

## WHEN A DERELICT ANGEL SPEAKS

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It takes a second for Steve's head to clear. He squints at the alarm clock on Cheryl's side of the bed; 2:17 a.m., its glowing red digits proclaim. The chirping noise that woke him, he realizes, is the bedroom telephone, but Steve hesitates. Should he answer? Once upon a time, late-night phone calls promised excitement. Back then, a telephone ringing after midnight might have meant friends insisting he join them for a nightcap, or an old girlfriend feeling lonely. But now Steve has turned forty, gotten married, become a father. He's acquired a mortgage and a cocker spaniel, and as a result the realm of possibilities for nocturnal calls has dwindled. The phone ringing now is either a wrong number or a death in the family.

Then again, it might be Kurt. In fact, probably it's Kurt: a ghost floating outside the gravitational field of ordinary clock time.

Steve doesn't want the ringing to wake Baby Sophia. In the darkness he lumbers to his feet, careful not to jostle Cheryl. He snatches the telephone receiver from his dresser just as it begins the fifth ring.

"Hello?" Steve whispers as he hustles into the bathroom, pulling the door closed behind him.

A soft Tennessee accent saunters out. "Steven, my man. How's tricks?" Without waiting for a reply, the spectral voice continues: "Say, you remember that Agamben book—that one I was telling you about?"

Steve's sleep-logged brain stumbles about, trying to gather flotsam of memory.

"What book?" he finally manages.

"You know, that book I told you about last time."

"Kurt, I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

The line falls silent. You might interpret this as an awkward pause, but that's only because you've never met Kurt. Awkwardness would require some minimal concern for social propriety. No, Kurt falls mute because he has sunk deep into the sweet molasses of his own thought, pondering *that Agamben book* again, and Steve's presence as interlocutor has lost all significance.

Knowing this, Steve sits on the toilet and waits for the soliloquy to resume. The neighborhood surrounding his Mankato house is utterly still. Finally,

Kurt's voice breaks through the quiet. "Hey, Steven, man. I'll call you back. I've got to work this thing through."

"How's Anchorage?" Steve blurts out. But the connection falls dead. "Kurt!" Steve grunts in annoyance, but no one is listening.

A surge of irritation shakes Steve fully awake. He opens the bathroom door and returns the telephone to its recharger. He crawls back into bed and shuts his eyes, but knows it's hopeless. Insomnia, the scourge of American academia, has laid down its siege lines. Steve will remain awake until dawn.

Thanks, Kurt.

But the resentment Steve feels is accompanied by a faint sense of satisfaction. Kurt is, after all, speaking to him. Once, for an entire year Kurt refused to speak to Steve. A peaceful year it was, with no telephones ringing after midnight. Steve never felt so bored his entire life.

Cheryl rolls over in the bed. "Who was it?" she mumbles.

"Nobody," Steve answers.

## §

He first met Kurt back in 1998, when he enrolled at the University of Chicago. Steve had been class valedictorian at Fargo North High and made the Beloit College Dean's List four years straight. In the Chicago graduate program, he felt as if he'd been transported to an alternative universe. His seminars were

mind-blowing experiences—at least the parts Steve could follow. Every Chicago student, it seemed, had always been the smartest kid in class, and for most of them that meant Harvard, Stanford, or Yale. In this rarified atmosphere, Steve's star no longer shone so bright. He learned to hold his tongue in class and to listen, listen, listen.

Kurt, by contrast, was a supernova. He was two years ahead of Steve in the program. Tall, skinny, and pale as a spider web, Kurt shaved irregularly. Sometimes he wore the same pair of jeans for three weeks before it occurred to him to wash them. Yet it wasn't the rumpled appearance that attracted you, nor the Tennessee accent, an alien strain on a campus dominated by Oxbridge parlance. No, Kurt stood out because he was a bona fide University of Chicago genius, a savant who deftly juggled passages of dense literary theory, passages that turned into anvils whenever Steve tried to lift them. By the third week of their seminar on American realism, Steve knew all about Kurt and looked forward to his pronouncements in class—but was Kurt even aware that Steve existed?

A couple of weeks before the end of his first quarter at Chicago, Steve stopped in at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore on his way home. In his reading he'd come across intriguing references to Mikhail Bakhtin. Unlike much of what Steve had encountered so far in his seminars, the Russian literary theorist made sense—his ideas paralleled how Steve thought the world really worked.

Meaning was not some stable kernel embedded in words, Bakhtin maintained, it was a fluid quality defined and redefined through the give-and-take of dialogue between speakers. The discovery of Bakhtin exhilarated Steve. Here was a patch of *Theory* he could homestead, a safe little clearing from which he could launch explorations into the dark woods surrounding him.

He needed to learn more about Bakhtin. That desire brought him to the cavernous bookstore, but of the twenty Bakhtin-related titles staring back at him from the shelves of the Lit Crit section, which should he buy? That's when Steve noticed Kurt standing in the next aisle, seemingly buried in a book.

"Excuse me for bothering you, Kurt. I'm trying to find something good to read on Bakhtin," Steve blurted out. It was the first time he had spoken directly to the prodigy. "His theory of dialogism seems kind of intriguing. What do you think about it?"

It was as if Steve had dropped a quarter into the slot of an old carnival fortune-telling machine. Kurt's eyes seemed to roll back in his head. His lips began to move, and ever so softly magical words floated out. "It's a tricky concept, that. Bakhtin was never entirely clear about it. On the one hand, he argues that all language is by its nature dialogic, that to know the meaning of an utterance you have to understand it in relation to the utterances that precede and follow it. On the other hand, he also claims that only certain literary mas-

terpieces are truly dialogic. So which is it, Mr. Bakhtin? Are all utterances dialogic, or only Dostoevsky's novels? But he's definitely worth checking out." Kurt walked over and tapped the spine of a maroon paperback with his long, slender index finger, and for the first time since the onset of the oracle Steve sensed that Kurt actually saw him. "I'd start with Holquist. And get yourself a copy of *The Dialogic Imagination*. Those two will fix you up nicely."

Steve carried both books home to his apartment that night. In the coming months and years he would extract Kurt's advice time and time again. You could ask Kurt about anything and the man would come back at you with his original take, a wondrous condensation of even the most abstruse problem into a comprehensible diagram, followed by a surgical critique. And then he'd get on his magic carpet and fly away. So far as Kurt was concerned, you could take it or leave it. But as for you, my friend, you'd be a fool not to take it.

When the mood struck him, Kurt could charm the pants off you. Literally, if you were female. But he could also retreat into himself to the point that you wondered if he might not be a little autistic. Kurt started reading philosophy on his own in ninth grade: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson. He played piano brilliantly—mostly modern jazz pieces by the likes of Thelonius Monk and Ornette Coleman—again, self taught. All of this astonished his parents, devout Nashville Pentecostals who drove a shiny Cadillac and watched Fox News religiously. They loved their son but beseeched the Lord: why was He testing

them? Why had He sent them something even more terrifying than a secular humanist: a theoretical anti-humanist?

There's one more thing you need to know about Kurt. All through his graduate coursework, he kept up a string of girlfriends to die for; mostly they did the dying. His romances never lasted more than a few months and usually ended when she stormed out because he had slept around. It was as if Kurt would forget he was already in a relationship when he met a new woman. They'd start talking about Derrida or Bataille and forty minutes later end up in bed. He slept with pretty much all the female students in the department, excluding the lesbians—and one or two of those Steve wondered about.

Kurt's ex-girlfriends usually ended up making their peace with him. For anyone grappling with a dissertation, Kurt was too valuable a resource to forswear. Spend twenty minutes listening to him and he'd identify the hidden cornerstone of your project, tell you where to place the weight-bearing cross-beams and what sorts of building materials you'd need. Nine times out of ten what he told you was genius. The tenth time might have been brilliant, too, but sometimes you just couldn't follow what Kurt said. You just watched helplessly as his words floated up past your eyes and into the stratosphere.

That was the deal with Kurt. You sought him out for dialogue because he could give you so much. Steve had never encountered an intellect so rich or

generous. But as he scrambled to transcribe in his mental notebook every enchanted word that Kurt spoke, sometimes a troubling flash would unsettle Steve. At such moments, Steve would realize that Kurt never actually engaged in dialogue. What he gave you instead was monologue; monologue in all of its brute clarity and all of its mucky self-absorption.

### §

Steve's falling out with Kurt took place during his third year at Chicago. Perhaps you've already guessed that it involved a woman.

Steve first collided with Caroline Zheng on the Sunday before the start of fall quarter at a "welcome back" brunch hosted by the English faculty. There were a dozen new students that year, but the entire party gravitated around Caroline; you felt the magnetic tug the instant you walked into the apartment. With long black hair, radiant brown eyes, and an electrifying smile, she was *stunning*. She wore a black miniskirt and a silver necklace studded with what looked to be emeralds; in a culture whose unwritten dress code dictated jeans and ironic t-shirts, Caroline favored Versace and Gucci.

Everyone in the room wanted to know her. At one moment she would speak with profound seriousness, the next she would veer off into an explosion of giggles, eyes flashing at her interlocutor.

She told Steve she hoped to study representations of technology in early twentieth-century American literature. He immediately started raking the



embers of his brain, hoping to turn up a spark: Dreiser, Norris, Crane.... Nothing. As he silently flailed about, he watched Kurt open a notebook on the coffee table and start diagramming Thomas Edison's proposal for electrifying New York City. Then Kurt began to speak about the first electric chair at Sing Sing and Gertrude Stein's psychological experiments with a wave stimulator while studying under William James at Radcliffe. The air pressure in the room plummeted, because everyone knew that the contest had ended before it even started. Kurt might just as well have walked up to Caroline and peed on her leg to mark his territory. The skitterish postdoc from Ireland that Kurt had been dating absented herself from the party when Kurt sat down at the baby grand in the living room and banged out a riveting performance of "Monk's Dream."

Later that day Steve met three classmates in Regenstein Library to plan a grad student conference. Kurt was supposed to join them, too, but never showed up. The four of them sat in a glass-fishbowl seminar room, glum in the certainty that at that very moment, as they drafted a form rejection letter to send out for rejected paper proposals, Kurt was back at his basement apartment on Dorchester Avenue banging out Caroline's extraordinary brains.

## §

It surprised no one that Kurt would scoop up Caroline. It turned out, however, that she wasn't like the other women he'd mesmerized. For starters, she

was easily his intellectual match. She hadn't read as widely as Kurt (no one had, not even the famous professors who taught their seminars), but she was amazingly fast at picking things up and at drawing unexpected connections between them. There was a real solidity to her thinking, too. When Steve tried to drop phrases like "the otherness of the Other" or "the kernel of the Real," a taint of self-consciousness haunted his pronunciation. But have those same words emerge from Caroline's mouth and they somehow felt as wholesome as butter and eggs. Mostly, though, what set Caroline apart from Kurt's previous conquests was that she didn't need him. She was going places—with or without him.

Caroline and Kurt lasted three months. When it ended, she was the one who had slept around—with Steve.

It all started with another party. This was a grad student affair, celebrating the end of fall quarter. The flat, a third-floor walk-up just off 53<sup>rd</sup> Street, was jammed with grad students, the windows steamed opaque. Kurt perched on the arm of a sofa in the living room, obsessing over his latest conundrum—something to do with one of Lacan's seminars. A small crowd huddled around him, listening to the multiple variant readings he'd derived from the paragraph in question. Steve had seen it a hundred times before: Kurt so immersed in a scholarly puzzle that nothing else in the world mattered. Kurt could stay up thirty-six hours straight grappling with a single line of text.

Caroline hung out in the kitchen at the back of the apartment. As the evening wore on, she became increasingly irritated, an anger she channeled into biting humor. She was snapping off one-liners about how Lacan's phallus didn't really exist, which is why he was so unbelievably screwed up: he had penis envy for himself. Steve threw in a few jokes himself about French theoretical assholes, *petit-a*. When Caroline laughed, those eyes flashed.

Out of the blue she set her beer bottle down on the kitchen counter and announced, "It's too hot in here. Let's go for a walk."

They left, Steve noted, without her saying a word to Kurt. Outside the first real snow of the winter was falling. Enormous feathery flakes stuck to their jackets and hair as they walked down to 57<sup>th</sup> Street. Caroline declared that she was hungry, so they stopped in at Medici. The restaurant was packed with undergrads blowing off steam before finals, but they lucked into one of the small booths at the back. They ordered French fries to share and a hot chocolate for him, a strawberry lemonade for her. As soon as the waitress left, Caroline gazed straight into Steve's eyes. Alarm bells went off in his head.

"There's something I have to tell you, Steve, something I realized tonight," she began. "Kurt's a dead end. He's going nowhere. He's smart, but he's going to spend the rest of his life chasing himself right up his own asshole. He'll never finish his dissertation."

Steve was stunned. How should he respond?

“I’m done with him. Done,” she continued.

Caroline looked Steve straight in the eyes. He fought down an instinctual impulse to look away. “You’re not seeing anyone, are you?” she asked.

She further astonished Steve by coming home with him that night. They made love on his futon, Caroline falling asleep immediately after. The sex wasn’t particularly good—it felt like an encyclopedia entry, the basic facts narrated in a neutral voice, avoiding any potentially controversial ideas. As he lay awake in the dark, Steve mused that there was at least one thing Caroline didn’t know how to do better than anyone else.

Then reality returned, and Steve understood that the fault lay with him: he was the prosaic, unimaginative lover. And he had betrayed a friend.

Shortly after midnight Steve’s telephone rang. He didn’t answer it.

The next morning he stood in three inches of snow on the sidewalk outside as Caroline collected her belongings from Kurt’s basement apartment. Steve spent the night at her place, a tidy one-bedroom flat above Powell’s used bookstore. They ate toast, plums, and chamomile tea for dinner: the only food she had on hand. The next morning Caroline flew off to San Jose to spend winter break with her parents. Steve rode the Megabus to Minneapolis, where he transferred to the Fargo bus. He spent the holidays with his mother.

He and Caroline returned to campus in early January. Their first day back they met up at Jimmy’s for a beer and when they raised their glasses for a toast,

she told Steve to congratulate her. She'd spent the week between Christmas and New Year's back home undergoing medical tests, and everything came back clean. Then she told him how she'd missed a year of high school for chemo and radiation: stomach cancer. About how they found another spot two years later when she was a sophomore at Smith, leading to another round of treatment. She'd been in remission since, but it could come back anytime. She asked Steve to keep this private.

He was stunned. And four weeks later, he was stunned again when their affair abruptly ended. Half the English department didn't even know they were a couple yet, despite Steve's efforts to trumpet the news. Caroline showed up at his apartment one afternoon to inform him that she liked him well enough, but it wasn't working for her and she hoped they would remain friends. She retrieved her toothbrush from his bathroom and left. Two days earlier at the Neiman Marcus on the Magnificent Mile, Steve had picked out a \$250 cashmere cardigan for Caroline's Valentine's Day gift. It was the most expensive present he had ever bought for anyone. But he was able to return it to the store for a full refund. During their brief liaison he even managed to finish a draft of his dissertation proposal. No regrets.

Well, one regret: Kurt stopped speaking to Steve.

Kurt disappeared once Caroline dumped him. Winter quarter began, but he never came to seminar. He missed workshop meetings, he skipped parties. The English Department's motherly Director of Graduate Studies pulled Steve aside to ask if he'd seen Kurt lately. Obviously, she knew nothing about Caroline.

This lasted until mid-February. Then, after Caroline broke up with Steve, Kurt suddenly reappeared, like a magician who vanished on the stage then startles the audience from the back of the auditorium. He once more became a regular at seminars and lectures. Kurt even resumed speaking to Caroline—he launched a sympathetic but devastating critique to a workshop presentation she gave on *Sister Carrie* and then stuck around for the dinner afterward to chat with her some more.

But Steve remained seemingly invisible to Kurt. No dialogue, no monologue—nothing. At the time Steve was overwhelmed with reading for his qualifying exams and had little time for socializing anyway. The morning of his orals, Steve happened to walk past Kurt standing in the Regenstein lobby, engrossed in a book. Four hours later (Steve passed his orals, without flying colors), he returned to the library and found Kurt standing in exactly the same position, same volume in hand. Steve said nothing to him. That night friends gathered at Jimmy's to toast Steve on the completion of his orals. Kurt skipped

it, of course. So did Caroline—but only because she was out of town, presenting a paper at Duke.

A month later Steve defended his dissertation proposal and advanced to doctoral candidacy. His mother mailed a box of home-baked ginger snaps to congratulate him. In the months after that Steve mostly holed up in his fourth-floor library carrel, reading and writing about the “dialogic modernism” of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. An article he wrote on *Save the Last Waltz* was accepted by *American Literary History Review*, a once prestigious journal that had slid out of fashion. Steve’s chair, an Emerson specialist nearing retirement, had advised Steve that he could probably publish there. The professor meant to be helpful, of course, but his implicit message was clear: aim low, young man. Caroline Zheng and other more promising students were steered toward flashier venues like *Critical Inquiry* or *South Atlantic Quarterly*.

When his article appeared in print Steve received two congratulatory phone calls. The first came from Caroline, calling on her cell from a departure gate at O’Hare. She was flying to Ithaca for a job interview at Cornell. Caroline was shortlisted for four tenure-track openings that winter, despite having finished only one chapter of her dissertation.

“The article, it’s really great for you,” she told Steve. He wondered what exactly the words “for you” meant in this instance.

The second phone call came three months later—at two in the morning. It was the first time Kurt had spoken to him in over a year.

“Steven, I just read your article on Zelda Fitzgerald. It’s not half bad.” Kurt then proceeded to explain why it was three-fourths bad and how Steve could fix it for the dissertation. Steve greedily scribbled notes on the side of a tissue box he grabbed from his nightstand.

“Thank you, Kurt,” he said when the augury concluded. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Just some thoughts I had.”

Extended pause.

“You doing okay?” Steve ventured.

“Can’t complain.”

Steve ventured another step forward: “Do you want, maybe, to get a cup of coffee one of these days? Or something?”

A disinterested, uninterested pause: Kurt’s mind was pulling away from the station. But then, distinctly, in that Tennessee drawl, “Sure. That would be nice, Steven.”

Two days later on a warm May afternoon they sat at an outdoor table at Istria over coffee. Their lopsided conversation resumed. Steve’s telephone again rang at queer hours of the night. Sometimes Kurt’s monologues still carried an enchanted aura, but other times they seemed pointless, like the words of a magic spell whose power was exhausted. Over the following year, as Steve



wrapped up his dissertation, he watched Kurt alienate the entire English department. No one had time for Kurt's pontifications anymore, it seemed. Steve sometimes wondered if he was the only person left who still listened to Kurt.

## §

Steve defended his dissertation in June of 2005. That autumn, he began teaching at Mankato State, a third-tier school, but as his adviser (now retired) told him, a job was a job. Kurt had yet to advance to candidacy. Caroline also filed her dissertation before Kurt advanced, and she was a full five years behind him in the program. Kurt was simply too busy reading his way through the entire Regenstein Library to settle down to the mundane task of qualifying exams. Professors who once spoke of Kurt with awe now dropped catty remarks. Finally, in his tenth year at Chicago, Kurt paused in his reading long enough to sit for his orals and defend his dissertation proposal.

Steve received tenure in 2012. Mankato State didn't require a book, thankfully. That summer he married Cheryl, the receptionist at his dentist's office. They held the reception at the American Legion in Elgin, her hometown. A month later Kurt finally submitted his dissertation. The thing was a mess: six hundred pages of baroque prose followed by three hundred pages of endnotes and another hundred pages of bibliography. His adviser rejected it at a glance, without bothering to read it. Three months later Kurt submitted a second draft, half as long but still preposterously ambitious. His committee passed him this

time, probably out of desperation. Other than Kurt, Steve was the only person on earth to read both drafts cover to cover. If you had the patience to decode Kurt's private language, you realized what he was up to: a brilliant rethinking of the canon of American literature as a rebuttal to continental philosophy: Poe against Descartes, Twain against Kant, Dreiser against Hegel. But what reader had that much patience? The tome quickly sank into the vast sump that was ProQuest Dissertations On-Line, where it came to rest not far from Steve's own forgotten thesis.

Kurt then bumped around from one adjunct teaching gig to another: Maine, New Mexico, Alaska. At each campus he endured onerous teaching loads with no time for research. Wherever he went, Kurt's intellect intimidated his colleagues, while his disregard for all proprieties, bureaucratic or social, infuriated them. His contracts never got renewed.

Meanwhile, Caroline Zheng was making quite the splash. She was hired by NYU right out of Chicago. From time to time Steve would encounter her byline in elite journals, often in special issues guest edited by world-famous scholars. A documentary film she co-directed about the TVA won an award at Sundance. Steve even received an off-the-record phone call from a woman at the MacArthur Foundation asking about Caroline.

"The sky's the limit," he told her.

Kurt's midnight phone call from Alaska about that Agamben book came near the start of a one-year contract at Anchorage State. The next morning, still exhausted from his sleepless night, Steve glanced at the online *New York Times* and encountered Caroline's name in a story announcing the latest recipients of the MacArthur genius grant. He looked up her email address on the NYU website and dashed off a congratulatory message. Almost immediately an answer arrived from Caroline, asking for his office phone number. He replied and forty seconds later the telephone on his desk rang. Steve couldn't remember the last time they'd spoken. It turned out the *Chronicle of Higher Education* was planning a profile and the reporter wanted to interview people who knew her on the way up. She asked if it was okay to give them Steve's contact information. They chatted a few minutes more—she feigning interest in his anecdotes about the academic life in rural Minnesota.

Out of the blue she asked about Kurt.

"Same as always," Steve responded. Did she want his phone number in Alaska?

"No thanks," Caroline laughed. "No point in opening that can of worms. Kurt's such a sad case. You know how some people peak in high school? Like the quarterback who spends his entire life talking about a touchdown pass he threw when he was seventeen? Well, some people have their moment of glory in grad school and never move beyond it."

Yes, Steve mused, and then there are some people who never have their moment.

Caroline told him that her book on the electrification of New York was coming out from Oxford UP. She'd also signed a contract with Norton to edit a textbook edition of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, and she was curating a show of contemporary conceptual pieces for a Brooklyn gallery.

"We should get together one of these days," Caroline said as their conversation dwindled. Out of politeness Steve agreed, but he doubted that there was much demand at NYU for visits by Mankato State faculty. And he knew that the only hope of getting Caroline to Mankato was an emergency aircraft landing. He wondered if he should ask about her health, but she never gave him the chance.

A few months later, Steve saw an ad for Caroline's *The Gospel of Power: Electric Angels in American Culture* on the back cover of *PMLA*. He ordered a copy on-line from the Seminary Coop Bookstore back in Hyde Park. When it arrived in his campus mailbox, the glossy trade paperback boasted a handsome cover design, including photographs of Thomas Edison and an electric chair. As he always did when confronted by a friend's publication, the first thing Steve checked was the acknowledgements. His name appeared nowhere—unless you counted a generic "shout out to my classmates in the Chicago program."

The book's dedication: *To all my derelict angels.*

Good for her, Steve thought as he flipped through the pages of the volume, good for her.

## §

Kurt continued to telephone Steve from Alaska every week or two. The last call came in early August, a few minutes before midnight Mankato time. Kurt's Anchorage State contract had lapsed, but he snared a last-minute replacement job at a tiny Christian college in Alabama, where a faculty member had dropped dead. As usual, it was only for one year and the terms were lousy—four sections of freshman comp per semester—but it was a paycheck. Kurt's Tennessee accent somehow sounded stronger than ever after twelve months in Alaska.

Six days later, Kurt's battered Toyota Corolla pulled up into Steve's driveway in Mankato. Because his new contract provided no relocation budget, Kurt was driving himself from Anchorage to Birmingham, staying with friends along the way. He looked almost the same as he did back in Chicago—chin stubble, unkempt straight blonde hair, faded jeans—but he'd put on a little weight. Steve introduced Kurt to Cheryl and Baby Sophia, who eyed the lanky visitor with suspicion.

Kurt moved so often these days that he had reduced his worldly belongings to a collection of eight cardboard boxes that fit easily in his car. "Have Ph.

D., will travel,” he joked. Steve asked about the hundreds of books he remembered from Kurt’s apartment in Hyde Park. Most of those, it turned out, were sitting in his parents’ home in Nashville. Kurt said his folks were afraid to touch the boxes, as if they might harbor demonic forces.

The four of them sat out in the back yard and barbequed steaks on a glorious August evening. After eating, Steve and Kurt took the dog out for a quick walk around the neighborhood. Around eight o’clock Cheryl brought Sophia up to bed and then came back downstairs to excuse herself as well. A pharmacist’s daughter, Cheryl was an exceedingly practical woman; she had no interest in this traveling mountebank. But she was also too nice to say anything outright dismissive. Steve knew she would lie in bed upstairs, watching cop shows on television until she got sleepy.

“You’re a lucky man,” Kurt told Steve after Cheryl left. “I wish I had a wife and kid.”

Steve nodded but silently thought to himself: *for God’s sake, don’t reproduce.*

When the mosquitoes got bad, the two retreated to Steve’s screened-in back porch. They stayed up late drinking beer and talking, almost like the old days—but something had gone flat. They hardly mentioned philosophy or literature. Mostly they complained about work. Kurt launched into a screed that

Steve had a hard time following about university administrators and governmentality, but the rant hit a dead end and stopped.

Steve was ready for bed by midnight, but it was nearly two in the morning before Kurt relinquished the floor. Steve showed Kurt to the guest bedroom in the basement, then headed upstairs and fell asleep instantly. He awoke briefly four hours later when Cheryl got herself and Sophia up: Cheryl was still working at the dentist office, and on her way to the clinic she dropped Sophia off at daycare. When Steve finally came downstairs around noon, he found a note from Kurt on the kitchen table, held in place by the piglet salt-and-pepper shakers that Cheryl found at a yard sale. The message thanked Steve for the hospitality and apologized for leaving without saying goodbye: Kurt hit the road early in order to make southern Illinois by nightfall—he would spend the night with another Chicago classmate now living in Champagne-Urbana.

The note was the last direct communication ever to pass between Kurt and Steve.

## §

Steve and Cheryl spent the following Christmas in Fargo with his mother. She doted over Sophia, her only grandchild, but was more and more forgetful. Steve wondered how much longer she could stay in the big house by herself—a house on a flood plain, no less. But he couldn't bring himself to broach the topic, not during the holidays. Maybe next spring, he thought.

The day after Christmas, Steve sat upstairs in his old bedroom, randomly dialing numbers from his cell phone contacts. Caroline's book was being awarded a prize by MLA, an old Chicago classmate told him. Another Chicago classmate passed on the latest rumor about Kurt: in Alabama he had misplaced all of his students' midterm exams and then tried to cover it up. The school canceled his contract for malfeasance. It was the death of any hope for a teaching career. Kurt had moved back to Nashville. Steve imagined Kurt, flecks of gray now dotting his unshaven stubble, sitting in the basement of his parents' house and surrounded by stacks of cardboard boxes: his precious books.

The following day, Steve and family drove from Fargo to Elgin. They spent New Year's with Cheryl's parents, returning to Mankato late on January 2<sup>nd</sup>. Steve found an urgent message from the provost's office waiting for him on their home answering machine. When he returned the call the following morning, the provost asked him to step in as Acting Dean of Students. The promotion came with a tidy raise—enough to allow Cheryl to quit her job at the dentist office and stay home with Sophia. The post also carried a reduced teaching load, and Steve at first thought he might finally get some writing done; he hadn't entirely given up on the idea of turning his dissertation into a book. But overseeing the tangled lives of students on academic probation ate up more time than he imagined possible. On the other hand, he also discovered



in himself a new competence: it turned out Steve was pretty good at interacting with troubled nineteen-year-olds. The key, he found, was listening to them, sussing out the patterns of their relations with professors, classmates, and family—patterns they could modify with a little effort. Steve started offering simple suggestions that sometimes worked. For example, he told his charges to sit in the front row for every class. That little adjustment nudged them into engaging more fully with their teachers. Steve succeeded in rescuing a handful of students who were headed for catastrophe.

His new responsibilities included serving as the Dean on Call every other weekend. His phone started to ring after midnight again, but now it was the university safety office reporting incidents: a brawl in an off-campus bar, a case of alcohol poisoning.

Kurt never telephoned anymore. Steve sometimes thought about calling him in Nashville, but didn't know the number. One morning as Steve waited in his Dean's office for a student, he ran a Google search: Kurt's name in quotation marks, plus "Nashville." The query returned a handful of hits, mostly classified ads. Kurt was apparently offering piano lessons for students who wanted to play post-bop jazz. The ads listed a telephone number in the 615 area code, but Steve didn't jot it down. Instead he tried another search: "Caroline Zheng" and "New York University." He discovered that Caroline now had

her own Wikipedia entry, including a photograph of her sitting at a desk. She'd cut her hair short.

Steve tried a new query: Kurt's name paired with the keyword "American literature." This turned up a smattering of hits, including an article from *The Slovakian Journal of American Studies* that praised Kurt's "provocative" argument. Another academic paper cited Kurt's dissertation in its footnotes, but the article was written in Japanese so Steve couldn't read it. The baby blue paperback print-on-demand copy of Kurt's dissertation still sat in Steve's faculty office—the thickest volume on his bookshelf. Steve hadn't touched it in ages.

A hesitant knock sounded on the office door. Steve's ten o'clock had arrived, twelve minutes late. It was a particularly tough case: an angry local man with a tattooed neck, a veteran of three years' combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. The student had matriculated the previous autumn and proceeded to fail three of his four classes.

"Come in," Steve announced as he closed the web browser. Steve's voice was loud enough to carry beyond his office door, but faded to nothing before reaching the end of the hallway.

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**Michael Bourdaghs** is a scholar and translator of modern Japanese literature. His fiction has previously appeared in *Avery*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Colere*, among others. His translation of Natsume Sōseki's 1908 short story "Ten Nights of Dreams" is forthcoming in *Monkey Business: New Writing from Japan* in 2016.