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Car Trouble and Other Stories

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CAR TROUBLE AND OTHER STORIES

by

Adam R. Charpentier

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in

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Car Trouble

Without Amy in the car, I invite Alice Cooper in in a way she never abides. He is loud, hopelessly angry sometimes, and at night my heart pounds along with the beats of his music. "It's such a brutal planet," he sings, and I nod my car right and left around this turn and that one like it's an extension of me, agreeing with the lyrics at a frustrating twenty-five miles per hour. The haphazardly scattered streetlamps paint the road in dark blues, light browns, and beer bottle amber. The street is somewhat inviting where the streetlights reach and disquieting where they do not, bathing me momentarily in islands of clarity before I'm hurled forward again into darkness. I smell, among other things, mildew and soured milk from too many spilled cups of coffee. My world. The shifting dark and light street, a stench that overwhelms the little blue pine tree hung under my rearview mirror, and Alice Cooper.

Down one particularly long but empty stretch of road, I find my car suddenly joined by others on either side, parked too close to one another and

not close enough to the sidewalk. The cars are all black chrome barriers; beyond, the houses are matte painting backdrops. This late at night, they represent unspace to me, places where I cannot drive. Three or four people are among the cars parked along the left side of the road and they are crossing the street. I slow from twenty-five to twenty to fifteen to ten to an agonizing five or less; my speedometer can't be sure. And they cross. They're distinguishable from the rest of the world outside of my car only because they are moving, their hair moves, and I see a man with a mustache, and a woman that resembles differently sized tires stacked together inside a zip-up jumper; they become jaywalkers and I grit my teeth and curse them and wait for them to pass. They do, dispersing again among the cars parked on my right side. But there is another, standing in the left lane. She's wearing a dark green sweatshirt, has long brown hair, is listening or speaking into a cell phone stuck fast to the side of her head.

I stare wistfully at the traffic light's Emerald City glow not one hundred yards in front of me. The woman in the left lane continues to chat brainlessly into her phone. Waiting even a moment longer for her to notice my car's glaring headlights as they drill into her backside seems like intolerable cruelty. I should have been asleep hours ago.

I ease my foot back down onto the gas pedal at nearly the exact same moment the woman jogs in front of my car. Whether her friends have called to her or she finally noticed that she was casting a dark and very distinct shadow on the street in the middle of the night —thanks to my headlights— I can't say.

And I can't say, with certainty, whether I am going five miles per hour or less when I drop my foot down on the brake. It took only a handful of seconds for me to slow down for her friends, then speed up again, but they pass as a single snapshot in my mind, and then in the next moment, I am at ease, albeit wide-eyed, as if I am watching myself, my life, while sitting comfortably at home watching television. Someone else's car hits a jaywalker in the middle of the night on TV.

I step on the brake. I turn the wheel ever so slightly to the right to avoid the woman. I'm not surprised or apprehensive. I no longer hear the music. I glide silently into the woman's rear end and there is no buffeting sound. She falls back on my hood as if I've slid a chair under her rather than a three ton automobile. Then she glides down it and off my bumper as if she meant to all along.

I know there are people around my car but I don't see them. I don't look at anything at all except the hood. I hold my breath. Seconds tick-tick-tick away. The woman stands up. I know she is fine.

Something takes hold of me. Something that cares that I am wearing pajama pants and sandals, and that if I get out of my car like I should, I will feel embarrassed. Something that wants to sleep, something scared –no, terrified. The woman steps out of my way, her face contorts as if she means to speak or shout, and I slam down hard on the gas pedal. The car lurches forward. My heart pounds so hard that I scarcely recognize the throbbing in my chest as I suffocate, forgetting how to breathe; then I breathe in deep gasps. I have the rest of the

night to listen for police sirens, count the seconds that I was situated beneath streetlights or shadow, and wonder whether half a dozen people can decide which six digits in the plethora of combinations available to them make up my license plate number.

Somewhere along the drive home, I realize that I can hear again. The inevitable groans and creaks from the plastic interior of my car as it strains against the suspension have returned, but the music has not. I don't remember turning the stereo off. Music so loud that it will gradually annihilate my hearing, which I blissfully condone, and I can't remember whether I shut it off or not. I wonder what else I can't remember. How fast was I going? How hard did I really hit her? A few months back, slogging through a murky pool of rainwater, my right front wheel temporarily disappeared into a deep pothole. The jarring was considerable and my stereo shut off. Some kind of safety feature. I didn't have the manual for reference, had never bothered to look it up.

Eventually, I get to sleep and I forget. And then five days later, I receive a letter from the police department, which is when I decide to get a lawyer.

On the phone, my lawyer, Mr. Pascal, a fat slug with distressingly sallow skin, says he'll speak with the investigating officer. "I'll check his temperature," he says. "If he's, like, 'fuck this guy,' then they'll charge you criminally, and they'll have you in a lineup. What'd this girl look like?"

"Uh, brown hair, green shirt?"

“What else?” he asks.

I shrug. He can't see me shrug, so I say, “I don't remember. Young.”

“You wouldn't recognize her in the street and it's been six days. What are the chances that she'll recognize you in two weeks? Not very good, right? And they won't have you in a lineup for two-three months. They have better things to do than deal with some drunk college girl that doesn't know how to look both ways before she crosses the street.”

“What if they don't charge me criminally?”

“Then you go to traffic court. You got eighty dollars? It'll be an eighty dollar ticket.”

Not to be outdone by a man I'm paying three hundred dollars for counsel, I scour the Internet to see what statutes I have violated. I quickly find out that I am facing a prison sentence that could last as long as half a decade if the woman is injured. But she walked away from it, didn't she?

Asleep and dreaming, I relive the scenario but it's never right. In my reimagining, there's blood and hair on my license plate and flecks of skin from where she slid down the front of my hood and her shirt rode up and she scraped her back. I imagine her face as angry, sometimes, but usually it contorts in different renditions of tearful pain. I am most afraid when she is crying, and I am

outside of the car watching or embracing her wet red body, and her teeth are broken, pieces scattered everywhere.

With Amy, the conversation is a steady checklist of our usuals: her day, my day, what we've read, watched, or overheard. The conversation veers toward the accident.

"Yes, I hit her, but I don't deserve to go to jail for it. Do I?" I say this, driving without a seatbelt, perhaps a little too fast in a residential area, looking over at her meaningfully every few syllables.

She shrugs, remains silent, and stares straight ahead. I turn down the radio so that I can concentrate. Rather than get angry, I decide that I've asked a rhetorical question, so I continue. "No. I don't," I say. "A fine, sure, but not jail. I'm not a bad guy."

Amy doesn't even bother to shrug this time.

"I love you," I say.

"I love you, too," she says.

She turns on the stereo. Alice again. I turn it off.

"I've got a headache," I tell her.

She rolls her eyes; she rummages in her purse for aspirin.

"Mr. Pascal is ready to see you," says the secretary, so I step inside my lawyer's inner sanctum. His desktop is a series of busily cascading piles of paper.

There are two desk calendars sticking out of the heap and an ink pad but no stamp. Pascal has his back to me and his rolling chair is pulled up to a smaller, more utilitarian computer desk. His thick fat neck is the same color of his olive shirt collar and his charcoal gray hair is curly, wiry, and upsetting.

“Have a seat,” he says. “I’m just looking up the statutes on this thing. Seeing what your responsibilities were in the matter. Bare minimum.”

I sit and wait. He fiddles with the computer. I recognize the website he lands on and reconsider the investment I’m making.

“How hard did you hit this girl?”

“Like I said, I stopped an inch past her. She fell back on my hood and got right back up again. I barely touched her.”

Pascal turns his chair around and faces me. One of his eyes is half shut and his face looks hot and sweaty but we’re well out of the summer heat.

“Well, she’s got a cast and a broken wrist that say different. Maybe she fell the wrong way. I left a message for Officer Castaneda, but it looks like they’re going to go ahead and charge you criminally.”

I sink in the chair and can no longer breathe. Under pressure, the air in my lungs wheezes its way out in words. “What do I do?” I ask.

Pascal leans back in his chair and his eyes roll up at the ceiling as he waits for liftoff. “Go to class,” he says. “Don’t worry about it. We’re going to tell them that she hit the car with her hand.” He slaps the table in front of him and grins at me. “She was drunk and pissed off because you stopped short but you didn’t

actually hit her. That should be enough.” And in the same breath, he adds,
“They’ll most likely pick you up in the next day or so.”

Pascal turns back around to face the computer screen. He isn’t even
listening, fiddling with the goddamned computer.

“I’ll set up another appointment with Castaneda,” he says. “See if I can’t
talk him down to a fine.”

“Am I going to lose my license?”

“Maybe. Most likely. But don’t worry about it. You haven’t lost it yet.”

My phone rings and I swear I’ve never heard the sound before. I struggle,
bleary and hopeless in the dark, my hands swatting the dresser top aimlessly. As
if my eyes are open underwater, all I can see is a stinging fog of algae and the
vague darting shape of my flashing cell phone.

I find the phone amongst the refuse of noise and light and I draw it close
and cradle it against my cheek. There’s a soft and incomprehensible voice at the
other end. Her inflection is as befuddled as my movements.

“Hello?” she says.

“Hi,” I say.

She asks me who I am. After a few seconds of silence, she says, “Hello?”
again and I realize that I’ve almost fallen back to sleep.

“Hi,” I say again.

“This is Denise Levine,” she says. She sounds no less perplexed. “I think you hit me with your car.”

I’m awake enough to understand her but nowhere near prepared for this conversation.

“Don’t you think you should know that?” I ask her.

“Okay, I know you hit me with your car.”

“Says you. How did you get this number?”

“Your name was on the accident report.”

“Do you know what time it is?”

“You were awake.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Oh, sorry!” she says so genuinely that I almost want to apologize for the hit and run. Then I remind myself that this jaywalking bitch could get me sent to jail. Could ruin my life.

“How’s your wrist?”

“Sprained.”

Admitting that she’s lying, it’s as bad as twisting a knife in my guts. Wish I had recorded that. I decide to lie.

“Really? I heard differently. I’m recording this call, by the way.”

“Yeah, right. Look,” she says, hissing through the word, sounding both exasperated and bored. “I don’t want to fight. My parents want me to press charges and they’re making me sue but I feel bad.”

“Then don’t sue me.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yes, it is. You and I both know your wrist isn’t broken, but you saying it is is enough for me to end up in jail. Do you realize that? Look, I can’t trust you. You could be recording this or your lawyer could be sitting there next to you.”

“I know.”

“Then why did you call? I could be sleeping.”

“I don’t know. I just wanted to talk to you. I wanted to see if you were a nice guy but you’re obviously a jerk, so why shouldn’t I sue you?”

“It’s a little hard for me *not* to be a jerk, don’t you think? You’ve got me in this situation, which is by the way probably the shittiest thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Try getting hit with a car.”

“Is that what this is about? Did you think you could call, say, ‘Hey, an eye for an eye, *amigo*,’ then we’d go our separate ways?”

“What?”

“Do you want to hit me with your car? Get even?”

“No! I want you to apologize.”

“Yeah. I’m going to confess over the phone. That sounds healthy. Get it out of my system.”

“You are such a jerk.”

“You’re pretending to have a broken wrist so that you can sue me!”

“My parents—”

“Your parents aren’t making you do anything! You can make your own decisions.”

“I just want you to say you’re sorry.”

“Say you’re sorry for jaywalking.”

“Sorr-ee,” she says, and this time it’s less genuine but it’s still unexpected.

So, I say, “Say you’re sorry for lying.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I pull the phone away from my ear and stare at it. I hear the muffled noise of Denise saying something else but I try and enjoy my accomplishments thus far for a few seconds longer. Then I put the phone back to my ear and I say, “I won’t say anything to you over the phone.”

“Okay,” she says. “You want to meet up someplace?”

“What, really? When?”

“Right now.”

“How do you know I’m not a jaywalker-hitting rapist?”

“I’m bringing my sister with me.”

“You wake her up at one in the morning, too?”

“Hah, no! She’s awake. Do you want to meet up or not?”

“Fine. Where?”

“Why not the same place?”

“Okay. Give me twenty minutes.”

I clutch the steering wheel so tightly that my fingertips tingle when my grip slackens. Beside me, Amy's brother, Alan, blinks, rubs his nose, clears his throat with a gummy smoker's cough he forces loose, letting me know that being awake is causing him actual physical pain.

"Bitch, bitch, bitch," I say.

"Fuck you," he says.

"Dude, I appreciate this."

"It's fine," he says.

We're nearing our destination. The green street sign for Crispin Avenue drifts by on the right and I dig my fingernails into the steering wheel all over again. Just like before, all my actions feel scripted and I am as much a viewer as an actor. This is a horror movie. I can hear my heart pumping blood. The killer is in the backseat.

I ease off the brakes and turn the wheel. The car crawls around the corner.

Ahead, a parked maroon Jetta lights up for me. I park across from it and get out. Both doors open on the Jetta and two brunettes step into the street.

Just before I slam the car door shut, Alan catches me with a, "Hey!"

I duck my head back in and say, "I'll be fine. Thanks. Give me a minute, okay?" Then I shut the door and I am alone in the street with my alleged victim and her sibling chaperone. I cross to meet them.

“Denise?” I ask.

The driver waves a cast-sheathed arm at me. So, I nod at her. At her sister.

“She recording this?” I ask.

Her sister throws up two empty hands and flips me the bird with both of them. Then we all stand silently, our knees locked. We sway slightly.

“You want me to just say it?” I ask.

“Not if you don’t mean it,” Denise says.

“I’m sorry,” I say almost immediately. My blood cools and I feel pins and needles dig into my arms and legs. It hurts to stand and I feel more tired than I have ever been. “I didn’t mean to hit you. You should have been looking where you were fucking going but I didn’t mean to do it. I thought I killed you until you stood up.”

“Is that why you left? You thought I was hurt?”

“No!” I shake my head. “If I had thought that I would have called an ambulance myself. I figured you were O.K. I was scared, and I knew I shouldn’t have left you but, Jesus, it wasn’t like I did it on purpose.”

“It’s O.K.,” she says.

She rubs the cast on her “injury” and I’m reminded of the stakes. “No, it isn’t,” I say. “Do you want money?”

Denise folds her hands in front of her and tries to fix me up with her best Ice Man stare but her voice wobbles and she isn’t as cold as she’d like me to

believe. She says, “My parents say I shouldn’t walk away from this empty-handed.”

“But your hand isn’t really broken.”

“No, but you *hit* me.”

“You’re *lying*.”

“My parents—”

“Don’t blame it on them. Do you realize what’s going to happen?”

“You have insurance.”

“If you’re really hurt then it’s a felony. I’ll go to jail.”

“Really?”

“What’d I say on the phone? That’s what the law says. I looked up the statutes. If you go forward with this, file a claim say that you’re an injured pedestrian and I left the scene, then you get a shitload of cash and I get five years in prison.”

“I don’t want that to happen.”

“Me neither.”

“But you *do* have insurance.”

“For emergencies. For when somebody is *really* hurt. Is that what you want? I have, maybe, three hundred dollars. I had six but I had to pay the lawyer. Do you want money?”

“Well, I have to wear this cast...”

"You *have* to wear a cast, or your parents said you'd have a better chance taking me for a ride if you had one on?"

Denise tucks some of her hair behind her ear and folds her arms in front of her chest. She's flustered. I'm angry.

"I apologized," I say.

"Yeah."

"So, are you going to recant?"

"What?"

"Are you going to change your statement?"

Denise shrugs. After a moment of heavy breathing, getting my adrenaline up, clenching my fists, she says, "I hate this," and my aggression melts away.

"Me too."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too," I say and I'm surprised to realize that I mean it.

"I don't want you to go to jail. I just thought, you know, you were some drunk driver or something."

"No, just stupid." Denise smiles a little when I say this. She takes a step closer to me. We're in the middle of the street and, when I realize this, I feel like a hypocrite.

She rubs her cast some more. I wait for the genie to pop out of it. Later, it occurs to me that there is a metaphorical genie roaming around here and it'll take more than a rub to get him back in the bottle.

After a moment, she says “You’re seeing a lawyer?”

“You’re not?” I ask.

Denise shakes her head. “My parents are lawyers,” she says.

“I’ll cut you a check,” I say.

Denise nods her head and shrugs her shoulders. And then, in case I hadn’t noticed the gesture, she says, “I guess.”

I nod and pull a checkbook out of my pocket. Then I drop to one knee and begin hastily filling out the appropriate information on the topmost check. While doing this, I recall Pascal, our conversation on the phone and after, in his office, and I feel closer to Denise now more than ever, which is why I joke, “Still, you could have looked both ways.”

Her eyes narrow and even in the dark they seem to glow red. I stare up at her, rip the check out of the book, then I stand.

“Fuck you!” she says. “You could have not *run away!*” And she takes half a step toward me, hesitates, then steps forward again and pushes me backward. “You should have been a gentlemen and let me cross first! Fucking asshole coward!”

Her sister’s rushing to her side. Behind me, Alan’s rising out of the car as if he’s being very reluctantly winched upward.

I take a step back and hold up the check. Denise pushes me again, the check sails out of my hand. I don’t watch it. I turn around and run, almost miss her sister letting another flock of birds fly. I catch another “asshole!” before my

car door seals me away from both of them. And then Crispin Avenue is lost to me. My check, curled up and left to the elements, is lost too.

Before I drop Alan off, he asks me, "How'd it go?" and I consider adding "strangulation" to the list of charges I'm going to be facing. But then he reaches down and turns on the stereo. *Killers* is in the CD player. Of all the songs in the world, Alice begins to sing "Under My Wheels," and Alan lets a small, rueful laugh escape. Before his door shuts and I'm left alone in my car again, we're both laughing our asses off about it. I chuckle all the way home then I back into the only available parking space and get out of my car. I come around to the front of it to begin the arduous pothole-and-broken-bottle journey to my apartment. In passing, I glance at my car. The streetlight refracted through the trees outlines new contours in the hood. I hadn't even noticed the dent. I tell myself it's a trick of the light but nonetheless I stop walking. I place my hands over it and my palm sinks in much further than my fingers. And all of the shining streaks form a circle of inwardly pinched angles that resemble palm fronds or the framework for a spider-web, surrounding my hand in a glowing cufflink, or a black hole drawing all of the light in the universe into its darkness.

A few days later, Denise drops the claim against me. The check is cashed but the signature on the back is nearly indecipherable but I'm positive that the surname isn't Levine.

Still, Pascal and I have to spend an afternoon at the police department in order to act out the drama we've concocted. We give Officer Castaneda the statement we agreed to. He reads it and shakes his head. He doesn't laugh but his head and shoulders rise and fall as if he means to and his chest heaves as if a guffaw is restrained behind his lips.

Castaneda compares my scribblings to Denise's and sneers at my lawyer.

"She was half-cocked when I took her statement," he says. "Refused rescue." He shakes his head and looks at me. "Is this how it happened?" he asks.

I don't nod like I should. I freeze up, forget my line and motivation. Then Castaneda looks away and I know I've missed my window. He knows. He knows I'm a liar. And doesn't care.

He gives me a traffic ticket and says, "Here. Traffic court. Ticket'll cost you a couple hundred dollars. You can dispute it, I don't give a shit." He's all smiles when he says this.

Ten More Minutes

The day after my roommate gouged out both of his own eyes with a piece of broken glass, I was coaxed into attending an emergency auditing session with Doctor Warski. Warski was my principle psychiatrist during my stay at the Barnaby H. Hollis Curative House, a long name for a small mental hospital on the Henderson/Las Vegas border. I sat quietly in front of his desk while he sat behind it and perused my file. My file's more of a brochure, really, listing emergency contacts, the reasons for my admittance, and the behavioral meds Warski prescribed during our first session together. Nothing fancy; a little Chlorpromazine for my weak stomach and, temporarily, Benzodiazepine for anxiety. Since it was my hollering and banging on the goddamn door that brought the orderlies running, Warski thought it might be prudent to give me a sedative and it was working wonders. I felt like the bees knees as long as I was seated. Standing brought with it an orchestration of protests from strained

sinews in my thighs and ankles, which led to a wobbly flailing dance ritual that subsided only once I sat down again.

Warski closed my file, either having remembered who I was or deciding that I had waited long enough. He set it aside, locked his fingers together, and leered over his desk at me. Then Warski, *ah-hemmed*, so I smiled politely and tried to maintain some semblance of interest. I would have rather been lounging in a hammock but for the time being I was content enough in the hospital hot seat so long as we weren't going to be discussing me. Warski had a patient in the E.R., after all.

"Albert," he said, "I would like to know why you insisted, as did poor Andrew, that a bird pecked out his eyes."

"That's what happened," I said.

"Both Brian and Jeff described the scene to me quite vividly. They said you were hysterical, and Andrew was curled up against the baseboard with a piece of glass in his hand, and the window was broken near his bed. There was no bird in the room. Glass all over the floor. And Andrew's blood all over your hands and the glass. You're quite lucky you didn't spend the night in a jail cell. Still, we have to maintain a measure of protocol and until the forensics lab are able to ascertain exactly what happened, you will remain in our custody."

"You think I did it?"

"The way you were carrying on, Brian's initial impression of the scene was that you had cut out Andrew's eyes." he repeated. "Or that you had

encouraged his behavior. But Andrew, while capable of gross delusion, judges his own delusions to be infallible. He is an atheist, did you know that? He told me once that God is horseshit and so is schizophrenia. You're not charismatic enough to influence Andrew's delusions."

"How is he?"

"Stable. He's being relocated to a crisis center in Toronto. I was able to speak with him this morning and he was quite lucid."

Warski took off his glasses and rubbed either sleep or aggravation out of his eyes. My hands had begun to sweat of their own accord. Why, I wondered, had Warski turned off the air conditioning? I wiped my palms and then the backs of my hands across my lap, unsure of what to say, feeling sticky and uncomfortable. I didn't like lying, especially when the lie was a lousy one, but Andrew had been a good guy right up until he put his fist through the window and set to work popping his own eyes like they were zits. Every time the headshrinkers played with my dosage, and I felt a little more hysterical than usual, or just abused, I would tell him about my girlfriend, and he would believe me, and when I insisted that there was a conspiracy, he would agree. He had never betrayed me. I couldn't betray him now, even if he wasn't coming back, even if he would never find out. I would know.

That being said, I wasn't about to take the blame for what was so clearly not my fucking fault.

"I didn't do anything," I said.

Warski replaced his glasses. “Why don’t you try to describe to me what happened? As you saw it. The truth this time.”

A drawer that I couldn’t see rumbled open and Warski produced another file that matched mine, set it down, and flipped it open.

While I admit that I was having some, shall we say, “trouble,” Andrew was fucking nuts. Two or three times a month, he would wake me up hollering because there were devils roaming the corridors waiting for him to fall asleep so that they could drink his blood. One night, I even got down on my hands and knees with him to prove that there wasn’t a demon or something-or-other under his bed, though he said one had flown in after I shut my eyes. We searched the five by nine, bare, cold tile floor for twenty minutes before he was equally convinced that while we were looking down, the something-or-other had gone up, and flew out the window, back whence it came. Never mind that the window was latched shut. Another night, he claimed that a man had appeared in his dreams with crushed velvet eyes and a mouth full of words, like little refrigerator magnets, words like shit and ass, and the words spilled onto Andrew’s face and into his mouth, nose, and eyes, and that’s why he spoke nothing but obscenities for three days. I had never told the doc these things. I wasn’t going to start squealing now.

“He said that he couldn’t see,” I said.

Warski tapped his pen against the desk in front of him.

“See what?”

“Anything. He said that there was...gunk over his eyes.”

“Gunk?”

“He said there was shit on his eyes and he couldn’t see. He was staring right at me when he said it, too.”

Warski chuckled. I didn’t think it was all that funny, doped up or not. I took a deep breath then let it out in a little spoken onomatopoeia, “*Whoosh*,” adding, “I thought he was just cursing, but then he said that it was the air. The air was turning into human waste and he was drowning in shit and there wasn’t any air to breathe. Then he punched a hole in the window.”

Warski scribbled in his notebook as I spoke. He had begun to smile. His dimples grew more pronounced the longer I spoke. My new statement was apparently more satisfactory than my old one.

“And his eyes? Dare I hazard a guess: was he scraping the, uh, excrement, off of his eyes with the window glass?”

I shook my head. “No. The bird flew in through the hole in the window and ate his eyes.”

Warski’s scratching pen halted. He stared across the desk at me, his dimples beginning to glow like small furnaces.

“I tried to catch it,” I added, “but it flew back out again.”

Warski ripped a piece of paper out of a pad I recognized as a prescription form, scribbled some long hostile words on it, then set it down in the Outgoing mail tray on his desk.

“Fine. If you want to play games, we’ll play games. Nurse Reid will be giving you some Clozapine to go with your lunch. I would suggest you eat light. Without your regular dose of Chlorpromazine, the Clozapine is going to hit your stomach like a fist.”

“What? You can’t do that.”

“I just did, Al. Listen, I’m your doctor and I want to help you,” he said, uncharacteristically lowering his voice like our parents were listening in the next room, “but if you’re going to fuck with me, waste my time, then you aren’t leaving me any choice in the matter.” Warski’s voice resumed its usual volume and cadence as he continued, “Clozapine is a perfectly reasonable prescription for someone in your condition and I won’t have you on two antipsychotics at once.”

“But I have a weak stomach. Chlorpromazine keeps me from throwing up the fucking terrible food here. That’s why you prescribed it to me in the first place!”

“No, Albert. That’s a happy side effect of the drug, yes, but you were prescribed Chlorpromazine the moment you arrived because, well, of the circumstances of your arrival.”

Then Warski grimaced. “I don’t think the orderlies have ever seen so much blood,” he said.

When our business had been concluded and I stood up to go I was still shaking. I thought I was going to be sick right away, but the medications, all of them, did their work, and I kept my breakfast down.

At lunch, I stood in line with all the other fruitcakes and whack jobs to get our daily dose of downers, uppers, whatever the ones that keep you from eating the Styrofoam plates instead of the food are called. True to his word, Warski put me on Clozapine, a drug ten times more debilitating than the others, which I had begun to think of as my daily vitamins. At lights out, I wasn't given any Benzodiazepine, "So that your body will adjust to the new medication," Nurse Reid said, but I was too busy holding my lunch in to care. I skipped dinner.

For three hours, after dark, I clutched my pot belly and tried not to swallow, cough, or even breathe. When I started to drift off to sleep, I thought that I heard something fluttering around in the room, which made me think of Andrew and the empty bed beside mine and I began to cry. I missed my own bed back in the real world, Anna, my girlfriend, that no one believed was a real person except me and Andrew, a certifiable —strike that, *certified* lunatic.

Two months before Andrew gouged out his eyes, I dutifully waited for Anna to come out of the women's restroom in a recently renovated McDonald's down the street from her house. It had a very "sports bar" feel to it. There were several TVs playing different highlight reels and a group of sportscasters prattling on about the upcoming title match. I watched a moment of each of them

in turn, but the elastic bands behind my eyes kept drawing my gaze back to the restroom. If not for the TVs, I probably would have noticed sooner that Anna had been gone for twenty minutes, not ten. My immediate concerns were that my hamburger and her chicken wrap were cold, the fries would taste like shit reheated, and if she didn't come out in five minutes I was going to eat without her.

After ten minutes more, I was really getting worried. I stood up and discreetly approached the restroom door. I felt a little self-conscious, not precisely paranoid, but no one appeared to be too bothered by me. There were three slack-jawed customers, aside from myself, eating, watching TV, and minding their own business.

I knocked on the restroom door.

"Anna?"

She didn't answer, so I knocked again. Called again.

"Anna?"

I looked around the McDonald's guiltily. The customers were now shifting their eyes from the TVs to me, and then back again in short bursts of disinterest and then curiosity.

I knocked again and almost pushed the door open but instead I marched back to our table, picked up our food, and brought it back to the counter. The woman at the register –her nametag read: Baby– looked at the bag in my hand

and then at the expression on my face with some concern, probably assuming that I had come back to complain.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yeah, uh, my girlfriend went in the bathroom a while ago. I’m getting kind of worried. Do you think you or somebody else could go and check and see if she’s alright?”

Baby looked momentarily relieved, and she smiled. “Sure thing,” she said. “To be honest, I was wondering why you were sitting there so long. What’s your girlfriend’s name?”

“Anna. Brown hair. Brown eyes.”

“Let me go check on her for you.” She turned and called over her shoulder, “Donna, can you take care of the customers for a minute? I’ve got to go check on something for this gentleman.”

Donna replied, “O.K.” from somewhere behind the stainless-steel preparation towers, then we were off. I waited dutifully for all of the three or four seconds it took for Baby to go into the restroom and come back out. When she returned, she looked apologetic and a little annoyed. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “She’s not in there.”

“Did you ask? Did you even say her name? I didn’t hear you.”

“There’s no one in there, sir. I checked both stalls; they’re empty.”

I shook my head and walked around her, pushing my way through the door. Baby followed me to no avail.

“Sir, you really can’t be in here!”

“Anna?”

I pushed open one stall and then the next. I did a three-sixty and looked everywhere. I even eyeballed the waste basket stupidly, desperate for any kind of lead.

“Anna?”

“Look, man,” said Baby, gesturing to the stalls, “she ain’t here.”

I walked past her back into the restaurant.

“Anna?”

Everyone was staring now. Two women were glaring over their chicken nuggets. I had violated the sanctity of their shithouse temple. A man eating by himself looked mildly apprehensive, mouth full of burger and dangling lettuce, but didn’t stand up, so I hadn’t become a threat. A new arrival, a child, held back by a couple, ordering food and minding their business, looked on curiously.

“Sir!”

Baby was much more insistent this time. I whirled around, grimacing at her petulance.

“Baby, didn’t you see her? Brunette, short, kind of curly hair...”

“Sir, you were alone at the table.”

“We ordered together!”

I pulled the chicken wrap out of the McDonald’s bag and waved it under her nose.

“You ordered everything yourself, sir. I assumed there was someone waiting for you.”

“No.”

I shook my head and dropped all of the food right there on the floor, spun around, and pushed my way through the swinging doors that led to the parking lot.

I jogged to my car, fishing in my pants pocket for my cell phone. I pulled it out and keyed in Anna’s number.

While the phone rang, I began walking back toward the McDonald’s. Then the phone clicked and a computerized voice said, “This number is not in service,” and gave me a number to call for technical assistance.

I stopped walking, finally stumped, unsure of how to proceed. Then I thought: Anna’s brother.

It rang three times and then, finally, he answered.

“Yo,” he said, managing to sound groggy in one single syllable.

“Hey, Troy,” I said.

“What’s up?”

“I’m standing outside of a McDonald’s and, uh, I kinda lost your sister.” I looked back at the McDonald’s. Shadowy faces were clustered around the glass doors. Watching me.

“Who’s this?” he said.

“I’m kinda freaking’ out, man. She ain’t inside. I was waiting for her to come out of the restroom and then she wasn’t even in there, now I’m standing outside and I’m about to go ballistic.”

“What? What are you talking about? Who is this?”

“What the fuck does it sound like I’m talking about? Don’t screw with me, alright? It’s bad enough the effing fry-a-lator girl was looking at me like I had a screw loose.”

“Maybe you do.”

“Ha ha.”

“No, look, man, my name’s Jacob. I don’t have a sister.”

It was as if my mind shut down. My voice, when I spoke, came out in a monotonous drone that I could not even recognize.

“Hello?” he said.

“Yes, you do.”

“I do not have a sister, dude.”

“Troy, I’ve been seeing her for two years.”

“Whatever, man. Get help.”

“Troy—.”

But he hung up and left me staring at the background image on my phone. It was a picture of Anna and me from our first anniversary. She looked so glamorous.

After that, things get a little *swimmy*. Someone had a broken nose, there were sirens, broken glass, and then lots of paperwork and plastic cups full of pills.

As night waned, my bed boiled. I struggled under the covers, sweating profusely, and finally tossed the sheets and then myself right off the bed. After the pain, which was considerable —underneath the linoleum there was no padding, just thick blocks of cement— the tantalizing cold of the tiles was more than inviting and I lay there shivering, enjoying it. I stared around at the room and rolled onto my back. The ceiling was a vaguely shadowed abyss and I imagined something-or-others creeping and clinging to it. The window let in the fluorescent glow of the parking lot lights albeit less than usual. A cardboard square had been duct taped over the hole Andrew had made with his hand. I was under strict orders not to remove it under penalty far worse than electroshock therapy. They would take away my Jell-O. I couldn't live without Jell-O. As I began to drift toward sleep, I realized there was another sensation near my right hand. Something velvety and soft lay on the floor with me. I closed my hand over it. Scooped it up. It was a feather. I knew immediately that it belonged to Andrew's imaginary bird. He had found the feather on a nature walk. It was just some debris that had blown in during the last window cleaning. It had stuck to the bottom of an orderlies' shoe on his or her last smoke break. I couldn't be sure.

I put the feather in my mouth and sucked on the tip of it. Stared at the ceiling. I recalled my last conversation with Andrew. He had been chewing on bits of toenail at the time, and lay on his side with his foot pressed against the side of his head like a novelty telephone. "The thing about you," he said as he chewed, "Is that you think you're trapped in here with the crazies but you're one of us. The doctor looks at me and he sees a wacko and he looks at you and he sees a loon. There's no difference."

"There is," I insisted.

"You feed them when you say that. You have to say you're not crazy or they starve." So saying, he spit out a sliver of nail and sat up. "Even I say I'm not crazy and look at me."

"Then why do you say it if it isn't true."

And Andrew smiled. "They feed me, so I feed them," he said. "It's only polite."

But I was adamant then and this time was no different.

I bit through the calamus, the quill, which ran down the center of the feather, and wondered if I was doing the right thing. I chewed on it thoughtfully for a moment, then folded the rest of the feather in half and gobbled it up. In only a moment, my fierce crunching subsided and I was alone again in the room, out of breath, and the only version of the story left was mine. No proof of a bird, real or imagined. It would be too distracting to have that bit of truth at hand or under

my pillow. I had to consume it, make it part of me. It had to become my truth.
That Anna was real.

Warski took my one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn as a blessing and a relief in the wake of Andrew's horrific final day at Barnaby H. Hollis. Maybe, he thought, bearing witness to the whole thing had jarred a synapse, which had been my problem all along. A missed connection somewhere between my ears, between reality and fantasy. In any case, at our next session, I took my seat and explained to him that something had changed.

"Oh?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "My room."

He chuckled politely. They had moved me down the hall while the room Andrew and I had shared was outfitted with a new plastic window pane.

"Another thing, too, doctor. I want you to meet the real Anna."

He stared over his desk at me with eyes that were both mildly suspicious and worried.

"Where is the real Anna, Albert?"

"She's here, doc." I brought my right hand, clenched in a fist, up to my temple as if to knock on it, but then I began to cough. I tried to sell it like I was really choking. The doctor stood up, got me a plastic cup full of water, patted me on the back and retook his seat. I began to drink, then sputtered loudly as he sat down, "Don't!"

He stood stalk still.

“You’re going to sit on Anna!” I pointed wildly at his chair. “You’ll crush her!”

He leapt out of his seat and stared at it, then at me. I began to laugh. I couldn’t help it.

“That’s not very funny, Albert.”

“Now who’s seeing things?” I said.

Six months later —even a speedy recovery from a mental illness takes time, board reviews, tests— I hardly thought the powers of the Curative House were a joke at all. I might not believe, as they did, that Anna wasn’t real, but our time apart had given me room to assess my life. She hadn’t even visited me. Her brother had acted as if we had never met. She obviously wanted nothing to do with me. I considered, briefly, that she could be in trouble, but I dismissed the idea. I began to see another woman, Lizette. And here I sit, feeling an overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*.

The maitre’d has begun to eye me nervously, and I am trying not to notice, but there are only so many places to look around in an enclosed space. I can’t help that every woman I date takes forever in the bathroom. Still, our table has already been given up once to a more efficient couple. I’ll give her ten more minutes, but that’s it.

Islander

Sea foam churned around his ankles. The earth cooled the calloused soles of his feet. Errol had scrounged in the deep green clutch of trees now at his back, distracted and irritated by the gnats testing his ears and the harsh brush he had to wade through. He slapped at his neck and waved one hand vaguely in front of his mouth and nose. All the insects on the island seemed to be following him in a sadistic parade. Lost in a world of feverish humming and foliage scratching along his bare calves with each step, he stumbled a quarter meter down into the salty water without even the chance to be surprised.

Errol tensed; the splash stunned his ears but he sunk no further than his knees. Mud oozed over his toes. Finally, though he had seen it through the island's natural kaleidoscope of differently shaped flora, bright green, dark, sallow leaves, and fragrant nectars, here was the ocean bare. He regarded it: close by, spirals of whiplashing surf lashed at the shore then crashed back violently into spires of rock jutting out of the water. Further out, the ocean

resembled blue glass blown chaotically out in random shingled layers and then a single overarching belt of cerulean stretching to the horizon. The water was loud. He could no longer hear the gnats but they weren't gone. The soaking had made him momentarily unappetizing.

Despite the heat, Errol shivered. He could see the gradual curvature of the Earth distinctly; his knees trembled as if he had suddenly felt the world spinning beneath him and he might fall off. This was why he had come to Tinian: the ocean, what the Himalayas were to *Shangri-La*. A nothing blip south of everywhere, the island was paradise enough and would sustain and separate him from his life, his family, even Karin. Here, he had a place to sleep. Soon, he would have a job. That was it. Enough.

Errol turned around to leave. His knees tensed and he stepped back out of the water. The gnats returned with renewed zeal. And he remembered the first time he had seen Karin.

She had been in the front seat of Lydia's old Chevrolet. He had noticed her staring back at him through the passenger-side mirror. Karin's eyes were iridescent globes of starlight and wish fulfillment fantasies that hadn't even existed before, but were conjured, consummated, and put to rest in his mind all at once, in that single glance. He'd shifted uncomfortably in his seat to avoid her gaze. The reflection of her eyes changed into a reflection of her lips. Those perfect lips, painted pink, parted, singing along softly with the car radio, "Mr.

Sandman, bum-bum-bum-bum, bring me a dream—" were even more beautiful. At the time, he couldn't help wondering what loving her might be like. A week had passed since, and there had been an exceptionally dull layover in Singapore, then a taxi, a fishing boat, a ferry, and Tinian. Not one day had seemed as pleasant or as pleasing to the eye as she had been in that car, but Tinian, he hoped, would change that.

The way back was easier. Errol heaved his legs through muck and weeds and over white smooth stones, wet backed and glistening like newborn maggots, with no greater destination in mind than solid ground. Each time his hand flapped in front of his eyes to clear away the greedy insects, the world seemed momentarily sped up. And, although a few mosquitoes managed to flutter away fat, he forced them all to earn their breakfast. By the time he stepped out of the gulley and began to trudge back toward the road, his face was streaked with the burst remains of so many irritants, which looked more like speckles of grease or mud rather than insectile body parts.

Gen, poised in the same position he had taken when Errol had descended into the gulley, his back against his Jeep's passenger door, his heels in the grass and toes in the air, stared openly as Errol came toward him. Gen's hat, red where it wasn't stained brown, green under the brim and decorated with widely stretched holes, was tipped back far, so the sunlight beat against his pimply forehead, shiny like the maggoty white rocks or oven fresh pizza. Gen shaped the

drool and betel in his mouth into a bullet of spit, then bent forward and shot the wad into the dirt and weeds in front of him leaving a dripping red blemish in the grass.

Errol waved when he came a bit closer and stood breathing with his mouth hanging open in front of Gen.

“You see the ocean?” said Gen.

“Ah-yup.”

“We go now? The mud out here will rust my bumper.” Gen’s accent became less discernable as his mouth once more began to overflow with drool. He bent to the side, turned his head, spit, and wiped away a thread of red film that threatened to establish itself amongst others in a nicely caramelized stain on his chin.

“Okay,” said Errol.

Gen nodded and walked around to the other side of the Jeep, revealing the peeling and frail blue crown *Dynasty* casino logo stenciled on the passenger side door. Errol picked at it with his index finger when he was close enough and a chip the size of a Saltine cracker broke off and fell into the mud. Gen changed out of his filthy wife-beater and into his wrinkled blue uniform shirt and pilot cap, which he donned only after they were both seated and Gen had started the engine. The visor was too short and, much like the threadbare blue crown lapels on his shirt, purely ornamental, so Gen had to squint against the afternoon sun as they began the long drive back to the *Dynasty*.

“You like that uniform?” asked Errol.

“Yeah,” said Gen. “Very smart, yeah?” He grinned sidelong at Errol, revealing black teeth and flourishing colonies of mossy stains overrun with tendrils of betel. Errol couldn’t smell Gen’s breath in the open-top Jeep but he cringed against the memory of it. Nothing like the Japanese food he had eaten for dinner the previous evening.

Once, having been sick for a considerable length of time and having gone without eating for most of a weekend, Errol had been so hungry that he wolfed down three bowls of a very heavy homemade Cajun stew without realizing the steak chunks fermenting in the scrumptious, tangy stock had turned. After a few hours, with the weight of his meal clinging to the back of his throat, Errol dropped to his knees in front of the toilet. What began as a series of painful belches eventually drove the sour brew over his tongue and between his lips into the porcelain god’s offering bowl. When there was no more meat plunking into the toilet water, the saliva that hung down from Errol’s parched lips spun together and spiraled into oblivion. He rested his head on the toilet seat and prayed there would be no more. And the smell of the concoction stirring beneath him then was not altogether different from Gen’s breath.

At best, it was a putrid reminder of the scent Errol had passed in the morning as the awakening pizza stand, *Monster Pizza*, cleared its throat. Errol passed *Monster* and the aforementioned Japanese restaurant on his way to Gen’s information desk, an unlikely description for a push-pin board overrun with

antique staples, a few advertisements for the casino itself, and a want ad. The ad was for a job teaching English to migrant Chinese, which the island had plenty of. After finishing a rolled-up, stale slice of pizza, Gen took the ad down at Errol's request.

The drive back to the hotel began in increments of discomfort. The humidity teased Errol's scalp and the stiff, dry seat cushion beneath him stuck to his ass whenever he shifted into a new position. Gen chewed betel thoughtlessly; apparently he was comfortable enough, and content with the silence, or used to taxiing dumb tourists.

"You ever been to America?" asked Errol.

"Land of milk and honey," said Gen, automatically. Then he said, "I like American baseball."

"Oh, really? What's your favorite team?"

Gen's smile broadened. "*Yomiuri Jaiantsu!*"

"That a Japanese team?"

Gen nodded and spat over his left arm. His phlegm ricocheted off the door and spiraled out of the Jeep. "Tokyo *Jaiantsu*. The, uh-hh-Giant."

"What other teams are there?"

"Oh, *Doragonzu*-"

"Dragon?"

"Uh-huh. Uh, Hanshin *Taigas*, the Tiger, *Toyo Kapu*, uh-hh-fish."

“The Toyo Fish?”

“Yeah.” Gen jerked the steering wheel. Ahead, there was a particularly nasty bend in the worn trail Errol was trying hard to believe was a main thoroughway. An entire chunk of road had been washed away in the last rainstorm. The right wheel fell into the crevice then crawled back up until it had risen into line with the others, showering the Jeep, Gen, and Errol with grass and mud. Errol's eyes went wide; his head swung back to front, hit the dashboard with a bang, and brought him back a bloody nose and stars in front of his eyes.

“No,” said Gen. “No. Sorry. *Kapu* is koi. You know koi?”

Errol held his nose. His eyes were closed and lightning ran across the insides of his eyelids in every direction.

Gen spared Errol a glance to see why his fare had suddenly grown quiet, turned his attention back to the road, then did a double-take. He pointed at the nose, and the blood bubbling between Errol's fingers and down the underside of his wrists, and began to speak rapidly in Japanese. His voice took on a cadence that reminded Errol of an auction house he had been to when he was younger and the old man that slid into the auctioneer's seat. The auctioneer banged a gavel atop the desk in front of him and began selling the ancient world in choppy sentences between gavel swings.

Errol dredged the contents of his pants pocket with his right hand, which had not yet come in contact with the blood that was still running out of his nose.

He found two crumpled tissues therein and stuffed one into his searing nostrils then waved his hand at Gen to relieve the driver of his concerns.

"It's okay," said Errol, as he slowly drew the seatbelt across his lap and buckled it.

"Sorry," said Gen. And then after a moment he added, "I did not do that! I am only driving!"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know. My bad luck, that's all."

Gen stared at Errol between eyefuls of the road, navigating over and around a few more muddy dips and minor crevices with minute adjustments to the steering wheel.

"You're bad luck?" he asked.

"Guess so." Errol pawed at his left nostril then his right and then folded the bloody tissue into the clean one and returned them both to his pocket.

"Then stay away from me, man, okay?" said Gen, a nervous half-smile easing its way up his right cheek. "I'm on a roll at the casino."

Errol chuckled humorlessly and peered into the side mirror. Up close, his nostrils were pink, speckled with blood, as were the hairs around them. Twin red-black bullet holes. He sat back in his seat still staring. They looked like nose plugs from further away.

"Great."

Another sidelong glance from Gen. "How's that taste, man?" he said.

"Beats the continental breakfast."

Gen chuckled, then remembered that he was back in uniform and driving the company car, and added, "Lunch is better. We'll be back in time for lunch. On the house."

"You know what they say about a free lunch," said Errol.

"What do they say?"

"I don't know. You don't get one bleeding all over the salad bar?"

"It don't look so bad, man," said Gen. "No worries, yeah? We'll tell all the girls you were in a fight. Very heroic."

"Not many people would hire a teacher with a bloody nose from a fist fight."

Gen spat again. This time, the smell of betel-nut met sea breeze as it flung itself through the Jeep and the two scents mingled and bedded down inside Errol's injured nose. Somewhat akin to nutmeg and acrid like tomato sauce or vomit.

"Don't worry, man," said Gen. "My sister put up the ad. She's a teacher, like you. She works at the school. I'll tell her you're O.K."

"Thanks."

"Hey, man, why did we have to drive out here for ocean? You came on ferry, flew from America; you see ocean all the time, right?"

"I wanted to see the ocean unspoiled by man, you know? No buildings or boats or oil in the water."

Gen nodded his head, but then he said, “No one lives back there because it’s a swamp, though. It’s ugly, man.”

Errol shrugged.

“Why are you here?” said Gen, apparently unsatisfied.

“I want to teach.”

“Come on, man. You can teach back home. Why?”

“Home didn’t feel like home anymore,” said Errol.

“But it is home.”

‘Not for me.’

Gen smiled knowingly. “There is always a girl.”

Errol smiled. “No girl,” he said. Then he asked, “Do you think I’ll fit in here?”

“Maybe. Maybe. Some people don’t like *Gaijin*.”

It began raining a few minutes later. Pitter-patter at first, then the sky opened up completely and poured its grievances onto the island. Gen, swearing in discombobulated mash-ups of Japanese and English, untied the bedraggled canvas roof that hung in a bundle behind them, but couldn't tug it over their heads with two eyes on the road and one hand on the wheel. Wary of another dip and bang, Errol unbuckled his seatbelt, brought his knees up to his chest, and spun around on his rump to face the roll of canvas, which was now swinging dramatically in their wake like a broken sail.

Errol wrestled the canvas over the cab but not before the water that had clung so desperately to it during its mad dance in the sky behind them suddenly cascaded down over both of them, causing Gen to swear more.

There was a sharp turn ahead and Gen's hands slipped down the steering wheel and didn't catch straight away. Butterflies pushed against the walls of Errol's stomach, expanding a deep, cool, empty place inside of him.

Errol saw the ditch pass and what *could* have happened played itself to death inside of that cool empty place.

Then Gen spun the wheel and the Jeep slid, caught gravel instead of mud, and continued onward without even a contemptuous glance at the ditch.

While Gen and the Jeep fought the terrain, Errol strapped in. Almost immediately, he felt as though his abdomen would be sawed in half by the seatbelt and twisted by it and there was a moment when it seemed likely that his head would crash through the passenger side door window, but those things didn't happen.

Forced to concentrate, Gen remained mute for the rest of the trip, leaving Errol alone with his thoughts.

Before he had left California, there had been one last hot shower. Afterward, the bathroom mirror stayed foggy no matter how many times he swept it with his hand, so he nicked himself no less than seven times with what turned out to be a broken razor. His gums bled from brushing too hard. His flock

of seagulls hair just wouldn't conform to the instruction of his comb. He walked out of the bathroom and into his bedroom. The bedroom was cool and he was alone for the time being. He was able to drop his towel and simply marvel at the feeling of privacy, of being cold, of being rested. The clothes laid out on his bed were simple, a T-shirt and jeans, his favorite pair. He dressed and only when he had finished, taking his time, had the front door creaked open.

"Little brother?" she said.

"Do you remember how to knock?" said Errol.

"Nope. You decent?"

"Never have been, little sister."

A pampered brunette bobbed through the kitchen, earrings bouncing, hair in a knot, her eyes on the bathroom door. He had left the light on.

"Is Sadie in there?" she said. "I have to pee."

"No. We had a fight," said Errol, lacing his sneakers. "She's gone."

"Oh."

He smiled up at her. She smiled back sympathetically.

"I'll just be a minute," she said.

"Okay."

A moment later, she opened the bathroom door.

"Lydia, I'm ready to go," he said.

"Okay. Um. My friend came along for the drive, okay? I didn't think I would be able to drive home."

“Who’s your friend?”

She took a deep breath and let it out, clearly *exhausperated*, like she’d run the Boston Marathon. Like all he cared about, *ever*, was girls.

“My dormmate, Karin.”

At the airport, Errol had gotten out of his sister’s car. When she stood up to follow him he gave her a kiss on the cheek, a last chance to look affectionate in front of her dormmate; he had scarcely said a word to Karin in the hour-long drive to the station.

Where the Hell was Sadie? he thought, while he smiled at them both.

“Thanks for coming,” he said.

“Sure. Take care of yourself,” said Karin.

“Yeah. Keep my sister out of trouble, hear?”

“Where’s Sadie?” said Lydia.

“I don’t know. She left pissed but I didn’t expect her not to be here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too. Well, so long, kid.”

“I love you!” Lydia said as he wandered into the throng of would-be passengers.

He answered her likewise.

Above them, the sun was going down. Behind Errol, the girls were waving.

Ten minutes after the rain subsided, Gen parked the Jeep beside two others like it; one, with a missing tire, up on cinderblocks for weeks, the spare abandoned in the crab grass that grew up around the front bumper. Still, no Jeep seemed worse than any other, or the broken, weeded parking lot, and the sun-faded and crackling hotel.

Feeling a bit sore that Gen had not driven him to the front door and breathing heavily through his mouth, Errol paid him in thank yous and five American dollars, then took his shirt off and wrung it out as Gen did the same. Together they went inside the *Dynasty's* lobby, mud falling like dung in their wake.

Plastic palm trees, full of leaves turning steadily bluer with the addition of each new year's coat of dust, in an environment that could sustain the real thing, and a shoddy lecturer's podium were centerpieces. On his first day, Errol stumbled over a rippling, brown rug askew on the floor, and avoided the bristling eyesore ever after. A faint and foul smell intermingled with the scent of stale air: an odor of boiled seaweed awash with globules of swollen grain, resembling discarded zits more than steamed rice, which is what the appetizer was called on the English language column of the menu. Errol mused that in Japanese the dish probably translated as something akin to *bird shit baked in a quiche and splattered on your plate pukewarm and watery*. His swollen nose resented it.

There were new patrons in the lobby, a middle-aged businessman-type clutching a cellphone and a younger woman that Errol thought of as an elbow crook, what others might call a golddigger. They were standing knee deep in red dyed leather handbags and suitcases and the *maitre'de* was absent. The couple turned toward the opening door as Errol and Gen stepped inside, then moved together as if they were a single organism, gathering between hooked fingers all of their belongings, with Businessman towing Golddigger in a staggering heel to heel to toe to toe step that left her face flush from the effort.

“We’ve been waiting *fifteen* minutes,” Businessman declared. Errol smirked and nodded sympathetically.

“So sorry,” said Gen. He reached toward the bags Golddigger held and she let them fall into his hands with a grateful sigh. Likewise, Businessman stepped forward and shoved a suitcase into Errol’s stomach without looking up from his cellphone.

“Here,” he said. “We’re the Studebegganses. We have a reservation for ten o’clock and it is now eleven. I’m not getting a signal on my Blackberry. Let me use your phone.”

Numbed by the bluster in Businessman Studebeggans voice, Errol reached into his own pocket and pulled out a poor gray phone, paint-scraped along the sides, and across the back, from half a decade of drops and brushing up with keys, change, pencils, and whatever else it found itself in collusion with.

Mr. Studebeggans took the phone from Errol and stared at it. "Don't you have a business phone?" he said.

"I don't work here," said Errol.

Gen, having shouldered a pack mule's weight in luggage, slowly lurched around to face Errol and Mr. Studebeggans. "Mr. Cornier is a customer of this hotel," he said.

Mr. Studebeggans stared at Errol and Errol stared back. Errol blinked; dirt clung to his eye lashes. Then Mr. Studebeggans guffawed.

"I thought you were one of these people," he said, then he slapped Errol's slick warm shoulder and immediately drew his hand back to stare at it in blatant distrust.

"It's okay," said Errol.

"It's so nice to meet you," said Mrs. Studebeggans. She was carefully smoothing out wrinkles in her pants and didn't bother looking up. And then Gen toddled off with Mrs. Studebeggans's luggage and began to ascend the stairs. Mr. Studebeggans gathered the remaining bags together then, followed upstairs by Mrs. Studebeggans, forgot Errol existed. Errol heard him exclaim "*something something* blackberry," to Gen, as they followed behind him, then they were gone.

Errol's room was a thinly veiled office that had been converted into a twin-bed hotel room. Errol's beaten leather suitcase lay at the foot of the bed,

unremarkable and unopened; an LAX tag shone brightly white against its brown handle. The lamp shed a too-orange glow on the headboard and thin hospital pillows, but the single window offered no illumination whatsoever, no matter whether the shade was drawn.

Errol sat on the edge of the bed, picking at his nostrils. Light flakes of dry blood fell and disappeared, camouflaged against or consumed by the ugly dull blue-grey carpet. His arms itched like Hell from gnat bites. And there was a thin contented smile on his lips.

Outside, the rain had begun to fall once more and tree frogs clung to the metal beams that supported the aluminum carport over the lobby entrance. The beams were flaking and salt-worn like everything else, which made them easier to grip. The occasional idling car left an acrid but dry and warm breath of exhaust in its wake, which the frogs gobbled up until they were shooed away by either Gen or some other shirtless islander. They sang, though, despite the threat of Gen's broom, and their song could be heard even over the raucousness of the rain against the carport.

From his luggage, Errol produced an air mattress, which included an electric pump. He had worried that the high pitched whine that it produced as the mattress expanded would disturb the other guests but his window hung over the carport and the symphony beneath it rendered the pump's drone inaudible. When the mattress was firm, Errol unplugged the pump and the rain concluded its noise almost simultaneously.

He drew a wrinkled blanket over the air mattress and crawled on top. Beneath him, the mattress sighed and sank in on itself to better distribute his weight. And aside from the chorus of frogs, which began to sing again as soon as the rain had quit, there was peace in the room, a degree of tranquility, which seemed warm and swollen, and consumed Errol, and his breathing slowed, and he closed his eyes.

Sometime during the night, the mattress yelped and began to squeal. Its whining roused Errol, who looked about in surprise as his memories languished in slumber and for a moment he couldn't remember where he was. The mattress first became more pliant then began to prune. Errol thought, "Oh, well," as the mattress's pathetic whine subsided and the chorus of frogs grew louder and the rain began again and Errol sank into the noise of the island and fell asleep.

Little Black Dress

Jackie excused himself for the afternoon the same way he had done every day since hiring his first employee. After Ptolemy returned from his lunch break, Jackie feigned a headache due to some marital discourse or summons from a higher power. Owning a comic book shop allowed him a renewable source of these excuses, and it was most often Diamond Distribution, the chief distributor of comic book merchandise in the U.S., which he blamed for his aches and pains. He would begin each leave of absence with a smoke break, which he took on the back stoop that led to an alleyway used for deliveries and trash pickup where he parked his car. The alley afforded him an imperfect view of I-95, a billboard that proudly proclaimed, "Take a bite out of the Big Apple. Greyhound can help," and a grove of second and third growth pines that had been molested and relocated time and again as the interstate writhed first east and then west at the whim of traffic currents. The trees, half of them supported by Popsicle stick stakes and

twine, reminded Jackie of Charlie Brown's Christmas tree, especially when the temperature dropped off around Thanksgiving and took the pine needles with it. Thinking of Thanksgiving led Jackie inexorably to thinking of Christmas, which made Jackie think of gaudy lights and glimmering tinsel strands, then diamonds and rubies, and eventually to the neon marquee inside of his head and his name emblazoned in light for the entire world to see. But what name? His name, but not Jackie. He liked 'C' names. Christine? Crystal, maybe? Something girly. He could spell it with a 'K'.

After his break, he drove home, and if Bridgid was still at school he'd spend a few hours in the garage modeling for imaginary onlookers in the full-size mirror, picking and choosing his outfit from the hidden selection he had tucked into the spare tire compartment in the trunk of his beat-up Chevy. Sometimes, he would daydream about looking into the mirror and seeing a real woman standing there in his high heels. He would purse his lips and she would purse hers. He would flash his midriff and she would do the same, then they would grin and giggle at one another. And he had nightmares about that mirror. He would walk in front of it and see himself transformed into a woman, and behind him he would see his wife, Bridgid, standing in the doorway, and she would *know*.

When he heard Bridgid park in the driveway, exit her car, enter the house, and begin casing each room for signs of her husband, he stripped down to his boxers, threw on a pair of sweat pants, and walked inside carrying a greasy

carburetor, a hammer, or cloth, even a pair of old work boots, all of which banged around in his trunk, neglected and dirty, useful both as deadweight in the winter months and as subterfuge to hide his cache of women's clothing.

This routine was taxing but it kept Jackie sane and his delicate marriage contained, like a Faberge egg. Once, on their third anniversary, in the bedroom he had broached the subject of roleplaying. She had responded with a wrinkled-nose smirk, and coyly she asked, "You want me to dress like a French maid?"

To which Jackie had replied, "No! Not like that!"

And then Bridgid had twirled a bit of hair around her index finger and whispered piteously, "Is it my hair? Would you rather I was a redhead?"

It wasn't that, either, but the subject of wigs had the conversation headed in the right direction. But after Jackie had suggested that *he* could wear the wig and lingerie tonight, albeit jokingly, Bridgid had responded with a humored, "That's faggy," and Jackie had grown sullen, smiled dully, and the sex that followed was only inevitable.

It was a Wednesday, the day before Bridgid left Jackie for good, and like every Wednesday, New Books Day, Jackie had to help Ptolemy organize the new stock. Then Bridgid called. Ptolemy would have to handle inventory by himself.

Bridgid's voice was strained amidst the chaos of pneumatic school bus doors opening and closing, children cussing, and adults blurting out short, shrill commands.

“Car won’t start,” she said, each word a careful pronouncement of his duty to respond to the situation like a husband should, but that was all. The rest of her attention ping-ponged between students and her coworkers, their needs ever present while Jackie was seemingly without needs; theirs were monumental: my mom isn’t here, I can’t find my purse, are you coming to the P.T.A.?, etc.

Jackie nodded and said, “I’ll be there soon,” and, “I love you.” He closed his phone after she automatically responded, “I love you, too.”

“Mother calling?” asked Ptolemy.

“Mmnhmm. Hold the fort?”

“Got it, boss.”

The parking lot was almost vacant when Jackie pulled up to the curb. His wife ended a hilarious conversation she was having on her cell phone, then got into the car when she was finished. She pecked him on the cheek after sitting down, then began towing the seatbelt out from its stowaway compartment, spooling more than enough by the time he began to pull away from the curb. She hadn’t yet closed the door, though, and Jackie hadn’t noticed.

“Jackie!” she said, reaching for the door as if she were reaching across an abyss, like the seatbelt didn’t have her locked into place, and she might fall out, and die, and it would be *his fault*. She slammed the door shut.

“Sorry,” he said. He wasn’t, but what else was there to say? “I forgot.”

“You always do that.”

“Don’t say ‘always’. I don’t *always* do anything.”

“You always forget about me,” she said.

“I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. Oh, it’s Lisa; stop the car!”

Jackie did. Outside the passenger side window, Lisa waved to both of them and grinned with whitening stripped teeth. Jackie tried not to grimace as Bridgid’s window rolled down and Lisa draped herself through it as if it were a window sill and she were a much-too-hot little black dress, red haired, and freckled cleavage pie.

“Hey, girls,” she said.

Jackie cringed. Lisa wore the dress as well as she wore the smile. Both drew him in.

“Hah! Lucy,” said Bridgid, “I’ve wanted to ask you *all day*. Did Eddie see you in that thing?” She wagged a finger at Lisa’s chest.

“Principal Lavery?” Lisa laughed. “Why, Bridge, are you saying I am dressed inappropriately?” said Lisa, still all toothy, hefting the dress higher, drawing everything else up with it. “I’ll let you borrow it sometime.”

She looked at Jackie as she said this. So, Bridgid did too. “Oh, keep it in your pants, Jackie,” she said.

A few minutes later, they were out of the lot, halfway home. Jackie thought about the argument they were about to have and decided to pretend they weren't going to after all.

"What's happening with the car?" he said.

"You always change the subject. Don't think for one second that I didn't notice the way you were ogling Lisa's tits."

Jackie felt his face flush and he turned his head to glare at his wife. *Look at how angry I am*, he thought. He tried to will the words into her mind.

"Jackie, look out!"

His eyes turned first, like the adjusting lens on a security camera. He saw the cat. Turned his head. Stepped on the brake. Pushed it down. Turned the wheel. The cat skittered to the left. Jackie's Chevy went right into the gutter, then, after a startling groan and gasp from the tire, settled itself with a wheel on the sidewalk. The wheel was tattered and *fizzing*. The cat was nowhere to be seen.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Bridgid," Jackie said.

"Well, watch where you're going!"

Jackie flicked on the hazard lights and got out of the car. He walked around the Chevy to the sidewalk, surveying the damage with the keen eyes of a man who knew a flat tire when he saw one and had AAA on speed dial, then he realized that Bridgid was already calling. So, Jackie leaned against the trunk and stewed. Fifteen minutes later, as the tow truck backed up in front of the Chevy,

Jackie realized with a momentary surge of apprehension that he didn't have a donut for the mechanic to replace the flat. It wouldn't fit in the trunk dug out with his heels and the mish-mash of other clothes. He glanced through the passenger door at Bridgid, who had been staring unseeingly, transfixed by the truck's crimson brake lights, but was now nose deep in the glove compartment, skimming through its contents on a search for God Knows What. Then Jackie waved at the mechanic as he dropped out of the tow truck's high seat and tipped his mesh baseball cap.

"Howdy. Flat tire?" he said.

"Yeah, there was this cat." said Jackie.

There was a clunky *ca-chik*, as if somebody had chambered a round, then the trunk opened along with Bridgid's door. She grew out of the passenger side of the Chevy like a sword unsheathed from a scabbard.

"There's a spare in the trunk," she said. She wagged the car's dummy manual in one outstretched hand.

"Uh, no, there isn't," said Jackie.

"Well, it says there is in here."

"It isn't in there. I took it out to get more mileage per gallon."

"Ha, that's a good one!" said the mechanic, swiping his cap off to wipe the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand.

"I read online that you can save half a gallon of gas by losing a little weight."

“Maybe they meant *you* should lose a little weight,” said Bridgid.

Jackie felt his face get hot for the second time in one day. Definitely not the afternoon he was expecting.

The mechanic could probably smell the carcass their marriage was becoming. It was injured, maybe dying, but wary and dangerous as it cooked crisp and blackened in the sun on the side of the road, so he stepped gingerly to avoid their gnashing teeth. He dropped back on his haunches and crawled up beside the flat. He ran a gloved hand down its treads, hummed thoughtfully to himself, then said, “Can’t patch it. Let me get the winch.”

“Thank you,” said Bridgid.

“Yeah,” said Jackie.

Tethered to his truck, the mechanic towed the Chevy into the parking lot of a Cuban garage and introduced Bridgid to the mechanic. The mechanic explained in broken English the arduous process of changing the tire and why it would exact such a high cost from their wallets, and Bridgid did her part by nodding agreeably. Jackie, sullen and slouched, expecting an interrogation and scolding as much as a child would after disobeying his parents, waited by her side and walked slowly behind her to the driver’s seat when the car was ready. Bridgid stayed silent for a fair portion of the drive home, and Jackie felt exposed and insulted. It was almost six o’clock when the Chevy was finally snug in the

driveway, but rather than putting the car in park, Jackie put it in reverse and waited for Bridgid to get out.

“I have to go back to the store,” he said.

“Jackie, where did you read about the mileage thing?”

“YouTube.”

“You mean you *watched* it.”

Bridgid stared at him as he spoke, her eyes narrowing with each word.

“What was I going to say? ‘I saw online’ doesn’t sound right.”

Bridgid nodded and got out of the car.

“I’ll see you later,” she said.

“Kay. Love you, hon.”

“Love you, too.”

She shut the door and Jackie began to hyperventilate.

The next day, Jackie woke up late next to a lime green Post-It note that decreed Bridgid’s classroom was more important than Jackie’s comic books, so she had taken his car to school. Jackie swore, already late, and now he wouldn’t be in till lunch thanks to the city’s lackluster transit schedule. Feeling a real headache coming on at last, Jackie dressed in a hurry and stumbled out of the house bedraggled and unshaven.

His feet twitched between bus stops. His fingers drummed along with the beat of incompetent passengers as they shoved their passes into the ticketing

machine facing the wrong way, dropped their change, or tried to cajole their way aboard, wasting his time with every inane word. It seemed like every one of them tried to scuff his shoes, jolt him with their straying limbs, or simply fill his personal space with their acrid, unwashed stench. Their constant stinking stupidity drove his headache forward until it jack-hammered behind his eyes, he saw stars, and felt like he should vomit. When the bus finally halted beside his stop, Jackie floundered off the steps, tripped on the curb, and broke his sunglasses on the way down to the sidewalk.

With his glasses in ruins, the sunlight refracted off the storefront too brightly and Jackie couldn't see the note taped to the door until he was fumbling his key into the lock. His skull was on fire, expanding outward, threatening to break out of his skin. He tore the note down and read:

Jackie,

Sorry, had to run home for my keys,

P.t.

"Fuck," he said. "That's it. Fuck it. I'm going home." Jackie called a taxi for the return trip.

On the way home, Jackie imagined how he'd look in his wife's turquoise blouse. With his stash tucked away safely in his car in the high school parking lot, it might be the best he could do under the circumstances. He'd try on some of her lipstick. That would be fun. He had never dared to take such a risk in the garage. In the bathroom, with the door locked, he could safely wash off the makeup if he

heard her come home. Of course, he realized, after running his palm down one bristled cheek, he would have to shave.

His headache began to subside. By the time the trip was over, it was almost nonexistent. Jackie paid the driver and, feeling better already, tipped well, then strolled through the front door of his house and through the living room without even wondering why the door was unlocked.

“Who is she?”

Jolted out of his high, Jackie spun around and stared at his wife. She was sitting on the couch with her hands full of rainbows; in the beginning, when Jackie hadn't dared to shop for women's clothes, the majority of his collection were bright, gaudy feathers, boas, and costume shop jewelry. Later, velvet wraps, silk blouses and skirts, even lingerie, were the least of the accouterments that Jackie added to his stash. Jackie's first thought was, *another day, ruined*. His second was more akin to mewling than actual words.

Bridgid stood up from the couch and let the clothes fall on the floor around her. She picked up a fire engine red imitation leather tube top and held it out to him. Jackie strode forward and took it, cradling it against him, his jaw quivering.

“Who's who?” he said.

“The woman that you're fucking when I'm not home,” said Bridgid.

Jackie squeezed the tube top and it crinkled under his fingers. Bridgid's fists were clenched, her eyes were pink around the edges, and her nose was

reddened, but only her husband would have known that she had *not* been crying. This was anger. Her capillaries were beacons of red light, showing vibrantly through her thin cheeks. Her jaw was set and her pink eyes focused. She might, in a moment of weakness, squeeze out a few salty drops. That moment hadn't come.

Jackie wanted to close his eyes. If he could only close his eyes, he could imagine the sun, sand, a warm sea washing against his back, then dragging him backward into the ocean and away from this. The sun would be setting and its waning light would coat him as splendidly as a Cashmere coat and dazzle better than diamonds.

He wanted to say that the clothes were his.

Bridgid was a proud woman. She was programmed with only one response to a cheating husband. Without her, he would be outcast, a strange bedfellow that would underperform if he had the nerve to invite a woman in at all, and never, he believed, would he feel comfortable enough with another human being to express his desire to crossdress.

Jackie's mind drifted and he thought of names: Something with an 'S'. Sandra. Serendipity. With a 'D.' Desiree. No. Screw it.

"They're mine," he whispered. He whispered to calm his nerves but they shook right through his skin and threatened to escape him.

Bridgid made no such attempt to calm down. Her voice slipped inside his skull and battered his brain around like a piñata. "What do you mean they're yours?" she said.

"I..." *Faggot* is the word that she would call him. There would follow a torrent of other insults and then, well, Jackie didn't want to be sure. If she only swore at him then he would feel lucky not to be ridiculed, driven into the streets, made a mockery of in front of their neighbors and friends. "I bought them," he said.

"You bought them." Bridgid's eyes were angry and there wasn't even a glimmer of understanding in them. *Faggot*. She'd say it automatically, and maybe as an interrogative, but hidden within there'd be a pronouncement.

"I bought them for her," he said.

"She dresses like a whore."

Jackie's eyes opened and he faced Bridgid's drooping mouth, upturned and puckered lips, and gritted teeth. Then he matched her scowl with one of his own. But she wasn't looking.

"What are these? Boas?" said Bridgid, kicking at a coiled mass of lavender feathers so that it unrolled. "Is that a joke?"

Then Bridgid shook her head, sighed in exasperation, and stepped over the pile of clothes.

Jackie's resolve faltered as Bridgid walked around him and into the kitchen. He tracked her with his eyes at first then obediently followed her in. Bridgid selected two glasses from the cupboard. Jackie hesitated, then opened the refrigerator door.

"What do you want to drink?" he asked.

"A new husband," said Bridgid, smiling. Then she laughed, "I thought you said, 'What do I want?'"

Jackie closed the refrigerator, pried the glasses out of Bridgid's hands, and filled them at the sink. He handed one to her, then drank from his own. Bridgid drank.

"It's not you," he said.

"Oh, please."

"I'm messed up. I've been confused."

"I'm seeing somebody, too, Jackie."

"What?" Jackie stared aghast and again Bridgid laughed.

"You're kidding," he said.

"Am I? Jackie, you're not the only one that gets to be messed up."

"But how could you?" Jackie's eyes felt gelatinous and quivered, so he didn't dare blink.

"Like this," she said. Bridgid slid toward him, put her mouth near his, touched his penis through his slacks. Jackie pushed her away.

"Bridgid!" he said.

Bridgid turned her back on him and set her glass on the counter. She rubbed her shoulder absently.

“You see? You make it easy.”

“Honey, I didn’t want to push you. We’re *arguing!*”

“I can take a hint,” she said and paced out of the kitchen and across the clothes in the living room. She trampled a lavender bra and her shoe caught in a black dress. It captured her attention. Alone, amongst all of the other bright and gaudy clothes, she picked it up in a fist.

“What is this?” she asked.

“What’s what?”

“Is this Lucy’s?”

“No! Honey—Love—”

“Don’t honey-love me. I don’t do it for you, so you fuck my best friend?”

Bridgid turned around and in her eyes Jackie saw genuine, heartfelt pain. He felt a pang of guilt but it passed. He couldn’t exactly tell her that, well, she did “do it” for him, when she was dressed up, had her hair done, makeup on, all her ducks in a row. It made him hard just thinking about how beautiful she was in this ensemble or that one. He imagined himself in every one of her outfits and it was exciting; undressing her was his favorite part of intercourse because he could imagine tearing the clothes off a shopping mall dummy and dressing himself in them.

Bridgid stepped close. Closer. Her right hand shot out and ran a hard left into Jackie's cheek. It hurt. Jackie made a whiney noise that sounded like helium escaping from a balloon. Bridgid's hand shot out again, crossing his face. Jackie caught it, held her wrist. Squeezed it tight.

"Fuck you! Fuck you! Our lives are ruined!" She hurled the dress at him and it fell in a useless clump at his feet.

"You said you're seeing someone else, too!" he said.

"If I am, it's because of you! I hate this shitty house, that fucking car, you're such a loser, playing with your little comic books! Let go!"

Bridgid shook Jackie's hand free and pushed him back. Jackie stumbled. His hands swayed like oars and knocked Bridgid's glass onto the floor. It broke apart. The shards spiraled outward in a dozen gleaming pieces and descended onto the dress.

"That's not true," he said.

"What's she like in bed, Jackie?"

"She's..." Jackie lost his voice in thought. He had fought to get here, whether he wanted to or not. There was acceptance in Bridgid's voice. And there was one brief and shining moment, thin as gossamer, when Jackie thought, *she's going to cry. Buckle down. I'll apologize. Life'll be hard, at first, but* —then the moment was gone. The injured look in Bridgid's eyes succumbed, replaced with something awful and dead.