

Esteban I.V. Galindo  
Mrs. Foster Douglas

I called Irene from Yuma: eleven o'clock at night, twenty degrees in the wind, from the pay phone outside of the Denny's. I was surprised she answered and she was just as surprised when I asked to meet me for drinks the following afternoon. When the conversation was over, I hung up and ran back to the truck. I almost cried from the cold.

Our drinking on Sundays was an old habit. It had started years earlier when we had both been undergraduates at State University. We'd sit, in the dark, away from the windows, and spend the afternoon talking about anything we could think of. It kept us cool in the summer, warm in the winter, and together. We'd been friends, close friends, and, for one reason or another, we never had the courage to move beyond that. But when I think about those times now, all those Sundays ago, it was the nearest I had ever been to a perfect relationship.

I drove through the night to meet Irene. I left a dry and smoggy California winter and emerged into a bitterly cold and snowy New Mexican winter. I pulled the truck to the side of the interstate just past Lordsburg to watch the rising sun reflect off the dust of snow that covered the desert. Beside the wind blowing, it was silent. When I left New Mexico, nearly a year before, I had needed a week to pack and filled my truck, front and rear, completely. Once I had decided to leave California though, it had taken me just two days to pack. I left a lot for my neighbors to divide among themselves. In the end, I returned to New Mexico with less stuff than I had left with.

In Las Cruces, all roads eventually lead to El Patio. It's a cavernous bar in Mesilla; that's Cruces's historic suburb. On the outside, it's just another biker bar in need of a paint job. The real magic of the place, like any speakeasy, is on the inside. El Patio is all arches and Mexican brick.

It's huge, easily five thousand square feet, with three pool tables, a stage and dance-floor, wraparound booths all dominated by a two-sided bar. Lito, a square built part time weight lifter, is the weekend manager and, on Sundays, is behind the taps. During the week, it's the kind of place you drink off a defeat. But, on weekends, it's a place to celebrate a victory by matching shots with your best bud. You can always take your piece on the side to El Patio but never the wife because it's not that kind of place.

We'd all be there on Saturday nights, of course, drinking off finals, term papers, work, or the student senate: Matt, Captain Morgan, myself, Irene, Shawna, Eric, Bill, Donna-Beth, and, of course, Frankie, who didn't drink but who use to tow our asses home. There were others on those wild music filled beer soaked nights: Johnna, Becky Van, the Anvil, Cisco, the Werlings, Devon, Andie the Freshman, Teresa, and, among others, Colin who knew the secret of The Counting Crows "Mr. Jones" before any of us. It was the early 1990's. The Great Eighties had just ended and we were confused, weird, and in college. The Gulf War and OJ Simpson trial were screwing with our collective sense of justice. And we were reading Conrad, Joyce, and Morrison for the first time. It was a small town tucked away in a huge desert full of little people with big ideas. To me, though, it became just enough. It became home.

By 10:30 A.M., I had half of my life back. Of the two storage places in town, one was open on Sundays. I rented a closet at the Main Street lot and unpacked the truck into it, fighting the wind the entire time. Next, I pulled out a clean shirt, changed in the truck, and headed over to the Hildagos' house. Over another cup of coffee, they rented me a small place in the "student ghetto". In Las Cruces, even in this day and age, deals to reconstruct one's life can still be struck over coffee and *pan dulce*.

"You deserve better than that little place," Carol told me. "You have a Master's degree."

Leaning over my coffee, I replied, "Actually, once I get working, I don't plan on staying." Carol and Tony exchanged looks.

"Wait. That's not right," I said, waving a hand through the air. "Once I'm working, I'd like to rent that little property you have over on North Mesa. The one with the little adobe guest room out back. I could fix it up for you and maybe rent it to a friend or something. You know, if you still have it." I kept forgetting how long I'd actually been away.

"Well, yeah, we still got it, but you shouldn't be renting, boy," Tony cut in. "Once you're on your feet we should talk about you buying that little patch of scrub. You do have your Master's, after all. You should own property." As warm and inviting as they'd been, I think I winced when Tony spoke those last few words. Being a property owner wasn't something I was ready for quite yet.

I walked into El Patio at five minutes before two. The warmth of the place hit me like a slap to face. The clouds outside had turned dark and the air smelled of rain. It would storm hard, I figured, before my story was done. But, inside was warm, inviting, and, in that huge empty bar, intimate. Lito was manning the taps and he had to do a double take before he finally smiled: "What the fuck is this. When you did you roll back in?"

I took his offered hand. "This morning. I'm meeting the big I. How's things?"

Without even bothering to ask, he poured me a coffee and Turkey. "Good enough. Old Man Malone passed on; two months now. The Great American got torn down. You hear about that yet?"

I shook my head. "Haven't even gone to that side of town yet. That's too bad about the Old Man. How long they been back?" I nodded toward a table near the front door. Abbot and Mr. Lincoln had returned while I

had been away. They sat, silently, half-empty pint glasses in front of each, staring intently at the chessboard between them. They'd been a feature of El Patio for years; Irene and I had watched them play for what seemed like forever. A single game between them would last for weeks. They'd sit, for hours, pondering strategies and tactics before ever daring to make a move. And, when one finally moved a piece, they'd break into a heated exchange of grunts and muttered insults. Then, one day, they simply weren't there.

"About three weeks. Still on their first game. Rumor has it they were up north. Did you hear about the new Applebees?"

I didn't even know an Applebees restaurant had been built in town.

"They shut it down. They got mice. What they get for building way out there on East Side."

We talked some more. Lito got me caught up with the comings and the goings. After he poured me another, and just as I was getting warmed up, I moved to our booth. The booths at El Patio are throwbacks. They're real leather, that curve at an almost impossible angle, with high padded backs. On a good day you can sink into them, and, on a dark enough night, become invisible. Our usual booth had the best panoramic view of El Patio. We could see anything or anyone come and go from the bar.

Irene arrived at twenty minutes after two. She swooped in the front door: wet and bearing gifts. She stood on the bar's brass rail and kissed Lito's shaved head. She swung her hips in salutation to Abbot and Mr. Lincoln. She rounded the corner and, finally seeing me, threw her arms wide, proclaiming, "He's returned! Kill the fatted calf! The son who was lost is found." She spun, almost losing her balance. "Thank you Jesus!"

I stood, already buzzed from caffeine and alcohol, and hugged her. She started to pull out, but I pulled her in close and held her. Finally, slowly, I let her sit.

“Well, here,” she began, plopping a paper bag on the table between us, “I thought you’d appreciate this.”

I don’t think she knew how right she was. I tore into the white bag to find a New Mexican treasure: two green-chile burritos from Roberto’s Famous Chiles. I meant to savor the flavor I’d missed so much, but I wolfed them down, ordered a pitcher from Lito, and waited for Irene to arrange herself. She waited until I had poured her a beer before starting in on me.

“So. What the fuck? You call me in the middle of the night for drinks on Sunday. Hello? You live twelve hours away.”

“I lived that far away. Life on the coast didn’t agree with me.”

“Honey, I’ve been to your mother’s house. It can disagree with me anytime.”

My mother had her house built in 1995 after divorcing my stepfather. She bought an empty lot on El Camino Real, just down the street from the Mission Catholic Church, and spent the next year arguing with her architect, then her contractor, then the city council, but, in the end, as always, she eventually wore everyone down and bent them to her will.

My mother’s house is not huge, but it is spacious. It’s built in a classic Spanish mission style with the living spaces built around open air patios. My mother’s house has two such patios. The front one, that guests see, features a half scale replica of the fish fountain built inside the historic Mission San Juan Capistrano. The other patio, the one that guests are not permitted to visit, is my mother’s personal space. She maintains a meticulous flower garden.

My mother still works five days week. She’s most hands-on with her catering business. But she either also co-owns or owns outright a car wash, a check-cashing business, the only real *tortilleria* left in south OC, and the only liquor store in town that features Mexican brands of everything that a newly arrived illegal immigrant might want or need to remind themselves of home.

“So start the fucking story already,” Irene almost whined.

I took a deep breathe and plunged in. “I’m going to be a father.”

That stopped her. Instead of saying anything else, she lit her first smoke and took a long pull. Finally, she said: “With whom?”

“Her name is Lauren. Lauren Davis-Douglas. She’s thirty-six, has a degree from Scripps College in Art History, devotes a lot of time to charitable causes, and is Mrs. Foster Douglas.”

“A married woman?” she asked. “You made a baby with a married woman?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think I did.” I ran a hand through my hair to steady myself. “I mean, I’m pretty sure I did.”

Irene looked like she didn’t know to laugh or to cry so I took a deep breath, a deeper drink, and started my story: “You know how it started. I graduated and was just waiting for something to come my way. My mother called to say that she had an excellent job opportunity for me back home. I went out there, interviewed, and, in short order, had been awarded a position as deputy director of activities for the Capistrano Valley Boys and Girls’ Club.”

“And whatever the fuck made them think you were qualified for that job? You have a master’s degree in archaeology.”

“Do you know any other male who worked six of his seven years of college at the Early Childhood Development Center? Or how about working with the Upward Bound Teen program every summer?”

“Well, I stand corrected. Pour me another and get to the baby making part.”

“Patience, my dear, is a virtue. I quickly marked my territory and started working the system. Fortunately, it didn’t take long to stand out. I quickly proved myself to the club’s directors. I was then allowed to meet the schoolmarms and such that constantly frequented the Club. All this was just a few months at most. By the summer, I was openly managing most of the teen

activities. By this time it was nearing the end of August. That's the beginning of fund raising time. It wasn't too much longer until I was being introduced to the major donors."

"Why? Who would give a fuck who you are?"

"I'm a young bilingual Hispanic male returning to the barrio I was raised in to give back to the community that gave me so much. You figure it out."

"Did you ever once go the Club when you were a kid?"

"Not a single fucking time," I told her, "My mother was too cheap to pay the monthly fee. It was cheaper for her to take me to work. But that was the company spin and I was expected to make it work. In any case, during the course of a midsummer night's fund-raiser, I made the acquaint of Mrs. Foster Douglas. As it turned out, her husband's children, when younger, had enjoyed the use of the Club."

"Wait. You lost me. I thought you said this broad was thirty-something?"

"I did. She is. Bear with me, majesty, and I will be brief." I told Irene that I had, as a child, known the original Mrs. Foster Douglas. I can't picture her face anymore; whenever I try to, I conjure an image of Barbara Bush. She, and, by extension, her husband, had been among the first and most loyal of my mother's customers. She bore Mr. Foster Douglas four children, three boys and a girl. The daughter and I are roughly the same age; I know this only because it was drilled into my head growing up. However, my senior year in high school, 1989, Mrs. Douglas became ill and died quite suddenly. The town mourned for a year.

"The entire fucking town?"

I poured us each another. Outside, the rain had started and the parking lot lamps had turned on. "To understand this, you must understand the town of San Juan Capistrano. It's not too unlike Las Cruces: it predates most of the state around it; it's

traditionally a ranch town; it's predominately Hispanic and Catholic; and, it's home to a few select land owning, founding families that take great pride in their role in local history. Among the five Founding Families of San Juan Capistrano, is the Douglas family."

I went on to tell her, in brief, about the Douglas's' Triple-J ranch and their role in taming the wild Capistrano Valley during the 1880's. I made mention of their assistance in founding both the Mission Catholic Church, in 1915, and, later, Fr. Serra Catholic High School. I touched upon the infamous of Arthur "Chuey" Douglas and his failed bid to rob the First United Capistrano Valley Bank in 1966. Finally I told her how, in 1986, the Douglas family has used old entertainment connections to bring about the televising of the annual Swallows Day parade.

"No shit," she cut in, "I always thought it was a little hokey."

"Whatever. That's major action for that small town. In any case, the original Mrs. Douglas had dutifully stood by her man through the whole process. Until, of course, her untimely death. The newest Mrs. Foster Douglas and I had met at the annual 'Fiesta Daze Fundraiser'. Which was, of course, catered by my mother's company."

Since we were two of the youngest people at the event, besides the token children, we bonded quickly. That night, over glasses of mid-priced chardonney, we shared a rather lively conversation. As it turns out, her degree in Art History had included a decent sized portion of anthropological theory.

Irene rolled her eyes. "Yes. That's fascinating. Get to the sexy time already."

Ignoring Irene, I continued to say that that night Lauren and I had swapped e-mails with the intent of continuing our conversation. We traded e-mails the next day. Within a week, our e-mails became personal, then, in another week, intimate. We swapped phone numbers and talked over the

phone. A week after that, we were texting each other every hour on the hour.

"Just a minute," Irene started, hanging a cigarette in midair. "Where's her beloved husband during all this?"

That was special point I wanted to make. For a man in his mid-sixties, Foster Douglas was amazingly active. He went into the offices of his real estate development business, his primary source of income, four days a week; then volunteer work; the yacht club; Rotary; tea twice a week with the monsignor; etc., etc., etc....Mr. Foster Douglas was often out of the house. He had plenty of things to do. Lauren, on the other hand, had precious little to do in order to fill the hours of the day.

"Think of whom she married," I told Irene. "Think of who she had to become. It was perfectly acceptable to catch sight of Mrs. Foster Douglas strolling the mall; a Saks Fifth bag draped over one arm. But, Mrs. Foster Douglas can't be seen at the gym getting sweaty as if she's just another housewife in a rush. Mrs. Foster Douglas can be seen sipping wine at an opening or a fundraiser, but she can never, ever, drop into Hennessey's Pub and have a beer with the girls."

Lauren had been a single woman for a long time I told Irene. She'd been a single woman with a career and passions and friends her own age. All that changed in the months following her wedding. Being Mrs. Foster Douglas was a full time profession. And it was all consuming. By her own admission, Lauren became distant to once close friends and associates. She had cried while telling me that she had become a "wedding friend" to once near and dear sorority sisters. By the time I met her, Lauren had no real friends of her own. Her friends were "their" friends. And all of them were twenty to thirty years older than she was.

Irene was quiet for a minute. "Why the fuck did she ever marry into that?"

"I eventually asked her the same damn thing. And you know what she said? That it

had been easy to fall for Foster Douglas. From the day they met, she'd been in love." Lauren had told me once that the first time she and Foster Douglas had made love he'd been as shy as a schoolboy. I told her that nowadays, schoolboys weren't all that shy. I should know; I worked with them day in and day out. But, she had shook her head and said that Foster Douglas had fumbled and blushed through their first intimate encounter. She told me that that had opened her heart more than anything else.

Irene gagged, then poured herself the last of the pitcher, and said, "That's one pathetic sister. Hey! Lito! Beer me! Beer me real good baby!"

Of course, there at the bar with Irene, I was the Monday Morning Quarterback. At the time, I thought I was meeting someone like myself: educated, socially conscious, and stuck in circumstances beyond our control. I thought she was bound to her husband in the same sort of way that I was the only person left to go to my mother's rescue. She had gone to Foster the same way I had returned home after a long absence: wary but optimistic. I supposed, at the time, that she had married Foster because for all his blustery yet very real power in Capistrano, there was something soft and warm underneath. When my mother told me that my sisters had all left and that she was surrounded by snakes and liars and was alone and afraid and needed someone she could trust to be near, I wanted to believe to it.

But, of course, there at the bar, I knew that those suppositions had been wrong. Lauren had woken up one day and entered that most fantastic of prisons with both eyes open and her back straight. I drove a car for twelve hours through the desert I had begun to call home to the coast I had just begun to forget. I didn't like Irene's tone, but she was right about Lauren and, even though she didn't say it, me.

"All right, it went like this. We took our first 'date' the last Saturday in September. We drove up to Tustin for the

opening of some exhibit at the cultural museum. She dressed up like something out of *L.A. Confidential*: dark glasses, scarf wrapped up around her hair, uncharacteristically demure. She even had her stockings straight."

"And you? Did you put up your coy little boy lost act?"

I told her that I had at first. One just doesn't pull up to the Douglas homestead. One has to be invited onto the grounds. So Lauren cooked up some story that I was going to tutor her in 'ancient wall art of the American Southwest'. I had told her that it sounded too academic and that Foster would never fall for it. But, her word proved true when she, without hesitation, hopped into my aging Ford pickup while it was still rolling to a stop. We arrived at the exhibit right on time and talked our way through the first hall. But by the time we got into the museum's second display we were holding hands. When we got to the diorama we had our arms around each others' waists. And before I dropped her off back her palace, we had made love at a dingy east-side motel.

Irene wrinkled her brow and looked at me seriously. "You made a baby on the first try?"

"No, of course not. No one ever does. Besides, we took the truck and I always have a stash of condoms in the glove compartment."

Irene guffawed into her beer. "And how old were those things?"

"About a year. But, God bless Trojans, because they were still soft and supple when they hit fresh air." Things escalated quickly. Lauren and I would meet every chance we could. Even though she was childless, she found excuses to get to the Club during the quiet middle of the day so we could have rough sex in one of the closets. I stole the key to my mother's homeowners' association pool, where we would soak and touch while Foster dozed in front of Monday Night Football. She invented girlfriends to visit and night classes to take. We hit upon a quiet dark back alley bar in Laguna Beach

were we would shed our public personas and just sit; sipping vodka tonics and fighting the impulse to talk about the future both of us knew we could never have.

“You actually drank vodka tonics?”

“It’s California. It’s different out there. But, the point was that we were doing anything and everything to get around her husband.”

“And your mother. I can only imagine, if what you’ve said is true, what effect such events would have on your poor failing mother.”

“Ah, yes,” I said, finishing off the beer in my glass. “My mother. The Queen.” While all this was happening, I told Irene, my mother had settled into what I thought was a pleasant busy season. I helped her out when I could, had dinner at her house on Sundays, and was genuinely impressed by her generosity and graciousness. Two traits that my mother was not normally known for.

A few weeks later, Foster had, I was told, finalized his annual trip to Arizona. He and some old buddies took off every year to a golf spa outside of Tempe. It was tradition and, for those invited, not to be missed. Accordingly, Lauren and I made plans to get away. I booked us into a Temecula bed and breakfast that overlooked a vineyard.

Irene nodded, clearly on the verge of intoxication, saying, “A masterful plan but I sense a...‘but’ coming.”

“Of course. I waited there, alone, for four hours.”

“Was the wine any good?”

“The merlot was okay but the cabernet was to die for.”

Irene: “And I’ll bet her excuse was lame and see-though.”

Me: “Not as much as you might think. Ready for it? It turned out that Foster had, at the very last minute, insisted that Lauren make the trip with him. So she dutifully packed a weekend bag and went.”

Irene: “Because what the fuck else did she have to do? It’s not like she had an extramarital affair to carry on.”

I didn't call her for two weeks. Even after that, it was another week or ten days before we saw each other again. Suffice it to say that I was angry. I had laid out good money for a trip that never happened. I mean, I wasn't terribly proud of myself. I was, after all, having an affair with the wife of the most prominent man in town. But, I was, I thought, understandably upset.

A hot October followed the dull summer and autumn, such as it was in Southern California, was in full swing. Lauren and I made up over a very rare dinner out. Foster was out of town and my mother busy with catering a weeknight wedding so we headed up to Newport Beach for a actual date. Lauren seemed more reserved that night. She didn't add much to the conversation and couldn't wait to get back to my apartment. Once there, she put on a show for the ages. At the time I thought that her enthusiasm was due to the magic of "make-up sex".

Over the next few weeks, however, our love making become even more brazen. Lauren insisted that we do it at my apartment during the day. She had always like sex a little rough, but now she was almost violent. She began howl and scratch like a professional. I could only imagine what the neighbors suspected when they saw the new white \$100,000 Cadillac parked in the weed-choked lot. "A property, I might add, owned by my mother by the virtue of a loan secured on the good word of Mr. Foster Douglas."

"I sense," Irene cut in, wagging a finger at me, "a major turn coming."

We made love three times like that. But, my performance was far from perfect. Lauren: a seasoned sex professional putting on the show of a lifetime. Me: a nervous wreck. After each, she lounged around my threadbare apartment, nude, making a spectacle of herself. She would sit on the balcony with an open bottle of beer held loosely between her legs. Or, she would watch the afternoon talk shows like a man: disgusted yet unable to turn the channel while scratching herself and drinking vodka

the entire time. Of course, I had to head back to work each time, so I would hop into the shower to wash the worse of our sins off of me, dress, and try to convince myself that this was, in fact, what I wanted. After the second of these sessions, my eyes wondered to the trash can just outside the shower stall and I couldn't find the condom I had just used. *It's not a big thing*, I thought, *I probably just buried it under some paper*. But, after our third session, I actually rooted through the can to find it, but it was nowhere to be found.

"You actually rifled through a wastebasket to find a used condom?"

"I had to. I was getting paranoid by then. Things were coming apart. She was coming part. I was freaking the fuck out. So that's when I decided to end it. I called it off the next day."

Irene nodded knowingly. "Now I get it. She had poked holes in the rubbers, stole them back to hide the evidence, then waited quietly just long enough to confirm that she was pregnant. Once she has such confirmation, she goes, smiles and all, to her husband, sells him on the story that the Viagra has worked and, bingo, she's going to bear him yet another heir; when she knows, full well that they baby isn't his. That way, when a beautiful brown little baby pops out of her full white belly, she gets back at the man she blames for ruining her promising young life while once again driving you, her coconspirator and victim, in shame, from the town of your mother's success. Bastardizing you, once again, in the eyes of your mother." She slapped her hand to the table, almost tipping the pitcher of beer. "Damn I'm good."

"You're close," I said. "Order us a closer and I'll tell you how it all ends." With that I stood and walked, ever so slightly tilted, to the toilet.

The bathroom's single small window was open maybe six inches. It was dark outside and the rain was heavy, beating against window and its pane. But the scent of the

night was thick and full; fragrant as any bouquet. It smelled of desert rain: sage, onion, and freshly turned over dirt. I'm not sure how long I stood in the corner of the restroom, deeply inhaling the smell of the rain. It could have been a minute or an hour.

Seated once again, one of Lito's espressos parked squarely in front of me, I started by saying, "The next morning was the day I was going to end things with Lauren. I wasn't sure what my next step was, but I knew that I would have to do something fast."

That day was a Saturday, and it was finally cold. A rare November storm had rolled into the OC: raining and getting as cold as it ever gets in Southern California. I got up early, showered and cooked breakfast. I was into my second cup of coffee when there was a knock at my door.

"How Hitchcockian!" Irene shrieked. "I mean...really! Think of it: the rain, the tension, memories of passion. You couldn't have planned it any better."

For the first time that night, Irene had been wrong. At the door had been two deputies from the Orange County Sheriff Dept. They were there to serve a child support warrant, but they had the wrong apartment.

"Needless to say, I was scared shitless. I mean, how did I know that Foster Douglas, a longtime and very public supporter of the department, hadn't called in a favor to have me harassed. But, they weren't. I walked them to the stairway, pointed them in the right direction and turned to beat a retreat."

That was when I spotted that familiar white Escalade in the parking lot. I made a break for my open door, but she was already standing at the bottom of the stairs. Her hair was ratty and unwashed, her make-up running, and with dark sunglasses askew.

"Wait. Stop," she called up at me. "Just hear me out!"

Me: "Lauren, for Christ's sake, lower your voice."

Her: "Just wait. Wait. Just let me up to talk..."

Me: "It's over Lauren. Do you hear me? It's over..."

Her: "I know. I know. But, just wait, please wait, I just want to..."

Me: "Lauren, I can't do this. Not now and not like this..."

Her: "I'm pregnant."

I stood speechless for a minute before I ushered her inside. I put her in the shower, fixed another pot of coffee, put some bread to toast, and waited. She emerged, wrapped up in my oldest most comfortable robe, looking slightly better. Her hair was piled high, her face clear, but her eyes red and puffy. She smiled weakly as I set her a cup of fresh coffee and three warm buttery slices.

Lauren: "I just want to say that I'm sorry. I'm sorry I got you involved in all this. You're a nice guy. You're a great guy; a really great person. You're warm and generous and silly and you remind of the person who I used to be."

I started with the only question I could think of, "Is the baby mine?"

She continued as if in a trance, "I'm sorry about the weekend in Temecula. I so wanted to go the country with you. I wanted to pretend to be your wife. But, when Foster insisted that I go with him, I couldn't say 'no'. I wanted to call you. And I tried. I did. I swear. But as soon as we got settled into the suite, Foster confiscated my cell phone and organizer. He said we were there to relax and to be with friends."

I tried again. "Lauren, please, who is the father?"

She drank a little coffee and made a face. "It's strong," she said sheepishly before her eyes again fogged over and she went somewhere else to tell her story. "We met our 'friends' that night for dinner. I didn't know any of the men; they were out of state business associates of Foster's. But, every couple was like us. I mean, it was a bunch of old men with younger women. There was one girl there who looked like she'd just gotten out of high school. She would laugh when she was nervous. It was weird. I was the

oldest woman at the dinner table. I couldn't stop asking myself why these men had brought their wives or girlfriends or whatever they were when they were supposed to play golf and drink all weekend."

It was right then that a spotlight went off in my head so I asked a different question. "Lauren," I said gently, "Who is Foster Douglas?"

She made a noise that was halfway between laughing, crying and growling. "Mr. Foster Douglas is a fake. He's a con artist. He has tea with a Catholic priest then surfs the internet looking for little girl porn. He donates thousands to Rotary for its charities, then builds second rate rat-trap apartment buildings here. He makes home and business loans to people he knows won't be able to make their payments, then he cooks his books to sell those loans to other lenders at a profit."

She stopped to drink coffee. I wisely kept my mouth shut. "Foster Douglas is the worst monster I know. He's cruel and spoiled and a liar. He's a sadist who gets off on embarrassing women. You should see this web site he pays for. It's all just girls who look like they're twelve having sex with older men who call them names and insult them. He used to watch that then come to bed and want to...you know."

I nodded then she added, "You know what? He stopped making love to me after he married me. After we were married, it was just about the sex. I wanted the love."

"Lauren," I asked gently, "What happened out in Arizona?"

She grimaced with real pain. "They did worse to those little girls than to me. They'd slip them drugs in the drinks to make them easier to use. They dressed them up like dolls. They swapped them around like they swapped golf clubs on the course. 'Give it a go,' one would say to the other. They were dirty old men playing out their sick fantasies. They were cruelest to the youngest one. She was just a little girl really. They drugged her up, stripped her

down, and poke and prodded her with anything they could get their hands on. Two of them tried to take her at the same time, but the poor thing was so drugged, she couldn't react. 'Stupid bitch', they called her. 'Can't hold her liquor,' they said. Then they dumped her in a corner and forgot about her.'

She drank a little more coffee. 'That first night, Foster had me just sitting on the couch next to him. I just sat there, hazy from whatever they put in my drink, and watched. By the next night, Foster couldn't keep the rest of them from looking at me. 'Hey, Foster, no holding back. We all share here,' they told him. I think I remember one of them touching me, then undressing me and then he...' But she didn't cry. She held back every tear.

'You know what the highlight of the weekend was?' Lauren asked me. 'I woke up the next morning sore and feeling hung-over. I couldn't believe the bits and pieces that I did remember. I was sick to my stomach and puked for what seemed like hours. The men were in the lounge watching football. Just as the girls were rousing themselves, the men started pouring more drinks into them. By sundown, the girls were almost lethargic. I held out for as long as I could, but when Foster noticed I wasn't drinking, he pulled me aside. 'Don't ruin this for me,' he said. 'These guys control a lot of money. Money I need. Money I use to make sure you get everything you want. Including that second rate beaner boyfriend of yours. Be smart. Have a future. Make sure your *amigo* has a future. Get with the program. You're Mrs. Foster Douglas and this is the hand we've been dealt.'

'Sweet Jesus Christ,' Irene swore. She was angry now. 'What a fucking prick.'

Lauren told me that she didn't honestly know who the father of her baby was. Given Foster's age, she hadn't been careful about birth control. It could have been Foster, any one of the other men from that weekend, or, most likely, me.

``What are we going to do?'' I asked Lauren.

She sipped a little more coffee and I saw her back straighten. ``There is no 'we'. You are going to quit the club and go back to New Mexico. You will not attempt to contact me again. You will live your life and forget about me.''

``But if that's my child...' I began.

``This is not your child,' she told me fatly, her shoulders squared and her jaw set. ``This child is a Douglas. It will be the next child of Mr. and Mrs. Foster Douglas. And this child will have all the benefits and privileges of being such. The only father this child will ever know will be Foster Douglas. If you ever try to push your way into this child's life, I will let Foster crush you. And your mother.''' Despite the robe and towel wrapped around her head, Lauren truly was, at that moment, Mrs. Foster Douglas.

``What has my mother...''

``Who do you think got you that job to begin with? There were ten other candidates with more real world experience than you. You have degrees in archaeology for God's sake. Think about it. Who uses the Club more than anyone else? Immigrant families with lots of kids. What do they need? Jobs. And who funds the Club? Rich white donors who need cheap household labor. Your mother wanted you in the club to sell her businesses to both groups of people. Foster teamed up with her to sell his 'affordable housing'. Then, in the end, when all the right palms have been greased, everyone comes out a winner. You're a tool. You've been used. Welcome to the club.''

Irene's eyes softened and her voice was low as she said, ``And that's what makes you sickest isn't it?''

I nodded and sipped the steaming coffee in front of me. It was hot, dark, and strong. Which could describe both Irene and my mother. Irene was New Mexican born and raised; with more than a little Indian in her past. Her face was broad, but heart-shaped.

She wore little make-up and had her hair cut into a long banged bob. She wasn't a thin girl but not exactly heavy. She looked strong; like she could bed steel rods or deflect bullets with nothing but her bare hands. Irene was tanned dark year-round and had the tendency to run hot and cold and, make no mistake, she was loud and bordered on annoying. But the biggest difference between her and my mother was that Irene would never lie to you.

Irene's ambitions weren't for real estate or for certificates of deposit. She wasn't led to undercut, or deceive, or manipulate situations for her own benefit. My mother's mindset was more mercenary. She approached her life as she did her businesses; always in terms of her bottom-line. She dealt with profit and loss. She hoarded any profits and cut any losses. She'd done that with her husbands first and then her children.

The last I saw of Mrs. Foster Douglas was as she left my apartment. She changed into a blouse and slacks she had had there, gone carefully down the stairs, started her Cadillac remotely, and left my life. I started giving stuff away that day. On the following Monday, I told the executive director that I wouldn't be coming back after Wednesday. For whatever reason, he didn't seem surprised. I never called my mother to tell her I was leaving. If she hadn't already been appraised of the situation one way or another, I figured, it wouldn't be long before she was. A rare wet autumn gave way to a more common dry and smoggy winter.

Irene and I sat for what seemed like a long time. Then, suddenly, she said, "So, you're not really going to be a father. I mean, Foster Douglas will, sure. But not you."

"That's not how I feel," was all I said to her.

The rain continued to beat upon the window behind us. We could hear Lito washing glasses and straightening bottles. We had even outlasted Lincoln and Abbot. We

discovered that they had packed their chessboard, after they each took separate Polaroids to verify their places on the board, and left quietly. Irene finally broke the long silence by asking, "Where are you staying tonight?"

I shrugged then smiled. "You know what? I don't know. I can't move into the new place until Tuesday. And I gotta get a haircut and start looking for a job." I took off my glasses and ran a hand through my hair. "So I guess I'm on vacation until then."

Irene slowly smiled her lopsided grin and looked at me from under her long bangs.

Mary Marie Dixon  
Shorty's Lament

When they stopped usin' the horses—  
That was the end of the manure spreader.

Took three outfits to spread all the manure.  
Some'd load,  
Some'd take the field, a couple hundred  
pounds on each section.

We had at least four horses at a time.  
Didn't neglect them either.  
No how. Sal, she used to nudge me for sugar,  
I always brought sugar cubes.

Workers, they was, eighteen hands high  
And broad as a barn door.

Team plowing, when you hit the rocks...  
Flip you right over the plow.  
Them horses better be alert or they'd drag  
you right on  
Through the field..

The trees worked against you from the roots.

The late forties, that was  
When we got the tractors.

Still, there was the threshing,  
Neighbors pitched in to rent  
An old McCormick Deering  
Took lots a men to run it.

Boy the table boards would groan then.  
Dumplings, bread, home-  
Made noodles, kolache, kraut, pickled chow-  
chows.

By nightfall, the dust on your neck 'bout  
drove you crazy.

Hanging popcorn to dry.  
We ate pie, meringues piled high,  
Coffee and politic talk.

We admired the fine neck of that cow horse

Johnny bought .

# Pilgrimage

We pitch rocks over the bridge  
into jellied water  
to scatter minnows in refuge mosses.

We slide down the bank  
into crystal clear pools and  
disturb a ground-blend tortoise.

Scuffling through dead weeds and shifted  
sand,  
we glimpse lifted dragonflies  
in milky waves on sylvan wings.

Our feet grate on ragged bottoms  
that cradle liquid silk and  
glittery jewelry fish.

Up top, on concrete rectangles,  
we reckoned it.

Down the sloping bank,  
we careened into it.

Over unlevelled land into pits and burrs,  
we experienced it.

Splashing shallows with tricky bottoms,  
we greeded it.

William McGee, Jr.

## Through the Valley

*The harvest is the end of the age, and  
the harvesters are angels.*

—Matthew 13:39

After leaving his home in Washington, Henry crossed Idaho and the southwest corner of Montana and traveled south through Yellowstone National Park, eventually entering Jackson Valley in northwest Wyoming. Route 189 crawled across the bottom of the expansive valley, between the majestic Grand Tetons to Henry's west—the glorious sunset behind their peaks—and the elk refuge to his east.

The night before he'd entered Jackson Hole, Henry had camped in a wooded area just off the main road, and as he slept in a sleeping bag under the stars, he'd dreamt of her again. She'd spoken directly to him again, beckoning him east, holding out her arms as if to embrace him. But this time, instead of the shorts or tank tops or other assorted exercise clothing she had worn on *Denise Austin's Fit and Lite*, she wore a long, heavy high-waisted skirt and a stiff blouse. Plus, her hair had been pulled back into a bun.

"Henry," she'd breathed, clutching a leather-bound book to her chest, "where are you?"

In his dream, he was walking along the shoulder of some unidentified road, when she materialized in front of him. "I'm on my way, uh, darling," he replied, but then he realized two terrible things: one, the Endeavor was gone, he'd never see it again and would have to walk for years to get to her now; and, two, he had just called her, of all things, *uh, darling*. Like that wasn't creepy. He put his head down, walked faster, and tried to convince himself that she hadn't noticed.

"Do not think that the Lord is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys," she told him. "There is nothing like staying at

home for real comfort, but I do await your arrival."

"You look different today," he said. "That a new outfit?"

Denise frowned. "Yes, I was going to mention that, Mr. Dreyfuss—I'm afraid I'm not myself today." As she looked at her Victorian fashions, Henry realized she was speaking with a slight English accent. "I think your subconscious must be mixing me up with someone else."

Of course. He'd read *Pride and Prejudice* in college—well, most of it, anyways; he had seen the movie—but he could see now that this vision was not quite Denise Austin; she was also a certainly erroneous likeness of Jane Austen.

"How often is happiness destroyed by preparation, foolish preparation!" Denise/Jane said, suddenly appearing at his side. Her arm flew out, and he felt her fingernail stab into his cheek.

"Oww!" Henry yelled, sitting up in his sleeping bag and protecting his face with his hand. On his pillow, a large black beetle, its pincers opening and shutting, moved forward, Henry's face no longer in its place.

As Henry drove the SUV into the city of Jackson, the bright neon green bandage on his cheek, he saw several people entering and exiting the motels and restaurants, none seeming to take much notice of him. He entered what looked like downtown Jackson, what with its public park surrounded by a flurry of shops, more restaurants and other attractions, people on horseback, in cars, but mostly on foot, in what looked like it had been—before the Rapture, of course—a tourist Mecca. Some store windows still advertised everything from T-shirts and toy bow and arrows to Charlie Russell prints and gold and turquoise jewelry, while others displayed crude signs offering "GUNS N AMMO" and "FRESH FOOD HERE." In the center of what must have been a once great commercial establishment of modern shops and stalls gilded with rough wooden, Wild West

storefronts, stood a square park cornered by large white arches. Henry drove around a parked stagecoach unloading passengers at the park and pulled into an empty parking spot in front of what looked like it might have been at one point a United Colors of Benneton. As he got out and locked the doors, a young man in buckskin shirt and pants, sitting in a folding chair at the edge of the park across the street, ran up to Henry and spoke.

“Hey—uh, I mean, howdy!” he said.

“Howdy, pardner! This your car?”

Henry looked at the thin, young man. In addition to the buckskins, he wore moccasins and had shaggy dark brown hair. Under his arm, he carried a shoebox and clipboard.

“Oh, of course it’s your car! You were driving it, right? Sorry.” He extended his hand. “The name’s Sam. What brings you here, uh, ‘round these parts?”

“Nice to meet you, Sam,” Henry said.

“I’m Henry Dreyfuss. I’m just passing through on my way out east, and I wanted to stop to eat, stretch my legs, maybe spend the night.”

“Well, all right. Mr. Dreyfuss, let me welcome you to our fair city. If you need food and rest, the Wort Hotel is a good place for both,” Sam said, pointing at something down the street, “but it’s pretty expensive. There’s also the Ranch Inn, or you can sometimes get a room at the Pink Garter or the old St. John’s Episcopal Church. As far as eating—well, if you like Mexican food, there’s the Merry Piglets. People also like the Cadillac Grille, the Cowboy Steakhouse, and the Acadian.” Sam turned and watched a large bus approach the square. It stopped for some pedestrians, then turned at the intersection.

“However,” Sam continued, “I have to tell you something else.” He leaned and spit chew into the gutter. “You can park here as long as you want, but there’s gonna be a price.”

“A price?” Henry asked. “Exactly how much are we talking?”

“Well, that’s negotiable, Mr. Dreyfuss. You’ll have to speak to the Abbot about that. He’ll decide.” Sam opened the shoebox and fingered through a collection of worn index cards. “You’ll appreciate the Abbot, Mr. Dreyfuss. He ain’t from *around here*—and he *knows* things.” Sam winked and smiled conspiratorially. “But, look, if you are going to park here, I’ll need your keys, and you’ll need to take this—to claim your vehicle later.”

Sam handed Henry an index card with a “7” written on it in red ink. “Just present this to me or Irma, if she’s in the office,” Sam said, pointing to the wooden hut across the street, “and we’ll be happy to return your keys—provided you’ve settled your account with the Abbot.”

Henry studied the index card. Unlike the dog-eared and water-stained cards in Sam’s shoebox, his looked new. “Is this the most secure system you could come up with? I mean, how do I know somebody else won’t make a card like this and claim my car?”

“Well, you have to sign for it, too,” Sam said. “Whenever you drop it off or pick it up, you have to sign for it. Right here,” he explained, pointing at the papers on his clipboard. “Besides, the Abbot said he’d take care of everything.”

“I probably don’t have many choices here, but I really can’t afford to lose what I’ve got.”

Sam nodded. “I understand, Mr. Dreyfuss. But perhaps you should read the back of the card.”

“The back of the card?” Henry flipped the card over, and saw a short message, also written in red ink.

*Dr. Dreyfuss,  
The Mitsubishi Endeavor will not be mishandled. Please give Sam your keys and get something to eat.*

—A

Henry silently placed the index card in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt. Sam

handed him the clipboard and pen. "Just sign here, after the number seven." Henry signed his name as the bus circled the park again and finally came to a stop, taking up several parking spaces. "Aw, jeez, that bus's gonna bogart the parking spaces!" Sam said as Henry handed him the clipboard, the pen, and his keys. "Got to go, Mr. Dreyfuss. Have a nice time in Jackson and don't forget to see the Abbot—he's probably in Dirty Jack's, where it's always Saturnalia!" He turned and jogged towards the bus, which was now unloading passengers.

Henry took a last look at his Endeavor and stepped up onto the wooden sidewalk in front of the row of old shops and other businesses, all adorned with the wooden façade. It's like a giant wild-west strip mall, he thought, walking on the creaking boards and noticing the hitching posts embedded into the curb. Or it was, at least. The hitching posts, probably intended as merely another affectation, now proved to be functional, as Henry noticed horses tied to almost every one.

"Tonight only! *Free* admission with coupon!" Ahead, Henry saw an elderly man in chaps and fringed vest passing out flyers and hawking some sort of entertainment. He handed a flyer to a man in a serape and turned to Henry. "Here you go, buddy—take one," he said, handing him the yellow paper.

Henry looked at the hand-written flyer. *SEE LOVELY LADIES! FOXY BOXING! PLUS FOOD & DRINKS FOR REASONABLE PRICES.*

"Where's this place?" Henry asked the elderly man.

"Only the *prettiest* ladies and the *best* grub in town, buddy!" the old man said loudly. "Present your coupon for *free* admission!"

"Right, but where is this place?"

"Sorry, buddy, *only one* per customer!" The elderly man stepped away and accosted a group of three men in matching camouflage jackets.

Henry studied the flyer again and saw the name of the establishment in slightly

smaller letters at the very bottom of the yellow paper. Well, he thought, I guess this decides my evening's destination.

*Corner of Center & Cache  
ONLY AT DIRTY JACK'S!*

Apparently the lobby of Dirty Jack's had once been a Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum, Henry observed as he waited in line to enter the theater and noticed the stuffed two-headed deer; the wax figures of Jack the Ripper and Vlad Tepes; the polished glass display case of what a gold plaque alleged was the incorruptible body of Jedediah Ewing, an outlaw killed in a botched bank robbery in 1872; and, other assorted oddities decorating the perimeter of the room.

"Please secure any and all firearms and/or weapons in our lockers, sir," one of two large men in dark uniforms ordered Henry as he approached the ticket counter. He studied Henry's large jacket. "If our metal detector goes off, you *will* be arrested."

"All right, but look—I just wanted to get something to eat—and talk to—"

"Your belongings will be secure in a locker, sir." The large man towered over Henry and placed a heavy, meaty paw on his shoulder. "It's just like at the airport or the mall. You put your stuff inside, you take the key, it locks, you keep the key till you need to open it again."

Henry found an empty locker and put his pistol and knife inside. He still had his first aid kit under his jacket—was there anything metal in there? He knew it didn't have a hypodermic needle, but what about scissors? He flipped open the white case, dropped the scissors in the locker, and put the kit back inside his jacket.

"Very good," said the large man.

"Thank you, sir."

"So, what can I get to eat here?" Henry asked.

"We just handle the admission, sir," said the smaller of the two men, but he must have been about 6' 6", Henry estimated.

"And I see you have a flyer."

“Oh, yeah. Um—here.” Henry handed him the yellow paper.

“The staff inside the show place will let you know what’s on the menu tonight,” the man said, nodding towards the theater, from which Henry heard loud music. “Just through the metal detectors and those doors.”

The “show place” had indeed once been some sort of theater with a large stage at the far end of the room. But where there must have once been rows of auditorium seats, now round wooden tables and folding chairs filled the large room, lit by wagon wheel chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Upon the stage, a woman danced to the music, holding and strategically covering her body with two large, feathery fans. A large bar stretched from one end of the wall opposite the stage to the other. Behind the bar were a mirror, rows of bottles, two bartenders, another large man dressed in black, and a young woman. Henry found an empty stool at the bar and sat down.

“What’ll it be, handsome?” the young woman behind the bar asked him. “We’re running low on ice, and we’re low on power, but we’ve got some beer that’s still cold.”

“I was thinking more of food than drinks,” Henry told her. “What’s on the menu tonight?”

“Well, right now it’s either jackalope burgers or rabbit stew.” She looked at the expression on Henry’s face. “I recommend the jackalope burger myself. Plus, each burger comes with a lottery number for the big drawing tonight.”

“The big drawing? Is there a good prize?” Henry asked.

She nodded. “Three of them, actually: some canned fruit, a cooler or something, and—well, no one knows what the top prize is, but the Abbot promised that it’d be a good one.”

“All right,” Henry said, “but let’s make it two jackalope burgers, if they’re recommended.”

She nodded, removing from her apron and opening a notepad. "Okay—and how will you be paying for this?"

"Uh, well, I've still got some cash—is it any good around here? Any more, I mean?"

She looked at his face wrinkled her brow. "If you're a serious customer, then you should offer something that still has value. Like, say," she said, staring at his cheek, "and bandages—or other medical supplies."

Henry searched his pockets, his mind racing. He only had his wallet and the first aid kit on him, and he didn't want to give either of those up. He reached into his jacket, opened the first aid kit, and felt inside the case. "It's a children's one," he said, producing a single adhesive bandage, its bright neon orange color radiating through the clean, translucent paper.

"Only one bandage?" She sighed. "You expect to get two jackalope burgers with just one bandage?"

"Well, hey, it's still sterile. See? It's still in the package."

"Yes, but one, Henry? And that's a children's sized one, too."

"Okay, so *two* then," Henry suggested, removing another from his jacket.

"Make it five," she said.

"Uh, how about three?" he asked. "And how about you tell me how you know my name?"

"The Abbot said you'd be here," she said, smiling and checking something in her notepad. "And he also said you'd give up three bandages for the burgers." She took his bandages and left with his order.

Henry directed his attention to the stage. The woman with the fans danced offstage to applause, and a line of can-can dancers stepped into view and began high kicking in ill-fitting hoop skirts and bloomers. While most of the men in the crowd hooped and hollered, Henry watched silently, waiting for his food. When their act finally finished and they ran into the wings, a slightly plump woman in a yellow dress walked onto the stage. When Henry's jackalope

burgers finally arrived on a paper plate, she had stripped down to a frayed pink bikini.

Henry had only taken two bites when he felt a presence behind him. "I was not aware that you would come this early," a melodious voice intoned. Henry swallowed the food in his mouth and turned to see a very tall stranger behind him. He had shocking white hair, both in his rakishly groomed handlebar moustache and in the long tresses that cascaded from his head to past his shoulders, and he wore a black T-shirt, leather vest, and crisp jeans over large black boots. Furthermore, Henry also noticed two very large wings, adorned with blindingly white feathers, sprouting from the stranger's back.

"But my foresight has always been what some of you would call 'fuzzy,'" the stranger said, "thus making it both my curse and my blessing."

Henry looked at the hand still on his shoulder. Even the thick hairs on his tanned hand and arm were amazingly white. "Can I help you?" he asked the stranger.

"Sam said you would need to discuss the fee for storing your vehicle. You do remember?"

"You must be the Abbot, then?" Henry set the jackalope burger on his plate.

"Pardon me if it's rude to ask—but what's an angel still doing here? You're not a, um, no offense, fallen angel, are you?" he asked.

The Abbot smiled. "You do not offend. I am the Abbot—of Misrule, more specifically—and I may be fallen, but not in a satanic sense. While I did leave paradise and come to your realm, that was by divine providence. I came to battle the forces of darkness, which I did nobly, valiantly, and victoriously." The Abbot looked around the room and glanced towards the stage. "The bikini that woman is wearing—tell me, is it pink? I am colorblind, and I ask for aesthetic reasons."

"A faded pink, yes," Henry said, taking a bite from the burger.

"Ah! Well then, that's not the one I asked her not to wear tonight." He gestured

towards Henry's jackalope burger. "As I was saying, while many of your peers certainly did go to their heavenly reward, many, like you, I, and the rest of this room, or this planet, this entire realm, rather, certainly did not make it heaven but remain here, neglected and apparently all but forgotten by our father."

Henry continued eating. "Yeah, I kind of assumed something like that had happened."

"Of course, my foresight is limited with matters celestial, at least while in this realm." The Abbot studied Henry.

"But, as for the fee for storing your vehicle, let's make this simple for both of us. We can spend time negotiating a price, or we can agree right now on the price we'll end up with anyways: four aspirins, which you will remove from your jacket."

Henry retrieved the pill bottle and carefully tipped four tablets into his palm. He then handed them to the Abbot.

"Thank you—I find that anything less than extra strength has little effect on me." The Abbot immediately swallowed two of the pills. "This payment will cover the rest of today, tonight, and all day tomorrow. You will have to see me again should you stay any longer—but, of course, I already know that you will not."

The Abbot rose and put his hand again on his shoulder. "And, Henry, please forgive Rosemary for what she will do tonight."

When Henry finished his jackalope burger, the barmaid brought him a tall glass of ice-cold beer. "Compliments of the Abbot," she said, and pointed to Henry's right. Henry turned and, of course, saw the Abbot sitting at a table and surrounded by some of the female performers of Dirty Jack's. The Abbot nodded and smiled at Henry.

"He said you'd be staying for the main show," she added.

"Would that be the 'Foxy Boxing'?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied. "By buying

those jackalope burgers, you've already entered the drawing—and there're some good prizes for the winner tonight."

Henry looked again at the stage, where the dancers had been replaced by four stagehands who were assembling four turnbuckles and the accompanying ropes that would form the boxing ring in the rear center of the stage. The turnbuckles slid into holes already in the wooden stage floor, and then it was only a matter of connecting the ropes, which were apparently like, Henry observed, the red velvet queue ropes that hooked to metal posts and formed lines outside theatres.

As the four stagehands secured and checked the ropes, a younger gentleman with spiky orange hair and a manicured goatee took the stage and lifted a megaphone to his mouth. "Ladies and gentlemen, you're here for one reason! And I'm happy to let you know that it is finally time for tonight's main event—Foxy Boxing!" Many of the men in the audience applauded and cheered as the announcer continued. "Tonight, once again, we have a new challenger, appearing for the first time, ready to match her skills, strength and nerves of steel against one of Dirty Jack's very own lovely ladies!"

Two of the stagehands reappeared, each pushing a shopping cart whose contents were hidden under a large blanket.

"Before we meet our contestants, ladies and gentlemen, let's take a look at tonight's prizes. As you know, until a challenger defeats one of Dirty Jack's desirable defenders in three rounds or less, the collection of prizes will remain unclaimed and continue to grow." He held his hand out, pointing at the shopping cart to his left. "So, let's take a look at—prize number one!" One cue, the stagehand quickly yanked the blanket off the cart, revealing several crates of canned food. "Five cases of twenty-four fifteen ounce cans of Happy Harvest cling-free peaches! Sweeter than nectar, and chock-full of vitamin C!"

As the audience applauded, the announcer

moved swiftly to the second shopping cart and pointed at its hidden contents. "And, if that's not enough, we have—prize number two!" The blanket was likewise removed, revealing what looked to Henry like a three-foot tall scratched box-like kitchen appliance. "A relatively new, four cubic foot Coleman Laboratories solar-powered refrigerator/freezer! Guaranteed for as long as it works to make ice—crushed or cube—and preserve your food and keep it fresh!"

The two prizes were wheeled into the wings while the announcer walked to the center of the stage and stood in front of the boxing ring. "And, finally, ladies and gentlemen, tonight's bonus prize! A one-o-a-kind, special item that, if given the chance, could save your life, lift your spirits, or win your heart! I present—prize number three!"

A large German shepherd mix, led on a leash by one of the stagehands, sauntered onto the stage and stood calmly at the announcer's feet. As the announcer patted the dog's head, Henry noticed the movements of a woman sitting next to the Abbot. The woman, wearing a black corset and gym shorts, suddenly rose from her seat. The Abbot placed his hand on the woman's corseted back, but she seemed to ignore the gesture.

"This three-year old female shepherd mix comes fully and professionally trained, housebroken, and ready to serve! Experienced with hunting and guaranteed to bear many a litter to come, Jellybean is a fantastic addition to tonight's collection of marvelous prizes!"

"Isn't that Natasha's dog?" Henry heard the bar maid ask someone at the bar. As Jellybean was led offstage, the woman in the black corset was already sliding her hands into and lacing up her black boxing gloves, with the help of the other women at the Abbot's table.

The announcer continued. "Let's meet tonight's fighters! Representing Dirty Jack's, at 5' 6", 120 pounds, 35-24-26, we have a frequent pretty face in the Foxy

Boxing ring—everybody give it up for Natasha!"

Natasha ignored the announcer and the cheers from the audience as she climbed into the ring. In her black corset, gym shorts, dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and bare feet, Henry found her attractive yet definitely intimidating.

"But now let's meet tonight's challenger. From nearby Dubois, at 5' 2", 105 pounds, 32-22-33, battling for all of tonight's fabulous prizes—let's meet Rosemary!"

A red-haired woman in a blue tank top and denim shorts ran onto the stage from the wings. The audience cheered as she lifted her boxing gloves over her head, as if in anticipation of her victory. She winked at the audience and, still smiling, climbed into the ring.

"Ladies and gentleman, it's the moment you've been waiting for. Let's get ready for Foxy Boxing!"

Somewhere a bell rang, and the fight was underway. Henry watched as the two ladies circled each other cautiously, sizing each other up; they exchanged a few swings, which missed until Natasha landed a blow, delivering a jab that glanced off the left side of Rosemary's head, to the excitement of the crowd. Rosemary lifted her gloves in defense, backed off, and spent the rest of the first round protecting herself from Natasha's steady barrage.

As the bell rang and signaled the end of the first round, Henry noticed the Abbot rise and approach the stage. As most of the girls began clearing the glasses from the tables and delivering them to the bar, the Abbot said something to Natasha, who didn't even seem to acknowledge his presence. The Abbot shrugged and left the room as the announcer with the orange hair and megaphone returned. This time, he was also carrying a tote bag.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen—time for the first drawing!" He dropped the tote bag and reached inside, pulling out a small round paper plate, like the one the jackalope

burgers had been served on. "And, our first number is—87! Odd numbers go to the challenger." Rosemary raised her arms in triumph. "Who's got 87?"

The crowd at Dirty Jack's flipped over their paper plates and checked the numbers written in black marker on the back. As Henry glanced at the backs of his two plates—numbers 21 and 40—another man whooped in excitement and jumped to his feet. "I got it! 87! That's me!"

"All right," the announcer called, "we have a potential winner! What's your name, sir?"

"Ben—Ben Hillenmeyer," the man shouted.

"Okay, Ben—name your attack, and if your attack succeeds in defeating Natasha, you win a free dinner at Dirty Jack's."

Ben thought for a moment and then spoke. "Upper cut to the chin," he pronounced.

Rosemary flew into action, flinging her fist solidly into Natasha's chin. Natasha, unprepared for the assault, stumbled backwards, fell clumsily and sprawled on the floor. The crowd cheered—Natasha didn't seem to know what had hit her. Rosemary danced in victory, but Natasha slowly stumbled to the turnbuckle and pulled herself to her feet.

"And Natasha is up!" the announcer yelled. Ben laughed and took his seat, shaking his head. "All right, let's begin round two!"

The bell rang, and Natasha came out of her corner in a fury, assaulting Rosemary, pummeling her mercilessly. The two fighters circled and pounded each other until suddenly Rosemary seemed about to fall. As she lurched against the ropes, the bell rang again. This time, Natasha continued pummeling Rosemary, until some stagehands physically separated them and led them to their corners.

"That's enough for now, ladies," the man with orange hair announced. "It's time for drawing number two!" He reached into the tote bag. "It's another odd number! For

Rosemary, our challenger, again—number 21!”

“Come on!” Natasha yelled. “Not fair!”

Henry checked his plate again. Sure enough, it bore the number 21, in neat black marker.

“There’s a fifty-fifty chance for either fighter to be chosen,” the announcer explained, as some members of the audience began to protest Rosemary being picked twice in a row. “Chance has picked Rosemary twice. The number is 21.”

Henry stood slowly. “Uh, that’s mine—number 21.”

“We have another potential winner!” the announcer said. “What’s your name?”

“Henry Dreyfuss.”

“Okay, Henry—you know how it works: if the attack you pick for Rosemary helps her defeat Natasha, you win.”

Henry hesitated. The only names for boxing moves he could think of were from video games—upper cut, body blow, and . . . well, that was it. The announcer seemed to notice Henry’s uncertainty and spoke up.

“Our last call was ‘upper cut to the chin.’ Now, you can stick with that choice,” he explained, and several men in the crowd booed at such a suggestion, “but custom dictates that you pick another choice: jab, cross, hook, head butt—or lady’s choice, where you let Natasha pick what she wants to do herself.”

Henry liked the idea of passing on the responsibility to someone else. “Okay, that’s what I’ll pick: lady’s choice.”

The small redhead whooped and flung off her gloves. She ran at Natasha, lunged at her legs, now clutching something small and metal, jabbed her weapon into Natasha’s left leg. Natasha cried as Rosemary traced a bloody line down Natasha’s calf, and, in an instant, thrust the bottom of her right foot into Rosemary’s chin, snapping her head back. Rosemary rolled over, dropping what Henry thought looked like a rusty corkscrew, and got to her feet.

Natasha leapt on Rosemary’s back and

sank her teeth into her shoulder.

When the screaming women went down, an outburst of both cheers and boos exploded from the crowd. The stagehands reappeared and, hurtling into the ring, fought to separate the two women. As the curtain fell, the stagehands were attempting to drag the combatants offstage. The announcer ran in front of the descending curtain, but his attempts to calm the excited crowd were thwarted by a folding chair that was thrown and bounced off his arm.

“Remain calm!” he shouted. “Show’s over! Now clear the room! You can pick up your belongings in the lockers tomorrow! But for now, exit the building in an orderly manner!” More stagehands arrived, now in black helmets and vests, brandished shiny nightsticks and began herding the audience towards the lobby. Seeing the chaos erupting around the room, Henry quickly moved to the exit, following the crowd into the lobby—where he noticed that the lockers were now secured behind some sort of heavy-duty steel mesh—and outside into the darkened street, lit by a few storefront lanterns and the stars and moon above.

As he moved away from the theater and down the street, he felt a large hand on his arm. He turned and was confronted by a large, dark-skinned man with a shaved head. “So who the fuck won?” he demanded. Henry smelled rank beer on his breath. “I had a lot of goddamn supplies riding on that fight.”

“I dunno,” Henry offered. The large man stared silently and did not let go. “Maybe they’ll disqualify the girl with the weapon, though.”

“Why the fuck did you say ‘lady’s choice’?” The large man squeezed Henry’s arm. “The Abbot said you’d do that! Do you know how much that’ll cost me?”

“Sorry,” Henry said.

The large man suddenly and viciously drove his fist into the neon green bandage on Henry’s face

Henry went down. As he fumbled

unsuccessfully for the gun in his holster, which he suddenly remembered wasn't actually there, he heard the large man mutter, "Says he sorry!" and watched him walk away and disappear in the crowds.

"You get the hell out of here!" a stagehand in full riot gear told Henry, helping him to his feet. Henry pushed the stagehand away and left Dirty Jack's, heading towards the security of his locked car. The cool night air chilled his skin, and as he touched his hand to his now tender face, Henry felt moist warmth—blood. Removing the index card from his pocket, he approached the wooden hut in the town square.

"Can I help you?" asked a thin woman, in buckskins identical to Sam's, as she stepped out of the hut. Henry could hear a couple of other people talking softly inside the makeshift wooden office. The woman looked concernedly at Henry's face. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I just need to get something out of my car," Henry said, offering her the card. "Can I have my keys?"

"Uh, yeah. Hold on." She took his card and stepped into the hut. A moment later, she reappeared. "Bring the keys back, or it'll get towed. Oh, and there's no sleeping allowed in any parked vehicle," she told him as she handed the keys over. Henry nodded, then crossed the street and crept towards his parked Endeavor. He opened the passenger door, got inside, shutting the door behind him. Twelve seconds later, the interior was plunged into darkness.

Henry tapped the light above, and, in the semi-lightened vehicle, he climbed over the seat and found the bag containing butterfly strips, disinfectant, and gauze pads. Using the rear view mirror, he removed the neon bandage, cleaned the cut beneath his eye, and applied the strips. While there'd probably be a scar, Henry thought it would probably be a small one. But what did it really matter? Who amongst us was flawless?

Henry climbed into the back seat and

stored his supplies. While it was slightly cool inside the vehicle, Henry considered for a moment disobeying the woman from the hut and spending the night in his Endeavor. If he reclined the front passenger seat, he could probably sleep somewhat comfortably—at least till dawn roused him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp knock on his window. Outside, he saw the silhouetted figure of a woman. Prepared to explain that he was most certainly not sleeping in his Endeavor, he opened the door.

"I thought you might be here," the woman said. But it was Natasha, wearing a black leather jacket, long dark skirt, boots and a stocking cap. "Look, I need your help," she told him and paused, resting her hand on the seat of the Endeavor. "Can you help me?"

"What do you mean?" Henry asked her. She looked down and bit her lip. "Here, get in," he told her, moving over and making room for Natasha.

Natasha slowly climbed in and sat beside Henry. As she crossed her legs, she carefully guarded the bandaged section of her calf with her hand. "I can walk on it fine, but the cut still hurts—and it looks pretty bad."

Henry examined her leg. The bandage looked like a section of a torn white bed sheet, and it was held in place with silver duct tape. He touched the smooth skin of her leg and began to carefully remove the tape. "What did that other girl have, some sort of weapon?"

Natasha nodded. "A corkscrew." She shook her head. "I should have never agreed to the match. But I wanted Jellybean—that's my dog." Henry peeled the rest of the duct tape off her leg, and Natasha grimaced as the adhesive tore from her skin. "The Abbot had Doc Lowell look at the cut, and he did wash it, but did you see that corkscrew? It was rusty. Can't a girl get lockjaw or something from a rusty weapon like that?"

Henry nodded. "Yeah, a person could contract tetanus—but the chances are

probably slim that you have." As he removed the bandage, Henry softly touched the reddened skin surrounding her wound. "I'd be more likely to believe that your cut's infected."

"Listen, I know you're a doctor, and I know you've got medicine and supplies that could probably help me. Sam told me you've got hypodermic needles, so go ahead and give me a tetanus shot—I don't think I've had one since I was a kid." She looked into his eyes. "I'll be in your debt."

Henry hesitated. "Sam told you?"

"He goes through everybody's vehicles when they park here. But he says he never takes anything."

Henry had been the one who had asked for the "lady's choice"—plus, hadn't she just say, "I'll be in your debt"? That statement seemed intriguing.

Henry retrieved the hypodermic needles, and Natasha turned on her side, hiking her skirt up past her hips. He swabbed her now exposed thigh and administered both the tetanus and the penicillin shots.

"Thank you," Natasha said, getting out of the Endeavor and smoothing her skirt. Henry stepped outside, locked his vehicle and slammed the door.

"You needn't return the keys, Dr. Dreyfuss." Henry turned and saw the Abbot, standing on the sidewalk, leading Jellybean on a leash. The dog stood calmly next to the angel. "I suppose I should not be pleased with you Natasha, as you failed to throw that fight—as we agreed you would."

"Jellybean was never supposed to be part of the deal," she said, kneeling and stroking the dog's head. Jellybean licked her face. "And what about Rosemary trying to kill me? You must have known that would happen—and you never told me. I might even suspect you put her up to it!"

"If I wanted you dead, Natasha, it would be done." He studied Natasha, who put her hands in the pockets of her jacket. "You need not fear for your life. In the future, I see you very much alive—and very far away

from here," he said.

"Oh, really?" she asked.

"Actually, I see two possibilities," the Abbot said. "One, you use that gun in your jacket, Natasha, and shoot me and whoever gets in your way; Henry, his weapon in a locker in Dirty Jack's, gets wounded; and, Jellybean runs away, never to be found. Many people get caught up in the gunfire and killed," he said, glancing towards the woman in buckskins, who was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the hut. "Or two, I convince you to abandon this foolish plan, and I simply accept that I must watch you two drive away—with Jellybean, of course—allowing me to keep whatever you leave behind, for my troubles."

Henry looked at Natasha, and from her expression, he knew they had little choice.

"The second option helps me to prolong my reign as Abbot of Misrule, so I like it better—don't you?" He handed the leash to Natasha. "I will need your locker key, Dr. Dreyfuss."

Henry found the key and handed it over. "It would be horrible to have people killed," he said to her.

The Abbot nodded. "It would be if anyone cared about them."

Henry watched Natasha push Jellybean into the back seat and then sit in the passenger seat. Henry climbed inside, fastened his seat belt, and as he started the engine, Jellybean clumsily leapt into his lap and licked his bandaged face.

Christina Kubasta

## The New House

In your locked rooms  
a chequered grip, some mud,  
and other things, never mentioned.

Perhaps the purple-blue hue  
cheeks turned again & again  
like a biblical injunction.

You've given me keys, and I've  
published the contents, with or without  
accompanying photographs.

So now we make an offer, write in the side-  
by-side  
with automatic ice maker, four top  
gas range, gleaming white.

In my own rooms wait only dust, all ghosts  
given up, at one time or another, but not yet  
to you. We'll share the furnace maintenance;  
You'll hang frames & fight with plaster.

I'll snake a drain from time to time.

My coffee bean child  
ground back down,  
you're next in line sometimes.

I'm rereading Plath.  
No word rhymes with chimney.

S.D. Dillon

## On Site

Earplugs only dull the sound  
as salt-skimmed asphalt a blade.  
Metal-smoke pierces  
my sinuses as sparks bouquet  
from a welding iron. I shift between  
coils & assembly lines  
forklifts & palettes  
of car frames  
where men tend fumes & fire.  
Someone's brother almost-pauses,  
peering through his welding mask  
not curious  
or unwary enough  
of this visitor to register—  
then turns back to  
pounding out parts.  
Aware of safety glasses, I move my feet  
look at my meter. Sunlight  
beams in from a loading dock  
and the midwinter light fools me.  
For an instant I think  
it's spring out there.  
For an instant I don't think  
I don't know what work is.

Mark Matson

Sa 06/09/2007 4:30pm

I.

as they focused on her ear with a lense  
I was dazzled by  
    the taste of her knees  
    & smell of her nose  
& thought about their effects:  
as she echoed with resonance                   fitores  
&  
parts vibrating at (to) the touch

bow bow triple-coloured bow  
bow to/associations (unsparingly critical)  
    spiritual correspondences  
    sympathetic clairvoyance &  
forms under the influence:  
elusive shapes in dull pigments—  
consequences are for the aesthetes

II.

as time went on words simply became colour &  
clearer  
    non-representational language  
they ran together toward obscure words  
    & longer words that stand near them

III.

as steel blue in my mind  
    sz sz twinkling in violet & green  
carrying tunes I love most  
vivid mental pictures when I listen in French  
    plotting perhaps  
    the arc of a rainbow

R 06/14/07 2:00pm

subtle autonomous light  
light at the height of darkness  
sensible & measurable datum  
applied to places we'll never go  
exiguous diachronic brightness versus hue

that is—to the surface not the substance  
but what? in proportion  
we do not see them as they are  
if they're there at all

we see them all mixed up with colour  
we see them all mixed up with light  
we see them all mixed up with shadow  
we see them all as all so different  
we see them all as they aren't at all

laden with particular emphasis  
the horizon lies

Clare Christina

## goodbye

is this how water feels  
when it falls  
and pieces of it scatter  
light this pool of water  
write a formula that yields  
no remnant  
I built a tiny boat  
out of a matchbox  
I can sail  
or I can burn  
I can go limp, be carried by cool tides  
drag my feet, cast sparks  
consume with my heat  
I wanted to be an orange  
cool and aflame  
to be a red ocean  
a red sea and then part of me  
to be a little god, kiss driftwood  
and make it a tree  
burn my cross  
to white ash  
blow it, it is your birthday

## the garden

the devil became like the old mother of a  
beautiful girl  
the beautiful girl is bound by a love like a  
rope  
to her snake-mother and must obey  
and mother knows the way to possess this form  
is to lock it up with hooks and snaps and to  
take it out sometimes  
this she learned from her father the miser  
getting off on his gold

but in the Garden, with humanity just  
beginning  
the devil made it up as he went along  
in his head, he made a quick sketch  
of Genesis and played it backward  
seduce the human body with itself  
its own taste, touch, smell—its own hunger  
offer food to the animal and when it comes  
close enough  
eat it

so there's the woman, she ain't been around  
much  
and she wouldn't mind eating off a new tree  
the rest—I'd say the rest is history, but  
it's just the Bible

## reading aesop

the boy who cries wolf stops crying  
to weary himself with his father's sheep  
and the lioness wins the contest for  
the choicest piece of shit if not  
the biggest; the cock finds a jewel  
among the litter but would rather it were  
corn—

keep a part of each to be a better person  
flatter a friend, read a story before  
dismissing  
do something nice and get your head bit off;  
let  
a lion live and save yourself, a mouse (a low  
creature, an ugly illustration, a beet's ass  
scraggly with a root-tail); save your dog  
then throw him in a well—

don't bite the hand of the naked man  
don't contradict  
if you've any morals at all

Amy Irish

## A Destined Shore

*''Wild Nights! Wild Nights!'' - Emily  
Dickinson*

Nothing -- No one -- preordained  
Cold daylight calmly states  
The Lunar Seas are dead -- Are Dust --  
No Breath -- No Touch -- No Taste

But once asleep -- the ocean Wakes --  
Pounding Blood beat -- Heart fed Waves  
And Swim -- I must in this Wild Unknown  
And Reach -- My Promised Fate

Destiny is out of season  
Still -- I seek a Destined Shore --  
Fiercely led -- by Seas of Fire --  
Nights that Breathe -- Your Name -- And More  
--

## Birthsong

In the soundless compression of space  
Your murmur--radio transmission  
Promising life--pierces atmosphere, splashes  
down  
In a primordial sea, swimming below the  
surface.

Your sonar echoes these depths, finds  
Fertile soil. Then the sound  
Explodes. Your densely packed voice expands--  
Saturn's rings, the storms of Venus.

A planet ripe with child, sparked  
By the rich fire released from your throat.  
Plant that seed deep. And when life  
Rises, raw and wet, to the surface -- it will  
sing.

Tom Miller

## Oakum's Razor

``A tree, finding water, pierces roof and  
solves a mystery.''

--From the notebook of F. Scott Fitzgerald

She's here about a case. Dressed too formally for a casual walk, tights and a little blue jacket despite the dry California heat. A looker. As a sapling I would have made a move and she'd have chopped me down with a glance.

``I'm looking for Manfred Oakum,''

 she says.

``That's me,''

 I say.

``They didn't tell me you're a tree.''

``Is that a problem?''

``Not really. It takes all sorts, I suppose.''

``Some of your best friends are trees?''

``No. I haven't had much use for trees. Until now. It's about my sister. Thalia Hudson. She's... that is to say, she was...''

``Had her throat slit. Franklin Avenue, two houses down. Nasty business.''

``What do you know about it?'' she asks sharply.

``It's my habit to know everything that happens on my block. Not that you could have missed it, the way the bulls were crawling over that place.''

``They went over that house top to bottom,''

 she says. ``Not a shred of evidence. Not one darn shred.'' She's about to add something, but instead dabs at her eyes with a handkerchief. I get a clear look: no wedding band.

``So, you want to hire me to investigate your sister's murder?'' I ask.

``I want Dennis Halket hung out to dry,''

 she snaps.

That takes the green out of my leaves. ``Halket has friends in high places,''

 I say.

``He's his own best friend,''

 she says.

``And it doesn't go any higher.''

“State Police Commissioner is plenty high,” I agree. “But not untouchable. He and your sister went together, if memory serves. I saw them a few times.”

“He proposed. Thalia turned him down. Denny was mad as heck. Mad enough to fix her.”

“The local cops liked him as a suspect,” I say. “But Halket had an ironclad alibi. He was presiding over the California State Police Ball that night. Nothing would make a conviction stick short of his fingerprints on the murder weapon. And I doubt Halket would have left it lying around like an acorn in January.”

“That’s just the sort of thing Denny would do!” she cries. “He bragged to me about hiding the knife in that house. But no one can find it. Not the bulls, not the feds, nobody.”

“What makes you think I can?”

“You cracked the Desoto case. The papers called you a hero.”

“I don’t care much for newspapers, Miss Hudson. Not unless they’re shredded and mixed with mulch for aeration.”

“Will you take the case?”

“Sure,” I say. “My rate’s \$2 a day plus expenses.”

“That’s practically nothing!”

“It’s enough to hire a gardener to water me once a week and fertilize a couple times a year. But fair warning—I work slow. Could be months, maybe a year or longer. Are you in for the duration?”

“I’ll pay any amount for the truth,” she says.

“Nobody wants the truth,” I say. “You said it yourself—you want Halket hung out to dry.”

\*

A crime investigates itself. Let it be known you’re interested in someone, he comes to talk. Takes years, sometimes, but everybody comes eventually.

The medical examiner drops past with Thalia’s autopsy results. She died around 10 pm. No signs of forced entry, no defensive

wounds. Two incisions across the windpipe, though the first was deep enough to kill. Sloppy. Amateur's work. But a very sharp instrument all the same, not an ordinary knife. Surgical scalpel, maybe. Bruising on the left ring finger, post-mortem. She was twelve weeks pregnant.

Then Thalia's neighbor visits. Says she saw a short, paunchy man in a white suit skulking around on the night of the murder. He rang the doorbell and went inside at 9:30. She didn't see him come out.

I've heard worse descriptions of Dennis Halket.

I put out word I want to see him.

\*

When Halket shows, he's wearing his trademark white linen suit, well cut. His hair's retreated a few inches since I saw him last, but he moves with the same smarter-than-thou carriage, shoulders thrown back and chin jutting forward. Halket walks up to me, rather than driving. He, at least, respects the old forms. You don't stick your head out a motorcar window to speak with a tree any more than you'd ride a bicycle through your doctor's office.

"Hello, Manny," he says. "Care for a drink?"

"Always," I say. Halket turns on the spigot on my property and sucks at the nozzle in that sloppy human way. When he's done, he lays the hose on the ground. The drink hits me immediately, a slug of cold liquid that focuses my thoughts.

"To what do I owe the honor, Commissioner?" I ask.

He looks puzzled. "Manny, I know you trees aren't much good with time, but I'm retired."

It must be a couple decades since I saw him. It's not that I don't notice the passage of time, but humans move so damn fast.

"I'll put this to you point-blank," Dennis says. "Your investigation is beyond an embarrassment. I should have visited earlier, but it's a long drive from Sacramento. And I was hurt you'd be so indiscreet with an old

colleague's reputation at stake."

"If it makes you feel better," I say, "I've never thought of you as a colleague."

Halket slaps a hand against my trunk and leaves it there. "I did not kill that girl. Three hundred people saw me at the Ball, all of them cops or captains of industry. If you live to see the Apocalypse, you'll never prove otherwise."

Dennis removes his hand. "Let me tell you something else. It was your investigation that forced me out. Twenty years of questions and insinuations. The governor finally decided he'd had enough. He offered me a sweetheart deal—resign to quiet things down and come back as a private consultant, triple pay. But your continued interest is threatening that arrangement. So let me propose something. Come work for me. Good cases. No interference. Investigate at your own pace. Nice paycheck."

I may not have an olfactory system, but I know when a deal stinks like rotten cedar.

"Just quit the Hudson case, right?" I ask.

Dennis pulls off his sunglasses and wipes the sweat from around his eye sockets. "Know much about aquifers?" he asks.

"Sure. The water table lies twenty-three feet below me. It's receded the past ten years."

"Very nice. But did you know I'm majority owner of a company called Hydro-Lite? Bottled water. We're discussing digging wells, maybe on the abandoned property on Boyd St. Hate to think what that would do to the groundwater around here. Life's hard enough for you trees."

I try not to laugh. "Halket, I didn't get to be a historic landmark by rolling over every time some fifth-rate copper applied the heat. Dropping cases is bad for business. Even you should understand that."

Halket re-buttons his jacket. "Good business means not cutting off your branch to spite your trunk, Manfred. The offer's still on the table. Very lucrative. Very smart."

Halket reaches down and tightens the

nozzle of the hose until only a thin stream of water trickles out. From behind his sunglasses he grins.

\*

Five years pass for me in the time it takes to shed a tear, a decade in the space of a daydream. It takes me nearly that long to realize Halket's serious. The wells are dug, the aquifers drop. It's dry times.

Yet, I need the water more than ever. There's one last witness I need a word with. So, I pay for round-the-clock watering. A small fortune, but I've invested wisely and can afford it. For a while.

I throw all my resources behind one root, inching toward Thalia's old place. Through the foundation, up among the cinderblocks and finally into contact with the solid hardwood frame at 137 Franklin.

Trees can see while they're alive—I've always seen unusually well for a tree—and deadwood, though it's blind, has an extraordinary sense of touch. Now it's just a matter of interrogating every inch of lumber in the house. What the fine parquet floor in the living room felt on the night of the murder, I can feel, too:

It's cold, creaky evening. The front door opens. Two sets of feet. One warm, barefoot. Thalia. The other is the murderer. 130 pounds, judging by the infinitesimal bend in the floorboards. The weight is distributed oddly—feels like stiletto heels.

But the floor is annoyed with me. It keeps pushing my consciousness toward the attic, where I finally realize the floor extends too far past the wall in one spot. Plywood of a different weight—blue spruce. Notches. A false space. Inside, a metallic object with a mahogany handle. That's good—mahogany's notoriously chatty. Something's traced on it—bloodstains. Whorls. Fingerprints. The handle describes every last line. The pattern is familiar, it's slapped my own trunk.

Just like Miss Hudson said: a big kitchen knife with Halket's fingerprints. Simple if you know where to look.

But the mahogany handle isn't finished talking. In fact, it's only getting started.

\*

Miss Hudson visits, as I've requested. She drives up in an enormous motorcar, the front grille big enough to breakfast on redwoods, and rolls down the window. She's as hard and shriveled as a walnut.

"What's this about?" she asks. "Didn't I pay on time this month?"

"Sure," I say. "But I'm more interested in where you were the night Thalia was murdered."

"How could I possibly remember? That was—sixty years ago? Sixty-five?"

"You can't remember where you were when you learned your sister was dead?"

"I don't remember *anything* anymore!"

"Let me refresh your memory," I say.

"You were in love with Dennis Halket, carrying on with him behind your sister's back. Hell, maybe Halket even loved you too, but when Thalia got pregnant, he proposed to her. She said yes. Not long after, Dennis invited you over for dinner to break things off. He sliced his thumb chopping onions and bled on the knife. While he was bandaging his hand in the bathroom, an idea hit you. You shoved the knife in your purse."

"You don't know any of that."

"Sure, I do. I have a witness. He was still hidden away in your handbag when you bought a straight razor a few days later. Then you dressed up in one of those absurd white suits Dennis favors. He'd left one at your place once that you'd never gotten around to returning. You made sure Thalia's neighbor saw you outside—she knew how Halket dressed and with heels you're just his height. But she didn't stop to think you were wearing a summer-weight suit in midwinter."

"Stop it!"

"You slipped inside and cut your sister's throat. Yanked off her engagement ring. You stashed the knife with Halket's prints in the secret compartment in the attic. Of course, you knew that compartment was no secret. Thalia bragged about it to

anybody who passed through her living room—it tickled her. You thought it was a cinch the police would check there. But the bulls worked like they always do—too fast. They never looked. So you hired me, hoping I'd find the knife and dig no further."

"I have a simpler explanation," Hudson says. "Denny Halket killed my sister. Isn't that what you trees say—the simplest solution is the correct one?"

"The simplest solution that accounts for all the facts. Yours doesn't."

"You can't call floorboards as witnesses," she says. "You can't depose ceiling joists."

"Maybe not," I say. "But I can make insinuations. I could make your life hell."

"What would that accomplish?" she says. "Thalia's dead. Denny's dead. My doctors say I have six months."

"Come clean to the cops," I say. "It'll give you peace."

"You cold unfeeling *thing*," she spits. "I hope you rot!"

She's more right than she knows. The carpenter ants are already working on me. My vision's fading. But I confessed my sins long ago. The Great Investigator in the Sky has nothing on me. And when I come back in the next life as an ottoman or bookshelves or landscaping fill, I'll do what I've always done, but from a thousand places at once.