

“For we each of us deserve everything, every luxury that was ever piled in the tombs of the dead kings, and we each of us deserve nothing, not a mouthful of bread in hunger. Have we not eaten while another starved? Will you punish us for that? Will you reward us for the virtue of starving while others ate? No man earns punishment, no man earns reward. Free your mind of the idea of deserving, the idea of earning, and you will begin to be able to think.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

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Art by Georgia Shenk

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No general but Ludd means the poor any good.

PANNING FOR GOLD

Carrie Esposito

I steeled myself at the door to the coffee shop after my shift at Vital Bliss Medical Spa, where I revealed, or purported to, the glowing skin underneath the unseemly aberrations, the bumpy and uncooperative layers. It was my first time going in since Bill had died yesterday.

Which of the other regulars would be there? Maybe none, like they existed only in relation to Bill and had now been swallowed into the mostly mysterious lives lived outside this coffee shop in a small Colorado mountain town, the short main street buzzing with tourists in summer and winter, dead now in early spring.

But when I pushed the door open, Hector, like he always did, sat on the stool covered with worn, flowered upholstery, which he'd pulled next to Bill's oversized brown leather armchair, the only one of its kind in the shop and the best seat in the place. Now Hector appeared to be guarding Bill's chair and probably was doing exactly that. He worked erratically as a roofer and seemed to have as many hours as Bill to be there. At around sixty, he was the closest in age of any of us to Bill, who I'd learned only after he died was seventy-four.

Now Hector, like usual, perched as if about to spring away somewhere as he scrolled through his phone and like Bill was still there next to him reading the paper and drinking black coffee from his tall burgundy mug. Hector's coffee, cream and lots of sugar, cooled in the white mug in front of him.

"Hey, Ava," he said.

“Hey, Hector.”

I was relieved he didn't commemorate the moment by looking up from his phone, leveling a grave gaze at me or something like that. I wasn't really great at moments. I brushed some dirt off my white scrubs, or maybe it was someone's skin cells, though I hadn't yet discovered them to have a color. I ran a thumb over my coarse brown hair in its tight ponytail, which I kept in place with cheap gel, applied only after I'd rubbed my face with this serum I had samples of from the spa. If I looked at myself from a certain angle, it probably, no definitely, added an effortless shine. Or I was just like my clients, wanting to believe in something.

Except for the absence of Bill's gangly limbs folded into his chair, the shop didn't look any different—it had the same mismatched chairs, stools and tables pulled in different directions based on who needed them for what. Maybe a book club or a study group or a sewing circle. We sometimes didn't even move ourselves near each other, those of us who came in the most. We were together in there, but not. I assumed that's how we all preferred it. The art on the walls was a rotating series of paintings by different local artists. Right now, a painter was featured who made these boxy paintings with sayings like *Home is Where the Heart Is*, though the drawings saved them. Swooping moons and resilient mountains, all of it brave somehow in its homage to goodness.

Bonnie was working the counter as usual, where they sold lemon-blueberry muffins made by the owner, an older woman who also ran a puppet theater in town and left the shop to the baristas to manage. Between Bonnie and Hector, I took it to mean the others would show up at some point too. Luke was probably out on the boats getting them ready for the season, and Mari, a retired teacher, was probably at one of her exercise classes, after which she would come in, chatty

and grinning. I'd never figured out what Jared, a kid in his twenties, did during the day, but he generally came in at night, so I only saw him when I needed to get away from the house while my baby slept and my in-laws watched the only television they allowed themselves. Those were the only times I just got a brief glance from Bill, because he'd be leaning toward Jared, nodding as the kid spoke in an intense whisper.

Bonnie's eyes were red and leaking as she handed me my usual, coffee with a splash of milk, obviously something I could make at home, but I never did, because where I lived didn't feel like home. I could guess I wasn't avoiding any moments with Bonnie, and my chest tightened. I liked her, just like the rest of the regulars did. She went the extra mile for anybody and everybody, even looked for opportunities to go the extra mile, and she slipped us free coffee, but I also resented how she cried and laughed with equal ferocity, how she shared loud stories about her shitty husband and shittier grown son with unabashed fervor, like she didn't need to keep any of it close, like it was available to anyone.

"It's a damn shame about Bill," she said, handing me back my filled thermos. "I was so shocked when I heard."

"Mmm," I said, trying to agree.

But this was what happened. People died. So it wasn't a shame or a shock so much. But it was still incredibly sad. I wasn't going to keep taking that away from myself.

As I walked back toward Hector, I didn't even consider taking Bill's seat. Instead I pulled a chair next to it, but put it at an angle to help Hector guard Bill's chair so some random customer didn't get any ideas. Hector glanced up from his phone, a *thank you* in his eyes.

Instead of sitting by Bill's empty chair, maybe we should have been out in the world forging something new, like his death was a sign or something to move on. But this was our

escape, or at least mine. We all came here to get away from jobs, spouses, children, parents, illnesses, diagnoses, and any number of horrors and inconveniences of the world. Only Bill seemed to be escaping nothing, to only exist there, with his newspaper, coffee, and his banana, like he'd been waiting.

I couldn't have said what anyone besides myself might've been escaping, because we had an agreement, unspoken and binding, that to be a regular meant we came regularly, of course, but also, that we could just sit around, drink our coffee, be silent, or bullshit about the most mundane, numbing shit of life—the weather or whatever, or reinvent ourselves to be anyone we pleased. There didn't need to be any give and take, like in the rest of the world.

What I was escaping, though no one knew, or I thought they didn't, was my in-laws, who I lived with along with Griffin, nine months old and counting. It was the only way I could afford to work, because Mrs. Rosemary C. Wilson watched him while I wielded my wand over hopeful skin, and they didn't charge me any rent. Not yet anyways. Me and Jay were always planning to move out, maybe even try Denver, but then he shot himself.

Or I should say he died by suicide. That's what I was supposed to say instead of shot himself or committed suicide. But if he didn't commit the act, who did? I didn't want the blame to be taken from him. I didn't think he would have either.

He'd brought a gun down to a creek in the dawn hours while his pregnant wife slept. At the coroner's office, someone handed me a pamphlet on mental illness and how suicide wasn't selfish. But if it were the other way around, baby inside me and all, what would people say then?

Rosemary would say it was a sin. About her own child, she kept silent, clicking her rosary beads as she rocked Griffin.

Hector looked up from his phone again. “Coming later?”

I nodded, and he hunched back over whatever he was doing. He meant the funeral thing he’d put together for Bill. The plan was to meet at the bar and grille across the street, a place with food beyond muffins and alcohol instead of coffee. My stomach tingled—it was stupid to be nervous, but we’d all never hung out anywhere but the coffee shop. It had taken months before I even knew everyone’s first names. Other than Hector, who liked to have everyone he’d ever met filed in his favorite device, we didn’t even have each other’s phone numbers.

Hector squinted at me. “Bring a banana.”

“Sure.”

I got to Faye’s later that night, after giving Griffin his bottle and rocking his small body until it was a warm weight I had to force myself to slip out from under. The rest of the group was already sitting at a long table, bananas piled in the middle, their laughter and loud voices unfamiliar, touched as they were by the drinks in front of them. I could recite each of their coffee drinks and scanned their alcoholic beverages of choice, wondering if there was any correlation.

A waitress barely stopped next to me. “What can I get you?”

“Beer,” I said.

“What kind?”

“Oh, any,” I said, waving my hand. I hadn’t had a drink since I found out I was pregnant with Griffin, and even before that, we never went out anyway. And now, the Wilsons didn’t keep any at the house and who was I to go to a bar, like some carefree woman?

Luke looked up from his cocktail, pink and in a martini glass, which would have been surprising considering the whole rugged mountain guy thing he had going with his

flannels and jeans and beard, except that his coffee drink was a cappuccino, two sugars, extra foam. He smiled and waved for me to sit next to him.

“Hey,” I said, sliding in and feeling somehow embarrassed.

Usually, I barely registered Luke was a male around my age and undeniably handsome. On Luke’s other side was Jared, who stared mournfully into a dark drink smelling of rum, and on my other side was Mari, looking entirely different in black jeans and a purple sweater instead of workout clothes. Hector, across the table, had his arm around a woman I’d never met.

“You made it! This is my wife, Jackie.”

He beamed, in an element I didn’t know could be his. His phone was nowhere in sight, and he and Jackie kept giving each other little pecks on the lips. Where was she all that time he was at the shop?

“Nice to meet ya,” Jackie said, reaching across the table with an outstretched hand. “Hector says nice things.”

I limply shook her hand, feeling disoriented by her exuberance. “He does?” I realized a beat too late I was probably supposed to say he said nice things about her too, except he hadn’t talked about her at all.

Jackie twisted in her chair and began chatting with Bonnie, sitting next to her. They both had the ability to drop into animated conversation with a stranger—and also age spots. I didn’t aim to check out the defects on women’s skin. It’s just that when you spend so much time looking at it, it’s what you notice.

The start of a microdermabrasion was the only time in my day I felt powerful—when I plugged the silver wand with its diamond-shaped tip into the hose, then skimmed off the crystals I’d rubbed over all kinds of skin, shades of white, brown, and black, bumpy and scarred and wrinkled, smooth

and soft as Griffin's cheeks. I often told women, during their first time, that the "worst part was the sound of the machine," even if, to me, it wasn't. It made an intoxicating hum, but their eyes usually widened when it came on, as if the whole thing had been a lie, and I was about to dig out their flesh. I'd say next, over the humming, how it wouldn't hurt a bit. But their eyes didn't go slack again until I applied the tip and brought it up and down their foreheads. I didn't blame them for not taking my word.

Sometimes I imagined them later, in the privacy of the first mirror they could get to, examining their radiant skin, then sensing something was missing and all of a sudden fearing the noise of the machine wasn't the worst part after all, but instead it was that I'd taken something from them as I methodically sanded their skin, pausing too long on the hardness of jaw or cheekbone under my instrument. I could reach bone, I sometimes thought, if I kept going. I could turn them inside out.

Slowly conversations turned to a murmur, then died out as everyone tuned in to what Hector was saying.

"He brought his damn self to the hospital, can you believe that? Walked or rode his bike through snow and ice, remember that storm last week? And it turned out he'd broken some ribs. That's what the guy who called said."

The broken ribs didn't kill him, but he'd died a few hours later from internal injuries. Turned out that before he'd gone under, he'd given a nurse Hector's number.

I thought of Bill, his tall, skinny body flipping over his handlebars, or had he slipped on some ice? He'd seemed so invincible, riding his bike in all kinds of weather because he didn't have a car. I'd never thought to be worried about him. Usually he was already at the shop, but once in a while, I'd see him outside, locking his bike to a tree and taking off his helmet. It was in my catalogue of lonely images, along with

Jay down at the creek, and now this, Bill, head down, knives of pain in his chest, taking himself to the hospital.

Hector put a phone on the table and raised his eyebrows. “It’s Bill’s. They gave it to me along with his pants, a belt, a shirt, the helmet and bent-to-hell bike.”

Jackie patted his arm.

“Son of a bitch, man. I put it all in my garage.”

“Like a memorial!” Bonnie nodded approvingly.

“So Bill never put a passcode in his phone. I was always telling him to, but now I’m glad he never listened to a damn word I said. First, I found a number for Dexter, in there as Dexter Sponsor.” Hector drew in a breath, shaking his head. “I never knew.”

I wondered if Bill had gone to meetings or if we were his meetings.

I sipped my beer. This funeral was nothing like Jay’s somber Catholic affair, though Jay had come to hate church, and we hadn’t been married in one, because I wasn’t Catholic. I wasn’t anything. The Wilsons disapproved of our choice to get married on a mountaintop, as did my parents who didn’t understand why we couldn’t get married in some kind of inside place like everybody else. But they flew in from Florida anyway. They, like the Wilsons, were dutiful people.

“Tell them the rest,” Jackie said, nodding at him.

“So then, I call Dexter and I find out Bill has two brothers and a sister who he hasn’t talked to in fifty goddamn years. Can you believe that?”

“Family’s family, but I’m sure he had his reasons,” Bonnie said.

Bill was the only one at the shop I’d told about Jay. The day after Jay’s funeral, I went to work. Being in Jay’s little bedroom with his posters of obscure bands still on the wall and where he and I spent most of our time felt impossible,

but my boss told me to go home because clients were complaining I was pressing too hard.

So I went to the shop, but I couldn't make it in the door. Bill must've seen me out the window, because he came outside. He just stood with me, listening, his newspaper folded at his side, looking grim, and I'd never considered until now the grim things that had happened to him too.

"And so then," Hector went on. "I find out the name of the brothers, and I google them." He tapped his head proudly. "One agrees to talk to me, this guy Peter, and he tells me how Bill skipped some sorry town in upstate New York during a freaking blizzard when he was twenty. Moved straight into an ashram near Boulder and lived there for the next fifteen years. Left a wife and newborn son too."

I tried to piece this story with the Bill I knew. Or didn't know. Who was I to judge what had happened so many years ago? It wasn't me he'd left. Did I forgive Bill his transgressions? More importantly: what the fuck did it matter if I did or didn't? He was a stranger, one of the randos from the coffee shop as Jay had called them.

And yet, he wasn't. He was Bill, and I'd seen him every day for the last five years that I'd lived in this town. He'd screwed up just as badly as any of us may have or would do. In a way, it was always clear, always obvious, information ready for the taking, if any of us had thought to ask.

"That guy dealt with some shit, man," Jared said, clutching his drink. "He was like . . . like my guru. He talked to me about everything, everything. I ain't going to be able to LIVE without that guy, man."

"Did he want to have a funeral or anything?" Luke asked. "Peter? Bygones and all?"

Hector shook his head. "Ohhhh no. He said this was the last time he ever wanted to hear that shithead's name and good riddance."

Good riddance? Somehow, I still felt protective of Bill with his silences and long hours sitting in a chair in a small-town coffee shop just so he wouldn't be alone.

Then Jackie said, "Tell them the other part, about how poor Bill tried to get in touch with his son when the kid was grown up, and he told Bill to leave him alone, to never contact him again."

"I think you told it, honey," Hector said, patting her hand.

When I brought Griffin into the shop on a Sunday morning, Bill became almost a different man, cooing at him with this large smile. I wished I could shake that kid, tell him to talk to his father. It was never too late, if you were alive, that is.

What had his mother, Bill's abandoned wife, said about him to the kid though? What would I tell Griffin about Jay? I could tell him anything, even substitute Bill's sorry life, give Bill back a son in a weird way. Who would ever know? My in-laws weren't going to live forever.

Hector shook his head at me. "Bill always liked the pretty, young girls."

"Uh-huh," Bonnie said, nodding.

"Hey now," Luke said, putting out his hands as if to stop anyone else from chiming in.

Luke, the sudden defender of my honor. But I didn't like the attention from him or from them. And I didn't think of myself as pretty or even young. I'd never thought Bill was flirting with me. For one, he was so much older, and for two, he never seemed to want anything. But really he only seemed to want nothing because he'd already lost everything, which wasn't the same.

How much did Bill regret what he'd lost? At the end of a session we told clients that our treatments required no downtime, meaning they could go enjoy their lives

afterwards. Nothing red and unsightly, nothing to reveal any pain to the world.

Conversation drifted, and Luke, though he was listening to Jared murmur in that same intense whisper he'd used with Bill, kept glancing over at me, as Mari told me all about this Zumba/Yoga class I had to try. Zoga, she called it. I willed myself not to give Luke any kind of look back. I wouldn't allow being in a new place together and the alcohol and tragic stories to sweep me into something I'd only regret in the dusty sunlight of the coffee shop, where Luke would probably return to the same amiable smile he gave everyone. I was already alone and getting together with someone and the inevitable return to aloneness would only double, triple the feeling. Then again, this was what Bill had probably figured for more years than I'd been alive.

Chairs started shuffling along with murmurs of how it was getting late as we all rose, putting on coats. Luke lifted mine off the back of my chair.

I took it from him before he could try to do some kind of weird gentleman thing. Then I murmured, "Sorry. I mean, thank you."

"No worries." Luke cocked his head to the side, as if listening for answers I didn't owe anyone anymore.

"What're we gonna do with all these bananas?" Bonnie asked.

Hector shrugged. "Dunno, didn't get that far."

The browning bananas looked so forlorn that I blurted, "We can't just leave them alone!"

Jackie gathered the bananas in her arms. "It's okay, hon, I'll make a bread."

"No!" I cried. "That'll just . . . destroy them."

Jared gripped the back of his chair, hanging his head. Mari bounced on her toes, and I wouldn't have been

surprised if she launched into jumping jacks. *And a one, and a two.*

Then Hector said, "I have his ashes."

"They're in a box, a cardboard box," Jackie chimed in, the bananas bobbing with her vigorous nodding. "In his van."

"Couldn't afford an urn," Hector mumbled.

Bonnie patted his arm. "You did the best you could."

Hector puffed out his chest in his thick orange jacket. "We'll find a place for them."

"The bananas?" Jackie asked.

Hector's eyebrows creased. "No. *Him.*"

Luke zipped his green bomber jacket. "I love it!"

"Ooh, an adventure," Mari squeaked, clapping her hands.

Jared pulled the chair he was gripping to his stomach, then dropped it decisively, righting it before it fell over. "I have flashlights in my car. Keep them there. In case."

"Wait, you mean now?" I asked, pressing the home button on my phone. Past eleven. Griffin had already been asleep for hours as well as the Wilsons.

Jackie kind of rocked the bananas. "I'll bring them, don't worry."

This seemed to be some kind of deciding factor as everyone made a determined turn out the door and around to the side lot where most of us had parked. I looked over to the beat-up blue Honda Jay had gotten us to share. He hadn't used it that day to get to the creek. I'll never know how he got there, and those minor blank spaces disturbed me more than the bigger ones, like what he'd eaten before he left, if he'd eaten, if he'd heard a song or silence on his way, if he'd said last words to the chilly dawn mountain air.

Jared faced Hector. "So where to my man?"

Before he could answer, I said, "I know a place."

I loosened my ponytail, letting my hair fall down my back. Stalling. Did I really want to do this? But Bill lost from everyone he'd ever (maybe?) loved and then having his only friends be us, people who really knew nothing about him, made me see that loneliness wasn't just a still set of images, but a series of choices, and I didn't know how much longer I could go on making mine the same way.

“Roaring Creek Trailhead. You know it?”

Hector nodded. “I can fit everyone.”

If anyone knew why I'd picked this place, they kept it to themselves. Jared grabbed a flashlight and shovel from his trunk, and Luke climbed first into Hector's brown van. Jared started to follow, but I edged in front of him.

“I'll squeeze in. You can have the leg room,” I said.

I ducked my head so I couldn't see anyone giving me a knowing look. Mari, Bonnie and Jared jostled themselves into the middle row, fumbling around and arguing in mock annoyance about who got which seatbelt, with some semi-suggestive comments about Jared thrown in. Luke and I flashed each other wry smiles. Jackie and Hector sat up front like surrogate parents.

“You all buckled up, kids?” Hector chuckled.

The smell of them, of us, in a closed car together was strange and somehow comforting—Mari's rose perfume, Luke's like mountain air and lake water, something older and powdery rising off of Bonnie and Jackie, and Hector, maybe dirt and rain, and then Bill's ashes, which smelled like nothing, sealed up as they were, and so I inhaled the ripening bananas and a tinge of coffee hanging over all of it. Tears stung my eyes because this was the smell of the shop whether Bill was there or not. It was his smell and a smell that existed with or without him, which made me devastated and relieved things could go on the way they did.

Hector turned into the parking lot for the trailhead. The sign was so small you could miss it in the dark, maybe even in the light. Except Jay hadn't.

Chastised and quieted as if by the ride and our task, we slid out one by one with the awkwardness of people who'd never arrived anywhere together before—a lot of murmured *excuse-mes* and trying not to brush any part of each other's bodies and nervous laughter.

Hector opened the back of his van, putting his arms around the box.

“May I?” I asked.

He handed it over to me, and it weighed more than I thought it would, almost the same as Griffin's body, limp and trusting in my arms. Jared, the hood of his thick gray sweatshirt tight over his ears, flicked on the flashlight, first waving it over our faces, then shining it at the sign for the trailhead.

Our procession went, me clutching the box and everyone gathered behind me with Jackie carrying the bananas, and Jared in the back, lighting a path under our feet on the rocky dirt trail, the only sounds the cardboard swishing against my coat, the distant exhalations of the creek, and the crunching of leftover snow.

About a quarter mile in, at the creek, I stopped, and we formed a loose circle. The only other time I'd come, it was marked off by caution tape and an officer told me miners used to pan for gold in this spot, sifting through the soil until something shiny and valued in the world rose to the surface.

I opened my mouth to tell them this was Jay's spot, but maybe they already knew. Or not. It didn't matter. The knowing and not knowing, the things we make up about others and ourselves, and the things we think we know, all those incredible lies and ordinary truths.

I put the box in the middle and opened the flaps, a dusty plastic bag inside. Jared shone the flashlight on what looked like coarse gray sand. Jackie placed the bananas next to the box, where they would stay, becoming fertilizer or food or yielding to some other fate that was out of our hands now.

“Who wants to go first?” Hector asked. “Just keep your back to the wind. It would be just like Bill to rear up and get someone in the face for being a dumbass.”

We all laughed a little, and it was a strange kind of miracle, how it had come to this. Us, here, scattering this man’s ashes, laughing about this small thing we knew about him. Would his brother or sister or estranged wife or son have more to say had he let them know him longer? Would they have said terrible things or kind things? It would’ve had to be a mixture of both, after a lifetime together, and maybe that’s what he’d succeeded in avoiding. Except what kind of success was that really?

Jared handed me the shovel. I knelt on the ground and scooped some of the ash. Closer up, I saw the shards of white. Bone. What was underneath Bill’s skin all that time, underneath all our skins.

Jackie shivered. “Creepy.”

Probably it should’ve been, a body ground into its smallest parts, but I found it comforting how some essential substance of the body survived death, then fire. I carried a shovelful of ash and bone over to the creek, and Jackie followed me, picking a few sticks off the ground.

“The cremation place said if you’re putting the ashes in water to send something with them so you don’t lose sight of them,” Jackie said.

I liked the idea of it, of not letting him disappear alone. Jay had been alone, according to the coroner, for almost twenty-four hours. No one volunteered that fact. I’d asked to

know and tried not to think about how it had been much, much longer.

I sifted the ashes and bone into the water as Jackie threw branches next to where they landed, dissolving into the current. All that was left of Bill's skin, his memories, his heartaches, his preferences, experiences and unexpected grins, all of it burned into something we could hold and then let go.

We took turns taking scoop after scoop to the water until it was gone. It must've been past midnight when we looked at our hands, lit by the moon hovering now over our heads. We flashed our palms to each other, coated dark gray. Turns out ash clings to your skin, forming its own layer, but we just stood together, none of us trying to wipe it off.

Carrie Esposito's short stories have been published in *The Georgia Review*, *Ruminate Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, *Pif Magazine*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Mused* and *Little Rose Magazine*. Her stories have been a finalist for the William Van Dyke Short Story Prize, the Curt Johnson Prose Awards, and have received an Honorable Mention from *Glimmer Train*. Carrie is working on her novels and short stories, and she is an Educational Consultant for Teaching Matters in the NYC schools. You can see more of her work at carriesposito.com or for occasional tweets about books and such, you can follow her at [@carriebesposito](https://twitter.com/carriebesposito).

FRANK'S BEST SHOT

Jon Fain

At the open kitchen window a warm June breeze rattled the slats of the blind. Frank peered out into the ragged back yard. After initially paying one of the local gangs of half-wits to have at it, he'd been maintaining the lawn himself. The weeds were thriving; he'd apparently been the only thing affected by the poisonous dust he'd laid down. His attention shifted to the house next door, a salmon-colored colonial with white trim and black shutters. Workmen were at the pool behind the chain-link fence.

"What's that?" one of the men called out. "A chipmunk? Can't they swim?"

"Why don't you grab the net," came the loud reply, "and we'll scoop that little bastard out of there."

All Memorial Day Weekend, Frank and Barbara had seen the woman next door reading by the pool under an umbrella, a radio playing loud enough to be annoying; at regular intervals she got into the water, floated around on a blue inflatable chair. Today she'd been out there again; Frank had seen her when he looked out his bathroom window. From getting some of her mail mixed in with theirs they knew her name was Julia, but they'd yet to speak in the four months they'd lived there.

Her husband was friendly enough the few times Frank had talked to him. Paul was half his wife's size, bald, and younger than Frank, probably early thirties. He drove off in

his black truck early every morning except Sunday. He'd told Frank he was a builder. He hadn't asked what Frank did.

"I'm not cleaning up your mess," Barbara said.

"We're out of OJ." Frank raised his small glass, as if in a toast.

"Is that what you're wearing?" Barbara waved at the shirt he always wore when he played golf, his favorite pair of khakis.

She sat at the table in her old marigold-colored bathrobe, frayed at the cuffs, the paper laid out.

"Do we have any Advil?" he asked her.

"Is there coffee?" she said, looking over at the empty pot.

On Wednesday mornings, Frank didn't drink coffee. It was about serenity, staying calm. The Buddha didn't drink coffee. Especially on golf day.

He thought to remind Barbara of his ritual. Instead, he wondered if his actions had become invisible. They'd been married thirty years. Once it was clear that it was going to be just the two of them, they'd carved out plenty of personal space. When you had lots of room it was only natural that some things got lost.

"When are you coming back?"

And it wasn't exactly that he was bored; and it wasn't as if he blamed her; it was more about there never being any surprises. And no doubt she felt the same about him.

"How do you know I'm coming back?"

Barbara tossed aside the paper's front section, then the Business pages. Frank had stopped checking his funds; from

the headlines detailing the crapping economy he assumed there was no point.

Sunday's Travel section was on the table somewhere, buried under the mail and papers that had come into the house in the half-week since. Sooner or later before she decided to recycle it, Barbara would recite to him the cheapest fares to California. She had gotten hot on the idea of moving there. Frank's sister and her family lived near San Diego, and Barbara's brother lived in L.A, so she had a big swath of the Golden State to aim at.

"Hey," he said.

Hearing the softening in his tone Barbara glanced up, but he was talking to the cat, which had come in through the pet door to rub up against him.

"What did you get last night?" Frank asked in a friendly murmur. "Huh?"

"You shouldn't encourage her," Barbara said. "And speaking of that . . . could you check the back step? I don't need to see another dead animal."

She was an outside cat, thin like a marathoner. Or like a serial killer—she favored small rodent in all its variations. Frank used the cat's current quality of life as one of his buffers against a California move, the unknowns they would face. Maybe a dearth of chipmunks, real or imagined.

Rossi couldn't do it, so Frank had agreed to pick up Leo. He drove the two miles to the center of town, first passing the latest patch of new development, yellow bulldozers leveling land and tearing out the woods no more than a hundred yards behind their year-old house.

More people seemed to be moving to New Hampshire every week, where there were no sales or state income taxes. However, it had taken Frank only as long as the line at the Department of Motor Vehicles to pay the surprisingly high fees for their “Live Free or Die” license plates, to confirm that (as with most things) it was not going to be quite as free as promised.

He slowed as he searched for a vacant parking space on Main Street, in the stretch of two-story wooden buildings that made up the central commercial district. The town’s history was common for the region. A period of farms, a time of textiles, and now a half dozen blocks of small businesses sucked dry of customers by the chains out on the ever-expanding strip.

Leo’s barber shop was at the end of the block. He sat on the bench in front, next to the classic striped pole, sipping coffee out of a white Styrofoam cup. His golf clubs were beside him: a set of irons with the grooves gone and woods that he’d put together in his garage from discount heads, shafts, and grips. Leo kicked Frank’s ass every week even though the barber was close to fifteen years older and had recently gone blind in one eye from a botched checkup.

Leo was the best of the bunch that he played with. He was a short, friendly Italian-American with black hair the color of used motor oil. He was always in a good mood, a mindset Frank decided had to be pharmaceutically induced.

“Beautiful day isn’t it?”

“We’re missing it,” said Frank, smelling the coffee. It pissed him off that Leo could drink it all day and hammer his hide every week. If Frank drank even half a cup before he played his hands would shake and his temper would overwhelm what little talent he had for the game.

He paused, deciding how involved to get.

“Did you ever get hold of a lawyer?”

“Nah,” the older man said, with a dismissive wave.

“Personally?” said Frank. “If it was me, and a doctor had blinded me They screwed you!”

Leo raised an eyebrow. Frank looked away, and sought out that elusive Buddha thing.

The golf course they played was an easy one, flat, with hardly any water hazards, no sand traps to speak of, and greens as big as helipads. Seniors played for ten bucks a round, twenty for unlimited play. Frank was too young for the bargain, but most of the golfers were in their sixties and beyond, and would presumably prefer to drop dead with their buddies than at home in front of the TV with the wife.

Frank and Leo went into the clubhouse snack bar. It was jammed with badly dressed past-their-primers, their conversations generating an annoying drone. Pulled apart, its inner workings would prove to be nothing more than taunts, teasing, bad jokes, and the airing of physical ailments and general complaints—in other words, the usual bullshit.

Rossi was at the lunch counter. A short, silver-haired guy with tinted glasses and a lit cigarette, he stood near the cashier as she rang up the doughnuts, peanut butter crackers, and fried egg sandwiches that everyone was buying.

“Leo, come on, come on, don’t stand in line! You’re late!” Rossi called out. “I’ve got your effen coffee right here! Frankie! Tell him I’ve got his effen coffee!”

“He’s got the effen coffee,” Frank said, and Leo laughed.

Rossi was seventy-two, always wore form-fitting plaid pants and expensive-looking golf shirts from name-brand resorts. He was a smug bastard who thought he was smarter, richer, better looking, and a better golfer than everyone else. He claimed he’d been a big deal at Sylvania and now fed off a fat pension and savvy investments. He was a know-it-all, a jerk.

Leo squinted into the black coffee Rossi handed him and blew off its rising steam. The two played partners, didn't give strokes, and won every week. Rossi held forth in his smoker's foghorn about everything from who should be President to when to use a driver off the fairway.

Frank looked around the clubhouse. "Where's Larry?"

Larry was Rossi's nephew, his sister's kid. While it was of some comfort to Frank to be a better player than someone, he would have preferred it not be his partner when he was playing in a money game. He and Larry lost anywhere from two to twelve dollars to Leo and Rossi every week.

"He got an effen DUI," said Rossi. "Stupid prick would have skipped court if I didn't drop him there!"

"So he's not coming?"

Rossi bunched up his face, looked at Leo, then back at Frank.

"No, he's not comin', and if he loses his license he's never comin'! It's bad enough I got to pay his greens fees since he lost his job, I ain't driving him and *this* one," he said, jabbing his finger at Leo. "What am I, effen Uber?"

They went out to where the golf carts were parked. Without Larry, Frank had to pay for the whole of his. Rossi drove past other golfers in carts to the front of the line at the first tee.

When Frank pulled up, the red-baseball-capped, red-faced starter, sitting in a cart with a clipboard and walkie-talkie crackling static on the seat, was telling Rossi that because they were late they'd have to wait until another group went off.

"Yeah, right," Rossi said, flicking his pluming cigarette away. He turned and glared back at Frank. No doubt he blamed *Frankie* for their being late, even when he knew how hard it was to get Leo there on time. And they couldn't skip the effen coffee.

“And you got to have a fourth cuz we’re so packed today . . . they’re sendin’ one down,” the starter said.

Frank climbed out of his cart. Back in April—bored, letting Barbara talk him into it—he went to play golf for the first time in years and was added to the Rossi, Leo, and Larry triumvirate. He didn’t know until they got underway that there was normally a regular fourth guy, who wasn’t there because he had died over the weekend. Frank didn’t even find out the guy’s name (Effen Earl!) until the sixth green.

“Let’s wait and see who it is, Frankie!” Leo called. He and Rossi were sitting in their cart, drinking coffee. “Then we’ll decide how we’ll play it!”

Frank had never understood the betting back when he played with his clients or other sales guys. Like now, he just handed over his money. With these guys, sometimes he got a stroke and sometimes he didn’t. Sometimes they doubled the bet when Leo and Rossi were behind. Some holes they added in closest to the pin. He and Larry sometimes won a hole, but they always managed to lose the war. At the end of the round Rossi would do his ciphering with his little green pencil. Then he showed more pleasure than Frank thought he should have as he took their money.

“Oh God no,” Rossi said loudly.

A young woman came down the path, pulling a handcart. Her golf bag was baby blue and the club covers on the woods were white with red tassels. She wore a white golf shirt, white shorts, white shoes with white socks and a white baseball cap. She had long legs and they were very tan. Her light brown ponytail bounced on her back.

“Hello!” she called, waving. “Thank you so much for waiting!”

Outside the clubhouse snack bar, one rarely saw women at the course. Someone’s wife or girlfriend sometimes, learning the game.

Frank knew so few women played there because it was full of guys like Rossi. Some—mostly the ones who stood over putts for ten minutes because there was twenty-five cents riding on it—complained that women played too slow. Then there were those who proclaimed they didn't like to play with women because they couldn't hit the ball far enough. These were the ones who sent half of their shots deep into the woods.

“Hi honey! I'm Leo, that's Joe. And that's Frankie!”

“Barbara!” She walked over to where Frank was standing.

“Hi, Frankie,” she said, extending her hand. She had shining blue eyes.

Frank bungled the distance, grabbed and shook her wrist, like an inexperienced intern trying to take a pulse. If such a weird grip bothered her, she didn't show it.

“Barbara,” she said again.

“That's my wife's name,” he said.

“Doesn't your wife play golf?”

“Speaking of names, it's just Frank.”

She reached behind her neck and undid her honey-colored hair, and it spread over her shoulders before she efficiently drew it back together. She pulled hair out the hole in the back of her white cap. Frank wondered how old she was. Thirties, early forties? Her slender wrist had been warm.

The starter called out that they could go. Leo was first up. He cocked his head and gave his teed-up ball a final once-over with his good eye. He jerked into his swing and as usual the little barber nailed one on the nose.

Rossi went next. He had all the mannerisms. He rocked his ass and waggled his club. Then he lifted his shot in the same direction as Leo's ball, down the left side. His ball rolled up a little shorter but not by much.

“Mother of Christ!” he bellowed. He was lighting his next cigarette as Frank walked past him. Rossi went over and handed a dollar to Leo.

Frank’s nervousness increased as he struggled to get his tee into the hard-packed ground pocked with spike holes, broken tees, cigarette butts, and a big gob of spit.

He stepped back and looked ahead. This first hole was a long par five, a dogleg left to the green. It was wide open, especially to the left; even if you hooked it onto the parallel fairway, you were okay.

He tried not to think of his tee shot on this hole the previous week, a topped grounder that had dribbled out no more than fifty yards, barely reaching the shorter grass of the fairway, and setting him up for another miserable round. He snuck a glance at the slender woman in white. It hadn’t been determined if they were playing partners, had it?

Whatever the status of their relationship, she laughed loudly (although quickly put her hand over her mouth) when he spanked the ball on a low line drive that went out and down the fairway, more or less straight.

Frank felt his face warm and he tried to look casual as he walked to his cart and slid his driver back into his bag. It wasn’t as though it was such a bad shot, especially for him, off the first tee.

“Frankie Half Swing!” taunted Rossi.

Having a woman around was one thing to the sick bastard. Having a woman around who might join in to bust balls was another. As she took her pull cart and went ahead toward the red women’s tee, Frank got pissed. It was a good shot, good enough for being rushed, good for the first tee. Frank took a deep breath. If he didn’t watch it, he’d turn into another Rossi.

By the time he drove up, Barbara was addressing her ball. She took back her club in a long, slow swing. She struck

a straight shot, not as far as Leo and Rossi, but beyond Frank's. She finished with her club high over her head, body twisted, chest out.

Predictably, it got ugly right away. Frank sliced his second shot off into the woods. Cursing, he cruised up and down in his cart while the others waited, finally found what he thought was his ball, kicked it out when he thought no one was looking, and played it from there. It wasn't until the end of the hole that he realized he had found and played a ghost ball from some previous loser.

It got worse. On the next holes he couldn't get off the tee, couldn't keep it in the fairways, couldn't hit the greens, and couldn't putt when he finally got there. In spite of the no-coffee zone he had established he couldn't stop his hands from trembling before each shot. He had completely lost touch with the minimal golfing skills he had. He topped balls, sliced balls, and knocked them into water.

He felt he was submerged in a hazard choked with weeds.

Normally, he would have shaved a stroke here and there when Rossi asked him for his score, but he didn't bother. They weren't betting; in fact, Leo and Rossi were giving him a wide berth. Rossi wasn't even making fun of him. They probably thought he was contagious, or otherwise toxic.

By the time they reached the eighth tee, he decided to quit. After the ninth hole, which ended back at the clubhouse, he would drive off. He'd never come back to the effen place. Trash day was the next day and his clubs would be out there at the end of his driveway and that would be effen *it*.

The eighth was a par three, about a hundred forty yards. The challenge was the big pond sitting in front of the green. There was always a high school-aged girl who sat in a chair behind the eighth tee. She had a walkie-talkie and was there to call orders into the snack bar. When you reached the

ninth green another girl would bring it out before your group went off on the tenth.

As Leo and Rossi went to order something, Frank waited with Barbara. They watched the group in front of them look in the pond for at least one guy's ball.

"How is it that you amuse yourself, Frank?"

She had rested the butt of her club against the crotch of her white shorts. Frank's gaze settled there before he realized what he was doing; then he looked away, pretending he'd heard some interesting warbler in the woods.

"I'm retired."

"Retired! So young! Your wife must *love* that."

Then she took a quick step closer, causing Frank to step back.

"Can I ask you something? What are you thinking? What are you thinking right now?"

"Right this minute?" he said, recalling where she'd rested her club.

"As you plan your approach. Based on the situation, the wind, then, how your shot naturally moves . . . left to right I would say . . . how your skills match up with the task at hand. When you address the ball, your swing thoughts. Which should be simple, direct, and consistent."

"Swing thoughts?"

"That you use to build the foundation for your swing, to allow you to repeat a good swing dependably, effortlessly, second nature."

"Like, 'keep your eye on the ball?'"

"It's helpful if you focus on something that can create a successful swing. Of course . . . for some, the whole setup to their ball . . . maybe even the grip is what they need to focus on. But I've been watching you and I don't think that's your problem."

Frank wasn't in the mood for bullshit advice, but here it came.

"See, for me, I have a tendency to rush things, so my first thought as I take back the club is 'slow as you go.' Then, as I swing through, I think 'reach up and touch the sky.' Because that gets my hands up. Finishing high, that's called."

You mean, "stick my tits out?" Frank almost said.

"You sometimes top the ball because you don't have a firm base. You sway and that's throwing you off. As you swing you lose your good position over the ball. What you might try is, as you address your ball . . . your setup as I said looks fine . . . try something like 'weight heavy on left leg,' think that. And when you swing you pivot, you're firing out from a solid base."

She took a step back and twisted her upper body and swung her club. "You see?"

The group ahead of them started walking off the eighth green. Leo and Rossi were back.

Because the red tees were only slightly ahead of the whites, Barbara went first after the group ahead had cleared. She gave it that slow, thoughtful swing. Her tee shot went over the pond, bounced twice toward the green, and ended up on the fringe.

"Oh!" she said, walking off the tee. "I don't believe I made it!"

Rossi went next. Normally, Frank would have gained some small satisfaction when the other man's short shot bounced into the water. He silently rooted for Leo to beat Rossi each hole. But this time Leo dunked his ball as well. Unlike Rossi, whose reaction had been to stamp his foot and bury his tee all the way into the ground, Leo just shook his head and grinned.

Although it was only the eighth hole, Frank had lost so many balls he was down to his last three: pristine new Top

Flites that had been a gift from his wife. Rossi saw Frank breaking open the fresh sleeve.

“Oh, here we go! He thinks he’s effen Lee Trevino!”

“Go for the flag, Frankie!” Leo encouraged. “You show him!”

“Plop, plop, fizz, fizz . . . oh what a shame it is!”

Frank walked over to Rossi.

“What?”

“How much money you have on you?”

Rossi smirked. “More than you got in the bank I bet.”

“I doubt that,” said Frank, feeling calm. Maybe it was that elusive Buddha thing finally kicking in.

“Twenty I get it on the green.”

“Make it fifty,” Rossi challenged.

Frank thought about how he would tell it later. The only question was to whom.

I had a twenty in my left pocket and a couple of singles in the right. In between was a pair of balls.

“Why not a hundred?”

“A hunnert!”

With that, Rossi broke into his smoker’s hack. He bent over and spit out a nasty gob the color of uncooked chicken skin. Frank, broad and deep of spirit (more Buddha?), almost felt sorry for him.

Frank teed up his shiny white ball. The group behind them had caught up and sat in their carts behind the tee. On most shots, having an expanded audience to watch him screw up would have doomed him. Barbara gave him a thumbs-up. She slapped herself on her left thigh. Rossi was still coughing; Leo handed him a bottle of water.

Frank looked at the flagstick. The week before he’d used his six iron on this hole and he’d put his tee shot into the pond. He had taken the same club again. He took a practice swing.

As he took another, he tried what Barbara had said, a swing thought, putting his weight heavy on his left leg. It didn't feel right. Then again, *right* was hardly the operative term.

He stepped up to his ball, planted himself, and swung.

The ball rose into a high arc, like a kite catching its rightful breeze. When he saw this, a tremor of instant accomplishment inspired Frank to throw in one of Barbara's "touch the skies" and he held a high-handed pose like he'd seen her do all day.

"It's right at it!" she said.

Frank knew better, saw it was going to be short. Right in the pond, he thought. He should have used the five.

Then the ball, a spot of white, appeared on the green. It bounced once and rolled up toward the flagstick. He thought it would go in the hole.

Even though it didn't, stopping a few inches away, it was like the period after a perfect line of poetry.

"Wonderful shot!" cried Leo. "Hah!"

"Beautiful!" echoed Barbara.

Rossi started coughing again.

The guys in the group behind clapped their hands and told him nice shot. Frank played it cool as he put his club back in his bag and drove off, like he did this all the time. *If I gave a shit*, he thought, *I'd be dangerous*.

He waited while Leo and Rossi played up to the green. After he took a drop, Rossi's second shot went in the water too. Frank was sure Rossi was on his seventh stroke when he got on the green, but who was counting?

"Wonderful shot, Frankie!" Leo said. "Great shot! A hundred dollar shot!"

"You lucky prick," Rossi said, but he'd lost some of his edge, not to mention most of his voice. "Double or nothin'?"

A putt of two or three inches remained. Even Frank would be hard-pressed to miss. He looked at Barbara as she came up to where her ball had landed.

“That was the best shot I’ve seen in a long time,” she told him, squatting down. She marked her ball, got the mud off by rubbing it on the grass, and put it back on the green.

“You focused, you set up your firm base. It was beautiful . . . look where it ended up! If it was a hole-in-one you wouldn’t be able to see it sitting there like that. This is better!”

“Pick it up, Frank,” Leo said. Rossi had a cigarette in his hand and in spite of the endless coughing seemed to be thinking about lighting it.

On the next hole, Frank kept thinking his thoughts. His drive was straight and his second shot was good too. But trying to get on the green for a chance at another birdie, he over-swung and topped the third. By the end of the hole he had lost the magic, and yet another ball in a pond, splashed down again.

He was back where he began. Business as effen usual.

It was a worse backup than usual at the tenth tee. Rossi and Leo went to pick up their food. Barbara stood under the shade of a tree, adding up her score for the front nine. Frank decided to say goodbye, make some excuse to Leo and Rossi, and be done with it.

As he drove up in his cart, Barbara folded her scorecard and clipped it onto her pull cart. She walked over to a red ball washer with a pair in her hand. She put one on either side of the device and then grabbed the knob and worked it up and down. It squeaked and foamed out suds.

“You didn’t tell me what you retired from,” she said, before he could tell her he was leaving.

In his 30s in the 80s, Frank had made a lot of money selling what they called mini-computers to people who knew

nothing about them beyond that they had to have one. When Tropical Storm Personal Computing came roaring through, like everyone else in his industry he thought he couldn't possibly get wet. Trying to get back on his feet after the washout, he'd gone from one thing to another in what became a twenty-year slog, working at big companies and small, pushing everything from financial services to lawn furniture, vitamins to timeshares, copy machines to copy crab.

And last but not least, back to computers. This time, software.

"Sales," Frank said.

"Well you must have done very well for yourself if you can retire at your age. What are you . . . forty-five or so?"

Frank wasn't quite so brain dead to think she was coming on to him. Otherwise, he might have started lying then and there.

"I'm fifty-two. End of next month."

"I never would have guessed!"

"By the way, I didn't retire," Frank went on. "I got fired."

"Oh, no!"

"A manager I had, well, it was this company here," he said, tapping the stitched logo on his shirt.

It was some sick joke that he hadn't burned it, let alone wore it still. "They had software that was supposed to . . . well it doesn't matter what it was supposed to do, because it *didn't*."

"That didn't stop me from selling it," Frank admitted. "What I had a problem with was a sales manager who took credit for my best sales. I went to the president of the company and told her what was going on and she went to him and he concocted this thing about how I was skimming expenses. One guess who she believed. They were a pair of

thieves. Maybe you heard about them.” He tapped the logo for her again. “They just went Chapter Eleven.”

It was like finally hitting the ball right. He’d never told anyone the truth. Not even his wife knew it wasn’t early retirement. A deal too good to pass up. He’d come to almost believe it himself. He didn’t budge even when she decided to take early retirement herself.

What he ended up with was a severance package, and not a very generous one. Twenty-four weeks of unemployment, getting the mail before Barbara so she wouldn’t see the monthly checks with the Division of Employment Security return address. When the stories about KSI began to break in the paper he didn’t think she saw them, because she never brought it up.

And now he had blurted it all out. It was liberating, but he felt guilty.

He’d told the wrong Barbara. And from the look on her face, she was deep into her swing thoughts.

Leo drove up, alone in the cart.

“Joe’s got to catch his wind. We’re going to take a little break. But you kids go on!”

“I hope he’s all right,” Barbara said.

“Frankie, this is for you,” said Leo, cash in his hand. Twenties it looked like. “Great shot! Clutch shot! Money shot!”

Frank looked at Leo. *Leo the Blind Barber*. A two-chair shop, a few pounds of hair on the floor.

“You don’t have to do that.”

Leo smiled. “Take it Frankie.” The little barber winked his good eye. “He’s effen loaded, right?”

“Why do you spend so much time with that guy?” Frank finally asked.

Leo’s smile widened.

“Oh you know how it is Frankie,” he said. “We’re like an old married couple. No surprises!”

When Frank pulled into his driveway behind Barbara’s car, he saw Paul from next door standing by his black truck, looking over at him. He wondered why the guy was home so early. Frank walked over, no neighborly way to head into his house without being rude.

“Dandelion greens are two-fifty a pound at the health food market,” he said. A red dump truck roared past with a load of whatever it was they were hauling out down the road. “I should harvest the damn things. Looks like I have the best crop in town.”

For the first time in a long while, since he was calling on clients and giving his pitch, Frank felt like talking. Confessing to the wrong Barbara had loosened something. Maybe his neighbor needed help selling whatever it was that he built.

“Did you see the surveyor tags back there?” he went on, working the old muscles, looking to make a connection.

Paul looked toward his house, not where Frank meant. Down the road, in the woods behind them, were bright orange ribbons, harbingers of what was coming: more neighbors, more houses, more pools.

“When do you think the sign for ‘Big Ass Homes’ goes up?” Frank asked.

The younger man looked down, toed grass and dirt. Up close, his lawn wasn’t all that hot either. Maybe he was about to blame Frank for spreading demon seed.

“Hey, you’re in that, building,” he tried next. “What do you think? Will it make our property go up or down? Up I bet.”

“My wife told me something,” the guy said.

“Yeah? Your wife?”

“Something you did.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something she saw you do.”

Frank realized it had to be about the chipmunk. The one his cat had killed and left for him. The ones the workers had netted from the pool that morning. The day before, Frank had scooped it up with the blue plastic dustpan he kept on the back porch. He went down into the yard, and hurled it away.

He meant to get it over the neighbor’s fence, back into their shrubs. But he tossed it further than he’d intended. The wife must have heard the splash, or maybe seen him, duck-walking away, where he ended up in his garage with a grin like a grade-schooler who’d just egged a house and thought he’d gotten away with it.

“Oh yeah,” Frank said, “well, I’m sorry if—”

“She saw your look . . . you looking out at her.”

“What?”

“She says you were looking at her while . . . obviously *pleasuring* yourself.”

Frank looked at his house. The bathroom. Its small window.

Although it had proven false earlier that day, his newest theory was that masturbating before he played golf might calm him, help him relax, keep his temper down on the course. No doubt even the Buddha gave it a wank now and then. At his age, Frank had a pack of reliable thoughts he used, mental snapshots worked and worn like a hard-played deck of cards. He shuffled them to turn up a girl from high school or college, or a woman from one job or another, or sometimes someone he’d seen more recently on the street, or in a store, or on TV. Sometimes even Barbara.

He remembered the woman next door by her pool, but didn't think she could possibly see *him*. Certainly only his head and shoulders. Maybe his face as he—

“Your wife!”

“What about her!”

“No, listen.”

“You fucking listen!”

“Hey!”

When he went into the house a few minutes later his face was flushed. Barbara sat at the kitchen table. Barefoot, she was dressed in a baggy sweatshirt and jeans, cutting and organizing more coupons than she would ever use.

“You're home early,” she said without looking up.

Frank used his left hand to toss his car keys on the counter, and his left hand to open the refrigerator. He looked inside. What he really wanted was ice for his right hand, which he kept in his pants pocket, curled around his last golf ball.

“Did I hear shouting out there?”

“I think the guy next door hit himself with a hammer or something.”

“Is he all right?”

“He's a builder. Those guys are always hitting themselves.”

Another truck went by and the house shook. Theirs was Cheap Ass, not Big Ass construction. With the windows open, you could hear the tearing-up of woods, the grinding of trees, the loading of dirt and boulders.

“This morning?” said Barbara. “I thought you fell getting out of the shower.”

Frank looked at her.

“When you were in the bathroom? I thought I heard you yell.”

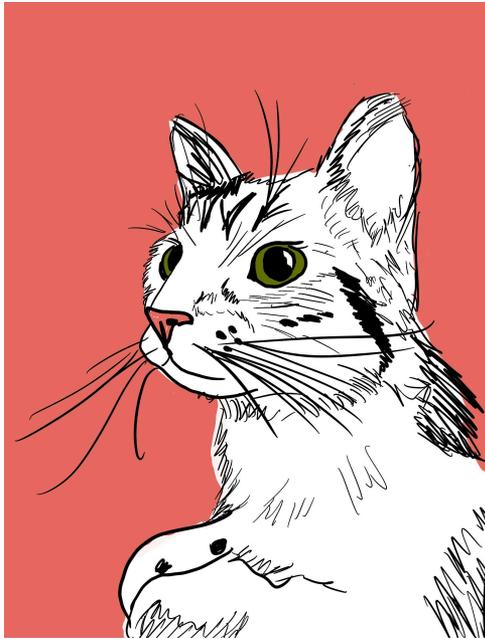
He remembered the first time he'd seen her; not the first time exactly, because he'd seen her around campus, but the first time that mattered.

She had long brown hair, tied in a ponytail. She wore an embroidered peasant top, and wonderfully tight bell-bottom jeans. They passed each other on the path to the library and when he decided to give it a shot, shyly raised his hand—she had smiled back.

There were lines at the corners of her mouth, but it was the same smile now.

He looked out the kitchen window and laughed.

“So then,” he said. “California?”



Jon Fain’s publications include short stories in *The Twin Bill* (a 2021 Best of the Net nominee) and *Little Death Lit*; flash fictions in *The Daily Drunk*, *Back Patio Press*, *(mac)ro(mic)*, and *Reservoir Road Literary Review*; and micro fictions in *Scribes Micro Fiction* and *Blink-Ink*.

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