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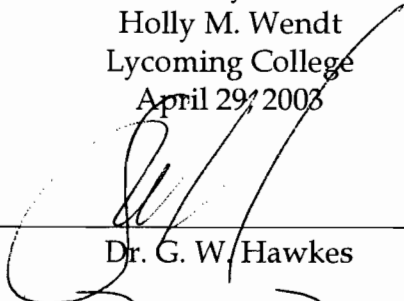
RETURNING

A Collection of Short Fiction

Presented to the faculty of Lycoming College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for departmental Honors in English

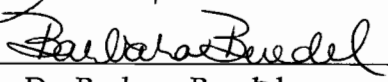
by

Holly M. Wendt  
Lycoming College  
April 29, 2003



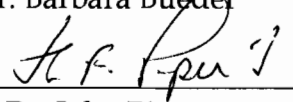
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Dr. G. W. Hawkes



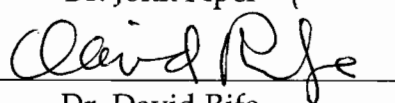
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Dr. Barbara Buedel



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Dr. John Piper



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Dr. David Rife

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A Collection of Short Fiction

by Holly M. Wendt

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOME	5
NEW YORK EXCHANGE	25
THE GIFT	38
LAST STORM OF THE SEASON	52
KILKENNY CIRCLE	66
ALREADY SPENT	81
DREAM-FISH	87

## HOME

When I called Renee back two days later, I told both of us that I did it to make good on a bet. But Renee will tell you the real reason: it was because she'd ordered a steak at dinner. I'd just spent every Friday night for two months taking Laurie to Viva, a vegan restaurant in downtown Miami; red meat and female pheromones in one place were more than I could ignore. Still, it took me until four o'clock to pick up the phone, even though I meant to call on her lunch break.

"You were right. It was Ranheim and Gilmour, not Nieuwendyk, who had the back-to-backs in '89."

Renee laughed. "I warned you not to argue hockey in Canada."

"I'll buy you a drink as penance."

"That wasn't part of the bet."

"Oh, I just thought--"

"But if you're free tonight, there's a band at Maddigan's at eight."

I could hear her grinning through the telephone. "I'll pick you up at seven."

I took a cab to the second-closest stop and walked the remaining five blocks to her apartment. The sooner I got used to the miserable Calgary weather, the better.

When I arrived, she was waiting on the stoop outside. With a snowball. It spattered on my right shoulder; bits of snow stuck to the black leather.

"How did you know I needed to ice my arm?" I leaned in and kissed her cheek.

"Canada's great. I don't even have to use tape to hold it in place."

"See, triple-A ball isn't so bad. Florida has nothing on the Calgary Cannons."

“Except heat.” I scraped some of the snow from my arm and threw it at her. “Let’s go before I freeze.”

We covered the four blocks to Maddigan’s quickly; Renee’s boots squeak-crunched on the white powder that clung to the hem of her corduroy skirt. I couldn’t remember the last time a date had worn anything ankle-length, much less corduroy.

I pulled open the heavy wooden doors to milling patrons holding their pints above their heads as they wove to the bar and back to the tables. The match between Hibernian and Aberdeen was in its final minutes on the big screen in the corner; a band headed by a mohawk-sporting young man in a kilt warmed up quietly off to one side. I stopped just inside to look for a table, but Renee took my hand and pulled me through the crowd. She paused to say hello to a few acquaintances on the way to the bar. She ordered a beer for me and a scotch for herself, which she drank in small sips while we stood watching the band tune up and move in front of the television when the post-game came on. The beer was something local, dark and thick and nothing like the whiskey sours I usually ordered.

The band opened with the shrilling of bagpipes before falling into a drum-laden rendition of “Whiskey in the Jar.” I finished my beer quickly and rubbed my tongue across the roof of my mouth. Renee laughed without sound, and I ordered a whiskey sour to rid my mouth of the taste. The alcohol and the closeness of the bar warmed me, and I draped our coats over my arm, but as the rest of my body became more comfortable, my knees ached with the contrasting temperatures. I cocked my head toward two stools pushed against the far wall behind the billiards table. Renee nodded and we sidled along the wall to them.

"What do you think about the music?" She swirled the ice in the amber liquid. I thought I could hear it clink against the glass, but I wasn't sure.

"Different. Definitely not salsa. Which is good." I glanced over my shoulder; a few people appeared to be listening, but conversations for the most part went on as if the band didn't exist. "At least I can't get coerced into the mambo."

"There's always Riverdance." She pointed at the lead singer, who alternately pogoed at the microphone stand and flailed his booted feet.

"I think you have to be Irish to do that. I'm Palm Beach-ish."

"So you've been in Florida your entire life? Wow. No wonder you aren't a big fan of the weather here."

"It's not that I don't like the snow and driving winds and having to scrape my windshield three times a day," I said, taking a swallow of my drink, "it's just that I miss the cockroaches."

She smirked and shook her head. Her thick, tightly curled brown hair bobbed gently. "No, seriously. Are you anything but unhappy here?"

I put my glass on one knee. The condensation soaked into my pants and stained the khaki, but it momentarily cooled the angry prickling in the skin. "I wouldn't say I'm unhappy. I'm just four thousand miles away from home playing minor league ball in the middle of nowhere with teenagers and senior citizens because my knees are falling apart. It's really not so bad." I reached out and touched her hand, cold from the glass.

"Give it some time," she said, curling her chilled fingers around and entwining them with mine.



Her gesture made me forget about baseball for a second, made me not remember October and having to sit out the final two games of the NLCS, which we lost, and the long fifteen minutes spent in the GM's office with an airline ticket in his hand. "Don't worry. Time I've got."

"And who knows? You could be back in Miami by April." She gave my hand a hopeful squeeze.

"Yeah, who knows." I suddenly didn't want to talk about baseball, about me, anymore. Hell, ever again. "So you're a translator. What did you do before that?"

"Teethed, crawled, learned to skate--"

"Straight from diapers to desk then?"

"Mmm-hm." Her retort was obscured by the last sip of scotch. She swallowed and set her glass on the floor. "Well, there was six years of college in there, here, at the University of Calgary. I spent a year of that at Cambridge, too. You think Calgary has miserable weather—at least we have seasons. England has thirteen months of rain."

"I was wondering why the British put out so few swimsuit calendars."

Renee stuck her tongue out. "Beach bum."

I grinned. "What's England like? I've never been out of the country except with the team, and locker rooms aren't landmarks. Usually."

"It was amazing. I had to learn English all over again. I had the most amazing professors I've ever encountered. And I picked up the most awful habits. 'Hello. My name is Renee and I'm a closet Hearts fan. I drink Guinness by the quart during Cup playoffs and let the air out of tires on cars sporting Hibs colors.'"

"No worse than Philly fans."

"Well, it's not all true. I don't much care for Guinness." She winked. "Anyway, I learned the finer points of linguistics there. Spectacular."

"How did that put you into translating?"

"Origins of languages. French and Sarcee, one of the native tongues here that's rapidly dying out. I was a linguistics and French major as an undergrad, then I decided that languages in general were what really hooked me, so I spent my last year at U Calgary learning Sarcee. Now I work for Indian Affairs, trying to formulate a dictionary of sorts."

"Sounds complex."

"It's not. I can sort of cheat because Sarcee is from the same base linguistic family as Apache; the resources we have on those languages show me how the phonetic patterns work as far as spellings go, and so I spend most of my time transcribing taped interviews with the few dozen people that still speak Sarcee. Then I break that down into individual words and conjugations."

"Can you show me some of your work?"

"You're really into this, aren't you?"

"It's fascinating, like everything you say. Teach me something. Simple."

"How about your jersey number? Nine, right?"

"Yep. Sounds easy enough."

She smiled. "It's actually the longest of the first ten counting words. It's

*tlik'u:ya:gháá.*"

"Tlick-you-ya-gaha?"

"Close enough." She patted my leg. "Did you do the college thing?"

"Well, a year at the University of Miami. Then I got drafted by the Mets, spent two years in their farm clubs, got traded to the Marlins." I shrugged.

"What did you do in your year of academia?"

"Biology."

She shuddered.

"Aw, come on. Bio labs were great! I could have done titrations all day."

"Uh-huh."

"I'm serious. I was even considering grad school before the draft."

"For what?"

"Ecology or marine biology. I grew up right next to the Everglades. The swamps are in my blood."

"Like the snow here for me. It's the one thing that I just couldn't find a substitute for in England. There's nothing like it."

"Brrr."

"Just takes getting used to. I'll show you." She took both of my hands and pulled me to my feet.

I slipped my jacket on and followed her into the Calgary night. After the vigorously thumping drums and the voices raised over them, the stillness echoed. The snow fell harder as we walked away from Maddigan's; a single cab passed, the yellow fare light unlit and hoary.

I blew a column of fog and pushed my hands deeper into my pockets. We walked a few more blocks in comfortable silence before pausing at a bus stop to sit for a while.

“Does that seem strange to you?”

“What?” She looked at me, her head tilted to the right.

“The light. Changing color. And there’s no sound.” The traffic light blinked green yellow red.

Renee laughed. The light changed again without sound, leaf-green and warm in the snow. “You don’t get out much, do you?”

“Well, even on the team bus in the middle of nowhere there’s always the sound of the bus engine. And when I’m home, the only way I get quiet is—” I stopped, tried to remember silence in my central Miami apartment, but only heard traffic, television, music, ocean—“well, never.”

“Wait till I take you up into the Northwest Territory. That’s peace.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready.” With Laurie, I would have been referring to the implication of future, us. This time, I thought only of the cold.

She patted my hand. “We’ll take it slowly.” Her thin fingers, bare and somehow warm, tightened around mine. “You’re numb. Let’s go.” She pulled my other hand from my jacket, and we walked back to her apartment. Though I wanted to, I didn’t put my arm around her waist or my hand on the curve of her hip. The sensation of palm on palm was enough.

We reached the cement stoop of her building too quickly. I opened my mouth to say good night, but she spoke first.

"Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

"Absolutely."

Though I had known her only three days, the apartment was Renee's. A couch and armchair, both overstuffed and well-used, faced the back corner of the room where an old pine curio held a small television, a large plant, and a collection of miniature brasses. The multicolored slats of the hardwood floor gave the room a golden light all its own. A Celtic tapestry hung on one wall opposite prints of churches I didn't recognize.

She led me into the kitchen, more brightly lit but still as visually rich and comfortable as the living room. "Irish cream okay?"

"Sure." I didn't tell her that the last hot beverage I'd had was a cup of tea my grandmother made me drink when I was eight and sick with flu. Still, I'd never tried Scottish punk music until that night, either.

We sat on the couch while the coffee brewed. She turned the television on. "I've got a video of some sights in England if you'd like to see it."

I nodded.

"I'll be right back with the coffee."

I flipped through the channels out of habit. I stopped on the fourth. ESPN was airing a baseball game, a replay of an October match between two of the top Dominican teams, showing off a number of players who had just signed with Major League clubs. I stayed. Renee came into the room with two mugs, filled to their brims and steaming.

"Thank you." I took one from her and kissed her hand.

She smiled that smile again, set down her cup, and reached for the tape. She hesitated. "Wait. Diego Esperanza. Isn't he the guy you said you were going to be working with here?" She pointed to the nineteen-year-old in the batter's box. The camera zoomed in for a closer look at his face, brows knitted together, as the announcers discussed his acquisition by the Marlins. He held his gold necklace between his lips, the thin rope an ineffectual bit and reins. The pitcher threw a high fastball. Esperanza swung and the ball sailed over the fence, barely left of the foul pole.

"The same one, and the one I have a session with tomorrow morning."

"He doesn't look like he needs much help." She settled beside me.

"Just wait." As I spoke, Esperanza took a powerful cut that would have sent the previous fastball into the cheap seats, had it connected. Instead, he was on his way back to the dugout before the change-up reached the catcher. "He's got no patience on offense or defense. Or maybe bad nerves. But something makes him think he's got to do everything at top speed. His bat is impressive, but you should see him pick off baserunners. If it weren't for the fact that the ball ends up in center field as often as it does in the second baseman's glove, you could almost pity the runners. Almost." I watched him sink to the bench and bow his head for a second before reaching for his catcher's equipment. "He's got to control himself better, though, or he'll never make it out of the minors."

Renee picked up her mug without looking at it. "How? Isn't it kind of hard to change something after years of doing things that way?" Her gaze was fixed on the screen.

"Practice and a few fixes in his mechanics. Athletes learn quickly. They have to." I took a sip of my coffee and burned my tongue. "I have a few tricks I learned that might

help him." I put it back down. "Wouldn't you rather watch your video? After all, Wednesday night I bored you enough with baseball."

"I wasn't bored. And I'd love to watch this with you; you can explain it to me from the inside. England will be here any time. Besides, you just learned some of my language—it's only right that I learn some of yours."

I was more than a little surprised and genuinely flattered. We talked baseball straight through the bottom of the sixth. She had an incredible memory and not only knew the lineup for both teams by the top of the fifth, but was picking out specific pitches as they crossed the plate. In the seventh, I finally got a chance to show her Esperanza's throwing arm. The ball slipped into his glove, chest-high on the right side, but he rushed the ball into his hand. The throw, dead on for second base, bit down into the red earth ten feet short and bounced skyward, pushed over the shortstop's head and nearly to the center fielder by the incredible momentum. If the ball had been playable, the runner would have been out by three steps.

The ninth inning blurred. Renee's head rested on my shoulder, her breathing slow and even. The next time I opened my eyes, the six a.m. Sportscenter was beginning. Renee had curled up, catlike, with her cheek on my thigh, right arm wrapped around my waist. I hated to move, but I had to be at the gym by eight. She blinked a few times when I eased away, but didn't wake. I covered her with an afghan, kissed her gently, and left.

As usual, I got to the gym much earlier than the others. When I started playing, I did that out of excitement to get on the field; now, I do it out of necessity. My warm-up,

once a jog and sprint along the foul line and a few minutes of long-toss with my second baseman, became a thirty-minute ordeal. I started my stretches in the sauna; there, the muscles in my legs loosen up more quickly.

I sat on the wooden bench and pulled one knee to my chest, slowly. The joint clicked as I brought it past ninety degrees. My knees used to pop, only once, when I began my stretches. Now I hear that grate of cartilage every time I squat, flex, bend. It doesn't hurt, though, before games, so I've learned to deal with it.

I was throwing the ball against the cement-block wall and fielding the bounces when Bob Hendricks, the head coach, strolled in.

"Jon." He raised a hand in greeting and shook mine when I approached.

"Bob." I looked around. "Where's the kid?"

"He'll be here shortly. He's in the locker room changing." He spoke slowly and softly, like nearly everyone I'd met in Calgary so far.

Diego burst through the door at the far end of the gym. He let the door slam into the opposite wall and back into its frame before it shut with a satisfying echo. His footfalls, though, were nearly silent as he sprinted to us.

"Diego, Jon Stevenson, your model. Jon, your loose cannon, Diego Esperanza."

I extended my hand to him, and he shook it, firmly. I liked the kid already. He didn't look any older than seventeen, lanky and taller than me by several inches. A duck's tail of black hair stuck out from the back of his cap which shaded dark eyes.

*"Bienvenido a Calgary."*



Diego grinned. "You speak Spanish? Here in Canada?" He accented the last 'a,' but his English was surprisingly sound.

"I'm from Miami." I pronounced it 'me-ah-me,' as some of the Marlins' players did.

Diego grinned wider.

"Warm up. I'll get the mound and bases ready." Bob disappeared into a side closet.

Diego swung his arms back and forth in front of his chest, clasped his fingers behind his back and lifted his hands nearly level with his head, and shook himself like a dog.

"Ready?"

"Yep."

He backpedaled to the far side of the gym. He caught my first throw at his chest and I rotated my shoulder until the socket clicked as he gripped the ball. He threw from his right; the ball whistled as it cut through the air. I reached and jumped; the ball smacked into the supple web of my glove high above my head. We continued to exchange volleys; the music of leather on leather almost eclipsed the throbbing sting in my left hand. After Diego sent another throw over my head, Bob stopped us. Diego trotted to the ball rolling across the wooden floor, and I walked to Bob on the far side of the gym.

"You weren't exaggerating. He's got an arm like Nolan Ryan." I took off my glove and flexed my cramped fingers. "Maybe he should pitch."

"The team doesn't have that kind of insurance." Bob waved Diego over.

"Sorry." Diego handed the baseball to me, shrugged, and looked apologetic.

"Don't worry about being sorry. Worry about making it so you don't have to apologize," Bob said, patting Diego's throwing arm. "Both of you suit up."

I strapped on my shinguards, hating the foam wedges nestled against my calves. Even though most of the other catchers around the majors use them to remove some of the strain on the knees, I never liked them. They made me feel even older than thirty-four and lazy, like the coaches in Little League who sit on overturned five-gallon buckets to catch.

Diego trotted out to the thick rubber mat and kicked it experimentally, then tightened the straps on his shinguards and bounced on the balls of his feet.

“You’ll get used to it. It’s good practice for playing on turf, too,” I called.

“Okay, let’s get this started. I’ll pitch, Jon, you stand on second, and Diego, just catch the ball and throw it to second as if you were still warming up. No runners. Just practice.”

Diego squatted behind the rubber plate and fielded Bob’s throw cleanly. That, unfortunately, was the only clean thing about the play. Something stuck a little when he flipped off his mask, and, to compensate, he threw sidearm, from his back foot, and I was thankful for the heavy plastic on my legs. The ball, as it had in the televised game, bounced in front of the bag, but instead of taking the clean hop upwards, the awkward spin and the wooden floor kept it low and it cracked into my leg just above the ankle. I’d have a bruise there by the end of practice.

“Diego! Jon’s a Gold Glove winner, not a miracle worker. Take your time.” Bob glanced backward at me, something like disgust in his eyes.

Diego said nothing, readjusted his mask, and crouched again. He fielded the throw cleanly again, the mask came off easily, but he still rushed his release.

The ball hit my glove above my head. I swiped the glove down quickly to the base, mimicking the tag. "Outta there."

Diego smiled briefly at me, but sobered.

"That's still not going to cut it, kid. Good runners will get under a high throw no matter how quickly it gets there."

I jogged in to the pitcher's mound, equipment clattering. "I think I know what his problem is."

"He's a basket case?"

"Well, it is in his head, but it's fixable. I don't want to waste your time if it doesn't work, so if you can give us an hour to work and come back, you might get some good results."

"The organization would be grateful." Bob removed his hat and scratched his forehead. "Good luck." He ambled across the gym and through the double doors to the offices. The doors latched with a hollow click.

"Diego, are you a religious man?"

The young man looked up at me, confused, and reached under his t-shirt to hold up his necklace, from which dangled a small gold crucifix.

"Good. Then you know the eighth commandment. The catcher's commandment."

He grinned widely. "Thou shalt not steal."

"Exactly. And, if you had a stopwatch in your hand, you would find that it takes you about one full second to say that, clearly and conversationally. What I want you to do

is say that, before you even think about releasing the ball, every single time you throw down to second base.”

“But—”

“Yes, it’s going to be very awkward for a while, and you’ll feel ridiculously slow, but I think it may work. Four words, four clean motions.” I paced off the home-to-second distance from the wall, ringed the second block above the base with tape, and adjusted the plate. “The wall is now your shortstop. You’re aiming for the block I marked—right where the fielder’s glove should be. Let’s give it a shot. And I want to hear you.”

Diego nodded, hesitantly.

I lobbed the ball in from the pitcher’s mound. Diego’s right hand curved around the front of the mitt. “Thou—” he wrapped his fingers around the ball, “shalt—” pulled glove and throwing hands in to his chest, “not—” brought his right hand and the ball to his right ear, “steal,” and released the baseball with his arm extended perfectly in front of his body. The ball thumped solidly into the wall, only half a block high.

Diego lifted his mask. “It worked.”

“Yes, it did. Do it again.”

The motion was smoother this time, but Diego’s voice still carried over the rattling plastic and the empty hum of the ventilation system. The ball hit the upper corner of the second block. The third time, he garbled his words into one, and, with rushed voice and motion, the ball smacked into the wall high and to the right.

“Slow down. Outfielders aren’t supposed to get fielding practice in the middle of a game. Again.”

He did it successfully the next dozen times, even with a few low pitches over the plate, but after fielding one that bounced, he stopped. "If I've got pitches in the dirt, won't it take too long to go through all of that and get to my feet in time to throw? Can't I do those normally?"

"Not if normally means they end up in center field. All we do is modify the system because your arm makes up for the extra time spent in setting yourself up for a good throw. Toss me something low."

I crouched behind the plate. Though the view was odd, a pitcher in full gear on the mound, the bend of my knees and the tension through my quadriceps felt like home. Diego spiked a fastball a little to the left of the plate. I kicked out with my left leg and dropped to my knees in one motion, pulling the ball into the chest protector, out of the glove, up to my ear, releasing it at its apex. The ball struck the center of the second block.

"It's the same four steps, but preceded by the vertical drop."

Diego copied me from the mound. "This doesn't feel right."

"No, it doesn't, but it will. Especially once you end someone's rally. Then it'll feel like the most natural thing in the world."

We worked on throwing from the knees until Diego was hitting the general area of the target consistently. We moved on to basic blocking skills, stifling the ball and then flipping it toward the other person, rapid-fire.

"Glad to see you guys practicing with the masks on. Good work, Jon." Bob let the door bang shut behind him. "Have any good news for me?"

"See for yourself." I stepped out onto the mat representing the pitcher's mound.

"Like we practiced, Diego."

He nodded.

Instead of throwing the ball to his glove as I'm sure he expected, I bounced the ball in front of the plate, forcing Diego to block it low. And, as I'd hoped, he scooped it into his glove, dropped to his knees, and fired a strike back to second base. Without giving him or Bob time to react, I threw another pitch, this time to Diego's left side, chest-high. He fielded it cleanly and returned it perfectly again, his mantra audible. We repeated the sequence half a dozen more times until Bob stopped us.

"I don't know what the hell you did, Jon. Nice job, Diego. Practice is over. I want to see both of you in my office before you leave, Diego first." Bob pushed through the door to the lobby.

I walked to the locker room behind Diego. He stood, eyes closed, in front of his locker, breathing deeply.

"Good work today. You'll be headed back down south shortly." I managed a smile and flopped down on the wooden bench to yank off my sneakers. "Now, me on the other hand—" I said quietly to myself.

"You think so?" He'd taken his hat off and a shock of dark hair covered most of his eyes.

"Yeah, no worries, man."

“Thank you, Jon.” He softened the ‘j’ sound, pressing his teeth into the consonant and exhaling, mimicking the way Renee had said my name the night before. He changed clothing quickly and hurried to Bob’s office.

I took my time and showered. I wished I had time to soak for a bit, even though nothing hurt at the moment, because I knew as soon as my body cooled, I’d be in sorry shape. I dressed and carried my bag to Bob’s office door. It opened after a few minutes, and Diego smiled broadly as he passed me. I inhaled sharply and went in.

Bob was settled behind his desk, and I sat backwards on the only chair. The office was much cooler than the gym, and I could feel my knees beginning to tighten. I saw the GM’s office in Miami again, the tidy Northwest Airlines envelope on the mahogany corner, and so I didn’t dare stand and stretch. I wondered if the Portland Sea Dogs, the double A affiliate, needed a catcher. Bob shuffled through a stack of papers, looking for something.

“Jon, after today—”

“It’s okay. He’s going to do excellent and I wish him the best.”

Bob laughed. “I wish every stud they sent down from the bigs were so humble.”

I stopped, puzzled.

“The head coach and the GM are flying up on Wednesday to check you out, a formality more than anything, and, barring injury or a sudden calling to the priesthood, you and Diego Esperanza are headed back down south by the end of the week.”

“I thought I’d been put out to pasture.”

“Until two hours ago, my friend, you were. Diego may have looked really good today, but that’s only throwing at a wall and without a real pitcher. The Marlins need to be

sure they've got a catcher they can rely on." He sighed. "But, at the same time, they really want this kid in Florida. He's got the big bat, and, well, you didn't have that. So we're sending you both back, which leaves me shit out of luck for a catcher until I find someone worth calling up from double A, but that takes care of the Marlins."

"They just sent me down. Why bring me back up? Not that I'm complaining, but I'm having trouble with the logic."

"You're the safety net. If Diego chokes, they expect you to bail him out. If that happens, we just pray your legs hold up until they find an everyday catcher. But that's worst-case scenario. If it all works out, Diego will be the franchise player they paid for. If not, you get a year back."

I stretched my legs as well as I could without being obvious about it. The tendons that, an hour ago, had felt as supple as rubber bands, were cooling into spiked steel. "It's not a glorious return but—" I grinned and stuck out my hand.

"Best of luck."

We shook and I left.

After stopping at a florist's, I drove straight to Renee's apartment from the gym. She opened the door and stepped outside, her slippered feet and flannel robe bright against the snow on the stoop.

"Good morning," I said, shoving the bouquet of daisies into her arms, and sweeping her inside in a single movement.

"Good morning." She buried her nose in the flowers. "That's heavenly." She looked up, face framed by blossoms. "How did practice go?"



"I'm going back to Miami," I said, hugging her to me again.

"That's wonderful!" She disentangled herself to look up at me, took my face in her hands and kissed me exuberantly. When the kiss ended, she wrapped her arms around my waist and pressed her cheek against my chest. "You'll be so happy," she said, her voice muffled in my sweatshirt.

"I've been happier."

"When?"

"Last night." I pulled her down on the couch, both of her hands in mine. "Any interest in learning Seminole?"

Renee smiled. "I would if I could."

"I'll come back. In the off season."

"You hate Calgary."

"Not anymore. It's where you are. And you can fly down to Seattle if we play them in interleague."

"Jon--"

"It'll work, I promise."

"You'll send me your schedule?" She finally looked up at me again.

*"Kitakitoma:tsinu."*

We didn't play the Mariners at all that season, but in October, I sent her a clipping of Diego's first perfect game and my flight number. It seems the Sarcee word for farewell doesn't really mean 'goodbye.'

## NEW YORK EXCHANGE

By the time Lisette was twenty-three, she'd stopped taking things—even those left for days—from places she knew. But things still found her, especially in the subway and the wide grassy places in the park. In this way, she acquired a portable CD player, a satin scarf, a copy of *The Sound and the Fury*, a crochet hook and two-thirds of an afghan she was learning to finish, and a rosary. She then lost, as required, her favorite Miles Davis CD, an embroidered handkerchief, *Gone with the Wind*, most of a latch-hook kit, and an antique charm bracelet.

Tuesday, as Lisette made another roundabout way home from work, she stopped at a bakery she'd never been in before. The scent of rich, fried dough and sweet, hot coffee rolled over the back of her tongue, and she ordered (by pointing) a coffee and the smallest of the pastries, something golden-brown and speckled with powdered sugar. Money and food changed hands, and Lisette sat at the corner table, back facing the sidewalk, to watch.

An elderly couple, eating cheese Danishes while looking at a brochure of sunny Cancun, occupied the next table. The old man winked at her. Lisette winked back. They remembered their coats and the pamphlet when they left.

In the opposite corner, a woman slightly older than Lisette leafed through the *Times*. With each page she turned, the woman glanced at something to her right. That table was hidden from Lisette's by the counter, so she watched the watcher instead. The woman wore her coppery hair in many small braids that framed her face, and a heavy blue sweater three shades darker than her eyes.

The coffee between her hands had cooled enough to drink, and she used the sharp sweetness to cut through the heavy bites of pastry. When she finished, she got up to throw away the plate and napkin she'd used, taking a circuitous route through the seating area, her gaze wandering over table tops and under chairs. At the table hidden from her own, a young man pored over a spread of papers. He shuffled through them, rearranged, shuffled again. She knew the full cup of tea at his elbow was now cold. Thick, sand-colored curls hung on either side of his face; she couldn't see anything but his lips, which moved silently and rapidly above a neat goatee. He turned his head to look more closely at one of the sheets. Papers and a dog-eared Kerouac nearly spilled from an open knapsack by his feet.

Lisette returned to her table to nurse her coffee over Faulkner. At 4:37, the young man shoved his papers into the knapsack, sipped the cold tea, and walked toward the door. As he did, his watch, once hidden under the papers, fell to the padded chair and disappeared under the table.

The red-haired woman folded her newspaper neatly and stood. She hurriedly discarded her long-empty cup and walked up to the young man, but just as she opened her mouth to say something, a high-pitched melody came from his pocket. He rolled his eyes and answered the phone. The woman bit her lower lip and edged through the door he held open. He smiled at her, but she was staring into the gray sidewalk.

Lisette observed all of this over the rim of her cup, and, when both had gone, she took her new copy of Faulkner from her bag. At 5:37, she put the book back in her brocade bag, tossed the empty cup into the trash, and walked to his table.

She knelt, as if tying her shoe, and removed the watch from the chair. Without looking at it, she slipped it onto her wrist and continued to the bathroom in the back. Once inside, she sat on the sink to examine her prize. The watch was made of braided metals; gold, silver, and bronze ropes threaded through each other to form the band. Roman numerals, four of each metal, glinted on the onyx face. The time was eight minutes fast, but the band fit her wrist as she liked, resting just above the knuckle of her thumb and hugging the back of her hand when her arms were at her sides. She smiled and ran her index finger over the crystal. Her smudge mark. She took out a pen and small journal and entered the watch and the date under a long list of items, some crossed out and dated a second time. She searched herself for what she could leave in its place. The book had little monetary value, the leather cover for her datebook was plain, and the bracelet of amber-colored beads she wore was only amber-colored. She closed the bag and left the bathroom, resolved to bring something tomorrow.

She walked the rest of the way, ducking in and out of shops to look at jewelry, replica swords, and iguanas in a large terrarium. As she wove soundlessly through the streets, half of her wished she'd stumble across a stray terrier, but the other half couldn't decide what an adequate trade might be. She skirted the places where people walked their dogs and the alleys behind restaurants to avoid the possibility altogether.

She'd almost decided on a name for the Jack Russell she hoped she'd never find when she arrived at her building, a twenty-storied brick affair without a doorman. Her mailbox was empty except a flyer for Postal Patron from one of the local markets. She left it

in the dull gray box for a day that yielded nothing at all and closed the little door with the watch resting solidly on her wrist.

She took the stairs to the seventh floor; the uphill climb was inevitably more interesting than the lurching cubicle of the elevator. Amusing things often came to her there—keychains, a change purse, a Swiss army knife—and she seldom passed anyone. At the seventh landing, she pushed open the door and walked to the end of the empty hallway. Her key stuck in the lock for a second, then turned, and she pushed open the heavy green door to 7-E. The first room was divided by a cloth screen into living area and kitchenette. A low sofa, a lamp with a shell-filled base, and a small cupboard holding a television and stereo occupied one side; a refrigerator, toaster oven, two chairs, and a table with all its leaves collapsed occupied the other.

She took her boots off at the door and padded to the back room, flicking on the stereo as she passed. A female voice began midway through a cover of “Across the Universe,” a track on the Fiona Apple cassette she’d chanced upon behind a bench at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The new tape was almost as good as the Tracy Chapman she left. She hung her bag on its peg inside the door, pulled an ornate wooden box from the top of the closet, and flopped onto the white iron daybed, a relic of her years with Nana. The watch was warm to the touch when she unclasped it and arranged it on the thick comforter. She opened the box. An assortment of jewelry, some real, some costume—all found—made gentle music as she stirred the pieces with her searching fingertips. A man’s platinum ID bracelet, edged with a thin ribbon of gold, rested across her palm. She’d worn it once and loved the substantial feel of the metal, but had felt foolish and guilty when she couldn’t

explain the engraving. The Greek letters caught the lamplight, flashing gold. She admired it for a second more, then tucked the bracelet into a pocket of her bag.

Lisette woke at six the next morning, showered, and readied herself for her eleven to seven shift at *Buen Gusto*. She ironed her black slacks and crimson shirt carefully, wound her hair into a neat bun, and wiped dust from her shiny black loafers before putting those into her bag as well. When she closed and locked the door behind her at seven-thirty, the tiny apartment was in perfect order.

She arrived at the bakery in the pre-work rush, and so she hid herself again at the corner table until the line at the counter subsided. By the time it had, she'd arranged a paper dragon, bird, and frog that jumped if pinched at the right place. She left the napkin creatures on the table when she went to the counter to order tea and a cranberry scone. When she'd gotten her order, she didn't return to the corner but sat at the table where the young man had left his watch. The Arts section of the *Times* lay discarded on the table next to her. She quickly folded another origami frog, put it on the table, and began reading about the newest display at the Guggenheim.

The bell on the door jingled, and the red-haired woman walked in. She started toward Lisette's table, but stopped, made an about-face, and sat at a table that looked out onto the street. Though she held a new copy of *The Dharma Bums* and turned pages every minute or two, her eyes never left the plate glass and the stream of people that passed. She drank her coffee in the same way, even looking over her shoulder from the bar holding

flavored creams and sugars each time the door opened. Her face was hopeful, and Lisette knew they were waiting for the same person.

She finished the article, tea, and scone, and took the ID bracelet from her bag. The watch face clinked against the zipper when she withdrew her hand. A smear clouded the bracelet's face; she rubbed it vigorously on her coat till the mirror-shine was restored. She surreptitiously placed it on the chair next to her, threw away her cup, and walked back outside, trying not to notice the man she'd nearly bumped into.

She'd reached the end of the block and was waiting to cross the street when a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"Excuse me, miss, but you left this at your table."

She turned to see the young man of the watch and sandy curls holding out the ID bracelet. Another origami frog leapt in her stomach.

"Miss? Are you okay?"

He had green eyes. "I'm fine," she managed to stammer.

"Your bracelet." He held it out in his bare hand, pink with cold.

"It's not mine."

"But it was at your table. The girl at the counter said she saw you put it down."

"She must have been mistaken. I can't even read the engraving."

He examined it more closely. "That's a shame. It's a very nice inscription."

She looked at him expectantly.

"Aristotle, I think. 'Nature does nothing uselessly.'"

"You know Greek?"

"I had two years of it in college."

"That's wonderful." She reached for the bracelet, to pick it up and look again at the letters she finally understood, but stopped herself and instead closed his fingers around it.

"It's not my bracelet."

"Okay. I guess I'll take it back to the bakery in case its owner comes looking for it.

At least that guy has a chance of finding this." He half-turned back toward the shop.

Lisette began walking quickly in the opposite direction. He caught up with her and tapped her shoulder again.

"I'm sorry, but I am on my way to work."

He blushed. "No, I'm sorry. It's just that I lost something in the bakery yesterday and if you go there often maybe you—" He stopped. "I'm sorry. I'm being a creep about this, and I really don't mean to be. I'm Ewan."

"Lisette." She held onto the strap of her bag with both hands, hyperaware of the exposed skin between her gloves and cuffs. He didn't extend his hand to shake, and she exhaled with relief and disappointment. The watch seemed to grow heavy on her wrist, the metal hot despite the chill entering her sleeves.

"If you don't mind my asking, where do you work?"

"A little Mediterranean restaurant downtown."

He laughed, a full, resonant sound, unlike the forced tittering that often filled the restaurant. "That narrows it down."

"*Buen Gusto.*"

"Ah. I've never been there. I'll have to check it out sometime."



“Do that. Get the paella. With fruit sorbet for dessert.” The metallic fear in her mouth and on her wrist pushed out word after word that hung in the white fog of her breath.

“I will.”

“And now I really have to go. Nice meeting you. Good luck finding your whatever-it-was.” She turned sharply on her heel and disappeared between the other people on the sidewalk as quickly as she could.

She arrived at the restaurant nearly half an hour early and spent her time rolling silverware and napkins into neat bundles instead of rifling through the lost and found or the catalogue of notes left by customers. Her co-workers gave polite smiles, and she courteously returned them, but no one came by to chat; the position of hostess was one of invisibility. She spent the short breaks between seatings rolling more silverware or making lists in her journal. On the page that held her inventory, she crossed out the watch and dated its departure for the next day.

At six-twenty, when she was in the middle of ranking her top ten vacation destinations, Ewan walked through the door. Lisette dropped her hands to her sides and stood squarely behind her podium. She unclasped the watch, very beautiful against her red cuffs and olive skin, and stuffed it into her pocket.

“Hi. Is now a good time for paella?”

“Of course.” She picked up a menu. The burgundy leather rested against the empty spot on her wrist. “Right this way.” She seated him at a well-lit booth in the center of the

restaurant, one where she could see him easily but that was too distant to encourage conversation.

He ordered iced tea and, of course, the paella, a mix of savories that Lisette could not bring herself to try, despite the rich smell and frequent praise.

He was waiting for his dessert when Lisette passed with a young couple. As she was walking back, a filigreed spoon fell from a table. She bent instinctively to pick it up, and, when she turned to assure the patron she'd bring a fresh one, she found herself looking at Ewan.

He grinned widely. "Thank you. This is one of the best meals I've had in a long time."

She smiled back, liking him so much she wished he would leave. "Did you find your missing thing?"

"No." He glanced toward the door. "No one is waiting out there; sit for a minute?"

"I shouldn't."

"Please? You can tell your boss I'm a food critic from *España*." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Just a minute, then." She sat, relaxing as her feet dangled from the high, cushioned bench, not even supporting themselves.

"So you know I know Greek, and I know you work here, but that's about it. I'd like to change that, if you're willing." He twirled the spoon in his fingers. "After your shift, would you perhaps like to go for a coffee?"

“Well,” she paused, not knowing what she wanted to say, then slid to the aisle. A party of four stood at the podium. “One minute.” When she got up, she didn’t see the metallic heap bunched where backrest met seat.

She showed that group to their table, and when she returned two more couples had arrived. The last minutes of her shift passed in a rush, and when she finally returned to the podium for the last time to drop off a menu and have a quick word with her replacement, Ewan was sitting in the foyer on a bench shaped like a fallen column. She clocked out, took her coat from the employee closet, and strode through the door.

“Do you have the time?”

His voice, suddenly tired, startled her. She clutched at her pocket without meaning to.

“Thank you for finding my watch.” The words were strained, but not yet angry.

“I-”

He stood, held up his hand. “I’m not going to ask you why you had it. I left the watch; it was my fault.” He shrugged, saying something but she didn’t know what. He ran his fingers through his hair and smoothed the curly strands as much as he could. “What I mean is-” He stopped and put his hand on the back of his neck. He stared into the floor, then straightened and let his arms fall limp against his sides. “My question is would you still come out for coffee with me?”

Lisette cocked her head and looked at him, nonplused. “What?”

“You’re interesting and attractive. And you’ve had my watch; you owe me at least an hour.” He winked impishly.

She chuckled. "All right."

They made love on the white iron daybed, and afterwards, Lisette showed Ewan the coffer filled with jewelry.

"You just 'found' all of this? What's it all worth?"

"Things find me." She pulled the sheet up. "And I don't know what it's worth. Never had it appraised."

"Why not? You could sell this stuff. Get a bigger apartment or at least new furniture or something." He turned a gold band over in his hand. "You could even put ads in the paper—I'd have given a reward for my watch."

"It's not like that." She took the ring from him, snapped the box shut, and slid it under the bed. "I'm not running a pawn shop." She stood and secured her robe tightly. "People lose things because they don't care enough. I care and I find them. I'm not a thief."

"I didn't say you were." He sat up. His pale torso looked even whiter against the sheets, wall, bedstead.

"You didn't have to." She was quiet for a minute.

He inched closer. She moved to sit on a trunk by the opposite wall. Ewan sighed. "I have to go. I have an early class. Meet me at the bakery at four? Maybe go out afterwards?" She nodded slightly.

He pulled on his clothing, kissed her softly on the cheek. "Here. Keep this for me." He lay the watch on her knee and left, closing the door solidly.

The box beneath the bed needed a new hiding place. She wrapped it in a pillowcase and put it in a corner of the trunk, under the sheets but on top of the towels.

Lisette arrived at the bakery at 3:15. When she placed her order, she asked the woman behind the counter if anyone had found a bracelet the day before.

“Could you describe it, please?”

“A man’s ID bracelet, silvery, with gold trim and engraving.”

The woman opened the cash drawer and withdrew the item. She handed it to Lisette. “I’m so glad someone claimed it. I hate when people don’t notice they’ve lost something. We’ve got an entire box full of left-behinds.” The drawer closed with a chime.

Lisette nodded, took her coffee to the corner, and watched. Four high school students argued over a chess game. The girl in the group pulled a rule book from her pocket and gesticulated at the king and rook she’d just swapped. The conversation stilled. Fifteen minutes later, the woman with the coppery braids walked in. She ordered a turnover and a coffee and sat at the table next to the one hidden by the counter. She took a book out of her bag—a biography of Neal Cassady—and began to read, glancing furtively toward the door each time it opened. Lisette walked over to the woman’s table.

“Excuse me, miss?”

The red-haired woman looked up.

“I was wondering if I could ask a favor. I’m meeting a friend here to return something to him, but I’ve got to leave.” She forced herself to speak slowly and, she hoped, naturally.

“Well, I can try, but I don’t know who I’m looking for.” The woman smiled apologetically.

“He’s got thick, curly hair–light brown–and a goatee. He’s thin, and about six inches taller than me. He comes in here a lot; you may have seen him before.”

The woman blushed. “Yes, I–”

“Will you please give him this, then? He’ll be here by four.” Lisette put the bracelet into her hand.

“Absolutely.” She smiled into the broken silver reflections in her palm.

“Thank you.” Lisette turned and left the bakery in one fluid motion. At the end of the block, she stopped and looked back. She knew what the woman’s first question would be, as well as Ewan’s. The sleeve of her jacket was turned up at the cuff; a snowflake landed and melted. She wiped the liquid bead away with her finger. The smear shone iridescent over the onyx face. She’d take a different route home.

## THE GIFT

Rèmi dismounted at the door, tied his horse with the dozen already in the small yard, and entered the church. Instead of finding the friar waiting for him, a host of men stood watching the old man lift flagstones and churn the earth behind the altar. Rèmi forgot his errand and silently listened to the digging, his view obstructed by several men wearing the Dauphin's arms. The dry scrape of iron against slate gave him gooseflesh. He made his way to the front, taking advantage of his slim frame to slip between the burly soldiers that filled the church of St. Catherine de Fierbois. Rèmi craned his neck to see over the shoulder of a man who still stood in front of him. Above the blue foreground of the man's doublet, the friar picked carefully through dirt and stone. To his left, a peasant girl waited, her hands folded and her eyes closed. She wore breeches and a simple tunic, her hair confined in a tight braid.

No one in the tiny sanctuary spoke until the friar walked to the opposite side of the altar, something long and thin in his hands. A murmur rippled through the spectators, one repeated phrase catching Rèmi's ears. *Just like she said.* The friar wiped the sword with the hem of his robe, and as the dirt fell away, replaced by the dully reflective steel, five small crosses became visible near the hilt.

The friar handed it solemnly to the girl, who took it carefully, said thanks, and knelt to pray. The rest of the company did the same. Her voice filled the church, resonating between the thick walls and bouncing like light against the stained glass windows. Rèmi lifted his head as far as he dared. The man in the blue doublet had shifted and Rèmi looked

directly at her. Her eyes, now open, gazed upward and her hands clasped the hilt, sword stuck upright in the floor as she prayed.

Only when the girl finally stood did Rème rise, he and the girl the only lay persons in the church. He moved against the wall to allow her to pass before following a pace behind. Her footfalls made no sound and Rème was acutely aware of the intrusive rasp of his own boots on the floor.

Rème remained at the doorway as a few of the soldiers circled her, examining the new weapon while she spoke to the man in the blue doublet.

He darted back into the church. The friar crouched by the altar, prodding the dirt with his fingers. Rème cleared his throat and the friar looked up.

“Good friar, who is that girl?”

“She is the one who will give France back to us.”

Rème touched the friar’s arm, forcing his fingers to remain limp against the linen robe. “Who is she?”

“Her name is Jeanne. She comes from God and the Dauphin to lift the siege at Orléans.”

“Jeanne.” Rème pressed his teeth into his tongue, exhaling the word and staring blankly at the altar. He dropped his hands to his sides, and as he did, his wrist jostled against the pouch on his belt, jarring him out of his reverie. “Friar,” he said, handing him a finely-worked silver cross from the pouch, “Master Luc says that he hopes this fits your needs. Wear it in health.”



“Master Luc has done something exquisite in this,” the friar said, running his fingers over the thorny vines that encircled the smooth surface of the cross. He turned it over, following one of the delicate strands with a fingertip. An ornate ‘R’ was engraved at the foot of the cross. The friar looked up and Rèmei nodded minutely. A small smile lingered on the friar’s face for a moment, then disappeared. “A simple friar does not deserve such a beautiful piece. When I commissioned Master Luc, I expected a good bit of work, but this is amazing.” He slipped the chain over his head and the cross rested on his chest. “Praise God daily for the gift He has given you, and give Luc my thanks for training such a fine craftsman.”

“I do and I would, gladly, friar, but I do not go back to Tours tonight. My apprenticeship is over now that that is around your neck,” he said, pointing to the cross. “I am on my way to Blois. I’ve purchased an old smithy there.”

“Opening your own shop so soon?” the friar said, arching one eyebrow. “Godspeed and good luck, my son,” he said, clapping Rèmei on the shoulder.

Rèmei stepped out of the church into the soldiers that still waited for orders to move. The horses stamped restlessly, tossing forelocks and dancing sideways as their riders halfheartedly tried to subdue them. Jeanne and Blue-doublet still spoke. Her hands moved fluidly as she spoke, armies navigating walls and skirting siege towers with each turn of her wrist.

“I don’t think we have enough soldiers to make a frontal assault on a town as large as Orléans,” Blue-doublet said.

“God will provide.” She went back into the church.

Blue-doublet nodded cautiously. "We're still going to need every man we can get."

He turned, seeing R`emi. "You, young man. Would you join the fight against the English?"

R`emi froze, his hands beneath the packs behind his horse's saddle. He finished tying the strap he'd been working with and faced the man. "I am on my way to Blois. I have business there."

"What better business is there than serving God and driving out usurpers?" Blue-doublet nudged his horse forward until he was in front of R`emi. "What better business?"

R`emi swallowed, his tongue a slab of iron in his mouth. "I have a smithy there."

"You're a smith? Perfect! We need people who can patch armor."

"I'm a silversmith. I have no experience with armor. All of my training is in commissioned items for churches, nobles."

"I am a noble and I commission you to take up arms."

"I have no skill in fighting."

"You don't need skill. You're young, look sound—we need every body we can get. It's God's will." Blue-doublet smacked his fist into his open palm.

The words of Master Luc rang in R`emi's mind. *Use all the potential God has given you and you are doing His work as well. Waste that potential, and may Heaven help you.* He did not see Jeanne approaching.

"My life is already in God's hands."

"That's a coward's answer."

Jeanne appeared beside Blue-doublet. She put a hand on his arm. "There are many ways to serve God, Jean. We are soldiers because we have no other recourse. You," she

said, fixing her gaze on Rèmei, "have your own way of service, do you not?" Blue-doublet scowled. "Truer than anything you might do with a sword?"

Rèmei nodded stiffly, his lips thick and dry. Jeanne smiled and Rèmei was transported, light filling him in spite of the black looks from all sides.

"Be faithful, then, to your calling, and pray God strengthen us in ours," she said, vaulting onto her horse's back. She raised an arm, wheeling her horse in a tight circle before leading the group west, back to Chinon.

He turned and leaned his head against his horse's flank. The day's chill seeped into him, filling his chest with lead. He shook himself, right leg then left and both arms, and pulled himself into the saddle.

At noon he stopped, lurching from horseback to feet. His knees buckled as he hit the ground, and rather than try to stand, he let himself sink. He willed his muscles to relax, slapping his numb thighs in an effort to force circulation and winced at the prickling in his flesh as blood returned. He paced along the muddy roadside for a few minutes and turned to the horse, its grayed muzzle hanging almost to its chest. He patted the beast on the neck and heaved himself onto its back with a grunt. The leather saddle creaked and shifted under him, forcing Rèmei to settle into the only possible position between pommel and cantle. The lines of the thick stitching dug into his already-tender skin.

"Too much time at the forge and too little on the road," he muttered, urging the nag forward.

The sun had already dipped beneath the horizon when they arrived in Blois, and horse and rider plodded through the narrow streets. Holding up his lantern to each dark

door, R`emi checked for the insignia of a ring and hammer that marked his destination. At the end of the street, nearly hidden behind a well-lit and boisterous tavern, he stumbled upon the door he was looking for. Setting his shoulder against its rough surface, R`emi pushed steadily. The door did not budge. He backed up a step and threw himself into it. Impassive. Rubbing his shoulder, he led the horse to a tiny three-sided shed behind the building. He tethered the animal inside and searched for another way into the shop. A small, glassless window faced him. He held up the lantern and peered in. He wriggled through the opening, gritting his teeth against the scrape of the sill on his back. Once inside, he took stock and was pleased to find that although the smithy was old, everything was in excellent condition. The anvil was free of cracks, the forge surface well-insulated, the work bench clean, the bin of charcoal well-stocked. The metallic tang in the air comforted him, reassured him with its fertile scent. He went into the tiny shop area in the front of the building. The previous owner had obviously used one corner of the shop as his personal living space—a low cot was slung against the wall. R`emi removed the heavy bar that had held the door closed and went back outside to tend his horse.

When he had carried all of his packs inside and dumped them on the floor, the growling of his stomach filled the silent room.

The tavern next door bustled with activity. R`emi got a bowl of stew and mug of ale and settled into the farthest corner. Within minutes, a short, pudgy man pulled out the chair across from him.

“Is anyone sitting here?”

R`emi shook his head, still chewing.

"I haven't seen you here before. Are you traveling?"

"I just arrived in Blois. I have the silver smithy next door."

"Ring and Hammer? Wonderful." The man grinned broadly, showing a crooked left front tooth. "I'm Robert Cuirard, saddler."

"Rèmi Argent."

Robert cocked a bushy eyebrow but made no comment. The clamor around them closed in, dissolving from sound into voices.

"It'll be suicide."

"They say a girl is leading the army."

"She's a prophet."

Rèmi sipped his drink as different reports of the sword's finding drifted through the room.

"Aye, have you heard that one, son? Some girl claims she's going to lift the siege on Orléans and have the Dauphin crowned." He whistled low. "What do you make of that?"

"I've heard." Rèmi continued eating.

Robert smacked that table with his open hand. "Well, are you going to *do* anything about it?" The lamplight shone redly on his cheeks. "She'll be passing through here in a day or two, they say, and I never knew an army to turn a man down. Even a gangly lad like yourself." Robert reached out and punched him hard on the shoulder, but Rèmi did not flinch. Years of working the bellows and wielding the hammers had tempered his body, hardened his muscle. "So, are you with us?"

Rèmi shook his head. "Like I said, I've got the smithy."

“Are you daft? You’ll take the piddling progress you’ll make there over the business of an entire army? I’ll be fixing the tack of the girl who’ll give us a king!”

“You won’t be doing shite.” A tall man with graying, rusty hair approached the table. Robert narrowed his eyes, deep creases in his forehead. The man continued. “That little girl and all of you ninnies stupid enough to follow her are going to die, very quickly, if you set foot near Orléans.” He hawked and spat. The gob splattered next to Rèmei’s boot. “Just because someone started a rumor about a sword, you think she’s some sort of miracle. Even thicker than the English with your damn swords.” He shook his head in disgust. “You notice no one but her ‘soldiers’ were there to see the amazing sword?”

Rèmei sat straighter. “I was there.”

“Really?” The man raised one thin eyebrow. “Hey! This boy says he saw the peasant girl find the sword.” Every face in the room turned toward the corner table and the clamor was replaced by an expectant silence. “So, if it was so miraculous,” the man leaned over, his boot on the edge of an empty chair, “why aren’t you crowing praises like these louts and sharpening your sword?”

Rèmei bit down on the corner of his lip, words stuck in his throat.

The man cackled. “That’s what I thought. Wasn’t no miracle and the rest of you are as full of shite as she is.” He spat again and took a few paces toward the door. Rèmei clenched his fists and teeth, knuckles white and jaw grating. A vein pulsated at his collarbone, tiny hammers thumping with every pulse.

"You're wrong." R`emi's voice was low but even. The man snorted and kept walking. When R`emi made no move to follow him, the faces resumed their chatter. Robert looked levelly at R`emi.

"You really believe she's sent from God?"

R`emi nodded, staring hard into the mug of ale in front of him.

"And you're going to stay here instead of following her?"

R`emi nodded again.

"Isn't that," he picked a bit of dead skin from his thumb, "sort of contrary?"

"It's what I need to do. God wills it."

Robert shook his head sadly, a rueful smile turning up the corners of his lips. He pushed out his chair and joined the would-be heroes at the bar.

R`emi gulped down the last contents of the mug.

By the light from the tavern window, he picked his way to the front door of the smithy and lit the lantern. Rather than lingering in the shop, he sat on the bench in the smithy, peering into the blackness of the forge. His roll of tools lay beside him. From it, he selected the largest awl. Fitting the smooth handle into his palm and positioning the metal shaft between his fingers, he jabbed the air with it. The awl was cold in his hand, more foreign with each parry and thrust. He snatched up the longer, heavier tongs with his right hand. Each movement pierced breastplate and greaves, each a hit and each more frenzied than the previous. The church bells pealed the first strike of nine and R`emi dropped his weapons. His forehead was bathed in a cold sweat, his hands clammy, his legs shaking.

He collapsed on the dirt floor, eyes closed and did not stir until the bells tolled the next hour. He lit another fire in the forge.

He fed this fire first with wood, then added charcoal until the waves of heat billowed through the room. As the temperature within the brick enclosure rose, he took from his pack a leather-wrapped ingot. The folds of calfskin fell away and the dull finish of the block showed only dim reflections of the blaze in the forge. Rèmei marveled, as he always did, at the weight of the silver in his hand. Taking his hatchet in hand, he cleaved a two-inch section from the whole and re-wrapped the larger part. For a long time he simply held the raw chunk in his hand, fingertips gliding over the corners and planes, feeling the life within the metal. Then he reached for his tongs and thrust the silver into the fire.

The metal blackened for a moment, then succumbed to the flames, burning red-gold from its own core. When he could see the surface of the metal begin to look fluid, its edges softening, he hammered it, elongating the piece and folding it back on itself, time and time again. With each hammer blow, each folding and reheating, the metal was purified, leaving him with a thing that surged with pure light, free of dirt, iron, sin.

The hammer continued to fall, the piece to take shape. A cross, unified by a circular band over the broadening arms, formed in front of him, guided but not forced by the steel in Rèmei's grip. Using an awl, he created spaces between the circular band and the arms of the cross, pulling thin bands of silver back to meet each other at the crossing until he had created a latticework intricate enough to suggest the great rose windows of the cathedrals. When the whole was nearly as long and as broad as his hand, he stopped and switched to a



smaller hammer with a rounded head. Delicately, he eased the marks of the larger hammer out of the cross till the surface reflected light in one even sheet.

When he finally let the hammer rest, his shoulders trembling and his eyes red-rimmed with smoke, the church bells rang out matins. He left his creation on the anvil to cool, rummaged for a scrap of parchment, and sat next to the lantern. He took a piece of charcoal from the edge of the forge and began to draw.

When lauds had rung and the sun pulled free of the horizon, Rèmei was still in the forge, stoking the fire. He held the still-warm silver in his hand as he sat on the bench, his array of tools laid out beside him.

He picked up one of the fine-pointed engraving implements and set to work. He continued through the noon hour, his fingertips and wrists sore, ignoring the tentative knocking on the shop door. The sun was beginning to sink again when he brushed away the final shavings from the mirror-like surface of the cross. He wiped it lovingly with a scrap of cloth to remove any dust or fingerprints before wrapping it carefully.

He slid to the earthen floor and stretched in all directions, his back popping and his shoulders tight. He was waked from a sleep he didn't know he'd fallen into by vigorous pounding on the door. With some difficulty, he got to his feet and opened the door to a street alive with people.

Robert stood in front of him, breathing quickly through flared nostrils. "She's here."

Rèmei clawed his way out of the doorway, looking frantically up and down the crowded street.

“They’re in the church, looking for more lads who’ll support the cause.” Robert shifted from one foot to the other. “So, are you signing on, boy?”

“Here?” Rème spoke only to himself, his voice barely audible. He walked back to the forge, leaving Robert confused in the doorway. When he returned, Robert was inside, examining Rème’s saddle that lay beside the bed. Rème brushed by him, entering first street then church.

The nave was in an uproar and Blue-doublet stood atop a pew, alternately praising God and country and cursing the disorganization. Jeanne stood off to one side, nearer the sanctuary, her sword sheathed and hanging at her side. Unlike the mob that surrounded Blue-doublet, no one crowded her; eyes deferred and many an epithet was cut short. Rème struggled forward, unable to dart between the bodies as he had before. His feet were lead, his eyes charcoal, his arms bars of raw iron. When he reached the perimeter of the circle around Jeanne, he stumbled, landing hard on one knee. Red flashes of pain burned away some of exhaustion’s fog, and he gave a silent word of prayer that the leather-wrapped item in his hand was still there. A slender-fingered hand took his own, pulling him to his feet.

“Are you all right?”

Rème nodded, his eyes downcast. “Mademoiselle, I have, if you please, I- ” He stopped, gathering his breath. “I come to join you.” He held out the object in his hand. She cocked her head slightly, questions in her eyes, but took it from his open palm. Slowly, she unfolded the leather, drawing in her breath sharply as the last corner was removed. She held the thin chain in one hand, cradling the cross in the other. The wavering light of the candles and lanterns caught the mirror surface, glinting off in a hundred directions and

giving the pendant its own fire. Jeanne ran one finger over the face of the cross, feeling the dove with its wings of flame and the female figure dressed in man's garb below with arms raised in praise. She marveled at the mere tendrils of silver that connected cruciform to curve in rigid lace. The arms of the figure followed the curve that joined the arms of the cross and the hands rested palm-forward against the transept of the tree. She would not see the stigmata on the upturned palms until thirteen months later in a small cell in Rouen.

"You've come to join me?"

Rèmi gulped. His chin bobbed slightly.

"What would you do in my army?"

"Fight."

She shook her head slowly. "I would not have you."

Rèmi started, something black and heavy sinking in his chest. "As you wish." He turned, slowly, painfully.

"It is not my office to take those whom God has already called."

Rèmi turned back, perplexed.

"I saw what you created for the friar, and I see what you have done here." She handed the cross back to him. "It would be a grievous sin to lose that gift to a chance arrow." She reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder, lowering her head. Rèmi looped the chain over her neck. As the pendant slid into place, the chain clicked out a tiny staccato against the mail she wore. She straightened.

"Go. Not to war, but to your ministry."

Eighteen months later, the sun shone brightly on the town of Rouen and caught on something at the girl's feet. Lucie brushed away the dirt to reveal a cross. It was bent, arms sagging as if it had been partially re-melted and the figure standing at the base of the cross was no more than a raised lump. She wiped it with the corner of her dress, rubbing away the earth that caked its surface. Fine lines appeared, still dark with the dust that embossed them; a dove with wings of flame and two hands were still distinguishable, palms marked with tiny nails.

## LAST STORM OF THE SEASON

Ethan Roberts stopped at the edge of the dirt lane to tie his shoe (he'd gotten a lace caught in the chain once, and didn't want it to happen again). Farther down, where the road passed the wood's edge, a small, dark shape ambled. He left his bike in the standing corn and walked as quietly as he could through the muddy hayfield. The rumble of a diesel engine cut through the warm October afternoon. The creature—a beaver—nibbled on still-green shoots in the natural fencerow, and he wondered if this was the same beaver he'd seen down by the dam. Whether it was Ethan's presence or the noise of the engine, the beaver turned and bolted for the thick cover of trees. A horn blared, and a milk truck, coming from the Strauss farm, struck the animal and continued on to the Browns' milking parlor. The beaver rolled, a tumbleweed, until it came to rest in the shallow ditch by the road. Ethan stepped closer, curious with a twelve-year-old's natural morbidity.

Its head lay against its back like a sleeping duck's, but beavers are not ducks and their coats do not shed blood like water. They become dark, matted, slick like a seal. The truck had exposed a patch of flesh the size of his hand on its neck and shoulder. Striated muscle and the shiny-pink white of the underside of the skin reminded him of the day he'd woken up in surgery. The doctor was stitching the inside of his thigh before he could sew up the outside. Ethan didn't walk on top of the guard railing beside his house after that. But the beaver twitched. Its legs kicked and spine knuckled even though it had to be dead. It was dead but didn't know it. Ethan stayed until it stilled and, after a last look at the orange-yellow teeth pointed toward him, he ran to his bike and began the ride home.

The red-brown earth was speckled with stones pressed flush with the lane's surface by pickups and tractors. The bike tires made snake patterns in the mud as he swerved back and forth, the diamond tread scalelike until water rushed in from a puddle. The wet mud spun up from the back tire, spattering his shirt and the backs of his ears.

Ethan touched his right ear. His fingers came away red. He shuddered and wiped his hand on his jeans. The front tire hit a too-deep puddle, and Ethan tumbled over the handlebars. As he rolled, he saw the beaver, saw through its eyes as the ground came up and then rolled over him and rolled him over and went down again. He closed the beaver's eyes. When he opened his, he was lying halfway in a puddle, his bike on its side in the deeper one. He gathered his arms beneath himself and pushed. He lifted from the mud and sat, gingerly testing his legs. They bent easily. He clasped his hands in front of his knees and tried to breathe regularly. A breeze chilled him, and his head cleared, but blood flowed from a dime-sized tear in his palm. He rinsed the dirt he could from it in the puddle he'd landed in, wrapped his soggy handkerchief around it, and stood. He pulled his bike up and wiped it off the best he could with only one hand. He skidded into the kitchen, sneakers leaving red marks on the linoleum.

Mother whirled around. "What happened?" She turned his face side to side, looking for scrapes beneath the mud.

"Fell in a puddle. I'm fine." He kept his hands in his pockets.

"You sure?"

When he nodded strongly enough to convince her, he retraced his footprints to the front door, removed his sneakers and jeans, and scrubbed away his path before padding barefoot to the shower.

Standing in the warm light cast by the peach shower curtain, he watched the silt that had caked his hair and face swirl down the drain. Tonight's visit to the hospital was nothing unusual. They'd done it every two weeks since Grandfather's surgery. More often right afterward, but now bimonthly. Ten months. Twenty-seven trips.

He shook his head and water sprang from his hair. He toweled off and put antiseptic and a Band-aid on his palm. He dressed.

Mother was setting the table, and he took the mismatched silverware from her and laid it out for three. His grandfather, one-armed since 1944, sat in his chair in the living room, looking listlessly out the window. The shallow box filled with moths on pins lay forgotten under the coffee table. Ethan picked it up and hugged the old man, careful to keep his shirttail from touching the delicate wings.

Grandfather waved away the project. "What have you learned today, boy?" The ritual question.

"That you can always learn more outside than inside."

He helped Grandfather up, and they sat down to pork chops, potatoes, and lima beans. He slid a chop to his plate, put two meager spoonfuls of vegetables beside it, and filled glasses with water for everyone. Grandfather said grace, but Ethan wasn't listening. He was looking at the pinkish exterior of the meat, glazed with grenadine and soy sauce, something Mother had probably heard about at work. With a butcher's precision, he

followed the curve of the bone with his knife, not actually cutting the meat, just the thin membrane that held muscle and bone together. He started to divide the piece into smaller portions but stopped when he saw the empty platter, still covered in viscous burgundy. Reaching instead for butter and salt, he masked the flavor of an extra helping of lima beans and potatoes.

“I’m going to be a vegetarian,” he announced, then pushed his chair away from the table and went to his room, skipping the last two steps. He closed the door softly. He sat at his desk and tried the first of the algebra problems he wanted to finish. He did the problem without thinking and leaned back in his chair. A shoebox held his first moth collection—a science project Grandfather had helped him with—and he’d hung it proudly above the desk. Though it was filled with common moths—none of the brightly-colored species that Grandfather had collected over the years—the old man had explained each specimen, its habits, its predators, and the care with which they were to be treated. Over the summer, they’d found a strange silvery moth with wings like feathers that Grandfather said was native only to Arizona, but he’d not yet catalogued it and had stopped writing his lepidopterist friends.

Mother called up that it was time to leave, and Ethan left his room, still looking at the shoebox and the neatly-labeled specimens. Mother and Grandfather were waiting for him in the kitchen. On the way to the hospital, he told them both about the puddle and the dead beaver, but only because they asked.

The receptionist handed the October *National Geographic* over the desk with the usual forms. They held the magazine for him now, instead of putting it out and having it



disappear the next day, leaving him only parenting journals and other pamphlets no one would steal. He read the cover, ruling out articles on economics, royal families after 1800, and chemical engineering. He opened it to an article on the Hoover Dam and marveled at the reflective lake behind the concrete, pausing every few paragraphs to show Grandfather another photo or whisper a new piece of trivia until Grandfather was ushered into one of the examination rooms.

The next section discussed natural dams: ice, stone, and animal-created. It explored the cycle of streams, wetlands, lakes, and reversion. The dead beaver had made a dam below the fields.

"Ethan?" Mother whispered.

"Hm?"

"Are you okay? You seem distracted."

"Just thinking about stuff."

"Well, you know you can talk to me—what happened to your hand?"

Blood soaked through the Band-aid and stained his jeans where he'd been keeping the palm face-down until he'd gotten the magazine.

"From when I wrecked today."

She held out her hand. With a sigh, he held up his own. She lifted the edge of the Band-aid.

"You should have said something." She walked to the receptionist's desk and came back. "One of the orderlies is going to take a look at that. To make sure it's clean and you don't need stitches."

He squirmed. "It's fine."

A young man in a lab coat appeared from around the corner of the nurses' station.

"See, they're on the ball for you," Mother whispered.

Ethan scowled back. "I like it better when they're late."

"Right this way, kiddo."

Ethan sat in one of the vinyl-padded chairs in an examination room, probably

identical to the one in which Grandfather sat. The orderly, Thomas, whisked off the Band-aid. More blood pushed its way around the flap of skin covering the wound.

"I won't lie and tell you it's not going to hurt. This is going to sting." He swabbed Ethan's palm with a pinkish solution that burned a lot and then with the white froth of peroxide. That stung, too, but the gurgling bubbles were interesting and Ethan didn't mind it as much.

"Dumped your bike, huh? Looks like some dirt and gravel's still in there." He fished around with tweezers. The pink solution must have been an anesthetic because it didn't hurt. Thomas held up a black fragment. "At least it was a good clean road and not junkyard glass. You'd be on your way for some blood tests next."

Ethan thought of Grandfather and the vial of blood that Cardiology drew twice a month.

Thomas wiped his palm with more of the pink solution, smeared a cream on it, and wrapped his hand thickly with gauze.

"The less you fuss with this hand, the sooner it'll heal. I don't want to stitch it if I don't have to, so take it easy, okay?"

Ethan nodded and walked back to the waiting room. Grandfather stood at the receptionist's desk, signing out.

"So we'll see you on Tuesday, Mr. Hayden, at four o'clock. Don't forget—nothing but water after midnight the night before."

Grandfather nodded. Ethan took the magazine back to the desk.

In the car, Ethan tugged at the white cotton bandage.

"Don't tell me they got you, too!" Grandfather held up his arm, yellow with antiseptic and the cotton ball taped in its usual place.

"Yeah. Mother ratted me out."

"Carrie." Grandfather clucked disapprovingly.

"The doctor said he really could have used a stitch or two." She shook her head.

"Honestly, Papa. One adolescent is enough."

Grandfather sobered. "I'm just sick of tests. There's no dignity in it. I don't know if I feel more like cattle or a German Jew. 'This way.' 'Sign this.' 'Hold still.' 'It's going to pinch.'" He flexed his arm. "I'm tired of it."

Ethan scratched at the rusty stain on his pants and said nothing the rest of the way home.

Mother grasped the steering wheel more tightly and kept her gaze locked onto the yellow center line.

When they got back, Mother had to make some calls and Grandfather disappeared into his room, so Ethan did the same. The weather had turned and rain spattered against the window. He looked out over the yard. His maple tree, the one he claimed by climbing

when his right arm was in a sling, still clung to its broad leaves, shivering with the barrage of raindrops. He started to reach for his school bag, to finish the algebra before the weather cleared, but a whisper of thunder made him stop. He propped himself on his elbows to watch what would probably be the last thunderstorm of the season, for the slope between summer and winter was much steeper than that between winter and summer. Lightning pulsed, a flashbulb behind a gray sheet, and the next thunderclap sounded closer. Within minutes, the wind was stripping the maple's stubborn leaves; one flew into his window and stuck there, the stem twitching on the glass before the wind tore it away. Ethan's forehead was against the windowpane, searching for individual lightning bolts beneath cloudcover when his stomach growled.

He sneaked into the kitchen where Mother was still on the phone.

"-has some complications-" She stopped and smiled. "Aunt Karen says hello."

"Hello." While he was making a sandwich, she hung up and automatically put the milk on the counter next to him. "Thanks. Where's Grandfather?"

"He's in his room."

"No, I'm not." The old man shuffled into the kitchen, already in his nightclothes even though Saturday nights they stayed up to watch *Dukes of Hazard* reruns.

"Well, I'm going to be in my room, grading, if anyone needs me." Mother poured herself a glass of water and left.

"The limas didn't exactly fill you up?"

Ethan shook his head, mouth full of peanut butter. He swallowed. "Want one?"

"No thanks. Not exactly hungry."

Ethan was quiet for a bit. "Tonight's the show when Uncle Jesse makes gas out of moonshine."

"That's a great episode, but I think I'll pass. I'm a little tired." He opened the cupboard, filled with varying prescription bottles since January, then closed it with a bang. He put his hand on Ethan's shoulder as he walked past, continuing down the hall and into his room.

The next morning at breakfast, Ethan ate half a loaf of peanut butter toast, politely ignoring the Canadian bacon that, until last night, had been his favorite.

"You're going to look like a peanut butter sandwich soon."

He grinned impishly. "Then I'll be delicious and nutritious, too." He drained his glass. "Where's Grandfather?" The old man was always up before him, but the past few days, Ethan had been through breakfast before he'd wandered out.

"He's still in bed. He's tired." Mother rubbed the dark circles under her eyes. "You have your watch? Be home before dinner. Enjoy the dam but don't get too close; you wouldn't want some strange creature walking into your bedroom and making it smell funny. Well, funnier."

"Ha ha." Ethan pulled on his sweatshirt.

He turned his bike left at the end of the drive instead of right toward town and school. The path to the dam lay at the top of a long hill, and the steady upward climb warmed him. Ethan left his bike behind a clump of the honeysuckle that walled off the last field and scabbled up the rest of the hill. A shallow valley lay below, bisected by a stream

and dotted with bare-branched hardwoods. Leaf clumps, on remnants of branches, littered the ground.

He picked his way down the path as carefully as he could; his sneakers slipped often and he had to swing downward, trunk by trunk, to the bottom. Another path led to the back side of the pond, almost a road, but it was not so adventurous.

Each step squelched, the mud sucking softly at his shoes. But despite the noise he made, the woods took no notice of an empty-handed boy, and even the jays and the crows talked only of the weather. A gray squirrel darted ahead—it managed to make a ruckus even on wet leaves—then churned up an oak with a clatter of claws and dead branches.

Ethan crossed the creek, using a rotting trunk and some rocks as a bridge. The oaks gave way to a stand of birches. Some had been nipped down, their wrist-thin trunks like unfinished palisades. One, only partially severed by the flat orange teeth of a beaver, lay bent in half. Ethan ran his fingers over the newly-splintered wood, still green and pliant. It, too, was broken by the storm. He could see it whipping back and forth like the maple outside his window, saw it fall. The beaver hadn't come back to it since the day Ethan had frightened it away and touched the birch, already bleeding sticky sap. He didn't touch any of the living trees in the birch stand again.

He climbed a little up the far bank and perched in the crotch of an oak so he could see the whole of the dam and most of the pond. The beavers' lodge was a small, dark dome in the pond's center. Its roof had survived, though most of the mud caulking had washed away, leaving the individual woven sticks exposed. Water gushed from one side of the dam, the logs, twigs, and mud pushed away. The backed-up stream pushed harder at the

little dam, and another log the size of his leg rolled a few feet. In ten minutes, the earth and wood structure was only some brush clinging to one bank and a slurry of debris downstream. The water line already appeared to be edging down the dome. He slid out of the tree and down to the water. Leaves twitched in the current.

Ethan kicked the largest log he could manage into the stream, wedging it across the site of the old dam, and raked the stick and mud mixture from the streambed into the chinks. He crossed the widening stream and ran around the pond to the fallen tree. He tried to pull the maple log with his own feet. He couldn't budge it.

Dinner was nearly silent, despite the bright tomato and basil pizza they'd made. Afterwards, when Ethan was helping Mother with the dishes, her hands shook and she dropped a mug. The pieces scattered in the sink. He picked them up, but didn't throw them away.

"I'll finish these."

She nodded, eyes red, and stepped into the laundry room.

When the dishes were done, he sat at the table for a while, rearranging the broken ceramic. The pieces wouldn't go together without the tiny chips and dust that had washed down the drain. He got up and went to his room, picked up the box of moths, and walked into the living room where Grandfather sat again, lap empty, looking older than ever.

"Summer's putting up a hell of a fight." On the other side of the big picture window, the leaves swirled in a miniature twister and hurled themselves into the thick glass.

Ethan looked at the old man. Grandfather didn't usually curse around him—only when the Phillies' bullpen blew it or when he wanted Ethan to understand something adult.

"I thought last night would be the last of this kind of weather."

"It's having too much fun to quit."

"Puddles to muddy yourself in before it's too cold and all the slippery mess of fallen leaves—"

"Yep." He held up the box, leaned over and pulled Grandfather's from under the coffee table. "We can put some more on pins tonight."

"My hand's stiff."

"Then we can write the letter to Mr. Davis and ask him if he knows what the new moth is."

Grandfather would not look him in the eye.

Ethan lifted the glass lid of Grandfather's collection anyway. He picked through the small plastic bags of individual moths that hadn't been labeled yet. "I hope it's clear tomorrow. I want to see something down at the pond."

"What something? You were just there today."

Ethan told Grandfather about the broken dam and how the other beaver had gone.

"I want to see if it came back. If it tried to fix the dam." He pulled one of the glossy lepidoptery volumes from its shelf and put it in Grandfather's lap.

"That one little creature can't fix everything, you know. It might have to move on and find somewhere else to build."



“It can’t just give up.”

“It might have to. One beaver can’t keep a whole stream at bay. And it knows that.”

Grandfather placed the book on the floor, facedown.

“Yes, but I started a new dam for it.” Ethan turned the book over and leafed through it rapidly until he got to the moths of the southwest.

“Ethan—” He stopped, gripped his stump of an arm. He massaged it, kneading the flannel-covered flesh just above where his elbow would have been. “You know how it feels when your foot goes to sleep? All prickly and almost numb?”

Ethan nodded.

“That’s what it feels like. Here.” He held out his hand and grasped the missing fingers.

“But—”

“Exactly. There’s nothing there. But my arm doesn’t know that. Over sixty years and it doesn’t know they’re somewhere in France.”

“Where the Allies landed.” Ethan had heard the story before, and they’d talked about it briefly in social studies class, but Grandfather had never explained the phantom pains in the hand and forearm.

“Yes, where the Allies landed.” Grandfather hugged the shortened arm to his chest and stared through the window.

Ethan watched him silently, hoping Grandfather would look away from the storm. When he finally did, he stood, slowly, pushing himself to his feet with his good arm.

“Good night, Ethan.”

“But it’s still early.”

“Not that early.” Grandfather shuffled down the hall to his room. When he heard the door close, Ethan took the pins from their package and spread the rest of the specimens over the carpet.

He cut open the bag holding a powder-blue luna and eased the pin into its thorax. He pressed it into the display case and arranged the delicate wings. When it was even with the rest of the insects, he opened the glass jar that held the silvery moth and slid it gently onto a piece of paper. The section on moths of Arizona showed a creature that looked much like the one beside Ethan, but the wings were more solid. Ethan picked up the moth, carefully, and held it in his palm. The wings’ downy edges barely covered the gauze wrapping his hand. He touched the velvety surface. His fingertip came away iridescent with minute scales, and one wing floated gently to the floor.

## KILKENNY CIRCLE

Michael linked his hands under the bottom lip of the barrel and lifted. Sean, managing the other side, swung the end around, and they heaved it onto the pallet. It settled beside thirty more of its kind, already sweating a salty fluid and smelling of the briny, preserved pork. The three dozen barrels would be hoisted onto the ship to feed the crew and passengers bound for New York the day after tomorrow. Michael would be among them.

"Tonight, I'm hitting the pub." Sean stretched, cracked his knuckles.

"You do that every night."

"Aye." He caught the next barrel as Michael pushed it to him. "You really ought to stop by, have a last drink with the boys."

"I'm coming back as soon as the job's done. And I've got a wife to say goodbye to."

Michael looked across the pier at the Pelican. "She still wants me to stay, especially with the baby coming now."

"Baby? I thought you weren't going to--"

"We haven't, not since I decided to go. But that's only been just over a month, and it'd already been done, I guess."

Sean whistled. "Congratulations."

"I don't know if I want congratulations now. This couldn't come at a worse time. You remember what she went through, when she lost that one."

"I was saying congratulations for tonight. You're going to get a proper send-off, you bastard."

Michael laughed. "I have to make sure she wants me to come home." He rolled another barrel across the boards. "What if she doesn't want me back? What if while I'm gone, she remembers before—or if it's too much to work and carry the baby?"

"You can't be afraid to let Anne stand on her own two feet—she's been doing that just fine for over a year now."

"I know she can do fine by herself. But you know what she came from, what she's used to. I'm the reason she lost that."

"And you're going to get it back for her, I know." Sean rolled his eyes. "If she wanted her meals cooked for her and served on fine china, she'd have brought the maid and stolen the dishes. Or she'd have kicked your arse to the curb like a sensible lass." Sean reached out and punched Michael's shoulder. When Michael didn't respond, he continued. "But she didn't. What are you so bloody afraid of?" He lifted the barrel. "Besides," he said, "you've got a job waiting for you. You can't afford to back down from it."

"I know, but if I'm gone, maybe she'll want to go home."

"She told 'em off. Anne's out of that kennel." Sean pushed the barrel against the others with his boot. A woolen sock showed through the worn leather over his left big toe.

"You didn't see her grandmammy begging her to stay, didn't hear her da' point out every ugly truth she's living now." Michael ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe she should have gone off to her aunt's."

"Well, she didn't. So you know she didn't just marry you for the sake of the baby. How much more proof do you want, man? She thumbed her nose at the middle-class

wankers, and it sure's hell wasn't out of a burning need to get in the laundry business. You owe her the balls to do the job you were offered."

Michael didn't respond.

They stacked the final barrel.

"I'm going in to the office to get the contract. Thanks again for helping me finish this. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You'll see me tonight. One pint. It'll help you keep your head out of your arse."

Sean jumped down from the cart.

Michael wiped his hands. He tried to scrape away the tar and brine that stained his palms as he walked to the tiny dock office just off the pier. A light in the window showed the clerk's silhouette, and the old man didn't look up from his ledger when Michael entered.

"I've finished—"

"Aye." The clerk pushed an envelope from the corner of the desk toward Michael. "Contract's in there. Bring it back tomorrow." He waved him out in the same motion of turning a page, and his pen never stopped its scrawl.

Outside, Michael held the page up to the lighted window. Passage for the undersigned from Dublin to New York for the loading and unloading of cargo at both docks. He refolded the page, tucked it beneath his shirt, and began the walk home.

He took the street that led by the Beggar's Arms. He could hear singing inside, paused for a moment, and, shaking his head, opened the heavy oaken door and stepped inside to find Sean.

Sean wasn't the man singing, though, and Michael had a pint in his hand before he saw his friend at a corner table with a man Michael didn't know.

"It's about time you hauled yourself in here."

"You're lucky I did. I wasn't going to even stop, but I heard the caterwauling and figured you were making a night of it in record time."

"I was going to, but this fella was here looking for you. And now that you're found," Sean took the mug from Michael and drank a third of it, "I'm getting started."

Michael watched him disappear in the crowd.

"Please, sit down." The man looked up at him expectantly. His shirt, once a fine one, was stained and torn in several places, and the coat draped over the chair behind him was equally worn. Though pale and rather thin, his eyes were older than his face and defiant, and something about the set of his jaw seemed familiar. His nose was crooked, obviously broken at least once, and recently.

"Who are you?"

"Sit, please."

Warily, Michael sat on the chair's edge.

The man took a breath, gathering himself. "My name is Liam McCourtney. I am Anne's uncle. And I've come to make you a proposition."

Michael brought his pint back to his lips. "Bollocks." He swallowed.

"McCourtneys wouldn't take a piss in here. And you look like you'd take a piss just about anywhere."

To Michael's surprise, the man laughed. "I am Daniel McCourtney's brother."

“Now I know you’re full of shite. He’s only got sisters–”

“Three of them. Alice, Mary, and Laura. And Alice has five children. Three boys, two girls. The two oldest, David and Sam, are at Oxford, playing football. Mary’s a miserable old spinster on account of her eye and her crippled arm. And lovely Laura married the Governor’s–”

“Favorite nephew.” Michael slouched. “How?”

“I’m his junior by nine years. The girls are between us. But to get back to the subject–”

“Trying to buy me out of her life didn’t work for her da’ and it sure’s hell not working for you.” Michael appraised the man’s dirty shirt. “Even if you attempt it.”

“Yes, I’m sure Daniel tried that. It’s very much in the McCourtney way. But I’m not trying to keep you from Anne. She’s better off than any of the rest of them, far as I’m concerned.” Liam swirled the whiskey in his glass. “I don’t suppose Anne even knows of me–the family has long removed me from polite conversation – but I did manage to hear about you two. My blessings.” He emptied the cup.

“Why doesn’t Anne know you?” The singing was getting louder.

“I spent the past twenty years in the north, trying to rectify some things. Politically and socially.” He looked levelly at Michael.

“I can’t get you back into their good graces. And I can’t help you pay any debts.”

Liam laughed again. “I certainly wouldn’t come to a fellow émigré for money.” He pushed up his sleeves. A long bruise, yellows and purples visible even in the dim interior,

covered most of his right forearm. "I need to get out of the country. Your friend mentioned that you are bound for America. I need to be on that ship."

"So buy a ticket."

"I cannot. If it were as simple as that, I would have already done so. But Liam McCourtney cannot be on that boat. That name is not safe." He tugged down his right sleeve. "I've made overtures toward the wrong kind of revolution."

"And I need to get to America. Since you've been keeping up with Anne and me, you know that what I'm doing here isn't enough to give my wife the kind of life she deserves." Michael finished his ale. "I'm sorry, but I can't stiff the job I'm headed for. If I walk out on that—" he shook his head. "Can't afford to be a scab these days. I'm lucky enough to have a job at all, let alone one that's going to make me some money."

"I don't think you quite understand."

"Look, I imagine you've got a situation on your hands, but I've got a wife, who you know. Who I love. And we're having a time making it as it is." Michael looked over his shoulder. Sean was laughing with one of the barmaids, a buxom redhead.

Liam lowered his voice. "I have to get out. You don't tell Sinn Fein to bugger off." He flexed his arm carefully. "I've spent the past year and a half in a northern prison. I managed to bribe my way out, but as long as I'm in Ireland, I'm still there. My only chance is to leave now."

"Fucking hell." It seemed as if suddenly the entire pub was watching, but as Michael glanced about, the rest of the patrons were as preoccupied with their pints as ever.



“Exactly. And I need your work contract to do it.” He leaned closer. “People in New York don’t know your face from Adam’s—they’re not going to know it from mine.”

“You want to use my bloody name to run out on Sinn Fein? No. Not a chance in hell. It won’t work, anyway. What if someone on the ship knows me?”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. There are two hundred Michael O’Briens in Dublin. One more isn’t going to make a difference.”

“Why me? I’m sure you know people all over Dublin.”

Liam rolled his glass between his hands. “You rescued Anne from my family, and you’ve made her happy. I know. Grace told me how hard you fought for her, how much you put on the line. Standing up to Daniel McCartney is nothing to sneeze at. I wish I’d done the same, but instead, I took my inheritance and ran.”

“You said you were doing something though, and it must have been important or you wouldn’t be here now.”

“I’ve been in touch with Grace since I left. I knew everything Anne and you were going through, and instead of being where I could have actually made a difference, I was pounding my head against a wall. Now, I don’t even know exactly what I was doing. All I know is that I’m not doing it any more.” He stared into the table. “And I thought that if anyone was going to help me, it would be you. Not my friends—they’re mostly in the same predicament I am. Not Daniel—I’m too much a liability for his station.”

“Well, what about Liam McCartney?” Michael shifted in his chair. “Does he just disappear and is forgotten?”

“Mr. McCourtney, I’m afraid, has tomorrow signed himself into everlasting perdition by plunging himself into the sea. The final indignity.” A shadow of a grin played about the corner of Liam’s mouth. “No one looks for a dead man, and no one questions the wealthy family of the damned.”

“God rest his soul.” Michael stood.

“Will you do it?”

“I have to think about it.”

“That’s all I can ask. Please, don’t tell Anne, no matter what you decide. I wasn’t around when she needed someone to stick up for her, and I’m useless to her now.”

Michael arrived at his own door and slipped in as quietly as he could. He draped his woolen jacket over a chair and moved carefully through the dim kitchen to the stove where he stood, warming his hands over its iron top. If the lamp had been lit, he could have seen his breath. He undressed hurriedly by the stove, then darted through the curtain that separated the flat into bedroom and kitchen. Anne’s small frame was curled up under a pile of thick comforters. He slid into bed next to her, trying not to touch her warm skin with his own frigid flesh. He’d just closed his eyes when she rolled over and wrapped herself around him.

“I waited up.”

He sighed and inched closer. Her breath was steam in his ear. “I am going to miss you.” He grinned into the darkness. “Who else will warm me up when I get home?”

“You’d better say no one.” She propped herself up on her elbow and kissed him fiercely enough that the underside of his lip would be tender in the morning. “Are you sure you can’t stay?”

“I need that job, love. If for nothing else, we need the money to buy coal.”

“We’ve never had trouble keeping warm before.” She ended the conversation with her mouth on his.

Anne woke early, before Michael, to pick up the laundry. Though there were only three households to gather from, Wednesdays were her worst day, and the sooner she returned from Kilkenny Circle the better. The roughly cobbled street sparkled with frost, and her footprints darkened the hoary surface. The houses got larger as she walked, the low tenements giving way to large stone houses with wrought-iron gates. She passed the Wilson and Fitzpatrick homes; she’d get their linens on the way back. The white house at the street’s end was always first, always before the sun rose.

She trudged up the first four stairs, but her feet nimbly skipped the cracked one in the middle, out of habit. She edged around the groomed yew and holly bushes, and knocked quietly on the back door. It was opened, after a minute, by an elderly woman in a black dress and lace cap.

“Good morning, Annie-dear.”

“Hello, Grace.”

“I’ll get the laundry. Will you come in and have a cup of tea while I get the clothes together? It’s so cold.”

"No, but thank you. I'm fine waiting here."

Grace nodded and left, only to reappear a moment later with a steaming mug. She put it into Anne's hand without a word, and disappeared again.

Anne leaned against the banister and sipped the tea, sweet and thick with cream. It was exactly as she had made it for Anne since she was fourteen. She sank to the step, cradling the cup in both hands. She didn't know how long she'd been staring into it when she heard something rustle in the bushes.

A man, thin and disheveled, pulled himself clear of the tangled branches. She did not know him. She coughed. He jumped.

"Excuse me, miss. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"I'm afraid I was the one to startle you."

"Not too badly." He smiled wryly. "At least I didn't make you spill your tea. Grace makes it too beautifully to spill."

"She does, indeed." Anne paused, trying to place the man in her memory. "Have you worked long for Mr. McCourtney?"

The man was quiet for a moment. "I've known him for many years, but I haven't," he paused, rubbed his arm, "had many words with him as of late. I pick up letters from Grace and I'm off again. You know how it is." He stepped up to the door and raised his hand, but didn't knock. Instead, he ran his fingertips over the engraved brass nameplate. "This is such a handsome place, don't you think? Makes me wish I had one more like it." He blew into his hands, looking at her curiously.

"It is lovely, but better a humble home and warm than one so big and cold." She drank the last of the tea, but kept the mug still tucked between her hands.

The door opened.

"Liam!" Grace clutched the laundry bundle to her chest.

"Ah, Grace. Anne and I were exchanging some pleasantries while we waited for your return. Now that you have, I am reminded that I wanted to discuss something with you before I set out." He slipped past her into the kitchen.

Anne took the bag of clothing from Grace. "Who is he?"

"Someone I haven't seen in a long while." The old woman reached out, hugged her close, and returned just as quickly to the house.

When Anne entered her own kitchen, she found Michael elbow-deep in a tub of soapy water. Several shirts lay draped over chairs.

"Since I was home, I didn't want you to have to do my washing, too." He leaned down to kiss her, and put her chilled hands on his chest. "You're freezing."

"And you're wet," she said, turning her hands over to warm the backs on his skin as well.

He laughed. "Yes, but it's not so terrible, is it?" They sat together on the edge of the bed. "Things going as usual on Kilkenny Circle?"

"Father has a very strange courier. He knew my name, but I know I've never seen him before. And yet, he looks so familiar. And Grace said she hadn't seen him in a long time, but it seemed as though they talked frequently enough."

“How is Grace?” He began undoing the buttons on the back of her dress.

Anne’s contemplative expression became one of pain.

“I miss her so much. She made me a cup of tea, just like she used to.”

Michael pulled her closer. “I promise you, someday, I’ll get that back for you. I’ll get it all back,” he whispered.

She wiped her eyes with the edge of a knuckle. The red skin was cracked. “Michael, I didn’t marry you for tea, or dresses, or a big white house. We had all of that, and you saw how happy it made my family.”

“But your hands—”

“Are capable of work. That don’t mind a few rough spots if it means they can be with you.” She looked up at him. “A house on Kilkenny Circle won’t keep me company when you work yourself into an early grave. Promise me you’ll be home before the baby comes. Please.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I promise.” His hands were on her stomach, and he lay his cheek against them. “Bollocks. I promised Sean I’d say goodbye to the boys at the Arms,” he said, words muffled by her dress.

She stood, dragging him to his feet with her. “Then go now. And come home sooner.” She winked, and pushed him outside, shirt in hand.

Michael stood on the pier, satchel in hand. The sun was beginning to color the sky over the water, and the silhouettes of men carrying trunks and bags up the gangplank were

dark against the mist behind. He took the contract from his pocket, and started toward the ship. Liam met him at the dock's incline. He looked at the paper in Michael's hand.

"When you get back, you'll give Anne everything she deserves?" The older man smiled wanly. "She's found a good one in you. Not many men have the courage to do what they need to when they need to."

Michael shouldered his bag. "It's easy enough when need and want turn out to be the same thing." He extended his hand to Liam.

The angry sizzle of the iron as Anne flicked water on it echoed in the flat. Michael had left without waking her to say goodbye. She knew he meant well, letting her sleep on her in-house day, but she thumped the iron down onto the starched petticoat in front of her anyway. She pushed the triangular point into the corners of the garment; the material rolled in front of its edge like waves. She pressed harder. She was working on a pair of trousers—her father's—when the door opened behind her. She whirled around, hot iron ready in her hand.

"Easy, love! Sean was right. You'd have no trouble taking care of yourself."

"Michael! But the ship—what happened?"

As she let go of the iron, he picked her up.

"Put me down. You didn't even wake me this morning before you left." She glared at him.

"I'm sorry." He kissed her enthusiastically. "And I'm not putting you down. If I put you down, you'll hit me with that iron."

"You're right." She wrinkled her nose at him. "No, I won't do it now. You're expecting it now." She frowned. "But what actually happened?"

"When we got to the yard, there'd been some changes. Only room for one of us," he said.

"One of who?"

"Oh—" he paused, "another fellow heading out."

"Sean?"

"No, not Sean. You wouldn't know him." He set her down, smiling ruefully. "But now I'm a bit buggered for a job." The loose sole of his boot caught on the threadbare rug in front of the door. "I'm going around town now to see if I can find something."

"You really have to go now?"

He nodded. "I'll probably be looking for a few days even for just a few hours work. I'll be back later."

Michael stepped into the street and looked at the row houses on either side of his own. A few men, not much younger than Michael, were gathered on a stoop. Their hands were jammed into their pockets, and a few of them bounced impatiently on the balls of their feet. He started towards them to ask if they knew of any work to be had, even though he knew what answer he'd get, when he saw an old woman a few houses down, looking nervously at the young men.

"Grace, what are you doing here?" She'd been crying, and her shoulders heaved with the effort of the cross-town walk.

"Michael! I wasn't sure if I was on the right street."



He helped her into the house.

"I'm afraid I'm the bearer of bad news."

"Heavens, what's the matter?" Anne ushered her into a chair.

The old woman pulled an envelope from her satchel. "Your uncle Liam has died."

"*Uncle* Liam? The Liam I met yesterday?"

"You never knew him until then, but he's drowned himself." She blew her nose noisily. "I don't understand. He was so cheerful yesterday morning."

Anne sat opposite her. "That's how he knew my name." She rubbed her temples and looked at Michael, then at Grace. "Why didn't he tell me who he was? Did I look too common?"

"No." Grace put her hand on Anne's knee. "He didn't want to embarrass you. He'd had a rather tumultuous past." She began to stuff her handkerchief back into the satchel, but stopped and blew her nose again. "Oh! I can't stay long enough to tell it all. I only came to leave this." She passed the envelope to Anne, then embraced her and pointed at the trousers still on the table. "Give me the rest of this lot. I'll send it out to someone who needs the work."

Anne didn't open the thick folio, addressed to her in an unfamiliar hand and sealed by a mark she recognized as belonging to the family's lawyer.

Grace shuffled out of the flat, her face haggard. She turned. "I know he meant you to have the peace he couldn't," she said, "in this world and the next."

Michael took the bundle of clothing from her and offered her his arm. "He's safe now, Grace. He's safe now."

## ALREADY SPENT

Audrey nearly stepped on it before she saw it, folded messily by someone else's foot. She stooped, slowly, carefully, to pick it up, convinced that someone was playing a joke or trying to get her to believe in his version of Jesus, but when she smoothed the bill, there was no comic picture or Scripture verse. Only Benjamin Franklin, smiling, benevolent Benjamin, looking up at her. She turned it over. Nothing was written in the thin border, no dyes or other liquids stained it; the hundred dollar bill's only sign of wear was the almost-wet, dusty finish from the sidewalk itself.

Audrey was in much the same condition. She'd passed a construction site earlier on her walk, and the constant humid threat of an August thunderstorm hung over the city, making her hair the same texture as the bill. The perm she'd treated herself to on her sixty-eighth birthday was relaxing, the original chestnut color had long been gone, and now it was speckled with a fine mist of concrete powder. She wished she'd thought to bring her umbrella.

She wiped the bill with her handkerchief, as she would if she'd picked up an earring or watch, and glanced around. A few people ambled along, mostly retired like herself or young mothers pushing strollers, taking advantage of the day before it got too hot. But none of them were looking at her or at the ground as if they'd lost anything. Audrey turned it over again and again, unsure. This one bill would go a long way toward next month's rent or food, but her Social Security check did cover that, if only by the smallest of margins. She could put it in the bank for just-in-case, but she did have medical insurance and a little savings. That much, at least, had remained after Peter's death. She touched her

hair again and pulled one limp strand in front of her eyes. Yes, she would get a new perm and color. With the bill held tightly, she set off for her hairdresser's on 18<sup>th</sup> Street.

As she walked, the flat storefronts were replaced by the colorful awnings—mauve, forest, and cream—that marked Carleton Avenue, generally too expensive to even windowshop. For the first time, she slowed to peer into the sparkling displays of a jeweler's. A very handsome pin, a hat of enamel and mother-of-pearl, shone under the Daily Special lamp, and she leaned in for a closer look. The blue enamel—or was it lapis lazuli?—was the same color as her favorite dress, the one she'd worn to her son's wedding and to Peter's funeral a year later because he'd said she'd looked so beautiful in it. Her left thumb instinctively reached for the simple silver band on her third finger, and she ignored the sore stiffness in her hand. She could buy the pin, but she had all the jewelry she needed.

She passed two more jewelers, but only looked into their broad windows to grin at her own reflection. She had a hundred dollars to spend on anything she wanted.

A few tables on the sidewalk and the scent of coffee filled the space in front of Guiseppe's Café. A man in a navy suit sat, drawing on a napkin and sipping a wide mug of cocoa-sprinkled foam.

"Excuse me, sir. Is that a cappuccino?" She'd always wanted to try one, but never had.

"Caramel macchiato. Same idea, just better." He squinted over his glasses as he took in her thinning, dusty hair and simple dress. He shrugged and picked up his pen again.

Audrey nodded politely and paused beside the white menu board. The superfluity of Italian words and the decadent descriptions were enchanting. The names tasted as wonderful as the beverages. She had more than enough to have a cup of something, even a dessert, too, and still get her hair done. She glanced back to the tables. The man had gone and only two couples were left. She'd have to sit alone. She hated that. And Gwendolyn, her neighbor downstairs, was coming that evening for coffee. Maybe next time. She walked on, the words *amaretto con panna* swirling behind her teeth.

The street divided around a tree-filled park. Audrey waited for the light to change and crossed to the park with a teenage boy being walked by a German Shepherd. She settled on the first bench and slipped off her sandals. The worn leather had lost the glossy finish, and the straps were beginning to wear. She wondered how much a new pair like them would cost. Her eyes followed the thin blue veins on her ankles over the tops of her feet. The pink polish on her toes, a gift from her Avon-selling daughter-in-law, was chipping, and the bunion on her right foot was sore.

On the other side of the street, a boutique sold pumices and creams and offered massage and pedicures. She rolled the hundred dollar bill in her palm and let her bare feet swing freely under the bench as she pondered. The blades of grass tickled. She laughed out loud and pressed her feet into the green carpet, rubbing them back and forth until the grass was flattened and twisted. Guiltily, she pushed the blades upright where she could.

A drop of rain landed on her forearm. Another splattered on the bench next to her purse. She hurriedly took out her emergency rain bonnet and fastened it under her chin,

again wishing for her umbrella. The drops came faster, and she shuffled to the opposite sidewalk. She ducked into a pharmacy.

Walking up and down the orderly aisles, she made a list of things she could really use—a new hairdryer to replace the one that kept blowing the fuse in the bathroom, liniment for her arthritic knuckles, the calcium supplements her doctor recommended. She lingered a moment by the beauty aids, turning jars and tubes over, remembering how proud she'd once been of her complexion. But too expensive and too weak to fight age. Better to fix her hair, which could successfully look young again. She stepped back into the rain, ignoring the stand of cheap umbrellas by the door.

The water poured from the plastic cap into the back of her dress, soaking her in minutes, and the cap's edges made it necessary to turn her whole head to see anything not directly in front of her. She took it off and wrapped it instead around her purse.

The air and even the rain remained warm, and Audrey turned her empty hand palm up to catch the drops. Many years ago, she and Peter had done this at her parents' house by the pond. They'd both caught colds, but they'd shared their first kiss that day, too.

As quickly as it had started, the rain ended, and Audrey sheepishly ran her fingers through her hair. She knew she looked a sight for sure, and she quickened her pace to 18<sup>th</sup> Street.

Connie's Cuts and More, run by the daughter of a friend, had its doors open, and a woman Audrey didn't know sat in the center chair while Connie's four-year-old son played with the spongy foam curlers on the floor. Connie herself appeared from a closet, bottles of dye and developer in her hands.

“Audrey, what a surprise! I haven’t seen you since February. You’re soaked.”

Connie handed her a towel when she’d put the bottles down.

“Thank you.” As she wiped her face and arms as dry as she could, Audrey waved at Charlie, who’d just put a curler in their Persian cat’s white coat. It groaned and slunk under the drying chair.

“I was hoping you had a few minutes.”

“I can be with you in a jiffy. Just let me get Mrs. Donovan’s color in.”

Mrs. Donovan selected a yellow-gold fringe of hair from the sample ring Connie gave her, and held it up in Audrey’s direction.

Audrey smiled and nodded, and Mrs. Donovan, pleased with the approval, showed it to Connie.

Audrey watched Charlie as she waited. He’d given up on coaxing the cat from beneath the chair and was instead seeing how many of the curlers he could put in his own hair. She leaned down to look at the cat when she saw the mirror Charlie had been playing with. She picked it up. Her cotton dress stuck to her shoulders, the sharp bones sticking out at the top where soft curves had once been, and the concrete dust had dulled the lavender material enough so that, when wet, it looked dingy. The rain had pressed her hair flat to her scalp, and all of the curl had gone out of it. The strands were now more gold than gray, though, tiny hints of the faded chestnut still visible, and her cheeks were blushed by the walk and warmth. She took off her glasses. The face blurred, the lines softened. Her mother had said they both looked like drowned rats. Peter had replied that Audrey was the loveliest drowned rat he’d ever seen.

She looked at the drying chair, pictured the plastic dome over her head, the shapeless pink cape draped over her shoulders and fastened at the neck.

The chair squeaked as it lowered. Mrs. Donovan, hair wrapped in a plastic cap, settled herself on a hassock with a magazine.

"Now, Audrey, what can I do for you?"

Audrey turned away from the mirror and put her glasses back on. "I just wanted to say hello. And tell your mother to give me a call some time. I haven't spoken to her in a while." She smiled at the younger woman. "Take care."

Several blocks down the street, she remembered the money she still clutched. She stopped, uncurled her fingers, and let the bill drift to the concrete. She stepped squarely on it and continued walking.

"Ma'am, you dropped this," a voice called.

Audrey turned. A girl, about eighteen, wearing cut-off shorts and a tank top, held out the money.

"Here." She popped her gum under her tongue and inched closer.

"No, no. I've already spent it," Audrey said, closing the girl's fingers over the bill. She turned and walked home to have coffee with Gwendolyn, her hair more gold than gray.

## DREAM-FISH

Eric watched at the creek's edge the cycle of rings, leaps, life, death. He put his field journal and flashlight on the round rocks and began fitting together his eight-foot fly rod. The weathered bamboo sections slid silently into place. He eased the line from the reel through the first guide, then the second and third, and finally through the last. It was supple and substantial in his hands and contrasted the weightless leader he attached to it. At the end of the delicate tippet, he fixed a gray and dun caddis, wetting the nylon leader on his tongue.

He stepped into the stream. He savored the cold working its way over his old sneakers and up his calves. The air around him buzzed; midstream, he stopped, water eddying around his thighs and wicking upward through his shorts.

He tugged lightly at the line just above the reel; a coil slipped through his fingers, quick and strong. He flicked his right wrist sharply. Line and fly ribboned out in a fluid arc, reaching into the sun until he snapped his hand back and kept fly and line from incandescence. Three more times he cast forward and back before allowing the line to settle soundlessly on the water. The caddis drifted downstream slowly, and Eric let the line play out as it would. A casual nibble made him tense, ready to set the hook, but the line stilled and he relaxed. A moment later, an aggressive strike sent the reel spinning, and Eric clamped his thumb down and set the hook with a twist of his wrist. He reeled carefully, patiently, enjoying the zig-zagging fight of the medium-sized trout. This duality of fishing pleased Eric; trout free in a stream were invisible, but trout on a hook lay just ahead of the rod's curved tip.



He lifted rod and fish clear of the water. The brownie's mottled green-gold stomach shone wetly in the slanting sunlight. He admired it for a moment and slipped it deftly into the wicker creel that hung from his waist. The trout swam against his leg as he walked downstream.

Two more fish came in quick succession, also taken in by the lifelike caddis. He made another languid cast, concentrating on a thick tangle of roots that surely housed a real lunker.

"Any luck yet?"

Eric wheeled, stumbling on the slick rocks and soaking himself to the chest. An elderly man leaned over the railing of the bridge, his face obscured by long shadows.

"A little." Eric wrung out the edges of his vest with his free hand. The necessary volume of their voices seemed offensive in the dimming light.

"It's a nice hatch, isn't it?" the old man asked, taking off his hat and wiping his forehead. He lost his grip, and it fell to the creek below.

"I'll get that," Eric said, but let the water bring the hat to him. He snagged it with the tip of his rod.

The old man met him at the edge of the bridge.

"Dr. Spencer. You're a long way from the lecture hall."

He looked at Eric for a second. "Ah, Eric. Reynolds's new TA. You're doing the karst study."

"Yes. I was in your Streams and Rivers class, too."

“Now I know where you were all those April mornings when you came in late.”

Spencer smiled and extended his hand.

Eric put the wet hat in it.

“Thanks.” He twisted it once and plopped it onto his head. “So, what were you fishing?”

“Elk hair caddis on a size sixteen.” Eric held out a fly from the wool patch on his vest.

“Nice.” The old man turned the fly over in his hand, running a fingertip over the bristly wings and thorax. “Tie it yourself?”

“Yep.” Eric held up the creel of trout. “Worked pretty well tonight, too.”

Spencer was still examining the fly. “This is beautiful. I can’t see any cement.”

Eric shrugged. “It’s the way I tie them. I try to stay away from the glues and dips. Makes the flies too clunky. If you take enough time on the wings, the elk hair will trap air, and it’ll float just fine.”

Spencer nodded. “Really fine work. Pale evening dun is my personal favorite.” He tugged at the loose skin of his cheeks. “This is a long hike in from the road for an hour’s fish.”

“Tonight I was in the area, and the hatch was on, so here I am.” Eric brushed wet leaves from his calves. “Well, I’ve got to get these into the pan. Nice talking to you.” Eric darted down the bank to his notebook and flashlight, but when he had scrambled back up onto the bridge, Spencer still stood there.

“What other holes were you fishing? I’m looking for some that are a little easier to get to than this one. I don’t get down these banks like I used to.”

“This is it, tonight. I can show you a few places where I’ve done well that are closer to the road and have banks that aren’t so high, but this little stretch produced these three beauties.”

Spencer gestured toward Eric’s journal. “Doing some field work, then?”

“Yes, sir. My thesis is on the karst formations of this region, and I think here,” he spread his arms, “has got the gem of a cave that might get my career going. I may have even found it tonight—I haven’t checked it out yet, but it looks promising.” Eric flipped open his journal to the rough map he’d drawn. “See, it’s a bit northwest of here.” He pointed left, up the railroad.

“One of my old students found something up there in seventy-eight, right in the middle of all that laurel. Followed this itty bitty stream through all kinds of brambles to get to this cave, and it was a dud. Two measly rooms, he said.”

“Oh.” Even Eric’s fishing rod felt heavy.

“Don’t worry about it, son. You paid enough attention in class to know the Penn’s doesn’t have any caverns to speak of. This valley’s full of creeks and limestone-niches, not systems. The paper’s the hard part of the Master’s anyway.” Spencer clapped a hand on Eric’s shoulder. Large, speckled with liver spots, it still gripped strongly. “Rocks may give us paychecks, but the fish give us life.”

Eric chuckled. “The right fellowship might give me both.”

Spencer appeared not to hear. "I've got a spot you might want to check out. Used to be one of my favorites, but I can't get to it anymore." Spencer began ambling off to the right, down the railroad bed, and away from the cave. At a slight bend in the tracks, the Penn's curved around a series of boulders and formed a deep pool overhung by a rock ledge and two monstrous beech trees, one of which leaned nearly perpendicular to the water.

"If you scoot out over the beech and onto that rock, you can get to the other side of this bend. Right here is good enough fishing, but I caught a twenty-five-inch brown over there." Spencer turned abruptly back toward the tracks. "Well, I've got to be going, and you've got fish to fry. See you around the department." He shuffled off into the growing dusk, leaving Eric leaning against the upright beech, grateful and somewhat puzzled.

Eric was shivering when he finally reached the car. He pulled a threadbare towel from the trunk and wiped down his rod and reel before disassembling them and returning them to their worn leather case. He patted his vest as dry as he could and finally took the towel to his own chilled body. He changed into dry clothes and as he drove home, he mulled over the cave he was told he'd found and the cave he'd wanted to believe he'd discovered.

The four-room apartment was as bland as unsteeped tea. Only the fresh sizzle of two plump trout and the promise of another at breakfast made the close kitchen bearable. Three pats of butter and a Yuengling later, when all traces of trout had disappeared, he picked up the manila folder overflowing with Intro to Geology tests. He remembered his

loathing for coursework as an undergrad, and it hadn't lessened any by simply placing himself at the other end of it. *Granite-igneous. Shale-sedimentary. Basalt-igneous.*

When he'd finished grading, he took out his journal and the folio he kept for his fieldwork. He forced himself to plot the cave on one of his topographic maps and compared it with the sinkholes and niches he'd found along the Penn's before. He looked hard for some sort of pattern; if he couldn't come up with a real cave, maybe he could find some method or regularity in the behavior of the streams, and that might get him the Filmore Fellowship.

Eric woke early and filled the black plastic projector tray with one-and-a-half-inch square slides, then sought out Reynolds in the geology lab.

"Do you have a minute, Dr. Reynolds?"

The bushy-haired man didn't look up from the tray of samples. "How big was this fish?"

Eric pushed a rolled-up map across the lab table. "No fish stories today. Look at the northwest quadrant. See that hairline stream? Follow it from its headwaters, past the little bend. It disappears for a few hundred yards, then resurfaces. Go about an eighth of a mile more."

"I see a band of limestone formations, but I'd imagine you're probably referring to Spencer's Cave, based on your coordinates."

He tried to keep the disappointment from his voice. "Spencer's Cave?"

"Franklin Spencer, the old codger who teaches Streams and Rivers. A pity position if I ever saw one. He's turned that course into a bad joke." Dr. Reynolds looked up at Eric.

“Walks around wearing one of those ridiculous hats you anglers are fond of? You know who I mean.”

“Yeah. I took that class. It was interesting, but everything I’ve found on the creek seems to work against our lecture notes.” Eric sat on one of the lab tables, his shoulders down, legs still instead of swinging as usual.

“What?” Reynolds cocked his head to one side.

“Well, I guess I rediscovered Spencer’s Cave last night, got all excited about finally finding something that’s got, at least, fully-developed rooms. Got all excited about the fellowship.” Eric paused. “Then I talked to Spencer himself out on the creek. He said a student of his found it in seventy-eight.”

“No, Spencer found it in seventy-two. He was probably just trying to save face.”

“But why wasn’t it on any of the maps?”

“He refused to have it documented. Said it was ‘too insignificant to be of any note,’ as he put it after exploring it thoroughly – an exciting twenty minutes, I’m sure. I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it–understand, he made quite an ass of himself backpedaling over his original elaborate description of what he apparently thought it would be like. Must be terrible to be that desperate.” Reynolds glanced at Eric, then rolled the polished bit of ruddy shale he kept in his pocket between his fingers. “The board even made him journal it–penance for crying wolf, it seems–if you’re interested. The whole two-room floor plan is drawn in and everything.”

“Have you seen it?”

"I stood at the entrance once and decided it wasn't worth the effort." He put the pebble back into his pocket. "Don't forget to put the new metamorphics in the slides for Monday."

"Already done."

"And have your journal up to date; you have to send out your application before Monday if you're still trying for the Filmore."

"I know."

"Then go commune with your fish or whatever you do. And if you decide to check out Spencer's Cave, take a few pictures." Reynolds rifled through the samples once more and left.

Eric stared at the map, the original circle he'd put around the cave darkened several times over. He traced the black mark again. The pencil tip broke. He rolled up the map and pushed through the door with a bang.

He drove directly to the service road that led to the railroad. He put on his spelunking gear: vest with notebook and pens, surveyor's tape, flashlights, rock hammer, brush, canteen, and helmet dangling from D-rings.

The dark slit in the wall of limestone appeared glaringly obvious the second time Eric saw it. He marked several of the laurel branches with tape, checked both flashlights one more time, and fastened the chin strap on his helmet. Kneeling, he peered in. To his left, the slit widened, opening into a cavity twenty feet in diameter. He shined the light downward. The floor, broken intermittently by smaller outcroppings, was four feet below. He turned and backed in. The narrow opening scraped his shoulders as he twisted down

onto the water-slick floor, and his feet touched with a clatter of equipment. He stomped as hard as he could. The heavy smack echoed once. Eric paused a moment, listening for the thick grating of cracking rock or the scurry of bats. Nothing. Satisfied that he was alone on solid-enough rock, Eric moved into the interior.

The cave showed only the beginnings of decoration; stalactites on the low ceilings were only tiny nubs, and the flowstone on the walls was just visible as slightly-raised ribbon. A wall materialized, forcing him to the right, behind the rock he'd seen from the opening. As he slid behind it, he also passed out of reach of the splinter of natural light that had managed to snake around the foliage. He watched his flashlight reflect one wall after another.

Sighing, he turned off his flashlight and leaned into the cold dampness of the rock. Gooseflesh rose on his legs and arms. He sank to his haunches, hands clasped in front, eyes both open and closed at once. A sound made its way to his ears, and he strained to filter it from the phantom sounds created by his brain to fill the oppressive quiet. He stood, snapping on the light.

He pressed against the wall, but the sound remained faint. He moved to the right. The volume increased. He shined the light against the wall, following it to the corner that appeared deeper than necessary, an odd shadow where a simple seam should have been. Further inspection showed it to be a mismatch, the rock faces jutting past each other and missing their junction by nearly a foot.



He wondered that the blood pounding in his temples didn't echo. As he pushed his head into the passage, the sound became the rush and burble of falling water. He sucked in his breath and squeezed through.

The next room wasn't much wider than the passage, but the sound of a stream penetrated cracks in the rock, leading Eric further into the curious formation. Another tight squeeze, this one sloping downward, took him to a low, spacious cavity where water pooled and the stream became visible again. He cracked and shook a glow-stick. He followed the stream along the far wall to another dark crack, avoiding the puddles and their unannounced depths.

The next turn yielded another surprise: shafts of red-gold trickled through a small opening behind another outcropping of rock under which the stream disappeared. He hastened toward the sunlight. A bruised shin took him over the rock and face to face with a man-sized entrance to the cave. He stepped out, shivering as sun warmed his skin.

Nearly at his feet lay a small pool, clean and deep. The stream resumed its course on the far shore, picking its way around small boulders and a few stunted hemlocks. The sunlight was disappearing though it was too early in the day for it to fall below the horizon. He looked up. Instead of forest, towers of rock rose on all sides, making the pool a courtyard.

He sat, tired all at once. Tiny circles were spreading to the edges of the pool from near the center. An early lightning bug ventured too near its own tantalizing reflection and floundered. He set his things aside and crawled slowly to the edge. Without the vantage point afforded him by standing, he could no longer see the depths of the pool, only the

reflection of the rock wall in it, but he continued looking through the shivering hemlocks and into water that had its own light and reflections. On the floor of the pool a layer of quartz had formed over the limestone, and it shone like burnished steel. Eric reached for a fragment of the glassy substance but stopped, his fingertips an inch from the water. A small fish, not four inches long, drifted upward and struck a remnant of leaf, spat out the not-food, and turned slowly toward another possible meal. Eric swallowed. The fish was the same mirror-color as the rock. He pulled his hand back and the fingerling disappeared. A series of ripples at the far side of the pool marked another strike and Eric gripped the rock he knelt on more tightly. The source of the ripples sped toward him along the bottom, slowed, and stopped its sixteen-inch bulk just beneath him. Its protruding lower jaw mouthed some secret; the fan-shaped tail twitched in time with the fins, more charcoal than the purely silver scales. Only that small constant movement kept it from melding with the sides of the pool.

Eric sifted through his mental catalogue for some fish that approached this ethereal coloring. He could think of nothing save an obscure blueish species of cutthroat trout native only to a small lake in Idaho. But these fish were not cutthroats: the upper lip was more blunted, the dorsal fin less pronounced, the tail unnotched. No collector had imported these creatures; rather, they seemed to be identical to the wild brown trout he'd been catching on the Penn's his entire life. Except for the extraordinary coloring.

Eric began sketching. A completed diagram of the fish emerged, and he was nearly done when it became too dark to see the page. The sides of the pool had dimmed without new light to reflect, but the fish seemed to pulse brilliance as its gills heaved gently and fins

kept time with Eric's own heart. He stood, and when he dipped his hand into the water and lifted a glassy pebble from the edge, the fish disappeared in a flurry of stars.

Reluctantly, he pulled himself away, back through the wet blackness, into the dry rustle of mountain laurel, and to bed, but that night, Eric did not sleep. When morning came, he'd tied three new Green Drakes and a partridge feather variation of the elk hair caddis. The rough leather of his rod case was supple with a new coat of waterproofing, and every pocket of his fishing vest had been reorganized. He shouldered the case and reached for the door, pocketing the pebble he'd taken from the pool.

Deep in the stacks on the fourth floor, he found what he was looking for: *Studies in the Field* by Franklin J. Spencer. When he opened the journal, the spine crackled, confirming that no student had ever pulled it from the shelf. The red glow of the librarian's scanner over the glossy black bar code appeared to him as light on water. He fairly wrenched the book from her plump hands and dashed out.

Dr. Reynolds was not in his office. He let himself in and poured a cup of cold coffee from the eternal pot on the filing cabinet. Eric gulped it down and sat at his end-table desk. With a quick breath, he flipped open the book. "Karst Topography and Penn's Creek: Water as Architect." The text began a detailed description of the effects of water on limestone, the reaction of carbonic acid on calcite, and the various formations caused by the dripping, mineral-rich fluid within the earth. Eric paged rapidly through the section, then stopped as diagrams of stalactites and stalagmites became a cavern floor plan. "Spencer's Cavern, 1.2 miles west of the first crossing of Penn's Creek and Penn Central Railroad."

The diagram, accompanied by a detailed topographical map that confirmed Eric's cave and itself were one and the same, was as Dr. Reynolds described it; only the first two rooms were drawn out, and the false corner Eric had found was depicted as a solid wall. Realizing that he was holding the pebble in the same neurotic way Reynolds held his, he slammed the book shut and stalked out.

He climbed to the second-floor lounge for fresher coffee. There he sat with his notebook, drawing out the cavern as he remembered it and trying not to look at the sketch of his unfinished trout. His anger softened to plain bewilderment. Why would Spencer not explore the cavern more closely, and, if he had, why not document it? Eric's thoughts returned to the fellowship. Bewilderment gave way to excitement. Now, eager to have a solid sketch to show Dr. Reynolds, he stood, measuring out dimensions on the tiled floor by steps as he'd remembered taking them, setting up chairs as walls and boulders. He was climbing over the last plastic rock when a voice from the doorway startled him. He tipped the chair over with a bang, but managed to keep his feet beneath him.

"Aren't you a little old to be climbing on the furniture?"

Spencer, still wearing his floppy olive hat, brushed by him and reached for the coffee.

"I was," Eric said, rushing to gather his papers, "diagramming. What are you--"

The old man stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Slow down. You'll spill my coffee." He picked up the fallen chair and sat, then dumped a creamer into his coffee.

"You didn't really think I'd be foolish enough not to explore my own cave?"

"Why the hell does the diagram stop at the second room?"

Spencer only smiled, cat-like. "You know why." He stood again, and, as he walked by, he knocked Eric's hat from his head into his lap. The dulled plastic cover of his fishing license stared up at him. Eric looked at it dumbly for a moment, then darted into the hall after Spencer.

"You masked the existence of an entire cavern system that might even warrant its own state park for a puddle of guppies?"

"You know better. You saw them. Silver scales gleaming like the Sankgreal. Those trout belong in a folk tale. Big blue ox, pure silver fish." Spencer lowered his voice. "I caught a twenty-three incher, *twenty-three!* in that pool the first time I fished it." He looked around nervously. "Forgive me. I'm old. Can we continue this seated somewhere?"

They walked slowly across campus, Spencer whistling tunelessly and Eric gritting his teeth. When they reached the library's fourth floor reading rooms, Spencer resumed his story.

"Back in the war—the second one, mind you, in '44—I spent a bit of time in Paris. On leave days. There was a considerable red light district there, a popular place for the gads of young men with things to forget and money loose in their pockets. I was always one of the more timid ones, remembering the army's lectures on venereal disease. But I knew if I went through with it, the sex'd be easy and it'd be good. The things those ladies knew aren't decent to repeat, but damn." Spencer shook his head softly, his gaze far away for a moment.

“So it was with the fish. And like I did in Paris, one day I took my rod and went.”

He chuckled briefly, then sobered. “Only problem was that I came home from the war, met Madeline, grew up. But that pool never moved and neither did I.

“I spent so much time away, without explanation, that my wife thought I was having an affair.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I didn’t deny it, because I was, in a way. And had she known what I’d found, she’d have wanted me to publicize it, make a name for myself.” Spencer sighed. “We’ve been divorced since nineteen seventy-four.

“Fishing that pool for the first time was damnation and maybe the hardest decision of my life. It was hard even physically. I took my rod and tackle every time, but something kept hindering me. Once I made a cast, but a woods fly bit me. I jerked my wrist and spent the next ten minutes untangling my line from one of those runty hemlocks. God was telling me to leave his favorite hole alone. But I kept at it until I spent an entire sunset watching them feed and saw only fingerlings come up. I knew I had to stop. And it wasn’t much later that I had the stroke, and that took care of all that.” He tried to smooth his wrinkled forehead. “But now I’ve got someone to share the responsibility with.”

“What responsibility?”

“I don’t want all of Pennsylvania shoving their way through the laurel and that delicate chink in the rocks. I don’t want bits of leader and plastic worms fused to that beautiful silver, the tendrils of flowstone destroyed by careless fingers. I couldn’t let it alone even though I knew what I was doing, knew what I’d found.” Spencer leaned forward in his chair, his face close to Eric’s. “Do you want to see wires and floodlights shoved into that tiny space? A more visitor-friendly passage cut through the chambers?”

"A throng of eager sportsmen going after your fish, you mean?" Eric said quietly.

Spencer turned red, then paled. "Yes," he answered, "and no. You've been there."

"Only because I was desperate to find something. How many others have you deliberately steered in some wrong direction?" Eric paused. "How many classes have you assured that there are no fully-developed caverns on the Penn's?"

Spencer pushed himself against the back of the chair, hands tense against his thighs.

"I know what I did seems terribly selfish to you, but I was not and am not going to sell it out just for the sake of sharing my discovery. That pool couldn't even support one man's fishing on a regular basis, and you'd have it opened up to the state. Regular people don't deserve those fish."

"Come on, Dr. Spencer. You know the parks service would never open that pool. But if some schmuck just happens to wander into it one day, he'll set up a gift shop." Eric stood, turned his chair around, and sat again, resting his arms and chin on its plastic back. "A tourist attraction, complete with a cement tipi, next to the railroad bridge. Penn's Cave Two. Rare trout: ten dollars an inch."

"Over my dead body."

"What's the worst he can do? Fish it till it's dead? You almost did."

"Go to hell."

"Dr. Spencer, I'm not trying to rob you. I don't want to see any of those awful things happen either, but I can't just sit on this. It's too much. I've got to do something besides fish for the rest of my life."

“All you have to do is confirm that it’s a waste of time and no one will even bother looking; there’s no glory in rehashing sloppy seconds.”

“That pool and those fish almost ruined your marriage, you had a stroke, and you still can’t leave it alone. What makes you think I can?”

“Anyone who ties flies like you do—” He stopped, closed his eyes for a long time then opened them. “Will you at least wait until I die to tell Reynolds and the rest of ‘the field?’ It won’t be long.” He rose, slowly, and Eric watched as he disappeared behind the stacks.

Eric sat at his kitchen table, a single barb of a peacock feather in his fingers, staring at the vice-held hook in front of him. He began wrapping the herl around the hook, but his hand shook and snapped the delicate strand. He sighed and reached instead for a spool of chartreuse nylon thread. The layer of thread went on smoothly, and, for the first time since he returned, he smiled. The lightning bug almost blinked as he turned it over in his palm. He hooked it into the wool patch on his vest and looked at the clock—still three hours until the feed, but he had other things to take care of first.

He opened the manila folder to the Filmore application. He stared into the empty lines, re-read the questions that, until seventy-two hours ago, had been impossible. He stepped out onto the concrete stoop, paper in one hand, disposable lighter in the other. In seconds, the flame wriggled up the page. Black waves preceded each twist of fire, smoky salmon pushing against the current. He wiped sooty fingers on his jeans and went back inside. He took the adjunct faculty application out of the bottom drawer of his filing



cabinet. The blanks and lines seemed to fill themselves. He put the complete application in the center of the table, picked up his camera and rod case and left.

Before he entered the cave, he fixed a headlamp to his helmet and took two photos of the cave's entrance: one looking directly at it, the other peering downward into the darkness. He snapped two more in the first room, capturing the timid nubs of stalactites and the girth of the chamber. He skirted the wall and, with his back to the false corner, took a single picture of the second room. Those five were a fish story that would satisfy Dr. Reynolds. He squeezed through the narrow passage. The cold, clicking shutter echoed, the glistening gray rock unnaturally exposed by the flash. When he reached the tiny pools, he used another glow-stick and switched off the headlamp. He hoped the effect of light on water would appear on the film as it did now.

He took one last photo of the cave, this one facing the courtyard, and in the flash, a young trout twisted up and out of the water, the liquid mirror of its stomach blinding. The fish snatched a mayfly and hung in the air like a dream.