

STACEY AND THE PILGRIM

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“Have a great day, Professor,” bleated the kid behind the counter. The bell above the door gave its *ting* and the noon-light blinded the man as he scuffed in his loafers into the gas station’s parking lot. Just then a rust-cankered pickup rattled and crackled onto the gravel-scattered drive, croaking blackish smoke from its tailpipe, and as it lurched to a stop beside the left pump, the passenger door jerked ajar with a clatter of buckled panels and a pale skinny leg with its pale little foot in a flip-flop flopped out of the cab. Dust from the lot floated over the truck, the driver cut the clangor of the engine, and now voices reached the man who’d just stepped into the daylight. This man wasn’t really a professor, but word had gotten around the village that he’d lectured one semester at a business school, years ago. His name was Dave, and he was 42 years old.

The voices from the pickup were bickering in a petulant way, as if they'd been eking their dispute out for an hour for lack of anything better to do and were ready for a new diversion, if any presented itself. The "professor" gleaned this much from the tedious snap of their voices as he strolled across the lot toward his SUV, which was at the right pump, where it had received its monthly refueling. Now the owner of the skinny pale leg and small pale foot slid down from the cab like a corpse from a cart and lapsed against the side of the truck with a world-weary sigh, even though she looked as if she was about 17.

Her antagonist moseyed around from the far side of their leprous vehicle; he was a lanky, tow-headed, sinewy, murderous-looking kid with a wisp of beard at his chin and tattoos seething on his bony arms and glints of metal in his ears, nose, and lip. Dave remarked to himself—he'd almost reached his SUV—that children like these treated their bodies with magnificent contempt, branded and inked and pierced them the way a bored student might torture a swatch of notebook paper. To do her justice, though, the girl had no tattoos that he could see.

He unlocked his SUV with the key fob, reprimanding himself in the back of his mind for bothering to lock his doors out here, where everyone knew

everyone, and then defending his precaution by adducing these squabbling strange delinquents who'd just drifted into the village from god knew where and might for all he knew have been murderers.

When the SUV unlocked, its lights flashed. This was probably what caught the girl's eye. In any case she soon came strutting toward the professor, a little ridiculously, apparently trying to mimic a runway model's walk by coyly and curtly extending a toe-pointed foot and then following it with a stride, her chin hoisted up like an indignant middle finger, her eyes glinting smugly, as if she were conscious of being supremely beautiful when really she looked dirty and starved. In another deliberate effort to do her justice, though, Dave allowed that she was pretty enough. Maybe she even had the looks of a runway model—tall, skinny, with prominent cheekbones and pouting lips. The looks, if not the grace.

From five feet away she chirped at him, "Hey, dude, how about I come home with you?"

Dave looked past her at her escort. The kid only glared back at him like a taxidermied rat, so Dave interested himself in the girl, or young woman. This was the first time in recent memory that he'd been addressed by anyone who

wasn't bound by courtesy to speak to him, so he felt a sort of academic curiosity about her motives.

Then, belatedly, he registered her question. Could she come home with him? He almost laughed at the absurdity of it. But of course she couldn't have known what had happened, so he smiled indulgently and said, "I'm afraid I don't know you."

She strutted close enough that she could have touched him and promptly spun on one heel to stand almost at his side, facing the kid, as if she and the professor had founded an alliance against him. "Just get me away from that fuckin *dick*," she yelled so the kid would hear.

In his disengagement the professor had leisure to appreciate the chiseled quality of her speech. There was a power in obscenity that eloquence couldn't achieve. With a wry respect, he tried her words: "What did that fucking *dick* do to you?"

Again, she pitched her voice so the kid would hear: "I'm fuckin tired of him. Time to get a move on."

The kid only glared.

The professor lost interest. "Goodbye," he said, hefting his dew-sweating gallon of milk, and opened the door of his SUV.

Then he considered that he would have to go to his house alone.

He felt the catch in his stomach that had made him move out of the home where he'd lived with Ellen and... What was it that brought on that catch now? In the past it had been—maybe, at bottom—the horror of being where his family had been, the awful contrast between those days and these. Now he felt the same catch because this skinny wretch had invited herself in. Again, he decided, it was the contrast—this time between the chance of having someone in his house with him and silence. This new contrast, however mild, was enough to remind him of the old one, and that was all it took.

“You want to come over?” he asked, turning to her again, still holding his cold gallon of milk. There were reasons not to let such a person into his house, and he simply didn't care about them.

Now the kid moved. He advanced over the dirt and gravel in a predatory slink, his face expressionless, his eyes very alert. The professor hoped in his heart of hearts that the kid would kill him.

A few feet away the kid suddenly stopped and said in a smooth but nasal voice, “You really wanna take her home?”

Dave said, “Sure.”

The kid narrowed his eyes with reptilian cunning. “*This*skank? Your wife must be a shit-ton prettier, boss.”

Professor...dude...boss. Dave smiled. He was all things to all people today. He said to the kid, “I’ll take her with me. Why not?”

A half-smile stole into the kid’s pale lips. “I like that. Honestly, boss, I do. ‘Why not,’ he says. Like it’s nothin.” The kid looked to one side as if he were conferring with an invisible accomplice. “I can dig that,” he finally reported. “So what now?” Then, as if his demonic accomplice had confided a scheme in him, he addressed the girl with new resolution: “You seriously wanna go with this dude? *This* is what you want now?”

The professor was merely amused by these disdainful inflections.

The girl shrugged and shot back, “Better than your thievin ass.”

The kid scoffed. “Takes all kinds,” he remarked to the professor, with insinuating camaraderie. Then: “What’s your name, boss?”

Dave wasn’t far gone enough to offer his surname, so he only said, “David.”

“Well okay, Dave,” said the presuming kid, “so you wanna take her home. And you think I won’t have nothin to say about it.”

Dave waited.

“You think maybe your wife’ll have somethin to say about it?” the kid asked. “You *look* married.”

“My wife’s a lifer in a state mental hospital,” Dave condescended to explain. “I’m sure she won’t mind.”

That flickered half-smile again. The kid ground his teeth once, spat to one side, and reached into his pocket with contemptuous deliberation. When his hand reappeared the sun-glare from the straight razor left an afterimage in Dave’s eyes. He looked away from it for that reason.

The kid said, “But I might have somethin to say about it.”

“Fuck off, Brandon,” the girl said.

The kid’s tone...there had been something melodramatic about it, as if he were very impressed with himself at this moment. Dave remained careless enough to notice this. He inferred from it that the kid was just acting a part for the sake of his own aggrandizement and wouldn’t push the issue even to the point of inconvenience. Dave decided to cut to the chase.

“So how can I smooth this over?” he asked the kid.

The kid cast a cool assessing eye at Dave’s new SUV. “You look like you’re rollin in dough—” he began.

Dave cut him off with a wave. “I have about a hundred dollars in my pocket. Will that do it?”

The kid left off all affectation at this and regarded Dave again with that frigid reptilian stare, which might have been the only spontaneous thing he’d done so far in their encounter. He spat to one side, stroked his wisp of beard, and said, “You know what? Fuck it. Gimme what you got, and get the cunt outta my sight.”

Dave paid him. While the kid stood and watched, Dave gestured toward the SUV in such a way that the girl took her cue, rounded the vehicle, and hefted her pale bony corpse into the cabin. When they were safe inside, and while the kid still watched, Dave asked her, “How old are you?”

She rang with a silvery laugh. “You’re wonderin if you can *fuck* me,” she sniped. “I’m nineteen, dude. And I can prove it: I’ve been a stripper, and you can’t get on the pole until you’re eighteen.”

Really Dave hadn’t been wondering if he could sleep with her. He didn’t even want to touch her. On the contrary, he’d been wondering if there would be a child in his house again. She was nothing like his children had been, of course. But the high voice, the energy, the silvery laugh, the utter irresponsibility and fearlessness... There was something in her of childhood, if you

looked, and with hardly any thought he'd grasped at it as if it could reanimate him. He realized, as they left the crackling gravel for the hole-pocked street, that his latching on to this girl was his first foray out of paralysis in almost three years. He was frightened and thrilled.

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At Dave's little bungalow at the end of the dirt road the girl flitted through the rooms like a sprite, declared it the most boring fuckin house she'd ever landed in, informed him that he would get her an Xbox One tomorrow, demanded ice cream, settled for a bowl of cold cereal, and then announced that she was going to take a bath.

For a few minutes Dave listened to the bath water plunging into the tub. She'd wanted a bubble bath; she'd settled for squeezing in a few squirts of shampoo. Dave had asked her twice what her name was; the first time, in the SUV, she'd said, "Who fuckin cares?" and the second time, here, she'd answered, "Call me whatever. I'm sick of 'Stacey.'"

The bath water plunged from the faucet and churned.

Dave doodled on a steno pad at his dining-room table. He was meticulously composing a tapestry of braided curves with his blue felt pen because this calmed him when he started to hurt. The girl might have been calling to

him for a moment before he surfaced from this occupation enough to acknowledge her.

“What?” he shouted over the drumming of the water.

“Can I have a towel?” came her chirrup.

“Use mine.”

“I want a *clean* towel, dude.”

He huffed, pulled a clean towel from the linen closet, and opened the half-open bathroom door the rest of the way to hand it to her. From her perch on the gunwale of the tub with her long bare legs stretched over the floor she smiled pertly and accepted the towel while she coyly covered her small bare breasts with a forearm. Her cutoff jeans weren't much more modest than bikini bottoms, so with her T-shirt wadded on the floor he could see part of a tattoo on her hip, creeping up out of her shorts like a black and poisonous patch of fungus. Involuntarily he curled his lip, not in disgust, but in self-defense against this unwelcome assault of near-nudity.

As he latched the bathroom door with her inside and him out he asked himself what he'd expected. Of course she was going to come on to him, not because she wanted him or because she felt any misguided gratitude for his hospitality but because it was a way to make herself the mistress of his house

when she'd otherwise be a precarious and indebted guest. This was a power struggle. He started searching his inventiveness for a way to let her know this wasn't needed, she was welcome, she could enliven his house as briefly or as long as she pleased.

The tap stopped—when he'd given her the towel, the froth from the shampoo she'd squirted into the tub had risen almost to the rim—and he heard the eerie whale-song of bare skin slipping over acrylic under water. She splashed once, maybe shifting to get comfortable. The water lapped and kissed. Another splash; more whale-song, probably her bottom scooting.

Then: "Can I have somethin to drink?"

Dave set down his pen. He hadn't been doodling this time, but holding it sometimes helped to soothe him. He perceived at once that her request was another pretext for titillating him, but if he refused it she'd think he was afraid of her, and she'd become entirely obnoxious. So after reasoning with himself for a second he called back, "Like what?"

"Somethin strong—not beer. You got any liquor? A margarita would be awesome."

That he'd be giving alcohol to someone not old enough to drink didn't occur to him with any particular urgency. Instead he considered that if he made her a margarita it would seem like supplication. "Whiskey?" he called.

Splash, lap, kiss, whale-song. "Shit, I don't care. That'll do it. Just dump a little Coke in it."

He liked to listen to her; her tone had a friendliness, a candidness, of a kind he hadn't heard in a long time. There was no jocularly or affectation in her speech; they might have been close companions for years, and his dormant capacity for friendship all but tingled with returning vitality.

He mixed her drink and carried it to her. Naturally she hadn't locked the bathroom door. When he opened it he saw her lounging in the much-diminished shampoo foam with one foot cocked over the tub's rim and her hair wet-black and slicked to her scalp. To reach the drink she rose from the froth enough that he saw the mesh of bubbles oozing from her breasts, even saw the dark mole by the nipple of one, and she noticed him glancing that way and smiled pleasantly, as if he'd complimented her on something she'd made. He turned to go.

"Hey," she hailed him, "come on. Hang out for a minute."

He turned back to her and leaned his shoulder against the doorframe.

Sipping the drink she gave a sort of facial shrug as if to say *this'll do*, and then she waved her fingers magisterially over the little wad of her clothes on the bathmat and remarked, "My clothes are filthy. Can I borrow some and wash these?"

"Sure."

"I can sit in a tub till I get prune fingers."

"Go ahead."

"So... Whaddayou do?"

He shrugged.

She smiled. "Yeah, I had that job, too," maybe taking his shrug to mean he did nothing, which was exactly what he'd meant. "You got a family?"

He shook his head no.

"Huh. You look like the kinda guy that'd have one. You have that sort of...anal, responsible look, like you take yourself seriously even though you wiped a baby's ass every day for three years." She laughed good-naturedly; he felt as if he were being gently caricatured by an old friend. "Why don't you have a drink?"

"Later," he said, shrugging again.

“Then again,” she said, reverting to her sketch of him, “I gotta say, dude, when you shrug, I feel like you mean it.”

He understood her, or believed he did: she meant that his apathy didn't seem feigned.

She drained the tumbler in a gulp and craned to set the glass on the mat by her clothes, incidentally raising her breasts above the thin white skin of soap that now covered the water.

“I'll get you some clothes,” he said.

§

When she emerged from the bathroom with his button-down shirt almost covering his shorts, she investigated his living room like a fish in a tank, drifting to one wall, staring at it, drifting to another, staring... Finally she turned on him and issued the result of her appraisal: “You got no stereo, no TV, no movies, no magazines, no computer—You don't even have pictures of anybody. What do you do all day, if you don't have a job?”

“That's why I wanted company,” he said.

She curled her lip with an exasperation that seemed directed at the insufficiently diverting world. “Seriously. What do you do here all the time?”

“There are hundreds of books in the bedroom.” He read novels because this was the most inconsequential distraction he could think of, and he wanted to annihilate his hours.

She seemed to skim over his mention of books the way he would have skimmed over a Greek word in a text. “Honestly, you need a TV, at least,” she prescribed. “We’ll get one tomorrow so we can play that Xbox One you’re buying.” She shot him a look. “Can you afford all that?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Cool. Anyway, you want to mix me up another one of those drinks?”

“Help yourself,” he invited.

Without answering she swept on her silent feet into the kitchen, out of sight. She hadn’t brought her used glass from the bathroom, he noticed, though he couldn’t have cared less. “So you bought me,” she called from the kitchen. A glass clacked on the marble countertop, then the door to the freezer snicked and huffed, and then ice wedges chimed in the glass. “What are we gonna do?”

He tried to think about it, but he’d trained himself not to plan.

“Tell me about yourself,” he said instead.

“That’s what everyone says,” she reproached him. “‘Tell me about yourself,’ like, ‘I think you’re so simple that you can tell me everything that’s happened to you in like twenty minutes.’ That’s bullshit, dude. It’d take me a week just to give you the upshot.”

“Okay. Tell me about your first day as a stripper, then.”

The glug-glug of pouring liquor, and then a briefer rasp of pouring pop; in a second she appeared in the kitchen doorway with the tumbler, which she’d only half-filled or had already half-emptied. “Shit, that’s easy. I heard it was good money, so the day I turned eighteen I auditioned at this place, and the jerk-off manager told me I was a shit dancer but the mooks—that’s what he called the customers—would probably get a hard-on watching me anyway, so he took me on. I had to buy a G-string and those fuckin six-inch heels you have to wear, so I was already in the hole for like fifty bucks by the time I got on the floor.” She drained her drink the way a speaker draws a breath, and Dave noticed that she hadn’t looked at him since she’d returned with it; she was staring off to one side, as if at an off-center teleprompter. “So I went around the floor and stuck my tits in guys’ faces, and they paid me to grind on their dicks. Easiest money I ever made. But then at the end of the shift the fuckin manager told me I owed him two hundred goddamn bucks for letting

me work the floor. I was like, goddamn, dude, give a girl a fuckin break. So I worked four hours and only brought home like sixty bucks, but at least it was under the table.”

She went back into the kitchen; the glass clacked on the countertop, the freezer door snicked and huffed again... From her apparent boredom with her own past he'd taken the impression that she lived the way another person might sit through a dull TV show, and that maybe her appearance of being completely at ease with him rose from the same dreadful coldness as her indifference to her history, like vapor from dry ice. His vague hope that she'd give him a transfusion of vitality withered a little, and in his disappointment he began to hope that if she couldn't move him with vigor she'd spur him with pain.

When she appeared in the doorway again—the tumbler full this time—she looked him in the eye and said, “I quit that strip job when the manager tried to rape me. He came into the bathroom while I was in there—You know how they always have a bathroom off of the changing room?—and locked himself in with me and told me I was gonna suck him off no matter what. Just like that.” She smiled coolly. “I told him he could fuckin *try* me, and no court in the world would convict me for what I'd do to him.”

She fixed Dave with such a look as she said this that he didn't need to hear the end. He knew the manager had backed down, because no one cowardly enough to corner a waif in a restroom could have faced down such a look, which was like a cackle of soul-chilling glee at the prospect of mayhem. And so it turned out: "He got one look at me, dude, and he fuckin opened that door and *held it for me*. Fuckin faggot," as if she would have respected him more if he'd mauled her.

For an instant Dave was afraid of her.

"So now you gotta tell *me* somethin," she said, still cresting on the fun of her fearful reminiscences. "Tell me why you don't have any pictures of anybody."

Dave looked at his hands. The subject was an uncomfortable one, but he had a violent urge to rip open his history for this psychopath to see. "There's no one I want to see," he said.

She finished her drink in a gulp. "No shit!" She laughed. "Maybe you're one of *us*."

"One of what?" though he wasn't particularly curious.

"Maybe you don't give a shit about anybody, either. That's like me and Brandon. You know Brandon, who you bought me from?"

This was the second time in a quarter of an hour that she'd thrust that transaction into his remembrance, as if to test whether he could acknowledge without flinching that he'd (Why not think the words?) picked up a whore at the gas station.

"Is he your pimp?" Dave asked.

She stared at him and worked her jaw. He could see that she was deciding whether it would be more to her advantage to work up a good head of indignation at the indelicacy of his question, or to laugh it off. She decided on indifference: "I'm not a hooker," she explained, and then she added negligently, "I've thought about doing it—It's the easiest money there is, right?—but then you have to worry about diseases and getting murdered and all that shit."

He admired her pragmatism. "So I'm one of you?" he asked.

She slunk around the table, sat across from him, continued to hold her glass without drinking. Her hair was beginning to dry, to fill out. He noticed a mole on her neck, of the same dark brown as the one on her breast. "If you don't give a shit about anybody," she said, "then yeah, you are. You're one of us. You're totally free."

That was what he wanted, to be free. But he still loved his children. He'd brought this reckless, outrageous child home with him as if her presence might

conjure the two-year-old and the five-year-old from the void by sympathetic magic. But his children had had rich interiors, had sympathized with tenderness, had regarded anguish with profound, instinctive reverence. Whereas talking to this girl, for all her superficial flourishes, was more and more like touching the skin of a corpse.

“So how come you don’t have a family?” she asked in her indifferent friendly way.

“I had a family,” he said, almost believing that her indifference was a place where he could bury this. “I had a wife—Ellen—and two children, a five-year-old boy and a two-year-old girl, whose names I don’t like to say. My wife was very pretty, smart, educated—and a go-getter. Then she seemed to get depressed, and she became preoccupied with religion. At first she told me it took her out of herself. Then she started to believe in it. She joined a fundamentalist church. Every day she’d go watch their pastor foam at the mouth. Eventually they asked her to stop coming—she never said why, but I imagine she scared them. A week later she took the kids to the woods and baptized them in a river. They were glad to do it; they would have done anything to please her. When they got home that afternoon she took them upstairs to their bedroom—this was in our old place—and poisoned them in their beds. When I

found her with them she said she'd done it 'while they were right with God, and pure,' as if these were two separate things. And this is the only hint I've ever had of what she was thinking. That was almost three years ago."

His hatred of the woman who'd killed his children tightened inside of him excruciatingly as he finished this history—his hatred was the constricting element of his grief, a binding so stiff that he couldn't find any relief in the expressions of mourning that might otherwise have let his grief out, bit by bit. This ligature had allowed him to relate the horror coldly, and now it prompted him to rethink the girl: maybe her apparent callousness was also the effect of some private agony. Hopeful, he looked to her for whatever comfort, whatever mercy, she might offer a fellow sufferer.

She finished her drink. "That sucks, dude," she said, not bothering to look at him.

Her glibness seemed to resonate with the low, hollow tone the world had returned when he'd discovered his children's corpses and pleaded with the whole force of his will for them to *wake*—and this made the girl's insouciance more painful to him than the sharpest rebuff would have been.

His horror of the girl soon resolved itself into a renewal of the bitter hope that she'd torment him into activity, though. To palliate his bitterness and her boredom they drove to the village's only big-box store, where he bought her a megalithic stereo system and let her pick out a shelf's-worth of CDs; she seemed content to live without the rest of the entertainment center until the following day. At home she hooked up the stereo easily and proceeded to rattle his windows with gangster rap and heavy metal. They drank until they both felt sick, and they barely talked—the music was so thunderous that they felt no pressure to talk—both sipping from their tumblers in separate chairs and void-surfing in their dulled, dimmed minds. By the time they were almost too tired to keep their eyes open Dave was drunk enough that it seemed rude to make her sleep on the couch, so they shambled to his bed together as if at the behest of some shared migratory instinct. Once they were in bed sex seemed obligatory, so without any foreplay or even a preparatory kiss she relaxed into an accommodating sprawl and he mounted her under the top sheet and jerked away for a few minutes while she waited with her eyes closed. Neither of them made a sound, except for his hard breaths and the quiet jostling of the box spring. When he'd finished he rolled off of her and closed his eyes, and she asked, "How long's it been since you fucked anyone?"

He said, "More than three years."

"No wonder."

§

Ten minutes later he found that he was nowhere near sleep. He said to her, "I was very successful in business. I was successful in everything. So I believed that if you wanted something enough, your will would make it happen. When I walked into my children's room, and saw them in their beds, and saw Ellen rocking herself and heard her murmuring, 'While they were right with God, and pure,' over and over again, I knew with absolute certainty that my children weren't just sleeping. I wanted them to be alive more than I'd ever wanted anything. I threw all the force of my will against the fact. I wanted mercy. I've never stopped wanting mercy... I've never stopped wanting to *wake up* from *this* and hear my children. And I feel the way a baby must feel, when it cries as loudly as it can and no one comes."

He paused to let her comment the way you might wait for a hiking companion to help you over a riverbed—but she was as silent as death, either because she was already asleep, or because she didn't care.

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He thought he had no chance of sleeping, and then he woke. The overhead lights were on—he didn't understand why they'd be on—but he'd never lost the sense that someone was here with him. It was comforting. It helped his dreams. He could see why his children had insisted on sharing a room, even though they'd had so many rooms to choose from.

Then a smooth, nasal voice said, "Howdy, boss. You finally awake?"

There was no disorientation. Dave realized that the kid—Brandon—had found the house, had gotten in. Dave turned onto his side, found the girl with her head propped on her hand, nude, smiling, watching him as if she just wanted to see the look on his face.

"Did you like fuckin her, boss?"

The kid was leaning against the doorframe, and now he offered an insolent wave of hello. For a second Dave was afraid, but then he remembered his life, and he no longer cared. In answer to the insolent question he said, "Not really, 'boss.' I felt like a necrophile."

The kid smirked, stroked his wisp of beard, ran a hand over the other forearm as if to soothe his florid and violent tattoos. "You're thinkin I don't know what that word means. But she ain't dead, boss, believe me. You just didn't fuck her right."

The light glinted from the stud in his nose, from the ring in his lip. He sat on the edge of the bed and draped his arm over the girl's bony hip, though in a way that seemed more friendly than proprietary.

"I thought you were done with her," Dave reminded the kid.

The kid shrugged. "Done, not done. We have our spats, for sure. But we're soul mates, boss. She always calls me, tells me where she's at. Then I come around and pick her up. And sometimes we stay on for a while, if we're comfortable."

"You're not welcome here," said Dave. "Take her and go."

The girl laughed the way a child might laugh at an obscene word. Lazily the kid raised the hand he'd hung over her hip and stroked her cheek. "Shit, boss," came the verdict, "I figure you owe *her* somethin."

Dave put iron in his voice and said, "Is she a whore? She said she wasn't," just to show them he wasn't afraid.

The kid smirked. "You don't have to be a whore to like a present from time to time. And you don't have to be a whore to believe in basic fairness, neither." He raised his other hand, which had been on the far side of him, and let it fall over the girl's hip. The lamplight struck the straight razor's blade.

Even suicides feared pain. Dave tried not to look at the metal in the kid's hand, which meant that he kept darting glances at it while he craned slightly away. He wondered if there was any way to get out of this without being cut. More than anything, he wanted mercy.

He swallowed hard and then loathed himself for showing fear and said, "Maybe you'll cut me, but get out of here."

"Get outta bed," said the kid.

Dave forced himself not to spring up in fearful compliance. Instead he stayed on his side and suppressed his trembling. "Let's negotiate," said Dave, who'd been very successful in business. "Tell me what you want, and we'll talk about what I'm willing to give you."

The girl sniffed contemptuously.

"Gimme your hand," said the kid, evidently changing his choice of torment. "That's all I want, really. I just wanna shake hands and be friends with a rich, handsome dude like you."

"You'll cut me," said Dave steadily—and even in his fear he was proud of this steadiness.

"Just trust me and gimme your hand," said the kid, "or I swear by the Buddha and Jesus H. Christ that I'll walk over there and cut off your nose."

In both pairs of eyes Dave saw nothing but malignancy—in the kid’s the snaky coldness, in the girl’s the murderous glee. There would be no mercy—this was as much a fact as his children’s deaths—and this time his will shrank from even pushing against such perfect hopelessness. Dave held out his left hand.

The kid seized the hand, and with the swiftness with which an animal kills another animal he slit the wrist along the vein.

Dave drew back his hand. Blood pattered onto the bed, a rapid dribble. The pain had been delayed for just a second, but now it was searing, and the hot blood inflamed the torn skin.

“Thanks, boss,” said the kid. “We’ll find our own way out,” and he rose from the bed.

Dave gasped, “Take the stereo and all your other crap.”

“Already loaded it into the truck,” said the kid. “Thanks anyway, though.”

Dave got out of bed—reluctantly, now that it was in his interests, though he’d been so eager to comply when he’d been ordered—and rifled his dresser for a belt while the girl slowly dressed and the kid lounged against the door-frame, both of them apparently completely unconcerned.

“I think my clothes are in the wash,” she remarked to the kid, taking the time to button the shirt Dave had given her. “Did you wash my clothes like I told you?” she asked Dave.

Dave found a belt, looped it around his forearm, cinched the tourniquet. The flow weakened, but the cut continued to drool.

“Fuck your clothes,” said the kid. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“Take my car,” Dave offered, because his SUV had GPS and would be easy for the police to track.

“We ain’t unloadin and reloadin all our shit,” said the kid almost irritably. When the girl had finished buttoning Dave’s shirt they slipped from the room like shadows, and a moment later slammed the front door. The pickup farted, clattered, revved... the scratch of gravel, another fart from the bad muffler, and they were gone.

Dave realized that he could end his misery of years just by loosening the tourniquet, or he could go out to his SUV and touch the emergency button on the rearview frame and within a day or two get back to futilely, painfully mourning his children. With the tourniquet on he had a little time to think it over; he just had to hold the belt tight. He was frightened of dying, but to call

for help he would have to admit that he was such an abject beggar that he'd fall to his knees and pinch up the rotten grains that had been flung to him.

While he was ever-so-carefully weighing the pros and cons of bleeding to death he realized that he'd unconsciously clamped the belt between his teeth and that he was awkwardly pulling his pants on one-handed because he didn't want the paramedics to find him in his boxers. In his anger at this sneaking weakness he saw what he should do: he'd leave the tourniquet behind and drive to the nearest town that had a hospital. It was twenty miles away; the sheriff was in that town, too—it was the county seat. If he bled to death en route, then fine; if he made it, though, then that would be that—in this way he'd submit his choice to chance, the way a more overtly superstitious person might consult a horoscope.

Since the murders he'd become reflective enough that even as he sham-bled from his bedroom to embark on this obscene and ridiculous trial by ordeal he was able to appreciate with an almost aesthetic detachment the contortions he'd twisted his will into. Living meant grieving because there was no mercy, except in leaving the tourniquet off. But he found that he'd shirked the choice between life and death so unctuously that even in leaving his tourniquet behind he'd pulled on slacks that had a belt through the loops; he'd be able to

stop his car and restrict the bleeding at any time, if his inclination tipped that way.

After making his way to the front of the dark house, Dave found his keys on their hook on the wall by the front door, left the door ajar because what fucking difference did it make, all the while leaving behind him a trail of blood that pattered on the carpet and then patted the tan-to-brown dust of the driveway. He was sad and sorry, for himself and for the world, and he wanted to slump to the ground and go to sleep. But the moon was almost full, he noticed; it would be easy to drive in this light. Mounting into the cabin of his new SUV, he thumbed the ignition button, felt the engine subtly bring the car to life, and told the GPS that he needed the nearest emergency room.

The route the receiver returned was the one Dave would have chosen if he'd had to find his way by memory in Brandon and Stacey's disintegrated pickup. But Jesus, he was sad. He'd never felt so wretched—it was as if his children—it was as if he was feeling it *now*, all at once, three years on. The sadness focused itself into a pain that was almost physical, like a sting in the center of him. He didn't want to move. But the SUV was rolling now. He pulled it through a U-turn at the end of the dirt road and headed toward the village, which he would pass through on his way to town. And he felt very

cold, all of a sudden, even though this was a warm night. Again, he wanted to sleep, to pull over and slump against the wheel. His children... Ellen would never get out of the hospital—the only reason he hadn't divorced her was that he'd hoped the legal tie would give him a chance to strangle her bare-handed if she ever got out. But she would never get out. And oh, Jesus, he was so cold and tired, and it was still nineteen miles to town, and the lap of his slacks was soggy with the blood from his wrist. It occurred to him that Ellen must have felt this way when she'd started to get sick: this awful weight of fatigue and sorrow, pressing... He hadn't understood how she'd felt at the time. Instead of offering his sympathy he'd resented the inward turn of her attention as if it were the expression of an obstinate narcissism. She'd lost all resemblance to the loud-voiced, fast-gesturing, sharp-minded woman he'd married, until he couldn't bring himself to touch her. He'd been afraid of her, really, as if she were a vector of some crippling disease. But her morbid self-absorption hadn't been willful—he could see this now, in himself. Just as breaking your toe could inflame the throbbing digit to world-eclipsing dimensions and force the whole body to limp, the soreness and affliction of one part of the mind could press all the rest into nursing it. He might have saved their children if he'd seen this

when she'd needed him. The realization loosened the knot of his hatred for her, just a little.

Fuck. He'd driven off the road, he was so fucking tired and sad. And the whiskey he'd been swilling until a few hours ago was like a coat of tar on his nerves.

He backed out of the ditch, got himself onto the highway again—he was on the highway now, just coming up on the village—then the lights of the hamlet that loaned its name to his address even though he lived outside its limits glistened from the bug husks on his windshield... No pedestrians at this time of night, just the streetlights—it disgusted him that people cared enough about anything to raise streetlamps; there was nothing worth saving that lamp-light could save. If anything was open at this hour it would be Lucky's, the bar, but he passed the street Lucky's was on, waiving any help he might have found there, while the traffic light winked amber overhead.

A mile or so past the village, after drifting from the asphalt, he veered away from a telephone pole at the last instant and trundled the SUV at about five miles per hour nose-first into another shallow ditch. This time he slumped against the wheel, as he'd been tempted to do before, but instead of going to sleep he set himself to weighing his alternatives in earnest. All he had to do

was wait and bleed. Or, all he had to do was touch the emergency button, and an ambulance would arrive within minutes. They'd stitch him up, and after the inevitable formalities, he'd drive himself back to his house, where he'd twist in the womb of his grief for another thirty years. He still couldn't decide, so he drew his belt out of its loops. It was tacky with blood. He ran it around his burning forearm and cinched it with the other hand, then looped it over the steering wheel so the weight of his arm would help to keep it tight.

This was a compromise. For the life of him—literally for the life of him—he couldn't decide whether to press the emergency button or loosen the belt. He felt the same dull, drumming ache when he considered either of his options, until he couldn't tell them apart, except as forms of words. Everything had been like this since his children. To try to choose between another thirty years of grieving or bleeding out within the hour was like trying to choose between two strains of music while his ears were ringing from the blast of a bomb. Belt or button—it struck him that just seeing a small act of mercy, from anyone, toward anyone, would have reconciled him to calling for help. He'd been merciless to Ellen in her pain; she'd been merciless to their son and daughter; Brandon and Stacey had been merciless to him, and he'd been merciless to himself—he'd been so hungry for mercy for so many years that he

imagined it must be the only thing of value whose worth he was still capable of feeling, if he could only find an instance of it.

Between drunkenness and blood-loss and despair, his confusion afflicted him with an urge to confide in... anyone. So he pressed a button on the rear-view frame, not the one that would connect him to 911, but the one that activated the speakerphone for general use. The computer's lucid toneless feminine voice drawled, "Please say the number you would like for me to dial." Dave recited a ten-digit number at random. The line rang, and then another computer told him that the number was not in service. He tried another random number with the same result. It was like putting messages into bottles. There were nine billion possible ten-digit numbers, if you didn't allow leading zeroes. How many were in use? A tenth of them? A twentieth? He tried another combination; it summoned the shriek of a fax machine. This was progress. But in the instant when he proved to himself that he could produce a working number, his whim of pestering a stranger left him. There was someone in particular he wanted to talk to. The need was blurry in his mind. And then, as if by squinting through a lens, he brought it into focus.

He wanted to talk to his wife. Not too many minutes shy of discarding his life to escape an intractable grief, he found himself missing the woman who'd

inflicted that grief, simply because she was the only living human being he'd ever sincerely confided in. He'd mapped himself for her, when she was well. After a lifetime of regarding his intuition as a sort of sacred oracle, he didn't second-guess this impulse, even though his inner sibyl had never issued a more freakish pronouncement. So he told the speakerphone the name and location of the institution where the state had refrigerated his bride. The line rang once. A computer announced the name of the hospital and offered a menu of options. Dave ignored these and said, "Operator." The line rang five times. A woman answered, repeated the name of the hospital, and said, "How can I help you?"

"I need to speak to my wife," said Dave.

A pause. Then, "Is she a patient or staff?"

"A patient."

"I'm sorry, sir, but—"

"I know it's late," Dave interrupted, "but a close relative is dying. Please bring her to the phone." He realized now, only now, that if he actually got Ellen on the line he'd have no idea what to say to her. They hadn't spoken since the day he'd found her with the bodies.

Another pause while the operator considered his excuse. "I'll have to ask if she can be woken, sir," said the woman. She sounded young; she spoke now with the boldness of voice, the hint of bridling, with which pretty women expressed their displeasure when men didn't offer the gallantry they were accustomed to. "What's your wife's name?"

He told her.

A long silence.

"You want to talk to *her*, sir?" asked the woman incredulously. Evidently she knew of the case.

"For the dying man's sake," he answered, "not for hers."

Another pause, then, "I'm putting you on hold."

The dreary elevator music that began to slosh around the cabin of his car seemed like a symbol of the world. He listened to it for ten minutes. When the Muzak broke off and the woman spoke again, Dave realized that he'd fallen asleep and would have died soon if her voice hadn't startled him back to himself. In his torpor he'd released the belt, and new blood had soaked into the lap of his slacks. His mind seemed to be wobbling, like a reflection on the surface of a pool.

"Sir?" the woman said again.

“Yes? Hello?” said Dave.

“Sir, an orderly is bringing your wife to the phone. I’ll connect you to her wing.”

A soft, soft ringing, like the chuckle of a dove. Then a corvine voice squawked, “B Wing.”

Dave told this new woman who he was calling for. She put him on hold. This time he had to do without music—there was only an occasional crackle in the line, but these snaps of static kept him awake for the minute or two he spent waiting. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open, and he was painfully cold.

At last a voice he hadn’t heard in years said, “Hello? David?”

His wife was the only person who’d ever called him *David*. “Ellen,” he said.

During the moment of silence that followed he remembered that she was unlikely to be intelligible. Her court-appointed attorney (David having refused to fund her defense) had told him years ago that her insanity had “surfaced” under the strain of the trial, and he imagined that her psychosis must have proven untreatable. If the faintest ray of lucidity had ever fallen on any part of her guilt, she would have bashed her brains out on the nearest wall, almost

certainly. So if this reprobate woman was *lucky*, she'd spend the rest of her life marooned on a skull-wide desert islet of derangement, surrounded by a sea of unspeakable grief. It struck him that he couldn't have damned her more terribly if he'd been able to express all his wrath, and with this reflection he felt the knot of his hatred for her loosen a little more.

When he'd reached the end of this meditation, David realized that he'd just passed a comforting silence with Ellen for the first time since before she'd been ill. He choked and forced himself to ask—in the conventional mode of someone who wants to say a great deal but can think of nothing particular to break the ice with—“How are you?”

Shyly, “Oh, I don't know. I'm okay. How are you?”

He shuddered with a suppressed sob. “I'm... okay. I'm just out driving.” He clenched his teeth. His good hand was trembling. The exertion of feeling so much would probably shorten the time he had. He unclenched his teeth and said, “It's a nice night,” with tears slipping over his cheeks. That banal, phatic weather report was so freighted with suppressed pain that saying the words had wrenched his nerves like a shock.

After another rich silence he asked, “What did you...What did you do today?” He was beginning to cry, and this broke up his phrases.

She reported of her day: "I was crucified on cockroach legs, David. Jesus needs more secretaries. Do you think he'll kill me, too?"

He sobbed once, heavily, because the only other person who might have joined him in grieving from the bottom of his soul over his children had a merry-go-round in her brain, chiming with meaningless music and revolving in the same round forever.

"No, Ellen," he said. "I... I don't think he'll kill you."

"That's good because I have children to raise, you know. How are the children, David?"

He sobbed so hard that he dropped the belt, and his wound squelched with the rush of blood and his numb hand began to tingle. Over the next half-minute he caught something in himself that was flailing like a loose sheet in the wind and jerked it taut and lashed it firmly down, and then he was able to say, "They're fine, Ellen. They're... They're fine."

She bubbled with a laugh of pleasure. "Oh, David, that's *so* great. I was... For some reason I was worried about them. All the time I've been worrying about them. But they're all right?"

He supposed against all probability that he could hear a deeply desperate plea in this question, as if something in her knew the truth and all the rest of

her was begging for his help in keeping that something contained—in which case the slightest reminder that she'd poisoned their daughter and son would release her inconceivable guilt into her bloodstream, as if by dissolving a capsule that she'd failed until now to digest. David chose to believe that the murderer of his children was suddenly at his mercy, that he had the power to poison the poisoner.

He tightened his tourniquet and unclenched his teeth and said in a voice that trembled from lack of conviction, "They're fine, Ellen. They're... They're great."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Thank God for that."

He'd needed to see mercy. Here it was—Its proof was that gasp of relief.

Maybe out of gratitude she said, "I love you, David."

He almost missed this, he was so relieved to have seen an act of mercy, but then he registered her lunatic avowal of love, and the rest of his hatred unraveled. More than all her other gibberish, the uncanny innocence of that declaration pierced him with the sense that hating her was as useless as hating an ocean that had swallowed a ship—Whereas to give up that stupid exertion would be to relax, just a little, from the strain of his constant resistance to unalterable facts. So in mercy to himself he said, "I don't hate you."

Having seen these two mercies—both from himself, that unreliable but only source—he waited on the phone with her a while in another perfect silence. It was the only way he could be with her, or with anybody—in a silence that was like a sea in which their thoughts might swim and meet, but would more likely slip around one another, or hunt one another into caves and hollows. Then, without warning to himself, he disconnected Ellen and pressed the emergency button.

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