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In Hand

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IN HAND

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Geoffrey Ryan Lee
May 2008

Accepted by:
Keith Morris, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

What I hope to create in each of my stories is a piece of fiction that is exact in expression and that can be felt by my reader. I hope but do not expect that my work will move my reader; that takes a combination of chance, circumstance, and skill, and my skills as a writer are still developing. I can say, though, that that is what I have attempted to do with the stories in this collection.

The name of the collection comes from the title of its first story, “In Hand.” I chose this title, both for the individual work and for the collection, for a number of reasons. With the first story itself, my intention is to call into question the notion of control—what the characters do and do not have in hand.

The stories here are about relationships. At the core of each one is the idea of communication and, in one way or another, the struggle to communicate effectively. I do not know whether these characters fight with each other, fight with themselves, and fight to communicate because their relationships are flawed or whether their relationships are flawed because they do not express themselves effectively. I suspect that both are true, and that ambiguity interests me. I cannot answer the question, but I can consider it. In different ways, that is what I attempted to do in the stories here: I tried to show *that* this phenomenon is, *what* it is, and *how* it is. For me, for now, that is enough. I leave the *why* alone.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Before going into a more detailed discussion of the stories in this thesis, I want to step back and take a look at the sources that most inform the work here.

I had wanted to write for years, and I started not long after I arrived at Clemson. Keith Morris encouraged me after reading a dialogue I wrote for his contemporary literature seminar, suggesting that I join his creative fiction workshop. The first novel I read in that seminar, and the inspiration for the dialogue activity in class, was *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates.

I can count on one hand the books that I have really connected with; *Revolutionary Road* is one of the few. Yates's own words might help me describe what I mean by that. In an interview with *Ploughshares*, the author articulated his view of post-modernist, or "post-realist," fiction:

I can read hardly any of the many other new "post-realists," whatever their ever-increasingly famous names may be. I know it's all very fashionable stuff and I know it provides an endless supply of witty little intellectual puzzles and puns and fun and games for graduate students to play with, but it's emotionally empty. It isn't *felt*. (Henry)

When I read *Revolutionary Road*, I *feel* the story. I feel what it is like to think as the characters do, to act as they do, to be what they are. I understand Frank and April Wheeler; I see pieces of myself in both of them. I think that that is what Yates meant when he spoke of feeling: what he wanted was to create stories with characters that his

reader could believe and, in a sense, become during the act of reading. This connecting of reader with work does not always happen. It takes skill and thought and time and dedication to get it right, and even when a writer does succeed, it will only be “right” for some readers. The connection between reader and fiction is a function with many variables; the achievement of the writer is one, but equally important is the state of mind of the reader. I read *Revolutionary Road*, an incredible, powerful artistic work, at a time in my life during which I *could* feel it—at the right moment for me and, whether coincidentally or not, around the time I started writing fiction seriously.

I do not wish to belabor the point, but I sense a rightness of language when I read the works that I admire most. Precision and correctness in expression are of the utmost importance to me in my writing. (To this end, I periodically return to Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* to refresh my memory and guide my pencil along the right lines.) I read short stories, books, and articles meticulously, with an eye to how well and how carefully rendered the writing is. And in the best of Yates’s fiction—*Revolutionary Road*, several of the stories in the collection *Liars in Love*, and in places in *A Good School*—nothing is wrong, nothing out of place. Kurt Vonnegut put it well: “When I made a journey . . . through all his books,” the author said in his speech at a memorial service for Yates in 1993, “not only did I fail to detect so much as an injudiciously applied semicolon; I did not find even one paragraph which, if it were read to you today, would not wow you with its power, intelligence, and clarity” (14). When I first read Yates, the language *felt* right; it still does today. I agree with the diction and the punctuation; I could not alter it and make it better. I find that to be the case with the

fiction that speaks to me most now. I read the stories in Richard Ford's *Rock Springs*, in particular the title story and "Great Falls," and they feel right. I may not agree with the language in quite the same way that I do with that of Yates's "Liars in Love" or "Regards at Home," but I know I could not make it better. The stories are too real and too right for that.

A look at a passage from Yates's work will go a long way toward demonstrating what I mean by this. In the following excerpt, taken from the short story "Oh, Joseph, I'm So Tired," the narrator and his sister, who live with their mother after their parents' divorce, say goodbye to their father when he drops them off at home after a weekend visit.

"Okay. See you soon. How about a hug?"

And those hugs of his, the climax of his visitation rights, were unforgettable. One at a time we would be swept up and pressed hard into the smells of linen and whiskey and tobacco; the warm rasp of his jaw would graze one cheek and there would be a quick moist kiss near the ear; then he'd let us go. He was almost all the way out of the courtyard, almost out in the street, when Edith and I went racing after him.

"Daddy! Daddy! You forgot the stamps!"

He stopped and turned around, and that was when we saw he was crying. He tried to hide it—he put his face nearly into his armpit as if that might help him search his inside pocket—but there is no way to disguise the awful bloat and pucker of a face in tears.

“Here,” he said. “Here you go.” And he gave us the least convincing smile I had ever seen. It would be good to report that we stayed and talked to him—that we hugged him again—but we were too embarrassed for that. We took the stamps and ran home without looking back. (*Collected Stories* 181)

Through carefully detailed gestures and physical description, clear and focused sentences, and simple but exact snippets of dialogue, Yates writes a scene that is once sad, touching, and, above all, believable. The moment is a difficult one for both father and children, but Yates does not shy away from the emotion; rather, he approaches it with directness, showing what happens and what it means instead of simply telling the reader that the encounter is significant.

That is what I hope to create in each of my stories: a piece of fiction that is exact in expression and that can be felt by my reader. I hope but do not expect that my work will move my reader; that takes a combination of chance, circumstance, and skill, and my skills as a writer are still developing. I can say, though, that that is what I have attempted to do with the stories in this collection.

I wrote each of these stories at one time or another during the past year and a half. They share common concerns, both thematic and stylistic. However, I see in looking back on them now, as I hope that you do in reading them for the first time, that my concerns have shifted and evolved.

The name of this collection comes from the title of its first story, “In Hand.” I chose this title, both for the individual work and for the collection, for a number of reasons. With the first story itself, my intention is to call into question the notion of

control—what the characters do and do not have in hand. Stephen, the protagonist in this story, grapples for control in several arenas: in his previous job as an army clerk, in which he finds the structure comfortable but the work tedious and aimless; in his new job at a warehouse, where all he wants is to be left alone; and, most importantly, in his relationship with Clara, the girlfriend he meets in Korea and brings back to the United States when his tour in the service is over. I find this last struggle most interesting and relevant. I likewise see it as operative in each of the stories in this thesis; it is for that reason that I use it as the general title.

The stories here are about relationships. At the core of each one is the idea of communication and, in one way or another, the struggle to communicate effectively. “The Letter Carrier,” the second story, explores the bond, or lack thereof, between a man, Vernon Nally, and the people he encounters over the course of a long, hot day delivering the mail. Whereas Stephen and Clara battle to express themselves, to make themselves understood and to understand each other, Vernon never has even a chance for expression: his meetings are always brief, either because the people he meets move on quickly or because he has to press on to complete his work on time; the communication and understanding that he desires is forever elusive. In “Unnamed” a man and a woman are at odds in ways similar to those in which the main characters are in “In Hand.” Paul, a young and lonely bank teller, wants companionship and love; Zenny, the woman he meets at a party and falls for soon after, values her independence above all else. This tension, and the failure of both characters to recognize or confront it, moves the story forward. And “Man, in Box” deals with a man’s relations with his sisters and with his

absent lover. Over the course of one Sunday, this man, Ray, moves closer and closer to his first encounter with the sister who, years earlier, has disowned him. In addition, as morning gives way to afternoon and afternoon to early evening, Ray talks to a companion who is not present but whom he wishes for.

I do not know whether these characters fight with each other, fight with themselves, and fight to communicate because their relationships are flawed or whether their relationships are flawed because they do not express themselves effectively. I suspect that both are true, and that ambiguity interests me. I cannot answer the question, but I can consider it. In different ways, that is what I attempted to in the stories here: I tried to show *that* this phenomenon is, *what* it is, and *how* it is. For me, for now, that is enough. I leave the *why* alone.

I have spoken of precision in language and storytelling, and I think it appropriate to discuss those ideas and their functions in the stories of this collection. Another reason that I chose “In Hand” as the title for this collection is that the story “In Hand” is, I believe, the most successful in terms of the style, structure, and theme I describe above. The novels and short stories of Yates and the short stories of Ford are works of realistic fiction: real people do real things in real situations. I see “In Hand” as working in that same genre. The story is, and should be, clear; its ambiguity owes not to a lack of detail given to the reader but rather to the simple fact that, when it concludes, we do not know what will happen next. The characters are conflicted and unhappy, but the reader does not know whether those characters will confront or ignore those emotions. “Unnamed”

functions in a similar way. The reader should have little doubt about what does happen; the question that I leave unanswered is what will happen next.

The other two stories, “The Letter Carrier” and “Man, in Box,” work different territory, one that is a step apart from strict realism. At the same time, though, the priority I place on precision of language remains the same. Yates once said, in an interview on the craft of writing, what he thought of his profession: “It’s the hardest because you’re self-taught, because each story implies the ending of its own craft and you have to start over” (Bunge 111). With “The Letter Carrier” and “Man, in Box,” the former written in the spring of 2007, the latter in the spring of 2008, I started over. Grammatical and syntactical accuracy are as important in these works as they are in my others, but I use them to convey a heightened level of ambiguity. And while I admit that I might be deliberately misconstruing Yates’s idea to justify my approach, I do believe that that approach has merit.

Part of starting over when beginning a new story is finding the right way to tell that story. To tell “The Letter Carrier” and “Man, in Box,” I needed direct sentences to convey an uncertainty that is central to each story. I think that it is possible to be direct about uncertainty, and if I have succeeded in doing so, my reader will still feel what I set out to create, a different feeling though it is: that these are real people doing real things in situations that are somehow unreal. When “The Letter Carrier” ends, the reader does not know what will happen to Vernon Nally; much of the reason for that is that it is unclear what has happened to him throughout the story. People enter and leave scenes, and neither Vernon nor the reader knows who they are, why they are there, and whether

or why they are important. While the sentences are clear and direct, I left a lot out of the story with the intention of giving it an uncertain feeling. “Man, in Box,” on the other hand, represents change in other areas—in narrative voice and confidence, in point of view, and in structure. It is the only first-person story in this collection, and Ray, the narrator, tells it by speaking directly to his apparently absent lover. While the answer to that incongruity does emerge, the question adds a tension that is not relevant in the more realistic pieces of this thesis.

I approached each piece here with care, and I tried to find the tone and voice appropriate for each one. The assessment of my success I leave to you. I hope that you enjoy the evaluation.

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CHAPTER TWO

IN HAND

Stephen set his mug on the counter and walked down the hall to the base of the stairs. He sat down on the bottom step and pulled his boots up close to him and paused, listening for sounds of movement in the bedroom above him. When none came, he slipped the boots on and tied them tight over his ankles, then stood and took a step forward. With the doorknob in his hand, he turned his shoulders and stared into the darkness behind him and listened again. “No,” he whispered, “no.” And, bowing his head, he opened the door and stepped out into the cold winter morning.

The city streets were dark, empty, and he wound through them slowly, the sputtering of his Impala’s rusted muffler breaking through the silence as he went. He kept his speed low until he crossed onto Woodbine, where the close-set duplexes and shadowy, tree-lined lawns gave way to street lights and industrial parks and gas stations. As he approached the red light where Woodbine met Brooks, he touched his hand to the breast pocket of his jacket. Bringing the car to a stop, he lifted the small flap and pulled out a receipt, the back of which was covered with the notes he’d scrawled at breakfast. He glanced over at the small clock on the dashboard—it wasn’t yet four-thirty—then back down at the note, checking quickly to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything. He scanned the list again—once, twice—then slipped it back into his pocket, and, with his eyes fixed on a spot in the center of the road ahead of him, waited for the light to turn.

If he changed his routine, he thought, he could fix things. That worked sometimes, changing your routine. Like here: he could do something here, with the quiet

minutes he had each morning. Praying worked before; it might work now, too. It didn't have to be prayer, but something. If he made it—whatever it was—part of his routine, something he did each morning, something good, he thought, it could work.

He coasted left through the intersection and came to a stop at the light a block onward. Looking off down the street while he waited, his eyes landed on the broad-shouldered figure of Stala, another loader at the warehouse, who stood on the sidewalk beside a bus stop twenty feet on. Stephen glanced down at the clock, then back up at the man, and watched him rock back and forth on his feet.

He didn't know Stala well. The man was older—by about twenty-five years, Stephen guessed—and his English was limited, but he always seemed friendly enough. The little Stephen had learned of him came from short, choppy conversations they'd had in the cafeteria or on the walk out of the building in the afternoon: he was a refugee; he'd been in Rochester, and held this job, for nine years; he was married and had a son and four daughters, all of whom were in the local schools. Stephen never spoke with him for more than the length of a coffee break, but Stala was one of the few of the hundred or so men on his shift that Stephen didn't mind bumping into, one of the few he didn't feel he had to avoid or get out of the way for.

Stephen reached across the front seat and, keeping his foot firmly on the brake, rolled the window down. Cold air rushed in, chilling the right side of his face and neck. In a whisper he rehearsed what he would say, working and reworking his words to make them easy for Stala to understand—How about a lift, Stala? Would you like a ride, Stala?—but before the light changed, he saw Stala turn to greet someone who was

walking up to the bus stop. The two shook hands, and, when the light changed and Stephen rolled closer, he saw that Stala, who a moment before had stared out from a face hard and fixed, was awake, animated with the greeting. Stephen's thoughts flashed quickly: he would still stop—no, he wouldn't; the two were friends—he shouldn't interrupt, he didn't even know this other man; no, he couldn't stop. And he drove past, slowly, sunk down low in the cold air that had filled his car, watching the sidewalk out of the corner of his eye, then in his mirror, and feeling farther and farther away from home.

Korea had been a cold, lonely place, and routine made it better. He knew what each coming day held: PT at six, breakfast directly after; work until noon, lunch for an hour; work again until five, off for dinner. He didn't like the work—filing, typing up mundane letters, and running stupid little errands around base; he didn't like most of the people around him then—not the self-important officers, and definitely not the other enlisted men, most of whom were ten years younger and shared a compulsion for unity that he could not understand; he didn't much care for the place either, though the piercing night winds that rolled down out of the hills and swept across the dusty streets of the town bordering post became familiar, homelike by the time he left. But he managed to get through it all because even when it was physically taxing—when drills left him without an ounce of energy or desire—it was never unpredictable and because he knew that when his tour was up he could leave.

He pulled the Impala into a spot up against the tall chain-link fence that divided the parking lot from the loading docks, and, glancing at the clock to make sure he still had time, turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. He took a cigarette from the

pack of Pall Malls in his pocket, lit it, and leaned back against his door. Things could come right, he thought. He had bad jobs before the army, and he got through them. And he got through his two years in the army. That turned out all right. He kept to himself early on, and with time he settled in—had even made friends with one of the Koreans assigned to his platoon. They talked, they drank, they joked; it was good, even fun. And, of course, there was Clara. He met Clara there.

He tossed his half-smoked cigarette through the fence and spit on the ground between his feet. Of course things came right. With time—with time they did. He paused for a moment and watched the white clouds of his breath billow out in the air before him. With his head down, he rounded the back of the car and started toward the entrance of the long cement building. Time, he thought as he joined the line of men shuffling through the turnstile, with time they would come right.

It was a long moment before Stephen realized that Sung Hwa was watching him.

“You will make your uniform dirty,” the young man said, nodding toward the metal chopsticks that Stephen held, frozen, above his lap.

Stephen looked down at his hand. “Oh,” he said, bringing them to his lips.

“Thanks.”

“You do not know this girl?” Sung Hwa asked in a whisper. He flicked his eyes back over his shoulder in the direction of a woman seated alone at the table behind them.

Stephen took a sip of his beer. “No,” he said, looking up at his friend. “Do you?”

“No,” Sung Hwa said, shaking his head solemnly. “But you must speak to this girl.”

Stephen reached out and pulled a piece of meat from the grill that lay in the center of the table. He put it in his mouth and began chewing.

“You must speak to this girl,” Sung Hwa repeated, placing his hands on the thighs of his neatly pressed pants.

“Why?”

“Because she is like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yes.” He picked up a piece of beef and put it in his mouth. “Like you,” he said, talking around his food, “she is an American.”

After picking at his vegetables in silence for several minutes, Stephen did speak to her. Clara was in fact an American. She came from Cleveland and she was in Dongducheon, she said, “Sort of by default. I married a staff sergeant—he’s still here, at Hovey—and when it didn’t work out I took the settlement money and rented a place here.”

Whether or not his friend was right in supposing that she was like him, Stephen did know after a few minutes that he liked her. Though he never shook the nervousness he carried with him when he crossed the room and introduced himself, her smile and her warm voice, were familiar, welcoming. And, he thought, she must have seen something that she liked in him. When, seated across from her and ringing his hat with his hands, he suggested that they get together sometime, she quickly wrote her number on a scrap of

paper and slid it across the table. As he reached for it, she took his hand in hers and squeezed it softly. “Thanks for coming over. I—I’m glad you did.”

He called her the next day, and, because that went well, he called her the day following and again the one after that. Their conversations were brief—snuck in during the few minutes he had access to a phone in the evening or when he could rush through his lunch and get back to his desk before afternoon work began—and what he felt each time was always the same: that she was warm, genuine, and interested.

Though Stephen finished every day sweaty and greasy, the warehouse always stayed cold in January. Standing on the small platform on the edge of his pallet truck, he wound up and down the noisy aisles with a thick stack of labels in his hand. Every few moments he jumped down and grabbed a case of soda or detergent or spaghetti sauce from a low slot in the high industrial shelving, slapped a sticker on it, and set it on one of his pallets. As he went, bending, lifting, setting, his body got warmer and warmer. He peeled away his jacket and his sweatshirt and set them on the truck battery, then put them back on when the pace slowed and the air cooled his skin.

Now, after six months on the job, he did his work quickly, efficiently, and if there was anything he liked about it, it was the relative freedom that his efficiency brought him. He built his pallets and loaded them onto trailers bound for stores throughout the northeast, and as long as he kept whittling away at his stack of stickers, people left him alone.

At nine o'clock, after putting his jacket on and having a quick cigarette under the canvas awning outside, Stephen made his way to the row of payphones across from the restrooms. Though he knew it by heart, he pulled his list from his pocket and set it on top of one of the black plastic phones. He made loose fists with his hands, blew into each, and rubbed them together, warming his skin and moistening his chapped fingers. Picking up the phone with his left hand, he dropped two quarters into the slot with his right and began dialing his brother's number.

"Paul," he said into the mouthpiece a moment later, "it's me. Did I get you at a bad time?"

"No," the tired voice said. "No, I'm fine. What's up?"

Stephen lifted up his hand and placed the tip of his index finger in his ear to block out the noise of the flushing toilets behind him. "I don't know—it's just—I need to ask you something." And he explained, in the pared down sentences that he'd been running over in his mind all morning, that he needed money. "I can't make rent—not if I pay the electric. I thought I could make it work but I can't—we can't. Insurance just kicked in, and that's another two hundred a month. I just—I'm really sorry."

In a soft, even voice, Paul assured his brother that he could help, that two hundred dollars wasn't too much, that there was no need to apologize because "it happens. But listen, I've got to get back to work. Just stop by the house after dinner tonight, all right?"

"All right," he said, taking his finger from his ear. "Thanks, Paul. I'm really—thanks."

He looked up at the big clock that hung on the wall above him—still time for another call—then back down at his list. He skipped past, “Clara: last night,” and selected “garage: estimate” from the items that remained, then picked up the phone and dropped two more quarters into the slot.

On the nights he could get away from post he’d met Clara in town, first at one of the quiet restaurants in Saengyeon-dong, later at her small studio apartment a few blocks away. And there were, it turned out, many ways in which they were alike. Clara understood, and shared, Stephen’s feelings about living in this place: that it was, all of it, monotonous, meaningless; that the majority of the people around them, locals and expatriates, civilian and military, were either distant, repellant, or both. But they had each other, and their time together was good. What they had was tender if not passionate, soothing if not exciting, and whether or not it was love, it was what they both wanted.

“Your girlfriend, she is a teacher?” Sung Hwa said over lunch some time later. He smiled up at Stephen. “I think she is. Your English is getting much better.”

“Yes,” Stephen said. “Thank you.”

“You see,” Sung Hwa said, nodding slowly. “I told you. She *is* like you.”

When Clara’s settlement money started running out, she booked a ticket on a mid-May flight back to Cleveland; Stephen, who decided early on that two years in the army was enough for him, finished his tour in early July.

“I’m going to ask her to move back home with me,” he said to Sung Hwa. He spoke softly, without conviction, and, with his eyes averted, waited for a response.

Sung Hwa looked up at him. “Stephen, this is good,” he said, reaching out and grabbing him by the shoulder. His face was bright, pleased, heartening. “This is excellent. I am very, very happy.”

“She hasn’t said ‘yes’ yet.”

“She will say ‘yes,’” Sung Hwa said, patting Stephen’s shoulder. “Of course she will say ‘yes.’ It is the best thing for you both.”

Stephen secured a two-day pass and took Clara to Gangneung, a small city on the East Sea. He was quiet for most of the three-hour bus ride from Seoul, waiting for the right moment, trying to think of the best words to use. It wasn’t until after dinner that night, as they sat drinking wine and looking down at the beach from the balcony of their hotel room, that he gathered up the courage to ask her. What he heard in response was far from the certainty he’d gotten from Sung Hwa.

“Stephen,” she said, glancing down at the glass in her hand and then back up at him, “that’s—that’s wonderful. I don’t know what to say. That’s really—that’s a wonderful idea.”

He stood up and took a deep breath. The smell of seaweed and salt water filled his head. “Does that mean yes?”

And they talked it through. Yes, it would be different for them, maybe even hard, but they could do it. Being together had made them happy here; they could be just as happy someplace else. For each question she had—Where would they live? What jobs could they get? What if it didn’t work out?—Stephen had essentially the same answer:

that to him these were details and that details didn't matter. "The only thing that matters is that we're together, right? I mean, that *is* what matters, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said when time and repetition brought her to the same conclusion. She took his hands in hers and looked up at him. The happiness in her face was guarded, but, still, it was happiness. "Yes."

After a few months in the warehouse, Steven decided that the secret to making work bearable was working through breaks. By moving fast and limiting his stops he could meet his quota by noon even on heavy days. He had to stay on company property until it was time to clock out, but as long as he stayed out of sight, those final minutes of the day were his. Some days he found a slot in a dark aisle and built himself a chair out of cases of kitchen cleaning products or olive oil; other days he went out behind the surplus trailers and practiced throwing pebbles and gravel at the company logos on the big, metal doors. Sure, the time was boring and it passed slowly, but it was his.

Today was a light day, and Stephen loaded his last pallet onto the trailer at eleven-thirty. He walked outside and took a seat on one of the benches under the awning and sat in silence for a moment, the cold air chilling his moist back. He lit a cigarette and took a long, slow drag. There were still phone calls to make, but, he thought, they could wait a few minutes. Besides, if he went back in later, after noon, Clara would be gone—she had an interview or lunch with friends or something—and he could call home and leave a message instead of talking to her. Yes, he would do that. He leaned back against the wall and bowed his head and closed his eyes.

#

The fights had started soon after they got back to Dongducheon. Up to that point they had rarely disagreed, let alone argued, but what Stephen found even more unsettling than that was his inability to identify a cause for any of their quarrels. They could talk through issues—such as what she should do while she waited for him to finish his tour—and come to solutions that they both seemed content with—postpone her departure; he could pick up her rent for a month—but they struggled with small, inconsequential points.

“I’d like you to come with me when I speak to my landlord.”

“I’m on post all week.”

“Then we’ll go when you’re off. There’s no rush.”

“Can’t you just do it? Why do I have to be there?”

“Because I don’t like the man, that’s why. He makes me nervous. And anyway, I think it’s the least you can do.”

It carried on that way, the arguments growing more frequent as their departure drew near. In their final evenings in Korea, as they lay around Clara’s apartment after dinner, fighting became part of the nightly routine. The tension never lasted: they usually talked or laughed away a quarrel within minutes, and by the time he hurried out her door and down the stairs and through the quiet streets on his way back to base, Stephen had usually forgotten what it was that they had been fighting about. What he remembered, and what he tried to convince himself was a good sign, was the feeling it

gave him: that regardless of what he had argued for or against, he had been neither right nor wrong.

Finishing the last of his calls, Stephen looked up just as the shift supervisor was leaving the restroom. He turned back quickly, and, picking the handset back up, leaned in close to the phone. When the man was gone, his khaki pants and green polo shirt disappeared around the corner and into the loading area, Stephen hung up the phone and started off in the other direction.

They couldn't fight if he wasn't at home, he thought as he settled in among a stack of tuna fish cans. And that wouldn't be hard to pull off, either. Clara started work at four today. All he had to do was kill two hours; he'd have the rest of the night free: free from tension, free to have a drink in peace. That sounded nice.

The thud of metal slamming into metal jarred Stephen from his thoughts. He leaned forward and looked up the aisle where two men stood beside their pallet trucks. One truck was empty, the other was covered with the remains of two fallen heaps of boxes.

"Shit," Stephen heard as he walked toward them. The man beside the empty truck took a step forward and bent over the other, who had begun restacking his load. "What the fuck, man?"

"Sorry, sorry," Stala's voice said. "Sorry."

“Yeah, so-ree, so-ree,” the other mocked, his tongue tapping the roof of his mouth on the *rs*. “Watch where you’re going.” He stepped up on his truck, backed up, and drove around Stala and his mess, mumbling over his shoulder as he passed.

Stephen took a step back toward the cases of tuna fish and stopped. Looking behind him, he saw Stala struggling to rebuild his first pallet. Stooped over, picking up groceries as fast as his aging body allowed, he looked tired and alone.

Stephen crossed to the truck, bent down, and began lifting boxes. The two worked quickly, building both pallets up over their heads in minutes. As they set the last, lightest boxes on top, Stala turned to Stephen. “Thank you,” he said softly. And Stephen, bringing a small smile to his lips, looked up at the man, nodded once, and walked back down the aisle.

Their fight the night before had been no better or worse than usual: it was simply one link in an almost continuous chain of arguments that stretched back nine months to those tense final nights in Korea. But whereas those early quarrels passed quickly, brushed aside with a laugh or forgotten with an embrace, these were longer and harder fought, and the bitterness lingered.

It was at dinner, after Stephen had gotten home from work and just before Clara left for her shift at the diner. “What’s that?” Clara asked.

Stephen traced circles with his fork, dragging brown swirls of gravy and kernels of corn into the mound of mashed potatoes on his plate. “What’s what?” he said, his eyes fixed on his plate.

Clara stood up and stepped quickly into the hallway. She returned a moment later with a large shoe box in her hands. “What,” she said, looking directly into his eyes, “is this?”

Stephen set his fork down carefully and leaned back in his chair. “Looks like boots,” he said, glancing up at the box.

“Tell me, Stephen,” she said, glaring down at him, “where’d you get the money for boots?”

He looked up at her, his face calm, impassive. “We spoke about this.”

Clara turned away and stood facing the hallway. “We did?” she said, her voice frank, mocking. “Oh, that’s right.”

“Don’t do this.”

“No, no, you’re right. I’d forgotten. When was it? Last week, right?” She turned back and set the box on the table. “That *is* right: last week.” She nudged the box toward Stephen, bringing it to rest against his plate. “Right. I remember now.” She nudged the box again, moving Stephen’s plate toward the edge of the table.

“Clara—”

“I remember,” she said, sitting down in the chair beside his and resting her hands on the box, “that we talked about the fact that we couldn’t make rent this month.”

“Yes, we did.” He placed his fingers flat on the table. “And I told you I couldn’t work in my old boots much longer. Shit, I’ve been keeping them together with *nails*. And,” he continued before Clara could speak, “I told you that Paul would help.”

“And he’s going to, right?”

“What?”

“He’s going to. You asked him, and he’s going to help.”

“Yes, he’s going to help,” Stephen said, lifting his hands up off the table. “Of course he is.”

“Well great,” Clara said. “That’s great.” She leaned back from the table and folded her hands in her lap. “So tell me, when did you ask him?”

Stephen looked at the box and then back at his plate. “I was going to call him tonight, or maybe tomorrow at work.”

Without a word, Clara stood up from her chair and, grabbing the sides of the shoe box, flung it at him, hitting him in the chest and knocking his plate to the floor. Stephen froze, his mouth slightly open, his eyes wide with shock and fear. When the plate had rattled to a rest on the floor, he took a deep breath and looked down at the box, which had landed in his lap. “Fuck, Clara.”

“Yeah,” she said, turning and walking out of the room. “Fuck.”

Stephen went straight home after clocking out. When he arrived, he sat in the Impala for a long moment, listening to the chugging of the old engine. He lit a cigarette, then changed his mind and put it out with his fingers. He just had to go inside, he thought. That was all.

Clara was dressed for work and sitting at the kitchen table when he walked in. He took off his boots and left them by the front door, dropping his jacket on top of them

before standing up. He walked past the living room and looked in at the couch he slept on the night before. Clara had folded his blankets; they lay neatly on the middle cushion.

When he reached the kitchen doorway, he stopped and leaned to one side, his shoulder pressing into the cool, smooth wood. “I thought you started later tonight,” he said, looking down at the floor.

“Amy blew in. They called and asked me to start early.”

“Oh.”

“I’m leaving now.” She took a sip from the mug in front of her, then set it back down. “I made sauce—it’s on the stove. Just boil yourself some spaghetti for dinner.”

Stephen looked up at her, at the curve of her nose and chin, at her lowered eyelids. “Thanks,” he said, keeping his eyes on her. “Clara, listen—”

“Really,” she said, standing up, “I’m on my way out the door. I don’t have time now.” She crossed to the sink and set her mug down inside.

“I spoke to Paul. I’m stopping by later to pick up the money.”

“Good.”

“Clara, listen—”

“Stephen,” she said, walking toward him, “I have to go.”

Stephen planted his feet and lifted his arm to block the doorway. “Clara, I think we need to talk.”

Clara turned and stood facing the kitchen counter. She looked as she had a moment before: her profile soft, her neck slightly bent, her eyes nearly closed. “Yes,” she said, still facing away, “we probably do.”

CHAPTER THREE
THE LETTER CARRIER

<i>Yo trabajo sin reposo</i>	[I work without rest
<i>Para poderme casar</i>	So that I may marry
<i>Y si lo llego a lograr,</i>	And if I succeed,
<i>Seré un guajiro dichoso</i>	I will be a happy man.]

- Cuban *son*

It was a foggy start, not unlike a good many of the mornings in which Vernon Nally had begun his work. The air lay heavy, thick on the rolling hills of the small urban park; glancing down, he saw his neatly pressed short-sleeved shirt fading into grey-blue shorts and bag, which in turn gave way to the moist air that shrouded, and left unseen, his sunburnt knees, tight support socks, and polished black walking shoes. He picked his way along as though by memory: around the overgrown little league diamond; through the field of barbecue pits strewn with plastic bags, half-eaten hot dog buns, and empty beer bottles; across the footbridge that led over the Genesee River; past the statue of the soldier with a rifle in his hands; and, at last over the canal bridge and out onto Thurston Road.

He made his way up the waking street, the purr of passing engines circling his head, the acrid scent of exhaust fumes in his nostrils. With his right hand he reached into his bag and pulled out the next bundle, with his left he wiped away the first beads of sweat from his upper lip. It would be a hot day. But then, a dozen miles with fifty

pounds hanging from your shoulder made any day hot. Vernon had made peace with it long ago: hot or cold, dry or moist, he finished his workdays wet. Sweat was his constant. In time, he came to take pride in it: sweat, and finishing on time, proved he'd done the best he could, gave him the right to go home each day.

He moved across the dewy grass and up toward the next house, a solid, three-story Victorian with white sides and green trim. When he reached the porch steps he bent down and, as best he could with his one free hand, brushed off the blades of wet grass that had collected on his shoes.

“Good morning, Vernon.”

Every day, without fail and for as long as he could remember, she had been there, waiting: old Mrs. Mathers, in the doorway, with something for him. On cold days it was a mug of hot cocoa; on wet ones it was a dry towel for his face and growing forehead; and on days like this it was a tall, cold drink.

“Hello, Mrs. Mathers,” he said, a soft smile on his lips. And though he'd already set aside her mail, already knew he had little for her, he reached down into his bag and shuffled through the letters and magazines, allowing himself a moment to hope that what he'd brought was, just this once, something better than the usual short stack of junk mail and community newsletters; something—a card, a letter, a postcard—that showed love, showed concern, showed something for this woman who was, for some reason he didn't understand, so kind to him.

Quietly, as was her way, Mrs. Mathers waited. Vernon pulled out a banded bundle of supermarket flyers and utilities bills. Looking up at her through the screen door, he held out the mail. “Here you are, ma’am,” he said, his voice almost a whisper.

The old woman smiled out at him and opened the door to accept the bundle. “Thank you, Vernon.” She leaned back into the shadows of the living room, set her mail down, and returned a moment later. Without a word, she handed him a large glass of iced tea.

Vernon took a short sip and then a longer one while Mrs. Mathers fixed her eyes on his. “Radio says it’s going to be hot today. You’ll be sure to stick to the shade and drink lots of water? And take your breaks?”

“Mm. Mm hmm.” He finished his drink and looked up at her. “And how are you today, Mrs. Mathers?”

The old woman averted her eyes. “Fine, fine,” she said, fidgeting with a seam on the sleeve of her blouse. “And you?”

“Yes,” he said. “Just fine.”

“And your family?” she asked, her voice quiet, steady. “How’re your boys?”

Vernon paused before answering. He could not remember having told Mrs. Mathers about his sons; then again, he’d been coming here so long that it was bound to have come up. “Oh sure,” he said without thinking about it. “They’re great.” He hitched his shoulder strap up toward his neck, and looked up through the screen. Mrs. Mathers had taken a step back into the living room and was fumbling with her mail. Squinting, he could just make out the shape of her head as it rose and fell with her breathing.

He stared through the door and thought for a long moment before inching forward, trying to bring the old woman back into focus. “It seems there was something I was going to tell you,” he said. “I can’t remember what it was, though.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” she said quickly, still facing away. “You’ll tell me next time. Besides, you’d better get going. Can’t have you falling behind because of me.”

Vernon took a deep breath and looked away from the house, out into Mrs. Mathers’s foggy front yard and toward the street.

“Just set that down,” she said. “I’ll take care of it later.”

Vernon looked down at the empty glass in his hand and paused. He knew there was something he wanted to say, but when he closed his eyes and searched for it, he found nothing. “I guess I’ll be on my way,” he said, looking up into the shadows as he set the glass down next to him. “Thank—”

“You take care of yourself now.”

Vernon paused. “Yes, ma’am,” he said, starting down the porch steps. “I will.”

Some time after, when he’d finished with his deliveries on Thurston, Vernon rounded the corner onto Main Street. Much of the early morning fog was gone now, and downtown stretched out before him: dirty, hazy, alive. A quarter of a mile on, he stopped and knelt down beside a faded green metal box. As he slid the moist strap off his shoulder and set his bag on the sidewalk, he glanced down at his watch: right on time. He opened the box with a key from his pocket and began filling up his bag.

“Hi there,” said a soft voice behind him.

Vernon stood up and turned around. In front of him, hands resting on the handle of a stroller, was a pretty young woman with short, wavy brown hair. “Hi,” she said, smiling up at him. “I’ve got a few more, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“No, no,” he said. “It’s no trouble at all.”

The woman reached down into the stroller and pulled out four envelopes, each one a different color. She looked back up at him, exhaustion in her eyes. “I do appreciate it,” she said. “I wasn’t sure how far we were going to make it in this heat.”

“Well, I’m happy to help.” A warm, protective grin crossed his lips as he stretched out his hand and accepted the letters. “Have to be careful on days like this,” he said looking down at her child, “especially with the little ones.”

“Don’t I know it.” With her right hand she reached out and pulled the canvas cover of the stroller down, lengthening the shadow covering the small body inside. She looked back up at him with kind, sad eyes. “There’s so much to do, Vern.”

Vernon’s pulse throbbed in his throat; fresh sweat began to roll down his sides. He turned to the left and tried to control his breathing. Something in those eyes, in her, saddened him, made him want to apologize for her troubles, for her pain. Something.

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning back to her slowly. “I mean, I wish there was some way I could help, Mrs. . . .”

“Weaver,” she said. She tightened her grip on the stroller. “And that’s sweet of you. But I’ll make it—we’ll make it. It’s just another day, right?”

Vernon watched as she leaned forward and began pushing the stroller down the street. After a few paces, she looked back over her shoulder and smiled her good-bye.

He nodded and smiled back, then returned to his bag. Squatting down, he glanced at the envelopes in his hands for the first time, his eyebrows pulling higher and higher as he flipped from light blue to yellow to orange to purple—stamps, and no other marking, on each one.

“Wait,” he called. He spun quickly from his crouch, losing his balance and falling on one knee. Steadying himself with one hand on the green box beside him, he jerked his head up, shouting “wait” again and looking first down the sidewalk, then up at the office building to his left, and, finally, out into the street. Pedestrians in gray and black business attire moved briskly along the sidewalks and cars and taxis and buses scooted past, but the pretty young woman and her child were gone. Vernon watched the scene before him and searched among the bustle—shuffled from side to side within his square of sidewalk, rose up on his toes and stretched his neck to see around cars, street signs, and passersby. He watched and searched until watching and searching came to feel impractical, futile; and then, with a sigh, he turned and loaded his bag, carefully placing the colored envelopes inside when he finished.

When he stepped into the tall gray office building some time later, his shirt, socks, and the back of his shorts were soaked with warm sweat. Intent on pushing ahead, on finishing his work, he had stopped checking his watch some time earlier; it was, he assumed, around midday. Although the sky over downtown was overcast and white, still hiding the sun, heat seemed to press down on him from directly above—swarming around his head and his shoulders and his back, pushing down, bending him forward. Inside the lobby he took grateful breath after grateful breath of the cool air. He closed his

eyes, allowing himself a moment to feel the slow, hot throb of his temples and arms and neck, then crossed the stone floor.

Vernon leaned against the corner, staring down at the floor, as the elevator moved slowly upward. At the third floor the door opened and a young man of about thirty, nicely dressed in pleated tan slacks and a crisp white shirt, stepped inside.

“Afternoon,” Vernon said warmly.

The young man glanced over at him. “Hello,” he said softly, and with a slight nod and a quick, polite smile, he stepped to the opposite side of the elevator.

Vernon turned to face him. There was something familiar in that profile: the curve of the large nose, the bend of the neck, the thin shoulders. “Excuse me,” he said.

The young man, head down and eyes fixed on his shiny brown shoes, made no reply.

“Excuse me,” he said again, his tone firmer.

“Mm.”

“I just wanted to ask you—you look so familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?”

“Mm.”

“I do?” he asked. “Where is it? I can’t seem to place your face.”

“Mm.”

Vernon waited a moment, then reached out and gently touched the young man’s elbow. “Excuse me.”

“What’s that?” The young man raised his head and recoiled slightly. “Were you talking to me? I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“That’s all right,” Vernon said, an understanding smile forming on his lips. “I’ve been there. Believe me.”

“Yeah,” the young man replied, looking away and letting out a sigh. He turned toward Vernon, his face patient and genial. “So, how’re you holding up out there? Looks like it’s a hot one.”

Vernon squirmed in his shirt and rocked back on his heels. “I guess it is,” he replied, “but I’m doing just fine. I like the heat.”

“Oh?”

“Oh yeah,” Vernon said, leaning forward. “I suppose it’s hard work—it’s not for everyone, that’s for sure. But every day, when I get home, I feel good. Feel like I’ve earned it—earned going home.”

“Well, good.”

The elevator slowed to a halt and the doors opened on the twelfth floor. “Yep,” Vernon said, “I go home proud. Every day. Oh, what I was saying before—asking, actually—was if I knew you—”

The young man stepped out into the hallway quickly. “I’m sorry, pop,” he said over his shoulder, “but I’ve really got to run. Late for a meeting, you see. You take care now.”

“But—” Vernon started after him, dragging his bag behind as he hurried into the hallway, but the young man was gone, around the corner and out of sight.

Turning back, the movement of a figure in the elevator startled him; he gasped and took a quick step back. “Excuse me,” he said, “I didn’t see you there.” And it was a long moment, time enough for him to lift his bag back onto his shoulder and to will an apologetic smile to his face, before he recognized the odd looking figure as his own, reflected back at him by the polished metal of the closed elevator doors.

“My goodness,” he whispered, raising a hand to flatten down the few wispy white hairs that rimmed the crown of his dark, bald head. In fact, everything was wrong with the picture in front of him: the ears much larger than he remembered; the sunburnt face that seemed to hide eyes that should have shown through blue; the shirt untucked at one side; the trickle of dry blood running from his right knee to his sock.

Nervous, confused, he did his best to quickly fix himself up—tucking in his shirt, wiping away the blood with his handkerchief. Standing back up, he noticed a foul smell and realized, after a few uncomfortable sniffs, that it came from him, rose up from his sweat soaked clothes and filmy skin. He dabbed at one arm with the handkerchief, but after drying just a forearm the cloth was drenched and useless. With a sigh, he returned it to his pocket and, his head bowed, started down the corridor.

A short time later Vernon pushed through a set of tall glass doors and found himself in a large waiting room. He shuffled across the room, past brown leather sofas and chairs, all of them empty, and made his way to the reception desk. A middle-aged woman, her died-brown hair short and straight, sat there holding a phone with one hand and taking notes with the other.

“Yes, that’s right,” she said into the mouthpiece. She glanced up at him, then turned back to her notes and began writing again. Vernon pulled out the next bundle in his bag—a handful of envelopes, a catalogue from a legal stationer, and a large certified letter—and looked away politely, waiting.

“All right, sir. I’ll take care of it right away.” She hung up the phone and continued writing for a moment before looking up again. “Yes?”

“Afternoon,” he said warmly. “I’ve got a—”

The phone rang softly. “Excuse me,” the woman said, picking it up. “Finley, Greene, and Finley.”

Vernon stepped back from the desk. His skin, though sticky with sweat, was dry now, and the chilled air of the office building was beginning to make him cold. He set his things down and, rubbing his arms with his hands, walked toward one of the sofas. Every few steps brought a slap of cold—on his back, on his chest, on his back again—as his loose wet shirt stuck to and peeled away from his skin.

Reaching the sofa and turning to sit, he looked back toward the desk. The woman, frowning at him in disapproval, motioned to him with her pen.

“What is it?” she hissed when he came close, her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. He picked up the bundle from the floor and held it up for her to see. She reached out and grabbed the mail from him.

Vernon gripped the edge of the desk with both hands, his feet squishing in his shoes, and waited. The receptionist, listening intently to the phone, appeared to have forgotten him. “Miss,” he said softly. “Excuse me, miss.”

The woman thrust up her hand without looking away from the desk. Vernon waited a moment before trying again. “I’m sorry, miss, but I need—”

The woman’s eyes, full of disgust, flashed up at him, halting his lips and sending a chill down his spine. He retreated the few steps back to his bag and picked it up, his hands trembling from the cold of the room and nerves raw from rebuke. He looked out the glass doors of the office. Leaving now was not an option: without a signature for the letter, he could not continue. He held his arms tight to his sides, trying to warm them and keep them still. Breathing slowly and setting a furrow in his brow, he turned back to the receptionist.

Standing there now, behind the desk, was the young man from the elevator, reading a document that he held in both hands. Seeing him there, Vernon’s concentration dissolved into a smile of relief, and he approached the desk confidently.

“Well, hello,” he said. The woman glared up at him, but he ignored her, his eyes fixed on the young face before him. “Here we are, together again.”

The young man traced a line on the paper with his finger. He looked down at the receptionist, who made a final note and, with a polite goodbye, hung up the phone.

“Here it is, Margaret,” the young man said, handing the paper over to her.

“Yes, sir. I’ll take care of it now.” The woman hurried away from her desk and down the hallway that stretched off to the right; the young man turned in the opposite direction.

“Excuse me,” Vernon called after him. “Excuse me.”

The young man turned and looked at him. “Yes?” he said absently.

“Hi. It’s me again.”

The young man smoothed out a wrinkle on his shirt. “What?” he said, raising his eyes to look at Vernon. “Oh, right. What can I do for you?”

The smile faded from Vernon’s face. He pointed at the large envelope on the desk. “Certified letter for Mr. Finley. I need a signature.”

“Of course.” The young man crossed back to the desk. With one eye still on his shirt, he signed the receipt and handed it back. “There you are,” he said, turning away and starting down the corridor.

“Sir? I wanted to ask you—”

“I’m sorry,” the man said, “but I’m really very busy, Vern. Whatever it is, ask Margaret. I’m sure she’ll be able to help you.”

The heat jarred him as he stepped back out onto Main Street. Above, the sky hung white, impenetrable; below, the sidewalk steamed. Vernon took a step forward and his left knee buckled; another step and his eyes rolled back, his head following, as he stumbled sideways into the cool glass wall of the office building. Leaning heavily, he eased himself down and sat on the step.

He took a few slow, deep breaths and tried to lift the bag at his side. It came up easily, and a look inside confirmed it: only Mrs. Weaver’s colored envelopes and a few bundles remained. Gaining confidence from the sparse contents—there couldn’t be much farther to go now—he gathered himself into a squat and, gingerly, stood up.

The last of the bundles delivered, Vernon turned right onto St. Paul Street and shuffled the few feet down to a bench surrounded on three sides by opaque fiberglass

walls. With a heavy, relieved sigh, he dropped onto the seat, holding his bag on his lap. He closed his eyes and, resting his head against the thin wall behind him, concentrated on his breathing—in slowly, and out; in again, and out. His limbs hung limply in front of him, at his sides, and he let the warmth surround and rise up from him.

Some time later, the heat having subsided and his breaths coming easier, he allowed himself, for the first time that day, to take pleasure in how far he'd come. Most men stayed indoors on days such as this—over a hundred degrees and humid, too—but he had taken on the day, had done his job. Still, he felt strange; something did not fit, and it was with a feeling of accomplishment mixed with uncertainty that he lifted his head and opened his eyes and looked out of his small shelter and saw, no more than a dozen feet from where he sat, a dark green mailbox—the one he'd forgotten; his final load of the day.

His heart sank as he opened the box and looked inside. He was far from finished; this last batch, all seventy-five pounds of it, was his largest of the day. That he had forgotten the final stage of his route puzzled him—he had walked it for years—but there was no time to dwell on that now. Resigned to his task, he opened his bag and filled it.

Dazed, lightheaded, Vernon stumbled on down St. Paul Street, too tired to think, too numb to notice the heat. Downtown offices gave way to apartment blocks and large duplexes. Before long, and without fully comprehending how he got there, he stepped out of the daylight and into a large, dark room.

His head bobbed and the walls spun around him, but the air was cool, welcoming, and he leaned back against the doorjamb and waited. Slowly, the room came into focus:

dark walls covered with dusty mirrors; small tables scattered in front of him and at his sides; and, at the far side of the room, a large bar lit dimly by the glow of soft neon and small track lights.

He took a step forward just as the door opened behind him. “Verno,” said a familiar voice. A man clapped him on the shoulder and, stepping past, wove his way through the tables and over to the bar.

Vernon followed, confused. Reaching the bar, he dropped a bundle of mail on the counter and turned toward the man. He was young—probably in his twenties—a thin man in faded blue jeans and muddy work boots.

“Some day, huh?” the young man said. He sat slouching, his arms on the bar, his eyes nearly closed with exhaustion.

Vernon looked at him questioningly. “Sure is.”

“So how’d you make out? Was it a heavy one?”

“I guess it was.” He paused. “But—”

“Buy you a drink?” the young man asked, looking up.

“What? Oh, sure. A Coke. Please.”

The young man leaned toward the corner of the bar. “Sharon, beer and a Coke please.”

A woman appeared from behind from the bar and set two bottles in front of them. “Thanks,” the young man said as she walked back around the corner. He turned to his bottle and bowed his head. “So?”

Vernon set his bottle down and turned. “What’s that?”

“So?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

“You were saying? About your day?”

Vernon smiled at the man and thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you one thing,” he said, staring at his drink, “I’m glad it’s almost over. The heat doesn’t usually get to me, but—”

“Yep.” The young man nodded his head in agreement.

“I couldn’t seem to—”

“Yep.”

“Couldn’t seem to—” Vernon looked up from his drink. The man, still nodding his head, sat with his eyes closed. “I guess it was just a bad day,” he continued. “But listen, thanks for the drink.”

“Mm.”

Vernon shifted in his seat. “Listen, I’m sorry—I’m a little embarrassed, really—but I can’t seem to remember—”

“Hey,” said the young man, sitting up in his seat. “Did you catch that game the other night?”

“What? No. I mean, I don’t know. Which game?”

“Shoot,” he said, picking up his beer. “I can’t remember who was playing. Good game, though.”

“Oh. Well that’s good.” Vernon inched forward in his seat and looked over at the young man. “You know, I’m sorry to have to ask this—I know I should know already—but I just don’t—”

The young man stood up quickly and took a quick sip of his beer. “Hold that thought,” he said, turning away. “I’ll be right back.”

As the man walked off and disappeared through a wooden restroom door, Vernon watched, looking for something—in the clothes, in the gait—anything that might remind him of this man, that might help him put the pieces in order. But nothing came, and, several minutes later, feeling like a failure for not remembering and like a fool for staring at a restroom door, he turned away.

He took a sip of his drink and pulled his bag up onto his lap. Pausing for a moment, trying again to place this young man, he opened the bag. Inside, underneath the purple and orange and yellow and blue envelopes, lay a full load of mail.

Forgetting the watch on his wrist, he looked up quickly, searching for a clock among the glistening bottles behind the bar. “Hey,” he called, standing up. “Is that clock right? Excuse me, is that clock right?” The room was silent.

As he swung his bag up onto his shoulder, its weight pulled him off balance and he fell awkwardly against the bar. Steadying himself, both hands on the counter, he turned toward the restroom. “Hello? Hey, look, I have to get going.” He started forward but caught himself; there was no time. “Listen, thanks for—I’ll be back, all right? I’ll finish up and come back.”

He bumped clumsily into chairs and tables as he made his way to the front of the bar. Stopping short of the door, he turned to look at the image in a mirror hanging on the wall to his left: hair matted oddly to his head, a ripped shirttail hanging at his side, a fresh pool of blood at his knee.

He took hold of the door handle and closed his eyes. His scalp burned; his arms and legs shivered. He took a deep, weary breath and let out a long, heavy sigh, and, as his bag slipped over his shoulder and down his arm, he pushed the door open and stepped into a wall of heat.

CHAPTER FOUR

UNNAMED

“Did you—?”

Paul leaned forward, his shoulders pressing up against his thumbs, and gave the road a hard stare before flicking his eyes up at the mirror. Zenny’s hands were flitting through the plastic bags that covered the backseat. Next to her, strapped into her car seat, lay their sleeping three-month old daughter. Paul dropped his eyes back to the road and took a deep breath. He took another, deeper drag, and blew half of it out through his nostrils. “Did I what?”

“Did you—did you remember the baby wipes?”

Paul let out the rest of the air in his chest and sank back in his seat. “No, I didn’t.” Zenny stopped her rustling and the car fell silent. “I’ll go back later,” Paul said as he eased the big Oldsmobile around the corner and up toward their house on Condor Avenue, the tires crunching the packed snow of the intersection as they went. “Okay?”

“I’ll go.”

“I said I’d go back to the store. I’m sorry. It’s just that I didn’t know we were out of baby wipes. Let’s just get the groceries put away and I’ll go back and get them. I’ll be back in a half hour. All right?”

Zenny paused for a moment before answering. “I’ll go.”

Paul twisted his hands on the steering wheel, his palms sliding through sweat. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t get the wipes. Really, I am. I’ll go back and get them and it’s all fixed.”

“Sure,” she said, her eyes meeting his in the mirror. “Fixed.”

Paul pulled the car into the driveway, lifted the gear shift into park, and edged back from the steering wheel. What was it now? he wondered nervously. He clicked his seatbelt off and slid out of the car slowly, then rounded the front of the car, walked up the short flight of steps, and propped the storm door open. With his head down and his eyes fixed on the ground, he crossed back to the car, opened the rear door, and reached for baby’s seatbelt.

“I’ve got it,” Zenny said, pushing his hands away.

Paul clenched his teeth. “Zenny,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady, optimistic, as he bent down and began picking up grocery bags, “I’ll go back, okay? No big deal. Really, I *am* sorry.”

Zenny pushed her hands down inside the pockets of her jacket and turned to look out her window and down the empty street.

“Listen, why don’t we just talk about this? I mean,” he said, forcing a small smile to his lips, “no big deal, right? It’s just baby wipes?”

Zenny continued staring out the window. “Right.”

“Seriously, though,” Paul said, “why don’t we talk?”

But there would be no conversation now. “Paul,” she said, her voice flat and cold, “go away.”

Paul turned away from the car, walked into the kitchen, and set the bags on the floor. Two trips later the groceries were all inside the house and Paul stepped back out and slammed the car door shut, remembering his sleeping daughter the moment after the

thin winter air had swallowed the loud clunk of metal on metal. With a guilty sigh he turned and went back to the kitchen, carefully closing the doors behind him as he stepped inside.

When he'd finished putting the groceries away, Paul leaned back against the counter, relieved. He'd slip past her when she brought the baby in, he thought, get out to the car, and take his time at the store. By the time he got back she'd have come around and realized how silly all this was. She wouldn't apologize—she never did—but she'd know she was wrong. He *was* sorry he didn't get the damn wipes. He was sorry he didn't know they were out. Still, it was hardly worth getting upset over—

Paul looked out the kitchen window and into the driveway. Zenny sat just as she was when he left her—staring through her window. The baby, still strapped into the car seat, kicked her feet a little, waking up.

She did this sometimes. Zenny. She would just sit, motionless, for long stretches—hours sometimes—fixed in anger, fixed on angering. He knew to leave her alone when she did: his soothing words and comforting hands pushed her further away, deeper into herself. Best to let her come around on her own.

He never understood where it came from, this quiet rage. He'd seen it a handful of times in their year together, just infrequently enough that most of the time he could forget it was part of her, tuck it out of sight like the stain at the belt line of the favorite shirt that he refused to stop wearing because it was such a great shirt if he didn't look at it. When he'd reached out to her at these times, she'd glared at him with a cold acidity

that burned through him and left him no where and knowing nothing. No, today was a day to give her space.

Paul put his hat back on and stepped out into the cold. Back at the car, he opened the rear door and unbuckled the car seat, keeping his eyes focused on his daughter. He zipped her tiny parka up and slipped his hands under the heavily padded little arms.

“I said I had her.” Zenny’s short, dark hair seemed to bristle on her head; and, still, she had not moved.

“I know you did,” Paul said. “I’m just helping. It’s getting cold in here, and I just want to get her inside.”

“So, you’re helping?” Turning fast, Zenny knocked his hands away from the child with a hard thrust of her forearm. “I didn’t ask for help.”

Paul let out a slow, quiet sigh and, with his eyes still fixed on his daughter, settled into the empty seat and pulled the car door shut. Keeping his right arm braced firmly against the door, he lifted his clenched left fist off his lap and stroked the child’s eyebrows with his thumb, bringing his palm to a rest against the warm red cheek.

“Zenny, let’s talk about this.”

“No.”

“Really, Zenny, let’s talk. Just a little. I’m sorry about the wipes.”

“Really, Paul,” she said, mimicking his earnestness, “no.”

“Fine,” he said softly, “then just let me take the baby inside so you can be alone.”

“No.”

“We don’t have to talk, that’s fine,” Paul said, his voice growing firm. “But holing up in the car while the baby freezes to death isn’t going to fix anything.”

“Isn’t it?”

“What?”

“You don’t even know what’s wrong, do you?” she asked, turning toward him. “You say, ‘let’s talk,’ and you have no idea what to talk *about*. Tell me, Paul, what *is* wrong? Can you tell me that, Paul?”

“I forgot the baby wipes—I know you’re angry about that, and I’m sorry. Other than that, I don’t know. But I’m trying to understand,” he said, looking up at her. “If you’d just talk to me—”

Zenny slapped Paul’s hand away from the car seat and lifted her daughter to her chest, then pulled the handle of her door and started out of the car. “You’re an idiot,” she said with a cool glance over her shoulder. In a moment she was inside the house and Paul was alone in the backseat, watching the puffs of his breath in the cold air.

It was at a party just last January that Paul met Zenny. He was making his way back from the keg, alternately nodding at the familiar faces and looking away from the unfamiliar ones, when he saw her standing alone in the spot he’d left just moments before. She looked as out of place in the room as he felt in it. It wasn’t just her clothes, though she was certainly the only person in the room wearing long leather boots—a sort of odd, brown cowboy boot; the only person wearing tan denim jeans, which hugged her legs just right; the only person in this crowd of young professionals with a scarf in her

hair or her shirt untucked. More than anything she wore, it was her eyes that set her off against the room's dull backdrop of flaccid cheeks, tightly cropped hair, and muted tones of business attire: thick, sticky brown eyes with a trace of amber and a glint of judgment in them. It took Paul several minutes and the better part of the contents of his plastic cup to gather enough courage for a timid greeting and a few polite questions. And after a few minutes of talking brought to them the pleasant and mutual revelation that they would both rather be somewhere else, Zenny suggested that they go for a walk.

She was staying with a friend who lived in the same apartment complex as his coworkers—the ones who were throwing this party. Just a few days before, she had returned from a year of traveling abroad—the boots were a souvenir from Australia, the purple scarf from India—and her plan, she told him, was to save up enough money to fund another, longer trip in a year's time. "I can't really explain why," she said matter-of-factly, "but I love it. I love the feeling of doing what I want when I want. I figure things out, I make my own way. Does that make any sense?"

And Paul assured her that it did. After all, how different was it from his own desire for independence? She pursued hers in a way he hadn't—a way that excited him—but, even so, wasn't the goal the same?

When their legs got tired after two hours of walking, Paul showed her to his Oldsmobile and took her for a ride around town. It was during their drive that he learned all he needed to know about Zenny. He learned a bit about her past—grew up here, the third of four children, close to her parents—and that there were parts of her that were off limits.

“Have you been seeing anyone recently?” he asked.

“Nope. Just traveling.”

“What about before your trip?”

“I was with someone before I left,” she said, her voice becoming almost a whisper, “but it ended.”

“Oh,” Paul said, his hands suddenly damp. “Do you mind if I ask what happened?”

“Yes,” she replied flatly, turning her head away. “I do.”

He learned that she was capable of an infectious, spontaneous excitement that he had never before encountered.

“Look! A *construction* site! Slow down. Let’s see if there’s any wet cement”

“What? Why?”

“There is! What do you mean, ‘why’? Let’s get out. Isn’t that funny? Wet cement in January? In Buffalo?” She broke a small frozen branch off a nearby tree and scratched her name, quickly and boldly, across a section of new sidewalk. “You see? Isn’t that great?”

And, by listening to the stories she told him, he came to realize that she was all he wanted. “I was here before. One night a couple of years ago—I was out for a walk. And you see those woods there? Well, this deer comes out and sort of trots up to the road real clumsy and slow, and a car comes by, and the driver’s not watching the road, and he smacks into the poor thing and spins it off onto the shoulder. And you know what the driver does? He slows down, but only for a second, and then he just hits the gas and

disappears around the corner. The deer was dead—but, you know, he *could*'ve been alive—because of him, and he just runs off. It was awful,” she said, tears running down her face. “People—they don't look, they don't listen. They just don't care, you know?”

Paul looked at her, not understanding how anyone could be so moved by a dead deer and exhilarated and weakened by his own incomprehension. He pulled the car over and slid up next to her and cried against her shoulder, holding her close to him and hoping, more than anything, never to have to let go.

Within a week they were spending every night together; within three months Zenny was pregnant, and soon after that Paul convinced her to move in with him. And a little more than a year after crying into a stranger's shoulder and not understanding why, Paul walked back into his house carrying a tub of baby wipes in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other and wondering how he could fix something if he didn't know how it was broken.

A few hours later Paul found himself alone in the living room, shuffling in circles around the coffee table, his ears hot and red and his pulse throbbing in his throat. As he wound around the table his eyes flitted from the floor to the closed bedroom door to the half-empty tumbler in his hand, his thoughts crashing back and forth between anger and disbelief.

“I have nothing to say to you, Paul.” Nothing? How can you have nothing to say? How is that possible? You've locked yourself up in the baby's room, the poor girl

screaming and crying, and you've got nothing to say? "No, I won't let you take the baby." Yes, you *will*. Open the *door*.

After nearly two hours of shouting through the bedroom door, the light of late afternoon having receded until he sat in a living room lost in shadows, Paul admitted to himself that he was losing. For the most part, Zenny was ignoring him; at best, she answered his questions, then pleas, then commands, with an even, monosyllabic reply.

She had to come out, he thought to himself. *Zenny*. What kind of a name was that? It was a stupid name. And she had to come out. He would wait here, let her cool down a bit. The baby would stop screaming and Zenny would be calm and she would come out—for food or something—and he would be right here, waiting.

And that became his plan. He would wait in the living room, watching the bedroom door and sipping his vodka to keep his anger fresh until she emerged, and then he'd make her talk to him.

Look, Zenny, he practiced in his head, imagining his voice firm, reasonable, I think I know what this is about. You never planned any of this, right? I never planned on a child either. And I know there are lots of things you want to do. I have dreams too, you know? But just because we didn't plan this doesn't mean we can't make it work. You can still do the things you want to do, still travel and everything else. The important thing is that we love each other. Sure, it's going to be hard, but if we love each other, we'll be just fine.

Firm and reasonable, he thought, that was the key. He took a sip of his drink and sat down in the armchair, his eyes fixed on the doorway across the room. Taking

another, longer sip of his drink, he settled back in his chair and allowed a smile to lift the left corner of his mouth. This'll all be fine, he thought as a wave of darkness swept over him.

The sound of the toilet flushing woke Paul two hours later, at eleven o'clock. He pulled his stiff neck and heavy head up off the back of the chair and sat motionless for a moment, then struggled to his feet and with soft, awkward steps made his way to the open bedroom. Looking in, he saw, by the bit of street light that seeped in through the opening in the curtains, that the baby lay sleeping in her crib and that the floor of the room was covered with messy piles of Zenny's magazines and notebooks. He stepped back from the doorway and gently pulled the door closed.

Zenny had left the bathroom and was in the kitchen looking through cupboards now. She slammed the cupboard doors as she went, but the slamming seemed calm, or at least careless, rather than angry. Gathering confidence from the soft banging, Paul stepped into the kitchen, leaned against the refrigerator, and furrowed his brow to make it look stern.

"Zenny? Look, Zenny, I've been thinking about all this. I know this isn't what you planned. I know that. It's not what I planned either. But we can make this work, you know?" Zenny, showing no sign of having heard, continued opening and closing cupboards. "Zenny?"

"Go away."

"Zenny, please—"

“Go away.”

“Listen—” but before he could continue his speech Zenny spun around and lunged at him, beating at his arms and chest with her hands.

“No, *no*, I won’t listen. Make it work? Make it work? How, Paul? How’s it going to work?”

Paul stepped back, shocked and scared, and pulled a chair away from the table and between them, hoping it would distract her as well as slow her assault. “Zenny, listen, I know—”

“Shut *up*, shut *up*,” she screamed, kicking at the chair with her heels. “Shut *up*, Paul. What do you know? What? Do you know that my life is over now, Paul? Over. Because of you and that little thing in there.”

“Over? Come on, it’s just—”

“Over, over, over. You’ve got what you want. You’ve got your job and your little family and an eighteen-year excuse to avoid all the people you were too chicken shit to avoid before. What about what *I* want, Paul? When do I get that? It’s all going to be fine? Bullshit. It’s all bullshit.”

“Zenny, just sit down and talk to me about—”

“Talk. All you want to do is talk. Talk to me about what *I* want, Paul. When do I do what I want if I’ve got that little thing hanging off me every hour of every day? Can you tell me that, Paul? And how do we save anything—*anything*—on *your* salary? As a *bank* teller. We pay the bills, buy the food, get all the garbage that little thing needs, and what’s left? What’s left, Paul? I’ll tell you what’s left: nothing. Not a thing.”

“Would you listen to yourself? And would you please stop calling our daughter a ‘thing’?”

Zenny stopped her kicking and stepped back, her eyes glassy and aimed at Paul’s chest. Her breathing came in quick, open-mouthed pants. “Yes.” She turned her head toward the baby’s bedroom. Her voice was lower, controlled now. “You know—yes.”

Paul closed his eyes and took in a deep, relieved breath. “Okay. Zenny, listen. We can do this you know. I *know* it won’t be easy, but I love you. That’s what matters. I know we can make—”

When he opened his eyes, the kitchen was empty. “Zenny?” He jumped into the living room and toward the open door of the baby’s bedroom. Standing in the doorway, he reached in and flipped the light switch on. Zenny hovered over the crib, her hands clutching its wooden bars. She glanced up at him with the same glassy eyes and a faint smile on her lips.

“You’re right,” she said. “It’s not a thing.”

If Paul could be happy about anything, it was that, despite his incomprehension and disbelief, he had moved fast. When she reached down into the crib, he started across the room; when she lifted the baby up by the legs, he had a hand on Zenny’s shoulder; and by the time she’d begun to swing the tiny body toward the wall—the lowest star of the mobile grazing the center of the girl’s forehead along the way—he’d grabbed his daughter’s waist and wrestled her away and, with an elbow to the chin, had thrown Zenny to the floor. Within minutes he’d moved the safety seat to the front of the car, strapped his daughter in, and headed toward his father’s house across town.

Consumed with concern for his daughter and a desire to get away from his home, Paul had barely noticed when Zenny crawled into the backseat, broken and defeated.

“She’s sleeping now, Paul.”

From his seat at the kitchen table, Paul watched as his father pulled the bedroom door closed and stepped toward where he was sitting. The room was warm and, except for the soft ticking of the clock on the wall, quiet. “Is she—is she going to be—?”

“She’s going to be just fine. It’s just a scratch. And she’s an Elliott, right? Elliotts always turn out all right.”

Paul let out a heavy sigh. “Thank you, Dad. I—” but he couldn’t hold back his tears any longer. He lifted his arms from his lap and onto the table, dropped his head, and sobbed into the nylon sleeve of his jacket.

“It’s okay,” his father said, settling into one of the chairs. He reached out and squeezed Paul’s shoulder. “She’s going to be just fine. Everything’s fine.”

Paul felt his father’s arm, warm and strong, across his back. When he caught his breath, he leaned into the arm and tried to talk away his tears. He was alone that night, he said, and in a way it was true, although he did not share that truth with his father. He had certainly felt alone as he drove across town, his daughter silent in the car seat beside him; alone as he dabbed the cut on the child’s forehead and wiped his own sweaty temples with a moist kitchen towel; alone as he kneaded his cheeks with his knuckles to restore some of the color before banging, banging, banging on his father’s front door. Through

all of it, and probably now still, Zenny lay crumpled on the backseat of the Oldsmobile, crying, and Paul felt more alone than he'd ever felt before.

“Here, have some of this,” his father said, setting a mug of hot tea on the table. “It'll help calm you down.”

Paul took a few quick sips and swished the hot liquid around his mouth before swallowing, then took another, longer drink. When he finished, he leaned forward on his elbows, both hands wrapped around his cup, and looked up.

“Good,” his father said, putting his hand back on Paul's shoulder. “Now, why don't you tell me what happened?”

Thirty minutes later, after hugging his father and looking in to check on the baby, Paul stepped out through the front door and took a deep breath of the brisk night air. He gazed out toward his car, which he'd left parked in the street, and sighed.

“Zenny's out of town, visiting a friend,” he'd said, and his father seemed to believe that along with the rest of the story he told: that he, Paul, caring father though he was, was lost without the mother of his child and that now he was stunned by his own ineptitude.

He'd put the baby to bed, he said, and gone to sleep on the sofa, “which is right in the next room, remember?—so I could hear if she started crying.” And she had started crying, at about eleven. “I hurried in, still half-asleep, and I picked her up and—I was going to take her out to sit with me in the living room, you know?—and I turned around—there's that mobile, the one with the little wooden moon and stars—the one I had when I was a baby—I just put it up the other day and I must've hung it too low, and .

..” Paul paused to wipe the tears from his eyes. “I’m such an idiot. The poor little girl. I’m such an idiot.”

Paul took another, deeper breath and started out toward the street. There was a mobile, and he had hung it a bit too low, and he did feel like an idiot. And he was, in fact, lost and alone.

Now, though, his daughter was inside his father’s home, sleeping in his childhood bedroom, safe, and Paul could think. Breathe—and think.

He climbed into the backseat of the car and closed the door behind him. The air inside was warm and moist—he’d left the car running when he pulled up in front of his father’s house—and it surprised him that he could no longer see the puffs of his breath; he tried a couple of times, breathing out heavily, before giving up.

Paul glanced down at Zenny and then out his window at the neighborhood he’d grown up in. He closed his eyes and tried to put his mind in order, but his thoughts were clumsy, numb, and he gave up and looked back out at the dark, quiet houses that lined the street. He sat that way for a long while—breathing and watching.

Almost without thinking, he lifted his hand off his lap and placed it on the quivering body beside him. “Zenny,” he said, turning toward her, “Zenny, listen,—”

CHAPTER FIVE

MAN, IN BOX

Good morning, Joe. It's a February Sunday here in Rochester: the sky is gray and close, the air is breezy and cold, and a thin blanket of snow lies on the lawns and sidewalks and lines the branches of the trees.

We haven't spoken in a while. I'm sorry; I never wanted that. I really didn't. I know it'll be hard—it is hard for me—but I would like to talk now. I want to tell you about what's been going on. I don't know if you understand, but I think I need to tell you. It's a good day for listening, isn't it? Sunday was always a good day for that—lying in bed late and talking, sharing the paper over brunch, catching up on the days we hadn't had a chance to talk about before. I want to try that now. Please, just listen for a while.

I moved three Saturdays ago; I own this place. That's right, I bought a house. Right now I'm trying to get the living room ready for tonight. My sisters are coming for dinner—Kathy *and* Kim—and I still have a lot to do.

It all happened quickly. One day back in December I was sitting in our old kitchen listening to Tammy from the apartment across the hall and trying very hard to be patient, and the next day I was sifting through the real estate ads in the paper. This wasn't the first place I looked at, but I liked it enough that it was the last. It needs some work, unpacking aside, but I like it. It'll be nice when I get it fixed up. I've got to get the paper off the walls in the kitchen, and the carpets all need to go. The floors are hardwood. They're a bit rough now, but they'll look great once I finish them. I really

want to open this living room up, too. It feels small, and it's a little dark. In fact, I'm going to open the blinds right now.

It was time to get out of that apartment; you and I both thought it was too small. It made sense to buy a place, too: my mortgage payment here is lower than rent was there. We always liked this neighborhood, near Park Avenue. I thought about that when I started looking for a place. Kathy helped me find this one. She was great: she and her husband, you remember, sold their place down here a few years back, and she knew the market—she made sure I got a good price. And she agreed that you would like the house; we talked about it, and she agreed.

The neighborhood's quiet. I know it's February, and a cold February at that, but if you look out the window here you don't see a lot going on—the occasional car driving by, maybe the young couple across the street walking their dogs. I like the quiet. I got tired of all the company at the other place. The Hendersons, the old couple from next door, were over every Wednesday night and Sunday morning—apparently they had a schedule. Mary always had a pie or cookies or some other dessert she'd just pulled out of the oven, and Max brought two beers every time, one for me and one for him. And Tammy came by a lot; she stayed a lot longer, too. “Hello, Ray,” she'd say, settling into my armchair—this armchair here—and she'd ask me questions and answer them herself for a while. “So, how are you? You look good. You look like you're feeling good—better, you know? I'm glad for that, Ray. I have to say that I'm really glad you're—good.”

She meant well. They all did. But most of the time I wanted the kind of quiet I have here. Sometimes you need quiet, don't you think?

I've got about a dozen things to do for tonight. I want the room to be just right. I can't get the whole house ready—that's going to take months—but I want this room to be right. I don't know what to expect from Kim. I've got a letter from her here on the mantle. I read it once, two weeks ago on the day it came. I haven't read it since—haven't touched it—and I've tried not to think about it. I just want to be ready for tonight. I want to get these walls painted and the boxes out of sight and the lasagna—I'm trying my mom's recipe—finished before they get here at six.

If you don't mind, Joe, I'm going to paint while I talk. It's so dark in here. It's almost ten, and you can hardly see. I'm sure it could be nice and cozy with a fire going—these wine-colored walls probably feel warm—but I've got to get the flue cleaned before I use the fireplace. And I do think the room would be better if it were brighter. That might open it up some, too. I picked up a can of paint from Sherwin Williams yesterday, a gallon of "hush white," and if I remember right, I've got a tray and a paint roller in one of these boxes. I'll just dig them out—yep, right here on top. Good: I can talk and paint.

I don't know why, Joe, but everyone was really happy when I decided to get this place. When the Hendersons found out, Mary baked a cake and Max bought a bottle of sparkling wine. They asked me over to their place, and we talked and laughed, and Max smiled and smiled and patted me on the back. "I'm proud of you, Ray," he kept saying, "I really am. You're moving—up and on." Tammy was almost speechless; she hugged

me and, with a tear in her eye, said she was “so, so happy” for me. And Kathy was more excited than anyone. You knew that she and I had always been close. Well, I think she’s called me every day since I told her I wanted to move. No, now that I think about it, she was calling that much before. But she has been excited.

As for Kim, it’s been a long time since I spoke with her. Kathy tells me that she’s happy for me; she says as much herself in that letter, too. I suppose that’s true; I don’t know why she’d make it up. Still, it’s been a long time.

But I don’t see why everyone’s so excited. Moving, and especially moving into your own house, is a lot of work. I’ve been busy—overwhelmed, really—for weeks now. I think it’s been a bit much for me. That’s part of the reason I wanted to talk to you: I thought it might help me get things lined up again.

There—that looks all right. This section of the wall really picks up the light. Nope, that’s not bad at all. Let’s see, it’s not quite eleven. I’ll bet I can finish the room—at least the first coat—by two. That’ll be good; I should have plenty of time to clean and get to the supermarket to shop for dinner.

I’m going to grab a drink, and then I’ll keep going with this. Hang on; I’ll be right back.

I remember how much you used to hate painting—how much you used to hate all maintenance work. I wonder if part of the reason that we never got around to buying a place was that you didn’t want the work that came with owning a house. That probably

wasn't it, though. I would have painted and mowed the lawn; I don't mind those things. I'm sure you knew that.

There: one wall done. That's not bad.

Work hasn't been good, Joe—steady, but not good. I was over at the old Kodak Elmgrove for a long time—from the last time I saw you, back in August, right up until they moved us last week. It was never great there; it was bad toward the end.

People have started to get to me. Most of the guys, especially the ones I've worked with for a while, leave me alone. They're nice enough in small doses. You remember; you met some of them. They tease me, but it's more to include than to hurt. But that's gotten to be too much. I know it was, and is, me. I've felt—I don't know what I've felt. It comes out as anger, but I don't think I'm not angry, at least not about anything in particular or with anyone in particular. Or maybe I am. I don't know.

You know me, Joe: I don't fight; I don't even argue. Remember how angry that used to make you? Of course you do. Do you remember the time you'd ironed your clothes and laid them out, real neat and tidy, for your interview at the bank? You had everything ready before dinner the night before, your shirt and pants and tie on the back of a chair at the kitchen table, and I spilled my beer all over it? You were *furious*. You shouted, and I apologized; you shouted at me for apologizing, and I apologized for apologizing; that made you even angrier. Eventually you just gave up and told me that everything was all right. That's me, Joe: calm, even-tempered.

But I haven't been me lately. And I haven't been apologizing for it.

#

I took a long weekend for the move—Friday through Monday—and when I came back the guys in my crew took me out for dinner after work on the next Wednesday; they called it my “housewarming gift.” When they asked me to go, I was happy but guarded: they’ve been pretty nice since the end of last summer, but . . . well, you know. In any case, I said ‘yes,’ and we went to Billy’s, which isn’t too far from Elmgrove, for burgers and a couple of drinks. There we were, sitting around after we finished eating, and everybody got really quiet all of a sudden. I looked up and saw one of the guys, Jake, standing at the bar and lighting candles. I’ve never had much to do with Jake one way or another, but when he turned and started back toward the table, a handful of candles burning on this big white cake, I felt a little choked up; I could actually feel tears coming into my eyes.

Jake walked up beside me and stopped; the candlelight flickered across his face. “Want you to know, Ray,” he said, a soft smile crossing his lips, “that we wish you the best in the new place.” And he set the cake down.

“Thanks, Jake,” I said. I rubbed my eyes quickly and stood up and shook his hand.

“Fairy tale come true, hey, Ray?” He reached out with his left hand and nudged my shoulder.

“What’s that?”

“I said, your *fairy tale*’s come true,” he said. The smile on his face turned sly. He nudged my shoulder again, then pulled me half a step closer and patted me on the back.

I glanced down at the cake for a moment, read the neatly written “Congratulations, Ray,” and then let go of his hand and picked up my beer. I looked around the table at the smiling faces, listened to the muffled laughter, then glanced back up at him—looked right in his eyes. “You know what, Jake,” I said, taking a long sip from my glass and setting it back down on the table, “you can go fuck yourself.” And without waiting for his or anyone else’s reaction, I stepped around him and walked out of the bar.

Jake came up to me during a smoke break the next morning. “Look, Ray,” he said tentatively, “I didn’t mean anything yesterday, you know?” He scuffed his right shoe a few times and spit on the pavement between us.

I took a long drag on my cigarette and let the smoke out slowly. I fixed my eyes on his small puddle of spittle, and I nodded slowly.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” he went on. “You know, I was joking—it was just a little joke.”

“All right,” I said, still facing away from him.

“Good,” he said. He spit again, this time between his own feet, and then looked up at me. “You sure?”

Would you look at that: it’s almost two o’clock. I’m really going to have to step on it here.

Elmgrove was a big place—a big cement box with pipes, wires, and not much else—and it was a big job. We had a couple dozen of our guys there, and there were just

as many electricians. I don't know what it was about those guys—the electricians, that is—but they really got to me. They were never working. Everywhere you went, there were a handful of them sitting around, talking to each other. And sometimes you heard them mumbling as you walked past. I couldn't be sure, but it sounded as though they were talking about me. I thought I heard an edge in it, you know?

Two Thursdays ago, about a week and a half after I moved, it got bad. My partner for most of the six months I was out there was Casey, a young guy who worked hard and didn't talk much. That morning we had to hang a half-ton steel pipe over what's apparently going to be a doctor's office. When we were walking to the site, we passed this brand new band saw that looked like it'd been run over with a forklift: it was a mess of crushed metal. Casey said something about it, that somebody was going to be pissed, and I agreed and we forgot about it and went to work on the pipe.

We got the thing hung, and let me tell you, it wasn't easy. I said the pipe was half a ton because it really was: it weighted just over eleven hundred pounds. When we finished Casey needed the bathroom, so he went off and I started picking up. I was tired—I could barely lift my hands over my waist—and I was so sweaty that my shirt felt like it was pasted to my back with cold glue. All I wanted was to lie down in a corner and sleep.

I dropped a couple of wrenches into my toolbox and tossed some scraps in the trash can nearby, and then I stopped for a moment. I thought of you then, Joe—sort of pictured you standing there, watching. It probably sounds strange that I remember that. I

think it stuck with me because it was then, as I stood over the trash can, my head bowed slightly, that two of the electricians I'd seen a lot at Elmgrove came around the corner.

"Hey, you," the shorter one said. He was middle-aged and stocky, and his voice was angry.

I glanced at him for a moment and went back to cleaning up.

"Hey." He walked right up to me, so close that I could see the bald spot on the back of his head. "I'm talking to you," he said. "You broke my band saw."

I looked at him and at the tall guy with him, and then I shook my head. "It was like that when I got here," I said to the first one. And I leaned down and closed my toolbox.

"It was him, Pat," the tall one said. He was younger, probably about my age, and he was big: he had about five inches and fifty pounds on me. And there was something mean about the way he looked at me; you could see it in his lips and in his eyes.

"Look," I said to the shorter one, "it was all smashed up when I got here. It looks like somebody ran over it with a fork. Why don't you talk to the fork drivers?" I picked up my toolbox and started walking away.

"It was him, Pat," the younger one said again. "Him and that big pipe of his." He started to follow me, keeping a few feet behind.

"You come back here," Pat said. "What's your name?"

I kept walking and didn't look back.

“I saw him,” the younger one said to my back. “Him and that other asshole— asshole that told me this one’s a queer. An asshole and a queer: a perfect couple, hey, Pat?”

I can take a lot, Joe; I could before, anyway. I could take a shot like that and walk away and forget about it most times. But I couldn’t take that one. I couldn’t take that meanness. Not then.

I let go of my toolbox, and as it hit the floor I planted my left foot on his right and drove my fists into his chest. Before he could think to raise his arms, I had his other foot locked down and was in too close for him to do much of anything. He strained and struggled, trying to grab my back, but he was so off balance that he couldn’t get a grip on me. I jabbed hard at his chest a few times then bent my head into his ribs and took a good hard shot at his gut, and he toppled to the floor and I fell down hard on him, my left knee driving into his thigh, my right landing on his stomach.

And that was it. Pat shoved me hard before I could take another swing, and I got to my feet, picked up my toolbox, and walked away without looking back. If they said anything to me, I didn’t hear it. I walked and walked across what felt like miles of empty factory. When I got outside, I saw a couple of the guys in my crew. I bummed a cigarette off of one of them and smoked it, fast and quiet, then went and sat in the car.

I didn’t see the two of them, or Casey, after lunch, and I asked to move to another area of the plant the next day. I didn’t tell anyone at work about what happened, and I’m guessing the electricians didn’t either because no one said anything to me.

I wanted to tell you about it, Joe. I told Kathy at dinner last Sunday. She listened carefully, and I could see her trying to understand and struggling not to let on that she was worried. I'm guessing she spoke with Kim later that same night because the letter came on Tuesday; she must have had it in the Monday's mail. She didn't mention the fight, but she did say she's concerned about me. *Concerned*. Well, maybe she is.

I'm not going to get this room painted by two. I hadn't realized how long this back wall was; it's one-thirty and I'm just now finished with it. I need a break. Actually, I think I'll make that a nap. I'm pretty tired, Joe. I'll talk to you later, if that's all right.

Joe, why am I doing this?

It's three-thirty. Even if I finished in time to clean and do the shopping and the cooking, we wouldn't be able to use the room: it's going to smell of paint for days. I don't know why I didn't think of that.

Well, I've started; I might as well finish.

This week went fast. Management split us up and sent us to different places on Monday. I wound up in Macedon, putting in the pipes at a new Wal-Mart that's going up out there. I've been on my own most of the time. It's not great, but it's better. Monday and Tuesday, and I guess Friday, were fine; work was slow, and I got home early and did some things here—unpacking mostly. Wednesday and Thursday—well, they weren't so good.

I called in sick both days. And that got me into more trouble than I had expected. My supervisor didn't mind at all. Other than the week back in August, and a few days

since then, I haven't missed work. No, he was fine with it. It was Kathy, and then Kim, who had a problem with it.

It shouldn't have been a big deal. You see, I drank a little too much on Tuesday night. I came home, got the mail, and opened a beer. You know that's nothing new: I have a drink or two when I get home, maybe another with dinner. Only Tuesday I felt like having a few more. So I did. That's all. I started unpacking—those boxes in the corner are what's left; there used to be more—and I drank while I worked and I worked late and I woke up feeling lousy. It happens, you know? I probably do it once or twice a week. The only difference was that this time Kathy found out.

She had come down on her lunch break to do some shopping at a boutique on Park Avenue, and she saw my car in the driveway when she drove past the house. Thinking I was home for lunch, she stopped in.

I was in the bathroom, my right temple pressed to the cold floor tiles, when she walked in.

"My god, Ray," she said when she found me. She knelt down and looked at me with worried eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," I said, making my voice sound light. "I'll be out soon."

It was a few minutes before I could get to my feet. When I did, I walked out and found her in the living room, looking at the mess of papers and bottles and half-unpacked boxes. I sat in my chair, and she handed me the glass of water she was holding. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine," I said, forcing a smile to my lips. "Just a little too much to drink."

“I see that,” she said, turning toward the coffee table beside her. She reached down and lifted up an empty bottle and picked up Kim’s letter. “You got it then.”

“Mm.”

She unfolded the letter and held it by the corner with the thumb and index finger of her right hand. “Why’s it wet?”

“Hm?”

“Why’s it wet?”

“Oh,” I said, “I spilled. It was an accident.”

She laid the letter flat on the mantle. “She does want to see you, you know. She always asks about you.”

I glanced up at her, then closed my eyes and drew my arms up across my chest and tilted my head so that my right ear rested on my shoulder. I could feel her standing there, watching me, but I didn’t say anything. I kept my eyes closed and concentrated on not moving.

When I looked up, the bottles were gone and so was Kathy. I stood up, checked the clock in the kitchen—it was just after one—and then went to my bedroom, lay down, and slept through the afternoon.

And you know what’s funny, Joe? I woke up at six, grabbed a beer and a box, and did the same thing again. This tall box in the corner here? A lot of your things are inside it. I started with that one, but I didn’t get far. I would take a couple things out—a blanket and a photo album and a couple of books—and I’d wander around looking for a place for them. But I couldn’t find one—not the right one—so I’d come back, put the

things back in the box, and take a few others out. After a while I gave up on that box and tried a few others, but it was always the same. That's why they're still here in the living room, taking up space.

Kathy came by again at lunchtime the next day. She didn't say much. She picked up quietly, clearing away the bottles and sliding the boxes into the corner. When she finished, she walked over to the mantle, picked up the letter, folded it, and put it back in its envelope. "I'm bringing Kim on Sunday, Ray." She laid the envelope on the mantle and stepped over to me. "It's—it's . . . I'm bringing her," she said, and she squeezed my hand and kissed me on the forehead and left.

Done. And it's—*five-fifteen*.

It looks all right, though. It's brighter anyway. But it still feels tight in here; it's too small. I'll bet I could open it right up if I knocked out that back wall. That would help a lot.

I'm nervous about tonight, Joe. Nothing is going to be ready. My house is a mess, my living room stinks from the paint, and I won't have a meal for the dinner I'm hosting.

I'm going to have to wrap this up before they get here—I have to figure something out for dinner. But there's one last thing before I go—before I let you go. It's the letter: I'd like to read it to you. It's not long, but I'd like you to hear it.

Ray,

I don't know where to start. I have said and done things that I wish I could take back. I know that I was not fair to you, and I know that I hurt you. I am very, very sorry. .

I miss you, and I am concerned about you. It has been too long. I miss you and I want to see you again if you'll let me.

Know that no matter what, I have always thought about you.

Love,

Kim

I don't know what to make of it. Does it sound sincere to you? I can't tell if it is.

She didn't call after your accident, Joe. And she never came later—not her, not her husband, not her kids. This little letter here is the first contact I've had with her since the first and last time she saw you.

It's been four years. That's a long time, isn't it? I think it's a long time.

Well, I guess that's all I can say for now. I'm glad I talked to you, Joe. It wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be—hard, but not too hard. I'd like to do it again if you don't mind. Maybe it's good for us—for me.

Anyway, I'm going to put a few things away before they get here.