

Free from Hunger

a novel

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Novel complete at 78,943 words

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Part One

Lance Boyle

“I am a man of no consequence.”

“Just look at its breast-feathers; like a jewel. It’s murder to shoot them. The Burmese say that when you kill one of these birds they vomit, meaning to say, ‘Look, here is all I possess, and I’ve taken nothing of you. Why do you kill me?’ I’ve never seen one do it, I must admit.”

— George Orwell, *Burmese Days*

“You’re choosing madness as a method, and it takes courage to do that, no question; extreme positions impress people these days; but if this method does not lead to its goal, I’m afraid that in the end, all you’ll be left with is the madness.”

— Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Pledge*

Chapter One

Here is a small story of unintentional cruelty. My parents, both wonderfully naïve and fanciful, named me Lancelot Andrew Boyle, immediately proceeding to call me Lance, and by the age of twelve, when homophonous proclivities have already taken shape, I had become a hyphenated word play. Boyle, boil, it didn't make the slightest difference. I became and remained Lance-A-Boil, the tall, thin, mildly introspective, awkwardly dressed young boy, gangly adolescent, and finally young man with the unfortunate, yet hysterical name. I found freedom the moment the diploma hit my hand at twenty-two, and entered an outwardly couth world where a man by the name of Richard Ring—my first and only business partner—can be called Dick with a straight face and no hint of homophonous high jinks. By then, though, very few things bothered me.

Dick has long since left San Francisco, taking his name from our shingle, to try his fortunes in New York. My new shingle, those stenciled markings on the door, reads: "Boyle Investigative Services, Inc." And I go it alone.

A hardness is required for this business; an honesty with the self and expectations; an understanding of limitations; patience and a facing of failures; allowing doubt to seep, but never to rot the framework; a banishment of pride, wisdom found in gutters easily rinsed-off; justice a notion held in reserve like an abiding faith; a re-examination and refutation of ideals. I've made the lists. Love is difficult in finding, its safekeeping a brutal endeavor.

My value lies solely in reputation. Attentiveness. Thoroughness. Efficiency. I bill on a cost-plus basis, biweekly. I expect prompt payment. I allot for one misunderstanding. To Caesar, that which can be expensed, is. That which can't, isn't. Certain things ought to remain as simple as possible.

I am paid to listen and remember. I am the rock upon which verbal waves wash to cleanse themselves. I am not in the business of healing, just as surely as I am not in the business of forgiveness. There is hurt out there. And there are sources of hurt out there that replenish at an astonishing rate. We come at each other with a ferocity mistakenly believed reserved for war. The human equation must be the most delicate bond in nature, its disequilibrium ready fodder for compost. No amount of nerves can steel the girders of endless dispassion. I am part of that equation, after all. But my options are limited. Non-existent. It falls upon me to take what has been given, to right the one-sided wrong. I deliver on my promises.

I am paid to watch and remember. I have a searing dispassion in watching people. To do more is folly. To judge is to participate. And I have no desire to participate. I am passionate in that regard. Where are people going? The frenzy is thick, blurred to the point of anonymous whitewash, noise-filled and obtrusive. I isolate and draw-out. I get into the places where secret things happen. I capture the smallest moments in time, people making prisoners of themselves for reasons that remain their own. But I know what takes them to these places, to become the people they've become. I know the reason for betrayal and self-destruction. It's in us all, held at bay with the greatest of efforts. But it will surface. It will come ashore. And it will feed whatever hunger allowed.

It's there in secret and plain sight.

I am standing at the window of my one-room office. I have opened it despite the frigid San Francisco morning. It is early July, and I know more fog is collecting off the coast. It will bear down relentlessly on the city for the next two months. Then, just as expectedly, the sun will return and warm us all.

I look down on the street. An antique street car is passing on its way to Fisherman's Wharf. Its bell clangs. Its metal wheels screech in their metal tracks. Without a doubt, alert tourists crammed into the vintage car peer-out at the scene below. There they find drunks, whores, addicts, runaways, and cripples in various stages of emaciation or bloating or corruption, congregating with as much self-consciousness as Coit Tower standing atop Telegraph Hill. Beggars, all. They are as much a tourist attraction as anything else in this city, a novelty to behold, rarely experienced. Their words, smells, and hidden diseases assault the senses as a prelude to an assault on sympathy, then on the wallet. It is too volatile a world to be considered quaint.

Nothing exists in isolation. Like competing ecosystems, there are few clear lines of demarcation to separate and make distinct. We live on a plain of blending, where the itinerants of the immoral world wash into the fixed moral one. It is a transaction-based place—this plain of blending—where money quiets the naggings of the largest of hungers for the smallest of desires. It is a bazaar, no secret at all, readily understood. They may be dismissed as miscreants or dangerous or parasitical by the comparatively affluent en route to their respective happiness, but I've come to see few differences between them all.

There may filth and degradation down there, but humanity is worn on sleeves. There can never be confusion between lusting and loving, just as there can be no confusion between caring and manipulation. There is elemental goodness. I see it every day. There is kindness on the streets. One man will feed another. And a woman will touch, and clean, and kiss the wounds of the fallen.

For a fee, maybe, but comfort nonetheless. It is there to be seen, beneath my office window, at noon, as it would be anywhere across the city in the quiet hours of the morning. The day never ends on the need for compassion. It can't. It is a part of who we are. It is part of who it is we want to become.

The streetcar is now past, on its way to better parts of the city. I drop a quarter from the window. It bounces and clangs against the pavement. A man sitting against the building wall twists and tilts his head and neck to look up at me. Our eyes meet. Neither acknowledges the other. He looks away, in the direction the coin may have bounced. I return to my desk and sit. I have only come to the office having forgotten a file last night. I will need it for Saturday morning.

Tomorrow, Friday, is Independence Day. The third day of July is Gwen's birthday. I give myself these two days for remembrance. I have a framed picture of the two of us on the desk. It is the same one I have mounted on my living room wall. In them, we are standing on the grassy lawn outside our home in Calistoga. The provincial life allows for lawns on which to pose. There and then, Gwen's longer, thicker bare arm is around my naked, narrow shoulders. She is a full head taller than me. We have near identical toothy smiles, exaggerated to the point of absurdity. We look the part of two adolescents having just completed a daring heist of forbidden candy, or the artful extraction of money from a father's wallet. My wet, clingy swimming trunks hang just below my waist, skewed at the hips as if I'd just run a great distance. My hair is matted, my chest hairless and flat, and my knees as wide as my thighs and calves. My toes are obscured by the green grass. Gwen's toes are upturned, as if she is perfectly balanced on her heels. All ten are painted a light red, but only eight show clearly. Her calves are smooth and shiny. Her legs above the knees are shaped like a vase, growing out and away into her hips. Her one-piece bathing suit, a solid navy blue, covers her hips, stomach, and the work-in-progress of approaching womanhood. Her face is round, her nose slim and straight, and her eyes as wide as mine narrow. The wet tips of her brown hair brush her shoulders. I look frail and accidental standing beside her. We were both nicely tanned that summer.

Our parents were allegorically reminiscent of complex plants with a single root system. They tended to each others needs with the diligence one expects from two people painfully and dependently in love. They weren't demonstrative with their physical and playful affections as much as they were constant in their attention and proximity. Dad wrote novels of fantastical fables, and Mom took care of all four of us.

At night, after dinner, Dad's story time. Mom would invariably be a landed creature—a ferret, a weasel, a lioness, a tigress, an orange monkey, a harmless spider—or a fish living in the

warm, blue waters of the world. Gwen and I would be her offspring. He would read from his notebook, pacing the room, his hand punctuating sentences, his voice rhythmically pitching back and forth. Thirty minutes of bright verbal images, absurdity, and high adventure. And maybe a moral squirreled away for later use.

After teeth brushing, Gwen and I would flop into our beds to hear one more—just one more—always shorter, always filled with exceedingly silly rhymes.

We giggled through our prayers.

Amen.

Goodnight kisses.

The room darkened.

The places of memories. Vague sounds, vague words, the sensations filling the voids, still in our beds whispering through childish secrecies, fighting sleep if for only one more idea shared, one more utterance, sleep coming nonetheless, Gwen's "goodnight, Lance" at the very right moment.

And the next day.

And the next night.

Growing despite ourselves and the threads of continuity that held us in place.

It was the certainty of belonging, a defined point on a circle. It was Gwen getting first to where I'd be going, arriving as I did on well-trodden, familiar fields, the habits perpetuated, even as Dad's stories changed and bedtimes delayed further into the night. Always the flurry of late night chatter. Always the goodnight wish. Always the good sleep.

And Gwen did get first to the places I went, only now with other girls to keep her company. This I remember vividly. They moved as a tall, slender pack through a Calistoga seemingly enclosed by vast and impassable expanses of vineyards and orchards between the frenzy of the harvest and the stillness of resting fields. I followed, catching whatever glimpses I could of bare arms, legs, midriffs. But I would tire of those things that seemed so much like imperatives, and return to the ball fields to be called Lance-a-boil and to re-hear its definition: "to lance is to cut, and a boil is that pus pimple on your butt!"

Then laughter.

Then the picking of teams. I could play ball well enough to be forgiven the sins of my name. Then—then—came my mother's sing-song voice from the distance: "LANCE BOYY-YYLE! DINNER!" Then more laughter as my running legs took me away.

Home.

Chapter Two

“Happy Birthday, Gwen!” I say aloud and alone, raising a tall glass to our picture mounted on the wall. I’m sitting in an armchair in my apartment with my back to the window. I’m drinking a toniced-down gin and tonic. I swirl the two limes and ice with a finger thinking of how we have aged, a miracle of sorts to have come this far and remember the general and specific as if along one long thread.

When Gwen and I lay in our beds at night, even as teenagers, the waking day faded gently. It would die because it had passed, we felt, but it still lived for those fleeing last moments as we talked to each other past midnight. We were remembering the day just passed, wondering aloud what tomorrow would bring. School or friends or crushes were certain things we knew would be there the next day. We talked about them as living things. And our parents, down the hallway, behind the closed door, still in the living room, would be there as well. We could hear their voices and laughter much clearer now than when we were younger. They remained the final sounds we heard before falling asleep, after the light had been relieved, after Gwen’s good night wish from the dark, and my response. It was all we needed, all we knew.

What could we know of life outside Calistoga? What could any child? We rarely went to it, and it never came to us. Only when Gwen started her college application process did it begin to arrive. We brought it to us, the months-long eyeing of the mailbox waiting for its decisions, rejections and despondencies at first, then its acceptances that negated the rejections, blossoming into options—San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Los Angeles. On three separate weekends, three trips down the coast to gauge fits, to measure feels. Indecision, followed by decisions, Los Angeles ruled out, followed by Santa Cruz, until San Francisco remained standing. Then euphoria among the friends who’d made identical decisions as if by kismet. Planning could begin with earnest collaboration, their expanding worlds begging for increased attentions. They busied themselves.

Whatever the outcome, I would be left alone in our room. I thought about that certainty. It felt daunting. It didn’t feel right for someone my age to be acting the little boy in search of invisible injustices. An embarrassing secret. It felt like a crimeless punishment. For something I would never do. A prolonged panic, the boy abandoned in the unfamiliar place, no fate crueler, the long brooding, self-pity like an applied balm soothing points of contact. Applied with guilt ...

... washed away with seemingly unthinking consideration—

“Wouldn’t it be something if Lance joined me in two years? It’s a great school.” That was Gwen to Mom and Dad at dinner.

Yes, it would.

Light. And a different type of guilt.

“Whatever he wants,” someone replied.

Two years didn’t seem like such a long time to wait. Two baseball seasons. Two birthdays. No time at all.

The crowning hurrah would be Gwen’s eighteenth birthday. Dad already had it planned in his notebook. There’d be games, four different types of barbecued meats, cold drinks from metal tubs, a band, fireworks. Everyone we knew would be invited, Dad made the long list, friend’s of friends just as welcome. Preparations began weeks in advance, a division of labor quickly established.

Her day came, a hot bright one.

The afternoon moved through a smoky reverie, eating more than is normally eaten, asking the band to play songs they didn’t know, pockets of sugared activity, boys and girls, more sedate ones of men and women talking through their beers, all a din, all racing against the long setting sun.

The evening ended with a display of light. Dad set-off fireworks into the night sky. There was a reverent hush as heads tilted skyward. There was no complexity to the lights, only their anemic trajectories, arcing, exploding, and falling. Sounds of approval left the group, only to be consumed by ensuing stillness and renewed anticipation. Gwen and I sat together on the lawn, our bodies resting fully against stiff arms behind our backs. I felt her physical proximity. She may place herself distant from me, for as long as she had to, but there could be no distance between us. I had thought it through. On my own. It made sense. The only thing missing would be her nearness. And that, I knew, didn’t matter. “Happy Birthday, Gwen,” I whispered then, feeling triumphant in my fashion, not looking at her, not really intending for her to hear me.

Chapter Three

This drink has warmed, too watery to drink. The fog outside the window still drifts by. I wish I were back in Calistoga if not to celebrate Gwen’s birthday, then to at least see the sun and stand outside on the warm grass. But the house is gone now. I sold it for this place, this confining space. Even in here, I feel in the wide open, out among the very things needing escape, the pulsing of energy, the weight of people in movement colluding to cacophony. It is not the kind of place to hide, or ease into rest. Somewhere else is. But there is no leaving San Francisco. Not

even for these few days. Too much accrued life lives here, too much knowing remains to be had. To walk away would be to run away, running away tantamount to dying. I stand my ground.

Mom and Dad are gone, passing within two years of each other. I have Dad's stories, letters, and books stored in heavy wooden boxes. They don't speak to me absent his living flourishes, voices, and winking earnestness. When I want to visit him—to have him appear before me like coming home—I enter a bookstore and pull one of his books. Inside the back cover, I can see a picture of the four of us, so young still, Gwen and I peeking around from under his outstretched arms, Mom in front, leaning her smallish frame against his body, her head resting fully against his chest. We may have been posed then, but there's joy there. I can turn to the title page, reading the dedication:

“To You who are me”

I can turn deeper and read ...

Between Chihuahua in Mexico and California's Central Valley, men move along dirt roads in either direction with an intensity, earth's tenders consumed by their role, the memory of the lush valley ripe on their minds, the toil had or to be had liberating to the man accustomed to exertions. Reynoso is such a man among them, moving northward, the nearest man to him two hundred paces ahead, a long bag slung over his shoulder, his steps in harmony with his thoughts. They are good thoughts, focused thoughts, thoughts of another time, of another road leading to another place, times and places he'd been to. For in his bag a silver box. A box like none other. A gilded box like an attentive god, responsive to dreams and desires, cautionary and liberating, terrifying and exhilarating. But always tempting. A time machine, this. A simple man transported to past and future selves, for good men shall always work the earth. This is the story of one such man.

I have it memorized, Reynoso, travelling through time. What had started as after dinner vignettes grew in form and style. Complicated action. Complicated morality. Complicated consequences. “Like life,” Dad said more than once. And there were complexities because what could Reynoso possibly know about the places he would go, Russia in the time of serfs, of Japan under the Kamakura shogunate, of the peasantry of the tottering Carolingian Empire? But Dad gave Reynoso great dignity in coming to terms with his complexities, despite hardships and

superstitions, his prodding, his toils, his fears. “Never underestimate the man,” Dad said. “Stay away from contempt. A man will find his way. Give him his wonder.”

Before Dad’s pen fell away, before he left us, he brought Reynoso back home to stay, to the land he knew best, back to his family, back to the good woman who understood him and who bore him a son. He taught the boy what he’d come to know, as best he could with the time given him, the sanctity of the land and hands, the shame of willful ignorance, the pride of finding the terms of one’s life. The son has the gilded silver box now, out there somewhere forever working the earth. Reynoso would always be a generous man. He’s part of my inheritance now, but his royalties I give away.

Mom’s time without Dad was brief. One of life’s mercies. She never felt him gone. There was no mourning, no sentimental longings, only calm, deliberate talk about him in the present tense. A biding if time, their common root system having found a common illness. Missing and illness gives and takes. To recreate memories for her could take her only short distances. We drove our valley for long hours, the natural world’s sights and smells ours to dream through. We drove aimlessly through the vineyards and orchards of our younger days, maybe we still up there hiking the brownish hills, or grasping at low hanging fruit for our baskets, Mom looking out the window as if we still were, bringing back memories to share. I remembered what I could.

And after dinner, I read to her Dad’s stories. I could never replicate his interpretations, but I brought to her what I’d come to know. I brought to her laughter and surprise, nods and smiles that kept me turning the pages. But all stories come to their end, and I slowed my pace to draw out those last vestiges of her merriment. We would still be back in the story as I placed the glass of tap water on her nightstand and kissed her goodnight.

I closed the hallway door and settled into her chair. I sat in long silence. I was home, but I was nowhere. The bad son in me’s thoughts took me to her passing, a time I saw with the clarity of certainty, as if I should be in sadness already. I gripped the chair’s armrest with hope flirting with prayer in contest against moribund thoughts. Nothing within me would compensate. I gave myself time to will away the inevitable. I released with vehemence unrelieved. I missed her already.

I didn’t cry at Mom’s funeral. I hadn’t at Dad’s. The drive back to the city lasted my lifetime. Every inch I moved created a distance I could never recover. I moved at a blinding clip. I wanted to be the small boy again, alternating between tears and reassurances. But I no longer knew what could follow the tears. So I did the coward’s thing, gripping the steering wheel instead, my dry eyes on the road ahead.

Chapter Four

I stir the undrinkable liquid, limp lime pulp suspended throughout. Fear. I'm thinking of fear. All the unknowns funneled into one place. I've tried the role of the supplicant. My prayers have long since remained unanswered. There's solace in knowing something touchable, a picture, a voice recording, a verifiable explanation. A clawing at certainty. A rebellion against faith, Galileo at his telescope untethering us into a universe of ugly truths. I have been there for a good long while, familiar and fluent. I can speak its language and transcribe for those in need. There is calm in knowing. Fear can then give way to knowledgeable options, the only ones I can provide, where revenge and punishment vie for predominance. But my job is done long before their execution. I only hear the rumors.

I see temptation nullifying reason. And reason begs us not to harm another. Because temptation is about pain. It is about breaching the dam of self-restraint to quench the most base of thirsts. And this thirst is always—*always*—accompanied by a ravenous hunger as undeniable as the thirst. Quenching whets, feeding the hunger. I've seen the hunting grounds. They're as mundane and obvious as the street beneath my office window, or the playgrounds where wealthy people play, or in the tall buildings where people strive upward. And from these places radiates deception, degeneration, addiction, revenge, rape, and murder. Someone is left standing, and someone is left low, discarded. Someone is fed, someone is consumed. No treatise on human relations could ever hope to describe the nuances of the hunger to fill. It simply is. And simply will be.

I have watched people running from their real and perceived demons. I have watched people running toward their hoped-for demons. It's a tangled, terrible mess. If it weren't, I'd have been made redundant, maybe never have existed. It's a game, a posturing between what is right, what could be made right, and what is willfully wrong. Oh ... it is sex being confused for passion, being confused for love, being confused for mastery, being confused for dignity, being confused for a life well-lived. For brief moments. Until the need arises again.

But there are airs of strength. There are always airs. Maybe it's hope seeping through layers of bitter experience. There's no shame in taking the step back. But fear is easier. It returns again, peeling away at the remaining layers of sanity. And anything becomes possible.

There is madness there in the dealings we have with one another. Just as there is a madness in the dealings we have with ourselves, intertwined to points of indistinguishability. It's a terrible admission that can only be assuaged, if at all, personally, one mind at a time, searching-

out individual truths. We are no more than a few degrees separated from one another, they and I. And only for the time being. We are all destined to descend into a peculiar form of madness, none perpetually immune from the ravishes of this hunger, all just biding time.

I stir. I know the safest place for me to be is somewhere in the past, with my parents, with my sister. The Calistoga I knew neither asked questions, nor demanded answers of me. There was no hunger there among the boundless. And at home, there was no consumption—we all remained standing together. Even as we were sitting, exhausted, yet elated, as we were towards midnight on Gwen's eighteenth birthday, our thoughts were of the day just passed and the one to follow. The house was quiet then, and clean. Dad voice:

“Well, that was quite a thing! Gwen, what are you doing next year around this time?”

Mom giggled, adjusting her head resting in Dad's lap.

“It's Lance's turn next,” Gwen said.

“It'll be your sixteenth,” Dad said looking at me, “I'll retire from driving that day!”

Mom let out a muffled sigh.

“He can pick me up from school,” Gwen said to Dad, “we'll take the long way home.”

I imagined driving the coast road up, cutting inland to the valley. I knew the way.

“We'll see about that. For now let's get Mom to bed,” Dad said, gently lifting her head. She stirred, opening her eyes, smiling. “Good night, babies,” she said, raising herself off the couch. They made their way down the hallway.

Gwen and I sat on the floor for a few moments in silence. “You can come with us tomorrow, if you'd like. It'll be fun,” she said in a low voice. I would have gone, if it were only the two of us, but not with all those other girls. I told her I'd promised to play ball in the afternoon. Which was true. “I'll tell you all about. I'll remember everything. I promise,” she said.

Later, I lay in bed in the quiet dark. I could hear the faint tapings of the ball-peen hammer I had used to build Gwen's birthday present. I had bought the cedar wood with my own money, sanded it, etched designs into the lid and sides, varnished, and wrapped it. I gave it to her at breakfast that morning.

“Oh, Lance! It's beautiful,” she said, breathing deeply the scented wood.

“It's a place to hide the little things,” I said.

“I love it,” she said. “I just love it.”

My hands had felt good on the tools, a dexterity, a fluidity with how my thoughts had imagined the box to be. It had been the same with the bookshelf Mom. And the bench for Dad. It would have been the same with the picture frames I would be making for Christmas. I already had

the pictures developed. I already had the solvent to make the glass shine like a mirror. I fell asleep thinking of the intricate box and the little things it could hold. I feel asleep imagining a work shed filled with the tools I could use, a wall covered in handmade designs, a work table clean and ready.

Sometime, I still do.

The day here too has ended, the light long gone away. To move from this armchair would be an effort. And I lack it. All on an empty stomach. My appetite doesn't move me. But I will move, to place the half-full glass in the kitchen sink, to find my way down a darkened hallway, to the bed where I sleep. In just a few more moments.

Chapter Five

July fourth dawns and slips into early morning. I lay awake in bed. By noon, I am showered, shaved, fed and seated again in the living room. The same low-lying fog strolls down the street as if to a casual appointment. There is a piercing chill that mocks the summer, a wool sweater helping me to forget July in San Francisco. I imagine most of my neighbors have fled the city in search of better conditions to commemorate their independence. Only the romantics, the adventurous, and the ill-informed come to San Francisco on this day. I think the confined spaces and crowded places give a sense of unity, of purpose. And the young suburban and country ones come here because the young urban ones are always here. I think it was the newness and excitement of independence that drew Gwen and her friends to San Francisco the day after her eighteenth birthday. They had a car, some money, newly bestowed responsibility and trust, and an eagerness to see what their new home had to offer. And so they came. It was twenty five years ago today—*twenty five years*—that Gwen was taken.

In a crowded, vibrating Golden Gate Park, among a city's-worth of faces, atop scattered refuse and matted, weary grass, enclosed by magnificently leafing trees, anonymous amidst the expressions of celebrations, confident in the direction of their movements, beneath a gray, gloomy sky, she was said to have vanished from their sights. They, Gwen's friends. She, Gwen. A small group among many groups. As many, they moved as one. And any one, for any given moment, could never be missed. Had she fallen behind? Had she slipped away for a toilet break? Had she found a craft's booth of irresistible interest? Was she tasting from a bowl of steaming cioppino? Had she chanced across another group? Had she? Had she? Only the crowd mattered.

And neither from malice nor callousness did her friends surge ahead, exuberance, impatience, and newly developing habits leading the way. And she was left behind, left to retrace their steps.

But the day ended, the light on its way. And the park emptied. And they were left huddled in confusion and deliberation, sending out search parties of lone girls in different directions, one remaining in place, scanning empty, dark spaces for her missing friend. Time freed itself, moving from them. The police summoned. And the small group of girls and men stood beneath a streetlamp, one set giving details, the other taking scribbled notes. They had seen plenty of displays, the uniformed men said, of women and men in the throes of ... bacchanalian rites. They had seen naked men missionary atop equally naked women. They had seen delirious, squealing women, just as they had seen comatose, limp women draped over the shoulders of young, smiling men as they moved headlong through the throng, away from prying and envious eyes. And they had seen young women, alone, perhaps dazed, walking the sidewalks in all directions. "Could not one of these be your friend," they asked in official, rhetorical query. "No! Never! Gwen is nothing like that," came the pleading responses. But it was dark, and the city impractically vast. San Francisco. Vast. Words rarely used together. They would all need to wait for daylight, to see things in a new light.

Many daylights came, and none would come. Dad, Mom, and I ferried between home and San Francisco for the remainder of the summer, then they on their own in the fall, and on into the winter. Spring came, as did early summer, and Gwen missed her nineteenth birthday. We sat in the living room in perfect stillness and quiet that evening. It would be that way, the three of us alone and quiet on that day and the next, until Dad died. Then it was Mom and me for two more year. And now just me.

I know where Gwen has been. It took hard years to admit it to myself. But I know—*God, I hate to know*—she lies in the earth. Maybe not far from here. I've imagined the spore of a fruiting tree settling into the fertile soil above her, protected from nature's tempest to take root. And tender roots burrowed into the ground, enveloping her body, respectful of the resistance offered. And the tree has grown, tall and full, bearing fruit. It is always a bittersweet fruit I eat, never unaware of the earth that bore it.

We all came to know.

Dad promised we'd see her again. In his stories, she lived. She came to Reynoso, the apparition Guinevere. She was his familiar in strange lands. She was borrowed strength in tired moments. She was wisdom at the end of doubt. She appeared the oasis in the frenzy of maddening thirst. Reynoso was never a weak man, but a man. And men need guidance. He came to rely on, to pray for "my Angel of tomorrow-come." It pushed him forward. Dad saw Gwen that

way, a young woman alive to those who sought her, giving beyond her years. There was no bitterness or regret, only a missing of immense and faithful literary proportions.

Mom read his drafts silently. She made notes with a green-inked pen. For her, too, Gwen took life anew in Dad's crowded papers. She sometimes paced the room in concentration, pausing in mid-stride to make a note against her thigh. Mom could be a mother to her daughter again in the notes she made. Her daughter would *always* be goodness-in-absence. She saw in Dad's words a daughter in full bloom, bringing forth to the world a smart womanhood borne of attentiveness, physical suffering, and abiding love. If both had been purely literary characters, Gwen and Mom would have read the same, because they ought to have been the same. If only time had permitted. Dad's volumes of "*Tales of Reynoso*" continued to be published, and their daughter found her way out into the world anew.

In time, Gwen ceased being either myth or allegory. Nor was she merely the memory of the young girl with her arm around me in framed pictures. She no longer lived, and breathed, and spoke new things in my thoughts. She became something I had had, but no longer have, the only thing worthy of desire. It was more than safety and shelter, more than peace of mind, more than understanding and trust, more than the responsibility of the giving and receiving of unconditioned love, much more than a series of conveniences. She became expectation, the fragility of a state, the brutal reality of its transitory quality. That Mom and Dad were to pass was to be accepted as part of the natural order of things. We lived our lives together as best we could. We gave and received with no thought as to calculations. But Gwen ... she kept with her too much. And I, too, have been keeping too much.

Who is this man who destroyed her? Where did he come from? What does he preserve from his taking? Does he forget, or does he remember? I imagine him in hardness standing over her crumpled body at his feet. He was thinking something singular that day, their day. He had fed a plan. From the moment he first saw her to the moment the dirt from his shovel covered her body, his mind lived in a place only he and Gwen were a part. What is this place, this sickness? Nothing before or after could have existed. There must have been an intensity. An exhilaration. His momentary freedom from hunger.

His perfect world.

A small place to learn the terrible lessons.

Out for a moment to apply the terrible lessons.

Then away, back to where he came, back into the anonymity of plain sight.

I have searched for this man knowing he can never be found. I will never grip the wrists, nor look unblinkingly into the eyes that last saw her. Nor I will be able to draw him in angrily, to smell his smells, to breathe his exhaled breath, to hold him down in place, to never let him get away. Nor would I have a chance to kill him, if killing were an option. For even were he standing here, now, the blinds drawn, exhausted and parched, confession dripping fresh off his lips, a conscience relieved, a loaded pistol in my hand, I don't have a measure of the trigger.

I don't have the measure of what tomorrow would bring.

He's out there. He's carelessness. He's selfishness. He's the liar manipulating the trusting. He's faithlessness in the guise of the reverential. He's temptation of difficulties easily solved. He's irrationality basking as certainty. He's ignorance usurping emotion. He's contempt. He's laughter at suffering. He's denial in the face of evidence. I meet part of him every day, pieces never coming to form the whole, the one who took. In pieces understandable, even pitiable, as a whole worthy of extinguishing wrath.

I know who he is.

Chapter Six

I am deadweight in this chair.

The day makes its way.

I am out in my world, seldom at rest, there out among those no different than I imagine myself to be—the barkeep, the waitress, the cabbie, the functionary three drinks into his evening, the nanny in the park, the cop, the greengrocer, the pusher, the writer with the broken pen. The operative is his conscious connections. We are part of each other's surroundings, the stakes driven into the ground. The long afternoon ending after midnight. We seek-out one another, a station of comfort built over years. I am the one who listens, and they the ones who talk. It's an insular and intimate and infinite world. They will talk, I find, in the presence of the uncritical ear, to genuine curiosity, by unobtrusive questioning, made more animated by an unquestioned flow of alcohol. Good people ranging through complex thoughts, at times afraid to act upon uncertain, uneasy convictions, at others content to drift along a seam. Easy to understand, all, having seen similar incarnations before. Having been similar incarnations before.

Life's lubricant is doubt. Doubt during the rise, doubt at rest, doubt at the fall. It's the quality of the doubt that matters, the going price of the antidote needed to unburden the nagging. We fall over ourselves, further into ourselves, away from our former selves into regrettable

places. We teeter together on the edge, all, and pitch-in eventually, for eventual reasons. I've seen plenty fall in, some never to emerge, never to raise another drink in toast to better days ahead.

And when I talk, I share tales of sordid woe. Cheap tales from a dime store life. That's what's wanted. It helps keep the edge off.

But some are different. A few men live atop a world of smooth and seamless confidence. There is no friction there, no confusion. It's a self-made, ordered place of priorities, predilections, and demands. A mastery over the self, the will detached to lord over the body's actions. This is no exercise in philosophical rumination. This is the rare man, wealthy, self-constrained, devoid of petty vanities, cruel, fearless, lawless with himself, free.

As successful a human being as ever to be found.

One to envy.

In contentment, power. A perfection attained. A banishment of the gnawing demons. A taking for takings sake, earned entitlement. Appetites that bring the thousand dollar meal eaten alone. Money a tool for problems, women distractions, the company of others an audience, tight-lipped private investigators an amusement.

James Brummel's intellect radiates outwards. He neither trips nor falls into any irretrievable place. He is self-possessed in his demands, just as he is self-directed in his consumption. He is neither over-indulging nor desperate. He is a marvel of rhetorical efficiency, speaking in declarative statements, closing doors behind him. It is not I that draws him in, but he who draws me in. We sit. He drinks. I drink. Neither of us ever seeming to get drunk. He talks. I listen. He pays. Always. He directs words at me as like a perverted ideologue devoid of ideology, and I the envious fool at his feet, never an afterthought as to my input. He doesn't need me. I am at his leisure. "You're free to walk away, Boyle. But I know you won't." I haven't. I won't. The draw of the demagogue, the repetitive motions of certainty, the sumptuousness of visions, the airing of a foul soul made scented by the things made desirable. We are lead by hope. And the money earned. And so I listen. They are narratives linear, logical, and bereft of any dreamy qualities. They are on the order of imperatives, the words of a faultless human being alive in a large world, free of expectations and consequences. He demands attention. He receives it. No countervailing opinion I could form, no moral repugnance I could conjure, no personal loathing I could harbor would give him pause. I would never try. His certainty trumps mine at every turn. I serve his purposes. I tell myself he serves mine. I tell myself many things.

The afternoon is fading away. I napped haltingly, awakening to the changing chill in the room. I've since closed the window, replaced my sweater with a still warmer one, and turned on the lights.

Gwen is found in two places simultaneously. She is the only thing in the past need remembering, and the reason for my constant drift away. I search for her taker in all I do. I'll take all comers. I'm in no position to discriminate. There are infinite parts needing fitting into infinite spaces, a lifetime's work, the obsessive compulsive's nirvana. I will stay here with her.

I stand, restless. I'll make an early dinner of steak, mashed potatoes, and a salad. I move to the kitchen, bring a saucepan of water to an open flame, and drop a potato in. I remain standing at the stove. I imagine the roads and bridges leading out of San Francisco are starting to get weighted down by a slow moving traffic of cars. The day is coming to a close. I imagine Gwen's friends driving back to Calistoga in the dark of a later night. There must have been a deathly silence in that car, the roadway seeming the impassive sea. In their rapidly beating hearts and stunted minds, they must have searched for the solace that she'd be found. It was all just a mix-up, a series of missed connections. The new day would bring her back to them. But somewhere else, maybe driving along the same roads, a man who knew it to be different. He was thinking of possibilities, too, and what his new day would bring.

The water starts to boil.

I imagine the traffic was light by the time they all drove away from here.

Chapter Seven

I walked the city. A constitutional. Twilight in the fog is no twilight at all, closer in feel to a murky pond, cold and wet, a bottom guessed at. I moved through it, a disruptive wake for the moments we met. Busy streets, blocked crosswalks, car horns from the distance in celebration, maybe some in anger and frustrations, a mass trying to stay and leave a finite city. Shuttered stores and living eateries, smells trapped low in the fog, my full stomach impervious to their temptations. A good, brisk walk, declines releasing the stresses of the inclines, the bay off in the near-distance shrouding the twinkling of bright lights. Fireworks from the park, discoloration reaching before sound, in rapid succession, an arc, translucent glory, implied fall. On rooftops and balconies, cheers. I walked until I reached the crest of the university height, looking down the funnel of the street to the park, a glimpse at crowds and their movements, their sounds as if banging from behind closed doors. I stood there for my moment. Then returned along the same path, pleased to be back, happy to be warm.

The music is light, beautiful sounds already at their destinations awaiting commensurate words and meaning of thought. The music is stirring and dramatic, like a complex innuendo from a needful and stunning woman. The body is nearly willed to heroic action, the mind thinking itself capable of anything.

Lily Brody came to me with an overt agenda of madness. A walk-in, a sullenness, desperation like a calling card. I'd seen it enough times. The voice betrays all. I knew there would be little latitude in my dealings with her. She had long abandoned the chicanery of formality and politeness.

"Mr. Boyle, I don't want you to waste my time, and nor you mine. Can you help me find my daughter? It is a very simple request." It was the lithe voice of inflexible thoughts, suffering nothing and everything.

I have searched for missing children. I've been the desperate bulwark against officialdom's perceived inactivity and secrecy, the mythical renegade unbound by law or procedure. The hard reality remains: good, clever, intuitive people with badges are infinitely more capable than I could ever hope to be. I have found some children, those taken out of familial spite and irrationality. Others ... remain out there, somewhere. Time and timing are the *only* considerations, the sweep hands playing wicked tricks against hope and sanity. I work hard and fast, a specter being chased. There are no illusions or niceties to this task of recovery, no relativity, no time for speculation or reflection. I will know when the trail has turned cold and desolate on my capabilities.

Lily Brody was unlike any married parent of a missing child that has ever come to me. She came alone. She came two years after the fact. She came with her mind resigned to a strange improbability. She came with no hope of ever finding her daughter. Our first meetings were for the purpose of judging me as a man who seeks. She had a long list of such men. To her, we seekers were a fungible commodity. I was somewhere on that list, and it was now my turn to be looked at, prodded, evaluated, and, if she could find something agreeable, retained. It felt the part of an elaborate ritual of an arranged marriage. Destined, but uncertain. She may have dressed and smelled the part of care, but she was calloused. It was there in her words, her tone, her diction, her posture, the discoloration of her cheeks, the mannerisms of her brown eyes. Her only recourse was to find that one man who would make her direction his, her remaining recourse a companionship of equals. I have seen desperation the foundation of relationships. The outcomes are at best unpredictable.

She retained me.

The facts remain. Anni, Mrs. Brody's daughter, disappeared from a San Francisco playground. She was seven years old, short brown hair, light brown eyes. She stood four feet, six inches, loved cats and hamsters, and had few inclinations towards television. Playtime was a god-given right. There was no fussiness at the dinner table. Homework done promptly, she read to her parents nightly. She was trusting, inquisitive, generous, as most smiling children are. She found fear in the dark, falling asleep on her right side staring at her nightlight, a small blanket, stuffed goose, and embroidered pillow arranged along the length of her stomach and chest. She breathed like light air, Lily Brody said, steadily sucking her thumb until gently removed. Habits running their courses. Normal. Mrs. Brody talked about her daughter in a mixture of the present and past tenses. I took my notes exclusively in the past tense. She gave me pictures of the small girl. I placed them in the file.

I met several times with Tom Giles, an old friend with the San Francisco Police. It gnawed at his very being that his Anni Brody file remained open. Policemen are like that. Tom was no happy stranger to failure. He had another, almost identical case. He had ruled out connections. He told me Mrs. Brody had lost her patience, and soon after her composure. She's an intelligent woman, he told me, but the last time she walked out his office after nine months of futility, she had ceased being the reasonable, hopeful woman. "Watch her, Boyle," Tom Giles said.

She came to me because I allowed her to come, a woman orphaned from her senses. She stayed because I made no demands of her. The soul is never more exposed, the intuitions of love and hate so clear and articulated, the juxtaposition of life and death so fixed and defined, as when poisoned. It is a form of perfection, an honesty not easily emulated. It's what love could be.

I take her checks, but don't cash them. She has never asked why.

She came to see me daily. She told me about her marriage, the nature of her intellectual pursuits, her indefinite leave of absence from teaching, her paradoxical thoughts of God, her dying father, her daydreams, the woman she was becoming. And about her daughter. These were the things she had had, but lost. All of them, in a moment's time.

"It all seems natural somehow," she told me, "as if it could be no other way."

I listened, no longer taking notes, seated at my desk leaning back toward the oftentimes open window. Below, as always, I heard the murmurs, the occasional shouts and screams from the assembled. A streetcar passed, a siren wailed, a car horn, then two and more. A city in daytime. And across from me, on the couch, Mrs. Brody sat, smartly dressed, perfumed, as meticulous in her appearance as with her words. But appearance and intent oftentimes diverge. And I listened and remembered.

“How low will I get to feel, God?” I ask this often, Mr. Boyle. How much self-pity will engulf me? Why do I cower on the shore, just at the water’s edge, always afraid to run inland? How could I have lost such bearings? How could such disorientation exist? What form would reorientation assume, anyway? A family again? A stronger woman? Comfort? Wealth? Ignorance? A state of perpetual inebriation? I don’t want to turn inland. I won’t. There is only to push back the sea, to reclaim that strip of sand I need to own. What is it that I will admit to myself? What form will this admission take?”

The city seemed noiseless. Her metaphors came and went as would be expected of an educated, articulate woman. Saying and not saying. I did and didn’t know what would be coming next.

“Mr. Boyle!” Her voice pierced and grabbed, the voice of a dying person trying once more for life.

She paused for reflection.

Then calmly:

“I chase him, but he doesn’t run from me. And why should he? Why would he? He lives in a place that doesn’t think of him, doesn’t hunt him, capture him ... kill him.”

Silence for a long time. I watched her.

Then as if continuing the long thought to herself:

“If you were him, Mr. Boyle, wouldn’t you stay? Wouldn’t you stay here for all time?”

I understand the rhetorical. I placed myself at the nexus of her mind’s living eyes. A man deserves death for taking so much. But which man? Was that not what she was asking? Was she not asking about the availability of death? But there could be no simplicity to it, anymore simplicity than in finding her Anni alive and well. The death needed to have meaning, just as once the frantic search for her daughter had had meaning. Neither desires were grounded in a practicality, merely one substituted for the other. And I could secure none.

I held my breath against the words forming on her painted, contorting lips.

“Mr. Boyle ... when you find this man, will you kill him for me?”

I am a man of no consequence. I am paid to watch and listen and remember. I have never been anything more. Out somewhere far from me is my sister in a shallow grave. The man who killed her is all around me. I touch his composite as often as I breathe. More so. In front of me sat a woman asking a killing of me, the killing of a ghost, a clever phantom who has made himself as invisible as the air itself. She was asking me to eliminate one idea among countless, for that is all this man could ever be in absentia. She was asking the impossible of me in the threshing of her own impossibilities. The unattainable should have forever been the thing remaining us. Distant

longings. Those things aspired-to. My refusal would accomplish nothing. It would send her down the line to the next one of me, and me to a similar fate.

We ought go there together.

I looked at her.

“Yes,” I said, with neither the resonating confidence she sought, nor the hesitation I felt.

“Yes,” I repeated to myself.

We readily bring ourselves to the places of beauty’s banishment.

Chapter Eight

The evening here is beyond regaining. It has started to feel like a night before a work day. I’ve arranged the work to be done along the table. Saturday will come as it does. For now, it’s still Friday, the music still plays, and Lily Brody remains ensnared upon the beautiful notes.

She angers like I have never angered. She steps into her void like my parents could never have stepped, they fearing an outcome that would betray love’s tenderness. But there ought to have been more. There ought to have been a rage that consumed the gentle soul into barbarousness—if only for its appropriate moments. There ought to have been fallibility. There ought to have been some vestiges of an inky animus. But there were none. They left me in a medium of indeterminacy, somewhere between reason and nature. It is who I have been. There is a plainness there, a hard truth. It ought to be one or the other. Sometimes, there needs to be absolutes.

I made my own absolutes, in my imagination. They first came shortly after Gwen’s taking. As the boy, I had severe daydreams about tracking her abductor, killing him, saving her. Images from books, images from the screen, I was the amoral and just detective. I see him on Lincoln Avenue in Calistoga. He’s the one. There could never be any doubt. I watch as he gets into an old Buick. There are grocery bags in his hands. I am in my car—always a 1965 Thunderbird, always gold and convertible. I follow him out of town and along long stretches of rural highway to a dirt road turn-off. He drives a half-mile ahead of me, the road’s dust betraying his location. I park a distance away, tuck a handgun into my waistband, and hike the road. The house is no more than a dilapidated shack with two dirty windows and a door facing the road. I approach slowly. I peer through the window. And there she is. Tied to a chair, her mouth taped. She appears to be sleeping. My course is set, my longings over. I draw my gun. I kick the front door down and catch him unarmed at the stove. He turns and looks at me, then at my gun. I take

big strides at him, his expressions alternating between surprise, fear and unfairness. His arms begin to rise in a surrendering motion. No words are uttered between us, his shaking body speaking the volumes necessary for contrition. But it is too late for him. I place the muzzle of the gun against his forehead and pull the trigger. Soundless violence. His knees buckle. He falls, blood cascading over his eyes, a heap on the floor. I kick him. He remains dead. I move to Gwen. I untie her, lift her over my shoulder and begin the long walk back down the road to the car.

There were few variations on the theme.

I can smile at the man's remembrances of the boy's energy and purity of resolve. Intervening time diluted dreaming matters to unfulfilled numbness, like the man still dreaming of sporting glory. What is left is what I do, the residue of long-lost good intentions, like a tired people paying lip service to a moldy, but honorable constitution. I could have been something better, the founding sin of never resolved. I couldn't live up to what I set out to do.

I tried. I tell myself this.

I've lived a hardened, unrealistic life. It shouldn't have been so. It should have been a continuation of boyhood, adjusted for aging, consistent in its meaning. I may have become an investigator regardless of Gwen's fate, but it would have been for different motivations. It may have been for logical reasons of adventure, or independence, or honest livelihood. A man ought to pick his avocation in accordance with his strengths. I have chosen mine from a position of weakness. I search for something that has been lost, where another might look for something to be found. What was taken from me could never be reduced to a single person. Nor could it be reduced to a solitary feeling or sensation. It is something complexly more formative, perhaps something never needing explanation.

It's in the nature of attachments, changing as they do for their reasons—for understanding, pity, self-loathing, boredom, expedience, piety, whim—that work to define moral sanity to make living possible, or undermine to make it more so, out past the stifling constraints, out where I wait. I've thought about it enough, two people in love identical to two people at hate, a singular emotion propelling forward, overriding failings and frustrations.

The attachments we make, even the ones with ourselves, are the same. Lily Brody and I have tangled ourselves up like reeds along a wide river, neither one concerned about tides or course changes. We cannot worry ourselves with matters beyond our control. We've done it because ...

It's not merely as simple as saying I will kill for Lily Brody because I want to kill for myself. We've done it to have one another, to wait together for another day to come, another to go.

Like this one ...

Like every one.

Enough.

A new year begins.

I switch the music off. It's ten minutes 'til midnight. I stand and look at the picture on the wall. How nice it was to have been that boy. I should never have left.

"Twenty five years is a long time to wait. I am sorry, Gwen," I say aloud. "Good night."

I darken the living room and walk the hallway to the bedroom.

Chapter Nine

I'm sitting in the car waiting, notepad and camera in my lap. I drink lukewarm coffee and chew gum for concentration. Wednesday is like Tuesday, only one day removed. I'm waiting on what I always wait on. Other people's actions. They'll make their appearance in their time. The waiting forces thinking. And there's plenty of waiting in this game. I look down at the scribbles on the note pad. Some thoughts to keep me company. The pen in my hand is ready. I keep it busy by tapping it on my thigh. Writing ... in writing there's more leeway, less room for deception, more room for redemption. The ugly can be made less ugly, the beautiful more so. It gives you time to sift through what is it the day has brought your way, no matter how routine or disagreeable. And the people encountered. They too can be reassessed, reworked to fit into the better narrative. That's what's wanted most of all, the better narrative. And the madness of ostensibly sane people having chosen otherwise erupting with shocking abruptness, or the opportunists up to no particular good justifying fecklessness, take on the better meaning, take on an importance, something reflective to hold-up against yourself, something that says the day hasn't been wasted, that the day hasn't been merely a means to get to the next day.

I don't have my father's imagination. I'm left to what I know, to the characters I know, any of them, to place them within context. My context. There would be a place there for Bobby Hingus, a petty thief, the one who once told me "there are things to be had, Boyle. Little things, big things, pricey things, worthless things, they're there to be had. And I take. Sometimes because I need them. Sometimes because I want them. And sometimes because I'm bored. It doesn't matter. And I don't care." And he doesn't care. He's on a first name basis at county lockup. He's too small for the system. This isn't a cute story, every action has its counterparty, and one of these days he'll overstep his boundaries because it's within reach. And then he'll be big game. But someone, somewhere is going to have to pay. I go to him for no particular reason, something

to do, someone to drink with, something to hear. And when we part company, I am none the wiser, and he the drunker.

And others.

Eva Tripp is the wait staff at *Sammy's*. Her eyes are brown and beautiful. And penetrating. And smart. She's there like I'm here, better stations awaiting us, both in no hurry to leave. She takes care of me, and I her, a secret we keep from one another no secret at all. These are the affectionate diner games we play with one another. We could go on infinite trips away from here, and we would go, if only asked. But we won't. We can't. Her husband is a brute of a man. I've seen him plenty of times. She married him on her seventeenth birthday. And by her thirtieth, despite an eight year college degree, he'd become an irretrievable part of her life. And their two sons. I've known her eleven of those thirteen years.

Timothy Freely practices law off Sutter, fourth floor, three man operation, nothing fancy, divorce, immigration, extricating the foolish from misdemeanor misadventures. He calls on me on occasion. A degree from Stanford down the coast, a wife dead seven years now, two children, twin boys, both in prison up the coast, having raped and killed a girl at a fraternity party. Also at Stanford. That was ten years ago. Mr. Freely petitions the state as a matter of course, from prosecutorial misconduct to defense incompetence. There's been no sympathy. The boys took too many pictures of their work. They're never coming out alive. They put their old man in a terrible place.

I work with Beatrice Kemp to coordinate James Brummel's assignments. She's a scarred woman, a face pocked from childhood. She touches it often, stroking it as if in thought. She knows what Mr. Brummel wants. She expects me to know just as well. That has never been a problem. We work as unequals, her word a strange gospel truth needing no further affirmation. I provide it anyway. She's been tasked. And paid. And paid again when it's done. I respect that. And there can be no thing devised that can distract her from her command. I asked her once to meet me after hours. She said no. But I think it's her scars that say no.

Vance Sizemore's beat takes him down my sidewalk in the early evenings. I see him when I see him, when I'm on my stoop with nothing particular on my mind. He walks with no particular burden. "It's a hard life, Sizemore. Take it easy now." Vance has been shot at. He killed the boy who shot at him. Maybe two blocks from here. Maybe a decade ago. One bullet to the chest, the only one he's ever fired. It was a local kid, maybe fourteen. The boy was just fooling around with his father's gun, that was the report. A tragedy. He was a good boy. But he was still dead. And Vance still on his beat. "How are those feet treating you?" He laughs. It's better than shooting someone. I know that's what he's thinking.

It was easy enough to grab the barstool next to Edward O'Hara. The bar was empty. At first silence. Then "Lance Boyle." And he took my outstretched hand the way bar veterans do. "Edward O'Hara." Maybe a nod. Idle chitchat for a while. I bought him a drink. He was drunk already. Then: "How did Lily Brody get you to take her home?" He may have been confused for a boozy moment. "Lily Brody?" He lit a cigarette. I didn't mind. "That's right." He took a few drags. "Just some dirty thing. Just some dirty disgusting little thing. Whatever she wants is none of my business." I'd watched those two for most of the night. Just watched. I left as they were leaving. I knew where they'd be going. "Why?" I didn't answer. I had no interest in hearing his version. We drank in silence.

Mr. Durst makes a living opening and closing doors. A funny man. "The things I've seen. Lord, they pay no attention to me. I am nobody, you see. A nowhere man, always right here. I have no one to tell nothing to. So you can do whatever it is you're desiring. And people do desire. I know. My door opens the way to Valhalla. That's right. Oh, you didn't think I knew that word. I can tell from the look on your face. You're a funny man, Mr. Boyle. You all come through my door, sure as god is rain, thinking of me as the nothing man. But I know. And the places you go, I know that, too. I wouldn't be forgetting that." I know you know, Mr. Durst. I know what you've seen.

Teddy Dye never knew what I had done to him. He never knew it was me and my work that had sent his wife and daughters away from him in disgust and hurt. He didn't know how well I knew his routines, for a period of two months at least, nearly two year ago. He didn't know it could have been much worse, the information I'd kept to myself, the contempt he'd shown Mr. Brummel, despite a salary paid him out of proportion to his abilities. I wasn't paid to report on contempt. I introduced myself in a crowded bar. He was under indictment for statutory rape, but he didn't tell me this. He had been unemployed for awhile, and it was this that bothered him the most. He asked me if I was hiring. I told him I barely had enough work to keep myself busy. Easy lies to move things along. We drank and talked about the Giants, mostly. I paid for both. His charges were later reduced on technicality. The sentence suspended. He was lucky.

And more and more. This world never ceases, this coming never slowing. I would like to believe no one is born to strength or weakness, no one destined to go anywhere particular from there. Nor inherently sinister, or clever, or obvious. Like me, like the way I'd like my writing to be. My pen would understand.

Writing will have to wait. My waiting has come to an end. They have moved outside. She is holding his hand, and his free arm is in the air, hailing a non-existent cab. I frame them within

the hotel's entrance. I know where they've been. I already know their story. There's no art to this. My life is simple.

I start the car and drive away.

Chapter Ten

It is the month's fourth Thursday. I'm at *Jansky's*, off the Embarcadero. It's dark, crowded and loud, tourists, mostly, and I feel the dwarf in the massive upholstered booth. I pick at the corner of the "Reserved" sign in the center of the table. The candle seems to heaves in its netted holder. I've already waved the waitress off. I am waiting on James Brummel. I come early out of courtesy. He'll be late, by a few minutes. I have completed work for him. It's in the briefcase at my feet. Our monthly Thursday meetings barge through what's to be expected of a business transaction. The transactional phase covers a few minutes. It's lasted as long as fifteen minutes. The informal, unscripted phase lasts longer, taking its course. Two men in conference with nothing to hide. I am never more the student than during these informal Thursday hours. I have come to depend on them.

With James Brummel, I've placed myself at the heart of manufactured chaos. Mr. Brummel controls through fear and uncertainty, creating indebtedness where none should exist. He hires only the most qualified, the most self-sacrificing. The competition for in with him is fierce, windows of opportunity glinting in the clear skies of the near future. No one is comfortable there. The system isn't designed for comfort. Few make the progress they'd imagined possible, the outcomes in line with the war they believe capitalism to be.

At the heart of it, money. The organism supporting it, a system cynically unmoored from legal or moral barriers to preservation and profit. The synapses directing the action, men of wealth funneling money to other men of wealth. James Brummel comes from it. He is it. He has an inbred dexterity. He speaks the language. His blood bleeds a green kinship from birth, the trust implicit. The organizations built-up around themselves facilitate the already established, Mr. Brummel's organization is not so much a going concern as an appendage of the man. It is a serious, deadly business, a war, where all manner of contrivance are to be considered—advantageous capital structure, off-shore profit accumulation to offset tax burdens, intellectual property manipulations, dubious dividend repatriation schemes, aggressive accounting, social networking, favors, congressional lobbying, foreign government consultations, systems of gifting, threats. All within the strictures of the law, but the fields of scrimmaging expand and contract as needed. But it's tolerated. And the *quo* for the *quid*? Cheaper goods, faster. Indefinitely.

The high priest squats atop a peak of his Olympus, never absent the attentions of his supplicants. No abuse, neglect, emasculation, misogyny, carelessness, callousness, or disrespect can willingly force them down the mount. There is never, ever, ever a want for pilgrims. The rarefied air is attained through long striving, a value system of a singular focal point of attainment, of devotional diligence to specialized scripture; sustained as they are through the sixteen hour day, interchangeable at the whim, fodder for endless and meaningless battles, paychecks automatically deposited.

They are worthy of forgiveness, those who sacrifice, for they know not what they do. The gods they attend, the ministries that lead them have long since been anointed, the heroes of possessions, the minstrels of consumption, the builders of the ramparts of brutalizing ideologies: “Up, you. Up and to your posts.” The whistle blows. They charge against the distant wires. Many will be felled in a noisy, hot clamor, the glory of sweet compensation on their lips.

“It’s banal as hell, Boyle. Sex and money. Tried and true. I can give them both. We know that much. Show me someone above it, show me someone who wants something I can’t give them, and I’ll show you respect.” I believe him. I’ve seen it. I’ve tried to be it.

I construct selective narratives of lives for Mr. Brummel, a sort of obituary for the living. It’s an indictment of his damned, or his soon-to-be-damned. It’s the stripping away of the sugary layer. It’s the ingredients. It’s the atoms that constitute the molecule. It’s honesty if honesty were made objective. It’s the self faced. It’s forced humility as much as it is the trumping of accumulated virtues—depending on the point of view. It’s the they, themselves, that they might not know. Themselves revealed, themselves nonetheless, fair game with no plausible defense. And I am the disinterested party, probing weakness in the defenses, probing in force.

We both of us move within well-ordered worlds. Like in battle, surprises find no friends. But within the realm of surprises, in reacting to them, one’s character and one’s destiny chance a meeting. At that very moment of surprise, what’s to be done? What *is* done? That is what I do for Mr. Brummel—I’m then there to document blunt moments of surprise. It’s for the application of temptation. To break the law. To betray loyalties. To breach common morality. To betray one’s self. To sacrifice tomorrow for today. To squander earned reputation. To mock justice. To taste the forbidden. To fulfill fantasies. To live. To relive. To take what is rightfully not theirs to take. To tempt fate.

Then I watch them torn down.

I am there for such occasions, as well.

Like them, he pays me well. That, too, is gladly deposited.

James Brummel is not a man dismissed. He doesn't allow it, there at all times like the current's undertow, his convictions sweeping to shore regardless. He understands himself, his wealth his direction, words his weapons, action his posterity. It is enviable, the certainty the missing piece in the personal puzzle. There looms on his horizon no doubt, a steady gait towards what should be unknown, doubtlessly known. Unwavering. Uncanny. Unnerving. The disquieting brutality he uses to get there is almost beside the point. We all share in it. He's taking us to where it is we think we want to go. And there are prices to be exacted. From his wards, a fealty to themselves. From his private investigator, an unceasing commitment to the unsavory deeds at hand. How he understands us all as one. How he isolates weaknesses and shines the glaring light forth. He knows *me*. He knows my need to know. And he has shown me, through the dissolution of those I watch for him, that which he knows I need to know. There's strength in knowing, there's power there. And he gives it to me. And I take, the price paid of no consequence to either of us. It's what keeps me on his dole. He knows I could never betray him.

I'm flush against the backrest when his words first arrive. "It's hard to believe it's been four weeks." His words haven't cleared my ears before he's slid into the booth. Our eyes meet. "Let's get our lady on over here and get started."

His hand goes up, and in an instant the hostess is there. "The usual?"

"Indeed, please."

And she's gone.

Mr. Brummel leans back. "Mr. Boyle, it is *good* to see you."

I smile, my back off the rest. "And you, as always."

"Let's take a peek at what you have for me."

And before I can retrieve the briefcase at my feet, the drinks have arrived.

Our business at hand takes a moment. Mr. Brummel knows what he's come to expect of me. I'd never fail him. A knowing nod ends it. He places the contents of my case in his, now on the seat to the left, there ready to mull at his leisure. He sips from his drink. His words will arrive momentarily. My right hand is busy with my drink's swizzle stick. I tap it against the rim, placing it alongside the folded napkin, and take my first taste.

"Some things, I just know." His voice arrives with clarity and direction. "We've been through this before, the tale of concentrated woe. There's only placement above it or below it. Hope or dejection. Each has its merits, no different than choices made for a vacation spot. Only longer. These pictures we have show a man below his woe. How foolish of him to think that there are no eyes to watch. The whole world is an eye to watch. And even if he were alone with that

girl, even if he and she were the last of the species, he'd break into parts. I know him. I've watched him. I've seen his shameful weakness. That veneer of strength is no more real than what I see here." He pats the case, a man at infinite ease with the spoken thoughts at hand. "I knew from the moment of our first meeting that there would be good, and that there would be bad. He works hard. He takes pleasure in his money. I've given him enough and more to think about infinite possibilities. And he has made his choices. It takes him somewhere. I will find out how sure he is of that somewhere in due course."

Our eyes may be watching one another's, but there can be no recognition on his part. He has already moved past our setting, off along a path in pursuit. I have followed after him enough times to know his tenacity. It spills forth into a directive, the empiricist tracking evidence. His drink has vanished into his system, and another has arrived. I raise and lower my drink at uneven and haphazard intervals, watching his composure retain its properties.

"The better part of guilt is denial. He's returned to his wife already with a cleanliness. And to his children he is no different. As it ought to be. But he doesn't believe his denial. He thinks about it often. It plays over and over again in his mind. He's drawn, and he's repelled. He's distracted. He would do it again, if only one more time. He can taste that young girl's flesh. It's the thing that keeps him drawn inward, imagining possibilities. And he's run the gamut of possibilities. He's seen himself wifeless, childless, young again with salacious memories. He would do things differently. He would lead a more vigorous life, more wonton, less structures, freer. But he has this one. And this one pays nicely. And he wonders how this one can be made the other one. It will surely change. The careless man always allows change never on his terms. The *very* thing he desires most will overwhelm the thinking faculties. It is the thoughtless who are the weakest."

Mr. Brummel drinks and continues. I know what he'll say. Who is he addressing? Who is he ever addressing? He's not talking to me for my benefit, not anymore than the professor lecturing, or friends arguing their points of politics. It's an arrogance of sorts, a victory yelp to remove any doubts as to who has triumphed over truth. Mr. Brummel has won again. I've given him his evidence. I'll give him his due.

"Do we not reach out to help our fellow man? Do we not give him the second chance? There's going to be a price for second chances. There's going to be a forced understanding. There's going to be a mirror placed there, at the very soul, asking the obvious questions. Demanding its answers. Not very patiently. Or delicately. You excise the rottenness to make better. Cut tissue. Leave scars for the reminders. The smart ones will appreciate this, take and

learn from it. Broken bones heal. I've done what I can for them. Made them stronger for later life. But for now ... we have what we're given."

Mr. Brummel is in his own place now, a man coming to terms with his disappointments. I understand his disappointments, like I understand weakness. I've dealt with them all my life. It doesn't need to be the defining characteristic. Mr. Brummel is wrong in that regard. There are such things as mercy and compassion. The awareness of shortcomings shouldn't necessitate its ravishing. But it's a pointless sentiment so long as there are men like me and Mr. Brummel seeking them out.

I do what I can to mask my own from him. I have thought—hoped—his weakness to rest in his need to talk to me, to tell me the thoughts that clear his mind. But I know it is my own weaknesses that are at issue between us. He has seen through me. He has known all along of my need to know, of my directionlessness. He has seen the diligent man gathering infinitesimal pieces to an infinite riddle. And he has given me what he wants to give me. And I have taken. He has shown me the capabilities of the mind. He has shown me the endless capacity to consume with avarice, indifference, and conviction; and I am grateful. He has shown me the many faces of the man I seek. Which one is he? Strong or weak? Knowable or unknowable?

Another drink is placed in front of me.

"You have one more on me."

I don't have time to respond. James Brummel is done. He stands, pays, and leaves. It ends as it had started. I am left to myself, a simple and flawed man, with more to know, in search of flawlessness.

Chapter Eleven

It is a fine evening in this chair. The few sounds that come from the street below are distracting. A honk, a cough, a yell, a response, a door slamming, hard heels on the sidewalk—they make for disjointed thoughts. My thoughts can be nowhere. I'm thinking about the day's dirty work. I am thinking of what's due Mr. Brummel in a month's time. The end of one thing is the beginning of another. I am thinking of Lily Brody's movements on a Saturday night. I am thinking of the lost little girl who will never be found. And of her taker. I'm thinking of the one that ought to be killed. I am thinking about the false promises I've made, the ones far beyond my acquired and desired skills.

I pick up the book, the marker wedged into its place. I open it from habit. It's heavy, this book, heavy paper with permanent ink. Somerset Maugham trapped in himself, trying to get out.

The self-explained the key. No apologies, just a journey, going to the places he needs to go. Better and smarter than most, I know. Honest. The company he kept. The delicacy of bonds and bondage. Page after page, telling me something if only I keep the patience to listen. I have been listening, I always listen, the examined life extracting its dues. He uses the language nicely. He tells his story nicely. He understands himself. Obsession and obsessiveness. Fine. His truth, nicely rendered.

I can't bring myself to remove the marker.

I can't hold another man's weight.

Not tonight.

What's *my* summing-up? If I'd watched myself, if I'd really listened, what would I have found? Who is the company I keep? What have been my actions of consequence? Where have I gone? What conclusions have I brought back? How much ink could be bleed on paper? What have I thought of myself?

There's no perfection. There is no heaven to model it after. Just as certainly as there is no hell to draw lines of demarcation. And there are no restraints. And demons are merely those things that gnaw and gnaw at an already shoddy fabric. I'm trying to think of what holds me back, the state of my shoddy fabric. There's nothing to do, no remedies to take. Just day to day until another day. Compulsion that has fused with necessity to form saleable expertise. Like anyone else anywhere. We're not a bad lot, doing the best we think we can. All the years. All the false promises. On into this, now the twenty sixth year. I close my eyes and wait for the next sound.

The door buzzer upstairs sounds.

It's that time again. Old buildings reveal too many secrets.

My eyes are open. I look at my watch. It's eleven o'clock. I don't want my heart to quicken, but it does. Cheap titillation. I look up at the ceiling. I close my eyes listening as my neighbor stands from the couch and walks barefooted across the wood floor. He is an awkward and careless man, his feet slapping hard against the wood, a sound I associate with the handling of low grade meat. A man like this can never be suspected of ritualistic infidelity. His wife most certainly doesn't. The lobby door is buzzed open. I hear its labored buzz from the street below. His two minute drill begins. His slapping feet—more hurried now—move towards the stereo stand. He plays one of five Broadway musical scores. Tonight ... Bernstein and *West Side Story*. He now moves to the cabinet below the built-in bookshelf to remove, unfold, and violently snap a large table cloth. He lumbers to the couch, spreading the cloth across the middle section, tucking, smoothing. He picks up a matchbook, removes one, strikes the side, and lights a scented candle.

He takes an exaggerated pleasure in his pacing, as if racing an unprepared fate. He ducks underneath the side table lamp and clicks the light bulb off. He stands in the middle of the room, dimly lit by the candle's light, rubbing his hands in a circular motion. He smells them. He is excited that he's prepared the room in such short order. He's excited by what he is about to receive. There is a light knock at the door. Then, two seconds later, a slightly louder knock. That is their simpleminded code. His feet slap again towards the door. He opens it. Her heels click into the room. He draws her in three steps further. Her right hand pushes the door closed. There are no words, only the sound of the door slamming shut. Her purse drops. Her coat slouches to the floor. The coat's buttons sometimes sound tiny against the wood. Tonight it falls silently. She is wearing nothing underneath. Her shoes are removed. He removes them for her. Four feet make their way to the couch. They ease into it, he sitting, she straddling him. Then, after initial exaggerated, theatrical moans, only music.

In thirty minutes, she will leave.

In thirty five minutes, he'll have reordered the room and slipped into bed. He leaves the lamp light on for his wife. She works a night shift at the airport. I've yet to figure out if he showers, or tempts his fate.

It's quiet.

The city is winding itself down to it's own thoughts.

This is who I am: I listen, I watch, I draw obvious conclusions. It is the nature of actions that needs to be understood. It is maddening in its infiniteness. There are no mechanisms available to stem the onslaught. The eyes and ears become immune. Part of sanity's imperative. There is no moral relevance here, only facile conclusions borne of observation and experience. Would I hazard conclusions as to motivations? Surely they would be simple: a marriage allowed to rot after five plus years, the carnal attraction of a woman ten years his junior, the thrill of deception, the utter euphoria of anticipation. "... but I would never want to hurt her," he once told his brother on the telephone. Self-deception and guilt are pervasive.

But, like so many things in nature, there is parity. There is a certain someone who lives four blocks away who understands the wife's needs, wants, desires, and erogenous zones. Each one minutely. And, as she once told her friend over lunch, "... I can't divorce him. I just can't. My mother would never understand. I could never go back to Saint —. Never." I've left it at that.

Selective morality can be a brutal thing. We all have a menu. We all have to select. But these are the easy conclusions, the most expedient. I remain in the arm chair, in the dim light, listening in the silence. And thinking.

Chapter Twelve

It is Monday afternoon, and Lily Brody's tears have long since welled in her eyes. She breaks me. Every time. I have the same impulses to fix all that is wrong. In my mind, it plays-out simply and obviously. She ought to return to her husband and friends. She ought to know her aloneness in her wilderness can solve no thing, at no time. Undigested opinions are worthless. The only thing she does give herself generously is time. One more day, every day. But time has already lost much of its meaning, its passage meaningless in the face of what she feels needs to be done. There's worry to fill the time. And self-castigations. And a hopelessness feeding itself. And there are other men. Her prostration, she has told me, serves the purposes of punishment and understanding—she gives with a violent intent, and she receives likewise. I've seen it. What can I say to her? She doesn't know what it is she gets or takes. There are no plans for her, no places for her to be. She cries now because of the places she's been. And she misses them, I know. And I feel helpless to help her find that which she misses. Today—at least—she's not focused on our arrangement. I can tell from her words. It would serve no purpose, regardless. I can't give her what I don't have. For now, she'll tell me more about her tears, what is driving her through yet another day. I can do no more for her.

"I miss the feelings of things," she says. "I keep returning to the simplest of simplest things. The little things. Food, water, sleep. I can't seem to reinvent their importance. I've come to know how habits are formed, the incremental march of an evolving ... organism. From a primordial soup to a specialized creature. But I hate that I can remember what had been. It's still all around me, and it intrudes on me. And I don't know what to do. It scares me. My instinct is to ignore it, to avoid it. I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't ignore it."

"Are you ashamed of yourself?" I ask. I can't think of any other question to ask her. I feel the therapist to her patient. As I often do. But we are neither.

"I don't know," she answers. And then: "Yes. How can I not? I was given the most basic duty. I was to bring a little girl into the world and take her through it. At least to a certain point. But not to the point where I left her. Never that point. How could I have left her there? How could I have left her in a place she'll never be able to leave? I'm nothing if she's nothing. We were both meant to be the same."

They are both the same, both mother and daughter, both faultless to extremes. But the mother will derive and absorb fault. It is the only thing left to her. She is still a mother even though she no longer has a child, just as I am still a brother without a sister. These are certainties that cannot be reasoned through.

“I feel I’ve neglected so much, Mr. Boyle. I feel as if I’d lived in the world of books and plans for so long that I no longer could recognize the world outside my own door. But it was there all along. It still is there. And I’m out in it now, taking as much from it as it has taken from me. We’re racing each other. Racing ... “

Her words lead-off into the world I know. I feel her true companion there, among the harshness and beauty that have taken equal root. No thing she could tell me would cause me pause, as she has taken on the affectations of those things with which I have become comfortable. Mrs. Brody’s degrees of differentiation from baseness have eroded to paper thinness. She remains clean and reasonably ordered from nothing more than ingrained habit. But that, too, is changeable. The body follows the mind to places dark. It is inevitable.

“I don’t feel guilt for what I must do,” she says. She’s back to shading shame. There’s a perceptible change in her voice, as if she’s made a rational decision to move from one place to another. “I don’t feel guilt because I don’t care. Caring has gotten me nowhere. He’s out there somewhere, and I know it. Anni would never have allowed a stranger who didn’t somehow look familiar to approach her. I can almost see him. Youngish and unobtrusive. He’s smiling because he can. As unassuming as the man you’d pay no particular attention to on the street. You’ve seen him, Mr. Boyle. We’ve both seen him. He’s one among many, but he’s still only one. And he’s findable. He is no mystery. I know him already.”

What she doesn’t know is that she doesn’t know him. There are no truisms to traits, the balanced becoming unbalanced if for only a hesitation in time. She need only look at herself—her new, sad self. There is nothing indictable about her behavior. Not to someone like me. All she has left is the search for this man, as defining as anything that came before. I won’t redirect her because I can’t redirect her. She still needs some place to go. And I will remain with her.

“Do you think we’ll find him, Mr. Boyle?” She asks, as she always asks.

My answer is always the same. It can never waver. “Yes, Mrs. Brody, we’ll find him. Everyday gets us closer.”

Nothing more.

We have had these conversations before. And we will have them again. In all humility, I know of my importance to her. It’s a responsibility I have chosen, free from mindless compulsions and nagging wariness. I lie to her because I need to lie to myself. The conscious lie—believed—is no lie at all. It settles over time into a system of mythology of sorts. A faith with defined rituals. Lily Brody has shown me how. It remains unspoken because we are both deep in abiding prayer before its power. And the irrational never question the volubilities of their

deities. One of us will break free, in time, and take the other along. We are neither of us ready at this point. There is still more to believe in, still more to hope for. I fear that once we break—once we are done—then we'd be alone, each to our own means, each along our own volitions.

Mrs. Brody leaves with a faint smile, the remnant of another old habit. She leaves so that she may continue on with her day. She leaves so that I may continue on with mine.