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DOWN THE LONG CONCOURSE they came unsteadily, Enid favoring her damaged hip, Alfred paddling at the air with loose-hinged hands and slapping the airport carpeting with poorly controlled feet, both of them carrying Nordic Pleasurelines shoulder bags and concentrating on the floor in front of them, measuring out the hazardous distance three paces at a time. To anyone who saw them averting their eyes from the dark-haired New Yorkers careering past them, to anyone who caught a glimpse of Alfred's straw fedora looming at the height of Iowa corn on Labor Day, or the yellow wool of the slacks stretching over Enid's outslung hip, it was obvious that they were midwestern and intimidated. But to Chip Lambert, who was waiting for them just beyond the security checkpoint, they were killers.

Chip had crossed his arms defensively and raised one hand to pull on the wrought-iron rivet in his ear. He worried that he might tear the rivet right out of his earlobe—that the maximum pain his ear's nerves could generate was less pain than he needed now to steady himself. From his station by the metal detectors he watched an azure-haired girl overtake his parents, an azure-haired girl of college age, a very wantable stranger with pierced lips and eyebrows. It struck him that if he could have sex with this girl for one second he could face his parents confidently, and that if he could keep on having sex with this girl once every minute for as long as his parents were in town he could survive their entire visit. Chip was a tall, gym-built man with crow's-feet and sparse butter-yellow hair; if the girl had noticed him, she might have thought he was a little too old for the leather he was wearing. As she hurried past him, he pulled harder on his rivet to offset the pain of her departure from his life forever and to focus his attention on his father, whose face was brightening at the discovery of a son among so many strangers. In the lunging manner of a man floundering in water, Alfred fell upon Chip and grabbed

Chip's hand and wrist as if they were a rope he'd been thrown. "Well!" he said. "Well!"

Enid came limping up behind him. "Chip," she cried, "what have you done to your *ears*?"

"Dad, Mom," Chip murmured through his teeth, hoping the azure-haired girl was out of earshot. "Good to see you."

He had time for one subversive thought about his parents' Nordic Pleasurelines shoulder bags—either Nordic Pleasurelines sent bags like these to every booker of its cruises as a cynical means of getting inexpensive walk-about publicity or as a practical means of tagging the cruise participants for greater ease of handling at embarkation points or as a benign means of building esprit de corps; or else Enid and Alfred had deliberately saved the bags from some previous Nordic Pleasurelines cruise and, out of a misguided sense of loyalty, had chosen to carry them on their upcoming cruise as well; and in either case Chip was appalled by his parents' willingness to make themselves vectors of corporate advertising—before he shouldered the bags himself and assumed the burden of seeing LaGuardia Airport and New York City and his life and clothes and body through the disappointed eyes of his parents.

He noticed, as if for the first time, the dirty linoleum, the assassinlike chauffeurs holding up signs with other people's names on them, the snarl of wires dangling from a hole in the ceiling. He distinctly heard the word "motherfucker." Outside the big windows on the baggage level, two Bangladeshi men were pushing a disabled cab through rain and angry honking.

"We have to be at the pier by four," Enid said to Chip. "And I think Dad was hoping to see your desk at the *Wall Street Journal*." She raised her voice. "Al? Al?"

Though stooped in the neck now, Alfred was still an imposing figure. His hair was white and thick and sleek, like a polar bear's, and the powerful long muscles of his shoulders, which Chip remembered laboring in the spanking of a child, usually Chip himself, still filled the gray tweed shoulders of his sport coat.

"Al, didn't you say you wanted to see where Chip worked?" Enid shouted.

Alfred shook his head. "There's no time."

The baggage carousel circulated nothing.

"Did you take your pill?" Enid said.

"Yes," Alfred said. He closed his eyes and repeated slowly, "I took my pill. I took my pill. I took my pill."

"Dr. Hedgpeth has him on a new medication," Enid explained to Chip, who was quite certain that his father had not, in fact, expressed interest in seeing his office. And since Chip had no association with the *Wall Street Journal*—the publication to which he made unpaid contributions was the *Warren Street Journal: A Monthly of the Transgressive Arts*; he'd also very recently completed a screenplay, and he'd been working part-time as a legal proofreader at Bragg Knuter & Speigh for the nearly two years since he'd lost his assistant professorship in Textual Artifacts at D— College, in Connecticut, as a result of an offense involving a female undergraduate which had fallen just short of the legally actionable and which, though his parents never learned of it, had interrupted the parade of accomplishments that his mother could brag about, back home in St. Jude; he'd told his parents that he'd quit teaching in order to pursue a career in writing, and when, more recently, his mother had pressed him for details, he'd mentioned the *Warren Street Journal*, the name of which his mother had misheard and instantly begun to trumpet to her friends Esther Root and Bea Meisner and Mary Beth Schumpert, and though Chip in his monthly phone calls home had had many opportunities to disabuse her he'd instead actively fostered the misunderstanding; and here things became rather complex, not only because the *Wall Street Journal* was available in St. Jude and his mother had never mentioned looking for his work and failing to find it (meaning that some part of her knew perfectly well that he didn't write for the paper) but also because the author of articles like "Creative Adultery" and "Let Us Now Praise Scuzzy Motels" was conspiring to preserve, in his mother, precisely the kind of illusion that the *Warren Street Journal* was dedicated to exploding, and he was thirty-nine years old, and he blamed his parents for the person he had become—he was happy when his mother let the subject drop.

"His tremor's much better," Enid added in a voice inaudible to Alfred. "The only side effect is that he *may* hallucinate."

"That's quite a side effect," Chip said.

"Dr. Hedgpeth says that what he has is very mild and almost completely controllable with medication."

Alfred was surveying the baggage-claim cavern while pale travelers angled for position at the carousel. There was a confusion of tread patterns on the linoleum, gray with the pollutants that the rain had brought down. The light was the color of car sickness. "New York City!" Alfred said.

Enid frowned at Chip's pants. "Those aren't *leather*, are they?"

"Yes."

"How do you wash them?"

"They're leather. They're like a second skin."

"We have to be at the pier no later than four o'clock," Enid said.

The carousel coughed up some suitcases.

"Chip, help me," his father said.

Soon Chip was staggering out into the wind-blown rain with all four of his parents' bags. Alfred shuffled forward with the jerking momentum of a man who knew there would be trouble if he had to stop and start again. Enid lagged behind, intent on the pain in her hip. She'd put on weight and maybe lost a little height since Chip had last seen her. She'd always been a pretty woman, but to Chip she was so much a personality and so little anything else that even staring straight at her he had no idea what she really looked like.

"What's that—wrought iron?" Alfred asked him as the taxi line crept forward.

"Yes," Chip said, touching his ear.

"Looks like an old quarter-inch rivet."

"Yes."

"What do you do—crimp that? Hammer it?"

"It's hammered," Chip said.

Alfred winced and gave a low, inhaling whistle.

"We're doing a Luxury Fall Color Cruise," Enid said when the three of them were in a yellow cab, speeding through Queens. "We sail up to Quebec and then we enjoy the changing leaves all the way

back down. Dad so enjoyed the last cruise we were on. Didn't you, Al? Didn't you have a good time on that cruise?"

The brick palisades of the East River waterfront were taking an angry beating from the rain. Chip could have wished for a sunny day, a clear view of landmarks and blue water, with nothing to hide. The only colors on the road this morning were the smeared reds of brake lights.

"This is one of the great cities of the world," Alfred said with emotion.

"How are you feeling these days, Dad," Chip managed to ask.

"Any better I'd be in heaven, any worse I'd be in hell."

"We're excited about your new job," Enid said.

"One of the great papers in the country," Alfred said. "The *Wall Street Journal*."

"Does anybody smell fish, though?"

"We're near the ocean," Chip said.

"No, it's you." Enid leaned and buried her face in Chip's leather sleeve. "Your jacket smells *strongly* of fish."

He wrenched free of her. "Mother. Please."

Chip's problem was a loss of confidence. Gone were the days when he could afford to *épater les bourgeois*. Except for his Manhattan apartment and his handsome girlfriend, Julia Vrais, he now had almost nothing to persuade himself that he was a functioning male adult, no accomplishments to compare with those of his brother, Gary, who was a banker and a father of three, or of his sister, Denise, who at the age of thirty-two was the executive chef at a successful new high-end restaurant in Philadelphia. Chip had hoped he might have sold his screenplay by now, but he hadn't finished a draft until after midnight on Tuesday, and then he'd had to work three fourteen-hour shifts at Bragg Knuter & Speigh to raise cash to pay his August rent and reassure the owner of his apartment (Chip had a sublease) about his September and October rent, and then there was a lunch to be shopped for and an apartment to be cleaned and, finally, sometime before dawn this morning, a long-hoarded Xanax to be swallowed. Meanwhile, nearly a week had gone by without his seeing Julia or speaking to her directly. In response to the many nervous messages

he'd left on her voice mail in the last forty-eight hours, asking her to meet him and his parents and Denise at his apartment at noon on Saturday and also, please, if possible, not to mention to his parents that she was married to someone else, Julia had maintained a total phone and e-mail silence from which even a more stable man than Chip might have drawn disturbing conclusions.

It was raining so hard in Manhattan that water was streaming down façades and frothing at the mouths of sewers. Outside his building, on East Ninth Street, Chip took money from Enid and handed it through the cab's partition, and even as the turbaned driver thanked him he realized the tip was too small. From his own wallet he took two singles and dangled them near the driver's shoulder.

"That's enough, that's enough," Enid squeaked, reaching for Chip's wrist. "He already said thank you."

But the money was gone. Alfred was trying to open the door by pulling on the window crank. "Here, Dad, it's this one," Chip said and leaned across him to pop the door.

"How big a tip was that?" Enid asked Chip on the sidewalk, under his building's marquee, as the driver heaved luggage from the trunk.

"About fifteen percent," Chip said.

"More like twenty, I'd say," Enid said.

"Let's have a fight about this, why don't we."

"Twenty percent's too much, Chip," Alfred pronounced in a booming voice. "It's not reasonable."

"You all have a good day now," the taxi driver said with no apparent irony.

"A tip is for service and comportment," Enid said. "If the service and comportment are especially good I might give fifteen percent. But if you *automatically* tip—"

"I've suffered from depression all my life," Alfred said, or seemed to say.

"Excuse me?" Chip said.

"Depression years changed me. They changed the meaning of a dollar."

"An economic depression, we're talking about."

"Then when the service really *is* especially good or especially bad," Enid pursued, "there's no way to express it monetarily."

"A dollar is still a lot of money," Alfred said.

"Fifteen percent if the service is exceptional, really exceptional."

"I'm wondering why we're having this particular conversation," Chip said to his mother. "Why this conversation and not some other conversation."

"We're both terribly anxious," Enid replied, "to see where you work."

Chip's doorman, Zoroaster, hurried out to help with the luggage and installed the Lamberts in the building's balky elevator. Enid said, "I ran into your old friend Dean Driblett at the bank the other day. I never run into Dean but where he doesn't ask about you. He was impressed with your new writing job."

"Dean Driblett was a classmate, not a friend," Chip said.

"He and his wife just had their fourth child. I told you, didn't I, they built that *enormous* house out in Paradise Valley—Al, didn't you count eight bedrooms?"

Alfred gave her a steady, unblinking look. Chip leaned on the Door Close button.

"Dad and I were at the housewarming in June," Enid said. "It was spectacular. They'd had it catered, and they had *pyramids* of shrimp. It was solid shrimp, in pyramids. I've never seen anything like it."

"Pyramids of shrimp," Chip said. The elevator door had finally closed.

"Anyway, it's a beautiful house," Enid said. "There are at least six bedrooms, and you know, it looks like they're going to fill them. Dean's tremendously successful. He started that lawn care business when he decided the mortuary business wasn't for him, well, you know, Dale Driblett's his stepdad, you know, the Driblett Chapel, and now his billboards are everywhere and he's started an HMO. I saw in the paper where it's the fastest-growing HMO in St. Jude, it's called DeeDeeCare, same as the lawn care business, and there are billboards for the HMO now, too. He's quite the entrepreneur, *I'd* say."

"Slo-o-o-o-w elevator," Alfred said.

"This is a prewar building," Chip explained in a tight voice. "An extremely desirable building."

"But you know what he told me he's doing for his mother's birthday? It's still a surprise for her, but I can tell you. He's taking her to Paris for eight days. Two first-class tickets, eight nights at the Ritz! That's the kind of person Dean is, very family-oriented. But can you believe that kind of birthday present? Al, didn't you say the house alone probably cost a million dollars? Al?"

"It's a large house but cheaply done," Alfred said with sudden vigor. "The walls are like paper."

"All the new houses are like that," Enid said.

"You asked me if I was impressed with the house. I thought it was ostentatious. I thought the shrimp was ostentatious. It was poor."

"It may have been frozen," Enid said.

"People are easily impressed with things like that," Alfred said. "They'll talk for months about the pyramids of shrimp. Well, see for yourself," he said to Chip, as to a neutral bystander. "Your mother's still talking about it."

For a moment it seemed to Chip that his father had become a likable old stranger; but he knew Alfred, underneath, to be a shouter and a punisher. The last time Chip had visited his parents in St. Jude, four years earlier, he'd taken along his then-girlfriend Ruthie, a per-oxidized young Marxist from the North of England, who, after committing numberless offenses against Enid's sensibilities (she lit a cigarette indoors, laughed out loud at Enid's favorite watercolors of Buckingham Palace, came to dinner without a bra, and failed to take even one bite of the "salad" of water chestnuts and green peas and cheddar-cheese cubes in a thick mayonnaise sauce which Enid made for festive occasions), had needled and baited Alfred until he pronounced that "the blacks" would be the ruination of this country, "the blacks" were incapable of coexisting with whites, they expected the government to take care of them, they didn't know the meaning of hard work, what they lacked above all was *discipline*, it was going to end with slaughter in the streets, *with slaughter in the streets*, and he didn't give a damn what Ruthie thought of him, she was a visitor in *his* house and *his* country, and she had no right to criticize things she didn't understand; whereupon Chip, who'd already warned Ruthie

that his parents were the squarest people in America, had smiled at her as if to say, *You see? Exactly as advertised*. When Ruthie had dumped him, not three weeks later, she'd remarked that he was more like his father than he seemed to realize.

"Al," Enid said as the elevator lurched to a halt, "you have to admit that it was a very, very nice party, and that it was *very* nice of Dean to invite us."

Alfred seemed not to have heard her.

Propped outside Chip's apartment was a clear-plastic umbrella that Chip recognized, with relief, as Julia Vrais's. He was herding the parental luggage from the elevator when his apartment door swung open and Julia herself stepped out. "Oh. Oh!" she said, as though flustered. "You're early!"

By Chip's watch it was 11:35. Julia was wearing a shapeless lavender raincoat and holding a DreamWorks tote bag. Her hair, which was long and the color of dark chocolate, was big with humidity and rain. In the tone of a person being friendly to large animals she said "Hi" to Alfred and "Hi," separately, to Enid. Alfred and Enid bayed their names at her and extended hands to shake, driving her back into the apartment, where Enid began to pepper her with questions in which Chip, as he followed with the luggage, could hear subtexts and agendas.

"Do you live in the city?" Enid said. (*You're not cohabiting with our son, are you?*) "And you work in the city, too?" (*You are gainfully employed? You're not from an alien, snobbish, moneyed eastern family?*) "Did you grow up here?" (*Or do you come from a trans-Appalachian state where people are warmhearted and down-to-earth and unlikely to be Jewish?*) "Oh, and do you still have family in Ohio?" (*Have your parents perhaps taken the morally dubious modern step of getting divorced?*) "Do you have brothers or sisters?" (*Are you a spoiled only child or a Catholic with a zillion siblings?*)

Julia having passed this initial examination, Enid turned her attention to the apartment. Chip, in a late crisis of confidence, had tried to make it presentable. He'd bought a stain-removal kit and lifted the big semen stain off the red chaise longue, dismantled the wall of wine-bottle corks with which he'd been bricking in the niche above his fireplace at a rate of half a dozen Merlots and Pinot Grigios

a week, taken down from his bathroom wall the close-up photographs of male and female genitalia that were the flower of his art collection, and replaced them with the three diplomas that Enid had long ago insisted on having framed for him.

This morning, feeling as if he'd surrendered too much of himself, he'd readjusted his presentation by wearing leather to the airport.

"This room is about the size of Dean Driblett's bathroom," Enid said. "Wouldn't you say, Al?"

Alfred rotated his bobbing hands and examined their dorsal sides.

"I'd never seen such an enormous bathroom."

"Enid, you have no tact," Alfred said.

It might have occurred to Chip that this, too, was a tactless remark, since it implied that his father concurred in his mother's criticism of the apartment and objected only to her airing of it. But Chip was unable to focus on anything but the hair dryer protruding from Julia's DreamWorks tote bag. It was the hair dryer that she kept in his bathroom. She seemed, actually, to be heading out the door.

"Dean and Trish have a whirlpool *and* a shower stall *and* a tub, all separate," Enid went on. "The sinks are his-and-hers."

"Chip, I'm sorry," Julia said.

He raised a hand to put her on hold. "We're going to have lunch here as soon as Denise comes," he announced to his parents. "It's a very simple lunch. Just make yourselves at home."

"It was nice to meet you both," Julia called to Enid and Alfred. To Chip in a lower voice she said, "Denise will be here. You'll be fine."

She opened the door.

"Mom, Dad," Chip said, "just one second."

He followed Julia out of the apartment and let the door fall shut behind him.

"This is really unfortunate timing," he said. "Just really, really unfortunate."

Julia shook her hair back off her temples. "I'm feeling good about the fact that it's the first time in my life I've ever acted self-interestedly in a relationship."

"That's nice. That's a big step." Chip made an effort to smile. "But what about the script? Is Eden reading it?"

"I think maybe this weekend sometime."

"What about you?"

"I read, um." Julia looked away. "Most of it."

"My idea," Chip said, "was to have this 'hump' that the moviegoer has to get over. Putting something offputting at the beginning, it's a classic modernist strategy. There's a lot of rich suspense toward the end."

Julia turned toward the elevator and didn't reply.

"*Did* you get to the end yet?" Chip asked.

"Oh, Chip," she burst out miserably, "your script starts off with a six-page lecture about anxieties of the phallus in Tudor drama!"

He was aware of this. Indeed, for weeks now, he'd been awakening most nights before dawn, his stomach churning and his teeth clenched, and had wrestled with the nightmarish certainty that a long academic monologue on Tudor drama had no place in Act I of a commercial script. Often it took him hours—took getting out of bed, pacing around, drinking Merlot or Pinot Grigio—to regain his conviction that a theory-driven opening monologue was not only not a mistake but the script's most powerful selling point; and now, with a single glance at Julia, he could see that he was wrong.

Nodding in heartfelt agreement with her criticism, he opened the door of his apartment and called to his parents, "One second, Mom, Dad. Just one second." As he shut the door again, however, the old arguments came back to him. "You see, though," he said, "the entire story is prefigured in that monologue. Every single theme is there in capsule form—gender, power, identity, authenticity—and the thing is . . . Wait. Wait. Julia?"

Bowing her head sheepishly, as though she'd somehow hoped he wouldn't notice she was leaving, Julia turned away from the elevator and back toward him.

"The thing is," he said, "the girl is sitting in the front row of the classroom *listening* to the lecture. It's a crucial image. The fact that *he* is controlling the discourse—"

"And it's a little creepy, though," Julia said, "the way you keep talking about her breasts."

This, too, was true. That it was true, however, seemed unfair and cruel to Chip, who would never have had the heart to write the script

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I grant that these are interesting issues," she said, "will you stop talking about them and come upstairs with me?"

Chip shook his head. "There's a poached salmon in the fridge. A crème fraîche with sorrel. A salad with green beans and hazelnuts. You'll see the wine and the baguette and the butter. It's good fresh butter from Vermont."

"Has it occurred to you that Dad is sick?"

"An hour is all it's going to take. Hour and a half at most."

"I said has it occurred to you that Dad is sick?"

Chip had a vision of his father trembling and pleading in the doorway. To block it out, he tried to summon up an image of sex with Julia, with the azure-haired stranger, with Ruthie, with anyone, but all he could picture was a vengeful, Fury-like horde of disembodied breasts.

"The faster I get to Eden's and make those corrections," he said, "the sooner I'll be back. If you really want to help me."

An available cab was coming down the street. He made the mistake of looking at it, and Denise misunderstood him.

"I can't give you any more money," she said.

He recoiled as if she'd spat on him. "Jesus, Denise—"

"I'd like to but I can't."

"I wasn't asking you for money!"

"Because where does it end?"

He turned on his heel and walked into the downpour and marched toward University Place, smiling with rage. He was ankle-deep in a boiling gray sidewalk-shaped lake. He was clutching Denise's umbrella in his fist without opening it, and still it seemed unfair to him, it seemed *not his fault*, that he was getting drenched.

Until recently, and without ever giving the matter much thought, Chip had believed that it was possible to be successful in America without making lots of money. He'd always been a good student, and from an early age he'd proved unfit for any form of economic activity except buying things (this he could do), and so he'd chosen to pursue a life of the mind.

Since Alfred had once mildly but unforgettably remarked that he

didn't see the point of literary theory, and since Enid, in the florid bi-weekly letters by means of which she saved many dollars on long-distance dialing, had regularly begged Chip to abandon his pursuit of an "impractical" doctorate in the humanities ("I see your old science fair trophies," she wrote, "and I think of what an able young man like you could be giving back to society as a medical doctor, but then, you see, Dad and I always hoped we'd raised children who thought of others, not just themselves"), Chip had had plenty of incentives to work hard and prove his parents wrong. By getting out of bed much earlier than his grad-school classmates, who slept off their Gauloise hangovers until noon or one o'clock, he'd piled up the prizes and fellowships and grants that were the coin of the academic realm.

For the first fifteen years of his adult life, his only experience with failure had come secondhand. His girlfriend in college and long after, Tori Timmelman, was a feminist theorist who'd become so enraged with the patriarchal system of accreditation and its phalometric yardsticks of achievement that she refused (or was unable) to finish her dissertation. Chip had grown up listening to his father pontificate on the topics of Men's Work and Women's Work and the importance of maintaining the distinction; in a spirit of correction, he stuck with Tori for nearly a decade. He did all of the laundry and most of the cleaning and cooking and cat care in the little apartment that he and Tori shared. He read secondary literature for Tori and helped her outline and reoutline the chapters of her thesis that she was too throttled by rage to write. Not until D— College had offered him a five-year tenure-track appointment (while Tori, still minus a degree, took a two-year nonrenewable job at an agriculture school in Texas) did he fully exhaust his supply of male guilt and move on.

He arrived at D—, then, as an eligible and well-published thirty-three-year-old to whom the college's provost, Jim Leviton, had all but guaranteed lifelong employment. Within a semester he was sleeping with the young historian Ruthie Hamilton and had teamed up at tennis with Leviton and brought Leviton the faculty doubles championship that had eluded him for twenty years.

D— College, with an elite reputation and a middling endow-

ment, depended for its survival on students whose parents could pay full tuition. To attract these students, the college had built a \$30 million recreation center, three espresso bars, and a pair of hulking "residence halls" that were less like dorms than like vivid premonitions of the hotels in which the students would book rooms for themselves in their well-remunerated futures. There were herds of leather sofas and enough computers to ensure that no prospective matriculant or visiting parent could enter a room and not see at least one available keyboard, not even in the dining hall or field house.

Junior faculty lived in semi-squalor. Chip was lucky to have a two-story unit in a damp cinderblock development on Tilton Ledge Lane, on the western edge of campus. His back patio overlooked a waterway known to college administrators as Kuyper's Creek and to everybody else as Carparts Creek. On the far side of the creek was a marshy automotive boneyard belonging to the Connecticut State Department of Corrections. The college had been suing in state and federal courts for twenty years to preserve this wetland from the "ecodisaster" of drainage and development as a medium-security prison.

Every month or two, for as long as things were good with Ruthie, Chip invited colleagues and neighbors and the occasional precocious student to dinner at Tilton Ledge and surprised them with langoustines, or a rack of lamb, or venison with juniper berries, and retro joke desserts like chocolate fondue. Sometimes late at night, presiding over a table on which empty Californian bottles were clustered like Manhattan high-rises, Chip felt safe enough to laugh at himself, open up a little, and tell embarrassing stories about his mid-western childhood. Like how his father not only had worked long hours at the Midland Pacific Railroad and read aloud to his children and done the yard work and home maintenance and processed a nightly briefcaseful of executive paper but had also found time to operate a serious metallurgical laboratory in the family basement, staying up past midnight to subject strange alloys to electrical and chemical stresses. And how Chip at the age of thirteen had developed a crush on the buttery alkali metals that his father kept immersed in kerosene, on the blushing crystalline cobalt, the buxom heavy mer-

cury, the ground-glass stopcocks and glacial acetic acid, and had put together his own junior lab in the shadow of his dad's. How his new interest in science had delighted Alfred and Enid, and how, with their encouragement, he'd set his young heart on winning a trophy at the regional St. Jude science fair. How, at the St. Jude city library, he'd unearthed a plant-physiology paper both obscure enough and simple enough to be mistaken for the work of a brilliant eighth-grader. How he'd built a controlled plywood environment for growing oats and had photographed the young seedlings meticulously and then ignored them for weeks, and how, by the time he went to weigh the seedlings and determine the effects of *gibberellic acid* in concert with an *unidentified chemical factor*, the oats were dried-out blackish slime. How he'd gone ahead anyway and plotted the experiment's "correct" results on graph paper, working backward to fabricate a list of seedling weights with some artful random scatter and then forward to make sure that the fictional data produced the "correct" results. And how, as a first-place winner at the science fair, he'd won a three-foot-tall silver-plated Winged Victory and the admiration of his father. And how, a year later, around the time his father was securing his first of two U.S. patents (despite his many grievances with Alfred, Chip was careful to impress on his dinner guests what a giant, in his own way, the old man was), Chip had pretended to study migratory bird populations in a park near some head shops and a bookstore and the house of a friend with foosball and a pool table. And how in a ravine at this park he'd uncovered a cache of downmarket porn over the weather-swollen pages of which, back home in the basement lab where, unlike his father, he never performed a real experiment or felt the faintest twinge of scientific curiosity, he'd endlessly dry-chafed the head of his erection without ever figuring out that this excruciating perpendicular stroke was actively suppressing orgasm (his dinner guests, many of them steeped in queer theory, took special delight in this detail), and how, as a reward for his mendacity and self-abuse and general laziness, he'd won a second Winged Victory.

In the haze of dinner-party smoke, as he entertained his sympathetic colleagues, Chip felt secure in the knowledge that his parents could not have been more wrong about who he was and what kind of

to be too mad at her? The important fact was that she sort of had a husband. The deputy prime minister of Lithuania—a small Baltic country—was a man named Gitanas Misevičius? Well, the fact was that Julia had married him a couple of years ago, and she hoped Chip wouldn't be too mad at her.

Her problem with men, she said, was that she'd grown up without. Her father was a manic-depressive boat salesman whom she remembered meeting once and wished she'd never met at all. Her mother, a cosmetics-company executive, had fobbed Julia off on her own mother, who'd enrolled her in a Catholic girls' school. Julia's first significant experience with men was at college. Then she moved to New York and embarked on the long process of sleeping with every dishonest, casually sadistic, terminally uncommitted really gorgeous guy in the borough of Manhattan. By the age of twenty-eight, she had little to feel good about except her looks, her apartment, and her steady job (which mainly consisted, however, of answering the phone). So when she met Gitanas at a club and Gitanas took her seriously, and by and by produced an actual not-small diamond in a white-gold setting, and seemed to love her (and the guy was, after all, an honest-to-God ambassador to the United Nations; she'd gone and heard him do his Baltic thundering at the General Assembly), she did her level best to repay his kindness. She was As Agreeable As Humanly Possible. She refused to disappoint Gitanas even though, in hindsight, it probably would have been better to disappoint him. Gitanas was quite a bit older and fairly attentive in bed (not like Chip, Julia hastened to say, but not, you know, terrible), and he seemed to know what he was doing with the marriage thing, and so one day she went to City Hall with him. She might even have gone by "Mrs. Misevičius" if it had sounded less idiotic. Once she was married, she realized that the marble floors and black lacquer furniture and heavy modern smoked-glass fixtures of the ambassador's apartment on the East River weren't as entertainingly campy as she'd thought. They were more like unbearably depressing. She made Gitanas sell the place (the chief of the Paraguayan delegation was delighted to get it) and buy a smaller, nicer place on Hudson Street near some good clubs. She found a competent hairstylist for Gitanas and taught him

how to pick out clothes with natural fibers. Things seemed to be going great. But somewhere she and Gitanas must have misunderstood each other, because when his party (the VIPPPAKJRIINPB17: the One True Party Unswervingly Dedicated to the Revanchist Ideals of Kazimieras Jaramaitis and the "Independent" Plebiscite of April Seventeen) lost a September election and recalled him to Vilnius to join the parliamentary opposition, he took it for granted that Julia would come along with him. And Julia understood the concept of one flesh, wife cleaving to husband, and so forth; but Gitanas in his descriptions of post-Soviet Vilnius had painted a picture of chronic coal and electricity shortages, freezing drizzles, drive-by shootings, and heavy dietary reliance on horsemeat. And so she did a really terrible thing to Gitanas, definitely the worst thing she'd ever done to anybody. She agreed to go and live in Vilnius, and she sort of got on the plane with Gitanas and sat down in first class and then sneaked off the plane and sort of changed their home phone number and had Eden tell Gitanas, when he called, that she had disappeared. Six months later Gitanas returned to New York for a weekend and made Julia feel really, really guilty. And, yes, no argument, she'd disgraced herself. But Gitanas proceeded to call her certain rough names and he slapped her pretty hard. The upshot of which was that they couldn't be together anymore, but she continued to use their apartment on Hudson Street in exchange for staying married in case Gitanas needed quick asylum in the United States, because apparently things were going from bad to worse in Lithuania.

Anyway, that was the story of her and Gitanas, and she hoped that Chip wouldn't be too mad at her.

And Chip was not. Indeed, at first he not only didn't mind that Julia was married, he adored the fact. He was fascinated by her rings; he talked her into wearing them in bed. Down at the offices of the *Warren Street Journal*, where he sometimes felt insufficiently transgressive, as if his innermost self were still a nice midwestern boy, he took pleasure in alluding to the European statesman he was "cuckolding." In his doctoral thesis ("Doubtful It Stood: Anxieties of the Phallus in Tudor Drama") he'd written extensively about cuckolds, and under the cloak of his reproving modern scholarship he'd been ex-

cited by the idea of marriage as a property right, of adultery as theft.

Before long, though, the thrill of poaching on the diplomat's preserve gave way to bourgeois fantasies in which Chip himself was Julia's husband—her lord, her liege. He became spasmodically jealous of Gitanas Misevičius, who, though Lithuanian, and a slapper, was a successful politician whose name Julia now pronounced with guilt and wistfulness. On New Year's Eve Chip asked her point-blank if she ever thought about divorce. She replied that she liked her apartment ("Can't beat the rent!") and she didn't want to look for another one right now.

After New Year's, Chip returned to his rough draft of "The Academy Purple," which he'd completed in a euphoric twenty-page blaze of keyboard-pounding, and discovered that it had a lot of problems. It looked, in fact, like incoherent hackwork. During the month that he'd spent expensively celebrating its completion, he'd imagined that he could remove certain hackneyed plot elements—the conspiracy, the car crash, the evil lesbians—and still tell a good story. Without these hackneyed plot elements, however, he seemed to have no story at all.

In order to salvage his artistic and intellectual ambitions, he added a long theoretical opening monologue. But this monologue was so unreadable that every time he turned on his computer he had to go and tinker with it. Soon he was spending the bulk of each work session compulsively honing the monologue. And when he despaired of shortening it any further without sacrificing important thematic material, he started fussing with the margins and hyphenation to make the monologue end at the bottom of page 6 rather than the top of page 7. He replaced the word "continue" with "go on" to save three spaces, thus allowing the word "(trans)act(ion)s" to be hyphenated after the second *t*, which triggered a whole cascade of longer lines and more efficient hyphenations. Then he decided that "go on" had the wrong rhythm and that "(trans)act(ion)s" should not be hyphenated under any circumstances, and so he scoured the text for other longish words to replace with shorter synonyms, all the while struggling to believe that stars and producers in Prada jackets would enjoy reading six pages (but not seven!) of turgid academic theorizing.

Once, when he was a boy, there was a total eclipse of the sun in the Midwest, and a girl in one of the poky towns across the river from St. Jude had sat outside and, in defiance of myriad warnings, studied the dwindling crescent of the sun until her retinas combusted.

"It didn't hurt at all," the blinded girl had told the *St. Jude Chronicle*. "It felt like nothing."

Each day that Chip spent grooming the corpse of a dramatically dead monologue was a day in which his rent and food and entertainment expenses were paid for, in large part, with his little sister's money. And yet as long as the money lasted, his pain was not acute. One day led to another. He rarely got out of bed before noon. He enjoyed his food and his wine, he dressed well enough to persuade himself that he was not a quivering gelatinous mess, and he managed, on four out of five evenings, to hide the worst of his anxiety and foreboding and enjoy himself with Julia. Because the sum he owed Denise was large in comparison to his proofreading wage but small by Hollywood standards, he worked less and less at Bragg Knuter & Speigh. His only real complaint was with his health. On a summer day when his work session consisted of rereading Act I, being struck afresh by its irredeemable badness, and hurrying outside to get some air, he might walk down Broadway and sit on a bench at Battery Park City and let the breeze off the Hudson flow under his collar, and listen to the ceaseless fut-fut of copter traffic and the distant shouts of millionaire Tribeca toddlers, and be overcome with guilt. To be so vigorous and healthy and yet so *nothing*: neither taking advantage of his good night's sleep and his successful avoidance of a cold to get some work done, nor yet fully entering into the vacation spirit and flirting with strangers and knocking back margaritas. It would have been better, he thought, to do his getting sick and dying now, while he was failing, and save his health and vitality for some later date when, unimaginable though the prospect was, he would perhaps no longer be failing. Of all the things he was wasting—Denise's money, Julia's goodwill, his own abilities and education, the opportunities afforded by the longest sustained economic boom in American history—his sheer physical well-being, there in the sunlight by the river, hurt the worst.

He ran out of money on a Friday in July. Facing a weekend with

Julia, who could cost him fifteen dollars at a cinema refreshments counter, he purged the Marxists from his bookshelves and took them to the Strand in two extremely heavy bags. The books were in their original jackets and had an aggregate list price of \$3,900. A buyer at the Strand appraised them casually and delivered his verdict: "Sixty-five."

Chip laughed in a breathy way, willing himself not to argue; but his U.K. edition of Jürgen Habermas's *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, which he'd found too difficult to read, let alone annotate, was in mint condition and had cost him £95.00. He couldn't help pointing this out by way of example.

"Try somewhere else, if you like," the buyer said, his hand hesitating above the cash register.

"No, no, you're right," Chip said. "Sixty-five is great."

It was pathetically obvious that he'd believed his books would fetch him hundreds of dollars. He turned away from their reproachful spines, remembering how each of them had called out in a bookstore with a promise of a radical critique of late-capitalist society, and how happy he'd been to take them home. But Jürgen Habermas didn't have Julia's long, cool, pear-tree limbs, Theodor Adorno didn't have Julia's grapy smell of lecherous pliability, Fred Jameson didn't have Julia's artful tongue. By the beginning of October, when Chip sent his finished script to Eden Procuero, he'd sold his feminists, his formalists, his structuralists, his poststructuralists, his Freudians, and his queers. To raise money for lunch for his parents and Denise, all he had left was his beloved cultural historians and his complete hardcover Arden Shakespeare; and because a kind of magic resided in the Shakespeare—the uniform volumes in their pale blue jackets were like an archipelago of safe retreats—he piled his Foucault and Greenblatt and hooks and Poovey into shopping bags and sold them all for \$115.

He spent sixty dollars on a haircut, some candy, a stain-removal kit, and two drinks at the Cedar Tavern. Back in August, when he'd invited his parents, he'd hoped that Eden Procuero might have read his script and advanced him money before they arrived, but now the only accomplishment and the only gift he had to offer was a home-

cooked meal. He went to an East Village deli that sold reliably excellent tortellini and crusty bread. He was envisioning a rustic and affordable Italian lunch. But the deli appeared to have gone out of business, and he didn't feel like walking ten blocks to a bakery that he was certain had good bread, and so he wandered the East Village randomly, trudging in and out of meretricious food stores, hefting cheeses, rejecting breads, examining inferior tortellini. Finally he abandoned the Italian idea altogether and fixed on the only other lunch he could think of—a salad of wild rice, avocado, and smoked turkey breast. The problem then was to find ripe avocados. In store after store he found either no avocados or walnut-hard avocados. He found ripe avocados that were the size of limes and cost \$3.89 apiece. He stood holding five of them and considered what to do. He put them down and picked them up and put them down and couldn't pull the trigger. He weathered a spasm of hatred of Denise for having guilted him into inviting his parents to lunch. He had the feeling that he'd never eaten anything in his life but wild-rice salad and tortellini, so blank was his culinary imagination.

Around eight o'clock he ended up outside the new Nightmare of Consumption ("Everything—for a Price!") on Grand Street. A humidity had stolen over the sky, a sulfurous uneasy wind from Rahway and Bayonne. The supergentry of SoHo and Tribeca were streaming through the Nightmare's brushed-steel portals. The men came in various shapes and sizes, but all the women were slim and thirty-six; many were both slim and pregnant. Chip had a collar rash from his haircut and felt unready to be seen by so many perfect women. But right inside the Nightmare's door he glimpsed a box of greens marked *SORREL from Belize \$0.99*.

He entered the Nightmare, snagged a basket, and put one bunch of sorrel in it. Ninety-nine cents. Installed above the Nightmare's coffee bar was a screen that gave running ironic tallies of TODAY'S GROSS RECEIPTS and TODAY'S PROFIT and PROJECTED QUARTERLY PER-SHARE DIVIDEND (Unofficial Non-Binding Estimate Based on Past Quarterly Performances / This Information Provided for Entertainment Purposes Only), and COFFEE SALES THIS STATION. Chip wove among strollers and cell phone antennae to the fish counter, where, as in a dream, he found WILD NORWEGIAN

SALMON, LINE CAUGHT on sale at a reasonable price. He pointed at a midsize filet, and to the fishman's question, "What else?" he replied in a crisp tone, almost a smug tone, "That'll do it."

The price on the beautiful paper-wrapped filet that he was handed was \$78.40. Luckily, this discovery knocked the wind out of him, otherwise he might have lodged a protest before realizing, as he did now, that the prices at the Nightmare were per quarter pound. Two years ago, two months ago, he would not have made a mistake like this.

"Ha, ha!" he said, palming the seventy-eight-dollar filet like a catcher's mitt. He dropped to one knee and touched his bootlaces and took the salmon right up inside his leather jacket and underneath his sweater and tucked the sweater into his pants and stood up again.

"Daddy, I want swordfish," a little voice behind him said.

Chip took two steps, and the salmon, which was quite heavy, escaped from his sweater and covered his groin, for one unstable moment, like a codpiece.

"Daddy! *Swordfish!*"

Chip put his hand to his crotch. The dangling filet felt like a cool, loaded diaper. He repositioned it against his abs and tucked in the sweater more securely, zipped his jacket to the neck, and strode purposefully toward the whatever. Toward the dairy wall. Here he found a selection of French crèmes fraîches at prices implying transport via SST. The less unaffordable domestic crème fraîche was blocked by a man in a Yankees cap who was shouting into his cell phone while a child, apparently his, peeled back the foil tops of half-liters of French yogurt. She'd peeled back five or six already. Chip leaned to reach behind the man, but his fish belly sagged. "Excuse me," he said.

Like a sleepwalker the man on the phone shuffled aside. "I said fuck him. Fuck him! Fuck that asshole! We never closed. There's no ink on the line. I'll take that asshole down another thirty, you watch me. Honey, don't tear those, if we tear those we have to pay for them. I said it is a fucking buyer's ball as of yesterday. We close on *nuffin* till this thing bottoms out. Nuffin! Nuffin! Nuffin! Nuffin!"

Chip was approaching the checkout lanes with four plausible

items in his basket when he caught sight of a head of hair so new-penny bright it could only belong to Eden Procuero. Who was, herself, slim and thirty-six and hectic. Eden's little son, Anthony, was seated on the upper level of a shopping cart with his back to a four-figure avalanche of shellfish, cheeses, meats, and caviars. Eden was leaning over Anthony and letting him pull on the taupe lapels of her Italian suit and suck on her blouse while, behind his back, she turned the pages of a script that Chip could only pray was not his own. The line-caught Norwegian salmon was soaking through its wrapping, his body heat melting the fats that had given the filet a degree of rigidity. He wanted to escape the Nightmare, but he wasn't prepared to discuss "The Academy Purple" under the current circumstances. He veered down a frosty aisle where the gelati came in plain white cartons with small black lettering. A man in a suit was crouching beside a little girl with hair like copper in sunshine. The girl was Eden's daughter, April. The man was Eden's husband, Doug O'Brien.

"Chip Lambert, what's happening?" Doug said.

There seemed to be no ways but girly ways for Chip to hold his grocery basket while he shook Doug's square hand.

"April's picking out her treat for after dinner," Doug said.

"Three treats," April said.

"Her three treats, right."

"What's that one?" April said, pointing.

"That is a grenadine-nasturtium sorbetto, sugar bunny."

"Do I like it?"

"That I can't tell you."

Doug, who was younger and shorter than Chip, so persistently claimed to be in awe of Chip's intellect and so consistently tested free of any irony or condescension that Chip had finally accepted that Doug really did admire him. This admiration was more grueling than belittlement.

"Eden tells me you finished the script," Doug said, restacking some gelati that April had upset. "Man, I am psyched. This project sounds *phenomenal*."

April was cradling three rimed cartons against her corduroy jumper.

"What kind did you get?" Chip asked her.

April shrugged extremely, a beginner's shrug.

"Sugar bunny, run those up to Mommy. I'm going to talk to Chip."

As April ran back up the aisle Chip wondered what it would be like to father a child, to always be needed instead of always needing.

"Something I wanted to ask you," Doug said. "Do you have a second? Say somebody offered you a new personality: would you take it? Say somebody said to you, *I will permanently rewire your mental hardware in whatever way you want*. Would you pay to have that done?"

The salmon paper was sweat-bonded to Chip's skin and tearing open at the bottom. This was not the ideal time to be providing Doug with the intellectual companionship he seemed to crave, but Chip wanted Doug to keep thinking highly of him and encourage Eden to buy his script. He asked why Doug asked.

"A lot of crazy stuff crosses my desk," Doug said. "Especially now with all the money coming home from overseas. All the dot-com issues, of course. We're still trying our very hardest to persuade the average American to happily engineer his own financial ruin. But the biotech is fascinating. I've been reading whole prospectuses about genetically altered squash. Apparently people in this country are eating a lot more squash than I was aware of, and squashes are prone to more diseases than you'd infer from their robust exterior. Either that or . . . Southern Cucumtech is seriously overvalued at thirty-five a share. Whatever. But Chip, this brain thing, man, it caught my eye. Bizarre fact number one is that I'm allowed to talk about it. It's all public knowledge. Is this bizarre?"

Chip was trying to keep his eyes focused on Doug in an interested manner, but his eyes were like children, they wanted to skip up and down the aisles. He was ready, basically, to jump out of his skin. "Yeah. Bizarre."

"The idea," Doug said, "is your basic gut cerebral rehab. Leave the shell and roof, replace the walls and plumbing. Design away that useless dining nook. Put a modern circuit breaker in."

"Uh huh."

"You get to keep your handsome façade," Doug said. "You still look serious and intellectual, a little Nordic, on the outside. Sober, bookish. But inside you're more livable. A big family room with an entertainment console. A kitchen that's roomier and handier. You've got your In-Sink-Erator, your convection oven. An ice-cube dispenser on the refrigerator door."

"Do I still recognize myself?"

"Do you want to? Everybody else still will—at least, the outside of you."

The big glowing tally for TODAY'S GROSS RECEIPTS paused for a moment at \$444,447.41 and then went higher.

"My furnishings are my personality," Chip said.

"Say it's a gradual rehab. Say the workmen are very tidy. The brain's cleaned up every night when you get home from work, and nobody can bother you on the weekend, per local ordinance and the usual covenantal restrictions. The whole thing happens in stages—you grow into it. Or it grows into you, so to speak. Nobody's making you buy new furniture."

"You're asking hypothetically."

Doug raised a finger. "The only thing is there might be some metal involved. It's possible you'd set off alarms at the airport. I'm imagining you might get some unwanted talk radio, too, on certain frequencies. Gatorade and other high-electrolyte drinks might be a problem. But what do you say?"

"You're joking, right?"

"Check out the Web site. I'll give you the address. *The implications are disturbing, but there's no stopping this powerful new technology.* That could be the motto for our age, don't you think?"

That a salmon filet was now spreading down into Chip's underpants like a wide, warm slug did seem to have everything to do with his brain and with a number of poor decisions that this brain had made. Rationally Chip knew that Doug would let him go soon and that eventually he might even escape the Nightmare of Consumption and find a restaurant bathroom where he could take the filet out and regain his full critical faculties—that there would come a moment when he was no longer standing amid pricey gelati with lukewarm

fish in his pants, and that this future moment would be a moment of extraordinary relief—but for now he still inhabited an earlier, much less pleasant moment from the vantage point of which a new brain looked like just the ticket.

-end 3
“The desserts were a foot tall!” Enid said, her instincts having told her that Denise didn’t care about pyramids of shrimp. “It was elegant elegant. Have you ever seen anything like that?”

“I’m sure it was very nice,” Denise said.

“The Dribletts really do things super-deluxe. I’d never seen a dessert that tall. Have you?”

The subtle signs that Denise was exercising patience—the slightly deeper breaths she took, the soundless way she set her fork down on her plate and took a sip of wine and set the glass back down—were more hurtful to Enid than a violent explosion.

“I’ve seen tall desserts,” Denise said.

“Are they tremendously difficult to make?”

Denise folded her hands in her lap and exhaled slowly. “It sounds like a great party. I’m glad you had fun.”

Enid had, true enough, had fun at Dean and Trish’s party, and she’d wished that Denise had been there to see for herself how elegant it was. At the same time, she was afraid that Denise would not have found the party elegant at all, that Denise would have picked apart its specialness until there was nothing left but ordinariness. Her daughter’s taste was a dark spot in Enid’s vision, a hole in her experience through which her own pleasures were forever threatening to leak and dissipate.

“I guess there’s no accounting for tastes,” she said.

“That’s true,” Denise said. “Although some tastes are better than others.”

Alfred had bent low over his plate to ensure that any salmon or haricots verts that fell from his fork would land on china. But he was listening. He said, “Enough.”

“That’s what everybody thinks,” Enid said. “Everybody thinks their taste is the best.”

“But most people are wrong,” Denise said.

“Everybody’s entitled to their own taste,” Enid said. “Everybody gets one vote in this country.”

“Unfortunately!”

“Enough,” Alfred said to Denise. “You’ll never win.”

“You sound like a snob,” Enid said.

“Mother, you’re always telling me how much you like a good home-cooked meal. Well, that’s what I like, too. I think there’s a kind of Disney vulgarity in a foot-tall dessert. *You* are a better cook than—”

“Oh, no. No.” Enid shook her head. “I’m a nothing cook.”

“That’s not true at all! Where do you think I—”

“Not from me,” Enid interrupted. “I don’t know where my children got their talents. But not from me. I’m a nothing as a cook. A big nothing.” (How strangely good it felt to say this! It was like putting scalding water on a poison-ivy rash.)

Denise straightened her back and raised her glass. Enid, who all her life had been helpless not to observe the goings-on on other people’s plates, had watched Denise take a three-bite portion of salmon, a small helping of salad, and a crust of bread. The size of each was a reproach to the size of each of Enid’s. Now Denise’s plate was empty and she hadn’t taken seconds of anything.

“Is that all you’re going to eat?” Enid said.

“Yes. That was my lunch.”

“You’ve lost weight.”

“In fact not.”

“Well, don’t lose any more,” Enid said with the skimpy laugh with which she tried to hide large feelings.

Alfred was guiding a forkful of salmon and sorrel sauce to his mouth. The food dropped off his fork and broke into violently shaped pieces.

“I think Chip did a good job with this,” Enid said. “Don’t you think? The salmon is very tender and good.”

“Chip has always been a good cook,” Denise said.

“Al, are you enjoying this? Al?”

Alfred’s grip on his fork had slackened. There was a sag in his lower lip, a sullen suspicion in his eyes.

“Are you enjoying the lunch?” Enid said.

down the middle of tread-marked twilit streets and smoked until the nicotine had dulled her distress and she could think more clearly.

She gathered that Don Armour, after the Wroth brothers had bought the Midland Pacific and commenced their downsizing of it, had failed to make the cut for Little Rock and had gone to Alfred and complained. Maybe he'd threatened to brag about his conquest of Alfred's daughter or maybe he'd asserted his rights as a quasi member of the Lambert family; either way, Alfred had told him to go to hell. Then Alfred had gone home and examined the underside of his workbench.

Denise believed that there had been a scene between Don Armour and her father, but she hated to imagine it. How Don Armour must have loathed himself for crawling to his boss's boss's boss and trying to beg or blackmail inclusion in the railroad's move to Little Rock; how betrayed Alfred must have felt by this daughter who'd won such praise for her work habits; how dismally the entire intolerable scene must have turned on the insertion of Don Armour's dick into this and that guilty, unexcited orifice of hers. She hated to think of her father kneeling beneath his workbench and locating that penciled heart, hated the idea of Don Armour's drecky insinuations entering her father's prudish ears, hated to imagine how keenly it offended a man of such discipline and privacy to learn that Don Armour had been roaming and poking through his house at will.

It was never my intention to involve you in this.

Well, and sure enough: her father had resigned from the railroad. He'd saved her privacy. He'd never breathed a word of any of this to Denise, never given any sign of thinking less of her. For fifteen years she'd tried to pass for a perfectly responsible and careful daughter, and he'd known all along that she was not.

She thought there might be comfort in this idea if she could manage to keep it in her head.

As she left her parents' neighborhood, the houses got newer and bigger and boxier. Through windows with no mullions or fake plastic mullions she could see luminous screens, some giant, some miniature. Evidently every hour of the year, including this one, was a good hour for staring at a screen. Denise unbuttoned her coat and turned

back, taking a shortcut through the field behind her old-grade school.

She'd never really known her father. Probably nobody had. With his shyness and his formality and his tyrannical rages he protected his interior so ferociously that if you loved him, as she did, you learned that you could do him no greater kindness than to respect his privacy.

Alfred, likewise, had shown his faith in her by taking her at face value: by declining to pry behind the front that she presented. She'd felt happiest with him when she was publicly vindicating his faith in her: when she got straight A's; when her restaurants succeeded; when reviewers loved her.

She understood, better than she would have liked to, what a disaster it had been for him to wet the bed in front of her. Lying on a stain of fast-cooling urine was not the way he wished to be with her. They only had one good way of being together, and it wasn't going to work much longer.

The odd truth about Alfred was that love, for him, was a matter not of approaching but of keeping away. She understood this better than Chip and Gary did, and so she felt a particular responsibility for him.

To Chip, unfortunately, it seemed that Alfred cared about his children only to the degree that they succeeded. Chip was so busy feeling misunderstood that he never noticed how badly he himself misunderstood his father. To Chip, Alfred's inability to be tender was the proof that Alfred didn't know, or care, who he was. Chip couldn't see what everyone around him could: that if there was anybody in the world whom Alfred did love purely for his own sake, it was Chip. Denise was aware of not delighting Alfred like this; they had little in common beyond formalities and achievements. Chip was the one whom Alfred had called for in the middle of the night, even though he knew Chip wasn't there.

I made it as clear to you as I could, she told her idiot brother in her head as she crossed the snowy field. *I can't make it any clearer.*

The house to which she returned was full of light. Gary or Enid had swept the snow from the front walk. Denise was scuffing her feet on the hemp mat when the door flew open.

"Oh, it's you," Enid said. "I thought it might be Chip."

"No. Just me."

road map, a cigarette lighter, an apple, and the Lithuanians' sincere good wishes and set off in the darkness.

Once he was alone, he felt better. The longer he walked, the more he appreciated the comfort of his jeans and gym shoes as hiking gear, relative to his boots and leather pants. His tread was lighter, his stride freer; he was tempted to start skipping down the road. How pleasant to be out walking in these gym shoes!

But this was not his great revelation. His great revelation came when he was a few kilometers from the Polish border. He was straining to hear whether any of the homicidal farm dogs in the surrounding darkness might be unleashed, he had his arms outstretched, he was feeling more than a little ridiculous, when he remembered Gitanas's remark: *tragedy rewritten as a farce*. All of a sudden he understood why nobody, including himself, had ever liked his screenplay: he'd written a thriller where he should have written farce.

Faint morning twilight was overtaking him. In New York he'd honed and polished the first thirty pages of "The Academy Purple" until his memory of them was nearly eidetic, and now, as the Baltic sky brightened, he bore down with a mental red pencil on his mental reconstruction of these pages, made a little trim here, added emphasis or hyperbole there, and in his mind the scenes became what they'd wanted to be all along: ridiculous. The tragic BILL QUAINTECE became a comic fool.

Chip picked up his pace as if hurrying toward a desk at which he could begin to revise the script immediately. He came over a rise and saw the blacked-out Lithuanian town of Eisiskès and, farther in the distance, beyond the frontier, some outdoor lights in Poland. Two dray horses, straining their heads over a barbed-wire fence, nickered at him optimistically.

He spoke out loud: "Make it *ridiculous*. Make it *ridiculous*."

Two Lithuanian customs officials and two "policemen" manned the tiny border checkpoint. They handed Chip's passport back to him without the bulky stack of litai that he'd filled it with. For no discernible reason except petty cruelty, they made him sit in an overheated room for several hours while cement mixers and chicken trucks and bicyclists came and went. It was late morning before they let him walk over into Poland.

A few kilometers down the road, in Sejny, he bought zlotys and, using the zlotys, lunch. The shops were well stocked, it was Christmastime. The men of the town were old and looked a lot like the Pope.

Rides in three trucks and a city taxi got him to the Warsaw airport by noon on Wednesday. The improbably apple-cheeked personnel at the LOT Polish Airlines ticket counter were delighted to see him. LOT had added extra holiday flights to its schedule to accommodate the tens of thousands of Polish guest workers returning to their families from the West, and many of the westbound flights were underbooked. All the red-cheeked counter girls wore little hats like drum majorettes. They took cash from Chip, gave him a ticket, and told him *Run*.

He ran to the gate and boarded a 767 that then sat on the runway for four hours while a possibly faulty instrument in the cockpit was examined and finally, reluctantly, replaced.

The flight plan was a great-circle route to the great Polish city of Chicago, nonstop. Chip kept sleeping in order to forget that he owed Denise \$20,500, was maxed out on his credit cards, and now had neither a job nor any prospect of finding one.

The good news in Chicago, after he'd cleared Customs, was that two rental-car companies were still doing business. The bad news, which he learned after standing in line for half an hour, was that people with maxed-out credit cards could not rent cars.

He went down the list of airlines in the phone book until he found one—Prairie Hopper, never heard of it—that had a seat on a St. Jude flight at seven the next morning.

By now it was too late to call St. Jude. He chose an out-of-the-way patch of airport carpeting and lay down on it to sleep. He didn't understand what had happened to him. He felt like a piece of paper that had once had coherent writing on it but had been through the wash. He felt roughened, bleached, and worn out along the fold lines. He semi-dreamed of disembodied eyes and isolated mouths in ski masks. He'd lost track of what he wanted, and since who a person was was what a person wanted, you could say that he'd lost track of himself.

How strange, then, that the old man who opened the front door

at nine-thirty in St. Jude the next morning seemed to know exactly who he was.

A holly wreath was on the door. The front walk was edged with snow and evenly spaced broom marks. The midwestern street struck the traveler as a wonderland of wealth and oak trees and conspicuously useless space. The traveler didn't see how such a place could exist in a world of Lithuanias and Polands. It was a testament to the insulatory effectiveness of political boundaries that power didn't simply arc across the gap between such divergent economic voltages. The old street with its oak smoke and snowy flat-topped hedges and icicled eaves seemed precarious. It seemed mirage-like. It seemed like an exceptionally vivid memory of something beloved and dead.

"Well!" Alfred said, his face blazing with joy, as he took Chip's hand in both of his. "Look who's here!"

Enid tried to elbow her way into the picture, speaking Chip's name, but Alfred wouldn't let go of his hand. He said it twice more: "Look who's here! Look who's here!"

"Al, let him come in and close the door," Enid said.

Chip was balking at the doorway. The world outside was black and white and gray and swept by fresh, clear air; the enchanted interior was dense with objects and smells and colors, humidity, large personalities. He was afraid to enter.

"Come in, come in," Enid squeaked, "and shut the door."

To protect himself from spells, he privately spoke an incantation: *I'm staying for three days and then I'm going back to New York, I'm finding a job, I'm putting aside five hundred dollars a month, minimum, until I'm out of debt, and I'm working every night on the script.*

Invoking this charm, which was all he had now, the paltry sum of his identity, he stepped through the doorway.

"My word, you're scratchy and smelly," Enid said, kissing him. "Now, where's your suitcase?"

"It's by the side of a gravel road in western Lithuania."

"I'm just happy you're home safely."

Nowhere in the nation of Lithuania was there a room like the Lambert living room. Only in this hemisphere could carpeting so sumptuously woolen and furniture so big and so well made and so

opulently upholstered be found in a room of such plain design and ordinary situation. The light in the wood-framed windows, though gray, had a prairie optimism; there wasn't a sea within six hundred miles to trouble the atmosphere. And the posture of the older oak trees reaching toward this sky had a jut, a wildness and entitlement, predating permanent settlement; memories of an unfenced world were written in the cursive of their branches.

Chip apprehended it all in a heartbeat. The continent, his homeland. Scattered around the living room were nests of opened presents and little leavings of spent ribbon, wrapping-paper fragments, labels. At the foot of the fireside chair that Alfred always claimed for himself, Denise was kneeling by the largest nest of presents.

"Denise, look who's here," Enid said.

As if out of obligation, with downcast eyes, Denise rose and crossed the room. But when she'd put her arms around Chip and he'd squeezed her in return (her height, as always, surprised him), she wouldn't let go. She *clung* to him—kissed his neck, fastened her eyes on him, and thanked him.

Gary came over and embraced Chip awkwardly, his face averted. "Didn't think you were going to make it," he said.

"Neither did I," Chip said.

"Well!" Alfred said again, gazing at him in wonder.

"Gary has to leave at eleven," Enid said, "but we can all have breakfast together. You get cleaned up, and Denise and I will start breakfast. Oh, this is *just* what I wanted," she said, hurrying to the kitchen. "This is the best Christmas present I've ever had!"

Gary turned to Chip with his I'm-a-jerk face. "There you go," he said. "Best Christmas present she's ever had."

"I think she means having all five of us together," Denise said.

"Well, she'd better enjoy it in a hurry," Gary said, "because she owes me a discussion and I'm expecting payment."

Chip, detached from his own body, trailed after it and wondered what it was going to do. He removed an aluminum stool from the downstairs bathroom shower. The blast of water was strong and hot. His impressions were fresh in a way that he would either remember all his life or instantly forget. A brain could absorb only so many impressions before it lost the ability to decode them, to put them in co-

herent shape and order. His nearly sleepless night on a patch of airport carpeting, for example, was still very much with him and begging to be processed. And now here was a hot shower on Christmas morning. Here were the familiar tan tiles of the stall. The tiles, like every other physical constituent of the house, were suffused with the fact of their ownership by Enid and Alfred, saturated with an aura of belonging to this family. The house felt more like a body—softer, more mortal and organic—than like a building.

Denise's shampoo had the pleasing, subtle scents of late-model Western capitalism. In the seconds it took Chip to lather his hair, he forgot where he was. Forgot the continent, forgot the year, forgot the time of day, forgot the circumstances. His brain in the shower was piscine or amphibian, registering impressions, reacting to the moment. He wasn't far from terror. At the same time, he felt OK. He was hungry for breakfast and thirsty, in particular, for coffee.

With a towel around his waist he stopped in the living room, where Alfred leaped to his feet. The sight of Alfred's suddenly aged face, its disintegration-in-progress, its rednesses and asymmetries, cut Chip like a bullwhip.

"Well!" Alfred said. "That was quick."

"Can I borrow some clothes of yours?"

"I will leave that to your judgment."

Upstairs in his father's closet the ancient shaving kits, shoehorns, electric razors, shoe trees, and tie rack were all in their accustomed places. They'd been on duty here each hour of the fifteen hundred days since Chip had last been in this house. For a moment he was angry (how could he not be?) that his parents had never moved anywhere. Had simply stayed here waiting.

He took underwear, socks, wool slacks, a white shirt, and a gray cardigan to the room that he'd shared with Gary in the years between Denise's arrival in the family and Gary's departure for college. Gary had an overnight bag open on "his" twin bed and was packing it.

"I don't know if you noticed," he said, "but Dad's in bad shape."

"No, I noticed."

Gary put a small box on Chip's dresser. It was a box of ammunition—twenty-gauge shotgun shells.

"He had these out with the gun in the workshop," Gary said. "I went down there this morning and I thought, better safe than sorry."

Chip looked at the box and spoke instinctively. "Isn't that kind of Dad's own decision?"

"That's what I was thinking yesterday," Gary said. "But if he wants to do it, he's got other options. It's supposed to be down near zero tonight. He can go outside with a bottle of whiskey. I don't want Mom to find him with his head blown off."

Chip didn't know what to say. He silently dressed in the old man's clothes. The shirt and pants were marvelously clean and fit him better than he would have guessed. He was surprised, when he put the cardigan on, that his hands did not begin to shake, surprised to see such a young face in the mirror.

"So what have you been doing with yourself?" Gary said.

"I've been helping a Lithuanian friend of mine defraud Western investors."

"Jesus, Chip. You don't want to be doing that."

Everything else in the world might be strange, but Gary's condescension galled Chip exactly as it always had.

"From a strictly moral viewpoint," Chip said, "I have more sympathy for Lithuania than I do for American investors."

"You want to be a Bolshevik?" Gary said, zipping up his bag. "Fine, be a Bolshevik. Just don't call *me* when you get arrested."

"It would never occur to me to call you," Chip said.

"Are you fellas about ready for breakfast?" Enid sang from halfway up the stairs.

A holiday linen tablecloth was on the dining table. In the center was an arrangement of pinecones, white holly and green holly, red candles, and silver bells. Denise was bringing food out—Texan grapefruit, scrambled eggs, bacon, and a stollen and breads that she'd baked.

Snow cover boosted the strong prairie light.

Per custom, Gary sat alone on one side of the table. On the other side, Denise sat by Enid and Chip by Alfred.

"Merry, merry, merry Christmas!" Enid said, looking each of her children in the eye in turn.

Alfred, head down, was already eating.

Gary also began to eat, rapidly, with a glance at his watch.

Chip didn't remember the coffee being so drinkable in these parts.

Denise asked him how he'd gotten home. He told her the story, omitting only the armed robbery.

Enid, with a scowl of judgment, was following every move of Gary's. "Slow *down*," she said. "You don't have to leave until eleven."

"Actually," Gary said, "I said quarter to eleven. It's past ten-thirty, and we have some things to discuss."

"We're finally all together," Enid said. "Let's just relax and enjoy it."

Gary set his fork down. "I've been here since Monday, Mother, waiting for us all to be together. Denise has been here since Tuesday morning. It's not my fault if Chip was too busy defrauding American investors to get here on time."

"I just explained why I was late," Chip said. "If you were listening."

"Well, maybe you should have left a little earlier."

"What does he mean, defrauding?" Enid said. "I thought you were doing computer work."

"I'll explain it to you later, Mom."

"No," Gary said. "Explain it to her now."

"Gary," Denise said.

"No, sorry," Gary said, throwing down his napkin like a gauntlet. "I've had it with this family! I'm done waiting! I want some answers *now*."

"I was doing computer work," Chip said. "But Gary's right, strictly speaking, the intent was to defraud American investors."

"I don't approve of that at all," Enid said.

"I know you don't," Chip said. "Although it's a little more complicated than you might—"

What is so complicated about obeying the law?"

"Gary, for God's sake," Denise said with a sigh. "It's Christmas?"

"And you're a thief," Gary said, wheeling on her.

What?"

"You know what I'm talking about. You sneaked into somebody's room and you took a thing that didn't belong—"

"Excuse me," Denise said hotly, "I *restored* a thing that was stolen from its rightful—"

"Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit!"

"Oh, I'm not sitting here for this," Enid wailed. "Not on Christmas morning!"

"No, Mother, sorry, you're not going anywhere," Gary said. "We're going to sit here and have our little talk *right now*."

Alfred gave Chip a complicit smile and gestured at the others. "You see what I have to put up with?"

Chip arranged his face in a facsimile of comprehension and agreement.

"Chip, how long are you here for?" Gary said.

"Three days."

"And, Denise, you're leaving on—"

"Sunday, Gary. I'm leaving on Sunday."

"So what's going to happen on Monday, Mom? How are you going to make this house work on Monday?"

"I'll think about that when Monday comes."

Alfred, still smiling, asked Chip what Gary was talking about.

"I don't know, Dad."

"You really think you're going to go to Philadelphia?" Gary said. "You think Coreck tall's going to fix all this?"

"No, Gary, I don't," Enid said.

Gary didn't seem to hear her answer. "Dad, here, do me a favor," he said. "Put your right hand on your left shoulder."

"Gary, stop it," Denise said.

Alfred leaned close to Chip and spoke confidentially. "What's he asking?"

"He wants you to put your right hand on your left shoulder."

"That's a lot of nonsense."

"Dad?" Gary said. "Come on, right hand, left shoulder."

"*Stop it*," Denise said.

"Let's go, Dad. Right hand, left shoulder. Can you do that? You want to show us how you follow simple instructions? Come on! *Right hand. Left shoulder.*"

Alfred shook his head. "One bedroom and a kitchen is all we need."

start
6

the smell of baking turkey that blanketed the house. Whenever he entered his father's field of vision, a smile of recognition and pleasure spread over Alfred's face. This recognition might have had the character of mistaken identity if it hadn't been accompanied by Alfred's exclamation of Chip's name. Chip seemed *beloved* to the old man. He'd been arguing with Alfred and deploring Alfred and feeling the sting of Alfred's disapproval for most of his life, and his personal failures and his political views were, if anything, more extreme than ever now, and yet it was Gary who was fighting with the old man, it was Chip who brightened the old man's face.

At dinner he took the trouble to describe in some detail his activities in Lithuania. He might as well have been reciting the tax code in a monotone. Denise, normally a paragon of listening, was absorbed in helping Alfred with his food, and Enid had eyes only for her husband's deficiencies. She flinched or sighed or shook her head at every spilled bite, every non sequitur. Alfred was quite visibly making her life a hell now.

I'm the least unhappy person at this table, Chip thought.

He helped Denise wash the dishes while Enid spoke to her grandsons on the telephone and Alfred went to bed.

"How long has Dad been like this?" he asked Denise.

"Like this? Just since yesterday. But he wasn't great before that."

Chip put on a heavy coat of Alfred's and took a cigarette outside. The cold was deeper than any he'd experienced in Vilnius. Wind rattled the thick brown leaves still clinging to the oaks, those most conservative of trees; snow squeaked beneath his feet. *Near zero tonight,* Gary had said. *He can go outside with a bottle of whiskey.* Chip wanted to pursue the important question of suicide while he had a cigarette to enhance his mental performance, but his bronchi and nasal passages were so traumatized by cold that the trauma of smoke barely registered, and the ache in his fingers and ears—the damned rivets—was fast becoming unbearable. He gave up and hurried inside just as Denise was leaving.

"Where are you going?" Chip asked.

"I'll be back."

Enid, by the fire in the living room, was gnawing at her lip with

naked desolation. "You haven't opened your presents," she said.

"Maybe in the morning," Chip said.

"I'm sure I didn't get you anything you'll like."

"It's nice you got me anything."

Enid shook her head. "This wasn't the Christmas I'd hoped for. Suddenly Dad can't do a thing. Not one single thing."

"Let's give him a drug holiday and see if that helps."

Enid might have been reading bad prognoses in the fire. "Will you stay for a week and help me take him to the hospital?"

Chip's hand went to the rivet in his earlobe as to a talisman. He felt like a child out of Grimm, lured into the enchanted house by the warmth and the food; and now the witch was going to lock him in a cage, fatten him up, and eat him.

He repeated the charm he'd invoked at the front door. "I can only stay three days," he said. "I've got to start working right away. I owe Denise some money that I need to pay her back."

"Just a *week*," the witch said. "Just a week, until we see how things go in the hospital."

"I don't think so, Mom. I've got to go back."

Enid's bleakness deepened, but she didn't seem surprised by his refusal. "I guess this is my responsibility, then," she said. "I guess I always knew it would be."

She retired to the den, and Chip put more logs on the fire. Cold drafts were finding ways through the windows, faintly stirring the open curtains. The furnace was running almost constantly. The world was colder and emptier than Chip had realized, the adults had gone away.

Toward eleven, Denise came inside reeking of cigarettes and looking two-thirds frozen. She waved to Chip and tried to go straight upstairs, but he insisted that she sit by the fire. She knelt and bowed her head, sniffing steadily, and put her hands out toward the embers. She kept her eyes on the fire as if to ensure that she not look at him. She blew her nose on a wet shred of Kleenex.

"Where'd you go?" he said.

"Just on a walk."

"Long walk."

"Yuh."

"You sent me some e-mails that I deleted before I really read them."

"Oh."

"So what's going on?" he said.

She shook her head. "Just everything."

"I had almost thirty thousand dollars in cash on Monday. I was going to give you twenty-four thousand of it. But then we got robbed by uniformed men in ski masks. Implausible as that may sound."

"I want to forgive that debt," Denise said.

Chip's hand went to the rivet again. "I'm going to start paying you a minimum of four hundred a month until the principal and interest are paid off. It's my top priority. Absolute highest priority."

His sister turned and raised her face to him. Her eyes were bloodshot, her forehead as red as a newborn's. "I said I forgive the debt. You owe me nothing."

"Appreciate it," he said quickly, looking away. "But I'm going to pay you anyway."

"No," she said. "I'm not going to take your money. I forgive the debt. Do you know what 'forgive' means?"

In her peculiar mood, with her unexpected words, she was making Chip anxious. He pulled on the rivet and said, "Denise, come on. Please. At least show me the respect of letting me pay you back. I realize I've been a shit. But I don't want to be a shit all my life."

"I want to forgive that debt," she said.

"Really. Come on." Chip smiled desperately. "You've got to let me pay you."

"Can you stand to be forgiven?"

"No," he said. "Basically, no. I can't. It's better all around if I pay you."

Still kneeling, Denise bent over and tucked in her arms and made herself into an olive, an egg, an onion. From within this balled form came a low voice. "Do you understand what a huge favor you'd be doing me if you would let me forgive the debt? Do you understand that it's hard for me to ask this favor? Do you understand that coming here for Christmas is the only other favor I've ever asked you? Do you understand that I'm not trying to insult you? Do you understand

that I never doubted that you wanted to pay me back, and I know I'm asking you to do something very hard? Do you understand that I wouldn't ask you to do something so hard if I didn't really, really, really need it?"

Chip looked at the trembling balled human form at his feet. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I'm having trouble on numerous fronts," she said.

"This is a bad time to talk about the money, then. Let's forget it for a while. I want to hear what's bothering you."

Still balled up, Denise shook her head emphatically, once. "I need you to say yes here, now. Say 'Yes, thank you.'"

Chip made a gesture of utter bafflement. It was near midnight and his father had begun to thump around upstairs and his sister was curled up like an egg and begging him to accept relief from the principal torment of his life.

"Let's talk about it tomorrow," he said.

"Would it help if I asked you for something else?"

"Tomorrow, OK?"

"Mom wants somebody here next week," Denise said. "You could stay a week and help her. That would be a huge relief for me. I'm going to die if I stay past Sunday. I will literally cease to exist."

Chip was breathing hard. The door of the cage was closing on him fast. The sensation he'd had in the men's room at the Vilnius Airport, the feeling that his debt to Denise, far from being a burden, was his last defense, returned to him in the form of dread at the prospect of its being forgiven. He'd lived with the affliction of this debt until it had assumed the character of a neuroblastoma so intricately implicated in his cerebral architecture that he doubted he could survive its removal.

He wondered if the last flights east had left the airport or whether he might still escape tonight.

"How about we split the debt in half?" he said. "So I only owe you ten. How about we both stay here till Wednesday?"

"Nope."

"If I said yes," he said, "would you stop being so weird and lighten up a little?"

"First say yes."

Alfred was calling Chip's name from upstairs. He was saying, "Chip, can you help me?"

"He calls your name even when you're not here," Denise said.

The windows shook in the wind. When had it happened that his parents had become the children who went to bed early and called down for help from the top of the stairs? When had this happened?

"Chip," Alfred called. "I don't understand this blanket. CAN YOU HELP ME?"

The house shook and the storms rattled and the draft from the window nearest Chip intensified; and in a gust of memory he remembered the curtains. He remembered when he'd left St. Jude for college. He remembered packing the hand-carved Austrian chessmen that his parents had given him for his high-school graduation, and the six-volume Sandburg biography of Lincoln that they'd given him for his eighteenth birthday, and his new navy-blue blazer from Brooks Brothers ("It makes you look like a handsome young doctor!" Enid hinted), and great stacks of white T-shirts and white jockey underpants and white long johns, and a fifth-grade school picture of Denise in a Lucite frame, and the very same Hudson Bay blanket that Alfred had taken as a freshman to the University of Kansas four decades earlier, and a pair of leather-clad wool mittens that likewise dated from Alfred's deep Kansan past, and a set of heavy-duty thermal curtains that Alfred had bought for him at Sears. Reading Chip's college orientation materials, Alfred had been struck by the sentence *New England winters can be very cold*. The curtains he'd bought at Sears were of a plasticized brown-and-pink fabric with a backing of foam rubber. They were heavy and bulky and stiff. "You'll appreciate these on a cold night," he told Chip. "You'll be surprised how much they cut down drafts." But Chip's freshman roommate was a prep-school product named Roan McCorkle who would soon be leaving thumbprints, in what appeared to be Vaseline, on the fifth-grade photo of Denise. Roan laughed at the curtains and Chip laughed, too. He put them back in the box and stowed the box in the basement of the dorm and let it gather mold there for the next four years. He had nothing against the curtains personally. They were simply curtains and they wanted no more than what any curtains wanted—to hang

well, to exclude light to the best of their ability, to be neither too small nor too large for the window that it was their task in life to cover; to be pulled this way in the evening and that way in the morning; to stir in the breezes that came before rain on a summer night; to be much used and little noticed. There were numberless hospitals and retirement homes and budget motels, not just in the Midwest but in the East as well, where these particular brown rubber-backed curtains could have had a long and useful life. It wasn't their fault that they didn't belong in a dorm room. They'd betrayed no urge to rise above their station; their material and patterning contained not a hint of unseemly ambition. They were what they were. If anything, when he finally dug them out on the eve of graduation, their virginal pinkish folds turned out to be rather *less* plasticized and homely and Sears-like than he remembered. They were nowhere near as shameful as he'd thought.

"I don't understand these blankets," Alfred said.

"All right," Chip told Denise as he started up the stairs. "If it makes you feel better, I won't pay you back." *end 6*

The question was: How to get out of this prison?

The big black lady, the mean one, the bastard, was the one he had to keep an eye on. She intended to make his life a hell. She stood at the far end of the prison yard throwing him significant glances to remind him that she hadn't forgotten him, she was still in hot pursuit of her vendetta. She was a lazy black bastard and he said so at a shout. He cursed the bastards, black and white, all around him. Goddamned sneaky bastards with their pinheaded regulations. EPA bureaucrats, OSHA functionaries, insolent so-and-sos. They were keeping their distance now, sure, because they knew he was onto them, but just let him nod off for one minute, just let him let his guard down, and watch what they would do to him. They could hardly wait to tell him he was nothing. They could hardly wait to show their disrespect. That fat black bastard, that nasty black bitch over there, held his eye and nodded across the white heads of the other prisoners: *I'm gonna get you*. That's what her nod said to him. And nobody else could see what she was doing to him. All the rest were timid useless strangers