

GENESIS

a novel

ZUBIN J. SHROFF



FOUR CIRCLE PRESS
MINNEAPOLIS

GENESIS: A NOVEL

Copyright © 2013 by Zubin J. Shroff
All Rights Reserved

If you'd like to reproduce, transmit, sell, or distribute any part of this book, please obtain the written permission of the author first. Note that you may freely quote (verbatim) sections of this book (with clear and complete attribution) for the purposes of articles, reviews, peaceful and nonhateful political manifestos, or doctoral dissertations (we'd like to see that thesis...).

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, events, brands, corporations, and organizations mentioned are either the product of the author's imagination or are being used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real people (alive or other), real places (old or new), real organizations (naughty or nice), or real events (serious or silly) not covered by the previous statements is coincidental and quite possibly a bleedthrough from a simultaneous life you are living in Columbus, Ohio.

Cover Art by August West
Book Design by Jack & Betty Frost

Set in Caslon

Published by Four Circle Press
Minneapolis, Minnesota, 55458-0442
First Edition, 2014

ISBN: 978-1-937308- (Trade Paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-937308- (Electronic Book)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

www.zubinshroff.com
www.fourcirclepress.com

GENESIS

one

I think I love her as I watch her shave my armpits. I'm not really in love with her, of course, but she really is shaving my armpits. I had lied about having lice, and with a scream she had descended upon me with a switchblade, but the blade was too dull for my thick hair, and she screamed until Boris brought her a straight-edged razor, and then she went to work on my scalp and my neck and now my armpits.

Lice are a constant worry here at the Inn, and so perhaps I should not have joked about having them. It is like making a joke about a bomb strapped to your inner thigh when airport security is patting you down—don't do it, just don't do it.

Anyway, she is almost done with my armpits, and by now my head and neck and eyebrows are smooth (even though I did mention that lice do not live in eyebrows if there is other hair available), and I think it is time to stop her before she moves down to my chest and perhaps even below (I am a married man, you know).

"Stop it, Elise," I say with a giggle as the cold razor-edge brushes my nipple. "I was joking, Elise. I don't have lice. I am not lousy."

"Shut the fuck up, Jew," she says to me through her teeth

(not because she is angry or anything, but because she is holding a spare razor in her teeth since razors go blunt quickly and it is best to have a sharp razor when shaving somebody). “I smell the lice on your musk. So shut the fuck up and hold still or I’ll cut you like you’ve never been cut before, Jew.”

“I’m not Jewish,” I say for the third time this morning, although I do not mind being called a Jew.

Elise, of course, is Jewish, and Boris—well, I don’t know what Boris is. He is Elise’s man, and as if to prove it, he starts to fuck her from behind even as she brings that razor ever-so-close to my nipple. Everyone else starts to either cheer (the men) or clap (the women) as Boris’s face lights up in a smile and Elise’s grip on the razor tightens and then loosens and then tightens again until finally she drops the razor and I jump away from her clutches and cover my bare chest and join the rest of the spectators.

It is a curious sight, Boris and Elise fucking in the dining room (which is also where the shaving and other de-lousing activities are carried out). I have seen it several hundred times by now, but it is still a curious sight because of how much the two of them seem to enjoy it. They have been married for twelve or fifteen years, the others say. Met in Germany in the old days and lived together for many years before getting married. How they ended up here at the Inn is anybody’s guess. Perhaps they even run the place. No one knows, because if you ask any of the others, even old man Tobin, they would say that they don’t remember the Inn without Boris and Elise.

The Inn, of course, is just what it sounds like (what does

it sound like, I wonder). It is a place where lousy people like us gather and live and do our art. So you might call it an artists' inn, I suppose.

There is no signage anywhere on the inside or outside to denote this place or distinguish it from any of the other large yellow old houses in the neighborhood. Except that our house is not yellow, and so perhaps that distinguishes the Inn from the other yellow houses.

We are in Columbus, the capital city of Ohio, and a very American city, they say, although it is not clear to me how one city in America can be any more or less American than another city in America. Perhaps they mean it is closer to the average American city in terms of size and topography and demographics and other such things, and so it somehow is more American than say New York or Des Moines or Santa Fe. Anyway, it is the most American city is what they say, and because of it (or perhaps to prove it) Columbus is a testing ground for new fast-food entrees and other such consumables directed at the average American.

The Inn is located in a nice area of town close to the sprawling Ohio State University campus, but make no mistake, there are no college students here. We have a strict rule of no residents or visitors below the age of twenty-nine. Not even if the visitors are your children (especially not).

So yes, we are a residency of artists (did I say that already? Not sure, because I cannot read). A group of artists. Not really a family, but perhaps a family, because we delouse each other and watch Boris and Elise make grunty love on the same tables that we eat and sometimes sleep on.

We have about an equal mix of men and women here. Most of us are married, and many of us have children. Our spouses and kids do not know exactly where we are, but they do know that we are gone (so that's something, right?). But it's not what you think. We are not run-aways. If anything, we are chase-aways.

Take Marie, for example. I always like to use her as an example, because she is the most direct case of a chase-away, and so it is easy to demonstrate the concept. Marie comes from Northern California, which is a nice part of the country, and very conducive to doing all kinds of art. She has a husband around her own age (late forties by now, I think), and three children (two girls and one boy, I believe). She was a model wife and mother from what I can tell, and she talks of her children sometimes and so I know they've been raised right, and she calls her husband on the phone once or twice a month and she often calls from the dining room and so I have listened to her talk and I know she loves him. There was no matter of infidelity on either one's part, and indeed, to a casual observer it would have seemed like Marie and her family were wonderfully perfect models of Ronald Reagan's America.

She had always dabbled in art (art spelled with a small, non-specific "a"), and at first this had meant she would paint a few pictures in water-color with her children or perhaps knit a design onto a T-shirt for her husband. Eventually she began to do things like make strange-looking sculptures out of malleable foodstuffs like dough or spaghetti or ground turkey or peanut butter (chunky). Over the years the oddness

of this faded away because she seemed normal enough in all other respects, and so when the children finally came of age and went off to college (Marie was a young mother), it was a surprise to all of them when she simply stopped talking (or speaking, but I think it means the same thing, yes?).

This went on for about six years, and finally all the kids were out of college and they gathered around her one day in the kitchen and the oldest kid told Marie about this place he had heard about but had been told never to speak of (not really), and within a week Marie had been chased out of the house and sent to the Inn.

Now that I write this down, it seems that perhaps this is not so straightforward of an example after all, but when you say it aloud to someone it seems to get across just fine, so I'll stick with it. Soon enough I will talk about the rest of us, and so perhaps someone else's story will be the one that resonates.

But anyway, back to Marie. So she had been chased out and sent to the Inn. There had been no psychiatrists involved (she had refused them over the years with a simple shake of the head), and all the attempts at intervention and lifestyle changes had made no difference. They had moved houses three times in those six years after someone suggested that perhaps Marie was being affected by certain electro-magnetic fields that line up funny in parts of Northern California. Although they were not religious people, the husband had succumbed to one of Marie's friends' suggestion to perform an exorcism, and he also followed it up with a spiritual healing of the kind created from a mish-mash of Navajo, Kabbalist, and Buddhist rituals.

She was functional enough in the sense that she cooked and cleaned and smiled once in a while at her husband and went to work four days a week at the bookstore (she was still quite good at her job, and although she did not use sign-language, some pointing and a few smiles and wide-eyed expressions were sufficient to get her through the days). There was really not much wrong with her, it seemed, and soon enough (after about four years), everyone just got used to it and left her alone.

And so it had been a bit of a surprise to everyone when she had agreed (with a nod of her head) to leave home and go to the Inn. The family had gone on many vacations during those years of silence, and the husband had even sent Marie off on her own to resorts and retreats in the hopes that perhaps she just needed the time to herself to do whatever she needed to do (and he was prepared to deal with anything, he told her). But she had always returned silent and subdued, if a little bit tanned.

But the day after she arrived here at the Inn, she called her family and spoke to them loudly and passionately and through most of the day and almost all the night. I know this because I had only just arrived at the Inn myself and this seemed like an undue invasion of privacy, I thought at the time, for one woman to stand in the hallways and speak so loudly about trivial things that happened with her children three and four years earlier. It was only after Marie told me some of her story and I pieced the rest of it together that I understood that it was not so trivial from the point of view of Marie and her family. And her art (but we will get to that later).

Of course, by then I had learned a few things about the Inn and privacy and all that, and I laugh out loud now as I watch Boris cry out and crumple into a heap on top of his Elise as she smiles and closes her eyes. Marie is laughing and clapping, and it is funny how far we have all come together here at this odd little place in Columbus, Ohio.

It is dinner time now. Actually, it was dinner time earlier, but I made that stupid joke about having lice and then things proceeded to get a bit hairy and grunty and so the stewards had waited in the kitchen for everyone to finish.

Yes, we have stewards that cook for us and serve us food. Perhaps you will wonder what kind of artists live together in a house with hired help, but I said this was an Inn and not a commune.

So the stewards are bringing out the food now. It is some kind of pastry stuffed with green things and brown things and covered with a red sauce. I wonder if it is a new fast-food entrée that is being tested on us, but I don't make the joke out loud because Elise is still eyeing me from across the table, and I know she still has one sharp razor left, and so I keep quiet and poke at my pastry. Lice can be a real problem in a place like the Inn, and I am sorry I made the joke.

I look over at Marie again, and she catches me looking at her, and I wonder if she knows I am writing about her. I think she does, because she knows I like to use her as an example when newcomers or visitors ask about the Inn. She does not mind, I know that. We came to the Inn around the

same time (did I say that already?), and so you can say we are from the same “class,” so to speak. But that is all that we share as far as the word class is concerned. In all other matters she vastly outclasses me, as she does most of the others here. Perhaps it was those six years she spent without talking. Maybe she got a lot of thinking done in those years.

I had asked her about it, but she had shrugged in her innocent way and laughed and clapped her hands and said she didn’t do much thinking at all during that time, and it was like she was not even there.

“But how can you be alive and waking up every morning and taking a bath and dressing and going to work and eating and sleeping and being with your husband and do all of it for six years without thinking about it?” I had asked. “Perhaps I can understand that you did not speak for so long. Yes, I can understand that. But to not think about it is something else. Perhaps it was some sort of displacement of consciousness. I have read about such things.”

Marie had shaken her head at this. “I do not mean that I don’t remember that time. I mean it did not affect me much. I don’t think it made much difference to me. I know it worried my family, but I did not know it then, and now that I know it, I have told them I’m sorry.”

“So you’ll be returning to them soon?” I had asked, and this was still early on and I had not yet learned a few things about the Inn.

But let me interject now and say that we are not prisoners here or anything like that. It is quite a free-flowing place, and a fairly lighthearted and wholesome place also. It was

pure chance that I chose to start this report around the same time as I made my ill-advised joke about being lousy. I had just been re-reading Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, which starts off with the narrator shaving someone's armpits for delousing purposes, and so perhaps I had lice on the brain.

Speaking of lice, my spongy, fried red dinner is moving about before my eyes, and I stab at it with my fork to make sure it is dead enough to eat. I know that in some places they eat live things, but those things are usually seafood, and those places are usually New York or San Francisco or Beijing, and we are in Columbus and on my plate is something red and spongy and brown and green and it has certainly not come from the sea.

"Steward," I cry out, and a steward comes running out of the kitchen, red-faced and spongy-eyed.

"Sir?" he says cordially as I eye the red streaks on his hospital gown.

"Why are you wearing a hospital gown?" I say, and I raise my hand and stop him because I am trying to make an honest effort to write all of this down as it is happening, but it is hard, you see, and distracting, and it creates bumps and inconsistencies in the motion of space and time (which are both unmoving, objectively speaking) and my spongy-food (which is most certainly moving). It also makes me less alert to the stimuli around me, just like when you stop to take a picture of something you often miss out on the experience itself. But still, no one said this was supposed to be easy, and so I will do my best to keep recording things in real-time, even though there will no doubt be some moments which I

capture and report in present tense when in truth I was not physically writing at the time. “And why is there fresh blood on your nurse’s uniform, young clerk?”

The steward is young and new, but the others have warned him about me, and so he wipes the reddish sweat from his bloody forehead and smiles at me nervously. “It is red-sauce, sir, and I am not a nurse, sir,” he says.

“Then why is my food moving?” I demand, and I begin to giggle, not because I am crazy, but because I am not.

“Leave him alone, Jew,” shouts Grover from two tables down. “He’s not ready for your bullshit yet. Wait until he’s been here a bit longer.”

“Then it won’t be fun anymore,” I say. But I know Grover is correct, because Grover is a mathematical genius, and such people do not speak unless they are sure of the precision of what they are about to say.

I, on the other hand, am happy to speak without thought of truth or consequence, and it has served me only moderately well. So I slap the young page on the back and send him off to the kitchen to fetch me a sharper knife, and although I do not think he will do it (would you bring me a sharp knife if I had behaved thusly with you?), it is sometimes just the perception of obedience that makes a man with terrible short-term memory happy.

“Thank you, Grover. I forgot that we had a new crop of caterers this year.” I wave at him, but he has his glasses on now and is drawing some things on a napkin (cloth napkin) with permanent marker, and he gets very angry if any of those drawings go awry.

I look at my food again, and it is still moving, but the movement is more like a shake, and it is a regular enough shake and so I suspect that either I have been served a still-beating heart or it is the table itself that is shaking. I look beneath the table and find my answer, and it is the large boot of Felicity James that is knocking against the sturdy table leg and sending the shiver through my spongy entrée.

“Felicity,” I say with a smile.

“Yes, Mr. Jew,” she says in her timid voice.

She is a large woman, almost six-feet tall, and perhaps almost as long if you measured around her wider areas, but no one would call her fat, and not because she could crush your head with her boot. No, she is well-proportioned and hard, and we all wondered if she had been in the army (British Army, of course, because she is English), but she always smiled and shook her head when we asked her that, and although some of the others press her with the question, I do not because I think perhaps she sometimes feels self-conscious enough about being taller and stronger than many of the men here, and badgering her about whether she had been in the army (after she has often said she hadn't) seems like overkill.

“I like your boots today,” I say to her. “Are they new?”

She giggles like a girl (she is fifty-three) and sticks her tongue out at me but does not reply, and I know she is happy that I noticed she has on her new boots. I saw the package come in a few days ago and I took it up to her room, and although she does not say much to anyone, she turned red when I handed her the box, and she whispered “New boots!” to me, and I thought it was a really nice moment right then,

and so I am glad I was given an opportunity to look under the table and notice her new boots.

Felicity's art is glass. She is a glass-blower, and a fine one at that. She has a studio a few steps outside the main house (in the backyard and linked by tunnel), and she does her magic there. (She is not the only glass-blower at the Inn, but we will talk about Owen later.) Felicity's new boots are knocking out a nice three-stroke beat on the solid old wood of this table, and I feel like I should say one or two or three more things about her as I tap my pen to her steady rhythm.

But to be honest, I do not know if I know even three things about her aside from what I have told you. She is English (from England), and she had mentioned the name of her hometown once but I do not remember now (I will make a note to ask her again). She is one of the few unmarried people at the Inn, but I think she was married once and she has a child somewhere. Felicity arrived here almost a year ago now, and I think at first she was not so happy about it, and she said something about wanting to be somewhere else. But now she has a glass studio that she shares with just one other person, and it makes her happy.

She is quiet and timid, but you can tell she is a confident and deeply satisfied person, and I think we would all know a lot more about her if she spent more time outside her studio (or we spent more time in it).

But now I suddenly remember that I am sitting here with the woman, and if I cannot ask her to tell me one or two things about herself right here and now, then what use am I? See, this is what I mean when I say that writing these things down gets in the way, and I think soon I will spend

the evening hours writing about the day (but I will write it as if it is happening as I write, and so in that sense I will be a little bit dishonest, but only in a trivial way).

“Are you writing about me?” she says before I can say anything.

I am a bit startled, but not surprised. “Yes,” I say, “but I’m done, because I don’t know that much about you.”

She laughs. “Well, let’s keep it that way, shall we?”

“I’m offended, Felicity.”

“Oh, shush. You are a silly man, Mr. Jew, and you know I mean no insult. I’m a private person.” She smiles again and I wonder why her teeth are so white and well-positioned. “And a boring person. Perhaps if I had been in the military I could have told you lads a few stories about how I killed Al-Qaeda militants. Although, given my age, it probably would have been Germans I’d have had to fight.”

“What’s that about Germany?” It is Boris, and he is walking past our table to drop his plate off at the kitchen (even though the stewards clear the tables, and in fact the stewards prefer that we leave our dishes on the table). “You know, Germany is on the rise once again, so be careful with your chatter, yes? Especially you, Jew. And with your new haircut, you look like you’re ready for the camps.” He laughs, but he is a peaceful man, and it says something about the Inn if a German feels so free that he can say such a thing to a freshly-shaved Jew (although I’m not Jewish; but my point stands nonetheless).

I stare at Boris as he walks away from the kitchen and I wonder what it would be like to be married to Elise for so

many years, many of which I think were spent here at the Inn. He looks over at me for a second as if sensing what I am thinking, and I feel guilty now and I look away and across the table at Felicity again, and she is hurrying through desert as if worried that if she does not eat up and get out of here quick I will ask her something that will embarrass or perhaps even enrage her. (I am joking about the latter; Felicity could not get enraged if I poked her with a stick.)

“Don’t worry, Felicity,” I say as I push my plate away and stand up. “I’m done with asking questions for now. I might be done with all of it, in fact. This is not working out so well, I think.”

“Stick with it, Mr. Jew,” she says under her breath as she pulls a hair out of the soufflé. “You never know what you’ll find.”

I watch as she carefully places the hair on a napkin (paper) and folds the napkin three times and puts it into her pocket. I do not find this strange, partly because we are a strange group, but mostly because I know Felicity likes to put small things into her glass. For example, she once put a toenail of old man Tobin’s into a beautiful glass horn that she blew (no, not the kind of horn that can be blown). I mean she literally encased the toenail within the glass, and she showed it to him one evening. Old man Tobin laughed in wonder like a child and reached for the horn, and Felicity gave it to him, which is unusual, not just for Felicity, but for anyone here.

See, we do not share our art here. We do our art alone. We share many other things, of course (not cooking and cleaning duties thankfully), but the art must be kept away from one

another. It is for the best, I have come to realize. We are not very good artists perhaps, but we know enough about our art to know that good and bad are words that are meaningless objectively, and while they are essential for conversation about art, they mean little in the absolute. But still, they are essential for conversation about art (did I say that already?), and so we have a strict rule of no conversation about art. We are to talk about other things, or nothing at all.

We do talk quite a bit here. I am a talker, they say, although nowadays I speak (means the same as talk, yes?) not so much and try to write more even though writing is not the art I am here for. My art is something else, but I will not bore you with the details of my work, because I am not so good at my art I fear, and if I start to talk about it I may use words that could have a negative effect on my mood and spiral me downwards into that place where the red spongy entrée most certainly moves on its own and with no help from the careful boot of Felicity.

Felicity is finished with her dessert and she politely excuses herself from the dinner table even though no one is sitting at her table (I am standing now and watching). She smiles at me and canters out of the room, and I wonder how a person with just two legs can generate such a nice four-stroke beat as she walks.

“Bye, Felicity,” I call after her.

She waves frantically without turning, and then she is gone around the corner, and I imagine her going into the tunnel that leads to her studio and putting on her goggles and perhaps unwrapping that hair she picked from her soufflé (whose hair was it, I wonder). And now maybe she is firing up that blow-torch or blowing into the glass-bulb (I really

have no idea how glass is blown) and preparing to do that which she was born to do.

Now Boris is back and he is standing next to me and making a show of trying to follow my gaze. It is quite amusing to me, and I think some of the others are noticing it now and beginning to chuckle like a group of well-fed pigs.

“Yes, Jew?” says Boris. “You are looking at my wife? You want to fuck her?”

“Always,” I say without hesitation. “But you are a hard act to follow, and I fear I will only humiliate myself. Besides, I know Elise still has one sharp razor-blade hidden somewhere in her folds.”

Boris laughs and thumps me on the back. “You are a funny man, Jew. Yes, I too worry about those razors.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re always in such a rush to get in and get out,” Elise cries out from nearby. She is at a table close to where we are standing, and she has very good hearing and an excellent sense of humor (although it can sometimes be dark and disturbing). “Would it kill you to take a little longer next time?”

This sets the room off, and some claps come from the women still in the room, and Boris pulls down his pants and does a quick round of the room as some of the men (but not all) cover their eyes and the women clap some more and Elise makes a disinterested face and waves him away when he comes close to her.

Finally he zips up and walks back to talk to me. “So, Jew,” he says, “you’re going to write about that?”

I shake my head. “No, if I wrote about every time you did that, I would have a thousand pages of it.”

“Good reading if you ask me,” he says, but now Elise has

gotten up and she is leaving the room and so Boris runs after her and they disappear upstairs.

I am standing alone again on one side of the dining room, and there are only a few of us remaining here now. Marie is still talking about something or the other to Nathan and Mukba, and old man Tobin is in the corner with his book (it is *Moby Dick*, I think). Owen is looking at Grover's napkin, and Grover is sitting back and sipping a cup of coffee, and I think he is pleased about something. Perhaps he has proved something, or maybe even disproved something (which is much harder, I am led to believe).

Now, Grover is a mathematical genius (I know I said this before), but that is not his art (even though it is an art). No, his art is with cloth. He does things with cloth that are quite amazing, bordering on the unbelievable. Again, I have only seen a little of it, and that was a few years ago and from before the time when we had been served the rule of not mixing our private art with life at the Inn.

But yes, since Grover's mathematical genius is only incidental to his art, I know some more about it (the former). He was a mathematics professor at the University of Chicago. In fact, if I remember right, he still is a mathematics professor because he had been granted tenure the year before he got here. But I might be wrong about this, because he has been here for several years now and I cannot imagine one would get to keep the job that long. Or perhaps it means he can simply go back to the University of Chicago when his time comes (or is up), and they will give him his old office back and tell him to go forth and teach. I will make a note to ask him about that, but now does not seem like a good time be-

cause he is only just filling up his pipe and I hate the smell of his pipe and so I cannot be near him. Although that is not so true; I can in fact be near him, because the truth is I love the smell of his pipe, but it drives me into a mood that sends me spiraling off into those regions of fancy that are fun for me but dangerous for others because as I twirl myself around and around I have been known to knock about things and people with great disregard, and although that is not my art, it is a peculiarity of mine that is not tolerated here in the dining room, and is only barely tolerated as it runs its course in the summer months when we sometimes eat dinner outside in the large enclosed backyard.

Now the smell of that pipe smoke is wafting over to me, and I can see that Marie has stopped her talking and she is looking at me with concern, and her head is turning to Grover's pipe and now to me and again towards Grover, and the motion is making me dizzy and so I back away and lean against the wall and hold on to one of the ugly pipes that is sticking out of it (the wall). I hold on tight, because the spirals are coming on strong, but I know them well and I know myself well and I will be fine in a minute or two.

The minute or two has passed, and Marie has chased Grover out of the room, and Grover is angry and shouting at Marie, but Marie shouts back and I smile when I remember that she spent six years in silence and so she has the right to shout and I do not think Grover will be able to out-shout her. Finally he slips out of her grasp and runs back to the table, and I fear he is reaching for the knife, and I prepare myself to fight, but no, Grover just wants his napkin, but Owen is not done inspecting it, and I can see the tension

and panic build up in the room, but now I realize that all of it is within me, and Owen has handed over the napkin, and Grover is leaving the room unescorted, and Marie winks at me and takes her place at the head of the table where Nathan and Mukba and that new woman are watching all of it with some amusement (except for the new woman, who is looking at me with an expression I am familiar with but cannot name at this very moment).

But the crisis has passed for now, and there has been very little violence today at dinner (the dead red entrée notwithstanding), and so I try and wink back at Marie, and I cannot because of my eye condition, but she is a sweet and loving woman so she winks again as if winking for me.

I thank her and start to walk over to their table, but although Nathan and Mukba are happy to see me on my way over to join them, that new woman seems a bit worried, and so I quickly make a face (so that she thinks I am crazy and will perhaps overlook my odd behavior) and dart out of the room and towards the stairs.

The upstairs is bathed in sunlight, and I wonder how that can be since it is winter and we have only just finished dinner and the morning would be several hours away. But the telling of time is not my art (and should not be an art, unless it is telling the time by means of sun, moon, and stars, which was a science in the old days and has only recently been advanced to an art), and so I do not question the bright sunlight but instead revel in it and spread my arms out to the side and move around in a spiral-twirl, and there is no one there to stop me so I get myself going real fast, real fast I think, and so I am knocking about the place and finally two (or maybe more) strong arms grab a hold of me and push me hard so that I fall into the sofa face-first.

“There you go,” says Felicity, and she is standing over me with her hands on her tremendously well-proportioned hips.

“I am sorry,” I say. “And thank you. Why is the sun out?”

“It isn’t the sun, silly. It’s the lights in my studio. And you shouldn’t be down here, you know that.”

“But I’m not down here. I went upstairs.”

“Now, that’s just not right. You’re down here, aren’t you? And so you can’t be upstairs. Do you need help going upstairs?”

I mumble something that even I do not understand and pull myself to my feet and take up my pen and papers and mumble something else and walk away, but when I hear her laughing I turn around and I see that I am indeed upstairs and it does in fact look like the sun is shining, and so I stick my middle finger up in the air at Felicity and watch as she ties that orange-and-blue rag of hers around her head and prepares to make her way down the other stairs that lead to the tunnel that goes to her studio. She has done this before, this trickery. It is an innocent trickery, and I do not think she means to be tricky. To be honest, from the dining room's vantage point one cannot tell if someone is taking the stairs up to the living room and main house or down to the sub-basement and the tunnels.

Yes, I said tunnels. There are several of them here, and all of them are connected save for one. Some of the residents' studios are within this tunnel system, but not all, and not all of us have or even need studios. Felicity and Owen share a studio, but that is all they share, and I believe they do very different kinds of glass-art. Their studio is at the end of the one tunnel that is separate from the others.

Boris and Elise share a studio as well, but as far as I can tell neither of them has ever used it for any serious art. The casual observer might think they use it for sex, but that is ridiculous because it is a well-known fact in the Inn (undeniably well-known due to the grunting) that Boris and Elise will only fuck when there is an audience. They are performance artists, both of them, although this fact has little to do with the first fact. What I mean is that they are naturally

dramatic people, and their need to make love in public is not any more a part of their art than anything else (you see?).

Soon I will go up to my room, but for now I am enjoying the sunlight and the sofa, and it is quiet and even though there are echoes of Grover's pipe-smoke in the living room, I am calm and steady and I feel strong and ready, like I can do anything or go anywhere, but of course there are many things I cannot do and many places I cannot go, and if you added all those things together it would come out to a very large and complicated number.

I laugh at this last bit of my own analysis, and I wonder if I should find Grover and show it to him. Perhaps he will get a laugh out of it, and so I stand up and look around and sniff the air like a dog to see if I can pick up the pipe-scent and follow it to Grover. Soon enough I think better of it, partly because even though my sense of smell is excellent, I am not so good at directional smelling, which is the ability to pinpoint the source of a smell in space-time coordinates.

We were tested on this when entering the Inn. Smell was a big part of the first day of testing, and although I failed the directional-smelling portion of the test, I was allowed to proceed regardless due to the excellent range of my smelling abilities, and also (I suspect, although this was never confirmed) because of some consideration for my eye condition (which makes it hard for me to wink).

But the other reason I have decided not to chase down Grover like a dog (me being the dog) is that there is something attracting my attention in the corner of the plush red-purple living room. It is small and it moves fast, and its

movement is almost a blur (and no, this is not just my eye-condition playing tricks). I am chasing it now, but it runs fast and I am not so fast anymore.

I was a fast runner back in the day before I came to the Inn, but my leg muscles have atrophied considerably in the past few years. Of course, when I say atrophied I do not mean anything too bad. You can still see some definition in my calf muscles and in my glutes. This is because I take the stairs everywhere, and sometimes I even climb stairs when I do not need to, and once in a while I climb all the stairs in the house and end up outside that last door at the top of those last stairs, and if I am not yet tired I walk down those stairs, but only down one level until I get to the elevator, and I take the elevator all the way down to the sub-basement so I can walk up all the stairs again just to exercise my glutes. (Walking down stairs is one of the major causes of damage to the knee-cartilage, and that is why I take the elevator down.)

Now the little blurry thing has run out of the living room and into the music room and I chase it, and I am moving faster now because my leg muscles are getting warm and loose, and it feels good and I start to howl but howling is a mistake because now this thing knows that it is being chased and has turned on the heat and is moving so fast and I almost have it but suddenly it disappears into the large stack of accordions.

I stop and stare. The accordions are not being played at the moment, and I have often wondered why we have so many. I have long suspected that one of the residents is an accordion-maker, but I have not yet confirmed this.

Of course, what I am saying is that while I do know all the residents here, I do not know for certain what each one's art is. Felicity and Owen and Grover—theirs I know about. And Marie too (more on her later). But some of the others still do things that are a mystery to me. Of course, soon enough I will figure it out, and perhaps this quick-moving scurrying-thing (no, not a rat) is reminding me that I still have not found out why we have a stack of accordions in the music-room but no accordionist (different from accordion-maker, I think, yes?).

I walk over to the large jar of dried walnuts that sits over by the window, and as I open it I notice that one of the accordions is a little bit different from the others. I contemplate that one accordion as I crunch on the surprisingly fresh walnuts (surprising because the walnuts have been here at least as long as the pile of unused accordions).

The accordion is beckoning to me now (in that special way that only an accordion can pull off without appearing silly. You know what I mean?), and I tell it that I would like to finish my handful of walnuts first, thank you very much (it is best not to let an accordion get the upper hand).

But soon the walnuts are gone and I must make my move, so I walk over to the gleaming, walnut-colored accordion and try to lift it but I cannot, and so I heave and tug and even make a noise and curse a bit (to break the accordion's spirit). Still it will not budge, and just as I am about to give up and walk away, Felicity comes from behind me and reaches out and looks at me and mouths a silent count from zero until three, and on three we both pull hard and wouldn't you

know it but the damn accordion comes right out of the pile and we are both thrown backwards onto the plushy goose-down carpet. It is a funny scene I think, and I do not stop to question Felicity about her location or locomotion, because by now I have realized that I did not actually see her go to her studio, and even if she had been in her studio, the studio is not so far and she could easily have gone there and come back for one reason or another.

"Thanks," I say to her cordially as we stare at each other on the moleskin rug.

"Anytime," she whispers to me with utmost sincerity and seriousness.

"There was something small and blurry that moved fast and is hiding in that pile of accordions," I whisper back at her.

"I know. I have seen it before. Don't worry about it. It's probably just a rat."

"That's ridiculous."

"Why? There are tons of stories of rats being seen in houses and Inns."

"Really?" Now I am just egging her on because of course I know that rats like to live in houses, especially in the winter.

"You're just joshing me," she says.

Now she is up and our moment on the coarse industrial carpet is done, and it is time for work, she says with her eyes.

"Fine," I say. "You win. Time for work."

"Indeed. I'm off to the studio. Are you sure you've got the right accordion?" She is smiling, and now she is joking with me, I think.

"No, but only because I'll never know if I have the right accordion," I say mysteriously.

“Is that a metaphor?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then I don’t need to help you pull out any more accordions?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Okay then,” I say.

And now she is off and I am alone again with nothing but walnut-crumbs on my lapel and an accordion at my feet and some carpet burns on my exposed glute. I look at the accordion closely, but it really is time to work now, and so I place it back on the pile and push hard so it gets wedged into the same position (and perhaps even a little tighter) and make a note to come back for it later when the work is done.

The work we do apart from our art is quite trivial, but it must be done. Felicity is one of the lucky ones in that her art is good and varied enough that the Innkeepers allow her to do nothing but the art, and so when Felicity says she must work she simply means she will be in the studio doing her art. But again, since I have not been inside her studio I do not know for certain what goes on in there, and so perhaps she does something unrelated to glass-blowing during the allotted work-hours.

The work-hours are usually in the late night or early morning, and now I am still a bit perplexed at the sunlight that refuses to stop pouring in through the windows even though it is an hour or two past dinner and the work-hours are already here. But as I said (and this I remember saying), the telling of time is not my art, and so I will leave the problem of the sunlight to the time-tellers. For now I have to work.

My work is done now, and that sun is finally going down (or so it seems). Soon it will be time for me to go to my room, and I look forward to it. Of course, I can go to my room anytime. We are not prisoners here. It is an Inn and not a prison. I know this because Owen has been in a prison before, and so he would recognize a prison, and he has told me in no uncertain terms that we are not in a prison because he knows what one looks like.

“Dark,” he had said to me when we talked about it some time ago. “Very dark. Sun is a privilege, and the deprivation of it is a punishment. Privilege and punishment are the great balancers in a prison. You fight to get the little privileges—a cigarette, an apple, a jellybean, a cupcake, a spoonful of beer, a thimbleful of brandy, a scoop of fresh dirt with some grass still on it, a bowl of cryogenics.”

I remember nodding vigorously as I wrote down all of the things on his list, which is why I remember each and every item and can reproduce it now. See, the moment I write something down, it is committed to memory, and I will never forget it. Sure, perhaps I have forgotten a few trivial things, but the things I have forgotten do not bother me. In

fact, now as I look at my faithfully-reproduced list of prison-privileges, I wonder if perhaps I do not remember all of them exactly as Owen relayed them to me. I make a note to ask him about the cryogenics, but now I cross out the note because I suspect his answer will be reminiscent of my red-dish glowing bowl of dinner entrée that I left unfinished on the dinner table. I am glad now that I ate those walnuts earlier, for walnuts are dense nuts and provide excellent nutrition, which came in handy because today's work was tedious as ever and even a bit exerting. I make a note to eat my dinner tomorrow regardless of its color, texture, or locomotive tendencies.

But I am trying to put all this down in a linear and coherent manner, and so I must return to what I was relaying about Owen's description of prison, and this is important because it proves that the Inn is not a prison. With the exception of the cryogenics, we can get any of those other items at any time and in any quantity, and so if the Inn is a prison, it is one of privilege. Either that, or Owen's previous prison was a very sorry one.

I look over the list one more time and check off the items. Cigarettes are indeed available in the storeroom downstairs near the dining room. You do need to ask a steward for the key, and the steward usually does not just hand over the key but instead inquires about your needs and if you say cigarette he (or she, because we have some female stewards, of course, but none younger than twenty-nine) will provide you with a freshly-sealed pack from the cartons of fresh-sealed cigarettes stored in the freezer (to keep them fresh, because we

buy cigarettes in bulk and there are not so many cigarette-smokers here at the Inn anymore and so it takes a long time to go through a full shipment).

Yes, so the cigarettes are stored in the freezer. Not the deep-freeze. No, the deep-freeze is for the meats and such, but since those items are not on Owen's list, I will not digress.

Apples, jellybeans, and cupcakes are, of course, also available via a steward, and one must use a similar process of requesting the key to the storeroom and then asking for the item. The residents have a private rule of always requesting the key to the storeroom even though we know that the stewards are not allowed to hand over the key. It has become a bit of a joke with the stewards now, but there are some new stewards and so perhaps one of us will get lucky and be given the key itself.

Not that the key is so important, because we are not limited as far as quantity. Why, I could go down to the stewards' area right now and ask the on-duty person to give me fifty-three packs of cigarettes and twelve apples and two cupcakes (one black and one yellow) and a single jellybean (but white only) and I would be given all those things (subject to availability, of course—I have never seen a white jellybean, but they would order one for me to be delivered within a week, and that is my point).

Alcohol is a different matter. There are some restrictions on alcohol, but not too many, and not for everyone. See, alcohol is a terrible drug, one of the very worst, and although it can be handled well by many people, for others it is like a magic potion that turns them into violent angry beasts, and

the Inn and her residents do not tolerate angry violent beasts. So the alcohol restrictions came into play on a case-by-case basis. At this time we have no residents that have proved themselves susceptible to the darker effects of the alcohol-demon, and so the liquor flows freely when the residents ask for it, which is quite rarely.

See, most of us are older, and while some of us have been doing our art for many years, others have only recently begun to take the art seriously, and any serious artist will tell you that once you commit to the art with all the seriousness available to you, there is no place (nor time) for serious intoxication of any kind, and especially not the kind brought on by alcohol, which is the only drug I have known (and I have known many in my day) that can disrupt memory, mental coherence, and physical stability at the same time.

But I digress again, and this report is not to be about my personal views, although my views on such levels of intoxication are shared by most of us here at the Inn. Sometimes we hear the stewards (the off-duty ones, of course) get loud and we know they are dipping into the Inn's stash, but it is funny for us and so we laugh along with them if the time is convenient for laughing.

And my point here is just this: a cupful of burgundy or a bowlful of rum would be available to anyone who requests it, and so the Inn is not a prison.

The question of dirt-and-grass is a different one, and now I wonder if Owen was not being facetious when he added the dirt-and-grass item to his list of privileges. No matter though, because it is on our list and I must address it, if only for the sake of continuity and coherence.

Of course, it is winter now, and so asking for dirt and grass might be a valid request but one that the stewards would probably not be able to fulfill until spring. But wait, no. I am wrong. One of us does art with plants and other associated materials, and so perhaps a piece of dirt with some grass would be available at any time of the year. The person is Mukba, whose studio is the small greenhouse some distance away (but still in the backyard).

Mukba is an Iraqi refugee, but not a recent one. She came over to the United States even before our first (official) war with her country (or perhaps I should say “in” her country). Her story is the bleakest one, and she is the happiest one of us here, and perhaps those two go hand-in-hand, but possibly not for the reason you think.

I will not repeat the details of her story because I cannot help but think that if anyone is to write Mukba’s story it should be her, and so for me to attempt to do so would be a violation of some sorts, and the woman has seen enough violations. Suffice to say that her story is rife with incidents of the kind that are now so commonplace in stories about women escaping ethnic persecution, that words like rape, murder, amputation, decapitation, and torture are losing their impact when heard by the people of Columbus, Ohio.

So I will say a few things about her art. It is funny how things work out, because you might perhaps not expect someone who grew up in a desert to be such an artist when it comes to the art of plant-rearing. But some others amongst you might laugh and point out that perhaps being forced by circumstance to learn how to make things grow in a desert is the best training for such a delicate and humbling art.

Mukba's art is different from everyone else's because it is no secret and we have been given no instructions to refrain from experiencing it or discussing it. Of course, part of the reason is that her art is done in a greenhouse, and so its beauty is available for all to see, and all one needs to do is look out of one of the back windows or step out onto the large wooden back porch to see that her gift cannot be denied. And although you might say that growing plants cannot be called an art because plants just grow on their own and anyone can do it as well as anyone else so long as the basic materials are available, you will be wrong, and I cannot prove it with any words because it is the kind of thing that must be experienced. There is a saying that even a blind man knows when the sun is shining, and that is how it is when you see Mukba's art for the first time. It just cannot be denied.

Now I feel weak and I have the urge to view Mukba's plants and take in their clean pure energy so that I can summon the strength to make it upstairs and go to my room, but the sun is still dimly shining outside and although the clock on the wall is alarming me with its ugly time, I think I still have a few minutes before it will be time for me to go to the room, and so I just sit here on this blue-yellow camel-hair couch and wait to see what happens next.

Soon there are arms shaking me and I look up to see Felicity again, and I am happy because she is appearing in my line of sight more often these days and I am seeing her much more clearly than I did even a few months ago. But then I worry that I had fallen asleep and perhaps I missed out on some action, and so the continuity and coherence of this report will be compromised.

I say all this to Felicity as she helps me to my feet and gently escorts me to the elevator.

“Don’t be silly,” she says with a laugh that puts her perfect teeth on display yet again. “You didn’t miss anything at all. The Inn’s been quiet for many hours now. All the others are in their rooms, and I was sent to bring you up. If anything, you’re the most interesting thing that’s happening at the Inn right now.”

She laughs again as the elevator stops with a bump on the third floor. We go to my room and she unlocks it and lets me in. She is still smiling, but I am upset.

“If I am the most interesting thing here,” I say to her as I stare at my papers, “then I am going to start writing about something else in the morning.”

two

The morning has come and with it noise and confusion. My wife's parents will be arriving today, I remember, and although my kids love them, I do not. But wait, no, that sounds too harsh. To say one does not love his in-laws is not saying much at all, and it should not be taken to mean I hate them. Hatred is a strong word, and it is not allowed in our household.

"I hate Bobby G," my daughter had said to us three years ago when she was six or seven or eight (I am not so good with math). "He pulls my hair."

"Well, kick him in the balls next time," I remember saying (without thinking, of course), and if my daughter hadn't been around (or if she had been older), my wife would have kicked me in that holiest-of-holy places. "Shit," I had said without thinking, and my wife, the sweetheart and study in absolute control and calmness that she is, had resolved the situation quickly, and my daughter left the room with a wholesome answer about balls, instructions never to kick anyone anywhere unless there was no teacher or parent around and someone was hurting her, and the strict new rule that the words "hate" and "shit" would never be spoken in our house again.

Then she had glared at me in a way that only she can, and I had buried my face in my hands, but she pulled my hands

down and soon we were both laughing like children and eventually we were on top of each other and behaving like adults.

That is a nice memory, but today my wife will be a different person. Anyone studying her for insight into the topic of temperance and coolness would be disappointed at how she behaves when her parents are due for a visit.

“Jesus Christ, Grover,” she is saying now, and I hear her footsteps thunder as she approaches. “Are you still in bed? Don’t you know what day today is?”

“Yes, Felicity,” I am saying now even as I bury my face in my pillow. “Today is the day Boris and Elise are coming over to turn you into a raging monster, and I will be the one who suffers, but I will suffer quietly and with the grace and poise of a much more graceful and well-poised man.”

She bursts in through the door and I think she has not heard me. “What? Did you say something about my parents? You need to be nice to them today, you know. Especially to Dad. He’s suspicious of you.”

“Why?” I say in alarm as I bolt out of bed (not because I am alarmed at the news that Boris is suspicious of me, but because I had only just gotten that shot of adrenaline that kicks into your bloodstream to help you get out of bed in the morning).

Felicity sighs very loudly and quickly. “Don’t irritate me today, Grover. Please. Not today. I don’t need your bullshit today.”

“I thought you married me for my bullshit,” I say as I reach for my lovely big-hipped wife. But it is an ill-fated move, and she steps back and I fall over onto the camel-hair rug because my feet are caught up in the sheets.

“Put that away, Cowboy,” she says.

I laugh because I know it will be her last attempt at a joke for at least the next day or so. I untangle myself and stand up, but she is no longer where I last saw her, and I quickly scan the room and catch her in the corner shuffling through my papers.

“Hey, hey,” I say in panic. “I have a system for those.” But really I am panicked because I do not want her reading it yet. It is not ready for her to read. “And it’s not ready for anyone else’s eyes yet.”

“Well, excuse me, Mr. Hemingway,” she says, and she jumps back from the table in a mock display of mockery.

“Don’t make fun of me,” I say, even though I know she is not making fun of me (it was a mock display of mockery, remember).

“Sorry, honey. You know I didn’t mean it that way. Now get your ass up and get to work. They’ll be here in two hours.”

Her voice is almost a shriek as she finishes the sentence, and I head to the bathroom to wash and groom so I will be presentable for Boris and Elise’s customary inspection of the entire family.

I finish up in the bathroom and am downstairs earlier than Felicity expects just so I can stand outside on our large wooden back porch and smoke a cigarette. I have two left from last night, and although Felicity says she doesn’t care how many I smoke, I know she does, and so I am careful with how many packs I go through in a month (we keep the cartons in a mini-fridge in the alcove on one side of our bedroom).

Our gardener and housekeeper is outside in the backyard and I wave to her as I light up.

“Hello, Mister Grover,” she says with a ridiculously large smile that somehow seems bigger than her lean round brown face. “Lovely day.”

It is always a lovely day according to her, and I envy her undeniable optimism and high spirits. It gives me hope for the country, when immigrants can arrive here and be so happy even during winter in Columbus, Ohio.

“Hi, Mukba,” I say and wave back. “Planting something in the frozen ground? Garlic perhaps?”

She laughs hysterically, and I make a note to write down that line about garlic and use it, but then I cross out the note because I remember that Mukba laughs at things that no other American laughs at.

Mukba is from Iraq. She is an American now, but I think you know that already (did I say that earlier? Yes?). Her story is quite troubling, but it is too lovely a day to repeat it, and I think she would like to keep her story and tell it herself someday.

“No, Mister Grover,” she says through giggles. “I am just scooping up the dog’s things.”

“Ah,” I say.

“No planting today, Mister Grover. But I am to harvest some of the spinach from the greenhouse. Miss Felicity is preparing a big meal for her parents. Fresh spinach salad is her mother’s favorite.”

And Boris’s least favorite, I think with glee, but now I am guilty and I spend some time analyzing my feelings of glee. What kind of a person am I to feel gleeful that my father-in-law is to be served a salad he hates?

“There you are. I should have known.”

It is Felicity, and I can see from her face that she is embarrassed at having let on that she is monitoring my cigarette-smoking.

“All done,” I say, and hurriedly flick my cigarette into the bushes.

“Grover!” my wife shouts. “Our backyard is not your god-damn ashtray.”

“I will get it,” says Mukba, and she has already picked up the still-burning butt.

“Thank you, Mukba,” my wife says while still glaring at me. Now she looks at Mukba. “And don’t forget the spinach. But wait for another thirty or forty minutes.”

“Of course, Miss Felicity.”

My wife knows her spinach salad, and one of the things about having a vegetable garden in your backyard greenhouse is that you can wait until the last minute before ripping the leaves off the plant you are about to eat. I suppose it is like killing a cow in your garage right before a barbecue, or chasing a chicken around the basement with a scimitar while the soup-water is boiling upstairs (neither of which I have done, but now I make a note to write stories about both those things).

“Okay,” says Felicity as I follow her into the kitchen. “Here’s the list. Get the groceries last. First pick up Nathan.”

“I thought Nathan wasn’t going today.” I mean football practice. It is cold outside, and I worry about my son because he comes down with a mean cold every winter and he has not had a cold yet this winter. “It’s cold.”

“Yes, but he’s on the team, and the team is practicing. You can’t keep him out of practice if you’re going to let him be on the team. And really, we can’t keep him from being on the team. This isn’t a prison, you know. He isn’t a prisoner. If Nathan wants to be on the team, we need to support him, and that means letting him go to practice when it’s cold outside. Right?”

“Right,” I say, and I salute and click my heels together as I look at the list. “Braunschweiger? I hate Braunschweiger. Why am I picking up Braunschweiger? You know I hate it.”

“But my dad loves it. And he’s not going to eat the spinach salad, so I want to make sure he’s got something to nibble on when we’re eating our salads.”

“And so you pick Braunschweiger? Who the hell nibbles on Braunschweiger?”

“Dad does. Dad nibbles on Braunschweiger.”

“You can’t nibble on something that’s so squishy. It’s disgusting.”

“Well, you don’t have to eat it. You can have the spinach salad.”

I feel the tables have turned on me, because spinach salad does not sound exciting, and the alternative sounds nauseating. But now at least my lingering guilt has been erased, and so I can deal with the resulting disappointment in a silently heroic manner. “Fine,” I say, and make a mental note to scan the supermarket aisles to pick up something for me to nibble on. “What about Emily?”

“What about her?”

“She’s not going to be here today?”

Felicity does not answer because she is picking walnuts out of the large jar near the window. “How long have these walnuts been here?” she says to me. “They look old.”

“You mean because they’re wrinkled? I think walnuts are born that way.”

“Funny. I’m serious, you know. I don’t want any of us getting botulism just because the goddamn walnuts have turned.”

“Walnuts don’t turn,” I say firmly. “Especially when they’ve been sitting in an airtight container.”

“In the sun. They’ve been sitting in the sun. You’d better pick up some walnuts, I think. Just to be safe.”

“Sure, honey,” I say, but I also grab a huge handful of walnuts and begin to stuff them into my mouth.

She smacks my hand hard, and I feel the sharp-edged wrinkles of the walnuts cut into my lips and chin, and I dab my chin and lower lip, almost hoping there is some blood to be found. But of course there isn’t, and now I have to pick up the walnuts that my wife has knocked out of my hand. Still, it is a funny situation, and I love my wife, and I understand that she only behaves this way when Boris and Elise are due for a visit.

“Go,” she says. “I’ll handle this mess. We’re running out of time.”

My PhD is not in telling time, and time has always given me trouble. I thought it would be on my side today, but when I get to the football field and no one is there, I blame that old bastard Father Time. So I call my wife because she will make things right.

“They’re practicing indoors today,” she says calmly over the phone, and I think she is being smug. “You need to go to the gym, not the field.”

“Right,” I say with mock smugness, “I knew that. I was just checking to see if you knew that.”

Felicity hangs up but I know she is not angry. She is just temporarily acting a little short and smug because of the impending visit of Boris and Elise. Her relationship with her parents is, shall we say, strained. And I think part of it is because of me. Not because of anything I did, but because of something that I am.

See, my PhD is in English. I am an English professor here in Columbus. No, not at Ohio State (I wish!), but at a two-year community college not so far from downtown Columbus. The school is nice enough, and the students are polite enough, but none of it is enough for Boris and Elise (but

mainly Boris—I think Elise likes me, because she sees that Felicity loves me and that I honor Felicity with the loyalty of a lap-dog).

Boris has a PhD in Mathematics. *Pure* Mathematics, he reminds me often. (Sometimes I think he calls on the phone to remind me, but Felicity, my darling sensitive wife, doesn't hand me the phone and so he doesn't get to do it. But he would, and that is my point.) Boris also reminds me often that his PhD (in *Pure* Mathematics) would be on the opposite end from mine on all sorts of spectra (plural of spectrum) if only my PhD had been in *Pure* English, but it is not. Then he stares at me with those suspicious German eyes (no offence to the Germans; I have a little *Deutsche* in me myself) and all is quiet until Elise or Felicity steps in.

His suspicion, of course, is that I do not in fact have a PhD. He knows I was in graduate school all right, and he knows I was in the PhD program at that excellent school up in Saskatchewan, Canada, but I am quite certain he doubts that I have my PhD. He doesn't ask me directly about it, of course. If he did, I would simply go upstairs and bring down my certificate and show it to him. No, he tries to manipulate me into "confessing." Of course, at the same time I have never volunteered to show him my certificate, which is my attempt to manipulate him into actually asking (which would be a victory for me, I think. It is a complex game we play . . .)

Now I should make it clear that I was a terrible English student (no reflection on the fine professors up in Saskatchewan), and I only barely made it past my master's degree examinations, and my thesis was so full of typos and grammati-

cal errors that the university refused to stock it in their library (thus violating a tradition upheld by every graduate school in the history of Western education). Still, they awarded me my PhD, if only to get me out of there. They justified it by saying the creativity displayed in the structure of the thesis overshadowed the glaring technical errors. Hell, yes.

Naturally, that was all the professors were willing to offer, and so I had no references whatsoever (no one wanted to be associated with me), and since it is hard enough for a Columbia or Stanford English PhD to get a job in academia these days, I had no chance at all.

“Your best shot is to be a writer,” was the only bit of advice I got from one of my professors, and I think he was drunk and couldn’t get up from that park bench at the year-end barbecue and so was forced to talk to me. “Wait, no,” he had continued. “What I mean is that your best shot at doing anything vaguely connected to this field is to be a writer. But your best shot at not starving is to get a job at a sperm bank.”

I was not sure if he meant I should make a career out of donating sperm or if I should just be a clerk at a sperm bank. Either way, I think the more important point was his first one, and so I pushed him on it a bit.

“Even some of the best literary writers have a hard time making ends meet,” he said. “But once or twice a year, a terrible writer will hit it big, and so you may actually have a better chance than most of the best writers.” This seemed to tickle him, and he began to laugh and then cough and soon he was shaking all over and spittle was on his goatee and I just got up and left the barbecue and went to my room.

Just as I wonder if that old professor had died there on

that Saskatchewan bench in obscurity, I see the gym doors open and the kids pour out and there is my son Nathan in the middle of the pack but he stands out because he is tall and has my beautiful thick long hair.

“Hey, dad,” he says as he gets close to my SUV. “I’m going to head over to Bruski’s with the guys. We’re gonna get some burgers and shakes and then play some video games. Sorry, I shoulda called but this just came up. That’s cool, right?”

“You know your grandparents are going to be here in an hour,” I say.

“Fuck,” he says, and then turns red.

I ignore it but make a note to talk to him about his language later. I suppose when you’re at football practice the language can get a bit loose, and I do not want to chastise him here (although I would have if any of the other kids had heard him use that word around me—got to set the right example, you understand. The last thing I need is someone else’s mom calling Felicity to say that Nathan’s dad thinks it’s okay to say “fuck” in polite company).

“Sorry,” he says, making the point moot. He is a good kid.

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “As long as you’re home before dark and you eat dinner with the family.”

“They’re staying for dinner?”

“Yup. And for brunch tomorrow.”

“Oh, wow.” His young face crinkles up with laughter. “Mom must be a wreck.”

I smile and ruffle his hair just enough to let him know that he’s still my little guy, but not enough to embarrass him. Pleased at my parenting skills, I wave to some of his buddies and drive off towards the store and the Braunschweiger.

The Braunschweiger is long and loud and red-brown and ugly as sin, but I pleasantly squeeze it to make sure it is squishy enough for Boris and then javelin it into my shopping cart. I scan the aisles looking for something for me to nibble on, but then think better of it. Felicity is very much a menu-Nazi, and she plans specific combinations of food items, and her calculations would get messed up by even one unplanned nibbleable item. She doesn't care so much when it's just us, but now with Boris and Elise, things are different. Sure, I could say it's just for me, but if I bring something different for me to eat, I'll have to offer it to Boris and Elise, and if they nibbled on it too, there'd be trouble.

So I pick up a variety of whole-grain crackers to go with the Braunschweiger and then grab the right kind of cheese and some more milk (we buy new milk every day due to the constant threat of botulism) and a few apples (our greenhouse is too small for an apple tree). When I get to the checkout area, there is a new checkout clerk just punching in and so I slip into her line and she smiles at me and rings me up quickly and efficiently, and just as the nicotine-withdrawal pangs kick in I am standing outside and the sun has poked

its head out and even though it is cold I feel nice as that cigarette smoke hits me and I think that I must be doing everything right today, as verified by the alarming synchronicity between the seemingly trivial events of the past few minutes.

Time is on my side again, I say to myself as I pull back into our driveway. But I am wrong, and time is a devil-whore that is straddling me and digging her burning heels into my sides, because there in the driveway is Boris's red Mustang. They are early, which means I am late.

I tear in through the back door, because Boris is almost never in the kitchen, but there he is, like a smug mathematician waiting to ask me questions of logic and long-division. Damn you, Boris, I say to myself as I smile and make as if I cannot wait to put down the groceries and hug my dear mother-in-law and shake hands with "Dad."

"There he is," Elise says, and she comes at me and gives me a big kiss. "Oh, you smell like cigarettes."

"Like an ashtray," Felicity adds. "He smells like an ashtray when he smokes those things. But whatever. It's his life."

"It's not so bad," Elise says. "I kind of like the musk it adds to the air."

"Musk" is by far Elise's favorite word. She uses it for almost everything, and even when there is no odor involved. But in this case it seems appropriate, and I can see from the corner of my eye that Elise's slight compliment has annoyed Boris, and so I grab Elise and give her another hug.

"We missed you," I say to her.

Boris is on his feet now and he steps up to me and shakes my hand. I pat him on the back as I pump his hand, but he

does not say a word to me. He is not angry, of course, and this is not a particularly tense moment for us. My previous statements notwithstanding, Boris and I get along well enough. After all, we have been family for over a decade now.

“Where are the walnuts?” comes a calm voice laced with panic. “Honey?”

“Shit,” I say aloud, and now I see Boris smile a little, and I wonder if he does in fact take some enjoyment out of even the smallest display of my weakness and incompetence. “I’ll go back. Funny you didn’t ask about where Nathan was,” I add as a joke, but I am feeling defensive and it comes out sounding like a low blow which only reflects poorly on me.

“He texted me,” she says as she grabs her coat. “Like he always does. I’ll go to the store. I need to pick up some spinach anyway, and I don’t trust your judgment when it comes to green leafies.”

“What happened to our spinach?”

“The dog must’ve gotten to it. It’s a mess.”

“Dogs don’t eat spinach,” I say wisely. “Maybe it was a rabbit.”

“Does it really matter right now what kind of animal ate the goddamn spinach?” And just like that my dear sweet calm loving wife, who for today is Satan’s wildebeest, is gone to hunt down some green leafies.

“So,” I say as I turn to face Boris, and now I realize that my punishment is to sit here alone with them. “Would you like to see my PhD certificate?”

I am as surprised as Boris is at my statement, and there is a moment of turgid silence as Boris’s eyes widen and then

narrow, and my aorta does the same, and for a moment I wonder if both of us will drop dead from the tension—Boris from a brain aneurysm brought on by a blood vessel exploding behind the bulging left eye that cannot wink, and me from a good old-fashioned heart-attack.

“What’s that musky thing in your hair?” says Elise with some curiosity and not a small bit of disgust in her voice. “Yuck. I think it’s fresh gum or something.

I reach around and touch it and my fingers stick and I hate it. “Ick, yes,” I say in horror. “How the hell did it get there? It must have happened in that damned grocery store. It was pretty crowded, and I did pass about ten carts with kids bouncing up and down on them. They shouldn’t allow kids on the grocery carts.” I immediately regret the statement when I remember how much fun I had with Nathan and Emily when they were small enough to ride in the carts and young enough to enjoy it. I carefully touch the gum again, but it is deep down in there, and my rubbing only spreads it out and I can feel the tendrils wrapping themselves in and around and even fusing with my thick brown hair.

“We’re going to have to cut it out,” says Elise matter-of-factly. “Boris, get me some scissors.”

I glance at Boris, expecting him to be in full grin at my misfortune that may or may not have been brought about by incompetence. But no, he is staring at me expressionless, and I wonder if he is dead on his feet from the exploding eye-blood-vessel. Now he blinks his right eye (he cannot blink his left eye due to an eye condition), and I realize he is staring at my hair, and I smile to myself. Boris is bald, and

I think it happened early, because it has left somewhat of a scar on his psyche, and it is the one area in which I exceed him (although through good fortune and not talent or effort).

The scissors are here and Elise takes them and approaches me with a determined look on her face, and as I sit down on a stool in the middle of the tiled kitchen floor, I get that feeling of synchronicity again, but maybe it is resonance, or what the people at the health-food store call *déjà-vu*.

She is parting the hair and clipping carefully, and after a few sighs and grunts Elise steps back and I look up and see that Boris is about to laugh, and this can only mean that something awful has happened.

“Oh dear,” says Elise, “I’m afraid we’re going to have to go all the way now.”

“No!” I say, and now I hop down from the tall bar-stool and race to the bathroom down the hall and position the medicine cabinet door so that its mirror creates an angle with the full-length mirror on the inside of the bathroom door. There is a bald patch where the gum was, and she is right. “No!” I say again, but this time it is an expression of defeated disappointment.

I sullenly march upstairs and grab the clippers that Nathan made me buy last year when he insisted on buzzing his own head every week (he keeps his hair long now). Boris is still smiling when I get back to the kitchen, and Elise is spreading old newspaper around the bar-stool, which is placed squarely in the center of our pristine kitchen. Insult to injury, I think as I wonder if my poor dear stressed-out wife will collapse when she gets back with the green leafies.

I almost suggest we do it outside on the back porch, but it is cold outside, and with the newspapers and tiles the cleaning will be simpler inside.

Elise plugs the clipper into the wall and comes at me with the humming handheld machine. Then she pauses for a moment, puts the clipper down, and begins to take off her sweater so it won't get haired on. It is a thick sweater, and beneath it Elise is wearing a sleeveless top, and as she pulls the sweater over her head I catch a glimpse of her white bra through the loose armholes of the red blouse and I blink and look away. She smiles and picks up the clipper again and comes close. I hold my breath as she takes off the first few locks, but soon I run out of oxygen and I gasp and take in a huge breath, and with the new air comes a deep musk from Elise's underarms, and it smells warm and nice and I feel guilty for enjoying it.

"It's no use," she says. "I'm really going to have to go all the way down."

"What?" I say, and only now do I realize my eyes are closed and I have a hard-on. "Shit," I blurt out and try to cover my shame, but I forget that Elise had already put a barber's sheet (improvised from a roll of paper towels) around me, and my movement only serves to give me away to Boris who is watching keenly.

I stand up in my embarrassment, but luckily Elise has not noticed, and by now the panic has returned me to a neutral position and so I take a deep breath, and even though I pick up some more of Elise's scent, I am not moved.

"What do you mean?" I say with some trepidation.

“I mean I’m going to have to go all the way down. I took off a bit too much that first time with the scissors, and now it’s all going to have to come off. But don’t worry, it’ll grow back thicker.” Elise smiles and rubs my already-buzzed dome.

“But it’s already buzzed as low as that clipper will go,” I say as I rub the head for myself. But now I feel the smooth patch where the gum had been and realize she is right and that first cut was indeed the deepest. “Dammit.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, dear. But that gum was stuck way too deep. I don’t think it would have come out any other way.” Elise unplugs the clipper and looks at Boris. “Get me a razor, will you, Boris?”

“You’re going to shave me?” I say in disbelief, and there comes that feeling of resonance again.

Elise ignores me and stands back and looks around. “You know, we should probably just do this in the bathroom. We’ll need water and some shaving gel, I think. And you should probably take off your shirt.”

I nod obediently and lead Elise to the bathroom where Boris is rummaging through the medicine cabinet.

“The razors are upstairs,” I say. “I can go get them.”

“No, Boris will do it,” says Elise firmly. “You’re still dropping small hairs all over the place, and Felicity might get upset. I think she just vacuumed.”

Indeed she had just vacuumed. Like picking spinach, vacuuming had to be done at the very last minute so that every coarse fiber on the beige carpet would be perfectly aligned for the arrival of King Boris and Queen Elise. But now my shirt is off and King Boris is coming close with a razor to hand to his queen so she can shave me clean.

“Here,” he says gruffly and hands the razor to Elise without taking his eyes off me.

“Okay, thanks, Boris,” she says. “Shut the door so I can use that big mirror.”

Boris wriggles around in the half-bathroom so he can shut the door without catching his toes under it, and Elise taps him on the shoulder.

“I meant after you step outside, Boris,” she says patiently. “Step outside and then shut the door. I don’t need your help, you know. How many times a month do I shave your head? I think I’ve got it down.”

Boris is naturally bald, of course, but for the past few years Elise has been shaving the little hair that still grows around the sides and back of his head. It turns her on, Felicity had announced to me once with some amusement and the little bit of horror that anyone feels when reminded that their parents might actually be having sex.

I stare downstream at myself to make sure I am not sending out any embarrassing signals, and when I look up Boris meets my eye and we share a look that communicates things that can never be spoken out loud, because if they were, it would just sound ridiculous because there is no possible universe in which Elise and I would have any untoward physical contact. Still, the last things I see before the door closes are Boris’s suspicious eyes, and as I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, it occurs to me that I should write all of this down because perhaps some people would find it amusing.

The shaving goes quick and smooth, and it is a decent and wholesome process and vaguely liberating in some way. I have had my hair buzzed very short once (suspicion of lice

when I was a dirty PhD student up in Canada), but I have never been clean-shaven, and I have to say there is something to it. As Elise wipes the remnants of shave-gel away and applies some moisturizer, I look at myself from a few different angles and decide that it isn't too bad, and although Felicity will be shocked at first, she is a cool woman and will get used to it and perhaps even ask me to do it again. And the kids will have a grand time with me for a while. All in all not a bad outcome, I think, and I smile and nod at my mother-in-law, who is also smiling, and I feel the two of us have crossed a threshold in our relationship and I suspect we are now in the top one percent of all husband/mother-in-law pairs ranked on the basis of odd-but-positive bonding experiences.

Boris is leaning against the wall just outside the bathroom, and although it looks like he has been listening to the proceedings, I cannot believe he would actually listen in. As I walk past him and into the kitchen, he silently moves out of my way and I hear the bathroom door close and when I turn around there is no one to be seen.

And so I move close to the door and listen, and although there are a couple of sounds of surprise, the subsequent sounds are of mirth and gaiety and mock-horror quickly followed by non-verbal sounds of unmistakable regularity, and I step away in real-horror, because there can be no doubt now that Boris and Elise are quite soundly fucking in our half-bathroom.