NAKED ANGELS

A Novel

by

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THE PIGEON ON THE PLATFORM

I've never had an easy time being myself, for one thing. I grew up the first and only child of a dirt-poor, single-parent family in Southwestern Pennsylvania, an area too far north to be part of the Bible Belt but still close enough to the Mason-Dixon Line for interstate billboards quoting God in Bible-red ink. "I'm watching you! Don't make me come down there!—God." Hunting and football remain the kings of the area, and while I've never really been inclined to pass the pigskin or to stalk deer in the wee hours of the morning, there was more than one winter when my family would have starved had my football-loving father not made hunting his sole religion.

Gabe's arm flew in front of me—as if this alone could defy the Law of Inertia.

"Watch Out!" he screamed. A string of brake lights ignited before us. My seatbelt stretched taut. The fender in front ran toward our windshield.

The car two spaces in front of us fishtailed, but unlike many of the other vehicles, it turned sideways without hitting the car in front of it—and because of the extra space created by the suddenly-sideways car before us, and though we lurched forward with a force that nearly ripped our rental car's body from its axle rod and wheels, we came to an abrupt but complete stop. All about us, the sounds of a pile-up on the George Washington Bridge screamed through the early spring air.

Uninjured but wondering why the rental car's airbags hadn't deployed, I craned

my head to see if the car behind us would stop in time. Tires wailed. A horn blared. Rubber howled. But there we did not crash, for with just inches to spare, the car behind ours stopped.

"That was close," I said, breathing again, turning around to look in front of me.

"Really close." Gabe heaved a heavy sigh. I watched as the scores of other cars either joined or avoided the collective wreckage all about us.

My life thus far has been a series of narrow escapes. All morning long, my mind had been racing the landscapes of my past. While throwing clothing into borrowed suitcases for our trip—the trip that would put an end to the hell of these last several months, the trip that would allow me to bury the memories of those who did not survive—I'd thought of my school years. Just before our narrowly-avoided accident, I'd been considering my father and my hometown, and now, while looking out the windshield at the sideways Subaru in front of us, the events that had brought us—once again—to this bridge raced through my mind, piling skyward like a modern Tower of Babel. I thought of the attempted Disney trip. That was only the second time I'd ever met Minerva, and Mary didn't—or rather, was not permitted to come on that guys-only trip. God, Mary.

And Sheldon.

At the other end of the bridge, paramedics, firemen, and police tended to the primary accident that had sparked the pile-up on the GWB. After several moments, people got in and out of their cars and screamed into their cell phones. Several policemen knocked on car windows to make sure everyone was alright. An SUV began blaring music loudly enough for the entire bridge to hear. I rolled my fingers on the

dashboard in quiet frustration, hoping that whichever cop came to check on us would make the guy turn down his music. After a moment, I put my hand on the handle and moved to ask him myself, but Gabe's hand, which had moments before flown to shield me from the crash, held me back again.

With a self-aware and somewhat dramatic sigh, I threw my head back on the headrest and said aloud that we would not be moving for a very long time. After a moment, my traveling companion emanated a disgruntled, guttural blat in response. I hit my head against the passenger side window. I put my feet on the dashboard and mindlessly locked and unlocked the car's automatic lock. I'd already considered the very real possibility that someone might be dead in front of us, but after a few moments with the lock, this was a triviality compared to the amount of time his or her possible death was adding to our carefully-planned trip.

A cop knocked on our window. We told him we were fine, waved him away. He continued on to the vehicle behind ours without asking the offending SUV to turn down its music. Perhaps he had not heard it in the blowing wind. Perhaps he just liked whatever monstrosity was playing, or maybe he had more important things to deal with. I sighed and stared at and through my reflection in the passenger side window and down to the Hudson below—aware, far too aware, of everything it had taken from me, from us. Its calm brown glaze masks its seething, unseen currents, hiding how the briny Atlantic climbs up into it, climbs like a virus to infect its already-polluted waters with bitter salt. There are lives, so many lives, trapped forever in the river's murky silt. And I had been a part of one of those lives.

In several hours we would no longer be in the city; in several hours, the months

leading to this point would be buried, could begin to be forgotten. But as I sat in immobile traffic and flicked the lock up and down and up and down in unwilling rhythm to the pounding music of the SUV, trapped in what the radio was already calling the worst traffic jam in New York City history, I could no longer control my serpentine thoughts, could no longer keep the memories of my narrowly-escaped past from overtaking the permanently-paused present. And so, against my will, I thought again of that mugging so many months ago, and I wondered what might have happened, how things would have been different if I had successfully fought him off, that unseen man who'd ripped my bag from my shoulder in a screaming blur and pushed me down, so militantly, to the unforgiving New York City concrete.

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"Are you okay?" a straphanger fresh from the bellows of the subway asked.

"My bag!" I said, pointing in the direction of the mugger from my sudden seat on the sidewalk at the corner of Broadway and 8th Street. "My bag!" Pedestrians on their way to work slowed to a hurry, pointing as they passed; a small group of on-lookers gathered around me. "My bag!" I screamed again. I looked at my hand. It was bleeding.

A man, clearly a tourist, held out his hand to me. I screamed an expletive and knocked him away. I jumped to my feet and bolted down the subway stairs, looked for a police officer. Finding none, I jumped the turnstile without paying my fare and navigated the sudden rush of exiting commuters in search of the mugger and my stolen bag, the contents of which tolled endlessly in my mind: a notebook, a James Baldwin novel (the title of which I could not then remember), my *Backstage* newspaper, my wallet containing three maxed-out credit cards, my bank card, MetroCard, driver's license,

social security card, and work ID. My stomach churned. I felt for my cell phone. It was in my right front pocket. Along with a pack of cigarettes. Consolations.

"ID, please," a gruff voice said behind me.

I turned around. My legs shook. I stared at him for several seconds.

"ID," the man repeated. He held a shiny gold badge in front of him. NYPD.

"I don't…what are you… What?" I stammered.

"What part of ID don't you understand, my man?" he asked. "You just jumped a turnstile. Now. Show me your ID before I stop being so nice and take you in."

"My bag was just stolen," I said as calmly as possible. "I ran down here because this is where the mugger ran. I was chasing him."

He looked at me blankly. "ID," he repeated.

"Look," I said, "my ID was in my bag, along with—" He raised his eyebrows.

Had I taken a moment to collect myself, I would not have pled for his help or understanding as long as I had. I would have realized that the mugger, whose face I had not seen, had either escaped onto an earlier train or run through the tunnels to his freedom. Regardless, he was gone for good and so was my bag. In a city of eight million, getaways are all but ensured.

"Listen," the undercover cop said in my face. "I caught you, and now I gotta issue you a ticket. Now. To do that, I have to know your name and address, which requires an ID. So. Last time. ID."

"I don't know how to make you believe me," I screamed over the clanging metal wheels of the passing express train, my legs shaking more than ever. "But my ID was—" The cop stepped toward me, a pair of handcuffs suddenly in his hands.

"My name is Michael Stalling," I said, taking several steps back. "My name is Michael Joshua Stalling. I live at 712 W. 190th Street in Washington Heights." He stopped his advance.

"Uh huh," he said. "Prove it."

"I can't!" I said. "My ID was stolen!" I was beginning to believe that the cop might be right. Perhaps I hadn't been mugged after all. Perhaps it was all just my imagination. Perhaps I was no more than a common deadbeat trying to avoid paying my fare. I looked at my bleeding hand.

"See?" I said to the cop. I held my throbbing hand in front of his face. "Blood!"

"What are you doing?" he asked, taking a step back.

"Blood," I said. "It proves I was just mugged, that I was—"

"You can't just go bleeding all over the place. Get yourself a Band-Aid or seven. Now show me your ID," he said with a long exhale.

"But I told you who I am," I said. "I told you where I live." I mindlessly licked my hand like an injured animal and wiped it on my pants. "There's nothing more I can do."

And whether it was because he did not desire the paperwork required after my arrest, whether it was because it would mean I would also get to fill out a report chronicling my mugging, whether the sight of me licking up my own blood freaked him out—whatever the reason, the cop put his cuffs away and pulled out his bulky ticket pad without arresting me.

"I guess I'll just take you at your word," he said. "But you're lucky my partner isn't here. He's a hard ass. He'd have taken you in. But he had to go to the bathroom,"

he said writing. "'Cause normally, if you can't prove who you are, we take you in."

"Uh huh," I said. "Okay. Thank you." He continued to write.

Naively and idiotically thinking I might still be able to talk my way out of the ticket, I opened my mouth to tell him how terrible this day had been, how it was awful even before getting mugged, how I'd just broken up with Rose the night before, my on-again-off-again girlfriend of one-and-a-half years. But as I inhaled to tell him, he stared at me, and I remained silent instead of saying one word, just stood and waited for him to finish writing my ticket.

A month into our relationship, Rose and I had moved in together. We knew it was a mistake at the time, of course. But her pregnant roommate had returned to Alabama, leaving her with an impossibly high rent to pay, and I'd been sharing a one bedroom in Brooklyn with four other guys for almost a year. It was a ridiculous living situation, that year in Brooklyn with the guys. None of the five of us was able to pay the extra rent we all agreed using the sole bedroom warranted. So to solve the problem, we got drunk and through the course of an all-night poker game developed an impossible system of sleep stations, an idiotic nightly rotation between a set of bunk beds stolen from Columbia, a cot, a second-hand couch rescued from the trash, and the floor. The rotations, coupled with the need to find alternative lodgings every fifth night, the night to be spent on the floor (there was a considerable roach problem), ensured that none of us ever came to think of the apartment as home.

So after Rose's pregnant roommate moved out, I left Brooklyn, and we found an apartment together. For a year and a half, we danced through our bipolar relationship of slamming doors and meaningful all-night conversations, of abstinence and no-holds-

barred sex, until she'd finally had enough, and as I stood waiting for my ticket, I heard again her voice from the night before tolling my considerable faults, which included, she had been sure to repeat, a considerable lack of talent in the bedroom.

"And you're a terrible actor!" she had said, climbing into the moving van with most of the possessions we had always called ours. "Terrible!"

I found this, of course, to be the unkindest cut of all and so had set out early that day to pick up a copy of *Backstage*, the struggling actor's weekly rag of audition notices and generic career advice. I was on my way to my revenge-against-Rose audition for *Richard III* when the mugger knocked me to the ground and took my bag. Actually, it was an audition for a show based on *Richard III,* entitled *Richard III: A Musical Animal Farce in Five Acts—A Horse, a Horse, My Kingdom for a Horse!* The audition notice said that the director would be dressing his actors like "musical farm animals embodying an Orwellian vision of modern society." And even though I was less than sold on the Orwell farm animal idea, even though I wondered how a title so tastelessly long would ever fit on a publicity postcard, I was nonetheless brimming with enthusiasm.

"What's your name again?" the cop asked, looking up from his pad.

"Michael Joshua Stalling," I said again with a heavy sigh. I imagined myself pushing the undercover cop into the subway tracks and making a getaway. But he was huge, and besides, there were security cameras everywhere, and I've never been prone to violence, anyway.

I didn't move to the city to be an actor, of course, and though I'd attended Columbia for a full semester, I did not move to New York to attend school, either. Rather, I moved to New York because it was not Western Pennsylvania. The

Appalachians are ideological molehills when compared to the man-made commercial mountains of Empire State, Chrysler, and, alas, World Trade, and I longed to act out my life beneath a larger sky, beneath a sky so vast it could only be seen in patches—and only if you happened to be looking up in the first place. I longed to live where no one knew me and where there was, therefore, no one who could judge me. And so I fled to New York to embark on the most American of all pursuits, even more so than that of the so-called American Dream: I came to New York to find myself. But if I had known the degree to which my past—my very home—would follow me, I wonder whether I might not have chosen Paris, Rome, or the mountains of Tibet for my flight. But of course, that wouldn't have helped, for no matter how far you run, home always hunts you down, one way or another.

After the five minutes it took for the cop to issue my ticket ("One more toward his quota," I thought but did not say), the officer wished me a good day, reminded me I'd gotten off easy, and walked to the other end of the platform where his partner, back from his piss break (with two coffees), met him.

A stray pigeon bobbed its head on the platform as if begging for food, the way pigeons do. I guessed, as I watched it in a trance, unable to move in the wake of a $60 ticket and my stolen bag, that it had flown into the subway from the street above and could not find its way out. I believed I could help it back to the street somehow, so I walked toward it gently. But it did not fly, it just scurried sort of. Amused and annoyed, I waved my arms at it like an angry child and tried to push it toward the direction of the stairs. And still, it did not fly. So I stomped. I galloped. I swore. I poured all of my aggression onto that stalwart city bird, and still, it just ran away from me in nonsensical

pigeon circles without ever once flying. Imperceptibly, my goal had shifted; I no longer cared if the creature ever returned to the street above. I wanted only that it should fly! Fly! Fly!

"Damn you," I said, balling my just-issued ticket and nailing the bird on the tail. But the ticket bounced onto the tracks, and the bird still did not fly away. I looked at the cops who were fortunately too busy issuing another ticket to see me discard mine.

Suddenly, the bird flapped its wings and charged after me. Or rather, it flapped its right wing, for its left one was grossly disfigured. I realized then that the bird had not flown away because it could not fly at all.

Another hundred people got off of an arriving train, but the bird, undeterred by the rushing feet of disembarking subway passengers, continued to charge toward me.

"You're a tough little son of a bitch," I said, laughing and stomping again. "Plucky! Plucky! Plucky!" I shouted, flapping my arms in mockery of its deformed wing, and it was during this tic fit fight with a handicapped pigeon that I accidentally back-handed a disembarking subway passenger in a football jersey and jeans. I hit him hard and squarely in the jaw. But I did not apologize—was instead ready to fight him *and* the deformed pigeon all at once. Two against one! Seeing that my attention was directed elsewhere, however, the pigeon walked away and left me alone to contend with the man I'd just clocked.

"Asshole!" the man in the football jersey shouted, grabbing my flailing arm so firmly I let out a yelp. I tried to pull away, oddly afraid that he, too, might try to mug me, or worse, issue me a ticket. "Watch what the hell you're—" But he stopped. And he stared. I tried again to pull away, began to thrash wildly within his grasp. Until, that is,

he said my name.

"Michael?" he said.

And there he was: my secret and best childhood friend; the most fantastic running back in our school's history; faster than anyone in state sport history; the guy who dodged through pockets of charging bodies; who jumped, who raced over fallen flesh clods; who zigzagged bouncing helmets and enemy shoulder pads—and then, always—the winning score! The unexpected touchdown! The boy with whom I had climbed my first tree years and years ago—Gabriel Woods, incongruous anachronism, stood before me on the subway platform while a broken-winged pigeon danced at our feet.

"Gabe?" I said.

"Michael!" he said again.

"Gabe," I repeated as he embraced me. His was a magical name in our town. There was not a girl in school who did not swoon at the mention Gabe's name, not a boy who did not wish to be him. Even parents smiled at the sight of him, a feat made all the more spectacular given his atypically dark hue for a resident of Cokeville. See, Gabriel Joshua Woods was the only child of the only Black family in our entire small town, a cause of considerable discord between my father and me on more than one occasion. It's easy to forget that even though we're now well into the 21st Century, there are still loads of white people all over this country living with a 1950s mindset where race is concerned.

He was valedictorian and the star athlete: pitcher on the baseball team, center on the basketball team, and most importantly, star running back for the fighting Bobcats football team, for despite Gabe's best efforts to the contrary, football was the only sport at which our school was ever any good, an unsurprising reality given that pro football

was invented in Western PA. Johnny Unitas, Joe Namath, Dan Marino, Terry Bradshaw, and many other legends of the gridiron were either literally or professionally born there. "When your nose gets broken and the blood runs down your throat," Bradshaw is supposed to have said, "stuff mud up your nostrils and keep on playing 'til you win." Gabe Woods embodied this ideal.

In real life, of course, winning was just one more unanswered prayer for Western Pennsylvanians, no matter their drive, no matter their determination, no matter their work ethic. Our fathers tried. God, they tried. But almost every new year brought the closing of yet another mine, and when the government mandated that the doors of the state mental hospital, the town's largest employer, be shut, it seemed no one in the whole county would ever again be gainfully employed. It was bad enough that the steps of Main Street had to serve as makeshift porches for all the new apartment-dwelling families who'd been forced from their houses. But when those same stoops became the literal homes to the slews of mental patients who had once lived at the state hospital—patients who, with the flick of a pen, had been declared suddenly and miraculously cured, capable, and sane by the government—the entire town roared with a righteous outrage that fell on deaf ears.

All this heartache had more than one person questioning how God could allow such suffering, such inequity, such injustice. So it was to the football field and not the church that Cokeville turned for inspiration. Oh, people still went to church, yes. If you'll excuse the pun, people went to church religiously. But they did so out of duty and fear. For inspiration, they went to the football field, where Gabriel Woods was the town's revered reverend of sport. And so, on those magical Friday nights, beneath

stadium lights, on a threadbare field maintained by volunteers, Gabriel Woods became a vessel for the town's every hope and aspiration. On several occasions, *The Cokeville Dispatch* even went so far as to call him an actual savior.

The rolling bass of his Western Pennsylvanian accent ignited a shock wave of recognition within me. With his arms around me, with the utterance of just one word—my name—Gabe had unwittingly buried me beneath the compounding memories of Rolling Rock beer and Sunday morning morning-afters; weekends of professional TV football games, when living rooms were converted to *Deer Hunter* bars and families forgotten. His voice was a transfusion that made me both comfortable and sick.

"There's a pigeon down here," he said laughing as we separated.

"You always had a talent for stating the obvious," I said, for his was a tautological world view. Nothing was either good or bad. It just was what it was.

He laughed and said my name again, then looked at me for an awkward moment before moving in to hug me once more. Uncomfortable with such prolonged and repeated expressions of affection, however, I clasped his right hand and held it stiffly between our bodies, as if shaking, while my left hand patted his back. A warrior's embrace.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him as we separated. Another train entered the station.

He paused a moment. "Just moved the other week," he screamed without really answering my question. The train squealed to a stop.

"And how are your parents?" I asked.

He remained silent. His eyes glazed over.

Just as he would soon learn to answer “Pittsburgh” instead of “Cokeville” when asked where he was from, Gabriel seemed in that moment to be learning the generalized view of his parents and his past, the view that comes only with time and distance, the view that buries every feeling of having abandoned your loved ones to pursue your own life, the view that paints their memory in dichotomous strokes of good or bad, black or white for the sake of personal survival, the view that answers simply and quickly “My parents are fine,” whenever asked about them—preventing any evidence to the contrary one way or the other.

Gabe glazed at the platform pigeon for a long moment. Then, as the train doors opened, Gabriel, the pigeon, and I wove away from the straphangers running to the exit, already late for work.

Though all of Cokeville loved Gabriel Woods, no one doted on him more, it should go without saying, than his own mother and father. They swathed their house in orange and black streamers, signs, and balloons each and every week in preparation for the coming football, baseball, or basketball game. They wore large photo buttons of Gabe on their lapels every day at work, to the supermarket, at the gym. And they continued to wear them long after each season had ended, when all the other parents decided that to go on wearing theirs would be distasteful, possibly even egotistical. But no one seemed to mind that they never retired theirs, for they were, after all, *the* parents of *the* Gabriel Woods. That, and Gabriel’s father was the minister at the town’s sparsely attended Baptist Church, and criticizing ministers, even when warranted, could not be tolerated. But as Gabe watched the subway pigeon without immediately answering me, I wondered if things with his parents had somehow deteriorated, and so, I repeated my

question. "How are your parents?" I asked again.

"Okay," he said a little too quickly, smiling his trademark, iconic smile, the smile most of us shuck after age nine, the smile that believes that if it just goes on smiling everything will be fine. "And how's your dad?" he asked. A commuter bumped into me without either acknowledgment or apology. I flipped him off, looked at Gabe, thought for a moment, and sighed.

My father, like many who'd returned home from Vietnam without going mad, had buried his acts of war in excessive drugs, sex, alcohol, and an extra-large helping of the protestant work ethic. He was a man incapable of self-expression, angry as all wordless men are angry. (Although, on countless occasions, he did shout racial epithets at Gabe). Several times, in fact, he threatened to shoot the both of us for playing together, and yet, our friendship continued. He openly mocked my relationship with Gabriel whenever his friends (His Men, he called them) came over. And still, we played on. Countless times, he even beat me for being with Gabe; beat me until I could no longer see or stand. And still, we played on.

I was, of course, aware of the town's whisperings about my father, and I slowly began to piece together more of his thoughts and actions as I grew up—how the Woods Family had discovered the word "NIGGER" scratched into the door of their car, and how my father's keys were covered in paint chips of the same shade; how another time the word had been spray-painted onto the side of their house, and how there was paint beneath my father's fingernails that very day. For a long time, however, I thought the word "Nigger" was just a different name for the Woods Family, just as "Sam" meant the same thing as "Daddy." But naïveté only carries a person so far before he must either

confront the truth or choose a sour, active denial to be the ruling force of his life. And by the time of the incident with the cross, I knew that my father was not harmless, and I felt—feel—responsible for not having stopped it, for never having confessed to anyone that I knew and had always known all about my father.

Guilt, I think, is biological. The sins of our fathers are passed down to us like an extra chromosome, a genetic disease carried in silence through centuries, and as I stood staring at Gabe, I was painfully aware of just how afflicted I was. But of course, how could I have done anything about any of it at the time? Yes, I knew the truth about my father even as a teenager. I was aware. But I relied on him for food and shelter, and taking action would put an end to what little stability I had. To say nothing of the beating I would have taken. But I knew. I knew.

In the glow of Gabriel Wood's iconic smile on that New York City subway platform, the smile that made whoever was in its glow want to be a better person, my impotent awareness of my father's actions—all the thought and feeling that had remained dormant since fleeing Cokeville—rose within me, and everything I'd worked so hard to forget was suddenly remembered. I looked at Gabe and tried to answer his question. How was my father?

An express train whizzed by. The pigeon tried to fly.

My father met my mother in a bar. She was fresh from an abusive, childless marriage that ended in divorce and excommunication, and she was, she told him that night, "looking." Just a month later, they were married. My mother wore a blue dress; he, a rented suit. After two miscarriages, I was born, and three years later, my mother died unexpectedly. But it's idiotic to say that anyone has died unexpectedly, isn't it? Or

at the very least redundant. Death, even after a prolonged illness, even when it is wished for, believed by all to be an end to intolerable suffering—death is always unexpected, always sudden, always complete.

My Aunt Ollie Anna stayed with us during the funeral to field, she said, "the endless calls, the deliveries of food from neighbors, etc." But after my mother was buried, Aunt Ollie Anna still did not leave, and one day, she sent for her things and took up residence on the third floor of our house, converting it into a studio where, in addition to sleeping, she worked tirelessly on her unappreciated oil paintings.

Tall as no woman in a rural setting should be tall, steely, square-jawed, and flamingly artistic, Aunt Ollie Anna was childless and always would be. Once, just after my mother's funeral, I awoke screaming from what is still a frequent nightmare filled with vague images of my mother in her grave. Aunt Ollie Anna held me on that and every night thereafter. She held me and she sang me back to sleep. I cherished her presence in our home. She was not my mother, no. But she was warm and loving in ways my father never would be. Every morning after he left for work, for instance, she made my breakfast and then, exhausted from her graveyard shift at the sewing factory, she fell asleep on the couch. I would crawl into the triangular space she created with her bent knees and eat my food while watching cartoons until it was time to leave for school.

But all that ended after painting in her bedroom-slash-studio one night. I'd been creating some masterpiece when, without a word, I moved over to her wall and began to paint it the same silver I'd been throwing onto the canvas.

"What are you doing?" she asked me.

"Painting the walls," I answered.

"Oh," she said, smiling broadly, returning to her own work. "Okay."

I declared suddenly that I wanted to paint the walls in the kitchen, too. She laughed and said we couldn't do that. I asked her why. She paused a moment, brush in hand, and answered, "Well, I don't really know why," she said. "Ha! Why not!" And off we went, frivolously painting the kitchen sans design, sans form, sans order, gleefully covering it with illogical flowers, bees, splotches, speckles, grass, clouds, suns, stripes, polka dots, stars, and rainbows! "You gotta let out what's inside of you," she said, squashing her brush into the wall and making a red blat. "You're only as sick as your secrets, Michael. Soooooooo…get it all out!" And pop went the paint all over the kitchen walls.

Until my father came home.

Though it was her night off, Aunt Ollie Anna was called into work at the sewing factory just after we finished putting the paint away and cleaning up the floor. There was some pending emergency over a sewing order, and no one could sew as fast as my aunt. Thus, she left me alone for an hour until my father arrived, certain that I would be fine until then.

And I was.

But my father beat me when he walked through the door. I tried to explain, as his hand flew down against my backside forty-five times, slamming me like a squadron of kamikaze war planes, that Aunt Ollie Anna, his sister, had said that it was okay, that we were just letting out what was inside of us. "But she said!" I said. But it only made him hit me harder.

"I'll take care of my bitch of a sister when she gets home!" he screamed, hitting

me. Forty-three. "But I will not let her turn my son," forty-four, "into a pansy!" Forty-five.

When he was done, my father hoisted me into the air by my four- or five- or six- or seven-year-old arm and threw me into the living room where no one ever went. Aunt Ollie Anna had made a painting of my mother as a gift for my first motherless Mother's Day, the same day we'd planted the enormous lilac bush in her memory. But through all those years of my childhood, it seemed to me that the result of my aunt's efforts was not so much a loving tribute, as I'm sure was intended. No, that painting hanging above the living room mantle terrified me. In it, my mother's abnormally large eyes were ghostly hollow. They watched over the room in the same way the billboards all over Rt. 22 said that God was watching. I lay curled in a numb, crying heap, and because I knew that above me hung my mother, I cried even harder and called for my father.

"Daddy!" I screamed. But there was no answer. "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" But still, there was no response, so I crawled into the hallway and watched him at the kitchen table reading one of the pulp war novels he loved so much. "Books where someone dies on every page," he said of them. "The only kind of book worth reading!"

"Daddy!" I cried again. But he continued to ignore me and began to pick at a callous on his foot. "DADDY!"

"Get back in the living room," he said casually. "Spend some time with your real mother."

At some point, I must have cried myself to sleep beneath her picture because the next thing I remember is Aunt Ollie Anna returning from work and carrying me from the

floor, up the stairs, and into bed. I awoke as she changed my clothes, but when she said my name in the dark to check if I was awake, I closed my eyes and did not answer, pretended to be asleep.

"What did you do to him?" I heard her ask him once she was back downstairs.

"Not really any of your business, now is it?" Daddy said, trying, I could hear, to walk past her and up the stairs.

She let him climb a few steps. "You can't hit your son, Sam," she said. "I won't allow it."

"My son," he said coolly, "is *my* son. Not yours."

"That may be," my aunt said, "but he needs a loving influence. What kind of an example are you setting for him?"

He tried to continue up the stairs.

"He's like a sponge, you know?" she screamed at him. "How do you think he's going to act toward others if you talk the way you do? How do you think he's going to treat women if you beat him? How do you think—"

But Daddy punched the wall instead of telling her what he thought. I know this not just because of the bang but also because of the hole the next morning, the hole which was never patched and remains to this day.

"Not only does he know when you come home drunk at night," she continued after a moment, ignoring his outburst as only a sister can, "not only can he guess what you've been up to when you're out all night, but worse, he knows what you and Your Men do. A child knows, Sam. A child knows!"

Lying in bed and staring through the dark, I realized that my Aunt Ollie Anna was

right. I did know. Though I was but four, or five, maybe six years old, though the coming years would afford me many opportunities to forget, in that moment, I knew everything. I knew so much that I pulled the covers up over my head and I began to cry.

"Goodnight, Ollie Anna," Daddy said, continuing up the stairs.

After a tense moment, my aunt yelled, "You're racist, Sam! I wouldn't admit it until tonight when I saw that boy's backside while putting him in his PJs. But somehow, somehow that made me admit everything. *Everything!* You are a racist and you beat your son, and he's a sponge, Sam! A sponge!" She was crying.

"Yes," he said. "He is a sponge." My father's voice shook with anger. "And I don't like what he is learning from you, damn it! I love him," my father said. "But I have no idea what to do with him now that his mother is—and I swear to God, it is that Woods boy rubbing off on him, turning him into, into, into—into I don't know what. But you can't allow them to play together, and you do. I'm surprised he wasn't over here painting my kitchen with the two of you. But I can't have any of this. I can't have it. I just can't have it. Because he *is* a sponge. And because, because, because I will make my son a man if it is the last thing I do," my father said. "I will make him a man, damn it! I will make him a man."

It was silent downstairs, save the sounds of creaking floorboards as my father leaned into my aunt and threatened her in his most quiet, most frightening voice. I don't know what he said to her, know only that doors slammed whenever he was finished. But I could not even cry myself to sleep in the unendurable silence that followed. Numb and awake, I stared blankly through the darkness of my room until dawn.

"I have to move out," my aunt said the next morning from across the breakfast

table. My father had stayed home from the mine to ensure she told me she was leaving. He did not look up from his book when she made her announcement. I ate my Cookie Crisp in silence at the kitchen table instead of on the couch with her. Tears rolled down my face, turning the designs on the newly-painted kitchen walls into a wavy kaleidoscope.

"Don't cry!" my father screamed at me, which of course only made me cry more, which of course only made him turn me over his knee. My aunt tried to pull me away from him but he pushed her. He pushed her so hard that she fell to the floor. But she sprang right back up and slapped my father across the face.

"Out!" my father screamed at her, and she flew from the room, packed her bags, and left that very day. And still, all these years later, I don't know where she went and I wonder why she did not take me with her.

My conversations with my father after that day were mundane and trivial. Several years after my mother died, he began dating a long line of nameless, faceless women that he never brought home. I often heard him talking to my mother in the middle of the night. He even occasionally cried in the silence that followed. And still, after he made my Aunt Ollie Anna leave, I hated him with the raw, pure intensity possible only to the very young. I kept to myself, made straight A's throughout school. I tried to maintain a friendship with Gabe, but as the years went on, the tensions between our families grew. (Because, you know, Gabe was Black and my father burnt crosses in his spare time.) And so, I holed myself away, talked to almost no one, and did whatever I could to separate myself from the world around me. I went for long walks in the night. I listened to music. But mostly, I read book after book in the guarded silence of my room.

Although, I don't think I ever understood all that was to be discovered between the covers of most of those books. But then again, what sixth grader reads *The Grapes of Wrath* and actually understands it?

At any rate, I wanted, more and more as the years went on, to turn my father in for the way he thought. But thinking—even hatefully—is not a crime, and vandalism is only vandalism, regardless of what words are written in the act. At least this is what I tried to tell myself as I moved through junior high and into high school, never allowing myself to think about the cross. But even now, I'm not sure I understand the scope of my father's actions, the depth of his guilt. Or mine. I'm not sure I ever will.

"How's your father?" Gabe asked again on the subway platform. And now it was I who was pretending not to hear him, I who was watching the bobbing pigeon instead of answering.

"He's…" I tried to answer. It is easiest—and perhaps necessary—to maintain the false notion that what is complicated is simple, what is simple, complicated. Gabe looked at me. He was smiling again. My face fired red. "Well. He's my father," I said.

"Yeah," Gabe said with a forced chuckle. "There's a lot of that going around."

"What?" I asked trying to copy his trademark smile. Another train pulled into the station, and the pigeon that could not fly walked over to it, hopped over the gap between the platform and the train, and boarded it like a panhandler. We, along with the subway passengers the pigeon was then greeting, laughed. A woman sitting on the train threw the bird a potato chip.

"Nothing," he said. "It means nothing. You wanna get a drink?" Gabe asked, watching the people's lively responses to the bird so suddenly on the departing subway

train.

And although I had been on my way to an audition, although I knew I should be finding the nearest police station to file a report for my allegedly stolen bag, although my stomach churned with the thought of all I had lost, although it was not even 10:30 a.m. and no bars would yet be open, although I was obligated to ultimately go to work at the bookkeeping mill where I was a permanent temp, I said, with a smile as the train with the bird on board disappeared into the tunnel, “Yes, I would love to get a drink with you, Gabriel Woods. I would absolutely fucking love to.”

AMBER ALERTS AND ABDUCTED ADOLESCENCE

The latest in the rotating line of *Today* show co-hosts flew by on a bus that, as the effects of the alcohol seeped in and the world around me darkened, I semi-believed was a rollercoaster fueled by a North Korean nuclear tornado in which the late Yasser Arafat played badminton with the also late Isaac Rabin. I laughed at my alcohol-sponsored, annoyingly pseudo-intellectual flight of fancy as Gabe put my head between my legs. Cabs honked. His voice was beside me and in the distance. Turns out I'd had *way too many drinks* with Gabriel Woods and, as a result, I was only partially aware we were on the corner of Broadway and 8th Street again, where just a few hours earlier I'd sat, so suddenly without my bag, a victim of mugging. I took a breath, held it, and exhaled, trying to keep myself from vomiting.

"You okay?" I heard Gabe ask from below the surface.

"Never been better," I said. An abundance of alcohol, violently shifting emotions, and, I think, a slight, unspoken awareness of the revelations the night would bring had landed me here, in the middle of this fever dream of noise and numbness. I closed my eyes, felt his hands on my arm, massaging my shoulder. I was suddenly holding a bottle of water I supposed he'd given me. The world around me grew even darker and I found myself back tracking again, trying to remember what I had just lived through and how it had brought me to this particular point.

When Gabe and I left the subway station and hadn't immediately found a bar that was open, we'd gone to a diner for breakfast.

"My treat," Gabe had said. Two words with which I never argue.

We ordered waffles and bacon and eggs and sat across from each other in a booth discussing what all New York City transplants discuss to try to prove their intellectual prowess: politics, war, Constitutional Law, religion, real estate. Anything but the personal stuff that actually matters. Anything but home.

During many of the topics (on which our opinions always matched), Gabe would say, "Oh, I wish my Uncle Sheldon was here. He said to me the other night that…" And I surmised from these interjections that Gabe was staying with his uncle, whose name I sorta recalled was Sheldon. But beyond this and a general awareness that Gabe revered his Uncle Sheldon Moses White, who had become some sort of an activist, there was nothing resembling an explanation of why Gabe had left home, why he was so suddenly in the city, or why he had, "decided to take some time off from school."

And just as it seemed that our nationally-pertinent, personally-irrelevant conversation might be about to veer toward that omnipresent but ever-forbidden topic of home, a breaking news story flashed on CNN, and we halted our talk to look over the salt and pepper head of the diner's Greek owner to the television above. A few moments into the broadcast, Gabe's leg began to bounce up and down beneath the table. Jittery people annoy me. Probably because I'm pretty jittery myself. I looked at him, but either Gabe didn't feel my stare or was choosing to ignore it. At any rate, several moments went by before I became annoyed enough to put my hand on his knee.

"Sorry," he said stopping.

"'S'okay," I said, sipping from my water. His leg began to bounce again. I sighed with heaviness and passive aggression. He stopped and apologized again. But in a moment, it began bouncing once more. "Anyway," I said, resigned to the constant jostling, "What were we talking about?"

"What's that?" he asked, looking at me quickly, his leg still bouncing.

"I was about to tell you something," I told him.

"I don't remember," he said, watching the screen.

"Hunting?" I said, searching through the list of topics. "Guns…the NRA—Right! I was going to say that my father—" I began to say. It was just a few moments into Wolf Blitzer's ad lib explanation of amber alerts. Or rather, Wolf's rehashing of whatever his producers were whispering into his ear about amber alerts.

"Shh!" shushed Gabe without looking at me, his leg suddenly ceasing its shaking. In one motion, he stood, bent it beneath him, and sat.

"Okay," I said. "Sorry." I looked at him. His other leg jumped up and down for one sympathetic dry heave of a bounce.

I sat for several moments and tried to both read the news crawl at the bottom of the screen *and* to listen to Wolf talk about the genesis of Amber Alerts. Listening and reading. Reading. Listening. All at once.

Feeling over-stimulated, I put my head down on the table and immediately felt Gabe's gaze on the back of my head. I don't know how to describe it, but... a *flash* or something erupted within me. It was as if I suddenly saw everything clearly. As if in that very moment, I knew that if I could somehow simultaneously forget and possess my past all at once—like one can sometimes simultaneously read the crawl and listen to Wolf

Blitzer—it might somehow bring some greater peace to my present, and might, therefore, finally allow me to begin to contemplate my future. To forget and to remember—all at once! This was the key to living a great life.

And to do this, I surmised, I needed Gabe. I needed to escape my wandering mind and to talk. To really talk. Because even if he wouldn't forgive me, even if he blamed me, hated me for all that had happened from our past, even if all those old wounds were ripped open and history came bleeding out, well, at least it was all out in the open, right? Bleeding can be ameliorative, can't it? Bleeding at least reminds you that your heart is beating. Right?

"You're getting blood on the table," Gabe said to me. My hand had started to bleed again. I wiped at it with a crumpled, egg yolk-stained paper napkin.

I looked at my best and earliest childhood friend. Some people say that everything happens for a reason. I am not one of those people. But Gabe's unexpected reemergence in my life felt like my way out of a pretty meaningless day-to-day numbness. It felt like a way for me to devise and enact a plan for my future, a future that, I somehow knew, relied entirely on his willingness to discuss our past. But as I opened my mouth to begin this discussion, it was clear from the finger so suddenly at his lips that he just wanted to watch the television in complete silence. I couldn't tell whether he was listening to Wolf or reading the crawl, but as I put my head back down on the table for no reason at all this time, I knew with some measure of certainty that he wasn't attempting both.

Then, in a flash as bright and as sudden as the one that had brought my revelation for how to live a great life—a discovery that had seemed so perfect, so pure, so

infallible... My blueprint for how to remember and forget the past, present, and future all at once was gone and seemed like utter bullshit.

I would reach for this revelation several times in the months to come, would even sense it whispering at the periphery of my awareness as I dove into one bad decision after another. But it would never again be so clear. Theory, those revelatory instructions on *how* to live life even as you are living it, arrives only in rare, dangerous flashes of sudden light, as if whispered from a knowing past to a forgetting present. And if it is not captured in the very moment of its whisper, if you do not act upon it immediately, it sinks back into the crevices of its origin and like fresh lava cools and hardens into a stone so common it is utterly indistinguishable from the earth around it.

"Where the fuck's our check?" Gabe asked.

"I'll get him to bring it," I said, trying to get the owner's attention.

Gabe drummed his fingers on the table and tore small pieces of his placemat into squares, mindlessly dropping them into his water cup. Drumming and dropping. Drumming and dropping. Drumming. Dropping. When the news broadcast went to a commercial, he brought his litter-filled glass to his lips. Seeing the paper, he stopped, moved the glass away from his mouth, and squinted at it questioningly, as if he wondered how all the paper had gotten in his glass. I chuckled. He set down his glass without drinking or acknowledgment of my chuckle. I looked away from him and again to the diner owner for our check. And Gabriel continued fidgeting.

And, then, I suddenly realized: Gabriel Woods has something he was trying to tell me. I didn't know exactly what it was at the time, of course, but as I sat watching him while he watched TV, as I sat waiting for the check, I did at least know that the cause

of our discomfort was not solely the past or my inability to create a road map for the future. It was also very much our very new and all too sudden present.

I tried to find out what he wanted to tell me, interrupting Gabe's civic duty to CNN to ask again how his parents were, as if this might be the path . He announced a little too loudly that they were fine, fine and reminded me I'd asked the question back on the platform with the pigeon. I looked at him, took a breath, and said the words, "My father," again, but he interrupted with the sudden suggestion we "go and get that drink we'd said we were getting. It's 1 p.m."

I stared at him for a moment, shook my head, took the money he had laid on the table, and rose to pay the bill.

"My bag was stolen," I told him out on the street, fresh from the diner. It was the first time I had mentioned it to him since we'd bumped into each other.

"What? How?"

I explained the whole awful story.

"Well," he said laughing, his arm around me, "I'm going to get you a new one."

I looked at him. A smile formed at the corner of my lips. "That's really…that would be great," I said. "You sure? I know you just moved here and money must be tight."

"Sure I'm sure," he said. "I mean. What's the big deal? You're my friend, right?"

I paused and looked at him. "Okay, then," I said, smiling broadly. He, too, was smiling broadly. We both, in fact, were smiling broadly. Maybe a little too broadly. Definitely too broadly. I looked away and was filled with dread, for I realized again that

I had to replace my old IDs and cancel countless credit cards. The lost bag was just the tip of the iceberg. I closed my eyes, pushed the thought away, and chose once again to deal with it all later. The credit cards were maxed out, anyway, I told myself.

Half an hour later, after the purchase of the bag, we stared over another salt and peppered head at another television and another breaking news story. This television, however, was in a bar instead of a diner and the head was very much Irish instead of Greek. After our first drink (Rolling Rock, brewed in Latrobe, PA), we played a game of pool, or rather, I watched as Gabe demonstrated another in his panoply of athletic supremacies.

"If this had been lawn darts…" I said humorously and humiliated.

"…I'd still have kicked your ass," he said matter-of-factly. I laughed again.

I had, of course, planned to go straight to my permanent temp job after my first drink with Gabe. After all, I'd told the office I would be in. Late, but in. But one drink turned into three and one game of pool turned into four. Of course, after that third drink, after that fourth game, after half-a-day filled with CNN and so-called breaking news, I should have left to temp-type away the remainder of my day bookkeeping for the business people and power brokers who make and lose money with the same glee of a child building a tower just to knock it down again. But after the third drink, I just didn't care whether or not I ever made it to work at all that day. I didn't even care whether or not I called them to say I wasn't coming in after my audition. And by the fourth beer, I'd forgotten time altogether. So when Gabe looked at his watch and, lifting me from my bar stool, said we were going, I was no longer aware that I'd missed work entirely, and I had no idea of either time or total beverage intake.

"Did you just black out?" Gabe asked me back on Broadway and 8th Street.

"No," I said, jumping up from the street corner a second time that day and sticking my head into a garbage can and vomiting.

I finished. Gabe handed me a handkerchief as the light changed. I began to cross the street as I wiped.

“So where are we going?” he asked, a look of disgust on his face.

I worked to gather my words, thankful that neither that new *Today* show host nor the late Yasser Arafat were anywhere to be found. Though the nuclear tornado I had moments ago imagined had quite obviously lodged in my gut, and I ran to the garbage can on the other side of Broadway. Once done, I drank some of the water from the bottle in my hands.

Gabe repeated himself. "Where are we going?"

“I don't know where we're going! It was your idea to leave!” I said, feeling a bit more sober. My esophagus burned. I was in desperate need of some Tums.

“Well,” he said, “you drank a lot very quickly in there, and I didn’t think you were going to stop before alcohol poisoning made you.”

“Heartburn,” I said, pointing at my throat and chest. He handed me a stick of gum.

“That will have to hold you over,” he said.

I chewed it and thanked him. He looked at me for one long, odd moment.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“No. What?”

"Well," he said. But no other words followed.

"You've been weird all day," I said. "What do you want to say to me?" He looked startled for a moment but then took a breath as if to speak. A chunk of antacid flew from my mouth.

"You're a mess," he said.

"Who isn't?" I pointed at him in his football jersey in the middle of Greenwich Village.

"Ha," he said.

"Ha ha!" I said. He stared at me hard. I stared back in return and decided as we were staring at each other that I did not like Gabriel Woods very much. Yes, I was glad to have reunited with him, glad to have played our uncomfortable, off-the-topic catch up, but I was also glad we would soon be parting, and I didn't care if we ever talked again.

"I'm hungry," I said, walking away from him.

"Me too," he said, following close behind.

Inside the Silver Bullet Deli, I told Gabriel to talk to the cashier.

"Why?" he whispered, surmising my felonious intent. "We have money."

"Just do it," I said.

Customers filed in and out of the store in droves. There was a long line of people at the deli counter waiting for their orders to be filled. An even longer line at the cashier. I looked up at the security mirror, saw no one watching me. I took a breath and looked at the nearby rack. "White cheddar popcorn," I said to myself.

Out of nowhere, a random college kid brushed by and knocked me off balance

and into the rack.

"Sorry," she said, looking down in an awkward embarrassment.

"'S'okay," I said, fighting to keep both the rack and myself upright.

Once I was standing securely on both feet again, I fought to ease my heart beat, to moisten my mouth. I shifted my weight back and forth between my legs and looked up at myself in the security mirror and then back to the bag of popcorn. And then back up to the mirror.

"Huh," I said, looking at myself in the mirror. My image was distorted by its convex shape. I was both gainly and gangly in my New York uniform of black-on-black. A black belt with silver buckle, black square-toed boots and new black bag Gabriel Woods had bought from a street vendor. A bag containing my tiny black cell phone and new, black, leather-bound date book which would soon be filled with illegible (black) scribblings jam-packing my days beyond recognition with liaisons, meetings of the mind, lunches to be done with people I hardly knew. An audition here and there. Temping.

I smiled at the bag of White Cheddar popcorn on the rack and picked it up. It seemed to vibrate in my hands. The woman who'd knocked me into the rack brushed by again. I took a step away from her and looked toward Gabe, who was just then smiling at the cashier. He tugged nervously at his faded football jersey.

"Don't look back here!" I muttered, beginning to put the popcorn back on the rack. "Don't look…" I paused. The bag was poised mid-air. At my feet lay a bag of Doritos I must have knocked down when hoisting the popcorn from the rack, or when the college kid had knocked me off balance.

Then—in one fell swoop—I thrust the bag of white cheddar popcorn down my

baggy black pants and tried to walk away. I tried to walk away, but I could not. The bag was too obvious and my heart was beating too fast and I was suddenly having considerable trouble breathing. So instead of leaving as I should have, I bent down to pick up the bag of Doritos. To take a few breaths. To devise an escape plan. I paused on the ground a moment while trying to think of a way to stand and walk from the store inconspicuously and without the bag sliding down my leg.

There was a tap on my shoulder.

"Shoes," I muttered to my shoes and then to the person tapping me, untying my laces just to retie them. Then, "Just a second," I said, pulling my chin closer to my chest and fumbling with my black laces. There was a desert in my mouth. My hands shook. I felt like I was going to vomit again and wondered if either stupidity or drunkenness would prove suitable excuses for why a bag of popcorn was in my pants. There was another tap on my shoulder, this one more aggressive than the first. The theme from *Cops* played in my mind.

"Michael?" said the voice belonging to the tapping hand. The cop from the subway, I thought. Even though I sensed from my still semi-drunken haze that it was a woman's voice. Why had I given the cop my actual name?

I stood up suddenly. The bag of white cheddar popcorn slid down my leg. "I'm not Michael. I'm— Oh! Oh my God! How are you, Jenn!" I exhaled, and though I was covered in sweat, I moved in to hug Jenn Gambatese. But unable to subtly shimmy the bag of popcorn back up my leg, I stopped before I touched her, adjusted myself, and leaned awkwardly in to kiss her cheek. I missed.

"How are you?" she asked, laughing at my failed greeting. We'd dated briefly

during my first and only semester at Columbia; even though she'd gone to NYU.

"Fine. Fine," I said, avoiding the underpinning I felt to her question, the same subtext I feel anytime another actor asks me how I am. "Sort of drunk right now and kind of in the middle of stealing a bag of popcorn," I said.

She laughed. "I saw that," she said. "Think everyone did."

I looked behind her. A group of customers were staring at me. The Korean Deli owner/cashier looked at me sternly. A man at the deli counter was on the phone. "Oh," I said, unbuckling my pants, reaching in, removing the bag, and putting it back on the shelf.

Jenn laughed and said the word gross and then my name. I chuckled and wondered why her name had two "Ns" when just one would do the trick. "So how are you?" she asked after a moment.

And there it was again. The question. "How are you?" See. Whenever one actor asks another actor how he or she is, what they really want to know is whether or not you're working. It inevitably feels like a challenge to your talent—no, it feels like an affront to your very humanity, for when the answer is, "I'm not even auditioning right now," your self-worth inevitably plummets. "So," the offending actor might as well say as he or she looks at his or her watch, "Prove your worth as a human being in 60 seconds or less. I'll keep time. Okay…GO!" And here was Jenn Gambatese, a golden-voiced, Broadway actor, with, like, seven Broadway shows under her belt, a girl who has shared the boards with stars like Harvey Fierstein… and that guy who was on "30 Rock" whose name I can't remember, a girl so successful that when she asks how you are, you can't help but to feel like, well, like a loser who used to date her but was just caught stuffing a

large bag of popcorn down your pants in the wake of vomiting into a trash can after drinking way too much because you were mugged and got a ticket for jumping a turnstile.

"Well," I said, trying to think of something to say. I chuckled nervously.

The hand-to-mouth years of my early twenties were exercises in repeated failure. I was long-accustomed to catapulting haphazardly from one relationship to the next, utterly unconcerned with the carnage left in my wake. But I wasn't yet aware of the effect all these failures were having on me, and this meant that I could not yet see any side to a situation but my own. Thus, the possibility that perhaps Jenn *really* just wanted to know how I was and that my answer needn't have anything to do with my resume never even crossed my mind.

"I just had two callbacks for *Richard III*," I lied. "Was out celebrating with my friend who is probably outside right now hiding from the cops he mistakenly believes will be coming."

She laughed. "Korean deli owners are kind of their own police force," she said. We laughed. "But, like, how are things otherwise?"

I looked at her. "Otherwise?"

"Yeah."

"Eh," I said, not knowing what she meant. "Nothing going on, really."

"Oh," she said. "Well, that can be the best time there is!" I shifted back and forth and looked up at myself in the mirror again. "Oh," she said, suddenly remembering something. "I just came from Jason's!"

Jason was my old college roommate. We'd hit it off well enough my freshman year and might have grown to be great, life-long friends but for my ejection from

Columbia's hallowed halls. It was almost impossible to keep in touch as he continued on through school and I struggled to remain afloat in the so-called real world.

"Oh yeah?" I said. "How is he? How is Jason?"

"He's great! You should go see him. He's moving uptown. His wife just had a baby a few months ago."

"Baby?" I said. I remained convinced that a man could be successful in this country without submitting to the dream of marriage, children, and full-time jobs—happy with just himself. For one brief moment, Jason had been, too. My head felt suddenly very heavy.

"I know," she said. "Since Maddie was always so you-know, he's almost the last person I thought would have all of that family stuff." She smiled and winked at me. "Except for you," said her wink. "He has other news, too, but I'll let him tell you."

"Okay," I said. "Sure. What's the address?"

"88 St. Mark's."

"Cool. Thanks."

Just then, there was another tap on my shoulder. The Korean deli owner.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"Leave, or I'll call cops," he said. I waved him away and started to leave, but he followed me to the front of the store where I defiantly waited for Jenn Gambatese to pay for her water and the bag of white cheddar popcorn I'd been trying to steal. As she put her money back in her wallet, we finally exited the deli—the judgmental owner watching our every step.

"Well," Jenn said to me out on the street, drinking from her bottle of water, and

handing me the bag of popcorn without comment, "you look *amazing*! Even if you are drunk off your ass."

There's nothing worse than an ex- saying you look amazing and actually meaning it when you're incapable of believing it's true.

"You do too," I said, absorbing fully her petite frame, her tiny waist line.

She smiled sadly and hugged me. "It was so wonderful to see you, Michael," she said. For no reason, we both laughed and hugged again. Her left breast brushed against my right arm. Electricity shot through my body. I looked at her with awkward longing. She looked at me like I no longer looked amazing but was the saddest, most pathetic person on this or any other planet. Then, without a word, she turned and walked away. After several paces, she yelled, "Good luck with *Richard III*," over her shoulder. Actually meaning it. I pushed down the lump in my throat only long enough to yell back my thanks. I didn't see Jenn Gambatese again until someone showed me a full page ad for *Wicked,* in which she was playing Glinda. Gabriel walked over to me from the corner where he had been waiting in case a getaway became necessary.

"Wow!" I said, turning away from him and wiping my eyes, the bag of popcorn under my arm.

"What?" he said nonchalantly, pretending to be cool with our attempted robbery.

"Her," I said.

"That girl you were talking to?"

"Yeah," I said.

"She's married it looks like," he said, handing me a roll of Tums, referring to the ring on her left hand I'd been ignoring. He paused a moment.

"You should fucking hear her sing, though," I said, trying to smile but too sad to do more than just try. "To say nothing of act. She's insanely talented."

"Uh huh," Gabe grunted.

"But mostly... Mostly it's just her," I said.

"Uh huh," he repeated.

"*All* of her."

"Uh huh."

I was about to mock his repeated grunts of "uh huh," but I stopped short for some reason and looked at him. When he caught my glance, Gabe looked down and stepped on his right shoe with his left. I held my breath.

Ours had not been a day filled with truth. In our activities of bonding, neither of us had said a single real thing about ourselves. We had eaten, drank, played pool, vomited, and almost shoplifted together. We had talked about every major crisis in the world, but we had not once talked about ourselves. Now, as I ceased my commentary on the considerable attributes of Jenn Gambatese, as I watched Gabriel continue to step on and stare uncomfortably at his shoes, I realized it. I wasn't certain, of course. And yet, I knew. So suddenly sober, I knew it as I patted him on the shoulder. I knew it as I told him we were going to my college roommate Jason's party. I knew it as he answered me with yet another self-conscious, "uh huh." I knew it with every step we took. I knew then that Gabriel Woods, my secret and best childhood friend, was gay. And, you know, we are well into the 21st Century, so I was, of course, okay with it. Mostly. Wasn't I?

THE FIERY MERCIES OF SKATEBOARDING ANARCHISTS

"So basically, he's a swashbuckling mercenary," Gabe said, still talking about his uncle. I threw my arm out to hold him back from the oncoming traffic. A cab hissed by, followed by a honking bus. We stepped up onto the curb. I passed Gabe the popcorn.

Because I had lacked any sense of direction in the wake of silently discovering Gabe's secret, a discovery brought about by Ms. Ombré's exit, we'd wandered in a directionless daze for several numb blocks before finally heading east toward 88 St. Mark's Place. The threat of an oncoming cab snapped me back into a certain level of awareness, but this awareness did not bring with it a willingness to talk with Gabe about my silent discovery of his sexuality. Where this topic was concerned, I still very much preferred silence.

"Actually," he said with a tone of correction, "I don't know about swashbuckling." He shoved a fistful of popcorn into his mouth. "Mercenary maybe. Maybe once upon a time. In a galaxy way back in the day." He laughed at his own joke, chewed, swallowed, shoveled in more popcorn.

I held out my hand to request the bag.

"Still," he mumbled, his mouth full, "my mom had to convince my dad it was okay I stayed with my uncle because, well."

He shot me an imploring look that seemed to say, "Please help me with this."