the infinitesimal span of time we occupy. Does it matter now if a Neanderthal clobbered a Homo Sapien? Did the woolly mammoths care? If they did, so what? Should we care more about the Neanderthals than the woolly mammoths? Taking the God’s eye perspective now. The world goes on spinning. The world will forget you and everything you ever did. So tilt against that windmill if you must. But don’t fool yourself into thinking that you’re changing the course of history.”

Pimplipper had wound himself up. He wagged his fingers, threw his arms this way and that. You’d have thought he was standing in a courtroom with twelve jurors, a court reporter, a brace of bailiffs, a rapt audience of family members and hangers-on. Not merely two animated corpses perched on a sewer pipe in a dripping cavern.

“So you just stumble around here in the gloom?” Doris asked. “You wait for... what? The end of time? The chance that you’ll move on to the next thing? Whatever that is. Why not watch paint dry for a thousand years?”

“Who said I’m just wandering the hallways?” said Pimplipper, defensive now. “We get out, as you’ve discovered. We can be the flies on the wall. Sticking our noses here and there. Watching. Listening. Finding out — maybe a little too late, but better late than never! — how our world operated. How it operates. I am opposed to inserting myself. Does your anthropologist find a remote tribe in the hope of remaking them in his image? Does she tell them, hey, this head-shrinking thing, it offends my sensibilities? Of course not. She watches. She learns. It’s self-revelatory. She discovers

things that are in her own heart. She might be disgusted. She might be elated. Either way, her thinking becomes deeper. Nuanced. Open to the possibilities. More profound.”

“So what?” said Doris. “If it’s in service of nothing except your own precious understanding of yourself? Why not just write yourself a memo and burn it? Who cares?”

At this Pimplipper offered a bitter laugh. “You’re not listening. As I said, wait long enough — like six minutes — and who cares regardless what. The world — have I said this? — spins on. More or less as it had before and will continue after. You want to blow your sense of self-importance and righteousness up to something the size of the Hindenburg, go ahead. I am satisfied to educate myself.”

“What did I expect?” Doris retorted. “So the underworld is full of nihilists and narcissists. Big surprise.”

“I object,” said Black. He took a hand to slick back his mess of stray hairs and whacked his cane against the wall for emphasis. “Pimplipper has a point of view. That’s all it is. A point of view. I don’t utterly disagree. The world is the world. Good. Evil. In between. Ha Ha. I describe my people. Characters on the top floor. Two walls worth of windows looking down at the world. What’s that out there? North Dakota? How about the other way? Iowa? Announcing to themselves, ‘Who is the lord and master if not me? Who takes home a hundred million a year? Why is that not really sufficient for a man of my talents? Why is my wife not a few years younger, blonder, thinner, bigger of tit, plumper of ass, more luscious of lip? Is that a wrinkle, a bag? Is she herself not a bag? Should she not be put out to pasture? Replaced with this year’s model? Nonetheless.

“Though my client is the top man on the ladder of late capitalist life, spreading poison of one sort or another — farm chemicals, toxic derivatives, bogus institutions of so-called learning that prey on those pathetic boot-strappers — does he not employ hundreds? Thousands! Do they not support their families thereby? Buying the food to be stuffed in the little baby’s craw, buying plastic gee-gaws that occupy baby for fifteen seconds, buying the minivan and the safety seats in which baby is

transported. Mountains of crap that keep the world humming, all interconnected, an ecosystem in which my man is the queen bee. King bee, actually, but you get my point. It makes a difference, does it not? In the short term, sure, but one generation begets the next. The torch passes. The good my bloated villains inadvertently do in the present resounds through the decades.

“And even if it did not, even if all of life is as meaningless as Pimlipper, my shrivel-hearted companion, maintains, don’t we still have an obligation to the fact of our existence? To tip our hat to the charade, to the notion that we have been created, that our lives might be no more consequential than those of an ant crawling on the floor of the Amazon jungle, but that still that we owe something to the universe? To the fact that life has been breathed into us, and therefore we have incurred a debt? That can never be repaid by our paltry efforts but that we must acknowledge and act, however absurdly, upon?”

“Jesus, Black. For a guy who mostly defended a pack of planet rapers, you’ve got an elevated notion of how you spent your day.”

“Excuse me, Pimlipper. I acknowledge I was working wholesale while you were working retail. Actual rapists and murderers, those were your guys.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Were you listening?”

“As far as I know,” said Pimlipper, “my rapists and murderers were on occasion supporting poor old mom. They weren’t all one hundred percent evil. Shades of gray. Which is where we started on this.”

“I never tooted my horn on this while topside,” said Black, “but I redistributed my share of wealth. The arts, the environment. My money got spent.”

“This assertion that you didn’t, what did you say, toot your horn? Let me refresh your memory. The Black Black Box Theater at the University. The Black Center for Environmental Rejuvenation. I could come up with more. Toot, toot, brother.”

Black gave Pimlipper a scornful glance, then turned to me and Doris again. “I am saying that the Pimlipparian view is not the only possibility. There are those of us who believe there is still good that can be done. Justice that still can be dealt. That the extra-legal methods available to us are more effective than those of our hamstrung, so-called lives. You can choose. You can be one of Pimlipper’s flies on the wall. Basically flies hovering over the shit of life, declaring that you love the smell, that it’s so revelatory, so elevating finally to experience the complexity of a nice fresh pile of shit. Or you can be with us and be a true actor rather than a bug.”

“Nihilists or existentialists, that’s my choice?” said Doris.

“Call it whatever you want,” said Black. “Sit-on-your-ass fly-on-shit or deluded do-gooder engaging in the ultimately meaningless. Though if you ask me, putting the world to rights is not meaningless. We don’t live in geologic time. Fuck the wooly mammoths. Be here, now.”

“Duke,” I said. “You think you know what *now* means in this place? What about *then*? *Then* could mean a thousand years from now, and us still stumbling around in this tunnel. I wish Marge were here. Maybe she’d know.”

“Let’s not overthink it, Fatman. For the record, Marge doesn’t know either. Or, we don’t think she knows. Of course, she might. She’s got the only watch in the underworld that actually works.”

“And it’s a fucking Timex,” said Pimlipper.

“Takes a licking. But forget about the watch. Let’s keep this simple. We can reward the righteous. Afflict the evil. Or do nothing. The point is, you can make a choice.”

I knew that for Doris this was not a question. She would not — could not! — watch the world go by without giving it a poke. She was the type who planted native species in the alley so the bees could get drunk on pollen. She organized the neighbors to circle the block on Saturday mornings to pick up the many and varied forms of trash — the cigarillo and popsicle wrappers from the convenience store down the street, the bags of McDonald’s trash strewn by litterbugs, the tires and mattresses and sofas hurled by the slobs who couldn’t be troubled to make a trip to the dump. This is

to say nothing of her campaigns against the armed idiots who punctuated the night with gunfire, or her tree-planting vigilante squad that replaced the insect-snuffed ash trees.

Take my word on this: To live in close quarters with such industry can tucker you out.

I participated in a portion thereof. I've picked up my share of candy wrappers with Doris. I've accompanied her to hector public officials about young fools with guns. But at heart I'm a Pimpliparian. I don't believe any of it will change. The armed morons will litter their way down the street until they arrive at the intersection where they will blast at their mortal enemies with their illegally obtained pistols. Then they'll pause briefly to toss a worn out sofa on the boulevard. Short of a sharia-style intervention, such as cutting off their hands, I don't see how it stops. Even then they would probably find a way to stuff a gun in their mouths and pull the trigger with their tongues. In the pursuit of their ends, the sociopathic are adaptable, innovative. You've got to credit them. I could see myself with Pimplipper, clinging to their walls like flies, listening to their chatter, attempting to understand their motivations, whatever they might be. Mama didn't love them enough, or they were hobbled by the vast historical flow of inequity, or no one had ever pointed out to them that there was such a thing as cause and effect. As in: the guy I shot has friends who will now attempt to shoot me? Why didn't somebody tell me! And, despairingly, all of it true enough. The world is unfair. Horrifying, but not quite a news flash.

I *embraced* Pimplipper's thinking. Yes, yes, give me the up-close and personal on what drove the poor and the rich and all those in between to do the things they do. But change them? Hmm. Better to direct our attention to making the sun rise in the west.

Pimplipper and Black looked at us expectedly, as if we were a jury about to deliver a verdict. I heard water dripping somewhere, like the ticking of a clock that would never run out of juice. As always there was a faint fecal odor escaping from the black pipe.

"I'm in," Doris said to Black. "I can't spend eternity twiddling my thumbs."

“Excellent, excellent,” said Black. “A woman with your vigor. Comforting the afflicted. Afflicting the comfortable. No shortage of work.”

“You, Fatman?” Pimplipper asked.

Given all that I have said, you’d think my answer would be clear enough. The world will not be significantly altered by my intervention. Except that my world was — is — Doris, and without her I would feel that the lines had been unwound from the dock, and that my vessel was drifting out into a dark sea.

“Where Doris goes, so go I.” I told the two counselors.

“You sure, Tommy?” Doris said. “You should choose for yourself. What you want, what I want, they can be different things.”

Not really, I knew. How long will it be before some handsome corpse edges in on her? How long until I’m the stooge on the wrong side of the honeymoon suite tarp?

“I’m with you, baby,” I said. “You know I always am.”

She put her arm around my waist and gave it a squeeze. Slightly mushy, our quasi-corporeal selves being what they are. But a squeeze nonetheless.

Black gave me a look that I interpreted as skeptical. Like the wise counselor that he had been, whatever his true thoughts were, he kept them to himself.

“I’m going to hook you up with Sean’s posse,” said Black. “Get you out on a training mission. See how things get done.”

“When?” said Doris.

“You’ll know.”

...

I would say it wasn't long before Marge... Actually, I have no idea how long it was, time being so vaporous.. No tolling bells to mark the hours. My Rolex still didn't work, no matter how many times I slipped it off my wrist and thumped it against my palm. Day or night, yesterday or tomorrow — meaning of the words slipped further and further away. Mostly we spent our time in the honeymoon suite hammock, sleeping, dreaming, waiting. From Doris, drooling, fidgeting, snoring, whispering unconsciously, sometimes gasping as if she had surprised herself with whatever was flickering beneath that whacked hairdo.

I pulled out my pocket square and was daubing at that stream of spittle leaking from Doris' sweet lips when I heard a rustling at the tarp. Marge. "Pull up your socks," she called. "Time to go."

Doris sat up with a dazed expression. The hammock swayed and dumped me in the dirt again. "We've got to work on that," I said.

Marge pulled back the tarp. "Off to a shaky start, I'd say," she observed. "You remember Sean, DeShaun, Carlita and Toua, right? Plus Segundo." They stood in a cluster with Segundo at the back of the pack, towering over them all. What caught your eye first was the neat hole in the center of his forehead. Next the tattoo of thorny roses that wrapped around his neck and encircled his ears. His mouth was a Fort Knox of gold dental work. "Amigos," he said in a tone that was not so easy to decode. Menace or solicitude? But with a curious note of formality either way.

I got back on my feet. For a man of my stature, this is neither simple nor dignified. Roll over, belly to the ground. Hands under the chest. Push up far enough to lift the knees. Having attained the all-four position, setting aside the inescapable notion that this is an image from a SM porn film featuring over-stuffed execs in, briefly, suits, I huffed my way upright. Doris swiped at the dirt that doubtless clung to the back of my garment.

"Perfecto," said Segundo.

"More or less," Sean added.

I tried to set aside my judgment of Sean. What was it exactly? The white, short sleeved shirt with tie? The pocket-protector with pens in three colors? The high-gloss oxford Corfam shoes? These being not the disease itself but the symptoms thereof. A fastidious nature, a desire to pull all the loose strands into a tight knot. Whereas I take myself to be more of an artist, not that I have unleashed paintings or poems or sculptures upon the world. But I have an openness to the here and now, a flexibility in rendering the data of existence into thought and action. The spreadsheet is not my metier.

“Let’s get going,” Sean said.

“Where to?” I wondered.

“We can talk about that on the way. For now, we need to get ourselves to the portal.”

Marge checked her watch. “You’ve got eighteen minutes,” she said.

“This way,” said Sean, taking off at a scamper. I was last in line, struggling to keep up.

...

We swung past Moonchild’s costume shop again. “Topside,” Marge said to her. “Nothing too heavy. Wigs for the scalped. Watch cap or similar for Segundo. Cover up the bullet hole.”

“How about a cork?” said Moonchild. “Ha, ha.”

Marge gave her a look.

“Okay. Sunglasses. A couple wigs. Watch cap? Cowboy hat? You tell me.”

“Keep it simple,” Marge said, checking her watch again. She grabbed the merchandise from Moonchild and set off again, dragging her bum leg at a pace that confounded me. One side of her shoe was worn to nothingness by decades of rubbing against the limestone grit.

Given the scenery, it seemed, as always, like we were getting nowhere. Down one tunnel cut through the rock. Turn. A tunnel that to my eye was the same. Flickering candle light. Thanks,

candleman. Floor of loose sand. That sweating black pipe, dripping goo at its joints. No point in thinking about what that might be.

Finally we came to a halt. A rusty steel ladder dropped from above. “We’ve got a few minutes,” Marge said.

“Until what?” Doris asked.

“Until the portal opens.”

“We can’t just push open the manhole cover?”

“This isn’t anarchy,” Marge replied. “There are rules. Or there seem to be. The portals aren’t open twenty-four seven. It’s like the tides. They come, they go. No point in arguing. Try to understand if you want but it all comes down to the same thing. Sometimes they’re open, sometimes they’re not. This one, five sixteen pm today. Tomorrow five thirty six.”

“How do you know?”

“A formula. Math.”

“You think somebody — something — is in charge? Setting it up, making it go?”

“You’re asking me personally? The unofficial view?”

“There’s an official view?”

“Not really. You ask yourself who’s in charge of anything. You move beyond the obvious line of malarky. It’s the president, or the mayor, or the police chief or what have you. But in reality? The sun comes up, the moon goes down, the stars do their little jig in the sky, the seasons change. I’m talking macro now. The mayor has jack to do with any of that. Maybe he’ll get a few potholes fixed if he’s lucky. The deep workings of the world, inscrutable. Why even bother asking why the portals open when they do? They do. You want to bust your brain over it, go ahead.”

From Doris, disappointment. A squint. A tightening of the lips. She wants a reason, an answer, a rationale. Preferably one in line with her existing notions. This is where we differ. I was with Marge on this. Mysteries of the world — let them be.

“You got three hours to get back,” Marge said. “Then the portal closes.”

“How do we know?” Doris asked. Always with the questions. “Three hours.”

“Topside. The church bells ring. The clocks work. Get back here at eight. It’s not that complicated.”

“I say we split into two groups.” said Sean. “All of us together, it’s like a ghost parade. Me, DeShaun, Toua, Doris. Group one. Group two, Carlita, Segundo, Fatman.”

“We do some good shit, man,” Segundo said to me, this with a menacing laugh and a slap on the back that seemed twice as hard as it needed to be. He launched himself at the ladder. He was halfway up before I got my hand on the first rung.

“Clock’s ticking,” Carlita said. She gave me a shove and then was right on my heels. Segundo pushed aside the hatch. The late afternoon light streamed in.

Topside.

I got my head just above street level and stopped, agog. How long had it been since I left full-time residence? I had no idea any more, the days and nights being an indistinguishable blur. A few days? A year? Ten? The world had not seemed to reorganize itself in my absence. The trees, so green they made my eyes ache. The birds and squirrels jabbering away. A rosy hue in the western sky, the clouds piled up in the colors of a cosmic bruise. Purple, blue, a thousand shades in between. The bustle of cars and buses. The familiar odor of kids smoking weed on the corner. The glint of foil wrappers caught in the breeze and tumbling along the gutter.

Life.

The pang of life.

And yet.

Beneath the color and commotion, that web of complexity in which the living are caught. The betrayal, the violence, the rapaciousness, the stupidity and greed, the lies and ridiculous self-justifications, the righteousness, the grievances and hatreds, the disappointment, the unfairness,

the illnesses and, finally, death. My God. Between the overwhelming beauty and all that is so wrong, ahh, I felt like I was being smacked on one cheek and then the other, my head wobbling back and forth as if attached by a rubber band.

These were the thoughts of a second or two, all the time allowed before Carlita reached up to jab at my butt and say, “You die again up there? People are waiting.”

Segundo grabbed my arm and tugged me up. I blinked a few times in the fullness of the sun, got to my feet and stepped aside. Carlita popped out of the hole. Before the rest had emerged, Segundo declared, “*Listo!*”

He marched across the street quickly, headed for a Benz with tinted windows parked at the curb. Before Carlita and I caught up with him, he had pulled a lever and a jimmy bar from his pocket and popped the lock. Carlita jumped in the front seat. I looked around before opening the door. “Lesson number one,” said Segundo. “Don’t look like a thief.”

“But we are.”

“All the more reason. As of the moment, it’s ours.”

He hunched over the ignition switch with a screwdriver. Bang. Grr, grr, grr. We were off. Carlita let loose a quick whoop.

“Where to?” Segundo asked her.

“West Side?”

“Take it back home?”

“Hard to resist.”

“Settle some scores?”

“Right some wrongs. Whatever.”

“If I weren’t so dead I would love you, Carlita.”

“Ha, you had your chance.”

Segundo shook his head and stepped on the gas. We tore toward downtown, zigging and zagging through the streets, then took a screeching turn onto the high bridge over the Mississippi.

Open the splendor-of-nature file! Dark verdant shadow amid the trees on the steep bluff. The psychedelia of the setting sun on the water. A twist, a turn in the river, nature and the hand of man — the roads and railroad tracks, grain silos, barges, a marina, office towers on the bluff, then a descent to the West Side, the buildings there mural-plastered with images of campesinos, Aztecs, Latinos of one stripe or another.

“Pull down the hat, Carlita,” Segundo said. “Sunglasses, *por favor*. Undercover.”

“If they recognized us they wouldn’t believe it.”

“People. They believe anything.”

He pointed at a church as we passed by. “Walking on water. Healing the sick. Gassing with the devil. Rising from the dead. You believe that, then three corpses cruising in a borrowed Benz is not so much of a stretch.”

We drove for a few blocks in silence. Their memories had something close to a physical presence. The grocery store where they shopped, the school where they sat at their desks and watched the clock hand crawl on its path, the park, the bakery, on and on.

“Look,” said Segundo, pointing. “Isn’t that Juanita?”

“Stop! Stop!” Carlita said. “I want to tell her... I need to tell her...”

“We can’t. Not now. Instant mob. Come see the ghosts. Then what? Live streaming. We’re on Facebook, Twitter, TikTok. Things we haven’t even heard of. Totally viral. As if being dead isn’t enough.”

“She holds it against me. I know she does. I feel it in my heart. If she understood, it would be like a rock removed from my breast.”

“You were fucking her husband as I recall. She might not care about the rock on your breast.”

“There were circumstances.”

“Such as...”

“The Cozy. He bought me a drink or two. Maybe three. Dancing.”

“What about Juanita?”

Carlita shrugged. “I don’t know. Home with the kids maybe. Maybe bent over some other guy’s dick. I don’t know. That I could understand. He wasn’t on the all-star sex team. So I’m carrying this burden through, what, eternity? And was it worth it? Nowhere near! Parking lot, back seat, his crappy Taurus, tailpipe leak, so on top of all else I’m thinking carbon monoxide, fucking this jerk is going to kill me. Then, to top it off, his good time buddies notice the fogged-over windows. They stop by to rock the car, bang on the glass. Of course Juanita gets clued in. She corners me in the grocery, next to the baby formula. Which she throws at me. Yelling the whole time. She sees me near her husband again she’s going to cut off my tiny tits with a rusty knife. She’s going to sew my.... Oh, God, the mouth on her. The.. the...vulgarity! The crowd egging her on. ‘What else, Juanita, what else you gonna do?’ Like it’s a comedy act. Ha ha ha. She dumps a tub of Similac on my head, so now I’m standing there like Mount Kilimanjaro and people are going nuts. Until the manager shows up — Roberto, you remember him? — and says, ‘okay, folks, that’s enough.’ He takes me by the arm through this collection of assholes, people I thought were my friends, and leads me to his office, where he pulls out one of those little vacuum cleaners and cleans me off. Or tries to anyway.

‘Breathe,’ he says. ‘Catch your breath. A cup of coffee. I’ll walk you to your car.’

“I’ll never be able to show my face again,” I told him.

“‘They all know they’re guilty, too,’ Roberto said. ‘Of something. Is there one who is not? They’re happy because you were caught and not them. You did them a service. They should put up a statue of you.’

“‘You think that’s how I feel?’ I said to him.”

“Of course not. But it is the truth.”

Segundo drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “It is best I believe if we leave this alone for now. Fatman.” He nodded to me. “His first mission. Something more straight-forward.”

Carlita sighed. A tear snaked down from beneath her sunglasses. More silence. Then, “So what’s our plan?”

“No plan. What happens, happens. Keep our eyes open. See what the world offers to us.”

“What if there’s nothing?” I asked.

“Trust me,” said Segundo. “There’s always something.”

He slowed down, the better to eyeball the streets. He rolled down the windows so that the bits of conversation could reach us.

They both were lost in their thoughts. We rolled through the commercial streets a few times, like kids cruising to kill the night. Then up the hillside to the houses there. “Want to go past your place?” Segundo asked Carlita.

“Yes. No. Maybe next time.”

“I know what you mean. You want to see, you don’t want to see. Life goes on. As it should. And shouldn’t. If they could freeze everybody in place. Like a museum. Where we could walk around and look. Maybe there’d be a guard who’d say, ‘Please don’t touch the statue, sir.’ Would you go for that?”

Carlita did not not answer at once. Finally she said, “Same answer. Yes. No. Maybe.”

This time they both sighed. We drove down a street filled with strip malls and big box outlets. Kentucky Fried. McDonald’s. Burger King. Home Depot. A tsunami of franchise capitalism. “You see this, it’s not so bad being dead,” said Carlita.

“Memory-free zone. No nostalgia about the McDonald’s drive thru. For better and worse.”

“Let’s head back to the river,” Carlita said.

We were like ambassadors in the big Benz, floating along the streets behind the dark glass.

“How you doing back there, Fatman?” Segundo asked.

“Next best thing to a magic carpet.”

Segundo grunted his approval. “You’re on the no-payment plan, you might as well go high end, right amigo?”

I let that hang in the air for a minute, then asked, “Segundo, that hole in your head?”

“Ahh. Not what you think.”

“I don’t know what I think. Just asking.”

“Mexican guy. Hole in his head. Usually, I’m just saying, the idea is, meth deal gone bad. Truck full of weed. Molly from a Juarez lab. Guy like me, caught up somewhere in the middle of it.”

“Segundo is not that stupid,” Carlita said, laughing. “Maybe he’s not so smart, but...” She laughed again and punched him on the shoulder.

“Hey, not while I’m driving.”

“Accident. Big deal.”

“Wasn’t even a gunshot,” said Segundo. “Rooferos. A million degrees up on the tar paper. Sun beating off the roof. Not a tree in sight. Everything slippery with sweat. But of course, no stopping. This roof, then that roof, then a thousand other roofs. Air compressor rattling away in the grass. Bang bang bang. Nail guns. Shingles slapping on the tar paper. Diego, my idiot nephew, turns and says, ‘Hey, Segundo...’ Nail gun in his hand. Slips on the tar paper. Finger slips on the trigger. Compressor was turned up so high that the nail went through to my brain. So a bigger hole than you might expect. Not just the nail itself but also the head.”

“There are a lot of ridiculous ways to die, as I can attest,” I said. “I myself was killed by a watermelon.”

“So Marge told us,” Segundo replied. “If you’re looking for the silver lining...”

“Segundo is a silver lining guy,” Carlita added. “It’s cute.”

“The silver lining, I didn’t fall off the roof. Just dropped right there, looking up at the sky. Big clouds floating up there. Birds. I don’t know where they all came from. Like it was on bird Facebook.

A flash mob of birds. Crows, okay, but still. Birds. Making a ruckus, like they had some thoughts about the situation. Damn if one didn't land on the chimney and look down at me, the way they do. One eye, then the other. Flapping its wings. Then he jumped down to my forehead. Probably would have started pecking at my eyes if Diego hadn't kicked it. ”

“What do you make of all that?” I asked.

“I don't know. Is it a sign? A sign from what? Who? I don't believe. I don't not believe. You think the watermelon was a sign?”

“I think the watermelon was a watermelon.”

“That much we can agree on.”

The sun had finally set. The town went from gloom to darkness. The glare of street lights. Kids mostly off the streets except for the delinquents.

“We're running out of time,” Carlita said. “We going to do something or drive in circles?”

“You got an idea, tell me.”

“How about we get off the main streets? See what's happening out back?”

Segundo cranked the Benz down an alley. We cruised for a few blocks. The usual. Overflowing garbage cans. Discarded tires. A few major appliances dumped to avoid city fees. Rabbits on their nocturnal rounds.

“Bunnies,” said Carlita. “Cute.”

“Rodents.”

“Beats rats.”

“Look harder.”

Suddenly Segundo brought us to a stop. He pulled the Benz up tight against a garage and slowly opened the door. Then he stuck his head back inside, put a finger to his lips, and whispered,

“*Silencio.*”

We followed him toward a rusted pickup parked behind a Prius. A pair of skinny kids jumped out of the truck. One of them carried a floor jack, the other a cordless grinder. This was like watching a choreographed dance performance. Drop the jack. Crank, crank, crank. One side of the Honda up in the air. The other kid hit the deck and rolled under the car. The sound of the grinding wheel against steel. In a minute they'd have the catalytic converter cut free. Some innocent would be out a thousand bucks for the repair. They'd sell the part to a so-called recycler—a partner in crime if you got right down to it—for a few hundred dollars. Easy money.

The trouble being Segundo's imminent involvement. The jack man failed to notice his approach, and surely did not expect to be grabbed by the neck and tossed against the garage. Nor did the lad with the grinder imagine that the jack would suddenly be kicked away, and that he would be pinned to the pavement by the car. He made some noises. Gasping, wheezing, coughing. A squawked, "Help! I can't breathe!"

Segundo grabbed the jack and tossed it aside. He knelt beside the door and stuck his head beneath the car. "You need help?" he said soothingly. "It is hard to breathe?"

In reply a gargling noise.

"Possibly you are choking on blood, my friend. This car, it is not high off the road, am I correct?"

More wheezing. This at a more desperate pitch.

"And your jack, it is gone. *Que horrible.*"

From the kid tossed up against the garage, a half-conscious groan.

"Your friend, indisposed. A most unfortunate situation!"

Something that sounded, faintly, like, "Help," came from under the car.

"Ahh, help," said Segundo. "Yes, I'm sure the owner of this vehicle would appreciate some help. With money to replace the part you were about to steal. With money for the groceries she will not be able to afford because she is replacing this thing you have ruined. Or her medical bills, or the school for her children. A thousand things. Help? Maybe you needed help to find honest work? Maybe

nobody pointed out to you that now and then there are consequences to crime? I am so sorry, muchacho, but I am not in a position to help you.

“You will be interested to know that I am dead. As you will be quite soon unless a miracle occurs. Or your friend revives. Or a good Samaritan happens by. Is life not full of unexpected twists and turns? You have been visited from the beyond. Did you ever imagine such a thing? Your thievery has opened a path to justice, which my friends and I have now delivered. Possibly that is a consolation.”

Carlita tugged at Segundo’s arm and said, “Maybe he has learned his lesson?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Segundo replied. “It is so hard to know. But it is certain that should he breathe his last here, he will never be stealing again.” Segundo stuck his head under the car and said, almost sadly it seemed, “Adios, amigo.”

...

“Fifteen minutes,” said Carlita.

Segundo hit the accelerator. We flew over the bridge, raced amid the downtown office towers. Screeching tires, the growl of the big Benz engine. He draped an arm over the seat, turned to me and said, “The *joven* with the grinder. What is your opinion?”

“I don’t know. My first mission. I’m trying to make sense of it.”

“I am not asking for a Supreme Court ruling. I am asking what you think.”

“The crime. The punishment. Do they match up? That’s what I wonder.”

“I’m still asking what you think.” He steered with the ball of his wrist, turned in his seat to face me, only occasionally glancing at the road. “You are not telling me.”

“He was just a kid. Kids make mistakes.”

“Then they grow up to be adults who make mistakes.”

“There must be programs, right? What do they call it?”

“Restorative justice,” said Carlita. “Perp and victim. A gabfest.”

“Maybe that works,” I said.

“What really works is, he’s got a car on his face. His buddy finds the jack. Gets the Prius in the air. Pulls his buddy out by the legs. Maybe calls nine one one. Maybe runs away. Grinder boy is dead possibly, but word goes out on your social media. Sure, go rob from some schmuck, take the things that are not yours, make his life miserable. Probably get away with it. At worst endure a social worker yapping about reconciliation. All the while thinking, yeah, I got to call my partner, charge up the grinder, get the truck back on the road. Do we never tire of the bullshit, Fatman?”

“Who doesn’t tire of the bullshit? There’s more bullshit than oxygen. Still.”

Carlita turned in her seat now, too. “You a bible reader, Fatman?”

“More an ex-altar boy with a bad memory. Those bible blurbs at Mass.”

“Sure. You know the one about the king who invites his pals to a wedding feast for his son?”

“It’s ringing a bell. Not too loud.”

“Sends the servants out with the invite. Would-be guests ignore them. King sends the servants out again. Says, ‘Look, I slaughtered the oxen, not to mention the fatted calves. Time to belly up to the board.’ This time would-be guests kill the servants. The king does not propose a reconciliation circle. No. He sends out his army, kills the invitees, burns their city to the ground. The dead. The homeless. Their wealth destroyed. The deed rippling through the generations. What do you think? Extreme?”

“It’s a parable. A little story. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Fiction writers.”

“What is justice? That’s my point. It’s not like gravity. It’s an interpretation. For the soft-hearted, the optimists, sure, reconciliation. Redemption. Forgive. Forget. Maybe not forget, but anyway. Everyone can be saved. Maybe everyone won’t be, but you got to try. Then there’s the Old Testament crowd. An eye for an eye. Retaliation, revenge. Reconciliation? Not their style.”

“Everybody thinks they are right,” said Segundo, turning to look at me again.

The Benz drifted into the bike lane and sideswiped a biker, who banged into a parked car and landed in a tangle of lycra. We hurtled onward.

“Maybe watch the road?” Carlita suggested.

“You got to pick your style, Fatman. We’re talking about how you deal with what you consider right and wrong. Let’s agree that it’s wrong to steal. Let’s get to the justifications. Doesn’t have a dignified way to make a buck so is driven to crime. No good model in the home. Nice kid who fell in with bad companions. Property is theft. The rich stole it in the first place. So on and so forth. Oh, but he had a beautiful smile. Always a joke for the little cousins. Working to get out of the gang. Always, the obit, exactly the same. Never is it said that the little felon came to a predictable end.

“Now the other side. The victim. Alarm clock rings, he drags himself out of bed. Got to feed the kids, keep the wife happy, fix the car, pay the mortgage, keep the heat on, buy the dog food. Hey, life’s a picnic, right? Then wham, there goes the catalytic converter. What the hell even is this thing? But you have no choice but to replace it, because now your tailpipe and muffler hang there, doing nothing. Turn the key and it is as if somebody opened the gates of hell. Not that we know, not yet, but you can imagine. Maybe this is the event that pushes him over the edge. Fuck it, he says, packs a bag, buys a bus ticket and he’s gone. Little baby and the wife left to fend for themselves. While some punk-ass *ladron* picks up two hundred bucks for a stolen cat, buys himself some crank and cheap booze, and when he recovers from that, grabs the jack and goes out again. Leaving behind a trail of misery, a parade of victims. The question here, Fatman, is, ‘Whose side are you on?’”

“Maybe it’s like eating meat,” I said. “I like a steak but I don’t want to kill a cow.”

“What?” said Carlita.

“Show these little kleptos some cause and effect. I’m okay with that. It’s hearing the gurgling. The gasping. Knowing you could still give the kid a chance.”

“A chance to make a whole lot more innocent people miserable. Tear the fabric of civilization a little further. Create a world where there are no rules. Where the impulses of gangsters and punks are

at the top of the pyramid, and they have their boots on the necks of the working people below. You're for that?"

"It's complicated."

"Right," said Segundo. "What isn't? But in the end. You can still make a decision."

We raced up the hill out of downtown. Segundo hit the left turn hard. Again, a scream from tires on asphalt, a growl from the engine as he stomped the accelerator. Red light? The dead don't care.

"I've got to sleep on this. I don't disagree. I never had to consider. Living my life. Not hurting for money. Roof over my head. Decent wine. Good clothes. Car in the garage so nobody's stealing my cat."

"You could afford to be big-hearted, my friend. It didn't cost you anything," said Segundo. "Those who paid the price, they were not your people."

No denying that.

"You think the work-a-jerk population would say they do not want to kill the cow? As you put it. Or would they be right there beside me, kicking out the jack? Would they be wrong? Or is that a hard-hearted interpretation of justice? Where we started on this. You're two degrees separated from desperation, fighting to keep your head above water, and now some punk grabs your things. And after that your neighbor's things. You want to reform the little prick, or do you want to stop him?"

"What I wonder is, what have we really changed? One squashed knucklehead in a world not lacking for replacements. The world is unchanged but there's blood all over our hands."

"I am happy to wipe it off," Segundo said.

He stomped the brakes in the church parking lot. The manhole cover was still pushed to the side. The church bells rang the hour.

"*Perfecto,*" said Carlita.

We scrambled across the pavement and scuttled down the ladder. Marge waited for us there, tapping at her watch. “Early is on time,” she said. “On time is late. The others are already back. Let’s get moving.”

...

Doris, Sean, DeShaun and Toua waited on the pipe around the corner. Doris jumped up, put her arms around me and pecked my cheek.

She had a glint in her eye that I’d seen before. This was her expression when she won and you lost, even though you probably didn’t understand that yet. Picture a wolf coming on a fawn stuck in snow up to its ears. “Looks like you had a good time,” I said.

She hooked her arm in mine as we trailed behind Marge and the rest.

“Sean,” she said. “He might look like a pocket-protector geek. But he’s a thinker.”

“How’s that?” Already I didn’t like the sound of this.

“He could just be out settling old scores. The guy who ran the meth lab in the basement next door. The mechanic who chiseled him on a new tranny. Nickel-dime stuff.”

“We dropped a car on some twerp stealing a catalytic converter,” I said.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Doris replied. “Retail justice. One case at a time. What changes?”

“Seemed harsh. A dumb kid getting the crushed-bug treatment. Punishment crime disconnect. A problem there.”

“You don’t have to go gooey,” she said. “Consequences. You’re not under the car, it doesn’t fall on you. But there’s always another bottom feeder to fill the role. Sean is more big picture.”

“How so?” I asked.

She set into a description of a complicated scam that Toua had revealed to Sean. This involved prime agricultural land in that golden triangle of the California weed country. The suckers were Hmong tribesmen recently delivered from Asian refugee camps. One-time farmers who worked the Laotian hillsides with hoes and oxen, they now found themselves huddled in urban slum property, mostly employed in factories owned by their brethren who had arrived decades earlier. Now the factory chiefs offered a variation of the company store deal. Work in the plant and allow your wages to be garnished as a down payment for that California land. After a few years you can flee the factory for what is in fact marginal, waterless soil not quite within that golden triangle. Nonetheless, your Hmong presence would draw the ire of the established white post-hippie growers. Hence, beatings, fires, snitching. No easy stroll down the golden avenues of America, albeit not an original scam either. The robber baron era rail entrepreneur J.J. Hill had worked a similar deal, selling parched Dakota land along his railroad line to hopeful, hapless immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Establishing, in case anyone wondered, that when it comes to grifting, the old can always be made new again.

At the top of this heap were a cadre of ex-military strongmen, characters who had once signed up with the CIA to rescue downed US pilots before the North Vietnamese gobbled them up. The lead man, Doris said, was the General. Revered by some of his fellows. Rightfully feared. Scorned by the younger generation, who, having come to the age of reason in America, recognized a money-grubbing scam when they saw it. The pockets of the General and his confederates bulged, the money chasing the usual ends. Luxury cars, gambling sprees, winter trips to St. Barts, shopping safaris to Paris. Sean's death was among the outcomes of this caper, by Doris' account.

"I don't get it," I said. "Death by land grab? I thought he said he died in a dentist's chair."

"Sean has a strict moral code. Maybe also some anger management issues. Toua explained this deal to him. They go back. Worked in the same place. Cubicles next door to each other.

"He could have gone to the attorney general. The FBI."

“He didn’t get the chance.”

“What? They threatened him?”

“No, no. Like I said, anger problems. He takes...”

“Took.”

“Took, takes. I don’t know he’s so different dead. Anyway. Ruminating. Churning. Fulminating. Whatever you want to call it. That’s what he was doing. He already had blood pressure trouble. His doc had him on diuretics, beta blockers. He probably should have thrown Zoloft or Prozac in there, too. Everything about this hit a trigger for him. The rich abusing the poor. Taking advantage of your own people. Licking caviar off the spoon while your brothers have their noses stuck in a tuna can. Plus, Toua was his pal. He doesn’t look like it, but Sean is an empathetic guy. He felt Toua’s pain.

“He blew a gasket. Aneurysm. Bang. He just happened to be in a dentist’s chair at the moment. That was that. Then a couple months later Toua died under what was labeled mysterious circumstance. As in, maybe he shot his mouth too much. So you end up with the so-called girlfriend situation. The knife, the fire. Sean thinks it wasn’t just love gone wrong. He hooked up with Toua again down here. The two of them shared their outrage with Segundo, Carlita and DeShaun, who were basically killing time. Bored. Maybe don’t care so much about justice, but enjoy busting loose. Now they’re a posse.”

“I still don’t know what you did with those guys today.”

“Sat in the car, mostly.”

“What car?”

“SUV. Lexus, I think. Nice.”

“We borrowed a Benz.”

“The finer things in life. Too bad if you’ve got to be dead to get your hands on them.”

“You sat in the car. What else?”

“A stake out. Like the cop movies. Waiting. Watching.”

“For what?”

“Who’s coming, who’s going. Outside the boss man’s townhouse. Nice spread. Gives you an appreciation for felony grifting. Pays for the better things in life. Curtains all pulled open. Nothing to hide here, folks! Chandeliers blazing. Quarter-sawn oak paneling. The usual nouveau riche art works. Hounds in the field. Big dumb guys on big dumb horses. A parade of goombas marching through the door. DeShaun worked the camera.”

“What’s the idea?”

“Get the ID on these characters. Find out who’s involved. Find out who needs to be uninvolved.”

“How do you get that done?”

“First night on the job. We didn’t get that far.”

“Do you drop the dime? Slip the dossier under the district attorney’s door?”

“I don’t know, Tommy. My sense is, that’s not how it works on our end. Maybe more like kicking the jack away. Only dropping the car on some bigger bellies and more expensive clothes. More splatter in the end. More people concerned about their own gig, should the shit hit the fan.”

...

Is it not a world full of injustice, both epic and petty? Greed-driven war, ethnic cleansing, corporate-sponsored opioid addiction, toxic chemical plants, rapacious farm practices; where to stop? And then, right down the block, the little graffiti clowns defacing buildings, the punks defending their so-called honor with their guns, the carjackers and break-in artists, the pale geek hacking your credit card info; again, where to stop?

Why the dead should be involved in righting these wrongs, at least to the extent that we are able, was a question that did not to me have an immediate, sensible answer. We had our shot. We did what

we could, or did half of what we could, or ignored the many problems altogether, lived our lives and died. We'd made our choices. Why not move on to the next thing, whatever that is?

Our grievances, our outrages, our lusting for revenge: by my lights it showed we were stuck in the past, reliving the life we once had in a misty sort of way. Quasi Life 2.0. Which was possibly the point, assuming there was any point at all.

Who does not fear breaking with what has gone before? Who, finding him or herself in a boiling cauldron, would not stop to think, well, it is at least *warm* here. And out there? It could be chilly, freezing even. Is it not best to remain where I am?

After Doris and I returned from our first mission, Pimplipper spotted me in that massive underworld cafeteria. "Fatman!" he exclaimed. "So you saved the world!"

"Absolutely," I said. "If dropping a sedan on a thief counts."

We sat across a table from each other, the chattering dead on all sides.

"You have some doubts."

He offered me that Pimplipper grin, all teeth and blue eyes. In his casket at the wake, eyes closed and mouth clamped shut, no one bothered to observe that he looked so natural. The natural Pimplipper was all sparkle and enthusiasm, a steamroller of certainty. As in, despite the fact that you had pistol-whipped your spouse, shot him or her several times, dumped the body in the basement and set the house ablaze, so as to form a pyre to consume the evidence, which it never did, you, nonetheless, had the supreme good fortune of becoming Pimplipper's client. And he would find the argument — specious, but good enough when backed up by that mesmerizing countenance, by that hoodoo pile of verbal gymnastics — that would have you strolling down main street before you'd had a chance to fully process the phrase, *Not guilty*, as it rolled off the jury foreperson's tongue.

"Let's assume for a moment there's a deity," I said.

Pimplipper shrugged. "For the sake of your argument, whatever it is, sure, go ahead. There's a deity."

“And the overall direction of the world, maybe this is something where he-she-it has a remote interest. “

“Again, for the sake of your argument. Though you’re getting further out on the thin ice. In my opinion.”

“Now assume there are pearly gates, and we arrive at them some day, rather than exist perpetually in what appears to be a sewer tunnel. By the way, do you notice that the odor is more ripe recently?”

“It comes and goes. You’d think people are people, shit is shit, what is there to change from day to week to month. Plus it is apparently confined within those black pipes. And yet...”

“What do you think? Seasonal? Humidity? Barometric pressure?”

“Jesus, Fatman. Who knows? I try to breathe through my mouth when it’s like this.”

“Anyway, so you show up at the pearly gates and there is the deity. Or his personal representative, Saint Peter. Who suggests that you account for the gentleman flattened by the Honda during your post-death adventures.”

“Maybe this is a statute of limitations situation,” said Pimplipper. “Nothing counts once you’re dead long enough.”

“I doubt it. But let’s hold off on the technicalities for now. The pearly gates. Saint Peter. White robes. Maybe some angels. Possibly a lectern and ledger. Or, a glass desk and a laptop, a Brooks Brothers suit. For all we know. So he glances at his records. Cocks an eye. Says, “Lil’ Jimi Mitchell. Name mean anything to you?”

“‘Hmm,’ I say, since I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“‘What is that?’ Saint Peter asks. He’s eyeballing the laptop now. ‘Honda Accord?’ Look at that jack go flying. Poor Lil’ Jimi.”

“‘Oh,’ I say. ‘That was his name? Lil’ Jimi?’”

“‘A punk,’ says Peter. ‘At that stage of his life. We had plans for him. Paul on the road to Damascus. That type of thing. Less dramatic. Not of biblical dimension is what I’m saying. No

epiphanies in the classic sense. Some Facebook posts of the I-once-was-lost-now-I'm-found variety. Twitter. TikTok. A fair number of friends. A decent following. Not great but meaningful. Every bit, so on and so forth. We eyeballed him for a faith-based band. Guitar. Not quite Hendrix, but better than average. Then bang, a pack of dead guys know better. Lil' Jimi choking on his own blood under the Honda drain pan. Care to explain?"

"My approach," said Pimlipper, "you sympathize with the bureaucrats. What is Peter but a functionary, really. Working for The Man, in the most expansive sense of the word. My guess is Yahweh can be a pain in the ass. He's always right, you're always wrong until you agree with him. So we start out by flattering Peter. Tough job, at it for millennia, who really fully appreciates him? A timeless barrage of pathetic excuses, self-justifications, whimpering, blame. We've got him nodding along by now. Certainly we accept whatever determination he might make. We bow to his judgment. But let it be said that we consider ourselves to be on the same side. Our interests being justice. Righteousness. Doing unto others and you would have them... Et cetera. Our consideration being the downtrodden. Did not Jesus Christ himself blow his stack with the money changers in the Temple? Our error being not our outrage necessarily but the unfortunate depth of our inabilities. We were able only to see the present, and could not predict the cosmic plan for Lil' Jimi's future."

"Alternate interpretation," I said. "Saint Peter says, 'You imagine you comprehend the judgment of the Almighty? You dare to take a life he/she/it has created? You make the implicit argument that he/she/it has fucked up?' Whatever happens next here, Pimlipper, I don't see it being good."

"This being not my typical jurisdiction," Pimlipper said, "we're in the realm of speculation now. He's Saint Peter, he's full of himself. He's not going to roll over right away. More flattery is the ticket here. You mention your boundless respect for his experience, for the moral authority he brings to what is an exhausting, complex position. You wonder if — especially in light of the overwhelming nature of the work — he might be interested in an intern, which is to say, you, who could tend to the pedestrian bookkeeping details, maybe run out for coffee, tidy up at the end of the day."

“I turn into a lap dog is what you’re saying.”

“No, no, no. What does he need you for? He’s got choirs of angels, seraphim, cherubim, what have you. He doesn’t need an intern. He needs to see you groveling. We’re setting up a plea deal here. You don’t march through the pearly gates quite yet, but you’re not taking the down elevator either. Maybe back here to the catacombs for a period. All subject to negotiation.”

“My point is,” I tell Pimplipper, “maybe we let the world be the world. We don’t mess with the Lil’ Jimis.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you. Your argument is with Duke Black. With Doris also, if I’m guessing it right. Your argument is with, oh, say, ninety percent of everyone stuck down here. You think the world can get along under its own steam, you’re a member of a small club. Most people...” At this Pimplipper shook his head. “They want to think they’re players. Not a memory. Then less than a memory. Less than dust drifting in the breeze. They can’t let go.”

...

The portal opened on a schedule known only to Marge. She believed in timeliness, but not so much in prior notification. She rustled the plastic curtain of our honeymoon suite and announced that it was time to go. Right this minute.

She wasn’t interrupting anything. Doris and I spent most of our time in the hammock. No binge-watching on Netflix, there being no power, no flat screen, no internet. No Facebook, no Twitter. Instead, we took on the sprawl of time in the old-fashioned way. We reminisced. *Do you remember when...? How about when we...?* For a gal who lived for the sake of organizing the future — what was logistics about, after all? — she could also wallow in the past. She would swipe at that rivulet of drool on her cheek, look at me with drowsy eyes and say, “I think I was dreaming. Maybe just thinking. I don’t know.

“How we met. You remember that, Tommy?”

“Sure I do, baby. Your smack-down of Lester Smack in the Victorian. My broken arm. Your healing powers.”

“You were an excellent patient.”

“What were you thinking?”

“You know.”

“Tell me again.”

As if we hadn't gone over this a thousand times. She doesn't get tired of it. I don't get tired of it.

“Dead of winter,” she said. “As you recall. A million degrees below zero. You dressed like a Russian. Those big boots up to your knees. The wool coat down to your knees. The fur hat. The scarf. The mittens. Like you were headed for the North Pole.”

“And you,” I added. “Total state of denial. Flimsy coat that didn't cover your butt. Gloves made out of what? Frog skin? Go-go boots. At the Victorian, of all places. Haute couture in that redneck dump. No wonder Lester was out of his gourd. At the ER I had to work overtime to get somebody to look at me instead of you.”

“They would have gotten to it eventually.”

“It went a lot quicker after you grabbed that orderly by the neck.”

“That plaster up to your armpit. The sling.”

“You wrote on it. People did that back then.”

“That was later. The next morning.”

“How did I end up back at your apartment?”

“I drove you. You had that rotten little car with the stick shift and a useless right arm. You were in no condition. Plus, drugged. Somebody had to take charge.”

“My good luck.”

“I'll say.”

“Still. You could have dropped me off at my place.”

“I was twenty-three years old. Here was life presenting itself in its crazy way. This Russian who stepped into an idiotic barroom brawl.”

“You didn’t really need my help.”

“I appreciated the effort. Maybe I wondered what was under your mountain of clothing. I took you for a gentleman. If it got too boring I’d find a way to get you out of the door.”

“That took the whole weekend,” I said. “You were a vision, baby. These memories are gifts, treasures. People line up at museums to gawk at portraits of beauty. Birth of Venus. Mona Lisa. Portrait of Madame X. But I carry this in my head. I want it, it’s there.”

“Those radiators hissing,” Doris said. “We had to open the windows, it got so hot.”

“Lucky you had that pile of ramen. We didn’t have to leave the house.”

“That claw-footed tub. Big enough for two.”

“Youth was not wasted on the young,” I said. “What if one or the other of us had not bothered with the Victorian that night? What if Lester hadn’t set foot in the joint? What if he hadn’t been such a fool, and could have seen a hustle the size of the Titanic?”

“You never know when you’re standing at a crossroads,” Doris said. “When your life can go this way or that.”

What is true in life, as it turns out, can also be true in that which comes after.

...

Despite my misgivings — despite my Pimlipparian view of our topside missions, the sense that we should acknowledge that the torch had passed, that we were meddlers past our due date — when Marge rattled the tarp, I carefully pushed Doris out of the hammock and then eased out myself,

avoiding for once the dump on the floor. Marge had already lined up the rest of the gang, which waited in the tunnel behind her.

I had lost track of how many times we prowled topside together. I went out with Carlita and Segundo. Doris set off with Sean, DeShaun and Toua. It got to be a routine. Following Marge as she clomped through the tunnels. Her lecture on punctuality. Up the rusty ladder. Pop goes the manhole cover. Into the world, there to be overwhelmed again by the light, the colors, those gaudy manifestations of life. Hawks carried on the thermals. Breeze-blown cottonwood leaves a-flicker. Kids yelling. Traffic noise. The inevitable nose of weed. On and on. I had to stop, all fours on the pavement, and reboot my consciousness. After the suffocating still of the catacomb, it was too much.

“*Listo!*” Segundo would announce, offering me his hand and hauling me to my feet. Then we were off. Again, the usual. Requisition a quality vehicle. A Benz, an Audi, a Tesla, maybe a Lexus or Infiniti. “Are we *los pobres?*” Segundo would declare. “No, no, no! In life, yes. But now? *Ricos!*” Then to cruise the streets, eyes open for bits of injustice, cruelty, stupidity. These being in bountiful supply.

“What is that?” Segundo would say, pointing toward a target.

A pair of nitwits in a truck, one driving, the other standing in the bed, tossing worn tires into the alley to escape the disposal fee. For them a lecture, this via Carlita, on responsibility, civic mindedness, compassion for those required now to clean up someone else’s mess. A grandmother, a single mom, afflicted by the thoughtlessness of others. Then a screwdriver through the gas tank, a match in the puddle, a fireball of surprising proportion. From Segundo: “*Que lastima, hombres!*”

Or, the graffiti artist, which is to say, punk with a spray can defacing a building, Segundo’s big hand clamped around his pale, spindly bicep. His rhetorical question being, “The owner, he has hired you to paint his building?”

The answer, this with a note of insolence, an unfortunate sneer: “It’s my art. You don’t understand.”

“Tell me what I do not understand. Who does not desire to be less ignorant?”

“Fuck you.”

“No, please.” A tighter squeeze now on the artist’s arm. He’s on tiptoes but not yet caving in.

“Could it be that you see yourself as insignificant? That this is your way of pissing on the great fire hydrant of the world? That you are pleading for notice, for attention, because meaningful ways of getting it are beyond your abilities. And so this?”

“Fuck you. Let go of my arm. I got my reasons. Property is theft. That’s one reason right there. Who says this pile of bricks *belongs* to anyone?”

“Surely. It is yours, it is mine, it belongs to the entire community. We are all in this together. Our ancestors, the unborn, those here now. But you are the only one who has decided the building must be painted. Tell me, Mister Artist, what is this color of paint?” With that he wrests the can out of the artist’s hand. “Ahh. Rustoleum Paprika! Durable. Bold. You have a vision!”

He pushes the artist against the brick wall, pins him there by his neck, says, “I would close my eyes. You should suck your lips into your mouth. It is best also if you hold your breath. Huffing, you know, it is bad for your health.”

Segundo gives the can a shake. We hear the musical rattle. He sprays the artist’s face until it is a vibrant Paprika. The artist squirms and kicks, but that doesn’t stop anything. “*Perfecto,*” Segundo says as paint drips from the artist’s chin. “You live your art. Go home. Show your mother. She will be so proud.”

...

With Segundo at the wheel we often ended up across the river, slowly cruising the streets where he and Carlita grew up. They pulled their hats down low, wore oversized sunglasses. Sometimes a

tear would run down Carlita's cheek. "We don't have to be here," Segundo would say. "The car drove itself."

"No, no, it's just..."

"Here and not here," said Segundo. "Life must go on. You feel it should not. Everyone, everything should be frozen in place."

"Exactly," said Carlita. "The nerve of the living. Look there, old Lucy and that stupid dog of hers, still shitting on the neighbor's lawn." She pointed at a hunched-over grandmother and an equally ancient chihuahua at the end of a diamond-studded leash.

From Segundo, a nod toward a knot of Harleys and bikers gathered outside the Cozy Bar, their black leather vests announcing they were Satan's Slaves. "Ha," said Segundo. "Costume party. Dentists, lawyers, contractors. You could find more dangerous Boy Scout troops."

Wallowing in misery or swimming in sweet memories? Life went on, and there they were, their noses pressed up against the glass.

"Go to the house," Carlita said one night.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. No." This is what she always said. I had never seen the place.

"Yes," she said. "Park down the block. They don't have to know."

We had a gleaming black Suburban that night. Segundo parked in the shadows. Anyone who noticed would have guessed us for cops or dealers.

Carlita rested her chin on her hand and watched. Light spilled from the picture window out onto the yard. A couple of kids' bikes lay in the grass.

"How many times do I tell them, put the bikes away or they get stolen. Turn out the lights if you're not in the room. We don't own the power company. Maybe someone could pull a weed in the flower bed?"

“They’re in mourning,” said Segundo, setting a hand on Carlita’s shoulder. “You should be happy everything has not returned to normal.”

“Lazy is more like it. How long before it’s a ruin? No one to crack the whip.”

“Carlos is a decent man,” Segundo offered.

“Carlos,” Carlita replied with a sigh. “You ever see him with a tool in his hand? He barely knows how to turn out a light. Never mind rewiring an outlet.”

“You want to leave?”

“A little bit more. Maybe see one of the boys.”

“I think you are breaking your heart.”

“It’s already broken.”

Segundo opened the windows a crack. The night-time sound track played. A pulse of crickets. Distant gunfire. The whine of Japanese motorcycles. Bass thump from boom cars.

We heard an I-need-a-new-muffler rumble. A rusted Chevy passed us and parked in front of Carlita’s house. “Carlos?” Segundo asked.

“He leaves the boys alone. This is what I didn’t want to know,” said Carlita. “Better to be truly dead and ignorant.”

“But we are not.”

Carlos got out of the car. He went to the passenger side and opened the door. “Ramona!” Carlita hissed. “I’m barely cold in the grave. And Ramona!”

Ramona was not overdressed. That which could be cut low was cut low, and that which could be cut high was cut high. “Look at that tits-and-ass slut bitch!” Carlita declared.

Carlos pulled her close, pushed her against the car. Their kiss was not of the peck-on-the-cheek variety.

“Sure, suck her soul out. As if she had one. All the times I watched her kids. Loaned her money. Lent her eggs, formula. ‘You got a cup of sugar, Carlita?’ ‘For you, sweet thing, yes!’ And this the

thanks I get. Go ahead, blow him on the sidewalk. You're halfway there, you whore of fucking Babylon."

She tugged on the handle and kicked the door open. Segundo grabbed her arm before she could jump out. "Forgive me for asking, but do you have any idea what you are about to do?" he said quietly.

"I'm going to kick somebody's ass."

"That is not much of a plan. Yelling, needless to say. All the neighbors at the windows, pulling back the shades. Probably asking themselves, 'Why is dead Carlita beating up her husband? What do they do? Call the cops or call an exorcist?'"

"I don't care who they call. But that home-wrecking cunt is going to..."

"Plus the kids. What will they make of it? Forgive me again, Carlita, but it used to be your home. That was... before."

"Look, the boys have to see this peep show," Carlita said. A pair of kids appeared in the doorway. Their heads barely reached the door knob. Carlos was now crushing Ramona against the car, grinding at her with his hips. "Why not just fuck her on the hood, asshole!"

Segundo closed the windows. "I think you should calm down. I think we should leave."

"Okay," Carlita pouted. "Leave."

Segundo started down the block past Carlos' car, the headlights off. As we closed in on Carlos and Ramona, Carlita grabbed at the wheel. She dropped her foot on top of Segundo's and punched the accelerator. The Suburban caught Carlos' wreck on the rear bumper. It jolted forward, hurling the make-out artists onto the grass.

Carlos crawled to his feet, screaming obscenities. Carlita popped the door and threw a few back at him. *Fundío. Puta. Mierda. Maricon.* Plus other terms in machine-gun Spanish that I did not understand, all this while Segundo wrestled the steering wheel out of her hand and directed us, swerving violently, down the otherwise quiet street.

“Carlita,” he said. “That was not wise.”

“Satisfying,” she replied.

“Really?”

“Maybe not. In the long run. But for the moment.”

“Ah, the moment,” Segundo sighed.

She turned to look at me. “What do you think?” Carlita asked.

...

What did I think? You might — justifiably! — ask, Has he not expounded on the subject? Has he not told us that the world is the world, that our efforts to change it are paltry, that for every rat that’s caught in a trap another litter is dropped behind the dumpster? Is there not an infinite supply of rats? So what if we send the Artist home with his paprika face? What does it matter if Carlos’ wretched vehicle is stoved in, or if those tire-hurling fools must watch as their truck is consumed in an inferno of gasoline?

Poor Carlita! We were thoughtless. We should not have staked out her house. What good could have come from it? Had she not previously informed us that Carlos was ruled by his dick? That she would consider him in deep mourning were he not fucking some second cousin in the church basement janitor’s closet while the church ladies set out Carlita’s post-funeral spread, her relations stuffing themselves with tacos and chicken and rice and lemon bars, while Carlos stuffed a not-entirely-distant relation among the mops and brooms and disinfectants.

How could we have better served her interests? What if instead we had parked the Suburban downtown and strolled across the bridge to its midpoint, suspended over the Mississippi? To our left, her old neighborhood. To the right, those commercial towers, the world of work, money, of various occupations and illusions. Neither here nor there, befittingly. Suspended in mid air. Before us, the

river bounded by bluffs cut over thousands of years. A canopy of trees, the setting sun, the clouds piled up with all the hokum of a Maxfield Parrish painting. And then the river, with its endless flow, the few boats gliding over its surface, ridiculously inconsequential in the sweep of geologic time. Perspective is what I'm talking about. Forget that pussy-hound Carlos, Carlita, and think instead of your boys, and their children, and the arc of human need and desire and love that will spring from them, generation upon generation. Of course — no need to mention this while watching the sun set and the moon rise and the brightest planets prick through the twilight! Not while attempting to apply balm to the heartbreak of separation and disappointment!— some of that progeny will be tax cheats, sex fiends, ax murderers, what have you. But let's try to keep our eyes on the big picture. Babe Ruth didn't bat 1.000 either.

I have tried to make this point to Doris as well. Not so successfully, as previously indicated. I have suggested to her that we should concentrate on being attentive to each other. We can count on that much at least. In the hammock within the honeymoon suite, there is only me and her. (And Marge rattling at the plastic, I should add, but not so often and never for long, Marge being always on one inscrutable mission or another, rushed even within the possible eternal expanse of time in which we reside.)

“What can we do better, baby?” Doris has retorted. “Except for our topside missions, we're together twenty-four seven. When we're here mostly it's in the hammock. I'm breathing all over you. You're breathing all over me. Pressed up against each other. We're not careful, we'll turn into Siamese twins. They'll have to cut us apart.”

And yet. When she describes her missions with Sean, Toua and DeShaun, I don't think it adds up. To hear her tell it, they are on a perpetual stake out. They appropriate a car, sometimes two. Sometimes they're all together. Sometimes it's just her and Sean, while DeShaun and Toua keep an eye out elsewhere. According to Doris, they're tracking down that shaky deal with the General,

lurking outside homes, bars, financial institutions, noting who comes and goes, snapping photos, occasionally slipping into a residence to ransack a file cabinet or boost a laptop in search of evidence.

“You’re just sitting there, hour after hour? Boring, right?”

Her rush to say, “Tell me about it,” leaves me with a sense that something else may well be true. Suspicion! The quicksand on the pathway of love. The bug that crawls in the back of your brain. The little tickle that can’t be scratched. The snare that had begun to catch me.

“What are you coming up with?” I ask, as innocently as I can manage.

“So far? Photos. Some matched with names. That’s Toua’s department. Like a spider’s web. Hmong elders. Old Hmong military guys. All the suckers at the bottom of this deal. People who were farmers in bamboo huts. Lucky not to be killed on their way to a refugee camp. Dumped here because some church group would help them figure out how to live in a frozen hellscape. People saving their crap wages for years. Storing cash in paper sacks in a closet. And now ripped off by their own people.”

“How long do you watch? When do you make your move?”

Do I hear the gears grinding in her mind, or is this a perverse confabulation on my part? We might all say we want to be happy, that we want uncomplicated lives. Ha! There is an appeal to grievance as well. Affliction: another bucket that wants to be filled.

So I am imagining Toua and DeShaun on their separate stake out, Doris and Sean on another. The minutes and hours ticking slowly past. Darkness descending. That liberation that comes while staring straight ahead out of a windshield. The revelations that are as surprising to those who utter them as they are to those who hear.

Sean. His short sleeved white shirt, the bland synthetic tie, the pocket-protector stained by ink of various colors — if he sat next to me on a plane I’d bury my nose in a book and pray that he’d take the hint. But is it ever possible to know until you’ve killed an hour, or two, or twenty, in a near-somnolent state, while your thoughts drift here and there? Remembering the past, attempting to

see how it led to the present. Asking, Is this what I wanted? Is this what I still desire? That person beside you, should he simply keep his mouth shut and listen, suddenly seeming like a paragon of compassion, or, even, wisdom. All this for the simple price of saying next to nothing, but doing so attentively.

And if there is this form of intimacy, then why not others? We know how this might start. The fingertip set lightly on the forearm. The hand that brushes back a stray hair, that rests lightly on that crease of the polyester trousers. The inevitable rationalizations of the tree-falling-in-a-forest category. If nobody knows, does it matter? If we're dead, does it count? Why should marriage be such a line in the sand? We had affairs before, so why not after? Is the distinction not fuzzy? Some mumbling delivered from that port-loaded Padre Shichtenbauer changes everything?

...

Once the bug of suspicion begins to crawl about in your brain, it can never be killed. I started looking more closely at Doris. That small bruise on her neck: death- or Sean-related? It was all too easy for me to imagine the steamed up windows, Doris' head thrown back against the car seat, and Sean's lips, vampire-like, fixed upon my lover's neck. What about that button missing from her blouse? Lost in the freeway wreckage or the result of fervent groping?

That wasn't all. Pre-death, Doris was a lot to keep up with, sack-wise. She had the libido of a teenager whereas I was showing my age. At my annual physical I took it up with my GP, who recommended blood work, exercise, weight loss, healthy eating, meditation, pre-visualization, Cialis, Viagra, hypertension meds, probably other voodoo I've forgotten. When the blood panel came back, the doc observed, "Damn, Fatman, you've got the testosterone level of an eight-year old. My recommendation — have you heard this before? — lose fifty pounds, get a dog so you've got to take

a walk. Fruit, vegetables. The Cialis can't hurt. Well, it can, but probably not. I'll prescribe testosterone gel. We'll get you tuned up."

I did not bound down the clinic steps with a song in my heart. I thought instead, oh, so I am dying now. I am like an hourglass, but instead of sand slipping through the neck it's the vital fluids of life. There go the hormones down the tube. What next? Cataracts, bad knees, aching back, a mitt full of meds morning and night for cholesterol, blood pressure, swollen prostate, arthritis-grade Tylenol bought in industrial quantities, hearing aids, trifocals, orthopedic inserts, Christ knows what all else just around the corner, and this while my beloved sweeps back the duvet, reveals her various treasures, says with a wink and a leer, "You got plans for tonight?" And I pray that the potions and lotions prescribed by the good doctor will prepare me for the task at hand.

In comparison, that idiot Sean. Perhaps not an idiot so much as a type unacquainted with the finer things and deeper thoughts. Sure, give him a call if you need advice on the top scientific calculator or a great home finance app. But poetry, art, dance? A decent bottle of Burgundy? A suit of cashmere instead of plastic? A set of silk pajamas? Not his department so far as I can tell.

What does he offer? Not memories, which I so eagerly supply. *Do you recall the time we.... I'll never forget the.... I didn't think we would ever....* Such a mountain of amusement, of happiness. It never occurred to me that Doris would tire of it. From her rapt look — like a kid being read a fairy tale — I thought I was delivering exactly what she wanted. Now I wonder. We fool ourselves so easily. Maybe that look disguised the mental state of a woman who felt her brain about to dissolve. As in: if I hear that story one more time I'll carve his heart out with a rusty butter knife. But this hidden behind a mask of apparent delight, the apple cart not requiring tipping at that point in time. Now, contemplating an eternity of the same old stories, perhaps the cart was tottering.

At the same time, in the ardor department my love had flipped the door sign to CLOSED. If I set my hand upon her breast, there was no squirming beneath it, no immediate response. Should my hand wander further still, she might pin it with her own, the better for it to remain motionless, or remove it

altogether. Sometimes, as if she were adhering to a schedule she kept in her head, she would say, not so romantically, but then who's to complain?, how about if I blow you? This having to my ear more the sound of a task to be completed than a testament to her desire.

“What happened, baby,” I asked her once or twice. Or a dozen times. Maybe a couple dozen. “It used to be...”

“I don't know, Tommy. Maybe it's that there's no actual light down here. That could throw everything off. Circadian rhythms on the fritz. Or the lack of red meat.”

“You're hungry?”

“No. I'm just speculating. The uncertainty. We don't know what's going on.”

“Nobody ever knows what's going on.”

“There's no privacy, not really. Marge sticking her head in when she pleases.”

She was staring at the ceiling, careful, or so I thought, not to meet my eye.

“It's such a change. So quickly. That's what I wonder about.”

“It's not you, Tommy. Maybe once we get settled in.”

“If that happens.”

“It will. Of course it will. Everybody gets used to everything eventually.”

Of that I'm not so sure, I thought, but did not want to hear myself utter the words.

...

My love perked up when Marge appeared to lead us to the portal again. As we marched behind Marge and the rest of the gang I noticed Doris pausing briefly at the intersections where Marge turned.

“What's up?” I asked Doris.

“Back to my Hansel and Gretel strategy,” Doris whispered. “I’m marking the path.” She had a rock in her hand. When she scratched it against the black pipe it left a faint line.

“What’s the point? Marge knows the way. When do we go anywhere without her?”

“That’s the point exactly. We never know where we’re going down here. Say something happens to Marge. She moves on to whatever’s next. Her leg falls off completely. She disappears. She decides she’s tired of playing tour guide. What happens to us? We sit on our hands for eternity? Listening to the water drip? Wondering how to get back to the honeymoon suite?”

“Even if we know where we’re going, we still don’t know when the portal is open.”

“Maybe it’s never closed. We don’t know.”

“Marge acts like she knows.”

“Maybe you’ve noticed, this isn’t heaven. If there is a heaven. Righteousness doesn’t rule here as far as I’ve noticed. Marge might act like she knows because at heart she’s a martinet. She enjoys marching us around. We think she’s necessary and that’s fine by her.”

“We can’t question everything.”

“Says who?”

“What are you two going on about?” Marge said over her shoulder.

“Sorry,” Doris said. “A personal thing.”

“Condolences,” she replied.

We arrived at the portal after the familiar slogging. Twists, turns, odors, gloom. The rusty rungs of the ladder.

“You got four hours this time,” Marge said.

“An extra hour?” Doris said. “What’s up?”

“You think I know? Might be like your neap tide, celestial bodies in alignment. Cosmic forces. Arbitrary decision on a divine or satanic level. What I’m saying is you’ve got four hours before the gate closes and you’re trapped topside.”

Up, up, one after the other. Then, blinking in the twilight. On every side life in all its extravagance while the six of us stood in a clump in our ridiculous costumes, hats pulled low, fringe of wig sticking out, hiding behind our sunglasses.

“She says we’ll be trapped topside,” Doris said. “But so what? She never explains. Why can’t we pop the lid whenever we want to go home?”

“Point is, we don’t know,” said Toua. “Marge says there are rules. Maybe there are not? Maybe we are free to come and go. We don’t need her. The worst is... We don’t know.”

“Toua,” said DeShaun. “You’re a rule-following type of dude. Not saying that’s bad. Means a man can count on you, generally speaking. Most times. I know the rules, then I know what you’re going to do. But we got to allow that it all might be bullshit. We’re nothing but Marge’s pawns. Like we’re writing a story for her. We come back, we tell her what we done. You notice that look she gets. That far-away thing. Like we’re reading her that book, *Runaway Bunny*. Used to read it to my kids.”

“We’re the bunnies,” said Doris.

“Damn straight. Or maybe we get stuck on the wrong side and the wrong time and it’s Wizard of Oz all over again. We’re a pile of smoking slime on the pavement. Only one way to find out if that’s true.”

“Stay out too late,” said Sean.

“If you want to roll the dice on the smoking slime option.”

“For tonight,” said Segundo, “I will do as I am told. In four hours, I will return. But of course others can do as they wish.”

I thought I saw Doris give Sean a meaningful look. In the next breath I decided it was nothing. Then I changed my mind again.

Segundo stirred me from my thoughts when he clapped me on the shoulder. He said, “Fatman, tonight it’s your turn to lead us. Adjust the world according to your whim.”

“Like chiropractors,” said Carlita. “A twist here, a push there. Straighten the spine of the universe. An adjustment.”

“Let me think on that,” I replied as Segundo took off down the street, looking for a car to boost.

...

He returned in a red Hummer with a winch on the bumper and a rack of headlights bolted to the roof.

“You couldn’t find something less discreet?” Carlita asked. “They didn’t have one in, like, yellow?”

“A few hours. By the time they know it’s missing we’ll be back. And then it will be right where they left it.”

I looked behind the back seat. The compartment there was filled with plastic tubs. I pried the lid off the closest.

“Jesus,” I said. “We’re set for the end of the world.”

“What?” Carlita said..

“Military rifles. Meals ready to eat. A couple jugs of water. Gas tanks.”

Segundo laughed.

“I don’t see what’s funny,” said Carlita. “You stole a lunatic’s car.”

“True. But now we have many options.”

“Like he calls his buddies and we’re on the run from a pack of whack jobs.”

“What are they going to do? Kill us?”

“We don’t know what they can or can’t do.”

“Then we will see. It will be educational.”

Segundo pulled away from the portal, heading south again. Inevitably, he took us toward the West Side. He navigated through downtown, then cranked the wheel on our giant rig to cross the bridge over the river. “Fatman,” he said. “Tonight is your night. What is your pleasure?”

“My pleasure? To live my old life. To wake up in my own bed. To watch Doris fuss to get out the door. Dressing herself. Studying the mirror. The makeup, the hair, the earrings. While I am propped up in bed, watching. That transformation from the private, the personal, to the Doris that grabbed the world by the neck and shook it. That would be my pleasure.”

“Poor Fatman,” said Carlita. “We all must let go. Is that what you tell us? Accept what is. Change those parts we can. Even if the difference is slight.” She paused. “Of course I say it but I don’t feel it in my heart.”

“Take me back then.”

“Take you back where?” Carlita asked.

“My old house.”

Segundo tapped the steering wheel, then gave it another twist, pulling a U-turn in the middle of the bridge, this accompanied by the honking and shouting from our aggrieved fellow motorists. And he, delighted, powered down the window and informed the outraged that they were pansy fuckwads, old ladies peeing their panties, plus other observations reeled off in staccato Spanish beyond my comprehension. As a final flourish he edged the Hummer up against the bumper of one of our fellow motorists and pushed it into the guard rail.

Carlita put a hand to her forehead. “Good work, Segundo,” she said. “Now we remain far under the radar.”

“Please,” he said. “Enough with the worries. We are beyond all that. We are ghosts. In this world but not of it. Past petty concerns.”

“Why don’t you save the philosophical bullshit for now and get us to a place where we can lay low?”

“To Fatman’s house then. What do you have in mind?”

“My thought is, we burn the place down.”

Segundo and Carlita exchanged a look. “Hmm,” Carlita said. “Maybe we start by driving there. We park. We contemplate. There is no hurry.”

“Ah, Carlita,” Segundo said. I was not sure what he meant.

We rumbled through the downtown streets, then up the hill to my neighborhood. The old white population had decided on flight in the late seventies, turning the place over to so-called investors (i.e., slumlords), Asian refugees and Black families that snapped up the sudden surplus of modest homes as the prices plummeted. I bought in just as my racial cohort packed up, this through a combination of ignorance and nonchalance. My bungalow screamed home in an old-fashioned way. Oak floors, oak trim, built-in buffet, box beams, pantry, porch. My neighbors at first were Caucasians too doddering to move. They died off or were hauled to nursing homes, to be replaced by elite Vietnamese immigrants — former military officers, government officials — who saved their money and fled for better neighborhoods at the earliest opportunity. On their heels came Hmong immigrants, scrupulously polite, mostly heads-down, work-hard types whose primary recreation was to invite their every relative to massive backyard weekend feasts. The rub here was the slumlords, who specialized in renting to anyone who could otherwise not find housing due to late rent, evictions, criminal convictions, mental illness or generalized sociopathy. A case in point: my one-time neighbors down the block, who insisted that the steady flow of traffic was the result of their bible study group and religiously-based rap group. That became a less convincing explanation after the cops hit the door with a battering ram and stun grenades, then hauled out a brace of automatic rifles, twenty-thousand dollars in cash, three Rottweilers, and a cache of coke and crank. To live in my tidy little house was a balancing act — an appreciation of the strivers, a reluctant tolerance of the bad actors, a sense that it was educational, even when the bullets were flying.

As we rolled through the familiar streets I felt that the blinders I had pulled over my eyes for years were slowly dissolving. Yes, the slumlords in their distant suburbs were a problem. Yes, they rented to people who could not really be blamed. Racism, surely; bad parenting, yes indeed; low wages and low expectations: the causes stretched on over the horizon. But was it impossible to pick up the garbage strewn outside your house? Was it strictly necessary to knuckle your child's skull while declaring him a miserable little motherfucker? Did you need to put a dozen nine millimeter rounds in the air at midnight, or conduct a pre-dawn screaming argument with your sweetheart in the middle of the street?

Until becoming dead I didn't realize that I had reached a boiling point.

"Pull over, will you?" I said to Segundo.

"Here?"

A dozen people spilled onto the street and sidewalk outside a ramshackle house at the end of the block from my love nest. Whatever grass had been in the yard was worn down to dust years ago. The door hung cockeyed from a single hinge. The broken picture window was filled in with cardboard and the curtain was in fact a Mickey Mouse bed sheet. A tricked out vintage Monte Carlo was parked out front, washed, waxed, rolling on low profile tires and chrome wheels.

"What are they fighting about?" Carlita wondered.

"Paths to world peace? Solutions to climate change? Does it matter?" I said.

I had lived with this for years. Ignored it. Tried, ridiculously, to talk to them. Pulled the pillow over my head. Made light. Dubbed them The Philosophers in honor of their late night screamed debates. Acted as though there was a cachet in living within proximity. Traded on the street cred with friends who lived in the better zip codes. Death brought on a sudden clarity. Talk about the scales being removed from thine eyes.

I reached around to the back compartment and popped the lid on that plastic bin again. I grabbed the AR15 there. Point. Pull the trigger. Those were the two things I knew.

“Is this good to go?” I said to Segundo.

“Ask her,” he said, nodding at Carlita. “She was in the army.”

“National Guard. Nonetheless. Hand it over. Barrel up, please.”

She gave it a once over. “Converted. Full auto. This lever here. More evidence this is the vehicle of a nutcase. Driving around with a loaded weapon. Chamber a round and you’re good to go. Not that I suggest it. You mind if I ask what’s your plan?”

“Plan? I figured I’d just shoot up the Monte.”

“That’s a plan?”

“More like making a point.”

“What’s the point then?”

“That the door can swing both ways. That all the stupidity, all the dumb-ass behavior can come home to roost.”

“That’s what you want to do? Shoot up some overpriced shit car from the 80s?”

“It’s a collector. But yes. Exactly.”

She shook her head.

“We could set the bar higher, you know. Look for a positive outcome.”

“Right now I don’t care. Give me the gun, will you? You said this was my night.”

Carlita and Segundo exchanged a glance. He nodded, shrugged. She passed the rifle back to me. I rolled down the window.

“You ready to hit it?” Carlita said to Segundo.

“The second the shooting stops.”

“Cover your ears,” she said to Carlos. “It’s going to be like a cannon going off in here.” She handed me a pair of tissues from her purse. “Better than nothing. Barely.”

I pointed at the Monte, pulled the trigger. Then everything at once. The noise, the smoke, the muzzle flash, the Monte rocking on its suspension, a spray of glass, the hiss of air from the shot up

tires. Gas on the pavement. A mushroom cloud of flames roaring into the twilight. After a moment of silence from the crowd, screaming, running, pointing at our Hummer.

“Fatman! That Fatman!”

“No way that Fatman. Fatman dead.”

“Maybe he dead, but he sure as shit shooting.”

Next, unsurprisingly, guns pulled from waistbands. Gunfire coming our way. The thud of bullets against the sheet metal. Windows dissolving into pellets of glass.

“Go go go!” Carlita yelled.

Segundo cackled as he stomped the gas pedal. The Hummer fishtailed down the street, bouncing off parked cars. Segundo blew through a pair of stop signs, ignored a red light, then pulled over in an alley behind a dumpster. “I ask this with all due respect, Fatman. That make you happy?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Might be a start. Let’s swing by my old place and take a look.”

...

Ten minutes later the red and blue flashing lights of a half dozen cop cars and a fire truck lit the far end of the street. Yellow police line tape cordoned off the shot-up Monte. From The Philosophers came wailing over the smoldering ruin. Neighbors filled the sidewalks, murmuring among themselves, doubtless of two minds — despairing over the Wild West show outside their doors; pleased to see a form of justice, no matter how rough, imposed upon their loutish neighbors.

“Take it down the alley,” I told Segundo.

“Are you sure you want to do this? I say this now from experience. Emotions. They get away on you.”

“Even if you're dead,” said Carlita.

“Especially if you are dead. That feeling, you have nothing to lose. Later you are back below. Sleeping it off. Trying to sleep it off. The next thing: regret. You took things too far. Because you could. You could finally get away with it.”

“Cut the lights,” I said. “Pull it over here.” We hid in the narrow space between the garage and a row of lilac bushes.

Memories! In spring the lilacs bloomed and filled the air with their intoxicating scent. The bees swarmed around the flowers even as the last of the snow melted in the shaded parts of the yard. Kids showed up, sometimes asking, “Mister Fatman, you give me flowers for my mama?” Or sometimes simply whacking at the branches with machetes they pulled from their backpacks.

As the lilacs finished the fruit trees got going. The crab apple tree exploded, the pear and plum trees put on their own gaudy displays. Pop! Up came the rhubarb. Asparagus emerged, green stems pricking through the dirt, all but screaming, *Fecundity!* This to say nothing of the flower beds that Doris tended, the crocuses and tulips springing up, the carpet of tiny blue flowers amid the suddenly green grass. Life, life, life!

I built the wood fence that enclosed it all. That was me sweating over the post hole digger, plunging it again and again into the soil. The neighborhood had once been a swampy wetland, so notorious for its population of frogs that it was declared Frogtown. With development the bog and the frogs disappeared, but the name stuck. The first few feet of soil were black as coffee beans, this followed by sand and then clay, the lot of it piling up next to the holes I dug. That was me again, sweating, cutting up cedar boards, banging them into place, only slightly surprised when, upon completion, a local artist spray-painted, *Fuck You!* on the alley-facing boards.

Then the house itself, so trim and tidy. I kept up on the paint. A weed had no place in my empire. I took the place to be a reflection — this is who I am, a deluded fool who thinks it possible to make a stand against the creep of chaos. “Just saying,” more than one of my friends observed. “But you look like the odd man out here.”

Segundo turned off the engine. The Hummer clicked and hissed. It had taken a few rounds in the engine compartment in addition to the shot-out windows and bullet holes in the doors. “Good news, not our vehicle,” Segundo said. “Bad news, maybe it makes it back to the portal. Maybe not.”

“Cute house,” Carlita said. “Who gets it?”

“Complicated.”

“How so? Second mortgage, that sort of thing?”

“No. Free and clear. All paid up.”

“Family?”

“They don’t need it. Even if they think they do.”

“Sounds like trouble.”

“More like amusement.”

“What’s the rub?”

“In a nutshell? I hesitate to use the term, Carlita. But they’re greedy little bitches. Everything would not be enough.”

“Family.” She got teary eyed at the thought. “I don’t know what’s worse. Greed or betrayal?”

“Comes to the same thing, more or less.

“So who gets it?”

“The kids across the street. The title anyway. They don’t know yet, but it’s in the will.”

“Relatives?”

“No. Romantics. A kiss. A hug. Holding hands while they stroll. Sweet words for the baby.”

“Nice payout for the basics.”

“Who says they’re the basics? Plus it will provoke the sisters, Donna and Deedee. A win-win.”

“Poetic, Fatman. The whole idea.”

“That’s what I think. But it’s a race against time. People notice. Empty house. Next thing you know, somebody’s cutting out the copper pipe for scrap. Same for the wiring. The leaded glass flies

out the window. They'll pry out the built-in buffet and sell it. Ditto on the oak trim. The same guys who would pry the gold out of the teeth of your dead mouth if you gave them the chance."

I climbed out of the Hummer and stepped in a puddle of coolant. The marksmen down the block must have hit the radiator.

I pushed open the gate. The yard was already shaggy. Again, that flood of memory. Doris and I side-by-side at the fire pit on a cool spring night, glass of wine in hand, watching the brightest stars emerge. Pulling up sod to make space for another bed of flowers. Wrangling over where the tomatoes should go.

"I do not suppose you have keys," said Segundo.

"No need." I picked up the fake rock beside the door and gave it a shake. Empty.

"Looks like somebody beat you to it," Segundo said.

I gave the back door a push. It swung open, revealing the kitchen as it was the morning we left. At first glance, everything seemed tidy, tended. Dishes cleared from the table. Pots hung from their hooks over the stovetop, copper-clad bottoms gleaming. Chairs neatly pushed in, napkins folded. Beneath all that, decay. I opened the refrigerator and got smacked by the smell of spoiled milk and rotting vegetables. The oranges in a bowl on the counter had turned fuzzy green and white with mold.

"You want me to bag this garbage?" Carlita wondered.

"No need," I said.

"What do you want to do?" she said.

"Take one last look. Remember. Drown. I know. I should move on. This is the past. The future, who knows? The moment, that's what we've got."

As I looked around I had my doubts. There was that ridiculous sofa that Doris bought at an estate sale. It looked like it came direct from a Chinese opium eater's palace, done up in upholstery featuring characters scampering in an Oriental forest. She bought it for ten dollars, this in consideration of its immensity, its absurdity.

Doris loved those sales for the window it opened into the otherwise hidden lives of others. All the trifles that had once been deemed necessary, that had been bought, paid for, hauled back home, installed, used and now abandoned by heirs who inherited the house and its load of flotsam. From the put-upon executor, upon initial examination, the inevitable groan of dismay. *Look at all this shit!* Then, after that first horrified glance, a cagey eye landing here and there, noting those items that might be worth the trouble. The silver service. That brace of shotguns and rifles in a gun closet. The dining room set. Is that an Eames chair? And surely those rugs must have some value, especially if knotted by Pakastani slave children. Next, haggling with the vultures arrived to pick at the carrion.

It says fifty but will you take twenty-five? I see a nicer one on Craigslist for half the price. Words unsaid, sadly: *So then why don't you drive across town and buy it, asshole?*

The other prospect being to rent a dumpster, hire some college kids to fill it to the brim, toss everything and never think about it again.

Which is impossible. So much of this hunting and gathering defined who we were. This color and not that. Wool, not synthetic, leather not pleather. Is it not time to replace the old white GE refrigerator with the gleaming stainless Sub Zero? Do we want to appear to live like graduate students? Should we not occupy our position in society and display our so-called achievements?

That absurd sofa — how many times had I stretched out upon it, my head in Doris' lap as she ran her fingers over my bare skull, my thoughts slowing, slowing and turning finally into the scantest cloud? How often had we set aside our glasses of wine and settled instead into a romantic tussle that would end with my love employing me as a trampoline?

Living in The Now — yet another delusion. Who does? The moment is because of everything that came before. Years and years stacked up, the present being less than a pinprick on top of the pile. I was all but crushed beneath those memories. I felt that my legs would give way with the next step.

“Some little gentrifier will end up with a sweet place. There's that,” Carlita said.

“Hmmm,” was my only reply.

Then Segundo grabbed my arm and said, "You hear that?"

"What?"

"Upstairs?"

I listened but didn't hear anything at first.

"Somebody's up there," Carlita said. "What do you want to do?"

"We're the ghosts," I reminded her. "Who should be afraid?"

She shuddered. "After you. Maybe there are ghosts and then ghosts. Capital G."

I led them up the narrow stairway. There wasn't much up there. Old clothes. Christmas ornaments. Things that should have been thrown away. I stuck my head into the space and peered around the clutter.

There, behind a pile of boxes, stood Doris and Sean.

...

"What are you doing here?" I said.

"What are *you* doing here?" she replied.

"Sentimental journey. Looking at the old place one last time."

"What happened to Toua and DeShaun?" Segundo asked.

"A break in," Sean said. "Lawyer's office. Looking for files."

"But you're here?" I said to Doris.

"So many memories. We were in the neighborhood. I thought, would it hurt to take another look?"

"It does. Hurt. And consoles. The memories."

Sean looked eager to get away. Fake smile. Desperate to plant his gaze anywhere other than on me. I couldn't be sure of anything with him. He might as well have been an alien species. That synthetic tie, I noticed, was a clip on.

I took a close look at Doris. She met my eye. If she was guilty of anything she wasn't showing it.

Sean glanced at his wrist, as if he had a watch that would tell the time. "We ought to get going," he said. "We've got to pick up the other two."

"See you back at the portal," Doris said. "We've got to talk about...this."

She followed Sean down the stairs.

Carlita, Segundo and I stood there until we heard the door close. Carlita gave me a look. Quizzical, as if she had opinions that she was tamping down.

"Now what?" she asked.

I led them to the kitchen. I grabbed a newspaper, a bottle of olive oil, a lighter. Back in the living room I doused the opium-eater sofa with oil, poured more on the newspaper, put a match to it. The flame spread quickly. A thick smudge of smoke filled the room. I stood motionless, until Segundo took me by the arm.

"Come, Fatman. We stay here, we will stink like a campfire."

"One more minute," I said.

"We will meet you outside. Don't wait too long."

"Go ahead. I'll be right out."

I watched as the blaze jumped from the sofa to the curtains. The curtain hooks melted and the fabric fell to the floor. The bookcase started to burn. Glass shattered with the heat. What would happen if I stayed? Consumed by the fire? Set free? Returned to the catacomb looking like a half-smoked cigar?

The stairway became a chimney. The fire roared upward. Smoke, now thick and black, filled the living room.

A hand grabbed my arm, hauled me through the kitchen and pushed me out the door. "How many times do you want to die?" Segundo said.

"Is that possible?"

“You want to find out?”

“I might not care.”

He opened the Hummer door and pushed me inside.

“One more minute,” I said.

“The cops. They’re just down the street.”

More windows exploded. Fire leapt to the clapboard. The plastic siding on the neighbor’s house sagged and melted.

“What about the kids?” Carlita asked. “The ones who were going to get the house.”

“They’ll get the insurance money. They’ll be better off that way.”

Segundo turned the key. Our shot-up Hummer sputtered, started, died. The smell of burning coolant filled the cab. Steam poured from the vents. From Segundo a stream of invective as he slammed the steering wheel. *Mierda! Coger a esta!*

“Stay put,” he said.

He hurried to a rusted Accord parked behind the neighbor’s garage. He had it hot wired in a heartbeat. Segundo pulled up behind the Hummer and yelled, “Get in!”

“We can’t steal this,” I said. “I know the guy. We take this, he has no ride.”

“We are borrowing, not stealing. He will get it back. Or do you want to tell the cops, Hey, I stole this Hummer, shot up the neighborhood and torched this house? But hey, you can’t touch me because, dear sirs, I am a ghost?”

I got in the car.

...

We followed Marge, single file and silent, and trudged through the underworld.

The others peeled off at their coffin-sized indents in the walls. In comparison our honeymoon suite was luxurious. When we arrived, Marge said, “Here you are, lovebugs.”

We settled back into our hammock.

I didn’t know where to start with Doris.

Things she did not say: *He has all this talk about how... And, well, you, you’re still trying to... Which I respect, I do...*

Instead she acted as if nothing had happened between her and Sean, between us. For all I knew, nothing had. This being the curse of suspicion, of jealousy. Only the most vaporous of facts are necessary.

“The car in the driveway?” she asked. “What was with all the bullet holes?”

I told her about the shoot out with the Philosophers, the torch job on the house.

“Oh, Tommy,” she said. A few tears ran down her cheek. “So much letting go.”

Exactly that. It went so quickly. A splash of oil, the touch of a lighter. Thirty years up in flames. In the morning, a smoldering ruin. Blackened lumber collapsed into the basement. Seared, heat-twisted appliances on top of the pile. CAUTION ribbon around it all, like a gift made up of ruination.

Everything was slipping beneath my feet. Often I had fantasized about someone — not me! — emptying a clip in the general direction of the Philosophers. Never had it crossed my mind to get a gun or, even more absurd, to pull the trigger. Set fire to my house? Not much was farther from my mind. The exception being to doubt my feeling for Doris, or what I presumed were hers about me.

All the endearments, all the kindnesses. *Tommy, you’re my Fatman. Or, I made this pie just like you like it, baby. Half the sugar and twice the ice cream. Or, this with a salacious little whisper in my ear, Why don’t we slip off those trousers and see what comes up?*

Was it the longest stage run in history, an act that had lasted for decades? What if, long ago, she had decided that I was close enough, that my tidy trust fund would put her over the top to a comfortable life, that my various charms and money made up for shortcomings in the width and girth

department, that — let's face it — nothing and nobody would ever be perfect, so why not get it over with?

Whereas for me, to be with Doris was like staring into the sun. I was blinded to all else.

Now, freed from the concerns of work, money, age, health, status — life! — she was also free to reappraise the question that had lurked on the lips of others for decades. What was she doing with me?

...

Allow me a moment to reflect on the pocket protector.

I wanted to rip it from Sean's pocket, grab one of his pens and scribble on his shirt.

I am not proud of the impulse.

It took a while to figure out why the stupid flap of plastic annoyed me so.

Did it not occupy the same territory as those stippled plastic sofa covers that appealed to a certain type of Fifties housewife? The idea being that catastrophe is right around the corner, that it can with the slightest bit of foresight be averted. For example, say your brain-dead hubby is transporting a forkful of Swanson TV dinner Salisbury steak from his TV tray to his saliva-glistening lips and — oh-oh! — there it goes, a gravy-soaked mess on the chintz sofa? Who's going to clean that up? Can it be cleaned up? Or is it a blemish you live with for who knows how long, a testament to your inability to foresee the inevitable future? Now say your unprotected pen leaks. So there you are, a Rorschach blob on your poly shirt. What does that reveal? To a certain type of individual — for example, Sean — it says, *Why would anyone not possess a pocket protector?*

Let me tell you why. Despite my current condition, I have never believed that the worst is lurking in the closet, waiting to leap out. I believe in seizing the pleasures, no matter how small, that are available in the moment. Thus I would rather park my quarters on a welcoming spread of chintz or leather or velvet and enjoy that slight luxury than listen to the crinkle of yellowing plastic beneath my sensitive ass.

When people announce that they hope for the best and plan for the worst, my reaction is, take your dreary self elsewhere. My head will not be filled with that drudgery. I plan for the best. I open myself to the moment. I dream about the possibilities.

At least I did until Sean and his wretched pocket protector inserted itself into my après-life.

...

Doris stirred in our hammock.

“Was I snoring?” she wondered.

“Not so much.”

“Drooling?”

“No more than usual.”

“Did I keep you up?”

“It’s like the sound of the ocean, the snoring. And the drooling. Like salt water spray. Like you’re channeling the mermaids.”

“Do you dream anymore?”

“Everything seems like a dream,” I said. I looked into her eyes. That crazy green, like the jungle floor; so shocking against the drab of the underworld .

“No clocks. No mirrors. Is there still time?”

“How long have we been here? What do you think?”

“I have no idea. It’s not like the birds start chirping every morning. Not like there’s a sunset.”

“How does this end?”

“Does it end?” She put a hand over my mutilated ear.

“It’s that bad?” I asked.

“A little... gruesome.”

“Maybe we go somewhere where we’re all fixed up. Someplace better.”

“Or worse. But together? Or do we each go our own way?”

“I don’t think we decide,” I said.

“What if there is no next thing?”

“Say life was a job. And the job is almost done. Just this last bit here where we do...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Straighten out the details, maybe that’s it. Of who we were. Of what we did. An accounting. A realization. To the extent possible.”

“Maybe we’re just being played,” Doris said.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve got choices. Like Pimplipper said. Do nothing. Let the world go on as it is. Or step in. For better or worse. Petty revenge on one end. Justice on the other. Settling on something that ...”

“What?”

“Leaves you with the sense that you’ve done the right thing. Or tried at least. That you’re not left feeling ashamed.”

“So we choose.”

“We see who we are at heart.”

“And then?”

“Poof.” Doris made a motion with her hands, like wings as a bird takes flight. “Say we’re nothing. Forever.”

“The men of the cloth say there’s something next. They’re all wrong?”

“How would they know?” said Doris. “The idea that nobody is nothing forever — that’s their product line. But what if you pass through the pearly gates and the next step is the big doozy? Not heaven or hell. Not floating from universe to universe. Not even eternity. Just nothing.”

“Can that be?”

“Well, it wouldn’t. Be.”

We stared together at the damp ceiling. Tiny stalactites hung from the rock. I tried to remember if they had been there before. I had no idea, except to think of the centuries it must take for them to form.

Doris said, “I think we should get out of here.”

“Get some air.”

“If there were some, yeah.”

“So where to?”

“The big hall? See who’s around. Get out of our rut.”

“Our rut?”

“We’re talking about non-existence. Absolute nothingness. I’d call that a rut.”

We followed Doris’ trail of marked pipe to the hall of the dead. Therein the usual cacophony under the candles in the chandeliers, our people in their various states. The drooling olds who had gasped their last in a nursing home; the youngs who killed themselves in car accidents, or by suicide, or whose mortal enemies had put bullets in them; those patients sucked dry by that trifecta of cancer, surgery, chemo. Children, even, wandering about with that mute acceptance that is theirs. Knowing so little, normal could be anything to them.

We hadn't made it down the steps before Pimplipper and Duke Black emerged from the throng, headed our way.

"Fatman!" Pimplipper exclaimed. As always, that two-hundred watt grin from him, bright even in the gloom of the hall. "And Doris. Has anyone asked you lately what you're doing with this character?"

"Only the jealous. Or the shallow. Jerks who haven't heard that beauty is more than skin deep."

"I'll keep that in mind," Pimplipper said. "Though if I have to choose — beauty or ugly? I go with beauty. Among the reasons it's a pleasure to see you."

"I'm being harassed in the afterlife?" Doris retorted.

"Appreciated." Pimplipper made a sweeping motion with one arm, taking in the mob behind us. "In light of all else."

Black sighed. "Pimplipper will never be woke. Lucky he died when he did. Only a question of time before a couple dozen female associates and paralegals appeared with knives in their teeth. He leered, he insinuated, he kissed, he grabbed. Headed for a predictable end. Reporters all over it. Reputation in the shit can. Death being an excellent career move."

"Standard operating procedure at the time," Pimplipper replied. "Back then I didn't hear any complaints."

"Of course you didn't," said Doris. "A: You weren't listening. B: They all needed to keep eating. Maybe now that they don't, we should take a look around down here. See if your victims want to share their perspective."

"Victims?" Pimplipper said. "I object. Given, hmm... everything. Now maybe they call themselves victims. At the time..."

"What?" Doris asked. "It was a job requirement? Like typing eighty words a minute? Letting the boss feel you up? The blow job under the desk?"

“Fascinating conversation,” Pimplipper said, his grin settling into something more tight-lipped. “However, we were hoping to chat with Fatman for a moment.”

“I’ll wait for you here,” Doris said as Pimplipper and Black each took me by an arm and directed me toward an empty table. It reminded me of being conducted to the principal’s office. The battered furniture, I noticed, was labeled Public Schools.

“I never asked,” I said. “What’s all this doing down here?”

“Cold war hysteria. Nuclear attack,” Pimplipper said. “They figured they’d move school underground if topside became radioactive rubble. As if school would be the biggest problem. They left all the tables and chairs.”

“But we’re not here to discuss furnishings,” Black added.

“What did you say the last time we talked?” Pimplipper asked. “Let the world be the world, right? No point in setting it to rights. It being always only as right or wrong as it wants to be.”

“Something like that.”

“The pointlessness of those exertions. You think you’re making one thing right but you’re making something else wrong.”

“Not that I agree,” said Duke Black. “But my colleague offers an accurate account. To the best of my recollection.”

“What is this? Some kind of proceeding? Underworld district court?”

“Relax, Fatman. It’s a conversation. We’re curious.”

“About my state of mind? What made sense topside, I’m not sure it adds up anymore.”

“Disorienting,” said Black. “No shame in that. Nothing like death to turn you upside down.”

Pimplipper drummed a finger on the table. It sounded like he was pounding with a half-rotted carrot. “There have been reports,” he said. “Your last escapade.”

“The shoot-up?”

“Automatic weapon fire is what we heard,” said Black.

“No injuries, but a lot of cops,” Pimlipper added. “Plenty of screaming in the street.”

“Nothing new there,” I said. “They’re a high-strung bunch, my ex-neighbors.”

“A vintage automobile up in flames,” Black added.

“Not my intent. But no regrets.”

“The fire department. Sirens, spray, foam, ax to the hood.”

“I didn’t stick around for the whole show.”

“What we hear, you were busy burning down your own house by then.”

“Big night,” Pimlipper said. “You made the news, my friend.”

“We get the news?”

“Recent arrivals. Sometimes their phones work for a day or two. We like to catch up.”

“You take their phones?”

“For the better. We didn’t? Next thing, you’d have the dead texting everyone they know. What a shit show that would be. *Honey, I’m dead. Sort of. Not really. They got me down in, I don’t know, it looks like the sewer. Call nine one one. No, no, don’t hang up. You got to get me out of here.* Then what? Firefighters. Cops. EMTs. Priests and ministers. Revival tents. Researchers. Reporters.”

“Would they see anything? Would we be visible?” I asked. “Are we really here?”

“Interesting. *Really.* What does that mean?” said Duke.

“A matter ripe for discussion,” Pimlipper added. “The sewer workers walk right past us and never blink. Either they’ve got remarkable self-restraint or they don’t see us. Given human nature, I’m choosing door number two. But topside we’re real enough. That mushiness disappears. Segundo grabs a guy by the neck and whamo, he’s flying through the air. Guy like you pulls the trigger on the Bushmaster and it’s bang bang bang. The Monte’s a sieve. Lucky nobody got killed.”

“We don’t have solid answers, that’s what Pimlipper is saying,” Duke said. “Therefore we prefer to err on the side of caution.”

“In that case we’d never head topside, right?”

“Nothing is ever clear cut. I believe that’s our overall message. Am I right, counselor?” Duke said to Pimplipper.

“Even that’s not clear cut,” he responded.

“Jesus,” I said.

“To the matter at hand,” said Black. “Your adventure.”

“Don’t you want to include Segundo and Carlita?”

“We debriefed them already.”

“We know what *happened*,” Pimplipper said. “We’re seeking some insight on the why. Frame of mind. Motivation. Expectations. Where is this getting you?”

“Is this some kind of trial? Are there outcomes? Punishments? Rewards?”

“No no no,” said Black. “Nothing of the sort. As far as we know.”

“Maybe there are,” Pimplipper said. “Maybe not. In any case, not our department. You can relax.”

“Well, as much as anyone can relax. Is lack of knowledge a problem?” Black offered. “Maybe we’re better off not knowing. For now anyway. Ignorance does seem to catch up with us eventually.”

“What this boils down to, Fatman, is, what were you thinking?”

“Shooting up the car?”

“That’s a good place to start,” Black said.

“That Hummer we borrowed. Some prepper nutcase, killing time until the apocalypse. Bins full of MREs, water, gas, food. Handguns. Ammo. A machete. Pepper spray. Hatchet. I saw the Bushmaster and things clicked into place.”

“You mind if I take notes?” Pimplipper asked. He pulled that smudged up notebook from his suit pocket.

“We don’t need to write in blood again, do we?”

“Really, Fatman. Relax. We’re just having a chat. Things clicked into place...”

“Like I was in the middle of a sociopathy jam-up. The prepper with his end-of-civilization kit. The Philosophers, bellowing, accusing. Motherfucker this and motherfucker that. Big-eyed kids learning to be criminals.”

“The Philosophers?” Black asked with an arched brow.

“Term of endearment. In recognition of their wit, their love of knowledge. I’ve listened to them for years. Nothing anyone can do about it. Cops. Social workers. Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Philosophers apparently do not study the Watchtowers that are left for them. Their slumlord could evict them, but he’s okay so long as he gets overpaid once a month in cash with a bump of meth on the side.”

“You don’t mind me asking, what did you hope to accomplish?” said Pimplipper, a pencil stub poised over his notebook. “You thought a shoot-up would change their ways? Make them into more reasonable people?”

“What do I care about that any more? I’m dead.”

“So what’s the point?”

“Evening out the score. Instead of everyone being afflicted by them, this time they take it on the chin. No cops, no prosecutors, no city inspectors. No public defenders. No social workers. Nothing but a flaming ruin. No retaliation possible unless they can find a way to get their hooks into the dead. Since that would involve something more than yelling at each other in the middle of the night, I’m guessing it exceeds their capabilities.”

“As you know,” said Black, “this is where Pimplipper and I part ways. Revenge. Too often a simplistic label. The line between vengeance and justice being easily blurred.”

“You want to know the truth?”

“It’s a starting point.”

“Anybody living next door to those nitwits would say that dropping the hammer on them was justice. Mostly the people who have a problem with that live in a different zip code.”

“Hmm,” said Black. “I had you pegged higher, compassion-wise. What about the facts of their lives? Bad parenting. Poor education. Poverty. Racism. Red-lining. Bad diet. Jesus, Fatman, I could go on like this all day. I merely raise the question. Do you think you’ve been harsh? In light of your own life — tidy trust fund, snug roof over your head, loving wife, and I’m just getting started here — are you failing to see this in light of your own soft ride?”

“I’m not saying they ought to be brain surgeons and rocket scientists. I’d settle if they were only modestly annoying neighbors. Don’t cut the grass, don’t shovel the snow, park the car on the lawn, get maybe half the garbage in the can — I could live with all that. It’s everything else — idiotic screaming arguments, mistreatment of the kids, kicking the dog. You want *me* to go on? I don’t hear about anyone volunteering to live next to this. Usually the righteous find their sympathy when the problem is a couple miles away from their own bungalow.”

Pimplipper looked up from his notes. “The way I remember it, you were ready to let the world be the world. That you’d had enough of trying to fix it up. Which I advocate myself.”

“I wasn’t trying to fix things up. I was just trying to put the shoe on their feet for once. To see how it feels.”

“So how did it feel?” said Black.

“Could have been worse. Could have been better. More about me than them.”

“How does this fit into your deal with Doris?” Black wondered.

“What’s that mean? What deal?”

Pimplipper and Black exchanged a look. “Maybe you should talk to her,” Black said.

...

Doris wasn’t where she said she’d wait. I spotted DeShaun and asked him where I could find her. He shrugged and said, “Man, I am not the sister’s keeper. Look around.”

I wandered among the dead. James Dean aside, not so many die young and make a pretty corpse. More like it they die old and decrepit, sagging of skin, limping and hunched, staggering as they attempt to move from point A to point B. Or, younger, but whittled down by cancers; bloated by obesity and the resulting chronic disease; twisted and contused by fatal accidents. Then the children sporting that post-chemo skull gleam, their appearance that of shrunken old men, drifting from table to table, searching for condolence, finding little thereof, the truth being that the dead are, like the living, primarily interested in their own affairs. That I passed a knot of them gathered around a table of dead priests and Boy Scout leaders came as no surprise.

There were hundreds, thousands. In the sprawling gloom it was hard to tell. Their costumes were like a catalog of haberdashery. Settler-era woolens, buckskin jackets, pinched waist dresses with full-on petticoats, gangster gear from the Twenties, super-fly disco regalia, hippie bell bottoms, a vast contingent in hospital cover-ups, bare asses drooping in the gloom. Many of these hollow-cheeked and gasping, stooped and coughing, victims of the latest pandemic. I spied a few Natives done up as if they had just wandered off the prairie, sitting glumly within a sea of Anglo dead. Another violated treaty no doubt, cosmic in this instance.

How long I spent searching was unknowable. Minutes, hours, days? Time having no meaning. This being for better or worse, I was unable to say.

I stopped to get my bearings near that conference table of dead priests. Most of them were done up in collars. A few wore vestments, looking like they were ready to uncork a sermon. A younger evangelist buttonholed me and said, "Not all who wander are lost."

"New Testament?"

"Tolkein, actually. It could be true."

"Who knows?"

"What are you looking for, my son?"

"Excuse me, padre, but I'm twice your age."

“You get in the habit. People expect it. Some people, anyway.”

“I’m looking for my wife. Maybe you noticed her.”

“That’s not a lot to go on.”

“You saw her, you’d remember. Let me put it to you straight. A looker. A lot going on, top to bottom. Some bad luck in the hair department. Half of it’s missing. But not the first thing you’d notice.”

“Her. I bet I know who you mean. Excuse me for asking, how did you land her...?”

“I won’t say fuck you to a man of the cloth, especially one who’s trying to be helpful. Allow me to observe. Why do you think churches are full of church ladies? You make some effort — pretense but who cares? — of listening to every biddy who shows up. Decades ago the hubby started doing nothing more than nodding along, if that. Hiding behind the sports section. Drinking with his pals. You show the slightest bit of attention and you are a god. Next thing you know your church-lady-in-the-making is signed up for the Daughters of Isabella. Working the funerals, dusting off the statuary. Maybe down on all fours in the rectory as well. Excuse me for observing. In my own case, I listen. I ask. I converse. I remember. I’m amusing. Plus, I managed the household finances. Did the cooking, and I’m not talking wiener-water soup here, padre. Coq au vin, beef bourguignon, cassoulet, sourdough bread, decent wine, a spot of calvados, espresso, you name it. Not to mention some other tricks that are not necessarily up my sleeve. You’re too young to remember the tune, *It Ain’t the Meat, It’s the Motion*. Which is not about pork chops. In my case, it’s meat and motion, if that’s not too much to think about. You got any more questions about what she’s doing with me?”

“Okay. Love is blind. I get it. If I were you, I’d head in that direction.” He pointed to a dark corner of the yawning space. “With some, I don’t know, accountant. Old school engineer. Probably big into vintage calculators.”

“Shit.” I said.

“That’s bad?”

“I wish I knew.”

I headed off for the recesses of the hall.

Everything said about jealousy is true. Yes, yes, it is the green eyed monster! It is the dragon in paradise, the hell of heaven, the cousin of greed!! Not to mention that it invokes the fear of comparison, a civil war of the soul!!!

I could go on.

Such were my thoughts as I marched past the dead gathered around their bomb shelter furniture.

What did I have as evidence that my love was slipping away from me? Next to nothing. What did I require? Next to nothing.

I saw — imagined being the better term — a look in her eye. An evasiveness when we talked about our topside outings. The odd circumstance that had her showing up with Sean at our former love nest. But why in the attic? Why there? What was the point? Then there was the rift between our ambitions. Despite my lapse — my splurge, my self-indulgence — with the Bushmaster, the Philosophers and the Monte Carlo, my to-do list did not include finding solutions for poverty, ignorance, hunger, bad parenting, hopelessness, or, in general, injustice. Life belongs to the living. Have I mentioned that? The problems are eternal. Millions of those living can address them. Is it not hubris to believe that a dead guy, which is to say, me, has a prayer of changing what has been the course of all history? The evil will find a way; the virtuous will tilt at windmills. Anyway, I played the cards I had.

The problem being that Doris did not share that opinion. And Sean? For all I knew he believed only what served him best in the moment regarding the love of my life.

Beneath the pocket-protector, the Walmart clothing, the Corfam shoes, there lay the heart of a schemer. I saw a glint in his eye, a desire to possess. There being so little to have in the land of the dead, then why not Doris? A treasure to me, a bauble to him. By my reading, the depth of his soul

was more like a shallow grave than the Mariana Trench. He was not half of what Doris deserved or required. Except that he offered the illusion of setting the world to right, what was there to the twerp?

Okay. I was guessing. I barely knew who he was.

Except that he had that head of hair, and, for a corpse, youthful vigor. Flat stomach, a spring in his step. Before his veins exploded in his brain, he surely put in some gym time. That ridiculous short sleeved shirt revealed biceps that knew a thing or two about dumbbells. A pile of muscle ran from his shoulders toward his ears. Could it be that my love's judgment had been overtaken by something more than the treacherous Sean's so-called interest in justice? Was it also driven by the physical realities, considering that Sean and I occupied opposite positions on the Schwarzenegger to Wimpy spectrum?

I spotted Doris and Sean in the darkest, farthest corner, bent over their table like a pair of conspirators, too engrossed to note my approach.

"What are you two cooking up?" I said.

They pivoted toward me, startled. Sean recovered first. "Spooked us," he said. "Ha, ha."

"Tommy," Doris said. "You can help us think."

"Depends," I said.

"What I hear is your die-and-let-live thing ran off the rails," Sean said. "The gun. The car. The torch job on the house."

"Consistency." I shrugged. "Hobgoblin of little minds, right? Even if you aspire you can't always achieve."

"Doris told you about our next move?"

Oh, yes, your next move. As in, Doris sneaking off to whatever cubbyhole Sean occupies. Wherein, what happens next? That foreplay of conversation, the *tell-me-more*, and *oh-really* and *I-can't-believe-it-that's-so-fascinating*. Then in her best Mae West style, *Is that an abacus in your*

pocket, or are you just glad to see me? Retreating deeper into the cubby now, a hand here, a hand there, some buttons popped and zippers zipped.

“I don't know that I've got it all straight myself,” I said.

This while thinking, if I had the Bushmaster right now would I empty a clip in his face to see what might happen?

“You know about Toua's project. That phony Hmong real estate deal. Money down for a California marijuana plot that doesn't exist. The old generals fleecing the new arrivals. Them sitting in a drafty slum rental, snow up to their eyeballs, dreaming of the old days on a steamy mountainside. Eager to believe. And as always, a villain ready to sell a bag of nothing.”

“That part I get. The willingness to put aside reason, to line up to get screwed, you can't beat that out of people. But what are you doing about it?”

“The stakeouts. The break-ins. Maybe a guy jammed in a trunk and driven around until he's ready to talk. Sometimes you've got to ram the car into a phone pole a time or two to establish that you mean business. Suggest that you know where their kids go to school. We're getting account information, logins and passwords, where the crypto is stashed. It all works out, these characters won't have two pennies to rub together. The clothes on their backs, if that. Though if they were left walking around in nothing but dirty underwear...”

“You could help us,” Doris said.

“Right,” Sean added, too quickly I thought. Help us by disappearing altogether is what I saw in the subtitles.

“Excuse me for asking. Too bad for the wanna-be farmers. But what do you really care? You got starvation in Africa. Wildfire in California. Disease everywhere. And on the other hand, some would-be weed growers looking for a sunnier climate. This is worth the trouble?”

“I get your point,” Sean allowed. “For Toua it's personal. His sense of justice. That the rich prey on the poor and laugh all the way to the bank. That his people doing the thieving. He wants to send a

message. You can't get away with it. That greed and double-dealing will get you in a mess. Could be you in the trunk, screaming about how you're ready to talk."

Sean pulled one of his pens from the protector and tapped it on the table to punctuate his argument. "Agreed — it's not world peace. We're doing what we can. Which to my mind beats sitting on our hands doing nothing. We're kneeling at the altar of righteousness. Say there is an accounting and we are forced to explain what we did in life. What we did in this period, whatever it is, to fill in the gaps. To reconsider. Do what we didn't do before. Act even if it seems hopeless or pointless. Align ourselves with virtue."

"You're putting this in a big package," I replied. "Why not just say that Toua has a vendetta going? He loves messing up his enemies. Things he didn't have the guts to do while he was living, now he's gung ho. No down side. He's already dead. How about this: that the cosmic forces look down on him eventually and ask, Where were your balls back in the day, when you were living and breathing and walking the earth? When you had something to risk, you cowered in the corner. We're supposed to respect your courage now?"

"Tommy," Doris said. "Better late than never, right?"

"Maybe. Maybe just the other way around. That it's all self-interest. Living, it was easier to keep your nose out of it. Dead, it makes more sense to put some coins in the virtue bank. The risks being so minimal. The pay-off being, well, who knows."

"Then strip it down to the basics," Sean said, this with a hard look in his eye. "Revenge. Getting even. Watching the wicked squirm. In your case, maybe not the wicked so much as the irritating. Tell me, how did you feel when you watched the Monte burn? When you watched them all scream and run?"

"You want to know? I'm not ashamed to admit it. Well, I am. Nonetheless. A song in my heart. The thought that for once the Philosophers are getting more than they're handing out. That it snaps them out of their little world and reminds them that there are others around them who are sick of their

antics. Who don't care about their excuses. While I was living I did nothing but endure them, just like everybody else. I didn't pick up the Bushmaster until I became untouchable. You think I'm going to get credit in heaven for that?"

"What are you going to do instead?" Sean asked. "Wander around here? Gas with a bunch of corpses about the good old days?"

Sean swept out an arm to encompass Ghoul Central, with all of its hacking and limping, with the non-stop, deafening buzz of... what? Conversation? Not really. More like a holler of I-couldas and I-shouldas. The endless dwelling on former aches and pains, surgeries, procedures. The kvetching about survivors insufficiently grateful for their inheritance, resentful to find they have to dispose of a pile of worthless possessions. As in, *Why did he save all this junk? Didn't he stop to think that someone would have to get rid of it?*

"We could let it all go. That's what I've been saying."

"Oh, Tommy," Doris said. She set her hand on mine. Room temperature, but still it brought back the memories, the many comforts of life. "We can't let ourselves be useless. We can't spend who knows how long sitting here and watching from the sidelines. I can't be that person."

Sean leaned in closer to me. "I don't believe you are either, Fatman. You can't bear to see your house fall into ruin, so you burn it down. You can't walk away from the Philosophers, so you get out an assault rifle. That's a start. You can take it to a whole different level. You're with us. You just haven't admitted it yet."

"Tommy, let's go back. We should talk. Just you and me."

Love, colliding now with jealousy and resentment. I might as well have been a lamb off to market, following along big-eyed and stupid as we marched through those endless corridors back to the honeymoon suite.

...

We barely want to let go of the past, even when it was awful. Witness the women who cling to men who abuse them, the worker bees who won't leave a wretched job, the children who ultimately care for parents who were at best neglectful.

Now consider my history with Doris. No need to dip further into her physical presence (though I can't resist pointing out again that when she walked into a room, it was like someone cranked the thermostat. The slaving, the dumbstruck expression on the face of men and women alike!). Set that aside, even if it is like suggesting that you move Mount Kilimanjaro over a couple hundred yards. I am thinking now of her attentiveness, her consideration, her kindness. And yes, her desire to make our life together happier, more comfortable, more beautiful. The gardens she tilled, the flowers she tended, the art on the walls, the tablecloths that matched the napkins, the mirrors that caught the sun and filled the rooms with light. The terms of endearment, the lightness of her touch, the songs she sang in the morning. She had a tin ear, but nonetheless, there was a song inside her. Don't get me started on her ridiculous breakfast costume. The fuzzy pink slippers, the fleece robe she loosely belted. So in the morning — how could I resist! — as she fussed over the sink I would tiptoe up behind her and slip my hand inside that hothouse, exploring here and there as she murmured, not altogether sincerely, "Thomas, I am trying to make us coffee."

Does it sound like this was a past I yearned to escape?

And yet. I sensed that I was standing on the end of a pier as a breeze caught the sails of The Doris and carried it off to a foreign shore. *Avast me now matey, for ye be tearing out me heart!*

Once again, back to the honeymoon suite. Once again, arranging ourselves in our sole bit of furniture, our hammock. Doris with her head upon my shoulder, her body pressed hard against me.

"Tom-Tom," she said, beating lightly on my stomach. This being an old trick of hers, to turn me into her own timpani. She knew it made me laugh, even at the worst of times.

I said, "I'm not sure I'm in the mood."

Her hand came to a rest against my dirty suit. "It's not that bad," she said.

"It might be."

"So tell me."

"We had so much together. The house. The meals. The wine. The garden. Those trips. The neighborhood. The politics. A million things. Now this. So close to nothing. Our house in ashes. Our tiny cave. A hammock. Who knows how many other corpses have swung in it."

"It's what we have," Doris replied. "What are our choices? We can give up and what? Just swing in the hammock? Or make of it what we can."

"It's absurd. We're dead. Why do we have to make anything of it?"

"What hasn't been absurd, Tommy? Start from the moment of conception and take it from there. Slime swimming up some tubing and bingo, here we are. The facts of our lives are crazy, top to bottom. Why should any of it be as it is? That the sky is blue instead of green, that there are elephants and ants, that we have our thoughts, however nuts they may be. Sometimes we're even capable of expressing them. More or less. That we found each other. That I care about your thoughts and you care about mine. You add it all up, that we're corpses together in a hammock is not the biggest surprise. Tell me what's eating you."

I knew the words, but I could not immediately get them out of my mouth. I feared I would head down a path that led to a cliff's edge.

"Talk to me, Tommy," Doris whispered into my ear.

I sighed. I was near tears. "We had so much we shared," I said. "Now that's gone. We're stumbling around in a cave with the clothes on our back. All the things we had. House. Cars. Clothes. Work. Travel. Shopping. Accumulation. Take that away and look at what's left. What is that?"

"What do you mean?"

I leaned up to look at her. I took the flash in her eyes to be ominous.

“You want to make things happen. You always have. Logistics. That’s you. That’s you chewing the councilman’s ear about garbage and slumlords. Buttonholing the police chief about car-jackings and graffiti. A thousand things. Stones, baby. You don’t leave them unturned.”

“I’ve got issues. You always helped.”

“This is a dance where you lead and I follow. I do it for you. Not for the world.”

“You say that, I know you do. I don’t believe you.”

“Let’s say we’ve got two realities at work here. That despite the futility of it — the poor are always with us, et cetera — we were obliged to act as though we could smack the world into shape. At least around the edges. Make it better. Or more lined up with our beliefs. Less poisoned, more fair, a few more parks, a few more books. The work of the living. Put some bricks on the wall. Meaninglessness lurking on the other side. We did that. You more than me. For different reasons. I saw it as a process. Something that had to be done. A question of morals more than outcomes. Mostly I did it for you. While you believed there was an actual product.”

“We got things done. The park. The library. All those things we fought for.”

“That was something. You were somebody. If I had a couple pennies for every time somebody called you a force of nature...”

Doris nibbled on the intact part of my ear. “That’s sweet, Tommy, that you say that.”

“That’s what existed. Maybe you noticed. We are not in that place anymore.”

“That doesn’t mean everything is different.”

“We don’t know. What if we’re still here because we haven’t recognized the truth? Maybe the work of the underworld is to scrape away the scale of life — to let go of the idea of all those possessions that are useless in the end. All the ambitions. To see that we could just as well be ants moving bits of dirt around. We had to do it. It was why we were put there. Work that was necessary and unnecessary at the same time. Being that the world was going to go on regardless.”

“You’re saying it all added up to nothing? That we wasted our lives?”

“No, no. That’s not the point. Maybe the point is that we should understand now that the things we did and said and bought and sold and hated and loved were as important as those same feelings in all the millions of people who came before us. Which are so lost in time that they might as well not have existed.”

“Except they did, Tommy. They existed. Some of them we still know. Buddha. Shakespeare, Jesus. Elvis.”

“Part of the same joke. Illusions to keep the greater illusion going.”

“The way you see it, what’s next?”

“Understand that the remaining work is to see that there is no remaining work. That our new obligation is to set aside the hubris. The self-importance. That we’re particles, drifting in space.”

“We disappear? Where I wouldn’t have you and you wouldn’t have me?”

“To be humble and admit our place.”

“Jesus, Tommy. Where is this coming from? Is this how you’ve always felt? It makes me question...”

“What?”

“Everything.”

She pushed away from me and rolled out of the hammock. “I’m going for a walk.”

“You want company?”

“I don’t think so, Thomas. I need some time alone.” She pushed back our plastic curtain.

“Tell me where you’re going. Just in case.”

“I don’t know. Don’t worry.”

As if I could stop myself.

...

In the inscrutable manner of the underworld, time passed. Awake? Dreaming? Caught in a Rip Van Winkle wormhole?

I snapped to when someone tugged at our tarp door. “Doris?” I said.

Pimplipper. He pulled back the flap and stuck his head in the honeymoon suite.

“What do you want?” I said.

“That’s a greeting?” Pimplipper said. “How about some respect?”

“I’m in a rough patch.”

“I figured.”

“What?”

“Ran into Doris. Head down. Marching along. Not looking like a happy customer. ‘What’s up, sweetheart?’ I made the mistake of saying. ‘I’m not your sweetheart,’ she said. Snarled, you could say.”

“You apologized, I hope.”

“I look like an idiot? Who wants to get on her bad side? I groveled. Doesn’t cost anything. Simple. Usually effective. Old habits, old school, world has changed, if I have offended anybody I most sincerely... So on and so forth.”

“She bought it?”

“Hard to say. She observed that I’m an asshole.”

“What else did she tell you?”

“Nothing. I figured, trouble in paradise. Maybe not paradise, to be reasonable about it. But trouble in any case. Want to tell me what’s up?”

“You going to send me a bill if I do?”

“Your money’s no good here, Fatman.”

“Generous.”

“Not really. Nobody’s money is good here. As you may have noticed.” He reached into his breast pocket and took out a clip loaded with hundreds. “Here, have some,” he said. “In fact, take it all.” He stuffed the roll in my suit pocket and gave it a tap. “Let me know if you find anything to do with it.”

“The trouble. It’s philosophical.”

“In my experience, you don’t want to go there. Keep things simple. *What do you want for dinner? You think we should get an apple tree? What color should we paint the kitchen?* That sort of thing.”

“You keep it simple for too long and that’s how trouble starts,” I said.

“You got me worried now, Fatman.”

He leaned up against the dripping stone wall and sighed. Some of the spark and vigor seemed to have left him. “You feeling alright?” I asked.

“This isn’t about me. Well, it always is, I suppose. But since you asked...”

“Wan is the word, I think. Like someone pulled out a battery or two. Low wattage.”

“Could be I should go topside. Get some sunlight, fresh air. Been a while since I’ve been up.”

“You think it makes a difference?”

“Sweet Jesus, Fatman. Who knows? You noticed an owner’s manual around this place?”

“I thought if anyone knows, it would be you.”

“Think again. We’re stumbling around in the gloom together.”

Pimplipper gave me a sharp look, those blue eyes of his boring in. “Back to the matter at hand. What’s messing you up with Doris?”

“A version of your beef with Duke Black.”

“I got no real beef with Black. Of course, you look at it straight up, he was a sanctimonious corporate stooge. A career built on battling against the underdog. Now, doornail dead, he’s all for setting the world to right, assuring that justice prevails. That’s a good one. What the hell. Let Black be Black. See how it works out for him. I told you I’m more of a zen kind of guy these days, right? I believe the path is the opposite. Remove myself, disappear. You mind if I get poetic here?”

“Do what you got to do.”

“My thinking is, the right move is to accept my position in relation to the sprawl of the cosmos. History isn’t the word, Fatman. Existence doesn’t do it. I’m talking about more than that. You don’t mind me putting it this way, surrender to the immensity of the void. Become nothing.”

“Unexpected lingo, Pimplipper. Humility. Not what I expected from you.”

“In as much as I can manage. Never my long suit. Rightfully while topside. I didn’t have that much to be humble about. But this is a different game.”

“Seems to me you’re looking more misty than usual. Maybe you’re onto something here. The next step. Assuming that nothingness is a next step.”

“We’re beyond words, Fatman. All that mumbo jumbo, how in the beginning there was the word? Before the word, after the word and all the meaningless words in between, forget about that crap. I’m talking about melting into immensity. Try blabbering at a nebula and see where that gets you.”

“You’re not going in by halves, Pimplipper. I’ll give you that.”

“I’ve been feeling more vaporish. No mirrors, it’s hard to tell. But you notice?”

“Could be my eyes. Plus the gloom. But you look fuzzy around the edges. Like you’re discombobulating. You think that happens?”

“Again, Fatman. We don’t know. Sometimes people vanish. Where they go, why, who knows? We don’t get announcements over the PA system. There being no PA system. I suppose you could call Marge the village crier, but it’s not the same. Anyway, she doesn’t know anything more than I do. To the best of my knowledge. Though she could also be the mastermind of the entire operation. Marge could be the Supreme Being. Ha, that’s a good one. Didn’t exactly die on the cross, if you recall. Plowed from behind, to refresh your memory. Anyway, there’s no telling.”

“Let’s pretend you’re right.”

“Pretend. Not really the right word. The implication being, preposterous.”

“Let’s assume you’re right.”

“That’s more like it.”

“You feel better? Worse?”

“Like a light went on. Or off. One or the other.”

Pimplipper pulled out his pocket square and patted his brow. “I think I got to sit down,” he said. He slumped against the wall of the honeymoon suite and sank to the floor.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked.

“What if I’m not? You going to call an ambulance?”

At that Pimplipper let loose the final ironic laugh of his temporal — or at least semi-temporal — existence. Later, as I explained it to Doris, it was as if Pimplipper were on a dimmer switch that slowly got turned off. He faded and then disappeared, leaving behind an empty suit and a fine pair of Italian shoes.

Figuring waste not, want not, I tried on the shoes. It was like nestling my feet in a tub of butter. I had some questions about the ju-ju that might be at work, but I kept the shoes on my feet.

...

“You kept his shoes?” Doris said.

“I don’t think we should get hung up on that.”

I filled her in on Pimplipper’s last testimony, his sole remaining ambition being to melt into the infinite.

Doris wasn’t buying it right off the shelf. “All we know is that he was here and now he isn’t. Or doesn’t appear to be. Who knows, maybe he’s down in the big hall. Walking around in a new suit. Wondering what happened to his shoes.”

“One thing about Pimplipper — he had an excellent sense of how to come out on top. Unless he suddenly went stupid...”

“It’s not like he never lost a case.” Doris nudged Pimplipper’s empty suit with one of her charred shoes. “That’s what you want for yourself?” she asked.

“Compared to what? Permanent residence here? Topside missions when Marge blows her whistle? For how long? Years? Centuries? Millennia?”

“I’m not ready to be some kind of stupid particle drifting in space.”

“We don’t know that’s what comes next. The big nothing, that was Pimplipper’s theory. Pimplipper being Pimplipper, concocting a story and selling it so hard that as long as he’s looking at you with those crazy blue eyes, you believe. Maybe instead it really is heavenly choirs, fire and brimstone. Maybe you come back as a cow or a cockroach. Obviously there’s something next. I watched Pimplipper disappear. He must be somewhere. Then again, maybe nowhere. But he isn’t here. Aren’t you curious? Don’t you want to know?”

Doris picked Pimplipper’s suit up off the floor. She gave the pants and coat a shake, as if something might fall out. Then she folded Pimplipper’s remains and handed them to me. That suit. The diamond stud cufflinks still in the shirt sleeves. Silk socks and boxers. More silk knotted around the buttoned collar. I put it all back on the floor, the honeymoon suite lacking a dresser.

“We should probably take these to Moonchild,” she said.

“Case in point: you can’t take it with you.

“Tommy,” she said slowly. “I don’t want to give this up.”

“I don’t think it’s so much, baby.”

“It’s what we have. Our topside mission. Another one when that one’s done. We’ve got things we can make better if we stay where we are. We know that for sure. What you’re talking about, Tommy, it’s all speculation. Fog. Mist.”

“It’s optimism,” I replied. “Or acceptance. Courage, maybe. Accepting that there is an end. Not allowing fear to rule. Humility.”

“It’s jumping off the diving board but believing there’s not water in the pool. You jumping and me jumping. It’s the chance we’ll never see each other again. It’s the possibility we’ll never do anything again that has any meaning to any living creature. You accept that?”

“I’m ready to take the chance. Until the moment arrives, how can anyone know?”

“Promise me this,” Doris said. She grabbed the lapels of my suit and pulled me close. “Come with us topside, next time Marge springs us. Be part of what we’re doing. Instead of blasting with your machine gun. For no particular purpose except to make yourself feel better. See if you change your mind.”

“It’s the same. Steal a car. Prowl around. Stick our noses into the business of the living. Watch as nothing really changes.”

“Mister Optimism. Keep your mind open is what I’m saying. Give it a chance. You can do that much for me.”

She plastered me with those eyes of hers, pulled me even closer. I nodded along like the zombie I was whenever she turned on all her powers.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

...

Sometime later — who knows when, exactly — Marge rattled the honeymoon suite curtain. “Anybody home?” she called, as if she didn’t know. She didn’t wait to be invited in. She had a notebook and pencil in hand as she dragged herself through the opening.

“Pimplipper,” she said. “You’ve got his effects?”

“How did you know?” I wondered.

“Word travels.”

“His clothes.” I pointed at the pile of the floor.

“Shoes?”

“I switched. He won’t be needing them.”

“We don’t really know that now, do we?”

“Does it matter?”

“Who knows what matters?”

“I should put them back?”

“Entirely up to you.”

“What do you think?” I asked Doris.

Before she could answer, Marge raised her voice to say, “It’s a pair of shoes. You want to keep them, keep them! Pimplipper’s soul invades yours, don’t blame me.”

“That could happen?”

“Anything can happen. That’s my impression. We don’t know what.”

“I’ll keep them then. What the hell.”

“Exactly.” Marge rolled her eyes behind her cat-eye glasses. She gathered Pimplipper’s suit and tucked it under her arm. “Inventory. Costume shop,” Marge said, rubbing the fabric between her fingers. “Armani. Pimplipper’s making a fine contribution.”

“Happens all the time?”

“Often enough. Mostly not high end like this.”

Marge made some marks in her notebook. “Sean’s looking for you,” she said to neither of us specifically. She parted the curtain and staggered down the hall.

...

Sean. A problem, as discussed.

But not the only one. Have I made it clear that I was a gentleman of habits and routines? Of a morning, first thing, breakfast. Yogurt, oatmeal, raisins, banana, blueberries, almonds, a drizzle of honey. Coffee. Black as Satan's soul, as I announced to Doris more often than strictly necessary. Then a session with the newspaper, the wretched little sheet produced by the holding company busy laying off, cutting costs, milking it for profit, apparently unconcerned that it is less a community service than an insult. Followed by the comparative grandeur of the New York Times online. More coffee. Bang, lunch time at the stroke of noon. This being on the order of a full meal. Vegetables. Carbohydrates. Protein. That fourth category, dessert.

Doris protesting, "Let me fill my own plate. You're turning me into a blimp."

"*Zaftig*, which you already are. Definitely pulchritudinous."

That settled, a brief nap, rest being among the keys to good health. Another jolt of coffee. A stroll around the neighborhood, because someone has to keep an eye out and possibly slow the otherwise inevitable slide into entropy. Some lolling in the backyard hammock or before the fireplace, depending on the season, upon my return. Then a glass of wine to pave the path toward supper. Something lighter, possibly, than lunch. Bread, soup, salad, another splash of wine. This upon the table as the church bells rang six, Doris knowing that to be late was to violate the precepts of our household. My trains ran on time.

Thus, problems at every turn in consideration of our new circumstances. Time: irrelevant, except for those topside entries and exits. Lunch at noon, supper at six? Forget it. There was no food, no lunch, no dinner. No clocks. No routine. Everything, or at least what little there was, up for grabs.

The Pimlipper solution spoke to me. Remove myself entirely from the tyranny of time, of decisions. Enter the space where petty markers had no meaning. Grab my share, no matter how piddling, within the timeless realm of the gods, assuming Pimlipper had even a portion of this right. There was an out-of-the-frying-pan-into-the-fire risk, of course — the possibility that Pimlipper had

no further need for his clothing because his threads would be scorched to dust in the inferno to which he was headed.

Uncertainty at every turn! I was surprised it didn't rankle Doris more than me. Doris: she of the shipping manifests and deadlines. All the space that now could only be filled with speculation, hypotheses, raw guesswork; and yet she was able to accept it..

Did I need more of this? Had I not enjoyed a happy life? It could have been longer, sure. It could have ended less absurdly. But better slain by a watermelon than to die at the hand of an oncologist slowly filling me with poison. Better to be the victim of those merry, youthful idiots on the freeway bridge than to be the prisoner of Nurse Ratched in an understaffed, underfunded "care facility," drool dribbling from my lips and down into my unchanged diaper. There are enough hells on earth to make any additional versions unnecessary..

Doris interrupted this unspoken monologue with an observation intended to sound off-handed. "I should see what Sean wants. You want to come along?" The correct response here being, *No, baby, you go ahead.*

"Sure," I said. "Maybe you're right. I'll go out with your gang. Get a feel. We can talk it over with Sean."

Doris took my arm. We strolled together as we once had topside, except that then the twilight might have filtered through the trees and dappled the sidewalk, and the breeze perhaps caught my love's hair, catching a tendril that she would push back with a fingernail colored to match her eyes. Such slight pleasures then, hardly of note. But now, oh, the yearning for them to be within reach again. We'd talk about next-to-nothing then and it seemed endlessly fascinating. All the trivia of life, shared with the only person on earth who could bear to listen to it. Find it, even, interesting! Should we rotate the tires? Buy a new microwave? Upgrade our web connection? Now this. No birds, no trees, no sunrise or sunset. Forget about the moon and the stars. That happy blabbing with Doris? So

much was now out of bounds, too worrisome to discuss. The weight of her arm on mine was enough to break my heart.

...

Sean. He wasn't hard to find. He sat at the bomb shelter table at the hall entrance. He was taking notes on a scrap of paper that he must have picked up on a topside foray, there being no underworld office supply closet.

He rose to kiss Doris on the cheek and offered me the mushy handshake of the underworld. We gave each other a once over, like a pair of baboons in an African tree. Who gets the girl?; this the subtitle at the bottom of the screen.

What did he see? How can I know? Given the inability of the young to imagine themselves twenty years into the future, maybe he was amused by my non-insubstantial girth. Possibly he got stuck on the remaining strands of gray hair that bristled from my pate, or the bags and sags around my eyes, or the elephantine floppiness (back to Africa!) of my ears. Then there might exist within Sean's mind certain feats of imagination, these of a carnal nature, in which he produces the mental video of scenes from our marital bed. Doris' splendor smothered beneath my corpus, which possesses, I admit, certain walrus-like qualities. Minus the barking and, I hope, the odors. Most likely he sees me as an old bull ripe for gutting.

The trouble for Sean and his ilk is that he has only a few blobs of paint on his palette. What does he know of my charms or his lack thereof? Certainly you could have a deep conversation with Sean about sines, cosines and square roots. But music? Fiction? Art? God forbid, poetry? Hey Sean, know this one? *I think that I shall never see...? Or, better yet: Roses are red, violets are blue...?*

How about the culinary arts? I took Sean for a sack-of-ramen guy, his diet augmented with muscle-building protein goo. Hey, baby, dinner is served! Bottoms up!

I haven't even gotten to empathy, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, soulfulness.

Don't make me go on.

"Good to see you," Sean lied.

Doris let go of my arm.

"The portal. Another opening coming up, Marge says."

"Are we ready?" Doris asked.

"Nailed."

"Tommy says he's in," Doris announced.

So much of conversation occurs at a microscopic level, beneath the reach of the spoken word. An all-but-imperceptible twitch of the lips, the narrowest squint, the lightest touch of color on the cheeks. And then in the next heartbeat, Sean's deceit against all of that flickering evidence: "Perfect! Glad to hear it!"

Certainly my features did their own unprompted dance.

"Sit down," said Sean. "I'll lay out the plan."

So there we were, a *menage a trois* of the dead, huddled over a bomb shelter table within Corpse Hall, amid its weeping walls and bad light, the chainsaw buzz of endless conversation, speculation, outrage, argument rattling around us as we discussed a plan to set the world — hilariously! — to right. This by the lights of a pocket-protected, muscle-bound nerd, his appeal to my love, seated now beside him, being a full head of hair, a gym-rat physique, and the capacity to develop a Special Ops scheme to rescue a pile of immigrant would-be weed peddlers. I had previously been aware of the dust of absurdity that covered our days. Now I recognized it as a front-end loader's worth of fill.

"You want me to start from the top?"

"Go ahead," I said.

Like Doris, Sean loved detail. All stones turned. I tried to stay focused, to issue an *uh-huh* and *really* and *oh-my-God* at appropriate moments. I tried to combat that droop of the lips, the slackness around the eye, the twitch that said, *You're killing me now, Sean.*

I glanced from Sean to Doris, struggling to see whatever that might reveal. Which was nothing. She stared at me. Whether with love or contempt, hope or despair, longing or boredom was impossible to say. She wore the face of a stranger.

Sean blathered. I got a family history of the famous general, his grandparents, parents on both sides, cousins, uncles, children. This plus a run down on military campaigns in the Laotian highlands, an account of various suspect business dealings, his network of bagmen, wheelmen, enforcers and stooges.

"Here's how we jam the stick in the spokes," Sean said at last.

"I was wondering."

"You don't have the background, it doesn't make as much sense."

To that I replied, "Hmmm."

"It's all cash. That's the beauty. The stiff's fleeced by the General, they're not Bank of America types. The money they've got, it's under the mattress. Stuffed in the rafters. Delivered to the General and his cronies in a paper bag. the General doesn't take it to the bank either. Paper trail? Who needs that?"

"You know where it is?"

"What do you think we've been doing? Figuring it out. The stakeouts. The eavesdropping. Toua spooking around at funerals, weddings. Slipping in here and there. Borrowing a ledger. That kind of thing."

"What's next?"

"Fatman. You mind if I call you Fatman?"

"Everybody does."

“Fatman, you’re on board for the thrills. Next time we bust out of here, we grab the loot.”

“Again, you know where it is?”

“In the General’s basement. Concrete pit behind the mini bar. Hidden door that looks like part of the tile work. Safe welded to the floor. We figure two million, cash.”

“You knock on the door and he invites you in?”

“Not exactly.”

“So...?”

“He’s a military man. He likes a routine.”

“I sympathize.”

“That’s what I hear.” He nodded at Doris, who kept on that poker face.

“The General...”

“Every Friday night he has a confab with his soldier pals. What you’d expect. Reliving the good old days. Working for the CIA, rescuing downed pilots in Laos. Whacking the North Vietnamese. *You remember that flyboy we grabbed, how he pissed his pants? What about that ambush, the one next to the river?* Ha ha. Murder, mayhem. Before the refugee camps, before the miserable landing in frozen North America. Before the shitty jobs, the diminishment. Once lord of the jungle, a dangerous, heavily armed man with murderous buddies. And then to become, say you’re lucky, a night janitor at a bank. Despite everything, I got some sympathy for him and the co-conspirators.

“These are not alcohol free events. More like a college fraternity hoedown. Filling a special glass, everybody free to say what comes to mind so long as they’ve got the glass in hand. Then emptying it in a gulp, passing it on, more speechifying from the next drunken dude, maybe an extra bottle of hard liquor on the table to make sure nobody goes home sober. All this in a bar owned by another of the comrades. Murals of the jungle covering the walls. A little stage decked out with tinsel. Possibly a babe in a tiny skirt warbling along, karaoke style, to a song that god only knows what it’s about.”

“What’s this got to do with the money?”

Sean looked at me straight on and spoke slowly, as if he were addressing a toddler. “The point is that the General is in the bar and the money is in his house.”

“He leaves a couple million in an empty house? That seems...trusting.”

“No, no, no. His wife clears out to visit her sister while the old man is getting schnoekered with his amigos. Takes the kids along. He’s got a couple goons who hang around to guard the stash.”

“You’ve got the safe welded to the floor and goons. Armed?”

“Certainly. Not with pea shooters either. Not that it matters.”

“Nonetheless. They’re not going to roll out the red carpet.”

“We do some spook stuff. Scare them shitless. This is where Toua comes in. Trust me, he has it covered.”

“There’s a plan B?”

“It won’t come to that. But yeah.”

“What about the safe?”

“Mini acetylene torch. We cut through the door. Maybe cut off the hinges. At worst cut the floor bolts loose and take the whole damn thing.”

“What happens with the money?”

“We give it back. Envelope under the door. A Robin Hood operation. A note of explanation. The General deeply regrets, et cetera.”

“But it’s got to be a Friday?”

“According to the plan.”

“I haven’t noticed there’s a schedule. I don’t even know what day it is. How is this going to work?”

“Marge.”

“My impression is, she’s reading the tide charts. Maybe she knows the time and the day. She doesn’t control when the portal opens and closes.”

“That’s what she wants you to think.”

“She’s the brains of the operation?”

“The whole deal? I don’t know,” said Sean. “But my bet is she can pop the lid topside whenever she pleases.”

“Why would she?”

At that Sean laughed. “Who doesn’t want to be loved?” he said.

Of course I took this personally.

...

You might think that within our suite, Doris and I would chatter about my decision to go on the prowl with Sean and his gang. What was it that convinced me to climb aboard? What did I hope for? What would keep me there with her?

That’s not how it went.

We had an inventory of stories that we told each other, fond memories, like paging through a photo album together. *Do you recall...? I’ll never forget...” And then you said... Do you remember the way...?*

The way the sky opened up at our wedding, and the rain came down so ferociously that I looked for Noah’s ark to come floating down the street. The way my hook-nosed, beady-eyed, bent-spined grandmother announced — totally out of character for a woman who saw only bad hoodoo at every turn — that a downpour was good luck.

That day we decided to paint the bedroom, changing the color from Bisque to Cosmic Latte, according to some hazy concern. The way the paint can got tipped and a lake of Cosmic Latte (water soluble!) spread across the floor. How Doris slipped and landed butt-first in Latte, then hauled me

down, too. How one thing then led to another, with our clothes in a paint-soaked heap, and our naked bodies covered in the color of the season.

That spring morning we woke and took our coffee to the backyard, there to discover that overnight a forest of morel mushrooms had sprung up through the leaves left from the fall. We filled a bowl, laughing at the bounty, at the generosity of nature, however diminished it might seem in the heart of the city. This while the bees capered and a rabbit gnawed the bark off my apple tree. We sauteed the morels in a pool of butter with fresh-ground pepper and a dash of salt. “Will they come back next year?” you asked. I said I had no idea. They never did.

The way we laughed at that old couple across the street as they rolled out their electric lawnmower to whack the grass. This being for them a two-person job, hubby pushing the mower, the wife carefully winding and unwinding the power cable to keep it from getting cut. Not imagining that we would eventually turn into versions of the same. Me never ascending two steps on a ladder without Doris holding it steady. Me shoveling the snow, Doris a step behind me with a bucket of salt and sand that she spread on the cleared path.

To say nothing of the even more inconsequential moments, memories so random that I can't imagine why my mind works to retain them. The two of us sitting at a train stop on the Mississippi as the sun went down. Reading the paper together at the kitchen table beside windows turned opaque with frost. Driving down a Dakota freeway while the sun set behind us, the prairie lighting seemingly directed by God him/her/itself.

All of this and a billion more moments comprising a life together.

Reduced now to a regurgitation within the honeymoon suite.

Are we ever prepared to know when we have reached the end?

Back before the watermelon incident, I had friends who, inevitably, got the news that their lives were effectively over, that they were biding their time until the hammer fell. Stage four this or that, impending dementia, livers and hearts and kidneys that had packed it in. With rare exception they

marched along, victims of the medical-industrial complex, suffering through treatments that might promise them a few more months of miserable existence. This the lead-up to a hospice slot as a withered, wheezing quasi-corpse, searching for an appropriate bit of false affect to match that of the death-watch relation, who would be, perhaps, grief stricken, but also wondering how much more of this before old mom or dad or Uncle Bob has the decency to croak, and, oh, by the way, what were the terms of the Last Will and Testament? Raising the question, what would have been wrong with getting the jumbo-size bottle of fentanyl upon diagnosis, retreating to a top-notch steakhouse, ordering a twelve ounce porterhouse and a decent syrah, and, what the hell, why not the dessert and the espresso, then a fine cognac, leaving a massive tip, raising a glass to those powers that had provided all the blessed moments up to this one, then returning to the shack, settling in the Lay-Z-Boy, going bottoms-up on the opioids and waiting for sweet Morpheus to swing by on a house call?

Except, as previously noted, are we ever prepared to admit that we have reached the end?

We were at a crossroad now, all those memories behind us while confusion and contradiction loomed ahead. We didn't talk about the General or the mission with Sean. We didn't talk about how we would confront the future together. Neither of us bothered to make plans on how we would kill the time that yawned before us. We wallowed in the past, that being the only decent place left to be.

...

"Let's hit it," Marge said, rattling at the honeymoon suite tarp.

This followed by the trudge behind Marge, first to the costume shop for the usual camouflage, then on to the portal entry, where Sean, DeShaun, Segundo and Toua waited. A cutting torch leaned against the ladder.

"Where's Carlita?" Doris said.

“MIA,” Marge replied.

“She opted out?”

“I don’t know that she opted. She’s just not here. Or doesn’t seem to be. Maybe she is, maybe she isn’t.”

“That’s odd.”

“What isn’t odd? And what are you going to do about it anyway? People disappear. Happens all the time. Who’s to say I’ll be here when you get back. Up and out,” said Marge. “You’ve got four hours. In consideration of your special op.”

“You’re a sweetheart, Marge,” Sean said.

“No I’m not. Keep that straight. And don’t make me wait. Because I won’t.”

“I never doubted,” said Sean as he hoisted himself up the ladder, dragging the torch beside him..

He popped the manhole cover. A shaft of twilight fell on us.

We emerged behind the church in an asphalt parking lot, hemmed in by a pair of dumpsters, a chain-link fence and a loading dock for the church school. Not a view, say, of the Grand Canyon. But the immensity of the world and the things in it were as always overwhelming. Kids kicking a soccer ball in the street, the pulse of old R&B from one corner and hip-hop from another, a motorcycle screaming down the avenue, some shouting about god-knows-what, the grandeur of the clouds stacked up in the west and lit by the fading sun. “Jesus,” I muttered. “It is so beautiful. Some of it anyway.”

“You’re ready to give this up?” Doris said softly.

“Mostly we already have.”

“It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. We can take what we’ve got. Be grateful. Use it.”

I did not answer that.

“Let’s huddle,” Sean said. “Toua, you and Fatman team up. You know what to do. Table at the bar. Wait for the General to show up. Keep an eye on him. He leaves, let us know. Follow him if he

does.” He pulled an old flip phone from his pocket and tossed it at Toua. “The only number on it is mine.”

“Doris, DeShaun, we go to the General’s joint. Make sure he’s gone, that the family cleared out. We deal with the goons and make off with the cash. Stick to the plan, do what we discussed, everything’s fine.”

“The plan we discussed?” I said to Doris. “When was that?”

“You were sleeping.”

“You didn’t say anything? Let me know?”

“I wasn’t sure you were along for the ride. I didn’t know that there was any point.”

“But here I am.”

Before Doris could reply, Sean issued an order. “Two cars,” he said. “Nothing flashy. Nothing anybody will notice or remember.”

Toua pointed at a Prius and a Corolla in the church lot. Sean nodded. A few minutes later Toua and I rolled down the street in a rusty Corolla. The others headed in the opposite direction.

“Too bad,” said Toua. “See that Tesla outside the church? Instead this little shitbox.” The Check Engine light was on. It seemed to be running on three cylinders. “Embarrassing,” he said.

We drove through the Hmong part of town, this notable for the number of kids scrambling on the sidewalk, the women tending gardens that filled the yards, the chicken cackle drifting into the street. Clouds of steam from the vats of soup stock, lemongrass, ginger, who knows what else. “Where I grew up,” Toua said, pointing at a ramshackle brick house, a typical slumlord operation. Screen door flapping in the breeze. Dirt yard littered with free newspapers that nobody bothered to pick up. A broken down truck parked beside the back door. On the opposite corner, the drive through for a branch of American Bank.

“American Bank,” said Toua, chuckling. “Not funny. But like a joke. My parents. They tell us, we’re lucky. No soldiers shooting at us. Not stuck in a camp. School to go to. Goodwill right down

the street. Plenty of work. True enough, plenty of work. Not plenty of money, not if you got a big family and a rotten assembly job, jamming CDs into jewel boxes or whatever. Right number of kids for farming in Laos. Not so good if no farm, grandma and grandpa in the back bedroom, relatives knocking on the door, wondering if you got this or that. Food, cash. Can't say no. Across the street, American Bank. Vault stuffed with dollars. ATM next to the drive-through. Piles of money. Not for us. What do you call that? There's a word?"

"Ironic does it, Toua. It's ironic."

"Ironic," he repeated. "Put it on the citizenship test. 'Who said, *Give me liberty or give me death?* Why did the Pilgrims come to America? What is the word when you're a no-bag-of-rice immigrant and live across the street from a bank?" He barked out a bitter laugh. "Ironic!"

"Except nobody was happy before they got here. They remind me every day. Now, a hundred pound bag of rice in the kitchen. Chickens running around out back. Garden in the back. Big step up. I was never lonely. You couldn't walk in a room somebody wasn't in it. You couldn't leave the house without all the Hmong aunties putting the eyeball on you. Think you'll get away with anything? You're crazy."

"I don't know, Toua. Should I be saying I'm so sorry?"

"Compared to white kid in his bedroom in the suburbs? Staring at a tablet all day? Alone. Nobody in his shit day and night. Solitary confinement without jail. Better?"

"Family coming out of your ears."

"The General. Doesn't he have family? He fucks other Hmong people, but we are not his family? Distant, maybe. Still. He doesn't think all of us are in the same pot?"

"You think he'll change?"

"Maybe not while living."

"What does that mean?"

Toua cocked his head and shrugged as he pulled into the parking lot of the Mariana Lounge. We parked behind the dumpsters, near the back door.

Glance at the place and you came up with a laundry list of repairs. Tuck point the brick. Replace those two bullet-shattered windows. Paint over the graffiti. Fill in the parking lot potholes. For starters.

“Come on,” Toua said.

He held the door for me. If there was anybody in the joint who wasn’t Hmong, he or she was hiding. Every head toggled toward me as I stood in the entryway, blinking in the gloom. Toua put a hand on my shoulder and nudged me through the door.

A mural artist had gone nuts inside. The walls were covered with Laotian highlands scenes. Tropical birds in the trees. Thatch roof huts with Hmong farmers doing what they used to do. Cooking over a fire. Chasing poultry. Marching plow-strapped oxen through the fields. On one wall, Hmong guerilla fighters sneaking through the underbrush to wreak havoc. The good old days, punctuated now with glowing neon announcing Bud and Miller and lottery tickets.

Toua rummaged in this pocket and pulled out a twenty that looked and smelled like it had been in a fire. The bartender held it up to a light, tugged at it, gave Toua a suspicious look. “You got so much money you burn it?”

“Yeah, that’s it. How about two Budweisers?” We retreated to a table in the darkest corner.

“What is it with the smoked cash?” I asked. “How did you get hold of it anyway?”

“Sad story,” he said. “My funeral. Part of the ceremony. Burn fake money so dead guy has some if he needs it in the spirit world. So, steel drum outside the funeral home. Fake money dumped into it, lighter fluid, match, boom, fireball, smoke. Good, except neighbors are tired of Hmong funerals. Hundreds of people, two, three days, kill an ox, eating, drinking, maybe you got gangsters settling scores. Usual family get-together. Except not in Laos anymore. Neighbors sick of it. They see the money fire, call the fire department. Now fire trucks, lights, giants in helmets, boots, fire

extinguishers, hoses. There goes the fire. There goes money for the spirit world. Big pile of wet mush. Everybody mad, but what can you do? Friend pulls a roll of twenties from his pocket, puts it on the pavement, lights it up. Nobody sober. ‘Toua spends real money in the spirit world,’ he shouts. A few sober people around. One of them stomps out the fire, grabs the money. Says, ‘Come on.’ Leads them all into the funeral home where they got me laid out on a table. He stuffs bills in my pocket, says, ‘Toua be king of the underworld now.’”

“Real money,” I said. “You are the king of the underworld.”

“Money,” he said. “Some things we want, we take. Other things, you can’t buy.” He peeled the label from his bottle. “I don’t want beer. Do you?”

“Now that you mention it, no. Feels good to hold it, to remember. But, drinking it... The General, he’s not here yet?”

“You’ll know. Right now, no.”

We killed time, traded death stories. I filled him in on the watermelon situation. He apologized for laughing. “Unnecessary,” I said. “It is ridiculous. Life is ridiculous.”

“Death, too,” Toua replied. “I told you about the girlfriend, right?”

“Tough deal, Toua. The stabbing, the fire.”

“In my sleep. What I was dreaming, I wish I could remember. Anyway. Very big knife, very sharp, But not a big woman. More like a teenager. Actually, a teenager. But very angry teenager. Here,” he said, pulling back his coat. “You can see.” His shirt was cut open in a half dozen places and covered with a smear of dried blood.

“Watermelon,” he said. “At least you can wipe it off.”

“It’s a mess, but you’re right. More comical than gory.”

“Girlfriend thought I would leave wife. But we have children, wife’s mom and dad in the house, they paid for half the place, take care of the kids. I can’t walk away. I explain to girlfriend. But she doesn’t understand.”

“Eighteen, nineteen, you can only expect so much. Their brains aren’t fully developed.”

“Fifteen,” Toua said.

“Excuse me for saying, but it might be better you’re dead.”

“True. Dead, it’s not so complicated. Lot of trouble ahead with the girlfriend, the wife, the family.”

“They remember the good times,” I said.

“Not true. Lots of blame. Less money. Living, dead, nobody happy.”

“Here you’ve got friends.”

“Hard to say.”

Toua spun the beer bottle in his hand. He stopped suddenly and said, “There.”

Two characters passed through the door and positioned themselves on either side. Muscle, obviously, short but thick, done up in black suits. They scanned the room, then knocked on the door.

“The General,” Toua said.

Except that his reputation preceded him, you wouldn’t have looked up from your beer. He barely cleared five feet. He wore an ill-fitting suit and a shirt that needed a run through the laundry. I fought back the urge to grab him by the lapels and say, *Good God, man, let me take you to a tailor!* In the hair department he had nothing more going on than me. To my credit, I did not wear the type of Fu Manchu that straggled over his lip.

“That’s the leader of his people?” I said to Toua.

He cocked his head. “I didn’t say he was a model.”

With the muscle on each side, the General made his way slowly to a long table in the center of the room. It was not a straightforward journey. People approached to whisper in his ear. They handed him glasses of beer, plates of food. He nodded, got a hand on supplicants’ shoulders, smiled or grimaced, depending, moving through the crowd like the pope himself. Which, it might be said, in this time and place and with these people, he was apparently the equivalent.

“What do we do now?” I asked Toua.

“Heads down. Eyes out. Anything suspicious, call Sean. Find a way to get rid of this beer so we can order another. Try to look like we’re doing a business deal. Bank loan. Insurance. Old white guy here, doesn’t make sense.”

“Not much I can do about that.”

Toua flagged down a waitress and asked her for a pen and paper. “We scribble. Look like we crunch numbers.”

The door swung open repeatedly now. The bouncer at the door ran a wand over the new arrivals. They made various displays of humility to the great man, bowing slightly, setting a beer ahead of him to join the half-dozen already arrayed, leaning in to mutter whatever one says to such a figure.

“They love him?” I asked.

“That’s a little strong,” Toua said.

“Respect?”

“He led the army. All of these guys, they were his officers. Part of the fight. Usual thing. Probably they think half of what he did was stupid, but he gave the orders. They followed. They were smart and brave and stupid together. Now they are all here. Scratching each others’ backs. Hmong car dealer advertises in the Hmong newspaper. Newspaper guy buys insurance from Hmong agent. Agent sells to Hmong real estate guy. One big circle. Everybody in on it. Like being in the army, except no guns. Mostly.”

Toua looked over my shoulder at the General’s assembly, then quickly ducked and pulled his ball cap lower.

“What?” I said.

“My uncle.”

“He recognized you?”

“He gave me a look.”

“Like he’s trying to put two and two together?”

“Right.”

“And keeps coming up with three. What do we do?”

He sighed and said, “Nothing. Heads down. Keep talking, like it’s all business. Like he shouldn’t interrupt. Which he doesn’t want to do because he thinks I’m dead.”

“Which you are.”

I twisted in my chair discreetly to get a view of the General’s gang at their table. It was like an Asian version of the last supper, the General seated in the middle in the Jesus Christ role, the rest of them leaning in toward him. They spoke among themselves in Hmong. “What are they saying,” I asked Toua.

“The usual. Complain about the kids. Kids don’t know the meaning of hard work. No respect. Girls to college, boys to jail.”

Now bottles of beer began a transit around the table. One of the General’s sycophants filled a small glass, raised it and set into a speech in Hmong. “Now what?” I asked Toua.

“About the great opportunity. Hmong people back to the land. Farming on the hillsides. What they did in Laos. Thanks to the General. Now it can be done again. California. The promised land.”

“Same old story. But no mention of the native-born dope fiends already there?” I asked. “Guys who might not be looking for competition. Plus the cops and drug agents. Water? I wonder if there is any. Not to mention fires. The whole state could go up in flames. Or sink into the ocean after the tsunami. The earthquake that’s right around the corner.”

“Assuming money goes to buy land,” Toua replied. “Doubtful.”

“Shit,” he said suddenly. He gave his cap another tug. He scrawled some numbers on the paper ahead of him and showed it to me. “Business. We’re doing business,” he said.

“Relax,” I told him.

“Here comes my uncle,” he mumbled.

“Should we get out of here?”

“Too late,” he said.

“Let me handle this. What’s his name?”

“Blong.”

Our table was en route to the door for the toilet. “Maybe he’s just headed for a urinal,” I said.

“Look at him,” Toua said. “He’s on a mission.”

I stood to intercept him. I was a significant roadblock. Blong came up to my chin. He wore a black suit, apparently de rigueur, and thirty or forty extra pounds.

“Blong!” I said.

He stopped and gave me a puzzled look.

“Thomas Fadiman,” I said. “But go ahead and call me Fatman.”

More befuddlement. “Fatman? I cannot call you Fatman,” he said.

“Blong, why is that?”

“Disrespectful.”

“I’m asking you to.”

“I cannot.”

“Alright then. Thomas. That works.”

“I know you?”

“We met. You own a restaurant?”

“No, no. Real estate. Buy. Sell.”

“Lucky meeting! I myself am in insurance. A vital part of the real estate world, wouldn’t you say? Flood. Fire. Theft. You name it. One potential catastrophe after another.”

I draped an arm around his shoulders and steered him away from Toua. Toua quietly pushed back his chair and slipped toward the door.

For Blong I elaborated on the world's many hazards. Theft, of course. Sewer back-up. Tornados. Burst pipes. Jerks who fake accidents, then collude with crooked chiropractors to bleed you dry. I could have gone on forever.

Blong slipped out of my headlock and turned toward our table.

"Your friend," he said. "He left?"

"Not really my friend, Blong. More of a customer. You know him?"

"Nephew. Looks very much like my nephew."

"Family reunion!" I said. "Good to catch up."

"Except nephew is dead."

"Not much of a reunion in that case. Sad when it's the young who die."

"Not so sad. His girlfriend stabs him. In bed. Knife this long." He held his hands about a foot apart. "All the way through. Pin him to mattress. Pours vodka on him. Lights it up."

"Passionate gal. Of all the things you could die from, love isn't the worst."

Blong gave me a look. "Love? Kids at home. Wife. Married to my sister. He loves the girlfriend? Fifteen years old! This is love?"

"Sounds complicated, Blong. Listen, I've got to catch up with my customer. Let me give you my card." I fumbled around for a card I knew I didn't have. "Just Google me," I said finally. "Fatman. I'm easy to find."

Blong gave me another look, then turned abruptly and hurried back to the General's table. They chattered back and forth urgently, Blong hunched beside the great man's chair, until the General summoned his muscle. At that I hurried out the door and into the parking lot. Toua had the Corolla running. As I approached he threw open the door. "I think we better hit it," I told him.

He passed me the burner phone. "Call Sean," he said. The tires screeched, the engine whined. We sideswiped a parked car, but Toua didn't bother to slow down.

The dead are terrible drivers.

...

The phone rang four, five, six times. Finally Sean answered. "What?" he said.

"We got ID-ed at the bar. Toua's uncle."

"The General knows?"

I heard noise in the background. Yelling, banging, glass shattering.

"What's going on there?"

"A little trouble. Not unexpected. DeShaun and Segundo are taking care of it."

"The General. My guess he's on his way back home. Along with his goons."

"Any luck, we'll have this cleaned up by then."

"What's happening? Sounds like a war."

"Security. They take their job more seriously than we thought. As I said, DeShaun and Segundo are on top of it."

"What about Doris?"

"She's right here with me. She's fine."

"We should meet you there?"

"Tell Toua to stick to the plan. We rendezvous here. Right now, Fatman, I got to go."

I heard what sounded like a body tossed through a window.

"Looks like DeShaun needs a little help," Sean said.

...

Toua drove like a guy who couldn't be any more dead. We caromed off a couple more parked vehicles. Car alarms sounded behind us. People stepped off their porches and pointed, as if that might slow Toua down.

"Toua," I said. I had a hand on the dashboard to brace myself as he made a corner. "You know the expression, the race does not go to the swift?"

He turned to look at me.

"Eyes on the road, Toua."

"How does race not go to the swift?" he asked.

"The idea is there are other things involved. The unpredictable. Say a mom with a baby carriage steps out ahead of us and you run them down."

"I would not run them down."

"You think you wouldn't. But the way you're driving..."

"Maybe I would."

"Right. Which would slow us down. Even though we are very swift at the moment. So we would lose the race."

"I should slow down."

"It might not hurt."

Steam rose from under the hood. One of our collisions must have gashed the radiator.

"Tell me more about the plan," I said. "I keep hearing about the plan."

"Simple. Money in the safe. General gone. Family gone. A couple of his little soldiers sitting around. Probably sleeping, playing game on phone. Sean knocks on the door, says they're Jehovah's Witnesses. Hand them each a copy of the Watchtower. They reach out, bang, they're in zip ties. We haul them to bedroom, wrap them in duct tape. Bring in the torch and cut out the safe. We're in, we're out."

"Sounds like it hasn't gone according to plan so far."

Toua pulled up to a red light and stopped. “What I said about the race and the swift?”

“Very good, Mister Fatman,” Toua said.

“We’re still in a hurry. Make the right turn.”

He floored the Corolla again, Toua being an all-white or all-black character. We raced down the main street as he swerved around any traffic moving less than sixty miles an hour. The street-side businesses passed in a blur — the nail salons and hair extension shops; the Asian groceries and used tire outlets; the thrift stores and fast food joints; the un-banks and dodgy cell phone operations; the store-front chapels; in short, the economy of the impoverished. Toua cranked the car around a corner, banged off another car, and raced down a residential street. A right, a left, another straightaway, and then an abrupt turn into the driveway of a rambler on a leafy and otherwise quiet street. The exceptional note was the punched out picture window in the General’s house, and the fracas in the shrubbery planted around the foundation. DeShaun had his knee on the neck of one of the General’s thugs while Segundo worked a zip tie around his wrists. He might have been shouting had his face not been planted in the dirt.

Toua jumped out of the car and ran to DeShaun’s side. DeShaun handed him a roll of duct tape. Toua turned the General’s thug into a duct-taped mummy. I pulled myself out of the car and entered the General’s home.

The living room was a post-struggle mess. The immense flat screen was tipped on the floor. Family photos hung cock-eyed. A brocade throne-like chair was in the middle of the room, legs up, like a dead animal. Given the evidence of a battle, the house was oddly quiet.

“Hello,” I called. “Sean? Doris?”

“Tommy?”

“Where are you?”

“The basement.”

I found her and Sean in a version of the bar that Toua and I had left. Liquor bottles arrayed around a mirror. Murals on the walls, these of a military theme. Hmong soldiers with Kalashnikovs, fighter jets trailing smoke, parachutes, NVA fighters getting the worst of it. Another mummified thug lay on the floor, big-eyed and bloody.

“You alright?” I said to Doris. Blood dotted her cheeks.

She nodded. “They didn’t make it easy.”

“Segundo was ready for a twist-off,” Sean said. “Lucky it didn’t come to that.”

He disappeared behind the bar. I heard the pop of the torch being lit, the sizzle of melting metal.

Sean was still cutting when the noise started upstairs. Yelling, the sound of a scuffle. Footsteps on the stairs. Someone pushed down the steps and tumbling onto the basement floor. Segundo and DeShaun were locked in battle with more of the General’s thugs, all of them punching, choking, gouging at each other. The General huffed down the steps and surveyed the scene. Sean rose from behind the bar, the blue flame of the torch throwing a dim glow over the space.

DeShaun tugged at the hair of the General’s man, who was himself busy choking DeShaun. “I’m warning you,” DeShaun gasped. “You don’t let go...”

“What, ghost man. What you gonna do?”

“I’m going to twist your fucking head off.”

“You can’t do that. You’re lucky you can stand up, marshmallow boy.”

“Marshmallow boy? You seriously disrespecting me now.”

“So fucking what?”

DeShaun gripped his hair more tightly and gave his head a crank. Toua paused in his struggle with the other goon. We all stopped and watched, wondering how this story would end.

The General pulled a pistol out of his belt and waved it. “You stop now,” he said.

“Shoot all you want,” Sean replied. “Toua’s uncle told you, didn’t he? We already dead.”

“You want to get down on your knees and apologize?” DeShaun demanded of his victim. “Or you want your head twisted off?”

“You don’t have the guts. We get every shaman in the state to curse your ass. Living, dead, doesn’t matter, you’ll be fucked either way.”

“Right,” said DeShaun.

“Anyway, you don’t have the guts.”

“Famous last words.” DeShaun twisted the goon’s head off.

...

Needless to say, it was a mess. Blood on the walls, on the ceiling, pooling on the floor. DeShaun was left with the head hanging from his hand. He dropped it on the body. It rolled into the puddle of blood.

To the General Sean said, “Why don’t you open the safe? Save us the trouble.”

“Nothing in the safe,” he said.

“Nice try. But open it anyway.”

I followed the General as he stepped behind the bar. Sean stood behind him, the torch still flaring in his hand. The General twisted at the safe’s knob but the door didn’t budge. “The combination. I forgot.”

“Try to remember,” Sean said. He bumped the General’s ear with the torch flame.

The General yelped and put a hand to his now-smoking ear. “Okay, I remember,” the General declared. More twists of the dial and the door swung open.

The safe was empty except for a small roll of hundreds.

“The money,” Sean said, moving the torch a few inches from the General’s nose. “Where’s the money?”

“I told you. Not here. We pay the man with the land. The land in California.”

The legs of the body on the floor twitched, as if he were trying to run away.

“When?” Sean said. “When did you give him the money?”

“Last night. We sat right here, drink to success. He left with grocery bags of dollars.”

“Where is he now?”

“California. Back in California.”

“Get the money back,” Sean said.

“How do I get money back? He’s in California.”

“You heard about airplanes? You fly there. You take your goons. You get the money.”

“He has many people. Many people with guns. He will not say, ‘I am so sorry. Here’s your money.’”

Sean sighed. He put his elbows on the bar. He turned off the torch and stopped to look around the room. The wild splatter of blood everywhere. The headless body. The head itself, eyes staring at the ceiling. That old soldier, the General, apparently resigned to whatever would come next. His remaining thug, wondering if he would be the next twist off. DeShaun wiping the blood on his hands onto a towel he picked up from the bar. Toua hissing at the General, “You cheat the people and nothing good comes.”

From Segundo, a pose of contemplation. “They should never say you don’t have the guts. It never works.”

And then Doris. Whatever was in her eyes was impossible for me to read. She was lost in calculations of her own, deep brain activity that she had not yet sorted out.

“You sure you’re alright?” I said to her,

“What about this is alright?” she replied. She looked from me to Sean and back again.

He said, “Not everything goes right the first time.”

“Nothing went right,” she said. “What are we going to do with them? Walk out and let them go? Say we’ll be back, uh, someday, when Marge decides to spring us?”

“What do you think we should do? What are our options?” An edge of irritation crept into Sean’s voice.

“You tell me.”

“We’ll come up with something. We’ve got time. Maybe you’ve noticed.”

I kept quiet, figuring that beat the other options. Doris did not love to see plans overturned. She did not enjoy excuses.

“Who is Marge?” the General asked.

“Shut up,” Sean snapped.

“What do I do with him?” the General asked, nudging the body with his shoe. Of all the things available to notice at that moment, what struck me was the child-like size of the General’s foot in his polished loafer.

“I don’t care what you do. Call the cops. Bury him in the backyard. Feed him to the wolves at the zoo. It’s not my problem.”

“What about my house? All wrecked.”

“You want a number for my interior designer? My cleaning lady?”

“You have good people?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Sean said. He kicked the head across the room. It hit a wall, rebounded, rolled through a puddle of blood.

“Let’s go,” Sean announced. He tossed the torch onto the floor, pushed past the General and headed up the stairs. We marched behind him, through the ruined living room and out the door. The thug that DeShaun tossed through the window struggled where had left him, wrapped in duct tape behind the shrubbery. A knot of neighbors stood on the sidewalk across the street, chattering among themselves, trying to figure out what was going on.

“I’ll drive us back to the portal,” I said, nodding toward Doris. “Give me the keys.” She yanked on the battered Corolla’s door. It opened with a metallic squawk.

The others piled into the Prius.

I turned the key and listened to coolant sizzle under the hood. “We don’t have to go back,” I said to Doris.

She gave me another inscrutable look and said, “What do you have in mind?”

...

We stopped for a red light that the others blew through. When they were out of sight I turned right, toward a hill that overlooked downtown. We walked out to an overlook and leaned against the rail.

To our right, the blaze of sunset, a thousand hues of red and blue and purple. A planet peeked through, bright, glimmering. Mars, Venus, I don’t know. Straight ahead the works of man, high rises and parking lots, a tangle of streets, traffic lights, brake lights. Left, the Mississippi making its lazy way toward New Orleans, a brown strand beside the rail tracks. Barges docked on the shoreline. Small planes descending toward the air strip there.

So much industry and commotion! So much color, so much noise! The crickets in the grass, birds blabbering about who knows what, the pulse of hip hop from a boom car. Was that not gun fire? Was that not an ambulance siren?

This was life. We were visitors.

“What are we doing, Tommy?”

“Sightseeing,” I said. “Taking in the world.”

“Like going to a museum?”

“More or less. More, really. There’s more here. Art. It’s a sliver. Hang it on a wall. Stare. Buy some junk at the gift shop. Go home. This is... this is... everything.”

I am in certain respects an emotional man, but not usually tearful. Now I felt a steamy flow on my cheeks. I dabbed at my eyes with the back of my hands.

“Oh, Tommy,” Doris said. She put an arm over my shoulder and pulled me close.

I said, “I’m sorry. It’s so much.”

Tears. So ridiculous. The red eyes, the deluge of snot, the glistening tear-stained cheeks, the gasping breathlessness. Now Doris cried too.

The sign on a building below us displayed the time in big red numbers. “If we don’t leave now we’re going to be late,” Doris said.

I didn’t say anything at first.

“We have fifteen minutes. We could still make it,” she said.

“You want to?”

Church bells rang somewhere below us. All those hulking old churches, piles of stone and brick, the spires now dwarfed by business towers, the faithful now mostly the elderly, driving in from the suburbs to which they had fled. Praise Jesus, so long as life doesn’t get too close.

“Do I want to go back? What choice do we have?”

“We don’t know what our choices are, do we?”

“Yes we do. We go back or we stay. We stay, we don’t know what happens next. That’s the difference.”

There was a light breeze that ruffled what remained of Doris’ hair. Someone was cutting grass nearby. The smell of it was like perfume.

“This moment,” I said. “Everything about it.”

“What?”

“The richness. The sounds, the colors. The certainty that everything will change. Day to night. The stars. The moon. The seasons.”

“We can visit.”

“When Marge says we can. And then that’s what we are. Visitors.”

“Everyone is. We’re here, we’re gone.”

“You’re saying this is the same as being alive?”

“It’s what we have.”

“Like looking through a shop window at all the things you can’t buy. That’s not what I want.”

“What do you want?” Her eyes, those beautiful eyes, narrowed in exasperation.

“I don’t believe I can go back to the catacomb.”

“Of course you can. We’ve done it before. We can do it again. We can wait and see what changes. We can do our work when Marge lets us out.”

“Our work? You want to do this over and over? Be part of a crackpot scheme? Tell yourself you’re making the world better, twisting off some fool’s head? Moving money from one pocket to another?”

“When was anything perfect? And who says this didn’t work out? Some jerks learned there are consequences.”

“Consequences. Like, make sure you have goons who take the hit. Make sure you walk away yourself. Same old lesson.”

“We did what we could do.”

We stood there silently for a while. The moon began its climb. Fireflies and mosquitos rose from the grass. The mosquitos knew; they didn’t land on us.

I said, “You remember when Rob and Randy and Mar all got sick?”

“Of course I do. It was the worst. Brain tumor, bone cancer, cancer of the...what...I forget.”

“Bile duct. Perfect cancer for these times.”

“So what?”

“One type of horrible treatment after another. Waterboarding by medicine. It was hopeless. They did it anyway.”

“There was a chance.”

“Accept the torment and you’ll live another... whatever. Six months. A year. Maybe. Maybe not. All that time a version of misery. Waiting rooms. Exams. Injections. Your butt hanging out of a gown. IV line open for months. Bed sores. The people who visit. The people who don’t. The hours staring at the ceiling, trying to remember what used to be your life. The present being something that barely qualifies.”

“It’s time. Time that can be used. If you don’t surrender.”

“Then all those worn out phrases can appear in the obit. ‘His courageous battle with...,’ ‘He fought until the end...’ ‘He never gave up...’ What if all of that is...”

“What...?”

“Stupid. Folly. Utter bullshit. Serving as a tool for the satisfaction of others. I am a doctor and I will save your life. Or a crude simulation thereof. I am a nurse and I will be your healing angel. I am your spouse and I will happily be part of this delusion.”

“As opposed to what?”

“As opposed to, I am not so full of hubris that I refuse to accept reality. That I was living. Now I am not even half alive. Eventually, quite possibly I will be nothing. The possibility of nothingness. Or whatever it is that comes next. That’s what I’m talking about. The willingness to accept what comes next. As opposed to refusing to let go. Clutching a few miserable scraps and pretending that it is enough. Because of fear. Fear of obliteration. Living the dream that you will not be forgotten.”

“So we don’t go back. Then what happens?”

“I have no idea. Remember Pimlipper?”

“He disappeared.”

“He had an ego the size of the Empire State Building. But in the end he was ready to let go. The tailored suits. The Italian shoes. Bossing Marge around. Being the big man.”

“Maybe he thought it was a career move. Let go here, but ascend a couple floors in the afterlife office tower. Bigger windows, better view. Roll the dice, see what happens. A different form of hubris — believing in your luck, that you will always come out ahead. Regardless of what he told you.”

“I’m saying I’m willing to open myself to the possibilities. Of something, whatever it is. Of nothing. Capital N.”

The street lights popped on below us. Bats swooped after mosquitos. Life: bloody, predatory, incomprehensibly rich.

“Where do we go? What do we do?”

“Does it matter? We walk. We drive. We end up somewhere. Or we don’t. We take it minute by minute. There is no plan.”

I looked at my love. She stared off toward the river, toward the dark bluffs beyond. I could all but feel her thoughts, the on-the-one-hand-but-on-the-other churning behind that still striking face.

“We would be together?” she asked.

“That’s how we would start. And then what happens...”

“No one knows.”

“Maybe we will. Or won’t.”

“But if we go back...”

“Back to Marge and Duke Black. DeShaun. Segundo. Toua. Carlita, if she hasn’t disappeared herself. That hall of zombies. The dripping corridors. Sean. That pitch he has about our consequence.”

“I don’t want to believe that we’re... nothing.” At this a tear from her, then another.

I wiped them away with my thumb. “I know that’s what you see in him.”

“You think it’s nothing but a sales pitch?”

“Maybe he believes it. Maybe he’s right. I’m tired of all of it. I’m ready to take a chance. Ready to accept the result.”

She laughed, proving there is so little that can be predicted. She laughed until her shoulders shook and she grabbed my arm for balance.

“You okay?” I said.

She struggled to get the words out between spasms of hilarity. “Killed by a watermelon. A watermelon, Tommy. You try to live a life with some purpose, some dignity, and then a piece of fruit drops on you from out of the sky.”

“Well, it didn’t come direct from Jesus Christ. It was those two knucklehead kids. Where’s the school to prison pipeline when you need it?”

“And now this,” she said. “Like Satan on the mountaintop with Jesus.”

“Who’s Satan? Who’s Jesus? I’m not offering you the riches of the world. Though I could fall to my knees and adore you. In fact, I will.”

I groaned a bit getting down. I grabbed her legs and pressed my face against her. The once-familiar warmth was no longer there, but it was something.

“Don’t be an idiot,” she said.

“You brought it up.”

She pinched my ear and pulled me to my feet.

“Do we take the car?” she said.

“Walk, I think. To take it all in.”

“Which way?”

“I doubt it matters. You decide.”

She took my hand. We walked through the lot, past the banged-up Corolla. Thousands of bugs flitted around the street lights. The sidewalk led down to a row of modest homes. Light spilled

through the windows and into the street. Inside, people going about their lives. Content, anguished, both. Dogs barking. The welter of existence.

“Where will we sleep?” Doris wondered.

“We’ll find a place if we have to. A vacant house. That would do.”

“Squatters.”

“We always were. More or less. It might not be important.”

In the dark it was hard to tell for certain. Doris appeared to me more ghostish. A blur around the edges, her words more like the wind than like her voice. She said, “Tommy, Tommy, I...”

My contradictory thoughts, so bittersweet. I tried to turn toward her. All I saw was a fog.

What we had, what might now all be behind me, an explosion of memory and thought. The loss, the liberation. And then... ahhh... and then....