

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

AT HOME AND ABROAD:
REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE AND LIMITS OF EMPATHY

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
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Part 1 – Reflections on the Nature and Limits of Empathy

Prologue	Empathic Conceits	1
Adam Smith	Sensible Discord	16
David Hume	Sentimental Physics	37
Michel de Montaigne	Unsystematic Empathy	59
William Shakespeare	Selfless Empathy	79
Jay Gatsby	Insensible Imagination	104
Barack Obama	Determined Disinterest	125
Epilogue	Metamorphic Discipline	146
Bibliography		204

Part 2 – At Home: A Novel

Prologue	213
Squinting	227
Jakob Crackleburry	275
Two Great Green Eyes	327
A Trick of Memory	424
A Familiar Black Bloom	478
Epilogue	577

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If the work of this dissertation has taught me nothing else, it is that patience in the face of others – their quirks, their passions, their hang-ups, their hopes, the philosophies that guide them, the prejudices that limit – is essential to establishing an empathic connection. It is also essential to the sympathetic understanding that characterizes careful mentors and dear friends. In my writing, I have benefitted from the graceful hands of both. The friends who have encouraged me in word and deed over so many years are too many to name, but Drew Dixon deserves special mention for being my most faithful, and indefatigable, of readers. He and so many others are a fitting complement to the members of my Dissertation Committee, Harold Bloom, John M. Coetzee, and William Mills Todd III, and my Chairs, Thomas Pavel and Adam Zagajewski. By their example, they have taught me what it means to be a teacher, and while I can never fully repay them for their time, their encouragement, and, yes, their patience, they have my deepest gratitude and sincere appreciation. The work of this dissertation is dedicated to them.

Prologue Empathic Conceits

Seamus Heaney was on his way out as I was on my way in, a coincidence that was surely as unremarkable to the Irish poet as it seemed to me auspicious back then. I was only aware of his name because of a high school English teacher whose good taste seemed vindicated when her favorite author won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the fall of my senior year. Because she expected of her students a small measure of self-restraint inconsistent with the eruptions of adolescence, her opinions were widely discredited, and the honor, accordingly, was jeered. Heaney's name instantly became an excuse for eye-rolling among a tiny group of Honor's English students and a byword for anything pretentious.

By the time I arrived at Harvard College, Heaney's connection to the university -- a relationship that had been disclosed in an unwelcome announcement to my class when I was admitted -- had evolved from being vaguely shameful to the intimation of something momentous. I had inklings of becoming a writer, after all, and our paths crossed almost immediately on my arrival in Cambridge. I had come to campus a week before classes started with a farrago of first years to clean dorms for pocket money -- in my case, to purchase textbooks and a bike that was stolen in a matter of days -- and I was soon dispatched along

with another strapping lad to carry an air conditioner to the suite of someone named “Seamus.”

That it was the same Seamus I had heard so much about seemed certain -- I had spent much of my youth on an apple farm in Michigan, Lord knows I had never met someone by that name -- and the fact that the room was located in Adams House, an archipelago of residential buildings with a reputation for being “artsy,” served only to bolster my suspicion. Sure enough, we were greeted at the door by a shirtless and slightly addled Seamus Heaney, whose tuxedo pants corroborated his explanation that he was getting ready to give a speech of some sort he hadn’t yet prepared. We deposited the air conditioner in the corner, I looked furtively for Alfred Nobel, and the great poet inquired if a lady I had never heard of still possessed his Monet.

In hindsight, the events of that day are far more inexplicable to me now than they were then, when they seemed nothing more than my imagining of the daily affairs of the average Harvard student, bandied about like a shuttlecock by the graceful strokes of history. By contrast, what seemed entirely unlikely, at least relative my own overactive sense of destiny, was the revelation that Heaney was not long for Harvard. The word came down sometime in the spring of my freshman year, months after what would prove my final chance to enroll in one of his classes.

A couple of years later, long after students had stopped spreading the rumor that Heaney might return to campus to teach the occasional seminar, someone I have long forgotten but who seemed entirely credible to me at the time provided an explanation. After being anointed by the Swedish Academy, he said, the volume of student requests had simply

grown too large for “Professor Heaney.” In particular, everyone, absolutely everyone, wanted a recommendation letter, an overwhelming burden for a man who simply couldn’t say *No*.

Still an undergraduate at the time, and therefore acutely sensitive to any request, however frivolous, that went unrewarded by a professor, I remember thinking how much I admired what I assumed to be a scrupulous respect for academic responsibility. If Heaney did not want to write letters of recommendation or schedule ample office hours or make time for any one of the many tasks I believed morally incumbent upon a professor, then the only honorable choice for him was to be no professor at all.

Now maybe I was right in my initial hunch about Heaney’s motivation, maybe the great poet did withdraw from teaching out of a chivalrous sense of academic duty. But as I’ve grown older and undertaken many of the responsibilities required by such a role, I’ve begun to wonder if my assumption was wrong, or at least incomplete.

For anyone who has flitted through life as most people do, anonymous and largely unobserved, to learn that his words, his ideas, indeed, his very person suddenly arouse in an unknown multitude the instinct to listen, to admire, and to follow (whether to emulate or merely gawk), such a discovery is surely flattering, but it is typically attended by the further revelation that being widely acknowledged is more than a little encumbering.

This is true in at least two ways. The first involves the matter of duty I initially attributed to Heaney. Among the qualities that commend status derived from meritocratic accomplishment are the obligations that inevitably attend it. Those who enjoy fame by birthright may do much to support their position by simply breathing, but for the vast

majority of individuals who owe their preeminence to hard work of some sort, they must not only continue apace in their endeavors, if they accept the emoluments and offices of great distinction, they make themselves obliged to discharge an additional set duties. This can lead to difficult choices – to be Seamus Heaney, Seamus Heaney must continue to write poetry; but to be Professor Seamus Heaney, he must also write recommendation letters – and for my own part, with each passing year, I grow fuller in my appreciation of the patient temperament, personal restraint, and, not least, assiduous scheduling involved in maintaining such duties without allowing them to overwhelm the very responsibilities that saw them assigned in the first place.

With that said, there is a second way in which being widely acknowledged may encumber one beyond the bloodless burdens of administrative duties. Being a figure of some responsibility and prominence inevitably attracts the interest of others, providing one ample opportunity to disappoint. I don't mean this is in this trifling sense of unmediated impression. That one is of smaller stature than he appears on screen, or that his observations seem far more witty in print than in person, or even that his teeth are stained and crooked and his breath slightly unbecoming -- all of these are disappointments, no doubt, but for the individual in question, if embarrassing, they are largely blameless.

The disappointments I am interested in are those that are a consequence of being unable to fulfill every petition. Like the hands that jut longingly from the audience at a rock concert, each one as if to grab the silky hem of some hunky crooner, a person of great fortune is subject, on all sides, to constant appeals. Some he may fairly dismiss as

unsubstantial or insincere, but those made in earnest, especially the ones he feels somehow obliged by, cannot help but haunt him until he answers.

Why so? It is not because fulfilling these requests will help him in some immediate and concrete way. On the contrary, in service of his calling, ignoring them altogether is far more expedient. No, it is knowing what another hopes for from him, together with the knowledge of what she will feel if he disappoints her request, that works on him. He no doubt remembers what it is like to be so vulnerable and to stand in such need. If he fails to be of assistance, especially if he knows such assistance is fairly requested, he knows full well the pang of disappointment she will feel, and, further, he knows he will share in that pain.

Insofar as Heaney was widely known at Harvard to be a man of exceeding good will and personal generosity, over the years, I have increasingly wondered if the desire to avoid such disappointment played a greater role in his departure than some sober sense of academic responsibility. Indeed, under the circumstance, to have remained a professor would have been to accept an inevitably precarious situation. Even beyond the concern for having ample time for one's essential vocation, to subject yourself to an overwhelming tide of demands is to hazard your emotional equanimity. To feel at once the fear of disappointing another and the frustration of never-ending claims on one's calendar, to say nothing of a begrudging sense that perhaps someone should know better than to make such demands together with the shameful feeling that, in light of such reactions, one's genial spirit has been compromised—all together, such emotions can take quite a toll. They can disturb one's essential way of being.

I have not yet used the word empathy, but its role in the story I've been telling is essential. To make sense of the moral quandaries that present themselves when faced with the possibility of disappointing another, one assumes an empathic connection that explains not only the emotional effects we have on each other but how we become aware of them and the way in which they shape our behavior. If someone in a position like Heaney's had no knowledge that the denial of a request would hurt a young student, to say nothing the fact that he might feel something of that pain, too, the ultimate decision to abdicate the responsibilities of being a professor could be chalked up to a kind of cold arithmetic about the requirements of poetic accomplishment. Such a decision might be viewed as essentially selfish, but it is more profitably seen as solipsistic. It suggests not that the interests of others don't matter to one, but that they don't influence his own interests, much less that they are included among them. Indeed, they might just as well not exist.

Surely there are such people, but they are so rare and exceedingly strange that little seems to be gained by dwelling on them. Adam Smith certainly thought so. "How selfish soever man may be supposed," the Scottish philosopher began *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."¹ Our interest in the "fortune of others," Smith observed, is derived not by some direct sensory perception of another's experience, but by an instinctive imaginative exercise in which "we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him."²

The fact that Smith titles the opening chapter of his book “Of Sympathy” highlights both the intimacy and confusion between the words sympathy and empathy. Writing in 1823, several decades after Smith’s death and almost 65 years after his treatise on ethics was first published, the confessional critic Thomas De Quincey would interrupt a brief essay on *Macbeth* to defend his own linguistic prerogative in the use of the word sympathy. “It seems almost ludicrous to guard and explain my use of a word in a situation where it should naturally explain itself,” he sniffed:

But it has become necessary to do so, in consequence of the unscholarlike use of the word sympathy, at present so general, by which, instead of taking it in its proper sense, as the act of reproducing in our minds the feelings of another, whether for hatred, indignation, love, pity, or approbation, it is made a mere synonyme of the word *pity*; and hence, instead of saying, “sympathy *with* another,” many writers adopt the monstrous barbarism of “sympathy *for* another.”³

Of course, the employment of that “monstrous barbarism,” today, is evidence of precisely the scholarly discrimination De Quincey extols. Since at least 1909, when the word first appeared in print as a translation for *Einfühlung*, a German term that had been christened only a few decades earlier by aesthetic theory before migrating to psychoanalysis, empathy has been understood to mean the act of “reproducing in our minds the feelings of another” (whatever those feelings may be) while sympathy has more or less become a “mere synonyme of the word *pity*.”⁴

That, at least, is the official distinction, if by “official” we take the word of Merriam-Webster. In truth, sympathy and empathy are more often used synonymously in conversation rather than with any persuasive sense of a rigid difference between them. Any

number of reasons may account for this, not the least of which being that the evolution of language is invariably a messy business, but one worth lingering over is the degree to which the moral upshot of empathy commonly assumes a sympathetic purpose.

In the United States, in particular, but increasingly around the world, empathy, or the lack thereof, is regarded as a favored metric for measuring the moral health of the body politic. In terms of the role it plays in debates over personal ethics and popular politics, the Empathic Conceit, as I am inclined to call it, takes two forms, one weak, one strong.

The weak form of the Empathic Conceit treats empathy as a solvent of sorts for abject cruelty and brute indifference. It is memorably illustrated by the opening stanzas of William Blake's "On Another's Sorrow," a ballad from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow's share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd?

Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan, an infant fear?
No, no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!⁵

The initial movement of the poem, notably the final selection in the *Songs of Innocence* portion of Blake's groundbreaking work, at once describes a constituent element of human nature, namely empathy, and its implications for moral action. Can one witness another's

woe without feeling something of it himself and further lending a hand? The answer is doubtless: *No, no! never can it be!*

That it can be and very often is the case that we are indifferent toward, or even blithe before, another's pain may help to explain the passion of the poet's response, which is otherwise oddly emphatic for a series of rhetorical questions. Still, such realities, unhappy though they may be, neither refute the existence of empathy nor annul its moral significance. Instead, they help to make empathy a rallying cry for those who firmly believe its cultivation and encouragement, simply put, would make the world a better place. If we paused to consider the pain of others rather than rushing past them to attend to yet another trivial engagement, or if we disabused ourselves of the petty bigotries that leave us miserly in spirit and morally blinkered – in other words, if much like the man stunned by some concerto when he is at last convinced to unstop his ears, we simply allowed empathy to work on us and to inform our behavior, so many of the moral impediments that hamstring human affairs, from everyday disappointments to moments of darkest misery, would simply fall away.

That, at least, is the weak form of the Empathic Conceit, and depending on the scope and strength assumed by the remedy, such faith seems hardly misguided. The reason for this may be explained by an old joke about the Golden Rule, namely, that it is a pretty good guide to moral behavior unless, of course, you're a masochist. The observation is humorous because it is a wry inversion of the expected logic at work in the command. Typically, we no more want to destroy ourselves than we do other things that resemble us, and insofar as the Golden Rule entails an attempt to recognize ourselves in another in order to orient what we

might do unto them, the process of identification is not only facilitated by empathy, the connection itself provides a further warrant on the ethic's preferred behavior (for, indeed, we are far less likely to hurt another if we only end up hurting ourselves in the process). At the same time, to the degree that the practice of empathy habituates one to pay closer attention to the lives of others, an empathic posture not only restrains us from doing harm, wantonly or recklessly, it also makes us far more likely step forward when we see someone in need: *Can I see another's grief, / And not seek for kind relief? / No, no! never can it be!*

The moral urgency of the weak form of the Empathic Conceit depends largely on one's opinion of the relative promiscuity of blatant barbarity and savage insouciance. Light may never pierce the blackest of hearts, but with respect to the small cruelties we casually inflict on each other, independently and at the behest of custom, the cultivation of empathy may do much to blunt our brutish instincts in favor of behavior that, if not always compassionate, is at the very least considerate. The triumph of such efforts can be quite moving, and when they are systematized into the strategy of some social movement—say, the efforts of Civil Rights leaders in the United States to present the plight of African-Americans directly to the public by means of non-violent protest—their success does much to inspire the belief that if the practice of empathy were ubiquitous and committed, indeed, if it were less a welcome departure than a general way of being, its power would be far more radical than that which merely keeps one from being a thoroughgoing creep.

Such a conviction often supports the strong form of the Empathic Conceit. For those who adhere to it, their faith is well exemplified by a passage from Barack Obama's 2006 book *The Audacity of Hope*. In a chapter titled "Values," then Senator Obama describes as a

“guidepost” to his politics the question routinely put to him by his mother when he was a cocksure and exceedingly precocious young man: “How would that make you feel?”⁶ He continues:

It’s not a question we ask ourselves enough, I think; as a country, we seem to be suffering from an empathy deficit. We wouldn’t tolerate schools that don’t teach, that are chronically underfunded and understaffed and underinspired, if we thought that the children in them were like our children. It’s hard to imagine the CEO of a company giving himself a multimillion-dollar bonus while cutting health-care coverage for his workers if he thought they were in some sense his equals. And it’s safe to assume that those in power would think longer and harder about launching a war if they envisioned their own sons and daughters in harm’s way.

I believe a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society. After all, if they are like us, then their struggles are our own. If we fail to help, we diminish ourselves.

But that does not mean that those who are struggling—or those of us who claim to speak for those who are struggling—are thereby freed from trying to understand the perspectives of those who are better off. Black leaders need to appreciate the legitimate fears that may cause some whites to resist affirmative action. Union representatives can’t afford not to understand the competitive pressures their employers may be under. I am obligated to try to see the world through George Bush’s eyes, no matter how much I may disagree with him. That’s what empathy does—it calls us all to task, the conservative and the liberal, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressed and the oppressor. We are all shaken out of our complacency. We are all forced beyond our limited vision.

No one is exempt from the call to find common ground.⁷

While grand in scope, Obama is not careless with his rhetoric. For him, the practice of empathy can be productive of revelatory moments that do far more than make one less liable to sneer at the homeless or drop a frog in boiling water. On the contrary, when embraced by a complex community of people, empathy has the power to pierce the accumulated experience, cherished customs, and stubborn belief systems that so often divide us in order to provide “common ground” on a host of issues no less thorny and complex than education, inequality, and war.

The belief that empathy has a unique ability to help us arrive at determinations with universal purchase represents the strong form of the Empathic Conceit. Those who abide by it, whether as a matter of considered reflection or casual faith, possess a remarkable confidence in the ability of empathy to take us far beyond individual differences not merely to glimpse the image of ourselves in others but to uncover a baseline sensibility that allows for broad agreement, even on highly contentious matters. *We are all fundamentally alike* so this logic holds *And empathy uncovers a set of transcendent beliefs that can guide us to common agreement.*

If it has something of the mystical glow that so often speaks to the secular and fashionable, such a radical faith in empathy is attractive to those who sincerely long for remedies to deep civil discord. Again, much like the implicit wisdom of the weak form of the Empathic Conceit, such faith is not entirely unreasonable. The felt understanding and common cause that empathy engenders can vitiate even the strongest convictions that can tend to divide us, and surely, in respect to popular politics, the battle-lines are more often a reflection of provisional conclusions than inflexible commitments. More importantly, a party to this faith, like Obama, might fairly contend that empathy need not yield unanimity on every minor matter for its common practice to give way to general accord on major concerns – an achievement, of course, that is hardly trivial.

But what does it actually mean to practice such a faith? Sometimes we speak as if empathy is an activity no more demanding than holding the door for a stranger, the kind of small gesture that costs one nothing and lends itself to a general sense of social concord. And yet, that assumption seems inconsistent with experiences, such as Heaney's, where the felt obligations of empathy are not only burdensome but fraught with trade-offs that involve

substantial moral and practical commitments. At the same time, the notion that empathy is a fundamentally undemanding activity also seems at odds with the conviction underpinning both the strong and weak forms of the Empathic Conceit, namely, that the practice of empathy has a decided tendency to shape our decisions, our behavior, and even our identities with broad implications for the way we lead our lives, the moral commitments we maintain, and how we engage others around us.

The aim of this book is to consider the faith assumed by both forms of the Empathic Conceit by exploring the requirements and ramifications of making empathy a way of life. Specifically, I explore what is involved in shifting the experience of empathy from an instinctive impulse to a concerted practice, what is required of that shift and how it might change us, and, finally, what we ultimately might hope for from this commitment, individually and as a community.

The six essays that comprise this book as well as the epilogue explore these concerns in different ways. Each of the essays revolves around a particular figure whose ideas or example teach us something about the nature of empathy. The first two essays focus on Adam Smith and David Hume, respectively. Intellectual interlocutors and dear friends, Smith and Hume placed empathy at the heart of their moral systems and saw its exercise as elemental to understanding how our social worlds revolved. The third and fourth essays take up Michel de Montaigne and William Shakespeare. In their lives and work, both men provide examples of how the frontiers of empathy might be surveyed as well as the dangers of such discovery. The fifth and sixth essays focus on the title character of F. Scott's Fitzgerald's most durable work of fiction, *The Great Gatsby*, and Barack Obama. These essays

examine, in turn, the psychological consequences of an incapacity for and an adamant commitment to empathy and how each state may shape our behavior. Finally, in the epilogue, I describe my efforts to develop my own capacity for empathy by the study of acting and what I learned from that experiment about the requirements of a radical form of empathy and its ultimate relevance to the moral ambitions of the strong and weak forms of the Empathic Conceit.

Prologue Empathic Conceits

¹ Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1982. 9.

² Ibid.

³ Quincy, Thomas De. “On the Knocking at the Gate of Macbeth” in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. 83

⁴ For a fine survey of the origins of the word “empathy” and its relationship to sympathy, see Chapter Nine - From *Einfühlung* to Empathy: Sympathy in Early Phenomenology and Psychology in *Sympathy: A History*. Ed. Eric Schliesser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁵ Blake, William. “On Another’s Sorrow” in *Eighteenth Century English Literature*. Eds. Geoffrey Tillotson et al. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Janovich, Inc., 1969. 1469.

⁶ Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2006. 67.

⁷ Ibid., 67-8.

Adam Smith Sensible Discord

When we say that empathy is *a problem*, what we most often mean that empathy is unreliable. In the hearts of others, but more poignantly in our own.

Certainly there are those who are incapable of empathy, but one suspects their deficiency (if we may call it that) doesn't strike them so keenly. The man who feels nothing for the anguish of a neighbor is as reliable in his capacity for empathy as the man whose heart beats time to every passerby.

But these are extremes. On the whole human beings are neither seismic conductors nor solid granite. We feel the pain and joy of others, but we do so imperfectly, in varying degrees, and it is the strain we feel when we fail to bring home the feelings of another, or the distance we feel when they fail to reflect our own, that makes empathy *a problem*. We know well enough its warm resonance that the failure of empathy concerns us. It seems unlikely that we can long abide in a world without fellow feeling, but it seems certain that we cannot do so contentedly.

Our distress would have endeared us to Adam Smith. It would have seemed earnest and well-intentioned but also essentially misguided. This is not because the man now better remembered for announcing the wealth of nations believed that the competitive spirit of the marketplace belied the hope for human accord. Smith did not have the calloused heart of a Hobbesian nor the merchant's cool, appraising gaze. He was a genial, gentle man if, in passing, a little strange.

Smith was born in 1723 in the small Scottish coastal town of Kirkcaldy, the son of a resilient young woman widowed shortly before his birth and a custom's officer who left him a small legacy that included his name. Tending to her young son, the formidable Margaret Douglas was rumored to have treated Smith with "unlimited indulgence," a not uncommon fate for an only child.¹ Nature, however, was not nearly so kind. Smith had a large, homely face, an imposing set of teeth, and an odd, alternating gait that one friend described as "vermicular."² These traits, in addition to his tendency to stammer in conversation and otherwise talk to himself, helped seal Smith's fate as a bachelor, a status he retained throughout his life.

It should not be surprising then that love – at least of the urgent, ardent variety – did not define for Smith the terms of human affection. They were better described by the filial piety he showed his mother, with whom he lived for most of the 60 years they shared and from whom the "final separation," as he termed it, fell like "a very heavy stroke."³

Better yet were the friendships Smith enjoyed – with men mostly, but not a few women, too – who relished the exchange of ideas almost as much as each other's company. Smith certainly did not suffer for ideas. Though he was known for the unfortunate tendency

to lecture (a vice not unfamiliar to his profession, for Smith spent over a dozen years in the academy) he was said to have “never been more amusing than when he gave loose to his genius.”⁴ Still he was loath to intrude upon conversation, so much so that one friend observed he was “scarcely ever known to start a new topic himself,” preferring instead “to enjoy in silence the gaiety of those around him.”⁵

It’s hard to blame him. Smith counted among his companions the likes of Ben Franklin, Edmund Burke, Adam Ferguson, Edward Gibbon, James Boswell, and above all others David Hume. These wits enjoyed a verbal bonhomie that ran the gamut from the desultory exchange of anecdotes to the parry and thrust of enlightened debate to the whipsaw report of rapid-fire raillery. Doubtless Smith delighted in these verbal skirmishes (who wouldn’t?) but as a moral philosopher, the vocation to which he dedicated himself long before corn laws and supply curves, he was intrigued by the mollifying effects of society and conversation, what he termed “the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquility.”⁶

Tranquility was no small matter. Even from the sanctuary of Scotland and the reassurance of a century, the English Civil Wars and the riot of the Reformation continued to haunt the Anglophone world. The flames of civil discord had long been extinguished, but the acrid smell of distrust lingered in the air. The scent was familiar to Smith, though it never seemed to fill his lungs. His own observations had convinced him that human interaction, instead of magnifying differences, tended to narrow them such that even the most intense debates, if pursued with sincerity and good will, almost always led to an armistice of understanding.

This conclusion, however hopeful it may seem, was underwritten by a faith Smith shared with almost all of his friends, but especially his fellow Scots, one that distinguished them, as a group, from the pessimism of an older generation. Namely, that belligerence wasn't man's birthright, nor solipsism his destiny. We had what an earlier, kindred spirit had called a "moral kind of architecture" with "the inward fabric so adjusted and the whole so nicely built" that, notwithstanding an instinct toward selfishness, we took an interest in each other and longed for mutual accord.⁷ Certainly, men might become wolves – Adam Smith never banished this possibility from his mind – but we did not spring from the womb fangs bared.

Smith contends as much in the opening of his other celebrated work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. "That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others is, a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it," Smith says, and such tender solicitude is "by no means confined to the virtuous and humane."⁸ The interest we take in others, the concern we feel for their welfare, is one of the "original passions of human nature."⁹ Even the "greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it."¹⁰

Fair enough. But what effect does the changing fortune of others have on us? This is a more complex matter, and Smith spends the balance of the work trying to explain it. He starts by providing a deceptively simple illustration involving a crowd gathered to watch a tightrope walker. Watching "the dancer" high above them, Smith says, the people down below "naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation."¹¹ Putting aside the unlucky soul

who might break his fall, it is safe to say that no one in the crowd is in any immediate physical danger from the tightrope walker while he practices his dance, no more than you are in danger while reading this sentence if a small child outside your window goes wandering into the street. You will not be hit by the car, and no one in the audience will die from his fall, not alone and certainly not in unison.

Moreover, there is nothing revelatory in this observation. If a strangely unmoved spectator tapped the shoulder of another, twisting and writhing, to inform him that he was safe, that no harm would come to him from the tightrope walker's dance, the second man would stop only to stare at him and perhaps move a few feet away. *He* knows he's not going to die if the tightrope walker falls. Never for a moment does he think otherwise, not even if the dancer mistakes his dance, his foot finds the air, and for an instant he is suspended, pendulous, before commencing his plunge. Even then, when the crowd gasps and the dancer cries and the man shuts his eyes, even then he still does not think *he's* going to die—though for a moment he might feel that way.

And this is critical, for feeling is precisely what he's been doing all along, what the entire crowd has been doing, feeling their way with the dancer, doing "as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation."¹² Which is another way of saying that the members of the crowd have been practicing empathy, an exercise played out in the liminal space between imagination and reality, between instinct and self-awareness, between our lives and the lives of others. Smith never uses the word, but only because it would take another hundred years before the term familiar to him, sympathy, became so pregnant with meaning that the midwife of language induced fraternal twins. Even so,

sympathy, as Smith understood it, was not only akin with what we mean by empathy, it was nearly identical. Smith says so himself. “[T]hough its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same” as pity or compassion, sympathy “may now, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever.”¹³ For Smith, whether I smile when you lift your arms in triumph or weep when you break down in despair, the moment of sympathy (or empathy) “arises from bringing your case home to myself, from putting myself in your situation, and thence conceiving what I should feel like in the like circumstance.”¹⁴

The imagination, in turn, takes center stage, for Smith is quick to observe what should be obvious, that whenever we see someone suffer, “as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers.”¹⁵ If the staff falls swiftly on another, it’s not my back that cries out. The senses “never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations.”¹⁶

What this means is that empathy does not communicate emotions like some contagion racing through a school cloakroom. If that were so, a crowd of people would soon be emotionally indistinguishable, the reflections of a man standing alone in a funhouse hall of mirrors, mugging and waving to himself. Yes, there are some emotions that seem to communicate themselves this way, say the electric fear of the audience while watching the highwire act, but Smith would say that their reaction is uniform not because they, too, see the spectators below, but because their imaginations immediately size up the danger high above. No investigation is needed, no interpretation necessary. The feeling is instant. When I

see a mother beating her child, I don't stop to wonder why the little boy cries. I simply wince along.

That the experience of empathy can sometimes seem automatic explains why we occasionally confuse it for blind instinct or even attribute to it a kind of uncanny power, one that evokes the reverential whispers of a sixth sense or the pious mummeries of a medium. In most cases, however, empathy is neither immediate nor immediately full, largely because, unlike the sobbing child above, we don't know what prompts another's tears. "General lamentations," says Smith, "which express nothing but the anguish of the sufferer, create rather a curiosity to inquire into his situation, along with some disposition to sympathize with him, than any actual sympathy that is very sensible."¹⁷ We don't channel the experience of another to understand his emotions, nor do they speak to us directly. We have to ask him, What has befallen you? Till this be answered, though we are uneasy both from the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable."¹⁸

Yet even if the outward appearance of grief is accompanied by a thumbnail sketch of the circumstances that brought it about, we still tend to experience what Smith calls "conditional sympathy," a reflex feeling that is no more emotionally involved than the exchange of smiles on a city bus.¹⁹ Smith gives the example of a "stranger" who bears "all the marks of deepest affliction."²⁰ We pass by him, and immediately we are told that he has just received news of his father's death. It is "impossible," says Smith, that "we should not approve of his grief," yet "without any defect of humanity on our part," it may happen "that, so far from entering into the violence of his sorrow, we should scarce conceive the first

movements of concern upon his account.”²¹ Why are we so hardhearted? In such instances, says Smith, our imaginations simply haven’t caught fire. A passing frown will always spark some interest, but if we were consumed by the open cares of every stranger in the street we would never get to work in the morning. More importantly, this is simply not the way of human nature. We don’t take an interest in every person, and certainly not in all people equally, and what tends to distinguish those we do empathize with is not the outward manifestation of some emotion but the degree to which we envision the circumstances surrounding it.

In contrast with the “stranger” above, let’s say that I receive a call from a dear childhood friend, Hutch, who informs me of the death his father, Mr. Simms. In addition to my own recollections of Mr. Simms, my memory is stocked with the peculiar circumstances of Hutch’s life: Mr. Simms’s habit of saying Latin prayers before every meal, though no one at the table knew the first word he spoke, not even Mr. Simms; the old greyhound, Amelia, that Mr. Simms woke Hutch one morning to help him bury in the backyard, she having passed in the night, and Mr. Simms wanting the grave prepared before his sisters woke for school; the way Hutch smiled and shook his head whenever his father sang the old standards while worked on the family station-wagon; the weeklong vigil Mr. Simms kept at his son’s bedside after he threw himself from a third story window, and Hutch at last awaking, and his father beginning to weep.

When I am informed of the old man’s death, especially if I am told the details—that he died of throat cancer in corner room of a hospice, his large brown eyes rolling in pain, wordless, his rich baritone voice having been taken from him, surrounded by his children, all

but one, the youngest, Sarah, who would not speak to him to the end—I can readily imagine the contours of my friend’s grief. Indeed, and this is important, I don’t even have to try. The very fact that I am so well acquainted with the circumstances of his pain give them an urgency that cannot be denied. They circle the open field of my imagination in an endless parade, filling me in some measure with the selfsame grief.

We have all experienced such moments. They are piercing reminders of the remarkable capacity of empathy to bind us to another’s fate. Even so Smith would caution us that their emotional intensity is not to be accounted for by the fact that the cares of certain people—our family, our friends, our lovers—have a special power over us, one that is somehow essential to empathy. If that were so, it would be hard to explain why we find ourselves so compelled by the tightrope walker, of whom we know nothing beyond his dance, or harder still the tragic hero whose passions are confected and carry us away nonetheless. In each instance, it is not the man that makes for empathy, but circumstances that make the man.

This may seem bewildering. Are we really to believe that the emotions of others are secondary to the circumstances that attend them? That, in Smith’s own words, empathy “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation that excites it?”²² It seems almost distasteful. Is empathy a matter of transcending circumstances or being captive to them?

The answer, in a word, is yes. Empathy is as much about dispossessing ourselves of the immediate circumstances of our own emotional world as it is taking on those of another. Think of it this way: How else should I get at your grief? If I saw you weeping and quickly

pinched my arm until I was weeping, too, nobody would say that we were sharing a moment of grief, no more so than if I took out an onion and began chopping it until my eyes were brimming with tears. Crying alone does not constitute empathy, but nor does the experience of just any kind of grief. I need to feel the way you do for the reasons you do because *you* feel that way. Again, if you are weeping because your dog has died, it is not necessary for me to put down my own or even to imagine that it is dead. In fact, doing so creates another reason for grief. I need to mourn with you for your dog, to feel your pain for the same reasons you feel it—not to imagine my own.

To achieve what he calls a perfect “correspondence of sentiments,” Smith says that the “spectator” to some emotion must “adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, the imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded.”²³

Easier said than done. Tragedies spend two hours traffic building an emotional world so that the struts may be knocked away in some awful moment, and only in the best of them is the workmanship so precise that the pain comes easy. In the dramas of everyday life, we most often arrive at the end of the final act, when the closing soliloquy is already well underway. We may linger for a moment, especially if the lament is extravagant and oversold, but typically we don’t bother asking someone what we’ve missed. We just look for the exit and continue on our way.

And what if we did want to go to such trouble? How would we assemble the “minutest incidents” of some strange person’s woe? There is no playbill, no reviews, not even a repeat performance. It seems unlikely that he will lend us the key to his diary, and we

are unlikely to pick the lock on his dresser drawer. Beyond canvassing onlookers or searching out friends, our only real alternative is to introduce ourselves and inquire into his grief. And even if the stranger is willing to oblige us—for he knows us no better than we know him—what if he cannot bear to relive the details? Or, more likely still, what if he proves a poor storyteller and fails them?

Of course, we rarely go to such trouble, so it should be obvious why empathy comes about more freely and forcefully with those closest to us, not again because their cares have some kind of primordial authority (empathy knows no blood) but simply because we know “better how every thing is likely to affect them.”²⁴ If the past is prologue to any present grief, in the case of family and friends we know the backstory by heart, and thus our feelings of empathy tend to be “more precise and determinate than it can be with the greater part of other people.”²⁵

What then of the “greater part”? Consider, again, the dancer on the rope and the crowd gathered to watch him. However much they tremble and gasp as he travels back and forth, the dancer is to each of them just a member of the “greater part.” Take him down from the line, and in a week, few would recognize him, and of those who did, odds are that not a single one would stop if they saw him weeping in the street. Yet when he is high above, turning and leaping, defiantly tempting fate, his anonymity is as much an impediment to the crowd’s fear as common genes are essential to sharing my sister’s grief. What matters is the urgency of the circumstances in the minds of the spectators, and in the case of the highwire artist, they are limited, obvious, and unavoidable.

The same may be said for any physical injury either threatened or endured. “When we see a stroked aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another,” Smith says, “we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm; and when it does fall, we feel it in some measure, and are hurt by it as well as the sufferer.”²⁶ We come by empathy easily in such cases—so easily, in fact, that when we say empathy is a problem for someone, we rarely mean that she is utterly incapable of feeling another’s pain. Sociopaths will always be with us, and there is the broader question of when custom sanctions violent behavior, blunting our capacity to feel another’s pain. Even then, however, it is the rare person, indeed, who can watch the inquisitor ply his trade and not shudder with grief. Why so? For Smith, the answer is obvious. We have all suffered enough to know the fact and fear of great physical pain. It is the lowest common denominator of human experience, and whenever we see it inflicted, the imagination need not work very hard to translate the grief.

The case is otherwise with the passions, that loose confederation of feelings that take their start from the imagination. When the welterweight sobs for the loss of his title, when the ingénue revels in her breakout role, when a schoolgirl envies an elegant sister, when a schoolboy grieves for an unrequited valentine, when a mother worries for a lonely child, when the scholar fumes at tenure denied—in each case, the feelings are prompted not by some change in the body. They are conflagrations of the soul. “The person who has lost his whole fortune, if he is in health, feels nothing in his body,” Smith says. “What he suffers is from the imagination only, which represents to him the loss of his dignity, neglect from his friends, contempt from his enemies, dependance, want, and misery.”²⁷

But such suffering requires a story before I can make it my own. And thus, when some passion afflicts a member of the “greater part,” unless the details are told, it probably won’t affect me half as much as watching the same person stub his toe.

Still, while physical suffering may more immediately provoke our empathy, Smith observes that what we feel in such cases is “altogether disproportioned to the violence of what is felt by the sufferer.”²⁸ If we are getting out of a car and someone shuts the door on your hand, I may cry out, but only one of us will go on shrieking. However, it is “quite otherwise with those passions which take their origin from the imagination.”²⁹ As Smith puts it, “The frame of my body can be but little affected by the alternations which are brought about upon that of my companion: but my imagination is more ductile, and more readily assumes, if I may say so, the shape and configuration of the imaginations of those with whom I am familiar.”³⁰ Anger, envy, pride, shame—I can better remember these than forget an unbroken hand.

Smith highlights this tendency in an amusing observation about the makings of a serviceable tragedy. “The loss of a leg may generally be regarded as a more real calamity than the loss of a mistress,” he says, but a drama in which the “catastrophe was to turn upon a loss of that kind” would be “ridiculous,” whereas a “misfortune of the other kind, how frivolous soever it may appear to be, has given occasion to many a fine one.”³¹ The distinction is simple. Strong fellow feeling, whether with Falstaff or a childhood friend, is better sustained by the afflictions of the mind than those of the body. A lost leg may not impede our pity, but it is certainly a stumbling block to a complete “correspondence of sentiments.”

By contrast, the passions can hold sway over our imagination precisely because they tend to be the cumulative effect of circumstance. As spectators, we come by the pain of a lost leg too easily, for the work of the imagination tends to begin and end with envisioning physical grief. To share the grief of a lost love, I need to know the circumstances of that loss, not merely the fact of it: what brought the two people together, the length and terms of their affair, the events leading up to the fateful day. This is why the loss of a mistress can make for a compelling drama—or, for that matter, any drama at all—for the pain lies in the story, not its end.

But what of the human dramas that fail, and not for want of circumstance or believability, but simply because we reject them? Those driven by bland ambitions, weird woes, shopworn convictions, jejune joys. They're hardly uncommon. To some, they may seem dramaturgy of the everyday.

“Even of the passions derived from the imagination,” Smith says, “those which take their turn from a peculiar turn or habit it has acquired, though they may be acknowledged to be perfectly natural, are, however, but little sympathized with. The imaginations of mankind, not having acquired that particular turn, cannot enter into them; and such passions, though they may be allowed to be almost unavoidable in some part of life, are always, in some measure, ridiculous.”³²

Smith is talking explicitly about amorous affection and how the obsession of one person for another may seem silly to the rest. The point he is trying to make, however, has less to do with the protocols of courtship (which, in any case, the incurable bachelor didn't much understand) than with the tendency of human experience to predispose the

imagination to automatically extend empathy in certain circumstances, a tendency that makes the practice of empathy either an instinct or a struggle.

To illustrate, consider one last time the dancer on the line. When we watch him high above, why do we feel fear? It is not because we actually remember those times when we've peered over a ledge to see the tiny people below, nor is it because we recall the moment when a tree branch split and sent us tumbling to the crack of a broken arm. These memories, and others like them, have already bent our imagination to the hot flash of fear when we put ourselves in the dancer's place. We needn't think of them, and we won't.

And yet, if we take a step back: Is this really what the dancer feels? Clearly not. He is a professional acrobat, an entertainer who has reenacted the turns of his death-defying dance in front of crowds for years. Likely, he feels no fear at all when he twists high above, and if he does, the smidgen of fear makes a mockery of our own. Moreover, we know this—*if* we stop to think about it, which is as much to say if we dam up the straights of our imagination through which fear, like a torrent, comes rushing past. We can comprehend the fact that the dancer's imagination has acquired a "peculiar turn or habit," one very different from our own, one different from most anyone who hasn't passed his life prancing on a high-wire, but it is hard for us to feel it. We can recognize that the man does not feel the same fear we do, and we can appreciate why this is so, but when we step out onto the line of our own imagination, reason alone won't keep our hands from shaking.

Of course, Smith well appreciated that empathy amounted to little more than emotional escapism if the interest I took in another was not his welfare but my own. When I commiserate with you on the death of your son, he says, "I do not consider what I, a person

of such a character and profession, should suffer.”³³ Rather, “I should consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters.”³⁴ This is what it means in full measure to empathize with another, yet the definition serves only to underscore, not overcome, the problem of putting ourselves in the shoes of one whose “peculiar turn” of imagination sees him react to circumstances in a way unlikely or unwarranted. That problem, *the* problem of empathy for us—not that we don’t want to empathize with another, but that we simply can’t—was not a problem for Smith. Human beings may not show enough concern for the fate of others (this was surely a problem) but among those who do, the tension they feel when they can’t empathize with another is not to be regretted, and certainly not deplored. For Smith, it is a natural tendency of human nature with irreplaceable benefits for society, for that tension, that feeling of sensible discord, is the admonitory hand of empathy working to repair our social world.

“If we hear a person loudly lamenting his misfortunes,” Smith says, “which, however, upon bringing the case home to ourselves, we feel, can produce no such violent effect upon us, we are shocked at his grief; and, because we cannot enter into it, call it pusillanimity and weakness.”³⁵ By the same token, if we meet a man “too happy or too much elevated” with “any little piece of good fortune,” we are annoyed by “his joy; and, because we cannot go along with it, call it levity or folly.” We are “even put out of humour if our companion laughs louder or longer at a joke than we think it deserves,” which is to say, louder or longer than “we ourselves could laugh at it.”³⁶

In each case, Smith is highlighting what we lightly call “bad behavior,” and if he seems a little priggish, it only because he is calling out the kinds of indiscretions that qualify

for misdemeanors in polite company, not capital crimes. We rarely speak up, but not because we wouldn't have the behavior curbed and the offenders chastened. The discomfort we feel signals as much, and we certainly don't question its propriety. In most cases, unguarded reactions – a pained grin, a derailed thought – make the point for us. Yet if the offense is committed by a loved one, we think we are doing him a favor if we take him aside and tell him he shouldn't go on for the better part of an hour about the inanities of his boss or the triumph of avoiding a parking ticket. No one at the dinner party cares that much, and frankly, he should know better.

For Smith, in each case, the underlying offense is selfishness. We become so enamored with our own private interests that we forget that our world is not the only one, indeed, that we all share the same cramped stage. Thankfully, it is the tendency of social interaction to discipline such excesses. One way or another, the feeling of sensible discord prompts other people to indicate that our actions are unwarranted, which, for Smith, is as much to say that when they put themselves in our shoes, they have to work hard to cram their feet in, for they simply cannot imagine acting the way we do.

Over time, the experience of disapproval predisposes us to anticipate the reactions of others by imagining them ourselves, by becoming spectators to our own behavior. And in the same way that our tendency to empathize with others prompts us to extend them pity and assistance when they suffer, the practice of empathy on ourselves, whenever we feel sensible discord with regard to our own actions, prompts us to check our behavior in favor of their feelings. This hardly means that we invariably succeed in overriding selfish instincts,

but even when we fail, it is despite the warnings of sensible discord, which not only haunts us with the possibility of being caught red-handed but enlivens that very notion.

For Smith, the directives of sensible discord are the consequence of an empathic dynamic that tends toward comity and rapport. “[A]s nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned,” he says, “so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. As they are continually placing themselves in his situation, and thence conceiving emotions similar to what he feels; so he is constantly placing himself in theirs, and then conceiving some degree of that coolness about his own fortune, with which he is sensible that they will view it.”³⁷

The moral advantage of empathy, in turn, is not that its practice makes us more accepting of human differences. On the contrary, it narrows them. Tolerance, for Smith, is neither a great benefit nor the chief lesson of empathy. Indeed, by his account, it is, at best, a virtue of last resort, one we turn to out of lingering distrust and practice in a spirit of cold contractualism. A society, he admits, “may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection,” but Smith is clear that nobody would want to live in it.³⁸ The man who “merely abstains from hurting his neighbours, can merit only that his neighbours in their turn respect his innocence,” he says, but such men, “whose hearts never open to the feelings of humanity, should, we think, be shut out, in the same manner, from the affections of all their fellow-creatures, and be allowed to live in the midst of society, as in a great desert where there is nobody to care for them, or to inquire after them.”³⁹

For Smith, a nation of such people is characterized by neither concord nor discord but universal disinterest. It may well “subsist,” but it will never thrive. Smith didn’t fear such a community, but only because it was practically unimaginable. It is an essential tenet of his moral psychology that human beings take an interest in others and that they have a stake in the interest others take in them. That interest is given life and urgency by empathy, which compels our approval and support when we enter the lives of others and find that we can make ourselves at home.

“The great pleasure of conversation and society arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another.”⁴⁰ Empathy supplies that harmony by lowering the pitch of selfishness and keeping our feelings in tune. It produces not a single chord of emotion, but a symphony of friendship. Sensible discord is inevitable, for human beings are always falling out of tune, but Smith believed that in the practiced orchestra of society, jarring notes are an exception that empathy soon conducts away.

¹ Stewart, Dugland. “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, L.L.D” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects with Dugland Stewart’s Account of Adam Smith*. Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1982. 269.

² As quoted in Heilbroner, Robert. *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times, and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*. New York: Touchstone, 1995. 45.

³ Smith, Adam. “237. To [William Strahan]” in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*. Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1987. 275

⁴ Stewart, “Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, L.L.D” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects with Dugland Stewart’s Account of Adam Smith*, 330.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 330.

⁶ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 23.

⁷ Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of. “An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 215.

⁸ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 317.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 337.

David Hume Sentimental Physics

“Moralist” is not a pleasant label—it evokes brittle parsons and pursed lips—but Adam Smith would have rejected it for more than *ad hominem*. At a telling moment in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he reminds his readers that “the present inquiry is not concerning a matter of right, if I may say so, but concerning a matter of fact.”¹ The warning is prompted by an observation regarding the prurient pleasure of seeing a villain get his due, and if Smith sounds defensive, that’s because he isn’t objecting to that pleasure as somehow crude or unworthy. His interest, here and throughout the work, is not “what principles a perfect being would approve of” but “what principles so weak and imperfect a creature as man actually and in fact approves of.”² Smith had written a *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, not a *Gospel*. His aim was not to be a sage, but a scientist.

Or a philosopher, to use Smith’s preferred term. Today that label is so promiscuously applied that it means too much to mean much anything. For Smith, however, it signaled a precise vocation. “Philosophy is the science of connecting principles of nature,” he said in a succinct expression of his life’s work.³ The philosopher did not daub reality with the broadbrush of metaphysics, nor did he prescribe some strange moral emetic to purge the public soul. The philosopher sought “the largest experience that common observation can

acquire,” and having inventoried events that “appear solitary and incoherent,” he worked to establish “the invisible chains which bind together all these disjointed objects” and “introduce order into this chaos of jarring discordant appearances.”⁴ His work was to make sense of reality, not subvert it.

The definition comes in *The History of Astronomy*, a long, discursive essay that Smith liked well enough he declined to burn it along with his lecture notes, working drafts, and all but two other of his unpublished essays shortly before his death in 1790. An exercise in the history of science may seem like an odd choice for a commentary on philosophy, but this only because we don’t share the overwhelming prejudice of Smith’s age that Isaac Newton was the greatest philosopher to have ever lived:

Nature and Nature’s Law lay hid in Night:
God said, *Let NEWTON be*: and all was Light!⁵

The couplet, an epigrammatic confection of Alexander Pope, expressed in sweeter words Smith’s own opinion that Newton had founded “the most universal empire that was ever established in philosophy.”⁶ In his *Principia*, said Smith, he had taken events as seemingly scattered as the arc of the heavens and the fall of an apple and derived a single principle, “the universality of gravity,” that “ascertains the time, the place, the quantity, the duration of each individual phaenomenon, to be exactly such as, by observations, they have been determined to be.”⁷ Here, indeed, was an invisible chain that bound disjointed objects with “a degree of firmness and solidity that we should in vain look for in any other system.”⁸ “The gates are now set open,” declared Newton’s friend Roger Coates, “and by the passage

he has revealed we may freely enter into the knowledge of the hidden secrets and wonders of natural things.”⁹

Smith longed to fashion his own philosophy with adamantine hoops, but he was content to leave to others the sprigs of electricity and the obscurer movements of the celestial vault. The nature he studied was human, and his “connecting principles” were derived from the arabesques of commercial exchange and the ebb and flow of human affection.

Today we are more familiar with the first of these investigations, *The Wealth of Nations*, that “very scientifick and learned book,” as one admirer described it, “containing the *principia* of those laws of motion, by which the system of the human community is framed and doth act.”¹⁰ Yet Smith’s principles spanned two books, not one, for while self-interest kept the wheels of commerce turning, empathy was the law of moral locomotion. It was a “natural disposition,” common to all human beings, “to accommodate and to assimilate, as much as we can, our own sentiments, principles, and feelings, to those which we see fixed and rooted in the persons whom we are obliged to live and converse a great deal with.”¹¹ It framed our social world no less than self-interest shaped the marketplace.

Both theories were underwritten by Smith’s confidence in what he called the “oeconomy of nature,” a belief that human beings were endowed with “original and immediate instincts” that lent themselves to actions that improved society regardless of, and even contrary to, their intended aim.¹² Hence the unlikely wisdom of the “invisible hand,” Smith’s most enduring image. Describing its providential work, he famously said, “in spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity” and though they employ the poor only for “the

gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires,” the wealthy are nonetheless led “by an invisible hand to make the same distributions of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions.”¹³ The rich “advance the interest of society,” Smith declared, “without intending it, without knowing it.”¹⁴

Of course, Smith’s faith was ambidextrous. He dedicated one work apiece to the invisible hands of self-interest and empathy, two forces that were familiar in everyday affairs but whose effects were writ large in a nation’s character and history. These investigations relied not on armchair speculation but on the studied observation of social interaction. They aimed to fulfill Newton’s hope that if the method of inquiry that had proven invaluable to natural philosophy “shall at length be perfected, the Bounds of Moral Philosophy will also be enlarged.”¹⁵ Newton’s faith was not so much in the scientific method as in what he hoped it would demonstrate beyond demonstration. Namely, that just as the theory of gravity is the universal expression of “what power [God] has over us,” so too “our duty toward him, as well as toward one another, will appear to us by the light of nature.”¹⁶

It was by that very light that Smith believed he had revealed the hidden gears of human nature and demonstrated that their motion, if it didn’t turn us into angels, narrowed the distance between heaven and earth. This was Adam Smith’s claim to the title of “philosopher.” Newton might have said he came by it naturally.

So, too, David Hume—if not necessarily for the same reason. He had only the kindest words for the work of his young friend, though he must have rolled his eyes at any reference, however diluted and offhand, to the sociological omens of divine design.

Hume drew the opposite conclusion from Newton's achievement. While he "seemed to draw off the veil from some of the mysteries of nature," Newton "shewed at the same time the imperfections of mechanical philosophy," which had always held the natural world to the high mark of speculative opinion.¹⁷ His work had demonstrated that we must allow the world to speak for itself, while still reminding us that, at some point, even the soundest deductions hit the bedrock of first principles. The theory of gravity was one such principle, but whereas for Newton the elegant consistency of its expression was the unmistakable signature of a divine hand, for Hume, it demonstrated nothing more than the strained absurdity of trying to account for the unaccountable by theological fiat or sublime syllogism. Indeed, far from accounting for nature's first principles, in Hume's opinion, Newton had "restored her ultimate secrets to that obscurity, in which they ever did and ever will remain."¹⁸

Smith, for his part, was cagy about his views concerning the metaphysical implications of mundane consistency. At the conclusion of *The History of Astronomy*, a work, more than any other, that bears the marks of Hume's influence, Smith reminds his readers that the astronomical systems he has been presenting are all "mere inventions of the imagination" that aim "to connect together the otherwise disjointed and discordant phaenomena of nature."¹⁹ Nevertheless, he continues, given the tendency to speak of these systems as if they were "the real chains" of nature, in light of the enormity of Newton's achievement, "[c]an we wonder" that it is viewed not as a work of the imagination, but as "the discovery of an immense chain of the most important and sublime truths?"²⁰

Hume didn't wonder. The human tendency to consecrate the consistent and familiar was ground he had covered long before Smith, who was not only 11 years his junior but also waited until he was 36 to publish his great work of philosophy. Hume was just 27 when the first volume of his modestly titled *A Treatise of Human Nature* debuted. It did not enjoy the outrageous success the young man had envisioned. "Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*," he famously said. "It fell *dead-born from the press*, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots."²¹

The statement was largely true, but unfortunately for Hume, not nearly true enough. However recondite the heterodoxies of the two volume work, they did not obscure the primary one, namely, that the "ultimate secrets" of nature were beyond the ken of mortal knowledge and would forever remain obscure. For this, Hume was branded an infidel – the Great Infidel, in fact – a distinction that opened doors to some of the more fashionable French salons (there he was a hero: *le bon David*) but barred him forever after from ever attaining a university chair at home.

Hume abided. He authored follow-up works that distilled and, perhaps, adulterated his ideas (they enjoyed middling success) and published essays and finally the English histories that brought him popular acclaim and financial security. He was by all accounts, even his own, a contented, cheerful man – Smith called his temper "more happily balanced" than "that perhaps of any other man I have ever known" –but the failure of the *Treatise* haunted him.²² Looking back at the end of his life, he said that he had always "entertained a notion" that his "want of success in publishing the *Treatise of Human Nature*, had proceeded

more from the manner than the matter,” adding that he had also “been guilty of a very usual indiscretion, in going to the press too early.”²³

There is something to this. Like many works that make a claim to first philosophy, the *Treatise* is poorly organized and incurably dense. Of the few notices the first volume received, the one that stung Hume most was an unsigned review that alternated between grossly mischaracterizing his work and sneeringly dismissing its design (“Our Author has sufficiently (he says) explained the Design of this Work of his in the Introduction. Perhaps he expects we should understand it by the following Passages...”).²⁴

In a particularly cruel touch, the review came as part of a monthly magazine dedicated to providing “Impartial Accounts and Accurate Abstracts” of recently published works. Hume was so enraged he penned his own unsigned abstract, a 32-page pamphlet that attempted to clarify the method and achievement of the *Treatise*. So many ancient philosophers were content “representing the common sense of mankind,” he observed, yet in light of Newton’s achievements, it is “worth while” to determine if “the science of *man* will not admit of the same accuracy which several parts of natural philosophy are found susceptible of.”²⁵ Not coincidentally, this is the very “aim” of the *Treatise*, whose author “proposes to anatomize human nature in a regular manner, and promises to draw no conclusions but where he is authorized by experience.”²⁶

If this sounds a bit like Smith’s methodological caveat in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, that is because the two men agreed that “experience and observation” are “the only solid foundation” for philosophy.²⁷ Like his friend, Hume drew inspiration from Newton’s work to build a philosophy of human nature with “the greatest degree of exactness.”²⁸ But

whereas Smith took empathy and self-interest as the building blocks of his philosophy and spent the balance of his reflection contemplating their broader implications for society, Hume turned his eye to the very anatomy of human experience. He labored to dissect its constituent parts, to determine how they were assembled, and, finally, to understand what enlivened them. “[W]e can never arrive at ultimate principles,” affirmed the anonymous author of the *Abstract*, but “’tis a satisfaction to go as far as our faculties will allow us.”²⁹

So how far might we go? Hume would have us consider a game of billiards. “Suppose I see a ball moving in a straight line towards another,” he says, “I immediately conclude, that they will shock, and that the second will be in motion.”³⁰ We nod our heads—this seems unobjectionable. What we are doing, he continues, trying to give a little philosophical precision to the discussion, is making an “inference from cause to effect.”³¹ The first billiard ball will strike the second, causing it to move. Fair enough, we say, perhaps denying the instinct to shrug our shoulders. The observation seems unremarkable. It certainly doesn’t require specialized training to derive or some obscure idiom to disclose. Human experience, we might say, is testament enough.

Hume would wholeheartedly agree, but then he would raise the stakes considerably, for “of this nature,” he declares, “are *all* our reasonings in the conduct of life,” including the entirety of moral and natural philosophy, with the exception of arithmetic and geometry, the two preserves of pure logic.³² This is quite a claim, and Hume is eager to defend it. As a first witness of sorts, he calls on the biblical Adam, a man “created in the full vigour of understanding” but “without experience” of any kind.³³ If, Hume says, after life giving breath, Adam were immediately brought to a billiards room, however would he know what

to expect when he sees a white sphere hurtling across a green felt table toward a lonely number eight? Perhaps the white sphere will hop over the black one or circle right around? Maybe it will explode or burst into a blossom of light? Maybe it will gobble up the second sphere, scream *No No No!*, or sprout wings and fly away? Or maybe it will just come to a full stop? Who knows? We do, Hume would say, because we have seen such events countless times before. But as for Adam, such an inference “is not any thing that reason sees in the cause,” for the “mind can always *conceive* any effect to follow from any cause.”³⁴ Adam needs to “have had experience of the effect,” to have “seen, in several instances, that when the one ball struck upon the other, the second always acquired motion.”³⁵

Unless, of course, he is “inspired.”³⁶ This is a possibility—it *is* Adam we are talking about—but one that Hume isn’t interested in, just as he isn’t interested in trying “to penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret causes of their operations.”³⁷ His study is more mundane. He wants to know “the manner in which objects affect my senses, and their connexions with each other, as far as experience informs me of them.”³⁸ And yet, he doesn’t attempt to determine what it is about the human eye that allows us to watch a game of pool. Hume is not an optometrist, and his is not a gross anatomy. His concern is the anatomy of human nature, a science he hopes to derive from the lived patterns of everyday experience.

The shock of two balls is one such experience. It could not be more familiar to us, yet if we ask ourselves why we believe that, when we see a cue ball speeding across a pool table, the event of it striking the eight ball will look a certain way, the answer, Hume says, has nothing to do with logical deductions, much less some insight into “ultimate principles.”

It's much simpler than all that. We believe it only because, after thousands of similar experiences, that's precisely what we've come to expect.

Now the physicists among us will roll their eyes at this. The shock of the two billiard balls looks a certain way not because of our expectations. Our expectations are irrelevant. The balls are obeying the laws of physics, not the prerogatives of human experience. The analytical philosophers, on the other hand, would note that Hume is indulging in something of a tautology. We believe that the shock of two balls will look a certain way because we expect it to look a certain way, and we expect it to look a certain way because that's what we come to believe. This seems like a highly questionable syllogism, and hardly the stuff of groundbreaking philosophy.

But Hume is undeterred. On the contrary, he embraces the tautology of experience as key to understanding how human beings make sense the world. On his account, we would not try to derive theories about the world if we did not expect it act a certain way, but that expectation is built not on our ability to see into the future, but on the felt experience of the past and its effect on the reasoning mind. The theory of gravity may explain why an apple dropped on Newton's head, but the impact gave birth to the idea, the idea didn't conceive it. Moreover, we have no good reason to believe that the world will continue to act a certain way except for the feeling that it must, which tends to be more than enough for us to try to explain the world we will know by the one we already have.

For Hume, this insight provides philosophy with "a new definition of necessity," one premised on the intensity of feeling, not strength of logic or proof of divine design.³⁹ As he describes it, "when many uniform instances appear, and the same object is always followed

by the same event,” in our minds, we “entertain the notion of cause and connexion” and, over time, come to “feel” a “customary connexion” between them.⁴⁰ In turn, whenever some connection seems inevitable – say that the shock of one ball with another sends the second into motion – we believe it to be necessary and assimilate that belief into the way we view the world and how we conduct our lives. Whether in fact it *is* necessary from some standpoint beyond human experience is irrelevant to Hume, not only because we have no way of proving such propositions, but because lived experience is inevitably a more dogged advocate than the apostles of reason or the advocates of otherworldly faith.

That feeling is the switchman for Hume’s system reminds us that we are not concerned with the cold logic of natural philosophy but the affective tendencies of human nature. On Hume’s account, we feel our way through the world, forming “a kind of system, comprehending whatever we remember to have been present, either to our internal perceptions or senses.”⁴¹ And though few of us ever bother to define for ourselves the laws of this system, that doesn’t keep us from observing them religiously. They are the felt necessities of our world, and the system they intend, when “join’d to the present impressions” of the day, “we are pleas’d to call a *reality*.”⁴² Our own.

It may seem strange that simple causality should do so much work for Hume, and indeed he combines it with resemblance and contiguity to provide the three “principles of association” that, together, form the “ties of our thoughts,” giving them a sense of unity and natural progression “even in the loosest *reverie*.”⁴³ Like causality, these principles may be illustrated by a game of pool. Resemblance explains why we expect the shock of two bowling balls to look something like the concussion of pool cues, whereas contiguity

describes our tendency to think of sticks, pockets, and even pool sharks whenever an eight ball comes to mind.

Beyond their role as two of the fundamental forces organizing our thoughts, these principles serve to radically expand the scope of Hume's philosophy, for they describe a mind that is more pliant and adaptable than one which interprets the world only in causal terms. That mind is limited by the fact that no two events are ever exactly alike. At the very least they are distinguished by time, and nearly as often by differences that, whenever they seem inconsequential, go by the name of detail. Yet if we could not generalize across events, draw lessons from them, and apply what we have learned to changing circumstances, our thoughts would be little more than vivid historians of a fractured past. We could at once remember everything and learn nothing. We could watch the sun rise and set for an eternity and still not know what to expect whenever darkness falls.

In this respect, resemblance and contiguity capture the propensity of the human mind to make metaphors of the past to explain the present and prepare us for the future. They are servants of the imagination, shaping our behavior and giving our experience meaning, and in their metaphorical power, they provide a bridge for Hume between material reality and the moral world. Consider, for example, how he defines the principles of association near the end of the *Abstract*:

These principles of association are reduced to three, viz. *Resemblance*; a picture naturally makes us think of a man it was drawn for. *Contiguity*; when *St. Dennis* is mentioned, the idea of *Paris* naturally occurs. *Causation*; when we think of the son, we are apt to carry our attention to the father.⁴⁴

Throughout the *Abstract*, Hume has used a familiar event from the physical world, the shock of two billiard balls, to describe how the mind makes sense of experience. Here, however, at the very end, he turns his gaze from “the actions of matter” to “human actions.”⁴⁵ This shift might seem surprising, though on further reflection, one might wonder what took Hume so long. Remember, his purpose in writing the *Treatise* was not to supplant Newton’s *Principia*. He never denied the laws of motion, merely their cosmic implications. As much as any of his contemporaries, he marveled at Newton’s achievement and hoped to duplicate it, providing the foundation for a “science of *man*” with no less rigor and certainty than Newton’s science of nature. And yet, when Hume went looking for his first principles, he did not attempt to peer directly into the human soul in order to discover the forces at play. He tried to figure out how the outside world pushed in, hence his discussion of the way in which a game of billiards constructs our reality. This led some of Hume’s contemporaries to get hung up on the implications of his philosophy for the natural sciences, but they were missing the point of his work. Hume is not concerned with the natural world, at least not beyond how it affects us. His is a sentimental physics, one whose fundamental laws define (and are defined by) a felt reality. He starts with “the actions of matter,” the world of billiard balls and falling apples, to explain how our impressions of them create a sensory map with the central coordinates of a second nature. If he can show us why we expect the physical world to look and act a certain way, Hume believes that he can apply these lessons to the world of human affairs, for the principles of association affect both worlds. The logic of one resembles that of the other, forming a continuous line between them. The conceit is not so much that

human experience is capacious enough to teach the wisdom of avoiding pinpricks and the pangs of a broken heart, but that it does so in almost exactly the same way.

The unifying idea is custom, what Hume would later call “the great guide of human life.”⁴⁶ It is this “principle alone,” he says, “which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past.”⁴⁷ Custom, as such, has very broad purchase. It includes any type of experience that, to the human eye, seems stable and routine. It applies to the rites of spring as much as the season’s return.

No doubt, Hume is being provocative, but not at the expense of philosophical consistency. He is merely trying to highlight his belief that the lessons of experience are expressed in feeling while also affirming that there is no significant difference between the way we learn from the shock of billiard balls and the cluck of human commerce. Both have customary motions of their own, movements which, over time, we come to understand. “[N]atural and moral evidence,” he says, are “deriv’d from the same principles.”⁴⁸ Whenever some type of experience has “the same constancy, and the same influence,” it endows us with a feeling of sentimental necessity, one that applies to human events in the same way, and to the same extent, as natural.⁴⁹ “I ask no more,” Hume says to those who long for grander metaphysical distinctions.⁵⁰ “What remains can only be a dispute of words.”⁵¹

Hume defends his claim with one of the most arresting passages in all of his work. It describes an anonymous man, penniless and unimportant, coming to grips with his fate after having been convicted of a capital crime:

A prisoner who has neither money nor interest, discovers the impossibility of

his escape, as well from the obstinacy of the gaoler, as the walls and bars with which he is surrounded; and, in all attempts for his freedom, chooses rather to work upon the stone and iron of the one, than upon the inflexible nature of the other. The same prisoner, when conducted to the scaffold, foresees his death as certainly from the constancy and fidelity of his guards, as from the operation of the axe or wheel. His mind runs along a certain train of ideas: The refusal of the soldiers to consent to his escape; the action of the executioner; the separation of the head and body; bleeding, convulsive motions, and death. Here is a connected chain of natural causes and voluntary actions; but the mind feels no difference between them in passing from one link to another: Nor is less certain of the future event than if it were connected with the objects present to the memory or senses, by a train of causes, cemented together by what we are pleased to call a physical necessity. The same experienced union has the same effect on the mind, whether the united objects be motives, volition, and actions; or figure and motion. We may change the name of things; but their nature and their operation on the understanding never change.⁵²

The nub of Hume's contention is that the prisoner knows well enough the customs of both the physical and human world that the iron bars of his cell seem as forbidding to him as the jailer's inflexible frown. Both express the grim necessity of his fate, that escape to him is hopeless and that he is best served spending the small balance of his time appealing not to the night watchmen, but to the warden of a world beyond.

For Hume, there is no mystery in how we learn the customs of the human world. They are "acquired by long life and a variety of business and company," a diverse set of experiences that, over time, tend to "instruct us in the principles of human nature, and regulate our future conduct."⁵³ These principles do not describe a world whose motions are fixed so much as predictable. Indeed, "were there no uniformity in human actions," it would be "impossible to collect any general observations concerning mankind."⁵⁴ Yet not only are we able to make such observations, they come by us naturally. Like Adam in the pool hall, we learn from experience what Hume calls the "moral causes" of human action, the

“circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons, and which render a peculiar set of manners habitual to us.”⁵⁵ We are the billiard balls, and the study we make of our movement underwrites the laws of a sentimental physics and, thus, the felt reality of our world. These laws don’t merely define how the world works, but how we feel it *must* work, providing a framework for the “same kind of reasoning [that] runs thro’ politics, war, commerce, oeconomy, and indeed mixes itself so entirely in human life, that ‘tis impossible to act or subsist a moment without having recourse to it.”⁵⁶

Empathy is the author of these laws. “No quality of human nature is more remarkable,” Hume said, “both in itself and in its consequences, than the propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.”⁵⁷ Among these remarkable consequences is the tendency of empathy to derive a sentimental physics. By its practice, we glean from other people the “moral evidence” by which we make sense of human actions. When we stand in their shoes, we not only have a better understanding of the effect we have on them, we extend our knowledge beyond the relative beauty of our own reflection. We learn that old ladies are more likely to have their groceries carried than burly young men and that burly young men are more likely to be chosen for a pick-up game than willing old ladies. We learn that the smiles of salesmen are not to be trusted and the frowns of children rarely endure. We learn that diffidence is to the strong as disappointment to the weak. We learn that the pains and joys of others are often a pale reflection of our own.

Going about our daily lives, Hume says, “nothing more nearly interests us than our own actions and those of others,” and thus “the greatest part of our reasonings is employ’d

in judgments concerning them.”⁵⁸ But empathy not only allows us to collect “moral evidence,” it spurs investigation. Like Smith, Hume believed that no one is “absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others” and that “fellow-feeling” is an obvious and undeniable “principle in human nature.”⁵⁹ Empathy, in turn, provides both a cause and effect of human action. We are drawn to others and want to understand them, but to do so, we learn early on that we must move from the mark of our own perspective. Every day, Hume says, we “meet with persons, who are in a situation different from us, and who could never converse with us, were we to remain constantly in that position and point of view, which is peculiar to ourselves.”⁶⁰ To communicate, we have to step toward them, but we find that they will also step toward us. Moved by empathy, we meet half way.

For Hume, this “intercourse of sentiments” creates “the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation” and “makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners.”⁶¹ The first process, we might say, is the creation of a shared sentimental physics, the second a conscious attempt by a community to articulate its laws. For Hume and Smith alike, by our interaction, we create a common sense of right and wrong, proper and improper, fair and unwarranted. For Smith, this leads to a kind of thick intuition about how we ought to conduct ourselves. As a moral matter, that intuition is embodied in what he famously called the “impartial spectator,” a kind of inner magistrate who evaluates our actions by standing apart from us and judging our behavior by the rules we apply to others, the articulated laws of a sentimental physics.⁶² The laws seem impartial by virtue of the fact that we hold ourselves to them as much as any one else but also because

they are derived not from personal prerogative, but from public interaction. This is another way of saying that, for Smith, the practice of empathy provides an impartial standpoint by which to evaluate the world of human affairs—impartial not because when we evaluate others (or even ourselves) we are indifferent to what we see, but because the evaluation we make is determined according to the common laws of custom and behavior. When somebody's transgresses these laws, when we cannot empathize with their behavior, the discord we feel is sensible not only because it pricks us, but because it reaffirms that the law being flouted has a kind of legitimacy that goes well beyond private whim.

For Hume, the resistance signaled by sensible discord is an even greater bar to empathy than the express limits of the imagination. Yes, we cannot empathize with those whose behavior or concerns are totally alien to us, for in such cases we have no experience to draw upon to even attempt to understand them, but Hume believed such cases were rare. “[N]ature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures,” he said, one that extends beyond physical appearance to the interior life such that “we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves.”⁶³ And yet, even if we all are compelled at one time or another by love, anger, compassion, pride or hate, when exactly we are compelled and on what terms will vary, not only from person to person, but across cultures and times.

Accordingly, the real problem of empathy lay in the accent, not the emotion. When the human world appears to move a certain way, when the exchanges, concerns, and habits of those around us all have a customary motion, one that seems somehow necessary, and therefore right, it is not easy to resist that force in favor of some other view. Indeed, said

Hume, “we cannot without a sensible violence survey them in any other way.”⁶⁴ To do so is not only to embrace sensible discord, it is to deny that the feeling betokens the moral sentiments of a higher power and the intention of a divine plan.

The Great Infidel was willing to deny the sentiments of unseen God, but he saw no reason to refuse the obvious motives of men.

David Hume Sentimental Physics

¹ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 77.

² Ibid.

³ Smith, Adam. “The History of Astronomy” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*. Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1982. 45.

⁴ Ibid., 45-6.

⁵ Pope, Alexander. “Couplet on Newton” in *Eighteenth Century English Literature*. Eds. Geoffrey Tillotson et al. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Janovich, Inc., 1969. 609.

⁶ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 104.

⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁹ Roger Cotes, “Cotes’ Preface to the Second Edition of the *Principia*” in *Newton’s Philosophy of Nature*. Ed. H.S. Thayer. New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1953. 133.

¹⁰ Pownall, Thomas, “A Letter from Governor Pownall to Adam Smith” in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*. Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1987. 337, 375.

¹¹ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 224.

¹² Ibid., 77.

¹³ Ibid., 184-5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 185.

¹⁵ Newton, Isaac. *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colors of Light, Fourth Edition*. London: William Innys, 1730. 381.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hume, David. *The History of England, Volume VI*. Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1983. 542.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Smith, “The History of Astronomy” in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, 45.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hume, David. “Hume’s *My Own Life*” in *The Life of David Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 612.

²² Smith, “To William Strahan, 9 Nov. 1776” in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*. 221.

²³ Hume, “Hume’s *My Own Life*” in *The Life of David Hume*, 612.

²⁴ Anonymous Author, History of the Works of the Learned (1739) as cited in *The Life of David Hume*. 122.

²⁵ Hume, David. “An Abstract of a Book Lately Published; Entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Wherein the Chief Argument of that Book is Farther Illustrated and Explained” in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 407

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 4.

²⁸ Hume, “Abstract” in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 407.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 409.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. [Emphasis added.]

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. [Emphasis Hume.]

³⁵ Ibid.

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- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 46.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Hume, “Abstract” in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 416
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 147.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 75.
- ⁴² Ibid. [Emphasis Hume.]
- ⁴³ Hume, “Abstract” in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 416-7. [Emphasis Hume.]
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 416.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 122
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 261.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Ibid., 261.
- ⁵³ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 151.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Hume, David. “Of National Characters” in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987. 198.
- ⁵⁶ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 260.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 206.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 101(n).
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 116.
- ⁶¹ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 384.
- ⁶² See the following selection from Part III, Chapter 1 of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

We either approve or disapprove of the conduct of another man, according as we feel that, when we bring his case home to ourselves, we either can or cannot entirely sympathize with the sentiments and motives which directed it. And, in the same manner, we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man, and view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station, we either can or cannot entirely enter into and sympathize with the sentiments and motives which influenced it. We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them, unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them. Whatever judgment we can form concerning them, accordingly, must always bear some secret reference, either to what are, or to what, upon a certain condition, would be, or to what, we imagine, ought to be the judgment of others. We endeavour to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the

approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it.

Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 108-9.

⁶³ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 206.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

Michel de Montaigne Unsystematic Empathy

Hume's infidelity never impressed him half as much as his friends. "I see not what bad consequences follow, in the present age, from the character of an infidel," he told one, "especially if a man's conduct be in other respects irreproachable."¹ The occasion was the 1748 publication of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume's sophomore effort as a philosopher. The work was largely an adaptation of the first two books of the *Treatise*, whose arguments he had strained and seasoned for popular consumption, yet it also included "Of Miracles," a stand-alone section Hume had refrained from publishing for nearly a decade at the advice of his cousin, the jurist and belletrist Henry Home.

Home was something of a mentor to Hume. He was fifteen years his senior and hailed from a distant and more distinguished wing of the family. The two men shared a love of literary fame (Hume called it "my ruling passion") but only one of them felt the need to change his name before making it.² That was David, who was the first in the family to trade away the traditional spelling of "Home," an act that must have seemed to Henry as very much in keeping with his cousin's demonstrated capacity for independence and irreverence. Still, this did not keep him from trying to convince the younger man that publishing "Of

Miracles” – a mischievous essay that argued the inconsistency of trying to prove God’s existence by events that, by definition, were beyond proof – would do nothing for his hopes of securing a university post. The counsel was sound, and the fact that Hume didn’t follow it helped to seal his academic fate, yet the prudence of the advice was not limited to one cousin’s career. Home never really understood the *Treatise*, but he didn’t need to appreciate its finer points to plainly understand that a close association with the Great Skeptic left his own principles in doubt. He was already an established advocate who would go on to become a member of the highest court in Scotland, earning the honorific Lord Kames along the way. He surely wanted to support his cousin, but not at the price of what remained of the family name.

Hume was not insensitive to such concerns. “Scotland suits my Fortune best,” he wrote Adam Smith, but “it mortifies me that I sometimes hurt my Friends.”³ The sentiment captures what, for many, was Hume’s outstanding quality, an abiding sense of decency. “He is a plain, obliging, kindhearted man,” James Boswell said. “Were it not for his infidel writings, everybody would love him.”⁴

That decency is reflected in the way Hume pursued his heresies. He may have been regarded as the Scottish Voltaire, but unlike the Gallic gremlin, who never tired of grinding the ax of unbelief in the face his enemies, Hume was more subdued. He didn’t shy away from the logical implications of his philosophy, but he never regarded them as a matter of urgent public concern. This was partly an exercise in discretion. It was enough that Hume had put himself on the other side of God at a time when doing so typically put one outside of society. He didn’t need to go waving a flag. Yet unlike Voltaire and other evangelists of

the French Enlightenment, he never felt the urgent need to do. Hume was not possessed of the narrow certainty of a convert. He didn't place his faith in reason, primarily because he never found a good reason for faith.

Reason, for Hume, served a limited if essential role. It checked our beliefs, those established and those received, by subjecting them to the shock test of experience. It was indispensable to good judgment, but it alone could not tell us how to spend our works and days. "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions," he famously said.⁵ It attended the felt necessities of experience much like a capable aide, organizing our tasks and clarifying our aims, but if we looked to it for marching orders, we were fundamentally mistaking its role.

This, for Hume, was the enduring lesson from his first foray into philosophy, when he was led by his own considerable powers of reason "into such dreary solitudes, and rough passages, as I have hitherto met."⁶ If skeptical philosophers begin by doubting the strong lessons of experience, it is often in the hopes of deriving a set of principles that stand beyond the fickle prerogatives of place, time, and human opinion. The effort, as Hume learned, is a fool's errand. "Abstruse thought and profound researches I prohibit," he said, channeling the wisdom of human nature, "and will severely punish, by the pensive melancholy which they introduce, by the endless uncertainty in which they involve you, and by the cold reception which your pretended discoveries will meet with, when communicated."⁷

Reason could lead us into a labyrinth of uncertainty, but for Hume, it could not bring us out the other side. Hence, his belief that reason both is and ought to be a slave to the

passions. They were the voice of nature, the feelings that ruled us, and no matter how far we had traveled down the dark corridors of logic, they were always calling us back to the reassuring comforts of the human world. “I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.”⁸

The relative impotence of reason in the face of human experience helps to explain why Hume’s infidelities never impressed him very much. No matter how carefully reasoned, they were still the cold conclusions of an overheated mind. They couldn’t change one’s behavior in any meaningful way, for they didn’t have the force. Their danger, the real danger of skeptical philosophy, lay not in the inquiry but the isolation. When Hume said, “Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man,” his warning was directed not at the search for truth, but at the manner of its pursuit. Human decency was not hard to come by, even for a skeptic, so long as one remained in society. But whenever he ventured out, he risked something far greater than the certainty he sought. He risked losing himself.

But what exactly does that mean—to lose oneself? For Hume and Smith, it meant losing the self one had found in society, a self decidedly shaped by empathy. “Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species,” Smith said, “he could no more think of his own character” than “of the beauty or deformity of his own face.”⁹ Yet, “[b]ring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. It is placed

in the countenance and behavior of those he lives with, which always mark when they enter into, and when they disapprove of his sentiments.”¹⁰

When we look into this mirror, we long to see something beautiful, to know that *we* are beautiful. That beauty is signaled in others by the flicker of their approval, a feeling brought home to us by empathy.¹¹ Both Hume and Smith believed that a desire for such approval was an irreducible fact of human nature. It spurred us not only to search out others, but to discover ways of interacting with them that were symbiotic in practice and spirit. Empathy’s role was that it compelled us to pay attention to those around us, to understand their concerns, and, thus, to be less selfishly inclined. This was the work of empathy individually, but it had the larger effect of narrowing differences in manners, morals, and taste within a community by creating a shared sentimental physics. Empathy did not so much bend one man toward another, it relieved us all of our individual bent while at the same time ensuring that, as a community, we were intertwined.

But what about a society that is radically fractured, one in which sensible discord is not the exception but the rule? This is the world Michel de Montaigne knew. Writing to the Provost of Paris, Antoine Duprat, in 1562, at the outset of the French Wars of Religion, nearly a decade before he would begin the essays that secured his fame, Montaigne describes the calamities that followed a skirmish between French Catholic and Huguenot forces in the Bordeaux region of southern France, not far from his ancestral home. Under the direction of a ruthless commander, Marshal Blaise de Monluc, the Catholics rout the Huguenots, sending the local people fleeing for their lives. The town of Casteljaloux surrenders, and its minister is put to death. The victors begin to pillage and soon converge on a local chateau, “a little

stronghold where there were two ensigns and a great number of people of the [Huguenot] religion.”¹² Before long, they force their way inside. Montaigne describes the horrors that ensue.

There every kind of cruelty and violence was practiced . . . without regard for quality, sex, or age. Monluc violated the daughter of the minister, who was killed with the others. I have the extreme sorrow to tell you that involved in this massacre was your relative, the wife of Gaspard Duprat, and two of her children. She was a noble woman, whom I have been in a position to see often when I went into those parts, and at whose house I was always assured of finding good hospitality. In fine, I say no more to you about it today, for this account gives me pain and sorrow.¹³

Such horrors speak for themselves, but consider the tangled sympathies underlying them. Montaigne is a French Catholic, writing to Duprat, another French Catholic, to recount the atrocities committed by third, Monluc, a man so intimate with Montaigne he would later share with him that his life’s great regret was that he never revealed to his dead son how much he had loved him.¹⁴ The mayhem Montaigne describes is committed in the name of Charles IX, the adolescent king to whom all three men owed their fealty, and in defense of a shared faith. Yet it entails executing an innocent Huguenot, a relative of Duprat and a woman whose hospitality Montaigne cherished and whose loss, senseless and violent, brings him exceeding grief. Still, that loss must be set against the background of a victory over Protestant insurrectionists, whose rebellion had terrorized Bordeaux, where Montaigne was a member of Parliament, and roiled the France countryside for the full term of his life. He was not only threatened by such violence, on a few occasions, he was nearly its victim.

“[The] worst of these wars,” Montaigne would later say, “is that the cards are so shuffled that your enemy is distinguished from yourself by no apparent mark either of

language or of bearing, and has been brought up in the same laws and customs and the same atmosphere, so that it is hard to avoid confusion and disorder.”¹⁵ Confusion and disorder characterized the times. Less than a century had passed since the nation of France had been knit from a loose collection of feudal cantons, yet the countryside remained a patchwork of customs, loyalties, and local dialects. As a people, the French had never known a strong sentimental physics, and in Montaigne’s time its development was constantly thwarted by a collection of religious zealots and minor Machiavellis who fomented the civil strife that pits neighbor against neighbor, splintering regions and towns along sectarian lines, dividing friends and families alike. Far from the intimate world Adam Smith knew, where broad commonalities cleared the way for instinctive empathy, Montaigne faced a world of ready difference and constant flux. One learned to take nothing for granted about the man passing him in the street or even sitting across from him at the dinner table.

For most people, the experience of daily uncertainty breeds a general distrust about the human world and urges a fast retreat into whatever seems most familiar. Thankfully for us, Montaigne was not most people. On the central crossbeam of the tower room where he wrote his *Essays* he had inscribed an epigram from Terence as his own personal credo: *Homo sum, humani a me nil alienum puto*. I am man, I consider nothing human foreign to me. Given the times, it was a brave choice. Not only did it require Montaigne to venture forth into an uncertain world, it obliged him to poke about the attic of sensibility and shine a light through the cellars of conduct, to become a connoisseur of experience and, in so doing, to make himself a test case for such exploration. If one tried to take on all human experience with an aim, not to judge, but to understand, could he derive a sentimental physics so capable and

protean? Could our capacity for empathy be stretched to meet the demands of an ever changing and uncertain world? Or was one doomed to be driven back, straight into familiar arms?

On its face, becoming a connoisseur of experience might seem like a straightforward proposition. “[For] this apprenticeship,” Montaigne says, “everything that comes to our eyes is book enough: a page’s prank, a servant’s blunder, a remark at table, are so many new materials.”¹⁶ One must “sound the capacity of each man; a cowherd, a mason, a passer-by; he must put everything to use, and borrow from each man according to his wares, for everything is useful in a household; even the stupidity and weakness of others.”¹⁷ Foreign travel is especially valuable, not to make a collection of trivialities like “the measurements of the Santa Rotonda, or of the richness of Signora Livia’s drawers,” but to “bring back knowledge of the characters and ways of those nations, and to rub and polish our brains by contact with those of others.”¹⁸

These prescriptions are part of longer essay, “Of the Education of Children,” and their intended patient is no minor detail, for as far as Montaigne is concerned, they would be lost on most adults. His own countrymen, he tartly observes, “think they are out of their element when they are out of the village.” They are “besotted with that stupid disposition to shy away from ways contrary to their own,” and if they do go abroad, they “travel covered and wrapped in a taciturn and incommunicative prudence, defending themselves from the contagion of an unknown atmosphere.” They “stick to their ways,” he says, preferring the company of familiars, and if they bother to look around (an exceptional moment, indeed) they “condemn all barbarous customs that they see.”¹⁹

Children, of course, have no ways to stick to. They can be taught an unusually wide set of ways or to be set in none at all. It is not so simple for their parents, who tend to be practiced in what Montaigne calls the “common vice” of human beings “to fix their aim and limit by the way to which they were born.”²⁰

The aim, we might say, is concrete, what Montaigne calls “the example and patterns of the opinions and customs we live in” and the ways in which they shape our world.²¹ The limit is psychological, though it is varnished with the gloss of metaphysics. The way we live is not just the way we live, it is the way we *must* live, not because we are creatures of habit (though this quickens the limit and gives it force) but because our way has a transcendent significance. It is *the* way to live, or so we assume whenever we look at the world most familiar to us.²² “*There* is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect accomplished manners in all things.”²³

Consequently, it is not enough for us merely to aim at a wider range of experience, we must learn to resist the instinct to turn up our noses at the unfamiliar, to extend our limit into the foreign and the new. For Montaigne, this comes about by a process of demystifying both the familiar and the unfamiliar, stripping the former of its metaphysical significance and the latter of its fearsome appearance. “Habituation puts to sleep the eye of our judgment,” he warns, and we have to be patient and purposeful in rousing it. Montaigne does this for himself in several ways. He scours the Ancients for fantastic practices, solicits the extraordinary from accounts of the New World, and travels to foreign lands, pressing himself upon rich and poor alike and letting himself be “served everywhere in the mode of each country, no matter what difficulty this caused him.”²⁴

The aim of these efforts is suggested in “Of Ancient Customs.” In it, Montaigne concedes that there is no one “so clever” that custom fails to “insensibly dazzle both his inward and outward eyes.”²⁵ The dazzle is the metaphysical quality we attribute to custom, an invisible force that places a powerful psychological limit on how we view the world and our place and purpose in it. Montaigne wants to make his readers aware of that dazzle and, more so, the limits it imposes. Ultimately, he wants to strip it clean away. To do so, he endeavors to “pile up here some ancient fashions . . . some like ours, some different, to the end that we may strengthen and enlighten our judgment by reflecting upon the continual variation of things.”²⁶ Piling up examples, whether they be customs, opinions, or precepts, is an exercise Montaigne engaged in throughout his life, during his travels, his conversations, and especially in his reading, and he recreates his experience for the reader over the course of the *Essays*. The sheer weight of example is at first impressive, then breathtaking, and finally ponderous. This is by design. Montaigne is trying to liberate us from the tyranny of custom, and he can only do so by winning a war of attrition. By showing us that every place and every time has its own set of customs and that these customs continue to change and evolve, he aims not to remove the metaphysical dazzle from any single custom, but to erase it from the category, altogether.

If Montaigne is successful, if his readers are less inclined to “fix their aim and limit by the way to which they were born,” they should find the familiar about their world less remarkable, and the unfamiliar less frightening.²⁷ “Barbarians,” Montaigne says, “are no more marvelous to us than we are to them, nor for better cause.” But we will arrive at this

conclusion only if we place their customs in one hand, ours in another, and “compare them sanely.”²⁸

Sanity here is juxtaposed with presumption, a signal vice for Montaigne, as it perverts our judgments about the world, leading us to overvalue what is familiar, and undervalue the rest. The presumptuous put themselves, their customs, and most importantly their beliefs at the center of a moral universe. Not only are the orbits of all other customs established by this fixed center, their worth is inversely proportional to their distance from it. The closer their orbits, the more credible their claims. The farther away, the more readily we can dismiss them.

Such views are the height of folly for Montaigne. In contrast to the Ptolemaic system of presumption, he offers a pointillist canvas. The man who goes looking for himself there finds “not merely himself, but a whole kingdom, as a dot with a very fine brush.” If he lets his eyes pass from one end to the other, seeing “many humors, sects, judgments, opinions, laws, and customs” – those of his own day and all those that have come before – “that man alone estimates things according to their true proportions.” He recognizes that his own world is no more than a dot on the canvas of humanity, and a single dot will never dazzle. Stand back, it can’t even be seen.²⁹

Such a perspective is humbling. Not only does our world lose the metaphysical luster that lends its customs a more permanent meaning, but when we look at them again in the dull light of the everyday, we see the cracked surface of the contingent, the fine lines of inconsistency, the work of human hands. Yet such modesty is necessary, for as we have seen, turning our face to the broader world of human experience only reveals our own

shortcomings if we look down on everything we see. Such a gaze predetermines what it finds, for it demands the world to appear in certain, fixed ways.

To look on the broader world with the innocence of a child, with eager curiosity and without any metaphysical precondition, is an achievement unto itself, at least for anyone who has achieved this gaze at the price of great presumption. And yet, for Montaigne, this second childhood only redeems us from the “common vice” of human interaction, to fix our “aim and limit” by the ways to which we are born. It only prepares us to be a connoisseur of experience, it does not make us one as well.

That is second process, one outlined in Montaigne’s advice on education and embodied in the progress of his own life and work. Montaigne finished the second of his three books of essays in 1580 which included the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” a plodding giant nearly five times as long as any other essay he had written. In it, Montaigne lays waste to the Ptolemaic system of presumption by piling up an astonishing number of customs, tenants, and practices, most at odds with each other, all enameled with a fixed metaphysics. “Finally,” he concludes, standing back from this staggering heap,

there is no existence that is constant, either of our being or of that of objects. And we, and our judgment, and all mortal things go on flowing and rolling unceasingly. Thus nothing certain can be established about one thing by another, both the judging and the judged being in continual change and motion.³⁰

The passage reads like an obituary for the Ptolemaic system of presumption and the worldview it commands, yet it also announces the sympathetic openness of a second childhood, one that must be arrested before another fall from grace.

For Montaigne, this involved a seventeen month tour after completing Book Two of the *Essays*, a sojourn that took him to Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and Italy, ending only when he was abruptly called home, having been named Mayor of Bordeaux, a position he neither sought nor desired. As his *Travel Journal* attests, while abroad, Montaigne pursued the eccentricities of every foreign land with relish and, at times, reckless gusto. Boasting that he has “no plan but to travel in unknown places,” at every stop along his way, he sought out the town theologian to learn about local beliefs, indulged every neighborhood custom, whether dancing, dining, or attending mass, and engaged people of every age and background to supply his insatiable need to fill out the varieties of human experience.³¹

There is “no better school,” Montaigne writes on his returns, than to “constantly” set before the mind “the diversity of so many other lives, ideas, and customs, and to make it taste such a perpetual variety of forms.”³² Reading and study can support this enterprise, but they cannot replace it. They may strip the metaphysical sheen from familiar practices, but only a face-to-face encounter with the vagaries and varieties of custom and conduct can prepare us to live in and even thrive in an unpredictable world.

The reason for this, as Hume well appreciated, is the decisive role that habit plays in shaping our experience and grading the contours of understanding. We might hope that a candid appraisal of an inconstant world would be teacher enough to contend with the foreign and unfamiliar, but Montaigne calls this tantamount to wishing that dancers “could teach us capers just by performing them.” The mind will not be trained “without setting it in motion,” and once in motion, it tends to stay its course.³³ Habit takes over, and habit is the momentum of the mind, providing it direction and force.

Yet, like the man who falls asleep in the station and wakes on a speeding train, most of us aren't aware of this motion until it's already underway. In fact, we don't even know we've purchased a ticket. Habit is sneaky that way. It tends to choose us, until we can't help choosing it. Habit is "a violent and treacherous schoolmistress," Montaigne observes, whose pernicious design first goes unnoticed by her students. "She establishes in us, little by little, stealthily, the foothold of her authority, but having by this mild and humble beginning settled and planted it with the help of time, she soon uncovers to us a furious and tyrannical face against which we no longer have the liberty of even raising our eyes."³⁴

Thus, a child's first lessons are vital for they will ultimately "regulate his behavior and his sense."³⁵ Montaigne's advice to the tutor is firm and telling: He should waste no time in taking the young boy abroad. While "the body is still supple," he must be "bent to all fashions and customs" and "made fit for all nations and companies, even for "dissoluteness and excess," provided "his appetite and will can be kept in check."³⁶ The aim is to get the better of habit by keeping any single set from calcifying. Montaigne says that habit can shape us into "whatever form it pleases," but also and more importantly "for change and variation, which is the noblest and most useful of its teachings."³⁷ This is a remarkable claim on behalf of the pliancy of the soul, to use a loving and careless term Montaigne favored. It is enough to say, as he does early in the *Essays*, that the "soul may be shaped into all varieties or forms," but to go further and declare that it may be shaped for variety itself is to say that form may be converted into function, that the goal of education is less to create a capacious soul than one that is fundamentally adaptable.³⁸

Yet this is precisely the conclusion Montaigne comes to when he reflects on his own life and broods on the *rigor mortis* of habit. He considers himself lucky to have been educated to “be flexible and not very stubborn,” to turn “with very little effort” from one tendency “and easily slip into the opposite.”³⁹ He credits his father for having imparted to him this way of receiving the broader world—a father who had his son nursed and early-raised among the peasants, “training me to the humblest and commonest way of life,” who then delivered him into the hands of tutors who spared him the rod and made Latin his native tongue, a father who proclaimed the Catholic faith but lived a life of tolerance, against the strong tendency of his own time, welcoming dissenters to his table even when they were kin.⁴⁰

Montaigne’s education was not without its shortcomings – “I have hardly been out of sight of my weathervanes,” he says – but it made him keenly aware of human differences, whether across the annals of history or just on the other side of the street.⁴¹ This awareness endeared him to skepticism in the face of universal claims and predisposed him to those undertakings that would shape the soul not for any single form, but for “change and variation.” These were great advantages, Montaigne believed, even if he knew that most of his own countrymen would never see them as such. They were content with fixing their eyes by the “aim and limit” to which they were born. They never felt the need to look beyond.

Some would, however, and Montaigne realized that it wasn’t enough to unfix their eyes. A second childhood might be achieved by an honest reckoning with the contrary ways of the world, but like newly-christened nonbelievers who still bow at church bells, old habits remain, the mortmain of a mummified metaphysics. Still Montaigne had great faith that the

heavy wheels of habit can be slowed, stopped, and ultimately turned in our favor. “To compose our character is our duty,” he says in “Of Experience,” the final essay he wrote and the closest he would ever come to a personal manifesto, excepting, of course, the essays as a whole.⁴² Habit might stamp the coin of character with a face we did not choose, but character could always be reminted, provided the heat was strong enough, the die carefully retooled.

Duty is a strong word, particularly for someone like Montaigne, who was always more interested in describing the contours of human experience than dictating their proper scope, yet in his final years, the clarity of closing life convinced him that the essential human duty was to shape oneself to receive “the harmony of the world”. Not a familiar melody from birth, but the sound of “different tones” and “contrary things” – “sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud.” We had to train ourselves “to use them together and blend them” in order to manage our lives and make sense of a moving world.⁴³

The connoisseur of experience thus becomes a conductor, one who calls upon his capacity for careful discrimination to pick apart and assort the chords of human experience, training his ear to each, lest a cacophony overwhelm him. This requires watching others closely, individually, taking them on terms they reveal to us, not those we expect of them. “I am as ready as you please to acquit another man from sharing my conditions and principles,” says Montaigne. “I consider him simply in himself, without relations to others; I mold my own model.”⁴⁴

Molding an individual model – this is a second route to empathic connection, one that leads us in the opposite direction from Hume and Smith. No longer is another’s

experience detoured through an impartial spectator who raises and lowers the gates of empathy according to the precepts of propriety, a local code that poses as “the ruling pattern of nature” to which all other forms stand “counterfeit and artificial.”⁴⁵ By unfixing the aim and limit to which we are born, bending the habits of our mind beyond habituation, we plow under these gates, see the statute book retired. We send the sentry home. Now we consider the experience of another directly, “without relation to others,” a practiced gaze that doesn’t begin by assorting people into the familiar and the unfamiliar, never bothering to look closely at either one. “I have a singular desire that we should each be judged in ourselves apart,” Montaigne says, “and that I may not be measured in conformity with the common patterns.”⁴⁶ We should not only take a man as he is, but meet him where he stands—this is where unsystematic empathy begins.

“I put myself in his place,” Montaigne says of this approach. “I try to fit my mind to his bias.”⁴⁷ The approach is both humble and bold. Humble for we must resist demanding of others what we ask of ourselves, no matter how good the reason. Bold for we must stare through the eyes of another with no more than a willingness to see what he sees. For a moment, his “bias” becomes our own, whether we would hold it in our hearts or cast it far away.

It is a remarkable vision that befits a rich and fluctuating world. The empathy implicated is not that of instinct but practice, not one we count upon to reaffirm the ways of a familiar world, but to understand those of an anonymous, even antagonistic one. This was the world Montaigne knew, and he believed it the one we all would likely know. Intimate worlds, even where they came to pass, tended to be narrow refuges fortified against

outsiders. At best, they were maintained by indifference to the world beyond, more likely they were bulwarked by exclusion and brutality. Most importantly, their walls could never hold.

Accordingly, an unsystematic empathy commended itself not for moral reasons – though it would doubtless appeal to anyone who would rather walk to understanding than rush to arms – so much as for practical ones. “[A]ll mortal things go on flowing and rolling unceasingly,” Montaigne said, and we could not hope to hold out against this tide.⁴⁸ We could either open our hearts and search for higher ground, or we could shut eyes shut, listen to the rising waters, and wait for them to carry us away.

Michel de Montaigne Unsystematic Empathy

¹ Hume, David. "Letter to James Oswald" in Mossner, E.C. *The Life of David Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001., 207.

² Hume, "My Own Life" in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, xl.

³ Hume, "36. From DAVID HUME" in *Correspondence of Adam Smith*, 44.

⁴ Boswell, James. Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle, VIII, eds. G. Scott and F. A. Pottle. [Privately Printed] New York 1928-1934. 227. As quoted in Mossner, E. C. *The Life of David Hume*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 587.

⁵ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 266.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 110.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Or, as Shakespeare had described it in *Troilus and Cressida*:

The beauty that is borne here in the face
The bearer knows not, but commends itself
To others' eyes; nor doth the eye itself—
That most pure spirit of sense—behold itself,
Not going from itself; but eye to eye opposed
Salutes each other with each other's form;
For speculation turns not to itself
Till it hath travell'd, and is mirror'd there
Where it may see itself. (Act 3, Scene 3, Lines 103-11)

Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida (The New Cambridge Shakespeare)*. Ed. Anthony B. Dawson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 159-160.

¹² Montaigne, Michel de. "Letter to Antoine Duprat (August 24, 1562?)" in *The Complete Works*. Trans. Donald Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 1275.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1275-6.

¹⁴ See "Of the affection of fathers for the children," p. 348.

¹⁵ Montaigne, Michel de. "Of conscience" in *The Complete Works*. Trans. Donald Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 321.

¹⁶ Montaigne, "Of the education of children" in *The Complete Works*, 139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁹ Montaigne. "Of vanity" in *The Complete Works*. 916.

²⁰ Montaigne, "Of ancient customs" in *The Complete Works*. 261-2.

²¹ Montaigne, "Of cannibals" in *The Complete Works*. 185.

²² The "common notions that we find in credit around us and infused into our soul by our fathers' seed, these seem to be the universal and natural ones. Whence it comes to pass that what is off hinges of custom, people believe to be off the hinges of reason." (Montaigne, "Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law," in *The Collected Works* 100.)

²³ Montaigne, "Of cannibals" in *The Complete Works*. 185. [Emphasis translator's.]

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- ²⁴ Secretary to Michel de Montaigne. *Travel Journal* in *The Complete Works*. Trans. Donald Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. 1077.
- ²⁵ Montaigne, “Of ancient customs” in *The Complete Works*. 262.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Montaigne, “Of ancient customs” in *The Complete Works*. 261-2.
- ²⁸ Montaigne, “Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law” in *The Complete Works*, 96.
- ²⁹ Montaigne, “Of the education of children” in *The Complete Works*, 141.
- ³⁰ Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond” in *The Complete Works*, 533.
- ³¹ Secretary to Michel de Montaigne, *Travel Journal* in *The Complete Works*, 1115.
- ³² Montaigne, “Of vanity” in *The Complete Works*, 904.
- ³³ Montaigne, “Of the education of children” in *The Complete Works*, 136.
- ³⁴ Montaigne, “Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law” in *The Complete Works*, 904.
- ³⁵ Montaigne, “Of the education of children” in *The Complete Works*, 142.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 150.
- ³⁷ Montaigne, “Of experience” in *The Complete Works*, 1011.
- ³⁸ Montaigne, “That the taste of good and evil depends in large part on the opinion we have of them,” in *The Complete Works*, 46.
- ³⁹ Montaigne, “Of experience” in *The Complete Works*, 1011.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 1028.
- ⁴¹ Montaigne, “Of vanity” in *The Complete Works*, 916.
- ⁴² Montaigne, “Of experience” in *The Complete Works*, 1036-37.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 1018.
- ⁴⁴ Montaigne, “Of Cato the Younger” in *The Complete Works*, 205.
- ⁴⁵ Montaigne, “The story of Spurina” in *The Complete Works*, 665.
- ⁴⁶ Montaigne, “Of Cato the Younger” in *The Complete Works*, 205.
- ⁴⁷ Montaigne, “Of solitude” in *The Complete Works*, 217.
- ⁴⁸ Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond” in *The Complete Works*, 533.

William Shakespeare Selfless Empathy

One can indulge the whims and customs of others without embracing them. The ethic is one of accommodation, not conversion. It aims to understand the lives of others, not inhabit them. Certainly, that effort may compel us to enter the lodgings of other minds. But we are guests, not tenants. We do not stay long, and we certainly don't try to pass off the furnishings as our own. We remain who we are. Like reeds in the wind, we bend—we are not blown away.

The work of the *Essays* saw Montaigne bend. He admired the man with a pliant soul, “well off wherever fortune might take it, which could chat with a neighbor about his building, his hunting, and his lawsuit, and keep up an enjoyable conversation with a carpenter and a gardener.”¹ This is the essence of Montaigne: The agreeable man, always looking and listening and trying to understand, so attuned to the lives of others that their trials too easily become his. “I catch the disease that I study,” he says, “and lodge it in me.”²

Yet if Montaigne put himself upon the world to gain a sense of the unspeakable varieties of human experience, he never presented himself as anything other than the simple man he was, nor did he exchange the customs that were his for those discovered him. He

was always Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, occasional civil servant, quiet Catholic, lord of a small manor in Bordeaux, a man who reveled in the ancients and regretted the limited compass of his travel, who spent much of his final years in solitude, laboring away in his tower library over the strange short works that would see people speak his name with affection, reverence, and occasionally awe. His inquiries were made to understand himself and the larger world around him, not to change his place in that world or to become some other man altogether.

“I hold to the simple way of old days,” Montaigne told his wife in the only letter we have between them.³ He was not averse to change – that change is the way of the world is the ultimate lesson of the *Essays* – but violent change, the quick, crude work of human hands, unnerved him. For this reason he feared the Reformists, not so much because they affronted his Catholic faith, which was stable if undemanding, but because they threatened to unravel the only way of life most people knew. Their “innovation has been costing this poor state so dear up to now,” he told his wife, “(and yet I do not know if the bidding will not go still higher), that in every way and every place I give it up. You and me, my wife, let us live in the old French way”⁴

Montaigne’s conservatism is striking to many readers, who expect the life he led to be as bold, irreverent, and unpredictable as his written work. Not so. For the man who saw custom as no more than the garnish of a particular time and place, he was suspect nonetheless of anyone took the trouble to exchange his father’s rosemary for a sprig of thyme. It “seems to me that all peculiar and out-of-the-way fashions come rather from folly and ambitious affectation than from true reason,” he declared.⁵ Still, the fripperies of foolish

affectation did not bother Montaigne so much. Such displays gave one good excuse to roll his eyes, but not to bolt the door and hide under his bed. It was a sterner set of opinions, those that cried havoc throughout the countryside during the French Wars of Religion, that steeled the spine of Montaigne's conservatism. He did allow for freedom of conscience (in the parish of our minds, we can practice whatever rites we choose), "but the rest—our actions, our work, our fortunes, and our very life—we must lend and abandon to [society's] service and to the common opinion" of men.⁶

Of course, Montaigne never believed that his own ways were superior to all others. His conservatism is not so much an idolatry of the given as a fear of the unforeseen. In the rigidly hierarchical world he knew, there was room enough for only one set of ways, a single sentimental physics, and the appearance of another did not invite accommodation, it augured upheaval and bloodshed. Change announced itself with sword and buckler, and it always met skirmishers at the edge of town.

Though he regretted them, Montaigne never challenged these tendencies in human conduct except to transcend them in his own life and work. He accepted them in others and in the world around him, favoring the familiar failures of well-worn ways to the innovations that risked calamity on the promise of a new and better life. It "takes a lot of self-love and presumption to have such esteem for one's own opinions, that to establish them one must overthrow the public peace and introduce so many inevitable evils, and such a horrible corruption of morals, as civil wars and political changes bring."⁷ The Reformist might respond that a little bit of blood was a small price to pay for salvation, especially for that of a nation, but Montaigne knew that we could no more look into the soul of another than we

could divine the mind of God. All we could know is the flesh. And the flesh is always conservative. Achingly so.

Shakespeare knew Montaigne more or less the way we know him. A copy of the *Essays* fell into his hands in the first years of the 17th century, only a decade after Montaigne's death, when the younger man was not yet 40. Serviceable in his French if not necessarily fluent, Shakespeare was saved the trouble of deciphering the labyrinthine sentences and Gascon patois by John Florio, a gifted linguist who shared a patron with the playwright in the third Earl of Southampton and gave the English speaking world a formidable first translation of the *Essays*. Shakespeare did not leave to posterity his own copy, so we cannot know all of the insights that saw him reach for his quill to scratch something in the margins, but scholars have identified at least two passages that seem to have been smuggled into the later plays. In *King Lear*, Edmund's forged letter on "the oppression of aged tyranny" appears to be inspired by a similar passage from "Of the Affection of Fathers to their Children," while, more famously, in *The Tempest*, an account of natives in the New World from "Of Cannibals" is translated into the day-dreams of a would-be colonial master, the king's counselor Gonzalo, as he surveys the island on which the hapless Neapolitans have been shipwrecked.⁸

Influence so immediate and direct is certainly enticing, but it shouldn't overwhelm a plainer kinship. For when Hamlet unpeels his onion of existential conundrums or Lear reflects on the frailty of fortune or Prospero intimates the insubstantial pageant of human experience, the echo of Montaigne, in Shakespeare, is most clear and moving.

Still, there is one way in which the two men were different—quite different, in fact. William Shakespeare was never content with the world he was born into, and far from accepting its limits, he strove to transcend them. In his early twenties, he departed Stratford-upon-Avon, the little burgh that had been home to his youth and still included his wife and as many as three small children, and set out for London, then the third largest city in Europe, home to nearly 200,000 souls. Here was a place where an enterprising young man could endeavor to lose himself promptly in order to find himself again, a new man altogether. Such a man was William Shakespeare. He shed the old world he knew, trading some anonymous vocation (a teacher perhaps, or a glover, like his father) to become first a player and finally the greatest playwright the world has ever known.

How did he initially fare? Late in the summer of 1592, no more than six or seven years after the young actor had arrived in London, Robert Greene, a literary wag best known for a handful of long forgotten plays and a series of pamphlets celebrating the relative virtues of the honest conman, took some time out from dying of dropsy to decry the presumption of barely educated players trying their hands at blank verse (the province of university men like Greene) and especially one whose *Henriad* had recently electrified the stage. “Yes, trust them not,” he warned his fellow playwrights

for there is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his “Tiger’s heart wrapt in a player’s hide” supposes he is as well able to bombast out blank verse as the best of you; and being an absolute *Johannes factotum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.⁹

Johannes factotum. A Johnny do all, Jack of all trades. This was the impression Shakespeare initially made, at least on Greene, whose bitter attack swells with envy and disdain for the

rustic arriviste. But who exactly was this upstart crow, who swooped in from out of nowhere, plucked the stylistic feathers of learned men, and sailed away, phoenix-like, to dramatic heights unseen?

That is a good question. Good luck answering it, for unlike Montaigne, whose *Essays* amount to a series self-portraits that aim to examine the man from every angle no matter how unflattering the view, we know next to nothing about Shakespeare. There are scattered details – that his wedding was hurried and reeked of insistence, that he was survived by two daughters but not one son, that he was as deft at waging lawsuits as he was in writing plays – but they are few and insufficient. Like gold coins, they have been passed around for generations, their faces rubbed free of certain denomination. We can look upon their smooth metallic surface and find whatever value we like.¹⁰

Indeed, it is as if Shakespeare arrived in London in the mid-1580s and disappeared from view, dissolving like a salt tablet in that black beaker of humanity, everywhere and nowhere, absorbing a world that absorbed him. We lose Will Shake-scene, the country rough, and gain back William Shakespeare, the Bard, a man whose voice is never heard so clearly as when it is heard in the mouth of others—Iago, Rosalind, Falstaff, Macbeth. This is how we know him, how Shakespeare’s admirers have always known him, at least since that careful hand, mortal and miraculous, finally laid its pen to rest.

It is left to the living, then, to make sense of the man and measure his achievement, and by any estimate, Shakespeare has done pretty well, even if, relative to the literary devotionals typically practiced in his name, he got off to an uneven start. Ben Jonson, a

fellow actor and playwright and the only truly great poet to know him well, set the stage for Shakespeare's reception. Yes, he adored his friend—"I loved the man, and do honor his memory, on this side of idolatry, as much as any"—but that did not keep him from acidly appraising his shortcomings.¹¹ Shakespeare was acclaimed for never blotting out a line ("My answer hath been, would he had blotted out a thousand."); Shakespeare was the greatest wit of the English stage ("His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been so too.");¹² Shakespeare was a native genius ("Shakespeare wanted art.")¹³

The last criticism in particular, that Shakespeare was undoubtedly a genius but a crude and untutored one, took root and grew for over a century after Shakespeare's death, never threatening to destroy his reputation, but like a benign tumor, marring and disfiguring his name. When in the early 18th century the third Earl of Shaftesbury praised Shakespeare's playwriting, notwithstanding "his natural rudeness, his unpolished style, his antiquated phrase and wit, his want of method and coherence, and his deficiency in almost all the graces and ornaments of this kind writing,"¹⁴ he was merely giving more restrained expression to Voltaire's later criticism that Shakespeare, though a "natural and sublime" genius, "had not so much as a single Spark of good Taste, or knew one Rule of Drama."¹⁵

Some of this criticism can be dismissed as mere adherence to Aristotelian formalisms. We cannot know whether Shakespeare read the *Poetics*, but we can be sure he didn't bother consulting it when he sat down to write his plays. If scenes refused to stay put and zigzagged from shore to shore, if instead of hours, a tangled plot required weeks or even years to unwind, if the grave urgency of a late act were broken by mordant jibes, then this is simply what *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Hamlet* required. Yet the accusation of

theatrical barbarism—“the Ruin of the *English Stage*” is how Voltaire famously described his influence—did not merely extend to Shakespeare’s stylistic and structural innovations (some of which were borrowed from Kit Marlowe anyway).¹⁶ They involved a deeper and more determined concern about the relationship between dramatic works and the impressionable public they entertained.

The problem (for that is precisely how it appeared) boasted its own ambassadors during Shakespeare’s day, some from the Church of England, others from the Royal Court, but the most elegant among them was Sir Philip Sidney, whose *Apology for Poetry* attempted to vindicate the poet’s essential role as an maestro of public morality. Contrary to the prelates and politicians who saw little more in poetry than the spark of vice or spur to insurrection, the poet, said Sidney, “doth not only show the way” to good Christian behavior, “but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it.”¹⁷ His purpose, he said, is not “to tell you what is, or is not” but to create an imagined world, in print or on stage, that demonstrates an ideal to the audience, showing them in artful but unequivocal terms “what should or should not be.”¹⁸

Sidney by no means thought that all self-proclaimed poets conformed to his definition. His aim was not descriptive so much as prescriptive (and proscriptive), drawing a bright line between the laurel-crowned poets who ennobled the public and the scurrilous hacks who sugared vice with wanton words. Celebrating the former, Alexander Pope would later write:

To wake the soul by tender strokes of art,
To raise the genius, and to mend the heart;
To make mankind, in conscious virtue bold,

Live o'er each scene, and be what they behold—
For this the Muse first trod the stage,¹⁹

The occasion was the publication of Joseph Addison's *Cato*, a play that Voltaire lauded for being "infus'd [with] a Spirit of Elegance thro' every Part of it," going so far as to declare the title role to be "the greatest Character that was ever brought upon any Stage," adding pointedly, "but then the rest of them don't correspond to the Dignity of it."²⁰ By the time of Voltaire's writing, the early 18th century, the rhetoric of refinement—dignity, elegance, delicacy—had begun to replace the moralistic idiom of Sidney's (and Shakespeare's) world. The question was less one of vice and virtue than of good taste and bad, but the underlying concern was essentially the same. All agreed with Pope that the audience would "be what they behold," and thus plays of good taste needed to present a world without serious moral complication, where heroes were heroes and villains were villains and the actions of each lived up to their billing. The dramatic arc of such works had to reflect and indeed reinforce the sentimental physics of a people; they should not confuse, and certainly they should never subvert them.

As the 18th-century aesthetician Alexander Gerard would describe the key belief supporting this view, "taste and affection are effects of the same cause, streams issuing from the same fountain."²¹ That fountain was sympathy, and the critic and philosopher alike had every reason to keep it free from taint. It was thus that David Hume was more ready to excuse Shakespeare's "total ignorance of all theatrical art and conduct" than "that want of taste which often prevails in his productions."²² The first served merely to distract the audience, the second to contaminate its sympathy. Hume called it "a real deformity" when

“vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper character of blame and disapprobation.”²³ “I cannot,” he proclaimed, “nor is it proper that I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I can never relish this composition.”²⁴

Hume’s inflexibility is surprising for one who was roundly accused of moral and philosophical libertinism. Indeed, he seems to provide critical support for what amounts to a tyranny of taste. Still, unlike the Master of the Revels whose censor’s pen ensured that Shakespeare’s work was proper meat for the masses or the Puritan fathers who later shuttered the English stage altogether, Hume’s was a self-inflicted tyranny. For him as well as for Adam Smith, honing our sympathy was a matter of closely observing the shared contours of approval and disapproval and strengthening our awareness of the sentimental physics that shaped our social worlds. The “polite arts,” as Hume tellingly described them, played a powerful role in this process, for insofar as they highlighted and accented these contours and dramatized the first principles of a second physics, they could teach us, in Sydney’s words, “what should or should not be.”²⁵ Accordingly, those with cultivated taste were capable of judging “compositions of genius” as well as “juster notions of life,” for the two went hand-in-hand with sympathy at either side.²⁶ Both, however, were very strictly defined. Smith’s impartial spectator, that disembodiment of ideal sympathy who acted as the final arbiter of human conduct, also wore a critic’s cape, and he was no less severe in matters of taste than in moral opinions. There was good taste and bad, right and wrong conduct, and while one did shade into the other, the poles at either end were fixed, and a well-honed

sympathy not only trained a man to distinguish the finer points between them, it disposed him not to step away from the ideal mark.

Hume captures this studied disinterest when he says that one who “has well digested his knowledge both of books and men, has little enjoyment but in the company of a few select companions.”²⁷ His sense of propriety is so strong that he “feels too sensibly, how much all the rest of mankind fall short of the notions which he has entertained.”²⁸ He has little interest in such men and no inclination to their fraternity.

Clearly, this is a far cry from the spirit of Montaigne, who eagerly solicits the fullest panoply of sentiment and experience to create a sensibility so pliant it is prepared to receive, understand, and even celebrate every strange act in the human circus. Against this cultivation of an unsystematic empathy, Hume advances a carefully circumscribed and highly inflexible sensibility that prizes deep engagement and delicate appreciation of a small and insular social world. Such a man may have a modest library and few friends, but he knows them both chapter and verse.

Accordingly, the barbarism of Shakespeare’s plays was most apparent not in the foreign sensibilities of its characters but in their obscene petulance. Hume granted that Shakespeare “frequently hits” on a “striking peculiarity of sentiment” in his characters but, he said, “a reasonable propriety of thought he cannot for any time uphold,” leaving his characters like his genius, “disproportioned and misshapen.”²⁹ “The shining Monsters of *Shakespear*” is how Voltaire described them, chief among them Hamlet, a character he worked tirelessly to detest.³⁰ Compared with the elegant, eponymous hero of *Cato*, Shakespeare’s darkly imagined agonist, and the verbal madhouse he keeps, was so grossly

outlandish—“Hamlet goes mad in the second act, and his mistress goes mad in the third; the prince slays the father of his mistress, pretending to kill a rat, and the heroine throws herself into a river. They dig her grave on stage...”—that Voltaire concluded “one might suppose such a work to be the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage.”³¹

And yet Voltaire, even Voltaire, was prepared to admit that this savage imagination smacked of strange and awesome genius. Strewn throughout Shakespeare’s “monstrous Farces,” he confessed, were “such beautiful, such noble, such dreadful Scenes” that it was as if nature had assembled in the playwright’s brain “all that we can imagine of what is greatest and most powerful, with all that rudeness without wit can contain of what is lowest and most detestable.”³²

This marvelous admixture, so maddening to Voltaire (and so discomfiting to Hume), was what critics pointed to in the generations that followed them to reclaim Shakespeare and his work from the stiff collared protocols of good (and bad) taste. When it came to a character like Hamlet, it was precisely his dreadful complexity that allowed him to speak to us, for we too were not made of simple stuff. He held “the keys of the human heart,” said the philosopher John Ogilvie, “from which he calls out alternately, love, pity, terror, indignation, grief, amazement, horror and anguish.”³³ That range—for the human heart has many rooms, some that look out upon the heavens, others barred in the basement below—captured the essence of what it meant to be human and stood in sharp contrast to a character like Cato who, “with all his perfections, is cold and uninteresting.”³⁴

It is notable that Ogilvie grants Cato his perfections, for as a moral matter, he did not dispute Voltaire’s grand estimation of the character. Addison’s creation was a paragon of

virtue and the avatar of elegant behavior, but these characteristics, while they might be desirable in a friend or neighbor, were not necessarily so satisfying in a stage creation. “We admire his virtues, as we may do those of a deceased friend,” Ogilvie said, “but the uniformity of these is such that any reader may guess at the general tenor of his discourse when he knows his situation.”³⁵ Characters like Cato, who so conform to the tyranny of taste, become rote, predictable, housebroken dogs to an audience who know exactly what will happen when the playwright whistles and points to the door.

Ogilvie would say that Addison’s failure was that “while his eye was fixed on propriety, it lost sight of nature,” a criticism that Samuel Johnson made before him in his *Preface to Shakespeare* when he said that “Addison speaks the language of poets, and Shakespeare, of men.”³⁶ That the language of poets and men might diverge was as much an indictment of polite poetry as it was a statement on behalf of a complex human heart whose beat could be heard insistent behind the door of Shakespeare’s plays. “The work of a correct and regular writer is a garden accurately formed and diligently planted,” Johnson said, “the composition of Shakespeare is a forest, in which oaks extend their branches, and pines tower in the air, interspersed sometimes with weeds and brambles, and sometimes giving shelter to myrtles and to roses; filling the eye with awful pomp, and gratifying the mind with endless diversity.”³⁷

Johnson’s vision of poetry may be read as a retreat of sorts from the *ought* of propriety, as declared by Sydney and seconded by Voltaire and Hume, to the *is* of nature, but what exactly characterizes such poetry and the particular genius implied by it is hardly self-evident. Johnson, who famously dubbed Shakespeare “the poet of nature,” stuck his toe in

this black, unbottomed pool when he said that Shakespeare's "drama is the mirror of life."³⁸ By this he meant that Shakespeare's characters transcended the peculiarities of any single human experience—"the customs of particular places," "the peculiarities of studies or professions," "the accidents or transient fashions or temporary opinions"—and instead embodied the "general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated."³⁹ In the work of other poets, "a character is too often an individual," whereas Shakespeare's creations were "commonly a species."⁴⁰

Johnson's pronouncement was not without controversy. Like Montaigne's attack on the Ptolemaic system of presumption, he aimed to subvert the tyranny of taste by calling attention to the fact that its polite protocols were tinctured by fad and defined by date. Yet he went further in suggesting that, behind the papier-mâché mask of custom and popular opinion, there was an essential set of passions which Shakespeare's characters, one-by-one, epitomized.

William Hazlitt did not care for Johnson's declaration, but only because he did not think the older man went far enough. To Hazlitt's mind, by portraying Shakespeare's characters as stage instantiations of particular passions, Johnson tended to judge the plays as moralistic moments of light and darkness, rather than evolving shades of gray. He "found the general species of DIDACTIC form in Shakespeare's characters," said Hazlitt, but the "individual traits, or the DRAMATIC distinctions" were lost on him.⁴¹ Johnson seemed too willing to see Shakespeare's characters as proxies for individual passions in a stable moral universe. Yet the passion at play was not nearly so stable, it was tumult incarnate:

not some one habitual feeling or sentiment preying upon itself, growing out of itself, and moulding every thing to itself; it is passion modified by passion, by all the other feelings to which the individual is liable, and to which others are liable with him; subject to all the fluctuations of caprice and accident; calling into play all the resources of understanding and all the energies of the will; irritated by obstacles or yielding to them; rising from small beginnings to the utmost height; now drunk with hope, now stung to madness, now sunk in despair, now blown to air with a breath, now raging like a torrent. The human soul is made the sport of fortune, the prey of adversity: it is stretched on the wheel of destiny, in restless ecstasy.⁴²

This was not the art of reassurance that Sidney, Hume, and Voltaire championed, but a drama of disruption, one that would see the impartial spectator throw up his hands in frustration for the familiar compass by which he evaluated events (and the men that attend them) is sprung. Thus, a play like *King Lear* could so trouble Johnson, for its fearful majesty seemed not merely to withstand Cordelia's fate, but to prosper from it.⁴³ Thus a play like *Hamlet* could so unnerve Voltaire, for it could be at once savage and sublime.

What kind of a mind could give birth to such a world? This was a question that poets and critics increasingly turned to when they stopped disparaging Shakespeare's shining monsters and began searching for the secrets of their art. For those who walked the long hallways of Shakespeare's works, the portrait gallery seemed impossibly large. As opposed to Milton, Hazlitt said, who "took only a few simple principles of character, and raised them to the utmost conceivable grandeur, and refined them of every base alloy," Shakespeare seemed to pluck his feathers from every bird – peacock, pigeon, and crow alike – to dress the characters of his creation. The tragic and the terrible, the humorous and the high-minded, the glamorous and the grotesque, the demotic and the divine—all muscled their way on stage, time and again, to take their turn in the spotlight.

He copied nature “as he found it,” said the critic Elizabeth Montague, not on the library shelves, but “in the busy walks of human life.”⁴⁴ This insight, as popular as it was slim, said less about Shakespeare than it did about the sympathetic shortcomings of human beings in general (and certain poets in particular). True, Shakespeare may have taken his dramatic cues from the hurly-burley of the London streets more than, say, the bookish Ben Jonson, who slighted his friend for having “small Latin and less Greek,” but the two men walked those streets together.⁴⁵ They ducked the refuse from whirling chamber pots, watched jackdaws perched on pendulous gibbets along the Thames, and heard the howls of poor Harry Hunks, the star bear-baiting attraction at Paris Garden just down the street from the Globe. What distinguished Shakespeare from Jonson and so many others was not so much what he saw—which, given that he saw little beyond Stratford and London than the road that ran between them, was far less than many an undistinguished poet—but that his imagination seemed so capable of arresting it, digesting it, and assembling it anew, all without ever being overwhelmed by its intensity.

Indeed, Shakespeare’s was the uncanny imagination, whose powers were never more remarkable than when they captured and recreated the broad melody of the human world. Montagu compared him to the whirling “Dervise, in the Arabian Tales, who would throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation.”⁴⁶ While Hazlitt would say that Shakespeare was “the genius of humanity, changing places with all of us at pleasure, and playing with our purposes as his own.”⁴⁷

This extraordinary capacity for empathy, more supernatural than simply human, seemed to unlock Shakespeare's creative imagination, for it explained how the poet might have slipped from the savage to the sublime and back again. Of course, we can never know if this explanation actually captures Shakespeare's genius—like all important questions we would ask him, Shakespeare never answers, he only hints—but it is worth lingering over what was widely assumed of the man who enjoyed this daemonic gift.

Like Montaigne's attempt to unfix the aim and limit to which he was born, poets and critics alike assumed of Shakespeare a remarkable ability to dispossess himself of any sentimental physics, allowing him not merely to tolerate the motley crew of full humanity, but to understand and embrace it. Yet whereas Montaigne struggled to create a pliant, adaptable soul that lent itself to an unsystematic empathy, Shakespeare's empathy was characterized not so much by a lack of system as an absence of self.

The reason for this had much to do with the ends to which empathy was employed. If Montaigne cultivated empathy in order to receive the wider human world, Shakespeare drew on its powers to recreate that world on stage. The playwright, said Lord Kames, must "assume the precise character and passion" of his creations. He must clear a space within, "annihilating himself" in order to provide room for the "sentiments that belong to the assumed character."⁴⁸ Shakespeare was the avatar of such creation, and while Kames, like Montagu after him, makes Shakespeare seem more the Sufi mystic than the exceptional poet, when the smell of incense dissolves, what remains is a striking contention about the relationship between empathy, the self, and the creative process. Simply stated, the secret of Shakespeare's art was his ability to access the experience of others without the mediation of

any sentimental tendency or moral restraint. These accents of individual identity were annihilated, allowing the emotional lives of others to pass through to the poet's imagination, immaculate and unjudged, by way of the heart.

This was selfless empathy, a capacity Hazlitt celebrated when he called Shakespeare “the least of an egotist that it was possible to be,” a man who was “nothing in himself” but “was all that others were, or that they could become.”⁴⁹ Montaigne, of course, had appreciated that humility could be a powerful ally to empathy, as it inclined us to see the world through the eyes of another and prepared us to not be too shocked by the view, but the strain of empathy implied by Kames and Hazlitt goes well beyond this. It described someone at once absolutely sensitive to the larger social world and totally immune to it.

The poet John Keats, who lusted after the secrets of Shakespeare's art, followed Hazlitt in locating the peculiar genius of his hero in his capacity for selfless empathy. “A Poet,” he proclaimed, “is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body.”⁵⁰ Not lacking for ambition, Keats claimed this power for himself. He told his friend Richard Woodhouse that, in a crowded room, the “identity of every one in the room begins [so] to press upon me that, I am in a very little time an[ni]hilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of Children.”⁵¹ Still, for Keats, whose emotional swings made him every bit the Romantic, annihilation seemed less a matter of a disappearing self than the loss of self-possession. The man who boasted “my Solitude is sublime” and rather carelessly told his parents he hoped never to marry seemed not so much to conduct the feelings of others as to

be stricken by them.⁵² “Health and Spirits can only belong unalloyed to the selfish Man,” he wrote another friend, “the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits.”⁵³

Montaigne had said something similar of himself. “The sight of other people’s anguish causes very real anguish to me,” he confessed in his *Essays*, “my feelings have often usurped the feelings of others.”⁵⁴ Such reactions shouldn’t be surprising. They are not only natural, they seem the very essence of empathy. It was the “hard-hearted man,” said Gerard, who “can be a spectator of very great distress, without feeling any emotion.”⁵⁵ Whereas those of “delicate” heart find themselves at the tender mercy of others, “the smallest uneasiness of their fellow-creatures excites their pity.”⁵⁶

The heart, of course, is rarely so delicate; rarer still is the heart that cannot be moved. Shakespeare’s, at once, seemed both. As a playwright, he lowered himself into the deepest mineshafts of human experience and robbed cemeteries of emotion, but nothing he turned his light upon, nothing he exhumed made him flush with fever or hide his face and run. “What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er, delights the camelion Poet,” Keats mused. He “has as much delight conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.”⁵⁷ The man so capable of selfless empathy may be enchanted by the passions of another, but they never overwhelm him—for indeed, what is there to overwhelm? There are no scruples to lacerate, no sentimental tendencies to infect. They have been annihilated, leaving an inner world that neither translates, adulterates, nor rejects the experience of another. It enters the heart as received wisdom, an open door to the broader human world.

By this account, the men and women who thrilled at Shakespeare’s plays were far more moved by the shining monsters on stage than the man who created them. Sidney had

nothing to hope, and Hume nothing to fear, from an audience of Shakespeares. They would not be moved. They were as impervious to art as they were the human world. The look they turned on the latter, Keats would say, was akin to a coldly scientific glare, “free to make its speculations of the differences of human character and to class them with the calmness of a Botanist.”⁵⁸

This was not Michel Montaigne, whose self was pliant but never disinterested, but was this, in fact, William Shakespeare, the uncanny man of selfless empathy? Impossible to say, but consider perhaps the most essential image in his most unlimited of plays: Hamlet contemplating the naked skull of Yorick beside a freshly dug grave.⁵⁹ Throughout the drama, even before the revelation of his father’s murder at the hands of his otiose uncle, the Dane has struggled with the riddle of being, “this quintessence of dust,” a contest that sees him endlessly grapple with appearance to gain hold of the absolute.⁶⁰ “‘Seems,’ madam,” Hamlet checks his mother soon after he appears in the play:

— nay it is, I know not ‘seems.’
’Tis not alone my inky cloak, cold mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
That can denote me truly. These indeed ‘seem’,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.⁶¹

These outward flourishes cannot “denote” one “truly,” not only because they can be misleading, painted indicants rather than the evidence of something integral, but because,

beneath them, there is always something indelible, absolute, something “within which passes show.”

The lesson is one that Hamlet is perversely reminded of in a moment of misprision when he is confronted by Yorick, or at least what remains of him. Standing beside the growing cavity in the ground, he spends nearly two dozen lines contemplating other skulls haphazardly disinterred by the gravedigger (“This might be / the pate of a politician”), and Yorick’s looks to him like any other: indistinguishable and anonymous.⁶² Eyes unsocketed. Empty.

And yet, the skull is not what it seems, and not because it is bereft of feature. The lost lips the young prince kissed most lovingly are ultimately no more the essence of Yorick than the skull they hung on. The bone may not mislead like the brow, but neither one captures who we essentially are or, to say much the same thing, what we might become. They are merely costume, not creative capacity, the infinite faculty that marks the true player and playwright and provides the surer margin by which we might ultimately measure the man. “A / fellow of infinite jest,” Hamlet remembers his playfellow to Horatio, “of most excellent fancy.”⁶³

Of infinite jest. Of most excellent fancy. There seems to me no better way of memorializing William Shakespeare, as well, whose flesh and blood are no more integral to his identity than the biographical minutia of mundane circumstance. Creative capacity, that is all, and the selfless empathy underpinning it.

For, indeed, however much he left unsated the grosser wants for revelatory gossip, it seems only fitting that a man who left almost no trace of himself furnished the selves of so

many others in so many imagined worlds. A poet who would have spent his time scrutinizing the joints of his own sentimental physics would have been more apt to ape it on stage and embalm it in print. Not Shakespeare. He made no effort to proclaim it to the world that he was there. He merely conducted the emotions and experience of everyone he met to proclaim that Hamlet was there. Lear was there. Cleopatra was there. Iago was there. Macbeth was there. Falstaff was there. Mercutio was there. Shylock was there. Olivia was there. Bottom was there. Rosalind was there. Prospero was there. Richard was there. Beatrice was there. Malvoilo was there. Timon was there. The Fool was there. And on and on and on. Shining monsters all.

The price of Shakespeare's poetry may have been himself. *His* self. For it, he purchased the world.

William Shakespeare Selfless Empathy

¹ Montaigne, “Of three kinds of association” in *The Complete Works*, 755-6.

² Montaigne, “Of the power of the imagination” in *The Complete Works*, 82.

³ Montaigne, “To his wife: Dedicatory epistle to La Boetie’s translation of Plutarch’s ‘Letter of Consolation to his Wife’” in *The Complete Works*, 1300.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Montaigne, “Of custom, and not easily changing an accepted law” in *The Complete Works*, 103-4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For more on the relationship between these men, see “Shakespeare, the Founder” in Bloom, Harold. *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. See also Stephen Greenblatt’s introductory essay in Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de: *Shakespeare’s Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays*. Trans. John Florio. New York: New York Review of Books, 2014.

⁹ Greene, Robert. *Greene’s Groats-worth of Wit bought with a Million of Repentance*. Cited in Burgess, Anthony. *Shakespeare*. Chicago: Elephant Paperback, 1970. 94.

¹⁰ Anthony Burgess sums up this problem in the Foreword to *Shakespeare*, his loving effort to chronicle the great playwright’s life:

I once wrote an article in which I said that, given the choice between two discoveries—that of an unknown play by Shakespeare and that of one of Will’s laundry lists—we would all plump for the dirty washing everytime....Every biography longs for some new reasons for some new gesture of reality—a fingernail torn on May 7, 1598, or a bad cold during King James I’s first command performance—but the gestures never materialize. We have Shakespeare’s unlocked heart in the Sonnets, but these only prove that he fell in love and out of it, which happens to everybody. What we want are letters and doctors’ prescriptions and the minutiae of daily life which build up to a character.

(Burgess, *Shakespeare*, 10.)

¹¹ Jonson, Ben. *Timber, or Discoveries in Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets (A Norton Critical Edition)*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974. 404.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jonson, Ben. *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden in Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets (A Norton Critical Edition)*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974. 418.

¹⁴ Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of. “Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 124.

¹⁵ Voltaire. “Letter XVIII. On Tragedy” in *Letters concerning the English Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999. 87.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sidney, Sir Philip. *An Apology for Poetry in The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends (Second Edition)*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998. 144.

¹⁸ Ibid., 149.

¹⁹ Pope, Alexander. “Prologue to Mr. Addison’s Tragedy of Cato” in *Eighteenth-Century English Literature*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969. Lines 1-5, 587.

²⁰ Voltaire, “Letter XVIII. On Tragedy” in *Letters concerning the English Nation*, 92.

- ²¹ Gerard, Alexander. *An Essay on Taste: To Which Are Annexed Three Dissertations on the Same Subject by De Voltaire, D'Alembert And De Montesquieu*. 1764. 191.
- ²² Hume, David. *The History of Great Britain*, Volume 1, 205
- ²³ Hume, David. "Of the Standard of Taste" in *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1987. 246.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Hume, David. *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688, Volume II*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1859. 205.
- ³⁰ Voltaire, "Letter XVIII. On Tragedy" in *Letters concerning the English Nation*, 92. (Emphasis Voltaire.)
- ³¹ Voltaire. As quoted in John Morley, *A Biographical Critique of Voltaire*. Paris: E. R. DuMont, 1901. 122.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Ogilvie, John. *Observations on the Nature, Characters, and Various Species of Composition, Vol. II* (1774), 293n.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 293n.-294n.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 294n.; Johnson, Samuel. "Preface to Shakespeare" in *Johnson: Prose and Poetry (The Reynard Library)*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967. 507.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 491.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Hazlitt, William. *Characters in Shakespeare's Plays*. BiblioBazaar, 2006. 29. (Emphasis Hazlitt)
- ⁴² Hazlitt, William. *Lectures on the English Poets in Lectures on the English Poets & The Spirit of the Age*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1964. 51.
- ⁴³ Johnson, Samuel. "Notes to Shakespeare: King Lear" in *Johnson: Prose and Poetry (The Reynard Library)*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967. 593.
- ⁴⁴ Montagu, Elizabeth Robinson. *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare: Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets. With Some Remakers Upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire*. London: Harding and Wright, 1819. xx.
- ⁴⁵ Jonson, Ben. "To the Memory of My Beloved, The Author, Mr. William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us" in *Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets (A Norton Critical Edition)*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974. 86. (Line 31)
- ⁴⁶ Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare: Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets. With Some Remakers Upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire*, xx.
- ⁴⁷ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets in Lectures on the English Poets & The Spirit of the Age*, 51.
- ⁴⁸ Kames, Henry Home, Lord. *Elements of Criticism Volume 1*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2005. 312.
- ⁴⁹ Hazlitt. *Lectures on the English Poets in Lectures on the English Poets & The Spirit of the Age*. 47.
- ⁵⁰ Keats, John. "To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818" in *John Keats Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 148.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*

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- ⁵² Keats, John. "To George and Georgiana Keats, 14, 16, 21, 31 October 1818" in *John Keats Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 159.
- ⁵³ Keats, John. "To Benjamin Bailey, 28-30 October 1817" in *John Keats Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 31.
- ⁵⁴ Montaigne, "Of the power of the imagination" in *The Complete Works*, 82.
- ⁵⁵ Gerard, *An Essay on Taste: To Which Are Annexed Three Dissertations on the Same Subject by De Voltaire, D'Alembert And De Montesquieu*, 81.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 81-2.
- ⁵⁷ Keats, "To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818" in *John Keats Selected Letters*, 148.
- ⁵⁸ Keats, John. "To Miss Jeffrey, 9 June 1819" in *John Keats Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 241.
- ⁵⁹ In addition to a close reading of the play, my reflections on the grave-digger scene in *Hamlet* takes inspiration from Harold Bloom's *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003), most notably Chapter Fourteen: We Defy Augury and Chapter Sixteen: Apotheosis and Tragedy.
- ⁶⁰ *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet, Third Series*. Ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Cengage Learning, 2006. 257. (Act 2, Scene 2, Line 274)
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 171-2. (Act I, Scene 2, Lines 76-86)
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 415. (Act V, Scene 1, Line 74)
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, 422. (Act V, Scene 1, Lines 174-5)

Jay Gatsby The Insensible Imagination

If we tinker with our capacity for empathy, often it is because we long to hear the notes, every note, of the unruly human symphony. High as well as low. Sharp and flat. On-key, but more importantly off. The aim may be moral, philosophical, aesthetic (empathy, we've seen, can be turned to any of these purposes) but the practice is passive. We are conductors of emotion; we do not conduct.

It needn't be this way. If empathy discloses the inner life of others, it also reveals the rope and pulley system of human emotion. A steady, studied hand may shift the weights. A few cranks can raise a finely calibrated fury, added slack a loose and overflowing love. Call it what you will, it is manipulation, for we exploit our knowledge of others, a knowledge illumined by empathy, to ends of our own choosing.

Shakespeare knew this, for he was an actor, and an actor's art is raising the emotions of those who watch him to the pitch and degree of his choosing. The hours that saw him strut and fret on the stage of the great Globe made an impression on the groundlings who clustered around the apron and the gallants filling the galleries overhead. If Shakespeare never stole the show, that's probably because it didn't interest him. According to lore, he

avored the gentle impression of “kingly parts” over the unquiet clownishness of Will Kemp or the brooding heroics of Richard Burbage, yet like them, he was always classed among the principal players of his company and was remembered as late as 1640, nearly a quarter century after his death, as “that famous Writer and Actor, Mr. William Shakespeare.”¹

He “did act exceedingly well,” William Beeston told John Aubrey, the first of many to try his hand at a biography of the Bard’s life. As hopeless a task in the seventeenth century as it is today, much of what Aubrey writes is untrustworthy at best (did you know that Shakespeare’s father was a butcher? neither did Shakespeare) but Beeston’s opinion has special claim, for not only was he an actor, so was his father, Christopher Beeston, who played alongside Will in the late 1590s. He too knew the gross intimacy of the Elizabethan stage, and especially the Globe, where as many as three thousand people packed the timbered amphitheater for year-round performances. The least among them paid a penny to squeeze into the pit, chewing hazelnuts and reeking of their trade, mooning up at the players on the squared stage that jutted into the open yard. The rest – university wags, merchants in felt hats, the occasional lord or lady – bedecked the galleries, sniffing pomander and smoking their pipes, watching with haughty lassitude the verbal traffic below. All in the mid-afternoon. This being London, the sun occasionally overhead.

Shakespeare and Beestons both knew what it was like to be scrutinized by thousands, and whenever Elizabethan playgoers did not approve of what they saw, they did not hesitate to make their views known. Volunteering advice. Always hissing. Sometimes hurling a tomato. It was not enough to know how they wanted to be viewed, as actors, their art was soliciting such looks. Thus they were skilled in making the division that Adam Smith would

later celebrate. They knew what the spectators saw for they were skilled at standing apart and being impartial spectators, too. Even in a “whirlwind of passion,” as Hamlet warns the players, they would not be carried away.² They were practiced at the strange detachment that allowed them to sculpt their impression with “a temperance that may give it smoothness.”³ They were at once the puppet, the puppeteer, and his prey.

But that was the stage, and it seems that Shakespeare, the Man, did not want to be seen as Shakespeare, the Player, or even (prepare yourself) Shakespeare, the Playwright. If so, we may forgive him. In the hierarchical society he knew, players jostled with prostitutes and panhandlers for the bottommost rung. Indeed, with the passage of the Vagrancy Laws of 1572, traveling troupes had to find a patron or faced being flogged, branded, or finally hanged. They might be Shakespeare’s players, but until the Queen (and later King) got hold of them, they were the Lord Chamberlain’s Men.

Even though he never openly disparaged his craft with the same caustic wit of his fellow player-playwright, Ben Jonson, the afternoon’s indignity of being permitted to wear silks and satin on stage as an exception to the Sumptuary Laws that would have seen him fined in the street at suppertime no doubt chafed at Shakespeare, especially once he could well afford the finery that was legally denied him. When that time came, quite early in his career, he applied to the College of Heralds for the coat of arms his father had failed to obtain. Once secured – a process that concerned itself more with hard cash than ancient claim – he upped the ante by trying to add the Arden arms of his mother’s family, who unlike his father’s had a claim to shabby gentility. Successful again, he would append a motto that likely came from his own hand: *Non sanz droict*. Not without right.

Or “Not Without Mustard,” as Jonson savagely lampooned it in *Every Man Out of his Humour*, the 1599 play performed by Shakespeare’s company. In it, a dimwitted rube pays a preposterous sum for a coat of arms, eliciting the cruel suggestion from a more sophisticated acquaintance. The Oxford educated Jonson seemed to be reminding his unlettered friend that though he might play the gentleman, he could never be one. His coat of arms was no more than another costume, and an actor of all people should know that a costume is an extravagant waste if the man who wears it is unconvincing in his role. Indeed, if the world were going to see William Shakespeare as a gentleman first and foremost, it would take a lot more than a purchased pedigree. He would have to leave the stage and London, buy a big house and lands to boot, and give to his divine writing, the sweet labors that secured his fortune and fame, less attention than a tailor’s receipt.

And this is precisely what Shakespeare did. He abandoned the stage sometime around 1601 – the ghost of Hamlet’s father, it is said, his swansong – and gave up writing plays, or anything else of enduring value, just twelve years later, never bothering to publish his work or even appoint a final draft. By then, he had other concerns to attend to, for in addition to the stake he’d long held in his company and the theater it played, he was a thriving landowner and the proprietor of a great house in Stratford. That home was crowned with ten chimneys and had once been owned by the Lord Mayor of London. It was called New Place. How fitting.

Inasmuch as it might be broken, the break with the past was complete.

Shakespeare's ambition was not unfamiliar to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Though he never tried to bury his past, he was haunted by its shortcomings. He was a boy from the Middle West, who aspired to be a member of the eastern elite with neither the religion (Catholic), the wealth (modest), nor the blood (Irish) to support his bid.

Still the headstrong boy from Minnesota blustered his way into Princeton and set out single-mindedly to realize his first dream, the feeble dream of so many college freshmen, to become The Big Man on Campus. A natural actor, he made himself an understudy to the most popular men, creating a costume of their enviable qualities, right down to a rich tenor voice. "When I like men I want to be like them," he confided in his *Notebooks*. "I want to lose the outer qualities that give me my individuality and be like them. I don't want the man. I want to absorb into myself all the qualities that make him attractive and leave him out."⁴

Notwithstanding the first-week's humiliation of failing to make the football team, Scotty excelled at stepping beyond the social limits of St. Paul into the privileged environs of the Ivy League. He was elected to Cottage, a fancy eating club, and found favor in *Tiger*, the campus humor magazine. He even won the scriptwriting competition for The Triangle Club's annual burlesque and joined the traveling troupe on its holiday tour, returning home at Christmastime a minor celebrity.

His star would blossom in full just a few years later with *This Side of Paradise*, a rambling, near roman à clef that passed for his first novel. Celebrated for its promise and prose, the first printing sold out in three days. Fitzgerald was just 23. His new wife, Zelda, a handsome southern belle of excellent breeding and awfully bad behavior, was not yet 20. Young and dashing, with affluence seemingly at hand, if Fitzgerald's work had taken a turn

toward the triumphant, nobody would have blamed him, for he seemed the poster-boy for upward social mobility and breakaway success.

Instead, his stories and second novel savored of fatalism, anticlimax, and, above all else, social insecurity. In one, “Winter Dreams,” the precocious son of a Minnesota grocer passes up state school for “the precarious advantage of attending an older and more famous university in the East.”⁵ His financial success after college is early and immense, and he proves deft at mastering the polite arts of American aristocracy. Yet, despite his success, he still feels like a “trespasser,” and when a society girl asks him, “Who are you, anyhow?” “I’m nobody,” he replies, adding, “My career is largely a matter of futures.”⁶

Fitzgerald might as well have been describing himself. As he would later write to his friend and fellow novelist, John O’Hara, the “intense social self-consciousness” he felt was not merely a matter of class.⁷ It went deeper, to the very core of who he was and how he engaged the world. “I would be capable of going to Podunk on a visit and being absolutely booed and over-awed by its social system,” he told O’Hara, “not from timidity but simply because of an inner necessity of starting my life and my self-justification over again at scratch in whatever new environment I may be thrown.”⁸

Fitzgerald never found the need to start his life over, at least not in full. He patched up the deficiencies of his personal history as best he could and tried to forget those, like his father’s financial misadventures, that were beyond repair. But that idea – to start one’s life over or, in the formulation of his most famous character, to “repeat the past” anew – obsessed the young author and became the catalyst for his third novel, the one to which that character gave his name: *The Great Gatsby*.⁹

To say that Gatsby lies about his past is to make his deception seem trivial. Sure he lies, he lies repeatedly, but that's the common art of the social climber. Lineal white lies are his stock and trade, obscure origins his calling card. To say no more than this is to dismiss the vigor of his deception, its gusto and grand vision, which is ultimately so sweeping that Jay Gatsby – or, more to the point, James Gatz – is carried clean away.

James Gatz, Nick Carraway says of his next-door neighbor, “was really, or at least legally, his name.”¹⁰ The distinction is important, for though Nick describes the moment at which seventeen-year old James Gatz becomes a young Jay Gatsby (a Horatio Alger happenstance that sees a good deed for a yachtsman turn into a transcontinental trip) the terms of the transformation are less interesting than the imagination that sets the stage. The boy from North Dakota who would become Jay Gatsby did not long to break with the past, but to rewrite it, as if he had been cast in a different role at birth and mistakenly sent by St. Peter to a crumbling community theater instead of a garish cabaret.

The evidence for this would have been more obvious, if less elegant, had Fitzgerald carried through on his intention to precede the novel with a prologue in which a young Gatsby (or Gatz) confesses to a parish priest the sin of “not believing I was the son of my parents.”¹¹ The scene was set aside for one of Fitzgerald's short stories, but the sin survives in Nick's observation that Gatsby's parents were “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as parents at all.”¹²

Not to be confused with more humdrum examples (hysterical children routinely deny their parents, teenagers at their most opportune) the remark aims to distinguish Gatsby from

the garden-variety arriviste. He never struggles with the dead hand of the past, at least not in any familiar sense. The habits, inclinations, ideals – the sentimental physics of the rural Midwest – have no claim on him. More importantly, they never did. “The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself,” Nick says. “He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father’s Business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty.”¹³

The most magnificent emanation of that vulgar beauty is the world of Gatsby’s parties, the “many-colored, many-keyed commotion” for which he plays composer and conductor, host and honoree.¹⁴ Again, like so much of *The Great Gatsby*, a novel unusually susceptible to trite interpretation, the excess of these affairs can be read as a simple indictment of the strained manners of the nouveaux riche. But to read it as such is to mistake the gross ecstasy of Gatsby’s soirees for some derivative spirit rather than the addled heartbeat of a “world complete in itself, with its own standards and its own great figures, second to nothing because it had no consciousness of being so.”¹⁵

This world, the world of West Egg, stands as the unfashionable alternative to another, East Egg, straight across the Long Island Sound. It is unfashionable, of course, only in the eyes of those who can tell the difference or, for that matter, those who see the difference as such. Nick Carraway is one, a perspective that, coupled with his tendency to “reserve all judgments,” makes him well equipped to provide the novel’s observing eye. Jordan Baker, the haughty golf pro, is another, as are the Buchanans, Tom and Daisy. All of

them spring from the same elite set, a fact Fitzgerald artfully underscores near the end of the novel in a tiny scene he added to the final draft.

The foursome find themselves penned together in a suite at the Plaza Hotel, trying unsuccessfully to escape the fearsome, late summer heat. They fall into a conversation about Bill Biloxi, a man they all seem to know without being certain of anything about him – “I used to know a Bill Biloxi from Memphis.” “That was his cousin.” “He told me he was president of your class at Yale.” “I didn’t know him.” “Well, he said he knew you.” – except for the fact that they have all heard of Bill Biloxi, that he is a man to be heard of, and thus that he is undoubtedly a member of their rarefied social world.¹⁶

Someone not to be heard of (and, for the duration of this small scene, someone notably not heard from) is Jay Gatsby, who spends the conversation beating “a short restless tattoo” into the carpet, having nothing to add to the confusion.¹⁷ He’s certainly never heard of Bill Biloxi. Why would he? James Gatz never summered in South Hampton. Never attended the Ivy League. No brother of his ever broke a tackle from Hobey Baker, no sister ever made her *début*. He couldn’t tell you the difference between Skull and Bones and a scullery maid, a boilermaker and the boiler room. And whatever he might know of horses – which may, indeed, be considerable – came not from the stirrups of a polo pony, but the backside of a plow.

“Mr. Nobody from Nowhere,” as Tom Buchanan, the polo player, scornfully dismisses him.¹⁸ Unlike Bill Biloxi, whose identity is blurred in every respect but one, Jay Gatsby of West Egg, or James Gatz of the Middle West, is undoubtedly not a part of their

insular social set, a fact Gatsby never seems to appreciate in full, largely because it's never clear how much he actually wants to be a member.

This is one of Gatsby's more remarkable qualities, for there is no mistaking such social ambition in other of Fitzgerald's characters or, for that matter, in Fitzgerald, himself.

"He knew what sort of men they were," says one,

the men who when he first went to college entered from the great prep schools with graceful clothes and the deep tan of healthy summers. He had seen that, in one sense, he was better than these men. He was newer and stronger. Yet in acknowledging to himself that he wished his children to be like them he was admitting that he was but the rough, strong stuff from which they eternally sprang.¹⁹

Such raw self-analysis – the kind that can provide clarity of purpose and, on occasion, cathartic relief – is foreign to Gatsby. His are the brute impulses of a child, strong willed and unselfconscious. It is not clear that he wants to be part of the world of celebrated schools and lazy summer days, the world of Bill Biloxi and Tom Buchanan. In fact, it is not clear that he wants to be part of any other world than that of his own creation, the imagined world into which he would import a single envoy from Old Money, Daisy Buchanan, Nick Carraways's cousin and Tom Buchanan's wife.

If Daisy represents the passkey to a world "redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery," Gatsby understands this only in a muted way.²⁰ Nick says that the young army officer from Fort Taylor who charms 18-year old Daisy Fay "had come in contact with such people but always with indiscernible barbed wire between them."²¹ Peering through that fence and briefly passing beyond it, Gatsby finds a world that is perfumed and liminal, exotic

and strangely indistinct. Indeed, even when he is seated in Daisy's parlor, there is still a "ripe mystery" about her home,

a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year's shining motor cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered.²²

It is a world intimated more than explained, one on the whole that is left largely unexplored by the young captain. This is partly because his exposure to this world is quite limited, as a matter of upbringing as well as immediate circumstance, for Gatsby is too soon shipped off to the Western Front. Yet it is also, and more deeply, a consequence of the insensible quality of Gatsby's imagination and the unpeopled experience from which the "Platonic conception of himself" springs.²³

Gatsby's dream, of himself and of the world that would embody him, is the candied confection of a solipsistic imagination, one that begins building its strange, fantastic settlement in lonely youth, with little in the way either of the brick of experience or the mortar of memory beyond a few fantastic novels and a litter of trashy magazines. Instead, it is created as if by divine incantation, by the power to dream and dream again until an empire awakes. "The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night," Nick says. "A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the wash-stand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace."²⁴

These are the world-building works of a fevered imagination, ever ransacking its own cloud city to build higher the castle walls. They ultimately create a “Jay Gatsby a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent,” one so silly, extravagant, and self-contained that, when Gatsby first describes his fantastical past to Nick – “I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little” – Nick says he could barely contain his laughter, for the words “evoked no image except that of a turbaned “character” leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne.”²⁵

That Nick is inclined to laugh at this “character,” a “conception” to which Gatsby “was faithful to the end,” signals the colossal failure of Gatsby’s deception, one, again, that he seems never fully aware of.²⁶ But this should not be surprising, for Gatsby has ultimately created a fantasy world, complete with its own tendencies, temperament, and taste, its own distinct sentimental physics, a world better to be marveled at than lived in, for it is the work of an insensible imagination, one incapable of empathy and the self-awareness it brings.

As Nick makes clear time and time again, Gatsby has spent his life fixated on his destiny, embroidering it, like the self-creating artist he is, with the fantasies of a funhouse imagination that is all mirrors with only the narrowest window to the outside world. Indeed, the attention he pays to others (which, as a celebrated host, can be substantial if decidedly superficial) has always been in service of that aim. They are manikins to be arranged according to the Lindy Hop of his imagination, not men and women to be engaged and understood. The lives of others have never meaningfully shaped his inner world, and their

lived experience never permeates his. He looks on them at a strict psychic distance, if he bothers to look at all.

Should he want nothing from the broader world, the insensible imagination would be no impediment to Gatsby. He could survive by its skim milk alone. But Gatsby does want something more, he wants Daisy, not so much as an entrée to some other social world, but as a centerpiece of his own. Yet his lack of empathy, and the ontological inflexibility it underwrites, hinders his efforts, for he can read neither Daisy nor the insular world she inhabits.

The young Jay Gatsby knows that the doors to Daisy Fay's world are closed to him for he is "a penniless young man without a past," yet he never undertakes the patient study and practiced behavior that might see him given the key.²⁷ He is simply not accustomed to watching others closely, much less to attempting to see the world through their eyes. Instead, he bluntly concludes that a fabulous display of wealth and the suggestion of a fantastic past will see the doors to Daisy's world opened, not so much to let him in but so that others may come outside to gawk. Hence the pink suits and never ending parties, the champagne guests and sweet breeze of celebrity. Indeed, he buys a mansion across the bay from Daisy "where he dispensed starlight to casual moths" in the hopes that, someday, they might draw a certain butterfly with them.²⁸

Whether Gatsby thinks his world is somehow an extension of Daisy's, or even an improvement, is unclear. What he doesn't understand is how different it is. If Gatsby's is a world of "many-colored, many-keyed commotion," Daisy's, at Fitzgerald's hand it, is one of pallid listlessness.²⁹ When Nick first encounters his cousin on a visit to her home, he finds

her and Jordan Baker dressed in white, reclining on an “enormous” divan, the latter “completely motionless,” not even bothering to acknowledge Nick, the former, making “an attempt to rise” and observing she is “p-paralyzed with happiness.”³⁰ They chat aimlessly for a time and then repair to the porch when dinner is announced. Nick watches the women, who proceed “[s]lenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their hips,” with a kind of voyeuristic fascination, for they seem to embody the blithe self-assurance of their elite social world. “Sometimes she and Miss Baker talked at once,” he says,

unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire. They were here—and they accepted Tom and me, making only a polite pleasant effort to entertain or to be entertained. They knew that presently dinner would be over and a little later the evening too would be over and casually put away. It was sharply different from the West where an evening was hurried from phase to phase toward its close in a continually disappointed anticipation or else in sheer nervous dread of the moment itself.³¹

“The West” has a double valence, for while Nick is explicitly referring to the Middle West of his youth (he, like Fitzgerald, hails from Minnesota), he is also describing the difference between the self-contented ennui of East Egg and the electric anxiety of West Egg, where its pink suited impresario is “never quite still,” always bending-over-backward to ensure his guests are having a good time.³²

This difference is lost on Gatsby, who never studies others half so closely as Nick and lacks the perspicacity that makes the latter such a shrewd observer of class. Well aware these traits are central to the tragedy of Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald sharpened his almost childlike oblivion between the first full draft of the novel and its final, published state. In one excised

scene, Gatsby not only reflects on Daisy's essential place in his technicolor world, he understands that she somehow disdains it, a fact that frustrates him. "She wants to leave that," he "bitterly" notes, pointing to his ridiculous home, prompting Nick's overtold warning. "Daisy's a person—she's not just a figure in your dream."³³

Another moment is an epiphany for Gatsby near the very end of the novel where he confesses that he hasn't "got anything."³⁴ He tells Nick "I thought that for awhile I had a lot of things, but the truth is I'm empty, and I guess people feel it. That must be why they keep on making up things about me, so I won't be so empty. I even make up things myself."³⁵

Such self-awareness, and the bracing self-examination it brings, is not in keeping with the oblivious Gatsby of Fitzgerald's final draft, and this is necessary, for a character with such capabilities would not nearly be so sympathetic or, for that matter, convincing as *The Great Gatsby* we all know (and so very many of us dearly love). We would expect far more from him, as an actor and as a man.

For Gatsby is a terrible actor. His "past" is a crazy quilt of incredible triumphs that convinces absolutely no one. His "elaborate formality of speech"—must everyone be *old sport?*—"just missed being absurd."³⁶ Nick says his mansion, "a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy," is a "huge incoherent failure."³⁷ And Tom calls his car, with its "labyrinth of windshields" and its "three noted horn," a "circus wagon."³⁸

Tom Buchanan, more than anyone else, knows that Gatsby is a fraud. "I'll be damned if I see how you got within a mile of her unless you brought the groceries to her door," he savagely retorts when Gatsby announces that he and Daisy were lovers before she and Tom met.³⁹ Part of his reaction may be accounted for by the fact that he has never heard of a Jay

Gatsby, which is enough to convince him that Jay Gatsby is not someone worth hearing of. (Hence, “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere.”) But more even than this, Gatsby makes a hash of his audition. He has only the crudest idea of how to act the part of a blue blood, for he has never bothered to look at the world, much less himself, through the eyes of someone like Tom or even Daisy, his beloved. By the opening of the novel, the “colossal vitality of his illusion,” the illusion that is Jay Gatsby and his rococo world, “had gone beyond her, beyond everything.”⁴⁰ The figure he presents, in turn, is not a close character study of the upper crust, one that might gain him access to and even acceptance in that snobby social world, it is something else altogether, a creature of “creative passion” that sees a self-obsessed artist “adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way.”⁴¹ Such efforts are no doubt remarkable, but they lend themselves to creating a freak show, not a trusted friend.

The gale force of such a remarkable imagination might have been turned to making sense of Tom and Daisy’s world and to figuring how a man like James Gatz might fit into it. No doubt, this is an exercise that Fitzgerald and Shakespeare engaged in when they tried out for their respective roles in the smart set and the suburban gentry. They drew on the capacity for empathy that actors and authors cultivate as key tools of their trade to understand the social worlds they would inhabit and the sentimental physics that shape them. By this study, they could understand if there were, in fact, a role for them to play (for sometimes, no matter how well we understand others, the doors to their world are barred) and, if so, how they might go about claiming it.

But Gatsby's is the insensible imagination, one that costumes itself not with the observation of others but with steadfast reflection on itself. This is necessary, for if Gatsby were more attentive to others and their inner worlds, as, say, the Gatsby of Fitzgerald's first draft, we would find his bad acting incredible. We would find *him* incredible. At best, he would appear unsympathetic and foolish rather than hopelessly lost. It is necessary that Gatsby pay so little attention to the world beyond his imagination and the dreamworld of its creation, for otherwise we would expect him to put in a better performance when he steps onto Tom and Daisy's stage, and we would be far less forgiving of his failure.

We would also be less forgiving of his cruelty, for Gatsby's inability to see the world through the eyes of others leads him to make the appalling request of Daisy that is his undoing. For Gatsby, it is not enough that he win Daisy from Tom, he must know that she never loved him, that their love, a love that predated her marriage to Tom or even their meeting, was unbroken and uninterrupted from the time it began. "He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: "I never loved you." Nick says. "After she had obliterated three years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken."⁴²

It is a monstrous request, one that sees Daisy sob, "Oh, you want too much!" when Gatsby makes it at the Plaza Hotel.⁴³ She is right, particularly in light of the fact that she is prepared to run away with him and leave Tom forever. To insist further that she deny Tom to his face before everyone in the suite is cruel and unnecessary, a demand so vicious that, were Gatsby a more self-aware character, it would ruin our opinion of him. It would be simply unforgivable.

But he isn't such a character, and his request is ultimately not terrible so much as tragic. It isn't made to hurt his rival, though he might savor the blow, and he has no idea how much it will wound his love. He makes it only because such a declaration conforms with the world of his imagination. The real world may have veered from its predestined path, allowing Daisy to slip from his grasp for a time, but Gatsby aims to make amends, to "repeat the past," and to that end, he is prepared to bend the facts of reality to the fancy of his imagination. He is not an actor trying to install himself in a new social world, but a demented demiurge, organizing his own world according to a strange, resplendent, *sui generis* sentimental physics. As such, his request -- which is not only in keeping with its logic, but central to it -- appears not cruel but cruelly misguided.

And this is why we are more likely to pity Gatsby than despise him, not only because he truly means no harm but because, as Fitzgerald describes it, his is "the sustained imagination of a sincere and yet radiant world."⁴⁴ Nick can't help but be compelled by that dream, even while he admits that its harlequin appearance "represented everything for which I have unaffected scorn."⁴⁵ It is not the dream itself that so moves him, but the "extraordinary gift for hope" that sees its self-creation, "a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which is not likely I shall ever find again."⁴⁶

When Daisy cannot conform to that dream, Gatsby's insensible imagination is finally breached, and the real world rushes in. As Nick describes it, floating alone in his pool, waiting out the hours for a call from Daisy that will never come, Gatsby "must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass."⁴⁷ It is the

vision of a man whose sentimental metaphysics has been rent and torn asunder, revealing a “new world, material without being real.”⁴⁸

Gatsby will not have to live long in that world for his violent death comes swift on the heels of his short-circuited dream, yielding the essential tragedy of the novel which we have known all along. Its outward manifestation is Gatsby’s funeral, where the great host is laid to rest surrounded by his servants, his father, Nick, and a single soul from his parties, “the owl-eyed man.”⁴⁹ “Why, my God! they used to go there by the hundreds,” he says, when Nick tells him that the rain kept people from getting to the house. One might be inclined to call them Gatsby’s friends, at least until that moment, but they are not his friends and never were, for Gatsby lives in a self-wrought world of lonely isolation, the price of an imagination turned not outward to understand the human world and how it moves through the open gesture of empathy, but inward, always inward, to reorganize once again the stage props of its own perversion.

No man can live so alone, not even The Great Gatsby, which is why the image of him reaching out toward the single green light at the end of Daisy’s dock is so indelible, for it symbolizes the distance between him and the world of human warmth, a distance his remarkable imagination, insensible to the end, will never let him cross.

It is a miserable fate, and for Gatsby – and all those like him – let the words of the owl-eyed man be his epitaph and our close.

*The poor son-of-a-bitch.*⁵⁰

Jay Gatsby The Insensible Imagination

¹ That Shakespeare favored “kingly parts” is found in a tribute by his friend, John Davies, titled, “To Our English Terence, Mr. Will Shakespeare.” The poem reads:

Some say, good *Will*, which I in sport do sing,
Hadst though not played some kingly parts in sport,
Though hadst been a companion for a king.

The full title of the anonymous poem 1640 is “An Elegy on the Death of that famous Writer and Actor, Mr. William Shakespeare.” (For an account of Shakespeare, the Actor, see Chapter XXIII Last Labors for the King’s Men in Adams, Joseph Quincy. *A Life of William Shakespeare*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925.)

² Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet (The New Cambridge Shakespeare)*. Ed. Brian Gibbons. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 165. (Act III, Scene 2, Line 7)

³ *Ibid.*, 165. (Act III, Scene 2, Line 8)

⁴ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Notebooks of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, #938 quoted in Brucoli, Matthew J. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald, 2nd Revised Edition*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press., 2002. 32-3.

⁵ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. “Winter Dreams” in *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1989. 220.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 221, 226.

⁷ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. “TO: John O’Hara c. July 18, 1933” in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*. New York: Scribner, 1994. 233.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 233-4.

⁹ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991., 86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹ See “Absolution,” the short story in which the prologue, or at least some form of it, survives. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. “Absolution” in *The Short Stores of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1989. 262.

¹² Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald)*, 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 76-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹ Fitzgerald, “Winter Dreams” in *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 224-5.

²⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald)*, 118.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77, 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

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- ²⁸ Ibid., 62.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 81
- ³⁰ Ibid., 10-11.
- ³¹ Ibid., 13.
- ³² Ibid., 51.
- ³³ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Trimalchio: An Early Version of the Great Gatsby (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 90.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 116.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 116-7.
- ³⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald)*, 40.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 8, 140.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 51, 94.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 102.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 75.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid., 85-6.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 103.
- ⁴⁴ Fitzgerald, "TO: Maxwell Perkins c. April 10, 1924" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 67.
- ⁴⁵ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald)*, 6.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 126.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 136
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.

Barack Obama Determined Disinterest

F. Scott Fitzgerald was never sold on *The Great Gatsby*. “The title is only fair,” he told his editor, Max Perkins, “rather bad than good.”¹ Perkins had informed him that the early sales of the novel were disappointing, a development Fitzgerald blamed on what he called “the one flaw in the book.”² He had favored *Trimalchio in West Egg* or, more simply, *Trimalchio*, after the freed slave turned flamboyant host in Petronius’s *Satyricon*. Neither one was very good. “[V]arious gentlemen here don’t like the title,” Perkins told him, “in fact none like it but me.”³

Among the other titles he considered—*On the Road to West Egg*, *Gold-batted Gatsby*, *The High-bouncing Lover*—all were inspired by same searching character. Fitzgerald never considered *Nosy Nick*, *Delicate Daisy*, or even *The Brutal Tom Buchanan*, which would not have been a good title anyhow, even if Tom occasionally steals the show. The wanton aristocrat is the unequivocal character of Fitzgerald’s creation, a Cain to able Gatsby. Smug, self-certain, fractious, cruel, his hulking appearance—“you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved”—underscores the hard marble of his identity: dense, indelicate, and richly veined.⁴

“I suppose he’s the best character I’ve ever done,” Fitzgerald confessed, adding with characteristic modesty that Tom was among “the three best characters in American fiction in the last twenty years.”⁵ Perkins agreed. “I would know Tom Buchanan if I met him on the street,” he said, “and would avoid him.”⁶

This, in uneasy contrast to Gatsby. “The reader’s eyes can never quite focus upon him,” Perkins warned after reading the first draft, “everything about Gatsby is more or less a mystery i.e. more or less vague.”⁷ Fitzgerald wasn’t surprised. He knew that the character of Tom was more viscerally remarkable and toyed with the idea of dispensing with Gatsby and letting him “dominate the book.”⁸ The thought soon passed. He would double-down, instead. “His vagueness I can repair by making more pointed,” he told Perkins, “this doesn’t sound good but wait and see. It’ll make him clear.”⁹

Fitzgerald returned to the manuscript and reworked Gatsby to make him even more an ideal in motion, rather than an actual man. That ideal, as Nick describes it, is Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is unlikely I shall ever find again.”¹⁰ This is the essence of Gatsby, not a defining achievement or characteristic mark, but a quality that is at once fugitive and fantastic, unmistakable and slightly empty. Indeed, even the notable feature Fitzgerald added to the final draft, Gatsby’s “radiant and understanding smile,” served more to accent that ideal than identify him in a crowd.¹¹

Such a figure was not unfamiliar to Fitzgerald. Whenever he looked in the mirror, he often saw him staring back. Five years before, the young author had been his own hero in Amory Blaine, the autobiographical protagonist of *This Side of Paradise*, a boy who conceives

of himself as a “variant, changing person” a blur of ambition whose advancement relies not on “strong char’c’ter” but on aptitude and adaptability.¹² Gatsby’s aspirations are more ambiguous than Amory’s or, for that matter, F. Scott’s – they longed for the secret handshake of *The Four Hundred* and a tumbler of literary fame – but all three are distinguished more by burning ambition than the end to which it glows. “If I couldn’t be perfect,” Fitzgerald declared as a sophomore at Princeton, “I wouldn’t be anything.”¹³

Whatever else such a man might be, he is always disruptive. Gatsby certainly is. “I disapproved of him from beginning to end,” Nick says of the friend he wonders at and not infrequently roots for even as he “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn.”¹⁴ What Gatsby “represents” is the ersatz aristocrat, the calloused-palmed pretender, the annoying nouveaux-riche. Nick, perhaps alone of all the characters, knows that Gatsby is more than this. Far more. The rest merely marvel at the remarkable figure he cuts in his catastrophic parties and highly contrived person. And though Nick is never convinced by the character of *Jay Gatsby*, in some way, he wants to be, for beyond the glitter and gaucherie, he can’t help but be compelled by what Gatsby represents, the human embodiment of unbounded hope, the undaunted spirit of an “incorruptible dream.”¹⁵

Not Tom Buchanan. “Who is he anyhow?” he demands of Daisy, when they visit one of his garish soirees, “Some big bootlegger?”¹⁶ Tom is never charmed by the handsome roughneck from the rural Midwest, and he certainly isn’t fooled by the man claims to be. Not only is he unwilling to look past the obvious—that Jay Gatsby was not to the manor born—he is repelled by the very idea of him, the very dream, itself.

For Tom, a man whose sense of place and self-importance has been nourished by a life of extreme wealth and privilege, Gatsby's gross social striving is emblematic of a larger threat to the exalted world he inhabits. "Civilization's going to pieces," he tells Nick at the opening of the novel, recommending he read *The Rise of the Coloured Empires*, a pseudoscientific tome that lends academic weight to a slender sense of existential dread. "The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged," Tom explains. "It's up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things."¹⁷

Nick finds this amusing – he calls the revelation that Tom has a mistress "less surprising" than the fact that "he had been depressed by a book" – but Tom proves obsessed with the stability of the social world he knows and the risk posed to it by those who do not know, or will not accept, their place in it. "Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions," he huffs, when Daisy objects to his insinuating remarks about her and Gatsby's relationship, "next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white."¹⁸

Nick says that Tom's "impassioned gibberish" is evidence that he sees himself as "standing alone on the last barrier of civilization," but he is merely giving voice to the feeling they all have about Gatsby, the feeling that Tom alone, immune to his charm and endangered by the loss of Daisy, cannot keep from venting. Namely, that relative to the sentimental physics they all know and share as members of the American elite, the glorified vulgarity that is Jay Gatsby is sensible discord incarnate. He doesn't merely cross the lines of good manners, he dances the Charleston right over them.

In this respect, Tom's conduct, brute though it may be, is unabashedly conservative. How the world ought to work is how it always has, and Tom supplies a cruel readiness to push back against any attempt to change it. The preemptory polo-player is every bit the aristocrat Fitzgerald intended him to be, an ambassador from the older world who, in his intolerance, professional lassitude, and smug rigidity, would undoubtedly be more familiar to the likes of Smith and Hume, Shakespeare and Montaigne than the atavistic Gatsby. Make no mistake, Tom Buchanan is a monster, but he is not a shining monster. That is the role of The Great Gatsby.

And this is the reason why a character like Tom, however lifelike and compelling, could never steal the story away from Jay Gatsby. In his "incorruptible dream," in the hope for something more and better than the anonymous fate staked him at birth, Gatsby is not only more remarkable than Tom, he is more quintessentially American, too.

Fitzgerald knew this, which is why he stuck with Gatsby and why, three weeks before the novel was finally published, he sent an urgent telegram to Perkins:

CRAZY ABOUT TITLE "UNDER THE RED WHITE AND BLUE"
STOP WHAT WOULD DELAY BE.¹⁹

The delay, Perkins told him, would be too much. The sentiment would remain implicit. *The Great Gatsby* would have to do.

There is something of Barack Obama in the tinsel-glint of Gatsby.²⁰ A man of unlikely past, whose aura is at once enchanting and strangely indistinct. A figure who spends his youth threading social circles in service of self-determined identity and some grand

design. A presence by turns desired and disruptive, but always electric, a current turned toward anxiety and awe.

All this—and a dazzling smile, too.

The differences are obvious, but some are no less intriguing, none more than the disposition toward the past. While Gatsby hails from the middle of nowhere, Obama is from nowhere exactly, a man who arrived in Chicago and later the White House by way of Honolulu, Jakarta, and seemingly all points west. Yet unlike Fitzgerald's creation, for whom obscure origins are an original sin, Obama has never distanced himself from his improbable past. On the contrary, it provided a rhetorical cornerstone for his first presidential campaign.

During that campaign, Obama consistently called upon the details of his transient childhood and scattered family, less to define his identity than to defend an ideal. "As the child of a black man and a white woman," he said

someone who was born in the racial melting pot of Hawaii, with a sister who's half Indonesian but who's usually mistaken for Mexican or Puerto Rican, and a brother-in-law and niece of Chinese descent, with some blood relatives who resemble Margaret Thatcher and others who could pass for Bernie Mac, so that family get-togethers over Christmas take the appearance of a UN General Assembly, I've never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe.²¹

The sentence reads like a moral declaration, the long unfurling of a universal flag. That is its purpose. It comes in *The Audacity of Hope*, a book published shortly before the 2008 presidential campaign.

Books by national candidates are not exactly distinguished for their elegance or introspection (or for being written by the author named), but Obama's defies the genre in all

respects while still hewing to its essential aim. Namely, not so much to present a manifesto and a memoir, but a manifesto *as* memoir, a common project for the body politic embodied in a single lived experiment.

The lived experiment of Barack Obama is a nation of uncertain sentimental physics and no established place. It is the primal fear of Tom Buchanan, and the very world Gatsby portends. What distinguishes Obama is not that he chooses such a world, he does, but only after it has chosen him. Indeed, this is the muted implication of the passage above, that the disposition to be inclusive, open-minded, and tolerant – to define one’s self not on the basis of tribe or race – may be a matter of moral conviction for some, but for Barack Obama, it was first and foremost a matter of fate.

That fate is chronicled in *Dreams From My Father*, Obama’s first book, a more intimate memoir written a decade before the prudential demands of politics put a high price on public confession. In it, he leads his readers along the switchbacks of his youth, scenes made famous by his first presidential campaign.

Obama began his life at the furthest outpost of Manifest Destiny and the nation’s final state. Even in 1961, Hawaii, by his account, defied the many of the sentimental conventions of the continental United States. “There were too many races, with power among them too diffuse, to impose the mainland’s rigid caste system,” he says, and for the newly arrived, the “chain of emerald rock” must have seemed like a place “where pioneers from across the globe could populate the land with children bronzed by the sun.”²²

His parents were two such pioneers, in more ways than one. Obama’s mother, Ann Dunham, was a barely 18 when he is born, a Kansan girl of talcum complexion newly

married to a Kenyan man, six years her senior, who gives the newborn child his name. Obama Sr. had arrived two years earlier, a student on a full scholarship and the first African to enroll at the University of Hawaii. The two meet in a Russian language class. There is love, marriage, and a baby, all in short order. Also in short order is their separation. By the time she is 20, Ann is a single mother, her husband having left his child for the greater promise of a Harvard PhD. But for a single visit when he is 10, Obama knows his father only by legend and occasional letter. For the most part, he is never more than a shade.

A divorce is granted, a few years pass, and Ann is remarried to another foreign student, Lolo, an Indonesian geologist of Chinese extraction, who returns home and, a year later, sends for his new wife and her six-year old son. They leave Honolulu for a small stucco house in the still growing outskirts of Jakarta, far enough that rice paddies and water buffaloes are just as familiar to Obama as two-wheel traffic and urban melee. He pals around with servant boys, marvels at monsoon season, and plays with Tata, his pet orangutan. Still possessed of a child's absorbent brain, Obama says that it takes him "less than six months to learn Indonesia's language, its customs, and its legends."²³ As for religion, his absent father had been a committed atheist, his mother skeptically inclined, but his stepfather introduces him to an ecumenical strand of Islam, one "that could make room for the remnants of more ancient animist and Hindu faiths."²⁴ Telling the boy that a man takes on the powers of whatever he eats, Lolo promises to bring him home a piece of tiger meat.

Yet the world is hardly idyllic. In addition to what Obama's calls "inconveniences" – "dysentery and fevers, the cold water baths and having to squat over a hole in the ground to pee" – there are the darker realities of an undeveloped country.²⁵ Obama is too young to

understand the precarious political circumstances of his new home, but he notices the soldiers on street corners and sentries in front of fashionable estates. There is also the open wound of poverty. “I didn’t tell Toot and Gramps about the face of the man who had come to our door one day with a gaping hole where his nose should have been,” he says of one of the beggars who swarmed Jakarta’s streets.²⁶ “The world was violent, I was learning, unpredictable and often cruel. My grandparents knew nothing of such a world, I decided there was no point in disturbing them with questions they couldn’t answer.”²⁷

He would soon find other ways to disturb them. At nine, Obama leaves behind his mother, stepfather, and a new baby sister to return to Hawaii. There, he moves into the two-bedroom apartment of his loving grandparents, Madelyn and Stanley. Transplants from the mainland, a bank executive and a struggling insurance salesman, Toot and Gramps (as he calls them) are a social world unto themselves: middle-aged and middle-class with Midwestern sensibilities.

Obama is enrolled in the fifth grade at Punahou Academy, the daily destination of privileged children on the island and the oldest private school west of the Mississippi. “Its reputation,” he says, “helped sway my mother in her decision to send me back to the States.”²⁸ Admitted to Punahou as a favor to Gramps, before school begins, Obama and his grandfather tour the 76-acre grounds. They navigate the “old masonry schoolhouses and modern structures of glass and steel” to see the “tennis courts, swimming pools, and photography studios.”²⁹ The sights make great impression on the old man. When they fall behind, he grabs Obama’s hand and whispers, “Hell Bar, this isn’t school. This is heaven.”³⁰

Obama continues like this for another 20 years, zigzagging across continents, cultures, and classes, following a path that will take him from the Ivy League to the inner city and back again. By any measure, including his own, his is an unusual youth, but Montaigne, for one, would have been delighted by it. Indeed, it contains all the elements of his pedagogical program. At a time when he is most impressionable, Obama is not merely exposed to but immersed in a “diversity of so many other lives, ideas, and customs.”³¹ His education and experience see him “taste such a perpetual variety of forms” with the result that the young man is spared the “common vice” of human beings, “to fix their aim and limit by the way to which they were born.”³² He is trained, instead, “for change and variation.”³³ He is shaped for shape-shifting.

But if Obama learns not to be bound by any single social world, the training is made easier by the fact that none seem to embrace him – at least not with open arms. His experience at Punahou is emblematic. The children don’t exactly ostracize him, but Obama is struck by the differences between them and haunted by the sense, as he puts it, “that I didn’t belong.”³⁴ He recounts

The clothes that Gramps and I had chosen for me were too old-fashioned; the Indonesian sandals that had served me so well in Djakarta were dowdy. Most of my classmates had been together since kindergarten; they lived in the same neighborhoods, in split-level homes with swimming pools; their fathers coached the same Little League teams; their mothers sponsored the bake sales. Nobody played soccer or badminton or chess, and I had no idea how to throw a football in a spiral or balance on a skateboard.³⁵

A few of these are the light embarrassments of foreign travel. Unpleasant, they may easily be mended. But there are also differences that can’t be overcome by the simple exchange of

sandals or even a few football lessons. It takes time to understand the social customs and sentimental physics of others, but far longer before they see you as integral to them. Obama's classmates have spent their lives learning to recognize themselves in their companions. Why should they make room for him?

Yet the distance Obama feels is not merely a matter of being accepted by others. He has his own difficulty embracing them. The most striking case is that of Ray, a student two years ahead of Obama who transfers to Punahou from a high school in Los Angeles. The two fall "into an easy friendship," he says, "due in no small part to the fact that together we made up almost half Punahou's black high school population."³⁶ Ray is cocky, irreverent, and cool – it is easy to see why the younger man admired him – but he is also a window into the African-American experience, a world that Obama is not only eager to understand, but one that he feels, by necessity, must somehow be his.

The two spend time on the local basketball courts, Obama says, with "the other blacks close to my age who had begun to trickle into the islands."³⁷ The young men share a candid camaraderie such that, whenever they are alone, the talk often turns to the one thing they share in common, the blisters of racial bigotry. Obama didn't escape them. "[M]y mind would run down a ledger of slights," he says: the first boy who called him a "coon;" the tennis pro who smirkingly told him not to touch a tournament sheet "because my color might rub off;" the old woman who became "agitated" when he entered an elevator behind her; and the assistant basketball coach who "calmly" tried to explain to him "there are black people, and there are niggers," and they had lost a pick-up game to the latter.³⁸

“That’s just how white folks will do you,” the other players would often say.³⁹ Obama does not relish the expression. “The term itself was uncomfortable in my mouth,” he says. “I felt like a non-native speaker tripping over a difficult phrase.”⁴⁰ He admits to using it (in what is an obvious attempt to fit in), but the phrase – *white folks* – never feels natural to him. “Sometimes I would find myself talking to Ray about *white folks* this or *white folks* that, and I would suddenly remember my mother’s smile, and the words that I spoke would seem awkward and false.”⁴¹

They seem that way to Obama because, in light of his own experience, that’s exactly what the words are to him: awkward and false. Despite the occasional reckoning with racism’s crudest face, Obama freely acknowledges that he was spared much of the bigotry he would have been exposed to had his mother’s family not been so unusually open-minded or had he been born in Alabama instead of the Aloha state. He presses Ray on the second point. “We weren’t living in the Jim Crow South, I would remind him. We weren’t consigned to some heatless housing project in Harlem or the Bronx. We were in goddamned Hawaii.”⁴² Ray admits that Obama has a point, but when he presses him further, “Maybe we could afford to give the bad-assed nigger pose a rest,” Ray turns on him.⁴³ “A pose, huh? Speak for your own self.”⁴⁴

Ray’s response is telling, for as opposed to Obama, *white folks* for him is not simply a password to some social world or the trademark of a chosen pose. It is an expression inflected with “bitter laughter,” the drawn curtain on a grievance Obama simply doesn’t share.⁴⁵ He can pretend he does, strike that pose, but the feeling that attends that phrase, *white folks*, is the long project of a particular experience. Ray and the others have had that

experience, one not flecked with racial prejudice but infused by it, and that is why *white folks* is not a phrase that seems awkward or false to them. Their lives have given it meaning, a meaning, we might say, that provides them with “the option of restricting [their] loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring [their] worth on the basis of tribe.”⁴⁶ They not only feel so inclined – “A pose, huh?” – they feel absolutely justified in their choice.

But Obama doesn’t have that choice. The sentimental physics of his life are so particular (and, to his own eyes, so hopelessly confused) that the felt identity of who he is doesn’t comfortably admit the shorthand of race or tribe. “I was different, after all,” he admits, “I had no idea who my self was.”⁴⁷

The assembly of that sentence – *I had no idea who my self was* – would have intrigued the likes of Smith and Hume. If it meant anything to them, the self was a sense, not an idea, a thing not discovered, but something already felt. It embodied the way we interact with people and experience the world, and its contours are made apparent when we confront other ways in other people that seem, in Obama’s words, awkward and false. In such moments, the feeling we have is one of sensible discord, an experience that outlines for us the laws of our own sentimental physics and reaffirms how we understand the human world. These laws are invisible, of course, and in a world where they are commonly shared, we rarely find reason to reflect on them. Then again, this is only because we are somewhat like dogs wearing an electric collar. We cannot see the lines of the invisible fence, but we know where they run—and know well enough not to tempt them.

The problem of Obama’s youth was a persistent feeling of sensible discord. He never found a collection of people – a group defined by tribe, race, or otherwise – who mirrored

his sense of self, who shared with him the felt necessities of experience, the sentimental physics that shaped and explained for him the human world. Not that he didn't try. *Dreams From My Father* is the aching chronicle of his efforts. "I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds," he says, "understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part, the two worlds would eventually cohere."⁴⁸ But they do not cohere, and "the feeling that something wasn't quite right stayed with me."⁴⁹

That incoherence is the friction between the sentimental physics of Barack Obama and that of everyone else around him. It is a painful feeling for Obama, one that underscores for him a profound sense of isolation. Gatsby is similarly isolated, but he doesn't recognize it for the same reason that a sense of incoherence strikes everyone but him. Gatsby never looks at others long enough to recognize what they don't share in common, that the friction between his world and Tom's is enough to power the searchlights at his dazzling soirees. But Obama is compelled from the very beginning of his life to study other people, and he ultimately proves such an apt pupil that he is not only able to "slip back and forth" between social worlds, he earns the provisional trust of others even as he feels an abiding incoherence between them. "Barack is the interpreter," says one of his long time friends. "To be a good interpreter means you need fluency in two languages, as well as cultural fluency on both sides."⁵⁰

You also need determined disinterest in the face of sensible discord, a trait essential to the empathy Obama has honed. As a young child, he says, his mother tried to instill in him a keen sense of empathy as a guiding light for his behavior. "She disdained any kind of

cruelty or thoughtlessness or abuse of power,” he says in *The Audacity of Hope*, and whenever “she saw even a hint of such behavior in me she would look me square in the eyes and ask, ‘How do you think that would make you feel?’”⁵¹

But while his mother played the teacher, it was in his relationship with his grandfather that Obama says he “first internalized the full meaning of empathy.”⁵² Obama spent his teens living with his grandparents, and he sparred with the more querulous and particular of his roommates, Gramps, “usually about me failing to abide by what I considered to be an endless series of petty and arbitrary rules—filling up the gas tank whenever I borrowed his car, say, or making sure that I rinsed out the milk carton before I put it in the garbage.”⁵³ With what he modestly terms “a certain talent for rhetoric, as well as an absolute certainty about the merits of my own views,” Obama says that he often won these arguments “in the narrow sense of leaving my grandfather flustered, angry, and sounding unreasonable.”⁵⁴ However, he notes, as he grew older, “such victories started to feel less satisfying.”⁵⁵ Obama begins to imagine why Gramps acts the way he does. “I started thinking about the struggles and disappointments he had seen in his life,” he says, in particular the fact that his “career had not been particularly successful,” an experience that left him chagrined and sometimes defensive, an old man whose feelings could be “easily bruised.”⁵⁶

It is important to note that the practice of empathy does not cause Obama to reevaluate the merits of particular arguments – in most cases, he clearly believes he had the better of them – rather it commends determined disinterest in the face of his own considered feelings, and in favor of a greater willingness to simply get along. Such a commitment, insofar as it entails patience, tolerance, and no small amount of restraint, is

essential to the empathy Obama practices and lends itself to the kind of eerie calm he is known for as well as a knack for understanding others and navigating a wide variety of social worlds.

Such skills served Obama well in his adolescent odyssey, but they have made him a gifted politician as well. “He can turn on and off the signals that work best,” Martha Minow, a former teacher, has observed, a talent that made Obama endearing to others, if occasionally doubtful as well.⁵⁷ “Barack earned the affection and trust of almost everyone,” a law school classmate has said. “The only criticism from conservatives was that he was somewhat two-faced and made everyone think he was all things to all people, that he was concealing his true feelings.”⁵⁸ Bobby Rush, a Congressman and the only person to ever beat Obama in a head-to-head political contest, takes an even more cynical tone:

He’s been adapting all his life. He had the discipline to accomplish it and the foresight to see what his vision of himself required, you know? Barack’s calculating in almost every decision in terms of how he wanted to project himself. Life is not a bunch of accidents, especially for someone with a huge vision of himself. He planned it out. If you desire to be great, the projective of your life has to be there, you have to map it out. And that’s what he did in every sense.⁵⁹

Rush is right to observe that a talent for adaptation, particularly when coupled with a certain empathic discipline, may serve some lifelong project, but he is wrong to imply that his former rival’s is merely a matter of splendid ambition. Obama came by his determined disinterest naturally, and if he has deployed it to exceptional effect, it is because he was trained by a childhood of blind corners and abruptness. Obama had no choice but to study others and to envision their social worlds, for such skills lent themselves to the kind of

dramatic dexterity that allowed him to integrate into different cultures and classes. And if he has continued to use those skills long after they stopped being necessary to his social survival, it is not only because they have proved exceedingly valuable for an ambitious politician. Far from just a convenient tool, determined disinterest, and the empathy it underpins, delivered Barack Obama from the crucible of personal identity and provided a promising politician the moral compass for a democratic idealism.

“When I meet people for the first time,” Obama says, “they sometimes quote back to me a line in my speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention that seemed to strike a chord: “There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America.””⁶⁰ The address, which was almost immediately elevated to the pantheon of American political rhetoric, launched an anonymous Illinois state senator to national prominence. For that one-time state senator, who would go on to occupy the highest office in the land, the speech’s success had less to do with the charismatic figure who delivered it than the vision of America it intended.

“[A]longside our famous individualism,” Obama said,

there’s another ingredient in the American saga: a belief that we’re all connected as one people.

If there is a child on the South Side of Chicago who can’t read, that matters to me, even if it’s not my child. If there’s a senior citizen somewhere who can’t pay for their prescription drugs and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it’s not my grandparent. If there’s an Arab American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.

It is that fundamental belief—that I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper—that makes this country work. It’s what allows us to pursue our individual dreams and yet still come together as one American family.

E pluribus unum. Out of many, one.⁶¹

For Obama, empathy is essential to that democratic conversion. He has called it “the heart of my moral code” and “a guidepost for my politics,” but his abiding faith in the transformative power of empathy is also the felt necessity and final lesson of his own adolescent experience.⁶²

Obama concludes *Dreams From My Father* with the journey he took to Kenya shortly before he started law school. His father had died in a car accident while he was still in college, but Obama longs to make sense of the man he barely knew and meet the undiscovered members of his family. At a deeper level, however, he hopes that he will unravel in Kenya what he calls “the mystery of my own life.”⁶³ He does, but not because he discovers himself (or *his* self) in yet another foreign place. Rather, he learns from the mistakes of his father and grandfather. They, too, were ambitious men who attempted to straddle social worlds – his grandfather that of rural Kenya and a colonial empire, his father that of a developing nation and a new world an ocean away. “Through force of will,” Obama says, they tried to “reinvent” themselves, to “create a life out of the scraps of an unknown world, and the memories of a world rendered obsolete.”⁶⁴ They failed, not, however, because their aims were unwise, but because their execution was incomplete. They did not understand that such reinvention could not take place isolated and alone, away from others, it had to be performed with a special faith “that wasn’t black or white or Christian or Muslim but that pulsed in the heart of the first African village and the first Kansas homestead—a faith in other people.”⁶⁵

Such faith doesn't merely invite sensible discord – it learns to embrace it. Obama has, in himself as well as in his politics. The “struggle set forth, on a miniature scale, in this book,” he says of *Dreams from My Father*, is one “between those who embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity, while still insisting on a set of values that binds us together, and those who would seek, under whatever flag or slogan, or sacred text, a certainty and simplification that justifies cruelty toward those not like us.”⁶⁶ Insofar as he had no choice but to embrace “irksome diversity,” some might say that Obama made a virtue of social necessity, yet for him, it is a necessity we all increasingly share. Obama's lived experiment is the ongoing American experiment, and it is guided by the belief that when we are determined “to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy,” we will not only learn how to disagree, be different, and still get along, we will also “remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.”⁶⁷

This is the present hope of a politics of empathy, that there can be common accord amid the din of ready difference. But the longer project is more ambitious still, that empathy won't only bridge basic differences but, as Obama envisioned in his first Inaugural Address, it will see them slowly flake away:

We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.⁶⁸

Barack Obama Determined Disinterest

¹ Fitzgerald, "TO: Maxwell Perkins c. January 24, 1925" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 95.

² Fitzgerald, "TO: Maxwell Perkins c. March 12, 1925" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 97.

³ Perkins, Maxwell. "TO: F. Scott Fitzgerald c. November 18, 1924" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*. New York: Scribner, 1994. 86.

⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 9.

⁵ Fitzgerald, "TO: Maxwell Perkins c. December 20, 1924" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 91.

⁶ Perkins, "TO: F. Scott Fitzgerald c. November 20, 1924" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Fitzgerald, "TO: Maxwell Perkins c. December 20, 1924" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 91.

⁹ Fitzgerald, "TO: Maxwell Perkins c. December 1, 1924" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 89.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹² Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *This Side of Paradise*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005. 19.

¹³ Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Ledger* entry, 1915 quoted in Brucoli, Matthew J. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald, 2nd Revised Edition*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press., 2002. 55.

¹⁴ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, 120, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁹ Fitzgerald, "TO: Maxwell Perkins c. March 19, 1925" in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, 98.

²⁰ The research for this essay was originally done with the encouragement and guidance of Linda Greenhouse at Yale Law School for a paper published by the *Yale Law Journal* in the fall of 2010, "Reversed on Appeal: The Uncertain Future of President Obama's "Empathy Standard."

²¹ Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope*. New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2006. 231.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Montaigne, "Of vanity" in *The Complete Works*, 904.

³² Montaigne, "Of vanity" in *The Complete Works*, 904; Montaigne, "Of ancient customs" in *The Complete Works*. 261-2.

³³ Montaigne, "Of experience" in *The Complete Works*, 1011.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁵ Obama, Barack. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004. 60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

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- ³⁸ Ibid., 80.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 80-1.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 81.
- ⁴² Ibid., 82.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 80.
- ⁴⁶ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*. 231.
- ⁴⁷ Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, 82.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 82.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Butts, Cassandra. As quoted in Remnick, David. *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. 190.
- ⁵¹ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 66.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 66-67.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 67.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 66.
- ⁵⁷ Minow, Martha. As quoted in Remnick, David. *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. 196.
- ⁵⁸ Berenson, Brad. As quoted in Remnick, David. *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. 207.
- ⁵⁹ Rush, Bobby. As quoted in Remnick, David. *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. 317.
- ⁶⁰ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 231.
- ⁶¹ Obama, Barack. “Democratic Convention Keynote Address (July 27, 2004)” in *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004. 687-8.
- ⁶² Ibid., 66-7.
- ⁶³ Obama. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, 432, 377.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 427.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 429.
- ⁶⁶ Obama. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, x.
- ⁶⁷ Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona,” January 12, 2011 (Retrieved from *The White House* website archive on July 21, 2017).
- ⁶⁸ Obama, Barack. “President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address,” January 21, 2009 (Retrieved from *White House* website archive on July 21, 2017)

Epilogue **Metamorphic Discipline**

A politics of empathy is underwritten by two remarkable assumptions, one involving the plasticity and potential of empathy, the other its transcendental bent. If we are determined “to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy,”¹ we might “embrace our teeming, colliding, irksome diversity” while locating “a set of values that binds us together.”² That, at least, is Barack Obama’s faith in the transformative power of empathy, and in respect to both the moral mechanism and model behavior it demands, his formulation well captures the strong form of the Empathic Conceit. Rather than the vision of Adam Smith or David Hume, which sees empathy as an instinct that blindly moves us to largely beneficial ends, Obama’s is that of a radical practice: patient, rigorous, and positively consistent with a new way of being.

I say “new” because the personal experience of most people isn’t favorable to a capacity for empathy that takes us far beyond the settled laws of our own sentimental physics. When people act in ways familiar to us – which is to say, in the very ways we might act – if we attempt stand in their shoes, they fit us quite

comfortably. We need only bring home their immediate circumstances to feel the way they feel and, in moments of urgency, to draw the appropriate lessons for moral action. The problem of empathy, in such cases, is more a matter of selfishness than psychic distance. I could know the way you feel if I only bothered to pay attention.

The American presidency is a strange occupation insofar as it doesn't give one the choice to be indifferent, not at least in any way consistent with occupational expediency. Whether in respect to the everyday demands of democratic engagement, the shifting accommodations of political persuasion, or the soft requirements of global diplomacy, a heightened empathic availability is incumbent upon a president in ways that make for a jarring contrast to the suffocating routines of the office.

Some of these routines are compelled by a calendar that is scheduled down to the minute. The president has far more demands on his time than might be met by any human being, however adroit, so in order to discharge as many of them as possible, his day is rigidly orchestrated to accommodate decisions, discussions, and engagements of every kind. Whether it is contemplating arcane amendments to the federal budget, debating the merits of an air strike an ocean away, or welcoming families to the annual Easter Egg Roll, from end to end of every day, the president is conducted along with alarming precision.

And yet, far more intriguing than the settled responsibilities of the office are the routines that are self-imposed. "You'll see I only wear gray or blue suits," President Obama told the America author, Michael Lewis, near the end of his first term in office.³ He didn't want to spend precious seconds in the morning paralyzed

before an open closet or figuring out what to eat for breakfast. “You can’t be going through the day distracted by trivia,” he explained of the cognitive requirements of the presidency. “You need to focus your decision-making energy. You need to routinize yourself.”⁴

One suspects that Barack Obama comes by that commitment quite easily. He is clearly a man of habit, so much so that a news story suggesting his evening snack of choice was precisely seven almonds was so widely credited (and seemingly consistent with the President’s behavior) that he had to disabuse his own friends of it (“I had to explain to them, no, this was a joke”).⁵

If it seems at odds with the knack for emotional improvisation required of a man whose daily affairs subject him to the widest array of human experience, such rigid self-command, such a capacity to “routinize” oneself, is actually quite conducive to empathy. On the one hand, if nothing else, determined disinterest is an exercise in self-restraint, a mode of engagement that privileges the needs of another over one’s immediate concerns or even the felt necessities of a sentimental physics. And when exercised in service of practical efficiency, such behavior provides more room for the indulgence of others (one less shirt to select, the more time for another’s suit) while habituating one to depersonalize any circumstances, not only to blunt the immediate impulse to respond to sensible discord, but to remain restrained in the face of events that implicate us.

Complete self-command in such circumstances is surely a challenge. The exercise of empathy is sometimes akin to a police detective watching an interrogation

behind a one-way mirror, but more often it not only involves direct engagement with another, the act responds to, and is almost inevitably productive of, a set of events in which one not an observer so much as an essential participant.

This is uniquely true of someone like Barack Obama. As Michael Lewis reflected after spending time with him, the American President “has the oddest relationship to the news of any human being on the planet.”⁶ No matter its origin or consequence, the news of the day “quickly finds him and forces him to make some decision about it: whether to respond to it, and shape it, or leave it be.”⁷ Moreover, Lewis continued, “on top of it all, the news to which he must respond is often about *him*.”⁸

Practically speaking, this means that, for better or worse, the president is never a passive observer. His words tend to alter, embellish, or distort the meaning of events. At the same time, his very presence in the company of others is a force unto itself, one capable of exerting a kind of gravitational pull on the collective psyche. The reason for this is memorably illustrated in Gore Vidal’s political drama *The Best Man*, when a civilian meets the President of the United States. At the end of their conversation, still starry-eyed, the man acknowledges, “I guess this is the biggest moment of my life.” The President grins. “I expect this *is* the biggest moment of your life,” he says, suggesting that such revelations are a standard part of the American presidency.⁹

Like his predecessors, Barack Obama benefitted from the flattering interpersonal dynamics that almost invariably favor the commander-in-chief, and his

uncanny ability to step forward while standing back, the detachment required by determined disinterest and the choreography of his own particular empathic engagement, is surely underwritten by the fact that others are inclined to accommodate him, either by silencing their emotions in favor of his or by forgetting themselves in his presence. The effect of such tendencies is to reduce the burden of empathy the president must shoulder, not so much by limiting the preposterous quantity or even the gross variety of instances in which the act is called upon, but by curbing or blunting altogether the urgency of the relevant emotion. People are generally on their best behavior when they meet the American President, which is highly advantageous to him in establishing a strong empathic connection, to say nothing of preserving his own peace of mind.

But there exceptions, even for Barack Obama, and they make for moments when the frontiers of his own capacity for empathy are probed and the price of such a journey is made apparent. None more remarkable than what he calls “the worst day of my presidency.”¹⁰

On December 14, 2012, just a few weeks after winning a second term in office, President Obama was given an impromptu briefing by his Homeland Security Advisor on the details a mass shooting. The attack wasn’t organized by adversaries abroad, the ultimate fear of federal officials after the destruction of the World Trade Center, nor was it the first time a gunman had chosen the adolescent precincts of a public school as the site for so much carnage, but the details of the assault on Sandy

Hook Elementary, a primary school in Newtown, Connecticut, were so austere and unforgiving as to beggar even the most hard boiled imagination.

After executing his mother while she lay sleeping, a young man whose name good taste and judicious custom preclude one from mentioning loaded into her car two handguns, a shotgun, and a rifle, all semi-automatic, in addition to hundreds of rounds of ammunition, then he drove a short distance to the public school he once attended.¹¹ There, dressed from head to foot in funereal black, he filled the pockets of an olive green utility vest with 30-round magazines, some of which were subjected to “jungle-taping,”¹² a practice of binding cartridges that allows one to release a clip and immediately engage another by flipping them, and shuttered the reasoning world with yellow earplugs, which were still snug when the police recovered his body.¹³

In addition to the side arms, a Sig Sauer and a Glock, the young man took the “long gun,” so called because the length of the weapon provides greater accuracy and stability, especially when discharging a volley of bullets. The first one shattered a plate glass window, allowing the young man to enter the school, the front doors being locked from the inside, a bleak and recent custom among grammar schools in the United States, but one clearly unavoidable. Running from a meeting when they heard the odd pops and ominous shower of glass, the principal and school psychologist were killed almost immediately after the young man had entered. A teacher who followed was wounded in the foot, arm, and hand. In a grim tribute to the gray amenities of the “long gun,” together with the fact that the young man used

“frangible ammunition,” which disintegrates on impact to inflict maximum tissue damage, she was one of only two people injured who survived that day.¹⁴

Then the unspeakable sequence began. The young man entered a first grade classroom and slaughtered everyone there except a little girl, who escaped by playing dead. Then he proceeded to a second room of first graders, where the calamity resumed.

In the course of an extensive forensics examination of the school, which was shuttered and subsequently razed, as if the ghosts, themselves, might be plowed under, over 150 shell casings were recovered, all of which were spent in roughly five-minutes before the police closed in and the young man, putting the Glock to his head, ended the horror.¹⁵ The stony efficiency of that final death stands in savage contrast to the others, some of whom were shot almost a dozen times.

It is impossible to know how many of these details were shared with Barack Obama in his first briefing, but more than enough that he found himself searching for composure, that afternoon, after he said in a statement that most of the victims were “beautiful little kids between the ages of 5 and 10.”¹⁶ As a journalist later described the moment, “For the first time in his presidency, he simply cannot bear to look at us.”¹⁷

Two days later, the President would journey to Newtown to meet with the bereaved. The centerpiece of the visit was an evening memorial service at which the he was scheduled to speak. Footage from the event concedes its strange nature, surreal, almost, relative to the familiar pomp of the presidency: A spartan stage in a

dour auditorium, a number of seats in the front row conspicuously empty. The makeshift podium is adorned with the ornate presidential seal, whose colors, together with those of two flags (the stars and stripes on one side, Connecticut's azure banner on the other) seem inappropriate against the tar black curtains behind them and immodest before the 27-votive candles at the foot of the stage.

A few speakers precede the President, most immediately Daniel Malloy, the Governor of Connecticut, whose words are most impressive for being measured, coherent, and direct despite the fact they are extemporaneous. The address, itself, is unexceptional, heartfelt but common, the kind of remarks that might be given in the aftermath of any disaster. In a rhetorical turn coincidental in hindsight and, in that respect, perhaps prophetic, the Governor recalls the anguished origins of the Christian hymn *Amazing Grace*, a story that would be invoked, again, by President Obama a few years later in service of a second tragedy. In that instance, however, the tale of a spiritual that celebrated a slave-trader's conversion (the "wretch like me" described in the hymn) would be used to underscore the kinship and consanguinity between the trials of African Americans at every turning point in the American experience and the fate of nine black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina, shot by a white supremacist in their church as they concluded a prayer group.

That second speech, most remembered for the President intoning the first verse of *Amazing Grace* before the congregation joined him in song, highlights a familiar element of Obama's oratory, at least in tragic moments, when it eschews well-worn homilies on pain and sorrow for a willingness to acknowledge, and even

interpret, a particular ache. There is risk in such a strategy—considerable risk, in fact. To acknowledge grief in general terms tends to release another, however briefly, from the particular elements of an immediate pain. It reminds her that she is part of a community of suffering that includes every one of us at some time or another, rescuing her, however briefly, from the deepest trough of misery.

To offer such consolation not only favors sympathy over empathy, it elides empathy in service of that aim. The details of the immediate devastation are implied but not investigated, the embers of loss left to smolder on the plain. On the contrary, to speak to the specific circumstances of some grief is not only to retrieve those embers and hold them close but to fill them with breath until they glow once again.

And that is one reason why President Obama's Newtown speech appears the most courageous of his presidency, courageous and, for one moment at least, even foolhardy, for one cannot embrace red embers without a willingness to be burned.

The moment occurs just a few minutes into the nearly 20-minute speech, which will conclude with a terrible roster of 20 children who died in the shooting. The 45-second roll call—*James, Grace, Emily, Jack, Noah, Caroline*—is the indelible passage of the address, but another, added, one suspects, for reasons of oratorical symmetry as much as necessity of circumstance, is far more extraordinary for the response it provokes.

The President begins on a tentative note, stiff almost relative to the athletic self-assurance that typifies his stage presence. After boilerplate familiar to every presidential address – “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, governor. To all the

families, first responders” – he picks his way across an extended passage from Second Corinthians (“so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen”) before turning to the catastrophe that brought them together. For most of that time, no more than 90 seconds, a baby has cried, wailed, in fact, screaming its guts out somewhere in the auditorium.¹⁸ The President pushes ahead. At first, he favors an approach similar to the Governor of Connecticut. “We gather here in memory of 20 beautiful children and six remarkable adults,” he says.¹⁹ “They lost their lives in a school that could have been any school in a quiet town full of good and decent people that could be any town in America.”²⁰ That it could be “any school” or “any town” at once suggests a sympathetic connection (“our world, too, has been torn apart,” he says) while generalizing the tragedy as another instance of deepest grief and, therefore, a timeless episode in the human tableaux.²¹

Then, however, almost three minutes into the speech, there is a shift, and Obama begins to re-interpret the ache. “As these difficult days have unfolded,” he says, “you’ve also inspired us with stories of strength and resolve and sacrifice.”²² The baby has stopped crying. The silence of the crowd seems somehow less eerie. He forges ahead. “We know that when danger arrived in the halls of Sandy Hook Elementary, the school’s staff did not flinch”—the words at last finding a familiar cadence, rising to the music of moral urgency—“They did not hesitate.”²³

Then the other roll call begins, second in memory, first in the speech. The President announces the first two names, “Dawn Hochsprung and Mary Sherlach,” and a single anguished cry goes up somewhere in the audience.²⁴

The President doesn't hear it, not at first, not that the sound is unexpected. Nothing is more particular than a name, nothing brings to mind the full measure of another person with greater force or precision. As such, the cry is not surprising, not for someone who so recently lost a loved one in circumstances so appalling and pointless they are absolutely unbearable. And if President doesn't hear that expression of pain, it is only for a moment, for sobs, heaving sobs, too heavy for a child's, too high to be a man's, follow along, and for an instant, the noise is loud enough to fill the auditorium with a feral note a hopelessness.

The President's pause at that moment is nearly imperceptible, but unforgettable once you've seen it. His head, which has a tendency to sway with his words whenever he enters a soaring passage, stops abruptly, his sharp chin jutting briefly in the sound's direction. His eyes fix on something, and his face tightens in recognition. It's the look of a man who's glimpsed something terrible, something he knows he should not see. For a moment, he is grief stricken.

Then he continues—"Vicki Soto, Lauren Rousseau, Rachel Davino, and Ann Marie Murphy"—but the drama of the speech has changed.²⁵ The attempt to retrieve the audience has been temporarily aborted, for the tide of empathy has shifted. Obama has been pulled back into their world, back into the very depths of despair.

Demanding Roles

A few years after the Sandy Hook address, an account was shared of the unreported hours President Obama spent before the vigil. He had told his staff that, when he visited Newtown, he wanted to meet with the families of those who had been killed in the shooting, which is to say, 26 groups of people enduring unimaginable grief. The families were assembled a few hours before the Sunday address and divided among “seven or eight” classrooms in the high school where the memorial service was being held.²⁶ A White House team laid out “water and tissues and snacks” in every room, but as one assistant, Joshua Dubois, described the arrangements, “[W]e didn’t know how to prepare; it was the best we could think of.”²⁷

When the President arrived, he was escorted to the first of these classroom rooms, where Dubois provided an overview of the assembly inside: “Two families per classroom . . . The first is . . . and their child was . . . The second is . . . and their child was . . . We’ll tell you the rest as you go.”²⁸ Then, says Dubois, the President, “took a deep breath and steeled himself” and proceeded into the first of these rooms.²⁹ Dubois describes the scene that followed:

Person after person received an engulfing hug from our commander in chief. He’d say, “Tell me about your son. . . . Tell me about your daughter,” and then hold pictures of the lost beloved as their parents described favorite foods, television shows, and the sound of their laughter. For the younger siblings of those who had passed away—many of them two, three, or four years old, too young to understand it all—the president would grab them and toss them, laughing, up into the air, and then hand them a box of White House M&M’s, which were always kept close at hand.³⁰

The emotional versatility of such a scene is striking. The President enters the shattered world of a family he has never met and, for a few minutes, makes himself at home. Then he turns to another family, also anonymous, for the same harrowing rite, all while attending to the children, whose innocence protects them from a full understanding their parents' pain.

For me, the most remarkable moment is what follows when he is done spending time with the families. The President leaves the classroom, says Dubois, "back into those fluorescent hallways."³¹ There, beside the door to another room of extraordinary grief, he would "walk through the names of the coming families." Then, when he was ready, "the entire scene would repeat—for hours."³²

"I remember worrying about the toll it was taking on him," Dubois confesses.³³ If that concern seems well-placed, that is because we typically think that emotional experiences, especially tragic ones, leave some kind of trace, whether it is merely a faint recollection that colors our disposition in kindred circumstances or an ominous bent that betokens a deep scar in our psyche. The idea that one might endure a terrible event without any lingering effect seems the evidence of something inhuman or else the mark of extraordinary self-command that may amount to more or less the same thing.

Shakespeare suggests something of the sort near the end of the first act of *Othello*, when a lovesick Rodrigo threatens to drown himself over the loss of Desdemona. Iago upbraids his pawn for being silly and petulant, but Rodrigo

hopelessly replies that there is nothing he can do about the way he feels, for it is not within his “virtue” or power to “amend” it.³⁴ Iago snorts:

Virtue? a fig! ‘tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners. So that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many, either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry — why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.³⁵

Iago’s commentary may be read as a simple commendation of self-command, that our reasoning faculties may subdue the passions to prevent them from leading us to “preposterous conclusions,” such as drowning ourselves over the loss of a woman’s hand. Still I have always regarded the passage as hinting at something far more remarkable, an almost uncanny ideal of self-possession, one conducive to, and consequent of, a kind of metamorphic discipline. Whether by virtue of concerted exercise or native aptitude, we can conduct ourselves such that our feelings leave no ineluctable legacy. We can “plant” them in our breasts or “weed” them up at will.

I discovered this passage not long before enrolling in “Shakespeare Acted,” a class at Yale College designed to bridge the gap between the study of Shakespeare’s plays as literature and the engagement with them as divine fodder for a dramatic enterprise. My time in that class helped me to compose the fourth essay of this collection, an experience that included performing or, perhaps more accurately, parroting the monologue above. In addition to the fact that “honest Iago” is, himself, one of the most convincing imposters in Shakespeare’s plays, his vision seemed

consistent with what I imagined to be an essential part of acting, both in respect to observing the requirements of the craft as well as preserving one's sanity. Much like the quiet moments in the fluorescent hallway before Barack Obama entered another classroom, I assumed that an actor behind the curtain must clear himself of the sentimental physics that characterize his identity before stepping forward on stage. By the same token, I also imagined that he had to possess the capacity to zero out those assumed emotions -- "weed" them up, if you will -- when the ovation subsided and the show was over, for to carry with you into the alley outside the theater the incandescent ecstasies of Hamlet or the carnal wrath of King Lear is a road to madness surely.

I returned to these reflections as I began to take up the criticisms of the first draft of the essays that comprise this collection. Among them was a challenge to consider the perils of putting so much faith in empathy. As I note in the prologue when I discuss the strong and weak forms of the Empathic Conceit, empathy is sometimes treated as a panacea to popular moral problems. If we committed ourselves to the practice of empathy, so the strong form holds, we would not only be kinder and more pleasant people in general (recognizing, as we would, ourselves in each other), but the rigid convictions that so often divide us, whether of a moral, political, or cultural variety, would weaken, allowing us to find common ground on a whole host of issues.

Now whether or not the practice of empathy has the effect of leading us to universal positions on complex matters, this possibility seemed to me only worth

seriously contemplating after investigating the requirements of making empathy a way of life. Accordingly, I returned to the lessons of the third and fourth essays of this collection, those of Montaigne and Shakespeare respectively. Both essays describe how empathy might be cultivated as a self-conscious, committed act, rather than the instinctive exercise that David Hume and Adam Smith celebrate. For these icons of the Scottish Enlightenment, the strength and scope of empathy is determined by a sentimental physics, the forces of which are constituted by individual experience and therefore vary across time, space, and culture. Accordingly, to dramatically expand one's capacity for empathy in order to appreciate those whose ways were contrary to our own is to act in spite of the felt wisdom of these forces, and for Smith and Hume alike, such an errand is more or less akin to acting in spite of gravity: foolhardy, pointless, and nearly impossible to maintain. Indeed, if sensible discord is a warning sign to restore the human world to familiar lines of behavior, the suggestion is less advisory than viscerally incumbent.

Reflecting on what might it mean to shift empathy from an instinct to a practice and reviewing the programs described in the third and four essays, I ultimately determined that, if I wanted to explore the outer limits of empathic understanding and the metamorphic discipline underwriting the journey, the training consistent with the selfless empathy of Shakespeare was ultimately a superior approach to Montaigne's unsystematic empathy. There were a number of reasons for this decision, not the least of which being the practical requirements of extensive foreign travel. Montaigne's peripatetic journey through Germany, Switzerland,

Austria, and Italy consumed nearly a year and a half of his life and interrupted only what he assumed to be an early retirement from public affairs. For those of us who don't enjoy the privileges of a 16th-century French aristocrat, the financial and professional impediments to wandering abroad for a sustained period of time are more than enough to eliminate Montaigne's example as a viable alternative. And yet, in respect to exploring the frontier of empathy, it is also true that Montaigne's approach is simply less demanding than that of Shakespeare's. Like a tourist who assembles knickknacks from every corner of the globe to fill the mantle over his fireplace, Montaigne is always collecting customs and practices to add to his own. Such efforts no doubt endow him with a perspicacious, pliant nature, one that is not only conducive to empathic connection but eager for the opportunity, but they never see him exchange the elements of his own identity entirely. At the same time, for the most part, they also fail to probe the abrasive sensibilities of those with whom it is hardest to make such a connection: the sordid, the fussy, or the simply unpleasant, to say nothing of the downright dangerous.

For anyone inclined to investigate the frontiers of empathy, this is no small shortcoming. Such individuals typically prove the greatest obstacles to the common cause envisioned by adherents to the strong form of the Empathic Conceit, and, thus, successfully understanding their worlds could be essential to testing the benefits of empathic communion with those whose behavior places them far beyond the conventions of polite society. Still, the difficulty involved in that undertaking should not be underestimated. The reason that we typically avoid congenital misfits and the

marginally misanthropic is that they can be exhausting to deal with. Their behavior begs constant accommodation not so much because they are indifferent to others but because they often obey the sentimental physics of an insensible imagination, self-contained and *sui generis*. Blithe to the full measure of the sensible discord they create, they go about unchecked by the cardinal impulse of empathy: To meet another halfway.

If empathic understanding is largely instinctive, an exercise in appropriating experience whose warp and woof would be our own were we in the same situation, to bring home the feelings of strange agents, to not merely make sense of them as one might the mechanical heart of an arcane contraption but, as the spark that enlivens it, to channel their dark energy—this is no small undertaking. At the very least, it takes time, care, and attention of the highest order, and the challenge is even greater when it comes to someone's whose behavior doesn't irritate so much as appall. Sharing the experience of the Sandy Hook parents is an anguished, grueling exercise, but let us be candid: How does it compare with standing in the shoes of the young man who murdered their children? What might be required of empathy in such an instance? At what cost? And even if one is successful, to what end?

Re-Education

These were some of the questions I hoped to answer by returning to the Shakespearean vision of selfless empathy and committing myself to the metamorphic discipline of dramatic training. I wanted to see if I could endow myself with a talent

for disabling sensible discord, adopting a foreign sentimental physics, and stepping into shoes of those whose lives were entirely different from mine, people who would irritate or outrage me, whose trials I would never, ever want to share.

In other words, to explore the outer reaches of empathy, for a time, I would inhabit an actor.

With that end in mind, there are any number of acting schools I might have chosen for my assignment, but in the United States, nearly all of them are descendents of the artistic vision of Konstantin Stanislavski, whose “School of Experience,” as he termed it, aimed to “prepare the soil” of the actor’s psyche for a “kind of genuine subconscious creation.”³⁶

The founder of the Moscow Art Theater and a capable actor who failed to dominate the craft he so decidedly shaped, Stanislavski despaired of the acting he was exposed to as a young man, the style of which was described by the most famous Russian actor of the 19th-century, Mikhail Shchepkin, as being deemed “excellent” when an actor did not speak “in his natural voice,” when “the words ‘love,’ ‘passion,’ ‘treason,’ were uttered as loud as possible,” and when, having finished “a long monologue,” the hero went “off into the wings with his right arm raised.”³⁷

Shchepkin, a serf whose freedom was purchased by admirers when he was in his mid-30s, died in 1863, the same year Stanislavski was born. His influence on the younger man came by way of Gilkeriya Fedotova, an actress who was at once old enough to have studied under Shchepkin and young enough to teach Stanislavski. Shchepkin’s proto-realism, imparted by Fedotova, became the north star for

Stanislavski's art, which he believed was especially well suited to the naturalism of the contemporary works he brought to the stage from the playwrights such as Anton Chekov and Maxim Gorky, both of whom he counted as friends. His commitment as a director to breaking down the wall between seeming and being hardly made him averse to dramatic flourish – he had such an affinity for sound effects that Chekhov once threatened to open play with, “Isn't it incredible, such a hot summer and you can't hear a cicada anywhere!” – but Stanislavsky knew that, however remarkable and, indeed, realistic the ambience of a play, its success relied entirely on the humanity of the ensemble.³⁸

Even if Stanislavsky could successfully identify a compelling turn on stage, like a young sculptor who stands longingly before the Pietà, that did not mean he could recreate the wonder once he had returned to his studio, much less train anyone else to a similar end. He spent years working, and reworking, the pedagogical approach described in *An Actor's Work*, a book that brings together *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*, two separate volumes that focused, respectively, on the inner and outer techniques of an actor's training.

An Actor Prepares was first published in English in 1936, 13 years before a translation of *Building a Character* appeared, and both because of its head start as well as its revolutionary insights, the lessons of that first volume are most commonly associated with what it is conventionally termed the Stanislavsky System. Fittingly, the work is presented as an extended play in which an acting teacher who bears more than a passing resemblance to the author instructs a group of young actors on the

elements of their craft. At the beginning of the book, Stanislavsky's stand-in, Tortsov, distinguishes the "School of Experience" from the dominant approach to acting, the "School of Representation." Citing the great French actor Benoit-Constant Coequelin as both an exceptional student of that second school as well as its outstanding apologist, Tortsov quotes from Coequelin's *L'Art du Comédien* to describe the more conventional approach to acting:

"The actor creates a model in his imagination, then like a painter, captures every trait and transfers it not onto canvas but onto himself," Tortsov read "Then, like the painter, he captures all its features and puts them not on canvas, but on himself. He endows his *Two* with every aspect of this person. He sees Tartuffe in a particular costume. He puts it on. He sees a certain way of walking and copies it. He forces his own face, and, as it were, like a tailor cuts and sews his own flesh until the critic inside his *One* is happy and says that this indeed looks like Tartuffe. But the matter does not end there, for there would only be a superficial resemblance, the outside of a character, not the character itself. He must make Tartuffe speak with the voice he thinks should be his and should make him walk and talk, think and listen with the very soul he thinks to be Tartuffe's to shape the entire performance. Only then is the portrait ready."³⁹

If the precision required of such an approach is to be admired – and at its very best, Tortsov says, it is deserving of admiration – for the artist, the price of such precision is a kind of sterile dispassion. "The actor does not live but plays," Tortsov says, citing Coequelin. "He remains cold towards the object of his acting, but his artistry must be perfect."⁴⁰

For Tortsov, such an approach to acting prizes style over soulfulness and tends, like the efforts of the undertaker, to apply its art to something lifeless. "This kind of acting has beauty but no depth," he says.⁴¹ "It is effective rather than deep.

Form is more interesting than content. It acts on the eyes and ears rather than on the heart and, in consequence, more readily delights than disturbs.”⁴² No doubt, he continues, “acting of this kind can make a considerable impression, one which grips you while you are watching and leaves you with beautiful memories, but these impressions don’t warm your heart or go very deep. Its effect is acute but transitory. You marvel, but you don’t believe.”⁴³

That you are supposed to believe that an actor is channeling the feelings of a character, indeed, that he has become the character rather than a fabulous fraud, was the singular aim of Stanislavsky’s School of Experience. “Between your art and mine there is the same gulf fixed as between the words ‘seem’ and ‘be,’”⁴⁴ Tortsov tells a student who has pledged allegiance to the School of Representation. “In your kind of acting an audience is an audience. In my kind it becomes an involuntary witness of and a participant in the creative process.”⁴⁵

To that end, Stanislavsky describes his “psychotechnique,” an intensive curriculum that mixes enigmatic exercises with virtual free play, tilling the hardened earth of one’s habits in order to “prepare the soil” for “genuine, subconscious creation,” a faculty for dramatic potential that was essential to achieving verisimilitude in actor and audience alike.⁴⁶ Such training, which is engaged long before the aspiring actor attempts to embody a specific role, was likened by one of Stanislavsky’s apostles, Lee Strasberg, to the rigorous workouts of a professional athlete. “No football player starts immediately testing his ability to perform his specialty,” Strasberg writes in his own memoir-cum-acting-manifesto. “[T]hey limber up, they

exercise generally, they run, they do calisthenics, and then they easily start performing their specialties.”⁴⁷

In the metamorphic discipline of Stanislavsky and his acolytes, this limbering up seems to involve four components. The first is Relaxation. As Stanislavsky reflected on what characterized exceptional performances, one consistency that stood out to him was that the very best actors always seem at ease on stage. Even when engulfed in a passion they seemed unencumbered by the claustrophobic self-awareness that stiffens the sinews when the eyes of the room are watching. Obviously, the comfort of routine is some help – an ancient Falstaff likely feels a little more at home on stage than shallow Hal – but especially insofar as Stanislavsky aimed to eliminate the “theatrical” element from the theater, training students so as not to appear permanently on the verge of delivering *To be or not to be*, he required an approach that favored the mundane, even the humdrum, over high drama.

The exercises that comprise this first element of the training achieve their purpose, at once, by focus and distraction. Take, for example, an episode in *An Actor Prepares* when Tortsov asks a student, who is also the narrator of the book, to take the stage before his fellow actors and do nothing more than sit on a chair. The experience quickly unravels the student’s composure. “I was split down the middle by conflicting demands,” he says.⁴⁸ “The stage by its very nature put me on display, while the human feelings I was looking for needed solitude.” The anxiety mounts. “There was one person inside me who wanted me to entertain the audience, and another who told me to pay no attention to them,” he says. “A simple movement of

the hand or foot turned into something mannered. The result was a kind of photographic pose.”⁴⁹

Tortsov then calls up another student, Marya, who sits on the stage beside him, waiting while he locates a passage from his notebook. She “gradually settled down and finally stopped moving completely, fixing her gaze attentively on Tortsov. She was afraid of disturbing him and patiently waited for further instructions from her teacher. Her pose became natural.”⁵⁰ Then, after a time, the curtains abruptly close, and Tortsov subsequently asks Marya how she felt. She is confused. “I thought I was just sitting and waiting until you found what you wanted in your notebook and told me what you wanted to do. I didn’t act anything at all!”⁵¹ Tortsov replies, “That’s just what was good about it, that you were sitting there for a reason and weren’t playacting.”⁵²

Such deceptively simple exercises are familiar to acting classes that descend from the Stanislavsky system. By bringing the actor before others and focusing him on something—say, listening intently to the outside world for three distinct sounds or engaging in a concrete task, folding clothes, perhaps, or assembling a puzzle—he is distracted from the fact that he is nevertheless still on stage. The aim of such exercises is to take you “out of your head” (a routine cautionary note to actors), the insight being that, when you are unselfconscious, when you are not thinking about your next line or how you may appear to the gallery of faces beyond the fourth wall, you seem at home in whatever you’re doing. Rather than learning how to act, you begin by learning how to be.

Relaxation allows for Receptivity, the second component part of an actor's training in Stanislavsky's School of Experience. In acting classes, and around the theater world generally, it is a high compliment to say an actor is "in touch" with his emotions, a tribute that is typically paid to someone who has shed the armor of everyday life, an image often invoked to describe the customary habits that allow us to endure disappointments and complex daily demands with equanimity, good manners, and great self-restraint. Such a dramatic aptitude for being acutely affected by others can seem at odds with a relaxed state, but only if you don't narrow the source of the disturbance. Think again of the would-be actor sitting before his fellow students on an empty stage. If he is an amateur, we would expect him to become overwhelmed fighting the feeling of embarrassment, a struggle that would play out in behavior that hardly suggests the young man is at ease. And yet, the goal of the Stanislavsky System, and its descendents, is not to inculcate a kind of Zen detachment, but to free the actor from the artistic self-consciousness that serves to constrict one's expression and render the choices he makes wooden and forced. To be receptive, in a theatrical sense, is to allow for real human feeling within confines of the play—and that, of course, can include dramatic circumstances in which one would feel the deepest sense of embarrassment.

Another of Stanislavsky's American acolytes, Sanford Meiser, describes just such an instance as the quintessence of acting. Citing a review by George Bernard Shaw of Hermann Sudermann's *Home*, Meisner recounts the lasting impression the Italian actress Eleonora Duse made on Shaw at a pivotal moment in the play. After

breaking with her father's wishes and leaving to pursue a career as an opera singer, Duse's character finally returns home, having achieved her dreams, and reunites with her family. Soon, however, she discovers that a newly minted family friend is actually a former artistic colleague of hers as well as the absentee father of her child. When the man comes to call on her, at first, she receives him gamely, and it is only when they sit down that "a terrible thing happened." Shaw continues:

"She began to blush; and in another moment she was conscious of it, and the blush was slowly spreading and deepening until, after a few vain efforts to avert her face or to obstruct his view of it without seeming to do so, she gave up and hid the blush in her hands."⁵³

Shaw marveled at such dramatic vulnerability – "I could detect no trick in it: it seemed to me a perfectly genuine effect of the dramatic imagination" – and Meisner writes with awe of moment as "the epitome of living truthfully under imaginary circumstances," a state of being, for him, that is the very "definition of good acting."⁵⁴

To be so vulnerable, so open to the influence of others, is the aim of those exercises that cultivate dramatic receptivity. Meisner, for example, picks up on one of the overlooked elements of Stanislavsky's system, Communion. When the actor goes onstage, Stanislavsky writes, "he naturally carries with him his own thoughts, personal feelings, his ideas from the real world."⁵⁵ These distractions tend to "break the lifeline of the character," undermining his performance and, therein, the play.⁵⁶ To remedy this problem, but also to engage the imagination of the audience, actors "must take great care always to be in unbroken communication with their partner through their

own feelings, thought, and actions, which are similar to the feelings, thoughts and actions of the character.”⁵⁷ In other words, rather than a mechanical exercise in which actors merely bleat lines at one another while marching along a predetermined path, actors must meet each other on stage as lively human beings who, from moment-to-moment, are capable of doing pretty much anything.

In Meisner’s case, this focus on “moment-to-moment” work demanded that actors listen to each other, truly take each other in, rather than obsess over what the audience was seeing or the next line of dialogue. On the blackboard of his New York studio, he wrote what was, by turns, an observation and a commandment that structured his approach to acting: “An Ounce of BEHAVIOR IS Worth a Pound of WORDS.”⁵⁸ In favor of that end, and to release students from the tendency toward crippling self-awareness, he crafted exercises where, as he put it, “there is no intellectuality.”⁵⁹ He wanted to “eliminate all that “head” work” from acting, “to take away all the mental manipulation and to get where impulses come from.”⁶⁰

These “impulses” help to unite Receptivity with the third component of the Stanislavsky System, Reaction. In Meisner’s adaptation, students are introduced to repetition, an improvisational game where two students interact with verbal recourse to brief statements that both isolate and respond to how they’re feeling in a given moment. As Meisner describes the repetition game in his own book:

Let’s say I say to you, ‘Lend me ten dollars.’ And you say, ‘Lend you ten dollars?’ ‘Yes, lend me ten dollars.’ And that goes on for five or six times until—and this is vital—your refusal sets up an impulse in me which comes directly out of the repetition and it makes me say to you, ‘You’re a stinker!’ That’s repetition which leads to impulses. It is not

intellectual. It is emotional and impulsive, and *gradually* when the actors I train improvise, what they say . . . comes not from the head but truthfully from the impulses.⁶¹

It is important to note that such a game only works if each person is taking the other in, not only listening to but allowing that person to affect her behavior. When someone says, “You’re a stinker!” – and given that my own exposure to the Stanislavsky system came by way of the Meisner variant, I can say with some confidence that one typically hears much worse – the exercise fails if one says what he is already thinking, checks his response, or simply ignores his partner, altogether. If, instead, he feels the insult and, enraged by it, flips his partner the bird and yells, “You’re a sponge!” (or, again, something far cruder), he has received the insult, felt the blow, and reacted instinctively. This, for Meisner, is “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances.”⁶² The point is not only to allow for honest feelings but, by lived behavior, to let them show.

Of course, it needn’t be said that few of us go through our days constantly confronted by extravagant situations that provoke passionate reactions. Such events make for terrible lives, if terrific theater. This is a point worth lingering over, for consider the contrary circumstances. “[I]magine that the [playwright] brings on two characters who don’t know each other, who neither wish to introduce themselves, nor exchange their thoughts and feelings but, on the contrary, to hide them, and who sit, silent, in different corners of the stage,” Stanislavsky says in *An Actor Prepares*. “If that’s the case, the audience is wasting its time.”⁶³ Indeed, there’s no drama of which to speak.

The training designed and inspired by Stanislavsky aims to remedy the fact that our lives aren't essentially dramatic. Sure, we all are thrust into the middle of urgent events from time to time, but for the most part they are fleeting. Moreover, even in the midst of them, rarely do we crack, rarer still do we shatter entirely. We “stay strong,” which is to say stiff and inflexible, consistent with the conventional forces of our sentimental physics, and, thus, dramatically speaking, a tad boring. Good plays not only take us to a highly emotional place, but relative to the untroubled tempo of every day life, they do so with primal haste.

Accordingly, the elements of the Stanislavsky System as I've described them—Relaxation, Receptivity, Reaction—all attempt to acclimate actors to the celerity and pitch of dramatic passion, but in so doing, they support the final element of the training: Range.

Describing the central insight she took from Stanislavsky when she studied under him at the very end of his life, Stella Adler observed that an “actor must have an enormous imagination, uninhibited by self-consciousness.”⁶⁴ Born into family of performers, Adler was a gifted stage actress who, along with Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner, established the third major mid-century school of acting in the United States that was inspired by the Stanislavsky System. While the three teachers diverged on the intellectualism of an actor's craft (contrary to Meisner's more carnal approach, Adler always maintained that an actor required the “the deep esthetic sense of the aristocrat”⁶⁵) and the role of experience in creating a character (Strasberg's focus on “affective memory” made personal experience an essential reservoir of

dramatic feeling, whereas Adler, in particular, believed it could narrow creative ingenuity⁶⁶), all three agreed that the exercises consistent with Relaxation, Receptivity, and Reaction prepared one to extend his Range precisely because they loosened the attitudinal tendencies that inhibited behavior. “The stretch is a great privilege,” Adler declared in her book, *The Art of Acting*, inadvertently echoing Strasberg. “[I]t isn’t easy. But when the artist does stretch, the entire world limbers up.”⁶⁷

Another way of saying this is that, by the exercises an actor engages in during his training, the world of emotion opens up, and for Stanislavsky and his acolytes, it does so in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the actor is exposed, and conditioned to, a broader range of emotion as well as the expressive behavior consistent with it. While Meisner’s repetition game trained students to become alarmingly comfortable with falling in love or flying into a rage at a moment’s notice, Adler encouraged her students to visit the zoo and study the behavior of the animals. “Learn to screech like a monkey. Make bird calls. Roar like a lion,” she said. “Being an animal teaches you about spontaneity. If you’re scared, do something. If you’re hungry, do something. Always be specific, never general, and do everything to the maximum.”⁶⁸

The second way in which the world opened up is that, by shaping one for shape-shifting, such training made an actor’s imagination more labile, capacious, and susceptible, which is to say, more predisposed to the demands of creative empathy, a faculty that works by encouragement rather than command. “You can’t squeeze feelings out of yourself,” Tortsov warns his students in *An Actor Prepares*, “you can’t be jealous, love, suffer for the sake of being jealous, loving, or suffering. That only

leads to the most repulsive kind of ham acting.”⁶⁹ Instead, one needed “decoys” to “lure” such feelings from “the deep recesses of our mind.”⁷⁰ For Adler, the most powerful of these decoys was what Stanislavsky called “Given Circumstances.” The actor, both by research and creative reflection, had to shade in the circumstances of some imagined setting, an effort that was singularly important when the training finally turned to breathing life into an actual play. “Your curse is that you have chosen a form that requires endless study,” she told her students:

Your job is to know what political time a play is set in, what class the characters are in, what style the play is written in. This doesn’t mean you have to go to Harvard. It doesn’t mean you have to spend the rest of your life taking classes at the Stella Adler Conservatory.

It means you have to read, you have to observe, you have to think, so that when you turn your imagination on, it has the fuel to do its job.⁷¹

By giving color, depth, and tone to the Given Circumstances of a play, those prescribed by the playwright as well as others that were self-imposed, the actor made lifelike the imagined world of the play such that, once of the events of the plot were set in motion, they seamlessly called forth the appointed passions of the character. “Building the gardens is our first step in understanding how to feel at home on the stage,” Adler elegantly observed.⁷² Much as we would the felt experience of any living person, an actor was more likely to believe the circumstances of the play, and, therein, be moved by them as a character, when he had already made them his own.

Unlike Meisner and especially Strasberg, Adler downplayed the usefulness of an actor attempting to make emotional analogies to his own experience—“The action

of Hamlet, to decide whether to live or die, has to match his circumstances, not yours,” she declared. “Your past indecisions on who to take to the prom won’t suffice.”—but all three agreed that the key to an actor’s education was not merely to loosen the screws of identity but to train one to evacuate the self, to jettison the habits, customs, sensibilities, and temperament that comprise the laws of a sentimental physics in order to reconstitute those of a fictional creation.⁷³ “Acting is a scary, paradoxical business,” Mesiner warned. “One of its central paradoxes is that in order to succeed as an actor, you have to lose consciousness of your own self in order to transform yourself into the character in the play.”⁷⁴

In other words, in order to become a character, an actor first had to discard the very things that characterized him as a human being.

Self Cultivation

So what is it like to subject yourself to such a process? To find out, I decided to enroll in classes at the Artistic Home, a Meisner based studio and storefront theater on the West Side of Chicago. Since the founding of Steppenwolf Theater in 1974, the dramatic ensemble that remains the north star of the city’s sprawling constellation of small companies, Chicago’s dramatic community has favored the rudely hewn naturalism of contemporary playwrights such as Lanford Wilson, Sam Shephard, and Tracy Letts. In turn, the primal, impulse-based approach to acting of Sanford Meisner – which an acting teacher once described to me as rooted in the premise that the every scene in a play turns on one of two motives, “fight or fuck” –

has long been the dominant school of acting among artists in Chicago and the programs that train them. The Artistic Home's is highly regarded, offering students a cycle of four classes which, if taken back-to-back, involve about a year of training. These classes don't involve many of the elements of an actor's training that are familiar to most conservatories, such as voice and movement classes, script analysis, and the rudiments of dramaturgy. Instead, they approximate the psychotechnique of Stanislavsky's School of Experience, itself only the first half of the two-year curriculum outlined in *An Actor's Work*. As Meisner himself described such classes, they aim to help students "lose consciousness" of a self addled by performance anxiety or, in the case of more experienced actors, ornamented with behavioral tics that often pass for top-notch acting.⁷⁵

The first class of the cycle begins with an innovation on Stanislavsky's chair exercise. Huddled in a small black box studio at the very back of the theater, one-by-one, students are called upon to enter the dramatic space, which is made up like a crummy living room, complete with an odd assortment of knickknacks, empty bottles, and books by authors nobody's heard of. There, they are supposed to content themselves while everyone else in the room watches. No directions are afforded, merely that they are to remain in the space until the exercise is over and the acting teacher tells them they may return to their seats.

It is a scene, of course, and yet not a scene, a small paradox that captures the limbo of being that Meisner classes inculcate. If you are an amateur actor, the exercise brings into raw relief your nervousness by leaving you feeling naked on stage, while,

for the experienced actor that feeling helps to reframe the very craft of acting. Rather than hiding behind her art, an actor must learn to embrace a perilous sense of emotional vulnerability as an open door to dramatic possibility.

That sense is heightened when two people are subsequently invited to spend time together in the space. Meiser largely agreed with Stella Adler's assertion that the success of a play lay in the dramatic tension between the people on stage ("If the play is just about the words," she wryly observed, "the audience can stay home and read the text"), and his own approach to acting fixed firmly on how actors found the life of a scene, together.⁷⁶ At first they are asked to do so silently, engaging each other, again, without any given agenda. Not that most people don't devise one, often slipping into a pantomime of some sort that intimates a plotline they are composing on the fly. It's a natural move, but one made to cover raw emotion rather than reveal it, defying the intention of the exercise, itself an innovation on most improvisational games, which prompt one to create an imaginative plotline around an artificial persona. Such games test one's ingenuity and resourcefulness, worthy aims for an artist but not those of Meisner training, not, at least, at this early stage. In these initial exercises, you are not supposed to become someone else (that would be faking your way through the scene) nor are you supposed to whip yourself into a frenzy (a move that provoke a familiar warning: *leave yourself alone*). Ultimately, these encounters aim to collapse the psychic distance between "actor" and "acted." It is never supposed to be anyone other than you who is doing the exercise, not some figment of the

immediate moment or a fantasy sustained for the scene, and whatever happens in the space happens to you as the organic result of engaging another person.

Accordingly, such engagement should be open and honest, qualities that are complementary if not necessarily coincident. The honest reaction to being compelled to meet another person in a small space with no particular direction for your interaction, all while a dozen or so people watch your every move intently, is most likely extreme discomfort with a dash of defensiveness, reactions that play out, behaviorally speaking, in stiff displeasure or taunt aggression. This is especially true when words are introduced in Meisner's most famous exercise, the repetition game. If I move toward someone in the space to interact with her and she has an impulse to say, "I'm uncomfortable," to which I am expected to reply, "You're uncomfortable," an exchange that we would repeat over-and-over again (*I'm uncomfortable. You're uncomfortable. I'm uncomfortable. You're uncomfortable.*) until one of us has the impulse to say something different, I probably feel offended, for she is passing judgment on me.

And I *should* feel offended, for the exercise is supposed to provoke an honest response to evolving circumstances, but how I deal with that feeling will say a lot about whether I am emotionally open, and therefore dramatically vulnerable, or whether I resist being affected by others, preferring to wear (as a teacher of mine once described it) a kind of emotional armor. Indeed, when interacting with another person, one can be entirely authentic in his behavior and never for a moment pay attention to what the other person is saying, much less allow her words to penetrate his disposition. Yet, dramatically speaking, such interactions aren't particularly

interesting. A playwright would never write a play where characters speak past one another for the entire performance, but neither would he author one where every time a character speaks the words merely bounce off another like nickels off a statue's nose. It is when words wound and reward that we grow interested in a play, and the point of the repetition game is not only to help you to forget that you are in a performance space and to establish an interpersonal dynamic that provokes authentic reactions, but to train you to be wounded and rewarded by the words of others.

Moreover, if you are allowing the other person to affect you, which is to say, to tickle, entice, or humiliate you, your responses will encompass a much wider spectrum of human behavior than shrugging your shoulders or flipping the bird. As such, if successful, the repetition game sees screaming matches, crying fits, or sporadic make-out sessions, often all within a single scene, and whatever else you might say about such events, watching them flower before you—feral, prurient, and altogether unpremeditated—is absolutely electric.

Such exercises, engaged long before the actual text of a play is introduced, tend to soften up the actor, helping to make him at once indifferent to those watching him from beyond the fourth wall while keenly attuned to others on stage. These workouts form the foundation of Meisner training, though they are later complemented by short episodes that involve what Stanislavsky called “Bits and Tasks,” incidental projects that aim to distract and absorb the actor while a scene unfolds. Even in these episodes there is still no script, merely the staccato observations of the repetition game. More importantly, the elements of the scene (the

plot and setting in addition to the small projects, themselves) are established by the actor, work that forces him to fire his imagination to fill out the episode, including his own hopes and fears, poles of moral gravity that, together, form a kind of magnetic field of motivation to which the behavior of scene partners prove attractive or repellant.

Importantly, even in these imagined scenes, the character is always you. A student who slips into third person while giving a briefing before an episode commences, often sharing details his scene partner, waiting outside the studio, isn't privy to, will be immediately directed to enunciate the circumstances in "I" terms. The reason for this is fairly straightforward: The more you distance yourself from the scene, the less believably you will inhabit it. If the trials, complications, or dilemmas are only some character's, you can keep them at a safe distance, but if they are *your* trials, *your* complications, *your* dilemmas, you will live with them. On stage, they will haunt you.

This approach is standard procedure even if you're describing an episode where you're contemplating an undertaking (robbing a friend, assaulting an elder) that, to anyone who knows you, would be absolutely inconceivable. In fact, these are precisely the kinds of episodes—urgent, uncomfortable, even ugly—that a student should creatively self-impose.

The reason for this involves the fabled "choices" an actor makes, a primary concern of acting teachers. These choices play out vividly before an audience, helping to distinguish the most gifted actors, but the behavior on stage is only an outward

flourish that flows from the extensive preparation an actor does beforehand, choosing for himself the dramatic circumstances left unresolved by the playwright. Does Lear know that Goneril and Reagan are lousy and unreliable before he turns over his kingdom to them? Has Stanley ever been violent with a woman before? (And does Stella know it?) Is Arkadina's vanity so thorough and complete that she has never contemplated the possibility that, as an actress, she's entirely past her prime?

In each instance, the bolder the choices an actor makes, the more they stitch conflict into the very hem of the character and the more engrossing their expressiveness will be on stage. By the same token, when an entire episode is in the hands of a student, he should establish circumstances that raise the dramatic stakes as high as possible (familiar advice from an acting teaching). Rather than providing him an emotional or psychological exit, he should make choices that put him squarely on the rack. Doing so not only extends his range of emotion and behavior, it prepares him to live out the extraordinary circumstances of exceptional dramas.

For this is finally the ambition of all this work. However seemingly extraneous or oddly self-indulgent, Meisner training never has any other aim than to prepare you to step into a dramatic role—to forget your self and to become someone else, altogether.

Each of these is its own achievement. The self forgetting begins by snipping the strings of sensible discord and loosening the corset of accustomed conduct. Such labors permit one a far greater range of feeling and expression, but this freedom is only a behavioral void that allows for selfless empathy. In any dramatic endeavor, it is

filled by close scrutiny of a character's circumstances as well the applied illustrations of the creative imagination. This effort rewrites within one the sentimental physics of another, her own having been disabled, with the result that, on-stage, she is now guided by new terms of appropriate behavior that tell her what exactly to do – how to feel, how to act, how to react – in the world of the play.

But this isn't an easy process, either in respect to the work of creative transformation or to the maintenance required by its sustained achievement. Consider two examples from my own experience.

The first involves John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt, A Parable*, the Pulitzer Prize winning play that revolves around the suspicions of the austere Sister Aloysius that Father Flynn, a charismatic and socially progressive priest, is preying upon one of the students in her keep. As the title implies, whether Flynn is guilty of such misconduct is a matter that remains unresolved for the duration of the play (Flynn steadfastly denies it, Aloysius is convinced), but for the actor playing the doubtful cleric, as I did in a scene study class near the end of my training, in addition to shading in unspoken details of Father Flynn's life, he needs to establish for himself exactly what happened off-stage with one of the alter boys in the rectory, the unresolved episode that precipitates the sordid allegations. He must not only imagine the circumstances of the incident, he must do so feelingly, allowing them to inform his sensibilities and shape his behavior.

To that end, once tasked with the role, I had to make a dramatic choice about the essential mystery of the play, the guilt of Father Flynn. To choose circumstances

that exonerated me entirely—for the creative process, once engaged, demands not so much that I think of myself as Flynn, but that I am Flynn—would be an easy out. If I am merely someone who has been wrongly accused of a heinous offense, I could flicker with the argent gleam of righteous indignity, hardly the badge of a wounded soul and, altogether, the makings of a different sort of drama. If, on the other hand, I imagined circumstances that left me overwhelmed by guilt, the moral project of the play is undermined and the performance risks becoming a one-note turn of half-hearted defiance.

No, I, myself, needed to be haunted by doubt, and the circumstances I chose for the scene—that I sincerely wanted to believe my conduct consistent with the warmth of an affectionate uncle rather than the fumbblings of a lecher—allowed me to waver between a pained conviction that I had honestly done nothing wrong and a pallid sense of shamefulness.

The very work of embodying such a state is difficult enough. One must begin by scrutinizing the play intently for clues about the character before firing his imagination to fill in the details. Then, employing every lesson of his training, he must put the playwright's words into his mouth, allowing their logic, together with the engagement of other characters, to spark the kindling of intense preparation until it blazes forth in lived behavior. And yet, throughout it all, the actor must do this work without passing moral judgment on the character. Yes, beyond the stage, one may be aghast by similar behavior—and how else to react to the pedophilic inclinations of a parish priest—but if he is to inhabit the role, that verdict must not only be set aside,

it must be reversed. The tripwire of sensible discord must be snipped before we can attempt to step into the role, and it is the very nature of the training that, if the preparation is successful, the shoes fit quite comfortably.

In the case of inhabiting Flynn, my own burden was made lighter by the fact that the haunted quality of the character allowed for a lurking sense of self-loathing. Rather than a villain like Iago, for whom one would have to develop a sweet-tooth for sadism, I did not have to embrace a set of values entirely at odds with my own, I merely had to live with the possibility that I had contravened one that was sacred. This, in addition to the fact that I was assigned a poignant if relatively subdued scene between Father Flynn and Sister James, the guileless young nun who acts as a buffer between Flynn and Sister Aloysius, meant that my behavior had no need to stray into some grotto of gross conduct. When I prayerfully defended my reputation—“I’ve done nothing. There’s no substance to any of this.”—I could rely as much on stage-fright as the immediate circumstances of the episode for my voice to quiver and break with emotion.⁷⁷

But what if creative transformation requires something more vigorous? Not merely that we would understand the way another feels, or even share that feeling in some restrained fashion, but that we would act, and react, according to the propensities of a fevered passion.

In Meisner training, this is sometimes referred to as “the release,” when an actor, overwhelmed by the urgency of the moment, explodes in wild behavior. Such instances make for breakthroughs in one’s training, the approving term typically

applied to some evidence of an actor having successfully explored a new frontier of expressiveness, but they may also be signs of the most extreme category of empathic connection, when our very bodies seem possessed by the ardors, frenzies, and tantrums of another. To sob or swoon, tussle or thrash, fulminate or freak out—when empathy provokes such reactions, it may fairly be said: In inhabiting others, they end up inhabiting us.

Apparent possession is the ultimate mark of any successful performance guided by the Stanislavsky approach. When an actor “disappears” into a role, the role, itself, seems to have overtaken him. But some roles make greater demands than others. Consider a second example from one of my scene study classes, when I was tasked with playing Doc in William Inge’s mid-century domestic drama, *Come Back, Little Sheba*. A recovering alcoholic marching patiently to the end of middle-age, Doc is the portrait of a man wound tightly precisely to keep himself from coming undone. He and his wife Lola—frowsy, devoted, and unfailingly well-intentioned—are barren, but they do host a boarder in their home, Marie, a cheery co-ed who, to the dotting and protective Doc, is at once a surrogate daughter, an object of sublimated longing, and a symbol of forgotten youth. Marie’s dalliance with Turk, an easygoing and overly familiar beefcake on the college football team, stirs up long dormant dysfunction in Lola and Doc’s marriage and ultimately dislodges the struts of the latter’s sobriety.

In class, I was assigned the climactic scene of the play, where Doc returns home after going on a bender. Lola has waited up for him, fearing what has become of her husband while also knowing that, once he staggers over the threshold, the fuse

is lit for something explosive. And explode it does. The choreography of what follows, as dictated by Inge, is startling. Humiliated by what has become of him and enraged by Lola's effectively holding up a mirror to his shameful behavior, Doc belittles Lola before smashing the fine china his mother had given them. When she moves to phone his sponsor in Alcoholics Anonymous, in a rage Doc runs onto the porch and returns wielding a hatchet. He races after her, swinging wildly and hurling abuse before the two of them struggle in the kitchen and Lola finally subdues him, begging him to remember the happier times in their life until Doc, shaken, finally collapses.

It is quite a scene. I was assigned it for two reasons, I imagine. On the one hand, to my acting teacher, I suspect that my mild manner betokens either great restraint or congenital composure, the impression Doc makes throughout much of the play. At the same time, if I do have any dramatic gift, it is for unbridled fury. With enough time and dramatic preparation, the right set of circumstances can trigger within me an incandescent pique. I can rage about the stage—with a hatchet, if necessary—and fill the room with an unusually powerful set of lungs. Indeed, I can work myself into such a lather that, according to a fellow student, one side of my face has a tendency to repeatedly twitch whenever I start howling.

Make no mistake, even if one is uniquely fitted for such behavior, these episodes are entirely exhausting. The aim of Stanislavsky-based training is not for you to ape exotic behavior, but to let it be the visceral consequence of careful preparation applied to dramatic circumstances. As such, like any sustained fit, those thrown in the

course of a performance can take their toll. In the case of the scene from *Come Back, Little Sheeba*, after running it through three or four times in rehearsal, each time triggering a shotgun burst of anger, I felt not so much emotionally drained as flattened.

And yet, far more than the self-abuse of channeling such a fierce emotional current, the most challenging part of performing a scene like this is that it calls on you to brutalize another. “I know what it does to me,” Doc snaps, when Lola tries to stop him from retrieving a whisky bottle. “It makes me willing to come home here and look at you, you two-ton old heifer.”⁷⁸ While he stifles such sentiments until the very end of the play, Lola, to Doc, is the mildewed nosegay that fills his nostrils with foul aroma of youthful folly and frustrated ambition, and once he has given up the dignity hard won by years of sobriety, he wants only to hurt her to propitiate his own sense of self-hatred.

Accordingly, when playing the scene, the actor must be prepared to embrace utter cruelty. “Doc, don’t say any more,” Lola begs when Doc berates her for her slatternly appearance. “I’d rather you hit me with the axe, Doc—Honest I would.”⁷⁹ The desire to strike Lola, with or without the axe, must be as real for the actor as the anger that sparks it. This is the very nature of the training. A sincere emotion on stage without any corresponding behavior is as artistically satisfying as a painter presenting a blank canvas, tapping his temples portentously, and telling the audience *the art is right here*. Whether or not this is true in any meaningful sense is entirely beside the point: How could they tell the difference?

No, the reason you prepare yourself to be receptive to some dramatic feeling, however foreign, is to act on it according to the sentimental physics of the character. And if that requires you to deliver verbal blows, you know that, if you and your scene partner have effectively done the work beforehand, on stage, the blows will land. They will wound the other person deeply.

Second Thoughts

My own experience inhabiting an actor is most assuredly not what Barack Obama had in mind when he entreated Americans “to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, [and] to sharpen our instincts for empathy,” even though all three practices are in fact central to Stanislavsky’s psychotechnique.⁸⁰ Learning to channel a wife-abusing wino or a perverted padre would likely seem to him as Shakespeare’s “shining Monsters” did to Voltaire: bizarre, irreverent, and unusually self-indulgent.⁸¹ The moral upshot of the very “instincts” he commends is inconsistent with the inhospitable emotions explored by such training, and the preferred practices that might “sharpen” them surely don’t include exercises that would prepare us to wound others, and be wounded, deeply.

And yet, if so, this means that Obama’s approach to empathy has little use for what is effectively a pretty broad spectrum of human experience and the emotions consistent with it. Indeed, like the man himself, the lessons that might be learned from empathy seem confined to a narrow band of behavior, both in terms of the empathic agent as well as the object of his attention.

Such limits raise intriguing questions about the relationship between empathy and ethics, between the felt lessons of experience and the spark of moral action, but before I take them up, the wisdom of attempting to explore the outer limits of empathy by investigating the art of acting should be revisited, for it is not without objection, most notably in that one involves embodying a figment, the other a flesh and blood person. The difference isn't trivial. Designed as they are for some dramatic purpose, the inner lives of stage creations are typically far less complex, and far more coherent, than those of actual people. At the same time, playwrights grant us access to some of the most intimate moments in their lives as well as their private reflections, opportunities rarely afforded us when we would understand the sentimental physics of some human. Accordingly, that latter endeavor often depends far more on the creative imagination than occupying a character, for whether in service of considered speculation or the actor's art, we are forced to fill in the details.

What empathy demands of us, therefore, is far more burdensome in channeling another human being than in successfully inhabiting a character. Yet rather than belie the lessons of Stanislavky's psychotechnique for empathic connection, such an observation merely suggests that successfully applying them in the streets is an even greater challenge than shrewdly plying them in a theater. To make empathy a way of life is no mean undertaking, and in respect to the wages and requirements of that commitment, the experience of an actor has much to teach us even as it remains a rough approximation.

Perhaps the most important lesson from my own experiences is how the nature of empathy changes when it shifts from a matter of instinct to applied practice. Again, as Smith and Hume conceived it, empathy was essentially a reflex conditioned by second nature. Our individual experience imparted to us a particular way of being, and empathy allowed us to recognize the relative consonance of such dictates in the behavior of others and to act, and react, accordingly. The dramatic approaches inspired by Stanislavsky assume that, in order for one to be capable of inhabiting a wider variety of roles, and feelingly so, he must first override the sensibilities of this second nature. This is the process of “limbering up” that the first three stages of an actor’s training—Relaxation, Receptivity, and Reaction—inculcate. They shape one for shapeshifting by uprooting established sensibilities and, in so doing, inculcating a heightened vulnerability to the varieties of human experience. These efforts all lend themselves to the final, ongoing stage of the training, Range, a notion a teacher of mine once likened to an advent calendar. The boxes on the calendar were the full spectrum of human emotion, and the time and attention applied to an actor’s craft were ultimately in service of opening up as many of them as possible. The more boxes a player opened, the greater her range, and the more feelings she might honestly, and therein believably, embody.

In other words, the soil of the soul must be tilled, for only then, after Iago, may one “plant nettles or sow / lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme.” Just as the work of inhabiting a role—studying the play, memorizing lines, making strong choices—is useless if one does not have the capacity within him to effectively live the

life of the character, merely bearing witness to the experience of another will not be conducive to empathy if one is hard-wired to reject it. Indeed, we spend an enormous amount of time watching villains without channeling their grossest sentiments, and for the likes of Smith and Hume, the tendency to reject them was essential to empathy's function as a custodian of moral behavior. That I cannot stand in the shoes of another is a signal, at the very least, that I cannot approve of her activity, and in more urgent cases, it is also a warrant for censure or even correction.

The act of empathy, in this sense, is always a return to the self, rather than a departure, and that is why the alternative assumed by either the unsystematic empathy of Montaigne or especially the selfless empathy of Shakespeare is a radical exercise. You are leaving your self, rather than affirming it, and to do this meaningfully, as an actor must every time he walks onto the stage, is exhausting in the moment and, at the end, more than a little bewildering. To release one's self from the forces of a sentimental physics, the prerequisite for inhabiting someone so different, takes concerted application and enormous restraint. Moreover, even if one is successful, the return home is a tricky business. The traditional vision of empathy assumes a nearly frictionless relationship between feeling and behavior, hence the reason that it could so successfully police our conduct, but when we decouple them so as to allow for new feelings and alien behavior, what happens when we try to return to our original state, and what might have become of it while we were gone? Having worn the shoes of another so different from our own, how well will ours fit?

If it is doubtful that deeply inhabiting a dramatic role leaves no emotional or psychological trace, this helps to explain why the metamorphic discipline seems so precarious to one's peace of mind (and why so many actors seem more than a little nutty). To fully immerse yourself in a character, to feel what he feels for the very reason he feels it, risks confounding the self, and even contaminating it. Iago, of course, is a sociopath, and if most of us cannot simply plant and weed up passions at will, certainly not without such efforts leaving a scar of some sort, that is because our way of being is embroidered with a felt morality. The dramatic approaches of Stanislavsky aim not only to teach one how to remove the handiwork, but to stitch anew some tracery.

I can attest to the toll of such efforts, even in my own limited experience. On the one hand, whenever we are asked to devote ourselves to some unusual task for an extended period of time – say, juggling a set of bowling pins, drawing a palm frond, or conversing in Finnish – the experience is exhausting. We are clumsy and self-conscious, and relative to any familiar task, it takes double the effort for results that are thoroughly middling. That said, if we apply ourselves to such tasks, with time and great care, they can become second nature, with everything that might entail for body and mind. Theatrical training is no different. The intent is to endow one with a facility for expansive empathy turned to creative purpose, and the notion that such work doesn't alter one's sympathetic disposition is no more credible than the notion that one can become an adroit long-distance runner without any changes to her legs.

It is similar with making empathy a way of life, except that the challenge is far more demanding than harnessing that capacity for some vocation. A stage actor spends months learning to embody a single character, whereas those who commit themselves to selfless empathy are somewhat more like an ensemble member in repertoire, constantly inhabiting one role or another. Emotionally speaking, the strain of navigating so many switchbacks is strenuous, to say nothing of the cognitive demands of making sense of so many different lives. Indeed, even if one can condition herself for the versatile sensibility assumed by selfless empathy, that doesn't resolve the problem of actually understanding the sentimental physics of another. With respect to their interior lives, most people simply don't leave the door off the latch, and even for those who do, it takes some rummaging around for us to make sense of the place.

Practically speaking, what this means is that tremendous weight is placed on the imagination to fill in the details. True, empathy always demands our being able to envision ourselves in the place of another. (Adam Smith says as much on the first page of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*.) But the more alien an individual – which is to say, the more she is the kind of person with whom an empathic connection might be especially valuable – the less likely that a brisk appraisal of her circumstances will illuminate her emotional world, much less do so for us feelingly. By contrast, when we share the same laws of a sentimental physics with another person, we know precisely how she would feel in some situation, for we would feel the same way, too.

In such cases, empathy is more a matter of bothering to pay close attention to another's experience than committing ourselves to an imaginative leap.

The willingness to pay attention, and to accept moral responsibility for what one sees, seems to be assumed by the weak form of the Empathic Conceit. Consider, again, the opening stanzas of William Blake's "On Another's Sorrow":

Can I see another's woe,
And not be in sorrow too?
Can I see another's grief,
And not seek for kind relief?

Can I see a falling tear,
And not feel my sorrow's share?
Can a father see his child
Weep, nor be with sorrow fill'd?

Can a mother sit and hear
An infant groan, an infant fear?
No, no! never can it be!
Never, never can it be!

In respect to the mainspring of moral action, the question is less the work of placing oneself in the shoes of another person – for, unlike pressing requirements of a particular psychology, torments of flesh are a lingua franca – than a willingness to confront one's concerns and make time for them. True, empathy can certainly enliven a sense of felt obligation that spurs such efforts, but too often we confuse the problem of actually understanding the lives of others with a simple sense of indifference.

The same may be said -- and in fact, makes for something of more tricky matter – in those instances when the needs of others inevitably enroll us. Take the

Seamus Heaney anecdote that began this work. If what I was told of the Nobel laureate's retirement from Harvard is true, it had nothing to do with a lack of empathy for his students. On the contrary, it was precisely because he had such a strong, even overwhelming sense of empathy for them, and what they would require of him as their professor, that he decided to step away from teaching. It was only because he knew those needs, and that they implicated him, that he determined it was better to remove himself from being subject to such obligations, altogether. True, recognizing the needs of others, what they require of us, and whether or not such requests are warranted are all matters that call on our capacity for empathy and the moral sense it superintends, but understanding the moral dynamics of instances like this seems more a matter of the duties that fairly attach to one's profession or the delicate balance between meeting the needs of others and making time for our own than a revelatory statement on the moral possibilities of empathy.

Another way of putting this is that, especially in regards to the weak form of the Empathic Conceit, what many people identify as a problem of empathy is better understood as a problem of attention, courtesy, or care. When people stroll past a crippled child, begging for change on the street-corner, if they don't stop to help, typically it's not because they don't honestly know that the child's in need, nor it is because they can't conceive what she's suffering. Rather, they're too busy to help, or, in any deep and meaningful sense, they simply don't care.

Such an observation is a dreary but essential reminder that who elicits from us empathy's reflex of moral action is also an elemental part of our sentimental physics.

That one walks past a street urchin begging for loose change is a far different matter than a similar episode involving one's sister. If indifference in the latter case seems especially cruel it is because those closest to us have a particular claim on our affections, one that makes empathy, and its coincident moral mandate, largely unavoidable. By contrast, to open ourselves up to the same sense of empathy with every human being would be paralyzing or confounding. We would either spend our days roaming from one wounded soul to another or, like a dog stranded in the middle of a busy intersection, turn round-and-round, not knowing where to head.

This is one reason why the moral logic of the strong form of the Empathic Conceit is so different from that of the weak. Insofar as it commends a more promiscuous practice of empathy as a way of understanding people who are far different from one, the strong form of the Empathic Conceit assumes that there will be a disconnect between the practice of empathy and any immediate moral reflex. Indeed, whereas the weak form asks why we cannot enlarge our circle of care – a request, at its most modest, that is akin to asking people to be a little less selfish – the strong form takes for granted that we disable the tingle of sensible discord that would otherwise spur us to action. The guiding belief seems to be that, by sampling the varieties of human experience, one might ultimately derive an ethics that transcends parochial complaint.

It's a nice thought, but even beyond the doubtful prospect that radical empathy might ever be practiced in any widespread way, I have seen no evidence of this possibility, which seems to me more often the result of an idealistic longing for

moral certainty than a considered reflection on a credible ethics. At same time, similar to the weaker version, when we assume the strong form of the Empathic Conceit, I think we often confuse the need for other virtues, such as tolerance, intellectual curiosity, and even personal self-restraint, with the moral promise of empathy. Being a kind, accommodating person may be aided by an empathic connection, but it is clearly not required, and insofar as putting so much emphasis on establishing such connections involves a considerable investment of time and attention and risks tremendous psychological strain as well as the paternalistic danger of empathic false positives – two circumstances that are hardly inconsistent – I am unconvinced as to what is gained by elevating empathy over other virtues that may be aided by, but are hardly the necessary consequence of, its determined practice. Indeed, the very endeavor of making empathy an activity unlimited by the laws of a sentimental physics requires that one disarm the moral instinct that typically unites empathy and ethics. And to my mind, the great danger of such an undertaking is less that we succeed in our attempt “to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, [and] to sharpen our instincts for empathy” without likewise strengthening the tendency toward moral conduct – though nothing precludes this possibility – but that these efforts actually undermine our confidence about what qualifies for such behavior.

For my own part, rather than providing a reliable arrow for one’s moral compass, the value of cultivating empathy as an applied practice, rather than simply an emotional reflex, seems to me most obvious and profound in artistic endeavors

and attempts, broadly speaking, to understand the human condition. To the degree that my own work spans both efforts, I remain intrigued by what the study of empathy can tell us about human experience and how its exploration might endow one with a capacity to portray it in a fuller, richer, and more complete fashion at the privacy of one's desk or on stage before a multitude. Indeed, I think there is much that an intense engagement with the study and practice of empathy can teach us about the human being, but I conclude this study far less convinced than when I began that such a study might also resolve, in senses narrow and expansive, the stubborn problem of being human.

Epilogue Metamorphic Discipline

¹ Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona,” January 12, 2011 (Retrieved from *The White House* website archive on July 21, 2017).

² Obama. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, x.

³ Lewis, Michael. “Obama’s Way.” *Vanity Fair*, September 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Collins, Eliza. “Obama sets the record straight on his 7 almonds a night.” *USA Today*, July 28, 2016.

⁶ Lewis, “Obama’s Way,” *Vanity Fair*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *The Best Man*. Directed by Franklin Schaffner. 1964. Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Video, 2010. DVD.

¹⁰ Gregory, David. Interview with Barack Obama. *Meet the Press*. NBC. December 30, 2012.

¹¹ My account of the Newtown shooting is based on the following sources: Barron, Jason. “Nation Reels After Gunman Massacres 20 Children at School in Connecticut.” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2012.; Barron, Jason. “Children Were All Shot Multiple Times With a Semiautomatic, Officials Say.” *The New York Times*, December 15, 2012.; Applebome, Peter and Wilson, Michael. “Who Would Do This to Our Poor Little Babies.” *The New York Times*, December 14, 2012.; Kleinfield, N. R. et al. “Newtown Killer’s Obsessions, in Chilling Detail.” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2013.

¹² Sherwell, Philip. “Connecticut school shooting: Adam Lanza rigged rifle for maximum damage.” *The Telegraph*, December 16, 2012.

¹³ Altimari, Dave and Lender, Jon. “Sandy Hook Shooter Adam Lanza Wore Earplugs.” *Hartford Courant*, January 6, 2013.

¹⁴ Sherwell, Philip. “Connecticut school shooting: Adam Lanza rigged rifle for maximum damage.” *The Telegraph*.

¹⁵ Raff, Susan. “154 shots in 5 minutes: Sandy Hook warrants released.” *Eyewitness Three News* (Online), March 28, 2013 (Updated April 25, 2013).

¹⁶ Obama, Barack. “President Obama Speaks on the Shooting in Connecticut,” December 14, 2012 (Retrieved from *The White House* website archive on July 25, 2017).

¹⁷ Garcia, Patricia. “How Obama Grieved With All of Us After the Newtown Shootings.” *Vogue*, December 14, 2016.

¹⁸ Obama, Barack. “President Obama at Prayer Vigil for Connecticut Shooting Victims: ‘Newtown, You Are Not Alone,’” December 16, 2012 (Retrieved from *The White House* website archive on July 25, 2017)

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

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- ²⁶ Dubois, Joshua. "Joshua Dubois: What the President secretly did at Sandy Hook Elementary School." *Vox Populi: A Public Sphere for Politics and Poetry*, December 11, 2015.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Othello (The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series)*. Ed. E. A. J. Honigmann. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 1997. 160. (Act 1, Scene 3, Line 319)
- ³⁵ Ibid. (Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 320- 377.)
- ³⁶ Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor's Work*. Trans. Jean Benedetti. New York: Routledge, 2008. 18.
- ³⁷ Shchepkin, Michael. Quoted in Edwards, Christine. *Stanislavsky Heritage*. New York: New York University Press, 1965. 15-16.
- ³⁸ Quoted in Donnellan, Declan. Introduction to *An Actor's Work*. Trans. Jean Benedetti. New York: Routledge, 2008. xi.
- ³⁹ Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor's Work*, 25-6.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. 26
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 187.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 18
- ⁴⁷ Strasberg, Lee. *A Dream of Passion*. New York: Penguin Group, 1988. 135.
- ⁴⁸ Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor's Work*, 38.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 39.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 39-40.
- ⁵² Ibid., 40.
- ⁵³ Shaw, George Bernard. As Quoted in Longwell, Dennis and Meisner, Sanford. *Sanford Meisner: On Acting*. New York: Random House, 1987. 14.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 14-5.
- ⁵⁵ Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor's Work*, 231.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 232.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 232-3.
- ⁵⁸ Longwell, Dennis and Meisner, Sanford, *Sanford Meisner: On Acting*, 4.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 36.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 36-7. [Emphasis Meisner]
- ⁶² Ibid., 15.
- ⁶³ Stanislavski, Konstantin. *An Actor's Work*, 232.
- ⁶⁴ Adler, Stella. *The Art of Acting*. New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2000. 237.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 207.

⁶⁶ As Strasberg describes the work of “affective memory” (or what is often termed “emotion memory”) in *A Dream of Passion*:

Equally important was the implicit recognition that not just the actor’s technical means – his voice, speech, bodily actions – could be trained. Boleslavsky contended that the actor’s internal means – what was still at that time called “soul” – could be trained. There were concrete methods or exercises that dealt with the most difficult aspects of the actor’s work, such as imagination, emotion, and inspiration. The means of arriving at the actor’s imagination, emotion, and inspiration were through concentration and affective memory.

Lee, *A Dream of Passion*, 67.

⁶⁷ Adler, *The Art of Acting*, 16.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁹ Stanislavski, *An Actor’s Work*, 43.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁷¹ Adler, *The Art of Acting*, 85.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷⁴ Longwell, Dennis and Meisner, Sanford, *Sanford Meisner: On Acting*, 114.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Adler, *The Art of Acting*, 84.

⁷⁷ Shanley, John Patrick. *Doubt*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2005. 38.

⁷⁸ Inge, William. *Come Back, Little Sheba*. New York: Samuel French, Inc, 1979. 62.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁰ Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona,” January 12, 2011 (Retrieved from *The White House* website archive on July 21, 2017).

⁸¹ Voltaire, “Letter XVIII. *On Tragedy*” in *Letters concerning the English Nation*, 92. (Emphasis Voltaire.)

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At Home: A Novel

Prologue

An old man's his own ghost, I get that now. I mean, look at me—I earned it. That's why we tell stories I think, the same ones over and over again. Keeps us from staring too long at the spook in the mirror. Keeps us from screaming *Boo!*

That's the way it was with the guys at the diner, though between you and me, most of them got a jump on being haunted. Back in those days I was a regular, and regulars were what you'd expect at a greasy spoon: the sorry joes you see at bus stops, the kind of guys that fell out of line a while ago and weren't in a hurry to catch up. You don't go around looking for company like that, it has a way of finding you. For me it was this claw I'm swinging. The regulars got a good look and they called me right over. I can't say I was flattered, but when you been out of line long enough, you don't turn down the invitation.

So I joined the regulars for breakfast, became one myself. Carl, Lenny, Girardi, Bones, they were always there. Stan came around most days. So did Red. Sharkey Badgerow whenever he wasn't sleeping off a hangover. We always found something to chew over, the

world's full of things to complain about. Besides, most of the guys just wanted to hear their own voice somewhere outside their head. You spend all day by yourself you can forget who's doing the talking. Believe me, I know something about that.

Most days there were enough of us we pushed together a couple of tables. I took the corner seat so I could watch the counter. Vera was there. Sweet gal. Her Uncle Vito owned the place, but he was always working the grill in back so you could afford to make eyes with her. She was a good looking girl, great can and all, but the thing I liked was watching her fill the saltshakers. She'd put them the counter and go down the row, pouring salt. She was terrible at it, just awful I tell you. No matter how many times she did it the counter always looked like a snowdrift. She caught me grinning once. I tried hiding it but the next time she came around she put her hand on my arm, my good arm, and leaned into my ear.

That'll be our secret Frank she said, rubbing my shoulder.

Yeah. She was a nice girl, Vera. Real sweet.

So with the view and all you can guess I wasn't thrilled when Girardi's kid brother came to town. He was only around for a few days and it wasn't like we had a seating chart or anything so I can't blame him for sitting by his brother. I just pulled a chair from another table and squeezed in next to Lenny, who gave me this look like I was sizing up his hash browns.

I was facing the door now, that's why I saw him. The door jingled (who knew it jingled?) and an old man came in. He took off his hat and started patting his head like he was making sure his hair was still there, or at least what was left of it. He didn't look like the kind of guy you'd find in a diner but really he didn't look like the kind of guy you'd find anywhere. Not no more. He kinda reminded me of a bank teller, or what I think a bank teller would have looked like when my pop was a kid. You know, pocketwatch, neat mustache. All dressed to the nines. Spotless and cheap.

When he was finished patting his hair, he came over to the booth behind us, just behind where I always sat. He had the paper under his arm, but he didn't read it. He just sat there looking out the window, kinda stiff, till his breakfast came—big breakfast, I remember that, eggs, pancakes, even a double stack of toast. He cleaned his plate, and when he was done he left a few bucks. Then he grabbed the paper and left.

I probably would have forgot about the old man (I mean there wasn't really anything to remember) but he showed up again the next day. He sat in the same booth, and when Vera brought him a cup of coffee and his food, all without asking, I knew he was a regular, too, cause she did the same thing for us. He didn't read the paper (he never read the paper) he just sat there, kinda stiff, almost like he was waiting for somebody he didn't want to see. He drank his coffee, ate his breakfast (skin and bones, but that old man could eat) then he grabbed his hat and left.

Third day I was looking for him and sure enough the old man didn't disappoint me: same time, same booth, same faded suit. I realized now why I never saw him. He came in and left again, all while we were sitting there. Wheels in wheels, I guess. I watched him go

through his routine (you could set your watch by it) and when he was done he disappeared into the street.

I got routines, too. With my pancakes I always put the butter on first, eating the eggs and the toast and the bacon, all before coming back to them, when the butter's melted and the pancakes are shining and they're looking at me like *Where the syrup, pal?* That's how I do it. Same with the laundry. I fold the towels first, then the sheets, then my shirts and pants. Then I do my drawers (making sure no one's looking) then the only thing left is the socks. They're last. I line them up like bodies, and if one's missing, I won't leave the Laundromat till I find it.

There are others—like I always eat a handful of peanuts before bed or when I feel like I'm sinking I pump my good hand and count to ten—my day is filled with routines, maybe that's why I kept thinking about the old man and why it felt like I was losing something when Girardi's kid brother left town and I went back to my old seat again. I mean, sure, everybody expected me to sit there and it was nice looking at Vera again, but it's strange when you got a way of looking at things and it changes for a while and then you go back again. Everything seems off somehow—incomplete I guess.

Anyway, I didn't have to listen for the jingle that morning. I heard it when the door opened and I didn't have to look behind me—I knew who was there. I mean I wanted to look, to see the old man just like he was the day before and the day before that and more

days than I knew, but I couldn't. I just couldn't turn around, not while I was swinging this claw. I knew that.

Still, when Vera came around to bring the old man his breakfast or fill his coffee, it was like the world disappeared for me. I wasn't paying attention to the guys, I could only hear the footsteps or the coffee being poured or a fork scraping the plate. But I also heard him:

“Goodness, Vera, thank you—thank you very much.”

“Certainly, you're so dear to me. Yes, certainly. Yes!”

“Wonderful, please! Oh, thank you, Vera. That's perfect—*purrfect!*”

I nearly fell out of my chair: What was going on back there? There were so many *thank yous* you'd have thought Vera was giving the old man *a lot* more than a refill. I mean, sure, there wasn't much competition where I was sitting, but the old man must have been the politest guy in town!

Now don't get me wrong, I didn't expect the old man to be rude. I just expected him to be, well, not nice—not *neighborly* as my pop used to say. The kind of guy that makes you want to check your shoes to see if they're covered in crap every time you're done talking to him. I mean, the way he looked, his clothes, the way he sat there all stiff, it was almost like he was holding up this invisible hand, telling you to stay away.

But the more I got to thinking about it—and I admit, I was spending a lot of time thinking about the old man—the more it seemed to me like he was doing the same thing by being so polite. I mean, you go around every day looking friendly as a funeral, sure, most people will keep their distance, but the world won't open any doors for you and you'll have

to look at people looking at you the way you're looking at them, and even for the saddest son-of-a-bitch that can't be very pleasant. But if you're polite, and I mean polite as Father Four Score when he hands you the collection plate, people will always be nice to you but they won't get too close. They'll keep their distance. Every conversation will look like fine china to them, and they'll worry about being the bull.

Anyway, that's what I came to thinking listening to the old man every day.

"Why yes, yes of course."

"Splendid, Vera, thank you."

"Oh please. You're too good to me—please do!"

"Yes thank you, that's just right, thank you so much. Thank you so much—so *so* much!"

Now look, I'm not saying the old man was being insincere with Vera, and I imagine she appreciated how he treated her, specially since most of the guys at my table thought being polite was not taking credit when you cut one, but listening to the old man, to the way he talked to her—it was like he was always busy dressing Vera in the finest fake jewelry.

You spend all day thinking about someone you can end up losing track of yourself. Something's gotta bring you home. My arm's been that for me. Not always, of course. Only since I got the claw and my arm started swinging. I gotta hold it down when I'm going

somewhere or it looks like a pigeon with its neck broke, the head all flopping over. It ain't a pretty sight, believe me. There are better ways to come home.

It's best when I'm sitting down. People can forget the arm that won't cooperate. That's why I did everything I could at the diner to keep from getting up in front of the old man. It would be like introducing myself in a voice I hated.

But sometimes you can't help it, specially when you been drinking coffee all morning, and when that time came for me, I got up quiet as I could and made my way to the john. I was sweating by the time I got inside, I mean making gravy, shaking too. Stupid, I know (I start boiling just thinking about it) but my pop used to say that pride ain't a friend to being smart, just to being a smartass, and, look, I admit it: I got a lot of pride in me.

Anyway, when I finished in the john, I found myself opening the door like I was trying to sneak back into the diner. The guys were carrying on like they always were—coughing and laughing and flashing rotten teeth—and Vera, she was busy making the rounds, refreshing coffee. When she was done she went over to the old man. He was watching something out the window, so he didn't see her at first, and she knew enough to top off his coffee without asking. I went to the table and was slow in getting to my chair so I had enough time to see what he was looking at.

There was a grade school down the street, old one, built like a castle, the kind I went to when I was a kid. School was about to start so the buses were pulling up out front and the kids were pouring out of them. The teachers were trying to get them to go inside but the kids weren't having it. They just kept horsing around, getting into trouble. They were little

ones mostly, and they had these coats on, big puffy ones, all colors. They looked like circus balloons, bouncing around all over the sidewalk, threatening to blow out into the street.

I watched long enough to remember I was watching, then I looked back at the old man. Like me, he was grinning.

It was spring before I saw the old man at the pond. It's halfway between the Men's Residence and the diner, right in the middle of the park. I like getting a loaf of day old bread and going there, feeding the ducks. It's one of my routines, puts me at ease.

I sit on this bench where the ducks come in to feed. There are bushes at either side so people can't see you, not unless they're looking straight on. I was sitting there when I saw him, newspaper under his arm. He was walking on the other side of the pond, then he turned off and disappeared into the park.

He came by the next day of course, and the day after that, and I guess it was only a matter of time before I started following him. I hid behind a tree on the other side of the pond, waiting. I saw him come up the path, let him get a ways, then I followed.

We went through the park, past the old gazebo and the skating rink and the statue of a man nobody knows, then the old man crossed back into the city. He went up half a block and turned into the alley. I thought he might be going home, but when he got to the end of it, he crossed the street and turned into another alley.

I was getting worried now. I don't like alleys. They're either empty or full of fellas you don't want to meet. I could live with the fellas (I'd fit right in) but if the alley was empty I worried about the old man turning around and finding someone following him holding his arm down like it was threatening to bolt.

So I let the old man get some distance on me, and when he left the alley I hurried to catch up, arriving in time to see him enter another. He traveled like that, from one alley to the next, and it got to the point I had no idea where we were.

Finally the old man got to where he was going. He crossed the street and headed into an old building, a library it said. I got to the end of alley just as he was going up the front steps. I'd never been there before, and I'm not much for new places, but I'd come that far already so it seemed like there was nothing for me to do but follow him in.

There wasn't a guard at the door, just some old biddy who looked up from her book and smiled at me. I tried smiling back and hustled in. I didn't see the old man so I started looking around, trying to remind myself not to look like I was looking around. I found him on second floor, near a bunch of windows. He was reading (no surprise there I guess) but I couldn't tell what the book was, so I sat a ways away from him. I grabbed the nearest book I found (child rearing, I got another) and started waiting.

When the old man got up to go, I watched where he put the book, then I hurried over to get it. It was a red book, kinda small. I looked around to make sure he was gone, then I started reading. It was fairy tales, a whole book of them—knights in shining armor, damsels in distress, even a dragon or two. The next day it was about a pirate captain but a good one—you know, ugly mug but a heart of gold. Then there was a book about this

Indian princess that's kidnapped by another tribe and falls in love with the chief's son, her father's sworn enemy (things don't end so good for them). Then there was a book about a girl that dresses up like a boy and goes to war (she turns out all right) and one about a couple of kids that learn magic from a ghost, then another book of fairy tales.

They were good books I guess, good cause you forgot you were reading them. But they weren't about forgetting, I knew that when I got to the second book of fairy tales. I was going to put it back when I dropped the book, and the pages came bouncing out. I bent down to get them, cursing cause I felt like a million eyes were crawling all over me. There was something in the back cover, a label. I saw it when I was picking it up. *In loving memory* it said and then there was a name, a girl's name.

I put the pages back.

I went over to the shelf and took down another book, the one with the pirates. I turned to the back. There it was again: *In loving memory*.

I looked through the rest of the books. They all had the label, every one.

"In loving memory," I said. I put the books back, careful so's I didn't hurt them.

I didn't go back to the library. I couldn't. I felt like a thief. It was a stupid feeling I know. I mean, me and the old man, we hadn't even traded hellos and here I was feeling like I owed him for something, something special, and I didn't even know what it was, not til Girardi's kid brother came back to town and I had to give up my seat again.

Girardi's kid brother—Salvatore was his name, but his brother told us we had to call him Sally—he was a loudmouth, the kind of guy whose one gift in life is finding arguments where nobody thought to look for them. A couple days after he showed up he started arguing with Bones about who hit a home run or got a touchdown or something else worth arguing about as much as it's worth remembering. Anyway Bones was just jerking his chain—he knew if you gave Sally half a chance he would argue about the sunrise tomorrow—and sure enough Sally got so excited he yelled at Vera for the sports pages. She said she didn't have them but I almost choked on my pancakes cause I knew who did.

“You reading that?” Sally asked the old man.

The old man was looking out the window so he didn't know anybody was talking to him, but that wasn't a problem for Sally.

“HEY! I said you reading that?”

Of course the old man wasn't reading it. He never read the paper. It was folded up like it always was and Sally was already reaching over for it. The old man smiled and let him have it.

Sally came back to the table and started flipping through the pages. The paper didn't say Sally was wrong. It didn't say he was right either, but that detail didn't seem so important to Sally. He made sure everybody in the diner knew exactly what the paper didn't say. Bones let the whole thing drop (thank God for that, cause Sally was more likely to pick up a check than cop to being wrong) but he held on to that paper like it was proof against any moron that ever doubted him and it didn't occur to him for a second it wasn't his to keep.

I could tell the old man didn't know what to do. It was almost like he kept calculating the likelihood of Sally handing over the paper and having a hard time accepting it was zero. He just sat there in his booth, long enough that Girardi finally asked his brother when he was going to give the paper back. The old man must have been listening cause he sprang up in time to hear Sally tell his brother the old man was done with it. His brother told him he was wrong, and the two of them started arguing about it, with the old man standing behind them. The old man, he had this look on his face, awful look, and it took everything in me to keep from grabbing Sally by the throat and squeezing till he dropped the paper.

Someone must be looking out for me cause I didn't have to. "Fine," Sally said and being the prince he was he held up the paper like it was a gift. "I'm much obliged," the old man said, reaching over to grab it. But Sally didn't let it go of it, not at first. The old man had to tug. That's how I saw his hand, the left one. The forefinger was gone and the middle one looked like it had been chewed away.

Finally Sally let go of the paper, and the old man's fingers disappeared behind the fold. The door jingled and he was gone.

Well now I knew what I had to do, there was no way avoiding it, and believe me I looked.

The guys knew something was up. At the diner the next day they kept looking at me like I was spoiling their eggs, but I was too busy getting ready. I let the old man finish his breakfast, then I got up from the table. "See you tomorrow," I said, louder than I needed,

and grabbed my jacket from the chair. I never took it off when I was in the diner. That way, I never had to put it on.

I dropped one side of the jacket to the floor so it looked like a puddle, then I started swinging the claw, jerking the coat up like my hand trying to thread a giant needle. With the way my fingers are, my hand kept hooking the armhole and pushing right out. Finally after what seemed like forever, it caught, and I started pulling on the jacket, careful so my arm didn't catch.

When the jacket was sitting on my shoulder I used the big nose God gave me to flip the collar, then I bit into it like a stick of dime store jerky and let the jacket go. I started swinging my body, swinging the jacket around me, trying to grab it with my arm, my good arm, but I kept missing. I got to panting so I had to wait, still keeping the collar in my teeth. When I was ready, I gave it one more swing, nearly knocking myself over, and caught the end. I started fishing for the armhole behind me. The lining was smooth, so I had to fight with the jacket to keep it from slipping, grunting the whole way.

Finally I hooked the armhole, pushing my hand in and waving my arm to sink it. When it was through, I reached up and pulled the shoulder snug. I let go of the collar. It looked like a dog's ear, soaked. I reached up and turned it down.

No one said anything while I did my buttons. Then I threw a few bucks on the counter and the door jingled. I got just beyond the windows where anyone could see me, then I sobbed in the street.

Squinting

With everything that had happened between me and the old man I figured the only thing left to do was to make my introduction. I didn't want the regulars to know, so I waited till after breakfast. I staked out one the alleys he went through, waiting on the other side of it. Right on cue he turned in and I started heading in his direction.

The alley didn't have any gangways so I knew he couldn't avoid me, but when I got close I started watching for him, waiting for his eyes. When they found me, I made like I seen an old friend.

"Guess I'm not the only one that likes a shortcut," I said, slowing down. Him being so polite I knew he'd slow down too.

The old man looked nervous at first (can you blame him?) but then he smiled that smile of his, the one he always gave Vera.

"Indeed, who doesn't like a shortcut?" he said. He took off his hat and started checking again to make sure his hair was there.

“Not my pop,” I said. “Not through alleys anyway. When I was a kid he told me that if he caught me and my brother in one, he’d open one of those coal chutes and stuff us in with the other bad kids in the neighborhood.”

The old man’s eyes opened wide.

“Goodness, that wouldn’t be nice.”

“For him or us?”

The old man thought about it.

“For everyone concerned!” he said, smiling his fake jewelry smile.

I grinned.

“Maybe, but I’d trade places with him all the same.”

The old man kept smiling and I wasn’t sure if he understood me so I pointed to one of the chutes. “It’s funny. These things, they’re are still here. I mean, they haven’t used coal in forever, but the chutes are still here. They’re holding out. Alleys are like that I guess. Telephone poles, bars on the windows, signs for things nobody knows—the world keeps changing but the alley’s holding out.”

The old man seemed to think about this.

“Holding out,” he said.

“That’s right!” (I could feel myself getting excited) “I mean look, look down the alley. You squint, it’s like nothing’s changed.”

The old man turned and looked.

“But, jeez, where are my manners—name’s Frank.”

The old man was still looking, then he turned back and offered me his hand like a gentleman. He kept on smiling till his smile cracked.

I let go of my arm and reached across to grab his hand. I knew he had been watching, too.

Now that we were getting to be pals I didn't want the old man thinking I was going to take over his breakfast, you know, ruin his routine. I was sure he'd worry about this, so the next day, when the door jingled, I kept my mouth shut and gave the pancakes in front of me all my attention. Did the same thing next day, and the day after that. Let a bunch of days pass, keeping a powwow with my plate. Long enough I figured the tables had turned, that the old man was wondering if he'd done something to keep me away.

Then I waited for Lenny to get an itch. I knew I wouldn't have to wait long. Lenny liked telling stories, and when he got an itch, a choir of angels couldn't keep him from scratching it. He only had about five of them, and couple were kinda the same, but since no one had anything better to do—not the least being Lenny, who'd been out of work since some of the guys were in diapers—everybody leaned into his stories like they hadn't heard the ending a thousand times before.

Anyway, when Lenny got his itch, I was ready for it. I got up and hit the john, listening inside the door. When a good part was coming up, I came out in time for Carl to start laughing like a stray hound (his lungs were shot). I stood behind my chair, shaking my head while the rest of the table joined in. When it couldn't get any louder, I looked over at the old man.

“You tell me if these jokers give you a hard time,” I said.

The old man lit up.

I gave him a grin and took my seat.

By that time the old man had already seen me at the park, I made sure of it. I sat on a bench by the path he took, always facing the pond, that way he could see me while thinking I didn't see him. I wanted him to get used to seeing me around, to being a part of his routine, so when I was gone, he'd know it.

That happened after I spoke to him in the diner. For three days I didn't go to breakfast, but on the third day I went to the pond. I could see him sizing me up when he came up the path. He passed me and I waited, long enough I was sure he was gone.

Turns out I was wrong.

“If those ‘jokers’ gave me a hard time, what was I to do?”

I turned around. The old man was standing behind the bench like he was waiting on me.

“Afternoon!” I said. “They don't charge for the view, take a seat.”

I moved over. The old man came around and sat down. He took off his hat and began patting his hair.

“What was I to do?” he said.

“Come again?”

“The ‘guys,’ the gentlemen at the restaurant—if they had given me a hard time? What was I to do?”

I wondered for a moment if he was serious, then he smiled his smile.

“*Ooohh*, those guys? They’re harmless. They’re strays, that’s what my pop called them—they’re friendly, they got fleas, and they’ll follow you home. Three F’s, that’s what he used to say, that’s all you need to know about guys like that.”

The old man thought about this.

“A wise man your father.”

“Wise man? Oh God, he would’ve loved that. Wisenheimer maybe.” I grinned. “When we were kids you should have seen him around the neighborhood. You’d have thought he was the mayor or something, walking around, shaking hands with everyone like they were his guests.”

“Sounds like a character.”

“That’s closer.” I said. “A real character, but a good man.”

The old man looked at his hat.

“He’s gone is he?”

“Pop? Oh sure—a while now. It’s all right. Had his more than his fair share of life—could have given back some and he still would have come out ahead. I used to bring him by the park when he couldn’t walk, wheel him around. Same old pop, greeting people like he was running for re-election.”

I grinned just thinking about it.

“My wife,” the old man started, “she was happy here.”

I was about to say something but for once I kept my mouth shut. The old man didn’t continue. Finally I said, “It’s a good place for being happy.”

The old man nodded. We were quiet.

“Is she gone?”

The old man nodded, I almost couldn’t hear him.

“Childbirth,” he said. “Long ago.”

We were quiet. On the other side of the pond somebody said something and a dog came running out. A child laughed.

“You know, my pop, he liked to sit by the pond—said he remembered it from when he was a kid. Guess ponds don’t change much, but the way the city looked, you know, standing over the trees: It was just like he remembered. His eyes weren’t so good so maybe it was just the shadow of things, but he told me—it looked like it always did. It hadn’t changed.”

The old man thought about this.

“Squinting,” he said.

I nodded, I could feel myself getting excited, again.

“You think he was right?”

“Who?”

“My pop.”

“About—”

“About the pond, the city. Does it look like like you remember it?”

The old man thought about it. “It does,” he said.

“I knew it. This place hasn’t changed in forever—not that I’m saying you know from forever, it’s just, well, you know what I mean.”

The old man smiled. I was talking too fast and my one hand, the good one, it kept moving, so I tried putting it in my lap, but it just kept flying up everytime I opened my mouth, like a strange bird trying to escape.

“So your wife, she liked it here?”

“Hm?”

“Your old lady,” I said, “She liked the pond? Women, they love the pond. I don’t know why—maybe it reminds them of a mirror, looking in it you know? I don’t know, but they love it.”

The old man didn’t say anything.

“You meet her here?”

“Who?”

“Your wife.”

The old man looked at his hat.

“No,” he said. He was quiet. I was breathing hard, and it felt like that invisible hand was pushing against my chest.

I jumped up.

“Gotta get a move on,” I said. “Got an appointment.” I patted my arm. “Maybe the doc can figure out what’s keeping me from breakfast.”

The old man didn’t say anything.

“Well all right,” I said. “Have a good one!” (I could hear the cursing in my head.)

“You as well,” the old man said. He didn’t stand.

The next day I went back to the diner, but I kept to my pancakes, and the old man returned the favor. Maybe a week passed like that, long enough I was feeling pretty low. I get like that sometimes, almost like I'm wearing a bag around my neck and somebody keeps filling it with dirty diapers. It's hard keeping my head up, and everywhere I go the world stinks.

That's what it felt like when I was sitting at the park, pumping my hand and counting to ten, when the old man came up behind me.

"Is the view still free?"

I turned around (I hadn't even seen him coming!) and I tried not showing how I felt.

"Last time I checked. Have a seat!"

"I'm much obliged," the old man said.

He sat on the bench and put his hat on his lap, covering his one hand. He looked nervous to me, almost like he was scared of something.

"You asked about my wife," he finally said.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I did."

"How I met her."

"That's right."

"Would you still like to know?"

"Would I?" I said, telling myself not to get excited. "I'm all ears—have at it!"

He nodded, almost like I'd given him the go ahead. He brought his hand to his mouth, his good hand, and made like to clear his throat, though it didn't sound like it needed

clearing. Then he turned and looked at the pond, raising his hand, almost like he was signaling the violins.

Then—and this is the only way I can put it—he began.

“I didn’t see her at first,” he said. “The motor truck idled beside the small school, and from the cab the foreman was busy hollering directions. When he was done, I hopped out of the trailer and crossed the street. Spring had arrived early that year, so the grounds we tended had already tufted with crabgrass and shrubbery sprouted obliquely along the perimeter. I had three days to prepare for a season that had already sprung. I started across the yard and set to work on the hedges.

At midday the school doors exhaled small children, and recess commenced. It was a good time for my break. I stashed the tools inside the shed while the little ones packed the yard, then I wandered down the street looking for a lunch counter. The stools were all spoken for, so I stood by the register for a sandwich to go. I returned to the school and leaned over the fence, peeling away the petals of wax paper while I ate. The little ones turned curlicues in the yard and not a few of them practiced screaming.

I saw her amid the mayhem, an auburn haired girl at the far corner of the yard, sitting on a bench in the shade of a cherry tree. She was reading. Indeed, her nose could not have been buried more deeply in her book. She was oblivious to the world around her, or so I assumed, for she never looked up, not once, no matter the commotion of her charges. She continued to read until the school bell rang, when, at once, she shut her book and followed the shrieking funnel back into the school.

The next day there were several seats at the lunch counter but I returned to the yard anyway. I ate my sandwich while watching the frenzy, which excluded only a single boy who stood conspicuously in the center of the yard. He was a large boy, short-haired and stoop shouldered. All together, a little sloppy. He brooded near a gang of boys who orbited each other, tossing a ball back and forth. Whenever the ball came near him, his doughy face darkened and fists drew at either side.

The boys avoided him, all but one, a buck-toothed child who liked to pass before him, turning to catch the ball before departing with a distorted smile. He came a little closer each time until, at last, he was just in arm's reach. The coincidence wasn't lost on the stoop shouldered boy, who raised his arm and drew a clothesline, knocking the buck-toothed boy to the ground.

The ball bounded away.

The stoop shouldered boy hurried to grab it and, with an agile quality that surprised everybody, took off across the yard. The boys looked on, then a cry went up. They pursued him in a pack.

The stoop shouldered boy raced to the edge of the yard, running along the fence until he abruptly met the tool shed. He stopped and turned to face the boys, who were not far behind. He seemed to size them up, then he dropped one stooped-shoulder and ran up the middle.

The boys scattered like pins.

He emerged from the pack, charging across the yard. The scrum swiftly reassembled, and with the whole yard watching, more boys joined in. The stoop shouldered boy headed in my direction, but he wasn't going to get caught in another corner, so he curved away before reaching the fence. He shot past me, curling back into the yard, swatting away a tiny boy who was late to the adventure.

The pack turned to follow, those at the very back racing to cut him off. The stoop-shouldered boy sent more children tumbling, but he was beginning to flag, and an assembly of arms closed in. Then, strangely, one by one, the boys seemed to fail.

The auburn haired girl was standing at the edge of the yard. The stoop shouldered boy was the last to see her, but when he did, he wound down like a toy soldier, stopping a few feet from where she stood. He was panting and when he looked down he seemed shocked to find that he still had the ball in his hands. He stared at it briefly, seemed to consider hiding it, and finally dropped it to the ground in front of him.

The auburn haired girl called to him. He came forward with heavy feet. She said something and he was silent. Then she took his head in either hand and lifted it. She gazed at him, then she spoke. What, I could not say, no one else could, for the words were shared between them. But I could see that the boy was crying now, for her fingers brushed away

tears. Finally he smiled and nodded and smiled again. She smiled as well and embraced him. He knew it would be okay.

She turned to the yard where the boys stood watching. She called to them, and another boy came forward, a handsome looking kid, nearly as tall as the other. He came before her, and the two boys stood side-by-side. She placed a hand on either outer shoulder and spoke to them as one. The handsome kid looked ashamed. She smiled and touched his face. He blushed and smiled and nodded vigorously. The stoop shouldered boy bent down and picked up the ball. He offered it to the handsome kid, but the handsome kid declined, so together they returned to the others, who looked on at the two of them in much the same way that I did, with envy.

While I waited that afternoon for the truck to pick me up, it occurred to me that the next day at the school would be my last, at least for a week. The work of restoring the yard was nearly complete, and from then on I would only be needed to trim the grass and tend the shrubbery—I, or one of the other men, for there was no guarantee I would be assigned to the school again.

This possibility haunted me the whole ride home, so much so that I didn't notice the familiar signs of my neighborhood until the foreman leaned out the window and told me he didn't have all day. I didn't sleep well that night, and not only for the obvious reason. A storm had settled over the city, and the empty blocks howled and boomed. By sunrise the rain had lifted, but the sewers still gurgled and alley cats stood in doorways, arched and stiff.

When I arrived at the school, I was dismayed to find my work was largely unscathed. The flowerbeds were tousled and a few standing pools spotted the yard, but I knew they would drain by midday. The exception was the cherry tree, where a large arm had cracked and a sleeve of blossoms touched the ground. My immediate thought was to clear the branch away before the auburn haired girl arrived, but then I realized something. The broken limb was opposite her bench.

When the bell rang, I was standing on a ladder with a handsaw inspecting the offending branch. I tried to look determined, but all I could think of was what I would say to the auburn haired girl when she asked me if it was safe for her to sit beneath the tree. I had not resolved on how I would answer that question before she settled it herself, sitting on the bench below me, a still figure among the blossoms, busy with her book.

I stood there holding the saw and realized I had no idea what to do—except, of course, for the one that had brought me up the ladder. I took my saw and set the teeth on the slivers of the split joint. I plunged the saw forward and shuddered at the sound. Immediately I looked over, relieved and then disappointed, that the auburn haired girl hadn't looked around.

I waited a moment more, then I continued sawing, sending a shower of petals falling around me. (They covered her shoulders and head.) The joint was stubborn, and I continued sawing until the branch finished its fall, stopping at the foot of the tree. I wiped my brow and looked over to see if she had turned at the sound, but on the contrary—the bench was empty!

I searched the blossoms. At the other end of the yard, the auburn haired girl was arriving beside a small child who rocked on the ground, holding her knee. I watched her comfort the girl, then I looked at the bench again. She had left her book behind. It was facing up. I could almost read the title.

Almost.

I leaned out from the ladder, but one of the feet lifted. I settled back. Then I noticed the other large arm that reached out over the bench. I swang my leg up and straddled the second limb. I began scooting along the trunk. The limb was strong, but I realized too late that I had brought the handsaw with me. I looked around for a place to leave it. I thought briefly of tucking it in my overalls, then, by turns, I tried to stash, balance, and finally impale it on the limb. The final effort succeeded. I held on to a branch above me and leaned out over the bench.

The book was gone. Two green eyes had replaced it.

I fell to the ground, landing at the feet of the auburn haired girl. I passed briefly from the world. When I returned I found her kneeling beside me. Our eyes met—a second time I remembered—and she smiled.

She took me by the arm and helped me sit up. We were surrounded by a halo of small children. They looked at me as if they had seen someone fall from the heavens (or, perhaps, rise from the dead). When I got to my feet, the circle trembled, but the children remained transfixed. They watched the auburn haired girl guide me to the bench. She sat down beside me.

‘You’re safe now,’ she said. Those were her first words to me, but they were spoken with such certainty that I might have been an old friend. ‘Just catch your breath, the tree will wait.’

She nodded as if we had shared a confidence, then she turned to the children.

‘You may go back and play now,’ she said. ‘Our friend here is fine.’

The circle remained unbroken.

‘Come now,’ she continued, looking around at the children in turn, ‘There’ll be time enough for silence when recess is done, so scoot!’

The children lingered a moment longer, then they began to disband, drifting away one by one until a single boy remained, the smallest of the lot. He continued to stare until a second *Scoot!* was sounded, at which point he seemed to shake from a dream and quickly joined the others. He left us alone.

It occurred to me that I hadn’t explained my reason for being in the tree. In my mind, I began fumbling for explanations, but every one seemed more preposterous than the last. Finally I blurted out the only thing I could think to say.

‘I didn’t mean to scare you.’

She smiled again.

‘You couldn’t have scared me,’ she said. ‘Not for a moment, not at all.’

She smiled as if we had shared a second confidence, and this time I knew we had.

She squeezed my arm gently.

‘You must return to work,’ she said, a command, like that to the children, which was gentle and unambiguous, ‘but I will check on you again to see that you are fine.’

I nodded. Words fled.

‘Good,’ she said. The school bell rang. ‘Come along children,’ she called. ‘It’s time to return inside.’

The clamor of the schoolyard did not cease at once, but the cries dwindled as the children moved toward the building. The auburn haired girl walked behind them, shepherding the stray back into line. She did not turn to look at me, not until she arrived at the doorway where she turned once and found me and we shared a smile before she disappeared inside.”

The old man's hat had slipped. He was too busy giving his speech to notice, so I could see his hand, the bad one. It was like I remembered. The pointer finger was gone, like someone had taken sandpaper to the knuckle and worked it smooth. But the middle finger, that was a different story. The end was blown out, like firecracker almost or an ugly flower. I kept staring at it, I couldn't help myself.

The old man caught me looking. He swallowed his fingers in a fist. I tried to sound natural.

"That was a swell story," I said.

"Thank you," the old man said. He seemed to remember he had a hat and snatched it up.

"Real nice. I liked it a lot. That part about the school—boy I liked that."

"Thank you," the old man repeated. He began standing up, then he sat down. He fiddled with his hat band like he was looking for something. I wanted to help him out.

“Well, gotta to get going.”

The old man shot up.

“Yes, yes of course, me, too. I must be getting home.”

The two of us went through the park. When we got to the street I told the old man how much I liked his story. I said it a couple of times, being real sincere, and I think it worked, cause his face lifted and, for a moment, he stopped looking at me like he had forgotten to put on his pants.

“Thank you,” he said. “I am grateful.”

He started to leave, then he stopped and turned again.

“Oh yes—is your arm all right?”

I patted it.

“Right as it’s ever going to be.”

“Yes,” he said. “But the doctor, did he figure out what was wrong with it?”

“It doesn’t take a genius to—oooh, yeah. Yeah he did. Much better now, thank you very much. I mean, better as it’s ever going to be, you know? Haha!”

I patted my arm again.

The old man smiled.

“I’m quite relieved,” he said.

I was lying of course. About the arm, sure, but more about the story. It was this feeling I had, and by the time I went to bed, it was big enough to keep me from sleeping.

I brought it with me to the diner the next day. I didn't say anything about it—couldn't have explained it if I wanted to—but when the door jingled, it set my teeth on edge, and everything I heard—the newspaper, the coffee cup, and every damned *thank you*—seemed like someone I hated flipping the bird at me.

By the time the old man left I was beside myself. I couldn't even finish my pancakes. I only remember leaving some cash and storming out, so blind with what I was feeling I almost ran him over in the street.

“Frank,” he said. He was holding his hat like a funeral.

“Oh, hello,” I said, wiping my eyes. The old man looked at me but he knew enough not to see anything.

“Would you be my guest?” he said.

“For what?”

“For dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Okay, sure—I guess.” I didn't know what to say. “When?”

“Of course, please forgive me, I should have been more specific. Tomorrow evening. Short notice I grant, I'm sorry for that. I fully understand it if you're busy.” He smiled.

“You're not busy are you, Frank?”

I shook my head, I was having a hard time speaking.

“Good,” he said. “I am very pleased to hear that.”

“Where at?”

“My home of course. Here.”

He handed me a card. There was a time on it.

“Thanks,” I said. “You want me to bring something?”

The old man laughed. It came out like a tiny explosion, liked he squeezed a turtle.

“No,” he said. “I am grateful, Frank. Truly. Just bring your appetite. I’ll see to the rest.”

And just like that, he was gone.

I don’t remember how I got back to the Men’s Residence that day. I mean, sure, I walked, but I don’t remember walking. I only remember getting there and looking at my hand. The card was still there. I read the address. The street sounded familiar to me, so I asked Virgil at the front desk. He looked at the card and started laughing at me through the chicken wire.

“Have I heard of it? Frank, it’s right across the street.”

That wasn’t fair. It wasn’t *right* across the street. It was down the street, across a parking lot, on the other side a ballfield. If you looked hard enough from the front doors you could just see the street, but it was easier the other way around, from the old man’s place. He lived in a walk-up, and from the window in his living room, if you leaned against glass, you could just see M-E in “MEN’S RESIDENCE.”

The old man was still cleaning up from dinner—no matter how hard I tried, he wouldn’t let me lift a finger—so I waited in the living room, trying to find something to look

at cause I didn't feel comfortable watching him clear the table. When he was done, he came in to the living room with a plate full of butter cookies.

"A little dessert," he said, putting them on the table. "Would you like some tea, Frank? Coffee, perhaps?"

"Coffee," I said. "Black—thanks."

"Black," the old man said. "This late, are you sure?"

"Oh, I'm a night owl. Always been."

The old man smiled. He went back to the kitchen. I didn't want to look like I was waiting around for him, so I acted like I was admiring the place. It looked old to me, not because it was run down (the place was so clean it didn't look like anyone lived there) but the furniture, the doors, even the wallpaper, they all looked like something out of a magazine my pop used to read.

"Can I turn on a light?"

"That's all right," the old man said, his back was to me. "The sun hasn't set yet. We'll sit by the window." He paused. "I mean, we can turn on the lights if you like."

"Nono, I was just trying to be careful—I tripped carrying a pot of coffee once."

"My goodness."

"I can't speak for the rug, but I turned out okay."

The old man chuckled.

"I promise I will watch my step. Mind you, I've been here for some time so I suspect I could serve you coffee at midnight blindfolded." He came back into the living room.

"*Squinting* as you say."

“Well squinting wouldn’t make too much difference if you’re blindfolded, but I see what you’re saying.”

The old man smiled.

“Please, Frank, have a seat. The coffee should be ready in a bit.”

I sat in an armchair beside the window.

“You lived here a while?”

The old man nodded.

“Practically since I came to the city.”

“Really, I thought you grew up here.”

The old man shook his head.

“Not exactly.”

“When did you get here?”

“Some time ago,” he said. “Not too long before the story I told you.”

“The one about your wife.”

The old man stopped.

“Yes,” he said. “That one.”

The kettle started screaming.

“Please excuse me.”

The old man went back into the kitchen and took the kettle off the stove.

“You didn’t like it, did you?” he said over the screaming. I heard him but I pretended like I didn’t. The old man started rummaging through the cupboards. He asked again.

“The story,” he said. “You didn’t like it, did you?”

I didn't want to answer.

"What makes you think that?"

"Just a feeling I had," he said. His back was to me. "Am I wrong?"

"No—I liked it."

"But not entirely."

He returned from the kitchen with two white cups in two white saucers.

"Two black coffees," he said. "I, too, am a night owl."

He put the saucers on the table between us and sat across from me by the window.

He sipped from his cup.

"But not entirely," he said again. He was watching me.

"I liked it, honest."

The old man waited.

"It was just . . . I don't know. I guess there was no air in it, no breath."

"Breath," the old man said.

"Yeah, you know, the auburn woman—"

"Girl," he said quietly.

"Yeah, the auburn girl. It felt like—I don't know. Like I said, no air, no breath."

The old man sipped his coffee.

"Would you like a cookie?" He leaned over to pick up the plate of butter cookies.

"Sure, thanks. One second here." I put down the coffee so I could take a cookie. "A little short-handed."

The old man smiled.

“Take your time.”

I grabbed one.

“Thanks.”

I nearly broke a tooth on the cookie. It was terrible, but I kept chewing.

The old man smiled. He didn’t take one himself.

“Your arm—it is better, yes?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “If I may ask, what did the doctor say?”

I waited to finishing chewing.

“Oh, you know. Looked it over, gave me a pill. The regular. It’s better now.”

The old man smiled and sipped his coffee.

“It’s all right, Frank,” he said.

“Sorry?”

“Being a good liar is a gift but hardly a virtue,” the old man said. “I know you didn’t visit the doctor.”

He was watching me from behind his cup. I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know what, so I took another bite of the cookie.

“Why did you feel that you had to tell me that—that you were *seeing* the doctor? It wasn’t necessary.”

I was quiet.

“I wanted to be respectful.”

“Respectful?”

“Of space,” I said. “I try to respect people’s space.” The old man watched me. “I just—with my arm and all, I’m careful of how close I get to people, cause I know they’re careful of getting close to me.”

“People you don’t know.”

“Yeah.”

“Until they get to know you.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Even then.”

“Is that why you followed me?”

The old man made a sucking sound when he tried to sip. The cup was empty. He put it back on the saucer.

“It’s no sin, Frank.”

“How did you know?”

The old man grinned.

“You have a way of making yourself known.”

I put what was left of the cookie on the saucer.

“Though you might have been a little more careful with the book.”

It took me a moment.

“Oh yeah, sorry about that. I dropped it, didn’t mean to, honest.”

“It’s all right.”

“I had to catch myself.”

The old man raised his hand, his good hand. I didn’t want to look at him so I grabbed the coffee again. The old man watched me.

“What happened to your arm, Frank?”

I looked at my coffee.

“An accident,” I said. “At work.”

He leaned forward.

“Tell me.”

I was quiet.

“Please, Frank. I want to hear it.”

I looked at him.

“All right.”

I finished my coffee and looked out the window. Somewhere on the other side of the house, the sun was setting.

“I was a mechanic,” I said. “Went to work for Mister Lucas straight out of school. He was a guy from the neighborhood, knew my pop. They played cards on Sunday. He was a good man, Mister Lucas. Gave me my start. Seen me working on this junker behind the house, asked me if I wanted a job. I never got the damn thing running, worked on it for nearly a year, but that didn’t matter to him. Asked me anyway. I couldn’t even get the words out of my mouth—pop said yes for me.

I stayed with Mister Lucas, worked my way up. Became the head mechanic at the garage, stayed that way till Eddy took over—God forbid you ever called him that, not to his face. Only his mother called him that. You didn’t call him Eddy or Ed. You called him Edwin or you didn’t bother calling.

Eddy was Mister Lucas's son, his only son. He was a trailer, had six sisters in front of him, so he was younger than me. A lot younger. He came to work for his father out of college, doing accounts, settling paperwork, that sort of thing. Always in the office. It seemed like you only saw his bald spot when his father was still around, but when Mister Lucas passed, Eddy turned his desk so he was facing the window, so you knew he was watching you, and he knew you knew.

By then I'd been working in the garage for a while, long enough that me and Mister Lucas were pretty close. I loved the old man—all of us did. He signed our paychecks but he never let us forget that he got his start like us, working with his hands, and he liked nothing better than coming around and talking shop while we were working. Eddy though, I don't think he knew how to open the hood of his own car much less fix it. He just kept to the office and never set foot on the floor, not unless he needed something. Even then he had this phone installed on the wall right outside his office, pink phone. Had a cord long enough Eddy could go anywhere in the garage, telling you what he wanted, all without needing to get off. Sometimes he'd just stand there on the phone outside his office, just watching us while he talked, and when he was done, he'd hang up and go back to what he was doing, all without saying a thing.

But that changed when a customer came in. Eddy came sprinting out of the office like his slacks were smoking. There he was, right in the middle of the garage, smiling and shaking hands, asking after the folks, inquiring about the kids. Drumming up business. *Attentive* as my pop used to say. But when it was done, when the customers left, that face of his closed up like a fist, and he returned to whatever he was doing.

This is all a way of saying, if you needed something from Eddy, you had to come to him. I had to do that a lot being that I was the head mechanic and all. I watched him through the window, trying to find a time when he wasn't busy doing something, but he was always busy doing something, so I had to grit my teeth and go in.

Now seeing that I knocked before opening the door, not to mention the fact Eddy could see me coming through the window, you'd have thought he'd be ready for me. But Eddy wasn't ready till Eddy wanted to be ready. Most times he'd let you stand there, working on whatever he was working on till he was good and ready to speak. I got used to that, standing there like a fool, but not the finger. I never got used to Eddy's finger. When you came in he wouldn't even look at you, he'd just put up his finger, one finger, just to tell you what you already knew, that you weren't nearly so important as whatever he was working on.

When I think about it now, I can't believe I stayed there as long as I did. But I liked the guys, and working at the garage was all I knew. Besides, the pay was good, and the worse you are with money the more you find yourself needing it, and, believe me, I was pretty bad. So I learned to swallow my pride, gulp it down. But you do that enough, pride has a way of turning in your stomach, and sooner or later, you know it's gonna explode.

It was a little thing that did it. Missus McGinney. She brought her car by one day cause her brakes were crying, but I'd known her all my life. She lived down the street from my folks, and when I was a kid, I used to clean her gutters. Her husband had passed, and I told her I was glad to do it, but what I really wanted was to see her daughter, Maureen. Maureen McGinney. Oh, man. She was Missus McGinney's only daughter, maybe four years

older than me. *The belle of the block*, that's what my pop used to say. She had red hair and green eyes and a way of looking at you that made you sorry you had to look away.

She didn't know I was alive, wouldn't have learned if I told her, but she was so pretty for a second look I would have cleaned gutters till kingdom come. It didn't work of course. Maureen got knocked up straight out of high school by some guy a few blocks over with a nice car and a lousy future, but her mom took a liking to me, and when I saw her in the garage talking to Eddy, I stopped what I was doing and came right over.

Hiya, Missus McGinney I said, holding out my hand.

Eddy grabbed it.

C'mon Frank—look at your hands. (He was holding my wrist like a dirty hanky.)

Missus McGinney looked like I felt so I went back to the car I was fixing and tried to get back to work, but it was useless. I was staring at the engine but I wasn't seeing anything. To be treated like that—not like nothing, it was worse than that. It was like I didn't exist unless someone needed something from me. That's what it was like, and I'm telling you, I was pumping my hand and counting to ten but my eyes were still filling with hate.

I waited till Missus McGinney left, then I went to Eddy. He was walking back to his office but I wasn't about to let him get inside. I caught him just as he got to the door.

Edwin, we need to talk. I want—

The pink phone started ringing. We both looked at it, then I saw that finger. I didn't let it get halfway to Eddy's chest. I grabbed the receiver and smashed the phone to pieces.

That pretty much ended our discussion, or the need for us to have any more, so I started leaving. I got a few feet before I stopped. I dug through my pockets and found what I was looking for, then I turned to Eddy and tossed him the keys.

I thought that was pretty slick, tossing the keys like that, specially the way they bounced off Eddy's hands and dropped on the floor, but it was a mistake. A big mistake. I realized that when I was on my way home that night after celebrating being unemployed. My tools were still at the garage, all of them, the most valuable thing I owned. Not having keys anymore I'd have to go back to get them when the garage was open, and you can understand I didn't think that was a good idea, so I did what seemed only natural after a long night of drinking: I decided to break in.

There was a junkyard behind the shop with a fence running the length of it. I parked in the alley behind it, climbed a dumpster, and hopped the fence. We had a dog back there. Big thing. Looked like it could chew through a fender. He was a sweetheart really, always treated you like you had a pocket full of hamburger, but he sure looked mean, specially when he came charging right at you to say hello. He met me at the bottom of the fence and nearly knocked me over. I gave him a scratch between the ears, then it hit me that I wouldn't be seeing him no more, so I bent down and let him lick my face.

I went through the junkyard, back to the garage. The gate was down, but the lock broke a couple weeks before, and we hadn't gotten around to fixing it, so I raised the gate and went in.

I had a lot of tools, so it took me a few trips. I'd bring them back with me to the fence. It was one of those old fences, cast iron, the kind that looks like a teller's window. I'd

reach through the bars and drop the tools in the alley. When I got the last of them, I closed the gate and started across the junkyard. I was halfway home when headlights came swinging through the yard. I dropped to the ground. A truck came roaring down the alley.

When it was gone—or, really, when I was sure it wasn't coming back—I got up and made my way to the fence, stepping lively as they say. I realized for the first time how scared I was.

I dropped the last of the tools through fence, then I stood on the grate, grabbing one of the posts near the top. I was pretty strong back then, so I pulled myself up, getting my one knee on the crossbar, right in between the spikes. I was bringing up the other when the dog barked. Just once. It wasn't his fault, he didn't know any better. He was just trying to say good-bye.

My knee slipped, and I was quick enough to push myself off the fence, keeping the spikes from going through my chest. One caught my arm though. It went right through the meat of it and kept pulling till it stopped at the wrist.

So I hung there like that, one hand reaching for the stars at the top of the fence. I tried reaching with the other, but it was no good. There was nothing I could do. I just hung there, waiting my time out. The last thing I remember is the dog. He started licking my hand, the one beside me. Buried his nose in it. His tongue was warm and I remember thinking to myself, *There's comfort in that*, and I prayed to God he wouldn't leave me."

I stopped talking. The room was quiet.

The old man stared at me. Finally he said something.

"Molly," he said. "My wife, her name was Molly."

We were quiet, then the old man tried to smile.

“It looks like we share something in common,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Our cups are empty.”

He picked up the saucers and took them to the kitchen. I wiped my face. I was sweating like I had a fever.

“Does it seem distant to you?”

“What?”

“That time,” the old man said, I could hear him pouring coffee. “Does it seem distant to you?”

“I guess. In some ways.”

“Which?” the old man said. He returned from the kitchen and gave me my cup. For a moment, I could see his blasted finger.

I didn't say anything at first, but the old man kept looking at me.

"I guess when I look at myself. You know, in the morning, when I'm brushing my teeth. I see what I see. It seems distant then."

"But not always?"

"No, not always. You carry it with you, I guess."

"Carry it?"

"In your head. You think about it. I do. So it can't be that distant."

"Yes," the old man said, he seemed to get excited. "It can't be. Not if what's far away is nearer to you."

I didn't follow exactly, but I knew it didn't matter. He wasn't speaking for me.

"I mean—we all have such stories, don't we?"

He looked at me over his cup. The sun had set, and sitting in his chair the old man was fading into a shadow. I took a long drink of the coffee.

"Tell me yours," I said, knowing that's what he wanted to hear, what he had wanted all along. "But remember—"

"Breathe," he said.

I nodded.

"That's right—breathe."

The old man closed his eyes. He looked like he was gathering himself. Finally he opened them and smiled. Smiled wide.

“An invitation to the past,” he said. “That’s the only way I can describe it. How it found me I’ll never know. I stumbled over it when I came in. A letter. A note really. It came spinning into the room. I watched it from the doorway until it stopped, then I retrieved it. I read standing first, then again at the kitchen table. When I was done, I sat there for a time, holding the note before me. Then I noticed my shadow. It leaned away from me, cutting the table in two. It touched the cupboards, soon it would overtake the kitchen. There was little time I knew.

I folded the letter and put it in my pocket, then I went to the coat closet. On a high shelf, in the back, I recovered a leather satchel and brought it to the bedroom. It still had the canteen inside it, and I added two linen shirts, a pair of overalls, fresh undergarments, and a bar of soap I wrapped in newspaper. I went to the kitchen and filled the canteen, then I dug through the icebox and fixed food enough. I finished only moments before Molly arrived, returning home with the groceries.

What did I tell her? A lie of course. The boss had just called to tell me we had been awarded a job by one of our wealthiest clients to groom his country estate. He asked me to lead a caravan out to the house, early the next morning, to begin the job immediately. It would probably take us well into next week, I told her, and I hoped that she wouldn’t mind my absence, for work had been so slow lately.

I was worried she would recognize the deception—what with her gift for observation and my dreadful skills at deceit—yet she only said that she would surely mind my absence, except that now she had a homecoming to look forward to. I seconded the sentiment with a kiss on her forehead and offered to put the groceries away.

I remember being especially affectionate that night. We had known only for a few weeks that Molly was with child (a relief of sorts for we had long wanted a family) and she was keen to enjoy the city lights before the demands of motherhood preoccupied her. Thus she was a little disappointed when I told her that I wanted nothing more than an evening at home with her, but I made amends by gathering her into my arms after dinner and reading to her while her head rested in my lap.

When her breathing betrayed that she was asleep, I laid the book aside and stared at her for a moment—how very much I loved her. Then I took her into my arms and carried her off to bed, lingering over the smell of her hair when I kissed her goodnight. She always slept soundly, and I knew that I could leave the house without waking her, that she'd suppose I'd gotten an early start when she rose in the morning. This much wouldn't surprise her. Indeed, she'd expect it of me.

I removed the leather satchel from the closet and went to the kitchen to retrieve the food I'd prepared. I wrapped it in more newspaper and packed it away. I was about to leave when I stopped. I dropped the satchel by the door and returned to the closet. I felt around the top shelf. In the very back I found what I was looking for. I pulled it out.

The hatband had long ago been lost, if there had ever been one to begin with, and the grey felt about the brim had faded to ash. I turned it over, feeling its weight, and noticed the letters that were stitched into the liner. I had forgotten about them. I turned the hat over again and beat it quietly against my leg to shake free the dust. Then I put it on.

I paused again at the front door and looked back over the apartment, giving myself one last chance to return the satchel to the closet, slip into bed, and forget I had ever received that note.

The moment passed. I turned off the light and closed the door behind me.

When I left home, I expected to find a sleeping city. Indeed it seemed only fitting given the clandestine nature of my journey, and I was startled to find the city wide-awake and alive as I made my way through it. The sidewalks brimmed with sharp dressed men, an assembly all angles and stripes, their hair tightly lacquered, sporting shoes that wouldn't tolerate a scuff. Alongside them hotel girls sallied forth wearing whirling skirts that wrapped smartly about their hips and dangled just below their knees. Their lips were painted a pouty crimson, and whenever they passed, the scents of baby powder, black licorice, and honeysuckle flickered behind them. The chosen among these groups walked arm-in-arm, unbothered by the worry of catching somebody's eye, while the others paraded before each other in playful displays of swagger and dalliance.

The taxis darting alongside me came squirting to stops, and out popped more couples bound for the evening's adventure. They streamed past me into the gilded gates of movie houses that beckoned to them with neon letters and the whitehot light of a million bulbs. Or else they sidled up to barrooms bulging inside with a chorus of voices that spilled out into the streets whenever somebody entered. Or else they disappeared into doorways to be quickly absorbed into the omnipresent palaver of partygoers in untold apartments overhead.

This was the city, the city I loved, at least on an evening when nothing but the promise of a weekend's repose lay ahead, and beneath that fantastic glow, I ambled forth, my gray felt hat pulled low over my eyes, my leather satchel clutched tight by my side. I was headed toward the stockyards, where the never-ending freight trains headed north, their heavy steel doors ajar, offering a free ride to any down-on-his-luck traveler who was willing to suffer a night of fitful sleep on the soiled floor of some empty boxcar. Well that night I was one of those travelers, and scurrying alongside the tracks, I threw my satchel inside and climbed in.

There was laughing.

'Y'ain done that before,' a voice said. I was sitting inside the doorway, trying to recover my breath. The voice came from the depths of the freight car, far beyond the reach of the city lights.

'Excuse me?'

'I said you ain done that before—hopped a car like that.'

It wasn't a deep voice but it was strong, as if the speaker were straining to reach someone at the end of a long hallway. I drew the satchel to my side.

'What makes you say that?'

'How y'got in,' the voice said, speaking slowly, deliberately, as if to burden every syllable. 'You threw in yer pack before jumpin the car. What would you ah done if you didn make it?'

I listened for any quick movements.

‘You’d ah lost yer pack, that’s what. That’s how I knowed you never hopped a car.’

The voice hesitated.

‘Unless yer a fool.’

‘I ain’t a fool,’ I snapped, cocking my head toward the darkness. ‘But I always throw my pack in first and there ain’t a train outrun me yet.’

The words were tinny, fraudulent. I could barely contain my shaking.

The car was silent.

‘I see,’ the voice replied, it was softer now. ‘If yer legs’re strong . . . folks have different ways I guess.’

‘They do,’ I said. My hands trembled, I buried them under my arms.

The corner of the car fell silent. I pulled my pack into my lap and turned from the darkness to watch the city slide by. We had almost reached the outskirts, where the tenements faded to cow patch and the dirty orange glow of street lamps was replaced by moonlight and the navy glimmer of the night sky. By the time we spoke again, there was nothing to remind us of the city we’d left behind.

‘I was gonna have a smoke. You want one?’

I turned to the darkness again.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

I heard something come sliding across the floor of the car. A pack of cigarettes appeared and came to rest in the moonlight. I leaned over and picked it up.

‘There’s one leff,’ the voice said. ‘Help yerself. Need a light?’

I thanked him and said I had my own. Then I heard the familiar quick scratch of flint. At the other end of the car, the owner of the voice flickered into view. His head was bowed as he held the lighter up to his mouth. He was wearing a cowboy hat so his face and hands were hidden from view. Then, like that, he disappeared again.

I removed the final cigarette and tossed the empty pack outside. The moonlight skipped off the pack as it cartwheeled through the air and fled from view.

‘Thanks,’ I said, lighting the cigarette.

We sat there smoking and listening to the rumble of the train. The inside of the boxcar was black, except for the red eye of the other man’s cigarette, which flared from time to time, and the shard of moonlight that cut through the open door, exposing me to my companion.

‘You travelin fer work?’ the voice asked.

I nodded my head. I didn’t know what else to do.

‘Thought so. Me too. Headin west—hay season.’

‘You a baler?’

‘You bet, one of the best around. Sun up to sun down I can throw a bale of hay simple as saying so.’

The voice seemed to savor the boast.

‘Y’ever baled?’

I nodded again, putting out the cigarette.

‘Yessir,’ the voice continued, the words came easily now. ‘Good work, ain it?’

The voice did not wait for my reply.

‘Yep—out there in the field, gettin them bales and throwin em on the truck, racin with yer boys to see who can get em up there fastest. Or how bout when the boss’s takin a piss and yer seein which ah you can throw a bale the farthest. You done that before, I know it.’

I nodded again. Another lie.

‘I knew you done it, I could tell. Any baler’s done it. I’m tellin you, when the boss is gone, me and the boys, we’re always competin. We stand there by the truck, one ah us on the lookout, and then we take those bales and heave-ho, there they go!’

The voice paused. When it began again, I could tell the words were spoken through a smile.

‘It was like they had wings on em. That’s what the boys say. They tell me, *Man alive, them bales must have wings on em!* That’s what they say when I toss em.’

‘That’s something,’ I said.

‘It’s somethin all right, them bales just flyin like that.’

The voice trailed off. For a moment, all that could be heard was the endless rumble of the train beneath us. Then the voice began again, quickly.

‘You know, at the farm I work on, at the end ah summer, when balin’s done, all the balers come to town fer the fair. They hold it every year, right at the end ah hay season. They got everythin at that fair—hog races, pie-eatin contests, even a fireworks show, everythin—and on the last day they got a hay toss. Everybody in town comes to see it, everybody—balers too. They come out from the farms, but they don’ all git to throw—no sir. Each farm

gits to send one baler to the contest, that's what the rules say, best baler they got, and he throws fer all the boys on his farm.

'Come the last day ah the fair, right after the picnic, everybody goes out to the field fer the hay toss, whole town. The balers, they line up in front ah everybody, and each ah them git a bale. Then the sheriff—he's standing at the end—he yells *Heave ho!* and there they throw. Man alive, you should see it! Up them bales go, like they had wings.

'The three balers that throw farthest, they stay put, but the rest, they're done, they gotta turn roun and face their boys, and believe me their boys ain happy cause it makes em look bad since they was supposed to be the best baler they got and they still ain good enough. You don' wanna be that baler, goin before yer boys when you come up short like that—no sir!

'Anyhow, the three that throw the farthest, they step up again, and people bring em a new bale. And them balers, they're standing there, and the sheriff, he stands right next to em, and he says *Heave ho!* and there they throw, one-by-one, and they're tryin as hard as they can now, like they could throw them bales over the moon and right up to the stars. Everybody's looking at em, and their boys is cheerin em on, and they wanna win, so they throw them bales, and up they go—

(The voice paused, as if to trace the arc of that golden volley.)

—and when they come down, the one that's farthest, he wins ah course, and the whole town can see it.'

The voice paused. When it began again, it was solemn, as if swearing an oath.

'I tell you, when you win that hay toss—it's like nothin else. The whole town's cheerin you, and the boys, they're comin over and clappin you on the back, makin sure everybody knows yer with them, that yer their own. Most times they go and liff you up and carry you roun like you was a hero. They carry you all over the fair with folks followin behin, cheerin you, and you look down, you can see the girls, and they're lookin up, makin eyes at you, and yer thinkin, I can get a kiss from any girl I want, any girl in town, I don't even have to ask. And you can see the little ones too, wavin at you, and you know what they're thinkin, they're thinkin, I'm gonna be him someday, I'm gonna be a baler and I'm gonna win that hay toss and they're gonna carry me all over town and everybody'll know my name—everybody!

The voice paused again.

'There ain nothin like it in the world, nothin at all.'

I listened to the rumble beneath me.

'You ever win the toss?'

The voice made to reply, then it hesitated.

'I ain won yet,' it confided. 'But I come close, real close. Couldn ah been closer, and one day I'm gonna win that toss. I tell you I'm gonna win it—all the boys know it, plain as day. Just ain been my time yet, but you'll see, I'm gonna win that toss, and when I do . . . '

The voice stumbled along. I released my grip on the satchel and sat back against the door. Outside the freight car, the land rushed past, a featureless black plain unbroken but for the lonely farmhouse and occasional dirt road. I watched it now. It was not an unfamiliar

sight, but its familiarity felt strange to me, discomfoting, the yellowed picture of a loved one passed.

I tried to accustom myself to that feeling for it would remain with me until I was done, I knew that, and as I did, my thoughts returned to the carefully folded note still buried in my back pocket. I thought about what it said and what it required, for I knew what I had to do, the duty was clear to me though the history behind it seemed distant, so distant—the story of some other life altogether.

And suddently I wanted talk to the man at the other end of the car. I wanted to share with him my story, tell him what had brought me there, why I was traveling with him. Why I had to leave. Not because I wanted comfort or a kind word, only because I hoped he would hear me out, wait until I was done, then nod his head and tell me he understood, that I was only doing what had to be done—nothing more.

I wanted to say these things, but then I heard the voice again. It was still prattling on in the corner of the car. It hadn't finished its defense.

I sat back, then I looked out at the land. After a time I wanted to see the man's face. I turned to the darkness and asked him to join me. The voice hesitated. For a moment, it was silent.

'It's kind ah you to offer,' it finally said, 'but I need to get a little shuteye. You might turn in yerself. When the sun comes up, this car starts bakin, and you won' be sleepin then.'

I thanked him for the suggestion and stretched out along the soiled steel floor, the satchel tucked under my head. The rumble of the freight car filled my ears. Soon it had rocked me to sleep.

I slept only a few hours that night and rose shortly before dawn to watch the color return to the world. I sat in the open doorway of the freight car and took out the bundle of food I had tucked away in my satchel. There were biscuits there, sandwiches—I'd made them before I left. My mother made them for me when I was a boy, first thing in the morning. I'd get up early to watch her, eating them the moment she was done. During the harvest, she'd make extra for me to take to the orchard. I'd carry them in a pail and share them with my father so we never needed to return home for lunch.

I took out those biscuits. They were wrapped in newspaper and tied together in a large red handkerchief. I removed the bundle from the satchel and untied it. I ate two of the sandwiches, washing them down with the warm water in my canteen.

I looked west out of the freight car. I knew that the tracks would soon bend in that direction, and I would have to get off the train and continue heading north. I began repacking my satchel and prepared to leave. As I did, I heard a snort and remembered my companion in the corner of the car. I looked over at him. Though he remained in the shadows, with the morning light, I could see him sitting against the side of the freight car, his cowboy hat tipped over his face. I was reticent to wake him but I wanted to say good-bye, so I finished packing and slung the satchel over my shoulder. Then I crept into the shadows.

When I came beside him I squatted down. I reached out to touch his shoulder, then I withdrew my hand. I watched him for a time. He sat slouched against the wall, skinny legs splayed, toes pointing apart. He was bootless, and the soles of his feet were calloused, crusted black. His jeans were filthy, filthier still was his shirt. It was threadbare and patched.

Along one shoulder, a seam had burst and the brittle ends curled from the smooth skin beneath like the petals of some squalid flower. His arms lay at either side, his small hands open as if to receive alms. There was no pack beside him.

I retreated to the other end of the car, I didn't need to see the boy's face. I took off my satchel and retrieved two of the biscuits, then I took out my wallet and removed a few bills, wrapping them as a bundle in my handkerchief. I returned to the boy and knelt down beside him. It was only then that I saw the glint. A pistol, a small pistol, lying beside his leg. I stared at it, wordless, until the floor shifted beneath me as train turned to west.

I snatched the gun and ran toward the open door, leaping out and landing in a scrubfield, rolling once before coming to my knees. I panted briefly and sat back on my haunches. I still had the pistol in my hand. In the other was the bundle of food. I turned back to see the caboose swivel and head into the distance. The rumble faded. I undid the bundle and put the biscuits back into satchel, the gun with them. Then I returned the bills to my wallet, wiping my face with the handkerchief.

I stood and looked north. In the distance there was a small town. I crossed the field, heading toward it, still headed toward home.

Jakob Crackleburry

It was early yet, but the heat had already settled like a heavy fog over the flat, featureless land. I pulled my gray felt hat low over my face, taking solace in the little shade it provided, and made my way toward the tiny town. The streets were deserted, but I found a general store where the owner was preparing to open. I knocked on the window, and he came around to the front and undid the latch for me. Inside, I bought a few apples, refilled my canteen, and found out exactly where I was. When I was done, I thanked the man and waded back into the heat, turning the corner at the town square and continuing north along the same simple road.

I followed that road most of the day. The heat was so fierce that it drove the world indoors. The fields were emptied, the farmyards still. Even the insects were silent, leaving only the footfalls that carried me to midday, when I retreated to the shade of a nearby tree and lay down to rest. There I ate another biscuit sandwich and one of the apples I'd purchased that morning, sucking the core dry before throwing it into the brush. Then I

pulled off my work boots and poured out the grit that had collected in them. I stripped off my socks. They were gray and damp and looked like dishrags.

When my socks had dried, I continued north, wandering on into the late afternoon, until the heat finally overwhelmed me, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to continue much longer. I began looking for a place to stay for the night and soon came upon a town, the first one I had seen since morning. It stood at the end of a long stretch of flatland and boasted a single intersection of whitewashed buildings. They glowed like tombstones in a late afternoon light.

I had nearly reached the town before I saw anyone. It was a man, a towering bull of a man. He appeared from behind one of the buildings, walking along the road that ran perpendicular to mine until he reached the middle of the square, where he turned and seemed to split into two.

It took me a moment to confirm that the duplicate wasn't some phantom of heat but the revelation of a second man—equally sized, exactly dressed, and absolutely identical to the first. I watched these giants from behind as they now began lumbering along in the direction I was headed, when a third, far less impressive figure appeared. He walked with an unmistakable hobble and struggled hopelessly to keep up with the other two. He turned the corner and fell in behind them, filling the horizon between their shoulders.

I was intrigued by the sight of these men, so much so they had drawn me to the edge of town before I realized that I had to decide whether to stop there for the night. I stood for a moment between the facades of two indistinguishable buildings, then I found myself moving again, faster now, closing in on the last of the three men.

When I had almost reached him, I slowed my pace, not wanting to betray my efforts to catch him. From behind, I could see that he was an older man. He had tufts of gray hair that stuck out below the brim of his hat, and the skin on the back of his neck was tawny and weathered and bunched together like the folds of an old blanket. As he hobbled ahead, the old man pumped his fist as if he were pulling himself along a rope, huffing noisily with every step.

‘Afternoon,’ I said in my friendliest voice.

The old man’s fist paused mid-pump.

‘Why hello there,’ he said, letting his fist retract when he sensed I meant no harm.

I slowed my pace so that the old man would feel comfortable slowing his.

‘Sure is a hot one,’ I continued, removing my hat and fanning my face.

‘You betcha, the old man replied. ‘So hot there’s bacon fryin in the pigpen an the hen’s layin scrambled eggs.’

I grinned.

‘Your farm must smell like breakfast.’

‘Ha!—you betcha!’ the old man exclaimed. ‘Name’s Jakob Crackleburry, but my friends call me Jake.’

I held out my hand to him and gave him a name, not my own.

‘A pleasure,’ Jakob Crackleburry said, shaking my hand. ‘You passin through?’

I nodded.

‘Headed north, looking for work.’

‘I see—gonna be tough, crops is dyin in this heat.’

I told him I'd find something. Jakob Crackleburry smiled.

'You betcha,' he said, nodding his head vigorously. 'That's the way to look at it!'

I smiled and gestured up the road.

'If you don't mind my asking, who are the gentlemen up ahead?'

'Gentlemen—ha! Them's the twins.'

He nodded up the road as if I hadn't seen them.

'They must be handy around the farm,' I said.

The old man grimaced.

'You'd think so right, specially being my own flesh and blood. You'd think they could do the work ah *ten* men! But no, *noooo* sir—you gotta keep yer eye on em jus to get an honest day's work between em.'

Jakob Crackleburry's voice had risen to such a pitch that the boys turned to look back at us.

'*Yes*—you two!' Jakob Crackleburry cried, waiving a weathered fist. The boys watched for a moment, then turned up road again. Jakob Crackleburry waved a moment more, then noticing I was watching him, he put down his fist, and his eyes fell with remorse.

'Now don' git me wrong. They ain bad boys—you jus can' trust em, that's all. They got this way about em, strange way. They share everthin those two, *everythin*, always been that way, even when they was kids—but that's it! They don' share nothin with another soul. It's like they don't need no one, no one but themselves. An listen,' Jacob Crackleburry dropped his voice and leaned in, 'sometimes it's like them boys is havin a joke on you. It's this look they git, I don' know, but I git a feelin sometimes, an it ain a good one, believe you me.'

The old man shook his head.

‘It’s jus, with everthin I gotta be worryin about, havin to keep an eye on those two— well, you understan.’

I told him I did.

‘I appreciate that, I do.’

Jacob Crackleburry paused.

‘I try an do right by my family,’ he said. ‘I try hard, honest I do, *every day*. Family— they let you know where you are, they give you yer place, an a man needs a place, else he don’ know where he is, so you got to see to em, do right by em, or else you’ll lose em, an then what’s left you?’

‘Nothing,’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ Jakob Crackleburry said. ‘Nothin.’

He looked down the road.

‘Yer lost.’

The old man and I had been climbing a low but steady incline for some time when I saw the twins, who had reached the top of the hillside, turn off the road and disappear behind a dense patch of trees.

‘That’s the farm,’ Jakob Crackleburry said. ‘Look, you can see the copula.’ He pointed to a small red box at the very top of the trees. ‘That’s all you can see from here but wait till we git up the hill.’

The old man quickened his hobble, impatient to show me his home, and we soon came to the top of the ridge and passed the high wall of greenery.

‘She ain much,’ he said humbly, ‘least not anymore—but a home’s a home an I’m proud a her all the same.’

There was nothing false in the old man’s modesty, for if you had passed the farm on a quiet day, you might have mistaken it for abandoned. The house stood at the far end of the yard, a ramshackle, two story structure with an awkward low slung roof and a gray, uneven

appearance, the consequence of too many seasons of weather and rot. The windows along the front were small and few and seemed mostly intact, though their panes were caked with a yellow film that gathered like dirty snow along the bottom. In front there was a small porch with a faded green awning whose trim along the side had come undone and curled in on itself, hanging from the corner like some strange, unruly vine. Around the perimeter of the house a fierce thicket grew, dense and untamed, shouldering the length of the porch and threatening the lowline of windows.

Moving out from the house, the thicket gave way to long grass. It grew dense and tufted, burnt yellow by the heat. A barbed-wire fence had been strung along a path that led from the house to the corner of the barn. Beyond it lay a divided patch of land, blackened and beaten down. A small horse sat still in the middle of the one plot. It was gray and gaunt and looked like an overgrown dog. In the other, two heifers flanked a large black bull. They were gathered at the far end of the fence, their backs turned to us, indifferent to our return.

The barn stood at the far end of the fence, opposite the house. It had been red once, but the years had washed away the color, exposing the wood underneath and giving the barn a raw appearance of decay, one reinforced by the shingles that had been stripped away from the ribs of the roof and the crumbling silo that stood stock still next to it like an aging but ever loyal servant.

‘I know what yer thinkin,’ said Jakob Crackleburry sheepishly. ‘You want to know what them cats is doin here?’

Cats? I wondered—but then I saw one, then another, and another, and now as my eyes passed carefully over the yard, I realized the farm was overrun by these creatures. They

were everywhere, some nearly hidden, their tails floating up over the tops of the long grass like antennae, while others were curled up on the porch in small mounds of black, gray, and calico. Still others dotted the small footpath that led through the long grass from road to home. A column of cats even went scampering up a tree, one after another, all in pursuit of some unknown object, or maybe just each other.

‘Let’s go inside and take a load off,’ Jakob Crackleburry said, stopping at the footpath, ‘lemme jus git through here first.’ The old man stepped off the road and onto the footpath, and no sooner did he do so than a pitiful feline cry rose from the long grass and reverberated across the yard. And there they came—shooting through the long grass, jumping off the porch, and circling down the trees—all drawn toward Jakob Crackleburry, a miserable furry mass that pushed and tumbled, trying to reach the old man to plaintively paw his trousers while avoiding his feet.

To keep from stepping on the cats, I fell behind, trying to accommodate the mewling mass that trailed the old man, who muttered to himself as he hobbled determinedly toward the house. When he reached the porch, the feline assemblage came to a halt, massing about the bottom step and raising one final cry to gain their master’s attention. Their master, however, wanted nothing to do with them and disappeared into the house before I even reached the steps. Once he was gone, the crowd quickly dispersed, most of the supplicants slinking back into the long grass, while a few mounted the porch steps to resume their afternoon naps.

I followed Jakob Crackleburry into the house where I found a dimly lit kitchen that smelled like old cabbage and overbaked bread. The room was empty, except for a few dirty

dishes that were moldering in the sink and a half-filled bowl of fruit that sat rotting on the counter. Jakob Crackleburry was already sitting down at the opposite end of a crudely hewn, egg shaped dinner table. He was staring pensively out the window, the waning light drawing out the lines in his face. He didn't say anything until I was seated across from him.

'Damn cats,' he said to himself. 'They's only hungry I know, but I jus can' feed em, can I? Every one? No—I can'. But they's hungry, I know that.'

He turned from the window and looked at me.

'My wife loves them cats,' he said, allowing himself a brief smile. 'Y'see, a few years back, I used to git to the youngins first. I was real good at findin em cause their mamas liked to keep em in the straw up in the hayloft. It's real nice there. In the summer, you got yer shade, and in the winter, the straw'll keep you nice and warm.

'Anyhow, when I saw one of em was expectin, I'd keep my eye on er till she disappeared fer a few days, then I knew she was birthin. After a week or so I'd go up to the barn, real early in the mornin when the missus was still asleep, an I'd find the youngins. When they was all alone, you could hear em the minute you come in the barn. They'd start mewin up a storm, thinkin you was their mother come back to feed em. I had no problem gittin em then. When they were with their mother, well, that was harder cause they weren cryin out fer no one. Still, I'd always find em, jus sucklin away while their mother was rolled over on er side. Or maybe they'd be curled up with er, all of em sleepin together real quiet like. Anyhow, when I come up on em, to show their mother I was meanin no harm, I kep a piece a jerky with me. I'd wave it in fronna her nose, an while she was chewin away, I'd pick up some a the youngins, not all of em, jus enough so my wife wouldn catch on. I'd take em

from the barn, right, carryin em all in my hands—they's so small, you can carry two or three in each hand easy—I'd take em from the barn back down to the crick behind the house. When I got there, well, I'd take care of em, you know?'

I nodded.

'Well, I was always careful bout it, cause my wife, she loves them cats, an I knew that if she foun out what I was doin it'd jus kill er.'

Jakob Crackleburry took his hat off and put it on the table. He ran his hand across the clean pate of skull until he came to the back of his head where he paused to itch right below the halo of gray hair. Then he began again.

'It was my fault cause I got sloppy,' he continued. 'There was this litter, big litter, seven of em, seven youngins—they were somethin, I tell you. They all looked the same, black as the devil's intentions, cept fer their feet. They looked like they'd gone runnin through paint cause they was all white, like someone had gone an put booties on em. They was a sight, I tell you. It even got to me what I was doin when I was bringin em back to the crick, not jus cause a how they looked but cause I'd taken em all with me, the whole bunch. We had too many cats already, and the rest of em would suffer if I didn be careful, I knew that, I jus couldn feed em all—you understan. I didn like takin all the younguns, but I jus had to.

'Anyhow, I come down to the crick, an I was squattin there. I already put the younguns down. They was heaped in a pile next to me, all tangled up. They're still blind then, so they're jus rustlin aroun, not knowing where they are an mewin to break the day, so I take em, holdin em face up like this—

Jakob Crackleburry cupped his hands like a beggar.

‘—then I holl their arms down with my thumbs while I dip em under the water. They move, right, not knowin what’s goin on, but when they stop, I know it’s done, an I take em out an put em beside me while I see to the others.

‘Anyhow, I done six of em already. They were lyin next to me, all stretched out an still, so I took the lass one in my hands. She was real scared, you see, cause she was all alone, and the youngins is not used to being alone. There’s always someone aroun, always someone right with em, keepin em company. So this one, she’s mewin as loud as she can cause she’s cold and scared and all alone—I understan, I do. So I took her, right, had her in the water, an I was holdin her there when I heard that scream.’

The old man paused and looked up at me. He nodded his head slowly.

‘I toll you I was sloppy that mornin, got roun to things later an most days. I shoulda done it all earlier—but I didn, an she was up already. I don’ know why, but she was up an foun me at the crick. She come up behin me, *right behin me*, and I didn hear her till—well, she was there, an I heard her all right, and I pulled that lass one out a the water so fast you’d ah thought it was my kin, not some damn cat.’

The old man laughed to himself and shook his head gently.

‘Well she was so mad she come up and pushed me to the groun, and when she saw that youngin was still in my hand, shakin and strainin, she reached down and took it from me and went runnin back up the path, holdin it in her arms. Ever since she’s been watchin them cats, and I know if I try it again she’ll catch me an she’ll never forgive me then, no she won’. That’s why we got all these cats now. That’s jus the way it’s got to be.’

What about the kitten, I asked, the one that had been saved.

Jakob Crackleburry grinned.

‘Oh, that’s her favorite. She sneaks that damn thing food all the time, an you should see the other cats—drives em crazy I tell you, plain crazy, you betcha!’

Jakob Crackleburry shook his head. Then he laughed.

‘Damn cats!’ he said. He pushed himself up from the table and looked down at me. ‘Anyhow, we don’ have much room in the house, but I can set you up in the tool shed behind the barn.’

I was taken by surprise. I’d planned to work my way around to asking the old man if I could stay for the night.

‘Well—I’d appreciate that,’ I said, ‘but I don’t want to put you out.’

‘Nonsense,’ Jakob Crackleburry replied. ‘I ain got a castle, but there’ll always be room here fer good folks needin a place to stay. You should feel welcome.’

I was moved by the old man’s gesture, which was so earnest and unreserved that I was ashamed I couldn’t tell him my real reason for passing through.

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said, standing up. ‘I’m grateful for the hospitality. There’s still daylight left, so I hope you’ll let me help you out around the farm. I’m good for the work, and I’d like to do something to show my appreciation to you and your family.’

Jakob Crackleburry tried to wave away my offer.

‘There’s got to be something I can do—some way I can help out.’

The old man continued to wave, but I pressed on until his hand slowed and a look came over his face like he had just put two and two together and realized it was four.

‘Well, if you want to help out—you don’ need to, but if you really want, there is one thing I—’

‘Anything,’ I assured him. ‘I’ll be glad to do it.’

The old man smiled.

‘Hold on,’ he said and promptly hobbled off into another room. He reappeared shortly holding a large object that was wrapped in a crimson broadcloth. He set the object gently on the table in front of me and unwrapped it. When he was done, he stepped back. In the middle of the table, lying flat in the crimson folds was a large gilded horse. It was nearly the length of my arm and perched atop a slender metal rod. It was caught mid-gallop, its legs outstretched, its mane flaring behind it like small wisps of flame.

The old man took the rod and held up the horse.

‘She tells you the weather,’ he said.

He pushed the horse’s hindlegs, it whirled atop the pole.

I smiled.

‘It’s real nice,’ I said.

‘Ain she?’ he said admiring the horse. ‘Had er fer a while now, wanted to put er up but never got the chance. The twins won’ do it, and me—’

Jakob Crackleburry bent down and knocked the bottom of his leg to reveal it was wooden.

‘—well, I can’ really, but if you could put it up you’d more an earned yer keep. Much more . . . I’d be obliged to you.’

We crossed the farmyard, and I looked over my shoulder at the house to inspect the integrity of the roof. From the ground, it looked sturdy to me, and there seemed to be a number of spots where I could easily get on the roof with the help of a ladder. When I turned back, Jakob Crackleburry had already hobbled ahead, and I hurried to catch him. We made our way across the yard, unbothered by the cats, who seemed to recognize that food came from inside the house so there was no reason to harass the old man whenever he left it emptyhanded.

We came across the twins who were standing around aimlessly at the far corner of the cowpen. They were as monstrous as they'd seemed from a distance and indistinguishable but for the scar. It was massy and inflamed and sat like a purple caterpillar on one boy's face, the end splitting an eyebrow in two.

The old man introduced the twin, and their hands swallowed mine in a perfunctory handshake.

'Our frien will be stayin the night out back in the tool shed. The two ah you be sure to give him a hand if he's needin anythin.'

The boys said nothing, they didn't seem to have much to say. Jakob Crackelburry continued.

'I'm takin him back so he can put his things away. He's goin to put up the horse fer us, so I'm gonna git him some tools and show him what he needs to do.'

When the weathervane was mentioned, a grin flickered over the face of the boy with the purple caterpillar scar. It had all the warmth of his handshake. Jakob Crackleburry noted the grin and moved quickly.

‘Now you boys can learn a thing or two from this man,’ he said, stepping toward them, the anger flooding his voice. ‘He’s just passin through but he’s good enough to help me out roun here. You nogoods is here all the time, my own flesh an blood, an I can’ even get an honest day’s work out a you!’

The boys looked at each other disinterestedly and then off beyond us. The one with the clear forehead began kicking at the ground. Jakob Crackleburry stared at the two of them, but receiving no response, he turned and told me to follow. As we left, I turned to the boys and saw that the one with the scar was grinning again.

I followed Jakob Crackleburry around the fence and back to the tool shed. It stood behind the barn, next to the pigsty, a final outpost before the pasture that banked the far end of the farm. It wasn’t very large, roughly the size of a small room, with a single window on one side and a corrugated tin roof that slanted steeply to one side. It was in a state of disrepair roughly equivalent to everything else I’d seen, but its humble size and intention seemed to excuse its appearance. The old man opened the shed, and I followed him inside. The interior was surprisingly cool and clean. There was a shelf that ran along the back wall on which, neatly arranged, were a collection of tools and an old metal can brimming with nails. Over the shelf there hung an oil lamp, and behind it along the wall were a few black metal saws, some implements of husbandry, and, in the corner, an old rifle.

The old man went around the shed, tidying up anything that looked out of place to him. When he was done, he reached under the shelf and pawed around till he found what he was looking for.

‘Here you go,’ he said, handing me a small pillow. ‘I like to catch a nap in here now an again.’

I thanked him and put the pillow and my satchel at the end of the shed, just inside the door.

‘Yer only goin to need these,’ he said, handing me a hammer and a few nails. He unwrapped the weathervane and held it in one hand. ‘Jus take the hammer and put the nails through here,’ he said, pointing to the four holes of the rod’s rectangular metal base. ‘That’ll keep er good and sturdy. Y’see?’

I nodded.

‘Good, I’ll show you where she goes.’

The two of us came around the front end of the barn, at which point I forked from Jakob Crackleburry and headed for the house. Noting that we’d split, I quickly adjusted my path and came alongside the old man as he hobbled toward the road.

‘There,’ he said, stopping and turning around. ‘Right up there.’

I followed the direction of the old man’s finger, and suddenly I understood why the one boy had grinned. The weathervane was not supposed to go on top of Jakob Crackleburry’s house, it was supposed to go on top of Jakob Crackleburry’s barn or, more specifically, on top of the copula on top of Jakob Crackleburry’s barn.

‘I see,’ I said, gazing at the summit far above me.

‘Yep,’ said Jakob Crackleburry, hobbling toward the barn. ‘You can go up through the barn to git there. I’ll show you.’

I followed the old man to the large barn doors which, to my surprise, he rolled open effortlessly. We entered the barn, and I was assailed by the familiar scent of wood, straw, and dung, a heavy smell that was nearly overwhelming in the late afternoon heat. The interior of the barn was everything the exterior promised. The long wooden floorboards, which had begun to buckle and burst with rot, were covered with white teardrop stains left by birds that flew through the broken windows of the cupola and nested in the rafters overhead. Along one wall, a series of crude tools lay rusting and neglected, while a collection of decrepit hay bales were heaped on top of each other. Their sides were cut with slivers of gold, and looking up, I could see the area of the roof where the shingles had been stripped away, letting the sunlight peer through the exposed wooden slats.

To reach the cupola, I would have to crisscross the barn, navigating a maze of ladders and beams until I finally reached the top. There, I could pull myself through one of the cupola windows and out onto the bell-shaped roof where, standing up, it looked like I would be just tall enough to mount the weathervane.

‘Y’see?’ Jakob Crackleburry said. ‘Nothin to it.’ He handed me the weathervane, which was bundled like a child in the crimson broadcloth. I took it from him and peered again into the small cavity of the cupola high above. The old man followed my gaze. He laughed uneasily.

‘Nothin to it,’ he repeated.

I looked back at him. He met my eyes and quickly looked away. I spoke assuringly.

‘Nothing at all,’ I said.

Jakob Crackleburry looked back and burst into a grin.

‘Yer a good man,’ he said, grabbing my free hand and pumping it repeatedly. ‘You don’ know what this means. This horse—this is about turning things aroun, about gettin this farm back to what it was, it’s about—’

He searched for the word.

‘Redemption,’ I said.

I never looked down on my way up to the cupola, not until I had reached the top rung of the peg ladder, unjammed a window, and pulled myself over the remains of an ancient bird's nest. For a moment, I rested on the rooftop, staring at a congregation of tiny cats in the barnyard below. Then I pushed myself up, straddling the spine of the roof, careful of my footing because the shingles were loose and unreliable. I grabbed the eave of the cupola box and unfastened one of my overall straps, removing the weathervane from where it had been tucked behind my head. I used the length of the rod to measure the box, then I stood the weathervane on end and slid the mount along the ridge of the middle of the cupola roof. I took the nails Jakob Crackleburry had given me from one pocket and the hammer from the other and nailed the mount into place. I jostled the rod to make sure it was secure, then, confident, I reached up and pushed the horse by its gilded tail. It flashed with sunlight as it whirled in place.

Content, I squatted and sat on the roof. The day had nearly ended, but the heat was still extraordinary, and for the first time I was aware of the sweat that pooled at the base of my neck and dripped from my chin. I drew my arm across my face, several times, and leaned gently against the cupola. For a time I watched the sun fall, slathering gold across the horizon and pressing shadows throughout the land. As a boy, I used to climb through the rafters to the roof of our barn to watch the sun set and the black cloak of stars draw slowly across the sky. During the summers I came most nights, a ritual I had not thought of for some time—the peace it brought me.

Then I remembered his eyes, his great green eyes, still and silent behind the darkening glass.

Not yet I thought.

I sat back and felt the weight of the day, then I climbed back through the window and down through the barn. I went to the house to find the old man. He was sitting on the porch steps, holding his hat in his hands so that the pale, baby flesh of his bald head shown. He was still watching the road, waiting for the remainder of his family.

When I greeted him, he sprang up and came hobbling down the steps to meet me. Before I had the chance to say anything he was already shaking my hand and praising my work. Indeed, you would have thought I had refurbished the barn, whipped the boys into shape, and drowned most of the cats he was so happy. Moved by his display, I told him again that I was happy to help and reiterated my thanks for his hospitality. He waved away my words and told me there was no need for them, then he asked me to sit with him while he waited for his wife and daughter. I thanked him for the invitation but told him that I was

tired from my travels and that, if it were all the same to him, I wanted to turn in early. Jakob Crackleburry said he understood.

‘I’ll have the missus set aside some dinner fer you,’ he said. ‘She’ll be real surprised to see that horse, she’ll want to meet you. I jus know it.’

The old man paused, as if weighing what to say next.

‘Yep—and you’ll like her. I know you will. She’s a goodun, got a good heart. Remember what I toll you about the youngins? Well that jus shows it. Sure, she gets goin sometimes—tire me out. But you show me a man with a wife that don’ tire him out, an I’ll show you a man whose wife don’ love him! Well that ain me. I love my wife, love her all to gone, an she tires me out sometimes. Heck, she tires me out mos days. But I love her fer it cause I know the heart she got. You can tell it by the cats. She jus loves them cats, she was only tryin to perfect em, and you can’t blame her fer that, can you? No sir, you can’t.’

Jakob Crackleburry found that he was talking to himself. He looked at me expectantly. I smiled and agreed.

I walked back across the farmyard and the cats scattered like a school of minnows through the long grass. At the corner of the yard, near the side path that ran back to the tool shed, I found the twins. They hadn’t moved from the place where Jakob Crackleburry and I had left them. Now, however, they were engaged in some sort of game, and when I neared them, I saw that they were each holding a cat by the nape of its neck so that its small, emaciated torso hung uncurled from their giant fists. The boys were taking turns swinging the cats so that their lower bodies repeatedly banged into each other. It looked like they were

trying to provoke the cats into a fight, but the cats would not be baited. They swang limply from their fists, paralyzed by their predicament or, perhaps, indifferent to it.

I did not look at the boys as I passed. I had already rounded the corner of the pen and started down the side path when I heard the voice of the boy with the caterpillar scar. I stopped. For a moment I didn't think he could be talking to me for I didn't have a—then I remembered.

'What you got a gun fer?' the boy said again. He spoke without inflection so the all words seemed rolled into one.

I turned to the boys. They had paused for an intermission in their show, the cats dangled motionless in their outstretched fists. The boy with the purple caterpillar scar looked at me disinterestedly, while his brother stifled a grin.

'What are you talking about?' I asked.

'Yer gun,' the boy said, tucking the cat under one of his thick forearms and turning to face me from across the fence, 'the one you got with you.'

'You mean in my bag?'

He said nothing.

'Why are you going through my things?' I demanded, trying to keep the anxiety from crowding out the anger in my voice.

'Needed somethin,' the boy with the purple caterpillar scar said, "from the shed." The cat began struggling under his forearm, and he dropped it to the ground. It immediately disappeared into the long grass.

‘That’s not what I asked,’ I came back around the fence until I stood before them. At full height, the top of my head would have just grazed their chins. ‘Why did you go through my bag?’

The grin had receded from the other boy’s face, he now began to inspect his feet.

‘It was open,’ the one said indifferently.

‘No, it wasn’t,’ I shot back, my voice began to tremble. ‘It was sitting in the corner of the shed—closed.’

‘What you got it fer,’ the boy replied, lowering his chin to look at me.

‘For protection,’ I said, keeping my voice hushed for the old man was still sitting on the porch. ‘Traveling like this, being alone at night—goddammit, why do you think I have it?’

The boy opened his heavy lips to answer, but he was too slow. I cut him off.

‘Now I appreciate the hospitality, but if you and your brother are going to be going through my things, I can just as well keep moving.’

I stared into the boy’s eyes. They were dull and grey, indifferent.

‘All right,’ I concluded and marched off, rounding the fence and continuing back to the shed. I went inside and immediately retrieved my satchel. Inside, the pistol was sitting on top of the spare pair of overalls. I took it out and lay it on the floor, then I dug through the pack to find that nothing was missing. Relieved, I drew out a small wooden stool and sat down. My hands were still shaking, I waited until they stopped. Then I looked down at the gun. I bent over picked it up.

I hadn't looked at it, not closely. It was a small gun, a pocket revolver with a worn wooden grip and a dull gray barrel. I turned it over in my hands. It reminded me of something a bandit might carry, or a bank robber maybe if he robbed banks long ago. I looked on one side of the trigger, then the other, finding the latch. It resisted at first, then it clicked and the gun cracked open. The cylinder was full.

I closed the gun and saw that my hands were shaking again. I put it back in the satchel.

I began preparing for bed, hoping that the activity would keep me from fixing on my anxiety and so give it time to pass. I stripped down to my underclothes and folded my shirt and overalls, both of which were heavy with the day's sweat. Then I took the canteen out of my satchel and drank the rest of the water. It was warm and tasted of copper. I gulped it down. Then I rechecked everything before closing the satchel again and placing it within arms reach of where I would sleep. Finally, after debating for a moment, I took down the old rifle that rested along the back wall of the shed. I pushed the barrel up under the door handle and wedged the stock tight against the floor.

When I was done, the remaining light left only the barest shapes of things inside the shack. I lay down on the floor, drawing the tick up under my head. The exhaustion from the day seemed to pull me into the warm wooden floor, but still I did not sleep. My mind wouldn't let me. It began shuttling through my past, a succession of single moments that flickered behind my eyes without order or sense, all recognizable to me but few familiar. I remember passing through those moments, waiting for them to finally be arrested by dreams. I can even recall the last of them. It was a vision of my wife's face, wrinkled up in a

predictable grimace before betraying itself with a smile, the way it did whenever I would come home from work, my face chalk-coated with sweat after a day in the sun. Standing before me, she would rise on tip-toes to kiss my cheek, and tasting the salt, she'd wrinkle her nose in disgust, just for a moment, just before a smile would sneak across her face and she'd clasp me affectionately and give me further kisses, indifferent to the sour taste of my flesh.

I remember that vision. I remember it well. But I don't recall it having any effect on me. Not then. It was a final moment before sleep. That was all. And sleep meant more to me then than any vision I could imagine, even one so essential.

I woke at some point. I don't know when. I would wake twice that night. The first time I heard something that brought me out of my dream. It sounded like a knock, but as I lay there, the room shapeless and black, I listened and heard no more. After a time, I took the pistol and laid it beside the satchel, then I crept to the door, carefully removed the rifle from its stopping place, and jerked the door open. There was no one outside, but I found a cloth covered pie tin and a glass of milk with a saucer on top to keep away the cats.

I drank nearly the full glass of milk, then I returned inside, putting the dishes on the ground while I fumbled along the shelf looking for matches. Finding them, I lit the oil lamp overhead and drew back the cloth to reveal the dinner that had been left me. There were mashed potatoes, gravy, a hard roll, and a small flank of meat. None of it was very good, and though I was hungry, I didn't feel like eating. I finished the hardroll and gnawed at the meat, then I went outside and threw the rest of the food into the pigsty. I returned to the shack and finished the milk. When I was done, I sat down on the stool again. For an instant,

I felt compelled to put some clothes on, as I was sitting around in my undergarments. I bent over to grab my overalls, but when I had them in hand I realized that there was no need for them, and I sat there holding them in my lap. After a time, I reached in the back pocket of the overalls and found the note. It was folded in a small square. I took it out, unfolded it, and held it in front of me. In the spare light of the cabin, I read it again.

Dear X (It began.)

Its John. From bak home. I ben meanen to rite. Its good heer. I gotta wife now. Mariam. We hav 2 chuldurn. Sarah an John. Ther good childurn. U shud see them. Johns gettn reel big. Sarahs got a smile like er muthr.

I had to fine u. I dont no if you tawk to ur sistr. I dont think so. Shes with Jack now. Shes bin with im fer a wile. U no what hes liek. He hurts er. He hurts er bad. Its gon on for awile now. Thers no one to pertect her. I hopd thengs wood chang. Onust I did. But now hes gon n hurt her. Hurt her bad. He beet her eyes cloosd. He beet her cold.

Ur sistr wont leev him. She needs him. No matttr whot he dus she needs him. Shes bin hurt bad but sumday hell go farthr. U

no Jack. U no he will. Hell go farthr and then no one will be
abel to help her. I wood do something. Onust. But its Jack an I
got Mariam an the childrun. Mebbe u can do sumthin. I hope u
can. I wantd to make sur u no. U neded to no.

I hope u get this.

John

(Then at the bottom, as if an afterthought.)

Ma n Pa hav passd so Im at the hows if u com thru.

Id be good seein you.

When I was done reading the note, I sat still for a moment and listened to the silence. Then I refolded the note and put it back in the pocket. I felt tired again, very tired. I blew out the lamp and went back to sleep.

I said I woke twice that night. The second time I was stirred from a dead sleep, when you wake more by a struggle than a start. I came to slowly, not knowing why I'd awoken. I stared into the darkness of the shack and soon felt myself being pulled back into sleep. Then I heard a sound. It was a distant sound. It came from somewhere far beyond the shack, and immediately I was aware that the rifle was no longer wedged against the door.

I reached over and felt along the floor for the pistol. Another sound, somewhat louder this time but still distant. I found the pistol and snapped it to my chest. When I had satisfied my imagination that there was no one waiting for me just outside the door, I put down the pistol and slipped on my overalls. I came to my feet and peered out the small window. I saw nothing but the dark outline of the pigsty and, beyond it, the looming backside of the barn. I opened the door and stepped onto the grass.

The land was still, and the air felt cool against my skin. I stood beside the shed, listening for the noise, but there was no sound except for the sleepy wheeze of the sow

nearby. I stood there for some time, and only when I had convinced myself that the sound was gone did it come again, louder this time, from the direction of the barn.

I stared into the darkness, as if waiting for some sign, then I set off around the pigsty and followed the narrow footpath that ran between the cowpen and the barn. When I reached the edge of the path, the noise came again, and its source, I knew, was somewhere deep inside the barn. I looked across the farmyard. Nothing stirred, there were no lights inside the house. I waited a moment more, then I came around to the front of the barn and found the towering doors slightly ajar. I slipped into the darkness and stood with my back against the wall. The noise came again. It was still distant, muffled, but it was a voice, a human voice, and I seemed to be standing on it.

I took a step forward. The floorboard did not creak, so I took a second step, then another, the dried bird-droppings crushing beneath the pads of my feet. I heard more sounds now, or rather some strange undercurrent of noise. It sounded like movement of some kind, footfalls to a gathering maybe. I waded deeper into the darkness, feeling with one hand the air before me, when two burning buttons of light appeared at the far corner of the barn. They were set in the floor, and when I crept toward them, I found that the boards beneath my feet began to buckle, suggesting a room or crawlspace beneath. I came beside them and knelt down. They were small holes that had been cut into the floor, a room was lit beneath them. I lowered my head to look through them, then I set my ear against one of the holes. I could hear the sounds more plainly now, that movement, a drumbeat almost.

Then I heard her scream.

My mind fled from the barn, down the path, returning to the shed and recommitting me to sleep. My body did not move. When I heard a second cry, my fingers went skittering across the floor until they stumbled over a piece of twine. I grasped it and pulled. A fissure of light opened beneath me. Immediately I closed the hatch. Then another cry, and I opened it again. I could see nothing beneath me but the top rung of a peg ladder that had been set into the wall. I listened, and when I was certain that the noise was not directly beneath me, I lowered my head through the opening.

The room was empty, but there was a darkened doorway at the far end. The sounds came from somewhere beyond it. I put the pistol in the side pocket of my overalls and quietly descended the ladder, nearly knocking over an oil lamp that sat at the bottom. It was an oblong room, narrow and bare like a catacomb, with a low ceiling and bone white walls. Grain was scattered over the floor and a sack of oats sat heaped in the corner. The drumbeat was louder here, almost like a stampede, and there were other voices now, furious movement. Another scream.

I pulled the pistol from my pocket and crept toward the end of the room. I paused at the blind doorway, then I peered into the adjacent room. It was L-shaped, my end empty and unlit. At the far end, lamplight flickered from a blind corridor. I followed the corridor, bringing the pistol to my chest, stopping at the end. The noise was deafening here, filling my ears, a frenzy just beyond me. I turned the corner.

What did I see? A cacophony of images—a maze of limbs, the luster of flesh, and a purple caterpillar scar. Enough. I turned back immediately.

I left the room and passed quickly through the next, climbing the ladder and escaping through the barn. When I was outside, I paused, hunched over, my hands pressed against my knees. I thought I might retch, but, in time, the feeling passed. I breathed deeply until I was ready to move on. When I stood up, my eyes passed over the farmyard, and I caught sight of the house. Briefly, I thought of Jakob Crackleburry and his anonymous wife, sleeping side-by-side in bed, still and undisturbed. Then I heard the old man's voice: *they share everything.*

I walked to the end of the barn and turned back toward the shed. I continued down the footpath, not noticing the bull until I was alongside him. He had left the two heifers behind at the corner of the cowpen and now stood stock still next to the fence. In the moonlight, his black coat shone like marble, and his big bug eyes glowed, round and insensible. I paused and stared at him. He did not move. After a moment, I continued on. I entered the shed and shut the door behind me. Then I took the old rifle and secured it again against the door. I sat down on the stool and stared into the darkness. I did not rest again until my hands ceased to shake. It took even longer for the feeling of dread to pass.

I rose early. I had not slept well toward the end of the night, staring listlessly at the ceiling as the rising sun restored details to the small room. With the sun came the heat, and soon the toolshed became unbearable. I got up and put the clothes on I'd worn the day before. Then I grabbed my satchel and left.

Remembering Jakob Crackleburry's story, I went around the house and down the small hill, following a footpath through the woods until I found the creek. It was larger than I expected, deeper too. I looked around, then I stripped down and waded into black waters, letting the stiff current swirl and wash away the day of travel. When I was done, I made my way to the shore and used one of the two clean shirts I'd brought with me to dry off. Then I washed the shirt and the clothes I'd worn the previous day and hung them on the nearby branches of a tree. I changed into fresh clothes and returned up the hill again.

I came back around the back of the house and took cover under a tree. The farmyard looked no different from the day before, which was how it looked everyday I imagine. The

gaunt, gray horse was still sitting in the middle of his pen, while the black bull had rejoined the cows at the far corner of the fence. The cats were strewn about, most of them taking cover from the morning heat in the long grass, though a few were stretched out on the porch. Nothing stirred until a new cat appeared in the yard. I first saw its eyes through a narrow opening near the corner of the barn where a plank had been torn away. They hovered in the darkness like two distant moons until the cat finally decided to enter the yard. Its broad black head appeared in the daylight, pausing before the hole. Then began the struggle.

The cat was enormous, far larger than any of the others I'd seen, most of which were so thin their ribs looked like fish gills when they passed along before me. There were no gills on this cat, whose remarkable size puzzled me until I spied its white booted feet. This was the kitten the old man's wife had saved.

That kitten had grown into a cat that now strained to fit through the narrow opening at the end of the barn. It would push itself forward, its body drawing tight, then fall back, the black coat bunching up against the opening like the folds of an accordion. Then the cat would begin again, pushing forward and falling back, pushing forward and falling back, its white booted feet driving ahead until, with one final push, the enormous black cat popped out of the hole and came skittering into the yard.

When it had come to a halt, the cat paused and seemed to collect itself, then it sat down. Behind it, a litter of kittens appeared at the opening. They were nearly identical to their mother, all black with little white boots, and they came marching into the yard. They lined up single file behind their mother, and when they were assembled, their mother rose

and began waddling across the yard, her head held high, almost to the tops of the long grass. Behind her, the grass shook as the little ones followed. The entourage crossed the yard to the shade where I sat. They passed near me, and I made a vain attempt to woo the queen. She ignored me, settling in the shade just beyond my grasp, but the kittens seemed intrigued by my presence. They began inching toward me, then springing back, as if surprised by their own audacity, retreating half the distance they had come so that it took the first of them twice as long to reach me. When he grazed my fingertips, and the rest saw that the bold explorer was safe, they joined him, allowing me to pick them up and using my body for play.

The mother was unimpressed by the discovery of her brood and remained aloof, waiting for someone worthy of her interest. That person made her appearance on the porch shortly thereafter. She was young still, barely a woman, middling height with slender boyish hips and bare feet that peeked out beneath the bottom of her blue cotton dress. She had thin lips, a small, sharp nose, and flint colored eyes. Her hair was long and black and so thick the strands seemed welded. As she approached, she thrust out her modest bosom, and her gait was proud and childish, as if she were striding into a room to challenge her mother, certain of her success. I had only seen her for a moment in the passage below the barn, but still I knew her immediately.

The raven haired girl strode over to where I was sitting and, without bothering to look at me, gathered the enormous cat into her arms. After nuzzling the underside of its neck with the tip of her nose, she produced a strip of burnt meat from one of the pockets of her dress and proceeded to feed the cat. I watched her carefully until her nonchalance convinced me that she had not seen me. I stood up.

'Hello,' I said.

The girl looked briefly at me, then returned her gaze to the cat.

'I stayed in the tool shed last night.'

'I know,' she said. Her voice was flat, expressionless. She didn't bother to look up.

The girl continued holding the meat up to the cat's mouth while she cradled it in her arms. Then, abruptly, she set the cat on the ground and looked at me.

'You're traveling right?' she said, not waiting for my answer. 'You ever go any place interesting?'

'Interesting?'

'Interesting,' she repeated. 'A place where there's something to see, things to do. Did you ever travel to any place like that?'

'No miss,' I said. 'I'm heading north, looking for work.'

'Oh,' she said. Her gaze fell back to the cat, who sat at her feet gnawing on the charred meat.

'Did you see the roof—'

'You know there are places like that,' she said.

'Sorry?'

'There are places like that—where there are people to see and things to do. If I was a traveler, that's where I'd go.'

I nodded my head, there seemed no reply.

The twins appeared at the back of the house. They came walking through the farmyard, slow and aimless. When they saw us, the boy with the clean forehead flinched and looked at his feet; the other simply grinned and continued across the yard.

‘I’m right aren’t I?’ the girl said.

‘What?’ I’d forgotten what we were talking about.

‘About traveling—don’t you think I’m right?’

‘I guess, it’s just—’

‘I *am* right,’ she concluded.

The raven haired girl lingered for a moment more, then she turned and left, striding off across the yard before ascending the porch and disappearing into the house. I sat down again, convinced that I would never know what to make of our exchange. The kittens, who had fled to their mother and the meat when the girl had put them down, reappeared now, cautiously advancing until the first one reached me and the rest regained their confidence.

I sat there in the shade playing with the kittens, but I knew that I had to get going before the midday heat. I stood up and crossed the yard, making my way back to the toolshed. I came inside and found the note sitting in the middle of the floor. I figured it must have slipped from overalls sometime during the night. I folded it once more and put it in my bib pocket, which I buttoned tight. I was straightening the small room when I heard a knock at the door. The old man poked his head inside.

‘Mornin,’ Jakob Crackleburry said. If it weren’t for the familiar voice I wouldn’t have recognized him. He was dressed in a clean pair of trousers, a freshly pressed work shirt, buttoned to the neck, and a pair of shiny black suspenders. He wasn’t wearing a hat, and he

had smoothed back the wisps of stray gray hair that remained on top of his head. This, combined with the fact that he had shaved that morning, clearing away the whiskers so that his face seemed drawn and vulnerable, made the old man look every year his age (and perhaps even a few more).

‘Morning,’ I replied, stepping back from the door to invite him in.

‘Sleep all right?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I lied. ‘Straight through the night.’

This pleased the old man. He smiled.

‘Y’got the dinner too,’ he said, pointing to the empty plate that sat beside the door.

‘I did—thank you.’ Then I added, ‘It was mighty good.’

‘Glad to hear that,’ Jakob Crackleburry said, ‘but don’ thank me, thank the missus. She does the cookin, I do the eatin. I jus asked er to make you a plate. Didn want y’goin hungry now.’

‘I’ll be sure to thank her,’ I said. ‘I haven’t seen her this morning. I got up early and went down to the creek to wash up. Met your daughter on the way back. She was out feeding the cats.’

‘My lil bit,’ Jakob Crackleburry said, smiling again. ‘She’s a sweet one, ain she? Apple ah my eye.’

‘Yes,’ I said, manufacturing a smile. ‘She’s real sweet.’

Jakob Crackleburry laughed.

‘So sweet, you give er a peck on the cheek and she’ll give you a toothache.’

I told the old man I’d be careful about kissing her.

‘You’ll git to meet the missus shortly,’ Jakob Crackleburry continued, ‘She and lil bit are makin breakfast right now. We don’ eat too much before services cause we always take a big dinner when we git home. Yer welcome to join us—you should join us, and you can stay here tonight if you like—e’en tomorrow. I don’ have work fer you, an I couldn pay you if I did, but yer welcome to stay. We like havin company.’

The gesture of friendship could not have been more sincere. I found myself almost accepting it before I remembered why I had to move on.

‘That’s too bad,’ the old man said, ‘but I understan. You gotta see to yer family, an I understan that, I do—besides, y’already done enough by puttin up that horse.’

I lifted my hand but old man continued.

‘No, now, that means a lot to me—honest it does.’

The old man hooked his thumbs beneath his suspenders, tugged at them once then freed them.

‘It’s about turning things around,’ I said gently.

The old man nodded.

‘It wasn’t always like this,’ he said, ‘not this way—things was different.’

The old man looked out the window.

‘Back when my brother and me started this farm, there was nothin but scrubland here, far as the eye could see. Ugly as all git out. But that didn stop us—no sir. We set to work and we built this farm, the two ah us. We was no more’n boys but we made it, an when we was finished, this farm . . . you should ah seen it.’

The old man shook his head. For a moment I wondered whether it was because he couldn't make me see it or because he could no longer see it himself.

'What happened?'

'What always happens,' he said. 'Money—it's good fer spendin till you got to pay it back. Fer a time you can' get enough of it, then it can' get enough of you. That's what happened to my brother—an the rest, well, yer eyes can tell you that.'

We were quiet.

'He's passed?' I said.

Jakob Cracklebury flinched.

'No—I don' know, I don' think so. He's got but a year on me. No reason he should ah passed.'

He hesitated.

'He leff.'

'Left?'

'Yep.'

'Left you?'

'Leff everythin—think he thought things'd be better without him.'

We were quiet, but Jakob Cracklebury caught my eye.

'Now see—yer thinkin and yer thinkin things you shouldn be thinkin. I know how you see it, an I suppose that's how a feller should. But I don' see it that way, I can'—don' want to. What he . . . the thing he did, in the end . . . it weren't...'

'It's all right,' I said. 'It's not my business.'

'I know, it's jus,' the old man searched the room. 'Y'see, when we was kids, Amby—his name was Ambrose but everybody but mama thought that was a fool's name—Amby, he was my big brother, and boys got a way of looking at their big brothers. You got one yerself?'

'Just a sister,' I said.

'Younger?'

I nodded.

'You close?'

I stared at the buttons on the old man's shirt.

'Yes,' I said.

'You watch out fer her right?'

The old man didn't wait for my reply.

'You have to, she's yer kin an that's jus the way it is. Well that's how it was with me an Amby. When we was kids he always watched out fer me. He was older an I was—bigger too, lot bigger. He watched out fer me, an whatever he did I wanted to do it right after him. If Amby's shadow was good enough fer him, it was good enough fer me to stand in. I would ah followed him till my legs falled off, then I would ah crawled.

'Y'know, that's how I see him—even now. I see him like I always did every mornin on the farm, back when there weren't but a shack fer a house, jus one room fer the two ah us to share. I see Amby outside, choppin wood. That's how he woke me up, every day, him splittin wood right outside the door so he could git a fire goin and start cookin breakfast. I never heard him leave. I sleep like the dead an he never had it in him to wake me before he

had to. I always toll him to but he wouldn't hear it. *Jakey*, he'd say, *yer made fer sleepin like a log, not splittin one*, then he'd get this grin on his face—you should of seen it cause you'd ah known there weren no use, that he was gonna split those logs all by his lonesome—that was just the way it was gonna be.

‘That’s what I remember. I remember him standing there with his ax, standing over the firewood, jus grinning. That’s how I remember my brother, cause if you think hard enough, real hard, you can remember someone anyway you want—and that’s how I want to remember him.’

We were quiet. Finally I spoke.

‘But he left,’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ the old man said. He was looking at the floor, grabbing his jaw gently as if he had a toothache. He itched along it, but finding no stubble he stopped.

‘I was laid up when it happen an mebbe in hindsight I should ah seen it. But I didn’t—heck, I was seein stars.’

‘What happened?’

‘Horses,’ the old man said. ‘Amby bought us some—colts, young ones. Thought we could raise em, sell em. There was money in that, he said, good money, but the farm was up and runnin and I thought we had money enough. I was more interested in startin a life like he done. But Amby, he thought we should have us some horses, so have us some horses we did. He was good with horses, had a way about em, but he wasn in the corral when it happened. I was. I saddled one, fierce one, kind that look you in the eye and dare you to git

on him. Well I got on him and I was riding him near the fence when he decided he didn' want to be rid no more and gave me a kick that sent me flyin.'

Jakob Crackleburry chuckled.

'Shame there weren' no cloud fer me to grab hold on cause I came down right smack on the fence post—'

He paused.

'—snapped my leg in two.'

We were quiet.

'Did your brother find you?'

'By the by,' he said. 'I pulled myself some ways before I passed out. Amby found me when he got back from town—he was always makin trips to town by then, had to. Carried me back to the house.'

'Took a few days for they knew they was goin to have to take my leg. Heck, at first, I was ready take their heads off if they got near it, but soon my leg was black, all swole up, smelled awful, like fruit from the devil's garden. The pain got so bad I would ah taken a knife myself to cut it off if only I could keep from howlin long enough.'

Jakob Crackleburry reached down and patted his wooden leg as if to thank it.

'I still had my leg when I heard him. I remember. Fever got so bad by then I thought it was me at first, but then I listened close and I knew I wasn' the one weepin, so I turned my head and seen him. He was sittin beside me, coverin his face like I'm somethin he can bear to look at, and he's sobbin. I ain never heard Amby cry but once, and that's when our

ma died and we was cryin together. But this, this wasn cryin, no sir. It was the sound of a man breakin an all he is pouring out, all at once, leavin him empty.

The old man was quiet.

'I didn know that at first. Took me a few days to understand, till my leg was gone an my fever passed and Amby . . . well, he didn come back. Then I knew.'

'Where did he go?'

'Oh I don' know—far away I imagine, cause money's got a way ah findin a feller, and there was folks enough looking fer him. I met em all when they came to the farm.'

'Creditors?'

'That's a fancy word fer crooks but I guess that's what they call them. I think Amby thought if he leff they would leave me alone cause I didn sign any papers, I didn owe any men. Well that was true as far as it goes—problem was it didn go far enough. They didn need me fer what they wanted, jus the farm. If Amby'd taken that with him—'

Jakob Crackleburry looked at me and grinned.

'—well, things might ah been different.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. The old man waved his arms

'Sorry nothin!' he said. 'The farm's still here, ain it? Sure, she ain what she used to be, ain as *big* as she used to be, but she ain gone neither. She's here and we got through jus fine. Took some time, sure, but we come through all right.'

The old man was quiet.

'You did,' I said. He looked at me and nodded.

'I wish Amby could see that,' he said. 'He'd be proud of what I done. *You come through all right, Jakey* he'd say, *I'm proud ab you*. That'd be nice, right? I'd like to hear that—sure be better than the lass thing I heard.'

He paused.

'Mebbe I could forget that.'

I followed Jakob Crackleburry out of the tool shed and down the footpath.

'I'm goin to find the boys,' he said when we reached the yard. 'We got to git goin, and the boys—it's like movin mountains gittin them to move. I already ate so you should go on an git some food before you push off. Lil bit an the missus will make you some breakfast, jus go in. They're expectin you.'

With this, Jakob Crackleburry set off hobbling along the front side of the barn. I crossed through the yard and went inside the house. There was no one in the small kitchen, but sitting on the egg shaped table, I found a loaf of bread, some butter and jam, and a plate of crudely sliced meat. There were no plates out, so I took two slices of the bread, slathered them with butter, and made myself a sandwich. The meat was dry and overcooked, but I ate the whole sandwich and made myself a second so that I wouldn't be hungry again before midday.

I was thirsty when I finished. I found a pitcher of milk that was sitting on the counter. As I looked for a glass, the raven haired girl appeared. She had not changed her dress but she was wearing shoes now and her long black hair was wound into a small circular knot that was locked tight on top of her head. I asked her where I might find a glass, and she

wordlessly removed a jelly jar from one of the cabinets and handed it to me before coming around the counter and sitting at the table. She took a slice of bread and covered it with a heap of jam. I came around the counter and sat on the other side of the table. Her face was turned to one of the windows.

‘Why do you have a gun with you?’ she asked.

I put down the jelly jar.

‘Excuse me?’ I said.

‘You heard me,’ she said blandly. ‘Why do you have a gun with you?’

‘For protection,’ I said. ‘I need it for protection.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ she said.

I made to speak.

‘I don’t believe you,’ she repeated. ‘If you were really looking for work you wouldn’t be traveling with a gun. No one trusts a stranger with a gun. It makes you look like trouble. And you’re not a troublemaker—I can see that—so I don’t believe you.’

‘Miss,’ I began, measuring my words carefully, ‘you can believe what you like, but I told your brothers—’

She turned from the window.

‘They’re *not* my brothers,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with your hearing,’ she said. ‘They’re Amby’s boys—they’re *not* my brothers.’

The room was silent. Outside, there was a commotion at the corner of the yard and a parcel of cats came sprinting across the footpath.

‘He raised them,’ I said. The revelation didn’t interest the girl.

‘How do they know about the gun?’ she asked.

‘They went through my bag,’ I said. ‘Didn’t they tell you?’

‘No.’

‘Then how did you know?’

‘I saw you with it.’

I moved to respond, but then I stopped. The cats came darting back. The room slipped away.

‘Did they see me?’ I asked quickly.

‘The twins?’

‘Yes.’

‘No.’

‘Did you tell them?’

‘Certainly not,’ she said dismissively. ‘I knew you wouldn’t say anything about what you saw, but the boys aren’t so trusting. They’d worry’—for the first time I saw her smile—‘and you wouldn’t want them to worry.’

The girl took a white bonnet from a dress pocket and began to tie it about her head.

‘You were asked to stay?’ she said.

‘Yes.’

‘But you said you had to leave.’

‘Yes.’

‘I knew you’d say that,’ she said. ‘I knew you’d want to leave.’

There were footsteps on the porch.

‘I still don’t believe you about the gun,’ she hissed, rising as the men entered.

Jakob Crackleburry came into the room first. He was breathing heavily and mumbling about the cats. The boys trailed him. Like their uncle they were dressed for services, but the legs of their trousers were too short and the ends of their shirts ratty and untucked.

‘Hurry up’n eat,’ he said, pointing to the table. ‘We should ah gotton on already.’

The boys moved in and began devouring what was left of the food. The old man pushed between them and drew out a chair. He fell into it. Signs of the heat were already showing around his temples and under his armpits. The girl got up from her chair and stood behind him. She began stroking the top of his head with her fingertips as a mother would a baby.

‘Our visitor says he’s moving on,’ she said. A strange inflection had crept into her voice. It might have been mistaken for regret.

‘Yep,’ Jakob Crackleburry said, nodding to himself. ‘He needs to be movin on, I know that. I jus hope he decides to pass through on his way back.’

He reached out and grabbed my wrist.

‘You should pass through,’ he said. He had soft blue eyes, I saw, the color of midmorning sky. They pled for him.

‘I will,’ I said. I would never pass through again.

‘Good,’ he replied.

The old man rose from the table.

'I'm goin to git together some food fer you before you leave,' he announced.

'I appreciate it,' I said, rising to stop him, 'but you don't need to do that, honest. I'll be all right.'

'Nohow!' he replied. 'A traveler with no food is like a horse no hooves, he may git started, but he ain goin very far.'

And with that the old man went hobbling into the pantry and reappeared with butcher paper and an empty feedsack. He filled it with a few apples and, pushing aside the boys, wrapped up the leftover bread and meat.

'There you go,' he said, handing me the sack back. 'This should gitcha through the day.'

I thanked the old man. His generosity was so sincere that for a moment my unease was replaced with remorse.

'We should git goin,' he said. 'Will you see us out to the road?'

I nodded and followed the old man onto the porch, over a few cats, and down the front steps. We turned onto the footpath and began walking toward the road when the old man stopped.

'We fergittin somebody!' he said and went trundling back down the path, leaving me alone with the others. I did not turn to them at first. Instead I looked over the fields to a stand of small trees that huddled in the distance. It was a lonely sight, and I watched it for some time until finally I faced them.

The girl was only a short distance behind me, and behind her, at either side, the boys. They stood in the long grass, their shoulders providing an incomplete ledge just above her head. The trio was watching me—not closely, rather the way your eyes might settle on an empty room. I waited for them to say something, to goad or insult me, perhaps even to make a threat, but they looked on indifferently, as if they didn't have energy between them to utter a single word.

The silence had grown intolerable by the time the door opened again and a child appeared, a little girl, no taller than Jakob Crackleburry's hip. She held his hand as he hobbled out to meet us.

'Here's my lil bit,' the old man said, stroking the child's head. 'She was playin in her bedroom all by her lonesome, thinkin we leff.'

When she came upon us, the child spied me and grabbed the girl's skirt, pulling it before her as if for protection. The raven haired girl looked briefly at her daughter, then back at me. The corners of her mouth curled into a grin.

I bent down to greet the girl for I'd told her father we'd met.

'Hi darling,' I said weakly. The child giggled and waved a tiny hand. I smiled and waved and returned to my feet, but it was too late. I had already seen the wide set eyes, the stub nose, and the clear swath of forehead, ripe for a purple caterpillar scar.

'We should get going,' said the raven haired girl in a tone that was gentle but unambiguous.

'Yer right,' Jakob Crackleburry said. 'Y'sure y'can' join us?'

I shook my head, I could not speak.

The six of us walked to the road. The old man hobbled through the long grass by my side and asked me about my plans for finding work. I don't remember what I told him but it was largely incoherent for my mind was incapable of organizing itself, as though my thoughts were a deck of cards that had been blown out of my hands and now whirled about me. I can remember standing by the roadside, talking to Jakob Crackleburry, my eyes inevitably darting from his face to those of the three people behind him, his wife and the all-but-identical boys. They should have appeared sinister to me, godforsaken, but I could see nothing but their indifference. The contemptible nature of their actions had no effect on them—it was not so much that they couldn't see the harm they were doing to the old man, it was that they didn't care. Not for a moment. Not a bit. The old man, who ached with love for his vile wife, who persisted in kindness toward his monstrous nephews—someday they would ruin him. They would leave him, at last, with nothing.

And the whorl of my mind now narrowed to this one thought, until Jakob Crackleburry stopped at the roadside and said goodbye, and I remembered that he didn't even know my name.

I stood by the roadside as the group receded from view. When they were gone, I listened to the rattle of leaves in the branches high overhead. I lay the feedsack beside the trunk and turned back toward the farmyard.

I came around the house and retreated down the small hillside. I found the footpath and followed it through the woods until I spied my overalls hanging like the remains of some woebegone scheme, empty from a tree.

I entered the clearing, but stopped when I spied my satchel twitching beside the creekbed. I came toward it and saw two white booted feet thrusting a swollen belly into the pouch. Above it a black tail flickered like a serpent. I bent over, snatching the end of the satchel and jerked it violently into the air. The giant cat launched from the bag, turning twice with no trace of majesty, and dropped into the creek. It bobbed once as the current grabbed it and quickly began to sink.

I turned when I heard the shriek. Near the footpath, the kittens stood in a tiny chorus, stiff and terrified. With a cry, they charged at me across the clearing, threading my legs, and dove straight into the creek.

And so the black waters churned with white boots. I listened, and the howling mass was soon swept away.

Two Great Green Eyes

And so I continued north, past brittle fields and distant barnyards and empty prairie towns, following the same single road that neither bent nor broke while the air thickened and burned beneath the sun's silent fury.

I thought about that note, still buried in my breast pocket. I thought about what it said, and more about the history it intimated, a time that now seemed to wake and rise within me, gaining color and shape and warming with recognition, until it finally appeared before my eyes like a creature stirred from a dream.

I saw Jack Dawes in the doorway of the schoolhouse. Or rather I saw the legs and single shoulder of Jack Dawes for the rest of him was obscured behind his Uncle Eli, a tall, cheerful, and preposterously fat man who kept a tiny farm just up the road from my father's. Jack was new to town, Eli announced, and he would be sticking around for a while. Was there any room for him?

Miss Marplehorn—the inevitable misfortune of nearly three generations of local school children—asked what grade Jack was in. Eli turned and conferred with him. *Eighth, ma'am*, he said when he turned back around. *Then there is room*, replied Miss Marplehorn, *you may take your seat in the front row, between John Jenkins and Exley Almer*. Jack emerged from behind his uncle's considerable shadow and took a seat at the empty desk beside me.

He was a plain looking boy, forgettable really. He was slim shouldered and sinewy, average height, with close-cropped hair and smooth, clayburnt skin. His lips, nose, and eyebrows were all sharp and linear and betrayed no emotion. The only remarkable thing about him were his eyes. They sat like emeralds in his head, so large and green his pupils seemed lost to them.

At first, none of us knew what to make of Jack, largely because he gave us so little to work with. He made no attempt to interact with us and answered our questions with simple, satisfactory answers that seemed to bolt the door tight against further inquiries. Still he never came across as timid or aloof. His manner, in short, befuddled us.

'That Dawes kid's got a problem,' Tom Cannon decided one day while we were walking home together. I never liked Tom very much, but he was my age, and his farm was on the way home to mine, so I learned to tolerate him.

'What do you mean?'

'*You* know,' he snapped. Had Tom been a bigger boy, he would have been a bully. Instead, he was just bitter. 'He's strange is his problem. Never says nothin. He just sits there by himself, all quiet, even at lunch. It's like he don' need no friends.'

'Maybe he don?'

Tom glared at me. I tried again

‘Maybe he’s got other friends—’

‘He ain got no friends, Ex.’

‘Maybe he just keeps to himself—maybe that’s just his way.’

‘Maybe, but him sittin there alone like that—all the time,’ Tom soured and shook his head. ‘It’s strange is all I’m sayin.’

Tom was right of course, even if I made a point of never agreeing with him. It was strange. Jack made no effort to know any of us. He never asked us any questions, he sat by himself at lunch, and he walked home alone after school—all with an instinctive ease that so irked Tom Cannon. If Jack had been shy, it wouldn’t have bothered him, for weakness would have explained his distance. But Jack’s distance had nothing to do with weakness. Quite the contrary, in fact. He didn’t need us, or anyone else for that matter. He was satisfied being alone, content even, and the strength that suggested couldn’t help but unnerve someone like Tom, who drew the only strength he knew from the weakness of others.

But as for me—well, I was fascinated.

It would be a while before Jack did something that showed he had any interest in the rest of us, but when he did, the introduction was so remarkable that even Tom was prepared to forgive him. For a time at least.

When it happened, the apple harvest was nearly finished, and Little John Jenkins had already taken over the farmwork from his father, who was bedridden with a fever. Little John was so named not because of his size but because his father was Big John and the name came by him naturally—except that Little John was actually a large boy, so large, in fact, that his body seemed an encumbrance to him. Whenever we set off somewhere, Little John was always a few steps behind, and at lunch, he rarely joined our games, preferring to watch while sprawled peaceably in the shade.

Though he tired easily, Little John's word was inexhaustible. He was the rare person you could ask anything of and be assured that it was done long before you needed it. His

goodwill was not spurred by any need for approval. He helped people because they needed his help. To do any less seemed incomprehensible to him.

Little John's simple goodness always endeared him to me and made him the best friend of my youth, yet it never seemed to have any effect on our teacher, Miss Marplehorn, who was as ruthless with him as she was with the rest of us. Even when Little John began falling asleep in class because he was getting up hours before school to complete the chores for his ailing father, Miss Marplehorn's wrath still fell on him in the swift stinging action of a simple brown burnished switch. For years I dreaded the whisper-flick of that switch, cutting through the air before meeting the soft of someone's flesh. The very hint of disruption would summon the blows, falling on hands, shoulders, even necks—blows that only concluded when the pupil had satisfied Miss Marplehorn with effusive apologies, begging her forgiveness for whatever had enraged her. She terrified us, and with each new year, as we moved one grade closer to the front of the room, that terror grew, until we found ourselves in the very first row, just a few steps away from the mouth of Miss Marplehorn's desk, a distance at which no violation ever went unnoticed—not that Little John's were hard to miss.

Even though he sat on the other side of Jack, I could still see the roll and droop of his head and waited anxiously until that movement stopped, when I knew that he was asleep. His repose, of course, were invariably short-lived, terminated most times by a swat on the arm by Miss Marplehorn's switch. Whenever he awoke, Little John earnestly apologized and tried again to explain the reason for his exhaustion, but Miss Marplehorn would not hear it.

All she wanted was a desperate guarantee that he would not fall asleep again. Little John always said as much, but unlike the rest of his promises, this was one he couldn't keep.

His repeated offense stoked the wrath of Miss Marplehorn, who thrashed him, in turn, with proportional severity. In fact, the final time he was hit, Miss Marplehorn brought the switch right down on Little John's neck, the length of which was exposed on one side as his head lay against his shoulder. Little John's heavy body sprang upright, his hand slapping the side of his neck as if a hornet had landed there.

Miss Marplehorn roared, 'John Jenkins, you *will* stay awake!' then turning to the class, 'Go eat your lunches!'

Tom and I shuffled out of the schoolhouse together. We were followed at a distance by Jack, who blended in among the students from the lower grades. Little John left the schoolhouse behind everyone else, his hand still pressed tightly against the side of his neck. His eyes had welled with tears, and he was working hard to restrain them. His efforts weren't very successful, however, so he sat with his back to us while they dried.

Not wanting to intrude on Little John, Tom and I ate our lunches and talked about the dam we were building in the creek behind my house. The drift of conversation seemed normal, lazy even, but both of us were anxious, for we knew that once we returned from lunch, it was only a matter of time before Little John fell asleep again.

At the end of lunch, Miss Marplehorn called for us to return. We filed back into the schoolhouse, and she began the afternoon lessons for the lower classes, working her way, grade-by-grade, until she finally reached our class at the day's end. In the meantime, we were supposed to revisit our morning lessons in silence, a task that no doubt terrified Little John.

Indeed, given that it was a struggle for him to stay awake when Miss Marplehorn was commanding his attention at the front of the class, leaving him to quietly review his lessons for a long stretch of afternoon was hopeless. The question was not whether Little John would fall asleep, it was when and what Miss Marplehorn would do about it.

From time-to-time, I looked over at Little John. His eyes were trained on his writing tablet as if, by unblinking concentration, he could somehow draw the necessary strength from it to stay awake. His gaze remained fixed for some time, almost as though he had compelled himself into a trance, and it was only late in the afternoon when Miss Marplehorn had nearly finished with the other classes that Little John's battle ended. His eyelids collapsed and he fell into a sleep that was so uncompromising that neither Tom's hushed entreaties nor my incessant shuffling seemed to wake him. His head remained bowed, his chin pressed against his chest like a prisoner waiting patiently for the noose.

I began watching Miss Marplehorn. She was sitting behind her desk, reading from some book as she instructed the lower classes. For a painfully long time, she took no notice of Little John. In fact, it was only when she turned to us for the concluding lesson of the day that she finally spied him. A familiar look of contempt broke like a storm over her face, and she snatched up the switch sitting at the edge of her desk.

Then something extraordinary happened.

As she drew back her chair, there was a slender noise like a rotting limb splitting away from a tree trunk, and Miss Marplehorn heaved backward, the back legs of her chair breaking off under her. She disappeared from view, but not before her head met the wall with a loud crack.

For a moment—nothing. Then the slow, tortured movements behind the desk. A hand appeared, then another, and soon we saw the familiar steel springs of hair appear like an appalling sunrise. Slowly, Miss Marplehorn rose full into view, wobbling at first but then bracing herself. For an instant, she seemed shaken, vulnerable even, but just as quickly that look passed. She regained her balance, and after smoothing down the wrinkles in her heavy brown blouse, the familiar grimace returned.

Miss Marplehorn scanned the rows of students, then her eyes seemed to fix on something. They narrowed, and she abruptly bent down behind her desk and reappeared grasping the switch. She came wheeling around the desk and stormed toward the front of the class, and it was only when I saw the switch wind back above her head that I remembered Little John, who was still resting peacefully next to me, having slept through the entire episode he unintentionally inspired.

Miss Marplehorn's arm came sweeping down like a scythe. I shut my eyes, waiting for the terrible sound, but it never came, the switch never touched Little John's cheek—it stopped, or rather it was cut short, for as it fell, Miss Marplehorn's arm was caught by Jack Dawes, who sat in the desk on the other side of Little John. He grasped her forearm, just below the wrist, and held it there motionless.

For a few moments, silence. Indeed, it took as much time for Miss Marplehorn to comprehend what had happened. At first, she dumbly tried to shake her arm—not, it seemed, to break Jack's hold but to test the certainty that her arm had stopped moving. Then, when the reality of the situation was clear, her demeanor changed. *Why you* she sputtered before she began trying to jerk her arm free, her sallow face swelling with rage. But

Jack held her arm calmly, as if Miss Marplehorn were no more than a child. *No, Ma'am*, he said, shaking his head slowly. *It ain't right.*

When her initial efforts had failed, Miss Marplehorn paused, panting like a bull. Then she began furiously yanking her arm, her shoulders thrashing about like a rag doll. But Jack never let go. In fact, he barely moved. *No, Ma'am*, he kept saying, still shaking his head, *It jus' ain't right.* Still Miss Marplehorn struggled, but even she knew the effort was hopeless, and like a toy she slowly wound down. When her arm stopped moving, the room was quiet. Jack released her.

You can beat me, he said, *but not him. Not now.*

Miss Marplehorn stared at him. She knew that Jack wouldn't let her hit Little John, who was still sleeping soundlessly next to him, and Jack knew that she understood this, for he would have never let go of her arm otherwise.

'All right,' she said, stepping back into the space between her desk and ours. 'Come here.'

Jack walked to the front of the room. He stood beside Miss Marplehorn and stared at the back wall, his great green eyes still and inscrutable, even when the beating began.

The blows were subdued at first, methodical even, which was surprising since Jack's offense had been so extraordinary. Miss Marplehorn seemed so intent on inflicting pain that her concentration had displaced her rage—but not for long, for when she realized that her cruel handiwork was having no effect on Jack, that it wasn't producing the pained hysteria or yelping supplications she was accustomed to, Miss Marplehorn's demeanor changed. She

began strengthening her blows, her hand falling more and more often as the terrible sting-snap grew.

But Jack remained impassive. He stood there before us as if there were nothing more than the wind at his back, and only when Miss Marplehorn had grabbed the collar of his shirt and demanded he unbutton it did his face seem to harden and the fingers of one hand curled into a fist. With the other, he unbuttoned the shirt, removing his arms and allowing it to hang down around his pants like a flaccid, second skin.

Then the blows began again, and a child in the back row began to sob. The sob woke Little John, who drew his head up from the perch he had made with his palm, revealing a dried red wisp across the side of his neck. With no reference to what had come before, the sight must have seemed even more appalling to him than it did to the rest of us. He looked over at me, bewildered and terrified, perhaps wondering if he were still dreaming.

The blows had a different sound now. No longer dulled by the shirt, they hissed behind Jack's shoulders, concluding each time with a brief explosion. Though we had all felt the sting of the switch, none of us had suffered the rage that gnarled Miss Marplehorn's face. This we could only imagine, and it was enough to make the sobbing in the back row spread like a swift disease, and more than enough to make Little John weep with awe and shame and gratitude when he learned what had happened.

But still Jack didn't cry out. The muscles along his jaw were rigid, and his fists were clenched, but he never expressed any pain, much less pled for mercy. Still I don't doubt that he was relieved when the beating ended, not with the capitulation of either party, but when

the switch disappeared behind Jack's back one last time and a sharp, unmistakable snap was heard. Jack recognized it, for his jaw relaxed, and his gaze dropped almost imperceptibly.

Miss Marplehorn, who was still standing behind Jack, drew the switch slowly back above his shoulders and stared at its broken arm. Then, with a cry of a dog that's been kicked, she shoved him from behind, stabbing the switch into his back. Even Jack wasn't prepared for this, for his legs buckled and he stumbled forward, dropping to one knee before regaining his balance. Miss Marplehorn raised the switch above her head to stab him a second time, but then she stopped. She stared at his back, her eyes searching.

Go she said, repeating it a second time, louder, so that no one was mistaken.

Jack drew his shirt up from around his waist and gingerly put his arms through the sleeves. Then he buttoned his shirt, turned, and left the room. His face said nothing, though from the front row, I could see that his fists were still clenched and the tail of his shirt had already begun to stain.

Miss Marplehorn watched Jack leave, standing before the class in the very place she had stood during the beating. After a moment, she returned to her desk, dropping the broken switch on top of it. She sat down in her chair and stared absently at the top of her desk. The room was silent, except in the back, where a few children were trying to stifle their sobs. Miss Marplehorn took no notice of them. She was holding her hands against her stomach, wringing them impulsively as if she were trying to clean them. She remained like that for some time, her darkened hairline drying to a familiar gray.

Go she said finally, adding *Go home* when no one moved. The room reverberated with footfalls until there was silence and she was alone.

When several days had passed without Jack returning to school, the guilt of not having expressed his gratitude drove Little John out to the Dawes farm, where he sat with Jack for so long that dinner was long over by the time he returned home.

'*You* missed dinner?' Tom Cannon asked the day after Little John's visit. 'What were you doin there fer so long?'

'Nothin,' Little John said. It was lunchtime, and he was lying flat-bellied in the grass. 'We was jus talkin.'

'Bout what?' Tom asked distrustfully.

'I dunno,' Little John said, 'things.'

'*Things?*

'Yup.'

'What kind a things?'

'All kinds,' Little John replied, nodding his head eagerly.

Tom looked like he might pounce so I spoke up.

‘What did Jack say?’

A concerned look came over Little John’s face. He rolled over and sat upright.

‘Nothin really,’ he said. ‘He just asked me about things.’

‘That all?’

‘Yup,’ he said. ‘That’s all.’

Over the next few days, Tom and I worked to gain a fuller account of the visit by assembling the inevitably simple answers Little John gave to our questions. In the end, however, there still wasn’t much to tell. When Little John arrived at the farm, Jack received him in his room, where he was still in bed recuperating. Jack invited Little John to sit down next to him, and the two of them talked—or rather Little John talked, answering the questions that Jack asked him, beginning with how Little John’s father was doing. Little John told him, and Jack followed with another question, then another, and so the afternoon progressed.

The questions were never persistent. Jack seemed so calm, and the questions were so natural that Little John soon forgot his own anxiety and, not long afterward, the time, such that when he finally remembered it he could not longer see the rows of apple trees standing outside Jack’s window.

Little John jumped up and was about to leave when he realized he’d never gotten around to the reason for his visit. He stood next to Jack’s bed and began fumbling for words of gratitude. Jack stopped him long before he found them. *It was only right,* he said. *You’d ab done the same fer me.*

And that was it. The look on Jack's face was so final, so certain, that there was nothing to do but say good-bye, which Little John did, rushing home as fast as his unwilling legs would take him.

Jack did not return to school for nearly a week, long enough that we all expected him to have changed somehow. His public defiance of Miss Marplehorn as well as his strange but still warm reception of Little John suggested that Jack no longer shunned all human connection, and Tom and I wondered aloud on our walks to and from school whether the beating might have fractured Jack's cool, untroubled demeanor. Privately I even hoped that maybe the next time Miss Marplehorn raised her arm against Jack, he would no longer be content to merely suffer the blows, he might inflict a few of his own.

Of course this hope remained unrealized, but I was still amazed when Jack returned and resumed his studies as if the calendar were all that had changed since he left. Once again, he was quiet, distant, contented, and only his posture hinted at what had happened, for he sat rigidly throughout class, his back a safe distance from the chair's painful touch.

No, the beating didn't change Jack, at least in no way that was apparent to us, but it did change the way we regarded him. The children from the younger classes now treated Jack with the kind of breathless reverence typically reserved for heroes. For days a small group of them kept a vigil at lunch just a stone's throw from Jack, watching him for some further sign of strength or, perhaps, a confirmation that he too was made of flesh that broke and bled.

Miss Marplehorn did not share their fascination. Her fearsome appearance had cracked during the beating and began to crumble in the days afterward, revealing her to be the shriveled old schoolmarm she was, still capable of bringing misery to our lives, but no longer terror. By the time Jack returned, the transformation was complete, and the first sight of him so unnerved Miss Marplehorn that her hands began to tremble and shook all morning long, forcing her to remain at her desk with them hidden in her lap. For the rest of the school year, she regarded Jack with nervous distrust. She rarely asked him questions during afternoon lessons and never looked him in the eye when she passed back our tests. She seemed to conduct class around him, which wasn't hard since Jack was the studious, unobtrusive pupil he had always been. She may have changed, but he certainly hadn't.

Little John was slow to accept that Jack didn't want his friendship. When he first returned to school, Little John broke into a broad smile that lasted right up until lunchtime, when Jack—who never returned Little John's smile, or even looked over at him—took his customary spot at the far end of the schoolyard, opposite to where we sat. His familiar behavior convinced Tom and me that the beating hadn't changed Jack, that he was still content to remain alone at lunch and otherwise absent from our lives. But not so Little John. He had lost his smile, but not his desire to claim Jack's friendship, and shortly after we sat down, he told us that he was going to ask Jack to come over and eat with us. Before we might have objected, he stood up and trundled across the yard, passing the small assembly of children who looked on in astonishment as Little John disturbed the quiet boy who had defied their teacher.

Little John spoke to Jack for a while, so long that I had already finished my lunch by the time he returned.

‘He wants to eat by hisself,’ Little John said when he sat down again. There was a hint of disappointment in his voice, but not so much that he didn’t plod across the yard again the next day to see if Jack had changed his mind. His departure left a scowl on Tom Cannon’s face.

‘That fool,’ he said, watching Little John leave.

‘That goddamn fool,’ he repeated, when Little John returned alone again.

On the third day, when Little John stood up to make his trek across the yard, Tom burst.

‘Goddammit, Little John, why you goin over there again?’

‘I jus want—’

‘You jus wanna make a fool of yerself?’ he interrupted. ‘You go over there every day, an you still cayn see that Dawes kid got more interest in a toothache than you. What’s wrong with yer head?’

Little John stood silently with his hands at his sides.

‘Now sit down so we can eat already,’ Tom continued—then, noting that Little John was redfaced, he added, ‘C’mon, my ma gave me some sweet bread, an I cayn eat it all. I’ll give you a hunk.’

Little John looked over at me to see if I would give him any reason not to sit down. I didn’t.

‘Good,’ Tom said, taking out the yellow bread and breaking it in two. He gave Little John the smaller half.

‘There you go,’ he said, pleased by the gesture. ‘Eat up.’

Little John folded the sweet bread in two and ate it in one bite.

‘Good ain it?’ Little John said, a grin creeping across his face. ‘Better than anythin you’ll get from that Dawes kid.’

Tom gestured across the yard to where Jack was sitting.

‘You don’ want nothin from him, Little John. That Dawes kid—he ain right. Keepin to himself like that, not talkin to no one—it ain right. It’s *strange*.’

Little John looked at me and shifted his weight uncomfortably.

‘And you know what? I tell you this—he’s trouble. I know it. Got a feelin about it. That Dawes kid is trouble, plain and simple.’

Little John stopped chewing and swallowed the sweet bread with a gulp.

‘His name’s Jack,’ he mumbled.

Tom turned to him.

‘I know that.’

‘Well you call him that then—call him Jack.’

Little John was breathing heavily and rubbing the side of his neck.

‘What—’

‘He ain done nothin to you, Tom,’ he said, his voice nervous with anger. ‘Jus leave him be, all right? Call him Jack and leave him be.’

Tom was speechless. He looked like someone had slapped him across the face, and he had just tasted blood. His fingers curled around the sweet bread.

‘That’s right,’ he fumed. ‘He ain done nothin, Little John, nothin at all, not with any of us, and that’s the problem, that’s exactly the problem.’

‘He done one thing,’ Little John said quietly.

Tom was about to reply when he remembered that one thing. The air seemed to slip from his body. He dropped his fist.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘But I’m stickin to my word. There’s somethin wrong with that Dawes ki—with Jack, there’s somethin wrong with him, awful wrong, and when he goes wrong, you won’ wanna be around to see it. Trust me, Little John, you won’ wanna be anywhere near.’

Jack Dawes never went wrong, at least not in the way Tom thought he would. He broke instead, and Tom was not around to see it. He wasn’t anywhere near. But I was. I saw Jack break, and I knew that the events that followed were not, as Tom claimed, the predictable consequence of his strange behavior, but the death throes of that behavior and the birth of new, darker habits.

But that was some time off yet, more than a year, a lazy, uneventful term when our discussions rarely returned to Jack, who quietly obliged us by never giving them cause. On the odd occasion they did, the attitudes of Tom and Little John were unchanged. The latter regarded Jack with a quiet sense of loyalty that, at times, bordered on reverence, as if Jack’s shoulders had once kept the sky from falling and he, Little John, would never forget it. As for Tom, his face snarled and sank whenever Jack’s name was mentioned. He was especially

sour if the discussion turned to the beating, for it reminded him that no one ever thought of Tom Cannon as brave or good. These were words that described Jack Dawes and what he did one afternoon. There were others that described Tom, but they, of course, were unwanted.

And so Tom regarded Jack with a muttering contempt, and though he never again referred to him as *that Dawes kid*, he still derided Jack for his strange behavior and repeated his promise that we would one day be grateful that he remained on the periphery of our lives—which he did. Even when the fall returned and the four of us left behind Miss Marplehorn's schoolhouse for the county high school, which was so large that every class had a room of its own, Jack was no less distant than before. He made no new efforts at friendship, with us or any of our classmates, and stayed apart from the predictable battles that soon broke out among the boys, who clustered in gangs along grammar school lines and jostled for dominance.

For the most part, these contests were quietly decided by intimidation, and fistfights flared only when threats weren't loud and decisive. Our group was smaller than those from the other grammar schools, each of which had sent a handful of boys to the county school. In turn, we tried at first to avoid confrontation by keeping to ourselves, especially at lunch when most of the posturing took place along the shoreline of the pond just behind school.

Our precarious position bothered all three of us, but especially Tom, who talked about it incessantly on our long walks to and from school. Far more than violence, the prospect of public humiliation terrified him, and he pressed me for ways to avoid this fate.

We can' lose, he'd say, time and again, as if the battle had already been scheduled and it was ours to win.

There was little I could say. We both knew that the three of us could hope only to skirt the conflicts, not win them. But that wasn't good enough for Tom, who ultimately decided to resolve his concerns by abandoning Little John and me for a gang of boys who had already bullied their way through a few of the other groups.

I can't say that I was surprised by Tom's decision, in fact, it stripped me of any lingering reason to suppress my disdain for him. Still, I knew the jeopardy he had put us in. Little John and I had both hoped to wait out these contests, which were bound to end when the rest of the boys concluded that the hierarchy among them was obvious and unquestioned, but Tom's defection drew attention to us and led others to wonder why we two remained apart.

'Come eat with us,' Tom whispered to me one afternoon as we walked to the pond for lunch. 'You and Little John—just c'mon over and sit.'

I glowered at Tom and kept walking.

'Look,' he continued, his voice sharpening with anger. 'I don' know what yer problem is, but stop bein so stubborn and come over.'

Tom gestured discretely to a group of boys who were gathered near the pond. The leader among them was a thickbrowed boy whose heavy arms were far too long for his body. He eyed us contemptuously from his perch.

'Me and Little John want to eat alone,' I said.

'Don' be stupid! Tom hissed. He spied something along the footpath. I turned. The boy with the long arms was heading toward us

“We don’ want any trouble,’ I whispered.

‘You ain got a choice,’ he said just as the boy arrived.

‘What’s keepin you from eatin?’ he asked Tom.

‘Nothin,’ Tom replied. His answer was quick and unconvincing.

‘*Nothin?*’ the boy said, he briefly looked at me. ‘Looks like a lot a talk fer *nothin.*’

‘I—I was just seein if Exley wants to come eat with us.’

‘That right?’ he said. ‘Well—y’comin?’

The boy with long arms had small, blackstone eyes and a wide nose that had been broken once but never set. He was taller than either of us by nearly a head.

‘I was goin to eat with John Jenkins,’ I said.

‘That right?’ he repeated, he set his hands on his hips and looked me over as if he were sizing me for purchase. ‘Maybe you and John Jenkins ought to eat with us.’

I looked at the boy but didn’t respond. He took a step toward me.

‘C’mon,’ he pressed, his breath smelled of beets and cured meat. ‘You want to be friendly, right?’

We are I thought but simply looked away.

The boy turned to Tom.

‘I don’ think, uh, what’s his name?’

‘Exley,’ Tom said quietly.

‘Exley wants to be friendly,’ he said. I was staring at his chest. He caught my jaw between his thumb and forefinger and lifted my head. His eyes crept over my face. ‘Nope, he don’ look friendly to me. That’s a *real* shame, ain it Tom?’

Tom hesitated.

‘Ain it?’

‘Yes,’ he said hurriedly, ‘a real shame a real shame.’

‘A real shame for Exley here,’ he said. He shook his head dramatically, his blackstone eyes never leaving my face. ‘What kind of name is that anyway—*Ebbbxley*? What’s yer last name?’

‘Almer,’ I said quietly, looking anywhere but the boys face.

‘Uhhllmurr,’ he replied, taking firmer hold of my jaw. ‘*Ebbbxley Uhhllmurr*—sounds like a fool name to me. What do you think?’

Tom shifted his weight.

‘I asked you a question Cannon!’

Tom stammered.

‘IS IT A FOOL NAME OR NOT?’

He bowed his head.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘That’s right,’ the boy with the long arms replied. ‘You know you got a fool name?’

I strained against his grip.

‘Well do you? I’m surprised yer mama never told you?’

Tom moved to say something but was silent. The long armed boy laughed and shook his head.

‘A fool’s name fer a fool—’ a hand flashed at my side, I doubled over in pain ‘—and a coward too.’

The boy turned to Tom. ‘Let’s go,’ he said and began walking back to the pond where the rest of the gang was squatting along the bank. They had watched the episode, for I could hear their laughter.

Tom stood over me as I gasped for breath. When he didn’t move I looked up at him. For a moment I thought I recognized regret, even shame. But then I saw the familiar curl of lip and gritted teeth and I knew I was mistaken.

Fool!, he huffed and left to join the others.

When I could stand again, I walked to the shoreline, where Little John was sitting behind the cover of a tree. I passed Jack along the way. He was sitting alone as he always did, farther away from the pond than the rest of the boys. He had been closest to the exchange, and his great green eyes followed me as I passed.

I sat near Little John. He hadn’t heard the conversation, but he had seen the boy strike me, which told him enough that he stared uncomfortably at his food and didn’t ask me where I’d been. Only after I’d been sitting for a time did he finally venture to speak.

‘We’re gonna have to eat with em,’ he said, the tone of his voice wavering between a question and a conclusion.

‘Ain we?’

Little John was right of course, but I knew that if I said so I would begin crying. I nodded instead.

Little John was quiet. How long I don't know for my mind couldn't shake the sting in my stomach. My thoughts were so distracted that he had to whisper my name several times before I recognized it.

'Look,' he said, nodding to the shoreline.

I turned and saw Jack. He was standing barefoot at the edge of the water, the pant legs of his overalls rolled just above his ankles. His back was to us, and he stood with his legs slightly apart, his hands set against his hips, looking out over the still water of the pond. He stood like that until all of the boys along the shore had stopped whatever they were doing to look at him, then he began to strip. He unhooked his overalls and stepped out of them. Then he began unbuttoning his shirt, removing it and dropping it in a pile behind him. He turned back to the water.

By then, nearly a year had passed since Jack had been beaten by Miss Marplehorn, long enough that the flesh of his back, stripped and slashed, had mended, the wounds leavening into long white scar lines that crisscrossed his back. They framed shards of bronze skin like cracks in a shattered mirror. No one on shore had ever seen that terrible sight, but three could account for it. Jack now called two of them.

'Exley, John—come out fer a swim.'

Little John and I sat still. We could hardly breathe, movement was unthinkable.

Jack stepped into the pond and waded out until the water touched the small of his back. He stood there, waiting.

‘*C’mon,*’ he said, turning and waving to us now.

Little John and I stood and walked to the shoreline. While Jack waited, we began to undress, two mutes drawn on by his command.

Little John was slow in undressing, and I waded into the water ahead of him. The pond dropped off steeply, so Jack stood nearby, still standing with his back to the shore. As I came up behind him, the scars no longer seemed so terrifying, but painful, gruesome. They met at the center of his back, where the wounds were so dense that the skin was a tangle of swollen, mold-colored flesh. From it the individual scars fanned like sunburst, trailing to the horizon of his shoulders and the ends of his back.

I was shaking when I came alongside him.

He turned and looked at me. His great green eyes seemed to gather the world.

‘Yer all right,’ he said, nodding to the shore

I turned back and saw the gallery of boys. They were all watching Jack, all of them silent except Tom. He was whispering something to the boy with the long arms. He spoke quickly, and the boy seemed to weigh every word with a care that was unfamiliar to him. When he met my eyes he looked away.

I turned back to Jack, but before I could speak, he dove deep into the pond. Little John came alongside me. He looked into the water where Jack had disappeared, then he turned to me and asked why I was grinning.

From then on the other boys were convinced that Jack was allied with Little John and me, which was fortunate for us since the impromptu swim was only a second exception to his odd behavior, which remained collected and content but always distant long after that day at the pond. In fact, nearly two years would pass before circumstances would finally conspire to ensure our contact. For a time at least.

In the fall of our third year of high school, just after the start of the harvest, the fear that robs the summer sleep of apple growers fell over the area when an untimely ice storm swept through one night. By the time they awoke early the next morning, local growers found their orchards glazed with frost, the apples hanging like holiday bulbs that sparkled in the sunlight when the clouds finally cleared around noontime. By then, the temperature had nearly recuperated, melting the ice from the trees so that the orchards seemed to weep as the farmers walked through them.

They were dead the apples, every one of them, their flesh, once firm and white, already browning with decay. All of them lost.

The storm had come so early that most growers had only picked through a third of their orchards, leaving untouched trees across the region that remained heavy with useless fruit long after the frost. It was a bitter sight for those who now had to survive on a partial crop that often filled just a single, empty corner of their cavernous storage houses. For my father, however, the sight was delicious, for it reminded him of that first euphoric moment when he stared out his bedroom window and realized he was rich.

You see, every summer, from the moment the apples were ripe, my father and I raced with the workers to clear the apples off the trees and spirit them away to the storage house behind our barn. My father was adamant that the trees be picked as quickly as possible, and he employed men late into the night, going so far as to fill the orchard with fire pits to ensure that there would always be enough light to work by.

My father's methods were hardly common, and whenever they were mentioned, the local growers would snigger and shake their heads—that is until the fateful harvest when the frost had passed and word got around that my father had a storage house filled with fruit. Now he laughed as his crop fetched a price that was four times what it had been the previous year, when gentle weather and a bumper crop had sent the price of apples tumbling.

Such good fortune might have slaked the ambition of other men, but it spurred my father to double and triple his newfound riches, as if their multiplication, not their enjoyment, were the true mark of success. Throughout the fall and on into the winter, every

evening he paced back and forth across the family room of our little home, his head bowed, hands clasped behind his back, trying to decide upon the most propitious employment for the stack of bills that now lay secure in a small metal chest that was buried in the standing closet upstairs.

He decided on that employment shortly after the new year, announcing it one morning to Carrie and me with the determined gestures that always accompanied his announcements. He told us that he had decided to become a cattleman. With the success of the crop, he had more than enough money to purchase a small herd, and all that we needed to do was to make a few improvements to the barn and clear out a section of orchard behind it for suitable pasturage. By the summertime, he continued, standing over the two of us, pounding his fist into his hand, our work would be complete, and we would be ready to raise a herd that would guarantee our prosperity for years to come.

I interrupted my father to ask how he thought the two of us would be able to tear down a quarter of the orchard, clear away the brush, and rip out the stumps all before the arrival of the incessant summer heat. My father paused mid-pound and looked down, his slender lips stretched wide in a sly, dismissive smile.

‘There won’ just be two of us,’ he said.

The night before, my father had remedied the problem of manpower when he clasped hands with Eli Dawes. The two of them were standing outside the only saloon in town, and Eli leaned heavily on my father. Throughout the evening, he had been the barroom beneficiary of my father’s newfound wealth—a remarkable event in itself, for my father was known for having the tightest fist in town—and now Eli was drunk for the first

time in nearly a week, which was remarkable, as well, for he regarded sobriety the way most men do chastity, with curiosity and distance. His turn to teetotaling had not been voluntary, however, he had no choice, for of all the growers in the area, none had been harder hit by the harvest frost than Eli Dawes.

This, of course, came as no surprise to anyone who knew Eli. Though his apple orchard was one of the smallest around, he never finished picking his trees until the leaves had already begun exchanging their green for more modest colors, and only then did he hustle through the orchard, clearing away the remaining fruit before the first chill crept through.

Most years, that chill arrived early enough to destroy a small part of Eli's crop, but since he had no family to support, what he had already hidden away in his storage barn tended to provide a meager but still satisfactory lifestyle. What it didn't provide was any savings, so that when the frost struck earlier in the season than anyone could remember, Eli was left with a few crates of apples and an orchard of lost opportunity. Consequently, in the weeks before my father's proposal, Eli had survived first by selling the few apples he had stored, then the furniture he pawned, then the charity of neighbors, and finally nothing. In fact, when my father concluded that Eli was the man he needed, the latter had been living for almost a month off the few eggs his chickens laid and the buttermilk of his lone cow.

The proposal my father made was simple. In exchange for helping us tear down and clear away the orchard, Eli would get the orchard wood to sell, and in the meantime my father would loan him the money he needed to get-by (at a rate, my father said, that deserved a man like Eli Dawes).

Eli happily accepted the proposal and was so grateful to my father that he refused to let go of his hand, shaking it repeatedly and mumbling an extended oath of loyalty while the two of them stood outside the saloon. My father finally freed his hand from Eli's paw and led the large man staggering back to our farm, leaving him outside on the front steps while he went into the house and up to the narrow room next to mine. There, he went to the standing closet and took out the small metal chest he kept buried there. He opened the chest and counted and recounted a precise number of bills. Then he replaced the chest and went over to the vanity that stood empty and isolated in the far corner of the room. There, he removed an oblong ledger he kept hidden behind it. In the book, he made an entry for the amount of money he now held in his hand and then, after pausing, another entry for the drinks he had purchased that night. Then he went back downstairs and woke Eli, who had propped his chin on his palm and promptly fallen asleep.

'So you see,' my father said when he had finished describing the arrangement, 'There'll be four of us clearin out the orchard.'

'Four?' I asked, wondering if he'd made a second proposal.

'Four,' he said directly. 'You, me, Eli, and Jack.'

'Jack,' I said quietly, 'of course.'

By the time Jack Dawes finally stepped foot on our farm, trailing in the shadow of his Uncle Eli, whose bulk seemed especially ponderous given his recent diet, I had grown uneasy about our meeting, so much so that that I'd spent the night before lying in bed, replaying the two instances when Jack had stepped from the margins of my life and touched its course. I searched these occasions, looking for something that might alleviate my

anxiety—a forgotten moment, an undiscovered meaning—or otherwise explain it. But to no end. Ultimately, shortly before dawn, I fell into a light, nervous sleep that soon ended when my father woke me to begin the day's work.

When Jack arrived, I couldn't help staring at him. He regarded me briefly with a cordial expression you might expect from some anonymous neighbor passing you on the way to work. Then he turned to my father, who was explaining to the three of us how he wanted the work to proceed. Jack and I were to go to the back end of the orchard and begin clearing away the trees while Eli and my father worked on making improvements to the barn and stables to accommodate the herd. Whenever we finished chopping down a tree, we were supposed to separate out the limbs that were suitable for firewood from the small brush that we would pile and burn. At the end of the day, my father would bring around the tractor to haul away the limbs that would be cut into firewood and brought down to the Dawes farm, which was just down the road from our own.

Jack and I set off down the small footpath that ran along the edge of the orchard. The winter weather had been reliably bitter, but it had brought with it little snow, leaving the area a dreary landscape of yellowed fields and skeletal trees, all beneath an ugly, overcast sky. The two of us were armed with an ax and a hand saw, the one for felling the tree, the other for trimming it. I also had my lunch with me, tied in a red handkerchief that dangled from the end of my ax. Jack had no lunch with him, and I decided that I would ask him to share mine. It was the only thing I could think to say to him as the two of us proceeded along in silence. Before I could bring myself to speak, however, Jack had turned into the orchard, slipping in among the trees. So quick was his departure that I stopped to look for him

between the tree fingers, as if to confirm that he hadn't disappeared, altogether. Sure enough, I saw him receding into the whisp and snap of bare branches, and when I came to the final tree at the corner of the orchard, I saw him several rows down, hands set against his hips, sizing up the tree before him.

I turned to the tree that I intended to fell. It was a strong, sturdy tree, thick as my waist at its base and rising into three large arms that annually held perhaps a dozen bushels of heavy fruit. I dropped the saw and came alongside the tree, ax in hand. After gently touching the base with my blade, I twisted my body, drawing the ax high behind my shoulder. Then I swung back around, my body unraveling as the ax head orbited.

The ax did not touch the tree that time. The wooden handle slipped through my gloved hands and shot across the footpath, tumbling end-over-end before coming to rest in the brush.

I quickly retrieved the ax, hoping that Jack hadn't seen its trajectory, and removed my woolen gloves to gain a firmer hold on the handle. I drew the ax behind me again and this time hit the tree with a dull thunk that rattled up my arm and died at the base of my spine. I pulled the ax away from the tree and revealed a small cleft in the bark the width of a child's thumb.

So began the work of clearing the orchard.

I worked throughout the morning to bring that first tree down. When I stopped to eat my lunch, I'd gnawed almost half way through the trunk, but the old tree was stubborn and refused to fall. I sat at the base of the tree and ate my lunch slowly, allowing every

precious bite to fill some small gap of time when my hands were free of the ax. By then, my shoulders ached so badly that I couldn't raise my arms above my head, and a narrow blister had formed across my palms where the ax handle ran between them.

After finishing both of the biscuit sandwiches I had brought with me, I leisurely looked over the barren landscape and began contemplating the merits of a brief nap when my thoughts were split by the sharp crack of wood and the subsequent tumble-thump of an apple tree. I held my breath, allowing the sound to reverberate through my head until it became bearable, then I carefully crawled over to the edge of the orchard and peered down the tree line. There, several rows away, I saw the body of a large apple tree lying prostrate on the ground, a familiar boy standing over it, ax in hand.

I retreated to my own tree and stared resentfully at the small wound in its side. Then I took up the ax and continued my work. I swung that ax all afternoon. I swung until my muscles cramped and my shoulders cried. I swung until my wrists swelled and the blisters in my hands grew and broke and grew again. I swung until one last desperate hit bit deep enough into the tree to send it toppling over its own weight and cracking against the ground.

I cried out and tried to lift my ax over my head triumphantly, but my shoulders shrieked, and I had to settle for a more subdued expression of joy. While I scanned the fallen tree, I heard the roar of machinery and turned around to see my father arrive at the corner of the orchard, riding atop his tractor. I stood over the tree, holding my ax proudly. Then I noticed the trailer behind him. There, another tree, cleaned of its branches, lay dismembered on the bed.

'Got any wood?' my father yelled over the terrific noise.

I shook my head. He grimaced.

'Get on,' he said, thumbing the end of the trailer.

I gathered the ax and saw and hopped on. Jack was at the opposite end of the trailer.

He sat facing away from me.

The next day, Jack and Eli weren't expected till noon, so I made my way to the end of the orchard alone. I told my father that I wanted to finish cutting apart the first tree as soon as possible so that I could get started on a second, but privately I only wanted to catch up to Jack, whose work my father had praised endlessly over dinner.

Physically, the task of quartering the tree was not as difficult as bringing it down, but the work was far more painstaking. To remove the larger limbs from the tree, which now lay on its side, I first had to maneuver through a thicket of branches, most times straddling one awkwardly in order to saw through another. Even when I succeeded in removing one of the limbs, I still had to disentangle it from the knot of branches that held fast to it. Most infuriating, however, was dealing with the thick limbs nearest the trunk, which were often so heavy that they had to be cut into several pieces before I could pull them out from under the carcass of the tree.

I worked all morning long, but by lunchtime, I had only removed two of three's three large arms, both of which still needed to be pruned of their smaller branches. I had forgotten to bring food with me, but Carrie had brought by some biscuits and jam, hoping the gift would induce me to play. I took the food and told her I was busy. She retreated to the orchard edge, where she lingered, tapping her feet and singing to herself, while I worked with determined indifference until she gave up and went away.

When she was gone, I sat gloomily among the tree's remains and ate my lunch, trying to ignore the fact that I wouldn't finish the work before the day's end. I wasn't very successful at that task either for by now the steady strike of a second ax had long resumed a few rows beyond me. It paused shortly after I finished lunch, but only for the familiar tumble-thump of another falling tree. Later on, I saw its limbs lying on the back of the trailer when my father brought the tractor around. I gestured to the remains of my own tree, which now lay scattered about the stump, still unprepared, and tried to explain that I was almost done. My father wasn't interested in explanations and shook his head in disgust. He drove off as I tried to finish. Behind him sat a figure whose legs dangled from the end of the trailer. He watched me as I stood on the orchard path alone.

I did not return home until long after sunset, having stayed behind to finish my work. When I was done, I rolled the crudely hewn limbs into a pile, collected the brush, and made my way back to the darkened house. I was ravenous, but no dinner had been left out for me. I ate the few stale biscuits I found in the pantry, wrapped my wounded hands with fresh bandages, and went to bed.

The next morning, I slept through the call at dawn and woke only when my room had filled with weak winter light. I changed into my clothes and hustled off to school, but I was already late by the time I stepped out of bed. When I arrived, the teacher directed me to the corner of the room, where I was made to stand with my back to the class until lunchtime.

At the end of the school day, I walked home alone, dreading the work that would begin shortly after I arrived. That dread collected in my stomach and curdled when I saw Eli and Jack leave their farm and make their way down the road. When they arrived, my father was quick to praise Jack's work.

'Eli, that nephew of yers's gotta helluva swing in his arm.'

Eli flushed with pride.

'He do, don' he?'

'That's right,' my father said, clapping Jack on the shoulder, 'you keep at it, son, we're goin to have this orchard cleared out before the blossoms come round.'

'Yessir,' Jack said quietly.

'Good,' he said. 'Glad I got someone workin.'

This time, I started out along the orchard path alone, as Jack had disappeared into the trees while I was busy sharpening my ax. I arrived at the end of the orchard and turned around to see the long line of apple trees that stretched back to the barn. Then I looked down at the lone stump that marked the corner of the orchard. I felt my shoulders slump. I

walked to the second tree in that endless row, drew back the ax, and hit the tree weakly. I hit it a second time, then a third, leaving small scars along the trunk.

‘Keep em together,’ came a voice from behind. I turned and saw the attention of two great green eyes.

‘The hits, you got to keep em together—here,’ Jack said, walking over to me. He rested his ax against his shoulder, and I stepped out of his way when he came alongside. He steadied himself, drew the ax back, and with three powerful blows removed a large chunk from the base of the tree.

‘Look,’ he said, stepping up to the tree and pointing to the deep gash he’d cut into the trunk, ‘all my hits are here, and yers,’ he drew his finger over the three clefts I’d made, ‘go up and down. You got to keep em together. You’ll bring down the tree faster that way. Y’see?’

I nodded and took up my ax. Jack stepped out of the way. I aimed my ax and delivered two blows, the first digging right into the open gash, the second just above it.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Now lean when yer swingin.’ He drew up the ax, rocked back slowly, and then brought it around with ferocious speed, his whole body moving with the blow. The tree shuddered and another chunk of wood split from the base.

‘Y’see?’ he said. ‘Now you try.’

I stepped beside the tree and tried to mimic what I’d seen. The tree did not shudder when I hit it, but the ax felt certain my hands.

‘That’s right,’ Jack said. ‘That’s how you do it—now watch.’

Jack grabbed the saw that lay on the ground and climbed into the tree, hoisting himself with one hand while holding onto the saw with the other. He pulled himself up past

the tree's two largest limbs and then squatted on top of them, one foot on either limb. He held himself upright with his free hand.

'You should bring down the big branches before you bring down the tree,' he said, tapping one of the large limbs with the saw, 'when the tree's standin, the branches are doin half the work fer you. They're so heavy you start sawin and they'll pull off long before yer through. Watch.'

Jack lowered himself onto one of the large limbs, straddling it. Then, bracing himself against the trunk, he carefully lined up the blade and began sawing through a second limb. The movement of his arm was swift and easy, betraying none of the pain that slowed my efforts. When the blade had cut halfway through the limb, I heard a crack. Jack paused and then continued sawing through the limb until there was a second, sustained crack, and the limb split away from the tree. Jack lowered himself to the ground.

'Y'see?' he said, gesturing to the limb, which was attached to the trunk by a bare joint of wood. 'You don' have to saw all the way through, the weight pulls it down fer you.' He stepped up, set the saw against the point where the limb was still attached to the tree, and with two quick movements, sawed through.

'Gimme a hand,' he said, pulling the limb back from its resting place against the tree. I hustled to the far end and grabbed a branch in either hand. Together, we carried the limb clear of the tree.

'All right,' Jack said, turning back and sizing up the still standing tree. I wanted to say something to thank him for his help, but before I had the chance, he had climbed back into the tree.

'I'll work on the other one while you get to choppin it down,' he said, tapping the second large limb with his saw blade.

I nodded and gathered up the ax. I stepped beside the tree and drew the ax behind me. Then I paused.

'What if the tree comes down while yer in it?'

Jack stopped sawing and looked at the ground. He hadn't considered this possibility.

'Well,' he said, a grin breaking across his face. 'You'll just have to warn me.'

The two of us hurried to finish quartering the tree before sunset, when my father would return to collect our work. Seated in the tree, Jack brought down the second limb not long after the first and then set about stripping the two limbs of their smaller branches. He had almost finished by the time I felled the wounded tree, and, together, the two of us stripped the trunk and began cutting it into sections we could lift and carry.

Shortly before the sun finally sank below the horizon, when our work was nearly complete, Jack abruptly took his saw and told me that he was going to begin working on a tree in the next row. He climbed into the tree and began sawing one of its main limbs. It came down just as the noise from the tractor reached our ears. Shortly thereafter, my father appeared at the corner of the orchard, hailing me as I bent over one of the forlorn limbs.

'Atta boy!' he said, jumping down from the tractor. 'You finally got the lead out ah yer arms.'

He came beside me and clapped me on the back.

‘That’s what I like to see,’ he continued, pointing to the scattered anatomy of the fallen tree. ‘Hard work—you keep that up, y’hear?’

‘Yessir, Jack was—’

‘Jack!’ my father interrupted, seeing the boy squatting over a limb beside the next apple tree. ‘How y’doin there boy?’

Jack stood up.

‘I won’ be finished with the tree till tomorrow,’ he said directly. ‘Lemme help Exley with his.’

He came over to where we were standing, picked up a smaller section of the tree, and carried it to the trailer. My father said nothing, his face wrinkled with confusion. I moved to explain the scene’s deceptive appearance, but Jack preempted me.

‘Can y’gimme a hand?’ he asked, standing at one end of a heavy limb. I came around to the other end, and the two of us lifted it. As we walked to the trailer, Jack stared at me, and I knew then that he didn’t want me to reveal the shared nature of our work. I deferred to him and said nothing, receiving full credit from my father, who clapped me on the back a second time and eyed Jack suspiciously before climbing onto the tractor seat. The two of us followed, carrying a slender, oblong limb that spanned the trailer’s length. I held the heavier end, and set it down on the side of the trailer nearest the tractor’s large coal-colored wheels, while Jack swung his around to the opposite end. When we had finished, I hopped on trailer and waited for Jack. Beneath the safe shelter of the tractor’s tremendous roar, I intended to tell him that he shouldn’t be bothered by my father, that he was temperamental, even a bully,

but that if we kept working together, we would give him no further cause for complaint. I was sure of it.

These were the things I wanted to tell Jack, but I didn't have the chance, for I was still sitting alone when the tractor departed, Jack having chosen the other side of the trailer, where he sat facing away once again.

But we did work together, the following day and everyday after, until the winter wore into spring and, at last, into summer, and the orchard had been cleared and the stumps removed. We cut our way across the rows of barren-then-budding trees, and whenever the limbs behind the barn piled high enough to threaten the stables, we spent the evenings by lamplight, quartering them for firewood and transporting loads to the Dawes farm, where we stacked the logs in darkness just inside the barn.

When we began, Jack showed me how to split the logs into firewood. I'd been holding the ax over my head as an executioner stands over the chopping block, intending to let the blade fall before me, but Jack took his ax and showed me how to swing it in a windmill motion so that the blade rose from the ground and orbited my shoulder before falling on the wood. *Splits easy that way*, he said, and it was true.

Jack showed me other things—how to hold a saw to keep my hands from blistering, how to build brush fires that didn't scatter before the winds, how to fell a tree before lunch

and dismember it by dinnertime—and I followed him, always, my own efforts smaller, clumsy, anxious, though they only seemed that way at night, when Jack had departed, and I lay in bed, holding my arms safely away from my body to rest my broken hands.

By his side, however, I never felt inadequate, for Jack Dawes was so strong, so steady, so totally indifferent to my shortcomings, that anxiety seemed somehow indulgent and soon slipped away. At the same time, his patient kindness (quiet though it was) inoculated me against any feelings of rivalry, making room for the raw and wonderful fascination I felt for him. Indeed, the more we worked together, the more I saw Jack not as someone to be envied, but to be watched and watched closely—especially in how he handled others. His sense about people was so sharp it seemed instinctive, for with a few words or a single, discrete gesture Jack could precisely steer events, break their momentum, or simply absolve you of your concerns.

He was especially deft in dealing with my father, whose tempestuous nature never seemed to bother him, and he often stepped forward on my behalf to deflect his displeasure or blunt his childish rage. My father suspected some of these interventions—such as the curious fact that any marked rise in my work tended to see a proportional fall in Jack's—but others were not so obvious, such as when Jack stilled my father through flattery, asking his ambitions for the herd or soliciting an explanation for some familiar task. Such maneuvers were failsafe, for Jack knew full well that there were few things my father better liked than talking at length while others stood by and listened.

The most remarkable of these intercessions came near the end of our time together, when the only work left us was to finish removing the few final apple trees from the

orchard. They had already begun to blossom, and stood huddled near a large pile of limbs that were sectioned and stacked and waiting to be transported from the farm. Jack and I worked on these trees, our backs to the empty orchard, while Eli and my father used the tractor to dig up the stumps and push them back to the gully.

Our efforts exposed, my father spent the afternoons hollering suggestions across the field, most of which were immediately overwhelmed by the metallic roar of the tractor, leaving us a heated display of abrupt gestures as the only clue to his criticisms. The gestures were generally aimed at me, and as our work drew to a close, they grew more urgent, so much so that at times I thought they might send my father tumbling off his tractor into the unwitting arms of Eli Dawes, who lumbered along beside him, seemingly unperturbed by the antics overhead.

Those antics never sent my father tumbling from the tractor, but they did send me tumbling out of a tree. I was straddling a smaller limb, trying to saw off one of the tree's main arms, when I heard my father explode beneath me. He had left the tractor and stormed across the field. When I heard his voice, my head swung round, and I lost my balance. I fell straight to the ground, landing on my back such that the air rushed from my lungs, pulling my throat shut behind it. I lay on my back, staring into an abyss of apple blossoms above me, and gasped for breath. My father leaned over me.

'A tree,' he spat, his mouth twisted so tight it was incapable of elaboration, '*a goddamn tree!*'

As if to highlight his inscrutable point, he grabbed a fistfull of blossoms and thrust them toward me. My lungs still refused breath.

Jack came running over from the woodpile where he had been splitting logs.

‘Yer all right,’ he said, kneeling down next to me, his great green eyes still, reassuring. ‘Y’jus got the wind knocked outta you, that’s all.’

I nodded.

‘He got the wind knocked outta him cause he was horsin aroun in trees,’ my father shrieked, finding the words that had eluded him. ‘Why the hell are you horsin aroun in trees?’

‘He wasn horsin aroun, Mister Allmer,’ Jack said, rising to meet my father. ‘He was jus cuttin off the big branches before tryin to bring the tree down. It’s faster that way. I showed him.’

My father made to speak, but Jack continued, leaning into him slightly.

‘I was jus tryin to help him, sir,’ he said. ‘Exley helped me when I came here, he was good to me, and I wanted to pay him back. That’s all. If there’s any fault here, it’s mine, not his.’

Jack was a little taller than my father, and as he spoke, he stared at him with green, unblinking eyes.

‘It’s mine,’ he repeated.

Jack was done speaking now, but his eyes remained on my father, who had never been very comfortable with either sincerity or fearlessness and found the two of them together nearly unbearable.

‘Fine,’ he said, looking away and letting the branch go so that the clutch of blossom flipped past his face. ‘Just finish the work so we can get the wood hauled over to yer uncle’s place.’

He turned to go, nearly tripping over Carrie, who was sitting around as she often did when we worked in the orchard. He stopped and stared at her. She looked up at him with large, apologetic eyes.

‘*GO HOME!*’ he screamed. For a moment, she sat still with terror, her lower lip quaking, then she sprang up, grabbing the doll that had been sitting next to her, and scampered off across the clear earth. Her wailing reached us just as she rounded the barn.

My father watched her go, then he stalked back to the tractor, where Eli sat waiting for him in the wheelwell of one of the tires. I watched him, then I saw Jack’s hand. I took hold of it.

‘Yer all right,’ he said, pulling me up. ‘Jus take a second to catch yer breath.’

I nodded and bent over, hands on my knees, letting the air ease back into my lungs. Jack placed his hand gently on my back.

‘Yer all right,’ he repeated. And I was.

The days were like this, all through the winter and on into the spring. Some days not a word would pass between us. Others, Jack came to my aid somehow—but always at his initiative. Our relationship was always at his initiative, at least during the months we labored together in the orchard.

That may seem strange to you, but nothing could have seemed more natural to me. I desired Jack's attention, even craved it at times, but I would no more have bothered him than I would have bothered my father (though for reasons different indeed).

No, I was content to leave our relationship at a remove, a distance at which I spent most of my time observing Jack, admiring him, and otherwise receiving the very help that confirmed my opinion of him. And what was that opinion? That I'd never known someone of such complete strength. Jack was quiet, inconspicuous, and yet the world seemed to split before him—always. He was unmoved.

This is what I saw in Jack, at least then, before I saw more and could no longer explain things. That began by accident, shortly after our work in the orchard concluded, and the two of us were left to finish splitting the wood and stacking it inside Eli Dawes's barn. We had chopped so much that the lumber overran the barn floor, and Jack and I had to restack it in a pile that was so tall it nearly touched the roof. I sat all alone atop that pile one morning, late in spring. I had arrived early for work, and Eli had shown me to the barn and told me to wait for Jack, who was out, he said—where he didn't bother to add.

The wood was stacked along the far wall so that the one end formed an uncertain staircase. I climbed to the top of it, right below the long wooden rafters that ran the length of the barn, and crawled to the end of the lumber pile. There the morning light peeked through wall seams so that if you pressed your face against them, you could look out over the long valley that rippled beyond the farm in rolling green waves that seemed to make for the horizon. It was there that I saw him. Not at first. I saw the valley first, long and lush and quiet—but then I saw Jack. He broke like a shot from the tree line, his body pressed tightly

against a small brown mare who carried him across the valley until he came to the top of a ridge. There he came to a stop, sat up, and stroked the neck of the small horse. Then he took off again, riding down the crest as fast as the animal was willing to take him. When he arrived at the top of a second crest, he paused again, nearer to the barn now so that when he reached down to stroke the horse's mane, I saw that he whispered to it before taking off again, racing like this from hillside to hillside across the valley until the horse roared up the final ridge and rumbled by the barn beneath me.

Jack opened the tall wooden doors, sending the birds that inevitably collected on the crossbeams overhead furiously flapping their wings and flying about the barn. When he had led the small brown mare inside, he removed its saddle and reins and ran his hand over its side as the horse recovered its breath. Then, standing in the shard of sunlight that had been admitted by the open door, he proceeded to brush the horse, stroking its mane with a tender solicitude that made me regret my heartbeat, which seemed loud and unruly inside my chest. I was incapable of movement as I watched him tend to the animal, but I must have done something to stir Jack's attention, for his hand paused along the horse's neck. It remained motionless, as if Jack knew that something had come to threaten him and he was considering whether to run for the open door or turn around and face it, then he slowly turned his head and looked at me. For a moment, his mouth was drawn tight like fist, and his eyes, his great green eyes, were incandescent. Then, just as quickly, they dimmed with recognition, and his lips eased into a smile that seemed studied and strained.

‘C’mon and help,’ he said, motioning to me. I stayed fixed, paralyzed by that initial look, but Jack continued to motion, and slowly I climbed back down the woodpile and out into the open light. Jack retrieved a second brush and handed it to me.

‘Take this side ah her,’ he said and walked around the horse until he was standing across from me and began brushing again. He did not look at me.

‘She’s not two yet,’ he said quietly, barely above a whisper. ‘I got er two years this fall.’

Jack fell silent and continued to brush. Then the words came again. In snatches.

‘She’s mine,’ he began, his eyes still hidden. ‘Bought er at the market. Couple ah towns over. Me and my uncle go to it. We sell apples there.’

He spoke carefully, as if the words might break.

‘I saw er there. Every week. She was young, real young. Jus a foal. Wasn big as the rest of em, so she stayed there. Nobody buyed her. Nobody even looked at her. But I wanted er.’

Jack looked at me.

‘Thought I could get er cheap,’ he said, and smiled gently.

‘I waited till the last day,’ he continued, the momentum beginning to catch his words, ‘till it was cold, and the market was done till spring. Went up to the man that was sellin her and told him I wanted her. She was the last one he had an I knew he didn want er. Nobody wanted er. I knew that, so when he tried to sell er dear, I said no sir and left.’

He nodded his head slowly as he spoke.

‘Didn let me get far. No—called me back and we argued till I got er.’

Jack paused and ran his hand along the back of the small brown horse.

‘Yes I did,’ he said to himself.

The barn was silent.

‘What’s her name,’ I finally asked. A red wave rippled over Jack’s face. He breathed deeply.

‘Lindy,’ he confided, when the wave had passed. ‘Her name’s Lindy.’

We finished up, making sure to brush dry the strip of sweat where the saddle had gripped the horse so that she didn’t itch and start uncomfortably in the afternoon heat. Then we put her in the empty stable at the end of the barn, opposite the woodpile. Between her and a lonely cow lay another empty stable where a packhorse had been before Eli was forced to sell it in the desperate weeks after the harvest frost. Hay now filled the stable, and as we broke up a bale to feed Lindy, Jack told me about how he had raised her.

‘She was sick when I got er,’ he said, so weak that he had carried her home from the market and worked for weeks afterward to heal the lesions that had clustered around her jaw and stained the length of her neck. Every morning, when he went out to feed Lindy, he’d bring with him a pail of soapy water to clean her, holding her head back as he scrubbed the underside of her neck. At first, she was so weak that she could only whinny in pain, but as the lesions began to recede, her strength grew, until one day she wrested her head from Jack and bit his hand.

‘Y’can still see the marks,’ he said, holding his hand up proudly.

When she was strong enough, Jack worked with Lindy in the farmyard, running her in a loop along the path that led from the barn to the farmhouse. He indulged her with hay in the mornings and gave her handfuls of sugar cubes he bought from the feed store in town. In the springtime, when the small garden that Eli kept began to blossom, Jack stole vegetables for her at night.

‘I told my uncle it was the rabbits,’ he grinned. ‘Now he can’ stan rabbits.’

Jack nursed her straight through the summertime, until her ribs disappeared for good beneath a hickory coat that seemed to glow whenever he led her out into the sunlight for their morning rides.

‘We go out back and ride through the woods,’ he said. ‘I’m careful cause it’s dark there, and I don’ want er to get hurt.’

He didn’t hurt her though. I couldn’t imagine him hurting her. Not from the way he spoke of her. Not then. Her cared for her too much, it was obvious to me. I felt that affection and recognized its unmixed strength, its single-mindedness. This was the Jack I knew

But there was more now. I knew that too. Even then, when the intimacy of Jack’s admissions never ventured beyond ambitions of one day riding Lindy at the county fair, when all he had revealed to me were the things that boys talk about when they are alone and avoiding work, when the revelations, every one of them, were still warm and routine, before they became complicated, dark, and desperate, even then I still felt the passing of something I had so admired in Jack, something remarkable and complete. And though the terms of

friendship were finally forming between us—at last, after so many months—I couldn't help feeling I had accepted a great gift at a price I would never have paid.

But that thought, strong as it was, slipped behind a series of stark impressions that were soon struck so deeply into my memory that the image of a boy who had inspired it, in hindsight, seemed even more incredible than before.

It began with a question, one that stumbled from my mouth as if kicked from behind.

‘What happened to yer neck,’ I asked, spying for the first time the small bruise that hovered above Jack’s collarbone. The two of us were standing at the door to Lindy’s stable at either side of the small horse while she ate the hay we put in her trough. Jack touched the side of his neck, and his green eyes opened wide like a man who’s just realized a terrible mistake.

‘Mind yer business,’ he said, stepping back so that the half of his head was obscured behind the horse.

I moved to apologize, but Jack cut me off.

‘Go,’ he said, darting from behind the horse and slipping into the half-shadows of the barn. He rubbed his neck painfully as he passed, ‘I got things here, jus go.’

‘I didn’ mean—‘

‘Go!’ he repeated, picking up the ax that rested on the floor.

‘I—’

‘YOU HEARD ME!’ he roared, slamming the ax head into the barn floor.

I shuddered and stepped back from the obscure figure that crouched near the woodpile. I left the barn and sprinted home.

For a time afterward I avoided the Dawes farm. My obligation had been to my father to clear out the orchard, not to Eli to quarter his wood. I had done so only because I wanted to (my father certainly didn’t care) but after Jack’s outburst I stayed away, not so much because I was afraid of Jack, but because my stomach turned and sank whenever I recalled what had happened in the barn. I tried my best to drive these thoughts from my mind, but they crept back inevitably, ceasing to return only when Jack himself supplied new visions that kept me confused and awake late into the night.

They would come shortly, but before then I avoided Jack, sticking around the house and helping out my father, who had welcomed the new herd that now grazed behind the barn with the peculiar joy that the prospect of pecuniary gain alone seemed to bring him. We had worked together to string up a barbed wire fence along the edge of the old orchard, and once the herd was inside it, I liked to climb up to the roof of the barn when the day’s work was done and watch the cattle while they grazed. I would sit up there for hours, alone, watching those glorious creatures amble about the old orchard grounds until the sun finally set, and the whorl of colors vanished from the sky, and the cattle faded like ghosts into the blackening landscape.

It was near the end of one such day when Jack appeared at the cupola window. I didn't notice him at first, and I am not sure how long he had been there when I finally did, but when I turned to go, I saw a familiar shadow, still and silent behind the darkening glass, and those eyes, those great green eyes.

I remained crouched on the rooftop, not knowing whether to sit down or to continue crawling toward the window. For a moment, I wanted nothing more than to get off that roof and down to the safe, stable ground, but that instinct quickly passed, for Jack opened the window and climbed out.

He stayed near the cupola box at first, squatting near the window while the last lights of the day died behind him. His eyes darted about nervously, occasionally alighting on my face before scattering again, as if it pained them to settle too long on anything in particular, especially me. He was shaking all over, and he held himself tightly as if bitten by the night air. I sat down again and waited for him to come.

He did by turns, settling a little ways away, not so far that I couldn't hear him when he finally began to speak, but far enough that the words seemed intended for no one in particular, as if they were spoken merely to be heard by the one who was speaking them. Jack spoke this way to himself, rocking ever so slightly as he did, and while he knew that I was listening, I am not sure how much that mattered to him. It seemed more important that the words should be spoken, that they were tender, precious, alive.

And what did Jack say? I could tell you, but the words would fail. I remember them, surely I do, but here, now, they would be insufficient. They would seem tired, familiar, even disappointing—the anguished confessions of first love, of a boy who had gone to the market

and met a girl a few towns over, a girl who had been that boy's first kiss, and his second, and third, until that girl had been his, and she to him the most wonderful thing in the world, so precious that merely to speak her name was to risk an ideal, and Jack was not about to do that, not until I noticed the small, suggestive mark on the side of his neck and became privy to this intimate world.

But why did he throw that world open to me? Why did he reveal the very details he had so jealously guarded, even when the world they described had only been hinted at? At the time I did not know. Later I concluded that Jack must have believed that I had suspected the mark and that he merely was confirming my suspicion. But even that did not explain why he shared his secret with me, why he still wasn't content leave me as uncertain of his own private world as I had been before—always.

I knew this, and as I sought an explanation, recalling the terrible sight that night, the anguish of Jack's admission nearly suffocating his words, his rooftop confession became for me a raw testament of his trust, a willing sacrifice that he had made as final proof of our friendship.

I convinced myself of this a few nights before Jack would visit me a second time. Between these visits he seemed to disappear, not stopping by our farm or even showing up for school. His absence never struck me as strange—so much was strange about Jack that a few unaccounted for days seemed unremarkable—but I knew that something had happened to him the moment I saw him again. He was standing outside my bedroom window, still and quiet. I woke to find him that way, he must have knocked on the glass or done something to

wake me, but I don't remember it. What I remember is stirring from a dead sleep to find him there.

'C'mon,' he said, when I had gotten out of bed and opened the window. I wanted to ask him what was wrong, but I knew from his face that I should just put on my clothes and follow him. I did and stepped through the window onto the landing that covered the front porch. I made my way to the end and climbed down the trellis. Jack was already waiting for me at the roadside. Lindy was with him, he was sitting atop her.

'Get on,' he said, when I came beside the small horse. I took his hand and climbed on. The horse groaned under the new weight, but Jack did not pause to comfort her. Instead, he dug his heels into Lindy's side, and we took off down the road that led from my farm, past Jack's house, and out into the night.

We crossed a few familiar roads before Jack darted off through an orchard and we began following a blind bend of footpaths, creek beds, and open plains. As we raced across the anonymous landscape, blue-black under the brilliant night sky, I clung to Jack, my fists knotted at the base of his strong stomach, and prayed that Lindy did not turn her ankle on some unseen rock and send us tumbling to the ground.

She didn't, but given the way Jack drove her, she might have preferred to. He seemed to know the very limits of her endurance, and whenever she tried to withdraw from them, he drove her harder, until her breath roared before us, and I thought she might collapse.

We raced like this for some time. How long I don't know—long enough that I was lost well before we turned into a wheat field and drove toward a hilltop where Jack drew Lindy to a halt. The stop was abrupt, and I continued to hold Jack tight, half-expecting the

small horse to go tearing through the night again. But she was far too busy panting and remained still beneath us. Jack struggled for air too. It came in hoarse, shallow sobs that beat beneath my fists.

We waited on that hilltop, a full moon hanging overhead. It illuminated the sea of hay stalks that filled the hillside. They stood guard until the winds whispered past, then they would bow and scrape, and the earth seemed to roll beneath us.

I watched this gentle miracle surround us over and over again that night, and each time I marveled at it, but the sight had no effect on Jack. He watched intently the farm that stood at the bottom of the hill, alone at the edge of a dark plain. The lights inside the house were dead, and the barnyard was still, but I could see that Jack's attention was focused on the pole barn that sat up the road nearer to us. It too was dark, but the tall barn doors had been left ajar so that there was a narrow black passage where one could slip inside.

Jack stared quietly into that void, and I knew then that nothing else concerned him. His concentration was perfect, his patience complete. Only when someone emerged did he start, and even then it was merely a hitch in his throat, one that passed as his breath began to quicken.

It was a girl. I knew it would be, even before she took shape passing into the moonlight. It was Jack's girl, and I knew in an instant what would happen next, what we were there to do.

It took some time but the boy appeared. He was a large boy and pushed himself through the tall barn doors. Then he shut them carefully behind him and followed the girl to the road.

Jack drew up the reins and looped the end around his fist. He crouched down in the saddle and drew his feet out from the sides of the small beast. I fastened my hands around his stomach and held tight.

In an instant we were boring down the hillside, flying just above the tall hay stalks, which parted wordlessly before us, until we reached the road and the hoof beats exploded beneath us. The two of them swung around, stunned. So close were we to them that the first thing the boy must have seen was Jack, who broke from my grasp and sprang from the horse, falling on him with such force that I heard the impact over the hoof beats when the two of them hit the ground

Jack was on top of the boy immediately, at least from what I could see when I had grabbed the reins and wheeled the horse around. He was kneeling on the boy's chest, one hand pressed against his neck, the other, a fist, poised high above his face. The boy did not struggle. He had lay whimpering on the ground, one leg turned beneath him.

I quickly dismounted and came toward them. The girl stood between us. She did not notice me at first, she was too busy watching the black tableau. It was only when I was a few steps behind her that she finally heard my footfalls. All at once she shook from her state and turned to run.

'Grab her!' Jack cried.

I caught the girl by her elbow as she fled past and pinwhweeled her against me. She thudded into my chest and began to struggle but I threaded my arms beneath hers and locked them tight about her waist. She struggled for a moment more, then her body began to ease. She went slack.

'Noooo,' she pleaded.

Jack did not move.

'Please,' she said, then in a whisper. *'He don' know anything about you.'*

Jack's fist wavered, he turned to her. I could not see her face—I never saw her face—I could only smell her hair, it was thatched with straw, and feel the roll and curve of her body, her breath still resisting my embrace.

'He don' know about you,' she said, shaking her head gently, *'Please, Jack.'*

For a moment she had him, she had him completely, but at the sound of his name Jack shuddered and drew back his fist. The girl screamed, and instantly I covered her mouth, muffling her cries as the arm began to piston. I turned my head, I could not watch. But the sounds remained—the feral shrieks, the ritual thud of falling fists, and the tentative silence that followed, when the world seemed to wait for reassurance that the awful moment has passed.

It hadn't, for when I opened my eyes, I saw Jack struggle to stand away from the form that lay still and unconscious beneath him, only to sink, the top half of his body curling in on itself as if broken. I moved to say something, but then I heard the howl. It rose from Jack like some final protest against the despair that now broke over him, sweeping away everything before it and leaving Jack sobbing, his hands pressed helplessly against his face.

Jack sobbed until his voice was raw with exhaustion. Then he cried quietly, lingering until he was done.

When he had finished, he stood up and walked past me. I let go of the girl, who ran to the side of the boy and began wailing. I returned to the horse, and we left by the way we came, turning off the road into the fields just as the first lights in the farmhouse appeared.

Vengeance was expected and it didn't disappoint. Not long after our ride, four men arrived at the Dawes farm looking for Jack. It was late in the evening, and Eli was still in town at the tavern reviving old habits he could once again afford, so the men found Jack alone inside the house. They dragged him out and beat him on the front lawn until his eyes swelled shut, then they took turns kicking him until his sides bled. Then the four men left Jack and set fire to the barn.

The barn burned slowly at first, the flames scattered by an oil lamp that had been smashed against the plank board floor, but when those flames found the woodpile, where the lumber near the bottom had been drying for months, the fire tore up the barn walls and soon engulfed the roof.

Blind to the building light that was swallowing the barn, Jack knew what was happening long before the animals gave unmistakable evidence, and he pulled himself in the direction of the heat. He never reached the barn, however, collapsing somewhere in the

middle of the yard, where he was found unconscious by the neighbors when they began arriving at the farm. I was among them, having seen the terrible light from my bedroom window, and I ran to the Dawes farm in my bedclothes.

From the moment I stepped foot onto the porch I heard the animals. Their end of the barn was the last to be reached by the blaze, so their skin had already begun to blister and burn long before the haystacks ignited and the animals themselves burst into flames. The lone cow died quickly, but Lindy would not give up so easily. She kicked and strained and finally burst through the barn walls, trying to outrun the flames that pursued her.

I saw her when I was halfway to the Dawes farm. From where I stood she looked like a comet screaming across the valley before she disappeared behind a blindbend. The next morning she was found lying against a hillside, the fire having burned itself out before killing her. She was breathing, but she no longer screamed, and the men who had brought shotguns with them shuddered at the sight and finally gave Lindy her peace.

When Eli Dawes arrived back at his farm, he was so drunk that he failed to notice the red embers of his barn and might have gone to bed if it weren't for the parcel of men who waited for him on the porch to explain the fate of his nephew, who had been carried up to his bed where he lay amid sheets stained red as one of the wives worked feverishly to bandage his broken body. Eli had to be sobered up before he fully understood their words. When he did, he sat down in the middle of his kitchen floor and cried like a child. The men gathered round him, but he would not stand.

I was the only one who knew why the four men had come—the only one, that is, besides Jack, and he spent the first week after the incident racked by fever and infection that

left him semiconscious and incoherent. Afterward, he had to contend with a broken jaw and an instinctive unwillingness to speak the truth of that night, so he shook his head silently whenever someone asked what had happened. *I don't know*, he seemed to be saying, but I knew better.

A few days after the fire, my father, who had not gone to the Dawes farm that night, told me to load up the last of the wood from the orchard. I did, and the two of us drove the tractor just down the road. We found Eli sitting on his front porch staring listlessly out over the farmyard to where the charred remains of his barn lay. My father told me that he was going to speak to Eli, and directed me to draw the trailer around to the back of the barn, which looked like a heap of black bones strewn by the edge of the barnyard. I did this and quickly unloaded the trailer, which was only a quarter full, mostly with small branches that had gone unnoticed before. When I was done, the sight of the small pile somehow pained me more than the wreckage next to it, and I turned my head from both as I made my way back to the house.

I found my father on the front steps of the porch, standing over Eli Dawes, who remained sitting and only seemed dimly aware that my father was speaking to him. When he saw me pull up, my father stopped talking. He looked back at me cautiously, and when he saw that I would remain by the tractor, he clapped Eli on the shoulder and said something definitive to him. Eli looked nervously at him. Then he nodded.

‘Good,’ my father said and clapped him on the shoulder again.

My father didn't disclose what he and Eli had spoken about on the ride back to our farm, but it became obvious to me one evening a few nights later when he told me that the

two of us were going to go inspect the Dawes orchard early the next day. At the time, I had been on my way to bed, and my father called to me as I passed the office—his word for the room, not mine. I returned and stood in the doorway. The first thing I noticed was the oblong ledger. My father kept it hidden behind the vanity, and sometimes, late at night, when I crept by the room, I saw him hunched over it, pouring over his accounts, and I had to fight the inclination to strike him. Tonight, however, he stood in the middle of the room. He had been pacing, for that is what he did whenever some new scheme was growing inside his head. When he told me what we were going to do, I asked him why we were inspecting the orchard. My father moved to respond, but then he stopped. For a moment, I think he knew shame.

The moment soon passed.

‘Eli can’ pay what he owes us,’ my father said, ‘so he’s givin us a piece ah his orchard.’

I flinched when he said ‘us.’

‘He owes us,’ he continued, he had noted my response, and his shame was hardening into belligerence. ‘We loaned him money, and he can’ pay us back. All we’re gettin is our due.’

I stepped back into the darkened hall, and my father pointed the ledger at me, his voice rising with anger.

‘All we’re gettin’ is our due!’

He continued, but I turned and walked away, leaving my father behind as he finally began to scream.

That night was the first time I wanted to leave home, to find some place where the noise could no longer reach me, where I could create a quiet, manageable world of my own. The second came the next morning, when I learned that the loan my father spoke of only accounted for part of the land he was claiming. The other had been purchased from Eli Dawes after the fire, when my father knew he needed money most, and the orchard was all he had to sell.

Eli showed us around the orchard. He had lost so much weight since the fire that his clothes no longer fit and his sad eyes seemed too large for his face. Still he tried his best to make my father see virtue in the poorest parts of the orchard, where the earth was rocky and uneven, and most of the trees were stricken with rot. My father tolerated his efforts just long enough to make up his mind, then he told Eli which part of the orchard he would claim. To no one's surprise, it was the best.

As we departed, my father and I passed the Dawes house, and I saw the shadow of someone watching us from a second story window. The shadow remained until I turned to it, then it slipped from the window and disappeared into the house.

That was the last time I saw Jack before the fall, when he returned for our final year of school. He had skipped the closing weeks of the spring term, and I had not seen him all summer. Instead, I spent my days working with my father around the farm. With the new herd and the additional orchard, we were busier than ever before, and during the days I had little time to myself. At night, I sometimes met up with Little John, whose farm was not far

from mine, but mostly I spent time at home, sitting alone or waiting around for Carrie, who passed her days in the migrant camps, looking for children to play with.

I could not bring myself to visit Jack, not that I'm sure he would have received me. I thought about him though, all the time, and sometimes, late at night, when something stirred outside my window, I would spring from my bed, expecting to find a familiar shadow waiting for me. But of course it was only the inexplicable sound of night, and the shadows I found, though familiar, never again included him. Afterward, when I had returned to bed, I would lay there shaking, filled with nervous regret, and ages would pass before I'd fall back asleep.

Well into the summer, the burning of the Dawes barn and the beating of the Dawes boy were widely discussed around town, and everybody had his own theory for what had happened. The schoolyard was no different, though the theories there never involved Eli, only Jack. They hadn't much time to build before school ended, and I hoped their novelty would pass long before we returned. It didn't. In fact, Jack's return redoubled speculation, giving it form and object in the quiet boy who still sat alone at lunch and slipped in and out of school a little less furtively than before.

Jack knew that people were talking about him. I could tell, for whenever a conversation turned to him, he'd stop what he was doing, and like an animal that knows it's being watched, he would remain motionless until the discussion passed. Most times, he was so far from the words that it was impossible for him to have heard them, yet he knew they concerned him all the same. He was too sensitive to the rhythms of human conduct to

mistake the anxious looks that accompanied every hushed debate over the ultimate explanation for his battered, broken face.

For the most part, these discussions were mindful of Jack—the terrible nature of what had happened seemed to demand it—and only one person ever aired his suspicions within earshot, well within earshot. That person was Tom Cannon, and he did so just once, standing a short distance from Jack with a pack of boys who looked around uncomfortably while Tom ventured his theory as to what happened the night the Dawes barn burned.

I was not part of that group—it was a reliable collection of dimwits who trailed Tom around the yard—but I watched him from a distance as he gestured extravagantly and knew immediately what he was up to. His head was craned toward Jack, who sat against a nearby tree, and he spoke in a voice that strained for every syllable, one so loud the words occasionally reached our end of schoolyard still intact. We didn't hear enough of them to make sense of Tom's theory, but we did hear enough to be certain that he had never found a better word than *strange* to describe Jack's behavior. He also seemed to have forgotten his promise to Little John, who shook his head and shifted in place every time he heard something about "the Dawes kid," whose kindness he'd never forgotten.

For his own part, Jack did nothing to stop Tom. In fact, after a long pause where he seemed to confirm for himself what Tom was doing, he proceeded to eat his lunch, unbothered, it seemed, by the offense. He gave Tom full occasion to elaborate his theory, and Tom, in turn, took full advantage of the opportunity, leaving him gleeful and grinning at the end of his speech, when those around him greeted him with nervous silence. So satisfied was Tom that the grin remained on his face until lunch was over, and we were all called back

into the school. Tom fell in with his gang somewhere in the middle of the crowd. I was far behind them, so I saw Jack first. He slipped in from the side and darted through the students until he had come right up behind them. He grabbed one of Tom's wrists and drove his knee into the meat of his leg, sending him falling to his knees. Then he bent over Tom, turning his arm up behind him.

The crowd behind them quickly parted. It was joined by Tom's gang, who abandoned their friend and rushed to the side when they realized who was standing over him. Jack had one hand pressed against the base of Tom's neck, and with the other, he held Tom's arm behind him. Tom whimpered and shook, his free hand flailing like a drowning man grabbing for driftwood that's just beyond his reach. Jack paused and for a moment seemed to take note of the crowd, then he leaned toward Tom's ear and began to whisper.

I could not hear what Jack said, no one could, but whatever it was it terrified Tom, whose whimpering grew to apologies, apologies pleas, pleas cries for mercy, all the while Jack marked the progress by slowly pulling Tom's arm upward, curling his body into a ball.

By the end, when Jack had pulled his arm so far back that it stood like a jackknife above him, nothing that came out of Tom's throat was intelligible. It was feral and excruciating and made the members of Tom's gang look ill in disbelief. Before it was over, somewhere in the crowd, a girl began to weep.

A teacher finally intervened, but not before those nearest Jack swore they heard a snap and Tom fell to the ground screaming. Jack was ordered home—a punishment he accepted without protest—and he left school immediately, passing just in front of the

dimwits and then cutting through the crowd, which parted wordlessly before him as if pulled by a string.

Though I did not say so then, I thought Tom had gotten what he deserved and suggested as much to Little John on our way home from school. Little John was silent and stared at the ground, which was his way of saying he disagreed.

‘C’mon, Little John—you know he was askin fer it.’

‘I know,’ Little John said, he stared at his feet.

‘He went too far maybe, but can you blame him? After what Tom did?’

Little John didn’t respond.

“Can you?”

‘It wasn’t right,’ he finally said.

‘But—’

‘I know, Ex,’ he said looking over at me, ‘but doin it right there, right in front of everyone—’

His voice broke off, he shook his head.

‘He shoudn ah shamed him like that,’ he said, his voice heavy with regret. ‘He shoudn ah shamed him.’

If Jack thought humiliating Tom would stanch the schoolyard talk, he was wrong. Confronting Tom only sharpened the chatter, removing from its concern the fire at the Dawes farm and focusing firmly now on the curious boy who kept to himself, preferring to go unnoticed and unremarked in the small school world. The talk tried to make sense of Jack, pulling together the few fragmentary glimpses of what was widely assumed to be the real Jack Dawes and filling in the many gray areas with speculation and likelihood.

Of course, no one knew much of anything about Jack, not even me, so the picture that people arrived at was mostly of their own creation. But that didn't stop them. Not at all. The glimpses were so remarkable, and the gray areas so intriguing, that the need to make sense of them as one was irresistible—except, that is, for Tom Cannon, who never again uttered a word about Jack and tended to shudder and shrink whenever his name was mentioned.

Initially, Jack was absent the scrutiny. He didn't return to school for some time, far longer than the suspension required, and when he finally did, his attendance was erratic. Some weeks he arrived at the schoolhouse every morning, others he missed all together, but most saw him present for at least a few roll calls, though even then he often slipped away at lunch.

Jack's presence did not eliminate or even depress the talk, it simply dispersed it, driving it to the farthest corners of the schoolyard and even around the blind side of the schoolhouse. There, at lunchtime, people would gather to exchange their observations, which were inevitably redundant, as well as the conclusions they derived from them, which were improbable and bizarre, all while peering cautiously over the shoulders of their companions, hoping to avoid any incidents that would leave them, like Tom, the touchstones for future talk.

Their vigilance was unnecessary. Jack would confront no one. He simply remained apart, making no effort to stop the talk. Not that he wasn't aware of it. He still had an innate sense about such things, and no matter how discreet the discussion, whenever it turned to Jack, he seemed to know it. The change was nearly imperceptible, but I saw it. It was unmistakable to me. His shoulders would stiffen with recognition, then they would sink, and his gaze would soon follow.

In these moments, Jack never seemed defeated to me—no, he seemed helpless, which was somehow worse, for I had always envied Jack's quiet confidence, in himself and in the world around him. Most people at school recognized this in Jack, though for them it was simply a matter of independence, not confidence, for the Jack Dawes they knew never

bothered anyone with needs. Indeed, he didn't seem to have any. I knew otherwise, of course, but even before, when Jack still seemed to me clear, untroubled, complete, I admired him most for those times he reached beyond his own private world, to confront Miss Marplehorn or defend Little John and me. In those moments I saw in Jack an absolute sense of how the human world was supposed to run, that its movement was to be smooth and untroubled, guided by the instincts of simple morality which, when they failed in others, were to be remedied by us, a task that Jack never shrank from, a tendency that could earn him lasting admiration for a single gesture.

More than Jack's strange self-sufficiency, it was this certainty that showed me his confidence, and I envied it. Terribly so. But now the talk seemed to rob Jack of that certainty, or at least stole its resolve, for he was incapable of doing anything about it, and whenever the talk surfaced somewhere in the schoolyard, he could only wait, motionless, until it passed.

What someone's certainty about the world fails him, when its course changes and the friction between expectation and reality grows so hot it becomes unbearable, something must give. For Jack, that point came in the fall of that final year of school, shortly after a lunchtime in which he had again dominated a quiet conversation in the far corner of the yard. When lunch ended, we filed back into school for the afternoon lessons. We had already resumed our seats and waited silently as the teacher wrote something on the board when a fist-sized rock punctured the window at the front of the class, shattering it and leaving an ugly gouge in the far wall, where it thudded before tumbling to our feet.

We waited until it was clear that a second rock wasn't to follow, then we rose from beneath our desks and looked out the broken window. There was nothing there but the beaten ground of the schoolyard and the placid pond beyond, but when I turned my eyes back to the room, they passed over a desk that had been filled that morning, and I knew.

The teachers suspected Jack of breaking the window, everyone did, but when it became clear that he wasn't going to return to school, they treated his absence as an acceptable conclusion, and an easy end, to the situation. Not so the students. For them, the act was another mysterious clue to this strange boy, and far from threatening the talk, it merely renewed its purpose.

But Jack no longer had to endure the gossip, at least not directly, for he stayed away from school, and since he left no friends behind him—except, perhaps, me—the talk did not pursue him. It was confined to his memory, where it may have been a greater threat to him than it ever was in the schoolyard. For a time at least.

It may surprise you, but I saw Jack more often after he left school. Every day, in fact. It was harvest time, and my father had put me in charge of the new orchard, so I spent my evenings supervising the workers while they picked clean the best trees on Eli Dawes's farm. Before giving it to me, my father had offered the job to Eli, whose heavy lips curdled at the suggestion. He looked like a starving man who had just considered eating his dog, and all he could do was to shake his head no. My father took offense at the refusal—*He had done Eli a favor in buying the orchard, hadn't he?*—but he didn't contest it. Instead, he gave the job to me,

telling me that it was the kind of experience I would thank him for when I finished school and joined him on the farm for good.

That would be the following spring, he reminded me, nodding his head sagely.

I accepted the task—unlike Eli, I had no option to refuse—and so, every afternoon when I returned home from school, I would wrap-up some food for dinner, gather up some of the migrants who were working with my father, and take them up the road with me. The new orchard lay at the far corner of the Dawes farm, near the blackened ground where the barn once stood, so we took the narrow footpath that ran by the house to and from our way to work. Eli was never around, but Jack was. Always. He spent the evenings sitting alone on the porch, on a small wooden swing that was secured to the ceiling by twine and dangled anxiously over the floorboards beneath. Jack would watch us from that swing, never saying a word, but he was there every night, swaying gently and shaming my gaze, which tended to follow the footpath whenever we passed by the house.

By the time we finished for the night and returned home, Jack was gone. Most times, I imagine, he had already gone off to bed, as we were working late into the night, far later than usual, even by my father's standards. We were not behind in our work, we were just shorthanded. Everyone was. The early frost that had destroyed the prior harvest (and made my father rich) had left so little work that year that many of the workers didn't return the next. My father had more than most of the local farmers, but not as many as the year before, when he had fewer trees to pick and no herd to contend with.

For my father, these were unacceptable circumstances, but there was little he could do about them, so during the day, he alternated between tending to the herd and supervising

the progress of the workers in the orchards behind our house. In the late afternoon, when I returned home from school, he turned the workers over to me so that I could take them to the Dawes farm, where we would begin by building pit fires in the orchard lanes so that our work could last late into the night. I had no control over when it would end; my father kept that responsibility for himself, and he would signal his decision by the roar of the tractor, which he brought around at the end of the night so that we could load the trailer with the heavy apple crates to bring them back to storage. When the crates were loaded, and my father had departed, we walked back to the farm, passing again the darkened house and the now empty porch on our way.

Near the midpoint between the two farms, the workers would slip from me and return to their camps. They were pitched in a small clearing at the edge of our farm, and at night, they were lit by the bonfires the wives kept burning while they awaited their husbands' return. The wives stayed by those fires, no matter the hour, and when they finally saw the familiar forms turn from the roadside and cross the fields, they rose and walked to edge of the clearing. There they met, just as the men emerged into the light, and for a moment, from the roadside, two shadows became one.

I would walk the rest of the way alone. From Jack's house, the approach to my father's farm was flat, but beyond it, the land fell away, so that on a clear night, the house seemed to stand at the edge of the world. Inside, one window would be lit. It was on the second floor, near the corner of the house, and from a distance it seemed to hover over the horizon, burning.

If I was lucky, when I got upstairs, my father would be so buried in his accounts that he wouldn't notice my return. I rarely was so lucky that fall, however, and toward the end of the harvest, I had no luck at all. My father would call out to me as I passed to ask when we would be done. I would stop and stand at the threshold of the small room. I would tell him how long I imagined it would take until we were done, and before I could finish, he would remind me that every extra day of work was another opportunity for loss, for though the autumn had been mild and dependable, the weather could always turn. *Faster than a fool and his fortune*, he'd sometimes say, grinning at me as if he'd let me in on a joke.

As the harvest neared its end, he never made that joke, for circumstances left no room for banter, not as far as he was concerned. *Jus get it done*, he would say, looking up from the vanity where sat with his accounts. Sometimes I'd make the mistake of saying that I'd try. *I didn't ask you to try*, he'd say, slamming his fist into the vanity, *DO IT!* The mirror that loomed over the vanity would teeter precariously before finally coming to a halt. By then I was already in my room, lying in bed, beginning a long effort to fall asleep.

When I woke to the day, I did not know it would be the last one we spent in the orchard, at least not at first. On the way to school, I noticed the dull gray clouds overhead. They had appeared the night before like a somber, unannounced guest, but with the air still warm and reassuring, I paid little attention to them.

Not so a short time later, when the winds that swept through the classroom windows were no longer refreshing, but instead caused the students to pull their arms tight about them, bracing against the chill. The windows were soon closed, but outside, the trees continued to sway, silent now but somehow more menacing. Over time, the schoolyard dimmed, and when I stepped outside for lunch, I saw that the winds had driven out the dull gray clouds of the morning, and a black bruise was spreading across the afternoon sky.

‘I think it’s gonna rain, Ex,’ Little John said. We were standing with everyone else near the school door in case we needed to run inside.

'I hope it's only rain,' I said, looking out over the still pond as a river of dark clouds rolled over it. 'But I fear it's somethin more.'

Little John looked over at me. He nodded.

'Tell em my Pa needs me,' I said, gathering my lunch pail and running off through the yard.

I was almost halfway home when the rain hit. It was cold and fierce, but it was gone in an instant. Still, it terrified me, and I ran harder, leaving the road whenever I could and cutting across the countryside. Finally, I turned onto our road and charged up the hill. I ran around the barn and out back to the pasture where the herd was grazing. My father was nowhere in sight.

I ran back around the barn and cut across the yard toward the house. Carrie was sitting by herself on the front steps. She had left school again early, or maybe she hadn't gone. She held in her lap the kittens that had recently been born to one of the feral cats that skulked about the storage. There were four of them, nearly identical, and she carried them everywhere with her, clutching them tightly to her chest. They were tiny, weak, deprived of their mother's milk, but she was quick to anger whenever one tried to escape.

'Where's Pa?' I asked.

She seemed startled by my voice. She looked up tentatively but made no reply. I tried again.

'Where is he, Carrie?'

She released a slender arm from the kittens and pointed mutely up the road.

'Thanks,' I said.

She smiled then and said something, but I did not hear it, I was already racing toward the road. The earth was still dry, but now a second shower hit. It too was cold and fierce, but it wasn't momentary, and by the time I reached the Dawes farm I was soaked.

I ran by the house. Jack wasn't sitting on the swing. He stood at the far end of the porch, watching the storm sweep over the countryside. He must have seen me when the rain hit, the miserable figure I made running headlong down the road, sopping wet well by the time I turned onto the footpath. He said nothing to me as I passed, and I ran by the house without looking at him.

I followed the footpath to the crest of an incline where down below, row-by-row, the orchard leaned into the distance. There I saw my father. He was standing atop his tractor, screaming out commands over the incessant drumbeat of rain. All around him, a swarm of workers darted like insects through the orchard rows, fetching apples from the trees before the winds tore them from the branches and sent them tumbling to the ground. My father hadn't seen me arrive, so I dropped down the hillside and raced up the tree line, ducking in next to the tractor. He didn't hear my approach, and I stood next to the tractor looking at him. As the black clouds continued to gather behind him, he waved his arms chaotically, his voice continuing to rise before the storm.

After a moment he looked down at me.

'MOVE!' he screamed.

I hurried beside the workers and began gathering armfuls of apples and dumping them into the wet wooden crates that lined the orchard rows. With the rain, the ground had already begun to soften, and a chaos of footprints soon appeared, crossing and crisscrossing

until the rows teemed with mud, and the men, tossed by the winds, went careening from tree to crate and crate to tree, slamming into each other but holding fast to their loads, even if that meant falling to the ground, where the soft mud received them.

The temperature continued to drop but no one took notice, not until what we had feared. The hail came. Just for an instant, it burst over us like a nightmare, and the orchard seemed to gasp. No one moved, not even my father, who stood stockstill atop his tractor and stared at the sky in horror.

Then the shower resumed.

‘GO!’ he screamed, and we went wheeling through the orchard again.

We ran harder now, as if our speed could keep the hail from returning. Somehow it stayed away, and we took the opportunity to rob the trees of every remaining apple and then, when we were finished and night fell over us, we began fishing out the fruit that had fallen to the orchard floor. Some of apples were embedded like jewels in the soft black earth, while others bobbed at the surface in standing pools of rainwater. We took them all, piling the fruit high in wet wooden crates until the crates were full, and the ground was bare, and the men slowed to a halt.

Then a hush fell over the orchard, and for a moment, you could only hear the footsteps of rain.

Someone let out a cry, then another, and soon all of the men were cheering. A celebration erupted. The men jumped up and down and embraced each other, caked with mud from head to toe, howling with joy. I joined them, dancing around the crates, my hands

thrown high above my head. I did not stop until I heard my father's voice. Even amid the clamor, it rose above the men.

'GODDAMMIT!' he cried, jumping down from the tractor. The celebration halted, my hands fell back to my sides. 'We got crates in the orchard, and yer dancin aroun like a bunch ah goddamn fools.' My father stalked from man to man as he spoke. 'The temperature's still fallin and the hail could spit any time—and where would you be then? *Where?* Just a bunch ah wet fools dancin around a pile ah spoiled fruit, that's where.'

'It was just fer a second, Pa,' I said, regretting the words immediately.

'What did you say?' he said, turning from one of the men. He came across the circle at me and stopped when our noses almost touched.

'We was just celebratin cause we got it done—we got it done and no one thought we would.'

'I did,' my father said and turned back to the tractor.

'*Be reasonable,*' I blurted.

My father stopped. I was breathing heavily and waited for him to turn back to me. He didn't. He stood facing the tractor. His chin drifted to the side, and I could see his profile. For a moment, he looked lost in thought. My father was never lost in thought.

'All right,' he finally said, his chin returning so that his face was hidden again, 'let's get them crates on the trailer, we got to get em back to storage.'

The men looked at each other nervously. Nobody moved.

'C'mon now,' he said. '*Hurry!*'

He climbed to the seat of the tractor and sat down. The men remained still until the tractor roared to life, then they began moving, surrounding the nearest crates and, with two men on a side, picking them up, and stacking them on the trailer.

I was slow to join them, and as I walked to the nearest crate, I eyed my father anxiously. He sat perched on the tractor seat and occasionally turned to yell at the men behind him. They needed to hurry because the wind was picking up, and the sky could break at any time. He didn't look over at me, not once, and I began to wonder if I had overestimated the incident, that more than being contradicted, my father hated losing money, and that all he was concerned about now was getting those apples back to the storage vault where they would be safe, and the season's profit with them.

As I joined the men and began lifting the heavy crates onto the trailer, I grew convinced of this logic, which seemed certain to me after my father had told me to stay behind with a few of the men while he took the others back with him to help unload the first full trailer. It was a terse, direct command, not at all unusual. For a moment, I even wondered whether he had forgotten the incident.

Three trips had to be made before all of the crates were back on our farm, and between each trip, those of us who were left behind waited around and tried not to think about the cold. It was an impossible task. The frenzied movement that had carried us into the night had distracted us from the still sinking temperature, which had dropped so low that now it glazed the standing pools of rainwater with a thin skin of ice. We watched those pools quietly at first, until a great gust of wind cut through the orchard, whipping us. One man cursed, his chin pressed tightly against his chest. A few of the men laughed, and one of them

repeated the curse. It was seconded by another, then another, and soon we were all cursing the cold. It eased the ache somehow, and we indulged ourselves, laughing at the crude words that echoed between us while we waited for the tractor's return. When it did, we rushed to greet it, relieved for an excuse to move. We hoisted the crates and dumped them onto the trailer bed, filling it for a second time. When we were done, the tractor headed back to the storage vault, the other men along with it.

As the roar of the engine receded, the orchard grew silent. The rest of the rows were vacant now. Ours held the few crates that were left, enough, perhaps, to fill a quarter of the trailer, no more. We huddled around these crates and waited for the sound of the engine's return. No one spoke this time. The wait was more troubling. Our clothes, which had been soaked by rain and caked with mud, had begun to freeze. I tried rubbing my hands over my arms, but all that did was press my damp clothes more tightly against my skin, which had ceased to tingle and chill and now simply ached. My feet were the worst. I walked around the crates and stamped them, but nothing worked, and I gritted my teeth in pain. Yet even then I was better off than some of the other men. Their feet no longer ached. They stood before the crates, their eyes focused and still, as if, by concentration, they might hate the tractor's return.

One man could not stand it. He was the youngest of the men, no older than I. He was a small man, slump shouldered and shorter than the rest, and his jug ears jutted from the sides of his head like a two-handled cup. The other men tended to treat the young man like a little brother. The taller ones among them liked to pretend that they didn't see him when he asked a question. They'd turn around and look over his head, searching back and forth

before returning to their work. Others would cup their hands behind their ears when he spoke and ask him to speak up because they couldn't hear him, repeating the request and pushing their ears forward until they finally resembled his. Then they broke into fits of laughter.

They kidded the young man relentlessly, but they were always protective of him. Once I saw a worker from another camp try the ear-cupping game. He stopped after one of the other men came up behind him and screamed into his ear what the young man had said. Whenever the young man needed them, the others stood by him, and now was just such a time. The young man had been quiet during the first trip. He didn't even bother to join the cursing, which was unusual since he tended to repeat the opinions of the others as if he had divined them himself. He didn't say anything though, he just stood to the side of the row, shaking, his palms pressed tightly against his jug ears as if to shut out some terrible noise.

He began moaning not long after my father left on the second trip. The sound echoed what we all felt, so at first no one noticed it. Only when he began repeating *no no no* did someone finally turn to him.

'Y'all right there?' one of the men asked.

'I can' buh-buh-be here no more,' the young man stammered. 'I got to go.'

'Hold on there,' the first man said. 'We got a few crates lef and then we'll git on home.'

'N-n-no,' the young man said, he shook his head helplessly, his hands still pinned to either side of his head.

‘C’mon now,’ another piped up. ‘We’re all cold, but we’ll git this done, go home, and stick our feet in the fire—you head first, how bout that?’

The rest of the men laughed. The young man didn’t join them.

‘I c-can’ feel muh feet,’ he said. His voice was soft with shame.

The men grew quiet. Some of them couldn’t feel their feet either.

‘I ain felt em f-fer a time,’ he continued, ‘not since the first ruh-ruh-run. I ain felt em since.’

No one responded.

‘I got to go,’ he repeated and turned to leave.

‘You can’ go,’ the first man said. His voice had sharpened.

‘Yeah,’ another man joined in, he looked at me nervously as he spoke. ‘Stay put, we’re almos done.’

‘I c-can feel—’

‘I know,’ the first man said, his voice was certain, but it had lost its force, ‘Jus hold on, stay with us.’

The other men bowed their heads in agreement. The young man couldn’t leave, they all knew it. If he did, he would forfeit his pay for the week. That was my father’s policy, and he would see that young man was gone from the camp by dawn.

The young man continued to shake his head, but the gesture was moot, and the men stood around him uncomfortably. Finally, the first man who spoke went up and stood beside him.

‘Yer gonna be all right, Dale,’ he said, pressing his shoulder against the young man’s. ‘Yer gonna be fine.’

A second man joined the first, he stopped at the other side of the young man and pressed against him. He was followed by a third who stopped directly in front of him, and another who fell in behind. The others followed, surrounding the young man, their tall shoulders towering over him, blocking out the wind and sealing in the heat. I stood alone, watching them.

The familiar rumble now touched our ears, and a funnel of light appeared in the orchard row next to us. It widened with the rumble, and soon the tractor rolled past us and rounded the end of the orchard. The tractor appeared for a moment, roared past our row, and disappeared behind a tree, pulling the trailer into view. The men who sat along the end of it jumped off. They streamed past me, moving toward the final few crates. The rest of the men blended in among them, except for the first man, who waited with his friend while the others finished the work. I watched them for a moment, then I walked toward the trailer. I had not moved for some time, so my pants were stiff and heavy, frozen almost to the knees.

I shuffled around the end of the trailer and came to the front of the tractor. My father was standing next to the engine. It was running still, and he was warming his hands by it.

‘Pa,’ I said, stopping next to him. My father looked up from the engine. ‘There’s a man—I think he’s got frostbite. We gotta get him inside.’

My father’s face soured.

'I don' pay fer complainin,' he said, rubbing his hands together. 'I can get that fer free.'

'Pa, the man's—'

My father's hand flashed beneath my chin, I felt stinging pain near my throat.

'Yer not gonna embarrass me again in fronna those men,' he said. He held the soft flesh that spanned my jaw-line bunched between his thumb and forefinger, pulling downward on it until I was squatting before him. He leaned into my face as he spoke.

'You hear me?' he said. I tried to nod but he squeezed so hard that tears flooded my eyes.

'*Do—you—hear—me?*' he repeated. I shrieked in pain, and he released me, shoving me so that I fell against the tractor's giant back tire. My father stepped over me and shouted to the men to hurry. Then he stepped back over me and climbed on top of the tractor to wait.

I lay against the tire, cupping my chin in pain, my head hidden in the cavernous wheel-well. I listened for the men. They grunted their way toward the trailer bed, and then I heard overhead the familiar thump and slide of the crates being loaded. When they turned back, I scrambled to the orchard edge and rolled into the shallow ravine that lay alongside it. There I waited in the long grass while the men finished their work. They loaded the few final crates, and when they were done, the engine roared again, and the trailer rolled past my head, the men marching along wordlessly behind it.

I stayed hidden in the long grass until the roar receded, and the footfalls died away. Then I knew I was alone. I rose from the long grass and climbed out of the ravine making my way down the orchard row. Throughout the day, a puddle had grown along the floor of

the ravine, loosening the earth on either side, so my clothes were soiled and wet again. I tried to wring them out, but my fingers refused to make fists, so I kept them pressed against my chin, stifling the sobs that swelled beneath.

I climbed the small hillside that separated the orchard from the farm and found the familiar footpath. I followed it back around to the barnyard and made my way to the road. Inside the house, the lights were dead so I did not see him. I had almost reached the end of the porch before he spoke.

‘You all right?’ he said. The voice was searching, tentative. I knew it immediately.

I removed my hands from my chin and turned to him. He was sitting on the porch swing, a dark, featureless form. Alone.

‘Are you all right, Ex?’

I moved to respond, but when I opened my mouth, I felt the sting beneath my chin, and my throat hiccupped with sobs. I said nothing.

He rose from the swing and walked to the top of the steps. Against the horizon, I saw the familiar outline from the orchard.

‘What happened?’ he asked. I tried to speak, but the words were threatened again, I choked them back.

Jack descended the steps.

‘Tell me what happened, Ex,’ he repeated.

I tried again, but this time I broke, and the words tumbled forth, jumbled among hoarse, rasping sobs. They spilled out together, fragments from the day, a sorry unburdening

so complete and uncontrolled that I didn't see the hand flash from his side. The slap was so hard it knocked me to the ground.

I lay on my back, touching my cheek. Jack was standing over me. I looked up at him, and for the first time I saw his face. He was panting, lips parted, revealing the craggy remains of his teeth. They had been broken along one side by the blows that shattered his jaw, knocking out several of the smaller teeth there and leaving a gash where he had bitten through his cheek. These same blows had closed Jack's eyes, his great green eyes, one beaten so relentlessly the swollen brow burst open. It was hastily stitched, and the wound became infected. It had to be reopened and cleaned. It was weeks before it finally closed. When it did, the massy scar that grew there sagged over his brow, closing the corner of one eye from sight.

I gazed up now at this broken face, Jack's face, and for a moment, I felt nothing. Not the cold, not fear, not pain, nothing but pity, an aching, terrible pity.

Jack saw that I was watching him. He recoiled, as if someone were going to strike him, then he looked at me again and his gaze fell. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then he closed it again and shook his head.

He turned and mounted the steps. In a moment, he was gone.

I left the Dawes farm and made my way up the road toward home. A light snow began to fall. It touched my face first, then I saw the flakes. They were scattered across the night sky, drifting slowly toward earth, where they disappeared at once when they finally hit the ground. Through them, in the distance, I could see the house. The only light inside came from the second floor, near the corner. I was not halfway home when it was extinguished.

When I arrived, I came inside, stripped off my clothes, and warmed myself by the wood stove downstairs. The feeling slowly returned to my body, first to my face, then to my hands, and finally, after an anxious wait, to my feet. When this was done, I hung my clothes next to the stove to dry, though I knew even then that I would never retrieve them.

I quietly climbed the steps to the second floor, passing the two bedrooms at one end of the hall before coming to my own next to the office. I worked quickly in the dark, changing into new clothes and setting out others to take with me. I pulled my coat out from under my bed and my leather satchel with it and laced up my winter boots. I packed the

extra clothes inside the satchel and slung it across my shoulder. I looked around the room but took nothing else with me.

I left my boots tucked under my arm and crept down the hall. I came to the top of the steps and paused, then I laid the satchel and boots gently on the floor and returned down the hall. I came to the office. The door was ajar, I slipped inside. In the corner of the room was the standing closet. My father never left the doors open, so I took the heavy brass handles and pulled gingerly on them. They stuck at first, but then they gave way, parting before me like a pair of overwhelming arms.

Inside I could see nothing. I waited, hoping some familiar form might emerge, but none appeared, and I knew that I would have to find it in the dark. I kneeled before the closet and dipped my hand into the darkness. It had nearly swallowed my elbow before my fingers touched something. I jerked back, cradling my hand as if it had been burned. I looked down at it, then I stared into the gloom. After a moment, I reached again.

My fingers floated through space until they touched something. I stopped, then I turned my hand and ran my palm along it. It was fragile, smooth, and rippled beneath my fingertips. I smiled. It was silk, it had to be, for I could see it, the creamy apple blossoms crowding the trees.

I turned my hand over and and came to the next garment. This one was also smooth but stiff, somewhat coarse, a sterner color, the last blush of leaves before the autumn fall. Linen I knew, it could be nothing else.

My hand moved out then, skimming across the dresses, and a wave of colors descended: the sunset's orange dispatch and the golden delight of morning hay, the navy

blue of nightfall and the green grass glistening with dew. These visions flashed before me like the shutter clicks of a camera, and for a moment, I forgot myself and remembered another world far away from my own.

With a thunk my hand hit the small metal chest. I opened my eyes and saw the darkness again. I grasped the chest and hoisted it from the closet floor, setting it gently on the ground before me. I fumbled with the latch and finally opened it. I ran my thumb over the greasy surface, feeling the wrinkles that had been lovingly smoothed, and thrummed my fingers along the stack. The bills ran to the bottom of the chest, just as the others beside it, stack after stack, carefully organized and arranged precisely.

My fingers hesitated, then they dug in, grabbing the bills and stuffing them into my pockets. They emptied the small metal chest, scuttling along the floor when they reached the bottom to ensure that every bill was gone.

I closed the empty chest and replaced it in the standing closet, then, gently, I closed the tall doors of the standing closet. I turned to the vanity. It stood in the corner of the room, right beside the window, so that during the harvest someone seated there could watch the men while they threaded the teeming trees below. I came beside it and slid my hand behind the mirror, feeling down along the wall until I found what I was looking for.

I grasped the ledger and pulled it free. I tucked it under my arm and retreated from the room. I carried the leather satchel and boots downstairs to the kitchen. There, I sat by the stove, pulled on my boots, and removed all but a few bills from my pockets. I stuffed them inside the satchel and slung it across my shoulder. Then I opened the door to the

stove, squatted down, and raked the coals. When they burned red hot, I set the ledger on top of them.

At first, nothing. Then orange tendrils of flame began blossoming along the ledger's edge. They rose up and curled over the black ends, enveloping it. When they had peeled away the leather binding, I took the poker and flipped open the book. The fire found fresh pages and the gentle roar grew. I closed my eyes and listened. The heat singed my face.

When it grew unbearable, I closed the door to the stove and replaced the poker beside it, then I walked to the front door. Beside it was a row of hooks. All of them were empty but the hook nearest the door. There hung my father's grey felt hat. I took it down and placed it on my head.

I opened the door and stepped onto the porch. The snow had picked up and the heavy flakes that now filled the sky no longer disappeared when they touched the earth. They covered it instead, removing all color and leaving the landscape anonymous and unrecognizable, a roaming sea of white that rippled and rolled toward the horizon.

I pulled my head into my collar and made my way down the steps, across the yard, and over the gentle swell of the barnbridge, arriving at the roadside. There I paused. At the other side of the road, just above the treeline, were the dark shoulders of the apple storage. I lingered a moment, then I quickly crossed the road and followed the wheelruts to a small clearing where the tractor stood. I dropped my satchel beside it and came before the black brick structure. Only the giant white door resisted the shadows. There was a narrow steel handle at the end of it, glinting like a blade. I pulled it. There was a heavy metal click and a brief hollow sucking sound, then the door rolled open. I could see nothing, but there was

the mild, musty air and the faint tang of decay. Somewhere beyond the black the apple crates began, crate upon crate, stacked high to the ceiling—the labor of a season, a year’s worth of work.

And now the frigid winds began filling the storage, swirling past me into the black belly of the building, washing up against the ribs of every wooden cradle, breaching them, and filling the gaps between the precious fruit, a bitter tide that would see them dead by morning, all of them, every one.

I stood staring at this black canvas, as the winds whistled past and the snow tumbled in. Then I turned to go.

A Trick of Memory

The memories persisted until the sun had set and the last dregs of light, like fog, seemed to burn from the horizon. There was nothing left then to distinguish the world except the line where the darkened plains met the blueblack sky. There was no moon that night, even the stars had retreated. I could barely see the road before me and held on to it by the stable scratch of boots.

I continued north through the night, on until I'd almost accepted the notion of sleeping in the fields, when a rectangle of light appeared in the distance. It emerged from the darkness, spectral, grew, shrank, and disappeared again, all in a few seconds. I pressed toward it, but the light did not appear again, not for some time. When it did, a shadow passed before the light and seemed to dissolve. A doorway. I quickened my pace.

The pocket of light was some way off, and the doorway appeared several times more before I reached it, flickering out from the darkness before disappearing again. Slowly, a building began to take shape around the light, and then the small town that sat beyond it.

The building stood apart from the town, whose whitewashed structures stood like spirits huddled around the town square. Unlike those buildings, this one was only a single story, a long windowless shack at the end of which was a door, the only point at which light could enter, or leave.

I came to that door and stood before it. Still as a tomb. I remained there for a moment more and turned to look back at the featureless black landscape behind me. I pressed my hand against the door. It gave way. I stepped inside.

The light stung my eyes. I shut them and stood still, waiting. Slowly they adjusted. I opened them again and the long length of bar drifted into view. It seemed to float like a mirage, brown and hazy, at the far end of the room. I made my way toward it. The rail was empty but for a single highbacked chair near the end. In it sat an old man. He was slumped over the bar, a withered arm cushioning his head.

‘Don’t worry about him,’ a voice said. I turned. A man stood at the other end of the bar patiently cleaning glasses.

‘He likes to put his head down between drinks, gives him more time to sleep that way,’ he grinned, ‘more time to drink too.’

The man crossed toward me. He was a small, sturdy man and wore a loose smock over his workshirt. He was bald and had a fair, hairless face—ageless but for the skin that gathered like flapjacks over his brow whenever his mouth pulled into a grin. He grinned widely.

‘Don’t worry about them either,’ he continued, sweeping the room with one small hand. ‘We’re just not accustomed to new faces around here.’

I turned and saw that the bar was filled with men. They sat far away from the counter at tables that squatted along the wall. With the lights perched overhead, they remained obscured beneath their hats. The men began talking now, and the inn warmed with indistinguishable voices.

‘Name’s Doc,’ the barkeep said, holding out the same small hand, ‘but that don’t mean I can do anything about your stomachache.’

I gave him a name, a different name from the day before. Doc smiled.

‘Good to know you,’ he said. ‘How about I pour you a drink while you tell me what brings you through?’

He was gone before I could stop him, so I told him what had brought me to the inn.

‘Lot of folks looking for work,’ he said. He put a full glass before me and leaned against the bar. Under the white lights above, his bald head glowed.

‘You got a family to look after?’

‘No,’ I said quickly. ‘Just me.’

‘That makes it easier, I reckon. But easier ain’t exactly easy. Heat’s been killing crops all over. Why Joe Brown’—he pointed to the back of man who sat in the corner of the bar—‘I don’t think his corn’s even peeked out of the ground yet.’

‘Joey,’ Doc called. ‘*You seen your corn yet?*’

A bearded man turned from his companions.

‘Nope,’ he grinned. ‘Still hiding.’

‘Well why don’t you send out a search party?’ came a booming voice from the other end of the bar. Some of the men began to chuckle.

‘You bet Gus,’ the bearded man said. ‘And we’ll tell them to look for your wife while they’re at it.’

The room ran with laughter. The other man scowled, then he leapt from his chair and drew his fists before him. He began dancing in place, circling his fists

‘Come on,’ the pugilist said, pushing his hat back to reveal a giant red nose. ‘Let me send you home to your wife and you can tell her you met a real man tonight!’

The room roared again. The man at the other end of the inn sat stroking his beard, then he jumped out of his chair and struck a similar pose.

‘I said look for your wife, Gus, not act like her!’

Chaos swept over the inn. Men were slapping tables, grabbing their sides, and yelling words of encouragement to the two men, who danced toward each other along the long length of the bar. When they met, the men paused, fists poised, then the one man tugged the other’s beard, and he in turn tweaked his giant red nose, and the two men joined the rest in laughter.

‘Their wives’re sisters,’ Doc said with a wink.

The bearded man put his arm around his brother-in-law.

‘We may not find Joe’s corn, Doc, but how about we find him a drink?’

‘Hooray,’ the bar cried.

‘And we’ll never find Gus’s wife, but I bet we can get him a drink too!’

‘Hooray,’ the bar cried again, and Doc rang the small bell that stood behind the counter before pouring the drinks. The men took the drinks, saluted each other, and gulped them down, slamming the glasses on the counter to another round of cheers.

Doc laughed.

‘They pull something like that every night,’ he said, ‘never fails to get the place rolling.’

‘All right,’ he called to the men, ‘back to your corners already.’

The two men parted and returned to their ends of the room. As they passed, others smiled and shook their heads and leaned across the table to share something. When the bearded man reached his table, he paused and stood behind his chair. The men there gave him one final salute, loud enough to fill the room. At the table next to them, a man in a broad black hat groaned and slapped down a handful of cards.

‘Fer cryin out loud!’ he said.

The men at the other table fell quiet.

‘Can a man play a hand without somebody hollerin in his ear?’

The man in the broad black hat glared at the other table. A large man in overalls shifted in his chair, but like the rest of the men, he remained silent.

‘Well can he?’ the man repeated. ‘Cause I can go home if I want somebody hollerin in my ear.’

‘Then why don’t you save us the trouble—’ the large man said, rising from the table. The bearded man quickly rose to meet him.

‘Easy there Fred—you got enough problems without looking for another.’

The man in the overalls remained standing, but his friend stared at him until he sat down. Then he turned to the man in the broad black hat and put his hand on his shoulder.

‘We don’t mean no harm,’ he said cordially, ‘just trying to have a little fun.’

‘That makes two of us,’ the other replied, pushing away the man’s hand. He sat back down and took up his cards. The bearded man stood looking at him, then he shook his head.

‘He’s losing,’ Doc said.

I turned back.

‘He loses most nights of course but tonight he’s been losing every hand, I know it.’

‘He’s from around here?’ I said.

The flapjacks gathered above Doc’s brow.

‘That surprise you?’ he said. ‘He’s here every night, but that don’t make him anybody’s friend.’

I turned back to the man in the broad black hat. He was staring intently at his cards, as if he waited long enough they might change under his gaze. Finally, he drew one out and placed it on the table. There were two men sitting across from him, one much younger than the other. The younger man leaned over to the older one and whispered something in his ear. Then the older man put his hand over the card, snapped it up, and exchanged it with another in his hand. He dropped that card on the pile, then he laid down the rest.

‘You see—lost again.’

The man in the broad black hat swore under his breath and tossed his hand onto the table. With a broad sweeping motion, the older man gathered the cards, drew them into a deck, and handed it to the younger man. The younger man flipped through the deck, turning over a few cards, and handed it back to him.

‘Why did he do that?’ I asked.

‘He can’t see,’ Doc said. ‘His eyes been gone a while now. The boys take turns helping him. They make sure the cards are turned right when he’s dealing, and they tell him what’s in his hand, but he takes care of the rest. Knows exactly what cards he’s got once they tell him. Keeps them in his head.’

The older man dealt. His hair was soft and white and covered his head and face. When he was done, he picked up the cards and fanned them before him. The younger men studied the cards, then he leaned over and whispered to him. The older man nodded and the game began.

There was a new voice.

‘*Doooooc*—I’m awake Doc.’

I looked over. The old man had raised his head from the counter. He sat holloweyed and bewildered, a few frail fingers itching the stubble along his chin.

‘Sure thing Pete,’ Doc said. He filled a glass and brought it down the counter, depositing it in front of the assembly of empty glasses that stood before the old man.

‘Much obliged,’ he said, lifting the glass with both hands.

Doc returned to my end of the counter. Though it wasn’t empty, he refreshed my drink.

‘What does the old man like better, his drinks or his naps?’

‘Ol Pete—I suppose he likes one as much as the other, I reckon they both do the trick.’

Doc paused.

‘Forgive me, I forget you’re not from around here so you don’t know what I’m talking about. It’s been some time now but everybody knows what happened to Ol Pete—folks just never mention it. It ain’t pleasant business and besides there’s no need.’

Doc looked cautiously toward the other end of the bar. The old man sat slumped over the counter. He looked like a rod that had broken in several parts.

‘Lean in here,’ Doc said, his bald head glowing. ‘Let me tell you about Ol Pete.’

‘Any town you come to, any town at all, there’s always a place folks stop by cause they can count on others being there when they arrive. Around here that place used to be Pete’s shop. He owned the general store in town, him and his wife Alma—his first wife that is.

‘Pete opened the shop after breakfast and closed it again for supper, but Pete’s porch was open to folks day or night. Everybody in town knew it. When the work day was done, the boys would come in from the fields to play checkers and shoot the breeze, and you’d see Pete making the rounds, slapping backs, asking folks how tall their corn was or when they thought the cold would snap. Pete was nothing like the bag of bones you see now. He had a stomach that swang like the dinner bell, and when he’d get to laughing, he’d grab that big belly of his and you could hear him clear down the street. There wasn’t a soul in town didn’t know that laugh, you couldn’t miss it—you heard it every day.

‘Whenever there was news in town, it always made a beeline for Pete’s porch. If something went wrong (or somebody went right) folks there was first to hear about it, and while they were waiting, Pete looked after them. Alma, too. In the summer you’d see her on the porch, whirling around, making sure everybody had shortbread and a full glass of lemonade. Lydell Jones liked to say she must be hiding a lemon tree somewhere cause she made so much of it, and Alma always smiled at that, no matter how many times she heard him say it that week.

‘I reckon it was a lot of trouble having folks around all the time, but Pete and Alma liked it that way. They didn’t have children of their own. They wanted them, I’m sure of that, but none came, so they took on the town instead. Everybody was welcome, even the little ones. When school let out, they raced over to the store cause they knew their Auntie Alma always had something sweet for them behind the counter. You had to wait your turn, that was Alma’s only rule and no kid broke it but once, so there was always this line of school children out the front door—big kid, little kid, then big kid—again, like a seesaw, going right down the street.

‘That always gave Pete a laugh. He liked horsing around with the kids, putting them on his shoulders, chasing them around the shop, making them feel special, and they loved him for it. His favorite thing was to come out on the porch and watch the boys play stickball. Most of the fellers had kids of their own in the game but Pete never took sides. He hollered for whoever was batting, calling out every boy by name. You wouldn’t think it now but he had a head for names back them. Folks used to say he never forgot one, not the name

of anybody that ever set foot in his store. I can't be sure of that, but I believe it. I can tell you he never forgot mine.

When things began to change Pete and Alma's porch had been the center of town for so long most folks couldn't remember a time when things were different. I wasn't much beyond a boy then, just old enough to claim a place on the porch but not so old somebody wasn't going to take it away from me. The spot appeared not long after I got there, right in the corner of Alma's jaw. It was a small spot, pitch colored, no bigger than a nailhead. I wouldn't have noticed it if Alma didn't like talking so much. I remember the first time I seen it. I was holding out my glass to her and she was pouring me some lemonade, carrying on like she always did, asking me if I had an eye on some girl in town. That's when I saw it, bouncing up and down, keeping time to every word.

I didn't think nothing of it at first, but I kept seeing it every day, right in the corner of Alma's jaw, just below her ear, and it began to grow—slowly mind you but it was growing. Nobody in town said a word about but people knew. You could see it when Alma was talking to them. They'd be nodding away with this frozen smile on their face like someone was making them grin while they put a match to their pants. It was terrible to see cause all they could do was keep nodding and wait for Alma to finish, and all they wanted was for Alma to finish, to take that awful spot away.

Pete, he never said boo about it. The way he was you would've thought the spot wasn't there though you could see it but clear down the street. I remember him standing there on the porch with Alma right beside him, telling Ethel Moody something, and you could see Ethel doing everything she could so's not to cringe, cause she could see that

spot—it was the size of a nickle now—but no matter how pained Ethel looked, Pete kept talking, like he didn't know what the rest of us knowed, what the whole town fell to whispering about every night when him and Alma went up to sleep.

‘No, Pete never let on like the spot was there, not even when Alma stopped coming to the porch and stayed upstairs all day. By then she'd started talking funny. She couldn't move her jaw so well and her words came out like she chewed on them first. By the end you could hardly understand her, but that's not what put her upstairs. It was a little one, Jessamyn Brown. She was on the porch one day when Alma come over to say hello to her ma, Bess. She says hello to Bess then she bends down to greet little Jessie. Well Jessie, she got one look at that spot—it was big as a toadstool now, puffy too, had these black lines running off it, like cobwebs, right up the side of her face—and that poor girl, she started screaming. I mean screaming. You wouldn't've thought something so little could make a sound so big but you'd've been wrong, and it only got bigger cause when Jessie started to scream, well Alma, god bless her, she did what she always done, she tried comforting her, staying right down in her face, and poor Jessie, it was like she seen the end of the world, right before her pretty blue eyes. She began clawing her ma's dress looking like the ground beneath her was sinking, screaming so loud the street folks come over from up and down to see what was happening. And Alma, she kept trying to comfort that little girl, saying things nobody could understand, and Bess just stood there like the rest of us, looking helpless for what to do.

‘Finally Alma reached out to calm the child, and when Jessie saw that hand and knew that Alma was going to touch her, her eyes rolled to white and she fainted dead away.

‘Well by now everybody in town was crowding round, trying to help out, all with Alma still leading the way. In all the fuss I could see Bertie Munn lean over to Myrtle Page to tell her to get Alma off the porch, cause if Jessie woke up and saw Alma kneeling over her I don’t know what would have happened. So Myrtle Page, she goes over and bends down and says something to Alma, but nothing comes of it, so she says it again and again nothing. Finally she leans in, real close (I can see her squeezing Alma’s arm) and Alma, she looks up, and her eyes, they’re wide as the child’s, wide as they can be. Then they fall. They fall and this look comes over her face, awful look, like something stopped working inside her and she knew it was never gonna work again.

‘Well that was the last time any of us saw Alma. She never came down to the porch again and no one went up to visit her—not that folks didn’t want to. They did, specially when they knew she wasn’t going to come down again, but no one wanted to raise it with Pete. You couldn’t. He kept on like nothing happened—every day slapping folks on the back, asking them about their family, listening in on the news around town. I mean, besides Alma, the porch looked like it always did. Folks came and folks went and nothing changed. Nothing, that is, but Pete’s stomach. I didn’t see it at first but some of the boys started whispering so I looked over and sure enough his belly had stopped swinging and his cheeks looked a little tight.

‘Throughout the whole thing Pete kept getting smaller round the middle, but he never called the doctor, not till the end. We only heard about it later on, when Alma was gone and things had started changing. Pete called when she was staring at death and only then in the middle of night when everybody had turned in and the porch was clear. He went

down the street alone to Doc Page's place and banged on the door till he could hear him on the stairs, but when Doc Page came to the door, Pete just stood there. He couldn't say a word. He just stood there looking at Doc Page like Doc Page was death himself. Lucky for Pete, Doc Page knew why he'd come—he'd been waiting for weeks—and he led Pete back to the shop without saying a word.

When they got inside Pete took him up to the room where Alma was, but Pete wouldn't go in. He just stopped at the door and stood there, looking at nothing at all, so Doc Page went in by himself. Alma was in bed. She didn't open her eyes when he came in. She wasn't opening her eyes anymore. Not for a time. Doc Page said he had to bite his hand to keep from screaming. That spot covered the whole side of her face now. One eye was dead and there was a hole in her cheek wide enough to see her teeth. She was breathing through that hole, Doc Page said, a terrible sound, low and wet—almost like a hiss.

‘Next day, she was dead.

‘To a man the whole town turned out for the funeral. Some of the older boys carried the coffin out of Pete’s shop, and we filed in behind them. Pete was up front. He had this look on his face, the boys said, a terrible look, not like he was staring at nothing so much as studying it. He looked like that all the way out to the cemetery, even when they put the coffin down and the reverend began. That’s what gets most men, that’s when they break. But not Pete. He just kept staring, not saying a word. It was only when they picked up the coffin and put it in the grave that Pete started shaking. You could see it in his shoulders, just a hitch, but when they started throwing the dirt in and you could hear it—that *thump thump thump*—well his whole body gave way. He was awful skinny by then so his funeral clothes looked like some kind of fearful waterfall, rolling off his shoulders and falling to his feet.

‘They hadn’t even covered the coffin when Pete dropped. I was the first that got to him. He looked so small down there, like a kid sleeping in a pile of his father’s clothes. We tried waking him but Pete wouldn’t come round so we picked him up and carried him back

home. The whole town followed. Folks crowded in the shop, right up the stairs, all the way up to the room, their room. Pete and Alma's. No one had ever been there before. It was their place, we didn't belong.

'We put Pete in bed and stood around waiting while Doc Page tended to him. It was a big room with a window on either side, almost like an attic. I stood in the corner next to the dressing table. There was a bunch of pictures there, all of Pete and Alma from when they were kids. I remember this one, big one, of Pete sweeping Alma off her feet. Must've been their wedding day cause they were all dressed up and Alma's got her arms around Pete and Pete's got her up in the air and you can tell she's screaming, holding on for dear life, and Pete, he's got this big dumb grin on his face, looking like he won the jackpot, like the whole world was his.'

Doc grew quiet, he laughed to himself.

'I reckon that's just what he thought.'

'Anyway, on the other side the room, right near the window, there was a worktable with tools on it. At first I couldn't figure out what they were for but then I saw the shavings and the pile of parts and when I looked I saw them, all along the window, toys, wood toys—wheelbarrows and trains, cats and dogs, a gang of puppet children. They were all sitting there, most no bigger than your hand, all painted so carefully, every one.

'I'd never seen toys like that, not in the shop, but then I remembered, from when I was a kid, standing in line to get sweets from Alma. I remember her putting her hand out to me and I remember thinking how strange it was cause she'd have these colors under her nails. I'd think about it only for a second, cause when that sweet was in my hand all I could

think about was getting it in my mouth. But every time I saw those colors— green and blue, orange and red—I remembered and wondered again.

‘I thought about that now, long after getting any sweets from Alma, and sure enough, when I looked at the table again, I could see the paint drops. That’s where she worked, right at the end. The two of them would sit at that table, Pete would make the parts (cut the wood, carve it up, sand it down) and he would pass them down to Alma and she’d paint them. That’s the way they made the toys and the parts at Pete’s end of the table, the ones that didn’t have any paint—they were all waiting for Alma. Pete must have kept on making them long after the spot appeared, even after it took Alma off the porch and upstairs for good. He must have had a lot of hope in him making those parts—too much. I wonder if he made them right to the end.

‘Anyhow, we were all waiting for Pete to wake up. He was breathing, of course, but Doc Page couldn’t get him to come to. He tried smelling salts, poured water on his head, but Pete was out and he stayed out till we all began wondering if he was ever gonna come back again. But then this sound starts coming from him. It was in his chest at first, real low, like a rumble from a storm you can’t see, and that sound, it started to rise, you could hear it building in him, building till it sounded like it was going to burst right out of him, like he was going to explode, and Pete, he opened his eyes then, staring at the ceiling, his mouth open, and this cry come out like I never heard in heard in my life, loud enough to scare the devil and send the angels to fits

‘Pete let go of that cry, every bit of it, till nothing was left and the room was quiet again. Then his eyes come down and they found something in the corner of the room, right

near the vanity. They opened wide and for a moment, just a moment, his mouth pulled into a smile. Then, like that, he was out again.

‘Well we all turned to see what Pete was looking at and there, right in the corner of the room, right behind everybody, was Ellie—not that we knew her name then. Why no one in the room had ever seen her before but everybody there was thinking the same thing—that girl looked like Alma, she looked too much like Alma. Sure there were differences, but you had to look hard to find them cause when you saw that girl you didn’t see differences, you saw Alma, Pete’s Alma, raised from the dead.’

'Godammit!'

I turned.

'Lost again,' Doc said, interrupting his story. The man in the broad black hat brought his fist down on the table. The bar grew quiet.

'Yer cheatin, old man!' he said.

The younger of the two men started to rise, but the older man put his hand on his shoulder.

'It's all right Will,' he said calmly. He turned to the man in the broad black hat and smiled.

'Am I?' he said.

'Goddamn right you are!' the man in the broad black hat said. He was yelling again.

'How do you figure?' the older man said. He began plucking the white hairs on his chin. The man in the broad black hat hesitated.

'Yer loadin the deck,' he blurted.

'You think so?'

'Yeah,' he said uneasily. The whole bar had stopped to watch the exchange.

The older man stopped plucking his beard and leaned across the table.

'Well that'd be quite a trick for a blind man wouldn't it?'

The man in the broad black hat snapped back as if the table had tried to bite him. He sat quietly for a moment, but laughter began filling the bar, pushing him forward again.

'Yer loadin the deck or countin cards or somethin, I know it.'

'You think?' the older man said.

'YES!' he exploded.

'Well I should thank you then,' the older man said, looking around the bar as if he could see the faces watching him, 'cause you must think I'm the smartest blind man in the world.'

The laughter surged.

'Or just a better card player,' somebody called out. The bar roared with approval. The man with the broad black hat shot up from the table.

'Who said that?' he demanded.

'The invisible man,' someone shouted.

'I can't see him either,' the older man said. The bar roared again.

'Somebody deal him in!'

'He can't hide cards up his sleeve!'

Now they were all at it, calling out suggestions that kept the man turning like a black pinwheel about the bar. Finally he tore off his hat and slammed it on the table. He was a young man, I saw, younger than I'd expected, little more than a boy.

The older man looked up. He'd begun plucking his beard again.

'C'mon now,' he said, putting his hand on the table. 'Why don't you sit down so we can play another hand?'

'No!' the other man said, picking up his broad black hat. 'I ain playin with a cheater!'

The older man shook his head gently.

'Suit yourself,' he said. 'Maybe Sam and me'll play a hand.'

The older man dropped his hand to pet the dog that lay next to him. It was a large dog and did not respond to his touch.

'That dog?' the man in the broad black hat said. 'The only thing I ever seen him play is dead.'

There was low laughter in the bar. The man in the broad black hat smiled.

'Yep,' he said, looking around. 'And I've seen a few dead dogs with more life than this one!'

A few more men laughed. The older man stroked the dog along its side. It still did not respond.

'What you bring that poor dog around fer?' he asked.

'Sam's been with me since he was a pup,' the older man said. 'I take him everywhere, been my guard dog for years.'

'Guard dog! What the hell is he goin to guard you from?'

‘Anything he needs to,’ said the older man directly. ‘Sam’s good that way. He knows his friends and keeps them out of harm’s way.’

The other man snorted.

‘Yer head must be as dark as yer eyes old man.’

The older man stopped petting the dog. The bar grew quiet.

‘Sam can hold his own,’ he said. ‘He knows his friends and keeps them out of harms way—and any son of a bitch that doubts that is welcome to try him.’

The room was still. Everyone watched the man in the broad black hat. He was standing over the older man, and for a moment, I thought he might fall on him.

Instead, he grinned.

‘I’ll try him old man—you wait here and I’ll try him.’

With that, the man in the broad black hat strode over to the door at the far end of the bar and jerked it open. He disappeared into the night.

When he was gone, the bar remained quiet. The men looked around at each other uneasily. The older man was quiet.

‘Where’s the invisible man?’ he finally said. ‘It looks like I’m going to have to deal him in after all.’

The men seconded him, and the bar began to warm with voices again. I turned back to Doc. He had a tense, troubled look, and it was a moment before he met my eyes.

He nodded slowly.

‘Where were we?’ he said, fetching me another drink. ‘That’s right, Ellie . . . Ellie.’

‘The day after Alma’s funeral, the curtains were down in Pete’s shop. It was a strange sight, not because the windows hadn’t been covered before but because no one in town could recall there being curtains in the first place. Something was going on inside, you could hear it, but when Cal Evans finally knocked on the door, whatever it was stopped doing what it was doing and everyone on the porch fell to looking at each other.

‘I reckon most folks assumed Pete was tidying up, getting the store ready to open again. Or maybe he just wanted to be alone. Whatever it was we felt like we owed him his space, so we gave up the porch till the store opened and kept to sitting on the steps.

‘Sure enough, after a week or so, the curtains were drawn and Pete appeared on the porch, hallooing folks in. It didn’t take long for the whole town to turn out. You would have thought there was a fair inside cause there was a line out the door going right down the street. I was late getting there so I had to wait, but when I finally got in, there was Pete, going around, shaking hands, slapping folks on the back, just like he used to. He looked good I tell you. That grin of his touched both ears that day and he was even getting thick around the middle again. It was good to see Pete like that. I was happy for him, we all were. Everything seemed normal again. Maybe that’s why you didn’t see Ellie behind the counter. Not at first. She was like a trick of memory. She blended in.

‘But when you did see her, standing there against the wall, staring at you and not saying a thing, your heart went cold. You wanted to know who she was and what she was doing there, but more than anything else you wanted to be certain you weren’t the only one that seen her.

‘Pete took care of that, and he wasn’t shy about it. When folks would say how good the store looked or how nice it was to have him back, he’d say *It’s all Ellie*, waving his hand like there was nothing but God’s green earth before she arrived. People took this in (what choice did you have) but it’s like some feller bragging about his dog and never mentioning the two tails, all while the dog’s wagging away right next to him. You know what you seen, but after a while you wonder if your friend don’t see it. Well that’s the way it was with Pete. He would bring up Ellie without ever bothering to tell us who she was or where she come from or what she was doing there. It was like he expected everybody to treat Ellie the way he did—like she’d always been with whith in the shop, like this is the way things had been since the beginning of time and nothing had ever changed.

‘It was an odd thing of course, but the rest of the town had to get used to it cause Pete sure was and in the beginning there was no good reason not to. The store was open, Pete was happy, and Ellie pretty much kept to herself. She was always around but you had to look for her cause she never said a word. You’d be at the counter, talking to Pete, and then you’d see her, standing off somewhere, staring at you. You had to catch yourself, right, cause when you looked at her, you seen Alma, but Alma looking at you in a way she never looked at you before, a way she couldn’t look, not if she was who she always was and not somebody else altogether.

‘Of course she was somebody else, she was Ellie, and looking at her, it left you feeling like something was wrong, awful wrong, and you just didn’t know it yet.

‘I remember the first time she come out on the porch. Everybody got real quiet and stared at her, then they tried to make like they weren’t staring and started talking too fast,

and pretty soon everybody was nodding and smiling and nobody knew what anybody was saying.

‘I was standing next to Pete when it happened. He was jawing away so he didn’t see her. She come up behind him real quiet and leaned into his ear. He looked over and I think he was as surprised as anyone to find her there. She whispered something to him, and he nodded and got this smile on his face, and she went back into the shop. Pete turned to me, grinning like a fool. *Just you wait*, he says.

‘When she appeared again Ellie was carrying a tray of something. They were brownies, I guess, or at least they looked like brownies, a big black heap of them. She went around offering them to people, and what could you do but take one. I did. I remember thanking her and holding it like the rest of the folks who weren’t so sure what they were going to do with it. Ellie had only one of those brownies left when she got to Jessamyn Brown. That’s right—poor little Jessie. She was like most of the children in that, no matter how many times her ma told her that Ellie wasn’t Alma, the little one wasn’t convinced.

‘Ellie had already given Bess a brownie, and little Jessie was busy hiding behind her ma’s skirt. Ellie bent down and held the tray out to her, but Jessie shook her head like Ellie was offering her a possum head. Now I reckon Bess had about as much interest in that brownie as anyone on the porch, but she was mortified by her daughter and scolded her for not being more polite. She tried pushing Jessie forward, but when Ellie waverd her off and put down that tray and picked up the last brownie, you would have thought the little girl was fixing to throw herself off the porch.

‘Ellie, she was kneeling in front of the child now, whispering something to her, saying things no one could hear, and all the while she was holding that brownie between them like the playing card of some woebegone world, almost like she was waiting for the little girl to smile so she could shove it between her teeth. Jessie obliged her by finally opening her mouth, and I think everyone on the porch expected her to start screaming. But Jessie didn’t scream, no she didn’t, she clamped her tiny mouth shut on the end of Ellie’s fingers.

‘Ellie, she didn’t scream so much as make that sound you hear when a wolf grabs a piglet in the dead of night. I think it scared Jessie so much she bit down even harder, cause when Ellie tried to pull her hand free, the little girl wouldn’t let go and that set the two of them to struggling, with the little girl’s head bobbing like a dog that won’t give up a bone. Finally, I don’t know if Ellie pushed her, but there was this sound, a crack, and the child just crumpled, the color on her lips the same as the one on the railing behind her.

‘Ellie, I’ll never forget, she was holding her hand, crouching over the little girl’s body, and when she looked back at us it was like we caught her in the middle of some calamity. She had this look, terrible look, I don’t know what to call it, but for a moment, it left me feeling something like pity. Then, just as quick, her face changed and she seemed to hiss. She ran right off the porch, leaving us all standing there, holding our brownies.

‘We gathered around Jessie. Bess was holding her head, and there were already stains on her apron. They bought out some spirits and sure enough the little girl came to. They got her to sit up and she was shaking and crying, saying what had happened, why she was so scared. Nonsense mostly, but there two words I do remember: *witch’s teeth*.

‘Pete and Ellie were married soon after. Everybody in town was invited but most folks didn’t stop by the church. It’s at the end of town, right next to the cemetery, and folks felt strange about passing Alma on the way in. I did. I could see the tombstone right outside the window and when the reverend was done and Pete and Ellie turned to us, man and wife, I felt like I done something wrong. We all did.

‘When the wedding was over Pete and Ellie went back to the shop and most of the town came by to congratulate them. Their hearts weren’t in it but it had to be done and the store was filled with people for the first time in months. Pete went around thanking everybody for coming. He was slapping backs, smiling ear to ear—could’ve been old times but it wasn’t and not cause Pete was so skinny. All you had to do was look around, folks were there for appearance’s sake. They were gonna shake Pete’s hand, wish him luck, and head home. They weren’t gonna be there a moment longer than they had to be.

‘A few of us felt obliged to stick around, so when then things settled down, Pete joined us out front. He brought some cigars with him, fine ones, and we sat around and smoked on the porch. We were enjoying ourselves, or at least as much as we were ever going to enjoy ourselves sitting there, until Pete told us about the house.

‘Boys he says I’m building a home for Ellie.

‘A big home he should’ve said—three stories, picture windows, and enough chimneys to send a forest to fits. He’d already bought the land outside of town, way outside of town. *Peace and quiet* he said.

‘Nobody knew what to say, but someone might have asked Pete where he was keeping his good sense cause it certainly wasn’t in his head, but before anyone could pipe up, we heard something inside the store. No one had seen Ellie for a while, not since a child spilled punch on her dress, and Pete gave us this look like he needed to go. He gets up and goes to the door, then he turns around and smiles. *Boys he says, holding out his cigar you’re welcome to stick around till you’re finished.*

‘Now I grant you that was a nice thing for Pete to say but I don’t think it occurred to him that it was the kind of thing that used to go without saying. Of course it also used to go without saying that we would stay till we were done but when Pete left the rest of us followed and we took our cigars with us.

‘I was just starting off then so me and some of the other boys fell to working for Kit Munn on Pete’s house. It was supposed to go up on this patch of land past the Delroy farm,

up beyond Mill Creek. Way back in the woods. I never been there before, don't think any of us had. There was no reason to.

'We found the road we'd been told about at the edge of the woods. It was used for something at some time, everyone in town seemed certain of that, though no one quite remembered for what. We drove on till we saw the red stake we were looking for and turned off onto another road, smaller, a trail almost, the trees leaning over like they was keen to grab us. We followed it till we came to a clearing. We hopped out and walked to the middle. There sure was plenty of peace and quiet. You could scream your guts out and no one would ever hear you.

'It took a couple of trips to bring everything we needed from Kit's shop, then we set to work. We lined the foundation and began digging the cellar. It was supposed to be as long as the whole house so it took us some time to clear. When the ground was about neck high I remember Cap Bower saying it was like we was digging our own grave. I told him if it got any hotter out we just might need it. Cap started grinning and shaking his head, then his smile gave way. I looked over my shoulder to see what he was staring at. At the edge of the clearing was Ellie.

'I don't know why she came round or how she got there. Ellie was never much for talking and that day wasn't no different. She was just standing there, wearing the black shawl she favored, as if she come right out of the woods. She was watching us, how long I don't know. Then I looked over and, just like that, she was gone.

'We didn't think much of it, or at least no more of it than you could think of something so strange, till we got back to town that night. We were putting our things away at

Kit's when Pete stopped by. He asked us how things were going, if there was anything we needed, pleasant like he always was but anxious somehow, almost like he was waiting for us to ask him a question. Finally he came round to what brung him over.

'The root cellar he says I know what I asked you fellers but—could you change it? You know, make it bigger?

'We all looked at each other and shrugged. Kit, he was the foreman for the job, he told Pete it was his house and he could have it any way he wanted. Pete smiled and started thanking us, telling us just what he had in mind, looking more relieved than he needed to be. Then he turned and went went back up the street. Cap Bower looked over at me and shook his head.

'Guess the grave wasn't deep enough.

'Next morning we drove up into the woods and set back to work again, digging the cellar until it was so deep not even the tallest man in town could've touched the ceiling, not even if he jumped. We started building the stone walls for the foundation then we set the crossbeams and dug out the doorway and steps.

'Finally we started framing the house. I was up on the ladder, setting the second floor, when I seen her again. She was closer this time, maybe halfway across the yard, standing there all alone, watching us between the bones of the building. I lost my grip on the floorboard I was carrying, and came close to giving Cap a headache. I was sorry about that but when Cap handed it back without giving me any guff, I knew he seen Ellie too.

‘When we got back to town Pete appeared just as soon as we pulled into Kit’s. He wasn’t much for the pleasantries that day and he talked like someone that was late for something he knew he’d never get to.

‘I need you fellers to raise the first floor he says The ceiling, if you can.

‘Kit looked at Pete. He told him we were already setting the second floor. We’d have to take the frame down and start over.

‘I know, I know he says, nodding so hard you worried for his neck But can you do it?

‘Well it was his money so of course we could do it. We took up what we done and brought down the walls so it looked like a giant hand had opened the house like a present. Then we started over, using what lumber we could, stacking what we couldn’t, and bringing in everything else we needed. It took us a few days but when we were done we stood the walls again and secured them. I got up on the ladder and started setting the floor. It was early yet and for the first time in weeks we had clouds enough to keep us from baking. I was working like madness was settling over me and by the time we knocked off that I was done with almost the whole second floor. I was pretty proud of myself til we got back to town and found Pete waiting for us.

I was wrong fellers he says I need you lower the ceiling again.

‘I could tell Kit wanted to argue with him but I could also tell he knew there was no use trying. He just told him we’d do it.

‘When we were walking home that night I told the boys I was surprised Pete asked us about the ceiling. They asked me what I expected. I told them I didn’t expect anything, it was only when Ellie appeared he asked us to change something.

'The boys got quiet.

'*You didn't see her?* Cap says.

I shook my head.

Was she there?

Cap nodded.

Right below your ladder.

‘It went on like that almost the whole summer. We were tearing down just as fast as we were building and the only thing getting any bigger was the garbage heap. I knew that house would never get finished—I reckon we all did—and I just wondered how it would end.

‘Not too long before it did there was a tussle about what Pete wanted us to do with the pantry cause it looked to us as good as finished. Kit got fed up and finally sent me back to ask him. I remember getting to town and coming down the street and it occurred to me I couldn’t remember the last time I set foot in Pete’s shop. He had taken to meeting us at Kit’s and like most folks I found reasons enough for not stopping in to see him.

‘When I got to the porch the curtains were closed but the front door looked open. I came up and listened—nothing—so I put my hand on the door and went in.

‘It was dark inside and there was a whiff of something unpleasant, but that’s not what got me. It was the shelves. Pete was always so fussy about them. No matter how busy he got

they always looked like the day the store opened, everything stacked so careful you worried about disturbing them.

‘But the shelves, they were all confused now, everything thrown together. Some of them were bulging with goods while others were picked clean, leaving these plots of dust to tell you what had been there. The rumor was that Pete needed money for the house so he was selling everything in the store for a price that made you feel bad about buying, but looking at those shelves you didn’t get the feeling Pete was doing a brisk business. More like he had given up trying.

‘I don’t know how long I was in there before I saw him. He was standing behind the counter, looking at the floor. Lost to something. I called to him and he looked up, this painful smile covering his face. I came over and shook his hand. He was awful skinny by then and the bones in his fingers felt like a crush of kindling.

‘I told him Kit sent me back to town and asked him what he wanted us to do with the pantry. Pete said what he wanted, which I’m certain was different from whatever he told us the day before. It was the dead of summer, but he was gripping his arms like he was cold, and he kept looking around like he was waiting for something.

‘I told Pete we’d take care of it and started heading toward the door, but then he seemed to perk up. Was there anything me and the boys needed—nails maybe or twine—anything, he was sure to have it in the store. I told him we were set for supplies but we would be sure to come round if we needed something. I turned again but Pete called to me.

‘What about you son? he says You must be needing something.

‘Well I know I should have bought something. Just pulled the first thing off the shelf, paid for it, and left, but I wasn’t thinking straight. I was so keen to get out of there the last thing I wanted to do was take something with me. So instead of going I found myself standing there, wanting to leave but not wanting Pete to see me hightail it. He seemed to find himself while I was wavering, bringing things out from under the counter—photo cards, glass beads, spools of thread—a horde of things with no reason.

‘Finally he started bringing out the toys, wood toys, the ones him and Alma made. Train cars and wagons, farm animals, a string of puppet children. It put a pain in my heart just seeing them, the way he dropped them on the counter—they were no different to him than a tin of biscuits.

‘I put up my hand to stop him but I noticed Pete had already stopped, he was staring at something behind me. I wasn’t quick about it, but I turned, knowing who was there. I was wrong though, the shop was empty. There was nothing behind me but the door to the second floor. It was closed now and, I couldn’t tell, but it looked like it was bolted from the outside.

‘I bought a tin of biscuits and hightailed it.

‘We stopped working on the house when Ellie disappeared, or when Pete said she disappeared cause no one had seen her for weeks. Pete was beside himself. He went all over town knocking on doors, trying to get folks to help look for her, but his mind was so mixed nobody knew what he was saying. He just stood in the doorway speaking nonsense.

‘He got all the way out to the Brown farm, up near Mill Creek. When Joe Brown’s pa was alive him and Pete were best friends, so when Joe opened the door he knew something was wrong. It took some convincing but he got Pete to come in and settle down. Joe got him a drink and told him to tell him what was wrong. Pete told Joe what happened, or what he was sure had happened, and when he was done Joe told him to wait there cause he was going to round up a search party.

‘Pete, Joe said it was almost like he couldn’t believe it, like no one ever done something so nice for him before. He tried thanking Joe but he couldn’t say a thing. He just started weeping, right there in the kitchen. He couldn’t help himself, he looked so tired and

his head wasn't working right. It pained Joe to see him like that. He'd known Pete since he was a kid. Him and Alma used to come over after church and he said Pete always had something for him in his pocket, hard candy or a nickel—he never forgot. And now, to see Pete like that, well, Joe said it was something could have lived his whole life without seeing.

Joe got Bess and told her to take Pete up to the children's room so he could rest. Then Joe went straight to town. But not to round up a search party, no, he was going to Pete's shop. There was something he needed to see.

It was late when he got there, too late to go knocking on anyone's door, so Joe went to the store himself. It was dark inside, but the front door was open, and Joe said he called up to see if anybody was around. He didn't hear anything so he went in, going through his matches till he found a shelf with candles on it. The store looked abandoned, he said. There was one shelf, near the back. Someone had been trying to find something in a hurry cause the floor was covered with whatever had been there. It was right next to the door, Joe said, the one that led upstairs. The smell was stronger there, and when he opened the door, it like sticking your nose into the heart of something rotten.

Joe went up the steps. The door at the top was closed but with the light he knew anyone inside the room could see that he was coming. He called, a couple of times, then he tried the door. It gave way. He couldn't see anything, so he held up the candle and entered.'

'The room, it wasn't like the store. The store looked forsaken, but the room—it was like nobody lived there. The bed was made, the vanity empty. All the dresser drawers were closed. The room was bare, except for the workbench. Joe only noticed it when he turned to go. At the end of it was a toy, a wood toy, a doll of some sort. It was sitting there all alone,

almost like it was watching him. Joe came toward it, then he stopped, careful so's he didn't drop the candle.

'The figure was wearing a tiny black shawl.'

Doc fell silent, then he looked over at Pete. He was sleeping on the counter again.

Doc crossed over to him.

‘You never saw Ellie again,’ I said. My voice sounded distant to me, distant and loud.

Doc shook his head.

‘She left just like she come,’ he said. There was a horn of white hair sticking up behind the old man’s head. Doc brought his hand over and smoothed it back.

‘Was she after his money?’

Doc shrugged.

‘Maybe. Some folks used to think that. Most didn’t know what to think so they preferred not thinking. It’s easier that way.’

‘What did you think?’

Doc grinned.

‘Who says I did?’ He gathered the assembly of glasses in front of Pete and brought them to the other end of the counter, adding mine as he went.

‘Maybe she was after his money,’ he continued, taking up the glasses in turn and washing them. ‘Maybe she was Alma’s kin, come in for the funeral and seen all he had. Maybe that’s all it was—but that don’t seem the end of it, not to me.’

‘What’s the rest then?’

Doc smiled to himself.

‘I don’t know. I can’t—nobody can, only Pete, I reckon. All I know is what I saw.’

‘What did you see?’

Doc hesitated.

‘I wonder about that sometimes,’ he said. ‘I’m pretty sure I saw a lot less than I think I did. That’s the thing about thinking, it’s got a way of helping you find things that were never there to begin with. I’ve had plenty of time to think about what happened, the whole town has, so I reckon we don’t remember what we saw half so much as we what we think we did.’

Doc shook his head and grinned, then he started washing the glasses again.

‘That’s a long way of saying I don’t know what I saw. Maybe it was just a young girl looking for a big house and finding an old man in between.’

‘You don’t believe that.’

Doc grinned again.

‘Maybe I do, maybe I don’t,’ he said. He took out a freshfolded towel from beneath the counter and began drying the glasses.

‘I tell you what I remember. I remember seeing those toys, the ones Pete brought down to the shop. It wasn’t that he was selling them, that’s not what got me. It was that he thought anyone in town would want them. It was like something of the past was gone for him, something we still had. We all knew where the toys come from, why they never been in the shop before, and cause of that we couldn’t buy them. Heck, it made me sick just having to look at them. But Pete, he didn’t have that past, not any more, something took its place, something filled up what he lost and when that happens it’s got a way of changing you. I mean look at him.’

I looked down the bar at the old man. His cheek was pressed against the counter, puddling his lips to one side of his face. I stifled a laugh.

‘What do you think he’s dreaming about? Alma? No—he’s dreaming about Ellie. She’s the one he can’t get out of his head. Every day he’s thinking about what went wrong, what he could have done to keep her, to keep things from changing. That’s all he thinks about. That’s why he wants to sleep all the time cause the thinking’s painful and dreaming’s all he’s got to set things right.’

‘Or forget about them,’ I said.

Doc looked at me.

‘Forgetting ain’t easy sometimes.’

‘Not if you find something to remember.’

Doc nodded. Unbidden, he brought me another drink.

‘Sure,’ he said, placing his small hands on the counter, ‘but just cause you find something to remember don’t mean it’s good for you. Pete found Ellie, and most folks here’d say she was better left unclaimed.’

‘Maybe,’ I said, leaning heavily against the bar. ‘But it sounds like Ol Pete was already lost. He was drowning, and a drowning man doesn’t discriminate, he grabs whatever’s in reach.’

Doc smiled, flapjacks again.

‘My wife says that,’ I said, hitching up my satchel. Doc stared at me.

‘Does she?’ he said, drawing out the words as if testing their strength.

‘Yes,’ I said, bobbing my head. ‘Says that’s a good thing too cause otherwise I’d be making my own dinner.’

I laughed and shook my head. Doc’s smile relaxed into a grin.

‘What happened to the shop?’ I asked.

‘The shop—well Pete was in no place to run it after Ellie left, and besides, he owed more money on that house than he’d ever seen, so the shop was sold off. Gus bought it.’

‘Doc pointed across the bar at the man with the giant red nose.’

‘He was a young feller then, just starting off, but he was smart, made some money on cattle. Took the shop off Pete’s hands—gave him a nice price for it which was good cause Pete owed more than the shop could cover. He offered to let Pete keep working but Pete couldn’t set foot in there once Ellie was gone—couldn’t do much anything really.’

‘Gus sold off Pete’s stock, everything that was left, and folks in town weren’t shy about buying. Even the toys. Folks didn’t feel strange about buying them no more. They

wanted to—not just to help Pete. It was a nice way of remembering him, him and Alma and the way things used to be. Look—’

Doc pointed to the shelf up behind the bar. It was lined with empty bottles, but in the middle of it, a space had been cleared for a small wooden horse. It was black and stood with its head drawn up and turned to one side, as if it were keeping watch over the inn below.

‘—I bought it from Gus the day he started selling them. I remember it, from Pete and Alma’s room. Put it up the day I opened. It’s never come down since.’

Doc turned back to me.

‘Most of the toys’re gone now. Folks bought them for kids and kids broke them like they should but you still see them around still, most times when folks’ve put them up somewhere out of the way, some place special. They’ll be there and when you see them you’ll know.’

‘Where does Pete stay?’

‘Joe took him in—said his pa would have wanted it that way. Pete never went back to the shop, he couldn’t, so a bunch of us moved his stuff over to Joe’s place. There’s a milkroom in the barn he don’t use no more so we moved Pete out there. That’s where he lives now. He used to help Joe around the farm but he’s old now, can’t do much. Beside his head’s not right. He gets by cause folks see he gets by. We give him jobs to do, simple things like sweeping up or watching the little ones, and when he can’t do that we’ll make sure he’s all right—or at least as good as he can be. He’d have done the same for us.’

Doc paused.

‘He used to in his own way.’

We were quiet. Doc’s head was bowed, as if bound in prayer. After a moment, he nodded in conclusion and walked to the end of the bar, away from Pete. He reached under the counter and withdrew another towel. He brought it back down the bar, unfolded it, and began cleaning the countertop. My eyes felt heavy, I closed them.

‘I hope you don’t mind my saying so but you look a little worse for the wear.’

I opened my eyes and found Doc, but he was watching his hand circle the countertop.

‘I am. Little tired, that’s all.’

Doc nodded.

‘Like something burned you out and left you smoking.’

‘I suppose,’ I said.

Doc smiled.

‘Been there once or twice myself. You get so tired it’s like the life’s threatening to leave you. Sometimes you’re just beat—and if that’s all, a good sleep’ll take care of it—but sometimes it’s more, it’s like you been left quiet by the world, stripped of all the noise and the nonsense. You know what I mean?’

I looked up at Doc again. He was still watching his hand make the countertop glow. I reached down for my satchel.

‘Yep,’ he continued. ‘Sometimes you get stripped of so much you’re left with nothing—nothing but the truth that is.’

Doc looked up.

‘You been stripped?’

The door burst open behind me. I staggered around. The man in the broad black hat stood in the doorway of the bar with a dog at his side. It was a large dog, large as the other, but it was younger, leaner, with steel colored coat that seemed gusseted to the muscles bound beneath. The animal was held by a twine leash that had been crudely looped around its neck and cinched its jaws shut. It stared at the bar with two coal black eyes and did not move by its master’s side.

‘Old man—I’m ready to give that guard dog of yers a try,’ the man in the broad black hat said. He jerked at the leash, the steel colored dog growled between its clenched teeth. ‘Bring him outside.’

The younger man leaned over to the older man to explain the scene to him. The older man dismissed him.

‘You sure about this,’ he called to the man in the broad black hat. ‘Ain’t nothing comes of fighting but a loser.’

‘There’s a winner too,’ the other man said. ‘Now are we goin to jaw or are we goin to see if that dog of yers’s got any fight left?’

‘Sam don’t fight,’ the older man corrected him. ‘But he keeps his friends out of harm’s way.’

He leaned down and stroked the large dog. He did not respond until the older man spoke his name, then the dog struggled to his feet. The older man rose. Around the bar, the other men rose with him.

‘Cap,’ Doc said. ‘I don’t think it’s the night for this.’

At the familiar voice the older man grinned.

‘Now Doc, you remember Sam from when he was a pup. He can look after himself.’

‘I know Cap,’ Doc said. ‘But he ain’t a pup no more.’

‘He can look after his own,’ the other man said.

‘I know he can,’ Doc said. He was wringing the towel between his hands. ‘But it’s a big dog Cap—I don’t want nothing to happen.’

‘A big dog?’ the older man said. His vacant eyes grew wide for a moment, then he grinned, ‘I’ll have to take your word for it, won’t I Doc?’

He turned to the younger man and said something, then he took him by the arm, and the two of them walked toward the door, the dog following behind. The man in the broad black hat left ahead of them, jerking his dog out the door. It growled but never strained against the leash.

Some of the men in the bar turned to Doc.

‘Let’s go,’ he said, throwing the towel on the bar and coming around the counter.

I held my satchel tight and stumbled after Doc. The bar followed. Outside the men gathered around a yellowed clearing created by the light from the bar. They stood at the edge of it so you couldn’t see their faces, only the brim of their hats, the point of their boots, and the occasional angry glow from the orange eye of a cigarette. In the middle, the man with the broad black hat stood with his dog. He had looped the crude leash around his fist, pulling the animal’s head so far back that it revealed the length of its neck, where its steel coat was divided by a black stripe that ran from its lower jaw, down its neck where it licked

out across its belly. The dog shuffled its feet and huffed for breath, but it never challenged him.

Doc stood directly in front of me, the older man at his side.

‘You sure about this?’ he said gently.

The older man had been plucking his beard again. He turned to Doc and smiled.

‘You remember that time we got the Fuller girls to promise us a kiss if we stole them a piece of Miss Mawley’s pecan pie?’

Doc grinned.

‘Course I do—might’ve been a taller man if I hadn’t lost so much sleep over Ginny Fuller.’

The older man smiled.

‘Or at least not a midget,’

‘Careful now Cap, you keep that up I’m gonna turn you like a top and kick your ass into the night.’

‘Night or no night, Doc, it’s all the same to me.’

‘Anyhow you were saying.’

‘I was saying you remember what you said when we come up on Miss Mawley’s place and saw that pie, cooling in the window?’

Doc smiled.

‘I asked if you was sure about this.’

‘And I told you I was and we got that pie didn’t we? And we shared it with those Fuller girls and we got what they promised.’

‘We did,’ Doc said.

‘Well I was as sure then as I’m sure now—sure as I always been.’

‘You always been sure, Cap,’ Doc said.

‘You bet I have.’

‘But you remember what happened when that pie was done right?’

The older man stopped plucking his beard.

‘My pa tanned my hide till I couldn’t hardly look at a chair.’

‘That’s right,’ Doc said.

‘And you know what?’ the older man said, turning his face so that his sightless eyes peered into Doc’s. ‘I’d do it all again.’

Cap stepped into the clearing. The dog followed behind him. He emerged into the light, his broad head swaying back and forth. When Cap stopped, he stopped and slumped to the ground beside him. The man in the broad black hat grinned and yanked at the twine leash. The steel colored dog growled.

‘This is your last—’

‘I know I know,’ Cap interrupted, waving away the words, ‘Let’s get this over with so we can all get back to drinking.’

There was laughter at the edge of the clearing. Cap kneeled next to his dog, who rose to meet him. He began stroking him, running his hand along his side from end to end, whispering as he did. He repeated the dog’s name, over and again, but more than this I could not hear. No one could. No one but Sam, who stood attentively at his side, his broad head hanging loosely between his shoulders.

At the other end of the clearing, the man in the broad black hat fumbled with the twine leash. He had knotted it at the base of the dog's throat, and when he could not untie it, he began trying to pull it over the dog's head. It got stuck behind his ears. He continued to yank, but when the dog began to choke and cough, he finally brought out a knife. He slid the blade under the loop that cinched the dog's muzzle, then he brought it around, cutting across the twine. It frayed and broke open. The steel colored dog howled and shook his head until the twine lay at his feet.

Sensing the other animal was ready, Cap whispered one final thing in Sam's ear and left him in the clearing. The man in the broad black hat watched him go. When he didn't return, he shook his head and squatted beside the steel colored dog. He grabbed him by the ears and pulled his head back, revealing the black stripe.

'You go git him,' he said, nodding at the other dog. 'You git that dog and you show him what you are.'

Still holding the ears of the animal, the man in the broad black hat pushed it toward the other dog and stepped back to the edge of the clearing, where he stood alone against the night. The two dogs stood at either side of the clearing. Around them, the men stood quietly, just out of the light. The steel colored dog watched the other animal suspiciously. He was standing just as Cap had left him, his large head drooping between his shoulders. He made no noise and looked at nothing in particular.

The steel colored dog did not growl, but his lips were drawn back far enough to reveal the jagged clasp of teeth. He began to walk across the clearing, slowly, never taking his eyes off Sam. He stopped a few steps from him. Sam lifted his broad head slightly and for

the first time seemed aware of the other dog's presence. He looked at the dog for a moment, then his broad head drooped again.

'Git him!' yelled the man with the broad black hat. The steel colored dog jerked his head around to look at his master, then his gaze returned to the other dog. He bared his teeth and barked twice—brief, shrieking barks—but they had no effect. Sam did not move. The steel colored dog was confused. He began pacing back and forth across the clearing, passing in front of the other dog repeatedly. Finally, he stopped just a few steps from him, and his smooth silver body arched back slightly, as if ready to spring. Sam seemed to notice the other animal again. He stared at the steel colored dog, then he barked at him, just once, a simple bark, like a signal to a friend.

The steel colored dog collapsed to his belly as if he had been struck by a blow from above. He remained there, watching the other dog nervously. Sam barked again, a third time, then his massive tail slowly began to move. It swooped back and forth behind him, the end just clearing the ground. The steel colored dog eyed the tail and barked once, still lying on the ground before him. Sam responded, barking in return and walking forward. He stopped just before the other dog, his broad head hovering over the narrow gray muzzle. Then he leaned down and nudged the steel colored dog. He did not respond, so he nudged him again, and this time the dog rose to his feet. Sam barked again, and the steel colored dog responded, then the two dogs began circling, one occasionally brushing the other.

'I thought they were going to fight,' said one of the men.

Another laughed.

‘That don’t look like fighting to me!’ he said, and the others joined him. Doc leaned over to Cap and whispered in his ear. He smiled. He didn’t look surprised.

At the other end of the clearing, the man in the broad black hat was cursing.

‘What you waitin for? GIT HIM!’

‘He’s got him all right!’ said one of the men.

‘I wonder if he’ll let him go,’ said another.

The men all began to laugh, and someone said that they should go inside and leave the two of them alone. The other men raised their voices in agreement, and boots began to disappear from the edge of the clearing.

Doc turned to his friend.

‘Looks like everything’s all right,’ he said. ‘I’m going head back and check on Pete. If he wakes up and finds the place empty he’s going to think the end of the world’s found him.’

Cap grinned. He put his hand out and searched for Doc’s shoulder. Doc waited. When he found it he said, ‘If Pete’s awake you get him a drink for me.’

‘You bet Cap,’ Doc said and turned to go back inside. He walked past me, his bald head glowing, and winked.

I remained standing just behind Cap. Most of the men had left the clearing to return inside. The rest were on their way. Cap turned to the younger man and told him to head in, he and Sam would return shortly. The younger man left, and soon there were just three of us around the clearing, along with the dogs, who continued to circle each other. The steel colored dog had grown playful. He would take a step toward Sam, then hop back, as if to

tempt him into giving chase, but Sam would not be tempted. He circled at the same unhurried pace. He did not stop until the man in the broad black hat screamed.

‘Godammit!’ he cried, stepping into the clearing. The steel colored dog stopped pacing and looked in the direction of the voice. The man in the broad black hat stalked across the clearing toward him. The dog cowered.

‘Go on,’ he cried, trying to raise the dog from the ground. ‘Git him!’

The steel colored dog would not move. Finally, the man in the broad black hat grabbed the dog by its muzzle. The dog whimpered as he was pulled to his feet. The man in the broad black hat held his muzzle and stared into his eyes.

‘You git that goddamn dog,’ he said, straining every word, then he let go of the dog’s muzzle to point at the other animal, but the steel colored dog stepped back from him. The man in the broad black hat stepped forward, but the steel colored dog stepped away.

‘Why you—’ he said, stalking the dog around the clearing. The steel colored dog kept backing away before him. He watched his master nervously, never running from him, but always keeping safely beyond his grasp. The man in the broad black hat pursued him, crouched with his arms outstretched, as if he were trying to tackle a hog. He walked slowly at first, then his pace quickened, and finally, frustrated, he sprang at the dog, missing his tail and tumbling to the ground. He cursed and slapped his hand on the dirt. For a moment he looked like he might spring again, but then, all at once, the heat seemed to leave him. He looked down. After a moment, he sat up and rearranged his broad black hat. Then he got to his feet.

‘Come on,’ he said to the dog. His voice was flat, broken. The steel colored dog eyed him nervously. He took one tentative step forward, then stopped. ‘Come on boy,’ he repeated, ‘Let’s go home.’ This time he held out his hand. The dog looked at it, then he took another step forward, and another. The dog neared his master, and when his nose almost touched his hand, the man in the broad black hat stepped forward to meet him. The movement was so smooth that when the second step did not stop where the eye expected, there seemed nothing wrong. Even the steel colored dog did not notice until the last instant, when he turned his head, and the point of the boot, which would have otherwise met his jaw, found his ribs instead.

There was an unmistakable crack. The dog was lifted into the air, turned over once, and went sprawling into the dirt, shrieking. The man in the broad black hat breathed heavily.

‘There,’ he said. ‘You’ll listen next time.’

He stared down at the dog which lay panting on the ground. A dark patch grew in the side of his smooth grey coat. The man in the broad black hat stared at him a moment more, then he took a quick hop step, drawing his boot back.

It never had a chance to come around. By then, Sam had already engulfed him, charging across the clearing and leaping onto his chest with such force that the man was driven backward, beyond the clearing, out into the night. Only his broad black hat remained.

I stood still as the terrible sounds started and the man began to scream. Cap listened to them. Then he turned his head slightly toward me.

‘Sam’s good that way,’ he said. ‘He don’t fight, but he keeps his friends out of harm’s way.’

A Familiar Black Bloom

I stumbled back from the clearing and fled into the night, passing between the glowing facades of the stone silent town, on toward the empty horizon, black upon black, till morning when the darkness at last relented, the land returned, and the blue breath of morning passed high overhead.

It took as long to reach Little John's, a safehouse, it seemed, the one thought that pulled me through the night, until the Jenkins farm stood before me, a short distance from a familiar crossroad. Just as I remembered it.

I stopped at the foot of the barnbridge and looked out over the yard. I didn't see her at first—she must have been still. No doubt she didn't see me. Instead I saw the stables, low and oblong, seated beside the barn, the eaves of the gray apple storage just beyond them. Near the barn the familiar coalcolored wheels of a tractor stood, obscuring the end of an ageless iron trough. The two shared a small clearing with the chicken coop, its sunwashed sides still streaked red, and the scrimskinned corncrib, a rent in one side dribbling feed. They

all stood at a distance, as if in respect, to the small farmhouse at the edge of the yard, simple and two stories, a single chimney, the same small porch—all as if drawn from memory, as if nothing about them had changed.

Exley!

I turned. A woman in gray trousers stood beside the barn, one hand on the red handle of a waterpump. When our eyes meet, she drew her fingers in a small steeple before her face, as if witness to some extraordinary event, then her mouth stretched wide into a smile that seemed to border on fright.

‘I *knew* it was you!’ she cried and started off across the yard.

She came so quickly I instinctively stepped back long before she arrived. Then, resuming my place, I put out my hand. She took it in both of hers and pulled me into an embrace.

‘You’re *just* like John described,’ she exclaimed, her cheek muffling one ear. I stiffened, she drew back. She looked me up and down.

‘*Ooooo*—John will be *so* disappointed that he’s not here to welcome you. He left last night on a cider run, but he’ll be back soon, tomorrow maybe but no later than the day after, certainly not. I don’t think he imagined you would get here so fast.’

She paused.

‘He didn’t even know if the letter would reach you—but it did, it surely did.’

She smiled again, that terrible smile. I nodded, I didn’t know what else to do.

‘But where are my manners?’ she said, a hand darted from her side, grabbing mine. ‘I’m Mariam.’

‘A pleasure, ma’am,’ I said, pumping her hand awkwardly. Again she looked me up and down, as if repeating a remembered cue. She was a tall woman, older than I had expected. A forelock of black hair had begun to gray. It swung beside her face, framing it. Her eyes were weary, as if she had not slept in days.

She squeezed my hand.

‘Come,’ she said, turning in the direction of the house. ‘I’m done with morning chores and was about to make breakfast. Did you walk all night?’

She spoke quickly, as if fearing she might fall behind her words.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ I said.

‘You poor, *poor* dear,’ she lamented. ‘You must be starving. I will get you some breakfast and make up one of the children’s beds for you. They’re sleeping right now. John says I indulge them but during the summer I like to let them sleep late. There’s no harm in that, right? Nono—of *course* not! I will put John Junior in Sarah’s bed so you’ll have a place to rest.’

‘I don’t want you to go to any trouble.’

‘Trouble? Trouble!’ she cried. ‘*Noooo*, no trouble—you’re our guest, you should feel at home here.’

We entered the house. Mariam sat me down, refusing my offer of help with a flip of her hand. She brought over biscuits and jam, pleading with me to help myself. While I ate, she cut thick slices of bacon and fried eggs and brought them over with a short stack of toast.

‘Keep eating until you’re full,’ she said. ‘If you’re anything like my Johnny Bird, there isn’t a sight more welcome than a heaping plate of food, especially after a long journey. Take all the time you need—I’ll go upstairs and prepare the bed for you.’

I thanked her, and she disappeared. When she was gone, I abandoned any delicacy and ate the food as fast as I could, neglecting the fork and using the toast to shovel the bacon and eggs into my mouth. When I was done, I broke up the final biscuit and sopped the thickening yolk that remained on my plate.

Having finished all the food before me, I leaned back in the chair and was soon pulled into sleep. A hand on my shoulder woke me.

‘The bed is ready for you,’ she said.

I looked up. Mariam was sitting next to me, her weary eyes expectant. It took me a moment to realize what was different. She no longer wore the grey trousers but had instead changed into a white dress with lace ribbons that, at that moment, seemed incomprehensible to me. ‘I’ve drawn a bath for you as well—you look like my Johnny Bird after a morning in the fields. Go upstairs and you can scrub the road from you before you sleep. The tub is right down the hall from the bedroom. Come—I’ll show you.’

My body felt heavy and unprepared, but Mariam took me by the arm and pulled me to my feet. I retrieved my satchel and followed her from the kitchen. She led me through the sitting room and upstairs to the bedrooms. I was dimly aware that not much had changed about the house since I was a boy, but the fog of thought was so thick I quit trying to pierce it and dumbly followed the hazy figure before me. Upstairs, she showed me the room where I would sleep. I left my satchel there, and she led me down the hall to the bathroom. Steam

curled from the still water of the tub, a white towel had been neatly folded and placed on the stool beside it.

‘Now the water is hot Exley so do be careful. I’ve told the children you’ll be in here so they won’t bother you.’

She paused. A look came over her casting deep wrinkles from either eye.

‘You look so tired,’ she said, gently touching my cheek. ‘Sleep deeply, we’ll be here when you wake.’

I nodded.

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ I said.

‘No, Exley,’ she corrected. ‘Mariam.’

I nodded once, and she withdrew her hand.

I fell asleep again in the bath, and when I awoke, the water was lukewarm and my hair was stiff and dry. I got out of the tub, took the towel from the stool, and checked the hallway to make sure it was empty. Then I snuck into the bedroom, dried off, and buried myself under the sheets.

Instantly I was asleep.

I slept all day. It was a dead sleep, I dreamt of nothing, and when I awoke, I wondered where I was and then where my clothes were. I looked out the window. The sun was setting but for a moment I thought it might be dawn and wondered why the shadows leaned the way they did. Then I remembered where I was and why the bed was so small. Finally, after a time, I remembered why I was there.

I sat up.

Across from me a closet door stood open. Suspended there over a shelf teeming with toys was a careful row of miniature shirts and tiny knee pants. There was a little boy, I remembered, a little girl, too. I had nothing to give them.

I looked around the room. The clothes I'd worn that morning had been washed and folded and placed on a dresser. I stared at them, then I remembered where I'd left them. I shook my head and cursed.

A basin sat next to the clothes. There was a white pitcher inside it, a small handcloth draped over the spout. I pulled off the covers and crossed the room. The pitcher had been filled with water. I poured the water into the basin and washed my face, drying it with the handcloth afterward. Then I unfolded the clothes, dressed, and went downstairs. Mariam was sitting at the kitchen table staring patiently at something I could not see far beyond the picture window.

'Evening,' I said. She looked up, then looked around. Finally she found my eyes. The smile appeared.

'Exley!' she said, far too loud for the tiny room. She rose and rounded the table, headed in my direction. 'Why I thought you just might sleep through the night. You didn't even stir when I brought in your clothes.'

I smiled weakly.

'It's been some time since I had a good night's sleep.'

Mariam giggled.

'And it will be some time more since you slept through the afternoon. Here—sit down, I saved you some dinner.'

Mariam stepped to the side to clear my way, then she retreated behind the counter. I took a step toward the table and paused.

‘I’m sorry for leaving my clothes all over the bathroom floor, I don’t usually forget my manners like that.’

Mariam was working at the counter, her back turned to me. At these words, both hands fluttered up beside her, as if to flee them.

‘Manners *nothing!*’ she declared. ‘You looked like the walking dead Exley, I’m surprised you remember your name. I half expected you to fall asleep in the tub and drown yourself!’

I smiled.

‘I nearly did.’

Mariam let out a small surprised laugh and turned to me.

‘Poor, poor Exley—*please*, sit down sit down.’

I sat down at one end of the kitchen table and waited on her. She still wore the inexplicable white dress, but now she had tied a bright blue apron around it. It was stainless and smoothed, as if it had been bought that afternoon. Her hair was drawn back so that the lonely lock of gray hair was lost in a black bun at the back of her head. She took a plate out of the oven. It was covered with a red check cloth. She pivoted carefully and made her way to the table, setting the plate before me. With a flourish, she drew back the cloth. There were mashed potatoes, pork chops, and a full ear of corn.

‘Would you like some lemonade?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘*Maarrriamm*,’ she sang. She returned with a full glass and sat next to me in the same chair she’d sat in that morning. She watched me eat.

‘Hungry, I see,’ she said with no small amount of pleasure. ‘You haven’t been eating much, have you?’

‘Nothing like this. Thank you for it—breakfast too. I can’t remember if I thanked you this morning.’

Mariam grinned.

‘We are a little forgetful, today, aren’t we?’ she said. She was made up now, I saw this, a red hint in her lips and cheeks that gave her a youthful look, one that seemed studied and strained whenever she smiled and her gray hindteeth appeared.

‘Those clothes in your pack also needed washing,’ she said, grabbing my wrist and lowering her voice, ‘though given their frightful smell I might well have *burned* them.’

She smiled again. Something troubled me, but it was distant. I thanked her and continued eating.

‘Good!’ she exclaimed, releasing my wrist. She sprang from her chair and retreated behind the counter. She reappeared with a rag and returned to the table where she promptly began cleaning the spotless surface.

‘Is John back yet?’ I asked.

‘Nono, my Johnny Bird will be back tomorrow, the next day at the latest,’ she grinned again. ‘You must have forgotten that, too—I told you this morning.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘It was a long night.’

Her free hand flew to her mouth, too late to smother a giggle.

‘I’ll say!’ she cried. ‘All the hurry, Exley, we weren’t *going* anywhere!’

She pursed her lips and shook her head, then she began cleaning the table again. I stared at her in disbelief, then I realized what had troubled me. She’d been inside my satchel. She’d seen what was there.

I looked at my food.

‘I need to see my sister,’ I said. ‘Tonight.’

Mariam was silent, her hand seemed to slow.

‘Of course,’ she said cheerfully. ‘She must be at home.’

I hesitated.

‘Whose?’

‘Whose?’

‘Whose home?’

‘Why hers,’ she said agreeably, then after a moment. ‘Yours—your home.’

She smiled again, wide but somehow weakened. She took hold of my empty dish.

‘*Done?*’ she sang, not waiting for my reply. She crossed over to the sink.

‘You’ll have so much to talk about when my Johnny Bird gets home—so *so* much!’

She began washing the dish. I stood up and excused myself. At the threshold she called to me.

‘Exley,’ she said, she paused for a moment. ‘He won’t be there.’

‘My father?’ I said.

‘No,’ she said quietly. She hesitated, ‘He’s passed, Exley.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I see, thank you . . . I imagined as much.’

The room was silent.

‘He still lives down the road,’ she said. ‘He won’t be there.’

I opened my mouth again to ask who. Then I closed it. She picked up a towel and began drying the dish.

I went up to the bedroom. The satchel was in the corner, next to the dresser. I brought it over to the bed and opened it. The revolver was still there, on top of a stack of cleaned and folded clothes. I took it out and lay it on the bed next to me. It sank into the sheets. I looked down at it. Someone had carved his initials into the grip, near the butt of the gun. I could only make out one of the letters, the other had been worn away. I took the pistol into my hands and tried to open it, then I remembered and looked for the latch. The chamber cracked open. It was still loaded. I closed the pistol and lay it back on the bed. I stared at it again. I hadn’t fired a gun since I was a boy.

I slipped the revolver into my pocket and returned downstairs. Mariam was no longer in the kitchen. The lamp had been turned out, so the only light in the room came from outside, where the sun had already set and the colors were fast fading from the empty barnyard.

I grabbed my gray felt hat and opened the porch door. I came down the steps, rounded the house and continued across the yard, headed straight for the road. I was nearly on top of the boy before I stopped.

‘Excuse me there,’ I said, withdrawing a foot from between two chubby legs. ‘I didn’t see you, little man.’

The boy looked at me like he'd just seen something inexplicable at the edge of the sky. When that look didn't change, I squatted down and asked him what his name was. He said nothing and continued to stare.

'Don't worry about him,' came another voice. 'He acts like that around anybody that's big as papa.'

I turned. There was the girl standing barefoot beside me. She wore a simple cotton frock, and when I turned to her, she smiled. She had neither of her front teeth. I offered her my hand.

'My name's Sarah Jenkins,' she said, shaking it, 'and that's my brother John Jenkins, but you can call him John Junior cause that's what everybody calls him.'

'It's nice to meet you Sarah Jenkins—you too John Junior.' I put my hand out to the boy. He stared at it, but then his sister told him it was all right, and he carefully placed a small, soft hand in mine. I grasped it and shook gently. He grinned.

'You see,' Sarah said. 'He's just shy around people he doesn't know.'

'Well now he knows me.'

'Noooo he doesn't,' she replied, 'and I don't know you either.'

'How do you figure?'

'We don't know your name! How can we know you if we don't know your name?'

I stared at her, then I smiled.

'My name is Exley Almer,' I said, 'but you can call me Exley.'

'Can we?' she asked.

'I can't think of anything else.'

Delighted, the young girl stuck her hand out again.

‘It’s nice to meet you, Exley,’ she said.

‘It’s nice to meet *you*, Sarah Jenkins—you too, John Junior.’

The little boy grinned and nodded his head eagerly.

‘You’re papa’s friend.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Mama told us about you, said you were sleeping in John Junior’s room.’

I nodded and thanked the little boy. He smiled approvingly.

‘Did you sleep all day?’ she asked.

‘Yes, ma’am—past dinnertime.’

The girl shook her head.

‘You must have been *real* tired. Mama said you came from far away.’

‘Beyond the woods,’ I said, pointing to the horizon. The girl gasped.

‘That sure is a long way! I’ve been that far, but just once, and I was little as John Junior so I don’t remember much.’

‘Maybe you’ll go that far again someday, maybe even farther.’

‘Maybe—but I don’t know, that’s a long way.’

She seemed to ruminate on the idea, then she said, ‘Mama said you used to live here, that’s how you know papa.’

‘I did, when your papa was a little boy, little as you—a long time ago.’

‘But then you left.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

I looked at the girl. She began twirling from side to side, the frock rising and falling just above her knees.

‘I wanted to,’ I said.

‘Why’d you want to?’

The pigtails beat time about about the girl’s head.

‘It was time for me to go.’

A giggle escaped the open cell of the girl’s mouth. She began to twirl faster.

‘That doesn’t sound like an answer to me-eee.’

I was quiet. The little boy also laughed, looking between us to learn why. The girl grinned mischievously.

‘Well why did you come back then?’

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. The girl began to giggle.

‘I know,’ she teased.

‘Do you?’

‘Yes,’ she said, waiting, waiting. ‘It was time, wasn’t it!’”

She burst into laughter and bounced up and down. Her brother clapped his hands gleefully. I smiled and said nothing. When she stopped, the girl tilted her head and stared at me, then she placed a tiny hand on either of my shoulders.

‘I’m just kidding, Exley,’ she announced, then she stepped forward into a hug. ‘I’m glad you’re here.’

She held me until my arms found their way around the fine bones of her back. When she was done, she turned to her brother.

‘Come on John Junior. We need to get ready for bed.’

The little boy stood up and dutifully followed his sister.

‘Good night, Exley,’ she said.

Her brother stopped and turned to me. He looked at his hand, then he waved nervously.

‘Nightnight,’ he said and plopped his fist in his mouth.

The two of them marched up the steps and disappeared into the house. I watched them go, then I stood and walked to the edge of the yard. I turned onto the road and followed the waning light, which drifted like an orange mist over the horizon. When it was gone, the world was dark, and the homes stood like giant jack-o-lanterns along the side of the road, the light from the ground floors burning within.

The houses marked my way until I came upon a slumping black structure that seemed to lean against the road. I had almost passed it before I stopped and stared. It took a moment, but then I remembered them—the Johnson stables. They’d been abandoned long before I was born when a nearby farmhouse burned to the ground. Little John and I had discovered them when we were boys, and instantly we made them our own private outpost. We spent our afternoons in the darkness there—lazing about, climbing the rafters, plotting fantastic schemes—all until Little John’s father discovered us. The building, he warned, was just waiting to fall on little boys like us. We should never return.

I grinned. The Johnson stables were far more patient than Big John. Though they leaned more than I remembered they still stood—a lure, no doubt, for other boys who looked for dark places to gather and pretend.

I turned off the road and followed the edge of the building, letting my fingers trip along the seams of the warped wallboards. The stables still abutted a small apple orchard. The harvest was some time off, but the trees were already heavy with black fruit. I passed into the orchard, following a path I'd used as a child whenever I visited Little John's farm. It cut through the orchard and then along the edge of a small grove. I knew the path was still used because the long grass grew at either side while the earth in between was trampled and pressed.

I followed the path back to the woods and then around them to where it forked and followed the lazy curves of a creek bed. A tiny stream danced in the moonlight, the modest descendent of a powerful brook that had once cut open the land and pushed it back, digging through the earth until it had carved out a channel so wide no boy around could jump from one side to the other, no matter how many tried.

I followed the creek, quickening my pace until I came to a footbridge. There, still lashed to the posts that once supported it, were remnants of the dam I'd built long ago with Tom and Little John. One summer we'd stolen floorboards from a barn that was being built nearby and nailed them to the posts that shouldered the small bridge. When we ran out of boards, with the dam incomplete, we dug up stones from along the bank and piled them at the foot of the boards where the water still slipped under the wood.

It was a clumsy looking dam, but it gave us a swimming hole deep enough that we didn't smack against the sand if we jumped off the footbridge, provided that we hugged our legs tight to our chest. No one ever discovered the dam, or if they did, they never bothered to destroy it, at least not as long as the three of us returned to the swimming hole every afternoon.

Now most of floorboards were gone. Someone had pulled them away, and those that remained hung down over the narrow bridge like the few final teeth in an old man's mouth, but beneath the bridge, in the middle of the creek bed, I found a collection of stones that still divided the stream. It pushed around them, digging into the earth, so that the stones along the bottom appeared half-buried in the creekbed. I thought about jumping down and pulling out one of those stones, but then I remembered that I had left my satchel behind and had nothing to carry it in.

I followed the path at the other end of the footbridge across an open hay field that bordered a small bluff. I climbed the bluff and at the summit saw the blue backside of a barn a few hillsides away. I was running now, following the rise and fall of the land until I passed through a meadow and was stopped by the black drop of a weed-ridden gully. Once, returning at the call of the dinner bell, I had lost my footing on the steep sides of that gully and slid down into the trough, my ankle turning beneath me. I tried to pull myself out, but it had rained that afternoon, and the ground gave way whenever I clawed at it. I began to yell for help, and kept yelling until my father found me. He tried to come into the gully to get me, but realizing the soft earth would not allow the two of us to return to higher ground, he ran to the barn and got some rope. He told me to turn my body so that my swollen ankle did

not touch the ground, then he let down the rope and pulled me out. He carried me back to the house, where my mother was waiting for me. She wrapped my ankle and spoke sweet words and fed me cookies until I could cry no more.

I squatted and shuffled down one side of the gully, using the speed I gathered as I neared the bottom to run up the opposite side. Near the top, when that speed ran out, I grasped some of the vines that snaked into the maw and pulled myself clear. Breathless, I paused, then I looked up the hillside at the barn—just as I remembered it, those nights when I would sneak out of my room and make my way to the roof. There, beneath the skycap of stars, the earth seemed to fall away, a gentle roll from one hillside to the next, ripples that spread across the shadowlands, through forest and field, on toward the unbroken banks of the horizon.

I looked up at the barn now but there was no new boy sitting atop the slanted black plane, so my eyes passed over the hillside instead. The trees were still gone, cut away long ago to make room for the pasture I now came upon. I walked along the edge of it, then I turned and followed the familiar barbed wire fence up toward the barn. A few cattle stood around aimlessly. They looked lost in the open pen, and I wondered briefly where the others were.

I came to the end of the fence and traveled a length of darkness along the side of the barn, which sat away from the road, far back from the house. When I reached the corner, I paused. Then I stepped out. The barnyard was still, the grass glowed in the moonlight. The dirt path that wound from the barn, traveled past the house, and emptied into the road was clear. There were no sounds, no dash of children's feet or the quick scamper of some dog

racing out to greet me. I might have wondered if anyone was home but for the corner of the house where there was a light, a half-light, that shown from one window.

I crept across the yard toward that light. It came from the kitchen, and I wondered if someone had run a curtain across the bottom half of the window. I crossed the path and came beside the house. The curtain seemed to move, but its movement was unexpected, not the gentle wisp of air escaping but a strange, bumping motion, hard against the glass. The curtain was a greenish color, a floral print, but only when I came to the windowledge did I realize that it wasn't a curtain at all but a dress. The owner was bent over, her backside blotting out the bottom of the window and occasionally thumping against it.

I heard crying now, a child. The wailing rose briefly, then I heard someone snap *Fine, suit yerself!* and the noise of something smacking against a hard surface. The floral print rose before me, blocking out the window for a moment. Then it moved away, revealing a grimy child, a girl, who sat locked in a high chair that stared out the window. Behind her, at either side of a table, were two boys, twins. They looked dim and over-grown. One had mange. It was advancing from his hairline down across his face. It had already coated his ear, leaving it red and puckered like the pursed petals of an appalling bud.

The two boys were picking at their food and occasionally flicking peas at each other. Behind them, the woman who had been at the window ledge stood before a full sink scrubbing a large frying pan, her back to me. She leaned in, her heavy arms rising and falling, but it would not come clean and she cursed beneath her breath. One of the boys asked her for dessert. She said there was no dessert. He asked why. *Cause you never finish yer dinner* she replied. The boy made a face and began picking his nose.

The grimy child had stopped crying. For a moment she looked bored, then she discovered the large spoon sitting on the tray of her highchair. It sat next to the gray mash she had refused to eat. She picked up the spoon and looked at it, then she began beating the tray, flinging gray ribbons of gravy all over her face. At the sink, the woman paused from her work, then she kept scrubbing. *Stop bangin that spoon* she said. The child did not heed her. She beat the spoon harder now, and the boys began to laugh. The woman continued to scrub. *If you don' stop bangin that damn spoon I'm gonna break it over yer head* she said, still not bothering to turn around. The child screeched and beat the spoon with both her hands. The woman slammed the pan down and looked over her shoulder. Her eye was swollen shut.

Lynnie! she screamed. *Stop it!*

The child stopped. The room was still.

After a moment, the woman turned back to her work. The child let go of the spoon. It clanged off the edge of the tray and fell from view. The boys began flicking peas again. The child looked down at the tray, then she pushed against it. It would not budge, she knew she was trapped. She looked bored again. Then she began looking around, first at her hands, then from side to side, and finally out the window. She shuddered. She looked again, then she began squirming, her tiny hands reaching toward the window.

Da she said. I stepped back from the glass. She paused, a confused look came over her face, then she began kicking her legs, the high chair rocking beneath her. *Da* she said again, louder this time. The woman at the sink paused. *Lynnie* she threatened and continued scrubbing the pan. The child did not heed her, she leaned across the tray, her tiny hands opening and closing frantically. *Daaaaaaa* she cried. I took another step back, and now she

began to scream *DA-DA-DA-DA*, kicking her legs wildly. The boys stopped to look at her, then they looked out the window. The one with the mange caught my eye. His mouth fell open. The woman finally turned from the sink.

What'n the hell—

No more. I was running—through the yard, along the barn, and down the pasture, scrambling across the gully and out into the fields, pausing only when my legs began to buckle and I stumbled to a halt, my hands grasping my knees, panting. For a moment, I thought I might retch, then the feeling passed. The world remained silent.

I stood and looked around. I was at the bottom of a small hillside, the long arms of an open plain unfolded before me. I scanned them, but found no familiar sight. It took little time, I had no idea where I was.

I crossed the plain, continuing until I came to a treeline. I lingered for a moment, then I passed into the woods, pressing on with growing regret until I stumbled down the side of a small ravine and stopped on hand and knee at the spindlelight of a stream. I watched it slither through the soft earth, then I got to my feet. I knew that I must be upstream from the footbridge. I followed the curves of the blindbending creek until the bridge came into view. Then I climbed out of the creekbed and continued back.

By the time I emerged from the orchard, the day was long gone, and the life had expired inside the houses. They stood like tombs at either side of the road, still and dark but still glowing in the moonlight. I passed quietly between them. Only one was lit, at the end of the road, a single light. Mariam. She was sitting at the kitchen table, staring out the picture

window. I stopped at the roadside and watched her. She was alone, hands clasped before her. She seemed to be kneading something. I waited, but she did not see me. She seemed to be looking at something far beyond. I turned briefly but could find nothing. Her hands wrung endlessly.

Finally I crossed the yard and mounted the steps. She didn't notice me until I opened the door. She looked up, startled. The black bun had come loose at the top of her head, strands of hair swung freely.

'I'm sorry,' I said. I closed the door behind me. She still wore the inexplicable white dress, but in the lamplight I saw the stains that had collected over time, a patchwork of shadows that stretched across her chest and down along the sleeves. The garment had been washed, several times, so much so that the fabric had grown threadbare, the hemline frayed, but the stains had merely faded. They couldn't be scrubbed away.

She looked at me searchingly.

'Did you see her?' she asked.

I removed my hat and hung it on the hook nearest to the door.

'Did you?' she asked again.

'Yes,' I said.

She watched me.

'I think so. I don't know.'

She nodded gently.

'You saw her,' she said. Her eyes remained steady, then briefly they fell. She seemed to remember something.

She stood abruptly, her hands coming apart. They held nothing.

She began smoothing back her hair.

‘Please, *please* Exley—sit down. I’ve saved you some pie. It’s in the oven, let me get it for you.’

I held up my hand.

‘It’s all right,’ I said. ‘I need to get some rest.’

‘Not on an empty stomach,’ she said, rounding the counter and heading toward the oven.

‘Is John back?’ I asked.

‘No, silly,’ she said, opening the oven door. ‘I *told* you, he’ll be back tomorrow at the earliest—maybe the day after.’

She removed a pie tin and set it on the counter.

‘Is there no one I can speak with?’

‘*Ob* Exley—be patient,’ she said, rumaging through a drawer. ‘My Johnny Bird will be back soon enough, don’t you worry.’

‘I’m not worried,’ I said, I looked at the floor. ‘There’s no one?’

‘There it is!’ she cried, removing a carving knife from the drawer. She took the pie in hand and came back around the counter. I raised my hand again.

‘I need to sleep.’

‘Not before desert,’ she said, setting the pie on the table.

‘Ma’am, I—’

‘—*Maarriamm*.’

‘Mariam—’

‘How big a slice?’

‘Enough!’

The knife shuddered and fell, clanging off the tin and falling to our feet. For a moment, we both stared at it. Then I moved to pick it up.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I don’t know what—’

‘It’s all right,’ she said hurriedly kneeling down. I paused before her, then I stood up. I looked over the small room, then out the window. Then I turned to the door. It was still closed. Mariam had retrieved the knife and stood beside the table. When I turned to her, she looked away, first at her hands then at the table. She found the pie again, briefly her hand rose. She seemed to notice it and instantly it fell away. Her eyes passed over the floor, several times. Finally, they rose to mine. For a moment, she looked lost, then she seemed to find something.

‘Your hands,’ she said.

I looked down. They were covered in earth, and when I turned them over, there was a stroke of small cuts across each padded base. They’d wept, leaving a strange black sheen that trailed across my palms and touched the gates of a few fingers. The cuts were encrusted with grit, and when I held up my hands, they welled and wept afresh.

‘Oh Exley,’ Mariam said. She came before me and took my hands in her own. She stared into the cuts, then she guided me to a chair gently by my wrists.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said. ‘I just fell.’ She went to the sink and filled a pitcher. She grabbed a small towel and returned with the pitcher and a bowl. She put them both on the table before me and stood by my side.

‘Let me help you,’ she said. I brought my hands up from beneath the table and placed them into the bowl. She poured water over them and the bowl ran red.

‘Wait,’ she said. She crossed over again to the sink and returned with a block of soap. She took the pitcher and poured water over her own hands, then she pressed the soap between them, building a lather which she rubbed over my palms, passing her fingertips gently over the cuts to dislodge the dirt there.

‘It’s all right,’ I whispered. She took the pitcher and poured the water afresh over my hands, washing away the soap and dirt, then she took the towel from her shoulder and pressed it firmly against my palms, blotting them until they were dry. She was sitting next to me now, her face turned toward her work. I could see clearly the deep channels that fixed either eye and cradled the heavy half-moons beneath.

She saw that I was watching her and turned to me.

‘Tom,’ she said. I did not reply. ‘Speak to him. He may know something.’

It took me a moment, then I thanked her.

Mariam had been to Tom Cannon's place only once, and even then she hadn't seen him. She'd stayed in the truck while Little John delivered the cider. Tom didn't pay for it. He never did. It was a gift, Mariam said—always a gift. Tom couldn't afford it. Why she did not know, and John was too decent to explain.

She told me over breakfast how to reach the house. It was far from town, she said, so far the sun would have begun its retreat long before I arrived. She asked me several times if I didn't want to wait for Little John. Each time I told her I didn't, each time she said she understood. Shortly I found myself on the road again.

I followed Mariam's directions. They took me in a wide arc around town and then beyond it, far beyond any place I recognized, and still I did not know what I would say when I finally saw the skeletal shack. It leaned against a pole barn that leaned right back, and it was hard to tell which of the two structures might fall on the other first.

I couldn't see all this from the road, only the roof of the barn, which jutted above a tight guard of feral trees like a final protest rising from some great green ruin. Brittle hayfields flanked the homestead on all sides. I followed the road that divided them, then I turned off onto a dirt path that, at points, was barely wide enough for a horse. The foliage rose above me on either side, so thick that it closed out the breeze that had blown behind me all the way from Little John's, leaving no noise but the wheeling movement of my thoughts and faint footfalls beneath.

The path seemed too long, but then it hooked a corner and spilled into a clearing, at the other end of which was the shack, the pole barn just behind it. The shack was windowless, the lumber gray. At one end there was a small stovepipe chimney next to an open door. A man in a beaten black hat sat on the other side of it, just inside the ragged strip of shade cast by the slant tin roof. He was shirtless, squat, heavy torsod and hairless, burned. He sat with legs apart, short-fingered hands on either knee. He was chewing something. He didn't see me at first—he seemed to be watching nothing in particular—but then his eyes fixed on me.

'Who're you?'

'It's me,' I said.

The man made no response.

'Exley,' I added, removing my hat.

The man leaned forward, hands gripping his knees, squinting now.

'Exley?' he said.

'That's right, Tom—Exley, Exley Almer.'

The man had leaned so far forward that I worried he might tumble and land on his face. I remembered that face. It was heavier now, jeweled and creased but nothing essential had changed, not even the expression, a handful of features that were screwed so tight they looked ready to snap.

I waited for that snap, but instead they seemed to loosen. His lips relaxed. Tom Cannon sat back.

'I'll be damned,' he said.

He rose from his chair and spat something brown and globular into the dirt. He stared at me again, then he began lumbering across the clearing, limping slightly. I put out my hand, he pushed it aside and embraced me.

'Exley Almer,' he said. 'By god, how long's it been?'

I told him. He shook his head.

'I'll be,' he said, clapping me on the shoulder. 'Well c'mon inside, take a load off.'

He turned and started toward the shack. Across his back was a thick ropy scar that drooped from his shoulder blades like a length of telephone line. I could not imagine what had made that scar, and it quickly disappeared beneath the sweat stained shirt Tom grabbed from the chair where he had been sitting. He pulled the shirt over his smooth paunch and was busy buttoning it when he led me inside.

'Take a seat,' he said, gesturing to a small square table that stood opposite the door on the other side of the room. I drew out one of the chairs and sat down. The room was dark and stifling, it smelled of men. Just inside the door, between an iron stove and a small stack of logs, sat an old hutch. One windowed door was gone. Tom stopped by it and

opened the other. He rummaged inside, recovering two tin mugs, then he crossed over to the standing sink, where a black jug was sitting on the floor. He retrieved it and limped over to the table.

‘Got some fresh cider,’ he said, setting the jug in the middle of the table. ‘I’ll pour you some.’

He uncorked the jug and filled both cups with the honey dark drink. I watched him and made no suggestion I knew its origin.

‘Drink up,’ he said, pushing the mug across the table. I thanked him and tasted it—sharp and sweet.

‘Good ain it?’ he said, settling into the chair. He took off his broken black hat and laid it on the table. His hair remained, but it had begun to gray. Even in the halflight this was apparent. That, and the added weight, gave him a gentle appearance, jolly even.

‘Sure is,’ I said. ‘Haven’t had any in a long time.’

‘I’ll say—where you been anyhow?’

I told him, he itched his neck.

‘That’s a walk,’ he said smiling. ‘Good cider don’ make it out that far.’

I nodded.

‘I’m surprised it makes it here.’

Tom looked into his cup.

‘It’s a long way I suppose.’

‘Sure is,’ I grinned. ‘You get sick of town, Tom, or town get sick of you?’

Tom looked at me but didn't respond. He drank down the cider, then poured himself another cup.

'Top yers off?' he asked. I told him no. He corked the jug and replaced it back by the standing sink.

'What brings you through?' he asked when he was seated again.

I thumbed the handle of my mug.

'My sister.'

Tom looked up.

'You got a sister?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Carolyn—Carrie.'

'Never knew.'

'No reason you would,' I said, then quickly adding. 'She's younger, a fair bit younger.'

Tom nodded. Outside, a breeze breached the trees and carried a cloud of dust across the clearing.

'She's in trouble,' I said.

'How?'

'Jack.'

Tom's eyes flashed, then they returned to the mug.

'Go on,' he said.

'He's with her, now. They're together, I guess. I don't know. I only know what John told me.'

'Little John?'

‘Yes.’

‘What’d he tell you?’

I hesitated.

‘He told me he hurt her—Jack hurt her, and somebody needs to do something about it.’

I paused.

‘That’s why I’m here. I aim to do something about it.’

Tom stared at me.

‘What do you aim to do?’ he asked. There was nothing jolly in his voice.

‘I aim to confront him.’

‘And—’

‘Make him stop.’

I hesitated.

‘Kill him if I have to.’

Tom stared at me. He grimaced and shook his head.

‘I forgot you two are cut from the same strange cloth.’

‘What did you say?’

Tom ignored me. He reached across himself gripped his shoulder.

‘What’s it like there?’

‘Where?’

‘At home,’ Tom said, ‘your home. You got a good job?’

‘I guess.’

'Nice place?'

'Nice enough.'

'Wife, kids?'

'A wife.'

'No kids?'

'We're expecting.'

'Is it good, Ex, you happy?'

'Yes.'

'Are you?'

'Of course.'

'Then what are you doin here?'

The shack was silent.

'I told you,' I said.

Tom shook his head.

'C'mon, Ex—d'you even know?'

I stared at him, then I looked in my mug. It was empty.

'I told you, Tom.'

'I know what you said, Ex, but did you listen to what you were saying, cause they sounded like dead words to me. I don't even think you believe em.'

I tried again. When I was done, Tom was quiet. He shook his head.

'I don' know why you left here, Ex, and frankly, it ain my business. But you did, and whatever it was that made you leave was enough to keep you from comin back. You went yer way, folks here went theirs. And what you got now is good—is it good, Ex?'

'Yes.'

'Is it?'

'I told you—*yes!*'

'Yet here you are, tryin to pick up the pieces of something you don' own.'

'It's my sister, Tom.'

'Really, Ex?' he leaned across the table. 'You left her too, you know? Were you close to her? She dear to you?'

I could see the tendons in Tom's hand where he gripped his shoulder.

'Was she?'

'She's kin.'

'*Kin nothing!*' he said, slamming his free hand on the table. 'Yer no sentimentalist, Ex. Never been. Goddammit, you hardly let people near you, kin or no kin. You changed?'

I was quiet.

'*Have you?*'

I said nothing.

'Didn' think so. You keep about as far from people as he does.'

'Who?'

Tom snorted.

'Who you think?'

I opened my mouth but said nothing. I sat back.

Tom began kneading his shoulder intently.

'I never got either of you,' he said. 'Yer both about as strange as strange can be.'

'I have to, Tom.'

'No you don't—yer jumpin back into somethin you don't understand to do somethin you ain capable of for reasons you ain even clear about. I mean—you ain never been the hero, Ex.'

He paused.

'Less you changed.'

He eyes narrowed.

'You ain' changed, have you?'

I looked out at the clearing.

'Didn' think so,' he said.

Tom sat back. He was panting now, but with each breath he seemed to tire. Soon he slumped over his cup.

'What can you tell me, Tom?'

Tom laughed. It was a weak laugh, almost a cough.

'Nothin,' he said.

'You have to help me, Tom. What can you tell me—about Jack, about what's happened to him.'

Tom looked up at me. He flicked open the top button of his shirt where a dark blossom of sweat had formed, then he drew his cup up only to find it was empty. He placed

it back on the table. I sat back. The sun sat low enough that black tendrils of shade had begun creeping across the clearing. In the distance, an animal cried and fell silent. I was exhausted.

‘I don’t understand it, Tom. This . . . it’s not like Jack, not this, beating a woman, a girl. Jack could stand his ground, better than anybody I’ve ever known, but he didn’t go around hurting people, not like this. I mean—you remember, he wasn’t a bully, didn’t have to be. He didn’t *need* anything, not from you or me or anybody.’

I shook my head.

‘I just don’t understand. It came so easy to him.’

Tom was watching me. He waited until I was done, then he released the hand from his shoulder.

‘Now I know why yer here,’ he said.

There were footfalls in the clearing and a small black dog came darting into the shack. A young round woman appeared in the doorway cradling a child in her arm. Tom stood up just as the dog reached the table, reaching out with one hand as if to show me the door.

‘Trudy,’ he said, gesturing to the woman. ‘Come here, meet Exley, Exley Almer.’

The young woman put the child down, a boy, who toddled nervously as he crossed the room behind her. In her other hand she held a large wicker basket filled top full with vegetables.

The woman came before me and put out her free hand. I took it gently.

‘Trudy,’ Tom said eagerly. ‘This here’s Exley. He’s been away fer some time, I ain seen him in years,’ he paused and grinned, ‘not since you was a girl, but he’s back now and stopped in to say hello.’

Tom looked back at me.

‘He’s an old friend.’

The young woman held my hand.

‘It’s a pleasure,’ she said.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ I said.

She passed in front of me and placed the basket on the table.

‘Trudy was out back in the garden,’ Tom said. ‘You should see it, Ex, some of the biggest tomatoes around—right Tru?’

She blushed and looked away.

‘*Ammmm*, she’s just bein modest. Take a look at em, Ex, I’m tellin you!’

Tom pointed at the basket so determinedly he might have been accusing it of murder. I walked over and admired what I found. The woman crossed behind me to the other end of the shack. I turned and saw there a bed and a baby’s crib. I had not seen them before. The woman went back to a small nightstand where a blue pitcher stood side by side with a bowl. She poured water from the pitcher into the bowl. Then she washed her hands.

I watched her and felt a hand grip my shoulder.

‘It’s late,’ Tom said.

I nodded and turned to the door. He steadied me, squeezing my shoulder.

‘You should stay for supper,’ he said. His voice was husky, there was regret in his face.

I smiled and picked up my hat.

‘It’s a long walk, Tom. I’ve got to get back.’

‘No,’ the woman said, turning to us. ‘*Please* stay, we never have company.’

‘I’m sorry, ma’am,’ I said. I didn’t doubt her. ‘I need to get home before nightfall.’

The young woman looked to Tom to see if there were anything he could do. He smiled to assure her there wasn’t.

‘All right, Ex, but you take a few of these with you for the road,’ he said, reaching into the basket. ‘And c’mon back and visit—yer always welcome here.’

He removed three ripe tomatoes and tied them in a handkerchief, then he handed the bundle to me.

‘I’ll just be a second, Tru,’ he said.

We left the shack. Tom led me back across the clearing, the small black dog trotting behind us. At the green gateway I stopped.

‘Is there nothing you can tell me?’

Tom smiled.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I left that all a long time ago, and there’s nothin here that makes me want to go back.’

‘All right,’ I said, turning. Tom caught me by the arm.

‘Listen Ex—look at me.’

I turned to him.

'The eyes don' lie the way yer memories do.'

He held me still.

'You got that?'

I hesitated a moment, then told him I did.

Near sunset, along the wide arc I'd followed that morning, I made a turn away from the redwash horizon on a road I assumed was Little John's. It was not—a mistake I didn't realize until a royal blue band began closing off the sky and I could only see enough to know that every farm looked the same to me and I had no idea where I was. I tried doubling back, but I soon lost track of turns and found myself on a small side road that had been scratched out of an orchard. I followed the path for some time, waiting for a turn, until I came to the end of the orchard, to a crossroad where I found the remains of an old outbuilding. Some time ago a corner post had split, shifting the weight of the roof and pulling the face off the narrow structure, revealing a weathered cavity within. I peered into the cavity, to the black timber guts, then I continued on, coming around the building to the still solid wall that fronted the far end. It slumped against the road. I'd nearly passed it before I stopped and turned and studied the warped wallboards that followed the orchard edge.

The Johnson stables. Big John had been right after all.

I turned and continued on.

By the time I arrived back, the countryside was shadowed in still shades of blue. I came upon the farm and crossed the yard, relieved to find the house. There were no lights on, but someone was waiting for me on the front steps. It was Sarah, she watched my arrival.

‘Mama told me to wait for you,’ she said when I reached the porch. Her pigtails had been combed out, and she was dressed in a blue cotton nightgown, her knees pulled beneath her chin.

‘That was nice of your mama,’ I said. ‘Is she inside?’

‘No, she’s out back putting up the wash. John Junior’s with her.’

‘So you’re alone.’

‘Yes—but only for now.’

I smiled wearily. ‘Thank you,’ I said and began climbing the steps.

‘*Sitsit!*’ she cried. Immediately she scooted over though there was ample room on the step.

‘*Pleese* Exley.’

‘All right,’ I said. I put down the tomatoes and sat on the step beside her, ‘Just for a minute.’

We looked over the yard at the blackened barn and waited for the saltpepper of stars. At some point, the girl looked up at me. She watched me for a time, then she reached over and fit her small hand in mine.

‘Are *you* alone?’ she asked.

I looked down. She was still watching the yard.

‘Now?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I mean at home—*your* home.’

I hesitated.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Good—It’s no good that way.’

‘Being alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘How do you know?’

She looked up.

‘Have *you* ever seen anybody happy that way?’

She grinned.

‘What’s she like?’

‘Who?’

The girl giggled.

‘*You know who.*’

She grinned again her gap-toothed grin. I picked her up, still holding her hand, and put her on my lap.

‘Somebody’s a busynose.’

‘*Me?*’ she objected. I squeezed her side. She squealed.

‘*Tell me tell me!*’

‘All right,’ I relented, ‘but not tonight. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day and I need my rest, but if you let me go to bed and tell your mama goodnight for me, I will tell you. Okay?’

She leaned her head toward mine.

‘Promise?’ she said.

‘I promise.’

‘Okay,’ she said and let me go.

I dreamed that night. I rarely dream, and even when I do, I wake only with the strange discomfort of dreaming. I never remember what I saw. But I did dream that night, and I remember what I saw when I woke and the dream ended and the night returned.

I was sitting in the middle of a small living room. A woman was with me. She walked about the room and every so often she stopped and pointed at some object. ‘Chair’ I would say or ‘Lamp’ and she would continue on. She circled the room, pointing to objects—‘Table’ ‘Desk’ ‘Window’ ‘Clock—and I named them, each in turn, until a look of uneasiness came over her. She stood still for some time, then she gestured for me to follow her.

The woman turned into a long hallway. At the opposite end was a mirror where I caught sight of myself. I wore a gray felt hat. I continued on. At the other end of the hallway was a second, smaller room. The woman was standing in the middle of it. She motioned to me, a gesture calm but somehow urgent. I spoke—‘Dresser’ ‘Bookshelf’ ‘Bureau’ ‘Bed’—then she paused before pointing again.

'Picture' I said when her finger finally stopped. She hesitated, then she began pointing more determinedly. 'Picture' I said 'Picture!' Her hand fell, she looked fearfully at me. She started across the room, I began exclaiming even before she arrived '*Crib*' '*Crib*'. She did not respond. She bent over the crib and removed a small bundle. She cradled it in her arms and turned to me. It was a little girl. She had auburn hair just like her mother. She was sleeping

'Baby,' I said. The woman lowered her head and began to cry. '*Baby*,' I pleaded with her, '*Baby, Baby!*' A sob escaped her and she turned from me. I held out my hand. 'Baby' I said. She laid the child in the crib, then she turned to me. She raised her hand, placing it over her heart. A finger touched her throat.

She looked at me.

I woke with a start. The house was still. I sat up and stared at the black passage of the open closet, then I pulled away the sheet and swung my legs over the bed. My feet passed in circles over the floor until they found my overalls. I bent over and picked them up. I put them on and went downstairs, feeling my way along the walls through the darkened rooms. The front door was unlocked. I opened it and stepped onto the porch, easing the door behind me. The night air was cool, the barnyard empty. I breathed deeply.

'Exley.'

I ducked.

'*Oh* Exley—it's only me.'

I turned to the far end of the porch. A black bloom rose from one end of the bench. I dropped my hands.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I didn't see you.'

‘No Exley not at all—*I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have startled you. There’s no reason for anyone to be up, it’s just—

The shadow stirred.

‘I have a hard time sleeping—when John’s away. I worry about him. It’s silly of me I know . . . I can’t help it.’

‘It’s all right,’ I said. ‘He’s lucky to have someone worry after him like that.’

She hesitated.

‘That’s nice of you to say, Exley—really it is.’

We were quiet for a moment.

‘Are your hands all right?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘They’re fine, thank you.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, really, it’s just scratches.’

‘Because we can bandage them.’

‘No, honestly, they’re just fine—thank you though.’

She nodded. Quiet again.

‘Did you get the tomatoes?’

‘Yes, Exley, they’re wonderful.’

‘Big, aren’t they?’

‘Yes.’

‘Perfectly ripe.’

‘Perfectly, thank you—I’ll use them tomorrow.’

I smiled and nodded and looked over the porch, then I turned to the door.

‘Well good night.’

‘No, Exley,’ she replied. ‘Please—you can help me, I’m skinning apples.’ I stopped and turned to her, she found my face and shrank. ‘Nono, it’s late of course, you must be tired.’

I let go of the door.

‘I can’t sleep either—let me help you.’

I crossed the porch and sat on the other end of the bench. There was a white pewter bowl between us, the eclipse of rim glowed in the moonlight.

‘Oh—wait here, Exley.’

She sprang up and vanished inside the house. After a moment, she returned clutching a white cloth bundle under her arm. She sat down and unrolled it. A slender knife was tucked inside.

‘Here,’ she said, draping the cloth over my lap. She handed me the knife, the dark handle first.

‘Just drop the peelings in your lap, cores too. We’ll throw them across the road when we’re done.’

She brought around a wooden basket that sat on her side of the bench and slid it between our feet, then she took an apple from the basket and peeled away the black skin. She split the apple into two pieces, then four. Finally, she cut the core from the pieces and dropped them into the bowl. The bowl was almost full. She’d been sitting there for some time.

I picked an apple and joined her. In the halfshadows of the moonlight, she seemed somehow at ease.

‘Whenever I can’t sleep I always end up baking,’ she began. ‘It’s habit, I guess. My mother was the same way. I’m making apple pie. It’s John’s favorite, he just *adores* apple pie.’

I smiled. It had been his favorite when we were boys.

‘You better be careful,’ I said. ‘If John figures out that you bake every time he’s gone he might leave home more often.’

Mariam laughed and shook her head.

‘You’re *awful*, Exley, don’t say that.’

‘I’m just teasing. Like you said, he’ll finish his rounds tomorrow and be home before you know it.’

‘Half of them,’ she corrected. ‘He’ll leave again in a few days to deliver the rest.’

‘He delivers a lot of cider,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘He does, doesn’t he? We make it in the fall, just after the harvest—the *whole* family. The children and I start. We go to the orchard and gather the drops while the workers are out picking. I make a game of it. We race through the orchard, and at the end of the day, we see who has the most apples. I undercount my basket so the children can win, but Sarah always gathers the most. She’s still too big for her brother, but he’s *so* good about it. He takes after his father that way, such a good-natured boy.’

‘He is,’ I said. She smiled with pride.

‘I know, he never cries, Exley, no matter how many more apples his sister brings in. He’s just happy to be helpful, to do his part.’

‘That’s the way his father was.’

‘He hasn’t changed,’ she said.

She removed another apple from the basket.

‘Do you make it here?’

‘The cider?’

‘Yes.’

‘In the storage. There’s a grinder there, a press too. They were John’s grandfather’s, old now but they still work. His father never used them so they sat up in the barn, back in the corner.’

‘Under the hayloft?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘You remember them—then you must remember they were left uncovered and every bird in town seemed to agree they were a perfect place to nest. Oh Exley, you should have seen the mess. It took us days to clean them out, but we did and moved them to the storage. When the harvest is done, John and I help the children grind the apples into mash and press them. There are barrels inside the storage, all along the wall, I’ll show you, we make enough cider to fill every one of them. John starts bottling in the spring. He sells to the same families every year so he only prepares as much as he needs for a run. He should back by lunch tomorrow—you know how much he hates missing a meal.’

She had been steadily peeling an apple as she spoke. Bare of skin now she turned to me, her face smoothed by the absent light.

‘Oh Exley, you don’t know how happy he’ll be to see you. He’s told me all about you, about when you were boys, the trouble you used to make. It’s been so long since you were here, there’s so much to talk about—where will you begin?’

She looked at me expectantly, then her mouth stiffened. She looked down at her hands.

‘Yes, there’s so much to talk about,’ she said.

We were silent. Mariam split the bare apple into four parts, cut out the cores, and dropped the white fruit into the bowl. I hadn’t finished my apple yet, but I took another from the basket and put it in my lap.

‘You have wonderful children,’ I said.

‘They were welcoming, yes?’

‘They couldn’t have been more so.’

‘Good,’ she said, her voice warming. ‘They are wonderful children, aren’t they?’

‘They are—you two are lucky, very lucky.’ After a moment I added, ‘I hope to be so lucky myself some day.’

‘We *are* lucky,’ she said, taking another apple from the basket. ‘Doesn’t John Junior take after his father?’

‘Spitting image. And Sarah looks just like you—I can see it in her smile.’

Mariam paused.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘That’s kind of you to say.’ She stared at the new apple she held, then she stuck her knife beneath the dark skin and began peeling it back.

‘They aren’t my children, Exley. You should know that. I mean they are mine—*now* they are—but I didn’t bear them. John’s first wife did.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘He didn’t tell me,’

‘There’s nothing to be sorry about,’ she said gently. ‘He’s not my first husband either. We’ve both taken on new things.’

We were quiet. I looked out beyond the barn over the rolling moonwhite land.

‘He died,’ she said after a moment.

‘Who?’

‘My first husband.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

‘It’s all right. It was time, he didn’t feel a thing.’

She paused and put down her apple, then she drew together her hands, as if to compose herself. She began again, slower this time.

‘My husband was older than I,’ she said. ‘Never married before me. I was just a girl when I became his wife, a young girl, but I loved him dearly. He loved me that way too—as if I were something precious to him, something that explained the passing of days, that bound them with purpose. We had a wonderful home together, out beyond town, far from here, and had my husband lived, there would have been children for us to share. But a fever took him, just after the harvest. He struggled in bed for days. I stayed by his side, read to him, waiting for him to grow well again. My husband was so strong—never cried out in pain, thanked me for whatever I did, told me he loved me, said it each time as if it were the last,

with such tenderness that it made me want to smile and weep and throw my arms around him.’

She paused, seeming to count the beats.

‘He died in the morning. I had taken away his breakfast—he had eaten nothing, his food was untouched—but he asked me to bring him an apple. He loved apples. So I went to the pantry and got the biggest one I could find. I had cut it for him and spread the pieces in a circle around the plate. I thought he was asleep when I came in, but when I put the plate on his lap and his eyes didn’t open—I knew then my husband was gone. His cheeks were still warm when I kissed him good-bye.’

The words were carefully measured, as if spoken for someone else. When they were done, her gaze fell, and she seemed to remember that I was beside her. She turned to me quickly, as if to warn me of something. Then she looked at her hands.

‘But I don’t think about that time,’ she said. ‘Not any more.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said again.

We were quiet.

‘What happened to her?’ I asked.

‘Who?’

‘John’s wife—his first wife.’

She was silent for a moment.

‘She died in labor,’ she said, ‘giving birth to Little John.’

We were quiet again. I began peeling my apple.

‘That’s how my mother died.’

Mariam turned to me, I stared at my lap.

‘She had a room next to mine, just across the hall. I could hear her all through the night. My father waited until it was over to call me in. There was a baby girl at the end of the bed—they hadn’t closed her eyes yet.’

We were quiet for a long time. The dark strips of skin collected in my lap.

‘I don’t know much,’ she said urgently. ‘I can’t help you.’

‘I know, Mariam—it’s all right.’ I hesitated, ‘I trust you.’

She moved to say something, then she paused and nodded. She looked down again at her hands. I cut what remained of the apple into four white pieces, then I removed the cores. I dropped the pieces into the bowl and drew the cloth into a bundle. I walked across the road, unfurled the bundle, and flipped the jumble into the grass. I folded the cloth twice and returned to the porch.

‘Will you be all right out here?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good,’ I said, drawing the front door open.

‘Exley.’

I stopped and turned to her. She seemed to struggle for a moment.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

I did not wake again until the morning returned and the house filled with a familiar smell. I lay on my side side, letting it fill my lungs. Then I sat up and looked outside. It was early yet. I could tell from the long, lean shadows that stenciled the front yard. I washed and dressed and went downstairs. There was no one around, but a warm reassuring scent filled the kitchen. I opened the oven. There were biscuits baking inside. They were spread across the griddle like small lumps of gold. I stared at them until the front door opened behind me.

‘Are they ready yet?’

‘Almost,’ I said. Mariam put down the basket of eggs she’d been carrying and joined me at the stove. She wore the same trousers she’d met me in on the first day. She opened the door and looked in.

‘Almost,’ she said. She removed the straw hat she’d been wearing. Her black hair fell to her shoulders, the gray forelock framing one side of her face. She looked at me, then she laid her hand on my arm.

‘He’ll be here soon.’

‘I know,’ I said.

She smiled.

‘Can I help you with anything?’

‘The chores are nearly done. I still have to feed the horses, but I’ll tend to them after breakfast.’

I told her I would join her. She smiled again, a gentle smile, and thanked me.

‘The children will be awake soon so I better get breakfast ready.’

‘Let me help you,’ I said.

She demurred, but I persisted until she handed me a slab of bacon and a carving knife. I put the bacon on the chopping block and began cutting thin ribbons of meat. Her eyes said otherwise but I asked her if she’d been able to sleep.

‘A little,’ she said. ‘Not much—I never do, not when John’s away.’

‘You miss him,’ I said.

‘Yes—very much so.’

She opened the oven and peered in. After a moment, she took a cloth in hand, folded it twice over, and removed the heavy tray.

‘I was going to make eggs, would you like eggs?’

‘Yes,’ I said, then adding quickly, ‘Let *me* make something—for the children.’

The suggestion surprised her, but when she saw I was serious, she smiled.

‘All right,’ she said. She paused, ‘You like them, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Very much so.’

‘They like you, too,’ she said and opened the cupboard.

I finished slicing the bacon. Mariam put a frying pan on the stove for me.

‘I’ll wake them,’ she said.

Not long after the children arrived, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Sarah’s hair had been pleated and pulled into two brown pigtails. She was wearing her cotton blue nightgown, her brother a pair of red long johns. Mariam followed behind, herding them toward the kitchen table.

‘No, bring them over.’

Mariam turned to me.

‘I want to show them something.’

The children were made to turn and staggered toward the stove. I bent down to greet them.

‘Good morning,’ I said. ‘How about a golden moon for breakfast?’

John Junior was the more awake of the two. He looked up at his sister uncertainly, but she preferred to keep her eyelids closed. Finally he turned back and put his hand on my knee.

‘Good,’ I said. I took him beneath the arms and lifted him. I leaned him over the chopping block.

‘Grab the bacon,’ I said. The boy grabbed a handful of meat. I wheeled him back around to the stove.

‘Now drop it,’ I said. John Junior opened his hand and the bacon plopped into the skillet.

‘When I was your age,’ I said disentangling the strips of meat and lining them across the pan, ‘if I woke from my dreams smelling biscuits, I knew that I was going to have golden moons for breakfast. My mama used to make them in the morning—’

‘What was her name?’

I looked down. Sarah had decided to open her eyes. She greeted me with a gaptoothed grin. I smiled at her.

‘Her name was Lynnea,’ I said, ‘but my papa called her Linnie.’

The girl nodded in thanks. I told her to bring me some cheese.

‘I would get up early to watch her,’ I continued. ‘She’d make the biscuits first thing in the morning, and when she put them in the oven and they started baking, you could smell them all through the house. That’s what morning smells like to me, even now, and when I was little and I’d wake to that smell, I knew that everything was just right, that my mama was downstairs waiting for me.’

Sarah returned with a block of cheese.

‘Do *you* want to help?’

The pigtailed bobbed.

‘Good,’ I said. I took John Junior from my side and sat him on the counter next to the chopping block, then I pulled out one of the drawers below. I took the cheese from Sarah and placed it on the block, then I leaned over, took her shoulders, and spun her around. I tucked my hands beneath her slender arms and hoisted her, lowering her so that one foot landed on either side of the drawer. I wrapped my arm around her tiny waist and held her against me, then I took her hand in mine and curled her fingers over the knife

handle. I drew the knife up, centered the blade on one end of the cheese, and we cut through the block.

‘I always wanted to help,’ I said, ‘but when I was little, she would only let me watch, that’s how I learned—watching her fry the bacon, slice the cheese—so when she told me I could help—’

‘—you already knew!’

‘That’s right,’ I said, looking at the pink pleat at the top of the girl’s head. ‘I knew exactly what to do.’

We continued cutting the cheese until we had a heap of small yellow slices. Then, still holding her hand, I lay the carving knife next to the cutting board, hoisted the girl again and lowered her to the floor.

I handed Sarah what remained of the cheese and asked her to put it away. She padded off. I checked the bacon. The strips were brown and bright with grease. She returned to my side. I picked her up again and sat her on the counter next to her brother.

‘Did your papa help?’

I smiled to myself.

‘No, he didn’t help make the biscuits—but he *sure* helped eat them.’

The children giggled. I took two biscuits and handed them to Sarah, two more and handed them to her brother. Then I took two myself and put them on the cutting board. I picked up the knife.

‘My papa had an apple orchard like yours,’ I said, taking a biscuit and cutting a portal into the side of it, ‘and when it came time for the harvest, my mama used to make extra for him to take to the orchard so he didn’t have to come home for lunch.’

‘Did you help him too?’

‘Yes,’ I said, digging my nail under the edge of the incision and carefully pulling away the crust, ‘My mama put extra sandwiches for me in my papa’s lunch pail—’

‘So you could eat together.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ I said. I placed the gold disc at one end of the cutting board and began removing white tufts of bread from inside the biscuit. ‘My papa would bring me with him.’

‘To help him?’

‘Eventually—but first I spent a long time looking.’ I took the boy’s biscuits. ‘I watched him do things when I was too little to help—in the orchards, around the barn, I watched him all the time. He’d show me things, he was good about that when I was little. He’d take me with him to tend the cows first thing in the morning, and when he started up the tractor, he’d put me on his lap. He had to yell because the tractor was so loud, I remember that, but he didn’t mean to scare me, he just wanted me to see things—but he didn’t have to tell me to watch. I wanted to know how things worked. Just like when I was with my mama.’

The white mound of bread grew at the corner of the cutting board.

‘But you do that, right—both of you.’

The children nodded.

‘That’s right. Everybody does. That’s how you make sense of things, you watch and you see how things work and you figure out where you fit.’

I took Sarah’s biscuits.

‘What happens when you see everything?’ she asked. I looked over at her. Her legs were swinging beneath her, her heels tapping softly against the drawers.

‘You don’t, I think,’ I checked, the bacon was ready, ‘If you’re lucky, you see enough, but there are always shadows, no matter how bright it seems, and things have a way of changing. So you have to keep looking, understanding things as best you can, making them familiar to you.’

The biscuits lined the chopping block, each had a hole in its side. The crust was still stacked in the corner. I grabbed it now and handed a wafer to each child.

‘What if you don’t like what you see?’

I looked briefly at the girl, she watched me intently.

‘Some people pretend they don’t see it,’ I said, taking a biscuit in one hand and a slice of cheese in the other. ‘You know, like at night, when you’re in bed and you hear a sound that scares you, you squeeze your eyes shut and pretend it’s not there.’

The children nodded their heads gravely. I tipped the biscuit and laid the slice of cheese over its side. I pushed it through the hole. When it had disappeared, Little John immediately volunteered his crust. I smiled.

‘Not yet,’ I said. I leaned over the stove and turned off the burner. ‘Others see things they don’t like and try to change them, to make them the way they should be so they can be at home with them.’ I retrieved the fork that was sitting next to the pan. ‘That’s the best way

I think, but it's not easy, for things have have a way of pushing back.' I speared one of the bright strips of bacon and twisted it until it wrapped tightly around the fork. Then I turned back around and held the biscuit before the children. With my free hand, I guided the fork to the hole in the side of the biscuit, closing the opening with my fingers when the meat disappeared inside. I withdrew the fork between my fingertips. The children oooed, Little John volunteered the crust again.

'Thank you,' I said, taking it and pushing it inside the hole, which oozed with warm cheese. I turned back to the stove where the bacon continued to crackle and spit.

'You have to seal it,' I said, turning the biscuit on its side and rolling it through the grease, my thumb and forefinger a hub. The skin along the side of the biscuit began to glisten. When it had an even shine, I put the biscuit back on the cutting board, still on its side.

'You see,' I said, touching the rim. 'A golden moon.'

The little boy grabbed for it, I caught his hand.

'We have to let it cool,' I said and took his second biscuit.

'What if you can't change things you don't like?' Sarah said.

I turned to her and took the wafer from her hand.

'What happens to you?'

Mariam had been watching us from the other side of the kitchen. She came toward us now.

'You have to learn how to live with those things,' I said when she stood by my side, 'and hope that, in the living, you don't lose your way.'

We sat around the table and ate biscuits together, drinking cupfills of cool milk and patting our bellies when we'd finished. The little ones lingered until Mariam herded them upstairs. In their absence I tended to the dishes, finishing just in time to see them stream past, scrubbed and dressed, headed out to play. Mariam followed. She grabbed her straw hat from the counter and swept back her hair.

'Let's feed the horses,' she said.

We crossed the quiet yard and came around the silo, climbing the barnbridge side-by-side until we stood before the towering barn doors. We each took a door and rolled it open, startling two birds inside. They dove from the cupola and darted about the rafters in a wheeling frenzy of flapping before coming to rest again on a heavy cross beam overhead.

When the noise had died, Mariam smiled. She grabbed two of my fingers in the knot of her hand and pointed to the birds.

‘They’re Sarah’s,’ she said. ‘She claimed them some time ago. She’s even given them names—though I can never remember them. I can’t even tell the difference between them, but Sarah can. When she thinks I’m not looking she’ll steal bread from the pantry to feed them. She loves it when they eat out of her hands. You should see her, Exley. She tries to keep from laughing because the birds will scatter but she can’t help herself.’

We stared at the two birds high above us. Mariam stood in the open light, just beyond the shadow that held half the floor. I watched her. She smiled faintly, as if remembering some promise made long ago.

‘My mother kept birds,’ I said. ‘Pheasant hens. We kept them just off the barn. There was a coop there. We fed them in the morning, she let me carry the seed. She had names for the birds, but I don’t remember them—not any more.’

I had run short of breath. Mariam waited. At last she spoke gently.

‘You remember her,’ she said.

I nodded.

‘Some things. Moments really—what I want to remember. I can remember the sound of her laughter. And her clothes, I remember her clothers. My father spoiled her, bought her whatever he could. The cost never mattered to him. Funny to think that—all he ever wanted was to make her happy, to bring her joy.’

‘I remember, in the summer, sitting by the line watching the wash, tumbling with the wind. The colors, Mariam—you should have seen them. I’d never seen anything so wonderful. If I close my eyes I can still see them, even now.’

I paused.

‘That’s how I remember her if I try. But I don’t try, not often anyway, not any more.’

I was quiet.

‘Your father,’ Mariam said.

‘He changed when she died. He was lost, I think. He never said so, but he didn’t need to. You could see it—the light left him. He felt wronged, I think, as if the very thing that made sense of the world had been taken from him and there was nothing left to do. Nothing he could do. Nothing at all.’

‘He never spoke of her afterward, not even her name. Imagine that. As if he could will her from the past, write her away . . . as if it could be that easy.’

‘He burned inside. I know that. It changed him. He became bitter, cruel—angry.’

I searched the shadows.

‘He was broken. What he was, what he had been—it was lost. He became simple, brute. That’s what happens I think. You become a simple expression of what remains. Of anger, misery. Grief. There’s nothing to compel you to look beyond anymore. Nothing at all. Why would you?’

‘That’s the danger when you’re lost like that, there’s nothing to keep you from swinging your fists. You break what’s left.’

One of the birds buried its beak beneath its wing and began scratching. I knew that I was talking to myself.

‘But I was just a boy, I don’t know, I can’t be sure.’

I paused.

‘He never married again—’

'He didn't,' she whispered.

'Good,' I said.

We were quiet again. Mariam pulled me from the shadows.

'Let's get the hay.'

We took a boundbale from the hayloft and carried it outside to the small corral that abutted the barn. I cut the twine, and we broke up the bale, filling the large trough. Then we leaned side-by-side over the split rail fence and watched the horses. There were only two of them, a large gray quarter horse and a lean white mare with brownspotted shanks. They ran side-by-side around the corral, the white mare on the outside, the quarter horse just behind it. They galloped past and continued down the length of the fence.

'He's blind,' Mariam said, taking off her straw hat and letting her black hair cover her shoulders, 'Disease took his sight some time ago. You can see it in his eyes, it's like storm clouds are building there.'

The horses came to one end of the fence. The white mare slowed her gallop and turned before the corner. The quarter horse followed, turning along the inside a halfstep behind her. The two continued to the next corner.

'He follows the mare,' I said.

Mariam nodded.

'They move as one.'

The horses turned the corner and began running the length of the fence at the opposite end of the corral. The mare briefly pulled ahead of the quarter horse, then slowed until he came alongside her.

‘They’ve run together a long time.’

‘They were raised together.’

Mariam’s straw hat dangled over the fence, it nodded gently with her words.

‘They run this ground every day?’

‘Every day, the two of them.’

‘Then there’s nothing to see. He knows when to turn.’

We watched the horses round the corner and thunder past. I turned to her as they went.

‘There’s something perfect in that,’ I said.

‘What?’ she replied.

I turned to her.

‘I said there’s something perfect in that.’

Her head was level with mine. She opened her mouth, as if caught in breath, then a new look came over her, one at once of tenderness, complete tenderness, and infinite pity.

‘Oh Exley,’ she said brushing past me. She ran the length of the fence, engulfing a man at the end of it. She sprang into his arms and covered his face in kisses. The man’s shoulders began to shake with laughter. *All right now all right* he said, trying to subdue her. She gave him one final kiss on his lips. The man lowered her to the ground and looked at me.

‘Exley!’ he cried, raising a large hand high above his head. I raised my hand slowly in return. The man came toward me, holding Mariam tightly by his side. I held out my hand to him. He grasped it and pulled me into a hug.

‘You got the letter,’ he said.

He released me, looking me over in disbelief.

‘I didn’t think you’d come.’

‘You look good, Little John.’

Little John smiled.

‘You think?’ he said. He smiled and patted his belly. ‘Took a little off the middle, I guess—but lost some up here, too.’

He ran his fingers over his sunburnt scalp.

‘It all evens out,’ I said. Little John laughed.

‘But you,’ he said. ‘Look at you—Exley Almer, y’ain changed a bit.’

I smiled and said nothing.

‘Mary been treatin you right?’ he asked, squeezing the woman’s waist. I looked briefly at her, she didn’t meet my eyes.

‘Couldn’t have been kinder,’ I said.

‘I knew it,’ Little John said. He looked down at Mariam, she stared at him in wide wonder, as if the world were otherwise lost.

‘She told you I was out runnin cider.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Gotta put the empties back in storage. Can y’gimme a hand?’

I told him I would.

'I appreciate it,' he said. 'When we're done, we can go check on the orchards, see how the trees're comin. Should be about time for lunch by then, right Mary?'

Mariam nodded, he could have asked her for anything.

The three of us walked back along the split rail fence, the two of them just before me. The horses had stopped circling the corral. They stood at the far end of the pen, facing each other, their necks crossed. The mare's white tail wisped back and forth. The gray quarter horse was still.

When we came to the end of the fence, we walked along the barn, out to the barnbridge where the truck was parked. We stopped beside it, and Mariam parted from us. She put on her straw hat, lingered for a moment, then turned toward the house. Little John watched her go. When he saw that I was watching him, his face grew red.

'I'm a lucky man,' he said quietly.

I got into the truck, and we pulled back around to the storage. Little John unlocked the large wooden door, and we were at once overwhelmed by the dark fragrance of moldering fruit. He eased the truck inside, back to the far end of the storage, beyond the dimly lit rows of empty apple crates, where we unloaded the cider jugs by the circular light of Little John's headlamps, stacking them on standing shelves that separated the apple press from the wood barrel rows that lined the wall. When we were done, we slowly backed out again, out into the light, and Little John sealed the yawning storage door.

We left the truck next to the barn, and I followed Little John across the road to the edge of the orchard. The leafy rows stretched farther into the distance than I remembered, so far I could no longer see the end of them. Little John saw my surprise and confessed that he'd bought farmland adjacent to his and extended the orchard.

'You've done well for yourself,' I said.

Little John smiled, we walked on.

'Heat's been somethin, Ex. You should see it when I'm out. All over it's like the earth dried up. But we've been spared. It's been hot here, but the rain's been good to us.'

'Looks like it,' I said, stopping beside one of the trees. The branches teemed with fruit so fat even the strongest branch seemed to bow down before us.

'Look here,' John said, plucking a large apple from the tree. He drew out a pocketknife and cut the apple in two, handing one half to me. The white flesh glistened.

'That's somethin ain it?'

'Yes,' I said, looking out across the trees. 'That's something all right.'

We emerged from the orchard to find the children playing in the yard. When they saw us, they stopped and came tearing through the grass. My arms sprang from my sides, but they cried aloud *Papa!* and swarmed their father's legs. He scooped them up, one by one, and received their kisses. They would not let go of him, so he carried them back to the house. I lowered my arms and followed.

Mariam had laid out lunch for us. She'd changed from the trousers into a trim white dress, and her hair was pulled back in a tidy black bun. She invited us to sit down, and we all took our seats, an extra place having been set for me at one corner of the table. We bowed our heads, and Little John said a brief prayer. Then the dishes were passed. There were pork chops and gravy, fried onions, mashed potatoes, and butter-bathed string beans. The room warmed with the sweet smell of cornbread, still rising in the oven. It was ready by the meal's end, and the children took hot hunks of bread and sopped up the gravy still left on their plates.

I was quiet and ate little, declining the cornbread and, later, dessert. It was apple pie. John took one slice, then another. He ate greedily. While he finished, I looked out the window that framed the front yard. The sun was at its height and the sky was clear, but the yard teemed with shadows that seemed to waver and roll in the late afternoon heat. I watched them until I heard someone's name, twice, and recognized it as my own. I turned to Little John.

'Let's go out to the barn,' he said. 'My office is there, we can talk.'

I followed Little John across the yard and up to the barn. He rolled open one of the large barn doors, and we disappeared inside. This time the birds were not stirred by our arrival. I searched the rafters, but they were nowhere to be found. I followed Little John to the back corner of the barn, beneath the hayloft, to a small room that had been two stables when I was a boy but had since been joined and walled off. There was a door at one end. It was unlocked. We entered the office. Little John sat behind an old desk that stood by a window overlooking the small corral. The horses were running again. The faint thunder of hoof-beats grew and faded and grew again as the two of them circled the corral. I looked out the window and watched them briefly, then I sat across from Little John in a wooden chair that was old and frail and groaned beneath me. There was a leather accounts book pushed to one corner of the desk and a single framed photo beneath the window. It was a picture of Mariam, tilted toward Little John. I could barely see it. The only other decoration was a picture tacked to the far wall, opposite the window. It was a crude charcoal drawing of a

man standing on top of a barn with two small children standing on the ground beside it. P A
P A was written over the man's head, the children were smiling.

Little John leaned forward in his chair. He clasped his hands, then he crossed his
arms. Then he clasped his hands again. He rested them on the desk.

'I didn't think you'd come,' he said. He looked briefly out the window, beyond the
corral to where the great woods shouldered the horizon. Then he looked back at me. Then
at the desk.

'I went by the house,' I said.

'When?'

'When I arrived.'

'He wasn't there—'

'No.'

'Good,' Little John said, then, after a moment. 'See yer sister?'

'Through the window. She was washing dishes.'

'She see you?'

'No—I don't think so.'

'Good,' he said again. He was quiet.

'The children were there,' I said.

Little John had been staring at the desk. His eyes rose and then they fell away again.

'They're his,' I said.

'I don't know. Probably not the boys. The child—I don't know.'

Little John looked out the window again.

‘You don’ know anythin do you?’ he said.

‘Only what you told me—in the letter.’

Little John nodded to himself.

‘Thought so.’

We were quiet.

‘I don’ know much,’ he cautioned.

‘I know.’

‘Only what I heard—an that ain much. Jack don’ come roun less he has to and most folks’re happy to return the favor.’

I nodded. Little John settled back in his chair. He looked again at his open hands.

‘The farm’s almost his now,’ he said.

‘Whose?’

‘Yer pa’s farm—yer farm. Been a long time comin. He’s been buyin the orchard piece-by-piece.’

‘He has,’ I said.

Little John nodded. Outside the thunder stopped, the mare whinnied.

‘Yer pa brought him on after you left.’

‘Jack?’

Little John nodded.

‘With Eli gone he needed help.’

‘He died,’ I said.

‘Got drunk one night, passed out in the road. The driver didn even stop.’

I was quiet.

‘I’m sure he didn’t want to work for yer pa, least not at first, but he didn’t have a choice, didn’t have no one.’

He paused.

‘I guess they had that in common.’

Little John sat back in the chair.

‘It was strange, Ex, they seemed to get along almost—least as much as any man could get along with yer pa.’

‘He knew how to deal with him,’ I said.

Little John nodded.

‘Had a picker once, used to work for yer pa, said everybody was scared to death of him, everybody in camp—but not Jack. No matter what yer pa did he never scared him. I think it made him crazy. Said one time yer pa got so mad he made to hit Jack, but Jack beat him to it. Knocked him right down and left before he could say a thing. Guess yer pa hooted and hollered but he called Jack back.’

Little John smiled to himself.

‘He always called him back.’

I tried to return the smile.

‘He needed someone like Jack. Got in over his head after you left but the drownin’ took some time. The first year was the hardest, had to sell off most of his cattle just to make ends meet and no one round here’d give him a fair price.’

I was quiet.

‘That almost killed yer pa, you could tell it by lookin at him. Nobody wanted to help him. Folks saw him gettin what he deserved and they left him to twist, but Jack held things together. Sure, he was helpin himself by it, got back Eli’s orchard by the time he was done, but he did right by yer pa. He brought him through.’

I stared at the desk.

‘He tried to take him in after that, least that’s what people said, but Jack always stayed up the road. Wanted to be by himself.’

Little John paused.

‘Guess he never changed that way.’

I remained silent.

‘He stayed out there till yer pa passed. A fever—didn take long. Jack stayed with him at the house, stayed right by his side. Heard he wept when he finally passed.’

Little John searched his hands.

‘I guess when two people spend so much time together—’

He left me to complete the thought.

‘He stayed on after that. Yer pa asked him to. Carrie wasn a girl no more, but she still needed lookin after, and there was no one but Jack. He took over the farm, knew how to run it. He did well, Ex, yer pa would have been proud.’

‘That’s how he came to be with Carrie,’ I said.

Little John nodded.

‘He watched over her, let her grow, did what you would’ve done had you been there. He was good to her, Ex. He’s ain a bad man, it’s jus—’

The sentiment was lost. Little John looked out the window as if to find it again.

‘He didn’t say a thing when she started seein’ Jim. You don’t know him, Ex. He was a farmhand, came to town after you left. He didn’t leave you much to trust but he always seemed to find work. Carrie fell in with him. I don’t know how but I guess that don’t matter. Folks find each other for bad reasons all the time, and for Jack, it was only the findin’ that was important, the rest was, well, it was jus—’

Little John searched for the word.

‘Details,’ I said.

He nodded.

‘The whole thing must have killed Jack but he never said a word about it. He just let her go and moved back up the road. Still ran the farm, till your sister started showing and her and Jim got married. Then he kept to his orchard.

‘But yer sister, Ex—I don’t know. After a while she starts comin’ down the road, lookin’ for Jack. She come by the house when Jim was gone. He was always out somewhere, whoring or pissing away the farm, so she was all by herself. Jack didn’t want her to, but she come by anyway. He wouldn’t make her leave—that’s not his way. He wanted her to go, but he wouldn’t make her leave.’

‘That how it started?’

Little John stared at me.

‘It started long before, Ex, he just couldn’t make it end.’

He sat back in his chair.

‘One night, Carrie come runnin down the road, screamin like she got death on her heels. Jack come out and he gets her calmed down, and she starts sayin that Jim’s suspectin things, that he’s gonna kill her. Well Jim’s comin up the road right behind her and Carrie’s so scared she runs inside the house, screamin to break the day, and Jim, he tries runnin after her, but Jack—’

Little John looked up again. I looked at the desk and nodded.

‘They locked him up fer that—lucky it weren longer. Lot of folks thought it should be. By the time he got out, Jim was gone. Didn even try to take the boys—wondered if they were his I suppose. Jack didn move in, not right then, he stayed up the road, but Carrie’d come round so much it didn matter.’

‘They get married?’

Little John shook his head.

‘They can’, she’s still married to Jim.’

He paused.

‘I don’ imagine they tried.’

Somewhere high above us, birds began flying about the rafters. There was a flurry of sound that stopped almost as soon as it began. Little John waited for it to pass, then he sat back in his chair.

‘Yer sister, Ex—’

He struggled.

‘I don’ know, she don’ leave you with an easy feeling. I mean, the way she goes aroun town—’

He stopped and looked at me anxiously.

‘It’s all right, John,’ I said. He waited a moment.

‘With her it’s almost like it’s all in the getting, not in the having.’

I was quiet.

‘You don’t think the child’s his,’ I said.

Little John shook his head.

‘I don’ know—I don’ suppose he does either.’

We were quiet again.

‘I remember this one time, I run across Jack in town. I was waiting around fer Mary and he come out of the feed store, walked right past me so I called his name.’

Little John stopped.

‘It was the strangest thing, Ex. He didn turn roun. He stopped there in the street, his shoulders all hitched up, like somebody’d whispered a horror to him. I could only see the side of his face, the one that looks like you remember, that ain all beat to hell, and it looked to me like he was wrestlin with what he heard, wrestlin with his own name, tryin to make it clear to him so he could turn roun and meet me.’

‘Did he?’

‘Eventually,’ He said. He laughed to himself, ‘Asked me about my pa—didn know he passed.’

We were quiet.

‘He ain a bad man, Ex—’

He shook his head.

‘But he ain a good man either—not no more.’

He paused.

‘He’s too busy bein haunted.’

We were quiet.

‘Who is it?’ I asked. ‘Now.’

Little John shook his head

‘I don’ know. Jack don’ either. If he did he would of done somethin about it. She denies it, but Jack’s sure of it. Maybe she’s tellin the truth, I don’ know.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said. ‘It’s happening for him either way.’

Little John nodded.

‘You know how these things end.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

Little John paused and looked down at his hands.

‘You know I can’ help you.’

‘I wouldn’t ask.’

Little John shook his head.

‘I’m sorry, Ex. I want to, it’s just,’ he gestured weakly, ‘I got a lot here to lose.’

I nodded.

‘You do,’ I said.

We were quiet.

When we left the barn, Little John pointed to the horizon. A pack of storm clouds had begun massing there. They gathered in clumps, drawing a bulbous black line between heaven and earth. Then they began moving toward us. No sound announced them, and had we not looked up they might have taken us unnoticed. As it was, by dinnertime, they were nearly overhead, and the children couldn't keep their eyes off the window, their mouths agape as they watched their arrival.

The wide eyes of his son made Little John chuckle, and near the end of dinner, he leaned over and put his hand on his shoulder.

'What do you think,' he said, 'them clouds angry?'

The boy looked up at his father and nodded. His father grinned.

'Bout what?' he asked mischievously. The little boy pondered for a moment, then he raised his small, soft hands.

'They're jealous,' his sister announced.

'Jealous?' her father said.

'Yes.'

'Of what?'

'The sky,' she declared.

'The sky? Why are they jealous of the sky?'

'Cause we look at it all day,' she explained. 'The clouds are jealous of it.'

Little John laughed and turned to get his wife's attention.

'You hear that, Mary? Jealous clouds—how bout that.'

Mariam didn't look up from the counter where she was busy wrapping the leftover food, but she gave an affirmative chirp and continued about her work. Little John grinned and shook his head at the wonders of small children, then he turned again to watch the black curtain still closing across the sky. Mariam finished her work and came back around the counter. She stopped at the table and ran her hands ritually down the front of her apron. She eyed the window anxiously, then she began collecting the plates.

Little John noticed her beside him, he lightly touched her back.

'You think the weather'll keep the boys away?'

'Why it never does,' she said.

'That's true,' he said reflectively. He watched her round the table by turns, 'Do you want me to stay anyhow?'

The words were tentative. It took a moment for Mariam to answer them.

'Oh no—nono,' she said. 'Go, *go!* If you don't Rolly will just move the game out here, you know he will.'

Little John chuckled.

‘If he’s ain too cockeyed to find his way.’

Mariam smiled.

‘Well I’m not going to take that chance. Go dear—you have your fun. Just don’t gamble away the farm. We have but one and I’ve grown quite fond of it.’

She carried the plates from the table. Little John watched her go, letting his eyes linger as she rounded the counter and made her way to the sink. When he turned back, he seemed surprised to find me at the far corner of the table. He smiled awkwardly and quickly raised his hand.

‘You should join me,’ he said. I said nothing but quickly glanced at Mariam. She held a dish before her and stared at the sink.

‘C’mon, Ex,’ he continued, growing convinced of the proposal. ‘Rock, Cal, Boyd, the boys’ll all fall outta their chairs when they see you. Rolly may even buy you a drink before he tries to empty yer pockets.’

He leaned in.

‘Don’t worry, Ex—he ain no better at cards than he ever was.’

Little John smiled and stared at me, waiting on my reply. Then something seemed to shift behind his eyes. His grin came loose.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I can’t.’

‘*Of course of course,*’ he said, waving his hands. ‘No use goin out anyhow—not with that storm rollin in.’

Mariam was watching us now.

'It's all right,' I said. 'You go on—I'll be fine.'

Little John protested.

'I'll be fine, John. Go ahead—I'll see you in the morning.'

I stared at him.

'Honest,' I said.

Little John looked at me, then he turned to Mariam. It took her a moment but she found a smile.

'It's all right, John—you go ahead.'

Little John kissed Mariam and the children goodbye. I told him I would follow him out, and we left the house together. We crossed the empty barnyard, rounded the silo, and walked back along the barn to the storage where the truck was parked. Little John was just ahead of me. He stopped beside the door and set one foot on the runningboard, then he looked up at the sky. The belly of the black front was moving overhead. Still, there was no rain.

'I went by Tom's,' I said.

He looked down at me.

'You did.'

I nodded.

'Mariam told me where to find him, thought he might know something.'

Little John smiled his weak smile.

'He didn.'

‘No,’ I said.

Little John removed his hat and itched the bare crown of his head.

‘He’s back on his feet now. It’s taken time, but he’s doin all right. You meet Trudy?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Good—she’s been a blessin to him, helped him forget.’

Little John shook his head.

‘That godforsaken place.’

He laughed.

‘Got that whole world to himself, doesn’ he? Him and Trudy and the little one. Guess it’s best that way. The rest, what happened—’

I waited, but he was done. After a time I looked at the sky.

‘I don’t see any rain,’ I said.

‘That don’ mean it won’ come.’

I agreed.

‘I’ll head back if it gets ugly.’

‘I’ll take care of things—and if I can’t, Mariam will, no doubt about that.’

Little John grinned.

‘She’s somethin, ain she?’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘and she’s got a touch with the little ones, they really seem to love her.’

Little John looked at me, he began kneading the brim of his hat.

‘She told you about Annie,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said, then quickly, ‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s all right. Sometimes we lose what’s most important to us. Sometimes we get it back. That’s how things work I guess.’

‘If you’re lucky,’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ he said, ‘if yer lucky.’

‘I guess you’re both lucky that way.’

His eyes flashed.

‘She told you about Kunder.’

I hesitated.

‘Not his name,’ I said.

His mouth stiffened.

‘Her luck began the day that—’

He twisted the brim.

‘She tell you how?’

‘A fever.’

‘A fever—*that’s* what she told you. Had a fever, sure, you would you spend a night like that.’

He stepped off the runningboard and reached for the doorhandle.

‘Wait, John. What happened?’

He shook his head.

‘It ain important, Ex.’

He opened the door. At the last moment I grabbed him.

‘*Please* John,’ I said. ‘Tell me.’

He stopped and looked at my hand, then he stepped down, easing the door shut.

‘He was at the bar,’ Little John began, ‘down in town. Cheatin at cards like he always did. Found his way into a fight. Hud kicked him out—not the first time he done that. Kunder had a way of uninvitin himself most everywhere he went. I reckon folks figured they were rid of him fer the night. But Kunder comes back, just as soon as he left. He’s yellin his head off. Seems somebody cut his tires, every one, and he wants to know who done it. He was fit to be tied but nobody fessed up. No matter how loud he yelled nobody says a thing, and Kunder, he’s so mad, he turns over a table and cusses out the bar.

‘He leaves—but Kunder comes back, not but a minute or so. Says he needs a lift, says it like he’s givin orders. Well nobody’s takin orders, not that night. All the boys keep playin cards, drinkin—nobody even looks up. And Kunder, he hoots and hollers but it don’ make no difference, nobody’s listenin. So he cusses out the bar and leaves again.’

Little John paused. There was a rumble somewhere overhead. We both looked up, as if to watch it roll across the sky. It passed, we lowered our heads.

‘Well it don’ take long,’ he said, ‘and there he was, standin in the door again, but this time he’s tryin to find the honey in his voice. *Can one of you boys give me a ride?* he says, couple of times. Well bein friendly didn much suit Kunder, and all he gets fer his trouble is Hud tellin him to hurry up and shut the door cause he’s lettin the heat out. Kunder keeps at it though, but it don’ make no difference. The boys keep swappin stories, playin cards, payin him no heed. Finally Kunder remembers who he is. He gets to hollerin and storms out the bar, slammin the door behind him.

‘But Kunder comes back—we knew he would, every man there. It’s takes some time cause it’s the last thing he wants to do, last thing in the world. But he had to. He knows it. And sure enough there he is, standin in the door. His shoulders are all white now, hat, too, and he’s holdin himself, shakin all over, lookin bout as sorry as a man can be. This time everybody stops what they’re doin to look at him. Every one. Ain a sound in the whole place. *Please*, he says, *Can somebody give me a ride home? Partways even? C’mon boys—please?*

Little John looks at me.

‘Nobody said a word, Ex. Nobody in the bar. No matter what he said, no matter what he did—not even when he began beggin folks by name.’

Little John was quiet, he shook his head.

‘You step on folks long enough—’

He was quiet again. Another rumble.

‘What happened to him?’ I asked.

‘Not what we thought. We thought he wouldn make it.’

‘Home?’

‘Home.’

‘But he did,’ I said.

Little John nodded.

‘I don’t know how long it took, all I know is Mary was waiting fer him when he got back. She always done that, no matter the hour. Not trustin somebody will do that I guess. Cost him a few fingers and toes that trip—not that Kunder was about to give em up. No, by

the time he let Mariam call the doctor his hands were black. Lost em both, foot too, but he was delirious by then—'

'A fever.'

'You could call it that—it didn't take long.'

He shook his head again.

'After what he did to her—'

He caught himself.

'I *ain* tellin you that,' he said.

'You don't need to, John.'

'Good,' he said, he was shaking. I waited a moment.

'It's not my business anyway,' I said.

We were quiet. There was a rumble, then another. Nearer this time. Little John put his hat on. He opened the door and got in. He turned on the engine and let it idle. He stared at the wheel for a moment, then he rolled down the window and turned to me.

'I should be gettin on.'

'I know,' I said.

He nodded, searching my face as if he were looking for something.

'You look beat,' he said.

I looked up at him.

'I am.'

He nodded and let his eyes drift. He seemed to consider something, then he turned to me.

‘Get some rest,’ he said and rolled the window shut. There was the crushing crunch of the gears and the clean roll of wheels. In a moment, he was gone.

I caught sight of Mariam just over the barnbridge, the fragile shadow of a figure alone against the horizon. She stood beyond the house, at one end of the clothesline, an empty basket at her hip, her head tilted toward the gray brooding above her. From time to time the wind caught her and made a black billow of her dress. It bloomed to one side.

Her back was to me—for as long as I crossed the yard her back was to me—until she finally heard my footfalls. She craned her head slightly, then quickly she dropped the basket and began removing the wash.

She turned when I came upon her, as if she didn't expect to find me.

'Oh!—*bello* Exley. I'm taking down the linens before the rain starts. It *is* going to rain, isn't it?'

I stopped short.

'Yes,' I said.

‘I think so, too,’ she said, turning back to the line. ‘Did my Johnny Bird head into town?’

‘He did,’ I said, then after a moment. ‘Let me help you.’

‘How kind of you, Exley,’ she said over her shoulder, she spoke quickly. ‘We must get this wash in. It *is* going to rain, isn’t it? Why don’t you take the sheets down and hand them to me. I’ll fold.’

I circled the line wordlessly so that a wall of white sheets divided us. It rippled and curled with the growing wind. I stood behind the first sheet and began withdrawing the pins.

‘Oh Exley, my Johnny Bird is so glad to see you—so *so* glad.’

I glared at the wall, then I plucked a few final pins.

‘It’s been a long time,’ I said, pulling the sheet from the line. She flinched when I appeared. I folded the sheet once over and handed it to her, then I moved down the line. She refolded the sheet and followed, dragging the basket behind her. She waited until she was hidden again before she spoke.

‘*Dear* Exley,’ she said with that sterile cheer she so devotedly practiced, ‘it must be *something* to be back.’

I removed a pin.

‘What do you mean?’

‘To be back,’ she said, ‘here—to be back here. It *must* be something.’

I stared into the sheet.

‘Something what?’ I asked.

I could hear her step away from the line.

‘Something,’ she said, ‘I mean, you’ve been away from home for so long—’

‘This isn’t my home, Mariam.’

She was silent.

‘Of course,’ she said. She was silent again, then she persisted. ‘I know it’s not your home, Exley, your home now, but here, your *old* home—is it what you expected?’

‘No,’ I said, pulling the sheet from the line. Her tired eyes met mine and darted away. I bundled the sheet and gave it to her, then I moved down the row. The basket followed. Slower this time. When it stopped, she tried again.

‘Of course not certainly not—it couldn’t be what you expected. I’m sorry.’

Patently I unfastened the pins.

‘Is it—is it what you remember of home, of your *old* home? Is it what you remember, Exley?’

‘Mariam, that was a long time ago.’

Silence, then a rumble overhead, deeper than the ones before. I finished the sheet and handed it to her. I had already picked two pins from another before she spoke again.

‘Will you be staying long?’ she asked, when she had made her way down the line.

‘A few days,’ I said.

‘Really,’ she said, then, ‘How nice—I didn’t think you’d stay so long.’

I stared at the sheet.

‘Why not?’

‘Well I thought,’ she hesitated, ‘I thought you’d need to leave—to get home.’

I said nothing. The sheets snapped at our feet.

‘It’s just that, Sarah said you might—’

Her voice welled with regret.

‘You don’t *need* to get home?’

‘No,’ I said. The sheet zipped from the line. Mariam was standing behind the basket. I bundled the sheet and dropped it at her feet. She looked at me once, then she bent down to retrieve it. I moved down the line. She was slow to follow.

I waited until she disappeared again.

‘John and I are leaving,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘We’re leaving.’

She hesitated.

‘Where?’

‘On the rest of the cider run—John said I should join him, said he could use the help.’

‘Oh,’ she said, then, ‘When will you leave?’

‘Tomorrow, first thing, that’s what he said—before sunrise I imagine, you know how he likes to get an early start.’

‘Of course,’ she said, her voice faltered. She was quiet.

The wind grew briefly, and the remaining sheets billowed and whipped in a long white wave. When they settled, I said, ‘We’ll be gone a few days, nights, too—that’s what John said.’

Mariam was silent for a moment.

‘I didn’t think he would leave again so soon,’ she said. Then weakly, ‘How nice for you both.’

I stared at the wall.

‘Isn’t it?’ I said. She didn’t respond. ‘It only seems fair. You and I, we’ve had plenty of time to talk, haven’t we?’

Silence.

‘Hm?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘And Little John and I, we’ve barely spoken.’

I paused.

‘Doesn’t that seem strange to you?’

The wind shifted.

‘Well?’

‘I suppose,’ she said.

‘You suppose. Why, Mariam, two people who share nothing so essential as the past, that they should talk for so long, while Little John and I, your husband—my goodness, so much time has passed it’s hard to know where to begin.’

‘Yes,’ she said softly, a rumble louder than the others broke overhead, soon it would pour. ‘There’s so much for you to talk about.’

‘So *so* much,’ I corrected her, raising my voice over the rolling sound, ‘For you know, Mariam, even when people are forthcoming—about *all* that has happened, *all* that has

changed—they leave you with so many questions, *more* than they can answer. Isn't that so, Mariam?'

She hesitated.

'Isn't it?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know, Mariam? It *is* so and do you know why it is so?'

'Please, Exley.'

'Because people forget things, Mariam. They tell you only what they remember, what they *want* to remember. They leave out so much—all the details, all the inconvenient details, and when they leave out these details, can you know them, Mariam? Can you ever really know them?'

There was silence on the other side of the wall.

'*Can you?*'

'You can try,' said a tiny voice.

'*Try!* With what? With what they give you, what they *want* you to remember?'

'It's a beginning,' she pleaded.

'*A beginning?*'

'Yes,' she cried.

'Then Mariam,' I said, tearing away the sheet. 'Let *us* begin.'

She covered behind the basket, one hand raised before her as if to keep a wall from falling. The other covered her face.

The rain began falling around us.

I turned from the line and started toward the house. Just as soon I stopped. Sarah was standing there. She had been watching us. When she saw me, her hands flew to her face, her fingers a slender steeple before her mouth. She stood like that until I finally raised my hand in a gesture of small giving. Then she broke with a sob and fled.

I went up to my room and sat on the bed. The drumroll of rain filled the house. I did not intend to sleep—I knew that I couldn't sleep—but the day weighed on me and soon I slipped off my boots and rested my head. I fell in and out of slumber with the noises around me—footfalls on stairs, the drawing of bathwater, a woman's voice consoling a child. Then the house was silent. I dreamt of nothing.

A flash of light drew me awake. I sat up and looked out the window. After a few moments, a deep rumble rolled through the house. I let it pass, then I lifted my feet off the bed. I bent down and felt along the floor until I found my leather satchel. I opened it. My clothes were still folded inside, below them was the revolver. I took it out and laid it on my lap. When the light flickered again, the barrel glinted. I put it in my pocket and slung the satchel over my shoulder.

I eased the door open and looked down the hallway. There were no pools of light. I stepped forward and closed the door behind me. Just across the hall the children were

sleeping. I watched their door, staring for some time, then I heard the wind whistle through the attic. I drew the satchel tight and passed to the end of the hall, feeling my way down the steps.

I entered the kitchen. My grey felt hat was hanging next to the front door. I put it on and stepped onto the porch. In the distance, a flash of light split the sky, revealing a skeletal world of light and shadow. Then, just a quickly, the darkness returned. A distant rumble followed.

‘You’re leaving,’ a voice said.

I turned. At the end of the porch a familiar black bloom rose from the bench.

‘I thought you might leave,’ she said, then, ‘I knew you would.’

I stood for a moment more at the top of the steps, then I put down the satchel and came beside the bench. I took off my hat and sat down. I could only see the barest outline of a face that looked away from me.

‘John hasn’t returned,’ I said. Another flash of light. In the ensuing rumble I heard her answer. We were silent again. She turned and looked at me.

‘I can’t sleep unless he’s here.’

‘I know,’ I said, then, ‘Neither can I when Molly’s gone.’

Mariam looked at me, she took my hand.

‘It’s not yours, Exley,’ she whispered. ‘You don’t have to do it.’

The world was lit again, I saw that she was weeping.

‘Tell Sarah I’m sorry,’ I said.

She moved to speak, but I kissed her forehead.

‘Thank you, Mariam.’

The rumble passed.

I set off into the night. But for when the light cracked the ceiling of the sky, I could see nothing but the shadowy rush of hands and the occasional farmhouse that rose and fell and rose again from the gloom.

I moved quickly, turning from one road to the next, making my way to the small hillside of memory, until a flash of light revealed the house atop it and I crouched before climbing. I kept one hand before me as if to pull myself through the darkness. Stormclouds were converging from the opposite direction, so the lightning shook the world, providing blackwhite visions of the past—the leafy ranks of Eli’s orchard, the hill’s blackened slope, and the house, always the house, until it finally remained, looming like a spirit before me beyond the brief relief of light. I stopped. My eyes settled on the structure, and the darkness gained contour. I saw the simple windows, the low slung roof, and at the edge of the house, a sliver of porch pushing into the night. Then I saw a figure, sitting alone on the porch swing. He was looking out over the orchard, watching the heavens rumble and rage.

I dropped into a shallow ravine that ran the length of the farmyard until I came even with a tree that obscured the porch. I scrambled across the yard and crouched behind it. Overhead, the winds were curling through the branches, sifting countless leaves into a metallic clamor, while the large arms swayed magnificently. I lay the satchel by my side and peered around the tree.

The shadow sat at the end of the black expanse of porch. Beyond him, the prow of the stormcloud passed over the orchard's edge. It was headed toward the farmhouse, trailing rain. I retrieved the pistol from my pocket, cracking it open again to assure, by touch, the cylinder was full. The heavens rippled with light and a boom quickly followed. Then we heard the avalanche of rain.

The shadow stood as it entered the yard. The sound preceded the rain, which now began to fall around the umbrella of the tree. It quickly obscured the yard. The figure came before the railing to watch the rolling immensity. I leveled the gun, cupping the trigger. The shadow lingered a moment longer, then he turned to leave. Before the sky erupted and the world glowed, something inside of me seemed to break.

That's when I fired, as the boom enveloped us from above and the gun exploded in my hand."

The old man stopped talking. He held up his hand to show me what was left of it.

"The shadow stopped beside the door and listened. In a moment, he was gone."

Epilogue

When my pop died I was the one that closed the casket. I didn't want to look at him, not till the minute it was shut, then it took everything I had in me to keep from opening it again. But I couldn't. I knew I couldn't. What's done is done, I said, which is as good as saying what's in there is dead.

I felt like that when the old man closed the door on me. Even before he showed me out I knew I would never see him again. He'd told me his story. What's done is done. If I turned around and knocked it wouldn't have surprised me if he never was there to begin with.

I made my way home. It was early still, and the shadows have that way of leaning, making everything familiar seem off somehow. You know the world will return – give it time – but while you're waiting things will seem strange to you, the world will be distant. You'll never feel more alone.