

## The World Weighs How Much?

by Evan L Williams  
[EvanLWilliams.weebly.com](http://EvanLWilliams.weebly.com)

Scott had called in sick. And though they were both married to other people, Terry and Brian had fallen in love and disappeared. That left just Francine and me to cover the entire floor. It was my fourth day as an orderly at Whispering Oaks Home for Elderly Living. So far I knew three of the eight color-codes, how to operate the autoclave, where the cafeteria was and how to make a bed with hospital-corners. “You gotta make it tight,” Scott had told me, “pull it in—tight like this—forty-five degree angles at the corners then tuck it all under.” I slept like that now. With my feet bunched under the sheets, I dreamt of closing walls or being buried alive.

Scott had hired me last week. Scott was a fuck-up I would never grow to respect because he’d hired me and I was unemployable. I couldn’t trust anyone who couldn’t see that. The day before, he’d told me, “Hey—New Guy—I’m not gonna be here tomorrow. I gotta go to Drain to visit my kid and I’m leaving early, so I’m gonna stop at a payphone somewhere and call in and say I’m sick.”

I was sifting through a stack of laminated charts that detailed each of two hundred instruments I had to memorize by Wednesday. “Oh yeah?” I said, “I didn’t know you had a kid.”

“That’s because I never told you.” He started rifling through the pockets on his uniform, searching for something. “But if they ask,” he went on, “and they might because they’ve been being dicks lately, I need you to tell them that when you saw me today that I looked like shit or something— Sounded like shit too.” He found what he was looking for and produced a beaten-up pack of cigarettes. He pulled one out and put it between his lips.

“I need you to do that for me, okay—”

He was rail-thin, had a pair of dark deep-set eyes over which his brow extended and he talked so loudly you wanted to cover your ears with your hands. I didn't like Scott, but I needed to be on his good side when he inevitably discovered how incompetent I was, and I gave everything I said to him a twice-over before saying it.

I put the charts down, looked him in the eyes and said: “Sure Scott, I'll tell them you looked like shit.”

“Do you really think he's sick?” asked Francine.

“Yeah, he's sick.”

“I don't believe it for a second. Son of bitch left us here to cover the entire floor.” She didn't bother to mention Terry or Brian whom, in my opinion, were the greater offenders in this. She sucked her teeth and sighed. “Son of a bitch.”

One after another, she placed the instruments—whose names I'd never come to know—on a tray and handed them over to me to stack into several waist-high racks. I sealed the racks—careful not to bump or jostle anything—then rolled each into the colossal steel autoclave, closed the door, turned the wheel, pressed one then two.

“It's just— I know he's lying. I'm sure he's lying. He's probably hung-over. Or strung out more likely.”

With great effort, Francine lifted her enormous body and stood at last. She was tall and morbidly obese. Her skin was always red and looked tender to the touch. I really liked Francine, which was unusual for me because normally I harbored an odd sort of grudge against the obese—I didn't know why, perhaps because so many people were starving. An unapologetic cynic, self deprecating, she'd often lambaste herself, her size.

It made me think no one had ever told her that her opinions were valid. But everybody knew her and when they saw her they always smiled.

She said: “Who knows, maybe he’s finally visiting that kid of his.” She turned and gave me a look that said, *we’re finished here*. “If that were the case, I’d have no problem with it.”

I thought of saying something but decided I couldn’t.

For reasons I’d tried many times but could never accurately explain, I liked hospitals. Though this wasn’t a hospital, it was close. There was still the prickling astringent, triple-bleached, glaring white quality so common to hospitals. And the bright checkered floors and endless labyrinths of florescent tubing, waiting rooms with vinyl chairs that still smelled of the factory Benzene treatments, doctors in blue suits and everyone else in identical white uniforms, which seemed to piss people off, the white uniforms. They’d turn dingy, even brown sometimes. I bleached mine back to a glorious almost glowing white every night after my shift. They were stiff as a board sometimes.

The autoclave ramped up, winding itself into a high-pitched whir. I looked at Francine. Her eyes said, *get along little doggy*.

We left the room. Behind us the double-doors flapped. In strange uneven intervals, I heard the fever-pitched whoosh of the autoclave. It sounded like a billion invisible knives scraping metal clean of blood and bone, snot and shit and skin.

In the hallway now, Francine walked at a sprinter’s pace. Her shoes squeaked against the polished floor. I kept up close behind. She said: “Now we gotta get to the nurses’ station and get things administered to the residents.” I watched as the soles of her sneakers warped into odd shapes beneath the stress of her weight. “We’re gonna have to

bust serious ass today, New Guy. I hope that's all right." She took a few strides without speaking, her breathing labored. "That son of a bitch," she said under her breath.

I had only seen this part on video, during orientation. But that was okay, as the production quality was actually quite good and I'd retained most of it. It looked straight forward enough. The cute middle-aged lady with the polite smile brought Ms. Bisby in Room 3b cup number 4 containing one pill Progestin: pink, oval-shaped; one pill Amoxicillin: white, round; and so on. She brought it in and watched as Ms. Bisby swallowed the pills. The old woman wagged her tongue while the orderly inspected her mouth.

Around the nurses' station a half-dozen people in white buzzed in hurried confusion like winged insects. I balked, stopping, not knowing where I should put myself.

The desk was long, crescent-shaped and covered in forms, charts and strange instruments I'd never come to know the names of.

"What do you think?" Francine said.

"I think I don't know how to make myself useful."

"Don't worry about that," she said. "Nobody here knows how to do that."

"They look pretty useful."

"Nope," she said. "That there's just autopilot."

"How do you learn how to do that?"

"Repetition." She laughed. "Think you wouldn't mind staying here forever?" She raised a long thick finger into the air, drew a circle around the room and whispered, "Most will." Then she nudged me and snickered as though I were fucked and an idiot for not knowing it.

My stomach went a little sour. I did need the job, but then again I had nothing I was responsible for. It occurred to me I was still one fuck-up away from actually needing the job, which made me feel a little better. I thought about that fuck-up, what it might look like: the law, medical bills, too much alcohol or say I knock-up some girl I meet at a party, something stupid like that. Then I would be here forever.

Francine and I pressed our chests against the counter. I spotted three trays lined meticulously with rows of tiny white cups. Each tray was situated on its own cart positioned near the cluttered desk. A pretty, blonde haired girl I'd never seen before looked up from whatever she was doing and smiled.

“Finally,” the girl said.

The first thing I noticed was how white her teeth were. I thought to ask her if she took them home each night after her shift and bleached them.

“Everyone’s sick,” said Francine, and she rolled her eyes for what seemed like too long.

The girl reached for a stack of clipboards then handed them to Francine. Her hand looked like a child’s next to Francine’s. They smiled at each other and it was clear they knew one another well. It was the kind of smile you gave someone who knew you well, someone with whom you had a secret and ongoing dialogue.

“Susan this is the new-guy.” Francine turned. “New Guy, this is Susan.”

We shook hands. Her lips peeled back past her eye-teeth. I noticed then that one front tooth crossed over the other; still, it was a beautiful smile. An odd pause registered itself as odd. I couldn’t think what to say because I was too preoccupied with how stupid the tradition of handshaking was, especially when it came to a man and a woman meeting.

Right then I pictured Susan being the girl with whom I'd make that fatal fuck-up that would leave me here in these sterile halls forever. Then Francine pounded my chest with a deck of clipboards and leaned in so close her nose hit my cheek. She said, "Now don't kill anyone."

I recalled the video from orientation: The dowdy lass with the polite smile runs a thin finger down the chart, checking off each necessary item with a slight nod of her head. Cups of colorful pills, small paper cups with water, several pairs of powdered latex gloves, a list of names and room numbers. I gave each item checked a slight nod of head.

I started down the hall, the cart's wobbling set of wheels squealing as I forced it along.

My first patient would be Marlon Jenkins in room 3e. I stopped in front of the door and stole a few unhurried breaths. Past me in the hall, Francine entered a room and a high pitched greeting erupted then went silent as the door shut. I scanned Marlon's chart, ran a finger down the page. Marlon took Lithium for depression, Diazepam for anxiety and several green horse-pills for softening stool.

I gripped a flimsy cup in either hand, took a breath to the bottom of my lungs and entered the room.

A rush of freezing cold air met me. Instinctively an arm shot into the air—as though I might fend this off—a stinging shiver riding a nerve to my heart and setting it thrumming in my chest. There was a horrible sound like a foghorn and I turned to locate an air conditioner rattling in the corner of the room. I'd thrown Marlon's water against the ceiling.

I turned, eyeing the body on the bed. “Mr. Jenkins,” I called through the blast of air conditioning. “It’s time for your medication, Mr. Jenkins.” Is this what they said? I heard my own voice ring hollow on the frigid air; I wouldn’t have responded to it either.

“Mr. Jenkins,” I said again, but Marlon didn’t acknowledge me. I set his pills on a metal tray attached to the bed. He had slung it far from himself. On it was a strange looking yellow mush of food. It appeared untouched. I held a finger near it then stuck it in. It was solid and ice cold. I stood for a moment, leaning over him a bit now. His eyes were open and fixed on the ceiling. His skin seemed lifeless, clotted anoxic blue veins spider-webbing. He lay like a cadaver, though I saw his chest rising softly beneath the covers and in even intervals. Was I supposed to give it to him? Actually administer it? I hovered over him, peering into his empty sky-blue gaze. He didn’t move. The air was so cold I thought maybe he was in shock—a stupid thing to think but I didn’t know, I could see my breath. I went to the wall and found the knob on the air conditioner that controlled the stream of air. I touched it and the man began screaming. He lifted his head into the air and screamed.

I didn’t know what to do. He was staring straight into the air and screaming at the ceiling. In a panic, I reached for the knob and reset it to full.

Marlon’s head rested back onto the pillow; he closed his mouth and resumed staring at the ceiling. I didn’t care now if he took his pills or not. I left the room. I couldn’t feel my legs moving or my feet hitting the floor. I moved like a phantom.

In the hallway now, I saw Francine open another door and start in. Before she disappeared, however, she turned and looked right at me. She winked mischievously then closed the door behind her.

My pulse throbbed in my ears. I sucked air but it seemed to lack any oxygen. From the cart I grabbed a chart at random and pretended to inspect it. My hands shook and the ends of my fingers were white. I pushed the cart and it squealed like a pig pulled from its mother's teat.

The double-doors at the end of the corridor flew wide and smacked against the wall. Scott's stickman-shape came lumbering forward with an awkward stride as though hobbled, an annoyed grimace pressed upon his addict's face. He drew nearer. There were red stains on the front of his white denim jeans. I couldn't focus on both of the things demanding my attention, so I went blank and smiled.

"The fuck's up man?" he said, peering over my head.

"What are you doing here? Everyone thinks you're sick? I told them."

"Kids suck, that's why I'm here." He stared at me with wide red eyes then said, "Don't fuck-up and have kids, understand?"

I didn't respond because what could you say to that? The stains were from spaghetti sauce. I could smell it. Bastard probably deserved it. I thought to ream him for making me into a liar, but I needed him to like me. I sought the favor of a person I wouldn't voluntarily spend thirty-seconds with and the sting from that was even worse than the cold screaming chill in Marlon Jenkins' room. I thought about leaving, just walking away, but then I froze and instinctively fell back into that numb place where all that registers is the word *Smile*.

Scott snatched the chart out my hands and scanned it, feigning an engrossing interest complete with several *mhhmm*'s and *ahaaa*'s.

"I told them you were sick," I said.



“That’s what you told them? Well it didn’t come from me.”

I stared some more because that’s what decent people did when confronted by devilry. But I could react my way out of anything; this was no exception.

“Okay,” I said at last. “They’ll just think you got better and came in. Just tell them you got better and came in.”

Scott was still staring at the chart. I imagined his rat brain trying to decipher the correct way of pronouncing *Thrombocytopenia*. Some ridiculous maneuver he’d use to wedge himself into the day was soon coming. I could see it forming there underneath that shelf of a forehead.

“Alright,” he said and slapped the clipboard against his palm. He straightened his spine and locked eyes with me, his posture attesting to some great importance unmarred by the rotten smell issuing from his jeans. “I’m going to finish up for you and the fat-ass, and since that’s such a nice thing for me to do, why don’t you get down to housekeeping and have these brand-new motherfucking eighty-five dollar jeans cleaned.” He began unlatching his belt buckle, his fingers working clumsily as he continued to stare with wild eyes violet with rage. From somewhere in the depths behind me I heard a door open and footsteps falling softly. “And another thing—” he said, pulling the belt from his pant-loops with one quick tug, the leather snapping as it went, “pick me up a clean uniform while you’re down there, too.”

I wondered then about that son of his, wondered where from he’d acquired such wisdom and wonderful aim.

“I don’t know Scott,” is all I managed. The footsteps got closer, the dry rub of polyester audible now.

“Look, do you want this job or not— It’s what, your fourth day now?” His lips pursed into a tight sphincter; his words were like tiny jabs. He waited for my response.

Then a hand touched my shoulder. Out the edge of my eye I recognized its tiny dimensions. Turning, I glanced Susan standing at my side. Her face went perfectly static from shock. Scott had his pants halfway off, the edge of a testicle visible through an opening in his drawers. He stopped, unmoving, his eyes popped wide as robin’s eggs.

“Scott,” she began; a long pause ensued. “—Why?”

“Why what?”

“Just— Why?”

“Um—”

She faced me—I could tell she was trying not to smile. “I’m going to need some help at the nurses’ station getting some of the dictation files ready for the graveyarders.”

Scott bit his lip and pulled on his pants. He buckled himself, the scent of marina lifting. It occurred to me then that Susan outranked Scott. She was an RN and he a pathetic orderly, like me.

“And Scott,” she went on, not bothering to look at him—she turned instead, as though leaving, and peered up at me. “I’m writing you up.” And then she did smile, her blue-green eyes flattening a little. I returned her gaze, hoping my eyes would wait a little longer before confessing their love and undying devotion.

“You think you can lend me a hand, New Guy? I’ll let Francine know Scott has joined us today and that he’ll be finishing whatever you both might have left after he gets back from housekeeping with a clean uniform.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “I can absolutely— give you, lend you a hand.” I didn’t

know what she had asked me; all I'd heard was the word *Help*.

Scott grumbled something inaudible then reached for the cart and lugged it in front of himself.

Susan said, "And Scott— Perhaps a shower." But he and the broken cart were already squealing away, then he was out the double-doors he'd entered and I was alone in the hallway with Susan.

I said, "Thanks," and exhaled a breath I'd been holding for twenty minutes.

Susan was staring at the double-doors intently, as though something terrifying and evil might suddenly pop through them. I couldn't tell if she was breathing. Then she clicked her tongue loudly and spoke from mid-sentence "—and he's just awful to the patients and—" she turned at last, revealing eyes that seethed "—and have you heard the way he talks about Francine?"

"Umm—"

"Francine knows every single patient's name the moment they walk in the door." Her words were deliberate, even spaced. "She knows their families, their friends, they know her, they talk, she makes them feel better about living in a freaking nursing home, eating mush, confusing their son with their husband who's been dead for twenty-five years." She breathed. "She makes them laugh."

"She does," I said. "Francine's a blasted saint."

"I love her."

"I love her, too."

"I don't actually have anything I need you to do. It's just—" and I could tell it was hard for her to cuss, which was excruciatingly adorable, "that guy's just such an

*asshole.*”

I didn't say anything. Susan frowned a little then shook it off. Above us, the vacuum blare of florescent tubing hummed loudly. I turned my empty gaze to the corridor and sent it bouncing along the endless series of doorways. I thought to leave, then Susan finally spoke. “Actually I do have a favor to ask you—” and she started off down the hallway, leaving me a pace or two behind, that dry scratch of polyester directing my eyes exactly where they wanted to go.

She sat and the chair let out a puff of air that made me think it must be a very comfortable place to be. I was behind the crescent-moon of the nurses' station, slouched in a fold-out chair I was sure would collapse on me any second. A stethoscope lay in a silver coil atop a pile of yellow folders with colorful tags hanging from them. Empty paper coffee cups were scattered, some on their sides, trailing muddy streams. An IBM Selectric whirred in the corner, emitting its furnace's heat.

It had quieted down and only periodically did I see anyone else—a nurse poking her head out of a room to steal a breath of unspoiled air, or Scott (clean in a white-uniform) systematically working his way farther down the corridor—and I felt quite settled.

Susan was entering something into one of the mess of yellow folders encircling her. The scratch of the pen ceasing, she'd slap the folder shut, swivel round and file it into the towering wall of identical folders before starting in on a fresh one. It was all one fluid motion. I leaned in and inspected her handwriting. Supposedly there were clues about a person hidden in their handwriting. Susan's just looked like any other girl's

handwriting, except she used strange abbreviations I'd never seen before: *ALP AVB PO cc* and other indecipherable mysteries. She wrote at a frenzied pace. I liked watching her hands work. They were tiny but agile. Precise. There were no questions there, only certainties.

I grabbed a pen off the desk and started fiddling with it. "So," I said at last, breaking a silence I was happy wasn't uncomfortable. "How long have you been a nurse?"

"Well," she began and went on to talk about that while I stared at her mouth and watched her tiny determined hands break from the page to run the length of her hair, pull it taught and twist it into a messy bun that sat crooked atop her head. She had miniature ears. She tried tucking loose strands behind them but they were too tiny to hold anything back. I think she'd been a nurse for two years, I think she grew up in Illinois and went to school near Chicago.

"What about you?" she said.

I didn't hear her the first time. She had these porcelain features that seemed sheer, as though I might tear through her skin by staring at it too long. I was focused on that when she asked me a second time: "What about you? Where are you from?"

It struck me as a happy thing how infrequently I was asked that question, *what about you? who are you?* I have no idea— "Well—" I glanced at the ceiling, blew out a long slow stream of air and tried to look as if recalling my past were a painful thing, though really I was just hoping some interesting lie would occur to me. It didn't. "I was born here, grew up around here. I've done very little actually." I kept opening and retracting the pen as I talked.

Susan nodded her head in the manner of the polite woman from the orientation video, then smiled as though I must be joking. “That can’t be right,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s more.”

“More what?”

“More life— I mean did you fall in love in high school? Did you ever contemplate joining the military because your grades were low? Did you get into Harvard but turn it down because you’d just read *Catcher in the Rye* and thought all east-coasters were *phonies*?”

I laughed. None of those things had happened. A stupid grin sat unmoving on my face. I clicked the pen. “Honestly, I don’t know how to make myself seem interesting.”

“Name one exciting thing that’s happened to you, just off the top of your head, without thinking— Go.”

But I thought about it anyway. Just blurting something out could have been very bad. Still, I made quick work of it and told her the worst story I had. I said: “When I was a kid my friend and I were hit by a drunk driver— We were walking across a bridge at the time and this van just came up and plowed into us. My friend shot across the street and out off the bridge and into the water. I flew off the other side of the bridge and landed on some rocks then went into the water. That’s not what you meant by exciting was it?” I clicked the pen.

“What happened?” she said.

“Uh, well, Matt died— I broke my femur and had some plates put in my head. I’m really bad at math now.”

“What about the driver that hit you?”

“She was drunk and crawled into the back of her van and passed out waiting for the ambulance to show-up.”

“Did she go to jail?”

“Actually she didn’t. She still lives down the street from my parents.”

“That’s awful.”

“Truly awful,” I said. “When I go to visit my parents, the bartenders around there all give me free drinks because I’m the kid that lived. That’s what they call me, *the kid who lived.*”

“That’s awful, too.”

“I know.” I dropped the pen and it fell onto my lap, leaving behind a thick black streak.

Susan leaned in and said: “So what’s the happiest moment of your life?” She was close now. She had something in her hand. It looked like a wet-nap, like the kind you bring to a picnic. She fitted her knee between mine and dropped her head a little. She began working at the stain with the wet-nap. The hair behind her miniature ears loosened and fell away and I pretended what it might be like to know her well enough to reach and pull it back. Instead I breathed in her perfume; it was like lavender and sunshine.

I was embarrassed for telling her such a depressing story, so naturally I kept on with it. I said: “I guess it was that same time—I mean—not being run over and thrown off a bridge— But I remember being down there and I’d only hit the rocks so far and I remember thinking how I must be dead. The impact was really intense and loud like the heaviest thing you can image coming out from inside you and going off like a bomb and

my body just slipped into the river and the current carried me off and I thought—and I have perfect memory of this—‘Yes I’m dead.’

“Then all at once, the feeling of having a body just went away, just sort of melted and sloughed off and it was really horrible at first because I was resisting it and I was terrified of being let go of, but you can’t hang on, it just keeps getting further from you and I remember feeling it—whatever *it* was—coming out of my chest—and that was the scariest part—feeling very dead, the most dead you can feel. But once all that was gone and my body was below me, there was suddenly the rest of the world.

“I don’t remember a whole lot about it— Just this feeling of disconnectedness coupled to this sensation that that was okay, which meant everything was suddenly and permanently there all at once and nothing was outside that— After feeling so dead, it was the most un-dead I’d ever felt.”

“That sounds nice.”

“So then what happens is the river takes me down and I sort of smack into some trees and suddenly I can move and when I do I see there’s all this grass and trees and it’s all very beautiful— So now I’m thinking I’m definitely dead, you know, ‘Good job you’re in heaven,’ that kind of a thing. And there really was this garden and everything.

“But then all these folks started gathering around me and their faces were terrified and firemen in big reflective jackets showed up and then I was recognizing people I knew weren’t dead yet— Everything sort of blanks out there. I realized I had a body after I started shivering so badly I couldn’t lift my head or even breathe— All that disembodied stuff suddenly just vanished and then I don’t have any memories.”

Susan lifted the wet-nap, inspected her work then went back to it. A damp corona



had formed over the material. Her eyes set to task, she said: “That’s a good one. So what had happened was you fell in the river and washed up where— In a park?”

“Garfield Park. It was like fifty feet down stream. I just bashed myself and slipped into the water and got snagged on some trees, all these people freaking out and gathering round because I’m hypothermic and hobbling around on a shattered femur like a zombie thinking he’s found Eden.”

“I’ve never heard of that place.”

“Eden?”

“Garfield Park.”

“Oh— That’s because it doesn’t exist anymore. They built the hospital on top of it.”

“And so now you’re here.” She looked up, smiled, that crooked tooth an ache in my heart.

“So now I’m here. Now we’re all here, I guess.” Susan lifted her hand and the stain was gone.

I thought about the handshake-process of getting to know one another, how strange it was and how nice it felt when it was going well. Susan gleamed atop her padded chair. She wheeled back a little ways and grinned, waiting for me to respond, I think. But I just stared at her for a while, marveling. I had to.

I thought to make my next line the useless old classic, *so what time you get off tonight?* But she spoke first saying: “So I do still have a favor to ask you.”

I said: “I wanted to thank you for getting Scott off my back.”

“Oh— Really it’s no problem. I just wanted to write him up.”

And an awful thought struck me: What if that was it? What if Scott was an asshole and she was helping me out because I looked like the kind of person who was always in need of others' help? Certainly that story I told earlier couldn't have turned her on— Maybe she was married. Maybe she had four kids, each with a horrible cleft pallet or a mouth full of metal teeth. It made more sense she was a welfare mother four-times divorced and straddled with a sixty-four thousand dollar maxillofacial surgeon's bill than it did she was interested in me. But she was still smiling and I could tell something good was about to happen. She said: "So what time do you get off tonight?"

I felt weightless for a moment. "Well I guess whenever you're done with me."

"Some people are getting together tonight after work— Have you met Pablo and Matthew yet?"

I hadn't met Pablo and Matthew yet.

"They're having a party at their house. You should come."

Whispering Oaks Home for Elderly Living was just a nursing home. Folks came here to die. Francine had told me how things typically worked. Some bewildered relation armed with power of attorney signed off for the individual, whom would linger a while then die. Sometimes they lingered for years, she'd explained. These the M.D.s would often release, but it wouldn't be a month before they were rushed back by some other bewildered relation armed with power of attorney. They were sick and they were incontinent and they were vegetables with million-dollar medical bills no one would ever pay. They were shards of themselves, but they had nevertheless lived lives—Francine knew all about them. They'd met people, fallen in and out of love with them; learned how to tie a fly or

make a cupboard with their bare hands; they'd learned the trick to alcohol was good food and good friends. And now they were here because their sons and daughters had full time jobs, which meant there would never be enough time or energy to clean up after incontinence or to help the near-comatose swallow their food.

Not every one was bed-ridden, however. There were a few—all women—suffering only the initial symptoms of senile dementia. Ambulatory blue-haired ladies who liked to roam the campus grounds and who lounged together in the common room to work on puzzles or read books for as long as their fragile minds would allow them, which was not long at all. One of these ladies was named Sophia Romanova and everyday before supper at 6:00 p.m. she loved to roam the campus grounds and sing to the flowers. This was what Susan had told me. “She finds a great big one and she sticks her face into it and sings old show tunes at it— Like Broadway songs.”

“Really?” I'd said, ecstatic almost. “Like from what plays?”

“I don't know— Fiddler on the Roof is one, I think.”

“Really?” I said, voice gone all high-pitched. “That's a fantastic one.”

A pale series of lines arced along Susan's forehead; I couldn't tell if she thought I was cute or a liar. “Well, she's in the common room and usually what we do is have an orderly take her out to tour the yard and then bring her back by six for dinner. So there's the favor I need of you.”

“What time is it?”

“It's ten till— So, really, you'd only have to be with her a few minutes.”

“But won't that interrupt her? You can't get *Tradition* out in less than ten minutes.”

She flashed me that crooked tooth. “She’s not going to know the difference,” said Susan. “So that’s one—but—I have a personal one, too.”

A twinge roared up my leg and entered my groin—couldn’t help it. “Okay.”

“I don’t want Scott around her.” Susan’s eyes went hard, mouth drooping a bit. “He’s just—very impatient with her. He can be forceful.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to match the severity of her expression.

“Give her these”—she held out a tiny white cup with three pills inside—“then get her into the dining hall.”

I hadn’t indicated one way or the other. Perhaps Susan could already see right through me. She’d said, “You’ll know her when you see her.”

Each day Sophia Romanova received one pill 3 mg. Warfarin: round, blue; one pill 0.4 mg. Clozapine: round, white; and one pill 150 mg. Progestin: oval, pink.

I filled a cup at the fountain and rang for the elevator. From somewhere beneath me, a hollow whoosh grew closer—I could feel it in my feet—a high-pitched ringing at each floor, doors opening, muted voices entering or exiting, their words to each other more like grunts, then the air whooshing again and pushing through the seam in the doorway, a greasy mechanical stench wafting. The door parted. Four sour looking faces stared out at me. Blue suits and leather handbags and impatient glowering eyes half-obscured behind wire-rimmed glasses. Their bodies formed a wall. I took the stairs.

The heavy metal door slammed shut. The loud burst ran the far reaches of the empty stairwell. The atmosphere was strangling and smelled of feet. By the time I’d descended the three floors and entered the foyer of the common room, my head felt light and my eyelids heavy.

I couldn't locate Sophia Romanova. Her three blue-haired girlfriends waved to me, each with a gummy toothless grin that shone bright pink beneath the florescent lighting. From an alcove made unmistakably their own—incomplete puzzles scattered on the coffee table, half drunken mugs of tea, ragged quilts, books with broken spines parted upon the armrests of hideous floral-patterned recliners—they relayed to me how they had once known a Sophia Romanova but hadn't seen her in eons. There were four mugs and when I asked about the fourth one they just turned to each other—their glassy eyes like antique marbles—and it was as if little clouds had come to fill their minds with dark vapor.

I had to turn down six invitations for tea and conversation before exiting out the same door through which I'd come, that same choking fume of fetid feet, the atmosphere like a vacuum. I pushed through a door below a flashing green exit sign.

The sky was orange. Beyond the lush campus lawn and stand of pine cut a jagged path across the horizon. The sun hung aloft a gray bank of clouds that glowed on end almost electric. The light felt like an abrasive on my skin. I wondered if perhaps being indoors all day—the darkness, the artificial lighting, the air conditioning—made you dirty and impure and that reentering the kingdom of nature meant the sun first had to scrape you clean. For a couple minutes, I stood there with my eyes closed and felt the heat grow against my eyelids.

The campus itself was not large. The surrounding area however was a huge forest with not much in it. There was supposedly a fish hatchery and a BLM (Bureau of Land Management) station and a loony-bin hidden somewhere out here. The southern bend of the Willamette River was nearby and there was always the smell of it on the air, like

snowmelt and salmon. Oak savanna and wandering hillsides and grassland gone golden with seed made it a nice place to put someone dying.

I had no idea where to start looking. I held both cups in my right hand, shielded my eyes from the sun with the left and scoured the area. The lingering burnt odor of a hot day gave the air a singed quality. I started walking. The sidewalk ended, opened onto a gravel expanse that bordered a neatly kept lawn dotted with nearly branchless dogwoods and poplars. They sometimes brought convalescing patients out here, let them shamble along the walkways in their ill-fitted hospital gowns or shade themselves beneath the vined and crooked leaning arbors. In the spring, I could imagine it being quite nice; however, it was the heart of summer and everything was dead.

I crossed the gravel perimeter, caught a toe in the grass and dropped Ms. Romanova's water. She would have to dry swallow these things now and I felt bad about that. I thought of Marlon Jenkins and hoped I wouldn't have to force feed them to her. Images flashed of a mouth full of tiny sharp teeth taking a bite out of my arm.

I was the only person out here. I kept going, searching, unable to avoid thinking Susan was screwing with me. Perhaps this was some stupid hazing ritual for new orderlies whom dared speak to a pretty nurse.

I reached the edge of campus. Beyond was a dense wood. The trees there were leafless and gnarled and the underbrush was lined with several crudely cut paths that weaved in and out of each other. They seemed to lead nowhere. I stopped, craned my neck and listened for something—I didn't know what. I bent an ear skyward. Air funneled in. For a moment, I saw myself as if from above: I looked like an orderly at a misplaced nursing home, searching for a ghost in the trees. I decided then I would get

plastered that night and fuck Susan in ungodly ways. But the thought made me sad and I turned back to leave. Then I spotted her.

At the opposite end of campus, before a dense copse of trees and underbrush, I sighted her. Her body was bent and broken looking, though she shuffled along ably enough. Her legs looked strong. She held her arms like a T-rex. I couldn't be sure, but it looked as though her eyes were shut. Yes. And her head, with its great plume of silvery blue hair, tilted skyward. I approached cautiously, trying hard not to startle the sightless woman.

Nearing her now, I noticed she wasn't wearing anything under her hospital gown. "Sophia?" I called out softly. "Ms. Romanova?"

She didn't budge. I was close. Her face squished up tight. She held an ear to the sky then jerked her head violently to angle the other ear at me.

"Ms. Romanova?" I held the cup out like a beggar pleading. "Ms. Romanova, I have your medication here."

"No!" she snapped, her voice low and gravelly. She kept her eyes shut tight, crows-feet stretching to her ears. "Can't find things with those things," she said.

"What are you looking for?"

"Can't find the rhodies."

"You're looking for rhodies?" I said, not knowing what she was talking about.

"Fall is coming. They're gonna need fertilizer." Her strong legs moved in erratic motions. She reached the campus perimeter, held out a tiny dinosaur's arm and felt along the branch of a particularly dead alder. "No! This isn't it either!"

"Maybe I could help you."

“I made a nice life for myself,” she said, “I’m not about to just let all that go.” She let go the branch and angled her face toward mine. Her eyelids were red stained with burst capillaries.

“I have your medication here.”

“Not medication. Don’t need help with medication.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Rhodies.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

She went totally still and it was as though I’d finally gotten her attention. “My garden,” she said. Her arms fell slack to her sides. I saw then that she was quite emaciated. “For fifty years I’ve kept a garden back here, and now what? It’s just gone? Is this Henry’s shenanigans?”

“Uh.”

“There is the sneaking suspicion, however, that I’ve lost my mind. It happened to my mother, you know. It happened to my grandmother.”

“What happened?”

“Do you listen? I’ve lost my mind,” she said and jutted her face toward mine, leaving it there for a long while, shuddering just a little, eyes rolling angrily beneath the lids as though wild and restless things were caught there.

“And do the pills help?” I asked her.

She backed a way a little, put a hand in her hair and scratched her head. A flurry of white dandruff cascaded and caught the wind.

“Nothing helps,” she said. “But you’ve gotta make a home here haven’t you?”



“I guess so.”

She got close and whispered, straining, almost inaudible, “It’s rough, but there are always the rhodies.” Then her voice cracked and suddenly there were tears in her words.

“I just can’t remember where I put mine.”

Her bearing sagged—it was as if she’d lost an octave—then she took the cup from out my hand and dry swallowed the pills. I heard them scrape across her throat. Her eyes popped open. They were a hard blue color like cobalt. They made me think of the iceberg that sunk the Titanic.

“Hello, young man,” she said in a bright cheerful voice. “Have you come from the pharmacy? Is it nearly supper time already? Has my Henry arrived? You will let me know when he arrives, yes? He’s been away—business of some kind—” she waved a hand as though dismissing me “—but then again isn’t it always business?”

On unsteady legs now, she set off across the lawn in the direction of the home, singing in a sharp falsetto: “Aow, just that spoonful of sugar helps that medicine go down!”

I should have followed her into the foyer, reunited her with her friends whom hadn’t seen her in eons—they would be so thrilled—but instead I just stared as she dragged her sinewy legs gone suddenly gimpy across the courtyard and in through the double-door entryway.

I let my muscles slacken and my mind go blank. It was wonderful finally to be alone. A warm wind came suddenly and lashed at the trees. The forest shuddered. I pivoted, faced the woods, closed my eyes and inhaled deeply an oddly sweet scent redolent with some clinging bit of spring, which didn’t make much sense. The summer

had been particularly brutal, hot and without a lick of rain, and I would think there to have been only dead things out there, but then here was the unmistakable scent of life. And a good thing, too, as Sophia Romanova's condition had depressed me a little. I'd always been afraid of one day losing my mind like that. Like Sophia Romanova, dementia ran in my family. I wondered then—breathing in that warm gust of life—if perhaps one day I too would be out here, a confused and emaciated waif scouring the Earth for some lost bit of myself.

The wind swelled and shook an incredible noise out the forest. It swallowed everything then receded, leaving behind a moment of absolute quiet. A chasm opening and closing in the same breath. I fell inside and was spit back up the same instant, and suddenly there was only the world rumbling its murmurous song, greeting me to my body once again.

I heard tree branches breaking underfoot. Something approaching, unhurried even pacing. I glanced into the woods and saw a little girl in a white hospital gown—barefoot and with debris snagged in her hair—trudging along a path in the underbrush. Her waist-length hair might have been blonde had it not been filthy with tangles knotted about unruly as a vine. Her gown, however, was immaculate so that when the sunlight—low-lying now, it cut lacework patterns through the twisted shapes of trees—hit it, it reflected an odd orange glow that was disorienting to look at.

She neared where I was standing on the lawn. A patient's bracelet hung slack from her left arm and when she saw me she paused and stood there so perfectly still it seemed like she wasn't breathing. It was as if a ghost had materialized from the woods. And indeed her colorless complexion appeared avascular. Her eyes however—she was

standing maybe three feet from me now, perfectly motionless in the tangled thicket and grinning as though prepared for the punch-line of some great joke—were a wonderful emerald color like that of a postcard I'd seen of the Irish countryside.

“Are you lost?” She said.

“I was just about to ask you that—” I let out a little nervous laughter. I should not have been nervous.

“You are a patient here?” Her voice was high pitched and there was a foreign songful quality about it. I couldn't place her age. She was very skinny, with knobby knees and a child's posture. I thought maybe she was ten or eleven years old.

“No,” I said, “but I do work here.” The girl's eyes widened and something about the glint there struck me as wild. Not feral, but definitely wild.

“But I work here,” she said. She was still grinning, grinning how people grinned before they'd encountered the world and been crushed by it.

“It looks to me like you're more of a patient.”

“It does? Well I suppose you all are.”

“Are what?”

“Patients really.”

“What does that mean?”

“Everyone is trying to get healthy.”

“Well I suppose you're right.”

“Why am I sick?”

“Well what does your bracelet say?” I said, pointing.

She peered down at her arm and laughed as though this were the first time she'd

seen it. She lifted her wrist to her face and read the words there: “Jane Doe Johnson Unit Floor Four Room Four Four.”

My insides stung with white heat. Fire in my veins and in my gut. A tangle of incomplete thoughts—I have an escaped psych patient here!—panic, red alarms went screaming through my head. I had no idea where in the woods the mental institution was, how far she’d wandered off or—

“What does your bracelet say?” She said.

“I don’t have a bracelet.”

“How do you know to get better then?”

The question shouldered itself into position at the front of the queue. My poor mind reeling, I had to cling to the tree closest to me to keep from keeling over. “Look what are you doing out here?” I said using a stern tone so foreign to me I couldn’t even be sure I’d said anything.

“What we’re doing out here.”

“You mean you live out here.”

“Yes!” she shouted and shot into the air, cascades of laughter erupting from her as though I’d sprung a jack-in-the-box. She twirled and flapped her arms like some mad flightless bird and pounded her naked feet hard against the earth, her hair soaring. Then she stopped, arms returning to her sides, and stood again so perfectly still. It was the about the weirdest damn thing I’d ever seen. An attempt to make sense of it only conjured the cartoon image of a ghost hovering slightly above her then entering through the top of her head.

But she was breathing heavily now, her skin so pale I could see the purple-atlas of

her circulation throbbing, the tissue moving rapidly, and I knew now that this was indeed a person. A sad little girl that belonged to a psych-ward concealed in a forest, so young and alone that escape could only mean hiding in an empty wood that would as soon consume her as it would protect her.

And it was my job to return her to prison. And so what if I didn't? She would probably die out here— I had to ask myself what was worse.

While I considered all this, another part of me wondered what quality of person would return her and what simply let her be. I had an idea of what I was becoming. I felt quite keenly myself at work with the illusions I would someday use to amass my fortune or ruin. But I could still plainly see what bullshit it was to believe any one way rather than another. It was a disease I had contracted—this compulsion to press the world into shape—though I'd yet to display any serious symptoms. I looked at Jane—or whatever her name was—and the whole ugly rigmarole of life occurred to me as this: The world is terrifying, so drop it to its knees. Once there, the thought felt like a rapacious cancer growing out the center of my brain.

“I saw earlier you with Sophie.”

“Sophia Romanova? You know Sophia?”

“I know Sophie.”

“How?” I had to ask.

“Everyone is trying to get better. Sophie knows what she needs because she used to already have it. She looks all around. That's how I know her.” She dropped her gaze. “But all her flowers are dead. She doesn't realize the old ones make the new ones.” She lifted a pale skinny arm and extended her hand. She opened it and in her palm were some

dead flowers. The course scent of lavender lifted off the squashed pedals no longer purple but almost gray.

I thought the opened hand presented an easy opportunity to snatch her up—I'd wrap an arm around her waist or hold her high above me if she resisted—so that I might arrange for her return to wherever she belonged. I said: "She's looking for something that doesn't exist except in a place she doesn't know she can't look, which she's forgotten all about." I offered my hand and when she dropped the husk of lavender into it, I didn't move to apprehend her. I made a fist, held it to my nostrils and breathed.

The wind kicked up and bounced along the treetops, briefly canceling out the world again. And when everything returned I couldn't think to make the responsibility of her my own. I would just let her die—

There was my quality.

"It does exist. She's just lost."

"And you really think she'd get better?"

"I think Sophie needs to know it because she's almost dead."

"I believe that."

"I believe in you, too" she said and smiled huge, which made my insides feel like bursting.

"Hey" she said. "I know how much the world weighs."

"What?"

"You wanna know how much the world weighs today."

"Okay."

She closed her eyes, made grunting noises then opened them wide. "Today the

world weighs eight million billion—”

Pablo and Matthew’s house was on Grant and Forty-Fifth. I lived twenty-five blocks from there, didn’t own a car or bus fare, so I walked.

I’d gazed into the mirror above the bathroom sink for the better part of an hour, teasing unruly eyebrows with a pair of pliers and forcing down my cowlick with gobs of horrible smelling hair cream and checking my teeth for bits of food four or five times at least. I found a decent shirt with a collar in the hamper and smeared deodorant in the armpits in an attempt to eliminate the hamper-stink. I grinned into another mirror for what I assured myself was the last time and practiced looking confident—grinning slyly, casual, a little removed yet engaged enough to know when to nod and ask the next question. Into a brown paper bag I packed the bottle of Woodford Kentucky Bourbon I’d received from my sister as a gift for finally getting a job and moving out of her house—evidently it was employment that made it okay to drink hard alcohol alone in your studio apartment—and shuffled out into the dark and empty streets.

I cleared my throat and blew into a cupped hand. Warm crowns of sodium vapor dappled the sidewalks in a mysterious orange light. I tramped up numbered streets through onslaughts of tiny barking dogs and a bedraggling humidity that set my cowlick on end. I worried a little about my gesture of booze but disregarded this, as the bottle was an expensive one. At least that would get through. At least she would know I meant business—whatever that was.

Cars streamed past in steady flow at the intersection of Haight and Thirty Ninth, headlights spilling into the streets, bumpers coming close yet never colliding as if by

some unseen magnetic repulsion. I waited for the little white man to appear then entered the crosswalk, glancing east at a Shell station emitting an eerie neon glow. A yellow-jacketed employee with shrouded face crouched at the curb outside the little convenient store and lit a cigarette. I watched as he dragged on the cigarette three, sometimes four times before exhaling. Long spires of twisting smoke came from him and when he noticed me watching—the bill of his cap lifting and his eyes appearing from out the shadow—I nodded, acknowledging perhaps some common bond of solitude and servitude. And when he saw this he only flicked the cigarette in my direction—bright red ember flashing then exploding upon the cement—turned and pushed back through the door from where he'd come.

The bag and bottle banged against my hip as I hurried along. Away from the noise of traffic now, I stopped in front of an unlit house with boarded windows and opened the bag. I snatched up the bottle and uncorked it, savoring that wonderful sound. I tipped it back. The amber fluid hit my lips, warming them instantly and I held my breath as I sucked several small swigs, eyes shut and watering a little. A heat emanated from my chest. I blinked and squeezed a few tears from my eyes. I wouldn't have been able to describe the flavor of the bourbon, but it made me think of golden sunshine and honey.

I peered up at the moonlit night, starless and gauzy, and waited for the alcohol to take effect. It hadn't cooled down much and the singed odor of the day lay heavy upon the asphalt, wafted every now and then when a lone car rumbled past. Sober I was nothing—uninteresting and wounded by the impression a question always hovered about me—but drunk I was lively and playful and could have a good time. I would get just a little drunk now, then I would search out Susan and together we would get very drunk



and laugh and each wonder what the other looked like naked until we found ourselves alone in a room and breathing heavily. I corked the bottle and drop it into the bag.

I kept on, hurried now—a little nervous—as I'd told Susan seven-thirty and it was already seven-forty. But still I couldn't shake free of the fear this party would reject me, that Susan would of course reject me. That I would soon find out about those four hideous children of hers and that angry ex-husband with only three days left to serve on a seven-year sentence for killing that high-school kid whom accidentally glanced at Susan from across a very large parking lot.

I didn't stop but hoisted the bottle and chugged as I walked, savoring the sound of the bubbles breaking against the glass. I stole a few hurried breaths—gasping a little—as images flashed of half-naked people dancing on tipping tabletops, white powder scraped across the smooth surface of a coffee table—another chug—windowless rooms where perfectly sculpted bodies inserted pieces of themselves into each other—another chug—and then I pictured myself there, suddenly without any clothes, and so disorienting was the sensation of my heart pulling away from what my body so hurriedly strode toward that my balance faltered and my head swirled. Then I realized I was drunk.

The vibration of the party traveled the sidewalk and entered my feet through the soles of my boots, giving to the world the sensation that all things existed on unsteady ground. Pablo and Matthew's was a dilapidated Victorian home so tall—propped upon a grassy hill so steep as to make mowing an improbable chore—it appeared to bend as it neared the sky. At the bottom of a tall set of cement stairs I assessed my appearance and odor, assuring I'd properly aligned the shirt-buttons and that my armpits smelled enough like an old sea captain to cut the reek of bourbon, as I didn't want Susan to think of me as

someone who drank alone, which I was. I thought again of all the strange faces I'd encounter and what might come out of them and prepped myself mentally by taking another pull off the bottle.

A rotted porch spanned the front of the home then turned to wrap around the side of the house I couldn't make out in the dark. The yard was wild with dead overgrowth. A hedge of boxwood consumed entire sections of the porch and strangled the railing. The only light came from inside the home. It streamed out opened windows alongside thundering music so bass-heavy I could not detect any vocals. An odd gray cloud hung over the heads of the partiers gathered on the porch, tiny red lights breathing just beyond their parted lips, their voices like angry birdsong. From my position at the top of the stairs, it was only possible to discern their heads, which moved in strange rhythm as though hypnotically connected.

Attempting to negotiate the crowd, I spotted a small opening through which to slip inside, but it was quickly absorbed and I could only watch as the mass came together to form a barrier excluding me. It moved as a single unit—a low-pitched groaning as it swayed—making it impossible to penetrate. I had to elbow my way in. I hit arms and shoulders, elbowed a face, stepped on top of bare feet with my heavy thick-soled boots. I was late and a little drunk and needed beyond all other concerns to get to Susan. But once subsumed by the mob, I was crippled by its heat. The stale stench of a billion cigarettes, the sticky sour gusts of metabolized alcohol clinging to my perspiration like an adhesive, everything smothered and booming, leaving me dizzy and brainless.

I angled for sight of the adjacent side of the house, where the porch extended and disappeared into darkness. I shoved past a guy with a giant handlebar mustache and John

Lennon glasses and a girl that might actually have been Yoko Ono and was thrilled to discover hardly anyone occupying the far side of the veranda. Once there I bummed a smoke from a guy wearing nothing but a tattered pair of cargo shorts and a necktie. He looked at me as though I'd asked him for a kidney then reluctantly pulled one away from a nearly full pack. I told him, *thank you* but he just sneered and turned away—his back was covered in little yellow pimples.

I was thankful for the cigarette. Thrilled. My head swam then settled, leaving me less drunk than I'd felt. I leaned against the broken railing. The night air tasted thick. Relieved I probably looked like I belonged here now, I gazed lazily through a closed window rendered almost opaque by perspiration. The scene inside was not unlike my visions, and though the warm life-affirming glow of the whiskey resided at the back my throat, muscles slack and leaning with ease into the splintered railing fragile as a matchstick, I could not keep the feelings of estrangement from entering between myself and everything else. And when an attractive girl turned to bat a thickly mascaraed eye at me and her drunkenness exuded forth like a contagion, I felt everything pull away. I was confused and at once ashamed at my confusion for how I could reduce myself to such feelings of alienation. There were so many people around yet I couldn't lose myself in them, which was the only thing I wanted to do. It was the function of a party.

I sucked on the cigarette, savored the hell out of the nicotine, then sucked hard again as though I might pull from it some pathway onto common ground I might share with all the costumed ghosts surrounding me. But it was no good, and my last thought before pulling away from even myself was of Susan waiting for me, getting frustrated, and then leaving with some douche bag in tattered cargo shorts, a necktie and a full pack

of cigarettes he didn't want to share with me.

It was what I had thought hell might feel like when I was a kid and imagined all the terrible things my Sunday school teacher had taught me. Falling off a bridge onto rocks and into a freezing river did not bring me as close to death, or the cold shrieking chill of Marlon Jenkins' room. And in all the universe there was only the warmth at the end of the cigarette, so I sucked on the filter and savored the hell out of it because after this I had nothing. And when at last the cigarette was gone and my mind prepared evacuation, my attention snapped at once to a small well-concentrated pain at my forearm.

My eyes adjusted on the arm—fingers still clinging to the rotted handrail—where there was a large brown spider biting me. It had to have been biting. The pain didn't make sense otherwise. And I thought at once to squish the son of a bitch—a big hairy bastard with long segmented legs—and even moved to do so, cocking my arm, an opened hand high in the air, but I stopped short. And I never really decided one way or the other, whether to kill or not to kill. It wasn't quite a conscious thing, but rather something outside me—outside yet very near—that struck, leaving me capable only of observing as this thing ate me. And what a wonderful thing it was—I realized suddenly—that this son of bitch spider might now go on to survive another few days, perhaps even to lay a big puffy egg full of little spider babies that could then go on to lay billions of their own.

I watched her:

She had her fill then raised her grubby little head, looked all around herself—as though satisfied with my flavor—turned and then descended the ramp of my arm to return at last to the shadowy underworld from where she'd appeared.

The area around the bite swelled immediately, a red-ridged mound rising as if out

of some internal tectonic shifting, and felt a little like static electricity caught just below the skin where I could not get to it. I pulled the arm away and when I did the faces in the crowd—their wry laughter inexplicably turning to exuberance, their scowls to smiles, harsh judgment to open armed invitation—were each and all dear friends whom I had simply forgotten.

I was suddenly ecstatic and didn't care I'd never know why the world could so suddenly take on such bright effulgence, every face shot through with sunbeams, and I, with a palsied grin, recognizing them all for kin. In fact, the kid standing directly to my side—he was wearing a three-piece wool suit and fedora and sweating uncontrollably—I recognized from high school, so—remembering his name now—I threw an arm around his shoulder and hugged him close. And when I felt a part of myself recoiling from the thought of how god-awfully long it had been since I'd shared anything with anyone, I just pulled him in tighter and yelled into his ear, “Philip! Hey, buddy!”

And Philip said: “Hey! Yeah I know you, don't I? —Ha! This guy here, this guys drunk!”

“Nah,” I assured him, “just happy— How the shit are you?” I slapped his chest.

He took a step back and smiled stupidly. “Good buddy, doin' real good— What have you been up to?”

I thought about Philip's face—all the pimples cleared, a sparse beard growing where previously there had only been a child's downy flesh—how like a man's it had become and what a beautiful thing it was to grow up and blow away like some dead and dried-up flower I couldn't remember the name of.

“You know livin'— Like really trying to be alive—”

“Uh huh—” He pulled a pack of cigarettes out the inner pocket of his jacket then wrapped his arm around the girl standing to his left. She turned around, eyes rolling in their sockets before settling on me. A pair of fairy’s wings extended over her shoulders and her sweat-soaked tank-top was transparent enough that I could see her nipples, which were glorious and huge and uneven like they’d been fashioned of silly-putty. “My God,” I said, “you’re beautiful.”

She frowned but I knew she was really excited to meet me—I was feeling pretty good. I thought another pull of whiskey would make me feel even better, so I took a swig.

Philip—who I was starting to think might not remember me, which was okay because I loved him at this moment—fitted his mouth over the drunk girl’s and set to rapidly licking her teeth. The girl’s knees buckled and she purred like a cat.

“Well it was really good to see you again, Philip!” I said and raised the bag with the bottle, toasting to his love. He groaned and cupped a hand over the fairy’s drooping nipple-capped boob.

Philip muttered, “Is it time baby?” and a shockwave moved through me as I realized I’d forgotten why I was here.

“Holy shit! Philip what time is it?” But Philip only grinded his face against the fairy’s, their pelvises pushed together and rubbing vigorously.

“Yeah,” said the fairy, “it’s about fucking time.” Then she moaned and put a hand down the front of his trousers.

“Philip,” I implored.

“The fuck, man!” he screamed, his eyes narrowed slits, a fist held taught at his side—he was wearing a wristwatch. “I don’t fucking know you— Get the fuck out of

here!”

But it was okay because I knew him and it was okay because I’d been given a shimmering intravenous jolt of poison—a Eucharist that raged in my veins and turned into golden light all the horrors and depravity around me—and he hadn’t. And so it was okay—I just leaned in close and spied it for myself. And holy hell it was eight forty-five!

I stumbled through the front door and into a large open room clogged with partiers. An electrical charge pervaded everything and there were so many bodies pressed together and the heat so immense I thought the place liable to explode.

I was absorbed into a thick swampy mixture of bong smoke—wonderful with a floral quality that brought with it visions of sun-soaked marijuana fields stretched across endless acres of Mexico I’d never see—and fetid human stink. There were people dancing on the tabletops and on the speakers and couches and, as I searched earnestly for any sign of Susan, I saw people dancing in the laundry room, in a closet, and I even thought I heard the heavy footfalls of partiers on the roof. I passed a boy in a tight wrestler’s speedo complete with bulging tan plastic muscles and a girl wearing only a purple Lycra suit and cat ears. I asked them each for any information on a beautiful girl with a crossed tooth who saved lives for a living, but they only looked at me as if I were even drunker than they were. I held close to my chest the bag with the half-empty bottle of bourbon and squeezed through the hallway and into several bedrooms filled with more pot smoke and idiots on guitars and drunkards paired off and going at it on the floor or against a wall; and when a tiny kid who couldn’t have been older than ten pounded into my chest, I thought the bottle would explode and that soon I’d be in an emergency room getting shards of glass pulled from my heart. And I gave up the search as easily it had

begun.

Dejected and certain Susan had gone home by now—it was nearly nine—I went into the kitchen to find ice so I could finish the bottle of bourbon and eradicate all memory of this night—the one where a blast of spider venom had shown me the sacred connection only so that I could blow it with the one person I cared to connect with—when at last I spotted her.

She was leaning against the kitchen sink with a glass of red wine, her body elongated and shapely beneath a tight white gown. She was talking amicably with another girl dressed like a devil. I watched her for just a bit. She seemed so gorgeously removed and holy and I could have sworn she glowed. The light came from her and transformed everyone else into a cretinous monster that crawled on its belly and talked with a forked tongue. There was a halo hovering just above her head.

I hesitated nearing her, as if approaching might shatter some beautiful melancholy to which I'd grown accustomed and feared losing at last.

But then her hand entered the air and waved in my direction and I saw then her bright smile and painted lips and in her eyes there was relief and I couldn't fathom that her excitement was for me and me alone.

We hugged and I felt like crushing her in my arms. "You're here!" she said, her words just a little slurred, her lips swollen and teeth wine-stained. The girl she'd been chatting with politely excused herself.

"Hi!" I had to yell over the music. "I'm late! Sorry, it's stupid. I tried to find you but that's not possible in here, so I was looking for ice— What are you?"

"I'm an angel!" said Susan.



“Yeah, that’s what it looks like. I didn’t know—was I suppose to wear something, come as something?”

“What? Yeah, it’s a costume party! I didn’t mention that?”

“No. Hey look—” I showed her the half drunken bottle of bourbon I’d brought for us. “I drank some!”

“Yeah you did—” She clutched the bottle and inspected it. I stared at her eyes reading the words on the label. They were green and large and watery as if a history of sadness hid there. It made me love her. “This is nice stuff, new guy.”

“Yup,” I said, satisfied at last.

“And you know what you *don’t* need with a bottle like this?”

“What?”

“Ice.”

“Yeah— I’d thought you’d left.”

“Have you been drinking out of the bottle you bum?”

“Um, yes.”

She yanked out the cork and drank from the bottle. And when her eyes opened again—her breath coming out in a long stream that smelled sweetly of wine and lip-gloss—a stray tear ran out the corner of her eye and left behind an ivory trail in the light downy flesh of her cheek. She raised a hand, brought a knuckle to the cheek and offered me the bottle with the other. I took it and drank, eyes shut, and in the total blackness I felt Susan’s lips on my ear and then I heard her say to me: “I want you to know you’re my favorite—”

And then we slept together.

And I was so happy at the time—my jaw actually shuddered—but really it was sad and sloppy and clumsy. We were drunk and we tried, but our rhythm was off. We'd bump awkwardly into each other, apologize then try again. But I didn't know what she wanted, what she liked, what she didn't. And she didn't know me either. We sucked air, made pleased sounds, whispered pleased words, but the disconnect between us revealed the act to be merely an act, and I never came and I'm sure—despite her best impersonation—she didn't either.

I walked home, stumbling through empty black streets, bleached my work clothes, got into bed and puked whiskey-pink-puke all over my sheets.

Scott didn't show up for work the next day. I was bloodshot and hunched and had slept the sleep of the drunk and smelled like it. Incredulous, her face scrunched up like she'd caught an awful odor, Francine hissed: "His ass is out of here— Seriously. They're not gonna let this go on any longer." She shook her head absently. "Son of a bitch."

I leaned in and buried my nose in an armpit. I smelled like a pint of bourbon being pushed through the pores of an onion skin. I just groaned in agreement, which was all Francine wanted. Her colossal frame swaying then rising into the air, I got to my feet and shuffled to the autoclave, pushed one then one again.

I hesitated at the nurses' station. Francine, noticing, shot me a tired look. She smirked, muttering, "She's not here, new guy."

My first resident was Mr. Comatose in Crypt 3e. I stood outside his door for a while—just as I had the day before—glanced down at his chart and cringed at the letters of his name. Yet an assuredness, inexplicably linked to the night before, emboldened me

and I clung to it as I entered Marlon's room, guiding the cart with fragile ease and admiring my perfectly ordered universe of latex gloves, charts, cups of pills and clear water.

I called out through the arctic blast of recycled air: "Hello, Marlon, how is the freezer pop this morning?" He was in the same position as yesterday, that same vacant expression and dead stare boring holes into the ceiling. I wheeled the cart to bedside. "Me? Well, I'm okay. I'm a bit hung-over and I might have an STD I don't know about, but that's okay, I work with doctors."

I gave the chart its perfunctory skimming. Marlon Jenkins received Lithium for depression, Diazepam for anxiety and several green horse pills for softening stool.

I lifted the cup from the cart and thought for a moment how best to get these things inside him. I wondered what Francine would do but left the thought: I couldn't rely on people anymore. I had to figure these things out for myself. It was my job to keep this man alive.

"Open up Marlon."

I gripped the man's bristly jaw and wrenched open his mouth. He instantly resisted me, thrashing his arms and kicking his legs wildly. He looked like a man that didn't know how to swim, like he'd been thrown into a lake to drown. I screamed at him, aching to strike him, "Do you want to live or not!"

He convulsed. Dire spasmodic gulping erupted from his throat. I placed my hand over his face, across his cheeks and squeezed until I felt my fingers enter past his jaws. If he wanted to get rid of me now he'd have to bite through his face. I squeezed hard until a small opening appeared then used my freehand to insert each pill, one at a time.

He tried gagging them up but I had my hand locked over his mouth, the other still wedged in his cheeks between his teeth. Hurrying, I grabbed the cup of water from the cart and dumped it down the hole in his face. I sealed my hand over his lips and waited for his throat to move.

Snot burbled out his nostrils. He'd stopped seizing though his breathing was still intense. His passageways were too clogged with mucus to take in the oxygen he needed. The acid would build. It would burn and he'd have to swallow to make it stop. I knew he knew it.

He never took his eyes off that position on the ceiling. He didn't blink. I felt his throat move and knew he'd finally swallowed the pills.

My nerves shot, I backed away, feeling wrong and dirty. Marlon was motionless. Then he started to aspirate.

A shrill wheezing, tiny coughing, he couldn't get in any air. He didn't move; as if pleased to die, he just lay there choking. He began to squeal. I thrust my hand into his mouth and forced a finger into his esophagus. There was something down there, so I scooped it up—pulling it up and away from the man—and then he coughed it into my lap.

I took the hand away and listened. The air conditioner rattled and spewed its fumes. Marlon was silent, motionless yet breathing at his normal suspended pace. I glanced at my uniform. There was a green and brown stain about the size of a fist near my groin. I wondered how long that had been inside the man. It was a disgusting consistency, like jell-o and oatmeal mixed together.

The icy wind clung to the perspiration on my skin and I began to shiver. I felt empty. I would have knelt before a priest had one appeared.

I went to the sink on the opposite side of the room and washed my hands. I tried washing the vomit off my uniform but the stain would not lift.

The rest of the day was fine. Everyone took his medicine without issue. I even started to think I could get the hang of this and I never once ran into Susan. Perhaps she had the day off—I didn't know her schedule, or her last name for that matter. With each room had come a kind of cleansing-effect. I fell into a state of removed ease and soon I was looking like someone who did this sort of thing for a living—was this a living?—as though this place were merely an extension of home. And the disappointment of the previous night, too, had begun to dissolve as it transformed into the convoluted shapes, faded colors and enigmatic odors of memory. In an odd way I'd even become thankful for it—thankful for its indication that indeed a life was happening here, a life of convoluted shapes, faded colors and enigmatic odors that dissolved at the pursuit of thought.

“You look like you been doin' this for years!” whooped Francine.

Her sudden presence startled me. I gave a little jump and then smiled back at her huge grinning face.

“Phew— And I don't know what all you did to Susan last night, but she called in this morning—” how did she know already? “—and she is in no shape to be here today. I told her no worries, we'd take care of our own, told her you'd showed and we could handle it— And look at you!” She whooped again and held out a hand for me high-five.

This must've been the Francine I'd heard about. The playful best friend. I was pleased to see this version replace the severe, often put-out schoolmarm. I looked at the big flat palm and then slapped it hard. I'd been inducted into the club. A familiar body

hurrying down hallways, head stooped in determination, booties chirping across waxed checkered floors. An orderly. And though I was getting better, the feeling was that I was a worse human being for it.

“Fortunate for us—and boy ain’t this becoming a Peyton Place—” she winked then continued “—fortunately Terry and Brian came in.”

“Uh huh.” I was waiting for her to get to it. The hangover was merciful enough to allow me to work through it, but standing here—not listening, unengaged and growing anxious—had loosed the thing and the screwdriver twisted in my skull.

I caught the end of Francine’s ramblings, “—and I sent Brian down to fetch her but he’s been gone over an hour now and I called down and they said Sophie’s not in the common room and dinner started fifteen minutes ago. Also, he didn’t bring her medication down. It’s still sitting on the tray.”

“Uh huh.”

“Uh huh,” she hissed, mimicking me, a flash of the old schoolmarm’s disapproving frown. “So get down and see what the hell he’s doing.”

Shit.

“After that you can clear out of here.” She started walking away.

I hadn’t processed any of this when she turned—halfway down the hallway now—and shouted back at me: “I like you, New Guy. Word of advice though—” she said it almost like a question “—take some time to get to know a girl. You got your whole life; you’ll be pleased with what you find.” And she smiled as though this were the most appropriate thing anyone had ever told me, turned and then waddled on down the hallway, that dry scratch of polyester directing my eyes exactly where they didn’t want to go.

I gathered Sophia Romanova's medication, filled a cup with water and took the stairs to the courtyard. That same antiseptic scrape of the sun met me, bristling my skin and bringing to surface all the workday had managed to blot out.

Through the fog of the clinging hangover, I scoured the courtyard, squinting hard in the sun and struggling to ignore a tightening in my gut. The sky today seemed somehow to occupy more space; it was as though the curvature of the earth were apparent: Cloudless and sharp, I felt peered into, investigated even. And perhaps it was my own surveilling eye caught upon some dark center I'd failed to rid of myself. I felt a great urge to apologize for something but I didn't know for what. If I'd been a religious man I might have fallen to my knees and begged for forgiveness, but I wasn't a religious man. I glanced at my arm, at the swollen mound of flesh still itching, pink and raw.

I found Brian sitting on a cement bench at the far side of the courtyard. He had Terry attached to him. I could see their hands moving over each other, the wet flash of their tongues, wedding rings reflective in the bright sunlight.

And it didn't take me long to find Sophia Romanova. She was resting peacefully beneath the dead alder I'd found her under yesterday, legs tucked neatly inside her gown, her boney arms wrapped about her knees. From here, she looked like a wild silver-tipped torso growing out the ground. I hesitated, balking at the notion I'd have to perform the same violation I'd forced upon Mr. Marlon Jenkins, which made me think of Scott and what Susan had said about him: that he was forceful with the patients. I wondered then if Scott hadn't slept with Susan. Perhaps the kid in Drain with the impeccable aim was the product of such a night as last night. And then a terrible thing occurred to me: perhaps not

long ago Scott had been a lot like me.

Bile entered my throat. I envied Marlon Jenkins at that moment. I wished for the confidence to just lie down and go numb. A deep eternal sleep sounded so pleasant right now.

“Ms. Romanova?” I said, having edged up slowly so as not to startle her. She had her eyes shut again.

“Please,” she said, her voice low. “Call me Sophie.”

“Alright. Sophie. It’s me again—from yesterday. I have your medication.”

“I know. I remember you.”

Her legs came out from under the gown and when she rose to meet me I saw the muscles in her calves flex and was shocked to see how truly strong she was. She angled her blind eyes toward me then started to cry. Beneath her eyes were puffy bags a deep shade of purple, and from them fell tears like small opals that refracted the sunlight as they trickled along the network of lines etched into her skin. A topography of suffering there.

I turned, eyeing the person who was supposed to be dealing with this. It was hard to tell from this distance, but it appeared he had his hand down the front of Terry’s pants. He was hunched and rubbing vigorously as if tuning some large and awkward instrument, and it wasn’t long before he had Terry singing like a pipe organ. “My God,” I exclaimed.

I turned back to Sophia. Her tongue slithered out its cavern and lapped at the tears. “Have you been out here long?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I can’t remember how I got here.”

“The rhododendrons,” I said.



“Yes, that’s right—” she said, her voice lifting a little. “Winter’s coming.” She took a few small steps, her arms dangled in their usual fashion. Air whistled in her nose. “Can I tell you something before I forget it?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Henry always put them out back on the deck for me to find, rhododendrons. He brought me hundreds of rhododendrons over the years. He’d bring them back from his trips. Different colors, different varieties. And I did learn to love them, eventually.”

“Okay.”

“He spoke five languages, my Henry. He needed to because of the business he was in. He traveled a lot, so he taught himself German and Japanese and French and Spanish—but he knew Latin, too. Because of the rhododendrons, he wanted to speak Latin. I used to leave them on the deck to rot. I’d make sure he knew I knew they were there, then I’d let them bake under the sun—stubborn woman that I was—I didn’t like how often he was gone.”

Sophia wrung her decrepit hands as if this motion might squeeze something valuable from them then smiled and—for a moment—I saw the woman as she might have appeared sixty years ago, glimpsed an uncomplicated beauty that reminded me inexplicably of the Midwest.

She said: “Well I don’t think Henry—sweet soul that he was—could handle seeing them like that, all starved and withered, baking under the sun. He only wanted me to have a hobby; I resented him for trying. He kept bringing these damn plants home anyway, and I’d hear him in the kitchen practicing his Latin, trying his tongue at some knew variety, *arboreum*, *arborescens*, *boninense*—” she rattled off these names as

though she were reading a textbook “—and I’d just leave them on the deck to rot. I think it was very hard for him to see that, my Henry.”

Sophia came near where I was standing at the edge of campus, where the lush grass gave way to wild underbrush that smelled strongly of scorched earth. She didn’t face me, but angled herself at a wood she believed to reside just beyond the perimeter of her own backyard. She said: “Henry was not a man suited for manual labor, but I found him out back here one day, digging in the dirt, filthy and sweating, huffing and puffing like he hadn’t exercised a day in his life. My God, he’d dug this hole you could have put a California spruce in! I mean the poor bush was swallowed. And then he drowned the wretched thing with so much water it sunk into the mud so that it stuck out so terribly crooked— They were two of the most miserable looking things I’d ever seen, the pair of them. I laughed and laughed at that!” She didn’t laugh but let her head roll back onto her shoulders, and it was as if she were seeing it all there, sketched out in the clouds. “That was the one I doted on—that big pink one.”

Then she began muttering to herself. I wished to hear what she was saying, but it was inaudible. I thought perhaps she was praying for something—sunshine maybe, or home more likely—something she did not realize was hers to be had. She spoke again, saying: “If your heart is set on truth then what you’ll find is beauty. Everywhere. The truth is not so important. Searching for the truth is what’s important. Henry showed me that. You don’t know it, but the search turns everything around you to truth. It makes you a true thing.”

She stopped suddenly and I thought perhaps she’d finished, so I asked her if she needed anything but she only swayed as if rocked by a breeze. Absently she sauntered

back to the alder beneath which I'd found her these last two days. "Can I get you anything?" I repeated.

"—I've lost even that now." She was crying again.

I beheld the dying woman, inflated with pity, and wished her tears were my own. She seemed to shrink even as I watched, as if her body were leaking away with the tears. Still, I didn't know why I felt as miserable as I did. Perhaps because she was out here, alone and lost and I—whom still possessed my mind—was just as lost with nothing more to go on but what I thought about things. I could make nothing more of the world than my reckonings. And they were only apparitions and would therefore one day be brought to bear as such, thus making it clear I too was nothing, had always been nothing. And had I ever known anyone? Had I known myself?

Sophia Romanova extended a dinosaur's arm to grope the barren branches of the alder and was again surprised to find there was no garden there. "Yes, there is something you can get me," she said, her body wilted like one of her dead flowers, "you can give me those pills."

I stared into the paper cup and thought to drop the pills in her hand. Yesterday's warm life-tainted breeze shook the trees and I thought of Jane—the little insane girl hiding in the forest—sure she would appear, sure her ratty head of hair would come traipsing out the woods any moment, but it didn't and when it didn't I felt a great urge to search for her. "Don't you want to look around a little longer?" I said.

Her mouth opened to reveal teeth like brittle yellow nubs; her eyeballs rolled beneath the lids. "No." She signaled earnestly, batting fingers shaped like ivory daggers, the nails thick and pointed.

A great longing for home stirred inside me. Normally I'd have let it pass but it occurred instead that this longing was not natural. What was it I longed for? The nursing home's sterile hallways and starched white uniforms; the valley filled with the incessant thrum of traffic, the busy determined legs of pedestrians pounding pavement, the dizzying hum of artificial lighting; and for what most? My crummy apartment with its rattling fridge and wet-cardboard stink, a good drunk and a night of sleep without dreaming. And here was Sophia committing suicide. I knew this. Her tight chin and quivering lip said so, that pathetic grimace of determination. And was it Marlon Jenkins she envied as I had just moments ago? The tiny misshapen bones of her hand were clear through skin like papyrus, joints trembling, fingernails like claws longing for the pill—  
For the murderer to do his goddamn job.

I dumped them at the base of the tree then twisted a foot over them. I heard them crunch into the earth.

Sophia's plume of silvery-blue hair moved in the breeze. "I know where there are rhododendrons," I said. "I know where to look."

I was lying to her of course but so too was I lying to myself: inane reassurances that indeed a garden once grew out here, that I'd found it before, that a taint about the wind meant I could again.

I recoiled only at first then took her hand in my own—frail with bones hollow as a bird's—and led her into the underbrush and onto one of the many winding paths that filtered into the trees where the sunlight cast elongated shadows full of terrible wonder.

Sophia's grimace softened. She lifted her knees high into the air, taking long strides through dry grass high as her waist. I kept turning and looking at her. The edges of

her mouth had stretched to form a little smile. In a bright voice I hadn't yet heard, she said, "Then you know where to look?"

"I do," I said, lying again. I figured to take her take her straight through the woods; we'd see what lay beyond, and if it was nothing then so be it.

Her voice grew even brighter. "You know what you and I have in common?"

"No."

"The hunt," she said.

"The hunt?"

"You and I, we love true things."

"I suppose," I said.

A complex system of pathways opened once we'd got inside the woods. A dizzying array of choices equally leading nowhere. I picked one I thought likely to take us as far from the home as possible. The trees grew denser, the moss thick as carpet and vibrant in the low light. The pines pulled the heat out of the air. A warm reek of decay lifted off the forest floor. Sophia began to sing softly, a faint falsetto trailing an indiscernible melody. I nearly tripped over an exposed root, lost my cool and shouted, "Fuck!"

Sophia said: "I have dreams where my brain is slipping out of my ears. It won't be long before I forget how to breathe— It happened to my mother and it happened to my grandmother."

We kept on and soon the pines thinned and fell away as the pathways converged to leave only one wide trail that cut a very straight line through the trees to a desolate expanse of oak savanna that glistened beneath a renewed sun still hot upon the horizon.

The land opened up and everything was brown and burnt looking. In all directions, surrounding us, were the remnants of fallen oak trees, which stuck from the earth like shattered bones pale in the reflective light. Barbed brambles clung to everything and the earth was like a bright field of concertina. The path wound round several boulders so inexplicably smooth all I could think to explain them was that this whole area must have once been under water; and on the horizon, I saw only barren hillsides pressed tightly against the sky such that nothing beyond them could be glimpsed. And I might have thought us lost if it wasn't for a familiar biotic perfume still discernable where there was wind, which blew hard then suddenly died as though the valley itself drew breath.

Sophia's ankles were bleeding badly yet she strode with such profound strength—her arms dangling, a slight grin still evident on her face—that she now led me. I felt her fingernails dig into my hand as she pulled me along. “Where are we going?” she said. “It smells so nice out here.”

“We're close,” I said, struggling a little to keep up pace.

The path wandered up a hill. The muscles in my legs burned. I heard birds, a river's strident current breaking over rock, and then I smelled flowers. I was so exhausted I about fainted.

The hill crested then dropped to a slow decline and immediately I could see we were headed in the direction of a very green expanse of land near the bank of the Willamette River. The desolation surrounded it and the air coming off the river carried in its cool slipstream the desiccate odor of the land and I couldn't tell whether it was the oasis beating back the desert or the other way round. Sophia's nose rose into the air and she sniffed hard like a hound with a scent. “We're close now,” she shouted. “I feel very

close!”

The land turned to green switchgrass that lashed at our ankles as we descended the hillside. And though it stung and itched so terribly, I could only focus on the wonderful color of the razor-like fronds. I just wanted to see something other than more barren wasteland. But I must have been moving too slowly for Sophia as she broke her grip and took off downhill alone, charged, and bounding with the keen intelligence of a doe. I watched her go, her sagging buttocks poking out from beneath the hem of the gown every now and then.

I paused on the hillside for just a moment to breathe and get some oxygen to my legs. I surveyed the area and though it did seem familiar I didn't know why. The faraway peaks of a jagged mountain range appeared beneath a low sun as miraculous polygons swathed in clouds like purple gauze. Mountainside streams twinkled and wandered with gravity blind as worms. I breathed in and out.

The oasis itself emanated from out a hollow near the river. A well-worn trail led there. And though the hollow was quite shallow, the sunlight was very low and it was nearly dark once inside. Only sparsely did it break through the arched canopy of thickly mossed trees, and where it did there would glow a golden aura that at once convinced me this place was holy.

There were great violet plumes of azalea, hydrangea, rhododendron, others. And when I thought about where Sophia might have got off to, I already knew. I put a hand against a tree to rest and above me was released an explosion of raucous birdsong, a rich cacophony that issued from the treetops then descended to dance in my guts and turn everything else about the world into shit. And there was lavender, too. And I knew I'd

find the little insane girl out here because hadn't she handed me sprig of lavender when we met?

A flash of pasty buttock registered at my periphery. Like a streak of white lightning, it flashed again and was gone. And then I heard singing:

*Life's a counterfeit and when you look at it*

*life's a laugh and death's the joke it's true!*

*Always look on the bright side of life!*

I followed the sharp falsetto and found Sophia face deep in a yellow bloom of rhododendron and singing at the top of her lungs:

*It's all a show! Keep them laughing as you go!*

And I could only watch as everything I thought I knew about life drained away.

I sat on the damp grass and pulled up thick handfuls of lavender and crushed them to release their wonderful scent. The river, just visible through the trees, was like a sea of jewels twinkling bright and pressing onward forever. Sophia jumped from bloom to bloom, piling her face deep inside each as she went. I just watched. And when the little girl finally did appear, I only knew because Sophia had gone so suddenly rigid, turned and opened her eyes: There was pollen everywhere, in her nostrils and packed into the creases on her cheeks and forehead and in her eyes even, and when she walked forward a tincture of light caught her irises and they glistened for just a moment.

"You found me!" exclaimed the little girl, her arms lifted high as though expecting a hug. She looked even more disheveled today. Her hair was badly matted and it had begun to divide into section as though dreadlocks might soon form. There were twigs and moss and it looked like she'd stuffed a few flowers into it too. Her bare legs



and feet were coated in grime and though she still wore the hospital gown—still immaculate somehow—the bracelet was gone from her wrist.

“I guess so,” I said.

“This is a palace!” she screamed. “You found me!”

“No we didn’t,” yelled Sophia Romanova.

“Oh, I thought you did— You brought a friend!”

I couldn’t tell if she’d meant Sophia or me. The little girl laughed loud enough to loosen a flock of finches from a tree. They swooped down and flittered then soared into the sky.

“This is Sophia Romanova.”

“Sophie!” screamed Sophia.

“She wanted to look at your rhododendrons.”

“I know,” said the little girl. “They are my best.”

“Oh,” said Sophia from somewhere in the bushes, “then you made all this then?”

“Of course, I made everything!”

“They are wonderful!”

“They are wonderful! This is a palace!”

I said, “Is this where you’re hiding then?”

“No. I live here.” She started spinning in circles and pounding her feet into the grass.

A great urge to pick her up and hold her burned on my insides. I felt I needed to keep anyone from ever getting to her. I thought: We’ll live here and you’ll dance and laugh so loud you scare the birds out of the trees and I’ll make fires and kill deer and

Sophia will stay too. We'll tell each other stories about our lives and speak an invented language and forget all about the thrum of the valley and eventually we'll die and turn into flowers people can stuff in their hair. There is nothing wrong with a life devoted to an insane thought.

“You have a stain did you know?” said the little girl. She was hunched now and inspecting my uniform very closely. She poked at the stain with her tiny finger.

Sophia continued bounding from one bush to the next, hopping about on her powerful legs, her face disappearing into an azalea then jutting into the air before settling on another bloom and disappearing again. I wondered if perhaps her exuberance might make her a honey bee in her next life. She could fertilize the Earth and remind people every spring just how fleeting was beauty.

I thought about what she had said. I said: “Yes, today I let a man keep giving up on himself— So he barfed on me.”

“Oh. Why?”

“I suppose because it was what he wanted.”

“What he wanted what?”

“To quit.”

“Quit what?” she said, dropping her eyes to the grass.

“Trying,” I said.

“You let him quit trying?”

“I think so.”

“Why?”

“Because it was my job.”

“I don’t know job,” she said. She crouched and began plucking at grass blades.

“At the home— My job at the home.”

“I hate home!” yelled Sophia. She had her face buried in another rhododendron, a bright red one this time. She was singing *Sunrise Sunset* from Fiddler now, which made me very happy.

The little crazy girl came up with something furry and crawling in her hand.

“Why’s your home so bad?” she said.

I waited a while because I thought the question was for Sophia, but Sophia just kept bellowing: *Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play? I don’t remember growing older, when did they?* so I said: “I don’t know— I don’t think I belong there.”

“At home? How can not you belong at a home?”

One of us was speaking a foreign language here. “I tried,” I said. “I tried hard to do what they told me to do, to get close to them and talk to them— I may have been getting better at it too, but the closer I got the worse I felt inside. I think maybe it was my fault. I think maybe we speak different languages.”

“Your home sounds bad,” said the girl. She had her hands cupped around whatever she’d found in the grass and was peering at it through a little opening between two fingers, her one eye pressed close and squinting hard.

“I hate home!” yelled Sophia.

“I guess it is bad. I’m very bad at living there, in that world. It make very little sense to me.”

“So the man barfed on you— But not Sophie!”

“No, not Sophie,” I said. “Sophie and I quit the home today.” I eyed Sophia, grinning.

“I quit!”

“Yay!” screamed the little girl, “then this can be home!”

“I quit!” said Sophia who stumbled back from an azalea, went onto her butt and rolled into the grass. She looked up at me and said, “Your stain looks like poop!”

It really did look like that.

The little girl cupped a hand around the mystery she’d been holding then held it out to me. I offered my hand and into it she dropped a thick furry caterpillar, a yellow and black striped one. It had a billion legs and tickled terribly as it scuttled across my palm.

“Put the Mr. Caterpillar on the stain and he eats it up—” She stuck her fingers into her mouth and made eating motions, “Rom rom rom rom rom—”

I had to roll my hand over to keep him from falling. He went around in circles. Around and around. “Is this how you stay so clean?” I said.

“Clean?”

“Your stain looks like poop!” hollered Sophia.

“I think it looks nice,” said the girl. “No reason trying to stay clean when there’s so much dirt—not you—you’re a dirty birdy! Spend your whole life getting clean and you know what? then you’ll die and they’ll put you in the dirt! Va-boom!” She punched the air and laughed hysterically.

What an adorable crazy person I thought.

“I’m ready for the dirt—” rasped Sophia.

“You can be with things,” she said. “You just have to get close.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said, “if you wait next to them they just open up.”

“They open up?”

“Yeah—they sing.”

The caterpillar went around and around. My hand felt wound in fuzz.

A wonderful wind came up off the river and bustled along the corridor through the trees. It shook loose the odor of every living thing and dragged it along. I threw my shoes into the bushes and went to the river, just beyond the hollow, and sat in the damp soil. The horizon was pink, the amber puddle of the setting sun perched and burning down the mountainside. I thought maybe this was the same place I’d washed up so many years ago. It certainly felt the same, though there was no one to wake me from my delusion, only dreamers dreaming the same dream. And I hoped to never wake, but Sophia was right about these things: hanging onto them changed them. I didn’t know in what way, just that whatever remained would be worse. There was no reason for it, but I thought of Susan then and wished she could be here and that together we might watch the setting sun and that maybe we’d be holding hands and she’d rest her head on my shoulder. I might have known her that way. I looked at the mound of bruised flesh. The bite did not itch anymore. I pressed on it and it went white then very red and it stung badly.

Sophia appeared from beneath a large hydrangea. She came crawling up with a mouthful of flower pedals then fell onto her side and sort of curled up how a cat might. “I’m ready for the dirt,” she muttered. I lay on my back next to her and stared at the sky. The pinpricks of pale stars flashed dully then became brighter as the sunlight left the world. I put my hands beneath my head. The earth felt spongy.

There was a noise like an animal foraging in the trees and I turned a cheek and saw the little girl digging in the dirt at the base of a very large and old looking rhododendron with low sagging branches heavy with pink flowers. She was doubled over and using both hands to toss the dirt between her legs. She came up with a jar half filled with little pink pills, uncapped it, dropped one in, turned the brass lid and buried it again. I thought maybe I'd seen them before. I thought maybe they were Progestin.

She came ambling up and sat next to me. I went back to the stars and waited for the oblivion of sleep. Something streaked the sky but before my eyes could adjust, there appeared above me the twinned faces of Sophia and the crazy girl, Jane. They both had smiles on their perfectly deranged faces.

“You wanna see something neat?” said the little girl.

I did want to see something neat.

“You wanna know how much the world weighs today.”

“Okay.”

She closed her eyes, made grunting noises then opened them wide. “Today the world weighs exactly what it's supposed to.”

And I had to laugh at that because it made no sense and it made a lot of sense.