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**BURN RATE**



# BURN RATE

Daniel Marcus

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*For my parents*





# 1.

Annie lit a cigarette, cupping the match to shield it from the briny wind. The East River was a greasy, wrinkled skin. Near the Brooklyn side, a cargo ship bristling with cranes plied slowly south.

She sat on the weathered edge of the pier. It felt good to take the weight off her feet. She let her hand rest, palm down, on her rounded belly. A small kick, then another, less tentative.

*Hey, Spud.*

Her feelings were a moving target – wistful, resentful, afraid, vulnerable in a way she could not articulate. The money seemed abstract, unconnected with her present condition. As was the life that would unfold from the scrap of blood and meat clinging like a leech to her insides.

If the Williamsons found out she was smoking it would void her contract.

Not that they'd actually do anything. Their desperation was so acute it sometimes made Annie actually wince.

She spotted Sanchez across Avenue C and waved. He dodged through traffic and cut across the parking lot underneath the FDR Drive overpass. His white-boy dreadlocks bounced with the shuffling bop of his gait and Annie knew he was high.

“Hey.”

“If the fucking Williamsons catch you smoking they’ll void your contract.”

Standing in front of her, his bop persisted as a slight rocking off the balls of his feet, a low frequency vibration.

“Fuck off, Sanchez. Hey, where’s our lunch?”

He stopped rocking. “Oh, shit.”

The expression on his face was so comically bereft that Annie had to laugh.

“You get stoned without me, then you meet me on the pier for lunch and you forget to bring it. You’re *such* an airhead.”

“Man, I’m really sorry. I was going to get a couple of meatball heroes at Sal’s. I ran into Robbie – ”

“– which explains why you’re an hour late and fucked up.”

“I’m really sorry,” he said again.

They both knew she was just jerking his chain about getting stoned without her. No more junk for Annie Day. She’d cleaned up before doing the surrogate Mom thing. It wasn’t as hard as she thought it would be, but the idea of operating with constraints was scary until she started walking the walk. She hit a NA meeting about once a week. The old timers told her that constraints were actually freedom, which sounded like bullshit to her. But some of the people were cool and the stories were pretty funny. They also told her she wasn’t supposed to hang out with junkies any more. She thought that was bullshit too. Most of her friends were musicians. What was she supposed to do?

“No worries. Let’s head back to Sal’s and eat in Tompkins Square Park.”

She stood up and kissed him on the cheek.

“Schmuck,” she added.

The meatball heroes were good, even though Sanchez barely touched his. They washed them down with bottles of Big Dog Stout – a bitter, dark beer from a microbrewery in Queens. The old timers wouldn’t like this either, Annie

thought, taking a long, cold pull.

The park was crowded for a weekday afternoon. Nearby, two old men hunched over a chessboard. They slammed the clock ferociously and cursed each other after every move.

On the next bench, a young Puerto Rican nanny bounced a ball in front of a blond, slack-jawed toddler.

“Ball,” she said listlessly. “*Vea la pelota.*”

Annie wiped a gob of sauce from her cheek. “How was the gig last night?”

“Not bad. The lead singer from *Mondo Pussy* got stuck behind a pileup on the Major Deegan, so we got to do an extra set. We sold fourteen CD’s.”

Annie nodded. “Good. Get that word of mouth going.”

Sanchez gave her his squinty ‘fuck you, moron’ look. Took a sip of beer. Wiped his lips.

“I said *fourteen*. What are you, irony deficient?”

“Don’t start, all right? A year ago you were playing *The Trolley Song* at the Perth Amboy Ramada – ”

“ — and making better money – ”

“ — *and* hating every minute of it. *Dilaudid Tango* is it, Sanchez. You guys are gonna *make* it.”

Sanchez was shaking his head, almost smiling.

“Annie Day, Annie Day...”

Annie paused dramatically. She’d stumbled to it, but it was a good line.

“In six months, Sanchez, *Pussy* will be opening for *you*.”

Sanchez choked on his beer. “Oh man, I hope so.”

The pigeons found them. Half a dozen fat, greasy birds massed in front of them, cooing threateningly. Annie ripped off a piece of bread and tossed it. The pigeons swarmed like piranha.

“Don’t do that, man, you just encourage them.”

She shrugged. “What’s wrong with encouraging

them?”

She suddenly felt very tired. The mood shifts were like that these days, the turning of a page. She supposed it was connected to Spud, but she wasn't sure.

Sanchez sensed it.

“How's the Spud?”

“Kicking. Okay, I guess.”

The pigeons were advancing again. He stomped his foot. They continued, utterly unfazed. Their cooing sounded to Sanchez like it was coming from inside his head.

“You're making how much from this, twenty thousand?”

Annie's eyes narrowed. This was Scheming Sanchez, a familiar modality. She didn't like it.

“That's right, twenty thousand. You know exactly how much I'm making from this. Let's cut right to the chase. What's on your mind?”

“How would you like to make a hundred thousand?”

“I'd love to make it a hundred thousand,” Annie said. “I'd also like world peace and a decent Knicks season. That doesn't mean it's gonna happen.”

“Look, these people are rich, right?”

Annie shrugged. “I don't know. I don't think so, actually. I mean, they've got some money, but they're not loaded.”

“Come on, they can afford to hire someone to have their baby for them. They've got money, believe me.”

Annie didn't like the direction this was headed.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Maybe they do. So what?”

“You keep telling me how desperate they are for this kid, right?”

Annie didn't say anything.

“What if you were kidnapped? How much ransom do you think they could come up with?”

“You are fucking stoned, Sanchez. Who's gonna kidnap me?”

This time Sanchez was silent. The pigeons clustered

around their feet, cooing. The chess players were taking a breather between games. One of them lit a cigar. The toddler dropped the ball and began to cry.

Annie looked at him and for an instant his familiar features looked completely foreign, his thin lips and pale skin the face of a stranger, his junkie cool a veneer to a smoldering meanness.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” She shook her head. “No way, Sanchez. No way.”

“Come on, Annie. This is easy money. They’ll be out here in a couple weeks. You meet them, sing *Kumbaya*, whatever you do with them. Then you disappear and they get a message at their hotel. A hundred grand or the girl gets whacked. What are they gonna do, let you die?”

“This is such a bad idea I’m not even gonna talk about it with you. First of all, I told you, I don’t think they have that kind of money. Second, they’re okay people. I wouldn’t do this to them. Third, even if they had the money, what makes you think they’d pay?”

Even as she spoke, though, Annie knew the last point was lame. They’d pay, all right. If they could come up with the money, they’d pay.

Sanchez smiled. Scheming Sanchez, reading her thoughts. She stood up.

“I have to go. Thanks for renewing my faith in how fucked up the human race is.”

Sanchez stayed seated, leaned back, spread his arms on the back of the bench. Still with that smug grin.

“You know it’s a good idea, Annie.”

She gathered the trash from their lunch and dropped it with a loud crash into a nearby bin.

“Don’t call me for awhile, okay?”

Sanchez watched her walk away. She lit a cigarette and turned left on Avenue A, trailing a plume of smoke. He half expected her to look back, but she didn’t.

Man, she’s really pissed, he thought. This will take some work.

He noticed the nanny giving him the hairy eyeball.  
“The fuck you looking at?”

Annie felt his eyes on her, but she kept walking. Asshole. They'd been on-again off-again for the better part of a year, after living together for two. This bullshit was pretty much the nail in the Annie-and-Sanchez coffin. They were headed this way anyway – Sanchez wasn't exactly relationship material these days. And he was getting worse. It was as if the two of them were in some kind of weird dynamic equilibrium – the more she pulled it together, the farther out on a limb he crawled. He'd been really cool about her recovery, though, which was surprising. She pushed that thought quickly away. She didn't want anything distracting her from her anger.

She didn't feel particularly loyal to the Williamsons. She didn't even like them much. But they were kind to her, and the enormity of their desire for this child, Lori's desire in particular, moved her.

What Sanchez suggested was just fucked up and wrong. And besides, she was pretty sure the twenty K they were giving her for carrying their child just about tapped them out.

She felt a sudden rush of emptiness and headlong motion and for the first time in months she wanted a taste. She stopped for a moment, tried to focus on her breathing, her feet on the sidewalk, the traffic sounds. It was something she'd learned from her NA sponsor. Needing junk is all about departure. Wanting to be somewhere else. If you feel the need you focus on the present, your body, your surroundings, you try to experience them without the filter of desire pulling you away from yourself. So you stop what you're doing. You breathe. You look around.

It was a complete crock, but it was something to do, better than calling her old dealer, or worse, Sanchez. She looked at her watch. Ten to two. There was a two o'clock meeting on St. Mark's Place. She could make it if she hustled.

## 2.

Privilege hung in the air at Chez Panisse like sage-scented smoke. The polished wooden bar glowed with soft reflected light. The plants were monstrously healthy. The patrons, true to Berkeley, rode the line between casual and smug without a shred of self-consciousness. The air crackled with a rarified, hermetic energy -- palpable but eerily quiet except for the hum of conversation and, from somewhere, a classical guitar, busy and faint. Slim serving staff in crisp black and white glided silently back and forth as if they were on rails.

The host was so slick and genteel, Lori thought he could have sprung from a pod. A fine gold hoop through one of his eyebrows gave his features a slightly sardonic asymmetry. He seemed to not speak at all, communicating with a subtle smile, a tilt of the head, an economical hand gesture, that although she didn't have a reservation it wasn't too crowded yet and she could be seated shortly; meanwhile would she like a glass of wine or juice?

"I'm waiting for someone," she told him.

He smiled and, with a slight bow, waved his palm in the direction of the bar.

She ordered a glass of Gewürztraminer grape juice and surveyed the scene. As usual, she was at once attracted and repelled. She took a green olive from a dish at the bar

and nibbled the salty meat away from the pit. She looked around for an ashtray without success. Finally, she backed up to a rubber tree and dropped the pit into the peaty loam.

“Lori?”

She turned to the voice. Susan Gupta. A streak of gray in her thick black hair, a few more lines around the eyes. Huge dangling copper earrings, an Aztec Nordstrom’s look. About eight months pregnant. Seeing her rounded belly, Lori felt a tightness in her chest and she blinked hard to keep back tears.

“Susan! My God.” They embraced awkwardly, shifting to accommodate Susan’s shape. “How are you? When did you get in?”

They’d gone to Cal together, shared a house for awhile on Blake Street just west of Telegraph. Afterwards, they drifted along in parallel, staying in touch via the occasional dinner party with common friends, never getting very close. Fifteen years of steady-state. Susan moved to Seattle five years ago with her husband Srini, who’d founded a startup. E-business mumble mumble – something very old new economy. Susan had a Masters in Public Policy, but she’d never worked.

“Srini has a board meeting in Cupertino, so I thought I’d come along for the ride. Alice told me I just had to try the scallops Provençal.”

“Alice?”

“You know...*Alice*.” She waved her hand, encompassing the bar, the host, the susurrus conversational white noise. Alice Waters, owner of Chez Panisse, *capo* of California cuisine.

“Oh...*Alice*,” Lori nodded brightly. Namedropping bitch. Lori suddenly remembered something about Susan: if there were ever a game show called Celebrity Suckup, Susan would be the first contestant.

Susan stepped back, resting her hands on Lori’s shoulders. “You look great, girl. How’s Ross?”

“Ross is good. He’s...good. Working, which in this



climate is...good.” She felt like a babbling idiot.

Susan nodded. “Srini’s had to lay off half his people in the last year. You know him, how much he cares. It’s really hard on him.”

“I can imagine. So what’s up with you guys? I guess the startup did okay – what was it called?”

“Beluga. Well, Beluga ‘dot com,’ of course. B2B e-commerce personalization infrastructure.” She rattled it off as if it were a single word. “Rules engines and middleware. We were acquired by Microsoft in late ’99, right before everything went to shit. Srini stayed on in an advisory capacity.”

Lori didn’t know the difference between a rules engine and a fire engine, and she suspected Susan didn’t either. She felt sick. Ross had an uncanny knack for poor timing. Twice he’d joined startups that ran out of runway a year later. Another he’d quit just a few months before an acquisition that made even the receptionist a millionaire. His current venture, with himself as CEO this time, was on thin ice.

“Wow, that’s great. And look at you – you’ve got, what, a month to go?”

“I’m going ultra natural. We’re bringing a shaman and a midwife to a lake on Mount Rainier and I’m doing a water birth. There’s a whole ritual. We’ll have an OB-GYN on call with a helicopter at base camp in case anything goes wrong.”

“Wow.” Lori couldn’t stop nodding.

“What about you, girl? You must have a couple at home by now. I remember you were always talking about it.”

Lori’s facial muscles hurt from smiling. “We had some trouble. A lot of trouble, actually. Had a couple of rounds of IVF, got some good eggs, miscarried. Another round, another miscarriage. Finally, we went on the Internet and found a surrogate, a nice kid in New York. My egg, Ross’ sperm. She’s seven months pregnant and doing great. We’re going to fly out there next month for the birth.”

She took a deep breath, trying not to let on how rattled she was.

Susan took Lori's hand and squeezed. "Lori, that must be so hard for you."

"No, actually, I'm fine." She looked up at Susan's pretty, round face. "I really am."

The restaurant swirled around the silence that hung between them.

"I should get going," Susan said finally.

Lori nodded. They embraced.

"Say hi to Srin. Good luck with your water thing."

"Bye, girl. Give my love to Ross."

Not on your life, Lori thought. Another thing she remembered about Susan was that she would fuck anything with two legs.

Susan darted around a great leafy bush and turned to wave before she walked gingerly downstairs, steering her rounded belly before her as if pushing a wheelbarrow.

Lori ordered a sherry from the bartender and took a big sip, closing her eyes to the spreading warmth.

*Where's Ross?* She looked at her watch. Twenty minutes late. She rooted in her purse for her phone.

"Ross," she said to the handset and held it to her ear.

She got his voice mail.

"I'm at Chez Panisse," she said. "You're late. I'm going to eat."

The host appeared by her side like a ghost.

"Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me."

He smiled benignly. "Right this way please."

She sat at a table for two near the back. Nearby, a weathered gnome-like man in a black turtleneck hunched over a classical guitar, his large bony hands massaging Bach from the strings with no apparent effort. He looked up at her and smiled, revealing a gold tooth.

Someone brought her water and stopped at a nearby table to exchange a few words with the patrons in fluent Russian.

Another server brought a menu and a basket of bread. She was thin and blonde, with high, chiseled cheek-

bones. She probably rowed crew in San Francisco Bay for two hours before dawn every morning, studied nuclear physics, played cello, and taught ghetto kids to read when she wasn't volunteering at the Berkeley AIDS Hospice.

"Hi, my name is Rosette. We have an excellent menu today. The scallops in particular are very good."

"I'll pass on the scallops, Rosette," Lori said, frowning at the menu. "Give me a few minutes."

### 3.

Ross' Level 39 Druid, Sayonara33, was getting his ass kicked by Flame Beetles in the Desert of Storms. One or two of the little bastards wasn't bad, but if you weren't quick enough with the kill, they swarmed, exploding in a shower of green goo and a couple hundred poison hit points. The only thing to do was run like hell and try to nail them with a ranged attack as you retreated. They were fire resistant, though, so you needed a really good cold spell or a Holy Crossbow. But the desert was crawling with Carrion Spirit Wolves, who sucked your Mana dry double for every hit point you scored off them. It was a losing battle.

His companions weren't much help. PiltdownMan and RoxyDoxy, a Barbarian and Amazon he met on the Ladder, had disappeared into the Temple of Cronos to put the spank on Anubis. PiltdownMan seemed friendly enough, but RoxyDoxy had a cranky streak and Ross suspected that she was actually a twelve-year old boy in cyber-drag.

He hadn't seen BiteMe9 in a while, but the plucky Sorcerer was still alive, his vitals ebbing and refreshing as he hacked his way through firefights. Ross guessed he was back in the Florian Jungle or the Spider Caves, grinding up Experience with easy kills. Ross had crawled with BiteMe9 a couple of times before and, even though the level of discourse between them had never risen above "Close one!"

and “Whoa!” Ross felt a soft glow of fellowship. He dropped a vial of Health on BiteMe9’s icon.

**BiteMe9: Thanks, dude!**

**Sayonara33: np. if u get out to desert of stroms, watch out for spirit wolves they are bad news**

No answer. It occurred to Ross that BiteMe9 was Level 77; he probably knew the Desert of Storms better than Ross knew the inside of his own refrigerator.

While Ross was tapping away in the chat window, his Druid had let himself get driven into a cul-de-sac. He had a defensible position; only one or two enemies could get to him at a time. But Flame Beetles and Carrion Spirit Wolves were clustering around the entrance to the canyon and Sayonara33’s Health and Mana were leaking slowly away. It wouldn’t be long.

**PiltdownMan: hey, u need a hand?**

**RoxyDoxy: take this, alien scum**

The Amazon lobbed Frost Arrows into the cluster of baddies while PiltdownMan tanked into the fray, swinging a Lightning Mace with both hands. Soon, there was nothing left of the horde but a shrinking puddle of fluorescent ooze.

The two adventurers approached Sayonara33.

**Sayonara33: thanks!**

RoxyDoxy fired a Frost Arrow at him and PiltdownMan took a swing with his mace. Sayonara33 had no time to respond. In seconds a flickering, translucent waif hovered above a pile of rumpled robes, weapons, and gold.

**PiltdownMan: Sayonara, sayonara**

**RoxyDoxy: faggot**

The scene grayed and a window appeared with the choices RESSURECT IN TOWN and QUIT. Ross clicked QUIT and, after assuring the game that yes, he really wanted to quit, his familiar blue desktop was restored.

Man, I didn't deserve that, he thought. The Ladder is like Lord of the Fucking Flies. These dungeon rats are getting meaner and meaner.

His message light was blinking and he looked guiltily at the clock.

Twelve-thirty. Fuck!

He slipped into his Mephistos, already tied, grabbed his jacket and bolted out of his office.

Gina smiled nervously as she realized it was too late to close her E\*TRADE window.

"I don't care if you daytrade, Gina, as long as you don't buy Microsoft. Has Lori called?"

She nodded. "I told her you were in a meeting."

"Good. I'll be back in – uh – an hour and a half."

"The Nasdaq is crashing again today but Krispy Kreme is up twenty percent."

"I wish you hadn't told me that. Is Peter around?"

"He left about an hour ago."

I hope he's on a sales call, Ross thought.

Peter was Ross' bizdev guy, about three weeks new and a replacement for Sanjeev, who'd left, he said, "for a real job." While Peter talked a pretty good game – which is what landed him the job – he'd yet to make a sale or even get a second meeting. Ross tended to extend a great deal of slack, but it wasn't inexhaustible. He figured it might be about time to go on a call with Peter and see what was going on.

In the Pit, Jason and Paul were arguing fierce programmers' arcana – distributed garbage collection this time, Ross judged from the bits he heard. LuAnne peered intently at her monitor, rocking, plugged into her iPod. Indigo Girls, he guessed, or Sarah McLaughlin. Dmitry and Jingtao tossed a Nerf football back and forth across the room. Alpa was asleep, her keyboard pushed aside and her

head resting on her arms, a beatific expression on her face. Doctor Bob appeared to be doing nothing. His monitor was dark, his mouth slightly open beneath a thousand-yard stare. His eyes focused on Ross as he passed and he raised a hand in deadpan greeting. Ross waved back.

The Geek Posse. *His* Geek Posse. Ross felt a surge of something very much like love. He hoped like hell he wasn't going to have to fire them all.

Emeryville clings to West Oakland like a scab on a child's knee. An eclectia of live-work lofts, warehouses, crack dens, high-tech firms, discount liquor stores, and shopping plazas, the best thing that can be said for it is that it's near stuff: the Bay Bridge, Berkeley, downtown Oakland. Even during the nineties boom, rents were relatively cheap. Now, you could get prime office space for less than twenty bucks a foot, with T.I. and parking thrown in.

In many ways, it was a great time to be building a company in Greater Silicon Valley. Forget about rent, you couldn't swing a cat in the nearest Starbucks without hitting an unemployed software guru nibbling a croissant and trolling the classifieds trying to sell his Hummer and his Klipsch Home Theater rig so he could coast the downturn for another six months. Most of these guys would rather work than give up their ride or their Surround Sound Star Wars parties, so you could get them for next to nothing.

The only problem was that the business landscape looked like the New Mexico desert after Trinity. Nobody was buying software. Nobody was buying services. One technology fad after another had its three months of glory and cratered, and the suckers who used to line up at the trade shows had either been fired or had their budgets trimmed so far back they could barely keep the lights on. The VC's were sitting on enough cash to buy Denmark, but they weren't handing any out. Routine business deals were getting the accounting proctology treatment, thanks to Enron, and if you were publicly traded odds were you were getting sued,

investigated, or your investors were pulling you apart and fighting over the scraps.

Ross took Adeline Street up through the flats in Emeryville and Oakland, past overgrown lots, empty storefronts, and a surprisingly trim little restaurant called Lois the Pie Queen. They served salmon croquettes with eggs, and very strong, very good coffee. Ross ate there once or twice a month. It hadn't been discovered by the yuppie hordes yet, who Ross regarded as latte-sipping locusts. He fully realized that he slotted nicely into that pigeonhole as well, but at least he had the presence of mind to laugh at himself.

By the time he got to North Berkeley, he was forty-five minutes late, and he spent another fifteen minutes circling the block looking for parking. He was tempted to buy a rose from the flower stand at the corner of Cedar and Shattuck, but decided that was a little too pathetic. Better to maintain at least a shred of dignity. You never knew when you were going to need it.

He always felt like the air was a little denser in Chez Panisse, softer, with different sound conduction properties than elsewhere. The maitre d' looked like Linda Hunt in male drag and seemed to be mute. Ross warded him off and spotted Lori at a table near the back.

He watched her for a moment. Her short black hair and compact, intelligent face reminded him of a small, furry animal peering out from behind a bush. Although she was slight, she pumped iron five days a week at the Y and took kung-fu classes at night. She'd made partner at Pilsbury-Winthrop a few years back, then bailed so she could throw pots full-time. And her stuff was selling. Not a lot, but she was getting gallery exposure. It still blew him away sometimes that she'd actually elected to spend the rest of her life with him.

She spotted him, raised her hand in greeting, then turned it around and curled all her fingers down except the middle. Almost smiling.

He wove through the maze of tables and sat down



across from her.

"I know, I know. I'm really sorry."

"Rough day at the orifice?"

"Yeah, I got my ass kicked by a couple of twelve-year old sociopaths on The Ladder." So much for dignity. He'd thought about lying for maybe a nanosecond, but he knew she'd know.

"You stood me up for that? Gina said you were in a meeting."

"She's very protective." He winced as Lori rolled her eyes. "That schmuck from Sierra Ventures canceled at the last minute. For the second time. His partner was talking term sheet a couple of weeks ago. Jingtao and Dmitry were up half the night coding a new feature for the demo..."

"Bummer. No wonder you had to piss away the rest of the morning with adolescent male power fantasies."

Ross nodded. "I'm glad you understand. It's hungry work, though." He grabbed a piece of bread from the basket on the table and tore off a bite.

Soundlessly, Rosette appeared and held out a menu.

"Shit, you startled me. Don't go away, I'll be quick."

He scanned the menu.

"How are the scallops?"

"Exquisite."

"Full of mercury," Lori said.

Ross glanced quizzically at her. Rosette's perfect little brow furrowed, but she didn't say anything.

"Hmm. I'll have the *Crostata di Perella* and a glass of guava nectar."

Rosette nodded and glided silently away.

"Why don't they just call it a calzone?"

Lori shrugged. "Marketing," she said. "It's good to see you, even though it would've been better an hour ago. Guess who I ran into?"

"I have no idea. My schmuck from Sierra Ventures."

"Susan Gupta."

"Wow. Is she still incredibly good looking?"

“She’s incredibly pregnant – ”

“Oh, shit.” He took her hand, gave it a gentle squeeze. “Oh, man. I’m really sorry.”

Lori squeezed back, pulled her hand away. She shook her head. “No, it’s all right. It really is. I mean, I’m still really raw around pregnancy, around anything to do with a successful reproductive cycle. But that’s okay. We have Annie now.”

He nodded. “Yes we do.”

He raised his water glass. “To Annie Day.”

Lori raised her glass and touched it to his. “To Annie,” she said.

## 4.

*Dilandid Tango* was opening for *Crack Ho* at the 5150 Club. They'd set up, done a quick sound check, and were waiting until 11 when their set was supposed to start. Sanchez was sitting at the bar sipping a beer. *Tango's* drummer, Blake the Snake, had parked himself under a spotlight next to his kit and was reading a Silver Surfer comic. Robbie wasn't around, which meant he was probably in the bathroom shooting up. An old *Dead Milkmen* disc was playing on the club sound system, the bass rumbling up through Sanchez' barstool.

The buzz from his afternoon fix was long gone, but he wanted to keep an edge for the gig, so he was sticking to beer. He hadn't heard from Annie for a few days. She was probably still pissed. He'd give her some slack, but sooner or later he was going to have to get current with her.

The 5150 Club had once been a D'Agostino's supermarket. Deli cases still lined one side of the big room. Within the cases, artfully harsh lighting illuminated rubber chickens, Frankenstein heads, and plastic human organs from a medical supply house.

It wasn't a bad crowd tonight; maybe they'd actually sell some discs. A mix of suburban faux trash, art students from NYU, and honest bottom-feeders sprawled at the few rickety tables, stood or sat at the bar, clustered on the dance floor or near the deli cases, posing, pogoing, prowling.

Sanchez saw Donny Blue enter the room and look around. He hunched over his beer and tried to be invisible.

Donny saw him, waved, walked in a straight line across the dance floor as if the room was empty. People got out of his way. He pulled up a barstool and sat very close. He wore an expensive looking leather jacket, tight jeans, and shiny pointed shoes. He smelled of after-shave and tobacco.

“Sanchez, my man! How’s it going?”

“Hey, Donny. You don’t get to the 5150 very often.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not really my thing, y’know? I’m more of a Rossini, Paganini, Berlioz kind of guy. Maybe a little Respigi if I’m feeling really crazy.”

He clapped Sanchez on the shoulder, held his hand there.

“I’m motivated tonight, though, you know what I’m saying?”

“I don’t have your money, Donny.”

Donny squeezed Sanchez’ shoulder. His features rearranged themselves into an expression of concern.

“This isn’t something I need to worry about, is it, Bennett?” Sanchez winced. Not many people knew his real name, and he knew for sure that he’d never told Donny or any of Donny’s runners.

“Don’t call me that, man. And no, it’s not something you need to worry about.”

“Just so we understand each other, this is a courtesy visit. You’ve got a week, then we’re looking at five points a week just to stay even.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know the vig. Don’t bust my balls, okay, Donny? I’ve never let you down before, right?”

“Right. You’ve never been into me for ten large, either.”

Donny’s hand was gripping Sanchez’ shoulder painfully hard. Sanchez twisted away.

“All right, all right, knock it off. You’ll get your money.”

Donny smiled, let his hand drop. “I know I will,

Sanchez. I have complete faith in you.” He stood up. “Well, places to go, Sanchez. People to see.”

“Yeah, see you later, Donny.”

Donny started to leave, then turned around.

“Like I said, I don’t listen to this shit, but I’m told you’re a very talented musician.”

Sanchez didn’t say anything.

Donny Blue nodded. “Don’t be a stranger, Bennett.”

He turned and walked out. Sanchez felt weak and shaky. He lit a cigarette and took a long pull of beer.

He’d made a very stupid bet when he was speed-balling a couple of nights before, buying the spread on the Knicks game at 500 a point. He could only cover half the cash with his winnings from the previous game, and asked Donny’s runner for credit. About an hour later he got a call on his cell from The Man himself.

“You sure you want to do this, Sanchez?”

“Absoluteley, man. I’ve got an inside.”

He thought he heard a sigh, but it might have been the connection.

“All right. You’re on.”

Of course the Knicks lost. Of *course* they lost. Leaving Sanchez up a long, lazy river in a leaky rowboat without a prayer of a paddle.

He took another pull, finishing the bottle. His head was full of spiders. He had no idea how he was going to come up with ten thousand dollars in a week.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and whirled around.

Robbie, looking very relaxed.

“Holy shit, man. You are fucking wired.” He squinted, as if trying to make Sanchez out from a great distance. “And you look like shit. What’s up?”

“Nothing. You save any for me?” Fuck the edge.

Robbie grinned. “Always.” He reached into his pocket and held his hand out. Sanchez palmed a small square of foil.

“You da man. I’m gonna hit the head. We’re on in

ten.”

Sanchez felt bad. Really bad. The bright morning sunlight spilling across Second Avenue was an affront to his senses that even sunglasses couldn't fix. He'd been up all night speedballing with Robbie and the owner of the 5150 and the crash was pulling him in two directions at once – the numb bliss of smack and rock's euphoric surge.

After his talk with Donny Blue, he decided to start packing, a little .38 snubnose he'd picked up six months back in a fit of honest urban dread and never touched. He wore it now, stuck in his pants in back, the barrel pointing down the crack of his ass. He intended to pay up – somehow – but he wasn't going to let some goombah break his fingers, no fucking way.

He stepped into the Arkady Lounge to get out of the light and noise. Soothing dark and a few pops to get his thinking straight.

The bar was empty. The TV hanging from the ceiling was showing an old Brady Bunch. The sound was off but that dumb bitch Alice was wagging her finger at one of the kids. Sanchez wanted to jab an icepick in her ear.

Good tunes on the rig behind the bar, though. For a fucking change. At night, all they played here was polka shit but this morning the bartender had put on the Miles Davis Birth of the Cool sessions. Sanchez could feel the music seep into his pores. It was better than a cool washcloth on the forehead and for a minute he felt almost right.

The bartender strolled over. He looked familiar but Sanchez didn't remember his name. He had a bad feeling, though, like he might have tangled with him at one point.

“Shot of Daniels and a draft. Better give me one of those deviled eggs, too.”

The bartender nodded and stood there waiting.

Sanchez shook his head, fished a crumpled, greasy twenty out of his pocket, and threw it on the bar.

“Asshole,” he muttered, not quite under his breath.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing, man, don’t worry about it. I don’t feel so good.”

“You don’t look so good, either. In fact, you don’t smell so good. I have a good mind to throw you out on your ass.”

“Don’t do this, man. I’m not in the mood. I just want —”

“Fuck your mood, pal. Just get out.” He picked up the twenty and tossed it back at Sanchez.

The piece jabbed into his back, as if announcing its presence. Before Sanchez realized what he was doing, the gun was in his hand.

“Hey now...” The bartender raised both hands, backing away. “Hey now,” he said again.

“Don’t fucking move!” Sanchez shouted.

“Just take it easy.” Backing toward the register.

“I said don’t move!”

The bartender stopped, hands still in the air.

Sanchez felt detached, like he was watching something unfold on a stage.

*This isn’t happening.*

“All right, empty the register!”

Sanchez tried to piece it together later, what happened, why he did it. He had no idea.

When the bartender started moving back toward the register again, Sanchez fired. The mirror behind the bar shattered. Sanchez and the bartender stood there for an instant looking at one another, then the bartender pivoted, dived toward the floor. Sanchez fired again, catching the bartender in the cheek and destroying his teeth, tongue, and palate. He leaned over the bar and fired three more times. At least one head shot, he was pretty sure. The bartender did not move.

Sanchez popped the register, stuffed a small wad of tens and twenties into his pockets, and ran down the hall towards the restrooms, where he knew there was an exit into

an alley off Second Street.

The bright sunlight hurt his eyes. The alley was deserted and 2nd Street was clear. He realized he was still holding the gun. He looked around quickly and stuffed it back into his pants. He walked east and turned right on Second, heading home.

Sanchez lived three stories above a laundromat on Essex and Rivington. One room with a hotplate kitchen and a bathroom the size of a broom closet.

He took the steps two at a time, panting by the time he made it to his landing. He heard sirens through the window opening to the airshaft and wondered if it was the Arkady.

The floor was strewn with pizza boxes, half-empty Indian take-out containers, and beer bottles. An upright bass and several electrics vied with a threadbare couch for the remaining floor space. Roaches scuttled when he opened the door.

He collapsed on the couch. The gun jabbed his back and he yanked it out of his pants. It was heavy and strange in his hands.

All he'd wanted was a little quiet time.

*Goddamn it.*

After he fixed, his thoughts took on a familiar shape, blurred and soft around the edges. He was pretty sure he'd gotten away clean. No witnesses, nothing to connect him with the bar except an occasional neighborhood visit.

He passed the Arkady almost every day, went in there a couple times a month. He wondered how he was going to deal with that now.

He figured he'd manage.



## 5.

**LoriLor: ?**

**Ross94707: !**

**LoriLor: How u doing?**

**Ross94707: k, u?**

**LoriLor: Bad day in the studio. Glaze ran all over kiln. Big mess.**

**Ross94707: bummer**

**LoriLor: I cried.**

**Ross94707: :(**

**LoriLor: I feel pregnant**

**Ross94707: !!!**

**LoriLor: I'm not**

**LoriLor: But I felt a kick down there this morning**

**Ross94707: weird**

**LoriLor: Feel nauseous, bloated**

**LoriLor: Want a cheesesteak and a banana milkshake**

**Ross94707: yum**

**Ross94707: i guess**

**Ross94707: weird that little piece of us in NY**

**Ross94707: waiting for us**

**LoriLor: I hope everything's all right with Annie. I had a bad fleeing**

**LoriLor: Feeling**

**Ross94707: u should give her a call**

**LoriLor: We don't know much about her. She could be a crack addict for all we know.**

**Ross94707: clean bill of health, no hep, no hiv**

**Ross94707: seems smart, was probably high school prom queen**

**Ross94707: besides, is brood mare**

**Ross94707: don't have to know anything about her**

**LoriLor: That's a really awful thing to say**

**LoriLor: Like it or not, we have a spiritual connection with her. She's carrying our baby for chrissake. Her blood is our baby's blood. If this works, I will wash her feet for life. She's family.**

**LoriLor: Hello?**

**Ross94707: i am not worthy**

**LoriLor: You got that right**

**Ross94707: k, family**

## 6.

Ross, Doctor Bob, and Peter waited in the reception area for their contact to show up. He was twenty minutes late and Peter had already asked the receptionist twice to make sure the guy knew they had arrived. They were in Building 7, Level 3: a single cell of the huge organism called Business Systems, Inc. It was hard to crack a place like BS, but once you were in, you were pretty much set.

Peter had set up a meeting to introduce the company, talk about a trial deployment, maybe get some services revenue. Peter would be the pitch man. Doctor Bob was there for technical credibility. Ross came along to keep an eye on Peter. They were dressed in full corporate regalia: dark suits, cream shirts, navy ties bearing innocuous, forgettable patterns. Peter looked like he'd stepped off a GQ cover. Doctor Bob looked like he'd stepped off a fourteen-hour plane flight. Ross had spent a couple of years on Wall Street after getting his MBA where the basic, daily uniform was suit and tie, so he was comfortable and figured he probably looked okay.

Peter scored this prospect as a 6 out of 7 on his pipeline report. Ross thought he was smoking crack, but was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, at least for awhile.

A sweaty balding man in his late twenties wearing a

Marine World t-shirt pushed through the frosted glass door. Behind him, in a room the size of an airplane hangar, a sea of cubicles awash in bright fluorescent light, their perfect geometry like an Escher painting.

“Are you the guys from Tesseract?”

Peter stepped forward.

“You must be Fritz – we spoke on the phone. Peter Magdalen.” He gestured in the direction of his colleagues. “Ross Williamson, our CEO. Dr. Robert Sanskrit, CTO.”

Hands were shaken, business cards exchanged. Fritz led them into the giant room. The opposite wall was impossibly far away. They made their way along the side of the cube farm, past copy rooms, break rooms, the occasional glass-walled private office.

Finally, Fritz punched a code into a keypad next to a door and let them into a conference room with a long, fake wood table and a PC projector hanging from the ceiling.

“I’ll let you get set up,” Fritz said, and backed out of the room.

Doctor Bob positioned himself strategically near a whiteboard. Peter stood with his hands at his sides, wearing a deer-in-headlights expression.

“Peter. How’s it going?” Ross asked.

Peter blinked, looked at Ross.

“Fine.” He began setting up his laptop. The team from BS began shuffling in. Not a gray head among them, Ross noted. He’d have to have a talk with Peter about qualifying prospects.

More introductions. The business card conga line. Someone came in with an armful of Evians. Peter fired up the projector and stood up.

“T-t-tesseract T-t-technologies is th-th-th-the leading p-p-p-provider of – ”

It was painful to watch. His ivy-league features crumpled like paper; his eyes bulged, a beached fish gasping for air. Explosive gasp and fine spray of spittle when he finally managed to eject a syllable.

Fritz looked like he watching a traffic accident unfold in slow motion. The rest of the BS guys were trying not to look at each other.

Ross slipped his cell phone out of its holster, held it under the table, tapped out KILL ME, and sent the message to Doctor Bob.

Doctor Bob's phone beeped. He flipped it open, looked at it and coughed into his fist, muffling a laugh.

Ross wanted to step in and shut Peter up, at least get in a few complete sentences before the BS guys told them to fuck off and bark at the moon. But there was no way to do it without pulling the rug completely out from under him and making them all look like chumps.

Peter's third slide was a ducky-horsy architecture diagram: the Tesseract component model in a typical deployment scenario. Doctor Bob saw an opening, stood up, and began an impromptu whiteboard talk. Peter looked annoyed. Everyone else in the room seemed to sigh as one with relief.

Doctor Bob gave great whiteboard. He had a Ph.D. from Harvard (in Philosophy, but everybody assumed it was in something technical) and had been crawling around the Valley, building software for one company after another, since the Visicalc days. He'd dropped two fortunes betting on technology trends that suffered from poor timing: pen computing and "push." Tesseract was the second company Ross had been in with him, and Ross trusted him completely.

Doctor Bob lobbed a softball to Ross about business models, and they riffed back and forth for a bit. Peter stood at the front of the room with his hands in his pockets, squinting in the projector's glare.

Finally, it was over. More handshakes. The obligatory "next steps" bullshit that nobody believed.

Fritz walked them back to the reception area. His pudgy face held an unmistakable expression of relief as he badged himself back into the big room.

They rode back to the East Bay in silence. Halfway across the San Mateo Bridge, Ross couldn't stand it any more

and put on a *Morphine* CD.

He pulled in front of a Starbucks near the office.

“Post mortem,” he said, and they all filed out.

They got themselves coffee and carbs and took a table in the back. The ambient music was vintage Leo Kottke, which Ross thought was pretty cool until he realized that it was a cut from a Starbucks-brand compilation CD called *Groovy Guitar Sounds* on display next to the register.

Doctor Bob sat back, sipping his latte. Ross looked at Peter, waiting.

“I thought that went pretty well,” Peter said.

Ross grimaced. “I don’t know, Peter, I thought we pretty much got our asses kicked.”

Doctor Bob leaned forward. “Man, that’s some stutter you’ve got there, dude.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ross and Doctor Bob looked at each other. Doctor Bob shrugged.

“Well,” Ross said. “You – I’ve never noticed it before, maybe it’s just a public speaking thing. You definitely have this, well, it’s a stutter.”

Peter looked at Doctor Bob, who nodded. Peter shook his head.

“Bullshit. I don’t stutter. Am I stuttering now?”

“No,” Ross said. “You’re not. But – ”

“Well, how bad is it?”

“It’s bad, man,” Doctor Bob said.

Peter raised his voice. “Bad? *What do you mean, bad?*”

Several of the other patrons looked up from their coffee drinks.

“T-t-t-tesseract T-t-technologies t-t-tops th-the ch-ch-charts,” Doctor Bob said, in a fairly passable imitation.

“You son of a bitch,” Peter said. He stood up, pushed his chair in with a loud crash, and stalked out.

Ross and Doctor Bob stared at the door for about thirty seconds.

“You’re fired,” Ross said, finally.

“B-b-b-bummer,” Doctor Bob said.

Ross unclipped his phone, said “Gina” into the handset, and held it to his ear.

“Gina, Ross. Listen, cancel Peter’s badge, okay? Yeah...Well, he kind of quit *and* I kind of fired him. Yeah...Oh, and listen...if he calls and you see it’s him from caller ID, answer with a stutter...Yeah, you know...T-t-t-tesseract T-t-t-technologies, c-c-can I help you?...Right, he’ll think it’s really funny. Oh, and tell him if he wants his last paycheck he’d better return his fucking laptop...Right, thanks.”

Doctor Bob looked at him, one eyebrow slightly raised.

“What? She can handle it.”

“So,” Doctor Bob said. “Who hired that asshole?”

“Don’t start with me. Four years at Oracle, Wharton MBA – his references checked out.” He took a sip of coffee. “Although...the last guy I talked to, I kind of wondered why it sounded like he couldn’t stop laughing.”

“So we need a sales guy,” Bob said.

“Well, what we need is a sale.”

“How much runway do we have?”

“Our burn rate’s about seventy K a month, we’ve got maybe twenty K a month coming in, and we’ve got maybe a hundred in the bank. Do the math, man – it’s not looking good. Two months. I finally heard from my guy at Sierra. Not the schmuck – his partner, Tryggvason. Turns out he skied off a mountain in Switzerland and he’s been laid up in a clinic getting wired back together. He e-mailed me, said he’s still interested. I know that game, though – he’s gonna circle around like a fucking vulture until we’re up against the wall so he can ratchet down the valuation. Then, just when we’re about to miss payroll, a term sheet magically appears. Fucking bloodsucking cocksuckers.”

“Don’t hold back, man. Tell me what you really think.”

Ross bit his lip, took a sip of coffee.

“I don’t think we can go back to Heaven for a bridge without at least a letter of intent from a marquee customer. I’m gonna try, but I don’t think they’ll bite.” Heaven was the angel investor fund that had provided Tesseract’s seed round, along with a hundred K from Ross and fifty from Doctor Bob. “It’s just timing, man – sales cycles are so fucking long these days. Lori’ll kill me, but I can probably pull a couple hundred K out of the house, buy us a few months, maybe more if we cut the Posse back.”

“You don’t want to do that.”

Ross shrugged. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You lose your house, your wife comes to her senses and dumps you, and we lose the company.”

“Hmm. Yeah, that would pretty much suck. I don’t see a lot of options, though.”



## 7.

- Hi, Annie. This is Lori Williamson. How are you doing?
- Oh. Hi, Lori. I'm good...yeah, I'm doing good. How are you?
- I'm okay. How's the Spud?
- He's kicking up a storm. Wants out, I think.
- Have you told Doctor Spiral?
- Oh, yeah. This is normal stuff. Spud's just pacing his little cage.
- Hm. I don't like the sound of that, but I guess it's okay.
- No worries.
- Okay, Annie. Did you get my check?
- Yeah, thanks.
- Good. How's – everything else?
- Could be better. I sort of broke up with my sort of boyfriend, so I'm trying to figure that whole shit out.
- Oh.
- One day at a time, you know?
- Yes.
- He's a complete asshole, but a great bass player.
- Really?
- Yeah. His band, *Dilaudid Tango*, is just starting to get some exposure. They're a little like *Morphine*, that

stripped down, minimalist sound, but a little less morbid. *Morphine* on X.

- Do you go to a lot of clubs?

- I – oh, I see where you’re coming from. No, I pretty much never leave the house, except when someone wheels me down to yoga class or the health food store for a shot of wheatgrass juice.

- I’m just trying to understand what you do, Annie.

- Okay, okay. But look. Just because I’m doing this doesn’t mean you own me.

- Of course not. I’m sorry, Annie, I –

- Face it, twenty K just isn’t that much.

- It’s what we agreed on. Plus living expenses six months before, two months after. I – listen, I don’t really care about the money. I want a healthy baby. I want you to feel like this is fair. What do you need, Annie?

- What do I need. I don’t know, look...*I’m* sorry. I’ve been getting these mood swings. Hormone city, like there’s someone else up there driving and all of a sudden she takes a sharp left and I’m plastered all over the door trying to hang on. I’m really okay with the money and everything. It’s gonna let me pull some shit together, maybe go back to school. It’s okay.

- Okay, good. Good.

- Yeah.

- Tell me about your boyfriend.

- Ex.

- Yeah.

- Sanchez.

- Yeah, you’ve mentioned him.

- His real name is Bennett Fischer, but he hates when people call him that. I don’t know where he got Sanchez – he’s about as ‘Spanic as I am – but it’s just the one name. You know, like Sting. He’s a really good bass player. Anything – cocktail shit, rock and

roll, jazz, punk. Whatever pays he plays, he says. We lived together for a couple of years, then split up and we've been in and out of it for the last year or so. Mostly out of it. At this point, I'm done. He can be a real asshole. I mean a *real* asshole. And he's got some personal issues. But he's also got this very sweet, gentle way about him sometimes. He's helped me a lot with — he's helped me a lot. But I'm out of it. I'm out of there.

- Maybe it would be worthwhile to try to salvage something.

- Salvage? Right. Like an old rusty boat. No, I don't think so.

- Well. You take care of yourself. And that little passenger. If you need anything, call. I'll be out there in a couple of weeks to wait on you hand and foot.

- I can hardly wait.

- Well, bye.

- Bye.

## 8.

Ross picked up a couple of halibut steaks at the Gilman Street Market on the way home. Lori was still working in the studio, so he slipped a Supremes CD into the kitchen boom box and went to work on dinner, letting the Motown thing and the familiar kitchen routine pull him into a place of little thought or effort.

The halibut, broiled with butter and a little rosemary from the garden, a simple pilaf, a green salad with balsamic vinaigrette and striped heirloom tomatoes, also from the garden, bizarre looking but really good.

He wasn't ready to talk to Lori about Tesseract, about refinancing the house, about any of that. Not yet. He had to run some scenarios, then work through how he was going to pitch it. Basically stare at the wall scratching his ass and hoping the numbers would come out differently than he knew they would. Get through the denial phase, through gloom and depression, on past the counterweight of irrational exuberance to some place where he was reasonably confident he wouldn't fuck them both out of house and home due to oversight or hubris. All in about a day.

Lori came in when he was nearly done, sat at the butcher block island in the middle of the kitchen and watched him work.

"I spoke with Annie today," she said.

Ross looked up, waited.

"Sometimes I feel like we're connecting, then I'll get this hostile vibe, then it's gone. I don't know if it's me or her."

"Well, look," Ross said. "It's a pretty weird basis for a relationship. I don't know how much you can really expect."

"I want her to know us."

Ross shrugged.

"No, really. I want her to know who we are, what's important to us."

Ross nodded, unsure what to say. He felt himself on thin ice. What he really thought was that he didn't give a leaping fuck how well Annie knew them as long as she delivered them a healthy baby, cashed her check, and went on with her life. In fact, the less she knew the better as far as he was concerned. He didn't want to get into that with Lori, though, especially after their IM exchange.

They sat down to dinner. The halibut was good. A little overboard on the rosemary, but not bad.

As they ate, they exchanged sparse domestic banter. The gutters needed cleaning. The washing machine was making that weird noise again. Autopilot stuff.

After dinner, they watched something forgettable on HBO, a post-apocalyptic action film starring a post-adolescent Patrick Swayze. Afterwards, Lori went to bed early, claiming a headache. Ross felt jumpy, guilty, and sad. He went into his home office in the converted garage he shared with Lori to do some work.

His office, her studio. Pottery lined the far wall. Two kilns hulked like squat Molochs in one corner. Ross' home office consisted of a couple of card tables sagging with electronic paraphernalia: printer, fax, scanner, cable modem, wireless router, KVM switch, 19-inch monitor, an old PowerMac and a Windows box. A couple of space heaters kept the garage reasonably warm, even in winter.

A floor-to-ceiling bookshelf held business books by guys like Geoffrey Moore and Tom Peters, software engineer-

ing books (mostly Java), gaming CDs and strategy guides, and every edition of *Wired* ever published. Ross wasn't a coder, but he kept up with technology and could hold up his end of a technical discussion if it didn't get too implementation-specific.

A Pasquini Livia cappuccino machine sat gleaming in the shadows next to the laundry sink, purchased in a fit of extravagance and rarely used.

A sagging wooden rack held hundreds of audio CDs; next to it were stacked a dozen or so plastic milk cartons holding vinyl albums. Ross no longer had a turntable but he couldn't bear to part with them. It was a minor domestic issue. Every time they cleaned the office, Lori would say something like, "Can we please get rid of some of this shit? Come on...Moody Blues? Leslie West? Give me a break. You will never, ever play these records again."

Clearly the only strategy was for Ross to go passive-aggressive — "Yeah, I know what you mean" — and not do anything until the next time they cleaned the garage. He figured one of these days she was going to get his number, but he'd deal with that when it happened.

He booted up and started running cash-flow scenarios. Nothing looked very comforting. He minimized the spreadsheets, worked on the Tesseract strategic roadmap revision for awhile, screwing around with slide transitions, then back to the scenarios. Cleaned out his e-mail Inbox queue, back to the scenarios.

He caught himself nodding off at the keyboard and looked at his watch. Two-forty-seven. Fuck!

He had a 9 AM meeting. He was going to be toast. He shut down the computer, pushed his chair back, and stood up. His back complained as she straightened and he stretched, almost touching the low ceiling.

He turned off the light. A constellation of pilot lights glowed red in the darkness.

The living room was lit by the pale glow of the television, its screen blank and bright blue. Lori's father, Irv,

was sitting on the couch. He was wearing a bathrobe and wet tennis shoes. Five remotes were cradled in the folds of his robe. Ross was going to ask him about the shoes, then he saw the expression on Irv's face. He looked like he was about to cry.

"You okay, Irv?"

"How am I supposed to work the goddamn television with all these remote controllers?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess it's a little tricky."

He walked over to Irv and bent down to gather up the remotes. Irv looked like he was about to pull away, but relented at the last minute.

"This one is for the cable box." He held up the plastic, button-studded candy bar and placed it on the coffee table. "You should never touch it."

"This one – " He held up another plastic box, this one with a curved back. "This is for the TV itself. You could use it for some stuff, but you probably shouldn't."

He pointed it at the television and pressed a button. The blue screen was replaced with Pierce Brosnan driving a car at high speed along a twisty mountain road. His hair was frozen into a windblown tousle. The sound was deafeningly loud and Ross quickly pressed the mute button.

Irv scowled at the screen.

"Now *this* remote is for the VCR. You should only use it if you're playing a tape. If you want, you can use the volume control, but it doesn't really make a whole lot of sense to use it just for volume if you're not playing a tape as well." The VCR remote joined the others on the coffee table.

"Same deal with this one, except this is for the DVD player. You can also play CDs with this one, or MP3 files. It looks almost exactly like the television remote only the TV is JVC and the DVD is Panasonic."

Irv's gaze was modulating into a thousand-yard stare. In the battle between confusion and apathy, apathy was winning. Ross barely noticed.

"Now this one is the one you need for all your stuff.

This is the Tivo remote. It's easy to pick out from the others because it not only has a curved back but the whole thing is curvy. And it's the only other black one besides the cable remote. Oh, and I guess the VCR. Kinda fits your hand, too. Here, you try."

He held the remote to Irv, who quickly shook his head.

"Well, I'll just leave it here." He put the remote on the coffee table next to the other four.

"You're up pretty late, Irv. Get some rest."

He padded upstairs, brushed his teeth, got undressed and slid under the covers next to Lori.

She rolled over. "Hey," she said sleepily.

"Hey," Ross whispered. "I just had an interesting time trying to teach your dad to use the remote. I don't understand what's so difficult."

"My dad – *what?*" She sat up in bed, now fully awake. "What are you talking about?"

"He was hanging out in the living room when I came out of the garage. He was having a little trouble with the TV."

"What's he doing here?"

"You told me he was coming down from Attica for the weekend." Attica was Atkins Glen, the residential care facility in Sonoma County they'd moved Irv to a few months back.

"*Tomorrow*. I'm supposed to go up there and pick him up."

She got out of bed, slipped into the bathrobe that was draped over the chair next to the bed, and went downstairs. Ross followed.

Irv was sitting on the couch, turning the Tivo remote over in his hands.

"Dad, hi. What's going on? I thought we were on for tomorrow?" She was making an effort to maintain the illusion of calm, but Ross noted a familiar half-octave edge.

Irv looked up. "I thought I'd come early."

"That's great, Dad, but how did you get here?"



Irv gestured in the direction of the front door.  
“Drove.”

Ross got up and opened the door. Parked in front of the house was a white van with black signage:

**ATKINS GLEN RETIREMENT COMMUNITY**  
**“Home with Helping Hands”**

He turned around and looked at Irv.

Irv shrugged. “Keys were in it.”

Lori’s shoulders sagged.

“I’ll call them,” Ross said.

When he returned, Lori and her father were sitting on the couch together watching Pierce Brosnan drive a speedboat across a busy harbor, followed closely by other speedboats. There were explosions and bullets. Pierce grimaced, ducked, and kept driving the boat. His hair barely moved.

Lori looked tired and resigned. Irv looked content. Seeing them next to one another like that, Ross thought of their unborn child and he had a sudden mental image of father-daughter pairs receding back in time and stretching into the future, an unbroken arc bound by love and duty.

## 9.

My name is Annie and I'm an addict. I – I'm really glad to be here. No, that's bullshit. I really fucking hate that I have to be here. And I'm looking at all of you and wondering what's wrong with you that you have to be here. I mean, can't you just handle it? You know, just keep it under control? That's the wily little junkie inside me setting myself apart, telling me that I'm better than all of you and that I really don't need to be here because I can handle my shit and you can't or else you wouldn't be here. Which means of course that I really need to be here. Someone a lot smarter than I am – hi, Greta – told me that contempt for others is just self-hatred turned on its ear.

I do need to tell you that my program sucks. I had a beer the other day. I'm not gonna change my birthday 'cause of it, no matter what Greta says. I might have another beer next week sometime, or next month. And I'm not gonna change my birthday 'cause of that either. Booze was never my problem. I know we're all multiply addicted, addictive personalities, okay, powerless over all that shit. Fine. But I haven't used heroin or coke or any other shit for eleven months three days. I actually quit the first time about fourteen months ago, but I slipped and I had to take a do-over. Yeah, it's funny now. And I quit smoking exactly yesterday and I'm Jonesing like a bastard way worse than I ever did with smack.

Thanks, I appreciate the applause. It doesn't help for shit, but I appreciate it.

Thing is, I've got someone else to think about now. Pretty obvious, huh? I get seats on the subway a lot these days – I'm really gonna miss that. That's new for me, having someone else to think about. I didn't like it much at first but I'm kind of getting used to it. Even when I have to give this guy up, I'll still have that. It's like practice for being a human being. Maybe some day I'll get to do it for real.

The basket's going around? Good. I guess you paid your dollar for a drugologue, so I'll give you one. Mine is actually pretty boring. I was a fairly high-bottom junk slut. Still have all my veins, never did any jail time. No HIV, no hep. But you're on an elevator going down, you can get off any time – you don't have to wait 'til the ground floor.

I was lucky, you can call it that. I had some help. I had an older brother, good studio musician, moved out to L.A. and oh-deed. We were pretty close and it just blew me away. I didn't stop using, but it blew me away. Then a girlfriend of mine, super careful, always uses her own kit, won't even kiss a guy unless he's wearing a condom, gets HIV. Okay, then another friend of mine gets busted for dealing and gets knifed with a sharpened spoon in Rikers. Different situations, but death by junk just like my brother.

So all this shit is happening to people around me and I'm thinking what a bummer it is but I'm not making the connection that is has anything to do with me. It's like they're all just getting struck by lightning in a freak electrical storm or something, right? Instead of stepping out into the FDR at 8 A.M. rush hour.

Then Nine Eleven hits. It's not like I had this big revelation about my life or anything. I mean, it was unbelievable, it was horrible, but thing was for like two weeks after it was fucking impossible to find any shit. Impossible. Some of you are nodding. I mean agreeing. Ha ha. But it was like all the dealers in New York left town or something. Or worked in the Towers. So I'm clean for the first time in years,

not by choice, looking around, everybody is completely crazy with Nine Eleven, completely raw, and I just thought, okay, what the fuck, let's see how this plays out. And I was cool for something like three months, and then I had this slip, and that was the last time I used.

Not much of a drugologue. I got kind of sidetracked. Okay, I'll take it back a ways. I grew up in Queens. Way out on the Seven line, near Bayside. One of my earliest memories as a kid is walking in on my Dad tying himself off in the bathroom. I must have been about seven or eight and I have no memories before that – none. It wasn't so bad growing up except that my Dad was never around and when he was he wasn't. He had a pretty bad temper and when he was sober or straightening out temporarily you knew to steer clear. He never hit us, not once, but he could yell. He was a musician but also worked in restaurants a lot, down at the docks sometimes, whatever he could get. My Mom was a classic enabler. Oh, daddy's not feeling well was the classic line. When I picture her, I see her standing in the kitchen with this pained look on her face, wiping her hands on her apron over and over. Daddy's not feeling well.

So that's what I grew up with. My brother, Ray – Ray Day, right? You can tell our parents hated us. Ray was always into something. He'd sort of test the waters and then pull me in. Grass, hash, acid, coke, smack. But other stuff, too — Dolfy, Mingus, Bach. Iggy, The Ramones. Burroughs, Don-leavy, Bukowski. Bunuel, Scorsese. All this great shit that people did with their brains and hands. If I have anything you might call an intellectual life it's 'cause of Ray.

I did a lot of drugs all through high school, managed to graduate somehow but couldn't see myself going to college. I just couldn't see it. Hanging around some campus somewhere. Studying for finals.

I basically did nothing for a few years, clubbing, working in restaurants, at least at first while I could hold down a job. Fucking writers and artists, musicians, smoking or snorting everything I could get my hands on. Then I met

this guy Sanchez who was playing a gig at a shithole off 17 in Jersey called the Dial Me Up. You sit in these booths with phones and call each other up, shouting over the music. He was on break and called me, we started talking and one thing leads to another. That lasted for a couple of years and then on and off for awhile. The junk really shifted into high gear with Sanchez, but it was... I don't know, it was fun. In a very desperate, fucked up way. He was making decent money doing clubs, an occasional studio gig, so that shouldn't have been a problem except he had this gambling issue. Yeah, well, it wasn't all that funny at the time. Things got really tight and all of a sudden I was like, where did it go? The fun, I mean. That's when I started thinking about getting clean, but it didn't happen for a while. Then like I said Nine Eleven hit and turned everything inside out.

Sanchez actually helped me stay clean once I told him what I was doing which I know some of you will find hard to believe but it's true. It's getting a little weird now with him, though, and I need – I don't know what I need. I just know I don't need him.

So that's it, I guess, that's me. Just another junkie. Grateful for being clean. Oh yeah, so I found out about this surrogate Mom thing and put my name and picture into a registry on the Internet. Embellished the personal history a bit, if you know what I mean and I think you do. These Yuppies from San Francisco called me up and here we are. Living expenses for now and a nice piece of change at the end and I'm gonna regroup, maybe take a few classes at City, figure out what's next for Annie.

I can't do that God shit so I don't really know what to say about it, but I do know that I'm not doing this alone. I couldn't. So maybe you all are my Higher Power, maybe it's the Spud here. I don't know. Thanks for listening. I'll try to be funnier next time.

## 10.

Afterwards, Annie and her sponsor, Greta, went out for cappuccino and biscotti at Figaro's on Bleeker. It was one of those early April days that native New Yorkers like to pretend are the rule rather than the exception. The sky was reasonably blue, the gray winter snow had receded to narrow, filthy patches near the curbs, and you couldn't smell the East River.

Annie liked Greta, but they were about as much alike as Frank Sinatra and Ozzy Osborne. Greta wore late-middle-age like a crisp suit of clothes – slim, trim, and no bullshit, please. She had silver-blond hair permed to a light bounce, smoked incessantly, and the tendons in her neck stood out like ropes. Annie's wardrobe was jeans and t-shirt under a black leather jacket she'd had forever and wore all year long.

Greta had been a head nurse in the children's oncology ward at St. Vincent's until she got busted for boosting drugs. Now she did home care and worked in a rehab center. The first time Annie heard her share at a meeting, Annie was three weeks clean and pretty much a mess.

Greta's decline was long and ugly. She spoke with a deadpan, self-deprecating dryness and an utter lack of melodrama that Annie found at once appealing and unsettling. Stealing pain meds from dying children, informing the wrong parents of a death, fucking an intern in the utility closet while

a kid was coding – each story built upon the previous, each a little worse than the last, a mosaic of humiliation and chaos so bleak it was comic. The details were nothing like Annie’s life, but in a weird way, she felt like she was hearing her own story.

After the meeting a crowd of people surrounded Greta, laughing, smoking, eating sugar cookies. Annie waited for the crowd to thin a bit and tentatively approached. Greta looked her up and down, said, “You need to get to a meeting. There’s a good one down on Prince Street starts in a half hour. Let’s go.”

They went to a few meetings together after that and after a couple of months Annie asked her to be her sponsor. Greta was pretty old school – there wasn’t a lot of metaphysical bullshit about how fucked up your parents were or how your inner child felt bad because your inner adult was a stone junkie.

Go to meetings. Don’t use. That was it.

Annie started working the steps even though they creeped her out a bit, especially the God stuff. But things got a little better, and then a little more better. Annie didn’t think the steps had much to do with that; she figured things were getting better because she wasn’t using any more.

They were sitting outside and it didn’t take long for the pigeons to find them. Annie broke off a piece of biscotti and tossed it onto the sidewalk. The birds swarmed.

“I swear, there are more pigeons in this town...”

“And you’re encouraging them.”

Annie shrugged. There was a screech of brakes up the block and Russian curses rose above the ambient city noise.

“I can’t get right about this situation. Sometimes I can’t wait to just cash out, get those crazy fucking yuppies out of my hair. Lori thinks she wants to be my friend, my big sister, something, I don’t know. Other times I feel like I want to keep the baby, hitchhike up to Vermont and hole up somewhere, just him and me.”

Greta raised an eyebrow.

“Not that I’d actually do it. But even though he’s not mine, he’s part of me. I’ve been talking to him lately. Feeling him kick, move around. Dreaming about him, having these dream conversations with him. He told me to quit smoking. Said it made him dizzy.”

“Dizzy.” Greta chuckled dryly.

“I’m fucking dying. This is definitely worse than smack, but I have to do it. Should’ve quit months ago.”

There were long pauses in their conversations, Greta waiting for Annie to find the words. At first it made Annie nervous and she’d speedtalk to fill the space. Lately, though, she liked the silences.

They watched the street scene together for awhile. Greta smoked. Annie chewed a toothpick to a pulpy mass.

“I haven’t spoken with Sanchez since he pitched his brilliant kidnapping plan.”

Greta nodded.

“It’s hard. I miss him. Kind of. We have a lot of the same friends.”

“Your musicians.”

“Yeah, yeah – I know. You take what you can get sometimes.”

“Look, hon’, I don’t have a problem with that. Let me tell you something. You hear a lot in those rooms from people who can’t get by without working other peoples’ programs, but there’s only one way to mess this up. You use, you lose. You can get through anything if you don’t use. And you’ll look back at the people you were with and the things you did or didn’t do and you’ll say, ‘Now that was exactly right. Those were exactly the right people for me to be with at the time and I did exactly the right thing for myself. Because I didn’t use.’”

“I guess. I’ve been thinking about junk a lot lately. Not so much the high, but the little rituals. You know, cooking, tying, finding a vein. They made me feel like I belonged to something. Like a club.”

“You want rituals, become a Catholic.”



Annie chuckled. “I was baptized as a kid. I remember my mom trying to get us out the door to go to church on Sunday mornings before my dad woke up hungover and mad as hell. The ‘Our Father’ at meetings really takes me back. I almost ran like hell first time I heard it.”

Another long silence. Across the street, a well-dressed elderly woman screamed as her little legfucker lap dog tried to mix it up with a Shepherd mutt five times its size. Barking, shouting chaos until the Shepherd owner managed to pull his dog out of the fray.

“Story of my life,” Greta said. She looked at her watch. “I have to go. You coming to Prince Street tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

Greta got up, looked at Annie.

“You’re okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“You’ll call if you need to talk.”

“Okay, mom.”

Greta smiled. “Okay. Bye, hon.”

Annie watched her walk quickly up Bleeker. She turned left on McDougal and disappeared from view.

Sanchez pulled the chair out from under the small rickety table and sat down.

“You gonna eat the rest of that biscotti?”

Annie opened her mouth, did not speak.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he said.

## 11.

Ross got in to the office around 8:45, hustling a little for a 9 AM con call. The entire Posse was in the Pit which was unusual; ordinarily folks drifted in anywhere between 8 AM and noon. Most of them were heads-down into their monitors, but Alpa looked up, waved, then looked over at LuAnne. They both giggled.

Ross nodded at Gina as he opened his office door.

“How’s the NASDAQ?”

“Down seventy-nine. Smith and Wesson just announced a new fifty-caliber product, though, and their stock popped ten percent.”

“I hope you made a killing.”

“Very funny.”

His office looked neater than he remembered leaving it. He sat down at his desk, slipped his laptop in the dock, and booted up. While he waited, he looked around the office. He had a weird feeling, but everything seemed to be in order. He looked out the window at the gray overcast hanging low over the Bay.

Another fucking day on the edge, he thought. Two months. He pictured himself sitting on one end of a big palette of neatly stacked and bundled twenty dollar bills. Someone had lit the other end on fire and flames were quickly consuming the stack. Two months.

The phone rang. Doctor Bob. Ross touched the speaker button.

“What’s up?”

“Everything okay in there?”

“Uh, sure. Why do you ask?”

He heard laughter in the background.

“Oh, I don’t know. You looked sort of distracted when you came in. Everything okay at home?”

More laughter.

“Fine. You mind telling me what the fuck is going on?”

Doctor Bob laughing outright now. “Never mind,” he gasped. “Don’t worry about it.”

Ross waited until the laughter died down.

“You on the nine o’clock?”

“Yeah.”

“I want LuAnn on the call too. She owns the schema.”

Ross spent the morning feeling like there was something caught in his teeth. Every half hour or so, Gina, Doctor Bob, or one of the programmers would stick their heads in his office and ask if everything was okay.

Finally, just before lunch, Doctor Bob came in laughing.

“I can’t stand it any more.”

He peeled a plastic, sticky-backed label off the desk and showed it to Ross. Raised capital letters, white on black: DESK.

Ross looked around the office. His docking station, bookshelves, lamp, chair – just about everything in sight – was affixed with terse, descriptive tags. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed them. Now that he knew about them it was hard to not see them. He peeled off the DOCK label and stuck it on his forehead.

“I owe you big time, you bastard,” he said.

Doctor Bob cackled. The Posse crowded the door,

spilling into the office.

"I'd love to take credit for this but it was Dmitry's label gun."

"We set up a pool for how long it would take you to figure it out," Dmitry said. "Gina said somebody would have to tell you, so she's the lucky winner."

"Thirty bucks," Gina said.

"Hey, you can buy a hundred shares of BroadVision," Jingtao said.

Ross shook his head. His Posse.

"You're all fired. Get the fuck out of here."

His voice almost cracked. Doctor Bob picked it up.

"Okay, nothing to see here. Move along, move along."

The Posse filed out, still joking and laughing. Doctor Bob went last. He turned around and flashed a grin, pointing to his forehead.

Ross put his hand up there and felt the label. It stung slightly as he peeled it off, leaving behind a sensation of pressure and cold that faded quickly. He couldn't stop smiling.

Ross and Doctor Bob waited in the main conference room at Alto Ventures thirty stories above the San Francisco SOMA district. The table was solid oak, fifteen feet long and polished to a dull glow that seemed to emanate from the wood itself. Floor to ceiling windows looked northeast on glass and metal buildings framing the approach to the Bay Bridge. The morning overcast had mostly cleared. Sailboats dotted the Bay.

The guy they were seeing wasn't directly affiliated with Alto, but by the grace of some kind of VC good old boy network magic, he used their conference room and admin staff for some of his angel stuff. Actually, the good old boy magic was that his father was Bobo Phelps, one of the founders of Cadenza Design Systems, the first and biggest chip design automation company and one of the Valley's

wildest V.C. success stories. “Little Bobo” was rumored to be a flaming asshole and a poor argument for intelligence attributing to heredity, but money was money. Doctor Bob had called in some chips to get the audience.

They sat sipping Evians and watching the traffic crawl at walking speed onto the bridge for forty minutes. Finally, the door opened. Little Bobo was about six-four, at least three hundred pounds. He wore a midnight blue velour jogging suit and a thick gold chain around his neck. Small, furtive eyes peered from deep within pouchy folds of flesh.

Ross and Doctor Bob stood up.

“How you guys doing?”

Fine fine. Good. Handshakes. Ross and Doctor Bob offered business cards. Everybody sat down.

“I thought we’d – ” Ross began.

“Hey, I just want to know one thing. Is this some kind of middleware play? Because middleware is deader’n shit. Deader’n last year’s shit. I had a couple guys in here yesterday trying to sell me another fucking app server. How many fucking app servers you think this market can take? Fucking WebLogic, fucking WebSphere, Jesus fucking iPlanet a-k-a Nutscape fucking Application Server a-k-a fucking Kiva, fucking thing’s got more goddamn names than Squeaky fucking Fromm. Jesus...”

“Well, no. This isn’t a middleware play. Actually, it’s \_ ”

“Good. ‘Cause I’m not buying into any goddamn middleware. Jesus fucking Christ on a goddamn pogo stick, you can get J-Boss for free, why would you buy a goddamn app server. Why would you ask *me* to buy a goddamn app server *company*? Jesus...”

His voice trailed off. He sat looking out the window with a sour expression, drumming ring-encrusted fingers on the oak.

Ross and Doctor Bob looked at each other. Doctor Bob shrugged.

Little Bobo sighed. “Fucking middleware.”

He looked out the window again, then seemed to remember where he was. He looked at Ross and Doctor Bob.

“Okay, what you got?”

Ross figured, to hell with the slides. If I can get through the elevator pitch it’ll be a miracle.

The pitch was pretty much burned into memory, right there next to the Pledge of Allegiance and the entire early Beatles repertoire. He hit a mental “Play” button.

Affinity routing. Hardware based XML processing. Smart caching. It was all there. Ross worked it with the passion of a believer because he really believed. Tesseract made the best gateway technology on the market, bar none, but the market was dominated by a couple of big dogs and the only people who’d take a chance on a boutique shop like theirs were porn sites and other startups worse off than they were.

Little Bobo seemed to focus for about fifteen seconds, then he started looking out the window again, breathing loudly through his nose, drumming his fingers on the table.

He started shaking his head, and before Ross could get to the part about exit strategies he waved his hands in front of them as if warding them off.

“No, no. Look, this has no legs. No legs.”

He stood up.

“Thanks for coming in. Good luck.”

He walked out of the room without shaking hands. The door closed behind him with a soft sigh.

Doctor Bob looked at Ross.

“Fucking middleware,” he said.

## 12.

Ross stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the garage and watched Lori working the kick wheel. She had an electric wheel, but she said she liked the kick wheel when she had things to think through. Her concentration was fierce and she put her whole body into it.

She saw him, held up five muddy fingers. Ross nodded and went back to the kitchen. He put water on for tea and sat at the big butcher-block table waiting for it to boil. When it was ready, he dropped a large pinch of leaves in the bottom of a thick glass and poured in the steaming water.

He put a Joe Pass CD on the little boom box next to the toast-R-oven and brought his tea back to the table. He had some things he needed to talk with Lori about and he wasn't looking forward to the conversation.

Lori came in a few minutes later. Sweat filmed her forehead and she wiped it, leaving a muddy streak. She grinned at him. "I love the kick wheel."

Ross nodded. "I know you do. Water's still hot."

Lori made herself a glass of tea and sat down.

"Irv's asleep," Ross said.

She nodded, sipped her tea, waited.

Ross took a breath. "I spoke with Attica again today. They want out of the contract. You've seen it – there's a lot of mumbo jumbo about what they'll put up with and what

they won't. Good citizenship, et cetera. They don't specifically mention grand theft auto, but it's not much of a reach. Besides, there've been a few other incidents."

Lori sipped her tea, ran her hands through her hair, rested her forehead on her palms. "I'm not sure I want to know."

Ross waited.

Lori looked up at him and sighed loudly. "Yeah, I do. Go ahead."

"They've had a poker game Thursday nights there for years among the more *compos mentis*. Nickel ante – on a really bad night you could drop twenty bucks. Irv got some people pumped up watching Celebrity Poker on ESPN, convinced them to play No Limit Texas Hold 'Em, and started cleaning everybody out. He was ahead several grand by the time they got wind of it and shut it down. There were some allegations of cheating but nobody could prove anything."

Lori winced. "I'm not sure about the cheating, but I do know that he likes his poker."

"Also several incidents of what they describe as sexual harassment. Apparently Irv had a thing for one of the admin staff and started writing suggestive haiku on postcards and sending them to her. She asked him to stop and he switched to e-mail."

"I didn't know he knew how to e-mail."

"I guess he was motivated. Apparently there's an Internet café in Petaluma. She's about twenty-two."

Lori was silent for a bit. Finally, "Do we have any of the haiku?"

Ross shuffled some papers in front of him. "We do."

Lori raised her hand. "No. Kidding. I don't want to know."

Her face was impassive; her eyes held a glistening meniscus of tears.

Ross touched her hand. "Who are you holding it together for?"

She shook her head, but didn't pull her hand away.



Joe Pass was doing “Here’s That Rainy Day,” a slow, sparse arrangement full of rich guitar voicings that hung in the air, filling the kitchen. They sat together, not speaking, until the song was over.

Lori took a deep breath. Ross could see the lawyer waking up, stretching, looking around.

“We can fight this if we want,” she said. “The contract’s bullshit, more of a M.O.U. than anything else, but if we go to war there it’s still on their terms and still subject to interpretation. There’s a better way.”

Her fingers drummed on the table, as if typing out a complex code.

“I know a guy up in Sonoma County Department of Health who owes me big time.” She looked at Ross meaningfully. “I mean big time.”

Ross nodded, seeing where she was going.

“So we go up to Attica, let’s talk this over and by the way, this is our friend from the D.O.H.”

“Yeah, and we’re like, is it lunchtime already, we’d love to see your kitchen.”

“That would work.”

Lori was quiet, working something through. Ross gave her time, but he had a pretty good idea what was coming.

“Or...” she said. “We’ve talked about this – ”

“Yes.”

“– but what if he stayed with us?”

Maybe the lawyer didn’t like what it saw and went back to sleep.

“To live.”

“Yeah, to live.”

The year before, Irv had broken his ankle in a fall. He’d stayed with them for a couple of months, the den off the living room converted to a bedroom. It was pretty close quarters. Irv spent most of the time in his room, but he had ears like a goddamn bat and didn’t like being left out of conversations. Ross and Lori would be sitting at the kitchen

table, talking, and this disembodied voice would chime in from halfway across the house. “Lori, Ross just has to work this weekend. The business comes first.” Or “Ross, you really don’t listen sometimes.” It was like having their own private Greek chorus. It was creepy, but they got used to it, and Ross thought *that* was even creepier.

After Irv mended enough to get around on his own again, they talked him into moving up to Attica. He didn’t like it, but he’d stopped complaining and Ross and Lori figured he’d acclimated.

“I mean, why do you think he’s doing this?” Lori said.

“Right. Playing the dementia card.”

Lori winced at the word.

“Look, Lori, he’s your dad. I’m not gonna say no. We’ve got Spud’s room upstairs and Irv can have the den permanently. But you know this is probably gonna be for the duration. Maybe he’s playing it up at Attica, but Irv’s not entirely tethered and it will get worse. And we’ll have a small child.”

“I know all that. I just...if I knew he was happy in a home, I’d be okay with it. But all this acting out...I can’t be all right with sending him back there, even if we could strongarm those people.”

“Well then, there it is.”

Lori smiled wanly. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet. You know like they say on the late night commercials, ‘Wait – there’s more!’ ”

Lori nodded, not smiling now.

Shit, nothing like inappropriate levity, Ross thought. He took a deep breath. “I want to take a second on the house to keep Tesseract alive. I’m still dancing with a VC, we’ve got a few prospects in the pipeline that are looking pretty strong. I just need more time.”

Lori stared at him like he was crazy. It took her a few seconds to find words. “God *damn* it, Ross. We’ve got a kid coming, my dad’s falling apart, and you’re talking about burying us in debt. I want you to know that your timing

sucks. If you'd stayed at Giant Monkey we wouldn't be having this conversation. What is more time really gonna buy you, enough slack to close a deal or just pushing off the inevitable so you don't have to fail *just yet*? And what happens if nothing comes through? Our equity in this house is gone, we've got a kid, my dad..."

Neither of them spoke for a while. The music had stopped and the kitchen was quiet except for house sounds – the wind outside gently rattling the windows, the living room clock, the ambient sixty-cycle hum.

Ross shrugged. "Everything you said is true. I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

"So what happens if we don't do it?"

"Tesseract has a couple of months. I'd probably shut it down next month, give everybody a few weeks severance, close it up right."

"And look for a job."

"Right. I'm not too worried about that part."

"Maybe you should be. Every week you hear stories about dot-com execs pumping gas."

Ross shrugged again. "So I'll go down to the Jiffy Lube on University and see if they're hiring."

"Not funny. What if we do it, take out the second, and you guys still hit the wall?"

"Same deal. I shut it down, move on to the next thing."

"Without our cushion."

Ross nodded. "Yeah, without the cushion."

"So if I say no, I'm the bitch wife holding her man back from greatness and if I say yes I'm an idiot. You're not leaving me a lot of choices here, Ross."

"I'm not going to try to close you here, Lori. You need to decide what you can live with. But here's what I think."

Lori rubbed her eyes, sighed. "What do you think, Ross?"

"What I think is, it doesn't make any fucking

difference. We score big, great. We hit the wall, that's okay too. It's just money. There's always more. I can always keep a roof over our heads."

She shook her head. "You're scary sometimes, Ross. The thing that most people don't get about the bubble – and you don't get it either – is not how easy it was to score, but how easy it was to fail. There was *slack*. You could get a roomful of greedy, rich chuckleheads to give you twenty million bucks to build an online pet food store to compete with the other two online pet food stores, both of 'em losing money hand over fist, and if you had to fold up your tent and go home a year later you still had your pick of five or six other two hundred K a year jobs and you could start the next day. Things are different now, both out there and for us. All that risk management crap you learned in B-school. Look around this kitchen. Look at *me*. Think about Spud. *That's* risk. We don't have a lot of margin for error and if we mess up, you, me, Spud, and Irv are hanging out a stop light washing windshields."

"I won't let it get to that."

She threw her hands up in the air. "You still don't get it. You might not have a choice. There's stuff out there bigger than you."

They looked at each other for a long time, Lori breathing hard at first then easing up. She still had that streak of clay on her forehead. Badge of the artisan. Odd, but it gave her presence a kind of gravity. She actually made stuff with her hands. Shaped it with her hands. Gave it to people and they gave her money in return. Ross built paper houses, sand castles, Rube Goldberg hype machines.

He was about to tell her forget it, let's shut it down, I'll take some time off with you and Spud and we'll figure out the next thing.

"Okay, Ross," she said. "Do what you need to do. Just don't screw it up."

## 13.

*I am not so old  
That I can't smell your youth when  
You uncross your legs.*

*My old friend is back.  
I could slap someone with it!  
Viagra online...*

*I wish I were your  
Soap, slick and slippery in  
Your secret places.*

*If I were forty  
Years younger, you would never  
Need another man.*

*How about some slap  
And tickle in the break room  
Next to the walkers.*

*Your iris opens –  
A Georgia O'Keefe flower.  
Pass the baby oil.*

## 14.

After the shooting, Sanchez holed up in his apartment for the next day or so watching MASH reruns, nibbling apathetically on month-old cinnamon frosted Pop Tarts and waiting for the NYPD to kick his door down. Nothing. No knock on the door, no phone messages except from Robbie wondering where the fuck he was because he'd missed practice that afternoon ("Sorry, man, I just blew away the bartender at the Arkady and it really messed with my schedule") and Donny Blue reminding him that the vig was going to kick in soon and he was looking forward to seeing him.

He walked up Second Ave on the east side of the street, opposite the Arkady. Yellow crime scene tape stretched across the door, but there was no apparent activity. Shit, people got blown away in New York for no reason every day of the year. It was like an anti-lottery.

He had an appointment in a couple of hours with Seva Baykin, a Russian club owner he knew who dealt some weight. Sanchez had decided that the only way he was going to come up with ten large in a hurry was move some coke. If he could get a half-key on credit, he could cut it by half, divide it into grams, and work the art crowd at NYU and the poser faggots that hung around with them. He didn't really have the stomach for it long term, and he'd never move it all

before the vig kicked in, but at least it would keep him from getting his hands fed to a punch press.

Seva worked out of Brooklyn and Queens mostly, and Sanchez figured he didn't intersect with Donny Blue. He hoped not, anyway. Sanchez had always pulled in good crowds in Seva's clubs – the Blue Yam in Park Slope and Rockin' Robin out near JFK. They'd gotten high a few times and once gone on an extended debauch together with a couple of teenybopper suburban pipeheads. Sanchez had even moved a little blow for him from time to time, small weight. They weren't exactly friends, but it was a relationship Sanchez hadn't fucked up yet.

He'd made an effort to clean up a bit. For Sanchez, that meant sticking to a maintenance dose of smack, staying away from rock, a shower, a shave, and clean clothes. Most of the people he passed on Eighth Street looked like they did that every day, all pink and scrubbed. He wondered how they managed.

There was a souvlaki place on Jane Street Sanchez liked. He figured he'd choke down some food, put something in his stomach besides candy bars and beer. By the time his meet with Seva rolled around, he'd be the picture of an eager young entrepreneur.

He hadn't been able to touch the gun since the day before, but the absence of that cold pressure against the small of his back made him nervous. His mind kept reeling back to that instant, right after the first shot, the two of them standing there looking at each other.

He walked up Bleeker, stopped to watch a dogfight between a Shepherd and some kind of yappy little rat, one of those old lady dogs. He looked across the street and saw Annie, sitting at Figaro's with an older woman he didn't know.

He ducked behind a parked SUV. He'd been trying to reach her, left a few messages, but no callback. She was keeping a low profile, letting him simmer a bit. She'd done this before, but never for more than a few days. They both

knew that she was going to come around to his way of thinking on the kidnapping scam. It was just too perfect. She had to run her number for awhile and that was fine. It was only a matter of time.

Annie's friend left. Sanchez crossed the street behind where she was sitting, walked up to her table and sat down.

"You gonna eat the rest of that biscotti?"

Annie didn't say anything.

"You've been avoiding me." He picked up the biscotti and took a bite.

"I haven't exactly been avoiding you, Bennett. That would imply that I give a shit."

"Annie Day, Annie Day...get off it, girl. We've got plans to make. Your cash machine is coming out here when, two weeks? We have a lot of details to work out."

"We don't have anything to work out. What part of 'no' don't you understand?" Something in her eyes clicked into place and Sanchez felt like she really looked at him then. She wasn't reading from a script any more. "Have you been speedballing again, Sanchez? Shit, you know how fucking crazy that makes you."

Sanchez felt his cool blow away like smoke in a sudden breeze. "You don't know the half, Annie. Things have been ...a little weird." He heard his voice crack a little.

*Fuck.* She always did this to him.

Pull it together.

"What's going on?" Her eyebrows furrowed, that concerned look that he'd figure was bullshit coming from anybody else.

*Pull it together.*

"Nothing, man, don't worry about it."

Sanchez saw the real Annie retreat again, like a hermit crab scuttling back into its shell.

"All right. No worries."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a toothpick, started chewing on the end.

"I gotta say, though, you look like shit. I hope



whatever it is that isn't going on doesn't eat you alive." She paused. "It's been really nice not having to deal with you, Sanchez. I miss you, but there's a lot more that I don't miss. I want you to stop calling me. Maybe in a few months I'll check in on you, come catch a show."

She got up, hesitated a moment, then leaned down to kiss him on the cheek.

"Take it easy."

He sat there holding the biscotti like an idiot as she turned on MacDougal and disappeared from sight.

Her smell lingered. It was Annie, but not Annie; different somehow.

Then it hit him. No tobacco. The thought of Annie divesting herself of yet another addiction made him feel strangely bereft.

He passed by the souvlaki place, got instead a glazed cruller at Donut World, and caught the Q train at 14th and 6th for the long ride out to Brighton Beach and his meet with Seva. It was the middle of the day, the train half full. Graffiti sprawled across Budweiser and Heald College ads like a second skin. There was a Transit Authority ad for the subways that hadn't been defaced yet – SAFE! CLEAN! EFFICIENT! – which Sanchez thought was pretty fucking stupid for a couple of reasons.

One, they were pretty much batting 0 for 3. The only reason Sanchez felt safe was that he probably looked too sickly to mug. Clean...the Q trains were pretty new and already the windows had a coating of greasy filth and the floor of the car looked like it had never been washed. He guessed what they meant by efficient was that it was better than bumper to bumper on the QBE. Which was true, but anybody who drove in the city was dumber than a box of dead crabs anyway, so what was the fucking point?

The other thing was that Sanchez thought the subway was a pretty stupid place to advertise for the subway. He was here already, right? This was how they spent his token money.

The train rocked him gently back and forth and he

put bass lines in his head down over the rhythmic clatter. He had the feeling he was stepping in over his head with Seva, but he didn't have much choice. Especially since it looked like Annie didn't have the heart for the kidnapping scam.

The more he thought about it the more perfect it seemed. What could possibly go wrong? Annie lays low at his place, he has a little come-to-Jesus meeting with the Williamsons, they chill a few days while the money comes together, and he and Annie are off to the Bahamas after he pays off Donny Blue. Well, after she drops the kid. Or she could meet him down there after. He'd never been to the Bahamas, but he imagined palm trees and little grass huts, cold rum drinks with umbrellas and blinding white sand meeting flat azure sea in a lazy curve.

That fucking bitch. After all he'd done for her. If she didn't come around in a few days he'd kidnap her anyway and go to the Bahamas by himself when it was all over. Fuck it.

*Newkirk Avenue.* Not far from the small Flatbush row house he grew up in. His mother was still there, in the same house, and like the house getting smaller and older each time he saw her, which wasn't very often. It was a little easier since his father died. At least there were no fights. Just a shroud of disappointment and guilt that stretched so far back he couldn't see his way past it to anything else.

*Kings Highway.* The map of the New York City subway system was hardwired into Sanchez, encoded in his DNA; riding the trains felt like he was traversing some artery deep within himself. Each station triggered a cascade of associations – not so much coherent memories but collections of mental snapshots, like photo albums, colors fading, contrast giving way. He and Latif Sharaq – six feet six in tenth grade, black as an eggplant and crazy mean, the best tenor sax player Sanchez knew until he got hit by a cab on Seventh Avenue and sent flying thirty feet across the street and into the next world – getting chased by a transit cop down the subway tunnel between Kings Highway and Avenue M after he'd caught them toking in the station.

Incredible rush of adrenaline when a train passed with a hot wind that pulled at their clothes and hair, close enough to touch and louder than anything they'd ever heard.

They found an exit up to a sidewalk grate, miraculously unlocked, and they cut through backyards laughing like idiots until they were sure they'd lost him.

*Sheepshead Bay.* Two blocks from East Brooklyn Emmanuel, where he was bar mitzvahed. Later that year, Rabbi Goldhaber was killed by a land mine in El Salvador, down there on some kind of joint relief mission with the Catholics.

One stop to go.

Sanchez closed his eyes against the bright sunlight strobing through the train window, saw the bartender's face, eyes wide with surprise and fear. He pushed it away, willing it to disappear.

*Brighton Beach.* Down grimy steps to Coney Island Avenue, twin indentations worn into each step from millions of feet over the years. Jews and Russians, mostly; Brighton Beach tended to attract the dispossessed.

Sanchez walked three blocks past a collection of neighborhood stores, unremarkable except for the occasional Hebrew or Cyrillic lettering in front. Seva held court at Pushkin's, a cavernous restaurant in the shadow of the El.

The place was nearly empty. Most of the patrons were sitting at the bar that dominated one end of the big high-ceilinged room. It looked like opulence long-faded, busy chandeliers and stained carpeting, naugahyde seats wrapped halfway around circular tables.

Sanchez walked up to the bar.

"I'm here for Seva," he said to the bartender. "He's expecting me."

The bartender was a big guy in a muscle shirt with a ropy, livid scar dividing his left cheek in two. He looked Sanchez over, nodded, picked up the phone and spoke quietly in Russian. The other patrons made no secret of looking Sanchez over too. Sanchez locked eyes with the weakest

looking guy and stared him down.

The bartender stepped out from behind the bar and motioned for Sanchez to raise his hands. He frisked Sanchez quickly and professionally, then motioned him towards a door next to the bar.

Seva could have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty. He had the rheumy-eyed look of someone new to contact lenses and wore a black t-shirt beneath an obviously expensive Italian suit, his thinning hair in a greasy comb-over.

He reminded Sanchez of a cross between one of the early *Saturday Night Live* “wild and crazy guys” and DeNiro in the Scorsese remake of *Cape Fear*.

He was sitting on a huge brown leather couch, sunk into the cushions like a wedding cake ornament half-buried in frosting, his arm around a sullen-looking teenage girl with a purple crewcut and tattoo ivy crawling up her arms.

They were watching *The Terminator* on a huge plasma TV, near the end of the movie, Linda Hamilton kicking ass and taking names. The sound was very loud.

Two legbreakers flanked the couch, young guys pumped on steroids.

“Sanchez!” Seva shouted. “My main man!”

“Hey, Seva. What up.” He held up his hand for a high five.

Seva stood up for the high-five and gave Sanchez a quick fierce embrace.

“You want something to drink? Smoke a little smack?”

The thought of heroin gave Sanchez the closest thing to a hard-on he’d had in weeks.

“No thanks. Maybe some, you know, Evian or something.”

“Igor.”

One of the muscle boys stepped out and came back with a bottle.

“Thanks, man.”

The guy looked at Sanchez without expression, as if calculating what he could do to him and how many seconds it would take.

Sanchez twisted the top off and took a big gulp.

“Sit, Sanchez. You have seen Terminator?”

About ten times.

“I think so.”

“Sit.”

He sat, sinking about a foot into the couch. Seva sat down and turned to him, waiting.

“I’ll get right to it, Seva. I want to start moving some more weight. I’ve got all these college kids on the one hand, the entire fucking Musician’s Union on the other. I can tap some captains, delegate a bit, and basically give you Manhattan from St Mark’s Place South.”

Seva looked at him for a long second, then laughed. “One of the things I like about you, Sanchez, is that you are completely full of shit. Is one predictable thing in my life.” He shook his head. “Manhattan. Jesus fucking Christ.”

Sanchez laughed nervously. “What – ”

“Never mind.” He looked at Sanchez, trying to figure out if it was worth explaining. “Eminent domain issues, Sanchez. I’d have to take so much grease off top it wouldn’t be worth it. Crips and Angels, cops and wops.”

Sanchez thought of Donny Blue and took another sip of water. Panic nibbled at him. He pictured it as a small rat with greasy fur and black, soulless eyes, biting and clawing at the base of his brain stem.

“ – wouldn’t have to know, yes?” Seva clapped him on the shoulder.

“Excuse me?”

Seva looked closely at him. “You have someplace else you need to be, Sanchez?”

“No, no...course not.” He had the feeling the conversation had turned some kind of corner without him.

“Good. I was saying, you keep low profile, just deal to your student friends, your musician friends. Sanchez the

candy man, nobody is wiser, yes?”

Sanchez nodded.

“So. I give you good deal. Half-kilo for eighteen grand. Good shit, you cut all you want. I tell you up front I only make three grand on this deal. I do this because you are my friend and so I can stick it to those biker sons of bitches on Lower East Side.”

The Hell’s Angels actually owned most of the buildings on Sanchez’ block. It was the safest block in the Village, but you had to seriously think twice if you needed to complain about anything.

Sanchez nodded. He could feel his eyes jittering around in his head, failing to find purchase anywhere in the room. His forehead felt clammy.

“Uh, Seva.” Sanchez looked at the Russian. Seva returned his gaze with a slight grin, eyebrow raised.

Just get it over with, he thought. “Seva, I was kind of hoping you could front me.”

Seva just stared at him. One of the legbreakers chuckled slightly. Seva glared at him and turned back to Sanchez.

Seconds stretched by. The mayhem on the TV was very loud, bullets, glass breaking, more bullets, more glass. Bullets, glass, bullets, glass –

Seva nodded to the other legbreaker, the one who didn’t smile. He left the room.

“You understand this changes our relationship, yes?”

Sanchez nodded.

“On credit, half-kilo is twenty two.”

Sanchez shrugged.

“I have always liked you, Sanchez, admired your talent as a musician, your appetite for debauchery. If you fuck me all that means nothing. Fuck me and you are dead man. Do you understand this?”

Sanchez knew better than to try to reassure him with bullshit platitudes. He nodded again.

The legbreaker returned with a Power Puff Girls

knapsack and handed it to Seva, who tossed it to Sanchez. Its heft was satisfying. He knew that he didn't have to try it. It would be good.

"Call me in a week and let me know how things are going."

Sanchez felt a rush of relief as strong as any drug.

"Thanks, man. You won't be sorry."

Seva looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"I am already sorry, Sanchez."

Sanchez, about to get up off the couch, paused.

Seva laughed. "Had you going there, soul brother."

He could feel their eyes on him as he walked across the cavernous dining room to the front door. One of the guys leaned towards the bartender, said something, and they both laughed. The Power Puff Girls pack felt insanely conspicuous.

When he walked out into the street the glare blinded him. Great splotchy afterimages swam in his vision as he walked to the subway. He felt sick with relief. He'd get Donny Blue off his back, maybe get back together with Annie. All he had to do was move this shit.

Fuck, let's see, how many grams in a kee? He wasn't sure. A hundred forty one? That didn't sound right. The numbers slid around in his head like ball bearings.

He stopped at a Mickey D's next to the subway station, bought an apple pie and a large Coke. He sat at a table near the door, rested the Power Puff Girls pack in his lap, and watched the street as he ate.

Near the subway entrance, an accordion player set himself up on a stool and set the open case in front of him for people to throw money into. He knocked off a couple of warmup riffs, then launched into *Smoke on the Water*.

Sanchez felt hypervigilant, but his wires were all crossed. He focused intently on an old woman pushing a shopping cart full of junk down the street and almost missed a young homeboy in baggy shorts and gold chains, waiting for

his Big Mac and giving him the Dominance Stare.

“You lookin’ at?” the guy said.

Sanchez shook his head, looked away, sipped his Coke.

You couldn’t relax in this town, not for a fucking minute.

A couple of young white guys walked in he thought he recognized from Pushkin’s, but they looked right through him and got in line.

The homeboy jostled his table as he walked past. Sanchez thought of the bartender at the Arkady, the big “O” of surprise when he pulled the piece on him. The noise filling the room, the sharp cordite smell. The ruin of the man’s face when he was done.

He looked down at the Power Puff Girls pack.

What the fuck am I doing?

He pictured himself sitting there, as if looking from across the street and down the block. Another customer at Mickey D’s, ten gazillion served. Stringy white guy with dreads and a soul patch below the lip. Coke and apple pie, a junkie’s balanced meal.

*What the fuck am I doing?*

He had an urge to go back to Pushkin’s, tell Seva he was kidding, give back the blow and go home. Work it out somehow with Donny Blue, patch it up with Annie. Get clean and put *Tango* on the map.

The accordion player was slamming through a polkacide version of *Paint It Black*. He’d drawn a small crowd – people tapping their feet, bobbing their heads in time.

Sanchez felt a sharp rush of envy for the player. He was making people happy. Using the talent he had. He was just collecting chump change in Brighton Beach and probably had some shit job sucking the life out of him for fifty hours a week, but he had something left when it was done and what he had left he was willing to give away to strangers for quarters and dimes. Making people happy.



Sanchez got up and walked to the station. The McPie contracted to a tight greasy bolus in his stomach. As he descended, the music – *Satisfaction* now – grew faint.

The train came almost immediately. Sanchez got on, took a seat in an empty car, closed his eyes to the rocking motion, his fingers clutched tight around the knapsack strap.

His head burst in a flash of pain and light. Someone was pulling at the knapsack. Sanchez pulled back, curling up, his hand held up trying to ward off another blow. He opened his eyes and recognized the muscle boys from the McDonald's, one of them still pulling hard at the knapsack, the other grabbing his collar now, slamming his fist into Sanchez' cheek. He fell, rolled, the guys both kicking him now, his stomach, his balls, his head. One of them came in close and stomped on his face. Sanchez saw a bright starburst, rolled again, curled up in a ball. They kept kicking. It seemed to go on for a long time. The train stopped. One of the guys spoke in a foreign language, guttural and musical. The other guy laughed. Sanchez wanted to laugh, too, but his mouth filled with bile and blood and he vomited. He closed his eyes and saw purple darkness swimming with blotchy pulsing shadows.

Sanchez felt the train come to a stop. He opened his eyes, grabbed the commuter pole and tried to pull himself up. Kings Highway. A pair of elderly women boarded the train, looked at him, and hurried into the next car.

His pulse pounded behind his eyes. He saw his reflection in the window, blood all over his face, vomit down the front of his shirt.

He thought suddenly of the backpack full of blow, looked around in a panic. Gone. Of course. He remembered one of the muscle guys pulling it out of his hands while the other one kept smashing his fist into his face. He reached up and touched his lip, pulled back bloodied fingers.

He thought of Seva's smiling face and wanted to smash it with a crowbar. He'd been set up. Walked right into it, like he had FUCK ME painted on his back in Day-Glo

orange. Seva gets his blow back and Sanchez still owes him twenty-two K. Either take two caps in the back of the head or get on the vig at five points a week.

Sanchez felt like he was going to throw up again. He leaned on the commuter pole, let the train rock him back and forth. The door between the cars slid open and a transit cop pushed through, a serious looking square-jawed older guy. He put his hand on his club and approached Sanchez.

“You okay?” Shouting over the train noise.

“Great, yeah. Fine.”

“I want you off my train.”

“Fuck you, pig.”

The cop whipped his club around and slammed Sanchez’ fingers where they curled around the pole.

“*Fuck.*”

Sanchez sunk to his knees, cradled his hand under his arm. The train pulled to a stop and the door hissed open.

“Get off my train.”

Sanchez didn’t move, felt his whole body wrap around the pain in his fingers.

The cop grabbed him by the collar, picked him up, and shoved him out the door. Sanchez stumbled onto the platform and steadied himself against a tile-covered pillar as the doors slid shut behind him. He watched the lights at the rear of the train recede down the dark tunnel at the end of the station. They winked out as the train rounded a curve.

He was in the Newkirk Avenue station. He knew a hole-in-the-wall bar nearby with a bathroom he could use to get cleaned up and assess the damage. He hurt all over. He should probably get himself to a hospital and make sure they hadn’t kicked in his spleen or something. Fuck it – if they did he’d find out soon enough. Start pissing blood, curl up somewhere and fade to black. It would almost be a relief.

The daylight felt flashbulb-bright when he emerged from the station. He covered his eyes and stood for a moment near the top step. He felt dizzy again and had to steady himself against the handrail.

There was a Drug Rite across the street. He crossed in the middle of the block, dodging cars. He bought a white tee shirt and some bandages. The checkout line was long and he felt very conspicuous. The woman in front of him, stooped and elderly, looked back suspiciously at him and hid her basket of purchases with her body. The rent-a-cop near the front of the store never took his eyes off him.

The Fratellanga Lounge was on the next block, the sign graced with a tilted martini glass. The place was empty and Sanchez thought of the last time he'd walked into an empty bar. The bartender looked him over but didn't say anything.

"Okay if I use the bathroom?"

"You gotta buy something."

Sanchez reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of crumpled bills.

"Draft."

The bartender nodded and pointed towards the rear of the bar. Sanchez made his way past a pair of dark pinball machines, the smell of stale beer and cleaning products hanging in the air like mist.

The bathroom was painted dark green, about ten coats it looked like. A fogged metal mirror hung over a rust-stained sink, a slow constant stream coming from the single faucet.

He barely recognized the sorry fuck looking back at him from the mirror. Man, he was a mess. He could probably use stitches over the eye. His upper lip was cut and swollen. He cleaned himself up as best he could, changed into the new tee shirt and threw the soiled one in the trash.

He went back into the bar, sat down to his beer. The bartender was watching an old Star Trek with the sound off, Kirk and Spock in velour pajamas standing next to a big cardboard rock, arguing about something. Early Ry Cooder on the sound system, something from *Into the Purple Valley*.

"That's a fine album."

The bartender looked over at him and nodded. "Yes

it is.”

Sanchez picked up the beer glass and took a sip. His fingers hurt like hell. They were beginning to bruise and the knuckles were swollen knots. He wondered if he'd be able to play. He tried to will himself to a state of calm.

Not an easy thing to do under the circumstances. He was thirty two grand in the hole to the Italian and Russian mobs, he'd killed a guy – he'd fucking *killed* a guy, for Chrissake – he was Jonesing like a sonofabitch, and he'd just had the living shit kicked out of him, which was, he was pretty sure, just a taste of things to come if he didn't come through with Seva's money. He could imagine the conversation.

- Seva, this is Sanchez.

- Sanchez, my main man! I was just thinking about you. How is little project?

- Well, uh, that's what I'm calling about.

- Yes?

- Just after I left you, I got mugged by a couple of guys. They took the blow.

- Sanchez.

- Yeah?

- You are all right, yes?

- I'll live.

- That is interesting choice of words, Sanchez, because –

- What's interesting about this, Seva, is that they spoke Russian to each other.

- Feh. There are more Russians in Brooklyn than Balashikha.

- Seva, I think you sent your muscle after me to steal back your blow.

- Sanchez, you have been sampling product. Do not try to fuck me. Because you are old friend I will shave point off vig. Four points a week, starting immediately.

- Fuck you, Seva.

No, that wouldn't do. He was going to have to get Annie to come around. One way or another.

## 15.

Ross was out in the front yard in jogging shorts and flip-flops, filling a Peet's coffee sack with Meyer lemons from the tree. He was thinking maybe a nice lemon curd tart. He liked to make a crust with enough butter to stop your heart, denser than a pie crust and the perfect foil for the mouth-puckering, creamy lemon curd he'd whip up from the Meyers. Just thinking about it made his saliva glands hurt. He'd put on something loud in the kitchen while he did the prep, maybe some old Huey Lewis.

It was mid morning, an edge of heat in the air, the sky an inverted bowl of brilliant, cloudless blue. Sailboats dotted the Bay; scintilla winked from cars on the bridge.

Next door, Ross' neighbor Rosenberg, looking fit in Speedos, Birkenstocks, and an even, golden tan, hammered away at a sprawling, Byzantine construction of wood that looked like a medieval trebuchet. Probably some kind of play structure for his surly five-year-old.

When Ross and Lori moved in, the Rosenbergs had them over for Shabbas dinner several times. Ross was pure WASP, but Lori's secular Judaism was grounded in memories of childhood ritual (although Ross had trouble imagining that Irv had ever set foot in a synagogue), and the brief pre-prandial prayer-and-candle Shabbas ceremony warmed her towards the Rosenbergs, at least at first, almost compensating

for the fact that Rosenberg himself, David, was a self-aggrandizing blowhard, the wife, Beverly, a brittle, intense converted Shiksa who worked 90-hour weeks as a physicist up at Lawrence Berkeley Lab, and the child, Maya, in day care twelve hours a day and perpetually on the verge of tears wondering who the hell these people were that she hung out with in the evenings and when her real parents were going to show up.

Rosenberg was a prominent local architect with a portfolio of highly visible retail renovation projects. Ross thought his work sucked. Whatever he put his hands on — bookstore, grocery, medical office complex — looked like it had all been run through a conceptual Cusinart, producing the same bland, identical product: pastel stucco frontage, insectile lighting fixtures, clean, modern lines utterly devoid of soul. It wasn't just Minimalist; if there was a Just Fucking Shoot Me school of design, Rosenberg would its chief proponent.

After a couple of glasses of chablis, Rosenberg liked to pontificate about Christopher Alexander, pattern languages, and postmodernism. Ross had once tried engaging, talking about software business anti-patterns, similarities between the architecture of space and the architecture of systems and software, but Rosenberg gave him a blank stare. Ross figured he just wasn't into dialogue and wanted to hear himself talk, so he pretty much nodded and smiled after that.

The second night they were over there, relaxing in the living room with glasses of after-dinner port, Rosenberg pulled out a photo album. Ross thought, okay, here come the wedding pictures.

There were about a dozen photographs, 8x10 matte finish black and white, of the Rosenbergs — mother, father, and infant daughter — nude in various tasteful art poses. They were extremely well done: beautifully lit, the nude bodies media for the exploration of form and texture. It was as if Robert Mapplethorpe had a moonlighting gig at Family Fotos up at the Hilltop Mall. But really, the last thing Ross wanted

to see was naked picture of his new neighbors. He noted in passing that David's penis was of average size and hung slightly to the left.

Ross and Lori made polite noises and got out of there as quickly as they could. When they got home, they looked at each other and broke up laughing.

Lori caught her breath, looked at Ross deadpan.

"Do you think they're swingers?" she said, which sent them both into spasms of laughter again until they were clinging to each other, gasping for breath, eyes tearing.

There was a third dinner, strained and perfunctory, and little contact after that. Out of duty, Ross and Lori extended a reciprocal invitation, but the Rosenbergs kept rescheduling and they both finally gave up. Ross didn't think the Rosenbergs were self-examined enough to consider that their photo showing might have been regarded as fairly creepy, but the relationship between the families had clearly turned some kind of corner in the direction of disengagement, which was fine with Ross.

Rosenberg looked up from his trebuchet and waved. Ross waved back, thinking, please god don't come over here you dumb fuck. Rosenberg made an expansive gesture with his hands, taking in the Bay view and the cloudless sky. Beautiful day here at the top of the food chain, he seemed to be saying, and bent back to his work.

Ross waved again, relieved, and returned to his lemons. He had spent the morning fielding e-mail and taking con calls, hunkering down and getting his mind right for a Tesseract all-hands meeting in the afternoon. He was going to lay it all out, where they were at, what he thought their options were. He wasn't looking forward to it.

It was the first time in weeks that Ross didn't head for the office first thing. He was too demoralized. He'd spent most of the previous afternoon cold-calling fourth tier VC firms. Salmonella Ventures in Foster City, one guy who'd gotten in on the Yahoo IPO because he was married to Jerry Yang's cousin, second floor office above an Asian massage



parlor in a shopping plaza off El Camino, that sort of thing. If they had a receptionist, she'd wised up since the crash and it was next to impossible to get through to anyone without begging or threatening. If they didn't have a front desk, you probably didn't want to talk to them anyway. Still, miracles happened and if you didn't show up at all you'd miss out for sure. It was the worst kind of knuckle dragging scut work, though, cold calling. Ross made sure he kept his hand in it on general principles. With Peter gone, he didn't have much choice.

Tesseract was actually doing fairly well under the circumstances. They had a couple of new customers every month, and the Posse worked their asses off to keep them happy. Nobody big, though, and to smell right to the first tier VCs in this climate, even to the second tier, you needed your Fortune 500 customers. And Tesseract's growth wasn't going to have a chance to overtake their burn without a wad of cash. He tried to stay positive – he was a sales bitch after all, when you got right down to it, and that was his job -- but some days were harder than others. It didn't help that Lori was getting edgy about Annie and the baby, and the Irv business had thrown everything off.

Ross gathered up the lemons and went inside to get ready to head into the office. Irv was watching *America's Funniest Home Videos*. He seemed to have figured out the remotes. He had the Tivo in one hand and he was jabbing it at the television: pause, rewind, pause, forward, pause.

"I'm going to work, Irv – back in a few hours."

"Suit yourself." Irv waved him out of his field of vision as if warding off a fly.

*I don't know if I can do this*, Ross thought.

The problem was, and neither he nor Lori had admitted this out loud, that a transaction had occurred. Irv for Tesseract. A tenuous equilibrium had been achieved, a balance of primal forces, love and money, and Ross didn't want to mess with it any more than he had to. But Irv exuded pathology, cycling from nearly normal to hostile and abusive

to deeply withdrawn. It was difficult to imagine settling down to something manageable and sane, especially with a baby in the house.

The Posse was assembled in the conference room Tesseract shared with FingerThis, a biometrics startup. Ross had lunch with their CEO occasionally and had learned the other day that they were on the verge of a Series A deal with Kleiner Perkins, one of the top VC firms in the world. Thanks to the Patriot Act, anything related to security was currently in high favor in the fad-driven world of venture financing. Pretty soon Ross wouldn't have to worry about double-booking the room.

He looked around the table. Doctor Bob looked half asleep, which meant he was on full alert. He would be processing everybody's reactions for deconstruction in private with Ross later. Dmitry and Jingtao, feet tapping, mouse fingers twitching, looked like they wanted to get back to their Counter-Strike game. Alpa smiled serenely at Ross when he looked at her, radiating her usual self-contained calm. LuAnn's eyes were red and she looked distracted, probably another fight with her girlfriend. Jason, Paul, and Gina were sitting close together, leaning in towards one another, whispering and laughing. Ross rapped his knuckles on the mahogany laminate tabletop and waited until everybody was looking at him.

"We're in trouble. I don't know how else to say it. Before I get into the details I want to tell you that each of you are doing a superb job. This is by far the best team I've ever worked with. I know that Doctor Bob thinks so too, even though he may not say it very often."

Doctor Bob affected a pained look, then shrugged. "Yeah, okay, you guys are pretty good."

"So if there's any blame to be had, it's mine. For one thing, I hired Peter, who sucked."

Jason: "He wasn't that b-b-b-b-bad..."

Paul: "Come on now, don't be m-m-m-mean."

“Man, you guys are harsh,” Alpa said. “Funny, but harsh.”

“Okay, okay,” Ross said. “I hired him, and I should have done more of a mentoring thing with him. I left him too much on his own to build up the sales pipeline after Sanjeev left while I was chasing down funding. Trying to chase down funding.”

He paused. This was harder than he thought it was going to be. He could feel pressure across his forehead, tightness in the corners of his eyes.

“I could go through the litany of mistakes, but maybe we can save that for beers at the Townhouse. Basically, guys, I fucked up. We have about two months of runway and we’re history. I’m really sorry.”

He stopped, looked around. He had everybody’s attention, their faces grave and focused. But nobody looked surprised.

“The customers we have love us. Which is great, but the revenue just isn’t there yet. We’ve got some sales meetings set up, and it’s not too hard to get in for a dog and pony show, but to get to the guy who’s gonna turn out Cisco, Sun, Microsoft, HP in favor of us, who’ll put his ass on the line to do that, that’s another story. Our pimp at Gartner says the market for this technology has kind of fossilized in the last six months or so. It’s not impossible to crack, but what it means is that what used to be a three month sales cycle is now six months. If we had a little more time I could get some of these guys to bring us into their data closets just to shut me up.”

A few weak smiles around the table.

Jason: “I’ll give you twenty bucks to shut up right now.”

Paul: “Shut up, Jason.”

“We do have some options,” Ross continued. “We could shut it down now, spend a couple of weeks documenting, working out sunsets with our pathetic ragtag band of existing customers – basically bag it and tag it. I can give

each of you six weeks severance, cover your COBRA benefits three months out. It's not much, but it's the best I can do."

Doctor Bob's head moved back slightly and Ross knew he was running the numbers in his head. With this sev package, Ross would be cutting seriously into whatever personal cash he'd put in that he might otherwise recover.

"I could pitch us as an acquisition target. I've been resisting that so far, but if I let the sales pipeline slide and went all out, we might be able to get some action. If I did that, it would probably burn down our buffer which would mean no severance package if we fail. And even if we succeed, it would be such a freaking fire sale that I'm not sure it would be worth it. But we'd all have jobs. Maybe. Well, all of us except me, probably."

Shaking heads. "Bullshit." "No way."

"Okay, third option. I've been talking to another potential investor, rich guy with too much money on his hands, who might be willing to throw in a couple hundred K. It would be non-strategic, dumb money, basically a one-shot deal. Pure cash. It would give us a little more breathing room, though. Close some more sales, maybe spin out Anaconda as a security solution for the New World Order. Thing is, if we did that, I'd want to pull out all the stops. Burn the candle down to the stub, which would mean no parachute for anyone, including me."

Anaconda was the code name for Tesseract's flagship product, a suite of server management applications that optimized performance and fault management for high volume Internet applications. Gateway technology was still a growth industry, even after the crash, but the window was closing fast.

Heads were nodding. Doctor Bob was giving him the hairy eyeball. He knew that the mysterious investor Ross was talking about would be the lienholder on Ross' second mortgage.

Pockets of conversation had sprung up; the drift was pretty positive. Ross waited for the buzz to abate.

“I’m kind of hearing Door Number Three.”

Nods.

“If anybody wants to bail, that’s fine. You’ll get your severance. But so will everybody else. What I mean is, either we’re all on board or we pick up our toys and go home. We just can’t make it on three cylinders. You guys want to go off and talk about it that’s fine.”

Alpa looked around, gathering nods of assent.

“I don’t think we need to talk about it. We’re in.”

Doctor Bob leaned back in his chair, a faint, crooked smile on his face.

## 16.

Lori eased the grey Camry down Shasta, then Campus, hugging familiar curves and switchbacks, the Bay in afternoon sunlight flashing hammered metal through the eucalyptus.

She hated being late to karate. The instructors busted her chops, which was all right – that’s what they were supposed to do. But hustling really threw her off, messed with her *man*, her centeredness, and made it difficult to focus.

She was pissed at Ross, playing the conversation over in her mind. It wasn’t so much the money itself. In a way, Ross was probably right that things would hang together somehow, with or without the cushion. Pilsbury-Winthrop would take her back in a second, and if she couldn’t stomach the corporate law thing, and deep down she knew she couldn’t, she knew half a dozen people from law school whose private practices were maxed out; she could always pick up some contracting work. *That* was cushion. She figured there were a lot of folks out there in Bush’s train wreck economy with a lot less cushion or none at all, and she felt a little sheepish as she realized what she was worried about was not survival but losing the gentle life. The sweet meditation at the kick-wheel, the transformations of clay and glaze. Juxtaposed against the vicious mercantile politics of galleries and shows. Being a Local Artist. She loved it, was scared that

it was threatened, and felt – not good exactly but solid somehow – that she could parse that out and be real about it.

No, what really frosted her was being manipulated, predicted, put in a box where there was only one way she could turn. If she said no, don't do it, Ross folds up Tesseract and it's her fault. He'd never outright blame her, but it would be there and they'd both know it. This way, he goes down in flames and at least he has to own up.

And the timing. The thing about Ross was that he was always in sales mode and he didn't even realize it half the time. But he had to know that Dad living with them was a possibility, even a likelihood, had probably worked it through in his own mind and laid out the sequence of discussion topics optimized for positive outcome. It was more instinct than guile, though, and she had a deep and certain belief that Ross, conniving fuck that he was, had a good heart. She *knew* him and trusted him at a gut level about the stuff that really counted.

But she was still pissed.

She charged a couple of yellow lights on University and pulled into a space right in front of the Golden Dragon Bok-Fu Academy. Eight minutes to spare.

The Assistant Head Instructor, Mr. Wing, was working the desk, checking ID cards and answering the phone. He was an earnest, young African-American guy with a shaved head and a meticulously polite demeanor. Lori figured he knew about thirty different ways to kill someone one-handed in less than two seconds, so he could afford to be polite.

One of the things she loved about the school was the formality, the courtesy, the no-bullshit merit-based hierarchy. It was Mister This and Miz That, no first names, and you had no idea who people were in the world, just what color their belt was and how many stripes. You bowed hello and goodbye to instructors, bowed yourself on and off the mat, and thanked the instructors for kicking your ass around the block. It could have been oppressive but it didn't feel that

way. It had the weight of tradition and history behind it. It was unambiguous.

It was a little weird, too, especially when the other students took the whole thing a little too seriously. Those were the ones that if they weren't in here ruining their knees for life and screaming "yes sir" at the top of their lungs at everything the instructor said, they'd be hanging out at the Albatross on San Pablo doing twelve-ounce curls.

"Good evening, Miz Williamson. Do you have your ID card?"

Lori had been coming to Golden Dragon for three years and knew all the instructors pretty well, but she still had to show her card. If she didn't have it with her, it usually meant about five minutes of Horse Stance, legs boxed, back straight, fists pulled tightly back into her armpits. She could nap in Horse Stance by this time, but it was embarrassing.

She bowed and held out her card with both hands.

"Yes sir!"

Mr. Wing looked it over. "Thank you, ma'am. Please head on back."

She changed quickly into her *gi* and went downstairs. The mats were crowded, mostly white belts and orange belts working their kicks and blocks. Lori had three stripes on a green belt and was getting ready for the brown.

She started off slow, breathing, stretching. Then into the kicks and blocks, pushing her energy up a little at a time until by the time she got to her *katas* and techniques, she was sweating freely and in the zone, a place of no thoughts or worries.

She noticed one of her instructors, Miz Dorr, standing about ten feet away, watching her work. Miz Dorr had been one of her first instructors at the academy, a tough, stringy androgyne who Lori suspected harbored a wry sense of humor but she'd never actually seen any evidence. She'd taught Lori through her entire orange belt and most of her purple. Lori liked her a lot.

She stopped in mid-*kata*, turned, bowed.



“Sensei!” she barked.

Miz Dorr walked over to her.

“How are you doing this evening, Miz Williamson?”

“Fine, sensei.”

“Your Kata Six is looking very clean. That’s an extremely difficult one.”

“Thank you, sensei.”

“It’s a shame this isn’t a dance class.”

“Hai, sensei.” Not sure where this was going.

“Mister Robinson asked me to have a word with you. He tells me your sparring sucks.”

Click. Mister Robinson was her current teacher, a baby-faced college-aged kid who always seemed on the verge of impatience.

“Hai, sensei.” Cheeks burning.

“You mind telling me what happens when you get on the mat with someone else?”

“I really don’t know, sensei.”

It was true. She could wear a partner down blocking but she couldn’t bring herself to hit anyone.

“You realize that you can’t get much farther here unless you spar.” It wasn’t a question.

“Hai, sensei.”

Miz Dorr looked her over, big owl eyes and craggy cheekbones beneath an unruly tangle of short, brown hair.

“You want to work on it when you get to the brown you let me know.”

“Hai, sensei. Thank you, sensei.”

“Good night, Miz Williamson.”

Lori returned to her workout. It took a while to get back in the groove. She finished with a long session at the kickbag. Whenever she pictured a person at the receiving end, her timing fell apart. Finally, she gave up and returned to Kata Six so she could end on a positive note.

She changed quickly back into street clothes. There were several instructors on the mat and she bowed to each of them on her way through the dojo, and to Mr. Wing out

front. He stood up and gave her what she thought of as the Secret Karate Handshake – right hands clasped like normal, left hand holding the others' wrist, then close by slamming opposite forearms together in an inward block.

She got a bottle of Arrowhead water from the 7-11 next to the studio and drove back slowly, switchbacking up into the Berkeley hills, enjoying the solitude and the endorphin afterglow in spite of her frustration. About halfway home, she thought of her father and her mild euphoria evaporated, leaving a residue of anxiety and guilt.

Ever since she could remember Irv had drifted in and out of her life like changes in weather. You just never knew if you were going to get Indian summer, an early frost, or low clouds the color of dirty ice that hung overhead stealing light and warmth for days without letup.

He was on the road most of the time when she was a kid. Her experience of him was the experience of absence, her memories of him memories of him not being around. She was never sure what he did exactly, sales for some company and the company kept changing. There was something unsavory about it, though, furtive and transgressive. The few colleagues he brought home from work were distant, scary, impenetrable. They smoked cigars and swore incessantly, ignoring her and treating her mother, Rosie, like a servant.

They had no friends except for the men Rosie brought home when Irv was on the road.

There was a divorce when Lori was nine, then a couple years she remembered only as snapshots of grim, defeated rust belt towns. York, Youngstown, Akron. Three or four months in one place and packing up the house again.

Then Irv was somehow back in the picture. Nobody consulted Lori or offered any explanations. He was just there and life was back to normal – Irv's perpetual road trip, her mother's serial infidelities, Lori losing herself in books and compensating for always being the new kid by becoming the class brain in whatever shithole institution of learning she was

impressed into.

Irv left again during Lori's senior year at Akron Central High. Four days after Lori's eighteenth birthday, two weeks after graduation, Rosie had a massive coronary while watching *Days of Our Lives* and cooking a frozen turkey pot pie in the oven. Lori came home to find the house filled with smoke and her mother slumped in her stuffed chair, inert and cold.

Lori was surprised to learn that there was an insurance policy, a big one, and she the sole beneficiary. She buried her mother without trying to find Irv and headed West to Berkeley as if pulled on a wire.

He called in the middle of her second year at Boalt Law School, leaving a terse message and a Los Angeles phone number. Six years. Lori didn't call back. He tried twice again over the next year, leaving a different number each time. She was home the next time he called and they spoke briefly. He wasn't exactly apologetic, but he sounded contrite, almost vulnerable. Lori hung back, letting him fill the silence.

They spoke twice again over the next few months and finally Lori agreed to meet him for dinner at a Hungry Hunter in El Sobrante, Irv's suggestion and apparently his idea of a fancy restaurant.

Of course he looked older, which she expected. What she did not expect was that in spite of her anger she felt moved by his effort. They didn't have a lot to say to each other, didn't discuss her mother or her childhood, and he didn't say much about what he'd been doing.

"Traveling," he said. "Working." But there was some primal connection, the genetic imprint, something that sent a radar ping back into her childhood and returned a familiar outline. She wasn't sure what she actually wanted to do about it, but she couldn't let it go.

Irv paid the check. Lori noticed that the credit card, a Gold Amex, was issued to Wade Leveque, a name she was not familiar with.

She was about to ask, when Irv said, "I've been a

shitty father.”

She nodded. “You noticed that.” Feeling a tightness across her forehead, not trusting herself to say anything else.

“I’m not about to become a good one.”

She nodded again.

“But I would like to see you from time to time, if that’s okay.”

“I don’t know, Dad. I just don’t know.”

She pushed her chair back and stood.

“Thanks for dinner.”

She turned just before she walked out the door and saw him sitting at their table in shadow and candlelight, a small man in a battered suit. He gave a rueful half smile and a little wave. She lifted her hand, turned around, and left.

He called again a few months later. Another dinner at a suburban steak palace, the Ponderosa this time, out on 580 on the way to Livermore. In this way, slowly over the course of the next couple of years, they developed a tentative and winsome friendship. His low key persistence wore her down. It was nothing like the relationship she imagined most of her friends had with their parents, but there was a distinct gravitational pull that maintained between them a loose, lazy orbit and she was oddly comforted by its presence. It was something like love, or the closest thing to it she figured she was ever likely to get with Irv.

For most of her life she felt never far from a reservoir of melancholy. Submerged or not, she always registered its presence, the weight and smell of its cold, green depths. Having Irv back in her life at once focused her grief and rendered it less potent.

The kitchen was warm and steamy and smelled of cumin and onions when she got home. Her father wore a red-checked apron that said DOCTOR GUMBO in black letters on the front that she vaguely remembered buying for Ross on a business trip to New Orleans a few years back. She wondered where he’d found it. She felt a rush of apprehension about Irv working unsupervised in the kitchen, but

he smiled when he saw her and his eyes were clear and alert. A good day.

“Chili – all right, Dad.”

He was proud of his chili and in truth it wasn’t bad, a little heavy on the macho heat, but decent. It was a signature of his, this chili. Before he got sick and they started seeing way too much of him, he’d disappear for months on end, no word, then show up unannounced with a bag of groceries and start cooking. A strange gesture, neither penance nor apology. For Lori, the smell of cumin and onions always had associated with it the faint burnt-hair whiff of betrayal and loss. Tonight, though, it seemed innocent and sweet.

“I thought I’d make myself useful.”

“You need anything?”

The counter behind him was a litter of cans, plates, pots. Scraps of papery onion skin littered the floor.

“No, I think I can find everything.”

Lori would remember this moment – the close humid smells, the silly apron, the clean light of reason in her father’s eyes, and she would come back to it again and again as a touchstone and place of reference.

## 17.

Annie sat in the waiting room at Doctor Spiral's office, leafing through a month-old Newsweek and surreptitiously sussing out the other patients.

A young woman, late twenties, either trying to get pregnant or too early to show, dirty-faced toddler boy in tow. A Banana Republican, casual affluence worn like another accessory. She looked Annie over when she came in – boots, white t-shirt, leather jacket – and Annie could see the wheels turning, writing her off. Bitch.

A couple in their late thirties, maybe early forties. She looking about ready to pop, the guy hovering and solicitous. Anxious but comfortable with each other.

There they are, Annie thought. They could be the Williamsons. There was no physical resemblance; it was more how Annie felt when she saw them that made the connection. A little wistful that they had something with each other that seemed out of reach for Annie. A little pissed at their apparent blissful ignorance of the shit most people went through just to get by. A little diminished that there was some measure out there, some yardstick that set things up so that they were on track for the California good life and Annie was pimping her body out to get them there.

Fuck, listen to me, she thought. Sitting on the goddamn pity pot. Poor, poor Annie. What bullshit.

The woman behind the little reception window called “Sonsini.”

The Banana Republican got up, tripped on her sandal, and almost took a header into the fish tank. The toddler shrieked with laughter and the woman glared at Annie as if it were her fault.

Annie shrugged. The woman grabbed her kid roughly by the arm and hustled him through the door.

A young woman came in from the hallway outside. A girl really, couldn’t have been more than seventeen. Dressed down, flannel shirt and baggy jeans. She gave her name to the receptionist and looked around for a place to sit. She looked spacey and lost, like she couldn’t quite figure out how she’d got there.

Annie wondered what her deal was – STD, pregnant, something else?

“Hey,” Annie said. “You okay?”

The girl looked surprised for a second, then pulled it together.

“Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks.”

Annie nodded. “Good.”

Sometime that’s all it takes, she thought. A little nudge.

The receptionist called “Day.” A nurse took her to a small, cold room with an exam table, a Monet print on the wall, and not much else. A grimy window looked out onto Central Park. The nurse gave her a green exam gown and asked her to change.

She waited for what seemed like a long time. She wished she’d brought the Newsweek in with her.

Finally, a different nurse wheeled in the ultrasound machine, bristling with knobs and wires. She asked Annie to lie on the exam table.

“This will be a little cold,” she said. She raised Annie’s gown and smeared some gel on her stomach.

Doctor Spiral came in just as the nurse finished. He was a short, round man with squareish gold-framed glasses

that always seemed on the verge of sliding down his nose. He had a jovial manner, but Annie suspected that you didn't have to dig too far beneath the beardless Santa number to find a tough, no-bullshit hombre.

"Hello, Annie. How are we feeling?"

"*We* have to pee about every twenty minutes but otherwise okay. He's moving around a lot."

"Can't do much about your bladder. Good that he's moving some, though. Let's see how he looks."

He touched the probe to her rounded belly, moving a little, stopping, moving again. The screen was facing away from Annie; she had been adamant in earlier exams about not looking at the thing.

"I want to see," she said.

Doctor Spiral raised an eyebrow and wheeled the machine around.

Black and white screen, like an old television. Spud, translucent and compact, almost smiling; a wizened, aquatic monkey.

*Hey, Spud.*

"There," Doctor Spiral said. "You can see his heart beating. And there, you'll clearly want a blue blanket."

Annie's own heart was racing. Her feelings were pre-verbal: focused, adrenal, intense.

"His kidneys look a little large, but I wouldn't worry too much about that. We'll keep an eye on it."

Great, she thought. Give me something to worry about then tell me not to worry about it.

"You want a wallet photo?"

It took Annie a second to figure out that he was talking about the ultrasound Spud.

"Sure."

The nurse touched a button on the console and a silent tongue of white protruded from a slot of the side of the machine. She handed it to Annie. It was glossy on the side with the image and felt warm to the touch.

Doctor Spiral walked through his usual laundry list of



questions about diet and exercise, drugs and drink. Annie answered on autopilot, instinctively revealing as little as possible.

"I'll call the Williamsons and let them know you're doing well. I want to see you again in a week."

Relieved that it was over, Annie got dressed and left the clinic, still clutching the picture. She walked a little ways into Central Park and sat down on a bench. The day was warm and the Park was alive with walkers. After a few minutes, an elderly Chinese woman carrying a bulging shopping bag sat down next to Annie. She had high cheekbones and a deeply lined face. Annie could tell that she had been beautiful as a young woman.

"Your baby?" She nodded at the picture.

Annie nodded hesitantly.

"He look like you," the woman said, and brayed with laughter.

Annie smiled. They sat together in silence and after awhile, the woman got up, nodded at Annie, and left.

Annie closed her eyes and let the sun warm her face. She imagined Spud nearly grown, a handsome, quiet boy of sixteen or seventeen, the two of them sitting on a porch somewhere. Maybe a beachfront house; they'd be squinting from the brightness of sun on sand. Not saying much, but enjoying the time together. She couldn't see anything else – what she'd been doing the intervening years, who owned the house, where the Williamsons were and what part they played in the picture. There was just the sun and the sand, the still quiet of afternoon on the screened-in porch; Annie, the boy, and the flat blue horizon.

## 18.

After lunch with Irv, Lori drove back downtown for errands in the Gourmet Ghetto. The day was warm and people sat on the grassy divide in the middle of Shattuck Avenue, eating pizza from the Cheese Collective, sipping smoothies from the Organic Juice Bar Collective. Someone had a guitar and was doing a passable John Fahey imitation, melodic and percussive at the same time, the music rising above the traffic sounds. She caught a faint whiff of reefer but couldn't locate the source.

She finished her shopping and drove slowly home. She felt restless and dislocated and on impulse, she turned towards the Bay and got onto the freeway, heading across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and up into the low rolling hills of Sonoma County. Towards Atkins Glen. Attica. She didn't know what she was going to do when she got there.

The place was tucked behind a winery off a small county two-lane. She parked near the sign in front and looked at the grounds. She tried to imagine herself looking at it with new eyes, as if she had never seen it before. Low buildings in pale stucco with red clay tile roofs, two big shade oaks on either side of a wide open green, people in various modes of locomotion pushing themselves along the asphalt paths or being pushed.

The main building sat behind a phalanx of eucalyptus,

a standard issue Northern California mission. She'd read in the promotional brochure that the place used to be an orphanage and the architecture still exuded the faint, musty whiff of abandonment.

She felt a sudden sense of loss, a fleeting grief so powerful that for a moment it took her breath away. Then it was gone, leaving a tension around her eyes. She didn't know why she had come.

But I'm here, she thought. Let's see where it goes.

A blonde receptionist stationed in the entrance hall, lots of eye makeup, big hair, looked at Lori with mild hostility as she approached. A small framed photograph of penguins waddling single file across an ice field sat on the large oak desk, facing outwards. There was a name plate – *Cindy Macy*. Lori didn't recognize her from her previous visits. She wondered if Cindy was the haiku lady.

"Can I help you?"

Lori blanked on the Director's name. Leopard. Topper. Sclera.

"Is Doctor Tepper available?" Please.

"The doctor is with a family at the moment. A *bereaved* family," she added meaningfully. She tapped on the keyboard in front of her a couple of times and looked at the monitor. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm afraid I don't, no."

"That's all right." She flashed a quick, brittle smile. "He should be done in a half hour or so. Would you care to wait?"

"Sure."

Lori sat on the wooden bench near the entrance and leafed through the magazines. *Better Homes. Sunset. California Living*. No politics, no medicine. Happy happy. She felt Cindy's eyes on her but when she looked up, Cindy appeared busy, tapping away at the keyboard.

After about twenty minutes, a cluster of people appeared at the end of the hall. A woman with a helmet of bleached hair and Spandex pants weeped openly while her

husband, looking uncomfortable, patted her lamely on the shoulder. A pair of young boys swirled around the group like eccentric moons.

They were shepherded along by Tepper, tall and lean, white doctor's jacket hanging loosely over a dark, well-cut suit, stethoscope dangling from her neck.

They seemed to take forever to make their way down the hall and out the door. Lori stood up.

"I don't know if you remember me –"

"Blumenthal," Tepper said.

"Yes, well – Williamson. But yes, Irv's daughter."

"Can I help you?"

Not inviting her back to the office.

"I'd like to talk with you about my father."

Tepper shook her head. She had a distracted, impatient affect, everything an interruption. Lori wondered if she was like that with the family that had just left.

"Look, Miz Blumenthal –"

"Williamson."

"Yes. Okay. Williamson. Your father – this is an assisted living facility. Not – our residents span a fairly broad range of physical mobility, but we don't have – aside from one staff, part time – we don't have really a psychiatric component here. Your father may be at onset – there's probably some dementia. Or, he might be a classic manipulator, personality disorder –"

No wonder that lady was crying, Lori thought.

"I want to ask you to consider readmitting him."

Tepper tilted her head and smiled without amusement.

"Your father stole a car from this facility, hustled thousands of dollars from the other residents, and sexually harassed one of my employees. You should consider yourself fortunate that we're not pressing charges. I'm very sorry."

"You don't look sorry."

Tepper pressed her lips together. "We're done," she said. She turned and walked back down the long hall, steps

echoing.

Lori looked at Cindy, who shrugged apologetically. Tepper's undiluted nastiness seemed to have pushed her into the Nice Zone.

"I actually liked the little poems," she said.

Lori found the Petaluma-Pt. Reyes Road and drove west, very fast, following the smooth contours of the rolling, brown hills. Sometimes, when she reached the crest of a hill, just before descending into the next valley, she could catch a glimpse of the ocean. It was a little closer each time.

That evening, they ate Irv's chili, which had turned out so salty it made Lori's lips pucker, and the three of them watched *Casablanca* on The Movie Channel.

Irv was withdrawn into a deep funk. Ross and Lori tried to draw him out, but gave up after a while and settled back into the flickering blue glow.

They managed to get Irv off to bed with little intervention, shut down the house and headed upstairs. Neither of them said much until they were in bed, the lights out.

"I went to Attica today," Lori said.

"Really? Kicking ass, taking names..."

"Hardly. I was set for a fight, my Inner Lawyer all pumped up, and I just lost it when I got there. Spoke with Tepper for about two minutes and managed to completely humiliate myself."

Ross reached out, touched her cheek.

"So I think we can pretty much write off Attica," Lori finished.

"So we have a new roommate."

"Yeah, at least for now. I'm a little worried about leaving him here by himself, though," she said. "He gets around fine but he's not all there. I'm home a lot, but I can't keep an eye on him all the time."

Ross nodded.

“Maybe we can get somebody in here for a few hours a day, cook him lunch, make sure he’s okay.”

“Yeah,” she said, although she had trouble imagining anyone putting up with him. “Something like that.”

Ross didn’t say anything. Lori snuggled closer. They listened to the late night sounds – a car passing by on Cragmont, wind rustling the leaves in the big oak in their front yard, the refrigerator motor downstairs kicking in.

“It’s weird having him here,” she said. “He was around so little when I was growing up, him and Mom fighting all the time. Moving out, moving back. We just never built up much of a relationship. Even with me as an adult, he’ll be out of touch for a couple, few years, maybe a birthday card, then all of a sudden he’s here and I’m supposed to drop everything...”

Ross nodded. She’d recounted her abandonment to him so often the telling of it had a feeling of ritual. He touched her hair, ran his hand along her cheekbone. She buried her face in his shoulder, pushing herself into his warmth.

## 19.

The next day at Tesseract was crazy, demoralizing, a Sisyphus day, pushing the same goddamn ball of shit uphill and scrambling to get out of the way when it rolled back down. One of their customers reported a bizarre bug, a server hanging only when receiving packets between 16k and 64k in size. Between sitting in on the hourly checkpoint meetings Doctor Bob was driving with the Posse, Ross spent another morning cold-calling VC firms and corporate IT departments, working through lunch and on into the afternoon, getting nowhere. Lori had tried to call four times. She'd left messages the first two times, then nothing: a brief electronic hiss, an emphatic click. Ross felt guilty for blowing her off but he felt like his focus required the fuel of solitude. Finally, she pinged him on IM.

**LoriLor: ?**

**Ross94707: !**

**LoriLor: Worried about Annie.**

**Ross94707: still can't get through?**

**LoriLor: Left a few messages. Don't want to be a Nervous Mom.**

**Ross94707: spiral says she's doing fine**

**LoriLor: Yeah, he also said she seems to be taking an interest in the baby. That's supposed to reassure us.**

**Ross94707: he seemed to think it was a good thing**

**LoriLor: What does he know?**

**Ross94707: uh**

**LoriLor: You know what I mean**

**Ross94707: i guess so**

**LoriLor: Just cause he's King OB doesn't mean he knows anything about people. I think he's kind of a freak.**

**Ross94707: ok ok**

**LoriLor: U still there?**

**Ross94707: y, still here**

**LoriLor: Just worried is all.**

**Ross94707: annie day**

**LoriLor: Annie Day. Where is she?**

**Ross94707: probably fine**

**Ross94707: just needs a little space**

**LoriLor: I don't want her to have space. She can have all the space she wants after she has our baby.**

**Ross94707: what's she gonna do**

**LoriLor: That's the problem. I don't know what she's gonna do.**

**Ross94707: are u over reacting a little?**

**Ross94707: we know how to find her**

**Ross94707: we have a contract**

**Ross94707: u there?**

**LoriLor: Go back to your little company.**

Ross put off going home for as long as he could. When Doctor Bob stuck his head in the door to say good-night, the sky was purple and the Bay Bridge was twinkling with moving lights.

He cleaned up his Outlook Inbox, moving stuff from Exchange to his Personal folders, saving attachments to disk and deleting the corresponding e-mail messages, tweaking his filters so they'd do most of this stuff on their own. Information housekeeping. Bullshit busywork.

He walked through a pitch he was giving later in the



week to a guy he knew who knew someone at Bessemer Ventures, tweaking the slide transitions for the third time.

He checked his Yahoo account. He only used it for buying stuff online and as a consequence it was choked with spam. The headers were becoming increasingly baroque.

*Oirignal dsiocunt - be.*

*Fwd: V|c.od|n \* xana+x+ ' v1@GRa = Valium*

*S:o:ma \_ Pnte.r.min fKxbsrfabatq*

*'Get Put Locate Dislocate Find' 'for more bigger higher transfer better'*

*eh..via -gra competitor at c.heap hangover abundanti*

*Order Pres/cription Dru\*gs online!*

*colloidal filmy bona feudatory methacrylate*

*Did You Have Any Questions For Us?*

*your was declined*

*U Are Crazy If Paying Hundred For Software, Our Price*

*Only 25 Dollars part gamma*

*This is your cabnce to socre big!*

*clearance sa-le for software woodnote*

*These girlies have monster clits.. you wanna see them.*

*Debt consolidation with a christian perspective*

Hey, Jesus really does save, he thought.

He knew the crazy spellings were just lame attempts to get past the spambots, but he still felt like he was inhabiting some strange Anthony Burgess future, language and culture dragging one another headlong towards an abyss.

He especially liked the names of the senders – Oliphant Peckerwood, Blibxxt Blibl, Smelly Reckoning, Tammi Toenailz. Computer-generated, clearly, but programmed by someone determined to have a little fun while drowning the world in shit.

Enough. Time to face the music. He knew he'd been a real asshole on IM. Lori just needed a little backup, a little affirmation. His withholding was perverse, an almost glan-

dular reaction to her pain. A guy thing. It was an ongoing issue between them and something he kept having to work at. They'd done couples counseling after a very rocky stretch about four years into their marriage and this was what they kept coming back to. Her need, his retreat. It's not that she was a whiner – she really wasn't. She just put it all out there, her heart right on her sleeve, and something buried deep in his WASP programming thought that was uncool. Which was weird, because Lori was the coolest person he knew. He really wanted to show up for her. He just fucked up sometimes.

He put on an old Squeeze tape for the drive up into the hills, and the upbeat British ditties about sex, drugs, and drink cheered him considerably.

Lori was night gardening, the security floods washing the lawn in bright light, throwing sharp shadows. She looked up as Ross pulled behind her Camry, then went back to digging. She was wearing faded overalls, rubber boots, a red bandana.

He walked up behind her and stood with his hands in his pockets.

"You finally showed up," she said, not looking up. "What'd you do, rearrange your Outlook Inbox about ten times, massage an old PowerPoint deck, sharpen a few pencils?"

How the hell does she *do* that? "I'm sorry I was such an asshole on IM."

She put her trowel down, looked up at him.

"Thanks. I appreciate that." She looked away, looked back at him. "You know, Ross, I can't do this alone. I sometimes feel like you're giving it all away at Tesseract and there's nothing left. That won't work. We're having this baby together – it's not just me, or me and Annie. You're *in* it. I need for you to fully engage here."

Ross nodded. He looked at the Berkeley flats spread out below, a carpet of light. Their plot was on the high side of Cragmont Road, sloping downhill towards a fortuitous gap in the treeline that afforded them a spectacular view of the Bay,

three bridges, the San Francisco skyline. The view alone added about fifty K to the value of the house.

He wanted to say something that would make it right, but he was pretty sure that if he said anything at all it would sound bogus or be an outright mistake. Basically, he wanted her to not feel bad so that he didn't have to feel bad. He realized at a reptilian hindbrain level that there was something not quite right about that, but there it was. He resisted the impulse to turn on the Sales Machine.

After a few seconds, he nodded again and sat down next to her in the dirt.

"What you got?"

"Herbs," she said, sounding the 'h'. "Sage, lemon thyme, basil..."

"Basil. You're optimistic. That's just ringing the dinner bell for the snails."

"We'll see. Worst that can happen is we'll have fat snails. Maybe they'll crunch better when you step on 'em."

Another long silence. The ground felt cold under Ross' butt.

"What are we going to do about Annie?" he asked.

"I was going to go to New York in a week anyway. I'll leave tomorrow, see if I can find her."

"I'll come with you."

"You can't. You need to keep an eye on my Dad and suck up to the VCs."

He knew she was right.

"Yeah. I still wish I could come with you."

She nodded distractedly, still pretty reserved, holding back a little. He figured he deserved it, but he also knew it wasn't really about him. She'd made a decision and she was pulling it in, setting herself up for follow-through. He'd seen this before with her and he knew the only thing he could do was roll with it.

"You got tickets?"

"Two twenty PM tomorrow out of Oakland."

"What if we haven't heard from her by the time you

leave?”

Lori shrugged. “Then I’ll find her.”

## 20.

Annie had a great apartment on Greenwich Avenue, near Christopher Street. Third floor walk-up, one big room with southern exposure, a kitchenette, and a tiny bathroom with a window into an air shaft. She was so deep into the chain of sublets she didn't know the original renter. Thanks to rent control it was insanely cheap, even with the rake each of the subs was almost certainly taking.

Her crib was the one thing she'd managed to hold together, even at the height of her using. Every month, no later than the third, the check went into the envelope and the envelope went into the mail, no matter what else was going on. Looking back, she figured it wasn't so much virtue but a sharp sense of survival. Boyfriends come and go, junk is more ephemeral than hope, but if she lost her crib it would be all over.

Most of the furniture came with the place. Sofa-bed, a couple of worn stuffed chairs, a Formica-topped kitchen table, that fifties looking pebbly pattern, weird little bits of tile embedded in plastic. An aging television with pirate cable that a friend of Sanchez had set her up with. A fairly decent little bookshelf stereo system, also courtesy of Sanchez. Fell off a truck, he'd said, his face hidden by the bulky box when she opened the door for him. Teetering piles of CD's on the floor, more on the shelves. Hugely eclectic: Morphine and

Monk, Mahler and Miles. Several rows of books – the beat poets, some science fiction, the 19th Century Russians.

Annie was sitting in the stuffed chair nearest the window, looking out at the gap-toothed skyline where the Towers used to be, resting her hand on her rounded belly. Waiting for the occasional kick, smiling slightly when it came. Trying to figure out what the fuck she was going to do.

She was missing Sanchez badly. Not that she wanted to see him. He was spinning out of reach, under the guidance of some compass she couldn't figure. He'd actually frightened her the last time, which had never happened before. Something was consuming him, something more than just junk, and Annie didn't want it to consume her too.

The phone rang. She let the machine pick up.

"Annie? This is Lori. I – I'm coming to New York a little early. I'll be staying at the W in midtown. Call me."

*Fuck.* Lori's voice sounded like it was made of glass. Annie just didn't want to deal with her. She needed to be left alone for a while to sort things out in her head. That image kept coming back, she and the boy, relaxed with each other and silent in the heat of afternoon, looking out at the ocean from the screened-in porch. She couldn't shake it, knew she had to give it up, couldn't figure out how to transmute it into something she could move ahead with. She knew one thing – the longer she put off talking with the Williamsons, the harder it was to imagine getting back in synch.

"You're going to have to talk to them eventually," Greta said. "You have something that belongs to them."

She looked around, lit a cigarette. They were at the Intermezzo on Spring Street, a little rathole of a cappuccino den somewhat off the beaten track. Opera posters on peeling, brown walls; pastries of indeterminate age under glass bell jars like museum pieces; sad, French songs, just voice and piano, quiet in the background. It was mid-day and they were the only customers.

"I know," Annie said. "I mean, I know that in my

mind. And I know I can't just keep avoiding them – Lori's probably here in the city already. But I just feel torn open. I keep having this vision, kind of. I'm sitting on this screened in porch, a house on the beach. It's summer, really hot. The sand is so white you have to squint when you look at it, rippled like it gets from the wind and green tufts of grass sticking up here and there. A slat fence twisted by the wind curving with the shape of the dunes. The sky is the kind of blue that you never see in the city. And he's with me. Spud is with me. Sometimes he's almost grown, sixteen or so. Other times he's still a little kid. But we're just hanging out, being together. It's just this timeless, perfect moment. No Sanchez, no Williamsons, no Doctor Spiral, no fucking meetings. I can't shake it, and I feel like if I give up the Spud I'm giving up something that I'll never get back."

She paused, took a breath, took the handkerchief Greta offered and wiped her eyes.

"I guess that's one way to look at it," Greta said after a while.

Annie waited for more. She figured maybe Greta was thinking something over, searching for the right words. A minute passed. Two minutes.

"That's it? That's all you're going to say? Jesus, fuck..."

"Why do you think you need me to help you figure this out? You know what you need to do. All this romantic sentiment is just your sickness talking to you, coming up with an excuse for pain so you can go medicate. You have to remember that there's a hungry little animal inside you and all it wants is junk. It doesn't care about you, the Spud, the Williamsons. All it wants is junk. And it will do anything to get it, tell you anything, make you believe anything. But you have a choice, hon. You have a responsibility to those people and you have a responsibility to yourself. Have their baby, take their money, pull your life together. And then if you want, go and have your own baby and take it to the beach. That's probably what your vision is about anyway, what your

heart is telling you. It's not the Spud you're with. It's *your* kid."

Another long silence.

"Man, you are one tough old bitch," Annie said finally. "I don't even get to feel sorry for myself."

Greta smiled tightly, shook her head. "It's a luxury you can't afford. Look, I have this little cottage on Block Island. My aunt died a few years back and left it to me. I rent it out over the summer but right now it's empty. Why don't you go up there, take a few days, think things over."

"Maybe," Annie said. "I mean, thanks. I'll think about it."

"You have to promise me that you'll call the Williamsons before you go."

Annie hesitated, then nodded. "Okay."



## 21.

Lori packed slowly, as if putting off the actual moment of departure. Sensible clothes, nothing fancy. Jeans and tees. Laptop. Workout gear – a *gi*, sweats, ankle weights. She could probably find a dojo somewhere that would let her use the mat and speed bag. It occurred to her that she should ask Golden Dragon for a New York contact, but there wasn't time.

She figured she'd be gone for a couple of months at least, so a week's worth of clothes ought to do it. She'd go to a laundromat or send out to one of those Chinese places – folds sharp as a knife edge and the whole thing wrapped in stiff blue paper. She'd be bringing back a baby, and she knew that there would be a ton of stuff she'd need, but she'd deal with that when the time came.

Finally it was done – a big black duffle, a day pack, and a slim, leather laptop case. The airport van was due in twenty minutes. Ross had wanted to drive her, but she refused. He would've had to reschedule a sales pitch and she didn't want him to do that. It was a little different now, having more skin in the game. She wasn't sure she liked it, but it gave her a different perspective.

She carried the bags downstairs, set them next to the front door, and went back to talk to Irv.

He was lying on top of the bed, fully dressed, shoes

on, the bed neatly made. His eyes were open but he showed no reaction when she came in. His teeth were out, giving his face a sunken, hollow appearance.

“Dad.”

He turned his head slowly to look at her.

“Dad, I’m going.” She’d told him the night before.

“Going.”

“To New York. To get your grandson.”

“New York.”

“To see Annie. To get our baby.”

Irv nodded.

“Ross will be here. He’ll take care of you.”

Then a falsely hearty “You boys get along now,” leaning over to peck him on the cheek and catching a faint whiff, papery dry and sour.

Irv reached up and cupped her breast in his hand. Lori was so shocked she didn’t move for a couple of seconds. Then she backed quickly out of the room, banging hard into the door jamb and almost tripping on her feet. His hand remained aloft, as if waving goodbye.

She carried her bags down the driveway to the street. She still had about ten minutes, but she couldn’t wait in the house.

She felt a numb tingling in her face and hands, tightness across her forehead. It hurt to breathe.

It’s not him, she thought. He’s had some kind of micro-stroke, probably before Attica. A dead spot somewhere in his cortex and the nerve signals detouring around it, re-routing, sending the superego off to weave baskets and letting the id take over. It’s not him.

God *damn* it, I don’t need this right now. She thought about calling off the trip. Thought about it for about two seconds. Ross is just going to have to deal.

Her cheeks felt cool and she realized she was crying.

She looked back up the slope at the house, imagined Irv lying in his room, his hand still poised in the air, cupped to the shape of her breast.

She took a deep breath, let it out. Another. Focused her breathing. Tried to empty her mind.

The van came and the driver put her bags in the back. She was the only passenger and she took a seat in the last row, hoping to avoid small talk. Nice day. Where are you going. Fuck.

She barely noticed as the curved, wooded hill streets gave way to the flatlands grid, the perpetual stop-and-go down University Avenue to I-80.

They passed the Emeryville exit; Tesseract was about two blocks east. She took her cell phone out of her pocket, held it up to her mouth, pressed a key.

“Ross.”

She waited through his answering message and began speaking, quietly, not wanting the driver to hear.

## 22.

Ross was in conference calls all morning, through lunchtime and beyond, and didn't get to Lori's message until mid-afternoon. He still hadn't eaten and his stomach was curled up into a tight fist, pressing against his backbone from the inside. Not just hunger but stress, uncertainty, fighting against the awful feeling that no matter what he did he couldn't beat the inexorable ticking clock, wanting to close the damn door every time he left the office to keep the money from flying out.

It's not like he was alone – most of the people he knew were treading water, at least the people he knew in startups. Even in Big Kompany Land, where you used to be pretty safe, you never knew when an RIF was going to come down out of the sky like a lightning bolt from an angry Jehovah and take away your house and car, rearrange your priorities for you.

True at least for the people he knew who hadn't cashed out. People who had tended to drop out of the network pretty quick. After a while you'd hear a rumor that so-and-so had moved to Hawaii and bought up a chain of restaurants, or was on a six-month eco-vacation in the Galapagos, or had funded a chair at some school and named it after Kurt Cobain.

They were schmucks just like him, people he'd known

in B-school or from jobs after, people he'd played cards with, gone hiking with, gone out drinking with. There were enough of them that he didn't really think of them as individuals – they were the Lucky Fuckers.

He wondered, more often than was healthy for him, whether there was some ineffable combination of character attributes that granted entrance to that particular club or if it was just blind, stupid luck – the same borderline fickle Jehovah throwing garlands of flowers instead of thunderbolts.

Better not to go there.

After he played Lori's message he just sat there for a minute, trying to sort out his feelings. He played it again.

It was too creepy. What he wanted to do was start working the phones, get Irv placed somewhere. He realized that up until this he'd thought of Irv's condition as unfortunate but a little bit wacky and happy-go-lucky, that they'd tsk-tsk when Irv wore different colored socks or poured salt in his tea, but that his incipient dementia wouldn't otherwise intrude very much into their emotional ecology.

He knew how freaked Lori must have been, could hear it in the edge in her voice, and wished that he could be with her.

His cell phone rang. The display showed EMMETT, Heaven's lead for their investment in Tesseract. God damn it.

- Emmett, how's it going?

- Not too bad, Ross. Yourself? How did the Web-smith meeting go this morning?

- Not too bad. We're going to have to bait the hook a little more, though, maybe throw in an extra quarter of support on our nickel. They're already under contract to Albatross and it's going to be a challenge to get in under their radar. They liked the demo, though, and for the kind of highly distributed operation they have there's nothing in the industry that can touch us.

- Good, keep me posted. We can use another account, because – Ross, I have to tell you that we’re not participating in the next round. We’re mostly a seed shop – we’re already way over guidelines with Tesseract.
- No worries, Emmett – I figured as much. It didn’t hurt to ask.
- You should be getting the paperwork from Kwan on the new money you’re kicking in. It tweaks everybody’s equity position, but we’re still first out, of course.
- Of course.
- You sure you want to do this? It doesn’t buy you all that much time. Long sales cycles these days.
- That could be enough. We have a lot of twos and threes in the pipeline, a few fours. Peter was fucking useless but he did work the phones while he was here. We need a couple of big accounts to slow the cash hemorrhage down to a trickle, then we’ll look a lot better for the Series A.
- All right, then. You need anything you let me know.
- Thanks, Emmett.

Ross took a deep breath. Emmett was pretty nice for a VC, but he made Ross nervous. Unlike the Lucky Fuckers, Emmett was clearly Old Money, operating on a different plane of existence.

He wasn’t surprised that Heaven wouldn’t float the company any longer without hard results, either sales or financing, but it was demoralizing just the same.

He punched Lori’s speed dial code.

“Hi, it’s me. I know you’re still in the air. I got your message. I - I just wanted to say that I’m thinking about you. Give me a call when you get settled at the W. I love you.”

Ross had half a dozen calls to follow up on, but he needed a break. There was just too much going on. He felt detached, his senses and judgment blunted. On top of

everything else, the Posse was gearing up to launch Phase 2 of their beta, implementing and testing feature tweaks from Phase 1 customer feedback.

The good news was that Phase 1 feedback had been almost uniformly positive. Some of these guys would segue to paying customers, but part of the deal pulling them into the beta was aggressively preferred pricing out several quarters. Ross could use them for references, which was great, but they wouldn't do shit for his cash flow.

He stood up, pushing his chair back. His back hurt as he straightened. He needed a walk. He stepped out in to the reception area.

Gina had talked Dmitry into installing a TV card in her rig and she was watching the Bloomberg Report on CNN in a window on her monitor, brow furrowed, chewing on a pencil eraser.

The Posse was doing what they usually did, most of which didn't look anything like work to someone who didn't work around hardcore geeks. Playing Nerf basketball, the hoop mounted high up on the south wall. Playing Counter-Strike over the LAN. Shooting the breeze about technology, movies and music. Ross knew that even the best developers and architects will get maybe two or three good hours out of a basic ten hour workday; the rest of the time they were doing whatever they needed to do in order to optimize their "on" time. The social stuff built trust and trust was about the only thing in all the bullshit teambuilding training he'd taken in B-school and beyond that he believed in unequivocally.

Doctor Bob was heads down into a debugging session and Ross left him alone. He waved at Gina and headed out the door.

Tesseract had a small suite in the Emery Technology Building, a former warehouse occupying an entire square block just off of I-80. The chic post-industrial setting was a direct result of the insane amounts of loose, dumb cash flying about during the late 90's. Faux stark, lots of exposed girders with bright neon piping, Herman Miller furniture everywhere.

A silly art installation in the front courtyard featured cast iron chairs and tables poised on one leg, as if they were about to dance into the street.

Most of the conversion had been done by a well-heeled startup called Ascendant. You might say they fulfilled the destiny their name implied, but not according to plan. They were in Startup Heaven, an endless launch party, surrounded by aging preppies with great tans and perfect teeth clutching term sheets, every office a corner office bedecked with framed cover stories in *Wired* and *Business Week*. Just prior to their Chapter 11, they sold the project to an enterprising Thai named Jimmy Niratpatanasai to give the VCs something to show for the millions they'd sunk into the company. In the post-Bubble commercial real estate market that wasn't much.

Jimmy was something of a hi-tech groupie and liked to rent to edgy startups and media content shops. Ross often saw him hanging out in the lobby with the security guard, who Ross suspected was a relative of some kind, watching Chinese soap opera on a small television perched at one end of the guard desk.

Sure enough, he was there as Ross passed through the lobby.

"Hey Ross! You getting Series A?" Jimmy seemed to know more about Tesseract's finances than Ross did.

"Working the phones, Jimmy."

"You go, man." Jimmy raised his hand in a tortured gang sign he'd probably seen on MTV. Ross waved in return.

He threaded his way through the dancing furniture installation, past the security gate, and out onto the sidewalk. The nearby freeway hummed with cars.

Across the street, a fenced-in lot choked with weeds and waist-high grass ran the length of the block down to the railroad tracks. A battered sign slightly askew on the fence proclaimed EMERYVILLE WATERFRONT PROJECT COMING SOON. You had to cross a set of railroad tracks, a freeway, and pathetic patch of boggy marsh to get to the



waterfront, but that didn't deter the developers' imagination. There was a picture of a glittering steel and glass box thrusting bluntly into a cyan sky. Shops and outdoor cafes clustered at its base. Tiny pedestrians strolled along a boardwalk next to the Bay, blue-green and dotted with sailboats.

The sign and the empty lot had been there for as long as Ross could remember. Another bit of speculative flotsam run aground on the reefs of the millennium.

Ross ducked through a hole in the fence and followed a footworn path cutting diagonally through the weeds, across the lot to the railroad tracks.

He passed a lean-to made from a flattened refrigerator box and a stack of milk crates, set back about ten feet from the path. A shoe, a ripped sleeping bag, a couple of empty Nalgene water bottles amidst the weeds and grass. No sign of the occupant.

When he got to the other side of the lot, he squeezed through another hole in the fence, taking care not to rip his jacket, and walked along the tracks toward the Emeryville Public Market.

The crossing bell at 65th Street began to clang and striped gates came down on either side of the track. Ross stood still, watching the train approach. The rumbling of the tracks rose to a roar and an ear-splitting whistle rended the air. It was a passenger train, just three cars. The sudden wind from its passage felt good on his face, lifting his jacket and flapping it behind him like a cape.

He began walking again, chewing over the conversation with Emmett, wishing he'd been a little more aggressive. He'd tried to milk Heaven for introductions to the next tier of VC firms but they'd come up with *bupkis*, a couple of coffee-shop meetings. That was part of what a seed shop like that was supposed to bring to the table. Not just money, but the Magic Rolodex and lots of company-building experience. The Heaven guys seemed almost disengaged. They'd tossed their dice and were hanging back to see if Tesseract landed seven or boxcars.

Ross knew all that guidelines stuff was bullshit. If he started talking term sheet with a top-tier firm, Heaven would be in there shoring up their equity position in a New York minute. Fucking sheep.

He left the track bed and walked through the parking lot to the Market, a typically Californian indoor-outdoor aggregation of retail outlets and non-chain ethnic food stalls. He got a paper plate loaded with pad thai and an iced coffee from the My Thai booth and took an outside table.

He didn't know what he was going to say to Irv when he got home. Probably nothing. Have you eaten. Do you need anything. Lori had said in her message that maybe they should get him evaluated somehow. Ross wasn't sure what that meant exactly or what they'd do if they found out anything. All he knew was that things in the Irv realm had spun suddenly into uncharted territory.

He heard a shout from inside the market and looked for its source. Another shout, unintelligible. Conversations at nearby tables stopped as people craned their necks to see what was going on.

A man appeared – white, mid-twenties – running full tilt boogie out the entrance followed by two uniformed cops about ten feet behind. He pushed a woman and child out of the way, stumbled and partly recovered, heading right for Ross.

Ross had no time to move. The man dodged to the side, clipping Ross hard as he ran past. Ross spilled out of his chair, banging his head on the edge of the table and scraping his knee and elbow. Stunned, he registered pounding feet as the cops slammed past in pursuit. He was vaguely aware of someone from a nearby table asking him if he was okay.

His cell phone rang.

On autopilot, he fished it out and flipped it open.

- Huh.

- Ross Williamson?

- Uh, yeah. Yes.

- This is Storm Warner, Microsoft Server Strategy Division. Is this a good time to talk?

## 23.

Lori had stayed at incarnations of the W Hotel in Sydney, New York, and Seattle. Like McDonald's, it was pretty much the same wherever you went. Mickey Dee sells cholesterol bombs and bullshit good cheer. W hawks a stark, phony hipness that lets laptop warriors on the global circuit think they're Keanu Reeves. Black walls, interior lighting best suited for mushroom cultivation, staff dark-suited and slim stationed everywhere to remind you that you're actually well into middle age and the last thing you saw really push the envelope was Lou Reed wearing eye makeup.

The best thing about the W, Lori thought as the cab pulled up in front of the Lexington Avenue entrance and a Goth troll in black Spandex scuttled up to the curb, maybe the only good thing, is that it's free. When she was at Pilsbury-Winthrop, Lori had been on point to Starwood Resorts, who owned the W franchise, on a series of lawsuits filed against smaller chains intended to carve out branding territory. Starwood management had been very happy with the work and offered her an open-ended comp at any of their facilities. Lori didn't see any reason to tell them that she was no longer with the firm.

She shooed away the troll who was trying to take her bags, paid off the cab, shouldered the duffle and walked into the lobby.

When they ran her name through the computer, the clerk's attitude transformed from mildly annoyed at having to expend the energy required to lift a pen to fawning attentiveness.

"Will there be anything else? Do you need help with your bags?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

She took the little folder containing the room key card, thick black cardboard with a satin finish, very nice, and she headed for the elevators.

I hate this place, she thought, squinting in the elevator's black light to make out the menu of the Lexx Bistro downstairs. Of course, dull black font on shiny black paper, the evil sons of bitches.

I really hate this place, she thought again. The gym sucks, the food sucks, and every time I step out of the hotel into daylight my mood lifts so appreciably that I wonder if they mist the rooms with Seconal.

The elevator door hissed open. The hallway lighting wasn't much better than the elevator. Every few feet, a cheesy white plastic freeform sculpture sprouted alarmingly from a pedestal illuminated by a tight, bright spot from a ceiling track.

She found her room, inserted the card, was rewarded by an emphatic, muffled click.

The W, she thought, pushing the door open, is what every place would look like if the Human League had won World War II.

The room was small and clean, sparse except for a huge television in an armoire dominating a corner and a glass-topped desk rigged with broadband and a small fax machine.

She cracked open the window the allotted suicide-preventive three inches and sat on the bed. Street sounds drifted up through the cool night. It was too late to call anyone, at least on the East Coast.

Restless and hungry, she got up again, went to the desk, and sifted through the pile of useless hotel information

and fashion magazines until she found the room service menu. More black font on black paper. What was wrong with these people?

She ordered a \$14 B.L.T., tried to call Ross, and got his voicemail.

"Me. I'm here at the W. I'll probably be up for another hour or so. Call me if you get this."

She wanted to say something else, some kind of follow-up to her earlier message, an acknowledgement of his message that she'd retrieved upon landing, but she just didn't have it in her. She felt raw, stretched thin. A couple of times during the plane flight she found herself crying again, without conscious thought or even an awareness of sadness; her mind completely blank and dampness on her cheeks, cool and sudden.

Her sandwich came and it was surprisingly good – heirloom tomatoes, fresh aioli, red leaf lettuce and thick, chewy bacon between slices of dense wheat toast. A nice little pile of waffle-cut fries on the side. Ice water, beads of condensate trailing down the outside of the glass, paper thin slice of lemon bobbing within. She surrendered to animal comfort.

The cable channels were full of war talk. She couldn't bear it and settled on a pay-per-view, title forgotten as soon as it left the screen, Angelina Jolie as some kind of FBI profiler. Lori had it figured out in the first fifteen minutes and was mildly annoyed that everybody in the movie was dumber than the audience. She couldn't take her eyes off Angelina's lips. They were huge, full of strange fissures and wrinkles, twin monuments to collagen, a screen presence in their own right. It looked like she'd gone three rounds with Sugar Ray Leonard. Why would anyone *do* that to themselves?

She fell asleep before the movie ended, woke up in the middle of the night to the LodgeNet logo and lounge jazz. She brushed her teeth, turned off the lights and TV, pulled the thick dark drapes over the window, and crawled under the covers.

She awoke slowly, rising through tenebrous threads of a dream that faded from her consciousness like a Polaroid print in reverse, shapes losing hold, contrast melting into whiteness. Her father was in the dream, and Ross, and a baby with wide blue eyes and chubby hands; soon even those details were gone.

She looked over at the clock on the bedside table. 10:48. Her head hurt, a dull, pre-migraine ache, and she felt slightly nauseous.

That's all I need, she thought. About once a year she got decked by a bad migraine – eight to twelve hours of nausea and headsplitting pain. She'd tried sumatriptan injections and that worked pretty well, but she hated needles so much that she'd almost rather pull the shades and stay in bed for the ride. You didn't have to shoot the new stuff, but by the time she got through to a doctor and got a prescription called into a local pharmacy it would almost be over. If she caught it early enough, Excedrin and lots of hard exercise seemed to head it off.

She rooted through her toiletries bag, found a foil pack with two Excedrin. She chased the pills with two full glasses of water, put on her workout clothes, tucked the card key in her waistband, and left the room.

The fitness center was on the third floor. She shared the small elevator with a very well-dressed elderly woman reeking of perfume. Lori tried to hold her breath as the elevator stopped twice more to let on passengers. It seemed to take forever and Lori felt her temples throbbing.

She got out at her floor and breathed deeply to try to clear her head. She followed the signs to the fitness center, slipped her key card into the lock, and entered a small room crowded with exercise bikes and treadmills, free weights and benches, and a few mats scattered about the floor. A television tuned to CNN hung from the ceiling.

She did a half hour on the bike, getting herself up near the zone, and moved to the mats. She worked up through the katas – Seisan, Seiuchin, Kusanku, Sunsu – hard

style, her moves explosive and focused. A couple of people came in for short workouts and left. Lori barely noticed. By the time she was done she was soaking wet, shorts and shirt clinging to her like a second skin. She felt alert and clear-headed, mildly euphoric from the workout, her incipient migraine gone. She returned to her room. Ross had called her on the cell and left a brief message. She tried to call him back and got his voicemail.

“Me,” she said, and hung up.

She showered, changed, and went downstairs to the Lexx Bistro just off the hotel lobby, a dimly lit café with chrome and smoked glass décor and Kraftwerk on the sound system. She took a table near the back, ordered granola, yogurt, fruit and coffee.

She got out a pen and steno pad and placed her cell phone on the table. Time to get organized. First she'd try Annie again, let her know she was in town. Then Spiral, check in, see if she couldn't get a little more out of him about Annie's state of mind. Then Ross. It had been less than twenty four hours since they'd last spoken, phone tag since then, but Lori needed to stay current with him. She felt the weight of events recent and impending like the gravitational pull from a black hole: massive, unseen. Forces were in motion, wheels turning in the Big Machine.

If she didn't hook up with Annie by phone, she'd go down to the Village and try knocking on her door, maybe camp out at a café with a view of the entrance. She felt a little strange about that, Lori the stalker, but she didn't know what else to do. Now that she was here two facts emerged from the blur of preparation and transit. One, Annie appeared to be AWOL, along with Lori's unborn baby. Two, Lori's sole purpose in being in New York was to find them.

Her mental state cycled between anger at Annie and concern for the baby, two sides of the same coin minted from raw fear that this whole thing, this exercise in hope, was coming completely undone.

If she still couldn't find Annie today, she'd have to go



at it from another angle. She remembered Annie saying something about an ex-boyfriend who was in a band.

## 24.

Sanchez's apartment smelled faintly of garbage. The dishes in the sink had been there for days and two D'Agostino's bags full of trash leaned precariously against the cabinet underneath the sink. The roaches, reckless and jaded, had stopped fleeing for cover every time he stirred.

He didn't care. He was so relieved to be home he'd almost cried when he staggered in the door after the beating. It seemed like a lifetime ago although it had only been a couple of days. He'd barely left the couch since then, just enough to choke down Cap'n Crunch and cook smack. His hand still hurt like a bastard and he hoped like hell he was going to be able to play. *Tango* had a gig opening for *Tapioca Buckshot* at the Latex Lounge on West 28th that night, coming on at midnight. The Latex had been a pretty serious S&M scene at one time, Dungeons and Dragons without the Dragons as Robbie liked to say, but that shit had practically gone mainstream and now the roots of the place were barely recognizable, straight men and women mixing with the leather boys. There was even a kitchen that served nachos, buffalo wings, potato skins. It was a good gig, a mid-tier niche in the very Darwinian New York club gig food chain.

He still had a small window in time before he would have to start actively avoiding Donnie and the Russians. He wondered how the hell he was going to make a living. All

they had to do was pick up the paper or go online – to Tango’s fucking *website* for Christ’s sake – to find exactly where he would be on any given evening.

He sat on the couch and picked up the Fender fretless, worked through a few licks. Fortunately it was his right hand that got smashed up, not his fret hand. He could play. It hurt like hell, his attack was weak, and it sounded like shit, but he could play.

He had to do something about Annie. He picked up the phone, mildly surprised that he still got a dial tone, punched her speed-dial number and got her machine.

“Annie, this is Sanchez. Call me.”

This won’t do, he thought. We could play phone tag all week long and never connect. Besides, she had Caller ID and if she didn’t want to talk to him she’d just let voicemail pick up.

Sanchez was going to have to get aggressive. He wasn’t sure that that meant exactly, but he was pretty sure it didn’t mean sitting around his apartment with his thumb up his ass waiting for something to happen.

Time to pull his shit together. He was dog tired even though he’d practically done nothing but sleep the last two days. He wanted nothing more than about twelve hours more, but that wasn’t going to happen. He fixed, just enough to straighten himself out, and put some edge on with a couple of lines of coke.

He took a hot shower, head down and both hands braced against the tile walls, the water running off his neck. He didn’t want to look at what might be swirling down the drain; imagined blood, filth, other parts of himself dissolving away and being swept out to sea.

Sanchez felt like a stranger was inhabiting his body and he wondered how he had become the person he was, whether it had happened gradually over time or if he had succumbed to some sudden transformation, the nature of which he couldn’t comprehend.

Abruptly, he slammed his head against the shower

wall. The sharp explosion of pain brought focus, and with focus a kind of relief.

He dried himself off, got dressed, and left the apartment. About halfway down the stairs he remembered his piece. He paused, staring out the window into the airshaft, empty of thought. He turned around and went back upstairs, let himself back into his apartment, and got the gun. Its sharp feel pressing against the small of his back was a mental anchor.

He walked over to the West Village, cutting through Washington Square Park. It was late afternoon, the sun warm and golden. A small crowd was gathered around the chess tables near the west end of the park.

Sanchez walked quickly, playing versions of the conversation in his head.

*Annie, please, they'll kill me.*

No fucking way. He wasn't going to pull his ass out of a sling by being a pussy.

*Annie, you know this is the right thing. How can you settle for twenty when you can get a hundred? Well, fifty after we split.*

Shit, an extra thirty K on top of the twenty she was getting anyway didn't really sound like it would be enough to turn her around. They'd have to up the ante, maybe two hundred K. In any case, persuasion by reason alone wasn't going to cut any ice. That time had come and gone.

He'd pull the piece. Not wave it around or point it at her or anything, just slip it out from his pants and hold it so she could see it, so she'd know they were at a whole new level.

*Annie, it's time. Or maybe something like, Annie, it's time to get serious here. Or just, time to get serious. Yeah, time to get serious.* Showing her the piece.

A middle-aged guy in gray pinstripe stared at him as he rushed past and he realized he'd spoken out loud.

"Time to get serious," he said again.

He arrived at Annie's building and stepped into the foyer. The buzzer hadn't worked for months, but there was a

trick he knew. He leaned on the inner door with his shoulder and grabbed the door handle, giving it a sudden sharp yank. He was in.

He took the stairs two at a time, slowing when he neared Annie's landing. He walked quietly to her door and stood still, listening, for about a minute. There were random stirrings and television snippets from several other apartments, but nothing coming out of Annie's.

The trick he'd pulled to get into the building wouldn't work here. Like most New Yorkers, Annie had an inordinate fondness for locks. In addition to the regular door lock, she had two deadbolts and a police lock. In spite of intermittent pressure on Sanchez's part, she'd never given him her keys.

He pounded on the door with a closed fist, waited, pounded again.

Annie knew without getting up that it was Sanchez.

"Who is it?"

"Annie, open the fucking door."

Bingo.

Kicking the door now, rattling the police lock.

"Open. The Fucking. Door."

She looked through the peephole. Sanchez had come home beaten up once, mugged for pocket change on Avenue B, but it was nothing like this. His lower lip was swollen to twice its normal size, a cut over his left eye still oozed blood, and various lesser abrasions and contusions covered his face, which looked like a single mottled bruise, swollen and pulpy.

"What the hell happened to you?"

He paused, confused for a second.

"Oh, my face. Yeah, it's bad. I'm really in the shit this time. Please, we need to talk."

He paused, and she felt her resolve waver, responding to that hurt puppy thing, another familiar Sanchez modality.

Then he pounded on the door with his fist again.

"Just let me the fuck in, will you?"

Fuck this, she thought. No way.

“You have to leave, Sanchez.”

He started kicking the door again, chips of paint flying off the frame. The locks would hold easily, but she wasn’t sure about the door itself.

“I’m calling 911, Sanchez – I’m dialing it now.”

She picked up the phone, held it with a shaking hand as if he could see it.

The kicking stopped.

“Annie – ”

“Go, Sanchez. Go *now*.”

“Annie – ”

“I’m dialing.”

“*Fuck*.” One final kick, then she heard his footsteps receding down the hall.

She looked out the peephole. Nothing.

Right, she thought. So now I’m supposed to open the door and look around. I don’t think so.

She went to the window. After a minute, she saw him walk out of the building entrance. He stopped next to a cluster of overflowing garbage cans, turned around and looked up at her, waved.

She flipped him off and closed the blinds.

Her heart was racing. Sweat beaded her forehead. She badly wanted a cigarette. She stood there in the middle of the room, hands resting on her rounded belly, breathing, *breathing*. Then, hands still shaking, she called Greta.

Sanchez crossed the street to Niko’s Coffee Shop, seated himself at a booth with a good view of Annie’s entrance, and ordered a slice of peach pie and coffee.

He added three packets of sugar to the coffee, stirring slowly, watching it slosh thickly in the cup. He teased the glutinous filling out from inside the crust, eating it all in three forkfuls, washing it down with hot sweet coffee. He ordered another slice of pie and settled in for a wait.

Annie packed lightly and quickly – a small duffel with

a few changes of clothes, toiletries, a sweater for the nights; a shoulder bag with her Discman and a small selection of punk, classical, and bebop CD's in paper sleeves, a small notebook, a collection of short stories by Paul Bowles. She didn't expect to be gone more than a few days. By that time Sanchez will have calmed down or completely self-destructed. Then she'd come back and get right with Lori.

She took a final look around her small apartment. Her gaze lingered on the phone.

"God damn it," she muttered.

She picked up the phone, dialed 411, and got the number for the W.

"Lori Williamson, please."

The phone rang six times and switched over to voicemail. Annie hesitated, then hung up without saying anything. The message light blinked persistently. She stared at it for a couple of seconds, chewing on her lower lip. *Fuck it.* She took a final look around the small apartment – windows shut, appliances off – and she picked up her bags and left.

She went down to the basement, dark and stinking of mildew and catshit, through the furnace room, and out the back way.

## 25.

Ross decided on Blowfish for the meeting with the Microsoft guy. Down at the Berkeley marina, surrounded by water on three sides and situated so they could watch the fog come in through the Golden Gate and creep towards them like an animate wall of cotton, it seemed rife with metaphor.

It was late afternoon and the place was quiet, poised between the lunch rush and the happy hour crowds from the University and the Emeryville infotech ghetto. Ross and Doctor Bob arrived fifteen minutes early and got a corner table, floor-to ceiling windows meeting at right angles providing the illusion that they were perched on a small spit of carpet in the middle of the Bay.

“He didn’t say anything else?” Doctor Bob asked.

Ross shook his head. “I was flat on my ass, still trying to clear my head. He just said he’d heard about Tesseract, didn’t say from where, and wanted to meet. I mean, he’s a bizdev guy in their Server Strategy division. It’s gotta be an acquisition play. If the Borg were interested in partnering, going out with a Windows-based gateway offering, I think we would have heard from their Professional Services organization first.”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe. Who the fuck knows? It’s like Jason trying to figure out Zeus. The Gods work in mysterious



ways.”

“Their wonders to perform. I’m not gonna work for Microsoft.”

The push technology company Doctor Bob had bankrolled was a victim of the kind of business practices that had made Microsoft and the United States Department of Justice such close acquaintances. They had a great business model, had slammed out a few solid prototypes, and were starting to line up clients. Microsoft bullied the clients into bailing, waited a few months, then bought the company at pennies to the dollar just to shut it down. It was a pattern Microsoft repeated so often, industry insiders referred to it as getting Microslimed.

“Nobody in the Posse does. *I* don’t. But we have to hear what they have to say. What I don’t want to do is shut them off at this meeting. If nothing else, maybe we can use their interest as leverage with someone else. You know, ‘Hey, Microsoft is making an acquisition play – we can’t hold ‘em off forever.’ So no matter what you hear, nod and smile, scratch your chin and say something like, ‘I like the approach in theory – rendering it operational depends on a confluence of tactics and strategy.’”

Doctor Bob chuckled. “Man, I love techno-biz babble. You have to use words like ‘synergy’ and ‘rationalize’ a lot. In fact – okay, here’s the code. We’re gonna have to communicate with each other under the radar. If one of us thinks the guy just said something bogus or suspicious, use the word ‘synergy’ in the next sentence. If one of us wants the other to go bad cop on him, use ‘rationalize.’”

“Good, good. If we want tip each other off that we’re gonna say something deliberately false or misleading, say ‘touchpoints.’”

“Yeah. Another good tactic is the change-up. If one of us wants the other to take the conversation on a hard left, say ‘leverage.’”

“All right, so here’s the mapping. Bullshit detector: synergy. Launch an attack: rationalize. Misdirection: touch-

points. Change-up: leverage.”

“Sounds good.”

They sat back, sipping their drinks, Doctor Bob working a virgin margarita, Ross an Evian. A waitress materialized with a bowl of unshelled peanuts. Doctor Bob started working through the bowl and soon a messy pile of shells and peanut skins was spilling out onto the table. On the sound system, Kenny G was doing horrible things to *Killing Me Softly*.

There was a loud *thump* and the huge glass window behind Ross vibrated. A seagull veered erratically away and made an unsteady landing on a pile of rotting timber jutting from the water.

“Signs and portents,” Doctor Bob said.

“He doesn’t like Kenny G either.”

“Hey, there’s our boy.”

A man on the early side of middle age was talking with the hostess and looking out across the dining room floor. Impeccably dressed down in a jeans and Izod motif, he exuded an ebullient, smarmy confidence as his gaze swept the room. His eyes latched onto Ross and Doctor Bob and he practically bounded across the expanse of carpet to greet them.

Ross and Doctor Bob stood up. Hands were shaken all around, business cards exchanged.

“Doctor Sanskrit,” Warner said, after they sat down. “I’m personally very interested in the transition from humanities to high technology. You were on the faculty at Harvard in the Philosophy department?”

Letting them know he’d done his homework. Ross already hated him.

“Actually, Storm, I got my doctorate from Harvard. I was faculty at M.I.T.’s Media Lab for a year before I jumped ship into the private sector.”

“Yeah, those tenure track appointments can be really brutal.”

“You have no idea...” Letting the implied contin-

uation – *what you're talking about* – hang in the air above the table.

*Man, thirty seconds and already the gloves are off*, Ross thought. *This is gonna be good.*

“Well, industry and academia certainly leverage one another in interesting ways,” Ross said.

“I understand Microsoft is making Dick Tracy watches these days,” Doctor Bob said.

“Funny you should mention that. Let me show you something.” Warner pulled back the sleeve of his calfskin Windows XP World Tour baseball jacket to reveal an artifact the size of a hockey puck strapped to his wrist.

“This is a cell phone, MP3 player, FM radio, three megapixel digital camera, video camera, voice recorder, PDA, GPS device, electronic car key, and a remote for my home TV, stereo, and DVD player. Oh, and a watch! It’s a prototype, won’t be available commercially for six months or so. Say cheese.”

He held the thing up in front of Doctor Bob’s face and pressed one of the many buttons sprouting around its circumference. Doctor Bob’s laconic features appeared on the LCD screen, frozen in a mild sneer. In spite of himself, Ross felt a stirring of technolust.

“Very impressive. Palm OS?” Doctor Bob asked.

“Windows CE,” Warner replied with a straight face.

“So, Mr. Warner – ” Ross said.

“Storm.”

“Storm. Maybe you can tell us why you called.”

“Yes I can. A venture firm we’ve done a lot of work with told me that you’re developing some interesting gateway technology. Since that market is going south faster than a BU co-ed on spring break, I thought we might be able to help each other. The next release of Windows is going to incorporate pretty much every feature in Anaconda – ”

Ross and Doctor Bob exchanged glances. The guy had *really* done his homework. Tesseract had all their customers sign a very tight NDA. Even *they* didn’t know the

product code names. Ross racked his brain trying to figure out which of the ratfuck VC firms they'd spoken to was in bed with the Borg. Problem was, they all were.

"— but you could save us some development cycles and yourselves some grief and walk away with a nice little piece of change for the effort you've put in. What kind of valuation are you looking at?"

"You have to account for recent customer touch-points we've acquired," Ross said. "We're looking at eleven, twelve million."

Warner didn't say anything for a few seconds. He let his eyes wander around the room.

"You know, when I was a student at Cal this place was a comedy club," he said, smiling thinly.

"You've got two patents, which is pretty good," he continued. "Four provisional patent applications, which are worth exactly nothing. Your customers include three porn sites, a Texas Hold 'Em parlor run by the Choctaw Indian tribe from a co-lo in the Virgin Islands, an online ice cream store, and the city of Bismarck, North Dakota."

He paused.

"Eleven million," he said, shaking his head, looking directly at Ross now. "Look, I'm trying to do you guys a favor here and you're playing games with me. I could go five hundred K. I'd be willing to throw in a six month contract for you and your friend here to help with the integration."

Doctor Bob snorted.

*Fuck this*, Ross thought.

"I appreciate your interest," Ross said. "But I think we're going to pass."

"This may be your last chance to pull this dog out of a tailspin. You've got — what? Two months of runway? The closer you get to lights out, the faster your valuation's gonna crater. In fact...now we're looking at four ninety."

"I can't believe this guy," Doctor Bob said.

"Four eighty," Warner said. "Tick tock, tick tock."

"Okay, you've made your point," Ross said. "We'll

talk it over and get back to you.”

Warner stood up, shook Ross’ hand. “Don’t take too long.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Doctor Bob said.

“Four seventy,” Warner said. “Call me,” he said to Ross, getting up from the table.

“You should stay for the *fugu*,” Doctor Bob said.

Warner ignored him. His gait had a cheerful bounce as he crossed the room.

“I think he likes you,” Ross said.

When Ross returned to the office, there were two voicemails waiting for him. The first was from Lori, just checking in, no news. He played it over to listen to her voice for subtext, trying to suss out her state of mind. She sounded fairly solid. He’d call her back later, see what was going on in New York.

The other message was from Warner.

- Ross. Storm Warner here. That didn’t go as well as I would have liked. I know Sanskrit has some history with my firm and it may cloud his judgment about this transaction. I want to impress upon you the gravity of your situation. A friendly acquisition is really the only way for you to come out of this on your feet and with your relationships with your investors relatively intact. We’d love to have your business expertise on board and could cut a very generous contract, or find a permanent role for you in our San Francisco office if you were so inclined. Or Redmond, for that matter. You need to start thinking about how it’s going to look for you two or three years out. Steering a company towards a successful Microsoft acquisition is a highly leverageable career milestone. Steering a company into a brick wall at seventy miles an hour is career-limiting, no matter how you look at it. Think it over and give me a call. Just you this time.

## 26.

Lori called Annie and got her answering machine.

- Annie, this is Lori. I'm at the W up on Lex and Forty Ninth. I – I don't know what's going on. I need to talk to you. Please call me.

She called Doctor Spiral's office and left a message asking for a callback. Tried Ross again, got his voicemail. She left a brief, economical message. I'm okay, still haven't connected with Annie. Call when you can.

She didn't feel as collected as she sounded. She kept bouncing back and forth between two poles: on the one hand wanting to stay connected with Ross, stay current, get strength from their relationship, on the other, wanting to push him away so she could find the strength within herself. It sounded so pop psych when she thought it through, and she cringed at the thought of turning into a hand wringing caricature of a yuppie California boomer so dependent on abstract therapy-speak that she never actually dealt with anything.

It was real, though, lean or stand up straight. She wanted it both ways and didn't quite know what to do with that.

She decided to walk down to the West Village. She

did the calculation in her head – at twenty short blocks and ten long to the mile, Forty Ninth Street down to Eighth then crosstown five blocks or so came out to about two and a half miles.

It was a nice enough day and the walk would give her time to figure out what she was going to say to Annie when she finally hooked up. With a little distance from home and no other distractions, she was becoming aware just how angry and frightened she was. It was catching up with her slowly, seeping into her consciousness and she was becoming sick with it. What she really wanted to do was grab Annie by the shoulders and shake her, scream *what the fuck are you doing* right in her face, but that wouldn't help anything. Somebody was going to have to be the grownup. Annie was just a kid after all, and it sounded like she'd been having boyfriend trouble.

She walked south on Lexington Avenue, keeping a brisk pace. Before she knew it, she was coming up on Gramercy Park. Surrounded by high fences, nearly empty of people, the park looked tidy and hermetic, the encircling brownstones stately and clean. It was an alternate New York, a Platonic cityscape. It gave her the creeps.

She walked west a block to Park Avenue South, then down to Union Square. She got a can of root beer from a hot dog vendor and sat on a bench near the north end of the park. The number of pigeons was alarming.

She was pretty close to Annie's now, about a fifteen minute walk, and she was nervous. Having spent about a decade in the corporate law swamps, Lori wasn't conflict-averse, but this was different. She was confused about how she was supposed to be with Annie, do the big sister thing, something more maternal, or maybe they should just be more like peers, girlfriends. In their interactions for the better part of the last year, Annie didn't give up too many cues.

Two cop cars careened south on Broadway, running through red lights with sirens blaring. A red and white paramedic van followed shortly after. A few pedestrians

looked up with mild curiosity and continued about their business.

Lori realized she hadn't given a lot of thought to the power relationship that existed between her and Annie, had blithely ignored it, in fact, assuming that it just wouldn't come into play. But here I am, she thought, paying this kid to have my baby. How desperate do you have to be to sign up for that? Lori knew one side of the equation, had lived it for years, but the Annie side was a complete blank. She felt a tug of raw emotion that could have been empathy or embarrassment. And what did Annie actually think of her? She didn't know that either.

But she figured she'd better start thinking about some of that stuff. Unless Annie was actually hurt or ill, the AWOL thing was a power grab, plain and simple.

Working it through like that, Lori was oddly comforted. Annie actually deserved a little empowerment under the circumstances. Lori promised herself that once they got through this current weirdness and re-established some rules of engagement, Lori would pay better attention to the dynamics. Well, okay, and better attention to Annie.

She threw away the empty can and walked the rest of the way to Annie's place. She'd never actually been there, even though she and Ross had spent a lot of time with Annie before and after the procedure. Annie always met them at the hospital or the hotel. They'd go out to a meal or for coffee after. It was always a little awkward between the three of them, nobody knowing what to say. Annie had given them a pretty thorough personal history, but they still didn't feel like they knew her very well and neither of them worked very hard to check her story.

They'd been so desperate. Their sadness around fertility was itself almost a third family member, demanding constant attention. Ross was trying to get Tesseract off the ground and that was his escape. Lori, not one for indirection or sublimation, pretty much put it right out there. It made for a bad dynamic between them, that push-pull thing again, and



more than once Lori wondered if the marriage would survive.

After their third IVF failure, they were so emotionally wrung out they could barely talk to each other for two weeks. Late one evening they made a listless, impulsive decision on a Caribbean cruise to try to unwind and help each other regroup. It was pretty much the worst vacation Lori had ever taken. St. Thomas, Dominica, Barbados, Aruba – she spent most of the time in the cabin with Ross stalking the decks talking on his cell phone. Finally, the night before they were due back in San Juan, the two of them sitting in big Adirondack chairs on the upper deck watching the sun hover low over the water, a rippling band of gold fire dividing the sea, Ross looked over at her and said, “This is fucked up. What are we gonna do?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said.

It wasn’t much, but it a start. It was as if they’d been pulling slowly apart, had reached the elastic limit of whatever it was that held them together, and now it had to either snap asunder or reassert itself.

When they got back home they found an adoption attorney through Lori’s professional network. They day after they wrote him a fat retainer check, a friend of Lori’s IM’ed her a link to Annie’s ad in SurrogateMom.com. They’d talked about going down this road before, but not since their third strike-out. Now, through the filter of defeat, it didn’t seem so bad. They both liked the way Annie looked in her picture, kind of lean and tough but with laugh-lines around the eyes. Her ad had a dry, direct appeal.

### *UTERUS FOR RENT*

*Furnished efficiency ready for tiny tenant.*

*9-month sublet.*

*No view.*

Annie’s building was a little old, a little shabby, but not too out of place in the upscale Bohemia of the West Village. Lori stepped into the small foyer, looked up DAY on

the directory next to the security phone, and punched in the code. No answer. She punched it in again, waited, nothing.

There were a couple of coffee shops across the street with a good view of the entrance to Annie's building, a retro Greek ptomaine palace and a Starbucks. Feeling a little like a stalker, Lori chose the Starbucks, got herself a cappuccino and a scone and seated herself at a window table.

## 27.

Ross didn't tell Doctor Bob about the follow-up call from Warner. He left the office early, nodding to Gina and hustling head down past the Pit as if he was late for an important meeting.

He got his car, badged himself out of the garage, put a *Thelonius Monster* disc in the player and cranked up the volume, avoiding the freeway, driving slowly through the Emeryville warehouse district, the marginal residential blocks interspersed with corporate outposts, up through North Oakland and into Berkeley. When he got to Oxford Street on the west border of the U.C. campus, he pulled over, turned off the engine but not the power, closed his eyes, and let the music wash through him.

He took his cell phone out of his jacket pocket and put it on the passenger seat. It would be so easy – pick up the phone and cut a deal. End the bullshit. No more worries.

He reached for the phone, brought it to his face, pushed a button. The handset chirped. “Lori,” he said, and brought the phone to his ear. She answered on the first ring.

- Hey.
- Hey, finally. How's it going? I've been trying to get through.
- Yeah, me too. I can't believe it's only been a day

since we talked. A lot's happened.

- You find Annie?

- No. I'm sitting in a Starfucks right across the street from her apartment building. I feel like a stalker. I've left a couple of messages, haven't heard a thing. She's totally AWOL. It's really pissing me off.

- What are you gonna do?

- I don't know. Call the police, rule out the worst if I can. Maybe file a Missing Persons. See if I can find her ex-boyfriend. If that doesn't work, I know a guy lives in Brooklyn I used to use for research when I was at Pilsbury, sort of an investigator type. He can find anything.

- What are you gonna do when you find her?

- I don't know. I've been thinking about it all day and I still don't know. I mean, I'm just praying nothing's actually happened to her. If that's the case and she's just flaking on us, we have to deal with it, talk it through, something.

- It'll work out.

- Yeah.

There was a long silence. Ross felt like an idiot, mumbling platitudes. He didn't know what else to say. He wanted to talk about the Microsoft deal but didn't want to suck all the oxygen out of the conversation. He watched two students toss a frisbee back and forth on the green bordering the street. A dog, a big black Labrador, ran between them. Every now and then one of the kids tossed the frisbee to the dog and he snatched it out of the air with a graceful leap. Ross sighed, took a breath.

- We haven't talked about Irv, just been doing phone tag. Are you okay?

- Yeah, well...I'm getting a little distance from it. I really believe that it's not him, not really. But I still feel his hand there, you know? It's...creepy. Horrible.

I can't think about what we should do yet. I just can't.  
One thing at a time.

- Yeah.

- Yeah...

Another long silence.

- So what's going on that you're not telling me?

- Jesus Christ. Okay, well, I got a call from Microsoft yesterday. We met today, this asshole named Storm Warner and me and Doctor Bob.

- Storm Warner?

- Yeah — nice, huh? Basically, he wants to buy Tesseract to shut it down. He's talking a bullshit valuation, too, serious lowball, and he also wants me to screw the Posse and save my own ass. It would keep our cushion, though. And he offered me a job with the Evil Empire.

- Wow, that's so Faustian. I don't know. I guess you need to decide what's important.

- What do you think?

- Don't *even* put me there, Ross. I went along with the second on the house because I trust you. What do *you* think?

- I don't know what I think. I want to do what's right. For the people that trust me.

- You will. Listen, I love you. I'm gonna go.

- It's good to hear your voice. I love you too.

- Call me tomorrow.

- Will do.

She'd ended the conversation so abruptly, Ross felt like something had been pulled out of him. It felt a little like she was punishing him for asking for help. She was right, though. All he had to do was the right thing, to be true to his nature. Whatever that was.

He tossed the phone onto the seat. It bounced and

landed on the floor of the car with a solid sound. He rested his head on the steering wheel. He wanted to cry but couldn't. After a while, a small shudder passed through his upper body, then another, like a joyless orgasm. It would have to do.

Lori almost picked up the phone again to call Ross back. She felt vaguely ashamed at being so short with him, especially after how hard he'd tried to let her talk out her own stuff before bringing up his. It was really sweet of him, and she'd smacked him upside the head.

She shook her head, took another sip of her grande caramel macchiato, winced at the sugary intensity. They'd work it out later. She just couldn't deal, had absolutely no reserves.

A young woman stopped in front of Annie's building, rummaged around in her purse. Lori bolted upright, was halfway out the door before she realized it wasn't Annie. Feeling dejected and a little silly, she returned to her table.

When she was practicing law, Lori had picked up the habit of carrying around a small notebook, shirt pocket size, to collect random thoughts, phone numbers, names, addresses. She wasn't a technophobe at all, but she absolutely loathed Palm Pilots and Pocket PC's, preferring an unstructured, analog chaos that better reflected her thought processes to the dumb Cartesian smoothness with which PDA's infected information.

She had made a few notes during a recent phone conversation with Annie and she flipped through her notebook until she found them.

*boyfriend trouble .. Sanchez aka Bennet Fischer*  
*ex bf – sounds like she's still attached – ex ex?*  
*bass player – Dilaudid Tango*  
*Morphine on X (!!)*

There was a stack of newspapers on a table near the door. She found a *Village Voice* and checked the date to make sure it was current.

She brought it back to her table and flipped through until she found the entertainment section. Sure enough, three inches and two columns on the Latex Lounge, something called *Tapioca Buckshot* and in smaller font just below, *Special Guests: Dilaudid Tango*.

She felt her heart racing. Finally something to get her teeth into, something concrete. The ad said that Showtime was 11 PM. She called the club to confirm and got a very bored sounding guy who said it would be more like midnight at the earliest.

She ripped out the ad, folded it up and put it in her wallet, took a last look across the street at Annie's building, and got up from her table. She had a few hours to kill. She was a little hungry in spite of sugar-loading and hoped she could find a cheap, noisy place near NYU. She didn't want to talk to anybody, but she wanted to be around people, surrounded with light and sound, to harmlessly eavesdrop, brushing up against the lives of strangers.

For the rest of the way home, the cell phone stared at Ross from the floor of the car like an accusing eye. He wanted to call Lori back, but all he really wanted from her was comfort and affirmation and he figured she was carrying enough of a load. He thought of Warner's offer, nothing too shabby about being on a winning team for a change. Tried to imagine himself a small cog in the machinery of Empire, taking the BART into San Francisco every day to do his bit for world domination. Thought of what it would be like to have to explain himself to Doctor Bob and the Posse. Sorry, guys. Had to do it. Write when you find work.

Ross worried at the meaning of loyalty like a monkey with a coconut. He suspected that there was some intersection of values and obligation that was eluding him, a correct answer of Japanese simplicity. If he took Warner's offer, screwed the Posse, that would be loyal to Lori, his little proto-family, their future. Kind of. But he felt that the act of betrayal would poison him somehow and he wondered if he

didn't have some responsibility to his family to be...good, true, something like that. On the other hand, if he told Warner to eat shit and bark at the moon, which is what the smarmy little fuckstick deserved, and Tesseract slammed into the ground at high speed taking his house and whatever other slim margin the Williamson life raft had against survival, well, there it was. Not so good either. His head was full of big ungainly wooden jigsaw pieces that weren't fitting together well.

An early 90's Chevy Impala, navy blue with an impressive collection of dents, was parked in front of the house, a conspicuous anomaly in what was primarily a Volvo and BMW neighborhood. A shadow of dread flicked across his mind.

When Ross let himself into the house, *Stairway to Heaven*, the original Zeppelin version, was coming from the den, Irv's part of the house, loud enough so that the bass rattled the windows. The smell of reefer, faint but unmistakable, hung in the air, triggering a fleeting sense memory of a college dorm.

"Hello?" he called. No answer. Not surprising; the music was loud enough to muffle a gunshot. He walked through the living room, worry and irritation doing a tug-of-war in his head.

Irv's door was ajar. Ross pulled it open.

A woman of indeterminate age wearing nothing but a thong bikini bottom, black curly tresses cascading down her back only partially obscuring a tattoo just below her right shoulder blade of a half-eaten apple, was straddling Irv's naked torso, facing south and fellating him with obvious simulated gusto, rubbing her bottom in his face and saying, loudly enough to be heard over Jimmy Page's guitar, "Oh yeah, oh baby. Oh yeah, oh baby." Irv clutched her buttocks, burying his nose between her cheeks.

Ross stepped back from the doorway, pretty sure he hadn't been seen. On a scale from one to ten of things he didn't want to deal with, this was roughly an eleven.



He leaned against the wall, closed his eyes, and began counting to five. When he got to three, he asked himself what counting to five could possibly accomplish.

He went to the kitchen, got a quart of Häagen-Dazs strawberry out of the freezer and a large spoon from the silverware drawer, and dug in. *Stairway to Heaven* segued to *Misty Mountain Hop*. Ross sliced a blueberry bagel in half, put the pieces in the Toast-R-Oven, and got a plastic tub of shmear from the fridge. While he was spreading the bagel, *Hop* segued to *Four Sticks*. In the middle of the song, the volume suddenly decreased. Ross heard voices, laughter. It was time to meet Irv's new friend.

He shouted "hello" to warn them he was coming although it seemed that was a wasted effort. Both Irv and the woman were sitting upright on the sofa bed, leaning together in a comfy sprawl, naked and glistening with oil. Irv still sported an impressive erection.

"Hi, Ross," Irv said, apparently unsurprised. "This is Cinnamon. She's the salad manager at the Sizzler on San Pablo." He turned to Cinnamon. "My son-in-law," he added.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, holding out her hand. She looked to be in her mid-forties. Aside from her luxuriant mane of black hair, she was the kind of woman for whom the description "plain" had been coined as a kind euphemism.

Ross, knowing where the hand had likely been recently, pretended not to see it. "Likewise. Irv, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Irv nodded.

"Alone?" Ross said, after a few seconds.

Still tumescent, Irv grabbed a robe and followed Ross into the kitchen.

"Irv –"

"Goddamn Viagra is the best thing that ever happened to me. It's like a goddamn baseball bat."

"Irv, you can't bring hookers into this house."

"She's not a hooker. She's the salad manager at the

Sizzler.”

“You pay her, right?” Ross said. He’d noticed a small pile of twenties on the coffee table in the den.

“You know how much a salad manager at the Sizzler makes? Nobody could live on that.”

Ross closed his eyes and massaged his temples.

“Cinnamon could take care of that headache for you. She’s got incredible hands.”

“I’ll pass, thanks. Irv, look – ”

Irv faced him with a blank, hostile stare.

Ross was completely at a loss. “No dope in the house,” he said weakly.

Irv shook his head. “You know what your problem is, Ross? You’re a fucking pussy.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Exactly.” Irv turned and stalked out of the kitchen.

Ross took a bite of bagel and shmear. He thought of Doctor Bob, who saw his in-laws nearly every weekend and spoke of them with obvious affection. Catalogued some of his other married friends and what he knew of their extended families. Not one of them had an abusive, hypersexed, dope-smoking car thief with borderline personality disorder and incipient dementia living in their den. He wondered how he was going to work it out with Lori.

The music from the den cranked up again. More Zeppelin. Ross finished his bagel and put away the ice cream. He wondered where the hell Irv had met up with Cinnamon. He imagined him hovering over the salad bar at Sizzler’s, checking out the action. Nice working girl. She’d probably walk out of the house with both goddamn televisions and the home theater rig.

Well, he couldn’t afford to vet Irv’s hookers right now. There was just too much shit going down. Embrace denial and passive aggression. Hope for the best. He’d talk it over with Lori and they’d figure something out.

He went into the garage through the kitchen entrance, shut the door behind him, and sat down at his desk. He

jammed his laptop into the dock, booted up, leaned back, put his feet up and closed his eyes.

He tried again to imagine himself in some future state, having cut the deal with Microsoft. Eating dinner with Lori. Playing with ex vitro Spud. Running into Doctor Bob or Alpa or Dmitry, any of the Posse, at the Berkeley Farmer's Market or JavaOne or down in Santa Clara at the Churchill Club industry events. What's up. How you doing.

Fuck, he just couldn't do it. He actually *wanted* to, in a way. It would make things a lot simpler. But he didn't know who it would be that would be living his life afterwards. It wouldn't be him. He knew that much. It wouldn't be him.

*Warner*, he thought. *No – Storm.*

*Storm, I've thought about your offer and I just want to tell you to go fuck yourself.*

No, man. Keep the high road.

*Storm, you little prick.*

Come on.

Really, the thing to do here is make lemonade out of lemons. The Evil Empire wouldn't be making an offer at all if they weren't interested. Maybe leave the door open to turn them into a customer. That would also provide the kind of validation that the bloodsucking sons of bitches on Sand Hill Road were looking for.

He fished his cell phone out of his pocket and pulled Warner's number from the call log. Got his voice mail, of course.

- Storm, Ross Williamson from Tesseract. I've given your offer a lot of thought and I appreciate your interest, but I'm going to have to pass. If you want to engage with Tesseract as a customer, I can make that very attractive for you. We can work together for awhile, then maybe look at acquisition down the road, or a strategic investment in a later round. In any case, thanks again, and stay in touch.

His hands were shaking as he clicked off. Nothing like dancing with the devil in the pale moonlight. Not a bad performance, though. He'd probably get a message from Warner tomorrow saying something like "we'll crush you like a grape."

He felt like he needed to talk to Lori. He tried calling her cell and got her voicemail.

- Hey, it's me. Call me when you get a chance.

He opened up IM and saw that Doctor Bob was online.

**Ross94707: ?**

**Bobareebop: !**

**Ross94707: i just told msft to fuck off**

**Bobareebop: Good. Wonder what cheesebag's gonna do.**

**Ross94707: i was pretty nice about it actually. left a v conciliatory v-mail. thank you for your interest, maybe we can still be friends, that sort of thing.**

**Bobareebop: kumbaya**

**Ross94707: xactly**

**Bobareebop: someone's folding lord**

**Bobareebop: kumbaya**

**Bobareebop: doors closing lord**

**Ross94707: kumbaya**

**Ross94707: chapter eleven lord**

**Bobareebop: kumbaya**

**Ross94707: calling heaven lord**

**Bobareebop: kumbaya**

**Ross94707: rotflmao**

**Bobareebop: One of the things I've always liked about you**

**Ross94707: do tell**

**Bobareebop: Your charming naivete**

**Bobareebop: I mean, you probably did the right thing under the circumstance, keep the high road, etc**

**Bobareebop: But I \*know\* these people. Once they notice you at all you're pretty much toast. And if**

**you buck the program, fuggedaboutit.**

**Ross94707: we'll see**

**Bobareebop: Yes, we will**

## 28.

Annie Day, in transit, the chaos of Penn Station swirling around her. She bought a ticket to New London; from there, she'd catch the Block Island ferry. With an hour to kill, she got herself a hot dog and fries at the Nathan's kiosk in the waiting room.

A television mounted high on one wall, tuned permanently to CNN, displayed a succession of talking heads interspersed with footage from Iraq: burning vehicles, maps festooned with brightly colored arrows, earnest young men and women in desert cammie. She couldn't hear the sound, which was just as well.

The room was crowded, all the bench spots taken. She hadn't been in Penn Station for years; the last time she was here there were more homeless than travelers. They were everywhere, sprawled on the floor, the benches, sleeping bags spread out. It was like a decrepit Woodstock. She remembered something about a Giuliani crackdown. If there were any homeless left in Penn Station, they were posing successfully as citizens. Annie wondered where the ones who couldn't pose had gone.

She had mixed feelings about leaving. She needed to hole up and figure her shit out without having to deal with anybody. She was in flight mode, an animal response to Sanchez, to Lori, to her own confusion about the Spud,

unexamined. But she could imagine how freaked Lori was, recalled the cracking of her voice on the answering machine, could almost see her face tight with pain, and it both pushed her further away and made her want to pick up the phone, meet Lori at the W, fall apart in her arms.

Now *that* came right out of left field, picturing herself letting go, letting Lori step in and take over.

She shook her head. *No way*. She was going to have to power through this on her own. Maybe she'd call Lori from Block Island, let her know she was okay. She leaned back, felt the hard bench against her tailbone, rested her palm against her round belly. After a minute or so, she felt a hard kick.

*Good boy*, she thought.

Annie loved the smell of trains, oiled steel and carpet cleaner, the faint suggestion of ozone, not unpleasant. She settled into a window seat, pulled out the Bowles paperback but let it rest unopened on her lap as she watched first the station, then the urban Amtrak clutter of empty cars on sidings and forlorn, abandoned machines, fall away behind her. It was dusk, the shadows long and purple. The train passed rows of apartment buildings, clothes hanging on lines like semaphores, the train's rhythm a subtle tattoo that worked its way into her mind so that her foot began tapping in unconscious time.

The train was somewhat crowded, but not mobbed. An executive in gray flannel sitting across the aisle smiled at her. It looked like a feral leer. She looked away, opened her book, but still did not begin to read.

Spud was moving a lot, not kicking hard but restless, exploring his prison. She thought of him floating in briny stasis, his consciousness a dim, quickening spark gaining strength with each passing day. She hummed tunelessly, quiet enough so that nobody nearby could hear but certain that Spud could feel the music. He seemed to respond, quieting his movements as she crooned.

She regretted bailing on Lori, could imagine her

brittle anxiety, but she was so relieved to get away from Sanchez for a little while that she didn't care. Now that she was on her way out of town, she was acutely aware that he'd been living rent-free in her head for days and she didn't even know it. Screening calls to avoid him, hyper-vigilant when she went down to the corner grocery for a goddamn quart of juice. Enough already. He'd quiet down after a few days, she was pretty sure, especially when he realized she was serious about a big time out. She almost smiled to herself when she thought of the kidnapping scam. Man, you really know how to pick 'em, Annie girl.

She opened up the Bowles, read a story about a ruined monastery in a valley, slowly consumed over the years by the encroaching jungle. A spirit resided within the ruins and would hitchhike from time to time upon the consciousness of nearby creatures, seeing with their eyes, living through them. When exposed to the venal toxicity of human relationships it reacted as if it had eaten a bad clam. She could relate.

She dozed, the open book face down in her lap, a broken bird. Her dreams were full of moving shadows, bright sunlight glancing off chrome, missed meetings, vanished opportunities, loss. She awoke with a feeling of vague shame just as the train was pulling into New London.

She was very thirsty and got a bottled water from a machine in the train station. Several cabs were queued outside. She got into the first one and asked the Indian driver, who introduced himself as Guri, to take her to the Block Island ferry. Guri looked like he was about seventeen years old and spoke in a lilting, musical accent so thick it was almost impossible to navigate. He spent the entire time talking about Madonna. Did she like Madonna. What did she think of Madonna's latest album. Her early music. The Britney Spears kiss. Motherhood and a performing career. A boom box on the front passenger seat blared unremarkable, slick pop music, a female vocalist that Annie didn't recognize but assumed was Madonna.



Annie didn't give a rat's ass about Madonna, but Guri seemed like a nice kid, new to the country and completely lost, toasted, overrun by media culture. Annie wondered if all his passengers got the Madonna treatment or if there was something about her that inspired him.

The road followed the waterfront; loading cranes in haphazard light crouched over shipping containers like great metal beasts of prey. The ferry station appeared from around a curve in the frontage road, an antiseptic palace, bright lights and sharp shadows. The boat itself, moored next to a long pier, looked like it could sprout wings and take to the air. Annie expected something more like the Staten Island Ferry, pilings bright with shiny black grease and the air thick with diesel fumes.

She paid Guri, hefted her bags and walked into the terminal. She was just in time – the last boat of the day was leaving in fifteen minutes. She bought her ticket and boarded.

The main cabin was like a 747. There were only a few other passengers. Annie took her assigned seat and buckled herself in. Television screens every few rows all displayed CNN, more war stories. Soon, a video came on about the boat. Correct operation of seatbelts, location of emergency exits. Annie was mildly disappointed that there were no oxygen masks.

She surrendered to the rhythm of travel. Go, wait, move, wait, go. She had spoken to nobody except Guri for hours. She liked it a lot. No thinking required, just enough raw instinct to stay in the groove.

The boat motored slowly out into the open water. The lights of the ferry station and the industrial port area receded behind her. Then, the boat accelerated until it felt to Annie like they were skimming over the surface of the water. She dozed again and when she awoke, they were almost there. Block Island loomed nearby, a deeper darkness against the dark sea and sky, punctuated by occasional lights.

Several cabs were waiting for the boat and she took the first one, the driver this time a laconic, grizzled man on

the high side of sixty wearing a denim jacket and a Red Sox baseball cap.

The cab wove through a few blocks of retail, B&B's, restaurants, postcard cute. Annie tried to get a feel for the place but it looked impenetrable and generic. Suddenly, like the turning of a page, they left town behind, speeding down a narrow road, no moon, stunted trees arching half across the road illuminated briefly in the headlights like flash photographs. The houses here were set back from the road, most of them sparsely lit or not at all.

He took her to the last house on Bates Cove Road, a small weathered cottage with peeling paint. The ocean was nearby but unseen, a muttering, saline presence. She let herself into the house. It was small and sparsely furnished, smelling faintly of mildew. She loved it.

She was safe.

## 29.

After a couple of hours, Sanchez figured Annie must have bailed out the back way. There was a five o'clock meeting on St. Mark's Place that she went to a lot. Maybe he'd find her there. If nothing else, he could ask around, see if anyone knew anything. He wasn't sure exactly where it was, but it had to be a church or something. He'd find it.

Sure enough, just off Third, St. Mark's Episcopal. The big front doors were locked, but there was a side entrance down an alley. Inside, small handwritten signs – NA, with arrows – led him down a flight of stairs to a large low-ceilinged room, bare light bulbs in wire cages, uneven rows of folding chairs facing a single chair in front. A couple of card tables in the back of the room were loaded down with a large urn of coffee, stacks of styrofoam cups, and several packages of cookies, Chips Ahoy and Oreos.

He was a few minutes early and the room was half full. Most of the people didn't look any better than he figured he did, but he noticed a few people looking him over, giving him the eye. An older guy in a brown turtleneck came over and held out his hand.

"Welcome. I'm Joseph. You look like you came to the right place."

*Fuck off, loser*, Sanchez thought.

"Uh, yeah. Hi." He took the guy's hand. The skin felt

dry and papery. "Sandy."

*Jesus...Sandy? Where did that come from?* He hoped he could remember it.

The guy was looking him over closely, heavy eye contact, probably trying to suss out if he was high.

"You look like ten miles of bad road, son. How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay. I had a little accident."

"I'm sure you did. Let me introduce you around."

He grabbed Sanchez by the elbow and gently dragged him over to a group of people, mostly guys, standing near the coffee and cookies, smoking, shooting the breeze.

"Hey everybody, this is Sandy."

Joseph rattled off names that Sanchez forgot as soon as he heard. He nodded and tried to smile. He figured he was coming off as pretty strung out, but he didn't give a shit. It occurred to him that it was actually good cover. People coming here, especially first-timers, were *supposed* to be pretty strung out. He grabbed a double handful of cookies, three Oreos, three Chips Ahoy, and kept an eye open for Annie as the room filled.

These people might be recovering junkies, Sanchez thought, but they sure weren't worried about secondhand smoke. Lazy, drifting eddies hung in the air. Someone turned on a fan, which moved the smoke around a little, but it didn't help much.

Nobody made an announcement, but people started sitting down, the rows of rickety folding chairs filling up. Sanchez took a seat in the back where he could keep an eye on things. He was glad he did because right after a middle-aged Hispanic guy took the single chair in front of the room, the blonde bitch Annie had been talking with at the café on Bleecker showed up.

Sanchez hated her right off. Neck like a goddamn lizard, all wrinkles and ropy tendons, grim, thin-lipped expression like she had a baseball bat up her ass, and she was way overdressed for a Narcotics Anonymous meeting.

Sanchez would bet his eye teeth she'd know where Annie was.

The guy in front introduced himself as an addict. Everybody said hello, loud enough to peel paint. The guy started talking. Another fucking loser. Sanchez couldn't believe that people wasted their time listening to this shit day in day out. Daddy beat me. Mommy was a hooker. I used to be a 'banger in the South Bronx. Big fucking deal. His ears perked up when the guy started talking about a meth lab, but it burned down, so never mind. Okay, so now God tells him if he uses he's going to get a bolt of lightning up his ass. Higher fucking Power. Sanchez leaned back so he could feel the piece dig into his back. There's your Higher Power, bitch.

The guy finished his shtick and applause filled the room. Sanchez noticed a couple of people weeping openly. What was wrong with these idiots?

The meeting segued into the sharing part, the guy in front calling on people, see who could bore them all to death first. More bitching and whining. I lost my job but I didn't use. My girlfriend and I had a fight but I didn't use. Some asshole in front of me at the supermarket had eleven items in the eight item checkout lane but I didn't use. One guy said he slipped and smoked a little smack, Sanchez wanted to run up and kiss him.

Finally, it was over. They all joined hands in a big circle around the perimeter of the room and said the Lord's Prayer, which Sanchez thought was a hoot.

The old blonde bitch left right away. Sanchez warded off Joseph and his friends and followed her. She walked east on St. Mark's and made a right on Second, heading downtown. Sanchez hung back about a block, making sure she didn't see him. They passed the Arkady, open for business now. He looked in the window, saw a big basket of flowers in the middle of the bar.

He cut the distance to about a half a block, then a quarter, then closer still. He wanted to be ready. At Third she crossed the street and walked up the steps in front of a nice

looking brownstone. As she fumbled with her keys in the vestibule, Sanchez took the steps two at a time, slammed the door open and shoved her hard against the mailboxes. Eyes wide, she reached into her purse. Sanchez grabbed her hand, pried it open, and pulled away a tube of pepper spray.

"Bitch." He shoved her against the mailboxes again. Remembering the piece, he reached behind his back and pulled it out of his waistband.

"Let's go," he said. "Inside."

She looked at him uncomprehending, eyes blank with shock and fear.

"Inside," he said, waving the gun. "Let's go, let's go."

Hands trembling, she pulled her keys out of her purse and managed to get the inner door open. Sanchez shoved her through, took a last look outside, and followed, pocketing the pepper spray.

"Come on," he said. "Nobody's gonna get hurt. You know where we're going."

"What do you want?" she asked. "Here." Holding out her purse. "Take it. Money, credit cards."

Sanchez hit her on the side of her head with his closed fist. "Shut up. Keep going."

She staggered, caught her balance, led them to an apartment on the second floor.

She opened the door. Sanchez shoved her inside, followed close behind. He closed the deadbolt and police lock behind him.

The living room was very neat, sparsely furnished but with nice stuff. Walnut coffee table, subdued floral pattern couch, row of photos on the mantle above the gas fireplace.

He waved the gun toward the couch.

"Sit down," he said. "Get comfortable."

He stood in front of her, very close, the gun hanging loosely at his side.

"Where's Annie?"

Something clicked in her eyes and Sanchez knew she'd figured it out, who he was.

“Annie who?”

He brought the gun down across her face in a slashing arc, the barrel cutting her cheek and leaving a bright swath of blood.

“Don’t even try to fuck around with me on this. I know you know her, and I’m pretty sure you can tell me where she is. What I’m *really* sure of is that you’d like me to get the fuck out of your apartment, and the only way that’s going to happen is if you tell me what you know.”

“I don’t – ”

He pistol-whipped her again, holding the gun by the barrel this time and bringing the handle down hard across the side of her head.

“I could do this all night, lady. Where is she?”

It took awhile, but eventually she told him. He even got a spare set of keys for the Block Island place.

He found a lockbox in the bedroom closet, the key still in the lock. Stupid bitch. There was about three grand in crisp fifties and hundreds, some other papers. He pocketed the money. She’s not gonna need it, he thought, looking at her body sprawled on the couch. There was a lot of blood, more than he thought possible.

Sanchez washed his face and hands in the kitchen sink. The drain was slow, water rising rose pink in the white basin. There wasn’t much he could do about his shirt; red spatter patterns streaked and dotted his chest and stomach.

He went back to the bedroom and looked in the closet again. Unless she was a dyke, an old bitch like this usually had a guy or two hanging around to take out the garbage or change a fuse. Sure enough, hanging in the back, several dress shirts, stiff with starch and reeking of camphor. He chose a light blue Oxford. It was a couple of sizes too big, but that was okay. Sanchez wore it tails hanging out like they were doing these days, sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms, top button open. He looked in the mirror on the closet door. GQ, baby.

One last look around the apartment. Everything was

ship shape. He set out a quick couple of lines to steady his nerves, then he let himself out, making sure the door locked behind him.

He passed the Arkady on the way home and looked in the window again. It was fairly crowded, the night heating up. Most of the booths were full; a cluster of young men hovered around the pool table in back. He went inside. The place smelled of sawdust and beer.

They hadn't yet replaced the mirror; a plywood sheet stretched the length of the bar, framing rows of bottles. He took a seat at the bar near the flower arrangement. In front of the flowers was a small portrait photograph of the bartender he'd shot in a simple wooden frame. He was smiling; green wooded hill rose behind him. There was a box with a slit on top and a handwritten sign: For Michael's Family.

Michael. That was his name. Sanchez played back the scene – the brief argument, pulling the piece, the gun acting almost on its own as it fired, shattering the mirror. Then more shots, the hot gunsmoke smell, the sense of watching himself watching himself, running, running, the bright harsh street. Michael.

“Did you know him?”

“Excuse me?”

The bartender's wide, rough face hovered in front of Sanchez like a balloon.

“Did you know Michael?”

“Yeah,” Sanchez said. “Yeah, I knew him.” He nodded in the direction of the taps. “Draft.”

The bartender looked at Sanchez for a moment longer, then nodded and went to the taps. He drew a pint and set it in front of Sanchez.

“On the house,” he said.

Sanchez nodded, picked up the glass, and drained half of it in one long gulp. Michael was ancient history. Fuck Michael. He was trying not to think about the bitch, whatever her name was, Gretchen, Greta, Grendel. Something with a G. She'd said her name at the NA meeting. It got pretty ugly



near the end – crying, bleeding, Sanchez pistol-whipping her just to shut her up.

He finished his draft and got out of there.

The phone was ringing when he got home. He ran to pick it up.

- Sanchez, Robbie. What the fuck is wrong with you, man? You missed sound check at the Latex. Five o'clock. I gotta tell you, Blake the Snake was pretty pissed. We had to set up without you. You're not, like, Sting or something, Holmes, just show up with your bass at showtime and play. Shit.

- I'm sorry, man. I've had a bad flu. Stomach poisoning. Bad clams. I'll talk to Blake.

- You're still gonna make the gig, right?

- Oh sure, yeah. I – I caught my hand in a taxi door the other day. Hurts like hell, but I can still play. I'll be there.

- Jesus Christ. Just show up at ten thirty or so, we'll get levels.

- Right.

- Later.

He felt a sharp pain in his stomach and put his hand there. He felt like he was unraveling, spinning off into uncharted territory. Things were getting way too complicated. He needed to find Annie. Annie was the key.

How the fuck was he going to get to Block Island? He wasn't even sure where it was.

He set up a couple of lines to straighten himself out. The familiar ritual was comforting.

Block Island. He booted up his laptop, hoping Rafa next door had his wireless access point turned on. Sure enough, a nice strong signal. Thank you, Raf.

He typed Block Island in the search widget and started scrolling through the results. Pretty soon, he had it all figured out. The guys in *Tango* would never forgive him, but

he was way past that.

## 30.

Lori headed vaguely South and East, her homing instincts pulling her towards the cloud of restaurants and coffee houses surrounding NYU.

She was weary with disappointment and concern, exhilarated that she had a plan of action. Hovering between those poles, yielding to neither. She didn't know what kind of reception she'd get with Sanchez; Annie had mentioned that they were pretty much on the outs. But she didn't have much choice.

She wondered how much Sanchez knew about their situation, how she should introduce herself, what Annie had said about her. There you go again, she said. She kept poking at her mental model of the relationship with Annie, hoping that the irritation would yield some kind of information, a pearl of insight. Because actually, there wasn't much more to the relationship than a mental model. They barely knew each other, had spent maybe a total of eight hours together all told. The stakes were so high, the foundation upon which they rested so flimsy. She felt dizzy for a moment and had to steady herself against a lamppost.

She recovered quickly and continued walking, slowly, feeling the night air on her face, breathing it into her lungs. Not too cold; winter's bite still apparent, but fading. The street was alive with that singular New York cross-section of

the well-to-do, the lost, the lame. Even at this hour, sidewalk vendors were hawking purses, jewelry, clothing. Jazz spilled from a club on 4th Street. A grimy Italian, pinched face beneath a battered Yankees hat, sold chestnuts that smelled like burnt hair from a wheeled cart.

She felt pressure on her left breast, the shape of a hand. Every time she thought of her father she pushed the thought away. She'd have to get him out of the house. This apparent manifestation of advancing dementia was something she just couldn't deal with.

She tried to imagine what he was thinking when he did it. Did he know her? Or was it just a primal urge without reason, synapses misfiring, wreaking havoc with impulse control, crumbling the id?

She found herself in front of Penne Lane on Macdougall Street. Penne Lane, Jesus Christ. The East Village was just like the Haight, a counter-culture flashpoint from another time drowning in mercantile cuteness. She looked through the window past the framed menu. About half full, mostly a college crowd. Red and white checked tablecloths, wax-encrusted Chianti bottle candle-holders. An outpost of the Cliché Preservation Society. Her stomach gave a small growl. She shrugged and pushed through the door.

She was seated next to a group of six twenty-somethings, grad students or newly minted yuppies, boisterous with alcohol and their frictionless, unblemished future.

Nearby, a middle-aged couple ate silently. She read a paperback while he gazed listlessly about the room. She looked again from the kids to the couple. Point A to Point B.

She shook her head. It was like someone else talking inside her sometimes, that negative shit. She'd read something in a pop psych article some years back, an acronym, HALT. Hungry. Angry. Lonely. Tired. If you found yourself spinning out, check the HALT inventory. She pretty much hit all four bullets right now, plus Desperate, Scared, and Fucked. FLAT...something. Shit, not enough vowels. Desperate,

Scared, Anxious. SAD FLAT. She was missing a letter somewhere, but she wasn't about to whip out her notebook and figure it out.

"Are you ready to order?"

The server, a woman in her twenties with big hoop earrings and a round, pleasant face, was standing in front of her, pen poised.

Lori scanned the menu, ordered the Bolognese and a glass of house red. She let herself drift in the current of conversation from the kids' table. Jobs, politics, art, war. Boyfriends, girlfriends. It was soothing and kept her from having to think about Annie Day, Sanchez, Irv and his hand on her boob, Ross and his corporate drama.

The pasta was very good and the wine had a welcome roughness. When she was done, she ordered a cannoli and a double cappuccino, and when they were gone she sat looking out the window, sated and blank. The kids had gone, the middle-aged couple now in quiet, earnest conversation, as if they'd been waiting for them to leave.

Lori ordered another capp, the place filling up again with the after-movie crowd. She looked at her watch. Ten-fifteen. The Latex Lounge was up past Chelsea in what used to be called Hell's Kitchen. It was more like Hell's Breakfast Nook with a Lovely View of the Hudson these days. Giuliani had done some good shit but he'd taken most of the honest terror out of city living and replaced it with marzipan. If she started walking now she'd get there just before showtime.

## 31.

Robbie and Blake were heads down at the bar, nursing beers and eating nachos. They didn't see Sanchez come in. Blake looked pissed. Robbie looked stoned. The Latex wasn't too crowded yet, still the safe-as-milk crowd, metrosexual mid-level executives and female office workers with strange hair and tats revealed by after-five attire. Whoever was behind the bar queuing up the music was in a serious 80's retro groove. As Sanchez made his way to the bar, *Thomas Dolby* segued to *Frankie Goes To Hollywood*.

He leaned his bass case against the bar between Robbie and Blake.

"Boys."

"Hey." Robbie signaled for another beer.

Blake looked incredulously at Sanchez.

"What in the holy fuck happened to you?"

Sanchez had forgotten that he looked like someone had tied him to the back of a car and driven from Battery Park to Grand Central.

"Oh, this." Pointing to his face. "Con Ed's ripping up the street in front of my building and I fell into a ditch. It's worse than it looks."

Blake kept staring.

"I mean, it looks worse than it is."

"Uh huh."

“Look, I’m really sorry I missed sound check. It’s been a really fucked up couple of days.”

Blake nodded, slightly mollified. “Just don’t make a fucking habit out of it.”

Blake carried the business end of *Dilandid Tango* pretty much single-handedly and never got tired of reminding the rest of them. He booked the gigs, negotiated the rates, set up their website, booked studio time for the demo and worked on the mix with the engineers. He owned the band truck, a battered white panel job that had once carried milk. He was also the only guy in *Tango* who wasn’t a heroin addict, which Sanchez figured should probably tell him something, but usually he didn’t worry about it. They’d agreed to go 40-30-30 on band revenues in favor of Blake to comp him for the extra work, and everybody seemed okay with that.

“Don’t worry about it.” Sanchez helped himself to the nachos. The bartender brought a bottle of Rolling Rock and he took a long pull. “Nice crowd. You bring some CD’s?”

“I talked to the bartender,” Robbie said. “He’ll sell them for us for two bucks a pop off the top.”

“Fucking skank. Don’t tip him.” He pushed the change on the bar towards Robbie.

“Jesus, what happened to your hand?” Blake asked.

Sanchez’s fingers were badly bruised and the knuckles visibly swollen.

“Taxi door,” he said. “It’s not as –”

“– bad as it looks,” Blake said. “Right.”

“Really. It’s cool. I can play, no problem.”

Blake just looked at him. Robbie was trying hard to look elsewhere.

*Fuck it, Sanchez thought. Maybe I’ve ridden this son of a bitch as far as it’ll go anyway.*

The first set sucked. In spite of some occasional tension offstage, Blake and Sanchez usually cooked musically. They provided the rhythmic architecture for *Dilandid Tango*,

laying a foundation for Robbie's sparse, clean guitar work and occasional tenor sax. Tonight, it felt like they were playing in separate rooms, separate *cities*. Sanchez was either just a touch behind the beat, dragging Robbie and Blake along with him like boat anchors, or hammering on it to compensate with just a shade too much anticipation, throwing everything off. His hand *hurt*. He was focused on the pain and that kept him from getting pulled into the music.

Two songs into the set Robbie started giving him this stern, pouty look. After he missed the single bar of 5/4 in the bridge of "DMZ," Blake threw a drumstick at him. Finally, the set was over. There was a weak smattering of applause, a few catcalls. This is when Robbie usually announced that there would be CD's on sale, but he didn't bother.

Blake kicked his stool back as he got up and it fell over with a crash. He stomped around the side of his kit and got right up in Sanchez's face.

"What the fuck was that? My *grandmother* can play better than that."

"Sorry, man. My hand –"

"I don't give a *fuck* about your hand, *Bennett*. It's your goddamn *judgment*. If any of us can't play we scrub the gig. How many times have we talked about this?"

He turned and started to walk away, then spun around.

"Look, can you do the second set?"

"Yeah, I can do it."

"Keep it simple. Don't try to be John Fucking Entwhistle."

"I said I can do it."

Blake looked hard at him, then nodded.

"All right. We're back in ten. I need a beer." He started to walk away again.

"Hey, Blake."

He turned around, glowering. "Yeah?"

"Can I have the keys to the truck? I want to get the other monitor. This one's going in and out again." He kicked



a small speaker facing the band, fastened with duct tape to the front of the stage.

“Yeah, sure.” He tossed the keys to Sanchez, a bright flashing arc in the stage lights. “Hurry back.”

Sanchez nodded to Robbie and jumped off the stage. A woman in her mid-thirties with compressed, intelligent features planted herself in front of him.

“Are you Sanchez?”

He nodded warily. “Yeah ...”

She held out her hand. “Hi. I’m Lori Williamson. I don’t know if Annie’s told you about me.”

## 32.

The Latex was a pool of blue light in the middle of a block of dark, decrepit shops, gap-toothed brownstones hulking above on either side. A dozen people clustered near the entrance, smoking, leaning on cars. Leather and chains, body art, a uniform affected androgyny. Urban bad boys.

Lori paid the twenty dollar cover charge and worked her way to the bar. Her first take on the crowd wasn't quite right. There were quite a few women inside, dressed to a calculated edge, their dates for the most part mutant preppies barely a nose ring away from Andover and Yale.

She ordered a club soda, certain that she was the oldest person in the room, and continued to survey the crowd. At the far end of the room was a large, low stage. Sparse drum kit, DILAUDID TANGO on the bass drum in big no-nonsense letters, two guitars, a tenor sax, and a bass on stands, amps, mikes, an undergrowth of cables secured by duct tape.

The barstool buzzed underneath her with thumping, synthy-laden 80's music. She couldn't place the band, but it was very familiar, probably the soundtrack to a summer in her twenties that flashed by in a hormonal blur, depositing memory triggers for her to stumble over later in life like a poorly maintained sidewalk. She felt a brief rush of bitter-sweet, unfocused nostalgia, synapses making half-formed,

subterranean connections with no conscious target.

She turned to the woman next to her, early twenties, kind of a punked Bridget Fonda look, pageboy blond hair streaked with black, lip-ring with an angry infection around the piercing.

“Are these guys any good?” Shouting over the music.

“They’re okay.” She belted back a shot of something clear and oily looking, winced as the liquor bathed her wound. “I’m here for *Tapioca Buckshot*, but I heard the *Tango* at CBGB’s a few weeks ago open for *Sugar Coded* and they were hot.”

“*Tapioca Buckshot* anything like *Pearl Jam*?”

“Man, you *are* old, aren’t you?”

“Well, I figured, you know, the name...”

“What about the name?” Deadpan, mildly irritated. Not jerking Lori’s chain.

“Never mind.” She wondered how many band names encoded references to bodily fluids, the sex act, or scatology.

Two guys, short and tall, stepped onto the stage. The tall guy, blond, denim work shirt open to a hairless chest and flat stomach, long sleeves unbuttoned and flapping around his wrists, picked up one of the guitars, slung it around his neck, and tapped the mike. Lori heard a flat thump over the *Human League* track. The drummer, the short guy, stocky in a black t-shirt, arranged himself behind his kit and shot an annoyed look off-stage.

After a moment, a third guy stepped up onto the stage with a slight, shuffling limp. His lip was swollen, and his left eye narrowed to a squint with a purple bruise that sprawled across his cheek. Soul patch under the lower lip, ripped jeans and Raiders jersey hanging loosely on a rail-thin frame. Brown, shoulder-length dreads pulled up into a loose topknot. He looked like a feral Dr. Seuss character.

This must be Sanchez, she thought.

The drummer tapped his mike, nodded to the other musicians, clicked his sticks twice over his head and they launched into a hyper-fast tune reminiscent of the *Ramones*

but richer harmonically, shifting textures around a hollow core instead of a dense interior of sound.

It almost worked, but something wasn't quite right and after a bit Lori figured out that it was Sanchez, either just behind the beat or just ahead of it, preventing the tune from ever getting into a groove.

They stumbled to a halt and there was a tentative smattering of applause, the crowd clearly expecting something other than what they were hearing. Lori could feel the vibes between the musicians from across the room, the drummer glaring at Sanchez and the guitar player in kind of a pout.

The next tune was better – bass, tenor sax, and sparse vocals, haunting and repetitious, the drummer working mallets and brushes underneath. But still, Sanchez should have been holding up the fragile architecture and he was all but pulling it down around them.

It went on like that for about an hour, one tune after another that almost worked but didn't hang together. Near the end of the set, someone called out "You suck" during a break between tunes and a couple of people applauded. Lori positioned herself near the stage so she could be sure to catch Sanchez when they took their break.

Finally, it was over. The musicians converged in an angry huddle for a minute or so, then Sanchez stepped off the stage.

Lori walked up to him.

"Are you Sanchez?"

"Yeah?" *Who the fuck are you* unspoken but clear.

She put her hand out.

"Hi. I'm Lori Williamson. I don't know if Annie's told you about me."

Something happened behind his eyes. Lori wasn't sure what, but it was more than mere recognition. He looked for a second like his center of gravity had shifted. Then he smiled.

"Yeah, yeah...Lori. Of *course* Annie's told me about

you. Mom, right?”

He took her hand gingerly, winced when she gave it a gentle squeeze.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah...basketball injury. Hurts like a son of a bitch to play, but it’ll clear up in a few days.”

*Ah, she thought. That probably explains why you sucked.*

She nodded and they stood looking at each other for a moment, the smile starting to creep her out a little.

“So, I was wondering if you’ve seen Annie.” Lori said.

“Yeah, she’s staying at a friend’s house while they spray her apartment for roaches. She said she didn’t want to be around any of that bad shit for the baby’s sake.”

He paused and nodded as if confirming something to himself.

“Do you have the number?”

“The number?”

“Where she’s staying.”

He nodded, then nodded again more vigorously.

“The number. Yeah, I’ve got it in the truck. I need to go out there anyway. You want to come?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

She followed him through a door behind the stage, down a dim hallway to a door at the end with a large, red handle and a sign that read EMERGENCY EXIT.

Sanchez turned to her.

“It’s bullshit. The thing isn’t hooked up.”

He pushed the door open and they stepped into an alley. A white panel truck was parked in front of them.

Sanchez disappeared around the back of the truck. Lori heard keys rattling and the rear doors squeaking open.

“Hey, can you give me a hand with something?”

“Okay.”

She walked around the open door and glimpsed a jumble of boxes and sound gear before she heard a soft hiss of air, saw a shape flying at her that she recognized as a mike boom an instant before her head split with a flash of white

light and searing pain.

## 33.

She went down like a bag of rocks. Sanchez looked around and quickly dragged her into the back of the truck. Her hair was matted with blood and he felt a lump already rising behind her ear. Her eyes moved jerkily behind closed lids. Sanchez didn't know anything about head injuries and he hoped he didn't hurt her too badly. He was going to need her.

He bound her hands and feet with cable ties and debated whether or not to gag her. He decided to wait, see what she had to say when she woke up.

She was carrying a soft leather shoulder bag and he surveyed its contents. Cell phone. *Good. That will come in handy.* Small, brown-covered notebook. *Maybe later.* Wallet with some credit cards, a couple hundred bucks, and a picture of a smiling preppie motherfucker that was probably Mister Williamson. Dad. *Keep smiling, asshole. Your world is about to change.*

He pocketed the cash and the phone, stepped out of the truck, closed and locked the rear doors. He walked around to the driver's side, let himself in and sat in the seat, moving his ass around until he felt comfortable. He looked back at the door to the club.

*This is it, he thought. No turning back.*

Prior to this moment he could at least kid himself that he was still a musician, playing in a band, all this crazy shit a

temporary setback and as soon as it was done he could get back to being Sanchez, back to the *Tango*, move on and move up. That was gone. He didn't know what he was now.

Two quick lines – one for courage, one for stamina.

Okay, two more – one for motherhood, one for apple pie.

Okay, okay! Truth. Beauty. That's it and that's all.

Wipe nose. Turn key. Put truck into gear. Drive away. Irreversible actions that set him on a trajectory with an uncertain arc but a single destination. Get the money.

He drove up 39th Street towards the West Side Highway. The streets were nearly deserted. There was a gas station on 11th Avenue, bright and harsh. He pulled up next to the pumps and went inside. A middle-aged guy, unshaven, thick glasses and pasty skin, fat belly stretching his white t-shirt out in a bulbous roll around his middle, sat behind the cash register, reading the Post and smoking.

"Thirty on number four," Sanchez said, tossing the bills on the counter.

The guy took the bills without looking at Sanchez and did something on a panel next to the register.

"Go ahead." Still buried in the Post.

"Hey."

The guy looked up.

"You know how to get to Block Island?"

"Where the fuck is Block Island?"

Sanchez sighed. "If I knew that I wouldn't be asking you."

"So?"

"So what?"

"So nothing. You're asking me. I've never fucking heard of it. It's like Nantucket or some shit, right? Martha's Boneyard. You want to know how to get to Brooklyn, Jersey, fucking Crouton-on-the-Hudson, I can tell you that. Block Island? You're S.O.L., pal, sorry."

Sanchez gave him the long, mean stare, which the gun sticking down his ass crack lent credence to, at least as far as



the voices in his head were concerned. Thought about taking it up a notch, then shook his head. Fucking New Yorkers. Might as well try to intimidate the weather.

“You got a map?”

The guy waved at a rack next to a haggard display of Slim Jims. “Over there, Einstein. Go crazy.”

Sanchez picked out a map of Long Island, a map of Connecticut, a map of the Tri-State area, and one of the entire New England region. As long as he was here, he might as well load up on supplies. He got a couple of bottles of water, a six-pack of Mountain dew, a large bag of Doritos, and three packages each of Ring Dings and Ho Ho’s.

He spilled the items on the counter in front of the guy, who looked up from the paper again.

“A health nut,” he said, and started passing the items over the scanner.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.* One after another. I could blow you away right now, you fucking toad. *Beep.* Shut you right up. *Beep.*

“Twenty six ninety eight.”

Sanchez counted out twenty seven dollars and handed it across the counter.

“Keep the change.”

As he pushed the door open, the guy called out.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

The guy paused a beat.

“You be careful out there,” he said, and barked out a laugh.

Sanchez walked to the gas pump and began filling the truck, rolling the feeling around in his head that he had been bested in the exchange. He wanted to go back in there and make things right. He looked over at the shop and could just see the guy through the window, facing away, newspaper held high with both hands.

Fuck it. He needed to work on his impulse control or he’d never get to payday.

He flipped a bird at the back of the guy's head, got in the truck and drove off. Mom in back groaned once, briefly, and said something unintelligible. He listened for more, but heard nothing.

The truck didn't have a radio, but there was a small boom box on the floor on the passenger side. When he was stopped at a light, he reached down, pulled it up onto the seat, and turned it on. There was an old Jonathan Richman tape in the mechanism and that was just about right.

*Roadrunner Roadrunner.* He cranked up the volume and pulled onto the West Side Highway, heading north. *Going faster miles an hour!* Right about now Blake would be sending Robbie out to the truck to see what happened. Fuck it. *New York City when it's late at night! I got the radio on!* Sanchez jammed the accelerator onto the floor until, rattling and groaning, the truck reached its top speed of sixty miles per hour.

*Be careful out there.* The fuck did he mean by that? Sanchez tried a few responses. *You better be careful, mother-fucker.* Or *You're the one that needs to be careful.*

No, he sounded like a goddamn second grader. Something a little more cool. *I'm always careful, bra'*, then whipping out the piece and giving him a few more holes to breathe through. Yeah, that would do it. *I'm always careful.*

But who the fuck did the guy think he was? Sitting on his fat ass in a Quik Stop. Be careful out there. With that Einstein shit.

Fuck it.

Sanchez got off at 96th Street and back on the West Side Highway Southbound. *Einstein my ass.* He took the 34th Street exit and drove the two blocks to the station practicing his line. *Hey.* The guy looks up. *I'm always careful.*

He pulled up to the pumps, got out of the truck, and walked towards the store. The guy looked up, mildly surprised but not alarmed, gave a bullshit little nod and went back to his paper.

Sanchez pushed the door open, pulled his piece out from behind his back, and shot the guy twice in the chest.

“*You* be careful, motherfucker.”

He walked up to the counter and looked over, twin red blossoms on the white shirt, eyes wide and pleading. Not so fucking cocky any more. Sanchez shot the guy once more in the head to make sure, and got out of there.

Back on the West Side Highway, cruising North. *Going faster miles an hour.* His hands vibrated on the steering wheel, buzzing, twitching. Every now and then he realized he was holding his breath; he’d exhale with a quick sigh and breathe deeply, filling his lungs with air again. His forehead felt clammy, slick with sweat, even though it was cool in the truck. He wiped his nose, leaving a bloody streak on his sleeve.

Sanchez popped the glove box looking for more tapes, leaned over rummaging through papers, tools, a flashlight. He looked up and saw he was veering toward the shoulder in a slow two-lane drift. He fought the steering wheel, the truck fishtailing a little as he pulled it straight.

*Okay, focus.* Problem was, now that he had Mom tied up in the back of the truck, he didn’t know what the hell he was going to do with her.

He needed a base. The Block Island place where Annie was holed up was as good as any. A fresh start at the ass end of nowhere. Annie would come around, especially once she saw Lori. Bow to the inevitable and her own self-interest.

He was headed vaguely in the direction of Point Judith, Rhode Island; the ferry there was his only bet for getting the truck across to Block Island. If he didn’t have Lori he’d dump the truck, but Lori was a gift, a blessing. When she came up to him after the first set, he couldn’t believe his luck. Lori would cinch it for sure. Lori was payday.

He followed the signs to I-95, slicing through the tangle of expressways in southern Westchester County. Iggy

Pop followed Jonathan Richman, then some early John Cale. He loved Cale, who put his work out there with musicianship and edge and compromised neither. *Fear is a Man's Best Friend, Guts, Leaving It Up To You* – songs that were just fucking great, completely pure. He howled along with the tunes, the little boom box sounding like shit at top volume, buzzing out on the bass and losing the midrange, but it was loudness that was important right now, pure volume, God's own grinding wheel smoothing over all the rough edges and filling the inside of the truck with sparks.

A small restless inner voice noted that he'd had one foot in Cale's pantheon – barely a toehold, but it was a shot – and he'd just burned it down. He swept the voice aside and howled against the wall of sound.

He passed through the outskirts of New London around 3:00 AM, the Interstate hugging the water's edge, shipyards awash with bright, white light. He wished again that he could ditch the truck.

He tried to figure out how else he could work it. He didn't know the first thing about stealing cars, except from the movies where you pulled something off the bottom of the steering column and twisted some wires together. He'd have to figure that out, then transfer Mom from the back of the truck to, shit, probably to the goddamn trunk. Unless he scored an SUV or something. Maybe a Lexus. Or one of those new Lincoln SUV's. That would be cool. Or he could get one of those kiddie vans with the DVD player mounted on the ceiling, put the car on cruise control and watch *Reservoir Dogs*.

Fuck it. He was stuck with Blake the Snake's skankmobile. He just hoped he wouldn't get into a high speed chase. He was flooring it right now, the needle quivering around sixty, and the truck sounded like it was about to fly apart.

Leaving New London behind, there was very little traffic and no moon, just his headlights peeling back the road ahead to the steady rhythm of the lane markers. After a while,

Sanchez began to see things out of the corners of his eyes and between the white dashes as the truck sucked them under: wispy, glowing wraiths with holes for eyes, deeper shadows in the darkness flickering with sudden motion, gone when he looked directly, translucent neon grids hanging in front of him, warping, skewing. Not outright hallucinations, but a living skin over the surface of the world, playing at the periphery of his vision.

He was looking for the exit to Pawcatuck. The place names around here all sounded like summer camps. Quonachantog. Weekapaug. Misquamicut. He caught himself sliding into another two-lane drift, eyes wide open but fixed on the next world. He pulled it out again, the fishtail as he straightened a little wilder this time.

He felt suddenly very tired. His range of vision constricted to a tunnel boring through the road ahead. Forget Pawcatuck – if he didn't find a rest area he'd roll the truck into a ditch. There was a sign for one a while back, should be coming up any minute.

The rest area was a long, thin strip of asphalt illuminated like a stage by high, bright lamps that threw deep shadows. Two semis occupied the end of the strip away from the bathrooms. Although he could not hear or see it, Sanchez knew that the ocean was nearby. He parked as far from the semis as he could, used the bathroom, and opened the back of the truck to look in on Mom.

Still out, breathing regularly. Hair matted with blood. He rolled up a section of carpet they used for amps and put it under her head, checked the duct tape securing her hands and feet. He debated again whether to tape her mouth shut and decided to let it be. If she started screaming he could do it then, or just hit her again.

He got back in the driver's seat, ate a couple of Ho-Ho's and washed them down with Mountain Dew. Even though the Dew was a little warm by this time, it was one of the best meals he'd ever eaten. He had half a Ring-Ding,

cracked another can of Dew, finished the Ring-Ding and did a thin line to keep his edge.

He felt much better, the sugar spreading through him like light. Lori's phone rang, a polyphonic riff that sounded vaguely familiar. He almost jumped out of his seat. Who the fuck would be calling in the middle of the night? He fished it out of his pocket, looked at the display. The number meant nothing to him. He didn't want to talk to anybody – he wasn't ready. The phone rang three more times then stopped. He returned it to his pocket.

Back on the road to some early Richard Hell. After twenty minutes or so, he hit the Pawcatuck exit, took a succession of turns onto increasingly small roads, no stores, few houses, not much of anything except low rolling dunes and anemic patches of pine, the ocean occasionally visible on his right, sometimes on his left, the night pressing in against the cone of light from his high-beams.

He followed a sharp curve and the road seemed to disappear under his wheels and widen in front of him, the truck getting purchase on nothing, wheels spinning in mush, slewing a bit and momentum pushing him forward until he stalled, stopping with a gentle lurch.

The ocean was loud now, and close, its chemical reek filling the truck. Sanchez sensed beyond his headlights a vast, black gulf, the surf barely visible in the darkness as a ragged, fluorescent line of lesser dark.

## 34.

Sayonara33 wandered through the catacombs underneath the Temple of Emptiness, a maze of dark corridors intermittently lit with smoky, sputtering torches. Mummified corpses in various stages of decrepitude filled shelves to either side. Inhuman screams echoed through the darkness. From somewhere nearby, water dripped steadily onto stone.

A band of warriors was imprisoned somewhere down here, probably a couple of Levels below his current position. His Quest was to free them before they got eaten alive by Odin and his coterie of Frost Giants. Ross suspected that once he freed the guys a very cool firefight would ensue. And if he didn't free them he was history — he didn't have the Health or Armor to go up against Odin and the Frost Giants alone.

BiteMe9 was somewhere in The Ladder; his icon glowed in the upper left corner of Ross' screen. It ebbed and waxed as he tangled with the local talent.

A pair of Fire Basilisks appeared from the shadows ahead. They hissed and spat droplets of blue flame that sputtered when it touched his armor and hammered down his Mana with frightening speed.

With no Mana he'd be relying on physical strength alone, and Ross had built up his Druid preferring arts magical

to martial.

He fired off Frost Blasts at the Basilisks as he backed away, depleting the last of his Mana. It slowed them down and they roared their displeasure.

**Sayonara33: yo bite me i could use a hand here**

**BiteMe9: Hang on – got my own problems right now.**

**Sayonara33: k**

Sayonara33 ran like hell with the Fire Basilisks hot on his heels. He was trying to retrace his steps to the stairway that led up to the Temple of Emptiness, running down identical corridors endlessly branching.

He hit a dead end and turned around to face the monsters. They approached, snapping their powerful jaws, hissing, slobbering. Sayonara33 charged the beasts, pushed them aside, and ran like hell. Blue flame hissed on his armor. His Health diminished visibly until it was nothing but a thin red line at the bottom of the Indicator. There was a quick flash of red, and his health jumped up to half full. BiteMe9!

Sayonara33 didn't have time to thank his Sorcerer friend. He was too busy trying to save his own sorry ass.

He was in an area that looked very familiar. Corpses littered the corridor – he *had* been here. Ross hit the Tab key and a translucent map appeared. The stairs to the temple were just ahead – left, then right.

The Basilisks were right on his heels, roaring, hissing. Sayonara33 made it just in time.

Blue sky arched over the crumbling pillars of the Temple of Emptiness. Before him stretched a plain of rolling hills dotted with small trees.

A pair of players winked into existence in front of him.

**PiltdownMan: Hey, it's Sayonara**

**RoxyDoxy: Hello goodbye**



**Sayonara33: hey i don't see your icons, how u do that**

**PiltdownMan: romulan cloaking device**

**RoxyDoxy: latest technology**

**PiltdownMan: sayonara faggot**

Two blows from the Barbarian's great mace and Sayonara33's ghost shimmered above a pile of rags and weapons.

I can't believe this shit, Ross thought. Stalked by a couple of virtual sociopaths.

He exited the game and looked at the clock on his toolbar. 11:33 PM. He wondered how Lori was doing.

He got up from the desk, stretched, and walked back into the kitchen. No music from Irv's part of the house. He went into the living room and looked out the window. The Impala was gone.

Ross went to the den and opened the door. The room smelled like Cupid's dorm — reefer, sweat, sex, a faint laundry effluvia. Irv was sprawled across the couch, a sheet wrapped around him. His mouth was open and he snored softly. A large plastic bottle of Astro-Glide lay on its side next to a bong and an enormous green dildo. Sleeveless CD's were scattered across the floor.

Ross shook his head and repeated his current mantra to himself. *Embrace denial*. Events would continue to converge towards some unseen future inflection point, then something would change. Maybe Irv would become un-crazy, or maybe Ross would stop giving a shit. Who knew?

*Fuck it*, he thought. *Bed time*.

He went upstairs, brushed his teeth, slipped his clothes off, and crawled into bed. He rolled halfway over to Lori's side and buried his face in her pillow, breathing in deeply through his nose, breathing in the smell of her. He missed her and wondered again how she was doing, if she'd managed to hook up with Annie yet.

He thought about the baby, tried to imagine what

Spud would do to the dynamics between them. His friends who had kids all said stuff to him like, your life is about to change, dude, big time. Not in an ominous way, but with a mildly annoying, smug certainty that he couldn't possibly understand what they were talking about until he was initiated. Trial by diapers.

He figured they were probably right. He really didn't know what was coming. His images of parenthood were rose-colored – Berkeley couples in the Cheese Collective, baby in a backpack waving grubby fists in the air, the little family surrounded by an aura of intimacy and contentment. He knew there was more to it than that and he was ready for it, for whatever it would be like. But his friends were right. He had no idea.

He drifted off to sleep seeing his son's face looking down at him from a cloudless, blue sky. Eyes wide and huge, big as lakes. Mouth moist and smiling.

*Hey Spud, he thought. We're here. We're waiting.*

## 35.

Annie woke suddenly, bolt upright, from a deep sleep. She was disoriented for a moment, a rush of vertiginous panic, then she remembered where she was.

*Greta's house.*

She breathed, and she was filled with the musty, damp smell of a house closed down and ill-kept, underneath it the ocean's vast, salt presence.

She got out of bed and, naked, padded quietly into the living room. It was dark still, the middle of the night. In the room was a battered couch, a cable spool coffee table, a chair ripped at the seat and leaking stuffing. A single bookshelf, books leaning lazily against one another or in ragged stacks. Everything in purple shadow.

She wasn't sure what woke her. She knew that she had been dreaming but she remembered nothing. She was relieved to be here but a part of her still felt in flight mode, hypervigilant, her reptile brain alert for danger, not letting her relax.

She thought of Lori and regretted her impulsive exodus. She wished she had a cigarette.

Annie got dressed, sweats and sneakers, and walked out the front door, stood on the porch looking at the sky awash with stars, more than she'd ever seen. She could hear the ocean's periodic sough and feel its mass just on the other

side of a small rise and bend in the road. Tough, hearty grass clung to the sandy soil in clumps. A battered fence of simple wooden slats secured together near the top by twisted wire veered crazily along the top of the hill then descended abruptly out of sight.

She walked down the road toward the ocean. The night air was cool and when the wind picked up she could feel it through her sweats. She crested the hill and the road turned, running parallel to a long, narrow beach, ends curved towards the ocean to form a protective cove. Two decayed piers, a hundred feet apart, disintegrated as they stretched out into the water to ragged fingers of rotten pilings barely breaching the waves.

She rested both hands on her rounded stomach, the Spud quiet now, at least one of them asleep. Thinking about the Spud made her think of Lori again, and a flush came to her cheeks. She felt like a jerk for disappearing off the face of the earth when she'd been entrusted like this. All the recovery stuff, when you cut through the bullshit – and there was a lot of bullshit – was about not making fucking excuses for yourself any more, about being accountable. She should've at least called, left a message. *Hey, I'm taking off for a few days.* What was the big deal?

There was a hint of lightness over the ocean. Annie wondered how far you'd have to go to hit land, where you'd be when you got there. England? Greenland? Spain? She had no idea. The mosaic of neighborhoods comprising Queens and Brooklyn was practically imprinted in her DNA, and her sense of geography was very acute between Battery Park and Harlem, but like most New Yorkers it deteriorated rapidly once you got out of the city. Once, Sanchez told her, he'd been out in California, L.A. somewhere, up all night speed-balling, and he'd driven something like an hour to the beach in the middle of the night so he could watch the sun rise over the ocean. She wasn't *that* bad.

She shook her head and felt a pang of sadness, missing the old Sanchez, the genial fuckup who could play a

mean stick. She wondered where he went.

*Shit, where do any of us go*, she thought.

Time to face the music, give Lori a call and let her know where she was. Maybe tell her to steer clear of Sanchez while she was at it. It was still the middle of the goddamn night, but she figured Lori was probably going bughouse by now and would be relieved to hear from her. At any rate, Annie felt the urge and wanted to act before she turned chickenshit.

She walked back to the house and let herself in. There was an old rotary phone mounted on the wall next to the refrigerator. Annie was mildly surprised to get a dial tone.

She dialed Lori's cell phone, hands a little clammy, heart beating in her chest. *Hey Lori, this is Annie*, she'd say, and wait to suss out her reaction. Or just put it right out there from the start. *Lori, this is Annie. I'm really sorry I've been out of touch*. Yeah, that felt right.

## 36.

The sound of loud, retro punk, somebody screaming at the top of his lungs along with it, pulled Lori into tenuous consciousness. She was in the back of a moving truck, rattling and bouncing, lying on a spaghetti tangle of cables, boxes looming all around her. Her head hurt, badly, the pain like nothing she'd ever felt, and she fought back a wave of nausea. Her thighs felt clammy and wet and she realized with a rush of embarrassment that she had pissed herself. She tried to move and discovered that her hands were bound with duct tape at her wrists and above her elbows, her feet similarly bound at ankles and knees.

Her thoughts felt jumbled and sluggish; it was difficult to think past the pain. She remembered the club, Sanchez, going down to the truck. He *hit* her, Jesus, with a goddamn mike stand or something.

She turned her head and she could see him through the gap between a couple of packing cases, not singing anymore, saying, "You better be careful, motherfucker. You're the one needs to be careful." Then, "I'm always careful." Carrying on a conversation with himself. Hard to hear over the music, coming out of speakers that sounded like somebody'd dropped them out of a window.

What was she doing here? She didn't know how long she'd been out. Her head hurt so badly. The pain contained

her heartbeat, pulsing. She felt another wave of nausea, but it didn't recede this time, lifting her up, out of her body. Sanchez's outline in the driver's seat doubled, blurred, merged. She closed her eyes, swallowing back bile. If she threw up he'd know she was awake. The sense of headlong motion was worse with her eyes closed but she couldn't open them and she careened down a tunnel past elongated tendrils of light, like time a exposure photograph of night traffic but moving, twisting, pulling her down.

The cessation of movement was what woke her this time. Her head still hurt badly, and she didn't want to test her limits by trying to move too quickly. She closed her eyes to slits, saw Sanchez get out of the truck and slam the door. Through the front window she could see that they were in a highway rest area, bright lights and asphalt surrounded by thin, scrub pine woods.

*What's going on? Why is he doing this?* It was obvious even as she posed the question to herself. Money. She was being kidnapped and he wanted money. Fuck. He was mistaking them for some other couple. What was he going to do when he found out they had squat? House rich, cash poor. Ross was moving forward with the second but that would take a while to process.

She imagined herself trying to explain that to him, desperate enough to commit a capital crime, possibly coked out of his mind, maybe not that bright in the first place. *I'm sorry, we have all this equity in our house. Very difficult to liquefy. Can I go now?*

*Annie.* Her breath caught. *The baby.* Annie was probably tied up somewhere too – maybe hurt, miscarried, who knows? Lori willed herself to breathe, in through the nose, deeply, out through the open mouth. In, out. *Their baby.* Wash the brain with oxygen. In, out. *Fuck.*

The back doors of the truck opened and Lori closed her eyes. She felt his presence, standing there looking at her for what seemed like a long time. She wanted to open her

eyes just a slit but she didn't dare.

She heard him rummage through the junk littering the floor of the truck, poking her ribs once or twice, then she felt his hand slide under the back of her head. He lifted her head gently, slid a rough pillow underneath her, and tugged at the tape securing her hands and feet. Apparently satisfied, he climbed back across the equipment boxes to the driver's seat.

Lori allowed herself to open her eyes and turn just a little so she could see him. Pain spiked through her head, filling her eyes with tears. Sanchez tore open some kind of packaged food and popped a soda. Lori's stomach rumbled sympathetically. She was thirsty, too. She wasn't going to be able to hold out much longer, but as long as Sanchez thought she was unconscious, he might unwittingly reveal something to her. She was beginning to think the only way this guy did anything was unwittingly.

Finally, he finished eating. She wasn't surprised to see him crouch over then and do a quick line. Coke probably, maybe crank. She wished it was Dran-O. He started the truck and got back on the highway. Lori drifted off to sleep again for a little while, and when she awoke they were on a smaller, bumpier road. Probably getting close to wherever it was they were going. Closer to Annie.

She thought of Ross and missed him fiercely. She didn't know if Sanchez had contacted him yet. She regretted pulling back into herself recently, circling the inner wagons. She'd do better. He was a good man. She'd do better.

The road surface changed to loose soil or sand. The truck slowed and stalled. Sanchez cursed.

It looked like they were on a beach. Sanchez wasn't doing anything, just sitting there slumped over the wheel. Lori was pretty sure that he had no idea where they were.

*Great*, she thought. *Kidnapped by an imbecile.*

She still felt weak and tenuous and her head hurt like hell, but she didn't think she had anything more to gain by pretending she was out.

"What now?" she asked.



Sanchez jumped. "Jesus," he said. "You're up."

"What's going to happen?"

Sanchez reached behind his back and pulled out a gun. He held it up to her, not pointing it at her, but displaying it. Show and tell.

"If you do everything I say, you'll be fine."

Lori didn't respond. Her silence seemed to make Sanchez nervous.

"Just cooperate. You'll be okay."

Lori couldn't make out his features well in the darkness of the truck, but she thought there was something seriously wrong with this guy. Drugs for one thing. Obviously. And she got the feeling he wasn't exactly the master criminal type, that he was making this up as he went along.

"Where's Annie?" she asked.

"She's – we're on our way there."

"Is she kidnapped too?"

His head nodded, dreads bouncing. "Yeah."

"So you have a partner?"

Sanchez didn't say anything.

"Can I ask you a question?" Lori continued.

"All right."

"Is he as stupid as you are? Because there is no way on God's green Earth that you can possibly get away with this."

Sanchez was silent for so long Lori wondered if he'd fallen asleep.

"You ever been to Block Island?" he asked finally.

"What?"

"Block Island."

"What about it?"

"You ever been there?"

*I can't believe this guy*, she thought.

"No."

"Okay," he said, nodding, then turned around and started the truck. The wheels spun in the sand. She could hear

it spraying against the underside of the truck. Finally the truck caught traction on something and started moving backwards with a hard lurch. Sanchez backed onto the road, turned around, and drove back the way they had come.

After about a hundred yards, he pulled the truck over, leaving the engine running, and turned to Lori.

“Listen. I’m not fucking around here. We’re gonna be on a boat in a little while. Other cars. People nearby. If I have to tape your mouth shut, I will. If you try anything, I’ll fucking hit you again then tape your mouth shut anyway. If I have to drop you in the fucking ocean, I’ll do that too. Or I’ll keep you on ice and tell my partner to shoot Annie in the fucking stomach. I don’t give a shit – I can get to payday either way. Don’t fuck with me and everybody lives, everybody comes out okay. You with me?”

Lori nodded. Her head spun with the movement. He didn’t seem like such a buffoon any more. She still thought he was a charter member of the Not-Too-Bright Club, but she believed he was capable of doing what he said he was going to do.

“You want a Ho-Ho?”

She shook her head, more gingerly this time. “No. Some water.”

Sanchez held a bottle of Poland Springs to her lips and she drank greedily, spilling most of it down her cheek.

“I have to pee,” she said.

Sanchez rolled his eyes. “Jesus Christ. Okay, look, I’m going to cut the tape off your legs. Don’t try anything.”

Lori didn’t think he had anything to worry about. Even if she wanted to risk the consequences, she felt like it was going to be enough of a challenge just to stand up.

Sanchez cut through the layers of duct tape with a utility knife and stepped back. She held her hands out. Her upper arms were still secured to her sides by several layers of tape circling her torso.

Sanchez shrugged and freed her hands. She pushed herself up and had to lean against the wall until the spinning

stopped. Sanchez opened the back of the truck and she stepped down onto the road. Nearly fell, down on one knee. Skinned her palms, feeling the grit pressing into her flesh. The night was cool, the smell of the ocean strong. There wasn't a house or a light in sight. She stood up, breathed, let the dizziness recede again. She stepped away from the truck, awkwardly pulled her pants down, still damp from earlier, and squatting by the side of the road, relieved herself.

Sanchez was standing in the back of the truck, making a big show of looking away, as if letting her take a leak without leering at her would make up for beating and abducting her. What a weird, creepy fuck.

She crawled back in the truck, completely spent. Without further words, as if he, too, were exhausted, Sanchez taped her wrists and ankles again, got back in the front seat, and drove into the night. Each bump in the road sent a lance of pain through her head, but before long, she nodded off to sleep again.

## 37.

Sanchez could barely keep his eyes open. Somewhere in the middle of talking to Mom he'd hit a wall and most of his brain just shut down. His pharmacological instinct, honed over years of abuse to a keen edge, told him that more coke would send him to a place he didn't want to go and from which he might not return. He was starting to jones a little, too, but smack was not an option right now either. Plus, he was completely fucking lost. He felt like he was driving around on the bottom of the ocean. What he really needed to do was find a place to kick back, close his eyes for a couple hours. Sleep. Goddamnit, he needed to sleep.

Mom sure had an edge to her, even punch drunk from the blow to the head. He wondered if she was going to give him any trouble. He loved the partner stuff, though, and mentally thanked her for handing him her leash. Don't fuck with me, I'll tell my partner!

The sky to his left was getting a bruised, purple look down near the horizon. It would be daylight soon. He wanted to be holed up by then. He didn't think he had much of a shot at finding a motel around here. It would have to be a house. Preferably, one with no occupants, but at this point he'd take what he could get and deal with whatever came up.

He checked out a couple of places, driving slowly past. One looked promising, a ranch house with aluminum

siding and a ceramic pelican in the center of a well-manicured lawn, set back from the road with no car in the driveway. He stopped to investigate on foot and had to run like hell when a dog started barking.

The next house he looked at was the one. Older, in minor disrepair: peeling paint, a sagging gutter. No garage, no car in the driveway. He looked in the window next to the front door and saw an austere dining and living room with no signs of occupancy. Around the back of the house, the bedroom window. Neatly made bed, closet door half open showing empty space and shadow.

Perfect.

He looked around, wrapped his jacket around his fist and punched through the bedroom window. The sound of breaking glass was loud in the still night. He knocked away the shards remaining in the frame and climbed through.

The house had a vacant smell – dust and ozone, the outgassing of carpet and particle board. He tried the faucet in the bathroom and it worked, coughing at first, then producing a steady stream. Good, they hadn't turned the water off. He flicked the light switch and squinted against the sudden brightness. He quickly turned it off. He wasn't sure how far away the neighbors were, but he didn't want them poking around.

There was a half-empty quart of orange juice in the fridge dated three weeks in the past and a sad, desiccated apple. In the freezer, Lean Cuisine lasagna and a lidless container of Hagan Dasz Mint Chip, a few clumps of desiccated curds clinging to the sides and bottom. In the pantry, Lipton's tea, two cans of Campbell's Chicken Noodle, Triscuits, and a box of Cinnamon Frosted Pop Tarts.

Pop Tarts! This place would do just fine. He went back to the truck. Mom was sleeping again and he wondered if that was okay. There was a nasty lump where he'd hit her and a purple bruise sprawled across that side of her face like a spreading stain.

He drove the truck around to the back of the house

and parked it close up against the siding. It wouldn't be visible from the road and was protected from view on either side by ragged hedges. A gentle hill rose behind the house, the lot ending at the border of a thin pine forest.

Almost there. Almost home free. He was running on fumes now, way past his limits. Almost there.

He shook Lori awake.

"Hey. Hey Mom. We're gonna take a break here. I need a few hours sleep." Her eyes opened, tracked him briefly, then lost focus and closed.

"Hey!" Shouting now. He looked around, found the Poland Springs bottle, and splashed some water in her face.

"Hey!" That got her attention. Her eyes opened again, focused on his.

"We're stopping here. I have to sleep. My partner is expecting a call from me by 11 AM. If you try to get away, if you do anything stupid, whatever, if he doesn't get the call, Annie gives birth to a calzone. You got that?"

She nodded. He didn't know where that calzone line came from, but he liked it.

"Look, I don't want to have to cut the tape off, get you in the house, fucking tie you up again. If I slide you off the end of the truck so you land on your feet, can you hop into the house?"

She stared at him, then slowly shook her head. No. Lying bitch. *Fuck*.

"No. Okay, fine."

He squatted and picked her up, threw her over his shoulder like a sack of grain, the years hauling musical equipment paying off.

She was small, but heavier than she looked. Compact. Sanchez was breathing hard by the time he got through the back door and dumped her on the couch. She groaned softly and glared at him.

"The fuck you looking at? You wanna go back in the truck?"

She sighed, looked away. After a moment, her eyes

fluttered and closed. Her breathing became regular.

Sanchez settled into the stuffed chair next to the couch. It was beginning to get light out. There was a remote on the coffee table, a smallish television on a cart in the corner. He turned it on. Scooby-Doo, behind flickering snow. Sanchez loved Scooby, hadn't seen it in years. He got a Pop Tart from the pantry and sunk into the chair again. Cartoon mayhem poured from the television. The chair was comfortable, Scooby and the Pop Tart resonating deep within him, invoking Flatbush on Saturday mornings, just Bennett then, Benny, light slanting into the living room in thick yellow slabs alive with dancing motes, the neighborhood quiet because of Shabbas but Benny's family off the hook because they were not observant, just the high holy days, the Paschal lamb, the menorah lights when winter's chill first begins to set in.

The pastry fell from his fingers. Scooby and Shaggy capered across the screen. Sanchez slept.

## 38.

Lori's arms and legs ached from pushing out against the duct tape, trying to loosen it. She was incrementally rewarded – a little more slack, a little more freedom of movement. She didn't know what she was going to do with it. She didn't dare try anything, would have to play it out for a while, at least until they got to Block Island, to Annie and the partner. She allowed herself the luxury of violent fantasy, feet and fists meeting soft tissue and musculoskeletal points of leverage, but she'd never actually hit anyone except in very stylized, very constrained sparring competitions. She didn't know if she could.

Her head still hurt, but the dizziness wasn't so bad anymore. She was bone tired, though. Sometimes when she was pretending to be asleep she'd drift off anyway, then come awake with a start.

She looked over at Sanchez, his head thrown back, his mouth open, emitting soft fluttering snores. He was young, late twenties maybe. In sleep, in spite of the bruises, his features looked vulnerable and half-formed.

She wondered at the confluence of forces that had driven him to this. Annie, in her descriptions of Sanchez, had given the impression of a talented fellow, slightly narcissistic, not a coke-addled sociopath who couldn't find his ass with both hands.



She was in a mess and she couldn't imagine it ending well, worried sick about Ross, about Annie, about the Spud. She was mildly surprised to note that she was not as concerned about her own safety as she probably should be. Denial maybe, detachment, some kind of reptilian hindbrain survival mechanism. She felt like there were multiple people inside her, multitudes, the old Walt Whitman thing, each of them clamoring for attention. Lawyer, expectant parent, worried spouse, angry victim, frightened child.

She let the lawyer take over.

Inventory time.

She'd taken a bad blow to the head, probably had a mild concussion. The nausea wasn't so bad now, but any sudden movement sent a lance of pain through her head and amorphous purple splotches rising up from the bottom of her field of vision.

She was seriously, seriously tired. Starting to get a little hungry, too, but she could deal with that.

Physical condition otherwise not so good, starting to cramp up badly from the tape.

Information. Definitely working from a deficit. Has Sanchez spoken to Ross yet? How much is he asking for? What about the handoff? The partner, is he as fucked up and stupid as Sanchez? What if Ross couldn't come up with the money in time, or at all?

It wasn't any good. She needed more information, but didn't know how hard she could push Sanchez. He didn't seem all that stable in the first place, and if you added coke, fatigue, and stress to that, she didn't know which way things would go. There wasn't anything to do except ride it out.

She closed her eyes, thinking she should rest while she had the chance, catch some shuteye while he was asleep too. But her thoughts raced, bird-like, flitting from one thing to the next. She didn't think she'd be able to sleep.

She awoke to a terrible cramp in her left calf and a painfully full bladder. It looked like mid-morning, maybe 9 or

10. Sanchez was still asleep, sprawled in the big stuffed chair.

She tried clenching and releasing her leg muscles, tried stretching as best she could within her bonds. The pain in her calf subsided and then her toes cramped on the same side of her body, the big toe and the one next to it feeling like they were being pulled in opposite directions.

“Sanchez! Hey, goddamnit, wake up!”

She had to repeat herself three times before his eyes fluttered open.

“What?” Eyes watering, nose running, not quite tracking yet.

She raised her bound hands in front of her. “You have to let me get out of this stuff for a little while. I’m getting cramps, I have to pee...”

“All right, all right – ”

“And I don’t know what time it is but didn’t you say you had to call your partner by 11?”

“Uh, yeah. Hang on.”

He groped in his pants pockets, looked confused, nodded once.

“I’ll be right back.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He went out through the back door. Lori heard him opening the truck and tossing things around. Then there were a few minutes of silence, and Sanchez came back into the house brandishing a utility knife. Some of the color had returned to his cheeks and it looked like some of his rough edges had been sanded down.

“Hold still and don’t fuck with me.” He cut the tape binding her legs and arms, his face hovering over her like a moon. His body odor was strong and sharp.

Lori pulled away and stood up unsteadily. She walked to the bathroom, Sanchez saying “Keep the fucking door open” to her back.

She had a brief moment of disassociation when she saw her reflection in the bathroom mirror. *Shit, that’s me.* A mottled bruise sprawled across the right side of her face,

starting from a noticeable lump on the side of her head. Her hair was matted with clotted blood. She touched the lump gingerly and winced.

She peed and washed up as best she could. When she returned, Sanchez was pacing the kitchen.

“We gotta go,” he said.

“Please don’t tie me up again. I promise I won’t do anything.”

He thought about it. “In a little while, we’re going to be around people, even cops. If my partner doesn’t hear from me every hour, his instructions are clear. You know what I’m talking about, right?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Not if I tape your fucking mouth shut.”

Lori just looked at him and waited.

“All right, all right,” he said. “Whatever.”

“Why are you doing this? You’ve got talent. Annie said a lot of nice things about you. You could do pretty much anything you want. Why are you doing this?”

Sanchez looked at her. He looked like he was about to speak, then shook his head. “You don’t know anything. Get in the fucking truck.”

## 39.

Irv was still asleep when Ross left for work in the morning. He stopped at Peet's Coffee on Vine Street, the line as usual at this time of day snaking out the door. He got a peach-raspberry scone and a doppio latte, and drove surface streets to Emeryville, sipping and munching, listening to NPR. He tried Lori on his cell, got her voicemail, left a brief message. Hey, how's it going out there. Call me when you get a chance.

When he walked in to the office, Gina, Jason, and Paul were at the far end of the Pit near the windows, talking quietly. Nobody else was around.

Doctor Bob was waiting for him in his office.

"Close the door," he said.

Ross pulled the door shut behind him and sat down at his desk.

"What's up?"

"Dmitry and Jingtao quit. LuAnne's on the fence, but wavering. I don't know about the rest of 'em yet."

"What the fuck?"

Doctor Bob didn't say anything.

"Warner?"

Doctor Bob nodded. "Most likely. They didn't say so explicitly, but I can't see any other explanation."

"We didn't play ball so he's trashing our team."

“It gets worse. I got a heads-up call from the CTO at Vixen. They’re pulling out. You should be getting a call from Goldberg later this morning.”

“Fuck me.” Vixen was the business behind a string of porno web sites – teenpussy.com, teengash.com, teen-cooze.com, slutpuppylove.com, to name a few – and Tesseract’s biggest customer. It made Ross’ skin crawl a bit, but the throughput challenges were formidable, a perfect foil for Tesseract’s gateway technology. They were a referencable account, too, if you didn’t get into too much detail. And their money was as good as anybody’s. Ross had established a pretty good working relationship with Maury Goldberg, their CEO, who had a dry, self-deprecating wit about the line of business he was in and seemed like a straight shooter. At least until now.

“We’ve got a contract,” Ross said. “What, they’re gonna breach?”

“Apparently somebody’s softened the financial repercussions for them.”

“Man, the Borg don’t waste any time, do they?”

“Resistance is futile.”

Ross sat for a moment, still stunned, trying to work through the implications, wondering exactly what kind of leverage Warner had applied. Getting to their customers was easy enough to understand, expected even, but he didn’t think they’d work so fast. What really threw him was that they were trying to take down the Posse as well.

“All right,” he said. “Damage control. You work the team, try and find out who’s on the fence and do what you can to tip them back. And find out what Warner’s putting in front of them. I’ll work the customers.”

Doctor Bob nodded and left the room. Ross took his laptop out of its case and settled it into the dock on his desk. As he waited through the boot, he looked out the window. A beautiful day, high puffy clouds, the bay dotted with sailboats. He wished that right at this moment he was two miles into a five-mile run on his favorite Tilden Park fire trail, eating up

the hills between Berkeley and West Contra Costa, sweat cooling his skin, a mild endorphin euphoria just starting to kick in.

Gina stuck her head in the door. Her eyes were red.

“You okay?” he asked. It was a small office. He assumed she knew everything he did.

She nodded. “How about you?”

“I’ve had days that started better. I’ll keep you posted. Route any customer calls right in unless I’m on another line.”

She nodded again. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do.”

Ross pulled down Goldberg’s direct number from Outlook, reflecting briefly on the essence of irony, and dialed.

- Goldberg.

- Maury, Ross Williamson.

- Oh, hello Ross. I was going to call you.

- Yeah, well, my CTO has been talking to your CTO.

- Yes, that’s how it usually works. Look –

- Maury.

- Yes?

- Just burn down the outstanding AR you have with us and I’ll cut you loose from the contract. I know what kind of pressure these guys can apply.

There was a long silence.

- That’s very decent of you, Ross. I will tell you that Microsoft isn’t even going to like that we paid down the account, but I can finesse that. What did you do to piss them off? Never mind, I don’t want to know.

- I don’t mind telling you.

- Yes?

- I said no. No, that’s not quite accurate. I said no thank you.

- It must have been the thank you. Never come off as

too polite when you're telling someone to go fuck themselves.

- Live and learn.

- Yes.

- Well, I've enjoyed working with you. Maybe down the road...

- Yes, there's always that possibility.

- All right, then. Take care.

- Good luck, Ross.

*This is not looking good*, Ross thought. Warner was probably applying both carrot and stick – sweetheart deals on the one hand, the threat of license audits, withdrawal of preferred pricing, who knows what else on the other. *Nice company you got here. Wouldn't want to see anything happen to it.*

Ross knew that some of his customers hated Microsoft so much that they would be immune to strongarm tactics. He'd find out by the end of the morning whether there would be enough of them left to even keep the lights on.

He went through pretty much the same conversation over and over again all morning long. The Borg hadn't gotten to everybody yet, and of those they got to, not everybody bailed. A call from Lori came in on the cell while he was on the land line with his contact in the IT Department of the City of Bismarck, North Dakota. He let the voicemail take it. By noon, he had determined that a little more than half his customers were gone.

He popped up an IM window to Doctor Bob.

**Ross94707: all hands in 10**

**Bobareebop: k**

**Bobareebop: How's it going?**

**Ross94707: could be worse...not sure how, but it could be worse**

**Bobareebop: That bad, huh? Where's your pathological optimism?**

**Ross94707: last seen on i5 headed south to mexico**

**Bobareebop: Tijuana...a little jai-alai, a little transgressive sex, a carnitas burrito...he'll be back**

**Ross94707: hey, why don't \*i\* go and leave my optimism behind**

**Bobareebop: That's what most people do.**

**Ross94707: what's the damage?**

**Bobareebop: LuAnne went home. Some Sarah McLaughlin on the iPod, a few shots of wheatgrass juice, she'll be fine. Alpa's good. Jason and Paul aren't too keen on our prospects, but they hate Microsoft so much they'd stay if their desks were on fire.**

**Ross94707: so just dmitry and jingtao...that's bad, but we can get by**

**Bobareebop: Jingtao was our security expert.**

**Ross94707: you've forgotten more security than he'll ever know**

**Bobareebop: Maybe.**

**Ross94707: c u in 5**

**Bobareebop: Okay.**

They gathered in the conference room. The all-hands the other day seemed like a long time ago. It was weird without Dmitry and Jingtao.

Ross looked around the room and shrugged.

“For those of you who don't know, which is probably nobody, Microslime made an acquisition offer and I turned them down. It was a bullshit offer – basically they wanted to buy us up and shut us down. That's what all this has been about. Like I said the other day, anybody wants to bail, no hard feelings.

“So, where we are. As of now, we've lost just over half our customer base. They didn't get to our pipeline – I don't think their intelligence is that good – so we can build some of that back. It'll take some time, though. Our burn rate's a little slower without Dmitry and Jingtao, but not



enough so it'll make much difference. And we're losing all that revenue, so net-net we're closer to the bone than we were before."

He paused, looked at the faces. Alpa, the Hindi beauty, hard to get a read on because she was always working at radiating serenity. Doctor Bob, who would always look like a cross between an ex-hippie and a disgruntled academic. Basically because he *was* a cross between an ex-hippie and a disgruntled academic. Gina, a bit of an odd duck in this group with a very clean, corporate look going on, Nordstrom's on a Target salary. Jason and Paul, who looked completely different but you were compelled to say the names together because by temperament they clearly shared an orbital in the office's atomic structure, like Dmitry and Jingtao. LuAnne on the phone, her high strung, brittle presence radiating from the spidery conference call device at the center of the table, a flake but solid as a rock with the technical stuff.

"I want everybody to take the rest of the day off. Except you, Doctor Bob. Sorry, dude. The Doctor and I are gonna look at the roadmap, look at the pipeline, see what we need to reprioritize. We'll hit the ground running tomorrow.

"I appreciate everybody staying. More than I can say. I'm doubling everybody's option grants. Not that it matters if we crash – twice nothing is still nothing – but it's something real I can do to acknowledge your support.

"Any questions?"

Long pause, a final scan of the room.

"Okay. Get out of here. Have fun and stay out of trouble."

They filed out slowly, Jason and Paul, Gina, Alpa, not saying anything. Doctor Bob stayed behind. Ross opened the shades and sunlight filled the room, harsh and bright. Ross blinked until his eyes adjusted.

"We might as well stay here," he said. "Nice big whiteboard. Hang loose a sec, okay? This message from Lori came in a couple of hours ago and I haven't had a chance to play it back."

Doctor Bob nodded. He leaned back in the chair, put his feet up on the conference table, and closed his eyes.

## 40.

In the daylight, backtracking to I-95 was easy, and they made it to Point Judith in less than an hour. Mom sat in the back of the truck with the cables and equipment boxes. Sanchez was a little nervous about her not being tied up, but as long as she was worried about Annie and the baby, he had her.

They almost didn't get on the ferry. When Sanchez went to buy their ticket, the lady behind the plexiglass window asked him if he had a reservation.

"We need one?"

She almost laughed, then took another look at him and thought better of it.

"Yes, it's usually very difficult to get a car across without reserving a couple of weeks in advance. Impossible in summer. This time of year, you may get a lucky break on standby. Just a moment, please."

Her fingers rattled across a keyboard. She paused, chewed her lip, nodded. Rattle rattle. Nod. Rattle. Nod. Sanchez wanted to reach through the plexiglass, grab her by the lapels, and shake. He'd left Mom in the truck, parked in a lot across the street. Every few seconds he looked back. It sat there, no change. Up close you could see it was dented all to shit. From here it looked like a big square marshmallow. He should have tied her up. He imagined her sitting there in back

thinking of ways to fuck him up.

Finally, the ticket lady looked up at Sanchez.

"There's no chance for the next boat, the twelve o'clock, but we've had a cancellation and I can get you on the two o'clock. Would you like a ticket?"

"Yeah." He paid cash and walked back to the truck, wondering what the hell they were going to do for three hours. A gleaming silver lunch truck had parked on the corner and Sanchez got tuna sandwiches, Cokes, Milky Way bars.

He let himself into the truck on the driver's side. She was sitting where he'd left her. Docile as a puppy. This was going to be easier than he thought.

"Here's some food," he said. "I have to do a couple of errands. I'll be back in maybe an hour. Don't even think about going anywhere. Wait, I want you to hear something."

He pulled out her cell, shielded the keys from her view and punched ten numbers at random. He held the device to his ear.

"Hey, Michael. Yeah, it's me. How's Annie? Good, good. Okay. Yeah, we're fine. We're on the two o'clock. Yeah. Listen, so if you don't hear from me in an hour, you know what to do." He looked meaningfully at Lori. "Right. Well, stay near the phone. We don't want any screwups. Right. Later."

He put the phone away. "Tell me I don't need to tie you up again," he said.

"You don't need to tie me up."

Mostly he was thinking if somebody passing by the truck looked in at the right angle, they might be able to see her. It would look a lot better if she was sitting on a speaker crate eating a tuna sandwich than if she were lying on her side hogtied with duct tape.

"Okay then."

He was going to have to kick the ransom part of this thing into gear. Put the squeeze on Ronald or Royce or whatever the fuck his name was. Give him some deadlines.

He had only a vague notion about how wire transfers worked, and thought about PayPal for maybe five seconds. What he needed to do was get the guy to stuff a big wad of cash into a gym bag and fly out here.

The waterfront strip was two or three blocks of retail chintz, stores with names like *The Sea Urchin* and *Land Ho!* Sanchez got a kick out of that one, thought there ought to be a sister store called *Sea Bitch*.

The Ocean View Café was a half block up from the waterfront and whatever view of the ocean it might once have had was occluded by a monstrous Pak-n-Save. What it did have was a small sign in the window that said *Internet*.

Sanchez bought a coffee and an apple fritter, paid five bucks for a half hour in one of the four computer kiosks near the back of the place, and logged on.

Three e-mails from Robbie, two from Blake, the words “asshole” and “fuck” prominent in the subject headers. Sanchez jerked back as if he’d been physically struck. Hands shaking, he deleted the messages without opening them. The *Tango*, all that stuff, it was already someone else’s life, already gone.

He looked around the café. Empty except for couple of bookish student types at tables near the windows, the nice looking girl at the counter who’d given him his food and password on the rig. None of them gave a shit who he was.

He got up unsteadily and went to the bathroom, locked the door behind him and set up a couple of fat lines on his pocket mirror. Sucked them down fast; left, right. Two more; left, right. His head was full of spiders that consumed conscious thought before it reached his forebrain, leaving only a coppery, chemical dread.

He looked in the mirror above the sink, saw grace and suffering, an outlaw nobility. He took a deep breath, then another.

*Fuck*. His fist snaked out and smashed into the mirror, denting the metal and warping his reflection. He’d forgotten about his injury and the pain was so bad that for a

moment it felt like he left his body; he was plastered against the ceiling of the bathroom like a cat treed by a dog, looking down at some poor sod clutching his hand and sobbing.

The pain receded after a few minutes and, without looking in the mirror, he splashed cold water on his face, wiped it off with a paper towel, and returned to the kiosk.

He felt like he was typing with a boxing glove, his hand curled into a claw. He pulled up a travel site, looked up the SFO to JFK direct flights. It was still early on the West Coast. There was a 5:40 United that looked pretty good. A rich fuck like Royce could pull together a sack of cash in half a day, no problem. Sanchez had seen in a movie somewhere the approach was to give the guy a schedule, never mind it was fucking impossible to meet, just lay it out and let him run his ass ragged. Keep him on the defensive, no time to worry about whether to call the cops or not.

Sanchez pulled out Lori's cell phone, flipped it open and scrolled through the directory. There. Ross, not Royce. Whatever, he was still a preppie looking motherfucker. Time to rock his world.

He looked around. Nobody within earshot. Pressed the button. The phone rang four times and flipped over to voicemail. Hello, this is Ross Williamson, yadda yadda. Sanchez sat there, poised to speak, and drew a complete blank. Gargling sounds emerged from deep in his throat. *Fuck*. He hit the pound sign, got the voicemail lady. If you are satisfied with this message, et cetera. Sanchez hit the star key, got the prompt, said "This is Ross Williamson...*Fuck!*" Pound sign. Star key. "Okay, listen up. The reason I'm calling you on your wife's phone is that, uh..." Pound sign. Star key.

After four more attempts, he managed to get through what he thought was a reasonably coherent message. He didn't dare play it back – he didn't want to have to erase it again. But all the basic stuff was there. The flight, the money. Annie, Lori, the baby. No cops.

Sanchez leaned back, relieved. Now all he had to do was get Mom to Block Island and wait for payday.

When he got back to the truck, Lori was gone.

## 41.

Ross pressed a button on the handset, held it up to his mouth and said “voicemail.” He entered the passcode and listened.

Lori’s number was in the call log, but it was a male voice on the playback, New York accent, almost Bowery Boys thick, voice tense and reedy.

- Williamson. Listen. If you ever want to see your wife, if you ever want to see your baby, listen very closely. Don’t even think about calling the police. You do that and you’re dead. They’re dead. Listen very closely. I want a hundred thousand dollars in cash. I want you to get it, get the money, get it...I want you to put it in a black gym bag and come to New York. Take the 5:40 United flight out of SFO to JFK tonight and call me, call this number when you get here. Call the cops and they’re dead. Miss the flight, come without the money. Dead. Don’t bother calling this number. I’m turning off the phone until your flight gets in. If you think this is a joke, if you think I’m not completely serious, just...don’t think that. No police.

Ross played the message again, fingers stumbling over



the keypad. Looked up at Doctor Bob. He suddenly felt himself sweating – his armpits, his forehead, his crotch erupting damp and rank.

“What is it?” Doctor Bob asked.

Ross held up his hand, shook his head. He said “Lori” into the handset, held it to his ear. It went right to voicemail, which is what happened when the phone was turned off or out of range. Again said her name, held the phone to his ear, got her voicemail.

“Lori,” he said. “Call me.”

“What?” Doctor Bob repeated.

Ross barely heard him. He found his voice after a moment.

“This is...crazy. Listen.”

He retrieved the message again, turned on the phone’s speaker, and put the handset down in the middle of the table.

As the recording played, Doctor Bob’s features morphed into a skeptical grimace. When it was done, he looked up at Ross.

“He sounds like a fucking retard.”

“Well...”

“No, seriously. He can’t put three words together without stepping on his dick. There’s something seriously wrong with him.”

“That’s fucking brilliant, Bob. Of course there’s something seriously wrong with him.” His voice loud in the small room. “If this is some numbnuts who hacked my voicemail, he’s got a sick fucking sense of humor and he knows way too much about me. If this is real...Fuck.” He put his head in his hands, ran them up across his forehead, through his hair.

“Fuck.” He looked up again. “Sorry. I’m just – ”

“Don’t worry about it. Play it again.”

They listened through the recording again.

“Whoever he is,” Doctor Bob said, “He’s seriously stressed. You can hear his voice cracking.”

They said nothing for a few moments, looking at the cell phone as if it had some organic connection to the message it bore.

Ross picked up the phone, dialed directory assistance and asked for the number of the W Hotel in Manhattan. He asked at the front desk if Lori was still checked in and they confirmed that she was. He asked to be transferred to her room phone. No answer.

"Lori," he said at the voicemail prompt. "Call me."

Ross and Doctor Bob stared at the phone for another couple of minutes.

"It's real," Ross said, finally. "I think it's real. Annie's been AWOL for a few days and Lori headed out there a couple of weeks early. She was going to hang out with her, help out before the baby..."

"You think Annie has something to do with this?"

"No, I..." Wait, did he? "No. It's not completely clear from the message, but it sounds like he has Annie too. 'If you ever want to see your baby.'"

"You said she was kind of rough around the edges."

"Well, yeah, but not like this. I just can't see it."

"Well, who then?"

"How the fuck should I know? I think we have to treat this like it's real, do what the guy says."

"What about the cops?"

"What about them?"

"You gonna call them?"

"Absolutely not. I think if we bring them in I can kiss my family goodbye. No way."

"Look, I don't like cops any more than you do, but they've got people who know how to deal with this kind of thing."

"What's to know? Christ. I get the money. Somehow. Get the money, get on a plane, show up."

"With a black gym bag."

"Yeah, black gym bag. Like a fashion statement. You're right – he is a moron."

“What about the money?” Doctor Bob asked. “Can you get it?”

Ross shook his head. “I hadn’t even gotten there yet, but no. I don’t think so.”

“Tesseract’s got just about a hundred in the bank.”

“Yeah, but I can’t draw more than ten without board approval and all kinds of signatures.”

“Well, my limit’s five, so we’ve got fifteen right there.”

Ross looked at Doctor Bob, leaning back in the cushy conference chair, high black Converse sneakers up on the table. He smiled in spite of the cold knot in his stomach.

“Okay, then. I’ve got about five in a money market checking account, another ten in savings, about fifteen in a brokerage account I can liquefy. There’s an IRA I could burn down but I couldn’t get my hands on anything before tonight. And it’s not that much, anyway. Most of our money is in the house. Or Tesseract.”

“What about the second?”

“In the works. It’ll be another ten days or so.”

“I’m even less liquid than you are, but I could pry loose fifteen or so.”

“You’d do that?”

Doctor Bob shrugged. “Sure.”

“Thanks.” He blinked back tears, took a breath. “Okay, where does that leave us?” He looked off to the side as he added the numbers. “Sixty grand. Not even close.”

“So you bring what you have, tell him that’s what you can do. Blood from a stone, et cetera. Convert the IRA as soon as you can to sweeten it, what, another twenty or so?”

“Something like that.”

“This guy will take what he can get and get out of Denver. He’s not gonna kill anyone over spare change.”

“I don’t know what this guy is gonna do. And forty K isn’t exactly spare change.” He was silent for a moment. “But yeah, okay, I see what you’re saying. I don’t like it, though.”

“There’s not much to like here. We just have to get

your family back.”

“Yeah. Okay, what else do I have to do?”

He felt like he needed to be doing something with his hands. He got up and started writing on the whiteboard. It was a familiar mode and he drew some comfort from it.

“Bank. Plane ticket.” He paused, a little lightheaded from the marker smell. “Also – damn it – also, I need to ask you to keep an eye on Irv. He probably shouldn’t be left alone.”

“You want me to stay there or just look in on him?”

“I hate to ask this.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“No, Irv’s been in this intermittent dementia thing. I came home yesterday and he was blasting Led Zeppelin, smoking weed, and getting a blow job from a hooker named Cinnamon.”

“And you think there’s something wrong with him.”

Ross gave him an annoyed look.

“Sorry.”

“What’s troubling is that there seems to be a personality change going on, but it’s not converging. He’s basically all over the map. Very withdrawn sometimes; other times definitely present but very hostile. Other times he’s fairly lucid and focused. And he cycles through these modalities on a daily basis, sometimes several in one day.” He didn’t want to tell Doctor Bob about the groping incident. It seemed too raw and private.

“So, yeah, I’d feel a lot better if you could stay there for a couple of days. It’s a lot to ask, I know. If this thing stretches out any longer than that, I don’t know what we’ll do.”

“It’s fine. Both of Mickey’s parents went through a long, slow decline. I’ve pretty much seen it all. Besides, I like Irv. He and I spent a couple of hours talking about horse racing at that barbecue at your place last fall. The guy’s a real track hound.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me,” Ross said. “I don’t

know what to say, Bob. I owe you big time.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Also...I need to ask you to keep this place from flying off the rails. If that’s possible. Right now, it’s more important than ever to try and refocus the Anaconda product towards an out-of-the-box security solution. If anything’s gonna pull Tesseract through this, it’ll be going niche. So keep the Posse focused, and maybe work on some of your old buddies in academia to get a handle on those good Homeland Security contracts. It’s not short term, but it’s the right positioning.”

Doctor Bob nodded. “I’ve already been working the corduroy jacket circuit. And I’ll tell the team you’re off raising money. They’ll like that.”

“Okay, let’s get to it. First thing, I’m gonna see if Gina can get me on that flight.”

“You sent her home, remember?”

“Shit.”

Ross caught her just as she was getting ready to go, desktop powered down, red leather purse hanging on a thin strap from her shoulder.

“Gina, one last thing...”

He gave her the flight information.

“It’s extremely important that I get on that flight,” he said.

Gina was already booting up again. “I’m on it.”

The corporate account and his personal checking, savings, and brokerage accounts were all at Washington Mutual, but he went to a different branch for each transaction. He didn’t know if he’d have any trouble, but he didn’t want to have to answer any questions.

It was easier than he thought it would be. In less than an hour, he had forty thousand dollars in hundreds in a Whole Foods grocery bag. He made a final stop at Big Six Sports and got a small black nylon ripstop duffle bag. He transferred the cash from the grocery bag to the duffle in the

Big Six parking lot, windblown and empty under the shadow of the BART tracks. He felt conspicuous and exposed and got out of there as soon as he was done.

On his way back to the office, he called Gina about the plane reservations.

- I got you standby on the five forty and you're confirmed on the red-eye, leaves SFO at 9 PM, arrives JFK at five forty AM.

- Standby? That's not gonna cut it.

- It's what I could get. They're sold out. Nothing in first or business either.

- You don't understand, Gina, I need to get on that flight.

- I've gone online myself, I've called Lois at Executive Travel to see if she could work something. It's booked, Ross. I'm sorry. They said you should just show up at least an hour before the flight, check in for the redeye, then get yourself on the standby list for the five forty. You can't phone that in – they said you actually have to be there.

Ross was silent, breathing through his nose, trying to get a handle on the panic that was welling within him. He closed his eyes, tried to empty his mind.

- Ross?

- Uh, yeah. Sorry. Listen, Gina, thanks. I'll be in shortly to get a couple of things, then I'm off to the airport. Why don't you go home.

He felt dizzy and pulled over. Turned the car off and rested his head on the steering wheel. He had to get on that flight. He tried to imagine where Lori was right at that moment - tied up somewhere, maybe unconscious. Maybe dead. He didn't know. He looked in his cell phone directory to see if he had Annie's number. It was there, Annie Day, and

he touched the button to connect. Three rings, then voicemail. He hung up without leaving a message. He tried Lori's phone again. Direct to voicemail. He hung up and tossed the phone on the passenger seat.

A car horn honked and he looked up. A cop car idled next to him, the guy leaning over in the seat and pointing to Ross' window. Ross pressed the switch and the window slid down with a soft whir.

The cop was young, not much more than a kid. Blonde crewcut, face dusted with freckles.

"You okay?" he asked.

Ross fought the urge to unload on the guy, tell him everything. "I'm fine. Thanks."

"You know you're parked at a bus stop?"

Ross looked at the blue curb, the route sign a few feet in front of him. He managed a weak smile.

"Oh man, I didn't even see that. Sorry! I'll just be on my way."

The cop nodded, narrowed his eyes a bit in that cop stare they probably teach you at the academy.

"You sure you're all right?"

Fuck. Ross really didn't want to have to explain forty grand in a gym bag on the passenger seat. It was his money and he could prove it, but not before things got complicated.

"I'm fine." He imagined laying across his features a mask radiating calm assurance and reason. It worked, or maybe what worked was that he was basically an aging preppie in a late-model Lexus and didn't cut much of a threat or ping the profiles on the El Cerrito PD watchlist.

The cop gave him one last look and nodded. "Find a better place to park," he said, and drove off.

Hands shaking, Ross started the car and pulled into the street.

By the time Ross got back to Tesseract, Gina was gone, the Pit empty. Screen savers rippled and winked. Iridescent bulbous goop oozed buoyantly in Jason's lava lamp. Alpha's statue of Ganesh smiled enigmatically from atop

her cube barrier.

Doctor Bob was waiting in Ross' office, four thick bundles of hundred dollar bills laid out in front of him on Ross' desk.

Ross nodded. "Twenty K?" he asked.

"Yeah."

He paused, not sure what to say. Doctor Bob stood up and put his arms around him in a fierce embrace.

"Be careful. Good luck."

Ross returned the hug and stepped back.

"Thanks." He reached into his pocket, took out his keyring, and worried off the house key. "Here you go."

Doctor Bob smiled and slipped it into his pocket. "I'll try to keep Irv out of trouble."

"If he stays out of jail and the house doesn't burn down, I'll be happy. Mickey okay with this?"

"For some reason, she really likes the two of you. She sends her love, says you need anything, just ask."

"Okay, then. I'm gone."

He packed up his laptop into its travel case, slipped the twenty grand into a side pocket, and took a final look around the office.

It was weird. All the Microsoft stuff, the customer suckup shuffle he'd spent all morning at, the VC crapola, it was all bullshit compared to what was going on now.

He'd been reprioritized.



## 42.

Lori was sitting on the floor of the truck with her back against a speaker crate, working through her options, which were precious few. She had no choice but to go along, try to keep Sanchez from fucking things up out of sheer incompetence, at least until they got to Block Island. She wondered if he was blowing smoke about the partner, but it didn't matter right now. She couldn't take any chances.

She heard the truck door open but didn't bother to get up. Fuck him.

She heard a sharp intake of breath, then "Shit." The door slammed shut. Lori got up and pulled open the back door of the truck, saw Sanchez stomping across the parking lot, pulling his gun out from behind his back.

"Hey," she called. "Sanchez."

He stopped, looked around. From twenty feet away, she could see white surrounding his eyes. He fixed on her and stood there for a moment, expressionless, swaying slightly. Then he ran towards her, jumped into the truck, and slammed the door shut behind him.

He raised the pistol, holding it like a club. Lori stepped back, distributing her weight evenly, ready to duck or block. She wasn't sure she could take getting hit again.

"Where the fuck were you?"

"What are you talking about? I was right here."

Sanchez didn't say anything for a minute, then he shook his head and stuck the gun back in his waistband. He looked around, found the roll of duct tape.

"You need to lay off the blow, Sanchez. You're losing it."

"Shut the fuck up and sit your ass down."

"Come on. You don't need to do this. I want to get through this as badly as you do."

"Shut up. Sit down."

"All right, all right."

Lori slid to the floor, held out her hands. Sanchez bound her as he did before: hands together, elbows secured to her sides, feet together at the ankles, thighs wrapped tight. Muttering soft curses as he worked.

When he was done he stood up unsteadily, pushed his dreads back with both hands. He was sweating freely.

"Sanchez."

He looked blankly at her.

"You need to take it easy. I'm not going anywhere –"

"Not fucking now, you're not."

She started over.

"You need to get us to Block Island. Ross will get the money. And you can let us go, me and Annie." Speaking slowly, deliberately. Not sure if she was getting through. Fighting back a rising sense of despair that this chucklehead didn't have it together to get them on and off a ferry.

"You want me to tape your mouth shut, too?"

"Okay, fine. Just don't do anything stupid."

He picked up the duct tape, then shook his head.

"Fuck it, you're right. I need to take it easy. We're almost through this."

"Hey, listen. You want me to drive?"

He tilted his head. "Are you out of your mind?"

"No, I'm serious. I want to get us through this as much as you do. More. I just think you're not in such good shape right now. If I were behind the wheel, I'd be less likely to attract attention."

He thought about it, nodding.

"You drive a stick?"

"Sure."

"Don't even think about fucking around. We get busted, my partner doesn't hear from me –"

"I just want to get through this," she repeated.

Lori could see that he was on board, but he pretended to think about it for another minute.

"Okay, then," he said finally. He reached into his pocket and tossed her the keys. They bounced off her chest and landed on the floor of the truck.

She raised her bound hands.

"Oh yeah." Sanchez looked around, found a utility knife on top of a speaker crate, and cut her loose.

Lori couldn't believe this guy. He was like Cheech *and* Chong, only scary. Cheech and Chong meets Travis Bickle, the *Taxi Driver* guy. Or Ray Liotta near the end of *Goodfellas* – completely feral, almost comically fucked up, bouncing against the interior walls of a box of his own devising. She had a brief, vivid fantasy of poking her fingers into his eyes as hard as she could as soon as her hands got free, feeling the gelid resistance giving way.

No way. Let him do this thing, get them over to Annie and the baby. See what happens then.

She drove the two blocks to the ferry queue, getting a feel for the truck. The transmission was stiff, the brakes squishy, and there was a weird lag between pressing the accelerator and the truck's response. But Sanchez seemed relieved. The aura of chemical panic had faded a bit and he seemed to withdraw into himself, hunched in the passenger seat, fooling with the boom box until he decided on some old *Clash* – *London Calling*. It seemed appropriately apocalyptic.

Finally, a hunched, ancient man in a yellow rain slicker waved them onto the boat and another man, equally crusty, directed them into the middle column of vehicles. They pulled to a stop behind a gray Subaru wagon over-

flowing with vacation paraphernalia: beach chairs, coolers, bicycles.

She could do it, she thought. Right now. Slam him in the throat. She knew exactly what to do. He'd never see it coming. She tried to picture it afterwards, Sanchez clutching his throat, fighting for air, and she couldn't see it, couldn't see how to jump that chasm between thought and action. Even without Annie or the Michael guy.

Deflated, she turned to Sanchez. "What now?"

Sanchez shrugged. "Couple of hours on this thing, I guess."

"Have you called my husband?"

"Yeah, I left a message."

"You left a message. You haven't actually spoken with him?"

"Yeah, that's right. So?"

"So how do you know that he got the message? That he's bringing the money? How does he know that you're not some joker?"

"I used your cell phone."

"Well, that's something, anyway. Look, can I call him?"

"Fuck no."

"I just want to make sure he knows I'm okay. And that he knows this is real."

"You let me worry about that."

Lori was getting used to his mood swings, discovering that when he was in the down phase he could be manipulated to some extent. She wasn't sure how far she could push it, though. Sometimes it helped to change direction, keep him off balance.

"You mind if I go topside?"

"Are you fucking serious?"

She shrugged.

"Whatever."

She felt more like a bitchy girlfriend than a kidnap victim. Do you want me to drive. Go easy on the coke. Pretty

soon she'd be commenting on his wardrobe. He frightened her, though, no doubt there, but she was as much afraid of his incompetence as she was of his violence or threats.

She tried to imagine herself on the other side of this somehow – Ross here, Annie safe, large with their baby, Sanchez and the mystery partner out of the picture, counting their money, on a plane to Mexico, whatever, just gone. She could not conjure an image, a place, all of them together, and felt despair pulling at something deep within her already tightly strung, stretching it thinner still. If only she could visualize an outcome she could believe it would happen.

## 43.

On his way to the freeway, Ross stopped at the Emeryville Plaza. Old Navy for a change of clothes and underwear, Walgreen's for toiletries and a cheap overnight bag.

Bridge traffic was light. 101 was starting to thicken south of San Francisco, but he made it to the airport by 3:50 PM.

He checked in for his red-eye and asked the clerk about his standby status on the 5:40.

"Just a minute." Her fingers danced across the keyboard for what seemed like a full minute, and she looked up.

"You'll have to register at the gate."

Jesus, why couldn't you just say so in the first place?

"Thank you."

The 5:40 flight to JFK wasn't even listed at the gate yet. Ross took a nearby seat and waited. He tried Lori's cell again, tried Annie again. No go. When the gate attendant finally showed up and opened shop, Ross practically pounced on her.

"Standby? Ross Williamson?"

She checked a printout with several handwritten additions and deletions.

"We have a very full flight tonight and there are

several people ahead of you on standby.”

“How could anybody be ahead of me on standby? I’m the first one here.”

She fixed him with the pitying gaze one would reserve for a particularly dull child.

“You can register by phone.”

“But they told me I couldn’t do that.”

“Who told you that?”

“They – my secretary – they told her on the phone– ”

She shook her head. She was pretty in a Farah Fawcett kind of way, big Bambi eyes and blonde hair piled in an improbable perm.

“I’m very sorry. You were misinformed.”

“You don’t understand. I have to get on that flight.”

“You’re on the list,” she said. “Number seven. Good luck. Now please, there are people waiting.”

Ross turned around. Half a dozen people had already gathered behind him in a ragged line. They looked curiously at him.

“I need to get on that flight,” he said again, weakly.

“We’ll do the best we can. Now please, step aside.” She waved her hand vaguely in the direction of a nearby seat. Her look had changed from condescension to grim annoyance. Don’t give me any trouble, the look said.

Ross sat down. He looked around at the other passengers. Next to him, a middle-aged road warrior – nice suit, small suitcase on wheels, a slim laptop case strapped to the extended handle – talking technology business arcana into a cell phone.

“Margolis doesn’t – No, if we can’t leverage their infrastructure our cap-ex goes through the roof. No. No. Yes. All right. Set up a meeting with their biz dev guy and have Jensen call their CTO. Right.”

Sensing a kindred spirit, Ross turned to the guy when he clicked his phone shut and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

“Excuse me.”

The guy turned to him with a mildly annoyed

expression.

“Yes?”

“I have to get on this flight. I’m booked on the red-eye, but I need to get to New York as soon as possible. Family illness. Would you be interested in switching? I’ll give you two hundred dollars.”

The guy started shaking his head halfway through Ross’ pitch.

“No. I’m sorry. No.”

Ross turned to the elderly woman sitting in the row of chairs across from him, who had obviously been listening in.

“How about you, ma’am? Three hundred dollars.”

She shook her head and looked away.

The technology executive got up, squeezed between Ross and the woman, and walked up to the podium ahead of the line. He spoke quietly to the gate attendant and she looked at Ross.

*Shit.*

She beckoned Ross to the podium. The guy passed Ross without meeting his eyes, retrieved his bags, and took a different seat.

“Sir, you can’t cut a deal with the other passengers. We have regulations. If you continue, I’ll have to call security.”

“My daughter is very sick. Cancer. I need to get to New York as soon as possible.”

“You’re booked on the 9 PM. You’re waitlisted on the 5:40. We’re doing everything we can. I need to ask you not to harass the other passengers or I *will* call security.” *And you’ll never get out of here*, her look added.

Ross could see her debating whether to call security anyway. He tried to smile, okay, thanks, and returned to his seat. He caught the technology executive’s eye before he sat down.

*Asshole*, he mouthed silently.

The guy looked away.

Ross, feeling frustrated and helpless, watched the



boarding area fill up. He gathered up his bags and walked across the concourse to the Starbucks. He ordered a doppio grande lowfat half decaf caramel macchiato, took a seat at a table where he could keep an eye on the boarding area, and listened to a Starbucks branded Groovy Soul Sounds compilation, Otis watching the tide roll away.

The barista reminded Ross a little of Annie. Younger, but she had that spiky-haired no bullshit look. Ross turned it over in his mind again, could Annie have anything to do with this?

He didn't see it. They didn't really know much about her, and maybe coming from such a bad place with the infertility treatments, they'd been a little too anxious to get the surrogacy going with her. And she did have this New York edge. But that was part of what Ross liked about her, that no-bullshit-zone aura. He'd had doubts, but felt for the most part that she was straight up, that she could be trusted, and he still felt that. But he also wondered if somehow she wasn't part of this, maybe unwittingly. She was the wild card here, really, the random element. He couldn't figure out how else this kind of chaos could have descended upon them. Annie was it. Annie was the key.

He thought of the guy's voice on the tape. *Miss that flight, they're dead.* Fuck, there just wasn't anything he could do without blowing the whole thing out of the water, bringing in the police. If he did that he knew it would be all over. He just hoped Doctor Bob was right and the guy was just blowing smoke. He called Lori's number again, maybe the guy would answer and he could talk to him. No answer, but he left a message anyway, saying he was on standby but probably wouldn't get on the flight, he'd be taking the redeye.

He tried calling United Customer Service, see how big an asshole he could be. He never even got to first base, stuck in IVR purgatory – *press or say one, say go back, I'm sorry I didn't understand that, press or say two.* It was impossible to get another human on the line. He clicked off after looping through the same circle jerk three times, getting nowhere.

Man, the world was really going to shit, you couldn't even abuse airline phone help any more.

He didn't know where to go, what to do. Passengers walked quickly up and down the concourse, rolling wheeled suitcases. The loudspeakers murmured incessantly of flights and gates, security, suspicious items, boarding passes. All around him hummed the machinery of transience.

It looked like there was something happening at the gate, people shuffling into a ragged line. He got his bags and walked over. The gate attendant was reading standby names over the loudspeaker. *Morosini. Jamison Sonnenschein.* He tried to catch her eye. She looked briefly at him, shook her head, managed to emit a little smile of fake sympathy. *Stanton. Khanapure. Please come to the podium at Gate Twenty Seven. Williamson. Please come to the podium. Gate Twenty Seven.*

Ross hefted the bag full of cash and slid it into the overhead compartment. He sat down in the aisle seat, willing his body to relax. His anxiety filled him completely and he didn't know what to do with it. It was a relief to turn himself over to the cocoon of travel, swaddled in soft P.A. system gongs, whirring motors, female voices murmuring reassuringly of exit routes and water landings.

He breathed in the airplane smell, a little like a new car but with a very faint undertone of human presence – body odor, gassy food, spilled booze. He closed his eyes as the plane hurled itself into the air, feeling the acceleration tug at his bones.

He had a double scotch and slept through the meal service. He woke in the middle of a movie he couldn't identify, multiple screens hanging from the ceiling splashes of color and motion mirroring one another in the darkened cabin.

He turned on his cell phone as soon as the plane touched down at JFK. Less than a minute later it began to ring.

## 44.

Mom sat still as a rock, looking straight ahead. Sanchez couldn't tell what she was thinking. Fuck it. He didn't need to. He looked around the truck – sound gear, cables, amps – the accoutrements of someone else's life. He could probably get a few grand for it all in Boston – the truck, the gear, everything. He doubted he'd make it to Boston, though. He realized he hadn't thought much about the getaway. Dad shows up with the gym bag, there's a tearful reunion, then what? Shit, he'd probably have to take somebody with him for insurance.

Annie, of course. She'd probably come around anyway, soon as she figured out who held the cards. It was back to Annie again. Annie Day. Annie was the key.

His thoughts raced faster than he could capture them. He felt on the verge of something, a deeper understanding hovering just out of reach.

Too much fucking blow, man. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a vial of smack, a square of foil folded in quarters, and a Bic lighter. Unfolded the foil, sprinkled a shallow mound of powder in the middle. Looked out the window. Around and above him the belly of the ferry, great functional spans of metal thick with red and white paint. He could feel the vibration of the engines below his feet. A small jolt, an increase in engine pitch, a slight side-to-side

sway. They were on their way. To payday. He folded the foil in half and carefully tapped the smack back along the crease into the vial, trying to compensate for a slight tremor. Not a good time to get all skagged out. Speedballing was what got him into this mess in the first place, that fucking Knicks game. Stay pure, stay with the yang, the light, the heat. Smack was yin – dark and cool, submissive. Plenty of time for that later.

He set up a short line of coke, paused and lowered his gear while a young mother passed in front of him, a trio of kids orbiting around her like moons, small and fast; Dad trailing behind dragging a couple of deck chairs and a cooler. Sanchez and the Dad locked eyes for a moment, then the guy looked away. Poor, sorry bastard.

He looked over at Lori. She was giving him the stinkeye. He held the gear out to her.

“You want some?”

She glared and shook her head. He sucked down the line, resisted the urge to immediately set up another.

They sat together in the front of the truck, not moving or speaking, looking straight ahead as if they were watching a movie. A seagull flew overhead and lurched to a halt on top of a battered Valiant in the next aisle. The air was heavy with diesel and salt. The boat vibrated beneath their feet.

## 45.

Annie slept well, the decision to get right with Lori like a balm. When she awoke it was nearly noon. She showered, made herself some tea and toast, and sat on the tiny screened-in porch in back of the house, listening to classical music on the radio and reading more of the Bowles. She was mildly surprised to note that she didn't want a cigarette.

She tried Lori's cell again, and left a message at the W. Spud was kicking it up again, and that was all right. Annie could see the road from where she sat, just before it curved around to run parallel with the beach. There was no traffic at all, vehicle or pedestrian. She supposed things would pick up as the weather warmed. By summer, the quiet would be hard to imagine. She wondered, by summer, where she would be. The thought was punctuated by a swift, sharp kick. The Spud, impatient with melancholy.

It occurred to her that she would miss him. Her captive audience. She was used to talking to him, tuning in to his alien presence, and she imagined that he was tuned to her as well. No, she was sure of it. She started to feel herself coming adrift with that sadness, like a car beginning to slide on black ice, but it stopped. It held. She felt tightness around her eyes and her vision blurred with tears, but it was all right somehow, it was okay. She could deal.

She imagined herself writing him a letter, getting the words right in her mind before getting up off her ass to rummage through her pack for paper and pen.

*Dear Spud*, the letter would begin.

*As I write this you are inside my belly, kicking, letting me know you are here. I have been very happy to give you a safe place to grow into the baby your parents want so badly. Hopefully I haven't made a mess of things and you are strong and healthy.*

*You will not remember this but we have come to know each other. We talk, you and I. Maybe not with words, but I know when you are happy and when you are afraid, and I think you know the same about me. I want you to know that you have helped me. I don't think we will know each other after you leave my body, but know this: I will never forget you.*

*Peace,*

*Annie Day*

It was all there, complete, hanging in her mind; it was pretty much everything she wanted to say. As she got up to get pen and paper to nail it down, she saw a white panel truck pass by the front of the house and continue along the road. It was battered and nondescript, repurposed from a decade or more of service carrying milk or newspapers.

It looked a lot like the *Tango* band truck, but that wasn't possible. She craned her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of driver or passenger, but the truck passed out of sight beyond the curve of the road.

*No way*, she thought.

A couple of minutes later, the truck returned, slowed, and pulled into the driveway. Sanchez got out of the passenger side, walked to the front door, and knocked. Annie couldn't see the driver.

*Jesus Christ*, she thought. With a mounting feeling of dread, she walked to the door and opened it.

She could tell immediately that he was coked out of his skull; a chemical aura surrounded him like a radioactive glow. It also looked like someone had taken enough of his

bullshit and beaten the crap out of him, but it didn't look like that had humbled him much.

"Sanchez, God damn it. What are you doing here? How did you find out I was here?"

Sanchez pushed past her and closed the door.

"Never mind all that. Your sponsor told me. That's not important. Listen, listen...payday. This is a fucking *score*, man – "

"Slow down. What are you talking about?"

"Listen, your guy, the Dad, is flying out with a bag full of cash. I've got Mom in the truck – "

"What? Lori's with you?"

"Aren't you fucking listening? We're *doing* it, the ransom thing. Only she thinks I've kidnapped you, too. Hey, where are you going?"

Annie ran out the front door into the driveway. Lori was standing next to the truck. Annie ran to her and the two women embraced.

"I've been trying to call you," Annie said, the words muffled on Lori's shoulder. "I'm really sorry I went AWOL."

She stepped back, saw the bruise.

"Shit, did he – ?"

"What's going on, Annie? Where's the other guy?"

"What are you talking about?"

Sanchez appeared, waving the gun vaguely in their direction.

"Back in the house, girls. Come on."

"Where's your partner?" Lori asked.

"What did you do, Sanchez?"

Sanchez laughed. "Partner," he said. "You dumb cunt. Get in the house, both of you."

"God damn it, Sanchez, what did you do?"

She walked up to him and pushed him in the chest.

"*What did you do?*"

She pushed him again and slapped him hard across the face. Sanchez tried to step aside and the gun went off.

Annie went down.

Lori had started moving towards them when things first got physical. At the sound of the gunshot, time slowed. She'd heard it before from her instructors at the *dojo*, from people who had been in violent situations. There was no other way to describe it. It was like a set piece, Sanchez off balance, gun in hand, Annie down on the driveway gravel, holding herself.

Lori stepped inside his reach, knocking his gun hand aside with an outward block and grabbing his wrist. She pulled him towards her and watched his head jerk up, exposing his throat. Just like it was supposed to. Feeling like she had all the time in the world, she made a half fist with her free hand, fingers curling tight and touching the top of her palm. She imagined a target behind his throat and her hand fully extended to meet it.

Then Sanchez was on the floor, clutching his throat, Lori crouched over him in cat stance. *Combinations*. Her instructors had hammered it into her head. Don't assume someone is out just because they're down. Without thinking, she fell on Sanchez, her pointed knee crushing his groin, her left hand curled in a stiff forked claw jabbing into his eyes. Her hand came away wet and she was back on her feet, cat stance, horse stance, her *kiya* scream echoing in her head. She was unsure if she had actually voiced it.

*Holy shit*, she thought distantly. It was like finding a different person locked inside her. *This stuff actually works*.

Annie lay in the gravel, holding her side, staring at Lori. Lori ran to her, lifted her bloody t-shirt to expose a long raw furrow in her side. There was more blood but it looked like the bullet had just grazed her. Sobbing, they held each other while Sanchez made choking sounds. After a while, the sounds stopped.



## 46.

Ross, Lori, and Annie were in the Captain's Quarters, a dubious strip mall seafood restaurant across I-95 from the Providence Best Western where the Rhode Island smokies had stashed them while disentangling the skein of Lori's story. Sanchez's trail of mayhem had spanned state lines and more than one capital crime, so the FBI was involved as well.

Everybody had been nice enough, for cops, but annoyingly relentless, asking the same questions over and over again in different ways, changing the order, the emphasis, the focus. They had assigned a "trauma specialist" to the case, an earnest, young woman named Adrian with a nervous laugh who might as well have had "new MSW" written across her forehead in lime green highlighter. Lori felt sorry for her and tried to give her something to work on, talking through the events, but in truth she felt more annoyed at herself than traumatized. She'd let Annie get shot, she hadn't been a skilled enough martial artist to merely maim Sanchez, she'd stupidly let herself get kidnapped in the first place, she'd swallowed Sanchez's story about a partner. The rest of her emotional energy was divided between a fierce protectiveness towards Annie, trying to process the gulf that hung between her and Ross, and an ongoing sense of violation and failure around Irv.

This was their second night at the Quarters and they

were old friends with Nicole, the waitress, who had heard about them on the news and kept bringing them refills of coffee and bread so she could eavesdrop.

“How’s the seafood chowder?” Lori asked.

Nicole had a disconcerting mannerism, pausing and staring into space for a beat or two in the middle of conversation as if listening to instructions only she could hear. She paused, then looked around and bent towards Lori. “It comes out of a can,” she said quietly.

“Okay, but how is it?” Lori asked.

Pause. Shrug. “Not bad.”

She went for the chowder and a salad. Ross ordered the crabmeat Caesar, Annie the fried clams.

They waited for their food in silence. Ross and Lori had spoken very little since his anticlimactic arrival the day before. He felt like an interloper, his presence not unwelcome, not exactly, but superfluous. There was some powerful female bonding going on between Lori and Annie and he didn’t quite know how he fit in. He wasn’t insecure about it, but after all that had happened he wanted his presence to matter more.

Later, alone in their hotel room, they circled warily around each other as they got ready for bed.

Finally, lying together in the blue television glow, feet touching, Ross broke the silence.

“How long do you want me to stay?”

She looked at him, smiled sadly, shrugged.

“Tesseract’s really hurting,” he said, “but I can stay here as long as necessary.” He didn’t want her to have to ask him to leave.

She nodded. “Maybe you should go back, then, take care of business, come back for the birth. I’m really okay here.”

“I know you are.” Even in bed, her presence seemed larger, as if she occupied more of the mattress.

“What about Irv?” he asked.

She exhaled loudly through her nose. “Irv. I don’t

know what to think about that, I really don't. I can still feel his hand on my boob. It's just so – *tacky*. I know it's not really him, or it's just some impaired shadow of him and what he did doesn't really mean anything. But that doesn't mean I want him in my house. It's too complicated. I really need to focus on being a mom and I'm not sure I can do that with the embodiment of parental failure hanging out in my den..."

"I'll take care of it," Ross said. "I'm not sure how, but I'll work it out by the time the Spud shows up."

"Thanks."

They didn't say much after that. Stewart segued to Letterman and they fell asleep to the amniotic murmur of canned voices and the sound of trucks leaving I-95, gearing down for the cloverleaf.

Lori was sitting near the window in Annie's shoebox apartment, looking out at Greenwich Avenue, listening to the *Dilandid Tango* CD. She'd put it on, with some trepidation, out of morbid curiosity, and was surprised and strangely appalled to find that they were pretty good. Sanchez in particular; his melodic bass was the glue that held their quirky architecture together.

She kept waiting for her feelings to come together about him, about their time together, but they were all over the map, like pieces of a dismantled engine scattered on a garage floor. When she pictured herself crouched over Sanchez in the driveway, her hand dripping with gore, she didn't know where to go with that or how to integrate it.

One thing seemed clear, though: an exchange had occurred, a ransom of sorts, Sanchez for Spud. And she was good with that, but transactions at other levels had also taken place, or were still unfolding. Before Ross went back to Berkeley, their time together had been both sweet and strained, punctuated with long silences, as if they were creating space for something new to happen between them but they didn't quite know what it would be. She figured they'd work it out. They were getting good at that.

She heard a key in the door and Annie came in gingerly, huge and beautiful.

“How’s Greta?” Lori asked.

“Better. She’s going to lose an eye, but she’s taking solid food, and she’s in good spirits. She says the whole ordeal is an exercise in gratitude for her.” She shook her head. “Fucking twelve-steppers.”

Annie sat down on the couch, slipped off her shoes, and put her feet up on the coffee table. Lori slid her chair close, took one of Annie’s feet, brought it to her lap, and began massaging the instep, working the spaces around the tiny foot bones.

“Man, that’s great,” Annie said.

“And how are you doing?” Lori asked.

“I’m okay. I’m gonna miss the Spud, but I’m all right with that. Definitely ready for the Main Event.” She rubbed her tight, round belly.

“Yeah,” Lori said. “Me too.”

## 48.

Ross was in the front yard again with a grocery sack, picking buttery yellow Meyers off the tree. He'd been on the phone all morning and it had inspired this small ritual, the gathering of lemons from which he would make a tall, frosty pitcher of lemonade. He was looking forward to telling Lori about it, exactly the kind of thing that would draw a deep chuckle out of her.

Emmett had called, the point guy from Heaven who had bankrolled Tesseract's seed round, to tell him that word had gotten out on the street that Microsoft had made an acquisition offer and he'd turned them down. Since then, Emmett had fielded half a dozen calls from VC firms asking about a Series A, and three of those were already headed down the due diligence road and Ross could expect to hear from them within the week. One of them was Sierra, his guy Tryggvason finally out of the hospital, and they were making noises about leading the round.

VCs were fucking sheep, no doubt about it. Never mind they won't give you the time of day when you need them, if Microsoft wants you, you must be good. If Microsoft wants you and you tell them to fuck off, you must be *really* good.

A battered Impala pulled up in front of the house, emitting a cloud of blue smoke as the engine coughed to a

stop. A woman with a huge mane of black hair wearing a tiger-striped leotard, hip-hugger jeans, and spike heels, got out of the car, grabbed a pair of empty boxes from the passenger side, and walked unsteadily up the path toward Ross.

“Hey, Cinnamon,” Ross said. “How’s it going?”

“Good,” she said. She was chewing a huge wad of gum and the smell of spearmint was almost overwhelming. “This is the last of the stuff.”

“You sure you’re good with this?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine. I exert a calming influence.”

Ross nodded. “I guess you do. Why don’t you go on ahead into the house. I’ll be in to give you a hand in just a minute. Maybe you’ll stay for a glass of lemonade.”

“Sure thing.” Her sizeable butt swayed alarmingly as she continued up the path.

When they were done packing, they carried their drinks back into the yard and sat in the big Adirondack chairs. The sky was deep blue, electric, depthless. The Bay sprawled before them, a cottony bank of fog just coming in through the Golden Gate, shrouding the towers of the bridge. The sun was warm on his face, the lemonade sweet and tart.

After Cinnamon left, Rosenberg came out into his yard. Ross wondered if he’d been waiting for her to leave. He was wearing Speedos that looked like they’d been sprayed on, Birkenstocks, and huge aviator sunglasses. He nodded at Ross, then bent to his trebuchet. The sound of hammering filled the air.









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