With Signs And With Wonders

by

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Part One
The Employer And The Employee

Oliver curled his thick lower lip into his mouth. The tiny sound it made was sexual and ugly, but only he could hear it. Those private noises—ears popping, thick swallowing, teeth grinding, the dull sound-blast of the shower hitting the base of the skull—had suggested to Oliver a long time ago that he was an isolated creature. Now, still bobbing in Tess’s wake, he was convinced of it.

His mind had wandered, and in the time he’d been thinking his lip had loosened. He curled it back in. It was a combined effort between the weak muscles of his chin and the light vacuum created in his mouth. This produced something chipmunk-like in his upper central incisors. Incisors. That was good. Sounded like a limerick’s end he remembered: “The apple became cider inside her inside.” It was something he recalled every so often. The creator should have found a way to include the teeth bit. More and more, in recent days, Oliver had felt at a loss for words. The instant accessibility of the rhyme made him smile. But only briefly. He had to return to his mouth.

With gentle precision, Oliver used his delicate rows of teeth to peel away the last scraps of dead skin from his lower lip. His teeth were crooked, but the fact was masked by their prelapsarian milky shine and near-comic smallness. When he smiled, it showed the purely-decorative white of a newborn cat. It was because of their daintiness he was able to do these tasks. Surgically, precisely, he continued to
remove the soft debris on his lip. He thought of the birds in the teeth of crocodiles, or more fittingly, those vague underwater creatures that cleaned with unmouthlike mouths. With each small success, his tongue curled back with the detritus, holding it in place against the ribbed roof of his mouth until his swallowing mechanism completed the anthropophagous bucket-line succession. These tiny movements barely registered on his face. A microscopic trembling of the muscles in his abdomen and shoulders betrayed a certain depth of focus, but his eyes remained glazed over. Eyes he hated, for the crème brûlée yellow of the sclera, for their uncontrollable shiftiness. His thoughts moved from his lips to his eyes, but then back to his lips. Stay with the lips, with the mechanic exfoliation. Take refuge in the unthinking. If he strayed too far or lingered too long on these parts of his body, he’d begin to see them from a perspective outside himself; through Tess’ eyes. And that couldn’t happen, when all he wanted was to slip inside himself and hibernate.

Finally satisfied with the smooth surface, he slowly unfurled the lower lip. The dry air chafed it, stung it with minute pins. Quickly this skin, fragile and new, would die. And then he would begin the process again.

He thought of the fight he’d just had. Maybe this time would actually be the end. Maybe now he was free from Tess. But he wondered at what cost. Already he knew he’d left some great part of himself back in that apartment. When he tried to give directions to the man in the cab, he could barely speak. Had she taken even his words? He looked at the taxi driver. Such a minor character in Oliver’s story. Yet the detail of his coarse, curly hair was so fine. And the noises that came from the outdated, beaded seat-cover—that abacus obscured to Oliver—were such tightly-
crafted plinks. Someone took a great deal of time designing this moment for me, he thought, grateful. He remembered, sad and little, managing to crawl into the taxi. It was moving before he could fully pull his feet into the door. He couldn’t think about her. Move on to the top lip. An even more difficult task. Something to forget; a way to disappear.

2

Time passed. Oliver turned back to his writing, but found he no longer could. The words weren’t available. He didn’t have the authority to harness them. And so he slipped from the world.

As he faded, it turned to those days when you could hear people everywhere talk about how crazy the rain was, as spring turned to that unrelenting summer. Some saw it as an omen. When the skies suddenly opened, they moved to the sides to hide in tight clusters under the flanks of awnings. In these brief downpours, the city looked like it was all out for a big parade that wasn’t ever going to come. Umbrellas were useless: the water hit the pavement with such ferocity that it whipped back up, so that the rain seemed to come from all sides. In these moments it was no longer rain, which, however fierce, regarded the laws of gravity; but flood. Then again, it was also a time when people seemed to care less about getting wet. One man with a full face—full nose, full eyes, the exception a patchy beard—ran tired fingers over a smooth porcelain elephant, hidden in his pocket. This was Nathan Wallace. Every movement he made was calculated and filled with purpose, in the event someone was
watching, or as if he understood the importance of his role at the center of some unknown story.

In the slowest of motions, he curled the elephant up into his fist, and flicked it out, as high and far as possible. Everyone’s focus flew towards the slowly spinning figurine, which violated taboo by whirling through the rain, into the street. Before its miniature tusks hit the ground and shattered, Nathan had already turned to go back into the restaurant. Only a couple of people saw his gray-green eyes. It seemed more important than it was.

“I’m sorry about that,” Nathan said, sitting down in the chair that was still marked by his body heat. “I was giving you the end of your story. Nathan Wallace has his last cigarette. Or something. You can include that as the final detail in the biography.” He sat distracted. “Across the street I saw a mother with a stroller built for two, but there was only one child in the seats. We both knew there was something missing, and the mother looked sad, even when everyone looks sad lately. It reminded me of a story that my brother used to tell. I’ll get the details wrong, but the details aren’t what matter here. When he was in Bangkok, he knew this Siamese twin. I don’t remember names well, but they were brothers joined at the hip. The trick here, what makes it interesting, is that one of the brothers had died in an accident. Some people said it was on the operating table, although plenty more claimed that that dead half committed suicide, unable to take the life-conjoined. Whatever happened, it would’ve been too risky to remove the dead half without endangering the life of the other, so they had a taxidermist stuff the brother and nail his feet to roller skates. If you slapped the departed brother on the back, a puff of
sawdust came from his mouth. And it looked as if he were speaking on a day when the air was freezing. Or like a child laughing after stuffing her mouth with confectioner’s sugar.”

Oliver decided the words sounded distinctly rehearsed, but were spoken with deep fondness. It had the quality of an old story told for years among bar-mates.

“The living twin was left to wheel his brother around everywhere they went. He tried so hard to drink himself into forgetfulness, but he could never get drunk. The alcohol just seemed to seep into his brother.”

Oliver Humm saw for a moment through the screen of the words to the man, but then promptly forgot what it was he understood. These were words to get lost in, not to comprehend. Across from this other man, he felt the difference in years; he felt younger, and in some intangible way, slighter. This man would never lose his voice. And then it wasn’t just the gray-green eyes that marked him as important.

“I understand,” Oliver said. He thought the response was necessary, although as soon as he said it, he saw it as thoroughly dispensable.

“What was that?”

“Oh no, I didn’t.”

Oliver looked up and saw a young, grainy movie star on the television in the bar. In the slow restaurant, the fast editing was hard to ignore. The long, greased hair might have belonged to James Spader, but Oliver couldn’t recognize the film. There were erratically paced subtitles for the deaf.
“I just didn’t hear you,” Nathan said. “Things have always seemed to slip away from me.” He undercut the melodrama in his words by flashing a nervous smile.

The man who might have been James Spader ran about, gesticulating, but despite his lips moving wildly, the black bars at the bottom of the screen remained silent. Perhaps the transliterator died mid-stroke.

“I said, ‘I understand.’”

“I don’t think I do. How old are you, Oliver?”

“Twenty-eight-ish.”

“That makes sense. I’m older. You know that. Are you otherwise employed?”

“This is it. I haven’t looked for a job in a long time.”

“Am I giving you enough to pay the rent?”

“I don’t pay rent. I’m staying with a friend.”

“How’s that going?”

“It’s temporary. Woman issues.”

“When you say that, I think menstruation, but I’m guessing that’s not your problem.” Nathan’s eyes smiled over the rim of his coffee. When he put it down, dark beads clung to the tips of his moustache. It was an image that matched his profession. He’d told Oliver he was a professor.

“She—her name’s Tess—told me to come back when I’m somebody. When I’ve found myself. Which means we’re both looking for missing persons.” Oliver maintained the mood Nathan had set of cinematic parleying. He was an expert.
Since things had ended with Tess, he’d spent a lot of his time in and out of movie theaters.

“I’m sorry.” Nathan Wallace waved his hand in the air and went on. “Very insensitive of me. I just have to wonder who’s going to take a job like this.”

“Perhaps I would,” Oliver said, making direct, sustained eye contact with Nathan for the first time since they’d met.

“Mr. Wallace,” Oliver began, reciting the speech he’d been forming as he listened to employer speak. “I’m sure you’ve had this experience. You walk up and down flights of stairs each day. It varies, from person to person, depending on where you work and where you live, whether you’re afraid of elevators or not. But everyone manages to make it up and down, automatically, up and down, without problem.” Nathan looked at his watch. He drummed his fingers on the table. Oliver noticed that the actions were all slightly fuller than they needed to be, and continued.

“But then there’s that one moment of that one day, when midflight, somewhere along the up and down, or more likely in that deciding instant on the last step when you shift modes and prepare for pure horizontal movement; there’s that moment where you snap out of the routine and think about how you’re going to make it from the step you’re on to the step above it. Your body might recover and remember to automatically go through the motions. That habit, your body’s memory, is a powerful thing. But there’s also that small possibility you might trip. You’re shaken out of the simple practice and forced to switch to manual. And then those stairs become a much steeper flight than you’ve ever imagined. You might grab the handrail. You might have a slight sense of vertigo. Climbing the sides of those
Mesoamerican pyramids, it is not the unrepentant incline that makes tourists cling statically to the side. They’re there, hugging the stone because with each step they’re forced to relearn how to walk. And, in the best way I can say it, that’s been me these last months.”

It had taken a supreme effort to compose that in his mind. Oliver had exhausted himself, and if the pitch didn’t work, he had nothing left.

“I’m glad we found each other.” Nathan said, his face obscuring his reaction. From the worn leather briefcase that had sat next to his chair the whole lunch, Nathan removed a folder, and set it on the table between them.

“Start working as soon as you can. Call me in a week and let me know how you’re progressing, but until then, happy hunting.” With everything he said, Nathan shook his head and sighed, as if displeased with the limited options available to him in the English language. Then he turned to go. “When you’re done, I got you a credit card. It’s on top of everything else in the file. Pay for lunch, leave a nice tip. File under necessary business expenses.”

“I needed this,” Oliver said.

“We all need something. Help me find my brother.”

And with that, Oliver watched as Nathan tripped over chairs and out of the restaurant. The rain had stopped, and a bright sun was sending waves of steam up from the asphalt. Nathan soon walked out of sight, lost between the upward currents.

Oliver Humm’s grin reflected in the wobbling egg yolks on his plate. He picked up his fork, but then had a second thought. He put his fork down.
He lay face-up on Michael Hopkins’ trundle bed. He’d been staying at his best friend’s apartment ever since he’d slinked away from Tess. The name entered his head, but he refused to think about it, refused to think about her, refused even to recognize the familiarity of the rolling motion his mouth made when he said it. She can’t come in, yet. He just needed a little more time.

Standing in front of the bowl in the tight space of the bathroom, he ran his unoccupied hand over his face, massaging life into the warm sleep-flesh while he peed more or less into the toilet. When he was done, he reached to take a single square of toilet paper to wipe off any residual drops, but found that Hopkins had put in a new roll. Oliver’s attempt to locate the beginning resulted in the separation of the two sheets, and a uselessly thin piece between his fingers. He abandoned it to the toilet bowl, but instead of falling straight down it drifted to the right and settled between the basin and the sink. He left it, feeling slightly guilty. It was only after he pulled up his briefs and was walking back into the living room that he noticed this underwear was made of laboratory fabric, and that rather than harmlessly absorbing his unrealized last drops of urine, the fabric forced the cold trail to cling to the inside and slowly slide down, pressed against his inner leg.

Nathan’s folder sat on the table next to the bed. It was large and worn, bound up by twine that still seemed unable to hold in the burst of papers. The file itself was a welcoming manila color. A warm tone that didn’t exist in offices anymore. It
looked like something Jimmy Carter might have had held in a picture. Oliver didn’t want to open it. He remembered what Nathan had told him:

“My brother is lying in a coma in a hospital on the Upper West Side. He was in a motor accident. When he wakes, the doctors imagine he’ll have deeply impaired functioning. Which includes severe memory loss.” The entire time he spoke, Nathan had a pen stuck in the corner of his mouth. It was memorable because he didn’t seem to need to write anything. “This is not the amnesia of Victorian novels. Amnesia is not, in any way, the right word. It always struck me as sounding more like a flowering tree standing next to some Greek temple than a serious ailment. His brain has been damaged. That is, simply, the situation.” The pen clicked with his words. “Because you will become very intimate with my family affairs, I don’t mind telling you that I have been taking care of my older brother for most of his life, in one way or another. Recently, we’d drifted apart. But there are certain inescapable obligations one has. I want you to be sitting there with me when he wakes. Until that time, you are going to create his biography. Your job would be to make an archive of his memory, and be its keeper. I want you to recreate my brother.”

Those words and the poorly-aimed toilet paper created enough accumulated guilt to overcome his morning inertia. Not for the first time he picked up the folder, gingerly opening it. Neatly paper-clipped were lists of names and dates, last known locations and charts with squares and arrows. Yellow photocopies of newspaper articles, diplomas, diaries, receipts, shopping lists, and poems were behind the directory. A page fell out that appeared to be from Nathan’s teenage journal. Oliver curled up with it on the trundle.
They had gone snorkeling together. Off a coast in the Pacific. A family vacation timed for when Abbott was visiting from college. The water had been shallow and warm. They decided to head out farther. Nathan’s sentences had a choppy and perfunctory quality. The ocean floor had dropped off below them, unexpectedly, into a dark rift. Abbott had panicked and began floundering, arms wind-milling and water shooting comically from his breathing tube. Nathan, already the stronger swimmer, towed his brother back onto the beach, where they both collapsed in the wake. He wrote about being embarrassed, about being younger and not wanting to take care of his crippled blood. About not telling the woman—what woman, Oliver wondered—not for her, but for his own dignity. He promised it would be the last time they went to the ocean.

Oliver replaced the page and closed the folder. He got back into bed and fell asleep, crying as he dreamed that he was doing exactly what he was doing, but with Tess’ body there to warm him. The deepness and vastness of realizing a man, especially one who seemed so much fuller than himself, was too daunting.

And Abbott Wallace returned to obscurity.

4

It wasn’t that Oliver didn’t want to do his job. He sincerely believed that if he worked to find Abbott, he would recover something of himself in the process. Hopkins, when he heard the logic, understood that even if it was imperfect, it served as a distraction. But nearly two weeks after his meeting with Nathan, Oliver had
fallen into a deep pit of apathy. He lied in their phone conversation, citing progress, and cashed the check he received in the mail without second thought. In Hopkins’ apartment, he could sit in isolation, thinking he was connecting to the outside world by connecting to the digital one. His inability to get over the stagnancy Tess had created in his life turned into a disinterest. He would when he needed to. For now, he was content in his gross convalescing.

So it was a surprise to everyone when Hopkins convinced him to come out for a night with the old group of friends. Oliver got to Remus’ before everyone else. He sat at the bar and talked to the proprietor. Remus was a terrible listener, but a half-decent bartender.

“Doc, I miss her.” He wasn’t sure if he meant it, but it seemed like something someone in his position would say at a bar. Oliver liked being one of those guys, talking to the bartender. It allowed him to fade into a rehearsed discourse he found comforting. His agony and apathy were channeled easily through the phrases available in bar-speak.

“I’m in the mood to splurge.”

Remus nodded and went to the back, even as the word splurge continued to ring in Oliver’s ears. Its sound violated the bar sounds, marking him as an interloper. It was ugly, vulgar and affectedly bourgeois. He decided not to talk so much, if at all; it was his own monastic vow of silence. There was too much recent trouble in trying to claim ownership of his speech. He didn’t even want it, the responsibility.

It was still early, and the oxygen bar hadn’t filled with jumpers. Low lights and labyrinthine bench configurations obscured his friends’ usual table. Remus came
back from the storeroom with a mason jar. A bartender, Oliver considered, is more difficult to conceive as someone greater than their function than those in most other professions. The bartender was the quiet, enabling force behind a personal, individualized ritual. Oliver didn’t know, after years of loitering around the place, what Remus dreamed of. He decided not to ask this time. He looked around again, his eyes straying to the worn pool table with the patches of warm color. Romulus founded Rome, and Remus this other thing.

“Havasupai Falls, bottom of the Gran Crandyon. 70%.” Remus, that mumbler, took the mason-jar in his hands and wiped it off on his spotty apron. Oliver took it, and pulled a mask from his pocket. It was a small, plastic apparatus that covered the nose and mouth, with a thin tube that hung out. He’d nicked it from the hospital, when he’d visited his father. Slinging the elastic of the mask over his ears, Oliver slipped into the device, embracing the safety of the tight, sticky seal—from old occasions and the old sweat they produced—and fastened the tube to the nipple on the top of the jar. He pinched the spigot, and inhaled.

“Fresh water. Spraying, not sitting. Sand, full of iron. Hint of sunscreen, hint of the bodies underneath. Jasmine?” His voice came from far away. Remus was already moving away to the next customer.

The concentrated air went straight to the top of Oliver’s head and kept on rising, sending him drifting up to the ceiling. He communed with the dead of Pompeii, the holes in the backs of their craniums where their superheated brains blew out their skulls. He didn’t need Abbott Wallace anymore. He was here, alive amidst the low lights and water stains from which he saw the establishment with fresh eyes.
The spots of spongy subfusc glittered on the carpet. Somebody had scratched ‘What am I doing here?’ on the ceiling with a knife. He reached a hand down into his pants, swiping his finger in the crevice between his testicle and leg. He wrote, in shining print, ‘Just living. No more, no les,’ but his finger ran dry before he could finish the word. Oliver blinked, and turned to head to his table. There was a woman already sitting there.

“This is our table.” Oliver said, lacking conviction. And proper enunciation.

“Do you always refer to yourself royally?”

His eyes slid down her body—like a movie camera, like a man, or like both—to rest on her right thigh, where her leg abruptly stopped.

“Are you feeling ok?” she asked.

Oliver felt the extra oxygen still flowing through his soul.

“No.” He thought about it some more. “Oh my god, I’m really not. There’s too much of me and too little of you…”

He watched as her stump pulsed at the same rate as the vein in his ear.

“I’m waiting for my friends. Can I join you?” he asked, although he already had. She put down the book she was reading. He caught one line in it before the pages had closed: “A man screaming is not a dancing bear.”

“My name’s Oliver Humm, after so many Humms before me.” It wasn’t the air making him talk; it was her.

“Good name,” she said.

She took a breath from her own jar. It looked like something off the tap. She exhaled into Oliver’s face. Tokyo? Her features were strong, on the verge of
masculine. She was, oddly, a blond. She, nameless, wasn’t good looking, but she was attractive. He was almost positive it was Tokyo.

“Tell me your name,” he said.

A crowd of jumpers walked in. In suits and dresses they stayed in a tight group, eyes cast down at jagged angles, and walked to the back of the joint through a thick black curtain, uneasily. Oliver, though he used to despise them, identified with the jumpers more and more. They were the oxygen junkies. Disenfranchised or disillusioned, they’d given up their stake in the grand narrative; it no longer mattered what was said about them or what kind of legacy they left behind. For that, Oliver was jealous. It seemed so easy, to sit around and blast the brain with pure oxygen.

“Crazy fucks,” she said. “Why can’t they come in the back entrance. We don’t need to see that.”

When they were all out of sight, the bar exhaled collectively. Oliver, still buzzing, thought he could see the sudden outpouring of carbon dioxide from all those relieved, fish-like lips, and reflexively put his mask over his mouth to breathe.

“I’m meeting a friend soon,” she said. “But while I finish this jar, I’ll tell you my name if you tell me about some of the Humms before you.”

Oliver heard his own words played back to him, squinted, and the skin in-between his eyebrows wrinkled up to form a near-perfect question mark.

“I just don’t think you’ll be able to,” she said. “I’m curious. Start talking.”

And he did.

“Everybody has eight genetic great grandparents-”
“Perhaps not everybody,” she said, laughing at him but not unkindly. “So many people are incomplete these days. But I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“Perhaps not everybody. But I had eight of them. And each one of them killed themselves. At different times in their lives, by different means, and I think for different reasons. My father’s father’s father ate a shotgun. His wife, impregnated only weeks before the red stain on the kitchen wall appeared, bled quietly to death in her birthing bed. She refused to give up the child, but she would not let the doctor sew her up. When I think of her, I can only picture that saturated mattress. It must have been so heavy, waterlogged with her. Then my father’s mother’s mother. When she found out she had cancer, she pulled out her lawn chair, downed a bottle of Quaaludes and sat out on her Palm-Springs porch drinking martinis for the rest of the afternoon. I remember hearing that word as a child when I wasn’t supposed to, Quaaludes, and it sounded magical in my mouth when I whispered it secretly under the covers. We only found out years later that the oncologist had told her it most likely wasn’t fatal. She just didn’t want to deal with it. And she loved her head of hair. She had never married my father’s mother’s father, who she only ever referred to as “That Good-for-Nothing Jew,” but he drowned in a bathtub. That’s all I know about him. My mother’s father’s father and my mother’s father’s mother killed themselves together. They were happy, from what I can gather. Which is maybe more than the rest of them. One of them got sick, though they never told anybody which one. It didn’t matter. They rented a rowboat, and pushed straight into the ocean. The boat was found, washed up on some beach on the other side of the world. Or just down the coast a little ways, in Jersey. My mother’s mother’s father, I think
he impaled himself, or walked in front of an oncoming trolley, but I’ll always be the most proud of my mother’s mother’s mother. She was the first woman to jump off of the Empire State Building. It was reported in all the papers. A child who’d been standing on the observation deck of the building said he saw her smile, and then there was an absence of air where she’d been standing, some slight vacuum. When he was older he found my grandmother and told her. It was because of her that he’d never been afraid of great heights. I owe them all something. If just one had committed suicide before passing on their stuff, everything would have stopped. I never knew any of them.”

“Only you,” she said.

“What?” Oliver was suddenly self-conscious.

“Not everything would have stopped; only you. A grandparent and a parent, by definition. But you’re talking about yourself.”

“I guess that’s right,” he said.

“That was just a story about you. Which is not surprising, really. I need to go, but here’s my card.”

She squeezed against him to get out of the booth.

“It’s the only kind of story there is.”

He looked at the card. Cara Freece. He turned his gaze to the stub. He saw a tattoo peeking from the very bottom, where the knee-joint might have been. A tiny, sad angel. Underneath the image he thought it said, in some sans-serif typeface, “Fat Charlie the archangel sloped into the room.”
“Incidents and accidents,” said Oliver, who knew names still meant something, even since they’d lost their old magic, even since he’d been unable to use them.

“What was that?” she said.

“Do you know Abbott Wallace?” he said.

She blew out the last strains of foreign oxygen from her lungs. “Past tense. I knew him. And that’s uncanny.”

He knew he’d seen the name before. She was from the folder.

“I’m rebuilding him,” Oliver said.

“Amen and hallelujah,” said Cara Freece, and she was gone.

As the door closed behind her, Oliver was swept by a wave of guilt. He knew nothing about Abbott; “Nothing new with Abbott-somebody,” he’d say to Hopkins when they talked in the evenings, and Hopkins would reply with, “Guess he’s back to Abbott-nobody.” He would try harder, and not for himself but for the Wallaces. In Cara’s appearance he saw Abbott’s hand stretching out from that hospital bed.

Looking around the empty bar, he muttered, for effect, “I will find this man.” It worked in the films he watched and re-watched, but not here. Embarrassed, even though no one heard him besides the sharp-eared Remus, Oliver sank into his air and reaffirmed his vow to keep closed his mouth. These were loan words; they did not belong to him. He perked up when his friends arrived, but it wasn’t until the next morning that he forgot the sensation of his mouth feeling dirty. Like it had been rented out. Or prostituted.
5

Things happened between Oliver’s first and second visits to the bar over the course of that summer, when the heat seemed to sit on the earth like a hostile layer of dust. He tried creating a timeline, charting Abbott’s movements over the last decades. But after college, after he’d lived in New York, it got difficult. He was in England for some time, then he was on a ship, then, or maybe before then, he resurfaced in Thailand. He had no profession; he took jobs where he could. Following him this way proved difficult, so Oliver turned to the directory. He tried calling one of the first names on the list, Howard Ozark, who was listed in Nathan’s neat print as a ‘childhood friend.’ He’d been distinctly unfriendly, and Oliver had hung up. Or perhaps, in retrospect, the man had been pleasant, if reticent; it was the ideas, the terrain, that had proved inimical. Oliver lost Cara’s card, probably on purpose. So Abbott returned to the file, his den of esoter, and Oliver remained lost, floating between cinemas and parks, deeply absorbed in his private mental life. It was from some briny depth within that he studied the people around him, trying to relearn what he’d lost. But he didn’t participate; he was interested only in watching. It was with serious reservations then, when at last his friends managed to coax him out once again to the house of Remus. He was drawn by the allure of the oxygen. He looked forward to the dizzying lack of responsibility.

“There were times of long silence in Oliver Humm’s life, punctuated by accidental eloquences and misguided martyrdoms,” TB said. This time, he was the
last to arrive. Oliver hated feeling late if he thought events and conversations had taken place without him present.

Oliver sat at their usual table, joining Hopkins, TB and Celso. TB offered a hit from his jar. His name was Gideon Something, but nobody had used his real title in years. Deathly pale, chauvinistic, vain and flamboyant, in public he would sometimes affect a cough and a limp. Oliver knew there was a real, naked creature buried deep in TB, beneath the cynicism and put-on airs. People like him did not truly exist anymore. Those people were purely of fiction. But that was why Oliver was devoted to him. TB was never too far from his thoughts, the Adonis who spent his week as a salesclerk and his weekends leading unauthorized tours of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their other companion was nearly opposite. Celso was shorter, browner, Spanish, with deep pockmarks. He was not prepossessing, but was important to the group because of it. He spent his time waiting tables, but ran home at the end of each day to follow his passion. He’d experiment with recipes, tweaking and disassembling, and publish his findings on his food blog, Epicuriouser and Curiouser. The name was TB’s, and the friends supported Celso’s project, despite their nonspecific distrust of the internet. The site had started with a large audience, but when the economy unraveled, people found that they could no longer afford the luxury ingredients necessary to replicate Celso’s creations. It was this steep drop in popularity that led to a dark time of eventual masochisms for Celso. But one person stayed with him. She went by the username OutoftheFryingPan. Every outlandish culinary feat that Celso manufactured was reproduced immediately by the Frying Pan, and a link had formed between the two. Nobody thought any good
would come out of the romance, but they were happy for him. It was, in a strange way, genuine. There’s not much to say about Michael Hopkins. He was Oliver’s closest friend and the stable center of the group, but he was too distant, too removed to be thought of as an equal.

The night progressed. It was getting late at Remus’, and Celso was finishing a story about his mystery reader when the door opened.

“Cara Freece,” TB said. “Come to have a breath with us?”

And there she was, once again.

“I left my jacket.”

She walked in her way over to the booth, grabbing the unaccounted article from under Celso. No one had noticed it. Oliver was surprised to see that she moved about with a simple wood cane. He hadn’t picked up on it the last time. TB settled back into the worn leather seat once she’d left. Oliver saw that they’d all straightened when she’d come over, and were slowly deflating.

“How do you know Cara?” Oliver asked.

TB, always casual, said, “She’s just one of those people.”

“We only happened to meet in here. And she knows Abbott.”

“That’s not surprising. You don’t get out much,” said TB.

“I don’t do anything much, since Tess,” Oliver said. He was tired, and realized it as he found himself, out of character, talking about his private life. “And I tell Nathan that I’ve made progress, that I’ve found out about his brother. But there’s nothing, because I don’t have the energy. Or will. I just don’t care who he was.
How am I supposed to figure out someone else, when it’s been such a long time since I’ve felt like myself.”

Hopkins cleared his throat. Oliver thought it was for him to stop talking, but noticed that the entire group had lowered their eyes. A group of jumpers left, huddled in the same formation as they always maneuvered, seeking anonymity. But unlike earlier in the evening, when they’d come in, some now sported silly, vacant lips, drooping as if the nerves had simply died. Others seemed unable to control the strength with which their black shoes hit the carpet. Oliver had a sudden compulsion to join them, to give that last bit of himself up completely, but they were out the door.

“Anyway,” Hopkins said. “Let’s give them a couple minutes distance, then I’m ready to head out.”

Oliver, as he moved to use the bathroom, noticed not for the first time how Celso’s face looked like an unforgiving hodgepodge. Unripe and old fruit thrown in a pile to make a fragile composition. The pores on his large nose made the organ look like a strawberry. He was a weathered Arcimboldo. But when Oliver looked around the room, for a moment every person seemed composed of rotting produce and household bric-a-brac, just barely sticking together. Perhaps with Celso it was simply more transparent.

Remus left markers in the bathroom to encourage controlled graffiti, and as he urinated, Oliver unsheathed a purple and brought it to his nose. The enthusiastic motion along with poor coordination left a wide mark in the space above his lip and below his right nostril. If it were a lipstick, it would have a name like Grape Comfort, he thought. Wordless, he left without writing anything.
On the way out, the group all saluted sloppily to Remus. Celso managed a “G’night doc.” The lights of the city were brighter than those of the bar, so it was while squinting that they patted each other’s backs and walked different ways down the block. Oliver followed Hopkins while trying to stay at an even pace, anticipating when they were going to turn. On the avenue he quickly got distracted: two different streetlamps were casting two different versions of himself on the sidewalk. Sprouting at angles from his feet, as he walked the shadows got closer, and as they merged an anxiety began to build in his lungs. The legs of the shadows overlapped. Then the waists. Somebody else passed by and Oliver shuddered as an additional shade darkened the picture. There were three shoulders where there had been four. He understood that both shadows belonged to him, but an unaccountable dread made him feel as though a dark and foul presence were nearing him. And it was, perhaps, scarier that it was somehow a part of himself. Oliver stopped. The noise that accompanied the changing of a traffic light hid his movement from Hopkins, who kept walking. It was only when Oliver started walking backwards, smiling, that his companion turned around and noticed. But before the shadows had fully diverged, Oliver veered too close to the stairs of an apartment, and stumbled over something lying out from a stoop. Oliver turned. Sprawled mainly in darkness on the steps of a brownstone lay Cara Freece. Oliver couldn’t see anything wrong, but knew from the expression on her face that something was. Hopkins was standing next to him.

“I’ll call the ambulance,” Hopkins said. “Fucking jumpers.”
It was only when they were moving her onto the trolley and Cara flinched for the first time, that Oliver noticed the splintered wood cane that had been driven into the stump of her leg.

6

From the hospital window, the city looked peaceful. Maybe it was. Maybe it was only that the window reflected the warm glow of the room at St. Andrews, projecting it onto the landscape. Oliver remembered old pictures he’d seen. The city of the movies from the 70’s and 80’s. People looked at this new city, this glass and steel modern metropolis and thought how much better it was. Better than the concrete days. But he knew the jumpers were out there. And that was the problem, Oliver thought. Maybe the city changed, but it’s the same damn people.

Cara was in a bed and Hopkins in the chair next to it. A floral patterned curtain separated them from the unseen person on the other side of the room. Cara interrupted Oliver’s thoughts.

“I met Abbott around,” she said. “I don’t remember when. He was part of the old New York crowd, but older than me. I don’t know anything deep about him. Because you can’t about very many people. They’ll know something deep in return. And then you’ve given out too much of yourself, or something. The rest is stuff everyone knows.”

“Like?”

“Like stuff,” she said. “That’s your job.”
“I don’t know anything,” he said.

“The guy was wild. Very up and down. Sometimes he’d hold the attention of the entire room. Sometimes he’d sulk in a corner.” Oliver had known some of this from Nathan’s description, but was surprised to hear it come from Cara. As if he didn’t expect Abbott to occupy a space in the real world. Hearing two corroborating accounts made his subject startlingly three dimensional. Abbott existed.

“Moody, I guess is what it was,” she said. “There was one time when I was around he got into a fight. It was at our usual place, this gallery owned by a friend. It was a farce. Abbott wasn’t a big guy, and this other one was huge. I think it started as a joke, but each one refused to step down, and we watched in amazement as it got more and more serious. It might have involved that woman, but whatever it was over, he ended up getting massacred, and we all just watched. By the end he was crying on the floor, repulsive, spread over bloody, white tiles. We’d never seen someone bleed on our turf before. It was like consecrated ground after that. He had marked our territory. If I had to give you one detail about Abbott, it would be that ugly forcefulness. I think that was part of the attraction.”

“For you?”

“You made up that whole thing about your grandparents,” she said. “Didn’t you.”

“Yes.”

Oliver put his hands in his back pockets to advertize his mild shame, and his left middle finger struck something metal. It was a Magic Hat bottle cap that must
have gone through the wash in his jeans. He remembered why he kept it: it said, Be Here Now.

“You’re hunting down information about Abbott Wallace and you don’t know anything,” Cara said.

Hopkins snorted from out of the sweatshirt he had pulled over his head. Oliver had thought he was asleep.

“I think it was attractive to his fiancé,” she continued. “I don’t remember her name. They were like Bonnie and Clyde. Except they didn’t kill people or rob banks.”

Oliver couldn’t think in what way they could be like Bonnie and Clyde then, but nodded knowingly. He was preoccupied, running through the names in the folder by memory. There was no mention of a fiancé.

“Or maybe they did. Kill people and rob banks,” Cara said. “But that’s all I’ve got.”

“How did it happen?” Oliver asked, looking at her bandaged thigh.

“I didn’t hear them. They came up behind and started beating me.”

“I meant the leg. In the first place. Did you fight in the… conflict? Somewhere in the Middle East?”

Cara looked down and smiled at the bandaged stump, as if they shared an inside joke.

“I walked in front of a car. I don’t think it was an accident, but maybe it was. People assumed I wasn’t happy, which of course had nothing to do with it. Why would getting hit by a car make me happier? I just didn’t want to be some character
in a story. I woke up one morning and realized I wanted to get a longer description than ‘blond and beautiful’ in the big book. I mean, how many lines would you get?”

A woman opened the curtain. She wasn’t the doctor who’d seen them earlier. She stood looking at Cara’s leg.

“I know you were considering prosthesis, but this seems like taking it a little far,” the new woman said.

Cara snorted and then covered her mouth in embarrassment. They embraced in the awkward fashion allowed by the oversized bed. Hopkins, more alert, motioned with his thumb that it was time for them to leave. This must have been the roommate Cara had called. Oliver silently elected himself spokesman.

“Looks like you’re in good hands now. We’re going to go. Feel better, and thanks for your help,” he said. It was more officious than he meant. Talk less. Talk less.

Cara didn’t say anything to them as they pulled the curtain aside and left, but walking away, Oliver heard:

“How do you know those guys?”

“I don’t.”

7

Hopkins was gone when Oliver woke. The ceiling fan rocked gently above him, whirring pleasantly, and the waves of air reminded him of the dreams he’d had
of flying. He inhaled, and thought Remus should bottle it: New York morning and hard wood floors; undercurrents of sandalwood aftershave; books, old and new.

Outside the windows, a plane flew over the city, and he instinctively ducked his head an inch. He’d never been on a plane. Since he could remember, the small metal glints in the sky terrified him. Nothing held them up but communal faith. He had convinced himself a long time ago that he was filled with an insatiable wanderlust, but could not imagine it being satisfied in the skies. Oliver wondered who the first person was to step off a flight and experience jet lag. Did they think, for a moment, that something deeply wrong had occurred? That they had been moving too fast for our bodies?

He thought about the previous night, about Cara, as he stood in front of the bathroom mirror. He hadn’t meant to lie about his family. It was a story he’d worked out in head before, for his own pleasure, but never told anyone about. As far as he knew, nobody in his family had killed themselves; they all clung stubbornly, ungraciously in the end, to this world. But within him there was a deep resentment. He remembered with envy one of his friends growing up, a girl from an Indian family who was perpetually embarrassed by her entire extended blood. They were always around her, showing up when they didn’t need to, and always, prominently different. They forced a foreign history on her, with a foreign dress and food, an entire culture that extended to the dance lessons they made her take. She griped about the imposition, the “colonization” she had called it, until he went to one of her recitals. He watched, rapturously, as she moved about the stage, a colorful and angry storm, her wrists finding ways to move that were unknown to him. He saw her differently
after that. But his family had nothing to give. They had nothing anymore except their pride for their small businesses, their mortgages and their casserole recipes. So Oliver killed them off. It wasn’t a lie he’d told Cara. It was the life he chose to live.

But this was easy to push to the back of his mind. He was far more preoccupied with Cara’s parting words. He looked up into the mirror. What did they mean, in books or in the movies, when they said someone had a wretched face? Because the sounds of that word matched his visage now. How many lines would he get? No more than one: “Stolid Oliver, in front of the mirror, wretched and… listless,” if he were lucky. He crossed his arms over his chest, resting each one on the opposite shoulder, and rubbed. It replicated, cheaply, another’s touch. He knew Cara had, in some way, been right. Narratives looked poorly upon the apathetic and the paraplegics, the static and the dull. He left the mirror and went back to the window. Something had changed, in this third millennium. None of the miniature people below him had stories. He watched, emptying his mind, but then realized how quiet the room was when it wasn’t filled with the enormity of his thoughts. Tess bubbled up to fill the silence, not unlike the small burst of air a fisherman sees, the only evidence of the expiration of some great ocean mammal.

No, he was not nobody, Tess. He had lost some color, some substance, but there was a way here, a path that Oliver saw to write himself back into existence. He understood things clearly, with fresh eyes. He could be restored by the reluctant resurrection of Abbott Wallace. He remembered the illustrated books of mythology he’d fallen into as a child; he knew as well as anyone else that it was the mandate of the gods to create men. But if he could come close to it here, there’d be something of
the divine in his work. Like one of those mortals drinking from the sacred spring, he would regain himself. Oliver would write Abbott back into existence, and in return the sleeping man would give him back his voice.

He looked out the window again, pleased with himself: “Stoic, solid Oliver stood looking out the window, with a new perspective, a new initiative. He sneered silently at the people below, filled with a new loftiness, but it quickly changed to dizziness. There were too many nameless, shapeless people in this city; it was overwhelming. And Oliver knew then that he needed to return home.”
Part Two
The Apocrypha

8

As the Metro-North train rattled through the roots of Manhattan, Oliver saw himself squeezing back into his provincial uterus, unbirthed as the amniotic waters of the East River rolled under the Bronx-bound bridge.

“Ooo, how symbolic,” he said to himself, barely audible. “How peachy.”

Travel, occupying the space in-between places, always left him lonely, and Oliver was in the habit of providing himself a soundtrack. So as the train rattled through an abandoned version of Yonkers, he slowly eased out the grinding of the wheels and his fellow passengers on their cell phones. From the silence, the first strains of guitar drifted through the stillness, then a lonely voice: “If I were a carpenter, and you were a lady…” The seats that were vacant around him looked empty; the seats that were taken looked emptier. Oliver imagined how he would have looked in this film, a medium close up on his face against the window, maybe a little blurred with the grays and greens of the suburbs behind, “Save my love for loneliness, save my love for sorry, I’ve given you my onliness, come give me your tomorrow.” The camera would follow his gaze as he’d notice the words someone had scratched out in the seat in front of him:

There’s a Way back to Paradise. Get off this Train!
Reaction shot. Maybe some voiceover narration from Oliver: “Hopkins said that when the world ends, everyone’s a man with a sign on a corner,” or something that made equally little sense but was filled with gravitas.

Oliver’s mother was waiting for him at the station. The air smelled faintly, sweetly rotten, like apples that been left unpicked, left to curdle on the curbs of suburbia. The apples became cider inside her inside. He smiled when he saw the way that the giant elms and oaks filtered the light. Light here was particular. Memories of being small and not knowing.

“Hey.” She was older, thinner, but not in a way he thought looked good.

“Don’t I know you?”

They both smiled and hugged for a long time. Oliver thought he saw an armadillo, and worried about leprosy, but then he recognized it was a little boy with a pointed little nose. The anxiety lingered, but it was an unease he’d been expecting the whole train ride. His childhood had been filled with random terrors and visions of disquietude. And those things don’t just disappear. It was silent in the car. His mother pointed.

“They tore down that giant beech. It was infested with some kind of beetle they were worried would spread.”

Oliver looked out the window opposite where she was gesturing.

“I don’t remember anything there,” he said. “And I don’t think I’d know the difference between a beech and other kinds of trees.”

“The leaves are always toothed. Either partially or completely,” his mother said.
It made him sad. More so than the old neighborhood that refused to be recognized. He could name few trees. Fewer birds. As if, to chastise the prodigal son for his absence, nature closed itself to him, pulled out of his reach. Oliver’s mother began to sing quietly to herself, but it was loud in the car.

“Winnie the Pooh, Winnie the Pooh, tubby little cubby all stuffed with fluff, he’s Winnie the Pooh, Winnie the Pooh…”

Another armadillo by the side of the road turned out to be an election sign for a county judge seat. Oliver exhaled with relief. Armadillos on the road, when they’re startled, jump up. But they can’t jump very well. Just to fender height. Oliver had seen it only once, on a family trip a long time ago in Arizona, but it had stuck with him. The animal, already so awkward, launched itself straight into the air, all its limbs extended, its face arched to the sky. In an instant, the animal’s entire body was flattened against the grill. But it was the most sacred death he knew.

“La dee dada silly old bear.”

No, there were no armadillos. It was impossible. But some of the things he imagined as a child still had to roam these streets.

“I appreciate this so much, mom,” he said.

“You know we’re always here for you,” she said.

And he did know it, although it was of limited comfort.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been in this place. All of a sudden, out on my own,” he said.

“Do you think she was seeing someone else?” she asked.
Stop sign. They turned their heads together to check for cars. Like watchers of a tennis match. It also meant she didn’t have to see his still-yellow eyes.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said.

It had always been easier to reduce things for his parents. They liked things simple; and in turn he appreciated their blind sympathy. They pulled up the driveway.

However long he’d been away, Oliver found it difficult to be in his house and think of it as just a place. He knew he’d never be able to describe it accurately to someone else. It was like the first time Tess asked what his parents looked like. They just were.

Oliver walked quietly up the stairs. His feet remembered being young, moving carefully,concertedly from heel to toe, careful not to wake the house. Not the people, but the walls. At the top, he peered into his parents’ room. He saw his father through the mirrors of two partly open doors, standing in the white bathroom with the checker floor, staring into the mirror. As if about to shave, he used his large hands to pick up his cheeks, stretch his upper lip, rub his throat. His hands, Oliver thought, will always look large. The sound of water, and his father immersed his face in the small and perfect slough formed by the cradle of his palms. Oliver walked in.

“You look great, dad” he said.

They hugged for a long time.
It was in an old office, one his mother had never used, that Oliver established himself. It was on the top floor, down the hall from his bedroom and bathroom, with a giant window that looked over the hill. On the bulletin board he tacked the three-page list of contacts. The notes Nathan had given him, accompanied by his own meager findings, were spread over the desk. The large bookcase was dominated by a 33 volume set of Thompson’s Miscellany. It was in these books, when he was a child, that he’d discovered the meanings of things.

The house itself, in Oliver’s adulthood, seemed small. It hadn’t been at one point. It was built into a steep hill, at the bottom of which, in the valley, ran a river paralleled by train tracks. It took him only a few hours to once again forget the combined sound of the water and the locomotives.

The house was such that upon entering, you were on the middle floor, with the kitchen and dining areas. From there you could work your way up or down to other living spaces. On each floor, one side of the rooms had giant windows that looked onto the gully, and in front of these Oliver fell in love with the way the water wound over the earth, and the faces of so many people that came back and forth on the trains. The other side had windows that didn’t open, obscured by soil. Most visitors thought they were a flaw in the design, but Oliver’s father had demanded they be put in. Oliver had spent days of his youth sitting in an overstuffed chair, watching a family of voles’ lives unfold. When Papa Vole ate the youngest of the four-vole litter, Pantagruel, it was the first time he’d sat down with his parents and cried about life’s futility. He never told them of the vicious glee he felt when, late one night, he
watched as the three remaining pups enacted revenge, slitting their father’s throat with sharpened needles from the fir in the backyard. With furtive hops they collected pebbles in clenched paws, and slipped them through the hole in Papa Vole’s neck. When he was bloated and distended, they dragged him out of the burrow by their teeth, and left him in a tepid pond that sometimes formed in the crack where the driveway met the garage. It was between these two windows that Oliver had grown up.

Oliver wandered around now, touching the arms of chairs and staring at empty corners. Somewhere on a lower floor, he found a crate of records. Wavy colors flowed from one cover to the other, spilling into the room. Some of the first naked women he had ever seen were still there, smiling to see their old friend, their admirer. The player hadn’t worked, even when he was a child, but Oliver still gingerly placed a vinyl on the spindle. He sang something that Joni Mitchell might have sung. He got distracted by lyrics on the back of one album.

“Tell me my life is about to begin, tell me that I’m a hero.”

He fell asleep, sprawled on the old carpet that was allowed only on a floor guests wouldn’t see. The room expanded, and Oliver sat down at the grand piano. He started at the eighty-eighth key and worked his way down, index fingers from both hands skipping back and forth over each other as he plunked left. One octave. Two. When it was within his range, he whistled two notes above the piano, harmonizing downwards. Two and a half octaves later, he dropped out. He lost track of the notes, now shimmering and defined only by the black keys around them, continuing past what he knew was the proper number of keys. Unable to reach from
the bench, he stood up and walked down the piano, feet stepping over one another in an echo of his fingers. Squeezing through a doorway, he found himself in a room he didn’t recognize. Oliver’s neck began to hurt from staying bent and bobbing. He almost tripped over a pill bottle. Turning his head for a moment, he saw that the room behind him was filled with similar bottles, orange with white caps, and only through the opaque labels that all claimed to be owned by M. Humm did Oliver notice the variations in color and shape. Through another doorway, Oliver was in a short hall. The floor was lined on both sides with wastebaskets, and they seemed to be filled with primordial ooze, pling plang. Or semen, pling plang. Or clam chowder, pling plang. The kind he didn’t like: New England, pling plang. He recognized this vision. This was some version of where he’d come from. Poking through the surface film of every briny tub a half-developed baby sported, some angry and thrashing but others content and paddling, like a tableau from It’s a Small World. These are the true bowels of the house, Oliver thought.

A rope ladder swung down, hitting Oliver’s back. From above, he heard someone shout. Must have been Fat Charlie the Archangel. Who sounded a lot like his mother. With one hand he felt behind him and gripped the loose rung. The other hand remained trapped, traipsing bottomward. Even after he lifted himself up, which necessitated both hands, his feet managed to make a few last grappled crashing chords before his entire body was on the ladder. Hoisted, he looked down only once, and freed a hand to wave back at a hundred thousand waving, cheering fetuses.

“So many me’s,” he said, just on the verge of exiting his dream.
Once he was through the trapdoor and in the kitchen, Oliver’s mother slammed it close and bolted the lock. She wiped the errant grease off on her jeans, which immediately got lost among the other stains of motherhood.

“Thought you were going to be late for dinner.”

10

Oliver’s sister was long gone, married and long-absent, so when they ate, Oliver and his parents filled only three sides of the rectangular table. The result was that they looked like a sitcom family, with no one’s back to the camera.

Son: You keep some strange things down in the lower rooms.

*The studio audience laughed.*

Father: Pass the potatoes, please?

Mother: Here you are. And how was work?

Father: Just fine.

Son: Publishing anything interesting?

Father: Not particularly. We could use more good fiction. The industry wouldn’t be suffering if we had the books. I’m still waiting for you to hand me the great American novel, Ollie.

Son: I can’t write anymore.

Mother: If you want to talk about Tess, you know we’re here.

Father: Jesus, Joan, if he wants, he’ll talk about it. Don’t nag the kid.
The son looked momentarily confused. He didn’t think his mother’s name was Joan.

He didn’t think his father said nag.

Son: In the paper the other day, this computer scientist, Thaddeus Hall, he’s in San Francisco, and he’s racing against time to upload his consciousness to a computer. As he’s getting older his work is slowing down. His colleagues don’t think he’s going to make it, but the technology’s not that far away. He’ll have missed immortality by, what in the great scheme of the world would be a split second.

Mother: Oliver…

Father: We try not to talk about those kinds of things at the table.

The son had forgotten. He’d grown up in a house that forbade the name of death as the one safeguard against it.

Son: He’s the only one trying. The first since the old rulers thought that they could live forever by drinking the blood of virgins.

Mother: Makes for poor dinner conversation.

There was uproarious laughter from the audience. The son stared out at them, not comprehending what was so funny. Or why a studio audience was watching him eat.

Had he woken from his dream?

Father: Why don’t you tell us about your new job, instead?

Son: I don’t like how when I come home, however old I am, we fall into the same stale patterns. Stuffy guidelines we wrote before I remember.

The son, about to continue, first looked at his mother’s face. He saw in it the great destruction of which he was capable. He shut his mouth, and the teeth coming
together made an outlandish karate-chop pop. The audience laughed louder than ever, but he refused to acknowledge them. They would not get satisfaction from him.

Son: Did you get my emails?

Mother: Why are you talking so loud?

Father: We read them. We know what your job is. It’s more an issue of understanding it.

*The chicken seemed to expand in the son’s throat. It was difficult for him to speak.*

Son: Tomorrow morning I get serious. Begin to find out who Abbott Wallace was.

*A sudden smack on the outside-facing windows made the son turn his head too quickly, so that he immediately knew it would be sore the next morning. Standing there was a little boy who had run into the glass. Not dazed at all, he took a couple steps backwards, unsure of his footing and charged the window again. The son saw the boy had no eyes. Just smooth skin where they might have been. The studio audience applauded loud enough to match their unbridled laughter. The parents failed to notice any of it. This was a familiar character for the son. A childhood companion or childhood enemy he’d left behind.*

Son: It’s been a long day. I think I need sleep.

*The son brought his plate to the sink but left it there without rinsing it. As he walked up two flights of stairs to the top floor and down a hall, the eye-less boy followed, deciding at uneven intervals to throw himself against the windows. The son was not unnerved by the act itself so much as by the thought that inside the house, with the lights on, they were highly visible to anything in the dark. At least he didn’t have to worry about that with the boy, he thought, quickly looking at the stretched-over*
sockets. Here was the son’s room. Before entering it, he turned to the window and held out his arms as if to say, “I left you, but I have been damaged too. I don’t need to suffer anymore.” He unbuckled his belt, one hand mindlessly groping around his crotch as he thought about the last time he’d been aroused by Tess. It had been months ago, and things had been simple. She had worn a sundress that seemed made to slip easily off her shoulders. Quickly stripping and throwing the articles of the day into a pile, the boy’s thumping turned into the rhythmic noises of his childhood, like the train and the stream in the valley. He decided, in this house, that he could not keep up the struggle of shutting out the world of his youth. He had returned, and there was no more running. The son got into bed and pulled the covers over his head, and everything abruptly stopped.

When Oliver woke the next morning, he’d forgotten about his decision from the previous night. It had made sense, in the darkness, the call to action. But now Cara’s words felt distant again. The terrors from his childhood that still occupied the house, those reminders of growing old and of perishability, meant nothing to his sleep-filled brain. Today he would watch a movie. He would stuff his head with cotton balls. And that would be enough.

He had gotten into the shower before reaching a wet hand to turn on a light. On the counter, sitting next to each other, were a case for his retainer and an electric shaver, the accoutrements of different ages contending for supremacy. His eyes woke
up, then his neck. When he had almost finished rinsing off the suds, his hand lingered around his penis. The thoughtless hesitation gave way to brute intention, and soon he was masturbating frantically, water bouncing off his back to form an aura of spray around his hunched form. As the pace quickened he caught sight of what must have been his reflection in the tiles of the wall. His face was tightened, in a grimace, and his useless left hand was clenched outward, splaying fingers that looked like someone had wrenched the talons off a large bird and glued them on backwards. When he came, he took a step forward and turned around, panting. The water ran down his sensitive front. As if he were now the reflection, he saw himself moments earlier, crazed and sexual. That was not me. I am nothing carnal, he told himself. He took his finger and wrote on the steamed wall: where have I been? He rubbed it out. The glass steamed up again, and he wrote, over where the other words had been: how many lines would I get? And so Oliver found himself, quite suddenly awake.

Precisely and perfunctorily he finished the shower, dressed himself, and sat down in the office. He made a scribble in the upper right corner to make sure the pen on the desk worked. The trial mark looked like the blip of a heart monitor. Or an infinity sign.

12

“I was a bartender on the Pearl Queen for three years before I met Able Kane. It started as a way to see the world. And then it became where I was. I think people, at least my parents, but other people too looked down on me for it, with the degree,
with this brain. That’s not ego, it’s quantifiable. But I like being with people. I get
to spend my time, my days… I mean I get to make money talking to people, serving
them drinks, being on the ocean. I don’t need to tell you what that’s like. You sound
like someone who knows things. The open sea is not really something in itself.
Boundless water is the source of thought. Like death. Like, I don’t know, space.
Great, incomprehensible things that force us to look inward because there’s no
possible way to look out. I don’t think I need to tell you what that’s like. Between
that and working with people, it makes a real difference. And there are some
interesting folk that travel on ocean liners. Not cruise ships. Don’t make that
mistake. But a luxury ocean liner.

“Able was hired to do a nightly magic show. We’d had a magician before,
Alonzo Magnifique, but he was old and sloppy. He liked children. Some people
whispered that perhaps he liked them too much, but I don’t think that was the issue. I
want to say he stopped believing in his own magic. That he just got tired. Whatever
the company thought it was, they gave him a generous retirement package and we
found ourselves on the seas without a conjurer. And the cabaret singers, the standup
comedian, the rest of the crew who had no obligations to entertain, all lost some of
their shine.

“From the beginning, and I mean truly, from his first steps on the Queen, we
knew that Able was the real deal. He wasn’t a hustler, in no way some charlatan. He
wasn’t a stage poser or a kids performer. He was real, and on top of that he was an
elegant, gracious human being. When he wasn’t giving a show, he’d walk around the
ship, almost always in a black turtleneck, ready to pull candies from children’s ears.
Flowers from midair for their mothers. A gold coin for the father. He had wonderful eyes, which is really what you remember about people. But you know that.

“His shows were more serious than Alonzo’s. They were Spartan, a bare stage and folding chairs deep in the ship, far enough below deck so that the slow rocking of the boat seemed disconnected from the actual motion of the waves, and more a product of Able’s deep power. There was no music. No unnecessary artistic flourishes. The productions were less entertaining than entrancing. He would just talk to the people. Not about anything in particular. The order of the universe and the way things worked. How grass grows. What Ezra Pound did while he lived and lost his mind in his outdoors cage. Things that might have been dull in some other context, but which kept people enraptured. It wasn’t rehearsed or repeated; I was at almost every performance, silently weaving through the chairs, serving drinks. His repertoire consisted not so much of tricks as feats. He’d read minds. Make wallets disappear from patron’s pockets and appear in his own. He would escape from chains, ropes and handcuffs. He would pull cards out of the air and send them back into nothing, walking away from the stage in that black turtleneck, empty handed. It was always different, the order, the lineup—he said it kept the audience from getting bored and from spending too much time considering the way the illusion worked—but he finished every night the same way. He’d walk out of the room, and up the staircases to the main deck. The audience, fixated, as if he were also hypnotist, followed without being told. At the stern, where they gathered, a rusty metal cage waited, its door open. Able walked inside, crouching to fit, and put his arms out. With the cool, practiced look of a wronged cowboy walking to the noose, he let two
audience members cuff him to the bars of the cage. And then, every night, four of the strongest sailors would take that cell, secured to the back of the boat by a long, thick rope—the kind that you only ever find on ships—and threw him overboard. There was a great cringe that ran through the masses as the cage hit the water. There was the windy, whistling sound as quickly the rope uncoiled, and the snap as it became taut. The crowd watched, working their eyes through the disorienting dark, following the white trail from the dragging prison. Depending on the night, by which I mean the weather and the mood, people waited sometimes for ten minutes, sometimes for hours. They engaged in casual conversations, sending me for drinks. Slowly they’d peel away, lingering and uncomfortable in their own capacity to give up hope so rapidly. There were nights that some lonely soul would stay up and watch until it was light, waiting for that other Jesus to come up, gasping for air, and walk back across the waves. At breakfast, 8:30 AM sharp, the same sailors as the night before, but brighter and more clearly defined, reeled in the cage. It was not infrequently that it occurred to me we were fishing for some massive ocean-dwelling god. Needless to say, the cage was always empty. Dripping and empty. And always, sometime after breakfast, when he failed to fill the lonely chair reserved for him at the meal, Able would show up on the deck, in that same turtleneck, talking confidently to the passengers. The kids were always a little scared, hesitant to touch the hands that worked so closely with death. But the candy—often salt-water taffy—soothed their nerves. And he’d do it night after night.

“I hope this is what you’re looking for. I mean, you did ask. I haven’t thought about Able in some time, but this was the stuff of our friendship. It took a
while to get through to him. That’s probably important. He was always gracious, but aloof. It was only because he needed my help in the show that he approached me. He taught me to slip watches off of wrists, undetected, a skill I maintain but which I’m proud to say I’ve never used for profit. We would sit in his room, and I’d talk while he endlessly practiced the flick of the wrist and the throw of the fingers that allowed cards to come and go. Sometimes he’d retreat into an interminable melancholy, but allowed me to stay in the room. I think it was over a lost love, but I never asked. How do you differentiate between those relationships where you know so much about someone, and those where you know virtually nothing, but feel a deep connection? We had the latter. Whatever it’s called. And then one day it was all unremarkably over. It was the passage from Seattle to Bangkok. The day before making port, Able did his normal routine. He added a mock salute from his chains, right before they threw him overboard. The cage was pulled up the next day, but he never reappeared. I heard he stayed in Thailand. Or around the area. I called him the Quiet American for a while, but then we dismissed him from the collective memory of the boat. The sea doesn’t allow for you to store too much. It was only when I was saddled with sending the possessions he’d left on the Pearl to his brother that I found out his name wasn’t Able Kane.”

13

After his third day of interviews, Oliver was sapped. His first real dose of Abbott Wallace had proved too intense. As if he hadn’t used the piece of paper his
teacher once called an eclipse viewer to stare into the sun. He recorded what was said, without elaboration. He wasn’t ready to write on his own. Simply channeling the words of others left him in a postprandial-like stupor. Abbott-magician, Abbott-infant, Abbott-ghost, Abbott-loser all elided, and behind him was this woman he was either running to or from. Ella. She went into the notes, at the end of an exhausted day, as Ella Someone.

And while he promised himself weeks before that he would limit his visits to the movies, the fine arts cinema was having a special viewing that he couldn’t miss, and that he hoped might restore him. Or at least allow him to throw off the burden of authorship for a while.

Oliver arrived at the late-night film an hour early. He sat in his mother’s car in the mall parking lot, the windows rolled partway down to let in the cool evening air. Unlike in the city, the darkness brought down the temperature in the suburbs.

He watched kids with skateboards. They were more interested in being loud than in skating, pushing each other, running their fingers through their own spiked hair. Some gum-chomping girls leaned on railings, pretending not to watch but giggling as the boys strutted. They passed a cigarette around like a minor idol. Or a rumor. Oliver guessed that a movie ended, judging by the wave of people exiting the rows of glass doors to the multiplex. It must have been some romance or comedy, from their faces. The couples all looked the same, holding each other as if for support, as if unable to stand from spending those two hours sitting in the dark, adrift from their bodies. Maybe it had been 3D; a few people held their hands out in front of them, comparing the different realities. A homeless man made a clear path through
the moviegoers, parting the tide with a shopping cart. That was unfair; he might have
had a home. But the people around the man sensed what Oliver sensed: that certain
pungency of itinerancy. He did not belong in their movie bubble.

Oliver went inside, bought a ticket and popcorn to last four hours. He sat
transfixed. In his yellow eyes there played the reflection of the Arabian desert, the
vast battles. He needed no body, because this man had one for him, standing on top
of a dune, his white robes fluttering around him, extending his being into the
atmosphere. He gave up his eyes to the piercing, hypnotic blue of Peter O’Toole.
The obligation to live disappeared, because this life in celluloid was greater than
anything he could hope for.

When the film ended, Oliver let out an involuntary gasp, his vocal chords
shifting from the force of his descent back into his body. He didn’t move until the
theater was silent and the screen was blank. How much was Abbott like this man?
Could he deliver Oliver with the same style, the same vitality? The skateboarders and
the couples and the homeless man were gone, set pieces no longer needed, and the lot
was empty. Oliver stood next to his car and spun in circles until he was dizzy, and
then, wobbly, drove home.

14

“I’m sorry to hear he’s not doing well. I really am. There’s only one story I
know about Abbie Wallace, and it’s nearly prehistoric. But I’m assuming that’s the
one I’m supposed to tell you; for otherwise, why would I be on your list?
“Abbie Wallace and I were best friends in elementary school, which I’m the first to admit was a position of honor. He was the leader of the small insurrections that happened daily in the lives of children. Our war hero. He stood up to the bad teachers and joked with the ones we liked. It’s hard to overplay his importance in the classroom, but it’s equally necessary to understand the classroom’s importance in his life. From what I remember, he had trouble at home. Not abuse or anything like that; not even close. The Wallaces were good people. He was just deeply unhappy in that house. It was as if the private life, that which was unobserved, wasn’t worth his time, and he went about it continually frustrated, waiting to be back under the eyes of his classmates. And we were always willing to oblige.

“Something happened then, although it’s unclear what. Another kid wrote some nonsense in Sharpie on the wall of the gym. Signed it in Abbie’s name. Or a dead mouse was found in this retarded girl’s bag. Learning disabled. Something disabled. But Abbie was never mean spirited. At home he was, but not at school. He knew exactly what the lines were. Someone framed him, in the simplest of school-child ways, and he was left with the blame. We only heard what happened afterwards. He was brought into the principal, a monstrous woman in size and attitude, and was grilled, by her and several staff members. The petty ones who thought school justice had something to do with real justice. It must have been clear that he was innocent; he would have confessed to any number of actual crimes to exonerate himself from this false one. But they kept at him, until they reached some cracking point. Because while he was a clown and a rapscallion—and I don’t mean this to be silly, that’s so firmly what he was—he had a heightened, perhaps
hyper sensitive comprehension of equity. In some way they broke that kid. It was there he came face to face with the injustice of the big people. And that’s difficult. I remember my own moment like that. When I realized that my mom was happiest with us when she was drinking. Everyone has that moment.

“Abbie could have screamed and fought, or he could have folded and taken the punishment. But he did something completely and drastically outside his options. He walked out of the interrogation to the bathroom on the second floor, the one with the most student traffic near the cafeteria, and locked himself in one of the stalls. There were no histrionics; that wasn’t his way. But it was in that bathroom he took his stand. It wasn’t a very large space. One of those rows of stalls with the beige metal partitions, where the locks never seem to work and the gaps between the door and the wall are just large enough to be embarrassing. On top of that gray checkered floor he took his stand. I remember that that was, when it was over, what he talked about. Staring at the ground and having patterns present themselves from the ground, only to fade back to dullness. I don’t know how he did it, but he stayed in that bathroom for three days. From this adult perspective, knowing what I do now, I can’t conceive how it was possible. The school didn’t intervene, but surely they knew he was there. There were no security guards or police. No parents, for a time. Food wasn’t an issue, and this was the most incredible part. Throughout the day, kids would raise their hand and go to the bathroom. But in their pockets and fists, in the elastic straps of their sports shorts and sweat pants, protected by Ziploc bags, they brought offerings. They went and laid their peanut butter sandwiches, their tuna, bologna, their fluffernutter sandwiches, their sliced fruit and their baby carrots, their
gummy candies, laid them right underneath the door of Abbie’s stall. He never reached for them while the devotee remained in the bathroom, but they were always received before the next person entered. Shy girls gave their gifts to the bold boys. Bold girls made the trip themselves. Even the Asian students who came and went and never spoke with us delivered their brand of lunch, their colored rolls and buns each a small consolation on the cold tiles. I cannot imagine, now, that he didn’t come out at the end of the day. But none of us saw him do it. And that was the magic. Because of that illusion, we loved him. For three days he was our porcelain hermit.

“At the end of the third day, I was leaving the school, hungry because I’d given up my blueberry muffin, when I was stopped by Mrs. Wallace on her way in. She took my shoulder in a way that was gentle but invoked authority, and asked, ‘Tony, where’s Abbie?’ That’s all she said, and I took her. I went into the bathroom with her, although I wish I hadn’t. I stood in the corner, my back pressed uncomfortably against a sink, hard enough so that I wasn’t sure whether it would leave an impression in my back or if I would dent its smooth white side. She asked once, calmly, and he opened the door, and cried into her shoulder. They didn’t see me at all. He just cried and she just held him. There were choices made there. Abbie could have emerged from that school toilet stall triumphant, victorious, resurrected. He would have been untouchable. But he walked out, tear-streaked, on the arm of his mother, barely able to carry himself. I could have forgotten it. I could have forgiven him and his weakness and returned to his side. But I made a decision too, and I didn’t. Something vicious woke in me at that moment, and I saw opportunity. I told the entire school what had happened, what a nothing Abbie Wallace had turned out to
be. I found new popularity. He returned to school, but he was depleted, and we never spoke. The next year we went to different middle schools. And I haven’t seen him since.”

15

One of the strangest things about Abbott Wallace was that he had no presence on the internet. There were traces, like sticky slug residue, but no pictures, no profiles. It made Oliver’s work difficult, but he understood, even respected it. It was too easy to self-document. It didn’t mean anything. Abbott had seen the people around him, the people in the coffee shops and shopping malls, fitting their lives in the premade boxes. Storytelling, life-telling packaged. And he refused. He wouldn’t be somebody in a world of somebodies. And Oliver, like the detectives he loved in the films, came to respect his quarry.

He decided to take a day from his calls and see if he could find any old records in the city. He wasn’t sure what to look for or how to find it, the long trail of papier-mâché ducklings meant to exist behind each person. Before he began, he met up with Hopkins at the church. It was the only way his friend could escape from the office.

The line stretched around two city blocks. Hopkins fidgeted with a piece of already wrinkled paper. They paced in place, outside the maternity hospital, inching slowly forward. The church was visible.

“Intimations of something. Ominous, I think,” said Oliver.
“Just foreign to your profane gaze,” said Hopkins. He rarely looked at Oliver when they spoke. He had a habit of squinting at something always too far away. “Foreign always scared you.”

Hopkins was somewhere close to Catholic. Our man was some ways past nothing.

“It’s not that. St. Carnelian the Righteous. What are the chances? Ella Carnelias, St. Carnelian.”

“Just names,” said Hopkins.

Ella Carnelias was in the background. Everyone Oliver spoke to knew about her, knew her in passing. He could not find or define her, she refused to be tied down, but he knew she existed. And at one point, she and Abbott Wallace had had plans together. As Oliver shifted his weight, he noticed that his topsiders were sticking to the asphalt sidewalk. The city was coming undone in the heat. The summer continued its dominance.

“How are you doing?” Hopkins asked.

“In terms of what?”

In the silence, Oliver looked to his left at the school in front of which they’d moved, the windows a harlequin pageant filled with different scenes of adolescence. He knew what Hopkins was asking.

“I’m still disconnected. I don’t think I miss Tess anymore but I miss somebody. Maybe myself. Or maybe it is still her. But now there’s Abbott’s life…”

Oliver was beginning to have a sense of the man and his wild existence that always threatened to fall across the line into the territory of fiction. A biography was
taking shape that claimed for itself the honest, the spurious, and the fabled, valuing them equally. Still, Oliver knew he was missing something. He had drawn too many tangential lines crossing close to the life. But he was missing the essence.

“Are you still writing poetry?” Hopkins asked.

“In some ways it’s perfect. It is immaculately, exquisitely fictitious.”

“Abbott’s life?”

“Yes,” Oliver said.

A man was walking down the church procession selling doughnuts and coffee to hungry souls. Oliver bought a cup, and it reminded him of some earlier time, the near-burnt coffee in unmarked Styrofoam.

“How many movies have you seen in the last year?” Hopkins asked.

“Near two hundred.”

It was more of a reaction than a calculation for Oliver.

“There it is again,” Hopkins said. “Better than living.”

“Why is the line longer than usual?” Oliver asked. “How many people could have the same patron saint? How many people would care?”

“It’s not longer than usual.”

They were getting close to the giant wooden doors. They were the type that had a smaller, human frame cut into the much larger entrance. Oliver thought it must be the difference between ordinary and ceremonial—they must open them for popes. But they hinted at the existence of some dormant being that, one day, would open those awesome doors and exit the sanctuary, light streaming from its pores. Oliver decided he didn’t want to hold the cup of coffee anymore and threw it in the trashcan
outside the building adjacent to the church, an old age home. He wondered if the retirees minded the noise from the school down the street.

“And no,” Oliver said, returning to an earlier subject. “One morning I woke and it was like poetry didn’t make sense. I can’t really write anymore. I think it demands too much perfection from each word. The stories that I have to tell are messier than poetry allows.” Some blocks away, a modified car horn played Dixie. “I tried writing. I’ve stopped. My words have been ugly and out of my control since Tess.”

They were in front of the church.

“Hopkins, I’m going to unearth Ella Carnelias. She’s the key to something. She was made to be found.”

“I shouldn’t be too long,” Hopkins said. “I don’t have that much to get off my chest.”

Oliver was left on the threshold, eyes peering into the dusty sepia. From inside came a jumble of sacrosanct cries and organ tones that bellowed REDEMPTION in drawn out syllables. The reverberations within intimated a world of faulty miracles that Oliver wished he could have fallen into. It was a world that had always been closed to him. Maybe to an earlier generation, or a different people somewhere, he could walk inside and check for answers hidden in the alcoves and statuaries. But that province of gilt and masquerade was inaccessible. As the door finally, slowly closed behind Hopkins, Oliver glimpsed a great triptych of gleaming icons by the altar. On the left, a woman in ecstasy with the caption, “Rejoicing Upon Losing Her Vision.” On the right, a man staring at the arms in his lap: “He Still
Wonders What Happened To His Hands.” And in the middle, with the round glowing face of the first European millennium, Fat Charlie the Archangel beamed.

“"This was a long time ago. You’ll have to forgive me the parts I can no longer remember.

“ My husband and I split apart not long after we were married. It wasn’t particularly sad, but I used it as an excuse to take some time from work. I was in accounting then. I was deeply into my 30’s, feeling pressure to be something and do something from my family, but instead I took an old interest and shaped it into my life, if only for a little while.

“It started with the Great American Graves Tour. For two months I traveled around the States, visiting the authors I’d selected from a predetermined list. They took care of the hotels and gave me food recommendations. I just had to go and converse with the dead. I sat with Faulkner’s small, pillared marker at the Oxford Memorial Cemetery. I was there in Harleigh Cemetery’s woods, at Whitman’s earthy catacomb that buries into the hill. A modest version of Agamemnon’s burial cavern. The movie stars, in death, still managed to keep their own company, gravitating to select plots of select graveyards. But they didn’t interest me as much. If you want to know a dead actor, watch their films. It was the authors who urged me to get closer to them. To communicate. And I liked that my deceased tended to be attached to certain geographic places, and were interned across the nation. It allowed me to see
our country and know its people, hopping across God’s acres. It was an unexpected recompense; I followed the dead and managed to rediscover the living. But that wasn’t at the heart of the trip. These were the minds that taught me how to dream. They populated my head when I was a child. You might say that I needed a way, after the divorce, to resupply my inventory.

“But at some point I exhausted America. And so that following summer, I ran away to Europe. Well, that’s unfair; I could have spent years continuing after Great American Graves. But there was a loneliness that developed, being in my home country without the person I loved, really without anyone. I thought traveling would help. You have excuses and fallbacks as a foreigner. So I went to the great Spanish cathedrals where they keep the bits of saints; the Isola di San Michele, that curious floating mausoleum; I spent days lying in the too-fertile grass of Père Lachaise; and then I pursued the departed back to England.

“I met Abbott Wallace in Westminster Abbey, at Poet’s Corner, of course. He was so young, a student at the time, standing without regard toward the bodies huddled around Chaucer. He looked severe, and I found him deeply attractive. Under the guise of overseas allegiance, which went only so far in Britain, I began talking to him. He was kind and responsive, perhaps because I was too old to be threatening. I treated him to dinner. We walked through London. We spent the next days sightseeing, wrapped up in each other. He was the Tadzio of my Death in Venice, and there’s no denying that my interest was obsessive. After so much death, he was, however desolate at times, life.
From the way he spoke, I knew he understood my pursuits and I hope I understood his sadness. For he was sad. I knew about his fiancé, about the life that existed outside his travel, without it disrupting any of the feelings I had. The rules of home, rules of decency warped and bowed away from their native ground for too long. He had no problem speaking about Ella—that was her name—because she simply didn’t exist in our world. There was no conflict. Although if we could, for a moment, I’d like to go back on what I said: I can’t say I ever knew that much about Abbott. I think earlier I said something about knowing him. I understood him. That’s what it was, and they’re different. I understood him, and sympathized with him, but I never knew very much about him.

“Perhaps after five days of this, which seemed so stretched and precious, he neglected to show up to a lunch date. He’d checked out of his hotel, I found out. And that was it. I tried to not feel hurt, but it was a destructive blow, the second man leaving me in such a short time. Two days before I left for Ireland, my last stop before returning to the States, he left a telephone message at my hotel. Following the instructions, I was up the following morning and standing in the lobby. Without explanation as to where he’d been, he showed up and brought me to a car he rented. We drove west for several hours, simply enjoying each other’s company, swerving to stay on the proper side of the road. I felt giddy again. Our destination was Tintern Abbey, and it was abandoned that Tuesday morning. To this day, I have never been anywhere like it. I cannot explain it particularly well but it is, in a perfect way, nature’s cathedral. He brought me inside, to the main, open-aired sanctuary. You could see the River Wye through the arches. I had tears in my eyes, but stupidly,
stubbornly blind, asked why he’d brought me. Which person was buried here that he wanted me to see? He smiled and said, ‘Nobody,’ and kissed me very gently on the forehead.

“I hope you understand me. I have a great fear that you will not, that this will not make sense in the way I want it to. These things happened, however absurd. But know that this was not some fairy tale ending: I hated him for so long because he made it seem like it all meant something, when they were empty grand gestures. He was just playing a game. However, perhaps unintentionally, in it all there was a gift Abbott gave me: he restored my connection to the great fiction. Beyond that, there’s not much to tell about him. That day he drove me back, dropped me off, and I never saw him again. I gave up my seat on that flight and stayed. I am all those things I wasn’t then: married, settled… I work part of the time writing for children. These are the things that cannot interest you. And while I’m certain it’s a normal time over there, it’s quite late here. So goodnight.”

17

It was a different wing of the hospital than the one in which he’d visited Cara. Oliver assumed that there would be the same sequences of vibrant, soft whites, but was wrong. Browns and beiges dominated, with the reds, yellows and greens of an elementary school to highlight different doors. This place looked older. Used. A sign for the hospital fundraiser, the St. Andrews Fall Festival, reminded him of St.
Carnelian. What was the connection? At what point did the biographer become the hagiographer? How could you tell who the saints mingling with the people were?

“How does he look today?” Oliver asked.

Nathan was in the waiting room when Oliver arrived. Something behind his bearded face told Oliver that he’d already seen his brother.

“You wouldn’t notice if a rock looked different from one day to the next unless something drastic happened. If one day it stood up on its gravelly legs and danced a gravel dance.” The fish in an aquarium on the wall were too emphatically bright for the dullness of the place. Nathan got up and wrote what looked like their names down on a pad at a desk.

“I’m glad you asked to come,” he said.

They walked down hallways that Nathan knew, smiling at men and women behind counters that Nathan knew. Oliver expected to come to a door with a window, to look through and sigh without the occupant knowing. Nobody was instructed in hospital behavior; most people never spent enough time in one to understand how they worked. It made Oliver remember the first time he was pulled over for speeding. He’d rolled down the window, and before he knew what he was doing, said, “Can I help you, officer?” That had made him laugh, and there was no getting out of the ticket then. But it was the ease of slipping into an oft-repeated role. The hospital demanded the same thing. There were certain unspoken expectations. But instead of the sun-filled room, they walked down a wide hall, a row of beds on each side. Most were filled with sleeping forms.
“I’ve talked with some of their families,” Nathan said. “A couple of others are vehicle accidents. A lot are from medical complications. But then there’s a surprising number of botched suicides. People who couldn’t take the end, but couldn’t end themselves. The Distinctly Undecided, I call them.”

The ward looked like a nursery, which unsettled Oliver. Too many things were the same at the beginning and the end. He looked at the curtains hanging limply unemployed by each cot.

“Nobody here needs privacy,” Nathan said.

Oliver was surprised by the bed they eventually stopped in front of. There was nothing revelatory about this person. He looked like Nathan, but belonged more to the other men and women around him. It was hard to believe that this was the body that climbed the college chapel many years earlier to proclaim himself King of All Beings. His first act had been to order the commencement of the Great Interspecies Orgy at the End of the Second Millennium, much to the satisfaction of the crowd below. There were too many memories for this limp vessel. So instead of thinking more about the body in front of him, Oliver avoided it and looked around the room.

“Who is Ella Carnelias?” Oliver asked.

Nathan was in the process of clipping his brother’s toenails. He didn’t respond, but missed one of the nails and bit into the flesh with his tiny clippers. The small trickle of blood was far less disconcerting than the unflinching body.
“That’s an old name filled with old power. She’s a person. Somebody. He loved her, she hurt him. Something happened. He ran away,” Nathan said. “It’s difficult to find things to say about her.”

“Why wasn’t she on the list?” Oliver asked.

“It broke our family,” Nathan replied. “She was one of us, and things cracked around her. She didn’t belong alongside those other names. And I figured you’d find her at some point, if you were doing your job.”

There was a great fluttering all around, like a flock of giant birds taking off.
In the peripheries of his vision, Oliver thought he saw the bodies rise from their beds, light emanating from their eyes, from their mouths, from underneath their skins. The fluorescents of the hall flickered and flared, hailing wonders in the wicked air. This columbarium retained the memory of old miracles. Unable to stay afloat for too long, the bodies snapped back to the earth-tones of the ward. The silence that followed was disturbed only by the residual creaking of the worn cots as the springs oscillated back into place. Oliver moved his head, slowly and royally, like an elephant, to stare at Nathan, who spoke first, unaware that he was in the presence of the celestial:

“You should find Ella.”

18

“I’m sorry sir. Unless you have written permission from the patient, I’m unable to let you access any of his records from Fern Glen. But I’ll say this: I knew Mr. Wallace. I cared for him, for a time. I’m telling you this because I feel sorry for
him, then and now. Alone without any memory of himself; that’s no way for that beautiful boy to end up. I used to walk with him around the grounds. Unlike most of our other patients, he liked the exercise, liked being outdoors whenever he could. He was so well behaved, especially when his Ella came. She visited him the most. His brother popped in on us every now and then. It was clearly difficult for him, to be near so many damaged people, to have his brother be a part of that damaged population. His visits never coincided with Eleanor’s, and he’d look nervous from start to finish, unsure how to even speak to his older brother. But she knew how to treat him. They’d read together and lie in the grass. She was loyal to him over that time. I also—please get this down—I never broke my promise to him. I never said a word around her. About how he had checked in voluntarily. That he’d never been committed. They worked so well, I wanted to nourish it as they continued to grow with each other behind our walls. It was only sometimes after she’d left, when it got dark and he felt her absence, that he got mean. Unruly. He’d harass other patients. Or overturn some tables. Nothing we weren’t used to with the others, but it was always a little unsettling with Mr. Wallace. He was the most like us, and his fits were a reminder than any of us, all of us, had that potential. It was sad to see him that way. When his mother and father weren’t available to talk him down over the telephone, I would hold him, thinking of my grandchildren, and sing. I don’t have a very good voice, but it worked. He’d fall quickly into sleep, and walk into the cafeteria the next morning as if nothing ever happened.

“He spent eight months with us. The day he walked out, with his bag of clothes and his bag of books, it was only Ella there to pick him up. They held each
other in the parking area for hours. And I mean actual hours. The last time I heard from him was when he sent a postcard to me and the rest of the staff from Thailand, which was not that long ago. Beautiful picture, but he didn’t say much. And that’s less than you’d have gotten from any of the records here. Because whatever those files were to say, I can tell you, there wasn’t much wrong with Mr. Wallace. He was angry and sad and scared. Like all the rest of us. He just wasn’t any good at dealing with it.”

19

Ella Carnelias had been almost as difficult to find as Abbott. But Nathan had left him at the hospital with a phone number that led to a phone number, and he finally found her in a tea shop in Burlington. Oliver sat at home, the number written on the pad next to his cell, unsure of how to proceed. She seemed, in so many ways, the principal character, and he had hopes that she might tie everything together. But there were suspicions he didn’t want realized. What if she was less than what he was searching for? Perhaps she’d simply be uninterested? There also lurked, at the back of his head, the half-formed sense that Nathan’s concern for his brother was driven by guilt tied to Ella. That something which occurred between the two of them destroyed Abbott. If he didn’t pick up the phone, he could remain innocent, an outsider. He’d done enough work to walk away from this.

“Hello?”
“Can I please speak to Ella Carnelias?” he asked. There was a lot of background noise.

“I’m incredibly busy right now-”

“It’s Abbott Wallace,” he said.

He lied and told her he was visiting family nearby the following weekend. They agreed to meet.

20

“Alright. This thing is recording me? Ok, no, I know, just talk… Abbie and I met in college. And we loved each other just as much as two people are capable of loving one another. I don’t know what you want to hear about us, and I don’t know how much of it I can tell you…”

It was wrong. Oliver held up his hand. This way had become ordinary for him. He had turned too many people into stories like this. Her words were more important. This was his tenable self-justification. But he also knew that if Ella kept talking, it would be too late; she would be claimed by the presence of Abbott Wallace. After all these years, she would belong to him again. There needed to be a time, Oliver told himself, a decisive moment when the biographer stepped from behind the tape recorder. He had, after all, taken the job to further himself rather than his subject. And here it was, opportunity presenting itself.

While he couldn’t understand why, being with her was exhilarating. In Ella there lay potential. She was his place to moor. For years she had been the site of
Abbott’s world, and there was still an energy encircling her that promised the life Abbott had lived. The written life.

“Don’t tell me about him,” Oliver said, lowering his hand. “Just talk to me.”

She did. He tried to listen to her, but found it difficult. Oliver couldn’t help but look and only look. When she was little, she wanted to be President of the United States of America. It was a dream that lingered until college, where she became convinced that there was something dirty about those words in that sequence. (Ella’s allure worked through extremes. Her whitest skin and darkest hair. Her black pupils and shockingly blue eyes. Her flat chest and full lips.) Her last job had been working in a bakery, where she’d never been able to call herself a baker; it sounded vulgar or as if it held secret importance. She sometimes volunteered at a soup kitchen. It didn’t make her feel good and she never felt as though she was doing good. Rather, it felt like an obligation, the debt from a previous life. (Her clear, reserved voice; the might of her stare; the small, uncommitted quality of her strides; the sins implied behind her tongue; the way her feet turned slightly in; the nearly inscrutable hairs between her eyebrows; the faint waft of lily-of-the-valley she left trailing behind her).

After they spoke in the teahouse, they walked around the city together, warm and resplendent, unfurled like a morning-glory to catch as much of the sun as possible. They continued to talk the whole way. In the moments when he saw her, he kept on looking and saw right through. He overshot and she became a piece instead of an individual, and he barely realized it. It is impossible to transcribe what Ella said. He heard it but missed it. (She was closer in age to his mother than to him, but it was nearly impossible to tell. The point of her nose, the point of her ears, the
ragged points of her chewed fingernails; the slenderness of her fingers; the meticulous ways she not only pronounced words but then the precision with which she used them; the soundlessness of her breath; the straightness of her back; the strength apparent in her body).

“Who have you talked to so far?” she asked. “On the list.”

He told her about the web of contacts. She smiled at some of the names, asked what they’d said. When they talked indirectly about Abbott, both tried to use his name as infrequently as possible.

“You know you sound like him,” she said. “You move your fingers like him.”

(Her arched eyebrows, her high cheeks, her red cheeks, her dry palms, her shoulders, her legs).

They moved through the city. Oliver liked the idea of a place where anything left on the ground would roll downhill until it was lost to Lake Champlain. Nothing lingered in decay. When she laughed at this, she said it was because it was a conversation she could have had with Abbott.

“Nathan must have hired you in part because of the resemblance,” she said.

“They were very close. Which is different from being similar.”

The only time in their conversation when Ella pulled away was when Oliver asked what happened between them. He immediately let it go.

(Those subtle unnoticeable parts that connected these things together. This was love. This was obsession).
Oliver returned to New York. On the bus ride home, after a strange dream, he remembered something, and when he returned to his family’s house, he went digging through the file, the contents of which were now spread throughout the small office. He came out with one of Abbott’s rare scraps of diary, typical in its brevity and curious lack of emotional depth. It was not dissimilar to his brother’s writing, which was surprising for how different they seemed.

“Went today with Marie to Tintern Abbey. It seems appropriate that I feel at home there, given my name. The season is right for the visit, as is the sun. The stones are the ones that they left because they weren’t valuable. What’s here is what wasn’t stripped for profit. Is it then a place that exists as negative worth? I won’t see her again after tomorrow, which is fine. It should be Ella here. To be clear, it is Marië, not Mārie. It is, that way, a much more attractive name.”

Oliver lay in bed, readying for sleep, glorying in the importance of the connection. Two accounts that stemmed from the same experience.

It was with thoughts of Ella and Marië running through his head that Oliver fell into sleep, and dreamed about his last moment with Tess. She had been strangely absent from in his thoughts of late, and so when he woke, sweating and wretched, he was surprised. The dream had been more memory than fantasy. They were lying in bed amidst the complications, strewn like children’s toys across the duvet. Someone said, “I fucking hate what’s happened to you.” It was then certainly Tess who had said, “You can’t deal with the end. It’s the one thing you can’t imagine out of existence.” They were both frightened, he could smell it, and because it was a dream
it reeked like strong, artificial orange. She said he disgusted her for being scared and weak. She terrified him by not being able to understand the world as he could. They were lying in bed, and he had taken her hands, although his eyes lingered around the whole room to avoid looking at her. “They’re clammy,” she said. “That’s the point,” he replied. “Who am I supposed to be, with these hands?” She had punched him, not slapped him, and her hand seemed to loom in the air, growing, before landing on the left side of his nose. Her eyes seemed to regret it immediately, and she pulled down her pants to apologize. Her underwear said, FUCK ME, and he thought, “Like looking-glass Alice,” and he did. Her clothes were completely off and his were on, but he dug in blind amphibian thrusts through his jeans and into her. The teeth of his zipper tore into his penis, and little drops of red sweat fell onto the sheet. She said something about loving him but he couldn’t hear her. He lay dribbling on top of her, still and finished, and felt only hatred for each fold below him. She was a piece of grotesque meat. He made to go. She said, “You have the remarkable ability to make me feel like an afterthought.” He looked at the waste basket and saw it was filled with semen. In it was the fetus of a Siamese twin, one half struggling and alive, the other dead, dragging it back into the mire. “It will always be about you,” she said, and Oliver gagged and said, “Yes,” but wasn’t sure what it was a response to. A door closed, a car engine started, and the dream took Oliver to a car wash, not the one he went to off the West Side Highway, but one he had known in his youth. Underneath the roar of the rhythmic spray and flopping mops, he refused to cry.
It was only then, lying sweating and sick in bed, deciding whether to get a
glass of water or just to resume sleep, that he realized why Abbott’s entry had stood
out to him. Why it mattered. Why would he need to differentiate Mariē, not Mārie?

On a Monday morning Oliver turned on the television, and nothing happened.
On Wednesday, the water stopped running for most of the afternoon, and a smell of
stagnation crept through the suburb. People didn’t ask questions; they wanted to
believe in an animate infrastructure that responded to their needs before they had to
complain. The summer was supposed to be nearing an end, but had so far refused to
relent, and people chose to blame their problems on the heat, the generalized ways in
which it interfered with the pipes and the airwaves. Everything was working
Thursday morning and Oliver decided to return to Abbott Wallace. He’d dropped his
work since visiting Ella. As if he knew what people would say, knew his subject
through and through, to the point where he no longer needed his ideas verified by
other subjects.

Oliver was greeted by the cool, decontaminating blast of air at the hospital
entrance. Things seemed to work well here, Oliver said to himself. Here the staff
and the patients had worked out an agreement so that both needed the other, and both
stayed busy. The hospital personnel knew Oliver at this point; they never asked
where he was going. He doubted that they would have anyway. He’d come while he
was conducting his interviews. To sit and watch, sometimes to read, but most of the
time just to watch. He never ran into Nathan. Perhaps he was less of a caring brother than he made himself out to be. Or maybe it was just that his loyalty was more conceptual and less physical, that Nathan was committed to the idea of Abbott than his literal wilting body.

On this occasion, an itinerant television was perched on the steps outside the burn ward, turned to the news. A caption underneath some mirthless reporter said, “On the threshold of death, they found reasons to live.” When he reached his subject, he was mildly surprised to find the body hadn’t moved. Oliver had learned so much since he’d last been. Ella wasn’t Abbott’s secret anymore; they shared her and her galvanizing aureole. The only difference in Abbott’s face to show this new development was his beard, which had come in, patchy and speckled with gray. Another reminder that Nathan hadn’t come in. Feeling like the sole keeper of the bodies around him, Oliver sat for some time and breathed deeply, timing the ins and outs. Then he picked up the only book on the nightstand: *The Collected Poetry of Stephen Crane*. He read it, closed the volume, and left.

On Friday, he had dinner with his family. As they ate, they put a laptop in his sister’s seat, and talked to her face. She looked good, Oliver thought. Maybe it was the distance. As a joke, his mother tried to spoon split-pea soup into the USB port. She accidentally spilled but the computer seemed fine. Oliver was disappointed because it would have made a much better story if the whole thing had gone up in flames. After dinner, he went straight to bed, but couldn’t fall asleep because the boy without eyes was back for the first time in weeks. He didn’t bump into the glass, though. He just sat outside the window, and read. Oliver couldn’t descry the title in
the dark. Between Saturday and Sunday, at three in the morning, Oliver made a phone call.

“Hey, I’m really sorry, Ella. I’m having trouble sleeping.”

“That’s ok. I don’t sleep much.”

He considered forgetting everything, asking her about Abbott and continuing his excavation. He thought about releasing her, but he couldn’t do it. Despite their difference in years, he was intoxicated. Instead, he remembered the story Nathan had told him about the conjoined twins.

“It didn’t happen like that,” she said.

“I thought not,” Oliver said. “Siamese twins don’t exist in our world. They are story stuff. We don’t inhabit the same plane. And it sounded fake. Too coincidental, Siamese twins in Siam.”

“No, that’s true,” she said. “They were real. I have a photograph Abbie sent me. It’s the three of them—two of them—I never knew which, standing by a street vendor. There’s a little boy in the foreground, and he’s pointing at the friends. His finger leads you into the picture. They’re dressed in different shirts, and so you might think that they were three different people. When Abbie arrived in Chang Mai, they were in his boarding house. Abbie was convinced, I think, that he brought the cancer from the West. That something foreign and malicious attached itself to the bottom of his backpack and followed him around. Ananda had a kind of liver malfunction, and there was no way for him and Anurak to function on just the one remaining organ. They enlisted a radical doctor from San Francisco to help. They couldn’t live without each other. To raise money for the surgery they auctioned off their corpse, sure that
someone would pay money for the guarantee of their skeleton once they’d died. One letter from Abbie told me about the sense of humor they kept the whole time. He drove with them to Bangkok to visit one of the major research hospitals, and watched, laughing, while they struck ridiculous poses, attempting to convince a panel of surgeons that even if they weren’t worth much to science, they would make a wonderful ornament in a foyer. They found the money. And Abbie wrote that the American doctor found a way to transfer part of Ananda’s brain function to his brother. Something about splicing right and left sides. He liked to think—Abbie, that is—that perhaps the operation was the finale of the genetic misfiring that created them in the first place. Those two people were back to one. It’s true, then, that Ananda’s half was stuffed and rolled around. But Anurak came out of the operation broken. His mind was completely fractured, a shared space. He couldn’t function at his old job, as a short-order chef, and to keep him off the streets his friends brought him to a carnival. Cheap alcohol and sedatives kept him quiet during the day, and stopped him from terrorizing fairgoers. He never spoke coherently to Abbie again, who left Thailand soon after. The one thing that he always said was that no matter how destroyed Anurak seemed, he always had a smile on his face. Abbie knew that when he looked into those rolling eyes, two pairs were staring, grinning back.”

“You believe that?” Oliver said. Her earnestness put Oliver off.

“I’ve looked into it; I’ve never heard of such an operation being possible, let alone successful. Abbie was always a consummate liar. Maybe one just got cancer and died. Maybe they never got sick, and were fine. But something I realized with Abbie was that the truth matters very little. What did or didn’t happen will never
mean anything to me; it is more important if he created the story for me. Because then it is not just those twins at the center, but me and him too; all of us. The creator, his subject, and the audience all continue to exist for another day.”

Something, somewhere in the space between one phone and the other hummed gently. Oliver was unsure if he understood or believed what Ella had said. He decided to press forward.

“Why would Nathan lie to me?” he asked.

“It wasn’t a lie, I would guess. Nate never had a mind for stories. They just didn’t matter as much,” Ella replied.

Oliver exhaled loudly and took a risk. He said: “I could really use to see you. It’s lonely, now I know you’re out there, doing this work solo.”

“A trip to New York could be exciting,” she said, not understanding his seriousness. His desperation. “Why don’t we talk in the morning.”

“You know, I know you don’t know me, but sometimes I feel like I don’t have anything left besides you and Abbott.”

It was late. He was acting, although that didn’t mean the words weren’t true. He had come to realize, since meeting Ella, since entering her atmosphere, her gravitational pull, the pull of her voice and her history; that it was not Tess who had sucked him dry. She was just an aspect of the modern force which had robbed him. Ella, although obscure, was Tess’ nemesis. She had the power to restore and sustain, as she’d done with Abbott for so many years. She had kept him sane, out of the asbestos-filled mental facilities and through the long nights he’d stood on his roof with her, unable to move forward as long as she held his hand. But now Oliver had
gone too far. She was too distant to take his late-night hysteria. He watched his mouth move in the mirror across from his bed. He gave himself up to his reflection, and tried to read the lips so he knew what was being said. But then he heard her smile over the phone, the crinkling of lips parting, and in that instant everything else fell away.

“Only me and Abbie? At least we’re better than nothing.”

23

“No, I don’t remember delivering an Abbott Wallace, no matter how unusual he claims the circumstances surrounding his birth were. I help hundreds of women a year, and I tend to remember the few that die over the many that live. So unless your friend died in infancy, or unless his nativity was accompanied by the heavens opening and the sounds of trumpets blasting, no, I do not remember.”

24

Oliver met Hopkins at Remus’ for drinks after he’d been to see Abbott in the hospital. The summer days refused to wane, and the ceiling fans were working overtime.

“Remember I told you about going to the doctor’s the other day?” Oliver asked.
“Sure,” Hopkins said. “You laughed that everyone around you was getting so frustrated in the waiting room, because you liked having dedicated leisure time…”

“No, I know I said that, but I didn’t tell you why I was there. It was for a full diagnostic.”

“But it’s not near your birthday,” Hopkins said. They spoke quietly even though the bar was close to empty. It was early, because Oliver wanted to catch an off-peak train back to the suburbs.

“I scheduled one. You can do it whenever. And it was terrifying, all the blood work and close inspection.”

“Terrifying because he might find something?”

“That he wouldn’t. Because if he did it would give me an explanation. A way out or a reason for how I am…”

“But you’re not anything,” said Hopkins.

The lights flickered, like there was an electrical storm somewhere, or as if an angel died.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Hopkins said into his jar.

“For us, we can pretend to escape. That’s the extent of it. But Abbott Wallace did.” Oliver looked down into his cup of lemonade. He never drank anything alcoholic in the oxygen bar. They didn’t mix well. Sitting uncomfortably on top of the ice was a wedge of lemon he’d squeezed in. Remus had failed to remove the sticker, and a small, white label said LEMON.

“He really did shake himself from the earth.”
TB arrived on Celso’s arm, shaky. His boyfriend had slipped out on him in the middle of the night. They sat and listened to him rant, because it was their duty. They constantly refilled his mason jar. It was easier that way. Every so often he’d swing his head up from his air and mutter something like: “Charles said earlier, ‘You’re too self-centered,’ and I could barely contain my laughter. ‘Self-centered?’ I said. ‘What the fuck else would I be centered around?’” He’d then return to the jar. Sometimes he pulled so hard that the vacuum threatened to shatter the jar before Hopkins could pull it away from his lips. When it was Oliver’s turn to top him off, TB shot him a wicked grin. People liked TB. They couldn’t help themselves. It was because of the looks he gave, that made you feel complicit in something not quite evil, but naughty, or mean-spirited. And once he pulled you in, you could only follow. You were an accessory. Finished with his jar, TB held it up in front of Celso, shaking it suggestively. They never had air of their own when TB was like this.

“Anything new on Wallace?” Hopkins asked Oliver. He knew TB would continue to crave attention as long as it was directed at him. He needed to be weaned off.

“An old professor who taught him some philosophy course, Dr. Stein or Stern, remembered that even when they went out for drinks together, Abbott was never able to tell a joke,” Oliver said. He wanted to stay off Ella. She was still too fragile to expose. “I think that fact surprised him. I think it surprised me too.”

“Does that signify earnestness?” Hopkins asked. “Or some kind of lacking?” He tilted his head in thought but then saw TB.

“Goddamnit.”
Oliver looked over and saw that their friend’s nose was bleeding heavily. Rather than squeeze his nostrils, TB just held his hands underneath, as if trying to collect the deep flow to stuff it back in at some later time. The look of surprise refused to leave his face.

“I’ll take him back to Brooklyn,” Hopkins told Oliver. “Go home, and I’ll talk to you soon.”

Oliver gathered his coat and made it to the door. He saw someone through the glass about to come in, so he pulled the bar and stood aside to let them enter. There was no one there. It took him several moments to realize it had only been his own reflection.

25

“I haven’t performed in years. I don’t talk to many people these days. When I have a new idea for a song, I write it down and seal it in an envelope, and send it to this kid who plays Tuesdays and Thursdays down at the Goat and Garter. He’s got a good beard, like I used to, full and expressive, and a voice that sounds like mine used to. Proud to say he got a nice write-up in the local paper recently. I sign the songs, but I don’t think he knows who I am. I’m something of a hermit up here. But when Sally told me that you were calling about an Abbott, I was intrigued.

“There was some point, a while ago, when I saw myself getting old. I’d stopped doing the big shows, finished with the appearances and signings while I still had an audience. I wanted to go out on my terms, before I woke up one day and
realized I was some washed up folk artist. It was easier in England, having recently
moved for good from the States; the venues were more intimate, the crowds gentler. I
was able to spend more time with Sally. And that’s how this happened, really. I was
playing at a hall up in the Lake District, around Windermere, and we decided to make
a holiday out of it. We spent a week on this old estate turned into an inn. I wouldn’t
be able to tell you how long ago it was. If you say around a decade, I’d believe it.

“His pa got to the manor first, appearing more worn and haggard than he
might have just from traveling. He was finishing checking in when we arrived. We
all heard him yelling at night on the telephone. As if he could pull continents
together on the strength of his voice. He was not a big man, but he had a big voice.
Abbott got there a day later, and it was immediately apparent that he had been the
cause of his father’s distress. That boy was a mess. His eyes were bleary. He would
sulk for hours in a chair on the lawn, seemingly unable to enjoy the perfection of the
gardens. He walked along the hedges, snapping branches in a way that may not have
caused too much damage, but the menace, the sneer, the rebarbative sneer that
stretched across his face made the act violent. Nastily, sexually violent. Here was a
grown man—young, of course, maybe a few years out of university, but certainly an
adult—acting like some child, petulant and perverse. His pa would watch from the
veranda with clear concern, reading and taking business calls. Sally and I were
interested. While strikingly peaceful, the place was dull during the day. We’d sit on
the lawn, when everyone was taking tea, and try to listen. It became clear, as the first
days passed, that something had happened. We could never determine what. Sally
thought it was about the mother; I maintained that it was about a love. From the way
he talked to me, I’m fairly certain I was right. On maybe our third night, I went to use the lavatory after dinner. In the small antechamber to the men’s room, the type with a couch and long mirror, they were sitting and holding each other. Abbott, taller than his father, still had his hands around the man’s neck, mimicking a child’s small desperation. They became silent when I walked in, but as soon as I entered the bathroom proper, I could hear them continue their conversation. I can still remember what it was like:

‘Dad, things are broken.’

‘Listen to me.’

‘Something broke and I’m not sure…’

‘Listen to me.’

‘I’m not sure that it’s going to be ok. Because there are a hundred million pieces…’

“I washed my hands, and lost the conversation, but I paused before leaving to listen briefly:

‘It’s not ok,’ Abbott said.

‘I know.’

‘I’m not ok.’

‘I know. We’ll make you ok.’

“They became silent again when I walked out, but Abbott’s pa gave me a stoic nod. I never had children, but in that motion he implicated me, as a parent, as someone in his struggle.
"The next day Abbott was back in his chair, but listening to music. I watched when a pheasant approached him, and he stood up, deciding to follow it. As he walked behind it in circles, he started making ducking and flapping motions that gave the impression of being unintentional. As if he were channeling the fowl. The bird brought him close to my table. I invited him to sit down and join me and Sally for some clotted cream and scones. He did, and we encountered someone very different from what we expected. He was enchanting. Asked the right questions, and not the formal ones, but the ones that seemed to matter. The wounded child, not knowing whether to lash out or nurse his wounds, was transformed—

"Hold on one moment.

"Alright. Sorry about that. Supper’s on in a bit. I’m not so sure what else you need to know. We went walking together a number of times. Along the ivied walks and through the hallways with their original paintings. I’m bad at the names, the ones I don’t care about certainly, but I believe there were Monets. Sketches from Renoir. He never told me very much about his situation. He called the manor the Sanatorium, and I believe that was proper for him. Every day he seemed stronger, more able. At the same time, quite noticeably, he was more in control of the things he said. At the beginning, he was vulnerable, and the words just came, and they were so transparently honest. It’s not that he started lying, but he began to choose his words more purposefully. You could see that he began crafting thoughts before actually saying them, and those thoughts turned cleverer. Is that a word? Cleverer? I any event, droller. Like a caterpillar turning into a philosopher."
“I never told him who I was. Which is why it’s surprising that my name appeared on your list. I told him my name was Roy. That’s all. And part of why I think we got along so well is we had no concept of who the other was or what they were going through. He talked to me like an older friend or mentor. Although that reminds me: one of those days, I was walking around the gardens, its inhuman perfection ruined only by Abbott, sitting on the ground, his back propped against one of the benches. I heard him singing, humming really, but then the words, “I’m not here, mister, I’m spinning in sunlight/Catch me, oh please, but I don’t think you’re near.” Those were my words. There he was, next to the rhododendron, singing a tune I wrote with Tom Auliff maybe thirty years before. A minor song, but Abbott knew it. Oh, hold on…

“Alright. Sally’s insisting. She hates waiting once the food is ready. That’s just about it. By the end of our time there, Abbott seemed recovered. They left, and we kept in touch through letters for a time, before the natural ennui induced by distance took over. Sad to hear his dad died later that year. That whole rest of the trip, he never looked quite happy, even once his son did. I had a lot of respect for that man, who seemed to devote everything to his child, and expected little return. It was his duty. His face was the one you see, or at least that you impose on those fathers in supermarkets, pushing their children in wheelchairs. Now maybe that’s fully realized… perhaps it’s good he never saw his son in a hospital bed. And I was glad that they had that weekend together.

“I want to be included in this story. I don’t need to perform anymore, but that doesn’t mean I don’t need to be heard. If he wakes up, play him some of my music.
Tell him my name. Roy Worth. As in, ‘How much is Roy Worth?’ Well. Not very much.”

26

This time, when Oliver visited the hospital, someone was sitting in his normal chair by Abbott’s bed. It was a man in uniform. He got up to go when he saw Oliver lingering in the doorway of the ward.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Oliver said.

“I was just leaving. Excuse me,” the man said. He seemed embarrassed to have been caught in this place. As if he’d been compromised.

“You knew him?”


“Afghanistan? There’s no record of his ever being in the military… And three years doesn’t work at all. He should have been in Thailand.”

They were close now, the man in uniform and Oliver. The larger of the two reached into his breast pocket and took out a photograph, passing it to Oliver. It was clearly Abbott Wallace and this man, posing goofy grinned with two other soldiers in a sand-colored camp. It was a picture that had been places where people hadn’t known not to put their fingers on the surface. It was the kind of picture that made you forlorn, however happy the people in it might be, because it was the kind of picture that was always used at a funeral, or on the pages of the local newspaper. It was a
‘this was one of our boys’ picture. Oliver gave it back. He tried to speak, to get some story, but the man in the uniform had left.

Oliver sat down in his usual chair, which had preserved some of the man’s heat. And like that warmth, the air retained a presence of sincerity and decorum, which corresponded to the lingering smell of bay rum. This was too enormous a task. Nathan Wallace had only wanted to be a good brother. To find someone to help him take care of his crippled blood. It wasn’t that something scandalous happened between him and Ella; he couldn’t handle the responsibility after his father died. But this was too much.

In the warmth of the late afternoon sun coming through the window, Oliver began to drift into slumber. In the silence of the ward he started up the movie in his head, filtering in the soundtrack. First the drums, which came from one of the sleeping bodies. The bass began from another. The patient next to Abbott began to sing: “Who are you? Who who? Who who?”

27

A nurse woke him up, asking him to leave so the janitor could mop. Oliver went to a bar, one that he’d never been to before. He wanted to be anonymous for a night. This was a brighter place than Remus’, filled with video screens and music. There was an O₂ tap in the back, to cater to certain crowds, but at the bar there was only alcohol. The female bartender was efficient to the point of officiousness. There was no sign of any jumpers.
Once he was drunk, Oliver moved a couple of stools down to talk to a woman. It was a move he’d never done before but seen in so many films. He let himself disappear into young-man-at-a-bar. This time he was able to stay in character. He thought that she looked like a version of Tess, a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy of her, so that the features had been blurred and lacked definition. Her name was something that started with J. He called her J the rest of the evening. She didn’t seem to mind, which was a distinctly bad sign.

“And what do they call you at the office?” she asked.

He couldn’t figure out why she said that. Had he said he worked at an office?

“How about Abbott Wallace.”

He tested the sounds. His tongue played along easily, and it was thrilling to have his body and mind collude with one another. He remembered the immobile body sixty blocks north. The name was free; it was his. And as he slipped it around him—it was easy, like being embraced by the coat check girls he’d smiled at in his childhood—he felt the whole life he’d uncovered slide onto him. He sealed it with:

“Most people call me Abbie.”

It was as if he’d always been Abbott Wallace, and saying it was his moment of stepping from the closet, emerging resplendent from a long hibernation. It felt natural, which scared Oliver for a moment. But it was too good to keep uneasy. All of the living he’d never experienced and the things he’d wanted to do but hadn’t… he didn’t need to anymore. It had been achieved for him, in absentia.

“And what do you do?” J asked.
“I used to be a private investigator. Of sorts. Now I’m just trying to live a little.”

She worked at an advertising agency it sounded like, right out of grad school, but was going through a metaphysical crisis. He worked on looking interested. His legs were too long for the stool and too short for the floor, so he spent most of his energy trying to balance and make it look effortless.

When the bartender asked if he wanted another gin and tonic, he told her to keep them coming. As soon as he heard those words, he knew it was time to leave, and he did.

Oliver woke at six in the morning, in his own bed, smelling not like himself but not like the girl either. Still drunk, barely awake, he managed to walk outside to the sloping hill on the side of the house, and punched a number into his cell-phone.

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“It seemed, when I was a child, that every plot hinged on the fact that a captain can marry people on his ship. That’s never resurfaced since I grew up. Whenever that was. It was the same time that I started becoming scared of dogs. It’s never stopped surprising me that people keep them in their homes, in their beds. They forget that they are animals. Like tuna. Or unknown vermin that live in walls. When a dog bares its teeth, or gets an erection, I can’t escape how grossly physical they are. The same thing happens when a person pulls back their eyelid in front of me. You wouldn’t think it would happen often, and I guess it doesn’t, but on
occasion I’m present for these personal, revealing acts. The windows to the soul disappear, and all that’s left is the organ. And organs are frightening. Especially when all they seem to do is fail. Liver failure. Lung cancer. Brain stopping. Gland melting. I go into the doctor more than most people do. He thinks I’m a hypochondriac, or that I’m scared of sickness. He’s wrong, though, my doctor. I go in wishing that he’ll find something. That I’ll be sitting in his white office with the cartoon picture of Las Rambla in Barcelona which he must have visited, and he’ll come in with a clipboard he’ll be studying gravely. Tell me that a number was off. A test returned positive. It never happens. I go in and it looks perfect, down to my model cholesterol and startlingly robust blood pressure. He asks about my dad and I remember how embarrassing it is to be so fine. And I’m left with myself. And there’s not much there to be left with. We’re so thin, these days.

“So what do I do? I can hate the dogs, but I can’t blame them. I get their same erections, on buses and trains, right before disembarking, but other places too. I don’t like not being in control of my body like that. I don’t like sharing my bed; who knows what someone else might see me do when I’m in that other place. I could be like Cara, and I could take off a limb, or poke out an eye, just to define myself, to differentiate. But that would square me away, just as simply. She thought that through some sacrificial disfigurement she could escape easy categorization. But of course she was wrong. She only moved locations. She left our story and now lives in the same one as the Siamese twins. But it’s still just a story. I’d like advice, or maybe guidance, but I don’t know who from. I sometimes make up tragic accidents for my family, so I have an excuse for not having someone to talk to, but most of
them are still around. We’re long-lived. It’s possible they have things they could tell me, but I’m not interested in their advice; my ancestors gave up their claim to ancestry when they gave up their heritages to be new-named Americans.

“I have a friend. His name is Gideon, I think, but we all call him TB. You would like him. Because everyone likes him. His mother died when he was 12 or 13. I don’t know what of, but she must have had warning, because she left a series of cassettes behind. Tapes. They have all kinds of things on them: advice, recipes, old family idioms, stories that were passed down to her from her mother. Those things that I cannot have from my family. Well, TB has cassette players arranged around his apartment. He’s very clever, and better with his hands than any of our other friends, which is something I’ve always valued. He has them rigged so that at different times of different days of the week, they turn on, play for a few minutes, and turn off. If you sit in his apartment for a whole day, say a Tuesday, you might be told the second half of how to make a real cherry pie at four in the afternoon, and before bed, the speakers in the bedroom would read part of the story how the raven turned black. She inhabits this two room space of brick and paint. He never told us about her, about this set up, until we were over one day and he had forgotten to turn the tapes off. We sat in silence as we were lectured about table manners until he realized what was going on and ran to shut it off. The only other time it came up was a couple of days ago. Apparently some of the players are getting old and starting to break. Normally TB makes minor repairs on his own, but if they get too bad he risks warping the tape. And now it is difficult to come by new cassette players. They simply don’t make them anymore. So what happens, Ella, when there are no more ways to listen?
“I don’t know what my options are. Maybe the answer is to buy a boat. I could sail around and start a family that only knows the rolling of the waves. I’d have sons who would get sick on land, and they would ask me how I could have ever have lived on that hard, unmoving soil. I would traverse the waters, which have so many different names and characters, but are really part of the same great body, and everything would work out. There would be mistaken identities, and people would run in and out of doors just missing each other, but everything would work out in the end, because that’s what happens on ships. And see, Ella, look how you’ve already helped me. I’m saying something. On ships, we are unfettered. We owe the earth nothing. Not our bodies. I’m tired, Ella. And it all ends in a marriage.”

29

The Old Time Arcade was way out in Brooklyn, near where the amusement park at Coney Island used to be. A train and two subways travel.

Oliver got off the second one around lunch, and found a small, dark Russian restaurant, where he ate vareniki and thought about how Russian restaurants tended to be under-lit. The second subway slowly moved from the subterranean tracks to an elevated line. Oliver hadn’t realized until he’d looked out his window and seen an older woman washing vegetables in her sink. A strange thing to be underground, he thought.

It was one of those days that confirmed to Oliver he was the center of his world. When he turned on the radio as he got into the shower, the song he wanted to
hear came on. There were more green lights than red as his mother drove him to the station. People smiled at him on the bleak train platform as if they knew him from some way back when. It had been a long time since he’d had a day like that.

He passed by the aquarium and considered going in, but it had made him sad the last time, so he continued past. He thought maybe he hears a walrus barking. The air smelled like the type of cold water and trash-littered sand that attracted seagulls. It washed out all the colors.

The arcade was deep in the heart of a community of folk from the old country, immigrants who complained about later generations of immigrants. They considered themselves American, when they still spoke Ukrainian in their dreams. The name of the arcade was deceptive; while they had maintained many of their older games, they had purchased newer ones. Games that read your movements with lasers. Games that read your mind with sensors. Games with guns that shot real bullets and some that shot bright points of plasma into the darkness. Games that were more abstract, where in a headset you went spinning through colors and shapes. Oliver walked past all of these, dropping quarters sparingly. He talked to the manager, who, smiling, said that business was better than it had ever been, better even than in the golden ages of Galaga or Mortal Kombat. The crowd was almost all Japanese boys. It smelled like body spray and the sweatiness the spray failed to hide. The manager, who sounded Greek, said he’d see if the boss was in.

Oliver walked like an invisible man past the screaming striplings and their bright t-shirts, pounding on buttons like it was an ancient rite. They killed each other
in every way imaginable, long into the afternoon. They were the lost boys, gelled and feral.

While he was waiting, Oliver settled in front of a generic martial arts game with a simple joystick and red and blue buttons. There was pleasure in the destruction he wreaked, and for some time he lost himself to the group, the flashing of the lights, the music spinning.

The Greek or something manager tapped him on the shoulder and led him to a room in the back. It was silent here, luxurious and scholarly in a way that was incongruous with the establishment. An older man, impeccably shaved, was seated behind the desk.

“Hello boy,” the man said.

“Hello Grandpa,” Oliver said.

“What can I do for you? How’s school going?”

“I haven’t been in school for…” he stopped himself. “I have a project I need your help with. It’s for my studies. We’ve been working with the biographies of famous people, but I want to know more about me. About our family. Anything, really.”

But all he got was the answer he expected from the grandfather he never saw. It wasn’t that there was bad blood in the family. They just none of them had the need for each other anymore. He didn’t have his tape recorder; this is, unfortunately, only an impression of what was said:

“There isn’t anything to know. Your people were Ellis Island nobodies. They didn’t raise us; we were brought up by this country. You were alive to know some of
our parents, even if you don’t remember them. If you did, you’d remember how they became fat and satisfied with being first generation nothings. This was the arcade I grew up with. I rarely had enough money to spend here, but when I did I’d run over from our block and milk my little silver for as long as possible. After your grandmother died, after I gave up the law, I bought this place. Put in the new machines. Adopted a new family made of misplaced boys with lasers in the dark. It’s never too late to make the story your own. That’s America, Oliver.”

He made his grandson walk around the desk to give him a stiff, one-armed hug, and slipped him an equally starchy ten dollar bill. On the way out, Oliver decided to play a game of Pacman. It wasn’t fun, but he thought it was obligatory in an arcade. And there was the pull, insistent and primal, of the kill screen. If he made it to the $256^{th}$ level, the game would experience integer overload, and the programming would give way to the perfect, or the infinite. After $2^8$ there was nothing written, but if you could beat that level, you arrived at the point past knowledge. Oliver was never very good, and had never come close, but when he was young, he’d been allowed to see his grandfather more, and he used to come to watch a man play for hours and hours. He had greasy hair that framed a golden beautiful face, with dark serious eyes that locked on Donkey Kong for hours. He’d heard it happened a few times, but Oliver was there only once when the player reached the $22^{nd}$ level. He had no idea what it really meant, as Mario flickered and the timer went haywire, but he felt, somewhere deep and instinctual, that the world had turned upside down, and he’d felt delivered.
Now he wasn’t playing very well. He kept getting distracted, and losing the paths of white dots. The last quarter in his pocket slipped from his greasy game-fingers and rolled under the machine before he could put it in the slot. It was unimportant, he could have left it, but Oliver got down on his knees and groped around for it in the colored twilight. He found it, but before resurfacing noticed words written in used gum on the bottom of the console: “You can never kill all the ghosts.” Next to it was a crude depiction of a Pacman bad guy. An unseen boy tripped over Oliver’s feet, and he yelled something Oliver couldn’t understand. Back above the submachine world of game parts and sound, he decided that the gum phrase meant nothing beyond the literal.

Standing on the subway platform on the ride out, the smells of the ocean and the old country mingling in the night, Oliver thought to himself, “This is not the way.”

They spoke again two nights later. This time, she called him.

“Tell me a story,” Ella said.

“I’ve only recently begun telling stories once more.” She had been the one to pick up the phone to get in touch with him. And that gave him license to flirt. “In some way you’ve given me back a voice. But I think I’d still be rusty.”
“You keep all those notes. You create new worlds from this one. I think you can do it,” she said. He could hear the sounds of her nighttime behind her voice. Crickets. Stars grinding.


He heard, behind her voice, great slow things crawl across the astral plane.

“I have a memory of being young,” he began, in story-voice. “Most of that time I’ve forgotten. My parents sent me to a Jewish preschool. Not for any religious reasons. It was close and had a good reputation. Maybe they wanted to encourage that percentage of my blood to distinguish itself. At some time, I was taught the story of Samson. Like your Rumpelstiltskin, there were too many aspects unexplained and incongruous to sit easy with me. Delilah was not his first wife. The first was a Philistine, who gave away his riddle. Because of her, more than a thousand died, killed by Samson wielding the jawbone of an ass. At some time he ripped a lion apart with his hands. He returned to find that bees had nested in the corpse of the lion, and that they had made honey. There might have been an illustration, as he reached in to scoop some out, feeding. Samson was blinded and forced to mill grain, sometime towards the end. They took his eyes so he could not see the points of wheat adrift in the Levantine light. Underneath the rage of blindness, I think he must have been grateful, so he didn’t have to see Delilah’s face when she betrayed him. She couldn’t cut the hair herself. She sent for a servant with shears. It is unclear what that man thought of his sleeping client, or knew how he figured into the great emasculation
with his clean blade and damp cloth. His was the first suicide I ever encountered. However many times it was repeated to me, I could not fathom that man, unseeing, resting hard on the column to bring the temple down around him. I always imagined a secret ending, where he climbed out from the rubble. Where he escaped into the same obscurity that befell Delilah… The story is so disjointed, I think there must be truth in it…”

Oliver trailed off, tricked by the heavy breath of sleep on the other end.

Before he could quietly hang up, she spoke.

“That’s not your story.”

“It’s from the bible,” he said.

“You didn’t have those thoughts. Abbie used to tell me those exact things. That’s his childhood.”

Oliver considered this. He realized that he couldn’t picture the colors of Delilah’s dress from the book illustrations. And it was possible he’d read something like it among Abbott’s things, scrawled on the back of a napkin, or in one of those sparse journal entries.

“It doesn’t matter, I don’t think,” she said. He agreed and both fell asleep.
Part Three
I Will Make Wings Out Of Your Bones

31

As the summer wore on into an unprecedented October, the interviews slowed down. Oliver had spoken to 86 people, and while there was limited sense to be made of the whole picture, he couldn’t help but feel like he’d done enough of his job to feel deserved of the checks Nathan sent him in the mail. The freedom allowed him to spend more time talking to Ella. Tess had nearly disappeared completely from his mind. Every so often he’d be reminded of something they’d shared together, but they were memories of times and places, not of her. He was used to being with someone, and it was easy to transfer, unquestioningly, his comfort with intimacy from Tess to Ella. They never talked about what was going on. It would have folded and dissolved if they’d tried to stop and analyze the situation. If anyone asked, these were just conversations. Between new friends who could never possibly be lovers. And if they had only been conversations, Oliver was happy enough just having a voice back with which to converse.

And then something happened.

It began with a call from Nathan.

“The doctors were doing a routine checkup, and they noticed some difference in the types of brainwaves Abbott’s emitting.” He sounded excited but drained. “They say it means he could wake up any day. And from the sound of your reports, I think we’re ready. I’ll be in touch.”
It was nearly impossible to believe. After the last months, the thought of that sleeper waking was inconceivable. It had been such a long time since he’d thought of him as a real person, someone who had a particular voice and certain mannerisms they executed with their hands. Would he exaggerate his sneezes into tiny dramatic performances, like people had said? Would he stare deep into Oliver with those gray-green eyes that nobody seemed to forget? He called Ella to tell her.

“I’m going to come down,” she said.

It wasn’t the response he expected. He said he was surprised, with all he knew, that she’d want to be there when Abbott woke.

“I don’t,” she replied. “I don’t want him to ever see me again. I want to see him while he’s still comatose. That was the doorbell. I have to go.”

“It’s late,” he said, but she was gone.

Time had been under his control that summer. It had unraveled at his speed, on his terms while he’d conducted his search. And now the real world of events and effects was threatening that bubble. He settled into bed for the night, hardly noticing the gentle bumps coming from outside, as the blind boy time and again threw himself into the window, like some tireless stupid bird.

Oliver couldn’t get back to bed after peeing at 6:30, so he made pancakes from scratch. It was the day Ella was coming in. She said she’s lost touch with most of her friends in the city, so she was planning to stay with the Humms for at least a
few nights. It was impossible to tell how things were different with the knowledge of Ella’s imminent arrival, and perhaps it would have taken finer tools than those available to the family in order to map the changes. That the Humms possessed no seismograph or Geiger counter mattered little; the fabric of their lives was different. This morning was also one of the rare occasions Oliver was up early enough to see his father before he left for work. After he burned his finger trying to manually flip a stuck flapjack, he sat down at the table.

“How’d you sleep last night?” Oliver asked.

“Pretty well.” Oliver’s father spoke from behind a newspaper. It had become expensive, of late, to get the paper delivered to the house, but it was a luxury he valued. Perhaps to reinforce his role in the same way that his father and his father’s father did.

“That’s really good, dad.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m five. Or ninety-five.”

The rest of the meal passed in a silence that Oliver regretted.

He went back upstairs and showered. He lingered in the overlooked places, scrubbing between each toe and behind his ears, dislodging a built up history. The crud that had accumulated since Ella had entered his life scrubbed away easily. The rougher, grittier plaque from the Tess-years was more like rust, more a part of his skin rather than on it.

He walked down to the lowest floor and stood by the row of basement windows in his robe. It slipped open, and he turned his waist so he wouldn’t be exposed to a passing train of commuters. Then, he thought, what if Ella was coming
in? Slowly he moved back in front of the glass. He put an arm against the window and adopted what he imagined to be a wistful look. His hips jutted out, but not enough to make him look effeminate. He snuck a look at his reflection, and was satisfied. He knew this likeness again, and it respected his authority.

And he stood there. Every time he heard a train coming, he came back from his thoughts, and found he’d shifted out of the pose. The face looking back at him was droopy, the back curved. And every time, he straightened himself, sure that his penis was just revealed by the gap in the fabric. Once, accidentally, he brushed it against the window and he shivered.

33

During the first day of her visit, while the sun was out, things seemed doomed. The intimacy he’d felt over the phone seemed calibrated to a completely different person than the woman in his house. He could not make eye contact with her. He resented the unidentifiable smell of her that lingered around his house. The worst was when Oliver’s mother decided to show Ella his baby pictures. They sat together, like siblings, flipping back through the pages as he retrogressed before their gaze.

When the sun set, however, a change took hold. It seemed that theirs was a relationship that belonged to the darkness, to the haziness. In his living room, in the small hours which never felt small, she lay on the couch, and he lay on the floor beneath. His fingers interlocked behind his head to support it. His knees formed a
ninety degree angle, one bent up facing the ceiling, the other facing away from her, relying on the tension in the fabric of his jeans for support while audibly stretching the seams.

She watched the few throbbing stars in the sky through the glass—she was always looking at the sky—and he said things like: “I always mix it up… grass grows from the top down, which is why if you cut it, it’ll always be flat-topped. Then there’re trees which grow from the bottom up, the new sprouting out, sometimes as the core rots. And then there are people, who grow… perhaps from the inside, outwards? Is it as a uniform, expanding body, like dough?”

When she responded, she said things like: “Why do you need analogies for living?”

And they always agreed on his answers. Or he thought she did, because she would remain silent. He’d say: “How would we know how to do it without them?”

They carried on like this, or he carried on and she complied. He told her, like a mantra, like a schoolchild eager to show off, that she had given him back his power of speech. He told her that he wanted to take her to the places of the world that weren’t anything like New York or Vermont. That he could write her, or write with her, rather—that sounded better—and they could go to those places that Abbott’s phantasmal presence had inhabited. No, the places he hadn’t touched. They could run to the deepness of South America. And even though he didn’t say it, they knew that she would be his muse, that she would give him what she’d given Abbott: an extra-corporeal life lived in people’s minds and now on the pages. While he spoke,
she silently moved her feet through the air off the end of the couch in holy, serpentine loops, made formless and mysterious as obscured by the stockings.

The next day she went into the city to shop and have lunch with an old employer, and he made some phone calls. That night, after a quiet dinner with the family, during which Ella never looked comfortable in the sister’s chair, she turned to Oliver and asked, “So what is there to do around here on a Friday night?”

The ordinary response was the city, but Oliver didn’t want to concede the night to the Wallaces. He gave the only other answer.

“We drive.”

They drove. Tucked in the bubble of his mother’s silent electric car, they burrowed into the hills of Westchester County, rooting through the history that belonged to the land. Oliver pointed to the house of the music teacher from the elementary school who was arrested for the dark secrets on his computer, and the street where the wife killed her husband over a Christmas dinner. These were the memories of scandal. They were the places that children remembered first, with the flashing lights and whispers, and that demanded respect. A silent satellite, the car circled the hubs that defined and constituted suburban life. They made doughnuts around the long-gone stain where the failed banker threw himself out the building window. They sat outside the gates of one of the largest pet cemeteries in the nation. It was Ella who eventually spotted the dark silhouette of the memorial to the lone circus elephant. They drove up the hill to the high school where Oliver had thought he’d grown up, and through the azaleas that were trying to die, Oliver pointed out the windows of the classes: Mr. Harnesty, Dr. Roberts, Mrs. Tarr. The names had
meaning when he said them. DeWit, Schott, Arlen, Weinstein. The recitation, the incantation of the theogony, Oliver thought. When he turned the dial, the temperature in the car rose. When he pushed a button slightly higher on the console, a voice that belonged to public radio filtered in. He opened his mouth wide and in his head sounded the private burst of his ears clearing. It was a rush. He had returned to his throne.

They drove west, to the banks of the Hudson River. They rolled down the windows, and the late summer air mixed with the smells from the water drifted in. There was distant noise from the bridges. To the right were the elongated lights of the Tappan Zee, to the left the soaring points of the George Washington, in the same, comforting places they were in when he used to take so many girls to that spot. Someone who sounded like Tom Waits took over the radio, while Ella talked about how much bridges fascinated her. The pictures of the men-as-ants, scrambling up cables and across beams that simply stopped in space. She wanted a picture in a coffee table book of her doing something courageous and industrial. No, she changed her mind, it didn’t matter if it was in the book. Just experiencing the dizzying heights among the metal was enough. He smelled her and it fit perfectly with the night.

He moved the car in broad strokes across the landscape. They drove past the bowling alleys with the bright neon pins and the clusters of young people standing outside, pretending to smoke. He showed her the perfect specimen of strip malls; that squat species, he called them, laughing. In one of those stretches of stores was his favorite Indian restaurant. He told her he liked that curry phenomenon, where for days after he could dig his nose deep into his armpit and smell the meal, or some
version of the smell that was both of food and himself. He told her he liked the tangibility of the relationship. He purposefully mixed up, “We eat what we are,” so he could shake his head and show off his laugh. And Oliver saw that he’d been delivered. Through Abbott Wallace, he’d recovered something of himself.

They drove north to the apple orchard where Oliver had first been stung by a bee. They sat in the parking lot, among the crude illustrations advertizing fresh pies. It had been a confusing experience, trying to understand the danger and pain that came from the small, pretty whirring around the rotting fruit on the ground. Anonymous pain after a day filled with wonder, stretching his picker with the aid of his father, up into the trees and reaching in amidst the accidental stems and leaves for the apple. A milkshake made the sting better. His parents had told him it was a magic milkshake. That was back when words could still alter the universe around him.

They drove to a parking lot, exactly like the other parking lots, and parked. He made the radio quiet. The way that he moved, on tenterhooks, silly, made him look like a jumper. He was infected by the night and by its easy revelations. And as she looked up through the sunroof at the sky, he slowly moved forward, propelled by the cheap, metallic smell of circumstance, and brushed his face against her cheek. She ignored it, until his hand began to move across her shoulder. She took it, gently returning to him his lost property.

“But I’m Abbott’s keeper,” he whispered as if it meant something.

“You’re wonderful, Oliver, but it isn’t…”

“I’m his heir.”
“This has nothing to do with him,” she said, her eyes fixed, refusing to come down from the firmament. “Please, you’ll embarrass yourself.”

He grappled ugly-like with the bra-straps he’d known existed all evening under her shirt.

“We’re the same person. You are the one who connects us, and you give us both what we need. I love you.” He felt, in his bowels, the pangs of desperation.

“Or by the transference of property…”

“Stop,” she said, and this time her voice, still quiet, rang clearly and with the authority and anger and the sadness that come with the memory of some great fall. And what had seemed lucid in his mind now sounded bastardized. He pulled his hands back in, clutching at the back of his neck, his elbows sticking up into the air like wings of bone and flesh. Tears fell from his eyes without him making any noise other than a hard and heavy breathing. For some reason, for which he would always be grateful, her look of fury, so profound and perfect, turned to something like comfort or sympathy, but without hint of disgust.

“I don’t want to talk about this after tonight. But what happened to you happened to me, and happened to other people. Somehow, even from his bed and from sleep, Abbott Wallace claimed another soul. You don’t love me. You love him. Like I still love him. And he used both of us. Don’t ever be like him.”

They drove back through the quiet streets, respecting the silence. The purr of the car lulled the passengers. Penny epiphanies were easy to come by in the night. At each red light, as they waited at empty intersections, the passengers grew more
comfortable, closer than ever before. When they were back on his street, pulling slowly in, he asked the one question he had left in him.

“What I don’t understand is this,” he said. “His life is intoxicating. It seems taken from the pages of a novel. But every time I’ve followed up, when I’ve tried to look past the image to the celluloid of the film, it’s all real.” The lights turned off with the ignition. “He did these things.”

“Abbie lived to create a story; he existed in a way that demanded to be written. And, perhaps as a consequence or a side-effect, or maybe it’s the same thing, he lived only to be loved.”

They brushed their teeth together; he turned away from the toilet and then the mirror as she peed. They went to their separate rooms, but Oliver found that he couldn’t fall asleep. By the light from the clock, he saw the boy outside the window, sitting on the grass with his back turned to the bedroom. He seemed to be watching the sky. Oliver wondered what he saw. When he exhausted the possibilities, he climbed out of bed and groped his way along the hallways to the guestroom. He curled up on the thick carpet outside the door and fell into a deep sleep.

34

When Oliver woke, it took him time to realize something was different. Rising from the imprint of his image in the shag carpet, he walked to his room, turned off his alarm, reached a hand out the window to gauge the temperature, and climbed into the shower. It was cooler. The summer was breaking.
On the train into the city, the people in adjacent seats smiled at Ella and Oliver like they were all in on a big secret. Like they were a part of something that’d be written down, or possessed the ungainly knowledge that they’d be part of the historical. Passengers reached over and squeezed the legs of those close to them, chuckling in anticipation.

Before they lost service underground, Oliver sent Nathan a message to make sure he’d get to the restaurant after them.

“Who was that?” Ella asked, leaning over his phone to look.

“My mother,” he replied.

He was planning on surprising her by having Nathan join them at lunch. He hadn’t told Nathan that Ella was in town, either. It would be a pleasant shock for both parties. Most of Oliver, especially after his breakdown the night prior, wanted them to meet like this because he thought it would be a welcome reunion. Both could use to make peace with the other. But some small part of him wanted to see their reactions; it was still a possibility that they’d been involved, that they had caused Abbott’s distress. It wasn’t malice that drove him, but a desire for the truth, or maybe a truthful conclusion. To walk away with all the ends in proper order.

“Do you have any gum?” she turned to him and asked. “I have a weird flavor in my mouth.”

They decided to walk through the newly cooled air to get across town.

Outside the Central Park Zoo, a man with a drawn-on sad face was making balloon animals for passersby. How serious he was, and how silly the latex pink giraffes
looked with the flesh seals in the background. The children ran about their feet like
the leaves that were just starting to swirl around.

They got to the restaurant where Nathan and Oliver had first met. It was
empty. The tables and chairs that had sat on the sidewalk all summer had been
rushed indoors at the first sign of autumn. The glasses of mimosa the waiter brought
over, still wet, slid on their own across the tabletop a few inches before settling. The
pair clinked. Oliver stood up as Nathan entered, waving. Ella turned around and
smiled. Nathan didn’t approach the table, but remained framed by the strong light
coming through the front windows.

Oliver, the clever one, said, “Don’t be shy. There’s someone I want to
introduce you to.”

Nathan walked over and Ella stood up to meet him.

“Hello Ella.”

“Hello Abbott.”

He started up the movie in his head. A long shot through the window as he
took a break from unpacking the boxes, settling on a crate of books, his elbows on his
knees, his chin resting on his fists. A shot of the silent stereo, and then to his profile.
He discovered his speakers were dead when he unpacked them, maybe crushed in the
move, and so he provided the soundtrack. A steel guitar, slow and dirty. The camera
moves around the room, but settles close to Oliver’s face. He looked up and his
eyes—as yellow as they were in the beginning—stared directly into the lens. He began to speak.

“‘It’s strange for me, to take over like this. I’ve been so used to hiding behind the words. To being words. But at some point the curtains and painted scrims come falling down. You find yourself in a… synonymless situation. You can’t see me, but if I were still narrating, I’d tell you that I’m smiling, if a bit nervously.’”

That’s better.

I was lost coming out of that restaurant. Not confused, because it all made sense in some way, but unmoored. Without thinking about it, I made my way uptown and into the hospital. He was still lying there, that body which had been Abbott Wallace. I talked to a nurse I’m familiar with. I could tell she was unnerved, hearing me ask questions about the man I’d spent so much time with. His name was Todd Wallace. He had been a marine, came out of the war without a scratch, and gotten into a motorcycle accident five weeks after returning. They didn’t think he had much of a chance of waking up. I suppose Abbott had picked him for the similarity of their names and faces. As long as I didn’t find a good picture anywhere, this Wallace would do.

I sat with that body for a long time. Most of the day. I just couldn’t get over the shock that I knew nothing about him. It was clear from the amount of time I’d been there alone that he had no family to take care of him. That he’d been adopted by Abbott was strangely advantageous for both sides. There was a body, and there was a benefactor. And now that the charade was over, this man would be abandoned. I thought, sitting in that familiar chair, maybe he still is the key to my rehabilitation.
He must have a story of his own that needs to be told. Maybe it would take me to the Middle East, or to his small hometown on the banks of the Mississippi River. I thought, that afternoon when the air was so much cooler than it had been in months, that Todd Wallace could give me back my voice where Abbott Wallace had failed. But when I left, when it got dark, I knew he’d be another dead end. I promised myself, though, that I’d still visit him, still read to him. Another advantageous relationship on both sides. Hold on, imaginary camera. Follow me while I make some tea in my new kitchen. I’ll keep talking.

That night I got home and went straight to bed. While I’d been at the hospital, Ella had been to the house and taken her small duffel. She even managed to rid the rooms of her smell. I think about her, still. All the time. How she never was a part of what Abbott and I were trying to do. She never cared to be a vehicle or a vessel in someone else’s immortalization. She was a bystander who didn’t want to get sucked into another narrative. There wasn’t anything special about her, even. Just a beautiful woman who became extraordinary because of how much other people invested in her. I’ll come back to them in a bit. I promise. Not that there’s too much to say. I will never know what happened between those two. I could make something up, if it’d be more satisfying that way. So, in flashback:

“I didn’t expect this,” he said, after I’d left.

“I did. Was this all an elaborate scheme to get me back?” she said.

“No. Maybe deep down. No.”

“You know I can’t be with you.” Give her voice that same absoluteness from our night in the car. Picture that same small squint in her eyes.
“I do know that,” he said.

Maybe things happened, maybe they never saw each other again. I believe that his project wasn’t about her. That it was about him and she was so much a part of that, it was impossible for her to keep clear. But right, as I said, more on them to come.

I slept a lot of the next day, after the reveal. My parents didn’t ask questions, which is one of the many things I love about my parents. When I did wake, after I showered, after I threw on some old sweats and sunglasses, I walked into town, purposefully walking past the Starbucks to our local coffee shop. The girl behind the counter, maybe a couple of years younger than I, complimented my sweater, the first one I’d worn in months.

After she gave me my coffee, she gave me this funny look and said she recognized me from somewhere; that maybe it was just the dark glasses but I looked like a movie star. It threw me off. When does that ever happen to me? Nobody that looks like me has ever been famous. She was unexpected, with her robust smile. Taller and blonder than anyone I’ve been attracted to. But in that at-first innocuous face I suddenly saw the possibility of salvation. She was someone who could love me, and who I could love. But for the second time in two days, I forced myself into comprehension; this girl could not be my deliverance.

Back home, the encounter made me think about Ella. And then my thoughts turned abruptly to Tess. Because however hard I tried to repress her in these pages, she kept returning. She would, I’m sure, object to this manuscript, and the ways in which she is and isn’t portrayed. I’m responsible for those omissions, for attempting them, or for needing them. I’m here because I put everything of myself into Tess, and when she left me there wasn’t anything I had of my own. But there I go again.
Perhaps that’s unfair. To give her a voice, if only for a moment, she’d probably say that it was over because so little of me seemed left. I miss her.

I found the real Nathan Wallace. I needed to. I told him what happened. He was embarrassed, clearly. He told me he’d been on the west coast for a couple of months, coordinating a summer lecture series, and Abbott must have capitalized on his absence. What he gave me was an apology, not an explanation. But that was satisfying enough. I don’t think he was capable of filling in the holes. He was too ordinary, and too satisfied being ordinary. In certain ways I couldn’t help but be sorry for him. It was a credit to Abbott’s performance that I recognized so many of his mannerisms, saw his intentions before they were clear. Abbott had inhabited his brother in a satisfyingly similar way.

When I felt more composed, I got together for a jar or two at Remus’ with Hopkins, who I’d neglected recently. He told me he’d seen that an apartment had gone up for rent down the block. He’d talked to the landlady for me, and if I was interested, as soon as I was ready I could put down the first month. And here I am. Moving in with the money I made from this summer’s strange work.

It’s hard not to think about them, the people that inhabited Abbott’s world. I considered, for some time, trying those numbers again, sure the lines would be disconnected. I had theories of Abbott constructing a history for himself, populating it with actors for me to discover, friends who were in on the joke, perhaps. Maybe he thought it’d be so compelling my dad would pick it up for publishing. I don’t think so. I think it was real. Abbott Wallace used me in his search for immortality. He wanted to live in my writing. For the first days I resented him. I sat on my computer
and stared at this file. I deleted it once, but immediately saved it from the virtual trash. It ended up being a conversation with Hopkins that changed my mind. We went walking along Fifth Avenue, to visit TB behind his counter and take in the crowds. I told him I wanted to destroy the project. That deleting it was too easy; that we should print it out and burn it on Jones Beach. He turned to me, and he said, deeply earnest, “If you deny him this, then all of us will disappear with him.”

And he was right. So I did finish. I will not destroy you, Abbott Wallace, however tempting it might be. But perhaps what he didn’t anticipate, or maybe what he did, is that the written needs the writer. Ella thought that Abbott pulled me in and dropped me, but she was wrong. Her, Tess, Todd Wallace… there was a limit to what they could do for me. But Abbott, he wanted to live in these words, and now they’re as much mine as his. For even if we never see each other again, we are, here, deeply bound. Not bad company. I owe him; he dragged me back into life. To make a character, to have a story, the author must exist. But he also must walk away. I’m no Abbott. I may be sitting in this apartment alone right now, in this city of strangers, but in a moment I’m closing this computer and going outside. Without a narrator, without knowledge of what the ending will be like. The problem is, it’s difficult… I could just stay and write for my life. Preserve myself in this safe haven…

If you could see me right now, you’d know I’m still smiling. It was wistful, sad for a moment, but now it’s a grin again. This has to end so I can begin again. I apologize for my roughness, for being unable, so much of this time, to find the right words. If I could, I’d like to leave you with this: yesterday, I was trying to think of how to finish, if I could finish, and as I was staring at the page, I started writing over
and over again, “I am not a character. I am not a character. I am not a character.”

Maybe I could click my heels out of the text. But when I’d worn my fingers down so
it felt like they were just boney stubs, I looked at the screen and saw myself trapped
in those words, still a stick-figure protagonist screaming for attention. It’s time to
put down the pen and start living. I’m going now.