



The Possibilities for the Social Novel in a Contemporary Context

A dissertation in two volumes

Volume 1 – She Wore Pants: A Novel
Volume 2 – Realism in a Postmodern World:
Exegesis

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Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will in the future be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide.

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Abstract

‘The Possibilities for the Social Novel in a Contemporary Context’ consists of two volumes. The first is a novel, ‘She Wore Pants’, and the second is a dissertation titled ‘Realism in a Postmodern World.’ Together, these volumes constitute my research on the genre of the social novel within the context of contemporary American fiction, arguing that a return to early twentieth-century realism will not result in a literature that is culturally relevant at this point in time.

This inquiry began with a decision to write a novel based on the 2008 global financial crisis, featuring a female financier-protagonist who succeeds on male-dominated Wall Street. How might one write such a novel today? Contemporary literary fiction contains few examples of the kind of social realism that characterised early twentieth-century fiction. In addition, I discovered through the writing process and through critical research that it is difficult to write in that way now. The nature of society has changed, and along with it the nature, function, and form of fiction has changed.

In a culture awash with hyper-reality characterised by replicas of the ‘real’ made available through cultural experiences including, though not limited to, Reality TV and cable news, the internet and social media, contemporary readers and writers seek something different from literary fiction. Instead of tragic realism, the contemporary novelist exploring broad social themes produces, for the most part, a type of social comedy described by literary critic James Wood in *The Irresponsible Self* as ‘the comedy of forgiveness’ (8). Wood traces the origins of the comedy of forgiveness to Freud’s concept of the unconscious and the notion that the depth of an

individual's character can never really be known. Contemporary readers and writers accept the inherent unreliability that corresponds with this idea, and can laugh with and forgive characters who may not deserve forgiveness, because in the end they are only human and worthy of our sympathy. Moreover, comedy is inherently social; its corresponding humorous effect depends upon a shared understanding of the social rules being broken. As Freud pointed out in *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, humorous exchanges relieve emotional tension and conserve emotional energy that might otherwise be spent in anger or resentment or repression (115). Certainly our postmodern culture is not dissimilar to previous points in history in terms of its sources of social conflict based on gender, class, sexuality, religion, and economic disparity. What has changed is how we regard these conflicts and the way they are expressed in the form of the novel. Wall Street's contemporary hyper-reality has the effect of making comic the once tragic demise of greatness. We laugh and cry at its hubris.

In the novel, 'She Wore Pants', Candace Cerise Pansenosky, daughter of a shoe factory manager, rises from her humble New Jersey origins to become the unicorn of the species: a female Wall Street investment banker who has it all – wealth, looks, power – and risks everything, including prison, when she learns the unintended consequences of her financial innovations.

Shortly after being made a full partner at her firm, Candace discovers that the Livesburg Tennessee School Board invested in one of her abstract financial instruments exposed to sub-prime mortgages. The school board lost all of its money. Unable to pay its debts, teachers' salaries, or its operating expenses, the board runs out

of options. Candace cracks a scheme to save the Livesburg County School Board and, with it, herself.

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Although this work is my own, one does not write a dissertation without assistance.

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Dr Dianne Schwerdt, my co-supervisor provided objective and sober second thoughts.

Dr Yvonne Miels copy-edited the final text, catching the minor issues that are easily missed when reading one's own work. Her contribution remained limited to the terms and conditions outlined in The University of Adelaide's policy on thesis editing.

The first chapter of 'She Wore Pants' placed first in Lightship Publishing's 2012 First Chapter Contest.

She Wore Pants
A Novel

Volume 1

Part I – The Pursuit of Happiness

‘We’re drinking and we’re dancing
But there’s nothing really happening.’

– Leonard Cohen, *Closing Time*

Martin Rhys-Davies – Notes for a Treatment

Some people ask if Shylock is a hero or a villain. I don't. Neither did Candace. It depends on your point of view, what biases you bring to the question. Before I grew old for my age, my idealism steamrolled. Before cynicism replaced it, my father told me never to judge a book by its cover.

‘Think about your own cover for a minute, Martin,’ he said in between small sips of sherry, ‘do you really want people to assume that you are an empty vessel of inherited privilege? A limp product of an irrelevant aristocracy? All I’m saying is you should extend the same courtesy to others as you might wish to receive from them.’

For most of my life this philosophy allowed me to develop social capital, as it predisposed me to the kind of open-mindedness that turned me into the confidante of many people, including Candace Cerise Pansenkosky.

From our first moment together, I sensed something gorgeous about Candace, masculinity unlike any I'd ever previously known. She was tough. With a mouth like a sailor, she spat nails. And yet there was something irresistibly endearing about her, a lusty integrity and romanticism unlike any other, because she lived her own cover art. If she were a book, her cover would be made of luxurious Nappa leather, her spine

lovingly hand-sewn with the strength to survive abusive openings, her artwork painted from the finest organic inks with the ability to morph with her mercurial moods – a technology yet to be invented. She was ahead of her time, some might say out of step with reality, but she turned out all right in the end.

It was the rest of them who were rotten. Worse, some were wilfully ignorant. It took me a couple of years to piece it all together, to comprehend the senseless tragedy that happened right before Easter 2008. We were in Memphis on a family vacation where we feasted on barbecued ribs and then visited Graceland not an hour before it happened. We saw it all. Daisy and Jordan with their son, Marvel, and I witnessed something terrible that changed our futures and ended our illusions. Nothing would ever be the same again. Jordan insisted that I write it all out, everything I remembered and everything I've learned since, to build something he called a 'treatment' that we can hand over to a screenwriter. This isn't how I expected to land in the movie business, even though that's exactly what I'd set out to do before the economy collapsed. Funnily enough, I would never have met Candace had I not ventured out to California with a silly dream about making movies and distinguishing myself from my brother. Life is strange that way. You never know who you'll meet when you leave home alone.

How I Met Candy

My family consists of a fading crew of aristocrats who live modest lives on an impossible estate passed down to the eldest male Rhys-Davies since one shrewd ancestor eschewed Catholicism and sailed to Virginia with Raleigh, thus establishing both an earldom at home and a toehold in the new world. When my grandmother agreed to allow tours through the ‘public’ rooms of the house in order to finance the upkeep, my father decided it was time to give London a try and went into the bond business there. He did well enough to maintain Rhys-Davies illusions and provide a respectable continuation of the tradition of primogeniture for my older brother and me. My brother, MacPherson, a.k.a ‘Fierce,’ went into the family firm, and I eventually took my trust to California to escape something that no longer sustained me. What that something was I can’t say, a definition of being I suppose, a way of life that served others but not me. London had become confining, an imposition. It seems crazy now, but I wanted to *make* something, I wanted to make films. Trouble was, I hadn’t the foggiest clue how. In the spring of 2007, I rented a slightly dilapidated Santa Monica bungalow, circa 1925, with Arts and Crafts details and redwood floors, a few blocks from the beach, below Chautauqua Boulevard. Under a delicate mauve

canopy of jacaranda trees and the consoling proximity of the rich and beautiful, I settled in to learn about the movies from books by the likes of Robert McKee and William Goldman.

The house next door had recently been renovated; a second storey dropped on top of a '60s rambler created an imposing modern design that dwarfed my own humble abode. In time, my neighbour's house would fit in with the rest of the street, as several homes displayed demolition permits. Eventually the little yellow house with the brick-red shutters I affectionately named 'Soleado' would be the one out of place.

My cousin Daisy lived in Brentwood at the time and one afternoon, in-between sips of white wine under my jacarandas, she told me, in the whispered tones of those who like to let you know that they're in the know, that my neighbour was a secretive film producer always on the prowl for project financing – Jack Winger. I'd never heard of him and she told me I wouldn't have unless I paid attention to the final credits of his films. Famed as much for avoiding all personal publicity as for his discreet dinner parties, the Who's Who of the film industry made a competitive sport of clambering for an invitation to his table. Daisy herself had been invited to dine at Winger's table the following Saturday night along with her husband, Jordan Hiller, the independent television producer who'd made a fortune from some vampire series I'd never seen.

'Well, score one for you, my dear,' I said and sipped my own gin and tonic.

'Score one for you, too, I managed to get the invitation extended to include you.'

'Really? How? I'm nobody.'

‘You’re his new neighbour and a titled aristocrat, of course he’d want to meet you and show you some hospitality.’

‘Daisy, you and I both know that titles do not necessarily indicate positive cash flow.’

‘Jack’s an American, he has no idea about these things. He assumes that old money remains moneyed throughout the ages.’

‘Well, Darling, thanks for looking after my social calendar.’

She raised her glass and grinned at me with the same optimism she’d had when we were teenagers playing tennis at grandmother’s house, her spotless tennis dress glowing in the summer sun, and her newly-fixed teeth whiter than the dress. Daisy could always be counted upon to maintain high expectations and life always seemed to deliver what she expected. Such was the coercive power of her charm.

‘What sort of gift should I bring my host?’ I asked.

‘Organic dog treats from the Bark and Wag Bakery on Montana.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Jack has a pair of French bulldogs and you’d make a good impression if you took something special for them.’

‘Why haven’t I seen the dogs in the yard?’

‘He takes them with him to work, they’re his constant companions.’

And so it was settled. Carrying an environmentally friendly sack of dog biscuits, I’d meet up with Daisy and Jordan at eight o’clock the following Saturday night at Jack Winger’s house.

That’s how I met Candace. She stood in the foyer, a dirty martini in her hand, and studied a Harington canvas that hung on one of the biggest walls I’d ever seen.

Unlike the kinds of places in which I'd lived my life – damp old houses organised as a series of cluttered rooms with a specific purpose – Winger's house was practically door-less. Like the continental expanse and big sky discovered by the Europeans who'd moved west, it inspired optimism, gave one more than enough space to breathe.

'Martin, glad you could make it,' Winger said. I handed him the fifty-dollar bag of dog cookies, which he accepted with a genuine smile. 'How thoughtful of you, I hope Issy and Felix haven't woken you in the night. They'll bark at anything that moves in the yard before bedtime.'

'I'm sure they're wonderful dogs, I've hardly noticed them.'

'Come in, a few people are already here.'

'Any sign of my cousin?'

'It's early, they'll be along shortly.' In fact it was already nearly thirty minutes after the appointed hour. Daisy had tutored me on the finer points of being fashionably late. 'This is Candace, a friend from back east.'

In her heels, Candace stood nearly as tall as me, no easy feat for most women because I'm tall for a Brit at six foot one. She smiled and revealed perfect teeth, good milk-fed American teeth unstained by tobacco. I couldn't decide if her eyes were blue or green. Gold flecks rimmed the outer edges of her irises, like the evening sun over turquoise Fijian waters. A mane of wavy chestnut hair splayed across her shoulders and framed her heart-shaped face; its layered ends ticked her collarbones.

'Pleased to meet you.' She extended her hand.

'Martin Rhys-Davies, a pleasure Miss ...?'

'Pansenkosky, but please call me Candy. Where are you from Martin?'

'England, northwest of London originally.'

‘What fine manners you have, much more naturally refined than most Americans.’ The way she said it, with a slight dip of her gaze and a tilt of her head to one side, deceived me at first into thinking she was a typical female who relied upon flirtation.

‘Thank you. How do you know our host?’

‘Business mostly.’

‘Mostly? Is there a personal aspect to your acquaintance?’

‘We share an alma mater.’

‘And that would be?’

‘My, you are English,’ she smiled. ‘Wharton, MBA class of ’92. You?’

‘London School of Economics 1999.’

‘No, I meant how do you know Jack?’

‘Oh, sorry, I live next door.’

‘Don’t be sorry.’ She did it again – a beguiling tilt of her face and smiled with her wheat-flecked eyes.

‘Where does one get a drink like yours?’ Our host had slipped away.

‘Follow me.’ Her walk was steady and flowing; her long white linen trousers floated above strappy three-inch heels and licked her painted toes with each step. A different man might have noticed the roundness of her *derrière* and commented on the undulating motion of her hips – and I did notice these things, but was immune to their impact. Her sleeveless blouse revealed toned shoulders kissed by the sun and long trim arms. Clearly I’d met a woman who knew how to care for herself and oozed the kind of self-confidence that couldn’t be bought. A portable bar stood by the pool, surrounded by six other guests. This intimate dinner party as described by Daisy was

no small affair; I'd counted ten people milling through the house and pool area as we passed.

'How big is the dining table?'

Candy laughed her original and delightfully unforced laugh. 'Smaller than the Queen's. Don't worry, there's room enough for everyone.'

'My cousin is meant to be here, have you seen her? Daisy?'

'Daisy Hiller is your cousin?'

'Yes.'

She made an O with her mouth and then lifted the corners into a smile. 'Lovely woman, charming husband, haven't seen them yet.'

The bartender handed me a gin and tonic, which I promptly lifted to my lips. This could be a very long night. Her small gesture had made it abundantly clear that my ignorance of the group's interconnectedness might result in my social life ending before it had begun. A well-groomed woman, whose figure resembled silicon grapefruit on a broomstick, an aesthetic that I had a hard time believing anyone actually admired, swooped upon Candy and led her away. She'd probably become a grotesque imitation of her younger self and didn't recognise the difference. It made me sad.

Daisy and Jordan arrived a few minutes before we were called to the table. Her sea-green dress draped over her curves and she wore her strawberry tresses loose, cascading over her shoulders. There was something ethereal about her skin; her face glowed like the North Star on a clear night, a quality that had escaped me when we sat in my garden. Her legs, lean and tanned, shimmered to perfection, the shadows of her muscled calves highlighting the effects of her new climate. My English cousin, player

of tennis and field hockey, wearer of riding britches and wellies, had transformed herself into a California Girl. On her arm, her husband looked equally dashing. Also tanned, he moved with the kind of assuredness only money and commercial success could buy. Everyone flattered him with deliberate greetings.

‘Can’t stand that guy,’ Winger muttered over my shoulder.

I raised an eyebrow.

‘I know he’s married to your cousin, I should probably keep my mouth shut.’

‘I’ve only met him three times.’

‘That should be enough for you to know what I’m talking about.’

‘No, not really. I always felt that Daisy had done well for herself.’

‘It’s just business, I suppose.’

‘Well, why did you invite him to your home if you don’t like him?’

‘Like I said, business.’

‘Movie business or monkey business?’ I don’t know why I said that.

‘Money business. He has plenty of it and his name brings credibility in some circles.’

‘But not yours?’ As soon as the words were out of my mouth I regretted it. I meant his circle, not his name, but this was too awkward to explain.

He looked straight down his nose at me and said, ‘Let’s eat.’

Three tables had been set up on the terrace that extended from the living room to the pool, each with eight place settings. Candelabras with actual candles hung from the vine-covered pergola above each table, creating both intimacy and flattering light, while soft jazz music drifted in the air around us. White camellias mixed with lemon leaves and herbs decorated the centre of each table. Judging from the layers of cutlery

on each side of the plates this would be a long night of fashionable courses. Place cards designated seating arrangements and I was relieved to find mine next to Candy's. This could be the first time in recorded history that a Rhys-Davies dined next to a Pole and looked forward to it immensely.

'I moved your name tag,' Candy said when she sat down. 'I wanted to sit next to someone real.'

'Excellent. Just curious, where was my original seat?'

'You were behind me, next to the host.'

'Are you sure you're the one who switched my name tag? I fear I may have offended Jack.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Nothing.'

The other guests had taken their seats at our table and we introduced ourselves, everyone doing their best to adhere to the social niceties they may or may not have been raised with. All of them were somehow connected to show business, although none of them were of the creative classes. Mostly they were suits: lawyers, marketing executives, agents, and production types. Making small talk with them proved excruciating and the effort made me tired. And there were six courses to go.

'Who's catering this thing?' I asked Candy.

'Jean-Paul.'

'Am I supposed to know who Jean-Paul is?'

'How long have you been in LA?'

'A couple of months.'

'Jean-Paul is the current "it" chef and Jack hires him for all of his dinners.'

‘I feel silly for having to ask.’

‘Don’t sweat it. But you need to know these things around here.’

‘Candy, why are you here and for how long?’

‘I’m helping Jack work some financing with his investors.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means I’m helping him figure out how to use other people’s money instead of his own to get his current project made.’

‘Sounds vaguely immoral.’

‘It’s how this business works.’

‘What’s the nature of this project?’

‘It’s one of Eastwood’s pets. He optioned it years ago and hasn’t been able to green light it.’

‘Eastwood?’

‘Shhh ... keep your voice down.’

I can only assume she meant Clint Eastwood. Since then, I’ve learned that Candy is better than most at keeping secrets and that she’d probably dropped his name deliberately, perhaps for the benefit of our dining companions, but ultimately for the financial enrichment of our host and, as a consequence, of herself. The rest of the conversation had grown tedious and it occurred to me that for some reason the others were freezing me out. Whatever faux pas I’d committed was a mystery to me; maybe I’d revealed too much of my foreign origins. Perhaps they understood that I could do nothing for them – couldn’t even make them laugh when I told them about how the tourists mistake my grandmother for a prop in her own home, expecting her to whip out jam, scones and cream before launching into the story of our ancestor, Robert Pell

Davies, who had, according to family lore, told Elizabeth the First that she looked tense and that he had the antidote under his codpiece. Blank stares, followed by frozen smiles, accompanied an uncomfortable silence before they all looked away and engaged each other in whatever qualified for light conversation in their world.

With four courses remaining, I stood up and re-filled everyone's wine glass, beginning with my own. Another faux pas, a double faux pas actually. I should have let the Guatemalan waiter do it, but frankly that seemed too pretentious and the whole thing began to depress me until I felt a hand squeeze my knee. It belonged to the well-manicured Candy. 'I'm not that kind of boy,' I whispered. 'Although I could make an exception.'

'Don't worry, your virtue is safe with me, follow my lead.' She pushed her chair back and announced to the table that she needed to be excused.

'Candy, can you show me the way to the loo?' I leapt to my feet and offered her the crook of my elbow.

'Martin, you're quite the gentleman.'

Inside the house, she relieved the bartender of a bottle of Tanqueray and practically levitated up the stairs toward the roof timbers that criss-crossed beneath vast skylights. Unfortunately, the stars were made invisible by the metropolis's light pollution. In her white ensemble accented with gold, swinging the Tanqueray in her free hand as she rose higher, I realised that she could be my hero, my saviour from a tired lifestyle that had made me soft. Certainly she had some superpower. How else could she know Tanqueray occupied a special place in my heart? She kicked off her shoes when she reached the top and abandoned them. I wondered if I ought to do the same – it was tempting, a non-verbal *fuck you* to the people below. Candy disappeared

into a room at the end of the corridor and, not wanting to lose sight of the gin, I followed.

‘Whose room is this?’ I asked. Large and modern, its floor-to-ceiling windows provided a view into the backyard, which explained why she’d left the overhead lights off. Feminine flourishes, such as the gyno-centric O’Keeffe print over the bed, deviated from the decor sensibility evident in the rest of the house.

‘Mine, at least for the moment.’ She busied herself rinsing out a glass in the bathroom. ‘Make yourself comfortable, take your shoes off.’

‘You live here?’ I did as she suggested and settled onto the chaise longue near the window.

‘Only when I come to LA. Jack always freaks if he finds out I’m staying at a hotel.’

‘Where are you based?’

‘New York. I come here a couple of times a year, whenever I feel like a break. My excuse is that I need to spend some quality time with clients.’

She splashed a generous serving of gin into the glass and handed it to me.

‘Hope you don’t mind if I drink from the bottle, I don’t want to go back downstairs for another glass. If we stay out of sight they’ll forget we’re gone.’

‘By all means, go ahead.’

We drank against a backdrop of laughter, chatter, and music rising up from outside. Candy settled onto the king-sized bed, holding the bottle as gently as she might a small bird in her hand.

‘This is a gorgeous room, you’re lucky to have such a generous friend.’

‘Check out the closet space.’

‘I don’t feel right looking at your personal things.’ I’d noticed this peculiar obsession with closets amongst Americans before, as well as their openness to sharing their contents.

‘Go on, you won’t believe what Jack did to the freakin’ closets.’

I opened the door closest to me. Like a refrigerator, lights turned on automatically, and I was confronted by a room as large as my London bedroom. Candy had placed her belongings on the shelves and racks closest to the entrance and I was enchanted by the most beautiful collection of Hermès scarves I’d ever seen. She’d neatly folded them into the compartments provided for men’s ties; row upon row of hand-dyed printed silk organised in a rainbow beginning with the deepest reds and ending with violet. Hanging above them were white shirts unique in shape and colour. If they were paint colours in a hardware store their names wouldn’t be white but latte, alabaster, ecru, honey harbour, sea shell, Jersey cream, passionfruit sorbet. Each incarnation of white provided a complementary canvas for the scarves. Beyond the scarves and shirts, shoes and pants, lay a cavernous wasteland waiting to display more things. The sheer emptiness of the shelves, racks, and cubbyholes compelled me to return my gaze to the comforting beauty of the scarves. I picked one up and shook it open, a delightful batik of aqua and tangerine, the giddiness of it made up for the loneliness of being the sole occupant of Soleado. ‘I’m relieved that you couldn’t fill the closet.’

‘Overwhelming, isn’t it? Imelda Marcos couldn’t fill that closet.’

Very carefully I re-folded the scarf and laid it in its place.

‘Candy?’ Jack’s voice broke the spell. ‘Are you hiding up here?’ The bulldogs followed at his heels, their bodies bobbing on little legs, dripping tongues betraying their sensitivity to the unusually warm night.

‘Crap. Busted.’ She sat up and hid the bottle beside the bed. ‘In here Jack.’

‘Are you feeling all right?’ He entered the room and spotted me in the closet
‘Oh, umm, sorry. I thought you were alone.’

‘It’s okay, Jack, you can come in, I just needed some quiet for a while, and I wanted to get to know Martin better without the voyeurs taking part. Forgive me for being rude?’

‘You can get away with murder in this house, but not snubbing Auggie and his Lemon Tart.’

‘Jack, they’re insufferable, a living cliché.’

‘That may be so, but they know people we need to know.’

Auggie had sat at our table with his bottle-blond, Pilates-toned silicon-enhanced bride. Neither had bothered to acknowledge me. I had no idea as to the nature of Auggie’s importance beyond self-importance.

‘I don’t need to know anyone associated with that egomaniac, he’s your problem Jack.’

‘My problems are your problems.’

One of the dogs, the boy, Felix, sniffed my feet and I bent over to make friends with him. He licked my fingers and I gave him a gentle scratch behind the ears, which caused him to fall down and roll over onto his back – an invitation for a belly scratch. At least the damn dog liked me; maybe the evening wouldn’t be a complete disaster as far as Jack was concerned.

‘Jack, let’s not bore Martin with business talk.’

‘Hey, he likes you,’ Jack said. ‘Felix rarely approaches people the first time they come to the house.’

‘Dogs and babies! What can I say?’ I clasped my hand over the dried jerky in my pocket. The other dog had found Candy’s gin and licked the drips off the outside of the bottle.

‘A whole bottle of Tanqueray, Candy? What am I going to do with you?’ Jack sounded like a father. He picked up the dog. ‘Come back downstairs and share the gin around.’

In order to satisfy Felix’s desire for more belly rubs, I sat down next to him. In a flash he was chewing at my pocket and had Jack not been looking right at us, I would have ceded its contents. Instinct told me that revealing the bribe would have been a mistake. Better that Jack believed the dog liked me for myself. ‘Later, Felix,’ I said, giving his ear a final scratch before I stood up.

Jack retreated to the corridor and the pooches went with him.

‘That was close.’

‘What have you got in those pockets?’

‘Never mind, let’s be social, you can show me the rest of the house. Bring the bottle.’

‘Nope, not until you empty your pockets.’

‘It’s jerky,’ I said showing it to her.

‘Martin, you are truly wicked. You know that Jack’s a Buddhist, right?’

‘You mean there wasn’t a single meat or fish course in that confounded meal?’

‘No.’

‘Well, I didn’t miss anything then.’

‘Here,’ she passed me the bottle. ‘Fortification.’

‘Are we about to do battle?’

We padded barefoot to the staircase, toward the guests and Jack. The grand view from the top step invigorated my longing for something new and elicited a refreshed boldness within me. A painting the size of a tapestry dominated the wall next to the stairs – an abstract, the kind of piece that some people denounce as something their six-year-old is capable of and therefore worthless. For a mournful moment I gazed at the painting. At the bottom of the stairs I moved back so as to gain greater perspective. The balance of colour and the sweeping brush strokes pulled me inside the work; my imagination mined the deepest recesses of my life’s experience and pulled out a smile. Fuck those people, whoever they might be, six-year-olds rock.

‘Like it?’ Jack asked. He held Issy in his arms.

‘I do. Something about it makes me happy, it transcends description.’

Jack raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s the most honest response anyone’s ever given.’

‘It’s the only one I have.’

‘Most people do one of two things: try to tell me what they think I want to hear, or they try to show-off their own knowledge of art.’

‘I can’t claim to be a reliable art critic.’

‘Nor should you want to, it’s all bullshit anyway.’

‘So why do you collect art?’

‘Because it gives me a chance to stand still and feel.’

Felix nipped at my pant leg and I ignored him.

‘Go ahead, pick him up, he likes you.’

I didn’t want to hold the dog, my hands were still greasy from handling the piece of jerky in my pocket, but neither did I want Jack to think that I didn’t like the dogs. Felix clenched my pant leg between his teeth and pulled. Worried that he’d tear it, I capitulated and bent down to reach for him. With bullet speed, Felix leapt up and jammed his head into my pocket, grabbed the jerky along with a chunk of fabric and took off through the garden door.

‘What the hell?’ Jack said.

‘I think I’d better go,’ I said.

‘What was in your pants?’

‘Beef jerky.’ I said, backing away. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were raising the dogs vegetarian.’

‘For the love of God, have you no respect?’

‘Calm down, Jack,’ Candy said, coming to my rescue. ‘He’s a dog for Chrissakes, they’re supposed to eat meat.’

‘Tell me it was grass-fed beef at least.’

‘Are you listening to yourself? Get a grip.’ Candy laughed and handed me the Tanqueray. ‘Stick around Martin, this party’s finally started.’ She punched Jack’s arm.

‘Be a good Buddhist and detach from your anger, you like Martin, I can tell.’

I took a swig of gin. And stayed.

Skinning Cats in Tennessee

Ashby Jefferson Rose, the man who changed our lives forever that day in Memphis, had a problem that came to a head in 2005. As the chairman of the Livesburg County School District it was his responsibility to go to the mayor, hat in hand.

On a warm September day Ashby and the mayor teed off at eight in the morning. The sun, still low, had already burned off the morning dew. Both men wore golf hats with decent brims and squinted eastward on the first tee. Their uniforms were nearly identical; each wore pleated khaki shorts, Foot Joy shoes styled like saddle shoes from the 1950s, and collared golf shirts.

‘Good shot,’ the mayor said.

Ashby had sent his drive three hundred yards down the middle of the fairway. It wasn’t what he’d expected. He intended to let the mayor win. Lying for personal gain wasn’t a skill that Ashby had mastered. His clients loved him for it, feeling that he was the only lawyer in the state they could trust with their most personal transactions. His real estate and probate practice at one time or another had touched nearly everyone in town. Eighty per cent of voters had approved his election to the school district. Now, when the schools needed him to fudge something as innocent as

a round of golf, even his body couldn't lie; it wasn't in him to botch a shot with a deliberate lift of his head before following through, or to shank the ball into the trees. Nope, his opening drive was straight as an arrow. And every ball struck from subsequent tees flew in a perfect forward arc and dropped to the ground approximately two hundred and fifty yards away. So, he relied on his short game to lose a couple of holes and that worked out well. The mayor didn't notice.

Although Ashby had the superior swing, the mayor also played well. His inconsistency had to do with the unfortunate physics created by a watermelon-shaped gut. Halfway through the round, his back strained to hold proper posture, yet he had one advantage over Ashby – his mind was clear. He approached each shot with an otherwise empty head.

Both men chewed their cigars as Ashby guided the cart over a bluegrass hill on the way to the twelfth hole. They'd already discussed the south-eastern conference, grudgingly agreeing that Alabama had the best chance for a national championship. They'd reviewed the news gleaned from their respective church communities and bragged about anything worth taking pride in. Football, churching, and family events were Livesburg's most socially acceptable weekend activities and topics of conversation. Once exhausted, awkwardness filled the space between them.

Ashby didn't want to bring up the property tax question on the twelfth hole with six holes left to play, three of them par fives, a pair of fours, and one par three. Eighteen had a killer dogleg and frankly, he wanted to concentrate. The last time he'd played the final hole, he had to stand behind an oak tree and use a seven iron to get out of the long grass, only to have the ball caught up in the Spanish moss hanging from the oak. He'd taken a chance on a new strategy to deal with the eighteenth and failed,

losing three strokes. Despite his desire to conquer the dogleg on eighteen, he didn't want to wait until they reached the clubhouse to defend the school district's budget – too many ears.

On the twelfth tee they spoke little. Each made noises about the best place to land the shot, took their turns, and got back into the cart. By then the sun was high and their shirts clung to their skin. Just before Ashby turned off the cart path and drove toward the mayor's ball, the angel of mercy came into sight and they waited for her to deliver her refrigerated beverages. Ashby bought the mayor a beer and a pre-mixed Bloody Mary for himself. The tomato juice and vodka felt good on his throat, mixing well with his cigar.

'So, Ash, is there something special you wanted to talk to me about today? I get the feeling you're distracted.'

'Well, Randy, as a matter of fact there is.' Ashby took another swig of his drink. 'I think you're already aware that the school board cannot balance its operating budget this year. In the last ten years everything's gone up except our revenue. Hell, even the toilet paper budget is taking a beating. We switched to single ply. Now we burn through thirty per cent more rolls, but it's forty per cent cheaper. What nobody counted on was that keeping the bathrooms stocked needs an additional two hours a day of janitorial time.'

'So, switch back.'

'It isn't about toilet paper, Randy. We can't afford new editions of textbooks. I can't pay teachers enough to keep up with inflation. The football teams can't take a goddamn shower after a game because the plumbing is falling apart. Shit, the stadium needs to be rebuilt.'

‘Your point?’

‘We need to raise revenue. Property taxes have gotta go up.’

The mayor looked at the ground. ‘You know that ain’t gonna happen.’

‘But the housing market is on fire, values have doubled in the last ten years, yet the school district has fallen behind.’

‘I feel your pain.’ The mayor chugged his beer and then crumpled the empty can with his sausage fingers. ‘Do you want to get re-elected Ashby? Well, I sure as hell do. Find another way to skin this cat. You and Hank are two of the smartest people around. If anyone can figure this out, it’s the two of you.’

‘Randy, listen to me. Don’t you think people care about their children’s schooling? Come on, a smooth talker like you could sell a small increase, just a half a per cent could make a world of difference. Or better still, you re-value every house in town and adjust the rate accordingly. You, Randy are a smart man. Can’t you at least look at it with your staff?’

‘Let’s go.’

Frustrated, shoulders tense and hands clenched around his club, Ashby played the dogleg conservatively and lost two strokes getting around it, losing the round fair and square. He chalked up his tension to the fear that if he let loose, showed his true colours, the mayor might find a putter jammed up his clenched Republican ass.

*

‘Get Hank Yeardeley on the phone,’ Ashby said to his secretary. He’d showered and changed into business attire at the country club. Still angry, he forgot his manners.

‘Good afternoon to you too. Having a bad day?’

‘Sorry, Emily. How are you today? That’s a new haircut, isn’t it? Very flattering.’

‘Thank you. Rough meeting with the mayor?’

‘It didn’t go well. Please find Hank and ask him to come over for a sit down.’

‘Sure.’

Ashby Jefferson Rose was a fourth generation Livesburg citizen on his father’s side and could trace his family on his mother’s side to pre-Civil War Charleston, where the family had made a fortune growing rice and cotton for the British market. A treasured family fable placed his great-great-grand uncle at Fort Sumter when the first shot was fired in the war against northern aggression. Although Ashby believed in the equality of all Americans, supported Civil Rights and school integration, he had had no black friends until Hank Yeardley had entered his life. A certified management accountant, Hank looked after Ashby’s books and also held the treasurer’s position at the Livesburg School District. Together, he and Ashby had run a tight ship for nearly four years and had a deep respect for each other.

Ashby couldn’t see how bake sales and car washes could make up the funding shortfall the board faced. If the town’s schools were to keep pace with technology and facilities that supported students’ needs in the modern world, an infusion of several million dollars was required. Ashby believed in public education and so did most of the people he knew. It was sacrosanct in a just and wealthy society. Yet attitudes toward its economics didn’t match up. Everyone wanted something from the government for free. He reckoned that the trouble was the word ‘entitlement.’ No one wanted to pay for entitlements. Instead, they preferred to pay for exclusivity. Livesburg’s reputation as the best school district in greater Memphis mirrored its

citizens' perception of themselves as part of an elite community, a place with high national test scores, excellent teachers, arts programs, and top-notch athletics – where the price of entry lay in the cost of real estate. He didn't want his town's kids to go without the opportunities that other districts had declared luxuries and no longer provided: music, drama, gym class, and French. He'd promised these things would stay during his re-election campaign and he intended to keep his word.

Emily had left six files on his desk for his review and he picked up the first one – a real estate deal for the local fast food magnate. He and his wife had decided to build a five thousand square-foot replica of a plantation house that the Union Army had burned to the ground. The land transaction wasn't difficult. They'd selected a couple of rolling acres on a ridge overlooking the river that a local farmer had given up on, sold up and retired to Boca Raton. Bank financing had turned out to be easy too. Everyone in town was giving away money, aggressively luring loan customers with creative repayment options.

Before he'd run for the school district, it hadn't occurred to him how fucked up things were these days. Hell, he'd thought that the job would be a piece of cake. An easy way to ingratiate himself further with the community and continue to enhance his reputation along with his business.

Unable to concentrate, Ashby picked up a snow-globe paperweight – a souvenir from a Vienna Christmas market given to him by his daughter – and turned it around in his hands. He leaned back in his chair and looked out the window on the street below. His office was on the third floor of an old Main Street townhouse. Below him his fellow citizens went about their business: shopping for the weekend, meeting for late lunches and afternoon coffees, paying bills, and making plans. Most of them

could afford to make plans, living as they did in the wealthiest zip code in the state. He knew the mayor was right, neither of them would be re-elected if they raised property taxes. The question was, did he care about his own re-election enough to ignore the problem and make it someone else's down the road? What was the honourable thing to do? In his desire to not have to choose, in wanting it all, he recognised that he was just as foolish as everyone else. Knowing this didn't help his state of mind.

By the time Hank Yeardley turned up at his door Ashby had brooded for a solid hour. Hank settled his lanky frame into the reproduction William Morris chair that sat between Ashby's desk and a wall of bookcases housing legal books such as United States Reports, which Ashby didn't need given that he didn't practise constitutional law. But they looked good. Their tan covers with black titles and gold trim suggested learnedness and knowledge and aroused respect, combined with a hint of intellectual intimidation, among his visitors. Some visitors, like Hank, were unfazed.

'What are we going to do, Hank?'

'I take it the discussion with Randy went nowhere.' A former track star in college, Hank's legs reached the distance between the chair and Ashby's desk. Something that few people, including Ashby could do. Hank stretched out, crossing his legs at the ankles and relaxed against the chair's high back.

'That's right.' Ashby dropped his pen, leaned back and crossed his hands behind his head. 'He refused to listen.'

'Maybe we need to look to the financial markets for a solution – issue bonds or something.'

Ashby sat up. 'Hadn't thought of that.'

'Well, it's a radical idea for a school board's operating budget, but what the hell? It's done all the time for capital projects – buildings, roads and shit like that.'

'Damn! That's the kind of creative solution we need. Got any more ideas like that?'

'No, but I know who does.'

'Who?'

'Kendall Dodds.'

Ashby raised an eyebrow. 'He's a salesman. What can he do for us?'

'But what does he sell, Ashby. You play bridge with him every other week, you know him better than I do.'

'Investments and shit.'

'That's right. Investments and shit. He's in the money business and we need some of what he's selling. Let's ask him to put together a proposal.'

'Jeez, I don't know. Kenny isn't the sharpest tool in the shed.'

'It doesn't cost anything to listen to what he comes up with.'

Ashby looked Hank in the eye. The man had a point.

'Why the hell not. We don't have any other brilliant solutions and Kenny's a good guy, he'll help if he can.' Ashby looked up Kenny's number on his computer and picked up the phone. 'No time like the present.'

'That's the spirit.'

Ashby put Kendall on speakerphone and the three men agreed to a preliminary meeting the following day. After the call ended, Ashby felt a cool breeze against the

back of his neck and he attributed it to the air conditioner reacting to the late afternoon sun.

‘Did you know that Kenny once sold two pairs of shoes to a dead man?’

Ashby asked Hank.

Hank laughed. ‘I’d like to hear that story and then I’ll tell him about the Frankenstein catfish I caught last weekend.’

‘Ask him about it. He’ll tell you. It’s true – one of the proudest days of his life.’

*

Two months later, a few days before Christmas, Kendall Dodds presented a proposal at a meeting of all members of the Livesburg County School District. He wore a conservative navy blue suit, a lilac striped cotton shirt with a white collar, and monogrammed cuffs. Polished cap-toed black leather shoes and matching belt completed the ensemble. Hank recognised the purple and gold silk tie from an Armani advertisement in *Esquire*.

Kendall came prepared with visual aids: a 50-slide PowerPoint outlining the problem as he understood it, something that in Hank’s mind required only one side, and an explanation of the financial instruments that could solve it. Two-thirds of the board stared and nodded their heads, too embarrassed to ask questions that might reveal their ignorance about what the hell Kenny was trying to explain to them.

Twenty-minutes into the spiel, Hank couldn’t take it anymore and interrupted Kenny.

‘What is all this stuff about Kenny? I see charts and graphs, but I can’t connect them to our situation.’

‘Are you asking me to cut to the chase?’

‘Yes.’ Hank met Ashby’s eyes across the table. ‘Ashby, do you understand any of this nonsense? Most of it looks like legal mumbo-jumbo.’

‘It’s bullet form legalese, mostly disclaimers about future performance. It’s kind of a weird way to try to sell us something, Kenny.’

‘I have to show you these slides, corporate forces them upon us. The joke around the office is that these canned presentations are a barrier to sales. But I have to show them to you. It’s the law. Full disclosure and all that.’ He paused and scrolled through to the second last slide. ‘The only one we really need to look at is this one, it explains what I’m proposing and why it’s good for you.’ A multi-dimensional graph showing a rising trend over time filled the screen. ‘This here is a performance chart for a thing called a CDO.’

‘A what?’ Ashby asked.

‘Collateral Debt Obligation.’

‘Sounds risky,’ Hank said.

‘It’s a safe way to generate income. See, it’s a financial instrument – they call ‘em derivatives on Wall Street – that bundles bonds from over a hundred of the most reliable companies on the stock exchange. You can’t lose.’

‘Come on, Kenny,’ Hank said. ‘If we can’t lose, what’s with all the other slides that you said you had to show us?’

‘Look, there would have to be over a hundred disasters on the scale of the Enron scandal for you to lose your money. This is a very conservative investment.’ Kendall pointed to his final chart. ‘Even better, if you borrow some money to add to your capital you’ll find yourself in a surplus situation.’

‘What do you mean “borrow?” We can’t go into debt, we told you that.’ Hank said.

‘Don’t you want a new football stadium? New computer labs?’

‘That’s why we called you.’

‘Does town council show any inclination toward increasing your funding?’

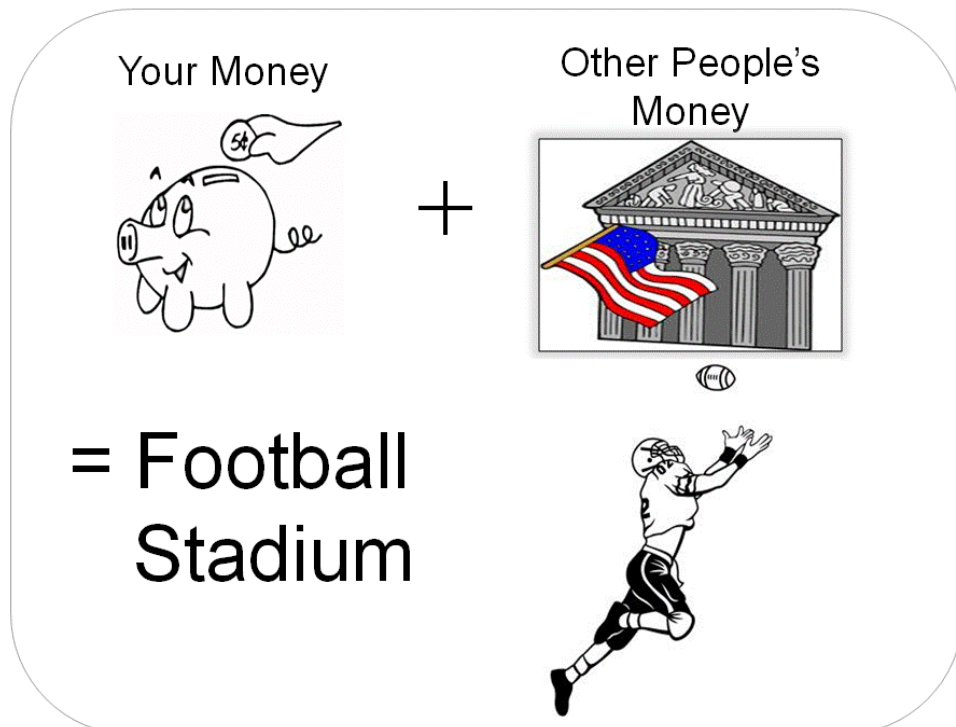
‘You know they won’t do that.’

‘All right then. Do me the courtesy of hearing me out.’

All eyes turned to Hank and he slouched back into his seat.

With a flourish, Kendall flipped to a new slide and pointed at the screen.

Theme music from Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice* (Money Money Money! Some people got to have it! Some people really need it!) rose from his computer and the slide looked something like this:



‘This is the answer!’ Kenny enthused. ‘You borrow another fifty mill, double up, and you’ll have more than enough to finance all the things you told me were important to you, including the one thing everyone agrees on that matters: a football stadium with brand new locker rooms, bleachers, state of the art training room, food concessions and so forth.’

‘Well, that’s great Kenny, but how do we pay back the loan?’ Hank persisted.

‘Your son plays football doesn’t he? The better the facilities the more scouts from out of state we’ll attract.’

‘You didn’t answer my question.’

‘You’re an accountant, Hank. You can put aside money from future earnings to pay it down every month. No different than your mortgage at home.’

‘I don’t have a mortgage.’

‘Everyone has a mortgage.’

‘Not me.’ Hank sat with his arms crossed and glared at Kendall.

‘I motion for a vote,’ Ashby said.

‘Don’t you think we should take some time to review this? In private?’ Hank asked..

‘We can’t leave things as they are Hank.’ Ashby looked around the table. ‘All in favour of moving forward with a contract to purchase a CDO as recommended by Kendall?’

Nine out of ten hands went into the air.

‘Motion carried. Let the record show that nine out of ten members voted in favour of Kendall Dodds’s proposal.’

And just like that the Livesburg District School Board entered into a derivatives trade with Candy Cerise Pansenkosky's Wall Street bank and also agreed to borrow fifty million dollars from an Irish Bank. The eggnog flowed. Santa Kendall had bought Livesburg a new football stadium for Christmas, and re-election to everyone at the table.

Hank put on his wool overcoat and gloves and took to the street. A cold snap had struck earlier in the week; snowflakes floated to earth and melted on the sidewalk. Preoccupied with the doomsday scenario playing out in his head, Hank failed to notice the accumulation of damp that settled on his shoulders as he strode six blocks to his office. A conservative accountant by nature, he didn't put money into things he didn't understand, couldn't quantify, or back with tangible assets that he could evaluate with all six of his senses. Anxiety settled into his stomach to roost.

How I Became an Executive in TV Land

My skin began to itch shortly before I reached the Hollywood Bowl. The smog blanket over the city wrapped itself around my Mustang convertible. Maybe leaving Soledad had been a mistake. I'm a nervous driver, but my deeper instincts couldn't refuse Jordan's invitation to visit his studio.

A peculiar awareness of an air quality border separating the haves and have-nots came over me as I turned north on Cahuenga and tracked along beside the 101. Smog hung over the canyon. A wasteland of automobiles, concrete, and super-sized petrol stations lay before me. Yet the McMansions on either side of the highway suggested irrigated middle class comfort. Glimpsed from the road, the homes were larger and better tended than Soledad, but they had a wrong side of the hill quality to them.

At the studio gates, a guard, protected by a shack with opaque tinted windows and an air conditioning unit, greeted me. When I lowered my window he slid open his own.

'Hello, I'm here to meet Jordan Hiller.'

‘Is he expecting you?’

‘Yes, my name is Martin Rhys-Davies.’

‘Can I see some ID?’

I pulled out my driver’s license.

‘Okay, you’re on the list, Mr Rhys-Davies.’ He came out of the shack and handed me a clipboard. ‘Sign-in here and display this visitor’s permit in your window.’

‘Where do I park?’

‘Here’s a map of the studio. The soundstage you’re looking for is number sixteen.’ He traced a route for me to follow on the map and pointed out where to park. ‘If there’s a red light on above the door, don’t open it. Just wait until it goes out, okay?’

‘Got it.’

If my brother could have seen me then, driving a convertible on a movie studio lot, he’d spontaneously combust.

Following the guard’s instructions, I found my way to Jordan’s soundstage. The red light above the door was turned off and I let myself inside. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust. The vastness of the place struck me first, followed by its hive-like nature. I’m sure it had an order to it, but I had no idea what the rationale might be for the amount of concentrated energy in front of me, so much so that no one bothered to acknowledge my presence. They were busy. Eventually I flagged down an official-looking woman carrying a clipboard and talking into a headset.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Are you lost?’ she asked.

‘I’m looking for Jordan Hiller.’

‘And you are?’

‘Martin, he’s expecting me.’

‘His cousin?’

‘His cousin-in-law actually.’

‘Follow me.’ As we walked, she advised Jordan through her walkie-talkie that we were on our way.

We found Jordan deep in conversation with the director inside a temporary office, a place that could be disassembled at a moment’s notice. At least I’d assumed she was the director. In fact, she turned out to be the head writer, the most powerful creative person in the place according to Daisy and the only person Jordan feared.

‘Martin, welcome to the chaos.’

‘Thanks for inviting me.’ We shook hands.

‘This is Brenda Nixon, our head writer.’

‘Pleasure,’ she said, ignoring my extended hand. ‘Come see me when you’re done, Jordan. We’re not finished here.’

‘Wow,’ I said after she left. ‘She’s a ball buster.’

‘She doesn’t need to be friendly.’

‘Why? Is she irreplaceable?’

‘She thinks so.’ He closed his laptop computer. ‘What do you want to see?’

‘Everything. I’ve never been on a soundstage before.’

‘It isn’t glamorous.’

Emphasising his point, a guy reeking of cigarettes and patchouli walked past carrying a sheet of plywood.

‘Is this your office?’

‘It’s everybody’s office, but mostly it’s Brenda’s domain. I have an office on the other side of the lot.’

‘How many people work for you?’

‘Nobody. They all work for themselves.’

‘Even the crew?’

‘Yep.’

‘So what do you do then?’

‘I’m the money man. There’s one person who works for me, my assistant and business manager. She makes more than I do, it’s how I keep her around.’

‘Really?’ I assumed he was kidding about the money.

‘Really. She tracks which lies I’ve told.’

‘Will I meet her?’

‘She may come with us to lunch. You won’t mind if it’s a working lunch?’

‘No, not all, but if it’s inconvenient for me to be there, I can head home before lunch.’

‘We’ll see how things go.’

‘Are you shooting this morning?’

‘Yeah, that’s why you’re here, right? See how this is done?’

Before I answered, Candy walked in and said, ‘Sorry I’m late. Have I missed anything good?’ She breezed into the cramped room and faux-kissed Jordan on both cheeks, pivoted on the ball of one foot like a dancer and proceeded to greet me with the same air kisses. ‘So, what are we doing? Is it tour time?’

‘Before we start, you’re going to have to ditch those shoes, they click too loudly,’ Jordan said.

She bared her feet without hesitation and pushed her shoes under the desk.

Witnessing the live film a major fight scene, complete with choreographed hand-to-hand combat and fake blood, gave me an appreciation for the complexity of the show’s production. What I’d seen performed and what would air to an audience were very different things. Live on the soundstage everything looked flat, phoney and slow to the naked eye. But the camera saw it differently.

‘No wonder so few people make it in this business – it’s hard to make this stuff look real.’ I said.

‘It isn’t for the meek.’ Jordan agreed.

‘Just like Wall Street,’ Candy quipped ‘smoke and mirrors.’

We finished our walking tour on the other side of the lot at Jordan’s office, where we reconnected with Brenda. Jack Winger was also there.

‘Martin, what did you think of the place?’ Jack asked. He didn’t appear surprised to see me, whereas I was taken aback by his unexpected presence.

‘Fascinating, an example of collectivism at work – successful collectivism.’

‘It’s all because of Jordan’s original vision.’

Based on Jack’s comments during the party, his sincerity was suspect at best, but I let it go, as one does. ‘I understand that university papers are written about the show.’

Jack nodded. ‘I hope you don’t mind my tagging along to lunch.’

‘Of course not.’

‘Let’s go, I’m starved,’ Candy said.

On the other side of the commissary door, the energy of a few hundred assembled creatives crackled like a commercial popcorn maker: sproing! there's an idea! shazzam! there's another, and another; until the idea bulbs heated up the kernels and transformed them into a fluffy crunch that stuck to your molars and tasted best with complementary seasonings like butter and salt. Complementary seasonings – maybe that's what Candy and Jack were to each other.

Soon, the giddiness of the commissary took over, and the electricity generated by the people hummed in my ears as I considered the possibility that there might be a place for me in this business, if I could convince someone to hire me.

After lunch, Jordan walked me to my car, unloading his conscience between soundstages twenty-three and twenty-four.

'Martin, I feel like I can trust you, that you're the kind who knows how to be discreet. There's something on my mind, a terrible weight like an iron anchor, and maybe talking about it will help.'

'Sounds ominous.'

'I'm trying to figure out how to get myself out of a bad situation. You see, well, I'm having an affair with Brenda.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Because I want you to protect Daisy.'

'How am I supposed to do that?'

'Reassure her that it can't be true, you've seen us together, tell her there isn't any chemistry.'

'Why are you so determined to stick with Daisy? Why not let her go? Let her find someone who'll be true to her?'

‘She’s my rock, my life.’ He paused. I didn’t bother filling the clichéd silence between us. ‘She’s pregnant.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Found out a few days ago. It’s what we’ve wanted all along, a family.’

‘Then why not end it with Brenda?’

‘Are you insane? If she leaves there won’t be a show.’

‘Have you considered what would happen if Brenda decided to end your relationship anyway? All I’m suggesting is that it’s unlikely to last forever, so why not man-up now?’

‘Are you judging me?’

‘I’m trying to help you look at this from another angle, like real friends do.’

‘Are you my friend, Martin? Or does this news make it impossible?’

‘Time will tell I suppose.’

‘Would you be interested in working here?’

I must have blanched then, for the next thing out of his mouth was equally unexpected. ‘The work I have is somewhat beneath you, but suits your qualifications if you’re interested in using that education of yours.’

‘What’s the job?’

‘I need a numbers man, someone to liaise with the likes of Jack.’

I reached out to him and with a handshake we became something to each other – not friends, more like accomplices.

*

Life took on a rhythm I had no previous experience of – that of the gainfully employed. Each morning I rose early and, after a run to the Santa Monica Pier and

back, I drove over to the studio to spend the day in Jordan's office. In exchange for a generous salary, at least I considered it generous at the time, I churned spreadsheets and summarised financial statements for Jordan's limited attention span.

Contrary to my initial conversation with him, almost no liaising needed to be done with Jack during the first three months of my employment, as he hadn't turned up at the studio after the day of my initial visit, although we spoke on the phone regarding Jordan's investment in Jack's new project.

'That's it?' Jack said. 'A lousy two million?'

'Jack, that's a lot of money for us.'

'You're a tightwad, I'm beginning to regret recommending you to Jordan.'

'Excuse me?'

'It was my idea to get you a job.'

'I thought Daisy ... never mind. Look, this is the most we can afford to risk this year. If circumstances change, we'll let you know.'

We both knew that Jordan could have anteed-up more cash, but what Jack didn't know was that Jordan had plans for a new series and he had no desire to find himself beholden to the likes of Jack, whether it succeeded or failed. Jack had invested in Jordan's nascent company, but all funds had been repaid, and now Jordan was determined to use in-house funds to finance his new pilot.

'Fine, it's not like I'm going to turn it down.'

After he hung up I couldn't decide if I ought to be annoyed by his sense of entitlement or wallow in the knowledge that at this rate I'd never be sufficiently rehabilitated in his eyes to merit another party invitation.

Family Matters

A couple of months after I settled into my new job at Jordan's, I rang Candy at her New York office to review the funds she managed on his behalf. As much as I liked dealing with Candy, I wasn't any closer to making movies. The most creative part of my day involved deciding what font I wanted to use for my reports to Jordan.

'How do you do it, Candy?'

'Martin, it's complicated. Just be happy about it.'

'But you're out-performing all of the major indices.'

'That's why they pay me the big bucks. When are you coming to New York?'

'I'm not sure, whenever Jordan wants to take a trip I suppose.'

'Jordan, schmordan. Come out here and we'll do the town.'

'Candy, I can't just take off, I have obligations now, I work.'

'What you're doing isn't really work, not like all those nine-to-five suckers do across the country. You could come out here if you wanted to, Jordan wouldn't care.'

'I don't want to take advantage of the fact that he's family. I actually care what the other staffers think of me.'

'What other staffers? You mean that bimbo secretary of his?'

‘Remember the secret I told you when we were drunk the first time?’

‘What secret?’

‘That I want to make movies, I want to learn this business.’

‘Well, I have news for you, you’re not going to learn it by applying GAAP rules to Jordan’s books.’

‘Everyone has to start somewhere.’

‘Give up on this movie-making fantasy of yours and come to New York, Coffey & Coffey is always looking for talent.’

Coffey & Coffey was her firm, a venerable investment bank founded by an Irish tough who’d refused to settle for a job in the police force like his father and his father’s father had. In its hundred-plus years of riding business cycles, Coffey & Coffey had failed to turn an annual profit only twice: 1907 and 1929. At least that’s what the About Us page on their web site said.

‘Why don’t you come out to California instead?’

‘I’m not sure when I can get away right now. I just bought a house in Madison for my mother and the deal hasn’t closed yet.’

‘You bought a house for your mother? Candy, you’re leading me to believe you have a heart.’

‘Shut up, Martin.’ She paused for a minute and I felt her drift away. I wasn’t sure if it was my turn to speak, but then she said, ‘The old neighbourhood isn’t the same any more.’

‘Whose is?’

‘I went to see Ma a couple of weeks ago and it wasn’t good. I had to drive over half-a New Jersey to get her shopping done because all the Polacks have moved or

closed up shop. No more Mr Paretsky, the butcher whose wife made the best kielbasa around. But if you want a goddamn tamale it's available outside-a Ma's door, assumin' a-course you can get past the kids on the street doin' nothin' but watchin' time fly and smokin'.' Whenever she spoke about New Jersey her speech increased in speed, clipping pesky consonants.

'So you bought her a new house?'

'Yeah, I figure she can keep the money from the sale of the old one to live on.'

'That's very generous of you.'

'Family, right? Who else are you gonna share the wealth with?'

Indeed, who else? And what does a person without family do? As the youngest and childless Rhys-Davies, the lack of a legacy gave me pause some enchanted evenings at Soleado when an empty ache invaded my heart, and I longed for someone to share my jasmine-scented candlelit terrace – to help me finish the wine. Jack had held several dinner parties since I'd begun work at Jordan's, but hadn't invited me. We hadn't had so much as a passing conversation over the fence. I imagined the price of admission was more of Jordan's money and, unwilling to manipulate Jordan toward greater financial risk, I wouldn't be attending Jack's table in the foreseeable future. So be it, Jordan had preparations to make for his own legacy – a son due to arrive seven short weeks into the future. He often spoke of taking the boy to Lakers games and teaching him the finer points of downhill skiing; clearly his thoughts extended well beyond a couple of months, and it was my duty to ensure that he could afford the future he visualised. Daisy and their child deserved nothing less. We were family, after all.

Still, I pined for an invitation, or a reason to make a social call on Jack. Ever since that first party I'd caught myself on numerous occasions wondering about him. How did he spend his days? His nights? Who finished his wine with him? Did he have any vices? Is the Buddhism thing a put-on or for real? Could his nights be as restless as my own, with loose thoughts dancing in the sliver of moonlight? What did he intend as his legacy? His body of work? Did he have a favourite charity? Might he look at the painting over the staircase and think of our conversation? Had I been rehabilitated from corrupting Felix? I wanted to know the answers to all of these questions and more.

*

Later that evening, at Daisy and Jordan's house over dinner, studio intrigues fell away to family time. Bloated and lumbering, Daisy preferred to stay home and with ever-greater frequency she invited me to her table. I chalked it up to the nesting instinct, although she rarely did all the cooking herself. Instead, she employed a Mexican housekeeper and a cook who came to the house three days a week.

'I helped Luisa make the tamale pie tonight,' she said with a shy smile.

'Daisy, it's wonderful.' I meant it. The food, although nothing like the meals from my childhood, stirred my sense of nostalgia. Why? Maybe because the moment felt like a family dinner ought to, with fresh home-prepared food touched by the love of a good woman, inexpensive but satisfying red wine from the corner store, and the company of people who'd taken me in when I'd run away from home.

'Is the wine okay? I dare not taste it, although the doctor says it's okay to a have nip now.'

'It's perfect.'

‘Daisy, you look wonderful tonight,’ Jordan said. It was true. The lumbering awkwardness she complained about only served to make her more adorable.

‘You’re both the sweetest.’

‘Quit fussing and sit down,’ I said. For some bizarre reason there were moments when Daisy became a 1950s housewife doting on the menfolk. ‘We should be waiting on you.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

She spent too much time at home. Before, she’d be out with her friends or at the gym or taking some course to keep that big brain of hers stimulated. Had she come from a different family, one whose attitudes reflected the century they currently occupied, she would have had some kind of career of her own. A different person might have broken out of the mould set out for her, but Daisy fell into line; although, marrying Jordan had constituted a rebellion of sorts.

‘I know this is crass to discuss at dinner, but I’ve been meaning to ask if this house is paid for?’ I said. ‘The reason I ask is that I had a remarkable conversation with my father early this morning before I went into the office.’

‘This is America, Martin, everyone has a mortgage,’ Jordan responded.

‘That’s precisely the point, I’ve noticed Candy is quietly getting out of mortgage-backed securities, and so is Father. He’s convinced that the US housing market is poised for a spectacular fall.’

‘You like Candy don’t you?’ Daisy interjected. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say you had a crush on her.’

‘The Phoenix predicts a bloodbath.’ In a moment of gin-soaked joy, my grandmother had nicknamed my father The Phoenix in acknowledgment of his ability to rise-up from any disaster better off than he’d been before.

‘What do *you* think?’ Jordan asked.

‘A credit crunch could wreck you, I’d follow Father’s advice. If he’s right, and you do nothing, you could lose everything; but, if he’s wrong, you’ll be no worse off for having taken his advice to eliminate debt.’

‘What about the tax implications?’

‘You have to earn income to pay taxes. If there’s a melt-down and money dries up, taxes will be the least of your problems.’

‘Money, that’s all you two talk about these days,’ Daisy said. ‘How boring, completely and utterly boring. I want to know about your feelings for Candy.’

Jordan slapped his knee. ‘Martin, this is exactly the reason I’m glad to have you around. Can you take care of it this week?’

‘How long have you lived here, anyway?’

‘Seven years.’

‘Jordan moved here before we met, and from the moment I saw it I loved it so much that I didn’t want to look for another house,’ Daisy chimed-in.

Bigger than Jack’s, the house felt cosier at the same time. Jack’s place intimidated with its cavernous grandiosity, but their house had warmth and charm with its Spanish influences: arched doorways, iron railings, terra cotta tiles, and textured frangipani-coloured walls that whispered sweet nothings on the summer breeze.

‘I don’t blame you, Daisy; the place is like balm for the soul.’

‘Hey, isn’t it your birthday tomorrow?’ she said with that free associative way she had.

‘As a matter of fact – ’

‘Thirty! You’re turning thirty.’

It wasn’t something I wished to be reminded of and had hoped it would escape everyone’s notice except, perhaps, my mother’s.

‘We must celebrate.’

‘No, we don’t have to, not now. Maybe when you’re not pregnant anymore.’ I poured some wine into Jordan’s glass and topped up my own.

‘I’ll be thirty in half-a-year, maybe we could celebrate then.’

‘I have no problem marking your birthday, Daisy, but leave out the “we”. I feel no compulsion to advertise my advancement into my fourth decade.’

‘Turning thirty wasn’t so bad,’ Jordan said. Eight years Daisy’s senior, he carried himself with rugged confidence unique to American men. Neither young nor old, Jordan received respect without asking for it. Men like him flew close to the sun, for a while at least, until their wings melted or they retired, whichever came first.

*

Afterwards, I arrived home to find Candy alighting from Jack’s Mercedes sedan. Joy leapt into my heart at the sight of her sunflower hair in the lamplight. She waved at me like a happy child returned home from a protracted hiatus and I realised how much I’d missed her physical presence. A voice on the telephone was a poor stand-in for Candy’s whole self.

She trod across the grass toward me, threw her arms around my neck, and offered a cheek for a kiss. I couldn't remember the last time a woman had greeted me in such an unabashed way. Even Daisy wasn't so easy with her affections.

'Surprise!'

'What are you doing here?' I asked. 'Why didn't you mention it?'

Jack waved from behind the Benz and then tugged at a pair of large suitcases nestled inside the boot.

'Staying a while?' I asked.

'Not sure.'

'What's with all the luggage?'

'I thought I'd leave a few things here for future trips; drives me nuts whenever I realise I've left something behind.'

'Would you like to come in for a drink?'

'Thought you'd never ask.' She hesitated. 'What about Jack?'

'Of course he's welcome too.'

'Jack!' she called. 'Come for a drink?'

Bless Candy, she was my ticket back into Jack's good graces. Willing him to say yes, I held my breath.

He looked our way before slamming the boot shut. 'Thanks, but I think I'll pass. Early meeting tomorrow.' With those words he turned his attention to the suitcases and wheeled them toward the front door. We were dismissed like a pair of second graders.

Friends and Lovers In Between

After a quick gin and tonic, Candy left Soleado and went home to her own room at Jack's. She lay down on her bed with Felix and Issy sprawled next to her. They were her dogs as much as Jack's. They read her moods and they could tell she was on edge. On the flight over she'd consumed an analyst's report authored by a one-eyed misfit in Los Gatos. No longer was she the only one who recognised the truth about America's affair with the housing market and its real significance. She considered chartering a plane to San Jose to meet with the guy; he'd earned her respect as the only other person she'd come across with the same insight she'd developed in recent months. Now she had to find a way to tame the beast she'd created before it crushed her and everyone else. Maybe, she thought, it was time to invent a new market for a new product, the opposite of a Collateral Debt Obligation. They could call it a CDS: Cold Dog Shit.

Jack knocked on the door, looking for Felix and Issy.

'They're safe with me,' Candy said.

'Can I come in?'

'Sure.'

He sat on the chaise. ‘You’re sober.’

‘You sound surprised.’

‘No, I guess not. Look, never mind. Thought you’d be celebrating another job at your nemesis.’

‘Is that what you came in here for – to chastise me about Letty’s family business? Or is there something more pertinent on your mind?’

‘About the financing for the Eastwood thing.’

‘What about it?’

‘We need more.’

‘How much?’

‘Another ten million.’

‘No problem.’

‘Who’s putting up the money?’

‘An anonymous fan. Don’t worry your pretty bald-head about it. Just get this thing done and in the can. Be the auteur of your dreams.’ She didn’t look at Jack when she said this. Instead, she focused on scratching Felix’s belly and the dog’s eyes rolled upwards with pleasure.

Jack detected no irony.

*

The following afternoon, after an attempt at physical exercise that involved what I thought would be an easy jog up the beach toward Malibu, but which devolved into childish competition, Candy and I collapsed into chairs next to Jack’s pool, panting harder than the dogs. She removed her running shoes and socks and I followed suit. The fresh air provided immense relief to my hot and swollen feet.

‘You do this sort of thing every morning?’ I asked her.

‘Yep, couldn’t function without it,’ she said before standing up.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Better get some towels before Jack sees us sweating on his furniture.’

‘It’s pool furniture!’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

She returned from the cabana with two large towels, one of which she spread onto her chair before handing the other to me so that I could do the same.

‘You kicked the shit out of me,’ I said. ‘I need a nap now.’

‘To be honest with you, I’m glad we’re back here, I couldn’t go another hundred yards.’

‘Thank God. That means we won’t do that again, right?’

‘No more hill racing in the heat is all I can promise.’

‘Slave driver.’

She laughed.

‘What’s going on?’ Jack said from behind us. I’d felt his presence before his voice had cut Candy’s laughter short. His tone wasn’t exactly friendly, but neither was it unfriendly. It hung in the air like a boss’s.

‘We’re just goofing around,’ she said.

‘Maybe instead of goofing around you could be taking care of some business before Carleton gets here.’

Candy began hyperventilating at the mention of his name.

‘Who’s Carleton?’ I asked.

‘No one important,’ Jack said.

‘He’s coming here?’ she said.

‘Yes, I invited him to dinner to review the Xipar deal.’

‘Oh, shit, how could you?’

‘He invited himself over a month ago and I didn’t see any reason to cancel his trip because you happened to turn up on my doorstep.’

‘But I told you about my last deal,’ Candy hissed. ‘And you invited him to dinner anyway.’

‘Relax, he has no quarrel with you.’ He turned his attention toward me. ‘Will you join us, Martin?’

‘I believe I’m free tonight; should I bring red or white wine?’ I had no idea what they were talking about, but whatever it was it had to be better than Jordan’s dirty little secret.

*

Candy blushed when Carleton Montgomery entered the dining room and I wondered if he was the one who’d gotten away. A handsome fellow with chiselled Marlboro Man features, he stood no taller than Candy and carried himself with similar self-assurance.

‘How do you know each other?’ I asked after introductions were made.

‘My other name is Mr Camparinga,’ Carleton said with a self-effacing grin.

‘As in Letty Camparinga, my friend from back in the day,’ Candy said. ‘I may have mentioned her to you once or twice.’

I stared dumbly at Candy. I recalled the name from the business pages of the newspapers, not from any conversations with Candy. Leticia Camparinga held the title of Chief Operating Officer and Partner at Stillman White Camparinga, a Wall Street investment bank.

‘So you’re the man behind the woman?’ I said.

‘Something like that. I work for a small outfit based on the other side of the river, running the technology department.’

I hadn’t pegged him for a tech-geek. He looked the part of a successful trader or fund manager.

‘Carleton’s being modest. He has a doctorate in physics. He *makes* the technology that runs the most successful hedge fund in the industry,’ Jack said, handing me a gin and tonic.

Felix and Issy trotted into the room and sniffed Carleton disapprovingly, while Candy grinned at him as though in the presence of JFK or some charismatic figure worth admiring, whereas I agreed with the dogs. Montgomery was a quant, the sort of computer expert who’d transcended the social aspects of investing and turned it into mindless gaming. All that mattered was the speed of an electronic trade based on models that no one else understood. And such men had become richer than God.

The dogs proceeded to ignore Carleton and rubbed themselves against my black trousers, depositing white hair and dander all over them. Pleased that they’d chosen me, I sat down on the carpet and played with them while the others continued to talk.

‘So, how is Dear Wife?’ Candy asked.

‘Madder than shit, as you well know,’ Montgomery replied.

‘Surely she doesn’t blame me?’

‘Of course she blames you. Who else is she going to blame? You architected the deal. Christ, Candy, of all the crazy things you’ve ever done, this one takes the cake.’

‘Someone else would have done the deal instead of me, you know that.’

‘Then you should have let someone else do it. She’s so angry we haven’t had sex for nearly a month.’

‘An unintended consequence, I assure you.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘All right children, can we change the subject please?’ Jack said. ‘You’re giving me a headache.’

Throughout this exchange Issy had thrust her head into my hand, demanding ear scratches, and I was happy to oblige. I had no idea what they were talking about. The temperature in the room had jumped at least ten degrees. Candy had kept secrets from me and my curiosity overcame any discomfort regarding the heat.

‘What sort of deal are we talking about?’ I asked.

‘I’ll tell you later,’ Jack said. ‘Let’s move onto more agreeable subjects. Like my movie. Would the Montgomery-Camparingas care to invest? It’s going to be a blockbuster, I assure you, bigger than *Titanic*.’

‘What’s it about?’ Carleton asked.

Standing behind Jack’s back, Candy shook her head vehemently in an effort to discourage Carleton’s question. Unfortunately, this one question sent Jack off onto a fifteen-minute monologue about the film’s plot and special effects. I lost the thread of his pitch after about a minute-and-a-half and contented myself with the remainder of my gin as well as the dogs’ affections. Animals delighted me more than people sometimes, but in that moment I was bursting to know more about Candy’s quarrel with Carleton’s wife and couldn’t have cared less about Jack’s movie. Had they been rivals for Carleton’s affection once? The two subjects had one thing in common – the

overwhelming presence of ego. Candy's hubris interested me more than Jack's. I wanted something quite different from him.

*

Jack had prepared dinner himself and I offered to help him clean-up after we'd eaten, mostly to escape the intoxicated banter between Carleton and Candy. The two of them had spent the evening playing an uneasy, yet stimulating, game of flirtatious cat and mouse, avoiding the one topic on everyone's mind – the latest blow-up between his wife and Candy. The verbal dance between Candy and Carleton reminded me of Hepburn and Tracey; its unconsummated sexiness of greater interest to them than anything that crossed the line. However, despite the tension, their game had grown as tiresome to witness as an epic tennis match and I willed them to go upstairs and get it over with it, bang the headboard against the wall with all the furious energy their words carried.

I cleared the dinner plates and Jack followed me into the kitchen where we rinsed dirty dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher.

'Got any scotch next door?' he asked after he started the machine.

'Glenmorangie.'

'Let's go. Those two won't quit until they pass out.'

He didn't need to ask me twice. We escaped to Soleado through the backdoor.

*

In the pre-dawn darkness of my kitchen, ruined for additional sleep by the recycling truck's motorised rumble, I learned that Candy and Jack had cemented their friendship back in '92 at a rally for Clinton in New Hampshire.

We sipped black coffee. He sat on my granite counter and I slouched against the fridge. He'd pulled on my old school rugby shirt and fleece shorts in self-defence

against the draughty old house, and I'd wrapped a velour robe around me. Standing there, leaning against the fridge, shaking the fuzzy remains of the scotch from my head, self-consciousness slipped away as I scratched myself and listened.

'We were the only ones in our class who supported Clinton, the rest of them didn't care about the Democratic nomination because they were all going to vote for Bush. Until I saw her at the rally, I had no idea that anyone besides me was a Dem., so I went up to her and do you know what she did? She started laughing in that wry way she has, like she's the only one who sees something ironic, and I say what's so funny? And she says, just my luck, the only gay man in the whole class is the one guy she has anything important in common with.'

'Go on.'

'Yeah, she wasn't interested in any of the other guys, which I know sounds strange, you'd think she'd be all over those testosterone-driven types with their single-minded will to win.'

'It seems to me that you're like a brother to her.'

Jack said nothing.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'It's just that I'd never thought of our relationship as sibling-esque before, but it makes sense if you look at it from Candy's point of view.'

'Oh, and why's that?'

'I suppose you haven't known her long enough for her to tell you about it.'

'About what?'

'She had a twin brother who died at birth.'

Candy covered her scars well; she'd given no indication of suffering. But did this explain anything about her? Could one fashion the entire narrative of her life based on this single fact of her birth?

I glanced at the clock and Jack caught me. With one smooth motion he slid down from his perch and stepped toward me. I turned my face toward his and for the moment he appeared unguarded, he was just Jack, a man whose masks had fallen away. With unexpected delicacy he kissed me goodbye.

'This was the best birthday I've had in a long time,' I said.

'Your birthday? And you didn't tell anyone?'

'Like most people, I don't like to mark off the years I have left.'

'How old?'

'Thirty.'

'Such a youngster.' He gave me the kind of look my father does when I'm too hard on myself.

Before I could respond, he slipped through the kitchen door and pulled it shut with hardly a sound.

Candace Reveals Sanguinity

Later that night, after a long day at the studio I found myself inside Jack's screening room wishing I'd stayed home instead. By midnight Carleton lay passed out on the leather couch. A combination of pot, booze, and Jack's dailies had taken their toll. Jack had retired. The dailies from the new movie were hard to watch, though a few scenes showed promise.

'Oh, fuck. He hates his own movie,' Candy said after Jack had left.

'One can't really blame him,' I said.

'Can you keep a secret, Martin?'

'Most of the time.'

'This turkey is going to be the best tax write-off ever.'

'I take it you invested?'

'Yeah, I invested. I didn't have the heart to tell him that no one else would give him another dime after the last pitch he made.'

'You're a softie.'

‘Well, you never know. If he can finish this fucking thing, he might be able to turn a profit. Nobody knows if a picture will tank until after an audience sees it.’

Candy spread out on the carpet in corpse pose, closed her eyes and moved her arms from side to side.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Making snow angels. Letty and I used to do this when we were little.’

‘Who?’

‘Carleton’s wife: Leticia Camparinga.’

‘Right, Jack said something about you and his wife last night, best friends wasn’t it? Back in New Jersey?’

‘I’m their oldest kid’s godmother.’

‘How come you’ve never mentioned her before?’

‘We’re not friends anymore.’

Candy drifted away, continued making carpet angels, and after a minute or two she said. ‘I wouldn’t recognise the child if I tripped over her on the sidewalk.’

‘Is there regret in your voice?’

She ignored me then and we were quiet in the glow of the film projector, her arms moving over her head and back down again. Compelled closer, I left the recliner chair and sat on the floor next to her where I noticed the dog-eared corner of a magazine poking out from beneath the chair. I pulled it out: a battered but recent copy of the *Sunday Times Magazine*.

‘Is this yours?’

She stopped making carpet angels.

‘Something wrong?’

‘I know that guy on the cover.’

The cover story featured a man named Aaron Stillman. Philanthropist. Hero of the 9th Ward. Two years on from Katrina and he remained there, building houses.

‘You know a humanitarian?’

‘He was no humanitarian when I knew him.’ She took the magazine from me and flipped to the interview with Aaron Stillman. When she finished scanning the text she asked me, ‘Do you believe in rehabilitation, Martin?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘His wife didn’t move to New Orleans with him.’

‘Maybe that’s why he decided to stay there.’ I looked at his face. He wasn’t handsome exactly, but nor was he unattractive. Intense brown eyes stood out from his forty-ish visage, its skin rough with sunshine. A full head of tousled grey-flecked brown hair – a tad long for a businessman – framed his face.. A scar gave his dimpled chin character. ‘How did you know him?’

‘He was my boss at Stillman White before I jumped over to Coffey & Coffey. I hated the bastard back then. Letty got his job after he left the company.’

‘Is that why you left?’

‘Pretty much.’

She resumed angel-making.

‘That’s exactly why she left,’ Carleton slurred. ‘My wife out-played her and she couldn’t stand it.’

‘Shut up Carleton. Have you been listening the whole time?’

‘Your god-daughter’s name is Anastasia. Try calling her sometime. She’d be happy to hear from you. She loves the story about how you cried at her christening.’

‘You’re so full of shit.’

‘I am not. Open your eyes, Candy. Things aren’t always as you perceive them.’ With that comment, Carleton won a small measure of respect from me. Maybe he wasn’t so bad after all.

‘Martin, ask me how Aaron got that scar on his chin,’ Candy said.

‘All right, what’s the story behind the scar?’

‘I gave it to the abusive SOB with the help of a stapler.’

‘You stapled his chin?’

‘I was trying to staple something else shut. It was one of those really heavy old-fashioned staplers made of metal rather than plastic. Anyway, I socked him with it one night after work.’

‘You assaulted your boss.’

‘Self-defence.’

‘Right, how come he’s the only one with a scar?’

‘Mine don’t show on the outside, you can’t take a picture of them, but he left a few.’

Candy refused to elaborate further and I used my imagination to fill in the gaps. Nothing I visualised allowed for the possibility that whacking Stillman in the jaw with a stapler could be a reasonable and measured response to whatever he’d done. And yet I thirsted for more information about Candy’s past. Her contradictions simply didn’t add up. I sensed a romantic temperament beneath her rage.

*

Candy went swimming at dawn the next morning, taking the dogs with her to the beach. She always went alone and Felix and Issy obeyed her command to stay on the

beach towel. In her mind, time spent in the water grounded her in eternity. Even though she spent less than twenty minutes in the Pacific, enough time passed to empty her mind of everything except the ocean's roar, the goose bumps on her skin, and the salt on her tongue.

After she walked out of the ocean and towelled herself off, she pulled on a hoodie, an old one from school days with the crest of St. Brigid's over her heart. She still wore the same size she did in high school. The wind chilled the bits of her still covered by the wet bikini. She looked around. No one paid any attention to her. She reached under the sweatshirt and unclipped her bikini bra, pulled one strap through the sleeve and then the other, tugging the wet top through. She dropped the bra into her tote bag. Using her towel as a shield, she shimmied out of her wet bottoms and pulled on a pair of shorts in its place. She could now walk the dogs to the Santa Monica Pier and buy a coffee without freezing. All she wanted was to keep moving. It was one of those too-frequent days when she feared stillness and doubted her ability to begin again.

She leashed the dogs and set out along the paved trail.

A Dumpster-diving homeless man stared at her. It wasn't the fact of his homelessness that made Candy uncomfortable but the smells that grew stronger as she approached: trash, stale alcohol, soiled clothes – odours from every pore and orifice. Yet her discomfort didn't morph into disgust or contempt. Instead a profound sadness overwhelmed her; she recognised the perfume of grief. He asked for money to buy a coffee.

'Sure I'll buy you a coffee. I'm heading there right now, come with me.'

He wanted cash.

She shook her head. ‘No cash, but I’ll buy you breakfast. How’s that? Better than a couple of bucks for coffee.’

‘What do I have to do?’

‘Excuse me?’ She furrowed her brow. ‘Eat it.’

‘No, I mean what do I have to do in return.’

‘Not a damn thing my friend. Not a goddamn thing. Do you have a family?’

She coaxed his story out of him over breakfast.

‘I used to sell photocopiers, made a pretty good living at it. My wife and I had a house over in Woodside and put our kids through college. Then she got cancer. At first we managed okay, until I lost my job and our health insurance went with it. I got another job a few months later, but the new insurance wouldn’t cover her treatments, they called her cancer a pre-existing condition. So, we got a home equity loan to pay for her medical expenses. Then she died. By then I was drinking a lot and not working enough, so I lost my house. But I didn’t really care anymore; everything was too hard to face. Living rough at the beach is better than dealing with the assholes at work anyway. Nobody at work was interested in my problems; they made a point of avoiding any personal contact like I had some kind of disease that was catching. My boss told me to call the employee assistance hotline rather than talk to him. You know what they did for me? Set up five sessions that were supposed to teach me how to solve my problems. Fuckin’ idiots. Five therapy sessions were supposed to cure grief and make me a productive worker.’

‘What’s your name?’ Candy asked.

‘John.’

‘Candy.’

‘Okay, my name isn’t really John.’

‘My name really is Candy.’

‘You don’t look like one.’

‘Oh, what do I look like?’

‘Pardon the insouciance, but Candy is a porn name. You’re more like a Joan or a Kate. Classic.’

A tear slid past Candy’s nose.

‘Did I say something wrong?’

She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. ‘No. Yes. Homeless men aren’t supposed to use words like insouciance. Clearly you’re not some high school dropout. It’s just ... I’ve been a capitalist all my life, believed that everyone could bootstrap their way to success like me. I got myself a good education. Worked my ass off; dear God in heaven I never expected anyone who did the same to become homeless. Shit, I drink too, especially when I’m sad, but so do a lot of people. None of us expects to lose everything.’

‘It’s just my bad luck, I guess.’

Candy stood up and walked outside to the ATM machine. When she returned she handed John five thousand dollars in cash. ‘Here, it’s all the bank lets me take out of a machine at one time.’

*

John, whose real name was Christopher, told me this story a year or so after the fact. After Memphis. He told it with genuine affection, even wonder. No one had ever shown him the sort of kindness Candy had. At the time he’d thought her unbalanced, a few bricks short of a load he’d said, no different from many other residents of the City

of Angels. He used the money to rent a room, clean himself up, look for work, and reconcile with his daughter.

Frenemies

A week or so later, fireflies danced about Soleado's porch light when I arrived home from work to find every one of Jack's windows ablaze with light. He hadn't mentioned another party. Should I have played harder to get?

Candy stepped out from behind a jacaranda reeking of gin, her lips rumped into a downward half-moon. 'Thank God you're here.'

'What's wrong?'

'He's losing his shit.'

'Jack?'

'Who else? Do you know who's in there?'

'Not a clue.'

'*Her* and a bunch of Republicans,' she slurred. 'Fucking chairman of the California Republican Party and get this,' – she leaned in closer and lowered her voice, 'the head of Moral Families First.'

'Isn't that the guy who was spotted in that restroom in Griffith Park?'

'Yes!'

'Why on earth has Jack invited him to his own home?'

‘Power. It’s not enough to be a big shot producer, Jack wants political power.’

‘Do they know he’s gay?’

‘Nope.’

‘Let’s go inside, the night air has ears.’

She took a step toward Jack’s door.

‘Not that way, I meant Soleado.’

Comprehending Jack’s reason for not including me at his latest party only made the rejection worse. It hadn’t occurred to me that Jack’s airs had their origins in self-loathing and that’s why he chose my house for our first night together. He hadn’t wished to contaminate his own.

‘Jesus Christ, you’re his beard,’ I muttered. Candy’s eyes opened wide as if I’d raised a hand to her. ‘That’s why you’re here all the time.’

‘No, that’s not it.’

‘Then what the fuck is going on in that house?’ I pointed next door.

‘Okay, maybe he uses me to run a little interference, but it isn’t what it looks like.’

‘He has no soul.’ I poured out a shot of vodka and drank it straight. ‘I’m such an idiot, I thought he was so evolved. He said he’d voted for Clinton, that he was a Democrat.’

‘He did vote for Clinton, that’s how we got to like each other.’

‘Then why is he wining and dining a bunch of bigoted neo-cons?’

‘Never mind them, it’s *her* that’s the issue.’

‘What are you talking about?’ I poured another shot. ‘He’s doing more than writing a couple of cheques. He’s *courting them*. And who is this ‘she’ that you keep referring to?’

‘Letty, Carleton’s wife.’

‘Is that why you’re so drunk, because lover-boy’s wife is in the house?’

‘Huh? Lover-boy? Oh, you think that I? That Carleton and I? Ha! That’s a good one.’

‘Then why aren’t you with them, ingratiating yourself with the Republicans?’

She fell silent. For all her bravado she had her principles.

I went into my moonlit bedroom to change my clothes. The cool smoothness of the wooden floor against the soles of my naked feet calmed me. As I walked across the room savouring the roughness of the slats between the floorboards, I wished that the day could begin again; that the memory of Jack emanating from the unmade bed – a unique blend of sex and woody cologne – hadn’t become just that – a strand of memory twisting over on itself under the humid effects of altered perception. Had we experienced the night in remotely the same way?

My favourite jeans were draped over the armchair in the corner and I reached for them, but before I had a chance to put them on a blood-curdling scream pierced the air through the open window. Still barefoot and half clothed, I reached the front walk in time to see Candy scoop Felix into her arms. A giant SUV had braked and sped off before I realised what had happened. Tears streaked Candy’s face, an anguished mask above the whimpering animal.

‘We have to save him,’ she said, her voice a fountain of grief.

‘Shouldn’t we get ...’ before Jack’s name left my lips he appeared.

‘What happened? Give him to me.’

Felix cried out as Candy attempted to hand him to Jack. ‘We shouldn’t move him around too much,’ she said, holding onto the dog.

‘We’ll take my car,’ I said, running for my keys and a shirt.

Jack climbed into the back and Candy took the passenger seat. She didn’t bother to buckle her seatbelt so as not to disturb the dog.

‘How did he get through the gate?’ Jack asked.

‘I don’t know. I was at Martin’s and then I decided to leave while he went to change out of his work clothes. The next thing I know, Felix is in the street and this black SUV drives right over him, didn’t even slow down until I screamed.’

Jack reached out to scratch behind the dog’s ears. ‘It’s going to be okay, boy.’

Throughout the trip he soothed Felix with his voice and his touch, stopping only when we exited the car. Felix most certainly had sustained a broken bone, maybe more than one, and by the time we arrived at the animal hospital he’d begun to drift out of consciousness, his whimpers and squeaks falling into silence. Each time he went quiet we thought the worst until our own stillness made it possible to hear the tiny whistle of his breath.

After a thorough exam, including x-rays, the Vet determined that Felix’s crushed pelvis and internal bleeding, among other injuries, meant that the chances of the dog surviving surgery were slim, and that he’d never walk properly again if he did make it through – a cruel outcome for a pooch.

Jack ran his hand over his shaved scalp, his fingers seeking what had been deliberately sheered away. In a stoic, foreign-sounding voice, he agreed to euthanise

his pet. He recognised the potential cruelty of massive medical intervention and wouldn't inflict it on Felix to avoid his own grief.

Back inside the car, Candy cried the make-up from her face and didn't stop sobbing until after her voice grew hoarse; the tissue in her hand disintegrated into dandruff-like flakes onto her clothes. As the Mustang rumbled along Highway One, the black sea to our left and the glowering city in its gaudy neon brightness to our right, Jack's grief consumed the space between us, while Candy's heaving sobs left insufficient oxygen for speech.

Only after we'd slammed the car doors shut in front of my house did Jack speak. He did so directly at Candy. 'It's your fault, you drunken slut, you left the gate open.'

'Hold on Jack, we don't know that,' I said.

'No Jack,' Candy said. 'I'm sure I closed it, I always shut it because I love the dogs almost as much as you do.'

He turned his back to her and walked toward Issy, who had stood up from the place where she lay behind the gate waiting for her master and her brother. She wagged her tail as Jack approached. He lifted her into his arms and held her as one might hold an infant. When, after a face nuzzle and murmured affections, he set her down, she looked back toward us and it seemed that she was missing Felix, for her tail pointed straight down and she peered in our direction almost as if she were asking a question: What have you done with Felix? But then she turned and trotted away toward Jack's heels.

The party guests had slipped away into the night during their host's absence and the only sound from Jack's house was the music that had been left on, an empty

smooth jazz melody heavy with sentimental saxophone. It wasn't something Jack would have chosen and I can only imagine that one of the guests had queued it up and left it behind, a dropped calling card of sorts, a memento of presumption.

'Let me pour you a drink,' I said wrapping an arm around Candy's shoulders and leading her toward Soleado's red door. 'It's not your fault. He'll come around, give him time, tonight you can bunk with me.'

She softened into my embrace and allowed me to guide her. The gutsy resolve and urban irony that marked Candy's daily demeanour, which I loved about her, had melted away leaving behind a deeply vulnerable soul. Hard as it was to believe, Jack's words had blasted through her tough skin as effectively as a shotgun.

'How could he say that to me? We've been through so much together. Christ, I helped him pick out those dogs.'

'You should sleep now, things will be better in the morning.'

'I can't sleep.'

'There might be some sleeping meds in my stash.'

'No thanks. It's nothing new, not sleeping, I barely manage four decent hours a night at the best of times.'

'Well, darling, I desperately need some rest.'

'Oh, yeah? Does that have anything to do with your birthday sleepover?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't be coy with me, yesterday was your birthday, I know because I peeked inside your wallet when you weren't looking.'

'You did what? That's outrageous!'

‘I wanted to know how old you were; you’re way too serious for someone who’s only thirty. And as for sleeping with Jack, well that’s your business; just remember that there’s a reason he lives alone.’

‘More than one I suspect.’

She nodded her head. ‘But you’re a man and maybe you don’t take sex as seriously as women tend to ... so I should just shut up now.’

‘No argument there.’

‘Martin, I think that maybe one of these days I’ll cash out and give up this racket, I don’t need to owe people like Jack anymore, I don’t need their business or their validation.’

‘I still don’t understand what your business relationship is about.’

‘Can you get me a blanket? It’s cold.’

‘Sure.’

I went to the linen closet for a spare pillow and blanket. On the top shelf, folded into a neat square, was a faded indigo cotton throw, one of the few things I’d brought with me from England, it had belonged to my older sister Clara, who died in a car crash when I was eleven. She remained forever imprinted upon me as her nineteen-year-old Amazonian self. Tall with strawberry blonde hair and sea-green eyes she’d dazzled everyone who’d crossed her path. Like Daisy, she had talent for charm and she also possessed that rare quality of beguilement. I hadn’t thought about her in years, but in the moment when I touched the nubby hand-knit cloth I remembered that the driver of the car in which she was a passenger had been a man fourteen years her senior and, although no one ever talked about him in great detail in my presence before or after her death, I had the distinct impression that my parents

disapproved of his nature. They did so not because they blamed him for the accident, the investigation had exonerated him and blamed the other driver, but for reasons I've never understood until now – he wasn't his own man. My father once described him as a chameleon forever camouflaging himself, in essence the worst kind of approval-seeking liar.

By the time I returned to the living room Candy had dozed off on the sofa. Caressed by lamplight, her face glowed like a movie star's on the silver screen and she could pass for an ingénue – Grace Kelly perhaps; no, more like Carole Lombard or the nineteen-year-old Lauren Bacall on the set of *To Have and Have Not*. Carefully, I placed the blanket over her and left the pillow within reach should she wake during the night. A dreamy hum escaped her lips and I kissed the top of her head. 'You're welcome,' I whispered.

A small rock slammed against the window. 'Candy! Get your ass out here!' A woman yelled from the front yard. Candy woke with a start.

'Who the hell is that?' I asked.

'Her. Fuck. I knew this would happen eventually.'

'Letty is outside my house throwing rocks at the window?'

She nodded.

'That's fucking juvenile.'

Candy shrugged. 'Yep, well she's got our attention, hasn't she?'

'What's her problem?'

'Tell you later. Maybe you could be a dear and call the cops? Have them haul her off?'

'No, we're going to ignore her and she'll go away.'

‘You’re dreaming. She isn’t going anywhere until she gets a piece of me.’

Candy threw off the blanket and walked outside barefoot.

Bewildered and concerned about a catfight on my lawn, I followed her.

‘Candy Pansenkosky,’ Letty yelled, ‘you are a fucking disgrace.’ Wild anger bordering on madness filled her eyes. Taut muscles in her face and shoulders betrayed her resolve to fight out whatever the hell she thought required it.

‘Eat me.’

Letty stepped inside Candy’s personal space.

‘If I’m a disgrace,’ Candy continued, ‘you’re a fucking sociopath. Get over it. It was just business, isn’t that what you always say?’

Letty tried to slap Candy, but Candy caught her wrist before the blow landed. They scratched and clawed at each other. Candy grabbed a handful of Letty’s hair and Letty succeeded in tripping her. With Candy still holding onto Letty’s long chestnut locks, they hit the ground together.

Jack and Carleton came outside, unable to ignore the commotion.

‘Are you responsible for this?’ I asked.

‘Me? Hell no,’ Carleton said.

‘Think we should break it up?’ I asked.

‘Good luck with that,’ Carleton said. Neither he nor Jack made a move, instead they took up positions as spectators.

As the two women grew tired, I found an opening and I reached around Candy’s shoulders to subdue her. Letty backed off then, collapsing onto the grass, her breath hard and fast, blood running from her nose. I helped Candy to her feet.

‘What was that about?’ I asked.

‘Ask her,’ Candy spat.

‘I’m the victim here,’ Letty said. She wiped the blood from her upper lip with the back of her filthy hand.

‘You’ve never been a victim in your life, you’re the victimiser,’ Candy said.

‘Clearly this is getting us nowhere,’ I said, pulling Candy toward the house.

‘You can tell me about it tomorrow.’ Then I slammed the door on Letty, Carleton, and Jack.

‘Candy, whatever you’ve kept from me, you’d best spill. I feel like I’m the only one who doesn’t have a program synopsis to this opera. Obviously Jack knows what the fuck this is about and he finds it goddamn amusing.’

‘All right, I’ll tell you.’ A bruise began to form on her cheek. ‘But let me clean up first, okay?’ She’d turned into the kind of dishevelled mess that gossip rags love.

‘I’ll run a bath for you and find something for you to wear.’

While she recovered in the tub, I made some tea for her and carried it to the bathroom. I tapped on the door, ‘You all right in there?’

‘Yeah, you can come in. It’s okay.’

‘I don’t know. I’ll wait until you’re finished.’

‘Seriously, Martin it’s okay. You’re not violating my privacy, I invited you in, bring the damn tea.’

I opened the door and went inside. Water and white foam reached her chin; all unmentionable parts were covered. ‘Where did you find the bubble bath?’

‘In the cupboard over there.’ She indicated the old built-in cabinet. ‘Are you saying it isn’t yours?’

‘Left by the previous renter, I suppose.’ I handed her the cup and then sat down on the floor with my back against the wall so that I could face her. I wanted to see every movement of her eyes, one of which had grown puffy from a bitch slap.

‘Martin, you’re a good caretaker.’

‘Thank you. Now do you suppose you could tell me why a woman you’ve known all of your life and once called “friend” throws rocks at my window in the middle of the night?’

‘She’s a mean bitch, that’s all.’

‘I don’t believe that’s all there is to it.’

‘She’s mad that her family lost control of their business.’

‘Did you have something to do with that?’

‘After ten years I found an opportunity to get even and I took it.’

‘What did you do, Candy?’ I was afraid of the answer, afraid that it would drag her down to the level of the Lettys and the Carletons of the world, and the world had too many of them already.

‘Look, I can’t tell you the details. What I can say is that the Camparinga family now own less than ten per cent of Camparinga Knits and that an outfit from China own fifty-six per cent of the voting stock.’

‘You stole their company out from under them. For what?’

‘I didn’t steal it, I merely facilitated a transaction that helped out Coffey & Coffey’s mergers business.’

‘This isn’t about Coffey & Coffey.’

‘No, it’s about what that bitch did to me when we worked together at Stillman White.’

‘Did you have insider information?’

‘Not technically, nothing that the Securities Exchange Commission would complain about.’

‘But you violated someone’s trust.’

‘We haven’t been friends for ten years. Let it go Martin. I didn’t do anything wrong.’

‘You keep telling yourself that.’ The sight of her bruised face pained me and I left her alone.

Later, at around dawn, I went out to the kitchen to refill my water glass and found Candy stretched out on the sofa with my sister’s blanket pulled up under her chin. An empty Doritos bag littered the coffee table, obviously pilfered from my pantry at some point during the night along with some salsa. The telly projected Kim Novak and Jimmy Stewart climbing the mission tower in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and Candy watched with the intensity of a first-time viewer. She’d stayed up all night, emptying her emotions into old Hollywood movies and junk food instead of sharing them with me or anyone else.

The Importance of Geography

Candy neglected to wear one of her trademark scarves on our beach walk the following day and dullness enveloped her. Despite heavy make-up, bruises marred her face.

A glint in the sand caught my eye and I bent to pick up a chunk of purple beach glass. Washed smooth by the sea, it had a pleasant shape and I put it in my pocket.

‘Candy, have you ever been in love?’

She held her breath. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘It seems to me that you love Jack, which is crazy I know, but still ...’ I tested my theory.

‘I do love Jack, but I’m not *in love* with him. We’ve been friends for nearly twenty years. Hell, I know him better than I do members of my own family.’

‘Okay, have you ever fallen in love with anyone? I don’t mean some romp, but real love.’

‘Yes, I have. More than once, but that was a long time ago, when I was green about such matters.’

‘Won’t you tell me about them?’

‘The first was from the old neighbourhood, we went to Loretto together.’

‘You met in high school? Didn’t you attend a Catholic girls’ school?’

‘When I was seventeen I fell madly in love with a girl in my class.’ She stopped walking and looked back toward the pier. ‘It was unrequited.’

‘What happened?’

She didn’t answer.

‘Did she reject you, shame you somehow?’

‘Look, it was just teenage hormones running wild and confused amid all that Catholic repression. My adult relationships have been with men, okay? Can we talk about something else?’

‘Was it Letty?’

‘Martin, sometimes you’re too intuitive for your own good.’

‘Thanks for being honest with me.’

They’d grown up together, the over-achieving children of immigrants, and had forged unlikely lives on Wall Street. Their bond had been tight enough for Candy to develop a teenage crush out of the mistaken belief that their sisterly affections could be something else. And now, unable to let go of the past, they remained entwined in a toxic relationship worse than any marriage gone wrong, all because Candy had risked her vulnerability and had been rejected with cruel laughter, the one thing every ego fears more than death. Knowing this, it became understandable why the brotherly give and take she had with Jack meant everything to her. He’d been her only real friend for twenty years. And he didn’t understand their friendship’s significance, at least not as it was for her.

‘She didn’t have to be such a bitch about it.’

‘What? Letty?’

‘Why did she tell? If she hadn’t told anyone, it would have been okay. Instead I had to endure a private sermon from The Penguin and the parish priest about the evils of homosexuality. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The other girls and their whispers and bathroom graffiti just about killed me. And it wasn’t true! What they thought was a lie and they wouldn’t believe me. She told her story first and that made it true.’

I linked elbows with her and guided her up the stairs to our favourite coffee shack. It wasn’t our favourite because it made the best coffee, although their lattes were pretty good. We liked the fact that on a weekday morning it buzzed with gossip and, if we didn’t overhear anything juicy, we invented our own.

Jordan and Daisy were seated next to each other on stools at a long communal table. He caressed her hand, their heads tilted such that their foreheads nearly touched. They had eyes only for each other and I wondered how it was that Jordan could cheat on someone he so clearly loved. Had he succeeded in mentally decoupling sex from intimacy, therefore it didn’t matter that he was fucking Brenda? Is that the problem with this city? Has narcissism and cynicism overshadowed the relationship between the sensual and the emotional, fading genuine intimacy to black? Perhaps it had to do with degrees of perceived risk, much easier to risk the physical consequences of casual sex than raise the curtain over one’s most private self. Maybe Jack shared his house with no one but the dogs for this reason. It was safer. But Jordan and Brenda were different – they shared the intimacy of their work.

‘Isn’t that a beautiful sight?’ Candy remarked. ‘God, I hope it’s true, their love I mean, for their sakes and for the kid’s.’

Candy knew about Jordan and Brenda and yet she wanted to believe in Jordan's devotion to Daisy, as did I. For this reason I made no gesture toward them – I didn't wish to break the spell.

'The usual?' I asked. 'My treat.'

'No, I think I'll have a herbal tea. Too much caffeine makes me nervous.'

'That's why you like it; it propels you through the day.'

'I'm beginning to question the value of nervous energy.'

We took our drinks outside and settled our tired bones into the sand. One of the more mundane sensual experiences available in California was Candy's habit of curling her toes in the sand, pushing it between and around her feet, as we sat talking. She liked the sensation of the grains grinding and flowing against her skin; in quieter moments it appeared to have a meditative quality.

Kites bobbed on gusty updraughts, their strings tethered to running and laughing children. Sculpted bodies travelled the bike path toward Malibu; ribbons of golden hair streamed out from beneath riders' helmets. Like a mirage, eternity shimmered into existence in front of me: surf and tide; moon cycles and procreation; sun and wind. And when you're on the cusp of eternity you understand that it isn't such a long time. It is now. It neither appreciates nor depreciates, you can't collect interest from it, unless you're the devil.

'I'm leaving tomorrow,' Candy uttered, almost choking on the words.

'Short visit.'

'Jack won't look at me. I may as well pack up and go, it's what he wants.'

'He's in shock, he doesn't know what he wants. Give him time.'

‘You’re right, that’s why going back to New York is a good idea – give him some space. Besides, I can’t stay under the same roof as *her*.’

‘There’s a second bedroom at Soleado, you know. It’s no problem to clean it out for you.’

‘That’s sweet Martin, but your house isn’t big enough for the two of us and I don’t want to crowd you.’

I didn’t want her to leave. She was the only person in America I could talk to about important things. ‘Brett Coffey might have a job for me, you say.’

‘It’s yours for the taking.’

‘What would I have to do?’

‘Why the sudden interest? I thought you didn’t want to move to New York.’

‘I fear this place is making me soft.’

‘What do you mean “making you”? You were never hard to begin with.’

‘Maybe New York can toughen me up a little.’

‘If that’s your reason for going, don’t bother, you’ll embarrass me. But if you want to apply that brain of yours to The Street’s top bond desk, you might have a shot. It’s only business after all, why do you have to make it so personal all the time?’

‘Why do you?’

She turned away.

‘You two look like a pair of conspirators.’ Jordan’s voice levitated over my shoulder, saving Candy from a response.

‘What makes you say that?’ I asked.

‘You’re thick as thieves,’ Daisy said, a gentle tickle in her tone.

‘We weren’t ignoring you. We didn’t want to interrupt your quiet morning.’ I stood and kissed her cheek.

‘You look sleep-deprived.’

‘Had a rough night, I’ll admit.’

‘What happened?’

‘Felix was hit by a car.’

‘Is he ...?’

‘Dead, I’m afraid.’

Daisy sniffed, ‘Tragic. How’s Jack doing?’

‘Not so good. He thinks it’s my fault,’ Candy said.

‘Was it? Never mind, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply you were careless.’

Daisy reached up and around Candy’s shoulders to hug the apology into sincerity.

‘I’m sure Jack will come around eventually.’

‘Candy and I were discussing New York a moment ago,’ I said, meeting Jordan’s gaze. ‘How would you feel if I took a couple of weeks’ leave?’

‘To go to New York? What for?’

‘Just to get away for a while and re-charge.’

‘Let me get this straight, you want to leave California to unwind in New York?’

‘Ironic, I know.’

‘Well, all right, but you’ll stay in touch, right? Take your computer with you?’

‘Of course.’

‘If that’s what you want, go ahead. Besides, you don’t really need my permission, Martin, but thanks for asking.’

The fact of the matter was that I wanted to put some distance between Jack and me. That was all. I had no intention of joining Coffey & Coffey, or any other firm, and fully expected to return to Soleado within a fortnight.

Part II — Mistakes Were Made

‘I’m good at love I’m good at hate

It’s the in between I freeze.’

– Leonard Cohen, *Recitation*

New York Dreaming

They couldn't be real, the apples in the clay bowl centred on Candy's dining table. Compelled by their aesthetic perfection, I made a beeline for the irresistible Granny Smiths to determine their edibility. Holding one in front of my face, I sniffed its skin, and delighted in the familiar perfume of fresh apple. The first crunch cleansed my mouth with sweet acidity, and removed the airline meal's residue from my teeth.

'This is heavenly,' I said with a full mouth, looking around her apartment at the same time. 'Your place is an oasis.'

'When I bought here it was the worst building on the street, but now, with a little vision and patience, it really is my sanctuary,' Candy said. 'Consider yourself special, Martin, not many people gain entry.'

Candy's Lower Manhattan flat held an unexpected softness, more akin to Soleado than Jack's place. Located in a converted factory, its wall of floor-to-ceiling windows illuminated the polished hardwood floors with afternoon's flaxen light. Meanwhile, the city's insistent presence had faded to white noise. Candy pressed a button on a wall-mounted panel and Ella Fitzgerald's *Someone To Watch Over Me* filled the empty spaces around us.

‘Follow me,’ she said, leading me down a short corridor. ‘Here’s your room.’

She opened the door to a small but functional bedroom with a double-bed set against the wall, and a small glass desk devoid of clutter set against the window.

Covered in a blue toile quilt that reminded me of summer afternoons in Provence and topped with overstuffed pillows, the bed held out an invitation to romantic notions, yet the room had the uncluttered loneliness of a fine inn – beautiful but impersonal. It seemed unlikely that Candy had selected any of the furnishings herself; they simply didn’t reflect her outward personality.

After Candy excused herself, I explored my surroundings, peeking inside the bathroom cupboards only to find extra toilet paper and a basket of miniature toiletries collected from hotels around the world. An artificial fern occupied a small decorative shelf next to the vanity; a thin film of dust dulled its leaves. In the bedroom closet hung some of Candy’s suits, presumably too dated to wear now, yet too expensive to throw away. The remaining hangers were empty triangles, some still fitted with transparent dry cleaner bags.

A box on the top shelf caught my eye. I stretched to reach it – one of those department store music boxes painted white with stencilled flowers on the lid popular among little girls in the 1970s. I lifted the top. A plastic ballerina in a pink tutu popped up and spun to music from Tchaikovsky’s *Sleeping Beauty*. Rather than jewellery, the box stored memories; concert ticket stubs from Madonna’s Blond Ambition Tour shared space with another set of stubs from a Frankie Valli show at a Catskill’s resort. In addition to these, there were a few Polaroids and other printed photos, matchbooks from various places, and what I assumed had been her father’s signet ring.

‘You are so busted.’ Candy stood at the open door.

‘Sorry. I know I shouldn’t have, but it was irresistible.’

‘I understand. I shouldn’t have raided your wallet for your driver’s license either. Consider us even.’

‘Oh my God,’ I said in response to a photo of Candy decked out like a young Madonna, hair teased, large crucifix hanging around her neck, school skirt topped by a sheer blouse with a black bra visible underneath. ‘You were a harlot wannabe.’

‘Just like every other girl my age.’

‘What’s with the Frankie Valli ticket?’

‘It was my Dad’s,’ she said with a strange tone. ‘We never went to the Catskills together.’

‘Did he take your mother?’

‘No, I don’t think Ma knows about it.’

My expression prompted her to continue.

‘Look, I found it among Dad’s things after he died, in a cigar box behind the furnace. There was all kinds of crap in there. Pictures, pens that when you tipped them upside-down naked ladies appeared, shit given to him by salesmen who did business with him.’

‘But why would you keep the Catskills stub and matches?’

‘They reminded me that my Dad had a life beyond coaching my baseball team and running a shoe factory, a private life with secrets. At the time I was pissed at him, but I kept it anyway.’ Her mouth hardened. ‘It’s how I learned that you can live with someone your whole life and not know them.’

‘I’m sorry.’ I closed the box and put it back where I found it. Some memories are best left consigned to the back of the closet.

She nodded and walked out of the room. Left feeling somewhat melancholy myself, I changed clothes and hit the street. A small strip of exposed cobblestones decorated the road and a pair of pigeons cooed from their perch on the fire escape of a neighbouring building. Music wafted out of open windows and shop doors, delightful and unfamiliar sounds of the city. A sweet-voiced rapper sang about heaven in New York and he meant it with a dreamy naïveté, one of eight million storytellers singing the gospel of a dream limited by nothing but one’s imagination.

What had Candy dreamed for herself as a child? What did she wish for? Did she expect the end of the rainbow to land here, on Manhattan’s golden sidewalks? Even though we’d become fast friends, I knew little about her inner life. Her overt persona, like the skyscrapers around me, cast a shadow over everything else.

I turned the corner in time to see a Gypsy cab drop a woman at the organic grocery store. Her hands were big enough to palm a basketball. I couldn’t help but watch her walk as daintily as her narrow hips allowed on a pair of platform heels. Even the transvestites had embraced the notion of food stores as urban status symbols. Where had the Big Apple’s grittiness gone? Had I missed out on its best days? Surely all its present cleanliness could only serve to suppress the creativity inspired by the dream? Still, I felt an energy I hadn’t experienced anywhere else, a sidewalk rhythm of possibilities that came from the electric concentration of the city’s eight million souls. A critical mass, whether they folded shirts for a living, emptied trash at The Plaza, foamed milk for latte lovers, or made cold calls at a brokerage firm, worked

because they dreamed. Maybe Candy was right; perhaps working for Jordan in Lotusland didn't serve me as well as this place could if I gave it a chance.

*

Later that evening, Candy introduced me to her boss, the ruddy-faced Brett Coffey, at Chinois, a restaurant of red and gold kitsch, where the hum of a large fish tank filled with lobsters and crabs vibrated against the back of my head. It was the kind of sound that stimulated paranoia about brain tumours.

Coffey had the kind of battle-ready Scots-Irish build that wins boxing matches. Although of average height, his hulking shoulders made him appear much larger. He wore the right clothes: a tailored but conservative charcoal wool suit, possibly Hugo Boss, a Dolce & Gabbana tie, a concession to fashion with its royal purple flamboyance, black Italian shoes and a Cartier watch. Yet, despite these accoutrements, Coffey was no Ivy League Patrician. More Hell's Kitchen than Greenwich, more SUNY than Yale, more sausage with mustard than filet mignon – in no way did he resemble my image of a man who'd inherited his position. He lacked the smooth confidence, finesse, and reserve that comes with a silver spoon. This roughness gave him some measure of credibility, suggesting the moral fibre of a self-made man.

'So what's your thing, Martin?' Coffey asked.

'My thing?'

'What turns you on? Winning? Numbers? Cash and prizes?'

'Are you asking what motivates me?'

'Yeah, in a sense, what gets your ass into work before anybody else?'

‘I guess I’m turned on by outsmarting everyone else.’ I hadn’t realised that this meeting might also function as a job interview.

‘So you do have a competitive streak in you, Martin,’ Candy said.

‘Doesn’t everyone?’

‘Never hire a man who has nothing to prove, or one who thinks he has nothing to prove,’ Coffey said. ‘Can’t motivate them to do shit, all you get is grief.’ He sucked a honey garlic spare rib clean, leaving a wide dollop of sauce on his chin that threatened his tie, but he wiped it away with his napkin in time.

‘What’s the most memorable deal you’ve done, Brett?’ I asked.

Candy laughed, not her hearty guffaw but a nervous tinkle. ‘Brett and Carleton caused the stock market crash of ’87.’

‘I thought it was a computer glitch.’

‘It was, but it was them behind it. Bit of an “oops”, but there you have it, the audacity of their power.’

‘We had a lot to learn back then, but modern software is much better. Can’t happen again. Hell of a ride though.’ Coffey paused for a sip of beer. ‘We made out all right in the end.’ He smiled ingenuously, speared a chicken ball, doused it with red sauce and brought the whole thing to his mouth. A shark’s tooth-shaped gold cufflink nosed its way out from the folded depths of his jacket sleeve.

Either Candy was more gullible than I imagined or this man was telling the truth. And he showed no remorse. He took pride in his ‘oops’.

‘How many people know that you’re at fault for the crash of ’87?’ I asked.

‘Everyone who remembers it. Rehabilitated myself during the recovery when I made a lot of money for the same people who’d wanted me lynched.’ He shovelled

some fried rice into his mouth and when he spoke again half-chewed rice kernels flew out from between his teeth. ‘Stock market’s too political these days. Derivatives, that’s where it’s at now, hardly any government regulations over those and no oversight. That’s why I hired Candy, she understands that side of the business better than me.’

Candy’s pleasure in Coffey’s praise was evident; it mattered to her that he liked her. Personally, I thought the man a complete jerk, but a tiny part of me wanted in on the glamour. I wanted to brag to Fierce – my older and prouder brother – about joining a major Wall Street player, to share war stories about lending rates and deals, and hoped that the meeting Coffey and I committed to taking at his office a couple of days hence would result in a job offer.

*

On the same night I learned that Candy’s employer had caused the stock market crash of ’87, I became a godfather. I know I congratulated Jordan, as did Candy, but neither of us spoke with the level of enthusiasm one might expect. Everything was strange.

After Jordan rang off, Candy and I were quiet. It seemed in some way that the news had reinvigorated the melancholic in her. Gone were the giggles and one-liners she’d delivered at Chinois.

‘How wonderful, they’re halfway to replacing their share of the labour force. Do you think they’ll have a third for me? And a fourth for you?’ She said.

‘You sound like Marx.’

‘Someone has to pay for our old age, Martin.’ She opened another bottle of wine and took it with her to her bedroom, ending our evening.

Of all the checkmarks against her list of achievements was there one goal left unchecked? Did Candy want a family of her own?

Suburban Fantasies and How I Met Candy's Mother

'It's too big,' Paulina Pansenkosky said the first time she saw the Madison house, the one Candy had purchased and renovated as a gift to her.

'Ma, give it a chance. You haven't been inside,' Candy said. 'You're going to love it.'

Candy opened her mother's door and assisted her out of the car, offering an elbow to grip. I jumped out of the back of Candy's Rover and inhaled the scent of the country – horse manure. The house stood on a hill overlooking pastoral New Jersey, its neighbours on each side a discreet distance away.

'Nice plants. Is there room for a vegetable garden out back?' Mrs Pansenkosky asked.

Candy snorted. 'If that's what you want.'

It irked Candy that her parents' Newark backyard had dedicated space to growing food rather than ornamental plants and grass, and that her mother canned the surplus produce for the winter. The presence of cucumbers, garlic bulbs, beans, tomatoes, apple and pear trees reminded Candy of her peasant heritage.

The carved wooden door gave way to Candy's key and a gentle turn of the handle. Daylight plunged through a skylight into the entry hall, a room dominated by a staircase and a crystal chandelier that mesmerised me with its rainbow prisms. A Persian carpet protected the walnut floor, and ochre walls comforted the eyes. First impressions suggested a home suited to a Wall Street banker or lawyer rather than Paulina Panskosky, former baker of rye bread and preserver of cucumber pickles.

'Nice, huh?' Candy said. 'I handpicked the rug and the previous owner left the chandelier behind. I think it's Austrian.' Candy held onto her mother's hand as she led her through the front rooms. 'Come on, you'll love the kitchen.'

Mrs Panskosky sucked in her cheeks and didn't speak. Candy mistook her silence for agreement.

The kitchen resembled the kind of thing one might see on the Food Network, sort of a cross between The Barefoot Contessa's Hampton estate and a designer's interpretation of a French country kitchen. Modern stainless steel appliances mingled with custom cabinetry painted buttery white and finished with antique rub. Terracotta floor tiles and billowy window shades made of gold and blue printed fabric evoked the south of France. An urn of dried lavender adorned the centre island. An abstraction of a family kitchen where real people prepared real food, it could only be a lonely place for a widow.

'You know I don't cook too much anymore, I don't need all this. Look at the size of that fridge! It holds enough food to feed the Osmonds.'

'Ma, nobody said you had to fill it.'

‘So much waste!’ Paulina said. To someone like her, wastefulness and artifice were as immoral as actual criminal code violations. ‘This place is so big, all my time will be spent cleaning.’

‘I’ll hire a cleaning lady for you.’

‘Bah, I don’t want some stranger going through my things.’

Candy strained to smile.

‘Let’s see the rest of it,’ I chirped.

My heart ached for Candy, even while I could see her mother’s point of view. The house resembled a world as alien to Paulina Pansenkosky as the boat loaded with displaced persons that deposited her girl-self on Ellis Island after World War II. Utterly foreign, the house spoke a different language and gestured toward a way of life that didn’t suit her values. It was as useful to her as an over-sized pair of stilettos.

Mrs Pansenkosky accepted my proffered arm and we followed Candy to the first floor. At the top of the stairs, Candy opened the double doors to the master suite, a sweeping space with vaulted ceilings and a view of the woods behind the house. Containing just one piece of furniture, a king-sized sleigh-bed, the bedroom’s expansiveness seemed even greater than it otherwise might. A closet as large as Paulina’s current bedroom stood ready to accept a wardrobe she didn’t have.

‘Candy, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I can’t see myself living here,’ Paulina said with all the warmth she could muster.

‘So what are you going to do? Stay in Newark?’

‘Yes, I think it’s the right thing for me.’

‘But what am I supposed to do with this place?’

‘You like it so much, you live in it. I own my house free and clear, I don’t need all that extra money from its sale if I have to plough it into furniture, maids, gardeners, and the new car I’m going to need to drive into Newark a couple of times a week to see my friends.’

‘But what about your long-term financial security? You could live another twenty years.’

‘Not in this house I won’t. If you want to give me a couple of hundred thousand in cash, be my guest, but I’m not asking for it, and I don’t need it.’ Then Paulina’s voice softened. ‘Candy, this was a generous idea, but it isn’t for me. Really, you’re a good daughter to think of this, but living out here, rattling around in this place will shorten my life. I know it.’

Candy’s shoulders slumped.

‘If you want to do something nice for me, send me on a trip to the old country to see my relatives, the ones who survived Stalin. That would be a great gift.’

‘All right, Ma. Whatever.’ Candy wiped the corner of her eye with an index finger. ‘You win. Stay in that grimy old house with its linoleum and shag carpet. Christ, you turn on the toaster and a hair dryer at the same time and the lights go out. But if that’s what you want—.’

‘I don’t use a hair dryer.’

Outside, the wind carried the scent of horse farms and cut grass. Before climbing back into the car, Candy and I took a walk around the property, and as we made a slow circle around the edges of the yard, she reached out to the living things in our path. We found thyme near the kitchen door and she rubbed the leaves between her fingers, and then she raised her hand to her nose and inhaled deeply. Closing her

eyes, she smiled and turned her face toward to sun. Then, satisfied with the pleasure of the thyme, she moved on and discovered a potting shed tucked between untamed dogwood and forsythia in the corner of the backyard. At the edge of the yard, we stopped and stood in front of a mature tulip poplar. Candy rested her fully-spread hand across its bark like a seeker might touch a holy relic – softly, gracefully, with deference. Then, she touched her forehead to the tree and wept.

*

Back at Paulina’s Newark home, Paulina placed a three-tiered cake plate lined with white paper doilies and loaded with sweets she’d baked herself onto the coffee table. Candy poured tea into three bone china cups. She’d sent the real estate agent home, telling him not to bother presenting any offers – Paulina wasn’t going anywhere.

I reached out for one of the biscuits that Paulina had made herself, a kind of sweet dough crescent with plum jam in the middle and icing sugar dusted on top. Its sugary tartness satisfied a longing I hadn’t realised I had – a desire for simple pleasures.

This house, the one Candy had grown-up in, stood as a time capsule to the 1970s and ’80s. Layers of photos of Candy filled the wall next to the staircase: Candy in a christening gown; a pre-pubescent Candy in plaid bell bottoms and long straight hair; Candy in her Catholic school uniform; and finally, Candy as a young working woman sporting shoulder pads and big hair in the early 1990s.

Crucifixes stood watch above the doors leading to other rooms. John Paul II’s portrait hung above the art deco sideboard, on top of which rested a rosary neatly twisted into a small circle. Candy caught me staring at the picture of John Paul.

‘What’s the matter, Martin? I suppose that for your kind that thing is like a black man walking in here and seeing a portrait of Strom Thurmond, racist SOB that he was.’

‘Something like that, yes, though I hadn’t considered it that way before now.’

‘Don’t worry, nobody here believes in the church anymore. Ma’s just a creature of habit. These relics belonged to my grandmother and they’ve hung around for no other reason than the superstitions of an old peasant lady with a third grade education.’

‘But surely your grandmother isn’t still alive.’

‘Died two years ago. Eighty-nine years old.’

‘Extraordinary, given the hardships she must have endured.’

‘Stubborn. That’s all.’

‘Runs in the family.’ I drank some tea. The coffee table in front of me had open shelves underneath and I spotted a photo album.

‘It’s okay, Martin, go ahead and open it,’ Paulina said.

As I did so, Candy whispered, ‘I think I’ll keep the Madison house. I like horses for neighbours.’

‘You’re never going to live out there,’ Paulina said.

‘I just like it, all right?’

Paulina dropped it. For some reason Candy had a vision in her head, a dream about a suburban life that wasn’t hers.

‘Who’s this?’ I’d come across a black-and-white photo of a young girl dancing on the beach, hair twisted in the wind, who appeared completely unaware of the camera or anything else but the meditative motion of her own body. Lost inside

herself, eyes closed, half-smiling, she held her arms above her head and twirled her pre-adolescent self against the receding tide.

‘That’s Candy,’ Paulina said.

After she said it, I could see the resemblance, the facial bones were definitely Candy’s, but that was the only recognisable aspect of the figure in the photo. What had happened to Candy during the intervening years? In the time I’d known her I’d yet to see her dance, let alone forget herself.

Candy turned the page. ‘See this one? This is my Dad receiving an award from the City for the work he did starting up a JA chapter.’

‘What’s JA?’

‘Junior Achievement. It’s a non-profit organisation that teaches teenagers how to run a small business. I did it for a year; my group ran a bank that made loans to the other kids’ businesses.’

‘What a shock.’

‘No way was I going to peddle cheeseboards or shit like that.’

‘Those things in your music box, the man’s ring, did it belong to your father?’

I asked Candy.

‘Yes, he wore it like a wedding ring.’

‘You have that?’ Paulina asked, wide-eyed. ‘I thought the funeral home lost it.’

‘I’m sorry, I had no idea ...’ I stuttered.

‘It’s okay, Martin.’ Candy said. ‘I should have ‘fessed up to Ma when she screamed bloody murder at the funeral director, but I just couldn’t. I wanted something special of Dad’s to remember him by. He believed in eternity, he believed

in commitment, in the sacraments, the moral underpinnings of a man's word. Fuck, I miss my father.'

'Me too. Every day.' Paulina said, touching her daughter's shoulder. 'And don't curse in this house.'

Candy reached for a plum preserve-filled crescent. Savouring a bite, she relaxed again. Polish peasant-style baking comforted her, whether she knew it or not.

Where I Learned to Like My Inadequacies

Brett Coffey's corner office, with its walnut panelling and view of Lower Manhattan, signalled his position in the pecking order of Coffey & Coffey society. In reality it wasn't much different from my father's office in style and décor, yet its pretensions hinted at the kind of social-climbing insecurity father shunned.

'Have a seat,' Coffey nodded at a low-slung leather chair. 'Drink?' He offered a decanted amber liquid.

'Thanks,' I said, even though I didn't want any. Sucked into the chair's deep crease, my above-average size felt increasingly diminutive as my spine folded pretzel-like into an uncomfortable slouch. A paranoid man might have thought that the chair was a setup, an intimidation tactic designed to make Coffey loom over his guest.

'Candy thinks very highly of you, thinks you'd make a solid addition to the analytics team,' he said. He filled two old-fashioned glasses with ice and eyeballed the amount of liquor he poured.

'I suspect she's biased, we've become friends.'

'Candy doesn't have any friends.' He handed me a glass. 'What do you believe you have to offer the firm?'

'International experience, integrity, a keen eye for numbers.'

'Blah, blah, tell me something I haven't heard before, tell me what you *know*.'

‘I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking.’ I sipped what tasted like a common Irish whiskey.

‘What do you hear? Any mergers buzz? Who’s overvalued or undervalued?’

This line of questioning confirmed my suspicions. Coffey hadn’t grown richer than his father by hiring people with integrity and a keen eye for numbers; he hired people who brought him insider information.

‘I’m curious, how did Candy respond to that question?’

‘She spent the first three months pissed off enough to steal the Metro Transit Authority account from Stillman White.’

‘Why burn that bridge?’

‘If you’re a friend of hers, you’d know.’

‘Are you talking about her history with Aaron Stillman? Or Letty Camparinga?’ I didn’t know anything about Stillman, but after Candy’s reaction to his cover photo it didn’t take much effort to realise he’d played a significant part in her past.

‘The MTA was about Stillman.’

‘And the Camparinga Knits deal was about Letty. What’s the story?’

‘Letty’s family runs – pardon me, used to run – a little manufacturing outfit over in Jersey. Nothing sexy, a knitwear company, socks and underwear mostly. What makes them outstanding is these Christmas sweaters they make. Huge profit in Christmas sweaters, they sell ‘em in every category from Wal-Mart to Saks.’

‘So what happened?’

‘Candy busted up the company. Sold the underwear division off to Fruit of the Loom and the Christmas sweater brands to the Chinese.’ He paused and seemed

absorbed in the copy of Egon Schiele's *Sinking Sun* that hung on the adjacent wall; at least I assumed it was a copy, who knew with this man? It seemed entirely possible that this was the original and that a copy took up space at a Viennese museum. When he spoke next his voice betrayed a pensive distance. 'Payback needs to be personal and it doesn't get more personal than busting up a former friend's company. So, who do you wanna payback?'

'No one.'

He shook his head. 'I can't figure you out Martin. You go out to LA and get mixed up in the TV business, but you don't make any money at it, at least not for yourself, and now you come to me looking for a job without any ideas about how to bring in new business. What kind of banker are you?'

There was a piece of fresh industry information I'd recently acquired from Jordan, but it hardly seemed fitting, yet it spilled from my mouth thanks to that damned painting. I didn't like the look of that sun; its faded pink haze over a bleak landscape left me doubting if it would ever shine on me again. I felt as though I'd fallen into a lacuna and I grabbed whatever resources I could muster. 'Carlo Spinoza, the Mexican soap opera king – you've heard of him? No? Well, he's rumoured to be the party behind a buyout of one of Disney's less profitable divisions. He may also take a run at Jack Winger.'

Coffey searched my expression and then laughed like a drunk at a comedy club, disproportionately hearty and long. When he stopped he said, 'Whatever Candy sees in you has nothing to do with what I need around here.'

We sipped our drinks and took in the view of the Manhattan Bridge, avoiding eye contact. Humiliated, I knew Coffey was right; banking wasn't right for me. Surely

Candy knew it too, perhaps that was the reason I'd won her confidence. I don't know. In that moment all I wanted was to click my heels together and land under the jacarandas at Soleado.

The telephone rang and Coffey turned back to his desk to answer. When he did, his eyes opened wide as he read the information on his Bloomberg terminal. 'Holy shit! This is gonna be a good day after all.'

I struggled my wrinkled body out of my chair.

'Thank you for the drink, and for releasing me from Candy's determined nepotism.'

'Whatever, Martin. Good luck to you.'

'You know something, Brett? Pigs in tuxedos are still hogs in the end.' I left the empty glass on his desk and saw myself out.

Outside Coffey's office the trading floor roared as the final bell approached. Brett probably kept his office close to the traders as a reminder of their myriad Faustian bargains.

Inside the elevator, a Bloomberg monitor ensured no one missed a minute of market action, and all those green and red triangles rolling across the ticker depressed the hell out of me. Well, I may have made a lousy banker, but I remained a solid judge of character. Coffey's impoverished soul stood in stark contrast to Candy's abundant spirit. Born rich, Coffey felt poor. I was ashamed of myself for taking the meeting with Coffey in the first place. I knew better and I hadn't trusted my instincts. No wonder Candy had accused me of being a dilettante. She'd read me correctly, understood something about me that I hadn't. If I continued to second-guess myself I'd never pursue anything with conviction, doomed instead to a life on the sidelines.

Before exiting the lift I caught one final headline; Limon Brothers, an investment bank twice the size of Coffey & Coffey, had filed for bankruptcy protection. This news must have been what Coffey had referred to before I departed and it had made him happy. It served only to remind me of the tepid sunlight failing to nourish the trees in the painting.

Confidence Man and Woman

Candy and Brett Coffey sat at Brett's marble conference table waiting on a client, one of the few of her hedge fund customers who questioned the wisdom of obligating clients to remain fully invested in the fund for a minimum of one year.

'Why do I have to meet this guy?' Candy asked.

'Because he's worth a couple of hundred million bucks.'

'So what? He wouldn't be giving it to me if he had the fortitude to manage it on his own.'

'Just be nice.'

'He's a waste of my time.'

'Jesus Christ, Candy. He's a client. Remember why we have them? So you can get paid.'

Candy knew why she sat where she did, as the only female hedge fund manager on The Street, and it had little to do with clients. They'd always been secondary, a necessary evil. But she would be nice, reassure him, remind him of her record, and remind him of the need for a little faith in the hand already dealt.

‘Do you play 21?’ she asked the customer after the customary handshake.

‘I’ve played a few hands.’

‘Do you hit on 17?’

‘No, never.’

‘I do. Sometimes I double up.’

‘Do you win?’

‘I win more than I lose.’

He swallowed.

‘Mr Blaine, one of the reasons you invested in my fund is that you felt the incentives were right. Unlike my competitors, I don’t make money if you don’t make money. That’s the reason you invested right? No flat management fee?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You studied my track record. The fund provides above average returns. Therefore you believed it was worthwhile investing in me. And you agreed that in order for me to do my job effectively, I needed a minimum commitment of one year. I can’t have nervous clients picking up their ball and going home because of one rocky quarter. This isn’t a game for pussies. You’re not a pussy are you, sir?’

‘No.’

‘All right then.’ She stood and reached for his hand. ‘Pleasure to meet you.’

‘Are we finished?’

‘I believe we are.’ She stood and ushered him out, noting the poor fit of his jacket. It was too big across the shoulders.

*

Later, in the kitchen pouring coffee, Brett said, 'Why'd you have to be such a bitch? He hates you now.'

Candy didn't understand why he should hate her; her words and arguments were no different from those of her colleagues.

Brett finished stirring his coffee and beckoned Candy to follow him. Together they walked into the bullpen where Brett called everyone to attention.

'Quiet! I have an announcement to make. As you know from the size of your bonus cheques, the company is in better shape than ever. There are a number of reasons for this, but right now I want to formally recognise Candy Pansenkosky for her contribution to the organisation over the past decade.' He paused and there was scattered applause. 'Without question we wouldn't be where we are today without her. The family and I have decided to make her a full partner and for the first time in the history of the firm we will rename the company. From now on we are Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky.'

'You didn't know about this?' asked one of Candy's staffers.

'Not a clue,' Candy whispered back.

'Get up here and say a few words Pansenkosky,' Brett said.

'Thank you.' Candy stood next to Brett and held his hand. 'This is beyond my expectations. When I joined the firm I had no illusions about its tightly-knit family and I was okay with being an outsider. In fact I was used to it. Hard work and loyalty paid off and now my name is on the door. If I can do it you can do it. Get back to work.'

A few hearty laughs punctuated her remark and Brett took over again. In the most sudden and informal way, Candy had received what she'd always wanted and

she'd bungled her chance to speak. She hated speaking in clichés. She never wanted anyone to perceive her as a cliché.

*

There was a story Candy longed to share with her colleagues, especially the young women, about how vindicated she felt in that moment. Her inability to do so had resulted in her clichéd response. Back when Candy had worked at Stillman White, and Aaron Stillman (now a post-Katrina humanitarian) was her boss he'd whisper terrible things in Candy's ear. I can smell your pussy, he'd say or, I want to suck your nipples until they bleed. These weren't private moments. He saved his bon mots for her weekly conference call with analysts across the country. As she began to speak into the star-shaped conference phone in the middle of the table, he'd lean over and with the lightest breath speak to her as one might to a common whore. Inevitably, her voice came out strange, less confident, not exactly unglued, but not quite together either. She didn't sound like herself, but someone else – an uncertain woman. She hated that woman.

One day Candy decided she'd had enough and complained to the human resources department manager. The manager's response was *not you too*. He advised her to document everything and keep it quiet, share nothing with anyone but him, and for God's sake don't talk to a lawyer. We can handle this in-house. So, Candy contacted a lawyer and discovered that taking legal action would mean leaving the company, possibly the industry, and there was no guarantee of compensation. Seeking justice would cost the highest price of all – her career. Stillman probably knew this, as did the human resources manager.

She'd told Letty about her situation, looking for a sounding board more than anything, and Letty had nodded, making all the right empathetic noises.

Candy kept quiet for over a year, recording the date and time of each of Aaron's transgressions in her journal. As she reviewed her entries, she noted that he'd crossed the line from verbal to physical abuse.

Her last entry was as follows: *Aaron followed me into the ladies' room after hours and reached under my skirt. I stabbed his instep with my heel. He called me a cunt and left.* The escalation of his behaviour suggested that the asshole human resources manager had advised Aaron of her complaint.

She considered handing her notes over to her lawyer but discarded the idea. What was the point? Nothing would change except that her career at Stillman White would end and The Street would blackball her.

Instead she invited Sol Stillman, the bank's chairman and the Stillman referenced in the bank's name, to listen-in on the next analysts' conference call, with the intention of having him witness his son's bullshit. Only she'd waited too long. Before she said a word he announced Letty Camparinga's promotion to Vice President of Bonds, replacing Aaron, who moved on to the global markets desk. Candy finished the call and went straight to Letty's office to congratulate her and to ask for her support in her complaint against Aaron.

Candy, she said, forget about all that, I'm your boss now, and I promise not to sexually harass you.

These are the reasons why Candy had left Stillman White and no longer called Leticia Camparinga friend. Boorish blowhard that he was, Brett Coffey had never laid a hand on Candy or undermined her confidence. He didn't bully her. In his own way he'd nurtured her over the years and now he'd paid her the ultimate compliment. He'd

made her a partner. They were equals. She owed him something, loyalty if nothing else.

*

On the same afternoon as her promotion to partner, Candy entered a community centre on the Lower East Side, something she did each Wednesday. The centre's concrete lawn harboured a children's playground complete with monkey bars, swings, and a sandbox. A handful of kids played under the watchful eyes of their mothers. Inside, Candy greeted the receptionist by name and walked past her to a room in the back. Its sunny yellow walls displayed words and pictures generated by the young women waiting for Candy.

'Candy! We thought you weren't coming,' Glory, a pregnant seventeen-year-old, said.

'I'm sorry I'm late. It's been that kind of day. How are you? Baby still kicking every night during Late Night?'

'Yeah, I think he's gonna be in show business some day.'

'And what about you Charley? What did the doctor say last week?' Candy draped her jacket on the back of a chair.

'Says I need to eat more to make up for the weight I lost during the first three months. But Candy, the kind of food she tells me to eat is expensive. I can't go to Whole Foods all the time.'

'No, you can't go to Whole Foods, but there are other places, you just have to know what to look for. Lord knows I'm the last one to talk, but you have to learn how to cook for yourself. You'll save money and you'll be better nourished.'

Candy hoisted her bags onto a desk.

‘What have you got for us this week?’ Glory asked. Eight pregnant teens looked at Candy with anticipation. ‘The last one was really good. Who knew that New York is the same as it ever was, just with more stuff.’

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn was their favourite novel yet. Candy had been uncertain in its selection, even though she’d loved it when she first read it at around age twelve. She’d worried that its historical nature wouldn’t speak to them, that pre-World War II Williamsburg with its Irish and Jewish immigrants scratching out lives in crowded tenements would be a foreign land they couldn’t relate to. But she was wrong. The problems were the same, just with different clothes. Alcoholic fathers, empty bellies, and enduring hope in the face of despair never grew old.

Candy reached into her cloth Strand Books bag and removed ten copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. ‘Another classic for you.’

Each of them looked hungrily at the brand new books whose spines they’d be the first to crack.

‘What’s it about?’ asked one of the new girls, a petite youngster not far beyond childhood herself who’d made the mistake of believing the boy – a friend of her older brother’s – who said he’d pull out, that he loved her so much he didn’t want to stop and go to the drugstore.

‘It’s about a young girl and her brother in the South whose father defends a black man wrongfully accused. As we’re reading I want you to think about the injustices you see in the world today, right here in your neighbourhoods, in your lives, and write down your thoughts anyway you want to write them. Rhyming verse, prose poems, stories or essays are all good. Write whatever comes up for you and don’t worry about what it looks like to other people. Just write it all down, fast and furious.’

You can combine words and pictures too. Do a collage, or if you have a computer make a digital collage expressing your feelings about what you see and hear.’

Candy volunteered at Literature for Life, a galaxy away from Wall Street, and that’s exactly why she liked it. Those kids knew more about truth than any girls their age ought to. And they were insulted, ignored, and punished for it. Like Shylock, they were persecuted, without mercy, by those who were more powerful. No one in her circle knew that Candy spent Wednesday afternoons mentoring pregnant teens. It was something she kept private, a reflection perhaps of her understanding that she thought differently, and that such thinking was both an advantage and a curse. Narrow-mindedness made it easier to follow the crowd, something that Candy would not do for its own sake. Her nature made her a lousy member of any herd. Like an eagle, she was a solitary creature who soared above her surroundings and saw beyond terrestrial borders.

‘Can I start reading?’ Joely asked. When she’d first joined the group she had trouble phonetically sounding out the words she didn’t know and reading aloud embarrassed her. Like her peers in the group, she tested at a third grade literacy level in the beginning. For the first couple of months she’d turn up each week with an empty notebook, scared that her written words would make her look stupid. Gradually that changed. She liked to write verse, emulating the rhythms of her favourite hip-hop artists. Candy had submitted one of her poems to the Transit Authority and they had made it available to New Yorkers riding on the underground. Joely’s rhymes shared public space with Charles Bukowski and Emily Dickinson. Sometimes Candy would go down into the subway and ride the trains just to see the poster, and each time she

did it moved her, this small thing, a poem by a young girl with the courage to hold her head up high despite everything.

They took turns reading aloud for an hour. That's all it took to settle them into their own skins and fire their desire to learn about Scout and Atticus. Half of them left the room with the book still open, hungry for more. Others sat for a few minutes scribbling in their notebooks. One word at a time and they grew less afraid.

Friends, Money, and the Big Bad World

With not a scratch or a stain on the enamelled Emile Henry casseroles or the non-stick skillets, it was clear that Candy had never used the thousands of dollars worth of cookware stored in her kitchen. On a whim I'd stopped at Whole Foods. Creating dinner from scratch seemed a better option than wallowing in my inadequacies at the tavern down the block from Candy's apartment. Softening Candy up for a word about my future in New York, or more precisely, my plan to return to Soleado ahead of schedule, dominated my thoughts as I sautéed onions, until the door buzzer interrupted me.

'Hello? Who's there?' I said into the intercom's handset, even though the security camera had already revealed Jack. Why had he come all the way to New York unannounced? His treatment of Candy had been harsh, and an apology was due, but I doubted that this had motivated his visit. Naturally, I unlocked the door to the street without question.

I killed the fire under the onions and poured myself a glass of wine while he journeyed up the lift.

‘Jack, good to see you.’ We shook hands. ‘What brings you here?’

‘Business, what else.’

‘Oh, I thought this might be a social call.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Candy? I imagine she’s still at the office, should be along soon.’

‘Do you know when? Can you call her?’

‘It might be better to just wait – ’

‘Why’s that?’

So, he wished to play it like nothing had changed. I turned away and fetched olives from the fridge.

‘What’s cooking?’ He asked over his shoulder as he hung his jacket on the coat stand.

‘Nothing special. Would you like some wine?’

‘Thought you’d never ask.’ He settled onto a stool at the breakfast counter. ‘So how’s it going here? Are you taking a job?’

‘No, I’m not taking a job with Brett Coffey.’ I handed him a glass of Barolo and turned my attention back to the onions. ‘I hope there’s enough food.’

My meeting with Brett Coffey wasn’t something I wished to share with Jack. It revealed too much. I feared for Candy. Clearly, her greatest mistake had been consuming revenge before it lay cold on the plate. Moreover, the encounter proved that Jack was also out of my league. Jack would most certainly have extracted something from Brett had he been in my shoes, whereas I hadn’t tried, didn’t have a strong enough agenda to know what to ask for; whereas, Jack always knew how to further his agenda and never allowed a meeting to go to waste.

‘I didn’t come here to eat.’ Jack shifted in his seat. ‘Been to any shows? Isn’t that what people do in New York, attend the theatre?’

Small talk had become excruciating. A houseful of conservatives and one dead dog later, and Jack had become someone I no longer cared to entertain. I thought of Brett and his painting. Maybe the artist’s perception of the sun and the world had been clouded by a similar disappointment, a failure of empathy.

Candy walked in then, her posture betraying Sisyphean exhaustion. She hung her jacket up before noticing Jack. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Well, that’s a fine how-do-you-do.’

‘Seriously, after the day I’ve had, I’m not prepared to deal with your shit.’

‘I come in peace.’

‘We’ll see about that.’ She accepted the wine glass I offered and remained standing.

‘Sit down.’ Jack said.

‘I’d rather stand, easier to show you to the door if you misbehave.’

Jack shrugged and I stopped cooking.

‘All right,’ Jack began. ‘I’m sure you know why I’m here, the project is behind schedule and we’re running out of cash.’

‘What a fucking surprise. That’s what happens when your leading man is the biggest coke-head – ’

‘Look, can we be serious, here?’

‘I am being serious. I told you not to hire that guy, he’s uninsurable.’

‘It’s not just him. The weather hasn’t co-operated and we had customs issues in Argentina. It’s one thing after another on this fucking movie.’

‘Well, what do you expect me to do about it?’

‘I just need a line of credit, another ten million ought to do it.’

‘That won’t cover post-production and marketing.’

‘It’ll get the shoot wrapped, I’ll worry about the post-production costs later.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’ Candy kicked off her high heels and walked over to the sofa, taking her wine with her. She curled up and retreated into herself. ‘You won’t make a cent if the thing never gets in front of an audience.’

‘What am I supposed to do? Quit now?’

‘Go big, like you always do, ask for what you really need to finish the film.’

‘I need another fifteen to twenty million.’ Sweat beaded his upper lip.

‘Peanuts.’

‘Then you’ll get it for me?’

‘No.’ She picked lint from her trousers.

‘For fuck’s sakes Candy, are you toying with me?’

‘There isn’t any appetite right now for the kind of risk you’re talking about.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Haven’t you heard? Limon Brothers is dead. No one’s lending money right now to anybody.’ And neither was she. Least of all to him. ‘Sorry about your luck.’

‘Why are you doing this to me? If this movie never earns a cent in box office receipts, I’m ruined.’ Jack’s temples throbbed.

‘Ask Eastwood for the money.’

‘Already did.’

‘Then you’re just going to have to shelve it until the markets settle down.’

‘What the hell am I going to live on? My credit cards are already maxed out.’

‘Get a job, like the rest of humanity.’

‘This is my job.’

‘You’ll have to lower yourself to becoming someone else’s employee, surely you can do that, given all the contacts you have.’

‘I don’t know how to be an employee.’

‘Figure it out.’

Jack stood over her then, staring down at her Buddha-like pose. Candy wasn’t giving an inch to his threatening posture; instead she projected calmness in direct contrast to Jack’s agitation, which served to turn his face redder.

‘Maybe Martin can find something for you to do at Jordan’s,’ she said, twisting the knife.

Jack threw the remains of his wine at her face.

‘That’s enough!’ I said. ‘Jack, you’d better go.’

Candy found a paper serviette on the table in front of her and wiped the wine from her eyes. ‘You’ve wrecked a four hundred dollar scarf, not to mention everything else I’m wearing.’

‘Send me a bill,’ Jack said. The glass he held shattered from the pressure of his hand and shards littered the rug. Blood oozed from his palm, but he didn’t appear to notice as he strode to the door and slammed it behind him.

‘Martin, I think we oughta stop welcoming unexpected company inside.’

‘Are you suggesting that this is the beginning of something?’

‘All I know is that things are only going to get worse. Your old man read the tea leaves pretty well.’

‘Then you won’t mind learning that my conversation with Brett went badly.’

‘Providence, I’d say. I’ll be right back.’ She got up and went to her room.

‘Dinner will be ready in ten minutes.’

She came back a few minutes later wearing fresh clothes.

‘This has been a hell of a day.’

‘You mean the thing with Jack?’

‘That and Brett made me a full partner, we’re Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky now.’

The spatula fell from my hand, splattering rice and sausage onto the floor.

‘You’re right, a hell of a day.’

For our own unspoken reasons, neither of us felt like celebrating, but we made a show of it with a fresh bottle of wine anyway. Looking back, it’s clear to me that Candy was already changing direction, adjusting her thinking and we were closer in our assessments about our world and the people in it than she let on. She’d wanted me in New York in order to have a like-minded person close at hand. Her spirit was lonely. And on some unconscious level, perhaps I knew it too, for I didn’t leave for Soleado the following day after all. That night we each grieved the end of our relationship with Jack. It was beyond repair.

Equal Opportunity Celebrations

‘Don’t block it in.’ Candy slipped the parking valet a twenty. ‘There’s another twenty in it for you later if you do as you’re told.’

Candy and I made our way to the open front door of Brett’s Hamptons house. The place glittered with strings of white lights hung on the branches of potted trees brought in for the occasion. A four-piece jazz ensemble played Nat King Cole tunes, and waiters circulated with trays of food and drink. Sweeping views of Long Island Sound lay beyond the terrace, visible through the wall of windows at the back of the house. Fifty or more people crowded the living room, chattering with practised smiles.

‘Candy!’ Brett’s wife said. ‘Congratulations! Welcome to the family.’

‘I thought I was already in the family, Shiloh.’

‘You know what I mean. Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky!’ Mrs Coffey smiled wider and embraced Candy. ‘I trust you know everyone? You’re all right on your own?’

‘Go ahead with your hostess duties, we’ll be fine.’

Shiloh floated off toward the kitchen and Candy lifted two martinis from a passing waiter’s tray.

‘Is one of those for me?’ I asked.

‘No, get your own.’

She downed one martini and walked toward the band carrying the other. They were playing *It's Only a Paper Moon*. Out on the terrace she spotted Carleton and made a U-turn into the house, where I returned to her side. Everyone above vice-president level at Coffey & Coffey had capitulated to this command performance and put their best shoes on. Candy didn't appear to want to speak to any of them. Empty congratulations and forward-looking speeches weren't her thing. Even though she'd desperately wanted to arrive at the top, she didn't really want to lead this motley crew of ‘mathletes’, perverts, and social climbers.

One of the new associates in private equity walked toward us and said, ‘Congratulations. A beacon of hope to women everywhere.’

‘Thanks,’ Candy said. ‘But it's really not that big a deal. Women everywhere have better things to do.’

‘Modest too.’

‘Just keeping it real.’

‘You don't remember me, do you?’

‘That obvious?’

‘Priya.’

‘Right, sorry.’

‘Can I talk to you? Not now, later, at the office.’

‘Happy to. Make an appointment on Monday.’

Priya nodded and wandered off to engage a circle of people.

Candy picked up a third martini, turned down food, and wandered off down a corridor. She knew where it went – Brett’s Cave, with its pool table, library, and PS3 that his kids weren’t allowed to use. They had their own. Brett held court with a group of guys sipping scotch and smoking cigars.

‘Pansenko!’ Brett called to her. He showed his teeth. ‘Get over here.’

‘Hi, thanks for the party, it’s really sweet, but not necessary.’

‘You’re officially one of us now, of course it’s necessary. Consider it sort of like a Bar Mitzvah. Today we make you a man.’

‘That’s funny. I’m flattered I guess.’ She lifted her glass and clinked it against Brett’s. ‘Salut.’

‘That’s my girl.’

A waiter came in with a tray of oysters and smoked salmon on mini pumpernickel. Candy took a long look at the young man. His nametag marked him as ‘Rob.’

‘Actor, Rob?’

‘Yeah, just like every other waiter in New York.’

‘Really?’

‘No, I live out here year round. I’m local.’

‘Going to school?’

‘Hofstra.’

‘Studying what?’

‘Law.’

‘You’re too pretty for the law. Say, don’t I know you from somewhere?’ She touched his forearm and batted her eyelashes. Candy hadn’t exhibited such overt

flirtatiousness since that first party at Jack's. Except back then her efforts had carried a light-hearted naturalness. Here, on Long Island, with Thanksgiving around the corner, her eyes betrayed weariness.

'Hey, you know what Dorothy Parker said about martinis?' Candy said.

'Tell us,' Brett said.

'I like martinis, two at the very most. Three, I'm under the table, and four I'm under my host.'

'How many have you had?' Brett asked.

'Three.'

'Excellent,' he said, grinning.

'How do you do that?' Candy pushed one of her eyebrows up with her finger. 'I've never been able to do that.' Then she turned and sauntered out behind Rob.

'Stick with me, kid.'

They rounded a corner toward the back of the house and climbed the hidden staircase to the apartment over the garage. The apartment had two rooms, one large open space for lounging and cooking, the second was a bedroom lit by a skylight. She flopped onto the bed and Rob climbed up next to her. Except for the moonlight and the glow of a clock radio, the room was dark.

'Look,' Candy pointed at the night sky. 'You can barely make out Aquila.'

'What does it look like?'

'It's the eagle.' She traced its outline with her fingers. 'Aquila was the eyes of Jupiter, together they led the world.'

'Did you bring me here for an astronomy lesson?'

'What if I did?'

‘That’s cool.’ He reached into his pocket and pulled out a lighter.

‘Can’t smoke in here.’

‘Not even this?’ Inside a crushed Marlboro box was a joint. ‘I’ll share it with you.’

He lit it and passed it to her. Inhaling deeply, Candy worked hard not to cough out the smoke.

‘Been a while?’

They finished two-thirds of the joint before pinching it out and Candy slid down the bed to lie flat. The world slowed down and she laughed.

‘What’s so funny?’

Rob slid down too and the warmth of him undid her. Until then she’d restrained herself, knowing that it was a bad idea to fuck a waiter in her boss’s house during a party held in her honour, in the same bed his mother-in-law occupied every August. Within seconds she found herself submerged in a sea of breath and bare skin where nothing else mattered except this boy with no last name and the connection she longed for. All external sounds vanished. She didn’t know if minutes or hours had passed, and didn’t care. There were no hang-ups connected to this sex. No ties. No history. No future. Unbound, she forgot herself.

‘Don’t stop,’ she said barely above a whisper, eyes closed until the overhead lights went on. ‘Shoulda known it’d be you.’ Letty teetered on high heels, her hand held by another woman Candy recognised from the Wall Street Women’s Alliance.

‘Shit,’ Rob said, reaching to cover himself with a blanket.

‘Well, what have we here? Looks like a standoff to me,’ Candy said. ‘I won’t tell if you won’t tell.’

‘Carleton knows,’ Letty said.

‘She’s bi-curious you know, but she’ll never be yours,’ Candy said to the botoxed blonde.

‘No one can know about this,’ she said ‘My career – ’

‘Don’t you worry about that. Letty will take care of you, just like she took care of me once.’

‘You too?’ Rob asked. ‘If you ever want to again, you can call me.’

‘Get dressed,’ Candy told him. She turned to Letty and her friend. ‘Do you mind?’

The two uninvited women left the room.

Candy dressed quickly. Why the fuck did Letty ruin everything? Why had she bothered to attend the party in the first place? Such boldness – and depravity! Who did she think she was?

*

Meanwhile, the posturing in Brett’s cave drove me outside into the autumn breeze, onto the terrace where a few couples foxtrotted and waltzed to the Cole Porter songbook. Shiloh Coffey spotted me on my own and, with the finesse of an experienced hostess, manoeuvred me into a circle of her women friends, where a manicured socialite asked me about my relationship with Candy.

‘We’re friends,’ I said.

‘With benefits?’

‘Charlene, that’s hardly polite,’ Shiloh said.

‘I’m checking on his availability. He’d look adorable on my baby sister’s arm. She just graduated from Smith.’

Didn't they know? Brett too had made a strange comment after Candy had followed Rob, suggesting that I ought to be bothered by Candy's behaviour. Was everybody in this damned place blind? Obtuse to the point of wilful ignorance? It may not be San Francisco, but for the love of God it was New York, one of the most sophisticated metropolises in the world. Or was Charlene just being polite? Making the kind of idle chatter one does on such occasions, meant to be forgotten before the night ended, layered with no meaning whatsoever.

I pointed at the walking cast on Charlene's leg. 'What happened?'

'Oh that. It's nothing. My husband works for Brett, he's the VP of operations. The whole management team and their spouses had to go on this team-building thing. You know, one of those bonding things that's supposed to turn us into a family. It was held up in Wyoming on a ranch with one of those ropes courses, sort of like the circus, with trapeze and stuff. Anyway, I broke my ankle when my husband failed to catch me during a trust building exercise.'

'Didn't you have a safety harness?'

'Yes, but my foot got caught up in the net, it's hard to explain a freak accident.'

'Charlene's a trouper though, she went on a ten-mile hike with the group on that ankle. She just taped it up and went,' Shiloh said. 'Didn't hear a whimper out her the whole way.'

'All for the company.' Charlene flashed a brave smile to the boss's wife.

'Why did you do that?' I asked. 'It must have been excruciating.'

'Mind over matter. Didn't know yet that it was broken. Thought it was just a bad sprain, besides how would it have looked to the rest of them if I'd backed out?'

The Harry Winston diamonds hanging from each earlobe might have influenced her decision too. Even the spouses were crazy in this place or, if not bonkers to begin with, complicit in the madness.

*

On leaving the mother-in-law flat, Rob and Candy went their separate ways; he wandered toward the kitchen and she searched for her coat and handbag. Shiloh usually placed guests' belongings into one of the bedrooms and Candy started opening doors. The first room she tried turned out to be their daughter's, made evident with its pink and white ode to Paris Hilton. No party guest belongings in there. She moved to the next door. Again, she opened it just far enough to get a look inside. Brett's voice carried out and she opened the door further. Inside, Brett attempted to kiss an unwelcoming Pryia.

'What's going on here?' Candy asked.

Pryia pushed Brett away, picked up her jacket and purse, and walked over to Candy. 'Nothing now, thanks to you.'

'Does this have anything to do with the meeting you asked for earlier?'

'Yes, partly.'

'I see. You go on home and I'll talk to you next week.'

'Great timing, Pansenkosky,' Brett said. 'Way to ruin a perfect night.'

'I don't know whether I should be upset because you're a sexual harasser or because you never tried it on me.'

'Aw, come on! You're not a real woman. We're partners for Chrissake. Where's the fun in that?'

‘Jesus Christ, Brett.’ She found her things in the closet. ‘Look, thanks for the party, I really should gather up Martin and be on my way.’

‘Hey, what are you so sore about?’

She turned her back on him and left him alone. What was she upset about? Pryia was a grown woman who could handle herself. Brett’s behaviour wasn’t all that surprising, although she’d never actually seen any prior evidence that he’d been unfaithful to Shiloh. Nor could she describe her own behaviour that night as pious. It wasn’t Brett’s indiscretion that troubled her so much as her own hypocrisy. They were both self-indulgent in their own way, she and Brett, and knowing this made her feel dirty.

Candy rescued me from further conversation with Charlene and Shiloh comparing the effects of Botox versus Restylane, and insisted that I drive the Rover back to the city. I accepted the keys without question, but I hadn’t expected Candy to want to cut-out early. It was her night. She ought to have basked in the glory and the audacity of her dreams coming true. Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky had more assets than Stillman White Camparinga. Candy had outcompeted her rival. And she didn’t seem to care.

After New York: Candy Checks Into Detox

Out of the blue, a few weeks after my return to the west coast, Candy turned up on Soleado's doorstep. We hadn't spoken much in weeks and, given the events in the wake of the Limon Brothers bankruptcy, I wasn't surprised. She had her hands full placating clients.

'Candy?' I squinted into the sunlight. 'What are you doing here?'

'How are you, Martin?' She leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. 'I need a place to hide out for a while.' A large suitcase stood behind her.

'Does this have anything to do with what appeared in my newspaper today?'

'What now?'

'The implosion of another one of your competitors for one thing and the sub-prime mortgage debacle in general for another.'

'Oh, that.' She actually sounded relieved. 'Aren't you going to invite me inside?'

'Can I get you anything? You remember where the guest room is?'

After she freshened up, we sat outside, under the jacaranda, sipping Mint Juleps, soothed by a babbling fountain on Jack's side of the fence. Candy nodded toward his house. 'Has he put it on the market yet?'

'He declined to list. The appraisals were lower than he expected.'

'But the carrying costs – ' She squinted over the fence.

'Oh? Is he heavily leveraged?'

'What do you think, Martin?'

'Why exactly are you here? Not that I'm unhappy to see you.'

'The kids.'

'Pardon?'

'Jeez, you should see the look on your face. Obviously not my kids.'

'Your unborn kids?'

'Too late for that,' she sipped her drink. 'I'm talking about the Livesburg Tennessee School District.'

'Go on.'

She waved her mobile phone in front of my face. 'Twenty-three messages in as many days from the board's treasurer.'

'So?'

'We have to fix it. It isn't right what happened to them and we need to do something about it.'

'*We?*'

'Me and you. You're the only one I can trust to help me out.'

‘I still don’t know what the devil you’re on about.’ She had a gambler’s twinkle in her eye, the one you see when the dice are suspended in mid-air. ‘If it involves a casino, I want nothing to do with it.’

‘Huh?’ She furrowed her brow at me. ‘Don’t worry, it’s a fool-proof plan.’

‘Does it involve card counting?’

‘What? No cards.’

‘Dice?’

‘Why are you fixated on gambling?’

‘What exactly are you intending to do?’

‘Some fundraising.’

‘Still need more information.’

‘You’re going to set up a private trading account for me at your daddy’s firm and we’re going to place some bets on the shake-out on Wall Street.’

‘You’re not proposing anything illegal?’

‘Hell no! I’ve never broken the law in my life, unless you count speeding or some pot smoking in college.’

Her voice grew agitated and her hands filled the air as she proceeded to tell me about the derivatives some hick broker had sold the Livesburg School District, a product supplied by Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky.

‘This guy, Dodds the salesman, probably only had an hour’s training on what the hell a Collateral Debt Obligation is. He told them that their investment was as safe as collecting interest on a bank account and they couldn’t lose!’ She rolled her eyes.

‘Fucking amateur. All it took was a ten per cent default rate for the whole thing to go tits up.’

‘What happened?’

‘Twenty-eight per cent defaulted so far. There could be more.’

‘Jesus.’

‘The School District is so far in the hole it’ll take a hundred years for them to dig themselves out.’

‘How much are we talking about?’

She removed her sunglasses and looked me square in the eyes. ‘One hundred and fifty-two million dollars. Poof! Disappeared.’

I whistled. ‘But what does that have to do with you? Didn’t they sign-off on the customer disclosure documents?’

‘Martin, I know it isn’t my fault, at least not directly.’

‘So why hatch some scheme to help them?’

‘Martin, just go with my plan, it’ll make you feel good to do the right thing. Sometimes the strong need to protect the weak.’

‘What do you want me to do?’ I couldn’t say ‘no’ to her. She knew it. I knew it. Why pretend?

Of course she had a plan. It was foolish of me to think she’d come to California without one. Step one involved calling my brother, Fierce, and opening up a numbered account linked to Candy’s holding company, something she’d set up for tax purposes years before. Even though I disagreed with her, felt that her zealousness was misguided at best, and a recipe for disaster at worst, I went along with her plan. Such was the coercive power of those gold-rimmed irises whose giant pupils bored into mine as she spun her story. It seemed possible that she had x-ray vision and the

electricity I felt in the face of her potential superpowers encouraged my own belief in her cause.

Fierce answered the phone on our first attempt. Kismet. My brother wasn't much different than Candy; they understood each other. He admired contrarian thinking. He wanted to be one of the few who succeeded in a market where others failed on a biblical scale.

'All right, now it's time to do some shopping,' Candy said after the call ended. 'By the way, your brother sounds like an all right guy, how come you never talk about him?'

'No reason to, I guess. He has his life and I have mine, they rarely intersect.'

'I wish I had a brother.'

'Oh? Why?'

'In a sense I did, I'm a fraternal twin, but my brother died shortly after birth.'

'Must have been hard on your parents.' Jack had told the truth about this much.

'He was too small, underdeveloped. According to Ma, I've demonstrated selfishness since the womb by hoarding all the good stuff, including the precious nutrition she provided for the two of us.'

'She said that to you?' What kind of mother would do that? Not Paulina.

'Not in so many words.' She took out pen and paper and began scribbling a shopping list. 'But I knew it was the unspoken sentiment whenever she got mad at me.'

We fell into silence and my mind wandered off into a world I had no direct knowledge of – the Pansenosky household with its heavy curtain of grief. Had her

parents wanted a boy? If so, why no children after Candy? Perhaps the delivery had been too hard on Paulina's body and she was advised not to have any additional children. Or perhaps she could not become pregnant again. If true, the couple's grief would have extended beyond the lost child to the desperately wanted and never to be born. Such awareness would have been hard on Candy and explained a great deal about her psyche, including her decision to pursue a masculine career. In a world where the NO GIRLS ALLOWED sign had moved from the tree house to the walnut doors barring entry to the executive suites of America's high fliers, she'd found a way, as had Letty.

Brett Coffey owed the success of his hedge funds and derivatives business to Candy. Not to mention his overall net worth. She was the only woman I knew who could have done such a thing. Hell, there were only a handful of men with the moxie to pull off some of the deals she was reputed to have transacted. Certainly no one in my finance-loving family, including Fierce, could have done what she did over a ten-year period. He lacked the intestinal fortitude. Sitting there, in the yard at Soleado, under the canopy of trees, tucked behind its discrete fencing, it became clear that what drove Candy throughout her life was shame and a commensurate desire to please her shamers.

Her parents had wanted a boy first, a girl second. It was her fault, at least inside the deepest part of her mind influenced since birth, that they did not have a boy. The dead boy was supposed to carry the Pansenkosky name with him as he climbed the New World's social ladder, producing progeny who'd do the same. Fate's twists convinced Frank Pansenkosky he'd been robbed of his legacy. He made the effort to love the innocent girl as she deserved to be loved. He taught her how to catch fly balls

and swing a bat. They ate hamburgers together on summer Saturdays down on the shore, just the two of them. He'd watched her swim against the current and admired the consistent determination evident in every stroke. At the midway he bought candyfloss and Cracker Jacks and they rode the Tilt-a-Whirl and the Scrambler together. One year, she won a pink elephant on the Whack-a-Mole game. By the time she'd grown into a teenager they no longer understood each other or pined for each other's company. Poisoned by the unspeakable, they disagreed about practically everything, except one – Candy's academic prowess deserved a turn in university. She'd earned her right to her father's funding of a prestigious education.

Frank Pansenkosky didn't live to witness his daughter's proudest achievement – an advanced degree from one of the finest business schools in the country. Thus connected, she knew people.

On a summer evening, one of those nights when the pavement radiated heat even after the sun went down, Frank Pansenkosky returned home after a ten-hour day at the shoe factory he managed. The neighbourhood kids played hopscotch on the sidewalk and Paulina tended the lilacs, while Candy remained indoors studying for her securities license. Frank parked his Chrysler in the usual place in front of the house. He twisted around to retrieve his discarded suit jacket and then reached for the car's door handle with his left hand. A tingling sensation ran down his arm, followed by pain few live to describe. He gasped for breath before he slumped over the steering wheel, sounding the horn with the weight of his head. Candy heard the horn and ran out the front door in time to see her mother collapse onto the ground next to the car, the driver's door hanging open, and her father completely still. The neighbour's wide-eyed children stood glued to the sidewalk and gaped at their first corpse. Her father,

whom she'd made her life's mission to please, had died before she could elicit the approval she craved most.

Candy's voice jolted me out of my projections, back to Soleado and the present.

'Okay, I think I have a complete list,' Candy said. 'If I've forgotten anything, I'm sure the salesman at Best Buy will tell us. Oh, and you have an AmEx right? I need to borrow some money, but I promise to pay it back.'

'You need to borrow money from me?'

'Umm, yeah, I have a little problem. The government froze most of my assets.'

'Jesus Christ Candy. Is there something important you've neglected to tell me?'

'Get a copy of *The Wall Street Journal* or go online. It's easier if you read about it.'

'Give me a synopsis.'

'We're having trouble with the Aquila Fund, we're under investigation for fraud. Don't worry, it's cool, they won't be able to pin anything on me.'

'Should I be concerned about the FBI knocking on my door?'

'I'll be gone before they show up here.'

'Excuse me?'

'Yeah, I'm moving into Casita Morales tomorrow.'

'Casita Morales?'

'It's a detox spa north of Malibu. It was the only way I could think of to get everyone to leave me alone for a while; if I'm in a rehab. centre looking after medical

issues, I can buy some time to take care of the Livesburg problem. Anyway, we better go if we're going to succeed in getting everything we need tonight.'

'I know I'm going to regret this,' I sighed before rising to fetch my car keys and wallet.

*

I couldn't sleep that night with Candy in the house. My mind picked up the thread of her childhood. What had happened inside the house she'd grown up in? Surely the Pansenkoskys had done the best they could as parents, didn't neglect the child, and loved her to their full capacity. Yet something had scarred her enough to hold nasty grudges, a sign of someone disproportionately wounded by events. At the same time, she lived by a personal moral code of the highest standards. She hadn't meant to harm or deceive anyone, least of all the Livesburg District School Board.

Grief, it had to be the grief, and the uncanny way that children have of blaming themselves for their parents' emotional problems. Candy spent her life taking responsibility for things she had no business going near. It was not her fault her parents were sad. It was not her fault her father had died. It was not her fault that the Livesburg District School Board had lost its money. Everybody who was anybody in business, banking, and the government loved her and Carleton and their ilk for the money that rained down on America for over a decade. Because of people like her Clinton ran a surplus. Home ownership increased among Americans. Personal retirement plans ballooned and money flowed into cars, appliances, home renovations, cosmetic surgery, jewellery, and real estate. New products that everyone had to have were designed and sold: stainless steel wine coolers for suburban kitchens, designer toilet brushes, one-touch espresso makers, Swiss diving watches for junior executives,

cashmere Christmas sweaters. Giddy with wealth the likes of which America hadn't seen in history, nobody wanted it to stop. At five per cent unemployment, everyone who wanted a job had one. Candy had done for Wall Street, politicians, and the general public what she hadn't succeeded in doing for her father – pleased them all so much for so long that they didn't know they couldn't afford to live in the style they'd become accustomed to without her.

*

A day later we found ourselves in the midst of converting Candy's bedroom at Casita Morales into a 7/24 trading desk with equipment purchased by me at a Best Buy in Ventura.

'Plug this in over there,' Candy said, handing me the printer's power cable. 'And we're done!' She powered up the computer and the cable modem and began clicking away, setting up her live quotes and account trading screens.

'By the way, I did some reading last night after you went to bed,' I said.

'Yeah,' she said, distracted by the screen.

'Does Aquila's liquidity trouble have anything to do with your timing?'

'Indirectly I suppose. It's unrelated to the Livesburg School District, if that's what you want to know.'

'Liar.'

'Martin, I don't have time for this. Can you get your brother on the phone?'

'I don't want to be a party to what you're about to do.'

'Oh? And what's that?'

'Shorting Coffey & Coffey shares based on insider information is highly illegal. Not to mention likely to get you killed if Brett Coffey ever finds out about it.'

‘Don’t let the door hit you on your way out.’

‘Candy, this is insane. What if you get caught?’

‘Who’s going to catch me? The SEC? Give me a break. Your family makes a little money, I make a little money, and the school board get its money back. Everyone will be happy.’

I shook my head. There was no point in pursuing the subject; she’d made up her mind. Not having done anything illegal before, she felt that the ends now justified the means and her arrogance prevented her from acknowledging the danger she’d attracted to herself. What had changed in her world to such an extent that she’d risk everything in the name of school children she’d never met and wreck a company she’d devoted her life to building? – a company that carried her name.

*

On the road back to Soleado, on-coming traffic lights spread distorted scrub brush shadows along the sandstone cliff side; a school of red tail-lights shimmied ahead. Lyle Lovett crooned *Nobody Knows Me* on the radio, and my head filled with zeroes and stripes. Candy would surely land in prison if the trades were traced to her, shunned forever by the people she depended on for her living.

When I arrived home, Jack’s house was darker than my own. I’d left the porch light on, expecting to be late, but Jack had no lights on at all, a first. A balmy night, it would be normal to have left the pool lights on, along with a few in the garden for Issy and himself if no one else.

‘Martin.’

‘Hello? Jack?’

He stepped out from the shadows.

‘Why is it so dark? Are you all right?’ I stepped toward him out of a desire to extend comfort, offer friendship, as well as to get a better look at him.

‘Didn’t feel like company.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘I saw her at your place yesterday. Where is she?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I need to see her, she can’t leave me like this.’

‘Like what? What are you talking about?’

‘I need money, she knows why.’

‘Look, you can’t blame her for the state of the markets.’

‘Some people from the bank came to see me today. They’re calling in my business loans, seems they’re worried about the securities I put up as collateral.’

‘That’s a shame.’

‘I’m bankrupt, Martin.’

‘Does that mean I should write off the money Jordan gave to you?’

‘Fuck’s sake, Martin, he should give me more, bankroll me until this blows over. That piece of shit owes me.’

‘You’re drunk, why don’t you go inside and sleep it off.’

‘Tell me where she is so that I can choke her with my bare hands. Maybe I should practise on you.’ He lurched toward me in the slow way that someone who has never been in a fight does and I easily sidestepped him, threw him off balance and pinned him to the lawn. ‘Hey, that’s pretty good for an upper middle-class poof.’

‘I wrestled and fenced in prep school. Useful skills for, as you say, a poof. Now, if I allow you up, will you quietly go inside and leave Candy and me alone? At least until the sober light of day?’

‘Fucking hell.’

‘Try anything and I will kick your ass.’

‘I’m a squatter in my own home now you know. It’s only a matter of time before they take it.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, you can sell.’

‘I doubt I’d recover the outstanding mortgage.’

‘Well, that’s something you should let the market determine.’ I stood up, releasing him, but he remained on the freshly watered grass. I could have offered him a hand, decided not to, went inside and bolted my front door.

Losing Face In Tennessee

Ashby Jefferson Rose escorted his wife, Pamela, inside the best restaurant in Livesburg, a pretty antebellum dining room with white tablecloths, soft lighting, and a piano player serenading patrons of a certain age and class with Johnny Mercer tunes. The Roses were there to celebrate their anniversary, twenty-two years of partnership that had survived law school, renovations, and children. He'd planned the evening down to the last detail, including returning home to a candlelit house emptied of children, with a bucket of champagne on ice in their bedroom, but first he'd arranged with the chef to prepare an off-menu dinner of her favourite things. She deserved these attentions and more. It made him happy to do these things for her; the pleasure on her face and the affection in her voice were rewards enough. This night was the one night a year that he felt he came close to matching the kind of attention she gave him every day of his life. Such was the demanding nature of his busy career and volunteer positions.

The maître d' led them to a table on the wait-staff highway between the kitchen and the front of the house. Pamela followed, walking briskly in a new frock she'd picked up at an outlet store on New York's Seventh Avenue. The dress

skimmed her narrow waist and showed-off her décolletage. A petite woman with Sofia Loren's proportions, Pamela carried herself with confidence.

'I asked for a table near the piano,' Ashby said.

'I'm sorry, they're all booked.'

'I made my reservation a month ago.'

He shrugged. 'We are full tonight, this is all I have.'

'It'll be all right,' Pamela said. 'Let's not make a scene, Ashby.'

'Fine.'

As promised, the custom dinner menu he'd requested lay in the centre of their place settings.

'Ashby, you are bold. Did you ask the chef to do this just for me?'

'It took some arm twisting, but I got him to agree.'

They ordered wine and sipped it slowly as they waited for their first course to arrive – stuffed zucchini flowers, Roman style with cheese and anchovies.

Conversation with his wife was always a pleasure; she knew to avoid topics that riled him, but she didn't avoid important subjects. Pamela had never been one for small talk, another trait he appreciated. It wouldn't occur to her to fill the air between them with notations of emptiness. Intent on developing her thinking about her opposition to extreme atheists, despite her own doubts regarding religion, she wanted to discuss Richard Dawkins until a man they both recognised interrupted her.

'Rose, you shouldn't be seen in a place like this these days,' the head of the local Kiwanis Club, whose wife taught fifth grade, said to Ashby

'I beg your pardon?'

‘You should be begging for more than that. My wife is afraid for her job because of your idiocy. You oughta be run out of town.’

‘Sir, I’m trying to enjoy a quiet dinner with my wife. If you have school board business to discuss, save it for the next public meeting.’

‘Really? That’s your answer? Attend a meeting?’ His voice boomed, drowned the piano music, and silenced the rest of the room.

‘Please, don’t make a scene.’

‘You got a lot of nerve. Rumour has it that you bankrupted the school system and you don’t feel the need to answer for that? You’re an elected official, we are your bosses.’ He gesticulated toward the room. ‘You owe us an explanation, what’s going to happen to our kids?’

‘It’s Jim, right?’ Pamela asked.

He nodded.

‘Jim, you’re right, Ashby needs to communicate with the public about the school district’s finances, and he will once all the facts are gathered and potential solutions found. Ruining our night and yours won’t solve the problem.’

‘Ma’am, because I respect you, I’ll take my leave. But this is only the beginning. Mark my words, I’ll have your husband arrested if there’s a whiff of evidence that he abused his position.’

‘Sir, you are a bully. Please leave us alone.’ Pamela stared at him with her sapphire eyes and would not drop her gaze until he turned away and waddled back to his table. ‘Now, where were we?’

‘Maybe we should go.’

‘We’re staying.’

What Ashby treasured about his wife, more than her looks, which in his opinion improved with time, or her skills as a mother and domestic goddess, or her intellect – formidable, possibly greater than his own – was her unwavering loyalty. She trusted him. She believed in him. She loved him despite twenty-two years of fuck-ups and moments of neglect. Not once had she shamed him in the face of his errors.

Step One of Twelve: Admitting the Problem

Candy catnapped in her room at Casita Morales. Real sleep had become a distant memory, something she'd done before the contradictions had taken over her consciousness. Overlooking lush gardens that led to cliffs dropping off into the Pacific, the room lent itself to rest and deep thinking. In the twilight of sleep, her mind's eye filmed herself as she stood overlooking the world's widest and deepest ocean, the wind in her hair, salt spray settling on her skin and lips. Seals waddled on the beach below, sunning themselves and barking conversation. She thought it would be nice to be one of those seals.

She woke to the sound of gentle taps on her door. It was three in the afternoon and the knocks disrupted the first afternoon nap she remembered taking since her undergraduate days at Rutgers. She resented the intrusion. She preferred the company of imaginary seals and ignored whoever stood behind the door.

'Candace, it's Dr Elba. Our group session begins in fifteen minutes.'

Fuck. She hadn't anticipated the requirement to attend therapy sessions. The last thing she wanted to do was share her feelings with a bunch of weak-willed whiners dispossessed of self-control.

'Candace?'

'Come in.'

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she looked up and took in the man entering her room. His light step, relaxed air, and kind eyes disarmed her. Unlike some of her customers, this man suffered no self-doubt and she couldn't easily dismiss him.

'We have daily group at 3:15. Think you'll make it today? It's good to start as soon as possible.'

Fatherly. His voice reminded her of her Dad.

'Where is it?'

'Next to the art room.'

'I'll meet you there in a couple of minutes.'

What the hell, it could turn out to be good theatre and besides, it was a good time for group. The stock exchange was closed for the day and she had nothing better to do except sleep.

*

Flooded with natural light, Dr Elba's group treatment room worked hard at creating calm. Candy snorted at the tabletop electric Zen fountain and the meditation cushions arranged in a circle on the floor, each topped by a participant's name card.

'You need to remove your shoes,' Dr Elba said to Candy.

'You're kidding.'

He looked down at her feet sheathed in a pair of strappy heels that brought her eyes level with his. They were custom-made Jimmy Choo's. The secret to wearing stilettos with confidence was to have them custom fitted. With the correct fit, pain-free balance was possible. She conducted no business without them so that she wouldn't have to look up to men like Aaron Stillman and Brett Coffey. But at Casita Morales Candy bowed to peer pressure – all six fellow addicts had assumed barefoot cross-legged positions on their cushions. She unbuckled each shoe, slipped them from her pedicured feet, and then arranged herself on her cushion in the lotus posture she'd spent years perfecting at a yoga studio run by a gay couple who divided their time between Goa and New York.

'Let's introduce ourselves by sharing the following: your favourite social activity, the contents of your fridge at home, and your hometown,' Dr Elba said.

'Beginning with you Candy.'

'I don't have a favourite social activity.'

'What do you do when you're not at work?'

'More work.'

'There must be something.'

'I walk the dogs by myself.'

'That's interesting, but what do you do with other people?'

'Outside of work? Nothing.'

'All right. What's in your fridge?'

'Vodka and butter. Maybe some white wine. And I'm from Newark. But I'm not an alcoholic.'

They all laughed.

‘Seriously.’

Dr Elba made a notation in his file that Candy read upside down; *Uses humour, denial*. Insulted, Candy remained quiet for the rest of the session. Fuck him. She wasn't paying her fees for access to his supposed wisdom anyway.

Hard Times at Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky

While Candy considered the benefits of the analysed life, Brett Coffey met with a consortium of his peers, including Sol Stillman. Everyone who was anybody on Wall Street circled the marble table in Coffey's private boardroom to listen to his pitch. The thing that enticed them to climb into their cars and journey several blocks north, for Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky wasn't located in the financial district but some distance up Park Avenue, wasn't Brett's offer of a lunch of rare beef tenderloin and oysters catered by Les Halles, but the scent of blood. They had him by the balls – he knew it, they knew it, the whole world knew it. He needed help from every man in the room, a half a dozen guys with memories like elephants.

‘Okay, so I've told you what you need to know. Now who's in?’ Coffey said.

‘Where's Pansenkosky?’ Sol Stillman asked.

‘Who fucking cares? She's gone, outta here, and good riddance.’ Coffey's face flushed. ‘I'm rescinding her partnership.’

No one looked him in the eye. Candy *was* the derivatives department. Nobody understood the math like she did, certainly not Brett Coffey. Moreover, the men at the

table – men like Sol Stillman, who'd watched Candy flower into an admired and formidable adversary – knew this, but Coffey couldn't admit it to anyone.

Brett called on Dave from Merlyn Fein. 'What about you, Dave? I'll pay an extra quarter point on the Fed's spread if you cough up fifty million. No? Why not? It's a great deal for you.'

'The Board said no more money for this junk. Sorry Brett.'

Coffey spoke directly to every man at the table and each answered the same way. They'd lost confidence. Coffey gazed at them and they gazed back. Silence. An impasse like no other Brett had experienced in his fifty years of life. After an untenable moment of sweat forming on his brow, he spoke again. Beginning with Sol Stillman, Brett tried to make it personal.

'Sol, we've known each other my whole life, my father loved you like a brother, you owe me,' Coffey said.

'Brett, I don't owe you shit. Your father, now that's a different story, may God rest his soul. But you? You're a *schmuck*. History means nothing to you.' Sol Stillman, assisted by Letty Camparinga, rose out of his chair and placed his trademark fedora on top of his septuagenarian head. 'Good day, gentlemen.'

Everyone else followed Sol out the door, down to the street, where they climbed into waiting Town Cars. Somehow, each of them had known the meeting would be brief. They'd made up their minds before they'd arrived.

What exactly were they thinking? Had their predatory instincts kicked in? Or was it more about self-preservation? They simply didn't have the money to wheel and deal, each of them under-capitalised. No one invited to the meeting had any love for Brett Coffey and he knew it, but they all loved one thing in common – making money.

Not all of them had liquidity issues; at least half of them sat on the positive side of trades that had proved disastrous for folks like Coffey. They could help him over the hump if they wanted to, like they were helping others. The fact was that nobody else could provide accurate valuations of their derivatives either, but these assholes had decided to make an example of *him*, to demonstrate lost confidence in *him*.

Like the Yankee pitcher he'd once dreamed of becoming, Brett hurled his water glass at the closed door and then slammed his fist against the stone table.

*

A day prior to the meeting with his fellow bankers in which he begged them for their support, Brett Coffey had met with a pair of dull government officials in cheap shoes at his Hamptons house. Brett had arranged the meeting outside of the city, far away from the gossip hounds. The last thing he wanted was for his staff to see the wolves at the door. No telling how they might react. He couldn't afford to have the best and brightest jump ship. How would that look?

He took the agents for a walk out the back, along the beach. Damp and cold with nothing but their suit jackets, the agents jammed their hands into their pockets and tensed their shoulders against the east wind. Brett didn't want them inside the house. The benefit of meeting with them outside of Manhattan would certainly have been cancelled-out by their potential reaction to the house and its contents. He needed as much goodwill as he could muster, and it was unlikely they'd take kindly to being served coffee from a ten thousand dollar German espresso maker while seated on a sofa that cost more than their cars.

‘Candy has known the Camparinga family since she was a kid. Shit, she practically lived at their house when she was a teenager,’ Brett said. ‘I can’t see her pulling something underhanded.’

‘Did she have access to current company information?’

‘How the hell would I know? Probably. She used to help the old man out with the books when she was still in school, she even knew how to fix some of the equipment on the shop floor. The old guy showed her because Candy wanted to know how a factory worked.’

‘So, you’d say she was well integrated into the business? Knew some of the employees?’

‘Hell, yeah, she knew everybody in that place and they’d tell her everything because the old man, Nick Camparinga, treated her like family.’

‘That was a long time ago. What about now? Your company did the deal. Were you aware of any potential conflict?’

‘Nah, no conflict of interest that I could see. Candy hasn’t worked for Nick in almost twenty years and I doubt she talked to him or anybody else over there after her falling out with Letty.’

‘Falling out? What sort of falling out?’

‘Shit? You don’t know? What kind of investigators are you?’ Brett stared meaningfully over Long Island Sound. ‘They both used to work at Stillman White, Candy got Letty the job over there. After a couple of years, Letty decided she wanted the same job as Candy did and she got it.’

‘So you’re saying Pansenko was motivated to do the deal.’

‘That’s what I’m saying.’

‘But you don’t know if she broke the law?’

‘No. That’s your job, right? To uncover malfeasance?’ Brett led the men back to their car. ‘Look, if she did something wrong with that trade, I want her to answer for it. It’s my reputation on the line.’

He watched Frick and Frack drive away from his property and mumbled.

‘Good luck.’

Wolves at My Door

Insistent knocks, the kind that come from large knuckles, shook my front door at eight o'clock on a cloudy morning. Assuming it was only Jack, drunk, I remained cocooned inside my sister's quilt reading the morning paper. Coffey & Coffey's troubles had made the front page. The bank's hedge fund, Aquila, was heavily exposed to consumer debt. Stillman White Managing Partner, Letty Camparinga, was quoted as stating that Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky's mortgage-backed securities required closer examination and, until an outsider confirmed their valuations, her firm would no longer provide them with overnight credit. My father was right – housing prices were stagnating and the American financial system had made no preparations for this development. Instead, lenders assumed that real estate would always rise. Candy had recognised this at the same time, perhaps even earlier, so why didn't she manage Aquila accordingly? Nothing in the financial world made any sense to me anymore, including Candy.

The banging on the door wouldn't stop. I got up and went to the window and peeked through the gossamer curtains. Two grey suits filled Soleado's tiny porch. Government officials. I struggled into a pair of running shoes and headed for the back

door; only to discover that in the time it had taken me to lace up my shoes, the fatter of the two men on the porch had passed through the gate into the rear yard.

‘Can I help you?’ I said.

‘Good morning, are you Martin Rhys-Davies?’ he said, showing his badge.

‘FBI.’

‘Yes, I’m Martin. What brings you here?’

‘May we come inside?’ Without waiting for my response, he called out to his partner. ‘Come around back.’

‘What’s this about?’

‘Candace Pansenkosky. We’re looking for your co-operation in our investigation.’

Both men pushed their way into my kitchen and I made no effort to resist them.

‘What do you know about the sale of Camparinga Knits to the Chinese?’ the short ferret-like agent asked.

‘Nothing.’ This was true. All I knew was what others had told me about it, I had no firsthand knowledge.

‘Really? We understand that you and Miss Pansenkosky are close.’ He didn’t believe me.

‘Did the Camparingas initiate your investigation?’ I asked. Why were they asking about a small stock deal? Surely there were bigger issues on their minds, like those plastered all over the front page of the morning papers. Nobody cared about Camparinga Knits but the Camparingas. The entire transaction had merited no greater

coverage than two sentences in the *New York Times*' 'Deal Book' column and a similar treatment in the *Journal*.

'We can't answer that.'

'Is Candy a fugitive?'

'Not yet, but if she contacts you, please notify us immediately. Trust us, you don't want to be on the wrong side of this investigation.' He pressed his body beyond the invisible boundary denoting my personal space. His breath smelled of cough drops and reflux. 'We're pretty good at prosecuting foreigners.'

Each of them handed me a business card and left. The big one was Agent Nero and the ferret was Marcowitz.

Their visit didn't entirely surprise me; it wasn't a secret that Candy, Brett, and a slew of Wall Street insiders were under investigation. What did surprise me was that the FBI was only a couple of days behind her. Was that the reason for the cloak and dagger stuff when she'd turned up on my doorstep? Candy had always kept secrets, but this one threatened to unravel me too. If the FBI wanted to, they could make my life very hard with a call to the IRS or the Immigration Service even though I'd done nothing illegal.

*

Later, it occurred to me that perhaps Candy had tuned into Brett's duplicity. This explained her excellent timing and her willingness to destroy her own company. But really, who knows why people make the decisions they do? I'd built an understanding of Candy based upon her actions, the things I'd seen, and the things she had chosen to show me, but like an iceberg – eighty per cent of her moved unseen beneath the surface.

Things Get Worse for Ashby

At his law office a few days after his anniversary dinner, Ashby received a call from Hank Yeardley.

‘Found him,’ Hank said without preamble.

‘Who?’

‘Kenny Dodds. That son of a bitch is in Spain.’

‘What’s he doing in Spain?’

‘Seems he bought a villa on an olive farm and he isn’t coming back.’

Ashby sucked in his breath.

‘Kenny’s been lying to us for a long time. Ran off with a small fortune and left us holding the bag,’ Hank continued. ‘Christ, how the hell are we going to explain this at the next public board meeting? At least we’ll have someone to point the finger at.’

‘Wonderful. Thanks for letting me know the latest, Hank, but I ought to be getting back to my files. Need to focus on billable hours.’ Fat chance of getting any work done; the blood vessels in his eyes were already expanding, the veins in his temples throbbed, and his lower lip twitched.

‘How’s business these days?’

‘You’re my accountant, you know as well as I do that new clients aren’t exactly banging down the door.’

‘This’ll blow over. People respect you Ash, you’ll be fine.’

‘Thanks Hank. See you at the meeting next week.’

At lunchtime Ashby took a walk to the café where he’d ordered lunch every day for the past five years. He craved a pulled-pork sandwich and sweet tea. Alone at the counter, he surfed the news sites from his phone while he waited for his food. At least he wasn’t the only one suffering. New York’s investment banks continued their free-fall toward extinction and the government, a *Republican* government, planned to bail them out with taxpayer’s money. No one had offered to help the school district pay down its debt, but the fat cats on Wall Street were getting away with wrecking the country. It wasn’t fair. Would the chairman of Coffey & Coffey write the school district a cheque like the one the federal government was about to make out to him and his cohorts? Would he support similar assistance from the feds to local governments like Livesburg? What a joke. Brett Coffey would laugh in Ashby’s face if he posed such a question to him.

And what about Kendall? How many times had Ashby congratulated Kenny on his success, not realising that he too had been corrupted by a corrupt system? How much had Kenny earned in commissions from the so-called safe investments he’d sold the school district? Enough to buy an Andalusian olive farm and retire. A college dropout with a penchant for bridge had achieved the financial freedom Ashby dreamed about and now, given the state of the financial and housing markets, would never afford.

*

On his way to the public school trustee meeting, Ashby walked past the half-complete football stadium, its concrete skeleton a monument to the fiasco he had to answer for. He dreaded the next two hours of his life, staring down a crowded auditorium of concerned parents, local journalists, and assorted angry citizens. How had it come to this? He loved his town and the town had, until now, returned that love. People used to stop on the street to shake his hand and inquire after his children, or talk about Tennessee's South-eastern Conference championship prospects and groan over Fat Phil's lousy coaching. These days he felt lucky if a person in the street acknowledged him with anything beyond basic courtesy: a tip of the hat, a nod, an utterance of good morning. Most of the time, following these simple gestures, they avoided any further eye contact and sped up. Worse, they took their real estate deals, contracts, and wills across the road; his billings had dropped by nearly a third in the last month alone. It occurred to him that he might have to leave town and start a new practise somewhere else. The prospect churned his gut. Dizzy, he sat down on a concrete slab that marked the south entrance to the unfinished stadium.

A student stopped to ask if he needed help.

'Thank you, I'm all right, just need a moment to rest.'

'Mr Rose?'

'Yes?'

'I thought that's who you were. My folks are going to your meeting.'

'Oh? And who are they?'

'The Freemans? You know them?'

'Leigh Freeman is your mamma?'

'Yeah.'

‘I was the lawyer who handled the probate on your grandmother’s will.’

‘That was a long time ago, you have a good memory.’

‘How old are you, son?’

‘Eighteen, graduating this year.’

‘Going to college?’

‘Ole Miss, just like Dad.’

‘Good for you.’ Ashby glanced at his watch, he had to go, but he didn’t want to. He stood, swaying on unsteady knees. The young man offered a hand and, for the first time in his life, Ashby felt old, despite the fact that his forty-fifth birthday hadn’t yet arrived. Forty-five was not old, yet he felt like he might splinter at any moment. In mind and body it seemed like he’d gone from forty-four to eighty-four; these last few weeks had served to disintegrate his very essence. He wished he’d never heard of a collateral debt obligation.

‘Sir?’ said young Freeman. ‘I just want to say that I know it isn’t your fault, what happened and all. It’s no one’s fault, but everyone’s fault.’

Ashby looked the boy in the eye and saw the sort of intelligence born of compassion that he knew would not greet him in the auditorium. ‘Thank you Mark. It’s Mark, right?’

The young man nodded.

‘Someone needs to answer to the people, and tonight in our town it’s going to be me, whether I like it or not. Folks want someone to blame.’

‘Easier for them than to look at themselves, I guess.’

Astonished, Ashby studied the young man’s face. Did he comprehend what he’d just said? Its depth?

Young people, they were the reason Ashby had run for the school district in the first place. He'd done his best for them. He'd bought that damn CDO from Kenny for them. And now they were going to suffer right along with him. Teachers with the lowest seniority, the youngest and most enthusiastic, had already received layoff notices.

Mark Freeman and Ashby parted company at the entrance to the auditorium and Ashby went backstage to look for Hank. As predicted, townsfolk filled the room beyond capacity. People staked out seats on the aisle steps and filled every available space. He could have asked the fire department to clear people out, but decided not to further inflame the masses. He had to hold himself together for two more hours, after that he could sit down and blow off some steam over a drink with Hank.

Behind the curtains, Hank and his colleagues passed around a bottle of Wild Turkey.

'Want some?' Hank asked Ashby.

Ashby shook his head. 'I'll wait.'

'Might be gone by then.'

'There's plenty more where that came from.'

At precisely seven o'clock, nine members of the Livesburg County School Board filed onto the stage, took their seats behind a long table, and faced a thousand or more angry citizens. Ashby took solace in the fact that the last lynching in Livesburg happened in 1967. Of course in modern times, it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that he might land in the annals of town lore as the first white man who found himself swinging from the nearest oak.

Ashby banged his chairman's gavel to call the meeting to order and the room reacted by directing all eyes toward him.

He didn't get through item one, the approval of the previous meeting's minutes, before someone in the audience interrupted him.

'What happened to the money? We want to know about the money.'

Ashby wanted to know about the money too. He wanted to yell and scream at every politician and Wall Street fat cat in the country. He didn't know what happened to the school district's money, couldn't understand how a CDO could be legal for heaven's sake, that someone could package debt in such a way to call it a safe investment, debt that had no tangible collateral he could point to like a house, or a piece of factory equipment, or even the intellectual output of a software program, or the formula for Coke. No, the Livesburg County School District had invested in a piece of paper, several pieces of paper that accounted for debts for things that neither he nor his bankers had any ability to value: houses in Tucson, office buildings in downtown Detroit, cars and trucks and subway lines in Los Angeles; factories pumping out cash registers in Ireland; revenueless internet start-ups; mortgages made to customers with no ability to pay them back. Who the fuck knew what lay behind the paper? Not Ashby. Not Kenny. Not even Candace Pansenkosky. How could he be held accountable for all of that and explain it to the teachers and janitors, parents and students who breathed the air he breathed right here in the room where he stood behind a podium wrapped only in the authority of his suit and title?

Under the weight of the one question everyone in the room wanted the answer to, Ashby passed out from the first panic attack he'd ever experienced in his life, another humiliation he could have done without.

Part III – Payback

'Everybody knows that the boat is leaking. Everybody knows the captain lied.

Everybody wants a box of chocolates and a long-stem rose.

Everybody knows.' – Leonard Cohen, *Everybody Knows*

The Audacity of Candace Pasenkosky

Suspended above the keystroke that would end her career and destroy the business that carried her name, Candy's finger held the power of the universe. One keystroke and life as she knew it would end, leaving behind an uncertain future. Prepared for the backlash, knowing that few would see this as an act of goodness, she pressed <enter> anyway and ignited a Wall Street fire sale. She did it for the kids, they needed the money more than the world needed Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky. Besides, she rationalised, others were poised to take CCP's place; but public education, now that had intrinsic value to everyone. It had made the goddamn country the economic powerhouse it was today. It had made her. Without it, what would have become of the displaced Polish children who became her parents, who landed on Ellis Island with nothing but the clothes on their backs and too much knowledge of fascism?

Candy cracked open a miniature bottle of scotch, the kind you see on airplanes, that I had smuggled in for her. It was only the beginning of a long road, but a milestone worth celebrating. No longer a Wall Street rat racer, she pondered alternative lifestyles. Maybe she'd sell the apartment and move into the Madison

house full-time. Unless of course the government took the apartment, in which case she'd have no choice but to move to Madison. The Feds couldn't take that one; it was in her goddaughter's name. She didn't know why she bothered to worry. They needed to convict her of something first. So far, they'd laid no charges.

She stared outside her window toward the cliffs that fell into the sea. The scotch heated her insides and its warmth mingled with the strange stillness she felt standing there in an addiction centre in southern California, a place that by afternoon would be smothered in empty white light.

*

Within twenty-four hours of Candy hitting the <enter> key, Letty Comparinga and Sol Stillman walked tall into Brett Coffey's office. Sol took Coffey's chair, while Letty perched on the edge of the desk. Coffey had no choice but to sit in the guest chair, while his lawyer slouched against the window.

'Let's not beat around the bush,' Sol Stillman said, his petite frame engulfed by Brett Coffey's leather chair. 'Two and a half.'

'That's outrageous!' Coffey sputtered. 'The building and the furnishings are worth more than that. Be serious. Ten cents a share.'

'Two and a half,' Letty said.

'Six,' Coffey said, crossing his arms.

Letty rolled her eyes.

'Three, that's my final offer,' Sol said.

'Five.'

'Do you believe this is a negotiation?' Letty said.

Coffey's attorney shrugged. 'Take it.'

‘So it comes down to this.’ Coffey struggled out of his chair and poured himself a drink. ‘A hundred years of slow, meticulous growth *kaput* in a month. One lousy month of market rumours and confidence games are all you vultures needed. You won, Sol.’ He raised his glass to the old man. ‘I know you’ve had it in for me ever since that junk bond fiasco that put your pal Minkie in prison, but if it hadn’t been me testifying in Congress it would have been you. You’d have done the same.’

‘What’s done is done. It’s only business.’ Sol said.

The lawyer pulled out the papers, filled-in the agreed-upon figures, and handed the pen to Sol for his signature. When Sol finished, he handed the pen to Brett, who signed his family’s legacy away to Stillman White Camparinga for three cents per share. One month earlier Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky stock had traded at \$42.43 per share.

*

That night Candy dreamed of an equation: $\{0\} = \text{freedom}$. It was a new dream, one that invaded her mind’s eye in the grey light of morning. After weeks of dreamless nothingness the idea of null sets startled her awake. Heart pounding, she pinched her leg. Thus reassured, she climbed out of bed, wrapped a white terrycloth robe around herself, and sat at her desk, where she digested newsletters written by rival fund managers. In her opinion, gypsies and their tea-leaves had greater predictive power than those clowns. Their interpretations of the markets’ volatility lacked insight, hindsight, and foresight.

She crafted her own e-mail to her clients explaining why everyone else was wrong, but decided against sending it and turned on the TV. Bloomberg talking heads twitched and twittered over the volatility index, which had reached an all-time high,

until breaking news interrupted their manic chatter. The announcer warned investors to prepare to lose their lunches: Wall Street darling Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky had sold itself to Stillman White Camparinga for pennies per share.

‘It’s only the beginning, people. Get used to it,’ Candy muttered at the TV and turned it off again.

She looked forward to her group therapy session for the first time since her arrival. For a change, she felt relaxed enough to take an interest in what the others thought and felt. It may have had something to do with the freedom dream. Freedom meant breaking her ties with a world she no longer believed in. She’d more than broken ranks, she’d bombed the place, and the liberation she felt had already begun to manifest new priorities. Dressing quickly, she made her way to breakfast and then the group.

*

After group, Dr Elba asked her to stay behind. For a moment she felt flattered. He was an attractive man and had nothing to do with Wall Street. With the exception of her dalliance with Rob-the-waiter who wasn’t an actor, it had been a mighty long time since anyone other than her gynaecologist had seen her naked.

‘I noticed liquor on your breath again today.’

‘Busted.’

‘Why are you here Candy? If you are aren’t committed to working on your relationship with alcohol?’

‘I needed a place to heal and this seemed like a good idea at the time.’

‘It’s only a good idea if you’re ready to make real changes, otherwise you’ve not respected everyone here, including yourself. It strikes me as a phenomenal waste of my time.’

‘I’m sorry. I figured my money was as good as anyone’s. What difference does it make?’

‘I’m not in this for the money and neither is anyone else around here. We have a waiting list of people in financial need who want to come here and avail themselves of the opportunity to turn their lives around, but because of you and your ability to pay full rates, they have to wait.’

‘You have no idea how much my life has changed during my time here.’

‘I’m asking you to leave and, as a courtesy gesture, perhaps you can donate your prepaid board and associated fees to someone who desperately needs a room here.’

‘Sure. I’ll be out by tomorrow.’

‘You’re welcome to come back if you’ll commit to the program.’

‘I don’t need to come back. My unhealthy addictions have been suitably dealt with, thank you.’

‘My God, you’re confident.’

‘You say it like it’s a bad thing.’

Candy closed the door behind her and returned to her room to ring me for a pick-up.

*

A courier delivered Candy’s severance notice from Stillman White Camparinga on the same afternoon that we tore down the equipment in her room at Casita Morales. She

removed the hard disks, beat the hell out of them with a hammer and threw them into the ocean. The rest of the equipment went into the boot of my car.

‘How does it feel to be severed by your new owners?’

‘Hardly a shock. But still, a registered letter? Really? Couldn’t they have summoned me back to New York for a face-to-face meeting?’

‘It’s better that they didn’t. You might have some explaining to do. As it is, the Feds are still sniffing around.’

‘I kinda feel like Robin Hood.’

‘You look different somehow.’ There was ease about her, or more like an absence of unease that made me more comfortable in her presence. She wore a white linen dress; it was the first time I’d seen her in anything other than pants.

‘It’s the healthy spa food. Maybe the group therapy did me some good, too. Improved my countenance.’

I shut the fully-loaded boot and we set off for Soleado. Candy tied a kerchief over her hair and adjusted her sunglasses. We drove down the coast with the top down under a cloudless sky.

‘Ever since I was a little girl I believed that rich people were good. Stupid, I know, but I desperately wanted to be good by proving that I could be rich all on my own.’

‘Now you know better.’

‘It’s not that I’m suggesting that they’re inherently bad, it’s just that wealth on its own isn’t an indicator of goodness.’

‘How did a Catholic like you pick up a Calvinist bent?’

‘Huh?’

‘Never mind.’

We stopped for a bite to eat at a roadside tavern haunted by yuppie bikers, guys who liked the idea of being outlaws, but chose to make careers as tax accountants and dentists. Candy attracted a few wolf whistles as she walked toward the door and she sassed right back at them with a few purrs of her own. We took a table on the rear terrace overlooking the ocean – a pod of surfers below us waited on a wave. On the hillside to our left, a foraging jackrabbit kicked up dust, startled by the sound of our chairs scraping the wooden decking.

Candy’s mobile rang and she picked it up on the second ring. I assumed it was Paulina, one of the few people whose calls she accepted anymore.

‘Hello there,’ she said with a warmth to her voice I’d never heard before. ‘Yeah, we’re on our way back to the city. No, don’t meet me in Memphis, why don’t we go down to Miami for a few days and get lost, go to the Keys or something after the Tennessee business is done.’

Candy had kept a secret from me.

‘Spill it. Who is he?’ I asked after she hung up.

‘Someone I used to know and want to know again.’ She looked straight into my eyes. ‘Do you believe people can rehabilitate themselves? Morally speaking I mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘I hope you’re right. I’ll find out in a week or so and let you know.’

‘Sounds to me like you’re playing with fire. Who is he?’

‘Aaron Stillman.’

‘Have you lost your mind?’

‘Actually, Martin, I think I’m saner than ever before.’

Her skin glowed and her eyes smiled and there wasn’t any point in pursuing the subject. She’d opened herself to all possibilities – the hard shell of doubt and judgement and self-defence had fallen away. I’d thought that Candy was like Artemis, but in that moment I knew that once the layers were peeled back to her intimate core she was all Aphrodite: open, untamed, and a consumer of all things masculine. Her transformation scared me a little, despite its pleasurable aspects. The swings were too wide, the contradictions astonishing, and the changes occurred as fast as fibre optic cables transmitted data.

*

Daisy and Marvel, her baby boy, were waiting for us when we arrived at Soleado. Daisy waved as we drove up and we exchanged hellos after I parked the Mustang. Marvel reached out to Candy when she came near and she picked him up. He rested on her hip and tugged at her pendant.

‘Know what Marvel? Your Auntie Candy has a secret.’ Candy rubbed the fine blonde hair on the top of his head and she didn’t mind that he dribbled whatever he’d last eaten on her scarf. ‘My middle name is Cerise, that’s French for cherry. How embarrassing is that? My mother named me cherry candy. But your mamma was smart, she called you Marvel-ous, accurate, don’t you think?’

‘Cherry Candy? No wonder you kept that to yourself,’ I laughed. ‘How are you Daisy?’ I kissed her cheek.

‘Not another word out of you,’ Candy retorted, though she smiled when she said it. ‘If you ever mention it again, I will personally wedgie your ass until you scream like a girl.’

‘Is that a threat or a promise?’

She placed her hands over Marvel’s ears. ‘Fuck off!’

Daisy laughed. ‘Judging from your complexion, that place did you some good, but watch the language around my precious one.’

Jack ambled across the lawn then, his game face on. Daisy retrieved Marvel from Candy’s arms and went inside the house.

‘What’s so funny?’ Jack asked.

‘Nothing,’ Candy said. ‘What do you want? Handing out invitations to a foreclosure party?’

‘Sharp as always. Is that a skirt?’

‘State your business or move on.’

‘I have no business left, remember?’

‘I’d best join Daisy inside. Good to see you Jack.’ It was clear that Jack wanted to speak with Candy.

‘Stay here, Martin,’ Candy said. ‘Jack, are you suggesting it’s my fault that you have no business?’

‘You’re the one who turned off the tap on my last film.’

‘And you’re the one who failed to pay attention to what I’d been trying to tell you for weeks. Jordan’s doing quite all right because he fucking listens.’

‘To Martin, he listens to Martin. Why didn’t you offer your advice to me, Martin?’

‘You didn’t want it, wasn’t what you wanted to hear.’

‘Look, I came over here to mend fences, not argue with the two of you. I won’t be living here much longer.’

‘Where will you go?’ Candy asked.

‘My parents left me a summer-house in the Berkshires. It’ll do until I recover.’

He turned to me. ‘Martin, I’m sorry I treated you like shit. You’re the nicest neighbour I’ve ever had in this goddamn town.’

‘I accept your apology,’ I said and shook his hand.

‘Candy, I’m sorry I treated you like shit, too. I took our friendship for granted, please forgive me.’

‘You have no idea.’ She paused and considered her words. ‘All right, I accept that you’re sorry. It’s going to take me a while to let go of the bad stuff though.’

‘I understand.’

Jack took a step backwards. ‘That’s all I had to say.’

‘Bye, Jack,’ I said.

He walked to his property and disappeared behind the gate.

‘That was weird,’ Candy said.

‘Awkward.’

‘He never apologises for anything. This is absolutely the first time I’ve received an apology from him, let alone witnessed one. Something’s wrong.’

‘His life is in the shitter, maybe he learned something in the process.’

‘Maybe.’

We went inside, drank lemonade, and sat on the floor with Marvel, playing with the vintage Matchbox racers Candy had bought for him under the proviso that the cars remained at Soleado. It was her way of making sure that Daisy had a reason to drop by and solicit babysitting services.

Drinking Coffee with the FBI

Agents Nero and Marcowitz sat opposite Candy and me at my kitchen table. Candy had agreed to the meeting, though I'd believed it unwise, particularly in the absence of her attorney. She held steadfast to her position that she had nothing to hide, such was the power of her self-imposed identity as the ultimate do-gooder. The fact was she had done something wrong, and they could both imprison and impoverish her if they figured out what laws applied. In these moments, being Candy's sidekick invigorated my life. Like a first-time cocaine user, the risk produced the greater high. And that's when I understood something about her personality. Risk was her stimulant of choice, her reason for getting out of bed each day. It turned an otherwise sepia world into full technicolour like nothing else could. Everything she did – the job, the crusade to save the school board, screwing Letty over – supported her habit.

‘So you're telling us this financial crisis is a cluster fuck?’ Nero said. Candy had spent the last hour explaining how CDOs, credit default swaps, and ratings agencies worked.

‘Pretty much. It's all about manufacturing confidence and exuberance. Investments are only dog shit when people believe they're dog shit. But the fact is that someone is always on the wrong side of a bet.’

‘And you made your living playing the game – making suckers out of the public.’ The blood vessel in Nero’s right temple twitched. ‘People like me and Marcowitz here, we’re your marks. My house isn’t worth the paper the mortgage was printed on thanks to you.’

‘That wasn’t my fault. I didn’t manufacture the housing bubble. Blame the politicians for that.’

Marcowitz frowned. ‘You took advantage.’

‘Are you holding me accountable for the political and financial system of this country? That’s not fair.’

‘Did you have inside information about Camparinga Knits?’ Nero switched-up the discussion.

‘No.’

‘All it takes is one e-mail for us to prove you’re a liar.’

‘So arrest me then. If you have evidence. Go ahead,’ Candy said, inviting him to handcuff her by extending her wrists forward. Fearless Candy. A different person might have chosen to ingratiate herself with Nero rather than raise his ire and fuel his motivation to continue the hunt for criminal charges against her, but not Candy. She didn’t worry about humiliating anyone, let alone some ignorant government agent who needed to be educated about how the world worked.

Nero retreated from those extended hands.

‘So, it’s true. You don’t have shit.’ Candy lowered her hands. ‘In that case, when will my personal assets be released back to me?’

‘These things take time – paperwork, judges – ’

‘Why are you here?’ I interrupted. ‘If you’ve found nothing and have no charges.’

‘This is the last day of our official investigation. Pity about Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky, stuck with some of that imaginary dog shit.’ Nero shut his notebook and put his pen inside his shirt pocket. ‘I sure hope you solved your problems up there in that high priced detox centre. Woo wee! A half-year’s pay for a month in that place.’

‘Release what belongs to me within a week, or you’ll hear from my lawyers. This is a civil rights issue and your organisation doesn’t need any more bad press on that score.’

‘Aw, I doubt the public would feel sorry enough for you to care,’ Nero said.

I rose, cueing the agents to do the same. They took the hint and I followed them out. After shutting the door behind them, I leaned heavily against it.

‘They have no idea that you destroyed Coffey & Coffey.’

‘Let’s keep it that way. They could put me in jail for that one.’

I doubted that we’d seen the last of them. And they certainly had no intention of making things easy for Candy. She’d have to go to court to regain access to her personal fortune. That much was clear from their attitude. Angry and frustrated, they wanted blood. Who could blame them? This case had become personal; they were suffering, and they wanted to make Candy suffer along with them.

Ashby Deteriorates

Ashby looked through his workshop window and saw Pamela stretched on a deck chair next to the pool, a tumbler filled with vodka or gin in her hand. The invitations had dried up after the local paper had broken the story about the school district's financial woes, leaving her to spend her days alone, unable to enjoy her home or her community. Right on the heels of that first story, the national networks' TV cameras rolled into town and the Junior League quietly suggested that Pamela give up her active membership, at least until everything 'blows over.' Still, she stood by Ashby throughout months of turmoil, even though she'd never trusted Kenny in the first place. Ashby had assumed this was due to Kenny's proclivity for propositioning married women, but her instincts about his general character had turned out to be right. She didn't rub this fact in his face and he was grateful for that.

Ashby opened the fridge underneath his workbench and cracked open another beer. He'd finished cleaning out the shop and organising his tools less than a month before the housing market collapsed. Thus capped a decade of renovating his small plantation house whose bare bones had survived the Civil War and a dozen half-cocked renovations since then. Every wall inside the house stood straight thanks to

him. He'd used a flashlight to inspect each piece of Sheetrock he'd hung and then sanded all of them over and over until they were perfect. He was just as exacting in his law practise. Not that anyone cared anymore.

Ashby needed a sign. He left the workshop and walked across the trimmed lawn toward his wife. He wanted reassurance, an affirmation. He wanted to see the look on her face that he'd seen a thousand times before, the one that made him feel like a hero.

'Hey,' he said. 'You all right?'

She didn't answer, didn't remove her sunglasses.

'Hank says Candy Pansenkosky is coming to town,' Ashby said.

'So? What's she going to do for us? Her bank is out of business.'

'What's wrong with hearing her out?'

'Nothing left to lose that's for sure.' She wouldn't look him in the eye. 'Why'd you go and buy that CDO in the first place? I bet you still don't know what CDO stands for.'

'Collateral Debt Obligation. I didn't make the decision alone.'

'You're the chairman of the school board – at least until the next election – it's your job to give everything sober second thought. Kenny suckered you. He knew you didn't have the balls to ask town council for a property tax increase. He played you, Ashby. Now look at us! Not a friend in the world, no income either. How long has it been since you signed a new client?'

Ashby turned away from her and returned to his workshop, where he picked up a set of darts. With each dart he threw he felt some pressure release like steam rising

from a nineteenth century locomotive. He didn't feel better, he felt focused. He alone controlled the darts and the violence they inflicted on the board.

Ribs, Elvis, and Tragedy: Our Family Road Trip to Tennessee

Yolanda's Soul Barbeque, a Livesburg institution, introduced Candy, Jordan, Daisy, Marvel, and me to southern cuisine. We sat on white plastic chairs grouped around a table protected from the sun by an umbrella supplied by a whiskey company. Collard greens, hush puppies, chitterlings, pulled pork, and braised ribs dominated the hand-written menu. Serenaded by Sam Cooke on the restaurant's jukebox, we tucked into racks of baby back ribs smothered in Yolanda's homemade sauce.

Marvel stared at Daisy, wide-eyed. It was probably the first and last time he'd see his mother eat with her fingers, coming away from each bite with sauce rimming her lips. She dabbed her chin with a paper towel before picking up the next rib and digging into it with abandon.

'I'm keeping it real from now on,' Candy said. She leaned back and sipped sweet iced tea.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'No more conspicuous consumption, too distracting from what matters.'

'Which is?'

‘Moments like this.’

‘Candy is sentimental. Who would have known,’ Daisy said. ‘I noticed you turned off your phone, that’s a new one.’

‘Do you think Jack is ready to sell his business?’ Jordan asked.

‘Not to you. He’d rather go down with the ship, like the captain of the Titanic.’

‘But he doesn’t have to.’

‘Pride knows no logic.’

We rested our overloaded bellies under the cloudless Tennessee sky, and it felt like a family vacation. When Daisy had learned about our plans to visit Memphis, she’d jumped at the chance to come along, wanting to see Graceland and Beale Street, experience a slice of the mythical Americana that occupies the land between the two coasts.

The bill paid, we readied ourselves for the short walk to the parked mini-van we’d rented. As we did so, the women reaching for purses, Jordan reaching for the keys, a man resembling a derelict wino – scruffy, unshaved, worn clothing, holes in his shoes – made his way down the sidewalk toward us. He yelled obscenities at an invisible stalker. As he came close, it seemed that he hardly registered our presence, but suddenly, without provocation, he punched Candy in the back. The audible blow sent Candy forward in her chair and her chest smacked the table’s edge. ‘What the fuck!’ she yelled. I jumped from my seat and grabbed the man by the collar and pushed him up against the wall.

A waitress came outside and called him by name.

‘You know this person?’ I asked.

‘He comes around once in a while. Only gets dangerous when he’s off his meds.’

The man accepted her invitation inside, ending the altercation, and slamming the door on our good mood.

‘Candy, are you hurt? Do you need to go the hospital?’ Jordan asked.

‘I think I’m okay. Gonna have a bitch of a bruise. Do I have a ‘kick me’ sign on my back or something? Why am I such an attractive target these days?’ Candy stood and stretched, rubbed her shoulder and rolled it around, and then shook out her skirt.

‘Let’s get you back to the hotel so that you can lie down,’ Daisy said.

‘We are not going to the hotel. We’re going to Graceland, like we planned.’

Following her orders, we piled into the van and rode along in silence until Jordan turned on the radio, pre-tuned to a gospel station. Mahalia Jackson’s *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* serenaded us along wide boulevards studded with magnolias in full bloom, past the Biblical Resource Center and Museum toward The King’s idea of the good life.

*

As we filed into Graceland’s recreation room, I noticed that Candy was missing and I went to look for her. Finding myself outdoors I breathed the garden air and enjoyed the pause. Contrary to my expectations, Graceland inspired private reflection. Yellow and red tulips danced in the gentle breeze and songbird lovers filled a bird box nailed to a live oak with the detritus of impending parenthood: twigs, soft pine needles, and straw mulch from the flower beds.

Candy sat alone in the meditation garden next to Elvis's grave. Her face glowed in the late afternoon sun and I had no wish to alert her to my presence. Her expression suggested a mind at peace with her decisions and she'd never looked as beautiful. Tendrils of her coppery hair floated on the breeze and her hands were clasped in prayer position against her heart. An unexpected gesture, those praying hands, they reminded me that you never really knew a person as well as you thought.

She spotted me then and she smiled. 'I don't know why I'm moved by this place; before today I'd never given Elvis a second thought. He was just another messed up celebrity who died young.'

'Mortality moves most of us sooner or later.'

'We're roughly the same age, Elvis and I, when he died I mean. Back then he was an old, fat blob, rather pathetic in my childish opinion. Now I understand what my mother had meant when she carried on about how tragic his death was. I'm the same age now as he was then and I feel like my life is just beginning.'

Daisy's nostalgia and Marvel's glee in response to the many shiny objects on display had made the day fun, but what had given it meaning was the understanding that Elvis's arrival at Graceland had required a leap of faith, which in turn required courage. Candy understood this, whereas I'd indulged cynicism.

'It's late, we should gather up the family and go before we're thrown out.'

The spell broken, she dropped her hands and linked arms with me. Together we walked toward the house and located Daisy near the restrooms, attempting to placate Marvel. Engaged in full meltdown, he wanted nothing to do with his mother's tricks of distraction.

'Should have left earlier,' Candy whispered.

‘Where’s Jordan?’ I asked.

‘Fetching the car. He’ll meet us at the gate,’ Daisy said.

Candy picked Marvel up out of his stroller, held him close and hummed ‘Love Me Tender’. She cast her spell and he calmed in response. During the ride to the hotel he fell asleep, his head slumped against the padded edge of his car seat, little hands balled into tiny fists.

Our hotel in downtown Memphis had one of those circular drives for passenger drop-offs and Jordan drove up to the door. I helped Daisy with Marvel’s assorted carry bags of nappies, toys, and food. As we gathered up the sleeping boy, he woke to an ear-splitting blast of gunfire. Until Candy’s yelp broke through the ringing in my ears, I hadn’t understood what we’d heard. She crumpled to the ground while I stood frozen, gripping a bag of baby accessories.

At the other end of the ramp a man turned his gun on himself.

‘It’s all your fault,’ he yelled at Candy. ‘Whatever you think you can do for me now will never restore my standing.’

He pulled the trigger and blew a hole through the side of his head.

Daisy screamed. Marvel screamed. No one moved for what felt like a century. Then Jordan and I dropped everything and ran to Candy. Blood turned her lavender scarf red and oozed onto her shirt. Her lips moved and I leaned close to make out her words.

‘Martin, finish it.’ She coughed. ‘Do it for the kids.’

‘Stay awake, Candy. Come on, don’t leave me now.’

Sirens blared and soon paramedics swept into action examining Candy as well as the gunman. The man had no pulse, but Candy's was weak and they whisked her away to the hospital.

Holding Vigil

Daisy and I drank foul coffee in the waiting room at the Emergency Department, our behinds mired in avocado-green vinyl chairs, while Jordan looked after Marvel at the hotel. Construction sites were quieter than that place and I asked one of the nurses why it was so busy. She told me it was on account of the full moon and she wasn't joking. One man clutched his crotch, his face indicating agony. It turned out that he'd attempted to masturbate with a vacuum cleaner. On any other day this story would have made me laugh.

The hospital supplied minimal information, all they told us was that Candy remained alive and that they intended to operate as soon as she was stable enough to endure surgery. I rang Paulina, told her what had happened and she dropped the phone. Headline News had listed a story about a shooting in Memphis, but it never occurred to her that Candy might be its victim. She planned to catch the first flight out of Newark.

'We can't lose her now, she's part of the family,' Daisy said.

'Your fondness for her surprises me a little.'

‘Somehow over the past year or so we’ve managed to adopt her, thanks to you mostly. Or maybe she adopted us. Lord knows she took care of us when we needed it, almost makes me wish I was a lesbian.’

‘Huh?’

‘Nothing, guess I’m still bitter about Jordan and that whorish screenwriter who used to work for him.’

‘You knew about that?’

‘Yes,’ she smiled a sad smile.

‘How?’

‘A wife has ways, Martin.’

‘But does he know that you know?’

She shook her head. ‘I’ll forgive him this one error. Jordan has proven himself a good man overall, flawed but good, and I see no need to end our fairy-tale because of wounded pride. It’s a selfish way to end a marriage. Yes, he cheated, but he loves me and I’d rather forgive him and keep loving him.’ She sipped her coffee. ‘One thing I’ve learned is that the truth is complicated.’

‘I wish I could make a toast right now – to all of us and our struggles to figure out how to live.’

‘We do it by the seat of our pants mostly.’

A policeman walked over to us and introduced himself. ‘I’m sorry to bother you.’

‘We’ve been expecting you,’ I said. ‘How can we help you?’

‘Did you know the man who shot Miss Pansenkosky?’

‘No, we’d never met him,’ Daisy said.

‘Why do you think he did what he did?’

‘Madness?’ Daisy said.

‘We understand from his widow that he blamed your friend for the school district’s financial losses.’

‘Oh?’ she said. ‘Why on earth would he think it’s her fault?’

‘Why did you come to Memphis anyway?’

‘We wanted to see Graceland,’ I said. ‘It was meant to be a vacation. You see my cousin and I are from the UK and we like to travel around America. Candy planned to go to Florida next and we planned to return home.’

Daisy’s eyes opened wider; she understood that we shouldn’t speak about the planned meeting with the school district’s treasurer.

‘I see. You’re sure that Miss Pansenkosky had no other business in this part of Tennessee?’

‘None that we’re aware of.’ I said.

‘Thanks for your time.’ He nodded at us and closed his notebook. ‘I hope your friend recovers.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

Daisy squeezed my hand and we watched the cop leave, holding our breath until the doors slid shut behind him. The television, mounted on the wall, relayed images of people picketing in front of the New York Stock Exchange. One of the placards read: Jump Mother Fuckers. Jump.

‘I didn’t like lying to the police, Martin,’ Daisy whispered. ‘I don’t know if I could do it again.’

‘They won’t ask you again. Me, on the other hand, they might come back for, depending on where this goes.’

When I’d left home for California the last thing I expected to become was Friar Tuck to Candy’s Robin Hood. Fact was I rather liked it, but the romantic in me couldn’t stomach the violence. After the shooting I’d vomited into the gutter and now that the police had left, the complexity of the enormous risk I’d placed Daisy, Jordan, and Marvel under by allowing them to come on this crazy trip sent my heart into a loopy bee bop arrhythmia.

Recovery

Candy's face looked like bleached cotton and her eyelids resembled the translucent flesh of hairless newborn mice. The surgeon took pride in the fact that her vital signs were good, but two days after surgery she remained in the intensive care unit and hadn't regained full consciousness. Until she spoke to us, gave us an indication that she was present in mind and soul, none of us intended to leave Memphis. Paulina spent each night sleeping in a chair next to Candy's bed. I visited each day, arriving when visiting hours began and leaving when the nurses threw me out. Daisy or Jordan would take Paulina to the hotel each afternoon for a shower and a proper meal. Sometimes she napped with Marvel before resuming her place next to her daughter. Life took on the combined rhythm of hospital hours and Marvel's needs. Nobody minded.

One bullet had gone through Candy's chest, damaged a lung, and exited through the back, while another had grazed her skull. When they admitted her, trauma experts had indicated that she was lucky. Her chances were good, assuming she didn't bleed out or suffer an embolism or a myriad of other complications. I tried not to hang onto this bit of positive news with too much hope in case they were wrong.

On the fourth morning after the shooting, as I carried coffee for Paulina into Candy's hospital room, I heard Paulina's voice through the open door. It took a moment for me to register that it was Candy she addressed rather than Daisy or a nurse.

'Don't talk,' Paulina said. 'You're on a ventilator. Understand? Squeeze my hand twice if you do.'

I sucked in some air and held my breath.

Candy squeezed twice.

She was awake! And she'd understood her mother's words.

Drunk with the knowledge that Candy would be all right I gathered up Daisy and danced her around the corridor.

*

Hank Yeardley paid a visit a few days later, after the ventilator had been removed. Although Candy could breathe without it, she still required oxygen and was under strict orders to limit her conversations.

A kind-faced man with a twinkle in his eyes and the easy body confidence of a former athlete, the Livesburg School District's Treasurer introduced himself to Paulina first.

'Ma'am, I'm most sorry for what happened.'

'Thank you. I'm sorry about your friend.'

'It was unexpected behaviour, as I'm sure you can imagine. No one saw it coming.'

Paulina excused herself and went to the cafeteria for a sandwich, leaving us to our awkwardness. As much as I instantly liked Yeardley, the unnaturalness of the

moment weighed on me. His friend had attempted to murder Candy and this fact alone made it impossible for me to imagine how our conversation might avoid the conflict this presented. Yeardley would be a monster if he lacked sympathy for his friend, but also for Candy; whereas, I felt no requirement to see things from Ashby Jefferson Rose's point of view. All of my sympathies lay with Candy.

'Mr Yeardley, I'm Martin Rhy-Davies.' We shook hands. 'Miss Pansenkosky has authorized me to carry out her business with you on her behalf.'

'May I see her?'

Yeardley flinched at the sight of Candy's bandaged head, the tubes extending inside her nose, and the banks of equipment on either side of the bed.

'Candy, Mr Yeardley is here,' I said.

'Hank, please.'

'Thank you for coming,' Candy whispered. 'Martin has something for you, it's the best I can do for now, but there'll be more.'

I reached into my jacket pocket and removed an envelope containing a cashier's cheque and handed it to Hank.

'What's this?'

'Open it later, at home or at your office. It's for the school board's expenses.'

'Where did it come from?'

I nodded toward Candy. 'She found a way; consider it an anonymous donation from a concerned citizen. You can't tell anyone who it's from.'

'Is it legal? I can't accept dirty money.'

Candy nodded. 'It's legal.'

‘No one can take it away from you, but if people find out where it came from, there will be questions,’ I said.

‘Stillman White – they’ll look after you. Letty Camparinga will call you,’ Candy said.

I stared at her. Really? This was news to me, when had Candy enlisted Letty’s assistance? I had a million fresh questions for her, but couldn’t ask them in front of Yeardley.

She closed her eyes for a moment and I thought that she’d fallen asleep.

‘Godspeed, Miss Pansenkosky,’ Hank said. ‘I best go.’

‘I’ll walk you out.’

‘Hank Yeardley I believe you’re a good man,’ Candy said. ‘I trust you to do the right thing.’

‘You’re a good Christian woman, Miss Pansenkosky, all things considered,’ Hank said.

Candy smiled her first genuine smile since she’d regained consciousness. Until then, her smiles had resembled a sleeping dog’s as she drifted in and out of morphine-induced dreams. Perhaps she’d dreamed about devouring T-bone steaks and chasing rabbits in the rain. I read in her smile the return of her capacity to appreciate irony and I knew she’d make a full recovery.

Yeardley and I walked down the corridor and into the elevator without speaking. Inside the elevator we looked from the other occupants’ faces to the floor. It wasn’t until we reached the hospital’s doors that we exchanged words.

‘How much explaining will I have to do?’ Hank asked.

‘It’s a big cheque, but if you follow Candy’s instructions you’ll be all right. Do speak with Ms Camparinga when she calls, she’ll look after you.’

‘Isn’t she another one of those Wall Street types?’

‘Yes, but who else have you got?’

‘What do you do?’

‘I’m not in the investment business. I work for a film company.’

‘Maybe you’re the person we need.’

‘No, I’m not much good at that kind of work, best stick with Candy.’ I shuffled my feet and led him outside. ‘Was Mr Rose a close friend of yours?’

‘We’ve known each other a long time, it’s a crying shame, what happened to him.’ Yeardley reached into his breast pocket and removed the envelope. ‘Something about this doesn’t feel right. Please return it to Miss Pansenkosky with my sincerest regrets.’

‘No, you must keep it. It’s for the next generation.’

He lifted my hand and placed the envelope on my open palm.

Determination filled his eyes, leaving no room for further persuasion. Hank Yeardley turned away from me and strolled toward the parking garage having rejected a cheque for fifty million dollars.

Funeral

It appeared that all of Livesburg and half of Memphis turned out for Ashby Jefferson Rose's funeral. Whatever demons had haunted him in the end didn't reflect on how people chose to remember him. Given the overcrowding, my presence went unnoticed. An outsider most of my life, this was one place where my status as such induced a measure of self-consciousness. The accents and the rituals were utterly foreign to me, as was mine to them. I took a seat in the back and listened to Ashby's oldest boy recall his father.

‘I remember when Daddy walked me to school for the first time. We said “good morning” to every person we passed, whether we knew them or not. Every flower, every bird, every tree along the way was a gift that made his days a little lighter and touched his soul. He pointed to these things as if they mattered.

‘He lived his life by paying attention to things like that and more. Paying attention to people built his law practise. People from all over came to see him, all referred by someone else. His reputation mattered to him. Doing a good job mattered to him. Being a good person mattered to him. When I was sixteen he said to me, “Son, before you enter a room consider what you want to leave behind.” This was his

approach to everything. He had his own code of honour and it began with this simple maxim.

‘My father loved this place as he loved himself. Sometimes it seemed as though the name Rose and Livesburg were intertwined to such an extent that one was diminished without the other. Daddy could have joined a big practise in Memphis, or anywhere for that matter, but he chose not to leave the place that raised him. For that I’m grateful. There is no better place that I can think of that I’d rather call my hometown. But it’s unlikely I’ll raise my own children here now that their grandfather is gone.’

Young Warren Rose lost his voice and ended his remarks there.

A man named Jim Pickles talked about Ashby’s professional integrity, how he admired him even though he hardly knew him. Other speakers focused on themes of honour, honesty, selfless contributions to the community; no one dared mention what Ashby had left behind in the circular driveway of the best hotel in Memphis. Some of them may have felt themselves culpable. Of course there was no way to know for certain, but anyone who’d given him a hard time ought to ask themselves: ‘Had I paid closer attention, been more compassionate or even merciful, could I have saved Ashby Jefferson Rose from damnation?’

Six pallbearers, Hank Yeardley among them, hoisted the casket and led the procession out of the chapel. As he passed, Hank caught my eye and I nodded toward him. Pamela Rose noticed our exchange and therefore noticed me, a stranger to her, perhaps the only one in the room. She cornered me on the church steps as I exited. Shielded by a pair of giant sunglasses, I couldn’t make out the expression in her eyes, but the tightness of her facial muscles confirmed her anger before she spoke a word.

‘Who are you? Why are you here?’ she asked.

‘Me? I’m – ’

‘Never mind, I already know. Your picture was in the paper. Came to judge us? The country bumpkins who fell for your New York Ponzi scheme?’

‘No. I’m not from New York. Look, Mrs – ’ I touched her arm, hoping the gesture would calm her. ‘I’m deeply sorry about your husband’s tragic end.’

‘You and your friends aren’t capable of understanding what you should be sorry about. You care only for yourselves.’

The small crowd that had formed around Pamela and me parted for Hank Yeardley, who’d finished loading the casket into the hearse.

‘Pamela,’ Hank said, ‘this is Mr Rhys-Davies, he’s a friend of ours.’

His words disarmed her. She backed off and allowed him to place a comforting arm over her shoulders.

‘Martin, I think you should go now,’ Hank said. ‘It’s too soon to expect her to understand.’

‘My deepest condolences to you and your family Mrs Rose.’

The cashier’s cheque remained in my breast pocket. I hadn’t had the heart to tell Candy that Mr Yeardley had returned it without opening it. I pulled it out and handed it to Mrs Rose.

‘What’s this?’

‘The reason Candy had wished to meet your husband.’

Pamela Rose opened the envelope and nearly lost her balance on the church steps. Hank Yeardley steadied her and viewed the cheque’s details over her shoulder.

‘Mr Yeardley, I understand your hesitation yesterday, your distrust.’ The circle around us had grown, and I lowered my voice. ‘It won’t bring Ashby back, but it will help the townspeople and its future generations.’

‘You knew about this, Hank?’ Pamela asked.

‘I had no idea the number was so large, all the more reason to turn it down, Pamela. No one makes this much money honestly.’ Hank gritted his teeth.

‘For heaven’s sake, Hank, take it!’ Pamela said. ‘Someone in New York suffered for this, and that’s good enough for me.’

Leaving them, I walked down the steps to the street and across the road into a park, and found a bench facing a fountain – one of those tiered beauties that resembled a wedding cake. When I sat down, a pair of red squirrels stopped and stared at me. Their tails filled out, and their whiskers shook as their black eyes penetrated the essence of me. Then they turned and scaled a century-old oak to their nest, a stash of acorns in their cheeks gathered for a family lunch. Breathing the mild air, smelling leaf mould and young flowers, I looked heavenward and asked myself what I’d leave behind when my time came. Ashby Jefferson Rose had left something profound behind – a town so overcome with grief that it didn’t matter to them that he’d died a sinner. What had mattered to them was how he’d lived.

Reading Fitzgerald in Memphis

After the funeral I returned to the hospital. As I approached Candy's door I heard an unfamiliar voice reading aloud to her. They were F. Scott Fitzgerald's words: slivers of moon, moneyed voices, bee yellow cars, owl-eyed billboard, hearts beating in time to a jazz number, west-facing sunflowers.

'Why did you do those awful things to me?' Candy interrupted the chain of beautiful words.

I froze and didn't enter, held my breath in the corridor and listened.

'I was stupid,' the man said. 'I'm sorry.'

'Damn right you were. Probably still are,' Candy said without malice. 'What day is this?'

'Wednesday.'

'Keep reading.'

'Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens.'

After the apology I worked out that the man was Aaron Stillman. Candy had risked initiating his re-entry into her life and now here he was, in the flesh; a long way from a magazine photo discarded beneath a recliner in Jack's screening room. His voice wasn't as I'd imagined it from the interview, it was more genteel than the New York Jewish brogue of my mind's ear and I wondered if New Orleans had affected him in ways that Candy's risk assessment couldn't have accounted for. Arguably, they'd each hit rock bottom in the intervening years since their departures from Stillman White and they now reached toward something new, a vision of different selves, and they'd reunited to do it. A rather Fitzgeraldian dream if ever there was one. Romantic. Candy was a romantic at heart, no question about it. Without breaking the spell, I tiptoed back to the elevator.

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With shoulders as thin as wire coat hangers, clothes fell from Candy's frame like sheets on a clothesline. She wrapped a cardigan over her ruffled blouse and the layers of clothing disguised her post-surgical status.

'Why don't you come home? I'll take care of you,' Paulina said. 'There are plenty of good doctors in Jersey.'

'Ma, I need to relax. You understand, don't you?'

Paulina continued to pack Candy's belongings into an overnight bag.

'The beach, peace and quiet, some sunshine, that's what I need.'

'You don't need that man.'

'Things are different now.'

'We'll see.'

‘Things might work out better than I’d imagined. Winds of change and all that.’

A nurse arrived to complete Candy’s discharge. Candy settled into the proffered wheelchair and the nurse pushed her down the corridor while Paulina and I followed, carrying Candy’s belongings. An entourage greeted us in the lobby: Aaron, Martin, Daisy, Jordan, and Marvel.

‘I’ll take it from here,’ I said to the nurse.

‘No, allow me,’ Aaron said.

I stared him down, took the nurse’s place behind Candy, and continued the slow parade toward the car.

‘What do you want to do first?’ Daisy asked.

‘Eat a cheeseburger with curly fries,’ Candy replied. ‘Lie in the sun.’

‘Guess we’re going on a picnic,’ Aaron said.

Aaron, Paulina, Candy, and I piled into Aaron’s rental car and followed Jordan and Daisy to the nearest burger joint with a drive-through. I sat in the back with Paulina, neither of us happy with the latest turn of events in Candy’s life. An interloper, Aaron was about as welcome as a malaria-carrying mosquito. Neither of us wanted to find ourselves in a position of putting Candy back together should this leopard’s spots turn out to be the same as they ever were.

Our car loaded with the heavy scent of charred meat and processed cheese, we drove to the end of Beale Street and located a grassy sliver of land next to the swollen Mississippi River. It was the first time any of us except Aaron had viewed the mighty river immortalised by Mark Twain. Bi-coastalism dominated our psyches. But this river bisected the continent from north to south, its history synonymous with the

history of mercantilism in this country. Those of us who made the mass culture, moulded ideas of who Americans were, paid the river and the people who lived on it little attention.

Aaron spread his jacket onto the grass and tenderly gripped Candy's hand as she lowered herself on top of it. They sat back-to-back supporting each other as they ate. Admittedly, they appeared comfortable with each other; I'd go so far as to say they were contented sharing greasy food and opposing views of barges floating downstream. And I was jealous. There wasn't a soul in my life, other than Candy, who I could point to and say that I experienced an easy intimacy with like the one she shared with Aaron as they gorged themselves on burgers and milkshakes. How did that happen given their history? What did they know about each other that cut through the nastiness and turned it upside down?

Afterwards, as we re-loaded the cars and set out on our separate ways, I had a chance to ask Candy why she'd taken Aaron back into her life.

'He remembered what I did on Wednesday afternoons,' she said.

Her words knocked me flat. I'd forgotten about Wednesdays at the Lower East Side community centre.

I held her gently even though I wanted to squeeze her and never let go. This was goodbye of sorts. Paulina and I had placed our belongings into Jordan's mini-van for the ride to the airport, where we'd board a flight to Newark together. Candy and Aaron were driving to Key Biscayne for a period of convalescence.

The Last Time I saw Jack

Jack Winger's cabin in the Berkshires was exactly as I'd expected – rustic, at least in comparison to the way he'd lived in California. Exhibiting Frank Lloyd Wright influences, the building blended into the landscape. Its roof probably leaked, but nestled among the trees, with smoke rising from its stone chimney, windows looking out onto a gulley lush with tall grasses and bulrushes, a creek chattering over smooth rocks, the house's beauty was undeniable. Clearly, fondness toward aesthetic pleasures ran in Jack's family.

‘Drink?’ Jack asked. ‘I don't keep much stock, not many visitors these days. I can offer scotch or wine.’

‘Scotch, neat.’

Something sticky clung to my shoe. The kitchen floor hadn't seen a mop in a while. Weeks of old newspapers stood stacked next to the fireplace. I cleared a recent edition of the *Boston Globe* from the sofa and took a seat.

Jack brought a bottle and two glasses. It wasn't his usual brand.

'How's Candy doing?' he asked.

'Better than expected. She'll recover, soon there'll be nothing but a scar to remind her.'

'You saw the whole thing.'

'Yes, we all did. Rather traumatic to say the least.'

We drank for a moment and avoided each other's eyes.

'Are you here on a mission from Jordan?' he finally asked.

'No. Why? Are you interested in selling some rights to him or something?'

'No.'

'Look, I came to see how you were. After an experience like Memphis, one realises how fragile life is and how procrastinating about things might lead to regret.'

'You've come. You've seen. How am I?'

'Not very well.' His face was drawn; he'd lost weight. His clothes had an unwashed quality about them, not smelly exactly, but not fresh either, like he'd slept in them. Worst of all, his eyes had hollowed, giving him a ghoulish appearance.

He poured himself a fresh drink.

'When was the last time you ate a proper meal?' An empty cracker box lay on the coffee table.

'Yesterday? The day before?' He looked at the ceiling for confirmation.

Lacking its former brightness, his skin betrayed neglectful eating habits.

Without the means to hire a chef to cook, or the interest to shop for fresh food, Jack's physical features oozed despondence. The problem wasn't that he had nothing – it was that he no longer cared to become something. Instead, he waited for something to

happen. Mired in a mud pit of self-loathing, without an adoring public to latch onto, he was stuck. And this holding pattern, this inertia, threatened to kill off the vibrant individual who'd once seduced me.

'Why don't you show me around? Let's go outside.'

We went out the back. The grass was short and someone had pruned the shrubs. An invisible bird called from a perch in the trees, a gentle song of longing. Past the gazebo, a structure of boxes presided over the rear corner of the yard.

'What are those?' I pointed to the boxes.

'Bees.'

'Excuse me?'

'I'm a beekeeper now. A few months back a swarm landed in that tree over there, they'd outgrown their hive, so I gave them a new hive. They seem perfectly happy.'

'What does Issy think of them? Where is Issy anyway?'

'She was stung a few times, didn't like that much. I gave her to my sister. Her kids like her, spoil her rotten.'

'Where does your sister live?'

'Long Island, she didn't venture very far from the old homestead. Married a plumber.'

'You gave up your dog?'

'There are lots of things I've let go, Martin. Can't you see that?' He walked toward the house. 'Come on, let me show you how I'm paying for liquor and gas.'

He led me into the living room where he picked up the remote control for the television, a standard first generation flat screen with a modest surround sound system

connected to it – a far cry from his former screening room. The DVD player popped to life and Ravi Shankar-like music pulsed from the speakers. A lithe blonde in expensive urban yoga wear faced a body of water and began a series of sun salutations, while a soothing voice-over encouraged the viewer to join in the blonde's meditative motion with both 'body and mind present on the mat.'

'The Dharma Centre is up the road, I make videos of their programs and they sell them over the web. I met Deepak Chopra there last year.'

'Maybe you could benefit from one of their courses.'

He laughed for the first time since my arrived. 'They offer nothing that I can use.'

That's when I knew I'd never see Jack again. Nothing applied in his world anymore, not even desire.

We wrapped up our visit and I made the long drive back to Madison. Candy had asked me to look after her house while she was away, pay the bills, clear out the mail, hire a gardener, that sort of thing. Foreclosure signs marked several country properties that I passed along the way. On one such property a sign advertised rabbits for sale for less money than hamburger.

Catch and Release

Candy regarded the angry lines above her right breast reflecting back at her in the bathroom mirror and thanked Ashby Jefferson Rose's ghost for missing her heart. She swabbed the wound with antiseptic and placed a fresh bandage over the gash where stitches held her flesh together. Six more weeks, they'd said, before her body would hold itself closed, and years before the redness might fade to pink or white. Her body will never shed the memory of Memphis and Ashby Jefferson Rose. When she finished, she washed her un-manicured hands in the raised porcelain basin.

Unable to tolerate a bra, she layered on a singlet and a white cotton shirt over cut-off denim shorts. Her loose hair draped around her shoulders and she left it that way. Satisfied with her appearance, she tore the bedroom apart searching for her Blackberry. Unable to locate it, she picked up the telephone and dialled her own mobile number, but the familiar ring tone didn't assert itself, even as she strained to hear it throughout the house. Giving up, she returned the telephone to its cradle and walked barefoot outside to the yard overlooking Biscayne Bay and the city of Miami. Next door stood Nixon's Florida White House, condemned to demolition by its

current owner who planned to replace the 1950s rambler with an imitation Mediterranean villa.

Aaron demonstrated to his sixteen-year-old daughter, Maya, how to control a fishing rod in preparation for their trip out to sea with a small group of friends, including me. Candy planned to go with them, but with no intent to fish. She'd go to avoid a day alone in the house with only her Blackberry for companionship. Since she'd announced her retirement from Wall Street, it buzzed all day long with messages from people all over the country – not all of them friendly, which was why Aaron frequently hid it around the house, and the reason she couldn't find it earlier. He'd turned it off and tossed it into a drawer somewhere.

The housekeeper handed Candy a glass of lemonade.

'Thanks, Connie.'

'Mrs Camparinga says you say nice things about me. She gave me a raise because of you and Mr Aaron.'

'You deserve it. You take good care of us, better than we could ever ask of you. Sometimes I think you're doing a better job than my mother would.'

'Don't say that about your mother.'

'Maybe that isn't fair, but trust me when I tell you that I'm thrilled to have you here.'

Candy stretched out on a chaise next to the pool and felt no guilt about the hour; two in the afternoon and she had nothing else she must do. No calls to make. No research reports to read. No market she cared to monitor. She surveyed her surroundings and counted her blessings. Food literally fell from the trees here.

Avocados, key limes, lemons, and mangoes grew on the property, and the tropical

humidity cast a maternal spell as it clung to her skin and frizzed her hair. Frangipani, jasmine, and the hummingbirds they attracted, provided endless visual pleasure. And, if she felt like checking out a predator, she could walk over to the state park and watch crocodiles lie in wait.

Aaron came over to where she sat and leaned over the back of the chair to kiss her forehead. 'I think Maya's going to be fine on the boat tomorrow.'

'Did Letty say what time her flight is coming in?'

'They should be here any minute, the plane landed over an hour ago.'

Maya put the fishing rod away and sat at the foot of Candy's chaise longue. She had a habit of sticking close to Candy, like a baby duck. But she wasn't a young child and it was a mystery to Candy exactly why she chose to be openly affectionate toward her. The only explanation she could come up with was that she provided something that Maya's mother didn't. It wasn't as though Candy tried hard to be liked by either of Aaron's children. She hadn't tried at all.

A few minutes later, Letty and Carleton turned up with their fifteen year-old daughter, Anastasia – Candy's goddaughter – in tow.

'We thought Maya and Annie might become friends,' Letty said by way of an explanation. 'I figured you wouldn't mind.'

'Of course not,' Candy said, turning to Anastasia. 'My Lord, you look just like your mother, except for the height of course, but that face! Come here and give your Aunt Candy a hug.'

Anastasia hesitated, before surrendering into Candy's open arms. Almost as tall as Candy, she had no need to rise up on her toes like her mother had to reach Candy's cheek.

Once the greetings were dispensed and the luggage stowed in assigned bedrooms, everyone returned to the yard and the late afternoon sun. Maya and Annie went into the pool, while the adults split along gendered lines. Carleton and Aaron walked down to the end of the dock with a cooler of beer, leaving Candy and Letty to talk.

The two women stretched out on adjacent lounge chairs. Letty took a swig of beer and placed the bottle on the small round table she shared with Candy. Neither of them had ever cared for small talk, their conversations often punctuated with silences that neither minded. Candy had missed those pauses with her old friend. They were a comfortable way to mark time.

‘I brought you something,’ Letty began. She reached into her pocket and removed a small gold crucifix on a chain so fine it almost evaporated against the skin of her hand.

‘What’s that?’ Candy asked.

‘Don’t you remember? It’s yours. You left it at my house.’

‘That was nearly fifteen years ago and I told you it was a gift for Anastasia.’

‘I know, but I think you should accept this re-gifting. Annie doesn’t wear this kind of thing anymore. If she wants to wear a crucifix, it’s four inches tall and hangs down to her navel, a fashion accessory and nothing more. That’s not the point. It’s yours, your father gave it to you and you gave it to me in safekeeping for Annie, and now I’m giving it back to you on the occasion of your resurrection.’

Candy reached out and accepted the offering from her old friend.

‘I’ve been an idiot a hundred times over and here you go and forgive me for it.’ Candy’s voice broke. ‘Thank you.’

She unhooked the clasp and Letty helped place the necklace around her neck.

‘It’s still pretty after all these years,’ Letty said.

‘You must have polished it.’

‘I looked after it, kept a spot for it in my jewellery box.’ Letty drank some more of her beer. ‘I admit that when you called me about the school board I had my doubts, thought you were up to something that couldn’t possibly be good for me. And it turns out I was right.’

‘Hey, you and Sol bought Coffey Coffey & Pansenkosky for a song, fair and square. You survived the great Wall Street crisis bigger and stronger than ever.’

‘You and I could both go to jail for what we’ve done.’

‘Not going to happen. You didn’t break any laws.’

‘I’m an accessory after the fact. I believe that’s called obstruction of justice.’

‘But you feel good about it, don’t you? Come on, admit it, otherwise you would have turned me in by now.’

‘Maybe a little,’ she smiled. ‘It’s a pretty sweet payback for losing Camparinga Knits.’

‘Sorry about that.’

‘Never mind, it would have happened anyway. Those assholes at Drexel were sniffing around too.’

‘At least you still have a legacy to leave your kids.’

‘It might surprise you to know that I don’t want my kids going into the same business as their parents and Aunt Candy.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Same reason you got out. Your centre couldn’t hold together, too much internal conflict in the end. I don’t want my kids to end up like you. They may not be lucky enough to escape with their lives.’

‘Then why do you stay? You could retire tomorrow and become a big time philanthropist like Andrew Carnegie.’

‘I’m not like you.’

They listened to the oncoming Florida twilight, its creatures’ preparations for the night witnessed by an already-risen full moon.

‘Why did you ask me for help with the Livesburg thing, anyway?’ Letty asked after a while.

‘Something Carleton said once. He suggested that my perceptions were distorted.’ Candy reached across the space between them and took her friend’s hand.

‘Besides, there wasn’t anyone else I could trust.’

‘You trusted me?’

Candy nodded. ‘A leap of faith.’

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At the marina the following day, we dragged our bags of provisions down a floating dock to a chartered fishing boat that Letty had found. Or more correctly, whose captain had found her. A small outfit, its operator promised Marlin for dinner. Personally, I looked forward to falling asleep in the sun for a little while. The flight from Newark had landed late and between the heat and a rough night I didn’t feel terribly alert.

The boat’s name was *Hadley*, presumably a homage to Hemingway’s wife, and her captain was Christopher Bigelow.

‘John?’ Candy asked after she had stared at the captain for a moment.

‘Candy!’ he said. ‘I heard you moved out here. By the way, the name’s Chris.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Thought you’d like to see what I did with the money you gave me.’

It was no coincidence that we found ourselves on Chris’s boat for our first deep sea fishing adventure. After the shooting in Memphis, he’d attempted to contact Candy through Stillman White Camparinga. On learning his connection with Candy, Letty had encouraged Aaron to hire him for the day.

‘What?’

‘The five grand you gave me; I decided to leave LA and start my own business. With a little help from my friends, I bought the *Hadley* and the charter business that went with her.’

Candy looked from Letty to me and back at Chris. ‘Another good investment I made. Does that make me a shareholder in the *Hadley*?’ She touched his cheek. ‘You smell like the sun. Florida agrees with you.’

‘And you. Knocked five years off your face.’

Chris’s eyes sparkled with the kind of joy exuded by people who have found their bliss. Without fear of the lonesome road, Chris had entered the dense forest of life where no previous trail existed and the risk had made all the difference. He and Candy had this much in common and it bound them.

Out at sea the tribes formed. Anastasia and Maya sat together and ignored everyone else. Each maintained a show of fishing, holding onto their respective rods, but they were more interested in talking to each other. They’d only just met, yet they’d managed to settle into a kind of instant intimacy that’s peculiar to teen girls. As

I lay on the deck pretending to sleep behind a hat and a pair of Ray Bans, their chatter about everything from the best figure enhancing Victoria's Secrets products to Justin Timberlake entertained me for a while, until one of the girls squealed. Annie's line had gone taut and the pole arched under the resistance of what turned out to be a sizeable and ugly fish. Aaron helped her control the rod as the monster grouper continued swimming in circles far enough below the surface to remain invisible. He didn't push her away or make any attempt to take the glory of reeling in the forty-pounder away from her. On the contrary, once she anchored her feet firmly on the deck, he encouraged her to hang on, to put her back into it, to trust that she could outlast the fish.

For nearly ten minutes Annie and the fish faced off in a battle of wills. Aaron and Chris gave her advice on controlling the reel and she listened. The wildness of the fish didn't faze her and her concentration didn't break. As the grouper rose to the surface, flipping against the tug of the line, Chris reached down and gripped it by the tail, pulling it onto the deck.

'I can't believe I did that,' Anastasia said.

'That's my girl,' Candy said.

Letty picked up her fancy SLR camera and captured Candy, Chris, Anastasia and her black grouper for posterity.

Candy reached out and gestured for the camera. Letty obliged and handed it to her. 'I think we need a picture of mother and daughter kissing the fish.'

'I'm not touching that thing,' Letty baulked.

'Come on, you can do it. I dare you.'

‘Candy, I think all three of you should kiss the fish,’ I said, reaching for the camera.

The rest of the group clapped and chanted, ‘Do it! Kiss the fish!’

‘I’ll do it if you do it,’ Letty said to Candy.

Candy bowed to peer pressure and the three women gripped the fish, surrounding its head with their faces, and placed their lips a millimetre away from its cheeks. Framing the shot in the viewfinder I noticed that Candy’s face had changed. Chris had described this change in an increment of time, and he was right to the extent that time is memory. The weight of remembering had left the corners of her mouth and released her eyes, their violet flecks mixed with turquoise reflected the present.

Stillman Rose Field

On a hot and sticky Livesburg afternoon, Candy complained that her scar tingled like an arthritic knee in the rain. Eighteen months after the shooting, our gang reunited for the dedication of Livesburg's new football stadium. I sat with Paulina under a tulip magnolia, where both of us used our programs to fan our faces. Around two hundred people, including a sizeable contingent of students, had decided to brave the mid-day heat for the official ribbon-cutting of Stillman Rose Field, a name that reflected a committee's inability to comprehend irony. Seated on the dais between Aaron Stillman and Letty Camparinga, Candy's radiant skin reflected a return to health. Of course it could have been only the heat causing her glow, but somehow I suspected it was much more than that.

Hank Yeardley spoke into the microphone. Next to him, the mayor waited patiently for his turn at the podium.

'They do like to talk in the South, so much polite double-speak. Get on with it already!' Paulina whispered.

'I couldn't agree more,' I said.

Our shade contracted to postage stamp proportions as the earth rotated throughout Hank's speech and I melted into my chair. Sweat dripped from every one of my pores and I willed the kind dignitaries of Livesburg to hurry the hell up.

Hank acknowledged everyone on the dais with him and expressed thanks to Stillman White Camparinga for signing a five-year sponsorship deal with Livesburg's high school athletics department, as well as for the establishment of a scholarship fund for top academic performers.

'Now I'd like to take a moment to recognise the contribution of Ashby Rose to this community, whose vision made this day possible. Reverend Scanlan will lead us in prayer followed by a moment of silence.'

With those words he may as well have reached out and yanked my necktie. He certainly had my attention then. Ashby's vision made this possible? Had I missed something?

'Let us pray for Ashby's soul,' the Reverend began.

Everyone bowed their head except for Candy and me.

'Fearful shall they come,' continued the Reverend, 'at the counting up of their sins, and their lawless deeds shall convict them to their face.'

Who were the real lawless 'they' the Reverend referred to? Had the narrative been rewritten making Ashby Jefferson Rose a hero?

As the holy man spoke, I noticed Candy's eyes had settled on something in the crowd and I turned in the same direction. Nero and Marcowitz, ineffectively camouflaged in their suits, weren't praying either – instead they flanked the stage.

After the moment of silence, the mayor took the microphone and called Aaron to the podium. ‘Would you do the honours on your father’s behalf?’ he asked, indicating the scissors.

Candy remained transfixed by Nero, who’d reached the stage. His eyes hid behind reflective sunglasses and he barred his teeth in what some might regard as a benevolent smile. Candy maintained her composure as Aaron snipped the ribbon and declared Stillman Rose Field officially open. With football season scheduled to open in two weeks’ time, the crowd roared its approval.

As the people disbanded, Nero climbed the stage steps and his partner, Marcowitz, closed in from the other side. I strode as quickly as I could toward them.

‘That’s a pretty dress, Miss Pansenkosky,’ Nero said.

‘Thank you kind sir,’ Candy said, attempting to ape a southern accent.

He stood inches from her face and I was at his back. Letty and Aaron huddled protectively around Candy. In a low voice Nero said, ‘I know what you did to your own company.’

A muscle twitched under Candy’s eye.

‘What are you talking about?’ Letty said too loudly. Heads rotated in our direction.

‘Are you going to arrest me?’ Candy asked in an even voice.

‘Yes.’ He nodded at Marcowitz, who pulled out a set of handcuffs. ‘You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law.’

Marcowitz reached for Candy’s wrists and said, ‘This football stadium sure cost a lot of money.’

Candy paled.

‘You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be provided for you.’ Nero removed his sunglasses and started laughing. ‘The look on your face! We’re just fucking with you. Can’t prove – ’

That’s when I poked his shoulder and, when he turned, landed a blow on his nose.

‘Jesus Christ, Martin! What’s the matter with you?’ Candy said, trying not to smile.

I handed Nero a handkerchief. ‘Sorry, I couldn’t help myself. You shouldn’t do that to people.’

‘You all right?’ Candy asked Nero.

‘Yeah, I’ll be fine, but I’m pressing assault charges against your friend here.’

‘You truly are an asshole,’ Candy said.

‘I still can’t figure out how you turned that hedge fund into gold.’ He wiped a small amount of blood from his face.

‘I bet on 17.’

FADE OUT