

SEX OFFENDER LIVES HERE

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Harry Ramble

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For Monica

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Section 9
Investigator's Notes
Evidence Log Entry #13DBE

Re: Evidence in the kidnapping
of Geffney, Christopher, 7/1/09.

Item: Transcript of data contained on
CD-R disc given to Conrad T. Hogan
by Fletcher Geffney. (Witness statement on file.)

Entered 7/3/09, Investigator J. Dunleavy.
Not for release to the public.

Transcript Begin.

Dear Christopher:

Some day, when you're older, you'll want to know what happened here. You'll want to know what kind of people your mother and father were, that we could do the things we've done.

When that day comes, I don't know where I'll be. I hope I'll be with you. I hope we'll be somewhere safe. I hope we'll be living some semblance of a happy, healthy, normal life.

But I can't see that far ahead.

If, for some reason, I can't be with you, then this will be my only chance to explain what has happened.

I know what the public record will say. And I know what your mother will say.

So this is my say. My account of the calamitous events that have overtaken us.

I love you so much. So very, very much.

And your mother loves you, too.

Though our actions suggest otherwise, we only wanted the best for you. We wanted you to be safe. If we failed in that—and we did, of course—it wasn't due to any lack of love and affection for you. Rather, it was a lack of love for each other. Your mother and I were incapable of sustaining a commitment to each other strong enough to preserve a simple, decent life for all of us. We didn't have enough trust, enough good faith, enough respect for each other and our own selves.

In the end, all we had was you.

We love you equally, fiercely, without condition.

What I'm about to do is a terrible thing, a forever-life-altering thing, but you must understand that I have no choice. If I could, I would go back and undo everything that's been done. I would go back and surrender you to your mother and make the most of whatever diminished role she intended for me to play in your life. I would have tried to be content with that, if only to ensure your happiness and your rightful expectation of a normal life.

But it's too late for that now. We were playing two different games, your mother and me. At first, we were both intent wholly on gaining primary custody of you. Me, because I felt I had more to offer you, and your mother because, well, because she's your mother. When it became apparent that I might be successful, your mother started playing a new game. A vicious, deceitful, dangerous game. By the time I recognized this change in strategy, it was too late.

The criminal charges against me are false and unfounded. To the extent that I have done wrong, I've done so in only the most technical,

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letter-of-the-law sense. I have done nothing malicious, nothing even remotely evil. And even then, I was tricked. I was set up.

Some day, perhaps, I will be vindicated. But even then, in that far future day that would be much too late for both of us, I could never recover sufficiently in the eyes of the law, in the eyes of what passes for justice, to be reinstated in your life in any meaningful way. Not after what's happened.

If that came to pass, what would you know of me? What would you remember? That I was some dangerous criminal? That I was a monster, a predator of the most vile sort? That I was a threat to you? That your mother saved you from me? I cannot be expected to live in the shadow of lies like these.

You must understand. If I give you up now, I will never see you again. I'll never see you again and even my presence in your heart will be erased. And that cannot be. I will not permit it.

So. Okay. This is more, maybe, than I had intended to say here. Right up front. But I'll let it stand.

Someday you'll understand. I hope when the time comes for me to explain all that has happened, I'll have more than these pages to offer you.

§

Dear Everyone Else,

I'm out of jail again. Released for the second time in three weeks.

Many thanks to my beleaguered lawyer, Art Archibald. I believe I've used the last of my get-out-of-jail-somewhat-free passes, however.

I'm writing this in my garage. I'm sitting in a plastic lawn chair, tapping this out on a borrowed laptop propped open on an overturned trash barrel. Borrowed, because the police have seized my own PC and laptop as evidence against me.

There's shattered glass all over the floor. Thick, opaque plastic is tacked up over all the windows. There's a sour, ugly stench still hanging in the air from earlier this week, when some neighborhood hero, some occupier of the moral and ethical high ground, tried to set fire to my house. My house has been spray-painted with hate messages, my lawn strewn with garbage.

I moved out here partly to get away from the new occupants of my house and partly to be closer to my Jeep, which is parked in the second bay of this two-car garage. I've already suffered the consequences of being too far removed from my vehicle during an emergency, and I'm not going to make that mistake again.

It's about 2am now. The house is silent. If any of you are creeping around outside—a not uncommon occurrence—you're doing so very quietly, very stealthily. My recent co-tenants—the convicted sex felons so popular with all of you—are either asleep or on watch. I don't get up there much anymore. It's their house now; I'll be gone soon enough.

You'll be glad to know they're all suitably humbled after the utter failure of their Sex Offenders Solidarity gathering two days ago. Their big public “statement.” Whatever they have planned for the near future, whatever's next in their doomed campaign for basic respect and the protection of the rule of law, you can be sure I'm not privy to it. I'm out of the loop. If they ever imagined me to be an emblem or public face for their desperate plight, they surely don't anymore.

I'll say the following, one last time: It was never my intention to provide these people with a safe haven or support of any kind. I never wanted them here. They were thrust upon me by circumstance and I simply ran out of the time and energy required to thrust them away. Some of you know that, even if it serves your purposes to suggest otherwise.

Not that I care anymore. They're your problem now.

Until today, I've tried to act within the confines of the law, to defend myself with decency and dignity. That's over, too, now.

Emily rolled out her endgame earlier yesterday. We met in the park in town and she suggested a final, hideous escalation of our hostilities

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that I cannot allow to take place. Destroying my life, it seems, is no longer enough for her. Now she would endanger our son, expose him to devastating mental and emotional anguish, simply to consolidate her legal hold over him.

I won't permit that.

So I have a few days, maybe three or four, to prepare my way. And then I'm gone. With my son.

That's how long I have to state my case here.

You may wonder why I would bother. After all, most of you won't like what you read here. Many of you will refuse to believe anything I say. Fine, then. Feel free. But I'll state my case anyway. I see no reason to let the lies my wife and others have told stand as the final word.

You people think you've won. But you haven't. You won't. Not where it matters.

You've taken my job, my home, my good name, everything. But you won't take my son from me. You can't have him. And you can't turn him against me.

I'm sure, after I kidnap Christopher, that there will be a lot of handwringing and gnashing of teeth about criminal dads and child endangerment. About a broken system that aids and abets outlaw fathers. I'm sure there will be Amber Alerts out from here to Ohio. I'm sure all sorts of ghastly motives will be attributed to me.

But remember this. I will have been the second person to kidnap Christopher. My wife kidnapped him first.

§

All right, then. Enough with the salutations. Let's get on with it.

Not quite six am, the sun just peeking over the treeline above the house, and there's already a commotion upstairs. The freaks are having a strategy meeting. What could they hope to accomplish after the Sex Offenders Solidarity fiasco, not even three days ago?

Oh, they're a resilient bunch, I'll give them that. Although really, what choice do they have? When the enemy won't concede your right to even exist, surrender isn't an option.

So on they go, planning their little plans, believing their little beliefs, dreaming their little dreams.

Many of the people upstairs persist in believing, despite all evidence to the contrary, that they're human beings with human rights. Many of them believe there's still something they can do or say that will improve their hopeless situation in some way.

I know that seems strange. Where, you might ask, do they get these ideas?

It would be easy to be glib and say, well, even persecuted sexual felons have to have hope. And leave it at that. But there's more to it, I think.

I've noticed among them a strain of naïve optimism that you rarely encounter out in the real world. They're not cynics, these guys. They're not defeatists. Amazingly, despite their unfortunate day-to-day existences, they don't seem ready to expect the worst, the way you or I often do. Maybe it comes as a result of having reached the very bottom, with nowhere to look but up.

Many of them have led sheltered lives. Even those who haven't spent long periods in institutional care. They're a very straightlaced group. Kind of square, so to speak. They're not nihilists, something many of you have accused them of being. Far from it, actually. It could be that they simply don't have enough flair, enough flamboyance, to be truly negative. To revel in the grim hopelessness of it all.

Odd, I know. But it's true. Except for the fact that they're dangerous sexual predators, these guys are almost comically conservative. Most of them, anyway. They're the kind of guys who are embarrassed by a dirty joke. Who are made uncomfortable by ribald TV sitcom chatter. Who would never dream of, say, making eye contact with a pretty girl on the street. Or buying a pretty girl a drink. Hell, some of these guys are too shy to even enter a bar, never mind offer anybody a

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drink. Even the most vocal among them are fussy, tentative, easily flustered.

Above all, they're self-conscious. Living outside the law, outside the protective umbrella of basic human civility, makes them that way, I suppose.

Ha, ha. Listen to me. The Inner Life of the Freaks. I know you all care so much.

So anyway, they're upstairs.

Good luck, guys. Dream on.

Oh, and they're all guys, by the way. Not a girl in the gang. The Sex Offender Registry includes a small-but-growing percentile of female sex felons—butch, blocky, stern-looking gals, mostly—but that demographic is absent here.

We have had a few girls here. But they're Bluffers. Bluffers and Rayn. Bluffers are misguided fans of my wretched third book, published a few years ago. And Rayn . . . well, Rayn's a story all her own. A story I'll get to, in time. Once I start regaling you with my wife's scorched-earth campaign to destroy me.

But first . . . what? Oh. Right.

I know the freaks are plotting strategy upstairs because Jamie came down and told me.

Jamie is simple. He's not necessarily retarded or nonfunctional. He's just slow. And shy. Very, very shy. He has an odd neural tic. He's incapable of initiating a conversation. He can only speak in reply. If he has something he needs to communicate—which isn't all that often—he'll creep silently up behind you and wait for you to notice him and address him. Which I did, a few minutes ago.

"What's up, Jamie?"

"They're talking. Upstairs."

"Uh huh. Who is?"

"Everybody. Chad. Sean. Steve. Hap."

Hap must be new. I've never met a Hap before. Until recently, I at least knew the names of the people who were availing themselves of room and board here. No more.

“Who’s Hap?”

“He’s from Poughkeepsie. He was a plumber. He says he can unclog the drain in the guest bath.”

“Tell him to plumb away, if it makes him happy.”

Jamie represents a rather extreme example of the man who says little, but notices everything. In the beginning, I ignored Jamie, like everyone else here. Because it was easy to do. The last time I ignored him, my garage was on fire. I was in the laundry room, pulling clothes from the dryer. Jamie stood behind me for five minutes before I smelled the smoke. When I asked him “Do you smell that?”, he responded by blurting “The garage is on fire!” Later, as I was putting the fire out with an extinguisher, he was telling me the whole story of what he saw and when.

So now I make a point of asking him what’s up.

“What are they talking about?”

“Stuff.”

“Good stuff?”

“Bad stuff.”

“What kind of bad stuff?”

“A protest, Chad called it. Turn the tables on them.”

“Great. Their first protest went so well.”

Jamie was living in my shed for at least a couple of days before my neighbor, Connie Hogan, told me he was in there. It wasn’t that Jamie was hiding, precisely. He was sleeping in there at night and coming out during the day to do yardwork and minor house repair. My powers of observation are not as sharp as they could be, I guess. Maybe I’d just figured the grass had stopped growing and the gutters weren’t as saggy as I’d originally thought.

After Connie took me aside for a neighborly heads-up, I went to my shed and looked through the dusty front window. The door and window of the shed have the same treatments—trim, shutters, a ridiculous doorknocker, everything but a doorbell—that the house has. This represents the previous owner’s attempt at either homey kitsch or humor, I don’t know which.

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A huge, pale, doughy guy, soft of belly and face, was lying on a paint tarp on the floor of the shed, his head propped on a bag of sand. His wrist was thrown over his eyes and he appeared to be sleeping. Anyone else, faced with a shed invasion, might have called the police. I didn't really have that option available to me. I'd already crossed a line in my relations with law enforcement. The law had stopped working for me, by this point, and was actively working against me. So I did something I'd never had cause to do before. I went to the shed door, grasped the brass knocker and rapped it a few times. No sound at all came from inside. I waited a full minute or so and was just reaching for the doorknob when it turned on its own and the door crept open a couple of inches.

Jamie is one of those people—blurred and swollen by extended stints in institutional care—that are hard to hang an age on. He says he's twenty-one, but the Sex Offender Registry lists him as thirty-eight. His first stay in state-managed care began when he sexually assaulted a ten-year-old girl, the child of a custodial aide employed by a special-ed program Jamie was enrolled in. He lured her into a supply closet and tried to sodomize her. That was in 1988, more than twenty years ago.

Since then, he's been hot-potatoed from one program to another, from minimum-care lockdowns to high-minded “developmental therapy” programs and back again. The first time he was released, into his mother's supervision under the auspices of an outpatient program, he stayed out of trouble for almost a year. Then he seems to have fallen in with a bad crowd somehow. The result was some sort of hazing situation, another young girl, more sodomy, a lurid cellphone video, more state-managed treatment. Six months ago, he was released again. He was released outright this time, with no supervision or follow-up, as part of recent Proposition 9-mandated budget cuts to state and local services. He seems to have tried to live with his mother again.

I looked all this up later, of course. At this point, a couple of weeks ago, he was just a bulky intruder in my shed, dressed in sweatpants and T-shirt, cheap running shoes curling up at the toes. He was looking sheepishly at the ground, lank blond hair hanging over his eyes.

“What are you doing in my shed?”

He didn’t answer. He seemed to think about my question. Then he shrugged.

“You can’t stay here.”

Same reaction. Same shrug.

“My neighbor says you’ve been mowing my lawn, doing repairs. Is this true?”

He ran a hand over the soft blond stubble on his face. “I guess.”

“Why?”

He looked up at me then and I was struck by the clear grey circles of his eyes. Not even grey. Almost white, like the grey of a brightly overcast sky. They looked more like lenses than eyes in the normal human sense.

“I don’t know,” he said.

By then it was apparent to me that he wasn’t quite right somehow. You see his type more and more these days, in places where they weren’t before. Developmentally challenged people, people with fussy brain wiring, people at the mercy of bad neural chemistry. Once there were programs for these people. Now there aren’t. Instead, they’re talking to themselves outside the library, sleeping in abandoned strip mall storefronts, chasing pigeons around fountains in public parks. Living in my shed.

Thank you, Prop 9. And Prop 12. And all the other Props that save us money and give us new, fascinating problems we never had before.

Oh, now, don’t worry. I’m not about to go off on some public-investment rant. Very soon, I’ll no longer have a stake in the condition of state and local infrastructure. So I have no need to take valuable time out here to suggest that we get what we pay for.

“You can’t stay here,” I said again.

“Okay.”

And he left. He walked past me, around the corner of my house, and disappeared. He had a funny way of walking, without moving his arms. I shut the shed door and went into my house.

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The next day, he was back. I didn't have to peer into the shed to find him. He was up on my roof, replacing a ragged patch of shingles that had come up in a storm, months ago. He'd gotten the replacement shingles and tools from the shed.

"Hey, you. Get down from there," I called up. I was standing at the foot of my ladder, which was propped against the back wall of my attached garage.

He turned and looked down at me.

"Look," I said, "I don't want to have to call the police."

I sure didn't. They hate me, as I've said.

He looked at me impassively for a little longer and then clambered down from the roof. That's the way he is. Not dysfunctional, necessarily. Or autistic, as it's commonly portrayed in movies on television. Just slow. And very reserved. Hard to read. He doesn't seem subject to boredom or irritation. Or humor. I don't know if he's always been like this, or if long periods of incarceration did this to him. Maybe a little of both. He may be a 'tweener, the kind of person the system isn't really designed to process. Not damaged enough to find a permanent niche in the managed-care system, not whole enough to make any real headway in the outside world.

"You have to go," I said to him as he stood before me, head down. "I told you yesterday, you can't stay here."

He raised his head, looked over my shoulder.

"Okay," he said.

"You have somewhere to go, right?"

"I guess." He was holding my hammer. He handed it to me.

"Then you have to go." I looked up at shingles scattered on the roof. I remember thinking, *Now I'll have to do something about that.* I'm sorry," I added, pointlessly.

He left, walking his peculiar stiff walk. This time I followed him out to the street to make sure he at least left the immediate vicinity.

The next day, I came back from somewhere and the loose shingles were all installed in neat new rows. The tools and ladder were returned to the shed. So was Jamie. He was standing between the wheelbarrow

and some stacked lawn furniture. It must have been a hundred degrees in that shed.

So I had a problem. Actually, I had plenty of problems and Jamie wasn't the worst of them, by then. But he was trouble I couldn't afford. I had to get rid of him. The police—for reasons many of you already know, though I haven't addressed them here yet—were still a last option.

“Why do you keep coming back?”

No answer.

“You said yesterday that you had some place to go. Is that true?”

He considered this, then nodded.

“Then why aren't you staying there?”

Nothing.

“Or . . . I don't know, going somewhere else? Why are you coming *here*?”

Nothing.

“This other place that you have to go to. Is there someone else there?”

Nothing. And then, almost warily, a nod. If Jamie is capable of being wary.

That was it, then. Maybe this other person would have something to say. Maybe, with a little investigation, I could find out what was going on. It beat going to the cops, anyway.

In the end, I didn't have to do much investigating. We got into my car and Jamie directed me to what turned out to be his mother's house. It was about ten miles away and I wondered if he'd been walking the entire distance, back and forth, each day. Our destination was a shit-brown bandbox of a house in a shabby neighborhood in Netcong, a block in from a busy commercial strip on Route 10. The house had a rust-stained concrete square for a porch and bare dirt for a front yard. We got there a little before noon.

A metal sign was staked into the dirt beside the porch. Many of you readers are familiar with this sign. Or ones like it. In fact, a couple of

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you may be among those who have attempted to place handmade versions of this sign on my lawn. It read:

BEWARE!

**Registered Sex
Offender Lives Here.**

Report Suspicious Behavior to:
1 (800) 854-4122

This Notice Posted by Order of the
New Jersey Sixth District Court

“Shit,” I said, without much heat. I wasn’t all that surprised. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Jamie is a sex offender. He is a sex offender deemed so dangerous that he must advertise himself as such to his neighbors. By order of a judge.

In the unlikely event you’re unfamiliar with the phenomenon, this business with the signs started a few years ago in Texas. A judge in Corpus Christi ordered fifteen sex offenders to post warning signs in their front yards as a condition of their release from prison. This novel punishment—or precaution, as many would have it—has since proven remarkably popular. Judges in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania soon took it up.

Now that Balloon Man hysteria is rampant, the signs are popping up everywhere. It’s not just judges doing the ordering, either. Local town boards are putting sex-offender signage laws on their books as a way of discouraging sex felons from trying to take up residence within their communities. And now, inevitably, grassroots sex-offender opposition groups, glorified bands of vigilantes in many cases, are putting up their own unofficial signs, unsanctioned by the law.

I’d seen these signs on the TV news, but, until then, I’d never encountered one in person.

I turned to Jamie. “This is why?” I said. “What are you thinking? What, we have something in common? We’re going to swap war stories or something? Are you crazy?”

Nothing.

So Jamie would have seen my story in the news. Hell, who hasn't? Maybe he thought I'd be sympathetic to his plight. I don't know. To this day, Jamie hasn't said.

If so, Jamie was the first to arrive at this conclusion and then act on it. He wouldn't be the last. Soon, I'd be a lot easier to find.

Soon, I'd have my own entry in the Sex Offenders Registry. Which is to say, soon an illegal entry filled with falsehoods and slanders would be covertly inserted into the Register by anonymous Internet hackers unfamiliar with the concept of presumed innocence and the right of the accused to defend himself from wrongful allegations. Anonymous hackers, I should add, who would be tacitly encouraged by the police and by our local mob-inciting assemblyman, Evan Lederer.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

Right then, I had Jamie on my hands and most, but not all, of my questions answered.

"Look," I said to Jamie, "There's nothing I can do for you. I don't know what you're thinking, but I have enough problems of my own. Alright?"

No reaction. He was looking at his house. At the sign. I saw that some of the brown ceramic exterior siding on the house was broken. A couple of panes of glass in the front-room bay window were missing, replaced by cardboard. All the curtains were drawn.

"I mean, for all I know . . ." I let it go. For all I knew, I was in danger. Stalked by a sex predator.

I went to the door and knocked. There was no bell. I waited a minute or so, then knocked again. And again.

I backed away into the front yard. There was an old car, a beat-up Ford Escort wagon, parked beside the house, under a tree. The three tires I could see were flat. I turned to Jamie, who was still standing in the front yard.

"You live here with someone?"

He nodded.

"Is this person at work or something?"

He shook his head. No.

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Okay. That was it, then.

“I’m going to leave you here. Do you understand me when I say that you can’t come back to my house?”

He looked at me.

“Do you?” I said.

Instead of answering, he walked past me, up to the front door. He turned the knob and pushed it open. He remained in the entryway for a moment, then stepped sideways into the house and disappeared, revealing an older woman framed in the doorway. She stood there, looking out at me, as expressionless as Jamie.

“Ma’am?” I said.

She was wearing a dusky brown housedress so threadbare that her legs were clearly visible through the material, and flat shoes. Her bare forearms were thin, painfully thin. Her grey hair was tied severely behind her head. She had Jamie’s eyes, only more opaque, more tired, less apparently interested in what the world might be up to.

“Are you his mother?”

She stepped forward and eased the door shut.

Later, someone would help me search the Sex Offenders Registry by home address and find my serial co-tenant, Jamie Dreyer. Along with some of the information I shared earlier. We would glean the rest by Googling his name. This home address was listed in the name of Dreyer, Louise, Jamie’s mother.

The next day, Jamie and I did it all again.

The shed. The ten-mile drive. Silence at the door.

“Hello?” I called.

I went around the side of the house. There were two windows on that side. One was broken and covered on the inside with cardboard. The cardboard looked fairly fresh, as if it had been recently placed there. The other window was intact, but covered on the inside by what looked like a blanket.

“We have to talk about Jamie!” On this day, the fourth day, I’d asked Jamie his name.

Jamie was standing, once more, in the front yard.

“Hello!”

The Ford was parked a few feet away, under its tree. Its four flat tires had sizeable punctures in the sidewalls. Someone had punched out the driver’s side window. The front seat was covered with tiny cubes of safety glass.

The backyard was as depressing as the front yard. More dirt, a couple of weed-choked flower beds, an ancient tire swing suspended from a tree. The neighbors behind and to the left had put up eight-foot hurricane fencing along the property lines they shared with Jamie’s home. The neighbors on the remaining side seemed to use their yard as a dump.

After I completed a circuit of the house, I saw that Jamie was gone. Either he’d gone into the house or he’d just walked away. I went back to the house and banged on the door some more. I tried the knob, but the door was locked.

The next day, the fifth day, I hustled Jamie from my shed out to my car without saying a word. I dropped him off in front of the Lake Lenni Lenape sheriff’s station, hoping he would get the message.

He didn’t.

So I gave up. By the sixth day, I had worse problems than Jamie on my hands. Compared to the creepy visitors I was receiving at that point, Jamie was a frigging breath of fresh air. He was the Welcome Wagon Lady compared to some of these freaks.

So here he is. He’s not bad company, really. He’s worthless as a watchdog, despite his size, as I’ve said. No bark, no bite. But he’s handy with tools. And he doesn’t openly despise me, like most everyone else around here. He’s even helped me out of a tight spot, once. Another story I’ll be getting to.

I told him he could stay in the shed for a week. Not that that arbitrary time frame means anything to him or to me. There aren’t any great life-altering changes on Jamie’s immediate horizon. And I’ll be gone soon.

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Ha, ha, ha. Oh, my.

Oh, excuse me. Sorry. I'm not laughing at Jamie's unfortunate situation. I'm not even laughing at mine.

It's later, now. Almost 10 am. I've just had more visitors, here in my garage redoubt.

First, Chad the Activist.

Chad came to retrieve Jamie, who was still watching me silently as I typed out the condensed account of our meeting that appears above.

"Come on, Jamie," Chad said. "We're going."

Jamie didn't look too eager to go wherever Chad was going. He looked at me and then off at nothing in particular. This, then, would be the bad stuff Jamie had reported earlier.

"Where are you going?" I said.

Chad looked at me stolidly. "Out."

"Out where?"

"Shopping."

I looked at Chad in surprise. "You? Shopping? Not locally, I hope."

Some of you know Chad. Unlike most of the freaks, Chad's not afraid to mix it up with the locals. He's the guy who had the temerity to permit himself to be interviewed on TV about his presence here in Lake Lenni Lenape. An act of foolishness he then compounded by trying to fill some prescriptions at Lakeside Drug, here in town. Chad is no longer a participant in the local economy.

"No. The mall in Rockaway. Come on, Jamie."

"You think that's far enough away?" Evidently not, since he felt the need to bring Jamie along.

The big garage door started rolling up then, revealing my next visitor. Sean the Drama Queen was standing outside.

"Goddamnit," I said. "What have I told you guys about the garage? The garage is mine. It's off-limits to everyone."

"Are we doing this or what?" Sean said.

“What? What are you shopping for?”

“Art supplies,” Chad said. “Why? You want to help?”

“Me? No. I’m not much of an artist. Words are my thing.” I indicated this laptop, sitting open atop the garbage can. The laptop is Sean’s, by the way. He lent it to me.

“I thought blaming other people for your problems was your thing,” Chad said. Chad is upset with me. He can’t understand why my recent experiences haven’t radicalized me in a more productive way. He doesn’t understand that I have other, more pressing matters on my mind. He limped past me and joined Sean on the blacktop.

“Do I even want to know what you’re going to do with these art supplies?”

“No. You don’t.” Chad the Activist is a testy guy. Not that he doesn’t have his reasons, but still.

“Let’s go,” Sean said. He had car keys in his hand.

“Whose car are you taking?” I asked.

“Clean Steve’s van.”

In order to safeguard his elaborately stylized van from towing and vandalism, Clean Steve has been parking it as much as a mile away. A different location each time. Of course, Abject Karl has been doing the same thing, and that didn’t prevent vindictive locals from shattering every window in Karl’s Buick Regal.

“This art project. Is it going to bring more unhappy people to my door?”

“Probably,” Chad said.

“Terrific. Are you going to tell me what you’ve done before they arrive? So I can prepare appropriately?”

Chad relented then and told me the plan. The Grand Plan. Some of it. Hell, he wanted to, anyway. Chad’s a real showoff.

Ha, ha, ha.

I have to admit, it’s pretty funny. And here I’ve already written that the freaks are a stodgy bunch. Disconcerted by a good joke. Foolish me. I take it all back.

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“You must be feeling pretty cocky, now that your swelling’s going down,” I said. “You really ought to get your back looked at, though. And your knee. That limp is getting worse.”

Chad shrugged. “I’ve been beat up worse. I’ve given back worse, too.” He turned his back on me and started hobbling down the driveway. “Let’s move it, Jamie.”

I watched Chad and Sean walk away. Jamie followed them to the bottom of my driveway, then turned and looked back up at me. He stayed like that, looking, hoping for some countermand, until I raised my hand and waved. He looked down at his feet and then trudged off after Chad and Sean.

I’ve mentioned that Chad recently ran into some trouble on a shopping trip. Chad might have escaped Lakeside Drug unscathed if it hadn’t been for the complex nature of his prescription order. Chad has one of the new hyper-aggressive strains of AIDS, you see. One of those strains that advance from merely HIV positive to full-blown AIDS in a year or less. One of those strains that have proven resistant to most of the major classes of anti-retroviral drugs. I’m only guessing, but I’d say they don’t have many state-of-the-art AIDS treatments on the shelves at Lakeside Drug. Lakeside is the sort of drugstore that also sells live bait — earthworms and such — from a cooler near the front register.

The other day, the pharmacist was still hemming and hawing over Chad’s sheaf of scripts as rumor of Chad’s errand leaped from Lakeside Drug to Nan Pratt’s Country Store, and then across the street to Holly’s Tavern, where the Saturday noon-to-five crowd must have absorbed the news with grim resolve. They knew who Chad was. The ones who hadn’t traded face-to-face insults with Chad had seen him on TV.

The two Holly’s regulars who took it upon themselves to restore civic order made two preparatory stops after entering Lakeside Drug. They stopped in the housewares aisle for elbow-length rubber gloves. Then they stopped in the hardware aisle for face masks, the kind that construction workers and painters use to avoid breathing sawdust and paint mist. They donned these protective measures before kicking the crap out of Chad.

You can't be too careful these days, I guess.

§

The portion of my wife's petition for divorce that addresses Christopher's future is brief. It states, *One child was born to the parties, namely Christopher Geffney, born August 12, 1998. Child has been and is currently in the care and custody of Plaintiff at Plaintiff's parents' home in Lake Lenni Lenape, NJ. Upon information and belief, Defendant concurs with Plaintiff that it is in the best interests of the minor child that Plaintiff be awarded his sole legal custody and primary physical custody. The Defendant should have reasonable visitation rights with the minor child at times and places to be mutually agreed.*

Everything after *Upon information and belief* is false. Emily's petition merely states her wishes as fact. That's her way.

When I arrived at the Lake Lenni Lenape Municipal Courthouse for the temporary custody hearing that would determine Christopher's immediate future, I was carrying a brown, vinyl-bound photo album. The album was filled with photos of me interacting with Christopher. Feeding him in his high chair. Pushing him along in his Batmobile pedal car. Combing him, dangling him, tickling him, dressing him, pitching softballs to him, bathing him, giving him pony rides. There were about fifty photos in the album. I wished I had more, but Emily had never been much for taking pictures.

The album was my lawyer's idea.

Wasn't the whole idea of producing photographs to document my love for my son a little, well, creepy? Wouldn't it make me seem desperate? Or, if not desperate, at least absurdly literal-minded?

The law rewards literal-mindedness, my lawyer told me. The spoils go to the party most obsessive in detailing minutiae. Nothing is so patently apparent, so ham-handedly obvious, that it cannot be pointed out in a court of law, evidence-tagged, and entered into the record.

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Art Archibald, my divorce lawyer, was recommended to me by my business lawyer. Which is to say, by the lawyer that I'd once brought business contracts to, back when I had business to conduct. Back when I had a career. Art seems to have an uneventful practice—personal-injury suits, no-fault divorces, custody litigation, estate documentation, that sort of thing. He has an office in a nearly vacant corporate park north of Lake Lenni Lenape and, he says, good relationships with many of the family court judges in our district.

Art and I got along famously from the outset. I liked Art because he was so sanguine about my legal prospects at our first meeting.

“So you're self-employed, right?” Art had asked. “What did you make last year?”

I gave him a figure.

“Jesus,” he said. “Talk about suffering for your art. Well, the good news is, we can petition your wife for one hundred percent of Christopher's expenses. Plus alimony.”

“Alimony?” This was before I even knew there was such a thing as alimony paid to husbands. Before I knew that husbands had rights.

“Alimony. If a divorce leaves one spouse with very little income and the other with enough to contribute to the low-income spouse's support, the court awards alimony.”

“Really,” I said. “Is that common for husbands? I don't want to look pathetic.”

“Oh, no. God forbid. No one wants to look pathetic,” Art said. “I wish I had your worries.”

“Excuse me?”

“Forty percent of what you eventually pay me will go directly to my ex-wife. And that doesn't include child support. Every time I open a bank statement, I wish I could be pathetic like you.”

It was Art's idea that I should try to gain full and sole custody of Christopher. Until I talked to Art, all I'd wanted was a 50/50 split.

“The law is not friendly to half measures,” Art said. “If you want to win shared custody of Christopher, you have to demand the whole cake. You can't look weak. You can't look like someone who wants to

spend only a portion of his time with his son. Your wife's not doing that, is she? Does she love him more than you do?"

"Of course not."

"Then tough up, bucky. You've got to insist on exclusive custody of Christopher based on your rights as his established primary caregiver. Will you win sole custody? Maybe not." He waved the idea away. "Probably not. But you will have staked out a high ground that you can negotiate down from. Demand one hundred percent, fall back to seventy-five, and then you'll look supremely reasonable at fifty. Start at fifty and you'll end up with every third Sunday afternoon and her lawyer's bootprint on your ass."

Oh, I liked Art. He seemed like a scrapper. Someone who'd wade into the fray with me.

"Now your wife, she's . . . what?" Advertising?"

"Marketing. A marketing consultant."

"Marketing. Late nights?"

"More and more, lately."

"Good. What's late?"

"Ten. Eleven. Sometimes later."

"Even better. That's pretty late. You're making the kid's dinner. Giving him a bath. Tucking him in. Reading him a story."

"Right."

"And your wife's out."

"Right."

"This is for what? Creative brainstorming? Ad deadlines?"

"Emily's more on the account-rep side. Client handholding, like that."

"Wining and dining. Industry conventions. Comped sports events, Broadway plays, Vegas. Client perks."

"Probably, yeah."

"High stakes, selling one of those marketing campaigns. Millions of dollars up for grabs, sometimes."

"I guess."

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“You hear things. I hear things. Escort services. VIP rooms. Controlled substances. Manhattan after dark, right?”

“Oh, I don’t know if—”

“The ad business, it can be a fast lifestyle.”

I shrugged. Maybe. Who knew?

Art knew. He was a scrapper.

He met me outside the courthouse before the hearing. He was wearing what he called his “lucky suit.” This worried me, until I decided he was kidding me.

“So how’s this judge?” I asked him. “She a hangin’ judge or what?”

“Timmerman? No. She’s a sweetheart. You’ll love her. She’ll be our new best friend in no time.”

“We have a chance, don’t we?”

“We have an excellent chance. I’ve seen fathers with less compelling cases than yours come away winners.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Art, I’ve since learned, was probably stretching the truth here. Or, if this statement was true in Art’s case, then Art’s experience is not representative of typical legal precedent.

In fact, the overwhelming majority of custody disputes end with the child in the mother’s full-time care. There isn’t a state in the union in which judges rule in the father’s favor even ten percent of the time. Go state by state and you find fathers winning two percent of the time here, four percent of the time there, like that. It’s a whitewash, basically.

Complicating my own case was the fact that Christopher was not currently under my supervision. He was in his mother’s care. The courts, I’ve learned, attach an absurd amount of significance to which party has possession of the child at the time of the temporary hearing. It doesn’t matter how you gained possession of the child. Just that you have the child. Because of this, most custody disputes begin with a legalized kidnapping. Lawyers usually advise mothers to take the children and leave. If that’s not possible, they advise mothers to get a protective order evicting the husband from the house. Or to try to talk

him into moving out for a “trial separation.” This enables the mother to establish herself as the sole caretaker of the child at the time of the temporary hearing.

Everything I know about custody law, I learned too late. I learned it the hard way. Emily caught me flat-footed at the starting line. By the time I knew what she was up to, the first leg—the most crucial leg—of the race was over.

“Are we ready?” Art was saying.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Buck up, bucky. Put your game face on. The future is ours.”

Oh, we were eager to get to it. We marched into the courthouse in lockstep solidarity, a man and his expert legal counsel. Sheep into the slaughterhouse.

Judge Timmerman was younger than I would have expected. How long does it take to become a judge? If, say, she was in her mid-forties, she didn’t look it. She had red hair pinned up in a hasty knot atop her head, a bright red slash of lipstick, and a default facial expression of bemused expectation. She spoke in the light, playful way of a woman determined not to let authority undermine her femininity. She was, in short, not altogether unlike my wife.

She entered the courtroom without fanfare and made a point of avoiding the bench. She wasn’t wearing any kind of judicial robe, just a modest navy business suit. She went to one of the counselor’s tables and set a laptop and a cup of coffee upon it. As she was doing this, a man who could only have been Emily’s lawyer entered the courtroom through the other, public, door. He looked imposingly Mediterranean, lithe and glittery-eyed, and I couldn’t help but steal a glance at Art. If this were a Hollywood movie, I thought, Art would be the crafty old fox, comfortably rumped and baggy, underestimated by the opposing team. The Robert Duvall guy.

Art’s counterpart was holding the door for someone. When Emily entered, I experienced a ridiculous, utterly misplaced pang of envy. As if this lawyer were some lucky suitor and his presence here wasn’t necessari-

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tated, in large part, by my own squandering of everything I'd once had with Emily.

Emily looked terrific. She has the kind of beauty that is only accentuated by somber clothing and formal gatherings. Her auburn hair was pinned up high and tight; her makeup just slightly underdone to suggest concealed sleeplessness and worry. She was wearing a severe black jacket over a white blouse and below-the-knee skirt.

Is it possible to develop a crush on your wife, just as she's becoming your ex-wife? I suspect that this phenomenon is more common than we might think. Perhaps this is all we need, a shock to the system, to revive in our minds an accurate apprehension of our good fortune, of all we have to lose. Emily was aglow with wounded dignity; her taut chin conveyed determination, her green eyes radiated a pretty resolve. She kept her hands folded before her narrow waist and ducked her head slightly as she entered the room, in deference to her lawyer and the presence of the judge. She didn't look my way.

I turned to find the judge holding her hand out to me.

"Hello, Mr. Geffney," she said. She took my hand and then turned to Art. "How've you been, Art? How's Priscilla?"

"Priscilla's great, I guess. They grow up fast. I wish I could see her more."

Priscilla, I've since learned, is Art's daughter. A less trusting client might have recognized a poor omen in the fact that his family court representative didn't get to see his daughter as much as he would have liked.

The judge took Emily's hand without comment and then offered her hand to plaintiff's lawyer. "Sally Timmerman," she said.

The lawyer grinned broadly. "Bruno Fargas. Pleased to meet you." Yes, that's right. Bruno. I'd never encountered a Bruno in real life before.

Judge Timmerman retrieved her laptop and coffee and took her seat on the bench. "This is a temporary custody hearing and we'll keep it as informal as possible. This hearing is confidential and an audio recording of it will be made. I hope, Mr. and Mrs. Geffney, that we can

make a good start today. In that spirit, I hope to make no judgments at all. Our goal here is to have the parties come to an amicable agreement of their own accord, with Christopher's best interests as sole motivating factor." She seemed to make a point of looking at Bruno. "Okay?"

"Excellent," Bruno said, over-heartily, I thought. I would discover later that Bruno is something of a hotshot, a highly regarded litigator on a partnership track at an exclusive Manhattan divorce mill. In the beginning, my wife must have believed she would be needing such formidable legal talent. Not so, as it turned out.

The judge removed a pair of glasses from her jacket, little half-circle lenses, and set them atop her nose. She reviewed some material on her laptop screen, then looked up at us.

"I've been informed that plaintiff's petition is inaccurate in its description of consensus regarding Christopher's future."

"That's right, your honor," Art said. "We intend to present a case for gaining full and sole custody of Christopher."

"Alright. Please keep in mind, Mr. and Mrs. Geffney, that the purpose of this hearing is to provide temporary guidelines for Christopher's guardianship and well-being. Nothing we decide here is necessarily permanent. Permanent determinations will be made at a formal hearing, which is yet to be scheduled. Now let's pull up some chairs and get to work."

We took seats behind our respective tables. Bruno pulled an impressively compact laptop from his briefcase. I glanced again at Art. Why was my lawyer's laptop so bulky and outdated?

"Christopher is living with you now," the judge said to Emily. "And where is that?"

"At my parents' house, on the east side of the lake."

"How's he doing?"

"He's doing well. He's going to his same school, has the same hours, the same routine."

Three weeks before this hearing, I'd come home from a business trip to Manhattan to find that Emily had emptied the house of everything she might have valued. Anything that she might want to start a

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new post-me life with. Her clothes and personal effects, all the china, stemware and silver, every framed photo free of my likeness. A bunch of other stuff as well; I don't know what. You know how it is. It's hard to remember what's gone, once it's gone.

She'd left behind all the unwieldy big-ticket stuff. The giant plasma TV, the leather living-room sectional, the hutches, breakfronts, and armoires. Even her antique marriage chest. A waste, as it turns out. The convicted sex felons who live upstairs now are pretty hard on furnishings and appliances and such.

On the other hand, Emily seemed to have made a special point of Christopher's room. It was stripped entirely bare, except for the bed and dresser. The desk, chairs, wall posters, toys, books, clothes hangers, dust bunnies, everything. All gone. There's a section of the wallpaper by the window that's peeled up, as if she'd considered taking that, too, and changed her mind.

I was shocked numb at first. Struck dumb by the blunt, clumsy, shrill reality of all that absence. The ear-ringing silence like an alarm, Christopher's empty room like a punch in the face. Oh, I'm not numb now. Believe me, it all hurts worse, much worse, today than it did right then.

Emily left no note that day. She didn't have to. We both knew the score. I would find out later that she and Christopher had moved in with her parents. No surprise there, either.

"Christopher is accustomed to staying with his grandparents," Emily was saying. "In previous years, when my husband would go on promotional trips related to his work, Christopher would sometimes stay with my parents for extended periods. My mother is retired; she watches him in the afternoon, after school. And I'm home nights and weekends."

I could have said something in response there, but I didn't.

"Oh, that's good. That's really great," the judge said. She moused through some material onscreen. "What a luxury, to have immediate family so close by."

"It's a comfort," Emily said. "It really is."

“The competition for responsible babysitters in this area is worse than I can ever remember it. The girl we bring in is booked half a year in advance.”

“How old is your girl now?” Emily asked. “Anita, right?”

“Anita, yes. Nine. Ten in September. She’s a year behind your Christopher at Tamerlane.”

Tamerlane Day School. I’d whiffed on the judge, but I realized I knew Anita Timmerman. She was a club joiner, like Christopher. Junior Entrepreneurs. Gamers’ Club. Drama Circle. Saucy little kid, too mature by far for her years. Red hair like her mother.

“Oh, I know your daughter,” I said, eager not to be left out of the proud-parents chatter. “Anita. Cute kid.”

The judge looked at me over her half-glasses. “Thank you. You’re a writer, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You work from home.”

“Yes.”

“That’s what you’re doing currently?”

“Yes,” I lied. “I’m home all day, every day.”

“You’re going to base your claim for custody of Christopher on your established household role as primary caregiver.”

“That’s right.” This information was derived from materials submitted in discovery by Art.

“Is that the sole substance of your claim?”

“No, your honor, it isn’t.” This from Art. “We intend to show that Mrs. Geffney is unfit for the responsibility of raising Christopher on her own. Or even, for that matter, raising Christopher with substantial professional or family help.”

“Unfit?” the judge said, to me.

“Well, unfit is a strong word,” I said. “It’s mostly a matter of availability. I’m home all day, my wife isn’t. I’ve always provided the lion’s share of Christopher’s care and nurturing because I can. I’m at home.”

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“We intend to show,” Art said, “that the professional and social demands of Mrs. Geffney’s career require that she be out of the house for extended periods of time, both day and night.”

“And you were never out, right?” Emily said, to me. “I was never covering for you at home while you were on the road, on promotional trips that I organized and paid for, pressing the flesh with your homely literary groupies. Right?”

The judge peered over her glasses at Emily, then looked at me again. “You have professional commitments that require extended periods of travel?”

“Not anymore.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he’s a failure,” my wife said.

“Because the realities of publishing are changing,” I said. “I can accomplish a lot more, these days, by way of the Internet than I ever could by meeting small groups in person. Q&As, chat rooms, direct online sales. The Internet is really . . . ah, the wave of the future.” I grinned weakly.

“So you intend to curtail your business-related travel in the future.”

“Yes, ma’am. I already have.”

“How’s your writing going?”

“Good. Great. I’m doing okay. I have a manuscript out. With another agent.”

“Not good,” Art said. “If you review the financials we’ve submitted, you’ll see that Mr. Geffney’s writing has ceased to be a generator of significant income.”

“He’s a failure,” my wife clarified, needlessly.

“Alright.” The judge key-tapped something into her case file. “Is there anything else you’d like to place into the record, Mr. Geffney?”

“Yes there is,” Art said. He got up and placed the photograph album on the table before the judge. “This volume is intended to present a day-in-the-life record of Mr. Geffney’s interactions with his son. Mr. Geffney would like to walk us quickly through it.”

We’d rehearsed this part.

“Okay,” the judge said.

I approached the bench and opened the album to the first page. I indicated the first photo. “Ready?” I said.

“Yes,” the judge said.

“Christopher is an early riser,” I started. “He’s always been that way. I never have to wake him up. When he was a toddler, he’d be at my bedside when I opened my eyes at five am. We’d let him into our bed to watch morning TV until six or so. These days, I’ll usually find him in the kitchen, finishing his homework. That’s when he does it. In the morning. Every morning, I make him breakfast. That’s without fail, every morning. Here’s a picture of Christopher and me, making pancakes. He went through a phase where we would try to make pancakes in the shapes of his favorite cartoon characters. See that?”

“Yes,” the judge said.

“Do you know who that is?”

“No.”

“Aw, come on. See the ears?”

“The . . . no. Oh, wait. Yes, I see them. Okay.”

“Mickey Mouse.”

“Ah, okay. Sure, I see it.”

“In this next one, you can see we tried something a little different. If you turn the flame up to high and use a thicker batter, you can —”

“Mr. Geffney?”

“Yes?”

“How many pictures do we have here?”

“About fifty or so.”

“Can we condense the descriptions a little?”

“Oh. Right. Sure. Okay.”

So on we went. And on and on. See Fletcher help Christopher bait a hook. See Fletcher light candles on Christopher’s birthday cake. See Fletcher and Christopher with matching fake tattoos. See Fletcher and Christopher on line for the Peter Pan flying pirate ship ride at Disney World. After about thirty minutes, I was wrapping it up.

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“I’d like to conclude by saying that I believe there’s no substitute for hands-on, face-to-face parenting. Babysitters and daycare facilities and even grandparents are all very nice in a back-up role, but kids need to be with their parents as much as possible. You can’t raise a child by proxy. You have to be there for them. And that’s what I want to do. No matter what happens here, Christopher’s health and happiness are my sole concern. As long as one of us, me or Emily, is with Christopher as much as possible, I know he’ll be fine.”

That last bit was meant to showcase my generosity.

“And if you can stay home all day on my tab, watching TV and trolling online message boards for ugly-duckling book-club members, so much the better. Right, Mr. Mom?”

Fifty pictures worth of father-son history had clearly eroded Emily’s patience. She had been indulging in ostentatious arm-folding and throat-clearing throughout the last fifteen photos or so.

“That’s not the point,” I said. To the judge. “The point is Christopher’s well-being.”

Art had warned me in advance not to address Emily directly during the proceeding, to address all my comments directly to the judge. You’re not trying to convince your wife, he’d said. You’re trying to convince the judge. The last thing you want to do is get into a pissing match with your wife in front of the judge.

“You sanctimonious boob. Leave it to you to turn your unemployment, your total lack of prospects or ambition, into an advantage. But that’s been your only talent all along, hasn’t it?”

I was elated that Emily was behaving so badly. Maybe Bruno hadn’t given her a heads-up on courtroom etiquette. Maybe her Bruno could use a few pointers from my local-yokel Art.

“One of the best things about finally being rid of you is that I’ll never again have to hear you talk about your obsessive sheltering of Christopher as if it were a good thing.”

“Obsessive sheltering is my wife’s term for what most people would regard as normal parenting,” I said to the judge. “My wife has always

regarded my willingness to be there for our boy when he needs me as evidence of eccentricity.”

“Oh, my,” my wife said and laughed at me. “Aren’t you precious, Mr. Family Man?” She turned to the judge. “The truth is, Christopher is lagging behind the median in several indicators of maturity as a direct result of being mother-henned by Fletcher. Christopher lacks confidence, self-reliance, and sociability skills. He has difficulty adapting to unfamiliar situations. I’ve submitted professional evaluation to back that up.” She turned to me again. “Christopher has a lot of catching up to do.”

“Christopher is a normal, healthy, happy boy. He has a sweet, sensitive nature. Not everyone regards that as a pathology.”

“The court has received a psychological evaluation of Christopher submitted by plaintiff,” the judge said. “Mr. Geffney, if you wish, you may have a second evaluation conducted by a psychologist of your choosing and the results submitted to the court. Mrs. Geffney, is there anything else you’d like to add?”

“Yes, your honor, there is,” Emily said. “We have our own photographic record we’d like to present. It’s not organized in a folksy photo album, as defendant’s was, but then the subject matter isn’t as heart-warming, either.”

Fargas pulled two bulky manila envelopes from his briefcase and passed them to Emily. Emily handed one to the judge and held the other out to me.

“Here you go, Mr. Family Man. I made copies for you, too. Suitable for framing.”

There was a sizable lump in the bottom of the envelope. I reached in and extracted a thick stack of photos. I looked at the first photo. Then the next and the next.

“I don’t understand this,” I said.

I was sorting through a series of photos that captured me in various sexual positions with a woman I couldn’t quite place. The photos, jarringly, were all taken from the same angle, a position about six feet or so above the bed. Who was this woman? I leafed through a dozen

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photos before I got a clear shot of her face. Oh, I thought. Pittsburgh. I'd met this girl through my website. I turned the photo over. *Evanston, Indiana. Ram's Head Motor Inn. 9/17/04.*

Have I mentioned I have a website? Well, I used to have a website. I had to pull the plug on it a few weeks ago, after it became a popular web destination for outraged zealots.

"These photos have been provided by two different private detection agencies," Bruno was saying. "Spyglass Detection of Netcong, New Jersey and Arthur McNellen Associates of New York. They document a period of time spanning three years or so."

"Where . . .?" I shook my head. More photos. *Fort Myers, Florida. Ramada Inn. 6/12/05. Wheeling, West Virginia. American Eagle Convention Center. Parking Lot B, Area 6. 12/3/06.* Oh, right, cold night, that one.

The judge was looking through her set of photos with an admirable lack of visible emotion.

"This is such—" Bullshit, I wanted to say. "It's not like I'm denying infidelity."

I sure wasn't. Emily's doctor's diagnosis of her gonorrhea was one of the documents submitted in discovery.

Art had come up behind me and taken the stack of photos from my hand. He was looking through them. Photos and more photos. I saw one girl I'd been with a few times. Cynthia, a writer of impenetrable stream-of-consciousness S&M blather. She'd hoped I might forward her work on to my literary agent. Here was another girl I recalled; I'd found her sitting on the rear-mounted spare-tire of my Jeep after a reading. I never learned her name.

"The purpose of this photographic record," Bruno said, "is to make it clear to the court that Mr. Geffney was doing a lot more than making mouse pancakes while his wife was providing financial support for him and his unconventional lifestyle. His reckless, selfish behavior destroyed their marriage. And it is our contention that his behavior represents, and will continue to represent, a very real threat to Christopher's emotional well-being."

“That’s not true,” I said. “None of this . . . Christopher has never been exposed to any of this. He knows nothing about it.”

“Oh, fuck you, Fletcher,” Emily said. “Consider yourself lucky I wasn’t having you followed around before 2004.” The judge was making cease-and-desist gestures at Emily, who was ignoring them. “Back when a handful of people still gave a shit about your crappy books. What would those pictures have looked like, Fletch? I wonder.”

“No, no, no,” the judge was saying. “No, no. I won’t have that in my courtroom. Counsel,” meaning Bruno, “please advise your client?”

“These photos and what they document,” Art was attempting to come to my rescue, “though they do not necessarily portray the Geffneys’ marriage in a positive light, do not and should not detract from Fletcher’s suitability as guardian of Christopher. In fact—”

“They don’t?” Emily said, incredulously. “They shouldn’t?”

“Ummm, no,” Art said.

“Alright, enough,” the judge said. “Counselor, you’ll get to present that unique argument at the formal hearing. In the meantime, I’ve seen enough photos from both sides. I’ve heard nothing here today that persuades me to alter the present situation. Christopher is in a comfortable, familiar setting with an established routine. Let’s leave it that way. Let’s move on to visitation.”

“Wait,” I said. I turned to Art, then to the judge. “Is that it? What about . . . ?” What about my established history as primary caregiver? What about Emily’s unfitness for exclusive guardianship?

“This is a temporary arrangement,” the judge said.

“Look, I’ve never claimed to be a model husband. But that doesn’t mean I’m not a good father.”

“They’re two halves of the same thing,” Emily hissed. “You silly, self-serving son of a bitch.”

Bruno was closing his briefcase. The judge was entering something into her laptop, tap-tap-tapping away with an air of finality, of closure.

“Wait!”

The judge stopped typing, but left her fingers poised over the keys. “Yes, Fletcher?”

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“Is that it? I lose? Isn’t there something . . .” I turned around.
“Art?” Where was my scrapper?

“You haven’t lost anything,” Art said. “This is a temporary custody hearing.”

“Mr. Geffney, I’m going to give you standard visitation for the next month, starting the first of June. One day a week, nine to five, and every other weekend. The court clerk will provide you with the breakdown.”

“One day?”

“And every other weekend. With court-arranged supervision. I will emphasize once more that this is a temporary arrangement.”

“No. No. Wait.”

“Yes?”

“What do you mean, supervision? You don’t mean that you expect me to be supervised in caring for Christopher, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Are you kidding me? Are you suggesting that I might be some kind of . . . of danger to my son? That somebody has to monitor me?”

“I can assure you that I am not kidding. Though this is an informal hearing, I am a justice of the court and this is an official proceeding.”

“I’m his father. I raised him from an infant.”

“I think you’re misunderstanding my intent, Fletcher. A court-appointed supervisor can prove helpful to your case. He or she will be charged with observing your interaction with your son. A favorable review of that interaction will be taken into account when a final determination is made regarding permanent custody.”

“I have to pass a test? This is preposterous. I am not a criminal. I’m the only real parent Christopher’s ever had. I have rights as a parent.”

“Mr. Archibald, I suggest you —”

“You fuck other women. Including one that our son caught you with. You make a fool of me.” This from my wife. “You give me a fucking disease.”

“—have a word with your client.”

“And now you want to talk about your rights as a parent?”

“Disease,” I started to reply, stupidly, “is probably a strong word for—” Art already had a hand on my shoulder and was easing me away from the judge’s table.

“You don’t have any rights. You have the right to disappear. Your gravy train has arrived at the end of the line. This is where you get off.”

“And that is your last outburst.” The judge was pointing a finger at my wife. No more Ms. Nice Guy, presiding. “Sit down, both of you.”

Bruno stood and came forward. “Your honor, my client objects most strenuously to the terms of visitation. Given Mr. Geffney’s serial adultery and his documented association with any number of unsavory people, we feel that Mr. Geffney should be entitled to no more than one afternoon per weekend, for a period of three hours or less, with court-arranged supervision.”

“Objection noted. Mr. Fargas, the behavior of your client today has also been noted. It will be factored into the court’s decision with regard to her petition for custody. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Your honor?”

“Yes, Mr. Geffney?”

“What about my life with Christopher? Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“Of course it does.”

“I’m the only round-the-clock caregiver Christopher has ever known. Yes, my marriage is over. And yes, it probably deserves to be over. But how is a grandparents’ home more stable and suitable than Christopher’s own home? The one I’ve raised him in? Shouldn’t we be trying to retain and reinforce every familiar aspect of Christopher’s life?”

“This is a temporary arrangement. Your testimony and the documentation you’ve submitted will be taken into consideration when a final judgment is made. Until then, my decision stands.”

“My wife kidnapped him. She kidnapped my son from his home. And you’re rewarding her for it.”

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“That’s enough. Mr. Geffney, your behavior has been noted as well. If I were you, I would take advantage of every opportunity to generate positive documentation for the court to consider. And that includes court-ordered supervision and evaluation. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, your honor,” Art said. “We do.”

The judge let a decorous silence gather before she addressed us again. “This court can, if it chooses, ask both parties to submit to a basic psychological evaluation conducted by an impartial licensed professional retained by the court for that purpose. And this court chooses to do so. Before you leave today, each of you will make an appointment with the court clerk. You each have seven days to begin the evaluation. Agreed?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Anything else?”

There was nothing else.

“This hearing is adjourned.”

Later, Art and I were sitting on a bench in the little park across the street from the courthouse.

“Your wife’s father,” Art said, after a while. “He’s some kind of contract lawyer, right?”

“Sort of. Henry Luckenbill represents some New York entertainment people. Stage actors, playwrights, artists.”

“Does he know Timmerman? How well does your wife know Timmerman?”

“They don’t travel in the same professional circles, obviously. Henry and the judge. But Henry is involved in county politics. He’s on the county board of freeholders. So they might know each other from that. Maybe. I mean, I’m guessing. You legal people all know each other, right?”

“We do?” Art seemed to consider this. “I’ve met Henry Luckenbill, here and there over the years, but I don’t know him personally. I don’t know much about county politics. How well does your wife know Timmerman?”

“It looks like she might know her from Tamerlane Day School. Or her kid, anyway. But so do I. I see the judge’s kid all the time.”

“Normally, I’d consider filing a motion requesting that the judge recuse herself. And I may still do that. But I’ll be frank with you. Until today, I regarded Timmerman as an asset for our side. Judges who have a history of cutting fathers a break in temporary custody hearings aren’t all that common. Especially judges who’ve just seen you naked.”

“Oh, is that what she did? Cut me a break? One day a week and every other weekend? With supervision? I thought we were going for one hundred percent custody. The high ground, remember?”

“And I thought we were going to treat your philandering as hearsay. Not as exhaustively documented fact. Right now, I’m grateful with what we got. Luckily for us, Timmerman seems to dislike your wife almost as much as she dislikes us.” Art was peeking into the manila envelope of snapshots Emily had given us. He reached in and pulled out one, then another.

“Enough with the photos, already,” I said.

“I ought to take up authoring,” Art said. “This lawyering is a bum rap. All late hours and no ass. Authoring is where the chicks are.”

“Is my wife allowed to spring photos on us like this, out of the blue? Isn’t there a rule against that?”

“It was an informal hearing. Just about everything is allowed. Except berating the judge, of course.”

I looked at the photo Art was studying. It was an innocuous shot of me sharing a little bar table with an older blond woman in an unfortunately tight black skirt. I plucked the photo out of his hand and read the notation on the back. *Tattletales, Scranton, PA. 1/16/07.*

“I did not have sex with this woman. No way. It was two drinks, some chat, and out.”

“Some chat about what?”

“I don’t know. Some novel she wrote, probably. Every damn one of them has a manuscript they want me to read.”

Art was looking at another photo, a purple-tinged limning of tangled limbs and carnal grimacing.

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“This is pretty bad, isn’t it?”

“It ain’t great,” Art said. “It’s part of an unhealthy environment argument they’re going to make against us. Look what young Christopher would be living with. Your wife’s been doing spadework for this case for years.” Art was inspecting an aerial view of a motel bed.

“How did they get some of these photos?” I said. “I mean, look at that.”

“Standard spyware, looks like. About the size of a standard 35mm camera lens. You stick one on a ceiling or a wall and it relays video footage to a digital recorder. Technology’s been around for years. Where you been?”

“I’m not a tech guy.”

“The exteriors and anything in a conventional frame of reference would be standard detective work. Hide, point, and click.”

“Terrific. Detectives following me around.”

“Happens all the time. Wives don’t like to leave anything to chance.” He reached into the envelope, pulled out more photos, and started flipping through them, turning each over to inspect the back. “You travel a lot.”

“I used to. Readings, signings.”

“Raleigh. Buffalo. New Haven. Wheeling. Jacksonville. Evanston.”

“The literary capitals of the western world.”

“Easy work for surveillance guys. They know your schedule in advance. They watch you check into a room, watch you leave, stick up a cam or two, see what develops.”

“The pictures make it look like more than it was. I mean, there were some women, but . . .”

“But?”

“It didn’t seem like that many. At the time.”

“Your publisher pay for all this?”

“The trips, you mean? Not really. Publishers don’t pay for much. We had the money and a lot of it is tax deductible.”

“You and your wife.”

“Yeah. She did some publicity work for me. In the beginning.”

Art leafed through more photos. “You mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“Not at all, Art. Something about sitting here with you, reviewing a lurid pictorial history of my recent sex life, has made me feel closer to you than ever. So, please. Fire away.”

“Your wife has known you’ve been fucking around for at least three, four years, right?”

“It looks that way.”

“With a number of women. In fairly anonymous situations.”

“Some women. A few. I guess so.”

Art seemed to be reflecting on this.

“And?” I said.

“She alleges that you gave her a sexually transmitted disease.”

“Yes, she is alleging that.”

“Recently.”

“I guess so.”

We sat for a little while on our bench, two middle-aged guys and a brick-sized clutch of dim, grainy, decidedly nonerotic pornography.

“My ex-wife had no great desire to have sex with me,” Art said, “even under normal circumstances. But she’d have been fucking me a whole lot less if she had photographic proof that I was banging the Ladies’ Literary Appreciation Society on the side.”

“What are you saying, Art?”

“Isn’t it unusual for your wife to want to have sex with you under these circumstances?” He wagged a photo at me. It looked like Cynthia, in one of her oddball S&M-derived positions. “Unprotected sex?”

“Maybe she was horny.” My wife, not Cynthia. “It happens.”

“Yeah, all the time. Maybe she had this STD first. Maybe she gave it to you as a going-away present.”

“What?”

“And then turned around and presented it as evidence of cruel and unusual mistreatment on your part.”

“Jesus, Art. Please. You’re creeping me out.”

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“Just speculating. We’ve let it go uncontested up to now.”

“No one would . . . no. It’s too diabolical.”

“Alright. We’ll file it away for now.” He was still going through photos.

“You can put those away, if you want.”

“Uh huh.” Flick, flick, flick. “You mind if I ask another personal question?”

“Is it the last one?”

“Some of these women . . . they’re not exactly, I mean, they don’t hold a candle to your wife, you know? In the looks department.”

“Are they not up to your standards, Art?”

“My standards? My standards might be different, if I was married to your wife.”

Art, with his paunchy gut, violet eye bags, short legs, and absurd comb-over, is probably accustomed to taking what he can get, girlwise, since his divorce. Although the law degree probably helps.

“So why graze in other fields? Is that what you’re asking me?”

“Yeah.”

“Got me, Art. Therein lies a tale, I suppose. If one of us could write worth a damn, maybe we could tell it.”

“Whoops. Hold the phone.” Art held up a photo. “Here’s one from three weeks ago.”

Art was looking at a photo of Rayn, getting into the back seat of my Jeep Cherokee, skimpy blouse unbuttoned. Then another, in which she’d gotten out of the Jeep, naked, to stretch. His eyebrows went up.

“Now this girl’s from the A-list,” Art said. “What a hottie. It’s amazing to me that books could have such chick-pulling power.”

I shrugged. “Chicks read books.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Nobody reads books. Who *is* this?”

“Rayn,” I said. “Rayn with a y.”

“Rayn. With a y. Of course. This was after your wife and Christopher left?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, good. So it’s only the first seven or eight chicks that are killing us.” He looked more closely at the photo. “How old is this girl?”

“I don’t know. Nineteen, twenty. She’s a model. TV ads, magazine ads.”

“A model. Unbelievable. I’m throwing my life away on this law stuff.” Art took one last lingering look and began stuffing photos back into the manila envelope.

It’s true. Rayn is a hottie. Truth be told, she was at least a step or two—okay, maybe four or five steps—above the kind of girls I usually got. There was a reason for that, too.

But that’s a story for later.

“So we’re hurting now, right?”

“Sure.” Art shrugged. “You’re the husband and the defendant. Everything hurts us. We’re two hemophiliacs in a switchblade factory. We’re eminently hurtable.”

“But we’re not going to lose, right? It’s not that bad.”

“Mmmmf.”

“Right?”

“You won’t lose alimony. You’ve got an airtight claim to that. You’re impoverished.”

“But . . . Christopher.”

Art made a face. “They’re trying to make you look like a shitheel. An unsuitable guardian. But hell, all is not lost. We’ll counter.”

“Counter? How?”

“By making the case that you’re the better alternative for Christopher. That you may or may not be bad, but she’s worse. In the end, that’s the only case that matters.”

“That’s true. We can make that case.”

He shrugged. “Sure.” He put the envelope in his briefcase. “You okay with this interview with the psychologist? You think you can stay out of trouble there?”

“Yeah. Hell, yeah. I’m as sane as they come.” And then I did a little eye-twitching, rabid-dog act.

We had a good laugh over that one, me and Art.

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“They won a round,” Art told me before he left. “We’ll win the next one. We’re not finished.”

Art wasn’t a bad lawyer. He certainly meant well. He had no way of knowing how high the stakes would become, and how quickly. He had no way of knowing that we were already outflanked by people who were faster, smarter, and considerably more sophisticated than we were. And he certainly never could have anticipated the series of hair-raising calamities that awaited me.

Only my wife knew about those.

§

That same morning, maybe an hour after I said goodbye to Art in the park, the Balloon Man raped and murdered another kid. The Balloon Man has everything and nothing to do with this story, everything and nothing to do with the life I’m living now.

If you’re reading this, you know of the Balloon Man. Hell, even if you’re reading this twenty years from now, you can’t help but know of the Balloon Man. Time is cruel and fame fleeting, but much less so for widely feared murderers and fiends.

Forty miles east of here, in a discount clothing store in a strip mall on Route 4 in Paramus, a young mother sorts through a heap of closeout one-piece bathing suits, plucking out size 6s. When she has accumulated five or six suits, she thrusts them into the arms of her young daughter, a stocky ten-year-old kid of Columbian-Irish descent with big dark eyes, an all-over fuzz of downy dark hair, and a stubby picket fence of evenly gapped teeth.

“Pick two,” mom says. She watches her child carry the suits off to the dressing room. The kid’s summer day camp starts in two weeks.

Twenty minutes later, the girl’s mother is on her knees and elbows before an empty changing stall, head cradled in her arms, ululating a song of mourning into the rough, fibrous industrial carpeting. There

can be no mistaking the meaning of the pale orange balloon that hovers above her prostrate form, reflected several times over in the stall's angled mirrors. The Balloon Man has struck in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Virginia, and North Carolina, and his infamy is already nationwide. Worldwide, it seems.

After several rounds of fruitless questioning, the mother will leave the scene in an ambulance. Cops will stride around pointlessly, barking into radios, mobilizing other cops, dispatching alerts, initiating road blocks, coordinating block-by-block reconnaissance. But it's all too late. Everyone knows the girl is dead. More than dead. Horribly, gruesomely dead.

In three days' time, they'll find the girl in a portable toilet on a construction site, naked, her head tightly sealed in a semi-transparent plastic orange bag. She will have been asphyxiated in a particularly agonizing and protracted manner. She will also have been variously sodomized and tortured, apparently over the entire seventy-two-hour period of her disappearance.

Some details of the Balloon Man's crimes are always the same. There is always a balloon left at the scene of the kidnapping. The balloon is always inflated with helium in such a way that it hovers in the air, about four feet or so off the ground. Roughly at the height of a standing child's head. There is always a string tied to the balloon. The string is always just long enough that a little coil of it, maybe ten inches or so, lies curled on the ground. The balloon is always a semi-transparent orange. There is always a crudely drawn face on the balloon. A wavy line for a mouth and two long vertical ovals for eyes. A shorthand improvisation of distress or terror.

The victims are always prepubescent children. The oldest has been twelve years old, the youngest, nine. The bodies are always recovered, naked, in a commercial/industrial area—trash dumpsters behind supermarkets, long-term storage lockers, public utility sheds. They have always been sodomized, tortured, and asphyxiated in the same ghastly manner.

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Others details are random. Sometimes the kidnappings are easily reconstructed. A child has been left unsupervised for too long in an area easily accessed by strangers. Other kidnappings seem to defy possibility. They seem almost supernatural. The girl gone missing in this case entered a dressing room with no exit other than the one at which her mother waited. A few women entered and exited, but no one saw anyone leave with a dark, stocky ten-year-old. Certainly not her mother, who was standing right there. Her mother watches the TV news like everyone else. She was vigilant. Maybe she turned her back for a moment. Who can say?

Sometimes the victims are girls, sometimes boys. Sometimes they are conventionally beautiful, sometimes not. Sometimes the bodies turn up mere miles from where the victims were last seen alive. Sometimes the bodies are recovered several states away.

Always there is the shock, the shiver of fear, as another child peers out at viewers from TVs and news websites. Prayers, then grief, then anger. The cycle growing shorter with each disappearance.

Who is the Balloon Man? Where is he? How can he be stopped?

§

Back to the present moment, where all is not gloom and doom.

In fact, we've had some good news.

We've just lost Rosey the Chicken Hawk. He gave up on us all, finally. Apparently, we'll never be stalwart foot soldiers in his war against small-mindedness, superstition, and hypocrisy. We won't be helping him usher in a new age of moral, sensual and emotional exploration. We won't be making the world safe for child-fucking and animal-fucking and whatever other wretched fucking Rosey envisioned for all of us. We've disappointed him. So he's left us, in a modest huff.

If a few more of the luckless reprobates upstairs would reach a similar conclusion and follow Rosey out the door, it would really clear the air around here.

Ha, ha. Little late for that, I know.

Rosey never really found his niche here. He was a glad-hander among introverts, a group organizer in a fraternity of loners. Whereas most of these freaks take a grubby, practical approach to their depravities, Rosey brought a whole idealist ethos to the party that never really caught on. Most of these guys want nothing more than a safe place to hide. They scatter like cockroaches when someone hits a light switch.

Not Rosey. Rosey is a climb-on-a-soap-box sort. He wants to change the world. Rosey is short for Roosevelt, by the way. Roosevelt Walker.

Earlier this morning, I was hammering away on the laptop, as usual. Morning sunlight was leaking through the window plastic, here in the garage. The first mowers and trimmers were roaring to life in yards nearby. The landscaping crews around here hardly wait for the sun to come up anymore. Back in my writing days, it used to drive me batty. While John and Jane Q. Public are off to work Monday to Friday, the neighborhoods they leave behind are fucking artillery zones of cultivation and pruning. Some of these people must get their lawns mowed three times a week. God forbid a stray blade of grass might go unshorn, unfed, untreated for forty-eight hours. Don't even get me started on the leaf-blowers.

I'm usually out of my army surplus cot by six am. I brush my teeth, rinse with warm Diet Pepsi, and then hit the ground typing, trying to get a train of thought going before the grass-shearing blitzkrieg commences. Getting started is a lot easier, I should say, now that I'm in the nonfiction business. This memoir gig is a breeze. I can't believe I wasted twenty agonizing years making shit up. This morning, I was well into an account of my humbling interview with Dr. Stanley Jacobsen, clinical psychologist, when I heard a car pull up in front of the house. The Jacobsen chapter comes later. More hilarious high jinks, rest assured.

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Cars pull up in front of my house all the time these days. They're almost always delivering bad news. I'm not nearly as curious about who's in them and why as I used to be. This car idled at the foot of my driveway for what must have been ten minutes before I finally got up and peeled back a section of window plastic to see what was going on. It was a cab.

Rosey always arrives in a cab. He never learned how to drive. Never wanted to, he says. Rosey's one of those charmed self-promoters who's never had to attend to the petty details of life. Like personal transportation. But it was way too early, I thought, for Rosey. Rosey is a late-afternoon riser.

So maybe, I thought, it's a print journalist of some sort. Or an unusually well-heeled felon. Most of the freaks currently squatting here don't have enough money to splurge on cabs. Publicized sex-offender status has an entirely predictable adverse effect on employability and personal wealth. Some of these guys have junk cars, some don't. I get a lot of walk-ups.

I watched as the front passenger-side door of the cab swung open and a rangy, loose-limbed kid popped out, a large professional-caliber video camera propped on his shoulder. He had a big blond afro and was wearing exaggeratedly flared trousers. That '70s SuperFly look that seems popular with the kids just now. He came around to the driver's side rear door and focused his camera on it. The camera confused me. TV journalists usually arrive here in late-model, station-logoed vans brimming with high-tech doodads. They usually don't film their own arrival, either. Perhaps this was a representative from the low-budget, public-access media. Then the passenger-side rear door opened and I was lifting the garage door and jogging down the driveway, preparing to engage in yet another farcical attempt at damage control.

Rosey assures us that his boyfriend is nineteen. If this is true, his boyfriend has some hormonal issues that need investigating. Nineteen or not, he's highly alarming.

His name is Tim, and he's been here before. Rosey's been told never to bring Tim here again, but warnings have little effect on Rosey.

If they did, Rosey wouldn't be here at all. Tim walked around the back of the cab and opened the driver's side rear door, allowing Rosey to exit the car with a regal air. Rosey is three times Tim's age at least, a portly translucent-skinned guy given to dandified suits and fedoras with loud hatbands. He tapped his walking stick on the blacktop, took Tim's hand and started swanning up my driveway. I met them halfway up.

"No way, Rosey," I said. "I told you before. No way."

Rosey's usual aura of genial forbearance dimmed only slightly. "Hello, Fletcher," he said. "You're looking rather frisky and animated, here in dawn's early light."

"Dawn was four hours ago. Get back in the cab and take your boyfriend with you. And this guy."

The camera guy was pointing his camera at me.

"Oh, Fletcher. Really. Lighten up. It's little wonder you can't get the public to empathize with your cause. With our cause."

"I don't have a cause. All I have is trouble."

"Tolerance works both ways, my friend."

"Go peddle your bullshit somewhere else. I told you about him." Meaning Tim.

"How can you expect people to rally to you, when you have so little goodwill to spare for others?"

"I've had more than enough of people rallying, thank you. People hate me."

"You need to develop a common touch. Likeableness."

"What? Like you? You're the reason people hate me."

"Ah. Right." Rosey patted Tim's hand reassuringly, as if stroking a nervous pet bird. "I'm the cause of your problems. Keep telling yourself that, if it helps." He swept by me, Tim and cameraman in tow.

"I'm here!" he called up to the house. "Let the revolution begin, my comrades in arms!" This last bit being solely for the camera. There was no one up there who wanted to see Rosey.

"No. No, no, no, no, no." I was following them up the driveway. The cameraman turned and recorded my pointless refusal to permit whatever Rosey was intending to do.

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“Rosey!” I shouted.

Rosey stopped and turned at the top of the driveway. I could see a couple of faces peering down at us from the front windows of my house.

“Why is this man pointing a camera at me?”

“Because the camera loves you. Why else, my friend?”

“Why?”

“He’s filming a documentary.”

“What?”

“A documentary. Of my life.”

At first, I didn’t know what to say. No wonder Rosey was out of bed before ten am. I settled for “Are you fucking crazy?”

“No.” Rosey was unruffled. He’s never ruffled. “It’s a good story. An epic story. A life lived at ground zero in the cultural and sexual wars that are shaping this infant century. This is a historic time. Ours is a historic cause.”

“Are you . . .” I raised my hand in front of my face. I wished I had a newspaper or an umbrella. “Are you paying this guy?”

“Of course not. Alex is a grad student at UCLA. This will be his second feature. Alex, what was your first feature?”

“The Breeding Trap,” Alex said, still focusing on me. “It’s an examination of the Total Abstinence Collective in Mesa, Arizona.”

“Well received, wasn’t it?”

“It was shown out of competition at Sundance, last year.”

“See? Alex is a rising star in the film industry. Unlike you, he knows a good story when he sees one.”

The interior door of the garage opened and Sean the Drama Queen appeared. He walked past us, pointing down the hill to where the cab was still idling.

“Hey! You!” he yelled. “Cabdriver! Don’t go anywhere! They’re not staying!” He turned to Rosey. “We don’t need your kind of trouble here anymore.”

“Stay out of this, Sean,” I said. “I’m taking care of it.”

Sean paid no attention to me. He was looking at Rosey.

“We know what you did. How can you even show your face here?”

“What do you know, Sean? Very little, I suspect.”

“This is all a game to you, isn’t it?”

“If it’s a game, it’s one I’m playing to win. If you could see the big picture like I do, you’d see the wisdom of what I’m doing.”

“You betrayed us. You endangered everybody.”

Rosey permitted himself a smirk. “On the contrary. I’m making the world safe for people like you.”

“You’ve pulled your last stunt here. You manipulate both sides to advance your own perverse agenda. You don’t speak for us. People get hurt because of you. You polarize people and it serves no purpose.”

“War is ugly, my friend. If you have no stomach for battle, then get to the rear with the rest of the sissies. You can come out and toss confetti after the real work is done.”

“All you do is enrage people even more. You make us look ridiculous. You make things worse.”

“They would hate us anyway. They hate you and all you want to do is agree with them. All you want is for them to love you. But they never will. The time for compromise is over. Now, at least, they know we’re willing to fight back.”

“You’re not a fighter. You’re a self-promoting parasite. And you’re endangering other people. They went after Chad because of you.”

“Because of me?” Rosey laughed a theatrical laugh. “Your boyfriend doesn’t need my help. He’s a lightning rod for outrage. I wish I had a hundred more like him. What this movement needs is a lot more warriors and a lot less self-hating, cultured fairies from polite homes.”

This struck me as funny. “Is that what you are? A warrior? I noticed you weren’t kicking any ass when the cops were trussing me up like a turkey,” I said. “I noticed I wasn’t sharing a jail cell with you.”

“Free to fight another day,” Rosey said, airily. “Someone has to maintain enough distance to see all the chess pieces on the board.”

“Go look for your photo ops somewhere else,” Sean said. “And take your boy toy with you.”

Tim made a rueful face at this. He crossed his toothpick-thin arms over his narrow chest and looked to Rosey for support. All bird bones

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and staring eyes, Tim looks to be about fifteen. He's tall, droopy, and slender, and always looks like he just woke up thirty seconds ago. He has a kid's way of staring blankly at you for long periods of time, observing you without pretense. He might not be a bad kid, necessarily. Just vapid to the point of utter noncorporeality. And a poor judge of companions.

"We will never take our rightful place in society, if we hate ourselves even more than our enemies hate us."

This, I recognized from experience, was the opening salvo of another Rosey Walker speech.

"We don't hate ourselves. We hate you, Rosey. You're the only thing we can all agree on."

"I'm all about validity, Sean. I'm about validating you, your lifestyle, who you are. I'm about validating us all in the eyes of an intolerant, fear-driven society. And that frightens you, doesn't it?"

"You're not about me. You're all about you. You don't give a shit about us. If you did, you wouldn't betray us to the people who hate us."

"Are you going to hide all your life? When will you step into the light? When will you say, I am a man, deserving of respect and dignity?"

"Is that why you've brought your twelve-year-old fuck toy with you? To make us all look good?" Sean had burst from the garage looking upset, and was growing increasingly manic; he was pale and flustered and pushing his glasses up on his nose every six seconds or so.

"Go back to your warm, comfy closet, sweetpea. We'll tell you when it's safe to come out."

"If you make us put you in that cab, you'll ride back to town in the trunk."

"I'm not twelve," Tim whispered, five beats late, as usual. "I'm eighteen."

"That's it! Shut up, everybody!" I opened my mouth to speak again, but then stopped and turned to Tim. "I thought you said you were nineteen."

"Terrific," Sean said. "He's lost a year. He's eleven."

Sean, it should be said, is particularly sensitive to Rosey's perverse ideology because their crimes bear a surface similarity. They've both been found guilty of despoiling the innocence of underage men. Now don't get me wrong, Sean is no Rosey. Rosey is a sociopath, driven entirely by greed, lust, and outsized ego.

And Sean? Sean did it for love, love, love.

Before Sean was Sean the Drama Queen, he was Sean the Drama Teacher, an instructor at the Whitechapel School, a tony private school west of here, in horse-farm country. Those of you who would paint all of the registered sex felons as hedonist provocateurs and depraved radicals—as Roseys—clearly do not have Sean in mind. Sean seems to have been an earnest, principled young man and conscientious teacher who grappled grimly with his sexuality well into his twenties. He dated girls until he couldn't do it anymore, then compartmentalized his life as best he could. And then he fell for a boy.

Sean never mentions any of this. What I know, I know from Chad the Activist, who told me bits and pieces of the tale back when he still thought I was worth confiding in. To hear Chad tell it, the whole debacle was the boy's doing. The boy, unlike Sean, was not conflicted at all about his sexuality. He was infatuated with Sean at first sight and sought out roles in every Whitechapel stage production he could ham his way into. Sean was the classic private school archetype — the fey, borderline consumptive, offhandedly charming Sensitive Teacher Guy that all the arty girls (and some of the arty boys) fall for. Sean fended this particular boy off for a year and a half and even considered leaving his teaching position. But plum jobs for drama teachers aren't growing on trees these days, so Sean hung on and held off as the boy turned fifteen. And then he slipped.

Even then, Sean might have escaped censure, had he not compounded one fatal error with another. He tried to cut the boy off. The boy was about as discreet as you'd expect a hammy, flamboyantly gay fifteen-year-old actor would be. Which is to say he carried on like a fire alarm in a church on Monday. Sean, guilt-ridden and terrified, tried to let him down gently again and again. Chad believes that the boy's

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parents knew all about this illicit romance, and were willing to turn a blind eye to it. I find that hard to believe. Certainly, however, the boy's friends knew what was going on. Sean persisted in his efforts at rejection until he finally provoked an ugly scene. The boy raised holy hell until someone had to do something in an official context. Sean resigned and left Whitechapel in disgrace. A year later, he accepted convictions on two lesser charges, criminal sexual contact in the fourth degree and endangering the welfare of a minor, in order to escape jail time. He got five years of probation, a hefty fine, and an indefinite period of counseling. Oh, and his own sex offender registry listing.

Now I don't condone any of this. I have a boy of my own and, homosexuality aside, I'll be good and goddamned if he'll ever climb into his teacher's bed at age fifteen. Or age twenty-five or frigging forty-five, if I have anything to say about it. I bring all of this up merely to make a distinction between Sean and Rosey. It serves no purpose to see all of these guys as equally depraved. In the Great Batting Order of Evil, Rosey is a slugging first baseman, batting clean-up. Sean is a slap-hitting utility infielder, used primarily for late-inning defensive substitutions.

Rosey was addressing the camera. This following stuff may sound canned, like I'm putting words in Rosey's mouth, but the truth is, this is how Rosey really speaks. He can spin this shit off the top of his head, without pause, for hours.

"As long as we permit the forces of intolerance to define us, not simply to the world at large, but even to ourselves, we will never control our own fates. Before we can take control of the message, we have to know what the message is. We have to know who we are. We are polysexuals. Our sexuality is not narrowly defined by conventional standards."

"Shut up," Sean said. He said it in a weird, pinched tone of voice that made me look at him warily.

"This does not make us evil. On the contrary, it makes us more enlightened beings. Sexually, morally, philosophically, we represent the dawn of a new age of human interrelationship."

“Shut up.”

“Sean?” I said. “Are you okay?” He was sweating in the mid-morning heat and his hands were clumped into sharp, bony fists. Standing next to him, I could sense him quivering. His glasses had slid to the bottom of his nose and he’d stopped pushing them up.

“As such, we will be feared by those who fear change. Who fear the inevitable evolution of mankind.”

When Sean first came here, looking for a night’s shelter, he still had the air of a lovestruck, mild-mannered educator. Amazingly, despite all he’d been through—the boy’s betrayal, the loss of his career, the hazing at the hands of vigilantes, the loss of at least two apartments and one car—he still seemed more sad than angry.

“Stop it now or you’ll be sorry.”

“Almost forty years after Stonewall and we’re still our own worst enemies. We’re still little ugly bugs, cowering in our cocoons, afraid to be butterflies.”

“Wrong bug, you fucking leech. You parasite.”

More and more, though, Sean is succumbing to the same sickness everyone else is suffering from around here. He’s getting angrier. Today is the first day he’s completely lost it.

Rosey turned to Alex the cameraman. “We’ll cut that part out. You can do that, right?”

The interior door to the garage opened again and Chad appeared. His hair was wet and he was wearing only a pair of loose terrycloth shorts. Despite the debilitating effects of the various AIDS medications he’s taking, he still looked pretty sinewy. Water droplets glistened in the fuzz atop his head. His midsection was a blue-and-yellow roadmap of bruises. He sized up the situation and went to Sean’s side.

“How many times do I have to tell everybody?” I said. “No one’s allowed in the garage. The garage is mine. It’s off limits.”

“Yo, Sean, fella. Chill out,” Chad was saying. “Let’s not start the day with a migraine, okay?”

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“It’s not bad enough, he willfully puts us in danger,” Sean said. “It’s not bad enough, the world thinks we’re part of his circus act. Now he thinks he’s going to film us.”

“No. He’s not.” Chad put an arm around Sean’s shoulders and gave him a gentle shake. “He’s leaving.”

“We could’ve used you in Trenton on Friday,” Rosey said to Chad. “The ORPs pushed us around pretty good.”

ORP. One Righteous Path. I’d seen them in action for the first time just a few days before, at Rosey’s ill-fated Sex Offenders Solidarity meet-up.

Chad shrugged. “I ran into some trouble.”

“So I heard. You don’t look too good.”

“I’ve been beaten up by better.” Chad lifted his chin to indicate Alex. “What’s with Camera Guy?”

“Alex is making a documentary about our movement.”

“Yeah?” Chad seemed amused at this. “What’s it called? The Roosevelt Walker Story?”

“Maybe. It’s got a ring to it. You can’t tell a story without putting a face on it. You’ve got to give the public something it can get a grip on.”

“That could be. Good luck with your new film career. But you might as well pack him up. I think you’ve worn out your welcome around here.”

Rosey seemed to sense for the first time that he was facing a united front, that he wasn’t going to be bluffing his way past us. He leaned on his walking stick and made an unhappy face at Chad. “I heard about the little stunt you’re planning. With the signs around town. Seems like a lot of effort for very little return.”

This is the art project I referred to earlier.

“I have a weakness for largely symbolic gestures.” Chad looked at Alex. “That’s a nice piece of equipment you got there. How’d you like to leave here with it intact?”

“I think your new girlfriend is taking your edge off, fella,” Rosey said. “Domesticity is not doing wonders for you.”

Chad the Activist has fallen in with Sean of late, though anyone can tell that Sean's still carrying a torch for his favorite actor boy. Sean and Jamie, by the way, are the only two squatters who've ever received my permission to be here.

"Turn off the camera and go home."

"I hope you're using appropriate protection during intercourse. Our movement can hardly afford to lose two good people to such a terrible disease."

Sean stepped forward, but Chad restrained him. Sean's glasses slipped off his face and fell to the ground. Chad stooped to pick them up. Alex lowered the camera.

"Pay no attention to him, Alex," Rosey said. "Keep filming."

Chad handed Sean's glasses back to him. "There's nothing going on here that you're going to want to save for posterity, Rosey. Just a bunch of people who are tired of your act."

Rosey grinned broadly at this. "Maybe, for the DVD release, we can tack on some funny outtakes. A little *Where Are They Now?* featurette. Chad the Holier-Than-Thou Activist. Dead of Hyper-Resistant AIDS, 2010."

Sean extricated himself from Chad's grasp and started walking back to the house. I thought he was going inside, but he stopped by the side of the garage and began to open the spigot there. I keep a water hose wound up in a revolving storage unit on the side wall of the garage. He opened the spigot all the way up and started walking back to us, spray nozzle in hand, hose unwinding behind him.

"Is your camera waterproof?" Rosey said to Alex.

"Yep."

Sean opened up and hit Rosey in the chest with a blast of water.

"Ow!" Rosey raised his hands to shield himself and Sean caught him full in the face. "Jesus! Ow!"

That hose-and-sprayer set is a pricey item. It's a special high-pressure system that I had custom installed when we bought the house. I used to use it to clean the algae off the little sailboat I once kept on the lake. It really packs a punch. Sean seemed pleased with its effectiveness.

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Rosey started to backpedal, then lost his footing and fell backwards onto his ass. Sean kept a steady stream going and Rosey rolled back into a fetal ball. “Stop!” he yelled. “Stop it!”

Sean stopped.

“Oh,” Rosey said. “Oh. Now you’ve done it.” He sat up and looked down at his soiled suit. “I’m in a *film* here. I can’t just . . . oh.”

“This is the end, Rosey,” Sean said. “Don’t come back. We can’t afford to have you around here anymore.”

“Alex?” Rosey said. “Turn the camera off, please.”

Alex backed away a bit, without doing anything that might signify the end of filming.

“I’m going to leave now.” Rosey tried to get up, but failed. “Your little self-defeating group here is not nearly the most important front in the war on ignorance and repression. I’ve got other irons in the fire, believe me.”

Poor Rosey. You know the road back to acceptance in polite society will be a long one, when even the outcasts, even the rapists and molesters, can no longer afford to be seen with you.

“One day, you’ll recognize what I was trying to do for you. You’ll see it in retrospect, of course. By virtue of hindsight. By then, the war will already be won and we’ll be living in a better, more enlightened age.” He beckoned Tim over to him. “Except for you, Chad. You’ll be dead.”

Tim offered Rosey a wispy hand, which offered little resistance or counterweight for upward movement. Finally, Chad went over and hoisted Rosey roughly to his feet.

“I just hope you don’t regret what you’ve done today.” Rosey moved further down the driveway and addressed the blank windows above us. “If any of you are fed up with living in fear,” he shouted, “you know where to find me. Our struggle is just and right.”

He watched the windows for a few seconds, as if expecting someone to reconsider him and his whole nutjob enterprise. Then he turned and walked to the waiting cab. Alex followed, a few steps behind, then Tim.

As he reached the cab, the front door of my house opened and Farmer Jack appeared. He was carrying two bags—a nylon purple gym bag and an old-fashioned corduroy valise with leather handles. I recognized the gym bag. It contained handouts and proselytizing materials for Rosey’s ad hoc advisory group, the Polysexual Institute, and its activist offshoot, *Queer Without Fear*. Rosey had left it here after an earlier visit. The other bag looked like some kind of garment bag. Who knows how many times Rosey has been here without my even knowing it?

Farmer Jack carried Rosey’s two bags to the bottom of the driveway, set them down, and then retreated to the front of the garage. We watched together as the driver pitched the bags into the trunk. Alex was capturing a shot of Rosey getting into the back seat.

Farmer Jack, by the way, is a prematurely grey, slab-muscled, stocky guy, fond of overalls. He seems to have two pairs that he alternates. Farmer Jack lived on a farm for twenty-plus years, though he never did much farming. He made his money by running a foster-childcare scam. For at least fifteen years, he and his wife took in foster kids, collected a state-provided stipend for each one, and raised them on a bare-subsistence diet of dented-can foods, dumpster-salvaged produce, and state-subsidized tranquilizers. A loophole in the foster-care laws of the state they lived in allowed for—indeed, practically encouraged—the home-schooling of mentally or emotionally-challenged youngsters. So Farmer Jack and Mrs. Farmer Jack each got teaching certificates and made a specialty of providing care for that specific variety of unfortunate child. Most of those kids rarely saw the light of day.

Farmer Jack might still be warehousing foster kids today if his wife hadn’t died. After his wife’s untimely passing, Farmer Jack took to fucking his charges. Boys and girls, according to newspaper accounts of the time. It didn’t much matter to Farmer Jack. Farmer Jack’s unique child-care operation was uncovered during a cholera outbreak in his rural county. Medical examiners enforcing a quarantine arrived

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unexpectedly at Jack's farm and found more than they'd bargained for. Jack plea-bargained down to twelve years and served seven.

"Will you turn the goddamn camera off already?" Rosey yelled. Alex raced around to the other side of the car.

"He won't be missed," Farmer Jack said.

I looked at Farmer Jack for a long moment.

"What?" I said.

"That guy. We're better off without him."

"Are you kidding me?" I said. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Jack looked back at me, his face registering mild reproof, and then turned away to watch Rosey's cab move out of sight down the street.

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